

A life in the time of knickers

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It was the time of knickers. And George McCann, who sported the knee-length pants customary for young men "until I took ballroom dancing classes in the eighth grade," was sporting them at center stage.

"The socks and the pants didn't meet," said McCann, looking at the publicity photo from the 1935 production of "Street Scene."

But McCann didn't care.

He was thrilled to be front and center at the place where the community came together: a performance of the Springfield Civic Theatre at the brand new, chock full auditorium at Keifer Junior High School.

McCann remembers the occasion as clearly as he remembers his one line in the play: "Good morning, Mrs. Cardosi, here's your morning paper."

The tone of the performances was set by the tuxedos donned by Ralph Zirkle, who led a full orchestra, and the ushers who helped a well-dressed audience to its seats. At a time well before television, early in radio, and when "movies were just beginning to talk," McCann said, any Civic Theatre production was "a big deal" in the social life of Springfield. The performance of "Street Scene" was a particularly big deal for Erna Gasser.

Having taught her elocution students to enunciate clearly during private lessons, "the whole idea of getting her students in front of an audience" was "extremely important," McCann said.

"There's no use teaching people to speak unless you get them in front of an audience," he said. "So that was her mission."

McCann admits he occasionally lacked the missionary zeal of his teacher. "You can imagine how a 9-year-old old boy felt about going to Pitchin to talk to a bunch of women at a silver tea," he said.

The routine of elocution lessons was inalterable.

"She handed me a reading, something from (poet) James Whitcomb Riley, and I'd memorize it," McCann said. "I really didn't see any advantage from this in the early years."

But the memorizing "was easy back then," he said, and the chance it eventually brought him to mix with the adults in the theater world through "Street Scene" was a bonus he'll never forget.

McCann remembers Civic Theatre regular J. Fuller Trump as a particularly distinguished and engaging man.

"He had an insurance agency in the Tecumseh Building and he was the Democratic candidate for Congress in 1938," McCann said.

A young man at heart, Trump "told me one time the reason he stayed with theater is that it gave him the chance to commiserate with much younger people," McCann said.

Trump would pick up a pack of Camel cigarettes each day from the store where McCann worked in high school.

"I said, 'Mr. Trump, do you think you should smoke these many Camel cigarettes?'"

"He told me, 'I'm 96 years old and they haven't killed me yet,' " McCann recalled in a written reminiscence. "Two years later, they did."

McCann also recalled Trump and Miss Gasser being "something of a team."

"At one point, they separated themselves from the Civic Theatre for some reason," he said, and staged productions at the Playbox, which was at High Street and Belmont Avenue where Governor's Manor now sits.

McCann said his oldest daughter, Christy Tidwell, now of the Indianapolis suburb of Zionsville, followed in his footsteps, playing in the Civic Theatre production of "The Loud Red Patrick" at Springfield's Ohio Theatre in 1958.

A freshman in high school at the time, she also studied with a certain elocution teacher who helped to push her on stage.

"All four of our kids took (lessons) from Erna Gasser," McCann said, "and the only way they could get out of it was the way I did: graduate from high school."

When he was ready to do that, McCann had to perform at a graduation exercise overseen by Gasser.

"Myself and a gal by the name of Mary Ellen Stawlings" each "gave a series of readings, and then we did a one-act play," he said.

For McCann, the most powerful play Civic Theatre produced was "Journey's End," starring Franklin Raymond, then director of the Civic Theater, and Harvey Freeman.

"It was my impression that (Raymond) was a Broadway man who during the Depression found that Springfield was a pretty good place," McCann said.

But he remembers being particularly taken with Freeman's performance.

Throughout the performance, the City Schools music teacher maintained such an impeccable British accent that McCann felt compelled to ask his elocution teacher how the man had done it.

"Why George, that's the only way he knows how to speak," Miss Gasser said of the British-born Freeman.

It was news that might have knocked the knickers off George McCann.

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