

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Salem Community Theatre

Personal Experience

O.H. 879

NANCY L. FEDIACZKO

Interviewed

by

Arlene Hasson

on

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INTERVIEWEE: NANCY L. FEDIACZKO

INTERVIEWER: Arlene Hasson

SUBJECT: guild purposes, selection of plays, purpose
and function of the board of directors,
conditions, publicity

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H: This is an interview with Nancy Fediaczko for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Salem Community Theatre Project, by Arlene Hasson, on May 27, 1982, at 3:30 p.m.

Nancy, how did you come to first be involved at the Salem Community Theatre?

F: I knew the theatre existed, but I wasn't involved with it the first year at all, until they got to the end of their season. I was asked to attend one of the luncheons that the theatre guild was having at the time. They always had luncheons at the Salem Golf Club. I was asked to attend one of those and thought it sounded like a really interesting organization. The way they worked ticket sales then, they would distribute tickets to the people that attended the luncheons, as well as sell tickets at the door. They did all their productions at the high school then, and they were getting ready to do Jesus Christ, Superstar.

H: What year was this?

F: That was the summer of 1978. It was right at the end [of summer]. That was the final production of that 1977-1978 year.

H: Then, you became involved in the theatre guild?

F: Yes.

H: What positions did you hold with the theatre guild?

F: I was in as president. In fact, late that summer when they were doing Jesus Christ, Superstar, they were trying to get some organization with the guild. They didn't have officers that first year. Board members sort of took care of things as far as the guild involvement was concerned. They didn't have a set of officers until the 1978-1979 season. I was approached to go in as president, took a deep breath, and plunged into it. I served as president that year and the year after.

H: What did the guild do? What was the purpose of the theatre guild?

F: Mainly, it was to stimulate interest in the theatre and also to sell tickets.

H: You said they had a luncheon before each major production. Is that about the only activity they had? There weren't regular, monthly meetings or anything like that?

F: No, no regular meetings.

H: Who generally belonged to the guild? Was it selected people [or] anybody that wanted to come?

F: It just seemed to be friends of the present board members. It was a very small group at the time. They didn't have a home. They didn't have a theatre to use as a central location. Invitations would go out mostly just by calling people that you thought would be interested in attending a luncheon. Usually, they had an excerpt from the play that was coming up, and then, they had tickets available to be sold for that play.

I went in as president, and we had a set of officers from then on.

H: When they got more organized, did the functions of the guild change at all? Did you go into doing other things, too?

F: Definitely. That's when we got into money-raising activities on a regular basis so that we would have some foundation for help if the theatre needed help financially.

H: As time went on, did you get involved in the board itself as president of the guild? Was there a position on the board of directors or anything?

F: Yes. They established representation the year that I had gone in as president. They could see that there was some organization, so they established a position that the guild president would serve on the board as long as she was president. That continues now.

H: Are you still in the guild?

F: Yes.

H: What exactly is your position with the theatre now?

F: Right now, I'm a board member. I had served the two years as president of the guild, and then when Cathy Ostarchvic took over as president, I filled the slot that was available on the board. I was asked to continue on the board as a regular board member, so I am continuing with the board membership as well as being [the] production coordinator this year for live productions.

H: Is that a newly created post?

F: No. There has always been someone to take care of producing the shows. It may be a newly created title. We had an open board meeting last night. The first thing I explained was how the season was chosen. The final decision is up to the board. Suggestions were taken from board and guild members for the season coming up.

H: Does the guild still do play readings to recommend plays?

F: The play reading committee sort of went by the wayside for this particular choice, as far as the season is concerned. We just took suggestions from everyone. As far as producer is concerned, once the season is set, I help select the season because I have access to catalogs and information from various companies that handle the productions. This enables us to have a better understanding as to how much these are going to cost us before we choose our season.

H: Had you gotten into some trouble with that before?

F: Yes. This season we have five productions that we're doing. We found that that was probably one too many. We are going back to four next year, for the main stage. Not only that, but we happen to choose three plays that were handled through one company in New

York, who charge a large amount of rental and royalty fees. That money always has to be paid before you even pay any of your expenses that you had incurred just putting on the show. We were more careful for our next season thinking as to how much it's going to cost us just to get the scripts and things.

H: What else do you do as the producer?

F: I'm responsible for ordering the scripts and making sure that they get delivered to the theatre and to the stage manager or director. I work out a budget for each production, and that has to go to the board for approval before we get into production. The budget includes anticipated income as well as how much our expenses will be. We do pay our directors, and for musicals, we have a contract for the season with a musical director; and he gets paid, also. Those are the only two paid people as far as our live productions are concerned.

H: Is there a great difference in the type of direction as far as the total budget? Would there be a big difference between a musical, for instance, and the children's play?

F: Yes. The difference comes in with the amount of people involved. You can figure on a larger cast, therefore you have to have larger crews. Costuming, set, props, and make-up, everything is larger with the musicals, usually. We're doing one musical next year, which only has seven people in it, but that's really not the rule. When you talk musicals, you're talking about a lot of people. The musicals take about twice the amount of money to stage as what we call a straight show, a comedy, drama, or mystery.

H: As far as returns are concerned, do you draw that much better with the musical?

F: Yes, we found [that] we do. We're still pursuing having a variety of shows to offer. Next year we're doing a mystery called Deathtrap and the musical The Fantastics. Then, we're doing The Importance of Being Earnest, which is an English satire, then A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, which is a comedy and a musical. We're trying to give the audiences a little of everything.

H: You don't get paid for any of this work that you're doing for the theatre?

F: No.

H: That's quite a bit of volunteer time!

F: It is. I'm going to keep track some week and see how many hours I put into volunteering.

Along with the budget, I've been getting ready for a show. I make sure that auditions are announced through the news media, and through area newspapers, television, and radio. I send to the other community theatres in our region and also [to] schools. I'm responsible, as producer, for lining up what they call the crew chiefs. Those are the people that head up each crew. I also work very closely throughout the production with the stage manager and the director. We have meetings at the very beginning of the production with the production staff. That would be the crew chiefs, the musical director, the director, [the] stage manager, or anyone else that's involved in that particular production and has a chance to listen to the script being read through the first time the cast gets together. That's a good meeting to clear up any gray areas that we might have about the set or costumes, who takes care of what, and getting us off on the right foot.

H: Do you have anything to do with actually selecting the cast?

F: Mostly, it's the director's responsibility. I attend as many of the auditions as I can. We usually have auditions three days in a row. We've found that that works nicely, a Sunday afternoon and two evenings, in order to accommodate everyone's schedule. The director [has] the final word. I am there if they have questions about certain people, maybe not knowing their background.

H: But it is their responsibility rather than your's?

F: Yes. I work mostly with crews and stage managers, and set the director off on his or her own. After the production gets started, I can lay low a little bit. I have to make sure that deadlines are being set and met. I keep a close eye on the budget as production goes along. If the scripts are all rented--which some companies do rent their scripts, [and] others will sell the scripts outright--I am responsible for returning all of those in good order, so that we won't be charged for any that aren't mailed back or are town up.

H: So, you are like the business manager? You have the responsibility and financial supervision?

F: Yes.

H: What was your first responsibility in the theatre, actually, [or] in a production?

F: During their first season, they had a play called The Boyfriend. It was done at the junior high, and a couple of weeks before opening, they had some cast members walk out and were searching frantically for someone to fill a few slots; one of them was the male lead. There was another slot with a small part that I stepped into, and I just loved it. I was scared to death, but I loved it.

H: Was that the 1920s flapper show?

F: Yes.

H: Who was involved as far as leadership, at that time? Tim Smith and Linda weren't in yet?

F: No. Chuck Williams, Jerry Sullivan, and Ed [were].

H: They didn't have a chairman of the board?

F: No. Chuck served as president. Who served under him as the other officers, I couldn't tell you.

H: At that time, did they have a regular organization, as far as a full-time producer?

F: Dan Callisto, and probably Penny, too, took care of being producer. Claudia Pasko and myself were also involved.

H: What else did you do? Have you been in any other performances?

F: I was in Our Town. It was a small part. Our second season, I was in Promises, Promises. That was during the 1978-1979 season. I haven't been onstage since. I got interested in the back stage things, worked on a crew, [and] headed up costumes and props for Fiddler on the Roof. Linda Smith and I worked on both of those things. We didn't designate one or the other as the head. We did a smattering of what were the beginnings of stage managing.

H: When you started, it really was amateur theatre? There wasn't really even much as far as experience?

F: No, no. We didn't have the experience. We had the talent, though. Those folks were really talented. A lot of those people are still around, coming to our auditions, and being involved, even though their lives have changed and they've gone other directions. In fact, we have Chuck Williams back on the board again.

H: What do you think is the most outstanding play that you've been involved with?

F: A favorite of mine would be Fiddler on the Roof, simply because it's a favorite production of mine. It was my first real experience of being very involved with the theatre, doing props and costumes, and helping out backstage on the stage crew as well. I would say one of the most exciting things for me with the theatre was our first production at our own theatre, which was The Red Dragon. There was a lot of trauma involved with The Red Dragon because we were not only finishing up the stage and all its trappings--when we bought the building, there was no stage. It was only about 10 feet [from] where the movie screen sat. There was major renovation going on in the theatre. Curtains had been ordered, and stage lighting had been ordered. Things were coming in hit and miss, and then, they all had to be hung and installed. At the same time, with a cast of what I call thousands, production was being rehearsed in the upstairs rooms and anywhere we could find a place.

H: How long had you had possession of the building before the production was scheduled to begin?

F: A year.

H: What else was unique about The Red Dragon, besides the fact that it was the first one in your theatre?

F: It was an original. Kathy Verhoff and Greg Smith wrote it, two of our favorite people involved with the theatre at the time. It was special in a lot of ways.

H: What do you think has been the biggest success of the theatre? I suppose acquiring the building has been a part of it. Do you feel that things are going well? Do you see a need [for] some improvement to be made or some change that might help the theatre?

F: The most important thing that's coming along is that more and more people are knowing about us and becoming involved. I think it's so much more to our advantage to have the theatre, so that we have a central location, and people know where they can find us. Up until the point that we got the theatre, we were in people's homes. Then for live production time, everything was packaged up and taken to the high school. We have so many activities going on at the theatre that there is really something for everyone. It doesn't always involve being onstage, as I have found out.

H: When the theatre is operating and you're not putting on a production, do you still use the facility as a movie theatre?

F: Yes.

H: So, the renovation didn't alter its usefulness for that purpose at all?

F: No, not at all. In fact, some of the renovation money went to purchase a new screen so that things are much nicer, as far as the cinema is concerned.

H: Is there a statewide organization of community theatres?

F: Yes, there is. We are in the Northeast region, and it's called OCTA, which stands for Ohio Community Theatre Association. There are seven or eight theatres in our area. There are two theatres in Canton, Trumbull New Theatre in Warren, Carnation City Players in Alliance, us, Tuscarawrus Little Theatre, and maybe one more.

H: Are these just amateur groups?

F: Yes.

H: Is there any funding from the state or anything like that?

F: OCTA does get some support. They sponsor workshops throughout the year; the state organization sponsors workshops. We hosted a workshop here in May for our particular region. There are contests a couple of times a year for a particular region, for live productions. Each theatre is asked to take an excerpt, and whoever comes out on top for the region then goes to a state competition and then to a national competition. OCTA is very involved with that. They also have a state convention each year where all the theatres from across the state get together. Then, they have workshops, skits, productions, and all kinds of things going on for that convention.

H: Have you met any difficulty, as far as getting publicity or having coverage for the presentations?

F: We're a non-profit organization, so we try to get as much free publicity or public service announcements as we can. We feel that we can't put out large amounts of money for advertising, but that's really the basis of your success: how well-known you are.

- H: Of course, the marquis does a little bit of good with that?
- F: Yes. We try to cut corners wherever we can. I hate to cut corners with the publicity, though.
- H: As far as your classes are concerned--I know that they are being held in the theatre building, but for the publicity part of that--are you responsible for taking care of that kind of stuff, too?
- F: Yes. What we're trying now is a publicity committee, where we have four people working on publicity. Barb Zeigler is doing press releases. Penny Callisto handles radio and television. We have Terry Uckers and Patty LaTally. They're involved with posters and things that go out, as well as keeping up the lobby area in the theatre to let people that are walking past the theatre know what's going on in the showcase down front. Julie Robinson is working with people from the theatre that either sing or dance, read from a script, do little skits, or have make-up demonstrations. Julie is putting that group of people for outside engagement, so that any clubs or organizations that want a program can contact Julie. She then handles a pool of folks that she can call on. We've had great success with that.
- H: Is that where you do it for free but hope to have some donations?
- F: We do ask for a donation with the outside engagements. They've all around the Salem area as far away as Wells-ville.
- H: One of the things from reading and watching who appears is that you don't have, despite the size of the town and community, a great reputation as far as leading parts are concerned. You do have a great variety of players. How far away have you had people as far as a drawing for actors?
- F: We always have one fellow from Pennsylvania. We are drawing more from the Youngstown-Canfield area, Austintown, [and] Boardman.
- H: What is your financial base? What do you operate on?
- F: We derive money from our productions. We like each of the activities going on in the theatre to be self-sufficient as far as being able to pay their own expenses, but also, keeping the building up. With income, we have income from our dance institute, as well as the live productions, the cinema, and any fund-raising activities that the guild has throughout the

year goes into the general fund. I would like to make our live productions self-sufficient next year. On the most part, we have been able to meet our expenses for productions this season, but we haven't been able to go beyond that, in paying the utilities and the fees for the building. The dance institute has brought in nice amounts of money for the theatre. We have a season ticket drive coming up this summer. Hopefully, with a successful campaign, we will be self-sufficient, as far as our live productions next year. Our goal for season ticket sales is \$2,000.

H: Have you noticed a decline in ticket sales in general? Do you feel that the interest is falling off? Attendance is still pretty good?

F: Yes. I would always hope for better attendance, and that's [why] I'm counting so much on the success of the season ticket drive. We've built each year on the number of people that have bought season tickets. We didn't have season tickets the first season. I don't even know if we had season tickets our second year. I would say starting in 1979, we started a season ticket campaign.

H: That gives you all of the admissions at a lower total cost?

F: Yes. There is a definite savings there, as well as being able to call in ahead of the general public for seat reservations. We have a box office with certain hours set that people can call and make seat reservations.

H: All that is manned by volunteer help?

F: Yes. Almost everything is volunteer. The dance institute coordinator, Judy Groth, gets some money, but it's on sort of a commission basis. The cinema manager gets paid, and two employees and the projectionist [get paid].

H: What is the cost of a general ticket to a play?

F: This year we're on a sliding scale. It's \$6.50, \$5.50, and \$4.50. That is for adults on a ticket at the door. Next year, we're anticipating the season ticket drive tickets being \$20 for adults and \$10 for children and senior citizens. That will give them four plays, plus we plan three director's specials between the major productions; and that will entitle them to a dollar off their ticket for that particular special. General admission is going to be \$6.00.

- H: Since you've been involved in community theatre, have you noticed any significant changes or differences since the first time you were involved in any activities?
- F: As far as the organization is concerned, they have a smaller size board. I believe, when I went on the board there were 12 members. Now, it is a 15 member board who serve for an indefinite term. The guild has been organized to a point where it is very efficient and very involved with all kinds of activities at the theatre, not only money raising activities. They come in and do lots of different jobs for us. I think the organization is stronger than when I came in. Everyone is maturing. We have our own home now, too. We've gone into more programs with the dance institute [and] cinema. I would say all of those things have changed for the good, as far as the community is concerned. We have a well-rounded number of activities that people can be involved in.
- H: How do you go about selecting the people that are going to be on the board, or how do you set up the board?
- F: We have a nominating committee of several board members that are scouting, watching, and talking with people that might express an interest in serving on the board. We do not have a general election time for our board members, as a lot of organizations do. We do elect our four officers, though: president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer are elected from the board members. We have 15 board members now, and the nominating committee is busy getting names of people or various folks that are involved with the theatre and come up to any board member to express an interest in serving on the board. The nominating committee has a report throughout the year, because we have these indefinite terms. The nominating committee gives its report as to whom they have talked with and screened, and [they] recommend board membership for certain people. Then, it's voted on by the present board.
- H: They can serve until they want to resign?
- F: Yes. We like to keep a variety on our board, business people, people from the community, housewives, teachers, and mothers.
- H: Are there any particular duties that you assume once you get to be on the board? What exactly does board membership entail?
- F: During the board meeting, we're responsible for setting the policies that need to be set for the theatre. We make final decisions on lots of things, such as the

production season and budget. The total budget for the theatre operation is gone over by the board. We have almost every facet of the theatre represented on the board.

H: That's what I wondered, if there was a carryover.

F: We pull people from the outside. We have a new board member now who is a priest at St. Paul's. We're mostly looking for people that are interested in theatre, have some community involvement, and will jump in with our organization and make it grow. The guild president is the one slot in particular that is a definite term.

H: Then, the four people who are officers do have definite terms, and they are reelected periodically?

F: Yes, on a yearly basis.

H: They have more responsibility as far as financial responsibility, paying the bills, and getting things taken care of that way?

F: Yes.

H: The board is like an executive directing body?

F: No. Our board right now is a working board. They're very involved with the goings on at the theatre, either in the production or involved with the cinema. They are involved even to the point of taking classes that are offered. I'm first a board member and second a producer for all the live productions. We have people that work the box office that are board members. Board members have taken on an awful lot. It's sort of a tradition right now. I think this is because when the theatre was formed it was a small, tightly knit group that was interested in making theatre grow. It has remained pretty much that until the present time.

H: Even though the make-up has changed considerably?

F: Yes. We're very involved with the day-to-day workings of the theatre. That may change at some point, but not now.

H: Thank you very much, Nancy, for your time.

F: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW