

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Salem Community Theater Project

Theater Experiences

O. H. 608

DAVID ALLEN MILES

Interviewed

by

Arlene Hasson

on

July 5, 1984

DAVID ALLEN MILES

David Miles was born in Columbus, Ohio on September 17, 1939 to Francis and Margaret Miles. Mr. Miles made a career of the Army so the family moved frequently. David graduated from the American High School in Frankfurt, Germany in 1957 and then joined the Coast Guard for a four year term. At this time David took a series of jobs working for banks and savings and loan companies which eventually brought him back to Ohio. Here he met his future wife, Marilyn, who he married on June 6, 1964.

With the passage of the G.I. Bill for veterans of the Vietnam era, David was able to enter Kent State University on a full-time basis. He pursued a degree in fine arts, which he completed in 1969. He took a job working for his wife's family insurance business in 1970 and is still with that company. The couple moved to Salem in 1971. Their first child, Stephen, was born in 1973, with a second son, James, being born four years later. A third child, Caroline, was born in 1979. During this same time David returned to Kent State and earned a Master's Degree in Fine Arts.

It was through community contacts that David was first asked to become involved with the Salem Community Theater. After joining the Board of Directors in the second year of the theater's existence, David began to develop a special interest in, and talent for, set design and construction. Although he never

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performed on stage he played a vital role in the success of many of the local group's presentations.

David was vice-president of the board for two years during which time the theater bought and renovated the State Theater building in downtown Salem. After this hectic period he felt compelled to resign his board seat due to the pressure of other obligations, but he continues to work with the theater in the capacity of set designer and designs posters, mailers, and other advertisements which use his talent in the area of art.

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INTERVIEWEE: DAVID ALLEN MILES

INTERVIEWER: Arlene Hasson

SUBJECT: Set design and construction for Salem Community Theater, schedules, new building acquisition

DATE: July 5, 1984

H: This is an interview with David Miles for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Salem Community Theater, by Arlene Hasson, on July 5, 1984, at 3:00 p.m.

Could you tell us a little bit about your childhood and background?

M: I was born in Columbus, Ohio. My father was a career Army man and we moved around the world frequently. I eventually went to school at Kent State University and married a girl from Ohio. We decided to stay in this area.

H: You graduated from high school in Germany?

M: That's correct.

H: Then you went into the Coast Guard?

M: That's right.

H: You served four years?

M: Yes.

H: How long after that did you get married?

M: I was married in 1964, so I'd been out of the Coast Guard three years.

H: What did you do in the meantime?

- M: I worked a couple of jobs. I had a job in Norfolk, Virginia with a loan company. Then I left there and came to Ohio where I went to work for a savings & loan company, and then with Automatic Sprinkler, which was a large sprinkling company in Youngstown.
- H: That was when you met your wife?
- M: I met my wife at the savings & loan; she worked there.
- H: You didn't start at the university until after you were married?
- M: Right. I had gone part-time to several universities, but never full-time. In 1966 we had been married two years and the GI bill for Vietnam veterans was passed so I decided to take advantage of that and return to school full-time.
- H: You didn't have to work during that time?
- M: I worked part-time doing odd jobs on campus, and my wife worked.
- H: You do have a family?
- M: Yes, we have three children: Two boys and a girl. Their ages are eleven, seven, and four.
- H: When did you come to Salem?
- M: I lived in Canfield and worked in Salem from 1969 to 1971. We moved to Salem in May of 1971.
- H: How did you happen to become involved in the community theater?
- M: That's hard to say. I can't remember the exact circumstances; however, Tim Smith was just elected president of the board of directors having replaced a long-time person who was leaving town. The theater was undergoing some major changes. I knew Tim from other community things, from Rotary Club and some other things. He asked me if I would be interested in just coming to a meeting and seeing if I thought I could be of help. I did and I guess I got caught up in it like everyone else does. I got involved in set construction and some other. Eventually I served several years on the board just as a member. Then one year they were looking for new officers and asked me to be vice-president. I was vice-president for two years, I think.
- H: Do you remember what years those were?

M: That would be the year we bought the theater, 1980-1981.

H: Had you had any experience with theater in your high school or college days?

M: None whatsoever.

H: What was your major in college?

M: Studio art. I have both an undergraduate and graduate degree in art.

H: Did you pursue any of that after you got out?

M: Yes, just on my own. I didn't teach or try to get involved full-time. I had no illusions about making a living as an artist. What art I do I just do on my own.

H: When you came into the theater and got involved with set construction specifically, was that more because you knew some construction or because you knew some art, or because you were at the right place at the right time?

M: I learned as I went along. I didn't know anything about set construction outside of just the rudiments of it and what I could get out of a book.

H: You were on the board then before they acquired the theater building?

M: Yes. I was on the board from around 1977, 1978. I was on the board the year after the theater formed.

H: Was Cathy Verhoff working for you when you first came on the board?

M: She was, but only on an incidental basis. She wasn't the regular director. We took directors by application per play. If someone wanted to direct we would just let them direct if we thought they could do it. We saw a need coming that we needed a stable force in the director, because it was becoming more and more difficult to get people to take on that duty as just a gratis thing. It takes a lot of time and know-how to direct a major musical, for example.

H: Do you remember the first play that you were involved with?

M: Yes, "Fiddler on the Roof."

H: Have you ever been on stage?

- M: No, I never have. I have no desire to be.
- H: What year was "Fiddler on the Roof" presented?
- M: I think that was 1978. It was at the high school. After "Fiddler" the next musical was "Westside Story". The next one was "The King and I", then "My Fair Lady", then "Carousel". It has been five years.
- H: What difficulties did you encounter being on the board at a time when they didn't have a permanent home?
- M: It wasn't so much a board difficulty; it was mainly a logistical problem. When we built sets it was hard. We had to do it away from school and then move them all up shortly before the rehearsals began. There was always a problem with getting things through doors and building them somewhere else and storing them while you're building them. That was the biggest problem. I don't think the rehearsals or the facilities were a problem because they were nicer than what we have now as far as the band and things like that. The seating was much nicer.
- H: Where did you rehearse?
- M: Generally, what we did was we would rehearse at the Y. They did a lot of rehearsal at the high school. We would rent it for a three-week period. The rehearsals would go on either onstage or they have a place downstairs. They have a large set construction room down there. They had a music room that they could use for the band to practice. Then they would all coalesce in one place. I think they rehearsed some things down at the old Legion building, at the Methodist church. They did a lot of rehearsals in the basement of the Methodist church. In fact, several auditions for major summer musicals were held at the Methodist church basement.
- H: If you build a set do you reuse that for another production? Do you have to start all over again from scratch?
- M: Depending on the set, one of the problems we had was that we had no standardized sizes to work with. We would more or less budget a set from scratch every play because we just couldn't rely on storing them. We had an old storage building on Jennings Avenue behind the Patterson Garage. It didn't even have a solid floor. We would store things out there and go get them and they would be all wet and mildewy. Tim would store a lot of things out in his garage. There was always a problem where parts would get lost and paint would get hard.
- H: Were you able to change that once you got the theater building?
- M: Yes, there was substantial improvement in that. We could build

a set and then use a lot of the parts from it; we would store them right there.

H: Were you involved in the decision as far as acquiring the State Theater, selecting the State as opposed to other sites?

M: It was pretty well narrowed down. We didn't have a lot of choice. We had looked at one other building and it just so happened the State building became available. The foundation had the money at the time and a lot of things happened at once.

H: The community foundation advanced the money to renovate the building but not to purchase it?

M: That's right. We were not allowed to use any of their money for the purchase or anything other than just fixing it up.

H: Were you involved in the renovation since you're into construction here all of a sudden?

M: Quite a bit. I'm more or less in the labor end of it. We had most of the major renovations done by contractor. The stage was built by a contractor and most of the equipment and so on, the electronic equipment, was bought, as is. Tim and some people installed that, but it wasn't anything that had to be a major installation job. The main thing we were involved in was the cleaning and the second floor renovations. The whole board and a lot of other people joined in on that. It was an exciting time.

H: That money that comes for the renovation comes from a series of installments over a period of time, but what about the money to pay for the building?

M: That comes through a building fund drive that they hold every year. Every year they try and get people to subscribe to a building fund, either over a period of time or a one time donation. The main part of their money came from those kinds of people who had agreed to donate \$5,000 over a five-year period, which came as a long-range base of donations. That amount really was never as big as it should have been; it never got to \$15,000 or \$20,000 a year on a pledge basis. Between pledges and the one time donors which they went out to get every year they're barely able but they always make their mortgage payments.

H: What year did they actually get the building?

M: It seems to me it was 1980, 1981.

H: They should be reaching the end of that.

M: That would have been true had they continued, but they really ran into some problems on their money between the pledged amount and the amount they needed. The first couple of payments were in the \$20,000 range because of the interest. They found that that was just insurmountable; they were taking their operating money; everything was going into this mortgage and they weren't having any money. They went back to the Rakestraw family and refinanced it with them. I think it was the second year they did that. I think they came up with an agreed amount of \$10,000 a year tops. They're at a point now where they only owe around \$25,000. I think \$75,000 was the original price.

H: Are you still involved with the theater?

M: I'm helping with sets still and doing some other things like flyers. I had to get off the board because of business reasons and family reasons, I was putting all kinds of time in it. It was eating me alive.

H: The institute that offers classes, is that still operating?

M: No. There were tremendous space problems and usage problems. Times were just not convenient. Space was a big problem; they don't have a place to rehearse upstairs and run those classes. Another big problem they had was just keeping qualified instructors. Today I think they could really make a go of that if they could get a couple of people. My own family, my wife takes our child over to Alliance for children's acrobatic dance classes. There doesn't seem to be anything around here like that, and I think there's a market for that. Someone has to do it and take charge of it and account for the money. It's an enormous amount of time.

The cinema operation was the same way. They tried to run that on a volunteer basis, but it just became a conflict; they were producing more and more plays. Getting good movies was becoming more and more of a problem. We were trying to run it as a children's theater. It just became impossible. We couldn't afford to hire a full-time person and still make money on it. We only ran it on weekends because we couldn't afford to heat the place during the week.

H: Was that a factor with the institute too?

M: No.

H: Is Mr. Ballentine still with the theater?

M: Yes, he is. He is the executive director now.

H: Is he doing the upcoming production?

M: Yes.

H: Funding is still a problem?

M: Yes, the number one problem.

H: How is attendance?

M: Not too good, at least for the director's specials. It's average. I don't know what the reason is; it's a combination of things. The facility is still rather seedy, the auditorium area. Heat is a problem. The utilities are still not working one hundred percent. People are starting to get turned off. If you go once and it's cold and chilly you don't go again. Plus they're cranking out so many plays that they're having difficulty getting top flight local talent to do that. It involves an awful lot of time.

H: I would imagine that you tend to rely heavily, if you can at all, on free publicity, coverage in the news and that type of thing that you don't have to pay for. Is that a problem with them that in the sense if you've got seven plays on a year they don't like to give you that much free publicity?

M: That's a problem, and even getting reviewers to come and look at your plays. Most reviewers like one or two a year tops for each theater, and we can't even get a reviewer down for half our plays.

H: Why have they gone to such a full season, simply because they have the theater space?

M: It's a combination of things. They have a director who is very theater oriented and that is his life. He wants to do plays all of the time. If it were up to him they would have a different play every month. I think they're confusing having a lot of productions with making a lot of money. That doesn't necessarily happen.

H: Is the children's theater still going on?

M: I don't know.

H: Since you're not on the board anymore do you know anything about the season ticket sales? I know that when Mr. Ballentine first came that was going to be a big project with him.

M: As near as I can tell he has not been involved other than incidentally with the season ticket sales. He tried at one time to organize a season drive. The support was so poor and so forth that it just never went anywhere. Our season ticket sales are terribly low. They can't be more than 200 or 250 a year, and I think that includes part of the free

tickets given with the donors for the building fund.

- H: As far as sources of income, I know one of the things that has always been successful since its beginning has been the madrigal feast conducted by the guild. That still is a successful project?
- M: As near as I can tell. They donate money every year to the theater and the project is always well-received in the community. They did try to expand it to two nights this year, and that was unsuccessful. I think the nights it was to be done was the weekend before Thanksgiving. It was a poor choice of nights. They had it at the Timberlanes this year and it did very well the night they had it. This particular one they had professional serving rather than volunteers.
- H: When you were involved with the set construction what do you think was your most difficult stage production?
- M: I can tell you exactly; it was "My Fair Lady". I designed a lot of that, but Dennis Groves built that set. From all aspects that was the most difficult set. There were so many major scene changes, so many people involved in the play. The cost, the limited size of the stage, and the director's insistence that we have a full scene change whenever it called for it really made that a very tough play.
- H: Depending on your director then you do have some leeway as to not follow it exactly the way it's supposed to be?
- M: Yes. There are certain things that you just simply cannot do on our stage. The director has to block them out of the play. Most directors can do that fairly simply, but it has to be done at the beginning. "My Fair Lady" was a tough set to do just from scene changes. A lot of hardware had to be moved around each scene. A difficult set from a technical standpoint was "Dracula" because there were so many special effects in that play. It had to be built more closely to what the original was in order to get those special effects in. The most fun set I think I built was "Fiddler" because it was kind of a free form set; you could do just about anything you wanted to.
- H: Were there any other productions that you were involved with that stand out in your mind particularly?
- M: As far as set is concerned?
- H: Yes.
- M: Another reasonably difficult set to do was "Westside Story" because we did that at the high school and the stage was enormous. I think it was around eighty or one hundred feet

wide. It takes a lot to fill it up. Another set that was kind of unusual that looked very attractive on stage was the set for "Spoon River Anthology". Rob Moore built that set and I designed it. He stuck to the design and I don't know how he did it. It was very effective. Most of the sets are relatively easy.

H: Most plays come with instructions on set designs already ready for you?

M: Yes.

H: Was there anything else that you can think of that you would like to share? Do you think the theater is going to pull through?

M: Absolutely.

H: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW