

# Local theater thrives in '89

1989 was a good year for theatre in the Charleston-Mattoon area. Eastern Illinois University's theatre department showed new vitality. They opened the year with a classic, Tennessee Williams' fragile mood-piece *The Glass Menagerie*, and closed it with another classic, Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical masterwork *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, both directed by C.P. Blanchette. *Menagerie* had a lovely Gentleman Caller scene, with Catherine A. Palfenier as Laura and Jason Eklund as the visitor, and the production was dedicated to Joan Allen, who played Laura at Eastern in 1975.

*Long Day's Journey* needs to be made larger than life, while at Eastern it seemed more a part of the everyday world, but it was still a special theatrical experience, thanks to the power of O'Neill's writing and the fine work of the production's Mary and Edmund, Ana O. Cooper and Robert E. Poe.

In between there was *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, given a clean, uncluttered treatment by director E.T. Guidotti that let the songs speak for themselves; Jerry Eisenhour's broad, tongue-in-cheek version of the old temperance mellerdrammer *The Drunkard*, with lots of old songs, little spoken dialogue, an occasional olio, and a handbar-twirling villain in the person of Thomas Schmarre; and Eisenhour's campy, exuberant *Once Upon a Mattress*, with a riotous performance by Angela Snead that almost out-Burnetted Carol.

Besides all this, the theatre department introduced us to a promising new young playwright, theatre arts major Robert Caisley. The play was *Once More Unto the Breach*, about the relationship that develops between two young men who are hospital patients. One has Hodgkin's disease, the other cancer, but it could as well have been AIDS, and it was done with insight, humor and compassion.

Eastern's music department gave us the McGinnis Sisters,



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Betty and the late Ralph McGinnis, in a music scholarships benefit concert, *From Bach to Broadway*, in the spring, and Yeaton returned in the fall for a Central Illinois District Metropolitan Opera Auditions benefit, *Great Moments in Opera*, featuring the complete last act of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, in which she was joined by Eastern music faculty member Jerry L. Daniels.

The University Board began the year with a whimper, a modest touring production of one of Neil Simon's lesser-known works, *I Ought to Be in Pictures*, which drew an audience of about 30 in the Union Grand Ballroom, and ended the year with a bang, the Indianapolis Ballet Theatre in *The Nutcracker*, which played to a near-capacity crowd in McAfee Gym. Both events demonstrated the university's crying need for a decent performing arts center.

Charleston Community Theatre was very much in evidence in 1989, with four productions compared to two the year before — Therese Supple's ship-shape staging of *Dames at Sea*, the popular nostalgic send-up of the 1930s Warner Brothers musicals with Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler; Tanya Wood's *Steel Magnolias*, which was blessed with a first-rate ensemble cast and, unlike the movie version, captured the true spirit of Robert Harling's play; *'23 Skiddoo: A Roaring Revue of the 1920s*, conceived and directed by Scott Saegesser, highlighted by Patricia Hubbard's flapper costumes and J. Sain's art deco set; and Judi Vaughn's staging of *The Real Inspector Hound*, Tom



Photos by Dan Hagan



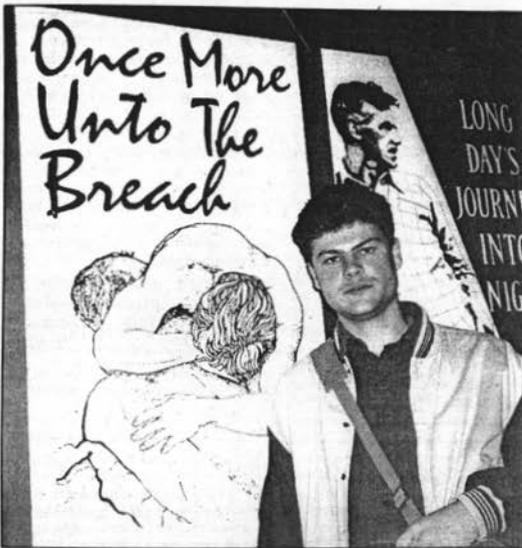
whodunits and inept drama critics. The latter was presented one weekend at the Burgess Osborne Auditorium in Mattoon and the next at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Charleston.

Happily, then, theatre is not completely dead in Mattoon, despite the long moribund state of MAPAS. Nor is dance, tanks largely to Margene's Dance Studio. But why do they have to pay such exorbitant rentals for the use of Lake Land College's theatre for their recitals?

Then there were the area high schools. I saw Marilyn Fessel's *Grease* at Mattoon High School, David Fehr's *West Side Story* for Sullivan High School and Doug McClure's *Oklahoma!* at Neoga High and was favorably impressed by the quality of each. I didn't see Alice Jayne Swickard's *And the Winner is...* at Charleston

and liked it. And there was the Little Theatre-On the Square in Sullivan, for which it seemed for a while like the best of times and the worst of times. The good news was that they had one of their best seasons so far, putting on five musicals, some well known, some not so well known — *Little Me*, *Drood*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Baby, The King and I* — plus a special pre-season production of *Greater Tuna*, with Jack Milo and Jeff Talbot, all splendidly done.

The bad news was that attendance was down 22 percent and the Little lost money, ending up with a debt of about \$150,000, and for a few weeks in December it was like one of those *Perils of Pauline* cliffhangers as to whether the theater would ever open again. Dec. 8 — Gov



questioned \$90,000 appropriation. Dec. 21 — A group of citizens organized about six months ago to try to save the theatre and asked the city of Sullivan for a grant of \$100,000. The city in turn offered a compromise package of \$75,000, \$60,000 as a flat grant and \$15,000 in matching funds, requiring the theatre to raise \$2 from private contributions for each \$1 it gets from the city, but the grant was voted down, largely because of the abstention of one of the commissioners, whose wife was a member of the Friends of the Little Theatre, a not-for-profit group that runs the theatre. Dec. 26 — The grant passed, thanks to the vote of the previously abstaining commissioner, whose wife had resigned from the board over the weekend, and the Little's general manager, Leonard Anderson, said "plans

five musicals.

What's the answer for the Little? Is it doing nothing but warhorses? The most popular shows this summer were *Hello, Dolly!* and *The King and I*. Next was *Baby*, a relatively obscure musical, but it had the advantage of its theme — getting and being pregnant — and a gimmick — a real live area baby was brought out for the closing scene, one of 15 chosen for each of the scheduled performances. Trailing far behind were *Little Me* and *Drood*. Or is it a return to the star system — say, Zsa Zsa Gabor in *Lady in the Dark* and Ronald Reagan in *Never Too Late*?

If the Little Theatre means something to you, that matching funds grant is the chance to prove it with a contribution to the Friends of the Little Theatre,