

Looking Forward to 45 More Years

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 26 June 2001 18:00

Oh, the perils of outdoor theatre. There are the mosquitoes. The heat. And of course, the threat of rain. At a rehearsal for two one-act plays on Monday, director David Wooten told the cast he wanted strong efforts for the next few days. “The bad news is we might get rained out Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday,” he said.

This is *particularly* bad news because the cast is still using its scripts occasionally, and the first performance is Saturday.

But such things aren't new for the Genesis Guild, the volunteer community-theatre organization that has presented free classics in the Quad Cities since 1957 and in Rock Island's Lincoln Park every summer since 1963. As founder Don Wooten said, referring to the compressed time frame for modernizing and rehearsing the guild's season-ending Greek comedy, “We've always kept that frantic pace.”

What *is* different these days is that Wooten is sitting backstage while his son directs. After helming nearly every Genesis play for more than 40 years, Wooten has finally scaled back his involvement, limiting himself to directing one play this year. (Each of the four productions this summer has a different director.)

“I've been backing off” in the past few years, Wooten said, “because I'm not immortal.” The two one-act comedies that kick off the season this weekend – George Bernard Shaw's *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* and Christopher Fry's *A Phoenix Too Frequent* – will be David Wooten's first directing credits, although he serves as the guild's president and has produced several plays over the past few years. “He's been very helpful in the transition,” Don Wooten said of his son.

The elder Wooten had no grand plan for the Genesis Guild when he started it way back in 1956. “We didn't have much of an intent at the beginning,” he said. He just wanted “to start a theatre group that would not compete with Playcrafters.”

Chance played a big role, too. Wooten had considered producing Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, but when scouting sites for performance, he noticed the Greek-style columns and an old wading pool at the top of a hill in Lincoln Park. “I thought, That's a perfect setting for a Greek play,” he said. “I'd never read a Greek play.”

Wooten found a paperback copy of three Oedipus Rex plays in a used-book store and fell in love. Genesis produced Sophocles' *Antigone* in 1957, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in 1958, and Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* in 1959. The dawn of the 1960s saw Genesis growing, performing Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I* in 1960 with Euripides' *Alcestis*, and two Greek classics with two of the Bard's plays in 1961. Since then, Genesis has

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produced between three and eight plays every summer.

The template hasn't changed much, and considering its unfocused origins, it's amazing that Genesisius' history reads like Wooten had a fixed idea of what he wanted and hasn't wavered since. Greek plays in mask and Shakespeare mingle each summer with the occasional more contemporary set of one-act plays. The slate typically includes one Greek comedy, re-written and updated with current references and jokes, with parts written for just about anybody who wants to be involved. ("The Greek comedy is *wild*," Wooten said. Tryouts for that play are scheduled for late July.)

And it's been a successful enterprise. Performances generally draw about 300 people apiece, and between 80 and 90 people typically try out each season for approximately 50 parts.

Although many people are on stage during a Genesisius season, for a long time the organization was a one-man show behind the scenes. The guild had a board, but its role was nominal, existing largely because of requirements for retaining not-for-profit status. That changed about five years ago, Wooten said, when a more active board was created.

Wooten is now 72, and he's been doing this since he was 27. "It's kind of hard to stop," he said. "I thought of stopping it cold after 20 years, but everybody objected."

Wooten seems determined to leave Genesisius in good shape, whenever he decides to step down. The Genesisius Guild Foundation raised \$143,000 for a capital campaign, and that money was used this year to re-wire the outdoor theatre, acquire a costume shop, and build a garage. Next year, the fund will replace the stage's substructure. (Genesisius cast member Earl Strupp noted that the wading pool now under the stage was closed in the 1930s because of polio. "We're reaping the benefits," he said.)

Genesisius Guild also bought mosquito machines this year to keep the cast and audience from being sucked dry around the 9 p.m. hour, although at Monday's rehearsal, the verdict was still out on their effectiveness.

Wooten's most important legacy, though, is the selection of plays. Although it's community theatre, you'll never find *You Can't Take It with You* on the Genesisius schedule. That's because Wooten wants to *believe* in the work that's being presented.

"Community theatre usually needs to worry about box office," Wooten said. "If you're always concerned with making money, you're going to do a lot of plays that aren't worth your while." Genesisius' shows cost about \$22,000 a year to produce, with more than half of that coming from the local park board. Grants and donations make up the rest of the budget.

"It's a commitment to the classical arts," said costume designer Ellen Dixon, who has outfitted Genesisius casts since 1991, even though she lives in Mississippi. She comes to the Quad Cities each summer to be a part of the Genesisius crew. She enjoys the experience because the guild's directors and casts try to mine the intent out of antique language, understand it, and express it.

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“You get a whole new perspective on Shakespeare,” she said.

Dixon said she also returns to Genesisus each summer because of the freedom afforded her. She said that Wooten simply instructed her, “You know what I want. Just do it.”

Wooten chafes at the suggestion that because Genesisus uses volunteer actors, the productions aren’t high-quality. Yes, he said, the classics “make demands on you that other plays don’t.” And yes, amateurs “don’t bring all the tricks of the [acting] trade.” But, he said, “amateurs can be very, very good. Some of the best acting I’ve seen has come from amateurs.” And, he added, “I’ve never had to be ashamed of a production in the park.”

“I think they’ve had a lot of good directing over the years,” Dixon said.

“You do it because you enjoy it,” said Andrea Drish, who plays the titular Dark Lady of the Sonnets in Shaw’s play and who has been performing at Genesisus for five years. “I look forward to it every summer.”

As does costumer designer Dixon. Looking over the Genesisus stage in the idyllic park setting – with trees providing shade and respite from the heat – she quoted *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* : “This green plot shall be our stage.”

For more information on Genesisus Guild, tryout procedures, rehearsals, or plays, visit (<http://www.genesius.org>).

2001 Genesisus Guild Schedule

All performances are free and begin at 8 p.m. in Lincoln Park, off 38th Street and 11th Avenue in Rock Island.

June 30, July 1, 7, 8

The Dark Lady of the Sonnets, by George Bernard Shaw
A Phoenix Too Frequent, by Christopher Fry

July 14, 15, 21, 22

The Trojan Women, by Euripides

July 28, 29, August 4, 5

Hamlet, by William Shakespeare

August 11, 12, 18, 19

The Acharnians, by Aristophanes