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SCT Loses Icon Bob Anderson

BY ZACK PLAIR
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A familiar face in the Playhouse on Main box office has punched his last ticket to his last show, but the mark Robert G. "Bob" Anderson made on Starkville Community Theatre will likely carry on for generations to come.

Anderson, 82, passed away Sunday morning in a Memphis hospital. He had traveled with friends Happy and Babs Deas to see a show at the Orpheum Theatre on Saturday when Happy said Anderson suffered a stroke.

The Deas ate with Anderson several times a week and traveled with him frequently. They also attend the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection in Starkville, where Anderson was a longtime member.



Anderson with the cast of *Trying*, Krista Vowell and Edwin Ellis, the last show Anderson directed for SCT.

"It hasn't sunk in yet" said Happy, who serves as SCT president. "I haven't really thought of what all this is going to mean. He was so intertwined in our lives."

Anderson lived a bit of a trailblazer's life, helping found the Starkville Community Theatre and being the communication department's first hire at Mississippi State University. He taught as a professor at MSU for a number of years, mostly within the broadcast concentration, before retiring in 1993. He served for decades

as SCT's treasurer.

MSU Communication Department Head John Forde was Anderson's student in the early 1980's, and he also serves as an SCT board member. He said Anderson had greatly influenced students in the department, encouraging them to pursue broadcasting careers, and he had a very personable teaching style.

"He was very humorous," Forde said. "He joked a lot. He told stories. He made it very interesting."

Anderson and his wife, Mary Eleanor, joined SCT in 1978 and longtime friend Edwin Ellis said Bob directed the group's first show, *6 Rms Riv Vu*, which the cast performed as a dinner theatre at the old University Inn (where Chick-Fil-A now sits.)

Ellis said he had become involved with SCT by its second show, performed in the old Fred's building on Lafayette Street that now houses Downtown Martial Arts Academy, and he's stayed involved ever since as either an actor or through building sets. He considered Bob something of a mentor.

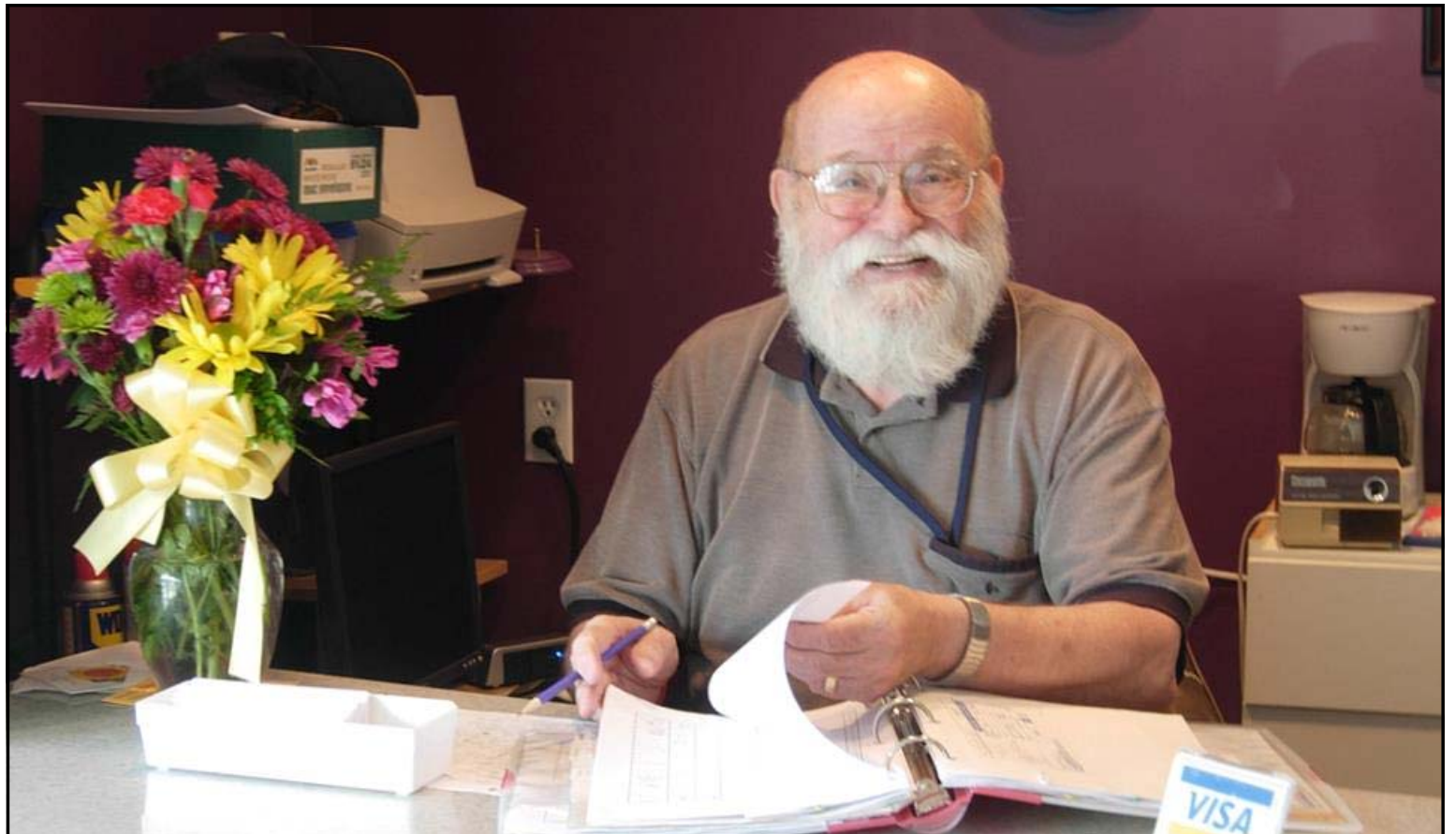
"(Bob) helped me learn how to set up lights and build sets," Ellis said. "That's what he knew how to do, and he didn't mind showing others how. He was always around for giving advice, and I used him a lot for that."

As both a director and set manager, Ellis said Bob always had in mind what he wanted, but that never stymied creativity for those productions. In fact, he said Bob always encouraged actors to develop their own characters as much as they could without negatively impacting his overall vision for the show.

Ellis said the Andersons became a very influential couple within the SCT, especially during the early years, as Mary Eleanor often worked with actors on diction and blocking. Sometimes, Ellis admitted, he had problems learning the diction because he had "too much of a Southern accent" for some of the roles he played.

"It's difficult to separate Bob and Mary Eleanor in the history of the theatre," Ellis said. "They worked well together as a couple."

Early on, Ellis said SCT hopped from place-to-place to perform, including the old Boardtown Cafeteria, the MSU School of Veterinary Medicine Auditorium and the Greensboro Center. He said the Andersons played an integral part in SCT acquiring and renovating the Playhouse on Main, which opened in 1996.



A familiar sight, Dr. Bob Anderson worked tirelessly with Starkville Community Theatre for decades, including manning the box office at SCT's Playhouse on Main.



Dr. Anderson with (left) Clyde and Marsha Williams and (center) Marianne Ulmer and Terry McDowell during the 2009 AACTFest awards in Tacoma, Washing; and (right) with SCT president and longtime friend, Happy Deas during the 2012 SCT Banquet.

After Mary Eleanor died in 2005, Bob remained active with SCT, primarily working in the box office.

"We depended very heavily on Bob," Ellis said. "Having him pass away so suddenly is truly a shock to everyone."

SCT Vice President Paula Mabry said Bob's death definitely cast a shadow on auditions for SCT's production of *Steel Magnolias* Sunday and Monday.

"Everybody knew him and was touched by him," Mabry said. "It was like the elephant in the room."

SCT members gathered at Old Venice before auditions for a toast to Bob's memory, and SCT will install a ghost light that will shine from center stage at the Playhouse on Main to honor the local icon.

Bob also started a scholarship fund in his wife's honor in 2006 that has provided scholarships to Starkville High School

students each year who plan to study theatre. Mabry said the fund started with just one scholarship annually, but each of the last two years SCT has awarded three \$1,000 scholarships to SHS seniors.

"His mission in seeking young people to pursue theatre arts was greatly appreciated," Mabry said.

"It was very important to him that Starkville Community Theatre keep up a high quality, and it was very important to him that our theatre was paid for and that we have become a notable theatre in the Southeast.

"He was a very special person to all of us," she added. "It will be very hard to go back to the theatre and not see him there."

Funeral services are scheduled for 11 a.m. Thursday at the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection.