

Original board and cast member reflects on the success of SCT

By Abby Barber
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Beautiful scenery, great scripts and talented actors may come to mind when thinking of aspects of a successful theater, but to a Starkville Community Theatre veteran, a theater is only as good as its volunteers.

"The involvement of so many dedicated people is what has caused SCT to succeed," said Robert E. Wolverton, who helped start the theater in 1978.

From the beginning, Starkville citizens and various community organizations, such as service clubs and Mississippi State University, gave their time and efforts to help SCT get off the ground, Wolverton said.

"Volunteers, such as Bob and Mary Eleanor Anderson, Clyde and Marsha Williams, Monroe Dewberry, John Graeff and Jean Snyder, were powerhouses behind the theater and made everything come together," said Wolverton. "Without the combined work of these volunteers, as well as so many others, SCT would not be where it is today."

Wolverton's involvement with starting the theater began after a talk with Jan Zeppelin, a Starkville native employed with the Chamber of Commerce. Soon thereafter, Zeppelin placed a small ad in the Starkville Daily News, asking interested persons to come to a meeting and discuss the possibility of forming a community theater. Much to their surprise, forty people showed up at the meeting, and the theater grew from there.

The Chamber of Commerce served as original headquarters, but the group soon grew too large and had to move to the public library. To keep the momentum going, SCT decided to put on its first play called, *You Can't Take it with You*, in the conference room of the Ramada Inn (now the University Inn).

"We decided to start with what is called a 'big cast play'," Wolverton said. "More people in the cast meant more people buying tickets to see their friends and family perform."

After the group began to plan future productions, it was faced with two dilemmas. First, SCT had to find financial patrons to keep the theater running. Next, the group had to find a permanent place to perform its plays.

"Our aim from the beginning was to make enough money from ticket sales and contributions not have to have fundraisers," Wolverton said. "We used membership lists donated by other organizations to round up members and donations for the theater."

The next problem SCT faced was establishing a location for its productions. "We had no permanent home, so it was hard to find a place to perform," Wolverton said.

The acting troupe did rehearsals and shows everywhere: the basement of the Wesley Foundation, the Episcopal church hall, Lee Hall auditorium, the vet school and even peoples' homes.

"We said we were like a medieval troupe," Wolverton said with a smile. "Give us a hay wagon, and we would perform anywhere."

Though SCT found places to perform, it had to pay for basic materials for sets, costumes and physical facilities attractive enough to lure audiences. Also, most locations could not remain available for the amount of time needed to build sets and rehearse, since six weeks is the normal time from first rehearsal to production.

"It was time to find a home for our theater, and the community-wide efforts to identify a permanent home remain one my fondest memories of SCT," Wolverton said.

Volunteers from SCT and the Starkville community decided to renovate a deserted school on Greensboro Street and turn it into a theater, as well as a community center. They raised funds and did necessary renovations for the project.

"We took an old, dilapidated school building and turned into a theater, as well as a community center for all Starkville citizens to use," Wolverton said. "I consider that the greatest triumph for SCT, and I am glad we were able to do that for everyone."

The building, now called Greensboro Center, was perfect for the SCT to put on its productions, but many other community groups also wanted to use it. Scheduling problems and the placing of permanent offices in the building forced SCT to begin to look for a new home.

In 1995, SCT moved into its present home in the Katz Building on Main Street. "We had to go through the process of a mortgage and a loan, but in the end, all of the sweat equity was worth it," Wolverton said. "Again, it was the volunteers that made the difference."

Starkville Community Theatre has settled nicely into its permanent home, and it now boasts over 400 members. Many actors who began with SCT are still acting today, making a nice blend of the older and newer generations of the theater.

Wolverton has enjoyed being involved with SCT, and thanks his wife Peggy for being the greatest member of SCT's support team, as well as his own.

"Peggy helped me with interpreting and learning my lines, and was tremendous in her support," Wolverton said. "She was also someone whom everyone could count on at SCT, because she would never hesitate to throw on some old clothes and do whatever was needed."

Wolverton looks fondly upon his involvement in SCT productions. "Our growing support would have waned, if people had not enjoyed going to the plays over the years," Wolverton said. "The plays were extremely enjoyable to me, due to the many delightful roles I had."

Wolverton's top three roles included father of the bride, "Roy Hubley", in Act Three of Neil Simon's Plaza Suite, head of the family, "H.C. Curry", in The Rainmaker, and "Carl Bolton" in Morning's at Seven. He has played everything from a minister to a policeman, and has loved every minute of it.

"It is fun to play a character for a few weeks, but it is sometimes hard in a small town to convince the audience that you are someone else," Wolverton said with a smile. "One time I played a villain, and no one believed that I could be a bad guy."

Another memorable experience for Wolverton came when his daughter Laurie Wolverton NeSmith directed him in a production of Arsenic and Old Lace. His wife Peggy played a part in the play as well. "Peggy didn't really want to be on stage, but we convinced her to play a non-speaking role as a ghost," Wolverton said. "It was a fun time for us to share as a family, and Laurie has grown into quite an actress and director."

Wolverton has seen SCT succeed for 25 years. "It's grand to see people you have gotten to know so well grow and change over the years," he said. "Where we are now, in contrast to where we began, is really amazing."

Starkville Community Theater has grown from a theater struggling to survive into a thriving company with a promising future. Without the help of Wolverton and many dedicated volunteers, it might not have been possible.