

“It takes a Community”

Reflections on Starkville Community Theatre’s humble beginnings by one of its founders

By Anisa Sullivan

She moved to Starkville, Miss. in the 1970s and could tell something was missing in the quaint college town – that something was a community theater program. Jan Zeppelin, founder of the Starkville Community Theatre (SCT), no longer resides in Starkville, but certainly left her mark and considers the town her home. From SCT’s humble, unsure beginnings to owning its own building, Zeppelin was there at the beginning of its evolution into something really special.

“I moved to Starkville and began making inquiries and found out we had no community theater,” said Zeppelin. “I went to the Chamber of Commerce and met with the director, Emily Jones. She spoke with the board and they agreed we needed a community theater.”

After that initial 1975 meeting, Zeppelin held one of her own. After placing numerous phone calls and advertisements in the Starkville Daily News, approximately 50 people showed up.

“Because of that initial excitement, we decided we couldn’t wait till the fall to put on our first show, so we did one in the summer,” she said. “We did our first show, *6 Rms Riv Vu*, in the Old Ramada Inn ballroom, which is now the University Inn. We had an excellent turnout.”

Zeppelin gives a lot of credit to Bob and Mary Eleanor Anderson, who directed that first show and remains active in the Starkville community. She also mentioned Charlie and Inez Thomas and Larry Jones who were avid supporters and participants of the theater.

“It took the entire community, who was very supportive, to get us started,” said Zeppelin. “We would take out ads in the paper asking for costumes and hats. We borrowed a control board from the Vet School. People made many donations. The whole town supported us and came to the shows.”

Zeppelin said the old Fred’s building on South Lafayette Street, another building across the street from Fred’s, a big room in what is now a law office, the Vet School and the Greensboro Center were just a few places SCT put on its productions.

“One of our productions was where Sullivan’s Office Supply now is,” said Zeppelin. “It was a restaurant and we build a stage right over the steam table!”

Sacrifices were many and the SCT crew often had to make do, but what Zeppelin remembers are the shows, the excitement and the good times.

“We scrounged in the beginning years and we put on some good shows and some not-so-good shows,” she said. “Lordy, did we make do! But, we had a great time.”

Zeppelin said that as time went on, the SCT was able to take more liberties with its performances. After proving itself as a respectable theatrical organization through “at least half-known plays,” the group was able to push more artistic limits. Zeppelin looks back on the variety of the performances fondly and easily rattles off an extensive list of memorable plays.

“Oh, heavens, I don’t have a favorite play!” Zeppelin exclaims at the mention of the question. “One that really sticks out in my mind, though, is *You Can’t Take it With You*. The cast was so large and varied. It was so much fun.”

Zeppelin also mentions *Dial M for Murder* among her favorites. She said she preferred taking on the role of producer, although she had a supporting role in *Our Town* and directed *Black Sheep of the Family*.

“I love just making sure the whole production comes together,” she said.

Zeppelin said she was thrilled when she found out current productions were being held at SCT’s permanent home in the old Katz dress shop.

“We tried to buy several places for the theater and I am delighted to hear Starkville Community Theatre has a place to call home,” said Zeppelin.

Although she only currently uses her drama major to “keep a straight face when I really want to laugh or cry,” Zeppelin feels drama is very important to a community.

“Drama expresses our lives,” she said. “Drama is a reflection of life and people want to see that.” She goes on to say that it was because of the community’s support and donations that the SCT flourished. Zeppelin says it was the whole process of working with such wonderful people in the theater and the Starkville-Mississippi State University community that really make her experience so memorable.

“You’ve made me want to check into my old boxes!” she exclaims after discussing her years in Starkville. “I’ve got some great posters, old programs and tons of other stuff. I can’t wait to dig through it.”

Jan Zeppelin has resided in San Antonio, Texas since 1994 and works in real estate. She remains an avid theatergoer.