

Bill Robinson's Legacy – Past, Present, Future

By Kathy Jordan

With a grandfather who ran a medicine show and a father who worked in a Charleston, W. Va., opera house, it seems inevitable that William S. “Bill” Robinson would end up in show biz.

And, although he almost abandoned the stage several times, the retired head of the Mesa College Drama Department became co-director of the college's outstandingly successful summer theater series, which ran for some 20 years.

When Bill first started teaching at Mesa in 1960, there was no opportunity to do summer theatre because the only stage was in the gymnasium-auditorium in Houston Hall. When the Fine Arts Building was completed in 1970, The Daily Sentinel wrote some editorials asking why there wasn't summer theatre. Bill remembers talking to Preston Walker, the Sentinel's owner-publisher, telling him he would like to do summer theatre and saying he needed the Sentinel's support.

The first curtain for Summer Theatre at Mesa College, directed by Bill and Perry Carmichael, went up in 1972. It continued after Bill retired until sometime in the 1990s. When the Fine Arts Building needed some rewiring, summer theatre was discontinued. It never re-opened.

Bill's idea was to provide entertainment for the summer and to give students an opportunity to work in theatre. He also wanted it to be a tourist attraction, which it was. People came from Aspen, Glenwood Springs, Delta, Montrose and Moab, along with casual vacationers from other areas.

Since there was also an academic school-year theatre program, Bill believed that the more classical, important plays in the history of theatre should be done in the fall, winter and spring, and the summer should be the time for great fun.

So the directors aimed for comedies and musicals, which the cast could enjoy along with the audience. When he talks to people who were in the program, they tell him it was a wonderful experience. It was also good training for television, where an actor rehearses today and shoots tomorrow.

Plays by authors such as Noel Coward, Kaufman and Hart, S.N. Behrman and more-recent comedy playwrights made great summer theatre fare, Bill said, because they had a “wonderful frivolity.”

Summer Theatre began as the “Barn Circuit” in the 1920s. Theatres in New York were open, but with no air conditioning, people didn't attend. They were going to resorts along

the coast, so actors started putting together plays and performed in barns. Some of America's best plays, which came out of the Provincetown Playhouse, were written by Eugene O'Neal. Elitch Gardens in Denver was the oldest existing summer theatre until it was closed in the 1990s

Bill credits at least some of his interest in theatre to "Granddad's trunk" which he and his siblings were never allowed to touch. However, one day Bill sneaked into the trunk and found old costumes and sundry things that had belonged to his grandfather and were used in his medicine show. The show had come as far west as Cripple Creek during its heyday.

Bill's interest in theatre remained as he grew up, and it was the thing that kept him in high school. After graduation he worked a couple of years before going into the U.S. Army during World War II.

When Bill returned home from the war in 1945, he went out on a show for about six weeks, traveling throughout the country with Clair Tree Major Children's Theatre Company. When they played in the West, Bill decided that if this was show business he wanted no part of it. He quit the show and hitchhiked back home to West Virginia from Albuquerque, N.M.

He then enrolled in college thinking that he had had his fling in theatre and that it didn't really work. But, after he graduated from college, he headed to New York to try to find fame and fortune. He got neither, he said.

He worked one season in summer stock in Provincetown, Mass., than got a job teaching school in North Dakota. Each summer he would return to work at the Newport Casino Theatre in Rhode Island. At Mesa College, he finally got a long-time opportunity to develop his talents as a director.

Bill found The Sentinel a great help in developing and supporting the summer program. Sentinel reporters reviewed the plays, with Bill sometimes agreeing and sometimes disagreeing with what they wrote. He remembers many letters to the editor praising or sneering at the reviews. That was okay with Bill because he felt as long as they were talking about summer theatre it was good.

Along with Bill and Perry Carmichael, Maggie Robb and David Cox worked in the summer theatre, doing five shows in a six weeks time. Sometimes the kids were rehearsing one show and performing in another, and trying to keep their lines straight could be a problem.

Summer theatre at Mesa became hugely popular, and even today, 20 years since Bill was directing, people are still asking him why there is no such program now. Bill said he has no idea why, but he thinks it would be a great program to start again.