

“Original” Bisbee performers visit Parsons

The Rivertime Players got a little surprise last weekend when some of the tent theatre “troupers” paid the Toby Show and its cast members a visit.

Mickey Lacey of Conway, Arkansas, Roberta Wilkes of Kansas City Kansas and Mark Peper from the St. Louis area were taken back in time as they not only watched the “Meal Ticket” performed by the local actors, but they also took their turn on stage to entertain like they used to.

Their experiences in the tent theatre bring back fond memories of a unique time and place and they all say they loved it.

“I was born in the business,” noted Lacey. “My mom and dad were in the business and I was born in 1941. My first time on stage was when I was six weeks old as a carry on baby. It didn’t last long. I began crying during the leading man’s line and I was traded for a doll!”

“Me and my sister did parts and I helped set up and tear down,” recalled Lacey.

Lacey says as he grows older, he remembers liking everything about the tent repertoire theatre.

“I used to cuss it when it was raining and bad weather,” recalled Lacey. “Then when the house was full, I loved it.”

Lacey says that when he thinks about the last year he trouped on the show, he feels remorse.

“As I was driving off the lot, I looked in my mirror,” disclosed Lacey. “Business was down. Everyone had a television, but I couldn’t see how anything so pure and American could die. Now, there are very few of the old troupers still left.”

Lacey has been coming to the Parsons Toby Shows for the past three years and he declares, “They are doing a fabulous job to keep it alive.”

“The energy and work they put into it,” Lacey says with a nod. “I can’t say enough about it and the way the city supports it. I spend the first 25 years of my life trouping in tent shows and I want to be back on stage.”

Wilkes says she drove in on Saturday especially to show her support to the “Vaudeville entertainers” in Parsons. She also says she was born in tent theatre and traveled until she was 11 years old.

“I quit traveling and went to high school and then went back at 18,” reported Wilkes. “I stayed about a year and then went on to college and got married.”

Wilkes says she still stays involved in theatre because she loves all aspects of it.

“I was a natural born gypsy,” Wilkes said with a smile. “It is a different life for a kid. We moved every week.”

Her first part was in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. She also did specialties like singing and dancing. She also performed in other plays which were not Toby plays.

“My mother was a dancer and my dad was a piano player,” explained Wilkes. “Both were also actors.”

Mark Peper performed in Schaffner Players which were based in Missouri, Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota. The group’s last play performance was in 1983.

“I miss the atmosphere,” acknowledged Peper. “It was festive, down home, earthy and wholesom. The beast part was the minute the first song started every night. You knew it was show time.”

All three troupers lived the life of jumping from town to town, setting up the tent, performing a comedy or dramatic play with Vaudeville songs intertwined. Then the tent would come down and on to the next location.

Wilkes and Lacey have written a book about trouping, “One More Season.” The book is a work of fiction based on facts drawn from Wilkes and Lacey’s memories. The authors’ notes say that the book is about a way of life that has disappeared from the face of American society and about the tent itself.

“A piece of canvas held up by poles. A circus top with a twist. The dramatic end tent. Made for repertoire tent theatre. Theatre in a tent.”



The Rivertime Players performed the Toby Show, “Meal Ticket” last weekend and had a chance to discuss the tent show’s history with former Bisbee actors Mickey Lacey of Conway, Arkansas, Roberta Wilkes of Kansas City, Kansas and Mark Peper from the St. Louis area. The “tent show” family oriented entertainment has been bringing smiles to people’s faces since the late 1800’s and has since been replaced by television according to the actors. Thanks to Rivertime Players David Taylor, Dottie Hill, Mark Tubbs, Jenni Turner, Hunter Jordan, Shane Bridges, Elicia Spain, Amber Lyles, Jake Lyles, Victor Evans and Hannah Mills the tent shows form the past have come back to life in Parsons.

Guess what? It’s not dead in Parsons. Just ask anyone who saw last weekend’s performance. The laughs from the crowd prove that the tent shows can still provide quality family entertainment.

The Rivertime Players will be performing the play again on Friday, October 4th and Saturday, October 5th. Tickets may be purchased in advance at the Parsons Centre for \$6 or \$7 the night of the play. Children’s tickets are \$2.

