

OUR TOWN



Bob Hollis from Scottsburg, Indiana, Dick Ellis from Quincy, Illinois, Mickey Lacey from Vilonia, Arkansas, Grace Davis from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, Roberta Wilkes from Kansas City, Kansas, David Wagaman from Burlington, Iowa, Mark Peper from Columbus, Missouri, David Ripper from Cedar Rapids, Iowa and Brian Haymond from Windfield, Iowa (pictured left to right) filled the “Toby Stage” Saturday afternoon and the stories began to fly. The group of entertainers came to Parsons to enjoy the performances from the Rivertime Players.

EXPERIENCES Under Canvas

By Rhonda Mitchell
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Time stands still for no man. Most people have heard that statement in their lifetime and it is true. Last week, nine former troupers visited the Rivertime Players’ Toby tent in Parsons, and recalled good times they have had and some still have as performers who get their thrills from making people laugh.

These seasoned entertainers have their own lingo added with their original flavor. They love to be on stage and when the curtain opens, it opens into a world all its own. Bob Hollis from Scottsburg, Indiana, Dick Ellis from Quincy, Illinois, Mickey Lacey from Vilonia, Arkansas, Grace Davis from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, Roberta Wilkes from Kansas City, Kansas, David Wagaman from Burlington, Iowa, Mark Peper from Columbus, Missouri, David Ripper from Cedar Rapids, Iowa and Brian Haymond from Windfield, Iowa filled the stage Saturday afternoon and “the stories began to fly.”

The performers talked about memories of past shows “specialty” acts and funny things that have happened along the way.

“It’s team work,” noted Peper. “It’s like no other. You become a family and it is the best experience.”

“When I came out of college, I had never heard of a tent show,” stated Haymond. “I found out it was a different way of doing things than the theater.”

“You have a connection with the audience,” explained Wilkes. “It’s a heart connection and I remember when I first got that. If I could just touch the heart of one person, then that’s my craft.”

“I remember one show and there was a farmer sit-

ting in the front row,” recalled Davis. “He kept laughing and slapping his leg, but he kept looking at the floor. He would laugh and slap his leg, but never look up. I asked and said he’s having a real good time, but why does he keep looking at the floor? He was blind.”

Hollis says he was a college student, majoring in theater arts, looking for a summer job when he began acting in Toby shows.

“In 1958, it was a bad year,” noted Hollis. There were no jobs to be had in Southern Indiana, so I went to visit an uncle in Missouri. He owned a restaurant and I figured if I couldn’t find anything else, I could help him and at least have something to eat. After a couple of weeks with no prospects, the tent show came to town. I, the hotshot college thespian from the big city, sat through one performance of the tallest, thickest, high-tasseled combine-ready corn I had ever seen and I knew I couldn’t take six more nights of that. Not from the audience. I had to be backstage. Or better yet, on stage. Long story short, I spoke with the owners the next day and two days later took my place in the cast as a singer, string bass player, straight man for Toby and general gofer.”

Hollis says the best part of doing Toby shows is the audience response with the grins on the faces of the kids and the twinkle in a pretty girl’s eye. “Oh, and pay call on Friday afternoons.”

Hollis says the worst part was being at the mercy of the weather. The difference in “way back when” and now is there was less competition for an audience.

“When the Toby Show came to town, it was a big deal,” stated Hollis. “We filled the tent almost every



Don’t miss the last chance to see *The Good, The Bad and The Toby* Friday, Oct. 9 and Saturday, Oct. 10. Tent flaps open at 6:30 p.m. with pre-show entertainment and the show begins at 7:30 p.m.

night 55 years ago. Thirty years ago, it was standing room only every night. But we’ve been technologized out of business. Now a traveling company could close the season with a small fortune in the bank — if they started out with a very large fortune!”

When asked to describe himself, Hollis contends he is “a 25-year-old man in a 78-year-old body wondering, how do I get out of here?”

Lacey’s (now age 72) first appearance on stage was as a replacement for a doll as a six-week old baby.

“Then after the second entrance, I began crying during the leading man’s lines, so they replaced me with the doll again. Dad said I was just trying to upstage the leading man!”

He spent the first 22 years of his life on Traveling Repertoire Tent Theatre Shows. He recalls swallowing bugs during vocal specialties, but one of the funniest things happened to his mother on Slout Comedians.

“Mr. Slout was playing a G-String (a comical old man in lieu of Toby),” explained Lacey. “My mother was to enter and begin her entrance down a stairway in a beautiful gown. Mr. Slout was to stand at the bottom of the stairs in awe of his daughter, supposedly to say, Marie, you’re a vision. An honest mistake he said, Marie, you’re a virgin. The audience knowing it was an honest mistake, cracked up and the whole cast did. Although that laugh was unintentional, it lasted forever before everyone could get themselves back in character.”

Lacey says Parsons should be very proud of the Rivertime Players theatre group.

“I’m so happy to see young children as well as the younger adults involved in this bygone era of theatrical history. “For the past few years that I have attended Rivertime Players productions, I have not seen a big difference in an audience from years past. The best way I can describe it (with

the most affections, corn is still selling. Maybe a tear or two; maybe a real belly laugh, but never a blush!”)

Roberta Wilkes, 73, began performing at age three, and was around 18 when she performed in a Toby Show.

“I was born into the business,” noted Wilkes. “I loved everything about it. I am, a gypsy at heart. In particular, I like seeing the audience smile and hearing them laugh.”

Peper, 52, joined the Schaffner Players when he was 17. He traveled between his junior-senior year of high-school and freshman-sophomore year of college.

“I had watched the show since I was eight-years-old,” recalled Peper. “I wanted to move to Hollywood, but doubted my parents would ever let that happen.”

He says the best part of the show was performing in front of a variety of audiences throughout the summer and finally getting that laugh he had worked on getting all summer long.

Ripper was in his late

teens when he first began performing in Toby shows as a steady, paying job to entertain audiences. He says in these type of shows, you learn the “grind” of show business.

“By that, I mean one gains the experience of learning how to think on your feet, work as a team and keep it fresh for the audience for many performances,” maintains Ripper. Getting to connect with a different bunch of people each and every night is important Ripper points out.

“After all, that’s why I do it in the first place,” contends Ripper. “The actor’s drug is that rare moment when you feel connected to the audience, your fellow players and the story you are telling.”

This weekend will be the last performance of the latest Rivertime Players production. The actors have put a lot of hard work into making the audience laugh and having a great time for the entire family. Make plans to attend “The Good, The Bad and The Toby” this Friday, Oct. 9 or Saturday, Oct. 10. The performances begin at 7:30, with the tent “flaps” opening at 6:30 for pre-show entertainment. Admission is \$7 for adults and \$2 for children under 13.

This year, the cast is offering a special “deal.” The local cast wants to help the Shepherds Fund who is needing food for the food pantry. Anyone who brings in canned food items for the pantry, will receive a free bag of popcorn.

Gather up your canned goods, your sense of humor and come on out under the big tent! It’s time to laugh and appreciate all the local talent who are carrying on the traditions which began in the 1920s. “It’s Toby time!”