

1951 - Gerda Brown, the Grande Dame of VLT, in a production of *Elizabeth the Queen*.



The Diamond on Hilyard Street

VLT TURNS 75. by Aria Seligmann

Calling yourself the oldest community theater west of the Mississippi is a pretty huge boast, so it's a tiny bit ironic that the claim to fame goes to a venue that's really quite small. In fact, the owner of that distinguished title is the Very Little Theatre, right here in Eugene. Celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, VLT boasts a vast history. Nearly every Eugenean who loves the smell of the greasepaint has passed through its Green Room at some point.

It all started on March 3, 1929, when eight Eugene thespians formed their own drama group. The legend goes that one said to the others, "There are hundreds of little theater groups up and down the country, but this is certainly going to be a *very* little one."

Very Little Theatre has survived the Great Depression, World War II, changing tastes and increasing competition to lead it to this year, when for its 75th anniversary, it will offer sort of a "Best Of" season. Four of the five plays programmed have been performed at VLT before, to critical and financial success. Of *Our Town*, *The Lion in Winter*, *Cabaret*, *Barefoot in the Park* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, only the latter has never been staged at VLT before.

One of the reasons for VLT's success, according to current president Karen Scheeland, now in her second consecutive term but who's served as president in the past and been a VLT member since 1969, is that the theater has its niche in the community, which is decidedly mainstream. That's due, in part, to the fact that the entire VLT membership, now 170 strong, votes on the season. In order to become a member, says Scheeland, "You have to work on three shows in different capacities," which prevents any one person from just being an actor or a director. Dues are \$15 per year.

Whatever the formula for success, clearly it's worked. In the beginning, the theater staged shows first at the Heilig, then the "Pillbox," an old drug store near the UO. That venue offered *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, starring Edgar Buchanan, who was later to be cast as Uncle Joe on "Petticoat Junction."

In 1934, the theater incorporated and in 1935 moved to the Lane County Fairgrounds, where in a space called "The Barn," which housed 275, it opened with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But paying for leaky roof repair and updating a wood stove, its only source of heat, sucked up many of the theater's resources, and it struggled for awhile through tough times and World War II. It remained afloat, however, and eventually had enough funds to purchase its current property at 24th and Hilyard from the City of Eugene for \$3000. In 1950, VLT member Claire Hamlin, an architect, designed the present auditorium.

Owning your own space is a pipedream for all of the other theater companies in town, as they must constantly meet rising rents and landlord demands. With its own space, VLT has been able to sink its funds into improvements, adding state-of-the-art light boards, equipment, seats, and remodeling as necessary.

A few years ago, a change was made that reverberated throughout town. VLT opened its Stage Left area, formerly used for rehearsal space and post-show receptions, to what shows future promise of housing a second season. In the past few years, Stage Left has produced brand new works by local actor/playwright Steve Mandell, a work-in-progress by William Mastrosimone, and last season, a phenomenal production of Beckett's *Endgame*.

Like the mainstage season, however, Stage Left shows are voted on by the membership after readings are presented to a special Stage Left play committee and the board, according to mainstage Play Committee Chair Steve Mandell.

Mandell's *The Audition* was produced in 2000 and his second work, *Personals*, produced in 2002.

Mandell says what VLT offered him was not just a venue, but all the talent to make the show. "It's a true collaboration," he says. "I just write the script, then I hand it over to others." Whereas some area theaters will allow new works to be staged if the writer/producer takes the financial risk, VLT offered the space and the directors, stage managers, and all of their contacts to bring his shows to fruition.

This year, with the 75th anniversary celebrations, which include, in addition to the regular lineup, a huge costume show in November and a benefit in the Stage Left area later in the spring, no new productions in that section have been slated. After all, VLT is an all-volunteer theater, and everyone has just so much time, says Scheeland. But there will be new works at Stage Left in the future, and in the meantime, VLT is looking forward to this season.

Its very first production of the season, *Our Town*, is brimming with talent. Mandell, who's in the show, points out that in addition to director Lloyd Brass, Stephen Speidel is stage managing, and Jenny Nissel (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Miracle Worker*) stars.

Bringing in younger talent is critical, says Scheeland, who points out, "After all, our membership is getting up there." To encourage younger people to come into the VLT fold, a special high school program is being formed to work with youth and a collaborative workshop and culminating performance with Rose Children's Theatre is scheduled for December.

Some younger faces should add to the ambience of the 75-year-old entity.

"VLT really is a family," says Scheeland. **EW**



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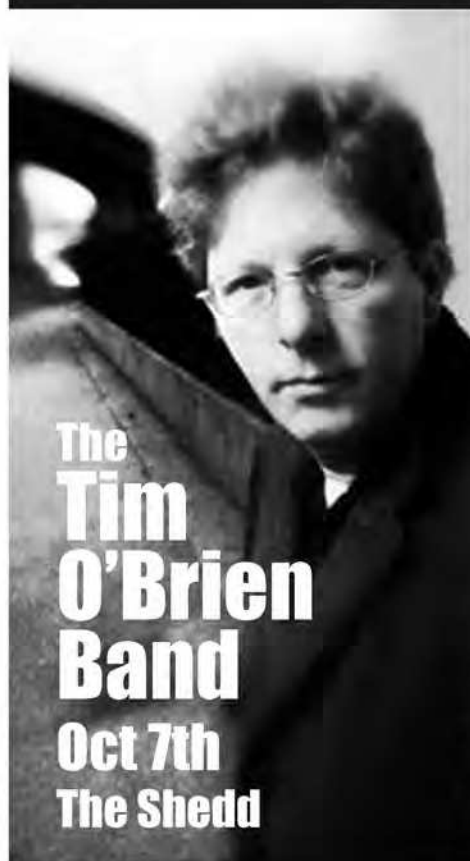
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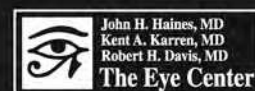
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