

WASHED out of business on opening night, 40 years ago, "MUNY" Opera has come a long way to pre-eminence in its field. A disastrous beginning became a technical and artistic triumph.

All it took was time, money, energy, imagination and the St. Louis spirit. All these elements are combined in that extraordinary civic organization, The Municipal Theatre Association of St. Louis, affectionately known as "MUNY."

In place of that once flooded field in Forest Park, littered with debris, vanished hopes and lost money, is now the world's largest outdoor theatre. It is the only air-conditioned outdoor theatre.

How?—because MUNY's Board of Directors included not only city officials and art patrons but also businessmen.

"The Theatre has the pick of the best brains in the St. Louis area," said the late manager, Paul Beisman. "Believe it or not, this board meets every week in the year to discuss theatre problems."

One of the first problems which confronted MUNY was the weather. Mark Twain, practically a local boy, said that everybody talks about the weather but nobody ever does anything about it. MUNY did that very thing.

The torrid St. Louis summers seemed an impossible obstacle to surmount if MUNY were to survive as a summer theatre. Air-conditioning experts took on the prob-

the
Municipal Theatre Association

PRESENTS

SEE IT
★ IN ★
ST. LOUIS

*The St. Louis Municipal Opera
blends cast talent with civic pride
to obtain perfect performances*

by Ed McNamara



MUNICIPAL THEATRE

Forest Park,

St. Louis, Missouri

lem. They began by air-conditioning the administration buildings, dressing rooms and wardrobes. Later they piped cool air down into the musicians' pit.

What about the vast audience?

THE ENGINEERS really had to come up with something different to cool 12,000 people sitting outdoors, with the temperature in the 90's most of the summer. First they used "concrete cooling conditioning". A thin film of water was trickled over the concrete tiers on hot days. This prevented heat from being stored up in the concrete and released at night.

Next season two huge dispersal fans were installed to reduce the humidity in the theatre. The fans bring down fresh dry air from high in the atmosphere to replace moist air near the ground, where the spectators sit. The fans also speed up the rate of evaporation of moisture at ground level. They are turned on just before the performances and also during intermissions.

Two summers ago, MUNY started the system of large blowers which draws fresh air into the lower section of the theatre, circulates it through ducts and at the same time draws out the warm air. Four low speed blowers move 25,000 cubic feet of air a minute and operate so silently that no one is aware of them.

However, MUNY still had to entice citizens from their homes on sweltering nights. The Board came up with the idea of air-conditioned buses. Now, gaily flagged "Opera Buses" course all over the city, transporting theatre-goers to and from the theatre in cool comfort.

St. Louis' Police Department co-

operates in preventing crowds from becoming "jams" at the gates.

To improve the acoustics in such a tremendous theatre, Bell Laboratories, Western Electric and RCA came up with the latest high-fidelity sound equipment. Each performance is supervised by a sound engineer in a control booth. The result is "front row reception" any where.

MUNY has the largest outdoor stage in the world. 115 by 90 feet, including a 48 feet revolving stage capable of a complete revolution in 90 seconds. A stage of this size requires all sets to be constructed three times normal dimensions. Since MUNY sets a dazzling pace of a new show each week, a corps of carpenters, painters and electricians is kept busy in a mammoth workshop backstage.

Despite these heroic proportions, the sylvan setting of the stage has been artfully preserved. Oak trees, a hundred feet tall, flank the stage and form a perfect natural backdrop. In fact, some of the 150-year-old trees are "on stage," because it was built around them to insure the pastoral effect. Once MUNY went so far as to insure the trees with Lloyds of London.

Visibility in the vast theatre is perfect because it has a natural slope of 53 feet. The site was originally used for early St. Louis pageants. In 1916, the St. Louis Advertising Club raised \$5,000 to lay a concrete floor on the site. The City Adminis-

tration matched the sum. In 1919, the present Municipal Theatre Association was formed with 60 civic minded guarantors.

MUNY scheduled its first performance June 15, 1919, with *Robin Hood*. The night was ominous with storm clouds as Mayor Kiel, the guarantors and the city's theatre-goers waited for the show to start. Just as the stage lights were turned on, Nature stole the show with a tempestuous performance.

THE STORM broke in a cloud burst. Rain poured down in sheets. Behind the stage, the picturesque little River des Peres turned into a raging torrent. It overflowed its banks, poured over the stage and swept away sets, props, musical instruments and scores. MUNY was completely washed out on its first night, and the \$27,000 raised by the guarantors floated away.

However, next morning MUNY set doggedly to work and cleared away the muck and debris. New properties were hurriedly bought. New costumes were scouted up. Sets were improvised and a make-shift stage was completed in time for the evening performance. Over 1,300 people showed up.

The first summer season of six weeks ended with a loss of \$30,000. The guarantors were a stubborn lot and voted to wait for repayment. Mayor Kiel initiated a door-to-door ticket selling campaign. By next season, the deficit was reduced to

\$11,000 and it was finally wiped out by the end of the 1921 season. MUNY was out of the red and on its way to eminence.

The guarantors were needed only once since that time and that was only for a refurbishing job. They were repaid the following year. Now, facing its 41st year of unprecedented success, MUNY is a three million dollar theatre plant that is absolutely free and clear.

This achievement is based solely on the sale of tickets. It is more noteworthy when you learn that there are 1,500 free seats at each performance. On Monday nights, 2000 persons from charitable organizations also are guests of the Association and are given reserved seats.

MUNY now has 1,400 guarantors who underwrote last season with a \$160,000 fund. Nice to know but not necessary, thank you. MUNY is concerned with maintaining its superlative theatrical reputation.

A staff of 400 keeps the summer season rolling. The aim is *perfection*. Backstage is a theatrical city where 5,000 costumes are issued during the season. Each member of the cast is individually fitted each week. \$75,000 a year is spent on renting costumes.

Talent is drawn from Broadway, Hollywood and TV. MUNY has helped to give many a big name a boost up the ladder of theatrical fame. Take Archie Leach, in 1931. MUNY fans liked him a lot. They

still like him, as Cary Grant. Other salad day performers were Irene Dunne, Allan Jones, June Havoc, Marge and Gower Champion, Red Skelton, Cass Daley, Gertrude Nielsen and Virginia Mayo.

THE YOUNGSTERS in the chorus are talented young people who come not only from the St. Louis area, but from all over the U. S. Several hundred try out each year and, after several winnowns, a scant 40 are chosen. There are also two dance masters, for the ballet and modern dance groups.

Near the theatre, two covered pavilions for rehearsals are constantly in use. After each Saturday night performance the entire cast assembles at midnight on the main stage for dress rehearsal for the next week's show. This usually ends at sunrise on Sunday morning. Hard work and high standards, stars from original Broadway casts, all under the supervision of Production Director John Kennedy whose staff includes Musical Director Edwin McArthur, Choreographer and En-

semble Directors Anthony Nelle and Ted Cappy, Art Director Paul G. McGuire, and Stage Director Edward Greenberg. All this adds up to top performances.

St. Louis audiences, over the years, have shown a decided preference for romantic operettas like *New Moon*, *Desert Song*, *Merry Widow* and *Naughty Marietta*, but a jazzy production of *Guys and Dolls* filled the house for an entire week.

If you like statistics, MUNY has presented 200 different operettas, comic operas and musical plays and comedies in 430 separate productions during the last 40 years. Also nine world premieres and eight American premieres. 3,172 total performances have drawn over 25,800,000 spectators.

Behind these cold figures, however, is the story of human effort, civic pride; a stirring example of cooperation between politicians, private enterprise, artists and citizens. These people have a motto adorning their theatre and it is well deserved: "Alone in Its Greatness."

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PITY

the childless couple

musings of a good mother—on a bad day

by Roslyn South

THERE'S nothing sadder than the childless couple. It breaks you up to see them stretched out relaxing around swimming pools in Florida, sitting all suntanned and miserable on the decks of their boats, or going off to Europe like lonesome fools. It's an empty life. There's nothing but more money to spend, more time to enjoy, and a whole lot less to worry about.

The poor childless couple gets so selfish and wrapped up in themselves that you have to feel sorry for them. They don't fight over the children's discipline, they don't blame each other for the characteristics most nauseous in the child, and they miss all the good fun of doing without things for the children's sake. They go along in their dull way doing what they want, getting what they want, and liking each other. It's a pretty pathetic picture.

Everyone should have children. No one should be allowed to escape the wonderful experiences attached to each stage in the development of the young. The happy, happy memories of the baby days: The alert nights, coughing spells, diaper deliveries, dipso baby sitters, saturated mattresses, spilled food, tantrums, emergencies and cries.

Then comes the real fulfillment as the children grow like little acorns and become real nuts. The wonder of watching your overweight ballerina of twelve make a fool of herself in a leotard. The warm smile of the small lad with the sun glistening on 500 bucks' worth of metal braces ruined on peanut brittle. The rollicking, merry, care-free voices as hordes of hysterical kiddies stampede at the birthday party.

A married couple, without little ones, envy their neighbor's bairn. It