

A Voice to Remember

It's time to recall Florence Foster Jenkins.

In this world of no-talent-required celebrity, of Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian, and Snooki, Florence's name has surfaced once again. It has arisen in the minds of several playwrights who sense a moment to revive attention to this woman. Three plays have been dedicated to her memory: *Viva la Diva*, written by Chris Balance in 2001, *Glorious*, by Peter Quilter in 2005, and *Souvenir*, by Stephen Temperley in the same year, this last to be presented at Unity Theatre February 3-20.

Born in 1868 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Florence Foster was a person to be reckoned with, possessing a musical ambition first thwarted by her wealthy banker father and later by her prosperous doctor husband, Frank Thornton Jenkins. Following her divorce and the death of her father, Jenkins came into a personal fortune that enabled her to rekindle her dream of a career as a soprano and singer of arias and art

songs. Her first concert was given in Philadelphia in 1912. Moving to New York, she became involved in the social and musical life of that city, where she founded the Verdi Club and where she began to give annual private recitals, which she bankrolled herself, for her elite friends and social contacts.

Soon, word about her spread beyond Park Avenue and the upper crust, and tickets for her appearances in the ballroom of the Ritz Carlton Hotel were much in demand.



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What Is Actors' Equity?

Periodically, we will attempt to answer questions raised by our readers. If you have a question, feel free to submit it through our administrative phone number, (979) 830-1460, or via e-mail, info@UnityBrenham.org.

Some of the actors you see at Unity Theatre are members of a union called Actors' Equity Association, sometimes simply called Equity. Like other labor unions, it is committed to negotiations promoting the interests, salaries, and working conditions of live theatrical performers and stage managers. Directors and choreographers have a different organization, the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, while film and television actors belong to the Screen Actors Guild.

Theatres that wish to employ Equity actors must meet certain requirements and conditions set out by the actors' union, including those for pay rates,

hours, compensated rehearsal time, and health and retirement benefits.

Prior to the establishment of Equity, a small group of influential actors, a social group known as "The Players," met in secret at the New York home of Edwin Booth, the actor brother of John Wilkes Booth. Equity was officially founded on May 26, 1913, by 112 professional theatre actors, writing a constitution and electing Francis Wilson as its first president. The union was formally recognized in 1919 by the American Federation of Labor, later becoming part of the AFL-CIO.

Throughout the last century, Equity fought for better treatment for performers, for recognition as the representative and bargaining agent for its membership, and for non-discrimination policies for both perform-

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ON THE INSIDE

A Voice to Remember

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The culmination of her ambitions was a concert given at Carnegie Hall in 1944. By this time, her acclaim was such that she sold out her presentation weeks in advance, with tickets being scalped for as much as \$20, even during war-time austerity. As many as 2,000 people had to be turned away.

And yet, the thing of it is, Florence Foster Jenkins had no talent. She had no sense of pitch, tone, rhythm, or phrasing. She simply could not sing. Not just mediocre, she was catastrophically tone-deaf, and quite naturally, she chose to sing some of the most difficult songs in the operatic repertoire: Mo-

zart's "Queen of the Night" or Delibes' "The Bell Song." She thought she was that good, and her presumptions combined with her lack of self-awareness delighted her audiences with suppressed hilarity.

Critics may have been stunned, but not to spoil the fun, they often couched their criticisms as flattery, writing that hers was "a performance not to be missed." Often less kind, one described her as "undaunted by the composer's intent." Another wrote, "Only Mrs. Jenkins has perfected the art of giving added zest by improvising quarter tones, either above or below the original notes."

However, Florence had an ability to interpret rebuke as professional jealousy, and she was always single-mindedly unaffected by any discouraging words. Famously, she once said, "People may say I can't sing, but no one can ever say I didn't sing."



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ers and patrons on the basis of race, creed, color, gender, sexual preference or political belief.

In the 1940s, it stood against policies of segregation. In the 1950s, when actors were being fired in Hollywood and blacklisted by major studios, it refused to cooperate with the anti-communist stance of the political climate and never banned any of its members. In the 1960s, Equity was involved in securing public funding of the performing arts, which included the

formation of the National Endowment for the Humanities. In more recent times, the organization has fought for the preservation of historic Broadway theatres and was willing to publicly recognize the devastating impact the AIDS epidemic was having on stage artists and instrumental in providing support, services and financial relief to them through the fundraising efforts of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

Through the years, many celebrated actors and actresses have served as president of the organization, including Burgess Meredith, Ralph Bellamy, Theodore Bikel, Ellen Burstyn, Colleen Dewhurst, and Ron Silver.

To become a member of Actors' Equity requires that an actor be deemed "eligible," which means he or she has achieved a level of experience indicated by belonging to a qualifying "sister" union performing in another medium (radio, film, or television), participation in a candidate program, or being offered a union contract by a professional theatre. Membership in Equity is not based on talent, and non-Equity actors can be every bit as skilled as union members. However, belonging to the actors' union does indicate a level of commitment to the profession of performance above that of a non-member. It suggests a person who has devoted themselves to acting as a career, who has experience working with theatres that demand a high level of skill and a professional attitude.

UNITY THEATRE REFLECTIONS

A publication for the curious theatre-goer.

Winter 2011

From the Executive Artistic Director,

We have some outstanding plays to offer you in the coming months. Each theatre experience has been planned to offer something unique and exciting, and each will require something different from YOU! You see, as with any of your favorite games, theatrical productions are conventionalized. In order to take part, we must have some common agreements—lay down some “ground rules.” By attending *Souvenir* and then *Charley’s Aunt*, you will have an ideal opportunity to observe how the rules of theatre change and what powers you have to affect the experience.

For most of the past two centuries, the theatre has offered lifelike characters and settings in an attempt to create an illusion of reality. There has been an unspoken agreement that the actor and audience remain separated; we have watched from a dark auditorium while characters interact, unaware that we exist. Your first theatre performance was probably viewed through the proscenium arch of a raised stage, like in your school auditorium. Right? You learned to watch the action through this “picture frame,” expecting realistic scenery with three solid walls, practical doors and a stage full of real furniture.

Nowadays, many theatre experiences require us to play by a new set of rules. In *Souvenir*, for example, contemporary playwright Stephen Temperly has created a character who talks directly to you “across the footlights.” This convention is not new to Unity Theatre audiences—the plays we select often remove the “fourth wall” and create a more intimate relationship between actor and spectator. We have also been known to change some conventions of theatre in order to produce older, more traditional plays that might otherwise be cost prohibitive. *Charley’s Aunt*, for example, requires three different locales which we plan to achieve with only one stylized set!

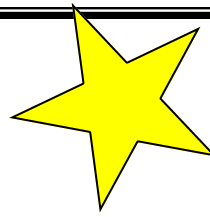
Enjoy seeing *Souvenir* and *Charley’s Aunt*, and remember to notice how the rules change and which conventions you are asked to accept.

~ Teresa Beckers

Now, just for fun, see if you can remember which of these past plays allowed the characters to punch through that fourth wall:

1. *The Glass Menagerie*
2. *The Odd Couple*
3. *Harvey*
4. *Angel Street*
5. *Talley’s Folly*
6. *The Matchmaker*
7. *The Amish Project*
8. *Camelot*
9. *On Golden Pond*
10. *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*

ANSWERS:
1, 5, 6, 7, 10



Summer DRAMA CAMPS

Grades 2-4

July 11-16, 2011

10 am-Noon

Tuition: \$150

Grades 5 & 6

July 11-23, 2011

10 am-Noon

Tuition: \$250

Grades 7 & 8

July 11-23, 2011

First Week: 1 pm-4 pm

Second Week: 10 am-4 pm

Tuition: \$350

Grades 9-12

July 11-23, 2011

First Week: 1 pm-4 pm

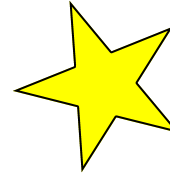
Second Week: 10 am-4 pm

Tuition: \$350

All classes include a
Saturday Showcase Performance

Call for More Information:

979-830-1460, ext. 12



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