

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

Shakespearean Festival In New Windsor
Carroll County Times article for 15 July 1990
By Joe Getty

Summer is the season for outdoor theatre. While the options are limited in Carroll County this year, at one time the words of Shakespeare resounded among the trees in front of the Brethren Center in New Windsor.

The year was 1938, and a Shakespearian festival was sponsored by the drama department of Blue Ridge College. Many of Carroll County’s small towns had colleges and Blue Ridge College was the former owner of the college campus that is now used by the Brethren World Service Center.

This was no small-town production but was planned with panache and great vision. The Westminster newspaper, the Democratic Advocate, proclaimed that “it is expected that New Windsor may become an American Salzburg. Special trains and buses are expected to be operated from Washington and Baltimore.”

The reason for all of this acclaim was the reputation of the summer theatre’s director. The college had attracted an actress and director with international stature – Madame Barry-Orlova.

Her press release lauded the breadth of her international accomplishments: “She won recognition in Europe first as a Dramatic reader. Later she played with Paul Cazeneuve in France in great tragic roles such as Francesca da Rimini and Monna Vanna. In London she played with Sir Herbert Tree in plays of Shakespeare. Just before the war [World War I] she had her own company and toured Europe and Russia. There she met a Russian nobleman, whom she married. During the war in Russia, she received many decorations for her war services, as a nurse in the Winter Palace of the Tsar. Returning to America she played with William H. Brady in New York and later for four years in John Colton’s famous drama Shanghai Gesture. She was a featured player in moving pictures with the famous director, J. Stuart Blackton. Being a keen student, her lectures are interesting, brilliant, and have a wide international aspect. She has just finished a thrilling and absorbing book on John Paul Jones at the Court of Catherine the Great and a Morality play, The Unbarred Highway.”

Excitement was also created in the town of New Windsor because actors from throughout the United States came to the campus to participate in the summer festival. They included Broadway actors Sylvia Leigh and Lee Young, Beth Eaton (daughter of a Hollywood designer), Laird Cregar of the Philadelphia Federal Theatre and dancer Bruce Hadley of Chicago.

The theatre group, known as the Blue Ridge Players, used many local residents in their productions. New Windsor High School principal Willard Hawkins played Touchstone in As You Like It, while Jacques was played by Blue Ridge College president Dr. Lynn H. Harris and Celia was played by his daughter, Elizabeth. Many people who were children in New Windsor at that time can recall participating as dancers and fairies in the forest scenes.

The productions played to rave reviews in Westminster. Mona Dale, who reviewed the productions for the Democratic Advocate, pronounced that, “The tall and superb Orlova has fired her own actors with

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the spirit and technical proficiency that brings to life the myriad shapes of her favorite dramatist. Also, the setting which the peaceful, shaded slopes of the Blue Ridge campus lend to the unfoldment of these most human of all comedies, is an enticement to stroll up there of a summer’s evening and drink at the very font of clean and sparkling entertainment.”

The repertoire during the ten-week season included Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*. Also in production were a tragic East Indian pageant *Savitri* (“in which it was shown that a woman’s love endureth e’en beyond the doom of death”) and the American premiere of Orlova’s own *The Unbarred Highway*.

The Blue Ridge Players’ productions are fondly remembered by long-time residents of New Windsor and represent a landmark in the history of local arts and drama in Carroll County.