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Interview with Bruce Jacklin

Anna Becker

Bruce Jacklin

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Researcher's name: Anna Becker
Event: Interview with Bruce Jacklin
Place: Pleasant Street Elementary
305 East Pleasant Street Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050
Co-workers present: none

AB: Anna Becker
BJ: Bruce Jacklin

AB: I am Anna Becker, today is February 16th and I'm interviewing Bruce Jacklin about the Alcove Dinner Theater. So, I'm just curious about how long you have been directing Dinner Theater at the Alcove.

BJ: Twenty-five years.

AB: Twenty-five years. And has it always been a tradition of the Alcove or did it start when you came?

BJ: They had a one-weekend event, which usually involved a one-act play, and they invited a select group - and this was in the 70s, early 80s. '86 it became a full-blown event where you invited the public and it usually only ran two weekends at that time.

AB: And have you seen as it progresses over the years becoming more successful in bringing in the community?

BJ: Yes and we've expanded. We just added an extra weekend to the current show. So that's a five-weekend run, which is unprecedented for the dinner theaters. We go anywhere from three to four weekends. We're starting to pull a lot of people from out of the community in.

AB: And what do you see as contributing to that? Just the level of the caliber of the plays you do or is it -

BJ: I believe it's a combination of both. First of all, the affordable pricing. We keep low overhead ourselves and we also recently acquired a corporate sponsor, the CES credit union. And they are supporting all our advertising, which is a big bulk of our budget, so with them relieving that we can put the money back into things like lighting, royalties for plays - the royalties have gone up in the last twenty-five years, considerably, about three times as much, the props, set pieces, things like that. So we're able to provide a better product and in turn that brings in a higher caliber of people that have the higher expectations.

AB: And this is year round you do the dinner theater?

BJ: Yes, we do three to four a year.

AB: And do you see any difference between turnout summer versus winter?

BJ: February is usually our big turnout. It was originally the end of January and we'd run to Valentine weekend. But we noticed a lot of people were waiting till February because they're still left over from the Christmas holiday and whatever. So, they're looking for a winter blues type of thing. So we moved our dates to the first weekend of February to the end of February and it did pick up attendance wise.

AB: Just getting more general, in your time and involvement with the Alcove how have you seen it change over the years?

BJ: Well we have our permanent stage now. We have our permanent light fixtures that are suspended for the ceiling. Years ago they were light trees that we portable and brought in which cast horrible shadows on the set. As a director I used to have to figure out ways to put sconces on the walls and floor lamps to diffuse the shadows but now that we have the light bar so close to the stage – plus our light instruments are a little more up to date. We have computerized lighting and sound. We started with the reel to reel so every time you had a sound cue coming up no matter where you sat in the house you heard the click-click-click and then the birds chirping. So we went from that to CDs - or no actually to cassettes, and then to CDs and now everything is computer generated, which is great, it's just seamless.

AB: What is it in your opinion that makes the Alcove different from other sit down restaurants in Mount Vernon?

BJ: The fact that it's unique, it's not a franchise, and it's located right in the middle of downtown so you get the feel that it's been there - it's been around for over a hundred years. It comes with a history and I think people can sense that when they walk in.

AB: Do you have a personal connection to the Alcove; does it mean something to you personally?

BJ: Sure. I've watched it turn over three owners. Tom Metcalf being the longest owner and then when he sold it a short span of time there was another owner and then Tom came back with a group of investors and he managed it. Tim died several years ago but he was the impetus for the dinner theater – he pushed for it, he supported it. He himself had a theater background when he was younger.

AB: Do you see the dinner theater continuing, do you see yourself being continually involved?

BJ: Yeah I was with another organization that I was involved with and it was running fairly well and then when they reopened after they closed for a brief time the organization decided to preform at the country club and other places – they wanted to take it to different venues. It was a new board that was elected and they wanted to try new things. That left the Alcove kind of without a director. I wasn't on the board at the time that decision was made, although I was a member of the organization, so as a favor to the new owners of the Alcove and Tom, who came back as manager and he at that time was just diagnosed with his illness and being a long time friend, I said I would step up and I'd run it. It's a different board and a different organization now that 's

been running it for seven years. Good and bad. Good meaning that you make the decisions and you don't have to run it by a board of people – elected officials, because everyone comes on with their own agenda, and the good thing is you can maintain the quality of what you want. The bad thing is when things need to be done it all falls on your shoulders.

AB: How do you see the Alcove as contributing as an active part of the community, as it adds to community life?

BJ: We offer the same caliber if not better than you would get in other towns, going out of town. I've been all up and down the United States and I've going to dinner theaters from Florida to Connecticut. And some of them I'm very impressed because of their budgets and because of their space where they can put on huge scale musicals where you can sit in booths and watch the show. And then I've seen some where the quality is very shaky. They have buffet lines and you're not sure whether the food is cooked at the right temperature, the acting - even the subject matter the scripts are very weak and not to the caliber where we search out Pulitzer Prize winning plays and authors. I think the Alcove offers good quality community theater at an affordable price and I think that's their contribution to the community and the arts.

AB: So when you're looking for your actors do you look for those primarily in the community? When casting who shows up?

BJ: All over. I look all over. I go to a lot of play competition and the Ohio Community Theater Association has a regional festival and then a state festival. And we've been fortunate for the last seven years to go to a regional and be invited to state sometimes with two shows. I have two companies, there's the Alcove Dinner Theater and then there's MTVarts, which is the big musical, we do the classic series and the senior theater. So we take a cutting from both groups. We've been very fortunate to be showcased at state. And then we see shows there plus I get to know actors. And I used to travel all around and act in Columbus, Mansfield, all over and I know actors. And if there's a role I can't cast locally I make a call and they're more than willing to come in and commit.

AB: Do you see a fairly good turn out of actors in the community that want to be involved?

BJ: Only with the big musicals, we have a huge turn out for our musicals. For our regular plays - no, it's very select. There's - people will come to the shows, the community will strongly support it but we don't have a strong group of people that are hammering, you know just hammering at the door to get up on stage. I'll get phone calls from people to say how to do I get involved and then of course we'll do a read through and we listen and you know talk about experience. And I do pull new people in. Like I said the last show I had had two children in it. The guy that played the father, he's new, had never been on stage and he takes direction very well. I'm careful not to put more than one or two new people in a production in order to keep the caliber of a high standard. Seasoned actors are great, the mother and the grandmother in the last show were seasoned actors so they were perfect for those roles. So I mix it, I mix it.

AB: We're doing a big exhibit at the end of this project and I'm wondering if you have any photos of the dinner theater that I might be able to include.

BJ: Do I have photos, do I have photos? [Laughter] We have got so many. I have some on the website you can look at. Or I can print you out a disk with photos from the last seven years.

AB: Yeah that'd be great. I think that's everything that I had to ask. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

BJ: No, except that we're in a good spot financially and a good spot with attendance. And we're very grateful to the community and even the outlying communities that come in to town to support us. It's nice to be able to create art and then have it appreciated. A lot of work going into it by a lot of people though, a lot of people help with that so yeah.

AB: Great, thank you.