



# The Voice of Fairfield County

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The guys from a PTP production of "Guys and Dolls" prepare for dress rehearsal in the early '80s.

Contributed

## Pine Tree Playhouse, a theater with deep roots

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WINNSBORO - Enter the old building, move past the ticket booth and the poster of the last show and your eyes will begin to adjust to the darkness of the empty theater. It's a



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classic black box, no windows or outside light. The carpeted floor slopes down to the stage. The lighting booth is in the back. With only 88 seats, the theater is small enough that major companies do not charge a lot for the rights to produce a play or musical. Even so, one show can cost more than \$2,000. It takes a full house, meaning every seat filled, to pay the bills.

Looking at the empty stage and

dismantled props, nothing there indicates how much passion goes into a live performance or how stage fright feels. Pieces of tape on the floor mark where the actors stand. Stage left, stage right, center stage. Backstage, one finds elf costumes, a cowboy hat, a blow-up turkey, unmatched dishes, odd groceries, candlesticks, clothes large and small, rhinestones, fur and flannel, tinsel drifting here and there and flashlights for when the stage is dark and the door is opened.

Once the heartbeat of Winnsboro, the Pine Tree Playhouse struggles today, though it is still the repository of the finest little theater a community could offer, with four or five plays or musicals a year in addition to fundraisers to include variety shows, gospel and musical acts.

The Playhouse provides something many in Fairfield County

take for granted, something most small towns don't have - live theater. It provides the unique opportunity for eager young actors to shine, and for older, quiet types who never dreamed they would be actors, to 'break a leg.'

Ask how it all started and you get many answers - over at the Recreation Department, with the help and encouragement of a beloved teacher at the old high school that burned, at Mt. Zion Institute. All of those answers are correct.

In 1972, the Playhouse found a permanent home at 230 S. Congress Street in an iconic blue granite building that used to be a Mormon Church.

The inaugural play, "Little Scandal," launched the first of many Playhouse stars, like Lily Broome, and more musicals and plays than

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there is space to list - showstoppers like *The Sound of Music*, *Oklahoma*, *Guys and Dolls*, *A Christmas Story*, *Brigadoon*, *Annie*, and the other *Annie*, the one who got her gun. Back then, everyone knew the words to the songs and, according to Ginny McKinney, unofficial mother of the playhouse archives, community participation in theater was big. Many in the town invited the cast to their homes after performances. It was the thing to do.

The 70s and 80s were, indeed, the Playhouse's heyday, and down in some old file cabinets in the midst of the visual cacophony of costumes and props, is a stack of scrapbooks full of yellowed newspaper clippings, old programs and page after page of photographs from those glory days. Sorting through them brings a flood of memories.

Who could forget the tender light on the pale shoulders of Catherine Hen-

drix playing *Blanche Dubois* in *Streetcar Named Desire*? That one, with Betsy and Mike Hemlepp, as well as *Steel Magnolias* - with audible sobs from the audience - were as good as anything you'll see in the big city.

Lynne Douglass played *Beth* in *Crimes of the Heart*, most fun role ever, and there is talk of bringing that one back. Ian Stratton and the entire cast of *Blood Brothers* were superb. Then there was *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* with Sarah English flashing lace and garter belt, her one and only role, next to *Bill Wedding* who was so in character it was scary.

Gary Baker, character actor who could pull off all three stooges at once, proudly undertook the ambitious lead in *The Mikado*. Newcomer Shane Moody and the young, sexy ingénue Sydney Fowler in *"Noises Off"* went above and beyond last year, perfectly cast.

And then there were the images that can't be unseen - Andi Phipps's *Marilyn Monroe* wardrobe malfunction and Matt Swanson's *British flag* boxers, thankfully not at half-mast. 'Twas in the script, mind you.

Another memorable night at The Playhouse occurred when vampire *Garrett Helms* said, "You have no idea what powers I have," and a light bulb exploded as if on cue.

In a historic town like *Winnsboro*, there are probably more ghosts per capita than any other commodity, affording the players frequent opportunities to portray ghosts and historical figures for the *Woman's Club's* haunted walking tour, and also for the *S.C. Railroad Museum*.

Over the years, the audience's tears, laughter and applause have been the only compensation these players receive other than recognition in the program notes or sometimes a review - yet the rewards are beyond measure in friendship, camaraderie and the enrichment they provided for the community.

Sadly, that strong community following and financial support have faded somewhat. The players spend almost as much time pursuing fundraisers to finance their performances as they do performing.

Still there are a handful of benefactors. Someone recently and generously donated an HVAC system, and a local roofing company came to the rescue. Local artists sometimes paint (for free) wall-sized backdrops - when the budget allows for canvas, that is. One big ticket item currently and sorely needed is a new curtain. The navy blue heavy upholstery-style velvet has seen its best days and is slowly disintegrating. Over the years, many little hands have clutched it, moving it aside to see if parents and grandparents were there yet.

This only skims the surface of the his-

tory and memories of the Playhouse, but there is more to come as new families - including the *Weddings*, *Reeds*, younger *Darners*, *Garners*, *Hackers*, *Pullens*, *Childers* and *Rambos*. - are making new Playhouse memories.

This spring, the Playhouse will present *The Dixie Swim Club*, directed by *Shane Moody* and written by one of the writers of the *Golden Girls*. Auditions will be held the first weekend in April. Check [www.pinetreeplayhouse.org](http://www.pinetreeplayhouse.org) for audition times and performance dates. If funds permit, a children's musical is planned for the summer.

If you want to help the Playhouse to flourish and continue to provide remarkably good community theater, the best thing you can do is volunteer. There are many levels of participation from simply being an usher or working the box office to loaning props, working backstage, helping with publicity, working on sets or costumes, acting, directing, becoming a member or sponsor, inviting your friends to attend performances with you or, simply, making a donation at [www.pinetreeplayhouse.org](http://www.pinetreeplayhouse.org).

Perhaps a celebration of the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Playhouse is in order to help bring back what once was. The Playhouse's players and patrons are open for suggestions - what about a playwriting contest? A special performance? A parade? Visiting dignitaries? *George Clooney*? Plant a pine tree? Have a costume contest? Maybe just have a place on the website for people to write their own memories of performances past?

No matter what, just know this - the *Pine Tree Playhouse* is a community treasure that brings something special to the town. May it stay evergreen. (That's code for, "May the treasurer's report be out of the red next month.")



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