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Dramatic women

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[write the author](#)



Above, the March 2010 production of "The Dixie Swim Club" with performers, from left, Anne Maters, Donna Ridella, Pat Vintevoghel, D.J. Haska and Monica Quinn. photo by Theatre Arts Club.

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Drama is the heart and soul of the all-female member Theatre Arts Club.

"This is an expressive (art) that has been around since the beginning of time. It is a creative outlet," said Izzy Donnelly, TAC's 2012 president and script committee chairwoman. "This is not mommy time or wife time but me time."

Created 102 years ago by local women, TAC provides both a creative outlet for women and raises money to help pay college tuition for an aspiring female thespian.

The women who founded and maintained the early efforts of TAC were "the wives, the sisters, daughters and aunts of the Players (an all-male's theater group) who would go to each others homes. These were well-to-do women. They were wives of huge auto barons," Donnelly said.

These early 20th century women, attired in choice dresses, heels, gloves and hats, gathered to recite poetry, write plays and stories and put on stage productions, always in the afternoon so as not to interfere with evening family time.

"They were educated. They were creative and expressing themselves in all kinds of artistic ways, just as their husbands did. They performed whatever plays they wrote," said Monica Quinn, past president. "The membership was big. The women weren't working. This was a way to express themselves without forgoing family time."



A playbill from the first performance of the 1915-16 season, May 24 -25, 1915. photo by Theatre Arts Club.

In the mid-1930s or 1940s, poetry readings were phased out, said Quinn of Grosse Pointe Woods and a TAC member since 1980. She is also the organization's historian.

"It doesn't mean they stopped doing it but (in the archives) you see more and more playbills. The purpose (of TAC) is to foster amateur theater."

Despite the ranks thinning when women, en masse, entered the work force first during World War II and then in the 1960s, TAC continued to stage performances.



Anne Maters and MaryLynn Bertetto in "Moonlight and Valentino."

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"It's lasted this long because women need this kind of outlet. Women need something that is theirs," Donnelly said.

Staging twice-a-year performances to provide a \$2,600 scholarship to a female Wayne State University drama major, women's theater enthusiastically and passionately survives in the 43 members who use the men's building, Players Theater on Jefferson in Detroit.

"We rent the space for a week," Donnelly said of the site. "The costs include clean-up, a parking guard and for the set material. We get our own clothes, (some) from the Grosse Pointe Theatre."

Donation tickets to TAC's next performance, "The Cemetery Club" by Ivan Menchell, can be purchased online at

theatreartsclub.com, performed March 23 to 25 at the Players Theatre. Three Jewish widows, who are lifelong friends, meet monthly in the cemetery where they talk to each other and their dead husbands. The three main characters are portrayed by Donnelly, D.J. Haska and Marianne Sharder.

"It's heartwarming and family-oriented. We go to the cemetery two or three times and are in Ida's (one of the widows) living room," Donnelly said of the production's settings. "It's all Jewish. It's a delightful play. Generally, we get scripts of all women. It is tricky and we have to have subject matter appropriate for the family."

But then the members are a family of sorts — a theatrical family, an intergenerational family.

Quinn said, "I am in love with this group. I love the history, the continuity. I love my daughter and granddaughters being involved. I loved being with my mother-in-law, Marge Locke, who inspired me to join the club. We help new members learn. We are fostering new actresses, making them comfortable. I like working with people, to get to know people in a different way. Working together to put on a show gets intense. There is a different basis of friendship, a lasting friendship. We become trusted sisters," she said.



Barbara Busby was the first Eva Woodbridge Victor scholarship winner. [photo by Theatre Arts Club.](#)



TAC member Mrs. Henry B. Joy on stage in 1947. [photo by Theatre Arts Club.](#)

In fact, Quinn got her friend, Donnelly, involved.

Donnelly explained, "She called me one night and said she was going to the Players tonight, taking her mother and grandson."

Prior to the evening's presentation, a try-out invitation was extended for the female version of the "Odd Couple."

"I had been in the arts. I was a music teacher at the (Grosse Pointe) Academy. I got Olive, the female equivalent to Oscar. I had more than 400 lines. After three weeks I asked, 'what am I doing?' I've been hooked ever since," she said.

Women are involved in every aspect of a performance from being on stage to behind the scenes, from costumes and makeup to set creations and serving light refreshments during performance nights. And some rope their husbands into helping in the sound and lighting booth.

"We wear many hats," Donnelly said.

Show time

The playhouse accommodates 160, all seated at round tables. The atmosphere is relaxed or as Donnelly describes it, "It's divine. It's kind of bohemian."

Productions are non-musical.

"We are weak with singers and lean toward drama," Donnelly said. "We did a musical for our 100th anniversary. It's a wonderful group of gals. We love dressing up and playing. We help each other with makeup and hair. Everybody helps everyone."

Assistance can come in the form of providing helpful hints on memorizing lines. For example, a fellow performer suggested Donnelly recite her lines into a tape recorder. She listens to the lines and repeats them over and over. She also highlights her lines script for easy access.

"There are different methods of learning lines. They find their rhythm," Donnelly said.

Before setting foot on stage with perfected lines for their two-night performances, the women go to one another's houses to practice and block sets.

It takes about eight weeks to pull the play together, beginning with an audition. When they get to the theater, the set building begins on Sunday and is completed by Wednesday because lights and sound have to be timed perfectly for opening night.

"Wednesday is full run. Thursday is dress rehearsal," Donnelly said. "Friday is always a great audience night. They are more vibrant. Saturday is not as vocal."

She goes on enthusiastically, "It's a wonderful thing to have this creativity. It makes life happier. There is tension but the show goes on. There is synergy. It is a creative outlet. We have a need to perform and get out of ourselves and have a break."

As much as TAC members enjoy putting on twice-a-year comedies and dramas, they are also focused on their goal of fundraising.

Once a year, since 1953, a Wayne State University female aspiring drama student is awarded \$2,600 for her senior year's tuition through the Eva Woodbridge Victor Scholarship. WSU's theater department submits three names of deserving juniors for the TAC scholarship committee to interview. One is selected.

According to Quinn, founding TAC member Victor bequeathed a significant amount of money to the nonprofit TAC for the scholarship. Members continued to raise funds during a single event.

"They had one event, an afternoon tea. They would drop checks into a bowl," Quinn said.

As the years went by, the amounts placed in the bowl decreased and by the 1990s new financial avenues had to be explored. The "Cemetery Club" is this year's fundraiser.



"Local amateur (theater) is a very special experience," Donnelly said. "We are not doing it for money. We love the whole experience. It's creating, it's like a sculpture. We show our talents as individuals. When someone sees a show, they say 'thank you.' It is something beyond us. We have the need to perform and get out of ourselves and have a break. It takes a lot of patience to listen to each other, a lot of bravery and you feel like a million bucks."

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