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Living Community Theater Orinda Starlight Village Players' Charlotte Meyer

By Lou Fancher

There's a degree of determination necessary for directing a community theater and for living to-and beyond-the age of 97. Charlotte Meyer, the founder of the Orinda Starlight Village Players (OSVP) and 97-year old Orinda resident, is doing both.

"I did all the scripts when we started," she says, in a phone interview from her home, "and I still write...when I can find my glasses!" Indeed, she does write, a fact on display when OSVP opens her adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* on August 27th.

"One of our actors, Malcolm, who's so helpful with the mechanics of the theater, was interested in doing it," she says, about the play. The explanation is a perfect example of Meyer's motivation: bringing culture to a community with little thought of herself.

Geotty Chapple, Meyer's son and President of OSVP, provided a historical overview and personal insights during a separate interview held twenty feet from the company's outdoor amphitheater in the Orinda Community Center Park. "Charlotte graduated from the University of California in the late 1920's," he begins. "She was the first woman in the San Francisco Scenic Artists Union, then worked as a set designer for the San Francisco Opera Ballet." Asked to comment on the ground-breaking positions Meyer assumed, Chapple is nonchalant. "She didn't see any barriers. Other people see them as milestones, but she didn't. She just thought, 'anybody could do it, so why didn't they?'" What Meyer did was start a family, direct *A Christmas Carol* at Lafayette's Town Hall Theatre for five seasons, bring theater to Orinda school children, create and direct the first 50 plays OSVP presented and help plan the Orinda Amphitheater. "Her main contribution to the amphitheater was getting them to swing it-turning the orientation of the stage so the sun wasn't in the audiences' eyes," says Chapple.

The amphitheater sat idle for several years after it was completed, according to Chapple. "But then, Charlotte said, 'Let's do some children's plays!'" he remembers. He recalls his first play, at the age of 5: *Teahouse of the August Moon*. And his first and only line: "The goat, the goat! We forgot the goat!" He also learned set design from his mother: "I wanted to help, so she gave me a paint brush and I painted the jeep."

"We had a project for young people to participate in," Meyer says, "I used *Pinocchio* and all those things that appeal to young people. Later, one of my actresses suggested we start doing adult plays." The result was a 3-show formula the company still follows: each season features a mystery, a comedy and a production that is either a fantasy or a classic. There's no profanity in the scripts and the cost of the tickets is kept low; two important principles in Meyer's family-oriented strategy.

Meyer has plenty to say about OSVP's future. "I think the country is screaming for things that have honesty and culture," she says. "I'd like the theater to be something the community appreciates and enjoys. Once people come, they're sold on it, but it's hard to get their attention."

She admits to feeling sidelined at times, saying: "It's a money thing. Suddenly, at 80, everything shuts off-the insurance companies don't think they can cover you." But just like the barriers she didn't see more than 25 years ago, her age is a non-event and she expects to live well into her 100's. "I enjoy life, and I'm appreciative of everything that's involved," she says. Her voice may quiver, and getting to the theater is a process, but her determination is unmistakable.

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