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Leave 'em Laf-fing: Laffrantics Cast Recalls the Good Old Days

By Cathy Dausman



Betsey Young holds a playbill from the very first Laffrantics presentation in 1956. Photo Cathy Dausman

catch on."

Laffrantics shows bore names like Curses, Soiled Again, Fangs for the Mem'ries, The Farce Be With You, Camelittle and Medic Heir. In a video memoir recorded last year, Mary Berger recalled how her husband prepared the scripts. "He'd work all week, and come home, and spend the weekend writing. It took him a year to write a script. And when he'd finished writing one, he'd start in on the next," she said.

"Charlie Berger was fabulous," raved Barbara Abel. Abel and her husband Dick were Laffrantics cast members from 1978 to 1986. Jeri Burnside designed the sets.

Dan and Louise Welty directed the shows for the first six years; Evelyn "Ev" McLean became director 1962. McLean also supplied live piano music throughout the show. "She was just a great lady," said Abel, of McLean, who recalled how McLean played "Alley Cat" if someone missed a cue.

To this day, Abel said she gets goose bumps if she ever hears that song.

Jan Day joined the Laffrantics in 1963, and stayed through its final curtain call.

After seeing their first show, Day and her husband went backstage. He saw the look in her eyes and knew she was hooked, saying, "Oh no, you want to be up there [on stage]!"

"I was always in the chorus," said Day modestly, who remembers rehearsing in Lafayette's old Veteran's Hall while her husband babysat their children.

A Tear for Tatters was the Laffrantics first production. It ran four nights, and tickets cost \$1.50. The playbill contained more than 60 local ads, including those for Moraga Record Album, Lafayette Sea Food Grotto and Les McFetridge Buick.

In 1986, after a 30-year run, Laffrantics called it quits. It was time for the final curtain call. Cast members estimate Laffrantics had 473 participants over the years. The group went out on a high note, still playing to standing-room-only crowds.

"Our group is fast depleting," explained Nelson, who is now 90. Dick Abel felt the group was getting too old for the rigors of performing; still, his wife Barbara said, "We all cried a lot when it ended."

CCI never built the community center for which they raised funds. When Lafayette decided to convert a former elementary school into its community center, CCI deeded their parcel at 711 St. Mary's Road to the city. That land is now known as Buckeye Fields.

Fortunately, the saga of Laffrantics lives on in weathered news clippings, photographs and handbills. Former cast members keep their own thick scrap books; some, including Nelson, have donated memorabilia to Lafayette Historical Society.

They wanted to build a community center. What they built instead was an entertainment legacy. Lamorindans of a certain age will recall the Laffrantics and their standing-room-only Town Hall performance antics with pleasure. The rest of us would do well to listen and learn.

When Theron Nelson came to Lafayette in 1950, he and his neighbors wanted to build a community center for their as-yet unincorporated city. They formed the Community Center, Inc. (CCI) and Nelson, as president, began fund raising.

Betsey Young, who became Laffrantics' choreographer, moved to Lafayette in 1956. She soon introduced herself to neighbor and fellow dancer Geraldine "Jeri" Burnside, and the pair danced wherever they could.

Someone suggested putting on a show. Cue Judy Garland's Babes In Arms character: "We've gotta have a great show, with a million laughs ... and color ... and a lot of lights to make it sparkle. And songs - wonderful songs."

The rest is 30 years of Lafayette history. From 1956 to 1986, May through September, members of CCI, the Suburban Woman's Club, Suburban Junior Club and Jr. Chamber of Commerce brought laugh-a-minute live theater to Lafayette.

They wrote original shows, learned songs, dance steps, made costumes, and designed and built sets. The format was a melodrama, followed by a two part olio, or vaudeville specialty acts. "Charlie Berger wrote original scripts," Nelson recalled, "and he was a pun-ster. Sometimes it would take the audience a moment or two to

A 2011 video documentary by Paul and Glenda Fillinger shows the LafFrantics camaraderie that continues to this day. Remaining cast members still meet, as they have for 26 years, for an early December reunion brunch. After a 30-year run, they certainly deserve an encore.

LafFrantics Melodramas, 1956-1986

1956 A Tear for Tatters
1957 Slippery When Wet or Frost
1958 Come Back, Jack
1959 Search for a Penny or
Tither's Long Look
1960 Trial La Law
1961 Hello Dere my Fren
1962 Toss Lightly and Serve, or
He ain't Done Well by Nell
1963 Her Fatal Beauty
1964 Under the Gaslight
1965 Sheer Follies of 1933
1966 Fireman, Save my Child
1967 Up, Up and Away
1968 Curses on my Fatal Beauty
1969 Curse You Jack Dalton
1970 The Lure of the Lumberlust
1971 Bewitched
1972 Curses, Soiled Again
1973 Camelittle
1974 Three for Jack and Ready
to Go
1975 How the West Was Too
1976 ABCDCIA
1977 Fangs for the Mem'ries
1978 FrantikAntiks
1979 The Lure of the Lumberlust
1980 The Matchmaker's Daughter
1981 Tillie the Teller or The
Great Bank Robbery
1982 The Farce be With You
1983 Camelittle
1984 How the West Was
1985 Medic Heir
1986 One More Time



Kristi Reed and Betsy Young, LafFrantics production, 1984 Photo provided



Stage crew on final show - One Move Time Photo provided



From left: Marge Stalker, Melba Luna, Dian Overly, Carol Finney and Dick Smith Photo provided



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