

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

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 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.

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



Stage crew on final show - One Move Time Photo provided

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