

SARASOTA

Playwrights Society: From

BY ARTHUR KEYSER

The year was 2007. George Loukides had a brainstorm. George, then in his mid-70s, had graduated from McGill University in Montreal in 1952. He attended the University of Denver, where he graduated with an MFA. After two years in the U.S. Army, he opted to enter the field of education, where so many aspirants for a career in performance arts find sustainable work. He became a teacher and then an administrator in Special Education for the Board of Education in New York City, retiring in 1979.

From New York, George moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where he acted and directed in the Footlight Players. His next move was to Alexandria, Virginia in 1986. There, he acted, directed and wrote plays. After eighteen years in Alexandria, George moved to The Glenridge on Palmer Ranch, a retirement community in Sarasota, Florida in 2004. A new performing arts venue had just been opened at The Glenridge and George formed the Glenridge Players, an amateur theatre group comprised of some of the residents.

George only remained at The Glenridge for three years and when he moved to a home in Sarasota in 2007, he had an idea. It was to bring together a small group of friends who were interested in theatre, to write and read plays in their homes. There were six

in the group. Some were aspiring writers and some were aspiring actors. This was the genesis of the Sarasota Area Playwrights Society, which we fondly refer to by its acronym, SAPS.

The term Sarasota is a misnomer. It would be more accurate to describe the area, within which SAPS draws its membership, as the Sarasota/Bradenton Area. The city of Bradenton adjoins Sarasota County at its north end. Most of the SAPS members reside in Sarasota County or in Bradenton.

Considering its size, Sarasota is probably as fertile an environment as exists in the United States for those interested in the performance arts. It is the cultural center of the Gulf Coast of Florida and perhaps, with the exception of Miami, the cultural center of Florida. It is no accident that SAPS grew into a vibrant playwriting institution, attracting local playwrights and actors.

I wrote my first play in 2009, learned about SAPS and joined that year. We were then eighteen, a mixture of playwrights and actors. At the end of our most recent season, this past May, the membership had increased to 65. The question often arises as to how large SAPS can afford to grow without encountering the kinds of administrative, logistical and space problems, that come with the territory.

When George first formed SAPS in 2007, the group would meet once a month, from October through May, at the home of a different member

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each time. Although the meetings in members' homes continued for about three years, growth began to make that impractical.

For a few years, SAPS operated in various venues in the area. Its migrant wanderings ended four years ago, when it settled into an ideal space, through the auspices of the Sarasota Arts and Cultural Alliance. The space enables SAPS to conduct its activities at capacity for all members as of now. If the growth continues at the present rate, the space issue could become a significant problem in the future.

In October 2012, SAPS embarked upon a new program, which defined its future course and had much to do with its growth. It had outgrown the once-a-month reading of new plays, written by its playwrights. A new "workshop" program was instituted, in which original plays would be presented in the form of readings of original plays to its members weekly instead of monthly. That single change resulted in quadrupling the number of SAPS events.

With the availability of more opportunities, SAPS playwrights filled the schedule with ten-minute plays, longer one-acts, and full-length plays. All of the plays are original and written only by member playwrights. After each reading of a play, there is a critique by the members, present with rotating moderators.

There is no limit on the number of times a play may be brought back to the workshop, as long as it has been rewritten each time it is presented. SAPS

encourages its members to continually rewrite in the quest for a better play.

The number of actors available within the SAPS membership has grown as the group has grown. The number of actors represents almost half the membership, but two-thirds of those listed as actors are also playwrights. SAPS has no problem with accumulating an inventory of plays for readings and no problem in enlisting actors for those readings.

The primary purpose of SAPS is to help its playwrights write better plays, and actors play a principal role in efforts to achieve that goal. Many of the actor members appear regularly in productions at the various theatre venues in the area, and some of them are members of Actors Equity Association.

In 2013, a new program was added to the SAPS schedules: outreach. Plays written by member playwrights are performed as script-in-hand readings at various institutions in the Sarasota area. Typically, an outreach event will include the reading of four or five short plays.

Also in 2013, a SAPS playwriting class was inaugurated. Called the Playwriting Lab, its schedule includes eight to ten two-hour sessions each year. Its primary purpose is to teach playwriting to those of its actor members who have not yet learned, but who wish to learn, the craft. Limited to eight participants each season, it has spawned a number of new playwrights whose plays eventually reach the workshop program. The Playwriting Lab is limited to

SAPS members, and there is no fee for participation.

The Theatre Odyssey Ten-Minute Play Festival in Sarasota has been showcasing ten-minute plays since 2006. Theatre Odyssey accepts submissions from playwrights who reside in what is defined as the Florida Gulf Coast area, from Tampa Bay to Naples.

The archives of Theatre Odyssey show that beginning with its 2010 festival through the 2016 festival, SAPS playwrights have had remarkable success. In those years, there were a total of 57 plays selected for performances out of over 500 submissions. Of that number, 41 of the plays which were selected to be performed, were written by playwrights who are current SAPS members. At each Theatre Odyssey Festival, awards are given for the Best Play and the Runner-Up. In the same seven-year period, five of the seven Best Play awards were given to SAPS members, and six of the seven Runner-Up awards were won by SAPS members.

In recent years, SAPS playwrights have had similar successes at an annual full-length new play festival sponsored by The Players Center For Performing Arts in Sarasota. Plays from SAPS members have been winners at festivals throughout the country and many original plays written by its members (both full-length and short) have been produced as fully staged productions throughout the United States and, at times, abroad.

Much of the success of SAPS has been fueled by the growth in interest for the ten-minute play format. Since the inception of the workshop program in 2013, SAPS playwrights have written 40 new full-

length plays and almost 200 ten-minute plays.

In 2013, SAPS took its first step towards coming out from under the radar. A website was created, not so much for promotion, but to give its members ready access to information about the ongoing activities of the group. The website, www.sarasotaplaywrights.com, has both a limited public side and a much more detailed private side, accessible only by its members.

The open, or public, side of the site has a home page with an explanation of SAPS' mission. It also has a Member News page, which is updated monthly during the season, reporting the successes of its members. And it includes a section explaining how to become a member. The private side lists all scheduled activities in detail, all special programs, contact information for each member, and archival information. The archive section allows any member to search for the name of any SAPS original play, that has been read in the workshop program since the inception of the website. Members can search for the author of the play, the character list, and the members who were cast in each of the plays.

Where do we go from here? We don't have any answers. We know that change is an inevitable factor in the life of any organization. How large should we grow? Is our next step to be: "Produced by SAPS"?

For the moment, we'll just continue with our primary mission: to help our playwrights make their plays better. 📧