



The History of Simsbury Summer Theatre
 Compiled by Nancy Grandin with help from other alumni

History is best told in the words of those who were there, so we start our story with the memories of Betty Emery. When founded, the group was known as Simsbury Summer Theatre for Youth (SSTFY).

“After St. Mary’s produced *Bye Bye Birdie* in the spring of 1966, the teenagers heartbroken it was over. We old-timers were pretty worn out, but Mike Hurley, our wonderful *Birdie* director, said he’d be willing to find something for the young folks to do during the summer. We went to Father Carlone at St. Mary’s to ask for ‘seed’ money, which he readily gave; other churches in Simsbury did like-wise. We got the rights to *Li’l Abner*, advertised for Simsbury youth to come out, and they did! All summer kids and adult advisors worked very hard and in August the show went on in Eno Memorial Hall. What a thrill to see it all come together! So – the Simsbury Summer Theatre for Youth was born with Mike directing and I guess they called me the Producer. The next summer SSTFY produced *Half a Sixpence*. The membership numbers grew — the crew was fabulous — the stage settings were so very professional – and working the kids was pure joy. They didn’t flinch at any task, whether it was running around town getting ads for the program booklet, painting scenery, helping with costumes — all were part of this very successful team.” There was no orchestra for *L’il Abner*, just piano accompaniment; the orchestra was instituted in the second year. In the beginning, SSTFY rehearsed at Boy Scout Hall; the set was built at “the gristmill” (the Hop Brook building) and performances were at Eno. In 1968 performances were moved to the newly-built Simsbury High School, where *Oliver!* filled every one of the 1000 seats of the new auditorium.



By the early 1970s, cast and orchestra rehearsals for “Summer Theatre,” as it was known (or in member-speak: “Sumrthetr”) were held in Eno and sets were built at Boy Scout Hall. This practice continued into the 1980s.

Both locations were not air-conditioned and were heavily infested with immense mosquitoes with a hearty appetite for young thespians. If used sideways, the Eno auditorium floor mimics the dimensions of SHS’s stage, so cast members rehearsed facing a large blank wall. The main beneficiary of the use of Eno was the orchestra, who rehearsed in the “Blue Room,” Eno’s only air-conditioned room. It proved a great recruiting tool for instrumentalists.

When the chorus was dismissed, they walked down Hopmeadow Street –stopping first at Hoffert’s Drugstore, and later Apollo’s Restaurant, to buy sustenance for the long trip — to Boy

Scout Hall. Being the bottom of the work-crew food chain, they were put to work performing menial tasks the backstage crew had lovingly saved for them.

During this time period, there was a line of demarcation between rehearsals and “show ready” – the moving of the set to SHS. An all-hands-on-deck activity, the move took place on a Saturday and required at least one annual “Truck? I didn’t reserve a truck. I thought you were renting the truck!” No matter the obstacles, however, the set always made it (not necessarily in the same condition it had been while being built in Boy Scout Hall, but that’s what nails and glue are for) and was set up ready for the last two weeks of rehearsal.

A chronic problem facing SSTFY was (and is) storage space. Putting on a show is a messy business and one that spawns a multitude of paraphernalia – set pieces, flats, props, costumes, paint, make-up- requiring storage during the off-months. Over the years, SST used flea-ridden tobacco barns, Eno Hall, unsecured garages, moldy basements, the Carriage House (before the holes in the floor were fixed), and currently, an empty storefront kindly provided by Andy’s Supermarket. The annual retrieval of flats and other items for the summer’s show is sometimes akin to a National Geographic expedition – without the protective gear.

For the first 25 years, our season was 8 weeks with 4 shows two weekends in a row. A mid-show pick-up rehearsal took place; however, “rehearsal” was usually loosely interpreted. Lines were re-written and scenes took a decidedly comic bent, the orchestra would “forget” the music and sound effects were, well, nevermind...and on at least one occasion, ice was dumped down the back of a lead trying manfully to continue singing.



In 1990, the production was shortened to 6 weeks and one show weekend to accommodate a SHS Concert Choir trip to Germany. SSTFY (the name having morphed into “Stiffy” by this point) has followed the same since. It was also in the early ‘90s that eligibility requirements, which required incoming members to be entering 10th grade, was lowered to include incoming freshmen. The upper limit, age 22, did not change; occasional exceptions to the lower limit were made (as this year) when young

children were needed to fill roles onstage, and these are filled by the siblings of members and children of alumni.

The 90s also saw a change in location; Boy Scout Hall and Eno were no longer used and the entire production took place at Simsbury High. Sets were built on the SHS stage, the orchestra rehearsed in the (usually sweltering) band room and the cast rehearsed in the gym. When the temperature in the gym reached 100 degrees – not unusual – everyone was dismissed. And, of course, every summer the SHS Auditorium Bat made his (her?) annual appearance during the

shows, causing no little consternation from audiences, but hardly a ripple from the cast, who learned to expect some periodic swooping mid-song.

A few notable exceptions to this schedule: In 1978, SHS was closed for asbestos removal, necessitating a move back to Eno. In 1985, SHS was again closed; SSTFY rented an enormous circus tent and performed Barnum on the playing fields at HJMS. In the early '90s and again in '98 SSTFY SHS's closure pushed rehearsals to First Church for part of the production. In '03 construction began on the SHS addition. Rehearsals were at HJMS and the "move to SHS" was reinstated (someone remembered to rent the truck!). From 2004 on, we have enjoyed the blissfully air-conditioned Centennial Theater at Westminster School. Accommodations have had to be made due to the smaller stage – sometimes the orchestra is actually on the stage, as it was as the shipboard orchestra in 2006's Anything Goes, and we have added an extra show to accommodate fewer seats, but the arrangement has worked out very well and we are most appreciative of the use of this beautiful theater.

To celebrate the 40th Reunion in 2005, the "old" SSTFY logo, in use since the 60's, was updated to a more contemporary look by an alum in the graphic design business. For the 2010 anniversary, we've made the change to the simple and straightforward description of who we are – and always have been, Simsbury Summer Theatre. The new moniker has presented a challenge for the members ("Stuh"? "Steh"?) but has been heartily embraced.

Social activities are also a big part of the SST experience. In the early years, there were cast parties after the show, usually at the house of a cast member. Beginning in the early 70s, on the Monday after the show, we rented buses to transport members, now close to comatose from staying up for wee-hours semiformal cast party after the final show and then arriving at 8 a.m. for set strike on Sunday, to Misquamicut Beach in Rhode Island. This practice continued until 1991 when a hurricane watch cancelled the trip and it was replaced with a picnic closer to home. Members have enjoyed summer activities: pool parties, picnics, baseball games, tournaments of the infamous "Wink," and cast parties; the fun continues during the year with a winter semiformal and other get-togethers.



Like rehearsal location, SST's professional staff has evolved. For the first two years, only accompanist Marilyn Hill was paid. Founder D. Michael Hurley was the artistic director from 1966 until 1972, and Lou Hurd was orchestra director and then overall music director through 1975's Annie Get Your Gun, both as unpaid volunteers. Following their tenure, a series of directors, music directors, and choreographers were hired. Many stayed no more than one or two years; however, like Mike Hurley and Lou Hurd, several professional staff are remembered for both longevity and popularity– Howard Sprout (director, 1978-1984), Doreen Cohen (director, 1985-90), and Ron Vermette (set designer, 1985-90) as well as current director Joe Campolieta

and choreographer Lesley Lambert, both in their 11th year and fortunately showing no signs of exiting stage right.

For most of SST's history, backstage was handled mainly by members with parent volunteer assistance. In the 60s and 70's, set design, set construction and lighting/sound were all run by members. In most cases, the senior members of the technical crew were in college and usually majoring in technical theater or a related field. Their interest and expertise in backstage had often been sparked as a new member. By the mid-80s, we moved to hiring a professional set designer and by the mid-90s, as sets and technical theater became increasingly expensive and complicated, to hiring professional staff for backstage as well for onstage and orchestra.

Initially, SST had no formal board of directors or operating by-laws. The group of founding adults oversaw the organization. Four youth officers were elected to the "Executive Committee" in the spring of 1966 when the group was established. Several years later, representatives from backstage, onstage and orchestra were added to the "Youth Board" to facilitate communication since everyone was not in one location for most of the summer. The adults made most of the major decisions, but still met informally. Mike and Dot Hurley, Rod Crocket, Jeanine Dash, Betty Emery and Joan Hansen and other adults met the youth executive board to plan for the summer. In 1970, growing in members and scope, a formal adult board of directors was established and bylaws were written.



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