

# 60 Years of the Falmouth Theatre Guild

by Joanne Briana-Gartner

“It’s devastating when the show’s over, that’s why we keep coming back.”

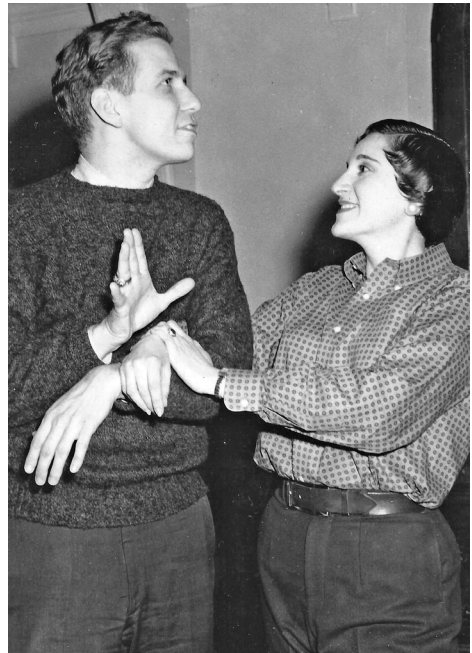
Davien Gould of Falmouth, who says she “grew up at the Falmouth Theatre Guild,” echoed the sentiments of many longtime guild members who gathered to reminisce about FTG, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year.

The first meeting of the Falmouth Theatre Guild took place in November of 1957 at the Falmouth Recreation Building. The *Enterprise* reported that ten people were present and at least seven other people called to say that they were interested but unable to attend the meeting.

Leading that first meeting was Elizabeth A. Rogers of Elm Road. Ms. Rogers had teamed up with Ginger Helm to co-found the group. Ms. Helm was unable to attend the first meeting although she would go on to appear as one of the leads, along with Ms. Rogers, in the guild’s first production, the comedy “Goodbye, My Fancy,” which was performed in February of 1958 in the Lawrence High School’s Memorial Auditorium. “Goodbye” was followed by “There’s Always a Mystery” in May of 1958 and “Janus” that December.

In the beginning the guild performed at the Lawrence High School. Local hotels and restaurants were also venues before the guild settled in at the 300-seat Highfield Theater. The first play to be

performed by the guild at Highfield was “Stalag 17” in December of 1960.



Neil Hickey and Francis Tsiknas in 1960’s “Light Up the Sky.” Photo courtesy FTG.

In 1962, in exchange for installing a heating system, the guild was given a ten-year lease for Highfield Theater. The theater is owned by the Cape Conservatory, which merged with the Cape Symphony Orchestra in 2010.

FTG members used their homes as collateral to secure the initial loan to heat the theater. Initially, recalled long-time guild member Irene

Thibeault, the heating system was not ideal. It was cold backstage, and for the audience the heat worked best in the middle seats. "People would leave at intermission because their feet were cold," said Ms. Thibeault.

Further money to upgrade the heating system was raised through fundraisers and grants. Two years ago the guild purchased an outdoor enclosure and added gas lights in order to bring some warmth to the patio area of the theater at intermission and before the shows during winter performances.

Presently the guild shares the Highfield stage with the College Light Opera Company (CLOC), which produces nine musicals in its nine-week season between late June and the end of August.

The Falmouth Theatre Guild's season generally consists of performances in the fall and in the winter, a large spring musical, as well as a Christmas production.

Although it is mostly known for producing big musicals, FTG performs straight theater as well. Past productions have included "The Women" (1973), "The Gin Game" (1988), "Our Town"

(2008), and three productions of "Blithe Spirit" (1965, 1989, and 2017).

The guild's first musical was "The King and I" in 1963. It featured Carolyn "Fuzzy" Jarvis in the role of Anna and Robert Collins as the King.



Sally Wheeler, Jeannie Cafarelli and Kitty Baker in 1993's "Sugar Babies." Photo courtesy FTG.

Recently FTG members Peter D. Cook and longtime historian Gil Rapoza transferred the contents of more than 35 binders full of FTG memorabilia to the image hosting site Flickr and uploaded it to the FTG's website where visitors can click through past shows and see programs, photographs, and newspaper clippings related to each of FTG's more than 150 performances. Mr. Cook estimated that there were over 6,000 images, clipped and filed by Mr. Rapoza

along with former historian Ray Vick and other FTG historians before him.

Storing costumes and props used to be a challenge for the guild, with members even storing costumes at their houses. Presently props are shared with CLOC and stored above the theater in the prop loft. Costumes are also stored on the property in the former Adelphia Cable building now owned by the conservatory. The



Street urchins ready for a 1989 performance of "Scrooge." Photo courtesy FTG.

building is now climate controlled. The goal with the costumes is not only to have them for future FTG performances but also to be able to lend them out to high schools and other community theaters as they did this past spring when Falmouth High School borrowed costumes for its production of "Once Upon a Mattress." The coat of many colors worn by Jeffrey Kelly in this spring's production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" was the same one worn in 2004 when FTG performed "Joseph"

as a dinner theater at the Upper Cape Cod Technical School.

Longtime guild members cited different performances as favorites for a variety of reasons and were not shy about saying what FTG has meant to them.

Eighty-nine year old Irene Thibeault, who runs the concession stand for the guild, has been involved in FTG since the early 1970s.

Widowed at a young age, Ms. Thibeault was encouraged to try out for an FTG performance by



a fellow volunteer in the school system. “I mean it sincerely, the Theatre Guild saved my life. I was so lonely, knowing no one,” said Irene. “I fell in love with the people. They were so kind. They just wrapped you up.”

Lori Welsh said she was going through a divorce when she first got involved in FTG in the early 1980s. “It was either join the theater, or join the circus,” she said.

Several longtime members cited 2009’s “Peter Pan” as one of the most successful shows to date. “Technically, and in terms of ‘wow’ factor, it was the best investment we could have made,” said current FTG president Victoria Santos about the cost of renting the equipment to fly Peter Pan and the Darling children. Matt Gould also recalled Peter Pan’s entrance as one of his favorite moments in FTG history. “We would all get quiet back stage just before the entrance,” he said, “so we could hear the audience go ‘ohhhhhh!’”

Irene Thibeault said her favorite show was “La Cage Aux Folles” in 1995. “Gil Rapoza directed it and he taught guys to dance who’d

never danced before. He’d yell, ‘Tom! Stand up straight! You’re a showgirl now!’”

“They were the ugliest showgirls,” recalled Irene, laughing over a shared memory with Gil about the wife of one of the cast members driv-

ing her husband to New Bedford for the show so she could pick out a bra for him.

“It’s the people,” said Gil Rapoza, citing his favorite thing about FTG, an organization he joined in 1960. “I enjoy what I’m doing, it keeps me vital.” A performer, director, and choreographer, Gil reprised his role as Jacob this spring in “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat.” He

played the same part in 2004.

Rob Bowerman remembered 2013’s “Sweeney Todd” as one of his favorite productions. “It was just so different,” he said.

“It’s so satisfying putting all the pieces of a show together,” said Rob. “It never gets old. There’s an energy that comes from community theater that you don’t get in professional theater. Community theater provides an opportunity to learn things you never would have learned before.”



Real-life husband and wife Matt and Davian Gould play Herr Schultz and Fraulein Schneider in 2008’s “Cabaret.” Photo courtesy FTG.

Woods Hole's Brian Switzer said he first got involved in FTG years ago when his daughter wanted to audition. He stays involved now he said, as payback. "The guild has given so much to my family."

Brian said he sees FTG, more than any other organization, as "a unifying force in the community."

"It's brought people together from all walks of life both onstage and in the audience. It's a vital piece of Falmouth. Community theater with a capital 'C.' It's like being on a team but there's no opposing players."

Davien Gould, whose involvement in FTG goes back over 40 years, cited 2014's "Young Frankenstein" as a case when "it takes a village to raise a show." While Davien directed the show, she was quick to admit that it never could have come off without the set crew, the music director, the pit, the choreographer, the costumers, and "the unbelievable performers who tap danced in seven-inch heels."

Davien also enjoyed playing her real-life husband's romantic love interest in 2008's "Cabaret" when she performed as Fraulein Schneider opposite her husband Matt as Herr Schultz.



Bonnie Fairbanks as Mrs. Lovett and Peter Cook as Sweeney Todd discuss "The Worst Pies in London" in a scene from this 2013 production of "Sweeney Todd." Photo courtesy FTG.



Carolyn "Fuzzy" Jarvis as Anna, and Robert Collins as the King in 1963's "The King and I," the first musical to be staged by the Falmouth Theatre Guild.

Photo courtesy FTG.

Another highlight for Davien was playing Eulalie Mackecknie Shinn in FTG's 2000 production of "The Music Man," because when FTG performed "The Music Man" in 1974 Davien had been a member of the cast (it was one of her first FTG performances) and Kitty Baker played the part of Eulalie. "I idolized Kitty," said Davien, "so it was meaningful to me to play that role."

"Kitty was a strong force in the theater," said Brian, adding that Highfield Theater's stage was renamed the Kitty Baker Stage after her death in 2011. In addition to Kitty, some of FTG's past "Dynamic Divas" according to Davien include Gloria Barnicoat, Gail Brooks, Vicky Engstrom, Barbara Fitzmaurice, and Charlotte Tashiro. Not only were these ladies tops on stage, in terms of costumes, "these first ladies of FTG were unbelievable. They made everything."

In addition to performing onstage, Matt is often behind the scenes and at the theater on the weekends or weeknights making sure things get done. “He’s the guy who knows where everything is,” said Brian of Matt. “I found that stuff has to get done, building sets, running the lights,” said Matt. “I learned from the best. People like Jim Tobey, Clyde Tyndale, and Gil.”

Appreciation also went out to Avery and Dr. John Funkhouser, who “took it upon themselves to raise the money to renovate the theater several years ago,” said Victoria Santos. On its website the guild has a Hall of Fame section set aside which includes short bios of many of the guild’s formative members.

Victoria commended the founders of FTG for their foresight. The mission statement they crafted, which includes resolutions such as “to engage in and promote the cultural growth of the community of Falmouth and vicinity by advancing interest, skill, and appreciation of the theatrical arts and sciences,” is the same one the guild uses today. “It’s been our guiding star.”

The 2017-2018 season will include “La Cage Aux Folles” in the fall, “Best Christmas Pageant Ever” in December, “The Nerd” at the end of January, and “The Producers” in the spring, an FTG premier.

A celebration of the guild’s 60th anniversary is planned for March 24, 2018 at the Coonamessett Inn.

“To have the audience laugh, applaud, and sometimes cry. It’s the most amazing high,” said Davien.

In keeping with its mission to foster the development of theater, the guild awards the FTG William Steele Memorial Scholarship annually to a student graduating from high school in Falmouth, Bourne, or Mashpee or to an active member of the Falmouth Theatre Guild who is planning a career in the arts and has been accepted to an accredited four-year college.

Some of the challenges FTG has faced and continues to face are bringing in new directors, trying to balance the season with shows that will appeal to a wide audience, and maintaining capital gains in order to better the shows and make purchases. “We can keep prices down because we are an all-volunteer organization,” said Brian. FTG has received a grant from the Falmouth Fund toward the purchase of new curtains, which they will share with CLOC.

Brian admitted, “There have been some ups and downs, but people have always stepped up.”

“It’s a labor of love,” added Victoria, “grueling at times, but we love every minute of it.”

### About the Author

Joanne Briana-Gartner is a lifelong resident of Falmouth, an unabashed lover of musical theater, and the entertainment editor of the *Falmouth Enterprise*.