

# Celebrating 50 Years of the College Light Opera Company

*By Caroline Lloyd*

Fifty years ago this summer the College Light Opera Company replaced the Oberlin College Gilbert & Sullivan Players as the resident music company at Highfield Theatre. According to the College Light Opera's fact-filled website discussing the history of the two theater companies,

"It wasn't until 1958 that the Oberlin Gilbert & Sullivan Players from Oberlin College, under the guidance of Dr. W. Hayden Boyers became steady summer tenants of Highfield Theatre providing Falmouth and Cape audiences with masterful productions of Gilbert and Sullivan



Robert A. Haslun, CLOC's founding producer.  
Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Ursula R. Haslun, producer and business manager of CLOC.  
Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



A production of *Anything Goes* during CLOC's 39<sup>th</sup> season in 2007.

Courtesy Fmouth Historical Society.

Comic operas and American and European operettas. It is to their credit that the Highfield Theatre summer light opera and musical theater tradition was established.” The web site further notes, “In 1969, Oberlin ceased their Cape Cod operations and moved the summer company to Oberlin. Unwilling to let the summer Cape operation demise, former Oberlin G&S members Donald Tull and Robert Haslun founded a new company, based upon the Oberlin players. And so was born the College Light Opera Company!”

DeWitt C. Jones III, in a 1995 *Spritsail* article titled “Curtain Rising,” described the new theater company, now known as CLOC, in the following way: “The transition from Oberlin

management was marked by several significant changes. The season was increased from eight to nine weeks, the size of the company was cut almost in half, two pianists took the place of the orchestra, and all members of the vocal company were hired as equal members of the ensemble, meaning that every singer could audition for the principal roles.” Furthermore, “CLOC also departed from the Oberlin Players by presenting more than just Gilbert and Sullivan, although in their first year of operation they kept five Gilbert and Sullivan favorites on the program. Not only did widening their repertoire help the box office, it also made CLOC more attractive to applicants hoping for musical careers.”

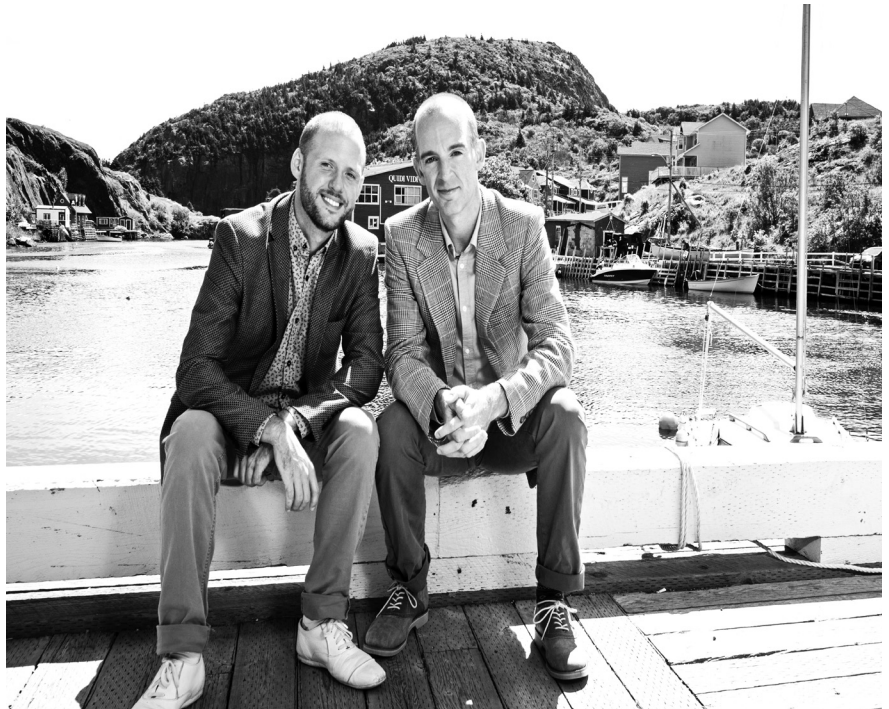
The inaugural nine-week CLOC season opened with a double bill of *Trial by Jury* and *The Pirates of Penzance* followed by *Brigadoon*, *Iolanthe*, *The Beggar's Opera*, *The Mikado* with a two-week run, *Die Fledermaus*, *Princess Ida*, and *The Fantasticks*. Ticket prices for that first season ranged from \$2.75 to \$3.75. CLOC brought back a full orchestra in 1970, which increased the size of the company to 70.

Over the next few years, CLOC established itself as a popular summer activity on Cape Cod. The company benefited from a wealth of talent seeking the training and experience CLOC offered. When Donald Tull decided to move on in the fall of 1973, Robert Haslun continued as CLOC's sole producer. Ursula Rooth, Haslun's colleague from the 1969 inaugural company, continued as business manager. In early June, before the 1975 season opened, Haslun and Rooth were married at St. Barnabas Church in Falmouth. In 1981, Ursula took on the title of CLOC's co-producer while continuing as head of the business staff.

According to DeWitt C. Jones III, "The entire company was housed in Tanglewood [a sister estate to Highfield Hall] which also included a

rehearsal hall and dining room. It was such a tight squeeze that on pleasant days many of the company ate outdoors. When it rained, the congestion indoors made for very fast meals." When the owners decided to tear down Tanglewood Hall in 1974, Josephine and Josiah K. Lilly made the Inn at West Falmouth available to the company. CLOC moved to the West Falmouth campus in 1975 and purchased the six-acre property from the Lillys in 1979. "The living quarters and rehearsal spaces have remained there ever since."

Built in 1895 for Sara M. Skull of Philadelphia, the estate was originally called Bridgefields Hall because it stood beside the bridge to Chapoquoit



Mark A. Pearson (left), Producer and Artistic Director, and E. Mark Murphy, Producer and Executive Director, succeeded the Hasluns in 2016. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.





Eighteen members of the orchestra during CLOC's 37<sup>th</sup> season in 2005. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Island. The estate was purchased in 1911 by Mrs. Katherine A. Montgomery, who established the West Falmouth Inn in 1912. Its Popponessett West restaurant made the Inn a favorite local gathering place for many years. Over the years additions included twin cottages on the harbor, a caretaker's cottage, and a staff cottage.

As a resident theater company, all students, staff, and faculty (approximately 85 people) live and work together to mount a new production each week during the nine-week season. Rehearsals, meals, and lodging all take place on the six-acre campus in West Falmouth. CLOC ensures that each student receives a well-rounded educational experience working with theater professionals in their chosen area of interest.

In the mid-1980s when an increasingly competitive summer job market for young musicians made it difficult to recruit a full CLOC orches-



The Inn at West Falmouth.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Factory ladies in *The Pajama Game*, the closing production of CLOC's 38th season in 2006. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

tra, an interested Oberlin trustee started small scholarships for CLOC string players. These stipends were eventually expanded to include all the orchestra musicians, a practice which continues today through endowed chairs.

All company members receive room and board for their eleven-week stay and are involved in every production. Applicants studying theater from across the country and abroad vie for this opportunity. With a limited number of openings, placement is highly competitive. On average, only 26 percent of applicants are ac-

cepted. For the 2018 season, CLOC received 247 applications for the vocal company with an acceptance rate of 11 percent. The company includes 32 vocalists, 18 orchestral musicians, 12 scenic and costume technicians, three designers, two collaborative pianists, two associate conductors, one choreographer, one stage manager, and four administrators.

Formation of the following summer's company begins in October when CLOC distributes recruitment information. CLOC sends invitations to those members of the previous company whom they think would best benefit from an

additional CLOC season. For new candidates, the application and audition deadline is January 31. By April the docket is largely in place and the new company arrives in Falmouth by the beginning of June.

The company benefits from the opportunity to work with a diverse group of professional stage directors, conductors, and producers. Conductors give individual feedback to the orchestra members prior to the start of the show's run. As one alumnus remarked, "This rarely happens in professional symphonies and other opera companies" where she has been employed since her summer at CLOC. Working with many conductors (as many as five in nine shows) provides training for playing with professional symphonies. Performing six times a week at the historic Highfield Theatre in Falmouth, students rehearse during the day at the Inn in West Falmouth for the upcoming week's new production. At any given time, a staging rehearsal could be happening in the living room, a choral rehearsal in the dining room, a choreography run-through out on the lawn, coaching in the cottages, small groups working on the deck, and other preparations taking place virtually anywhere else space can be found. All the while costumes are being sewn in a back room and sets are being built behind the theater.

After 47 successful seasons, the Hasluns were ready to retire. Effective with the 48<sup>th</sup> season in 2016, the CLOC Board announced E. Mark Murphy and Mark A. Pearson as the new producers. A talented stage director and designer, Mark Pearson is no stranger to CLOC having served in many capacities since 2003, and Mark

Murphy brings both vocal performance talent and skilled administrative experience to the Company.

The 2018 season marks 50 summers that talented young people have come together to explore the varied possibilities of music theater while staging exciting productions for audience enjoyment on Cape Cod. The College Light Opera Company is the largest resident theater company of its kind in the United States and has staged over 120 productions since its founding. It provides unparalleled educational opportunities for talented young singers, instrumentalists, designers, technicians, and nonprofit administrators.

For many of its 3,500 plus alumni, CLOC has been the experience of a lifetime. Working to ensure that music theater remains a vibrant part of our culture, CLOC cultivates the next generation of professionals who will shape American theater through their professional work on and off stage in theaters, universities, cultural organizations, and non-profits.

Perhaps F. Paul Driscoll, Editor-in-Chief of *Opera News* and CLOC alumnus, sums it up best: "Since its inaugural season, CLOC still remains true to its purpose: to provide young and still-developing artists with an atmosphere where they can learn their craft, challenge their skills, and celebrate their talents. It engages these young artists in the business of presenting quality living theatre; as members of a supportive ensemble, these artists grow as individuals. Whatever success the alumni may achieve in their chosen fields – whether in the arts or not – their appreciation of the creative process and the discipline it requires will be deepened by

the knowledge and experience they acquired at CLOC.”

Long after its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary season has come and gone, CLOC will continue to celebrate its mission to educate, entertain, and enrich. To quote the current producers: “There is no substitute for live theater. CLOC does not exist to preserve the history of music theater; it exists to ensure its future.”

### **An Anniversary Memory**

by David Ward, Vocal Company (1982-1983)  
and Stage Director (2014-present)

“When I walked back into the Highfield Theatre after being away for 31 years, nothing had changed. I would soon hear the kids in the vocal company call it CLOC-adoon (after that beloved Lerner & Lowe musical, *Brigadoon*). Every summer it reappears at the top of Depot Avenue and out near the beach on Chapoquoit Road in West Falmouth. This magical place where every week we put up another grand old operetta, a G&S masterpiece, or a Broadway blockbuster, it returns every year.”

### **Sources:**

The College Light Opera Company website

DeWitt C. Jones III, “Curtain Rising: Theater in Falmouth Over the Past Seventy Years.” *Spritsail*, Summer 1995.

F. Paul Driscoll, “25 Years at Highfield, A History of the College Light Opera Company.” (1993)

### **About the Author**

Caroline Lloyd is a trustee of the College Light Opera Company and the former board president of the Falmouth Historical Society.