

Runners. Blackout. Blocking.

Ellie Mencer

Sounds like the beginning of an action thriller? Maybe football? No. It's actually a few of the terms used in theater production.

Recently, photographer Rob Otis and I observed the arduous process of creating a stage event by the Tidewater Players, a community theater in Havre de Grace. This year they celebrate their 30th year and over 50 productions, bringing the excitement and talent appreciated by those who love attending community theater.

Watching an early rehearsal of two actors going over lines and blocking with the director and stage manager

for the play, *The Rainmaker* by N. Richard Nash, I was made aware of the daunting tasks required to have a polished, public performance less than four weeks later.

It was quite a lesson for me – a lover of theater with absolutely no desire to be 'onstage.' What flows so naturally during the performances is a feat of extraordinary effort by a dozen folks or more, each perfecting their particular task. Some members actually work in more than one area: a stage manager may create costumes, an actor also paint sets.



But possibly, ghosts of performances past – or maybe it's the late Harry Malin – keep watch on the development of each new presentation. You'll notice a photo and flowers on a shelf in memory of the work and support given by Mr. Malin, founder and member emeritus. Look closely for the use

of Harry Malin's photo as a prop somewhere on stage with each presentation, a Tidewater Players tradition.

The Havre de Grace Opera Hall located at 121 North Union Avenue has a long history of public performances. When you walk into the theater, there's a glass case with memorabilia from years gone by including playbills from 1902 and 1905.

It is not a stage that presently receives accolades for its beauty. Its location on the second floor and no elevator means it is not handicap accessible at this time. Between scenes when the lights go dark, there are no curtains to pull as the stage crew changes scenery. If you look closely and your eyes adjust, you can actually watch them rearrange props.

Yet the beautiful tin roof and meticulously painted trim add a certain flair to the building. Sitting quietly, you might visualize performances of a century ago and the balcony that would have risen above you.

Simplicity is the charm of this historic building, reminding me a bit of outdoor performances where the audience enjoys the behind the scenes activities.

Several years ago, my grandson Brenden and I, enjoyed a performance by the Tidewater Players. He was more fascinated by what was happening in the dark than on stage under the lights. It made me realize that it's a perfect way for newcomers to theater to notice other tasks involved in stage production, maybe even encouraging them to consider if they have a talent to share.

Local resident and Harford County Executive, David Craig, explained that the Opera House was originally a multi-purpose civic center in the late 1800s. The first floor contained city hall as well as the city's library, which was separate from the county's until the early 1950s. It was three stories tall, but only had two floors – the third floor being the balcony for the stage located on the second floor. The second floor often served as a large meeting room for the city and for the school system. The hose company also had a drying tower in the back of the building to dry out hoses after a fire.

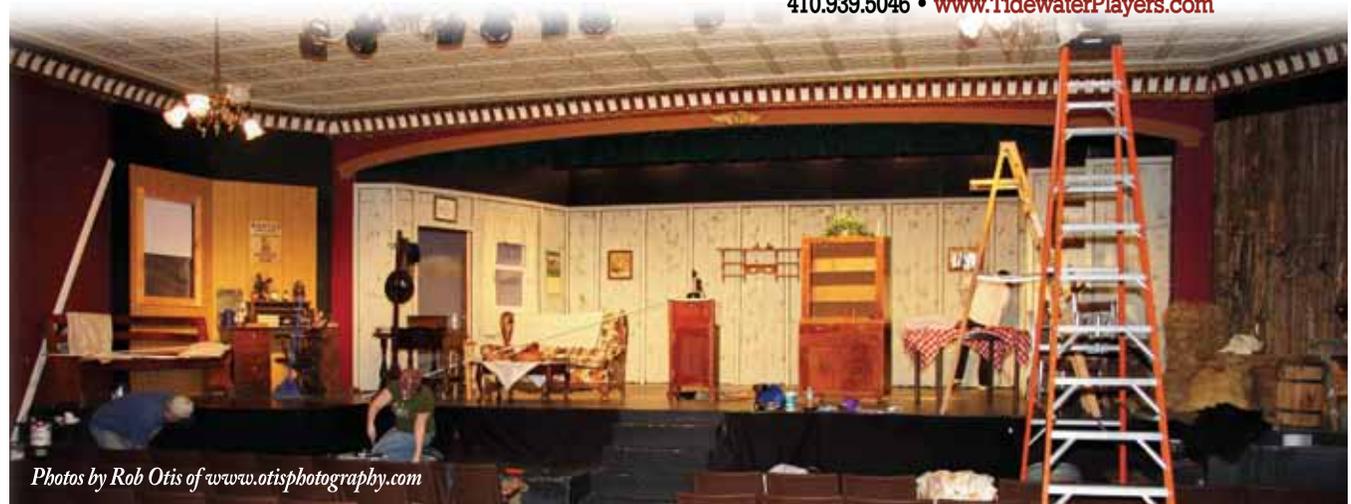
Somewhere around 1920, the building caught fire. The city put the reconstruction on the ballot for the citizens to vote for a loan to rebuild it to its original state. It was voted down and the city had enough money to put a roof on it, removing the third story (balcony). The first floor of the structure now is home to McDermott Chiropractic Offices, the Chesapeake Heritage Conservancy (owners of the historic Skipjack Martha Lewis) and the Havre de Grace Main Street, Inc. Office. Over a century later, it continues to maintain its multi-use function.

The Tidewater Players' performances at the Opera Hall are as varied as its audiences. Musical to romance, comedy to drama, plus a number of presentations for children have been offered throughout the years by this community theatre group. Visit their website for regular updates, www.TidewaterPlayers.com Choose your play. Then take your seat and prepare to enjoy a couple hours of excellent, local entertainment while you imagine plays of a century ago in this very same building.

Visit <http://library.thinkquest.org/5291/terms.html> for a great glossary of theater terms.

Tidewater Players, 121 N. Union Avenue, Havre de Grace, MD

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Photos by Rob Otis of www.otisphotography.com