

Community theater on a whole new level

Some neighborhoods have block parties. Some organize neighborhood watches.

A Maple Grove neighborhood puts on its own musical every year.

The family and friends of **Janet Grove '80** and Jerry Irvin just hosted their seventh annual backyard musical.

Yes, a full-fledged musical.

This year it was "The Music Man"-- with a cast of 40, an orchestra of 12, and an audience of 1,200 people for their two performances last week.

All in the back yard of their home on Cedar Island Lake.

"We do it with full sets, full costumes, all on our back deck," Grove says.

In the process, they collected \$6,000 in donations to help less-fortunate kids attend Sing Minnesota, a youth music day camp at Concordia College.

This is all the brainchild of Nate Irvin, himself a child when he first proposed staging plays in his backyard.

When he was 3, he began asking his mom if he could put on "The Wizard of Oz."

Today, he's 13 and can't even remember those earliest requests: "I just remember really liking 'The Wizard of Oz'," he says.

By the time he was 7, his mother finally relented. He put on a play during the summer of 1999 with a few friends. About 90 people showed up to see it.

The productions have grown each year, until now much of the neighborhood is involved in some aspect of the show. Rehearsals go on for much of the summer, two or three times a week.

Nate, now a rising eighth-grader at Maple Grove Junior High School, was the "Music Man" director. He got his love for the theater from his parents. **His mother was a theater and music major at Macalester College**, having fallen in love with drama during her years at Cooper Senior High and Hosterman Junior High. She and her husband met while appearing in their high school musical. She's now the lead cantor at the Basilica of St. Mary's.

The productions involve the whole family -- Janet, Jerry and their two daughters, Katie, 17, and Samantha, 5, had parts in the play this summer.

But this is really a community project.

"Our next-door neighbor builds our sets," Janet says. Other neighbors help with everything from music to parking. And some help with concessions, the proceeds from which go toward paying startup expenses for next summer's show -- including the rights to put on the show. The rights to this year's show were \$1,200.

Other neighbors and friends relish the chance to participate in the musicals.

The band director at Orono High School, Don Krubsack, who lives in Maple Grove, played this year's lead role as Professor Harold Hill. His wife, the music director at the Basilica, Teri Larson, played the female lead, Marian the librarian. There were also cast members from all around the west and south metro -- Eden Prairie, Bloomington, Minnetrista, Golden Valley, Hopkins, New Hope, and of course Maple Grove and Osseo, among others, Janet says.

"It's a blast," Krubsack says. "One of the most exciting things about the project is that you've got people of all ages, from Samantha Irvin, who is 5, on up.

"Seeing all those people interact is really a special way to spend the summer."

The audiences come from all over too, Janet says, and they pack the yard: "They don't have a millimeter between each chair," she says. "They brought their own chairs and their own bug spray."

The experience is great for everyone involved, especially Nate and the other kids.

"He wants to be in movies, on Broadway, to be an artist," Nate's mother says. He has always loved theater.

Last Friday, the day after the final show, they were cleaning up the yard. "The day after the last show, we always tear down the set," Nate says.

And they're already looking forward to next year. They are considering several options but seem to be leaning toward "Beauty and the Beast" -- if they can get the rights for an affordable price from Disney.

It all can get quite complicated, and Nate doesn't recommend that just any kid take on such a big production. It requires a major commitment from a lot of people.

"It's not just them -- they've got to have the parents, too," he says.

It is indeed a rare breed of parents who will put up with so much work and inconvenience and chaos for weeks every summer, he says.

Parents like his.

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