

# Kal's Kaleidoscope

**EVER BEEN BITTEN? BITTEN BY A BUG?** A huge, multi-faceted, bug called the Theater Bug? I'm happy to report that a bite by the Theater Bug is NEVER fatal, but can bring on a complete paralysis of a person's common sense, causing said individual to wander from theater to theater in search of that next great role. Alas, I must confess that I was once bitten by the Theater Bug, and soon discovered there is no known cure for this life-changing illness.

Eons ago - the mid-70s - amateur theater was the farthest thing from my mind. Sooo, imagine my surprise when a dear friend called and said, "Anthony, I'm helping direct *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* at Gulfport Little Theater. I need someone to play a eunuch. You interested?" "A EUNUCH?", I thought. "Lady surely you jest!" But I put common sense on the "back burner," as the old-timers say, and down to the G.L. and T. I went—audition at the ready—complete with the required soprano voice. I got the part!

That part lead to another part, and then another, and for the next twenty-five years, I stammered and stomped my way across the stages of nearly every amateur theater organization on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. During that time, my heavenly muse constantly waved her magic wand over me, which enabled me to land some of the best roles ever written: the Emcee in *Cabaret*, a role made famous by Joel Grey on Broadway, and the Artful Dodger in *Oliver*, played when I was 35 - they gelled me in all the pink gels in town to give me a youthful glow! I plopped and hopped my way through the role of Captain Andy in *Show Boat* and cringed and cried my way through *Sweeney Todd* as Toby. I was Harpagon in *The Miser* and Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. But one of my favorite roles, and one of my smallest, was the demented, bug-eating, Renfield in *Dracula*.



The word Dracula starts with a "D" and so does the word DISASTER. For those of us who have tread the boards, we are familiar with the Bard's famous line, "All the world's a stage!" That is true. But closer to home, a local stage production can be a disaster in the making. How nice it would be if our local theatrical triumphs were what was remembered, and not the disasters. But it's the disasters that I too remember, because they produced the most amusement.

Gulfport Little Theater's production of *Dracula* was top-notch! The director was spectacular and so was the cast. The set was a masterpiece of gothic creepiness. The technical crew outdid itself with the simple, but dramatic, special effects: heavy, carved chairs swivelled with no one in sight; doors opened and closed, untouched by human hands; and Dracula actually "disappeared"

right before the audience's startled eyes. But the piece de resistance of the production was the FLYING BAT! A particularly talented, tinker-of-sorts put together a track that was suspended above the stage and out of sight of the audience. The tinker's bat - a carved piece of wood



with moveable wings and beady, red-glass, eyes - was attached to the track by wires. Controlling those wires marionette-style enabled the bat to fly from one side of the stage to the other. They also made the bat move up and down. Get the picture? The tinker tested his bat over and over. It was a flawless creation—perfection in flight!

So, the play opened. Great reviews! Packed houses! A triumph in the making, until halfway through the run of the show. As always, the bat's first grand entrance was right on track, as it were. The scene was set. Pulling his hair, Renfield babbled, "MY MASTER IS ALL AROUND! HE'S COMING FOR ME!" The stage lightning flashed. The canned thunder rolled. The gothic-styled chandelier suspended above the stage quivered, its electric lights flickering. Suddenly the towering, French doors, stage right, flew open. The sheers fluttered, and with a canned screech, in flew the bat! The audience gasped! The young man playing Jonathan Harker yelled, "LOOK OUT! IT'S A BAT!" Renfield screamed, "NO! IT'S MY MASTER COME TO KILL ME!" And then it happened!

Those of us on stage heard a muffled snap from off stage, accompanied by a muffled expletive. The bat, still fluttering around, made an erratic dive and hit the floor. After another muffed, offstage expletive, the bat was airborne once more. But then the wires, which gave it life, snapped completely, and the bat, as if on automatic pilot, made a crash dive, slamming with great force right

into the unsuspecting crotch of poor Jonathan Harker. THUD! Another THUD was heard when the bat hit the floor. And a third THUD was heard when Jonathan Harker hit the floor. The poor young man went pale, face convulsed with pain. He then managed to rise to his feet and limped off stage. But those of us left on stage knew that the show must go on. With renewed babbling and much hair pulling, Renfield writhed on the sofa. The elderly gentleman playing Professor Van Helsing ad-libbed something about "the only good bat's a dead bat," and with that, pitched the now-discredited bat through the French Doors and into the waiting arms of its creator - the blood-red, cursing tinker. Those of us left on stage quickly slammed the scene into high-gear! At last, the curtain rained down and the audience rained down into the lobby. We could hear their howls of laughter from our dressing room. But by this time, our poor director was in tears, and poor Jonathan Harker had swooned in misery.

Pulleys, wires, and strings were an integral part of another stage disaster. But for this disaster, thankfully, I was a member of the audience and not the cast. Sometimes it's nice to just sit in a darkened theater and let your fellow thespians entertain you. And what more wonderful entertainment could there be than a production of the ever-popular *Peter Pan*? I had played Captain Hook before, but this time around, it was nice just to sit and watch.

The Biloxi Saenger Theater's production of *Peter Pan* spared no expense. There were lavish sets and costumes. There was an orchestra. And the Director had enlisted the talents of Flying by Foy, a company that for the past fifty years has flown actors across stages worldwide. When their technicians arrived at the Saenger, they set up their "track on track" flying system. They insisted that four local stage hands learn how to pull the counter-weighted ropes that made Peter Pan, Wendy, John, and Michael fly. During the run of the show, the system, as always, worked like a charm. That is until the local stage hands - laid low by one of those 24 hour viruses, - had to be replaced with family members. Now don't forget! Flawless though it was, this production of *Peter Pan* was amateur at best. And sometimes amateurs, especially fathers, uncles, and boy-friends, can be a bit over zealous!

So, there I sat in the gilded, 1920s, splendor of the Biloxi Saenger Theater, awaiting the much anticipated flying scene with Wendy and her brothers. Peter Pan's first flying entrance was an audience pleaser. The next flying scene would certainly be the same. Everything went as planned. Wendy and her brothers found their

assigned spots, and their flying hooks were attached to their body suits. Peter Pan's famous lines, "Now, think of the happiest things! It's the same as having wings!" echoed through out the theater.

The music swelled to a crescendo. Wendy, John, and Michael thought only of happy things. And so did their family members, getting all TOOOO happy, as they yanked the ropes attached to the counterweights that were attached to Wendy, John, and Michael. With a whoosh and holler, Michael was airborne. His sudden liftoff made him forget the flying techniques that the Foy Flyers had taught him. He flapped around and around like "a goose in a snowstorm," as the old-timers say. Having lost his control, he was a rudderless ship. With a



whopping, big SPLAT, poor Michael hit the stage flat. The child could do nothing but ignominiously slide down the wall, while his doting mother bit her fingernails in the wings.

Wendy and John were somewhat better off. Although they were in control, their flyers were not! As Wendy and John attempted to deliver their lines, they bobbed up-and-down like a ball attached to a bolo board. BOING! BOING! BOING! And Peter Pan? He was in big trouble! His flyer had managed to fly Peter Pan to his assigned spot, the fireplace, but had stopped just short of the mark. Sooo, there poor Peter Pan was, trying to deliver his lines while twirling in the air, attempting to grip the edge of the fireplace with the toe of his shoe. Peter Pan would

say a line, twirl, try to grip the fireplace, and then start all over again. Recite! Twirl! Grip! Recite! Twirl! Grip! He looked like Kermit the Frog trying to grip a tree branch.

Now by this time the audience—as audiences are wont to do in situations like this—was in stitches. Grunts, groans, and guffaws rang-out across the Saenger auditorium. Tears flowed! Underwear were dampened! And me? I had already chewed-up one end of my theater program, and was by now feverishly working on the other end. Having been on stage during my own stage disaster, I knew exactly how my fellow thespians felt. Their pain was my pain. Their agony, my agony. Their . . . Oh tell the truth! I was howling too! Thankfully for the actors and the audience alike, the curtain finally rained down.

The audience spilt-their-knickers getting to the lobby. And like the cast and crew of *Dracula*, I'm sure the cast and crew of *Peter Pan* could hear their audience howling in the lobby.

So there you have it! Stage disasters in all their glory. And all that glory the result of one bite! A bite by the Theater Bug! I should warn you, Fall's cool nights are like incubators, producing swarms of Theater Bugs! But if you are bitten, don't tear-out to your local hospital—tear-out to your local community theater. Because whether it's a stage disaster, or a smashing theatrical success, being part of a local theater production can be a most rewarding experience!

Katrina may have destroyed much along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but thankfully, nearly all of the local theater buildings survived. Fall is the time when many of those theaters hold auditions. Look for their audition announcements in the *Sun Herald*, or listen for them on the radio. If all else fails, look on page 673 of the yellow pages, in the local 2006 phone book for Theaters - Stage. GIVE 'EM A CALL! "All the world's a stage," and YOU need to be on it! Sooo, this Fall run out into the night!

Run around the house! Up and down the street And hope the Theater Bug takes a big chomp out of you!

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers.

*May God bless, and keep a song in your heart.*

**Anthony Wayne Kalberg**



*Your thoughts and comments are always welcomed at iougarbo@cableone.net*