

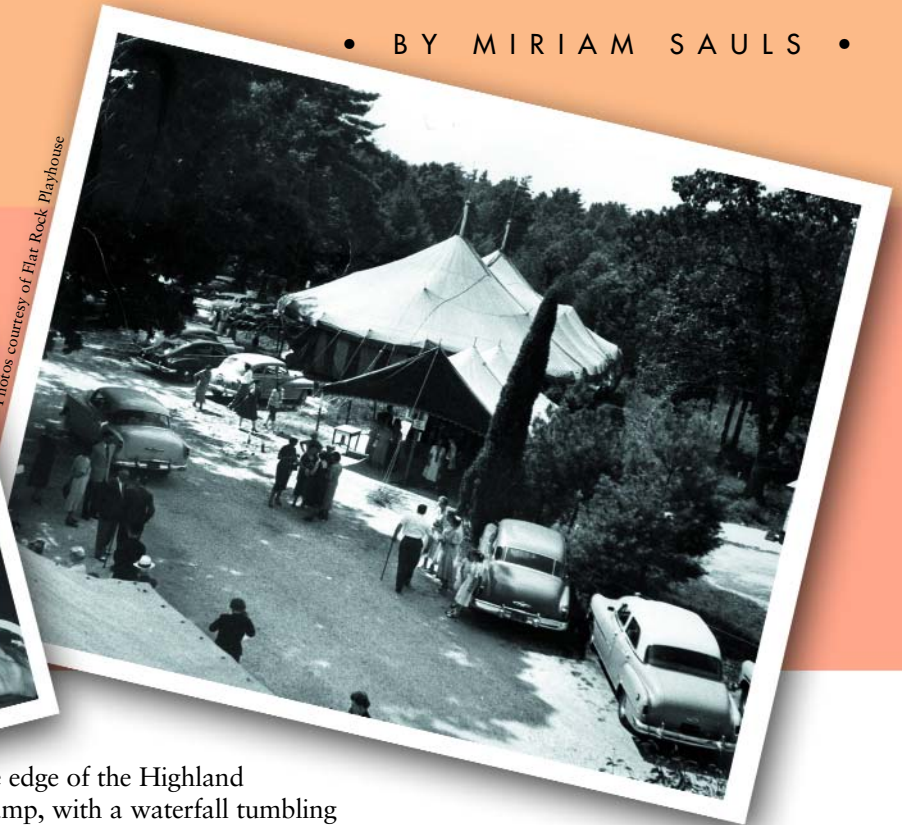
taking to the stage

THE PEOPLE OF THE AREA BUILT AND SUPPORTED THE FLAT ROCK PLAYHOUSE,
WHICH HAS GROWN RIGHT ALONG WITH THE COMMUNITY THAT LOVES IT.

• BY MIRIAM SAULS •



Photos courtesy of Flat Rock Playhouse



If you happened to have been in downtown Hendersonville in the early 1950s, you might have witnessed a gentleman sporting a plaid beret, beaming with eagerness and optimism, and placing flyers on car windshields. He had a mission, you see. He was bringing theater to the area, and he had a tent to fill.

In 1940, Robroy Farquhar discovered the community of Flat Rock outside Hendersonville. Smitten with the landscape, which reminded him of the Scottish Highlands in his native British Isles, he decided to move his Vagabond Players theater troupe from New York City to western North Carolina.

Farquhar rode his bicycle on scouting trips for theater space around Flat Rock and found an old grist mill no longer in use. “After hours of walking and searching, I came up with the Old Mill

on the edge of the Highland Lake Camp, with a waterfall tumbling down beside it. ... The location is excellent, the surroundings perfectly beautiful, a more delightful atmosphere couldn’t be achieved anywhere than on that most alluring spot,” he said. “In my humble opinion, I believe we’ve got something here! I get all itchy at the prospect. ... I estimate we could get in about 150 to 200 seats.” And the Old Mill Playhouse was born.

The Vagabond Players performed for two seasons at the Old Mill, with the cast ignoring an occasional bat swooping overhead during a performance. Then they had to take a break for World War II. Farquhar became an infantryman in General George C. Patton’s 3rd Army. Or, as he put it, “I had just played Eliot Chase in Noel Coward’s *Private Lives*. Suddenly I went from *Private Lives* to the life of a private.”

The Vagabond Players resumed in 1947, converting an old summer camp into Lake Summit Playhouse in nearby

Tuxedo. They found their third and permanent home in 1952, became incorporated as The Vagabond School of the Drama, and named their new professional venue Flat Rock Playhouse.

Not having a suitable building on the property to serve as an actual theater, Farquhar rented a retired circus tent. Forty truckloads of dirt were brought in to make a base for the tent stakes and white gravel was spread to create a floor. The seats were wooden slat chairs connected together in rows.

Soon the fund-raising to build a permanent theater began. A “Be a Brick, Buy a Brick” campaign began, with theater apprentices walking down the aisles at intermission with a clothesline strung over the heads of the audience that had paper bricks attached with clothespins. Patrons would take a brick and pin money in its place.

All the while, Farquhar would be on



Robroy Farquhar (far left) brought his acting troupe to Hendersonville in the 1940s and, by 1952, founded Flat Rock Playhouse (left).

Esteemed productions include *State Fair* (above), *Bye Bye Birdie* (top right) and *The King and I* (right).



stage with his tabby cat Snodgrass perched on his shoulder, pitching the idea of the new facility to his audience. The campaign continued for many years, and the donations from patrons literally built a new theater “brick by brick.”

“We’ve come a long way since the ’50s — we’ve got cushions on the chairs and all the bells and whistles of a modern theater now,” says Robin Farquhar, current executive and artistic director of Flat Rock Playhouse — and son of Robroy. “We graduated to a structure with a roof in 1956, just using the tent canvas on the sides. If it rained really hard, you couldn’t hear a thing in the theater.

“The evolution of the theater was a grassroots effort and from the start created community support that has continued to this day,” he says. Neighbor Carl Sandburg, at 80 years old, gave a benefit concert of songs and poems in 1958, raising \$1,375 for the Playhouse.

Official state theater

What had started as Robroy Farquhar’s dream was so well established and successful by 1961 that the North Carolina General Assembly designated Flat Rock Playhouse the “State Theater of North Carolina.” It is now rated one of the top 10 summer theaters in the nation.

A children’s theater was formed and began public performances. The Theater for Young People has continued to develop and in the past two years alone, has performed for more than 50,000 people through its touring program and performances offered in the Playhouse. And after-school theater classes and camps run year-round.

In 1962, Norman Corwin wrote “The World of Carl Sandburg,” comprised of excerpts from Sandburg’s stories, commentaries, poems, and folk songs, and the Vagabonds staged the first performance. The production was loudly acclaimed by critics and by Sandburg himself, who declared, “Every neighborhood in the country should

have a group like the Vagabonds.”

An abridged version of “The World of Carl Sandburg,” is still performed each summer at Sandburg’s home, now The Carl Sandburg National Historic Site. Sandburg’s “Lincoln” is staged in the fall. Both shows are performed by members of the Apprentice/Intern Company from Flat Rock.

Over the years, the Apprentice and Intern Programs have become known for providing excellent theater experience (theater students say they learn more in 10 summer weeks than the rest of the school year put together) and have created what has become the core of the Flat Rock Theater staff.

“I spent my life savings, which at the time was \$385, to become an apprentice at Flat Rock in 1967,” says Dennis Maulden, now the scenic designer and director of education at Flat Rock Playhouse. He is quick to add that “having a title belies the way things work here. We all simply do what needs to be done. We’re all out weeding and planting or building rock

walls when the time comes.”

That team spirit is central to the culture at Flat Rock and explains why so many who start as apprentices come back year after year. “What we’ve got here is like a family,” says Scott Treadway, director of development, an actor, and himself a former apprentice. “The theater here epitomizes what we got into this business for. These are the hardest working people I have ever been around. We understand that the goal is the success of the show — it’s not about an individual performer.

“Theater is a very tough business, and it can be extremely competitive,” he says. “But nice guys can finish first in this world. After my first summer, I left here thinking there are good human beings in this business. We treat each other kindly and uphold good values and high standards. The old-guard actors like ‘Mutt’ Burton (W.C. Burton, a writer for the *Greensboro Daily News*, for years spent his summers as a Vagabond) really took time with the apprentices and established for us a model, and now those of us who have been here for years want to give that same experience to new apprentices. We want them to understand they are in a unique place.”

Treadway returned this year from his annual spring audition trip to New York City reminded of Flat Rock’s reputation. “It’s an ego boost to see how many people in New York have heard of us,” he says. “The word is out in the acting community, and they want to be a part of our show. We auditioned 450 eager actors in [about] four days for our summer season. We look for the right talent, but we also look for the right attitude. Actors need to be able to learn a lot of work in a short time and not only handle it, but embrace and revel in it like the rest of us do.”

Flat Rock philosophy

Robin Farquhar never intended to be the man in charge of Flat Rock Playhouse after his father. He came to run the show on an interim basis when Robroy was ailing in 1981. Robin figured he’d go back to Atlanta to resume his career in sound engineering when a permanent director was found. Perhaps the theater was too much in his blood for him to walk away.

He had grown up at Flat Rock Playhouse of course, hanging around the Children’s Theater while classes were going on, watching rehearsals and hearing stories told by experienced actors and actresses. He remembers Lee Marvin’s classic demonstration of how a “bad guy” should die (Marvin spent the summer of 1949 in Flat Rock trying out his wings as an actor), but he admits that he was more into playing cowboys and Indians with the other children than being in a play. He made an occasional appearance on stage, and once, when he was no more than five, his mother found him trying to direct traffic in the parking lot, although he was too short to be seen over the hoods of the cars.

Once Robin realized he was there to stay, he began blending new styles with the old way of doing things to perpetuate his father’s dream. “I didn’t want to stand pat,” says the younger Farquhar. “My mother, who had been such an integral part of the theater alongside my father, was very supportive of me and gave good advice as I pushed the envelope. We performed our first musical in 1987 and began performing new works.

“We can still do things the old-fashioned way,” he says. “We produce what audiences want to see. We make sure people want to come out to the theater — we want no husbands being dragged kicking and screaming for a

if you’re going

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dose of culture. And we want parents and grandparents to be confident they can bring their kids. We’ve always provided illuminating and exciting and entertaining theater, and we’re never going to change that. Luckily and gratefully, our patrons have grown to trust us.”

“We have a wonderfully loyal audience base,” says Treadway. “It really motivates us as actors. They’ve watched a lot of us grow up since we were apprentices, and we know they are rooting for us.”

The Playhouse likes to give back to the community that supports it so generously. It gives hundreds of complimentary tickets each season to various organizations including Western Carolina Community Action, Boys and Girls Club, Council on Aging, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Something Special, YMCA, and others. And the Playhouse designates one show per season as a “Show for Schools,” providing thousands of free tickets for special morning performances for high-school students from three counties.

As the programming has grown, so has the community. “It has been fun to watch the area grow with a lot of seniors coming in from sophisticated places like Chicago and New York. It has made it possible for us to diversify our product. With a more discerning audience, we can do more challenging work,” says Treadway.

In fact, the Playhouse gets credit for bringing many of those retirees to the region. Area realtors report that the theater at Flat Rock is a primary reason why many new residents choose Henderson County to put down roots.

“Our area has grown from a place where there was nothing open past eight at night to one where you can go out now and get a sandwich and beer after the show,” notes Treadway. “And we’re delighted.”

“We take seriously the fact that our audience is used to a high level of quality,” says Robin Farquhar. “Whether we’re presenting the latest thing from Broadway or the London stage or a world premiere from a North Carolina playwright, we can promise we won’t disappoint.”

Miriam Sauls lives in Raleigh.