

# Singing on the Island

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Bainbridge Light Opera Association this summer becomes ten years old...and it crowns its loudly-applauded decade with a full-scale production of *The King and I*.

By Myra Lenington

**T**HE KING and I, rich and royal in settings, lyrical and lavish in melody, will celebrate this season the tenth anniversary of the Bainbridge Light Opera Association. The company chose this brilliant show in its wish to present a "something wonderful" to mark its first decade.

In the summer of 1956 five people had \$150. This was the profit from a casual little performance of Kurt Weill's one-act "Down in the Valley," whipped up the previous spring just for a lark by a small group of Bainbridge musicians. The original discussions of where and why and when to do some such thing had included the suggestion of playing it on the porch of the old Wing Point Golf clubhouse—a theater under the stars sort of thing. *Puget Sound natives, however, would not* guarantee a starry night, so glamor was sacrificed to the practical and the aging Grange Hall selected. That first show was fun for the performers and fun for their friends if determinedly modest in its aims.

That was the seed for today's Bainbridge Light Opera Association. Louise Mills, then a career girl with a passion for costumes, decided that Bainbridge should have a light opera association. She figured that \$150 was too much not to do anything with and that the residents had demonstrated their enthusiasm by turning out a decent crowd of fifty or so. She convinced her friend Corinne Berg, a professional musician at that time starting to raise a family, that she had time to give to it. She talked her father, the late Colonel Marmion D. Mills, into being business manager, and that's the way it went. For years, whenever something was needed it was Louise Mills who went after it and got it. Some people play cards on the ferry ride to Seattle, some read or just chat, but Louise spent her commuting time talking people into joining the Bainbridge Light Opera and recruiting reluctant males for the chorus.

Thus it was that in 1957 these people had stirred up enough interest to stage "Song of Norway" backed by a 32-piece orchestra provided by the Musicians' Union trust fund at the theater in what was then Fort Ward. The contrast to the show of the previous year was even more startling when, not the expected hundred or showed up, but over a thousand people clamored to get in. The fact that the show was free as well as a novelty possibly had a bearing, but in any case it was a thrill to the company. They crammed in about 900, many of whom sat on car seats hurried in from the parking lot, but about 200 had to be turned away.

It was with this show, too, that the company's reputation for superiority in costuming began to grow. With a large

population of Scandinavians and their descendants on Bainbridge, a committee set out to see what they could find in the way of costumes. By dint of much persuasion they were able to costume all the women in authentic gowns. Ever since, this enthusiasm for excellence has driven the staff.

With a turn-away crowd as ample evidence of interest to encourage them they incorporated that fall as the Bainbridge Light Opera Association with four officers and six trustees elected from the membership. Colonel Mills was fond of pointing out that it was a good thing they were organized as a non-profit corporation because they always were!

BLOA lives by grace of its patrons and sustaining members who contribute substantial sums of money as well as by its active members who pay a fee and then get in and work like people possessed.

In 1958 it was "The Merry Widow" again backed by a large orchestra provided through a grant from the Music Performance Trust Funds administered by Local 76 of the Musicians' Union. "Brigadoon," done in the round in North Kitsap High School at Poulsbo in 1959, is recalled by many people as their favorite.

The trustees began to develop a theory of selection of shows and planned to alternate old and new as well as modest and elaborate; the latter idea is considered essential to keep the financial situation safe. Thus in 1960 the choice was "Naughty Marietta," again performed at Poulsbo. The next year they tried a new format, a review made up of groups of numbers from different shows and called "A Night to Remember." In 1962 it was a lavish "Kismet," followed by another review, "One for the Road." "Vagabond King" was played in pure bravura style in 1964 and "Little Mary Sunshine" as classic corn last year. During the last two Christmas seasons they have performed "Amahl and the Night Visitors" (the first performance of which was to benefit a local charity known simply as the Bainbridge Committee).

The Association has performed in other communities at times, with a notable performance of one of the reviews in Port Angeles and "Little Mary Sunshine" last summer on a ghastly hot night after rehearsing through a ghastly hot day at Anacortes. On June 24, 1966, they will play "The King and I" to open the month-long Port Townsend Arts Festival in that city.

From singers to swingers to scholars—the company has included them all. Association officers try to cast their shows and make up a production staff with Island and North Kitsap residents but occasionally they cannot meet a need up to their standards so they look to Seattle's re-

Lyman Black  
Brigadoon.



This is the opening tavern scene from Vagabond King, which Bainbridge Light Opera Association put on two seasons ago.

sources for help. Among the professional singers who have sung leads are Gloria Goller and Maxine Wright, well-known sopranos who do live on the Island. Jack Turner sang the baritone leads in "Brigadoon" and "Kismet" and then won the San Francisco Opera auditions and has gone on to a career with them. Pat Palmerton, who regularly sings with the Opera on Wheels company, was a dashing Francois Villon and his brother George, normally a rock singer, assumed the red coat and stiff upper lip of the Forest Ranger Captain in "Little Mary Sunshine." Margheret Sundsten, widely respected choreographer and ballet instructor, has worked with them and so has Dorothy Fisher. Young dancers who have made it on Broadway who got early experience with the Island group are Mimi Funes, Nikki Sowinski and Terry Lee Sparks. A Spanish dancer, Miguel dos Santos, livened up a couple of shows and many know him as the gifted costumer at Brocklind's, Bill Green.

A number of excellent stage and music directors have led them: Dr. Denton Rossell was a consultant on one of the early productions and two of them were directed by Jerry Sando who has gone to the Midwest into a first-rate theater position. For the last four years Aurora Valentinetti, instructor of puppetry at the University of Washington and a former leading soprano with Thalia Opera Company, has been the director. Peter Hallock, musician at St. Mark's Cathedral, has assisted and Ted Plute, now teaching at Whitman, Linder Charlson and Lloyd Simpson have at different times worked with Mrs. Berg and others in the pit. One accompanist of a few years ago, Jim Quitslund, used to hurry home from Harvard to get in a few rehearsals before playing the show.

Bainbridge Light Opera Association can thus be considered a community theater, not an amateur one, nor, of course, professional. By the inclusion of semi-professional and professional talent along with amateur it falls into this category. They work somewhat like a repertory group in that the nucleus of enthusiasts turns out for all auditions and one year a fellow is a member of the chorus, next year a lead and the next maybe back in the chorus. To use "community" in another sense, as a group of people interested in the community, the company can also qualify. They have outfitted Commodore Bainbridge school auditorium with about \$1,000 worth of stage lighting. To be sure there is a measure of self-interest in that this is the auditorium they usually play in, but school productions certainly benefit, too.

Ten years is a remarkably long span for a theatrical company to stay together. There has to be an explanation for such durability. Mrs. Knapp thinks it is that from the beginning it has had sound financial management as well as artistic excellence. The caliber of the men who have served as officers and trustees over the years would tend to bear her out: James Hodges, retired industrialist; Lyman Black Jr., clothing manufacturer; C. H. Sutherland, longtime director of the Swedish Male Chorus, now retired and living in California; Charles Elicker, attorney and sanitarium owner; the late Colonel Mills who was the watchdog of the treasury for many years; Carl Berg, bank vice president; Ben Bradford, former minister of the Bellevue Congregational Church, now of the Boeing Co.; Ed Ulloa, CPA, and a vast assortment of other sensible theater buffs ranging from housewives to real estate company presidents.

Bainbridge Light Opera has been pretty

free of major conflicts and the Board of Trustees has been very adaptable to changing needs. They constantly review the bidding, so to speak, to be sure they are meeting the needs of the community and those of the people involved with their time and money. The most debated question is, "Are we a group of amateurs playing for our own fun and games, or should we be stressing quality to the extent of hiring a lot of professionals to lead us?" The answer is always a compromise.

This 10th anniversary show, *The King and I*, will play Friday, Saturday and Sunday, June 17, 18 and 19, 1966 in Commodore Bainbridge Auditorium. It should demonstrate the growth and strength of the Light Opera in that for the first time in many years the cast and production staff are all from the Island, Poulsbo and Bremerton. When Aurora Valentinetti resigned last January as artistic director of the Board of Trustees was able to find an Island woman with the credits necessary to replace her. Ann Thomas studied at the American Theater Wing School in New York, acted in summer stock and has been both student and instructor at the Perry Mansfield School in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

Lyman Black Jr. will cap a series of parts starting from chorus boy through villainy and comedy with the complex and dramatic roles of the King. Shirley Loomis has an excellent reputation as an actress and now it develops she can sing well, too. She will play the role of Anna. And every 10-year-old on the Island wants to be part of the children's chorus.

After *The King and I*, what? The Bainbridge Light Opera Association plans to step right out into the next decade with their formula of good nature, sound management and the best of productions.