

## **Universalist Church of West Hartford and Its UU Players Multigenerational Theatre Company**

### **Sally Oxman**

For over 20 years, the Universalist Church of West Hartford has been home to a musical theatre company known as the UU [Unitarian Universalist] Players. This group evolved from a parent-teacher performing group at a school down the road, who had several members who belonged to our church; when the school no longer wanted to sponsor the group, it moved to the church. This theatrical activity was simply the latest manifestation of church interest in theatre and music; previously, the church had a light opera society that performed Gilbert & Sullivan. At its inception, this group was all adults, with adults playing the Banks children in the group's premier production of Mary Poppins. Always a musical, each play is deliberately chosen for its wit and appeal to intergenerational audiences.

During the 1990s, director Duncan Bockus, who had first performed in and eventually directed many productions with this group, opened auditions to youth for another production of Mary Poppins. From the handful of children who first began to perform with this group, the interest in the company has grown; this year there are 13 elementary and middle school students and 3 high school students in the cast of 33. The youngest member of the company is 8 and the eldest 74.

What has happened with this inclusion? We have seen intergenerational friendships thrive; we've seen children absorb good lessons about how adults play. We've seen more and more parent-child acting teams; sometimes the parents just come along to be at the tryout with the children, and before they know it, they are cast – one such recruit last year discovered to his astonishment how much he liked this and has expressed a new-found interest in acting as an avocation. This year we have 8 parent-child groups on stage and 4 others where the parents have major backstage roles that include them with their children in the many facets of the team effort required in putting on a play.

One of the long time members of the group, a single woman, observed: "The most rewarding part of the show for me is the camaraderie, working with people young and old, thespians experienced and novice. It's especially exciting to see the children blossom over the years, building their dramatic skills and personal confidence in this fun, non-competitive environment." Another member of the group, a parent who is now often called upon to "mentor" youth in the church Coming of Age program, truly summed up the wonder of this group's success in bridging the ages:

"The UU Players Group has given me the opportunity to have fun and make connections with nice people, and at the same time work towards the common goal of putting together credible and entertaining theatrical productions. It is the spirit of the journey that I have enjoyed most.... And while we do put some

serious work into our productions, we have not lost sight that the truly important aspect of this group comes out of the moments that we have with one another along the way.”

The Universalist Church’s former Minister of Religious Education, now the Pastoral Care Minister, Rev. Jean Cook Brown, who played the role of Mrs. Banks in *Mary Poppins* in 1983, comments:

“Whenever we bring a group of people together in a worthwhile endeavor, we are doing ministry. The UU Players have been ministering to each other and to their audiences for more than 20 years.”

This year turned out to be a great success. The message of the value of diversity in this year’s musical, *Honk!* is very UU. The play is the story of the ugly duckling and the week before the play, Jean Brown did a sermon called “Warts and All” (the title of one of the songs). We had full houses all three performances, and the show was loved by young and old alike.

*The Wind in the Willows* is often mentioned as a past favorite, but all of the shows have their own special memories. We have done musical versions of fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* and musical versions of classic children’s stories such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Just-So Stories*, and *Mary Poppins*.

Every member of my own family has participated in the UU Players. My son did one show, I have done three, my husband has done five, and my daughter has done nine! As a matter of fact, on Saturday night at the cast party, we celebrated the participation of three of our graduating seniors (my daughter is one of them). They have been so much a part of the group that it is hard for us to imagine doing a play without them. One of them, Michael Morales, has played the lead a number of times—he was Ugly in this year’s production.

It is wonderful that so many families are now taking the opportunity to work on these plays together. This year, we had a father stage manager/turkey, a mother costume assistant, and a daughter duckling; we had a mother props manager, a father spot operator and a daughter duckling; we had a mother hen and a son duckling; we had a father drake, a mother refreshments organizer, a daughter chick, and a son duckling; we had a husband cat and a wife costumer: we had a mother producer and two daughter geese; we had a mother hen and a son chick: we had a mother magpie and a son chick; we had a mother musical director and a daughter chick; we had a father frog, a mother duck, and a daughter swan; we had a mother swan, a father set builder, and a son goose; we had a father sound operator and a daughter goose; we had a mother set designer and a daughter goose; we had a wife cat and a husband swan; we had a mother rehearsal assistant and a son chick, we had a wife duck and a husband special effects operator; we had a mother hen, and father and son house managers. It was tremendous effort with a very gratifying outcome!