

This is the Francis Wilson Playhouse BUT WHO WAS FRANCIS WILSON?

We May Wonder Who He Was And Why The Theatre
Bears His Name

1993 Francis Wilson Playhouse

IF.....

If you had lived in the small town of Clearwater between 1905 and 1935, you might have seen him about town during the winter months – a short man with a jaunty step, a ready smile, expressive dark eyes, and a prominent nose. His dark hair, parted in the middle, was often covered with a straw hat.

If you had played golf, lawn bowling or bridge with him, you would probably agree that he had charm, warmth, wit and enthusiasm. He was a kind, friendly person whose energetic spirit entered everything he said and did.

If you had known him, you would know that he lived in his two-story stucco house at 400 Osceola Avenue, which still stands, where he enjoyed an open view of Clearwater Bay. Here he spent many hours writing plays and biographies. In fact, you would have found his books in the local library about two of his close friends: Eugene Field (1900) and Joseph Jefferson (1907), and later a history of John Wilkes Booth (1929). However, in 1924, you were probably more interested in reading his published autobiography.

If you had been active in “Clearwater Players” which began in 1928, you were aware of his keen interest in your organization. But this was natural, for everyone knew that Francis Wilson was a celebrity on Broadway.

HIS GREATEST HIT

“There is only one Francis Wilson- Thank God! If there were two, we would all die of apoplectic laughter.” The NEW YORK WORLD drama critic said in his 1921 review, about the second revival of the operetta ERMINIE. At 67, Wilson was graying, but his expressive legs, comical larynx and inimitable personality had created his most famous role, Cadeaux, “a laugh-breeding blackguard.”

Transformed from an old French play, ERMINIE was first performed at the Casino Theatre (the house of comic opera on Broadway) in 1886. Wilson created “Caddy” as a wistful, blundering, tender, seriocomic. This was a secondary part which he elevated to star billing. A strong story with tuneful melodies, ERMINIE became the most successful operetta of the

century, playing a record 1256 performances. A pastel portrait of Wilson, as “Cadeaux” hangs in our lobby.

THE URGE TO ENTERTAIN

In his autobiography, Wilson says “one of the things that occurred in 1854 was him, on February seven in Philadelphia.” He describes the young Francis as “restless, mischievous, uncomfortable (like a pin prick) little person” who wandered about seeking an outlet for his urge to entertain. At ten, he was performing as a song and dance boy for Union troops in Virginia. Such experiences led naturally into minstrelsy which was then very popular. Where he entertained was immaterial as long as he could face an audience. For a time, he traveled with a circus, but left it to form a partnership with another teenager. Their act was booked into variety theatres (later vaudeville) around the country. During one of those years, Wilson learned to be a swordsman and won the national fencing championship held in 1876 in Chicago.

Then at 23, he quit vaudeville, returned to Philadelphia, and joined the Chestnut Street Theatre as a handyman and bit part player. In this stock company, he soon became second low comedian, and the understudy for all male parts from farce to Shakespeare.

He now believed there was no amusement comparable to the theatre. He surrendered to the spell of the dramatist, the illusion of the play, and he loved to act, regardless of the play. Inventiveness led him to discover that he could spice up dull dialogue by “cocking my voice into a peculiar intonation.”

SUCCESS ON BROADWAY

With a preference for comedy, Wilson decided in 1880 to try the New York stage where comic opera or operettas (like Gilbert and Sullivan), were the rage. He was soon earning \$100 a week, and was described as a creative player.

Only six years later ERMINIE brought him fame. He tells how it also influenced fashion. One of the leading ladies, Isabelle Urquhart, decided to accentuate her gorgeous figure by appearing without the traditional petticoats. So many copied her that the petticoat vogue gradually disappeared. Both sexes were grateful.

Wilson’s success enabled him to form his own company, which opened with the OOLAH, a long running comedy. As manager and star, he produced twelve plays in the next ten years. Now well known and popular, he became a Charter member of the Players Club which first met in Edwin Booth’s house. Here he became friendly with leading actors and

writers. In the early 1900's Wilson joined the famous Broadway producer Charles Frohman for a succession of profitable productions. When the right comedy for his talent was not to be found, he became a playwright. His first play, a comedy called THE BACHELOR'S BABY, ran for three years. He wrote eight more, always with the object of providing enjoyment rather than lasting literature.

MORE THAN AN ACTOR

The turn of the century brought a change in ownership and in the management of major theatres in the big cities. A small group of profit-seekers formed the Theatrical Syndicate which dictated every activity in these theatres with no regard for the acting profession. Cast and stage crews were exploited in every way possible; they were without organization or leadership.

Francis Wilson led the counterattack. By 1913 he had convinced many players to form what became known as the Actors Equity Association. He was their obvious choice for president. Progress against the syndicate was disappointing until he convinced the association to affiliate with the American Federation of Labor. In 1918, he led the actor's strike for better conditions. The managers soon capitulated, and wished they had never crossed swords with Equity's deft fencer.

His aggressive leadership helped to get reasonable treatment for all stage personnel in professional theatre.

In 1920, at 66, Wilson decided to quit the stage and devote his time to writing. However, star actors seem impelled to revive former successes after they "retire." The great Joseph Jefferson, for example, repeated his famous roles of Rip Van Winkle, and of Bob Acres in Sheridan's THE RIVALS. Wilson followed his old friend in the same roles. In 1925, he came out of retirement, at the age of 71, to play them again. A large theatre lobby illustration of him as "Acres" was donated to our theatre but was destroyed by fire in 1942. We now have a full length portrait of him as "Acres" painted in 1945.

Five years later the New York Herald Tribune reported that he had revived his hit of 25 years before, THE LITTLE FATHER OF THE WILDERNESS, in which he played the part of a French missionary.

Meanwhile, in 1924, he had written FRANCIS WILSON'S LIFE OF HIMSELF, a book designed to entertain rather than give a full account of his life. He told about many of his famous contemporaries, and his mother, to whom he was devoted. Although his formal education had been neglected, he compensated by

becoming a voracious reader and book collector. His writing shows excellent command of language as well as a nimble intellect. He also spoke French fluently, and practiced it almost daily. In retirement, he was in demand as a lecturer, and was recognized as an accomplished raconteur.

AND NOW TO FRANCIS WILSON AND THE LITTLE THEATRE OF CLEARWATER

The Little Theatre of Clearwater was organized in 1930, and Wilson inspired the group with his advice and encouragement.

During three winter seasons, he wrote the reviews of 27 LTC productions, which had been directed by a professional, William Tennyson. These reviews, with biological material, were typed and bound by Daniel Fuhrman, who was the LTC librarian and Historian for many years.

Francis Wilson obviously enjoyed these amateur productions and was both generous in his praise and very tactful when criticizing. Drawing from his broad background, he described how audiences reacted and responded. He detailed the problems of presenting plays on the small City Hall stage, and later, when they were played in the new cavernous Civic Auditorium. In 1973 the Auditorium was replaced by tennis courts.

As so well told by Mr. Fuhrman in his BRIEF HISTORY OF LTC, Francis Wilson's greatest contribution was to convince his friend, Mary Curtis Bok to loan \$5000 for a permanent LTC Home. She graciously stated that the money would be a gift, if the building, as a memorial to him, was called the FRANCIS WILSON LITTLE THEATRE. This was cast in bronze, and may still be seen on our original 1935 fireplace in the lobby.

The first plans were very grandiose and much too costly, but Wilson felt he could persuade his friends in Washington to grant WPA funds for the labor, because other cultural groups could also use the building. A contractor and the land were obtained. On June 21, 1935, he laid the cornerstone, which contains his correspondence with Mrs. Bok, her picture and a medal honoring the son from his first marriage, who was killed in World War I.

His speech at the ceremony included this comment on the purpose of a theatre. "It is an opportunity for the gifted and not-so-gifted to express themselves ...to entertain with great stories by brilliant dramatists.

Plans for the theater kept him in Clearwater until August of 1935. Before he left for his summer home at Lake Mahopac, New York (north of Westchester

County), he offered to help dedicate the new theatre by playing the lead in **THE LITTLE FATHER OF THE WILDERNESS**. At the young age of 81, he had an afterthought – “However, it depends on being able to postpone a rendezvous with the Grim Reaper.”

Prophetically, the rendezvous with the Grim Reaper took place two months later. On October 7, 1935, he died of a heart attack at his home on Gramercy Park in New York City, after an emergency operation.

New York and our local newspapers praised him in lengthy articles. He was compared by many to Will Rogers, as another great comedian who insisted on clean, wholesome material. Although tolerant of vices in others, Francis Wilson avoided alcohol, tobacco and risqué stories.

THE MEMORIAL

The ambitious plans for the **FRANCIS WILSON LITTLE THEATRE** had to be changed. The site and cornerstone were moved further west on Seminole Street and because WPA Funds were no longer available, the building had to be more modest. Theatre members raised money for the furnishings by holding bridge luncheons, suppers, bingo games, and other activities, and did much of the interior finishing themselves. On opening night, January 7, 1937, the following telegram was received.

“**FRANCIS WILSON MEMORIAL THEATRE: THE ACTORS EQUITY ASSOCIATION, IN THE NAME OF WHOSE FIRST PRESIDENT YOU BEAR, IS MUCH INTERESTED IN YOUR OPENING TONIGHT AND HOPES YOU WILL HAVE A HAPPY SEASON. CORDIAL GREETINGS TO ONE AND ALL. FRANK GILLMORE. PRESIDENT.**”

The theatre was badly burned in 1942. Now, after extensive alteration, it still includes the beamed section of the lobby, its fireplace and the auditorium. These make up the memorial sections known today as the: **FRANCIS WILSON PLAYHOUSE**

The lobby contains two stately carved-back chairs. The carved sections are pew ends from a church, which Shakespeare is reputed to have attended. Mr. Wilson bought the pew ends, and had them built into twelve chairs for his own dining room. At his death, the theatre received two of these chairs, and the other ten are in the Actors Equity building in New York City.

The members past and present are proud to continue the tradition of the founders and of their illustrious benefactor. The theatre has been expanded and renovated many times over the years. The large and

attractive lobby which overlooks the bay, The Francis Wilson Playhouse Gallery, the Strand Lighting System, the spacious Green Room and dressing rooms for our Actors and Actresses, our large scene shop and expanded stage, all serve to make our Playhouse the outstanding community theatre on the Suncoast.

The new Lauren Drake Room is a well-lighted area on the second floor of our newest addition and will be used for auditions and rehearsals. Now future casts may rehearse while the current play is still on stage. The first floor of our Lauren Drake addition is used for storage of props and related stage furnishings.

Special access facilities have also been installed for the handicapped, along with our new infra-red hearing devices, at no charge to our patrons.

We now have an orchestra pit built for our musical productions.

FRANCIS WILSON PLAYHOUSE constantly evolves to meet the needs of live theatre.

MORE OF FRANCIS WILSON’S FRIENDS:

George Arliss, George Baker, all the Barrymores, David Belasco, Norman BelGeddes, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), George M. Cohan, Lotta Crabtree, John Drew, Edwin Forrest, Richard Hampden, Dewolf Hopper, Henry Irving, Richard Mansfield, Julia Marlowe, Eugene O’Neil, Lillian Russell, Otis Skinner, Ellen Terry, and Walt Whitman.

Our theatre is honored to be the
FRANCIS WILSON PLAYHOUSE

REFERENCES:

Who Was Who in America Vol. 1

National Cyclopedia of American Biography Vol. 2

Page 34

“Francis Wilson Life of Himself”

Clearwater Sun 1930-1935

Minutes of LTC Board of Directors Meetings, 1930-1935

New York Herald Tribune, Oct 8, 1935

Daniel Fuhrman’s “Brief History of LTC”, which includes the story of two very unique chairs given to LTC from Francis Wilson’s Estate

Dorothy Ellison, present executive director of productions and member since 1937, and now Life Member on our Board of Directors.

Original charter members were: John Chestnut, Lester Dicus, Jeanne Eccles, Maria Stephan, Eloise Swinburne, and Jean Wallace, whose husband was the architect for the original theatre.

Neil Robinson was responsible for compiling much of the material in the 1974 edition of this booklet.

Ann McKenzie – 1993 edition of this booklet.