

Thespian

In 1947, beginning my senior year in high school, I joined the Masquers, the Waverly High School drama club. During that school year—and under the auspices of the club—I was involved in three one-act plays, two of them as student director. Later in the year, I had a major role in the three-act senior class play. That year marked the termination of my short career as a thespian that had begun six years earlier in the sixth grade at Irving Elementary School in Waverly.

The music teacher at Irving School during my tenure there was Mrs. Lynch. I remember her now as a pear-shaped matron who was older than my regular teachers and somewhat failing in a sense of humor. My recollection is that I never went off to music class looking forward to it as a welcome escape from the old routine. And, my only memory of being involved in any performance in the earlier grades was when we had a rhythm band and I was numbered among the stringers in the back row relegated to beating two sticks together. So I certainly had no reason to expect that, over my six years at Irving, I had accumulated many favorable points in the eyes of the music teacher. It was, thus, a big surprise to me—as I'm sure it was to the faculty that had endured me over those years—that Mrs. Lynch selected me to be the lead in the year-end, sixth grade production...a minstrel show.

Here is how I described that experience in a memoir I wrote describing my early years as a kid in Waverly:

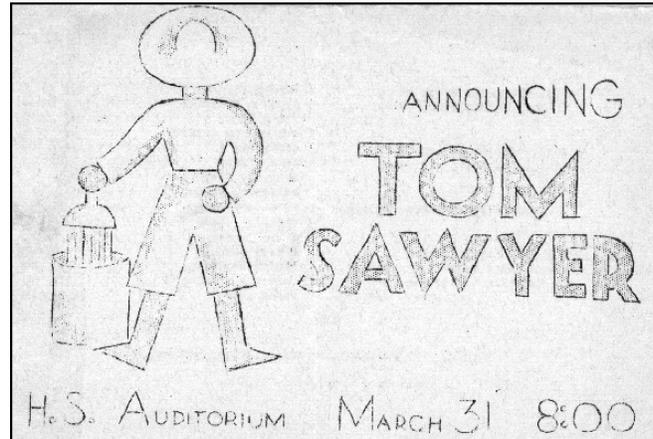
In 1942, a minstrel show, with black-faced white folks burllesquing the customs of southern Negroes, was perfectly acceptable entertainment in the culture in which I grew up. Obviously, we don't see such shows performed in this day and age. Typically, the performers in a minstrel show sat in a semicircle on stage with the three main characters distributed with one on each end and one in the middle. The "end men," as they were called, were the show's comedians. Their names were "Mr. Bones" and "Mr. Tambo." I remember that my friend Roy Knott played Mr. Bones. I don't recall who was Mr. Tambo. The man in the middle, the only white face in the show—and the part I was selected to play—was "Mr. Interlocutor." He was the master of ceremonies of the show and the straight man who fed lines to the two comedians on the end. The rest of the performers in the semicircle were the chorus for the musical portions of the show.

The black-faced performers were all dressed in work clothes typical of slave-era southern Negroes. The white man, Mr. Interlocutor, was dressed in formal attire, including a top hat...and therein lay the problem. Where do you find a top hat for a 12-year-old boy? That was heavy on my mind when I went to bed the night before I was expected to show up in costume for dress rehearsal. My father assured me, however, that things would be taken care of. Sure enough, when I awoke the next morning, I discovered a top hat, leaning against a hot air register where Dad had put it for the paint and the glue to dry after he finished making it the night before. It was made from a large oatmeal container and a brim cut from a pasteboard box. I don't recall whether or not I distinguished myself as Mr. Interlocutor in that performance, but I was certainly well dressed for the part.

In fact, I have very little recollection of that performance, except some vague impressions of the interplay between myself and the end men.

Then, when I was in the eighth grade, Mrs. Jones, a junior high English teacher, announced that the seventh and eighth grades would be presenting a three-act play to the community. The play was "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer." I don't think the Junior High had ever undertaken such a venture before and I'm sure that students were lined up when tryouts began. Although I don't remember the tryouts, I must have done well because, when the parts were posted, I was assigned the role of Tom Sawyer. However, my selection for the lead in the play may have as much to do with my appearance as my potential as an actor. The description of the character in the playbook reads as follows: "TOM SAWYER, A regular, mischievous boy, freckled and unruly-haired." As far as the unruly hair was concerned, I was type-cast, as you will see in the picture below

On the right is the front page from the playbill that was distributed to the audience that evening. Shown below is its announcement of the cast and setting of the play. Of the fifteen players, nine were eighth graders and six were seventh graders.



Waverly Junior High Presents
 THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER BY PAULINE PHELPS

Cast

Aunt Polly..... Janet Meyer	Time: About 1840
Jim..... Wendell Wilharm	Place: St. Petersburg, Mo.
Mary..... Emma Jean Aardal	Scene: The entire play takes place in the livingroom of Aunt Polly's house.
Sidney..... Richard Rowray	
Tom Sawyer..... Richard Ecker	Act I: Saturday afternoon
Amy Lawrence..... Betty Strotman	
Becky Thatcher..... Mary Jane Gogg	Act II:
Alfred Temple..... Robert Robertson	Scene 1: Three weeks later
Widow Douglas..... Mary Ann Carr	Scene 2: Three days later
Huckleberry Finn..... Jerry Davis	
Joe Harper..... Roy Knott	Act III:
Mrs. Harper..... Shirley Mae Kupker	Scene 1: A month later
Judge Thatcher..... Arlan Rahlf	Scene 2: A few hours later
Susan Harper..... Patricia Gardner	
Injun Joe..... Beverly Gordon	

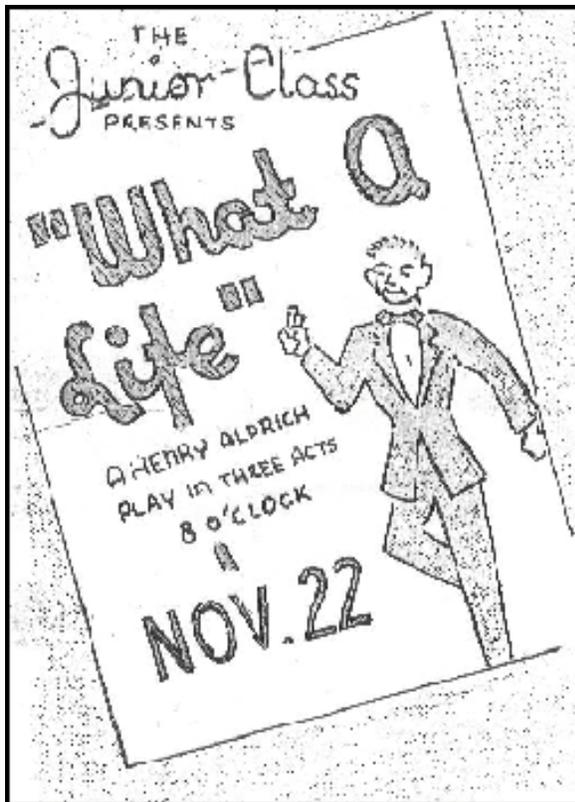
Below the list of the cast of the play is the photograph of Becky and Tom taken by the local paper to promote the play. To the right of the photograph is a copy of the note on the back of the photo from Mrs. Jones, suggesting that my unruly hair had been accompanied by an acceptable performance.



To Tom,
 A souvenir of our play March 31, 1944
 There couldn't have been a better Tom Sawyer. Thank you for a grand performance.
 Sincerely yours,
 Mrs. E. Jones

Although I'm sure that the junior high play spawned in me some appetite for the life a thespian, my tenure in high school gave me no further opportunity to feed that appetite until early in my junior year, when tryouts were announced for the junior class play. The play was "What a Life." By the fall of 1946, this was a timely production, because the main character in the play, Henry Aldrich, had become a popular radio and motion picture personality at that time. Henry was a high school student who had a proclivity for getting into trouble with his family, his teachers and George Bigelow, his rival for the attentions of classmate Barbara Pearson. Here is how Time Magazine described Henry when the play opened on Broadway in 1939:

...a cross between Penrod and Willie Baxter, who attends classes mainly in the principal's office. With a talent for head-on collisions, always ingenious, never crafty, always there with an answer, never with the right one, brash, bouncing, rumped, rattled, rueful by turns, Henry grows into that rare thing on the stage—a person...



In this play, I was assigned the role of George Bigelow. On the left below is the title graphic from the playbill and next to it is the cast of characters and the players. I don't remember

C A S T	
Miss Shea - - - - -	Ellen Niewohner
Mr. Nelson - - - - -	Daryl Polenz
Students - - - - -	Emma Jean Aardal Milton Mack
Mr. Patterson - - - - -	-Dick Swensen
Miss Pike - - - - -	-Carol Schoof
Bill - - - - -	-Tom Laird
Miss Eggleston - - - - -	-Janette Ressler
Miss Johnson - - - - -	Mary Ann Engelbrecht
Mr. Vecchitto - - - - -	-Delvin Lynch
Henry Aldrich - - - - -	-Arlan Rahlf
Barbara Pearson - - - - -	-Elsie Peyer
Gertie - - - - -	-Shayna Schlass
Mr. Bradley - - - - -	-Don Kroger
Miss Wheeler - - - - -	-Janet Meyer
George Bigelow - - - - -	-Dick Ecker
Mrs. Aldrich - - - - -	-Roselea Munsterman
Mr. Ferguson - - - - -	-Donald Pothast
Mary - - - - -	-Ruth Koelling
Other Students - - - - -	-Norma Eggleston Charles Adams

S C E N E S	
ACT I:	Principal's office in Central High School. A morning in Spring.
ACT II:	The same. The following morning.
ACT III:	The same. An hour later.

much about the action in this play except one scene in which George had taken something out of one of Henry's books and Barbara was trying to get it back. In the struggle George grabbed her and gave her a big hug, much to her displeasure. If I pulled off that scene, it was all acting, because I was not at all comfortable doing it. The fact is, at that time, hugging girls was an activity with which I was still attempting to find my way.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to the explosion of my participation on the stage as a senior in high school was the appearance on the faculty of a new speech and drama teacher, Miss. Bonny Twombly. Her influence in expanding the activities of the club can be seen in the description of those activities in that year's annual:

Masquers was reorganized this year to further dramatic pursuits...During this period a rush or pledge party was given and membership opened to the entire student body. A one-act play, "Pop Reads the Christmas Carol," was presented by the Masquers for the Rotary Club and a school assembly...Student-directed plays for Freshman, Sophomore, All-school and Masquers groups were produced for selection and presentation at the Play Festival in Iowa City.

Among those activities, I was involved as the student director and the title character (Pop) in "Pop Reads the Christmas Carol" and as director (and a walk-on player) in a one-act play presented at the Play Festival.

The play that was probably the most fun that year was a four-man, one-act comedy. Here is how I described the experience in my biography for the 50th reunion yearbook of my high school class:

The second play was produced to be presented at the Senior Class banquet. A spoof of ladies' bridge clubs, it was titled "If Men Played Cards As Women Do," and the four male characters were played by Doug Harris, Bob Mong, Dick Swensen and me. I suspect that our selection for the job was influenced in part by the fact that we were all in Miss Twombly's speech class and she could excuse us from class periodically to rehearse.

Most of the action involved four guys playing poker. So, as soon as we had set up to rehearse behind the curtain on the stage, we selected a cue line from the script for one of us to pick up on in case Bonny came to check on us. Then we spent the whole period playing poker while the rest of you listened to one another give speeches. It was tough duty, but somebody had to do it.

My major role that final year of high school was as one of the leads in the senior class play, "The Night of January 16th" by Ayn Rand. It was a challenging production and typified Bonny Twombly's efforts to stretch the talents of her actors. The whole play was a murder trial set in a courtroom on stage. What made it challenging was that the jury was selected from the audience. As one of the two attorneys trying the case, I had to address my arguments to a bunch of local citizens that were included as a part of the action for the first time that night—including the wife of the Methodist minister who sat in the front row of the jury box...knitting.

On the following page is the playbill for that production and on the right is a photo of me being made up by a classmate before the play was presented to the public.



No. 97

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SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW YORK

The State

vs.

Karen Andre

SUMMONS

April 23, 1948. 8:00

Rufus Flint. State's Atty.

Action For

The Murder of

Bjorn Faulkner

Bo Ellison. Clerk

Judge Heath. Presiding

SENIOR CLASS PLAY

"The Night of January Sixteenth"

by Ayn Rand

THE CAST

Prison Matron.....Betty Miller
Balliff.....Duane Brandt
Judge Heath.....Lyle Bergstraesser
District Attorney Flint.....Daryl Polenz
His secretary.....Glenna Loomis
Defense Attorney Stevens.....Dick Ecker
His Secretary.....Carol Schoof
Clerk.....Bo Ellison
Karen Andre.....Shayna Schluss
Dr. Kirkland.....Jim Mooney
Mrs. John Hutchins.....Jean Wylam
Homer Van Fleet.....Doug Harris
Elmer Sweeney.....Don Pothast
Nancy Lee Faulkner.....Mary Jane Gogg
Magda Svenson.....Ruth Koelling
John Graham Whitfield.....Don Kroger
Jane Chandler.....Janette Ressler
Sigurd Junquist.....Bob Mong
Larry Regan.....Arian Rahlf
Roberta Van Renselaer.....Elsie Peyer
Press Photographer.....Dick Swensen
Janitor.....Delvin Lynch
Cleaning Woman....Roselea Munsterman
Policeman.....Milton Mack

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Green and Company--New York and Chicago

SYNOPSIS

The action of the play takes place in
The Superior Court of New York

TIME—The Present

ACT I-A Day In March

ACT II-The Next Day

ACT III-The Following Day

DIRECTOR

Bonny Twombly

Assistant Director

Wilma Chapman

CREW CHAIRMEN:

Stage Manager

Milton Mack

Advertising Manager

Carol Schoof

Properties and Costumes

Marcia Lou Chandler

Make-up Crew

Roselea Munsterman

To the Audience Greetings:

Before the Honorable Judge William Heath of the said Court, on this night of April 23, at 8:00 P.M., you are hereby invited to witness and produce all evidence pertaining to the conviction or acquittal of the defendant being tried for the death of Bjorn Faulkner, on The Night of January Sixteenth, last.

The "Night of January 16th" has had long and successful runs in New York and London. It was one of the most successful productions of the Cleveland Playhouse. Part of its appeal lies, no doubt, in the place that the audience plays in the production. At one time there were four United States congressmen on the same jury. There have been actors, judges, lawyers, and even lords and ladies on the jury. Whether called for jury service or not, each member of the audience can decide for himself on this question, was Karen Andre guilty of the murder of Bjorn Faulkner? What is your verdict?

After I graduated from high school, I never again participated as a performer in any kind of production. However, I have no doubt that my experiences as a thespian were beneficial in many ways in my later life. In fact, I recall reading some comments in a letter that I had written home from leadership school in the Army suggesting that I could credit my facility as an instructor in part to my participation in dramatics at school.