

"LITTLE" BY ANY OTHER NAME

by Whit Andrew, Reprinted from Spotlight Newsletter, July/August 2001

I've been asked several times lately why the largest community theatre in North Carolina is still called the "Little" Theatre of Winston-Salem. Well, I'm glad you asked that question. It gives me an opportunity to offer a brief treatise on the history of the community theatre movement. I am indebted for much of what follows to the Tupelo (MS) Community Theatre. Their website offers a wealth of information on the subject and their research is greatly appreciated.

Amateur, or volunteer, theatre companies actually pre-date the Revolutionary War. One such company existed in Boston and that city's Footlight Club, founded in 1877, is still in existence today. A community theatre was founded in Salt Lake City in 1853 and, right here in North Carolina, the Thalian Association of Wilmington has been in business since 1788, and has played host to numerous community theatre groups for over 200 years.

With the advent of movies shortly after 1900, many small town professional theatres either closed their doors or were converted to movie theatres. But small communities still wanted live theatre and, following the examples of Dublin's Abbey Theatre or Antoine's Little Theatre in France, they began to produce amateur theatre in small groups all across America. These groups were originally, and generically, referred to as "little theatres" to distinguish them from movie houses, large professional theatres in major cities, and the touring vaudeville shows which frequently passed through.

While some have come to prefer the term "community theatre" and many have changed their names accordingly, we are strong believers in tradition. The Little Theatre of Winston-Salem has operated under that name since 1935 and we remain committed to the goals and ideals that served as catalysts for the movement from the beginning; the celebration of drama using the pooled talents and resources of the community we serve.

Once in a great while, it has been suggested that we change our name to more adequately reflect our status as one of the 15 largest community theatres in the United States. Luckily, in my opinion, tradition has carried the day and our original name remains. Even though we're not so little any more, we're part of a history that goes back to the very beginnings of our country and its community theatres. Our name is a tribute to that long history and we think we'd like to keep it that way.