

# opinion

## Tears and, yes, some smiles as the curtain comes down



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**W**hen a dramatic storm swept through town in late April, Sky Masterson and Sarah Brown were just about to make their getaway from El Cafe Cubana in Havana.

As the storm killed power in parts of Pleasant Ridge, Sky and Sarah left the stage in the dark, along with their castmates in a local production of the famous 1950 musical-comedy “Guys & Dolls.”

And then, with the can-do spirit of community theater stalwarts everywhere, they all relocated from a dark gym in the Nativity Catholic grade school to a less-dark cafeteria and finished the show – with a little less music, a lot less light and a more than generous audience.

The high-drama opening night was matched only by the high-emotion close: The next weekend, Sky, Sarah, Nathan, Adelaide, Nicely-Nicely, Big Jule and all the other vivid characters of Broadway lore took their final bows along with the company known as the Nativity Players. After 39 shows in 35 years, the Players closed the curtain for the last time.

When I’ve talked to nontheater friends about my 16 years with the Players, they’ve sometimes asked whether I’ve seen the 1996 Christopher Guest mockumentary “Waiting for Guffman.” Yes, I know it. I like it. And yes, like in “Guffman,” the Players were everyday amateurs with a strong – OK, sometimes overly dramatic – affection for community theater.

Over the years, as something of a defensive strategy, I’d invite friends and family to Players’ productions, telling them, “We’re just putting on a little show in the cafeteria.” That was even more the case this year – substitute “gym” for “cafeteria” – since I was directing for the first (and, as it turns out, last) time.

But really, what I wish I’d said all those years, is this: “We’re putting on a little show in the cafeteria. We’ve poured our hearts and souls, along with our achy knees and backs, into it. It’s pretty good. You should come.”



Nicely-Nicely (Charlie Rader) and Gen. Cartwright (Kate Clarisey) take to prayer in the Save-A-Soul Mission in the Nativity Players’ production of “Guys and Dolls.”

I wish, in short, I’d confessed my Guffman-like affection for all that was the Nativity Players.

Over the years, this mighty little troupe staged outrageously ambitious productions like “The Sound of Music,” “The King and I,” “Hello, Dolly!” and “Annie” (twice!).

We assembled casts with 75 or more actors – sometimes with hard-to-herd kids – and choreographed numbers with two dozen or more dancers. We erected ships and mansions and fairgrounds, along with elaborate homes for “Camelot” and “Seussical” and the wizard in “Oz.” The year I joined – in 2001 for “Man

of La Mancha” – we put a dungeon on stage.

Our members were equally outrageous in their dedication to the Players. The “Guys & Dolls” team included two six-time directors and one five-timer. This year’s producer was one of our Nathans; the assistant director and production manager grew up in the company; one of our Skys handled dozens of musical tasks; and the choreographer (one of our Adelaides) began heading Players dance numbers (and more) in 2003. The youngest member of our company ran the sound board – and swept the floors in his spare time. One of the



Sarah Brown (Bonnie Emmer) and Sky Masterson (Peyton Hahn) in the Nativity Players’ last production.

older ones, Nativity’s longtime, now-retired principal, volunteered to assemble the show bulletin board.

This spring – like every spring for the last 35 years and a few summers, too – dozens of us gathered in the school gym or cafeteria twice a week with just a script and our imaginations and built a show from scratch. Over the weeks, strangers became friends, actors became characters, lyrics and notes became songs. We shared news from our real lives – kids, dogs, illness, jobs – as we shared show updates. We gave up our Saturdays to build a stage and set. And then, on show nights, we gathered in a circle, held each others’ hands, shared a pre-show prayer (“Pray for Lou!”) and then put on our little show.

Six shows later, one relocated by a storm, we had a big party, then tore down the set and ended our long run.

The back of our program featured a quote attributed to Theodor Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss: “Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.”

Sorry, Seuss, but we did spill a few tears when it was over.

But I’m guessing and hoping I’m not the only one still smiling because it all happened.

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