

Stitch-by-stitch scenery

Volunteers' work to share spotlight as 'Quilters' returns to stage

BY BOB FISCHBACH | WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Jan Fry remembers the remarkable quilts shown in the Omaha Community Playhouse lobby in 1987 during the run of the musical *Quilters*.

I was dazzled, said Fry, who was just starting to quilt. I thought to myself I would never be able to make something that marvelous.

Twenty-two years later, 37 dazzling quilts will again hang in the playhouse lobby for its new presentation of *Quilters*, the story of prairie pioneer women told through the quilts they make.

Two dozen more including one made by Fry will appear onstage.

Now a past president of the Omaha Quilters Guild, Fry eagerly said yes when the playhouse called in February and asked her to recruit women to make the quilts needed onstage.

More than 40 women donated more than 1,000 hours of labor in all. Most of the quilts will be auctioned off to benefit the playhouse.

The largest, 12 feet 9 inches square and worth more than \$10,000, was designed by Peg Pennell of Ashland, Neb., an up-and-coming national star in the world of art quilting.

I just want to cry, looking at it, longtime quilter Judie Zinn said last week after Pennell unfurled her creation.

Every time that quilt is raised, it will bring a gasp, a roar of applause and tears from the audience, Zinn predicted.

Pennell said it took three months to design and make the quilt, which 12 women helped with. Four Omaha fabric stores Country Sampler, Sew Creative, Sunshine Stitches and Log Cabin Quilts donated more than \$800 worth of fabric in pioneer-era colors and prints.

My reward is getting to see it onstage, said Pennell, who will store the huge quilt after the show closes.

Thirty more women worked on smaller quilts, donating their own fabric as well.

The play itself is a patchwork of stories, told by a character named Sarah and her eight daughters. Each story is matched to a quilt pattern. Pattern names reflect the stories the women tell: Sunshine and Shadows, Rocky Road, Crosses and Losses, Windmill, Robbing Peter to Pay Paul, Double Wedding Ring.

The big quilt brings all the patterns together, surrounding a Tree of Life Pennell created for its center.

History will be everywhere you look when *Quilters* opens the playhouse's 85th season Friday.

There's the Omaha Community Playhouse's history: *Quilters* was a smash hit in 1987, leading to a 1988 encore run. In 1989 the playhouse performed *Quilters* in the Soviet Union as part of a cultural exchange, and its touring arm, the Nebraska Theatre Caravan, took the musical far and wide in 1989-90.

Onstage, Kathy Wheeldon is recreating her 1987 choreography for the show. Backstage, Steve Priesman will again stage manage each performance, as he did in 1987 and in the Soviet Union. Zinn, who gave quilting demonstrations before each show in the Soviet Union, is teaching the new cast quilting techniques.

Director Susan Baer Collins, one of the 1987 cast members, said she will use some of the same staging that director Carolyn Rutherford Mayo created back then because it

Peg Pennell of Ashland, Neb., with the help of 12 other women, made a 12-foot, 9-inch square quilt for the musical "Quilters" at the Omaha Community Playhouse.

felt so right. Most of the 1987 cast members will reunite for the Sept. 26 performance of *Quilters*.

There's also the history told in the 37 quilts, spanning 170 years, in the playhouse lobby exhibit.

To create the display, the playhouse called on Nancy Kirk of Omaha, a nationally recognized collector who does quilt appraisals and who writes and speaks about quilt restoration, history and fabrics. She and her late husband, Bill, bought and sold hundreds of antique quilts through their business, the Kirk Collection, which she has since closed.

When you buy and sell quilts for a living, you learn quickly what makes a great quilt, Kirk said last week in the playhouse lobby as volunteers unfolded quilts for the exhibit, several of them hers.

The quilts run the gamut, from an 1840-era crib quilt in mint condition to a novelty quilt made

just this year titled *The Demise of Sunbonnet Sue*.

Quilts of historical significance include a sagan, made of navy and tan-gray fabrics circa 1900. Kirk said ranch wives sewed the piecework top, then sent it out on the range, where the cowboys did the quilting at night around the campfire.

Collins marveled at the huge volunteer effort made for *Quilters*.

There's more community involved in this project than just about any other at the playhouse, she said. Quilters have an ethic, like people who have faith for all the right reasons.

Fry said it was an honor for the quilters to give.

We appreciate that Susie recognized this was an important show to us and we would want to be involved.



LAURA INNS/THE WORLD-HERALD

From left, Francie Conrad, Nancy Kirk and Teri Quinn are the behind-the-scenes workers responsible for gathering quilts. The Omaha Community Playhouse opens its 85th season with "Quilters" Aug. 21.

LAURA INNS
THE WORLD-HERALD

This quilt pattern is called Drunkards' Path or Solomon's Puzzle.

The zoo animal is part of a crib quilt that dates to the turn of the 20th century.

This is part of Grandmother's Flower Garden, a 1930s quilt.

The Admiral Dewey commemorative quilt is from 1899.

The Seven Sisters pattern is popular among families with seven daughters.

Quilters

What: Stage musical

Where: Omaha Community Playhouse, 6915 Cass St., Howard Drew Theatre

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays, beginning Friday through Sept. 27.

Tickets: \$38 adults, \$24 students

Information: 553-0800

Director: Susan Baer Collins

Cast: Laura Beeghly, Bailey Carlson, Jennifer Gilg, Kim Jubenville, Connie Lee, Emily Neve, Sally Neumann Scamfer, Jodi Vaccaro, Suzanne Withem