The History of the Stevens Dramatic Society

The Stevens Dramatic Society has a long and rich history. Part of that history is the place we have called home for over 90 years, the Edwin A Stevens building. It was constructed in 1870, two years after the death of its namesake, the founder of Stevens Institute of Technology. It was designed by Richard UpJohn, one of the foremost church architects of his day. The Stevens Theater served as many things, including a lecture hall (1872-1877), a gym (1878-1886) and a workshop. It served as a laboratory until 1903, when a balcony was added and then it fully became a theater.

Dramatics at Stevens started almost as soon as the school opened its doors in 1871. The original Stevens Institute Dramatic Association only lasted for six years, but it accomplished much, performing, A Travestie on Hamlet, An Ugly Customer, and Cool as a Cucumber among others. The group performed both within the Stevens Theater, and outdoors. The shows were typically done as fundraisers, for the benefit of the Stevens Rowing Team, and the Gymnasium.

During the next twenty years there were other Dramatic Clubs started at Stevens. These included the STEVENS DRAMATIC CLUB in 1889; the 200 Dramatic Society in 1891 (this group listed its property as 2 costumes and one tank), and the DELTA TAU DELTA Dramatic Society in 1892.

There was then a break in dramatics at Stevens until 1909, when the Junior Class produced and presented a show, "It Happened Here", written and musically composed by two students: W.F. Scully '10 (Author), and C.A. Schlegel '10 (Composer). The show was performed in the theater, and was a massive success. It was so successful, that many Stevens students felt that a Dramatic Association should be formed. By early the next year, the current Stevens Dramatic Society was formed. On December 18, 1909, at a joint meeting between the heads of the Senior, Junior, and Sophomore classes, it was decided that the school had the interest necessary to form a dramatic group. On November 14, 1910, the first General Meeting was held, and anyone was welcome to join. A $25.00 prize was offered to the student whose play would be chosen to be performed early in the spring semester of 1911.

On December 16, 1910 the first officers of SDS were elected, headed by President Lambelet. Not much progress was made over winter break, and less than a month later, President Lambelet resigned. P.B. Wiske ('11) was then elected the second president of DS. By the beginning of March 1911, a show was selected, entitled, "The Professor's Daughter". It written by Malone ('12), with music by Kennedy ('12). The show was a lighthearted comedy. Mr. Warbug was chosen as Coach/Director for the play with rehearsals starting immediately. After many postponements, the show was finally cancelled for the year because Coach Warbug was called out of town on business.

A full year had passed, and still no show had been produced. The students who were involved with the successful 1909 Varsity Show that started the whole thing had all graduated. Nevertheless, the Stevens Dramatic Society continued to try and finally put on a show equal to that Varsity Show.

The student newspaper, The Stute, urged more students to go out for the play and get involved--and it worked. Membership and interest increased. When the 1911-1912 year started,
the show chosen the previous year, "The Professor's Daughter" was agreed upon again, with a
date of performance set in February.

A new President, Trewin, and a new director, B.F. "Cap" Hart '87, were chosen. After
another postponement, tickets were put on sale at $1.50 for the first 12 rows, and $1 for the rest
of the house. The price of the ticket included a dance, which was to be held after the show.
Finally, On March 27, 1912 at 8:15PM, the first Dramatic Society Show was performed in the
Edwin A. Stevens building, although at that time, it was simply known as the main building, or
"The Old Stone Mill". The show was a great success, and there was a large call from all to start a
tradition of a yearly show on campus.

In 1913, the society asked "Cap" Hart to direct again. There was even much talk about
doing shows in towns outside of Hoboken, to make more of a profit from the shows. This year's
show, "Blazer Girl", was written by President Trewin and Kay '14, with music composed by
Russ, Silbert, Cawley, and Milligan. The show opened on February 6, 1913, and was another
great success.

1914 was another
repeat of the two years previous, and an even better show, "Engaging
Betty" was produced. "Engaging Betty" opened on March 14, 1914. Written by Cawley, Trewin,
Cozzens and Bernard ('14), this year's show was the best show done by the society to date
according to the director "Cap" Hart. The membership had grown dramatically, and continued to
grow.

"Cap" Hart directed for the fourth time in 1915. The show, "This is the Life" was opened
on April 6, 1915 to the largest audience to date. A formal dance followed the show, as it has all
the years previous.

The Society's success grew as their experience and expertise also grew. Between 1918
and 1920 however there were no shows produced because of World War I. The war had
completely drained out the Society. By the beginning of the 1920-21 school year, there were
only 5 members remaining. A new president was elected, W.B. Faust, and the Society was
significantly reorganized to try and rebuild. The production of the show was split up into four
divisions: Scenic, Program/Tickets, Costume/Make-up, and Cast. A show, "Hold Em Stute", was
produced, written by Breitenfed '20, and Glenn '21, and the first woman director, Mrs. William
Kellum was chosen.

In 1921, the Dramatic Society, and the Glee Club joined forces to form "The Clef and
Cue Club". It was a joint effort in which the 1922 show, "Guess Again Professor", written by
John Hemion, was produced. For the first time, the show was performed not in the Auditorium,
but in the Hotel Astor in New York City.

The annual shows would continue to be performed in the Hotel Astor until financial
difficulties forced the 1929 show, "Wyse Up" into the Auditorium again. The student support
had dropped that year, making it difficult to pay for the roughly $3,000 show, forcing the move
back to the Stevens campus.

During the 1920s, the Society continued to produce student written shows, and fill the
female roles with the male students, since women were not admitted to Stevens until 1971. This
continued at least through the 1930s, when sometime thereafter, women were recruited from the
surrounding towns and local highschools to fill the female roles. There were a few exceptions,
including Who's Hugh in 1925. This followed the general trend of producing light-hearted
comical musicals into more serious theatrical productions.

In 1931 the Society produced a student written show entitled, "What the Hell". The title
of this show caused extreme campus controversy, and alumni support for the show was almost
lost. The 1931 yearbook even went so far as to call the title "disgusting". There is a New York Times article on the show (3/19/31) [1] explaining the difficulties.

In the 1931-1932 school-year, the tradition of performing two shows a year, one in the spring, and one in the fall began. Also by this time, SDS had gained a countywide reputation for stagecraft. All of the area theater technicians would attend the performances. The first fall show was, "Androcles and the Lion". Two extra performances were put on to benefit the Red Cross. This is the show pictured below.

The next year, 1933, The show "Pipefitter's Fancy or Virtue Rewarded" was a mixture of many smaller shows, one of which was "The Goodship Pride of Communipaw Flats". This skit in particular, was a farce on the "old" style silent films with the perfect hero, and the dastardly villain. Hunter College asked Stevens to perform the skit at their school a few weeks later for a two-show run in commemoration of the opening of Hunter College Theater. The show is still produced regularly by Stevens Alumni at special events.

In 1934, the fall show was produced almost entirely to test new, cutting edge techniques in sound and theatre acoustics and was titled, "The Sound Show". In the years to come, the Stevens Dramatic Society would receive grants in order to greater study sound properties. The techniques they developed would be applied even to the Broadway stage. In 1935, a show was produced during Freshman Orientation week, "The Boor", and by 1936, SDS had received enough alumni support, that two shows were produced in the spring of 1936. "The Pipe Fitter's Fancy" by students, and "The Sawdust Heart" by Alumni. Their innovation allowed them to take part in the planning of the construction of the Paper Mill Playhouse, which is one of the largest professional theater groups in NJ today.

The Society was vastly different in the late 1930s than it is today. At the time, crew members outranked cast members 3 to 1, and the society was very departmentalized. The sound crew, the business crew, the cast, and all the other aspects of a production were taken care of by almost entirely separate mini-groups of people, and were thought of as being completely different until the end, when they came together. The cast was usually in need of more actors, and had the right to "steal" members of the other groups to be actors.

In 1939, "Kismet" was produced. and by 1940, membership had climbed to over 100 active members.

In 1941, "Sound Show II" was produced to further study control of sound. The show itself was composed of Shakespearean outtakes, and world renowned black singer Paul Robeson, who had appeared as the lead in "Othello" and the musical "Showboat" many years earlier, was a member of the cast.

In 1943, Yelena Petrovna, known as "Pete" to friends, directed the Fall production, "Masque". Born in St Petersburg in 1907 as Ellen Routsky, daughter of Russian Nobility, she was well known for her original translations of Russian literature into English, including Jean Anouilh, with whom she was a friend. She wrote many plays and short stories herself, directed over 100, and created the Two by Four Playshop in Union City and Theatre 212 in Manhattan some years later. Her influence over the Society was incredible. She first was involved in the society as a member of the cast in 1937 in Five Star Final. She was an inspiration as well as a moderator of the Society from 1953 until her death in 1971. Today, there is an award given in her honor to the graduating senior most dedicated to theater arts.

By the mid-1940s, SDS became one of the largest experimental stagecraft organizations in the country, and frequently received outside funding for major technical research. No member of the society was exclusively an actor. The entire casts were chosen from the stage, shop, and
lighting crews. Only on special occasion were people outside the society cast in shows. The exceptions were women, who were now cast from the local area.

Membership dwindled slightly towards the end of the 1940s, and an outside group was hired to perform "The Glass Menagerie" in 1949. The membership rose up to its highest levels within the next couple of years however.

An interesting note, in 1951, a show was produced in which the Stevens cannon was used as a prop. Unfortunately, someone stole the cannon from the stage, and it was later found in the Stevens park.

In 1952, "Room Service" was the most financially successful show since before World War II. DS still was an innovator, and to its credit includes developing the sound system used in the first 3D movie. Because of this financial success, the next year, DS attempted to operate unfunded from the Student Council, and they still made a profit.

During the 1950s, DS became a lot more cast oriented, with a lager number of people coming out, and being solely actors.

In 1960, due greatly to the guidance of Yelena Petrovna, moderator, Stevens was offered membership in Theta Alpha Phi, the national performing arts honor society. Stevens was the first and only technical school to receive a chapter. Stevens is the New Jersey alpha chapter. Ms. Petrovna would later become national Vice President.

The Dramatic Society continued their excellence throughout the sixties, and sadly in 1971, Yelena Petrovna passed away.

The society nevertheless continued to thrive under new advisor Robert Reed, producing such shows in the 1970s as "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum", "Don't Drink the Water", "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown" and others. In 1971, women were first admitted to the institute, and a few years later DS had their first female president, Amy Foley.

Membership peaked at well over 120 in 1981, "My Fair Lady" played to an audience of over 800.

Throughout the 1980s, many great shows were presented with technically advanced features. Such as a dropping stairway in Man of la Mancha and a two level set that came apart, and spun around for Noises Off. For The Mystery of Edwin Drood there was a life-sized train that moved on and off the stage. Also for 1988's Mystery of Edwin Drood, Students both musically directed, and choreographed the entire show. Other large productions of the decade included, "Chicago", "Anything Goes", "Brighton Beach Memiors", "Cabaret", "Camelot", and "South Pacific" among others. After a string of advisors, Linda Vollkommer became faculty advisor of DS.

In 1992, the Stevens theater was closed for short-term renovations, forcing the semester's show, "Tomfoolery" to be produced in the Bissinger Room in the Stevens Center Building. All of the property the Society had amassed over the past 80 years had to be removed. Many things were either lost or stolen including the recently purchased piano, and a short time later, the renovation was halted because not enough money remained in the project to continue renovating the theater. Many efforts and fundraisers were attempted, but the needed funds were well out of reach.

For the next 6 years, Stevens Dramatic Society was forced to produce all of its shows on the fourth floor of the Stevens Center Building. Although this was difficult, the shows still went on, including greats, "Godspell", "Little Shop of Horrors", "The Heidi Chronicles" and "A Funny thing Happened on the Way to the Forum".
In the Summer of 1995, Kenneth W. DeBaun (‘49), challenged the Stevens alumni to raise $1 Million dollars. He said that he would donate the remaining $500,000 necessary to complete the theater renovations, if the alumni could meet his challenge. The challenge was defined to last for exactly one year. A Theatre renovation committee was formed, whose members included current undergraduates, and many SDS alumni.

After a year of active fundraising, planning and telethons, the money raised was still roughly $600,000 short. In October of 1996, Ken DeBaun decided to donate the $600,000 necessary to complete the challenge, and the $500,000 he promised originally, for a total of $1.1 Million. Work began shortly, with DS representatives John Zaccaria 76 and faculty advisor, Linda Vollkommer, very actively involved, along with the support of other alumni, including Bob Reed ‘70, and Marcus Weissenrider 96.

After 6 years of the theater being closed, the newly renamed, Grace and Kenneth DeBaun Auditorum, was finally completed in May 1998. The last show produced in the Bissinger Room was "Guys & Dolls".

The official re-opening of the theater occurred on October 15, 1998, with a three-day ceremony. On October 16th, the rock-band 10,000 Maniacs performed as part of the Student portion of the dedication.

The first Dramatic Society performance in the newly renovated theater, was Grease on November 19,20,21. The show was a complete hit. There was a three-day audience of 1,265. Hopefully, even brighter things are in the future for Dramatics at Stevens.

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