

Play combines fact, fiction to tell city's history

"Third and Oak" uses time travel to tell an intriguing and humorous story about Farmington history...one that you won't want to miss

by Michelle Leonard

Farmington's history, intertwined with a fictional storyline, will come alive during two productions of "Third and Oak" during the upcoming Founders Festival.

Written by Rob Knowles for the community's 125th anniversary, "Third and Oak" will take the audience through time to an era of hobos, gangsters, circuses and fires. Set at the intersection of Third and Oak Streets in downtown Farmington, the play's location was chosen because of its identity as the "center of town," says co-director Wendy Turner.

In addition, Third and Oak was the location of the Great Fire of 1879, an event important to the storyline.

The show opens in 1931, just after a famous gangster is murdered in Farmington, Turner said. In reality, several prohibition-related deaths occurred in the community, and gangster Eddie Harlowe's was among them. That event brings a young investigative journalist, Blair Becker, to Farmington. At the same time, another man who spent his childhood in Farmington, Del Marxen, comes to town because of his estranged father's death.

The two fictional characters are used to highlight the importance, mood and trend of early Farmington, and to comment on events that occurred during those years, Turner explains.

Del and Blair try to stay clear of two gangsters who come to Farmington, looking for money they believe Eddie Harlowe has hidden with Del's father. The young people es-



cape into a circus tent, the site of a show about the Great Fire of 1879.

When the two emerge later, Turner says, they find themselves transported back in time to the day following the fire, in which 22 buildings were destroyed.

"People are devastated, but hopeful, because everyone in the community has pulled together to put out the fire including the hobos. Hobos were very common during those days, because two major train tracks crossed in Farmington,"

she says.

While visiting the past, Del meets his father, Albert, who is only a child. Del finds that his father had a longing to help people, but felt constrained in Farmington. After an incident involving the hobos, Albert decides to leave town.

As they learn more about Albert, Del and Blair discover where Eddie's money could be hidden. They hop on a special train that takes them back to "the present," when the issue is resolved.

IN EARLY Farmington, a Temperance Union was established by local ladies. In the production of, "Third and Oak," the Temperance Ladies mistake a knock to the head as drunkenness, and take St. Paul photographer, Hughie Hawks, off to be cured.

Through their escapades, Del and Blair gain a real appreciation for the community's ability to overcome adversity.

"They really get caught up in the community's idealism," Turner says.

All of the 90 cast members develop the community's historic events. While the central plot shows what Farmington was actually like, the other characters directly represent actual people who fill in important facts.

"It's a funny play with all kinds of comic elements in the show," Turner says. In one instance, some ladies come upon Blair's photographer, who had been hit in the head. The women mistake his dizziness as drunkenness, and take it upon themselves to help him.

Knowles and Turner are founding directors of the Children's Castle Theater, a community troupe that does three productions annually. The two are co-directing "Third and Oak," due to the cast's large size.

"It's been great. We've mixed the adults and children roles in with each other. It's always been fun working with kids, but the adults latch onto the ironies and the humor," she said. "It's also kind of fun to have an accurate representation of the ages, rather than a 10-year-old with a mustache glued on."

"Third and Oak" is Farmington's first successful community play, Turner says. Residents tried to organize one for the 100th anniversary, but it failed before the first practice was held.

"It was a real disappointment back then. Now, there's a certain amount of pressure to make this production happen," she comments. "With only days left before we go on stage, there's no question that this show is going to go up, and it's going to be good."

Two performances are slated for Founders Festival Weekend: June 19, at 7 p.m., and June 22, at 5 p.m. Both will be held in the Farmington High Auditorium.

Tickets can be reserved by calling the Children's Castle Theater hotline at 953-1731. Advance tickets are available at the Edina Realty office in Farmington, and from cast members. Tickets will be available at the door.

Community play *Third and Oak* opens tonight

By Jennifer Thorson

Fire. Gangsters. Murder. Hobos. Temperance. Bootleggers. Time travel. The stuff true drama is made of.

In Farmington? Yes, Farmington. The Farmington depicted in the Children's Castle Theater's new play *Third and Oak*, that is.

Third and Oak is an original, historical play set in Farmington in 1931. Against a backdrop of true historical events like the Great Fire of 1879 and the murder of a bootlegger in 1931, fictional characters Del, a Farmington native returning to his roots and Blair, a big city reporter from St. Paul investigating the murder, unravel some of the secrets of the past, outwit a pair of nefarious gangsters and make Blair's news deadline.

The play was written by Rob Knowles, a St. Olaf graduate and company manager for MPR's *A Prairie Home Companion*. In *Third and Oak*, Knowles said he wants to show people that "Farmington is a place that is exciting and has an interesting



Farmington 'residents' struggle to save their town in *Third and Oak* history."

"People don't realize how exciting a place Farmington was," he continued.

During his research for the play,

Knowles consulted the Dakota County Historical Society and local historian David Schreier, whom Knowles described as "a one-man encyclopedia of the history of Farmington." He learned that Farmington was once a haven for hobos and gangsters, a thriving railroad crossroads and supported a strong temperance movement. And, that the community of Farmington is nothing if not resilient.

"Farmington people are people who've overcome serious problems in the past," Knowles said. Now, as Farmington faces with explosive growth and change, he said that message is particularly relevant.

"Now, [Farmington] is really booming, and is getting a lot of energy and vitality," he said. And, it has a history "people can be proud of."

Veteran Castle Theater director and Farmington native Wendy Turner directs the cast of 85 Farmington residents, who range in age from five to adults in their fifties. This is Turner's sixth Castle production.



The 'Spark' that started the Great Fire of 1879

Third and Oak is showing Thursday, June 19 at 7 p.m. and Sunday June 22 at 5 p.m. Both performances will be at the Farmington High School Theater. Tickets are \$5 at the door.

About The Children's Castle Theater

☛ *Third and Oak* is the 10th production presented by the Children's Castle Theater. It is Farmington's only community theater company and was founded in 1993 by a group of residents from a wide range of professions, such as government, education, medicine and business who were concerned about the lack of opportunities in the arts for children of elementary and middle school age.

☛ Since the first production, *The Arabian Nights*, the average audience size has more than doubled. In 1996 alone, 160 young actors performed in four productions attended by more than 2000 people. Each production has been praised for its originality and humor. The Children's Castle Theater has twice been awarded funding from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council.

☛ The Children's Castle Theater relies on the volunteer efforts of parents, family and cast members for the building of set, props and the sewing of costumes. *Third and Oak* will use more than a hundred 1930s and 1880s costumes, the result of dozens of hours of sewing by volunteers.