



REHEARSING "TIGER AT THE GATES," opening tomorrow night: Left to right, Mrs. Bunny North, Clyde North, Mrs. Virginia E. Butler, Candace Gunion, Henry C. Hart Jr. Little Miss Gunion is third generation Player, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Philip C. Gunion, granddaughter of Mrs. Hazel Browne Goodwin.

# 1,000 PERFORMANCES 1,000

The Players this week ring up their curtain  
on a new play and an impressive record

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

**T**IMES HAVE CHANGED. Only one member of the cast presenting *Tiger at the Gates* at the Barker Playhouse this week in the 1000th performance by the Players had even been born when the group gave its first production 48 years ago, opening in *The Liars* by Henry Arthur Jones, at the old Talma Theater on South Main Street, Dec. 16, 1909.

Vanished, to some extent is the lavender scent given off by theatrical performances which were also fashionable events. Evening dress is no longer customary wear for Players' audiences. Gone, too, is a certain cozy family atmosphere which once prevailed. One veteran Player recalls two spinster sisters who always occupied front row seats at opening nights and audibly discussed (one was deaf) the personalities and private lives of the cast. . . . *That's SOandSO. I understand his wife is leaving him. Or That's Mrs. Whatsername. I wonder why they gave her that part. She lives in Edgewood.*

Certain inhibitions have disappeared, certain moral attitudes have relaxed. Changed, in these outspoken days, is the type of contemporary plays acceptable to well-bred audiences. Such offerings as *Tunnel of Love* and *The Seven Year Itch* would never have done for the 1909 dowagers. And by the same token, the situation developed in *The Liars* (a lady steps innocently out with a gentleman who is not, oh horror, her husband) would scarcely titillate a 1957 audience.

Casts work harder. Audiences demand a high quality of acting, worthy of a group which has been called the finest Little Theater organization in America.

There was, long ago, a time when it was all good fun among



"School for Scandal." Play was presented in 1891 by Talma Club, predecessor of Players. Henry Barker, left.





**FIRST PLAYERS PLAY.** Scene from "The Liars," given at Talma Theater in 1909. Left to right, John R. V. Gilliat, Mrs. Daniel Webster, A Chester Snow, Robert T. Burbank, Prof. Thomas Crosby Jr., Mrs. Alexander

Hobbs, Maus S. Wheelwright, Mrs. William W. Weeden, Harold Babcock, Mrs. Sarah Rhodes Washburn, Miss Helen M. Capron, Henry W. Gardner, Charles T. Richmond. Play was typical light comedy of period.

## 1000 PERFORMANCES 1000 continued

# Mothers clucked like worried hens

friends. In *Grumpy* (1922) Henry Barker, who had the title role, in one scene found himself onstage, *solus*, when he was supposed to be in London. Enter William J. Story, registering understandable surprise. Quick-witted, Mr. Barker laid finger to lip. "Sh-h," he said. "Don't tell anybody I'm here," and walked calmly off, leaving Bill and the audience to work things out for themselves.

From away back, there have always been amateur dramatic societies in Providence. The Players group incorporated in 1909, with 397 members. Its immediate predecessor was the Talma Club, an outgrowth of the Amateur Dramatic Club. Incorporated in 1891, the Talma Club took over an abandoned Methodist church on South Main Street and gave performances there. Its opening production was *She Stoops to Conquer*, which was quite possibly the play that was responsible for the firing of Harry Barker from Brown University.

Henry Ames Barker, the son of Henry R. Barker, was a gifted young man who might have become a great artist in scenic design. As a Brown undergraduate, he missed an important examination because he was too busy painting scenery for the Talma Theater. Given a chance to take a makeup exam, he missed that, too, and was dropped from the university. So Harry, as his widow, Mrs. Sarah Minchin Barker, puts it, "didn't get through college as soon as he should." He was finally graduated in 1895, went into his father's insurance business, and later became president of the Electric Protective Company.

"I think," Mrs. Barker said the other day, "that must have partly satisfied Harry's love for the drama. You know — men watching lights flash on a board and then grabbing guns and rushing out." But he continued to paint scenery and design sets for Players' productions — and to act and direct plays — all the rest of his life.

And when he died in 1929 he left funds to be used for the purpose of promoting the drama in Providence. With this money the incorporators of the Barker Foundation purchased from the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island an old church building at Transit and Benefit Streets. Renovated and christened the Barker Playhouse, it has been the home of the Players for a quarter of a century. They opened there on Nov. 7, 1932, in *Trelawney of the Wells*.

Before that, the Players had many homes and for brief intervals sometimes no home at all. Their valedictory offering at the Talma was Sudermann's *The Far Away Princess*, presented June 15, 1916. That fall they moved into Infantry Hall and were there 10 years. After the Hall was sold there was an Elks Auditorium period (and oh, that squeaking board in the stage the Players had to build themselves!) and even a time when the group might have called itself the Strolling Players. They played everywhere they could find houseroom and acting space, gave "laboratory" dramas at the Brown Union, at the Providence Art Club, and in the schools.

In 1929 Infantry Hall again became available for a time, and the Players returned to it rejoicing to be back home on frowzy old South Main. During the Hall's first occupancy by them the ingenuity of Henry Barker had been hard put to it to transform its barnlike auditorium into a theater. He devised a removable semi-circular partition or "division set" cutting the hall in two. Stage and seats were at one end and the cut-off area in the rear became a ballroom in which the very best people of Providence danced between the acts of decorous teacup comedies, varied by shots of Shakespeare and Shaw.

One of their most notable efforts was *Pomander Walk* (1917) directed by Mr. Barker. It was while the Players were rehearsing this production that he and Miss Sarah E. Minchin became engaged.

Mrs. Sarah Minchin Barker is now the oldest acting Player. In October, 1956, she appeared in *Anastasia* in the role of the Dowager Empress and last spring she played in *The Madwoman of Chailot*. It is almost half a century since she sat in the old Talma in a pink satin dress and saw the Players act *The Liars*. "I was thrilled by it," she says, "completely."

Like the prosperous young businessman and frustrated scenic artist directing *The Liars* she had a desire to go on the stage, a longing taken care of in these days by the summer stocks. People had a curious attitude toward the theater in those days. They loved it, but mothers of daughters who came home from the play all starry-eyed clucked like worried hens.







BRENTON G. MEADER was Henry the Eighth in "Anne of a Thousand Days," a 1951 Players production. Critic said he played him with vigor. Anne: Virginia Butler.

**1000 PERFORMANCES 1000** continued

## Mrs. Goodwin says nobody ever sauced Tom Crosby

Miss Minchin's parents, while they frowned on the theater as a career for their Sally, had no objection to her joining the Players. So she did. She has played more than 100 parts since 1910 and has directed many plays. Her first big role was in *Sweet Laverder*, 1912.

In the theater, as in life, it is the things that go wrong — or almost do — that stick in people's memories. Recalled by Mrs. Barker is the performance of *Kindling* in which she stole the show by opening a bottle of milk clumsily. A deluge of milk ruined her black dress and J. Harold Williams, as "Heinrich Schultz," ad-libbed "You won't find cows in Idaho that give milk that way!" to cover her confusion. But it brought down the house and next day the old caretaker at Infantry Hall said to her, "Mrs. Barker, you were wonderful! I never saw anything more natural in my life."

So it goes. The pratfall is remembered, the soaring line forgotten.

Older Players chuckle reminiscently as they recall the dismay of the actor whose habit it was to paste his cues on the backs of chairs when he discovered that some mischievous hand had rearranged the set.

There was plenty of scene-stealing in the old days, a lot of jockeying for the center of the stage. In the Twenties, when skirts were short, leading men often murmured "Darling, your slip is showing," causing leading ladies to blow their lines.

A more professional atmosphere is evident today. Outstanding among player-directors who set a high standard of acting was Prof. Thomas Crosby Jr. He was a strict disciplinarian. "Nobody," Mrs. Hazel Brown Goodwin said recently, "ever sauced him." And then she proceeded to tell how she once did.

Mrs. Goodwin was rehearsing a scene in which she was supposed to enter right. Instead, she entered left. Professor Crosby rebuked her.

"But Mr. Crosby, there just isn't any right entrance!"

"Hazel," said Director Crosby sternly, "do as you're told."

So she did. She retired backstage and entered by way of the set's property fireplace, right.

"Hazel," Professor Crosby told her, "that isn't funny."

Mrs. Goodwin joined the Players in 1918, had her first part in *The Talker* the following year, went on to play leading roles; became familiar, as time went on, with the tensions and anxieties of directing. On the opening nights of the Players productions which she directs it is Mrs. Goodwin's custom to retire to the





**FLORENCE BRAY** was Good Queen Bess in Maxwell Anderson's play, "Elizabeth the Queen," given in 1948, in Barker Playhouse. Her jester is Raimund W. Adams.

boiler room of the Barker Playhouse and remain there, a red sweater thrown over her shoulders, until someone comes to the stairs and shouts, "Hazel, it's going all right!"

In the 48 years of their existence as an organized dramatic group, the Players have given 240 major performances, always five each season, plus innumerable minor productions and studio or workshop performances. By actual count 4,546 characters have been portrayed and upwards of 2,606 people have assisted backstage. It is a big Little Theater group.

Only once has the performance of a major production been canceled. That was on March 19, 1956, when *Dial M for Murder* was postponed because of a howling and impenetrable blizzard.

That doesn't mean that there haven't been some close calls. Well-remembered is the time when double trouble threatened the 1910 production of the operetta *Erminie* at the Talma. Twenty-four hours before the Monday night opening, Maus Wheelwright, cast for the important comedy role of Cadeaux (*Jolly Jail Birds of a Feather*, remember that song?) announced that he would be unable to appear. Paul B. Howland, now a motion-picture critic of these newspapers, was drafted as a substitute and sat up all Sunday night studying lines and lyrics; hummed, even in the batroom the raffish Cadeaux's song . . . *When brought afore his beakship my evidence to give, I'm allus in a dreadful state.*

In the meantime the Players were working themselves into a dreadful state over something else, and they had reason. Their *Erminie*, Mrs. George King had informed them that she would be unable to sing the role Tuesday night, due to serious illness in her family. That almost did it.

But the Players were lucky. They learned that an amateur dramatic group in Westbury, Conn. was rehearsing the same operetta and was sending a theater party to windowshop the Providence *Erminie*. And that the Westbury *Erminie*, a Mrs. Beardslee, was in the party.

She was shanghaied at the Union Station and rushed onstage at the Talma with cues pasted on her fan.

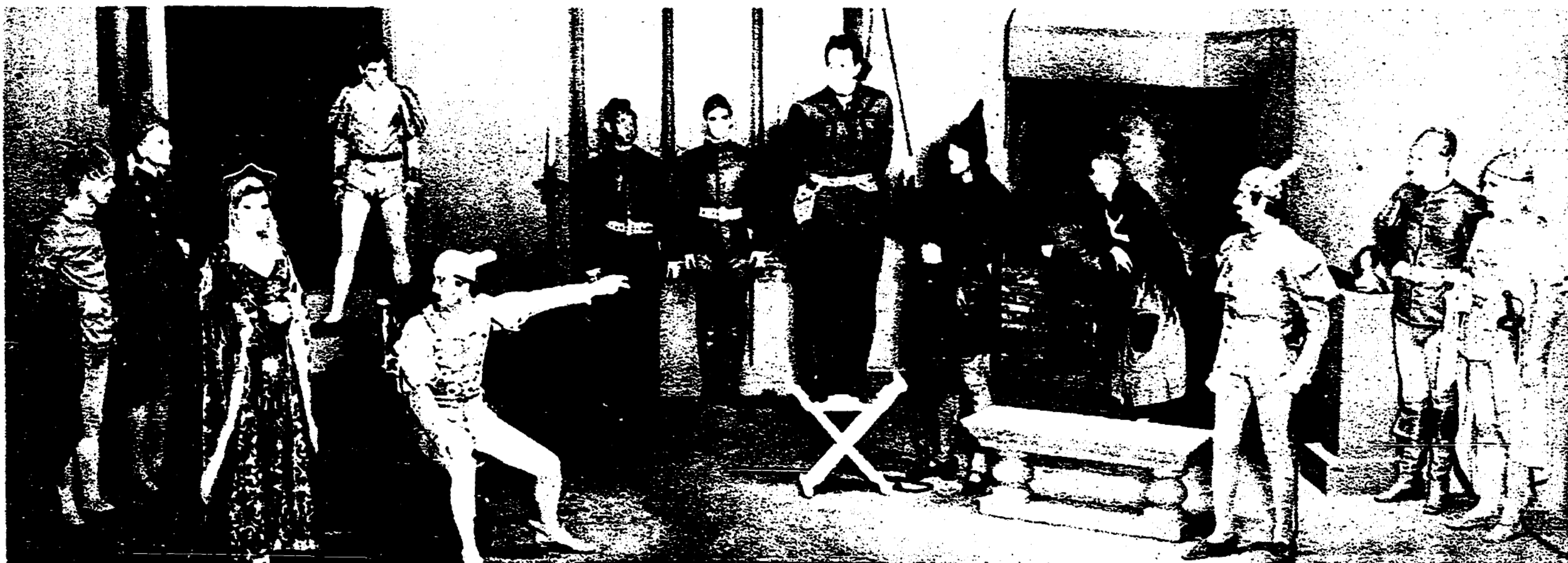
Westbury's Mrs. Beardslee and our Mr. Howland both gave good performances.

There have been other emergencies. Once William Tilden II, who liked to act, subbed for a Player who was ill, read lines from a manuscript concealed by a shawl.

So it went in the old days that are no more. The intimate and congenial social atmosphere of Players' productions once ex-







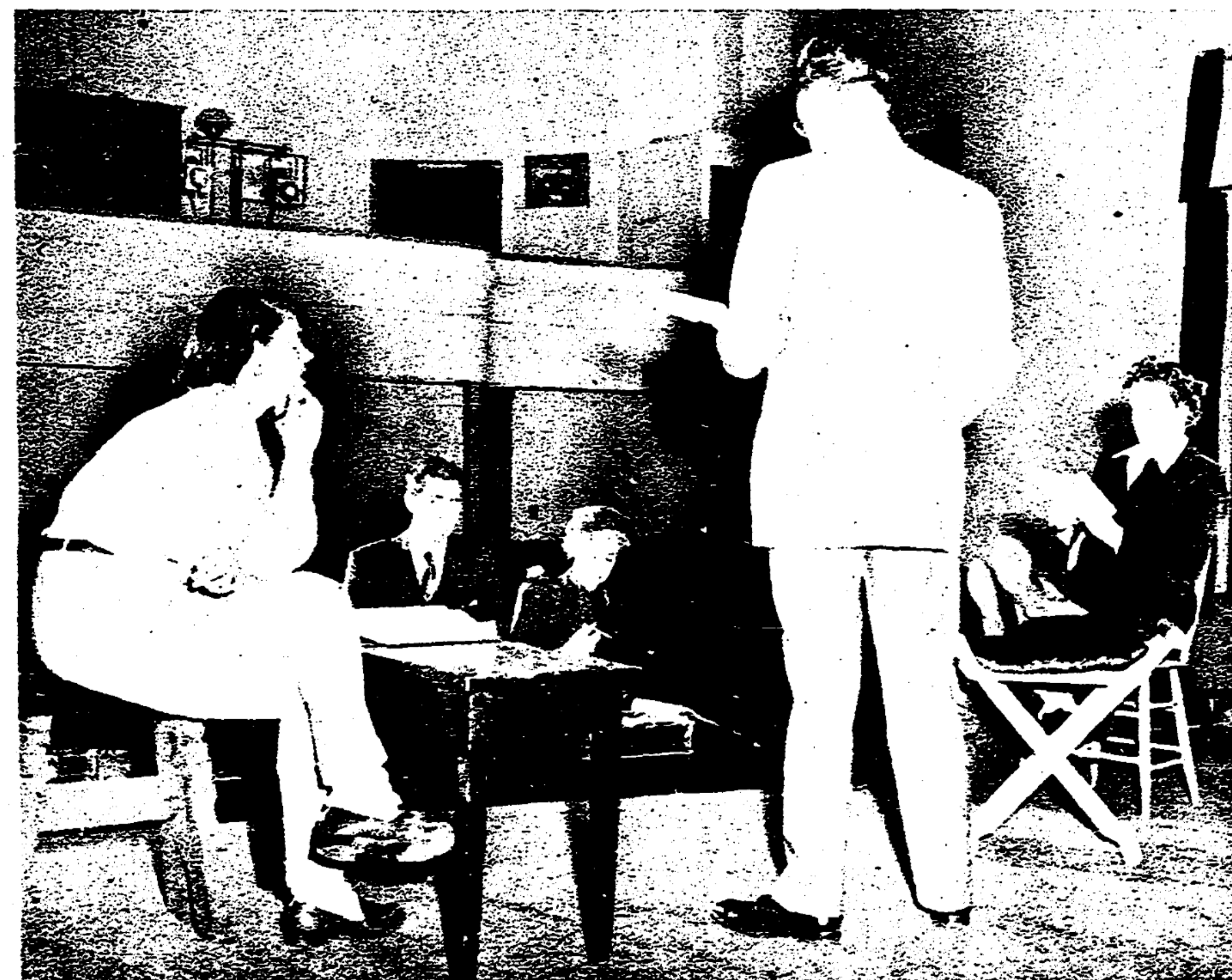
RUTH HUSSEY, left, now movie star, played Duchess of Florence in "The Firebrand" (1935), based on life of famed Benvenuto Cellini (Theodore Sweet, in noose).



IN "BLITHE SPIRIT," left to right, were Mrs. Brenton G. Meader, Robert T. Engles, and Mrs. Bertram Buxton Jr.



"POMANDER WALK," 1917, in Infantry Hall. In it Henry Barker (with eye patch) achieved scenic triumph. At his right, the then Miss Sarah Minchin, his fiancée. This set was built and painted from scale models.



PLAYER Maurice Dolbier, center, at rehearsal of "Pastime," play he wrote himself. Others, left-right: Mrs. Virginia Rooks Turner, Mrs. Sarah Minchin Barker, Leo LaPorte, and Mrs. Brenton Meader. Play was presented in 1951.

## 1,000 PERFORMANCES 1,000 continued

# Amateurs in the true sense of the word

tended even to costumes and props. Many a leading lady's train has been instantly recognized as old Mrs. So-and-So's velvet drapes. Unerringly traced to their lenders or donors were Rutherford B. Hayes spittoons and other period furniture. Nowadays furniture houses in downtown Providence supply tables and chairs but there was a time when East Side families sent furniture to the Talma and Infantry Hall by the vanload. And in a city with a past as old and rich as that of Providence, there was never any lack of period costumes.

The Players have started many young men and women on theatrical careers and have given inspiration to a host of fledgling playwrights, some of whom became famous. Among them was A. E. Thomas. Ruth Hussey of the movies is a former Player. So was the late Richard Hart. Florence Bray, the Players top character woman, has played on Broadway with Bea Lillie.

But the strength of the Players lies in the fact that they are, in the truest sense of the word, amateurs — people who love the theater no less because they are also school-teachers and salesmen and store managers and bankers and brokers.

A Players performance today represents something more than the flossy social occasion it was back in the Gay Nineties. That fashionable audience which packed the Talma for the opening of *The Liars* 48 years ago never dreamed that the day would come when the Players would be the main prop and support of the living theater in their city.

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