

# CREATING MINDS

Experienced professionals deliver unique choreography and costumes



## BEHIND THE SCENES

***The Villages community is filled with talent.*** With countless theater productions constantly being created, residents shine in the spotlight and behind the scenes. It requires dedication, creativity and lots of passion to develop choreography and costumes for these incredible shows. Barbara Byers and Jan Wagner are experienced professionals who dazzle audiences with their vision and execution. ➔

STORY BY JILL WINTERS | PHOTOS BY BRANDON ATWELL



**Left:** Barbara Byers works on choreography with a group of girls for Smash Productions' upcoming presentation of "Gypsy."



**Below:** Barbara Byers with Arianna Ogerio, Zada Wood, Aven Wood, Sofia Sallee and Maci Natalino.



## CHOREOGRAPHY

**Barbara Byers** grew up surrounded by music. Her parents owned a music store back in the 1940s and 1950s in Ohio. She remembers playing her 45s and twirling around the house. Her parents noticed their shy little girl loved to dance, so they put her in a dance class. There is no way they could have realized at the time how that decision would influence her life's journey.

"They thought it would be a good way for me to meet others kids and get me ready for kindergarten. I was prob-

ably 5, and a little girl cut in line during acrobatic time and I said 'I was next.' The teacher was like 'Wow, Barbara can talk.' She was so proud and gave me an extra star," the Village of Sanibel resident said smiling. "By the time I was probably 11 or 12, I found that I would pick up steps pretty quickly. If somebody else had a problem, I would be in the dressing room showing them the steps." She carried that newfound confidence, knack for breaking steps down, helping others and thinking outside the box into creating a variety show at her all-girls Catholic high school, which led to even more opportunities to showcase her variety of talents.

At the age of 16, she earned a teacher's certificate with Dance Masters of America. The first dance she put together was in "I Ain't Down Yet." "From that, I tried out the next year for my first musical, "Annie Get Your Gun." I really watched the lead girl. She was the choreographer, too, and she got in a big fight with the director, so she was done," she recalled. "I went up and said, 'I think I can pick up those dances,' so I got the lead dance role in that. That is where I met John. We were put together as dancing partners in "Bye Bye Birdie." Barbara was a 16-year-old junior, and John Byers was 17 attending an all-boys Catholic high school. Barbara has kept the programs from every show she has been in, including "Oliver," the first one where she was listed as the choreographer.

She went on to graduate from John Carroll University in Ohio majoring in speech, drama and English. John and Barbara have been married for 53 years, and he served in the United States Navy for 22 years. Barbara owned her own dance studio for 26 years, and while living in Tampa, she was an elementary school teacher for eight years. "I started a performing arts group there. We put on little musicals with the students," she said. "I've always been one to incorporate a team because I realize I couldn't do it by myself. I'd get the art teacher to help with costumes and scenery and then get the music teacher to help with the music part of it."

## Return to Theater

As a teacher, she always incorporates education into her productions and the importance of teamwork. Those skills and her extensive background were noticed not long after she and John moved to The Villages in 2013. "It kind of burned in me that desire to get back to musical theater. So, I was looking in the Recreation News and saw there were auditions for "Brigadoon" under Bill Davis," she said. She and John auditioned and earned roles in the production, joining each other on stage again. "I took a 55-year gap," John joked about his time between stage performances. They also joined POPS Chorus, and Barbara joined Music and Motion a year later. "One thing leads to another. I was in several other shows with The Villages Musical Theater. Then someone asked if I could put together a religious type of dance for the Choralettes," she said. "I did it and then pretty soon somebody came out of the audience and said, 'Oh, I'm doing a show would you join us?' That has happened several times."

**Below:** A collection of photos from Barbara's childhood, teenage years and early career.







**Left:** Barbara oversees rehearsal of "Gypsy" at Big Cypress Recreation as choreography director along with Mary Ann Rockenbach, music director, Bob Stehman, show director, and Dianne Bolton, director of sound and visual effects.

**Below:** Aven and Sofia rehearse a dance routine.



Those led to choreography opportunities with SMASH Productions. Along the way, she has built up a network of talented performers in this community who she asks to be in various shows. When she learned Jim Caisse, director of Music in Motion, was stepping away to travel more, she waited for someone to volunteer to take the lead. "We interviewed people and nothing seemed to fit. All of a sudden, I said, 'John, I'm getting this feeling that I should at least try to keep it together for a year. That was four years ago,'" Barbara said. "We've tried to build up entertainment for everyone. We have singing, we have dancing. This year our theme is going to be 'Get your Kicks on Route 66.' I try to theme it where you're on a journey and learning things." The show is scheduled for early November at Savannah

Center. Barbara describes it as "a fun-filled nostalgic but positive immersive musical experience that everyone will enjoy." In a conscious effort to provide a variety of songs that can appeal to different generations, the audience can expect to hear the music of Frank Sinatra to classical tunes and even "Cowboy Carter" by Beyoncé.

In addition to directing Music in Motion, Barbara is working on the choreography for three upcoming SMASH Productions shows, "Gypsy" in mid-October, "Cinderella" next April and "1776" next June. To keep her busy musical theater life organized, she has a large desk calendar filled with auditions, rehearsals and show dates. She admits that at times "it gets a little nutty" but she never stops smiling when she talks about this magical performance journey she has been on for nearly seven decades. "There is something about theater. You develop a very close family feel because it's working as a team to get things together and we see the end result," she said. "I cherish the years I could perform a lot. But to me, being able to share that and see the growth and happiness when people are performing and you know you were a part of that, that's very special."

She has been so impressed with the talent here in The Villages, which ranges from seasoned performers to those like her husband who are coming back after multiple years off the stage. "There are the professional people that inspire the other people in the cast, but yet they work as a team with the other newly qualified performers that they learn from each other. It's truly a very rewarding experience seeing how people from all different levels of abilities work hard together and come up with a very professional product that really entertains the masses," she said. "We are very encouraging and nurturing of opening up doors, so they can really get the full benefit of being on stage and feel good about themselves. Maybe they never did it and now they have the opportunity because life got in the way, and they had to earn money."

When it comes to creating and putting on SMASH Productions, there is so much involved. It begins by teaming up with the producer to decide what show they will present, then getting the music. From there, she learns what talent level they will need for each character. "It's hard to sing and dance at the same time, so that's why there's usually an ensemble of just singers. But we don't always have that, so sometimes, you have to embellish the vocal section," she said. "We're the only group that has live music; we do not use tracks. We have professional musicians that work with the music director, Mary Ann Rockenbach, and sometimes she has to rearrange some of the music to fit in, or she can just add music. It could take up to six months of preparing before the show."

Barbara never imagined when she moved to The Villages, she would still be so involved in musical theater. "It is all I know, but I thought that part of my life was over," she said. "And then I'd go to see a few shows, and it was kind of like a pull." John added, "People discover your talent, and they recruit you back in."

