



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

## Remembering Falmouth Playhouse

Summer on Cape Cod is theater time and has been since the 1920s. Thanks to several recent donations, the Museums' archives now boast an extensive and growing collection of theatrical memorabilia. Our holdings represent a range of groups, from the University Players at Old Silver Beach, who counted Henry Fonda, Jimmy Stewart, and Margaret Sullavan among their number, to the College Light Opera Company of today. (For a general history of theater in Falmouth, see DeWitt C. Jones III's *Spritsail* article "[Curtain Rising.](#)")

Not long ago, while sorting through a box of oversized items, we came across a cache of playbills from the Falmouth Playhouse, once a cultural institution, now a fading memory.

The playhouse was born in March 1949, when Richard Aldrich signed a long-term lease on the Coonamesett Club in Hatchville. Already very successful with the Cape Playhouse in Dennis which began in 1930, Aldrich would go on to own the Cape Cod Melody Tent in Hyannis. His new Falmouth venue, located near the north end of Coonamesett Pond, was owned by Bob and Frances Crane, uncle and mother of Charles Leatherbee (a key figure in the University Players). It had seen use as a ranch and a high-end resort. During the Second World War, the property served as an entertainment center for convalescent soldiers and was maintained by German prisoners of war. The ballroom of the facility, with appropriate adjustments, was perfect for Aldrich's 600-seat theater.

Falmouth Playhouse opened in 1949 with a bang,



*Screen legend Joan Fontaine enjoyed a clambake during her working vacation in Falmouth, summer 1970. Playbill in Museums collection. Photos by Ray Hall, also in collection.*

when leading lady Tallulah Bankhead christened the theater by smashing a champagne bottle against a stage prop. The venture was an immediate success thanks largely to the professional quality of Aldrich's productions. (Robert Crane, another University Players alumnus, was retained as associate producer.) Many top-notch actors came for the summer shows, including Helen Hayes, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Joan Blondell, Lillian Gish, Eve Arden, Zasu Pitts, John Garfield, and Veronica Lake. Aldrich's wife, Gertrude Lawrence (who played Anna in the first Broadway version of *The King and I*), starred in some plays, to popular acclaim.



*Falmouth Playhouse, ca 1950. Photo by Hugo Poisson, in Museums' collection.*

Aldrich desired his patrons to have a comprehensively luxurious experience. To this end, the playhouse complex contained Leonard Rosenfeld's elegant Playgoers restaurant, where dancing and entertainment were offered each evening beginning at 9:00 p.m. For the 1952 season, a unique cooling system was added to the theater to insure comfort of the playgoers. Fans brought the cool outside air into the theater and distributed it through ducts placed under each row of seats. Tiny holes allowed the cool air to flow into the theater and fans at the top of the room sent it back outside. Also that year, buses were scheduled from Falmouth Heights to the theater for each performance. In 1956 a more traditional air conditioning system was installed. Even into the 1970s, playbills proudly included the declaration: "Air Conditioned."

Beginning in 1953, its fifth season, the playhouse opened under the direction of Mrs. Sidney Gordon, Aldrich having decided that he had more theaters than he could personally handle. Gordon would continue to direct the productions for the next 25 years.

Our playbills undoubtedly date from Gordon's era, but deducing exact dates is tricky, since no years are inscribed. Entering play titles into a search of the *Enterprise* online archive (which only goes up to 1962), yielded one result—a Myrna Loy vehicle called *There Must Be a Pony*, staged in 1962. The Loy poster lists the theater's phone number as LO3-5922, while other posters use the newer, all-numeric form 563-5922, indicating a post-1962 production date. One poster teases an upcoming run of the musical *Godspell*, thereby placing its time frame post-1971. Another promotes Alan Sues, a regular on "TV's *Laugh-In*," indicating a date of 1968 or later.





*Postcard, ca. 1955, in Museums' collection.*

The playbill featuring Academy Award winner Joan Fontaine (*Suspicion*, 1940) particularly caught our eye. As part of our ongoing effort to digitize late 20th century slides and negatives in our collection, we had recently scanned some slides, labeled 1970, which showed Fontaine enjoying a clambake in Falmouth. We wondered if the clambake coincided with her run in *Relatively Speaking*. Knowing that the play ran July 6-11,

and assuming that each play ran from Monday through Saturday, we were able to use a [perpetual calendar](#) to confirm that July 6, 1970 fell on a Monday. Though she had come to Falmouth to work, Fontaine clearly found time to have fun too, just like any other summer visitor. When the playhouse was in season, fans always cherished the hope that they might bump into their favorite celebrities gadding about town.

Falmouth Playhouse had several owners after Aldrich, and in 1984 it was purchased by Ralph Miller. Under Miller, the theater came on hard times. Financial difficulties and problems with the actors' guild led to poor quality productions. Then on February 28, 1994, the building burned to the ground. A law suit from the insurance carrier accused Miller of arson; he had had other suspicious fires in his history.

The mystery was never solved, but at least we have these reminders of the gorgeous playhouse that once stood in the Hatchville woods, until the night when, as Prospero could have foretold, its substance melted into thin air.

*Terry White  
& Meg Costello*

For a limited time, click [here](#) to see more images of the playhouse from our collection.