

John Bittrich

Nominated by his students

On behalf of the Marshfield High School English, speech and fine arts alums, we nominate our former teacher and mentor, John Bittrich, "Mr. B.," for membership on Marshfield's 150: Heroes and Leaders, Past and Present Honor Roll.

In the fall of 1960, Baraboo native John Bittrich arrived in Marshfield to begin a 50-year teaching career with the Marshfield School District. In that time, he influenced many young minds in his classroom and exposed countless more to the stage by immersing them in play and musical productions.

As a new hire, he was challenged by school administration to start a viable theater program here, and that's exactly what he did. Until he arrived, Marshfield's theater program consisted of an occasional class play or sometimes a one-act play at Christmas time. During Mr. B's first year he produced and directed two plays and a musical.

From the first production in December 1961, a comedy titled, "Visit to a Small Planet," to his last production, the musical, "Camelot," in April 2011, Mr. B. created an exceptional high school theater program, ultimately producing and directing 101 shows.

Mr. B. enjoyed working with students, but he wanted his productions to be absolutely perfect. If students played their part well there was unending praise, but if they didn't, his infamous temper might flare. They may not have known it then but even those occasional rants were a deliberate effort to make them better students, performers or crew members. He held them accountable for both their successes and failures; and he would not let any of them not live up to their full potential.

The quest for perfection called for demanding and fast-paced rehearsal schedules. It seemed there was so much to accomplish and too little time, but Mr. B. had a knack for enlisting community talent to share the load. His theater programs printed lengthy acknowledgment lists of supportive individuals with each production.

These folks provided indispensable practical and organizational support as they helped him guide performers, designers and the technical crew throughout the rehearsal and production process preparing for opening night. When that night arrived, they were ready for the performance.

Before the lights dimmed and the curtain rose, Mr. B. would call his cast and crew together for a final set of instructions. He praised their efforts, acknowledged their anxiety and fears, and



reassured them that they were ready for the show to go on. Then, before taking his seat in the audience, he would give one last reminder for them to support each other, to deliver the best they had to offer, and to have fun!

When the final curtain fell on the production all that remained was striking the set. Again, a team effort with everyone, actors, actresses, crew and volunteers coming together to remove and properly store away sets, props, costumes, lights and sound equipment. Then with a final sweeping of the stage, dressing rooms and workshop the semester's production was over and a more typical high school student schedule resumed.

As the end of the school year approached Mr. B. brought the cast, crew and volunteers of the year's productions together for recognition and celebration. He recognized the best students working backstage in non-acting roles with a Trojan Award, one of his own creations. He had great respect for those who ran technical services and managed backstage and believed it was important to recognize them. Truthfully, the recognition made them all more cognizant that everyone's contributions were necessary for a successful show.

Those honored with titles of the year's best actor, best actress and so on were selected by the Trojan recipients. Trojans voted in each category from a list of nominations covering both productions. The winners were then announced and presented at the Senior High Awards Night.

During Mr. B's 50-year career at Marshfield High School, he had the opportunity to work with hundreds of this community's children both in and out of the classroom.

As former students, and cast and crew members, we benefited directly from working with this talented, and caring, educator. We learned the importance of teamwork and how to budget time so we could balance school work with our participation in the theater program or other extra-curricular activities. We also gained a lifelong appreciation of what hard work can do.

Each of us have an anecdote or two that we could share about our experiences with Mr. B. over the years, but we could never fit them all in one article. For now, know that while he inspired us all to be our better selves, he also has been a creative force providing Marshfield audiences with 50 years of great theater

The Marshfield School District has a record of attracting talented educators to their roster of faculty members. John Bittrich, may be recognized here as a member of Marshfield's 150, Heroes and Leaders, Past and Present, but he is certainly not the only Marshfield educator deserving of such recognition.