



## Storage Area

Scenery and stage equipment are moved after productions by the Johnson County Park Department into a stage house under the platform at the small lake area at

Shawnee Mission Park. Crowds in a casual mood assemble for the 8:30 p.m. curtain, bringing chairs or sitting on the grass.

# Summer Park Theater 'A Satisfying Experience'

By Ellen Dahms  
A Member of The Star's Staff

It was the chance to do "Showboat" that attracted Willett Wiggins to tryouts for the Shawnee Mission Park District's amateur summer theater program.

Backstage at the production last weekend, Wiggins, a veteran of eight years with the San Francisco Opera Company, smiled when he contrasted his eagerness to play Joe and sing "Ol' Man River" and his weariness with concerts, solo recitals and 23 years of traversing the country.

"I'm sick and tired of it," he said before the show. But at intermission, he admitted it wasn't the singing he was tired of. It was the packing up and moving every three days on the concert tour. Four years ago he moved to Kansas City in an attempt to put some stability in his life.

"Now I run a janitorial service," he said.

The role of Joe in "Showboat" calls principally for a bass to sing about the river in the first

act and a reprise at the end. "I'm not an actor," he said.

"Oh I wish he'd do it again," said one woman in the audience after Wiggins's majestic voice rolled up the glade at the small lake area at Shawnee Mission Park. The free musical played to 6,000 persons in four nights last week.

What prompted Wiggins, the man who activates his membership in three performers' unions at Christmas and Easter to sing, to join a production with a group of amateurs?

"Showboat," he said with a grin. "I always wanted to do that but I never had a chance." He said he would do "Porgy and Bess" for the same reason.

Players and production people in "Showboat" and the other two musicals the park district offers this summer seem to show as much self-satisfaction in their work as Wiggins does.

"I like to perform, to sing, to act," explained Mrs. Michele Sue Jones, a 1966 Kansas University graduate who played Queenie in "Showboat."

"But one show is all I could do in a summer."

Mrs. Jones, of 1715 E. 48th Terrace, drove a 36-mile round trip daily when the musical was in rehearsal in the park.

"It's not a lot of work; it's a lot of time," she said. "There is a joy in singing and making people react."

Sia Sadri, superintendent of recreation for the park district, views the summer theater as serving two types of audiences.

"Basically it is recreation for two levels of people—those who have a part in the production see it as a means of self-expression and the people who come to watch see it as entertainment."

The tax-supported park and recreation district budgeted \$17,500 for this year's three musicals. "Oklahoma" will wind up the season July 20-23.

"Johnson County's people are fortunate to have a park system that wants to have a giveaway program," Mrs. Dodie Brown, 11161 Wornall Road, said. The 39-year-old housewife played "Dolly" in the first production, June 22 through 26.

Dan Zollars, choral music teacher at Shawnee Mission East High School who is director of summer theater for the park system, uses talent regardless of where the persons come from in the community. Most are from Johnson County.

The bulk of the audiences are

from the county too but Sadri gets a reading of the geographical range from the telephone calls that come to the park office asking how to get to the park from Independence or North Kansas City.

Like Zollars, many of the persons involved in the productions are from the Shawnee Mission school system. The choruses and dancers are predominantly Shawnee Mission students.

Mrs. Brown taught music at old Mission Junior High School before she left education about 10 years ago and has found herself caught up in community theater since then.

"When I was teaching I felt I had my classroom as my stage. All of a sudden I missed my stage so I had to go out and find one," she said with a smile. "My husband, Robert Brown, lets me go out twice a year to do theater."

In "Showboat" both the director, Duke Howze, and the actor who played the boat's captain, Roy Vanderwood, are high school theater teachers in Kansas City. Howze teaches at Southeast High School and Vanderwood in the Hickman Mills district. Mrs. Jones teaches vocal music at C. A. Franklin Elementary School.

Howze keeps his actors' equity card in his back pocket although he has been at Southeast two years. He acted on and off Broadway, directed at what b

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