



Ernie Dyer starred as Aunt Abby in this production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*

The Daytona Playhouse

The Community Spirit Lives On

Story by: Barbara Salter Nelson

The Daytona Playhouse has an intriguing history. Not only have amateur actors from the local community been delighting their neighbors with live theatrical performances for more than sixty years, but the theater is listed as one of Florida's legendary ghost sites.

The entrance to the Daytona Playhouse faces the Halifax River. The ivory building with maroon awnings surrounded by palms and pink crepe myrtle makes a lovely sight. Productions have been held in this active theater since 1956, including Broadway shows and musicals using local talent. Inside, the Playhouse is quiet except for workers on stage building the set for the opening production of the new season. It appears to be just another community theater. The anticipation of good entertainment is there, even with the empty seats. But this theater is different. Here there are more than the thespians, more than the audiences, when the curtain rises.

That's how award-winning writer Joyce Elson Moore begins her chapter on the Daytona Playhouse in her book, **Haunt Hunter's Guide to Florida: thirty-three of the most bone-chilling places in the sunshine state**, published in 1998 by Pineapple Press. The chapter details some of the sightings and other evidence of spirits in the landmark building. Moore also says that, while a ghost-busting psychic group from Daytona State College was able to document the spirits, the group's efforts to guide the spirits to the light were unsuccessful . . . so the legend continues.

The Daytona Playhouse's story begins long before the first documented ghost sighting. The inaugural production of the amateur theater group (then called the Daytona Beach Little Theatre) in 1947 was a comedy presented in the old Spruce Creek High School. Shows were performed at a variety of venues until the group raised enough

money to build their own theater in 1955. Today that location is still the home of the Daytona Playhouse. The elegant theater seats 264, and it hosts six plays each season.

In 1956, Daytona Beach resident Ernie Dyer was in the audience for *Sabrina Fair*, the first production in the new facility. That evening someone (not a ghost) tapped her on the shoulder, said there was a role that would be perfect for her in the next production, and asked her to try out. Although she had never acted before, Ernie decided to give it a try. "I was hooked," she says. "It opened up a new world to me. I was a bit of an introvert at the time . . . it was the most amazing feeling in the world to look out at that audience just waiting for me to say my lines. It has its own special magic."

For more than fifty years, Ernie has been actively involved in all aspects of the theater – from acting and directing children's shows to working the lights, sound, concessions – even cleaning



Murder Among Friends