

THE LAST SUPPER

Ernest Emurian was born in Philadelphia in 1912 and died in Virginia in 2004, never having lived in Bella Vista, but his work became the basis for a well-known production here, one especially meaningful to those of the Christian faith. Emurian wrote a play in 1953 about Jesus and the twelve disciples, which has been produced all over the U.S. The play was first produced in Bella Vista during Easter weekend, 1974, as "The Twelve Soliloquize."

Emurian studied at length Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting of the Last Supper, then wrote soliloquies for the Twelve Apostles. (A soliloquy is a solitary speech, in which a character expresses his innermost thoughts or feelings aloud while either alone upon the stage or with the other actors keeping silent.)

In 1974, Bella Vista resident Maxine Ickis, who had been a drama and music teacher in the Chicago area prior to retiring to Bella Vista in 1972, decided to put on a version of this play at Riordan Hall, with her husband Ralph serving as stage manager. Sponsored by the POA, several organizations and churches collaborated with her in the effort.

The play was extremely well received every year, and Mrs. Ickis continued it for six years through Easter of 1979. That fall, she and her husband lost their lives in a tragic one-car accident in Illinois after visiting family over Thanksgiving, and they were buried at Dug Hill Cemetery near Town Center. In March, 1980, it was decided to continue the production as a memorial to them, with Elsie Ruth Reitz taking over as director and Harry Coryell as stage manager. Through the years, there were only three directors (Helen Young became director in 1989 after the death of Mrs. Reitz).

Rehearsals started each March, with the program usually held during Easter weekend on the evening of Good Friday. The performances were so popular that they ran for 25 years. Finally, in 1998, the cast and crew decided to stop. Only two members of the original 1974 cast had stayed with the production the entire time, Bill Harris and Gleason Smith, who by then were both in their 90's, but four other men had been actors for 20 years, and several of the crew members had been involved for many years also.

In describing the play, the Weekly Vista of April 12, 1977, reported, "The house and stage lights darkened to make way for the sudden brilliant light on...the re-creation of da Vinci's famous painting.... The figure of Christ was centered among His 12 disciples at a long table. There was no movement, the figures appeared to be of wax. The curtains closed and when they were re-opened, Jesus and His disciples sat with bowed heads. One by one, each disciple raised his head to relate his experiences with the Lord before and after the crucifixion and resurrection, then bowed his head again."

Marilois Bach, former Weekly Vista columnist and participant in the production along with her husband Fred, in her March 24, 1993, column gave the play the ultimate compliment, saying, "This is not an ordinary home talent show. It is something extraordinary. For one brief hour on Good Friday evening, Riordan Center is holy ground."

Picture 1 : The cast members of this particular "Twelve Soliloquize" were, left to right, Floyd Shaw, Adam Crouch, Emil Carr, Clem Hannum, Fred Bach, Bob Craner, Ron Tullis, Harry Benson, Jack Butler, Calvin Heintz, Cassey LaCasse, Gleason Smith, and Bill Harris. Smith and Harris were the only two actors to participate the entire 25 years. (Courtesy of the Bella Vista Historical Museum)

Picture 2: Bill Craig (pictured) played the role of Jesus Christ the first few years. Ron Tullis held that role the last 20 years of the production. (Courtesy of the Bella Vista Historical Museum)

