

PIPESTONE, Minn.- At first the rain is just a gentle drizzle, hardly a reason to cancel this evening's performance. Then the heavens break open. A single spotlight shines on a white birch wood canoe; Hiawatha and Minnehaha cling to one another in hopes that this show won't end with them cold, soaked, and standing in knee-deep water.

They live by the old adage, "The show must go on." Though the rain continues to pour, they continue as planned. The show finally ends and the lights are shut off revealing that the 800-person audience has dwindled to about 40 brave and dedicated play-goers.

The summer of 2007 storm wasn't the only reason for the low attendance. Over the past decade the Hiawatha Pageant, which is held in Pipestone, a small-farming community in southwestern Minnesota has seen a steady decline in attendance.

The play is based on Henry Waldsworth Longfellow's epic poem "Song of Hiawatha," which tells the story behind the legend of a young Native American man named Hiawatha and his wife Minnehaha. The legend details Hiawatha's life story and concludes with Hiawatha telling his tribe to believe in the message of salvation brought to them by the Christian missionaries before he sails off into the distance never to be seen again.

Mick Myers, who has worked on advertising and marketing for the Hiawatha Club since 1978, described feeling "sad, blue, and heavy hearted" upon hearing that the club had voted 28-7 not to host the pageant after 2008.

"I think that since we made that decision, everyone is really committed with putting a good show on," Myers said. "We are all kind of happy that we did something for 60 years that was good for the community and good for the state of Minnesota."

The play was so popular it has been featured in such popular magazines as: *Time* and *Life*. Other notable awards include being listed as the *Top 100 Events* in the country by the American Bus Association for several consecutive years.

“People took pride in that,” Myers said. “The local community took ownership in the pageant. They enjoyed the popularity it got.”

Steve Hicks, a long-time pageant participant said, “I don’t want it to stop, but I call it progress.”

Hicks, who has played every male lead in the stage drama “Hiawatha,” was originally asked to play the role of Hiawatha by his eight-grade math teacher and the play’s original owner, the late Robert “Bob” Owens.

The role of Hiawatha required a highly athletic individual, as the stage spans a whopping 300 yards. The set of “Hiawatha” lies practically in the backyard of the Pipestone quarries, a mere 1 ½ miles away from the stage. The Pipestone Quarries are renowned for the soft, jasper rock and used by several Indian tribes to make their religious peace pipes. On the set is a large rock formation, locally known as the three Maidens, and a small lake, which are used as props during the play. Hicks, who participated in both track and archery in high school and college was considered a perfect fit for the job.

Hicks was more than happy to oblige. “Longfellow’s poem is special to everyone in the country. I don’t know any place in the country that does the play, it is unique to Pipestone. There are people from all over the world who come to see it.”

However, just as Longfellow’s poem has lost popularity over the years, so has the play itself.

Myers, who annually sells Hiawatha booklets during the show, has noticed a decline in the number of audience members who are acquainted with Longfellow’s poem. “About that time, in

the mid-70s they took that poem out of school. So people don't have the relationship with the poem anymore," he said.

Not only is the play's attendance suffering because the poem on which it is based is less familiar to today's generation, it also faces detrimental affects from a much more competitive entertainment market.

"There is so much competition for the entertainment dollars, and then you throw in casinos, and the high price of gas and the high cost of advertising," Myers said.

Joe Schelhaas, a local convenience store owner and long-time play participant, agrees the show has "been a pretty good economic boon to the town" over the years before attendance begin to decline. The economic benefits that accompany the play are not the only aspect that will be missed.

Each of Schelhaas' three children have enjoyed acting in the play. Schelhaas' oldest, Austin, 11, has played little Hiawatha in the past, and is finally tall enough to be a dancer. According to Schelhaas, Austin is "the one that is absolutely mad that we aren't having it."

However, the play "Hiawatha" sparked the acting bug for both Austin and his younger sister, Aspen, 8, who are both now involved in local theatre events.

"It's almost a love-hate relationship," Schelhaas said. "You enjoy doing it, but it does take a lot of time and because our members have gone down over the years and we have had to step up."

According to Myers it takes a cast of approximately 125 men, woman, and children, along with large volunteer crowds to successfully produce a show. However, as the years have gone by it has been harder and harder to round up enough volunteers like the Schelhaas' to put on a show.

Gary Olsen, the backstage stage director and veteran actor said, “You have the same few people that do it every year. It’s really demanding. Sometimes I’m ready to throw the towel in and be done, but you still want to continue it.” Olsen adds, “I think that I’m going to miss meeting new people and being in the play is something that I will never be able to show my grandkids.”

With this year being the last, the Hiawatha Club has several special plans in the works. According to Myers that play will be experiencing a first. “One thing we have never done through the years is videotape the entire show, just promotional snippets. It’s very difficult to shoot the pageant, because there is so much action, it is so far away, and the spotlights are all changing colors,” Myers said.

Celebrations will also include the annual pow-wow, a group photo and perhaps a small memorial in the Pipestone County Museums’ Tabor garden.

After the final curtain call the Hiawatha Club will meet to decide how to proceed. “We are set on 40 acres of land here,” Myers said. “We are not sure what we are going to do. We are going to wait until September or October when all our expenses are in and we are going to listen to others,” he said. “The only thing we are sure as club members is that it will not be used for development. It will always be used for pageant or park-like grounds.”

So far, the Hiawatha Club reports having sold over 900 tickets for the show which is set to run one last time at sundown the final two weekends in July and the first weekend in August.