

# Starlite showcases silver screen's Nancy Drew at tailored events

By LILLIAN KING  
BLADE THEATER WRITER

For decades, Toledoans didn't know the first and most prominent Nancy Drew ghostwriter was in their midst.

"I was surprised when I start mentioning this around and how many adults really weren't aware that the author was a Toledo person," said Linda Szyskowski, Starlite Theater Group president and director.

At two separate Sunday events, Sylvania-based Starlite Theater Group will show the 1939 adaptation of the classic character with *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, in honor of the teen sleuth's 95th anniversary.

The nonprofit organization aims to foster community engagement and shared experiences by hosting cultural events otherwise unavailable in the region. With no independent movie theater in the area, Starlite focuses on film, as well as author events.

Nancy Drew is a little of both. Under the pseudonym Carolyn

Keene, Iowa-born Mildred Wirt Benson wrote 23 of the original 30 Nancy Drew children's mystery novels. She would later move to Toledo, where she spent 58 years as a working journalist at the Toledo Times and later, The Blade.

Benson's work includes the first Nancy Drew book, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, which came out in 1930.

Legal issues with Stratemeyer Syndicate, the publishing group that created the fictional sleuth, prevented Benson from revealing Nancy's provenance until a lawsuit revealed her identity in 1980. The public has been catching up ever since.

"It just felt appropriate that we should dig back into this and reacquaint people with Millie Benson and Nancy Drew," Szyskowski said.

Sunday's first event, "Nancy Drew's Junior Detectives," starts at 3 p.m. and is intended for a younger audience, engaging kids with mystery-themed activities before sitting down for the 4 p.m. movie showing.

The film's short 60-minute runtime is a boon for an audience that may not be used to older media.

The movie's modern tone helps.

"Sure, they're in black and white, but they don't feel super old to me. There's a lot of action stuff and funny stuff," said Jennifer Kellow-Florini, Starlite's programming and social media director.

Based on Millie Benson's favorite of her Nancy Drew novels, *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, starring Academy Award nominee Bonita Granville, was the fourth and final film in the 1930s series.

Benson originated Nancy's straightforward, do-it-herself attitude; while not autobiographical exactly, it's easy to draw the line to the adventurous Benson, who'd go on to earn her pilot's license, explore jungles, and retrace the steps of her own South American kidnapping.

"A female character that had the



BLADE ARCHIVE FILE PHOTO

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Millie Benson in 1949.



COURTESY OF STARLITE THEATER GROUP

Millie Benson at The Blade in the 1990s.

## Benson

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personality of Nancy Drew was not the culture of the day," Szyskowski said.

*Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* may have differed from her book counterpart, but she still showcases a young woman that's not "a typical girl waiting to be married, for sure," Kellow-Florini, also Szyskowski's daughter, said.

The second program of the day, "Nancy & Millie," will begin at 7 p.m. It opens with *The Storied Life of Millie Benson*, the 30-minute documentary produced by WGTE in 2004.

The documentary will be followed by comments from WGTE TV Program Coordinator Cathy Kamenca, who worked at the station when the documentary was produced. While all

ages are welcome to attend, the event is geared towards adults.

With this added context about Millie's life, Starlite will show *Hidden Staircase* for a second time.

There will also be a reader's raffle, with the winner taking home a package of wine, mystery books, and other goodies.

Adults too may be surprised by how well the movie holds up.

At a time when Hollywood was stifling female expression, Nancy Drew's movies had action, comedy, and girls in trousers.

Even dialed down for the silver screen, Granville's spunky Nancy was an early female role model. Like Benson, Granville pushed boundaries for women, transforming from child star into one of the Hollywood producers who greenlit the television series *Lassie*.

"It just happens that the ac-

tress playing Nancy Drew also did some things that were, you know, new for women," Kellow-Florini said. "I think it's fun the way they portray her character."

Eventually, Starlite wants a venue of its own to host film and arts events where it could serve the public home for an arthouse film community that Toledo currently lacks.

Movie marathons, slumber parties, themed nights — there's so much room for a vibrant local film community, Kellow-Florini said.

"I've seen parents bring their kids in to see stuff like *Singin' in the Rain*, and the kids love it, like love it. Those are things they'll remember, and then they'll bring their kids, and that's the only way to pass it on," she said. "I really don't want us to lose that."

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