



James Stewart, at left, with the Henry Fonda family: Shirlee, Jane, Troy, Peter and Vanessa.

## A THEATER FOR HENRY FONDA

By JANICE ARKATOV

**H**enry Fonda may have been a movie star to millions, but at Sunday's gala fund-raiser, "Henry Fonda: A Celebration of Life," colleagues, friends and fans were on hand to pay tribute to Fonda the stage actor.

"He was just about the best actor I ever worked with," James Stewart told a reporter. "In the early '30s, we were together in New York—there were a lot of us getting started then—but of all the people, the most enthusiastic about acting and theater—and the importance of it—was Henry Fonda.

"Later in his career, he regulated his time between the stage and movies very carefully. And he wouldn't go back to the theater for something like a personal appearance; he'd *work* at a show, take it

on the road. He was in 'Mr. Roberts' for four years, and at the end of the run it was a better play than the day it started."

Choruses of "I Remember Henry" were the order of the evening as Stewart and Debbie Reynolds co-hosted the opening of Hollywood's new Henry Fonda Theatre (formerly the Pix, 6126 Hollywood Blvd.) by the Plumstead Theatre Society—a group originally co-founded by the actor.

Backed by the Rush Robinson Orchestra, Sunday's program was a hodgepodge of the sentimental and entertaining: from a touching welcome by Shirlee Fonda (with stepchildren Peter and Jane, and grandchildren Vanessa and Troy in tow), to the glitzy song-and-dance

of Debbie Reynolds, to impressions by George Kirby, crowd-pleasing numbers by Joe Williams and Linda Hopkins, a short reading from 'Mr. Roberts,' a buoyant sing-around-the-piano interlude by a dozen stars and a taped replay of Fonda's Kennedy Center Honors tribute in 1979.

Reminiscences of Fonda were also shared by John Forsythe, Gene Kelly, John Houseman, Dorothy McGuire and David Rintels.

Many participants spoke of their hopes for the Fonda Theatre (where a revival of Reginald Rose's "Twelve Angry Men" opens Feb. 26, featuring, among others, Jack Klugman, Ken Kercheval, Howard Hesseman and John Randolph, directed by Robert Lewis).

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"Our business," Plumstead President Daniel J. Travanti noted, "is to produce American plays at affordable rates for people to see—and to use all the wonderful actors available in this town." Although his "Hill Street Blues" schedule prevented Travanti from joining this production, he promised: "I love the theater; I came from it. I'm going to go back."

Ditto Ken Kercheval, who has taken time from his troublemaking on "Dallas" for the play's seven-week production schedule (three weeks of rehearsal, four of performance). Essaying the role that Fonda made famous in the film version, Kercheval acknowledged, "is such a great opportunity; to have this place reclaimed, and for the acting community in Los Angeles to have a theater like this. . . ."

Producer James Nederlander

said after the ceremony that his affinity for the 59-year-old theater goes back several years—"since it was called the Music Box and was being used as a movie house."

"I said then, 'Let's reconvert it.' Now it's finally happening," Nederlander added. "There are really three great theaters in Los Angeles—this, the Pantages and the Huntington Hartford. (The Henry Fonda Theatre and the Pantages are both owned by the Nederlander Organization.) There's no question that this (Hollywood) should be the new theatrical district."

That situation would suit Plumstead co-founder Martha Scott just fine: "This is our message to Broadway," she announced from the stage. "They're out there tearing down theaters—and here they're being *preserved*." As for her choice of namesake for the new theatrical setting, the actress said, "I think Hank would've loved it."