

Teen Theater's 'Grease' gr

By PETER NISSEN

On a humid Sunday night at the Lutheran Church, a cluster of five boys learns the dance steps for "Greased Lightning" in the center of the gym floor. A summer-colored crew of 12-through 18-year-olds sits along the fringe of the makeshift stage among handbags and shed clothing, chirping softly above the roar of the huge fans used to move the sweltering stillness. One can watch friendships in progress.

Since its birth in 1972, the Port Washington Teen Summer Theater has matured into a perpetual adolescent. It is a virtual summer camp, offering close to 100 teenagers exercise, woodworking shop, sewing class, and a chance to perform on stage. Rarely does a summer diversion have such focus: the teens' efforts will bear fruit on the evenings of Aug. 19 through 22 at 8:30 p.m. at Weber Junior High School when they perform Broadway's formerly longest-running hit, "Grease."

Pam and Ron Meadows, the tireless director and producer who seem as young as the teens they supervise, have nurtured the program through its childhood, offering the community annual entertainment through the talent of teenagers.

A stylized 50's montage celebrating the All-American greaser and his girl, "Grease" originally had 15 cast members. Pam as revised the script to make the show appropriate for six times that many.

"The script hasn't lost any of the 'cool' enthusiasm of the original production," said Corey Berman, 18, the musical director, and an alumnus of the Teen Theater. It might seem unrealistic to expect kids born no earlier than 1965 to relive the fifties. "Of course, we have to explain a few terms to them," chuckles Pam. "Can you believe there are people who don't know what a 'Sock Hop' is?"

This year's scenery is another Meadows masterpiece. Ron, who designs his own sets, supervises the construction and painting, most of which the teens do themselves.

"No one is assigned to any particular task," he said. "They teach themselves and each other

everything there is to know about transforming a jumble of one-by-fours and Upson board into a finished product."

From the Weber stage will emerge Rydell High School, an ambitious structure rising toward the back of the stage, where a seven-piece rock band will be visible. Flying gear, once used for "Peter Pan", will hoist a brave "teen angel" high above the heads of the other actors.

The Meadows are well aware of the educational pull they have on their teens. Each participant has a responsibility, namely to hit the streets and make \$30 in ticket sales.

"I've always enjoyed the teens' uncanny sense of business," said Ron. Most shoulder more: building sets, making costumes, and adding their own personal touches to the production.

Pam said, "You know, it's fascinating to watch the older kids take charge, instructing their younger friends in acting, singing, dancing, set building, costume making — even discipline and, of course, socializing and flirting. In this forum, peer group pressure operates on a positive level."

The Meadows seem to have been born to be mentors of the teens. The story of their courtship is a classis of Port Washington romances. Pam Papisidero, a Queens College junior, was working at her summer job at the Publisher's Clearing House switchboard. In the lobby one day, she was bewildered at the conduct of a regular with the firm. Ron, 29, was holding a heated cross-lobby argument with the regular switchboard operator concerning village garbage pail ordinances, just for sport, of course.

Less than a month after Pam was graduated with honors they were wed, and lost no time merging into Port Washington life. The following winter Kathie O'Connor, a junior high school student proposed a summer theater. The newlyweds circulated sign-up sheets in the schools.

Fifty teens turned up for a hectic mid-summer "Anything Goes" at the Sousa Bandshell. Barely out of her teens herself, Pam was still adjusting to married life the following winter when parents started calling. Their kids refused to go away to camp if "that new

Teen Summer thing" was on again.

"Bye Bye Birdie" (1973) established the Meadows as regulars on Port calendars. After one summer in the town's portable bandshell performing "Red, Hot and Blue", access to the high school was granted to them, where they have since done "Guys and Dolls" in 1975; "Oliver!" 1976; "On the Town," 1977; "Golden Apple," 1978; "Once Upon a Mattress," 1979; "How to Succeed..." 1980; "Red, Hot and Blue," 1981; and "Kismet," 1982. At the 12-year mark, the program now includes actors born in its first year.

Financially, the Meadows and their teens must generate new funds every summer. "People get the idea that the Teen Summer Theater is a permanent, fully-financed program of the school system — that we're teachers during the winter," said Pam. "We're not. We operate on a shoestring budget, but we usually manage to tie it all together by the end of the summer with no losses."

Usually. In 1976, the school system slid into austerity, ending the summer recreation program. The Teen Summer Theater, which now had to pay all overtime for custodians, ran a deficit. The novelty of the program had worn off. By 1979, there was not going to be a summer show.

Over the horizon came Robert L. Harding Jr., a local real estate agent who realized the importance of the program to the youth of the town.

Harding pledged a substantial annual donation to the program. Through a group of parents, more people heard the teens' cries for help. Several generous businessmen, organizations, and individuals set up a permanent fund for annual support. The teen theater was sizzling again.

But, by far, the bulk of the income is raised by the teens themselves, who seem tireless in their quest for \$2 ticket sales and \$10 sponsorships. Some have been spotted at the break of dawn in full costume at the train station, charming commuters.

"It's like a summer camp your parents don't pay for," observed Nick Scandalios, 18, who plays Danny, "But I still have time to