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Neither age nor projector fire stop him

The Jacksonville
Symphony Orchestra
honors a stagehand's
50 years of service.

By JEFF VRABEL, The Times-
Union



Bob Christopher has spent more than 50 years with the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra as a stagehand, making sure the show always goes on.

For 76-year-old stagehand Bob Christopher, helping behind the scenes is a family affair. Stage manager Mary Hess (left) and Christopher's daughter, Debbie Williams, rearrange the stage during Thursday's Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra intermission.
WILL DICKEY/The Times-Union

But this week, the show took a moment to stop for him.

Thursday night, Christopher, 76, was honored with a plaque presented by music director and principal conductor Fabio Mechetti.

"It was a big shock," Christopher said. "Fabio just started making a speech, about someone who had worked there for 50 years. And it really surprised me when I found out [my family] was out there."

That's appropriate, because stagehand work has been in the family for four generations now. Christopher got involved with showbiz in 1947 as a projectionist. But he started doing stage work on the side, and began working with the symphony during its time at the George Washington Hotel in the 1950s.

His responsibilities since that time have included pretty much everything. "We set up each concert -- the chairs, the music stands, the risers, the spotlights," Christopher said.

Fifty years lend themselves to a great many memories, and Christopher's favorite involves a place familiar to symphony members: Carnegie Hall.

"In the '70s, the symphony played at Carnegie and the Kennedy Center. At the time, Willis Page was the conductor, and he wanted a stagehand to go with him," he said.

He has spent decades putting out figurative fires but has only had to deal with a real one once. "On one of the programs, [the symphony] had an old-time slide projector. And we had flash powder to make smoke, and the projector caught on fire somehow," he said. "I had to go on stage with a fire extinguisher. It didn't bother the musicians, though. They just paused and started playing again."

These days, symphony stage work is more or less a family production: Christopher's wife, Mary, had until recently worked in the wardrobe department; his son Fred still does. His daughter, Debbie Williams, still helps him out, particularly when his work involves moving a piano. And his grandchildren, Michael Anderson, Timmy Christopher and Christopher Williams all pitch in at the symphony as well.

He said he has no plans to retire. "I'll work there for another year, anyway," he said. He still serves as a projectionist at the Florida Theatre, too, screening films during the summer. He seems happy to maintain his backstage role. "I'd rather be doing this than sitting at home," he said.



"It was a big shock," says Bob Christopher of his surprise honor from the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra. On Thursday night, he came out from behind the scenes to the sound of applause.

WILL DICKEY/The Times-Union

And the show goes on.

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