

How Alvernia High School Helped Create *The Sound of Music*

Teachers at Alvernia High School knew they had chosen the perfect play for the senior class of 1953, but there were challenges to getting it produced. For one thing, there was no actual play!

The sisters had loved *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, written in 1949 by Baroness Maria von Trapp, but the school would need her permission to adapt the memoir into a play.

“It was a family story, and the soul of the family was a woman,” wrote Joan Kuffel Zeitz, '59, in the Winter 2014 issue of *Alvernia Alive*, the alumnae newsletter. “It was a perfect fit for an all-girls Catholic high school. The baroness was contacted, and her authorization came by telegram.”

Once Baroness von Trapp gave her permission, there was the matter of writing the script, making costumes and sets, and learning the music. Students and faculty had just five months to get it all done, but they jumped in anyway.

Sister Francis Borgia Rothlueber wrote the play. (Sister Francis Borgia, who would go on to lead the School Sisters of St. Francis in the 1960s, also wrote a history of the congregation, *He Sent Two*.) Drama teacher Anna Reuter cast it, and rehearsals were well underway when they encountered another obstacle, courtesy of the Korean War.

“The male lead was drafted and called to leave two weeks before the opening date of the play,” Peggy Anderson Smykowski, '61, wrote in notes from her 50th class reunion. “The school principal, Sister Hyacinth Kirch, was away at a meeting and the problem fell in Sister Vitalis Koester's lap. Sister Vitalis called someone with a high-powered job in Washington, D.C. He was able to get a draft extension for the male lead.”

Thanks to so many heroic efforts and Sister Vitalis's unusual pulling of strings, the show *did* go on. It also attracted a special group of guests. The von Trapps were touring the United States and were in Chicago, so they attended the opening of Alvernia's production of “One Family Sings: A Two-Act Play with Music.”

"During intermission, Maria took the mic and spoke with enthusiasm for the performance," Joan wrote. At the end of the performance, the family joined cast members for a grand finale, singing the closing number for "an endlessly applauding audience."

Maria's imagination was piqued. “The impact of seeing her story on stage perhaps emboldened the baroness's consideration toward future productions,” Joan continued. Broadway and Hollywood producers agreed the show was worth taking on.

Although Sister Francis Borgia's play had been commercially published, and had even been produced by other high schools around the country, all rights eventually were rescinded. The Broadway production of *The Sound of Music* premiered in 1959 with music by Rodgers and Hammerstein and won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical. The beloved movie starring Julie Andrews arrived in 1965 and won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

The dramatized story of the von Trapp family, first brought to life on the Alvernia High School stage, continues to draw audiences around the world. Its themes of hope, determination, and freedom keep ringing true everywhere it is performed.