

Richard H. Berger

Starlight Theater Producer
1904-1998

by Dory DeAngelo

Kansas City celebrated its centennial anniversary in 1950, and to commemorate the occasion, *Thrills of a Century*, a historic pageant, was written. A temporary stage was built in Swope Park for the big production. The show was a smashing success. City leaders decided to build a permanent outdoor theater in the park. Construction began that fall on a 7500-seat theater to open the following summer. It was called Starlight Theater.

To ensure the theater's success, Richard H. Berger, the former production manager of St. Louis' outdoor Municipal Opera, was hired. Berger had the experience and the contacts in show business to bring quality performers and stage technicians to delight Kansas City's audiences.

Berger was born in Brooklyn, New York, and quit high school in 1927 to become a ticket seller in a Broadway theater. He was soon working for a producer of New York musicals and then worked eight years for St. Louis' Muni Opera. Later he went to Hollywood and became a producer for film studios MGM and RKO. In the early days of television, Berger was hired by NBC to produce the Perry Como Show and the network's specials.

Berger, his wife Sherry (a former 'Ziegfeld Girl'), and their son Rick lived in Kansas City three summer months out of each year, but the Starlight work continued throughout the entire year. During the winter, Berger cast the leading roles and mapped out the details for the entire production of the next season's ten shows. Auditions for the dancing and singing chorus were held in New York, Chicago, and Kansas City. Berger knew how to discover talent. Rising young stars, including singer Marilyn Maye and television actor Charles Nelson Reilly, got their big break on the Starlight stage.

When his son Rick was 15, Berger put him to work as a Starlight stagehand. Rick became a successful producer at 20th Century Fox, CBS-TV, and later for Disney's Touchstone films.

Dick Berger was Mr. Starlight and made audiences happy for 20 years. He died in Los Angeles in 1998.



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