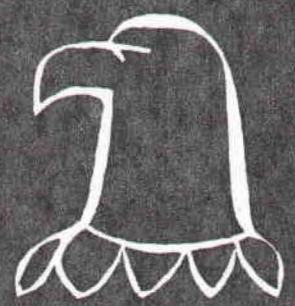


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AMERICA IS BUILDING A REGIONAL THEATER

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ALBERT E. HEMSING

TENTH SESSION
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 Washington, D.C.

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THE SENIOR SEMINAR IN FOREIGN POLICY

TENTH SESSION

1967 - 1968

AMERICA IS BUILDING A REGIONAL THEATER

A Case Study

by

Albert E. Hensing

April 1968

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SUMMARY

Resident professional theater is bringing live drama, from Aeschylus to Albee, to citizens across the country. A firsthand look at companies in seven cities reveals the growth of a regionally-based theater of serious purpose and artistic merit. These are gaining recognition as a public good as well as a private pleasure.

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AMERICA IS BUILDING A REGIONAL THEATER

Why Theater?

Theater alone celebrates "live" that magic interaction between people which is the joy and sorrow of life. However human a story they tell, film and television, by their very nature, must always lack a degree of humanness. All the performing arts are live. Yet opera, music and the dance must necessarily subordinate the word or so honor it themselves as to approach the essence of theater. Only in theater are the word and its instrument, the human being, central. When today's concern for the inhuman ways we live, work and play draws attention to the arts, theater deserves special heed. The play's the thing wherein to catch the conscience of us all.

Congress has now come to recognize that the arts are a measure of the worth and strength of a nation. In 1965 it declared: "A high civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone but must give full value and support to the other great branches of man's scholarly and cultural activity." So saying, it established the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. For the first time in American history, legislation deems it "necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to complement, assist and add to programs for the advancement of the humanities and the arts". Thus far the sentiments expressed have clearly outdistanced the monies appropriated, but the way is pointed.

Chaired by Roger L. Stevens, the Foundation's National Endowment for the Arts had channeled \$10,500,000 to the arts by the end of 1967, an amount supplemented by nearly \$16,000,000 from states, cities and private sources. Of the federal funds, regional theater directly benefited from grants of \$728,500, with other theater projects receiving \$1,765,000. An earlier and continuing major patron of theater is the Ford Foundation, with grants of over \$11,225,000 to date.

A Brief Look Back

New to America, regional theater has been taken for granted in Europe since the days when petty princes vied to enhance their courts with Amusements and Culture. As the burghers took over they found it quite natural to support these former royal theaters with public funds, as natural as they found it to tax themselves for schools.

Theater did not thrive in an America bent on conquering a continent. Nor were puritan values overly hospitable to play-acting. In 1876 Henry James could write of The American that he was a man for whom "an undue solicitude for 'culture' seemed a sort of silly dawdling...a proceeding properly confined to women, foreigners and other unpractical persons". What hunger for theater existed was stilled by commercial shows done by Broadway-based road companies. They presented star performers in some serious drama and a great many melodramas and musicals. By 1900 over 300 companies toured the country playing at 600 theaters. Today there are barely 200 theaters in operation, and since 1932 the number of road companies has never risen above 25.

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Broadway itself waned as movies became "better than ever". Between the Great Depression and 1965 its theaters declined from 54 to 36, with new productions dropping from 142 to 60 per season. Nor has the Off-Broadway movement substantially altered the picture. Despite critical applause and fresh audience interest, despite scaled-down salaries and admissions, Off-Broadway threatens to founder on economics. With some exceptions, only star-studded musicals tailored to the expense-account and theater-benefit crowd are assured success.

Regional Theater

Regional theater is, more accurately, regionally-based theater; it is not as yet evocative of the local scene. Matter-of-factly catalogued, its attributes appear hardly startling. Yet they represent a revolution when contrasted with Broadway "show business". Relying little on the star system, regional theaters offer trained actors a chance to "stretch" themselves in a variety of roles. They strive for a balanced repertoire made up of classic, contemporary and experimental plays done by a trained and well-rehearsed ensemble. Above all, built by and with the community, they constitute a bridge of understanding between artist and citizen. This is reflected in the fine rapport between actor and audience which is one of the special delights for the visitor.

Half of all regional theaters and all of the leading ones are non-profit enterprises, organized with community backing, financial and moral. Continuity in management and artistic policy gives them a measure of permanence hitherto little known in American theater. Most play an extended season of at least 20 weeks, presenting perhaps six to eight plays during that time. Many offer training in acting and stagecraft. All do educational work in the community, bringing theater to school children and underprivileged youngsters. Quite a number are housed in theaters built for them from funds raised by private donation, foundation grants and local tax support. By and large they meet 75% of expenses from box-office receipts but must look to benefactors to make up the rest. They are home to a new breed of university-trained directors. They offer their core of actors the exhilaration of ensemble work, a measure of security, and the novelty of sinking roots in a community in return for very modest salaries.

Some prefer to describe these theaters as "permanent professional" or "resident". Depending on one's definition, there are some 36 to 50 scattered across the country in places as likely or unlikely as New Haven, Dallas, Houston, Memphis, Minneapolis, Baltimore, Seattle and Washington, D.C. (See complete listing below).

A First-Hand Look

Resident theaters are accomplishing their primary purpose -- to quicken the pleasure of theater-going for more Americans by offering them an opportunity to see a balanced selection of drama on a regular schedule in their own communities. So much was obvious after a two-week tour of seven cities this spring. The acting encountered, the staging and direction were all professional and often refreshingly good. The artistic level of regional theater is a tribute to the good taste of the people who make theater today. The choice of plays offered tends to be rather predictable. (Moliere was probably played in more cities in America this season than in France).

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Dallas

DALLAS

Fresh national attention was drawn to regional theater this March when Paddy Chayefsky chose the Dallas Theater Center for the world premiere of his new play, "The Latent Heterosexual." This induced Clive Barnes to make the unwonted pilgrimage to Dallas and to report: "If writers of Mr. Chayefsky's undoubted reputation will give new plays to the regional theater, thus putting these theaters in the critical spotlight, they will be doing an enormous service to one of the most vital (even perhaps the most vital) branches of the American theater".

Vitality is unmistakably felt in regional theater. In Dallas, for instance, the energetic Paul Baker and his colleagues have put on 140 plays since opening their theater in 1959. A commendable number of these, 30, have been new plays, of which "Journey to Jefferson", based on a Faulkner novel, was taken to Paris and won a prize at the Théâtre des Nations. Another, which I saw on the small experimental stage, dramatizes Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology" skillfully and unaffectedly. The Chayefsky premiere, a spoof on sex and taxes, was a tour de force by leading actor Zero Mostel who came down for the occasion. Chayefsky's choice of Dallas to unveil his play was influenced no doubt by Baker's reputation for breaking new ground. Unquestionably, this company has achieved artistic standing and community support. But that support, in Dallas and elsewhere, is not yet sufficient to pay the artists a living wage.

Los Angeles

Salaries and operating funds in regional theater remain meager while more and more cities build opulent cultural centers. In a city otherwise unfocused, Los Angeles has built a Music Center complex which dominates the downtown landscape like an acropolis. The Center's Mark Taper Forum houses a permanent theater company headed by Gordon Davidson. What was formerly the Theater Group at UCLA became the nucleus of the present group. At last, Hollywood's large pool of professional talent finds an outlet for stage acting which television and movies do not provide. Thus it happens that actors of the caliber of Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy were starring in a sparkling version of Moliere's "Miser" during my visit.

San Francisco

San Francisco has had its ups and downs in theater recently. The city's one-time repertory tenant, the Actor's Workshop, got national attention but apparently failed to win local acceptance and support. In 1967 ACT (American Conservatory Theater) took over. It is currently presenting a rotating repertoire of 30 plays at two theaters. Called the "most prolific and probably the most exciting repertory company in the U.S." and directed in a flamboyant style by 37-year-old William Ball, ACT emphasizes the conservatory concept--continuous daily training of the professional actor. The night I saw Ball's "Tiny Alice" by Albee, the actors seemed more interested in doing "their thing" than in the play. For which, in this case, they may be forgiven. Support at the box office has been good and local benefactors have pledged \$400,000 to keep ACT in the city, to which the Ford Foundation is adding \$300,000 and the National Endowment for the Arts \$350,000 more.

DALLAS

Minneapolis

Deep in the heartland of America, the Minnesota Theater Company set out to prove that a midwest community will support serious repertory and not just roadshow hits from Broadway. Five years ago British director Tyrone Guthrie established a theater with the cooperation of Minneapolis' leading citizens which has evolved into considerably more. The evening's program was a most flatteringly intelligent performance of Pirandello's "Enrico IV" which bore witness to the fact that this enterprise has grown into America's most distinguished repertory company. Peter Zeisler, one of its founders and present managing director, discussed building theater "from the ground up". While Minneapolis had always been friendly to the arts, it offered none of the infrastructure which theater needs. Thus, in addition to building a fine acting company, the Guthrie has also reached into the community and developed stage carpenters and electricians, wardrobe women and seamstresses -- craftsmen who serve theater right down to the dyeing of fabric for costumes. At the same time the Guthrie is also building audiences in the Twin Cities. Each year Zeisler talks theater to the incoming freshmen at the University of Minnesota. Further inducements such as student tickets turn youngsters who have never seen live drama into enthusiastic patrons by the time they graduate.

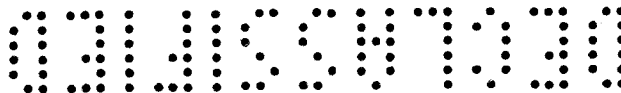
New Haven

The Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, is set smack in the middle of a wholesale meat and produce market. Opened in 1965, it has already established a reputation for courage in disregarding easy and comfortable playbills. Even New Yorkers are attracted to its new plays. Arvin Brown's first American staging of "A Whistle in the Dark" by the modest size company of 12 points the way for smaller cities to enjoy resident theater despite minimum budgets. The evening's production of Moliere's "A Doctor in Spite of Himself" and Ionesco's "Bald Soprano" left no doubt that New Haven's investment is worthwhile.

What permits theater to succeed under these circumstances is the dedication, ability and versatility of the people who run it. The group's artistic director, Arvin Brown is a case in point. A graduate of Stanford, he also worked at Harvard and the Yale School of the Drama. A Fulbright Scholarship took him to the University of Bristol in England with a chance to direct plays at the Bristol Old Vic. This sort of preparation is not unusual among regional theater people. Yet this still-young man also shows a realistic appreciation of managerial problems, public relations, fund-raising and the community responsibilities of regional theater. Long Wharf has, for example, organized a Touring Stage which performed at over 110 schools and colleges this year. A Speakers' Bureau filled requests from clubs, schools and civic organizations who wanted talks and demonstrations on all aspects of theater. Efforts such as these go far to integrate artist and community.

New York City

Few people are aware that New York has five repertory companies. Lincoln Center Repertory springs to mind at once, but critics generally prize the APA-Phoenix' artistic niveau and its selection of plays over that of the Lincoln Center. Unfortunately, on my single visit to one of APA's four productions, an ill-assorted group transmuted "The Cherry Orchard" into lesser educational TV fare with Old Russia laid in Upper Suburbia it seemed. APA's general excellence, nonetheless, won it a Special Tony Award this year on behalf of all resident theater.



With the help of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Negro Ensemble Company is drawing new audiences to its productions on the Lower East Side. Nearby, in the beautifully restored Old Astor Library, Joseph Papp has fought his way to a new home for his New York Shakespeare Festival. Since 1953 his company fought an uphill struggle for survival by playing free performances to more than two million spectators in Central Park. Bored perhaps by Shakespeare played straight, Papp has now produced a controversial "Hamlet" whose "Hellzapoppin" style I did not appreciate. His "Hair" of last season is now extracting hard cash from tired businessmen and hippies alike.

With 8 million admissions each year, New York continues to account for at least a quarter of all theater-going in America. Studies ascribe 7.9 million to Broadway and Off-Broadway, 1.5 million to regional theaters, 7.8 million to the "road" and 9-10 million attending summer stock. Thus while New York has its resident theaters, their special character is muted by the dominance of Broadway.

Washington, D.C.

Based in New York, the National Repertory Theater has organized an NRT company at Ford's Theater in Washington. Accustomed to touring and doing educational work, NRT is sponsored by Congressionally-chartered ANTA (American National Theater and Academy). It must yet achieve the kind of compelling theater which will keep the public coming after the novelty of visiting the place where Lincoln was assassinated wears off.

Now in its eighteenth season, the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. is the best-established resident theater in America. Its 840-seat house operates at 90% capacity, with 18,500 loyal subscribers. When it still used an abandoned old brewery in Foggy Bottom as its home, the Arena was affectionately known as the Old Vat. Today it occupies a modern, specially-built auditorium in the city's Southwest urban renewal area which is already bursting at the seams. Plans for more rehearsal space, offices, set construction and storage space plus an additional stage for experimental and children's productions are already approved. Local fund-raising is under way with a goal of \$500,000. Contingent on that sum, three foundations have pledged an additional million to complete the project. So, things are looking up for resident theater in the nation's capital.

Observations: Random and Pertinent

1. The desire to do more new plays and to be more "experimental" is laudable and universal. But resident theater tills mostly virgin ground and for some seasons yet would do well to catch its audiences up with the best of the world's dramatic literature. Anti-establishment, avant-garde theater comes naturally after established theater flourishes. A special snare, it seems to me, is the frenzied attempt to pour old wine into new bottles by unconventional stagings of well-known plays. A "rock" version of Othello and the ghost of Hamlet's father cavorting in long winter underwear may entice the man on the street but it takes him exactly nowhere and Shakespeare is left out in the cold.
2. There has been a quantum jump in the quality of acting. The "Method" is clearly giving way to learned skills and stricter discipline. In this respect regional theater seems to be ahead of Broadway. Too often, however, sloppy speech and local accents break the spell of otherwise fine performances.

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3. Resident theater and educational television could cooperate to present taped classic plays to wider audiences. Transferred to film, these plays would also serve English teachers in preparing youngsters for live theater experience. (Those who mistrust taping plays performed on a stage might want to study West Berlin's television successes with the technique. Ever since the Wall went up, East Berliners have been kept abreast of new plays appearing in the West by this means).
4. There is spotty use of Health, Education and Welfare's Title I and II funds by resident companies. In New Haven and in the District of Columbia, for example, resident theater people are bringing live drama to underprivileged school children and helping teachers instruct the three R's with techniques borrowed from play-acting. Elsewhere the local school authorities seem to be dragging their feet and theater managers find the negotiations and paper work too time-consuming. More could be made of this opportunity to supplement theater income, to render a community service and to build future audiences.
5. The artists themselves make a major financial contribution to resident theater in the form of low salaries. Actors are among the lowest-paid professional in our country today. The LORT (League of Resident Theaters) scale set with Actors' Equity provides for a top salary of \$250 per week. Few receive this maximum. In 1965 the average regional theater actor made \$80-100 a week. I regret to report that there has been little improvement since.
6. Regional theater suffers from an almost total absence of market research. Much more needs to be known about the composition of the audience. Who comes and why? Who stays away? How elastic is the demand for theater? In what ways do repertoires, ticket prices and present subscription systems affect audience profiles? With federal tax funds now being funneled to these theaters, a nationally-directed research project geared to local situations seems indicated, nay essential.

Available information on the nature of the audience for the performing arts offers little comfort to those (myself included) who hope that regional theater will become a popular force in American culture. Performing arts audiences would seem to be remarkably uniform, whatever the region, whichever the art: white, well-to-do, and extraordinarily well educated. Blue-collar workers account for only 5% of the audience, professionals over 60%. About the only significant plus for regional theater is that students compose 21% of its audience as against 8% on Broadway.

Given fifty-some cultural centers standing and forty abuilding across the country, it must be assumed that the number of resident theater companies will increase to fill at least a portion of these. Some of the present groups may go under but others will take their place. As for theater-goers, today's six million college students offer a potentially rich lode. With 115,000 undergraduates enrolled in some kind of drama course and 18,000 majoring in drama, theater is assured both public and players in the years to come.



7. The splendid Twentieth Century Fund study, "Performing Arts--The Economic Dilemma", documents the thesis that the root of the cost pressures which beset the arts is in the nature of their technology. The more industry increases its productive efficiency, the more will the cost of the performing arts rise relative to costs in general. They share this characteristic with other hand crafts in an age of mass production. Thus, if the performing arts are not to price themselves into an indulgence for the rich, the box office alone cannot sustain them. In 1965, the year's income gap for the performing arts was \$20 million. Projecting this gap into the future (and allowing only for a modest increase in the number of arts organizations) the gap foreseen for 1975 by the Twentieth Century Fund will be at least \$50 million. Yet these are paltry sums for a nation of our size and wealth. What the National Endowment for the Arts now spends amounts to only 4 cents per capita. Non-box-office support from all sources (private and corporate donations, foundation grants and tax monies) probably does not exceed 60 cents per citizen.

Our healthy tradition of supporting the arts from the private sector makes comparisons with the European situation academic. Still, some figures obtained from the German Embassy may be of interest. In 1965, for theater and opera alone the Bonn government supplied subsidies equivalent to \$112.5 million, or \$1.88 per capita. These subsidies supported 135 theaters, the private sector 54 more. In a nation of less than one-third our population with a Gross National Product less than one-sixth of ours, those are figures to ponder.

8. Tours abroad by our best resident professional companies would increase their stature and our own. More accustomed to ensemble playing, they could better represent us abroad than some of the hastily assembled ANTA companies sent overseas by the Department of State back when it still had money for such purposes. At present the Department has no such funds. It has been argued that American theater played in English abroad has too limited an appeal. Yet some seasons back the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of "King Lear" by Peter Brook, in English of course, played to packed houses in Paris and standing ovations. On my own recent tour I was amused to find Vienna's famous Burgtheater dogging my footsteps in four American cities -- playing Goethe and Schiller in German. Either Britain and Austria are richer and their cultural bureaucrats mere dreamers or we are misguided.

If the "simple" problem of who would foot the extra costs could be resolved, resident companies ought to play more guest performances right here at home too. New faces on both sides of the stage, a greater range of playbills per season and new critical yardsticks might ensue. No man is a prophet in his own country.

DEVELOPMENT

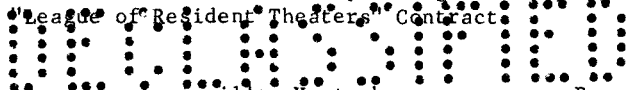
Conclusion

It would seem logical to allow American theater to build to a critical mass before expecting from it a creative explosion. This requires a balance and sufficiency of creators, purveyors and consumers. Regional companies clearly expand the size of theater and improve its geographic penetration. Whether they can also be midwife to a generation of new playwrights and thus truly evocative of the regional scene is problematic.

The singular contribution of resident companies is likely to stem from their essential character. They substitute the symbol of a community-serving institution for that of an entertainment business. Theater is seen to emerge as a public good as well as a private pleasure -- a notion of consequence to the arts and society both.

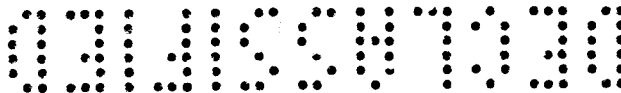
To extol the growth of regional theater implies no belief that this development will, of itself, vivify our cultural life, nor even cure what ails our theater. The forces which integrate art and life, and metamorphose both, remain elusive. I expect they grow by accretion and are not to be invoked by program or fiat.

RESIDENT THEATERS: Theaters Operating Under Equity's
League of Resident Theaters' Contract



Abingdon, Virginia BARTER THEATER	Louisville, Kentucky ACTORS THEATER OF LOUISVILLE	Providence, Rhode Island TRINITY SQUARE PLAYHOUSE
Atlanta, Georgia THEATER ATLANTA	Memphis, Tennessee FRONT STREET THEATER	Rochester, Michigan MEADOW BROOK THEATER
Baltimore, Maryland CENTER STAGE	Milwaukee, Wisconsin MILWAUKEE REPERTORY COMPANY	Rochester, New York THEATER EAST
Boston, Massachusetts CHARLES PLAYHOUSE	*Minneapolis, Minnesota MINNESOTA THEATER COMPANY	St. Louis, Missouri LORETTO-HILTON CENTER
Boston, Massachusetts THEATER COMPANY OF BOSTON	Natick, Massachusetts REPERTORY OF CLASSICAL DRAMA	*San Francisco, California AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Buffalo, New York STUDIO ARENA THEATER	*New Haven, Connecticut LONG WHARF THEATER	Sarasota, Florida ASOLO THEATER FESTIVAL
Burlington, Vermont CHAMPLAIN SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL	New Haven, Connecticut YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA	Seattle, Washington SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATER
Chicago, Illinois GOODMAN MEMORIAL THEATER	New Orleans, Louisiana REPERTORY THEATER OF NEW ORLEANS	Stanford, California STANFORD REPERTORY COMPANY
Cincinnati, Ohio PLAYHOUSE IN THE PARK	*New York, New York A.P.A.-PHOENIX LYCEUM THEATER	Stratford, Connecticut AMERICAN SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL
Cleveland, Ohio CLEVELAND PLAYHOUSE	New York, New York LINCOLN CENTER REPERTORY	Syracuse, New York SYRACUSE REPERTORY THEATER
Detroit, Michigan DETROIT REPERTORY THEATER	New York, New York NATIONAL REPERTORY THEATER	Waltham, Massachusetts BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY THEATER
Hanover, New Hampshire DARTMOUTH PLAYERS	New York, New York NEW YORK SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL	*Washington, D.C. ARENA STAGE
Hartford, Connecticut HARTFORD STAGE COMPANY	New York, New York NEGRO ENSEMBLE COMPANY	Washington, D.C. GARRICK PLAYERS
Houston, Texas ALLEY THEATER	Oklahoma City, Oklahoma MUMMERS THEATER	Washington, D.C. WASHINGTON THEATER CLUB
Lafayette, Indiana LOEB PLAYHOUSE MEMORIAL CENTER	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania THEATER OF THE LIVING ARTS	Waterford, Connecticut EUGENE O'NEILL MEMORIAL THEATER
Lakewood, Ohio GREAT LAKES SHAKESPEARE ASSOC.	Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania PLAYHOUSE	West Springfield, Mass. STAGE WEST
*Los Angeles, California MARK TAPER FORUM	Princeton, New Jersey McCARTER THEATER	

* Denotes theater visited during present survey. DALLAS THEATER CENTER, Dallas, Texas, which is not a member of the League of Resident Theaters, was also visited.



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