A Remarkable Mirror:
The Ups and Downs of Regional Theater in Cleveland
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Hamlet said it first, of course—the purpose of theater is "to hold...the mirror up to nature...to show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." And so I want to talk about Cleveland's two regional theaters, the Cleveland Play House and the Great Lakes Theater Festival, as institutions whose development, problems and triumphs to some extent mirror Cleveland's history.

First a word about regional—or resident—theater. When I use the term, I mean fully professional, not-for-profit theaters of a certain size, established in communities outside New York, supported by and in some way responsible to those communities. They are all members of the League of Resident Theaters, a national association. And Cleveland, luckier than many cities, has two of them.

This national network of theaters began in the cultural explosion of the '60s, born from Ford Foundation initiatives, the Kennedy administration's support of the arts and the establishing of the National Endowment for the Arts. It has, in a little over 30 years, replaced Broadway and New York as the major source for new plays, as a look at last year's Tony awards would quickly tell you. The network of regional theaters has become America's true national theater.

The Cleveland Play House, of course, pre-dates the regional theater movement by about 50 years. Its founding can be seen in the context of the Little Theater movement, a time from World War I through the '20s when non-professional groups who nevertheless took the art of theater seriously became popular in many cities. In talking about how it all started, I'm going to use some of an article I wrote for the Plain Dealer Sunday magazine of Sept. 30, 1990, celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Play House.

The Play House, founded in 1915, was part of the cultural explosion in Cleveland that produced the Institute of Art at the turn of the century, the Music School Settlement (1911), the Museum of Art (1916), the Cleveland Orchestra (1918) and the Institute of Music (1920). Looking back on that heady time, you can see a booming city, rich from coal, oil, shipping, steel, full of eager idealists ready to improve the lives of its citizens and forge a destiny as the artistic center of the Western Reserve. To them, Cleveland could compete not just with Pittsburgh and Detroit but New York and Chicago.

But the Play House was different from the museum and orchestra. It owes its existence not to a Severance or Wade or Mather, but to a group of artists who wanted to explore the newest ideas and techniques in theater. You could say it all started with a bohemian theater critic and the rheostat.

Raymond O'Neil ("Tippy" to his friends) wrote drama, music and art criticism for the Cleveland Leader, which merged with the Plain Dealer in 1917. His father, an electrician at the Colonial Theater, made a model theater to amuse his invalid wife, Raymond's mother. Raymond and his friend, artist Henry Keller (who taught at the Institute of Art) cut out silhouette figures and manipulated them while Papa O'Neil worked lighting changes, friend Walter Heller played the piano and they all sang popular songs like "Two Little Blue Shoes."

Young O'Neil thought of himself as an avant-garde intellectual, a bohemian. In her history of the Play House, "Leaps of Faith," Chloe Oldenburg reports that a colleague at the Leader remembered him as "a modified beatnik. He wore a necktie in a soft, droopy bow and sported open sandals without socks."

His friends were the iconoclastic artists who founded the Kokoon Club, staged an annual masked ball like their Parisian counterparts and mounted an art exhibit in 1914 at Taylor's department store featuring new works, including some from the shocking Armory Show in New York that treated Americans to their first glimpses of Seurat, Picasso and Braque.

About that time, O'Neil went to Europe, where his theatrical eyes were opened by director Max Reinhardt's lavish, poetic productions, by Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater (then in its Symbolist/Expressionist phase) and especially by the ideas of designer Gordon Craig, who talked about "total theater"—a unity of expression that produced a profound, almost mystical experience. Avant-garde productions used light dramatically, changing effects swiftly on the new cyclorama (a concave backdrop that gives a feeling of infinity) and orchestrating brightness with the rheostat, newly adapted for theatrical lighting.

When O'Neil came home to his father's toy theater, "Two Little Shoes" went out the window and in came a rheostat, a little cyclorama and, probably, Debussy. Pretty soon he was presenting shows for friends. As the group grew, they adopted the motto "Art in Democracy," an appropriate one since everybody had
different ideas about how to create an art theater for Cleveland. They divided into three groups, one to work with puppets, one to design and perform shadowgraph dramas, one to stage contemporary plays with real human beings. They wanted to produce art, and they wanted it to be cutting edge.

A theater was born, with O'Neil as its first director and Charles Brooks as president. Francis Drury, retired president of Perfection Heating Co., offered them temporary quarters on property between Euclid and Carnegie avenues, just about where the Play House is today. They hammered out a lofty purpose: "for establishing an art theatre; for encouraging native (i.e. Cleveland) art in all its forms and native artists; and for cultivating the rich legacies in folk art possessed by our cosmopolitan population."

The first production, in May, 1916, was a play for marionettes, "The Death of Tintagiles" by French Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, a poetic drama drawn from Celtic myth. Grace Treat—"not a skilled needlewoman," says Julia McCune Flory in her book "The Cleveland Play House, How It Began"—made the dolls, "ripping them apart numberless times" until they were right. They were young, ambitious, serious about art and amateur.

When Drury decided to tear down the barn in 1917, the Play House group found a new home in a decommissioned Lutheran church at Cedar and E. 73rd St. The Plain Dealer, reporting on the move, described them as people who believe "that in this theater all the arts—poetry, music, dancing, miming, painting, designing—are to assemble to give spectacles that will transcend anything yet accomplished." It's the kind of sweeping statement only young artists would make.

The repertory from 1916-1920 mixed symbolist drama and fantasy with Strindberg and folk-tale adaptations. There were concerts and recitals, poetry readings, art exhibits, speakers. Jacques Copeau, director of the innovative Paris Theatre du Vieux Colombier came to talk. John Newberry (treasurer of Sandusky Cement Co.) translated plays by Paul Claudel to be performed. Margaret Hamilton, the future Witch of the West, joined the group in 1917 and played Discretion in "Everyman." The atmosphere in those days, as remembered by Elizabeth Flory Kelly, then a child, was like a family—cosy and clubby.

But trouble brewed. O'Neil became difficult and temperamental; finances were shaky—too shaky for the businessmen on the board. A perfectionist, O'Neil promised a season of plays to subscribers and then had trouble delivering. In 1919, Walter Flory resigned as president, feeling that the Play House had strayed from its true mission of encouraging "openness of mind and heart." The Play House "belongs to the community," he wrote. "It was dedicated at birth to this great, striving, thriving, struggling, multifarious, cosmopolitan city."

At the end of the 1920-21 season, O'Neil resigned and went to New York, indicating in a brief note that he felt the American art theater needed to evolve from amateur to professional production. The board apparently agreed, since it hired three recent graduates—theater professionals—from Carnegie Tech: Frederic McConnell, then about 30, who became director of the Play House; K. Elmo Lowe, only 22, who became his assistant; and Max Eisenstat, who became his backstage manager.

Oldenburg's book quotes a Clevelander's approving description of McConnell as "not one of the long-haired, sandal-footed type... He is at all times business-like and, for one with such a gift of imagination, is extremely matter of fact."

Ever since then, fiscal responsibility has been the watchword at the Play House. It is, I think a particularly Cleveland virtue, the virtue of a city of businessmen and blue collar workers—pay as you go, don't get into debt. At the Play House, it led to a drift toward the safety of the mainstream, away from the cutting edge on which it began.

McConnell and Lowe, with their combination of artistic and business sense, suited Cleveland. They ran the theater for nearly 50 years, since Lowe became director after McConnell retired in 1958 and remained until 1970. During the '20s and early '30s, the theater was often in the forefront of American drama: Eugene O'Neill's "Beyond the Horizon" played here in 1921, a year after its New York opening; Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author" opened in 1923, a year after its Rome premiere. Sean O'Casey's 1924 play "Juno and the Paycock" opened in January 1927, and local Irish patriots came to throw eggs at the actors, just like their Dublin counterparts; Elmer Rice's experimental drama "The Adding Machine" was a hit in 1928, revived in 1929 and 1931.

It is fair to say, however, that on the whole the Play House pursued mainstream programming, a mix of classics, new works and contemporary drama that still pertains. Productions became more professional, audiences larger. In 1927, the company moved into a new building with two theaters, named for Drury and Brooks, at Euclid Ave and E. 86th St. and expanded to a third stage in a remodeled church at Euclid and East 77th in 1948.
The mission to represent this “great...struggling...cosmopolitan city” led to education programs of various kinds. Esther Mullin founded the Curtain Pullers, theater classes for Cleveland area children, in 1933. McConnell sometimes allowed other local groups to use the theater—indeed, when the Karamu theater on Central Ave. was almost destroyed by fire, he offered the Brooks Theatre to its actors, the Gilpin Players.

Actors and staff took pay cuts in the Depression, but the theater managed to stay open and even paid off the mortgage on its building. McConnell headed the Ohio Federal Theater Project of the WPA (a program he was quoted as not having much use for), which put on a series of children’s plays and started a playwriting project.

The Play House called itself a community theater, and meant that it represented the people, the tastes, the artistry of people in Cleveland. But through the next decades, it began to seem more circumscribed—mostly white, middle and upper middle-class, fairly conservative, East Side. The Play House resisted unionizing—union stage hands picketed the theater in 1939 until Judge Frank Lausche issued a restraining order. The resident company did not become fully Equity (Actors Equity, the professional actors’ union) until 1958. In spite of its being not-for-profit, in spite of tours and outreach, it was perceived by many as a clubby institution for people with education and money.

I'm not going to go into detail about the Play House from 1930-1988 because essentially it did not change. Yet there were some odd parallels between the fortunes of the theater and the city: In 1969, when Cleveland itself was in dire straits, so was the theater—Lowe retired and his successor committed suicide; Rex Partington took over briefly, but was fired after a supposedly too daring production of Aristophanes’ “Lysistrata.” At about the same time, members of the touring company of that shocking musical “Hair” were attacked in their downtown hotel by some zealous local puritans.

In the aftermath of the Hough riots in 1967, the theater became more and more isolated from the inner city community surrounding it. To the credit of the trustees, it stayed where it was and did not move to the suburbs like everybody else. But it would be more than 20 years before any real initiatives were made to attract black audiences.

Richard Oberlin, a member of the acting company, took over as artistic director in 1971 and stayed until 1985. In 1983, a year after the Great Lakes Theater Festival moved downtown and the real restoration of Playhouse Square had begun, the Play House completed its own large-scale building plan, designed by Philip Johnson. Two existing buildings—the original Brooks and Drury building and the production center, a former Sears store—were joined and a third theater, the Bolton, added. The result is a palace of theater, whose wide lobbies and echoing marble corridors are stately and impressive but to me carry the message that productions there are cultural events with a capital C—not user friendly.

The Bolton Theater was also clearly designed by a man who had never designed a theater before. It has been improved, but it is still hard to hear from some seats and short people can’t see if they sit past row C. But it satisfied the aspirations of board and administration, and it helped the Play House compete with Playhouse Square for grandeur.

The marble halls and vaults of the new complex, however, appeared to demand higher quality productions than had been possible with a comfortable—even complacent—resident company. In an era when tv comics were still thriving on Cleveland jokes, the Play House trustees realized that outside northeast Ohio, nobody had heard of the Play House—even if it was the oldest residential theater in America. Regional theater for national journalists meant the Guthrie in Minneapolis, the Arena Stage in Washington D.C., the Seattle Rep, the Mark Taper Forum and the like. Furthermore, the Great Lakes Theater Festival (which I’ll get to in a moment), had hired Gerald Freedman, whose visibility as Joseph Papp’s assistant at the New York Shakespeare Festival made people outside Cleveland start paying attention to that theater.

The Board’s answer was to hire Josephine R. Abady, whose track record off-Broadway and at the Berkshire Theater Festival was commendable. They did not reckon with two things—Cleveland audiences’ resistance to change and Abady’s own decisive personality. She fired the resident company during the first week—an action she had been hired to take, but she did it with what seemed unnecessary ruthlessness—and began a polarization process between admirers and haters that lasted throughout her tenure.

But, Abady did yank the Play House out of its insularity and put it on the national map. Reviewers from the New York Times, Variety, USA Today, the Associated Press and newspapers in states neighboring Ohio came to see what was happening. Abady staged many new plays (not all of them good and none of them avant garde), brought in name performers like Marlo Thomas, Stefanie Zimbalist and Daniel Travanti, sent Play House productions of “Born Yesterday” and David Storey’s “The March on Russia” to
New York. She also made a real attempt to follow the mission set down so long ago by Walter Flory—to have the theater represent the ethnic and cultural diversity of Cleveland—this “great striving, struggling, multifarious city.” Her third season, 1990-91, included casting black actors as Elwood P. Dowd and his family in “Harvey,” a South African festival of two plays in repertory, and a black gospel musical, “Abyssinia.” In every season, she had two or more plays that reached out to black audiences, and for the first time ever, the lobby began to feel integrated.

Abady also had the theater reach out to Eastern Europe, orchestrating cultural exchanges that brought the New Experimental Theatre of Volgograd, Russia here in 1992, the National Theater of Slovakia in 1993 and the Czech National Theater in 1994. Each time, the local ethnic community here became involved in hosting actors and attending plays. Abady took the Play House production of “House of Blue Leaves” to Prague and Bratislava in the spring of 1993.

The overall production quality also rose considerably during her time here. But it cost a lot. For a few years, single ticket sales records were continually broken but subscriptions decreased. The Play House still had not finished paying for the new building and its environs, and production deficits raised the debt. Tensions between Abady and members of the executive committee of the board mounted and early in 1995, she was told that her contract would not be renewed. Roger Danforth produced the 1994-5 season, which had some interesting choices, including a new play, “Jungle Rot,” that won a national prize.

Peter Hackett, Abady’s successor, also chose an interesting line-up of plays for his first season, 1995-6. But the overall quality of productions sank and so did attendance. In an effort toward fiscal stability, Hackett has decided to try to woo former subscribers and new people to the theater by choosing a 1996-97 season of standards—a something-for-everybody smorgasbord of plays people have heard of. It may work, but it may have unfortunate implications, depending on how easily these people who like the familiar are willing to try something new in a future season.

Cleveland audiences are conservative. I keep trying not to believe that, but it is true. Yet this is also a city of givers. Board members saw to it that the Play House mortgage got paid off even in the midst of the Depression, and just recently raised enough money to balance the budget and erase a $1.5 million deficit. On the negative side, its supporters have made the Play House insular, resistant to change; but on the positive side, this fierce loyalty and sense of ownership has ensured its survival.

The growth of the Great Lakes Theater Festival tells quite another story—although, since it is only 35 years old, I promise to make shorter work of it. But the Festival has always known what its mission is—to present classic drama—and has held to it through good times and bad. In some ways, it is a product of the regional theater movement in the 1960s, but its story is unique.


The Great Lakes Theater Festival started with an empty auditorium and serendipity. In 1961, Dorothy Teare, president of the Lakewood school board, read in the Plain Dealer that a Shakespeare company was losing its home in the Akron area and remembered that the auditorium at Lakewood High School, built to house community and cultural as well as school events, sat idle during the summer. In no time she had contacted Arthur Lithgow, head of the homeless company, and found herself president and organizer of a new theater’s board of trustees.

Lithgow, then educational coordinator of the McCarter Theater in Princeton, N.J. (he became artistic director in 1963), had produced all of Shakespeare’s works at Antioch College from 1952-57, then produced Shakespeare at Stan Hvyet Hall and in an old movie theater in Cuyahoga Falls, from which he had been evicted when the Plain Dealer discovered him. He was a visionary who dreamed of bringing quality classic theater everywhere. His son John (yes, the actor) called him “The Johnny Appleseed of Shakespeare.”

Lithgow presented the board with a six-year plan to repeat his Antioch feat and produce all of Shakespeare’s plays. Nobody knew exactly where the money would come from, but the Festival announced a season in April, 1962 and opened on July 11 with “As You Like It.” Lithgow brought with him a company of professional actors based mostly in New York (a few locals joined them), all of them hungry for the opportunity to work on Shakespeare and willing to put up with low salaries and makeshift working conditions to do so. In 1964, Time magazine remarked on the high quality of the acting.

Behind the scenes, however, the Festival was strictly grass roots. Lithgow said in 1966: “The Great Lakes Festival is one of the few, if not the only festival that does not have strong institutional sponsorship such as a university or college, organized theater association, art or civic foundation, government subsidy
and/or angel." Yet from the beginning, the community supported the theater. The West Side is still the stronghold of community theater—Beck Center, Greenbrier, Berea Summer Theater, Clague Playhouse and the rest. The meshing of community support with a professional company seemed like a heady challenge—and West Siders were eager to have something cultural to brag about on their side of town. Their model was the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, founded by Tyrone Guthrie about six years earlier, and they had heard of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the country's oldest. And so, although their primary concern was making good use of their local auditorium, they chose a name that looked beyond Lakewood to the whole Great Lakes region.

But they were impresarios in spite of themselves, as Teare liked to say. Money was tight, cajoled from local businessmen; Lakewood's superintendent of schools Williams Edwards and Teare talked the school board into free rent for the auditorium, upgrading the stage lighting, providing space for making costumes and props, and print-shop privileges. During its first years, the Festival's professional staff was very small. The woman's committee (all volunteers) licked stamps, sold coupon ticket books, planned a bookstall and cookie sales for the lobby, scrounged up furnishings for the company's lodgings, pitched in to assist designer Hal George on costumes and props—sewed, dyed and constructed armor. Volunteer leadership ran the theater for years—Georgia Nielsen, for example, master-minded advance ticket sales from her basement.

Lakewood businessman George Dryer brought his professionalism to the financial side as an early board member and paid off a $30,000 deficit by the end of the 1965 season. Lithgow also began an exchange of productions between the Festival and the McCarter—four of the seven shows had originated the previous season at the McCarter; three new ones would go back to Princeton in the fall. The exchange brought non-Shakespearean classics into the Festival repertory. But Lithgow's dream of a top-flight regional classical theater needed more money than the still-fledgling board felt it could raise, and so he left to devote himself to the McCarter—another case of fiscal timidity. One can't help wondering what would have happened if they had met his challenge.

Lawrence Carra, professor of drama at Carnegie Tech, took over and began using more local professional actors—as well as starting an apprentice program for area students. He did bring in a few Broadway stars, notably Celeste Holm and her husband Wesley Addy, and he did the first new script—a musical called "Godspell" by local boy John Michael Tebelak. Because of all the local people involved, the company had a family feel—a summertime, West Side Play House; Lakewood showed its pride by putting up signs at its borders saying "Home of the Great Lakes Theater Festival."

The Festival was growing, adding professional staff (the first year-round staff member was a young woman named Mary Bill) and doubling its budget. It clearly needed a year-round artistic director, and Carra, who had just become chairman of the Carnegie theater department, could not take that job.

In 1976, the first full-time director was hired—an Irishman named Vincent Dowling, who had been deputy director of the Abbey Theater. The following year, the Festival became a member of the League of Resident Theaters. Dowling assembled a resident company of professional actors from regional theater (many of them from Missouri Rep, where he had directed) and New York. To raise the quality of productions without budget increases, he cut the season to four shows plus a one-person gig. The pattern has more or less held until now, with the addition of "A Christmas Carol."

The Festival had outgrown its high school home, however—not a place conducive to a professional image. The dream of a new building in Edgewater Park died because half the $16 million price tag had to be raised locally, and the Festival was competing for dollars with Playhouse Square renewal and the Play House expansion. The theater took the plunge and committed itself as the first tenant of the Ohio Theatre, the first Playhouse Square theater to be restored. In 1982, it moved downtown.

The move certainly helped Playhouse Square in its campaign to restore the theaters. And it has helped the Festival become recognized as a Cleveland—not Lakewood—institution with national aspirations. But it cut the theater off from the community that had been its main base of support at a time when expenses were tripling. The Ohio is a jewel box of a theater, rich but cozy once you get past its tunnel-like lobby, and with fine acoustics. The ambiance demands high production standards—just as the Bolton does at the Play House.

Dowling met the challenge with a production of "Nicholas Nickleby" that still lives in my mind as one of the great events in Cleveland theater. It was superb—in some ways better than the Royal Shakespeare Company's. But its popularity (buses came from Michigan and Pennsylvania) prompted a fatal error—a repeat the following year. The furor had died down, the television version of the RSC production had just

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been aired, and nobody came, although the second production was better than the first. The season also included an excellent—but poorly attended—production of "Waiting for Godot," still apparently a stretch for Cleveland audiences, and a real bomb, a musical version of Shaw's "The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet" called "Blanco!"

At the end of its second season downtown, the Festival had an enormous deficit and a whole new support base to build. Financial woes plague it to this day. It had also discovered that it was hard to lure Clevelanders downtown in the summer—part of the drop in attendance was attributed to people's reluctance to get dressed up for classic theater (or think weighty thoughts, although that had not been a problem in Lakewood). After trying a split season (May-June-late August-September), the Festival went in 1993 to the same schedule most other theaters have, from October-May.

Dowling left the Festival in 1984 and the board chose Gerald Freedman, a New Yorker who had grown up in Lorain and been Joseph Papp's right-hand man at the New York Shakespeare Festival. It was a choice that committed them to increasing the theater's professional quality; Freedman was ambitious to show what he could do with a classical theater of his own and he had wide connections in the theater world. Stars like Hal Holbrook, Piper Laurie and Tony Randall have come to star in the classics and some shows went on to New York.

In 1985, the theater also changed its name from the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival to the Great Lakes Theater Festival, to reflect its programming more truly; nevertheless, a Shakespeare play has been part of every season except one (and that one because of financial cutbacks).

Under Freedman, the Festival has more truly reflected the diversity of Cleveland's peoples and tried to make classic drama accessible to everyone through its educational programs, especially annual symposiums and "surrounds" for one of the productions. "Festival Fantastico" focused on Spanish and Hispanic culture as an introduction to "Blood Wedding," and "To Life," a year-long festival of Jewish culture, co-sponsored by the Jewish Community Federation, surrounded last winter's "The Dybbuk," to name only two. The Festival has the best educational program in the city, adding to the usual student matinees teacher workshops and summer institutes and—most innovative—sending teams of actor-teachers to spend week-long residencies in a school, introducing theater as a form of expression and a way to learn to students in grades 1-12. A production for adults, related to one of the season plays, also tours to retirement centers, churches, libraries and the like.

Through its history, the Festival has taken real risks in order to serve its twin goals of presenting quality productions of classic theater and educating the community about them. The term "classic" has occasionally been stretched to include Broadway musicals and Feydeau farce—a practice it shares with both Stratfords—but you've never felt that the main eye was on the box office—except, perhaps (forgivably) with its annual fund-raiser, "A Christmas Carol." It has even done a new play or two, including Adrienne Kennedy's "Ohio State Murders."

But it has hewed to its mission at the expense of financial security. Because it is a latecomer as an institution, forced to raise funds in the midst of downtown and harbor development, it has had a financial struggle. It is now taking another risk—but one that may help its financial future—by forging a new relationship with Playhouse Square.

Theater has never had a high priority in Cleveland. Public perception has persisted that theater is either made by the community (an unpaid hobby in other words) or a Broadway tour whose worth has been certified because it comes from outside Cleveland. Too many people like to see something they already know about.

In fact, the most difficult struggle going on right now involves the small theaters in town who want to go beyond community theater, to become professional and still survive—Dobama, Ensemble, Karamu, Cleveland Public Theatre, Cleveland Signstage. They have banded together as the PACT group (Professional Alliance of Cleveland Theaters) and are beginning to present a real alternative to the two regional theaters and the Broadway series, presenting some of the most provocative and interesting productions in town. They can provide a depth to the theater scene—an off-Broadway, off-Loop, off-Square experience not available before.

Cleveland needs a whole range of theater—of live performance. As solitary or second-hand, mediated experience—headphones, internet connections, television, and the rest—grows incrementally, we need the sense of community, of life being lived that theater provides. As no other art form does, it lets us step into someone else's skin look out at the world through new eyes.