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DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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ABSTRACT

This study is an historical overview of the explosion of Chicago's Off-Loop theatre scene from 1969 to 1989. During these two decades, resident theatre grew in Chicago at an amazing pace. Blazingly talented ensembles of actors and directors renovated storefron ts, warehouses, lofts, and basements and created over 100 small theatres where none had been before. This vibrant, mutually supportive theatre community is as rich and varied as any in the United States. Prior to this, Chicago was often described as a "theatrical wasteland." How and why did this explosion of theatre happen in Chicago?

The roots of indigenous Chicago theatre can be traced back to the early theatre activities of the Jane Addams Hull House, the Compass Players, and Robert Sickinger's neighborhood theatres. The sense of community and the spirit of ensemble that developed from these theatre traditions combined with factors in the city of Chicago and its nascent theatre community to make a concentrated creative environment for the proliferation of new theatre companies.
Eight theatres have been chosen to represent the development of Chicago's Off-Loop movement: the Body Politic, Organic, St. Nicholas, Goodman, Wisdom Bridge, Victory Gardens, Steppenwolf, and Remains theatres. A close look at the histories of these theatres prompts further questions. How did they develop from "gypsy" troupes to storefront theatres to permanent artistic institutions? How did each theatre's identity and artistic mission change as it grew? How did the theatre community and the city of Chicago contribute to the growth of these theatres? How did the sense of community and the spirit of ensemble help define the Off-Loop theatre movement? Is there a "Chicago style" of theatre? What were the stages of institutionalization that Off-Loop theatres went through? Did this maturation and survival process damage their artistic vitality? And, finally, what is the future of this unique theatre community?
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study is an historical overview of the explosion of Chicago's Off-Loop theatre scene from 1969 to 1989. During these two decades, resident theatre grew in Chicago at an amazing pace. Groups of young people, "possessed by the theatre," came from surrounding Midwestern colleges and universities and formed blazingly talented ensembles. With unstoppable energy, they renovated storefronts, warehouses, lofts, and basements into rough performance spaces and began to make their own theatres where none had been before. In the process, they created a vibrant, mutually supportive theatre community as rich and varied as any in the United States. Prior to this period, Chicago was often described by residents and visitors alike as a "theatrical wasteland" with nothing but amateur theatre groups or Broadway touring productions available to its citizens. How and why did this explosion of theatre happen in Chicago?

The roots of indigenous Chicago theatre can be traced back to the early community-building efforts of the Jane Addams Hull House, a settlement house organization for Chicago’s large immigrant population, begun in 1889. Jane Addams and Ellen Starr Gates were two Midwestern girls who became friends at Rockford College in Illinois in the 1880s. After college, they travelled together to Europe and, in addition to cathedrals and art galleries, they saw the ravages of industrialism on Europe’s impoverished cities and studied attempts at social reform. Upon their return to the U.S., these well-educated, financially independent young women became social missionaries, determined to improve the quality of life for America’s urban poor. They purchased a rundown mansion on Chicago’s Southwest Side called Hull House and there, in addition to teaching English language, reading, writing, employment, and social skills, Addams and Gates used the arts, and especially theatre, to bring the diverse cultures of Chicago’s immigrant community together. From the 1890s to the 1950s, Hull House theatre groups produced serious drama and helped to create an awareness and appreciation of theatre as a shared, formative community experience.

In the 1950s, the liberal environment of the University of Chicago served as an incubator for the ensemble-building techniques of groups such as Playwrights Theatre Club and the Compass Players, both precursors of the now legendary Second City comedy club, and all inspired by the theatre games and ensemble work of Viola Spolin and Paul Sills. These new methods turned actors into
improvisers who then became their own playwrights. In the process, groups of actors grew into ensembles that used the imagination of the group to invent highly physical acting styles and new ways of creating and staging plays. The bonds formed among the members of these ensembles were a major factor in the proliferation of new theatres as actors created their own opportunities to work together.

In the 1960s, Robert Sickinger became head of a revitalized Hull House Theatre and taught the community to express itself through the work of contemporary playwrights, demonstrating that Chicago could create its own quality resident theatre. His vision of neighborhood theatres sprouting all over the city inspired the explosion of professional theatre in Chicago that was to come. Using the community service mission of the Hull House Association, Sickinger created a network of neighborhood theatres, classes, children's and touring companies that made budding professionals out of community theatre participants. With adventurous play choices and strong artistic values, Sickinger gave Chicago a taste of high quality artistic self-expression and made the community want more.

These three distinct periods of theatre activity in Chicago's history were the precursors of the theatre explosion that began in 1969. They created a sense of community and a spirit of ensemble that became major contributing forces to the growth of Chicago's Off-Loop theatre movement. A unique set of additional factors, circumstances within the city of Chicago and the theatre community itself, combined with the previously mentioned influences of
community and ensemble to make a concentrated creative environment for the proliferation of new theatre companies. An examination of these factors and the individual histories of eight representative theatres from this period will be the focus of this dissertation.

The eight theatres that have been chosen to represent the development of the Chicago Off-Loop movement are the Body Politic, Organic, St. Nicholas, Goodman, Wisdom Bridge, Victory Gardens, Steppenwolf, and Remains theatre companies. As with the selection of any group representing such a large and colorful population, many worthy candidates for study, unfortunately, had to be omitted. It is hoped that these omissions can be rectified in a future study. These selected theatres, however, each in their own way, had a major artistic and institutional impact on the Off-Loop theatre movement.

A close look at this sampling of theatres prompts some further questions. What are the individual histories of these theatres as they developed from “gypsy” troupes to storefront theatres to permanent artistic institutions? How did each theatre's identity and artistic mission change as it grew? How did the theatre community and the city of Chicago contribute to the growth of these theatres? How did the sense of community and the spirit of ensemble help define the Off-Loop theatre movement? Is there a “Chicago style” of theatre? What were the stages of institutionalization that Off-Loop theatres went through? Did this maturation and survival process damage their artistic vitality? And, finally, what is the future of this unique theatre community?
Development of a community

Nobody knew it was going to become a movement. There was no master plan, no visionary prophets. Just a handful of people who loved the theater and loved Chicago. . . . 2

In the late 1960s, Chicago's Lincoln Park area was an aging inner city neighborhood with a mix of working class families, blacks, Hispanics, hippies, and students. Rent was cheap in Lincoln Park but there were good reasons. The neighborhood was run-down, the number of empty storefronts indicated that the business climate was not good, racial tension and gang activity were problems, and whole blocks in the area were slated for demolition under the city's urban renewal plans.

Various social programs, sponsored by government agencies or church groups, were at work in the area. In the counter-culture atmosphere of the late '60s, artistic self-expression was an important part of making life better in the neighborhood. Street fairs, pottery workshops, mural painting, poetry reading, rock concerts in the park; all contained an element of rebellion against more "establishment" forms of art and communication. Fledgling theatre groups such as Paul Sills' Game Theatre and, later, Story Theatre were part of this counter-culture scene. Many churches, in a search for '60s "relevance," liberalized worship services by including music and the arts. Some churches also became involved in liberal social and political causes, including the anti-war and civil

rights movements. In 1966, the ecumenical Community Arts Foundation (CAF) was created by the Presbytery of Chicago to revitalize the Lincoln Park area through community-oriented arts activities. The CAF created community programs in dance, music, painting, crafts, writing, storytelling, and theatre. The CAF became one of the founders of the Off-Loop theatre movement with the establishment of the Body Politic community arts center in 1969.

Artists lead the way for urban renewal

The social challenges of this decade caused some members of the church to reevaluate their personal and spiritual goals. One of these liberal, social activist church leaders was the Reverend James Shiflett who began searching for new meaning in his ministry in the mid '60s. After resigning as pastor of a Northwest Side Presbyterian church in 1965, he began investigating church outreach programs in the arts. He was appointed director of the Community Arts Foundation in 1966 and became the supervisor of a growing number of community arts activities, including drama groups, sponsored by the CAF. In 1969, when Shiflett was approached by William Russo and Paul Sills, both directors of their own small theatre groups, about the possibility of the CAF creating a community arts center for these various programs, Shiflett needed little convincing. The three soon found an available building on a dicey stretch of Lincoln Avenue and Shiflett arranged for the CAF to purchase the building, site of a former bowling alley and slicing machine company. The building was named the Body Politic and became the vibrant center
for many of the community programs of the CAF and other activist
groups. In an article by journalist Marla Paul, Shiflett describes the
Lincoln Avenue neighborhood at the time:

"This was thought of as a place that wasn't being exploited
and might have enough buildings on the street with the
atmosphere we were looking for," Shiflett said. He called the
area "pretty bombed out, sort of a dark depressed street
labeled for demolition by the department of urban renewal."^3

The Body Politic building became home to a number of theatre
groups during the '70s and '80s and the area was truly the birthplace
of the Off-Loop movement. The environment of Lincoln Avenue began
to turn around with the arrival of these small theatres and the
neighborhood became a gathering place for bohemians, hippie types,
protestors, coffee houses and inexpensive restaurants. "The once-
seedy, depressed street was rising. Storefronts were renovated;
blocks were revitalized. Lincoln Avenue, [Jonathan] Abarbanel [local
theatre writer] said, "became part of the Chicago establishment."^4

Plans to tear down the entire Lincoln Avenue block in which the Body
Politic was located were canceled. The tough little Off-Loop
theatres had already begun the urban renewal process. A dozen years
later the Lincoln Avenue area is described in quite different terms
by reporter Howard Reich:

The Body Politic-Victory Gardens [theatre] combination
couldn't be better located--the building is in the center of one

^3Paul, 2.

^4Paul, 2.
of Chicago's liveliest blocks. In addition to all the blues clubs, jazz dens, and western bars, the area offers several kicky eateries.\(^5\)

But before the '80s, when the suburbanites discovered it was safe to go see a play on Lincoln Avenue and the neighborhood went upscale, the new theatre groups had to work to find an audience. Jonathan Abarbanel describes one theatre company's simple but effective method of audience development:

The Chicago Extension Improvisation Company used to literally pull people in off the street which, Abarbanel said, "was not unusual for that period." The price of a ticket was $1.50. Hardly anybody got paid, and if they did, it was very little. Slowly the public began to take notice. "Eventually we started to get some attention," Abarbanel said. "Certain new publications began to cover these theaters, and the dailies picked up on it."\(^6\)

**Lincoln Avenue theatre starts to happen**

Several productions that started out on Lincoln Avenue got the public's attention. Paul Sills' Story Theatre with its refreshingly simple and clever presentation of folk tales, and the rock operas of William Russo's Free Theater brought a hip, adventurous crowd to the Body Politic. Something interesting was happening on Lincoln

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\(^6\)Paul, 2.
Avenue and the public perception of a community of artists working there began to form. Shiflett remembers how quickly it all happened:

Paul Sills opened up his theatre and it went over big. He was packing in one hundred and fifty to two hundred people per show. You see, the traffic in the theatres didn't start over a period of time and build up. It zoomed from nothing going on in the area, to thousands of people coming into one building on a weekend.7

Small, alternative theatre groups such as the Game Theater, the Theatre of Phynance, and the early Organic Theater also staged their off-beat performances at the Body Politic but the theatre activity still seemed a temporary and slightly makeshift affair. It was the 1970 success of Jim Jacobs' and Warren Casey's nostalgic '50s musical, Grease, that really put Lincoln Avenue on the map. The hit production ran at the Kingston Mines Theater for seven months and drew city and suburban people who had never been to theater on Lincoln Avenue before. Even tourists started including a visit to the North Side theatre on their list of destinations. Grease went on to New York as well as on national and international tours, and even became a major film, all of which helped convince Chicago that there was some outstanding local theatre after all.

The next major happening was WARP!, the Organic Theater's science fiction adventure trilogy by Stuart Gordon and Bury St. Edmund. This was mind-blowing, comic book-style, Age of Aquarius theatre live on stage. It ran for over a year and a half, captured

7Verne Noparstak, "Jim Shiflett and the Dream Theatre," News from the IPRC date unknown: N. pag. 9
numerous local drama awards, known as Joseph Jefferson awards or Jeffs, and went on to New York (though with much less success than Grease—it closed after six days). After these hits attracted local attention, especially from a younger, typically non-theatregoing crowd, taking in an Off-Loop production became a "hip thing to do."

By the early '70s, there was a general realization that the North Side was a growing market for theater and the performing arts, and many persons—who might have flown east or west decided to stay. Some, such as David Mamet, returned. And new groups, recognizing the North Side phenomenon, moved here.8

Theatre community cooperation

The early successes of the Lincoln Avenue theatres encouraged other theatre groups to form in Chicago. The Organic Theatre, in particular, became a model for other companies to follow. The Organic had professional aspirations and, though sometimes the salary was meager, their goal was for members to make their living doing theatre. The group was organized as a collective ensemble which meant that, although the group had a strong artistic director, Stuart Gordon, the artistic tasks, administrative work, and box office income were shared equally by all the members of the ensemble. The collective ensemble structure was less rigid and hierarchical than conventional theatre administrative structures and, therefore, was more attractive to the anti-establishment Off-Loop groups. As actors, company members were also given casting

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8Paul, 2.
priority which meant they were working much more often than the freelancing actors in town. Being a part of an ensemble meant having an artistic home to call your own.

As more groups formed, they began to cooperate and share performance space in places like the Body Politic and Kingston Mines, the other hot Lincoln Avenue theatre founded by June Pyskacek. The Body Politic, in particular, nurtured many new theatre companies including the Organic, Dinglefest Theater, and the Magic Circle Company, all of which went on to work in their own theatre spaces. Theatres would help out other struggling fellow theatres with costumes, lights and sound equipment, even theatre seats. Rather than becoming jealous and territorial as happened in other cities, theatre companies shared actors, directors, and designers without apparent friction and, often with positive artistic results. Directors such as Stuart Gordon, Robert Falls, Michael Maggio, and Dennis Zacek, actors such as Mike Nussbaum, William L. Petersen, Amy Morton, Gary Cole, William Norris, and Joe Mantegna, and actor/directors such as Frank Galati, John Malkovich, and D.W. Moffett worked for several theatres often in the same season. Petersen and Mantegna recalled their Chicago experiences in a 1984 *Vanity Fair* article by Bill Zehme:

Actor William L. Petersen is a founding member of Remains, which is considered by many to be the finest troupe consistently working in Chicago. Yet Petersen sometimes works with such neighboring companies as Steppenwolf, Wisdom Bridge, and the Goodman. "The ensemble movement has
been regenerated in Chicago," he observes. "Everybody helps everybody here. We compete amongst each other, not against each other."

Joe Mantegna, who won a Tony for his performance in Glengarry Glen Ross, credits his good fortune to his ensemble training at the Organic Theater. "Acting," he explains, "is like baseball. You can't play it by yourself. Having the opportunity to work constantly, creating your own work, is such an advantage in this business. We were honing our craft while our contemporaries in New York were sitting around waiting for the phone to ring."³

Looking back at the cooperative atmosphere, Diane Rudall, theatre administrator and chair of 1993's Theatre Year Chicago, described the city's working historical environment:

The theatres, from Apple Tree to Zebra Crossing, draw from a pool of gifted performers, designers, and directors who at times seem to function like one grand city repertory company.⁴

As the Off-Loop movement grew in the late '70s and '80s, the larger, more established companies such as the Goodman, St. Nicholas, or Wisdom Bridge would welcome entire ensembles from younger theatres such as Remains or Steppenwolf into their theatres, forming artistic partnerships. The sense of theatre community easily spread across company boundaries. Gregory Mosher, who helped nurture both individual artists and young companies, commented on the cooperative nature of Chicago theatre:


⁴Joseph Jefferson Awards Committee, Theatre Year Chicago, Jeff Awards 25, 1993: 5.
"What's different about Chicago," according to Gregory Mosher, the passionate artistic director of the Goodman, "is that we encourage and reward a sense of community."

The non-competitive, cooperative atmosphere was strongest in the '70s when the Off-Loop movement was growing most rapidly and the possibilities seemed limitless. All the theatres were young and had less at stake, financially and artistically, than in the following decade. The idea of making a career or building a permanent institution in Chicago theatre had not yet begun to seem possible for the 20 to 30-year-olds who were leading the movement. Robert Falls, past artistic director of Wisdom Bridge and current artistic director of the Goodman Theater, explained his perception of the cooperative atmosphere:

I just think that there was and there still is a certain spirit in Chicago that sets it apart . . . a sort of openness and sharing, a communal sense, that one can go from theatre to theatre in a kind of free way. It was small enough and early enough that I don't think any major boundaries were set in terms of actors, directors, affiliations. . . . People were rather free to go and there was a sense of support that we had for each other. I mean it was competitive, and it still is, but there was this wonderful sense of support, that everybody had the freedom to go from theatre to theatre.\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\)Zehme, 52.

\(^{12}\)Robert Falls, personal interview, 4 March 1993.
British actress and director, Pauline Brailsford, a theatre émigré to Chicago, echoed Mosher and Falls in an interview with the International Performance Research Center:

"Here we are not so competitive—we support each other. This is the best place in the States to work."1

The Jeff Awards - celebration not competition

The Joseph Jefferson awards, or "Jeffs," are another example of the community-building process. The Jeffs are Chicago's version of the Tony and Obie awards. Named for nineteenth century Chicago actor, Joseph Jefferson, the awards were begun in 1969 by a committee of approximately 40 local theatre people to honor outstanding Equity productions and artists. In 1973, due to the explosion of small theatres, the Jeff Committee added the Jeff Citations for non-Equity companies. The strictly volunteer members of the Jeff Committee see nearly a hundred or more shows a year before voting on the awards. The Equity Jeff awards committee selects a "best" in each category but the non-Equity Jeff citations are less competitive, with multiple citations frequently given in each category. The award ceremonies, held in the fall for the Equity Jeffs and in the spring for non-Equity, are much more celebratory gatherings of the theatre community than competitive events with winners and losers.

1International Performance Research Center, "Is Chicago Theatre Hot or Not?" News from the IPRC date unknown: N. pag.
Chicago - Midwest hub of the university theatre community

The Off-Loop movement in Chicago has benefitted from the large number of Midwestern universities in the several surrounding states. The University of Chicago, though lacking a formal theatre department, was the birthplace of the Playwrights Theatre Club and the Compass Players in the '50s and later, provided a home for the Court Theatre, another Off-Loop company. The Goodman School of Drama and DePaul and Northwestern universities trained generations of talented actors, directors, and designers. In the '70s and '80s, Chicago became the big city destination for many actors looking for a liveable city in which to start their own theatre careers. The pattern, continuing in the '90s, is that each new season brings the graduating classes from what seems like at least half of the theatre departments in the Midwest to Chicago to start their own theatre companies. Four of the eight companies in this study were formed by groups with a shared college or university affiliation. Stuart Gordon first formed the Organic with his fellow students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, St. Nicholas grew from David Mamet's acting classes at Marlboro and Goddard Colleges in Vermont, Victory Gardens' artistic director, Dennis Zacek, started as a professor at Chicago's Loyola University, and the Steppenwolf ensemble came, nearly full-blown, from Illinois State University in the Midwest's agricultural heartland.
**Favorable economic conditions, cheap real estate**

During the '70s and '80s, economic conditions in Chicago were very favorable for the formation of new theatre companies. Housing was inexpensive and easy to find compared to New York or Los Angeles. Chicago's size and business community insured that there were plenty of restaurant and office jobs available to support young actors while they worked evenings in the theatre. Since most small theatre acting jobs involved little or no pay, rehearsal and performance schedules were built around everyone's need to work a "survival job." Rehearsal and performance space was relatively cheap in Chicago so Off-Loop expenses were manageable, permitting more freedom to take risks.

"At $500 a month for a storefront [there was] no problem paying rent, even with a disastrous box office," another director says. As a result, the fledgling Off Loop theaters were afforded the greatest of artistic luxuries—the opportunity to experiment.14

**Chicago community**

There are three definitions of community, amongst several listed in Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, that pertain to the theatre community and the audience that developed in Chicago. Both theatre companies and frequent theatregoers in Chicago could be defined as; 1) a body of individuals organized into a unit or manifesting, usually with awareness, some

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unifying trait, 2) the people living in a particular place or region and usually linked by common interests 3) any group sharing interests or pursuits. As the Off-Loop phenomenon grew, both the theatre community and the audience were strengthened by their growing awareness of unifying Off-Loop theatre traits, by a shared interest in Chicago, and by the pride of participation that each group felt in the burst of creativity of the Off-Loop scene.

Previous Chicago audience dissatisfaction

The city of Chicago, in general, has not always taken pride in its cultural institutions. For many years, Chicago has had a "second city complex." Chicago's cultural institutions and its level of sophistication were frequently compared to New York's and found wanting. The city's inferiority complex can be traced back, at least in print, to a 1952 satirical article in the *New Yorker* in which A.J. Leibling dubbed Chicago the nation's "second city" with New York, of course, as the "first." As Pat Colander notes Leibling went on to comment on the theatre scene at the time:

"It is not considered smart to admit having seen any play in Chicago because this implies either (a) that you haven't seen the real play or (b) that you haven't the airplane fare to New York, or (c), and possibly worst of all, that you are indifferent to nuances and might, therefore, just as well go back to Fond du Lac, Wis., where you went to high school." It was 1952
when, with those words, A.J. Liebling declared the Chicago theater scene a terminal case, another victim of that city's mass inferiority complex. . . ."15

Native Chicagoans had bemoaned the state of cultural affairs for years. In 1966, Mayor Richard J. Daley's Committee for Economic and Cultural Development did a $60,000 study of arts and culture in Chicago. The study found that the lack of theatre was viewed as the most important cultural need to address in the city. The committee recommended spending $31 million on arts and culture in Chicago, including $6 million for the construction and support of a resident professional theatre. The city never acted on the recommendations but the need continued to be felt. Clive Barnes, another slightly chauvinistic New York critic, graciously pointed out the city's cultural aridity after a visit to Chicago in the early '70s:

> With an estimated population of 3,460,000, Chicago is virtually a theatrical desert. It survives chiefly on "national companies" from Broadway, but there is precious little indigenous Chicago theater. This is surely a national tragedy.16

There was a bit more going on than Mr. Barnes realized, but not much. Local writer Christine Koyama lists the theatre options available to Chicagoans at the beginning of the '70s:

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Seven years ago Chicago theatregoing was a simple set of choices: New York hits played downtown at the Shubert, Blackstone, and Studebaker. The classics bowed at the Goodman during the regular season or appeared at Court Theatre in Hyde Park and Lake Forest's Academy Festival Theatre during the summer. Suburban dinner theatres served up fading TV and film stars in forgettable comedies. Yet on the periphery were tiny companies that have since changed the face of Chicago theatre. . . .

These tiny Off-Loop companies had begun to attract local audience attention but, at first, Chicago was suspicious of its own artists. Chicagoans needed the stamp of approval from more sophisticated sources to believe that homegrown theatre was really any good. The city's cultural inferiority complex was so deeply embedded that it would take nearly a decade before Chicagoans felt comfortable bragging about the quality of their local theatre.

The turning point for Chicago theater was getting local audiences past the traditional second-city dilemma: If you're good, why are you here? Warren Casey and Jim Jacobs answered that question in 1972 by going from a converted trolley barn on Lincoln Avenue to most major cities in the Western world with Grease. Several years later David Mamet emerged with a burst of award-winning plays: Sexual Perversity in Chicago, American Buffalo, A Life in the Theatre. That one-two punch gave artistic and commercial credibility to theater with a local zip code--not to mention encouraging a generation of Chicago talent to believe in itself.

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Chicago audience development

In her 1984 dissertation entitled "Rhetorical Strategies of Chicago Regional Theaters in the 1970's: A Case Study of Audience Development," Bren Adair Ortega Murphy describes the size and nature of the potential theatregoing audience in the greater Chicago area. Murphy demonstrates that the audience was there and the Off-Loop movement came along at the right time to capitalize on Chicago's unmet cultural needs.

There is ample evidence that a significant number of Chicago area residents fit the national profile of people likely to support the arts in that they are upscale in terms of education and income. One reason for this is that Chicago is a center for national and even international commerce. Chicago is second only to New York in the number of first and second Fortune 500 corporate headquarters. . . . Five major universities--University of Chicago, Northwestern University, De Paul University, Loyola University, and University of Illinois, Circle Campus are located in the area as are several colleges.

These findings indicate that Chicago has a substantial financial and educational base with which it could support the arts. Not only do corporations, law firms, universities, etc. attract the kind of person most likely to be a patron, but--in the case of some institutions, notably corporations, there is the possibility of grant money for artistic endeavors. In addition, the fact that some advertising work is done in Chicago also offers support to actors, musicians, and visual artists who use the income from their commercial work to supplement more poorly paid performing/creative jobs. And--in the case of universities--there is the potential to directly encourage patronage and participation in the arts. With regard to theater in particular, all of the major universities with the exception of the University of Chicago have drama departments. These increase appreciation of theater for many students and University theater patrons as well as train
actors, directors, and technical personnel. Northwestern and the Goodman School of Drama (associated with De Paul since 1978) in particular have established national reputations for excellence in theatrical training. Columbia College, though not a major academic institution, has also been a source of trained talent since 1973. Thus, every year, fresh talent is made available to Chicago stages. Moreover, the professors training students are also available for local productions. Even the University of Chicago has been the seedbed of two of the city's most enduring theaters, Second City and Court Theater.

Thus, in spite of its blue collar image it seems clear that Chicago has population elements that would be very good in terms of building local, sustaining audiences for the performing arts, including theater. Another factor that works in favor of audience creation is that these elements tend to be concentrated in certain sections of the area--some of which are in or near the city itself. Most of the institutions described are in the city proper; many within a section called "The Loop." The business and professional people who make up Chicago's best audience potential tend to live in the "Near North" section of the city, along the lakefront into the northern suburbs (often referred to the "North Shore"), and in a few western and northwest suburbs. ("Regional Data Report," Chicago: Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, 1978, p. v-28.) Access to the city from these suburbs is fairly quick and easy. Thus, unlike many large cities, Chicago proper has remained a vital metropolitan center, capable of attracting professionals during social as well as business hours.19

A level of mutual respect between audiences and critics developed in Chicago in which audiences were interested and responsive to the critics' opinions and critics assumed a high level of intelligence and support on the part of the audience. Both critics

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and audience seemed to share a pride in what was happening in Off-Loop theatre as evidenced by critic Glenna Syse's comments:

I watched these theater-goers carefully throughout, listened to their attentive absorption and eavesdropped at intermission. These were earnest, demanding and inquiring audiences, prepared for the occasion, ready to grow, anxious to be pleased, and willing--ah, so wonderfully willing--to support. And without exception, I came away thinking: These are my kind of people.20

Press support for Chicago theatre

Chicago papers were willing to devote a large amount of space to the growing Off-Loop theatre phenomenon. Murphy's study cites the influence of theatre reviewing and features that were targeted toward upscale, educated, and "North Shore" audiences. Newspapers such as the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, the Daily News (through 1978 only) were the major dailies providing immediate arts coverage of the growing theatre scene. Also the Chicago Reader, according to Murphy, devoted the most space of any paper to theatre. The Lerner papers, the Pioneer Press group and the Daily Herald covered theatre for the northern and western suburbs and were likely to have a high percentage of potential audience members in their readership.21

Individual critics in the Chicago press took an especially active role in promoting awareness and appreciation of the small

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21Murphy, 79-82.
Off-Loop theatres from the very beginning of the movement. Richard Christiansen, in particular, first with the Chicago Daily News and then as chief critic with the Chicago Tribune, made it a point to seek out the newest young companies in storefronts and church basements and champion the work they were doing. He was one of the first critics to discover the talents of the Steppenwolf and Remains ensembles. Glenna Syse of the Chicago Sun-Times is also frequently cited for her sympathetic, generous reviews and support of the Off-Loop movement as a major addition to Chicago's cultural scene. Scott Fosdick in “The Press on Chicago Theater: Influencing an Emergent Style” suggests that Christiansen’s support helped shape not only the theatre companies’ sense of community but influenced the style of plays they produced as well, by favoring a rough-and-tumble naturalism to the exclusion of classical and experimental theatre.

A single critic, Richard Christiansen, was predominant in influencing Chicago theater to become a community of many small theaters renowned for its physically demonstrative style of naturalism but limited in its presentation of other forms, particularly pre-modern classics and the avant-garde.22

**Audience appetite for risks**

The picture of the scrappy little Off-Loop theatre struggling to make ends meet while producing exciting, physically dynamic theatre became the press’ and public’s central image of the Off-Loop movement. Audiences expected that their favorite neighborhood

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theatre would take some big artistic risks, risking failure as well, in order to find something new and different. Murphy credits the Chicago tradition of ensemble and improvisational theatre and the popularity of Second City's improvisational style with creating an adventurous and forgiving audience that was willing to:

tolerate "misses" for the sake of the "hits" they trust will come. . . . What became important to many Chicago patrons was that they saw these people first; they were on the ground floor; they were part of the creation. It is this willingness on the part of the audience members to see themselves as credible theatrical explorers, even risk takers in a sense, that has been an important Second City legacy to Chicago regional theater which, like most regional theater, also requires risk takers.23

Lack of City of Chicago support for theatre

While audiences were very supportive, the government of the City of Chicago was initially either indifferent or hostile to the development of Off-Loop theatres in the early '70s. The city provided some support to mainstream cultural institutions like the Symphony, the Art Institute, and the Lyric Opera but, with an occasional exception such as the CETA program in 1974, gave little in direct financial support to its resident theatres. Perhaps part of Chicago's reluctance to support theatre may have stemmed from the city's sense, previously noted, that homegrown culture was not as worthy as culture imported from New York or abroad.

The City of Chicago is almost alone among major cities in the U.S. in providing no regular assistance to its theatres. New

23Murphy, 98.
York City provides $1 per year leases to Joseph Papp's Public Theatre and Shakespeare in the Park buildings with substantial funding and in kind contributions coming directly from the city. San Francisco, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Washington, D.C. all provide either subsidized rentals or direct funding or both to the major theatres in their cities. Chicago has hotel tax revenues set aside for cultural events but the city fathers seem to favor fireworks displays and parades instead of live theatre.24

Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley, not known as a supporter of the arts, was, perhaps, more suspicious of the theatre community in particular because of its roots in political activism, especially the anti-war protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Paul Sills' Story Theatre and Jim Shiflett's Body Politic mixed radical politics, community activism, and theatre in a way which made the conservative Daley uncomfortable. The Body Politic and other "hippie theatres," as conservative city officials characterized them, were subject to political surveillance by the "Red Squad" of the Chicago Police Department and harassment by the city's building inspectors during the early '70s. It took years of growth and a dose of national recognition before the entire city of Chicago began to celebrate its small theatres rather than ignore them. Robert Falls reflects on the lack of official support from the City of Chicago:

'It's amazing that the Chicago theatre scene happened because in its beginnings the city was hostile to us. It's not like Seattle or Minneapolis, for example, that are far more liberal cities in terms of foundations, corporations, and city

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involvement. The theatres were formed, were carved out of bowling alleys and second floors. We did that almost illegally and in great opposition to Mayor Daley's Chicago. The fact that Chicago looks on its theatre community with pride is because we've earned that, we've demanded it. It wasn't something that was created. . . . And the fact that so much theatre happened in Chicago is almost in feisty opposition to the climate rather than because of some cushy invitation.  

Changes in Chicago fire laws in 1973

A major problem encountered by the small Off-Loop theatres in the early '70s was the enforcement of Chicago's strict building codes. As result of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the tragic Iroquois Theatre fire in 1903, the city had some of the most stringent fire laws and building codes in the country, especially for theatres. These codes required a theatre in Chicago to have a proscenium stage with an asbestos fire curtain, fixed seating, firehoses and water pipes, and multiple exits that were ridiculous requirements for a storefront theatre with 100 seats.

The large crowds and the radical political activity at the Body Politic had already attracted the attention of Mayor Daley's building inspectors. The theatre had built its performance space on a shoestring, without proper permits, and was cited for numerous code violations in 1970. Shiflett, director of the Body Politic, estimated the cost of the renovations demanded by the city at the time to be nearly $500,000. The city appeared determined to put the Body Politic, Lincoln Mines, and the other young theatres that were


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starting to develop, permanently out of business by strictly enforcing theatre building codes and fire regulations.

Tom Nolan, board chairman of the CAF/Body Politic Theatre and a lobbyist for Catholic Charities, focused the Body Politic's efforts to resolve its code problems toward getting City Hall to be more flexible. Gienna Syse wrote a series of passionate editorials in the Chicago Sun-Times which seemed to change the balance of public opinion in favor of the underdog theatres' continued existence.

After three years of court battles over the theatre building codes, Shiflett of the Body Politic and representatives of a dozen other small theatres met with Mayor Daley and a committee of city officials late in 1973. After the theatre coalition presented their case, Daley, who had apparently pre-planned his response, took a proposed amendment to the building codes out of his drawer, handed it to an aide and said, "If these places can be made safe, let's make it possible for them to stay open." The building codes were relaxed and Off-Loop theatres came under a new code category as "theatrical community centers." The relaxed regulations encouraged many other storefront theatres to open and, in 1974, the first full year of the relaxed codes, there was a noticeable increase in the start-up of new Off-Loop theatres.

**CETA offered artistic and administrative salary support**

Another sign that the city was beginning to change its attitude to the Off-Loop theatres was the approval, by Sam Bernstein,

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26 Noparstak, N. pag.
Director of the Mayor's Office of Manpower, of the use of CETA funding, the federal job training program under the 1974 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, to provide job training programs for theatres and other not-for-profit arts groups. Though this was not the primary intent of CETA programs nationwide, other cities besides Chicago chose to use CETA to help fund the training of young artists in similar ways. Chicago theatre and dance companies found this salary support for artists and administrators to be invaluable in helping them make the transition from being essentially seat-of-the-pants outfits to well-managed business operations. In 1975, CETA's second year, for example, theatre and dance organizations received $506,250 of the city's CETA funding which provided 90 salaried positions for small Chicago companies. Sharon Phillips, then business manager of the Body Politic, describes the influence of the CETA program on the theatre community.

One peculiar thing that affected the growth of this nascent community was the gift and curse of CETA. Shiflett and others had done an extraordinary job in getting the city to include the non-profit theaters in this indirect funding. CETA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, was a federally funded program administered by the Mayor's Office of Manpower to regrant monies to city agencies to employ the unemployable. Well, who could be more unemployable than bunches of actors and largely volunteer theater staff members? The CETA money turned us overnight into responsible employers. We paid real salaries rather than cash shares out of the box office receipts. We offered real benefits like health insurance and IRA contributions. We even paid real employment taxes to the government. We became legitimate. A shock! But the CETA funds also enabled groups of artists to
work as artists—have the luxury of long rehearsal periods—to experiment—to do work that we wanted to do rather than what we had to do. Unbelievable. The curse of the system was, of course, when the CETA funds disappeared a couple of years later, we didn't have enough money to replace them. Our artists had to go back to their non-artist jobs and weren't as willing to do developmental work just for love. Still we were able to sustain a small staff and had begun to understand that there was a business to this theater business.27

CAPA - First cooperative arts organization

Also in 1974, as the benefits of working together became clear, the first cooperative organization of theatres and other performing arts groups was formed. Headed by Ruth Higgins, the Chicago Alliance for Performing Arts, or CAPA, was a nonprofit organization that served as an information clearinghouse by issuing a monthly newsletter, a guide to arts classes, and a calendar of events, as well as providing resource manuals and directories to member arts organizations. In 1976, CAPA established a discount ticket program for union members and employee clubs to encourage attendance of its member companies' performances. However, CAPA disintegrated in 1980 due to internal fighting and competition with the better organized League of Chicago Theaters which had been founded in March of 1979.28 The League was able to solidify the


28Murphy, 155.
cooperative spirit and considerably expand its theatre support activities in the '80s by building on CAPA's earlier accomplishments.

**Founding theatres began to grow up**

The founding group of theatres in this study, with the exception of the Goodman, were all created during the expansion of the Off-Loop movement in the 1970s. The Body Politic and the Organic got off to a flying start at the beginning of the decade. St. Nicholas, Wisdom Bridge, and Victory Gardens were all founded in the same year, 1974, followed by Steppenwolf in 1976 and Remains in 1979. The influence of the Off-Loop movement and the arrival of Gregory Mosher were responsible for a re-energized Goodman Theater and its Stage Two program in 1974. Though certainly a period of limited resources, it was a time of unlimited optimism and unleashed creativity. Chicago audiences had discovered Off-Loop theatre and were coming in droves but there was little yet at stake for the theatres in terms of fame, money, or survival. People were involved for the love of theatre and not much else. Playwright Alan Gross commented on the freedom that this gave artists:

> More chances are taken in Chicago than anywhere else. The reason? There is no money to be made in Chicago, so no one has to be careful. No one can make a living here. So you can do anything you want. And we do. There's nothing to lose. And that is exactly what makes this an interesting and viable theatre town.²⁹

²⁹Zehme, 55.
But theatre artists eventually began to tire of this hand-to-mouth lifestyle. As Steppenwolf actor John Malkovich recalled, "You just kind of live in a burned-out pigsty and try to put on good plays and never think much beyond that." Malkovich, who later became a film star through his work at Steppenwolf, claimed he never earned more than $5,000 a year as an actor in Chicago. The romance of poverty had begun to wear thin for many of those in the Off-Loop movement by the late '70s. The small theatres had begun to realize that they could become legitimate businesses and could eventually provide full-time jobs for artists and administrators. But to do so, the theatres would need to address organizational and institutional issues in ways that they had resisted during the carefree, communal days of Lincoln Avenue theatre. The latter part of the decade was a time for these founding Off-Loop theatres to begin to grow up, to organize and to institutionalize.

**Equity concessions and the CAT contract**

Part of this institutionalization process and an example of the cooperation that helped Chicago theatre grow was the successful Off-Loop contract negotiation with Actors' Equity Association. The first Off-Loop Equity contract was called the COLT contract (Chicago Off-Loop Theater). This contract was first used for the Body Politic's 1973 production of *The Night They Shot Harry Lindsay with a 155mm Howitzer and Blamed It on Zebras* by Dick Cusack. Produced by Del Close of Second City, the show starred Mina Kolb.

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30Zehme, 55.

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Byrne Piven, Mike Nussbaum, and young playwright, David Mamet, this time acting instead of writing. The show-by-show terms of this contract made it necessary for each theatre to negotiate with the union every time it wanted to hire an Equity actor. Individual theatres wound up with different deals, depending on their negotiating skills, which did not help producers or actors in their planning. In 1976, several Off-Loop producers including Roche Schulfer from the Goodman, Sharon Phillips of Body Politic, Marcie McVay from Victory Gardens, Jeffrey Ortmann from Wisdom Bridge, and Peter Schneider of St. Nicholas tried, unsuccessfully, to get Equity to create a simplified contract for smaller theatres. They continued for several years to try to convince the union of the need for a flexible contract structure, adapted to the needs of Chicago's Off-Loop movement. Sharon Phillips recalled the ultimate success of their efforts:

However, in 1983, reorganized as the Producers Association of Chicago area Theaters (PACT), we found a favorable adversary in the person of Suzanne Brown, a tough but enlightened labor leader who understood the need of the theaters to survive if they were indeed to hire actors. The resulting CAT (Chicago Area Theaters) contract is an extraordinary document--reflecting the needs and desires of this professional community including the non-profit theaters as well as the commercial producers. Chicago is the only city that has its own contract. It exemplifies what collective concern and focused energy by our theaters can and does produce.31

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31Phillips, 8.
The successfully negotiated PACT-Equity contract, known as the CAT contract, set up five tiers based on house size, ticket prices, number of performances, et cetera. The weekly wage and the number of required Equity actors per show was planned to increase with the size and box office potential of the theatre and to encourage successful theatres to grow and hire more union actors. The lowest wage in Tier 1 started out at $130 per week in 1983 and rose to $181 per week by 1989 for a four performance week. Wages for Tier 5, the highest under the CAT contract, began at $375 in 1983 and grew to $457 for an eight show week by 1989. While even the highest levels of the CAT contract did not provide an extravagant weekly salary, the contract did provide health benefits and other union protections, and could be used as the basis of a living wage for a working actor in Chicago. This was a big organizational step forward from the Lincoln Avenue days of dividing the box office take amongst the cast at the end of the night's performance.

**Mamet and St. Nicholas take Off-Loop into the mainstream**

It would be impossible to address the history of the Off-Loop movement without assessing the impact of playwright David Mamet on the Chicago scene. Mamet grew up on Chicago's South Side, son of a prominent lawyer, and attended the exclusive Francis Parker High School in Lincoln Park. He had an early exposure to two of the major influences on Chicago theatre. While in high school in the mid '60s, he worked backstage at Bob Sickinger's Hull House Theatre and acted...
in several small roles in productions there. Watching the community work together in Sickinger's dynamic productions, Mamet learned about the process of building a theatre.

After high school, Mamet attended Goddard College in Vermont but returned in the summer to work as a busboy at Second City, where many of Chicago's finest received their improvisational training. Already fascinated with theatre, he spent much of his time watching, taking notes and learning. Richard Christiansen, in an article on Mamet, commented on the result:

The blackouts and quick comedy sketches of Second City had a deep influence on the structure of Mamet's early plays. As [Mamet] laughingly confesses, "for the next ten years, none of my scenes lasted more than eight minutes."32

Mamet's first production in Chicago as a playwright was the production of *Duck Variations* staged in August, 1972, at the Body Politic by Fritzie Sahlins, a friend from Mamet's earlier days at Second City. His next production, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, directed by Stuart Gordon, premiered at the Organic in June 1974 and received both positive and negative press but did well with the public. At this point, Mamet left Goddard College where he had been teaching after his graduation from the school and returned to Chicago to start his own theatre company. He brought a group of former students with him and together they formed the nucleus of the St. Nicholas Theatre Company.

Mamet's stay in Chicago was brief. His rapid success as a playwright lured him to New York in less than two years but his artistic sensibility and professionalism infused St. Nicholas with a vision that set it apart from the other Off-Loop theatres and raised the expectations for the entire Off-Loop movement permanently. Todd London quotes Steven Schachter about Mamet's influence on the theatre that he founded:

"All the other young theatres [read Organic] were very hippie-seque in the way they worked. We tried to bring a corporate- - in the best sense of the word--aesthetic into garage theatre. It was a unique way of working." The "corporate" approach insisted on a kind of professional perfectionism, which Schachter says "filtered down from David." It meant that everything, from the graphics to the lobby to the playing of scene five, had to be perfect, reflective of the theatre's serious intent.33

Mamet's early work came to be identified as the quintessential Off-Loop style; tough, spare, gritty dialogue with a macho edge. The rough-and-tumble acting styles of the Steppenwolf and Remains ensembles were undoubtedly influenced by Mamet's salty prose.

[Mamet] introduced a new level of professionalism to the developing theatre scene; he reinvented midwestern machismo and opened the way for the second generation of Chicago playwrights that is emerging today.34

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34 London, 63.
Mamet went on to become an artistic associate and playwright in residence at the Goodman. There, in partnership with Greg Mosher, he premiered his plays *American Buffalo*, *A Life in the Theatre*, *Lone Canoe*, *Edmond*, and *Glengarry Glen Ross*. He also continued his relationship with St. Nicholas and his plays *The Water Engine*, *The Woods*, and *Revenge of the Space Pandas* premiered there in the '70s. His plays went on to earn many awards including the New York Drama Critics Circle award for Best American Play of 1977 for *American Buffalo* and a Pulitzer Prize in 1984 for *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Mamet’s national reputation brought considerable attention to Chicago theatre.

**League of Chicago Theatres**

In March of 1979, a group of 20 theatres formed the League of Chicago Theaters as an outgrowth of the Chicago Alliance for the Performing Arts. The League was unusual at the time in that it was the only theatre support organization in the country that included five categories of theatre: commercial, professional non-profit, non-professional non-profit, educational, and community theatres. The League was very successful at fostering a spirit of cooperation among the wide variety of member theatres during the maturation of the Off-Loop movement in the '80s. At the time of the League’s formation, its president, Northlight Theatre’s artistic director Gregory Kandel, outlined a series of proposals for audience expansion, including a city-wide fall theatre festival, a central information hotline for performance information on member
theatres, and an increase in cooperative efforts for advertising, print, and television coverage of theatre activities. The League then moved quickly to implement the majority of these programs.

The city-wide theatre festival proposed by Kandel, the Chicago Theater Festival, was held from October 8-22, 1979. The event included discount ticket packages for the thirty-some productions being staged at that time, free shows in Lincoln Park and downtown locations, a lecture series, staged readings of plays, costume, make-up, and set construction demonstrations, window displays in some downtown stores, wandering troubadours, and a "do-it-yourself" musical. Clearly a success as a promotional event, the Festival drew attention to the League's formation and boosted attendance at member theatres but, for unknown reasons, did not become an ongoing event.

In 1980, the League began its Hot Tix discount ticket program with the opening of a ticket sales booth at the downtown Daley Plaza with half-price, same day surplus tickets for productions at member theatres. Modeled after the successful Times Square TKTS booth in New York, the League found that patrons would often take a chance on a production at an unfamiliar theatre for half price when tickets for a show they originally wanted were sold out. This, it was hoped, would encourage theatre-goers to sample more of the variety of Chicago theatre. The revenue helped boost box office income and may have generated some subscribers for participating theatres. Sun-Times reporter Rick Kogan concluded that:
Everyone agrees Hot Tix has been a smashing success. As of last week, 64,392 half-priced day-of-show theater tickets had been sold resulting in sales of $563,710. Of that money, Chicago theaters received $476,394.50; the booth netted a nifty $87,315.35.

The League also published a bi-monthly theater guide, sponsored media and audience surveys, helped in theater advocacy campaigns (especially against proposed cuts in federal spending), and promoted the image of Chicago as a major theatre center. League membership grew very rapidly, beginning with 14 members in 1979 and reaching 104 members just five years later. According to Pat Colander's article in the New York Times, Off-Loop theatre had become a major economic force in Chicago by the mid '80s and the League had the numbers to prove it. "Theater is a $90 million market in Chicago and two Hot Tix booths (the local version of Broadway's TKTS outlet) return about $1 million each year to the theaters."36

In addition to its publicity and marketing functions, the League served an important theatre community function by holding an annual retreat for member theatres. This two-day retreat featured a combination of panel discussions and nationally recognized guest speakers that focused on both artistic and management issues facing

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The smaller theaters--now redefined as "younger theaters"--began to stand up and offer to help each other. They didn’t offer to exchange mailing lists, but they suddenly decided to band together.

One volunteered a collection of shoes dating from the 1920s to the 1960s. Some had theater seats to spare, unused spaces, costumes, etc. One offered a survey on how to orient your theater’s board of directors. Another had technical students available to help. Someone suggested that a group of the “younger” theaters should share the costs of a press agent.

Then there was a story told by a member of the Commons Theater. One night a cast of four was faced with an audience of four. Should they proceed? Well, yes. They had a bottle of champagne left over from opening night. They divided it up between the four customers and the four players. And one of the theatergoers was so pleased--presto, a new board member.37

There was a continuing effort to find a balance between the widely varied concerns facing commercial houses, Off-Loop storefronts, and suburban dinner theatres and the issues such as arts advocacy and funding that affected the entire theatre community. For artistic director Robert Falls, who previously headed the storefront Wisdom Bridge as well as the much larger Goodman, the League’s communication function was its most important:

In its heyday, I think [the League] was a very important organization in the same way that, at its best, TCG facilitates

communications between American regional theatres. . . . I think in miniatur, the League did that; encouraging a sharing, a communication.38

In the late '80s, the League encountered financial problems and an unstable leadership which weakened its ability to serve as a unifying force in the theatre community, though its advertising and marketing functions continued to be important.

**National recognition of Chicago theatre in mid '80s**

In the '80s, considerable national recognition came to the city as Chicago theatre went "on the road." The process began slowly. In the early '70s, there had been some attempts to export hit Chicago productions to New York such as the Organic's *Candide* and *WARP!* but these were mostly unsuccessful. The first Chicagoan to gain New York's attention was playwright David Mamet when his double bill of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *Duck Variations* successfully played Off-Off-Broadway at the St. Clement's Theatre and then transferred to Off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre in 1975. The dynamic duo of Mamet and Greg Mosher returned to New York, taking Mamet's *American Buffalo* to the St. Clement's Theatre in 1976 and on to Broadway in 1977. These productions earned Mamet an OBIE award followed by a New York Drama Critics Circle award for the Broadway production of *American Buffalo*. The Organic Theater also returned to New York in 1977, this time successfully, with a nine-week run of its Chicago hit, *Bleacher Bums*. A lull in transfers to

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38Robert Falls, personal interview, 4 March 1993.
New York seemed to occur during the latter part of the ‘70s as Off-Loop theatres concentrated on building a solid audience base at home.

In the ‘80s, however, it was as if New York could not get enough of Chicago theatre. First, in 1982, Steppenwolf resurrected Sam Shepard’s True West in a seethingly funny production that erased New York’s memory of the troubled 1981 Joseph Papp production and proved that Chicago actors could really conquer the Big Apple. Steppenwolf was invited to reopen the Mitzi Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center with And a Nightingale Sang in November of 1983 and later, in the spring of 1984, the theatre remounted its production of Balm in Gilead at Circle Repertory Company, both shows demonstrating the company’s ensemble acting skills. John Malkovich was becoming a major movie star, and most of the Steppenwolf pack was not far behind. Undoubtedly, national exposure through Steppenwolf’s New York success was a major factor.

Chicago productions were even more plentiful in New York in 1984. The Goodman Theater’s premiere production of David Rabe’s Hurly Burly, directed by Mike Nichols, went on to become one of the longest running non-musicals on Broadway that season. Chicago’s favorite son, David Mamet, won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize with the Broadway transfer of the Goodman’s production of Glengarry Glen Ross, directed by Greg Mosher, and Chicago actor, Joe Mantegna, picked up a Tony. The London production of Glengarry also won the British equivalent of a Tony, the S.W.E.T. award, for best play. In 1984, Steppenwolf’s John Malkovich played Biff opposite Dustin
Hoffman in the hit revival of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* on Broadway. Writer Bill Zehme, in a 1984 *Vanity Fair* article, suggests that "The evidence would almost suggest that the heart of the theater world has very suddenly been transplanted to the Midwest." Chicago talent was everywhere.

In 1985, Washington's American National Theater received a $1 million grant from AT&T to bring Wisdom Bridge's productions of *In the Belly of the Beast* and *Kabuki Medea* as well as Steppenwolf's productions of *Coyote Ugly* and *Streamers* to the nation's capital. The American National Theatre's iconoclastic young artistic director, Peter Sellars, was widely quoted when he declared that "Chicago is the hottest theatre town in America right now." Sellars went on to describe what he saw as the unique character of the Off-Loop companies.

Your theater has a Chicago character, a kind of sheer energy and street-tough approach. It's not drama viewed as some exquisite object of art on a shelf, and it's done in neighborhood theaters in those gritty little neighborhoods. The theater in Chicago is something you live across the street from.

The national press quickly adopted Sellars phrase, "the hottest theatre town in America," and began to laud Chicago theatre in article after article. The AT&T grant brought tremendous recognition

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39 Zehme, 52.

40 Kroll, 72.

to the kind of work that many Off-Loop theatres had been doing for years. When Steppenwolf won the 1985 Tony award for best regional theatre, it was a spiritual victory for all Chicago theatre, finally able to boast of being "second city" no more. It was also an inspiration to many young storefront theatres, dedicated ensembles struggling to make ends meet, that someday their work would be recognized and they, too, would make it big. Newsweek critic Jack Kroll raved about Chicago's young companies as they visited the nation's capital:

Washington saw what makes Chicago theater a hot ticket. It's the fearless young actors who perform with a raw but humane passion. It's the Chicago directors who feel closer to the body than to the head, who work as supercharged choreographers of emotional and psychological states. Many Chicagoans would say that this freewheeling style comes from the city's brawling politics, its "Front Page" journalism, its roller-coaster Cubs, its heartland directness. . . . But most of Chicago's young theater people are determined to nurture the special sensibility that has made their work the freshest development of the decade in America. "We have a long, intricate, beautiful history," says Steppenwolf's Sinise. "We've grown up together, lived together, fought together, we've even had marriages. I'm proud of what we've done and I have endless energy to keep us together. We're inspiring people in the theater. What more can you have?"

When Steppenwolf won the regional Tony, its production of Orphans was playing in New York and John Malkovich had recently received an Oscar nomination for his film role in Places in the Heart.

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42Jack Kroll with Patricia King, "All the City's a Stage," Newsweek 8 July 1985: 72-73.

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as well as considerable praise for roles in *The Killing Fields* and *The Eleni*. In 1986, Gary Sinise left the *Orphans* cast to direct the London production of the play starring Albert Finney, an international first for Steppenwolf. Wisdom Bridge had already conquered Europe, sending its production of *In the Belly of the Beast* on a successful tour of London and Glasgow in 1985. Even William A. Henry III of the establishment-oriented *Time* magazine got on the bandwagon, sounding more like a writer from *Rolling Stone* as he praised the Chicago style.

While much of the rest of the American seems overrefined, elite and abstract, the Chicago troupes have built an enthusiastic mainstream audience for what many of the artists characterize as "rock-'n'-roll theater," rough-edged, noisy, pulsating with energy, appealing less to the mind than to the heart and groin.  

Film and television interest in Chicago talent followed the flood of national press. Mamet led the movement of Chicago theatre artists toward film and television, writing his first screenplay, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, in 1981 and receiving an Oscar nomination for his second film project, *The Verdict*, in 1982. Fortunately, though, Mamet was not lured away completely by Hollywood and he continued to write for the theatre. Chicago actors Malkovich, Gary Sinise, and William Petersen developed enough clout in Hollywood that, by 1986, all three had formed their own film production companies.

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Back home, Chicago audiences had also responded to the national attention. In 1985-86, subscriptions to many local theatres increased considerably and many attributed it to national praise for the local product. Steppenwolf subscribers increased to more than 4,000, Wisdom Bridge jumped from 6,000 to over 10,000, and the Goodman, despite the departure of Greg Mosher, increased its subscribers from 18,000 to 20,000. Chicago theatre seemed to be on a roll.

Although national attention peaked in the mid '80s, Chicago continued to successfully transfer productions to New York and other regional theatres. For example, Steppenwolf sent productions of The Caretaker and Grapes of Wrath to Broadway in 1986 and 1990 respectively and the Goodman co-produced August Wilson's Fences and The Piano Lesson with Yale Repertory in 1986 and 1989. Chicago actors such as Joan Allen, Gary Cole, Dennis Franz, Glenne Headley, John Heard, Terry Kinney, Malkovich, Mantegna, Laurie Metcalf, Petersen, Sinise, and Meshach Taylor were winning leading roles in film and television. As the glare of national publicity began to fade, the challenge for Chicago theatres was to find ways of maintaining the interest and support of their own audiences at home.

**Chicago style**

The stylistic variety of Chicago productions went through a series of transformations as the Off-Loop movement developed. Early Off-Loop theatre groups produced quite a bit of experimental work, plays which challenged society's pre-conceived attitudes and
expectations. June Pyskacek's productions of Jean Claude van Italie's *America Hurrah* and *The Serpent*, Allan Carlson's staging of Megan Terry's *The People vs. Ranchman*, groups such as Gary Houston's Pary Productions, Byron Schaffer's Dinglefest Company, the high camp productions of the Godzilla Rainbow Troupe, the experiments in storytelling of Jim Shiflett's *Dream Theatre*, and Stuart Gordon's wild *WARP!* series all contributed to a feeling of risktaking and experimentation that audiences found exciting. But with the success of Off-Loop theatre, the stakes got higher. Theatres wanted to grow, they wanted to attract larger audiences and achieve financial stability. Off-Loop theatres began to temper their artistic choices in order to appeal to a wider public. Theatrical experimentation began to be replaced by a more popular, non-threatening realism which audiences understood and responded to more easily. Gary Houston, an early Off-Loop director known for his experimental work, describes these new audiences:

The suburbanites brought back naturalism in a big way and for awhile the Identifiability Principle ("I must see myself on that stage!") became completely hegemonic. It wasn't just a matter of style: these people didn't want to see plays about foreigners or any people who faced issues and problems unlike their own, to say nothing of people who did not live in this century.\(^4\)

Of course, it was not just the suburbanites; city folks liked to see themselves on stage too. Chicago audiences liked to think of themselves as tough, smart, sexy and funny, even occasionally with

an edgy violence. They responded to Mamet as an authentic Chicago voice and the image of these underdog, scrappy little theatres such as Wisdom Bridge, Steppenwolf, Victory Gardens, and Remains fighting for survival, won Chicagoans' hearts. Syse described the kind of theatre that had earned the "Chicago style" label.

Sex, violence, raw language, abrasive talk, high-voltage intensity, acrobatic action and intense energy--these are the hallmarks of the Chicago shows that have captured the attention of critics and audiences outside Chicago, as well as here.45

Robert Falls understood this kind of theatre as a director and had been very successful with tough, visceral productions of *In the Belly of the Beast* and *Hamlet*. His sense of visual spectacle and his eclectic interests also drew him to such varied work as *Galileo* and *The Misanthrope* but both he and Petersen, who played the psychopathic lead in *In the Belly of the Beast*, understood the audience-pleasing dynamics of "Chicago style."

"Chicago theater is big-shouldered theater," says Robert Falls, the artistic director of Wisdom Bridge, a gutsy little theater that sits on the northernmost edge of the city. "At its best, it's a very muscular, fuck-it-all kind of thing. It's not polite. It has rough edges. It's not polished. But there's a tremendous energy to it."

William L. Petersen [an actor with Wisdom Bridge, Remains, and other Chicago theatres] says about Chicago actors, "We're fresh. Our attitude is less measured; there's more wild abandon. Among the companies I work with, for

instance, we very rarely choreograph fights onstage. We just let 'em work themselves out. As a result, people get hurt a lot.46

Obviously, some actors took this "wild abandon" to dangerous and foolish extremes and, in some cases, the lack of intelligence and variety in this macho approach became a parody of itself. In an article by Syse, Petersen seems to be the Chicago spokesman for the city's most primitive acting techniques:

Chicago has a blue-collar theater. If you spit or drool on your face while you're performing, you leave it there until it dries.47

Almost as soon as the national press defined a "Chicago style," many Chicago theatre artists began to avoid the limited artistic range suggested by the term. Uncomfortable with such labels being permanently attached to Chicago theatre, Syse responds with her own opinion. "The tough Chicago theater image is real only to outsiders. By no means does it represent the whole theatrical picture here."48 She goes on to point out Chicago's cultural diversity including classical work at the Court Theatre, the rich language of Body Politic's productions, tender new plays by Chicago writers at Victory Gardens, and the many co-productions and imports of the Goodman as well as the Goodman's own exported productions to New

46Zehme, 54.


York and elsewhere. Michael Maggio, then artistic director of Northlight Theatre and a frequent guest director at many other Off-Loop theatres, cast his vote for diversity.

Now is a golden opportunity to take advantage of this notoriety we are getting as a strong theater town and use it—not to sit back on our laurels, but to work even harder. There is a bigger aesthetic than the rough and tumble. . . . I prefer a higher style, although I don't mean it is a superior style. We need classical theater in Chicago. We need musicals. We need Stoppard. We need to be sure to explore the broadest range of theatrical style. We need to establish a clear identity for ourselves in our own community. I want to make sure that our theatrical landscape is rich and diverse.49

Improvisation

Another major factor that helped shape the Off-Loop movement was improvisation as both an acting technique and a method of creating a text. For a variety of reasons, many young theatres at the beginning of the Off-Loop movement were not interested in working on established scripts in conventional ways. Sometimes it was because groups such as Sills' Story Theatre and Shiflett's Dream Theater wanted to try out new ideas and discover different ways to tell a dramatic story. Sometimes it was simply because the theatre could not afford to pay royalties or was too unknown to acquire rights, making the development of original material a necessity. The Organic was an outstanding example of this as they developed their own material collectively through improvisation, often by adapting existing literature such as *Candide*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *Switch*

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Or, alternatively, by developing original ideas through the company as in *Bleacher Bums, Cops, or E/R Emergency Room.*

The theatre games and ensemble building techniques of Viola Spolin and Paul Sills were a major physical basis for the visceral acting style of the Off-Loop companies. The influences of improvisation on the companies in this study will be examined in their individual chapters. Lessons learned through improvisation helped Chicago theatres find their own ways to grow. The theatre games focused on the spirit of play, building a place, Spolin’s “Where,” out of nothing but imagination. Actors established relationships by watching and playing off each other in the moment, working together as an ensemble. They took their space, created imaginary objects, took impulses from the group, and were ready to adapt instantly to new ways of telling the dramatic story. Even those theatres that had not grown directly out of an improvisational background, such as Steppenwolf and Remains, sought out teacher/directors like Sheldon Patinkin, a Paul Sills-trained founding member of Compass Players, to teach them theatre games and improvisational rehearsal techniques. As early as 1975, Christiansen commented on the pervasive influence of the improvisational tradition.

Improvisational theater is the deepest well of theater experience in Chicago. Beginning in the 1950s, blossoming into fame with Second City and Paul Sills’ Story Theater in the ‘60s and continuing to the present with such troupes as the
Organic Theater, Dream Theater, and the Dinglefest group, it has become not only a local tradition, but a source of enrichment for theaters across the country.50

**Ensemble**

Another major factor in the success of the Off-Loop movement was the desire of actors to build their own ensemble companies. This element of "Chicago style" grew out of the improvisational techniques used by so many of the city's early groups. Belonging to an ensemble gave the Chicago actor an artistic home, a place where their gifts would be appreciated and their faults hopefully overlooked. The ensemble gave a voice to each of its members and gave the entire group a sense of ownership of the artistic process. The near-legendary loyalty and tenacity that this gave many companies became a crucial element of their survival during hard times. For many theatre artists, the ensemble became their most immediate family. Gary Cole describes the excitement of the early days of Remains ensemble:

> It was one of the most collaborative times I remember as an actor. It was exciting. We were managing ourselves, and we were in charge of everything. And we spent virtually all of our time together, a group of 10 people, almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We were like a family, and that was

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exciting. We had the same benefits and advantages of a family, but we also had the same problems that a family goes through when people are that close.51

Among the reasons that theatre artists were willing to work in Chicago, often for little or no pay and minimal recognition, were the personal rewards of having an artistic home and of belonging to such a community. Actors, directors, and designers who knew each other and had lived and worked together for many years were able to collaborate more closely and do more powerful, connected work, relying on the strength of their already existing relationships. Alan Wilder, a longtime member of the Steppenwolf ensemble explained the value of working this way in Chicago.

Chicago theatre is a city of ensembles; it began with Second City and Steppenwolf kicked it into high gear. Ensembles can keep themselves working consistently, perfecting their craft and themselves while creating a special bond between a group of actors. This is more conducive to excellent theatre than being a "gypsy company" of actors who get together for one show and then split apart.52

The "gypsy company" approach described above is the standard model for American regional theatre. This model gives individual artists no power over their own artistic lives. Theatrical power


structures are usually hierarchical and quite autocratic with artistic authority residing in an artistic director or, perhaps, a small number of theatre staff members. Within this structure, the artistic director views the actors, directors, designers, and technicians as non-decision makers and, therefore, ultimately expendable. In a world of too many artists and not enough opportunity, there are always others ready and willing to take someone else’s place. The goal, then, is to hire the best worker to accomplish the artistic task as defined by the artistic director. Very little sense of loyalty is developed for a theatre or its longterm aesthetic by artists who knows that they will not be a part of the group past the closing of the current production.

The ensemble structure, on the other hand, gives each artist a real voice in making decisions about their own work. Sometimes, however, the ensemble can create too many voices speaking at once. In an artistic director-led ensemble such as the Organic under Gordon, the artists are part of a family structure and have a responsibility to share their creative energies with each other. Richard Fire of the Organic describes how the sharing worked.

The Organic is more than any one of us; it’s like an extended family. We develop obligations not only to our audience but to our friends in the company. We each want to look good, but we want to make them look good, too.53

In an artistic director-led ensemble, the artists all have a vote in the artistic decision-making process but, just as in a family,

there is a parent/artistic director who has the final say. The artistic director can focus the group's work and lead them using his own artistic vision but, ultimately, creative authority remains resident in the ensemble. This seemed to have been the structure of the Organic under Gordon, the only clear example of such a tenuous power-balancing organizational structure in this study.

Steppenwolf and Remains theatres provide examples of the third kind of theatre company structure, the collective ensemble. The collective ensemble is a family of sibling artists in which there is no parent/artistic director. Each member of the ensemble has an equal voice and all artistic decisions are made by voting or through group consensus. This can be frustrating and tremendously time consuming as every minor decision can become a matter of debate. It can also lead to a lack of artistic focus in the theatre's work. However, this type of structure is tremendously empowering to the members of the ensemble and, though it makes it difficult for non-ensemble members to integrate easily into the company, the bonds created between ensemble members seem to be the strongest of any company structure.

Larry Sloan was a Remains company member and later became its artistic director as the company's collective nature changed. Remains continued its dedication to ensemble work as Sloan makes clear in an interview with the International Performance Research Center in Chicago:

Remains is a perfect example of Chicago's ensemble approach and the strength that this type of acting opportunity can give a company. We have done everything together--as best friends,
lovers, fighters—for the past ten years. We've made history together, grown stronger than we could have during the production of any piece assembled in eight weeks. This togetherness is not a common working option in other cities.54

The Remains ensemble ultimately could not balance individual careers and subsequent stardom for some members with their necessary commitment to the group. In the '90s before its unfortunate demise, Remains ceased functioning as a true ensemble and moved toward becoming a hierarchically structured company.

Steppenwolf, on the other hand, has fought to maintain its ensemble structure and, though similar pressures of fame and fortune have threatened its survival, the company has maintained a modified ensemble structure with an artistic director position that periodically rotates within the group. Though many of its ensemble members have film and television careers that make day-to-day involvement impossible, the ensemble still makes most major artistic decisions collectively and the members consider Steppenwolf their artistic home. In a recent interview, Steppenwolf stage manager Malcolm Ewen describes the trust and interdependence of ensemble acting in Steppenwolf's Tony award-winning Grapes of Wrath.

In Grapes of Wrath when Gary [Sinise] and Terry [Kinney] played that opening scene together, they had twenty years of trust, of working together and relying on each other, to build on. There was no way one of them could have been replaced by another actor. . . . They all have a tremendous commitment to each

54International Performance Research Center, “Is Chicago Theatre Hot or Not?” date unknown: N. pag.

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other, to keeping the moment alive between each other on stage. In fact, I think that's the basis of the ensemble.\footnote{Malcolm Ewen, personal interview, 2 April 1997.}

The sense of community and the spirit of ensemble developed from the early Hull House days through Chicago style improvisation combined to create the actor-driven companies of the Off-Loop movement. Chicago in the '70s and '80s just happened to be the right place and the right time for a unique community of artists to come together.

**Institutional Growth**

Many Chicago theatre groups experienced similar phases in their growth and it is worthwhile to examine this general pattern. In the beginning, the artist's need to make something creative happen was paramount. Groups of artists came together, often out of frustration, tired of waiting for opportunities to arise and eager to prove their own artistic merit. Chicago theatre ensembles came into existence in two ways; through the creative energy of a single founder or as a common artistic vision shared by a group. The passionate desire to make important theatre became the company's reason for being; it was the force that sustained the theatre through its sometimes long and difficult birth. Members of the theatre company needed to be willing to make tremendous personal and economic sacrifices during this birth period to insure the new theatre's survival.
Once the theatre organization came fully into existence and had survived for two or three productions, the theatre entered an adolescent phase. Often the younger theatre had no home and had to constantly scramble to find a venue, production by production. The theatre lived from hand-to-mouth, searching for its artistic identity as it searched for its next production. During this phase, the younger theatres literally survived on a hit or miss basis; too many misses, or productions that failed to find critical or audience success, and the theatre died, while one or two hit productions might give the young theatre a strong artistic identity, separating it from the other young hopefuls. Usually there was little or no institutional structure during this period; when work was to be done, everyone in the company did everything. Actors had to be carpenters, typists, scene painters, publicists, costumers, fund raisers and janitors. The sense of artistic risk was palpable, the sense of artistic involvement was total. Burnout was just around the corner. The theatre company became the artist's most immediate family, creating very strong artistic and emotional ties.

As a theatre company reached maturity, its priorities changed. After three to five years of existence, hopefully, a theatre had earned a certain level of recognition. If the theatre had built a strong identity through an accumulated body of work, its primary task was to maintain that identity while keeping itself artistically fresh. The process of building an institutional identity with a solid organizational structure and maintaining a quality body of work was full of pitfalls, however. To be successful, the theatre needed to
balance its heart - the artistic passion behind the work, and its mind - the organizational skills needed to do the work. If the theatre overemphasized organization and lost its artistic vision, it would soon die. If the theatre overemphasized artistic vision and developed a weak structure, it also died. As a theatre company transformed from its early amoebic structure toward institutional stability, each company member was given a particular job to do and the sense of total involvement in the artistic and organizational life of the theatre became a sense of orderly participation and, occasionally, frustration. Institutional maturity, though necessary for the continuity of artistic work, meant an undeniable loss of artistic freedom and personal involvement.

The history of Chicago theatre is the story of the balancing act between the youthful creative impulse and a more mature creative life. In order to be a full time theatre artist, it became clear to many in the Off-Loop movement that institutions would be needed to support those artists. Robert Falls states the situation clearly:

Our goal was to institutionalize. We wanted to pay artists, we wanted to pay playwrights, we wanted to make an adult life for each other, rather than sort of an adolescent life. And I don't think that money or institutionalization limits vision or art. I really believe that it supports it.56

Off-Loop theatre has grown up and has become a cultural institution in Chicago. Visions have been pursued and dreams realized. The way has been difficult. Many artists have given up and many dynamic theatres no longer exist. But new groups are formed to

take their place and the cycle goes on. How and why this unique theatre community grew in America's heartland and the individual histories of eight seminal theatre companies compose the chapters that follow.
CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITY AND ENSEMBLE ROOTS

Early Hull House Theatre (1890-1957)

Chicago, "the City of Big Shoulders," has always been a hard-working town. Begun in 1779 as a fur-trading outpost on the swampy border of Lake Michigan by a French Haitian black man, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, the town had a population of only 50 inhabitants by 1830. When Chicago incorporated as a city in 1837, the town still had streets muddy enough to swallow a horse during heavy rains.

The 1840s and 1850s brought canal and railroad activity and a tremendous surge of immigration to the area. The city rapidly became the commercial hub of the Midwest, shipping goods from its factories, grain from its farms, and meat from its stockyards, by boat and rail, from the East to the West and South and back again. Despite the temporary setback of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the city's population had grown to over one million by 1890.¹

There was quite a bit of commercial theatrical activity in the burgeoning city. The Rice Theater, built in 1847, was the first theater to open in the downtown Chicago area now known as "the Loop." A proud local newspaper, the Chicago Democrat, trumpeted forth "A new era is unquestionably dawning on the theatrical world of this city."\(^2\) By 1902, the Chicago Tribune reported attendance of 20,000 people daily at downtown Chicago theatres and a combined 30,000 plus patrons daily at outlying theatres. Clearly, commercial theatre had a presence in Chicago from the city's earliest days. Touring productions found a voracious appetite for entertainment in the city. However, the large audiences they attracted sometimes brought tragic results.\(^3\)

On December 30, 1903, an audience of 1,900 had crowded into a matinee of Mr. Bluebeard starring Eddie Foy at the downtown Iroquois Theater. Although the theatre was advertised as "completely fireproof," a stage curtain touched an arc lamp and the set ignited. Mr. Foy quickly approached the footlights and urged the audience to stay calm but the asbestos fire curtain became stuck half way down and the lights went out. The audience panicked and rushed for the doors, some of which were locked or only opened

\(^2\)Cited by Linda Winer, "The current theatrical renaissance is no mirage," Chicago Tribune 7 October 1979: N. pag.

inward against the crush of bodies. The fire was extinguished in less
than fifteen minutes, but 602 theatre-goers were killed, more than a
third of them children. As a consequence of this disaster, the City of
Chicago adopted some of the most stringent theatre fire laws of any
city in the country. These fire regulations would make it very
difficult for small theatres to exist in Chicago until the laws were
eventually modified in 1974.

Tough fire laws, well-financed touring productions, and the
city's cultural inferiority complex combined to make it difficult for
Chicago to create its own homegrown theatre. Consequently nearly
all theatre productions during Chicago's first century were imported
from New York or elsewhere. The development of indigenous drama
through the social work at the Jane Addams Hull House was a notable
exception, however.

Much of Chicago's rapidly growing population in the 1890s
consisted of recent immigrants to the United States. Since most of
these newcomers spoke little English and had few possessions, they
were desperate for work and easily exploited. The best housing they
could afford was in the miserable tenements on the West and South
sides of Chicago. Jane Addams, founder of Chicago's Hull House,
described these neighborhoods as follows:

The streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools
inadequate, sanitary legislation unenforced, the street lighting
bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the the
alleys and smaller streets, and the stables foul beyond
description. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the
street sewer. The older and richer inhabitants seem anxious to
move away as rapidly as they can afford it. They make room for newly arrived immigrants who are densely ignorant of civic duties.4

Addams and Ellen Gates Starr saw the need for a settlement house in Chicago to help the varied immigrant population adjust to American urban life. The settlement house movement had begun in England in the 19th century as a middle class response to the squalid conditions of the urban poor. The followers of social philosophers such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and later William Morris became urban missionaries and began to "settle" in amongst the people they were trying to help.

These two highly educated and financially independent young women had heard about Toynbee Hall in East London, England's first settlement house, founded by Canon Samuel Barnett, and they visited there to observe. In 1889, they brought back the concepts of social rehabilitation and community-building from England to aid the diverse immigrant population on Chicago's South West side. This polyglot neighborhood of Irish, Germans, Russian Jews, Italians, and Greeks was filled with crime and ruled by corrupt politicians. Together, Addams and Starr began Chicago's Hull House in a rundown mansion on South Halsted Street on what is today the University of Illinois-Chicago campus.

For the purposes of this study, the theatre activities of Hull House theatre will be summarized in two periods; early Hull House

4Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House, in 100 Years at Hull House, Mary Lynn McCree Bryan and Allen F. Davis, eds. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1969) 12-13.
Theatre (1890-1957) and Robert Sickinger's Hull House Theatre (1963-1969). The community-building activities of Hull House theatre will be explored as one of the major factors leading to the Off-Loop theatre explosion of the 1970s and 1980s.5

Addams and Starr believed that the arts had considerable power to improve the lives of the people in the community that Hull House was to serve. They wanted art, music, and drama to be an integral part of Hull House, to draw people of different backgrounds together by giving them the positive shared experience of artistic expression. Many of those who had come from Europe brought the cultural tradition of theatre-going with them. New immigrants needed to become acclimatized to American culture and the settlement house offered ways to ease this process. Addams planned to use the arts to educate and build a sense of community among these varied Chicagoans.

Addams' social intentions were quite clear. The arts, most particularly theatre, were to be instruments of social change. The arts were for everyone. They were not be elitist and, therefore, talent and the quality of artistic expression were of secondary consideration to the purposes of socialization and rehabilitation. The amateur theatre groups that formed in the early periods of Hull House's history were organized to demonstrate the artistic sensibility in the ordinary citizen.

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5 Much of the following information on Hull House theatre is based on Stuart Hecht's 1984 Northwestern University dissertation, Hull House Theater: An Analytical and Evaluative History 1889-1982. 64
Addams believed that the arts could help immigrants adjust to the new culture in America while keeping strong ties to their own traditions. She enthusiastically organized dramatic readings, concerts, art exhibitions and craft classes. In 1890, Starr began a class in Shakespeare which led to classes in Greek tragedy in 1892. Theatre production began in the fall of 1893 with the Hull House Students' Association presentation of *She Stoops to Conquer*. All the social clubs at Hull House were encouraged to participate in drama as part of their club's activities. The work of Addams and Starr transformed their South Side neighborhood and enriched the lives of many generations of Chicago immigrants. As the founder of Hull House, Jane Addams' would eventually be recognized with a Nobel Prize.

One of the most successful early Hull House productions was a staging of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* presented by a group of high school boys in June of 1897. Directed by a Cornell University graduate student, Walter Pietsch, the play was very popular with Hull House audiences. The production was also taken to wealthy suburban audiences in nearby Kenilworth and Winnetka. According to Hecht, Addams wanted the production to demonstrate the untapped human potential of these working class immigrants to influential North Shore audiences. This would prove that Hull House Theatre was capable of elevating the masses, thereby justifying political and economic support for Hull House and for social reform.

The Hull House Players, founded in 1897, were the first club at the settlement house whose primary purpose was producing plays.
Walter Pietsch, mentioned earlier as the director of *As You Like It*, became the first Hull House dramatics director, working with both adults and children. He was interested in improving the artistic quality of Hull House productions by casting only the best actors available. This, however, contradicted the democratic principles on which the Hull House social clubs were based. By creating a separate dramatics club in the Hull House Players, open to actors only by audition, Pietsch created the first conflict between artistic and social concerns at Hull House.

Following Pietsch's resignation in 1900, Laura Dainty Pelham, a former professional actress, was appointed by Addams to head the Hull House theatre program, which she did until her death in 1924. Under Pelham, the Hull House Players were the first "Little Theatre" in America devoted to producing serious works of drama such as Hauptmann, Ibsen, Pinero, and Shaw. Ms. Pelham often produced international plays in their original languages, casting immigrant residents of Hull House from those countries. One such production, *The Return of Odysseus* which opened the newly completed Hull House theatre in 1899, was performed in Greek by immigrants in costumes modeled after ancient Greek vase paintings.

Other ethnic dramas, including Russian, Yiddish, Lithuanian, Hungarian, and Bohemian plays, were presented by groups of amateur actors in the various social clubs during the early 1900s. The aim of Hull House dramatic activity was to encourage immigrant education and to build a sense of community among those of such varied backgrounds.
In 1933, Maria Lazareff, a former member of the Moscow Art Theatre brought Stanislavski’s acting methods to Hull House. Mme. Lazareff directed plays by Chekhov, Gorky and Ibsen with the Lazareff Theatre Group throughout the ’30s.

In 1939 Charlotte Carr, newly appointed as the director of the Hull House, consolidated the Hull House Players, the Hull House Actors Guild, and the Lazareff Players into a single organization known as Hull House Theatre. The social problems created by the Great Depression caused Carr to attempt to reduce the budget and focus on the social rehabilitation uses of drama rather than its artistic objectives. She used WPA funding to hire specialists such as Jess Ogden, Viola (Sills) Spolin, and Edward Spolin to teach classes and manage programs for adults and children. Jess Ogden, head of the Worker’s Education Department, was head of the theatre program during this period. Hecht describes Ogden as one of Hull House’s most inspired and innovative theatre program directors. “He actively sought to create what he termed an ‘Everyman’s Drama,’ a form of theatre which reflected the lives and concerns of the community.”

Ogden described an example of this community building spirit surrounding a production staged in 1937:

Hull House . . . has found that its players have been effective in bringing about a harmony of the various groups with which the settlement must work. It has a large Mexican group which in itself is divided into three factions. . . . Last spring someone thought of having a real Mexican fiesta. . . . The younger people went to work on pageants and plays, each faction planning

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something in which it was especially interested. The help of other actors was enlisted and three episodes in the history of Mexico were finally produced before an audience composed of the entire community in a carnival mood. Not only did the factions forget their differences in admiring each other's contributions, but there also resulted a better understanding on the part of the other groups in the community.7

Viola Spolin was the visionary teacher who connected the Hull House tradition of community-building with her own ensemble-building theatre games. Growing up on the North West side of Chicago, Spolin had played all kinds of games in her neighborhood as a child; playground games, made-up games, traditional sports like baseball and basketball, and let's-pretend games. "Spolin's own roots are sunk deep in the soil of community."8

"When I was a girl," says Spolin, "we didn't have television or radio. We read a lot, and we played games. All the families were large, there was no traffic on the streets, so we were always playing. Of course, games are dramatic in structure. And we had our own theater. We charged an admission of ten pins or a penny."9

This game playing experience came in handy when, during the Depression, Spolin was hired to teach children's dramatics at Hull House. She had also studied with Northwestern University

7Hecht, 58-59.


sociologist Neva Boyd at the Recreational Training School at Hull House. With Boyd, she learned dances, games, and sports from around the world as well as the structure and theory of play.

Married at nineteen to Wilmer Silverberg, she had two sons, Paul and William (Silverberg changed his name to Sills during World War II; the boys kept the new last name). Soon divorced from Sills, Spolin met her second husband, set designer Ed Spolin, while working at Hull House.

There Spolin continued to develop her theatre games. Her games were designed to invoke the spirit of play, encouraging her students to release their inhibitions and free their imaginations. Gradually, Spolin's theatre games became ensemble building techniques; techniques which would later, along with the work of her son, Paul Sills, play such an important part in the development of Chicago theatre.

The withdrawal of WPA funding in 1941, signaled the beginning of the end for Hull House Theatre programs. The changing administration at Hull House had begun to favor a more individualized approach to social work and large group activities such as drama were regarded as craft activities rather than serious social education. With these changes, Jess Ogden, Viola and Edward Spolin and most of the theatre staff resigned. Theatre programs went into a serious decline at Hull House with reduced funding and fewer productions during the '40s and '50s. After a series of temporary drama specialists ended with the departure of Irene King in 1948, there were only a handful of children's theatre classes
remaining. There were no drama groups still using the 60 year-old Hull House Theatre when it caught fire and burned to the ground in 1957. This marked the sad end of theatre activity at Hull House until the facilities were relocated and the programs revitalized by Paul Jans and Robert Sickinger in 1963. But the tradition of Chicago theatre as an expression of neighborhood life had developed strong roots in the work of the early Hull House Theatre. The work of Viola Spolin, first developed there, would come into play with the founding of improvisational theatre, Chicago-style.

Playwrights Theatre Club

During the late '40s and '50s the theatre activities at Hull House slowly diminished and eventually became dormant. The social cohesiveness and conformity in America after World War II lessened the need to bring the community together through the arts. Using theatre as a means of learning about the cultural diversity of people in the "melting pot" of Chicago seemed less important in the age of Eisenhower and Father Knows Best.

It was in rebellion against this conformist society that the ensemble element of Chicago theatre came into being. There is something about the "us" of an ensemble that makes its members feel funnier, smarter or more talented than the "them" of society at large. Whereas Hull House drama activities were intended to draw people of differing backgrounds together, to give them a shared theatrical experience and help them bond as a community, the
theatrical ensemble was often a group of like-minded people who banded together to face a hostile or, at least uncomprehending and frequently foolish, world.

Satire was "serious business. Conventional society was the enemy," according to Roger Bowen, "a force hostile to our values and our individual quirks, and our satire was a counterattack, a relief from the oppression we felt."\(^{10}\)

The groups that formed in the rarified intellectual environment of the University of Chicago--Playwrights Theatre Club, Compass Players, and, eventually, Second City, were intended to analyze and satirize human behavior, to open wounds not heal them.

The University of Chicago was a very liberal educational institution in the 1950s. Robert M. Hutchins, Chancellor of the University of Chicago from 1945 to 1951, envisioned the University as a community of scholars sharing a common body of classical knowledge and engaged in vigorous intellectual debate. He reorganized the curriculum to reflect his admiration of the great thinkers of Western civilization. All undergraduates were required to read Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Goethe, Kant, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Marx and Dostoevski. Admission to the University was based on a student's entrance exams scores and normal student age requirements were abolished. Incoming students were permitted to enter the University as early as fifteen. Sheldon Patinkin, later a member of the Compass and an important Off-Loop

\(^{10}\)McCrohan, 55.
director, was one of these fifteen year-old whiz kids. Class attendance was not mandatory but success on a series of grueling graduation exams was. In this unconventional intellectual environment, it was possible for a disciplined student to pass his or her exams and earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in two years or less.

In the late '40s and early '50s, a group of particularly talented and witty students came together as kindred souls at the University of Chicago. Though they came from many other disciplines, they all had a passion for the theatre. This was odd in itself because the University of Chicago had no formal drama department. Although the University administration deemed the study of dramatic literature a worthwhile academic pursuit, they felt that taking an acting class or producing a play was not. Theatre at the University of Chicago was considered a student club activity, officially under the auspices of the University Theatre, a division of the student activities office. The University hired a director of University Theatre to supervise the student's activities but, by and large, the students were left to their own devices to learn acting and stagecraft and mount their own productions.

Students submitted plays to the University Theatre which then selected and mounted a regular season of productions. Another student group, "Tonight at 8:30," formed in 1951, also produced plays, sometimes offering opportunities for projects that had been passed over by the University Theatre selection process. The freewheeling nature of theatre activities at the University of Chicago was augmented by the University's liberal enrollment.
policies which meant that non-students often sat in on classes or participated in productions without the formality of registering as students.

Among the students enrolled at the University of Chicago during these formative years were Roger Bowen, Edward Asner, Zohra Lampert, Fritz Weaver, Mike Nichols, Eugene Troobnick, Sheldon Patinkin, Bill Alton, Anthony (then James) Holland, Andrew Duncan, Severn Darden and Omar Shapli. They were ostensibly studying English, history, psychology, even Egyptology, but they "hung out" together as fellow artists in the University Theatre and "Tonight at 8:30" productions. Also part of the theatre crowd, though not formally enrolled, were two later key players, David Shepherd and Elaine May.

Paul Sills, son of theatre games pioneer Viola Spolin, enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1948. Although the Spolin family had moved to California in 1943, Sills had come back to Chicago to attend Francis Parker High School in Lincoln Park. After graduation and a stint in the U.S. Army, Sills took advantage of the G.I. bill to enroll in the University of Chicago, earning his degree in two years. Although he had not planned on a career in theatre, the lure of the stage ran deep in family gene pool. As Viola Spolin's son, Sills had grown up in what he often called "the family business." He was brought along to workshops and classes, learning theatre games at his mother's knee. Although she was the creator of the games, Spolin
acknowledges that her son had "a vision of where it could go" and applied her work in a variety of theatrical experiments.\textsuperscript{11}

Sills learned to extend the use of the games to free actors from a dependence on text, getting them to listen to and trust each other. Under Sills’ guidance, the games first became a rehearsal technique for approaching an existing script then, later, with the Compass Players and Story Theatre, the games allowed the actors to become collaborative playwrights themselves. They took the focus away from the individual actor and put it on working with the group. The games became an ensemble-building technique since used successfully by many Chicago theatre groups to create the energy and immediacy that are often described as being part of the "Chicago style."

Playing at solving the problems of Where, Who, and What to create dramatic action was able to release the spirit of play in the even the least experienced actor. Spolin says "My games are more than just a bunch of exercises. Used properly, they are a learning system which can reach the intuitive power of the individual and release genius."\textsuperscript{12} Sills said of these games, "I used them as a group formation device, as a way of working to make an acting

\textsuperscript{11}McCrohan, 20.

company." When Sills came to the University of Chicago, he found it a most hospitable environment in which to hone his developing skills as a director and teacher.

Sills first became involved with University Theatre as an actor. Then in the spring of 1951, he directed a University Theatre mainstage production of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* with a young Fritz Weaver as Bosola. Apparently Sills had some disagreements with the folks in charge of University Theater and decided to seek greener pastures. In 1951, Sills helped found the previously mentioned student theatre group called "Tonight at 8:30." This campus club had fewer impediments to creativity so Sills continued to direct there, meeting other University of Chicago students who would later help him found the Playwrights Theatre Club and the Compass Players. Sills' first directorial effort for "Tonight at 8:30" was Federico García Lorca's *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife*, presented in the winter of 1950-51. Other plays he mounted in Ida Noyes Hall for "Tonight at 8:30" included a risqué *Rounddance* by Arthur Schnitzler, *Madonna Dianora* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and a production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, with a stiff Mike Nichols, badly miscast, as Jean, the seductive valet. It was this production that introduced Nichols to Elaine May, his future partner in crime. Nichols remembers "one night there was this evil, hostile girl staring from the front row. I was about four feet away from her, and she stared at me all the way through it, and I knew she

\[13\] Coleman, 22.
knew it was shit." Fortunately, for the history of American comedy, Elaine May did not make that her final judgement of Mike Nichols.

David Shepherd, one of the co-founders of the Compass Players, left his native East Coast for America's heartland because he had heard "things could grow there." He came from a wealthy family, had earned a B.A. from Harvard and an M.A. in theatre history from Columbia. But just as Jane Addams had used theatre to support social change, Shepherd had a vision of a theatre that he thought would speak to the working class, though it didn't quite turn out that way.

In October of 1952 he hitchhiked to Chicago. He was 26 years-old and had recently inherited about $10,000 that he planned to use to start his theatre company. He had exciting ideas about creating an American cabaret, modeled after those in 1930s Berlin, in some Midwestern steel town, a true proletarian theatre "that addressed itself to issues to real and immediate, in language so simple and straightforward, and in surroundings so low-priced, convenient, and congenial, that people from all levels of society--everyone in town--would flock to it in a mood of celebration because they saw their lives reflected there." 

In the fall of 1952, a new Director of University Theatre, Otis Imbodin, drew the "Tonight at 8:30" group back into the fold of

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14Coleman, 39.

15Coleman, 42-43.
University Theatre and Sills came along with them. Sills began teaching a regular Saturday morning workshop using Viola's improvisational theatre exercises. About this time, Sheldon Patinkin joined the games workshop. He went on to become Sills' assistant, a key member of Playwrights Theatre Club, the Compass, and Second City, and, eventually, the chairperson of Theater and Music at Columbia College. David Shepherd, who would be co-founder of the Compass with Sills, also joined the group at this time. The games workshops began, sharpening the skills of the untrained actors and molding them into a group that would be the foundation of the Chicago ensemble movement. Author Janet Coleman describes Shepherd, then working a day job as a civil servant, as fascinated with the process, "watching Sills in action at his workshop 'bawling out in the darkness to the students' became manna to the civil servant Shepherd, 'preferable to the front-row seat of any theatre in America. '"

Sills returned to University Theater, after six months in rehearsal with his "endless workshops" as Sheldon Patinkin called them, with a production of Jean Cocteau's *The Typewriter* starring Mike Nichols, Joyce Piven (founder, with husband, Byrne, of Evanston's Piven Theatre Workshop), Charlie Jacobs, Estelle Lutrell, and Sills himself. This production earned good reviews and much positive audience reaction but it was a later production of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* that was Sills' final University of Chicago triumph. It also would be the nudge he needed to get out of

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16Coleman, 53.
the college nest and into the professional world.

On May 1, 1953, Sills directed the second production ever mounted of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Brecht's Berliner Ensemble did not perform it until June, 1954) for University Theater. Sills' university group had become an ensemble, committed to each other, and they felt ready to move beyond the bounds of campus theatre. Sills and Shepherd found a third partner in Eugene Troobnick, a writer and an enthusiastic theatre supporter. The three began to formulate a plan to create their own theatre. Shepherd agreed to invest $7,000 of his inheritance in this new theatre company, Playwrights Theatre Club, and the search for their own theatre space was on.

The producing team winnowed down to three. Shepherd had the money. Sill had the actors. Troobnick had the car. They scoured the city in Troobnick's car for a suitable space, and once they found the empty Chinese restaurant on North LaSalle Street, Shepherd says, "Things happened pretty fast."17

The young producers found an affordable space and began constructing a 125-seat theatre in a former Chinese restaurant at 1560 N. La Salle Street. They all pitched in and worked fast so that by June 23, 1953, the Playwrights Theatre Club was ready to open its first production, a restaging of Sills' successful *Caucasian Chalk Circle* based on his earlier University Theatre production of the play. Since the production was now by an off-campus group it received considerable press attention. Coleman describes critic Roger Detmer's prophetic review in the Chicago American:

17Coleman, 56.
Not only did he praise the production as "strongly syncopated and infectiously multi-rhythmmed," he perceived the group's impact on theatre starved Chicago as "an experience such as New York alone has been privileged to own." He said, "The people who played last night are very new--vigorously, crudely, wonderfully, irrationally new... Their love of the stage is so overwhelming one cannot remain indifferent."18

However, their failure to pay royalties came to the attention of Brecht's American agent, Walter Nubel, who refused to consider political homage alone as an appropriate form of payment and the theatre was forced to apologize and close the show.

Playwrights Theatre Club, under the artistic guidance of Sills, also used the ensemble-building improvisational techniques developed by Spolin. The ensemble that was being formed, however, was still relying on existing dramatic literature for the most part. With the exception of an unsuccessful original play by Sills, The Coming of Bildad, they had yet to begin writing their own improvisational scenarios.

The actors in the ensemble, mostly former University of Chicago students, included Zohra Lampert, Anthony Holland, Jerry Cunliffe, Ed Asner, Eugene Troobnick, Marvin Peisner, Jon Jackson, Bill Alton, Vernon Schwartz, Byrne Piven, Joyce Piven, Ann Sweet Petry, Mike Nichols, Donna Holabird, Creighton Clarke, Joy Carlin, Sheldon Patinkin, and Estelle Lutrell. Later members to join included Barbara Harris, Elaine May, Bernard Sahlins, and Tom O'Horgan.

18 Coleman, 58.
Sheldon Patinkin compares the ensemble nature of Playwright's Theatre Club to the Steppenwolf ensemble:

Steppenwolf is, without question, and I don't mean this to sound in anyway patronizing, the closest to us of any group I've encountered in all the years since we [Playwright's Theatre Club] started back in '53, in terms of how they got together. The fluke of all of those very talented people being in the same place at the same time. The fluke was greater with us, because we were at a college that doesn't have a theatre department and only has extracurricular theatre activities, so it was even weirder. . . . The dedication was similar. We did live together. Many of us literally did live together at Playwright's, because a lot of us slept in the theatre in the little alcoves that we put cots in.19

During the two years of Playwright's Theatre Club's existence, they produced twenty-five plays, a variety of classics and contemporary works including Schnitzler's Rounddance, Buchner's Woyzeck, Jonson's Volpone (with Ed Asner as Volpone and Mike Nichols as Voltore), Sill's original play, The Coming of Bildad, and Shepherd's contemporary adaptation of The Duchess of Malfi, retitled The Fields of Malfi.

Playwrights had over 2,000 subscribers after their first season and had planned a series of Shakespeare plays as part of their second season when the theatre was forced to shut down in February of 1955 due to violation of Chicago fire laws. Some suggest that the left wing political sentiments of the theatre may have contributed to an over-zealous enforcement of the law. This would not be the

last time that the City of Chicago used the fire and building codes to 
shut down a small theatre. But the spirit of the company and the 
ensemble methods that Sills was developing could not be stopped by 
a setback such as this. Learning from the experiences of 
Playwrights, successful and unsuccessful, Sills and Shepherd would 
form a new company and a new way of working together with actors 
that would profoundly affect theatre in Chicago and beyond. 

**Compass Players**

Following the demise of Playwrights Theatre Club, Shepherd 
returned to his dream of creating a populist, politically-active 
theatre, where working class people could see their own problems 
and experiences dramatized onstage. He felt frustrated with the 
elitist, literary theatre that Playwrights, in his view, had turned out 
to be. These sentiments were reflected in a journal entry dated May 
25, 1954:

> In a year and a half I have helped build a miserable self-
centered arts club which talks over the heads of its bourgeois 
members at the same time it licks their feet for support. . . . In 
order for theater to be an institution, its audience must love it 
and hate as they love and hate the church and the President. 
Our fables must present not Wozzeck but the Chicago draftee, 
not the Azdak but lawyer Jenkins, not Volpone but Alderman 
Bauler. . . . For a brief moment last fall, Charley Jacobs 
[another U. of C. veteran involved in the operation of 
Playwrights] and Paul and I saw that the goal of our theater 
should be a riot in the audience. How could we forget it?²⁰

²⁰Jeffrey Sweet, *Something Wonderful Right Away*, (New York: 
Politically oriented writers such as Brecht and Odets weren't current enough for the kind of theatre he was seeking. Shepherd's problem was finding the scripts, the kind of contemporary material that would enable him to put his artistic and political beliefs into action.

I think that any theatre written for the working class will have to use simpler forms than those of the contemporary theatre, which is an expression of the middle class. I don't believe you can keep a working-class audience awake during a play written in the style of Ibsen or Miller. 21

He began to talk with former Playwrights member Roger Bowen about writing scenarios which would satirize contemporary life and current events. Shepherd wanted actors to be able to improvise their lines and discover their own comic business, much like the Italian commedia dell'arte of the Renaissance.

At first, Sills was not particularly interested but Shepherd and Bowen went ahead anyway. On May 14 and 15, 1955, an evening of one-acts was presented by the University Theatre in the Reynolds Club on campus. In addition to short plays by Pirandello and O'Casey, there were two scenario-based plays directed by Shepherd, Enterprise and An Exam Play. The scenario, Enterprise, in particular, was a great success and when approached again by Shepherd, Sills was now interested in the new idea.

Shepherd initially gathered a large group of actors together for a series of improvisation workshops with Spolin and Sills. The workshops ran for nearly a month, with Sills continuing the training

21Coleman, 47.
after his mother's return to Los Angeles. They finally narrowed the group of sixty down to an ensemble of twenty.

Meanwhile Shepherd met with Freddie Wranovics, a bartender at the Woodlawn Tap, also known as Jimmy's, a popular tavern with the University crowd on E. 55th Street in Hyde Park. Wranovics was tired of working for other people, a sentiment that has motivated many Chicago actors as well, and he wanted to open his own business. Shepherd sold Wranovics on the idea of having cabaret entertainment in his new tavern and a partnership was born.

Just a short distance from Jimmy's was the former Hi-Hat bar at 1152 E. 55th Street. Wranovics signed a lease permitting the partners to knock out a doorway through the wall to the empty storefront space next door. In this space Shepherd and his company of actors built a small, cabaret-style stage and filled the room with enough tables and chairs to provide seating for up to 90 people. Shepherd hoped that theatre patrons would be drawn first to the bar and then stay for the show, eventually building a loyal cabaret audience.

On July 5, 1955, the first Chicago-style improvisational theatre was born. The Compass Players began with no prepared scripts, only brief scenarios that outlined the plot and basic characters. The subjects they dealt with were things like first dates, lovers' spats, parent and child conflicts, and life on the job. On the nearly bare stage, the actors were able to let their imaginations soar, creating space objects and environments from phone booths to camels, automobiles to Greek vases. The object of
their scenarios, first and foremost, was to create interesting characters and situations. Humor was permissible, even desirable, but only if it came from the reality of the character and the moment. This was not stand-up comedy and the group considered it cheap to go for the easy laugh.

The Compass performances that summer consisted of a curtain raiser, a *Living Newspaper* sketch, a forty-five minute scenario play, and, in a radical departure from formal theatre, an improvised set based on audience suggestions. The company performed nightly Tuesday through Thursday, two shows on Friday, and three shows on Saturday. They created a new show each week for the first ten weeks. It was a grueling schedule.

"It soon became apparent," concedes Andrew Duncan, "that actors are limited. That is, if you're short-circuiting writers by using actors who write in their heads while on stage, that's fine. You can look at it from a certain point of view and say they were trying to save money, or they didn't have the people to write for this theater. Let's train actors to be writers. Whatever. Some people could do it, and some couldn't, more or less. But it soon became apparent that anybody would dry up. You just can't keep going. So the scenario form was started as a way to get around that. Then that dried up. So a new source became the audience, which is another aspect of involving the community.22

Perhaps in a way unforeseen by Shepherd, this collaboration between performers and audience created the kind of populist theatre that Shepherd had been seeking. The improvisational nature of the performance meant that it was happening just at this moment

22McCrohan, 26-27.
for this particular audience, the performance even came from their own ideas. The performance was for them and about them and it drew the audience into a unique partnership with the performers. The performance’s spontaneous nature left the actors with nothing to rely on but each other. The necessary trust and interdependence of improvisation forged the individual performers into an ensemble, a community of artists, which then joined forces with the larger community of the audience. The roots of all this community and ensemble-making go back to the principles on which Spolin’s theatre games are based.

For Sills the idea of community supersedes the urge to make theatre. . . . In fact, community--in a spiritual, even mystical sense--underlies the theory of games that Sills serves as spokesman for. . . . Former Sills protege Patinkin puts it another way: “When you drop all the life problems and just invest yourself in solving problems within the rules of the game--and since the rules are always about getting what happens off the person that you’re responding to--it creates a sense of community. . . .” 23

Sills was an arts activist. Perhaps from his close contact with the community-building theatre of Hull House, he wanted to involve the community in theatre as much as possible. In Jeffrey Sweet’s Something Wonderful Right Away, he speaks about the possibility of similar groups making their own theatre, as had the Compass Players:

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23London, 22.
Compass, if carried to its logical conclusion, is a sort of 'do it yourself' movement. I'd like to see neighborhoods all over the city form groups like this. It's a search for community.  

The Compass quickly became popular. The shows attracted large crowds that included locals from the working class Hyde Park neighborhood as well as students and faculty from the University. Shepherd comments on some possible reasons for the audience's appetite for the work:

"I think the neighborhood was starved for a theatre that would speak to Chicago issues, and the whole academic bullshit which had to do with expectations that parents had about children, and the whole Eisenhower ethos."  

The summer of 1955 was a fantastic success for the Compass but maintaining such a hectic pace proved to be difficult. Problems had begun to develop. Shepherd comments on the business aspect of running the Compass:

I hadn't been to theatre school. I hadn't been to the Harvard Business School. That first summer we were flooded, taking in thousands of dollars at the door, sucking up every possible resource. I was ignorant. I didn't expect it to happen so fast.  

The Compass lost certain key players at the end of the summer of 1955. Members of the company needed to return to jobs or school and could not afford the time needed to rehearse and perform at such

24Sweet, xxv.

25Coleman, 112.

26Coleman, 115.
a hectic pace. Actor/writer Roger Bowen was drafted. Bob Coughlan, an important actor, had to return to his industrial counseling job after taking a leave. And most damaging to the ensemble, Sills had received a Fulbright grant and he and his new wife, actress Barbara Harris, left for a year abroad.

It was clear that the Compass Players needed fresh ideas and fresh talent to continue to grow. Even the wonderful Chicago talent pool would occasionally dry up. In the fall of 1955, Shepherd went to New York to seek new actors to add to the company. Chicago’s Mike Nichols, who had been studying with Strasberg in New York, Severn Darden, Shelley Berman, and Mark and Bobbi Gordon were among the talented recruits he brought back. Nearly all of them had studied acting in New York and they brought a stronger sense of technique and character work to the Compass.

The new actors that Shepherd had recruited from New York changed the company dynamic considerably. The work improved as the newcomers refined the scenes created through improvisation and developed stronger acting skills in the ensemble. Company member Andrew Duncan commented on the improvements:

There was no question that the work got better . . . Until the New York actors came, it had been pretty raw work. It really improved. The artistic work, the acting, was worlds apart from the early stuff. It was more entertaining. The audience reaction was much better. I know. I was there. I never heard such laughter in my life.27

27Coleman, 138.
It was during this time that the famous team of Mike Nichols and Elaine May began working together. Nichols had been a well-known University of Chicago actor with University Theatre and Playwrights Theatre Club, before he moved to New York to study acting with Lee Strasberg. When things weren't going well in New York, Shepherd offered him a job and he returned to join the Compass Players in the fall of 1955.

May, daughter of Yiddish actor Jack Berlin, had been in show business since she was a child. Though never formally enrolled at the University of Chicago, she had been an actress with Playwrights Theatre Club and a founding member of the Compass. She also had a reputation for withering lesser mortals with her scorn. Coleman tells a story about her arrival at Jimmy's one windy day with wild hair. "Someone male called out, 'Hi, Elaine. Did you bring your broom today?' 'Why?' she replied, without pause. 'Do you want something up your ass?'" 28

Nichols with his Actors Studio training felt awkward improvising with most of the other actors at the Compass but he seemed to hit it off with May as each challenged the other's sharp tongue and quick wit. People could be a little intimidated by May but Nichols rose to the challenge.

The two specialized in what fellow actors called "people scenes," delicious observations on the complexities of various kinds of relationships. In one of their more famous scenes together, they played a pair of teenagers in a car, nervous, awkward, groping.

28Coleman, 40.
trying to kiss while keeping their pantomimed cigarettes alight. The audience went wild with the humor of recognition and Nichols and May became a permanent team.

The Compass Players soon moved from Freddie Wranovics' bar to the Dock, a Hyde Park nightclub at 6473 South Lake Park, in November of 1955. Although the room was bigger, the spot was well away from the University of Chicago which had provided an audience base for the group.

Success had produced some negative as well as positive results. The Compass was becoming a showcase for individuals. The possibility of being singled out as a talent was beginning to interfere with the ensemble sensibility of the company. The scenario play which relied on a strong ensemble to create cohesive characters began to give way to the short improvisational scene. In the shorter scenes there was usually only one central event, instead of a more restrictive plot to follow, so there was more freedom for improvisation. The scenes were also easier to freeze and repeat. These changes in playing style put less emphasis on the ensemble and more on the individual wit and brilliance of the performer.

During the period at the Dock, the ensemble nature of the Compass was shaken by friction within the company. Shelley Berman, one of the recently recruited actors from New York, was at the center of the conflict. To many in the company, it felt as if Berman's onstage concerns were only for his own success, that he was always going for laughs at the expense of the ensemble. Berman describes the situation from his own point of view:
I was hungry for recognition. I wanted to get somewhere. I was looking at thirty years old, and nothing was happening in my life. It was scaring the hell out of me. I was getting panicky. My energy was that of a man running. Sometimes it was a bother to the others. Sometimes it was a bother to me. I developed a facility for improvising, but I was always inclined to go for the laugh. I was very pushy about that. I always wanted to be onstage. I wanted to hog the evening. I wanted to get all the laughs. Here were these brilliant kids, and I was competing with them. I didn't feel competitive, but that's what was happening up there.29

This newfound competitiveness began to alter the work and some company members longed for the supportiveness of the ensemble. Company member Mark Gordon recalled that earlier “Nobody competed. Nobody thought, ‘Why aren't I doing that?’ It had been obvious what each of us could do.” His wife, Bobbi, added:

Until Shelley came. Then it became, “I can do that!” Then, “I can do that better!” And that to me was real sad... Shelley really broke that chain. It became “Me.” And once that “me”—and a very powerful “me”—began to take over, then it was, “I’ve got to protect myself.” And everybody began to withdraw.30

On May 17, 1956 the Compass moved again to an even larger 250-seat club, the Argo Off-Beat Room, 6400 North Broadway at Devon on Chicago’s North Side. According to Shepherd, the group had been regularly losing $100-$150 per week at the Dock and this move was an attempt to find a larger audience and keep the company

29Coleman, 163.

30Coleman, 164.
afloat. But, in fact, the opposite happened. The producers at the Argo wanted to make money and they wanted to have a consistent and funny show. The creativity and risk of improvisation were no longer what the Compass was about. The commercial demands were too much for Shepherd and he decided to leave the company he created and he asked Sills, back from his year in Europe, to take over.

As the reputation of individual performers grew, outside work started to lure them away from the ensemble. This proved to be damaging to the company’s survival as well.

"Now there was an awareness of commercial possibilities," says Mark Gordon, "and that was another part of the downfall. As long as the naïveté was there, it remained pure. As soon as people began to realize the commercial possibilities, the competition became fierce."

The Compass in Chicago was doing poorly in its new North Side location, far away from the intelligentsia of Hyde Park who had been such loyal supporters. Sills tried to persuade the company to return to Viola’s exercises and to revive some of the old scenarios but still the audience stayed away. The ensemble slowly fell apart amidst firings and recriminations and, in 1957, the Chicago Compass closed permanently.

In April 1957, Shepherd and his new partner, Theodore J. Flicker, decided to open another branch of the Compass in St. Louis, Missouri. Flicker was part of the new group along with Del Close, Jo Henderson, and Nancy Ponder. After the closing of the Chicago Compass, Severn Darden, Elaine May, and Mike Nichols traveled to St.

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31 Coleman, 167.
Louis and joined the Compass there for a short time but that group, too, was in trouble. The St. Louis branch of the Compass disbanded in late 1957 and the individual company members each went their own way.

Nichols and May took the material that they had developed at the Compass and formed their own nightclub act. They played some hip spots like the Village Vanguard and the Blue Angel and they played some hot spots like *The Steve Allen Show* on television and their own Broadway show, *An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May*, in 1960. Their comedy albums were smash hits. Donna McCrohan in her history of *Second City* comments on their success:

On television—sitting on their stools, creating and developing relationships out of dialogue and objects out of space—they were like nothing viewers had ever seen. So far-ranging was their influence that it seemed as though they invented satire. In short order, the team of Mike Nichols and Elaine May revolutionized comedy.\(^{32}\)

In 1959, Sills was working as the house manager at a Chicago nightclub called the Gate of Horn. Although the nightclub had some off-beat acts, Sills missed the camaraderie, the ensemble, and the spirit of the old Compass. He began to talk with his friends, Bernie Sahlins and Howard Alk about starting a new theatre.

The three still-hesitant producers called Mike Nichols, who had clearly made a success of himself, and asked him to come discuss the idea of a new company with them. He flew in for a few days and they talked about the format. The question of whether to

\(^{32}\)McCrohan, 33.
produce a unified scripted show or risk presenting disconnected improvisational scenes was debated and the decision was made to try the revue format.

The producers found a former Chinese laundry and adjoining hat shop on the Near North Side of Chicago, part of a then-seedy neighborhood known as Old Town. Both stores had been abandoned recently by their former owners. The partners linked the two buildings and refurbished them into a theatre and a coffee shop, using old phone booth doors as interior paneling. They put an old upright piano on a bare stage framed by red velvet opera drapes. A few chairs were all the actors needed and the house was crowded with mismatched tables and chairs for 120 or so patrons. Smoking and drinking were permitted during the show and expresso and hamburgers were as fancy as the menu got. The atmosphere was reminiscent of the old Compass with a touch more class.

The first Second City revue opened on December 16, 1959. In the cast were Howard Alk, Roger Bowen, Severn Darden, Andrew Duncan, Barbara Harris, Mina Kolb, and Eugene Troobnick with Paul Sills as the director. Second City was, even at the beginning, more commercial and certainly more sophisticated than the old Compass; the men wore three piece suits and the women wore stylish black sheath dresses with pearls. Building on the previous successes and failures of Playwrights Theatre Club and the Compass had made this group a very tight ensemble. Some of these performers had been working together for ten years or more in a style of theatre that
they had invented. But they were not sure that this new company would fare any better than the others or that there was much of a future for this improvisation stuff.

"We worked organically," explain[ed] Barbara Harris. "That's a way of saying there was no money. Actually, there was a little salary, just enough to live on. But the main thing is that we were working with people who were interesting and nourishing, people who had something to offer each other."33

In fact, there turned out to be an excellent future for improvisation Chicago-style. The success of Second City, its famous alumni and the influence it has had on comedy has been well documented elsewhere. More importantly, the working methods developed by Sills and Shepherd in Playwrights Theatre Club, the Compass Players, and Second City have since been used by thousands of actors to create hundreds of small theatres companies in Chicago and elsewhere. Sills and Spolin's improvisation and ensemble techniques were a major source of inspiration to the explosion of young Chicago theatre companies to come. These were the actor-driven ensembles that often used the actors as playwrights, relied on the ensemble as the primary creative entity, used improvisation to explore text, and were eager to take risks with new material. This legacy of improvisation and ensemble would prove invaluable to the generations of young actors yet to arrive in Chicago, "that toddlin' town."

33McCrohan, 38.
Bob Sickenger's Hull House Theatre (1963-1969)

The decline in Hull House theatre activities from the late 1940s through the 1950s was culminated by a fire that destroyed the Hull House Theatre building in 1957. Shortly thereafter, the University of Illinois announced its plans to relocate its Chicago campus to the site then occupied by Hull House. These events combined with Hull House administrative changes to force Hull House to move its location and to reorganize its services.

A goal of this reorganization was the decentralization of Hull House sites and services into several neighborhood centers and a revitalization of Hull House theatre in each of these centers. Rising from the ashes of previous Hull House theatre programs, Robert Sickenger, director of Hull House Theatre from 1963 to 1969, created a theatre organization that, at its peak, included four neighborhood theatres in Hull House community centers, a touring theatre, a playwright's workshop, a children's theatre, and a chamber theatre, as well as drama classes for children and adults.

Sickenger raised the expectations of local theatregoers by producing Chicago premiers of risky new works by such playwrights as Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Athol Fugard, Jack Gelber, Leroi Jones, and Harold Pinter. He inspired many of those he worked with to go on to professional careers, such as actor Mike Nussbaum, playwrights Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, and a 16 year-old high school student named David Mamet.

William Robert (Bob) Sickinger first became active in drama during his undergraduate years at Bloomsburg State Teachers
College in Pennsylvania. He went on to earn a Masters degree in Education from Temple University and taught junior high school English in Philadelphia for ten years. But Sickinger never lost his love for the theatre. In 1952, while walking past a former movie house that was soon to become an ice skating rink, Sickinger made his own leap of faith. He decided that he had found the perfect place to start his own theatre company. According to journalist Richard Gosswiller, the plan began in the following fashion:

Sickinger found five friends with $10 each, added $10 of his own, and went to the theater owner with $80, offering to pay him $200 a month. Within a few weeks he'd found a hundred other small contributors and with $1,000 he opened the Abbey Playhouse—so called because that was the name on the marquee.34

The Abbey Playhouse lasted nearly three years as a community theatre and Sickinger directed a number of successful productions there, however, the theatre was finally forced to close in 1955. During the next seven years Sickinger continued to produce and direct plays in other theatres in the Philadelphia area and, in 1961, he opened his own acting studio. Sickinger’s experimental studio, the Theatre Workshop, was in Philadelphia’s Lighthouse settlement, a project very similar in philosophy and methods to Chicago’s Hull House. It was here that Bob Sickinger met Paul Jans, director of the Philadelphia Lighthouse, and the two men became friends.

In 1962, the Hull House Association appointed Paul Jans as its new Executive Director and he was given a mandate to reorganize Hull House programs in Chicago. The original Hull House buildings were scheduled to be torn down to make way for the new University of Illinois Circle Campus and Jans was asked to supervise the decentralization of Hull House’s services. The plan was to spread out services in the community with a number of smaller centers in Chicago’s neighborhoods. Jans, in turn, invited his friend, Bob Sickinger, to come along as artistic director of the Hull House Theatre programs. Sickinger accepted and was formally appointed Theatre Director on February 1, 1963.

Jans continued to support the vision, begun by Jane Addams, of building strong communities through the arts. He stated the importance of revitalizing all the Hull House arts programs to the agency’s overall social mission:

We couldn’t conceive of beginning a program without the arts. We see them as one of the integrating forces in a community. Settlement experience has shown that people of extreme differences—children of the wealthy Anglo-Saxon American families and children of Negro families on relief—can come together through the arts better than by means of any other vehicle.35

Sickinger arrived in Chicago with ambitious plans to revitalize theatre programs at four neighborhood Hull House centers, each with its own producing theatre. Each theatre would be economically self-sufficient, relying on volunteer labor, amateur performers, single

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35Hecht, 203.
ticket sales, and eventually, subscription income, fundraising and outside grants. Each theatre would offer a combination of “classics, original, and experimental works,” along with classes for adults and children. Sickinger planned to open one theatre at a time in each of the four Hull house neighborhood centers.

His vision was that Hull House Theatre would transform Chicago’s barren theatre scene and be the source of a new resurgence in the arts. In a plan of action submitted to the Hull House board of trustees, Sickinger talked about the mutually beneficial relationship between theatre and the neighborhoods of Chicago. But, instead of focusing on social work, his primary objective was to build Chicago’s enthusiasm for theatre and revitalize the community’s theatrical life, as his proposal makes clear.

We feel what Chicago is slowly losing, in the professional arena, is an audience. And isn’t it the neighborhood units that create this? Without a revival of the spirit of the neighborhoods of the city to want and desire theatre there will be no audiences left. And this is the big job neighborhood theaters can do. And we don’t mean watchers alone... but people participating, along with them one professional theatre craftsman working each neighborhood. Then we can have a better understanding of real theatre followed by a realization of the importance of the professional at his work. We believe that we must return to the earlier American Social Concept of Jane Addams, that the intellectual and cultural life of the nation should be centered in the neighborhoods. We must build
into the fabric of neighborhood life a place for theater to flourish close to the grass roots of American democratic culture.36

Other aspects of Sickinger's program beginning in 1963 included theatre classes for children led by his wife, Selma, and a Writer's Studio, begun by Byron Tobin in that same year, with a mission of bringing forth new plays and new playwrights from the community. With a different but no less important purpose, the Hull House Chamber Theatre program focused on creating financial support in the upper socio-economic levels of the Chicago community. Several nights a week, actors from Hull House would present staged readings of new plays at parties in the homes of well-to-do Chicago theatre lovers. In addition to raising funds and pleasing patrons during its six years of operation, Sickinger's Chamber Theatre developed the tastes of a prestigious local audience for new and experimental theatre. These adventurous theatregoers were, a decade later, eager and willing to venture forth into the bohemian neighborhood of Lincoln Avenue to support the struggling Off-Loop theatres of the 1970s.

As each of the neighborhood centers took shape, Sickinger would bring in people to design and build a theatre. In 1963, Sickinger supervised the building of a theatre space in the Lakeview Hull House Center known as the Jane Addams Hull House. Officially named the Hattie Callner Memorial Theatre, it was more often referred to by the name of the center, as the Jane Addams Theatre.

36Hecht, 210.
Designed as a 110-seat theatre with an arena stage, the theatre opened on November 15, 1963 with a production of Frank D. Gilroy’s *Who'll Save the Plowboy*, directed by Sickinger. Among those actors cast in this first production were several actors who had worked in Hull House theatre programs during the ’30s and ’40s which helped link Sickinger’s work to the Hull House community theatre tradition begun by Jane Addams.

Sickinger’s first directing effort for Hull House Theatre was a hit. Among those who recognized his talent was a young reporter, Richard Christiansen, who later became the dean of Chicago theatre critics.

The most exciting, significant and promising Chicago theatrical event in years has now taken shape with the opening of the Hull House Theater Assn.’s [sic] new Callner Memorial Theater. . . . With their premiere production . . . the theater, its director, Robert Sickinger, and his actors have pulled off a smashing success, wonderful not only for its immediate pleasures, but for its promise of things to come . . . [T]o stage the plays . . . this nonprofessional theater has found, in Sickinger, a director equipped with a solid sense of drama who has been able to draw from the vast reservoir of local acting talent and channel it into a theatrically right performance of moment and meaning. . . . The advent of this theater is a towering tribute to the traditions and high standards of service identified with Hull House through the years. For once, in these times of do-nothing cultural committees, a group of people entrusted with financial means and social responsibility truly has done something about theater in
Chicago, and done it well. They have built their theater, they have found their director and they have set us all an example.37

The Henry Booth Theatre, located in the basement of the Hull House center at the Chicago Housing Authority's Harold Ickes complex, also opened in the fall of 1963. This underground theatre became the Hull House theatre specializing in social activism, particularly producing plays about the African American experience. It actually opened the first production of Hull House Theatre under Sickinger's leadership, Josh Greenfield's Clandestine on the Morning Line, on September 7, 1963. Though Sickinger developed and supervised the Henry Booth and other Hull House theatres, they never received the focus or the publicity of the Jane Addams Hull House Theatre in Lakeview. Sickinger was the artistic director for all the Hull House theatres but personally directed most of the productions at the Jane Addams Theatre. It was clearly his showcase for contemporary drama and the focus of his professional pride.

The first two seasons of Hull House Theatre under Bob Sickinger's artistic guidance introduced Chicago theatre audiences to some interesting and adventurous work. Sickinger's artistic tastes inclined toward serious contemporary drama, often containing controversial political, social, or artistic critiques of

the status quo. Sickinger brought the latest plays from New York's Off-Broadway scene to the Chicago community and helped to broaden the city's provincial tastes.

Other plays produced from 1963 to 1965 included Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, William Snyder's *The Days and Nights of Beebee Fenstermaker*, Murray Schisgal's one-acts, *The Typist* and *The Tiger*, Edward Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The American Dream*, also on a double bill, Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot*, Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig*, and, again on a double bill, Harold Pinter's *The Lover* and *The Collection*. All of these were directed by Sickinger at the Jane Addams Theatre. In addition to coordinating children's theatre classes, Sickinger's wife, Selma, directed a one-act, Fernando Arrabal's *Picnic on a Battlefield*, on a triple bill with Lanford Wilson's *Home Free*, and LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman*, both directed by Sickinger. Robert Benedetti, a University of Chicago graduate who would briefly take over Hull House theatre programs upon Sickinger's departure in 1969, directed a double bill of Samuel Beckett one-acts, *Play* and *Endgame*, as his first Hull House outing but otherwise Sickinger's monopoly on directing at the Jane Addams Theatre was complete during these first two years. Sustaining this hectic directing schedule was to become increasingly difficult as Hull House's theatre programs grew and Sickinger's administrative responsibility grew along with them.

The second major critical success of Sickinger's first season was his production of Jack Gelber's play, *The Connection*, a harsh
look at the lives of a group of junkies waiting for a fix, in January 1964. The amateur cast consisted of, in real life, an exterminator, a city employee, a drama teacher, a public relations man for a cement company, and a mail order house worker and, as technical advisor, a reformed junkie that Sickinger brought in. Christiansen again reviewed the Hull House production positively.

With the occasional accompaniment of a jazz quartet, they howl out their individual confessions, and when Cowboy, their connection, arrives with the heroin, they show the effect of addiction in horrible detail. But the staged drama keeps getting out of hand. Life is not a matter of neat patterns. The junkies snarl at the producer, sneer at the audience, refuse to go through with a tidy ending that wraps it up in proper fashion. Instead, there is every indication that the same life will go on and on. . . . Richard Lucas, Bill Terry, Mike Nussbaum, and Stuart Eckhaus are magnificent as the inhabitants of the junkies’ pad. Terry is so natural in speech and body movement that he almost eliminates the line between acting and being; and Lucas, with his whiny rasp and heavy, asthmatic breathing, creates an image at once hilarious and terrifying, reaching a peak when he gives himself an overdose in a frenzy of trembling expectation.38

In addition to critical acclaim, The Connection was a tremendous box office success. The tiny 110-seat Jane Addams Theatre was too small to satisfy the demand for tickets and there was pressure to transfer the show to a larger theatre. With support from the Chicago-based Kate Maremont Foundation, Sickinger moved

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The Connection to the newly remodeled Sheridan Theatre at 717 West Sheridan for an open-ended commercial run. Though it was financially risky, Sickinger’s dream was to create a permanent professional resident theatre in Chicago. The hope was that the Hull House theatres could develop “hits” that could be moved to this larger theatre and generate enough box office revenue to support themselves.

In line with this plan, a revival of Who'll Save the Ploughboy was mounted at the Sheridan Theatre in October 1964. Sickinger and his associates, Selma Sickinger, Paul Jans, and Robert Calvin, readied a press release announcing their planned formation of a resident professional theatre in Chicago to compare with those already in existence in Minneapolis, Cleveland, Washington, San Francisco, and Boston. Resident theatres were sprouting like wildflowers across the country in the early ‘60s and the time seemed right to Sickinger.

On December 3, 1964, the Hull House Sheridan theatre opened a production of Athol Fugard’s anti-apartheid drama, The Blood Knot, directed by Quinton Raines. Though hailed by critic Glenna Syse as one of the best plays in Chicago in years, it was the last play mounted by Hull House at the Sheridan Theatre. In his optimism, Sickinger had agreed to shift the Sheridan Theatre operation to professional status and, in so doing, he lost the support of the Maremont Foundation. Without this financial subsidy, the increased costs of producing professionally were too great a burden and the plan had to be abandoned.
As previously mentioned, several important Chicago theatre people began their careers with Sickinger's Hull House Theatre in the mid '60s. Among them were playwrights Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, who would go on to write *Grease*, as well as actor Mike Nussbaum, director-teacher Robert Benedetti, and a 16 year-old high school kid named David Mamet, who a few years later would become a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright.

Mamet wrote about the excitement created by Sickinger's theatre company and the sense of community it inspired in a 1984 article in *Vanity Fair*:

The company was the community: high-school students, housewives, businessmen and women, working people. We bathed in his pride and we became proud of ourselves. We were proud of ourselves in some nameless way...we didn't call ourselves artists, but we knew we were *something*. We were proud to be engaged in the business of a collaborative art. . . . No, we were something new: we were the neighborhood getting together and talking about the world. We were the community talking to itself, and we learned (I learned) that when the community goes home, it had better have either been reduced to thoughtfulness or had a damn good laugh. And we learned that if you could do both, God bless you. We learned that if you want it to be perfect, strive to make it so, and don't go home until you're done. It was the first time in my confused young life that I had learned that work is love.39

As a teenager, Mamet landed an understudy assignment at Jane Addams Hull House for one of Sickinger's most physical and visceral productions, Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig*. This production, set in a

bleak and violent military prison, attracted a great deal of attention and controversy. It is certainly possible that, to some degree, Mamet's visceral writing style and gritty use of language was influenced by his exposure to Sickinger's productions of *The Connection* and *The Brig*.

In the same *Vanity Fair* article, Mamet commented on the dynamic influence that Bob Sickinger had on him and the Chicago theatre scene in general:

Bob Sickinger was one of the greatest directors I've ever known. He worked in the Hull House settlement house, at Broadway and Belmont in Chicago, and he invented the Chicago theater of today. He was a maniac. Grown men and women lived in fear of his wrath and blossomed at his praise.40

Sickinger continued to expand Hull House theatre programs. In 1964 the Writer's Studio, which had been meeting on a weekly basis with some twenty playwrights for nearly a year, began workshop productions of original plays generated by the Studio. Hull House also began offering a fine arts summer camp for children at the Bowen Country Club in East Troy, Wisconsin. Classes were provided in music, art, dance, and drama with scholarship support provided for economically underprivileged children. The fine arts camp replaced a more general summer camp program previously operated by Hull House. Without meaning to be exclusive, however, the fine arts nature of the camp replaced social action with a kind of arts elitism, substituting talent and interest in the arts for the socio-economic factors previously used in the selection of students for

40Mamet, 52.
the camp experience. This was only the beginning of a conflict in Sickinger's programs between the social action agenda of Hull House and the theatre's artistic concerns.

A touring children's theatre company came into existence in the '64-'65 season at Hull House performing original children's plays. In March 1966, Jans appointed University of Wisconsin, Madison faculty member Marvin Foster as the Director of the Hull House Touring Theatre. The program, which created the popular Captain Marbles Squad characters, later continued at St. Nicholas Theater, toured throughout Wisconsin and Illinois in 1966. During the 1966-1967 season, adaptations of In White America, and Man Without a Country and productions of Contrasts in Shakespeare, John F. Kennedy, and Mary Poppins were performed at colleges and universities as well as elementary and secondary schools. During the 1966-1967 season, there were eight touring Hull House companies that gave over 3,000 performances in schools, colleges, churches, and clubs throughout the Midwest in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, and South Dakota. This program expanded so rapidly that its expenses outgrew available revenue and the Hull House Touring Theatre was abruptly cancelled in 1967 due to mounting financial losses. This foreshadowed similar financial problems with the Hull House theatre program that would become apparent a year and a half later.

Sickinger's artistic success came to national attention in 1965 when TV producer David Susskind selected Hull House Theatre's production of Harold Pinter's The Dumb Waiter for a series
on the growing regional theatre movement. Hull House Theatre was the only non-professional theatre in a group of twelve other professional theatres whose productions were broadcast nationally in the *Esso Repertory Theater* series, narrated by theatre critic Walter Kerr. This kind of national recognition helped Chicago grow beyond its cultural inferiority complex, rejecting the label of "second city".

In July of 1965, Hull House's Parkway Community Center opened its new theatre program with a production of *Doubletalk*, *Sarah and the Sax*, and *The Dirty Old Man* by John Lewis Carlino. The Parkway Center’s group of actors called themselves the “Skyloft Players” after a group formed by Langston Hughes in the same performance space in the 1940s. Both the Parkway and Henry Booth Theatres attempted to attract a primarily African American audience but this audience never materialized. Perhaps connections to the African American community were not strong enough or perhaps the theatres were not perceived as home-grown cultural institutions but rather as institutions organized by liberal whites. It may be simply that the stresses of living with poverty do not allow people to commit much time and energy to keeping the arts in their lives. Whatever the case, black audiences did not come forth to support the Hull House theatre companies in these communities. This made the social mission of the Hull House Association more difficult to reconcile with the financial resources committed to the theatre programs.
Chicago experienced a rising tide of community activism, as did much of urban America, in the '60s. Hull House theatre began to receive criticism from members of the community about high ticket prices (from an agency whose mission was to aid the urban poor), cultural elitism, and a lack of social awareness in play selection. Sickinger responded to these issues in an interview with critic Peter Jacobi:

"No, we don't attract many from the neighborhood with our far-out plays," says Bob Sickinger. "But we are using our success with such plays to support what will be a more conventional theatre of service in other Hull House drama centers now in operation or soon to go. We are not forgetting the Addams goal. By charging sizeable prices for a product which the intellectual elite of the area cannot get anywhere else, we are making possible--or going to make possible--the introduction of theatre into the lives of those who cannot afford it, who should have it as an outlet of escape and for whom theatre could be a mental and emotional opportunity. I want our success at the Hattie Callner Theatre to mean theatrical exposure at Henry Booth House, at the Parkway Community Center and before long in the Uptown neighborhood where transients need ties and cultural chance so desperately." 41

Sickinger was attempting to serve two very different communities. He was wooing Chicago's upper class liberals for their artistic and financial support with the challenging productions offered at the Jane Addams Theatre. He was then using revenues from his flagship theatre to support the money-losing operations of

41Hecht, 239.
the Parkway and Henry Booth Theatres in the ghetto, both of which were more faithful to the social principles of Hull House. This balancing act would prove to be difficult to sustain.

The 1967-1968 Hull House season was disappointing. Opening in November, Sickinger's production of *Fortune and Men's Eyes* by John Herbert wasn't received enthusiastically by the critics and the play's open portrayal of homosexual behavior made the more conservative members of the Hull House audience uncomfortable. Despite good reviews, the Parkway Theatre's production of William Hanley's *Slow Dance on a Killing Ground*, also drew dismally small audiences.

The Leo Lerner Theatre at the Uptown Hull House Center, 4520 N. Beacon, was the fourth of the Hull House neighborhood theatres. Dedicated to musicals, according to Sickinger's master plan, it opened on November 18, 1967. Named for the late owner of the Lerner newspaper chain in Chicago, the theatre had a total of 144 seats surrounding the sunken thrust stage on three sides. The opening production was *Take Me Along*, Joseph Stein and Robert Russell's musical adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* directed, of course, by Bob Sickinger.

The fifth season of Hull House theatre ended in disappointment. The difficulty of managing four theatres, children's programs, touring shows, and classes as well as continuing to direct his own shows had begun to take its toll on Sickinger. During the 1967-1968 season, he directed only four productions. Though there were other directors in the season, this cut back on the total number
of productions since too much of the Hull House Theatre's artistic output was dependent on Bob Sickinger. The neighborhood theatres were in trouble in their own neighborhoods. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, racial tension caused deteriorating conditions at the Henry Booth and Parkway Theatres. Rocks and bottles sometimes greeted theatre patrons upon their arrival. Neither theatre was able to attract a sufficient black audience and both theatres closed in 1968. Sickinger explained:

"We're just out of money," Sickinger said. "Right now at Parkway we have no box office, we're losing about $25,000 a year. We mainly lost the white audience because people just didn't want to go into the Woodlawn neighborhood," Sickinger added. "And the whites did not support it with contributions which they could have mailed to the theater, if they believed in it."42

The African American community had been part of all onstage and backstage operations at both theatres. Each theatre had been headed by an African American director and had concentrated on material from the African American experience. In an article in a local black newspaper, the [Chicago] Daily Defender, the African American community asked itself some hard questions:

What do we really want. . . . The doors of the Hull House Parkway Theatre have closed for lack [of] community support. This is really very sad, because it is the second time [a] valiant effort has been made by this community house to offer an opportunity to community persons interested in the theatre. A generation ago the Skyloft players flourished at the old Parkway Community House. . . . Now a new and dedicated group

42Hecht, 264.
of dreamers have seen their vision of a community theatre fade, as they played many weekends to an empty house. In April, the little theatre at Henry Booth House in the Harold Ickes Homes folded. This was the ultimate in offering an opportunity to learn the craft of the stage, without regard to the economic basis of the actor or actress, playwright or set designer. Not enough interest.43

Sickinger’s large theatrical organization had grown very rapidly. Hull House theatres had tried to fill many needs in the neighborhoods they served. In retrospect, it is possible to say the rapid expansion itself was partly to blame for the organizational and financial problems that followed. Sickinger was a man with many good ideas and, perhaps, he tried to implement too many of them too quickly. At its peak, Hull House Theatre was a whirlwind of activity with four separate theatres, a playwright’s center, a touring theatre, a children’s theatre, a chamber theatre and community theatre class offerings. Hull House productions won local and national artistic acclaim and introduced exciting contemporary theatre created by Chicagoans to the community.

But despite its acclaim, Sickinger’s Hull House Theatre drew criticism from members of the community and the board of trustees for neglecting social action in favor of the theatre’s artistic goals. Sickinger’s vision of Hull House Theatre began to draw fire for putting his own professional artistic aspirations ahead of service to the community. Controversy had also developed in the community

43Hecht, 264-265.
about his avant-garde play selection. Whose interests were ultimately being served; those of the community or those of the avant-garde artistic director?

Sickinger was opposed to turning over artistic control to local community groups. He used the best actors he could find from the Chicago theatre community. By working with the same actors frequently, he seemed to be creating a loose ensemble rather than making an effort to recruit amateur actors to fulfill Hull House's social mission. Jans felt obliged to support Sickinger's artistic standards, however, and this brought him into conflict with the Hull House board. Finally, feeling the pressure of supporting a money-losing theatre program and deciding "that a social work agency should not support what they saw as a primarily artistic endeavor," the Hull House board of trustees requested the resignation of Jans. Sickinger resigned shortly thereafter, leaving Chicago to pursue his interests in film-making and ending a fertile period in Chicago's theatrical history.

The now vacant Hull House Theatres became prime venues for Off-Loop theatre groups in the '70s and '80s in Chicago. To foster more community control, each Hull House center was in charge of their own space. In 1970, Hull House sponsored the drama activity of a drug abuse program headed by George Costas. Former Sickinger actor Frank Bates produced two eclectic seasons of plays in the Jane Addams Theatre ranging from the melodrama Ten Nights in a Bar

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44Hecht,12.
Room to Durrenmatt's *The Physicists*. However, Bates also showed little interest in community involvement and was dismissed in 1973.

During the next few years, the Hull House centers abandoned social objectives as a focus of theatre activities. The centers realized they could avoid the artistic and financial headaches of running their own theatres and began to rent space to local groups. Burt Ferrini, another Sickinger alumnus, rented the Jane Addams Theatre in 1973. He built an amateur group with assistance from the Illinois Arts Council and CETA (the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) and produced some twenty-five plays during the next six years, including productions of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* and Miguel Piñero's *Short Eyes*. June Pyskacek rented the space for a pre-Kingston Mines production in 1977. Then the young Steppenwolf ensemble began renting the space in 1978, eventually taking the theatre exclusively from 1979 through 1982.

The Leo Lerner Theatre at Uptown Hull House also has an illustrious history as a host to rising Off-Loop groups. It was home to the Organic Theatre from 1973 through 1977 during some of the theatre's most exciting years. St. Nicholas Theatre produced several shows there and the space continues to be occupied by Jackie Taylor’s Black Ensemble Theatre Company.

The Parkway Center Theatre has been used by a number of non-Equity African American theatre companies. The Experimental Black Actors Guild (X-BAG) produced six or seven plays a season in the
space from 1972 to 1980. After the demise of X-BAG, a group called Black Visions took over the space and produced for a number of seasons.\textsuperscript{45}

Again giving credit to Sickinger's pioneering work in creating both a Chicago theatre community and the appreciation for theatre in the Chicago community at large, David Mamet summarizes the relationship that binds audiences and artists:

Twenty year later Mr. Sickinger's legacy is a city with ninety-three small, distinct, and vital theaters. They are run, in the main, by young people. And those young people are serving a theatrical apprenticeship in responsibility. They are learning that a theatrical company is accountable to its audience, that if the artist does not improve, the audience does not grow.\textsuperscript{46}

The Hull House Theatre of Robert Sickinger had planted the seeds of creativity in the community. These seeds were growing as the ensemble techniques of Playwrights Theatre Club, the Compass Players, and Second City created new groups of actors, directors, designers, and playwrights, groups who were finding new ways of working together in Chicago, the city of neighborhoods. It was time for Chicago to start making its own theatre. The explosion was about to begin.

\textsuperscript{45}Hecht, 73.

\textsuperscript{46}Mamet, 52.
CHAPTER 3

THE BODY POLITIC THEATRE

The Body Politic Theatre was founded in 1969 as a program of the Community Arts Foundation (CAF). The CAF itself was established in 1966 as an ecumenical program of the Presbytery of Chicago with the goal of urban revitalization through the arts. The CAF's dedication to using the arts to stimulate social change places it firmly in the tradition of the Hull House Theatre, as described in the previous chapter. The CAF went on to work with settlement houses, schools, hospitals, ethnic and youth groups, and, in the name of community development, to become one of the pioneers of the Chicago Off-Loop theatre movement with the founding of the Body Politic Theatre and community arts center in 1969.

In the '60s, Chicago, like other large cities in America, had problems with deteriorating inner city neighborhoods. Many governmental, educational, religious, and social organizations attempted to address urban renewal with a variety of programs. The run-down Lincoln Avenue neighborhood was identified as a primary target of federal and city of Chicago urban renewal programs.

One of the key figures in the renewal of Chicago's North Side was the Reverend James Shiflett, a transplanted Texan who
graduated from the McCormick Theological Seminary in Lincoln Park. He began his career as pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church at Armitage and Orchard in Lincoln Park, then went to St. Andrew Presbyterian on the Northwest Side where he served as pastor for nine years. During this time, he became involved with the civil rights movement and other liberal causes.

"I was a fairly decent preacher," he says with more modesty than history deserves. "But while at St. Andrew I took stock of what I'd been preaching—guilt, just heavy handed guilt. . . . These were Northwest Side people, upper-working class. Lord, they're the ones who've got the most to lose and the least to gain from conflicts in our society. They don't need their heads hammered. They need a way to enjoy their lives. These people are already so goddam guilty it's pathetic—they've got to be told it's all right to enjoy."¹

In 1964, while contemplating his ministry's purpose, Shiflett attended a children's matinee at the Second City on Wells Street with his wife and children and saw Viola Spolin's theatre games for the first time.

"The theater games involved a teaching process that dealt with human beings in terms of joy. It was possible for people to join with each other in play, in a peculiar, natural communication."²

¹Linda Winer, "Body Politic's friendly giant and a miracle on Lincoln Av.," Chicago Tribune 20 August 1972, sec. 11: 7. CTC-BPT 5/2.

Shiflett's children became involved with Spolin's children's workshop and, eventually, Shiflett began to play the games too. Although he considered himself terrible at first, he continued to study with Spolin and Paul Sills at their Game Theatre and, after three or four years, he said he finally learned to play the games. He wanted to be able to use them in his ministry. He felt that the church's mission would be helped by such free and joyous communication. When he realized that the church might not approve of such non-traditional methods, he became disillusioned with his role as a minister. Increasingly, he found he was being drawn to the sense of community and ensemble he felt from playing Sills and Spolin's theatre games. Searching for new ways to approach his ministry, he resigned from St. Andrew's in 1965.

After leaving the ministry, Shiflett joined an experimental ecumenical group called the Broken Jar Center, established in 1965 by the Presbytery of Chicago. The Center's mission was vaguely expressed as a desire to explore new forms of communication within the community. Shiflett and his wife, Betty, moved their family into a communal household and the Center soon became a drawing, ceramics, and painting workshop. Shiflett joking refers to the center's work as "psycho ceramics" and says, "It didn't take long before we were called 'the Cracked Pots'." This project began Shiflett's search for a community ministry through the arts.3

[The Reverend Jim] Shiflett was a visionary. He took up where Sickinger left off. He believed that the arts—particularly theater—could revitalize a community, that it could serve to give a resonance and consequence to the quality of our lives.4

The Community Renewal Society, part of the urban wing of the United Church of Christ, dealt with urban renewal issues in the Lincoln Park neighborhood. The Society sponsored the Chicago City Players, a local community theatre producing experimental and absurdist plays. James Smucker, a leader with United Church of Christ, became involved with the Chicago City Players and, as a result of his interest, persuaded several churches to commission a study on the need for a North Side arts center. The group asked Jim Shiflett of the Broken Jar Center to interview over 50 artists, church representatives, and community leaders about the project. The study group then recommended establishing a church-supported arts center in Lincoln Park because of the area's diversity, urban renewal efforts, and the continuing work of several church groups in the area.

In response to the panel's recommendations, the Community Arts Foundation was founded March 4, 1966 as a grassroots community renewal organization under the sponsorship of the Presbytery of Chicago. Shiflett was appointed as its director. Initially headquartered at the Wellington Avenue Presbyterian Church, it was an umbrella organization that had the dual purposes

of community outreach and social action through the arts, creating "a dialogue between artists and the community and the Church and the community."5

The Community Renewal Society turned over the Chicago City Players, originally directed by Bill Hildreth and George Ralph, to Shiflett and the Community Arts Foundation to administer. This was the first theatre program supervised by the CAF. Shiflett was now in a position to spread theatre games and other experimental theatre techniques with the help of his friend, Paul Sills. Shiflett turned the CAF’s fundraising capability toward creating new arts programs in the community.

Later in the same year, the CAF was asked to coordinate the summer arts programs of Operation Encouragement, a half-million dollar summer work program of the YMCA, financed by the U.S. Department of Labor. The arts component of the program became a model for later CAF programs with workshops in Theatre Games, Story Workshop, painting, music, journalism and performances staged at nearby Waller High (now Lincoln Park High School).

In 1967, Spolin’s Game Theater received a grant from the Chicago Community Trust which Shiflett administered through the CAF. Additional CAF outreach programs incorporating Theatre Games, Story Workshops, music, and film workshops were offered at the Parent’s School, New City Film Group, and Waller High School’s Artist-in-Residence program. The three-month Artist-in-Residence

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program involved eleven artists including Sills who led workshops in Theater Games, John Schultz from Columbia College who led the Story Workshop, William Russo from Columbia College who taught music, and the famous choreographer, Kathryn Dunham, from Southern Illinois University, who taught dance. The program involved over 500 of the school's 2,500 students. Many of these CAF outreach programs continued through the mid-1970s.

Sills had been a major creative force behind the Playwrights Theatre Club, the Compass Players, and Second City but he could never stay with a theatre that he created for long. He would grow disenchanted and move on to create another new group. In the early '60s he formed the Game Theatre with his mother, Spolin in a bar near Sedgwick and Lincoln Avenue. There he continued to develop theatre games as community and ensemble building techniques with a group of non-professionals, including Shiflett.

During the summer of 1968, Sills, founder of the Compass Players and Chicago style improvisation, asked Shiflett to help raise money for the Free Theater, a new company he was developing. Shiflett agreed to lend a hand. When Second City moved to their new digs at Pipers Alley on North Avenue, Sills moved his new company into their old theatre space at 1848 North Wells in July of 1968. Here Sills' group began offering free performances of stories based on fairy tales. He was developing his new "Story Theatre" technique, with characters simultaneously acting and narrating action to tell stories in a fresh, new way.
During the hot, angry summer of 1968, the Democratic National Convention was held in Chicago. As anti-war protests surrounding the convention became pitched street battles, the area around Sills theatre experienced heavy fighting between demonstrators and police. Always politically active, Sills had opened the doors of his Free Theater to provide space for a Yippie Field Festival. Shiflett later described Sills' theatre as looking like "revolution central." This activism drew the negative attention of Mayor Richard J. Daley and city officials to the area. Six months later the entire block was scheduled for demolition under the heading of urban renewal so Sills' group and a sympathetic local bar, the Oxford Pub, began looking for a new place to call home.

In 1969, Sills, music teacher William Russo, and pub owner, Bruce Oxford, approached Shiflett with a plan. They wanted Shiflett and the CAF to purchase a home for a community arts center on a run-down stretch of Lincoln Avenue. The building, at 2257-63 North Lincoln Avenue, had previously been occupied by the Monte Carlo bowling alley and the U.S. Slicing Machine Company. The purchase price of the building was approximately $100,000. A single anonymous individual on the CAF board put up the $20,000 down payment. The plan was that rental income from Oxford's pub and other future tenants would be sufficient to pay the mortgage, thereby supporting the community arts programs of the CAF. Sills' playwright-in-residence, Arnold Weinstein, came up with the

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6 James Shiflett, personal interview, 10 May 1993.
name for the new venture. Borrowing Harley Granville-Barker's phrase to describe the collaborative nature of theatre, they called the new center "The Body Politic."

Sills' Story Theater took over the U.S. Slicing Machine space downstairs at the Body Politic and began drawing large crowds with popular productions of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Grimm's fairy tales. William Russo's Free Theater was producing a series of rock operas at midnight upstairs in the former bowling alley. Shiflett recalls the crowds of young people and the air of excitement along North Lincoln Avenue as the new theatre movement began to develop. "The theatre became the in place and people were swarming in." The bohemian, counter-culture atmosphere of the Body Politic lent an air of artistic adventure and rebelliousness to the various groups that performed there. Journalist Marla Paul attributed similar perceptions to critic Jonathan Abarbanel:

"Theater for the sake of theater was not the sole motivation for these early groups. The founders and their art grew out of a political movement, and anti-establishment political philosophy, said Jonathan Abarbanel, chairman of the Joseph Jefferson committee citations wing."

Story Theater's success in Chicago led the company to leave town for a tour in Los Angeles and, eventually, for a run on Broadway. This, however, took Sills away from the Body Politic.

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7 James Shiflett, personal interview, 10 May 1993.

William Russo's Free Theater also departed for another performance space in 1970 and Russo returned to his teaching duties at Columbia College. This left Shiflett's Body Politic community arts center, at least temporarily, without much theatre activity. Shiflett was determined to provide a home for experimental theatre groups and, as he got the word out, new companies began to flock to the Body Politic.

One of the first new groups to make the Body Politic their home was the Organic Theater Company. In the summer of 1970, prior to his departure, Sills had met a talented young director from the University of Wisconsin, Madison named Stuart Gordon. Gordon had started his own ensemble, the Organic Theater, in Madison and Sills had seen a Chicago staging of Gordon's *The Game Show* which had impressed him. Due to the political backlash in Madison from a controversial nude scene in his production of *Peter Pan*, Gordon's Organic Theater was looking for a new home. Sills convinced Gordon to come to Chicago and helped him locate temporary performance space at the Holy Covenant Methodist Church on the North Side. When Sills' Story Theater left Chicago for the bright lights of Broadway, the Organic Theater quickly moved into their downstairs space at the Body Politic.

No one at this point in the Off-Loop movement had any expectation of earning money by putting on plays. Shiflett was more interested in keeping theatre happening at the Body Politic than anything else and welcomed the Organic. The group's first production at the Body Politic was an original adaptation of Homer's *The
Odyssey. It was a modest hit which helped the Body Politic keep its reputation as a hot theatrical venue. The next Organic production, The Tarot, based on the mystical card characters, wasn’t as well received and played to nearly empty houses. Shiflett was a visionary but he wasn’t much of a businessman. The Body Politic’s contract with the Organic stipulated that rent would be paid to the Body Politic only after the Organic’s actors were paid. When the houses were bad, the Body Politic received no rent at all. Shiflett learned a hard lesson. After the Organic, all future companies’ box office receipts went directly to the Body Politic. After deducting rent and other expenses, the Body Politic then passed the remaining box office income on to the tenant company. A more detailed look at the history of the Organic Theater is presented in the next chapter.

Shiflett was still looking for experimental theatre groups who wanted to perform at the Body Politic so he decided to form a group of his own. Shiflett had been one of the leaders of the Game Theater, a group that conducted audience participation theatre games at the Body Politic from 1970 to 1971. After this experience, he decided to create his own resident theatre company and founded the Dream Theater in May of 1971. Dream Theater combined the Story Workshop techniques taught by John Schultz with Sills’ Story Theater style to act out people’s dreams onstage. Chicago Reader critic, Bury St. Edmund, described the Dream Theater as “a gymnastic team of actors who excel at physicalizing the psyche.”

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Sharon Phillips, an actress in Dream Theater who later became the Body Politic's managing director, described the company's style as "hippie theatre." Shiflett, she said, "always wore long flowing shirts and long hair and sandals and beads; he was quite impressive." Indeed, the company's dreamlike performance quality was often reminiscent of altered states of consciousness. Shiflett described the process of putting together the Dream Theater and its counter-culture appeal:

We started out trying to figure out how to put these dreams on stage. We found David Moore and he knew quite a bit about Grotowski, the use of the body and the limits of the body so we started getting into that. Then because of the Theatre Games we decided that we had to do everything with our bodies. That was my contribution because, by this time, I knew a little bit about them. Then we figured out that we needed some mime. We had a young lady in group who was a pretty decent mime so she taught us some mime. And everytime something else came along that we thought we might be interested in, we'd grab that too. It was self-taught kind of stuff.

We discovered that I really wasn't directing. It was an ensemble and I was the objective person on the outside. I would make a call and they, in turn, would respond to the call how they would. The more we worked together as an ensemble the further we could go. And once we stopped we began receding; you have to keep going with it or you lose it.

We put this thing together and we took it to the Experimental Theatre Festival at Ann Arbor, Michigan. We had this dream called "Crackers" which starts out with one person sitting on the stage on a milk crate or whatever and he's just sitting there. Now David Moore has the biggest staring eyes and he just sat there for a minute or two not saying anything.

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staring ahead and then he said “I was driving my Volkswagen bus.” And the crowd just went up for grabs, they just hooled and they hollered! It almost shook David off his milk crate. I swear that place was like pandemonium, they were with us and they were screaming and yelling. So what we found out was that we were communicating with the college students. There was a good connection there. And nationally we became a name but Chicago was still a hard nut to crack. Chicago just didn’t believe it.

Later we started asking for dreams from the audience. People were telling the dream as we were acting it out, it was complete improvisation. It still gives me chills thinking about it.11

Dream Theater cast member, David Moore, summed up the group energy that Shiflett was searching for when he said, “We have a company that’s going to stay together. There’s a sense of community here.”12 The group went on to receive CETA support and passed a certain milestone when it began paying its actors in 1974. During the short five years of its existence, the Dream Theater staged a variety of material from the dreams of senior citizens in Heritage to an adaptation of Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying to classroom visits in which they dramatized the dreams of schoolchildren. Despite the ensemble spirit of the Dream Theater, the group disbanded in 1976 when Jim Shiflett formed the Body Politic Theatre Company and began to focus his energy on producing scripted material on the Body Politic stage.

11James Shiflett, personal interview, 10 May 1993.

In 1971, the Organic Theater's continued residence at the Body Politic produced one of the landmarks of the Chicago Off-Loop theatre scene: the \textit{WARP!} series, written by Bury St. Edmund (aka Lenny Kleinfeld) and Stuart Gordon. This psychedelic, comic book action-adventure-spectacular was a huge hit with Chicago audiences. The original 1971 production of \textit{WARP!} was serialized by the company in two more episodes, \textit{WARP II} and \textit{WARP III}, which ran through 1972 at the Body Politic. Unfortunately, financial issues were again a problem. Some hard feelings arose between the two theatres during this time regarding the Organic's unwillingness to share profits with the Body Politic from its long-running hit. In February 1973, the Organic decided to try their successful Chicago production in New York but the critics again were unkind and the show died quickly. When the Organic returned to Chicago, the company reorganized and decided not to return to the Body Politic. The company moved to the Leo Lerner Theatre in Uptown, formerly one of Bob Sickinger's Hull House theatre spaces, and did not renew its association with the Body Politic.

Another Body Politic resident company, the Alice Liddell Theater Company, was a children's theatre group founded in 1971 by David Childs. The company adapted traditional and international fairy tales as well as created audience participation pieces such as \textit{Let's Pretend}, \textit{A Visit to Make Believe}, and \textit{Let's Do a Story}, at the Body Politic through 1976. The company was noted for its imaginative work and regularly drew families with young children to the Body Politic, strengthening its function as a community center.
The Dinglefest Theatre Company was founded by Byron Schaffer, a Northern Illinois University drama professor, at the Body Politic in 1972. Originally named the Luther Burbank Dingleberry Festival, the company created its first show, *Verbatim*, using text from books, commercials, labels, even street signs, as the main source of the script. The group specialized in satirical comedy with montages and split scene action. Director Schaffer said about the company, "You can say we're unconventional, but we can be watched by someone with a conventional head."\(^3\) The company performed at the Body Politic for several years until Schaffer broke away in 1977 and founded his own three theatre space, the Theatre Building, on Belmont Avenue.

Another Body Politic company resident in 1973 was the nine-person Magic Circle Company which started in New York and performed for a year in Seattle before finally deciding to settle in Chicago. Describing the reasons for the move, director Guy Giarrizzo said he could relate to:

"a vibrancy and innocence about this town that most big cities lack. . . . With several companies working here at Body Politic, the rent hassles are alleviated a little. With that pressure eased, you don't have to make so many artistic compromises. We're really a little community here," Giarrizzo adds.

"Ordinarily you find a lot of jealousy, a lot of competition between acting companies, but not here. It's a rare thing, and that's another reason why Magic Circle is staying in Chicago."\(^4\)

\(^3\)Bridges, 93.

\(^4\)Bridges, 93.
Later in the same article, the subject of community comes up again. Under one roof at the Body Politic, many companies shared a sense of artistic community.

Community is a magic word which reappears often when you talk with various people at the Body Politic. To Shiflett, it goes beyond the sense of togetherness, apparent when the various Body Politic companies gather for Thursday dinner... There is also the community of the immediate neighborhood which Body Politic hopes to serve with a variety of workshops for children in puppetry, mime, film animation, story writing, and theatre.¹⁵

As well as those companies previously mentioned, the Body Politic was home for a variety of other arts and political action groups. Additional theatre companies that began under the auspices of the Body Politic include the Puppet Place, Chicago Theater Strategy, The Independent Eye, Chicago City Theatre, Pinworm Players, Peripatetic Task Force, JAG (Just Another Group), Pary Productions, Theater of Phynance, Chicago Extension, the Zebra Company, the Bang Company, and the company formed to produce David Mamet's Duck Variations. Groups that visited and performed at the Body Politic include Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater, Milwaukee's Theater X, the Theater of All Possibilities, Herbert Blau's KRAKEN, Los Angeles's ProVisional Theatre, the Broom Street Theatre, the Omaha Magic Theatre, and the Darlene Blackburn Dance Troupe.

Beginning in 1970, the CAF began teaching theatre games as creativity and communications exercises to Chicago Public School Gifted Program teachers and to a group of Columbia College faculty.

¹⁵Bridges, 93.

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These teacher training workshops continued into the mid ‘70s. The Chicago Mural Group, based at the Body Politic, painted over 60 murals on public and private buildings in the neighborhood. The Yellow Press Poets were headquartered at the Body Politic and gave Monday night poetry readings there. Also in residence there was the Chicago Contemporary Dance Theatre, headed by Maggie Kast.

There was a great deal of controversy surrounding the politics of urban renewal in Lincoln Park and Old Town in the ‘70s. Working class African-American and Latino families and low income students and hippies were being squeezed out of affordable housing by the “gentrification” of the neighborhoods by upper income whites. The large single family Victorian homes and durable brick two-flats and three-flats were very profitable to rehab and upgrade, forcing lower income residents out of the neighborhood. Resistance politics included groups such as the Young Lords street gang, headed by militant Cha Cha Rodriguez. The Young Lords were a well-organized group who received ample media attention and support from churches and other social service agencies. In May of 1970, Cha Cha Rodriguez led the Young Lords and other militant groups in a sit-in and takeover of buildings at the McCormick Theological Seminary. The dispute centered around the free use of church grounds and facilities by lower income people of the neighborhoods. Fortunately, church authorities and the police were patient and the situation was resolved without violence.

With these kinds of tensions in the rapidly changing neighborhood, political groups with their offices at the Body Politic
kept things lively at the community center. Jim Shiflett recalls the theatre's radical political legacy and the trouble it caused the Body Politic.

The youth group, Rising Up Angry, had their headquarters upstairs at the Body Politic. These revolutionaries used to hang out the windows screaming and cursing at the cops as they went by. That was a pretty good technique for a revolutionary [laughing]. After a while we had the "Red Squad" [the infamous Chicago Police Department political surveillance unit] from the city out front in their cars taking pictures of who was going into the place.\textsuperscript{16}

The Building Department had been used before by Mayor Daley and the City of Chicago to make life difficult for dissident groups. The political activity and counter-culture theatre, not to mention the crowds that the Body Politic produced, attracted the attention of the city building inspectors. As described in Chapter 1, the theatre was soon cited for numerous violations of the city's building code. The city's inflexibility threatened to put the Body Politic and many other developing theatres out of business. Their struggle to legitimize themselves helped to unify the Off-Loop movement and the resulting changes in the codes opened the floodgates to the hundreds of storefront theatres to come.

After leading the successful effort to amend the city building code, the Body Politic made elaborate plans to raise $300,000 for program expansion, building improvements, and mortgage retirement. Shiflett wanted to create a training program at the Body Politic in "Chicago style theater" with himself teaching Spolin Theater

\footnote{Jim Shiflett, personal interview, 10 May 1993.}
Games, David Moore teaching Grotowski technique, Babbs Fischer teaching mime, and John Schultz, chair of the English/Writing Department at Columbia College, teaching Story Workshop techniques. Some of the funds sought would be used for building improvements such as improved electrical work, additional restrooms, air conditioning, and a sprinkler system. While seeking donations, the Body Politic moved ahead, refinancing the Lincoln Avenue building to begin work on heating, ventilation, and sprinkler systems to comply with the new regulations. Ironically, the sprinkler system had been measured and was ready to be installed when, on Friday, the 13th of September 1974, an electrical fire destroyed a major portion of the building. Most performances at the Body Politic had to be canceled and the theatre community began efforts to help rebuild.

"One morning, shortly after the fire, the entire company of Horses, Inc. showed up at the theater armed with brooms and dustpans. And without ever saying a word, as if in a performance art piece, they set about sweeping up the cinders and debris in the upstairs theater. This bizarre company, then housed in the building where Steppenwolf is now located created alternative alternative theater--their Christmas card one year featured one of their actresses, a woman of ample proportions, clad only in flour."17

Though even the oddest elements of the Chicago theatre community responded with love, support, and lots of free labor, the $80,000 cost of repairs created a financial problem from which the Body Politic never really recovered.

17Phillips, 8.
Another Chicago theatre space had been created as part of the "Lincoln Avenue theatre movement" just up the street from the Body Politic. June Pyskacek was a director of avant garde plays during the late '60s with Chicago City Players. After staging a successful production of Jean Claude Van Italie's *America Hurrah* with the Chicago City Players, Pyskacek had a falling out with Shiflett and the CAF over the appropriation of grant monies. At about the same time Shiflett was establishing the Body Politic, Pyskacek found an old trolley car barn at 2356 North Lincoln Avenue. After remodeling the building into a theatre space, she opened the second of the Lincoln Avenue theatres, the Kingston Mines.

Kingston Mines, unlike Story Theater, the Organic or the Dream Theater, was not a company formed by an ensemble of actors but brought in a new cast for each production. The theatre opened with a very successful production of Jean Claude van Italie's *The Serpent*, paying only modest royalties since van Italie had seen and liked Pyskacek's previous production of *America Hurrah*. Other productions included Michael McClure's *Gargoyle Cartoons* and Terrence McNally's *Terminal*. In 1971, Kingston Mines drew national attention to Chicago's growing Off-Loop scene when it premiered *Grease* by two Sickinger alumni, Chicago playwrights Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey. The fifties rock and roll musical went on to Broadway and film success and is still touring the nation today, twenty-six years later, as one of Chicago Off-Loop theatre's biggest commercial successes.

As the new Chicago building codes for theatres went into effect, the theatre administration at Kingston Mines estimated that
necessary renovations to the cavernous old building would cost upwards of $300,000. There was no alternative but to close the theatre. During the company’s four years, from 1969 through April, 1973, they hosted twenty five productions and, much like the Body Politic, helped many new groups get started.

Beginning in 1976, the Body Politic Theatre Laboratory began to produce its own productions such as *Who’s Happy Now?* (which earned nine Jeff nominations), the long-running *Lunching* by Alan Gross and *Banjo Dancing* which toured for more than ten years after its development at the Body Politic. The theatre also offered workshops and theatre classes regularly. By the 1978-79 season, the Laboratory was offering a mainstage subscription series along with the Mixed Events series and New Playwrights series. The Body Politic continued to book national touring companies in a series of guest performances.

In 1979, the Body Politic reached another crisis. The theatre had been unable to significantly reduce its debt burden from the 1974 fire. The income from each long-running production was quickly offset by the losses from an unsuccessful production or two and little progress was made on the balance of accumulated debt. In 1979, the theatre still owed $69,000 and, in April of that year, the Body Politic announced that unless they were able to raise $26,000 to stave off their creditors, they would be forced to close permanently. The newly formed League of Chicago Theatres rallied to aid the Body Politic. Sharon Phillips, soon to become managing director of the Body Politic, remembered the situation:
One of the first actions of the League illustrates for me the extraordinary sense of mutuality in this community. In the spring of 1979, the BP [Body Politic] announced that it would "go under" if it didn't raise $26,000 in four weeks. Unbeknownst to us, League members stuffed their theater programs with flyers asking patrons to send $1.50 to the BP. Lots of people did just that. I would burst into tears with each mail delivery.18

The Body Politic weathered this crisis but it took its toll on the staff of the theatre. Shiflett had been struggling with financial problems, apathetic boards, leaking roofs, and building inspectors for too long. He was worn out and decided to turn in his resignation.

Finally in the summer of 1979, I decided I'd had it, too much fundraising, too much stress. I was burned out so I talked to the board chairman and Sharon one day and I said I want to turn this over to Sharon. It was a mean thing to do because the theatre was in so much debt but she actually pulled it out of the hole. She created a financial miracle. She got a real board together. That was one of my weaknesses; I never had a good board. They would almost get the debt wiped out and then they'd have a flop of a play. It was hard. Without Sharon it would have folded much sooner.19

Sharon Phillips took over as managing director with Dale McFadden serving as acting artistic director. Season plans already made were scaled down. Some small cast, small budget Body Politic events continued but, during the remainder of 1979 and 1980, the Body Politic had no money to produce and rented space to North Light Theatre and other groups. Phillips recalls a series of management

18Phillips, 9.

19Jim Shiflett, personal interview, 10 May 1993.

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workshops arranged by FEDAPT (Foundation for the Extension and Development of the American Professional Theatre) which were tremendously helpful. Individual consultants worked with five Chicago theatres, Body Politic, Victory Gardens, Wisdom Bridge, Organic, and Travel Light theatres for a period of three years to improve management and fundraising skills.

As the theatre began to reorganize, local actor/director James O'Reilly staged a production of Fugard's *Statements Made While Under Arrest* at the Body Politic during the summer of 1980. The theatre was searching for new leadership and, in 1981, James O'Reilly was appointed artistic director. Along with director Pauline Brailsford, O'Reilly began to develop an Equity company using many of the city's top actors, directors, and designers. O'Reilly had a good reputation and strong contacts in the Chicago theatre community with ten years of work as an actor and director at the Court and other Chicago theatres on his resume. The company, led by O'Reilly and later, Brailsford, would become particularly well-known for its outstanding productions of classics and English and Irish drama by such playwrights as Alan Ayckbourn, Brian Friel, and Hugh Leonard.

But the Body Politic's first challenge was to insure its own survival. The theatre had never been able to fully recover from its debt as a result of the 1974 fire. Carrying this deficit was causing the theatre to curtail its own production plans and rent out its theatre space to generate income. After a year of negotiations, Body Politic agreed to sell 53% of its building at 2257-63 North Lincoln to Victory Gardens Theater. Victory Gardens agreed to pay all the
operating expenses of the building (gas, electricity, maintenance, etc.) for three years to help the Body Politic recover its financial health. The partnership permitted both theatres to stabilize their operations by sharing space and expenses and created an attractive multi-theatre complex with a wide variety of programming.

In 1981, the Body Politic opened its season with a well-received production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, staged by Pauline Brailsford. O'Reilly and his artistic associate, Brailsford, brought a new sensibility to the theatre, an appreciation of language and literature that had been lacking in the earlier anti-establishment days of the Body Politic. Sharon Phillips recalls O'Reilly's love of dramatic language and the actor's craft:

> He was a total character. Our work was a wonderful reflection of his vitality, his irascibility, and his contradictions. But his over-riding love of the theatre and the magic that can happen from it and the ability of the dramatic word to excite people informed everything. He was a character and a half.

> We shared the same vision in terms of the kind of theatre on stage and the importance of ensemble. At the Body Politic, had we been smart and changed our name to focus on what we were about, I think we should have called ourselves the Body Politic Actors Theatre. Wisdom Bridge was a director's theatre, Victory Gardens a playwright's theatre, but the Body Politic was an actor's theatre, I mean, Jim was an actor, Pauline was an actor, I was an actor, so the work that we did really was about acting.²⁰

O'Reilly's production of *The Sea Horse* by Edward J. Moore, his first directorial effort as artistic director, received generally good

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reviews. Critics commented that O'Reilly's particular strengths lay in skills in working with actors in realistic or classical material. O'Reilly attempted to revive the Body Politic's flagging audience and reputation with sensitive stagings of contemporary English and Irish plays along with Shakespeare and other classics.

In February 1982, O'Reilly staged a production of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, as presented by a traveling troupe of players in the American West of the 1880s. Critic Glenna Syse wasn't impressed with O'Reilly's attempt at stylizing Shakespeare. She said, "I can scarcely recall a night of Shakespeare so lacking in personality."21 O'Reilly didn't contemporize any further Shakespeare productions.

O'Reilly's September 1982 production of Brian Friel's *Translations* was quite successful with critics and audiences. Of the production, Richard Christiansen said:

Director James O'Reilly's production of the play is a sensitively modulated and tenderly orchestrated rendering of Friel's magnificent dirge. He gives a fine, rich, subtly played performance himself as Hugh, the old school master, and he has created a marvelous ensemble of actors who bring the drama stunningly to life.22

In 1983, O'Reilly announced the formation of a core company of actors at the Body Politic for the 1983 season. Perhaps his Irish

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American background gave O'Reilly his strong connection to Irish drama: another of his successful revivals, the 1983 production of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* was, according to Christiansen, a "frolic of Irish wit." He went on:

> O'Reilly who staged a thrilling production of *Translations*, Brian Friel's contemporary Irish masterpiece at the Body Politic last year, has carried himself and several other members of that production's small family of players into this faithful and affectionate new presentation.\(^{23}\)

The *Daily Herald*’s Tom Valeo echoed Christiansen’s praise saying, "The Body Politic Theater will have to change its name to the Emerald Isle if it continues to stage such outstanding productions of fine Irish plays."\(^{24}\)

In July 1983, Pauline Brailsford’s direction of Alan Ayckbourn’s farce *Taking Steps* earned a rave review from Christiansen. He hailed the quality of the 1983 season as evidence of the Body Politic’s rebirth under O'Reilly and Brailsford.

*Taking Steps* is--putting it mildly--the comedy of the year. What director Pauline Brailsford and her associates at the Body Politic have done in this show is just short of miraculous. They have taken the very English work of Alan Ayckbourn and given it a production in their second-floor


theater at 2261 N. Lincoln Ave. that could stand comparison with the best this master of comedy has yet received. . . .

Brailsford and company have extracted every ounce of joy from their rich material, embellishing it with exquisitely timed bits of physical comedy uproariously delivered dialogue and brilliantly paced action. . . .

It's a triumphant of ending the season for the Body Politic, which under artistic director James O'Reilly and managing director, Sharon Phillips, has rebounded from near-oblivion to become a first-rate theater of imaginative programming and consistently high quality.25

Even the curmudgeonly Bury St. Edmund of the Chicago Reader, a self-confessed Ayckbourn hater, described the show as "a sidesplitting comic triumph."26

The next major critical success was the Body Politic's production of Ronald Harwood's The Dresser. Rick Kogan of the Chicago Sun-Times said:

The captivating James O'Reilly imbues "Sir" with the tangible fear that his life on the theatrical run has been an exercise in "hopelessness." . . . As Norman, Frank Galati gives a stunning performance . . . . The co-direction of [Pauline] Brailsford and B.J. Jones catches every nuance, every gesture. It crackles with life.27

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Christiansen agreed, saying:

Here are two tremendously intelligent, powerful performances, perfectly complementing each other, and the Body Politic production, directed by Brailsford and B.J. Jones, sets them off with a beautifully designed staging.28

Frank Galati shared his thoughts on the Chicago theatre community while working with O'Reilly in *The Dresser* in an interview with Suzanne Weiss:

One of the joys of working in this city is that it gets to be like a family," he noted. "We wind up knowing each other very, very well."29

After five years as artistic director, O'Reilly retired in 1986 and Brailsford took over as artistic director. Brailsford had a longstanding relationship with the Body Politic both as an actress, appearing in *Macbeth, The Dresser, Ladies in Retirement, A Life, and Madwoman of Chaillot,* and as a director, with *Twelfth Night, Confusions, Taking Steps, Volunteers, All My Sons, Seasons Greetings, Falstaff and Hal,* and *The Hitchhikers* to her credit. Raised in England, Brailsford was an excellent choice to continue the Body Politic's commitment to Shakespeare and Anglo-Irish contemporary drama. With her appointment, Brailsford became only the second woman to head an Equity Off-Loop theatre (Harriet Spizziri of Next


Theatre was the first). O'Reilly continued to oversee the theatre's outreach and discovery projects such as the new play readings series, Bible Story theatre, touring projects, and children's theatre. O'Reilly also continued his acting career with roles in the Goodman's production of *Galileo* and roles at the Court Theatre until his death in 1990.

The company struggled with financial and management difficulties with the departure of managing director Sharon Phillips in 1988 and finally, the resignation of Brailsford in 1990. At the end of its second decade of existence, the Body Politic was wracked by debt and floundering administratively. All of those who guided the company from its experimental counter-culture theatre days to its more recent literary focus had left the theatre company. There was no money to mount productions and no artistic director with the vision to try to revitalize the theatre. Put simply, there was not enough management expertise or board involvement to support the artistic mission of the theatre.

The company limped along for several years in the 90s as a rental house but was not financially strong enough to return to production. Finally the company sold the remaining portion of its building to Victory Gardens to resolve its debts and the Body Politic was dissolved by its board of directors in 1996.
CHAPTER 4

ORGANIC THEATER

The Organic Theater Company was the most wildly original and successful of the early Off-Loop theatres. Founded in 1969 by Stuart Gordon as part theatre company, part commune, writer Todd London described the company's wild counter-culture style:

The Organic could only have sprung from the head of the '60s: anarchic in spirit, improvisational in method, colorful, electric, populist and completely zonked out.¹

The company had its origins at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in the late '60s, when Stuart Gordon began working with a group of radical theatre students, writing, improvising, and adapting material to create his own highly physical, eclectic productions. After settling in Chicago, the company's phenomenal success inspired other young companies by establishing a pattern for the development of other Off-Loop ensemble groups.

"Our theater is absolutely outrageous and people are gonna either love it or hate it, but they're not gonna think it's boring," says Gordon, with the confidence of a man who knows his audience mostly loves it.2

The company was the first Off-Loop company dedicated exclusively to producing original plays and adaptations and earned a reputation for adventurous, larger-than-life productions.

**Stuart Gordon founds the Organic**

While growing up in Chicago, Gordon had an early exposure to improvisational theatre. As a student, he took workshops with Sheldon Patinkin and Paul Sills and saw his first Second City revue when he was 13 years old. Second City's work so impressed him that he created his own comedy troupe, The Human Race, while still in high school. During college he spent his summers traveling as an actor with Second City's touring company.

Starting college as a film major at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Gordon felt that he needed to know more about acting. He got involved in a campus production of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*. In an interview with Terry Curtis Fox, Gordon said he was disappointed with the experience because he felt that the show "copped out" and didn't go far enough in assaulting the audience's complacency. He decided to write a play which would take audience involvement one step further by *literally* assaulting the audience. Gordon's play was called *The Game Show* and was based on self-...

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abasing TV game shows like *Let's Make a Deal*. Produced at the University by the New Playwrights Club, Gordon's play planted actors in the audience as well as onstage who volunteered to do a variety of humiliating things to win prizes and money. His plan was to test an unknowing audience's reaction to an apparently out-of-control theatrical experience. Gordon described how he tricked the audience into getting involved:

In *The Game Show* they really go the whole way, really humiliate themselves. They're stripped, whipped, just do hideous things to each other. The thing is that the audience believes that this is really going on and that they are being held prisoner in the theater to watch it. The doors are chained. The ushers are walking up and down the aisles with sticks. . . . What happened was that every production that was done ended in the audience rising and attacking the stage and attacking the actors. It always happened at the same point in the show. . . . It wasn't planned. As a matter of fact the point of the play was apathy. My expectation was that this would go on and that a tremendous sense of guilt would build up in the audience that they would allow those atrocities to be committed without doing anything about it. But what happened was [that] they did do something about it and they stopped the show. . . . It was a huge scandalous thing and there were all sorts of letters pro and con, whether it was morally right to do this, which I still haven't got straightened out in my own head.3

After this radical theatre experience, Gordon decided that he was a director and he formed his own experimental theatre group at the University in Madison. The group did six productions during the summer of 1967 including a wordless production of *Titus*

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Andronicus, staged in a construction quarry, with actors in the rock pit gibbering like Neanderthals. "It was very Artaud, although at the time I hadn't read any Artaud," says Gordon. Another show, The Catalyst, was scripted by Gordon in a style that was to become his specialty. It was a science fiction show in which machines rise and take over the earth. The futuristic play ran for 24 hours straight in a constantly repeating loop.

The Madison group's last production was its most controversial and, ultimately, resulted in Gordon's move to Chicago. Gordon decided to stage Peter Pan in the psychedelic style of the '60s flower children. Peter and the Lost Boys were characterized as hippies and the Darling children were suburban kids, ready to "drop out and turn on." To complete the counter-culture analogy, Captain Hook was a bureaucrat, the pirates were cops, the Indians were blacks and, of course, the fairy dust that made the children fly became a psychedelic drug. This interpretation made Gordon's anti-establishment point but it also got him into trouble.

What was interesting was that we kept the dialogue from the show exactly. We didn't add or subtract any dialogue--the way it was staged gave it the interpretation. . . . So the whole thing turned into this revolution, but fantasy revolution. One of the scenes, the flying scene, was done with a light show and nine nude women dancers. And it got us busted.5

4Fox, 4.

5Fox, 4.
The Madison district attorney read about the scandalous production in the local papers. As a result, the district attorney, the local alderman, and the chancellor of the university came to a special performance. The district attorney promptly ruled that the production was obscene, and the chancellor closed down the performance and shut off the theatre's electricity. Not easily discouraged, Gordon and his crew surreptitiously moved the scenery and lighting equipment into a nearby classroom and staged two more clandestine performances, attended by nearly 1,300 people. The police reacted swiftly and arrested the lawbreakers, chiefly Gordon and two of his nine nude dancers, who, in the confusion of the bust, were the only ones the police could find.

As the authorities attempted to move forward and build an obscenity case against the arrested individuals, they had difficulty, despite the 1,300 people in attendance, in finding any witnesses willing to get on the stand and testify that the production was obscene. Apparently only one person was willing to come forward but it was discovered that he had a record as a child molester and so was dropped as a witness. Six months later, the obscenity case faded away due to lack of evidence. However, according to Gordon, the press had a field day with his marriage to Carolyn Purdy, one of the arrested dancers. The romantic implication was that he had fallen in love with her when she performed as one of the nude fairies in Neverland.6

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6Fox, 4
The University was not amused by Gordon’s artistic sensibility and imposed severe restrictions, including faculty censorship, on any of his future productions. So he and his ensemble moved off campus and founded the Broom Street Theater. Gordon directed the premiere production at the theatre but, with his strong personality, soon ran into some ugly power politics in this new group. As a result of artistic differences, they voted him off the board and locked him out of the theatre. At this point, Gordon decided to organize his own company and the Organic Theater was born. He knew that local police and building inspectors would continue to make life difficult for the adventurous company in Madison. He decided to look in other directions for a supportive home for his new theatre.

On a trip to visit his mother in Chicago, Gordon met Sills again. Gordon recalls seeing *The Serpent* at Kingston Mines and Story Theater at the Body Politic. He said of Story Theatre’s influence on him, “I was knocked out by it when I first saw it. It was a very simple and direct way of working.” Sills had seen a local Chicago production of Gordon’s *The Game Show*, directed by Ted Sarantos, and Sills suggested that Gordon consider bringing his ensemble down to Chicago. “They’ll leave you alone here,” he is supposed to have said, suggesting that Gordon’s radical style would be more appreciated in the sophisticated city of Chicago.

Sills offered his help and found a performance space for the Organic Theater at the then vacant Holy Covenant Methodist Church on Diversey Avenue. The Organic’s first production in Chicago was a

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7 Fox, 5.
non-verbal adaptation of Orwells' *Animal Farm*, which was staged with the actors in tights and leotards and the audience sitting on the floor. Roger Dettmer of the *Chicago Tribune* described the show as "of few words but much grunting." 8

When Sills' troupe left the Body Politic to move Story Theater's production of *Aesop's Fables* to New York, Gordon moved the Organic into the air-conditioned 150-seat space. For the Organic's first production at the Body Politic, Gordon adapted Homer's *The Odyssey* in a similar bare bones style with few words and much action. A critic, puzzled by this off-beat group in long hair and leotards, called them "undernourished but interesting." 9

The company was run as a collective with Gordon as the group's artistic guiding light. Gordon, however, ultimately had the final say in most artistic matters. Sharing all the work as well as profits, the amateur actors took up a collection after each performance, and, after setting some cash aside for weekly expenses, the ensemble divided the rest equally amongst themselves, earning from $50 to $150 per week, depending on the success of the show. The ensemble, at first, consisting of Gordon's wife, Carolyn Purdy-Gordon, Cecil O'Neal and two other actors from Madison grew slowly into a group of eleven during the three and a half years at the Body Politic.


9 Colander, N. pag.

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In 1970, the group developed a piece called *Tarot Cards*, based on the mystical characters suggested by the cards. This second show at the Body Politic was, by most accounts, a dismal flop, but the group persevered. In 1971, the Organic’s next show, based on Voltaire’s *Candide*, was a hit, breaking all attendance records for the Body Politic space. Paula Meinetz Shapiro describes the Organic’s successful adaptation:

The lively company handles delicate tasks, such as audience participation in *Candide*, with sophistication and skill; they actually had businessmen—crew-cut, grey suit and all—acting like sheep and enjoying it. *Candide* broke all attendance records and was extended for a 25-week run.\(^\text{10}\)

*Candide* was so successful that the group received an invitation from Joe Papp to bring it to New York for a brief run at the Public Theater. Upon their return to Chicago, the company disbanded, partly due to exhaustion and the intensity of the ensemble work as well as to recover economically from the expensive New York trip.

In 1971, Carolyn Purdy-Gordon and Cecil O’Neal joined Gordon to re-form the company for the Organic’s *Poe*. The company worked with nearly twenty actors during *Poe* before finally settling on a group of seven that began to develop a working style together. Gordon described the ensemble’s highly physical regime as part Marine boot camp, part Grotowski, and part yoga with special skills

\(^{10}\text{Shapiro, 28.}\)
like gymnastics and combat learned as needed. This high energy style called for big physical characters and strong visual action and such stylization became part of the Organic's method for adapting literature to the stage.

The company was developing their own way of generating a text. Poe, for example, was scripted by Steven Most, working collectively with the members of the ensemble. Using the energy and imagination of the ensemble in improvisational rehearsals, raw material was provided for one or two "writers" to record, edit, and rework in successive rehearsals until a complete group-generated work evolved. Gordon's use of improvisation to shape a text was very similar to the Compass Players' method of using scenarios and improvisation to create performances. This group-writing technique became a hallmark of the Organic's style.

The collective imagination of the ensemble offered a creative high which conventional theatre didn't. Years later, company member Richard Fire described the fervor of this visionary bunch:

It was like a religious calling, this work in the theater. The theater said, "Hey you, come over here. This is where you belong." We were going for something like what Theresa must have felt when they shot her with those arrows... passion, ecstasy and a lot of blood.

We were to be a Company producing original theater, working together from show to show, supporting ourselves by

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11 Fox, 5.
this collective endeavor. We were in love and wanted to make magic. We wanted to be the priests of the theater and to be called by their special name: Artists.\textsuperscript{12}


During their 1971 production of Poe at the Body Politic, the Organic took a rudimentary audience survey which provided information on the sorts of people coming to the Lincoln Avenue theatre. The results are strikingly different from the typical demographics of more established cultural institutions. The age breakdown, for example, was:

- 15-25 years old - 60\% of audience
- 25-40 years old - 30\% of audience
- 40-60 years old - 4\% of audience

Geographically, 70\% of the audience came from the city as compared to 30\% from the suburbs. Occupational categories included 25\% students, 15\% blue collar, and 10\% white collar while previous theatre-going percentages revealed that 60\% were visiting for the first time and 40\% had been

to the theatre at least once before. These numbers seem to suggest that the Organic was drawing a younger, hipper crowd and many were discovering the theatre for the first time.

In December of 1971, the Organic opened *WARP!*, described as "the world's first science-fiction, epic-adventure play in serial form" at the Body Politic and it quickly became the biggest hit in Off-Loop theatre's short history. Based on the style of Marvel comics, *WARP!* was a mind-blowing, tripped-out comic book on stage. The plot was a classic struggle, good versus evil, set in the fifth dimension. A meek bank teller, David Carson, was transformed by the galactic guru, Lugulbanda, and his soldier maiden, Sargon, into the mighty Lord Cumulus who then battles throughout the Universe against the Prince of Madness, Chaos and the evil goddess, Valaria. The script was developed by the ensemble, through improvisation and team-writing, and was so popular that *WARP!* eventually became a three part series. Chicago had never seen anything like this production in the Organic's wildly imaginative and highly physical style.

Lenny Kleinfeld, who co-wrote the script with Stuart Gordon under the name Bury St. Edmund, described the style of *WARP!*, "It looked like a cartoon, was as loud as a garage band, and generally embodied the psychedelic exhilaration of the late 1960s." This

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14Lenny Kleinfeld, "20 Years of Great Performances," *Chicago* December 1990: 122.

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was a kind of experimental theatre that Chicago could really enjoy; it was wildly entertaining and not at all "like going to the dentist," which was just the way Gordon thought theatre should be.

Avant garde director and writer Gary Houston described the acting style in WARP!:

Actors changed personae rapidly, often back and forth, from drab earthlings to exotic extraterrestrials. The "acting style" was akin to Second City's: actors were not trying to create various characters, they were simply assuming them--throwing on and off such things as hats and eyeglasses, at least for the earthlings, and keeping vocal indications of "character" to a minimum.¹⁵

Due to WARP!'s popularity, the company went on to produce a total of three episodes by July of 1972. The original episode was subtitled My Battlefield . . . My Body, the second Unleashed! Unchained!, and the third and final episode, which concluded the monumental struggle for the survival of the universe, was called To Die. . . . Alive! The prevailing opinion of the WARP! saga was that it was fun, pure and simple. Critic Linda Winer describes the special silliness of the homemade special effects:

Gordon, director of the Organic Theater since it began two years ago, has made a magical production of supernatural effects so slick one hardly has to suspend disbelief. The ray guns may be corkscrews, but they shoot real rays. The

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characters may be acting, but they fly off the cushy raked stage every time a thunderbolt of pain shoots through them.16

Apparently there was substance under the populist spectacle as well. Audiences were moved by the Organic's ability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary through its tongue-in-cheek theatrical magic. Terry Curtis Fox praises the completion of the WARP! trilogy in his Reader review.

Every promise that WARP! had made was fulfilled last Friday night, and every objection I have had about the play (especially the second episode) was demolished. To Die . . . Alive! is not merely a stunning achievement in its own right; it manages to give a unity, structure and purpose to the entire trilogy which makes WARP! as important, joyous, and significant a play as any now being performed on any stage in the country.17

For those in the Organic company, this praise, even if slightly extravagant, was manna from heaven and helped them justify the hard work and miserable pay that they had endured. Richard Fire describes the building of ensemble feeling in those early days:

Our work reflected our commitment to the collective process, not to a particular party or platform. It was ensemble work . . . together work . . . the work of exploration and discovery. We wrote plays together, improvising in front of a tape recorder and later editing those transcriptions. We


adapted novels like *Huck Finn* together. We painted the sets, hung the lights, swept out the theater, plunged the toilets together. . . .

Paul Sills told us you had to step off the cliff out into the unknown or you weren't doing it. And we believed him.

We financed our early operations on faith. We rehearsed for free. We sold ads in homemade programs to local merchants. We begged and borrowed props and costumes and lumber for sets and we hoped for good reviews and popular success. And, of course, we lucked into the special magic of that most elusive of theatrical phenomenon, a hit! *WARP!*

Saturday nights we sat on the floor of the light booth—which was also our green room and divided the cash into piles, everyone getting an equal share. It was great fun while it lasted.18

In February of 1973, the Organic took *WARP!* to Broadway but the response of the New York critics was less than kind. Clive Barnes' review in the *New York Times* was cold and condescending.

The company here is from Chicago. It calls itself the Organic Theater Company and this mythic brush with the universe has apparently brought a great deal of local renown. . . . For comic-book addicts in search of a childhood they never had, lost, or are currently sustaining, *Warp* might well be a lot of fun. Others are warned that, while it is cleverly done, it is at heart a one-joke evening. But some people like one-joke evenings. Go with friends, and go at least a little cheerful, if not actually high.19

18Fire, 3.

The show was a financial disaster and closed after six performances. This failure nearly destroyed the company. Gordon recalls their dismal return, “We came back to Chicago with no theater, no company and no money to produce a new show.”

Organic Style

It took some time but Gordon and the Organic bounced back. The core of the company stayed together and Gordon began recruiting new members and looking for a space the Organic could call its own. A major source of Gordon’s resilience lay in his dedication to the concept of ensemble. He was developing a directorial style and was determined to keep working with a company as Todd London observed in his 1990 Chicago retrospective article in American Theatre.

Underneath the comic-book energy and the anything-is-possible aesthetic was Gordon’s fierce devotion to the concept of company, an ethic he claims to have inherited from Sills. In Gordon’s words, Chicago provided “an environment where companies could stay together.”

But just barely. Gordon used long rehearsal periods, theatre games, and improvisation to pull his company together. He came from the learn-by-doing school and didn’t much believe in drama

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21London, 60.
school acting technique. He needed actors with high levels of physical energy and good improvisational instincts, not what he considered artificial, classical training.

"Technique is a lot of bullshit--a dead approach," he [Gordon] says. "An actor has to get himself into a trance. The company is like a bunch of addicts. We want the strongest possible feedback from the audience. First the actor understands, then the audience picks up on it. You don't get this from an actor when he is reciting lines or moving a certain way just because he's in a Shakespearean play."22

**Organic's move to the Uptown Hull-House**

In the fall of 1973, Gordon and the Organic finally found and moved into their own space, the Leo Lerner Theater in the Uptown Hull House at 4520 Beacon Street. Their first production fit well into the Organic's new, multiracial Uptown neighborhood. *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit* by Ray Bradbury was the story of five down-and-out Puerto Ricans who decide to pool their money and buy a shared suit. Each then gets a turn to wear the suit that is as white as "banana ice cream," hoping that it will fulfill their most exotic fantasies. Critic Denise DeClue discovered that, in addition to being a good time, the play opened her eyes to the multicultural aspects of her own Chicago neighborhood.

It's really a wonderful, rousing play. It sweeps you along with up-beat Latin music and whooping and hollering, hand slapping, back and butt-punching greeting rituals. It's expertly executed and a helluva lot of fun.

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Consciousnesses are raised and perceptions altered at such events as theatre productions. Feelings change when life is perceived in a new way. And that's what Stuart Gordon does with Ray Bradbury's script. He's giving us middle classers a view of urban Latin culture—a view from the inside. He's introducing us to that gaggle of threatening [Latinos], hanging out on the corner or moving down the block, and son of a bitch! --they turn out to be nice guys.23

The Organic ensemble had gone through another major contraction and expansion process after the WARP! disaster in New York. Five original members, Cordis Fejer, Cookie Gluck, Carolyn Gordon, David Gordon, and William J. Norris, had been joined by Dennis Franz, Joe Mantegna, Joseph Martinez, John Paoletti, Michael Saad, and Bruce (later Meshach) Taylor. In these early years, each set of new challenges seemed to make the core of the Organic company stronger and more determined. Richard Christiansen offered some of his perceptions on Gordon's growing vision as a director.

The Organic has moved up to 4520 N. Beacon St., into the Leo Lerner Theater of Uptown Hull House. It is not the most accessible place in the city, but right now it is the most exciting theater in town. The Organic is more a concept than a company these days. Only three of the cast of The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit, a play by Ray Bradbury which is the Organic's current offering, have appeared under the company banner before. Yet at the same time, the entire cast has the discipline and specific acting style we have come to expect from an Organic production, a testament to Stuart Gordon's talents as a director of actors as well as to the strength of his vision of a theater as something distinct but not apart from his vision of a single show.

It is this quality which sets Gordon apart from everyone else in this town. It is not, as some have suggested, merely a matter of the controlled athleticism which Gordon quite properly demands of all his actors, nor his superb ability to weld a group of actors into a cohesive unit. Rather, it is his conception of a theater as a super magic show, a place where the actors invite the audience to watch them take a simple and clearly defined space and transform it momentarily into a place where the rules of gravity and logic do not apply.

It is, in many ways, a theater built on essentials, and thus quite close to the story theater concept from which the Organic grew.\textsuperscript{24}

The \textit{Wonderful Ice Cream Suit} was successful enough to be selected for the Organic's tour of Europe and was revived again in 1975 for a 10-week run at Victory Gardens Theater.

Next, Gordon's love of spectacle produced the Organic's version of an Elizabethan revenge play, \textit{Bloody Bess} which opened in March of 1974. Full of sword fights, lady pirates bent on revenge, and evil noblemen, the play offered plenty of opportunity for derring-do but wasn't judged one of the company's more satisfying works.

The following Organic production was more auspicious. Stuart Gordon directed the Chicago premiere of David Mamet's \textit{Sexual Perversity in Chicago} which opened in June of 1974 at the Organic's Leo Lerner Theatre. Gordon's flair for raunchy comedy and Mamet's lustful, lovelorn dialogue were an excellent match. Though some critics were uncomfortable with the raw language and found the plot empty, the play resonated for Chicago audiences. Christiansen was

\textsuperscript{24}Richard Christiansen, "Class and Crass in Chicago Theater," \textit{Chicago Reader} 19 October 1973: 7.
much more positive in his review and called the production, "so sweet, sad, understanding and utterly believable that it just about knocked me out with pleasure." Sexual Perversity was one of the Organic's few successful productions with a conventional script. Most of their later successes were with company-developed scripts. This landmark Off-Loop production brought considerable attention to the young local playwright, Mamet, with much more to come.

In the fall of 1974, the Organic took their productions of Bloody Bess and The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit on a European tour for two months. The company found enthusiastic reactions and a fascination with mythology of the city of Chicago during performances in Amsterdam, Brussels, Hamburg, and other smaller cities. In an article he wrote after the tour, Gordon observed that the company earned "nothing less than rave reviews" everywhere they appeared. He also bemoaned the difference in arts spending between European cities like Amsterdam and Brussels and American cities like Chicago which had virtually no arts funding.

Gordon explained the chief strategy behind his company, begun 10 years ago with almost no money, as "believing that theater should be fun, not like going to the dentist." In an earlier brochure, he described the 160-seat Organic as a place for "people who otherwise hate the theatre, who find it pretentious, boring, and expensive."  


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Gordon had developed a style of adapting a work of literature with his company and he now turned that skill toward Mark Twain's masterpiece, *The Adventures of Huck Finn*. "The gimmick of the production is that there are no gimmicks. We can cut, but we can't rewrite," said Gordon.

He tells of the concern of one of his black actors surrounding the political aspects of the book. At first offered the role of Jim, actor Bruce (Meshach) Taylor was reluctant to accept the role because he was worried about being accused of playing an "Uncle Tom" character. But after reading the book and hearing Gordon's assurances that Jim would be the moral center of the play as he is in the original Twain, Taylor accepted the role.

Gordon divided the story into two parts, for thematic reasons as well as making it possible to do more of the book in two full-length evenings. Gordon's earlier tactics of assaulting the audience were beginning to mellow. Of his style in *Huck Finn* he said, "We used to make audiences think we were raping them. Now we try seduction. Huck begins *Adventures* by talking to the audience and, bit by bit, pulls them into the action."28

Christiansen called the production "triumphant" and went on to praise Gordon's staging and adaptation:

Gordon's command of his stage is by now practically consummate, and his blazing theatrical talent, coupled with

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27Roger Dettmer, "The Organic grows up and tackles *Huck Finn*," *Chicago Tribune* 2 February 1975: N. pag.

28Dettmer, N. pag.
his almost childlike delight in and devotion to the wonders of a good story, have produced a show that both honors and exalts the immense humanity of this greatest of all American stories. . . . And the supreme passage in the novel, when Huck humbly realizes how deeply his spiteful tricks have humiliated his fellow human being, Jim, is done so simply, so softly, so beautifully that I found myself weeping uncontrollably at its conclusion.29

Brian Hickey’s Huck got good notices from the major Chicago critics with the exception of Sun-Times critic Glenna Syse who suggested that he was too clean and pale to have ever “felt the ooze of Mississippi mud.” But this was the only discordant note in a chorus of praise for the production. Bruce (Meshach) Taylor’s Jim, Jack Wallace’s Pap and several comic characterizations of Joseph Mantegna were cited by most critics as being especially noteworthy.

Roger Dettmer, the stuffiest of Chicago critics and not an early fan of Gordon’s adventurous theatre, spoke about the company’s maturation.

Organic Theater may have assimilated techniques from Story Theater, Environmental Theater, that of Cruelty, and all the other subspecies, but has evolved a unit of expression and oneness of purpose that mark Stuart Gordon, at 27, as Chicago’s reigning resident director. And beyond that, now, a Renaissance Man of the theater.30


30Roger Dettmer. "Huck Finn is alive and swell." Chicago Tribune. 7 February 1975: sec. 3: 3.
Part II of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn followed in April 1975 and the two shows played in repertory. This minimally staged but fully imagined adaptation of one of America’s richest novels preceded by more than five years the Royal Shakespeare Company’s adaptation of Charles Dickens’ Nicholas Nickleby which appeared on Broadway in 1981. The local PBS affiliate, WTTW/Channel 11, went on to televise Huckle Finn.

The Uptown neighborhood surrounding the Leo Lerner Hull House Theater could be a little scary. In an interview in 1975 with Roger Dettmer, Gordon recounts a revealing story about his relationship with the community. One evening as they were walking to the theater, a couple Organic patrons were being hassled by some neighborhood kids. Gordon calmly intervened, telling the kids that he worked at the neighborhood theatre. One of the kids challenged his claim to be a part of the neighborhood by saying, “Yeah, you work here, man, but when you’re finished, you can leave. We gotta stay. We gotta live here!” A short time later, Gordon decided the kid was right and moved into the neighborhood to strengthen his ties to the area.31

By January 1976, the Organic company was 20 members strong. The theatre was growing up and becoming a recognized arts institution in the city. The Organic had received grants and encouragement from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, ranking it in the company of established theatres like the Goodman and the Guthrie. They had remounted a successful production of The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit at Victory

31Dettmer, "The Organic grows up and tackles Huckle Finn: N. pag. 165
Gardens Theater while continuing *The Beckoning Fair One* at its Uptown Leo Lerner Theater, producing in two locations simultaneously. The theatre had had a series of hit productions but hadn't been able to make it past the hand-to-mouth stage of development. Chicago's most radical Off-Loop theatre began to realize the need to become an institution and develop some degree of financial stability.

The theatre persuaded two capable young business managers to help them get organized. Stuart Oken, then 24, had served a year as business manager at Drury Lane Theatre and Michael Stoneall had two years experience as general manager at Pheasant Run Dinner Theatre. They planned to keep the Leo Lerner Theater for experimental work but were seeking a larger theatre such as the Ivanhoe in which to mount larger, more profitable productions in a better location. It would take several years for the Organic to make the move to a larger home.

Later in 1976, while adapting Roald Dahl's *Switch Bitch* as their next production, Gordon described the way he and the Organic ensemble developed a playable script from a work of literature. First he and the company read the book thoroughly, using different colored markers to highlight passages that would become dialogue, narration, and stage directions. The company read the book aloud together, chapter by chapter, discussing characters and visualizing scenes. Then, working from a framework of scenes held together by
narration, the company began to improvise, adding and adapting dialogue, compressing plot and combining characters, when necessary.32

Switch Bitch was another Organic hit. Christiansen called the three one-acts "a shrewdly selected evening of sex comedy, perfect for summer fare, and I'm willing to bet that there isn't another small troupe in the country that could have pulled it off with the flawless acting and impeccable production provided here by director Stuart Gordon and his matchless company."33 Unfortunately, when adapting a living author's work, the Organic discovered that they didn't always have artistic control of the piece. In this case, author Dahl came to see the production and liked it. He and an English producer invited the company to come to London and Dahl sent his own revised version of the script to the Organic. Dahl's script was terrible, according to company member Richard Fire, and the Organic was never able to perform their version of the piece again after that.

The Organic used their rowdy, contemporary sensibility when approaching a 1976 production of Ben Jonson's Volpone, the first in Chicago since 1928. Since the Organic troupers were not known for their classical skills, Gordon cut the script's abundant Elizabethan verbiage. According to the Tribune's Linda Winer the result was not so much Ben Jonson's play but "Gordon with his endearing sense of

32Henning, 208.

the hideous . . . in a monster mash . . . [with] genitals, juvenilia, and memorabilia enough to bore you but not nearly as often as their ingenuity enchants."\(^{34}\) Gordon's talents were much better suited to contemporary work and this became the company's primary direction.

In late 1976, Gordon and real estate lawyer, Stuart Glicken, came up with a plan to find a larger home for the Organic. They rejected government agencies and corporate foundations as possible sources for the large amount of money needed to buy and renovate a theatre space and they decided to create a tax-sheltered investment opportunity instead. They approached Chicago arts patrons Lester and Hope Abelson. Ms. Abelson had been a successful New York producer, with both Off-Broadway and the huge Lincoln Center project, and she became interested in the plan. The proposal called for a syndicate of private investors who would purchase the Buckingham Theatre at 865-75 W. Buckingham for approximately $250,000 and then guarantee a $600,000 loan for the necessary renovations. The Abelsons agreed to participate and the Borg Warner Foundation was the first foundation to pledge support for $100,000 to encourage other corporate participants.

The building, originally built as a garage in 1913, became a movie house during World War II. After it was gutted by a fire in the 1950s, the cavernous building was used as an industrial film studio as well as the home of the Chicago Outlaws motorcycle gang. In January 1977, plans were announced to build a 450-seat theatre

\(^{34}\)Henning, 208.
with renovation costs estimated at $500,000. By the time the renovation was actually completed the cost had risen to $1.2 million.

Raising the money for the renovations turned out to be much more difficult than expected. Part of the problem was that major Chicago corporate contributors were not forthcoming. Corporate donors were well aware of the prestige of supporting Chicago's more established arts institutions such as the Art Institute, the Lyric Opera and the Symphony. Chicago's Off-Loop theatre was so new that many corporations were not familiar with the individual theatres and their need for support. Also image conscious corporations may have been reluctant to support anti-Establishment groups such as the Organic for fear of embarrassment. As Joel Henning suggests, "After all, good or bad, a symphony concert can hardly embarrass a corporate sponsor unless Sir Georg Solti's pants fall down. On the other hand, clothes often come off actors on the Organic stage." 35

Part of the Organic's attempt to become more business savvy in the Chicago theatre world involved offering their first subscription season. This was difficult since Gordon had always opposed the idea of a subscription season as too Establishment and too boring for the avant-garde company. His interest was in artistic not money matters.

I want the Organic to surprise the audience. Conventional subscriptions are for people who like to work their lives out in advance--like our parent's generation. I want people there

because it's fun, not a cult obligation like going to the dentist. It's real boring when a theatre lays out the whole season at the beginning. 36

But financial realities were beginning to sink in and Gordon's attitudes had to change. If the Organic was to survive it needed some financial consistency instead of relying on an occasional hit which would run long enough to pay off the accumulated debt. The investors insisted that Gordon plan a subscription campaign and Chicago's own subscription guru, Danny Newman of the Lyric Opera, was brought in to advise. Plans were put forward by Newman targeting a subscription audience of 18,000 for the Organic, which would place it ahead of the Goodman's 15,300 subscribers. This would turn out to be an unrealistic goal.

Meanwhile, the Organic continued producing in its Uptown location. In December of 1976, the Reader's Michael VerMuelen wrote about the ultra-realistic quality of the work developed by the Organic in their production of Cops:

While their last production of Ben Jonson's Volpone showed the Organic at its thinnest, Cops has them back in their metier: namely contemporary American drama.

Gordon and his actors create such strongly natural images that the play rivets our attention to the stage. Under any other theatre's auspices, I'm sure Cops could prove deadening.37

36Henning, 210-211.

Gordon recalled one of the first previews of *Cops* which they performed for a group of Chicago policemen. The play was unflinching in its gritty portrayal of Chicago's mean streets and some of its meaner cops. Gordon was nervous about the group's reaction, as he said "the first time we played in front of an armed audience." Instead the cops loved the show and even offered advice on how to make it more realistic, including ideas such as "'After you shoot the guy down,' suggested one policeman, 'you should kick him.'"38

In 1977, the Organic company created *Bleacher Bums* from an idea company member Joseph Mantegna had about the die-hard fans of the city's perpetual underdogs, the Chicago Cubs. Also a Cubs fan, Mantegna had spent many afternoons in the "friendly confines" of Wrigley stadium. His fellow Organic actors could not believe the stories he told about the crazy fans in the bleachers. To develop the play, the Organic actors went to the ballpark, followed a particular fan during the game and then used their observations as the basis for a character. Rehearsals began with improvisations using these characters, then the taped improvisations were condensed and scripted into the play. *Bleacher Bums* went right to the heart of the blue collar Chicago spirit. The rowdy camaraderie of the play's sports fans was similar to the rough and ready spirit of Chicago theatre itself. The undying loyalty of the Cubs fans mirrored the gutsy appeal that many small neighborhood theatres had to their audiences. Critic William Albright commented, "This highly

38Christiansen, N. pag.
entertaining and ultimately touching 90-minute one-act is truly an organic theater product. Written by Chicago about Chicago for Chicago, it is a sterling example of what home-grown Chicago theater is all about—and what makes it so alive and special.  

_Bleacher Bums_ was another Organic hit and ran for two months. Michael VerMeulen characterized it as:

A terrific summer trifle: lightweight, disposable, and mildly intoxicating, like cold beer and Cracker Jacks for the stage. A drama built around no single idea or conflict as much as on the incorruptibility of total faith, it is a droll study of a group of people who are truly characters. . . . "Dis ain't a ballgame," says one of them, "it's a fuckin' circus." And of course, he's right—a circus with each character acting as a different ring. 

That fall, the Organic took the production to Off-Broadway where it ran for nine weeks and became the company's first real New York success. The play was also the second Organic production to be televised locally by WTTW/Channel 11 in 1978.

After several years of trying to line up financial support and watching renovation costs climb to $1.5 million, the Organic finally announced in 1980 that it was abandoning its plans to move to the Buckingham Theatre. The theatre's finances were not helped by two years of mediocre productions, 1979-80, which had caused operating deficits to soar.

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Move to the Buckingham

The Organic didn’t give up easily. It was not until the summer of 1981 that the Organic was finally able to line up the necessary financial backing to complete its move to the Buckingham. According to Gordon, the move was made possible by a $225,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and by several of the theatre’s benefactors who decided to donate the building to the company instead of renting the building to them as originally planned. Money from the NEA grant and matching funds provided for basic renovations to the 10,000 square foot space including flexible seating for 500, lighting grid, thrust stage, and, courtesy of Borg Warner Corporation, 60 tons of air conditioning equipment.

Unfortunately, the company’s adaptations of Mary Renault’s *The King Must Die* and William Kotzwinkle’s *Dr. Rat* were not successful. Critic Tom Valeo commented in his *Dr. Rat* review that “the show falls short, stumbling--like so many recent Organic works--over a disturbing lack of professionalism. Is Stuart Gordon burning out?” The subscription campaign hadn’t gone as planned and the company’s financial future looked grim once more.

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41 Richard Christiansen, “Organic Theater will open '81 season in Old Buckingham,” *Chicago Tribune* date unknown: N. pag.

E/R saves the day

The company had developed a collective style of writing plays on *Bleacher Bums* which it used again on its hit production of *E/R Emergency Room*, first produced in February of 1982. When a physician friend of Gordon's, Dr. Ronald Berman, sent the theatre company a cassette recording of some of his dramatic emergency room stories, the company began to investigate making them into a theatre piece. Several company members went to area hospitals and observed the typical events in their respective emergency rooms. The company then pooled their observations and began working through improvisational scenes toward a completed script.

In the spring of 1981 while *E/R* was in rehearsal, General Manager Nick Rabkin was brought in to run a very different Organic than the storefront group of the early '70s. The theatre now had a $400,000 annual budget and needed strong management to maintain the organization's financial stability. Box office was a large variable in the company's budgetary projections. Rabkin applied some good marketing sense to the subject of *E/R* and began selling previews to hospital groups, who responded very positively to the show's dark humor. Though the production received mixed reviews initially, positive word-of-mouth made it a hit. In fact, *E/R* was the Organic's biggest hit ever; it ran for three and a half years and became the basis for a television series.

But the Organic was still in financial trouble. The original $225,000 NEA challenge grant in 1979, designed to encourage the theatre to bring in new sources of funding, was to have been
matched four to one. When the grant was given the Organic's annual budget was only $150,000 and annual contributions averaged about $46,000. This was an unusually large grant for an organization of the Organic's size. But in the explosive '70s, dynamic growth in Chicago theatre seemed certain. Under the terms of the grant, the theatre needed to find new sources of revenue amounting to $675,000 while maintaining the normal level of contributions they'd already been achieving for a total of $815,000 in contributed income over a three year period. This whopping increase proved difficult to obtain. At eighteen months, or half way through the grant period, the Organic had raised only $209,000, approximately 26% of its goal.

According to the NEA's rules, the largest contribution during the period, the $147,000 equity value of the Organic's building, was not allowable. Only cash contributions, not in-kind donations, were allowable contributions. To get credit for the donation, the Organic would have to convert its building into cash by selling it and then use the cash to buy another building.

At the end of the three-year challenge period, the theatre had raised $591,209. They applied for a one-year extension to 1983. During this 1982-83 period, the theatre opened its smash hit, E/R, and post-show appeals by the actors and general publicity brought a large increase in donations. Still, the theatre needed to raise $154,000, with seven months remaining in the one-year extension. The theatre received rental income from several shops on Clark Street that were part of the building. They also earned income from rehearsal and performance rentals. Rents from the building had
helped the theatre's cash flow and company management persuaded
the NEA to consider the $60,000 in rental income collected from
building tenants as eligible income toward the goal.

And finally, the company did it; in 1983, the last donations
came in under the wire and they made their match. The Buckingham
Theater was theirs.

The Organic as a Company

The Organic was one of the Off-Loop theatre's most solid
companies. The group stayed together and worked as a true ensemble
more than any other company during the '70s. But Stuart Gordon was
clearly the leader of his company and his artistic vision was what
the company was about. Gordon kept tight artistic control; for a long
time he was the company's only director. Joel Henning suggests in
his Chicago magazine profile that perhaps the company's disastrous
experience of bringing WARP! to New York made Gordon over-
protective. Gordon said WARP! "got mugged in New York" but the
company's two successful European tours had helped to heal those
wounds.

Over the years, however, Gordon's control of the company had
bothered some. William J. Norris, an actor who had been with the
Organic since WARP!, left the company in the late '70s in order give
his career more room to grow. He said, "I came to realize that I was
a good actor and could get further working with other directors. I no
longer trusted Stuart's judgement."43 Norris went on to say that, for

43Henning, 208.
him, the Organic style under Gordon was too exaggerated and mechanical, often lacking in emotional truth. Critics had complained over the years that audiences weren't often given characters that they could empathize with in Gordon's shows. Norris suggested that perhaps Gordon, though "a loving person offstage," might be reluctant to dramatize deep emotion onstage. 44 Company members wanted to work in other styles and with other directors to continue to grow.

After the SJWKR, E/R, the limitations were becoming clear to many company members. Everyone had always gotten an equal share of the company's weekly net—rarely more than $150 a week. This was the pay scale for members of the company throughout the '70s and '80s and people were being worn down by the economic hardships. Veteran actors began to leave the company for the money and fame available in Los Angeles or New York, despite their feelings for the ensemble.

**Stuart Gordon leaves the Organic**

Gordon's efforts to build the Organic into an established cultural institution with its own building and more stable financial management had altered the artistic nature of the theatre. To garner the support necessary to move into the Buckingham Theater, Gordon had built a solid, responsible board of directors and hired a large administrative staff. These moves permanently increased the overhead of the theatre and changed its institutional identity.

44 Henning, 209.
Gordon’s boom-or-bust financial management style and idiosyncratic artistic choices were being forced to change by institutional pressures. The more there was at stake, financially, for the theatre, the fewer risks could be taken, and Gordon loved to take risks.

Looking back at this riskiness in Gordon’s early work, critic Tom Valeo described his reaction to the experimental staging of *The Game Show* at the University of Wisconsin.

Soon everyone in the audience was praying the same prayer: Please, don’t let it be me next. When audience members balked at going onstage, ushers dragged them out of their seats, forcing them to participate. With each contestant, the level of humiliation escalated. Finally, our host told a girl to take off her clothes, and when she resisted, the ushers rushed onto the stage and ripped off her blouse. As she screamed hysterically, audience members stood up and attacked the ushers, and the melee brought the show to a halt. That’s when we learned that the contestants were all actors, and that we had spoiled our host’s final speech—about how we were all contemptible sheep willing to let anything happen to others, as long as we were spared.

I have seen hundreds of plays since *The Game Show*, but none evoked such a gut-wrenching response. Stuart Gordon’s ingenious effort made me appreciate the power of bold, audacious “experimental” theatre, while his subsequent career demonstrated the inherent contradiction in such efforts. If a company is truly innovative and experimental, it probably won’t develop the broad support it needs to survive. But if it survives, it becomes an institution with a board of directors and a big budget—elements that can tame even the wildest vision.45

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Gordon felt his theatrical vision was being tamed by the pressures of institution and success. He wanted to try new dramatic experiments but his theatre would not let him. Gordon had always been interested in filmmaking, since his student days at the University of Wisconsin, and now he wanted the Organic to expand into filmmaking, much the way Ingmar Bergman's company in Sweden alternated between theatre and film production. In 1984, Gordon proposed a film project to the Organic board of directors. He had adapted H.P. Lovecraft's novel, Re-Animator, and wanted the theatre to give this new idea a try. The conservative board rejected Gordon's proposal, stating that it preferred to focus its resources on the institution rather than subsidize Gordon's own artistic vision. In response to his board's refusal, Gordon approached L.A.'s Empire Pictures and they agreed to produce the film as a low-budget black-humor horror movie. Gordon spent the winter filming the project and took it to the Cannes Film Festival in May of 1985. The film was a hit with late-night audiences and distributors at the Cannes Film Festival and Gordon subsequently signed to direct additional horror films. The trials and tribulations of running a small Chicago theatre company, the tremendous artistic success and the constant financial struggles, had taken their toll. Gordon decided it was time to turn the company over to new leadership. In the summer of 1985, Stuart Gordon left the Organic Theater for Hollywood.
His friend and colleague, Lenny Kleinfeld, described his departure as the end of an era in Chicago theatre. It was the last of the age of Aquarius and the dawning of a new era of institutionalization:

And so Stuart Gordon makes a classic movie exit. Getting out one jump ahead of the suit-and-tie, facts-and-figures boys. Leaving the crowded, bustling boom town that had been a lonely outpost on the theatrical frontier when he arrived 15 years earlier. He's riding west, into the sunset. And probably trying to figure out how to improve the sunset. And then reproduce it indoors. And maybe make it one of the characters. And... 46

Troubled leadership

After the departure of Gordon, the Organic was never quite the same. A new artistic director, Thomas Riccio, was appointed in May 1985. Although originally from Ohio, Riccio had been Robert Brustein's assistant at American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts and had worked with avant-garde companies in Italy as well as Ellen Stewart's Cafe LaMama in New York. He wanted to bring European performance art and avant-garde work to the Organic. He headed the company for the next two years and his tenure was an artistic disaster.

One of Riccio's first efforts at the Organic was a play titled Rubber City which he wrote and directed. Critic Tom Valeo described the piece as "a chaotic work about the last day in the life of an Elvis


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Impersonator." Riccio abandoned ensemble casting to use the larger Chicago acting pool, then proceeded to cast his wife as the Marilyn Monroe character in the play. This did not make Riccio popular with the remaining members of Gordon's company.

Another attempt to rekindle the high energy Organic spirit was Riccio's Betawulf, which Christiansen described as a "fantasy-feminist-kung fu-No Nukes-Road Warrior-Wizard of Oz-Chicago Bears version" of Beowulf. The piece earned terrible reviews and audiences stayed away in droves.

In 1986, the Organic appointed Richard Friedman to the new position of General Manager. This structural change divided administrative and artistic functions along more traditional regional theatre lines than ever before at the Organic. As founding editor and publisher of the Yellow Press, Friedman had organized poetry readings and workshops at the Body Politic from 1972 to 1978. From 1977 to 1983, he worked in the Chicago Office of Fine Arts, administering grants programs and had acquired good administrative skills there.

Unfortunately for Friedman, however, the Organic Theater was, once again, in financial trouble. The phenomenal success of E/R had caused some problems by coming to the theatre's rescue. It had given a picture of financial success to the public that had actually driven away benefactors. Also many of Riccio's artistically risky

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productions had bombed at the box office, quickly eating up any cash reserves. The Organic had the big beautiful theatre they had always wanted but there was no company of actors left and no money to mount new productions.

The Organic, in its struggle to stay healthy, inaugurated the Greenhouse program in their upstairs studio space, a program which benefitted the Chicago theatre community. This program encouraged emerging non-Equity companies to use Organic rehearsal and performance space in exchange for reduced rent and work details and enabled the Organic to continue renovations and upgrading of the facilities. With a reduction in its own artistic and economic resources, the Organic earned revenue by having other companies fill its space with their artistic output. The Organic also used the space for its own classes, workshops, playreadings, and showcases. Despite initial union objections that the Organic, an Equity theatre, was producing non-Equity work through the Greenhouse, the program was touted as a model for theatre groups and individual performance artists working together to improve collective economic survival.

In a newspaper report by Sid Smith, Riccio announced the formation of a new 10-member company of non-Equity artists and plans to begin producing again in the 1987-88 season. "Essentially, we're a brand new company," he said. "We've gone back to zero." At the same time, Riccio revealed that general contractors and city inspectors had identified the need for repairs to the building totaling $700,000. Rental revenue under the Greenhouse program had
been disappointing and contingency plans were made to sell storefront portions of the building or to sell the entire building and move the Organic elsewhere.

We don’t want to sell, but the way we’re operating at present isn’t doing us any good, either,” he said. “We’ve become embroiled in real estate, and our art has been lost in the struggle. We’d like to operate a not-for-profit arts complex here, but the bottom line is our own company.49

A major factor in the worsening condition of the Organic was, oddly enough, the Greenhouse program which was meant to help its financial condition. In fact, this situation did become a model in a sadder, more practical sense for other Off-Loop theatres. When a young theatre could afford to purchase its own performance space, it significantly improved its chances of economic survival. However, in several cases, as the company matured and lost its sense of artistic direction in the struggle to survive, the company became the landlord for newer, more dynamic groups in its own space. These groups then had the freedom to use the space without administrative or maintenance expenses themselves. This shift of administrative responsibilities allowed the tenant companies to succeed artistically while continuing to drain artistic energy from the parent company and preventing its return to artistic viability. This was the fate of the Organic as it became the caretaker of its own building and eventually, ceased production altogether.

Riccio’s programming of the Greenhouse seemed to present a conflict for him between promoting progressive Chicago artists and attempting to force an East Coast avant-garde sensibility on what he perceived as a backward Midwestern audience. He offered performance space to such Chicago companies as Remains Theatre, City Lit, Chicago New Plays Festival, and MinaSama-No. But, despite the financial situation at the Organic, Riccio insisted on booking such rarified acts as Dutch performance artist, Ton Pompert, a play about the Sandinistas by the Theatre de Banlieue of Belgium, and Italian solo artist Dario D’Ambrosi’s Ne Mico’ mio. Chicago audiences have never responded well to international performance art, considering it much too stuffy; after all, at least Stuart Gordon’s examples of avant-garde work were never boring.

In the summer of 1988, Riccio resigned from the Organic to take a university teaching post in Fairbanks, Alaska. After his departure, his former artistic coordinator at the Organic, Ronald Falzone, analyzed the reasons for his lack of success in a letter to the Chicago Reader:

Tom was always willing to prejudge and form impressions based on little or no information if that prejudgment favored his preconceived opinion. . . . Tom is and always has been quick to make the statement that Chicagoans have a “midwestern sensibility,” that somehow it is important for us to shed our “staid” ways and become . . . Become what? At no point in my time with Tom did I ever know of him to suggest an answer to
this question. His interest was never in either the question or the answer. He only seemed interested in the graphic depictions of our "wasted lives."\textsuperscript{50}

Falzone was right; one of the biggest mistakes one can make in Chicago theatre is to ignore the sense of community in either the audience or the artists. Riccio had tried to impose his own artistic sensibility on both with unfortunate results.

After Riccio's resignation in the summer of 1988, long-time Organic actor, writer, and board member, Richard Fire, was appointed Artistic Director. Fire announced his intention to bring back former Organic actors such as Joe Mantegna, Meshach Taylor, Andre de Shields, and Dennis Franz as well as founder Stuart Gordon. He also planned to rebuild the producing capabilities of the theatre by developing new plays in the Greenhouse Lab while renting the mainstage to generate income and reduce the company's $35,000 deficit. And in 1989, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Organic Theater, Mantegna returned to direct a revival of the archetypal Chicago play, \textit{Bleacher Bums}. As the decade came to an end, the Organic was on the road to recovery but it had lost its artistic leader and with it, the artistic vision the theatre had once represented.

CHAPTER 5

ST. NICHOLAS THEATER

St. Nicholas was a theatre company that changed the face of Off-Loop theatre through its professional and institutional ambitions. The theatre grew more rapidly and received national recognition sooner than any other Off-Loop company. The theatre's four founders had strong organizational as well as artistic skills but all left Chicago for opportunity elsewhere and the theatre died as quickly as it had grown. St. Nicholas was one of the Off-Loop companies formed by a group of university students who had worked together in school. They then came to Chicago, home town of their teacher, David Mamet, to find a nurturing environment for their new theatre company.

St. Nicholas Theater Company was formed in 1972 in Vermont by teacher and playwright, David Mamet, and a group of his students from Goddard and Marlboro colleges. Mamet graduated from Goddard College, then returned for a year as a lecturer at Marlboro College followed by two years as a visiting artist at Goddard. He and a group of his students formed their own theatre company "to investigate aspects of the Stanislavski system," according to their mission.
statement in early programs. They named the new theatre company after Nicholas of Maya, who they mistook for the patron saint of actors. Later they claimed they had named the company for the patron saint of "mountebanks, prostitutes, and the demimonde."¹

The first public performance of St. Nicholas Theatre Company was Mamet's Duck Variations on a double bill with Chekhov's The Marriage Proposal at Vermont College in Montpelier, Vermont. Prophetically, Professor Gordon Gayer of Vermont College wrote about this 1972 college theatre group production, "The continuity of art is clear. David Mamet and his troupe are serious artists."²

The new theatre group obtained a 6-week residency in the summer of 1972 at the Boston Center for the Arts. There they performed early versions of two of Mamet's plays, Duck Variations and Clark St. or Perversity in Chicago, an early draft of Sexual Perversity in Chicago.

During August of 1972, Mamet returned to Chicago for a hometown production of his play Duck Variations, staged by Fritzie Sahlins, the former wife of Second City producer Bernie Sahlins, in the Body Politic's downstairs New Room, also known as the "Rug Room." Mamet was still interested in all aspects of theatre; teaching, writing, even acting, and he was looking for the best place to start his theatre career.

¹Squirrels program notes, CTC-SNT 1/7.

After the summer, the St. Nicholas company regrouped and mounted their last Vermont production, O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, directed by Mamet at Goddard College. It didn't appear that there was much of a future for a traveling theatre troupe in Vermont so Mamet and other members of the group went their own ways at the end of the school year. When his teaching contract expired, Mamet returned to Chicago in the summer of 1973 "because I didn't have any money and because I always believed in the old saying that if you can't make it in Chicago, you can't make it anywhere."³

He lived in the Lincoln Hotel at 1800 North Lincoln Avenue ("For $130 a month, you got maid service, TV, an answering service, and all-night restaurant in the same building and a view of the lake."⁴) where he wrote, working daily on a new play called *American Buffalo*. The idea for the piece came out of Mamet's visits to a North Side junk shop where the clientele called him "Teach," a name he would eventually incorporate into the play. About this time, Mamet also met the Organic's Stuart Gordon, whose *WARP!* trilogy had played opposite *Duck Variations* at the Body Politic. Gordon read and agreed to direct Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. Gordon,


⁴Christiansen, "The young lion of Chicago theater," 11.
used to working with new scripts at the Organic, aided Mamet in shaping the disconnected sketches into an audience-pleasing hit. "Stuart helped me out a lot," recalled Mamet.⁵

After Mamet’s success at the Organic, he called former students, Steven Schachter and William H. Macy in California, and convinced them to move to Chicago to rebuild St. Nicholas Theatre Company there. Mamet added some local company members; actress Linda Kimbrough, musician Alaric "Rokko" Jans, and University of Chicago graduate Patricia Cox. While Gordon’s company toured Europe that summer, St. Nicholas used their space and mounted their first Chicago production, Mamet’s short play, Squirrels, in the Leo Lerner Theater at Uptown Hull House on October 10, 1974.

Squirrels was a comedy about the problems of artistic creation and won positive reviews for the comic acting and directing as well as the use of language. The rarity of a new Chicago playwright brought quite a bit of attention to St. Nicholas and the play’s dialogue, though simple, seemed written to reveal interesting characters. Tribune critic Richard Christiansen called the play “an exuberant and intricate piece of poetry in the theater.” ⁶

The four founders who became the primary movers behind St. Nicholas were Mamet, Steven Schachter, William H. Macy, and Patricia Cox. Though they participated in all aspects of the developing theatre, each had their own area of interest; Mamet was a

⁵Christiansen, “The young lion of Chicago theater," 11.

writer, Schachter was a director, Macy was primarily an actor, and Patricia Cox became the jack-of-all-trades administrator in charge of publicity, marketing, development, box office, props, and anything else that needed to be done.

Their crowded apartment, above the Love Boutique at 2110 North Clark Street, was the St. Nicholas business office, rehearsal hall, audition space, conference room and crash pad. Everyone worked a survival job; Mamet and Macy were even waiters in a gay bar for a time because it was the only job they could find. They rehearsed in whatever odd hours were available. Mamet describes the group going through "incredible love-hate crises every day" during this period.7

The next St. Nicholas production, O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon, directed by Mamet, got very unfavorable reviews which cited St. Nicholas' youth and inexperience as poor preparation for O'Neill. The play was called "boring" and the acting "wooden." As Mamet recalls, "Everybody hated it."8 Poor audience response caused the production to close early.

During the summer of 1975, the theatre company, desperate for money, put together a bawdy version of Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales which they performed for $25 a day on weekends at the Gurnee Renaissance Fair. In between shows, Mamet, Macy, and Cox worked the crowds with a medieval mind reading act. Schachter got a job directing Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream at the Oak Park

7Christiansen, "The young lion of Chicago theater," 11.
8Christiansen, "The young lion of Chicago theater," 11.
Shakespeare Festival that same summer and cast Mamet, Macy, and Kimbrough in the show. Schachter updated the play with zany costumes, vaudeville humor, and rock music in what one critic called the Marx Brothers approach to Shakespeare, thereby proving the young company no serious threat to the classics.

As if performing days and evenings weren't enough, the St. Nicholas company also staged midnight performances of Mamet's children's play, *The Poet and the Rent*. Fortunately, the play had enough wit for adult audiences since few children were midnight playgoers. Richard Christiansen wrote that, "Mamet has just let his own abundant, antic imagination loose. . . . Amazingly, the production has real farcical style, performed by players with charm and skill under William H. Macy's zestful direction."^9

Also during this first 1974-75 season, St. Nicholas began offering classes in acting, voice and scene study. Mamet used the scene study classes to work on *The Poet and the Rent* and drew on actors from the classes for his cast.\(^{10}\)

Somehow in the midst of all this frenetic activity, Mamet managed to finish his play, *American Buffalo*. The Chicago native had always wanted to work at the Goodman but the theatre had a reputation of ignoring local talent. Mamet was nothing if not ambitious. He wanted to break out of what he saw as the minor leagues, so he brought the script to William Woodman, artistic

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\(^{10}\)Post and the Rent program, CTC-SNT, 1/19
director at the Goodman, instead of offering it to St. Nicholas. Woodman felt that it wasn’t right for the mainstage and referred it to his assistant, Greg Mosher. Mosher, who had seen Sexual Perversity and liked what he saw, read it and immediately agreed to stage it as part of the Goodman’s Stage 2 program in October. This was the beginning of the transfer of Mamet’s allegiance from his own company to the Goodman and to director, Mosher.

Despite mixed reviews, American Buffalo was a success and drew increasing audiences for each of its twelve performances at the Ruth Page Auditorium. When the Stage 2 run was over, William H. Macy, the only St. Nicholas actor in the cast, proposed moving the show somewhere else as a St. Nicholas production. The company had spotted an empty building at 2851 North Halsted Street and had about $2,000 in the bank. Why not build their own theatre?

In December 1975, the young company moved into its first permanent space, a former bakery and printing shop, and, in a whirlwind of activity, spent barely six weeks turning it into a theatre. A young designer from the company, David Emmons, planned the three-story space with a 226-seat thrust mainstage, a 60-seat studio theatre, rehearsal rooms, classrooms, and offices. Although the company never completed the planned studio theatre, they created a workable theatre space in an incredibly short period of time.

The opening production for the new St. Nicholas Theatre was the transferred Stage 2 production of Mamet’s American Buffalo. The production drew even larger audiences in its longer run at St.
Nicholas and the added prestige of the association with the Goodman helped get the new theatre started off with a bang. After the play's run in Chicago, *American Buffalo* later went on to New York where, with Robert Duvall in the cast, it won the New York Critics Circle Award for Best Play of the 1976-77 season and an Obie Award for Mamet as Best New American Playwright.

In the 1975-76 season, the educational wing of the theatre added children's classes to its adult offerings. St. Nicholas also began a very popular children's theatre series in the 1975-76 season. Entitled *The Adventures of Captain Marbles*, these serialized adventures were based on a character first created by playwright John Stasey in 1965 at Bob Sickinger's Hull House Theatre. The St. Nicholas troupe presented weekend matinee performances for children at the theatre and toured to the Ravinia Festival theatre and other Chicago area locations.

Also in the 1975-76 season, the late night Showcase series began, creating a low risk performance outlet in which students and company members could try out new work. Mamet returned as a playwright to St. Nicholas with his play *Reunion*, the first Showcase production. Directed by the Organic Theater's Cecil O'Neal, the play was the story of a daughter reuniting with her alcoholic father as her marriage is collapsing.

In April 1976, Arthur Miller's *View from the Bridge*, directed by Stephen Schachter, succeeded as a serious drama done by a serious young company. Christiansen says, "Hands down, it is the most thrilling piece of theater to emerge from a local company this
year."¹¹ Schachter's first major directing effort, *View from the Bridge* won him a Jeff Award as Best Director. In a very short time, the reputation of St. Nicholas Theatre Company as one of the leading Off-Loop theatres seemed assured.

Patricia Cox, in an interview with Mary Kerner, commented on the advantages of starting a new theatre company in Chicago. "It's the only place where you can afford to do it and still get an interesting and varied audience. . . . We can do things here we wouldn't be able to do anyplace else."¹²

Greg Mosher recalled the energy in that period when, "everything seemed possible. The forces were all there. We believed the only limitations were the bounds we would set for ourselves."¹³ But the knowledge that this wouldn't last forever was present even then. Fame, money, and opportunity would break up companies and partnerships sooner or later. Mosher remembered having this realization watching the show one night during the run of *American Buffalo* at St. Nicholas. "It was beautiful because it was the last time it was simple, just about the work and not about anybody's career."¹⁴


¹³Christiansen, "The young lion of Chicago theater," 12.

Mamet was becoming a recognized playwright and New York began to express interest. Sexual Perversity and American Buffalo both received Off-Off-Broadway productions and Mamet began to get the urge to move on. He was losing interest in running a small Chicago theatre, Macy and Schachter were developing in their own artistic directions, and Mamet wanted to focus on his writing.

St. Nicholas' next production, Sitcom by Julian Barry, author of Lenny, was a sprawling, unfocused social satire on the age of TV. Mamet thought the play was a negative artistic statement, had stereotypical, even anti-Semitic characters, and argued strongly against doing it. Macy and Schachter decided to produce the play over Mamet's objections. At that point, in June of 1976, Mamet decided to leave St. Nicholas in order to pursue his playwriting career in New York. He announced his resignation as a protest against "irreconcilable artistic differences." Though Mamet officially left St. Nicholas, he maintained a good relationship with the company and returned to St. Nicholas many times over the next few years with his new work.

When the production of Sitcom opened, the critics were nearly universal in their dislike of the piece. Will Leonard wrote in the Chicago Tribune, "The only thing more painful to behold on stage than vainglorious stupidity is heavy-handed satire upon the same. . . . In Sitcom, [Barry] has lost control completely and his play not only
dashes off in all directions, it also falls over its own feet. . ."  
Mamet's advice had proved to be accurate as *Sitcom* was one of St. Nicholas' artistic disasters.

Even without Mamet, though, St. Nicholas was growing up fast in both budget and reputation. To prove that they were skilled enough to perform a period style piece, the theatre presented a Showcase production of a Noel Coward story, *Ashes of Roses*. Directed by Victory Gardens artistic director, Dennis Zacek, *Reader* critic Michael VerMeulen described it as "so loaded with polish, wit, and taste, and so true to its genius source, that it begs to be seen."  

The theatre had grown so rapidly that, by 1976, St. Nicholas had a budget of $220,000. Unfortunately, they also had an alarmingly large deficit of $40,000. Subscribers were a new concept to Off-Loop theatres who usually depended on the young single ticket buying crowd. As of 1976, St. Nicholas had only 1,000 subscribers and this presented problems of financial stability for St. Nick as a growing institution.  

In the summer of 1976, Peter Schneider was brought to St. Nicholas to serve as the new business manager with the remaining three founders of the company, Schachter, Macy, and Cox. Schneider

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17 Kerner, N. pag.
improved the theatre's financial accountability which made St. Nicholas the grants champion of Off-Loop theatre.

However, with the departure of Mamet, the theatre began to have difficulty with script selection. The company's goal was to nurture new plays and playwrights but without Mamet's guidance this proved more difficult. Many critics began to comment on the excellent acting in St. Nicholas productions but complained of an increasing number of flawed scripts.

In September 1976, Chicago theatre stalwart Mike Nussbaum, who began his career along with the young Mamet at Bob Sickinger's Hull House, directed Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* at St. Nicholas. Christiansen wrote, "It's an imperfect work, exciting work, streaked with bolts of brilliance and weighted down by stretches of sophomoric sensationalism." All agreed, however, that the work of founding company member Macy was outstanding.

*Mert and Phil* by Anne Burr was a play that had not done well in a previous production at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival. Staged in November of 1976 by Steven Schachter, the serious drama, about the after effects of a mastectomy on a blue collar couple, got positive reviews from some Chicago critics, again for the company's strong acting while the play itself was judged as somewhat grim and pointless.

Up next at St. Nicholas in January of 1977, was an even weaker offering, *Joplin: an Original Ragtime Musical*, based on the life and

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music of Scott Joplin. Written by Kathleen Lombardo and directed by
Steven Schachter, the play was a major disappointment.

Christiansen wrote:

There are some shreds of stagecraft in the evening and the
saving grace of Joplin's music but on the whole, the show
leaves one with the queasy feeling that it is a large mistake, a
silly, pretentious work fashioned with the best intentions.¹⁹

Chicago Tribune critic Linda Winer agreed saying,

Those of us who depend on the distinguished young company
for some of the city's most consistent theater adventures
suffered along.²⁰

Though many of the Chicago Off-Loop theatre companies were
fiercely anti-New York, St. Nicholas was not one of them. The
founding company members all came from the East Coast and were
quite willing to draw New York talent to Chicago. In March of 1977,
Gerald Gutierrez, a young New York director with credits from the
Acting Company and Lincoln Center, came to St. Nicholas to direct a
double bill of one-acts, Domino Courts by William Hauptman and A
Slight Accident by James Saunders. The plays were well received by
most critics who praised the brisk comic style and first-rate acting.

²⁰Richard Christiansen, “There's no Sting to this Joplin,”

²¹Linda Winer, “Scott Joplin dies again on St. Nic. stage,”
The actors in this production, however, were all from Chicago and, in an interview with Paula Levy, actress Linda Kimbrough comments about the pleasures of being part of the community.

"Living in the neighborhood is like being a walking sandwich board," Kimbrough notes. "People always stop me and ask how things are going. . . . The nearby Hull House theater was a career starting point for most of the cast, and they still retain a special feeling for this part of the city."\(^{21}\)

The Showcase productions proved to be excellent opportunities to test the work of new playwrights and were cast with students from the continually expanding classes at St. Nicholas. There were now classes in acting, scene study, jazz, tap and modern dance, mime, voice and speech, combat and theatre management. Although the results of Showcase productions were sometimes mixed, the theatre got high marks in the press and the theatre community for creating a nurturing environment for new artists.

Though he was no longer a company member, much of Mamet's new work continued to be produced in Chicago by St. Nicholas. In May 1977, Schachter directed the St. Nicholas production of Mamet's *The Water Engine* which, despite lukewarm local reviews, proved very popular with audiences and was extended for more than a month. The play later moved on to Broadway, making Schachter, at the time, the youngest director ever to stage a play for Broadway.

\(^{22}\)Paula Levy, "St. Nicholas cast feel Lake View is perfect backdrop for their talents," *Lerner Newspapers*, 13 April 1977, sec.2: 1, CTC-SNT 3/16.
In September 1977, Schachter directed the Chicago premiere of David Rudkin's *Ashes*, a heart-rending story about a childless couple's unsuccessful efforts to have a child. Critic Lawrence Bommer called the production "a wrenching if uneven picture of frustrated parenthood, redeemed by the sincerity of the acting." He notes of a young actor in the production that "Malkovich promises to be one of the finest actors in Chicago."22

Christiansen, writing in the *Daily News*, singles out John Malkovich's performance even further:

Malkovich, a very young and quite extraordinary actor, is simply electric. With a clenched fist, or a voice that can rise from a resigned sigh to a cry of anger and frustration, he shows us a man desperately struggling to come to terms with himself, his heritage and his world. His is an almost instinctively right performance; the timing of the smallest gesture and inflection is perfect. St. Nicholas, a small theater with a giant spirit, once more has produced a brave and beautiful work for our theater."23

Mamet's children's play, *The Revenge of the Space Pandas; or Binky Rudich and the Two Speed Clock*, was a modest success in its November 1977 production. It was notable as well for the appearance of Robert Falls, then artistic director of Wisdom Bridge and later, the Goodman, as an actor playing a Space Panda.


In November 1977, Mamet directed the world premiere of his play, *The Woods*, starring Patti Lupone, at St. Nicholas. This was Mamet's first directing effort at St. Nick since the abysmal *Beyond the Horizon* in the early days. A playwright who directs his own work can be problematic; in this case, the results were less than outstanding. Mamet's play is a delicate love story about a young man who is unable to overcome his own anger and loneliness to return the love of a gentle, romantic young woman. Christiansen gave the production a lukewarm review, noting that Mamet,

"has buttressed this love story with dazzling, quicksilver imagery. . . . At its best, this clear, monosyllabic language gives the drama an almost mythical quality. . . . At its worst, alas, the stripped-down dialog ("This is no good, Nick.") approaches the banal and ludicrous range of a soap opera."

Linda Winer of the *Tribune* was even less equivocal:

One yearns for a reason to care about their trivial traumas, hopes for a suspenseful climax that does not seem trumped up for the sake of one, and wishes the words self-conscious and affected wouldn't even once creep into the mind.

In January 1978, Gerald Gutierrez directed a popular revival of Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take It With You* which got warm

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reviews from most critics. This New York director was becoming a regular at St. Nicholas and brought a polished comic style to his productions that audiences appreciated.

At the beginning of the year in 1978, St. Nicholas had become an institution with a $500,000 annual budget, over 2,000 subscribers, 14 staff members, and 100 volunteers plus the actors, directors, and designers hired on a show-by-show basis. The theatre produced a five play mainstage season, a five play Showcase season, a children's theatre and an acting school with 2,000 students annually. This was no longer a typical storefront Off-Loop theatre; it had become an institution.

St. Nicholas continued to produce work that pleased local audiences using local artists as well. In March 1978, Off-Loop stalwart Mike Nussbaum directed the Chicago premiere of Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others*. Critic Glenna Syse wrote that the piece was:

Uncommonly well done. . . . Mike Nussbaum's direction has wit, compassion and love. It illuminates every little pang, bravado and poignancy of the script and peeks beneath its brave veneer. Indeed I would say it gives the story more depth than it deserves. And the cast of nine women is that uncommon ensemble, uncannily cast and flawlessly played.26

After the amazingly rapid growth of St. Nicholas' first five years, the founding triumvirate was beginning to face artistic burnout. The company tried to take a break from producing during the

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summer of 1978 by booking in other shows but this, too, was a lot of administrative work. In an interview at the time, Patricia Cox, co-founder and director of audience development, explained, "We've all been working extremely hard this year and we needed to change the rhythm." She said that getting past the five-year milestone was a major achievement for any young theatre because "the original founders often run out of energy around then, and if the theater isn't established on its own the whole thing collapses." She expressed her optimism about the future of St. Nicholas and its plans for a more cautious approach to future expansion. Unfortunately, Cox' optimism and her tenure at St. Nicholas was to prove short-lived.

In 1978, co-founder Macy left St. Nicholas to pursue his acting career in New York. In this same season, co-founder Cox quit to direct publicity for the Academy Festival Theater in Highland Park. Later she would serve as director for the Chicago Alliance for the Performing Arts. The intensity of St. Nicholas' rise as an Off-Loop theatre had produced administrative burn-out more quickly than most other theatres.

Mamet, whose artistic partnership with Greg Mosher was then very strong, was named associate artistic director and playwright-in-residence at the Goodman in 1978. He commented several years later on the negative side of the institutionalization process at St. Nicholas and the Goodman's efforts to keep the artist's voice at the center of the work.

"As long as I've been at the Goodman," Mr. Mamet said, "it's been artist-centered. They didn't go in for these get-rich-quick schemes--Broadway tryouts, federal funding. Exactly that happened to me with another theater, the St. Nicholas. It got taken over by the administrators. It was like they changed the locks. You'd come in one day and they'd have gotten a grant for audience development or some garbage and no one knows your name. The Goodman eschewed all that." 28

Mamet's positive relationship with Mosher and the Goodman may have colored his recollections. In actuality, the Goodman received federal funding, worked hard at audience development, and was criticized in the '80s for using its resources to mount Broadway tryouts of plays by David Rabe and Mamet. But, in Mamet's perception, the balance of power between administrators and artists was in the artist's favor at the Goodman.

In September 1978, in a remarkable example of the Chicago theatre community's spirit of collaboration and cooperation, Steven Schachter directed most of the Steppenwolf ensemble in a St. Nicholas production of Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*. Schachter reportedly wanted to work with the Steppenwolf ensemble, using their energy and rapport in this play about '60s radicals coming to terms with their past relationships. Steppenwolf benefitted by getting the exposure and prestige associated with an appearance at

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the well-known St. Nicholas. This was the first of many other cooperative company exchanges between Off-Loop theatres in the '70s and '80s.

The rapid and unexpected demise of St. Nicholas began in 1979 with the theatre's decision to produce an annual Christmas production, similar to the Goodman's annual holiday money-maker, *The Christmas Carol*. The theatre planned to create a family-pleasing production with an original musical adaptation of Percy Granger's *The Enchanted Cottage*, staged in the large Athenaeum Theatre. Unfortunately, this non-religious holiday musical did not deal with any particular holiday traditions and was difficult to market. Dean Corrin, playwright and St. Nicholas literary associate, recalled, "The show ended up being very dark and was rejected by critics and audiences alike. It had been an expensive show to mount, due to the larger space and the costs of commissioning the play. It was this misstep that created most of the debt that then hung over the theatre."30

On December 18, 1979, the St. Nicholas board optimistically announced plans to take over and renovate the Ivanhoe Theater. In order to maintain the pace of its growth, St. Nicholas needed a larger theatre. But by April 3, 1980, the financial picture had worsened due to the failure of *The Enchanted Cottage*, and the board had to reverse itself, announcing the cancellation of the move.


30Dean Corrin, personal interview, 10 June 1997.
St. Nicholas was an institution in trouble. With a reputation built on developing new plays and playwrights, the theatre had fallen on hard times, artistically. They had not had a real hit for the last two seasons and deficits were mounting. Knowing the end was near, co-founder Schachter announced his resignation in April 1980, followed shortly by managing director, Peter Schneider.

Once the shining star of the Off-Loop theatres, St. Nicholas was noted for developing new plays and playwrights. Its reputation began to dim in the past two years as its productions lost power and quality. One by one, its founding members--William H. Macy, David Mamet, Patricia Cox, and artistic director Stephen Schachter--left to pursue their individual careers. Although it's too early to tell about the theatre's future direction, acting artistic director Cynthia Sherman is in a unique position to help because she was once its literary manager.31

Unfortunately, Sherman was not given the opportunity to be a successful artistic director. Though St. Nicholas' last production, *Herringbone*, was a hit, it was too little too late. The theatre had built up a deficit of $157,000 during the 1979-80 season that it was unable to erase in 1980-81. In addition, the theatre's management had been confused about the theatre's responsibility to withhold FICA taxes for all its employees. In the not-for-profit world, some artists and independent contractors legitimately do not have Social Security income tax payments withheld from their artistic fees. Employees, however, are subject to such withholding, creating an

additional salary expense for the theatre. Good theatre management should know the difference and should not attempt to stretch the budget by not paying FICA taxes. Managing director Schneider, however, had taken the view in previous seasons that certain employees of the theatre were exempt from these taxes. The IRS vehemently disagreed and, in 1981, informed the St. Nicholas board that all back tax payments were immediately due and payable. Realizing their personal liability for these debts and not having the resources to pay them, the board of directors voted to close down St. Nicholas Theater in November, 1981. The nature of the IRS debt was embarrassing to the theatre and the board suppressed evidence of this as the cause of St. Nicholas’ sudden demise.32

The abruptness of the theatre’s closing took its own staff as well as the theatre community by surprise. Sherman and Bill Conner, the new managing director, had actually balanced the 1980-81 season operating budget and they had planned the entire 1981-82 season. The set for Anna Christie, the production to follow Herringbone, was under construction at the time the decision was made to close the theatre. The bar from the Anna Christie set was used, however, for one of several wild closing parties at the theatre, including one in which staff members wore t-shirts with their résumés printed on them and decorated the interior of the building with spraypainted sentiments of regret for the theatre demise. The theatre’s seats, lighting instruments, and office equipment were

32Dean Corrin, personal interview, 10 June 1997.
later sold and the remaining St. Nicholas artists, staff members, and subscribers dispersed among the various other theatres in the Chicago theatre community.

[Mamet's] theatre, which had grown in a burst and upped the city's ante of artistic discipline for all time, folded shortly into the new decade, after Schachter and managing director Peter Schneider both lit out for new territory. . . .33

During its brief lifespan, St. Nicholas produced 30 world premieres and 20 Midwestern premieres. They were the first theatre to present the Tony award-winning production, *An Evening with Lily Tomlin*, and in 1979, received a Tony nomination for Outstanding Regional Theater. The theatre was instrumental in launching the careers of Mamet, Macy, and many other Chicago actors, directors, and designers. St. Nicholas proved that a national level of recognition was possible in Off-Loop theatre and challenged other theatres to make their mark as well.

33London, 62.
CHAPTER 6

GOODMAN THEATER

The Goodman Theater, Chicago's oldest resident theater, began as a professional theatre in 1925. When the stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing Great Depression made the professional company too expensive, the Goodman became a school of drama with students-only productions. Gradually, professional actors came back as guest artists supported by drama school student casts, and, finally, in 1969, the Goodman again became a professional resident theatre. The theatre has always been a civic institution by virtue of its affiliation with the Art Institute of Chicago but more often this affiliation has limited the theatre's artistic mission more than it has helped. During the Off-Loop movement, the Goodman, became revitalized under artistic director Gregory Mosher, as a playwright's theatre. Then, under artistic director Robert Falls, the Goodman transformed again and became a director's theatre, unique amongst Chicago theatres with a permanent company of resident directors instead of actors.¹

¹Much of the information on the Goodman Theater comes from Sheila Ryan's At the Goodman Theater, a catalog published by the Special Collections Division of the Chicago Public Library.
The Goodman Theater was founded in 1925 as a memorial to a promising young Chicago playwright, Kenneth Sawyer Goodman, who died in 1918 during an influenza epidemic. Son of a wealthy Chicago businessman, Goodman had been an amateur playwright as well as the unsalaried director of the Chicago Art Institute’s Department of Prints. Through the Art Institute and the Chicago Theatre Society, Goodman met another theatre lover, Thomas Wood Stevens. Stevens taught illustration and art history at the Art Institute and produced dramatic pageants with the Art Students League. Together the two men worked toward the goal of making Chicago a play-producing center.

After their son’s death, William and Erna Sawyer Goodman approached the Art Institute about building a theatre as a memorial to their son. Thomas Wood Stevens, who had left Chicago to found the first drama program in an American university at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, was asked to head the new theatre. Because of height restrictions near the lakefront, the 740-seat mainstage theatre had to be built below ground level. The theatre opened on October 20, 1925 with a professional company which produced a mix of classics and new works, including some of Kenneth Sawyer Goodman’s plays. A small training program was also begun with the idea that, by working alongside the professional company, students would be building their own careers in the theatre. In addition to appearing in small roles on the mainstage, the students appeared in a smaller Studio Theatre in children’s plays. This children’s series
rapidly became popular with Chicago audiences and became one of the longest running and most successful children's theatre programs in the U.S.

Though the first few years of the professional repertory company were successful with both critics and audiences, the theatre began to accumulate deficits. The stock market crash of 1929 made matters considerably worse. In 1931, the Board of Trustees of the Art Institute decided to phase out the professional company and reorganize the theatre solely as a training institute for young people. Maurice Gnesin became head of the Goodman School of Drama and, in addition to classes in theatre production, he instituted classes in history, literature, economics, and philosophy, creating a well-rounded academic theatre program. The arrival of playwright and faculty member, Charlotte Chorpenning, in 1932 made the Goodman a leader in the field of children's theatre for the next twenty years.

Through the '40s and '50s the Goodman School of Drama did an excellent job of training young actors. The Goodman offered popular children's theatre but the student productions of both classics and new plays made little impact on the Chicago audience. There was no professional company and, due to their training nature, no critics were allowed to review any of the student productions. Despite this lack of exposure, many Goodman alumni went on to considerable fame in theatre and film. Among these Goodman graduates were actors such as Karl Malden, Geraldine Page, Shelley Berman, Lois Nettleton, and Harvey Korman.
The Goodman began to be rebuilt as a professional theatre with the appointment of John Reich as artistic director in 1957. Reich had been a student of the famed Max Reinhardt in Vienna and, since coming to the United States in 1938, had been successful as a theatre director, professor, and adapter of European plays. When he arrived at the Goodman in 1957, the theatre had a mere 1,900 subscribers for the students-only productions. With financial help from the Ford Foundation, Reich was able to convince the Board of the Art Institute to reinstitute a core company of professional actors to be guest artists in the predominantly student casts and to open up the theatre to the press. With the help of the Chicago Lyric Opera’s legendary publicist, Danny Newman, Reich increased publicity and began to campaign for subscribers.

Soon Reich’s campaign began to pay off. He was named one of the ten outstanding American producing directors by the Ford Foundation and received a grant of $10,000. Reich used his award to lure “name” artists such as Morris Carnovsky and Eugenie Leontovich to the Goodman. When it was announced that Carnovsky would appear in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* the Goodman box office was deluged with ticket orders. Though it appeared that the Chicago audience could only be attracted by a famous actor heading the student cast, Reich’s overall strategy for reestablishing a professional company at the Goodman was working. The 1959-60 season showed an audience increase of fifty percent over the previous season.
In operation since 1925, the Goodman School of Drama, now under Dean Charles McGaw, continued to train outstanding students such as Melinda Dillon, Carrie Snodgress, Linda Hunt, and Joe Mantegna. The children's theatre program, now under the direction of Bella Itkin, continued its tradition of delighting generations of Chicago audiences as well as providing performance opportunities for the drama school students.

Reich's taste in plays was more adventurous than previous Goodman artistic directors. Under his guidance, the Goodman was the first American theatre to mount its own production of Peter Weiss' controversial *Marat/Sade* and he presented the Midwest premiere of Paul Foster's "historical happening," *Tom Paine*, directed by Tom O'Horgan.

In the fall of 1969, the seminal year of the Chicago theatre explosion, the Goodman became a fully professional theatre again. It had taken twelve years but Reich had finally convinced the Art Institute trustees to establish the Resident Professional Company that was his dream. Englishman Douglas Seale, former associate artistic director of London's Old Vic and artistic director of Baltimore's Center Stage, and Canadian Douglas Campbell, renowned actor with the Stratford, Ontario Festival, were leading players in this new company. The first production was *Soldiers* by Rolf Hochhuth, followed by plays by Kaufman and Hart, Shakespeare, Pinter, and Shaw. By the end of the season, the number of Goodman subscribers had risen to 17,000.
Critic Richard Christiansen was the most optimistic about the important changes being made at the Goodman. In a 1970 article in the Chicago Daily News, he spoke with pride of "a good major professional company in our midst which stages a season specifically for a Chicago audience." Goodman Theater Committee Chairperson William E. Hartmann commented on the need to connect to the cultural needs of the community when he said, "I don't believe we at Goodman should ever want to be the theater for Chicago. But we want to be able to grow, and we want to do our part in becoming involved with the community. The best way for that to happen is for the support and demand to come from an audience that has seen us and consequently wants to see more of us."

Having a resident company of actors that lived and worked in Chicago was part of Reich's dream. However, the company concept was expensive. The annual budget for the combined resident professional company and drama school rose in 1970 from $750,000 to $1 million.

Unfortunately, the 1970-71 season was a disaster and left the Goodman's Chicago audience cold. Two classics, Brecht's Threepenny Opera and Shakespeare's Twelfth Night were judged by many critics to be overlong, boring, and peppered with bad acting. A British anti-war drama, John Whiting's Marching Song, had the audience leaving

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3Christiansen, "A season of promise launches a new era at Goodman Theater," N. pag.
in droves at intermission and an Anouilh play, *Poor Bitos*, did not fare much better. The classical directors, Reich, Seale, and Campbell, were trying to force play choices on a Chicago audience that didn't seem to care. Patrick Henry's production of the more populist *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee brought out a younger, more enthusiastic crowd but it was too little, too late. By the end of the 1970-71 season, the theatre's deficit had grown to over $200,000. The following season, a decision was made to abandon the resident company and Reich was asked to retire at the end of 1972-73 season. The Goodman began to play it safe, relying on more commercial choices like the 1972 production of the Rodgers and Hart musical, *The Boys from Syracuse*, which had an extended and financially successful run through the summer.

While the Goodman Theater became more conservative, the school became more adventurous in its play choices. During the 1969-70 season, the school refurbished the 135-seat Studio Theatre at a cost of $40,000 and added additional plays for a total of eight productions in the student season.

Patrick Henry, at 35 the youngest teacher and director on the Goodman staff, was responsible for the Studio season and some of the more avant-garde play choices put on by the all-student casts. Within the conservative Goodman, in both the theatre and the school, Henry met resistance to producing mostly new and avant-garde plays. This institutional split personality was to exist for some time at the Goodman with the mainstage receiving criticism for
stuffy, boring classical productions and the work done in the Studio, either by the Goodman School of Drama students or, later, by the young professionals brought in under Greg Mosher, being called risky, raw, and adventurous. But it was hard for a young, talented, experimental director such as Henry to succeed in the conservative artistic environment at the Goodman, though the critics and audiences appreciated the fresh approach. In a review of a production of Charles Marowitz' *The Marowitz Hamlet*, Christiansen exclaims:

> It was the most exciting evening of drama I have experienced this season, and the best thing to happen to Chicago theater in years. . . . The production, superbly directed by Patrick Henry of the Goodman staff, is an out-and-out triumph. . . . You will not find a more rewarding or stimulating evening of theater than in this splendid production. All hail to Goodman for giving us a remarkably apt showcase for young talent and youthful ideas.  

Henry also conceived and directed the Theater-in-the-Streets program which began in 1969 at the Goodman Theater. Funded in part by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, this program of original topical plays for inner-city neighborhoods eventually broke away from the Goodman and became the Free Street Theater with Henry as its artistic director.

The Goodman students performed in plays by authors such as Sam Shepard, Edward Bond, Leonard Melfi, and Boris Vian who, never produced on the mainstage, were seen in their Midwest premieres in the Studio. In addition to performing in the children's theatre

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productions on weekends, the students took productions on tour to Chicago area elementary schools. Goodman children's theatre productions played to large audiences for half a century and helped generations of Chicagoans become lifelong theatregoers.

For the 1972-73 season, Kenneth Myers was named executive director and a search was begun for an artistic director to replace Reich. Calling it the "Director's Season," Myers invited several important regional theatre directors to, in effect, audition for the job. For example, Michael Kahn, Broadway and regional theatre director, teacher at Juilliard, and artistic director of the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut, came to Chicago to direct a production of Pinter's *Old Times*. William Woodman, also from Juilliard, was invited to direct a production of *Twentieth Century* by Chicago newspaperman, Ben Hecht, and Charles MacArthur. Perhaps the Goodman's choice was influenced by a bit of Chicago chauvinism, but in winter of 1973, Woodman was offered the job as artistic director. Christiansen, who had hoped for a more innovative artistic leader at the Goodman, went right to the heart of the problem.

The Goodman is an institutional theater in all the worst connotations of that word--safe, flaccid, and uninspired. The appointment of William Woodman as Artistic Director this year should do nothing to ease this problem.¹

However, luckily Woodman brought a talented young assistant, Gregory Mosher, with him from Juilliard. Recently graduated at

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twenty five, Mosher was in a similar position to that of Henry under the Reich regime, challenging the institution's conservatism with new ideas. Later, after becoming a part of the institution himself, Mosher described the dichotomy. "An institution shelters, supports, preserves, and all those other nice things. But it doesn't create. And it doesn't like to take chances."

As the resident young Turk at the establishment Goodman Theater, Mosher also sought to produce adventurous, exciting theatre. But instead of turning to the School of Drama as Henry had done, Mosher got grants and other support for his new Stage 2 project, a series of Goodman productions mounted in alternative spaces. Starting out with late-night productions in the theatre's lobby and eventually moving on to spaces like the Ruth Page Auditorium and the Latin School of Chicago, Mosher began to co-opt some of the energy and talent from the exploding Off-Loop movement. One of his first successes was to lure David Mamet away from his own Off-Loop company, St. Nicholas, to the Goodman Stage 2 which began producing the premieres of his new plays. This fruitful relationship between Mosher and Mamet brought in new ideas and new audiences and helped transform the Goodman as an institution.

The energy and innovation from the Off-Loop movement got even the venerable Goodman mainstage to change. Woodman, aware of the staid image of the theatre, began to select a wider range of plays. The 1973-74 season included the successful American

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premiere of Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City* which established Woodman as a director of some stature with Chicago audiences and critics. In January of 1974, a production of Sam Shepard's *Tooth of Crime*, directed by Michael Kahn, was given the mainstage, a big risk for the Goodman. Christiansen retells a story that was popular with the Goodman staff about the results of the theatre's changing image:

> Earlier this year, when *The Tooth of Crime* was being presented on the mainstage, a little old lady walked up to the lobby box office and asked for a seat far up front.
> The ticket seller, knowing the controversial nature of the play, thought for a moment and then felt obliged to warn the woman that Sam Shepard's hard rock drama contained frequent obscenities, scenes of nudity and near-nudity, and live music that just might blow her out of her seat.
> "Yes, I know," replied the little old lady. "I've seen it twice already. Now, may I have my ticket?"

The formerly lily-white Goodman also began to reach out to the large African-American audience in Chicago. A work based on the writings of Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, directed by Henry, didn't get the strong critical response or large increase in black audience that were hoped for when it opened in February 1974, but it started the process. As if to show how far the racially divided city of Chicago had to go, the theatre received a few "depressingly bigoted letters" from subscribers complaining about the production and its all-black cast.

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The theatre was soon helped on the administrative level by the appointment of John Economos as managing director. Economos used sound, penny-pinching management techniques to tackle the theatre's deficit. Stanley Freehling, previous chairman of the Ravinia Festival, took over as chair of the Goodman Theater committee of the Art Institute board and his dynamic leadership helped to pull the theatre out of its perceived slump with the business and financial community. But the trustees of the Art Institute were still unhappy with the drain on energy and finances that the theatre and drama school represented. The theatre and the school were competing with each other for the same space and available funds with radically different goals. The theatre no longer used the students in production and considered their use of the mainstage for weekend children's performances a nuisance. The school no longer received much benefit from the presence of the professional company. The school which had been the primary reason for the existence of the Goodman for many years lost out; the board began to discuss moving or discontinuing the school.

Mosher’s Stage 2 project began in October 1974 with a midnight production in the Goodman lobby of Winnebago, a surrealistic play about the murder of several dysfunctional family members in their motorhome by a mysterious Apache Indian. The play, written by local actor/director/playwright Frank Galati who would go on to much greater success, was not a hit but the final production of the season, Three Women, was. Three Women was originally a Victory Gardens production that Mosher transferred to
Stage 2, much the way a baseball team moves a winning pitcher up from the minor leagues. This pattern of transferring a successful Off-Loop production to an institutional theatre to give it a wider audience was a frequent, mutually beneficial practice in other large and smaller theatre relationships. The more established theatre was able to get proven material while conferring an aura of success on the smaller theatre. The Goodman, St. Nicholas, Wisdom Bridge, North Light and, eventually Steppenwolf, all used this method at some point to infuse fresh artistic energy into the institutional nature of their theatres. This is an example, depending on one's point of view, of either the cooperative relationships between theatres or of the exploitation of struggling young companies by more established groups. Both elements were probably present in such cooperative ventures but the fact is, for whatever reason, the degree of cooperation in the Chicago theatre community was remarkable, cooperation which had tremendous benefits for everyone.

The Organic's Stuart Gordon was invited to direct Feydeau's *Chemin de Fer* in 1975 but Gordon seemed to be out of his element in the halls of the establishment and the farce fell flat. But other Off-Loop directors continued to be invited to the Goodman.

Stage 2 continued to provide most of the excitement during the 1975-76 season, with a budget of only $30,000 and 850 subscribers, again by bringing Off-Loop talent to the Goodman. In an article on Stage 2, *Chicago Reader* critic Michael VerMeulen praises the project for fulfilling its promises to "to devote the considerable resources of the Goodman to developing new works for the theater, to allow
Chicago's native artists an opportunity for refining their talents, and to lend a sense of import to these artists and new works."

Dennis Zacek, artistic director of Victory Gardens Theatre, directed Sam Shepard's ode to melancholic love, Chicago, in a production that VerMeulen called a "thoughtful exploration" of the play's "simple eloquent beauty." He went on to comment on the companion production of The Local Stigmatic by avant-garde director Gary Houston, artistic director of Pary Productions, by saying, "this production stands as the most meticulously honed presentation that Houston has produced in many years." 8

As part of the focus on new plays and Chicago artists, 1975 was also the year that Stage 2 presented the premiere of American Buffalo, which was the beginning of the exciting collaboration between Mosher and Mamet. Their legendary first meeting came about after Mosher had put out a call for new scripts. Mamet, who already had a measure of success in his hometown with the Organic's production of Sexual Perversity in Chicago and his St. Nicholas Theater Company, came to Mosher's office with a big cigar and a bigger sense of chutzpah:

According to Mosher, the writer dropped a pile of pages onto his desk and informed him, "You have to do this play. This play is

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going to win me the Pulitzer Prize. In fact, I will put $5,000 in escrow and if it doesn't win the Pulitzer, you can have the money!" "At which," Mosher says today, "I laughed."\(^9\)

The play, which Mosher scooped up and directed later that season, was *American Buffalo*. It didn't, however, win the Pulitzer and Mamet welched on the $5,000 bet. But ten years later, Mamet did deliver the promised Pulitzer for another play directed by Mosher, *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

During the rehearsal process, Mosher, fresh out of school and directing his second professional production, became frustrated with his actors' inability to learn Mamet's fragmentary, repetitive dialogue. He thought it would be a good idea to really yell at them after a particularly bad rehearsal to give them some added motivation. Christiansen describes what happened next:

> At that point, Erhard [playing Teach], possessor of a hair-trigger temper, threw the script in the air and advanced toward Mosher with murder in his eyes. "My stage manager looked at me," Mosher says, "and whispered, through clenched teeth, 'He's going to kill you.'"\(^10\)

Mosher quickly discovered the volatility of Chicago actors. Fortunately, he was able to talk his way out of imminent bodily harm and continue on with rehearsal. Afterwards, he met a depressed Mamet who was drowning his sorrows with Mai Tais at a nearby

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\(^9\)Zehme, 52-53.

Chinese restaurant, convinced that the production was hopeless. “But I said, out of the wisdom of my vast experience, ‘Don’t worry. Everything is just fine now.”’ Mosher held on to the reins, the volatile cast finally mastered the dialogue, and the show opened on October 23, 1975 at the Ruth Page Auditorium at 1016 North Dearborn Street. It was a major moment in Chicago theatre history, though not many may have realized it at the time.

The production received mixed reviews but word of mouth spread and it did well at the box office. Audiences liked Mamet’s portrayal of ordinary “Chicago guys” and they responded to the implied criticism of materialism in their struggle to “make it,” losers that they were. Most critics, however, thought it was too long and had a weak ending. Bury St. Edmund of the Reader said:

American Buffalo, while being funny, sad, slick, touching, full of opportunities for terrific acting, and other good stuff like that, is simply too long and too diffuse. Director Gregory Mosher has, while definitely divining the core of his characters, mounted a show that emphasizes the play’s soft spots. . . . Once the fat is trimmed and some hustle is added to the performance, it will be more clearly seen for what it is, an excellent piece of theater by someone who’s got something to say and a goddam original way of saying it.12

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11Christiansen, “The story behind a modern classic,” 19.

Glenna Syse of the *Sun-Times* said the play was,

a dreary slice of life that needs tightening, focusing and clarifying. Shortening? Yes, but if they took out all the four-letter words, it would last ten minutes . . .

Roger Dettmer was the most negative saying:

Whether the author, young David Mamet, can organize almost two hours of bleep-rated dialog into a beginning, a middle, and an end is altogether more problematical . . . *American Buffalo* right now is about 20 usable minutes of a play that Mamet needs to edit, expand, enliven, and point in some direction."

In hindsight, the judgement of the critics seems to have been less than prophetic, in this case.

In 1977, the independent Chicago Theatre Group was formed and the Art Institute began its three-year phaseout of financial support for the Goodman Theater. Board chairman Stanley Freehling steadily built a new board of directors composed of accountants, advertising executives, and other financially and politically influential Chicagoans with the clout to finally make the Goodman a major cultural institution.

While the Goodman mainstage, under William Woodman's guidance, continued to offer a "balanced season" of classics and revivals, Mosher pressed forward with his Stage 2 project and his

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developing relationship with David Mamet. Mosher directed a very successful production of Athol Fugard's anti-apartheid drama, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, which won several Jeff awards at the end of the season. Off-Loop directors Dennis Zacek and Gary Houston returned to direct projects with Stage 2. Mosher and Mamet collaborated again on *A Life in the Theatre* which received good reviews and boosted the image of the Goodman as a nurturing home for Chicago theatre artists.

In 1978, DePaul University took over the Goodman School of Drama and moved the school to its Lincoln Park campus. John Ransford Watts was brought in to head the new conservatory program, combining it with DePaul's existing theatre department into a separate School of Theatre within the larger DePaul University. From 1978 through 1986, the school was known as the Goodman School of Drama at DePaul University. In 1987, the name was changed to The Theatre School at DePaul University.

The departure of the school made more space available to the theatre. Soon Stage 2 came back to the Goodman facility with its productions now in the Goodman Studio. The theatre's lobby was expanded and renovated.

In 1978, after two seasons as artistic director, Woodman resigned and Mosher was named to replace him.

Mosher had been brought in to take up the cudgels against the brash little North side theaters that had stolen much of the thunder from the musty old Goodman. Mosher's first project: Goodman Stage 2, a series of smaller, more experimental
works. Among his first Stage 2 productions: world premieres of Mamet’s A Life in the Theater and American Buffalo.  

Mosher interest was primarily in directing new works in the smaller, more intimate Goodman Studio. He was uncomfortable with the size and formality of the mainstage. Mosher wanted to increase the variety of plays offered to the subscribers. He felt that new plays belonged on the mainstage, not relegated only to the Stage 2 season. When asked in an interview by fellow director Nicholas Ruddall about this change in the Goodman’s image, Mosher responded:

“Regional theatre has gradually shifted away from the classics,” he replied. “A balanced season 15 years ago would have been Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Molière, and Arthur Miller. Today a balanced season is two plays you’ve never heard of, an obscure American revival, and maybe two classics. . . [Audiences] have to come to us with an open mind,” says Mosher. “If the play is an experiment or a challenge or a risk, we’ll tell them that. All I can promise them is that we’ll get the best people to take that risk.”

Mosher’s 1978 adaptation of Richard Wright’s novel, Native Son, on the mainstage helped attract some of Chicago’s large African-American audience. A new adaptation of Dickens’ A Christmas Carol proved to be a great audience pleaser and Mosher made a strong commitment to the playwright’s voice by appointing David Mamet as an artistic associate of the theatre. Mosher’s attempts to bring in

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other underrepresented segments of the general audience and to make the Goodman a livelier, more exciting place were making notable changes in the theatre's image:

The clearest example is the new artistic direction at the Goodman. Along with the quality success of his first two shows, *Native Son* and *A Christmas Carol*, Gregory Mosher has cleverly attracted blacks and families into the Goodman—which, fairly or not, has been seen as lily white and stuffy. . . .

Mosher, 29, also is connecting the staid "establishment" Goodman with the young off-Loop theater. Both of his first two shows used all-Chicago casts, and David Mamet has been named associate artistic director.17

Mosher was a gambler and was willing to place his bets on new works and good writers.

"The Goodman is the only theater in America that regularly does new plays," Mosher said. "Sure, it's risky, and the economics are always impossible. There's no reason why anyone should be able to do theater in this economy. But for a long time, Chicago theater was what worked in New York last year. We're putting what we believe on the line, but I think audiences respond to that. If a theater says to the audience, 'We don't like this play, but we hope you do,' the audience can tell."18

The risks of doing new plays became quite evident when Mosher's 1979 production of Mamet's *Lone Canoe* turned out to be a flop. The working relationship with Mamet was slightly bruised but

17 Linda Winer, "The plot thickens offstage, as audiences play key role," *Chicago Tribune*, 7 January 1979: N. pag.

continued on to greater success. Mosher also began a positive relationship with New York playwright John Guare with the 1979 mainstage production of *Bosoms and Neglect*, directed by Mel Shapiro.

In 1979-80, Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka came to the Goodman to stage the American premiere of his own *Death and the King's Horsemen*. Lanford Wilson's *Talley's Folly* was a hit with subscribers and was transferred to the Studebaker for an extended run. A sumptuous production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, directed by Michael Maggio, proved that the theatre had not lost its touch for grand revivals.

In 1980, managing director Janet Wade resigned and was replaced by current general manager, Roche Schulfer. The theatre had lost 4,000 previous subscribers but gained about 7,000 new ones making a total of 18,200 subscribers for the 1979-80 season. The budget had risen to $1.4 million annually with $500,000 of that figure coming in as contributed income. The Goodman's institutional image had improved tremendously with funding from 85 corporations and 17 major foundations along with a $200,000 NEA grant.

In the 1980-81 season, Derek Walcott directed the American premiere of Mustapha Matura's *Play Mas*, Samuel Beckett worked with Greg Mosher directing on productions of *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Endgame*, and Emily Mann directed the world premiere of Michael Weller's new play, *Dwarfman, Master of a Million Shapes*.

Mosher developed a relationship with Tennessee Williams, with workshop productions of several one-acts which eventually led
to the full-length 1982 production of *A House Not Meant to Stand*. In 1982, Mosher directed the Chicago premiere of one of Mamet’s earlier plays, *Lakeboat*. It was the last production Mosher would direct on the 683-seat mainstage at the Goodman.

Mosher’s emphasis on new and not-always-successful plays by lesser known American and international writers caused problems at the box office. During the 1982-83 season, the number of subscribers dropped to 14,500 from the previous season’s 18,000. Goodman board president Allen Turner was reported to be on the verge of firing Mosher at the time but a compromise was reached. The successes of the following season brought many subscribers back and secured Mosher’s position with the board.

Mamet’s new play *Glengarry Glen Ross* had its American premiere on January 27, 1984 in the more intimate 135-seat Goodman Studio. Directed by Mosher, the play received good but qualified reviews initially in Chicago but went on to Broadway where it won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize. The play had actually premiered in September of 1983 at the National Theatre in London at the urging of Harold Pinter to whom Mamet had sent the play for advice. Pinter suggested that the only thing the play needed was a production and passed it on to Ralph Richardson at the National. The play was a success in England before its American premiere in Chicago and had won a Society of West End Theatres award as best play of the year just prior to its Goodman opening.
Christiansen called the Goodman production "well-produced, consummately well-acted drama" saying "Mamet's poetic gutter language is brilliantly displayed."  

On the Goodman's mainstage, Remains presented a beautifully crafted revival of *The Time of Your Life*, in March of 1984. Also at this time, David Rabe's new play, *Hurlyburly*, opened in the Goodman Studio. The production, directed by Mike Nichols featured movie stars William Hurt, Christopher Walken, and Sigourney Weaver and was well-received though somewhat controversial. The commercial potential made it appear to some critics that the non-profit Goodman production was being used as an out-of-town tryout for the show prior to its for-profit New York run. Mosher vigorously defended the Goodman's involvement but this was clearly not a Chicago production. 

As part of Mosher's efforts to find more creativity in his post as artistic director, he and Mamet started the New Theatre Company in April 1984 as a separate company affiliated with the Goodman. As Mosher explained in an interview with Christiansen, the group wanted to be free of the restrictive mainstage:

The idea of doing 11 plays a year, six on the mains stage and five in the studio, was becoming enervating. . . maybe it's time to renew ourselves, and the Goodman main stage probably raises the wrong expectations as the place to do it. The Goodman was created at a time when plays had large casts; it was not created for the kind of play David writes. Let's see if we can get away from there; but let's see if

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19Richard Christiansen, "Glengarry refines map of explored terrain," *Chicago Tribune* 7 February 1984, sec. 5: 2.
there's a way Goodman can do this internally, by creating a company within a company that makes use of everything we have learned.20

They raised money through the Goodman and built a new theatre space, the 350-seat Briar Street Theatre at 3133 North Halsted. They then assembled a company composed of friends and family including Mamet's wife, Lindsay Crouse, William H. Macy, Linda Kimbrough, and Mike Nussbaum and planned to produce plays by Chekhov, Mamet, and John Guare in their first season.

As the New Theatre Company was preparing for its opening production, a new translation by Mamet of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* in March of 1985, it became known that Mosher was a candidate to take over as artistic director of the moribund Vivian Beaumont Theatre in Lincoln Center. At first, Mosher talked of being able to continue his involvement as a director with the New Theatre Company, even if he accepted the Lincoln Center post but this was soon dismissed as impractical.

In April of 1985, Mosher accepted the position of artistic director at Lincoln Center in New York. Mosher had done much of what he set out to do at the Goodman. He had opened the Goodman to Off-Loop artists from the Organic, St. Nicholas, and Remains. He created an appetite for new plays at the Goodman, against strong opposition from members of his own board, and had won a whole new

audience. Of the Goodman's 20,000 subscribers in 1985, only 2,000 were subscribers in 1974 when Mosher came to the theatre.

But with Mosher's planned departure, the plans for the New Theatre Company faded away. *The Cherry Orchard* as well as two short Mamet plays, *The Shawl* and *The Spanish Prisoner* were produced at the Briar Street Theatre in the spring of 1985 but they were the final productions of the New Theatre Company.

During the summer of 1985, the Goodman conducted a nationwide search for a new artistic director. The theatre's worsening financial position made new artistic leadership imperative. The expenses of the Goodman's move of its annual *Christmas Carol* production to the cavernous Auditorium Theatre as well as those incurred by the now defunct New Theatre Company added to the distractions of Mosher's final season had left the theatre with a deficit placed as high as $700,000 in some reports. In the meantime, plans went ahead for the 1985-86 season under the guidance of producer Roche Schulfer. In order to keep costs down, Schulfer booked in Yale Rep's production of August Wilson's *Fences*, inaugurating a long-term relationship with both Lloyd Richards and August Wilson. He also scheduled the Acting Company's production of *Orchards*, an adaptation of Chekhov's works, directed by Chicagoan Robert Falls.

By October of 1985, the search had been narrowed to two local Chicago candidates, Robert Falls and Frank Galati. Falls had developed a strong reputation as the innovative artistic director of Wisdom Bridge. Galati who was a professor of performance studies
at Northwestern University, had been a leading actor and director in Chicago area theatre throughout the 1970s. Both were well-known and very popular with Chicago theatre audiences.

At the end of October 1985, in an unusual move, the Goodman wound up hiring both. Falls was appointed artistic director but, at Falls' suggestion, Galati was hired as associate artistic director. Both men were friends and, in the spirit of collaboration so common in Chicago theatre, had expressed an interest in working together. Galati planned to continue in his position at Northwestern and made a commitment to the Goodman to direct one show and write or act in another per season.

Falls came to the Goodman with a mission to revitalize the theatre's mainstage, in particular by presenting Shakespeare and other large scale classics that the smaller Off-Loop theatres didn't have the resources to produce. In order to focus the theatre's energies, Falls made the decision to temporarily shut down the Studio. The Goodman's financial situation was also eased by the award of a $500,000 MacArthur Foundation grant at the beginning of 1986, permitting the theatre to retire the $750,000 debt from the Mosher years by the end of the '86-'87 season.

Falls brought all the energy of his Off-Loop, struggling theatre experience to the flagship institution of Chicago theatre. The problem at the Goodman had always been finding a match between the institution's size and the director's imagination. Under Reich and Woodman, the imagination had been lacking; Mosher had been intimidated by the size of the institution. Finally, in Falls, the
Goodman had found an artistic director who was eager to work on a larger scale and who had the imagination to make it an exciting theatrical experience. In a personal interview Falls said:

A lot of the work that I've done was built on the work that Greg had done in terms of new work, non-traditional casting, all sorts of things. But the one thing that wasn't happening, that historically hadn't happened, was a real commitment of energy toward the classics. I was very fired up [coming to the Goodman] because the play that I had done coming out of Wisdom Bridge, the bridge play literally between the Goodman and Wisdom Bridge, was 

*Hamlet*, which was a real breakthrough production for me personally. I really discovered something about myself and my love of classic writing and large work and director-driven interpretations of Shakespeare and the classics. I came into the Goodman determined to do *Galileo* and *The Tempest* and to make large work in directors' visions the key focus of the theatre which is why I brought Frank Galati on as my associate as well as Michael Maggio. I wanted to create a theatre that was driven by the director's vision, doing principally large scale work.

It was such a totally unique situation that Michael Maggio, Frank Galati, and I are all what I would call homegrown Chicagoans . . . we came out of the soil of this community, with a deep-understanding of this community. . . . And we all have a shared vision of what we want, what we like, yet we're all three very different.21

In planning his first season, Falls decided to play his strongest cards at once. Based on his success at Wisdom Bridge with Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*, Falls scheduled a revival of Brecht's *Galileo* featuring film actor, Brian Dennehy, and later in the season, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which he had first staged at

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Chicago's Court Theatre in 1977. Associate director Galati was set to stage his own adaptation of the writings of Gertrude Stein, *She Always Said, Pablo*, and associate director Michael Maggio would direct Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*.

Falls' gamble on a sumptuous production of *Galileo* with a cast of 28, turned out to be a good one. *Sun-Times* critic Hedy Weiss exclaimed:

Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo* swept across the stage (and the domed roof) of the Goodman Theater last night, and leading it into glory—with the blinding light and searing power of a blazing, white-hot comet—was actor Brian Dennehy. . .

Once again, Falls, who is making his formal debut as artistic director of the Goodman with this show, has proved that he can unleash every weapon in the arsenal of theater spectacle, and put them to work in the service of illumination rather than diversion. Together with Dennehy and designer George Tsypin, he has created a work of theater that can appeal to the showman, the synthesizer, and the scholar.22

The 1986-87 season was a tremendous success in both artistic and financial terms. Not only was the deficit erased but the theatre ended the season with a $618,000 operating surplus and attendance figures averaging 97% of capacity. *Sunday in the Park*, the season ending musical, had played been extended for three months and grossed $1.3 million. The Goodman had reclaimed its position of prominence in the Chicago theatre community. By 1987, the Goodman had grown to one of the largest resident theatres in the country with an annual budget of $4.5 million.

Falls had successfully reshaped the theatre from an institution dedicated to supporting writers to a director's theatre, something that Chicago Off-Loop theatre, mostly actor-driven, had been lacking.

"With Bob (Falls) at the theater," explains Allen M. Turner, past board chairman, "the Goodman has become a director's theater with the stamp of the auteur on it. We're doing all kinds of theater, but now, it's seen through a director's eye."\(^23\)

As the '80s drew to a close, the Goodman established a unique model of artistic leadership for regional theatre based on the values of the Chicago theatre community. The Goodman company became an ensemble of directors led by the triumvirate of Falls, Galati, and Michael Maggio, each accomplished enough to head the theatre alone. Each director was responsible for supervising two mainstage productions as well as a single research-and-development project each season. This structure provided the Goodman directors with artistic freedom, collegial support, the possibility of rotating duties; scheduling flexibility, and even artistic leave, when desired, to work with other companies on special projects. A group of young directors were also part of the staff structure, serving as assistant directors and directors of Studio projects. The Goodman was intent on training the next generation of directors to insure its survival as an institution.

Wisdom Bridge Theatre was one of the most eclectic and artistically varied of the Off-Loop theatres. Graced with the worst location of any of the city’s leading theatres, in a run-down Rogers Park neighborhood, the theatre seemed to thrive on adversity and produced some of Off-Loop’s most powerful productions. The theatre was founded in 1974 by David Beaaid, a 21-year-old native of Shreveport, Louisiana. Beaaid had come to Chicago a few years before to appear as Eugene in a production of Look Homeward Angel at the Ravinia Festival directed by George Keathley, a well-known Chicago director at Ravinia, the Ivanhoe and other theatres. He won a Jeff award for his portrayal but when he realized how little training he had as an actor, he enrolled at the Goodman School of Drama. Trained or not, his talent continued in evidence and during a summer off from school, Beaaid won another Jeff award, acting in Lanford Wilson’s Hot L Baltimore at the Ivanhoe Theater.

In 1974, when Beaaid auditioned again for George Keathley, he told Keathley of his interest in starting his own theatre company. Later Beaaid credited Keathley with casting him in a large role in The Dark at the Top of the Stairs to help make the dream of having
his own theatre come true. Beaird took his entire $1,500 salary for the role and used it to start Wisdom Bridge. Beaird described the theatre's impoverished beginnings in an interview with Jim Maronek:

The place used to be a karate parlor, Chinese restaurant, whorehouse, bar, occult bookstore, and when we got up there, it was just one enormous room. So some of the girls sweet-talked some construction people out of their scrap wood. And that's what we built the thing out of. And then we went to an abandoned movie theatre over on 71st Street and bought the seats. Unscrewed them and cut away through fifty years of Cracker Jack. The first year, for the most part, we were working out of coffee-can lights. We raid; we make lumber raids. Like, we raided a vacant lot the other day. There's so much lumber laying around this town! You couldn't do anything with it maybe, but we made a whole set out of it.1

Beaird found a space to make into a theatre on the second floor of a building at 1559 W. Howard in the northern neighborhood of Chicago known as Rogers Park. There were very good reasons that the rent was so cheap. The neighborhood was downright seedy with local businesses like Frank's Place (which became the theatre bar), the Charm Beauty Salon, "Readings by Annette", an "adult" bookstore, and various thrift shops and used furniture stores. Many patrons from the well-to-do suburbs or the North Side were nervous about going to Wisdom Bridge but some, like Wisdom Bridge actor Larry MacCauley, felt it helped bring "people who like to come in because it's a bit of sleaze. They slum a little, they support these

1Jim Maronek, "Wisdom Bridge is falling up," Chicago, March 1976: 118.
poor, starving sons of bitches, and they can still stand around in the lobby and have their cappuccino—all of which is great."²

Beaird told an interesting story when asked about the origin of the name of Wisdom Bridge Theater. He had come to the Art Institute to look at a particular abstract painting titled *Rhinoceros Waiting* which he had read about in *Time* magazine. While wandering through the galleries at the Institute, Beaird came across another painting that caught his eye:

There was another picture, and on top of it, just over the picture, was written, "I wish somebody had told me sooner that I will have all the time I ever need right up until the time I die." And the picture was called *Wisdom Bridge*. And I thought, man, I've been running in a dead run since I was 17 years old, and I said, "Just relax, there's no need to be famous, no need to get to New York or Broadway. Just relax, we'll go over on the North Side and work on ourselves. You know, do small theatre and just work." That's it. I liked the picture, I liked what it said, and Wisdom Bridge turned out to be the name."³

The theatre's first production was William Hanley's *Slow Dance on a Killing Ground* which earned good critical notices but didn't sell tickets. Beaird describes opening to a less-than-enthusiastic audience response:

The first year we opened, for the first six weeks, we played to sort of nobody: six people every night, but we grew progressively. When we did *The Fantastiks*, we got just a

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³Maronek, 118.
tremendous response—we ran the show for something like six months. That told us where it was. . . . Well, I found that there was definitely at least a potential for plays with a high degree of entertainment, and not for plays that made audiences work, necessarily.4

*Dignity* which opened Wisdom Bridge's first full season was Beaird's play on the life and philosophy of Socrates. His motive for writing the play was to investigate the human side of the great philosopher and try to make drama that would challenge the intellect as well as entertain. The mixed reviews, however, convinced Beaird that his taste was a bit too off-beat for Chicago audiences and that, to succeed, he needed to rely on more conventional scripts.

Beaird had a reputation as a very odd person, a vital but idiosyncratic artist. He had Crohn's disease, with painful intestinal ulcers that required strong medication. Larry McCauley, an actor in *The Fantasticks*, recalls,

"We were always being told that Beaird was supposed to die within a few weeks—which made him even more romantic. . . . But he was a charming guy, really. And totally unpredictable. He was a wonderful actor. As a director, he just rough-blocked a lot and expected you to fill in. He also wanted very much to be a writer. He said he used to write plays about his mother's sexual fantasies. He'd cut down large-cast plays like *Oedipus Rex* to fit his budget, and somehow he made it work because he had very versatile actors who could play three or four parts. David made you feel that nothing was impossible—although half the time it was. And you knew that, too. It was a con job. He had these marvelous ideas, but some of them reminded me of the late '50s, when Ferlinghetti and others would read poetry while someone else beat the bongos. If there's a major

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4Maronek, 118.
difference between him and Bob Falls [Beaird’s successor as Wisdom Bridge’s artistic director], it’s that Bob will draw on the talent of other people, whereas David wanted it to be a one-man theater, and there ain’t no such thing.”

In May of 1976, Beaird directed Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, his last show with Wisdom Bridge. A short while later, he was forced to resign due to ill health. Without an artistic director, the theatre languished until, nearly a year later in March of 1977, Robert Falls directed his first show at Wisdom Bridge. After he saw the ramshackle theatre space, he decided to do an adaptation of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*.

“I’d heard about Beaird, that he was extraordinarily gifted, a visionary eccentric, a madman,” says Falls. “When I came here that spring, the place was totally in shambles. They told me I could direct anything I wanted but I had to use the existing set. Off the top of my head I said, *Of Mice and Men*, because it looked like a barn to me. Actually, it was a junkyard, because Beaird felt his theater was basically that—in a positive sense. So he built a permanent set from doors, old chairs, pieces of lumber. We did the show on a budget of $50.”

In the fall of 1977, Robert Falls became the theatre’s new artistic director and brought in Mary Badger as production stage manager. Conditions at Wisdom Bridge began to improve almost immediately. Falls had the artistic and organizational skills that Wisdom Bridge needed and Badger was able to make the physical side of the productions happen, with next to nothing for a budget. Badger

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5 Terry, 22.
6 Terry, 23.
had gained valuable experience from previous work at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, NJ, and at the San Quentin Drama Workshop.

Robert Falls soon became a major force among Chicago directors with the success of his work at Wisdom Bridge. In October of 1977, he directed *Ladyhouse Blues*, Kevin O'Morrison's matriarchal family drama set in the years following World War I. The production won four Jeff citations, the non-Equity awards for excellence from the Joseph Jefferson Committee. Although the quality of its productions was improving, the theatre's physical environment was not. A visit to Wisdom Bridge in its early days was a bit more adventuresome than some of its audience members were ready for.

Wisdom Bridge Theater for a long time was as physically scruffy as portions of its surroundings. Its interior resembled a curbside dumpster, and it was such a firetrap that one actor warned his friends not to set foot inside the place. There were break-ins and blackouts, flooding, and box-office famine. Money was so scarce that the performers literally held out a hat in order to survive. During its initial production, the cast would count the house and sometimes have to stop at three. If they were lucky. Some nights, they gave a play and nobody came.7

Falls did not choose seasons composed of only realistic, contemporary plays. He wanted to stretch his own skills as a director and expand his audiences taste to include classical plays as well. In December 1978, he conceived and co-directed a production of *Tartuffe* with Michael Maggio. This was the beginning of a healthy

7Terry, 20.
and productive relationship between Falls and Maggio, both at Wisdom Bridge and later, at the Goodman Theater.

In April 1979, Falls directed a musical with a Chicago setting, *Bagtime*, about the adventures of a Treasure Island supermarket bagboy. Co-written by well-known *Tribune* columnist, Bob Greene, and Paul Galloway, the production received mixed reviews but got lots of press coverage due to Greene's local popularity. Actor B.J. Jones described a disastrous blackout during the last night of the show at Wisdom Bridge.

It was just before the show moved down to Drury Lane Water Tower. I ran offstage to tell this one actress not to roll out the grocery checkout counter (which we called "Bagtime Galactica"), but she didn't hear me and the thing hit me right over the eye. It was like murder onstage. Everyone in the audience must have thought, "Oh, Bagtime is rather Brechtian." Here I was, gushing blood, the whole front of my shirt just soaked. Fortunately, I was wearing a red grocery vest. They put a bandage on me, the show went on, and I got a nice hand. Later, when I was getting 13 stitches in the hospital emergency room, I looked at the guy and said: "I'm an actor. Could you try to hide the scar so I don't end up looking like Frankenstein?" The guy says: "I know who you are. I saw Bagtime." And he proceeded to give the show--and me--what you might say was a less than flattering review. Well, what was I going to say as he was sewing me up: "---- you, buddy?" It was the first time I literally understood the term "adding insult to injury." 8

In 1979 Jeff Ortmann, college roommate of Bob Falls, came to Wisdom Bridge as its executive director. He had previously worked in audience operations and as house manager at the Krannert Center on

8Terry, 21.
the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana campus and spent two seasons at the St. Louis Symphony as director of operations before coming to Wisdom Bridge. Ortmann took over the business side of the theatre and he and Falls worked well together as a team.

In 1979, Wisdom Bridge had a season with four hit productions in a row, beginning in October with Arthur Kopit’s *Wings*, directed by Falls. A poetic story of a former aviatrix and wing-walker who has a stroke, the play blends the interior reality of the woman’s still lively mind with the grim exterior reality of her slow recovery.

At the beginning of its 1979-80 season, Wisdom Bridge was doing well enough to be able to make $40,000 worth of improvements to its second floor space, one of Chicago’s most primitive. The theatre increased its seating capacity from 150 to 200, rearranged the stage and improved sightlines, fixed up the heating system, installed new seats as well as a new ladies restroom. The lack of basic creature comforts was wearing thin with Chicago audiences.

The restroom, in particular, was a much needed improvement. Roslyn Alexander, who won a Jeff for her performance in *Wings*, tells a story about the trials of acting in a poor Chicago storefront theatre:

"I have washroom stories that have made my afternoon anecdotes for the last year," she says with a laugh. "The backstage bathroom didn’t have a door--only a curtain--and they put a sign on it that read ‘Gentlemen.’ On opening night, of course, I had the usual nerves, and I asked someone, ‘What should I do?’ They said: ‘Use it. Somebody will watch.’ Well, they didn’t, and I was walked in on so many times that finally I
pinned a sign, ‘Occupied,’ on the curtain—which didn’t do anything. The men would open the curtain, look at me sitting there, and tell me, ‘It says “Men.”’ ‘Yes,’ I’d answer, ‘but it’s the only one we have backstage.’ I wouldn’t have cared so much except that I was in costume and makeup and was easily identifiable when the curtain went up. I remember one man opened the curtain, went through the whole routine. I saw only his suede shoes and beige corduroy pants, which looked so classy I thought, ‘Oh, God, I hope he’s not a critic.’ But I didn’t want to look up. I was trying to be poised, which was hard under the circumstances. After the show, they had a little buffet, and I was introduced to a man who turned out to be (Chicago director) Sheldon Patinkin. He smiled and said, ‘We’ve met.’ I looked down and saw those shoes and pants!”

Money was always a problem at Wisdom Bridge but as the theatre’s reputation grew, the financial picture was getting better. The budget for the 1979-80 season was approximately $315,000 with 62% of that figure coming from earned income and the rest from corporate, foundation, government, and individual contributed income sources. In an interview, Falls gave his assessment of working in the low-budget world of Off-Loop theatre:

“The miracle of Wisdom Bridge is that we’ve never been able to do anything we’ve done—but we’ve done it. We’ve never had enough money to produce it right; we’ve never had enough people to do it right. All we’ve had is this crazy energy.”

Despite the scarcity of resources, some productions were able to pull it all together. In December of 1980, Maggio returned to Wisdom Bridge to direct Tom Stoppard’s Travesties with Chicago

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9 Terry, 20.

10 Terry, 30.
stalwarts Frank Galati, Linda Kimbrough, and Alan Wilder in the cast. Artistic director, Bob Falls, remembers how pleased he was with the production:

"Travesties was so extraordinary and the people in it were so good," says Falls. "It's sort of the high point in achievement in the years we've been here. It brought everything together for us--design, lighting, acting."11

In May of 1981, Robert Falls directed a magnificent production of Brecht's Mother Courage and her Children featuring Sonja Lanzener, Gary Cole, Frank Galati, and Glenne Headly. In an environmental production in Wisdom Bridge's upstairs theatre, Falls tackled the difficult Brecht play head-on and the results were very positive. Christiansen called the production, "a feast of theater, a blazing evening of beauty and glory, and one of the single most thrilling productions I've ever seen in an Off Loop playhouse."12

Falls also successfully added an Eastern element to Wisdom Bridge's eclectic programming. In October of 1981, Shozo Sato, a visiting artist with the University of Illinois' Krannert Center, came to Wisdom Bridge and directed his first Kabuki adaptation of a Western classical play. The unusual combination of Japanese traditions with Western text in Kabuki Macbeth was one of the outstanding productions of the 1981-82 season and won a number of Jeff awards for the theatre.

11Terry, 20.

In September of 1983, Wisdom Bridge had one of its biggest successes when Falls directed *In the Belly of the Beast*, adapted from the writings of convicted murderer Jack Abbott and featuring Remains actor, William L. Petersen. The production was a smash hit at Wisdom Bridge as well as in its subsequent transfer to the Goodman Studio. The production was then remounted in April 1985 at the Ivanhoe Theater in Chicago and went on to tour to London, Glasgow, and Washington D.C. from May to August, 1985. Exerpts from the production's Chicago reviews below emphasize the energy of Petersen's acting and the power of Falls' directing.

The work of William L. Petersen in *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison* is such an extraordinary achievement, and of such heroic stature, that it crosses the usual boundaries of "acting" into an area of experience I found staggering. . . .

How do I account for the fact that minutes after leaving the theater Thursday night, I had to pull my car over to the side of the street so that I could clear the tears from my eyes?

Such shocking power comes only, I suspect, when an actor gives himself to the life of a character with deep inner strength and commitment. Not many actors have the character or intelligence or skill to reach that far within themselves, and not many are given roles that seem so right for them, but when they make it, as Petersen has on this occasion, it's breathtaking. . . .

Robert Falls, who re-arranged the material from an earlier, original adaptation by director Adrian Hall of the Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence R.I., has
staged the drama with searing force, aided immeasurably by the brilliant lighting design of Michael S. Philippi.\textsuperscript{13}

Rick Kogan, \textit{Sun-Times} critic, was equally impressed with the production:

\textit{In the Belly of the Beast} is an experience of gut-wrenching innovation, vitality and dramatic craftsmanship; 90-some minutes of breathtaking theater. . . . The direction—the astonishing Falls is also responsible for the original set—is agile and inventive, precisely punctuated. The striking lighting by Michael S. Philippi is so effective as to be considered a fourth cast member.\textsuperscript{14}

In December 1983, Shozo Sato returned to Wisdom Bridge to stage his adaptation of Euripides \textit{Medea}. As with his previous effort, \textit{Kabuki Medea} was a hit with critics and audiences alike. Glenna Syse called the production, "magnificent, always mesmerizing, perpetually striking, rarely eloquent and occasionally droll. Provocative theater? Yes, indeed."\textsuperscript{15} After its run at Wisdom Bridge, the production went on tour in the Midwest and to the A.T. & T. Festival in Washington, D.C. along with \textit{In the Belly of the Beast}.

The homeless Remains Theatre ensemble created several successful productions in collaboration with Wisdom Bridge. In May

\textsuperscript{13}Richard Christiansen, "Unforgettable acting powers \textit{Beast}," \textit{Chicago Tribune}, 30 September 1983: N. pag.

\textsuperscript{14}Rick Kogan, "Petersen brilliant in haunting, gut-wrenching \textit{Belly of Beast}," \textit{Chicago Sun-Times}, 1 October 1983: N. pag.

\textsuperscript{15}Glenna Syse, "Kabuki \textit{Medea} striking in making the twain meet," \textit{Chicago Sun-Times}, 9 December 1983: 76.
of 1984, Keith Reddin's new play *Life and Limb* was staged by Falls at Wisdom Bridge in a production featuring Alan Ruck, Amy Morton, and Gary Cole. Reddin, a local Chicago playwright who trained at Northwestern and Yale, developed a strong relationships with Falls and the Remains ensemble and had several of his plays done by both in later years. This Eisenhower-era love story told of the wife of a disillusioned soldier who returned from hell after her death for a brief reunion. Christiansen gave it a mixed but, ultimately positive, review:

*Life and Limb*, Keith Reddin's heartbreaker of a play, is its author's first full-length work for the theater and, as such, it probably falls under the category of promising. Like many first plays, it is at once overly ambitious and underdeveloped, and its production at Wisdom Bridge Theatre, while often inventive and exciting, doesn't always make the bridge from realism to surrealism that a full realization of its poetry demands.

None of these faults seem consequential, however, in view of the fact that the play is quite wonderful. It is a thoughtful drama of political and social issues, a hilarious comedy of deep, dark humor, a disturbing fable of the corruption of the American Dream, and, particularly under Robert Falls' direction at Wisdom Bridge, a deeply moving love story.¹⁶

In January 1985, Wisdom Bridge's production of *Hamlet* was directed by Bob Falls, starring Aidan Quinn. The controversial production was hailed as a landmark of "Chicago style" for Falls and Wisdom Bridge. Christiansen described it as, "pocked with flaws,

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streaked with invention and emblazoned with daring, Wisdom Bridge Theatre's new production of *Hamlet* is blessed and cursed by its passionate desire to throw fresh, startling light on Shakespeare's tragedy." The modern dress production was full of jagged contemporized images such as Hamlet spraypainting his famous "To be or not to be" monologue on the wall or cavorting with Horatio to the anarchic strains of Talking Head's "Burning Down the House." Chicago Reader critic J. Linn Allen commented that, "The Elsinore of Fall's *Hamlet* is a tissue of styles. Life doesn't go on there, only images. Claudius, that instant, self-created king, delivers his opening speech on television monitors. . .".

In February 1986, Wisdom Bridge took a big risk when it opened the Encore series in the 900-seat Civic Theatre in downtown Chicago. This venture was designed to test the viability of transferring hit Chicago productions to a larger, more commercial venue. Two productions, a complete restaging of the earlier Wisdom Bridge *Hamlet*, and a new production by Shozo Sato, *Kabuki Faust*, were to bring the best of Off-Loop theatre to a wider Chicago audience. The four-week series, two weeks for each production, was budgeted at $500,000 and, despite the much higher production costs, the hope was that a sizeable audience in the large theatre would make both Wisdom Bridge and the Civic Theatre a decent profit.

17Richard Christiansen, "Wisdom lights up *Hamlet* with lively, daring sparks," Chicago Tribune 1 February 1985: N. pag.


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Despite excellent reviews, both productions failed to attract large crowds. The project lost a total of $64,000, cutting deeply into the theatre's surplus, and dealt Wisdom Bridge a serious financial setback. During this same time, Falls had become the primary candidate for the position of artistic director at the Goodman Theater. In 1986, he accepted the Goodman's offer and resigned from Wisdom Bridge. The losses from the Encore project coupled with subsequent lackluster seasons after Falls' departure began Wisdom Bridge's troubling financial downturn.

In the interim, Doug Finlayson, associate artistic director, directed a number of Wisdom Bridge productions including Tina Howe's Painting Churches, 'Night Mother by Marsha Norman, and The Immigrant by Mark Harelik. The theatre continued to produce under Jeff Ortmann's leadership while a lengthy search was conducted for a new artistic director.

In November 1986, Wisdom Bridge announced the appointment of Richard E.T. White as the new artistic director, replacing Robert Falls. White was previously associate artistic director at Berkeley Repertory Theatre and artistic director at Eureka Theatre and had directed at the Berkeley and Oregon Shakespeare Festivals, Milwaukee Repertory, and the Mark Taper Forum. Wisdom Bridge's choice of White as the new artistic director was influenced by his eclectic interests in both classical and contemporary theatre, similar to the departing Falls. Jeffrey Ortmann, Wisdom Bridge executive director, announced optimistically, "White was the top choice. He will answer ultimately to the board. It's a partnership.
between him and me. That's how that works, just as it did before with Falls and me." Unfortunately, the partnership that Ortmann envisioned was to become a battle of egos and begin the decline of Wisdom Bridge Theatre.

Wisdom Bridge had always been a model of community involvement in its Rogers Park neighborhood. The theatre had a large student matinee program in which Chicago school children saw Wisdom Bridge productions free or at reduced rates. The theatre also participated in the Adopt-A-School program with Gale Academy and ran an after-school theatre program at Hayt School. Wisdom Bridge maintained a strong community presence by providing a site for public meetings sponsored by various Rogers Park organizations. These programs earned strong community support.

In April of 1987, Wisdom Bridge board president Diane Goldin and executive director Jeffrey Ortmann announced Wisdom Bridge's purchase of its own theatre building and adjacent parking lot for $250,000. With 10,000 subscribers and a $1.5 million annual budget, Wisdom Bridge was second only to the Goodman in size and seemed ready for such a step. Spearheaded by an Amoco Foundation grant of $80,000, the 13 year-old theatre joined the Organic, Victory Gardens, and Body Politic among the few Chicago Off-Loop theatre companies that were their own landlords. In each case, the properties consisted of several storefront rental spaces that provided income to offset the expenses of maintaining the theatre.

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portion of the property. In the case of Wisdom Bridge, the theatre occupied the 5,000 square foot second floor while the first floor contained theatre office space, Frank's tavern and Reuter's violin repair shop.

It appeared that the selection of White as the new Wisdom Bridge artistic director was not a match. In September 1987, White directed a lackluster production of *Ten November* by Steven Dietz. This, along with White's next two productions, Stephen Jeffrey's *Hard Times* and Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die*, weren't popular with either critics or audiences.

Soon a struggle for leadership of the company developed between White and Ortmann. The fight was unusually bitter and public with both parties seeking support from the board and the press. White was eventually forced to resign. The problems that the theatre company faced at the end of White's two years as artistic director were many. The theatre had not had a hit production during White's tenure. The number of subscribers had dropped from a high of 10,000 at the end of Robert Falls' reign in 1986 to 6,000 by 1988. The resulting deficit was estimated to be between $100,000 to $250,000. White claimed that Ortmann's management was undercutting the artistic work of the theatre. Dissatisfaction with Ortmann's management also caused artistic associate Douglas Finlayson and literary manager Christine Sumption (who was married to White) to resign. The board, after making several attempts to patch up the rift between White and Ortmann, finally chose to side with Ortmann, keeping him on in the position of
executive director and chief financial officer. Following the board’s decision regarding White, development director Thomas De Walle, set designer Michael Philippi and sound designer Rob Milburn also resigned, leaving the theatre with a fragmented staff.

As usual, “artistic differences” were cited as the cause of the rift but in this case, it was not an idle phrase. White was a West Coast liberal who felt theatre should be used to critique fascism, sexism, industrialization, and other perceived social ills. On his arrival at Wisdom Bridge, he said, “I like the heritage of plays that deal with disquieting themes, with assumptions that don’t often get questioned. . . . I want to bring them out into the light and look at them. I want theatergoers to question, to ask ‘why?’” He had intellectual, political, and literary tastes in theatre that Ortmann did not share. Ortmann, on the other hand, had middle-of-the-road tastes. He felt that he knew the Chicago audience well from his years of experience under Falls and that White’s disdain for “entertaining” theatre would drive away Wisdom Bridge subscribers. It is also appears, in hindsight, that Ortmann was frustrated with his management role and wanted the position of artistic director for himself, a position for which he was only marginally qualified. After White’s departure, Ortmann did, in fact, become the artistic director until the theatre’s demise in 1995.

At the end of the decade, Wisdom Bridge was battered and bruised. The theatre suffered from a lack of artistic direction and

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had lost many loyal subscribers. Ortmann had won his battle but he had endangered the theatre in the process. He now faced the difficult task of rebuilding the staff and artistic reputation of Wisdom Bridge in a much more competitive Chicago theatre scene.
CHAPTER 8

VICTORY GARDENS THEATER

Victory Gardens' primary artistic mission since its founding has been the development of Chicago talent. The theatre has strong roots in its North Side neighborhood and has had a consistent track record of offering opportunities to local actors, directors, designers, and, especially, playwrights. Though originally founded by a collective of artists, the theatre has the longest continuity of artistic leadership of the Off-Loop theatres in this study. Dennis Zacek was first producer, then artistic director at Victory Gardens and continues as artistic director at this writing. It is Zacek's vision that has shaped the theatre's artistic development into a quintessentially Chicago neighborhood theatre. Though essentially a mainstream theatre, Victory Gardens has had a long commitment to African American and Hispanic playwrights and performers and has built a strong following for their work.

Victory Gardens Theater was founded in the summer of 1974 by eight local artists who shared a common interest in developing Chicago theatre talent. Like the backyard vegetable patches of World War II for which the theatre was named, Victory Gardens gave nourishment to the community using the resourcefulness and self-
reliance of Chicago's home grown theatrical talent. The directors and actors in this group were Warren Casey, co-author of the musical *Grease*, Stuart Gordon, Cordis Fejer, and Cecil O'Neal, from the Organic Theater, Mac McGinnes and June Pyskacek from Kingston Mines, and Roberta Maguire and David Rasche, both of Second City. They composed the founding artistic board and ran the new theatre for the first three years of its existence.

In the fall of 1974, the owner of the Orphans Tavern, Dan Johnston, purchased the Northside Auditorium Building at 3730 N. Clark with plans for a new bar and a possible arts center. Built in 1927 as Chicago's first Swedish Club, the building had successively housed social clubs for Italians, Germans, and most recently, a Latin American club. The building had been vacant since 1971 when Johnston purchased it and his preliminary plans for the space included two theatres, an art gallery, a music club, a dance company, and a video production studio. The newly formed but homeless Victory Gardens Theatre Company approached Johnston with plans, originally, for a 600 to 800-seat Equity house in the arts complex. The appeal of this new theatre's mission was that it would concentrate exclusively on nurturing the talents of Chicago actors, directors, and playwrights.

Victory Gardens soon scaled back their initial plans and created a 300-seat theatre space in the second-floor former banquet hall of the Auditorium building. In the best Chicago tradition of mixing theatres and taverns, they also added a small bar in the

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theatre lobby. The opening production in October of 1974 was the world premiere of *The Velvet Rose* by Stacy Myatt, directed by Mac McGinnes.

The second production opened in November, 1974. *The Magnolia Club* was a country western musical, written by David and John Karraker and Jeff Berkson and directed by Cecil O'Neal, which became a hit and ran for six months. Richard Christiansen, one of the first critics to discover the new company, wrote:

*The Magnolia Club* is one of those happy occasions in Chicago theater when a local show, put together with baling wire and ingenuity, just seems to come out of nowhere to set its audience rocking with pleasure at its homegrown, homemade delights. . . .

Created by Jeff Berkson, John Karraker and David Karraker, it's "a contemporary country musical" set in a grungy, dingy bar, where the boys from the bowling league hang out to drink their beer, pinch the waitress's behind and listen to the down-home songs. . . .

There's not a slick trick in the whole show, but Cecil O'Neal has done a superb job in staging it with sensitivity and a keen sense of the right theatrical moment.¹

According to writer Rick Kogan in an article about the new theatre, the actors in this popular play could often be found downstairs at Johnston's Northside Auditorium Bar after the show. There, mingling with post-show theatre patrons and residents of the

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Wrigleyville neighborhood. Victory Gardens actors, directors, and designers became an important element of the surrounding community.

Beginning in January 1975, Victory Gardens offered its first series of theatre classes featuring an acting class taught by David Mamet, a directing class taught by Stuart Gordon, an improv class taught by Roberta Maguire, and a Readers Theater Program led by Warren Casey. These classes were popular enough that they quickly became a permanent part of Victory Gardens' programming.

The success of *The Magnolia Club* encouraged the founding group of artists to continue producing. In March of 1975, Victory Gardens presented *The Lover and Other Strangers*, an evening of three short plays by Harold Pinter, Tennessee Williams, and John Guare, starring Cordis Fejer and David Rasche and directed by Mac McGinnes and Loyola University professor Dennis Zacek. The *Sun-Times'* Glenna Syse recommended the show in her review, calling it "an evening of irony, mystery and merriment. . ."2

Victory Gardens developed an important production in its early years which helped put the theatre on the map. *Three Women* developed by Cynthia Baker Johnson, Sandy Lipton, Roberta Maguire, and director Cecil O'Neal, had its world premiere at Victory Gardens where it ran for five months. The show then went on to the Goodman Stage 2 before transferring again to the Leo Lerner Theatre at the Uptown Hull House.

In the summer of 1975, Victory Gardens produced the harrowing prison drama, *The Cage*, by former San Quentin inmate, Rick Cluchey. In the cast, along with Cluchey, was William H. Macy on loan from St. Nicholas Theater, another example of the free exchange of artists in the Chicago theatre community. Roger Dettmer of the *Tribune* called the view of prison life, "the scariest, most gripping, most claustrophobic ever experienced." The *Cage* played in repertory with Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, both originally staged at the San Quentin Drama Workshop where Cluchey had been a member. With *The Cage* and subsequent social dramas, Victory Gardens developed an activist style of social realism that became evident in many of its play choices.

Another noteworthy event in Victory Gardens history was the production of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*, directed by Zacek in November 1975. This was the first of Zacek's many memorable productions of Pinter at Victory Gardens, this time featuring a trio of solid Chicago actors, William J. Norris, Frank Galati, and Michael A. Saad. Critic Roger Dettmer noted in his review,

> The isolation of these three . . . is conveyed most poignantly by Frank Galati as the elder brother, Aston; but most powerfully by William J. Norris in a triumphant performance as the tramp.

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Michael A. Saad is physically ideal, with unnerving concentration and quicksilver moodiness, as the Teddy boy, Mick.4

Victory Gardens also hosted a long run of the Organic Theater's production of *The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit* beginning in December 1975. The income from renting space to such long-running productions helped struggling young theatres such as Victory Gardens stay financially healthy enough to produce the next few plays on their schedule.

In May 1976, Victory Gardens produced a script by a young Chicago playwright, *All I Want* by Bobby DiCicco about the struggles of a down-and-out family in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood that ran for over a year and became the Off-Loop theatre's longest-running straight play. Developed out of Stuart Gordon's playwriting workshop, the play was part melodrama and part gritty urban realism and helped Victory Gardens earn an image as a producer of Off-Loop theatre hits.

Loyola theatre professor Dennis Zacek and his wife, Marcelle McVay, had been involved with Victory Gardens as director and business manager, respectively, since the early days. In the late spring of 1976, Zacek was appointed official producer at Victory Gardens and became its guiding artistic force. McVay had been the theatre's first full-time employee, serving as business manager and chief fundraiser for the theatre since 1974. She had watched the

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theatre grow from its start-up funding of $5,000 to an annual budget of $150,000 in 1975-76, then to $250,000 for 1976-77. This husband and wife team were a stabilizing force for the theatre, providing Victory Gardens with more consistent artistic and financial leadership than most Off-Loop companies were able to muster during their early years.

In what was then seen as a potentially risky move, Victory Gardens began its first subscription campaign in the fall of 1976. The risk in making a commitment to a subscription was the loss of flexibility for a small theatre. If a theatre promised its subscribers a series of plays on a set schedule then it had to stick to that schedule.

"The problem with building your season around subscriptions," [McVay] explains, "is that you have no room to accommodate 'hits.' And it's the hits--Magnolia Club, Wonderful Ice Cream Suit, Three Women--that have increased our audience and given us a visibility." 5

Using tactics similar to Bob Sickinger's Chamber Theatre group, Victory Gardens took their theatre to the community. They presented scenes at meetings of local neighborhood groups like the Lakeview Citizens' Coalition in order to promote their subscription campaign. The theatre's advisory board had raised the necessary $8,000 to fund the subscription drive through their own community resources and the marketing campaign went forward. From its early

days, Victory Gardens consistently had a more supportive board than most other Off-Loop theatres, a sign of its strong community support.

By 1976, Victory Gardens had become a theatre complex with its 300-seat mainstage on the second floor and, on the third floor, a 150-seat studio theatre and a tiny 85-seat lab. The smallest space was used for classes and Reader's Theater performances while the studio theatre was a venue for the new plays which were beginning to come out of Victory Gardens' playwriting programs.

By January of 1977, Victory Gardens had produced sixteen plays, including nine premieres by Chicago playwrights. The young theatre had won five Jeff awards out of 22 nominations. Over 500 students attended classes at the theatre annually in everything from scene design and makeup to theatre management and t'ai chi.

At the season's end in May of 1977, a major operational change occurred at Victory Gardens with the merger of the artistic board and the community advisory board into a single board of directors. As a result of these and other changes, Victory Gardens strengthened its board structure further, allowing the combined board to oversee all aspects of the theatre's operations. Led by its chairman, Allen Turner, the board appointed Zacek as the theatre's first artistic director. This change in the theatre's organizational structure, from governance by committee to the leadership of a single artistic director, helped bring the theatre's artistic vision into focus.

In addition to his work with Pinter, Zacek also directed several strong productions of the plays of the South African writer,
Athol Fugard, beginning with *The Blood Knot* in February 1977. Plagued by a series of cast changes and other setbacks, Zacek became determined to mount this difficult production. However, *Reader* critic Bury St. Edmund noted a plodding quality to this production that became a frequently-heard criticism of other Victory Gardens' productions.

This *Blood Knot* is clean, well thought-out, and faithful to the most obvious intentions of the text, but there's something missing. What happens is that Zacek, thinks, but he doesn't imagine. . . . He's still more an explainer than an entertainer, and a director needs to be both. Don't get me wrong—what he's done here is good, but what he hasn't done makes itself felt in turgid stretches that should have been illuminated or simply thrown out.6

In the summer of 1977, Victory Gardens went through a period of uncertainty about its future. The four-story Northside Auditorium Building had water in the basement, a leaking roof, and was difficult to heat. Owner Johnston had complained about high maintenance expenses as well as poor profits and declining business at his Northside Auditorium Bar. In July, entrepreneur Chuck Renslow bought the Northside Auditorium Building from Johnston with plans for a gay disco and several stores in the complex. He was willing to keep Victory Gardens in the building and agreed to fully renovate a 155-seat theatre for them. They would, however, have to give up the larger 300-seat space on the second floor for the planned disco, leaving them with two smaller theatres on the third floor.

General manager McVay, in announcing acceptance of the arrangement, explained that instead of having "three scantily equipped theaters" that they would have two well-equipped spaces. "We are losing seating capacity and some of our ability to be self-sufficient. But we're losing potential rather than the actuality of being able to fill those [300] seats downstairs... and we will have a pretty theater which I hope will be up to code."7 However, the changing nature of the building and possible noise from the disco interfering with theatre performances prompted serious concerns for the future of the theatre in this location.

In 1977, with Zacek's appointment as artistic director, Victory Gardens had expanded its original mission statement to emphasize the development of Chicago playwrights and the expansion of its audience through a commitment to African American and Latino theatre. In 1979, Victory Gardens received a grant from CBS to further develop minority theatre. Zacek used it to mount Latino Chicago, a successful production which he and Ramiro Carrillo directed, using local Chicago talent. The group that formed for this original production went on to become the independent Latino Chicago Theater Company. The troupe adopted the carpa or cartooning style of Teatro Campesino and the San Francisco Mime Troupe and quickly became Chicago's leading Hispanic theatre

company. Victory Gardens also strengthened its outreach commitment and began touring programs and artistic residencies in the schools at this time.

Through both its playwrights laboratory program and its regular season of plays, Victory Gardens began to nurture Chicago playwrights. The theatre also developed longterm relationships with non-Chicago minority playwrights by premiering their work in Chicago. Many of African American playwright Steve Carter's plays, originally produced at the Negro Ensemble Company in New York, were given their Midwest premieres at Victory Gardens, including *Eden* (1978), *Nevis Mountain Dew* (1979), *Dame Lorraine* (1981), *Shadows* (1982), and *Shoot Me While I'm Happy* (1986). The theatre's commitment to seeking out underrepresented artists and audiences was, and still is, rare for a primarily white theatre but the effort brought critical and audience rewards to Victory Gardens. The play, a story of black on black prejudice, is set in 1927 in New York black neighborhood and tells of a domineering father who tries to prevent his daughter's marriage. Richard Christiansen commented in his review of the 1978 production of Carter's *Eden*:

*Eden*, which opened Wednesday night at Victory Gardens, is an important and significant production in the life of Chicago theater... its presentation at Victory Gardens would not have been possible without the growing sense of community that has occurred in Chicago's indigenous theaters within the last decade.

By giving a play that has an all-black cast and is staged by a black South Side director with all the resources of it...
white-oriented theater at 3730 N. Clark St., Victory Gardens has helped break down some of the barriers that keep theater in ghettos, wherever they might be.

What's more, the move has paid off, for Eden, a strong, old-fashioned domestic tragedy with some strong, old-fashioned acting, looks like a blooming hit.\(^8\)

Local Chicago playwrights were given preference whenever possible. William J. Norris, an actor with the Organic, Victory Gardens, Goodman, and other Chicago theatres, had several of his plays produced by Victory Gardens including His Satanic Majesty (1978), Dillinger (1979), and Before I Wake (1987). Dean Corrin worked with Victory Gardens on several productions of his plays, including Butler County (which won the Court Theatre's Sergei Prize in 1984), Gentrification (1986) and Expectations (1987). Nicholas Patricca had Victory Gardens productions of his plays, The Examen (1980), The Fifth Sun (1984), and Gardinia's 'N' Blum (1987).

But non-Chicago playwrights also found a local home for their work at the theatre. Minnesota playwright John Olive's plays Minnesota Moon /Harvest Sun (1981), and Clara's Play (1982) were given their Chicago premieres at Victory Gardens. James Sherman had his plays The God of Isaac (1985), Mr. 80% (1986), and The Escape Artist (1988) all produced by Victory Gardens. His hit comedy, Beau Jest, was directed in 1989 by Zacek and had a fabulously successful run at Victory Gardens, earning over $577,000 in gross revenue for the theatre in the 1989-90 season. The Chicago

\(^8\)Richard Christiansen, "Victory Gardens lifts black drama from the ghetto," Chicago Tribune, November 1978: N. pag.
production was followed by successful runs at the Off-Broadway Lambs Theatre and many other theatres across the country.


Though the whole was less than the sum of its parts, the parts were superb. In *Ties*, Sweet distilled to new purity his gift for characterizations that are angelically compassionate and devilishly funny. The show, with much of the original cast, under original director Dennis Zacek, is being taped by WTTW for broadcast next year.\(^9\)

Unfortunately, Victory Gardens' Clark Street location continued to present problems such as limited seating, poor building maintenance, and increasing noise problems from the disco downstairs. The financial strain of keeping the theatre afloat became so severe that McVay often turned back her salary in those days just to stretch the available operating funds. The theatre was nearly forced to close and was desperately searching for other space options. In 1980, Victory Gardens began negotiations with Body

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Politic on becoming a permanent partner in Body Politic's theatre space. In 1981, Victory Gardens purchased a 53% share of the building owned by the Body Politic Theatre at 2257-63 North Lincoln. Victory Garden's purchase also bailed out the financially ailing Body Politic. The two companies agreed to share the building with Victory Gardens taking up residence in two theatre spaces on the first floor of the building while Body Politic retained the upstairs theatre, rehearsal studios and offices.

In August 1981, Victory Gardens began renovating its downstairs theatre spaces at the Body Politic installing a new 195-seat thrust stage mainstage and a 70-seat studio space with soundproofing between the first and second floors. Total cost of the purchase and renovations was approximately $165,000 with $45,000 coming from a grant from the Chicago Community Trust. The theatre's strong administration and community service mission helped it win grants that other groups couldn't and contributed to its growing image of stability.

By February 1983, Victory Gardens had grown into its new home. As the theatre approached its tenth anniversary, it claimed to have 3,341 subscribers, more than any other Off-Loop theatre. Its annual budget had grown to $500,000 and its enrollment in its theatre classes had grown to 700 students a year. Its playwriting workshops received particular focus as Victory Gardens remained committed to its mission of developing Chicago artists for Chicago audiences.
Victory Gardens continued to work with Jeffrey Sweet, one of the theatre’s most successful playwrights. In 1983, Shelley Berman, whose career was launched earlier in Chicago with his Second City success, returned to the city to star in Sweet’s *The Value of Names*. The production was a hit and was transferred to the Apollo Theatre for an extension after its Victory Gardens run. Richard Christiansen called Berman’s performance “victorious” and gave the piece high praise.

*The Value of Names*, in a beautifully crafted production at Victory Gardens Theater, has it all: a provocative subject, superb writing, stirring acting, a consistently engrossing story, and an almost overwhelming emotional wallop at its end. It’s a wonderful play, the best work yet written by Jeffrey Sweet, and a tremendously moving, deeply rewarding high point of this theater season.\(^\text{10}\)

In 1987 Victory Gardens and Body Politic co-produced the first Great Chicago Playwrights’ Exposition to focus attention on the work of Chicago writers. Supported in part by a $20,000 grant from Chicago’s Borg-Warner Foundation, the two theatres received a total of 384 script submissions for the competition. Playwrights were to either be resident or have lived in Chicago long enough to feel that the city had influenced their work. Play Expo concluded with a series of productions showcasing the work of thirteen playwrights over a six-week period. Two full-length prize winners, Nicholas Patricca’s *Gardenia’s ‘n’ Blum* and Valerie Quinney’s *In the Service of Others*, received $3,000 each as well as full productions. The remaining

\(^{10}\)Richard Christiansen, “*The Value of Names*: A solid-gold lesson,” *Chicago Tribune* 31 March 1983: N. pag.
short play winners received $1,000 each along with a production. Relationships formed with playwrights in the festival led to subsequent Victory Gardens productions of Claudia Allen's *The Long Awaited* and Charles Smith's *Jelly Belly*, directed by Zacek.

In 1988, as a result of the Great Chicago Playwright's Exposition, the Marianne and Michael O'Shaughnessy Playwright Development Fund was created to provide support and encouragement to Chicago area writers. This $150,000 gift, to be distributed over five years, allowed Victory Gardens to work with a core of playwrights on the development of scripts for mainstage production. In 1988, recipients included Claudia Allen for *The Long Awaited*, Steve Carter for development of *Pecong*, Marisha Chamberlain for work on *Angels of Warsaw*, John Logan for *Music from a Locked Room*, Dean Corrin for completion of *Shooting Spots*, James Sherman for work on *Beau Jest* and Charles Smith for an adaptation of Jean Toomer's *Cane*. All of these scripts were eventually produced by Victory Gardens. The O'Shaughnessy Playwright Development Fund also supported master classes with emerging writers and a series of developmental staged readings.

Victory Gardens continued to function throughout the '80s as Off-Loop movement's leading "community-oriented" theatre. Zacek admittedly was not searching for great literature nor brilliant performances but was committed to providing support for neighborhood artists. The theatre chose to stay local and small. During the two decades under review, Victory Gardens received less media attention and critical acclaim than any of the theatres in this

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study. The general critical consensus seems to have been that the theatres productions were solid but not exciting. The plays selected seldom ranged far from kitchen sink realism and social activism of the white liberal variety. Perhaps Victory Gardens owes its institutional stability and strong community support to this sense of consistency and minimized artistic risk-taking. A large segment of Chicago's audience seems to appreciate the intelligent and thoughtful, but somehow, unimaginative domestic drama regularly produced by Victory Gardens.
CHAPTER 9

STEPPENWOLF THEATRE

Steppenwolf achieved the most national recognition of any of the Off-Loop theatres and its history is an important example of the development of ensemble acting in Chicago. The company functioned during most of its history as a collective ensemble built on the strong relationships between its actors. More than any other Chicago company, Steppenwolf succeeded in bringing physically dynamic "rock and roll" energy to its work. The "Chicago style" of acting in the mid-'80s was particularly descriptive of the productions and the actors of the Steppenwolf ensemble.¹

The inspiration for creating their own theatre came to two high school drama students, Jeff Perry and Gary Sinise, friends in the Highland Park High School drama classes of Barbara Greener Patterson. Highland Park's theatre program was very comprehensive, offering classes in directing and multiple levels of acting classes

¹Much of the information in this chapter on the early days of Steppenwolf Theatre Company comes from John Mayer's thorough dissertation, "The Steppenwolf Theatre Company of Chicago, 1974-1982," University of Missouri, Columbia, 1993. This source is footnoted in cases of direct quotation.

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along with an extensive production program. Regular field trips to Chicago area theatres helped expose the high school students to a wide variety of professional productions. Especially important were the productions of the Academy Festival Theatre at Barat College in nearby Lake Forest, Illinois. In the early '70s, Patterson’s students were able to see such actors as Jason Robards and Colleen Dewhurst in O’Neill’s *Moon for the Misbegotten*, Irene Worth and Christopher Walken in William’s *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Cicely Tyson in an all-black revival of *Desire Under the Elms*, and Geraldine Page and Rip Torn in Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes*.

According to Sinise, one of the founders of Steppenwolf, he was a terrible student and was so disinterested in school that he rarely went to class. He claims that before he discovered theatre, he was on his way to being expelled. His main interest was rock and roll music and he spent most of his time playing in local bands. When he heard that the drama department at Highland Park was preparing a production of the musical *West Side Story*, he and a group of his rock and roll friends decided, on a whim, to audition. Sinise recalls, "We decided it would be fun to be in a play about gangs and run around and fight on stage." Sinise and his friends were cast, he thinks, because they were so different from the other theatre department guys. It was through this production that Sinise met Jeff Perry and the two became close friends.

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Sinise gives Patterson credit for turning his life around. He says her theatre classes sparked an interest in reading and literature. "She was the only teacher I ever needed. She brought some stuff out of me that I had but didn't know or care about... Her philosophy was very actor-oriented. One of the things I remember she said was, 'You don't need anything but actors to have a theater.' That's the exact philosophy I took into founding Steppenwolf."3

Sinise remembers a drama class field trip to the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis that turned out to be a life-changing experience for him. Under the supervision of Patterson, the students were to see three plays in two days, including an adaptation of John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*, a play and an author that would figure strongly in the work of both Sinise and Steppenwolf. He describes the impression the trip made on him in an interview with Clifford Terry:

I just thought we'd stay in a hotel a couple of nights and hang out. I went to the play totally unprepared as to what it was about, and I knew absolutely nothing about John Steinbeck. An at the end I was so choked with emotion I stood up and applauded and was trying to scream some sort of acknowledgement of my feelings about the actors as they took their curtain call, but I was so choked up nothing came out except tears. It really let me have it in the forehead. I left that experience thinking, "That's the kind of work I want to be a part of. I want to affect people with my work the way I was affected here." I took it home and thought about it. Then I read it and read *The Grapes of Wrath* and really got into Steinbeck.4

3Terry, "The Cool Season," 5.

4Terry, "The Cool Season," 5.
Jeff Perry, another Steppenwolf founder, was exposed to theatre and to ensemble acting methods at an early age when the newly formed American Conservatory Theatre visited the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park. Perry was on summer vacation between his seventh and eighth grade years and lived only a block away from Ravinia. After seeing an audition announcement for children, Perry's older sister dragged him to an open call. He was cast in a small role in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, directed by Bill Ball with ACT company members René Auberjonois, Richard Dysart, and Austin Pendleton in the cast. Pendleton would meet Perry again, years later, when he directed a major Steppenwolf success, the production of Ralph Pape's *Say Goodnight Gracie*. That summer, Perry got his first professional theatre experience with ACT's remarkable company.

In high school, Sinise and Perry were both very active in the Highland Park drama program. Their first production together was a 1973 class project for Patterson's directing class, Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come*. Sinise and Perry were co-directors as well as actors in the production. According to John Mayer, "They both believed that working together as actor and director would help them to achieve the best performance results, foreshadowing what would become a Steppenwolf trademark: free crossover between actor and director." In fact, more actors in the Steppenwolf Company took on the role of director than in any other Chicago ensemble at the time. In addition to Sinise and Perry, Randall Arney,

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H.E. Baccus, Terry Kinney, John Malkovich, and Laurie Metcalf all served as both actors and directors in the company.

Perry and Sinise weren't allowed to use the stage so they turned the school cafeteria into a theatre by putting up risers for the audience and platforms for the stage. They made their own lighting system by installing flood lights in coffee cans and cabling it all together through a homemade dimmer board. This lighting system actually went with them when they graduated and became the Steppenwolf light board in the company's early days. During high school, other roles for Sinise included the lead in Tartuffe, Nicely Nicely in Guys and Dolls, and roles in The Bald Soprano and The Little Foxes. Perry directed both Bald Soprano and Little Foxes and acted in The Caucasian Chalk Circle during his high school years.

During the summers of 1972 and 1973, Sinise gathered more theatre experience when he worked as an intern at the Court Theatre, an Equity theatre company at Beloit College in Wisconsin. Patterson was able to get him the job. There he saw Philadelphia, Here I Come before directing it in high school and he received valuable experience watching the professional company, including his teacher, Patterson, perform.

In 1973, Perry graduated and left Highland Park to attend Illinois State University at Normal, Illinois. Sinise had one more year of high school but began producing theatre on his own in the Highland Park community. In the spring of 1974, before the official founding of Steppenwolf Theatre, a group of Highland Park drama students, including Ricky Argosh and Sinise, produced for the first time...
time using the Steppenwolf name. The students presented an off-campus production of Paul Zindel's *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*, directed by Argosh, at the Unitarian Church in Deerfield, a neighboring community. One day during rehearsal, as they were trying to decide on a name for the new group, Sinise noticed Argosh reading the popular Herman Hesse novel, *Steppenwolf*. Impulsively, Sinise suggested the book's title as the name for the fledgling community theatre group, not knowing that it would eventually become the name of an internationally-known professional theatre.

The success of *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little* encouraged Sinise's first solo effort as both director and producer. In April of 1974, he staged a production of *Grease*, the Warren Casey and Jim Jacobs musical that had originated on Lincoln Avenue, in the auditorium of his old elementary school, the Indian Trail School in Highland Park. Mayer notes that the first five performances played to full houses without any advertising and that word of mouth in the community was so positive that four more added performances also sold out two weeks later. The community response to *Grease* was even more encouraging than the group's first production. When Perry came home from college to see Sinise's show, he brought Terry Kinney, a fellow drama student from ISU with him. Kinney liked Sinise as well as the production and all three made plans to work together during the coming summer break.

The summer of 1974 brought Perry and Kinney back to Highland Park where they joined Sinise in production of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, directed by Argosh. The
positive relationship formed between Sinise, Perry, and Kinney during this production in the Deerfield Unitarian Church would lead to the official founding of Steppenwolf Theatre Company two years later. As the summer came to an end, the three friends vowed to work together again. Perry then moved for a short time to Minneapolis and Kinney returned to school at Illinois State while Sinise stayed on in Highland Park, playing bass with a variety of rock and jazz bands and keeping the idea of their theatre company alive.

**Illinois State University**

The Theatre Department at Illinois State University was the incubator for the formation of the Steppenwolf ensemble. The department, chaired by Calvin Pritner, didn't impose a comprehensive actor-training philosophy but instead had a variety of approaches represented by individual faculty members. Early Steppenwolf company members mentioned Ralph Lane most often as a creative influence, followed by Jean Scharfenberg and Gail Cronhauer, but the lack of a unified approach may have, in fact, contributed to the independence and self-reliance at the core of this group. They learned to rely on their own artistic judgement rather than adopting the style of their teachers and mentors.

In order to generate more casting opportunities, there were frequent student directed productions, both on and off-campus. In one instance, cited by Mayer as a motivating factor in the creation of the company, a proposed off-campus production of Pinter's *The*
Homecoming, featuring Kinney, a now re-enrolled Perry, and Alan Wilder with non-student Gary Sinise coming down from Highland Park to be a part of the show, was vetoed by the department. Faculty were opposed to having the department's best actors and scholarship students committing their time to an off-campus production. This frustrated the young actors' desire to produce their own work and led Sinise, Perry, Kinney, and others to hold a series of meetings to discuss the possibility of forming their own company, away from the paternal control of the university. One of the founding members from ISU, Nancy Evans, recalled the first meeting in the spring semester:

I was invited to a meeting in 1976. I think Jeff invited me to go, and John [Malkovich]. A friend of their's, Gary Sinise, was going to be there and wanted to talk with us. So I said sure. I went into this conference room and literally everybody in the theatre department that I had respect for was in that room. There were maybe fifteen of us altogether, and Gary was sitting in the corner, just off to the side. They just started to talk to us about how Steppenwolf was a germ in their minds when they were in high school, and had come up with the name based on the Herman Hesse novel, and they said they wanted to put this company together and be the best theater in the world.6

During the planning meetings for this new theatre company that took place over the next few months, the young actors discussed their goals. The major focus was on actors creating an ensemble company, as Perry said, "to find good roles for each other"

6Mayer, 63.
and "to direct each other." If no one would give them a chance, these actors would make their own opportunities. The company would protect them from the constant rejection and uncertainty that was the single actor's lot.

The Steppenwolf actors were inspired by the stories of famous ensembles such as Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre and Harold Clurman's Group Theatre, by the film ensembles working with John Cassavetes, Ingmar Bergman, and Robert Altman, and by the actor-centered aesthetic of Peter Brook in *The Empty Space* where he speaks of "the true unspectacular intimacy that long work and true confidence in other people's work brings about." This direct way for actors to take control of their own work was then—and still is—the motivation for much of the Off-Loop movement.

Sinise, Perry, and Kinney had promised each other that they would work together again and, in the summer of 1976, they convinced six other ISU students, H.E. Baccus, Nancy Evans, Moira Harris, John Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf, and Alan Wilder, to move north to help found their new theatre company in Highland Park. Kevin Rigdon, a classmate from Highland Park High, became the company's resident designer. Sinise found a performance space, the former Red Door coffeehouse, in the basement of the Immaculate Conception Church school at 770 Deerfield Road in Highland Park. Though the space was small, the price was certainly right; the

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7Mayer, 64.

school charged them only $10 a month rent. The money for their first production included a $500 grant from the Illinois Arts Council, $400 left over from the now-defunct Steppenwolf community theatre group, some private contributions from the community, and $1,000 from Perry’s bank account. The company worked diligently on the basement space, cleaning and painting, to create a small 88-seat thrust stage theatre. When it came time to choose a name for the new theatre, no one was able to come up with a suggestion that everyone liked. In an article by Clifford Terry, Kinney described how they decided to keep the name of the former community theatre group.

We didn’t want to reincorporate—it cost $300, and we had only $50 among us—so we just kept the name. But at first we hated it. Hated it. None of us liked the book that much; it was so nihilistic. Besides, “Steppenwolf” sounded like the name of a rock band.9

The company did their best to bring the space up to code but the floor was peeling, the toilets often backed up, there were no exit lights on opening night, and the City of Highland Park wanted the theatre to install a $3,000 sprinkler system. Money was always a problem. Fred Plattner became the executive director of the young theatre company during this early period and began to help them with fundraising. Plattner was the music instructor at Highland Park High as well as director of development for the Ravinia Festival during the summer and he knew Perry and Sinise through their high

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school roles in *West Side Story*. When the theatre was having financial problems, the community would often chip in their support. Kinney recalled that "People would give us $500, $1,000 checks just to get us out of trouble."\(^{10}\)

Steppenwolf's first official production was a rotating bill of one-acts which opened on July 22, 1976; Harold Pinter's *The Lover* and Leonard Melfi's *Birdbath* as one evening's bill, and Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson* and Israel Horovitz' *The Indian Wants the Bronx* as the other. The plays were an odd mix of styles but they were chosen primarily because they offered good roles for the young actors in the company.

Critical reaction in the local *Highland Park News* to *The Lover* and *Birdbath* was positive. These were hometown kids and the community wanted the fledgling group to succeed. Reviewer Dorothy Andries wrote:

> The facilities of Steppenwolf Theater are modest. Opening night performance was attended by 35 people, but in the tiny quarters, the house seemed almost full. The Steppenwolf company doesn't need to impress us with surroundings or stage properties. They impress us with their talent, their discipline and the care with which they perform their roles. Theater really doesn't need to be any more than that.\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\)Terry, "Steppin' out with the Steppenwolf," 38.

\(^{11}\)Dorothy Andries, "Powerful new theater opens in Highland Park," *Highland Park News*, Date unknown: N. pag. 284
In choosing Pinter's *The Lover*, Steppenwolf began a rewarding relationship with the British playwright. The intensity and terse dialogue of Pinter's characters, often barely concealing threatening, violent or sexual intentions, made a strong connection with the Steppenwolf actors. The company would go on to successfully stage *The Dumb Waiter* that same year, *The Caretaker* in 1978, 1979, and again, in 1986 on Broadway, as well as *The Hothouse and The Homecoming* in 1983 and 1989 respectively.

Similarly, the other three plays in this inaugural production involved the kind of bizarre, violent, and sexually aggressive characters that came to represent a frequent stylistic choice in Steppenwolf's selection of material. In particular, Israel Horovitz' play, *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, with its story of two young street punks terrorizing an innocent East Indian man at a bus stop, gave Sinise and Kinney an opportunity to overpower the audience with the intensity of their acting. Tim Evans, who later became director of audience development with the theatre, explains how the actors generated the almost frightening physical energy they put into the production:

> They just went on stage and did it to their own feelings and instincts. It was always cool to watch because it was real honest. It wasn't flowered up or it wasn't stuck with all sorts of background about a particular character they were playing.

In *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, the only way they could get pumped up to do it, Gary and Terry, would be to run up and down the hill three times behind the theatre, and like wrestle outside. While the audience is there, you know, clearing their throats gettin ready for the curtain to go up, they're in back running around in circles and then they come screaming into
the theatre, sweating and the whole bit, because that is how they prepared for a role. It wasn't that they intellectualized it, they went out and physicalized it. That's how they sort of approached everything in the early days.12

The production, especially Indian Wants the Bronx, gained quite a bit of critical attention. These college kids seemed too talented and intense to be acting in a church basement and many critics weren't prepared for it. The Reader's John Kennedy responded quite viscerally to the performances.

Terry Kinney as Murphy and Gary Sinise as Joey turn in performances that make you want to punch those two sweaty fuckers right out of their garbage can kingdom, while at the same time you wish you could forgive them. These guys have what this play takes: physical dynamics, from their panicky boxing bouts to their panicky eyes and snapping fingertips. Kinney and Sinise are seamlessly choreographed by director John Malkovich into a fluid torrent of nervous energy and hyper-malice that makes the visual spectacle just as explosive as the language.13

It seemed that the Steppenwolf actors were more than willing to blur the boundaries between art and reality. When the action called for violence, these guys really punched each other, preferring to take a beating rather than have anything look fake. Christiansen remembered his nervousness when he saw Kinney and Sinise in a later remount of the show in 1977.

12Tim Evans, personal interview, Mayer, 70-71.

One of my favorite stories, which I repeat every occasion I get, is about the early days of Steppenwolf when I went to see *The Indian Wants the Bronx*. There's this scene where the two street punks attack the Indian who's lost in the Bronx, and Terry and Gary were the two punks. They were so intense, so convincing in their portrayals, that for the first time I lost the suspension of disbelief. I really thought they were going to come after people in the audience once they got through with the Indian, because they were so menacing. You just got caught up in the illusion of danger and menace and fear that they created. So it was clear from the start that there was some extraordinary talent involved.\(^\text{14}\)

That first summer, everyone was committed to the common dream of building a company but survival was difficult. Financially, they were all struggling, sacrificing to give more time and energy to the company. The variety of actors' day jobs included short-order cook, waiter, stationery-store salesman, phone solicitor, secretary, and Ravinia subscription sales staff. No one was getting paid and the box office was barely covering production expenses. Occasionally, Malkovich recalls, they would make "a killing" by selling apple cider at intermission to an especially large crowd of 45-50.

Perry had been the informal artistic director during the summer season, a title that didn't really mean much when all decisions were argued out amongst the group. The company realized that, to minimize company dissension, they needed to give some authority to an artistic leader. In the fall of 1976, the company appointed Baccus, by consensus, as artistic director, replacing

\(^\text{14}\)Richard Christiansen, personal interview, Mayer, 70.
Perry. The company was still very much involved in the decision-making process but decided to rely more on the positive leadership of an artistic director.

The excellent response to the company's summer productions encouraged them to plan a year-round season of plays. The first full Steppenwolf season began with Hugh Wheeler's *Look: We've Come Through*. The play, which Baccus found in a book called *Broadway's Wonderful Flops*, was a tender story involving two lonely people who "come through" to find each other's love. Though the acting received good critical notice the production but didn't do very well at the box office. Christiansen gave the company a generous review in which he described Nancy Evans as "achingly touching" and Perry as giving "a remarkable and deeply felt performance." He described the production as "solid and satisfying enough to make one look forward to their growth in the rest of the season."\(^{15}\) The show, however, was a letdown from the excitement of the summer's success. Evans summed up the predominant reaction to the weak script when she said, "This is a sterling silver company, why are they choosing to use flatware?"\(^{16}\)

In December 1976, Steppenwolf followed with a pair of one-acts, Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, and John Guare's *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year* by John Guare. Kinney and Moira Harris weren't too
successful in the absurdist Guare play but Malkovitch and Baccus made a strong impression as the two mysterious hit men in *The Dumb Waiter*.

In March of 1977, Steppenwolf presented *The Sea Horse* by Edward J. Moore, directed by Malkovich and featuring Sinise and Harris. The production nearly came to a halt when, shortly before opening night, Harris became ill with phlebitis and couldn't walk. Rondi Reed, a classmate from ISU and future company member who had also worked on the show, stepped in for Harris on opening night. Later Laurie Metcalf also filled in until Harris recovered and was able to return. The support of the ensemble helped Steppenwolf overcome these minor setbacks. Perry commented on *The Sea Horse* as representative of the company's pattern of selecting plays for good acting roles rather than literary merit.

*The Sea Horse* epitomized a certain strain in the company's work in that it was an O.K. play, depending on your take on it, or a mediocre play, depending on your take on it, but kind of given life, because of the force of the production. Actually a strong 'strain for anybody standing outside of the Steppenwolf's work who would arguably suggest that we did work weak on literary merit. I think we often picked thing that 'play' well.\(^\text{17}\)

After its initial success, the theatre encountered financial problems as its first season progressed. The company decided to bolster its box office by remounting the successful one-acts, *Birdbath* and *The Indian Wants the Bronx* and hoped to address a $12,000 first year deficit. Christiansen, who had missed their

\(^{17}\text{Jeff Perry, personal interview, Mayer, 76.}\)
original staging, reviewed both plays in the Chicago Daily News which helped bring attention to the struggling group. He gave both plays on the double bill encouragingly positive comments:

With Steppenwolf, there was some acting of staggering power. In Indian, Terry Kinney and Gary Sinise literally storm the small stage arena with brutally exhausting performances. . . . Malkovich himself gives another stunning performance in Birdbath . . . . Here is an actor of magnetic stage presence, full of sudden little vocal tricks and physical movements that command attention, all harnessed to the demands of his character's personality.

I am in danger, I realize, of overpraising these young actors, but when one considers their short careers as performers and the brief existence of their theater, their accomplishments are truly remarkable. Between them, Kinney, Sinise and Malkovich are giving some of the most accomplished and deeply felt acting it has been my pleasure to see on stage this year.18

The group transferred the double bill to the Jane Addams Hull House Theatre for two weeks which marked the Steppenwolf Theatre Company's first performances in Chicago.

During these first few years in Highland Park, the members of the company spent all their time together. Their ambition was to build Steppenwolf into the best theatre company possible and they became completely dependent on each other. Perry recalled those years:

"Being away from the city and being relatively isolated there in the 'burbs,' I always thought was very important, vital for the group to find its own character. In a sense, we kind of fed

off that isolation a bit, in a way we were free of other theatrical influence which rather forced us to figure out what we wanted to do.”

Metcalf described the social aspects of the company and its group dynamics:

It was definitely like a big Peyton Place [a popular t.v. soap opera of the time]. We stayed so cloistered, I mean we could do our day jobs during the day and then we would do our play at night, and then party with each other at night, not really socializing with anybody else. We never went into town [Chicago]. We were stuck in the suburbs and we only saw each other for three years. Different couples would form and break up.

The only thing that was good about it was that since you were working together, you got over things quicker if there were problems. You sort of had to.

The insularity of the company helped form the tight ensemble and reinforced the “us against them” mentality needed to get through the hard times. The Steppenwolf actors treated theatre like it was a contact sport and they wanted to be the best team in town.

“There’s a certain arrogance about Steppenwolf,” says one theatrical insider. “They think there’s only one way to do things, and that’s their way. It’s also true that while they’re extremely supportive of each other, they’re also extremely competitive.”

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19 Jeff Perry, personal interview, Mayer, 60.

20 Laurie Metcalf, personal interview, Mayer, 65.

21 Terry, “Steppin’ out with the Steppenwolf,” 38.
Kinney described how this competitiveness and arrogance, often mentioned as part of the company's attitude in the early days, came about.

"We had a little chip on our shoulders. We went to a lot of Chicago theater, but we didn't see anything that we liked, ever," said Kinney. "We wanted the kind of intensity that we saw in the films of [John] Cassavetes; he was our hero... We never felt we succeeded unless we tore people's evenings apart."22

Despite the press and public attention, the actor's were still having difficulty convincing their families of their seriousness. Larry Kart quotes Kinney as he described his own situation:

"I talked to my father last night," Kinney added, "and he asked what he always asks: 'Are you making any money yet?' And my answer is always the same: 'No, but we're working at it.'... He'd rather see me working at Caterpillar."23

For its next production, Steppenwolf brought in an outside director, Gary Houston, for the first time, to stage Wallace Shawn's Our Late Night. Opening on July 13, 1977, this controversial piece centered on the jaded sexual practices of a group of neurotic Manhattan partygoers. Judging the material to be better suited to a city audience, the company presented the piece at the Jane Addams Hull House in Chicago. In addition to the regular ensemble, Joan Allen, former classmate of Malkovich's at Eastern Illinois


University, joined the company for the first time. Despite their hopes, the production received mixed reviews and was not a box office success. Reader critic Michael VerMeulen commented that the actors were "good if undisciplined performers, with their most significant weakness lying in their mediocre taste for plays and directors. . . ."24

This was not the last time critics questioned Steppenwolf's selection of material. The frequent comment was that the company chose mediocre material but acted it very well. The actors in the company felt most comfortable with American realism and, consequently, the range of play selections was narrow. The actors expressed an interest in the classics, especially Shakespeare, but, perhaps feeling out of their element, they ultimately stayed away from such material. In October 1977, to broaden their range, the company tried a musical revue titled Mack, Anything Goes over the Rainbow but, as Malkovich put it, "We discovered that you shouldn't try to do a musical when you don't have anybody who can sing."25

Seeking a larger audience

In November 1977, the company returned to more familiar ground after the poor response to its last two productions with a restaging of Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,


directed by ISU professor Ralph Lane. The popularity of the production prompted Steppenwolf to add additional performances, making it the theatre's first money-earning success.

The next two productions were undistinguished efforts, *Sandbar Flatland* by Edward Urcen, a farcical look at a collection of smalltown oddball characters, and two one-acts, Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and Lanford Wilson's *Home Free*. The company finished its second season with another successful Pinter production, *The Caretaker*, directed by Malkovich featuring Wilder, Perry, and Sinise. Critical and audience response was very positive and helped the company get through a less exciting period.

Steppenwolf had run head-on into the limitations of a small theatre space at Immaculate Conception. They had developed the skill of mounting successful productions on next-to-nothing budgets, they were all working "survival jobs" that they hated, and they were losing money rapidly. The annual budget hovered around $70,000 at most. They were trying to get organized and improve the business operations of the theatre but the limitations of the space and their location in the suburbs were a major part of their economic problems.

Sinise recalled the early years of trying to survive the personal conflicts and maintain the company:

After that first summer, I though we'd never last because everyone was fighting with each other... There were personal conflicts like crazy. I'm not saying everybody hated each other, but there were a lot of differences of opinion that could confuse the forward momentum of the theater. Those were real hectic years. Nobody was making any money from acting.
Finally, we got a couple of CETA positions and were able to hire some full-time business people to start handling the publicity and box-office and other stuff we'd been doing.26

Kinney recalled that the company hired several business managers, one right after the other, who all came to the same conclusion: the company was a financial disaster and should be dissolved. No matter how creative the bookkeeping, the basic problem was that the theatre needed a larger audience and increased revenue. Kinney remembered, "At one point, we were $12,000 in debt; we were having the usual big fights among ourselves, and we didn't seem to be going anywhere."27

An opportunity to gain a wider audience and get out of the suburbs came with the invitation to appear at St. Nicholas Theater in Chicago in a production of Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*. Stephen Schachter, St. Nicholas artistic director, wanted to work with the dynamic young ensemble on this play about a group of former anti-war radicals who are trying to move on in life. Schachter felt that the company's youth and ensemble style would be a strong asset to the production. Steppenwolf was eager for the association with one of the most successful Off-Loop companies and the increased exposure that it would bring to Chicago audiences. Press reaction praised the acting but found the play's plot confusing and unresolved. Glenna Syse of the *Sun-Times* described the piece as "partly stoned,

26Terry, "Steppin' out with the Steppenwolf," 38-40.

27Richard Christiansen, "Spirited troupe successfully clears hurdles of indecision," 8.
relentlessly flaky, bleakly bitter, vigorously profane and blackly comic.\textsuperscript{28} But it was an important and successful step for Steppenwolf and contributed a great deal to their increasingly positive image in the Off-Loop theatre scene.

In November 1978, the company again returned to remount a familiar play, this time Brian Friel’s \textit{Philadelphia, Here I Come} which Sinise and Perry had co-directed in high school. For this production in the Immaculate Conception basement space, Baccus was the director and, due to the large cast, several non-company members were cast including John Mahoney and Gary Cole, both of whom would later join the company. Though these early productions were often full of dynamic and powerful acting performances, the Steppenwolf company realized that they had very little future in Highland Park.

“We had sporadic success,” says Kinney. “One play would do well, but there were nights when we filled 6 of those 88 seats. Nobody in Highland Park wanted to believe we were legitimate. We were ‘suburban.’ Until we moved to Chicago, no one took us seriously.”\textsuperscript{29}

In January 1979, Ralph Lane, former faculty mentor from ISU, returned to the company to direct Ionesco’s \textit{Exit the King}. Though the play receive some good reviews and was produced in the city at the


\textsuperscript{29}Terry, “Steppin’ out with the Steppenwolf,” 40.
Jane Addams Hull House, the audience response was dismal. Tim Evans summed up the company's discouragement:

There were a couple of spots that we really didn't think we were going to make it. *Exit the King* was one of them. It was not a great time. I think it was one of the lowest points that I can ever remember. . . . Everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong."30

Finally, the company realized that they had to stabilize the business side of the theatre. Since the departure of Plattner, the theatre had been through at five other business managers in less than three years. The CETA funding for the hiring of Evans as director of audience development helped a great deal. Evans described how the company tried to cope with their business manager problems.

[Tim] Ansett [business manager] sat down with the accountant who was donating his time, and they had gone over the books and gone over projected cash flow and all this garbage for this little theatre company that had absolutely no projected cash flow. The theatre had no money. It was day-to-day. We were struggling every day to get the ensemble members a little money for food. The accountant basically made the recommendation that the theatre wasn't a viable business.

Ansett called a company meeting in the office one afternoon. I think it was December, and he basically sat everybody down and said, "I think we ought to go out of business." And it was pretty much that blunt, and that quick. . . . they all sort of looked at each other and they all went home and the meeting sort of broke up. Everybody went back to John's apartment and sat down and they basically said, "What are we going to do about this?" And they all said, "We're going

30Tim Evans, personal interview, Mayer, 118.
to have to fire this guy." So they fired Ansett and decided the only way to survive was to get out of Highland Park.31

For economic reasons, the company decided to remount The Caretaker with Malkovich directing and taking over Sinise's original role. The production helped to ease the financial pressure by earning needed box office revenue and gave the company time to plan their final move to Chicago.

In May of 1979, Steppenwolf's production of Glass Menagerie, directed by Baccus with Anne Edwards as Amanda, Malkovich as Tom, Metcalf as Laurie, and Kinney as the gentleman caller, was described by critics as one of the most moving and tender of the company's many outstanding productions. David Elliott of the Sun-Times wrote, "Heavens, does drama ever get much better than Steppenwolf Theatre's new production of The Glass Menagerie? . . . It is surely a great production. It is a thing for awards and applause and deep gratitude."32 Christiansen described the company's unusual interpretation of Tennessee Williams' play in more detail.

Steppenwolf Theatre's new production of The Glass Menagerie has the effect of turning this American classic into a fresh, jolting, completely unexpected experience. . . .

John Malkovich, an amazing young actor whose performances always seem to teeter on the edge of danger, portrays Tom, the narrator who gives us "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion," as if he were Williams himself. . . .

31Tim Evans, personal interview, Mayer, 119.

Laurie Metcalf’s Laura is not the sweet, sad innocent of many productions but rather a disturbed young cripple close to catatonia. She rushes for her old phonograph records with eerie compulsion, and she actually seems to be on the verge of physical illness in times of stress. . . .

This is not a gentle, wispy interpretation. It is jagged and harsh in many scenes, spooky and quirky in others. Yet it strikingly illuminates the poetry of the play by casting it in a different light, re-examining its humanity, and dispelling some of the false illusions that have surrounded it in past presentations.33

The production was successful enough that the actors were paid for the first time. But, at the end of his review, Christiansen pointed out that he was one of 20 people in the audience and commented that “It’s amazing, and depressing, that this gifted troupe, consistently interesting in its work, was able to pull so few people into so fascinating a production.” This was to be the last Steppenwolf production in the 88-seat basement theatre at the Immaculate Conception Church.

**Expanding the Ensemble**

In September of 1979, Sheldon Patinkin directed an updated version of *Waiting for Lefty* by Clifford Odets. The play was produced at the Apollo Theatre as a commercial venture by producers Stuart Oken and Jason Brett. To fill out the 22 member cast, local actors were jobbed in, Allen rejoined the company after a brief absence, and five new company members were added; Francis Guinan,

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33 Richard Christiansen, “The poetry of Menagerie gets impressive illumination,” *Chicago Tribune* 18 May 1979: N. pag. 299
Glenne Headly, Tom Irwin, John Mahoney, and Rondi Reed. Patinkin molded this expanded ensemble into a unit by working on Spolin theatre games with them and provided the group with its most positive experience of working with an outside director. New company member Guinan explained how the exercises brought the company together:

Sheldon was very important to the company at that time, as a matter of fact I would say he was instrumental in molding us into a single group. He did lots of Spolin and Second City exercises for weeks. It was invaluable, absolutely invaluable. I had thought all of that stuff was nonsense when I was in school, but somehow working with Sheldon and all of those people in the same room—it just crystallized us. And Waiting for Lefty, I think in many ways set a pattern for our work later on. . . I think in many ways Balm in Gilead is considered our signature production, but I think the whole thing started with Sheldon's production of Waiting for Lefty.34

The Steppenwolf company thought of themselves as outsiders in the theatre community, as rebels storming the citadels of Chicago. The actors in the company felt strongly that the ensemble provided them an artistic home and, though they might work in other theatres in Chicago and elsewhere, the door would always be open for their return. This was the place where, working together and building on the trust of long-term relationships, they felt they could take their biggest risks and do their best work. Allen talks about the family nature of Steppenwolf's ensemble:

Steppenwolf is like a family, because there is such a deep history. There's a lot of trust and deep feeling that is just sort

34Francis Guinan, personal interview, Mayer, 129.
of a given. . . . You're in for life, pretty much, and it's a shared experience. That's not always the experience when you go outside of the company. There are people who you act with that want the attention on them and they think their character is more important than yours, and they don't care about the story and how it's told. It's about getting personal attention.35

In December of 1979, Ralph Pape's Say Goodnight, Gracie was produced by Michael Cullen of Travel Light Theatre and was directed by Austin Pendleton with Robert Biggs as Jerry, Allen as Ginny, Malkovich as Steve, Guinan as Bobby, and Headly as Catherine. This was an especially popular production with audiences and critics alike. The production ran for three months at the Theatre Building and then was transferred to the Ruth Page Auditorium for an additional five months. Though Cullen as producer reaped most of the financial benefit, the production provided continuous employment for many actors in the Steppenwolf ensemble, who replaced each other periodically during the extended run. Christiansen wrote of the play in the Chicago Tribune:

Ralph Pape's Say Goodnight, Gracie is an almost perfect and completely joyous production. . . . The acting is by five members of the Steppenwolf Acting Ensemble, an extraordinary group of young players who richly deserve the title of "ensemble." The staging is by Austin Pendleton, the play's original off-Broadway director, who has forged the unique talents of the Steppenwolf people into a fresh,
absorbing wonder of theater. . . . This is ensemble acting so generous, understanding and committed that it can bring tears of joy to your eyes.\textsuperscript{36}

In March of 1980, a less than stellar production of Michel Tremblay's \textit{Bonjour la Bonjour} was the first production in Steppenwolf's new Chicago home, the refurbished theatre at the Jane Addams Hull House. The company had spent $15-20,000 fixing up the 134-seat theatre which had been the center of Robert Sickinger's theatre programs at Hull House in the '60s and a rental space for several groups in the '70s. The theatre's board had been reorganized and the company now had five full-time paid staff members and nearly 1,000 subscribers.

In September of 1980, one of Steppenwolf's landmark productions, \textit{Balm in Gilead} by Lanford Wilson was staged by Malkovich at the Jane Addams Hull House. This was a real ensemble showcase as described by journalist Anthony Adler.

With their communal fervor honed by a year of work on the Spolin games, the Steppenwolves were ready to tackle the huge logistical and emotional challenges involved in staging \textit{Balm in Gilead}, Lanford Wilson's clumsy, elegiac mess of a script about a lost battalion of junkies, whores, misfits, and wounded souls holed up in an all-night diner in New York City. . . . Malkovich's direction provided some of the framing that the play needed; the Spolinized ensemble imbued it with emotional intensity--and the show succeeded spectacularly, giving Steppenwolf its first honest-to-God popular triumph.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36}Richard Christiansen, review of \textit{Say Goodnight, Gracie}, \textit{Chicago Tribune} 11 December 1979: 1, in Mayer, 134-135.

\textsuperscript{37}Anthony Adler, "Act Two," \textit{Chicago} October 1991: 143
The production met with unanimous praise from the critics and an excellent box office response. This was the kind of ensemble acting that only years of working together could bring about. Christiansen's review in the Tribune exclaimed: "Lanford Wilson's Balm in Gilead is not much as a drama, but it is a play filled with marvelous theater, and in the miraculous ensemble production that Steppenwolf Theater opened Thursday night, it already has given the young Chicago season one of those brilliant, electric evenings for which the living theater was made."38 During the season's Jeff Awards ceremonies, the production won seven out of the twenty-two awards given, including outstanding Production, Ensemble, Director, Actress, Supporting Actress, Cameo Performance, and Lighting Design.

The success of the company and the growing reputation of individual company members was not without problems however. Midway through the rehearsal period of Alan Ayckbourn's Absent Friends in November 1980, the director and artistic director of the company at the time, Baccus, apparently had an artistic and personal crisis. As a result, he abruptly left the Steppenwolf company and the company experienced some turmoil. Guinan's recollection is quoted by Mayer:

We were doing Absent Friends. H.E. was directing and about a week or two into rehearsals, during a note session one afternoon, he literally stopped in the middle, in the middle . . . of a sentence and put his hands over his face and then stared at

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38Richard Christiansen, "Marvelous moments spice Balm in Gilead," Chicago Tribune 19 September 1980: N. pag. 303
the center of the stage and he stood up and he said "excuse me" and he went into the back. And about 45 minutes later, someone went back to see him, I can’t remember, but it was pretty clear that we weren’t to go back there, because he needed to be alone for a minute. And about 45 minutes later, Malkovich walked by and went into the back office and came back out and said “H.E. doesn’t really feel that he can continue with this, and if nobody has any objections, I’m going to direct it.” And while we were talking, H.E. walked out from the back office and out the front of the theatre and I didn’t see him again for two years.39

Baccus was less driven toward professional goals than others in the company. Apparently, the changing goals of Steppenwolf and the pressures of success caused him to leave the company. Years later Baccus explained some of the reasons behind his sudden departure:

“There were some in the company, including myself,” he explained, “who would have been content to work at a printing factory every day of their lives until they were 65 to do theatre in that certain way. . . . Some members of the company were very distressed at that time. They needed monetary recognition for what they were doing. And I thought, This is pretty much the end of the company as I know it. This is going to mean the end. And it did, in the sense of the intimacy. It was just the fork in the road. . . . But which change do you make? Do you go this way and head for the recognition and the bucks? Or do you go back to the original intentions, forge ahead that way, and do what we planned to do in the beginning?”40

39Francis Guinan, personal interview, Mayer, 154-155.

After a certain amount of confusion and debate, Sinise was elected by the company as the new artistic director. This represented a major change in the company’s direction, according to Mayer:

Whereas the mild mannered and introspective Baccus focused on the company’s artistic purposes, and in many ways allowed members of the business staff to make their own decisions, Sinise entered into the role of artistic director with a serious agenda for growth from both an artistic and a business perspective. Sinise’s ambitious plans included a calculated effort to establish a national reputation for Steppenwolf.41

By 1981, the total budget had grown to $260,000 with a $340,000 budget projected for 1982. About 60% of the budget was earned income with the remainder coming in as contributed income from foundations, corporations, and special events such as a 1981 Barbara Cook concert that netted $15,000. However, the Steppenwolf actor, when he or she was working, was still only getting paid about $130 per week. The lure of fame and fortune on the East or West Coast was starting to put strains on the ensemble that would only continue as the company’s reputation grew. But Bernie Sahlins, long-time producer of Second City and someone familiar with the problems created by too much success, predicted with relative accuracy that the company would stay together:

This is an unusually strong company. They have a sense of values. I don’t expect any of them to turn down a starring role in a movie, but I think that as long as they’re doing good work and making progress, you’re going to keep the majority of them

41Mayer, 155-156.
together. I think, too—unlike other groups—they've wisely spread around the directorship, so that there's not just one spiritual artistic spearhead who, if he or she goes, will therefore destroy the theater.42

The company continued to rotate the position of artistic director amongst the company to permit members to focus on their individual acting careers when needed. Perry, Baccus, and Sinise had variously served in this capacity during the first five years of the company's existence. In 1983, Perry again took over followed later by Kinney and Sinise as co-artistic directors in 1985 and then Randall Arney as solo artistic director in 1988. Though the personal style of each artistic leader influenced the company's direction, the fundamental nature of Steppenwolf as an ensemble-directed company remained one of its strongest characteristics.

Off-Loop audience tastes and demographics were beginning to change from the counter-culture days of the Organic and the Body Politic. The Steppenwolf company's selection of material moved away from their more unsuccessful non-realistic choices such as *Sandbar Flatland* and *Exit the King* toward the gritty naturalism of *Balm in Gilead* and, later, *Of Mice and Men, True West, Orphans, Coyote Ugly* and *Grapes of Wrath* which proved more popular. Russ Smith, the theatre's executive director in 1982, stated that the age range of the Steppenwolf audience was primarily between 25 and 45 years old with approximately 65% coming from the North Side and

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42Terry, "Steppin' out with the Steppenwolf," 46.
35% from the North Shore. As the Steppenwolf actors were beginning to grow older and grow up, so was their audience.

Regarding the way the material was chosen, artistic director Sinise described the company's practice of holding readings and discussions to find out how "playable" a piece would be. The play had to have good roles for the company and needed to be marketable to the Chicago audience. Ultimately, though, Sinise, the company's first activist artistic director, began making the final decisions. "You've got too many opinions to be really democratic," he says. "In the early days, we were more of a collective."43

In 1981, the Steppenwolf adaptation of Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men* met with much critical success. Guinan told Mayer a characteristic Malkovich story that took place during the run of the show:

A high school came in to see *Of Mice and Men* . . . during the bunk scene, some kid kept putting his foot up on the bunk. . . so Malkovich had some blocking over there and he sat on the bunk and this kid was like kicking it and during part of his business Malkovich turned around, looked at the kid and this kid gave sort of a defiant kick a little harder. . . any way the scene was over and the lights go down . . . I heard this later, but Malkovich jumped over the top of the bunk and reached up and grabbed the kid by the ears in the blackout and put his forehead up against the kid's and said "get your fucking feet off this stage or I'll tear your goddam head off" and he ran offstage and the lights

43Terry, "Steppin' out with the Steppenwolf," 42.

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came back up and John said that the kid's eyes were like huge silver dollars . . . He was scared to death . . . Some monster had grabbed him in the dark.44

In April of 1982, the landmark Steppenwolf production of Sam Shepard's True West opened and was an immediate hit. The Chicago critics noted the humor as well as the danger that Steppenwolf's all-out assault on Shepard's play had discovered. Critic Tom Valeo commented that:

Sam Shepard's True West will surely be the best play of the year in Chicago. It is a brilliant execution of the playwright's vision. And as a result of John Malkovich's high-energy performance, the impact is overpowering.45

Christiansen wasn't certain that the company's interpretation was definitive but he liked what he saw.

I'm not sure at all that this kind of romping, stomping guerilla attack on Shepard's script is what the author had in mind. I'm certain, however, that the play can sustain the interpretation and that Steppenwolf has turned True West into one of the funniest, scariest evenings of theater we're likely to see this year.46

The play which had received an earlier lackluster production at the Public Theatre in New York was described as revitalized by the

44Francis Guinan, personal interview, Mayer, 216.


freshness and vibrancy of the Steppenwolf production. The show was extended in Chicago at the Apollo Theatre and then moved to Broadway where the theatre was praised for having restored a "contemporary masterpiece."

The move of True West to New York was a very difficult decision for the company to make. Was the company selling out its original artistic purpose and ensemble structure by transferring hit productions to Broadway? Would company members want to return to Chicago once they'd seen the fame and fortune possible in New York? The debate over these issues nearly tore the company apart.

Sinise, as artistic director at the time, argued that the company wouldn't stay together unless it helped fulfill the individual member's artistic aspirations. Other members, perhaps influenced by a certain level of professional jealousy since Sinise and Malkovich were the ones who were going, feared that the singling out of individual company members would destroy the group's cohesion. Should they keep their vow to stay pure, poor, and together in Chicago or should they help each other make it in the larger world of New York and Hollywood and risk losing their sense of belonging to an artistic family? As Perry put it in an interview with Anthony Adler, the company had been leading an "austere artistic existence" for years. Now they were entering a new world where the possibilities were both exciting and frightening, like the "Amish, discovering a refrigerator and liking it," especially since

47Adler, 161.
they had never really planned or expected this kind of fame to happen. Critic Meg Cox commented on the company's newfound success in the *Wall Street Journal*.

This season's hottest Off-Broadway hit is a Chicago-bred production . . . The play is Sam Shepard's *True West*, and the difference is the Steppenwolf Theater Company, a group of young, idealistic actors working together for seven years. The Steppenwolf crew literally tears up the stage in a brutally intense production that is also profoundly funny. John Malkovich's portrayal of an obnoxious, sleazy drunkard tormenting his successful, uptight brother has been particularly praised.48

Years later, Sinise commented on his reasons for taking the company's work to a wider audience in New York.

The whole purpose for me as the artistic director in choosing to take *True West* to New York was to build strength in Chicago. It did nothing but make us more popular there--which made it possible in the long run to build the building we have today. It was only through becoming more of a nationally recognized organization that we could draw more national funding.49

Many people thought New York exposure, money, and movie deals would cause the ensemble to break up but it didn't. In fact, New York's discovery of Steppenwolf and its talented actors helped strengthen the company and their commitment to each other in Chicago. The company realized, as well, that they needed to continue


49Terry, "The cool season," 32.
adding new actors to the ensemble and shortly thereafter expanded the company to include such fine actors as Kevin Anderson, Robert Breuler, Gary Cole, Frank Galati, Tim Hopper, Molly Regan, Rick Snyder, and Jim True.

After the milestone of *True West*, Steppenwolf began to transfer its work to New York on a seemingly regular basis. In 1982, Steppenwolf produced C.P. Taylor’s tender British family drama *And a Nightingale Sang*. The production, which in 1983 went on to Connecticut’s Hartford Stage Company and then to New York’s Lincoln Center, drew an enthusiastic response from Valeo.

The acting is exquisite, the direction by Terry Kinney, one of the Steppenwolf founders, is remarkably clever, and the staging is so effective that the characters can roam from the town square to the family bomb shelter in just a few perfectly plausible steps. . . . In the hands of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, this play becomes a magical vehicle that transports the audience into the richly textured lives of very real people. A piece of theatre this effective is very rare. Don’t miss it.50

By 1983, Steppenwolf was feeling the limitations of the small theatre space at the Jane Addams Hull House and decided to find a larger venue. Perry took over as artistic director to help coordinate the company’s move to its new theatre space, the 224-seat theatre space on Halsted that had been vacant since the demise of the St. Nicholas Theatre.

In 1983 and 1984, Steppenwolf produced a variety of work in its new space in Chicago. In 1983, several productions stretched the

company by bringing in outside directors to work on unfamiliar material such as Pinter's *The Hothouse*, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* directed by Don Amendolia and *The Miss Firecracker Contest* directed by author Beth Henley. In 1984, outside activities drew some of the company's energy, resulting in only four shows instead of five that year. However, *Tracers* and *Fool for Love* satisfied the Chicago audience's appetite for slam-bang Steppenwolf style theatre. The company also took steps to improve its business operations, hiring John Economakos, former Goodman managing director and director of resources for the League of Chicago Theatres, as its executive director while its annual budget grew to $790,000.

In an effort to find younger actors to replenish the company as senior members' availability became limited by expanding careers, Steppenwolf planned to create a training ensemble of 13 actors who were to understudy mainstage roles and perform in educational productions. Cary L. Libkin, education director, was appointed to lead the group but the program was short-lived and never really developed into an organized method of recruiting new ensemble members.

In May 1984, another opportunity to show its work outside of Chicago arose when Steppenwolf offered a remounted production of *Balm in Gilead* Off-Broadway at New York's Circle Repertory Company. The show's cast combined actors from both the Steppenwolf and Circle Rep companies, again, as in Chicago, under Malkovich's direction.
In February 1985, Steppenwolf presented Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*, the story of a pair of misfit orphaned brothers who kidnap a drunken businessman for ransom. The businessman, an orphan himself, then turns the tables and insinuates himself into a dominant parental role in a three-way power struggle. Directed by Sinise and featuring company members Kinney, Kevin Anderson, and John Mahoney, the play was another example of the high energy emotion and sweaty physicality that had become the trademark Steppenwolf style. Christiansen described it as a "breathtaking, bone-crushing production"\(^5\) Valeo described Kinney's over-the-edge performance.

Terry Kinney throws himself into the role of Treat with such ferocity that at times he seems to cross the line that separates play acting from authentic emotion. When he's angry, he paces the room like a seething tiger. When he's frustrated, he turns his rage on himself with wild punches and slaps.

And near the end, when an orphan's fear of abandonment finally wells up inside of him, his terror and rage seem to rip him apart. Even during the second curtain call opening night, he still hadn't pulled himself together completely.\(^5\)

Immediately following *Orphans* was another seething, twisted, highly physicalized Steppenwolf production, *Coyote Ugly* by Lynn Siefert. The play tells the story of an incestuous family of desert dwellers who simultaneously depend on and destroy each other.


other. Critics responded positively to the powerful acting especially that of Metcalf as the feral, sexually ravenous twelve year-old daughter who seduces her brother/father. But the play itself was found wanting. The limitations of an actor-driven ensemble that selected plays for their acting opportunities rather than their literary substance were becoming clear to and more frequently criticized by the critics. Jonathan Abarbanel criticized the company’s pattern of frequently picking contemporary plays with strong but quirky leading roles, lots of physical action, and ample doses of comedy, sexual tension, and/or violence. He expressed his view of the company’s literary failings in his review of Coyote Ugly.

With the company’s fondness for contemporary works, it is absolutely shameful that they have no ongoing, long-term commitments to writers, and no program of literary management or script development. . . . To be very blunt, great acting isn’t enough any more. By failing to advance dramatic literature—as well as really stretching their acting ranges and styles—Steppenwolf fails to advance the art of theatre. . . . The limitations of Steppenwolf’s repertory are the difference between their being a great acting ensemble and a great theatre company.53

These criticisms, however, didn’t slow Steppenwolf’s growing reputation on the national scene. In June 1985, Steppenwolf won the 1985 Tony award for outstanding regional theater. At the same time, the theatre’s production of Orphans was playing Off-Broadway in New York and Malkovich was directing a production of Shaw’s Arms
and the Man starring his wife, Headly, at Circle in the Square on Broadway, while Allen was appearing at the Public Theatre in Durang's The Marriage of Bette and Boo.

Steppenwolf continued to take its productions "on the road." In 1986, Steppenwolf took its production of Pinter's The Caretaker to Broadway. The following year, Malkovich and Allen appeared on Broadway in a Steppenwolf production of Lanford Wilson's Burn This for which Allen won the 1987 Tony award as Best Actress.

**Evolution of the Steppenwolf ensemble**

The Steppenwolf ensemble went through a tremendous evolution as a result of the artistic success of the company and the growing fame of its individual actors. But the freedom and support of the ensemble continued to be of major value to them as artists. Sinise commented on his attachment to the group.

"I can do work here I couldn't do anywhere else," he says, "because we've a history together, and history's a bonding thing. . . . It's an environment within which you can argue and disagree and really embrace the work. I think a big hole would be cut in the heart of every member if the company ever fell apart."\(^5^4\)

Glenna Syse's review of the 1981 production of Loose Ends gives her view of the Steppenwolf ensemble's strengths:


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They are a company in the true family sense of the word. I suspect they are all really related to each other, probably had to share their toys when they were growing up.\textsuperscript{55}

Austin Pendleton described the ensemble nature of the Steppenwolf company during \textit{Say Goodnight, Gracie} rehearsals:

The term "ensemble work" is loosely used in the theatre; usually it means you got lucky, and the people you assembled happened to hit it off and play well together. The Steppenwolf people take the idea of ensemble to a whole new dimension. The life between them, which they have developed through the past few years with joy and self-sacrifice, is a creature in itself--almost another character hopping around between them and setting firecrackers. They have given me a whole new vision of what theatre can be, and I suspect they'll do the same for the many others who will want to work with them in the years ahead...\textsuperscript{56}

The structure of the ensemble and the style of decision-making continued to evolve as members of the company became more famous and engaged in more work outside the company. During the early days in Highland Park and at the Hull House in Chicago, the group met weekly and made most decisions collectively. Beginning with the designation of an actor from the company as artistic director, the power structure in the company began to change. More authority for decisions came to rest on the artistic director with input from the company on all major issues.


\textsuperscript{56}Austin Pendleton, "Letter to the People of Chicago," Steppenwolf promotional material, 7 February 1981.
"We know and trust each other so well that we start way ahead of the game," says Randall Arney, the company's present artistic director. "We can cut through so much of the stuff that happens when strangers are coming together for three or four weeks of rehearsals. Also, for a free-lance actor, the audition never really stops. You're trying to impress the director because you want to work at that theater again. . . .

"But we can take that onus of employment away. We can immediately get down to the task at hand. And we can do a lot of tricks on the high wire because we've built ourselves a security net beneath. We can take risks we'd never otherwise take because we're in our own theater with people we love. And risk is a large reason for our success." 57

By the late '80s, the scattering of the company and institutional growth made it impossible for any but those members who were regularly resident in Chicago to participate in the day-to-day operations of the company. The company was transforming from a company of resident actors to a more director-driven company with actor/director company members proposing long-distance projects built around the participation of a director and a few key ensemble actors.

In 1988, Arney took over as artistic director with Stephen Eich as managing director. The company had now grown to 21 members. According to Arney, the entire company would gather only once a year to confer on season selection as well as artistic and financial issues. Characterizing his job as more of a "facilitator" than a leader, Arney said, "I'm in constant communication with all 21. If people aren't here, I'll try to talk with them every week, or they'll

57 Nightingale, 5.
call me, maybe suggesting a play or telling me when they can be in
town."\textsuperscript{58} The company still was the source of most of the ideas for
the season. As scripts were passed around and read, if three
company members thought a play was good, then a reading was
scheduled. If, after the reading, all went well then the final
decisions about production and casting were up to Arney as the
artistic director. The bonds of the ensemble remained strong even as
the opportunities to work together diminished as Sinise makes clear
in an interview with journalist Christine Koyama.

"The thing about Steppenwolf is that we're something special
when we're all together. As individuals, we're talented actor-
director types. But when we're together, we're a company of
talented actor-director types. If you've stayed together for ten
years, there must be something that kept all of you there for
that long. . . . Everything we know has come from Steppenwolf
and working together.\textsuperscript{59}

The fame and scattering of the company had some important
benefits. Their national reputation gave the theatre more access to
top quality material. Fund raising for the new theatre was made
easier by increased visibility. And as long as individual members
continued to return, they brought new energy and ideas back to the
company. Arney comments, "Then they get hungry to return, and they
bring their new strengths back to the group. I think we've done our

\textsuperscript{57}Benedict Nightingale, "Steppenwolf Plays Together, Stays

\textsuperscript{58}Christine Koyama, "Steppenwolf's Next Step," \textit{Republic} July
1985: 44.
best work since 1982. Steppenwolf is stronger, and I mean Steppenwolf, not just individual ensemble members.\textsuperscript{60}

In August of 1988, Steppenwolf announced plans to build a theatre in the 1600 block of North Halsted as part of an arts center development financed by Royal Faubion, owner of the Royal George Theatre. Original plans included a move by Second City to the complex as well as retail shops and condominiums however financing fell through for Faubion. Steppenwolf was able, due largely to the efforts of board president, Bruce Sagan, past chairman of the Illinois Arts Council and former publisher of the Southtown Economist, to purchase part of the site and continue with their own plans. The cost of Steppenwolf's new theatre was initially estimated at $3 million. By the time construction was completed and the new theatre opened in April 1991, the cost has risen to $8.25 million.

On September 18, 1988, Steppenwolf opened its adaptation of the John Steinbeck novel \textit{The Grapes of Wrath} at the Royal George Theatre and the production received a tremendous critical response. Adapted and directed by Galati with a budget of $500,000, the production went on to further development at La Jolla Playhouse in California where the production was tightened down to a little over two and a half hours from its previous four and a half hour length. The production then went on to the Royal National Theatre in London before beginning its Broadway run at the Cort Theatre in March of

\textsuperscript{60}Nightingale, 5.
Grapes of Wrath won the 1990 Tony award for Best Play with Galati winning the Tony for Best Director as well.

Frank Rich in his review of Grapes of Wrath draws a parallel between the Steppenwolf style and its material, a parallel that might as well apply to the relationship between the rugged city of Chicago and its homegrown theatre aesthetic:

It is an ensemble that believes in what Steinbeck does: the power of brawny, visceral art, the importance of community, the existence of an indigenous American spirit that resides in inarticulate ordinary people, the spiritual resonance of American music and the heroism of the righteous outlaw.

Rich goes on to praise the production as "majestic" citing "a stream of tableaux whose mythic power lies in their distillation to vibrant essentials. . . . Mr. Galati, a director of exquisite taste strips away sentimentality and cheap optimism. . . . Elegance may seem an odd word to apply to The Grapes of Wrath but it fits this one."

Sinise commented on the resonances he felt in doing The Grapes of Wrath with his company.

It's all about the force of a group of people versus the force of a single individual. It's about a family, the struggles of the family to survive. The themes are so fitting for an ensemble, a community of actors. . . . Everything it says is something that we as a company can identify with quite strongly.

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62 Dolen, 4.
Outstanding Steppenwolf productions in 1989 included the Chicago premiere of Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods* and a revival of Pinter's *The Homecoming*, the last all-company Steppenwolf production of the decade.

At the end of the '80s the individual members of Steppenwolf had achieved more success than the members of any other Chicago theatre group. Malkovich had become a film star with credits in *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Places in the Heart* as well as starring on Broadway in *Death of a Salesman* and *Burn This*. Allen had won back-to-back Tonys for *Burn This* and *The Heidi Chronicles*. Metcalf was a co-star on television's *Roseanne*. Mahoney's film credits included *Say Anything* and *Suspect*. Headly appeared in the movie of *Dick Tracy* with Warren Beatty and Madonna. Sinise, Perry, Kinney, Harris, and others would go on to more work in film and television raising the profile of the theatre company to an international level. But the ensemble has stayed together, in a looser form than ever envisioned in the early days, and its members have continued to return to Steppenwolf as their artistic home. More than any other company, Steppenwolf represents the success of the Off-Loop movement in Chicago, though not without a sense of loss of community and ensemble.
Remains came into existence in 1979, later than any of the other Off Loop theatres in this study. As has since become a frequent pattern in the founding of new Off Loop ensembles, a dissatisfied group of young actors and directors got together and began talking amongst themselves about what they felt was wrong with Chicago theatre. They thought that local theatre was becoming too safe and predictable and they wanted to try something more experimental. Starting out as Innisfree, a performance collective, this first group lasted for only a few months before disintegrating in disagreement. The "remains" of Innisfree, who had gotten to know each other and were still interested in working together, established Remains Theatre in the summer of 1979. The founding group of seven consisted of Dawn Arnemann, Gary Cole, Lindsay McGee, Don Moffett, Alan Novak, Earl Pastko, and James Roach. Many of these founding members had experience acting or directing with other other Off-Loop theatres so a network of personal contacts was already established to help the group get started.

Remains was founded as a collective ensemble in which all members participated in decision-making and expected to be
involved in all productions. The intensity of true ensemble acting was their artistic goal. They were not interested in the traditional division of labor between artistic and administrative tasks found in a more hierarchichal theatre structure. They planned to share the hard work of building a theatre by producing and performing together, as well as taking classes, mailing flyers, and sweeping the floor together. In an early program note, the company states its reasons for wanting to work as an ensemble:

Remains Theatre is committed to the resurgence of ensemble theater in the United States. We believe that quality theater is most consistently produced in an environment where actors, directors, technicians and management work together on a continuing basis. . . We believe the communal involvement generated in an ensemble atmosphere best provides the essential focus on the production as a whole; as a group-created work of art.1

In a short time the group had located a vacant store front space at 3744 N. Clark, conveniently near the Ginger Man tavern, a local after-theatre hangout. They committed to signing a lease, a brave step for a young as yet untried company, and began renovations to transform the wedge-shaped interior into a usable performance space. Appealing to the theatre community, Remains was able to get chairs from St. Nicholas Theatre, a lighting board from Victory Gardens, and advice from both Steppenwolf and Victory Gardens, all theatres where Remains actors had previously worked.

Remains opened their new theatre on December 2, 1979 with a production of The Tower by Peter Weiss, directed by James Roach, in

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1Remains Theatre brochure (1980).
their newly converted storefront theatre space. The dream-like, avant-garde script received puzzled reactions from both critics and audiences although the production values and the talented ensemble earned positive comments from Simon Bottle of the Chicago Reader. Although they had hoped for a longer run, the production ran for only three weeks and was a rocky beginning for the young ensemble.

Remains opened their second production, Ronald Ribman’s *Harry, Noon and Night* on March 7, 1980. They borrowed the considerable talents of another up and coming Off-Loop actor/director, Steppenwolf’s John Malkovich, to direct the piece. Audience response was better to this more accessible play and the production ran for nine weeks. But Remains still hadn’t hit upon a defining playwright or production style to shape its identity as a company.

On June 27, 1980, Remains opened the Midwest premiere production of Sam Shepard’s *Seduced*, directed by James Roach. The company seemed to have an affinity for Shepard’s story of a semi-mystical Howard Hughes-like figure’s search to prolong his life. Anthony Adler commented in his Chicago Reader review on the young company’s fearlessness in their approach to Shepard.

The people at Remains seem to marvel at the giant [Shepard]. They want to wake him up and ask him questions. They want to ride on his shoulders and see how things look from up there. Shepard talks and they don’t shut their ears. Shepard spins and they hold on.²

The production, originally scheduled for a 6-week run, ran for nineteen weeks and the company seemed to have found a measure of its identity with this early success. Richard Christiansen also recognized the new company with his much sought-after praise:

Remains Theater's striking and exciting Midwest premiere production of Sam Shepard's *Seduced* amply illustrates the pleasures and perils of staying alive in Chicago's volatile small theater scene.

After a year of touch-and-go existence and on-and-off work, this 60-seat storefront theater founded by a group of independent young theater artists has hit upon the play, the part, the players, and the designer-director to give themselves a genuine artistic and commercial success. *Seduced*, slated for a six-week run, is a knockout show, a seductive, fascinating production of a rich, very theatrical American drama.3

Christine Koyama singled out Remains after their first season in an article in *Chicago* magazine. Noting the theatre's adventurous play choices, Koyama saw promise that Remains' "future work could breathe fresh life into the flagging experimental theatre scene."4

Did the arrival of Remains Theatre signal a truly experimental ensemble as part of the Chicago Off-Loop scene? Remains began with serious intentions of filling this niche but there were still significant questions, as yet unanswered, about the willingness of Chicago audiences to support truly off-beat, non-realistic work.


In 1980 several new company members joined the ensemble bring valuable skills with them. Amy Morton and William L. Petersen, who would both become key artists in the ensemble, joined at this time as well as business manager Connie Jean West, costume designer Donna Marr and stage manager Mary McAuliffe.

The collective decision making process was difficult to adhere to in such a volatile group but Remains seemed to thrive on it. The group routinely read and discussed in boisterous meetings all the plays being considered for upcoming productions. In the process of looking for work to stretch their talents and keep them fresh, "We fight a lot," said Amy Morton, an actress and member of the company in an interview with Richard Pollack. The inventive results of ensemble casting are further noted by Pollack:

We would not ordinarily expect to see Gary Cole [ensemble member], who is young and healthy, play Henry Hackamore, who is aged and sickly, in Seduced. Few directors would have thought of casting him in this part, but director James Roach was working with an ensemble. Ensemble work cannot be achieved, of course, unless its members are committed and talented. Remains' members are. . .5

Like other ensembles, Remains had its share of growing pains. In a 1982 article written by Christiansen, Donald (later D.W.) Moffett remembers when company meetings often became the occasion for arguing over "who will buy the toilet paper." Remains, like Steppenwolf, also lost important members, such as Remains director James Roach, who wanted to strike out on his own in Los

5Richard Pollack, "When the play and the players are all," Chicago March 1981: 118.
Angeles. The lure of both coasts would become even stronger as individuals in the company began to pursue film and television careers. Unlike many other ensembles, Remains company members had not known each other before in high school or college. They came together because of their shared interest in exploring experimental theatre as an ensemble. As has been seen before, however, it is much easier to develop an ensemble out of previously shared relationships or experiences than it is with a group of strangers, also there is a constant tension between the demands of the group and each member's individual identity. Members of Remains commented on these difficulties in Christiansen's article:

These different aims and goals sometimes can make life in an ensemble "very nerve-wracking," according to Morton. Or, as Cole, who has worked in other theaters while continuing with Remains, says: "Sometimes, it's hard to start thinking of yourself as an individual because you're so involved with the group. You miss the independence, but you also have the security and strength of belonging to a group. It's the best and the worst of the business, and it's the way we've decided to go."6

Throughout its existence, Remains stuck to its commitment to produce challenging and risky shows such as Seduced. Other Off-Loop theatres became reluctant at a certain stage in their growth to offend subscribers— or donors— by putting on too many difficult shows. Remains, however, refused to offer subscriptions because

they did not want to compromise the theatre's artistic integrity or underestimate its audience's intellect with easy and inoffensive plays. The difficult part of such a strategy was that Remains never had the audience loyalty or financial cushion that faithful subscribers can provide. The theatre remained dependent on the adventurousness of the single ticket buyer and was always one major flop away from financial ruin.

Remains began its "Nighthawk" series of late night productions in the summer of 1980 with a company adaptation of Spalding Gray's *Rumstick Road* which they titled *Family Snapshot*. Though the production didn't draw a large audience, it encouraged Remains to try more experimental work. The late-night production, *Sixty-Six Scenes from Halloween*, a script first seen at the Performing Garage in New York, found a much larger audience in 1981.

Remains' *Book of Splendors: Part II* by Richard Foreman provided the company with a tactile, visually stimulating, experimental piece to strengthen their growing reputation. Composed of brief absurdist episodes including frequent nudity, that exposed the illusions of theatre and made comedy of pretense and nonsense, the play challenged expectations without chasing the audience away.

Richard Foreman's romp along the imaginative edge, subtitled "a chamber piece," is the kind of thing that has made a reputation for the Remains Theatre . . . this little pizza-slice theater offers magic. I won't forget when Novak and another
actor walk right through the back door of the theater, and, distant but visible in the twilight, seem to pull the traffic of Clark St. into the play.7

Bob Quinn, writing in Theatre Journal about the production says:

The Remains Theatre is the only Chicago ensemble that consistently does experimental work. With this Midwestern premiere of Richard Foreman's somewhat shortened Book of Splendors, they have fulfilled their announced role of presenting new ways of looking at theatre.8

Unfortunately in 1981, Remains lost their lease on their Clark Street theatre. The company moved to the MoMing Dance and Arts Center at 1034 W. Barry to take advantage of a proven performance space for late-night productions while they continued to seek a permanent home. This itinerant existence was a continuing problem for the rest of the '80s for Remains.

The 1982 production of Sam Shepard's, Tooth of Crime, helped to establish the reputation of Remains, along with its fellow ensemble theatre, Steppenwolf, as a major representative of the hard-driving, "rock-and-roll" style of Chicago theatre. For this production, Remains used a rented space in the Theatre Building where the junkyard-style set had members of the rock band hovering on scaffolding above the audience's heads. The battle between

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Petersen's aging rock star Hoss and Cole's gypsy punker Crow, gave "the play a thrilling, unforgettable rush of full-throttle acting and sexual excitement," according to Christiansen and Remains found itself with another bonafide Sam Shepard hit.

For its next production, the itinerant Remains was invited by Greg Mosher to perform in the Goodman Studio. This gave Remains an opportunity for much-needed exposure to a larger audience. The Goodman, by showcasing dynamic young companies in its smaller Studio space, was able to strengthen its image as an innovative theatre by borrowing proven Off Loop talent.

In this instance, Remains had forged another alliance with director Steven Rumbelow of England's Triple Action Theater. A group of five ensemble members had seen Rumbelow's work in Toronto and had issued an invitation to him to come to Chicago to work with Remains. The company created their own adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Rumbelow staged it in a highly physical, environmental production that transformed the Goodman Studio into a jungle of ropes, ladders, sails, and spars. This was the kind of production that only an ensemble company could have attempted and the fresh input of Rumbelow created an evening packed with action and excitement, according to *Sun-Times* critic Gienna Syse:

This production which has hoisted its sail in the small Goodman Theater Studio (and made it look like a space worthy of a mighty voyage) has taken the book and treated it with both

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reverence and awe and impudence and gusto. Born in workshop and guided along by Steven Rumbelow, the founder of Britain's Triple Action Theater, the evening has ominous moment, vigor, cunning, goosebumps, giggles, rousing rhetoric and ever-so-engaging stagecraft.\textsuperscript{10}

Christiansen's review describes the physical production in detail and makes it clear that Remains had the imagination, born out of the poverty and necessity of Off-Loop circumstances, to transform simple props and settings into theatrical magic:

\textit{Moby Dick}, that most intractable and untranslatable of novels, miraculously has been transformed by Remains Theater into an utterly absorbing, absolutely thrilling production of living theater. . . .This is a production that lingers and expands in the mind long after the show is over. The choice and placement of scenes from the novel are unusually keen, and the delineation of images is always arresting, often brilliant. . . . Through careful, clever selection of props and costumes, and with marvelous choral and athletic coordination, Rumbelow and Remains summon up some staggering theatrical imagery for the language of the novel. . . .

Starbuck, the first mate [Donald W. Moffett], trapped in a net and crying out for heaven's mercy; Queequeg, the gentle cannibal harpooner [Earl Pastko]; and Stubb the second mate [Ted Levine], float or hang suspended from ceiling ropes in an eerie intimation of their watery deaths. Finally, using only a ladder, broom, picture frames and a few stray boards, the cast creates the image of a whale.\textsuperscript{11}


\textsuperscript{11}Richard Christiansen, "Remains' \textit{Moby Dick} is a whale of a show," \textit{Chicago Tribune} 8 October 1982: N. pag.
The success of the collaboration with the Goodman on *Moby Dick* brought other opportunities to Remains. The Goodman invited the company to develop an original piece for the 1983 Studio season. Remains decided to create an ensemble-written production called *The Conjure* in 1983. While other Off Loop companies had been successful in developing ensemble-written work, this was to be Remains' only attempt. This story illustrates the intense bonding and the occasional unreliability of the creative process in a tightly-knit ensemble.

In an article in the Goodman newsletter *Notes from the Underground*, Sloan describes the company's effort to create the piece while on an 18-day retreat to a farm in rural Michigan. The seeds of the project came from the success of the ensemble effort in *Moby Dick* and the company's desire to investigate "real fear and awe on stage." Upon their arrival at the farm, far away from telephones and offices, the company began brainstorming and workshopping, enjoying the pleasures of strolling in the orchard and collecting fresh eggs from the farm's chickens. But the company couldn't seem to settle on a focus for the project. They talked about monsters, vampires and witches--archetypes that engender fear. They worked in daily sessions of reading, writing and research with afternoon workshops referred to as "jello molds" that began to generate scenes. Just as the hippies from an earlier generation had done, they even threw the I Ching daily, seeking guidance for the project, to no avail.
Witchcraft began to become the focus of the company's imagination. The farm's eerie orchard seemed to make its spirit felt. Bones of an unknown skeleton were discovered. A copy of John Fowles' *The Magus* turned up mysteriously in the barn. Finally they celebrated the retreat's main event, a ceremonial conjuring of the great spirit, Kantia Ecdain Emoken, complete with cloud-veiled moon and flaming torches. Sloan describes the mystical effects of the experience on the Remains ensemble:

What happened in those four hours, led by a selected magus and lit by the moon and a circle of torches, touched the awe Remains had been wrestling with for months. They felt their own potential and the potential of the universe that night. Whether or not a spirit actually materialized is of lesser importance. They felt its presence. The temperature changed and clouds appeared for the first time since their arrival at the orchard. A huge bird, unlike any they had seen, flew across the moon and past the constellation Cassiopeia. They had brought themselves to an exciting, chilling state of being and awareness. They had become mages in a way...

"There was magic in the air," says Petersen. "Now, if we can get the audience to feel some of what we felt that night."\(^1\)

Sloan goes on to describe the difficulties the ensemble encountered in attempting to bring this mystical, communal experience into the theatre as a final product, an experimental form of performance:

Rehearsals for *The Conjure*, originally scheduled for a September opening in the Goodman Studio, led the company

\(^1\)Larry Sloan, "Nice Place for a Conjure," *Goodman Theatre's Notes from the Underground* September/October 1983: 5.
toward further questions and discoveries in the piece. The task grew more complex with each working session. Finally, after an intense meeting of the company, it was decided that a postponement of the production would give the ensemble more time to bring the piece to its fullest potential. .13

The piece was never completed and Remains made no further efforts at ensemble-written work. But the benefits of the communal experience to the ensemble are less easily measured. In the family bonding process that Off Loop ensembles experienced, failure sometimes produced stronger ties to the group than did success.

"We never pulled it off," Petersen says of the hoped-for mix of drama and magic ritual. "But we did conjure a spirit on the summer solstice in the middle of an apple orchard in Michigan."14

Remains was asked to return in 1984 to the Goodman Theater to mount a production of Saroyan's *Time of Your Life* on the Goodman mainstage. The '30s realism that the play called for was a new style for Remains and there was some nervousness on director Don Moffett's part about staging such a sprawling work. Moffett cast six ensemble members and thirteen non-company actors as the inhabitants of Saroyan's Bohemian San Francisco barroom. Moffett revealed some of his concerns in an interview with journalist Sid Smith:

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13Sloan, 5.

"It's especially a great risk for us in that Remains as a producing entity has never done an American classic, quote-unquote, before," Moffett said. "And we've certainly never worked as a group on a stage as large as Goodman's. But we have some things going for us. I think our interest in the visual structure of theater will serve us well... Our work in presentational, nonnaturalistic acting should help, too," he added...

"The first rehearsal, there were all these people gathered in the room, 60 of them all staring at me for direction. This important man at the Goodman looked at them, looked at me and says, real seriously, 'Listen, Don. Don't --- it up!'"

But Moffett's fears of failure went unrealized with the successful production that followed. The core of ensemble members and the quirky sense of humor that were becoming part of Remains' style served Saroyan well according to Christiansen:

I have the feeling today that the world is a little better place in which to live now that Goodman Theatre has revived [Time of Your Life] for us in such a loving and life-giving production. ... At times, director Donald W. Moffett's usually sure touch goes for the quick laugh. The second half of the play drags along for much of its early part; and some of the pacing needed to keep the play humming is off by a few seconds... That said, however, this is a rich and vital production, blessed with many actors in its large cast who breathe remarkable life into the loners, losers, drunks and whores whom Saroyan embraced with such unabashed delight.

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The itinerant ensemble was then invited to Wisdom Bridge Theater where Robert Falls directed the group in *Life and Limb*, a new play by a young playwright, Keith Reddin. Remains seemed to find a good match in Reddin's off-beat sense of humor and fractured realism. Reddin, who was an undergraduate theatre major at Northwestern at the beginning of the Chicago theatre explosion before studying playwriting at Yale, went on to premiere two of his other plays at Remains, *The Highest Standard of Living* in 1986 and *Big Time* in 1987.

Remains seemed to specialize in broad, off-beat comedies in 1984. Their next project was Christopher Durang's *Baby with the Bathwater* at the Goodman Studio in September, directed by Moffett. Glenna Syse, while very supportive of the skill of the Remains ensemble, comments on a weakness which many Off Loop companies shared--selecting mediocre material and acting it very well:

The Remains Theater company, which is one of the sharpest ensembles this side of Dr. Spock, manages somewhat miraculously to make you think this script is much smarter than it is. In delivery, bravado, pose and poise, the players toss it off as if they wrote the book on satire. . . Technically, under D. W. Moffett's sly and savage direction, the production is indelible. The cartoon music, cunning costumes and bright, simple props give the show a smackeroo image. Too bad the playwright has written too many scenes that easily could be thrown out with the baby and the bath.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{17}\)Glenna Syse, "*Bathwater* runs hot, cold with sharp Remains Theater" *Chicago Sun-Times* 12 September 1984: N. pag.
As Remains grew more successful, many of its actors began to find work elsewhere. Cole became a company member with Steppenwolf. Both Cole and Moffett began getting film offers. Petersen performed in *Balm and Gilead* directed by Malkovich at Steppenwolf and *In the Belly of the Beast* directed by Falls at Wisdom Bridge. The acclaim for these performances brought him to Hollywood's attention and a series of film roles followed. Just as with Steppenwolf, as the individual company members' careers took off, it became more and more difficult to function as a collective ensemble.

In February 1986, Sloan who had been an associate director at the Goodman, resigned to become the first artistic director at Remains. This was a much-needed attempt to stabilize the administrative structure of the company. The emphasis at Remains had always been on the artistic product and the financial stability of the company had suffered. With so many of the ensemble working away from Chicago, the company needed someone to take charge of the day-to-day operations.

However, the addition of an artistic director couldn't turn the situation around overnight and the company continued to have financial and artistic problems. Syse points out that "the company has suffered from the lack of a permanent home, an uneven stable of script choices and some iffy, adolescent and problematic productions that overstepped both their financial and artistic capabilities—not to mention an audience that likes to find adventure comforted by shows that reaffirm its taste in plays. Its a hard fact
of life that no matter how much your board of directors
loves you, there is always someone around who would prefer you do
Everyone Loves Opal rather than Mother Courage."\textsuperscript{18}

But Sloan began to find a wider variety of scripts and
developed a relationship with the Organic Theatre which gave
Remains a consistent performance space. Syse, well aware of the
problems she outlined above, was supportive of Sloan’s first
directorial project with the ensemble:

That’s why I feel so kindly to Remains Theater’s new
production of Bertolt Brecht’s \textit{Puntilla and His Hired Man},
which is now playing at the Organic Theater at 3315 N. Clark
and directed rambunctiously by its new artistic director, Larry
Sloan...Denis Arndt plays Puntilla, whose soul soars only with
booze, as if he was born to command a stage. I guess it is no
secret that I would kill for William L. Petersen, who plays
Puntilla’s wily servant and who is the single individual who
has kept the Remains company afloat. Also, I ask you: Have you
ever seen Amy Morton do a dramatic misstep? And for the first
time, the barny Organic space has been used to full capacity.
This is a make-or-break production for Remains. It’s costing
$120,000. But in two hours yesterday morning they sold
$1,500 worth of tickets. Onward!\textsuperscript{19}

Positive critical response follows the success of \textit{Puntilla} with
the Remains productions of Keith Reddin’s \textit{The Highest Standard of
Living} directed by Michael Maggio and \textit{Big Time} directed by Sloan.

\textsuperscript{18}Glenna Syse, “Brecht’s \textit{Puntilla} gives helping hand to gutsy

\textsuperscript{19}Glenna Syse, “Brecht’s \textit{Puntilla} gives helping hand to gutsy
Syse's review of Keith Reddin's *Highest Standard of Living* made clear her positive opinion of Remains' skill at physical comedy.

Remains is never satisfied to take a small bite when there is a big plate to be had. This is the company that will keep the adventuresome Chicago theater image alive. Copycats they are not. They scour the dramatic terrain for provocative and unusual material.

As I have written before, I prefer my satire less physical and more cerebral. But no one can fault director Michael Maggio's talent for choreographing craziness. The falling-into-the-aisles, opening-night audience probably has had the stitches removed by now.

Christiansen called *Big Time* "a small play of smashing impact, in a polished production of great power." However, Minnesota playwright Kevin Kling's play, *Lloyd's Prayer*, doesn't fare so well at Christiansen's hands:

The script, though it is dotted with some ingenious lines and bravura passages, is littered with dead-ends and stale bits, and the Remains production, though overproduced to the outer inches of the Goodman Theatre Studio, does not pull together the play's loose screwball structure and cannot find a consistent comic tone for the playwright's innocent voice.

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21Richard Christiansen, "Big Time is a gleaming little gem shedding light on 'me' generation," *Chicago Tribune* 13 November 1987, sec. 2: 10.

Remains’ last production of the decade, David Mamet’s *Speed-the-Plow*, starring Petersen, Moffett, and Hope Davis, marked a turning point for the ensemble. The Mamet play, which deals with the corrosive nature of Hollywood money, was symbolic of the pressures that individual fame had brought to bear on Remains. The company was producing less frequently and the ensemble was breaking up while individuals followed their own careers. The success of these careers, however, gave added luster to Remains’ image. While still a gypsy company, they had a core audience that followed them wherever they performed. Petersen had several successful movies under his belt and his name helped to sell tickets. He continued to return to Chicago to work with Remains on projects like *Speed-the-Plow* that used his L.A. experience to advantage. On opening night of the co-production with Wisdom Bridge, Hollywood producers arrived in limousines and many of Remains’ friends and family from the Chicago theatre community were there. Peterson commented on the irony of the situation:

“We were a hit before we opened, sold out to May, which was very disconcerting,” [Petersen] said. “In the old days, when we were in that little pie-shaped theater on Clark Street, we used to be lucky on opening night to get anyone to come. We used to go into the bar next door and pull people off stools to fill seats.”

The nature of Chicago theatre had changed during the ‘80s. The possibilities that had once seemed endless were now more limited.

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Many theatres, in order to survive, had become institutions with all the attendant obligations. Petersen talked about his hopes for Remains:

We are trying to create opportunities where the 24-year-olds—where we 10 years ago when we started Remains—will have the same opportunity in this community that we had. I feel that these opportunities are being taken away—first of all, because of our lack of leadership and our lack of commitment to the community and to our audience that has created careers for us... people have come in to take our audience. And they are charging twice as much money. They run shows forever and ever. You can't compete against four full-page ads. Audiences can't figure our where these little theaters are anymore... We feel we are changing more than other theater companies, the ones that get locked into buildings, spaces, overheads, staffs, subscription. They become institutions. We have four people on our staff... 24

Petersen, Moffett, Cole, and others in the company were caught between the artistic ideals of the ensemble and the financial realities of their own careers. To favor one meant neglecting the other. Petersen had tried to use his fame to support his art, even using his own movie earnings to rescue Remains financially but that was not a permanent solution. At the end of the two decades of the Chicago theatre explosion, Remains Theatre had survived but was seriously endangered, both financially and organizationally.

As the first wave of Off-Loop theatres grew toward maturity, new theatre groups starting out realized that they needed something unique to distinguish themselves from the many theatres already in existence. A second wave of developing Off-Loop theatres wanted to become permanent cultural institutions but they needed to find their own cultural niche to fill. The solution for many companies was to become what can be described as “culturally specific” theatres. These companies attempted to attract their own audience by creating theatre from a specific cultural perspective or for a specific cultural group, for example, African American (Black Ensemble and ETA Creative Arts), Hispanic (Latino Chicago and Teatro Vista), Jewish (National Jewish Theater), and gay or lesbian (Bailiwick and Footsteps theatres). Some culturally specific theatres emphasized a particular style or type of material such as classical plays (Court Theatre, Shakespeare Repertory), social activism (Free Street Theatre), adaptations of literature (City Lit Theatre), American classics (Raven Theatre), or musicals (New
Tuners). Still other theatres focused on more general service to an identifiable community or suburb separate from the greater Chicagoland community such as Evanston (Evanston Theater Company, eventually Northlight Theatre) or Highland Park (Apple Tree Theatre Company). The artistic mission of each of these theatres sought out a particular audience segment with a sense of purpose often lacking in some early Off-Loop companies who felt that "doing good theatre" was an adequate mission statement for their work.

These culturally specific companies, most of which were founded during the explosion of the '70s and '80s, contributed their own rich voices to the Off-Loop scene and added immeasurably to the talent and variety of Chicago theatre. In many companies, the artistic and social bond with the community was even stronger than in the more generally focused companies because of the specific audience being sought. The difficulty for culturally specific companies was to appeal to a broad enough audience to avoid being marginalized and grow as institutions without losing the sense of identity and cultural mission that made them unique.

Institutionalization

As the Chicago Off-Loop theatre explosion reached its peak in 1985, many theatres discovered, in a world of shrinking resources, that it was an absolute necessity to create a permanent institutional structure for survival. Artists and administrators needed to be hired and paid, permanent theatre spaces and offices
needed to be established, and a theatre's management needed to be able to plan seasons and budgets to insure the future of the organization. The achievement of financial and organizational stability brought an image of permanence to a theatre that was critically important with both audiences and funders. The earlier forms of hand-to-mouth existence, led by most theatres in the name of artistic risk-taking, burned people out quickly and could not be maintained without, ultimately, destroying the theatre itself.

The most difficult issue for theatre companies moving toward institutionalization was trying to maintain a balance between artistic and administrative concerns. The management of a working theatre, both organizationally and financially, required much of a theatre company's energy. Administrative divisions of labor into areas of production management, development, marketing, press, subscription campaign, box office, etc. required a kind of specialized knowledge and business discipline unfamiliar to an ensemble of actors whose only real interest was in performance. But someone had to mind the store or soon a theatre would go broke.

Occasionally, as in the latter days of St. Nicholas, theatre administrators spent too much energy on audience development, fundraising and the like, thereby ignoring artistic concerns and causing a consequent decline in the quality of the theatre's work. More frequently, a theatre's energy was too heavily devoted to creating an artistic product without paying enough attention to financial issues and organizational structure. Remains Theatre, perhaps, is the best example of a theatre with a strong artistic
product and a weak administrative structure, a situation that prevented the institution from achieving organizational stability. Other theatres, such as the Organic, Body Politic, and Wisdom Bridge, suffered from a combination of weak administration and poor artistic choices that ultimately led to their failure.

In some circumstances, institutional solutions actually caused bigger problems. As some theatres grew, they moved to larger theatres expecting to expand their audience. However, sometimes these larger theatres were harder to fill, producing less revenue and higher expenses than the smaller venue. Half-empty theatres became self-fulfilling prophecies and the theatre's attendance figures would continue to fall. The Organic and Steppenwolf both experienced this problem in their moves to larger theatres.

Purchasing a building to provide a permanent theatre space proved, in hindsight, to be damaging to both the Body Politic and the Organic theatres. The expense of maintaining their buildings turned both organizations into landlords, forcing them to rent their theatre spaces to other groups in order to pay the building's mortgage. Until a company reaches a certain level of stability as an institution, the burden of owning rather than renting performance space can draw energy and resources away from the theatre company's primary purpose of producing plays.

Overcrowding

Another factor contributing to the decline in Chicago theatre was the large number of new theatres that started up in Chicago in
the late '70s and early '80s; so many that audience growth was unable to keep up. Media attention and national artistic recognition helped focus Chicago's attention on its hottest Off-Loop theatres but the audience's attention span was short. Long-term theatre-going habits were not formed by enough of the Chicago audience and overall theatre attendance began to drop off in the late '80s.

A survey of statistics provided by the League reveals that the earned income (ticket sales) of non-profit theaters has slid precipitously over the last three seasons, from more than $16 million in 1985-86 to just $11 million in 1987-88.¹

The spirit of cooperation between theatres became more difficult to maintain as it became clear that there were too many theatres and not enough audience members to go around. Some observers, such as Goodman artistic director Robert Falls, felt that the observable decline was a natural growth cycle not a sign of serious trouble for Chicago theatre:

"I think it's survival of the fittest time," Falls says. "It's possible we may be overglutted with theaters. And that's not necessarily a good or a bad thing. What's happening right now is the theaters that have the most secure background with money and the longest history are surviving the rocky time best."²

Due to economic and political conditions, corporations and foundations began to cut back on charitable giving in the '80s. They


²Collins, 9.
preferred to give to recognized groups rather than upstart companies without a strong record of artistic achievement. More elite cultural groups like the Chicago Symphony, the Lyric Opera, and the Art Institute offered more bang for a funder's buck. Giving to these established institutions was less artistically risky and offered a higher community profile than funding a struggling storefront theatre. Journalist Scott Collins interviewed Raven Theatre artistic director, Michael Menendian, then head of a theatre with a budget under $50,000.

"We do very solid work," Menendian says. "We've gotten a lot of good recognition from the press over the years; we've dotted our i's, crossed our t's, done what was expected of us in terms of board development, etc., etc. We go to these funding sources, and we're still a non-entity."

"No matter what we've done over the last five or six years, and how we've developed in the neighborhood and how vital we are to the community, it goes in one ear and out the other."³

Competition with commercial theatre

Also, in the latter half of the '80s, a strong commercial theatre sector began to compete with the Off-Loop theatres. Blockbuster road companies of shows like Cats and Les Misérables played a long runs at commercial houses in the Loop and brought attention to the market for popular entertainment. New commercial houses such as the Apollo, Briar Street Theatre, and the Royal George invaded Chicago's North Side, traditional Off-Loop territory,

³Collins, 11.
and hosted long-running light entertainment like *Pump Boys and Dinettes* and *Steel Magnolias*. With better financing, these productions could easily outspend their Off-Loop counterparts in advertising and marketing campaigns, making competition for audiences much tougher.

**Economic survival**

Cooperative ventures such as co-production and sharing of equipment and resources continued among Off-Loop companies. As an example, a group of six separate theatres banded together in 1986 under the name United Stages to share rented space at the Theatre Building. The idea of buying a storefront building and remodelling it into a permanent theatre home was becoming less and less financially feasible due to rising real estate prices and increased competition from businesses and other theatre companies. New groups such as those in United Stages needed to minimize their overhead and focus all their economic resources on short rehearsal periods and economically viable performance runs.

In 1989, both the Organic and Remains theatres scaled back their season plans due to budget constraints. Wisdom Bridge and the Body Politic followed suit shortly thereafter with serious financial problems which affected their ability to produce. Many Off-Loop theatres produced fewer plays but held on to them for longer runs, hoping for moneymakers like *WARPI* or *E/R* which would rescue them from their ever-increasing deficits.
The economic survival of the small and mid-sized Off-Loop theatres became much more tenuous as the decade waned. Fewer young companies were starting up and League membership dropped by 10 percent. Michael Menendian of the Raven Theatre described the struggle facing most young theatres:

"The actual base of the foundation, where a lot of the talent comes from—the farm team, as it were—is eroding," Menendian says. "And once the farm system goes, the major leagues will go." 4

Economic hardship hit the mid-sized Equity houses hardest. They had higher expenses, union contracts, and paid staff. Wisdom Bridge, Remains, and the Organic didn't have the solid financial and organizational base needed to become stable institutions. New theatres continued to crop up, survive for a few years on optimism, youthful energy, and volunteer labor and then fade away. The process of moving toward institutionalization with a permanent location, paid staff, and a loyal audience was becoming much more difficult. The theatre community began to split into a handful of stable, well established theatres and much larger number of impoverished young groups, the rich and the poor, with nothing in between.

Career opportunities

The fairy tale-like story of Steppenwolf Theatre became deeply imbedded in the cultural mythology of the Chicago theatre

4Collins, 9.
community. It drew many young actors, directors, and designers to Chicago and increased the already overcrowded theatre scene.

The image of a group of high school and college friends who joined together to produce shows in a suburban basement—and ultimately moved on to fame and fortune without ever completely severing the artistic bonds that first united them—has become the paradigm for every self-starting storefront theater group in town.5

But Steppenwolf's experience was more difficult economically than the company's sudden fame suggested. In a press conference announcing the ensemble's re-commitment to their Chicago theatre home, artistic director Jeff Perry described the economic situation faced by Steppenwolf actors and directors.

"As most of us are aware," he said, "artists working in the theatre not only don't make a killing; they generally qualify for public aid. Outside of Gary Sinise and me, who have served as artistic directors, none of the actors and directors in the company have ever made more than $7,000 in a given year working at Steppenwolf. As a group of people approaching a mean age of 30 who have produced over 60 plays together, Steppenwolf naturally seeks and deserves economic return above the subsistence level."6

The city didn't live up to expectations for many artists who hoped to build viable careers. Journalist Christine Koyama commented on the realities of life for Chicago theatre artists:


In New York and Los Angeles, success means money. Not in Chicago. After years of effort, our established Off-Loop theatres and the artists working in them live much closer to the edge than we care to realize...

We hand them awards. We applaud their work. But that doesn't pay their rent or help them raise families. That doesn't help their credit ratings or buy them life insurance. Still, we expect them to forgo all those middle-class goals that the rest of us work so hard to gain....

There's something incredibly lopsided about our attitude toward theatre in Chicago. If the members of Steppenwolf, our most talented and celebrated acting ensemble, have been working in Chicago on subsistence wages, then what about all the other actors and directors in the city who, while less visible, are no less talented? What have we given them beyond just words? Anything of substance? As time passes, their options in Chicago decrease instead of grow.7

The Chicago theatre explosion was created by young people in their twenties who were not yet worried about careers, families, or mortgages. Working in Chicago was easy, getting paid was not. The artistic fulfillment of creating theatre for a dwindling audience in a 40-seat theatre had a limited shelf life and it was time for Off-Loop theatre to look to its own future.

The future of Off-Loop theatre

For more than a decade, artists and critics alike have been worried about the direction of Chicago Off-Loop theatre. The explosion of new theatres and the consequent increase in attendance and funding that peaked in 1985 does not seem likely to ever happen

7Koyama, 191.

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again. The gap between established, well-funded, not-for-profit theatres such as Steppenwolf and the Goodman and the struggling storefront theatres that became apparent in the ‘80s has only widened. Many mid-sized Off-Loop theatres have lost ground in their move toward financial and artistic stability and some are now gone. Since the start of this research project in 1993, four of the eight theatres in this study, the Body Politic, the Organic, Wisdom Bridge, and Remains, have permanently closed their doors. For most Chicago Off-Loop theatres, the goal of becoming a healthy permanent artistic institution in the community has begun to seem a distant dream.

Off-Loop theatre is a unique Chicago resource. It brings young talent and imagination from all over the country to a vibrant theatre community in the city. Off-Loop theatre is as important to the cultural life of the city as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Lyric Opera, or the Art Institute. Theatre patrons are important consumers and provide major revenue to an entire sector of the economy including local hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, shops, and transportation facilities. The energy and intimacy of Chicago’s many small theatres shouldn’t have to be replaced by a few select and costly productions staged, for economic reasons, in cavernous 2,000 seat auditoriums.

The City of Chicago needs to become a more active supporter and promoter of its own magnificent theatre resources. Funds from the hotel tax should be earmarked for annual subsidies to a wide variety of Chicago theatres. City tourism resources should feature Chicago Off-Loop theatre as one of the city’s top attractions.

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Chicago critics need to take a longer view of the Chicago theatre scene. Encouraging the public to rush to the latest exciting new company is, ultimately, destructive to the permanence of the artistic community. While the press has historically been very supportive of the raw, young companies that start up each year, there needs to be a distinction made between the artistic quality and experience of a maturing company and the raw energy of this year's crop of newcomers.

Chicago audiences need to become more discriminating and should regularly attend the high quality theatres that deserve their long-term loyalty. Audiences need to recognize that their steadfast support will encourage a flourishing of the arts in the community and convince the best local artists to stay and build their own artistic home here in Chicago.
NOTE TO APPENDICES

The following appendices contain the production histories of the eight Off-Loop theatres profiled in this study. These histories were compiled, in most cases, by the theatres themselves, making them primarily responsible for their accuracy. However, history being the tenuous art that it is, records are occasionally incomplete, inaccurate, or missing. The quantity of information can be daunting. Some theatres provided only a year of production and the title and/or author of the play. Dates of the run, director, designers, and cast can be reconstructed by researching programs or cross-referencing reviews but most theatres do not have the time or staff available to do this. It is interesting to note the information that theatres have chosen to include. Steppenwolf's official production history, for example, always lists directors and actors but omits designers and, most telling of all, playwrights. Many thanks to John Mayer for researching a very detailed production history for Steppenwolf up to 1982 which I have reproduced as it appears in his dissertation. Additional thanks to the many researchers and interns who compiled histories on each of the other theatres. When possible, I have attempted to fill in some missing information. My apologies for unavoidable errors, inconsistencies, or omissions.
APPENDIX A

Production History - Body Politic Theatre

Companies in Residence at the Body Politic, beginning March, 1969

March 1969 - November 1969

Free Theater
(Columbia College Center for New Music)
Director: William Russo

Civil War (Russo)
Liberation (Russo)
City in a Swamp (Bob Perry)
David (Russo)

August 1969 - June 1970

Story Theater
Director: Paul Sills

Ovid's Metamorphosis (Arnold Weinstein, trans.)
The Master Thief
The Parson in the Cupboard
March 1970 - October 1971

The Game Theater
Leaders: Mel Spiegel, Jim Shiflett, Claire and Michael Haye

*Audience Participation using Theater Games*

June 1970 - December 1972

Organic Theater
Director: Stuart Gordon

*Ulysses*
*Tarot*
*Candide*
*Poe*
*WARP!*

May 1971 -

Dream Theater
Director: Jim Shiflett

*Dream Show (Original dreams)*
*A Country Doctor (Kafka) and Other Dreams*
*Peep Show and Other Attractions*
*Hero*
*Pure Desire*
*A Dream Matinee*
*As I Lay Dying (Faulkner)*
*Les Femmes Savantes (Moliere)*
*Orpheus Decending (Williams)*
*Real Inspector Hound/After Magritte (Stoppard)*
*Your Own Thing (Driver)*
*Heritage*
December 1971 -

Alice Liddell Theater Company
Director: David Child

1971 The World of Let's Pretend

1972 Let's Do a Story
   The Storyteller's Hat

1973 The Pied Piper
   A Day at the Carnival
   Let's Experiment with Drama
   Glooskap and Others
   How the Children Stopped the Wars

1974 Now a Little Something for the Grownups
   Tale Time
   Spot and the Bandits
   The Storyteller's Hat

1975 House of Feathers
   The Adventures of Kantijil
   Legends of Christmas
   The Selfish Giant
   A Visit to Make Believe

1976 Let's Do a Story
   The Great Quillow (James Thurber)

February 1972 - March 1974

The Puppet Place
Director: Ray Nelson

For children:
The Magic Onion
Yente Babushka's Gargantuan Magic Circus II
The Little Prince

For adults:
Letters from the Earth (Twain)
Hayavadana (Garish Kinard)

May 1972 -

Dinglefest Theatre Company
Director: Byron Schaffer, Jr.

Verbatim
Tom Swift and His . . .
Guessworks
Goosebumps
Vacuum Pact
Chautauqua

February 1973 - June 1973

The Magic Circle Theater
Director: Guy Giarrizzo

Bite On
Noh Antigone

October 1973 - April 1974

Chicago Theater Strategy
Director: June Pyscacek

The Influence Show
Three Plays by Kopit

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1974 - 1975

The Independent Eye
Directors: Conrad and Linda Bishop

1974 Song Stories
Goners
1975 The Money Show
Sunshine Blues and Dessie

1974 - 1976

Chicago City Theatre
Producers: Joseph Ehrenberg and Joel Hall

1974 The Queen Bee is in the Tiger's Eye and the Yellow is Stained Red (Shabazz)
1976 Don Juan in Hell (Shaw)

October 1974 - October 1975

Pinworm Players/Domestic Blend

The Trip/The Landing (Bill Lederer)
Ludlow Fair (Lanford Wilson)
The Reader and the Writer (Bill Lederer)
The Last Million Miles (John Blades)
Side by Side (Bill Lederer)

February 1975 - January 1976

Peripatetic Task Force
Producers: Ron Offen, Kristine Cameron

The Beard
Midnight Madness
Brecht on Brecht

359
December 1975

JAG (Just Another Group)

Midnight Angel (Oscar Griffin)
Hats (Ray Miller)

1975 - 1976

Chicago Contemporary Dance Theatre
Director: Maggie Kast

1975 Crazy Quilt
City Sequence I

1976 Hop, Skip, Run and Dance
Choreographer's Workshop
Jamboree

May 1976

Pary Productions
Director: Gary Houston

Sunday Dinner (Joyce Carol Oates)

Companies that formed at the Body Politic to do one show and continued elsewhere.

February 1970

Theater of Phynance
Director: Yuri Rasovsky

Krapp's Last Tape
October 1970

Chicago Extension
Director: Del Close

*Improvisation Workshops*

September 1971

Godzilla Rainbow Troupe
Director: Eleven

*Whores of Babylon*

Companies formed at the Body Politic to do one show.

August 1972

Company for *Duck Variations*
Director: Fritzie Sahlins

*Duck Variations* (David Mamet)

July 1973

The Bang Company
Director: Tom Tully

*Bang* (Tom Tully)

October 1973

The Zebra Company
Director: Del Close

*The Night They Shot Harry Lindsay with a 155mm Howitzer and Blamed it on Zebras*
Visiting Companies

1972

The Open Theater (New York, NY)
Director: Joseph Chaikin

Terminal

1973 - 1974

Theater X (Milwaukee, WI)
Leader: Conrad Bishop

1973 Comedying
1974 X-Communicaton and Howard

1973

Theater of All Possibilities (Santa Fe, NM)
Director: Salty Hoffman

Baal (Brecht)
Seven Deadly Sins
Maruf

March 1974

KRAKEN (Oberlin, OH)
Director: Herbert Blau

The Donner Party, Its Crossing
May 1975 - April 1976

ProVisional Theatre (Los Angeles, CA)
Director: Steve Kent

XA: a Vietnam Primer
Voice of the People
America Piece

April 1976

Broom Street Theater (Madison, WI)
Director: Joel Gersmann

Gone with the Wind

April 1976

Darlene Blackburn Dance Troupe
Director: Darlene Blackburn

June 1976

Omaha Magic Theatre (Omaha, NE)
Director: Megan Terry

Babes in the Bighouse (Megan Terry)
Temporary Insanity (Judith Katz)

Body Politic Theater Company

August 3 - October 16, 1977 (Rental - Genesis Partnership)

In Da' Begin'ng written, directed, and designed by Oscar Brown, Jr., costumes by Jean Pace.
September 22 - October 9, 1977

*Ants in the Attic* by Ric Gusczynski.

October 26, 1977 (Rental - Chicago Theatre of the Deaf)

*Production unknown*

December 2, 1977 - January 29, 1978 (Rental)

*Mark Twain in Person* adapted by Richard Henzel. Directed by James Thornton, costumes by Julie Nagel.

December 7, 1977 - March 12, 1978

*Lunching* by Alan Gross. Directed by Mike Nussbaum, sets and lights by Michael Merritt, costumes by Julie Nagel.

December 17 - 23, 1977

*Visions of Sugarplums*

February 3 - 26, 1978 (Rental - High Noon)

*Catcher in the Wry* by Gary Slezak. Directed by Paul H. Thompson.

February 19 - April 30, 1978 (Rental - Stage of Development)


March 3 - 26, 1978

April 4 - May 13, 1978

_The Baron Must Die_ by Frank Shiras. Directed by Sharon Phillips, sets and lights by Nels Anderson.

April 16, 1978 (Co-production - Chicago Theater Strategy)

_Vanaver Caravan_

June 9 - July 2, 1978

_Slapstick and Sawdust_

August 25 - 27, 1978 (Mixed Events series - Warsaw Mime Theatre)

_Warsaw Mime Theatre_

Dates unknown


Dates unknown (1978)


Dates unknown (Rental - Maaco Productions)

_Madame Hortense_ written and directed by Eugene McCarty.

Dates unknown (Co-production - Chicago Theater Strategy)

_Cold Shoulder_ Written and directed by June Pyskacek, music and lyrics by Tony Zito, sets by Stephen Packard, lights by Gene Wojcik, costumes by Nell Wade.
Dates unknown (New Playwrights series)

*Eyes of Wonder: A Dream Wonder* arranged, directed and designed by David Moore, lights by Gerald B. Stephens, costumes by Sharon Phillips.

Dates unknown (New Playwrights series)

*Dead of Night* by John Ostrander. Directed by Mary Ellen McGarry, sets, lights and costumes by Thomas Beall.

Dates unknown (New Playwrights series)

*Station J* by Dale McFadden. Sets, lights, and costumes by Leon Warner.

September 20 - 24, 1978 (Mixed Events series - Independent Eye)

*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare.

September 28 - October 8, 1978 (Mixed Events series - Theatre X)

*A Fierce Longing* by John Schneider. Directed by Sharon Ott.

October 18 - November 26, 1978


October 23 - 26, 1978 (Mixed Events series - Warsaw Mime Theatre)

*Warsaw Mime Theatre*
November 19 - December 31, 1978 (Mixed Events series)


December 9, 1978 - January 7, 1979 (Mixed Events series)

*Snowchildren* developed and directed by Mary Ellen McGarry.

December 13, 1978 - January 21, 1979


February 1 - March 31, 1979 (New Playwrights series)

*Hide and Seek* by Frank Shiras. Directed by Francis Kuhn, sets by Esther Smith.

February 14 - April 1, 1979

*Spring's Awakening* by Frank Wedekind. Directed by Joseph Slowik, sets and lights by Nels Anderson, costumes by Janet Messmer.

April 5 - 15, 1979 (Mixed Events series - Chicago Contemporary Dance Theatre)

*Chicago Contemporary Dance Theatre*

May 2 - June 10, 1979

*Statements from an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* by Athol Fugard and *Scenes from Soweto* by Steve Wllmer. Directed by James O'Reilly, sets by James Boley, lights by John Rodriguez, costumes by Bobbie Hughes.
May 15 - September 16, 1979 (Mixed Events series)


May 21, 1979 (Mixed Events series)

"Personalities I Have Known: Shaw, Yeats, O'Casey" by Denis Johnson.

September 13 - 30, 1979 (Mixed Events series)


October 11, 1979 -

The Ruffian on the Stair and Funeral Games by Joe Orton. Directed by Dale McFadden, sets by Thomas Beall, lights by John Rodriguez, costumes by Maggie Bodwell.

November, 1979 (Benefit)

St. Mark's Gospel written, directed, and performed by Alec McGowan.

November 18 - December 15, 1979 (New Playwrights series)

The King's Clown by David Vando. Directed by Dale McFadden, sets and lights by Luis Ramirez, costumes by Sherry Ravitz.

November 30 - December 16, 1979 (Mixed Events series - remount)

Dates unknown

The Decline and Fall of the Entire World as Seen Through the Eyes of Cole Porter by Ben Bagley. Directed by Dean Button, sets and lights by Thomas Beall, costumes by Julie Nagel.

Dates unknown (New Playwrights series)

Rhyming Couplets by Kevin Grattan. Directed by Bruce Burgun, sets by Frances Maggio, lights by Gerri Kelly, costumes by Carl Forsberg.

December 1, 1979 - (Mixed Events series)

Parsifal. Personnel unknown.

March 27 - April 27, 1980


April 10, 1980 (Mixed Events series - Chicago Contemporary Dance Theatre)

Crossings.

May 1980 (Rental or Co-production - Northlight Theatre)

The Club by Eve Merriam. Directed by Michael Maggio, sets and lights by Maher Ahmad, costumes by Christa Scholtz.

June 12, 1980 - (Rental or Co-production - Northlight Theatre)

Buried Child by Sam Shepard. Directed by Gregory Kandel, sets and lights by Maher Ahmad, costumes by Marsha Kowal.
October 2, 1980 - August, 1981

**Coming Attractions** by Jerry Haislmaier and Shelly Goldstein. Directed by Kate Benson, sets and lights by Sara Berg.

Dates unknown


May 6 - June 7, 1981

*The Sea Horse* by Edward J. Moore. Directed by James O'Reilly, sets by Nels Anderson, lights by Gary Heitz, costumes by Elizabeth Passman.

July 8, 1981 -

*Holding Patterns* by Jeffery Sweet in collaboration with Sandra Hastie, Stephen Johnson, Christine Kellogg. Directed by Tom Mula, sets by Nels Anderson, lights by Gary Heitz, costumes by Kerry Fleming, with Audrie Neenan.

July 11 - August 2, 1981 (Mixed Events series - Clay Martin's Puppet Theatre)

*The Coronation of King Arthur* and *Three American Folk Tales*. Personnel unknown.

September 4 - October 5, 1981 (Mixed Events series)

September 17 - October 25, 1981

*The Petrified Forest* by Robert Sherwood. Directed by James O'Reilly, sets by Tony Nowenbrook, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Virgil Johnson.

November 27 - December 30, 1981

*Class Enemy* by Nigel Williams. Directed by Harriet Spizziri, sets by Karl Kochvar, costumes by Dale Wibben.

February 24 - March 14, 1982

*Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare. Directed by James O'Reilly, sets and lights by Chris Phillips, costumes by Nan Zabriskie.

May 5 - June 6, 1982

*Eve* by Larry Fineberg. Directed by Susan Dafoe, sets by Jeff Bauer, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Elizabeth Passman.

July 14 - August 15, 1982

*Confusions* by Alan Ayckbourn. Directed by Pauline Brailsford, sets by James O'Reilly, lights by Lynn Ziehe, costumes by Kerry Fleming, with Jayne Atkinson.

September 22, 1982 - January 2, 1983

*Translations* by Brian Friel. Directed by James O'Reilly, sets by Michael Merritt, lights by Mary Badger, costumes by Kerry Fleming.
February 23 - March 27, 1983

_Playboy of the Western World_ by John Synge. Directed by James O'Reilly, sets by John Rodriguez, lights by Robert James, costumes by Kerry Fleming.

May 4, 1983 -


July - August, 1983


October, 1983 - January 1, 1984

_The Dresser_ by Ronald Harwood. Directed by B. J. Jones and Pauline Brailsford, sets by Lynn Ziehe, lights by Michael Rourke, costumes by Kerry Fleming, with James O'Reilly as Sir, Frank Galati as Norman.

February, 1984


April, 1984

July - August, 1984


September 20 - November 21, 1984


February 19 - March 24, 1985


April, 1985

*All My Sons* by Arthur Miller. Directed by Pauline Brailsford, sets by Jeff Bauer, lights by Michael Rourke, costumes by Kerry Fleming.

July 11 - August 18, 1985


September - November 24, 1985

February, 1986


Dates unknown


July, 1986


September 24 - October 19, 1986 (Special production)


November, 1986 - January 4, 1987


February 5 - March 8, 1987

April, 1987


Summer, 1987 (Collaboration with Victory Gardens Theater)

*Play Expo* - new play festival.

Dates unknown


September 17 - October 18, 1987

*Moonlight Daring Us to Go Insane* by E. Eugene Baldwin. Directed by Pauline Brailsford, sets by Linda Lane, lights by Michael Rourke, costumes by Susan Bonde.

November 12, 1987 -

*Rough Crossing* by Tom Stoppard, with music by Andre Previn. Directed by Pauline Brailsford, sets by Jeff Bauer, lights by Michael Rourke, costumes by Kerry Fleming.

February 25 - March 27, 1988

April 28 - May 29, 1988

A *Whistle in the Dark* written and directed by Tom Murphy, sets by Jeff Bauer, lights by Michael Rourke, costumes by Renee S. Liepins, fights by Michael Sokoloff.

October, 1988

*Coastal Disturbances* by Tina Howe. Directed by Pauline Brailsford, sets by Jeff Bauer, lights by Michael Rourke, costumes by Kerry Fleming.

December 1 - 31, 1988

*Sherlock's Last Case* by Charles Marowitz. Directed by Roger Mueller.

February 10 - March 12, 1989


May 21, 1989 -

*Wenceslas Square* by Larry Shue. Directed by Tom Mula, sets by Brian Traynor, lights by Michael Rourke, costumes by Kerry Fleming.

June - October, 1989 (Rental - Cullen, Henaghan and Platt production)

*Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* by Terrence McNally. With Kathy Bates.
APPENDIX B

Production History - Organic Theater


1970  Animal Farm by George Orwell, adapted by the Company. Staged at the Holy Covenant Methodist Church.

Odyssey by Homer, adapted by the Company. Staged at the Body Politic Theater.

Tarot Cards, created by the Company. Staged at the Body Politic Theater.

1971  Candide by Voltaire, adapted by the Company. Staged at the Body Politic Theater.

Poe by Stephen Most and the Company. Staged at the Body Politic Theater.


Sexual Perversity in Chicago by David Mamet. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1975  The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn I and II by Mark Twain, adapted by the Company. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1975  The Beckoning Fair One by Bury St. Edmund, based on the story by Oliver Onions. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1976  Switch Bitch by Roald Dahl, adapted by the Company. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

Volpone by Ben Jonson. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1977  Cops by Terry Curtis Fox. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

The Sirens of Titan by Kurt Vonnegut. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

Bleacher Bums created by the Organic Company. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1978  Night Feast adapted from Beowolf by the Company. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1979  Campaign by Richard Harris. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

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The Little Sister by Raymond Chandler, adapted by Carolyn-Purdy Gordon and Stuart Gordon. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

Jonathan Wild by Lawrence Bommer, based on the novel by Henry Fielding. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1980


A Decent Life by Pat Rahmann. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

Fornicopia by William J. Norris, Stuart and David Gordon. Staged at the Leo Lerner Theatre, Uptown Hull House.

1981


Doctor Rat by Richard Fire and June Shellene-Jans based on the novel by William Kotzwinkle. Staged at the Organic’s Buckingham Theatre.

1982-84


1983

The Forever War by Joe Haldeman. Staged at the Organic’s Buckingham Theatre.

1984

Angry Housewives by A. M. Collins and Chad Henry. Staged at the Organic’s Buckingham Theatre.

1985

Dope by Louise DiLenge and Shawn Wong. Staged at the Organic's Buckingham Theatre.

Kiss It Goodbye by Michael Miner and Scott Jacobs. Staged at the Organic's Buckingham Theatre.

Akron by Thomas Riccio. Staged at the Organic's Buckingham Theatre.

Rubber City by Thomas Riccio. Staged at the Organic's Buckingham Theatre.

1986

The Stranger in Stanley's Room by George Freek. Staged at the Organic's Buckingham Theatre.

Betawulf by Thomas Riccio. Staged at the Organic's Buckingham Theatre.

(Note: Presentations at the Greenhouse were not Organic productions and, therefore, were not recorded in this production history.)

1989

Bleacher Bums originally created by the Organic Company. Staged at the Organic's Buckingham Theatre.
APPENDIX C

Production History - St. Nicholas Theater

Pre-Chicago Productions

May 1972


July 1972

*Clark Street; or Perversity in Chicago* and *Duck Variations* both by David Mamet, featuring Betsy Carpenter, Matthew Elkan, W.H. Macy, Steven Schachter, and Michelle Simon. Performed at Boston Center for the Arts.

Spring 1973

*Anna Christie* by Eugene O'Neill. Performed at Goddard College, Vermont.
Chicago productions

October 10, 1974

Squirrels by David Mamet. Directed by David Mamet, sets by John Paoletti and Mary Griswold, featuring Linda Kimbrough as the cleaning woman, W.H. Macy as Arthur, and Steven Schachter as Edmond. Performed at the Leo Lerner Theater, Uptown Hull House.

February 15, 1975

Beyond the Horizon by Eugene O'Neill. Directed by David Mamet, sets by John Paoletti, Mary Griswold, and Geoffrey Bushor, costumes by Cookie Gluck featuring Penelope Court as Kate Mayo, Matthew Elkan as Robert Mayo, Mary Frances Farrell as Ruth, W.H. Macy as Andrew Mayo, and Byrne Piven as James Mayo. Performed at the Grace Lutheran Church.

June 19, 1975 (Children's theatre production)

The Poet and the Rent by David Mamet. Directed by W.H. Macy, sets by David Stettler, costumes by Tim Rose, featuring Patricia S. Anderson as the Girlfriend, Claudia Bohard as Yukon King, Linda Clink-Scale at Tony Durango, Penelope Court as Uncle Georgie, Russell Fear as Spuds, David Alan Novak as the Poet, Fran Roth as the Girl, Terri Silverstone as the Ad Exec, David Stettler as Sgt. Preston, and Larry Weiss as Pendergast. Performed at the Jane Addams Theater, Lakeview Hull House.

July 15, 1975

A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets and lights by Michael Merritt, costumes by Terrell Murphy, featuring Sharon Barre as Hermia, Jim Barry as Lysander, Elliott Delman as Flute, Rokko Jans as Philostrate, Bruce Jarchow as Demetrius, Linda Kimbrough as Hippolyta/Titania, Gene Kroschel as Egeus, W.H. Macy as Puck,
David Mamet as Theseus/Oberon, Audrey Noonan as Helena, David Stettler as Bottom, Bud Thorpe as Peter Quince and Patricia Anderson, Claudia Bohard, and Patricia Cox as faeries. Performed at the Oak Park Festival, Oak Park.

December 21, 1975 - January 18, 1976 (Transfer from Goodman Stage 2)


January 6, 1976 (Showcase production)

*Reunion* by David Mamet. Directed by Cecil O'Neal featuring Linda Kimbrough as the Daughter and Don Marston as the Father.

January 7 - 8, 1976 (Special events)

*Squirrels* and *Litko* by David Mamet and *The Unnatural Acts*. Directed by David Mamet, music by Rokko Jans, Lynn Mamet, and Ben Goldberg, featuring Steven Schachter and W.H. Macy.

April 17, 1976 (Children's theatre production)

*The Adventures of Captain Marbles I* by David Kovacs. Directed by W.H. Macy, featuring Russ Cady as Uncle Arnold, Bobby Di Ciccio as Morry, Michell Costello as Sally, Alaric Jans as Rokko, Joan Lazzarini as Wanda the Witch, Herb Lichenstein as the Astronaut, James D. Murphy as Captain Marbles, Gretchen Trapp as the Ballerina, and Brian Vandenbroucke as Francis.

April 20 - June 12, 1976

*A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets, lights, and costumes by David Emmons,
featuring Annabel Armour as Catherine, Gerald Castillo as Eddie, Carole Goldman as Beatrice, Mark Hutter as Rodolpho, John Starr as Alfieri, and Norm Tobin as Marco with Rozlyn Adams, Eva Cadet, Bob Chiappetta, Arnold Gonzalez, Michael Hammermeister, John Harrington, Steve Levin, Jason Preker, and Marianne Preker.

May 29, 1976 (Children's theatre production)


June 22, 1976


July 1 - August 6, 1976 (Showcase production)

*Ashes of Roses*, adapted by Peter Amster from a story by Noel Coward. Directed by Dennis Zacek, sets by Maher Ahmad, costumes by Phyllis Hojnacki, featuring Marcus Anst as Felix, Eileen Dolan as young Leonora, Kathleen Hart as Leonora, Robert Talkie as the Narrator, with Megan McTavish and J. Pat Miller.

September 15 - October 31, 1976

October 1976 (Showcase production)

_The Marriage of Bette and Boo_ by Christopher Durang. Directed by Anne Claus, sets by Pam Pennison, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Gay Crucious, featuring Claudia Bohard as Bette, Russell Fear as Skippy, Michael Fijolek as Ferd, and Coleen Maloney as Miriam.

October 1976 (Children's theatre production)

_The Adventures of Captain Marbles III: Cliff Notes_ by W.H. Macy and David Kovacs. Directed by Catherine Mae, lights by Tom Herman, costumes by Nanalee Raphael, with June Shellene and Gregg Flood.

November 10 - December 19, 1976

_Mert and Phil_ by Anne Burr. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets by Dean Taucher, lights by Robert Shook, costumes by Kaye Nottbusch, featuring Guy Barile as Phil, Catherine Goedert as Lavonis, Joanne Good as Beauty Lady, Gerry Lange as Lucille, Patricia Malekow as Mother, Madonna Niles as Mert, and Joe Young as George.

December 14, 1976 (Special events)

_A Christmas Commercial_ by Warren Leming and Nate Herman. Directed by Robert Falls, costumes by Julie Nagel, lights by Rita Pietraszek, with Tom Mula.

January 27 - February 27, 1977


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February 1977 (Children's theatre production)


March 2, 1977 (Special events)

*An Evening with Lily Tomlin.*

March 22 - April 24, 1977


May 11 - July 31, 1977

*The Water Engine* by David Mamet. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets by David Emmons, lights by Kathleen Daly, costumes by Jessica Hahn, featuring Steve Anders as Leon/Cop #1, Guy Barile as Lawrence Oberman, Belinda Bremner as secretary/Mrs. Varek, Dan Conway as Chainletter/Dave/Lecturer, W.H. Macy as Charles Lang, John Mahoney as Postal/Cop #2/Re-write, Michael O'Dwyer as Martin Keegan/Deitz, Gail Silver as Rita, Norm Tobin as Mr. Wallace/Guard and Joseph Weisberg as Bernie.

June 8 - 22, 1977 (Showcase production)

*Mattress* by W.H. Macy. Directed by Daniella Violet-Green, sets by James Boley, lights by Dave Garretson, costumes by Rosalyn
Kriener, featuring Natalia Nogulich as Linda, Michael Sassone as Michael, Jim Scholle as George, and Patricia Stewart as Susan.

August 1, 1977 (Special events)

*An Evening with Robert Lewis.*

September 28 - October 30, 1977

*Ashes* by David Rudkin. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets by David Emmons, lights by James Highland, costumes by Steven English, featuring John Mahoney and John Malkovich.

October 10 - 26, 1977 (Showcase production)

*The Nuclear Family* by Mark Frost. Directed by Emily Mann, sets and costumes by Barry Robison, lights by Tom Herman, featuring Barbara Robertson.

November 17 - December 18, 1977

*The Woods* written and directed by David Mamet. Sets by Michael Merrit, lights by Robert Christen, featuring Patti Lupone and Peter Weller.

November 19, 1977 - January 1, 1978 (Children's theatre production)

*The Revenge of the Space Pandas; or Binky Rudich and the Two Speed Clock* by David Mamet. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets by David Emmons, lights by Tom Herman, costumes by Julie Nagel, featuring Barbara Robertson and Robert Falls.

December 12 - 23, 1977 (Showcase production)

*Spider* by Bobby Joyce Smith. Direction and sets by W.H. Macy, lights by Mary Fran Loftus, costumes by Nanalee Smith.
January 20 - February 26, 1978

_You Can't Take It With You_ by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart. Directed by Gerald Gutierrez, sets by David Emmons, lights by James Highland, costumes by Julie Nagel.

February 13 - 28, 1978 (Showcase now known as New Work Ensemble production)

_The Slow Hours_ by Bruce Burgun and _I'd Rather Be It_ conceived and written by the women of the New Work Ensemble. _The Slow Hours_ directed by Jim Wise and _I'd Rather Be It_ directed by Audrie Neenan, lights by Dan Kobayashi, costumes by Sandra Kabins.

February 18 - March 26, 1978 (Children's theatre production)

_The Adventures of Captain Marbles and his Acting Squad: Parts III (Cliff Notes) and IV (When You Wish Upon a Cookie)_ by W.H. Macy and David Kovacs.

March 10 - April 16, 1978

_Uncommon Women and Others_ by Wendy Wasserstein. Directed by Mike Nussbaum, sets by Maher Ahmad, lights by Rebecca Binks, costumes by Christina Scholtz, featuring Annabel Armour, Cynthia Sherman, and Belinda Bremner.

March 20, 1978 (Special events)

_An Evening with Harold Clurman._

April 28 - June 4, 1978

_Barnaby Sweet_ by Glenn Allen Smith. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets by Christopher Harris, lights by Tom Herman, costumes by Jessica Hahn, featuring Jason Brett and D.W. Moffett.
April 10 - 18, 1978 (New Work Ensemble production)

*Marty* by Paddy Chayefsky. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets and lights by Raynette Smith, costumes by Sherry Ravitz.

June 21 - July 2, 1978 (Special events)

*My Astonishing Self* by Michael Voysey.

June 27 - July 11, 1978 (New Work Ensemble production)


July 5 - 16, 1978 (Special events)

*Song of the Streets.* Directed by Richard Maltby, Jr. featuring Geraldine Fitzgerald.

July 19 - 30, 1978 (Special events)


August 2 - 27, 1978

*Scrambled Feet* by John Driver and Jeffrey Haddow. Directed by John Driver.

September 20 - October 29, 1978

*The Fifth of July* by Lanford Wilson. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets and costumes by Barry Robison, lights by Tom
Herman, featuring Joan Allen, H.E. Baccus, Moira Harris, Marge Kolitsky, John Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf, Jeff Perry, and Gary Sinise.

October 10 - 24, 1978 (New Work Ensemble production)


October 26 - December 22, 1978 (Children's theatre production)

*The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson. Directed by Catherine Goedert, sets by David Emmons, costumes by Jessica Hahn, featuring Jeff Perry.

November 10 - December 24, 1978


November 27 - December 19, 1978 (New Work Ensemble production)


January 5 - February 18, 1979

*All Honorable Men* by Michael Chepiga. Directed by Dennis Scott, sets by Peter Winter, lights by Gary Heitz, costumes by Jessica Hahn, featuring Richard Fire.
January 29 - February 13, 1979 (New Work Ensemble production)


March 5, 1979 (Special Events)

A Kurt Weill Cabaret with Martha Schlamme and Alvin Epstein.

March 7 - April 15, 1979

Funeral March for a One Man Band by Ron Whyte, music by Mel Marvin, lyrics by Robert Satuloff. Directed by Amy Saltz, sets by David Emmons, lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Thomas McKinley, featuring John Mahoney.

March 26 - April 10, 1979 (New Work Ensemble production)


March 24 - April 22, 1979 (Children's theatre production)


May 9 - June 17, 1979

The Curse of the Aching Heart by William Alfred, music by Clair Richardson. Directed by Gerald Gutierrez, sets by John Lee Beatty, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costume by Julie Nagel.
May 29 - June 12, 1979 (New Work Ensemble production)

Fancy's Touch by Bruce Burgun. Directed by Jim Wise, sets by Michael Tomko, lights by Kathleen Daly, costumes by D. R. Edwards, featuring D. W. Moffet.

June 19 - July 8, 1979 (Special events)

Nadha Guevara with Alberto Favero.

July 20 - 29, 1979 (Special events)

Gotham. Musical direction by Ron Abel, lights by Jim Hicks featuring Gary Herb, David McDaniel, and Michael Pace.

August 2 - 19, 1979 (Special events)

Sheba book and lyrics by Sarah Miles, music by Chad Stuart and Sarah Miles. Directed by Harris Yulin, lights by Daniel Adams, costumes by Jean-Pierre Dorleac, featuring Sarah Miles.

August 24, 1979 (Special events)

Janos Starker.

October 3, 1979 - January 12, 1980

The Primary English Class by Israel Horowitz. Directed by Gerald Gutierrez, sets by David Potts, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Jessica Hahn, featuring Linda Kimbrough and Mary Lou Rosato.

October 15 - November 6, 1979 (New Works Ensemble production)

October 19, 1979 (Special events)

The Late Night Cabaret.

November 6 - December 18, 1979 (Children's theatre production)

The Diary of Anne Frank dramatized by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. Directed by Catherine Goedert, sets by Gary Baugh, lights by Dan Kobayashi, costumes by Kate Bergh, featuring Jeff Perry, Laurie Metcalf, and John Mahoney.

November 26 - December 1, 1979 (Special events)

Gotham. Musical direction by Ron Abel, lights by Jim Hicks featuring Gary Herb, David McDaniel, and Michael Pace.

December 11 - 30, 1979

The Enchanted Cottage by Percy Granger, based on a play by Arthur Wing Pinero. Book and lyrics by Percy Granger, music by John McKinny. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets and costumes by Barry Robison, lights by Robert Christen.

December 27, 1979 - January 6, 1980 (New Work Ensemble)

Another Part of the Forest by Lillian Hellman. Directed by James Wise, sets by Gary Baugh, lights by Kathy Daly, costumes by Jordan Ross, featuring Amy Morton.

February 11 - March 4, 1980 (New Work Ensemble)

March 18 - May 4, 1980


April 7 - 27, 1980 (New Work Ensemble production)


May 13 - June 29, 1980


June 2 - 24, 1980 (New Work Ensemble production)

*Tennessee Williams: In the Shade. Hello from Bertha* and *Twenty-Seven Wagons Full of Cotton* directed by Steven Schachter. *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* and *The Case of the Crushed Petunias* directed by Lois Hall. Sets by Nancy McCarty, lights by David Radunsky, costumes by Emily Erickson.

July 8 - August 24, 1980

*Celimare, the Good Friend* by Eugene LaBiche and Delarcour, translation by Lynn and Theodore Hoffman, lyrics by Eric Bentley and George Sherman, music by James Kowal. Directed by George Sherman, sets by David Emmons, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Jessica Hahn, featuring John Mahoney.
October 1 - November 23, 1980

Table Settings by James Lapine. Directed by James Lapine, sets and lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Jessica Hahn, featuring Bernard Beck and Barbara Robertson.

October 20 - December 4, 1980 (Children's theatre production)

The Prince, the Dwarf, and the Blacksmith's Daughter adapted and directed by Tom Mula from In the Suicide Mountains by John Gardner. Music by Les Stahl, sets by Gary Baugh, lights by Dan Kobayashi, costumes by Douglas Koertge, featuring John Mahoney.

October 27, 1980 (Special events)

Why Don't We Go to the Theater? with Ken Brecher.

December 10, 1980 - February 1, 1981

Teeth n' Smiles by David Hare. Directed by Betsy Carpenter, sets by Jeremy Conway, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Cookie Gluck, featuring Joan Allen, Brad Hall, and Jeff Perry.

January 1981 (Performance Group production)

Hooters by Ted Tally.

February 18 - April 12, 1981

April 29 - June 21, 1981


May 25 - June 16, 1981 (Performance Group production)


September 30 - November 1, 1981

Herringbone by Tom Cone, Skip Kennon, and Ellen Fitzhugh. Directed by Ben Levit, sets and lights by Jeremy Conway, costumes by Jessica Hahn, with David Rounds.
APPENDIX D

Production History - Goodman Theater

January 3 - February 1, 1969 (Mainstage)


February 14 - March 15, 1969 (Mainstage)


March 28 - April 26, 1969 (Mainstage)


May 9 - June 7, 1969 (Mainstage)

October 20 - November 23, 1969 (Mainstage)

Soldiers by Rolf Hochhuth, translated by Robert D. MacDonald.

December 1 - 21, 1969 (Mainstage)

You Can't Take It With You by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart.
Directed by Edward Payson Call, sets by Marc Cohen, lights by G.E. Naselius, costumes by Virgil Johnson.

January 19 - February 22, 1970 (Mainstage)


March 2 - April 5, 1970 (Mainstage)


April 13 - May 17, 1970 (Mainstage)


May 25 - June 28, 1970 (Mainstage)

October 12 - November 15, 1970 (Mainstage)


November 30 - December 20, 1970 (Mainstage)


January 18 - February 21, 1971 (Mainstage)


March 1 - April 4, 1971 (Mainstage)

*Marching Song* by John Whiting. Directed by Douglas Seale, sets by Sandro La Ferla, lights by Jerrold Gorrell, costumes by Alicia Finkel.

April 12 - May 16, 1971 (Mainstage)

*Poor Bitos* by Jean Anouilh, translated by Lucienne Hill. Directed by Douglas Campbell, sets by Marc Cohen, lights by Wayne Tignor, costumes by Virgil Johnson.

May 24 - June 27, 1971 (Mainstage)

*Lady Audley's Secret* adapted by Douglas Seale from the novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Directed by Douglas Seale, sets and costumes by Alicia Finkel, lights by Jerrold Gorrell.
1971 (Mainstage - No information available except titles)

A Place Without Doors

Assassination, 1865

1972 (Mainstage - No information available except titles)

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde.

The Royal Family

The Ruling Class

The Boys from Syracuse

October 6 - November 12, 1972 (Mainstage)


November 6, 1972 (Special events)

Emlyn Williams as Dylan Thomas Growing Up adapted by Emlyn Williams from the stories of Dylan Thomas. Lights by Robert Crawley.

November - December, 1972 (Mainstage)

Scenes from American Life by A.R. Gurney. Directed by Harold Stone, sets by David Jenkins, lights by Beverly Emmons, costumes by Alicia Finkel.

January 5 - February 11, 1973 (Mainstage)

February 16 - March 25, 1973 (Mainstage)

*Twentieth Century* by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur with Bruce Millholland. Directed by William Woodman, sets and lights by Clarke Dunham, costumes by Virgil Johnson.

March 30 - May 6, 1973 (Mainstage)

*The Lady’s Not for Burning* by Christopher Fry. Directed by Stephen Porter, sets and costumes by Alicia Finkel, lights by G.E. Naselius.

May 10 - June 17, 1973 (Mainstage)


October 5 - November 11, 1973 (Mainstage)


November 16 - December 23, 1973 (Mainstage)

*A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen, translated by Christopher Hampton. Directed by Tormod Skagstad, sets by John Scheffler, lights by G.E. Naselius, costumes by Alicia Finkel.

January 8 - February 10, 1974 (Mainstage)

February 19 - March 24, 1974 (Mainstage)

*To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* adapted by Robert Nemiroff from the book by Lorraine Hansberry. Directed by Patrick Henry, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Daniel Adams, costumes by Andreeah Kalish.

March 29 - May 5, 1974 (Mainstage)


May 10 - June 16, 1974 (Mainstage)


October 4 - November 10, 1974 (Mainstage)

*The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov, translated by Tyrone Guthrie and Leonid Kipnis. Directed by Brian Murray, sets by David Mitchell, lights by Patricia Collins, costumes by Virgil Johnson.

October, 1974 (Stage 2)

*Winnebago* by Frank Galati. Directed by Greg Mosher.

November 15 - December 22, 1974 (Mainstage)

January 3 - February 9, 1975 (Mainstage)

‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore by John Ford. Directed by Michael Kahn, sets by Robert U. Taylor, lights by John McLain, costumes by Lawrence Casey, fights by Larry Carpenter.

February 14 - March 23, 1975 (Mainstage)


March 28 - May 4, 1975 (Mainstage)


May 9 - June 15, 1975 (Mainstage)


1975 (Stage 2 - No information available except titles)

The Son

Once and for All

Three Women developed by Cynthia Baker Johnson, Sandy Lipton, Roberta Maguire, and Cecil O’Neal. Directed by Cecil O’Neal.
October 3 - November 9, 1975 (Mainstage)


October 23 - November 9, 1975 (Stage 2)


November 14 - December 21, 1975 (Mainstage)

*Benito Cereno* from *Old Glory* by Robert Lowell, based on a novella by Herman Melville. Directed by Michael Montell, sets by David Jenkins, lights by Gilbert V. Hemsley, Jr., costumes by James Edmund Brady.

December 4 - 21, 1975 (Stage 2)


January 2 - February 8, 1976 (Mainstage)


January 29 - February 15, 1976 (Stage 2)

*Chicago* and *The Local Stigmatic* by Sam Shepard and Heathcote Williams, respectively. *Chicago* directed by Dennis Zacek, sets by Paul K. Basten, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Marsha Kowal, *The Local Stigmatic* directed by Gary Houston, sets and lights by Paul K. Basten, costumes by Marsha Kowal.
February 13 - March 21, 1976 (Mainstage)

_The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia_ by
Preston Jones. Directed by Harold Stone, sets by Joseph
Nieminski, lights by F. Mitchell Dana, costumes by John David
Ridge.

March 18 - April 4, 1976 (Stage 2)

_Dandelion Wine_ by Ray Bradbury, arranged and adapted by John
Bailey. Directed by William Woodman, sets by Michael Merritt,
lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Maggie Bodwell.

March 26 - May 2, 1976 (Mainstage)

_Our Father's Failing_ by Israel Horovitz. Directed by John Dillon,
sets by Stuart Wurtzel, lights by Arden Fingerhut, costumes by
John David Ridge.

April 22 - May 9, 1976 (Stage 2)

_Statues/The Bridge at Belharbour_ by Janet L. Neipris. Directed
by Gregory Mosher, sets by Brian Laczko, lights by Robert
Christen, costumes by Marsha Kowal. World premiere.

May 7 - June 13, 1976 (Mainstage)

_The Devil's Disciple_ by George Bernard Shaw. Directed by
William Woodman, sets by James Maronek, lights by Patricia
Collins, costumes by Virgil Johnson.

October 1 - November 7, 1976 (Mainstage)

_Design for Living_ by Nòel Coward. Directed by William
Woodman, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Patricia Collins,
costumes by James Edmund Brady.
November 12 - December 19, 1976 (Mainstage)


December 1 - 19, 1976 (Stage 2)


December 31, 1976 - February 6, 1977 (Mainstage)


February 3 - 20, 1977 (Stage 2)


February 11 - March 20, 1977 (Mainstage)


March 25 - May 1, 1977 (Mainstage)

*Streamers* by David Rabe. Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Pat Collins, costumes by Marsha Kowal.
April 21 - May 8, 1977 (Stage 2)


May 3 - 20, 1977 (Stage 2)

Kaspar by Peter Handke. Directed by Gary Houston, sets by Maher Ahmad, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Michelle R. Demichelis. Chicago premiere.

May 6 - July 12, 1977 (Mainstage)

Don Juan by Molière (adapted by Christopher Hampton). Directed by William Woodman, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Gilbert V. Hemsley, Jr.

September 23 - October 30, 1977 (Mainstage)


November 11 - December 18, 1977 (Mainstage)

The Seagull by Anton Chekhov (translated by Jean-Claude van Italie). Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Pat Collins, costumes by Virgil Johnson.

December 30, 1977 - February 5, 1978 (Mainstage)

January 10 - 29, 1978 (Stage 2)


February 10 - March 19, 1978 (Mainstage)

*Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Herbert Senn and Helen Pond, lights by Stephen Ross, costumes by Virgil Johnson. Transferred to Annenberg Center, Philadelphia and McCarter Theatre, Princeton, NJ.

March 14 - 19, 1978 (Stage 2)


March 16 - April 2, 1978 (Stage 2)

*Annulla Allen* by Emily Mann and Annulla Allen. Directed by Emily Mann, sets by Barry Robinson, lights by Phil Eickhoff, costumes by Barry Robinson.

March 18 - April 8, 1978 (Stage 2)

*Scenes and Revelations* by Elan Garonzik. Directed by Betsy Carpenter, sets by James Guenther, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Jessica Hahn.

March 31 - May 7, 1978 (Mainstage)

April 9 - 23, 1978 (Stage 2)

*Battering Ram* by David Freeman. Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Maher Ahmad, lights by Robert Shook, costumes by Christa Scholtz. American premiere.

May 12 - June 18, 1978 (Mainstage)


May 23 - June 11, 1978 (Stage 2)


October 6 - November 12, 1978 (Mainstage)

*Native Son* by Richard Wright (adapted by Paul Green). Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Pat Collins, costumes by Christa Scholtz.

October 22 - November 5, 1978 (Studio)


November 30 - December 31, 1978 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Barbara Field). Directed by Tony Mockus, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by James Edmund Brady.
January 11 - 28, 1979 (Studio)


January 12 - February 18, 1979 (Mainstage)


February 23 - April 1, 1979 (Mainstage)


April 12 - May 13, 1979 (Mainstage)

_Holiday_ by Phillip Barry. Directed by Tony Tanner, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Clifford Capone.

May 18 - June 24, 1979 (Mainstage)


October 5 - November 11, 1979 (Mainstage)

November 24 - December 30, 1979 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Barbara Fields). Directed by Tony Mockus, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by James Edmund Brady.

January 18 - February 24, 1980 (Mainstage)

*An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen (adapted by Arthur Miller). Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Jessica Hahn. Transferred to Annenberg Center, Philadelphia.

February 29 - April 6, 1980 (Mainstage)


March 28 - April 18, 1980 (Studio)

*The Island* by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Nishona. Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets, lights, and costumes by Phil Eickhoff. Performed only at the Annenberg Center, Philadelphia.

April 11 - May 18, 1980 (Mainstage)


May 23 - June 29, 1980 (Mainstage)

*Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand (translated by Brian Hooker). Directed by Michael Maggio, sets by John Lee Beatty, lights by Duane Schuler, costumes by Christa Scholtz.
June 5 - 29, 1980 (Studio)

*The Flying Karamazov Brothers.*

September 23 - October 18, 1980 (Studio)


October 3 - November 9, 1980 (Mainstage)


October 21 - November 2, 1980 (Studio)

*Still Life* by Emily Mann. Directed by Emily Mann, sets and costumes by Tom Lynch, lights by Robert Christen. World premiere.

November 8 - 23, 1980 (Studio)


November 20, 1980 - January 4, 1981 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Barbara Fields). Directed by Tony Mockus, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by James Edmund Brady.
December 3, 1980 - January 4, 1981 (Studio)

*Kukla and Ollie Live!* by Burr Tillstrom. Directed and designed by Burr Tillstrom, lights by Rita Pietraszek.

January 16 - February 22, 1981 (Mainstage)

*Betrayal* by Harold Pinter. Directed by André Ernotte, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Paul Gallo, costumes by Christa Scholtz. Midwest premiere.

February 27 - April 5, 1981 (Mainstage)

*Plenty* by David Hare. Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Marjorie Kellogg, lights by Jennifer Tipton, costumes by Virgil Johnson. Midwest premiere.

April 2 - May 23, 1981 (Studio)

*A House Not Meant to Stand* by Tennessee Williams (re-written version of *Some Problems for the Moose Lodge*). Directed by Gary Tucker, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Ellen Ryba.

April 10 - May 17, 1981 (Mainstage)

*Play Mas* by Mustapha Matura. Directed by Derek Walcott, sets and costumes by Adrienne Lobel, lights by Robert Christen. American premiere.

May 22 - June 28, 1981 (Mainstage)

*Dwarfman, Master of a Million Shapes* by Michael Weller. Directed by Emily Mann, sets by Adrienne Lobel, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Rita Ryak. World premiere.
June 11 - 29, 1981 (Studio)

The Flying Karamazov Brothers.

July 7 - 20, 1981 (Studio)

Lily Tomlin Appearing Nightly.

September 7 - 19, 1981 (Studio)

Welcome to our Living Room (featuring the Flying Karamazov Brothers and Avner the Eccentric). Sets and costumes by Rebecca Magid, lights by Rita Pietraszek.

October 2 - November, 1981 (Mainstage)


November 24 - December 30, 1981 (Mainstage)

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens (adapted by Barbara Fields). Directed by Tony Mockus, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by James Edmund Brady.

December 18 - 20, 1981 (Studio)

Kukla and Ollie Live! by Burr Tillstrom. Directed and designed by Burr Tillstrom, lights by Rita Pietraszek.

January 15 - February 21, 1982 (Mainstage)

Panto by Derek Walcott. Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets and costumes by David Gropman, lights by Robert Christen. Midwest premiere.
January 19 - 31, 1982 (Studio)

Miss Margarida's Way by Roberto Athayde. Directed by Roberto Athayde, lights by Phil Eickhoff, featuring Estelle Parsons. Chicago premiere, booked in.

February 9 - 14, 1982 (Studio)

Charlotte by Peter Hacks (adapted by Herbert Berghof and Uta Hagen). Directed by Herbert Berghof, sets by Lester Palakov, lights by Thomas Skelton, costumes by Patricia Zipprodt, featuring Uta Hagen. Chicago premiere, booked in.

February 26 - April 4, 1982 (Mainstage)

Lakeboat by David Mamet. Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Michael Merritt, lights by F. Mitchell Dana, costumes by Christa Scholtz.

March 3 - 14, 1982 (Studio)


April 8 - May 2, 1982 (Studio)


April 16 - May 23, 1982 (Mainstage)

May 28 - July 3, 1982 (Mainstage)


June 3 - 27, 1982 (Studio)

*Edmond* by David Mamet. Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Bill Bartelt, lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Marsha Kowal. World premiere, transferred to Broadway.

September 24 - October 31, 1982 (Mainstage)

*The Man Who Had Three Arms* by Edward Albee. Directed by Edward Albee, sets by John Jensen, lights by F. Mitchell Dana, costumes by Barbara A. Bell.

November, 1982 - May, 1983 (School touring production)

*Mark Twain Today* by Ron Falzone (based on *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain). Directed by Steve Scott.

November 26 - December 31, 1982 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Barbara Field). Directed by Tony Mockus, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by James Edmund Brady.

December 17 - 24, 1982 (Studio)

*Kukla and Ollie Live! The Theatre of Burr Tillstrom* by Burr Tillstrom. Directed and designed by Burr Tillstrom, lights by Rita Pietraszek.
January 14 - February, 1983 (Mainstage)


January 17 - 30, 1983 (Studio)


February 1 - 13, 1983 (Studio)

A Spalding Gray Retrospective by Spalding Gray.

February 18 - March 20, 1983 (Studio)


March 4 - April 10, 1983 (Mainstage)

The Dining Room by A. R. Gurney, Jr. Directed by Michael Maggio, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Marsha Kowal.

April 13 - May 15, 1983 (Studio)

April 22 - May 29, 1983 (Mainstage)


June 3 - July 10, 1983 (Mainstage)


June 3 - July 3, 1983 (Studio)


September 23 - October 30, 1983 (Mainstage)

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. Directed by Thomas Bullard, sets by Karen Schultz, lights by Dennis Parichy, costumes by Judy Dearing.

November, 1983 - May, 1984 (School touring production)

*Mark Twain Today* by Ron Falzone (based on *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain). Directed by Steve Scott.

November 1 - 19, 1983 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)

*Hubbard Street Dance Company*. Artistic director: Lou Conte.
November 2 - 20, 1983 (Studio)


November 29 - December 31, 1983 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Barbara Field). Directed by Tony Mockus, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by James Edmund Brady.

November 30 - December 31, 1983 (Studio)


January 13 - February 19, 1984 (Mainstage)

*Candida* by George Bernard Shaw. Directed by Munson Hicks, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Nan Cibula.

January 27 - March 4, 1984 (Studio)


February 17 - March 17, 1984 (Rehearsal Room)

*Hey, Stay a While* by John Guare with music by Galt MacDermot and Jan Warner. Directed by Larry Sloan, sets by Phil Eickhoff, lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Nan Cibula. Midwest premiere.
February 21 - 26, 1984 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)

_Pilobolus Dance Theatre._ Artistic directors: Robert Burnett, Alison Chase, Moses Pendleton, Michael Tracy, and Jonathan Wolken.

March 2 - April 18, 1984 (Mainstage)


March 23 - April 22, 1984 (Studio)

_Hurlyburly_ by David Rabe. Directed by Mike Nichols, sets by Tony Walton, lights by Jennifer Tipton, costumes by Ann Roth. World premiere, transferred to Off-Broadway.

April 10 - 15, 1984 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)

_Lar Lubovitch Dance Company._ Artistic director: Lar Lubovitch.

April 20 - May 27, 1984 (Mainstage)


June 1 - July 8, 1984 (Mainstage)

_The Three Moscowteers_ by Paul Magid (from Alexandre Dumas). Directed by Robert Woodruff, sets by Kate Edmunds, lights by James F. Ingalls, costumes by Susan Hilferty, featuring the Flying Karamazov Brothers. World premiere.
August 31 - October 21, 1984 (Studio)


September 12 - 16, 1984 (Special events • Merrill Lynch Dance Series)

_Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians_. Artistic director: Laura Dean. Presented in association with MoMing Dance and Arts Center.

September 21 - October 28, November 28 • December 16, 1984 (Mainstage)

_Candide_ by Hugh Wheeler, music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Richard Wilbur. Directed by Munson Hicks, musical direction by Kevin Stites, musical staging by Terry Reiser, sets by John Lee Beatty, lights by Judy Rasmuson, costumes by Christa Sholtz.

December 11 - 29, 1984 (Mainstage)

_A Christmas Carol_ by Charles Dickens (adapted by Gregory Mosher and Larry Sloan). Directed by Gregory Mosher, sets by Kate Edmonds, lights by Duane Schuler, costumes by Christa Scholtz. Performed at the Auditorium Theatre.

January 25 - March 3, 1985 (Mainstage)

_Adventures of Huckleberry Finn_ by Mark Twain (adapted by and featuring the Organic Theatre Company). Directed by Stuart Gordon, sets and costumes by Mary Griswold and John Paoletti, lights by Geoffrey Bushor.
March 1 - 31, 1985 (Studio)


March 8 - April 14, 1985 (Mainstage)


April 6 - June 2, 1985 (Mainstage)

The Water Engine by David Mamet. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets by John Lee Beatty, lights by Dennis Parichy, costumes by Jessica Hahn, music by Rocco Jans.

April 19 - May 19, 1985 (Briar Street Theater)


June 7 - July 14, 1985 (Mainstage)


June 18 - 30, 1985 (Briar Street Theater)

Swimming to Cambodia; Parts I and II by Spalding Gray.
August 27 - September 22, 1985 (Studio)


September 3 - 15, 1985 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)


September 17 - 21, 1985 (Ravinia Festival)


September 20 - 22, 1985 (Special events)


October 2 - November 17, 1985 (Studio)


October 4 - November 10, 1985 (Mainstage)

November 27 - December 22, 1985 (Mainstage)

A *Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Larry Sloan). Directed by Sandra Grand, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Christa Scholtz.

November 27 - December 22, 1985 (Blackstone Theatre)


November 27 - December 22, 1985 (Blackstone Theatre)

*Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Davis Giles, sets and costumes by Christina Podubulk, lights by Michael J. Whitfield. Produced by the Stratford Festival of Canada.

January 14 - 26, 1986 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)


January 31 - March 9, 1986 (Mainstage)


March 11 - 23, 1986 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)

April 4 - May 11, 1986 (Mainstage)


May 23 - June 29, 1986 (Mainstage)


September 26 - November 1, 1986 (Mainstage)

*Galileo* by Bertolt Brecht (translated by Adrian Hall and James Schevill). Directed by Robert Falls, sets by George Tsypin, lights by James Ingalls, costumes by Jessica Hahn.

November 5 - 16, 1986 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)

*Hubbard Street Dance Company.* Artistic director: Lou Conte.

November 12, 1986 - January 4, 1987 (Studio)

*Zoo Thousand One* by Friends of the Zoo. Directed by Rob Riley, sets by John Paoletti and Mary Griswold, lights by Geoffrey Bushor, costumes by Karol Kent. Produced by Friends of the Zoo.

November 23 - December 31, 1986 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Larry Sloan). Directed by Sandra Grand, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Christa Scholtz.
January 9 - February 14, 1987 (Mainstage)


January 22 - February 22, 1987 (Studio)

*My Werewolf* by John Schneider. Directed by David Schweizer, sets by James Matson, lights by Margaret Nelson, costumes by Sam Fleming. Produced by Theatre X.

February 17 - 21, 1987 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)


February 27 - April 4, 1987 (Mainstage)

*She Always Said, Pablo* by Gertrude Stein, music by Virgil Thompson and Igor Stravinsky (adapted by Frank Galati). Directed by Frank Galati, musical direction by Edward Zelnis, images by Pablo Picasso, production design by John Paolletti, Mary Griswold, and Geoffrey Bushor. World premiere.

April 7 - 21, 1987 (Special events - Merrill Lynch Dance Series)


April 17 - May 29, 1987 (Mainstage)

June 5 - September 6, 1987 (Mainstage)


September 25 - October 31, 1987 (Mainstage)


November 4, 1987 - January 17, 1988 (Studio)

*Big Time* by Keith Reddin. Directed by Larry Sloan, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Laura Cunningham. World premiere, Remains Theatre production.

November 21 - December 30, 1987 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Larry Sloan). Directed by Michael Maggio, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Christa Scholtz.

January 8 - February 14, 1988 (Mainstage)

*Passion Play* by Peter Nichols. Directed by Frank Galati, sets by John Conklin, lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Jessica Hahn.

February 2 - 7, 1988 (Studio)

*The Redthroats* by David Cale. One person show. Lights by Carol McDowell.
February 16 - 28, 1988 (Studio)

Avner the Eccentric. One person show. Lights by Jeffrey Ross Norberry.

February 26 - April 2, 1988 (Mainstage)


March 9 - 20, 1988 (Studio)

Stuff As Dreams Are Made On by Fred Curchack. One-person show.

April 25 - May 21, 1988 (Mainstage)

A Flea in Her Ear by George Feydeau (adapted by Frank Galati). Directed by Michael Maggio, sets by John Lee Beatty, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Lindsay Davis. World premiere of adaptation.

June 3 - August 7, 1988 (Mainstage)


June 22 - August 7, 1988 (Studio)

Bad Moon by Rick Cleveland. Sets by James Dardenne, lights by Mary Badger, costumes by Erin Quigley. World premiere; American Blues Theatre production.
September 19 - October 23, 1988 (Studio)

*Lloyd's Prayer* by Kevin Kling. Directed by David Petrarca, sets by Tamara Turchetta, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Frances Maggio. A Remains Theatre Ensemble production.

September 23 - November 5, 1988 (Mainstage)


November 18 - December 28, 1988 (Mainstage)

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (adapted by Larry Sloan). Directed by Michael Maggio, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Julie Jackson.

January 6 - February 18, 1989 (Mainstage)


February 24 - April 4, 1989 (Mainstage)

*The Rover* by Aphra Behn (adapted by John Barton). Directed by Kyle Donnelly, sets by John Lee Beatty, lights by Judy Rasmuson, costumes by Lindsay W. Davis.

March 7 - 26, 1989 (Studio)

*Smooch Music* by David Cale with music by Roy Nathanson. Lights by Sabrina Hamilton. From the Kitchen Theatre in New York City.
April 11 - 126, 1989 (Studio)

P.S. 122 Field Trips. Touring project of Performance Space 122. Lights by Lori Seid.

April 14 - May 20, 1989 (Mainstage)


April 25 - May 14, 1989 (Studio)

Mill Fire by Sally Nemeth. Directed by David Petrarca, sets by Linda Buchanan, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Laura Cunningham. World premiere, transferred to Women's Project in New York City.

June 2 - August 6, 1989 (Mainstage)

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Directed by Frank Galati, musical direction by Janet Aycock, sets and costumes by Mary Griswold and John Paoletti, lights by Geoffrey Bushor.

September 29 - November 4, 1989 (Mainstage)


November 17 - December 30, 1989 (Mainstage)

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens (adapted by Tom Creamer). Directed by Steve Scott, sets by Joseph Nieminski, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Julie Jackson.
November 21 - December 24, 1989 (Studio)

_The Meeting_ by Jeff Stetson. Directed by Chuck Smith, sets and lights by Tim Oien, costumes by Glenn Billings. Produced by Amaryllis Theatrical Productions.
APPENDIX E

Production History - Wisdom Bridge Theatre

June 1974

*Slow Dance on the Killing Ground* by William Hanley. Directed by David Beaird, designed by David Emmons.

October 1974

*The Fantasticks*. Directed by David Beaird, choreographed by Joel Hall.

January 1975

*Oscar Wilde in Person* by Gregg Flood.

November 6-December 7, 1975

*Dignity* written and directed by David Beaird.

February 1976

*The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare. Directed by David Beaird, designed by Steven Burgess.
March 11-April 11, 1976

*The Wizard of Id* by David Beaird. Directed by David Beaird and Steve Fletcher, sets by Eric Fielding, lights by Steven E. Burgess, costumes by Gay Caldwell and Lisa Lee Melkus.

May 13-June 13, 1976


March 30-May 15, 1977


June 15, 1977

*Canticle of the Sun* written and directed by William J. Norris. Lights by Geoffrey Bushor, costumes by Mary Griswold with William L. Peterson.

October 12-December 18, 1977

*Ladyhouse Blues* by Kevin O'Morrison. Directed by Robert Falls, sets by David Emmons, lights by Mary Badger, costumes by Julie Nagel.

January 18-March 12, 1978

*The Idiots Karamazov* by Christopher Durang and Albert Innaurato. Directed by Robert Falls, sets by John Yeck III, lights by Larry Schoeneman, costumes by Tom McKinley.
March 29-May 3, 1978

*The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. Directed by Patrick O'Gara, sets and lights by Michael Merritt, costumes by Julie Jackson, with Glenne Headley.

May 24-July 2, 1978

*Carmilla* by Le Fanu, adapted by David Campton. Directed by Aubrey Berg, sets by David Emmons, lights by Michael Merritt, costumes by Christa Scholtz.

October 9-November 12, 1978

*The Runner Stumbles* by Milan Stitt. Directed by Robert Falls, sets by Gary Baugh, lights by Mary Badger, costumes by Julie Jackson.

November 19-20 1978 (Special performance)

*Suburbs of Heaven* by Thom Bishop. Directed by Gail Isaacson.

December 14-January 31, 1978


January 31-March 11, 1979

*Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths. Directed by Judd Parkin, sets by Robert Doepel, lights by Tom Herman, costumes by Kate Bergh.
April 10-May 20, 1979


October 10-November 11, 1979


December 5, 1979-March 2, 1980


January 25-April 13, 1980

*The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, in repertory with *Travesties*. Directed by Robert Falls, sets by Michael Merritt, lights by Robert Shook, costumes by Ruth Howell.

April 25-June 8, 1980

*Getting Out* by Marsha Norman. Directed by Robert Falls, sets by Tom Beall, lights by Dawn Hollingsworth, costumes by Marsha Kowal, with Laurie Metcalf and Gary Sinise.

June 25-August 3, 1980

*Treats* by Christopher Hampton. Directed by Anne Claus, sets by Gary Baugh, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Kaye Nottbusch.
October 22-November 9, 1980


January 22-February 22, 1981


March 12-April 12, 1981

One Reel Romance by Lenny Kleinfeld. Directed by Jeff Schweitzer, sets by James Maronek, lights by Gary Heitz, costumes by Kaye Nottbusch.

April 3-11, 1981

Wacker Drive, author unknown.

May 7-31, 1981

Mother Courage and her Children by Bertolt Brecht. Directed by Robert Falls, sets, lights, and costumes by Michael Merritt with Gary Cole, Frank Galati, and Glenne Headley.

June 18-July 12, 1981


October 1, 1981

Kabuki Macbeth adapted from William Shakespeare. Conceived, directed, and designed by Shozo Sato, lights by Robert Shook, with Tom Mula.
December 3, 1981-January 31, 1982


February 26-May 2, 1982


May 11-14, 1982

The Trojan Women adapted from Euripides. Arranged and directed by Tadashi Suzuki. The Waseda Theatre Company.

May 25-August 1, 1982

Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You and An Actor's Nightmare by Christopher Durang. Directed by Robert Falls, sets by David Emmons, lights by Robert Shook, costumes by Kaye Nottbusch.

June 1, 1982

Sizwe Banzi is Dead and The Island by Athol Fugard. Directed and designed by Jim O'Connor, lights by Gary Heitz, costumes by Julie Keen.

September 13-October 17, 1982

September 25-27, 1982 (Workshop production)

Rapid Transit by Julie Siegel. Directed by Susan Hope and Dan Lamorte.

November 17-December 19, 1982


December 13-14, 1982 (Workshop production)

Wrong Way Out by Jan Novak. Directed by Susan Hope.

January 28-March 6, 1983

We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay! by Dario Fo, translated by R.G. Davis. Directed by Robert Falls, sets by John Murbach, lights by Robert Shook, costumes by Kaye Nottbusch with Tom Mula.

March 31-May 1, 1983

Losing It by Jon Klein. Directed by Robert Falls, sets and costumes by Gary Baugh, lights by Mary Badger with Scott Jaeck.

May 24-June 5, 1983


August 17-28, 1983 (Special production)

Legends from the Side of a Hill by W.P. McLennon.

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September 29-October 30, 1983 and November 30-December 31, 1983 at the Goodman Theatre

*In the Belly of the Beast* adapted from the book by Jack Abbott. Arranged, directed, and designed by Robert Falls, lights by Michael Philippi with William L. Petersen.

December 8, 1983-January 29, 1984

*Kabuki Medea* adapted from Euripides. Conceived, directed, and designed by Shozo Sato, lights by Michael Philippi.

March 1-April 8, 1984

*Billy Bishop Goes to War* by John Gray and Eric Peterson. Directed by David Colacci, sets and lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Sraa Davidson with Alan Ruck.

May 3-June 3, 1984


June 21 1984


September 12-October 14, 1984

December, 1984-January, 1985 (Touring production)

*Kabuki Medea* adapted from Euripides. Conceived, directed, and designed by Shozo Sato, lights by Michael Philippi.

January 31-March 31, 1985

*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Robert Falls, designed by Michael Merritt, with Del Close, Aidan Quinn as Hamlet.

April 14-28, 1985 (Remount production at the Ivanhoe Theater)

*In the Belly of the Beast* adapted from the book by Jack Abbott. Arranged, directed, and designed by Robert Falls, lights by Michael Philippi with William L. Petersen.

May 9-June 9, 1985


May-June, 1985 (Touring production to London - Glasgow).

*In the Belly of the Beast*

June 12-August 6, 1985 (AT &T Festival, Washington, D.C.)

*In the Belly of the Beast* and *Kabuki Medea*

June 27-July 28, 1985

*You Can't Judge a Book Looking at the Cover: Sayings from the Life and Writings of Junebug Jabbo Jones* by John O'Neal. Directed by Steven Kent, lights by Ken Bowen.
September 12-October 27, 1985

*Rat in the Skull* by Ron Hutchinson. Directed by Steven Robman, sets and lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Sraa Davidson, with James O’Reilly Jim True, Brian Dennehy.

December 5, 1985-January 19, 1986

*In the Middle of Nowhere in the Middle of the Night* based on songs by Randy Newman, concept and dialogue by Tracy Friedman. Directed and choreographed by Tracy Friedman, sets and lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Nanalee Raphael-Schirmer.

February 27-April 13, 1986

‘*Night Mother*’ by Marsha Norman. Directed by Doug Finlayson, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Erin Quigley.

February 16-March 2, 1986 (Remount production - Encore Series at the Civic)


March 16-30, 1986 (Encore Series at the Civic)

*Kabuki Faust* adapted from Goethe. Directed and designed by Shozo Sato, lights by Michael Philippi.

May 22-July 15, 1986

*The Immigrant* by Mark Harelik. Directed by Doug Finlayson, sets by Russ Borki, lights by Julie Mack, costumes by Kathryn Schimmelpfennig.
June 2-8, 1986 (Touring production to Israel).

Kabuki Medea

September 4-October 26, 1986

Union Boys by James Yoshimura. Directed by Jim O'Connor, sets and lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Colleen Muscha with Michael Rooker.

November 21, 1986-January 11, 1987

Kabuki Othello adapted from William Shakespeare by Karen Sunde. Conceived, directed, and designed by Shozo Sato, lights by Michael Philippi.

February 19-April 12, 1987

The Voice of the Prairie by John Olive. Directed by B.J. Jones, sets and lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Jessica Hahn.

May 14-July 5, 1987

Circe and Bravo by Donald Freed. Directed by Doug Finlayson, sets by Linda Buchanan, lights by Michael Philippi, costumes by Kay Nottbusch.

September 17-November 1, 1987


December 10, 1987-January 31, 1988

February 25-April 17, 1988

*Hunting Cockroaches* by Janusz Glowicki. Directed by Doug Finlayson, sets by Linda Buchanan, lights by Paul Miller, costumes by Malgorzata Komorowska.

May 19-July 3, 1988


September 22-30, 1988


December 7, 1988-January 15, 1989


March 1-June 11, 1989


May 15-June 4, 1989

Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill by Lanie Robertson.
Directed by Arnold Mittelman, musical direction by Darryl Ivey, sets by Rob Hamilton, lights by Kevin Rigdon with Ernestine Jackson.
APPENDIX F

Production History - Victory Gardens Theater

October 1974


November 1974


March 1975

*The Lover and Others Stranger* - Three plays by Harold Pinter, Tennessee Williams and John Guare.

May 1975

*Sweet Bloody Liberty* by Paul Sills (world premiere).

May 1975

*Three Women* by Cynthia Baker Johnson, Sandy Lipton, Roberta Maguire, and Cecil O'Neal. Directed by Cecil O'Neal. (world premiere).

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June 1975

*Endgame* by Samuel Beckett.

July 1975

*The Cage* by Rick Cluchey.

September 1975

*A Little Louder Please* (Mime) by Robert Gifford (world premiere).

October 1975

*Strangle Me* by Frank Shiras (world premiere).

November 1975

*The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

December 1975

*The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit* by Ray Bradbury.

January 1976

*The Benevolent Devil* adapted by June Pyskacek (world premiere).

February 1976

*The Hitler Masque* by Ron Rae (world premiere).

March 1976

*Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury.
May 1976

All I Want by Bruce Hickey (world premiere).

May 1976

Dreams by Tom Sharkey (world premiere).

September 1976

Volpone by Ben Jonson.

December 1976

Jesse and the Bandit Queen by David Freeman. Directed by Cecil O'Neal.

January 1977

Some Kind of Life by Bruce and Brian Hickey (world premiere).

February 1977

The Bloodknot by Athol Fugard. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

March 1977

I, From the Prose of Samuel Beckett arranged by Alan Wade (world premiere).

May 1977

Sizwe Banzi is Dead by Athol Fugard. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

June 1977

Sensoria from a mime concept by Steven and Christine Ivicich (world premiere).
September 1977

*June Moon* by Ring Lardner and George S. Kaufman with new music by Warren Casey.

November 1977


December 1977

*Colette* arranged from the writings of Colette by Ruth Landis (world premiere).

February 1978

*Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* by Lonne Elder III.

February 1978


February 1978

*His Satanic Majesty* by William J. Norris (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

February 1978

*Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* arranged by Greg McCaslin (world premiere).

April 1978

*Night of January 16th* by Ayn Rand.
April 1978

This is My Play Song by Jackie Taylor (world premiere).

July 1978

The Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie by Albert Innaurato.

October 1978

The Homecoming by Harold Pinter. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

November 1978

Towards the Morning by John Fenn and Peppermints by Mark Larson (both world premieres).

November 1978


November 1978

Dillinger by William J. Norris. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

January 1979

Other Pinter Pauses by Harold Pinter.

February 1979

The Artaud Project by James Rinnert (world premiere).

March 1979

The Play's the Thing by Ferenc Molnar. Directed by Michael Maggio.
May 1979

_Polaroids_ by Virginia Smiley (world premiere).

June 1979

_Latino Chicago_ developed by the Latino Chicago Company under the direction of Dennis Zacek and Ramiro Carrillo (world premiere).

October 1979

_Slow Dance on the Killing Ground_ by William Hanley.

October 1979

_The Examen_ by Nicholas Patricca (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

November 1979

_Cowboy Mouth/Killers Head_ by Sam Shepard.

December 1979

_HOME_ by David Storey. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

January 1980

_Solitaire_ created and performed by Steven Ivcich (world premiere).

February 1980

_The Uprooted_ by Humberto Robles.
March 1980

Porch by Jeffrey Sweet. Directed by Tom Mula.

March 1980

Weekends Like Other People by David Blomquist (world premiere).

May 1980

Clowncave by Steve Ivcich (world premiere).

May 1980

East Liberty, PA by Allan Bates (world premiere).

June 1980

Cowboys #2/The Unseen Hand by Sam Shepard. Directed by James Roach.

October 1980

Hard Feelings by Jeffrey Sweet (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

September 1980

Hollywood Confidential by Charles Busch.

November 1980


November 1980

Avner the Eccentric created and performed by Avner Eisenberg.
November 1980

*Three Stories High* adapted by Ruth Landis from short stories by Chekhov, O'Henry and Robert Penn Warren (world premiere).

January 1981

*Ties* by Jeffrey Sweet (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek. Production transferred from Northside Auditorium Building to Body Politic building.

February 1981


March 1981

*Dame Lorraine* by Steve Carter (world premiere). Directed by Chuck Smith.

May 1981

*Ludlow Fair* by Lanford Wilson.

May 1981

*The Dumbwaiter* by Harold Pinter.

May 1981

*La Brea Tarpits* by Alan Gross (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

June 1981

*Halloween* by Leonard Melfi. Directed by Sandy Shinner.
September 1981

*Stops Along the Way* by Jeffrey Sweet. Directed by Dennis Zacek. Produced at Victory Gardens on Lincoln Avenue.

September 1981

*Routed* by Jeffrey Sweet (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek. Produced at Victory Gardens on Lincoln Avenue.

October 1981

*Daughters* by Martin Jones.

November 1981

*Clown* by Richard Strand (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

December 1981

*Avner the Eccentric* created and performed by Avner Eisenberg (return engagement).

January 1982

*Cait* by Janice Finney (world premiere).

January 1982

*Close Ties* by Elizabeth Diggs. Directed by Sandy Shinner.

March 1982

*Blind Mice* by Dennis Ryan (world premiere).
April 1982

Shadows by Steve Carter (world premiere). Directed by Chuck Smith.

May 1982

Einsteins by Steve Ivcich (world premiere).

June 1982

Clara’s Play by John Olive. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

September 1982

Old Times by Harold Pinter. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

October 1982

Niagara Falls by Victor Bumbalo.

November 1982

Your Move by Jeff Berkson and John Karraker (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

December 1982

Marty Pollio (mime)

January 1983

Wonderful Wonderful Siberia by Felix Leon (world premiere).

January 1983

Daddy’s Seashore Blues by Farrell J. Foreman (world premiere).
March 1983

The Fine Line (improvisational comedy)

March 1983

The Value of Names by Jeffrey Sweet. Directed by Sandy Shinner.

May 1983

Buddies by Mary Gallagher. Directed by Sandy Shinner.

June 1983

The Whales of August by David Adams Berry. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

September 1983

Turntables by Jeff Berkson and John Karraker (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

September 1983

Crossing Niagara by Alonson Alegria.

November 1983

Home by Samm Art Williams.

December 1983

Avner the Eccentric (return engagement)
January 1984

Butler County by Dean Corrin (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

January 1984

Dreams of Flight by Brian Richard Mori

March 1984

Scheherazade by Marisha Chamberlain (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

May 1984

Eminent Domain by Percy Granger. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

September 1984

The Fifth Sun by Nicholas Patricca (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

November 1984

Tab for Stardom by Jeff Berkson, Denise DeClue and John Karraker (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

January 1985

Symphony Pastorale/Fugue by Bob Barnett (world premiere)

January 1985

Levitation by Timothy Mason. Directed by Sandy Shinner.
March 1985

*Master Harold and the Boys* by Athol Fugard.

March 1985

*The Sovereign State of Boogedy Boogedy* by Lonnie Carter (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

June 1985

*The God of Isaac* by James Sherman (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

June 1985

*Young Psycho-Vivisectionists Meet Marilyn Monroe* by Steven Ivcich (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

September 1985

*Wild Indian* by Theodore Shank (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

November 1985

*American Dreams: Lost and Found* by Studs Terkel

January 1986

*Gentrification* by Dean Corrin (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

February 1986

*Tomorrowland* by Jeffrey M. Jones.
March 1986

*Split Second* by Dennis McIntyre. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

April 1986

*Slumming* by Marisha Chamberlain (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

May 1986

*Mr. 80%* by James Sherman (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

June 1986

*Penta Benta* by Steven Ivcich (world premiere).

September 1986

*Other Places* by Harold Pinter. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

November 1986

*Shoot Me While I'm Happy* by Steve Carter and Smokey and Adjora Stevens (world premiere).

November 1986

*Prior Engagements* by Frank Manley.

January 1987

*Eleemosynary* by Lee Blessing. Directed by Sandy Shinner.

April 1987

*Rough/Catastrophe* by Samuel Beckett.

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April 1987

*Kids in the Dark* by Rick Cleveland (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

April 1987

*Naked Zoo* by Friends of the Zoo (world premiere).

June 1987 - THE GREAT CHICAGO PLAYWRIGHTS EXPOSITION

A co-production with the Body Politic Theater.

*Gardinia's 'N' Blum* by Nicholas Patricca (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

*In the Service of Others* by Valerie Quinney (world premiere). Directed by James O'Reilly.

*Centipede* by Rick Cleveland (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.


*Mothers and Sons* by Lonnie Carter (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

*Takunda* by Charles Smith (world premiere).

*Roof Top Piper* by David Hernandez (world premiere).


*They Even Got the Rienzi* by Claudia Allen (world premiere).

*Floor Above the Roof* by Daniel Thierrault (world premiere).

*Before I Wake* by William J. Norris (world premiere).
The Figure by Clifton Campbell (world premiere).

Moonlight Daring Us to Go Insane by E. Eugene Baldwin (world premiere - workshop). Directed by Pauline Brailsford.

The Tether Disorder by Clifton Campbell (world premiere - workshop). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

September 1987


October 1987

The Necktie Party by Lonnie Carter (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

November 1987

Expectations by Dean Corrin (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

January 1988

The Stick Wife by Darrah Cloud. Directed by Sandy Shinner.

February 1988

Der Inka Von Peru by Jeffrey M. Jones.

March 1988

Chekhov in Yalta by John Driver and Jeffrey Haddow. Directed by Arnold Aprill.
April 1988

A Joy Forever by Frank Manley (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

June 1988

The Escape Artist by James Sherman (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

September 1988

Some Men Need Help by John Ford Noonan. Directed by Dennis Zacek.

November 1988

Tamer of Horses by William Mastrosimone. Directed by Chuck Smith.

January 1989

The Long Awaited by Claudia Allen (world premiere). Directed by Sandy Shinner.

February 1989

Jelly Belly by Charles Smith (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

March 1989

Music from a Locked Room by John Logan (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.

April 1989

Tito by Romolo Arellano.
May 1989

*Woman in Mind* by Alan Ayckbourn. Directed by Sandy Shinner.

June 1989

*April Snow* by Romulus Linney. Directed by Terry McCabe.

September 1989

*Three Ways Home* by Casey Kurtti. Directed by Sandy Shinner.

November 1989

*Beau Jest* by James Sherman (world premiere). Directed by Dennis Zacek.
APPENDIX G

Production History - Steppenwolf Theater Company

July 22 - August 28, 1976 (Immaculate Conception School)

Rotating repertory twin bills of the following one-acts. The Lesson by Eugene Ionesco. Directed by Jeff Perry, with Alan Wilder as the Professor and Moira Harris as the Pupil. The Lover by Harold Pinter. Directed by Terry Kinney, with Laurie Metcalf as Sarah and Jeff Perry as Richard. The Indian Wants the Bronx by Israel Horowitz. Directed by John Malkovich, with Terry Kinney as Murphy, Gary Sinise as Joey, H. E. Baccus as the Indian. Birdbath by Leonard Melfi. Directed by H. E. Baccus, with John Malkovich as Frankie and Nancy Evans as Velma. Sets and lights for all plays by Kevin Rigdon. Performed at the Immaculate Conception Church and School, 770 Deerfield Road, Highland Park, IL with one performance of The Indian Wants the Bronx and Birdbath at St. Nicholas Theater on August 24, 1976.

October 21 - November 21, 1976 (Immaculate Conception School)

Look We’ve Come Through by Hugh Wheeler. Directed by H. E. Baccus, sets by Charles Heinrich, costumes by Moira Harris and Jennifer Schumann, with Nancy Evans as Belle, Moira Harris as Jennifer, Terry Kinney as Wain, Alan Wilder as Miltie, Jeff Perry as Bobby, and John Malkovich as Skip.
December 10, 1976 - January 16, 1977 (Immaculate Conception School)

Twin bill of one-acts. *The Dumbwaiter* by Harold Pinter. Directed by Nancy Evans, with John Malkovich as Gus and H. E. Baccus as Ben. *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year* by John Guare. Directed by Jeff Perry, with Terry Kinney as He and Moira Harris as She. Sets and lights for both plays by Kevin Rigdon.

March 9 - April 16, 1977 (Immaculate Conception School)

*The Sea Horse* by Edward J. Moore. Directed by John Malkovich, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Gary Sinise as Harry and Moira Harris as Gertrude.

May 13 - June 5, 1977 (Remounted at Jane Addams Hull House)

Twin bill of previously successful one-acts.*The Indian Wants the Bronx* by Israel Horovitz. Directed by John Malkovich, with Terry Kinney as Murphy, Gary Sinise as Joey, H. E. Baccus as the Indian. *Birdbath* by Leonard Melfi. Directed by H. E. Baccus, with John Malkovich as Frankie and Nancy Evans as Velma. Sets and lights for both plays by Kevin Rigdon.

July 13 - August 7, 1977 (Jane Addams Hull House)

*Our Late Night* by Wallace Shawn. Directed by Gary Houston, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Moira Harris as Annette, Terry Kinney as Lewis, John Malkovich as Grant, Joan Allen as Kristin, Laurie Metcalf as Samantha, Alan Wilder as Tony, and H. E. Baccus as Jim.

October 7 - 30, 1977 (Immaculate Conception School)

Baccus, with H. E. Baccus, Moira Harris, Terry Kinney, Laurie Metcalf, Jeff Perry, Gary Sinise, and Alan Wilder.

November 25 - December 31, 1977 (Immaculate Conception School)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard. Directed by Dr. Ralph Lane, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by John Conklin, with Gary Sinise as Rosencrantz, Jeff Perry as Guildenstern, Terry Kinney as the Player, Alan Wilder as Alfred, Laurie Metcalf as Hamlet, Mary A. Ross as Ophelia, Robert L. Maxey as Claudius, Ellie Weingardt as Gertrude, William E. Hastings as Polonius, H. E. Baccus, Gregg Winters, and Peter Holek as Tragedians.

March 10 - April 2, 1978 (Immaculate Conception School)

Sandbar Flatland by Edward Urken. Directed by John Malkovich, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Terry Kinney as Narrator/Timmy, Gregg Winters as Work Day, Laurie Metcalf as Razorface/Aunt Sally/Lisa, Gary Sinise as Thick Jack Crack/Eric Goldeneye, Jeff Perry as Thick Jack Crack/Edsel Ben/Moses Eyes, Nancy Rubinstein as Blue Moon Sue/Motorcycle Cindy, H. E. Baccus as Dollhouse/Moses Eyes, and Anne Shapland as Lucille Bizarre/Martha.

May 12 - June 11, 1978 (Immaculate Conception School)


June 23 - July 23, 1978 (Immaculate Conception School)

The Caretaker by Harold Pinter. Directed by John Malkovich, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Jeff Perry as Aston, Alan Wilder as Davies, and Gary Sinise as Mick.
September 20 - October 29, 1978 (St. Nicholas Theatre)

_The Fifth of July_ by Lanford Wilson. Directed by Steven Schachter, sets and costumes by Barry Robison, lights by Tom Herman, with John Malkovich as Ken, Gary Sinise as John, Moira Harris as Gwen, Jeff Perry as Jed, Joan Allen as June, Marge Kotlisky as Aunt Sally, Laurie Metcalf as Shirley, and H. E. Baccus as Weston.

November 24 - December 30, 1978 (Immaculate Conception School)

*Philadelphia Here I Come* by Brian Friel. Directed by H. E. Baccus, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Mary Copple as Madge, Jeff Perry as Gar O'Donnell-Public, Alan Wilder as Gar O'Donnell-Private, John Malkovich as S. B. O'Donnell, Joan Allen as Kate/Mrs. King, Mike Sassone as Master Boyle, Moira Harris as Lizzy, Peter Whittrock as Ben, Gary Cole as Ned, Jeff Brown as Tom, Doug Wood as Joe, and John Mahoney as Canon Mick O'Byrne.

January 19 - February 25, 1979 (Jane Addams Hull House)

*Exit The King* by Eugene Ionesco. Directed by Ralph Lane, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Terry Kinney as Berenger, Laurie Metcalf as Queen Marguerite, Moira Harris as Queen Marie, Jeff Perry as the Doctor, Joan Allen as Juliette, and Alan Wilder as the Guard.

April 18 - April 29, 1979 (Immaculate Conception School)

*The Adventures of Mutt and Jeff* written and directed by Rob Maxey, with Laurie Metcalf as Mutt, Terry Kinney as Jeff, and Alan Wilder as the Eccentric Professor with an additional performance April 8, 1979 at the Highland Park Public Library.
April 1979 (Arts and Crafts Fair, Highland Park)

*The Dock Brief* by John Mortimer. Directed by Jane Perry with Jeff Perry as Herbert Fowle and Alan Wilder as Wilford Morgenhall. Performed at the Arts and Crafts Fair, Highland Park.

March 14 - April 1, 1979 (Immaculate Conception School)

*The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. Directed by John Malkovich, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Jeff Perry as Aston, Alan Wilder as Davies, and John Malkovich as Mick.

May 10 - June 24, 1979 (Immaculate Conception School)

*The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. Directed by H. E. Baccus, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with John Malkovich as Tom, Anne Edwards as Amanda, Laurie Metcalf as Laura, and Terry Kinney as the Gentleman Caller.

September 5 - November, 1979 (Apollo Theatre)

*Waiting for Lefty* by Clifford Odets. Directed by Sheldon Patinkin, sets by David Emmons, lights by Deborah Acker and Geoffrey Bushor, costumes by Kaye Nottbusch, with Vince Viverito as Harry, John Malkovich as Irv, Terry Kinney as Joe, Francis Guinan as Miller, Jeff Perry as Sid, Alan Wilder as Benjamin, Robert Biggs as Phillips, Mike Sassone as Agate, Richard Figaletti as Lefty, Glenne Headly as Claire, Joan Allen as Edna, Laurie Metcalf as Florrie, Mary Copple as Tillie, June Shellene as Grace, Susa Cygan as Ellen, Tom Irwin as Tom, John Mahoney as Clancy, John Evans and Rudy Matus as Sergeants-at-arms, and Herb Lichtenstein, Marty Taylor, and Bill Davidson as union members.
October - November 1979 - (Apollo Theatre - every other weekend)


December 5, 1979 - January 13, 1980 (Theatre Building, then Ruth Page Auditorium)

*Say Goodnight, Gracie* by Ralph Pape. Directed by Austin Pendleton, sets by Nels Anderson, lights by Gary Heitz, costumes by Jordan Ross, with Robert Biggs as Jerry, John Malkovich as Steve, Francis Guinan as Bobby, Joan Allen as Ginny, and Glenne Headly as Catherine.

March 4 - April 5, 1980 (Jane Addams Hull House)

*Bonjour La Bonjour* by Michel Tremblay, translated by John van Burek and Bill Glassco. Directed by H. E. Baccus, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Mary Copple, with Michael Sassone as Gabriel, Joan Spatafora as Albertine, Anne Edwards as Charlotte, Tom Irwin as Serge, Mary Copple as Lucienne, Laurie Metcalf as Monique, Rondi Reed as Denise, and Joan Allen as Nicole.
March 28 - April 18, 1980 (Jane Addams Hull House-Almost Midnight series)

The Collection by Harold Pinter. Directed by Stephen B. Eich, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Jeff Perry as James, John Mahoney as Harry, Glenne Headly as Stella, and Gary Sinise as Bill.

May 8 - June 5, 1980 (Jane Addams Hull House)

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller. Directed by Sheldon Patinkin, sets by David Emmons, lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Kaye Nottbusch, with Mike Nussbaum as Willy, Mary Seibel as Linda, Terry Kinney as Happy, John Malkovich as Biff, Jeff Perry as Bernard, Mary Copple as the Woman, John Mahoney as Charley, Mike Sassone as Uncle Ben, Alan Wilder as Howard, Petrea Burchard as Jenny, Gary Cole as Stanley, Michael Moore as Second Waiter, Gretchen Genz as Miss Forsythe, and Rondi Reed as Letta.

July 17 - August 17, 1980 (Jane Addams Hull House)

Quiet Jeannie Green by Edward Urcen. Directed by H. E. Baccus, sets by Kevin Rigdon, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Glenne Headly, with Tom Irwin as Dr. Francis X. Cherry, Laurie Metcalf as Alice Green, Joan Allen as Jeannie Green, Jeff Perry as Alan Rome, and Joan Nelson as Almadean Weathervane.

September 28 - October 26, 1980 (Jane Addams Hull House)

Balm in Gilead by Lanford Wilson. Directed by John Malkovich, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Francis Guinan as Joe, Laurie Metcalf as Darlene, Gary Sinise as Dopey, Alan Wilder as Rake, Glenne Headly as Anne, Terry Kinney as Fick, William L. Peterson as Tig, Robert Biggs as Bob, John Mahoney as John, Rick Snyder as Martin, Rondi Reed as Bonnie, Billie Williams as Rust, Joan Allen as Judy, Michelle Banks as Terry, Kathi O'Donnell as Kay, Debra Engle as Babe, Kim Nardelli as Ernie,
Paul Jones as Carlo, Michael Moore as Al, Bill Williams as Frank, Tom Irwin as Stranger, Jeff Perry as Franny, Tom Zanarini as Xavier, Randall Arney as Tim, Beth Shields as Marleen, Doug Gould as David, and Aaron, Dylan, and Greg Kramer as Halloween Kids.

November 20 - December 21, 1980 (Jane Addams Hull House)

Absent Friends by Alan Ayckbourn. Directed by John Malkovich and H. E. Baccus, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Glenne Headly, with Laurie Metcalf as Evelyn, Rondi Reed as Diana, Glenne Headly as Marge, John Mahoney as Paul, Alan Wilder as John, and Francis Guinan as Colin.

January 14 - February 15, 1981 (Jane Addams Hull House)

Savages by Christopher Hampton. Directed by John Malkovich, sets by Kevin Rigdon, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Glenne Headly, with Tom Irwin as Alan West, Rondi Reed as Mrs. West, Terry Kinney as Carlos Esquerdo, Glenne Headly as Jane Crawshaw, John Mahoney as the General, Paul Draper as the Attorney General, Laurie Metcalf as the Investigator, Tom Zanarini as Ataide Pereira, Alan Wilder as Major Brigg, Bill Schroeder as Bert, Francis Guinan as Rev. Elmer Penn, Paul Jones as Kumai, and Bill Applebaum, Randy Arney, Warren Baumgart, Renee Church, Joan Deschamps, Michael Fosberg, Audrey Iversen, Paul Jones, Julie Laffin, Martha Lavey, Charlotte Maier, John Mayer, Tim Murray, Gail Myers, Jane E. Natal, Wendy Oldenburg, Marcia Riegel, Bill Schroeder, Gary Shrader, Madeleine Sosin, and Leonard Weiss as the Tribe.

March 11 - April 12, 1981 (Jane Addams Hull House)

Arms and the Man by George Bernard Shaw. Directed by Sheldon Patinkin, sets by Kevin Rigdon, lights by Rita Pietraszek, costumes by Sherry Ravitz, with Laurie Metcalf as Raina, Joan Allen as Catherine, Rondi Reed as Louka, Jeff Perry as Captain Bluntschli, Randy Arney as the Russian Officer, Alan Wilder as
Nicola, John Mahoney as Major Petkoff, and Francis Guinan as Major Sergius Saranoff.

March 13 - April 11, 1981 (Jane Addams Hull House-Almost Midnight series)

*The Great American Desert* by Joel Oppenheimer. Directed by Stephen B. Eich, with Rick Snyder as the Old Cowboy, Francis Guinan as Gunny, Paul Jones as the Young Cowboy, Charlotte Maier as the Whore, Glenne Headly and Madeleine Sosin as the Banker's Beautiful Daughters, Robert Biggs as the Banker, Alan Wilder as the Sheriff, Rondi Reed as the Madam, John Mahoney as Wyatt Earp, Mike Fosberg as Wild Bill Hickok, Doug Gould as Billy the Kid, Rob Maxey as Doc Holliday, and Madeleine Sosin as the Violinist.

May 1 - June 7, 1981 (Jane Addams Hull House)

*No Man's Land* by Harold Pinter. Directed by John Malkovich, sets by Kevin Rigdon and Deb Gohr, lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by John Malkovich, with Francis Guinan as Hirst, John Mahoney as Spooner, Tom Irwin as Foster, and Jeff Perry as Briggs.

May 8 - June 5, 1981 (Jane Addams Hull House-Almost Midnight series)

*Action* by Sam Shepard. Directed by Gary Sinise, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Terry Kinney as Jeep, Laurie Metcalf as Liza, Jeanine Morick as Lupe, and Don Moffett as Shooter.

June 18, 1981 (for WMAQ television)

*Morning Call* by Alan Gross. Directed by Gary Sinise, WMAQ direction by Sandy Whiteley, with Jeff Perry as Greg and Laurie Metcalf as Joyce.
July 8 - August 30, 1981 (Remounted at Apollo Theatre)

_Balm in Gilead_ by Lanford Wilson. Directed by John Malkovich, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, with William L. Petersen as Joe, Laurie Metcalf as Darlene, Gary Sinise as Dopey, Alan Wilder as Rake, Glenne Headly as Anne, Gary Cole as Fick, Don Moffett as Tig, Stephen B. Eich as Bob, John Mahoney as John, Rick Snyder as Martin, Rondi Reed as Bonnie, Billie Williams as Rust, Joan Allen as Judy, Michelle Banks as Terry, Beth Shields as Kay, Debra Engle as Babe, Kim Nardelli as Ernie, Alan Novak as Carlo, Michael Moore as Al, Bill Williams as Frank, Terry Kinney as Stranger, Jeff Perry as Franny, Tom Irwin as Xavier, Randall Arney as Tim, Doug Gould as David, and Aaron, Dylan, and Greg Kramer as Halloween Kids.

September 16 - October 18, 1981 (Jane Addams Hull House)

_Of Mice and Men_ by John Steinbeck. Directed by Terry Kinney, sets by H. E. Baccus, lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Glenne Headly, with Gary Sinise as George, John Malkovich as Lenny, John Mahoney as Candy, Rick Snyder as the Boss, Jeff Perry as Curley, Joan Allen as Curley's Wife, Francis Guinan as Slim, Tom Irwin as Carlson, Alan Wilder as Whit, and Greg Williams as Crooks.

September 18, 1981 - (Jane Addams Hull House-Almost Midnight series)

_Big Mother_ by Charles Dizenzo. Directed by Laurie Metcalf, sets and lights by Deb Gohr, with Doug Gould as Buster, Moira Harris as Mrs. James, Joan Deschamps as Sweetums, and John Malkovich as Mr. James.

November 18 - December 20, 1981 (Jane Addams Hull House)

_Waiting for the Parade_ by John Murrell. Directed by Gary Sinise, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by John Malkovich, with Joan Allen as Catherine, Moira Harris as Eve,
Laurie Metcalf as Janet, Rondi Reed as Marta, and Shirley Spiegler-Jacobs as Margaret.

December 5 - 24, 1981 (First Illinois Center)

_The Littlest Elf_ by Rob Maxey, music and lyrics by Robert Biggs. Directed by Rob Maxey, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon, costumes by Mary Copple, with Chris Vecchione as Desmond Dwindle, Francis Guinan as Bernard Bodkin, Terry Kinney as Gizmo Robbins, and Alan Wilder as Gruff Baskin.

February 3, 1982 - (Jane Addams Hull House)

_Loose Ends_ by Michael Weller. Directed by Austin Pendleton, sets by Kevin Rigdon, lights by Robert Christen, with Gary Sinise as Paul, Laurie Metcalf as Susan, Moira Harris as Janice, Dan Kobayashi as the Balinese Fisherman, Terry Kinney as Doug, Rondi Reed as Maraya, Tom Irwin as Ben, Glenne Headly as Selina, Jeff Perry as Russell, John Mahoney as Lawrence, and Alan Wilder as Phil.

April 16, 1982 - (Jane Addams Hull House, then moved to Apollo Theatre - July/August )

_True West_ by Sam Shepard. Directed by Gary Sinise, sets and lights by Kevin Rigdon and Deb Gohr, with Jeff Perry as Austin, John Malkovich as Lee, Francis Guinan (Randy Arney - Apollo run) as Saul Kimmer, and Laurie Metcalf as Mom.

October 17, 1982 (Cherry Lane Theater - New York)

_True West_ by Sam Shepard. Directed by Gary Sinise, sets by Kevin Rigdon and Deb Gohr, lights by Kevin Rigdon, with Gary Sinise as Austin, John Malkovich as Lee, Sam Schacht as Saul Kimmer, and Margaret Thompson as Mom.
1982

*The House* directed by John Malkovich

*A Prayer for My Daughter* directed by John Malkovich

*And A Nightengale Sang* directed by Terry Kinney

1983

*Cloud 9* directed by Don Amendolia

*A Moon for the Misbegotten* directed by Jeff Perry

*The Miss Firecracker Contest* directed by Beth Henley

*The Hothouse* directed by Jeff Perry

*Our Town* directed by Ralph Lane

1984

*Tracers* directed by Gary Sinise

*Canadian Gothic/Dentity Crisis* (Late night production) directed by Glenne Headly and Cary Libkin

*Cowboy Mouth* (Late night production) directed by Phyllis Schuringa

*Fool for Love* directed by Terry Kinney

*La Ronde* (Late night production) directed by Keith Miller

*Stage Struck* directed by Tom Irwin

*Three Sisters* directed by Austin Pendleton

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1985

*Orphans* directed by Gary Sinise

*Coyote Ugly* directed by John Malkovich

*Miss Julie* directed by Tom Irwin

*The Caretaker* directed by John Malkovich

*You Can't Take It With You* directed by Frank Galati

1986

*A Lesson from Aloes* directed by Suzanne Shepherd

*Lydie Breeze* directed by Rondi Reed

*Frank's Wild Years* directed by Gary Sinise

*Bang* directed by Randall Arney

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* directed by Austin Pendleton

1987

*Educating Rita* directed by Jeff Perry

*A Lie of the Mind* directed by Julie Hebert

*Aunt Dan and Lemon* directed by Frank Galati

*Burn This* directed by Marshall W. Mason

*Little Egypt* directed by Jeff Perry

*Born Yesterday* directed by Frank Galati
1988

*The Common Pursuit* directed by Rondi Reed

*Killers* directed by Randall Arney

*The Grapes of Wrath* directed by Frank Galati

*Stepping Out* directed by Rondi Reed

1989

*A Walk in the Woods* directed by Randall Arney

*Terry Won't Talk* (Late night production) directed by Jim True

*Ring Around the Moon* directed by Rondi Reed

*El Salvador* directed by Francis Guinan

*The Homecoming* directed by Jeff Perry

*The Geography of Luck* directed by Randall Arney
APPENDIX H

Production History - Remains Theatre

1979


1980


Family Snapshot (late-night production)
1981


Sixty-Six Scenes of Halloween (late-night production)


1982

*Farmyard* Staged at MoMing.


1983

Traps

A Class “C” Trial in Yokohama

The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny

1984


Life and Limb by Keith Reddin. Directed by Robert Falls, sets and lights by Michael S. Philippi, costumes by John Murbach with Alan Ruck-Franklin, Joshua Bartz-Chris, Will Zahn-Erik, Natalie West-Doina, Amy Morton-Effie, Alan Novak-Tod,
Lindsay McGee-Miss Barr, Gary Cole-Sam, Ted Levine-Grandfather. Staged at Wisdom Bridge Theatre, 1559 W. Howard Street.

*Baby with the Bathwater* by Christopher Durang. Directed by D. W. Moffett, sets and lights by Michael S. Philippi, costumes by Marsha Kowal with Amy Morton-Helen, Will Zahrn-John, Natalie West-Nanny/Mrs. Willoughby/Kate, Lindsay McGee-Cynthia/Angela/Miss Pringle/Susan, Alan Novak-Young Man. Staged at the Goodman Theater.

1985

*White Biting Dog*

*Name Withheld by Request*


*Seventy Scenes of Halloween*

1986

*Days and Nights Within*


1987

The Mystery of Irma Vep by Charles Ludlam.

Road by Jim Cartwright.


1988

Sneaky Feelings

Lloyd's Prayer by Kevin Kling. Directed by David Petrarca, sets by Tamara Turchetta, lights by Robert Christen, costumes by Frances Maggio with Denis O'Hare-Bob, Will Zahrn-Lloyd, and Lucy Childs, David Alan Novak and Holly Fulger.

1989

Speed-the-Plow by David Mamet. (Co-production with Wisdom Bridge Theatre)
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