THE HISTORY OF THE WICHITA COMMUNITY THEATER

A Thesis by

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THE HISTORY OF THE WICHITA COMMUNITY THEATER

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Public History.

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DEDICATION

To My Mom
I would first like to thank all the members of my committee for their patience and all their assistance during this entire project. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Jay Price for his guidance and friendship throughout some rough times during this project. He has guided me through a lot to see this project to completion. Next, I would like to thank my friends of the Wichita Community Theater in allowing me to learn from them the history of this organization and the pride they have in it. They include Don Wineke, Randy Ervin, Jane Tanner, Dan and Vonda Schuster, Gina Austin-Fresh, Mary Lou Phipps-Winfrey, Crystal Meek, Robert Ryder, Dudley Toeves and the many others in the theater community in Wichita that I do not have room to list here. Lastly, thank you for all those who supported me, such as my mom, sister and my dear friends who have kept me motivated Troy Dilport, and Phil Speary.
ABSTRACT

When the members of the First Unitarian Church in Wichita Kansas met in the autumn evening of 1946 to set up a performance group, they had no idea that they were starting an organization that would change the landscape of performance arts in Wichita Kansas. The Unitarian Experimental Theater expanded out of its small confines of the basement of the church to the University of Wichita’s 1,200 seat theater, helping to develop the University’s theater program and bring even more attention to live theater in Wichita.

With the establishment of the Century II civic center to celebrate the centennial of Wichita’s founding, the Wichita Community Theater moved into the Little Theater, promoting its live shows with guest stars featuring the likes of Helen Hayes, Maurice Evans and many others from television and movies. These shows along with the purchase of a new property, the old Temple Emanu-El Synagogue in the College Hill area, increased the reach of the Wichita Community Theater to include classes, meetings and smaller more intimate productions.

The history of the Wichita Community Theater is full of successes, including the year in review show, Commedia, donations to the Wichita Public library and scholarships for high school student. The theater has also had its
controversies, including the ousting of Mary Jane Teall, the picketing of the College Hill property by religious groups and being on the brink of extinction with bankruptcy.

With all of these events, the theater kept producing quality shows. While the actors, directors and designers all strived to create perfection on each individual show, these dedicated volunteers kept much more than the production alive. These men, women and children kept the core spirit of this organization alive keeping the theater running.

Although highlighting the history of the Wichita Community Theater, this history focuses more on the volunteers and the sacrifices that were made to keep the organization alive and well.

The Wichita Community Theater is still alive and well and producing shows in the city of Wichita to this day. The theater is full of stories, individual tales of comedy and tragedy and events that made each specific story unique. These stories are forever ingrained in the individuals involved and even though only a few of them are highlighted in this paper, while others are not documented. Their efforts reflected in these stories, and many future ones that will keep the spirit of the organization alive for years to come.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Wichita Community Theater is an organization in which people act, build scenery, paint, create costumes, hammer, saw, sew, design and run props, set and focus lights, sweep floors, take out the trash, haul furniture, make posters, design lights, iron, clean costumes, address envelopes, sell tickets, schedule events and keep a business running in just their spare time. These people are mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, secretaries, teachers, lawyers, engineers, accountants, dancers, salesmen, psychologists, businessmen, architects, carpenters, contractors, artists, performers, directors, supervisors, writers, and students. Some have had previous training in the arts; others have never set foot inside a theater. Yet they are the lifeblood that keeps the organization going. These are the people of responsibility with the know-how, energy and interest to spend their free time working at whatever job has needed to be done.

The Wichita Community Theater has a storied history of these types of people giving up a great deal of their lives to help the theater grow. Starting from meager beginnings in a small church basement, the theater went on to fill to capacity a six hundred seat, state of the art theater for consecutive nights. The Wichita Community Theater has been synonymous with theater in Wichita for going on seven decades, from early in its
existence, the organization has depended on hard work, opportunity and good luck to have survived. The Wichita Community Theater has attracted local, state and national attention for its attentiveness to excellence in theater and for its ability to create art where none seemed to be available. It continued to provide outlets for those who otherwise may not have any, and gave back to a community that supported it. It has also adapted to the changing times when it was necessary to survive. The history of the Wichita Community Theater has been a rollercoaster of successes and failures, of losses and triumphs, but the future of the theater was hard to predict. The Wichita Community Theater has had its highs and lows and although parts of the story are not necessarily altogether unique, the overall story is one that should be told so that the history may be examined.

**EARLY WICHITA ENTERTAINMENT**

The earliest evidence of theatrical entertainment in Wichita came in the city’s infancy. The *Wichita Eagle* recalled the memory of the first documented theater troupe,

“All our older citizens will remember that in the early days, when Wichita was merely an outpost, destitute of many of the advantages of older civilization and without amusements or pastimes, that a club of young men organized the Frontier Minstrels, which gave a great many entertainments. Several of the original members are still citizens of the place and the club, rejuvenated and
Following the end of the Civil War a population explosion occurred on the Kansas frontier. Families from the east coast were following the railroads to the west in the hopes for better opportunities. With the railroads came the cattle trade and cowboys traveled up from Texas driving the herds through Indian Territory to the railheads in towns such as Abilene, Dodge City and Wichita. With this boom in population, cities became more developed, creating needs in government, business and of course entertainment. Each summer the flood of money that arrived in these Kansas towns attracted all different types of businesses, who attempted to lighten the population of their wealth. These businesses included gambling, drinking, prostitutes and acting troupes that arrived to entertain the masses. Craig Miner, Kansas historian, discussed the different types of culture that was available in early Wichita,

Wichita had a cultural life in the seventies, but it could be described as popular rather than high culture. The average musical taste favored brass bands, which made up in volume what they lacked in sophistication. Wichita soon had several bands, which played at Fourth of July barbeques

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1“Early Player Troupes That Were Attracted to Youthful Wichita: Word Soon Spread Among the Actor Folk Over the Country That This Prairie Outpost was a “Good Show Town” Wichita Eagle June 6, 1942.
and accompanied twenty sets of dancers on a floor constructed outdoors next to a platform for balloon ascensions. Traveling theater troops put on plays, the most popular of which was *Our American Cousin*, and there was enough local dramatic talent to justify a city theater tax and some petitions against keeping some of the theaters open on Sunday. But the most popular entertainments were circuses and firemen’s balls.²

Although most actors appeared in any available spaces adapted for performance, many different types of spaces emerged on the frontier to accommodate the ever increasing population and its need for entertainment and meeting space.

Opera houses really could be thought of as community centers, and they were where churches met before they had actually built their church building. They were where traveling troupes played. The troupes brought with them, you know, entertainment, excitement to the community. They were where the various civic organizations met. So you really could think of an opera house as a community building.³

In the city of Wichita there were numerous Opera Houses which ranged from the small, simple halls to the most elaborate, ornate houses. “Generally speaking there were two major types of performance facilities constructed between 1860-1925. The majority of the opera houses in Kansas were constructed on second floor or second and third floors of commercial buildings.”⁴ There were several second floor rooms that were above businesses in Wichita that were adapted to become


performance spaces. Some of these examples of the second floor opera houses were Crawford’s Opera House and Lewellen’s Hall. Lewellen’s Hall was “nothing more than a long room above Lewellen’s Grocery which was located on Main Street. Seating was on kitchen chairs and a platform with a black draw curtain was the stage.” Many of these spaces were only temporary and soon Wichita started to build single use spaces dedicated solely as Opera Houses, because of the quick deterioration of the second and third floor spaces above businesses and the fire safety concerns. Construction of larger facilities would also have accommodated larger scenery, bigger acts and of course more audience.

One of the first documented amateur, homegrown presentations in Wichita was called the “Union Spy”. This production, according to Richard M. Long in *Wichita 1866-1883: The cradle days of a Midwestern City*, was “given at Eagle Hall, at the corner of Main and Douglas. Among the “dramatis personae” are included Johnny Allen, Jessie Ash, George Bergman, “Tiger” Bill Campbell, Dick Cogdell, Fritz Schnitzler and Gene Arnett.” This was just one of many different troupes that performed in many of the Opera Houses located in Wichita.

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5 Ibid.
In Wichita, the first theater built for the specific purpose of theatrical entertainment was Turner’s Hall. Jane Rhoads, in her book *Kansas Opera Houses: Actors and Community Events 1855-1925*, described Turner’s Hall,

This two-story brick building constructed by the Turnverein Society contained a ground-floor theatre with a seating capacity of 1,000. Red and white velvet curtains draped the windows and large pictures of scenes from the Fatherland hung between the windows. Stchudy and Blomberg painted the theatre’s scenery. The front curtain was pulled up and down on large wooden rollers and contained a scene of Conway Castle surrounded by mountains with a lake in the foreground. The stage was 30’x 35’ with 12 full sets of scenery. Illumination was provided by gas.

For many years, Turner’s Hall was considered one of the best places for amusement and a gathering place for large meetings in the city of Wichita. Local historian Mary Sattgast recalled that in Turner’s Hall, “Actors and singers of national note appeared on its stage; grand balls were given there, and plays starring local talent were presented. But the great Turner Hall finally had to give way to modern trends. The Crawford and the Princess theaters were built in 1914 to take its place.”

Soon many different Opera houses were being built in Wichita, attracting acts such as the Kendall’s Komedy Kompany, the Lord Dramatic Troupe featuring Louie Lord and the most popular stage show during this time period “Our American

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7 Later expanded and called “Turner’s Opera House”
Cousin”. Opera houses in Wichita included Variety Hall, Eagle Hall, Russell Hall, Garfield Opera House, Crawford’s Grand Opera House, New Lyceum Theatre, Lyric Theater, the Wonderland Park Theatre, Princess Theatre, and the New Crawford Opera House.10

These opera houses hosted many different events, not only live entertainment but events such as high school graduations, basketball games and other community events. Many of the Opera Houses however soon became obsolete as local high schools began to build their own auditoriums. The largest and the most popular auditorium, Wichita High School, which is presently called Wichita East High School, had a space that seated about 2,000 people. The Opera Houses were used less by the community and began to fall into disrepair. This along with the lack of a consistent fire department allowed a lot of the Opera Houses to become destroyed by fires.11

Even though the era of the Opera Houses was beginning to be phased out at the start of the 20th century, Wichita built one of its largest civic centers to that point. Built in 1911, the Forum seated over 5,000 people and featured a “$1,200 Ben Hur curtain on its large stage.”12 The Forum stood in the center of Wichita, and was eventually torn down when the plans for the new

11 In Wichita, the Orpheum still stands, the Orpheum now a historical landmark and movie house in Wichita.
Civic Center Century II were finalized and took its place. The final Opera House and one that is still standing to this day is the Orpheum Theater.

The Orpheum, which was opened in 1922, was the first atmospheric vaudeville theater in the United States. When the Orpheum opened it was a part of the famous “Orpheum Circuit”; almost every major vaudeville star graced its boards.

This ground-floor theatre was designed by John Eberson with an interior that featured a Spanish motif. This was the beginning of Eberson’s atmospheric theatres. There was a cloud machine that project clouds moving across the ceiling of the auditorium. The ceiling also featured lights to give the appearance of stars. The theatre was designed as a vaudeville house, but by 1929 it had switched to motion pictures although many notable stage performers continued to appear there. The Orpheum Theatre, with its original stage, is still in use and is in the process of being renovated.13

During its most popular time, the Orpheum staged more than 17,000 acts, changing its playbill more than three times weekly.

With the advent of the motion picture, however, Wichita vaudeville houses including the Orpheum started to become transformed from stage to motion picture houses, and the time of the traveling actor became less popular. Movie houses in Wichita included the Palace, the Crawford, the Crest and the Uptown.

13 Ibid, 144.
FIGURE 1. Turner’s Opera House.

Courtesy of Wichita Public Library Photograph Collection.

FIGURE 2. The Wichita Forum.

Courtesy of The Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum.
FIGURE 3. The Orpheum Theater.

Courtesy of Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum.
The community theater movement, also referred to as the Little Theater movement in America is highlighted by the book *Theater in America*, which discussed the importance and state of theater in America.

Community theater occupies a peculiarly important position in the American theater picture. It is the largest, by far, of the theater’s numerous segments, and has the best chance of reaching the average citizen and family. In the bigger cities its clientele is the neighborhood; in smaller ones, a fair cross section of the stable, educated population; and to countless localities not served by the professional of the educational theater it offers the only opportunity to see live drama. Community theater, consequently, is the ultimate retailer of the largest quantity of dramatic material in America—plays and musicals of all varieties. It engages more people in theatrical activity, albeit part-time, than all the rest of the American theater put together, including schools and colleges. And, as its best and strongest organizations become increasingly professionalized, both in quality of workmanship and in paid staffs, it may well come to offer a substantial share of job opportunities for trained theater artists, managers, and technicians. Community theater is our most direct attempts in America today to create a true popular or people’s theater. Its groups are organized mostly with frank dependence upon the localities in which they exist. They reflect the community’s image; they project the citizens’ devotion to community service; and, in organization, they rely chiefly upon volunteer workers.\(^{14}\)

The history of the American community theater is a direct product of the amateur volunteer movement which evolved out of the European art theater and the free theater developments of the late nineteenth century. “The American movement, which was

at first highly creative and experimental, was originally called Art Theater, Little Theater or Civic Theater, but of late years has been generally known as community theater.”15 Although audiences for American Community Theater far outnumber the amount of the population attending professional theater, community theaters have faced a constant battle of attracting the public in the face of the rise of cable programming and the large number of movies being released on a weekly basis in a variety of milieu. Community theater has had a great burden of responsibility placed upon it, simply because it is the kind of theater most readily available. Certainly not a large portion of the American public is attending professional theater. “The local theater is the product of local necessity16.”

In the 19th century, theater was a form of mass entertainment but by the twentieth century, theater became less popular. Small and medium sized communities, similar to Wichita, created the opportunities for live theater to grow within their cities. With the booming population and desire for entertainment, many cities created little theaters or community theater entities to fill a small niche in the community. According to the Wichita Eagle in 1927, “One reason for the success of the little theaters has been the decay of the road

15 Ibid,39.
shows. Many of the high class traveling shows have been forced to discontinue because of high transportation and competition of the moving picture houses."17 Cities such as Sapulpa, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma all created volunteer theaters in the early 1900s to fill in that need, a need for actors to entertain and a need for the population to be entertained. "A community theater would in no way compete with a commercial theater. The purpose of the community theater is not to make money; the subscriptions and prices of admission will be arranged on a low scale to pay for the price of production, lease of an auditorium, costumes, advertising and royalties."18 In contrast to professional theater owners who operated as a business and constructed elaborate facilities, community theaters tended to start small in whatever spaces were available. By the end of the 1920s Wichita’s arts community began to follow the trend and created its own “Little Theater Club”.

THE PAIRIE PLAYERS

The Prairie Players, the first little theater group in Wichita, was formed under the guise of Mrs. Patricia Mikesell, and Dr. Kirke Mechem in 1927. Both Dr. Mechem, the Dean of the Art School of University of Wichita and Mrs. Mikesell both had previous experience with the little theater movement around the

17 “A Little Theater for Wichita”, Wichita Eagle, June 6, 1927,5.
18 Ibid.
country. Mrs. Mikesell, a former professional actress from New England and director of several little theater productions at the University of Illinois, was elected president of the group. Many other contributing members of the Prairie Players had previous experience including Dr. George Wilner, professor of theater at the University of Wichita, Professor Nova Hiser, director of dramatic works for Friends University and Dr. Paul M. Gilmer an entomologist and former member of a New Mexico little theater. The group’s first production, Bernard Shaw’s “Arms and the Man”, a satirical war play, took place at Friends University on December 14, 1927.19

After two years performing productions that range from original scripts by Dr. Mechem to William Shakespeare the Prairie Players were fighting to become a staple in the Wichita theater community and with the onset of the Great Depression, the Prairie Players fell on hard times, but soon teamed up with several professional actors to form a new theater group, a civic theater.20

The new group was formed when William Amsdell, director of the Oberfelder-Ketchum Players during their engagement here, met Friday with Mrs. Patricia Mikesell and other officers of the Prairie Players amateur theatrical group. Plans are being made for a series of plays with several of the Oberfelder-Ketchum Players who have remained in Wichita

19 “Wichita Theater,” *Wichita Eagle*, November 27, 1927, 3A.
20 Ibid.
in the cast, as well as Wichitan's who have had stage experience.\textsuperscript{21}

This new configuration, modeled after several successful civic theaters across the country, performed their first show at the Wichita High School East in February of 1930.\textsuperscript{22} This group became extremely popular in the following months, mostly due to the support of the Wichita community. Many people in Wichita came to the support of the new civic theater idea in the city. The \textit{Wichita Eagle} in the early part of 1930, claimed that “With such persons as Mrs. Gouldner and the others of her spirit and vision behind this movement it appeared that Wichita is to have a dramatic organization of its own which will be considerable more effective than many of the little theaters which are struggling nobly in many portions of the country.”\textsuperscript{23} Even with this vote of confidence, the new civic theater or little theater movement in Wichita still lacked one key element that had been missing for several years, a home.

\textbf{THE TWENTIETH CENTURY CLUB}

By the beginning of 1932, the civic theater was dwindling and without a facility to produce consistent productions, the little theater movement in Wichita seemed to have failed. But by July of 1932, the Twentieth Century Club, a not-for-profit

\textsuperscript{21} “Professional, Amateur Actors Form New Theater Group Here.” \textit{Wichita Eagle}, February 2, 1930, 5A.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} “Theater Tattle” \textit{Wichita Eagle}, April 4, 1930, 1.
organization for women picked up the mantle for the little theater movement by sponsoring several productions to be showcased in their newly built 500-seat theater. The first production, under the guidance of the Wichita Civic Theater, featured many previous members of the Prairie Players, including its president Mrs. Mikesell. The *Wichita Eagle* highlighted the organization's plans for the future of the little theater movement:

> Leaders of the little theater movement in Wichita, which was recently organized and sponsored by outstanding members of the Twentieth Century club, already have planned for six plays to be given in Wichita during the coming winter. This will initiate the city in the Little Theater league of the United States. The purpose of the organization of the Civic theater is two-fold: to give Wichita talent an opportunity for self-expression and to present to the people of Wichita and vicinity worth while dramatic productions at a nominal fee. According to plans already drawn up by the board of management, 25 per cent [sic] of the receipts from the plays will be used for new scenery, furniture and lighting equipment and 75 per cent [sic] will go to the club building fund. 24

Of the six shows that were performed in that initial season, some were performed by the Wichita Civic Theater, while others were produced by the local universities acting troupes, such as the University Players from University of Wichita under the direction of Dr. George Wilner and the Quaker Players from Friends University under the direction of Irene V. Baker. The success of the initial season of the Wichita Civic Theater

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brought several more years of productions along with drama classes held at the Twentieth Century Club taught by the likes of Dr. Wilner and Irene V. Baker.25

Dr. George Wilner, initiated the University of Wichita’s theater program in 1924 when the school was still referred to as Fairmount College.

His desire to work in a smaller institution led him to Fairmount College where he founded a university theatre centered on instruction rather than entertainment. For 35 years, he led countless thespians to perform mostly Shakespearian theatre stage classics. In 1964, the university recognized Dr. Wilner for his remarkable efforts and named the auditorium staging all major shows after him.26

With Dr. Wilner and Mrs. Baker’s training and guidance, many new opportunities of theater began to arise in Wichita.

Although the Twentieth Century Club continued to support and sponsor shows from all different areas of Wichita, including the Wichita Civic Theater, Friends University and University of Wichita, but after several years, a new theatrical organization was incorporated in Wichita, which spurred on a vast amount of excitement and support in the city.

25 Ibid.
LITTLE THEATER OF WICHITA, INC.

In May of 1938, a new theater organization formed, giving Wichita a consistent little theater presence in the city. With the Twentieth Century Club, the Wichita Civic Theater grew but was unable to give consistent productions, often times sharing the stage with the University of Wichita and Friends University, along with the Twentieth Century Club’s own theater organization, the Twentieth Century Club players and also competing with non-theater organizations renting out the theater space for meetings and celebrations. The new little theater organization, aptly called The Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., was designed to be dedicated solely to the little theater movement in Wichita.

The Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., is a recently organized civic group designed to promote better understanding and enjoyment of theatrical productions and includes in its schedule many productions for the season of 1938-39 as well as an active workshop where members may study and experiment in the theater arts. Luncheon meetings are held regularly at 12:15, Tuesday, at Wolf’s cafeteria, where everyone interested in the theater is welcomed.27

This group created a presence of a single entity dedicated solely to the little theater movement, however unlike the Twentieth Century club, this organization lacked a consistent place to perform but used several venues around the city to

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27 “Gottschalk Directs First Little Theater Organization Play” Wichita Eagle, May 22, 1938,1.
produce its shows, including the local universities. “On June 3, when barely one month old, the Little Theater’s modest group of 20 players lifted its first curtain at the Wichita University auditorium to an audience of 500 persons.”28 Other venues that opened themselves up to the group included the Arcadia theater, and the Lassen Hotel, which allowed the group to use its space for its workshops and the business headquarters, practically whenever it wanted or needed to. This group consisted of a large span of people, including one person that led the way into the Unitarian Experiment, a Mrs. Bettina Coover. Another element that this group brought to the city of Wichita in regards to the little theater movement was excitement.

There was such a push for the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., to be successful that even the mayor of Wichita, Elmer R. Corn, dedicated the week of September 11, 1938 to begin a concerted drive to gain memberships.29 Mayor Elmer Corn, who witnessed the first performance of the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., and afterwards proclaimed the following statement, in the hopes that it spurred on more memberships to the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc:

Believing that appreciation and participation in the drama is a healthful and essential activity in any well-rounded community and realizing what the Little Theater movement

28 “Begin Membership Drive-Mayor Designates Theater Week Here.” *Wichita Beacon*, September 6, 1938.
29 Ibid.
has done throughout the United States to promote a
democratic and discrimination appreciation of the best in
the theater therefore, I, Elmer R. Corn, Mayor of the City
of Wichita, officially recognize the week of September 11th,
as Little Theater Week. During this time, I hope that the
aims and ideals of the Little Theater may be called to the
attention of the people of Wichita in such a manner that
they may be inspired to become a part of an support this
organization, which is open to every one, and the sole
purpose of which is to utilize and develop in a fruitful
and profitable fashion talents among our citizens that
otherwise would have no opportunity for expression.30

This dedication by the mayor of Wichita and carried on by the
next mayor, Mayor Frank Coleman, in 1939, dedicating the week of
September 24, 1939 as Little Theater week in Wichita. This was
the second consecutive year that was dedicated solely to
promoting the Little Theater movement and aiding the group to
gain memberships. This weekly dedication by the mayor also led
to the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., gaining a new workshop,
the old abandoned Wichita Police Courtroom on the second floor
of the Wichita City building.31

‘It is the first time we have had a place we could call our
own,’ said Mrs. Josephone Holtzhute, director of the
workshop, said last night, ‘although the Lassen hotel has
been more generous in allowing us space there whenever we
wanted it.’ A stage will be constructed in one corner of
the room, and a part of a partition will be removed at the
back in order to allow more seating room. When completed
the room will be able to accommodate nearly 100 persons.32

With the new workshop open, the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc.,
began holding speech, costuming, makeup and play reading

30 “Wichita’s Little Theater Week” Wichita Eagle, September 7, 1938.
31 “Little Theater To Have Home of Own in City Hall Here.” Wichita Eagle, October 7, 1938.
32 Ibid.
sessions with members of the organization that have had training from such places as Emporia State Teachers college, Boston Little Theater and the University of Wichita’s University Players.  

The excitement of the little theater movement in Wichita not only brought opportunity to the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., but also brought more people taking up the little theater movement in Wichita. With the Great Depression still taking its toll in America, one little theater group took advantage of many government programs, including the Works Progress Administration, forming a new organization allowing productions to be seen free of charge called the WPA Players.

The production is made possible by the combined efforts of the recreation centers at Allison and Hamilton schools. Besides the designs, the costumes have been made by the sewing groups at each center, and the construction has been done by the woodworking groups. Other productions are to follow this one. Anyone interested in any phase of the recreation theater’s activities, whether design, costuming, settings, lighting, or acting will be given an opportunity to work on future shows. Details may be obtained at the centers or at the office of WPA recreation in Webster school.

As the world hindered on the brink of a World War, many elements of keeping an all volunteer theater open remained difficult. Groups such as the WPA recreational theater remained open only one season, and the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., by 1939 had

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33 Ibid.
34 “Recreation Theater to give first play,” Wichita Eagle, April 9, 1939.
moved their organization yet again in order to have more opportunity, recently leasing the United Congregational Church on east First street, for a three year period, where the group will hold its workshops, lectures and productions.\textsuperscript{35}

The future for the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., seemed to be secure. The Little Theater of Wichita not only performed productions out of its newly leased facility, but also held lectures on theater, conducted workshops on an array of things such as makeup and costuming but also performed dinner theater special events, such as one on top of the York Rite building, a more melodramatic production with music, an olio and dinner included.\textsuperscript{36} But after several successful years of theater in Wichita, the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., no longer existed in Wichita, due to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America’s involvement in World War II.\textsuperscript{37}

Shortly after World War II, two organizations formed in the city by several enthusiastic and knowledgeable people, and both are still around to this day.

\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Wichita Eagle}, November 19, 1939.
\textsuperscript{36}“Little Theater Play Pleasing Crowds at Roof-Top Auditorium” \textit{Wichita Eagle}, June 2, 1941.
\textsuperscript{37}This conclusion has been drawn by the author because of the lack of coverage of the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., after 1942. Many extra curricular activities tended to be canceled due to the movement of America and Americans to fight the war. Because there was no other coverage of any other types of theater in Wichita besides the newly formed Children’s theater, which is covered later in the thesis, the conclusion is that when the outbreak of WWII, the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., no longer existed.
IRENE VICKERS BAKER

The longtime head of the department of speech and dramatic arts at Friends University, Vickers Baker made the Quaker Players synonymous with Friends University and the city of Wichita with all of the good will and excellence in theater.

When Mrs. Baker organized the Quaker Players, dramatic organizations were not so numerous in Wichita. The Twentieth Century Club Theater was not built and no Little Theater was active. The Friends University dramatics and speech department was just becoming a fact. A fine auditorium was a part of the school, but it was poorly equipped for theater productions.38

After the retirement of Mrs. Vickers Baker from Friends University led the way for her to be in charge of the drama department of the Wichita Art Association, an association dedicated to the growth of art in Wichita and the start of the Wichita Children’s Theater.

Staging its first performance in 1946, the Wichita Children’s Theater was incorporated in 1947 with Mrs. Schollenberger as president of the theater and Mrs. Baker as managing director. The Wichita Children’s Theater’s founding had been documented in a book that was published by the Wichita Area Chamber of Commerce. In its infancy, the Wichita Children’s Theater opened all its productions on the stage of the Wichita East High School auditorium and was the only theater

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of its kind in the state of Kansas, dedicated solely to performances geared toward children.\textsuperscript{39}

Impressed by her grandchilren’s reaction to a performance of a children’s theatre in Pittsburg, Penn., Mrs. Maude Schollenberger imported the idea for a theatre planned and presented just for children to Wichita. To realize her plan, Mrs. Schollenberger, then the dedicated president of the Wichita Art Association, found that Irene Vickers Baker had the enthusiasm and the know-how to get the project off the ground. In 30 years this theatre grew form a small group, headquartered in the old courthouse and producing its plays at East High Auditorium, to a full programmed theatre organization. A long-nurtured hope became a reality when actress Helen Hayes dedicated the new home of the Children’s Theatre at 9112 East Central. Named the Irene Vickers Baker Theatre in honor if [sic] its founder, it featured excellent facilities for the performers and a comfortable auditorium with 487 seats.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{THE UNITARIAN EXPERIMENTAL THEATER}

The second organization formed in Wichita was the Unitarian Experimental Theater, formed by many different members of the Unitarian Church of Wichita. One member, Mrs. Bettina Coover, had been the first vice president of the Little Theater of Wichita, Inc., the first full time organization dedicated to the Little Theater movement of Wichita, also called the community theater movement. On an invitation of Mrs. Bettina Coover on a fall evening in 1946 a group of passionate members of the First Unitarian Church in Wichita, Kansas met at the home of Mrs. Bettina Coover to discuss starting a performance group. “I

\textsuperscript{40} Wichita Area Chamber of Commerce, \textit{Wichita: 41 Facts That Helped Build Wichita}(Official Publication of the Wichita Area Chamber of Commerce, July-August 1976), 20.
think it was November, I remember it was chilly,” ventured Mary Jane Teall. “But dates were never important. They are kind of dull.” In attendance, along with Mrs. Ralph, was the church’s minister, Rupert Holloway, and Martin and Mary Umansky, who all shared Mrs. Coover’s hopes that this meeting resulted in the beginning of such a group. “The group was intent on learning theater and having the fun of lavishing care in the perfection of every detail.” The church had offered the group the basement stage of the Unitarian Church, rent free, so the group at least had a place to perform. There were several problems that needed to be approached before the organization could get off the ground. One problem for the church was that there was no money to get the project started. There were no materials for sets, they had no lights nor any fabric for costumes.

THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF WICHITA

The First Unitarian Church of Wichita, Kansas had been around the City of Wichita for sixty years prior to that fall evening. The Unitarian church congregation established itself in the late half of the 19th century, around 1887, at least that is when a consecutive account of the history began. The group, which called itself The Emerson Society or The Sunday Circle.

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41 “In the Beginning, It Was Just a Dream: Community Theatre Takes to the Boards For Its 35th Season” The Wichita Eagle-Beacon, Sunday, October 5, 1980. 235C.
42 “What Community Theater Means to Wichita” The Wichita Beacon, Tuesday, April 24, 1956, 7.
decided to form the Unitarian Church. It came together with the help of Dr. Nannie Stephens and a newly arrived Unitarian minister, C. E. Rogers.

The congregation met in such places as Garfield Hall at First and Water streets, then moved to Peerless Hall at First and Main, then to the Sedgwick Music Hall. Around the turn of the century, interest in the Unitarian Church swelled and the congregation soon outgrew the small Sedgwick Music Hall. They purchased the land at the corner of Topeka and Central avenues, and in 1902 construction began on the new church. Securing all available cash and using up all funds, the First Unitarian Church turned to the American Unitarian Association for a loan of $3,500.00 to be paid back without interest.

The congregation, began going through many ups and downs within the congregation, trying to find the funds to not only stay afloat within Wichita, but to provide for its congregation the many different activities that kept members active within the church and help to bring in new members. With this movement of creating activities for its congregation, the Unitarians looked to their newly hired minister, Rupert Halloway in the fall of 1942. Halloway, an Englishmen by birth, came to the United States after finishing college and was considered to be a

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43 Frances M. Rosenberg, and Jessie B. Bing, A History of the First Unitarian Church, Wichita, Kansas,(First Unitarian Church, Wichita KS, 1966) 3.
“cultured gentlemen and polished speaker.”44 As a more established and experienced minister, the congregation was not sure if they would be able to entice the Englishman to come to the small, budding city of Wichita as their reverend. The offer of $200 a month and no parsonage turned out to be just what he wanted, and in the winter of 1942, Reverend Holloway, his wife Constance and their son Robin moved to Wichita and he became the Unitarian Church’s newest minister.

With the reverend, activities began to spring up within the congregation, including a renovation and redecoration of the church parlor, serving room and kitchen, and then once that was completed, a church dinner followed. All this activity led to more ideas within the congregation of how to provide for its congregation, opportunities sprang up and eventually lead to the idea of the Unitarian Experimental Theater.

Rupert Holloway was at heart an artist. He painted as a hobby, in both water color and oil, and exhibited, becoming a well known figure in the artistic community of Wichita. He was also interested in drama. A delightful Christmas program one year was a reading of Dickens’ Christmas Carol by the Holloway family. With this encouragement Bettina Coover, who was trained in dramatics, taught a drama class of 15 children at the church in the winter of 1944-45, concluding by presenting a group of playlets.45

This progression led to the meeting on that fall evening of 1946. Even though Mrs. Bettina Coover, had been trained in

dramatics, and taught a drama class at the church, she knew how the group should organize and knew that the group needed a dedicated and dynamic person to start the theater group. Yet a new member of the Unitarian Church was in attendance that night, a dynamic, creative woman known at the time as Mary Jane Woodard.

![Figure 4. The Unitarian Church on the corner of Topeka and Central.]( Courtesy of The Unitarian Church. )

**MARY JANE TEALL**

Born February 28, 1911 in Tekamah, Nebraska, Mary Jane Houston grew up with a purpose to direct theater. When pinned down on her story Mary Jane told sporadic stories about how her grandfather, E.C Houston, a former mayor of Tekamah, former Vice
President of the First National Bank of Tekamah, State Senator, and owner and founder of Houston Lumber Yard, allowed Mary Jane to put on circuses and shows on his huge lawn, building plank seats out of scraps from his lumberyard and charged two cents admission. Mary Jane, however, was not one to be in front of the audiences. She felt that she was geared more toward the directing, being able to shape the way the show flowed, and trying to bring out the best in each individual involved with the production. She lacked the type of guidance to develop those skills until she attended high school. Hardly a person to talk about herself, Mary Jane was always a person of energy and information. After graduating from High School, Mary Jane attended Columbia College in Columbia, Missouri. The college, a school for women, which was affiliated with the Disciples of Christ church but was mostly a nonsectarian school. Mary Jane graduated with a degree in Communications, and, according to the 1930 Columbia College yearbook entitled College Widow, she was “admired by everyone for her sweetness as well as her brilliancy.”

After graduation, she then moved to Evanston, Illinois to attend Northwestern University. Graduating from Northwestern University with a Master’s degree in theater, she then married

46 “Mary Jane” The Wichita Sun, March 3, 1976, B7.
47 Columbia College Yearbook “The College Widow” Mary Jane Teall Collection, MS96-08, Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries (hereafter cited as Mary Jane Teall Papers).
Stan Woodard in 1934 and moved to the small town of Tyler, Texas where the couple had two children, Lee Woodard and Marilyn Benke\textsuperscript{48}. Mary Jane was liaison officer for Camp Fannin, the local Army post, serving as the director for GI entertainment during World War II. Mary Jane and Stan Woodard divorced in 1942, and in 1944 she moved out of Tyler, Texas to Wichita with her two children after being hired as the director of the teenage after school program run through a community organization called the Community Chest\textsuperscript{49}. In 1958 Mary Jane went on to marry Bob Teall a construction contractor in the city of Wichita.

After one year, the school program was cancelled due to an issue with interracial social events after hours, something that Mary Jane knew nothing about. According to the 	extit{Wichita Sun}, a short lived investigative newspaper headed by Martin Umansky, two incidents occurred that got her out of the teenage club business once and for all. One of the young girls at the aforementioned program, the Bamboula Club, had secretly built a little hideaway above the girls’ rest room and was spending nights there. The girl told some of the other kids at the club, and they began hiding in the perch until after Mary Jane locked up for the evening. Then they’d party. Somehow the newspaper

\textsuperscript{48} “Mary Jane” \textit{The Wichita Sun}, March 3, 1976, B7
\textsuperscript{49} The Community Chest started out as a precursor to the current United Way.
found out about it and ran a story with the headline Love Nest and All Night Parties at Teenage Center. "'I knew nothing sexual was going on,' Mary Jane said. 'The adults made a big scandal of it.' Just as the “love nest” controversy was cooling down, a second problem arose forth right citizens began to take issue with the fact that blacks and whites were dancing together at the club.”\(^{50}\) Soon after the closing of the Community Chest, Mary Jane was asked to speak at the Unitarian Church about her Bamboula Club experience and then she began to attend the church regularly. About the same time, she was hired as a speech teacher at the University of Wichita.\(^{51}\)

FIGURE 5. A younger Mary Jane Teall.

Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.

\(^{50}\) “Mary Jane” *The Wichita Sun*, March 3, 1976, B7.
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
THE FORMATION

Mary Jane, after much insistence by the group, agreed not only to help get the theater up and running but also to direct some of the plays. After a long night of discussions, three decisions had been made. First, the group performed only short plays, one act shows written or adapted by members in the community. There was very little scenery used on the small three-level platform in the church auditorium. Finally, the group was known as the Unitarian Experimental Theater.

The Unitarian Experimental Theater opened the 1946-1947 season, its inaugural season, with *The Eternal Ingénue* an original one act play written by a local radio writer, John Spear. The rest of the season continued with two other one acts, *Billy Sunday Goes to Heaven* and *The Marriage Proposal* and the final show, the third act of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*.\(^5^2\) The main reason for the use of original one act plays at this time was the cost of performing full shows. Many companies that represent the writers require a specific amount of royalties to be paid in advance for an organization to perform certain shows. Performing original shows kept the cost down and adaptations were cheaper than performing the original shows.

\(^{52}\) All information taken from programs and collected data inside the Wichita Community theatre over several years of volunteers collecting information, no formal history has been kept except a few excerpts.
In the 1946 to 48 seasons 14 short plays were produced. 9 of them were new scripts written by Unitarians, James H. Stearns, Rupert Holloway, and Mary Jane Woodard, and by John Spear. Several were translations and adaptations, with the Chairman of Wichita University German Department contributing.”

The first two seasons had limited publicity to anyone outside of the Unitarian church and the University of Wichita. Open auditions were held at the church, hoping to cast actors that were dependable and be developed into giving a consistently effective performance, for all shows. There was no admission charged to see the performances and the only source of income was an inconspicuously placed ice-cream carton near the exit with a slit on the top for donations. The carton was almost always full after every show and consistently had enough change in it to cover the production expenses.

Each year the theater grew more ambitious, performing plays written by local artists and mixing in shows written by Shakespeare, Chekhov and O’Neill. These writers were used to also keep the costs low. Tickets and public fan-fare were not utilized at this time, for the staff wanted to first develop effective techniques of staging on the small, unconventional three level platforms in the church and to develop the talent

53 “A Report on the Experimental Theatre.” (A four part brief description of the history of what is now the Wichita Community Theatre, when it was known as the Unitarian Experimental Theatre). Mary Jane Teall Collection, MS96-08, Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries (hereafter cited as Mary Jane Teall Papers).
which could be depended upon to give consistently effective performances.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened the 1948 season, and with that show the group started producing three shows a season, with each production running for three performances. Due to the popularity of each production many extended to as many nights as the church permitted the scenery to remain standing.

Within three years the audience was pushing out the walls of the little church. The director was often forced to watch the show from under the lighting table at the back of the house for want of two feet of floor space and a chair. Players had increased from 15 to 85, and runs of plays were extended from the original two nights to nine.

In 1949 season, each production became standing room only, selling out the small church auditorium.

With such rapid popularity, full length plays began being produced at the start of the third season and the first single adult admission tickets were being sold at the door. The group continued to use the church rent free, but with the ticket sales and donations in the ice-cream carton, the group began to give the church money to pay for heat and electricity. Before the success of the group took off, costumes, sets and props were patched together and endless amounts of time was spent lavished

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55 “What Community Theater Means to Wichita” *The Wichita Beacon*, Tuesday, April 24, 1956, 7.
on the design and execution of production detail. James Stearns designed costumes from drapes and whatever other fabrics that could be gathered together. By the third season the group was successful enough to be able to purchase satins, taffetas, lace from stores for the costume designers and full scale productions were underway.\textsuperscript{56}

The group, which had no formal organization beyond a chairman and a secretary of the Players, had decided in the summer of 1950 to reorganize on a civic level. The Wichita Community Theater\textsuperscript{57} was formed and incorporated as a non-profit organization. All of the members of the Unitarian Experimental Theater became the Community Players. The theater turned over its inventory of costumes, scenery, props and equipment to the Wichita Community Theater, including all money that was in the group’s treasury at the time.

Realizing the need for a community theater in Wichita, a group of prominent citizens have volunteered their services to organize and promote the Wichita Community Theater. The group met Friday at the Lassen Hotel to set up the organization of the theater.\textsuperscript{58}

The board consisted of Rene R. Gouldner as chairman, Kathleen Edmiston as secretary, and Kenneth Brasted, Emory Cox, Leo Mulloy, Martin Umansky, Galen Graham and O.F. Sullivan as at

\textsuperscript{56} Frances M. Rosenberg, and Jessie B. Bing, \textit{A History of the First Unitarian Church, Wichita, Kansas}, 45.

\textsuperscript{57} From now on, the Wichita Community Theatre shall be referred to as WCT unless spelled out entirely for purposes of context.

\textsuperscript{58} “New Theater Group is Formed Here.” \textit{Wichita Beacon}, September 17, 1950.
large members. The designers who were a part of the Unitarian Experimental Theater all transferred the titles over to the Wichita Community Theater, with Mary Jane Woodard as director, James H. Stearns as scene and costume designer, Arthur Risser as lighting designer, Robert F. Harrison as treasurer and Martin Umansky as Business Manager. From its start back in fall of 1946, the Unitarian Experimental Theater, now had become a full-fledged civic organization, a theater organization that set the direction for Wichita theater for years to come.

From the 1950 to the 1952 season the Wichita Community Theater remained in the auditorium of the Unitarian church. In time, however, each production began to exceed the church’s capacity. The productions had outgrown the auditorium, mostly with the initiation of season ticket sales and expansion of production runs to as many as nine performances. “Oh, it was a fascinating and creative time,” she (Mary Jane Teall) says. “We had this little octagonal stage, and if you wanted to make a right stage entrance, you had to go all the way outside and around the corner of the building.”

60 “Mary Jane Teall: The Play’s The Thing” Wichita Eagle-Beacon, Sunday April 5, 1981, 3D.
The growth and popularity of the Wichita Community Theater had a lot to do with the growth of the city of Wichita itself. During the Second World War, the small community of Wichita Kansas began to grow by leaps and bounds, mostly due to the aircraft industry. A wave of migration out of the southern states by white, Hispanic and African American families grew the population of manufacturing northern cities such as Chicago, Kansas City and Wichita by enormous amounts. According to James Gregory, author of *The Southern Diaspora*, “A much bigger second wave begins with World War II when more than 4 million southerners move north or west, grows even larger in the 1950s when at least 4.3 million leave the South, remains near that level through the 1960s and 1970s, and then declines in the 1980s and 1990s.”

With the inclusion of government contracts to aircraft companies in Wichita to develop bombers, fuel tankers and even elements of jet fighters increased the size of the city as families looked for employment in the aircraft industry. Places such as Boeing Wichita and Cessna were granted many of these government contracts and looked to increase their production.

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Wichita’s population, which stood at 114,966 in 1940, grew to an estimated 135,000 in 1941. The social and political impact on Wichita of a population increase of over fifty percent in three years, eight times the increase for the total decade of the 1930s, was tremendous, added as it was to the excitement created everywhere by a world war.62

Soon after the end of World War II the influx of people coming into Wichita continued.

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CHAPTER II

UNIVERSITY OF WICHITA

As the city of Wichita grew, so did its need for more cultural and educational outlets. The University of Wichita identified this need and soon reached out into the community to attempt to grow because of that need. Martin Umansky, long time business manager, retold how the theater group came onto the campus of the University of Wichita.

Well, Harry Corbin was largely [sic] responsible for that. He was President of the University and he was very anxious to develop [sic] a closer relationship with the community at large. And get community activities happening at the University he thought, which was true, would be in the best interest of the University and he invited us down there. We were elated, if not hilarious [sic].

The University of Wichita’s president, Harry Finch Corbin was a Wichita native, having attended high school at Wichita’s North and East Schools. Corbin completed his bachelor’s degree of arts in political science at the University of Wichita and then enrolled in law school at Stanford University. Shortly after attending Stanford, he married and transferred to the University of Chicago, where he earned his bachelor’s of divinity degree. Corbin then served three years as a lieutenant in the Navy’s Chaplain Corps. After earning his law degree from the University of Kansas, Corbin joined the University of Wichita in

63 “Interview about The History of Community Theatre: Sixty’s and Seventy’s with Mary Jane Teall; Martin and Eva Reif; Agnes Quinn; Millie Meier; Mary and Martin Umansky,” Mary Jane Teall Papers) 8.
1946 as an assistant professor of political science and philosophy.

In 1949, Corbin became president of the University of Wichita, at age 32 the youngest president of a major college in the United States. Among the many of his accomplishments at the University of Wichita were the additions of many new buildings to the campus, including the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed College of Education building. He also attempted to connect the University to the community by establishing the Urban Research Center, which brought educational television to the city of Wichita, which soon turned into KAKE-TV and be headed by Martin Umansky as general manager of the television station. Corbin resigned in 1963 after a long fight in attempting to get the University of Wichita into the regents system. Soon after his resignation, however, Corbin’s cause reignited when the University of Wichita’s enrollment increased from 3,300 to 6,000 and Corbin became the driving force behind the admission of the University of Wichita into the Kansas Regents system in 1964. Corbin also continued to teach at Wichita State University until his death in 1990.64

Among Corbin’s accomplishments was his support for the Wichita Community Theater, which moved to the Commons

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Auditorium on the campus. Although the Unitarian Church at the intersection of Central and Topeka had been the birthplace for the Wichita Community Theater, the members saw what a success they had been and felt that to create something more important with lasting power the theater had to be moved out of the small church auditorium and move to a larger space. Forever grateful to the Unitarian Church for all of their support, and to the original Unitarian Experimental Theater members, they referred to those days in the church as the most satisfying period in the theater’s history with the enthusiastic brain-storming, the imaginative struggle and the raw creativeness that came with the new organization. At the same time, the University offered a new venture and more opportunity for the small organization. It was a chance that could not be passed up. “True, the university facilities offered about 1200 seats for the audience and an expanded work area.”

The relocation was attributed in large part to the relationship that Mary Jane Woodard had with President Harry Corbin and his desire to expand the University’s influence into the community. The University of Wichita did not offer any type of theater degree and the teaching of the performing arts was still in its infancy, combined with offerings from the

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65 The Common Auditorium is now Wilner Auditorium on the Campus of Wichita State University.
66 “In the Beginning, It Was Just a Dream: Community Theatre Takes to the Boards For Its 35th Season” The Wichita Eagle-Beacon, Sunday, October 5, 1980, pp. 235C.
communications department. The theater group on campus was a small and not very active although this changed with the addition, energy and publicity that the Wichita Community Theater brought.

The move began yet another chapter in the history of the Wichita Community Theater. The University gave the opportunity for the theater to stage shows with a critical feature needed to keep a theater thriving, space. There was a scene shop on the campus next to the University’s football stadium, in Henrion Hall, where the group was able to build and paint sets. There was also now use of an auditorium that was able to seat almost seven times as many as the Unitarian Church. Martin Reif, long time member of the Wichita Community Theater, told of the move to the University of Wichita and the facilities.

I remember that little scene shop we had in the old football stadium there under the stairs. It’s a wonder that flats or anything else got painted and constructed, because if I turned around twice I was out the door, and some people are very considerably larger than I am. But somehow things got done, and it was very good to be that close to the stage.  

Even though the move to a larger space such as the University of Wichita was beneficial for the theater, the change had its issues. Mary Jane Teall discussed the benefits with the Wichita  

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67 “Interview about The History of Community Theatre: Sixty’s and Seventy’s with Mary Jane Teall; Martin and Eva Reif; Agnes Quinn; Millie Meier; Mary and Martin Umansky,” Mary Jane Teall Papers) 9.
Eagle-Beacon after the differences between the two spaces and how grateful the group was to the small church.

...the intimacy of the church, with its 200 seats, made it easier to present experimental productions for a specialized audience without worry about finances. When you try to fill up 1200 seats, you begin to look more popular, audience pleasing plays.68

The auditorium on the campus was a lot larger than the church auditorium, but that did not discourage the community theater’s passion for the shows that they produced. Normally working in cooperation with the university students, the Wichita Community Theater staged four productions a year, but running each production sometimes only three times, due to the availability of the theater. The shows that were produced featured a very vast array of shows including: Picnic, Madwoman of Chaillot, Rainmaker and Solid Gold Cadillac. Soon, the twelve hundred seat auditorium was filled to capacity with standing room only. The influx of patrons coincided with the big push for season ticket sales.

The community theater created four different groups each working on a specific aspect of running the theater. The first and oldest of these groups, the Players, was in charge of producing the plays. This particular group hailed back to the Unitarian Experimental Theater, days and their numbers grew to

68 “In the Beginning, It Was Just a Dream: Community Theatre Takes to the Boards For Its 35th Season” The Wichita Eagle-Beacon, Sunday, October 5, 1980, pp. 235C.
almost two hundred participants by the time WCT had moved into the commons area on the campus of the University of Wichita. The second group was a twenty-five member board, the administrative wing of the theater. This group determined policies, protocol and the theater’s finances. The third part of the system, new to the theater, was the Theater Guild, a women’s auxiliary group who either participated in the Wichita Community Theater productions or were the wives of WCT members. This group staffed the theater with ushers, ticket takers and did whatever else was needed during shows, handled the secretarial work and organized and supervised social affairs; they even ran special promotional activities for the Wichita Community Theater, such as after show parties and season celebration barbeques. The last, largest and perhaps most important segment of the Wichita Community Theater consisted of the season ticket memberships which at the height of Wichita Community Theater’s success reached a whopping twelve hundred tickets.

Even though their schedule of four productions for five to seven shows\(^69\) was small in comparison to the amount of shows that they once ran at the Unitarian Church, the theater sold out all of the shows. WCT’s first and foremost objective was to provide

\(^69\) There are some papers that have some shows running up to nine performances, but overall that apparently was rare.
varied theatrical entertainment of an increasingly professional quality. This was done in many different ways. Members of the community theater, during the University’s summer break, set up classes and workshops on the campus to train new talent and help the more experienced talents hone their skills under the tutelage of Mary Jane and others from the theater. This also brought new faces to the theater and helped develop the best performances from each individual.

With the popularity of the Wichita Community Theater, other organizations began to get started in Wichita and the surrounding area, mostly with the guidance of the Wichita Community Theater and its members.

The Red Barn Players, an organization producing melodramas formed in 1956 with the help of Mary Jane Teall and Irene Vickers Baker. “The theater group is composed of students and professional people of Wichita. Many are active in Wichita Children’s theater and Community Theater during the winter months. The summer playhouse was organized last summer by Bob Copeland, former East High drama coach, and two of his students, Jerry Coleman and Brad Hammond.”

This organization, which only lasted two years, was supported by the Wichita Community Theater and several other

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organizations around the city of Wichita. The shows, which were produced outside of the Wichita city limits, in Valley Center, were treated as a summer stock type of venue, only offering productions 12 weeks out of the year. This group reorganized and moved out to the Old Cowtown Museum in Wichita.

Boos and hisses mixed with cheers and applause to greet the opening Thursday evening of Wichita’s theatrical season. Cow Town Repertory Co. presented its first bill, ‘Dirty Work at the Crossroads,’ at the Shirkmere Apartment Hotel. Co-directed by Julie Masters and Robert Copeland.71

This group only lasted a couple of seasons, but put in roots for other organizations to produce melodramas in the city of Wichita.

Many of the local actors gave more than just their time and effort towards making the Wichita Community Theater grow. Lots of members donated money and items, sometimes even buildings, to foster the constant growth of the Wichita Community Theater. As the Wichita Beacon stated,

Wichita Community Theater troupers have a new “behind the scenes” headquarters—a roomy, renovated structure they fondly call “The Barn.” Located at the corner of Gilbert and Pershing, it was donated by a Guild member and now houses all the business and production activities for the hard-working theater colony. Whipping the new headquarters into readiness for the big season ahead has been one of the biggest productions ever staged by the local Thespians and stagehands. First to arrive on location was the volunteer clean-up crew, who had the role of scouring floors and windows and applying several coats of paint to inside

walls. That completed, the business crew came on the scene, setting up files and making typewriters hum to open the campaign for the upcoming season ticket sales. Simultaneously, tryouts started in the “upstage” corner of the spacious barn. (In the new WCT quarters, there’s plenty of room, also much theater atmosphere.)

“The barn”, had been donated by the Murfin family and consisted of a seldom used horse barn. This allowed the WCT to create a business office to keep the financial side of the theater running and a place to keep track of season ticket sales, instead of relying on Mary Jane or Martin Umansky’s living room. The barn was also an audition space and a rehearsal space used up until the show was supposed to be performed so as not to get in the way of the University’s school programs. This facility was also used to offer training for community theater actors and develop new talent for the upcoming seasons. Members of the Wichita Community Theater could enroll in the without auditioning, but according to the Wichita Evening Eagle,

Because of limited space, enrollment of non-community theater members will be by audition only. Private auditions will be held on May 20 and 21 from 7:30 to 11 p.m., in The Barn, before the auditions board, members of which are Mrs. Martin Umansky, Dick Welsbacher, and Mary Jane Teall. Applicants can phone the community theater office or Mrs. Robert Teall for appointments. Boys with exceptional talent, ranging in age from 9 to 14 years may audition as well as high school students and adults.

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72 “Barn Door to Stage Door” The Wichita Beacon, Sunday September 6, 1959, C1.
This training allowed the community theater to extend its reach outside of the University of Wichita and increase its numbers.

After the first couple of shows on the campus of the University of Wichita, the Wichita Community Theater’s business manager Martin Umansky began to see even more potential at the theater. With Martin’s business savvy and Mary Jane’s guidance, the Wichita Community Theater began a new venture, bringing stars of stage, screen and television to perform the lead role onstage with other members of the Wichita Community Theater.

Starting with the 1958 season, the Wichita Community Theater brought in their first star with the production, *The Caine Mutiny*, featuring guest star Chester Morris. This show was an immediate sell out. Ticket sales for a three night run of the star shows reached its peak at thirty-seven hundred tickets per show. The audiences seem to be thrilled about the stars coming to the small town of Wichita. This excitement, recalled Martin Umansky, “...really wasn’t unusual. The kind of people we brought in were always, they were passé. And on the way out, but still had some value, because...They were movie stars, basically.”

74 “Interview about The History of Community Theatre: Sixty’s and Seventy’s with Mary Jane Teall; Martin and Eva Reif; Agnes Quinn; Millie Meier; Mary and Martin Umansky,” Mary Jane Teall Papers) 8.
With the success of Chester Morris, the community theater brought more stars to the Wichita stage, actors such as Eddie Bracken, Reginald Gardener, McDonald Carey, John Carradine, Judd Jones, Lyle Talbot, Hugh Marlow, Peggy Cartwright, William Shust, William Lundigan and first lady of American theater Helen Hayes.

The community theater also kept theater alive onstage at the University of Wichita. “When the Broadway Theater League, which had brought in four shows per season, dropped Wichita from its itinerary several years ago, the community theater stepped in and underwrote two performances of the touring “Miracle Worker”—last year and one of the Helen Hayes-Maurice Evans bus-and-trucker, “A Program For Two Players,” this season. The former sold 2,363 tickets at $4 each in the 1,500-seat Wichita Univ. Auditorium, and the latter went SRO\(^{75}\) in the same house.”\(^{76}\)

The success of the star productions did not stop the community theater from taking advantage of lack of entertainment in Wichita. “But we had many, many sell-outs,” Teall added. “You have to remember that there wasn’t a lot of theater in Wichita in those days.”\(^{77}\) Soon Mary Jane offered another idea that became the most popular and lucrative enterprise ever

\(^{75}\) “Standing room only”
\(^{76}\) “Little Theatre Books Touring” Variety, Wednesday, January 9, 1963, 1.
\(^{77}\) “In the Beginning, It Was Just a Dream: Community Theatre Takes to the Boards For Its 35th Season” The Wichita Eagle-Beacon, Sunday, October 5, 1980, 235C.
conceived by the Wichita Community Theater. The endeavor was the popular summer variety show, Commedia.

FIGURE 6. Wilner Auditorium.

Courtesy of Wichita State University.
COMMEDIA

Commedia, loosely based on the fifteenth century improvisation-theater, Commedia dell’arte, was another inspiration of Mary Jane. She and other friends researched the concept in several comedy clubs in New York. As recalled by Jean Ann Cusick:

I had been doing some avant garde shows at WSU and she wanted me to do something here, but she wanted to do Commedia and she said it takes after Commedia dell’arte, and I know we can go to New York and Chicago and steal all of the material, and she said it was very risqué and we just have to find someplace to do this. We flew off to New York, it was Mary Jane (Teall), Mary Umansky, Mary Jabara and myself and this was 1960 and we would go to the upstairs to the downstairs and the downstairs to the upstairs and we would sit with little notepads and quickly write down all we could and even the actors would look at us and find out what we were doing and we brought all this stuff back and Mary Jane would put stuff together and then she would print it off...so the Lassen hotel would let us go there, and we started the show in 1961 and we did only one act of Commedia and the second act was Lysistrata. We were in a big hallway in the Lassen hotel and they literally set up chairs every weekend and we sold out every weekend and they asked us to stay another four weeks and we had to come up with more material, and they told us they were selling drinks by the ton and I think at the time when Commedia was here I think they were making $30,000 a summer, people would beg and we would stay opened til labor day. It was very good, they got their comedy training by being in that show, no one ever really thought about improv in those days, and she never thought that the actors would be clever enough to come up with anything for the headlines that people would

78 The greek comedy by Aristophanes.
come up with in the intermission and the actors are creative at improvising.\textsuperscript{79}

Commedia blended the quickness, silliness and outrageousness of improvisational theater with one popular entity, alcohol. Entertainment was the main goal of Commedia, but the difficulty was not always finding actors to create a festive atmosphere, it was finding writers to create the up to date, news worthy satire of the day to keep the basis of the theater community entertained. “Commedia, is a series of blackout sketches, some written around local situations, some adapted from popular professional skits and revues.”\textsuperscript{80}

**GIVING BACK**

Commedia along with the other performances were such hits that the Wichita Community Theater felt that they should give back to the community that had supported them for so many years and brought so much success to the once small group. Along with the classes and workshops on the campus of the University of Wichita, the community theater set up a scholarship for a promising high school boy and a promising high school girl at the university level. Martin Reif, a long time member of the Wichita Community Theater and one time President of the board, discussed when the community theater first started to give back.

\textsuperscript{79} Jean Ann Cusick, Interview by author, 14 December 2008, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.

\textsuperscript{80} “No Longer is Stage Life Wicked.” *The Wichita Sunday Eagle and Beacon*, July 25, 1965, 1E.
I must say the first scholarship we ever gave was probably the best one we ever gave out, to Larry King, who went on to graduate and get a Master’s degree at Yale school and has been a major designer of theatrical design ever since then. I’m not quite sure where...I think he works for one of the soap operas...For “As the World Turns”, he is a designer, one of the designers...Some of the others, we were perhaps less happy with, but just the idea of the community theater being able to return to the community part of the profits that we had accumulated is such an extraordinary thing that I feel that any record of the theater should have that as part of Martin Umansky’s accomplishments.  

Although there were other scholarship winners, the first award winner was the most memorable for the group. Later, after the scholarships had been cancelled due to lack of funds from the Wichita Community Theater, the Mary Jane Teall awards committee picked up the torch of the scholarships, giving money to an incoming freshman at Wichita State University.

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81 “Interview about The History of Community Theatre: Sixty’s and Seventy’s with Mary Jane Teall; Martin and Eva Reif; Agnes Quinn; Millie Meier; Mary and Martin Umansky,” Mary Jane Teall Papers) pp23-24.
FIGURE 7. Martin Umansky.

Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle.
The scholarship was just one of many accomplishments that Martin Umansky provided for the Wichita Community Theater and the City of Wichita. If Mary Jane was considered the energy, the source that drove the spirit of the Wichita Community Theater, the mother of theater in Wichita, then Martin Umansky was considered the rich, business minded uncle, keeping the theater running on all cylinders, paying salaries and keeping the theater relevant as business manager of WCT for over thirty years. Umansky, a New Yorker by birth, served as KAKE-TV Wichita’s chairman of the board and spent nearly his entire professional life as a Wichita broadcaster.

A journalism graduate from the University of Missouri, Umansky hitchhiked through Missouri and Kansas looking for any type of work and eventually stumbled on KANS radio who hired him as news editor. After serving in the Army during World War II, he returned to Wichita and created “a late-evening disc jockey show called “Nightcap with Martin.” 82 Asked to change his name when he volunteered his time to the show because his last name from Umansky to Martin Bass because his last name sounded too “Bolshevik-y” during the height of the Cold War, and people accused of communism were blacklisted from almost any type of

career. In time, however, the name Martin Umansky became synonymous with one of the most successful television stations in the Midwest. He headed a board of national network affiliates, run the Kansas Arts Commission and serve on the Kansas Board of Regents and the boards of the Wichita Community Theater and the Wichita Art Museum.83

When KAKE radio was created in 1947, Umansky moved his nightly show to the new radio station, where he also was in charge of selling advertising and later became sales manager. Once KAKE-TV Wichita went on the air and Umansky became general manager, he always tried to help sponsor local events such as parades, health fairs, local programming and improvements in education in Wichita. Umansky was the beneficiary of many awards and honors bestowed on him for his. The Benemerenti Medal and the Knight of St. Sylvester, the highest award given to a non-Catholic was given to him by Pope John XXIII. He also received many other local awards such as Wichita Advertising Man of the Year in 1967, the Distinguished Service Award from the Kansas Association of Broadcasters and the Wichita Board of Education Distinguished Citizen Award.

As general manager of KAKE-TV Wichita, he constantly strove to give back to the city that supported KAKE-TV, a philosophy

83 “Wichita Loses TV Pioneer, Civic Leader” Wichita Eagle, Friday May, 5, 2000, 1.
that he carried with him as business manager of the Wichita Community Theater, both positions he held for over thirty years.

Martin’s wife, Mary, an actress and original member of the Unitarian experiment, met and married Martin shortly after World War II in Oklahoma. Mrs. Umansky attended Northwestern Oklahoma State University where she received her teaching credentials before moving to Wichita with Martin Umansky. Martin Umansky did not miss a single show in his years as business manager, running the theater and keeping the governing board financially fit for each season and helped plan some of the best theatrical productions in Wichita. Why Martin and his wife were attending the Unitarian Church’s group meeting is still unclear. The Umanskys, members of the Jewish congregation in Wichita were likely invited due to the many connections that Martin had from his radio career and his business mind.

Because every good creator needs a good financial planner, Martin Umansky filled the bill. He helped Mary Jane create the possibility for the stars to come to Wichita by offering the stars small, but worthwhile payments. He also attempted to create a friendly atmosphere within Wichita by creating the opportunity to award scholarships to High School students. Martin Umansky also created the opportunity for the Wichita Community Theater to help the Wichita Public Library so that it
may create a collection of reference books. The library received a check for 2,500 dollars to invest in new books for the library mostly on the subject of theater and theater related topics. Never one to delegate responsibility as the Wichita Community Theater’s business manager, Umansky did the tasks that were needed at the theater for over 25 years. Instead of hiring a house manager to prepare the theater for the upcoming shows, Umansky took on the task for over 500 performances.

FIGURE 8: A drawing of the Temple Emanu-El at Second and Fountain Streets, now the Wichita Community Theater

Courtesy of the Temple Emanu-El
TEMPLE EMANU-EL

Martin Umansky’s ties to the local Jewish community also contributed to the Wichita Community Theaters move to its next base of operations. With the great support that the city of Wichita gave the theater, the success of Commedia, and the popularity of the road shows, Wichita Community Theater found themselves in a financially fit condition to try to find a place of their own. Soon the opportunity arose for the small group to purchase the old Temple Emanu-El Jewish synagogue at Second and Fountain streets in the development of College Hill in Wichita.

Temple Emanu-El, the first Jewish congregation within the city of Wichita, was established in 1885. The Jewish congregation consisted of many different members within the Jewish community, including men such as Ike Goldsmith, Sol H. Kohn and Henry Wallenstein who all devoted their lives to bringing the Jewish religion and values to the whole community. After meeting in many different locations, such as the G.A.R Hall, the First Unitarian Church’s new facility at Topeka and Central, and the United Congregational Church at First and Clifton until 1932 when the congregation’s first building at Second and Fountain in the College Hill area was completed. The two story building contained classrooms, a Rabbi’s office, a small library and a 125 seat sanctuary with a balcony and choir.
loft. When the Congregation constructed a new Temple on East Central in 1961, its College Hill facility became available to be purchased. Agnes Quinn, a long time member of Wichita Community Theater, recalled the trip by some of the board members to look at the facility that they then approved to become the community theater workshop.

Well, Martin had been at the Board meeting, of course, and told us that there was a possibility that this building could be purchased and I (Agnes Quinn) live just a couple of blocks south of here and had never been in it and after the Board meeting it was 11:30 or 12:00 at night, Mary Jane, Mary Jabara and myself came over here. Dark as pitch. The doors were supposedly locked, but we jiggled them and the locks were poor enough that we came in. Talk about breaking and entering. Remember, we had a terrible time...we came with no flashlights no nothing, we couldn’t find light switches but we did stumble around in the dark and finally got some light on in here and then got tickled, because we thought if the neighbors saw lights coming on and off they would call the police. But we covered this building from stem to stern and we made up our minds right then and there that this was what we wanted to have. And remember, we reported to Martin (Umansky) and he got that good price for it because we paid cash on the barrel head. Remember there were no loans, no nothing. It was paid and it was ours after you got the easements and everything84.

This new purchase brought something that the Wichita Community Theater had not experienced in their history, a place to call home. With a new home the theater not only had a new business office so that it may keep track of season ticket sales, house its costumes (instead of the basements of members) and have a meeting place for its members. This provided a new venue to

84 “Interview about The History of Community Theatre: Sixty’s and Seventy’s with Mary Jane Teall; Martin and Eva Reif; Agnes Quinn; Millie Meier; Mary and Martin Umansky,” Mary Jane Teall Papers) 24.
keep the summer variety show “Commedia” going and also to expand WCT’s theatrical entertainment to include some avant garde shows. It also created a place to offer expanded classes and workshops. “The W.C.T. also gives classes in acting once a week to about 90 children. The purpose is not primarily to train them to be actors but to give them a chance to stretch their imaginations.”85 The group still performed on the stage at the University of Wichita and still graced the halls of the commons area to help promote the shows and to teach classes, but the new property offered a place for rehearsing and storage. The barn was cleaned and turned back over to the Murfins after the purchase of property on Fountain.

The property brought in a new era to the Wichita Community Theater, and a new era brought a new celebration. The Wichita Community Theater christened the new Wichita Community Theater Workshop on a fall Monday evening of 1963. The group’s quick success in the short time, sixteen years, was celebrated on that fall evening in November.

Joining the group to help christen the theater was Helen Hayes, who was in town with Maurice Evans to perform a production at the Wichita East High auditorium. Festivities included Isaac Stern, a renowned violin virtuoso, who was in

town with the Wichita Symphony Orchestra for that week. Hayes, a long-time visitor to Wichita, was the keynote speaker and chosen to unveil the abstract metal letter above the entrance. “Miss Hayes pulled a rope which lowered canvas curtains from the two signs, designed and made by Frank Curry in abstract metal. Beneath the sign “Community Theater Workshop” is a mask with two faces—the traditional masks of tragedy and of drama.” The letters to this day remain above the doorway, however the masks are missing and have not been located. “She referred to the commandment inscribed above the workshop door—“Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself”—which she said was appropriate for volunteer theater activities. Persons working in a community theater are more apt to grow to know their neighbors and know the true spirit of neighborliness.” All the success and philanthropy of the Wichita Community Theater brought not only the local media to the theater, mostly due to the workings of Martin Umansky, but also brought the small organization national attention.

THEATER RECEIVES NATIONAL ATTENTION

Two major publications sang the praises of the small organization. Variety discussed both the surprising popularity that the theater was attracting and the good that the theater

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
was contributing to the surrounding area. The national publication Pageant discussed what was so surprising about the Wichita Community Theater.

It might be an eyeopener [sic] to those who think of the city of Wichita as a cultural desert that two events slated for the same evening are SRO more than two months in advance. While it seldom happens here that a legit and a longhair booking conflict, the night of Feb. 4 has Isaac Stern playing a recital at the 2,400-seat East High Auditorium and Maurice Evans and Helen Hayes in their "Program For Two Players" at the 1,600-seat Univ. of Wichita Auditorium. The Wichita Community Theater, having become the sole sponsor of roadshows in this city of 350,000, points up the possible role such amateur groups might play in the future of professional legit at the grassroots level. In 16 seasons the Community Theater has developed an average audience of 4,000 per show, including 2,800 season subscribers paying $6 for a series of four productions. That represents more than 1% of the city’s population. With never losing a semester, and without benefit of donations or gifts, the group’s treasury this year grew to $57,000, representing the total profits from ticket sales nursed along 16 seasons.90

Both magazines, Variety and Pageant, touched on both the popularity and success of the Wichita Community Theater and Pageant delved into the comparisons of the small city theater versus that of Broadway and how the success of the small city community theater’s showed a rapid trend of the theater entertainment industry in America. Pageant also discussed how the Wichita Community Theater differed from a lot of other small city theaters.

All this is done without any grants from foundations, any large gifts, and fund raising. Martin Umansky, the business manager, believes that one reason for the project’s success is that “Nobody is ever asked to go out and knock on his neighbor’s door asking for cash.” Of course, the Wichita Theater has many things going for it that Broadway hasn’t. Tickets are from $2.25 to $2.75 tops. The rental is $2500 for the entire season. Except for one imported star for the opening production of the season who gets from around $1000 to $1500, it doesn’t have to pay salaries to actors, stagehands, or set designers. The total cost of each production ranges from $3000 to $4000. (On Broadway it averages $75,000 for a straight play and $300,000 for a musical comedy.) And neither of the two local newspaper critics has a taste for blood. Most important is, of course, the support of the hundreds of citizens of Wichita who work with boundless enthusiasm on each production. At one time or another half the merchants in town have lent props. The bed manufacturer who supplied most of the furnishings for “The Best Man” at another time set his mechanics to forging heavy swords for “Rashomon”. But even that yeoman service pales in comparison with the sacrifice of the family that went without its living room couch, several of its chairs, and all of its dining stools for ten days while a show was being rehearsed and played. Every institution in town, it seems, pitches in. The Public Library sells season tickets (at from $7 to $11). The leading department store encloses with its August bills advertisements of W.C.T.’s coming season and allows customers to charge season tickets. The employees’ clubs at two large aircraft companies sell season tickets to members at reduced prices, making up the difference from club funds.91

Another major recognition that the community theater received also came with the recognition of Wichita as an All-American City.

The Wichita Community Theater is proud to be singled out by the judges of the Look Magazine-National Municipal League Committee as one of the reasons why Wichita was recognized for its community achievements. And we are just as pleased to pass this honor to the patrons of our Theatre who made

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possible this nationwide spotlight attraction. The Look representatives were delighted to learn that during its fifteen years of existence the Community Theatre never called upon its local businesses or citizens to donate funds to meet its expenses.92

All of this attention from the local and national media brought the Wichita Community Theater to the forefront of Wichita’s cultural changes and the movement in the 1960s and 1970s called Urban Renewal, a movement that created a possible new home for the group and the theater would have some type of influence on how the theater would be designed.

CENTURY II

Nearing the end of its first century in existence, the City of Wichita began to follow a national trend called Urban Renewal, which tried to revitalize urban areas within a city. During the 1960s, President Johnson put into effect an agency created to help renew a lot of bigger cities downtown areas. This agency, called the Urban Renewal Agency, was utilized by these cities to create a more pleasant and appealing downtown area. Wichita’s goal was to create a larger and more attractive auditorium and civic center. The Forum, built in 1911, was in disrepair and was no longer an attractive entertainment venue. A push was on to create something that brought in more events but also something to celebrate Wichita’s centennial birthday in

1970. The thought was to create a centerpiece for the city of Wichita, creating a more pleasing to the eye downtown area and replacing many unattractive structures that filled the downtown area south of Douglas and Main and the river.

The proposal of the new Century II complex excited the arts community and the fact that the Wichita Community Theater had some type of influence in how the new “Little Theater” inside the new complex was to be designed created good will with the theater. The excitement of the designs for the proposed civic center brought together the Wichita Arts Council in May of 1959 to discuss the “Cultural Requirements of Wichita’s Proposed Arts Center.” Many different representatives of Wichita’s arts community attended the panel to discuss what was necessary for the new building. Among these attendees were Henry Peltier, manager of the Wichita Symphony, Mary Jane Teall, director of the Wichita Community Theater, Richard Grove, director of the art museum, and former Wichita mayor James Gardner. An article in the *Wichita Eagle* summed up the panel’s discussion and support of the new proposal “Panelists agreed that art groups in Wichita are struggling along with facilities designed for a city of only 47,000.”

The “Little Theater” in the new Civic Center, which will be used by the Wichita Community Theater, but because of the

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93 “Art Council Panel Discusses Center,” *Wichita Eagle*, May 30, 1959, 6A.
The uniqueness of the stage with its new technology and the intimacy of smaller venue that created an more distinctive audience-actor relationship will require fresh imaginative design and direction, even perhaps a new style of play. Wichita is likely to have a theater plant sufficiently new and distinctive design to attract national attention.94

The new civic center, called Century II in recognition of the city’s upcoming centennial in 1970, took 8 years to construct. The new civic center spanned 9 city blocks, costing over 12.6 million dollars to create. The circular building was divided into 4 different pieces, housing four different types of venues, including a 675 seat theater called the Little Theater, a 5,700 seat Convention Hall, a Concert Hall seating 2,200 people and a 50,000 square foot Exhibit Hall, along with dressing rooms, a theater work shop, meeting rooms and office spaces.95

Soon the Wichita Community Theater left the technologically outdated University of Wichita stage to perform their mainstage productions in the newly created Little Theater inside the Century II civic center. Larry Klein, at the time technical director for the Wichita Community Theater discussed with the Wichita Eagle the benefits of Century II’s Little Theater. “The lighting equipment at Century II is far advanced over many new theaters. It’s flexible, artistic lighting.”96 The lighting, sound and stage systems were all top-of-the-line inside Century II.

94 “City’s Theatrical Outlook Considered Bright in ’64” The Wichita Eagle, Dec. 28, 1963, 7A.
II, and it provided storage space on sight for the Little Theater.

The positives of moving from the University of Wichita outweighed the negatives. Century II was more expensive to lease, having to rent out not only the stage and facilities, but also an extra room for storage. The theater group did so to consolidate its storage facility at the University of Wichita. The new scene shop at Century II had state of the art facilities including a lift, lighting, stage curtains and seating. Moving into the Little Theater inside Century II solved another major problem for the theater group, priority. Although it shared some of the facilities with events such as road shows, the Wichita Community Theater had first priority when it came to scheduling productions. This was a major change from the University of Wichita. Instead of sharing the stage with the University’s theater schedule, rehearsing and building outside of the stage and then moving in and out as quickly as possible to keep the University’s theater available, WCT was able to house sets, keep shows running longer and not have to worry about getting out of the way.

In January of 1969, the Wichita Community Theater finally moved to the new state of the art “Little Theater” within the confines of the new community building, Century II. That year,
the 1968-1969 seasons was a split season, starting out on the planks of the University of Wichita and then moving to the newly created scene shop and stage of Century II.97

From the moment of the move from the University of Wichita scene shop to the confines of Century II, however, nothing seemed to go right. Martin Reif recalled the move into Century II, he remembered that nothing seemed to go right in the new state of the art facility.

This one I remember, because for the first time ever we had a real beautiful honest to goodness, full of space scene shop. I hired most of the football team and I hired two trucks and I thought I was so organized that I be [sic] the United Nations could take pride in what we were doing and really drove one of those trucks and about the first load that came in on Saturday morning we hit the overhead pipes down in the basement in Century II and we drained downtown Wichita of all the available water. We finally got the city plumber to shut off the water and we hired some people with huge squeegees because by some trick known only to the architects, the floor drains are always a quarter of an inch higher than the ground that surrounds them. So they were sweeping the water down there and by this time someone got a hold of Mary Jane who came streaming down there, hiked up here shorts and single handedly was going to save all the organ pipes. But we finally persuaded her that the pipes were a good deal heavier and bigger than she was and got her out of the way. The thing was done, the place was obviously unfit. We called a halt for it and we did another two shipments or so and things were pretty marked so all we had to do was set them in. I got another telephone call and Larry said, ‘Guess what?’ and I said ‘What do you mean, guess what?’ Larry said, ‘We did it again.’ ‘Now what?’ ‘Don’t worry, he only knocked off the automatic sprinklers and we pushed corks from bottles into it and we’ve got it under control.’ Pretty soon the telephone rang again and it was Larry and he said ‘Well, as

97 This comes from the Wichita Community Theater playbills.
Through all of the struggles that the theater was having with its new surroundings, the group pressed on, trying to move all of the sets, scenic work and storage into the new confines in time for its next production, *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, which opened the new Civic Center, Century II, to the City of Wichita.

No sooner did the group settle into its new facilities in Century II than it began to sell out shows. The move did not affect the popularity of the community theater in any way, and soon the group was on its way, and even began producing more shows, not only at the Little Theater inside of Century II, but also at the Workshop at Second and Fountain streets.

The workshop, the former Temple Emanu-El in Wichita was a small little building that now housed the popular annual variety show *Commedia* and the home of the news/media satire *Gridiron*. It also began to offer to the public the same classes that were on the campus of the University of Wichita. Soon several students had the desire to want to produce even more shows, at the small workshop, more avant-garde, possibly student directed shows.

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98 “Interview about The History of Community Theatre: Sixty’s and Seventy’s with Mary Jane Teall; Martin and Eva Reif; Agnes Quinn; Millie Meier; Mary and Martin Umansky,” Mary Jane Teall Papers) 27.
Up to this point, Mary Jane had the reigns for directing all the shows, but with the new movement to produce shows at the workshop, to extend its reach to outside of Century II, the group decided to go ahead and produce some smaller shows at the workshop. Mary Jane directed the first several shows there as well, not quite comfortable with releasing the direction to someone else, but as Dr. Phil Speary, former President of WCT and current Vice President remembers it, “Mary Jane let me direct “Seagull” in 1978, but it was a very difficult thing, she had always been in charge and directed everything, so for her to let someone else direct a show was very difficult for her.99”

The community theater had found a new niche within the community. Throughout the 1970s, the Theater ran a very lucrative practice by having not only main stage shows performed at the Little Theater in Century II, but also putting on performances to a smaller crowd at the Wichita Community Theater Workshop in College Hill, housing its very successful variety show Commedia and the news satire Gridiron but also offering acting, directing, costuming and other theater related classes.

The Wichita Community Theater went through a lot in its infancy, struggling to get started, working with a limited budget if any at all, filling up a 200 seat church basement to

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99 Phil Speary interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
selling out 1,200 seats on the campus of the University of Wichita to having two places of their own, the Little Theater inside Wichita’s new civic center, Century II, and the Wichita Community Theater Workshop in the small little neighborhood of College Hill. The organization was leading the way in live entertainment in the city, with its annual year-in-review comic variety show, *Commedia* staged at the workshop, to hosting the media’s yearly satire in March *Gridiron*, to providing acting, design and directing classes and on top of all those activities, producing four professional quality main stage shows to near sellout crowds at the Little Theater in Century II.100

Behind all of this success was a group of motivated volunteers, a solid group of amateurs seeing that things within the theater group succeeded. One of the things that made the Wichita Community Theater stand out was that there were few paid staff members. Most community theaters in America consist of several paid staff members, including artistic directors, technical directors, business managers, office managers and executive directors. WCT only had three people within their ranks that were paid Mary Jane Teall, the director of all of the shows on the main stage and artistic director, who was forced by the board to take a modest salary but donated it all back to the theater living off her Wichita State University teacher’s

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100 This information also comes from the Wichita Community Theater playbills.
salary. The theater also paid a business manager (Martin Umansky did not have a salary before he retired), and one office assistant. The salaries were not usually enough to live on, but attempted to be adequate enough to compensate for all of the hard work and time that those workers put into the theater. However the group of volunteers that made up the board kept people coming in the door.

The board of the Wichita Community Theater was created so that it could sell season tickets not run the theater, Mary Jane and Martin Umansky handled the normal day to day operations of the theater. Mary Jane, as artistic director, was the one who came up with a list of shows that she wanted to do at Century II and at the workshop which would be the Wichita Community Theater’s season. Mary Jane (on occasion) turned over the directing duties for shows at the workshop to people she trusted to do a good job. She felt that it was a good ground for people to learn how to hone their skills to direct. Soon the shows at the workshop were turned over to many different people, allowing for more expansion. Among the people to direct at the workshop included Dr. Phil Speary, Misty Maynard, Dr. Don Wineke and Beth and Larry Sifford. This group of people began to then create a committee to select what shows were produced at the workshop, working in coordination with Mary Jane and the shows at Century
II. The 1970s seemed to be the “Golden Age” of the Wichita Community Theater’s history, but of course as with any story of success, there seems to always be a fall.

FIGURE 9. Century II Civic Center.

*Courtesy of the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum*

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101 Phil Speary interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
CHAPTER III
OVER-SATURATION

As the Wichita Community Theater began seeing the height of its success, a remarkable thing was happening in the city: theater began to become popular. It was not that theater and entertainment were not popular within and around the city, but it started to become more popular than ever. At the time that the Wichita Community Theater began its meager existence as the Unitarian Church Experiment, not even a handful of theaters doing live performances were available to the public.

By the mid 1970s to early 1980s there were a host of groups, including Music Theater of Wichita, the Kechi Playhouse, the Crown Uptown Dinner Theater, the Cowtown Dinner Theater, Cabaret Old Town Theater, and the Wichita State University Summer Theater. All remained successful for many years, most to this day, and all had a connection to the Wichita Community Theater or Mary Jane Teall. Dr. Phil Speary told the Wichita Eagle: “I don’t think there are very many people in Wichita who haven’t been part of community theater in some way...”

Live theatrical entertainment became so popular that there was a thought that Wichita, a small city by many standards, was

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102“Wichita’s Oldest Theater Troupe still evolving---The Amateur Volunteers Survive Moves, Artistic Differences, Splintering and Controversy to Launch 60th Season this week”, The Wichita Eagle, Sunday, September 3, 2006,5E.
becoming over-saturated with live theater, and this theory was
brought on by a drop in attendance in many theaters during the
mid 1970s. According to Mary Jane Teall that oversaturation
coincided with a drop in attendance:

I go along with the saturation idea because there are so
many things to go to that it’s hard to make a choice. It
has begun to disturb people, and we may be close to the
point where there are too many. At one time we were the
only theater in town, and we used to have people lined up
four abreast waiting to get in for only a few tickets. But
theater has grown incredibly since then, and we’re all
hitting the same people over and over.103

Even Wichita State University’s director of theater, Dick
Welsbacher, saw over-saturation as the cause for the drop off in
attendance. “People who go with the saturation idea often fail
to consider the huge number of quality high school programs that
also compete for leisure time. The saturation actually is more
than they realize.”104 Of course, not everyone shared that same
idea. Most believed that in the summer time, the triple digit
temperatures and below freezing winters in a time before central
heat and air, kept the population from attending theater.
Whatever the reasons, theater was popular in the city of
Wichita, and even with the drop in attendance, theater was still
thriving. Dr. Wineke stated his reasons for the drop in
attendance, “I think that it had a lot to do with the invention
and popularity of the VHS player and recorder. Now families

104 Ibid.
could stay home, rent movies, record television shows and not leave the house.” But the drop in attendance and the large amounts of theater in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to have been a small sign as to what was to come for the Wichita Community Theater.

GROWING PAINS

The fourth decade for the Wichita Community Theater organization seemed to be filled with lots of controversy, but it began with one of its founding members being honored. Mary Jane Teall, considered the mother of all live theater in Wichita, was honored as she was named to the Kansas Theater Hall of Fame in 1981. Nancy Pate, staff writer for the *Wichita Eagle and Beacon* told of Mary Jane entering the Hall of Fame.

Mary Jane Teall, director of Wichita Community Theater and assistant professor of speech communications at Wichita State University, will be inducted into the Kansas Theater Hall of Fame Saturday night in Salina. The hall of fame was established last year by the Association of Kansas Theaters to honor outstanding contributions to theater by Kansans.

The honoring of Mary Jane into the Kansas Theater Hall of Fame was one of the highest points for a member of the Wichita Community Theater, but it was a very short lived commemoration. The rest of the decade was filled with controversy after controversy.

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105 Don Wineke, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
106 “Teall Named to Theater Hall of Fame.” *Wichita Eagle and Beacon*, March 14, 1981. 2C.
The first major controversy for the Wichita Community Theater occurred at the Workshop, located in the very conservative and very intimate area of College Hill. The theater began to get into some trouble with the surrounding community with the behavior of a few drunken and boisterous late nights after the popular shows, Commedia and Gridiron. One appeal about Commedia and Gridiron to their audiences was that the workshop sold alcohol and even “allowed” theater-goers to bring alcohol into the theater and have a drink or two...or four. Commedia and Gridiron were, after all, a celebration of the past year, a “year in highlights”.

Yet liquor by the drink was still not allowed and the states complex and restrictive alcohol laws were major controversial issues at this time. But with all of this alcohol, and no regulation, sometimes things tended to get out of hand. Gridiron, a year in review production performed by Wichita’s local media, not only giving the local journalists and media to poke fun at themselves but to raise money for the Kansas Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists for college scholarships to aspiring journalists.107 These productions, which are still being organized at the Orpheum Theater in Wichita, have had a reputation for being very rowdy and risqué. Dr. Don Wineke, former WCT President recalled a few

of the issues. “Commedia and Gridiron were very rowdy, there was drinking, there was illegal consumption of liquor during Commedia and Gridiron, but you have to understand that Commedia was THE moneymaker for the community theater, the budget for the entire year was predicated on the money that Commedia took in.”

This made no difference to the surrounding community. Soon complaints from the College Hill community about the noise, public intoxication and after hour partying came to the city of Wichita. One letter to the editor of the *Wichita Eagle and Beacon* summed up the problems that the theater was causing.

No, we don’t have a bar in our neighborhood, but with the community theater here, there’s not a lot of difference. Some of my neighbors have had to call the police to get the loiterers out of the streets and off their lawns after a theater show. And the day after a performance, ever one in the immediate area can count on getting to pick up trash and beer cans from their yards. A class B club must face state regulatory control, and the theater doesn’t. So when the drunks carrying their liquor in brown bags stumble out into the streets breaking the nighttime tranquility with loud, profane language and screeching automobile tires, there’s no law enforcement personnel around.

Police Chief Richard LeMunyon, at the urging of the local community, decided to crack down on the public intoxication at the Wichita Community Theater’s annual Commedia shows and started to try enforcing the liquor laws. The community theater

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108 Don Wineke, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
109 “Don’t expand community theater-move it.” *Wichita Eagle and Beacon*, May 20, 1985, 1C.
found a loophole, however, went to their local attorney, and got a private club license for each show that sold alcohol. This allowed each patron the legal ability to drink on premises by stating that a ticket purchased was to a private club, but this was not a cheap approach to the problem. This was the first problem in a list of incidents that occurred in the 1980s for the workshop that had long lasting effects.

The controversy that caused a major public demonstration and was the most prominent in the memory of a lot of theater leaders, however, was the show at the Wichita Community Theater workshop called “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You” by playwright Christopher Durang. Directed by Beth Sifford, the show was about a nun who lost her grasp on sanity; when confronted by four of her former students who had strayed from the church’s teaching, she kills one of them in self defense and then another, who was a homosexual, to save him from sin.

Dr. Wineke recalls that it “was one of the most stressful periods I have ever endured in theater.”110 He recalled:

“Sister Mary Ignatius” was in 85…I ran the lights for that show. It was a mean spirited satire, a mean satire on Catholic teaching and College Hill was one of the most Catholic neighborhoods…it was a very anti-Catholic show and it has a crazy nun and a week before the show opened the Catholic Advance ran a headline saying that WCT had anti-

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110 Don Wineke, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
Catholic show running at community theater and we had picketers; there were people parking close to the theater to discourage people from coming and I got in a verbal confrontation with a guy across the street. Some people got up during the show and very vocally said I don’t know why some of you people think this is funny and left while the actors were on stage.\textsuperscript{111}

The show, however, did go on without any major incident, except for the picketers outside and on closing night a couple of people who left the show but as Wineke recalls, “Mary Jane went to all the neighbors and apologized for the incident, she did not want to alienate anyone in the area.”\textsuperscript{112}

\textbf{FIGURE 10.} Picketers of “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All”.

\textit{Courtesy of the Wichita Eagle and Beacon.}

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
For the city of Wichita, artistic changes were occurring, not only with the Wichita Community Theater, but everywhere. Productions that were considered “safe” theater were well liked in the community. However, controversial productions such as the WCT’s production were picketed or even threatened with police action. Productions of the rock musical *Hair* by James Rado and Gerome Ragni was a show about the hippie counter-culture and sexual revolution. The musical's profanity, its depiction of the use of illegal drugs, its treatment of sexuality and its nude scene caused controversy all across the United States.

Dudley Toevs, a Wichita born artist who has taught drama, speech, history, a Methodist minister and has also directed choirs for over 50 years, recalled the situation at Century II with the new musical production of the rock musical *Hair*.

I remember Vern Miller, former Sedgwick County Sheriff, was appalled at the language and nudity of the production *Hair*. Miller was a tough cop, he would try to enforce antiquated laws. He would jump out of the trunks of cars to arrest people. I remember one story where he would fly and if the people served alcohol over state lines, he would arrest them on the plane. The place was packed, about 2,000 people. I saw a friend and leaned over to him and said ‘I guess we are going to jail tonight.’ He told me that he was prepared. The guy sitting next to me was jerking around and he was just there for the nudity, he was listening to a transistor radio, some game. The cast handled the nudity well, they all got under a parachute, got naked as the lights dimmed, and then they flipped the parachute up in the air as high as it could be thrown and stood naked like statues and as the parachute came down the
lights would dim some more. There was no real reason given to why Vern Miller did not arrest anyone. ¹¹³

For the Wichita Community Theater, changes were everywhere. With falling attendance numbers and rising costs, the theater was forced to make changes in order to survive. One idea was to expand the Workshop at Second and Fountain Streets in College Hill. As Wineke remembered, “During the mid 80s, this theater got very ambitious in terms of expansion but it became less and less feasible to stay at Century II. The costs were prohibitive and became hard to break even.”¹¹⁴ A proposed expansion did not sit well with the people in College Hill for the fear that it disrupted the quiet neighborhood. The proposal was to build a rehearsal hall and storage facility onto the existing workshop structure that extended into the vacant lot south of the workshop, land that is owned by the theater. The workshop had been used for smaller productions, rehearsals, meetings and summer revues but the because of rising costs and the lowering of attendance, the Workshop seemed to be a better place to grow, because the theater group owned the facilities and the land and had a better chance at breaking even with its shows. Although the community theater owned the land that the facilities were on and the proposed expansion, the group had to have applied to the city’s Board of Zoning Appeals for a zoning exception to build

¹¹³ Dudley Le Roy Dodgion Toevs interview by author, 5 October 2009, Wichita, KS.
¹¹⁴ Don Wineke, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
the proposed addition. That board had final say in whether or not to approve the matter.

The College Hill residents opposed the expansion and expressed concern that if the theater’s board of directors, the 24 member decision making board for the non-profit theater group decided to expand there was a possibility that the run of each performances be expanded, that there were problems with traffic, parking, noise, trash and alcohol consumption during workshop and Commedia performances. Some in the College Hill neighborhood expressed opinions that they thought that the theater group had over-stepped their bounds from the original agreement in 1961, when the city of Wichita granted zoning variances for the community theater. Others expressed their opinions to the Wichita Eagle and Beacon; for instance, Sue Horn Estes, who represented the Citizen Participation Organization Council wrote, “It sounds like they’ve really outgrown the building and it’s time for them to move out of the neighborhood.”

At about the same time that thoughts of expanding were taking place, the community theater also pursued the idea of purchasing another building in place of performing at Century II’s Little Theater and to sell the workshop on Fountain and to

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115 “Neighbors fight possible theater growth.” Wichita Eagle and Beacon, May 6, 1985. 2C.
consolidate to one building. The community theater had made a tentative offer in late 1984 to purchase the Crest Theater, a single screen movie theater that had opened in the 1950s, with plans to convert that building for use by the Wichita Community Theater. The offer that was made was contingent on the outcome of a study that was to determine the feasibility of converting the old movie house into a live theater facility. “Cusick said the $10,000 earnest money be refunded if the study is negative and the theater group backs off. However, she emphasized that the offer is tentative and that an ultimate total cost of about $790,000-$365,000 purchase price plus a potential $425,000 remodeling cost—may be too high.”\(^{116}\)

The community theater’s board of directors voted down both options, the first to expand the Wichita Community Theater workshop and the second to purchase the Crest movie house for varying reasons. The expansion of the workshop was voted down because, as theater manager Jean Ann Cusick, who took over the position in March of 1984 recalled, “It would create bad public relations with the neighbors who were against it.”\(^{117}\) After declaring that it would not expand the workshop, the community theater immediately began to attempt to be better neighbors by purchasing trash carts with more capacity, herbicide to try to

\(^{116}\) “Crest Theater On Sale Block” \textit{Wichita Eagle and Beacon}, Saturday, November 24, 1984, 7C.

\(^{117}\) Jean Ann Cusick, Interview by author, 14 December 2008, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
control the weeds, and a notice to all theater attendees their programs to respect the rights of the neighbors regarding noise and parking. The purchasing of the Crest movie house was voted down unanimously because of the feasibility and cost effectiveness to turn the old movie theater into a live theater.

As problems with the neighborhood began to die down and the community theater began to go back to business as usual, hoping that the low attendance of shows and the financial problems resolved on their own a small but ambitious group of local actors decided to create a group within the theater called “The Players.” The Players came together as part of the Wichita Community Theater’s members and elected a representative to have on the theater’s board and was a deciding factor on what occurred at the Workshop. Many of these members were actors who had worked alongside many of the other people for the past several decades, including Beth and Larry Siford, Bob and Judy Braddy, Don Wineke and many others. These members arranged meetings for the members at the workshop to discuss the latest shows, critique those shows, have guest speakers address the group, throw Sunday afternoon get-togethers, and just to have more to do within the theater community. Soon some members of the Players group began to want more and more say in what occurred at the Wichita Community Theater.
MARY JANE TEALL’S RESIGNATION

The rise of the Players at the Wichita Community Theater was considered one of necessity. The community theater was getting bigger, with many new faces getting involved in the day-to-day operations of the theater. New people were coming in with very different ideas, very different talents and very different personalities. Some people were very vocal about how things were run within the organization, and those few expressed their ideas in any way they possibly could. They started seeing Mary Jane Teall as an obstacle to progress as much as an asset.

Since its inception, Mary Jane Woodard, now Teall, had been the artistic driving force of the Wichita Community Theater. From the days of performing original one acts at the Unitarian Experimental Theater in the basement of the Unitarian Church, Mary Jane has been the person in control of all things artistically, and for 43 years, each endeavor worked. Mary Jane created the “star” shows, albeit stars past their prime, but recognizable names for one show of a four show season. It was Mary Jane who saw a need in Wichita for a variety type show with music and lyrics, poking fun at the previous year and it became the most lucrative and successful ventures in theater for the Wichita Community Theater ever. Mary Jane was the director who pushed her actors as far as they could go, trying to get
professional quality performances out of amateur actors, and a majority of the time she got just that, a professional caliber show. Mary Jane was the person who gave credit to anyone else, humbleness and giving were one of the many reasons why she was a staple at the Wichita Community Theater and such a driving force, she was the main reason for success, giving not only almost all of her time to the theater, but a lot of her space, including her basement for the storage of costumes, props, a goat and other sundry items. However when things began to drop in popularity, when attendance consistently dropped and new, younger and more energetic people began to emerge, a new generation of actors and directors with their own ideas, Mary Jane’s ideas that brought such success to the theater were the first to be attacked. Along with those ideas, many thought that Mary Jane was getting too old and out of touch with the present day to keep up the success that she established so long ago.

Dr. Don Wineke, Associate Professor and English department chair at Wichita State University, teaches Shakespeare, Renaissance literature, drama and has authored several articles in those respective fields. His avocation is theater, in which he has been active locally since 1981. His "dual citizenship" is reflected in the fact that he has won both the Barrier Award for distinguished teaching in the humanities and social sciences
and a Mary Jane Teall award for outstanding theatrical performance. Dr. Wineke, who came into the theater at the same time as the establishment of the Players group discussed what he remembers of the situation.

In the early 80s began to be the power shift in the theater. The players association, by the time I came into the theater, was established for about a year, the Siffords, Larry and Beth were very instrumental in calling the shots at the workshop with what shows were put on and who directed.\textsuperscript{118} In early 1989, a proposal for a bylaw was put forth at a board meeting that the artistic director no longer be in charge of choosing the plays that were to be done on the main stage. With this new proposal there was a split within the Wichita Community Theater, those on Mary Jane’s side and those on the proposal’s side, but in reality this was not seen by all about who chose the shows, but who ran the theater. The proposed bylaw changed who chose the shows. Instead of Mary Jane, the new bylaw gave a committee of two board members and a voting member of the theater, the power to select and approve main stage shows.

People who were on the side of the proposal, attempted to bring statistics into the argument, stating that in the past years, attendance had been going down. According to Larry Romine, Business Manager of the Wichita Community Theater to the \textit{Wichita Eagle}, “in the last 15 years, we have lost 25 percent”\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{118} Don Wineke, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
of the ticket-buyers, mostly through attrition. “We’re just not getting the younger crowd in.” These numbers were just part of the argument when explaining the reasons for the new proposed bylaw.

Other people, most of them within the Players association, stated that the issue was due to Mary Jane and her inflexibility, that she was jealous of the success by other directors who directed shows at the community theater workshop. The theater’s board of directors claimed to have studied other community theaters around the country and felt that the best way to proceed was with the new proposed bylaw.

A vote took place and the bylaw passed by a wide margin with the board of directors. What was officially adopted called for a five-member play reading committee made up of board members, audience members and the artistic director that read, selected and suggested a season to the board of directors who then approved the season by vote. There were, of course, members of the Wichita Community Theater who did not agree with the new bylaws, and saw this as a setup, a way to force Mary Jane out of control at the theater. As Don Wineke recalled, arguments and heated discussions were occurring backstage during rehearsals for the show The Dresser,

119 “Resignation of Teall still fans flames” Wichita Eagle, April 13, 1989,1C.
I was no longer on the board so I heard everything word of mouth. We were in The Dresser, directed by Mary Jane. That was my last show with Mary Jane. I had heard rumors from friends on the board that the board made Mary Jane an offer that she couldn’t accept, they put a proposal to her that she was only going to be able to direct a certain number or amount of shows and that the board had decided that they would select the shows. They gave her terms they knew she would not accept ultimately, it was a Machiavellian thing, they KNEW she couldn’t accept it.¹²⁰

On March 16, 1989, Mary Jane Teall resigned as artistic director for the Wichita Community Theater. Immediately, a split followed within the ranks of the Wichita Community Theater. People, mostly consisted of older members of the Wichita Community Theater and the faculty of Wichita State University’s theater department, who supported Mary Jane saw this as an overthrow. Martin Umansky, retired long time Business Manager of the Wichita Community Theater told the Wichita Eagle, “They’ve taken a person, a woman who’s devoted virtually her entire adult life to this theater and really unceremoniously deposed her. Instead of arranging for a conclusion to her tremendous career, her contribution to theater in Wichita, in a proper manner, she’s just been dumped.”¹²¹

These changes resulted in a schism within Wichita’s theater populace. It was one that some saw as a natural progression and some saw as Machiavellian. It is and has been a very touchy

¹²⁰ Don Wineke, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
¹²¹ “Resignation of Teall still fans flames” Wichita Eagle, April 13, 1989,1C.
subject for years. It created almost a hatred of the Wichita Community Theater among certain members of the Wichita arts community. The overthrow of Mary Jane Teall as artistic director has been a subject which, although it occurred over three decades ago, is still a topic of contention and one that an entire generation may not even know about. The story caused long time Wichita Community Theater loyalists to stop seeing shows that the Wichita Community Theater produced and kept actors from auditioning and attending Wichita Community Theater productions. It created a gap in Wichita’s theater community that took years to mend, if mended at all.

Mary Jane seemed to be doing just fine after her resignation from the Wichita Community Theater. The theater, however, was struggling to save face from the split, struggling to bring in audiences and still struggling financially. Not long after the resignation of Mary Jane Teall from the Wichita Community Theater, remaining members of the theater felt that there should be something done to try to create a better feeling in the arts community due to the split from Mary Jane. The Wichita Community Theater board of directors proposed to the Wichita City Council that the Little Theater inside of the Century II civic center be rededicated in honor of Mary Jane Teall for all her dedication and service to the arts community.
not only in the city of Wichita but her influence throughout Kansas for over 40 years.

This request was accepted by overwhelming approval by the Wichita City Council and a ceremony was held at the Century II’s Little Theater honoring Mary Jane Teall, naming the Little Theater after Mary Jane. Supporters of Mary Jane and maybe Mary Jane herself might have felt a little retribution over the naming of the Little Theater to the Mary Jane Teall theater although she never said anything publicly she might have felt better, because, according to Jean Ann Cusick, “that at least those people who were against her had to act in a theatre named the Mary Jane Teall theatre that was dedicated BEFORE she died.”122 In the transition of this board change, the finances fell to two people who were very prominent figures in the Mary Jane Teall overthrow and two really combative people, Larry and Beth Sifford.

Mary Jane, as usual, did not want any publicity over what was going on at the Wichita Community Theater. She did not want to cause any problems and tried to keep the community theater out of the media. She told the *Wichita Eagle* that “the board never asked her to retire, but that “I had definitely planned to

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122 Jean Ann Cusick, Interview by author, 14 December 2008, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
stop either in a year or two.” Mary Jane had always feared that once she was done with theater, she would just melt away, like she told the *Wichita Eagle*,

See, I think the reason that it took me 10 years to quit—because there was a lot of misery on my part during those 10 years—was that I thought that I would turn into a vegetable, that I would sit in front of the TV, I would never have a phone call, I would never leave the house. 

**MARY JANE MOVES ON**

Mary Jane did not just sit in front of her television and turn into a vegetable, however. She decided to move on and take on more things to keep her artistic mind going. After only a year following her resignation from the Wichita Community Theater, an organization she help found, she was already directing several other shows. Her first was *Steel Magnolias*, for the Actors Playhouse at the Wichita Art Association, and was followed by *Deathtrap* and *Driving Miss Daisy* for the 1990-1991 season. Teall also kept *Commedia*, her popular year in review show that had been staged for the past 29 years at the Wichita Community Theater. She changed its name, calling it “Laugh at...” and began producing the show at the Cabaret Royale inside the Wichita Royale Theater. She also kept up with her other groups that she created at the end of her reign at the Wichita Community Theater. One group, called “After 60”, was a group of

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123 “Resignation of Teall still fans flames” *Wichita Eagle*, April 13, 1989,1C.
124 “Steel Magnolias, reflected Teall’s resilience.” *Wichita Eagle*, April 22, 1990,1C.
older actors performing at venues around Wichita and her touring version of Commedia, called “Laughing Back at…” would go to different venues, business meetings, conferences and perform. Mary Jane was definitely still keeping the rapid pace artistically and socially that she had before her untimely resignation at the Wichita Community Theater.

Mary Jane also had ideas to extend her reach to all walks of life. According to Jean Ann Cusick, "Mary Jane said that we should go to Washington to study from a lady who taught a course about Lock-in kids, and it was in Seattle and it taught her how to bring in volunteers into something like that and we had talked to someone out at Judge Riddel’s boys ranch on Lake Afton. It was a lock up facility for boys under 18 who committed adult crimes but could not be tried as adults."  

Mary Jane drove out to Judge Riddel’s boy’s ranch on Lake Afton and tutor the boys, helping them to learn, teaching them how to put on shows, giving them a creative outlet.

DEATH OF MARY JANE TEALL

The stories of Mary Jane’s poor driving habits were lore. Mary Jane often recalled herself to be so busy that she would only get a couple of hours of sleep at a time, often catching cat naps on her way from one destination to another. One story

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125 Jean Ann Cusick, Interview by author, 14 December 2008, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
was that on her way across town from one event to another, Mary Jane became the first car at a railroad crossing. While waiting on the train to go by, Mary Jane decided to take one of her infamous naps while the train was moving along. Next thing she knew, a policeman was knocking at her window, waking her up. The cars behind her attempted to wake her up by honking, but eventually it was a policeman knocking on her car window asking her if she were okay. Once she told the policeman that she was fine, she proceeded to her scheduled event just as if nothing else had happened.

As the *Wichita Eagle* recalled “Her thorough devotion to the theater led to neglect of the minutia of daily living. She once asked Burns (Karla Burns a Musical Theater star) to teach her class at the university while she went to traffic school after accumulating 150 tickets.” At the age of 83, Mary Jane was still directing shows at various places in Wichita and was still working at Judge Riddel’s boy’s ranch out at Lake Afton, just outside of Wichita, when she accidentally ran a stop sign and collided with a truck. On Thursday, October 13, 1994, the woman considered the matriarch of Wichita Theater lost her life in an automobile accident. The *Wichita Eagle* recalled the details of the accident.

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126 “Mary Jane Teall Inspired Many as First Lady of Wichita Theater.” *The Wichita Eagle*, Friday October 14, 1994, 1A.
Mary Jane Teall, the leading lady of theater in Wichita, was critically injured in a three-vehicle accident Wednesday night southwest of Wichita. Teall, 83, was driving south on Maize Road approaching K-42 and either didn't stop at the intersection or stopped and pulled into the roadway, according to Sedgwick County sheriff's Capt. John Daily. Teall's car was hit broadside by a westbound van. The van went out of control and hit an eastbound midsize car head-on, Daily said. Teall's car came to rest in a field southwest of the intersection. The drivers in the van and the car were slightly injured. Teall was taken to St. Francis Regional Medical Center with head injuries. She was in critical condition early today.¹²⁷

She passed away from those injuries suffered in the car Thursday morning, October 13, 1994. Her memorial, which took place at the Mary Jane Teall Theater inside Century II, brought throngs of people, including the boys from Judge Riddel’s ranch, to help celebrate the life of Mary Jane Teall. Jean Ann Cusick, long time friend remembers the celebration.

Lee (Mary Jane’s son) asked several of us to be a part of putting it together and it was really hard and Mary Jane was like my second mother, first in many ways and so Mary Jabarra and I put together the memorabilia in the hallway and there was Dick Welsbacher, Umansky’s and we all met at Lee’s and he wanted it to be upbeat and we all agreed that Dick should do the eulogy and The Eyes are on the Sparrow and that was one of Mary Jane’s favorite song. Dick got up he looked up, and the Mary Jane Teall theatre was filled to capacity and Dick said “I think that if Mary Jane peeked out between the curtains as she always did, she would say, Oh this would be a good audience.” Everyone laughed an applauded and it was a great celebration of her life, Bob Teall (Mary Jane’s ex-husband) stood in the back. The boys who were at the boys ranch were brought on a bus and they all sat on the second row, they wanted to come and they could not believe she was gone, they wanted to come.

¹²⁷ “Mary Jane Teall Critically Hurt in Car Accident”, The Wichita Eagle, October 13, 1994, 1A.
The emotional day was a day of celebration and sadness. It was a day to remember Mary Jane Teall, the inspiration, the driving force behind the Unitarian Experimental Theater which turned into the Wichita Community Theater. The artistic director of the Wichita Community Theater for 43 years, who dedicated her life to creating something more than what was necessary, expecting more out of amateurs onstage than professionals. A person who gave her life to creating art, not out of canvas or clay, but out of people and leaving those people in a better frame of mind, with a better attitude toward their endeavors.

Mary Jane saw a production as one piece; there were no stars involved in a show. As Agnes Quinn noted in an interview with her and some of the older members of the Wichita Community Theater in the 1970s, “That makes me think of Mary Jane’s standard rule that there was never any personal bows, she always said we were a community theater and the whole cast lined up and took their bows together.”¹²⁸ Mary Jane wanted to create togetherness to achieve a goal of nothing but perfection. Mary Jane was at times brash, at times stubborn, but she was upfront about how she felt and once things got out in the open, she moved on. Mary Jane was about art and giving back, hoping that in some way her legacy would be about more than just directing a

¹²⁸ “Interview about The History of Community Theatre: Sixty’s and Seventy’s with Mary Jane Teall; Martin and Eva Reif; Agnes Quinn; Millie Meier; Mary and Martin Umansky,” Mary Jane Teall Papers) 11.
few shows. Mary Jane’s legacy will be carried on, no matter how many generations will have passed, through the stories about her and her dedication to so many different causes. Mary Jane will always be remembered for believing in the good in people and accepting nothing but perfection.

Not forgetting what she stood for, several friends and disciples of Mary Jane Teall, a few years after her death, created an award for excellence named after her to award to participating theaters within the city of Wichita and the surrounding communities. Following the awards examples of the the Tony in New York, and the Helen Hayes awards in Washington, member theaters submitted their seasons to a board of voters, and at the end of the theater year, based off of Music Theater of Wichita’s season, awards were presented at an annual celebration of excellence. Past winners have included many influential members of the community such as Joyce Cavarozzi, Dick Welsbacher, Phil Speary, Don Wineke, Gina Austin-Fresh and many others. The Mary Jane Teall awards still continues that love of art and excellence in theater that Mary Jane observed.129

THE SIFFORDS

R. Lawrence Sifford, a Internal Medicine doctor in the city of Wichita and his wife, Bethann, a registered nurse, joined the Wichita Community Theater sometime in the mid-1970s, and soon became very influential members of the Wichita Community Theater going from acting to directing at the Community Theater Workshop to holding office within the Players Association to the Wichita Community Theater’s board. Dr. Sifford not only acted and held office for the Wichita Community Theater, but was also writer and many of his plays were produced on stage at the Community Theater Workshop. Beth, a member of the dresser’s union, was not only a prominent force behind the scenes at places such as
Community Theater, but also Music Theater of Wichita. Phil Speary recalled with fondness the formidable, multi-talented actress, “Beth Sifford thought and would tell you that she knew more about theater than anyone in town. She told you that she knew more about ANYTHING than anyone.”130

Beth and Larry Sifford were the next generation of members of the Wichita Community Theater, but were also considered the heavies who forced Mary Jane’s resignation. Both Phil Speary and Don Wineke recalled that even though the Siffords were very intimidating, they both wanted nothing but the best for the Wichita Community Theater. Both members remembered that Beth was one of the best acting instructors that either of them had ever been directed by and Don Wineke recalled that “they were such combative people by nature, even with each other. The ironic thing was that Beth was very similar to Mary Jane, that was the reason that they butted heads, she was like Mary Jane.”131 Amid attendance and financial problems, the Siffords tried to keep the theater prominent and out of debt, but with budgetary problems the Wichita Community Theater came very close to closing their doors for good on several occasions. Beginning in the 1990s, the Wichita Community Theater always seemed to be in the news with some type of resignation by either a board

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130 Don Wineke, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
131 Ibid.
member or business manager, and it always involved some sort of financial trouble.

Even with this possible show of remorse by the Wichita Community Theater’s choice to try something new, it did not help bring in audiences. The popularity of the Wichita Community Theater within the arts community was still faltering, and financially the theater was going through many different problems. One major problem for the theater was the lack of a permanent Business Manager. When Martin Umansky retired after serving 25 years as the Community Theater’s business manager, a handful of people took over the responsibility, including many Mary Jane Teall supporters, who after her resignation, left the Community Theater. A business manager, the way the Wichita Community Theater ran, was an essential part of the theater, promoting shows, booking events, getting all of the royalties paid for each individual show, handling the season ticket sales, taking reservations for each show at Century II and at the Workshop.

The lack of available money made it difficult to provide a large salary to run the theater, however for the years that Martin Umansky worked as business manager, he never took a salary, but some people wanted way more than the theater could provide. If the business manager was reliable and able to
fulfill the position, some people on the board did not always get along with each other and there were always suspicions that certain business managers were stealing money from the theater. Wineke recalled "Well there was a succession of business managers who were either inefficient or corrupt, the Community Theater didn’t have a lot of budgetary control."

Eventually the board of directors decided the theater could rely on volunteers to run a majority of all theater responsibilities except for three paid staff positions. The theater felt that the only way to create a professional type of theater would be to hire professional people as technical director, administrative director and office manager.

The board began to change from one whose members were connected to a lot of influential people in the city and sold season tickets, to a more operations board, with board members to hold specific titles and duties, such as president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, publicity, house management and finance. With the board becoming more operations based, the technical director was in charge of all aspect of shows design, the office manager in charge of reservations and other office management and the administrative director in charge of the Community Theater’s season memberships, corporate underwriting
To this new position of administrative director, created shortly after the resignation of Mary Jane Teall, the theater hired Vince Landro an arts management consultant from Pennsylvania. Appointed in April of 1990, Landro resigned in October of that same year over what the community theater board stated as a job dispute, but Landro, who told the *Wichita Eagle* his resignation was because “it has become apparent that the goals, financial expectations, and decision-making process of WCT’s board leadership are significantly different from my own.”

This, for the Wichita Community Theater, was its last attempt to transition from an all volunteer organization to a more professionally run theater. The Wichita Community Theater, in the past, relied mostly on Mary Jane Teall, Martin Umansky and other “original” members, people who dedicated many years of service to the theater. With these people either retired or not willing to come back to the theater because of the split with Mary Jane, the board of directors had to go outside of their ranks to interview, hire and work with unknown businessmen. The disagreements with these men seemed to be the beginning of some

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132 “Job Dispute Leads to resignation” *Wichita Eagle*, October 21, 1990, 1C.
ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION

The executive committee of the Wichita Community Theater gathered together on December 17, 1991 to vote on whether or not the Wichita Community Theater organization, a not-for-profit company, should be dissolved amid consecutive years of deficits ranging from $56,000 and $49,000 respectively. The recommendation was made by the Wichita Community Theater’s Board President Cary Oswald, who stated to the Wichita Eagle, “that he is “extremely doubtful” that the theater can survive beyond its current season.”

The suggestion to dissolve was also taken into consideration after the projected year end deficit of the 1991-1992 season ranged from $35,000 to $40,000 for the fiscal year, that left the Wichita Community Theater’s bank account down to about $27,000, down from the $200,000 that the organization had in reserves when former Artistic Director Mary Jane Teall resigned in March of 1989. The WCT’s Executive Committee soundly defeated the recommendation by an 8 to 2 margin, pledging from that decision to vigorously pursue a fundraising campaign in order to make the theater viable again. Soon after this decision President Cary Oswald resigned, saying

133 “WCT Board President Quits amid Fiscal Woes” Wichita Eagle, Thursday December 19, 1991, 1C.
that the community theater “refused to address its underlying problems and was looking for scapegoats.”134 This meeting was the first time that the Wichita Community Theater began to consider changing its relationship with Century II’s Mary Jane Theater, where 4 of the theater’s 8 yearly shows were performed. The suggestion was to move more or all of the shows to the Workshop in College Hill.

LEAVING CENTURY II

After the resignation of Cary Oswald, Larry Sifford was elected to the President’s office at the Wichita Community Theater. Sifford confirmed that the Theater was considering all options but had not solidified any particular path at that current point. With all of the issues such as heating, air and building maintenance and the rising cost of renting out Century II’s Mary Jane Teall theater, leaving was being considered as an option. WCT soon decided that the best way to save for the future was to leave Century II and perform solely at the Wichita Community Theater workshop at Second and Fountain.

At the beginning of the Wichita Community Theater’s 1993-1994 season, the Wichita Community Theater vacated Century II’s Mary Jane Teall theater in order to save money by producing all its upcoming shows at the community theater workshop in College Hill.

134 Ibid.
Hill. The reasons for the move were, according to Scott Marshall Wichita Community Theater’s general manager, not isolated to just one. He told the *Wichita Eagle* that the move was “partly economic-ticket sales haven’t been strong enough lately to fill the theater or pay the bills.”

To look on the positive side, the community theater looked forward to being able to provide more shows to the public for a cheaper ticket price, starting the 1993-1994 season with 10 shows instead of the 4 main stage shows and providing those shows at a cost at around $6 a ticket—a price much less than the $20 to $26 dollars at Century II. Each production also ran longer, an estimated three weekends, which provided more opportunities for audiences to see the shows. This, however, caused more of a tight schedule for the group to build, paint and then rehearse for the upcoming productions.

**LAST TWENTY YEARS**

Wichita Community Theater entered its 5th decade, the 1990s, in about the same condition as it started, struggling to fill a 100 seat auditorium in a former house of worship, performing one act plays written by local playwrights to save money and try to stay relevant. It seemed that the Wichita Community Theater came full circle in 50 years. The last two decades of the

135/"WCT is vacating stage at Century II." *The Wichita Eagle*, Sunday September 19, 1993, 2E.
Wichita Community Theater’s history has been one of slow progression and slow change. Starting out in the mid 1990s, the community theater cancelled its season ticket sales, going instead with individual sales and group ticket sales. The office management part of the Wichita Community Theater has also reverted back to using volunteers, instead of having any type of paid professionals. This approach has been questioned, because some, such as Jean Ann Cusick feel that no organization should be without at least one paid staff member. Jean Ann explained that,

I don’t think that any organization should not have a paid person, I was in that office as office manager two weeks prior to the show, and a couple of days after and I was here all the time and for the 6 weeks of season ticket sales, I know you don’t do them but I think that money begets money and I just think that the you need people who fundraise.\textsuperscript{136}

Larry and Beth Siffords tried everything they could think of to try to keep the theater afloat, including performing plays written by Larry Sifford with subjects involving anything from A.I.D.S and HIV to gay rights. At this point the community theater was back to producing shows without paying the exorbitant royalties that are normally charged with professional works.

\textsuperscript{136} Jean Ann Cusick, Interview by author, 14 December 2008, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
The theater also took to getting underwriters for shows, which it had done from time to time in its past. Underwriting came from such business as Boeing, Lear Jet, Cessna, Greyhound Charities and private donations. But the community theater lived on mostly by the work of some very determined volunteers. The theater struggled for a while after Mary Jane left but they (Siffords) kept things going while very consciously laying the pattern for the next generation of leaders...We’ve had our ups and downs—particularly when we were hit all at once with major repairs to the roof and heating systems. We had some tight times.\footnote{“Community Theater runs on passion.” The Wichita Eagle, Sunday July 20, 2008, 1C.}

As one story goes, one night during a production of “Uncle Vanya” in April of 1996 the Wichita Community Theater’s roof caved in. Luckily for the theater, no one was injured because it happened late at night, but to bring in a crane, which was required to fix the roof, took a big chunk out of the Wichita Community Theater’s finances. The Siffords, although at one time the focal point for the removal of Mary Jane Teall, kept the theater alive in a time when some felt that it was easier to just let it fail. Larry and Beth Sifford brought in a lot of new, fresh faces and attempted to provide the same quality entertainment that the Wichita Community Theater had been known for in its past. People who were involved in the Mary Jane era, although upset over the split, saw that the Siffords were doing what they could to keep the theater alive, from writing shows.
for the theater to figures involved with the theater at the time recalled that Larry offered to take out a loan against the theater to help pay for heating, air conditioning and roof expenses.\textsuperscript{138}

Even though the community theater employed no paid staff members, that did not meant that there was no shortage of dedicated volunteers to make the community theater work. Devoting time and energy into making the community theater run, members have spent their time sweeping and mopping floors, answering phone calls, mowing, cleaning and building sets all this besides a rehearsal schedule that consisted of five days a week, sometimes six with hours ranging from three to six hours a day. It seemed that the Wichita Community Theater reverted back to its roots, following the original Unitarian Experimental Theater’s example of doing whatever it took to put on a show. The difference was that the Wichita Community Theater already had a staple of volunteers, a stage of its own and over 60 years of history to depend on.

\textsuperscript{138} Poor records and lack of any type of paper work makes this a very difficult thing to prove. It was solely out of memory that anyone recalled Larry offering to take out a loan on the theater, but the people who remembered the suggestions discussed that it was too much power to give to one person at the theater and no one else knew whether it happened or not and such poor records were kept at the theater that there is little evidence of it, except for memories.
CHAPTER IV
NEW ERA

Larry and Beth Sifford were very passionate people who paved the way for a new group of talented individuals to have an outlet to express their ideas, passion and talent. Bethann Sifford, in 1996, was diagnosed with cancer and retired soon after as artistic director of the Wichita Community Theater, a post that she held for almost 10 years. She passed away from complications of cancer in January 2000. Larry Sifford, who worked at the community theater throughout her retirement, steadily began to spend less and less time at the Wichita Community Theater, allowing for a new group of people to take over the theater. Martin Umansky passed away of a heart attack in May of 2000 at the age of 83 years old, survived by his wife, Mary Umanksy, who passed away in May of 2004.

People such as Stephen Broker, Phil Speary, Jane Tanner, Bob and Dona Lancaster, Don Wineke, Mary Lou Phipps-Winfrey, Crystal Meek, Dan and Vonda Schuster and many others began to carry the baton of the Wichita Community Theater into the next century coming in with new ideas on how to make the theater run more efficiently. An entirely new group of people began to contribute to the theater, a younger generation, from all walks of life. As Phil Speary told the Wichita Eagle, “We’re a pretty diverse group. We have people from the medical, engineering and educational fields. We have a pool of about 100 people to draw
from with 40 or 50 of them core workers. In the past 10 years, we have been attracting younger people because we are a good place to make the transition from high school or college performance into adult performance.”

Since the turn of the century, the Wichita Community Theater has returned to the forefront, producing many high quality shows at very low costs. As a result, the Wichita Community Theater has been one of the cheapest tickets in town, competing against the likes of Music Theater of Wichita, Cabaret Old Town, Mosley Street Melodrama and Kechi Playhouse. The community theater still relies on an all volunteer staff, only paying for an answering service to take ticket reservations for upcoming shows. The theater board still consists of an all operations based volunteer board, featuring president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, publicity, technical director and house manager. It has relied on each individual to give their time to keep the theater running. According to former president and current vice president Phil Speary,

It’s a hobby for most people but it is also a passion. You have to really want to be in theater because there is such a time commitment. People who aren’t involved either onstage or backstage have no idea. It’s like a part-time job. You can easily put in 40 hours a month.

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139 "Community Theater runs on passion." The Wichita Eagle, Sunday July 20, 2008, 1C.
140 Ibid.
The community theater has also kept up with the times, creating and hosting its own website to help promote its shows, doing radio advertising and working with many different special interest groups to promote their shows. Ann Yoder and her “red hat” society has become a staple on Wednesday night dress rehearsals, bringing in around 40 older but no less energetic members who have limited opportunity to see shows. The Wichita Community Theater has also started doing volunteer parties again and special events for the arts community.

Old ideas have become new again at the theater. Many board members have attempted to bring back the talks of expanding the community theater workshop in College Hill so that it could accommodate the growth and create a more professional space for the aging theater. The building built in 1932 has been kept in decent shape by small renovations, but is in need of some massive renovations. With the new season starting in 2009-2010, the Wichita Community Theater finally began to take steps to renovate the entire theater and but not expand. Members of the board of directors voted to make improvements, including striving towards making the community theater workshop American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant.

The building, due to its age, has been able to remain functioning because it was built before the ADA compliant rules were put into effect for businesses, but the theater has bigger
plans. The hope is to make the theater compliant so that it may apply for grants from the Kansas Arts Council and other government agencies in order keep the theater running and provide entertainment to the community for years to come. With a newly paved sidewalk and handicap ramp up to the front doors of the theater, the theater is on its way to becoming compliant. With a budget that is in the black and the ability to make sure that the building lasted into the future, the theater has scheduled its first show-less September in order to make improvements within the theater, along with making the bathrooms ADA compliant, refinishing the wooden floors, rebuild the performance area and work on the outside of the theater by replacing aged and broken windows, clean out the yard and connect all the theater’s lots together in the hopes that in the near future the theater can expand to the south lots, which it owns, for storage and parking lot spaces.141

**LEGACY**

The Wichita Community Theater paved the way for a lot of live theatrical entertainment within the city of Wichita and the surrounding communities. Every major live theater group in the city of Wichita and the surrounding areas had some connection to either the Mary Jane Teall or the Wichita Community Theater.

141 Phil Speary interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
Once the Unitarian Experimental Theater began to create popularity within the city for live theater, things began to change very rapidly. The Unitarian Experimental Theater’s mission statement was “to give members of the community the opportunity to learn or further develop skills in acting, directing, design and technical theater, and to produce and present varied theater exhibitions.” This was a time before the University of Wichita had an educational training ground for future actors and designers. On the back of hard working and dedicated volunteers such as Mary Jane Woodard, Martin and Mary Umansky and others, the Unitarian Experimental Theater soon began to sell out its small little basement theater, squeezing 200 bodies into a small little area.

Without the Wichita Community Theater, the city of Wichita may not have necessarily been void of the mass amounts of live entertainment, but it is unlikely that Wichita would be abundant in live entertainment, as it is today. Mary Jane Teall and the Wichita Community Theater’s arm of influence has been seen all throughout the city of Wichita, not only with the number of theaters within the city, the awards for excellence but also with the University of Wichita, now Wichita State Universities theater program, training new actors, directors and designers.

142 “Community Theater runs on passion.” The Wichita Eagle, Sunday July 20, 2008, 1C.
By the mid 1970s Wichita began to see an influx in theaters in the area. The Crown Players, headed by the late Ted Morris, eventually turned into the Crown Uptown Dinner Theater, which started around the same time that the Wichita Community Theater moved into the Century II civic center. The construction of Century II paved the way for Music Theater of Wichita to have a venue to perform their musicals for the summer season. Starting with an idea by James Miller, the Music Theater of Wichita has become a consistent staple in the city of Wichita. Wayne Bryan as its leader, tickets are almost always a hot item once the season is announced in September for the following year. The *Wichita Eagle* summed how important Music Theater of Wichita had become to the city,

> Once upon a time, audiences at Music Theatre of Wichita had such thoughts. In fact, they needed to have such thoughts, as part of Music Theatre's 19-year metamorphosis from hometown theater to respected regional summer stock company. But this summer, more so than any in recent memory, Music Theatre is confidently casting current and erstwhile Kansans in important onstage and backstage roles. Wayne Bryan, Music Theatre's producing director since 1988, thinks the time, city and theater are right for the renewed use of local talent.  

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143 Jean Ann Cusick, Interview by author, 14 December 2008, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.

144 "Music Theatre Embraces Kansans Local Talent Landing Important Onstage, Backstage Roles." *Wichita Eagle*, Sunday, July 8, 1990, 2D.
This, along with the Wichita State University’s theater season created an over-saturation within the city, but the growth for other theater groups did not stifle with that. Dr. Phil Speary, a student of Mary Jane Teall as an undergraduate at Wichita State University, currently serves as the Director of Assessment for Butler Community College in El Dorado Kansas. With a Master’s of Arts and a PhD in Theater from Ohio State University, Dr. Speary has been active in several Wichita area theater organizations, including the Wichita Community Theater and other theater organizations for over 30 years. Dr. Speary, even participated in and eventually ran the new Wichita Shakespeare in the Park organization, which started in 1991 by the Wichita Association for Repertory Arts, which then became the Wichita Shakespeare Company with the start of the new millennium.145 The Wichita Shakespeare Company, after years of success, floundered a little until the 2003, when Dan and Vonda Schuster took over and re-applied for not-for-profit status. It now works two shows a year, just as it did when it started, showing Shakespeare shows free of charge to its audiences.

Dr. Phil Speary was not the only student of Mary Jane or member of the Wichita Community Theater to branch out and start a theatrical organization.

145 Phil Speary, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
Misty Maynard, director of “Under Milkwood” at the community theater workshop in January of 1983, opened her own theater in Kechi, Kansas later that year where she now produces 5 shows a season during the summer and early fall months.\textsuperscript{146}

The Actor’s Playhouse, which staged shows inside the Wichita Center for the Arts, the same place that the Wichita Children’s Theater also performed has its connections to the Wichita Community Theater as well. This new building, dedicated by Helen Hayes created this connection to the Wichita. The theater, which was home to the Actor’s Playhouse was a new venue for Mary Jane Teall after she left the Wichita Community Theater. Mary Jane directed several shows at the Actor’s Playhouse, inside of Wichita Center for the Arts.

Started in 1989 with a production of \textit{St. Joan}, the Actor’s Playhouse began performances at the Irene Vickers Baker Theatre, directed by people such as Mary Jane, Gina Austin-Fresh and several other Mary Jane disciples. The Actor’s Playhouse, now called the Wichita Center for the Arts Theater has had success under several different people, from Kathy Page-Hauptman, a former student and close friend to Mary Jane, to directors such as Carla Sanderson, Tom Frye and John Boldenow and now performs

\textsuperscript{146} \url{www.kechisplayhouse.com}, October 3, 2009.
at least 4 shows a year which include anything from Shakespeare to local playwrights.\textsuperscript{147}

Soon the city of Wichita shared in several other areas of theater. In 1993, Christine Tasheff opened the Cabaret Old Town, a venue that had musical revues and housed “Laugh at 93,” Mary Jane’s spin off of Commedia after she left the Wichita Community Theater. For this production of “Laugh at...”, Mary Jane let go of the reigns and allowed Jean Ann Cusick to direct the yearly revue, the cast included a lot of Wichita Community Theater people such as Bucky Walters, Tracy Sloat and Liz Willis. After closing due to several years of low attendance, the Cabaret Old Town reopened in 2005 with Christie Moore and her husband who have attempted to carry on the tradition of Cabaret in Wichita.\textsuperscript{148}

The Empire House Dinner Theater, a melodrama venue that was held in the old Empire House Theater on the grounds of Old Cowtown Museum was headed under the direction of Ted Morris from the Crown Uptown, in the hopes that a dinner theater/melodrama would be able to last in Wichita. Eventually Mr. Morris decided to focus more on the Crown Uptown Dinner Theater. The melodrama then went under the direction of Michael Ballinger, a local artist but only lasted until Christmas of 1995, then closed

\textsuperscript{147} Phil Speary, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.

\textsuperscript{148} Jean Ann Cusick, Interview by author, 14 December 2008, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
except for the occasional special performances. Out of the ashes of the Empire House melodramas, a new venue was brought to life in Old Town Wichita called the Mosley Street Melodrama.

Mosley Street Melodrama opened its doors in 1997 under the vision of Scott Noah and Patty Reader in the old town area. Former artists at the Empire House melodramas, they cleared out a comedy club, added a backstage and asked for the help of Tom Frye, high school drama teacher and former student of Mary Jane Teall to coach the actors and also write and perform on the stage at Mosley Street Melodrama. He, along with others from the Empire House including J.R Hurst and Randy Ervin, went on to aid in the success of Mosley Street. Later on in Wichita’s theatrical expansion, Theater on Consignment, the avant-garde, experimental theater came out of several aspects. Theater on Consignment is the theatrical arm of Films on Consignment, started in 2002 by Jason Bailey and co-founded by Cherice Henderson, an ex-board member of the Wichita Community Theater, both members learned theater and acting from many of the Wichita community theater representatives.149

Theater on Consignment tended to have the more experimental theater shows that normally would not be seen on other stages. The group became a not-for-profit organization in May of 2003, shortly before initiating the first outreach to other local

149 Randall Ervin, interview by author, 4 November 2009, Wichita, oral interview, Wichita, KS.
artists. The first annual "Poorman’s Theatre Festival" began showcasing original plays by local playwrights performed and directed by Wichita talent. Theatre on Consignment has become a credible organization in the Wichita Arts Community despite our low budget beginnings.\(^{150}\)

The Guild Hall Players, another theater organization founded by Phil Speary, emerged at St. James Episcopal Church to present quality productions of plays and musicals that grapple with issues of Faith and Reason. Founded in 2006, this is the newest arm of the Wichita Community Theater and Mary Jane Teall’s reach that established theater in Wichita.\(^{151}\)

The Wichita Community Theater seemed to not only outlast several different theaters within the city of Wichita and the surrounding communities, but it also helped theater grow. On several occasions, the theater lent other venues props and costumes and often supported other theaters in creating the best productions it could.

With all of these theater companies growing and producing shows, the questions that needed to be addressed by the Wichita Community Theater were, where did it fit in? What niche did the Wichita Community Theater fill in the city of Wichita?


\(^{151}\) Phil Speary, interview by author, 4 January 2009, Wichita, video recording, Wichita, KS.
Once a thriving company producing main stage, popular productions at the Little Theater, the Wichita Community Theater also produced edgier, more avant garde productions at its Community Workshop in College Hill. Now that the theater produces shows out of the property in College Hill, the Wichita Community Theater has adapted to changing times. With the rise of Theater on Consignment, which has filled a niche with edgier shows, and due to some past controversies when the Wichita Community Theater performed edgier shows, the Wichita Community Theater has had to come full circle, looking back to its roots from whence it came. In the mid 1990s, the Wichita Community Theater, headed by Larry Sifford, began producing original scripts and more fan friendly shows. Shows written by R.L Sifford such as the “Errant Crane” were funnier, tame comedies instead of the edgier shows that the community theater workshop had held in its past. Soon the Wichita Community Theater began to find its niche in the Wichita Theater Community, performing more middle of the row shows with big name authors and productions more popular within the community.
CONCLUSION

As the Wichita Community Theater opened its 2006-2007 season, it did so with a celebration, a 60th anniversary celebration. This first annual season opening celebration took place on the front lawn of the community theater workshop, sponsored by Clear Channel Radio and brought in around 50 paid attendees to share in hamburgers, hot dogs, sodas and theater. The small theater group celebrated its long history by celebrating the one consistent thing in its history, its volunteers. Not one single person can be attributed with the Wichita Community Theater’s long history, its successes and its failures. Many key people were involved in the theater’s history, many fit together like a puzzle, making it work. There were driving forces in getting things accomplished, such as Mary Jane Teall, Martin Umansky, Beth and Larry Sifford and others, but volunteers were the reason that the community theater endured. The Wichita Community Theater became so successful for several reasons and is still around to this day because of its past successes. The Wichita Community Theater had a main staple of dedicated people striving to establish the theater company and took pride in what they were creating.

Sixty years prior to the celebration, members of the Unitarian Church got together to discuss an activity that no one
in the room thought would amount to much, but the desire and the want for something more drove the group to establish something that turned into the root of all live theater in Wichita today. There is not one theater company in the city of Wichita that has not had some type of connection to the Wichita Community Theater or its volunteers.

That said, Mary Jane Teall was the name synonymous with Wichita Community Theater. With her drive, dedication and charm, she managed to create for the city of Wichita many elements of entertainment that had not been seen before, from the creation of a musical review called Commedia to bringing in stars of television, stage and screen to perform with local talent. She strove to bring new ideas and excellence in theater to the city of Wichita and dedication brought the Wichita Community Theater onto bigger venues such as the University of Wichita’s stage and the newly created civic center Century II. Mary Jane was so ingrained in the establishment of the Wichita Community Theater that any thought of her followed along with the thought of the community theater group. She along with Martin Umansky, the long time business manager, found such success that they even gave back to the community with their establishment of University Scholarships to money for an established art book collection to the Wichita Public Library.
With Martin Umansky’s business savvy he was able to purchase the old Temple Emanu-El Jewish Synagogue and establish a second performance space where gatherings could be held and the theater could create cutting edge entertainment on its stage.

The Wichita Community Theater’s beginnings were not a purely unique story. Many community theaters across the country started in the basements of churches, or private homes, just performing in order to perform, to have an outlet for the arts. Many of the community theaters in other cities began shortly after World War II, just as the Wichita Community Theater did due to the easy access to education and the training of so many actors, directors and technical designers on the campus of the Universities in those cities. Many small theaters established themselves with the help of churches around their cities, purchased performance spaces that were at one time churches that the congregations grew out of, and many conducted season ticket sales drives to help their particular theater establish a audience base and to help raise awareness of the theater’s existence.

The Wichita Community Theater, in spite of all of the bad publicity, the loss of dedicated volunteers and audience members due to Mary Jane Teall’s resignation and the pending bankruptcy the community theater pushed on, riding on its history and
looking to the future, hoping to preserve some sort of future for the community theater.

The Wichita Community Theater changed its way of doing business several different times, trying to adapt to changing times. First depending on volunteers like those of Mary Jane, Martin Umansky and others to run the business end of the theater, while selling season tickets fell to the board members, but with changing times, the theater adapted. Attempting to bring in a more business minded staff, the theater tried to following other community theaters in the country by attracting business managers and other staff to come to Wichita and run the organization, but with very little success. Eventually, the theater turned to its backbone, the volunteers. Now, the Wichita Community Theater has had success depending on its vast array of volunteers, not having one paid person on staff for anything, and this has been the recipe for success for this organization.

Even throughout all of the ups and downs, the pitfalls and successes, the one main constant within the community theater ranks was the volunteer. Many people, who are and have remained mostly nameless, have dedicated major parts of their lives in making sure that the Wichita Community Theater has remained successful. With each show, whether it was of professional
quality or purely amateur, the volunteers within the community theater ranks dedicated their lives to making sure that they were able to take pride in their adventure. From dedicated unpaid board members pushing season ticket sales or writing press releases, designing sets and choosing plays to the actor onstage or the costumer back stage, the volunteer kept the Wichita Community Theater relevant.

The Wichita Community Theater became so successful for several reasons and is still around to this day because of its past successes. The Wichita Community Theater had a main staple of dedicated people striving to establish the theater company and took pride in what they were creating. While changing trends in theater attendance, growing competition from other venues and a turbulent history have caused many community theaters and even some professional theaters to close over the years, the Wichita Community Theater perseveres. At the time of writing, in the fall of 2009, the theater is hard at work cleaning its facility and preparing for its next performance Agatha Christie’s Spider’s Web and it’s up coming 65th season. In spite of it all, dedicated volunteers do indeed know that the show must go on.
To find sources that highlighted the history of the Wichita Community Theater and its beginnings was not necessarily an easy process. Some people within the Wichita Theater Community still to this day hold some ill feelings with the Wichita Community Theater and are unwilling to discuss its history.

The other difficulty was due to the age of the theatrical organization. Because the Wichita Community Theater started out as the Unitarian Experimental Theater back in the 1940s, a lot of its members are no longer around and very few notes, documents and descriptions were available. The biggest sources were of people who passed along information to me that were around, or heard about stories handed down. Another big help was the histories of the First Unitarian Church of Wichita and the Temple Emanu-El history.

Some people who were unable or unwilling to provide information regarding the Wichita Community Theater have a vast amount of knowledge and the hope is that with this basis for the history of the Wichita Community Theater, more people will be willing to discuss what they have gone through and what they know.
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SECONDARY SOURCES


East Wichita News


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Wichita Beacon

Wichita Business Journal

Wichita Eagle

Wichita Eagle-Beacon


Wichita State University Website, [www.wichita.edu](http://www.wichita.edu), November 22, 2009.


LIST OF SHOWS
WICHITA COMMUNITY THEATER SEASONS

1946-1947—(only 1 acts as the Unitarian Experimental Theater)
The Eternal Ingénue
Billy Sunday Goes to Heaven
The Marriage Proposal
Our Town (3rd Act Only)

1946-1947 (only one acts)
Song of Songs
Precious Little Pu-Ching
All That I Have See
Harlequinade

1947-1948 (only 1 Acts)
The Rope
The Departed
Queen of Clubs & The Rabbling Court
Literature
Slaughter House
Nightingale
The Shoemakers Prodigious Wife

1948-1949 (Full length plays)
The Importance of Being Earnest
Truffles and Wife
Antigone
Jason

1949-1950
Twelfth Night
They Came to a City
Highland Fling

1950-1951 (First season as The Wichita Community Theater Inc.)
Much Ado About Nothing
Born Yesterday
Skin of Our Teeth

1951-1952
Hasty Heart
School for Scandal
Curious Savage

1952-1953 (shows @ Wichita University Commons Auditorium)
Happy Time
Little Foxes
First Lady
Ring Around the Moon

1953-1954
Stalag 17
Gigi
Uncle Harry
Male Animal

1954-1955
Mr. Roberts
My Three Angels
Silver Whistle
Misalliance

1955-1956
Picnic
Madwoman of Chaillot
Rainmaker
Solid Gold Cadillac

1956-1957  (began producing shows w/o Wichita University Theater)
The Women
Hasty Heart
Love of Four Colonels
The House of the August Moon

1957-1958
Witness for the Prosecution
Matchmaker
Career
The Great Sebastians

1958-1959  (now opening productions featuring a guest star)
Caine Mutiny  (featuring Chester Morris)
Visit to a Small Planet
What Every Woman Knows
Taming of the Shrew

1959-1960
Reluctant Debutante  (featuring Alan Mowbray)
Bus Stop
Inherit the Wind
Once More With Feeling

1960-1961  (Commedia begins this summer, Commedia ‘60)
Golden Fleecing  (featuring Eddie Bracken)
The Visit
Cradle Song
Thieves Carnival

1961-1962 (Commedia ’61)
Send Me No Flowers (featuring Lyle Talbot)
A Streetcar Named Desire
Rashomon
Happy Birthday

1962-1963 (Commedia ’62)
Present Laughter (featuring Reginald Gardiner)
Majority of One
All the Way Home
Androcles and the Lion

1963-1964 (Commedia ’63)
Take Her, She’s Mine (featuring Hugh Marlowe)
The Best Man
John Brown’s Body
Member of the Wedding

1964-1965 (Commedia ’64)
A Thousand Clowns (featuring MacDonald Carey)
The Public Eye & The Private Ear
A View from the Bridge
Don Juan in Hell

1965-1966 (Commedia ’65)
Never Too Late
Long’s Day’s Journey Into Night
Nude with Violin

1966-1967 (Commedia ’66)
The Heiress (featuring John Carradine)
A Shot in the Dark
The Wall
The Amorous Flea

1967-1968 (Commedia ’67)
The Odd Couple (featuring Lyle Talbot)
Summer and Smoke
Barefoot in the Park
The Waltz of the Toreadors

1968-1969 (Commedia ’68, January 69 moved to Century II)
Generation
The Night of the Iguana
Royal Hunt of the Sun (Judd Jones)
A Raisin in the Sun

1969-1970 (Commedia '69)
Don’t Drink the Water
Hogan’s Goat (Featuring William Shust)
The Show-Off
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (featuring Peggy Cartwright)

1970-1971 (Commedia ‘70)
Absence of a Cello (featuring Hans Conried)
Summertree
Everything in the Garden
A Bug in Her Ear (featuring Penny Metropulos & John O’Connell)

1971-1972 (Commedia ‘71)
Sheep on the Runway
You Know I Can’t Hear You When the Water is Running
Romeo & Juliet (featuring Penny Metropulos & John O’Connell)
Wait Until Dark

1972-1973 (Commedia ’72)
Adaption/Next
Room Service (featuring Jay Gerber)
Lysistrata
The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds

1973-1974 (Commedia ’73)
Last of the Red Hot Lovers (featuring Gene Ross)
Sabrina Fair
The Lark
The Rose Tattoo

1974-1975 (Commedia ’74)
Captain’s Paradise
Ah, Wilderness
The Gingerbread Lady
Finishing Touches

1975-1976 (Commedia ’75)
Marathon ’33
The Man in the Glass Booth
A Member of the Wedding
The Last of Mrs. Lincoln
The Skin of Our Teeth

1976-1977 (Commedia ’76)
Beckiett (featuring Jack Eddleman)
All Over Town
Romanoff & Juliet
Mary, Mary

1977-1978 (Commedia ’77)
The Man Who Came To Dinner (featuring Jack Eddleman)
Money
The Chalk Garden
No Sex Please, We’re British

1978-1979 (Commedia ’78)
Bullshot Crummond
The Chinese Prime Minister (featuring Margaret Rubin)
Lover’s and Other Strangers
The Royal Family (featuring Ruth McCormick)

1979-1980 (Commedia ’79; Sun. matinee @230pm, no Tuesday night)
The Good Doctor (featuring Charles Oldfather)
Arsenic and Old Lace (featuring Ruth McCormick & Millie Meier)
Equus
Toys in the Attic

1980-1981 (Commedia ’80)
Bedroom Farce
Shadow Box
Chapter Two
You Can’t Take It With You

1981-1982 (Commedia ’81)
My Three Angels
The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail
Whose Life Is It Anyway?
Tribute

1982-1983 (Commedia ’82)
First Monday in October
Sleuth
Arms and the Man
Mornings At Seven

1983-1984 (Commedia ’83)
To Kill A Mockingbird
To Grandmother’s House We Go
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof
A Little Family Business

1984-1985 (Commedia ’84)
The Members Of The Wedding
That Championship Season
Romantic Comedy
The Last Meeting Of The Knights Of The White Magnolia
Six Characters In Search Of An Author
Greater Tuna
Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You

1985-1986 (Commedia ’85)
Quilters
Taylor’s Tickler
Educating Rita
Servant of Two Masters
The Sly Fox
Fool For Love
The Foreigner
I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking it on the Road

1986-1987 (Commedia ’86)
Pack of Lies
Agnes of God
Brighton Beach Memoirs
When We Are Married
Philadelphia Here I Come
Inherit The Wind
Luann Hampton Laverty Oberlander

1987-1988 (Commedia ’87)
Luv
The Dining Room
As Is
The Merry Wives Of Windsor
And Miss Reardon Drinks A Little
The Oldest Living Graduate
Stepping Out

1988-1989 (Commedia ’88)
The Best Man
Hay Fever
Julius and Ethel
The Dresser
Nuts
The Birthday Party
Social Security

1989-1990 (Commedia ’89)
Dracula
Geech the Musical
Three Men on a House
The Little Foxes
Torch Song Trilogy
The Mousetrap
Steel Magnolias

1990-1991 (Commedia ’90)
In A Room Somewhere
I Ought To Be In Pictures
The Rainmaker
Expectations
Veronica’s Room
The Deadly Game

1991-1992 (No Commedia)
Greater Tuna
Do Black Patent Shoes Really Reflect Up?
Rumors
Speed the Plow
Orphans
The Boys Next Door
Extremities
Tartuffe
Teeter Totters, Tightropes and Trapezes

1992-1993
Neist My Heart
The Foibles of This and That (A Revue)
Rock Around The Clock (an Improv)
The Sunshine Boys
Close Ties
Black Comedy
Emigres
Children of a Lesser God
The Owl and the Pussycat

1993-1994
Richard II
Run for Your Wife
Gay Deceiver
Unexpected Guest
The Zombie
The Belle Of Amhurst
Leviticus 20:13
Lettuce and Lovage
American Dreams
The Whales of August
A Few Good Men
Fortinbras
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest
Love Letters

1994-1995
It Runs In the Family
Father of the Bride
Hamlet
Verdict
Little Women
Trip To Bountiful
Goodnight Caroline, Bound Feet & Lady of Larkspur (3 Original Plays)
Falsettos
The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man in the Moon Marigolds
Keely and Du

1995-1996
11:11
Isn’t It Romantic
UD
Measure for Measure
Frankenstein
Greetings
Goldies Bar & Jocko’s Bar (2 Original Plays)
Night of the Iguana
Uncle Vanya
Leviticus 20:13 & The Hundred Dollar Night by R.L Sifford

1996-1997
Funny Money
A Perfect Analysis Given By A Parrot
Confessional
Zombies
Remembering Christmas
King Lear
Waiting in the Wings
12 Angry Men
Jeffrey

1997-1998
Run For Your Wife
Out of Order
Hard Times
Sweeney Todd
A Tuna Christmas
The Rivals
Marvin’s Room
Romeo and Juliet
Love, Valour, Compassion!

1998–1999
The Errant Crane by R.L Sifford
Fences
The Tooth About Dracula by R.L Sifford
The Man Who Came to Diner
Octetted Bridge Club
Twelfth Night

1999–2000
Laughter On The 23rd Floor
Young Man From Atlanta
Witness for the Prosecution
The Last Night Of Ballyhoo
A Doll’s House
The Foreigner
Burning Blue

2000–2001
Radio TBS
Death of a Salesman
Murder in Mind
Art
Hay Fever
House of Bernardo Alba
Comedy of Errors
As Bees In Honey Drown

2001–2002
Crimes of the Heart
Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?
Ten Little Indians
It’s a Wonderful Life
The Cemetery Club
Three Sisters
The Tempest
The Women
Broadway Bound

2002–2003
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof
The Mousetrap
It’s a Wonderful Life
Blithe Spirit
Dinner with Friends
Much Ado About Nothing
Gross Indecency: The Three Trials Of Oscar Wilde
Mary, Mary

2003-2004
Proof
The Haunting of Hill House
Life with Father
The Nerd
The Duchess of Malfi
Private Lives
The Importance of Being Earnest
An Evening of Culture

2004-2005
On Golden Pond
Dial M for Murder
Jacob Marley’s Christmas Carol
The Fourth Wall
Enchanted April
Antony and Cleopatra
Anton in Show Business
Play it Again, Sam

2005-2006
Rope
Little Women
Two Gentleman of Verona: The Musical (adapted by Phil Speary & Greg Ewing)
Enemy of the People
The Last Sunday in June
Black Comedy

2006-2007 (starting this season there is a one week run of two shows called the “Spotlight series”)
(Spotlight SERIES) Eve and Co.
The Hollow
O'Connor Girls
She Stoops To Conquer
(Spotlight Series) Parallel Lives
A Piece of My Heart
Auntie Mame
Steel Magnolias

2007-2008
(Spotlight SERIES) Tuesdays With Morrie
Dracula written by Leroy Clark
The Last Christmas Show (You’ll Ever Need To See) by Phil Speary
The Diviners
(SPOTLIGHT SERIES)—All I Really Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten
Mornings At Seven
Dearly Beloved
Moon Over Buffalo

2008—2009
SPOTLIGHT SERIES)Driving Miss Daisy
One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest
Tuna Christmas
The Philadelphia Story
(SPOTLIGHT SERIES)The Complete Works Of William Shakespeare, Abridged
Hamlet
Our Town
You Can’t Take It With You

2009—2010
The Spider’s Web
Christmas Belles