

The Sixty-Year History of Great Lakes Theater

By Margaret Lynch

Prologue: The First Fifty Years

Fifty years is a long time. Especially the fifty years that measure the distance from 1962 to 2012--from the Beatles to Lady Gaga, from the first transatlantic TV transmission to the iPad, from the Civil Rights Movement to Occupy Wall Street, from the Cold War to the War on Terror. So it's not just fifty years that Great Lakes Theater marks this year, it's fifty years against the backdrop of some of the most tumultuous, eventful and quickly changing decades on record. It's noteworthy that Great Lakes Theater survived these fifty years, but the fact that it has also flourished is a cause for incredible pride and joyous celebration.

There are few adults whose close involvement with the theater spanned the entire fifty years and in 2012 could still remember gathering at the Lakewood Civic Auditorium on the evening of July 11, 1962, to launch Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival. Audrey Watts, the theater's longest serving trustee, was one who could recall fifty years later how the Lakewood High School cafeteria was festooned with banners that evening for a festive dinner catered by a popular Lakewood family restaurant. She could relive the anxiety when the air-conditioning broke down during the dinner but also the mounting excitement when congratulatory messages were read from First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and former First Lady Mamie Eisenhower and the lights dimmed for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

Much has changed since that long-ago July evening. Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival became Great Lakes Theater Festival and, recently, Great Lakes Theater. The Lakewood Civic Auditorium gave way to the Ohio Theatre in downtown Cleveland, which in turn gave way to the Hanna Theatre, one of the newest jewels in the crown of the Playhouse Square theater district. But the enduring legacy of Great Lakes Theater is a testimony to the aspirations and commitments of countless people--artists, administrators, educators, and community members--who have made contributions large and small to the success of a theater dedicated to the classics that has rooted itself for five decades on the edge of America's north coast.

Many theaters are founded by artists, but Great Lakes Theater was founded by a group of civic leaders. Most of them were citizens of Lakewood, Ohio, a West Side inner-ring suburb of Cleveland. They served on the library and education boards of their community. In the 1950s they built a library, a skating rink, and swimming pools and added a "civic" auditorium to their high school--all to enhance the education and well-being of their children.

Once they built the auditorium, the school board set out to find edifying ways to use the space. "During the year, the joint was jumping, but in the summer it was idle," remembered Dorothy

Teare, who was president of the Lakewood Board of Education in 1961. With this dilemma on her mind, Teare happened across a *Plain Dealer* article about a director of Shakespeare who was looking for a theater space. Teare had attended Oberlin and Radcliffe Colleges and studied with the great Shakespeare scholar George Kittredge. As a Shakespeare buff, she was already familiar with the work of Arthur Lithgow, the director mentioned in the article.

Dorothy Teare and her colleagues and friends were at the heart of the impulse that led to the founding of a theater. But their interests may not have taken that specific shape if they had not crossed paths with Arthur Lithgow.

The Arthur Lithgow Years: 1962-1965

When Dorothy Teare contacted Arthur Lithgow, the auditorium in search of a tenant found a theater troupe in search of a home. The director's son, actor John Lithgow, called his father "the Johnny Appleseed of Shakespeare"—which was fitting because, by chance, a ceramic mural of Johnny Appleseed marked the front entrance to the Lakewood Civic Auditorium. Since 1952, Arthur Lithgow had been staging Shakespeare across the state of Ohio. As a faculty member in the English department at Antioch College, he had initiated a professional summer theater program at the college called "Shakespeare Under the Stars." Between 1952 and 1957, he had staged the bard's entire canon of 37 plays at Antioch. Then he began branching out: at the Toledo Zoo, the actors had to strain to be heard over screeching peacocks. Stan Hywet Hall in Akron and an old movie theater in Cuyahoga Falls offered better performing environments but only temporary quarters.

Lithgow was not an aimless wanderer, but was, in fact, a tireless pioneer of the classical and regional theater movements. In the 1950s and early 1960s two theater trends were converging. One of those trends was a rising interest in Shakespeare; *The Shakespeare Complex*, Glen Meredith Loney and Patricia Mackay's 1975 survey of American Shakespeare producers documented numerous theaters with origins in the two previous decades. The second trend was the desire to produce high quality, non-commercial theater, especially classical theater, and especially beyond the boundaries of the Broadway district in New York. As a result, numerous classical theaters were springing up around the country

Among not-for-profit theaters, there were earlier outliers. The Cleveland Play House, the city's other major regional theater, is a rare professional survivor of an early 20th century impulse known as the "art" or "little" theater movement. And the Oregon Shakespeare Festival dates its founding to 1935. But beginning with the Alley Theatre in Houston in 1947, not-for-profit, and especially classical, theaters appeared at a quickening pace throughout the 1950s and '60s—with Arena Stage in Washington DC in 1950, The Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada

in 1953, Joseph Papp's Shakespeare Workshops and the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut, in 1955, and the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis in 1963.

Lithgow and his collaborators were right at the center of this activity. While Lithgow landed in Lakewood in 1962, two of his early colleagues, Ellis Rabb and William Ball, opened theaters in 1965--the Association of Producing Artists in New York and the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. As Lithgow would recall, "At that time, actors around the country interested in classical repertory were a kind of family. Many had trained at Yale, Carnegie Tech, or Northwestern. They all worked at the same places." Actor Donald Moffat, a stalwart member of Lithgow's "acting family" who would go on to become a leading stage and film character actor, concurred: "Most of the good young actors I met had worked for Arthur at one time or another."

Lithgow had the visionary dream that a quality American classical theater could exist in an Antioch or a Lakewood. He had, as Moffat would attest, "an extraordinary love of the text, a real joy in Shakespeare" that he communicated in an inspirational way to actors, boards, and audiences. For their part, Clevelanders were hungry for Shakespeare. The Cleveland Play House only offered a smattering of Shakespeare and the classics alongside the contemporary plays that were always its mainstay. And Clevelanders on the West Side of town were particularly hungry for something cultural on their bank of the Cuyahoga River. So the fit was auspicious. By the beginning of 1962 negotiations had begun in earnest for launching a summer Shakespeare festival in Lakewood in July 1962.

There were a few hurdles. As Lithgow pointed out in 1966, Great Lakes was unique among American Shakespeare Festivals in not having "strong institutional sponsorship such as a university or college, organized theater association, art or civic foundation, government subsidy and/or angel." During all his earlier years of wandering Ohio, Lithgow had Antioch College as a "home base." But in 1961, he had accepted the position of visiting lecturer at Princeton University and was named resident director of the McCarter Theater Project, a precursor to the professional theater that the university was thinking about launching. Distant Princeton was unlikely to sponsor a Shakespeare Festival in Lakewood, Ohio. The folks in Lakewood only had a high school with an empty auditorium to offer. And summer was only a few short months away.

Decisions were made quickly, but with prescience. The enterprise would be named Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival. The "Great Lakes" looked beyond Lakewood to a regional horizon. And while "Shakespeare" was front and center, the theater's articles of incorporation wisely also allowed for a time, as Teare admitted, when they "would run out of Shakespeare." The "Festival" signaled that the founders were staking their claim within the summer festival model

set forth by the “two Stratfords,” in Canada and Connecticut. The name and the aspirations were ambitious.

Most remarkably, the decision was made to incorporate, not just to present a summer of Shakespeare on a trial basis. Significantly, Lithgow did not incorporate the theater. Neither did the Lakewood Board of Education. Instead, Dorothy Teare, who yielded her role as president of the school board to an ally named William Edwards, embraced the task of assembling an independent Board of Trustees for the new Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival.

To give the theater credibility in the broader Cleveland community, Teare reached out to such theater professionals as Russell and Rowena Jelliffe of Karamu House and K. Elmo Lowe of the Cleveland Play House, along with noted cultural “mavens” such as Kay Williams and newspaper veterans such as *Cleveland Press* editor Louis Seltzer and *Plain Dealer* theater critic Harlowe Hoyt—whose article about Lithgow had prompted Teare to call the director in the first place. She recruited Lakewood High School classmates who had become the suburb’s bankers and lawyers. But most of the day to day “heavy lifting” was done by a group of extraordinary women who moved between the Board of Trustees and a working Women’s Committee. These women rose to the occasion and became, as Teare was fond of saying, “impresarios in spite of ourselves.”

Well educated and energetic, many of these women, such as Teare and her close friend Georgia Nielsen, already knew each other from the Great Books Club, the College Club, or the Women’s City Club. Three other future Great Lakes Board Presidents—Lindsay Morgenthaler (1967-68), Marilyn Brentlinger (1974-76), and Audrey Watts (1977-79)--were all neighbors of Teare’s on Edgewater Drive. Morgenthaler would also go on to chair Cleveland’s public television board, the Women’s Council of The Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Women’s City Club, among many other commitments. Watts spearheaded many of the theater’s most successful fundraising initiatives and was also an active fundraiser for the American Heart Association and other charities. And over the years, Brentlinger was in such demand across the community as a benefit chair, event planner, and board chair that she would eventually co-author, with Judith Weiss, *The Ultimate Benefit Book*. These were formidable women who already knew how to work with each other.

But Teare also placed a call for volunteers in the *Lakewood Post* newspaper, and other likeminded folks surfaced, such as longtime Board Secretary Phyllis Kyle. They quickly became new friends. Men and women, most of them were already theater lovers. But they were also, as Nielsen pointed out, “people whose names carried weight in the community.”

No one knew where the money would come from, but in April 1962 the intrepid group announced a season. “Money?” scoffed Nielsen. “We had spirit.” More than twenty years

later, in 1986, she would say, “We were a family working for a cause, and we continue to be friends.”

School board president Edwards helped Teare to convince the Lakewood Board of Education to allow the company to use the auditorium rent free that first summer—in return for presenting several performances for Lakewood students in the early fall. Since Teare was initially shy about asking old friends for money, Edwards also began twisting the arms of local businessmen for financial support. The high school print shop agreed to produce tickets. Meanwhile the women—many of whom were young mothers—set to work licking stamps, stapling ticket books, holding bake sales, and spreading the word at bridge parties. Dorothy May “Dee” Ranney, whose husband had been a newspaper critic, said she could spearhead publicity. Others volunteered to stock a gift shop. Georgia Nielsen organized ticket sales from her basement, which came to be known as “The Shakespeare Annex,” a bustling operation that she would continue to oversee for more than a decade.

Audrey Watts formed a committee to find housing for the actors. And the enterprise almost foundered right then. At the time, the I-90 freeway was about to cut a swath through Lakewood. Scores of houses had been appropriated by eminent domain; the houses were already empty but were not yet torn down. And construction had been delayed until the fall. Someone inquired if the actors could take over a few of the empty houses. Negotiations were proceeding apace until a councilman began churning up fear of godless actors, inter-racial communes, and orgies.

Even after other lodgings were secured and the unwanted hubbub died down, it took conservative Lakewood time to get used to the newcomers. Since the crew cuts of the day didn’t jive with an Elizabethan “look,” the male actors were letting their hair grow. Norma Joseph, the only Clevelander in the early troupe, later recalled that at least one company member was arrested as a vagrant while walking home one night to his rented digs.

“Care and feeding” of the actors remained a cherished volunteer commitment for many years; the women drove the actors downtown to interviews, invited them to family picnics, shared recipes, baked cookies, and arranged for boat rides and swimming parties. Working side by side, the volunteers and actors shared a wonderful camaraderie—and celebrated together at cast parties thrown by such gracious hosts as Lindsay Morgenthaler and Audrey Watts. At Watts’ house one night, trustees and cast members alike were swept up in an exuberant Greek circle dance—a vivid and long-held memory.

Whole families were caught up in the whirl of activity. Architect Wallace Teare, Dr. Richard Watts, and banker Walter Kyle, who later joined the Board as treasurer alongside his wife, were among the many spouses who gave unstinting support. The Teares’ daughter Jenny got

married that first summer, and her wedding photographer was pressed into double duty for the Shakespeare cause. Teenaged children became ushers, “pages,” and spear carriers on stage when needed.

The costume shop was another hub of activity for volunteers, again mostly women, with Phyllis Kyle and, later, Marge Greenwald leading the way. Working in a close, windowless space beneath the stage, the volunteers rustled up old sewing machines and helped designer Hal George in countless ways. They dyed material in their own washing machines, collected old sheets to turn into linings, and sewed seams. The husband and wife team of Lois and Raymond Dellner—a NASA mathematician and a civil engineer—learned to fashion armor from Elastoplast, which was more commonly used as a medical dressing. Phyllis Kyle recalled that designer George asked her the first summer to go downtown one day at 2:30 pm to buy chiffon for Desdemona’s nightgown; it needed to be ready for the opening night of *Othello* that evening. Actress Delphi Harrington later confided to Kyle that she had played her moving death scene held together by safety pins.

Costumes and sets were extremely spare. All-purpose brown capes were the most prevalent costume item. A cape would be snatched from the shoulders of an exiting actor and draped on the arm of an entering one, only to reappear yet again as a tent or a tablecloth in another scene. Every production relied on the same basic “unit set”—an assemblage of pipes, drapes and platforms. An economic necessity, the bare stage also reflected an aesthetic choice. During the early 1960s, American actor Sam Wanamaker was raising money to rebuild Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre; he planned a spare, open stage that was modeled after the original. The fluid flexibility of the Elizabethan stage was frequently touted as an ideal.

Lithgow and his actors were used to such “rough and ready” conditions. To reach their dressing rooms, the actors had to climb under and around the pipes in the high school’s basement boiler room. But an air-conditioned auditorium beat performing outdoors at a zoo. Certainly there were challenges. For instance, there weren’t enough spare cast members to provide for understudies. Actress Anne Murray was suffering a gall bladder attack one night but had to go on anyway. Dr. Richard Watts sat in the audience, a syringe filled with pain killer in his pocket, in case she took a turn for the worse mid-performance.

Still, the sense of opportunity trumped the challenges. Lithgow and the Board agreed to concentrate on Shakespeare for the first few seasons. As the director observed, “We needed the unity of costumes, settings and numbers of people that Shakespeare provided. The Bard probably had some of the same considerations himself.” Lithgow had decided on six plays because he felt that “we couldn’t get enough people there if we didn’t do a lot of plays.” With six large-cast Shakespeare shows in rotating repertory (with staggered openings), Lithgow could offer actors a full summer’s worth of bracing work.

The director was thus able to attract a strong company of actors who were soon to make their mark in the burgeoning regional theater scene. Donald Moffat reported that in the early 1960s he had the option of playing bit parts for little money in Joe Papp's Central Park productions or tackling "the great roles" at Great Lakes for a modest but decent wage. Emery Battis, who had taken a detour in life as a history professor but would become a staple at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington D.C., had the unparalleled opportunity to play Bolingbroke, the future King Henry IV, in three separate plays on consecutive nights, when *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV* were offered in rotating rep. Board member Lindsay Morgenthaler recalled that Lithgow had "a tremendous ability for selecting exciting, charismatic people on stage." *Plain Dealer* critic Peter Bellamy complimented the company's ensemble acting and their "infectious joy of living" in his first Great Lakes review.

Bellamy observed that the actors seemed to "eat, drink and sleep" Shakespeare—a way of life that also involved Lithgow's wife Sarah and his children. There was a great deal of trust and experimentation. With what Moffat called "a wonderful histrionic streak," the director sometimes took to the other side of the footlights, romping as the innkeeper in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for instance. He also nudged designer George and company members Moffat, Mario Siletti, and Larry Linville (later Frank Burns on television's M*A*S*H) to try their hands at directing. For instance, Siletti, who went on to have a 25-year career as a leading acting teacher in New York, melded the three cumbersome, and rarely performed, parts of *Henry VI* into an electrifying whole.

As a director, Lithgow concentrated on clarifying what he called "the thematic soul or center" of a play and creating "a rhythmical, picturesque form on stage." He carefully orchestrated moments of terror and hilarity in comedy. In a production of *The Comedy of Errors*, which he would recall as his most satisfying at Great Lakes, he heightened the brutality of the beating of an old man in the opening scene, believing that in Shakespeare, "comedy arises out of an essentially frightening situation."

After establishing a framework, he allowed the actors leeway. Since rehearsal time was short, the early productions had an improvisational energy. Lithgow grumbled when Moffat would be late learning lines, but trusted that, "lo and behold, opening night, he would be letter perfect, and this brilliant performance would emerge." Lithgow's young son, John, was another actor who "suddenly emerged with an absolutely irresistible" Dr. Pinch, a minor charlatan in *The Comedy of Errors*. On his own, the teenaged John planned elaborate make-up and props, including a potion bottle that showered confetti. Seasoned first on the Lakewood High School stage, the versatile young apprentice would go on to star in movies such as *The World According to Garp*, television shows such as *3rd Rock from the Sun* and Broadway musicals such as *Dirty, Rotten Scoundrels*.

Despite shoestring budgets, Lithgow and his company managed dynamic productions that thrilled audiences. Decades later, the founding Board members still had vivid memories: Moffat as a doddering Justice Shallow in *Henry IV, Part Two* and an awkward Henry V. Siletti as the future Richard III caressing the throne he covets. The leaping abandon of Laurence Luckinbill as Orlando. The panther stalk of Edward Zang as Tybalt. The heart-rending death scene that Battis etched for *Henry IV*. Ken Ruta's Shylock, Earl Hyman's Othello, Norma Joseph's Ophelia. Murray and Linville, an even match as Kate and Petruchio. Clarence Felder's uproarious Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Nicholas Kepros's toadying Roderigo in *Othello*.

Fortunately, the press was also enthusiastic. Not surprisingly, the Lakewood papers were boosters. But Great Lakes also attracted national attention. In 1964, *TIME Magazine* reported, "The consistent high level of its productions is the achievement of director Arthur Lithgow, long a professional man-about-Shakespeare." *The Plain Dealer* critic Peter Bellamy was a strong advocate; for years he routinely profiled Great Lakes actors and designers on the front page of the Entertainment section. Bellamy often reviewed productions of the three Stratfords—in Canada, Connecticut and England. He didn't hesitate to judge the new company by the standards of their higher profile counterparts and was happy to point out when the fledgling troupe had outplayed them. Explained Bellamy, "Shakespeare is one of the abiding passions of my life, so at every opportunity, I wrote feature stories to help keep [Great Lakes] alive." Decked out in the bright green dinner jacket that he invariably wore on opening nights, Bellamy was another colorful figure in the theater's tapestry.

At the end of the 1963 season, *Cleveland Press* critic Tony Mastroianni reported that attendance grew from about 18,000 in 1962 to 30,000 in 1963, but he also mentioned a deficit. Tallies varied but at the beginning of 1965 a "three-year" deficit of \$30,000 was reported. The debt could have been crushing to a group that was proud of what Audrey Watts called its "housewife's mentality about spending." But they were "bitten by the Festival bug" said Watts, and instead they stepped up their fundraising efforts.

Audrey Watts had worked as a fashion buyer in department stores as a young woman. In 1963, Watts approached Francis Coy, head of the May Company Department Store, about presenting a benefit fashion show in May and enlisted Coy's wife Virginia, a close friend of Watts, to co-chair the event. The show featured a spread of English pastries and tea and the teenaged children of all the "Festival families" as plume-hatted pages. On the strength of this first event, Watts went on to stage an annual fashion show that remained one of the theater's primary fundraisers for years.

Also crucial to the company's survival was the fact that businessman Carl Dryer emerged to take hold of the theater's financial management. Banker, outdoorsman, and leading Lakewood

citizen, unlike many of the early Great Lakes patrons Dryer did not join the fold as a theater buff. He and Dorothy Teare had been Lakewood High School classmates, and he didn't want to leave an old friend in the lurch. He allowed his wife Margaret to drag him the first season to one of the history plays that Lithgow excelled at, and he became a convert. Teare also shrewdly showed Dryer a Canadian newspaper article detailing the economic impact that the festival there had on Stratford, Ontario, and the businessman could see the potential for Lakewood. At the end of the first season, he agreed to join the Board as chairman of finance, a position he held for many years before he also took his turn as president from 1969-71.

The Great Lakes volunteers desperately needed Dryer's financial acumen and business contacts. They hadn't even realized the first season that they had to withhold social security from wages. Cash flow was so uneven from week to week that they could barely meet the payroll, and Dryer is widely credited with digging into his own pockets to get the company through rough spots—the first of several trustees to do so. Dryer convinced friends to forgive debts. He also brought aboard Robert Bender, the first in a long line of Board members who were partners from the accounting firm that is now known as Ernst & Young. With evidence of financial planning in hand, by the time the 1965 season opened, the theater was able to announce that it had obtained a two-year grant of \$20,000 from the Cleveland Foundation, a \$15,000 grant from the Leonard C. Hanna Final Fund, and a grant from the Beaumont Foundation to subsidize student matinees. Great Lakes was not only able to end the 1965 season in the black but was also able to erase the deficit accumulated during the first three seasons.

The 1965 season inaugurated an experiment—an exchange between Great Lakes and the McCarter Theatre, where Lithgow had acquired the title of Executive Director. Great Lakes announced a seven-show season, which included four productions that originated at McCarter during the previous academic year and three new ones that would travel back to McCarter in the fall. The same actors would work with Lithgow at both places, and, as he told *The New York Times*, “The acting company will be strengthened by the opportunity for ensemble acting.”

The exchange between the two theaters also led Great Lakes into non-Shakespearean territory for the first time, where it joined other prominent Shakespeare festivals of the day. Audiences took the expansion in stride and enjoyed the delicious performances turned in by such company favorites as Emery Battis and Ruby Holbrook in Sheridan's *The Rivals*.

Lithgow's proposal reflected a long-range vision. “I felt,” Lithgow later explained, “that we were moving toward a time when there would be a network of resident theaters and [Great Lakes] would be one of the important elements in the network. In effect these theaters would be the national theater.” But he admitted that the “drive of the regional theater movement was parochial and civic-centered, not national.” (Though he had like-minded compatriots, Lithgow was far ahead of his time; the kind of producing arrangement he envisioned would only

be fully implemented decades later by Producing Artistic Director Charlie Fee—and would still be regarded as innovative in 2012.)

Lithgow’s dream required more money in any event, and his budget request for a second “exchange” season in 1966--\$150,000 according to contemporary newspaper reports--exceeded the Board’s limit of \$107,000. The economic pressures at the time included the fact that the Lakewood Board of Education was requesting the payment of \$5,775 rent in 1966. “We’d just gotten our house in order,” explained Dryer later. “We couldn’t go out and blow everything.” Protective of the theater’s hard-won and home-grown identity and stability, the Board opted for autonomy. With regret, Lithgow cast his lot with McCarter.

But the theater’s first artistic director had indeed planted seeds. And the Board leadership was by then confident of its ability to weather a change and tend the sapling on its own. Dorothy Teare and others had their own sustaining vision: “What kept us going through that chaotic first year and through the hard years that followed was that we could see what we were doing for children and young people.” From a handful of performances for Lakewood students, the student matinee program had grown to twenty performances for schools all over the city. Programs for adults had also sprouted; the Lakewood Board of Education and local colleges were offering classes that tied in with the theater’s season, and Women’s Committee member Ruth Morrill was giving preview talks at the Lakewood Public Library—which she would do for many years.

Dedicated to the theater’s educational mission, and unabashedly stage-struck, the volunteer leadership still ran the theater on a day-to-day basis. With a nostalgia that many shared, Phyllis Kyle recalled in 1986, “It was not a very formal, business-like operation in those first giddy days. It was more like a frenzied but happy anthill with everybody scurrying madly around in all directions. And I miss it!”

The Lawrence Carra Years 1966-1975

Fortunately, a man capable of succeeding Arthur Lithgow was already known to the Great Lakes Board. The trustees had considered hiring a general manager during the 1965 season, and then-Vice President Lindsay Morgenthaler suggested that they talk to Lawrence Carra. Carra was a professor of drama at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (soon to become Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, which was Morgenthaler’s *alma mater*. Carnegie was, as theater historian Joseph Zeigler put it, “the cradle of many regional theater talents.” Co-author of the classic textbook, *The Fundamentals of Play Directing*, Carra had a wealth of stage experience. But he was also a veteran of the pioneering days of live television drama and had shepherded the *Pulitzer Prize Playhouse* series. He shared Lithgow’s talent for putting on a

show quickly and with limited resources. And as Mary Bill, who joined the theater's staff under Carra's tenure, once noted, he was "a very astute theater business person."

Carra recognized the importance of the community's support. Looking back at his Great Lakes days, he later said, "All accolades should go to the Board and the Women's Committee. They freely, lavishly, and unstintingly gave of their time." The theater was still running primarily on volunteer man-and-woman-power when Carra arrived and continued to do so throughout his stint in Lakewood. Carra once laughingly told David Morgenthaler that his wife Lindsay and her Edgewater Drive neighbors "could rule the world." Civic pride in the theater ran high in Lakewood, which sported signs that proclaimed, "Entering Lakewood, Home of the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival." As the authors of *The Shakespeare Complex*, a survey of American Shakespeare festivals, observed in 1975, "[Many] useful activities are provided by community volunteers, making this Festival an interesting study in cooperation."

Carra enhanced the spirit of community involvement by using local talent. Staples in his acting company were professional actors who had been associated with the Cleveland Play House and made Cleveland their home at that time, most notably, Norma Joseph, Susan Willis, Keith Mackey and Robert Allman. Dozens of area students trod the Lakewood stage in the apprentice program that Carra established. He also turned to local collaborators such as Joseph Garry, then a professor at Cleveland State University, to guest direct and to the versatile Mary Bill to translate *The Italian Straw Hat* and develop a musical adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*.

Some of the actors associated with Lithgow also returned to Great Lakes in 1966. Although the regional theater scene had grown since the 1950s, there were still, as Carra pointed out, "very few opportunities to act every day and do classical material." Carra and the Board agreed to continue producing both Shakespeare and other classic authors, tapping Shaw and Moliere first. "This is the tendency all over the country," the new director pointed out at the time. "Otherwise a Shakespeare Festival exhausts itself." The typical season throughout Carra's tenure consisted of three Shakespeare plays and two non-Shakespeare plays, still performed in rotating repertory.

Within that framework, Norma Joseph lived every actress's dream, taking on most of Shakespeare's major heroines under Carra's direction. Emery Battis fulfilled a lifelong ambition to play Lear, delivering a harrowing and monumental performance that Peter Bellamy found "intensely thrilling" and the equal of anything the Royal Shakespeare Company could field. Robert Allman found himself doing shows, "like Shakespeare's satiric *Troilus and Cressida* that I had never done."

Carra also brought in, said *Cleveland Press* critic Tony Mastroianni, "an element of the glamour of Broadway and Hollywood." Louis Edmonds, a lead in the popular television soap-opera *Dark*

Shadows, flew in from New York weekly during the 1967 season to tackle *Cyrano de Bergerac*. In 1969, Carra invited his old friends, Broadway and Hollywood veterans, Celeste Holm and Wesley Addy, to guest star in a warm, witty *Candida* that became the first Great Lakes production to transfer to Broadway. Addy came back to Great Lakes a few years later to put his regal, elegiac stamp on Lear and to share a little fun with actress Edith Owens in *Under the Gaslight*, a melodrama that featured a ditty with the memorable refrain “Oh the Er-i-e was rising/ And the gin was getting low.”

The theater’s resources were still extremely limited. Fortunately, as Carra told reporters when he first came, “I do my best work under stringent budget.” He also reduced the number of plays per season from six to a more manageable five. A man of few words, Carra relied on organization, tight economies, and the invaluable assistance of his wife Marguerite (“and she made wonderful lasagna,” chirped Susan Willis). Also key: a talented production team decamped with the director every summer from Carnegie. Faculty, alumni, and students who were familiar collaborators during the academic year could be trusted to work miracles in short order during the summer in Lakewood.

With reliable collaborators on hand—and the tools they brought with them—Carra could create a proscenium “mask” for the stage his first season or expect 160 costumes to be ready for the 1968 season. (The meager costume budget allowed for less than \$800 per show, even as late as 1973.) Carra enlisted designers Milton Howarth and Warner Blake to create a series of flexible unit sets that could be reconfigured from night to night. Carra felt that the 1973 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, his personal favorite, represented the best of what they were able to accomplish. Blake’s gauzy streamers in blue, green and white, William French’s sumptuous costumes and Frederic Youens’ ever-changing light-play combined to evoke an airy enchantment that provided an effective counterpoint to the antics of Keith Mackey as Bottom and the impish Charles Berendt as Puck.

Rehearsal time was limited to 50 hours for each show during those years, about half of what other comparable regional theaters had. (It took a special grant for enhanced rehearsal time to attract Jean Gascon to Great Lakes to direct *The Miser* in 1975. A leading interpreter of Moliere, Gascon had just retired from the Stratford Festival in Ontario and was used to a much longer rehearsal period.) In order to hit the ground running each summer, Carra prepared meticulously each spring—cutting scripts ruthlessly and providing cut scripts to actors months in advance. Most of the company members learned their lines before they arrived each summer, which gave the theater a “do-it-yourself” reputation among actors.

The director shrewdly parceled out parts and managed rehearsal schedules to get as much work out of each company member as the Actors’ Equity Association would allow. Every company member was in at least three shows, playing a balance of featured and less

demanding roles. A lack of depth “on the bench” meant that armies or crowds in history plays and tragedies might consist of the teenaged children of the Women’s Committee members, high school students, and actors’ spouses. Young actors had to impersonate older ones; Jeremiah Sullivan later chuckled at the memory of his 31-year-old self playing an “old goat” of a father in Shaw’s *Misalliance*.

Working within these constraints, Carra assembled his cast, then, as Allman said, “trusted you to do the right thing. He treated you as an equal in a partnership of getting a show on.” John Straub, who played the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, told a reporter, “Larry is very good at putting the finger on key things in a script and production. From there it is the actor’s job to create the character, not the director’s.” With what Sullivan laughingly called Carra’s “great Italian sense of the father, the *padrone*,” the director encouraged calm and harmonious working conditions. “Make it sparkle, Norma,” he would urge, and Joseph brought forth a saucy Dorine in *Tartuffe*, a spunky Desdemona and a radiant Juliet. Robert Allman delivered a multi-faceted Shylock, Susan Willis a wily Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and Roger Robinson an impassioned Othello. If four characters had to stride on stage in a history play to mask a scene change by announcing “The English power is near,” it was up to the actors to make it work. And work, they did. Confessed Sullivan, “We were all vey haggard by the time the five shows opened.”

Playing in rotating repertory produced a few “if this is Tuesday, it must be Belgium” moments. Actress Eve Collyer only had a small part in the last act of *The Tempest* so she usually arrived at the theater after the show had already started on the nights that *The Tempest* was playing. One evening, as she bicycled up at about 9:00 pm, she noticed that the large banner announcing the evening’s attraction named a show she was starring in, not *The Tempest*. Panic-stricken she ran backstage to find out, with immense relief, that the banner had already been changed to reflect the next night’s show. There wasn’t enough money for brush-up rehearsals even when there was a gap of more than a week between performances of a show. Some desperate dressing room huddles and scary pauses on stage resulted. But despite all the challenges, Willis insisted, “Actors love rotating repertory. They love to test themselves that way. From Mistress Page [in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*] to that awful Clytemnestra—each role strengthens the other.”

Emphasizing pace, timing, and movement, Carra excelled at marshaling brisk comedies: Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*, with a mugging John Milligan in the title role, the rapid-fire opening and closing of doors in the bedroom farce, *The Beaux’ Stratagem*, and a host of others. Those talents were never more tested than in the 1973 production of *Tartuffe*. Carra had introduced the practice of hiring occasional guest directors from outside the company, but sometimes the guests weren’t accustomed to the economy that Great Lakes required. Halfway through a two-

week rehearsal for *Tartuffe*, the guest director hadn't gotten beyond staging the first act of the play. Carra had to step in and pull the show out of the fire. Thanks to such stalwarts as Kermit Brown, whose credulous Orgon was impeccable, the show came off with panache.

Carra put into practice the ideals articulated in Jan Kott's influential 1964 book *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. "We didn't look at the classics as antiques," emphasized Carra. It wasn't just a matter of doing Shakespeare in "modern dress," though there would be some of that. Citing the spare look of his sets, his judicious cutting of texts, and his focus on character development, Carra concluded, "Conceptually, our approach was contemporary."

The production that most exemplified this goal was Carra's 1968 *Hamlet*, with Jeremiah Sullivan in the title role. Sullivan had already caught the audience's attention with his nimble Mercutio in the previous year's *Romeo and Juliet*. Claimed Sullivan, "That particular *Hamlet* would not have been born were not the times the way they were. The late 1960s was an exciting time of change and danger." Before arriving in Lakewood for the summer, Sullivan had steeped himself in the *Hamlet* recordings of Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud—and was almost in despair about his ability to bring anything new to one of Shakespeare's most challenging roles. But a few weeks before rehearsal began, Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles, and Sullivan immediately knew the Hamlet he had to create—an outraged idealist who would have to "sacrifice life in the face of total corruption."

Like many of his fellow actors, Sullivan was striving for an American approach to classical repertory. He worked at mastering the verbal fluency with Shakespeare's poetry that British actors claimed but also tried to charge the verse with an American energy and passion. Listening to the jazz recordings of Billie Holliday, he thought about how to underscore the words of the monologues with "emotional choices" that conveyed Hamlet's mercurial moods. A strong supporting cast and a crisp, theatrical staging matched Sullivan's assured intensity.

Overflow crowds flocked to see the show, with many, old and young, returning more than once; the curtain that normally closed off half of the 2000-seat auditorium was drawn back. It didn't hurt that Sullivan was handsome, and witty. Critic Peter Bellamy quipped that the young actor was the theater's first "matinee idol." But the attraction of Sullivan's Hamlet ran much deeper. Carra found that "students had an extraordinary empathy with the production." Student reporters wanted to interview Sullivan for their school newspapers, a father wrote in wonderment that his son chose to attend the theater rather than go to an Indians baseball game, and student matinee audiences routinely leaped to their feet at the end of each performance—a sight that Carra called his "most enriching experience" at the theater.

The *Hamlet* production in 1968 signaled Carra's contemporary outlook. That same season, a production of Shaw's *Arms and the Man* opened with a poignant rendition of the anti-war folk

ballad “Where Have All the Flowers Gone.” Modern-dress Shakespeare was just becoming popular across the country. In 1965, Lithgow’s ensemble had rebelled at the idea of doing *Coriolanus* in a futuristic setting. But a few years later, in 1970, Carra staged a *Julius Caesar* that made direct visual reference to the Kent State killings, which had taken place only a few months earlier. In 1972, guest director George Vafiadis and actress Dimitra Arliss collaborated on a searing production of Sophocles’ *Electra* that spoke to the frustrated idealism of the early 1970s, while a 1974 production of *Measure for Measure* dripped with post-Watergate cynicism.

Carra also began to venture with success into 20th century drama, with *R.U.R.*, a futuristic Czech play about a robot rebellion, Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, and Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (the first Great Lakes production of an *American* classic, in 1975). But a more daring contemporary choice was less well received. In 1972, Carra felt that an audience steeped in Shakespeare was ready for the American premiere of *The Marowitz Hamlet*. The piece, which deconstructed, rearranged, and re-purposed Shakespeare’s play, had been devised by Charles Marowitz for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 1964 “Theater of Cruelty” season that also included *Marat/Sade* and work by Antonin Artaud. Carra thought the “collage,” which was charged with undercurrents of violent sexuality, was an “exciting, highly theatrical experiment.” The director cast Gregory Lehane, a recent Carnegie graduate, as the clown-faced Hamlet, and the game young actor showed the baffled veterans the way through the murky script. Audiences were divided about whether the results were distasteful, muddled, or provocative.

A risky choice that could have backfired helped set Great Lakes on solid ground financially for the first time in its scrappy existence. For the theater’s tenth season, in 1971, Carra proposed an unusual title. One of his Carnegie students, John-Michael Tebelak, had developed a musical setting of several New Testament parables as a master’s thesis project. In February 1971, Tebelak had directed a version of his *Godspell* at Café La Mama (now La Mama Experimental Theatre) in New York, and it was picked up immediately for an off-Broadway production that spring, refitted with a new musical score by composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz. Carra approached Tebelak about directing the play at Great Lakes that summer, but first he had to convince the theater’s Board. Recalled Dorothy Teare, “We were very skeptical: A rock musical based on the Bible! It will never go in Lakewood.” But the Board trusted Carra and went along for what turned out to be a thrilling ride.

Sun newspaper critic Arthur Spaeth eloquently summed up *Godspell* as “a thing of youthful joy, ache and wonderment . . . at once a play, a circus, a magic show, a sawdust-trail revival and a rock-folk music sermon.” Berea-raised Tebelak, who was only 22 at the time, breezed into his hometown in applied overalls and t-shirt, espousing a theater of celebration.

By the time the show opened in August, word was out that *Godspell* was something special. The curtain that split the Lakewood Civic Auditorium was pulled back again. Nearly every

performance played to standing-room-only audiences. Norma Joseph recalled that when the cast heard the unaccustomed din of the opening-night crowd over the backstage PA, they were terrified. Only a few of them professed to be singers, and they felt under-rehearsed for the charades, hand puppetry, magic tricks, pantomimes, and vaudeville routines that they needed to pull off. Atheist, agnostic, and believer, they formed a circle and prayed: “This play is about You—You better help us out.”

The audience was certainly rooting for them—when Bruce Gray (who would go on to a varied television and film career) and Robert Englund (who later created the character of Freddy Krueger for the franchise *A Nightmare on Elm Street*) soft-shoed a scene between Jesus and Judas or Robert Denison filled the house with a stirring rendition of the song “All Good Gifts.” “It was like a revival meeting,” exclaimed Lindsay Morgenthaler. *Godspell* opened up space in the repertory for musical theater, including *The Beggar’s Opera* in 1972 and the Midwest premiere of Burt Shevelove and Stephen Sondheim’s quirky adaptation of Aristophanes’ *The Frogs* in 1975. Along the way, the “rock” musical broke all attendance records and put Great Lakes in the black for almost the first time. “What if we hadn’t done it?” wondered Teare.

The windfall from *Godspell* enabled the organization to grow in much needed ways. Over the years, the Board had gradually added a few seasonal employees, most notably husband-and-wife team Pat and Betty O’Toole, who took over publicity and also handled school bookings and group sales. But thoughts about building a staff were always put on hold when nearly every season ended with a deficit. However, in 1972, then Board President Peter Shimrak, a Lakewood banker who had been a *Cleveland Press* reporter, was finally able to hire Mary Bill as “Coordinator of School Programs.” Bill was the theater’s first full-time, year-round employee.

Mary Bill was a native Clevelander with a degree in theater from Catholic University who had received the same kind of training that many regional actors and directors had. She taught theater at Notre Dame College when she returned to Cleveland after graduation. But as the mother of three children, she had elected to channel her theater-making energies as a “drama coach” at St. Joseph Academy, a high school for girls located only a few miles from Lakewood High School. St. Joseph’s was one of the first schools outside of Lakewood to attend the theater’s student matinees. In 1967, Mary Bill had invited Great Lakes actress Susan Willis to participate in a summer workshop for high school students at St. Joseph’s. Bill also saw first-hand how enthralled students were by the 1968 *Hamlet*. A group of her St. Joseph’s students--her own two daughters and future dramaturg Margaret Lynch included--were inspired to begin ushering at Great Lakes and volunteering in the costume shop. Their engagement “made me so conscious of the resource that youngsters should be taking advantage of,” Bill said.

Programming for students had been core to the theater’s mission since the start. By the early 1970s, area schools were sending students by the busloads to Great Lakes every September.

But the results were sometimes mixed. “Our first student audiences were very badly behaved,” admitted Board member Audrey Watts. Actor Jeremiah Sullivan had to stop one performance of *Hamlet* to reprimand an unruly group.

Mary Bill wanted “to give young people a richer theater experience” and felt strongly that better student preparation was the key. In 1969, while she was still teaching at St. Joseph’s, she approached the theater with an idea: she would write a grant to the Ohio Arts Council that would allow her to organize a summer subscription series and pre-performance talks for economically disadvantaged young people. One project grant led to another, and by 1972 Bill had become indispensable. She initiated workshops for students and teachers, study guides, meet-the-actor sessions, and a Shakespeare-in-the-schools program that brought actors to classrooms before the students came to see a play.

In the process of putting these programs together, Bill further developed her skill at grant proposal writing. Grants had already played a crucial role in the survival of the theater during the mid-1960s—when “\$10,000 seemed like the whole world,” remembered Morgenthaler. But Bill’s concentrated grantsmanship opened new doors with the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, the Ohio Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and local corporations—and earned ever-more consistent support from the Cleveland Foundation and The George Gund Foundation. Her efforts yielded a remarkable growth of income. The theater’s budget nearly doubled between 1972 and 1975, and the 1975 budget of \$300,000 was six times the size of the first budget in 1962. The theater’s audiences were also growing—from 40,000 a summer in 1966 to 54,000 in 1975. And yet, the organization was still just barely keeping up; the Lakewood School Board requested rent of \$9,000 for the 1976 season, but Great Lakes could only pay \$7,500.

At this time, non-profit theaters across the country were beginning to come to grips with the fact that a gap between earned income and expenses seemed to be endemic. As Marilyn Brentlinger, Board President from 1974-76, often explained, “A ticket to the theater is never going to cover operating costs. Many times you’ve only paid for one leg of your chair, sometimes two.” Since Great Lakes’ ticket prices had modestly hovered at the \$2-\$3.50 range for more than a decade and still hadn’t climbed above \$6 in 1977, grants and contributions from individuals provided the necessary bootstrap for vaulting Great Lakes into the permanent administrative operation it had to become if it was going to grow. In the mid-1970s, Board treasurer Walter Kyle was still keeping the theater’s books on a day-to-day basis. But grants enabled Bill, who was soon named Administrative Director, to hire additional staff. She found a committed nucleus in Eileen Humphrey, director of audience development, and administrative intern Bill Rudman.

The increased budget also enabled an expansion in 1975 that Carra had long been in favor of: touring Great Lakes productions around the state of Ohio. However, touring had to take place during the “academic” year, which placed new strains on the organization’s “summer festival” model. Both Carra and the Great Lakes Board agreed that the theater needed an artistic director who could commit full-time and year-round. Carra had just been appointed head of the drama department at Carnegie Mellon. With fond memories of 10 solid seasons of artistic and financial growth, he and Great Lakes parted ways.

The Vincent Dowling Years, Part One—Lakewood, 1976-1982

Fortunately—a word that pops up frequently in the theater’s history--Vincent Dowling was already on the horizon. For 20 years, Dowling had graced the stage of Dublin’s legendary Abbey Theatre as a leading actor and had been appointed deputy director. But he had also been branching out as a guest director in the United States. Homer Wadsworth, who in 1976 was director of the Cleveland Foundation, had held a similar foundation post in Kansas City and knew of Dowling as a guest director at the Missouri Repertory Theatre. Wadsworth passed Dowling’s name along to the Great Lakes Board as a possible successor to Carra. Dowling’s twinkling blue eyes, lilting Irish brogue, and all-consuming passion for theater charmed the Board and the community as well. With his wife Olwen O’Herlihy by his side as stage manager, Dowling plunged heart and soul into life in Cleveland.

“Vincent was not only a fine director,” observed long-time Board member Thomas Stafford, another Ernst & Young accountant who served as Board President from 1984-87, “he was also a charismatic promoter who brought great visibility to the Festival at a time when it was needed.” If Lithgow was “the Johnny Appleseed of Shakespeare,” Dowling was--as critic Bill Doll, who later joined the Great Lakes Board, proclaimed--“the Pied Piper of theater.” Often sporting a trademark fedora hat, the artistic director was everywhere, across all of Greater Cleveland, addressing Irish-American organizations, labor unions, women’s groups, and the City Club. On opening nights at the theater, he bounded to the stage to welcome audiences.

Dowling made good copy for the newspapers. Once when the troupe was on tour in Columbus, the director persuaded company members Dan Westbrook and Madylon Branstetter to stroll with him to the state capitol building, where he whisked the actors past astonished secretaries into the assembly room, where he announced that Great Lakes was appearing in Columbus that week. Within minutes, marveled Westbrook, “three news photographers were snapping pictures of us shaking hands with legislators.”

Dowling was an evangelist for Great Lakes and for theater itself. His fervent message? “The art of theater is the art of charity, the art of love.” With passages of poetry ever on his lips, he articulated a vision of the centrality of art to life. “Theater is a necessary human resource,” he

would remind his listeners. Like Lithgow before him, he perceived that America's regional theaters had essentially become the country's national theater. He declared so in 1977 when Great Lakes joined what Dowling dubbed "that mystical body," the national League of Resident Theaters, which had been founded in 1966. But like Carra, Dowling regarded the community-centered aspect of the regional theater movement as its strength. "My belief is in parochialism," he explained. "The world happens in your own 'parish.' If you serve your parish well, that will attract the notice of the next parish and the next."

Out of this belief rose Dowling's dream of building a company of actors, dedicated to performing in Cleveland, who would create an ongoing dialogue "among ourselves and our audiences." It was a congenial idea to long-time supporters who had been reared on Lithgow's ensemble and Carra's familiar faces. "And it pretty much came true," said John Q. Bruce, one of the close-knit Dowling regulars. From guest directing stints in places like Kansas, St. Louis, and Indianapolis, Dowling was able to assemble a company, as Bill Rudman would put it, "from the American heartland." Dowling himself, his daughters Bairbre and Rachael Dowling and then-son-in-law Colm Meaney added a touch of Ireland to the mix—and were feted in a Midwestern city that boasted more than 200,000 inhabitants who claimed Irish ancestry.

With the example of the Abbey Theatre in mind, Dowling believed that actors could hone their skills best in the context of a company. Working within a limited budget, he was also able to get more mileage from familiar collaborators. Bernard Kates, another Dowling veteran, pointed out that with a company, "you're way ahead in the rehearsal process." Bruce agreed, stressing the advantages of "an environment where you don't have to prove yourself as an actor but can concentrate on the challenges of the role." Bruce likened the on-stage chemistry of a company to "an old double-play combination"—an ease that was apparent, for instance, in the inspired interplay among Bruce, Robert Elliott, Robert Breuler, Jonathan Gillard, George Maguire and Dan Westbrook as the "rude mechanicals" in Dowling's 1984 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Dowling and his company embraced Great Lakes' tradition of performing in rotating repertory because it challenged the complacency that a company could fall into. As Kates once observed, "Most audiences are excited by seeing the same actors doing totally different roles." Highlights of Kates' own varied and memorable portfolio at Great Lakes ranged from the buffoonish Stephano in *The Tempest* in 1976 to a two-bit hustler in *Hughie* in 1980 to a philosophical tramp in *Waiting for Godot* in 1983. Bruce believed that Dowling heightened audience interest by casting against type. A droll favorite in such comic shows as *Clarence* and *Charley's Aunt*, Bruce was assigned the sober Kent in a 1981 production of *King Lear*. Even he feared the casting was a mistake, but admitted later, "I really grew as an actor." The assembled company didn't always offer an exact fit for each play. Six-foot-tall Holmes Osborne towered over his five-foot twin in the 1979 *Twelfth Night*. But the group tackled the challenges with zest.

An accomplished actor himself, Dowling advocated for his acting troupe. He carried out Carra's plan of touring shows around the state of Ohio, extending the actors' contracts. He lobbied to have rehearsal time doubled, expanded the number of Equity contracts, introduced a more formalized acting intern program, and hired voice coach Robert Williams "to find an American speech pattern that will work for the classics." Such commitments required the entire organization to gear itself up for ever larger budgets.

For the first time, Great Lakes casts had the luxury of taking time "around the table" to discuss complex shows like *King Lear*. Time to probe suited Dowling's directorial approach. "He could recognize when you were coasting," observed Westbrook, "and was relentless in not letting you get away with easy choices." Bruce recalled one evening when he was preparing to go on as the foppish Alaric in *Peg o' My Heart*, a part he was playing broadly to the audience's delight. Dowling popped in to the dressing room to tell Bruce, "Johnny, if I ever do *Peg* again, you're my Alaric, but I think you're just getting a little too broad with the character." Bruce began working on the less caricatured tack that he subsequently polished in the production's 1984 revival. Some of Dowling's advice was extremely practical; he taught one actor how to overcome a nervous hand gesture by holding quarters in both hands during rehearsal. But his daughter Bairbre Dowling summed up his fundamental concern as a director: "It's humanity he's always looking for—the truth of the human being."

Alongside actors, another essential collaborator was scenic designer John Ezell. On the theater faculty at University of Missouri-Kansas City, Ezell had designed the production that prompted Homer Wadsworth to recommend Dowling to the Great Lakes Board. Used to the better appointed scene shops of Missouri Repertory Theatre and The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, the designer faced a huge challenge in Lakewood. Great Lakes didn't have the facility or staff for building sets. Lithgow and Carra had relied on spare unit sets, and Carra's tech crews brought their own equipment with them from Carnegie Mellon. "When I arrived with Vincent," Ezell recalled, "the theater didn't own a hammer, not a nail. It was like being on a frontier. It was so primitive. We had to start from the ground up." Ezell brought tech director Richard Archer aboard and worked out an arrangement to use acting interns as carpenters. Sets had to be built in hallways or outside, if the weather permitted.

One of the acting interns who doubled as a stagehand was future film star Tom Hanks. Dowling had encountered the young Hanks while guest directing at the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre; he told his wife that he had "discovered" the next Tony Curtis. Dowling persuaded Hanks to come to Cleveland for three summers from 1977-79. While Hanks was able to tackle such roles as Grumio in *The Taming of the Shrew* the first summer, he spent just as much time sawing and hammering. "I knew there would be a lot to do," the young actor told a newspaper reporter at the time, "but this is really a LOT." When he had acquired enough stage hours to

obtain his professional Equity card at the end of the first summer, John Ezell famously “tried to tell Tom Hanks that he had a more secure future as a stage carpenter.” (That was before Hanks sold his Volkswagen beetle to Communications Director Ksenia Roshchakovsky’s father and headed to New York where he quickly landed a leading role in the television comedy *Bosom Buddies*. Iconic roles in such movies as *Big*, *Philadelphia*, and *Forrest Gump* soon followed. Suffice it to say that the two-time Oscar-winner never needed to rely on his carpentry skills.)

Less remarked, both at the time and since, another large talent was waiting to emerge among the acting interns during the summer of 1977--Obie Award-winning playwright Jose Rivera. Rivera was feeling aggrieved during a long tech week about how much crew work the interns were doing and how little acting. During a break he noticed Hanks onstage romping on his own with the “ghost light” and had a major revelation: “This guy would die if he wasn’t an actor. I wouldn’t die if I wasn’t acting. I would die if I wasn’t writing. I guess I’m a writer.”

This ragged crew of actors and writers didn’t limit Ezell’s horizons as a designer. He did devise a flexible “unit” set for the first season, but at the time the national trend was moving toward what Ezell called “a more pictorial, more illustrative approach to Shakespeare.” Ezell was soon creating purpose-built sets for each show. To stretch their limited resources, Ezell and tech director Archer experimented with industrial materials. For Dowling’s first production in 1976, a “new-world” envisioning of *The Tempest*, they built a scenic environment out of smoked plexiglass. They carved period architectural details out of Styrofoam for a production of *Ah, Wilderness* that same season. Later they would create *Godot*’s blighted landscape out of polyurethane and other synthetic materials.

But the push toward higher production values almost swamped the operation. “By the time we got to the fourth show that first season, we didn’t have any money,” Ezell admitted. “My aunt sent the Festival a check that allowed us to finish the season.” Dowling had to quickly acquire some of Carra’s shrewd business sense. Like his predecessor, the director began reducing the number of original productions per season. However, the theater was still able to field a five- or six-show lineup because Dowling introduced a new budget-balancing idea that allowed for much-needed breathing space in the production and rehearsal schedules.

From Dowling’s second season on, the show that was offered in the middle of a five-or-six-show summer was frequently a one-person show. This exercise in fiscal prudence allowed audiences to experience the talents of charismatic performers: Geraldine Fitzgerald in *Streetsongs*, Gay Marshall as Edith Piaf, and Dowling himself in a variety of roles. One of the actor/director’s most incisive portraits was that of poet Robert Service. Local writer James A. Brown scripted a one-man-show for Dowling out of Service’s poetry and recollections; it was titled *My Lady Luck*. And as luck would have it, Service happened to be President Ronald Reagan’s favorite poet.

Dowling was invited to perform the piece at the White House in 1981—and twice again after that—an experience that the Irish actor likened to attending “Cinderella’s Ball.”

During Dowling’s tenure, two Shakespeare plays typically counterweighted each season. In a stark production of *Othello*, Clayton Corbin, whose physical stature, sonorous voice, and emotional range were outsized, was virtually caged within the circumference of a small, round platform while Robert Elliott as Iago—in his least typical Great Lakes role—flickered at the perimeter like a matador enraging a bull. On the lighter side, guest director Dan Sullivan—later a longtime presence at Seattle Repertory Theatre and on Broadway-- nurtured Tom Hanks’ comic talents as Grumio in a riotous *Shrew* and as Proteus, to Holmes Osborne’s Valentine, in an award-winning turn in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Dowling also hewed to the Great Lakes tradition of tackling Shakespeare’s more problematic plays. The gory bloodbath of *Titus Andronicus* was relieved by compassionate moments between Madylon Branstetter as the ravished Lavinia and Robert Ellenstein as her heartbroken uncle, as well as stirring performances by old Great Lakes friend Emery Battis as Titus and Corbin as his foe.

Other classical titles were not forgotten. For instance guest director David Trainer delivered *She Stoops to Conquer*, with Gale Fury Childs playing the foolish Mrs. Hardcastle at full steam. A Shaw play provided the basis for a musical adaptation titled *Blanco!* But, tilling ground broken by Carra, Dowling also staked out a central place for modern classics—and invited some of the regional theater movement’s most talented directors to help him do so. Dowling directed himself and Bernard Kates as a pair of drunken mates and Aideen O’Kelley as a long-suffering Juno in Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*. Abbey Theatre director Eamon Morrissey helmed Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, with Kates, Richard Brown, Robert Breuler, and William Youmans wringing humor, pathos, and terror from the script. The work of Eugene O’Neill made its first appearance on the Great Lakes stage—with the bittersweet *Ah, Wilderness!* (directed by John Dillon, who would serve for 16 years as artistic director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre). Dowling brought to life Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* with Edith Owens as Amanda fussing comically about “Christian martyrs” and Bairbre Dowling as a luminous Laura.

Dowling also brushed up light comedies, both British and American, many from the early 20th century. Open-hearted, spunky, with a touch of the “devil” in her, Bairbre Dowling took audiences by storm in 1977 in *Peg o’ My Heart*. Once again, the Lakewood Civic Auditorium curtain was drawn back, and this homespun charmer became the theater’s second largest hit.

The auditorium that had been the theater’s reason for being could still pack the crowds in. But as early as 1965, newspapers had rumbled about the need for a new home. Increasingly, the theater’s artistic ambitions outstripped the facility. The basement costume shop and lack of a scene shop led the list of problems. But the Civic Auditorium also didn’t have “fly” space for scenery changes. And it didn’t have enough electrical power for sophisticated stage lighting.

Behind a thicket of pipes, the actors' quarters were cramped and sweltering. One long, un-air-conditioned room served as the only dressing room, with the women cordoned in a corner behind old stage flats. "When we were a shoestring operation," reported Dorothy Teare, "Actors' Equity hadn't bothered us too much." But as the organization grew, said Mary Bill, "We kept saying proudly what we were—a professional classical theater performing in rotating repertory. Finally, Equity said, in effect, 'Okay, if that's what you are, this is what you have to do.'" The union began pressing for air-conditioned dressing rooms and rehearsal space.

The administrative staff was tucked into the Auditorium's checkroom and also needed space to expand. The staff now also included Mary Pat Daley, who taught English and theater at Ursuline College and was hired to develop a school residency program called "Shakespeare Lives With Us." The purchase of a 60-year-old Firehouse in Lakewood in 1977 provided roomier quarters for administrative offices and a costume shop. But in general, said Trustee Marilyn Brentlinger, "We had a lot of work to do to overcome the fact that we were playing in a high school. People didn't look upon us as a professional theater, when in fact we were." Great Lakes was grateful to Lakewood and its school board for years of support, but it had to move forward or risk slipping back.

The Vincent Dowling Years, Part Two—The Ohio Theatre, 1982-84

Even before Dowling arrived in 1976, the forward thinking Brentlinger had already begun investigating other performing venues during her tenure as Board President. She was willing to consider moving beyond the borders of Lakewood—though the theater's Lakewood identity was a source of pride for many West Side supporters. The region's geography created a fault line; as Brentlinger would later observe, "The division from East Side to West Side by the Cuyahoga River is unfortunate." At the time, a cluster of 1920s-era theaters--over the river in downtown Cleveland--were lying vacant, and a move was afoot to restore them. An advocacy group had formed in 1970, and the Playhouse Square Foundation was incorporated in 1973 to spearhead the reclamation. But the initiative didn't have much traction yet when Brentlinger first inquired about the spaces in the mid-1970s. "It was too early," she shrugged.

In 1977, Mary Bill read that the Ohio Department of Natural Resources was taking over the waterfront parks in Cleveland. The idea took hold in Dowling of a theater on the bluff overlooking Lake Erie in Edgewater Park. Located on Cleveland's West Side, nearer downtown, but only a few miles from Lakewood High School, Edgewater Park offered the kind of location needed for the destination theater that the founders had envisioned, along the lines of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada. And in 1978, Governor James Rhodes and State Representative Patrick Sweeney shook hands with Great Lakes Board President Audrey Watts and pledged \$1.5 million in state money to build a theater overlooking the lake.

Architect Chuck Dickson, whose wife Carolyn would serve as Board President from 2005-07, drew up plans for an intimate 500-seat theater with a flexible thrust stage—exactly the kind of space Great Lakes would finally move into in 2008. However, objections surfaced quickly: how would a parking lot, traffic, and such amenities as a restaurant and gift shop harmonize with the size and natural beauty of the park? As Dickson made revisions to the setting of the building in order to address such environmental concerns, the price tag for the project ballooned. And the state insisted that Cleveland sources had to fund the increase.

In the end, concluded Thomas Stafford, who was then serving as Board Treasurer, “the push was going on for Playhouse Square, and the Cleveland Play House had their own plans to expand. There was simply not the support in the city for a third capital project.” Bill, Watts and Stafford returned to “running the place” in Lakewood, as Stafford saw it. But the dream died hardest for Dowling. In 1979, the director said, “The drawing image of a summer Shakespeare Festival is green grass, trees, and water.” Dowling would regard the loss of a lakefront home as his biggest regret.

Henry Metcalf, who succeeded Watts as Board President, realized that at Edgewater “we would still have been a West Side theater, instead of the Greater Cleveland theater we knew we were.” In fact, Great Lakes Board members had in the 1970s made a conscious effort to invite more East Siders to join the group. Sid Zilber, a long-time theater buff, was an East Side recruit who actively reached out to colleagues from his side of town. One of the first, in 1977, was Natalie Epstein, a long-time friend. Epstein was then a free-lance theater director completing an MFA in theater at Case Western Reserve University, where she had studied, before her children were born, as an undergraduate. She frequently directed at area high schools, such as Hawken and Hathaway Brown, and also at the Jewish Community Center and other venues. She and Mary Bill had similar journeys and, she reflected warmly, “got along wonderfully from the beginning.”

Epstein quickly rose to the challenges facing Great Lakes. She became Board President in 1980, the first who didn’t hail from the theater’s West Side origins, and would become one of its longest serving leaders. Encouraged by Patricia Jansen Doyle, the Cleveland Foundation’s Program Officer for Cultural Affairs, Epstein, Dowling, and Bill agreed that it was time to take another look at the theaters in Playhouse Square. The Cuyahoga County Commissioners and the Cleveland Foundation were poised to make a sizable investment in the district but the entire venture hung in the balance for want of a single tenant.

Epstein’s theater experience stood her in good stead as she scrambled through the neglected spaces. “The Ohio Theatre was in shambles,” she recalled. “But I fell madly in love with it. I stood on that stage—there was red peeling paint and plaster and the boards were coming up—but it was clear that the original architect, Charles Lamb, was brilliant. The relationship

between actor and audience was so wonderful. I just felt like we were home.” Realistic about the ambitious effort that the board, staff and artists would have to embark on together, Dowling and Bill concurred. By signing on as the first tenant in Playhouse Square, Epstein believed, “We gave the rest of them hope. I really do feel that Great Lakes was instrumental in saving Playhouse Square.” Many years later, the Cleveland Foundation’s Kathleen Cervený agreed: calling the theater “a real pioneer,” she added, “That’s the entrepreneurial spirit that’s part of the organizational culture. They could see the possibilities.” Great Lakes and the Playhouse Square Foundation quickly began working together to claim \$3.5 million from the Cuyahoga County Commissioners and move the Ohio Theatre to the head of the line for renovation.

Great Lakes received support for the move downtown from a variety of major funding sources. However, the Cleveland Foundation, one of the theater’s earliest funders, played a particularly pivotal role. When Homer Wadsworth became the foundation’s director in 1974—followed a year later by the addition of Pat Doyle to the staff—he placed a priority on examining the state of the performing arts in Cleveland. Wadsworth, a self-described “community entrepreneur,” believed in investing “venture capital” in the city’s arts organizations but also stressed the need for long-term planning.

Wadsworth recognized that Great Lakes needed to move, and that any move would require administrative and financial growth. Accordingly, in 1976, the Cleveland Foundation had already invited Great Lakes to join a consortium of six of the city’s leading performing arts institutions to apply for a major challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Working in close communication with the other institutions, Bill helped to craft a strong case. The grant was awarded in 1979. But in order to obtain its share of the money, which was \$400,000, Great Lakes had to raise an additional \$1.2 million, above and beyond its annual needs, by 1982. At that time, it had never raised more than \$178,000 in a single season.

“The challenge grant put us in another orbit,” said Stafford, “on a you-can’t-go-home-again track.” When the challenge grant and the opportunity to move downtown converged, Great Lakes cast its lot with Playhouse Square in April 1981. The opening date for the Ohio Theatre was set for July 9, 1982.

To gear up for the task, the theater made administrative changes. Acknowledging the “tremendous support and love” involved in the theater’s “grass-roots” origins, Epstein also admitted, “It’s very hard for a Board to totally run a theater artistically or professionally manage it.” As part of a plan to strengthen the theater’s administrative staff, the Board also took on the added financial burden of looking for office space in Playhouse Square. The dauntless Mary Bill assumed more responsibility, advancing rapidly from “development director” through “general manager” to “managing director.” Heeding the Cleveland

Foundation's insistence on organizational development, Bill brought on Anne DesRosiers, a consultant with FEDAPT (The Foundation for the Extension and Development of the American Professional Theater), to design a fundraising and development program that would take the theater through the move and beyond.

The existence of a national theater consulting agency like FEDAPT was a sign that Great Lakes was not alone in its need to develop a more sophisticated approach to non-profit management. In fact, less than a dozen regional theaters across the country had development directors in the early- to mid-1980s. DesRosiers was one of them; she had served as Director of Theater Relations and Development at The Repertory Theater of St. Louis. As a consultant, she stressed that development encompassed more than fundraising. She urged the integration of marketing and fundraising under the broader umbrella term of "institutional development."

Anne DesRosiers and Mary Bill were on the same wavelength. Said DesRosiers, "Mary saw that if the organization was going to survive and be the first successful tenant in Playhouse Square, the theater was going to have to operate at an entirely different level." DesRosiers conducted Board workshops to inculcate the idea that each person associated with the organization had to take responsibility for its development. Board members had to be refocused on the big picture rather than the day-to-day tasks of "running" the theater. A new generation of Women's Committee leaders, such as Elsa Pavlik, Diane Young, and Kathryn Berkshire, had to start reinventing the role of volunteers in the theater's new environment.

The Board redoubled its efforts to attract "heavy hitters." Herb Strawbridge, head of the Higbee Department Store and a man widely known as "Mr. Downtown," came on the Board to help identify new supporters. The Board added the position of Chairman with a designated focus on fundraising, and William Fine, CEO of The Sherwin-Williams Company, agreed to serve as the first in that capacity. Board members who joined during the early years of the move downtown were likely to hail from Cleveland's leading companies of the day: Cleveland Cliffs, TRW, BP, Eaton Corporation, CSX, East Ohio Gas Company, National City Bank, Jones Day, and Baker Hostetler.

Many of the new trustees were theater lovers, like the founding trustees before them. But others joined out of a sense of civic responsibility. Participation in The Cleveland Roundtable and Cleveland Tomorrow led John Collinson, president and CEO of Chessie Systems, to join the theater's Board in 1981. "One of the bright spots of Cleveland was the cultural offerings," he noted. "I thought that was important and something the community should try to build on."

The pieces were falling into place for the move—in large part because the city's civic leaders so desperately wanted the Playhouse Square District to succeed. As Fine said, "The community responded very graciously to the campaign, with corporations, foundations, and individuals

setting the pace and tone.” To make sure the terms of the challenge grant were met, Audrey Watts teamed up with East Side co-chairs—bridging the theater’s past identity and its future—to organize its first-ever stand-alone benefit evening. The job of hounding the contractors fell to Natalie Epstein and Mary Bill. Women’s Committee President Diane Young devised an “Adopt an Actor” program so that the acting company would not feel lost in the shuffle of the move. Mary Bill’s son Matthew and a crew of young friends still had to paint the dressing rooms at the last minute, and the Women’s Committee had to rush to set up and stock the Green Room. But the challenges were met.

Struck by the symmetry of the Ohio Theatre opening in July 1982 and the Lakewood opening in July 1962, long-time trustee John Schubert, a retired teacher and inveterate play reader, suggested that Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* would make a fitting choice to inaugurate the Ohio Theatre. Emotional applause filled the new space as the curtain rose on the cathedral of trees that John Ezell designed to evoke Shakespeare’s “Forest of Arden.” The need for a new home, said Dowling, was proven in that breathtaking moment. “It was the same company, the same designer; only the facility was different.”

The move came at a price. Driving downtown and walking through an ornate, mirrored and chandeliered lobby, into a magnificently appointed theater raised expectations for production standards. “That has an impact on your budget immediately,” Bill stated. The budget level jumped from \$980,000 for the last Lakewood season to \$2.4 million for the first summer downtown. Rent alone skyrocketed from \$12,000 for the last summer at Lakewood Civic Auditorium to \$35,000 a month at the Ohio. The 1,000-seat Ohio Theatre was a larger “union house,” which required a higher rate of pay under the union contracts for both actors and stage hands. Originally built in 1921, the large, formal stage seemed to cry out for more sophisticated sets, yet it would be cost-prohibitive to change such sets from night to night or travel with them. Rotating repertory and the touring program both had to be sacrificed.

But as Ezell pointed out, the tradeoff was “a theater that’s gracious, comfortable, historically significant. New theaters don’t have the Ohio’s elegant proportions. It has a full counterweight system backstage, good lighting positions, a trap floor—all the things inherited from the 19th century to provide spectacle.” It was, in short, a theater that suited the scope of the Yale-trained designer’s talents. Ezell’s international credits included theaters from Broadway to Scandinavia to Turkey to Hong Kong. But the Ohio Theatre could hold its own among any of these settings.

Dowling also rose to the occasion of this stately new home with his biggest coup: securing the first American rights to *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. This eight-and-a-half hour telling of Dickens’ novel had been created and performed only by the Royal Shakespeare Company, for limited runs in England and on Broadway. Dowling always had his eye on what

the RSC was doing: he had produced *Wild Oats*, an 18th century comedy, a few years after RSC had rediscovered the charming piece. But the sprawling *Nick/Nick* (as it was soon dubbed) was in a class of its own. “Nobody outside Cleveland thought it was possible,” wrote company member Maurice Good. And it wouldn’t have been—on a high school stage. But in the Ohio Theatre, the impossible became possible.

To marshal the enterprise, Dowling enlisted two distinguished guest directors—Edward Stern, who later served 20 years at the helm of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, and Robert Lanchester, who had directing credits from the Guthrie, the McCarter, and other notable regional theaters. And what an undertaking it was! 46 actors played 300 roles in 96 scenes, with a script the size of the Manhattan telephone book. Properties mistress Mary Kay Stone had to conjure up more than 1,000 props, costume designer Lewis Rampino 400 costumes. The hours allotted for rehearsal—500—were unheard of at Great Lakes but still fell short of the RSC’s six months. Two whole weeks were devoted to resolving technical glitches with moving platforms, a lumbering wagon, gangways and catwalks. “We never actually did a complete run-through,” confided Dan Westbrook, whose chief role was that of the good-hearted Lord Verisopht. The stage floor itself presented perils; it was made of slats with spaces between them, in order to allow light to come up from below. When a cane got caught between the slats, an actor crumpled mid-swagger.

Each cast member, except for David Purdham who took on the central role of Nicholas, had to create multiple roles, some as many as 12. Even when not involved in the action of a scene, they were visible observing from scaffolding above. They proved adept chameleons. Audiences often didn’t realize that the bluff John Browdie and the menacing Mulberry Hawk were both played by Colm Meaney (who would go on to create the role of Chief O’Brien in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*). As critic William O’Connor of the *Akron Beacon Journal* wrote, “the acting disappeared and in its place stepped hundreds of men and women who had lived more than 100 years ago.” Maurice Good singled out some memorable moments: “that departure of our hero to Yorkshire to seek his fortune; the swirl of London life; those grim horrors of our Dotheboys Hall, its orphan waifs; the warm glow of the interior of the Keniwigs home; the roar of recognition, hisses and cheers, which greets the entire cast for the reprise of Part Two; the amazing Billy Youmans [as Smike] ‘going home’ at last.”

The seamlessness of the whole was the highest expression of Dowling’s idea of a company. “You can have the dream,” said Bairbre Dowling, “but this actually happened.” As director Stern told reporters, “The star of the show is the company.” So many individual voices were melded into one as each took a line or a phrase in the narration. *Nick/Nick* also embodied Dowling’s notion of theater as a “co-creation” between company and audience. The actors were asked to talk with audience members before the play and during the intermissions.

Though scared to do it at first, Bairbre Dowling found that it forged bonds—“then you got up and told the story to the people that you knew.”

Nicholas Nickleby was a heady experience. Critics from *The Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Variety* came and cheered what they saw. The influential Clive Barnes, who was then writing for the *New York Post*, called it a “triumph.” Four thousand people traveled from out of town to see it, and the production went on to a successful 12-week run in Chicago. But the reaction that meant the most to Dowling, “the high moment of all my life in the theater,” came from a young audience, students “from every section and social strata of Cleveland, who rose to their feet, cheered, applauded, and threw flowers on stage. Even after it ended, they simply didn’t want to leave.”

Great Lakes didn’t seem to want this euphoric season to end either; the theater kept the spirit aloft with a holiday show, something else that the school schedule of the Lakewood Civic Auditorium would not have allowed. Dowling commissioned RSC play consultant Jeremy Brooks and poet Adrian Mitchell to create a Christmas entertainment out of poet Dylan Thomas’ childhood memories and asked RSC associate director Clifford Williams to direct. The artistic team worked poetic magic with *A Child’s Christmas in Wales*. Another lyrical production from 1982, *The Playboy of the Western World*, was also filmed for screening on WVIZ, Cleveland’s public television channel.

The new downtown setting made possible another experiment—a second stage to counterpoint the classics with significant contemporary works. It was something Dowling had wanted to do since he came to Cleveland and he had even re-written the theater’s mission statement to provide for the possibility. He always identified his chief goal as “challenging ourselves and our audiences by taking artistic risks.” As actor Good summed it up, “Vincent Dowling is a gambler.” In the Parthenon Restaurant, across the street from the Ohio Theatre—in a curtained-off space that more often sported belly dancers—*The Island* by South African playwright Athol Fugard stunned audiences with its raw power.

The theater’s risk-taking seemed to be paying off. But a decision made in 1983 would threaten its tenuous hold in its new home. Given the tremendous success of *Nick/Nick* in Cleveland in 1982 and the production’s equally acclaimed run in Chicago, the theater’s leaders agreed to extend the customary summer season to reprise it in Cleveland in the fall of 1983. But the RSC unexpectedly broadcast its production on television before the Cleveland re-opening, and the vibrant theatrical experience didn’t translate well to a small screen. Also, the novelty of the opening season in the Ohio Theatre had worn off. Natalie Epstein and others believed that the Playhouse Square location “had the best potential for drawing from East and West Side.” But the emphasis was on “potential.” Janet Neary who would soon join the Board, observed that as “unforgettable” as *Nicholas Nickleby* was, the deserted streets outside the theater left an

equally indelible impression of a “total wasteland.” For whatever reasons might be identified in hindsight, ticket sales for the production’s return engagement never took off. After so many lucky gambles, the “second” *Nick/Nick* became the byword for an unlucky one.

Once again, the organization had to dig in. With what Brentlinger would term Mary Bill’s tough-minded “stick-to-it-tiveness,” the managing director led the way. “She had a starch that wasn’t immediately evident,” agreed Ezell. Her buoyant humor and graciousness also lifted the organization—as well as the fact that she was, as then-intern Richard Parison observed, “a caring administrator who supported and loved artists.” With the help of consultant DesRosiers and such long-time staff members as marketing director Andrea Krist, Bill methodically laid out the theater’s case to ticket-buyers and funders alike. “She was tenacious with the foundations,” remembered Bill Rudman. “She should be credited for bringing the foundations ‘under the tent’ and keeping them there. She had a great mixture of idealism and pragmatism. The more she learned on the job the more pragmatism she developed.” As Deena Epstein, Program Officer for the Arts at the George Gund Foundation, observed, “She didn’t let go despite all the ups and downs. She kept plugging away.” There were no quick fixes, and much work to be done on all fronts.

Another key staff member began to come to the fore at this juncture. After his early stint with Great Lakes, Bill Rudman had gone to New York in 1979 and worked there with publicist Susan Bloch for such non-profit theater clients as Roundabout Theatre Company. When Rudman returned to Cleveland and joined the Cleveland Foundation staff as Communications Director he also began doing consulting with FEDAPT. As he recalled, he’d been thinking more and more about “how to serve an audience.” When he had a chance to come back to Great Lakes as Director of Special Projects in January 1984, he took it. He and Mary Bill shared a long-term interest in the integration of marketing, communications and education with the goal of audience development.

Rudman took stock of the theater’s audience education offerings; brief background notes about the plays were included in the theater’s programs, and pre-performance talks were offered sporadically. He began advocating for a more systematic commitment to audience education. He felt that a better prepared audience would become a more engaged audience. One of his first calls was to free-lance writer Margaret Lynch, who had written a program note for the 1983 season. Lynch had attended her first Great Lakes show, the *Lear* with Emery Battis, at the end of grade school. As a St. Joseph Academy student, she’d been to the theater’s student matinees, become an usher, and volunteered in the costume shop. She had acquired a PhD in literature in the interim and, when she returned to Cleveland in the early 1980s, had contacted Mary Bill, her high school drama coach, about volunteering at the theater. Lynch became the theater’s “dramaturg” in 1984.

Rudman's first large-scale "special project" dovetailed with a typically daring choice of Dowling's. For the 1984 season Dowling paired a production of Thornton Wilder's beloved *Our Town* with the American professional premiere of the writer's little-known last play *The Alcestiad* (retitled *Alcestis and Apollo* at Great Lakes). To complement the unusual pairing, Rudman enlisted Lynch's assistance in organizing "A Wilder Weekend"—a symposium that featured a slate of internationally acclaimed scholars and Wilder collaborators: designer Tanya Moseivitch, director José Quintero, actress Martha Scott—who played the role of Emily in the first production of *Our Town*—and Wilder's sisters Isabel and Janet. A fascinating blend of theater lore and scholarship, the ambitious symposium signaled a new phase in the theater's longstanding commitment to education.

The 1983 season had ended with an \$800,000 deficit but the 1984 season "almost broke even," reported Stafford, who gallantly stepped up as Board President at this critical time. In order to prevent backsliding, the Board felt it was time to focus on how the organization conducted its operations. With the theater settling in artistically, Vincent Dowling came to the difficult decision to hang his fedora elsewhere. Dowling would always have an abiding fondness for the city that embraced him. But having dared the theater into a new home and new theatrical territory, he drew the curtain on his near decade of "poetic realism and relevancy" in Cleveland.

The Gerald Freedman Years 1985-1997

Once again, Great Lakes needed another "right person at the right time." That person was Gerald Freedman. Freedman had trained in another classical theater "cradle"—Northwestern University. His classical theater credentials were unrivaled: he directed for Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival throughout the 1960s, serving as its artistic director from 1967 to 1971; directed Juilliard alumni for the fledgling Acting Company in the 1970s, and helmed the American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut in 1978-79. In addition, he had assisted Jerome Robbins on the original Broadway production of *West Side Story* (co-directing a revival with Robbins in 1980) and had directed the world premiere of the rock musical *Hair*.

As a child growing up in Lorain, Ohio, Freedman had spent his Saturday mornings at art classes at the Cleveland Museum of Art and later studied on a painting scholarship at the Cleveland Institute of Art before heading to Northwestern. "I feel a very strong identification with Ohio," he declared when he arrived. According to Stafford, the Board perceived that Freedman was "interested in a home base." The director himself said, "One of the things that led me to Great Lakes," he said, "was the chance to again create a body of work—a chance I've not had since the New York Shakespeare Festival days. That's what's so exciting about regional theater. Your work collects in a place and can be seen as a whole." He hungered for the artistic growth that could come from a sustained dialogue with the kind of informed audience that Great Lakes had cultivated.

The expectations that greeted Freedman were in part shaped by the setting of the Ohio Theatre in Playhouse Square. The cluster of renovated theaters was often spoken of as “a performing arts center” and was often likened to New York’s non-profit Lincoln Center with its multiple performing spaces. But the Playhouse Square Foundation’s first leaders were focused on creating what could more accurately be termed an entertainment district. Right outside the Ohio Theatre, the brightly lit marquees of the larger State and Palace Theatres were promoting Broadway touring shows and such high-wattage performers as comedian Bill Cosby and singer Dolly Parton. Great Lakes had to assert the place of classical theater within this landscape.

With Freedman’s arrival, the organization decided in 1985 to claim its territory under a new name—Great Lakes Theater Festival. The choice of “theater” reflected the broader interpretation of classical repertory that had been taking shape under Carra and Dowling. Freedman was committed to classical theater; as he assured the Board, “Nothing would have attracted me to this theater if you weren’t committed to the great plays. I want to work in a place where I can do the classics--because they’re challenging.” And certainly the director who once said, “Music is my language” had a deep affinity for Shakespeare and the musicality of his verse. But he also yearned to take on such modern masters as Ibsen and Chekhov and to make wider forays into world theater and musical theater. He also felt strongly that American theaters needed to be doing American plays and coming to terms with “the traditions that make our culture unique.” But like his predecessors he also stressed, “I want to show how vital the classics are in the present.” Staking out room for new plays, he added, “You have to work through that sensibility in new plays or you lose the sense that older plays can have a contemporary meaning.” Trying to create as much range as possible within the limited number of slots in a summer season, Freedman decided to offer one Shakespeare production a year.

While committed to a classical repertory, some of the trustees had begun to wonder whether, as Stafford put it, “you had to have stars to compete” in Playhouse Square. Fortunately, like Larry Carra before him, Freedman had extensive contacts in the American stage and screen worlds. But he could now also offer something that Carra could not: a fully equipped professional theater supported by an ever-growing professional staff. Throughout Freedman’s time in Cleveland, the director was able to attract many well-known names of stage and screen who were part of his large and far-flung “artistic family.”

Some of these high-profile performers brought one-person shows that they had already developed elsewhere; Freedman continued Dowling’s budget-saving tradition of including one- or two-handers in the middle of most seasons. And Cleveland audiences were thrilled to experience Estelle Parsons’ trenchant *Miss Margarida’s Way*, or Avery Brooks’ commanding Paul Robeson, or Lynn Redgrave’s moving *Shakespeare for My Father*.

Other long-time friends and collaborators came to work with Freedman on productions originated by Great Lakes: Jean Stapleton led an all-star cast of Polly Holliday, Abe Vigoda, Tony Roberts, and William Hickey in a daft *Arsenic and Old Lace* in 1986; Olympia Dukakis bore *Mother Courage* on her shoulders in 1992; and Piper Laurie embodied a haunted Lyuba Ranevsky in *The Cherry Orchard* in 1994. Some, such as Ruby Dee who came to tackle Adrienne Kennedy's *Ohio State Murders*, were on the director's short list of actors he had always wanted to work with. Several came back more than once, drawn to Great Lakes--like Moffat and others before them had been--by the chance to do the "great roles:" Anita Gillette in *Skin of Our Teeth* in 1985 and *The Seagull* in 1989; Jane White in *Ghosts* in 1986 and *Blood Wedding* in 1988; Shirley Knight in *Absent Forever* in 1987 and *Hamlet* in 1989.

Though Hal Holbrook and Gerald Freedman had only known each other slightly before their Great Lakes encounters, the two theater veterans forged a deep artistic partnership, exploring *King Lear* together in 1990, *Uncle Vanya* in 1991, and *Death of a Salesman* in 1994. Holbrook's journey was chronicled in *Spotlight*, the theater's subscriber newsletter. Frustrated by the lack of "spiritual substance" in the television work he'd been doing, Holbrook had been reading and thinking about the character of Lear. "I knew what the man was going through," the actor claimed. It had to do with "being old, angry, frustrated and most of all feeling powerless, neutered, impotent, betrayed." In 1987, Holbrook brought his one man show, *Mark Twain Tonight!* to Playhouse Square. Hearing that Holbrook was rehearsing in the theater, Freedman decided to stop by. As the director entered the house, the actor was doing a sound check--by reciting passages from *King Lear*. Freedman immediately invited him to play the role at Great Lakes, which Holbrook was able to do in 1990.

When the actor returned to play Vanya in 1991, he confessed that playing Lear had shaken him out of the kind of despondency that paralyzes the character of Vanya. When Holbrook returned to Great Lakes once more to examine the "sickness" of the American way of selling oneself in *Death of a Salesman*, he admitted, "The big, difficult roles appeal to me these days. My life is getting shorter. I have lost too much time--years--when I could have taken on some of these roles and been enriched by them." When Freedman reflected on his collaboration with Holbrook years later, he said, "Hal deserved that--to play great roles. He's a great actor. I demanded what the shows required, and he was always up for it. He had to dig, but he had so much to give. I wasn't happy unless he gave it all. He was able to focus so attentively. He was always in sight of truth." A grateful Holbrook concluded, "There's a reason the plays of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Shaw, O'Neill and *Death of a Salesman* are classics--they are feasts."

But it wasn't only film "stars" who came to feast on the great roles and great plays. Elizabeth Franz was a fine actress whose distinguished career had been firmly rooted on the stage. She first came to Great Lakes in 1990 to help launch Horton Foote's *Dividing the Estate* and came

back to sound the emotional complexities of Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman* in 1994 and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* in 1997. Franz would go on to win a Tony Award for her sensitive performance of Linda in the 1999 revival of Miller's play on Broadway.

Young actors also found a place in Freedman's "artistic family." The director heightened the poignancy of such tragedies as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* by fielding very young casts. James Kall, who had just graduated from Northwestern University, remembered learning quickly how to make bold choices when assigned to speak the opening lines of *Romeo and Juliet*. Other shows highlighted the contrast between youth and experience, as when the up-and-coming Josie de Guzman had to measure herself against the formidable Jane White in *Blood Wedding*. (A Tony Award nominee for her portrayal of Maria in *West Side Story* in 1980, de Guzman would also net a Tony nomination as Sarah Brown in the 1992 revival of *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway.)

During Freedman's early years, understudies came from the ranks of the theater's growing education program—giving recent graduates a chance to learn alongside mature practitioners of the craft. Once at the end of an *Uncle Vanya* rehearsal, Hal Holbrook murmured, "It's every other day. You know what you're doing one day, and the next you're lost again." Mary Tensing, one of those young understudies, heard and took heart, both at the time and many times since. Kenn McLaughlin, who would later become the theater's Director of Education, recalled his first day "on the job" as an understudy at Great Lakes. He somehow found himself wedged at the table between Jerry Freedman and playwright Horton Foote. "I couldn't breathe," McLaughlin exclaimed. "I was in shock. But during a break, Horton put his hand on my arm and said, 'Thank God you laughed.'" Under such tutelage, James Kall could start his Great Lakes career as one of the Capulet rabble in *Romeo and Juliet* and in less than a decade grow into an actor who could assume the romantic lead of *She Loves Me*—a journey that Kall, a Cleveland native, cherished all the more because family and friends could witness it. Working alongside Freedman's accomplished colleagues, a new generation of theater artists drew inspiration.

Playwrights were among Freedman's artistic collaborators as well. Horton Foote, Adrienne Kennedy, and Arthur Miller were all writers the director had intersected with earlier in his career. While Miller looked forward to Freedman and Holbrook's collaboration on his *Death of a Salesman*, the legendary playwright was just as gratified that Freedman revived *Up from Paradise*, his musical retelling of the story of Genesis. The Great Lakes production of Foote's *Dividing the Estate*—and associated film festival and symposium—called attention to the playwright at a time when his work wasn't being produced widely; during the subsequent decade Foote would garner numerous New York and regional theater productions and win a Pulitzer Prize.

In 1969, Freedman had directed a production of one of Adrienne Kennedy's enigmatic and haunting early plays, *The Owl Answers*, in New York; at Great Lakes he commissioned her evocative *Ohio State Murders*, which was produced in 1992. In addition, Freedman created a dramatic adaptation of the playwright's autobiographical memoirs, *People Who Led to My Plays*, to tour northeast Ohio that season. Community history projects were also conducted in each of the three Cleveland public schools that Kennedy had attended. Although her career has included three Obie Awards and she subsequently received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2003, the playwright recently reflected that "The Great Lakes project meant the most to me personally of any project. I was reunited with childhood friends and my parents' friends and was able to share the events with my children and my mother Etta Hawkins. The play took place on 'Theatre Row,' a place I had loved as a child. Finally, I got a chance to work with the great Ruby Dee." The chance to revisit her childhood schools brought back fundamental memories: "It was on those snowy days as a child I sat in the Lafayette School Library and read. I can never forget that when Lafayette was still open, they named that very Library 'The Adrienne Kennedy Library.' For learning to read was the beginning of it all."

Freedman often reached for collaborators beyond the boundaries of the theater world. Cuban artist Juan Gonzalez created paintings that informed the scenic world of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. For *The Bakkhai*, fiber artist Barbara Kessler made hand-painted robes from a paper-based material, while Richard Kuch, a principal dancer with the Martha Graham Company, created choreography that was performed by the Tom Evert Dance Company.

Freedman assembled his creative teams carefully, approaching each production almost as a stand-alone project. Even though many faces became familiar over the years, most of the designers and actors were no longer hired "for the season," but show by show. Some of Freedman's productions were, literally, "years in the making." Research came first, which sometimes involved travel: to Russia for *The Seagull* or Spain for *Blood Wedding* or Texas for *Dividing the Estate*. Negotiations followed; the caliber of person the director wanted to work with always had a full calendar. If the right pieces couldn't be assembled for a given show by the time a season had to be announced, the title would be put off for another year.

Other theaters around the country took notice of the theater's carefully produced work; during Freedman's tenure, ten Great Lakes productions transferred to other venues around the country—from the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami to The Old Globe in San Diego. Perhaps it wasn't surprising that the star-studded *Arsenic and Old Lace* made its way to Broadway or that Hal Holbrook toured the country with *Death of a Salesman*. But the young, unknown cast of the 1988 *Love's Labour's Lost*—consisting of such Freedman "regulars" as Spike McClure and Steve Routman—also found themselves on the boards at the New York Shakespeare Festival. And the Missouri Repertory Theatre asked for *The Lady From Maxim's*, a

highly polished French farce. “It was an acknowledgement of the quality of the work,” pointed out John Ezell.

Freedman frequently articulated a thoughtful rationale for producing each title—in *Spotlight* articles and in countless pre-performance talks and post-performance discussions. He might refer to his research into the 19th century production history of *Macbeth* or analyze theories about the nature of farce. But scholarship for its own sake didn’t interest him. He didn’t hesitate to tell an interviewer, “That is an academic question.” He was striving to create what Mary Bill called “total theater--combining words, music and movement within a strong visual context.”

When Freedman came to Cleveland, an essential collaborator in realizing this vision was already in place. After Dowling resigned, the Board had been eager for designer John Ezell to stay. “Jerry inherited me,” laughed Ezell. “But we hit it off immediately. After our first meeting, we went to dinner. We both ordered the same sushi. We had the same taste in sushi. We had the same taste in theater.” Ezell would form the linchpin—he would be named “Associate Artistic Director” in 1987—of a group of designers who helped Freedman to utilize the resources of the Ohio Theatre.

This was their typical way of working: Once a title was chosen for a season, Freedman and his designers, but particularly Ezell, would collect images that captured something about the play. Ezell would assemble the images on boards, and the design team would gather round the boards to discuss color palettes, textures, and silhouettes. The collaborators in the room often included such Broadway stalwarts as lighting designer Thomas Skelton or costume designer Jeanne Button but might also encompass such up-and-coming talents as lighting designer Mary Jo Dondlinger, costume designer Jamie Scott, or set designer Christopher Barreca. Freedman recalled feeling that he had indeed come “home” with his inaugural production in Cleveland—a lush *Twelfth Night*--with Ezell’s sets, Button’s costumes, Skelton’s lighting and John Morris’s music all working in harmony.

Often the design team would be inspired by the work of a particular visual artist—or what Ezell called “a movable feast of imagistic inspirations: Renaissance masters Andrea del Sarto and Piero di Cosimo for *Romeo and Juliet* (the *Plain Dealer* described the set as “ravishing”); Abstract Expressionists Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell for *Macbeth*; Henri Matisse for our all-white production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. When I complained to Jerry after many tries in frustration to ‘design like Matisse,’ he calmly replied ‘Don't design LIKE Matisse...Be Matisse!’” As the design group looked for inspiration at the “pure and playful” cut-outs that Matisse created toward the end of his life, Freedman told lighting designer Skelton, “This white on white and the color of these roses—this is what I want. I don’t know how to achieve it on stage, but it’s what I’m looking for.” Or another kind of visual identity might be established:

The scenic world of a 1994 production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* was created entirely out of plastic utensils, party favors and other household goods.

At other times, Freedman and Ezell focused on what the director called “the delivery system” of the play. For a production of *The Seagull* in 1989, he and Ezell decided that an abstract “forest” of string would best evoke the disappearing world of the Russian family’s estate. In *Uncle Vanya* in 1991, the entire ground floor of the family’s house, without walls, rested on a turntable so that the whole life of the house was visible at all times during the action of the play. In each of the four acts of *The Cherry Orchard*, as Freedman described it, “a miniature version of the room or landscape . . . [was] seen alongside or within the larger space, . . . silently evoking the fluid, fragmentary nature of memory.” But a canopy of 50,000 cherry blossoms, floating above the space throughout the play, also suggested that some memories of the past become fixed. Freedman had never attempted a Chekhov play before coming to Great Lakes, and the opportunity to explore a major writer’s work in such depth was a gift.

In order to realize Freedman and Ezell’s ambitious visions, the theater’s technical staff and resources needed to be built up. Great Lakes repurposed a worn-out industrial building on the city’s near-West Side as a scene shop. And by 1987 a strong technical team had been assembled that would work together for the better part of a decade. The crew was highly trained; most of them had advanced theater degrees. Production Manager Tony Forman, Technical Director Martin Simonsen, Costume Shop Head Al Kohout, and Sound Designer Stan Kozak and their crews worked together productively—alongside the Ohio Theatre stagehands, headed by Adrian “Buddy” Short. The Great Lakes production staff appreciated the fact that, as long-time Technical Director Martin Simonsen told a *Spotlight* interviewer, “In my job, one minute I’m looking at drill bits, and the next minute I’m talking about Cezanne and Gauguin.” They were also eager to figure out how to create rain on stage or smooth the curves of Matisse-inspired cut-outs. As Simonsen said at the time, “Jerry and John are constantly stretching me to the limit of what I think is practical, and that’s one of the rewards of this job—to be pushed to the point of creating something you didn’t think was possible.”

Just as more experienced cast members passed along their craft to their younger peers, John Ezell mentored his assistant Gene Emerson Friedman, who came on board as a painter but would soon be designing mainstage shows himself and would later join Ezell on the University of Missouri-Kansas City faculty. Lighting designer Tom Skelton took Tony Forman under his wing. Forman, a Yale graduate who arrived at Great Lakes in 1987 from the Goodspeed Opera House, remembered how the designer was “a tremendous help and mentor” as the young production manager set out to forge a partnership with the Ohio Theatre stagehands in order to use tech time more efficiently.

Freedman and Ezell developed a way of working that required the technical crew to duplicate stage conditions within the rehearsal hall. As much as was possible, Freedman wanted his actors to be able to “live with” the actual props and furniture that they would use on stage. So the crew built a rehearsal turntable for *Uncle Vanya* because the actors had to learn how to work with its movement during scene transitions. The stuff of the family’s life in *Vanya*—books, letters, balls of string, and the contents of desk drawers—was gathered ahead of time so the cast could make these objects their own during rehearsal.

For most of Freedman’s tenure, rehearsal took place in the basement of a run-down YMCA several blocks from the theater. Most often it was stage manager Richard Costabile who ruled the rehearsal hall with unflagging efficiency. As Costabile explained to a *Spotlight* interviewer at the time, “Jerry depends on me to anticipate every element of the process, whether it’s knowing when to turn off the lights during a rehearsal or how to approach an actor who seems to be having difficulty, or managing a scheduling conflict.” Whereas once the Women’s Committee volunteers attended to the needs of the actors, now the volunteers managed the introductory “meet and greet” sessions on the first day of rehearsal but everyday concerns were handled by DeAnn Boise, the first staff “company manager.”

Freedman himself managed the ever-increasing complexity and scope of the production process with the help of directing interns. His first intern was Victoria Bussert. The two met when Bussert was an MFA directing student at Northwestern and Freedman was visiting his *alma mater*. He recalled noticing her talent and “readiness for growth.” Freedman paid out of his own pocket for Bussert to shadow him after she graduated. She remembered arriving in Cleveland for the first time—to serve as “child wrangler” for *Take One Step*, an urban holiday show that Freedman was directing. She got in from Chicago at 11 pm and picked up the key to her studio in the Lakewood Garden Apartments. “It was completely empty. Not a stick of furniture,” she laughed. The beginnings were inauspicious but Bussert would build a dynamic career for herself, at Great Lakes and at Baldwin Wallace University, where she has served as Director of Music Theatre since 1995, as well as nationally and internationally.

Other assistant directors and directing interns who learned on the job at Great Lakes included Richard Hamburger, who went on to serve for 15 years as artistic director of the Dallas Theatre Center, and Rob Ruggiero, who has directed on Broadway and also acquired substantial regional theater credits across the country. Another intern, Jay Indik, who would soon take charge of the theater’s student education program, remembered what it was like to sit between Gerald Freedman, choreographer Donald Saddler and director George Abbott as they worked on *The Boys From Syracuse*. The three stage veterans—Abbott celebrated his 100th birthday in Cleveland—were sharing the moments when they fell in love with theater. As Indik recalled, “They all chose moments of awe as audience members when the curtain went up and

they were anticipating the magic of being transported. They were full of energy and innocence. It gave me perspective that after all they had accomplished it was this young boy's promise of a different world that was underneath their savvy and sophistication. And it was still alive."

Freedman's absolute and passionate commitment to theater was never more evident than in the rehearsal room. As Holbrook once observed, "Jerry has a total dedication to the work that must be done. His focus is exhilarating." Speaking of what she and the director shared in common, actor Olympia Dukakis pointed out, "There is always an inquiring aspect about our work." Sometimes Freedman's habit of blunt questioning could be disconcerting. For instance, after a technical run-through of the one-person show *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*, the first show that Bussert directed on her own at Great Lakes, Freedman turned to his young protégée and said, "I just have one question. Why does she need to say any of this?"

He made room for actors to find their own way. As John Buck recalled, "He allowed his actors enough leeway to explore the characters they portrayed, yet he could guide us and shape what we brought to him so that it blended well with his concept of the total work." But he could also challenge cast members and relished when they pushed back. Said Kenn McLaughlin, "Jerry didn't like people being afraid of him. He wanted people to talk to him like a person." And challenging was a form of caring. In his first stint at Great Lakes, James Kall remembered that Freedman would often prod him, "You need to get more training." When Kall returned several years later with an MFA from Yale and did a monologue for the director, Freedman wept for joy. Creating theater was always an engaged, emotional experience with him. Bussert remembered a run-through of another show she directed, *Rough Crossing* in 1992, which began with the droll Steve Routman merely walking across the stage, creating the roll of a ship's deck with his own physicality. "Jerry was laughing so hard. It's the most joyous rehearsal I've ever experienced."

The moments of stage magic that Freedman and his collaborators created have remained etched in the memories of many involved with the theater during that time period: the snap and precision of *The Boys From Syracuse*. The vivid red yarn spooled out among three fates in *Blood Wedding*, and the heavy and ornate wedding dress that encased the doomed young bride in the same show. Delroy Lindo, a restless, glittering presence in his Tuareg-inspired jewelry and robes, prowling the stage as Othello. The "raw" pain of Anthony Powell's disillusioned Hamlet. The searing ending of *The Dybbuk*, with the lovers united in death, intertwined with burning letters from the Torah. Hal Holbrook as Lear, holding Cordelia's lifeless body, "howling his loss to the universe" and Harriet Harris as Hedda Gabler ripping apart Eilert Lovborg's manuscript. The life that the actors developed within the cluttered house in *Uncle Vanya*. Elizabeth Franz facing the abyss in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Freedman tackled challenging work—usually shows he had never done before—because he himself wanted to learn from them. And he was keen to share that quest with audiences. Educational programming flourished during his tenure under the growing leadership of Bill Rudman, who took responsibility for both communications and education. Under Rudman’s direction, it became Margaret Lynch’s province to provide the tools for audience preparation; pre-performance talks and post-performance discussions were routine for every show, as were program notes, lobby displays, and preview articles and interviews in *Spotlight*.

Additional programming accompanied selected shows. Early in his Great Lakes years, Freedman invited George Abbott to direct *Broadway*, a play that the legendary theater maven had written and first directed in 1926, and to consult on Freedman’s production of *The Boys From Syracuse*, which Abbott had directed, produced, and written the book for in 1938. Bill Rudman invited a few Abbott collaborators to participate in a “Classic Broadway” symposium weekend, and their ranks quickly swelled to include producer Hal Prince, actors Eddie Albert, Nancy Walker, and Joe Bova; songwriters Betty Comden, Adolph Green, and Sheldon Harnick, set designer Oliver Smith, writers Garson Kanin, Dorothy Hart, Stanley Green, and Robert Sklar, and choreographer Donald Saddler. An unparalleled weekend of non-stop and high-flying theater lore ensued.

Symposium weekends were one audience education tool among many deployed by Rudman, Dramaturg Lynch, who also took more and more responsibility for outreach programming, and Student Education Directors Jay Indik and Kenn McLaughlin. What came to be called “surround” programming—educational programming that surrounded or complemented a focal production—took on a variety of shapes in response to the diverse work on stage. For Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*, the theater’s first foray into Spanish theater, Great Lakes reached out to an ambitious array of cultural, educational, and community groups to spearhead “Festival Fantastico,” a citywide celebration of Hispanic arts and culture that ranged from library presentations of a puppet show written by Lorca to a concert of Latin music performed by actress Josie de Guzman. Programming of similar scope, but with an emphasis on Jewish arts and culture, complemented *The Dybbuk*. The careers of Horton Foote and Arthur Miller inspired film festivals organized in collaboration with the Cleveland Cinematheque. Kinescopes of Foote’s early television dramas were screened, along with talks by such notable colleagues of Foote’s as producer Alan Pakula and director Arthur Penn. Radio plays that Miller had written in the 1940s were aired. Western Reserve Historical Society partnered in exploring the local roots of Cleveland-born Adrienne Kennedy’s autobiographical writing, while mask-making workshops provided an entrée into the ritualistic performance style of *The Bakkhai*.

Ambitious in scope, the outreach programming heightened audience engagement. Mary Ann Jorgenson, a Squire Sanders senior partner who served as Great Lakes Board Chair from 1991-

94, confessed to a *Spotlight* interviewer that *Blood Wedding* could have been “remote or inaccessible. But because of the imaginative way Gerald Freedman approached it—and the equally imaginative way Bill Rudman and Margaret Lynch surrounded it with dozens of “Festival Fantastico” events—the community not only bought it but embraced it.” Great Lakes received local recognition for its outreach programs throughout the 1990s, as did Epstein, Gutzwiller and Partners, the firm that most often designed the souvenir books and posters promoting the theater’s outreach efforts during that time period.

Another component of the outreach effort was a free touring performance and discussion program that Indik and Lynch designed in 1989 to prepare audiences for upcoming productions. With funding from the Ohio Humanities Council, shorter works by mainstage playwrights were presented at libraries, senior centers, and other community venues. With modifications the “Outreach Tour” is still a cornerstone of the theater’s audience education undertakings today.

Indik was named Director of Student Education in 1988 and began to shift the emphasis of the school residency program. Later pursuing a career as a social service administrator, Indik had what Bill Rudman laughingly called “an obsession with personalizing classical texts and a hyper-interest in human psychology.” A former English teacher, Rudman had himself been strongly influenced by the 1969 book *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* and had come to feel that, “There is no education unless the student sees the connection between the material and his or her own life.” Rudman encouraged Indik to revamp the residency curriculum, which hadn’t substantially changed since 1980. The result was a highly interactive week-long program that involved students in staging scenes and making connections with their own lives.

Shakespeare still formed the core of the residency curriculum. Indik remembered working with Lucinda Underwood, an actor-teacher who would succeed him in his post, to find the right questions to ask students about *Hamlet*: “When was the first time you realized there was a way that you were stronger than your parents and what was that like?” Or “Why do parents lie to their kids?” Underwood codified these explorations into lesson plans. Actor-teacher Mary Tensing remembered completing a residency week focused on *Romeo and Juliet* at the time of the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots in Los Angeles. The Great Lakes team asked the students what the parents in the play could take away from their loss. “It was exactly the question everyone on the country was asking-- what can we possibly learn from all this bloodshed? And in the library with those students, we all felt the power and tremendous gift of theater-- helping us to raise the most difficult questions, and giving us some vocabulary to open those discussions so that we can find greater empathy, and hopefully nudge the door open to some better understanding.”

Along similar lines, Indik also created residencies to complement specific productions, such as a bilingual *Blood Wedding* residency and a Chekhov residency to prepare students to see *The*

Seagull. The successful *Seagull* experience led him to crow at the time, "There are 800 kids whose ears perk up when they hear the name Chekhov, and they all live in inner city Cleveland." Eventually, the residency curriculum broadened to include such American classics as *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Death of a Salesman*. Rudman also later challenged Indik's successor Lucinda Underwood to work with a team of teachers from the Cleveland school district to develop a middle school residency model and later charged Underwood's successor, Kenn McLaughlin, to lead the process of developing an elementary school curriculum.

During Indik's years as Director of Student Education, the actor-teachers understudied the mainstage productions and acted in the "Outreach Tour," which started out as a summer venture. However, as the residency program grew and as the performance calendar, both for the mainstage and the "Outreach Tour," shifted, it was difficult for the education staff to balance conflicting obligations. By the time McLaughlin took over as Director of Student Education in 1993, the actor-teachers were understudying less and less. McLaughlin focused on hiring actors who wanted to work in the classroom rather than on the mainstage. In 1982, the year Great Lakes moved downtown, four actors were hired for nine weeks. By 1996, eight actor-teachers taught in 100 schools in a seven-county area throughout the academic year.

According to Deena Epstein, the George Gund Foundation and other education funders had by this time concluded that "The drive-by arts experience doesn't do it." Grateful to work with a like-minded arts institution, Epstein regarded the Great Lakes residency program as "unusual and pioneering." The program's consistency also reassured funders; each Director of Student Education came up from within the ranks of the program and its rigorous training, and Rudman, who assumed the title of Associate Director in 1989, provided a continuity of oversight as well. In its totality, the outreach and education programming, both for adults and students, attracted steady support from such long-time education funders as the George Gund and the Martha Holden Jennings Foundations.

This support was a bright spot in the theater's financial picture at the time. Despite the quality of its stage product and favorable audience and critical reception, Great Lakes struggled to find solid footing downtown. In a 1989 *Spotlight* article, Mary Bill admitted that the theater had not been able to climb out of the hole financially since the repetition of *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1983.

It wasn't for lack of trying. The Board had made a strategic commitment to increasing the professionalism of the administrative staff. And as Development Associate Ann Garbler observed, "Lots of administrative staff had had production experience and could relate well to the production staff. They were closer than in many theaters." They shared a pride in the work and were valued. During this time period, Communications Associate Zandra Wolfgram profiled almost every long-serving staff member in *Spotlight*, from Mary Bill to Bill's long-time secretary Kate Lunsford and receptionist Annie Mitchell. Company photographer Roger Mastroianni

(whose father had reviewed the theater's shows decades earlier) took portraits that accompanied each interview. The staff also assembled for annual company photographs; a closeness was evident that extended beyond the office walls. As stage manager Jan Wolf reported, "We have been to weddings, funerals, and remembrances and just plain fun times for many years."

And yet, the ambition of the stage product still often outstripped the organization's capacity. Although Managing Director Mary Bill was able to strategize with consultant Anne DesRosiers about development initiatives, Bill was still carrying most of the burden in the development arena. Bill Rudman stepped up to help with grant writing. The \$10,000 grants that bowled Lindsay Morgenthaler over in the 1960s paled in comparison with the herculean grantsmanship required in the 1980s and 1990s. In the fiscal year 1986, for example, major grants included: \$200,000 from the Cleveland Foundation, \$50,000 from the Kulas Foundation, \$35,000 from the John P. Murphy Foundation, \$25,000 from the Reinberger Foundation, \$25,000 from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, \$50,000 from the Andrews Foundation, and \$20,000 from the George Gund Foundation. Funding was secured from an ever-more diversified portfolio of local and national sources. Mary Bill and the Board also worked with local banks, most notably Keybank, to maintain the theater's line of credit despite its accumulated debt. In 1989, the theater obtained another NEA challenge grant—to help erase the deficit and develop a cash reserve fund.

The Board continued to step up to its financial obligations. Another strong nucleus of Board members became involved in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, including Jim and Gann Roberts, Michael Peterman, and, from the ranks of Ernst & Young--still heeding Bob Bender's call "to see what you can do to help them out"--Jack Katzenmeyer and Robert and Janet Neary. A grateful Natalie Epstein asserted, "We had people who watched the bottom line and who cared about it. They might have been bean counters but they were also lovers of theater." "And of accounting in all its forms," added Janet Neary. Katzenmeyer had served an earlier stint on the Board in the mid-1970s and then been transferred out of town; when he returned to Cleveland in 1989 and rejoined the Board, he became particularly involved in the day-to-day oversight of the theater's always-delicate finances. He served as Board President from 1992-94 and as Board Chair from 2002-04. Like Carl Dryer before him, he received many a panicked phone call about bank balances and is widely credited with dipping into his own pockets to cover payroll more than once. Katzenmeyer would only admit with pride, "We made payroll every week."

In order to meet the challenges, Board members collaborated on a series of ever-more ambitious benefits, often chaired by the indefatigable Audrey Watts. At a New Year's Eve gala in 1988, *Spotlight* reported that "12 ladies in dazzling showgirl costumes, one for each month"

stepped off the elevator of the then-new Galleria space. Watts also chaired the 1990 Twelfth Night Party, on which society reporter Mary Strassmeyer bestowed her coveted imprimatur as “the benefit party of the year.” The Women’s Committee continued to sponsor a fashion show each year. Board members also made generous individual gifts. Katzenmeyer remembered going into a Board Meeting with then-Chair John Collinson when the theater was still short for meeting the terms of an NEA challenge grant. “We have to get \$60,000 from this group tonight,” they agreed. “And we did,” said Katzenmeyer. Echoing Georgia Nielsen’s remarks about the founding group of trustees, Gann Roberts summed up the unflagging devotion of the nucleus that emerged during this timeframe: “We are friends. We have committed time and money together. I can’t think of a more caring group.”

The Board also continued to cast the net for new supporters. Though the most engaged West Siders had made the move downtown with the theater, some West Side backers had stepped away after the move. And East Side backers were slow to join. With guidance from consultant Anne DesRosiers, a fresh crop of support groups sprouted in 1989 and 1990: Mary Ann Jorgenson and Merlene Treuhaft helped to form The Backstagers, a group for men and women who were interested, said Jorgenson, in “rubbing elbows with just about everyone who makes the Festival tick.” A group of young professionals coalesced as The Friends of Falstaff. Inspired by Adrienne Kennedy’s *Ohio State Murders*, Louise Kent Hope and June Antoine recruited a group of retired school teachers and friends to form the Adrienne Kennedy Society. Their goal, explained Hope, who had known Kennedy since the playwright was a young girl, was to work toward “total involvement for minorities who have a desire to know more about the classics but have no means of entry.” But, like the Women’s Committee before them, the new support groups had to find an appropriate niche within the theater’s “ecosystem.” Without the history of the Women’s Committee behind them, the three groups proved a promising but short-lived experiment. Admitted Gann Roberts, “They were all supposed to be about audience development, but fundraising was needed.”

Fortunately, another lucky programming break gave the theater some breathing room at that time. The Cleveland Play House had been producing Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* for a few years but announced in 1988 that the show would not be repeated in the upcoming season. With her customary vigilance, Mary Bill pounced on the title. Vicky Bussert remembered being in the office the day Bill found out: “It seemed like the next day after we announced it, we were doing it.”

It may have seemed instantaneous, but many things had to come together first—specifically, \$550,000 needed to be raised because Freedman and Ezell were determined that this production would fully exploit the Ohio Theatre’s resources for “spectacle.” Board Chair John Collinson took the lead in securing corporate support for the production. Freedman got to

work on a new adaptation of the story, framing the tale within the context of a family reading Dickens' story together before bedtime. Ezell and Gene Friedman began planning how to use trap doors, dramatic scene changes, and various stage tricks to embody the story's ghosts. And the tech crew figured out how to render Victorian-era architectural details with synthetic materials. Freedman didn't originally plan for music to play a major role in the production, but music began to seep into its sinews, and Sound Designer Stan Kozak soon found himself organizing all-night recording sessions. Education Director Jay Indik suggested a Dickens-inspired writing contest for middle school students in the Cleveland district—a program that's still running in 2012. William Leach, a warm and generous actor, was engaged to play Scrooge, which he would continue to do for seven years, bringing the holidays with him when he arrived each year at the theater's offices.

The stage effects for *A Christmas Carol* were bold, striking, and full of surprises. "Jerry's productions," marketing director Phil Crosby once said, "were like Faberge eggs. The trick in Faberge eggs is not only in their exquisite attention to detail, but in the surprises that are discovered underneath their surface." Ann Garbler was standing in the back of the theater next to designer John Ezell when the Ghost of Christmas Future made its first dread and startling appearance during a final dress rehearsal: "I clutched John's arm and whisper-screamed 'How did you DO that???' And he told me," she recalled. "I will never forget that first moment."

The entrance of Jacob Marley from a trap door in the stage floor--and the eight lengths of chains that he dragged behind him--made another indelible impression. For actor John Buck, who would play Marley for 15 years, the chains provided a mini-drama of their own. Buck knew that "Gerald always had a conception in mind for the chains." But the actor wasn't able to work with the actual chains during the first rehearsal. (In subsequent years, Scrooge, Marley, and the chains had a dedicated tech rehearsal of their own.) For his sudden entrance, Buck had to crouch on a ladder, with the chains arrayed around him, his head against the trap door. He figured out a system for pre-setting the chains, and two stagehands assisted him on the ladder. Onstage, he developed a way of flicking the chains so that they wouldn't get caught on anything (though of course they sometimes did, and Stage Manager Rich Costabile had to dart out to free them at least once). Buck's mastery of the chains—he learned to twist and untwist them around himself with deft economy-- became an arresting element of his performance, and sound board operator John Reilly was able to time the sound effects to match Buck's movements precisely.

Out of such attention to detail, stage magic was created—and an annual tradition was born that continues to this day. Said Vicky Bussert, who has staged the show twelve times, more than any other director, "During some of the years, without that money infusing the company, I don't know what we would have done."

Another boost came from Tom Hanks. With such films as *Big* and *Joe Versus the Volcano* under his belt, Hanks was in demand on talk shows. As a young man he had imagined himself appearing on these shows and, during interviews, he was quick to give generous credit to Great Lakes for teaching him how to become an actor. Bill Rudman and Hanks had been peers during the Dowling days; Rudman and Mary Bill reached out, and Hanks agreed to do a one-person show for the theater in January 1991. As Hanks later wrote to Rudman, “I saw a chance to reinvigorate the actor inside me, sharing that with two people who are still nurturing the tree from which I sprouted.” After filming *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Philadelphia*, Hanks graciously returned to do a second, baseball-themed show in 1993. Both shows offered an intimate glimpse of the charismatic star’s extraordinary journey from apprenticeship to maturity.

Always trying to close the gap between income and expenses, the organization shifted the performance calendar several times during Freedman’s tenure—in search of the elusive “best” time of year to present classical theater in a still relatively deserted downtown. In 1987, Great Lakes performed a “split season” in the Ohio Theatre in late spring and early fall, presenting two contemporary plays in the outdoor Cain Park during mid-summer. Even though the city of Cleveland Heights, which owned the park, didn’t renew the agreement the following year, the theater still went dark in July or August for the next few years. In 1991-92, citing the benefits for its school matinee program, Great Lakes officially turned away from its summer origins and began performing during the “academic” year from October through May.

The organization also tinkered with the number of plays per season. Five plays provided a baseline throughout Freedman’s time, but the number sometimes crept up with the addition of special one-person shows. The announcement of the calendar shift in 1991-92 also came with stricter adherence to a five-play season. As then-Board President Janet Neary said at the time, “Our attendance is up, and for five years in a row, we have balanced our operating budget and reduced our accumulated deficit. We believe the community expects us to continue to act in a fiscally responsible manner.” One of the five shows was *A Christmas Carol*, and another was usually a one person show; that left only three slots per year for original productions. Freedman’s hunger for new theater challenges led him to add another responsibility at this time. In August 1991, he accepted the position of Dean of the School of Drama at North Carolina School of the Arts. Like Lithgow before him, he hoped that his new academic connection might prove “mutually beneficial” to both organizations.

More change was on the way. In 1993, Mary Bill retired after more than twenty years of dedicated service, and long-time development consultant Anne DesRosiers succeeded Bill as Managing Director. With mentors in both the profit and the non-profit worlds, DesRosiers had a passion for non-profit management; when she took the reins, she said, “It would be wonderful if together we could make the Festival a prototype for management in the not-for-

profit arts.” DesRosiers instituted regularly scheduled staff and management team meetings—with both production and administrative staff in attendance. She lobbied successfully for an upgrade of office space. The original downtown office space in the Bulkley Building had become very cramped; even when Bussert assumed the title “Associate Director,” she still perched at a small desk outside Freedman’s office door. DesRosiers also instituted expectations for professional behavior and dress—such basics as ‘no jeans in the office’ or ‘no eating lunch at the Reception Desk’—with the goal of shifting the organization’s mindset toward survival in a competitive world. “We believed the arts were a business,” she would later say, “and we would behave accordingly.”

As it happened, DesRosiers stepped in at a synergistic moment; Kathleen Cervený had succeeded Patricia Doyle as program officer for the arts at the Cleveland Foundation in 1991. Cervený had grown up in Cleveland, attended Great Lakes’ student matinees, and then returned to the theater often on her own as both a high school student and as a ceramics student at the Cleveland Institute of Art. Cervený joined the Foundation at a time when non-profit management had become a top priority. The 1980s had been what Cervený called “a decade of continuous growth for the arts,” but in the 1990s funders began to realize, as she observed, that many arts administrators “had grown to be smart, capable leaders but had an artistic background or academic training, and no professional management training.” One of Cervený’s charges was to lay the groundwork for a Civic Study Commission on the Performing Arts. Released in October 1996, the commission’s “white paper” explored the need for addressing the long-term survival of performing arts institutions.

Encouraged by the Cleveland Foundation, the theater’s staff and Board assessed all areas of its organizational development during the mid-to-late 1990s. Some of the theater’s next generation of Board leaders came on during this activated time, most notably Barry Doggett, Tim Pistell, David Porter, and Patrick Zohn. Though the challenges continued to be many, there was also fun to be had along the way. Several lawyers among the ranks came up with a new idea for a benefit, enacting a “Trial of Hamlet” in 1994 and a “Trial of Brutus” in 1996. Many trustees of this era also have a fond memory of taking turns onstage as a café patron in *She Loves Me*—alongside James Kall and Tony-Award nominee Josie de Guzman.

Some Board members who stepped up in the mid-1990s, like Jack Katzenmeyer and Michael Peterman, were “almost like staff,” DesRosiers appreciatively recalled. Katzenmeyer and Peterman made invaluable contributions within their areas of expertise—financial for Katzenmeyer and real estate and landlord-tenant relations for Peterman, who was then Executive Vice President for North Pointe Realty—but both also assumed multiple leadership responsibilities as Board Presidents and Chairmen. Other Board members from this era worked

on more targeted projects. In 1994, trustee Leigh Carter, a retired CEO of BFGoodrich Tires, took an active role in soliciting funders to pledge “bridge funding” over and above their customary contributions in order to tackle the accumulated deficit. Another trustee, Tony Lang of the former Hausser + Taylor accounting firm, took the lead in providing Board support as the staff structured the theater’s first comprehensive strategic planning process—an extraordinarily thorough and thoughtful undertaking that DesRosiers would regard as “my best strategic planning experience.”

Whether the theater’s foresighted focus on organizational development in the 1980s and 1990s can be identified as the cause, many staff members during this time period went on to become theater administrators throughout the country: Dean Gladden (Managing Director of The Cleveland Play House and of the Alley Theatre in Houston), Richard Hamburger (Artistic Director of Portland Stage Company and of Dallas Theater Center), Bill Rudman (founding Artistic Director of The Musical Theater Project), Victoria Bussert (Director of Music Theatre at Baldwin Wallace University and Theater Artistic Director at Cain Park), Tony Forman (Managing Director at Madison Repertory Theatre and Senior Consultant with Theatre Projects, an architectural consulting firm), Phil Crosby (Managing Director of Richmond Triangle Players), Margaret Lynch (founding Co-Director of the Cleveland Theater Collective), Kenn McLaughlin (Producing Artistic Director of Stages Repertory Theatre in Houston), Richard Parison (Executive Director and CEO of Richmond Center Stage), and Phil Santora (Managing Director of Northlight Theatre and of TheatreWorks).

Certainly these future leaders absorbed the lessons in strength that Gerald Freedman, Mary Bill, and Anne DesRosiers presented. Bussert was the only woman in her MFA directing program; she stated, “Mary Bill inspired me--a woman in charge like that.” When making difficult decisions in his subsequent career, McLaughlin often summoned up the example of Anne DesRosiers, mentioning her “courage” and her ability to “focus very clearly on one goal: The next day for Great Lakes.” Rudman counted Freedman as a role model, exclaiming, “The detail. The homework. His social consciousness. He believed that theater was a socially necessary vehicle for anyone who wanted to change the world.” Richard Parison, who had his first job in theater at Great Lakes, concluded, “Because of everything I learned there and everyone I met, I continue to pay it forward.”

A master at focused multi-tasking, Freedman himself thrived on the challenges of the day—juggling directing with the increased demands of administrative duties at Great Lakes and his considerable responsibilities as dean at North Carolina School of the Arts. He was able to carry out some of his most ambitious stage projects during the three seasons from 1994-97 that coincided with the theater’s strategic planning process. *The Cherry Orchard*, *Death of a*

Salesman, *The Bakkhai*, *The Dybbuk*, and *The Glass Menagerie* were some of the soaring achievements during that timeframe. Such titles indicated the continued range of the repertory despite the limited number of slots each season. They also represented Freedman's stylistic range, from bold theatricality to subtle realism. As Freedman himself said, reflecting back, "These pieces couldn't have been more different." And yet, a lyric sensibility threaded through them all. Just as he hoped when he arrived in Cleveland, the work had "added up."

"I accomplished everything I set out to do," he would later marvel. But at the end of the day, the strategic planning process led the Board to the conclusion that the theater needed artistic leadership "on the ground" in Cleveland year-round. As passionate as Freedman was about making theater, the deanship in North Carolina had confirmed an equal passion for training young theater artists. It wasn't a choice that he wanted to make, but, when faced with it, Freedman chose to hold onto the School of the Arts. "It was very hard," remembered Barry Doggett, who would become Board president in 1998. "But the Board also had to think about what was best for the theater," added Patrick Zohn, "tactically and strategically."

The Interim Season: John Ezell and Victoria Bussert, 1997-98

Continuity has been one of the theater's hallmarks, but different people had to step up to provide it at different times. The Cleveland Foundation's Kathleen Cerveny noted the importance of continuity at the Board level. "There is a debate about boards: should board members serve two terms then rotate out? But at Great Lakes, the most committed members have stayed so close for so long. They successfully transitioned from one artistic director to the next and carried the value structure through. This is a great strength." It was a strength needed at this juncture in 1997.

The theater had become an ever more complex operation, and the next choice of leader required a new level of deliberation. The Board was able to resist rushing the search process because two very capable individuals were already at hand to provide continuity on the artistic front. Designer John Ezell and director Vicky Bussert both enjoyed close personal and professional relationships with Gerald Freedman, and yet both had their own sense of connection with the theater. Each would have an association with Great Lakes that spanned the tenures of several artistic directors. They had also both assumed a variety of titles—evidence for the sense of stewardship that they both felt for the theater's artistic life. Then-Board President Michael Peterman sat down with the two over an intense lunch, and negotiated with them to serve as Interim Co-Artistic directors while the Board conducted a search for a new artistic leader.

Ezell had long been a favorite speaker among the theater's various support groups; during this transition year, his knowledgeable, charming, and familiar presence assured supporters that

Great Lakes would persist. His close association for two decades with the scope and ambition of the theater's stage product promised that quality would not diminish.

Bussert had already come into her own as a director. She had taken responsibility for *A Christmas Carol* since its second season and had also been directing at least one other show per season since 1992. She had a deft touch with light comedy and had a special affinity for the knowing wit of Noel Coward, whose *Fallen Angels* graced the interim season. Musical theater was also one of Bussert's core strengths—as her subsequent career at Baldwin Wallace, Cain Park, and around the world bears out. Hewing to the long-held Great Lakes tradition of examining neglected gems, Bussert also burnished Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella* that season.

The strategic planning process had identified a need for DesRosiers, with the help of the Great Lakes Board, to keep working with various stakeholders in an attempt to improve the theater's financial stability. "Under the requirements of the NEA cash reserve grant, we had to break even every year. We couldn't do it," admitted Katzenmeyer. DesRosiers led the way in renegotiating debt payment terms with the banks, contract terms with the IATSE (stagehands) union, and even the terms of the NEA challenge grant. She was proactive about finding mutually beneficial solutions, understanding that these entities were partners who imposed "organizational discipline and accountability."

Another stakeholder relationship that occupied DesRosiers was the theater's evolving partnership with its landlord, Playhouse Square. Art Falco had assumed the role of President of the Playhouse Square Foundation in 1993. He was keenly interested in strengthening strategic partnerships with the Square's non-profit "resident" companies. Great Lakes was responsive; the theater had realized, admitted DesRosiers, that "we could never cut back enough on our expenses or charge enough for our tickets to maintain a balanced budget." DesRosiers and Falco explored a number of possibilities, including sharing "back office" services such as bookkeeping, box office, and marketing. The two organizations even announced in 1996 an innovative plan under which Playhouse Square would, explained DesRosiers, "in effect, 'buy' our season and market it. If there was any surplus over costs, Great Lakes would share in the profits." However, the results of the "bridge funding" campaign, combined with more rigorous budgeting, relieved financial pressure to the extent that the announced co-producing arrangement proved unnecessary. Nonetheless, pointed out DesRosiers, "We actually went that far in our discussions with Playhouse Square. It was unselfish, remarkable, and really visionary thinking." Habits of cooperation were forming.

The strategic planning process also revealed another organizational priority: reexamining the theater's mission statement. Bill Rudman, whose association with the theater also spanned

three artistic directors and numerous title changes, had decided to retire at the end of the interim year. He felt he had achieved his goal of ensuring that education was identified as central to the theater's reason for being. During that year, he rewrote the theater's mission statement to reflect the collective wisdom of the organization's then-35 years. One of Rudman's proudest achievements, the statement deserves to be quoted in full—as it often was at the time: “The mission of Great Lakes Theater is to bring the pleasure, power and relevance of classic theater to the widest possible audience in northern Ohio.”

The James Bundy Years, 1998-2002

One priority of the search process, Doggett emphasized, was “to find someone who wanted to be a presence in Cleveland.” And in James Bundy, the Board found the next “right person.” Bundy moved his young family to Cleveland and participated eagerly in such civic ventures as Leadership Cleveland, a training program for the next generation of community leaders. In addition to acting and directing credentials, Bundy also had experience in non-profit management. He had served as Associate Producing Director of The Acting Company and as Managing Director of Cornerstone Theater Company. Less than a year into his tenure at Great Lakes, he had to draw on his management skills when health problems led Managing Director Anne DesRosiers to retire. Bundy became the theater's sole leader, and for the first time in almost thirty years Great Lakes would be moving forward without the continuum of institutional experience represented by Mary Bill, Bill Rudman, and Anne DesRosiers.

But one of the first things that Bundy did when he arrived in Cleveland was to have lunch with Great Lakes founder Dorothy Teare. Struck by her still-burning passion for classical theater, he exclaimed at the time, “Even though Dorothy is now in her 90s, she has a complete command of Shakespeare, the Bible and all the arts that is still so compelling.” Respectful of the theater's longtime trustees and grateful for their ongoing involvement, he also forged strong partnerships with such younger trustees as Barry Doggett—who himself was immersed in the community's civic conversation as an officer of the economic development group, Cleveland Tomorrow. It fell to Bundy and such emerging Board leaders to serve as a bridge, connecting the spirit of the theater's founding with the changing tastes and social conditions of the late 1990s.

“James was much too well bred to be referred to as a ‘Young Turk,’” laughed Ezell. “But he was young and vital and radical in his thinking. And extremely intelligent and well-educated. He had graduated from Harvard and the Yale School of Drama. His father [McGeorge Bundy] had been famously a JFK advisor. His blood was bluer than Lake Erie.” A “Young Turk” with the social skills of a “blue-blooded” diplomat and the heart of a social activist was well positioned to champion the kind of community engagement that the theater was seeking.

Some of Bundy's parameters were given. He inherited a five-play season structure that ran from October through May, with *A Christmas Carol* falling in the center. Bundy continued Freedman's decision to reserve one slot for a Shakespeare play. Like Freedman, he tried to squeeze as much variety as possible into the other three slots. Drawing on Bussert's proven strength in musical theater, he created space for her to direct classics from the Broadway tradition. But Bundy also included musical plays in other idioms such as the bluegrass-tinged *Lone Star Love* and the blues fable, *Thunder Knocking at the Door*. He made room for contemporary voices, concluding his first season with Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. And he had a particular interest in new work that drew on narrative sources and storytelling traditions as various as Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From the Mississippi Delta* and *Travels with My Aunt*, which was adapted from the novel by British author Graham Greene. To describe the range of repertory he was tackling, Bundy was drawn to the phrase "great stories."

Bundy gave plays that articulated the African-American experience a prominent place in the theater's repertory. The commitment was personal and deeply felt but was also responsive to the demographics of his adopted city. According to *Cleveland in Focus: A Profile from Census 2000*, a Brookings Institution study, 50.5% of the city's population was African American. And although Cleveland ranked 33rd in population among American cities at the time, it was ranked among the top ten most segregated cities in the country. In order to help the theater's offerings reach a diverse audience, Bundy added a community relations director to the theater's administrative staff.

Repertory was one tool for representing the city's diverse population on stage. And casting was another. Bundy's multi-cultural casting was noted in newspapers of the day. Critics debated how to talk about his choices: The diverse casting in *A Christmas Carol* was called color-blind, while other, more intentional, casting choices were deemed "non-traditional." Nomenclature aside, when African-American actor Derrick Lee Weeden arrived in Cleveland to play Macbeth in 2000, he told a *Spotlight* interviewer, "I think of myself as a classical American actor, not imitating the European theater, but doing something that's immediate to our society. And really that's what the classics are about—the whole human experience, not just one race or one part of a society, but what makes us all human."

Human stories—the great stories—presented in highly theatrical ways were a hallmark of Bundy's tenure. For the third time, John Ezell proved to be a key collaborator. In *Travels with My Aunt*, where an unexpected journey leads to surprising self-discovery, Ezell designed two worlds. The British world, where bank manager Henry Pulling begins his story, was represented by spare, striking set pieces inspired by the paintings of Magritte-- clouds, benches, and four men in bowler hats, along with iconic symbols of the British Empire. Ezell's representation of

Argentina, where Pulling's journey takes him, involved cracked walls that pitched precariously and suggested the dramatic changes ahead for the bank manager.

Bundy's balancing act between classical and contemporary, past and present, can be glimpsed by comparing the two productions that bookended his own directing work in Cleveland: Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* at the end of the director's first season in 1999 and Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, the last show he directed in 2002. The bleak, black, and improbable humor of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, in which a lonely woman is driven to kill her mother, spoke to a very contemporary sensibility. And yet, for an audience raised on Vincent Dowling's work, the edgy new play was on a continuum with Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. The cast for *Beauty Queen* included Aideen O'Kelley, a familiar face from Dowling's time period, and Irish actress Derris Ring.

Ring also graced Bundy's production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, along with Dowling himself, who returned to Great Lakes as an actor to give a nuanced portrait of one of the Irish-American playwright's canny old fathers. It was the first time that the theater's audiences would have a chance to revisit O'Neill's work since Dowling had been artistic director. John Ezell rooted a New England farm house on the Ohio Theatre stage. As he had done with so many productions for Gerald Freedman, Ezell "inhabited" the structure with the stuff of the characters' day to day lives. Ring marveled that the drawers inside the house—which the audience never saw—were filled with such things as the tattered "knickers" that her homely character would have worn. Such details helped to ground the actors in a lived reality. Bundy wrapped the scenic world, the honest and revealing performances, and O'Neill's poetic language into a satisfying whole that was deemed a "favorite" production from this time period among Great Lakes staff and trustees.

Bundy's administrative responsibilities required him to function more often as a producer than as a director. As Doggett pointed out, "James Bundy was being asked to do a lot in the community, so he had to use outside directors a lot." Some of his guest directors were already close at hand. Vicky Bussert found the aching heart in both a rich rendering of Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* and a brassy rendering of *Gypsy*, with Broadway veteran Donna McKechnie on board. Like Freedman, Bundy also relied on a directing intern, Shelley Butler, who "cut her teeth" on *A Christmas Carol* at Great Lakes. Other guest directors came from "outside the fold." Northwestern alum Daniel Fish was an up-and-coming theater artist who both stunned and puzzled audiences. His storm-swept *Twelfth Night*, the stage awash in wrecked pianos, made an evocative impression. But many viewers scratched their heads at his *Romeo and Juliet*, which set the Capulet's ball as a pajama party in a wood-paneled recreation room.

In his first season at Great Lakes, Bundy turned the direction of Shakespeare's *Richard III* over to Bartlett Sher, another brash "Young Turk" who was subsequently nominated for four Tony Awards, winning one in 2008 for his revival of *South Pacific*. Sher aggressively pushed the boundaries of the stage for his production of *Richard III*, bringing the actors out onto a catwalk that extended into the theater auditorium, as far as the balcony line. A column of smoke—whirling within a 55-foot scaffold tower sheathed in clear plastic—cast an ominous pall over the riveting action of the play. The tower was taller by 20 feet than anything else the Great Lakes scene shop had built, before or since. And Mark Cytron, who was a rookie technical director that season, had to figure out how to anchor it; fortunately, Cytron had served as Assistant Technical Director under Martin Simonsen and had already constructed the 20-foot tall cut-out shapes for Freedman's *Cyrano*. Cytron and his crew were up to the challenge.

Bundy and another guest director, Bill Rauch, shared a common history at Cornerstone Theater Company, where Bundy had served as managing director and Rauch as artistic director. Rauch first came to Great Lakes in 2000 to direct a modern classic—Ibsen's *Wild Duck*. Like Bart Sher, Rauch confronted the audience directly; in the play, a burdened young girl retreats often to her own room, and most productions placed the room offstage and unseen. Rauch pushed the room to the front edge of the stage, forcing the audience to witness firsthand her shocking and heartbreaking suicide. In *Wild Duck*, the guest director also offered a glimpse of the Cornerstone methodology for audience engagement. A party that took place at the beginning of the play was peopled each night of the run by a "cast" of trustees and local celebrities. "It got people more familiar with our theater," recalled Trustee Peterman. "And it was a lot of fun."

But Bundy and Rauch were preparing the way for a more ambitious collaboration slated for the 2000-01 season. Cornerstone was known for taking classical plays or literature and, working alongside community collaborators, refitting them to speak to the context of a given community. Interviews with Clevelanders suggested to Cornerstone writer Alison Carey a preoccupation with a sense of "home." J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* was chosen as the focal text for the collaboration. 18 months were allotted for the process of developing the script—a large-scale undertaking involving workshops and auditions in 9 locations across the city, ranging from inner-city churches, to a Native American Education Center, to a suburban high school. People of all ages, colors, and physical abilities shared the stage; the cast included a cab driver who drove Bundy home from the airport one night, a father and son from Lorain, Ohio, and an administrator from the Jewish Community Center.

The result was an irreverent approach to Barrie's story—the boy who never grew up was re-envisioned as a frat boy—but the whole community was on stage. "It sent some people off the wall, which theater ought to do from time to time," quipped Ezell. And yet, *Plain Dealer* critic

Tony Brown reported at the end of the season that *Peter Pan* had been the theater's top-drawing new show since *A Child's Christmas in Wales* in 1982. Thanks in great measure to *Peter Pan*, 70,000 people attended Great Lakes during the 2000-01 season—the largest total for a season in the theater's history.

The production of *Peter Pan* signaled, said then-Education Director Kenn McLaughlin, "That it was time for the next generation of theater artists. Their way of working was less singularly artistic. They were concerned with how a community comes together and makes art that means something to them." Since community engagement was such a focus on the mainstage, it's not surprising that the theater's educational programming also flourished at this time. Bundy and McLaughlin developed a strong partnership. As McLaughlin recalled, "We developed together the way we were going to talk about our programming and how we were going to engage the community."

McLaughlin in turn was assembling a solid team around him: In 1997, he hired Daniel Hahn as supervisor of the residency program. Hahn, a Baldwin-Wallace graduate, had served as an actor-teacher in 1995-96 and gone on to complete a master's degree in theater at the University of Akron during the interim. Kelly Schaffer Florian also came on board to handle student matinees and study guides. Rounding out the crew, McLaughlin assigned "surround" and other special programming to Todd Krispinsky. A national high-school speech standout and graduate of Youngstown State University, Krispinsky was a game collaborator who brought with him "triple threat" theater talents as an actor, director and designer.

The Education Department was clicking on all cylinders. Under Hahn's steady tutelage, the core residency program flourished. There were six actor-teachers in 1993, and ten by 1998. The student matinee program was robust. As Bundy was fond of pointing out, Great Lakes had become "the largest outsource provider of theater arts education in the state of Ohio." In the realm of adult education, Margaret Lynch continued to take responsibility for basic audience preparation tools such as program notes and lobby displays. Pre-performance talks and post-performance discussions continued to be a staple as well.

With encouragement from Bundy, McLaughlin re-envisioned "surround" and other kinds of special programming. The irreverent and contemporary feel of the theater's mainstage offerings also characterized the "surround" programs. To complement the production in 2000 of *Twelfth Night*, McLaughlin dreamed up "Total Will Power: Shakespeare in the New Millennium." He recruited local theaters and other community groups to read, perform, or listen to all of Shakespeare's plays over an 8-month period. The theater itself sponsored the kick-off event: anyone who showed up at "Shakes-beer," in the basement of the local Great Lakes Brewing Company, could participate in a raucous marathon reading of the three parts of

Henry VI. Krispinsky spearheaded “Shakespeare Shorts” and “Bardstock,” film-making and song-writing competitions for area high school students. Setting a precedent for the future, the script for the “Outreach Tour” that year was commissioned for the first time from a local playwright, Eric Coble, who had also been an actor-teacher.

As Doggett said, “Kenn McLaughlin was constantly coming up with new ways to expand the reach of classic theater.” A three-year residency project in Ohio’s Auglaize County—shepherded “in the field” by Krispinsky—used oral history as the inspiration for community-based plays. Similarly, a letter exchange between students from Cleveland’s Whitney Young Middle School and the “ex-urban” Hudson Middle School became the basis for plays—in a program dubbed Counterparts that would continue to spark thought-provoking exchanges between the two schools for several years. Theater workshops were held for healthcare professionals at Hiram College, for K-12 teachers at Cleveland State University, and for high school students preparing for the Shakespeare monologue competition held annually by the English Speaking Union. In 2001, Great Lakes launched a partnership with the Cleveland Municipal School District to co-produce an annual “All-City” musical—a venture that continues through this day.

When McLaughlin first joined the residency program himself, most actor-teachers only stayed for a year, but he began to focus on retaining them. As he observed, “We would spend 10-12 weeks training new actors, then we released them after a year. I said, ‘This is ridiculous.’” Selected for their commitment to educational work, many of them began staying longer and also put down roots in Cleveland. As Deena Epstein observed, “They were nurtured, they had a paycheck, they looked around and saw what else was here. They have remained in the community and become an important part of the community.” A short list of actor-teachers who remained teaching artists in Cleveland must start with those who went on to become Great Lakes residency supervisors—the long-serving triumvirate of Daniel Hahn, Lisa Ortenzi, and David Hansen, along with earlier supervisors Jodi Maile Kirk (who is now a teaching artist with the Musical Theater Project) and writer Eric Coble. Other program alumni who remained teaching artists in Cleveland included: Nina Domingue (Cleveland School of the Arts), Sheffia Randall Dooley (Karamu House, Cleveland Public Theatre, the Musical Theater Project, and Kaiser Permanente), Larry Nehring (Artistic Director of Cleveland Shakespeare Festival and Sign Language Interpretation Instructor at Cleveland State University), Scott Plate (Assistant Professor in Baldwin-Wallace’s Music Theatre Department), and Beth Wood (Associate Artistic Director of Cleveland Public Theatre)—not to mention a host of others who stayed on in Cleveland as free-lance actors and directors. Ticking off their names, Epstein concluded, “Think about the ripples of that. It’s an example of the creative workforce.”

The community integration that the Board hoped for when Bundy was hired was happening at many levels. And, yet, balancing the budget remained a challenge. In candid discussions with

the Cleveland Foundation, the theater's staff and Board leadership had identified the size of the theater's rent burden as an obstacle to fiscal stability. At the same time, Playhouse Square was also requesting support from the Cleveland Foundation for the next phase in the district's long-term master redevelopment plan—the reclamation of the Allen Theatre. Playhouse Square's Falco recognized that the Square's resident non-profit companies helped to anchor the district and understood that the vitality of the district was linked with the health of the resident companies. In January 1998, the Playhouse Square Foundation and the Cleveland Foundation announced the "largest single grant" in the Foundation's 84-year history. The terms of the \$4 million grant allowed Playhouse Square to eliminate rent for ten years for its resident companies—which then included Cleveland Opera, Cleveland-San Jose Ballet, DANCECleveland, Dancing Wheels, and the Ohio Ballet, in addition to Great Lakes.

While a decade of rent relief removed a certain amount of immediate financial pressure, the theater still needed to develop a more viable plan for long-term survival. By the end of Bundy's third year, he had come to realize, "Even though we could actually get more people than ever to come to the theater, we learned that the operating model of producing four shows a year in the Ohio was unsustainable. There was no time of year when a 1000 seat theater made sense except for *A Christmas Carol*. There were multiple options to consider and pursue, but it was clear that being in a smaller theater would be highly desirable." Among the Playhouse Square properties, Bundy had his eye on the Hanna Theatre, which was then housing the long-running interactive show, *Tony and Tina's Wedding*. But it was anticipated that the appetite for interactive shows would remain strong, so the climate wasn't right for pursuing the discussion with Playhouse Square at the time. Still, said Barry Doggett, "The seed got planted."

Another boost came in 1999 when an unexpected bequest landed on the Cleveland Foundation's doorsteps and enabled the Foundation to initiate the five-year BASICS program, a competitive capacity building grant awarded to selected local arts organizations. Great Lakes was one of the beneficiaries. Throughout the next decade, the Foundation instituted several giving programs focused on organizational development, and Great Lakes was always in line as a recipient. From the theater's point of view, "We only survived because of the Cleveland Foundation," insisted Katzenmeyer. From the Foundation's point of view, Cervený said, "Great Lakes had the self-awareness and readiness to make good use of everything we put out there."

Alert to utilizing all available resources, Bundy was an active and visible administrator. He regularly answered the public's questions and even complaints in a column in *Spotlight*. His sense of community responsibility and responsiveness spurred Great Lakes to take a leading role in such local arts initiatives as the Cleveland Theater Collective, a service organization co-founded by Margaret Lynch and actor Fred Gloor that operated from 2000-2011. In terms of administrative staff, he kept the theater on an even keel through the gradual "changing of the

guard” that took place between the last few years of Freedman’s tenure and the first year or so of his own.

One person who would become central to the theater’s future joined the staff midway through Bundy’s tenure, in 2000—Bob Taylor. After obtaining an MBA from Case Western Reserve University, Taylor had initially pursued a for-profit career. But he was looking, as trustee Zohn put it, “for an opportunity to weld his business background and love of theater.” In Taylor’s first foray into non-profit management, he initiated the position of business manager at Karamu House, the country’s oldest African-American cultural institution. Little more than six months after Taylor arrived at Great Lakes as Development Manager, Marie Hubonette resigned her position as Bundy’s Director of Administration. Taylor took on that title in August 2001, but whereas Hubonette’s human resources background led her to focus on personnel issues, Taylor’s MBA background and experience yielded a focus on the theater’s finances. Taylor quickly became another right person at the right time. As he recalled, “The Board had decided to outsource finance issues several years back. I pulled finances in house so that we could get a handle on what was happening and make good decisions.”

Taylor’s administrative and financial skills would soon be needed in unforeseen ways, because fate was about to throw a few curve balls. Bundy was recruited to apply for the joint position as Dean of Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of Yale Repertory Theatre. A Yale graduate himself, Bundy was as compelled as Freedman had been by the opportunity to shape the next generation of theater artists. When Yale tapped him, Bundy decided to accept; he planned to tell the incoming Board President, David Porter, of his decision on September 11, 2001. Amidst the chaos, grief and confusion of the attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York that day and the tragic events in Washington DC and Pennsylvania, Bundy nevertheless felt that he had to go through with the scheduled conversation that day.

Like many a Board President before him and after, Porter was at a moment in his career when he felt he could take on the responsibility of the job. When his children were young, his travel schedule “had been a problem when I tried to join boards as a younger professional,” Porter recalled. “I had more control of my hours by then.” Porter had come up through the Board ranks quickly—a common story among the theater’s long-serving Board leaders. When he was named President in the summer of 2001, he “thought I had an artistic director for three years, and we were in good financial shape, and things weren’t going to be all that difficult. Boy was I surprised.”

Bundy’s resignation would not take effect until the end of the season, in May 2002, so there was time to organize a search process for a successor. However, an ambitious production went forward in October 2001 that would have an adverse impact on the theater’s always-precarious

financial stability. The production was *Lone Star Love, or The Merry Wives of Windsor, Texas*. A musical adaptation of Shakespeare's late comedy, the play originated with a group of actors and musicians in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in the early 1970s. The artists remained friends and worked together intermittently; the musicians coalesced into the string-band, the Red Clay Ramblers. They and playwright John Haber had returned to the piece and felt they had found its shape. Great Lakes invested extraordinary resources in order to assemble a top-flight production team--the Red Clay Ramblers in full force, RSC director Michael Bogdanov, and a production team of Broadway veterans, including choreographer Randy Skinner, who had just received a Tony Award nomination for *42nd Street*. The intention was to transfer the Great Lakes production directly to Broadway. While the musical was full of rollicking life and good humor, the theater climate in New York turned cold after September 11. (The show finally had an off-Broadway run in 2004-2005, but never made it to Broadway.)

Like the repetition of *Nicholas Nickleby*, the ambitious *Lone Star Love* production had an unanticipated effect on the theater's bottom line. "We had been making progress at chipping away at the deficit. But it slipped back that last year, to the same place where it was when I arrived," lamented Bundy. A few good years had glossed over the fact that the theater's underlying finances were still tenuous. More sophisticated financial management was still needed. Looking back, said Porter, "We didn't have a system in place at the time that gave an accurate projection of cash flow week to week. We were collecting subscription dollars for next season, but spending them this season. We didn't have the money we needed, when we needed it, so the cash reserve fund was spent. We were running out of cash." There were still times when Porter and Katzenmeyer had to step in to meet payroll.

Although the extent of the spiraling cash flow situation was not yet completely understood at the time, "It was clear that we had to investigate possible strategic alliances with other institutions," Bundy said. While DesRosiers had focused on shared "back office" ventures with Playhouse Square, Bundy had also begun to look at a range of shared production services with the Cleveland Play House—from combining set and costume shops to Great Lakes performing in one of the Play House's several theater spaces. As a result of those talks, as cash flow tightened, Bundy--and the Board--came to the conclusion that, "A merger with the Cleveland Play House was a subject that had to be responsibly considered."

At that time, the city of Cleveland was losing population and jobs—55,000 jobs in 2000—and was slipping in its status as a corporate headquarter city as BP withdrew from the city, and TRW and LTV Steel were eclipsed in merger deals. Mindful of the city's shrinking resources, the Cleveland Foundation supported the sober-minded assessment of the Great Lakes Board. Cerveny reflected, with admiration, on the organization's courage: "They were willing to look at everything, including asking whether or not they should continue to exist—if they couldn't

continue to add value at a level of quality that honored the work.” Unknown to the public, the possibility of a “merger” was broached toward the end of Bundy’s last year.

From the audience’s perspective, the director’s lyrical production of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* left the last impression of his own stage work. A few months earlier, before it was known that *Lone Star Love* wouldn’t transfer to Broadway, there had been what Bundy remembered as a kind of “hootenanny dinner for the Board and staff, the Red Clay Ramblers and the whole company of that show, all together there. That night was as warm and gratifying an evening as I’ve had in my career.” From New Haven, he later mused, “I hope that I’ve brought that sense of community with me to the Eastern Reserve.”

The Charles Fee Years, Part One, The Ohio Theatre, 2002-2008

Once again it fell to the Board to provide the continuity that sustained the enterprise. Charged with heading the search committee for Bundy’s successor, Patrick Zohn shaped the process by drawing on his personnel experience as a senior trial lawyer with the Department of Labor. He put together a comprehensive set of interviews for the candidates with “all the stakeholders,” both within Great Lakes and in the community at large. Charles Fee made an immediate impression. Zohn had developed a set of stock questions, and Fee answered nearly all of them before they were asked. “He had done his Cleveland homework,” remembered Zohn. “He asked questions about the Cleveland Clinic and Karamu House. He knew accounting terms. There were tears of joy from Jack Katzenmeyer.” Fee also had, claimed David Porter, “boundless energy and enthusiasm, the can-do attitude you see in a successful businessman.”

Fee understood how daunting the theater’s finances were. He also already had a fulfilling job--at the helm of the Idaho Shakespeare Festival in Boise. In *The Plain Dealer* a year after his arrival in Cleveland, an arts writer for the *Idaho Statesman* was quoted as saying that Fee’s leadership had marked a “turning point” in the Idaho company’s history. He was credited with raising \$4 million for a new outdoor amphitheater in Boise, increasing the annual budget from \$300,000 to \$1.9 million, and more than doubling attendance to 50,000, not including educational tours and programs.

But something drew Fee back to Cleveland when he was asked to return for a second interview. Quite simply, he “liked the people.” During his second round of interviews, the Board’s Executive Committee felt they had to share with him the fact that he was interviewing for a job that might not exist in a year. As Fee remembered it, “On the last day, before the last interview, on the way in, I was given a document: a plan for a merger with the Cleveland Play House. At first I thought, ‘How can I absorb this?’ But then I thought, ‘This is a fascinating idea. It would be the first merger between any two LORT theaters in the country.’” “As soon as Jack Katzenmeyer told him what the situation was,” added David Porter, “Charlie was already seeing

the possibilities that then became the model. He has a very nimble mind.” Fee was also, as he himself has admitted, “a risk taker.”

At both Idaho, and before that, as artistic director of Sierra Repertory Theatre in California, Fee had already been thinking long and hard about viable ways to manage non-profit theaters. As he reported, “I had been looking around the country and thinking: there are too many theaters. In addition, it wasn’t cost effective to mount individual productions once. Many companies were beginning to experiment with co-productions on a one-off basis. That co-producing model was out there in the ether. I actually had been thinking through how to create this very model for a couple of years at least before I met with the Board in Cleveland. But I didn’t go to Cleveland with the idea to propose a co-producing model.”

In any event, new models, as such, weren’t the first order of business. After learning of the merger talks with the Cleveland Play House, Fee proposed that he take a one-year contract as producing artistic director at Great Lakes without resigning his position at Idaho Shakespeare Festival, which was a summer theater. “Then I had to explain my proposal to the Board in Idaho. They were hesitant, but they knew I could do it. They wanted to allow me to have this opportunity.” Fee’s contract with Great Lakes began on July 1, 2002, and his first production was set to open in October that year. “The financial problems were growing all throughout the search process,” Porter observed. “We had to do \$200,000 in emergency fundraising among the trustees to open Charlie’s first season.” In order to get a season up quickly and relatively inexpensively, Fee relied to some extent on re-staging shows he had already done in Idaho. “Necessity is the mother of invention,” he quipped wryly. No matter what the outcome of the talks with the Play House might be, with the support of the Great Lakes Board and the efforts of a capable staff, the show was going to go on.

Fee’s first six months were intense. News of the “merger” talks with the Play House broke publicly in August 2002—though Porter, who was then a mergers and acquisitions lawyer at Jones Day, always stressed that the term “merger” was misleading. By then the Cleveland Foundation had hired an outside consultant to facilitate the talks, which had become focused on a consolidation of the two companies, in which neither would take over the other but a new third entity would emerge. *Plain Dealer* critic Tony Brown reported frequently during the latter half of 2002 about the challenges that led to the talks and gave frequent status updates. Brown laid out the problems: both theaters were losing subscribers, both were in debt, and both had “real estate” challenges. The Cleveland Play House, the larger of the two theaters, had a budget that hovered between \$7 and \$8 million, more than twice the size of Great Lakes’ \$3.5 million budget. The Play House was reporting a \$3 to \$4 million dollar accumulated deficit while Great Lakes’ accumulated deficit stood at \$1,059,000, including money borrowed from its

own cash reserve fund. In addition, the Play House's rambling facility cost \$800,000 a year to maintain; Great Lakes' rent relief at Playhouse Square was temporary.

Brown was careful to put the struggles of the two local theaters in context, pointing out that theaters nationwide were suffering from declining subscriptions. He also emphasized that other local theaters were also struggling; during the 2002-03 season alone, Cleveland Public Theatre and Dobama, Ensemble, and Charenton theaters all cut their seasons short. Through it all, Brown championed theater as an important community resource, pleading with both companies to "entertain us, educate us, even infuriate us. Anything, as long as it makes Cleveland excited to go to theater again." Another time, he wrote, "If [a merger] is done right, properly capitalized and with dynamic leaders in charge—it could make Cleveland home to one of the country's truly great regional theaters." But by December the talks had been called off; an agreement could not be reached on the specific shape that a new consolidated company might take. Yet by forefronting the topic throughout those months, Brown had reminded his readers that Great Lakes was, as he said, "a smart and resourceful classical company."

While the "merger" talks were taking place, Fee—with what Zohn called his "populist read"—fanned out across the city to drum up support for Great Lakes by speaking at City Club forums and other luncheons and events. From those days, Fee recalled "a lot of lobbying with our constituencies: 'Yes we know we are in this financial crisis. We know exactly how bad it is. We will bring you a plan for how to get out.'" With self-deprecating humor, he told the Board, "We are running a company that is the size of a moderately successful dry cleaning operation. We can do it." His effervescent optimism won converts.

He also concentrated on producing theater—even though he had to severely curtail the run of each show to two weeks. Fee came from a region that was new to the theater's history, the American West; he was raised in San Francisco and received his theater training at the University of California San Diego. But he grew up attending the American Conservatory Theater, where Arthur Lithgow's colleague William Ball had been in command. One of Fee's signature productions that first year, a 1960s-infused reckoning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, signaled that his approach to the classics was going to be bold and contemporary. The breezy show featured a Volkswagen "Beetle" onstage, psychedelic clothing, aerial stunts, brisk pacing, and the swinging sounds of the "British Invasion." Heir to the same tradition that rooted Great Lakes, Fee presented it with a brash new twist.

When the contemplated merger came off the table in December 2002, Fee had to convince the community to re-embrace an institution that had, publicly, faced the possibility of its own extinction. "Fortunately, our first season was successful artistically," he remarked. "That's what helped 'sell' it. It was the most stressful year of my career, but it was also really fun,"

allowed Fee. “We eked through financially because of the Board’s extraordinary generosity and because of the Cleveland Foundation.” Fee thrived on the “business” aspect of running the theater. As Taylor said, “He has been a complete partner in the business end of the theater. I talk to my peers around the country, and that isn’t always the case.” And fortunately, as his friend, director Bart Sher, told *The Plain Dealer* after he arrived in Cleveland, “Charlie is the perfect combination of a real impresario and a deeply sensitive person to artists.”

Fee had to make some difficult decisions. “He’s fearless,” asserted Victoria Bussert. When he came on board, the administrative staff numbered 25. Although attrition cut the number down somewhat, Fee also “had to downsize the company drastically. It was very difficult, of course. A lot of people lost their jobs within the first year. What I was hired to do was to create a sustainable business model for Great Lakes. That was harsh,” he admitted. By the end of the first season, the staff was about half the size it had been. On the balance side, Fee brought the salaries of the remaining staff members up to something more closely resembling a living wage.

The core staff had been hired during Bundy’s tenure and consisted of Taylor, who took on the title “Executive Director,” Daniel Hahn, who was already in place as Director of Education, and Todd Krispinsky, who agreed to take charge of Marketing and Public Relations. Heather Sherwin came on as Development Director to focus on rebuilding the theater’s cash reserves and working capital. With development experience at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Sherwin, a member of one of Cleveland’s founding industrial families, brought to the enterprise what Patrick Zohn called “a world class talent at the exact time it was needed.” On the production side, Mark Cytron stayed on as Technical Director. Christopher Flinchum, who had been serving on and off as a stage manager since Gerald Freedman’s years, would round out the team a few years later when he joined the staff full-time as Production Manager.

The first season weathered, Fee’s hardy band settled into place. A transparent process for group decision-making developed. Realistic budgeting required what Taylor called “a big shift in culture. Before the company had started with anticipated expenses and made the income side work. Now we started with realistic income goals and made the expenses fit.” The staff welcomed the chance to participate in creative problem-solving. According to Taylor, everyone looked around and said, “Okay. Now what? Let’s figure it out together. An entrepreneurial spirit emerged that carries through to this day.” Fee agreed, commenting, “This crisis allowed for creativity and risk taking that was very unusual.”

First there was Fee’s one-year contract to consider—and the fact that he was still artistic director at Idaho Shakespeare Festival. The joint appointments that Arthur Lithgow and Gerald Freedman juggled were a cause for concern in their days, but in this time of economic hardship the Great Lakes Board was open to Fee maintaining multiple commitments. Fee’s considerable charm and powers of persuasion also helped. Citing the model of orchestra conductors with

several appointments, Fee talked at the end of his first year in Cleveland to both Boards. He asked each group, “Is this something we are going to continue? Is there any reason to stop? Let’s do one more year.’ We did that for three years.” Fortunately, he added, both Boards included savvy business leaders who managed global workforces and “ran companies that took risks like this all the time.”

Next, Fee and his crew started tinkering with the structure of the theater’s season. In the spring of 2004, Great Lakes co-produced a contemporary play, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, in collaboration with the scrappy Cleveland Public Theatre—in CPT’s smaller and grittier performing space on Cleveland’s near West Side. Conserving resources was a particular priority at the time because Great Lakes was gearing up to present a July through December season that would begin a few months later.

Given that the Idaho theater had successfully developed a “destination” cachet in its region, Fee had decided to try out summer-fall seasons in Cleveland in 2004 and 2005. He wanted to test whether or not intensive marketing could finally clinch the Cleveland theater’s “festival” status in a downtown that was beginning to display signs of life. As Fee reflected, “We had to show that we were willing to make bold decisions.” Todd Krispinsky devised an ambitious and comprehensive marketing campaign that emphasized a renewed commitment to Shakespeare. A pantalooned Bard in high-top sneakers—played by actor-teacher alum and Associate Residency Supervisor David Hansen—attended an array of community events, from rib cook-offs to Indians baseball games to art festivals. A new slogan heralded Great Lakes as “Shakespeare’s Great Company,” and the handwritten name “Shakespeare” was scrawled over the word “theater” in the company’s typographic logo. To enhance a festival atmosphere in Playhouse Square, a wigged, heavily powdered and ornately costumed Queen Elizabeth—impersonated by local actor George Roth—arrived at the theater each night in a carriage.

Unfortunately, summer sales were not encouraging. Single ticket sales had been up the previous fall, but for the first summer season subscriptions actually fell by 20%. Yet Fee remained undaunted. “Part of my job in leadership is cheerleading: ‘Guys, we can do this, and it’s going to be fun.’ You have to believe it. And I do believe it.” Fee and company returned to the drawing board and shifted back to a fall through spring calendar in 2006-07. At that juncture, the clear distinction between the Great Lakes calendar and the Idaho summer calendar allowed for an even bolder plan—a more structured relationship between the Cleveland and Idaho theaters.

From the start, Fee had sprinkled his first few pressured seasons with titles he had produced successfully in Idaho. But with the shift back to a fall season in 2006, variations of the word “co-producing” began to appear more and more frequently in newspaper accounts about the theater. In 2004, Fee was quoted in *The Plain Dealer* as saying, “I create a *Hamlet*, perform it

14 times and then throw it in the garbage can. That's just not smart." Gradually, Great Lakes and Idaho settled into a pattern that put both theaters on an equal footing as co-producing partners. Idaho would originate two productions each summer that would travel to Great Lakes in the fall, and Great Lakes would originate two productions each spring that would travel to Idaho in the summer. Although, as Fee recently confided, "There is still no signed document between these two companies," he began to talk about the two theaters as "one large company with two performing spaces 2000 miles apart." (A third producing partner, the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival, would be added in 2010.) Since both companies, and eventually all three, had the same artistic director, one obstacle to harmonious collaboration was eliminated off the bat.

The co-production model posed both challenges and opportunities. The Idaho and Cleveland theater spaces were completely different: the Idaho company played on a thrust stage outdoors, while Great Lakes performed on a traditional proscenium stage. As Technical Director Mark Cytron reported, "A lot of the concern in Boise is making sure the sets don't fall over in the wind. If we were just building for Cleveland, we could build the sets lighter, with less structure, and spend more time on rigging. But we can't do that. And we have had to be active in educating our designers, but now they understand the reality. New shows are designed now to go to all three theaters whether or not they are scheduled to go to all three when built. It can be fun to come up with solutions. But it's taken a while to find a balance." Adjustments inevitably have to be made; the band for *Cabaret* played in an orchestra pit in Boise and atop a platform in Cleveland. For each set originating in Cleveland, Great Lakes has had to budget an extra 10% over what the theater would have spent if the production were not traveling. But an overall savings has been reported of between \$150,000 and \$200,000 a year—since each theater is originating fewer shows.

In order to solve the technical problems posed by transferring the physical productions, Mark Cytron and Production Manager Chris Flinchum now have contracts with all three theaters. "Someone has to coordinate all this," observed Cytron, "to track the details, to know the issues when a set gets to a new location. It can't just be a truck pulling up." Several key scene shop members also work for all three theaters, leading to nearly year-round employment for the shop crew. In what is usually a seasonal business, "That's very rare," added Cytron. Summed up Flinchum, "It has become a 'machine' that works. It's being created intrinsically in all three cities."

For actors the chance to revisit productions in both locations has meant a chance to dig deeper into a play. After tackling Sir Toby Belch recently at Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival, Aled Davies reflected, "I've done it before but I got to go back and feel that I had a slightly better handle on it this time." "A production never feels like a finished product," allowed actor Sara

Bruner, a company member in Idaho since 1996. “To get to go back to a play is really invigorating. Especially with the classical work we do. Also, our performing spaces are so vastly different. Stylistically you learn how to work in different ways.” Used to winning over Idaho audiences who are picnicking and sipping wine outdoors on a summer’s evening, Bruner eagerly anticipated the opportunity to perform on the Broadway-style stage of the Ohio Theatre. She recalled that she made the first entrance after the curtain came up on *Arms and the Man* during Fee’s first season. “I felt like I was stepping into a thick theatrical tradition. Having both places to work has completely changed my life.” For actors traveling the other way, from Cleveland to Idaho, the adjustment and rewards are similar. “From an actor’s point of view,” admitted Cleveland-based actor Laura Perotta, “performing outdoors requires a different energy vocally and physically. It’s very athletically demanding.” The outdoor Idaho audiences are also more “vocally responsive,” said Perotta. It’s been a learning experience both ways.

The co-producing model dovetailed closely with two other hallmarks of Fee’s tenure: a return to performing in rotating repertory and an emphasis on a company of actors. Fee experimented with rotating repertory as early as his second season, with productions of *Hamlet* and Moliere’s *Tartuffe* that utilized the same basic cast. Since 2004, most seasons have contained two pairs of shows in rotating repertory. Putting two very different shows in close context with each other has had the advantage, Fee believed, of allowing the two to inform each other. For instance, both Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* exhibit a dark view of human nature, but Shakespeare’s late play creates an even more cynical impression when the two are set side by side. By 2005, Fee could proclaim that the theater’s “core values” consisted of “producing great classic plays in repertory with a company of resident actors.”

In order to make rotating repertory work—and in order to transfer productions easily from Cleveland to Boise and Tahoe and back and save money in a time of straitened economic circumstances--scenic elements had to be pared down. As Cytron indicated, sometimes the schedule only allowed an hour and a half to change the set over from show to show. “That is a restriction,” admitted Fee. “But I personally think it’s often healthier for artists to have more restrictions. The tighter the restrictions, in many cases, the more creative artists have to be to overcome them, and the more efficient they have to be with resources. It helps with the budget too.”

Sparer scenic environments also constituted an aesthetic choice for Fee, who has said, “I am rarely moved by sets or costumes. They are critical, but they are not what I go to the theater for.” And yet within those “constrictions,” Fee and his designers created visually striking theater. Audiences audibly gasped when a large piece of red fabric covering the stage floor

disappeared almost instantaneously in his production of *Hamlet*. Guest director Risa Brainin's *Othello* utilized a sleek, updated version of the abstract pipe scaffolding that characterized Lithgow's early sets, yet was performed in repertory with Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, which was set in a more "realistic," yet still economically indicated, house. But at the end of the day, as Cytron noted, "Charlie is most concerned about how people can move on stage. The stage needs to be very actor friendly."

In Fee's aesthetic, the actors were in the foreground. And more specifically, like Dowling, he wanted to sustain a company of actors. Pointing out that both Shakespeare and Moliere wrote for and within "confines of a company of actors," Fee contrasted a baseball team with an all-star team. "With a baseball team there is more trust and familiarity. You can get right down to work." "Audiences want the feeling of rooting for a company, a home team," he insisted. The company consisted not only of actors but also of guest directors and designers—people like guest directors Drew Barr and Risa Brainin and scenic designer Gage Williams, who embraced "constraints" as creative challenges.

Fee had developed such a company in Idaho and brought along many of the same actors, directors, and designers to work with him at Great Lakes. But as he grew acclimated to Cleveland, he also began to integrate Cleveland-based theater artists into the fold. During his hiring process, he met with Cleveland's Equity actors. His openness was subsequently affirmed in a high-profile way with the addition of actor Andrew May to the Great Lakes staff and stage. May had been serving as Artistic Associate at the Cleveland Play House, but a classical repertory better suited his personal tastes and talents. After the "merger" talks between the two companies were tabled, May joined Great Lakes in a similar capacity in 2003, with responsibility for casting. While "local" actors had found a place on Great Lakes stages at all periods of the theater's history, May was in a unique position, as an active member of Cleveland's theater community, to open the door for others in a new era.

May also became a focal talent within the company himself. His comedic gifts were prodigious—physically and vocally—and harmonized with Fee's strength in comedy as both a director and a producer. May's energetic contortions, the pratfalls and double-takes, as Mortimer Brewster in *Arsenic and Old Lace* or as the Russian dancing instructor Boris Kolenkhov in *You Can't Take It With You* will long be remembered, along with his dynamic renderings of Shakespeare's Petruchio, Bottom, and Jack Ford. And yet May's versatility and depth of preparation were equally suited to such serious roles as the anguished John Proctor in *The Crucible* or the tormented Salieri in *Amadeus*. The range appealed to May but could also be exhausting; it was particularly demanding to alternate between Salieri ("the longest role in the

English language,” he joked) and the physical comedy of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. “But I’m glad I did it. I was challenged.”

The phrase “matinee idol” began to surface in newspaper articles about the handsome, charismatic actor. While the term sat uneasily with May himself, such shows as Noel Coward’s *Private Lives* capitalized on his bond with audiences. Four out of five of the cast members in *Private Lives* were Cleveland-based actors, including May’s frequent “leading lady,” Laura Perotta, and another Cleveland favorite, Scott Plate. Patrick Zohn recalled, “As each walked on stage, each got a roar of applause. It was so gratifying to see that recognition.” “That’s the first and only time I felt like a matinee idol,” May conceded. “I did enjoy it then.” Now a free-lance actor based in New York, May recently reflected, “I always received positive energy. It made me want to be as good as I could possibly be and exert as much energy as I possibly could. I was glad to do so.”

Whether the actors hailed originally from Idaho, or California, or Cleveland, the community came to look for and expect familiar faces—and to enjoy watching them tackle new challenges. “I have loved seeing Laura Perotta’s emergence over more than a decade of work,” said the George Gund Foundation’s Deena Epstein, voicing a common sentiment: “I like seeing the actors in different roles, seeing how different people can change so dramatically.” Examples of “crossover” moments abounded: when David Anthony Smith, known for broadly comic takes on such roles as Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest* or Parolles in *All’s Well that Ends Well*, created a witty but eerily cold-blooded Iago in *Othello*. Or when the audience sat hushed as the droll M.A. Taylor cut through the manic frivolity of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* with a spellbinding delivery of the soliloquy of Hamlet’s that begins, “What a piece of work is man.” Audiences have enjoyed watching Lynn Robert Berg as he morphed from Caliban in *The Tempest* to Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol* or Jeffrey Hawkins as he assailed the hapless Hysterium in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* one year and the imperiled and imprisoned Claudio the next year in *Measure for Measure*.

As has happened with the production staff, the opportunity to perform in two, and now three, locations has afforded actors longer contracts. But the length of the contract “is not the critical piece,” cautioned Fee. “For some individual actors that’s very important. Others want flexibility to do other projects. We can now offer many different kinds of contracts—some for only one play, some for all three venues, for anywhere from six through 40 weeks. Flexibility is giving us our strength.” Packing and unpacking for what can seem like 30 to 50 times a year can be “overwhelming,” admitted Sara Bruner. But conversely, said Perotta, for an actor working outside “home base” the upside is that the pressures of home—getting kids to school, putting dinner on the table, feeding the dog—can be put aside to focus more fully on the work. And, as Aled Davies pointed out, “I have averaged 36 weeks of work a year for the last 12 years.

Compared to most people in my field, that's an amazing thing. I have medical insurance because of those weeks. I pay half of a mortgage and car insurance. I have a mature life." The co-producing model has enabled the company to begin to realize what Fee has called his "simple" credo: "I wanted to be able to pay artists that I wanted to work with."

As at every other time in the theater's history, these artists were attracted by the opportunity to work on great plays. Take the example of Aled Davies, who, like Emery Battis before him, made several detours in life. Davies had been teaching acting, voice and speech, and Shakespeare. But he "wanted to be doing it. But most September to May theaters have variegated programming. It's a lottery whether or not something is going to be programmed for an actor's skill set." Given that his own "skill set" tended toward classical theater, he had the good fortune to make his way to Boise shortly after Fee, a classmate in graduate school in San Diego, took over as artistic director in Idaho. Davies has since acted in 55 productions of 23 of Shakespeare's plays—and has had "the experience of being cast in roles I would never have sought."

The Shakespeare-centered marketing initiative of 2004-05 celebrated what had been evident from the start—that Fee intended to re-ground the company in Shakespeare and a more traditional definition of the classics. From his first season on, Fee committed to restoring a second Shakespeare play to the season lineup. He avoided the tactic that Dowling and Freedman had used of relying on one-person shows to balance the budget. Such a move could be viewed as "counter-cultural" in the context of the early 21st century theater climate nationwide. As Perotta recently observed, "Charlie Fee is in such a minority in 2012; he's still producing shows with lots of people in them." Like Carra before him, Fee had a particular affinity for fast-paced physical comedy—whether it was "bracing" fun or "over the top" in any given instance could be a matter for heated debate. But he did not shy away from tackling Shakespeare's iconic tragedies and so-called "problem plays" as well.

The tight economic conditions of the last decade or so, not only in Cleveland, required Fee to shave rehearsal periods back to three weeks at most. The co-producing model helped out in this regard since a good portion of the cast would typically travel with each show from Cleveland to Boise or vice-versa, so the rehearsal for the show on its second run didn't need to be as long. Working with a company of actors helped as well. "We don't have to re-navigate the early part of figuring out how to work together," noted Perotta.

Within these parameters, Fee's approach to rehearsal is predictably brisk, energetic, and demanding. "You know to be prepared," stated Perotta. "You have to get down to business and get your script out of your hand as soon as possible. He likes to start playing right away. In that respect, as a director, he works almost like a choreographer." His guest directors may have different styles of working but they share in the company's unity of purpose. Drew Barr, for

instance, has directed a show in Cleveland almost every year during Fee's tenure. "Charlie starts with questions but his emphasis is on questions finding answers; Drew is more comfortable with letting the questions live," observed Perotta. But Barr and other trusted colleagues know what needs to be done to get the shows up on time and in polished shape.

Sometimes "guest" directors came from within the ranks of the acting company, and the familiarity of the company also assisted that change in roles. Andrew May knew that Sara Bruner "was a very physical actress. Every move was rehearsed; every turn, every wink, was finessed for timing, speed, and complete accuracy." But when May directed *The Tempest*, "Andrew gave me a fantastic freedom," Bruner recalled. "He let me try out all kinds of freaky movement things. A lot of my friends are dancers, and I had been thinking about the idea of a physical vocabulary. But I had a breakdown in the middle of the rehearsal process: I worried that I might just be making a fool out of myself." From May's point of view, he was giving her the space to develop "an explosive form of spontaneity that kept her on her toes and freed her up." With birdlike movements and non-human affect, she created an Ariel who truly seemed out of this world. "I couldn't believe how people responded to it," she marveled.

Bruner was also moving into a directorial role, serving as assistant director on several productions, directing educational touring productions in Idaho, and staging *A Christmas Carol* in Cleveland in 2011. "The people I admired were operating in multiple ways in the theater. As an actor you do your scenes and then you have downtime. As a director, you are the leader in the room all day long. When there's a question, everyone looks to you. It's intense and exhausting but exciting." Directing actors that she has worked with, in some case for more than 15 years, might have been intimidating, but within the company context it was "a smooth transition."

No matter who was directing, a contemporary approach to Shakespeare was a given. In Fee's ten years as producing artistic director, audiences witnessed young women in rolled-up bangs and bobbed hairstyles plotting to foil their male counterparts in a Big Band Era *Much Ado About Nothing*, political operatives of the present-day working cell phones behind dark glasses in *Julius Caesar*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* recast as a suburban comedy, drenched in the blue and orange hues of a 1950s Howard Johnson, a production of *The Comedy of Errors* tinted by the loud colors, sounds, and abandon of a Carnival weekend in Rio, and *The Taming of the Shrew* that traded on the slick artifice of Hollywood in the 1980s. Sometimes the settings were timeless or different time periods were purposefully juxtaposed: a ship with a period profile juttied up against video projections of Miranda as a young child in Andrew May's *The Tempest*; hard-edged industrial scaffolding contrasted with long, flowing clothing in Risa Brainin's *Othello*. What audiences rarely saw was a Shakespeare play with characters wearing

the clothing of Shakespeare's own day—except in a spoofing way in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*.

Often these productions approached Shakespeare—and other classics—with the choreographed movement, fluid staging, and quick transitions of musical comedy. Witness the carefully timed and synchronized reactions of Scott Plate and Nick Koesters as the gossipy “Venticuli” or “Little Winds” in *Amadeus* or the equally well devised sniping of Liz Conway and Layla Schwartz as social-climbing hangers-on in *An Ideal Husband*. Early in Fee's tenure in Cleveland, he spoke about the alignment of classical and musical theater in terms of “scale and musicality of language.” It's not surprising, then, that under Fee's direction the company easily encompassed both classical and musical theater in its repertory.

Great Lakes already had a history of producing musical theater, but the Idaho company did not. Once the co-producing arrangement between Cleveland and Boise was in full swing, a new challenge emerged: the same company of actors had to perform plays in both genres. Fee recognized that in Vicky Bussert he already had a director nearby who could take the lead in working with classically trained actors on musical material. As Bussert said, “Charlie reached out to me and made me part of his theater family.” With the musical theater program at Baldwin Wallace growing in stature under her leadership, Bussert could also introduce young musically trained actors to the company, both as understudies and onstage. “Both organizations served each other,” she observed. “It was really valuable to both.”

Stephen Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was the first “full company” musical that Bussert worked on under the co-producing arrangement. Rehearsing in Idaho, Bussert conducted musical theater workshops above and beyond the ordinary rehearsal sessions. She enjoyed working with actors who didn't have a track record in musical theater. “It was a hoot,” she recalled, “to watch Shakespearean actors practice a kick line.” Sara Bruner confessed that she had last done musical theater in high school, when she had also sung “sad teenage ballads. But I had never sung professionally on stage. You're at you're most vulnerable singing on stage. But Vicky said, ‘You can absolutely do this.’ It's great to have a mentor like that.” Aled Davies believed he would never have been chosen to play such roles as Senex in *Forum*, the Chairman in *Drood*, and the Sheriff in *Bat Boy*, “except for the fact that I was in a company that was programming both Shakespeare and musicals.”

The co-producing arrangement between Great Lakes, Idaho, and Lake Tahoe also opened up opportunities for the theater's administrative staff as well. Increasingly, many of Cleveland's senior staff members have the option of working flexibly with either the Idaho or the Lake Tahoe company or both. As Bob Taylor, who serves as executive director for both Great Lakes and the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival, pointed out, “All three are small-to-mid-sized

companies. None can afford to pay top managers what they are truly worth. The partnership allows all three companies to offer new challenges and additional salary for administrators who otherwise couldn't be promoted. It results in a higher level of talent in all areas. The art is better, the management is highly professional, and each company saves money." "That's the most innovative piece of what has evolved," claimed Fee, "the innovation of flexibility within the company at every level--actors, designers, production staff, even administrative staff."

Education initiatives are by their very nature specific to the community being served, so the three theaters have maintained fairly independent education programs. The education program in Cleveland has been characterized by continuity since the late 1980s; everyone in a supervisory role has been promoted from within the residency program, and staff longevity has been exceptional. Daniel Hahn followed the path from actor-teacher to residency supervisor in 1997 and then to director of education in 2001. Lisa Ortenzi, who became residency supervisor in 2001, and David Hansen, who joined her as assistant residency supervisor in 2004, both brought three years of experience as actor-teachers to their administrative responsibilities. Kelly Schaffer Florian has coordinated the student matinees and teacher resource materials since 2000. All four were still on the job in 2012, and the core residency and matinee programs were still going strong. By 2012, these were the statistics: More than 15,000 students attended student matinees each year. The residency program annually fielded 8 actor-teachers, reaching 16,000 students K-12 in over 100 schools.

With quiet determination, Hahn thoughtfully weighed resources, personnel and goals when making decisions about additional programming. Despite times of drastic cost-cutting, strong funding support enabled Hahn to sustain and grow numerous long-running programs: A *Christmas Carol* Writing Contest, open to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, has been running since 1989, and Great Lakes has co-produced the Cleveland school district's All-City Musical since 2001. The theater has continued to conduct Shakespeare monologue workshops, joining Playhouse Square as an official cosponsor of the English Speaking Union's annual competition for area high school students in 2011. A summer theater program for students ages 4-18 originated at Hawken School in 2003 and is now situated at Berea High School. Other long-running programs include the annual "Bardstock" song-writing competition and a playwriting competition co-sponsored with Lorain County Community College. Hahn also continued to be on the lookout for other partnerships and programs that made strategic sense; for instance, he approached a special "Creative Campus" initiative at Cuyahoga Community College as an opportunity to explore the feasibility of adapting the residency model to a college environment.

Another core education program, the "Outreach Tour" continued to evolve. While the "Outreach Tour" still complemented selected mainstage productions, a more intensive focus on

Shakespeare in the repertory presented challenges to the original tour model of offering shorter works by the same playwright. Hahn relied more and more on commissioning original work and new adaptations of source material in order to provide unexpected and imaginative perspectives on the mainstage repertory. To accompany a production of *As You Like It*, for instance, Hahn commissioned 7 local playwrights to write short plays responding to the play's famous monologue about "The Seven Ages of Man." He used a little known 1916 play about Caliban as a springboard for imagining *Before the Storm*, a kind of prequel to *The Tempest*. Tales from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Shakespeare's source material for *All's Well That Ends Well*, provided the jumping off point for another "Outreach Tour." But Hahn's flexible approach still allowed, for instance, for David Hansen to adapt an early Agatha Christie murder mystery to whet the community's appetite for the theater's production of *The Mousetrap*.

Under Hahn's leadership, the "Outreach Tour" gave opportunities to local writers, actors, and designers—many of whom also worked under Hahn's direction for several years on the "Counterparts" exchange between the Cleveland and Hudson middle schools. Many of these local theater artists—such as Eric Coble and Margaret Lynch—had previous associations with Great Lakes. However, in keeping with the theater's emerging philosophy about maximizing creative and employment opportunities for existing company members, Hahn took a look at the multi-talented individuals already on the theater's staff and began to rely more and more on "in-house" talent to develop the annual touring production. As Charlie Fee would say, "It helped with the budget," but it also offered longstanding employees another creative outlet: for Hahn himself as writer and director, Andrew May and Lisa Ortenzi as directors, David Hansen as a writer and actor, and Todd Krispinsky as an actor and designer. As the creative producer of the program, Hahn, said Andrew May, "was a joy to work with. He was always growing, always inventing something new."

Decision by decision, adjustment by adjustment, the theater worked its way back to financial stability, despite the fact that Fee was producing large-cast plays in rotating repertory. Board leader Michael Peterman helped Great Lakes sell off a condominium in Lakewood as well as the old firehouse property that had served as a costume shop since the mid-1970s. Great Lakes continued to look for ways to work with Playhouse Square, for instance, on joint-marketing initiatives and ticketing services. Playhouse Square allowed Great Lakes to experiment with permitting drinks in the theater, and bar revenues tripled. "We were working as a partner, not a competitor," pointed out Bob Taylor. The theater was also selected to participate in such competitive Cleveland Foundation initiatives as a three-year "Arts Advancement" program. In 2005-06, attendance grew 21% over the previous year. In 2007, the *Plain Dealer* reported that the theater's subscription base had grown by 37% and that there had been a budget surplus in each of the past four seasons. The crippling deficit finally overcome, *Plain Dealer* critic Tony Brown claimed in 2007 that Great Lakes "has survived through its ability to reinvent itself."

As the financial picture stabilized, marketing director Todd Krispinsky worked at what he called “changing the narrative” about the theater in the local press. Positive “messaging” would have been needed in any event to attract continued support and patrons. But positioning Great Lakes as a smart, successful company also served another, more specific, purpose as well.

The Charles Fee Years, Part Two, The Hanna Theatre, 2008-2012

The theater’s ten-year rent abatement agreement with Playhouse Square was slated to run out in 2008. As early as August 2005, Charlie Fee and Bob Taylor began to talk with Playhouse Square about how the theater’s landscape might change after a decade of rent relief came to an end. “We were still looking for a ‘right sized’ theater space,” indicated Taylor. At that time, the Hanna Theatre was empty again; the interactive *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* had run its course and an equally long-running successor had not emerged. Playhouse Square’s Art Falco agreed that the timing was then right for Great Lakes to take a look at the Hanna Theatre.

“Take a look” is too casual a phrase to connote the activity that their conversation set in motion. The Board agreed to a feasibility study; architect Paul Westlake of Westlake Reed Leskosky was commissioned to draw up plans. Board members fanned out among all of the theater’s “stakeholders” to sound out their approval for such a move—and for the capital campaign that would be needed to transform the Hanna Theatre. The campaign—which would be the most ambitious in the theater’s history—would require aggressive, and well-connected, leadership.

Fortunately—a recurring theme in the theater’s history—Tim Pistell was another right person at the right time. Pistell had joined the theater’s board in the mid-1990s. He was impressed with Charlie Fee’s “dynamic energy.” When the opportunity to consider the Hanna came up, Pistell was excited. Looking at the economy at large, market conditions were relatively favorable for a capital campaign at that time. And, as Pistell observed, “The strategic rationale was clear. It made sense for Playhouse Square. The Hanna wasn’t working for them. The Ohio was too big for us, but it was a great size house for other groups. Getting us out freed up space for them. It made sense business-wise.” Pistell had just been promoted to serve as CFO of Parker Hannifin, one of the largest remaining Cleveland-based companies. Though Pistell advocated at first for other peers to lead the campaign, in the end, he admitted, “I was the most logical choice. I was the number two guy at Parker Hannifin. Parker Hannifin was a big company in town and had strong relationships with all the bankers, accounting firms, and law firms. The stars and planets were aligned.” He concluded, “This is the moment. Let’s do it now.”

Once he decided to commit to the undertaking, Pistell moved quickly. He approached a group of 8 to 10 key Board members—such “usual suspects” as Janet Neary, Michael Peterman, Bill McDonald, Joseph LoPresti, and Barry Doggett-- and asked “Should I do this? Will you support

it?” A leadership team formed and, in November 2006, recommended that the Board approve a comprehensive campaign to raise funds to renovate the Hanna Theatre. Heather Sherwin managed the nuts and bolts of the campaign, but Pistell and other Board members made all the major calls with her to foundations, corporations, and individuals.

By January 2007, the Board had raised \$2 million in personal gifts from its own ranks. Next Parker Hannifin announced a lead corporate gift of \$1.5 million. Longtime Great Lakes trustee Ellen Stirn Mavec also served as President of The Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Foundation, which then stepped up with the campaign’s first grant of \$1 million. With strong evidence of community support in hand from these three sources, the theater was able to approach such longtime donors as the George Gund and Cleveland Foundations. By the time the campaign went public in January 2008, the theater had already secured \$14.2 million in funding.

The total project need had been estimated at \$19.3 million, but the theater was confident of reaching its goal and proceeded immediately with “ground breaking.” An ambitious target was set for opening the newly configured Hanna Theatre on September 24, 2008. While the Turner Construction Company and its subcontractors labored diligently and swiftly, fundraising continued at an equally intense pace. In July 2008, the national Kresge Foundation announced a challenge grant of \$1 million—which would provide the last piece of the puzzle if Great Lakes could meet the target of \$18.3 million.

The construction and theater crews were due to cross the finish line before the fundraising was complete. But the funding pieces continued to fall into place one by one. Trustee Robyn Barrie, who had assumed Audrey Watts’ mantle as tireless benefit planner, pulled out all the stops and closed 14th Street for an exuberant opening gala that took place a week before the theater opened. Pistell also went to the Board and said, “I’m going to add another installment to my pledge. I’m going to go to six installments instead of five. I’d like you to consider doing that too.’ That boosted everyone’s pledge by 20%. Just about every one of them did. Everyone on this Board loves theater and loves Great Lakes. They are dedicated; you can count on them.”

Another person who could be counted on was Tom Hanks. In October 2009, Hanks generously came back to Cleveland for a third time to present a unique evening of reflections on the nature of theater--as embodied in Hamlet’s charge to the actors to “hold a mirror up to nature.” As Hanks told an interviewer, “That’s actually the commandment that the actor carries around with him. That’s the vow he makes to the audience, the promise the actor has before he comes out on stage.” Hanks’s compelling evening of insights about acting and filmmaking put the theater in reach of the Kresge grant. By January 2010, Great Lakes had exceeded its campaign goal of \$19.3 million.

The careful planning that went into the capital campaign was more than matched by the detailed restoration work that took place inside the theater house. Like the Ohio Theatre, the Hanna had originally opened in 1921 as a “legitimate,” as opposed to vaudeville or film, house. The Hanna hosted touring shows produced by the legendary Shubert brothers and continued to offer Broadway touring productions through the 1960s. As Marketing and Public Relations Director Krispinsky observed, “The renovation respected the historic space, but re-envisioned it as a contemporary space.” Encompassing a bar and a variety of seating options from traditional theater seats to lounge-style couches and tall chairs, the result, said Krispinsky, “is a metaphor for the company itself—flexible and fun.” The Cleveland Foundation’s Kathleen Cerveny agreed: “The Hanna design is well known in the arts world nationally. Often I participate in webinars about ‘next generation engagement.’ Invariably someone will show a photograph of the Hanna Theatre.”

The stage itself was core to the renovation. The design began with a thrust stage in an intimate 550-seat house—not unlike the one that architect Chuck Dickson had envisioned for the Edgewater space so many years before. But Parker Hannifin’s involvement in the Hanna renovation project was not only crucial in monetary terms; the manufacturing company also gave the theater company the freedom to envision an even more flexible performing space. Since one of Parker Hannifin’s specialties is hydraulic equipment, Pistell proposed early on during the planning stages that the renovation plans for the Hanna Theatre should include a segmented thrust stage that could be reconfigured in a variety of ways using hydraulic lifts. The specially equipped stage would increase the cost of the project, but it represented an opportunity for a Cleveland-based company to give back, said Pistell, “to take one of the city’s gems and ‘recut’ it and polish it up. And it was a way to show what Parker Hannifin can do.”

The Hanna Theatre opened with a stunning production of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* that utilized the capacity of the new performance space in a striking and theatrical way. The show opened with spider-like witches climbing up from below and behind a platform. “The reveal on the witches was like ‘blow your mind away,’” enthused Pistell. The Japanese-influenced production featured live drumming throughout, with the drummers arrayed on platforms overlooking the action. Recalled Patrick Zohn, “The drums kept up a dynamic, dramatic tension. It was in your face—palpable.” Sara Bruner, who played one of the witches, recalled speaking the first lines of the show. “I felt so lucky to be the first actor to speak on this stage. Our entrance was really exciting. We felt, ‘This is our theater company. This is our home.’”

While the production of *Macbeth* exploited the highly theatrical potential of the new space, another production that first season—of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, directed by Drew Barr—displayed the quiet closeness that the theater’s stage also afforded—in an auditorium where no seat is more than 12 rows from the stage. The company operated at a high level as an

ensemble on the Chekhov piece. “It was a group of actors who worked together for a long time,” said Perotta. “When Aled and I met on stage as the Doctor and Arkadina, a whole history passed between the two of us. Silent and subtle. We didn’t talk about it; it was just there.” The family’s “living” room was situated on the thrust, and in it the actors went about such day to day tasks as knitting, reading, or playing cards: “Everyone was living their lives on stage. Not just acting,” Andrew May marveled. And audiences and critics agreed. Writing for the *Jewish News*, Fran Heller called *The Seagull*, “a consummate ensemble piece. One of the chief pleasures of this production is watching a seasoned troupe.”

The Hanna Theatre offered the possibility of surprises. The thrust platform actually consists of three platform segments, each operated independently by a hydraulic system. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, two hand-shaped, molded plastic chairs—one pink, the other blue—rose unexpectedly from the orchestra pit as the sleek sounds of the 80s pulsated and vibrant lighting saturated the stage with color. At the rise of *The Comedy of Errors*, a balcony overlooking a street scene lowered instantaneously to become the bars of a prison; later in the play, as Antipholus of Syracuse was swept away by the riotous abandon on the streets of Ephesus, he and the revelers descended slowly into the pit—still partying as they disappeared.

In addition to the variety of stage configurations enabled by the hydraulic thrust platforms, the depth and height of a traditional proscenium stage added to the staging possibilities as well. In Vicky Bussert’s production of *Cabaret*, for instance, multi-leveled platforms enabled striking juxtapositions between the seedy realities of the boarding house and the artifice of the club life and even allowed for audience “club” seating on the thrust platform, which was set at an even level with the theater house floor. The easy communication between the stage and the audience made the chilling climax of the production all the more horrific because of the audience’s complicity in the action of the play. In many productions in the new space, actors entered the stage from a variety of locations in the house, sweeping the audience along with them into the world of the play.

The technology built into the Hanna space also posed new challenges for the theater’s technical crews and the IATSE stagehands. “Not only is the Hanna lift one of a kind,” pointed out Mark Cytron, “the automated fly system was also the first of its kind in Cleveland, and the light board used newer technology than any other in town.” The partnership between Great Lakes and IATSE that had been nurtured since the company moved into the Ohio Theatre in 1982 was needed now more than ever. Fortunately, the Playhouse Square crew has enjoyed a longevity similar to that of the Great Lakes crew. “We’ve had the same stage hands working with us the whole time,” observed Cytron. “We meet with them to go over issues. We get good ideas from them about how to work faster and easier. They have become more and more a part of the team. They take ownership and responsibility.”

The sophisticated stage equipment at the Hanna required new skills, and Parker Hannifin generously continued to provide technical support. “The Hanna systems are unbelievably complicated,” Cytron said. “Fly rigging used to need a big strong guy to pull the ropes. Now it’s automated. It has to be or we couldn’t do switch overs for rotating rep quickly enough. The job of the electrician used to be about big wires. Now it’s about little ones—electronic circuits. Before, we could fix everything. We had the tools we needed—usually ropes and cables,” mused Cytron. Now the Great Lakes and Hanna crews have to call on engineering and rigging consultants to talk them through simpler repairs. But sometimes the technical consultants have to fly in from New York to make the repairs themselves. In the fall of 2011 the platform lift broke down a few hours before “curtain” on the opening night of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Despite urgent phone conversations back and forth, the platform would not budge. The production had to go on for a few days without platforms rising and disappearing as planned, while the nimble company and crew came up with old-fashioned solutions to new problems.

Fifty Years

Creative problem solving has always been a way of life at Great Lakes. As the theater embarked on its next fifty years, the man that Tony Brown once dubbed “the innovation itchy Fee” continued to look for ways to surprise and delight the theater’s audiences. Eyes ever on the future, Fee continued to honor the theater’s past as well. Another storied name from the theater’s history, John Lithgow, returned to Great Lakes for the first time in May 2010 to do a benefit show, “Stories by Heart,” which paid tribute to his father and to the power of storytelling itself.

Does everything work? Some Great Lakes patrons were not thrilled to see the tabloid-inspired musical *Bat Boy* in the lineup, despite its references to Shakespeare and Greek tragedy. But the quirky show fit the theater’s spirit of experimentation. And Great Lakes continues to be a place where the probing, entertaining, and compelling work of artists as various as Shakespeare, Moliere, Noel Coward, and Stephen Sondheim add up.

Perhaps for a living organism like a theater the only constant can be change. Since the move into the Hanna Theatre, finances have been the most stable they’ve been since the move downtown, but the wolf is never far from the door. In 2011, Great Lakes Theater dropped the “Festival” from its name—a bow to the fact that the theater is committed to its urban setting in downtown Cleveland. The green lawns of a summer festival are not in its foreseeable future. The theater’s 50-year history has been marked by many comings and goings, and sometimes those leave-takings have been attended by sorrow or strife. Among so many intensely engaged and committed people, disagreements and conflict are bound to surface from time to time.

But from the perspective of a 50-year span, all of these caring, passionately engaged people can live together in memory as integral participants in the legacy of the theater that they all helped to build or sustain. As Mary Bill once said, “Throughout the years so many have woven their own dreams into the fabric of Festival. What a rich tapestry! Our greatest achievement is that we have built an institution.”

From the perspective of those 50 years, it is the threads of continuity and longevity that hold the story together—shot through with judicious risk-taking and hard decision making. It starts with the Board—especially decades of service from Dorothy Teare, Audrey Watts and Natalie Epstein (who is currently taking a turn as Board Chairman), and such caring financial stewards as Carl Dryer, Tom Stafford, Jack Katzenmeyer, and Bob Neary. It continues with strong artistic leadership from all six artistic directors—Arthur Lithgow, Lawrence Carra, Vincent Dowling, Gerald Freedman, James Bundy, and Charles Fee--and the long standing involvement of such versatile theater artists as John Ezell and Vicky Bussert. The long stretches of staff leadership provided by Mary Bill, Anne DesRosiers and Bob Taylor helped the theater to navigate transitions, as did the commitment of loyal, talented and long-serving staff members. Good working relationships built over time with the Cleveland Foundation and other local funders and with Playhouse Square provided another ingredient, along with critics who were theater advocates and wanted Great Lakes to succeed. Season all that with some blockbuster play choices that were either bold or fortuitous or both, most notably *Godspell*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *A Christmas Carol*. It helped to have the best playwrights on board—the likes of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Moliere, and Miller--and committed and inspired actors, headlined by John Lithgow, Tom Hanks, and Hal Holbrook. And the final ingredients have been enthusiastic audiences and a supportive community. That’s what it has taken to make classical theater in Cleveland for 50 years. Let the next 50 years begin!

Sixty Years

An Update to the History of Great Lakes Theater in 2023

“Sustainability” was Great Lakes Theater’s watchword as the company embarked on its second half-century in the 2010s. The “Great Recession” cast a long shadow; its abiding lessons kept everyone’s attention focused. In decisions large and small, the theater’s staff, artists, and Board were determined to construct a workable framework for producing classical theater, no matter what challenges might arise.

The on-going cost-savings of Great Lakes Theater’s unique three-theater partnership had already become essential to the company’s vitality. Born of necessity when GLT and the Idaho Shakespeare Festival began sharing productions in 2002 and amplified when Lake Tahoe

Shakespeare Festival became a third cross-country partner in 2010, the informal experiment had grown into a strategic alliance.

“Charlie Fee started this on the fly,” laughed longtime trustee Sam Hartwell, who served as the theater’s Board President from 2014-2016 and currently serves as Board Chairman. “But it was working, and we wanted to support it” he added—emphasizing that “to this day, there’s no written agreement between the three theaters.”

In lieu of a written agreement, Hartwell suggested a board-level task force whose basic purpose was to keep the lines of communication open between the board members of the three theaters. Members of the Strategic Alliance Board Task Force agreed to meet annually—and “as needed”—rotating the meeting location among the three theaters. Leaders of the three boards began building the relationships that were needed, Hartwell insisted, “to pick up the phone, whenever the ‘next’ crisis inevitability arrives, and already know the person at the other end.”

Howard Epstein, current chair of the Board Task Force, stressed that “None of the three theaters is dependent on the other for fundraising. Each has its own board. The job of the task force is to make sure the collaboration remains in the best interests of each of the theaters.”

While striving to keep the lines of communication open among the three independent boards, the GLT Board also had to work at shoring itself up. Continuity had long been a GLT Board strength. The Board that raised the money for the Hanna campaign in 2008 was anchored by many of the stalwart supporters who had spearheaded the fundraising for the company’s move downtown in 1982.

However, in the natural ebb and flow of individual commitments, some who had been active during the Hanna campaign stepped back within the next few years, even as others, such as Sam Hartwell, remained involved. Hartwell had relevant skills—he advised small family businesses on succession planning—and he came from a family of theater patrons. Not only was his mother a dedicated theatergoer, but she also served on the Board of the Cleveland Play House. “Supporting theater was something I knew that one did,” Hartwell emphasized.

A new round of engaged folks began to join the GLT Board. Recruits were sought from the ranks of major Cleveland institutions, individuals in leadership roles who could advocate for GLT within their organizations. Entering the ranks in the years after the Hanna opening were Bill Caster, who was then with PNC Bank, and Kim Bixenstine, who was serving as Vice President and Deputy General Counsel at University Hospitals. Both quickly took on significant committee work, and each in turn served a term as GLT Board President.

Howard Epstein, a rheumatologist and Medical Director of the Cleveland Clinic’s employee health plan, stepped up. The son of longtime GLT Board member Natalie Epstein, he followed in

his mother's footsteps as a GLT supporter and joined the board as what he jokingly called "a legacy trustee." Walt Avdey, who served several terms as Board treasurer, followed a long line of Ernst & Young accountants onto the GLT Board. "The EY people played a very supportive role over the years in making things work," attested Tom Stafford, another EY accountant and perennial GLT Board officer whose "institutional memory" stemmed from 45 years of active service.

Also key to "making things work" were the company's staff leaders, Producing Artistic Director Charles Fee and Executive Director Bob Taylor. As has often been the case in GLT's history, necessity created opportunity. When Lake Tahoe joined the three-theater alliance, Charlie Fee added a third "producing artistic director" title to his name, shouldering the artistic leadership of all three theaters. Rising to new challenges with zestful enthusiasm, Fee liked to joke, "I've just kept adding jobs. I never left any of them."

Bob Taylor also became proficient at "adding jobs." Taylor had assumed the position of Executive Director during Fee's second season, in 2003. "Since Charlie would be splitting his time between Cleveland and Boise, he was looking for an equal partner," Bob Taylor recalled. When Lake Tahoe joined the mix, Taylor took on the executive leadership of Lake Tahoe as well. "The Tahoe job allowed me more professional development," Taylor noted. He also added a title at Idaho Shakespeare Festival to his portfolio along the way—Director of Finance.

Fee and Taylor both became very adept at working closely with each other to balance their schedules and responsibilities seamlessly so that all three organizations could flourish. The comfort and familiarity levels among the three theaters were high. All three did work centered in Shakespeare. And as GLT associate artistic director Sara Bruner observed, producers and performers of Shakespeare constituted "a kind of invisible tribe across the country."

But practical considerations were even more important: the three theaters had roughly complementary schedules, despite areas of overlap. Since 2006, Great Lakes Theater had been operating on a fall-through-spring production calendar, while Idaho Shakespeare Festival performed from early summer into early fall. Lake Tahoe presented a seven-week summer season, from July through August. Skillful juggling was required of the two multi-tasking leaders. And they delivered.

"What a great team to have leading us," exclaimed Tom Stafford. Sam Hartwell chimed in, "They're a wonderful working pair; they both have great strategic vision. Unusual for an artistic director, Charlie believes that art and business have to support each other. Bob is an administrative genius at creating operating surpluses and capital funds." As Taylor summed it up, their success at working together was built of "mutual trust, mutual respect, and the ability

to let the other person lead in certain areas and be the follower in other areas. One of the things we've done is build a shared leadership culture that's healthy."

The collaborative working relationship of Fee and Taylor was mirrored elsewhere in the company. In 2013, Lisa Ortenzi and Kelly Schaffer Florian, who both majored in theater at Bowling Green State University, implemented a collaborative model for leading the education department. Ortenzi, with a background in acting and directing, took the lead on artistic matters, while Florian, with a background in stage management, stepped to the front on the administrative side. "Actor teachers go out in teams," reasoned Ortenzi. "We're each other's team. We can bounce ideas off each other."

The added responsibilities of Fee and Taylor had a domino effect on the rest of the staff. Reflected Taylor, "If I'm not here in Cleveland full-time, I look around and consider what the strategic needs are and who has the capacity to step up and take more responsibility—especially Todd Krispinsky and Stephanie Reed. My opportunity became opportunities for them as well." Both Krispinsky and Reed were core staff members who grew into new responsibilities during this timeframe.

Todd Krispinsky's Great Lakes Theater journey began with a six-week contract as a stage manager for one of the theater's Outreach Tours in 1998. Stints in the education department, coordinating student matinees and surround programming, and in the marketing department followed. "I had to learn on the job," Krispinsky deadpanned. Along the way, he became Director of Marketing at Lake Tahoe. Responsibilities for development as well as marketing and communications accrued, and staff reorganizations led to other titles—director of strategic advancement, director of institutional advancement, and managing director.

Stephanie Reed also learned by doing. She first served as a GLT production assistant in 2007, then worked for Playhouse Square for several years, earned a master's degree in Cultural Policy and Non-Profit Management from The City University London, and returned to Great Lakes Theater as a finance associate. "I know you've never done finance before," Bob Taylor acknowledged when they first met. "But do you want to give it a try? I'll teach you whatever you need to know." She came on board in 2013—just as Great Lakes Theater and Playhouse Square were co-producing *Guys and Dolls*, which required complicated bookkeeping. "Then six weeks later," she recalled, "everyone said, 'So long! We're going to Boise.'" It was baptism by fire. Reed has also had a series of titles, most recently as Director of Administration. In 2022, Reed joined the Lake Tahoe administration as Director of Finance.

The organizational culture that prioritized people like Krispinsky and Reed over job titles also encouraged an adaptive approach to opportunity within the entire company. As Reed reported, "Our company manager indicated, 'I'm burned out on production. I would be

interested in working on marketing.’ Our marketing manager at the time said, ‘I’m missing production.’ They swapped jobs. They were both high performing people in their jobs. We might have lost both of them. But with flexibility and trust, we were able to keep them and their institutional knowledge.”

Sara Bruner also benefited from the culture of raising others up. She had been a longtime member of the acting company at both Great Lakes Theater and Idaho Shakespeare Festival and was a fan-favorite for such performances as a birdlike Ariel in *The Tempest* (2007), a vigorous Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew* (2011), and an impertinent French maid in *The Imaginary Invalid* (2012). She had an opportunity to join the company of Oregon Shakespeare Festival, one of the meccas of Shakespeare production in the US. She had already directed touring productions in Idaho and taken a turn at the helm of *A Christmas Carol* in Cleveland before she left. She continued to seek directing opportunities during her six years in Oregon, earning a Princess Grace Fellowship in directing.

“I start learning about leadership in an intentional way,” Bruner explained. She returned to Cleveland and Boise as a guest director in 2019 and then stepped into the role of associate artistic director with both companies. “Administration was the final balancing piece,” she revealed. “I was always curious beyond the rehearsal room. I didn’t realize it myself. Charlie pointed it out to me. I may not have dared to say it out loud.” Summing up her trajectory, Bruner acknowledged, “I’ve had a career that very few people get to have. I’ve been a beneficiary of all this work. I’m so grateful for that.”

More broadly, Charlie Fee had built a company of actors who could work in flexible ways for as much of the year as suited—in Cleveland, Boise, and Tahoe. Some actors made Cleveland their home base, others centered themselves in Boise. Some returned year after year while others circled back after absences of several years. As trustee Tom Stafford noted, the resident company has been a source of enjoyment for loyal supporters who look forward to seeing what familiar performers will do with new roles.

For the production team, the strategic alliance of the three theaters presented more than a chance at professional development, it offered the possibility of year-round employment in theater. The logistics were hammered out over time, resulting in a single year-round contract for key production team members to work at all three theaters. The reconciliation for taxes and benefits was done by the three theaters on the back end. Production team members were eligible for full-time salaries, health insurance, and pension benefits for the first time. “We wanted to offer our theater technicians a more stable life,” pointed out Bob Taylor. “We had to figure out a business model that allowed us to do that.”

All of the administrative architecture had to serve the essential work of producing live theater in a cost-effective way. And it was working. Bob Taylor estimated that, as the strategic alliance matured, “the two larger theaters, GLT and ISF, have saved approximately \$250K-\$300K per season, depending on the number and size of the shared productions. The smaller theater, LTSF, has saved approximately \$100K-\$150K per season, depending on the same factors.”

The syncing of the performing calendars for the three theaters paved the way for a production rotation that gave each theater a chance to originate work. Circumstances on the ground sometimes disrupted the ideal plan. For instance, an adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, originated in Lake Tahoe, was presented in Boise during summer 2017, and was supposed to travel to Cleveland in the fall—until the Cleveland Play House announced that its upcoming season would include a different adaptation of the same title. When such hiccups occurred, Charlie Fee responded dexterously. As trustee Sam Hartwell has observed, one of Fee’s hallmarks is his “willingness to change. When there are obstacles, he says, ‘I’ll think of another way to do it.’”

The logistics of the three-way strategic alliance, as challenging as they could be, were easier to resolve than the task of finding repertory that met the needs of all three theaters. As Fee pointed out, “Lake Tahoe and Boise are the only theater ‘games’ in town. But Great Lakes Theater operates in a busy theater district with 12 performing spaces, where brightly lit marquees and glossy show posters compete for attention all the time. Playhouse Square itself has the highest subscription model in the US for Broadway shows.”

Great Lakes Theater had in *A Christmas Carol* a singular and enduring model for a show that produced an excess of revenue. When Gerald Freedman, GLT’s Artistic Director at the time, first crafted his original adaptation and direction for the Dickens tale in 1989, he specifically had in mind what is now called the Mimi Ohio Theatre in Playhouse Square. The Ohio Theatre’s traditional stage machinery, its ample 1000-seat house, and its opulent lobby all invited the sumptuous and festive spectacle that he shaped. The theater’s annual presentation of *A Christmas Carol* always hewed faithfully to Freedman’s original direction. The production was so site-and-holiday-specific that it never shifted to the Hanna Theatre, much less to the outdoor summer venues of the two cross-country partners.

Marketing for the show’s 25th anniversary production in 2013 included a lavishly illustrated, multi-page “behind the scenes” insert in *Cleveland Magazine*, and an uptick in community interest resulted. Gerald Freedman was feted during the show’s opening weekend. In return, he gifted Great Lakes Theater with the rights in perpetuity to his compelling and definitive adaptation.

The 30th anniversary presentation in 2018 included a reunion gathering that brought together people who had worked on the show in various capacities during its three decades. Targeted grant writing enabled the production crew to completely refresh costumes, set pieces, and lighting. With such updates as an LED star backdrop, the revitalized production yielded what Taylor called “an appreciation for its enduring value that maybe had gotten lost for a while.”

“The production’s surplus is a bulwark that every year returns money to help sustain the rest of the year,” Fee pointed out. “Because we knew what *A Christmas Carol* could do, we had to look for other kinds of shows that could do the same.” And any other such kind of show had to be built to travel.

Musical theater first entered Great Lakes Theater’s repertory in 1971 with the pioneering rock musical *Godspell*. In 1987, the Kulas Foundation supported the tandem “Classic Broadway” productions of George Abbott’s *Broadway* and *The Boys from Syracuse*. Productions of other musical theater classics, such as *Gypsy*, were also sprinkled throughout subsequent seasons.

Early on, Charlie Fee recognized that in Victoria Bussert Great Lakes Theater had an exceptionally skilled and passionate musical theater artist. After arriving in Cleveland as an intern for then-Artistic Director Gerald Freedman, Bussert had stayed in Cleveland and built the musical theater program at Baldwin Wallace University into a national powerhouse. Fee tapped Bussert to direct musical theater productions in more seasons than not. With no seat more than 13 rows away from the stage, the Hanna Theatre enabled audience members to experience the power and intensity of full-scale musicals in an intimate setting.

In 2012 and 2013, the theater made the decision to co-produce two musical theater titles with Playhouse Square as part of its Broadway Series. “The two co-productions with Playhouse Square were very strategic,” emphasized Taylor. With the marketing muscle of the Playhouse Square Broadway Series behind them, the two productions introduced Great Lakes Theater and the Hanna Theatre space to Playhouse Square’s much larger subscriber base of musical theater enthusiasts. The two co-productions—*Sondheim on Sondheim* (directed by Victoria Bussert) and *Guys and Dolls* (helmed by guest director Daniel Knechtges)—amplified Great Lakes Theater’s reach. In 2012, *Sondheim on Sondheim* attracted 25,345 audience members, a new Great Lakes Theater record for a single non-holiday production, while *Guys and Dolls* surpassed this record in 2013 by attracting 37,276 patrons.

Given the encouraging results of this experiment, GLT made musical theater a cornerstone, launching the annual Kulas Musical Theater Series during the 2014-2015 season in Cleveland and introducing large-scale musical theater fare to its two strategic alliance partners. Four of the shows produced in Cleveland with the support of the Kulas Foundation have entered the ranks of the top-six, best-attended shows in GLT’s 60+-year history. In 2014, the grand epic

sweep of *Les Misérables* enthralled audiences. A stirring performance at the barricades by the late Kyle Jean Baptiste, who was still a Baldwin Wallace student at the time, commanded attention. Bussert created fresh, heartfelt interpretations of *My Fair Lady* in 2016 and *The Music Man* in 2019. The infectious *Mamma Mia!* shot to the top of the theater's regular-season attendance list in fall 2018. "Musicals have become part of our brand," affirmed trustee Howard Epstein.

The success of those large-scale musical theater productions led to the idea of adding a small-cast musical as a sixth show to Great Lakes Theater's longstanding five-show season format. "They represented another small-cast genre that had the potential to be revenue positive against the hard costs of the show," reasoned Fee.

The timing of the idea to add a sixth show coincided with a new opportunity that the Cleveland Foundation was then offering—to provide matching dollars for creating an "Innovation Fund." The fund would provide a financial cushion for exploring new, untested ideas. Adding a small-cast show also allowed Lake Tahoe its first chance to become an equal producing partner in the three-theater consortium. The Nevada theatre initiated the first small-cast musical, *The Fantasticks*, in summer 2015. The production traveled next to Boise, finishing up its run in Spring 2016 in Cleveland.

Sighs of relief resounded from Tahoe to Boise to Cleveland when the box office for the first "sixth show" covered the production's expenses. Great Lakes Theater didn't have to dip into the Innovation Fund at all (and hasn't had to do so yet). "We learned a lot, and it was a model that we could build on," concluded Fee. With the help of such titles as *Forever Plaid*, attendance for the sixth show slot began to build, year by year.

Fee turned his attention to moving the needle for attendance at Shakespeare plays while challenging the company to create additional cost efficiencies. The spring 2017 production of *Hamlet* deployed Globe Theatre-style seating galleries onstage, at once engaging audiences and providing a "unit set" that could be re-used for several seasons. A production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* repurposed the *Mamma Mia!* set. Both shows required the quick entrances, exits, and hiding places needed for physical comedy.

Charlie Fee double cast the character of Hamlet in 2017, with a male and a female actor rotating in the iconic role. Sara Bruner offered a female Julius Caesar and had women playing the clowns in *The Tempest*. These intriguing casting decisions attracted interest. Bruner's production of *Julius Caesar* also employed the striking visual imagery of red ribbons to suggest blood, prompting critics to call on such adjectives as "riveting," "enthraling," and "astonishing."

The theater's repertory—and the repertories of its cross-country partners—remained rooted in Shakespeare, with one or two Shakespeare plays presented every season. "While we aren't

pursuing [founding Artistic Director] Arthur Lithgow's goal to do the whole canon, we haven't changed our mission," insisted trustee Tom Stafford, who paused before quipping, "But we have changed our way of doing things."

Great Lakes Theater placed more priority than ever on choosing Shakespeare titles that aligned with the curriculum of area schools or would appeal to student matinee audiences. As the theater approached and crossed over into its seventh decade, such Shakespeare stalwarts as *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Merry Wives of Windsor* received their 7th or even 8th productions over the course of the theater's long history. Attendance at student matinees often rivaled and sometimes surpassed attendance at public performances. Thoughtfully moderated post-show discussions and in-school residencies allowed students the chance to grapple with such relevant issues in Shakespeare's plays as teen suicide in *Romeo and Juliet* or the empowerment of women in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

While reaffirming its commitment to Shakespeare, the theater continued to look for another genre that might resonate. Such family adventure stories as *Treasure Island* were considered. But those tended to be large cast shows that seemed to demand spectacular production values. After much head scratching, Charlie Fee came to realize that "The thing we weren't doing is the most produced genre in the world. Why not try the most famous murder mystery ever done?" Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* had been playing continuously in London's West End since 1974, establishing itself as the world's longest-running theater production. However, confided Fee, "None of us had ever seen it or read it." For the theater's spring 2012 production, guest director Drew Barr created an aura of menace by setting the action within an abstract, claustrophobic box set, its back wall filled with vintage radios. The production sold out. Audiences loved it, and, as Fee exclaimed, "Everyone had a blast doing it."

Exploration of the mystery genre emphasized the importance of title in the Playhouse Square environment. Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* was scheduled for the next season, in spring 2013. As Fee observed, "It's actually a murder mystery as well." The Fee-directed production was, said the *Plain Dealer*, "sparkling and clever. [It's] a play that crackles with life." But ticket sales were not on the same level as those for *The Mousetrap*, or *Deathtrap* the following year.

The theater committed to a "mystery-thriller" slot. Just as happened with musical theater productions, large-or small-cast, attendance grew nearly every year for "mystery-thrillers," often directed by Charlie Fee. The spring 2016 production of *And Then There Were None*, an Agatha Christie adaptation, surpassed all previous murder mystery titles in attendance and had the second-highest paid attendance for any genre of production in the theater's history.

Over a several year period of experimentation, a reliable—but flexible—formula emerged. The typical GLT season now had six shows. A large-scale musical and a Shakespeare or other classic title typically originated in Boise every summer and opened the fall season in Cleveland. A *Christmas Carol* anchored Cleveland’s mid-season slot. Cleveland originated a mystery thriller and a second Shakespeare every spring; both shows then traveled to Boise for the summer. A Shakespeare production and one other show usually traveled to Lake Tahoe as well, but Tahoe could also originate a small-cast musical or other title as needed. All three theaters could generate work; all had ownership of the repertory. As Charlie Fee proclaimed, all three could say, “It will be OUR work.”

Of course, there were challenges. The private foundation world started shifting away from making operating grants, emphasizing special project grants instead. For instance, in 2016-2017, the Cleveland Foundation pivoted from its long-time focus on operating support and initiated a three-year “step down” process for ending unrestricted funding to local arts organizations. Cuyahoga Arts and Culture and the Ohio Arts Council still provided operating support but gaps in private funding had to be overcome. Great Lakes Theater had to be careful not to chase project money that would tempt the company away from its core mission. The theater was fortunate to be able to identify mission-based projects—like the Kulas Musical Theater series—that aligned with funding interests.

The theater’s commitment to providing educational programming for underserved school audiences received a boost as several key local foundations placed increasing priority on programming for the most underserved urban districts in our region, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and the Lorain City Schools. Foundation support enabled GLT to strengthen its outreach in these two districts by providing deeply subsidized student matinee tickets, customized school residencies, and other outreach programming.

A Christmas Carol was a staple of the Cleveland district’s middle school curriculum, and the theater created a new *Christmas Carol* residency to complement its longstanding annual Dickens-themed, literacy-based writing contest for CMSD students. To support a curriculum unit on tolerance in the Lorain City middle schools, GLT developed another new residency that paired *The Diary of Anne Frank* with Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. A request for anti-bullying programming for Lorain City elementary school students helped to catalyze the transformation of the theater’s traditional Outreach Tour—originally designed to complement mainstage productions—into a family-friendly, school-based performance program called Classics on Tour. A spirited adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s *The Jabberwocky* was the first Classics on Tour offering in spring 2017.

During the theater’s decade-long focus on sustainability, its central administrative task was to develop an effective, and conservative, budgeting process. Up-to-date record-keeping systems

were a necessary underpinning. Todd Krispinsky had been around long enough to remember when the theater's record-keeping consisted of scrawled numbers on scraps of paper; he made a continuous effort to develop and maintain structured databases for tracking attendance numbers, ticket sales, donors, and the like. "You need to have an institutional memory to know how far you've come and where you need to go," Krispinsky reasoned. Bob Taylor successfully championed a unified financial budget system for all three theaters.

For budgeting purposes, Taylor paired each GLT department head with a trustee committee chair. Department heads attended board meetings, and staff and trustees collaborated on the budget together. As Sam Hartwell observed, "The budgeting process for the company is really healthy, as good as I've seen in non-profits. It is important for us to be able to say, 'This is the budget that we developed together. This is OUR budget.'" An essential tactic, Bob Taylor explained, "was not to over-promise. We wanted a win at the end of each season. Whether we were \$500 or \$50,000 over goal, we were over goal. It's important to the life of the organization that we have wins."

At the end of the day, added Taylor, "We have to be good stewards of the community's investment in us. As non-profit organizations, there are benefits. There are no taxes, but there is also responsibility." With this kind of fiscal mindset, said Hartwell, "We made budget and had surpluses every year. That's remarkable for a non-profit." In fact, there were budget surpluses for 16 of 17 seasons in a row. The only miss occurred when an unforeseen external event resulted in an unexpected increase in operating costs. "But we worked through the process," stated Hartwell. "There was good communication about the issue and what we could do about it." As Tom Stafford noted, "We've gained support because we've always been so honest about where we are."

The laser-focus on sustainability paid off, creating stability but also fostering creativity and growth. The 2018-2019 season manifested what could be achieved. Each show was successful in its own right. Leading off in fall 2018, *Mamma Mia!* broke all previous regular-season attendance records. Reminiscent of *Godspell* many years earlier, audiences danced in the aisles, singing along to such anthems as "Dancing Queen." As Todd Krispinsky marveled, "It was a party!" Based on the title's anticipated popularity, a longer run was built into the schedule. As a result, extended runs would become an option for targeted shows in the future.

A production of *Pride and Prejudice*, the theater's first foray into presenting Jane Austen, benefited from the popularity of film adaptations of the English author's witty work. Agatha Christie's *Witness for The Prosecution*, produced in spring 2019, broke into the top five of the theater's highest attended and highest grossing productions. *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Sara Bruner, became a top seller for a Shakespeare comedy.

Perhaps the season's biggest surprise was the overwhelming success of *Million Dollar Quartet* in the "sixth show" slot. Imagining a studio session with Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis, the production featured four virtuosic, high-octane leads who acted, sang, and played musical instruments. Fingers blazing across the piano keys, leaping atop his piano, Gabe Aronson was a particular standout as Jerry Lee Lewis.

Numbers stood at an all-time high for educational programming as well. Attendance at student matinees--from a 20-county area in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York--topped 19,000. More than 15,000 students from schools in an 11-county area participated in school residencies. Classics on Tour notched an attendance of 8,000 at elementary schools and libraries that year, about triple the number who had been attending the former Outreach Tour at libraries and senior centers.

The 2019-2020 season also got off to a strong start in the fall with stellar productions of *The Music Man* and *Julius Caesar*. Following in early spring 2020 was *Sleuth*, a mesmerizing cat-and-mouse game, directed by Charlie Fee and enacted by longtime company favorites David Anthony Smith and Jeffrey C. Hawkins.

And then everything came to a screeching halt.

In March 2020, the country and the world became engulfed in a global pandemic. The life that everyone took for granted shut down. Before the infection was understood and vaccinations were developed, fear and uncertainty governed everyday life. Two urgent questions had no immediate answers. How did this frightening disease spread? Could it be controlled?

As everyone retreated anxiously into their own households, new ways of connecting had to be identified quickly. A video-based communication platform had already been developed but it wasn't widely known yet. Bill Caster remembered wondering, "What is this thing called Zoom?" He had just assumed the board presidency. No one realized it at the time, but, as Caster reported, "I would never preside over one in-person meeting, and the company would not present one live, in-person performance during my time as president."

As Stephanie Reed recalled, "Our staff has a family vibe. We met over Zoom. We did goofy stuff like staff jeopardy." Sometimes it seemed to her that the main task was reassuring each other: "We're still here." As COVID wore on during the first summer, reported Kelly Schaffer Florian, "We celebrated Christmas in July. We each had to get a gift to someone's house, and everyone opened them together on Zoom."

Since many of the theater's senior staff had multiple appointments in Cleveland, Boise, and Lake Tahoe, everyone was already used to some amount of "remote" working and communicating. GLT was uniquely positioned to adapt to the enforced work conditions of the

pandemic. But it was hard to imagine how a theater could survive without presenting in-person programming.

In the first few bewildering months of the pandemic, education department staff members used cell phone cameras to record short scenes from residency units, which they shared on the theater's social media networks and website. As the pandemic wore on, improvising soon gave way to detailed planning. First-time funding was obtained from the National Endowment for the Humanities for creating video-based alternatives to the theater's school residency program. During summer 2020, the staff developed, produced, and packaged video modules for use by students and teachers during the upcoming school year. As Todd Krispinsky reflected, "We had to quickly turn into a video production company."

The pivot to video had to be accomplished without adding new staff and while working within strict budget constraints. Some staff members were able to dust off previous video production experience. And almost everyone on staff had been a theater major with some acting experience. As Lisa Ortenzi recalled, "We had lofty goals, and we had ideas. Then we had to figure out how to do it." They all became experts at sharing ideas on Zoom and collaborating on scripts and resource guides via Dropbox or Google Drive. They only met in small groups to film, often outdoors, with scene partners observing the required six feet of "social distancing."

Two formats were developed for video-based delivery of educational programming. Eight of the program's basic curriculum units were adapted for live presentation on Zoom. Video modules were also recorded, approximating the experience of a two-day residency for *A Christmas Carol* and a five-day residency for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Both modules included interactive "You're the Director" segments that permitted students to view several pre-recorded performances presenting different approaches to the same scene. In other segments, karaoke-style subtitles allowed students to perform scenes "with" actor-teachers. In addition, a two-episode podcast series was developed to approximate the experience of a two-day residency focusing on *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Since most students were learning at home that year, the video modules came with Student Activity Guides. Students needed direct access to material that was normally only provided to teachers—such as background information, discussion questions, and suggested activities. Teachers received the traditional Teacher Resource Guides along with the new Student Activity Guides and links to the video modules, which were also posted on the theater's website on a new page dubbed "Artist in (your) Residence." A great deal of work had to be accomplished in a short amount of time. As Florian summed up those busy days: "We were as creative as possible and used all the resources we had. Everybody got involved. We kept our sanity. We had creative outlets daily."

“It was hardest on the artists,” Charlie Fee pointed out. The theater had enough resources to guarantee continued employment for full-time staff, including the ten full-time members of its production team, but not for the actors. In the earliest days of the pandemic, several longtime members of the theater’s acting company nonetheless videotaped themselves reciting monologues that offered messages of hope and solidarity. Their video messages were posted on another new page of the theater’s website called “Great Lakes Theater @ home.”

Several video-based cabaret projects gave the performers some work, and kept the theater connected with its patrons. “Ghost Light Cabaret,” presented on October 24, 2020, featured 14 Great Lakes Theater artists performing Broadway showstoppers. “The Snow Must Go On,” a holiday cabaret presented on December 20, 2020, featured seven Great Lakes Theater artists performing songs and sharing stories of “comfort and joy.” The “Offstage Bash Cabaret,” presented on June 5, 2021, spotlighted another seven musical theater artists. All three video-based events, streamed live via the theater’s YouTube channel, included a live post-show-Zoom conversation between artists and audiences.

Spaced throughout the year, three multi-media “behind the scene” interview series appeared on the “Great Lakes Theater @ home” webpage and were delivered to patrons via email. In December 2020, GLT kept its holiday traditions alive with a radio production of *A Christmas Carol*—broadcast on Cleveland’s public radio station—and a family-friendly *Christmas Carol* storytelling event on Zoom.

The company was able to keep pace with the constant need for adaptation because the theater’s leadership made a strong commitment to the staff from the outset. As Stephanie Reed observed, “The people-centric aspect of our culture made the pandemic easier on us. Charlie, Bob, and the board made clear they were going to do what they could to keep us in place.”

In one way the situation was totally unprecedented and unexpected, but in another way the entire theater company had been preparing for something like this all along. The theater had already developed “the habits needed to overcome crisis and adversity,” observed Todd Krispinsky. “The pandemic required the same ‘all hands-on-deck’ effort that had brought us through the lean years of the early 2000s and the pressures of the Hanna campaign. Once again, everyone was working on all kinds of aspects of the operations. We had developed an institutional culture that was able to rise to the occasion.”

The habits of conservative budgeting were well-established, and three reserve funds provided a financial safety net. The theater had invested a \$700,000 surplus from the Hanna campaign into its first-ever endowment fund in 2010. By 2023, thanks to many generous friends, the fund had grown to nearly \$3 million—even though the theater never mounted a dedicated

endowment campaign. Also offering a cushion were a Working Capital Fund to cover cash flow and the Innovation Fund launched in 2014 with the support of the Cleveland Foundation. As it happened, the theater didn't have to tap into any of its reserve funds during the pandemic. But it was a relief to know that the money was there if needed.

More important to the company's survival during those strange times was, Sam Hartwell claimed, "the reservoir of trust and communication" that had already been built up—from board to board in the three-theater strategic alliance, from board to staff members at all three theaters, from staff to artists and production crew, from Great Lakes Theater to Playhouse Square. As Bob Taylor summed it up, "We had developed understanding, trust, and friendship. We already knew how to work together."

So many twists and turns took place over what would turn out to be a three-year period. Budgets were made, and shows and even seasons were announced, only to be cancelled again—and again. Even when the GLT re-opening officially launched in fall 2021, a new strain of the virus forced the cancellation of yet another show in early spring 2022. Great Lakes Theater made it a priority, reported Kim Bixenstine, "to be generous to artists when shows were canceled. We paid them for four weeks of their time."

Despite all the "false starts," the theater's loyal supporters were patient, understanding, and giving. As Todd Krispinsky recalled, "One of the things I'll most remember of that time was the generosity of the audience." Under normal circumstances, theater ticket sales had always been non-refundable. But these weren't normal circumstances.

As the cancellations mounted, GLT offered refunds. The organization nonetheless hoped that audience members would apply ticket purchases to future productions or donate the ticket price entirely. Some tickets had been purchased directly from Great Lakes Theater; others had been purchased through the Playhouse Square box office or online ticketing service. The two organizations had to work closely to resolve audience requests, no matter how complicated the bookkeeping became. At the same time that the GLT staff was reorganizing as a video production company, observed Krispinsky, "we also had to become a full-on patron services operation."

The first time that an appeal went out to ticket holders for canceled performances, 76% of the theater's loyal supporters agreed to exchange or donate their tickets. GLT's marketing and development staff had to offer ticket resolutions five times in all—when spring 2020 productions were canceled, when fall 2020 productions were cancelled, when *A Christmas Carol* 2020 was cancelled, when the spring 2021 productions were cancelled, and when *Ain't Misbehavin'* was cancelled in spring 2022. Supporters continued to respond open-heartedly.

Even though operating costs fell when the stages were dark, other sources of revenue were desperately needed to keep the full-time staff in place. Grant writing took on a new urgency. The federal government stepped up in a way it never had before in support of the arts. Although GLT's programming had not previously fit within the parameters for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the NEH expanded its scope for emergency funding in a way that accommodated the theater's proposal to support video production. The state and county committed emergency funding as well. Many of the theater's longtime foundation partners also extended a hand. For instance, the Gund Foundation made an increased two-year funding commitment, while The Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Foundation doubled its annual operating support during two consecutive seasons.

As Todd Krispinsky recounted, the theater established a prudent framework for managing the funds: "We developed a multi-year financial strategy that leveraged federal, state, and county funding. We received \$3M in public funding. We only used about \$2M before we re-opened and had \$1.2M left to help us through the next few years, knowing that it might take 4 to 5 years to fully rebuild our audiences to pre-pandemic levels."

As special funding was secured, the pandemic offered space for reflection on the part of both individuals and the company as a whole. On an individual level, for instance, Sara Bruner took the time to go back to school online to get an executive MBA degree. "I needed to sharpen some skills," she explained. "I wanted the tools—spreadsheets, budgets, forecasts—to figure out sustainability." Acknowledging the mentorship of both Charlie Fee and Bob Taylor, she added, "I was intentionally trying to absorb what leadership looks like."

The staff structure was reorganized to reflect responsibilities taken "on the ground." Director positions were created for Stephanie Reed in Administration and Kacey Shapiro in Marketing and Communications. Todd Krispinsky, named Managing Director, was tasked with spearheading the theater's strategic planning process.

And against all odds, the planning process advanced. "The pandemic gave us the opportunity to step back, to revisit our mission and vision," reflected Bill Caster. "The staff was able to think about it a bit more because ticket-selling and rehearsals weren't going on."

Succession planning was an important item on the agenda. "The Strategic Alliance Board Task Force began talking about succession planning ten years ago," revealed Sam Hartwell. Before the pandemic, Bob Taylor and Charlie Fee had agreed on a sequence of retirements, with Bob Taylor going first. Taylor was going to announce his retirement at the end of the 2019-2020 season. He delayed the decision because of COVID, but his inevitable departure loomed.

However, Fee and Taylor never let future uncertainties distract from the clarity of their leadership during this time. "I give tremendous credit to our leaders Charlie Fee and Bob Taylor

for their stewardship during the pandemic,” asserted Kim Bixenstine. “Our financial statements show that we weathered it better than many arts organizations. They made shrewd decisions with the support of the Board’s Executive Committee.”

All signs began to point to the feasibility of reopening in fall 2021. Various entities had to sign off and agree to protocols, including the Governor’s office, the performing unions, and Playhouse Square. The unions were in an unenviable position, admitted Fee. “They had to focus on both health and employment. And sometimes the two were in conflict.” GLT decided not to begin the season with a large-cast musical. Singing had been deemed a riskier pathway than speaking for transmitting the virus, and a musical would expose too many people, including musicians and crew.

Testing protocols for cast and crew members were formulated. Health and safety teams were designated for each cast, to oversee the rigorous testing regimen that was implemented. Understudy rehearsal became a much more significant, and costly, aspect of the rehearsal process than ever before. In close consultation with Playhouse Square, masking and vaccination policies were put in place for audiences. Younger students would not be able to participate in educational programming during fall 2021; they would not be vaccinated yet.

GLT decided that it was important for the first show to be a Shakespeare production. *The Tempest* was announced. Thought to be Shakespeare’s last complete play, the show celebrated the power of theater magic to summon up a “brave new world.” Directed by Sara Bruner, the show opened in a highly theatrical and ethereal way—as billowing blue-green parachute material evoked a storm-tossed sea. Krispinsky recalled feeling “nervous but exhilarated. There was a palpable sense of relief and excitement!”

GLT was able to present *A Christmas Carol* in December 2021, without canceling a single performance, when many other holiday shows across the city were shuttered. *Much Ado About Nothing*, which was about to open in Cleveland in spring 2020, when COVID first hit, was finally presented in spring 2022. *Ain’t Misbehavin’*—which was also initially postponed in spring 2020—had to be postponed again in early spring 2022 when the omicron variant of the virus caused infections to surge once more. The show, a buoyant celebration of jazz musician Fats Waller, would not enliven the Hanna Theatre stage until spring 2023.

The strength of the theater’s understudy “bench” was stress-tested when members of the four-person cast for Alfred Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps* tested positive during the show’s run in the late spring of 2022. Directed by choreographer Jaclyn Miller, the production was a zany and intricate dance of props, costumes, and action as four virtuosic comedic performers impersonated at least 150 characters—some for mere seconds of stage time. Great Lakes Theater was able to ensure that the show would go on.

Jaclyn Miller was another artist “raised up” from within the company, joining the staff as an artistic associate during the pandemic and subsequently serving as interim Production Manager. Miller and Sara Bruner would go on to co-direct another highly choreographed comedic production—of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*—in spring 2023. “There’s a special physicality and energy to her work,” declared Kim Bixenstine. “She’s a great addition to our artistic company.”

The pandemic did not dislodge any of the theater’s essential priorities. The company was still striving to field the same kind of repertory and season structure, maintain a balance among three independent theater companies, and cultivate “home grown” talent.

The theater’s educational programming bounced back more quickly in terms of attendance. Even though schools had accepted video-based programming during the pandemic, Kelly Schaffer Florian spelled out their attitude as follows: “We would like to support you. We want to make sure that you’re still here when this is over. We value you. But we want to return to live programming as soon as possible.” Speaking for herself and the teachers, Florian added, “There were tears of joy when we came back to our first matinee.”

The initial ramp-up for school programming was a bit delayed in fall 2021 because vaccinations for students were slow in rolling out. The theater accordingly reduced the number of student matinees presented and only hired two teams of actor-teachers to deliver the school residency program that fall. The residency program’s administrators, who were all actor-teacher alumni themselves, formed a third team when needed. By spring semester, demand had picked up enough that a third residency team could be added full-time.

A long-overdue pay increase for the actor-teacher teams for the school residency program resulted in a modest price increase for a weeklong residency in fall 2022. But the increase did not dampen enthusiasm for the program. The roster for the 2022-2023 school year had the full complement of four teams of actor-teachers, and the number of students served that year—14,647—nearly reached pre-pandemic numbers. Based on requests from school districts, the education department developed a new residency focusing on August Wilson’s *Fences*.

The residual effects of the pandemic continue to impact the company. Attendance at mainstage shows is climbing toward pre-pandemic levels. Perseverance has become the new watchword. “2018-2019 was a banner year,” observed Tom Stafford. “Not every year is.” Cell phones and streaming video are ever more ubiquitous, at the same time that theater critics have lost status and centrality as arbiters of taste. The landscape for popular entertainment was already changing before COVID enforced a break in the live theater habit.

COVID did not, however, prevent GLT from pursuing its long-term goal of diversifying the theater’s board, staff, and acting company. Promoting diversity, equity and inclusion has been

the life's work of current GLT Board President Kim Bixenstine--since she oversaw "minority outreach" in the 1990s for Jones Day law firm and for the Cleveland Bar Association, as well as through her work as the chief compliance officer at University Hospitals and as an independent management consultant. At Great Lakes Theater, she helped to make sure that all staff and board members participated in DEI training throughout the pandemic. "We did it together," she said, with pride. And the diversity of the board, the staff, and the acting company has steadily improved.

GLT continues to look for ways to flourish within the multitude of theater options in Cleveland. In addition to the presenting juggernaut that is Playhouse Square, GLT performs alongside the Cleveland Play House as well. As Fee pointed out, "The number of cities in the US with two professional "League of Resident Theaters" is miniscule." Playhouse Square is also home to the theater programs of Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland State University—both of which frequently present titles that are indistinguishable to the public from GLT's repertory. The effort to meet the branding challenges of performing in Playhouse Square is ongoing.

And yet, Great Lakes Theater is in better shape than many theaters around the country that have had to close their doors or take a lengthy pause. Sara Bruner reported curiosity about GLT's multi-partner production model among many of her peers in artistic administration around the country.

As the theater emerged from the COVID shutdowns, the topic of Bob Taylor's impending retirement from Great Lakes Theater, as well as from the Idaho and Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festivals, came to the fore again. Members of the Cleveland and Lake Tahoe Boards met, said Howard Epstein, "to hammer out shared values, to agree on the kind of individual that we were both looking for in an executive director." Stephanie Reed, a staff representative on the search committee, reported, "All these trustees are deeply invested—to a degree that I hadn't completely known before. They approached the task with so much thought and real interest." Although Taylor officially retired at the end of summer 2023, he agreed to stay on in a consulting role while the search process continued to unfold.

All involved in the theater's leadership have conveyed the sense that it's not up to one leader to ensure that Great Lakes Theater thrives. It never has been and never will be. Commitment to sustainability was needed this past decade from board members, staff, artists, production crew, foundations, theater partners, audiences, and community members. And commitments from all those stakeholders are still needed.

"Nothing lasts forever," shrugged Charlie Fee. "If we need it to change again, we can do it very quickly. We are very nimble. It's always only about trust. You have to be willing to take risks.

You have to be willing to change. All we've done these last two decades is to take the company through change, trying each time to build a more sustainable model."

The theater's Board leaders have continued to voice their staunch commitment. "It's still a challenging time, but I feel optimistic," said current Board President Kim Bixenstine. Tom Stafford acknowledged, "We've had a lot of ups and downs, but in the end it's quite a story. I don't want to leave this team; we have the best team going!" "I love this organization," echoed Sam Hartwell. "It's been a joy to be associated with the company from the moment we rose up from the ashes to where we are today." Speaking for all, Bill Caster exclaimed, "I'm excited for what the future brings!"

The camaraderie that the company has built has been a big part of its "secret sauce." As Kelly Schaffer Florian pointed out, "People working 10, 15, 20+ years in the same place – that doesn't happen everywhere. Where you spend a huge part of your day and who you spend it with, if you enjoy who you are working with – it's as important as what you're doing." Added Stephanie Reed, "We are a team. We are a well-oiled machine. It's up to all of us to retain what makes us US." Over the course of Great Lakes Theater's history, noted Todd Krispinsky, "Challenging moments have given way to extraordinary next chapters. What will the next chapter bring?"