

40 years, 3 stages, 1 community: A brief look at the history of Circuit Playhouse, Inc.

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2009 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

Time: Now

Place: Memphis

Ask any person what they know about Memphis and you're sure to get one word: music. Memphis is known worldwide for artists such as Elvis Presley, Booker T. & the MG's and Otis Redding. Historical landmarks like the Stax Museum and Sun Studios convey the influences of jazz, rhythm and blues, gospel, and soul music styles. But music is not the only artistic area Memphis excels in.

The city has an equally rich theatre history dating back to the late 1800s when ferries carrying touring opera companies traveled down the Mississippi River, stopping in Memphis on their way south¹. The river gave the city access to the arts and Memphians didn't say no. However, this rich history of the theatre arts isn't easily available to the general public. Avid theatergoers are aware of how thriving theatre is in Memphis, but the average person on the street is probably oblivious. But why?

Music and theatre are both confined, unlike the visual arts, to time and place. Art exhibits such as those at the Brooks Museum, Dixon, and Pink Palace have been there for years and continue to be displayed in the same spots for viewers to enjoy time and again. Traveling exhibits frequent the museums, but even these stay for months at a time. Music can be performed live and in that respect is confined by a certain time and place. However, it can also be recorded and sold on CDs and tapes or bought electronically through programs such as iTunes. In this

¹ Morrell, Alison. *The Life of Memphis Opera Houses: 1808-1910*. 2009 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

respect, like art, it defies time and place and, with the ability to be played over and over again for the pleasure of whoever whenever.

However, unlike visual art and music, theatre – *live* theatre – only exists at a certain time in a certain place. Each audience is different and each performance is unique. “When you can hear the audience response and you can see the performers feeding off of that, it’s just an electric current that happens that night and the next night it’ll be different. You know, that’s what is so great about live theatre – it happens then it’s gone.”² These time constraints limit the public’s knowledge of theatre, for only if you are there do you gain the experience. One could argue film provides theatre freedom from time and place. However, film is not live theatre and does not offer the same feeling of being in the space with the performers; it does not offer the possibility, given a willing audience, for the creation of a bond between performers and audience.

Just as live performance is constrained by time and place, theatres themselves exist in a world defined by such constraints. Theatre in Memphis has experienced several eras defined by the rises, and sometimes falls, of prominent playhouses and theatrical venues. Each era has left a unique mark on the theatre community and has affected the history of theatre in this city. The late 1800s and early 1900s saw the rise of opera houses like the Grand Opera House and Lyceum Theatre, which served as venues for traveling shows³. Beginning in the 1920s, Memphis Little Theatre (now known as Theatre Memphis) and the Ellis Auditorium were the main attractions for theatrical performance. In the 1950s, Front Street Theatre was established and offered a new,

² Bill Short is the Coordinator of Public Services at the Rhodes College Paul Barret, Jr. Library. He attended Rhodes College as a student and has participated in Memphis area theatre for the past 40 years. He has designed scenery for both Circuit Playhouse and Playhouse on the Square, as well as other local theatres. He is an invaluable source of knowledge for Memphis theatre history. Personal interview. 7 July 2009.

³ Morrell, Alison. *The Life of Memphis Opera Houses: 1808-1910*. 2009 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

edgier form of theatre. While both Ellis Auditorium and Front Street no longer exist today, Theatre Memphis still continues to provide Memphis with live theatre throughout the year.

However, some of the most successful theatres in Memphis history have been Circuit Playhouse and Playhouse on the Square, both part of Circuit Playhouse, Inc. The company began in 1969 with a small group of high school students and has continued for 40 years, persevering through many financial challenges. Despite its challenges, Circuit Playhouse, Inc. has grown and expanded and now includes both Circuit Playhouse and Playhouse on the Square; TheatreWorks, a space housing six different performance groups; and the Jeanne and Henry Varnell Theatre Arts Education Building. This coming season, 2009-2010, marks the company's 40th anniversary and is a prime time to look back at the successes, failures, and memories made during the past 40 years.

This paper began in the hope of capturing the company's history through personal interviews with prominent individuals within the company as well as within the Memphis theatre community at large. Historical information not provided through interviews was supplied by the 20th⁴ and 30th⁵ anniversary booklets published by Circuit Playhouse, Inc. What has resulted is an inside look at what spurred the creation of Circuit Playhouse, Inc., the journey it has traveled since 1969, and the hopes for the future.

In order to illustrate the impact of Circuit Playhouse, Inc., a brief history of Memphis theatre prior to the company's creation has been included. The history focuses on Memphis Little Theatre and Front Street because they, like Circuit Playhouse, Inc., are or were producing companies. Ellis Auditorium, a non-producing venue, is also included because of its direct

⁴ Circuit Playhouse, Inc. *Circuit Playhouse, Playhouse on the Square: 20th Anniversary Season*. Memphis: Towery Publishing, 1989.

⁵ Circuit Playhouse, Inc. *Circuit Playhouse, Playhouse on the Square: 30th Anniversary Season*. Memphis: Towery Publishing, 1999.

involvement with the initial exposure of Memphis to the arts and its connection to the other venues.

ELLIS AUDITORIUM

Time: 1924

Place: 255 N. Main Street

Ellis Auditorium was established in 1924. The building, originally called the Memphis and Shelby County Auditorium, served not only as a space for artistic performances such as operas, but was also used for exhibitions, pageants, conventions, and other large productions.⁶ It contained seating for 12,000 and was expected to make Memphis the South's recognized convention city.⁷ Although the Auditorium was built to be used as a large convention center, one of its purposes was to bring a greater sense of culture to Memphis and entertain audiences with finer theatre and live performance.

A 1924 article in the *Press-Scimitar* (a once operational but now defunct newspaper in Memphis) described the theatre audience of Memphis at the time the auditorium was built, saying:

The people of Memphis and Shelby County have always been partial to art and drama. There was a time in the years gone by that the biggest theatrical attractions came to this city and they never failed of liberal patronage. Judging the future by our past, our people are correspondingly appreciative as we have grown in population and influence. We are reaching out for the larger and better things of life. It is within the bounds of actuality as well as desire to have come to us the best talent of the theatre and drama.⁸

In 1930, the auditorium was renamed in honor of Robert A. Ellis. Ellis was heavily involved with the civic and commercial progress of Memphis and was responsible for the

⁶ "Memphis Municipal Auditorium Formally Dedicated October 17th." *Memphis Chamber of Commerce Journal*. Nov. 1924.

⁷ "Memphis' Completed Auditorium Should Make It The South's Recognized Convention City." *Memphis Chamber of Commerce Journal*. Aug. 1924.

⁸ "The Auditorium." *Press-Scimitar*. 11 June 1924.

building of the Memphis and Shelby County Auditorium.⁹ The following year was “particularly bright” and saw the performances of Eugene O’Neill’s play, *Strange Interlude*, and George White’s musical comedy *Flying High*, with audience members from as far as Tulsa, Oklahoma.¹⁰ Ellis Auditorium was a performance venue for not only the Memphis area, but for surrounding states. The auditorium helped bring business to Memphis and put it on the map as a city with exceptional theatrical performances.

To keep up with its popularity, Ellis Auditorium was remodeled in the 1950s and reopened to the public in 1958, with renovations including new exhibit halls and air conditioning.¹¹ Ellis Auditorium continued to be a center of theatre and entertainment well into the 1990s. However, in 2003, Ellis Auditorium was torn down and replaced with the Canon Center for Performing Arts.¹²

Ellis Auditorium provided a space for the performance of all kinds of entertainment including opera, musicals, and theatre. The Auditorium accommodated thousands and because it was a large space it attracted mostly grander performances. The Canon Center today serves a similar purpose, hosting concerts, operas, and touring theatrical productions. Both Ellis Auditorium in the past and the Canon Center now lack the intimacy of space found at smaller venues, and it was these venues, such as the Memphis Little Theatre, where Memphians went to experience locally produced shows in an intimate setting.

MEMPHIS LITTLE THEATRE

Time: 1921

Place: 680 Adams Street

⁹ “Auditorium is Named for Robert A. Ellis.” *Commercial Appeal*. 13 June 1930.

¹⁰ “Auditorium is Becoming Vital Factor in Civic Life.” *Commercial Appeal*. 31 Dec 1930.

¹¹ Wells, Reese. “Exposition of Progress for Remodeled Auditorium to Show Off New Facilities.” *Commercial Appeal*. 20 July 1958.

¹² “History.” The Canon Center for the Performing Arts. 29 June 2009.
<<http://www.thecannoncenter.com/facility4.php>>

The curtain rose for the first time for the Memphis Little Theatre in 1921 and continues to rise today. Although the name has changed to Theatre Memphis, the theatre continues to offer exceptional performances for the Memphis area. The Little Theatre was first located in the Fontaine home at 680 Adams in the stable, inspiring the name Stable Playhouse.¹³ It was established at a time when professional theatres were declining and local amateur artists began offering community theatre to those who wanted an entertaining evening out. The Little Theatre Movement, which struck the nation, was “designed to perpetuate the spoken drama, to provide a medium of expression for those dramatically inclined and to encourage embryonic actors and actresses seeking a foundation for professional careers.”¹⁴ Memphis Little Theatre was an integral part of this community-focused movement, offering high quality theatre to the city, by Memphians for Memphians. From the beginning, the Little Theatre was recognized for its talent, participating in the National Little Theatre Tournament with 16 other theatres spanning from Oklahoma to England.¹⁵

Time: 1929

Place: 3050 Central Avenue

The Stable Playhouse became too small for the growing theatre, and in 1929 Memphis Little Theatre moved to the basement of the Pink Palace where a new proscenium stage offered more space than in the Stable Playhouse, as well as more lighting options.¹⁶ The theatre was located specifically in the swimming pool, which provided a convenient built-in slope for raked audience seating. Although Memphis Little Theatre was a community theatre, in the 1930s it was criticized for performing shows for a select audience of “high-brow” theatergoers who “loved art

¹³ Theatre Memphis. *Theatre Memphis: Its history and aspirations*. 1979.

¹⁴ Carley, Jack. “The Little Theatre Has Achieved Permanent Place In Community.” *Commercial Appeal*. 23 Apr. 1934.

¹⁵ “16 Little Theatres Enter Tournament.” *NY Times*. 22 1927.

¹⁶ Ottinger, John C. Jr. “From Stable to Palace: Here’s Palace.” *Evening Appeal*. 22 Mar. 1929.

for art's sake"¹⁷ and for holding "its chin so high that the average, everyday, run-of-the-mill theatergoer passed it by."¹⁸ To make the theatre more accessible to a wider audience, Memphis Little Theatre broadened the scope of plays and playwrights featured and instituted a new policy with the goal of making "Memphis Little Theatre more of a community affair than it had ever been, to arouse more public interest in the players."¹⁹ In 1932, after a drop in membership and financial struggles, a new director was brought in to help rehabilitate Memphis Little Theatre. Eugart Yerian from California was the director at the Pasadena Community Playhouse and was "considered one of the most capable directors in the national Little Theatre movement."²⁰ Under his direction and after a little over a decade, Memphis Little Theatre grew from an "acorn" and "developed into a mighty oak in such short time that national critics and writers are taking a refreshing pause and attempting to discover how it happened."²¹

The theatre had established a prominent place in the community as well as the nation. In the June 1937 issue of the leading theatre magazine *Stage*, Memphis Little Theatre was cited as one of six "west of Broadway" playhouses chosen for outstanding national distinction.²² Yerian left in 1939 and was followed by Talbot Pearson, also from California, who shepherded Memphis Little Theatre into the next era of theatre. Radio and cinema began to challenge live performance but the stage kept up and was more alive than ever.²³ Over the next 15 years, Memphis Little Theatre thrived, despite financial struggles and threatened evictions, and

¹⁷ "New Policy for Little Theatre Calls for Pageant and Opera." *Commercial Appeal*. 24 Sept. 1930.

¹⁸ Bell, Laurence. "Little Theatre No Longer Shrine of 'Highbrow' Art." *Commercial Appeal*. 28 Sept. 1930.

¹⁹ "New Policy for Little Theatre Calls for Pageant and Opera." *Commercial Appeal*. 24 Sept. 1930.

²⁰ Carley, Jack. "The Little Theatre Has Achieved Permanent Place In Community." *Commercial Appeal*. 23 Apr. 1934.

²¹ Howard, Hazel Eumunds. "Little Theatre Here Grew from 'Acorn' to 'Oak'." *Commercial Appeal*. 22 Sept. 1935.

²² "Little Theatre Rated Near Top," *Press-Scimitar*. 7 June 1937.

²³ Amis, Everett. "Little Theatre Director Sees New Trend in American Stage," *Commercial Appeal*. 15 Aug. 1939.

continued to produce exceptional theatre, winning countless national community theatre competitions. By 1954:

the production of professional caliber plays has become a tradition of the Memphis Little Theatre. It's a tradition that has had artistic value for Memphis difficult to measure. Certainly, Memphis would have been many plays the poorer had it not been for the Little Theatre. The productions of other amateur groups and the occasional Broadway shows at the Auditorium [Ellis] have been great factors in keeping alive the dramatic arts in Memphis. But the Little Theatre must receive credit as the main source of stage fare for Memphis. Each year, more than 15,000 people present their play tickets and file into the Little Theatre auditorium at the Pink Palace. Beyond its value for the general public, it has served as a pleasant hobby and esthetic stimulant for many hundreds of Memphians who have taken part in producing the Little Theatre plays.²⁴

In 1962, Sherwood Lohrey was hired as a fulltime director. Under his direction, Memphis Little Theatre blossomed, its membership swelling from a few hundred to 6,000.²⁵ Memphis Little Theatre was considered community theatre at its finest, involving Memphians in every aspect of a production, both on stage and back stage. Even ushers were community members, often students from local high schools or Girl Scout troops²⁶.

Memphis Little Theatre also offered its stage in the Pink Palace to other groups, such as Circuit Players, a group of high school kids who performed in churches and community centers for the pure joy of performing and bringing something new to the community. In 1965, the Circuit Players performed *Babes in Arms*, a show about young adults who put on a show while their parents travel the vaudeville circuit, in Memphis Little Theatre.²⁷ Fate would have that this small group of young adults putting on their own shows would grow into Circuit Playhouse, Inc., with Memphis Little Theatre supporting that growth.

Time: 1973

Place: 630 Perkins Extended

²⁴ Cook, James. "Big Plays in a Little Theatre." *The Commercial Appeal*. 26 Sept. 1954.

²⁵ Theatre Memphis. *Theatre Memphis: Its history and aspirations*. 1979.

²⁶ Jennings, Robert. "Record Backs Theatre's Status." *Commercial Appeal*. 10 July 1966.

²⁷ "*Babes in Arms* Ready to Sing Favorite Songs." *Commercial Appeal*. 1 Aug. 1965.

Memphis Little Theatre's success begged a new building, and plans began in 1973 to construct an actual theatre building, with proper fly lofts and wing space, necessities the theatre lacked in the Pink Palace swimming pool. In spite of disputes with the local community about the new theatre's location²⁸, the building site was selected and the new theatre at Audubon Park opened in 1975. Not only was the location new, the name also changed. It was felt by the Memphis Little Theatre's committee on name change that:

Particularly with its move into new quarters, the organization has far transcended its original purpose and function as an invitational group of amateurs banded together through a common interest in theatrical activities. Now that as wide a base of community support as possible is being sought, both in the sense of financing and through participation in the theatre's activities, a name more compatible with the organization's present-day status and function seems appropriate... The words 'Memphis' and 'Little' in the present name constitute, in the committee's opinion, words of limitation. The first indicates that participation in the theatre's activities, including audience participation and financial support, is limited to those living within the city limits. In the committee's opinion, a name should be adopted which reflects the theatre's regional function.²⁹

The new building and new name, Theatre Memphis, allowed the theatre to expand and present even grander productions to its audiences. It continues as one of the largest community theatres in the nation as well as one of the oldest continuing play-producing organizations in the country. The complex includes the main stage as well as The Little Theatre, now named the Next Stage, which offers a more intimate experience.

Theatre Memphis is and has been known for producing family friendly shows for audiences of all ages. This not only pleases the masses but also ensures a constant flow of income to keep the theatre alive and well. However, theatre can be much more than pure entertainment. Theatre can also challenge the audience to question their beliefs and ideals. It can bring to the stage taboo issues in society that are so often ignored or suppressed. While such controversial theatre does not always guarantee a full house, it can provide a thought provoking

²⁸ "Homeowners are Against Theatre." *Press-Scimitar*. 18 May 1968.

²⁹ Howard, Edwin. "What's in a Name? Ask Little Theatre." *Press-Scimitar*. 23 Sept. 1974.

and eye opening experience for those who choose to see it. While Memphis Little Theatre was the place to go for family friendly “safe theatre,” Front Street Theatre offered a deeper experience for the Memphis community.

FRONT STREET THEATRE

Time: 1957

Place: corner of Jefferson and Front Streets

Established by George Touliatos in 1957, Front Street Theatre’s history spans just over a decade. Yet during that time, the theatre brought over 104 major theatrical productions and 35 to 40 experimental, children’s, and youth theatre productions to Memphis audiences.³⁰ Front Street Theatre was preceded by Touliatos’s troupe of actors called Theatre 12, who, like the performers of the early Memphis Little Theatre, performed in a swimming pool. From 1954-1956, Theatre 12 staged shows in the basement of the King Cotton Hotel. In 1956, Touliatos left Memphis to gain a MFA at the University of Iowa, and upon his return in 1957, created Front Street Theatre. The company was still located in the King Cotton Hotel, but had moved from the basement to the ballroom.³¹

Time: 1959

Place: 1819 Madison Avenue

In 1959, Front Street Theatre moved³² from the King Cotton Hotel to the Idlewild Theatre, a neighborhood movie house at 1819 Madison. Front Street Theatre was the city’s only professional theatre and by 1961 it had achieved national recognition in the Ford Foundation’s³³ program promoting cooperation among professional, community, and university theatres. The

³⁰ Howard, Edwin. “What Front St. Has Meant to Memphis.” *Press-Scimitar*. 10 Aug. 1968.

³¹ Zeigler, Joseph Wesley. *Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1973.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ The Ford Foundation, an independent, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization, was formed in 1936 and serves as a resource for people and institutes worldwide by providing grants or loans that build knowledge and strengthen organizations and networks. “About Us.” *Ford Foundation*. 2009. Ford Foundation. 6 Aug. 2009 <<http://www.fordfound.org/about>>.

program, called the Theatre Communications Group, involved theatres across the country in Texas, Chicago, Pennsylvania, California, Ohio, and New York.³⁴ The program resulted from a two and a half year study by W. McNeil Lowry, the director of the program in humanities and the arts at the Ford Foundation during the time, who found through his investigation that the performing arts nationwide needed more support to continue growing.³⁵ This was very exciting news for the Memphis theatre community and seemed to promise hope for the future of Front Street Theatre in gathering both new talent and financial support.

The excitement continued as Memphis was cited by the *New York Herald-Tribune* as being “in the charmed circle of only half a dozen cities in the country which can boast of resident theatres with trained professional staffs,”³⁶ made possible by the existence Front Street Theatre.

By 1964, Front Street Theatre had a solid following and interested audience in the Memphis area. They had grown from a semi-professional theatre, employing only two or three Equity actors at once to a professional theatre with the capability to employ 10-12 Equity actors at a time (Equity Union is the actor’s union).³⁷ Edwin Howard, Amusements Editor for the *Press-Scimitar*, referred to Front Street Theatre as “our” theatre, writing that the theatre’s performances had “not only moved, amused and delighted us; they have influenced our thinking and our responses to our own problems and to the people around us.”³⁸

Patrons increased from hundreds to thousands by its 8th season. However, a mere 3 years later, the theatre found itself in severe debt and turned to its patrons asking for only \$12 donations to keep the theatre running, hoping the small price would encourage donations.

³⁴ Howard, Edwin. “Front Street Theatre Wins Place in Ford Foundation Program.” *Press-Scimitar*. 20 Mar. 1961.

³⁵ Sterling, Wallace. *The Front Street Theatre of Memphis: The Emergence of a Resident Professional Theatre in the Mid-South*. Diss. Southern Illinois U, 1966.

³⁶ “NY Admiration for Front Street. Theatre.” *Press-Scimitar*. 14 Sept. 1961.

³⁷ Howard, Edwin. “Front Street Theatre Audience Triples in Five Years.” *Press-Scimitar*. 2 Feb. 1966.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Despite its efforts, the financial needs were not met and Front Street Theatre was unable to survive.

Front Street Theatre, although it closed its doors in 1968, was instrumental in exposing Memphians to new and cutting edge theatre:

regularly filling three-fourths of its seats. ‘There was a hunger for the type of plays we were doing,’ Touliatos recalls...Despite the failure of a couple of dinner theatres since then, theatre is livelier than ever in Memphis. Since 1969, Memphis has gained the Circuit Playhouse...Touliatos is proud of the role his old professional repertory theater had in bringing new material to Memphis. Asked if his efforts had anything to do with the type of plays that groups like the Circuit Playhouse are now staging, Touliatos is emphatic, ‘Everything, everything in the world.’³⁹

Touliatos was correct in his answer. The plays at Front Street Theatre had a direct affect on a young man there, Jackie Nichols. Nichols was employed by the theatre and the knowledge he gained there helped him start Circuit Playhouse, Inc., which, unlike Front Street Theatre, has continued for forty decades with no end in sight.

CIRCUIT PLAYHOUSE, INC.

Time: 1969

Place: Walker Street, Circuit Playhouse

Before Circuit Playhouse, Inc. was ever established, before there was a building to perform in or a name above the door, before anyone came to sit through a performance of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* or *The Roar of the Greasepaint, the Smell of the Crowd*, there was a group of high school kids that wanted to put on shows. Led by Jackie Nichols, who used his experience at Front Street Theatre to help manage the group, they called themselves the Circuit Players and performed all around town for anyone who would listen and watch.

Jackie Nichols:

³⁹ Richardson, Malcom. “Fertile Seed Was Sown by Old Front Street Theatre.” *Commercial Appeal*. 26 July 1972.

Well, throughout the year, Circuit Players, this was in the middle 60s, we would do shows either at our school or at some other theatre, like Front Street Theatre or at that time Memphis Little Theatre in town, but in the summer we were left to our own devices. It was kind of like the Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland thing – we’ve got two months off, let’s put on a show in daddy’s barn – we literally would do that. We would use that as a way to channel our energy. And the idea that we were doing something that was fun and collective and we were the boss of it. We were doing something for the community so we gathered together a bunch of high school kids, some people painted scenery, some acted in the shows, some directed, some sold ads and people did different things. We were basically learning how to run a theatre by doing it and at that time it was at a low enough risk, at the end of the summer we would have our show done and we would travel around to community centers and churches and do it. That’s where the title “Circuit” came from, as if we were doing a traveling circuit. It was really something that we were doing collectively that was ours to do. It was a sense of accomplishment for the community.⁴⁰

Circuit Players continued to bring theatre to the Memphis area for four years before they decided a more permanent space was in order. By 1969, Nichols was the only remaining member of the original group but that didn’t stop him and his fellow actors, including Don Winfield, Susan Kahn, Harris Segal, Nancy Johnson, and Skip Giles, from finding a place to call their own. The old Jane Bischoff Dance Studio on Walker went up for rent and Circuit Players claimed it as their own.

Jackie Nichols:

⁴⁰ Jackie Nichols is the founder of Circuit Playhouse, Inc. His appreciation for theatre stemmed from his experience in dance, which taught him about the “great deal of discipline in the performance area.” This encouraged him to pursue theatre and his involvement in musicals put him at Front Street Theatre where he also tap-danced. Personal interview. 22 July 2009.

You've got to have a place that really gives you an identity, that's yours. And what literally happened in 1969, during the summer of '69, we had produced our last show that summer, which was *The Roar of the Greasepaint, the Smell of the Crowd*, and like a month before that, Front Street Theatre, which had moved from Midtown here to Memphis State for one year, was in the death throes and it finally died...the community was really without that theatre company. So, we just said what the hell. Each of us pitched in \$50 to pay the first month's rent and utility bill and got a director to do our first show and just went from there. And it's kind of just history; nobody could tell us we couldn't do that or that was a bad idea. We were just very gutsy and went out and did it. We rented a building that had been an old dance studio so it had a big open space and started doing shows. Our first year budget was \$17,000 and today it's \$1.7 million. We've had a lot of growth.

The first show Circuit Players performed in their new home, named Circuit Playhouse, was *We Bombed in New Haven*. The show carried an anti-Vietnam War message and showed the Memphis community, from the beginning, that Circuit Players were not afraid to challenge their audiences by producing edgy and controversial shows. The controversy over *We Bombed in New Haven* helped bring in an audience who was both intrigued and entertained by what Circuit Playhouse had to offer. Since Front Street had closed, the audience who wanted to be challenged through theatre lacked a venue to go to, but as soon as Circuit Playhouse opened they once again had a place to enjoy an evening of more than just entertainment.

Over the next few years, Circuit Playhouse hosted the directing talents of Barry Fuller, Gene Crain, Shep Welsh, Ken Zimmerman, and Santo Romeo and produced shows that opened the eyes of the community. *The Boys in the Band*, a show about homosexual characters, opened a

door for gay theatre across the nation. The Circuit Players chose to address the subject of homosexuality rather than ignore it, even at a time when homosexuality was ridiculed and unaccepted in society.

Bill Short:

It's exciting to see the passion for theatre that Jackie Nichols has had and always will have be shared by so many other people, and, like any enterprise that has so many challenges financially, you know they started off very small and did spirited – maybe that's the word – productions. I remember *The Boys in the Band*, that was a ground breaking play, and they wisely chose to do that. And Memphis realized that it [Circuit Playhouse, Inc.] could do theatre that would probably offend a certain group of people.

The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade (Marat/Sade) contained the first nude scene on stage in Memphis and encouraged the audience to look at the issue of social injustice.

Julia “Cookie” Ewing:

I remember watching the theatre grow and when it was still over on Walker Street, I remember having a meeting with Jackie about what he was going to be doing and I do remember seeing their production of *Marat/Sade* that Barry Fuller directed. And I really loved it because at the end, it was a little tiny place, but at the end he had the jail walls come down to separate the audience from the inmates, and the inmates were running toward the audience...schoomp! as it just came down, like it just stopped them right before they got to you. And that really stuck with me, (laughs) I really liked that...If I haven't been working on the stage I've been a big supporter of Circuit because, probably

because of Barry's show, phoonk! You know, just as the audience feels like they're getting ready to be attacked, you know they're [the prison inmates] stopped, and it's this hahhh! [*gasp*]. It's that moment of hahhh! [*gasp*] catching and that's basically what they've [Circuit Playhouse] always done. They've always done something that was pushing an envelope.⁴¹

With its growing audience, Circuit Playhouse needed a larger production venue with more technical capabilities and audience seating. The first of what would become many moves for the company came in 1971 when the space on Walker, which the company had been renting, was sold to become a blood bank. Times were changing and Circuit Playhouse, only 18 months after having been created, needed a new place to call home.

Time: 1971

Place: 1947 Poplar Avenue, Circuit Playhouse

A new home opened up for Circuit Playhouse across the street from Overton Park, providing a central location with other Memphis highlights like the Memphis Zoo, the Memphis College of Art, and the Brooks Museum and Midtown was being revitalized with the building of Overton Square. Overall, the location on Poplar was central to a growing audience.

Bill Short:

When Circuit Players moved to its house over on Poplar across from Overton Park they had, you know, it wouldn't be called make shift anymore. It was really, it had decent seating, it had dressing rooms, and I'm sure anyone watching this whoever acted there

⁴¹ Julia (Cookie) Ewing is a Professor of Theatre at Rhodes College. She has been involved in theatre her entire life, first taking the stage at the age of five at the Ewing Children's Theatre, which her mother started. Since then, Ewing has traveled to New York and St. Louis for theatre and film and has directed, acted, and watched performances at Circuit Playhouse and Playhouse on the Square. She is an icon for anyone, and especially females, involved in theatre in the Memphis area. Personal interview. 17 July 2009.

would laugh, they were dressing rooms. And the building had its own issues because on more than one occasion I might be visited in my seat by a little bit of something that was falling out of the ceiling, I don't know what it was, but a piece of plaster or something might drift down. But the same would happen to the actors and they would ignore it and hope you would ignore it, too.

Once seats were acquired through fundraising and an old dimmer board was taken from the former Front Street Theatre, Circuit Playhouse was up and running. The Midtown audience proved perfect for the theatre's choice in productions and a bond was soon formed between theatre and audience that stands strong still. Two buildings near 1947 Poplar served as spaces for actors and directors to create, explore, and experiment. Behind Circuit Playhouse was Workshop Theatre, a space for one-acts, small plays, and original works. Next to Circuit Playhouse was Theatre II, a space for smaller plays requiring very little in the way of set and cast size.

The main stage continued to bring new and edgy plays to its audience. Nichols was not afraid to produce shows about violence, homosexuality, or racism. He wanted to offer more than entertainment, regardless of what other theatres, like Memphis Little Theatre, were offering at the time.

Cookie Ewing:

At the time Theatre Memphis was also Midtown, it was at the Pink Palace and it was called the Little Theatre. And they did a lot of family, well, it's not necessarily family, *adult* fare, but they also did a lot of classics, Little Theatre did. And when you look at your classics they also have social issues buried in them, it's whether you pull them out or not, whether you lift them up...I think Jackie did have something he wanted to say, whether he's conscious of it or not. I think he was *wanting* to push that envelope, to

shake things up a little bit, to have a voice...look at the '60s, what was going on. So I think yes, in that sense, it was – *this* is a way to express things, *this* is a way to push the envelope, *this* is a way to make you think, *this* is a way to march, *this* is a way to sit with flowers in my hair. You know, *this* is a way to do it, to make my statement. So I think probably, yeah, as to whether he's conscious or not. But I think it definitely, yeah it did, because even at that time Little Theatre I think represented the “establishment,” the vocabulary of the day, the “establishment,” and in that sense it did represent that and Circuit represented the rebel at that point in time.

One production in particular that spoke to and about the Memphis community was *The Me Nobody Knows*, which begged its audience to look at social injustice not only in the setting of the play but in the Memphis area as well. Edwin Howard, Amusements Editor for the *Press-Scimitar*, wrote:

Ms. Gossett [Ewing] has produced the midtown theatre's best musical and one of its most skillfully staged and performed offerings of any kind...there is something at work in *The Me Nobody Knows* that goes beyond talent and technique. It is passion. Dedication and love and passionate conviction alone do not guarantee the quality in the theatre, but when they underpin such essentials as valid and engrossing material, talent and at least some technique, and the professional discipline of an experienced and perhaps inspired director, they can produce results far beyond the province of mere proficiency, in however high degree.⁴²

Cookie Ewing:

Then they moved to the place on Poplar [from Walker Street]...I directed there. I directed a production called *The Me Nobody Knows*, which was, you know, I'm into social theatre. When I say social theatre, I'm not into pounding people in the head with issues, but I am into allowing issues life on stage. And *The Me Nobody Knows* was about a group of, it was taken from writings from a teacher who worked in the Bronx and

⁴² Howard, Edwin. “At Circuit, Needed a hat to Tip, Toss.” *Press-Scimitar*. 9 Feb. 1974.

Brooklyn, from kids who were the disenfranchised, and he took their writings and fashioned them into a play, a wonderful, beautiful play, a poignant play. But even now, I think if we did it now, it would look sweet because the violence now is so much more intense than it was then. There was the one song that was very haunting in that play, which was, one character says to another one, "I hear your baby brother die" and he says, "Yeah, he doesn't have to go through what I did." And it's a powerful song about be glad he's dead, he doesn't have to live this way. And there were several songs that dealt with that, the ugliness...

It's different in the sense that the urban environment has at least some green so there is a vision of some life in Memphis. When you're dealing with New York and you're dealing with Chicago and you're dealing with those areas there are places where you don't see green, it's all concrete. And the violence is tougher. It's a compression of society, so the violence is tougher. But the violence and the disenfranchised is very strong here [Memphis] as well. All you have to do is cross the street and go that way several blocks and that's not as bad as if you go that way several blocks. What happens to these kids? People want to blame the parents but you know, my god, sometimes those parents are doing the best they can, if they're both there and they're having to work two or three jobs and who's going to be there to look after their kid. And then the educational system, their hands are tied. It is an ugly world for some of these kids to have to live in, where they are having to look after, being five years old or six years old, and having to look after their baby brother and sister...

And how many kids are having to grow up that way? And how many kids are facing the drug situation? That's been with us for a long time and I don't think that's

going away because it's a form of escape, and until we can do something to make escape another way, a healthy way, it's going to be here. And the violence, if you don't understand or care about another human being because you're having to fight everyday for your own life, survival. So the idea of understanding that there is another human soul inside that body and yours, and you don't have to kill to get a pair of tennis shoes. It's, now I'm simplifying, over simplifying obviously, but no, it's here in Memphis. Its shadings are different, but it's here.

Time: 1975

Place: 2121 Madison Avenue, Playhouse on the Square

All three stages, Circuit Playhouse, Theatre Workshop, and Theatre II ran until 1975 when the winds of change blew again. Overton Square, Inc. approached Circuit Playhouse, Inc. and invited them to move Circuit Playhouse into the old Lafayette's Music Room at 2121 Madison. This proposal aimed to associate theatre goers with shops and restaurants and create an "entertainment" district that would ramp up profit for Overton Square. However, Nichols thought the audience Circuit Playhouse had found at 1947 Poplar was not commercially feasible at the new proposed location. He didn't want to risk losing the audience that had come to support the theatre or risk losing the theatre's identity by moving Circuit to the Madison Avenue location. In an attempt to entice Circuit Playhouse to move, Overton Square, Inc. gave \$30,000 towards renovating the 2121 Madison building and the Memphis Arts Council gave Circuit Playhouse, Inc. a grant.

Jackie Nichols:

They asked us to move Circuit over here because at that point Circuit Playhouse was where the graduate program is for the College of Art, there at Tucker and Poplar, so we were in that group of buildings right along there. The people that ran Overton Square had

come over and seen our shows and they had seen the fact that people who go to the theatre seemed to be well dressed and they had money and they are the kind of individuals that, if they came in to the Overton Square area, would go to the restaurants and shops to have dinner and to buy things. Prior to that, we had ended up moving into a place called Lafayette's Music Hall, and it was mainly a music venue, and mainly young people and no one would go out to the restaurants. They were really not nurturing the rest of the businesses around Lafayette's Music Hall and they were losing money there because of that, so Lafayette's Music Hall closed and they started courting us to move Circuit over.

We realized that if we moved Circuit over there, because Circuit does really things that are out there on the edge and are pretty sometimes controversial with language and subject matter of the shows, we didn't want to compromise what our identity was. So we told them we would open a separate theatre, Playhouse on the Square, which would do a little more mainstream stuff but still not just dinner theatre fare. It would be classics and contemporary comedies and musicals but not the more edgy, weird hippy things we were doing at Circuit Playhouse. So we opened a larger, professional company as part of Circuit Playhouse and it was the case of, and this is the tail wagging the dog – it was Circuit Playhouse, still about the same size of its budget, \$30,000 a year, and Playhouse on the Square, which was much larger. We made that decision to go forward; Overton Square paid all the money to renovate that building down the street. We made that decision in the summer, and as in all cases of our historic growth, we renovated the building, started selling subscriptions and opened Playhouse on the Square in four months. So we moved very quickly.

Thus, Playhouse on the Square was born. The theatre opened November 12, 1975 with *Godspell* to an audience capacity of 89%. It was clear from the first production that the community was going to give the same support to Playhouse as it had been giving Circuit since 1969. Created as an outgrowth of Circuit Playhouse, Playhouse on the Square was a professional theatre with a company of resident actors and staff. This was the first professional theatre in seven years, since the closing of Front Street Theatre in 1968. The first season of Playhouse hosted the performances of Larry Riley, Michael Jeter, John Dunavant, and Beverly Baxter, all who went on to have careers in New York and Hollywood. This was merely the first round of talented actors who would grace the Playhouse stage and move on to even bigger and better things.

Bill Short:

And Playhouse on the Square, when it was on Overton Square across from Bosco's in what had been the former Layette's Music [Hall] home, was an interesting space, three-quarter thrust stage with a three-quarter balcony. It was kind of like the Globe in its own way – the audience sat on three sides on two levels and, I guess the playing space was constricted, I never designed anything there, again I was helping with props and just generally hanging around, but I really felt like Memphis had taken a step in the right direction with what Jackie's vision was, to have a place where they could more easily produce larger works. In fact, I remember seeing Cookie Ewing in *Pippin* there, and how much fun it was to see people on our home team here [Rhodes College] playing at Playhouse on the Square. Of course, that would happen over the years more than once.

In 1977, Playhouse on the Square began receiving funding from the Tennessee Arts Commission (TAC) and the National Endowment for the Arts, and was accepted into the Theatre Communication Group (TCG), establishing the theatre as a driving force for arts in the Memphis community. In 1979 Playhouse established a new troupe to reach a previously overlooked audience. Under the direction of Marc Martinez and Karen Barile Hill, Show of Hands, the Theatre for the Deaf, was created with hearing and non-hearing actors to perform for both hearing and non-hearing audiences. At its time, it was one of only 10 professional theatres for the deaf nationally.

Cookie Ewing:

They used to have a group called Show of Hands, which was for the non-hearing. I thought that was one powerful group. Karin Hill ran that, and she's still over at the educational center. That was, that was wonderful and I wish that could come back because we actually have a very large non-hearing public here and it would be nice if we could get that. It would also be nice if it could go into schools so that people can connect with sign [language] so that we can communicate even with people in our own city, you know, I would love to see that come back.

New and exciting developments were taking place at Circuit Playhouse as well. Theatre II was given to the Beale Street Repertory Company, a company presenting the works of black playwrights and utilizing the talents of black actors, singers, dancers and technicians. Sadly, the company lasted only a few years before it went under, however, there were successful endeavors at Circuit.

At this time, environmental theatre was emerging and catching on as a national movement. Environmental theatre seeks to challenge the bounds of theatre, especially in respect

to the audience-performer spatial relationship, asserting that theatre could be performed anywhere, not just in buildings set aside for theatrical performances.⁴³ With Circuit Playhouse's reputation of offering new forms of theatre, this movement was perfect for Circuit to explore and experiment with.

Circuit produced its first experimental theatre show in 1975 with *The Hot l Baltimore*. The performance was staged in the lobby of the abandoned King Cotton Hotel, the original home of Front Street Theatre. Despite the fact it took place during the excitement surrounding the creation of Playhouse on the Square, *The Hot l Baltimore* was received well by the public, running for over a month. Three seasons later Circuit staged *The Rocky Horror Show*, starring Larry Raspberry as Dr. Frank N. Furter, in the old movie house at 1705 Poplar, which was built in the 1900s and was formerly known as the Ritz, the Guild, and the Evergreen.

Time: 1980

Place: 1705 Poplar Avenue, Circuit Playhouse

With two successful theatres, both selling out to audiences, production after production, it was time yet again for another change. Rumor had it that the 1947 Poplar home of Circuit was going to be renovated and Circuit would need to look for a new home. It happened to be the old movie house – where *The Rocky Horror Show* had been staged – that became Circuit's new home. Through much persuasion from Circuit Playhouse, Inc. board members Buck Clark and Gene Katz, the old movie house owners agreed to sell the building to the company. For the first time since its creation 11 years previously, Circuit Playhouse would not be renting but would instead be the owner of its own space.

⁴³ Environmental Theatre was a movement popularized in the 1960s and 1970s. Richard Schechner, editor, writer, and director, was a leader in the movement, defining it with six axioms dealing with space, elements, and relationship. Schechner, Richard. "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre." *TDR* 12.3 (1968): 41-64.

As exciting as this seemed there was little time for celebration. The renovation and move had to take place within 2 months, not an easy feat with running productions. Everyone at the theatre, from the box office to the stage, worked to prepare for the new space. Nichols called in architects, plumbers, electricians, and carpenters for a complete redesign. Only three weeks after the closing of *The Play's the Thing*, the last Circuit production at 1947 Poplar, the space at 1705 Poplar raised its curtain with *Loose Ends*. This new space was a huge upgrade for Circuit and seemed a promising improvement for the theatre's and the company's growth. There was a costume shop, set shop, rehearsal room, as well as better dressing rooms and storage for props and costumes.

Jackie Nichols:

When we moved from the location where Circuit was to the new building that Circuit is in now, the movie theatre, that was a big jump. We tripled our square footage.

Circuit Playhouse and Playhouse on the Square continued to offer their different styles of theatre. Circuit staged Off-Broadway and experimental shows, started a Foreign Films Series and the Mid-South Playwright's Contest, with *Show of Hands* continuing to tour. Playhouse offered school matinees in addition to its regular season shows. The intern program at Playhouse was started in 1981 when five young performers were added to the performance cast. The program continues today, educating and exhausting young aspiring actors in every aspect of theatre, from the stage to the shop to the box office.

Time: 1985

Place: 51 S. Cooper. Street, Playhouse on the Square

With the success of the intern program and school matinees at Playhouse on the Square, the building at 2121 Madison seemed to be too small. It was time, yet again, for Circuit

Playhouse, Inc. to pick up and search out a new home – this time for Playhouse on the Square. Talk began with businessman Danny Owens about leasing the Memphian Theatre but the move would not come without a price. Nichols and company would need to raise \$150,000 to buy the building. By taking 3-year pledges from individuals and businesses and through generous donations from the Memphis community, including carpet, design work, furnishings, and contractual work, the Memphian Theatre was ready. The 1985/86 season opened at 2121 Madison with *Evita*, and in the two weeks before the opening of *Gypsy*, Playhouse made the move to 51 S. Cooper. The move was celebrated with a grand opening on November 13, 1985 for both the show as well as to thank all those involved with preparing and supporting the new building.

Jackie Nichols:

When we moved Playhouse from Lafayette's Music Hall into this one and raised money for this, at any point there's a chance of failure but as long as you do your home work on it and your heart is in the right place, I've always thought that the gods of theatre will provide for us.

1986 saw the creation of the Theatre for Youth (TFY), with Jay Kinney, former Managing Director for Circuit Playhouse, Inc. (1983-85), as the program's director. The program soon expanded to include the Summer Youth Conservatory, seven levels of year-round classes, a touring program, and a full season of school matinees. The new building at 51 S. Cooper especially allowed for the school matinees to flourish with the increased amount of space. Carl Asmus, Chairman of the Board at Playhouse on the Square in 1999, wrote of the TFY program:

The Theatre for Youth serves more than forty thousand children annually through school matinees, Summer Youth Conservatory, the new After School Acting Program, Saturday Morning Matinees, and outreach performances in the schools...Playhouse and Circuit are

taking up where the schools have left off – bringing the arts to our young people and bringing the young people to the theatre.⁴⁴

Jackie Nichols:

Well, you look at something prior to having kids, you look around and it's like oh, kids and animals, keep them out of the theatre, we're serious artists. We can't have them around. But as soon as that [having kids] happens, you start to say okay, here's what I do with my life, how can I make my community better for my children with what I do? I think we should all look at that. For me it was, I need to create the same opportunities for my children that I had growing up doing theatre because it's really, I think being involved in the arts is one of the most positive things a child can be engaged in – it gives them self-confidence, it gives them a sense of (the same things as why I started the theatre) a sense of importance that this is something we are doing...

We [Circuit Playhouse, Inc.] now have 13 education and outreach programs that we provide in the community: Summer Conservatory, which is going on downstairs now, for seniors and juniors; after school theatre programs that we run throughout the community; Theatre School program; we tour professional children's theatre into the schools and then we bring them in here for matinees, too. Whatever kind of, or however intense program that the community wants, we work on providing that. But besides making a difference in the community you're also exposing audiences, kids, that are going to be your future audiences, so that's extremely important, that you get them used to going to the theatre. They don't do all this other stuff, soccer and everything else, and then all of a sudden oh, I'm an adult; I'm going to go to the theatre. They need that

⁴⁴ Circuit Playhouse, Inc. *Circuit Playhouse, Playhouse on the Square: 30th Anniversary Season*. Memphis: Towery Publishing, 1999.

exposure to the arts – painting, singing, dancing, acting – as kids, and so if we don't do that, we're not really developing our audiences for the future.

Michael Detroit:

Our TFY programs reach about 30,000 kids a year. There is no other arts organization that does that many except for the Arts Council, which includes our numbers in theirs...We institute certain TFY programs because we see that there is a need for it in our community.⁴⁵

Cookie Ewing:

The children's theatre that my mother started, I was gone by the time that it started nose diving and then Hurricane Elvis came through and collapsed the building and it just kind of went away, and they keep saying they're going to do something about it but they really haven't. Morgan Woods Children's Theatre picked up there and then Germantown axed it, and now there's a new group called A New Moon and they are trying but I don't know if they're going to be able to move forward.

And while these groups have been trying, Jackie's [company] has taken another slant. Where [with] these groups where children's theatre the important word was *children* not theatre, so it was theatre of, by, and for children, Jackie took the other slant with children's theatre – *theatre* is the important word – that children are coming here to learn about theatre. So in that sense, I think it's served a very valuable purpose for young kids because theatre is being cut out of all the schools. Young kids need a place to go.

⁴⁵ Michael Detroit is the Associate Producer at Circuit Playhouse, Inc. He began as a resident company member in 1989 and has since been appointed the audition coordinator for the Unified Professional Theatre Auditions (UPTA) and the Development Director. He has worked closely over the 20 years with the company and has been centrally involved with the building plans for the new theatre. Personal interview. July 20 2009.

And then his afterschool program is very good for kids who don't have any of those benefits, [they] can come in...

My mother's expression was, "Theatre allows the child to discover the hero within themselves" and once you discover that hero you can make that hero work in whichever area you want to work. And she used theatre as the medium for doing that whereas I think the programs, the classes, the serious classes that they have at Playhouse are for really developing your theatrical skills. But the afterschool is more of discovering the hero within yourself. So I think there he's [Jackie] got a blend going.

The education programs grew and in 1990, Memphis's first independent Theatre School was created and offered classes for all ages. Initially, the school offered five classes, but in less than 10 years the course offerings had quadrupled. This speaks volumes for the affect theatre can have on a community and a generation. With arts being cut out of schools when the budgets tighten, and in light of today's economy, many children miss out on the creative learning theatre offers. Whether youth are in the audience or on the stage, being involved in theatre provides the creative freedom to ask questions about society and work through the answers in imaginative ways. Circuit Playhouse, Inc. has provided that freedom for the Memphis community for the past 40 years and will hopefully continue for the next 40 years.

Jackie Nichols:

There have always been these things that have confronted us, and at the time I used to stay up at night worrying about that oh, so and so is leaving, going to do something else and we've lost the building, what are we going to do now, blah blah blah. But at some point, maybe 10 years ago, I started looking back and realized that every single thing that

happened, that I would stay up at night worrying about, something better came our way because of it...

I guess I'll give you an example of this. There are a whole bunch of examples but this is the most obvious. About 15 years ago, Circuit Playhouse over on Poplar, there was a building next to it that was a recording studio, and it came up for sale and we wanted to buy the building because it's always good to acquire property next to you. We were going to use that for Second Stage and offices and costume shops, rehearsal rooms, stuff for Circuit Playhouse. We offered \$100,000 for the building...did some plans on it, did a board meeting there. We were really excited, didn't think anyone else would be interested in the building. Then we found out that someone had bid \$150,000 on the property and we were devastated. It's not like they bid \$101,000 or \$105,000, they bid \$150,000 they offered on the building, so it was pretty obvious we didn't want to get into a bidding war with these people because they just didn't care. They wanted the building.

So, we didn't get the building. It would have saddled us with a mortgage at that point to acquire the building, although we'd figured out how that could work. About a month after that the building next door to Playhouse, which at that time was a paint store, Devoe Paint, became available for Playhouse to acquire it to create a new scene shop, the Memphian Room for parties, the conference room, handicap bathrooms, all this stuff we didn't have here at Playhouse, and if we had been saddled with the mortgage on the other building we would not have been able to acquire this. So we did, we moved forward, it was a major improvement for Playhouse on the Square to acquire this building; we did a fundraiser, which we got all the money for, and purchased the building. That next year,

the people that had bought the building next to us [Circuit], the recording studio, donated the building to the theatre.

So at the time, the nights we were up [worried] because we couldn't buy the old recording studio for our educational programs and stuff, we ended up doing – and at that time we would never have imagined we'd get this building, and then that one would be donated to us. So, you never know what the results are going to be on something, but generally down the line I've always found out that the gods of the arts or theatre have looked out for us, and I think it's mainly because we deal with what we do with a sense of responsibility and integrity and quality and the universe, that big universe, gives back to you.

The building next to Circuit became the Jeanne and Henry Varnell Theatre Arts Education Building, housing all of the TFY programs as well as the Ray Hill Memorial Library (Hill was a retired Rhodes College professor of Theatre and been heavily involved in Circuit Playhouse, Inc. throughout his career). The building gave the TFY programs the space they needed to expand and grow to the success they have found today.

The next years saw huge developments in Circuit Playhouse, Inc.'s history. In 1994, with the celebration of Circuit Playhouse, Inc.'s 25th anniversary, construction began on TheatreWorks, a black box space for artists of all kinds to work, perform and produce, that now houses six companies. 1995 saw the commencement of the Unified Professional Theatre Auditions (UPTA) with Michael Detroit as coordinator. For these auditions, Circuit Playhouse, Inc. hosted 26 theatres and 200 actors nationwide looking for more than just summer work. In 1997 UPTA was extended to include production personnel and by 1999 the auditions hosted 73

theatres and 400 actors and production personnel. Today, UPTA continues to have an impact nationally in the theatre world.

Circuit Playhouse, Inc. continued to grow, taking its audience to new and exciting places show after show. Circuit Playhouse kept its reputation for producing controversial shows with its 2004 production of *No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs*. In a *Commercial Appeal* article, Nichols commented on his decision to stage the play despite the obvious racial and religious discriminations in the title:

Playhouse executive producer Jackie Nichols said he heard about the play, first produced by The Philadelphia Theatre Company in 2001, from a theatrical publisher in New York City. "He told me he had a really good script, but that the title would probably be a problem," Nichols said. "After I picked my jaw off the floor, I got a copy of the play, read it and knew that we needed to do it."⁴⁶

Another controversial show that shocked community was the 2007 production of *Jerry Springer the Opera*. Due to set requirements, the show was staged at Playhouse rather than Circuit, and although the subject matter was more in line with Circuit shows, the community came out to support and the show was successful.

Jackie Nichols:

I guess one of the, the thing that has been the most unique for me was us acquiring the first national rights to *Jerry Springer the Opera*, which we did about two years ago here. I had seen the show in London; it's a show that pissed off hundreds of thousands of people. I figure, if you do something that's really theatre and you piss a bunch of people off, you're doing something right...when I heard they were doing Jerry Springer as an opera I thought what a lousy idea, how bad can this thing be? And people kept coming back from London and saying you got to see this, it's just wonderful; it takes musical theatre to a

⁴⁶ "Play's shocking title gets careful marketing look." *Commercial Appeal*. 10 June 2004.

whole new level...and the show in the meantime had won the Olivier Award for Best Musical in London. I went over and saw it and loved it.

A lot of people don't like it because of its approach to religion; I found the piece to be very spiritual. The language in the show, it's opera with profanity sung in a high C. You've got a song, "Fucked up the Asshole with Barbed Wire," it's like, it takes *The Jerry Springer Show* – I mean, you think about it though, opera: it's like bizarre, strange characters in a bizarre situation and *The Jerry Springer Show*: bizarre, strange characters in a bizarre situation – it's just putting it to operatic music. Yeah, the language is offensive to some, I say don't come see it.

But we did get the first national rights on that. It was not being produced in this country and they were concerned about the fact of the language in the United States. It was being protested all over England where it went, mainly by extreme religious right groups, but it wasn't coming here, so I had acquired the email address of the producers in London, the people who control the rights for the show, and on a takeoff of David Letterman's thing I sent an email that said "The 10 Reasons That *Jerry Springer the Opera* Should Have its American Premiere at Playhouse on the Square in Memphis, Tennessee," and it was these things that, you know – Memphis had the first production of *Hair* in the United States, that we did the first staged production of *Rocky Horror* outside of New York (which we did in 1977 at our theatre), that the real live Jerry Springer audience lives all around us, that we're not afraid of a little controversy – we went on down this whole list of things. The show ends with this character that may be Elvis Presley singing "It Ain't Easy Being Me" and that was one of the things – Elvis Presley is from Memphis. And then the last, the number 10 thing, was 'Why the hell not?' And so

we got an email back from the producers saying we're interested, let's talk and we communicated and corresponded back and forth and finally got the first rights. We had to bring a number of the opera singers in from out of town because many of the opera singers in Memphis have church jobs that they probably would have lost if they had sung the show.

But it was unique, it's different, it's special. If the show wasn't such a great production and very interesting, different kind of music it would not have had the success that it did. But once again, some people didn't like it, so then don't come see it.

Of course, not every show produced was controversial; Circuit Playhouse, Inc. offered family friendly shows, such as *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*, a “vibrant celebration of simple goodwill, community, and cheer in the face of hardship.”⁴⁷

Bill Short:

A show that I did at Playhouse that seemed to have no set at all, that seemed to work rather well. It was *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*, and the idea is that you're watching, in the 1940s, something like the Lux Radio Theatre, which was produced before a live audience, and mistakes and all went out over the air. All of the sound effects were done acoustically, there was nothing prerecorded. So a car door opening would be an old refrigerator door opening and shutting, a car engine would be a sewing machine, the walking in a bed of snow would be squeezing a box of corn starch, and surprisingly, interesting to watch that happen.

When I was asked by the director to design that I thought well everybody knows the movie, why don't they just watch the movie? And she said no, actually it's

⁴⁷ “It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play.” *Playhouse on the Square*. Circuit Playhouse, Inc. 2 Aug. 2009. <<http://www.playhouseonthesquare.org/0607/itsawonderfullife.html>>.

interesting; you get to meet the readers, the actors, who are playing the show, and you see there are some jealousies – the older actress is kind of jealous of the younger actress, and there's a little bitchiness going on there. And of course, that doesn't go out over the air but we can see it, the live audience.

And it turned out there were 82 little objects and furniture and a little musicians' corner and the microphone with poinsettias around it, because it was their Christmas broadcast, and antique mikes and all this stuff I found and I had to learn to make all these sound effects, that was a huge learning curve.

So the set was interesting in that period coat racks and all the stuff that go with a studio and the kind of bandstand-looking cover with the product name on it, Kremel Hair Cream or whoever was bringing our show to us, all had to be constructed with period accuracy and then it had to be functional because they actually had to produce the show, read it over a microphone, and create all these hand effects. So, it was all made very complicated by the fact that the set was part of the character of the show...But people really enjoyed the *Radio* show. It was podcast and it was actually on WKNO Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Eve. People called in to say how much they enjoyed it, so I'm happy for that.

Circuit Playhouse, Inc. was not only continuing to produce topnotch theatre, they were also thinking of expanding, once again, this time to upgrade their facilities.

Michael Detroit:

The planning for this building goes back probably about six years. And it didn't start off as a new building. I remember sitting in Jackie's office and we were talking about expanding Circuit Playhouse, which is over on Poplar Avenue. And we were talking

about how gosh, it would be nice if we had fly space, because we've never had, in the 40 years, we've never had fly space or very much wing space, maybe five or 10 feet either way, because they're all converted movie houses or dance studios or whatever. And so we said well what would it cost for us to basically bust out the back of this old movie theatre and put a fly loft in? We couldn't expand sideways because of property lines, but we could at least give ourselves some fly space. And then we looked at Playhouse on the Square here, too, to say, what does that cost [to upgrade it]. And we were getting into, is it worth tearing the whole building down just to build a new theatre, and what are those costs.

So you start comparing those things and it was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars to renovate. And then you have to deal with code, which became the discussion of if you add something to an old building you've got to bring the rest of the building up to code and that's a whole bunch of more money, so maybe sometimes it's just best to tear down the building and start fresh. Well, so we started thinking in that direction. And one day Jackie just said maybe we should just build a new theatre and so we said okay, well, how do you do that because we had never built a brand new theatre. So we talked to a couple of folks and we got involved with the Community Foundation, we had some connections there with people who had been involved with this sort of thing before where you're trying to get funding to figure out if a project is worthwhile to pursue, a feasibility study...I think I wrote that grant in 2004, maybe 2005. So we brought a professional in, you know, for umpteen thousand dollars, whatever it was, and they studied a) does the city need a new theatre, b) where should it be.

Once the word got out that we were looking to do this downtown Memphis started pursuing us saying you should put the theatre down here. East Memphis said we should put it out there, you know, Midtown was saying no, no, no, no, you're all about Midtown, don't go away. Well, and then it was okay, well where is there land? Is there an existing building that we could retrofit? All these questions that none of us in the theatre have ever, you know, we've built sets, we've never built a building. If we could, we could build a façade and put some, you know, muslin over it, but build a building, that's crazy talk. And, so, eventually the feasibility study said no, you're really acquainted with Midtown, it's in the center of downtown and east and north and south, so it needs to be there. Well then, where the hell should it be, you know? Well, should we tear this building down? No, because it's the old Memphian Theatre and every Elvis fan in the world would be completely upset, and quite frankly it's a line of income for us, the Elvis birthday week and tribute week. So we weren't going to do that. So it was a question of finding space, when it just so happened that space across the street from us was vacant and for sale. And so we were able to negotiate with them and buy it.

And so that all happened in 2005/06. Then we had to raise money, you know, and how much is that going to cost? Well, \$15 million. That's crazy talk... Yeah, all the preliminary stuff takes forever and then once you sign on the dotted line the building goes up very quickly.

Jackie Nichols:

It's something I wish I did a little better, but I don't really sit back and enjoy the fruits of my labor very much. Probably the day after opening and it'll be okay, what's the next project, what can we do now. And this is a journey that started 4 years ago, that in a

strategic planning session with the staff and the board we realized that Playhouse could not go to the next level unless we had a real quality facility to perform in... The symphony had the Canon Center downtown, the opera had a new building out on Humphreys Boulevard, the ballet had a new rehearsal office space out in Cordova – that as the city’s professional theatre company we were basically working very creatively but in a renovated movie theater: no fly space, no wing space, no orchestra pit, poor sight lines, no traps on the stage. The designers and directors have done a great job but we’ve always been pretty handicapped with that...

A couple things were the keys to that [new building project] moving forward. A director that was working with us at that time, Rob Satterlee, worked at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago and said well if you are serious about this you need to come up and look at Steppenwolf; that the facility is phenomenal. So we did, we went up and looked at it. We visited with the stage managers, lighting designers, technical directors, and asked them what would they change on the building after having worked in the Steppenwolf Theatre for five years, and they said that they wouldn’t do anything differently, so we realized we that needed to meet the architect. Usually you spend the next five years fixing all the things that were wrong in a theatre. So we met John Morris and discovered why that was the case: John Morris came to architecture after having been a set designer and technical director, so he already knew how a theatre is supposed to work and all he builds is theatres.

We got a grant from the Community Foundation for a feasibility study, for him to come down here and look at our facility, look at our productions, visit the community, talk to people, and come up with a comprehensive space plan on what it would look like.

And at that point we were considering moving to a new location and that was very quickly taken off the table, he said your audience is in Midtown, a lot of people don't want to go downtown, you have access to East Memphis, you've got all this property already in Midtown. So the feasibility study came up with a plan for us to move forward and we got another grant and started raising money.

It's been a monstrous climb. I've stayed up late at night worrying about where we're going but every time I would start to get down about the fundraising, something else would kick in that would help get us to the next level... We've currently raised \$12.3 million, \$15 is the goal for the building and the endowment to operate the building. As we were developing the plan we showed the designs to the local ballet company and the opera and the symphony and they all asked if there was a way to be involved in this because as performing audiences are changing, the Canon Center and the Orpheum are becoming too large for some of their productions. So we reconfigured our season, knowing that we are going to have more seats so that we're doing fewer performances, and we freed up 13 weeks that we would make it available for other local groups to use it because this is going to be the best theatre in the city.

It's 350 seats, the back row is only 10 rows from the stage, so it's very intimate. Our current theatre, the back row is 13 rows. It's 100 more seats but it's more intimate and this is accomplished by a 100-seat balcony in the facility. Every row has a 6 inch rise from the row in front of it so there are no sightline issues. The acoustics and the theatre technical components are being designed by Shuler Shook [theatre consulting] and TALASKE [acoustics], and these are the people who just did the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. It's going to be a high quality, state of the art theatre with amazing

acoustics, amazing sightlines, and it's going to be a revitalization project in Midtown that's going to have not only a new home for Playhouse, but it's going to be the new Midtown home for Ballet Memphis and the opera and symphony are going to be performing in our new facility also. Once Playhouse moves across the street Circuit is moving from Poplar to here and then that theatre will become a theatre for children's theatre productions and for the community to rent out...

This is a very substantial jump we're making with this new building over here; we're going to double our operating budgets a year. It's a major change for the whole Midtown area. There have been a lot of naysayers along the way with this current project that has been underway for four years: you could never build it for the money, you can never build it on time, you could never raise the money. Now, since we've proved all those things wrong, everyone can say well you'll never be able to operate the building financially. There's a whole bunch of naysayers out there that are constantly telling me you can't do something and eventually they'll be right. They go through a hundred things and nobody ever questions them when they are proven wrong and you are able to accomplish what you wanted to; they only come out when finally something doesn't work and it's I told you so. But, some people that's how they have to live their lives.

This building is more than just a new home for Playhouse on The Square. All four components of Circuit Playhouse, Inc. – Playhouse on the Square, Circuit Playhouse, TheatreWorks, and the Varnell Education Building – will benefit with the building of the new theatre.

Michael Detroit:

What will happen, and again, it's in reaction to what the needs of the community are – the Playhouse name will move across the street into the new theatre. The Circuit Playhouse name will move from Poplar into the current Playhouse space, 51 S. Cooper. The old Circuit will remain unnamed unless someone wants to give us \$1 million for naming rights and we'll put their name on it. But there is a need for additional rental space. TheatreWorks, which we own that building and lease it to TheatreWorks, Inc. (they program TheatreWorks currently with the six groups that are down there), but it is booked two years solid. So if there's another group wanting to come in and rent a small theatre space it's not available for two years. So TheatreWorks is also going to take over the current Circuit Playhouse to utilize that as a rental space similar to what the current TheatreWorks does. So they'll have two theatres that they can rent out and that's going to be for 40 weeks out of the year, 39 weeks out of the year.

The other 12 to 15 weeks out of the year, that space, which is located currently next to our education building, will be utilized for children's theatre. When Hurricane Elvis came through a number of years ago it tore the roof off of the Ewing Children's Theatre in Midtown and it was never repaired and so the children's theatre went away. Germantown had Morgan Woods Theatre, but the city funding dried up for that so that went away. So there was no theatre for kids by kids – there's a lot of children's theatre programs – but nobody was really producing theatre with kids helping the production of it. So we said okay, that's something that needs to happen in the city so we can do that.

Now we have a stage [the soon to be former Circuit] where we can produce shows there. We can put any number of our 13 programs that we currently have on that stage without having to plop them on the set of *RENT* or the set of *Narnia* or whatever it is.

They actually have a bare stage they can build sets on and do whatever they need to. So it's serving a dual purpose: it'll be another TheatreWorks, whatever that name ends up being, and then so many weeks out of the year it will be a children's theatre...which makes sense, because it's right next to our Theatre For Youth building.

Bill Short:

And to that end I should say that Jackie Nichols' new theatre has been designed, of course to fit the space it's going to be built on, but it's been designed to keep an intimate actor to audience ratio...Again, back to the idea that it's all really story hour whether it's grand opera or something with almost no scenic trappings, it should be immersion, it should be the audience getting completely lost in the story, like reading a good book...And if we ever lose collectively that suspension of disbelief or ability to wonder like we do naturally as a child, if we can't let ourselves go and just give ourselves over to something like that, then we've kind of lost something, lost a very old and grand tradition of sharing ideas.

I think it's Thornton Wilder who said that theatre is the most correct way for an idea to be transferred directly from one human being to another. And he wasn't saying anything grand about his own work – but this is theatre all time, all places, English language, any language, Greek drama – this is what it's always been. Whether it's sung to you like Greek drama used to be in some part or opera, or just spoken, it comes off as being really a rich experience if it can work. You know, you get all the right elements together.

Jackie's venues had a growth spurt I suppose in the 80s when he got better venues. Moving from one end of Poplar to the other to the current Circuit Playhouse was

a step up and I think everybody felt the increase, not that the plays got all of a sudden better, but there was a sense of pride of place. The early place on Poplar, as I said, the ceiling would crumble down on you, and it was kind of humble. The old movie theatre that Circuit is now in is just a much more comfortable place for audience and really for actors, too. And TheatreWorks with its theatre outreach concept, the six resident companies that have no place to perform of their own, but they certainly take ownership of TheatreWorks, they know that's their house and they have that so many weeks in a year for their companies' performances. And they will have other options once the now Circuit [building] opens up and the time in the year that's not devoted to children's programs can be left again for as small a theatre group as there exists to have a place to perform, to give voice to the energies of some young Jackie Nichols out there, Jackie Nichols, Jr. who wants to put on a show.

Creating a building of this caliber, costing millions of dollars, is not an easy feat. Months of fundraising and planning have been needed, and continue to be needed, in order to make the new Playhouse on the Square a reality. Not only is money and time important, a recognizable face supporting a cause never hurts. For Circuit Playhouse, Inc. and the "Breaking New Ground" Capital Campaign, those faces are Hollywood actors Morgan Freeman and Gary Sinise.

Michael Detroit:

A lot of it really is who you know: who you know helps you get your foot in the door, how much you know determines if you get the job or not and how long you keep it. Morgan had come to see some shows in Memphis because he lived in Mississippi, and he actually lived in Memphis for awhile, too. Anyway, a number of years ago his

granddaughter was going to be going to school in Memphis at one of the local middle schools or high schools and he was looking for somewhere she could live...His granddaughter ended up staying with somebody who was on our board of directors at Playhouse and they became friends.

Now, that was long before we ever decided we were going to build a theatre, right, but once we started doing that we knew that we needed somebody people recognized even outside the realms of Shelby County, who might be able to help us in getting the word out. So we approached him through our connection on the board of directors, and had lunch, and he said yeah I'd be happy to do something for you. So one day his agent called and said Morgan's going to be in town for two days, he's got to see a dentist and an eye doctor (and this was three or four years ago now) and he'll be in town for these days if you'd like to get some media stuff out of him. And we said sure. We put a film crew together, he came in one day, and we had it all scripted for him and all he had to do was read it, but you know, he changed a lot of it, but we had that all ready for him. And we videotaped him on the stage of *Peter Pan*, and he said as long as we're not selling it or doing anything untoward with it, we could use it for promoting the theatre. That's been every effective for us in terms of promoting the Capital Campaign.

Gary Sinise got on board a different way. One of the inspirations for the new theatre is Steppenwolf Theatre up in Chicago, on a couple of levels. Number one, the architect for this new theatre is the architect who designed the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago and the design is actually quite similar to it. It's smaller than Steppenwolf but the design is similar in terms of the audience's relationship to the stage and the orchestra pit...One of our directors we've had come in from Chicago used to be the Production

Stage Manager at Steppenwolf...but he's a friend of Gary Sinise's because he worked with Gary Sinise at Steppenwolf. We said, Rob, we sure would love to get Gary Sinise involved, do you think you might do that?

And the third reason was, when Steppenwolf was built in the part of Chicago where it was built, it was kind of a warehouse district, kind of downtrodden, and the theatre really turned that part of the city around in terms of redevelopment. And that's one of the things we're trying to do with the new theatre across the street. We're trying to get Overton Square to get back up and running and make this a real kind of arts-mecca, you know, get the energy going. That's exactly what happened with Steppenwolf up in Chicago. They built a theatre and suddenly these warehouses were being converted into condos and shops and now it's a very wonderful place to walk around. You can go have coffee or dinner before the show, you go to the show, you hit a bar afterwards or a book store, whatever it is, there's all kinds of stuff there that wasn't ever there before, and we wanted that same vibe with the new theatre.

So Rob asked Gary, and it was kind of interesting the way it came down. Rob said Gary would be happy to give you a snippet of something about how the economic redevelopment happened in Chicago and wish you luck with your Capital Campaign, and yes, if Playhouse does this they have every chance of doing the same thing in their community as we did in Chicago. Well, getting that worked out, to get him on film, was challenging because of his schedule with *CSI: New York*. So I got in touch with his assistant...I said when do you think Gary will be able to do this? Because I'll hire somebody in New York to come to the set on a certain day because they were going to do it on the set, in costume, he [Gary] said he might bring in a couple friends of his or

whatever. And I'm thinking oh, you can do that, it'd be awesome, because he's doing it for free, we aren't paying anybody. We put all these plans in place and he just couldn't work it into his schedule. And finally his assistant said to hell with it, I've got a digital camera and I'll just go in and we'll just wing it.

So I sent him a script, like we had done with Morgan Freeman, and they sent the video back – it had nothing to do with my script, it had nothing to do with anything we had talked about, but it was done on a break in between takes or whatever in his trailer and so he's in this kind of crappy chair in his trailer, and he just starts going on about everything they did at Steppenwolf, how good it was for that part of town. But he was very friendly; he said you know, we hope Playhouse has the same luck that we did. So that's how we got these folks involved. They believe in what we're doing. There's no way we could have ever paid them for that, it was great stuff.

Time: Now

Place: Memphis

For the past 40 years, Circuit Playhouse, Inc. has enriched the lives of Memphians with professional and regional theatre that both entertains and challenges its audience. Tears, laughter, gasps of shock, moments of silence – all are inspired by the talent and the productions that have graced the stages of Circuit Playhouse and Playhouse on the Square. In this time of change and uncertainty, the company continues to grow and thrive despite economic struggles. The Memphis community has supported Circuit Playhouse, Inc. through every move to a new building and every fundraiser for better facilities. In return, Circuit Playhouse, Inc. has sought to better the community through educational programs and making theatre available to everyone who is interested, regardless of who they are or where they live.

This relationship, between community and theatre, is the heart of theatre itself. A performance not only depends on the talent of the actors, director, and production crew, but also the willingness of the audience to journey with the cast into the world of the play, to get lost in the story and be captivated by the characters.

Bill Short:

A lot of people have an idea and it blooms and flourishes and for every kind of reason interest is lost, monies can't be found, the public abandons it and it goes way. I think the genius of Jackie is that through really hard times, financially hard times, he has spearheaded this and kept it going and there's such a huge following now for what's coming out of those theatres that, not to say they'll last forever, but they're certainly here to stay for the foreseeable future. I think the excitement is just ramped up and quadrupled by a new house opening, a proper theatre finally for anything that Circuit Playhouse ever hoped to do...

I think everyone agrees that plays, great plays, can be studied as literature, as we treat Shakespeare. But it's like reading great recipes – it's not a fulfillment of what it was meant to be. So it's really only in its element when it's, even read, a staged reading of a play to me is more valuable than just the printed page. But a fully realized work is what Jackie can now do...So it's going to be a great showcase for all the talent that Jackie's been able to amalgamate locally and from out of town. It'll just be a proper showcase of everything they've been able to do, will have really almost no limits.

Michael Detroit:

One of the reasons that Playhouse is so successful is because Jackie Nichols, who started the theatre 40 years ago, has had this vision of what theatre should be doing for the

community. You know, it's not ego based, it's not just because we want to go produce these shows and you should love it, you know. There's a little bit of that, there's no doubt about that, but it's not all about us and by the way you, the theatre community, can come see it when you feel like it. It really is about taking an art form that will enrich the community on various levels, whether it's through education or mental fitness or spiritual fitness, whatever that happens to be, art feeds us in many different ways.

And he's [Jackie] kind of kept that going through the whole tenure of his career in terms of how we as an organization should become and maintain a good community relationship, a good business relationship with those around us. You know, we're not up to screw anybody and we don't want to be screwed either, in terms of those relationships. So everything we do, we start with that. You know, it's like you're a business and we want to have a relationship with you, but we know you're a business and we want you to make money; here's how we think we can work that out because we're a business, too, but we're feeding the community, you know, viscerally, and you're feeding the community literally, so how can we make that work? And we create these bonds, and then at the end of the day we do it by putting what we think, or hopefully will be, good art on the stage...

That's never changed in 40 years, but what you have to do, you have to find those people to work with you who believe in that same sort of mentality. We don't want to hire the people who want to come and just make money, a) We don't pay a lot of money, you know, we are a professional theatre but we're not a Broadway theatre, and [b)] but what we have is stability. And if you give a crap about the community you're probably going to do pretty well for yourself on a couple of levels. Number one, you know, if

you're halfway talented, that will even feed your talent even more because you give a crap about what's around you not just what you're doing on the stage. And so Jackie has surrounded himself with people who believe that same thing.

Jackie's been here 40 years, our Director of Theatre for Youth has been here for 30 years, I've been here for 20 years, our Managing Director who started off as an intern has been here for 17 years, our Associate Director has been here for 16 years and started off as an intern, our Director of Auditions and Special Events has been here for 9 years, she started off as an intern. When you take the senior – our Administrative Director has been here for 22 years. You take the senior administration and you can't find that seniority anywhere in the non-for-profit world, you know, find one, I dare you, you know, there's over a hundred years of experience at this one theatre. So, what that means is we all buy into the message, and that goes to what you were talking about earlier, you know, why is it become such a special thing in Memphis, that's one of the biggest reasons right there.

And it's interesting, because when you put all of us in the same room, we're not all yes-men or yes-women. We disagree, we argue, you know. I'll say Jackie, you're full of crap, and Whitney will say Mike, you're full of crap, and Dave will say Whitney you're full, you know, but we come out of the room with a vision and a goal in mind and maybe we don't agree on everything but we agree on what the end product is going to be and we do our damndest to make sure it happens. And it's not about the money because we can all get jobs somewhere else and make a lot more money. But it helps us, it's kind of in us, what we feel and what we do. And I think that shows to the community.

Having said that, we've built these really good business relationships and that's not just locally, but that's nationally, too. That's why we get really good shows from publishers, they want us to do their shows first because there is no theatre like us in the mid-south, you have to go to Nashville or Atlanta or St. Louis or Little Rock or Jackson. But we have a big impact on our community in terms of professional theatres so we get really good shows and we seek out interesting new shows. And some of them hit really well with our community and others fall flat. And you know what? That's art. You know, I wish everything was a grand slam home run, but it's not, it's not...

So, you know, is there a change in society? I don't know that I've seen Memphis change because of us but what has changed, for the good, and because we're working our butts off to do it is, we've really broadened our network of affiliations. You know, we have a lot more impact in the schools than we did 20 years ago. We have a lot more impact in the churches and community centers than we did 20 years ago. So, I guess if there's a change, maybe the city is more aware of us because of that.

I don't think it's just because we put on plays on stage, that's definitely part of it. Are we changing our society because we're putting a production of *RENT* on the stage? Sure, maybe. You know, there are people who come in and go, ahhh, I love theatre; you know, that show speaks to my soul, and there are other people going, I don't even know what that crap was that they put up on the stage. Did we affect them, too? Sure we did, you know, maybe negatively, but maybe it's that next show that affects them. So, we have the opportunity of diversity. We get to, you know, we like to say we're the theatre that's black, white, gay, straight, male, female, young, old, blue, red, all of those things. There's something in our seasons, with 16 shows, that appeals to everybody.

Cookie Ewing:

We are all in the midst of change. What we've known in the past, is going to be an unknown eventually, we're going into a new area, so I really don't know how it is going to affect [theatre]... I don't know whether it's going to have to be so much glitz in order to get people in. Is that what people want to see? I don't know, I kind of like what you like, being able to go in and it's intimate and you're there.

That's the one thing that live theatre has that film doesn't, that big splash Broadway shows don't, you are right there with it. And there's the idea of having, you know it'd be wonderful if we could have, what, 40 theatres of 100 seats in this city...there are a lot of communities that are tiny that have these tiny theatres and they're all doing okay because people feel a part of that theatre. And I think that maybe that was part of Circuit's power in the beginning, is that people felt very much a part of it. Audience members knew it, they were a part of it, and I don't know whether that will get lost. I think it's about time Memphis had a state of the art theatre other than the Orpheum or the Canon Center, I think it's about time...And I'm kind of hoping this state of the art theatre will stimulate more interest but it could also do the reverse, in order to stay open they may have to do what's safe. I don't know...

I DO want to say, that if it wasn't for Jackie there wouldn't be another theatre in town. I mean, he is the one who, his passion and his drive, he was not an actor, he tap dances, he wanted to produce theatre and that was his drive and he pushed and pushed and pushed and made it happen. And my hat is really off to him. We used to have all sorts of jokes about, you know, he will steal light bulbs from his mother's house, we all

did at that time. You know, my mother used to joke about she couldn't find clothes in her closet because they were being used as a costume somewhere.

So, but he really did, I mean it was his life and he pushed it. And because of that we have Circuit, we have Playhouse, we have TheatreWorks, we're getting ready to have a nice new building that he's doing...And many, many theatres across the country are closing their doors, it's like one a week. And so far [knocks on wood desk] we're not... Yeah he had a lot of people behind him and supporting him, but if it hadn't been for him it wouldn't have happened.

Jackie Nichols:

Definitely we've made an impact and yeah, we have developed an audience from the very beginning that says, here's who we are, we're going to do things that may shake you up but we're also going to do some things that you're just going to laugh and be entertained. But we're not going to not do the things that are going to shake up the community because some people want to see that. If you don't like it, don't come see it...

But we have developed an audience and we do shows that shut theatres down in other communities because they don't do it that way. We've developed an audience that [knows] this is who we are, this is what we do, if you don't like to see this thing don't see it, come and see *Peter Pan*, come and see something else. But occasionally people still stumble into the show for the wrong reasons, or unexpectedly, and they get offended and we get a letter. We try to respond to those people, but we're not going to not do things that are unique and different and cause people to think. And sometimes people don't want to think. They don't want to know what else is going on, their way is the only way. That's not who we are, that's not who we're ever going to be.

The community is kind of interesting. The audiences at Front Street Theatre were about the same kind of audiences we have now. Generally the audiences are, especially at the symphony and the opera and Theatre Memphis, are generally older audiences. The ballet and us, we have pretty much younger audiences and they're not afraid of experiencing new things but you really need both of those. You need the older, more mature audiences because quite honestly they've been around longer and those folks have more money. You know, they've developed their careers, their jobs, and they're able to financially keep the professional symphony, opera, ballet going. We need to have the support of the maturity, which generally what comes with that is money, but we don't want to be put in a narrow framework of only doing older, conservative kinds of things because if you're not growing you're dying. I've seen it happen over and over again, you know, the symphony is struggling now, how do you get younger audiences in when you're only doing old stuffy stuff?...

And audiences today, they support us pretty well, never as large as you would like. But people have so many more things that they have options of doing today, the technology has changed our options enormously. But people that really want to grow and have a real sense of place in the community and a sense of personal growth are not the people that want to spend 24/7 sitting in front of the computer. You can't ever in a computer get the range of emotions that can be achieved or experienced by sitting in a live theatre with 200 other people and we want to make sure that experience is available for those in our community that are ready to experience it.

Memphis and Circuit Playhouse, Inc. have built and strengthened a relationship with the hope that no matter what the future holds, that relationship will continue to grow with many

more audiences in the generations to come.

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