

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: NATIONAL THEATER OR PUBLIC THEATER: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE THEATRICAL GEOGRAPHY OF WASHINGTON, D.C., CIRCA 1970-1990

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NATIONAL THEATER OR PUBLIC THEATER: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE THEATRICAL GEOGRAPHY OF WASHINGTON, D.C., CIRCA 1970-1990 explores the changes in the theatrical landscape of the nation's capital. Using a paradigm of Theater of Commerce, Theater of Community, and Theater of the Public, the study examines the growth of theaters that began in the 1970s. The study combines theoretical approaches—Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jürgen Habermas' *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and others—to explore the meaning of theater generated by interactions among theaters, social spaces, publics, and media representations and simulations.

The study begins prior to the opening of the Kennedy Center when Theaters of Commerce and Community dominated the landscape. Washington's National Theater struggled in a declining downtown while amateur theaters boomed. Although Washington supported two regional theaters, they existed as anomalies within the larger framework.

The founding of the Kennedy Center and the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts signaled the beginning of government's support for theater. For two decades, Theaters of the Public struggled to redefine theater's significance. Using identity politics and the aesthetics of intimacy they developed unique publics. Media coped with this variety, acknowledging that theater's purpose was as varied as its audiences were. In the 1980s, the Center initiated the American National Theater and area theaters inaugurated the Helen Hayes Awards. These developments signaled the reemergence of a unified view of theater. The two projects suffered different fates, however. ANT failed in its bid to generate a national theater-going public, collapsing in less than two years. The awards just completed their twentieth year, significantly altering the meaning of the theater community. As the media's simulation of the theater-going public shifted from a diverse set of communities to one community—a community of sophisticated cultural consumers—the city's theaters faced growing pressure to compromise, replacing their own concerns with those of their national sponsors. Although Washington's theater artists continue to resist those demands, the socio-aesthetic implications of their work rarely is heard in the public sphere.

NATIONAL THEATER OR PUBLIC THEATER:  
THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE THEATRICAL GEOGRAPHY  
OF WASHINGTON, D.C., CIRCA 1970-1990

By

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## Preface

My work on this dissertation began in 1995 when I researched a small indigenous theater in a holler near Hinton, West Virginia, called EcoTheater. Because of circumstances beyond my control, I did not realize that dissertation; nevertheless, that work clarified two important ideas that would become crucial to this study. On the one hand, the impact that indigenous production has on local culture and the social meaning of theater cannot be underestimated. Communities that experience theater and performance as the product of outsiders do not develop an appreciation for theater's community building or socio-aesthetic aspects. Rather, they come to understand theater and performance, at best, as the art of the entertainer and, at worst, as that of the colonizer. On the other hand, my earlier work demonstrated to me that the significance of theater and performance cannot be apprehended without a thorough investigation of the producers' and the consumers' social milieus. Theater is an aesthetic object that interacts with the public in a variety of ways. Its temporal state defies reification. What a theater and/or its performances signify to one group of people is not what it will signify to another group of people. The signification changes as the publics change. Hence, the aesthetic power of indigenous production depends predominantly on the community from which, and for which, a theater is founded.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge a number of people for their help on this dissertation. To be sure, without the support and patience of Professor Catherine A. Schuler I would never have completed this study. Her advise, questions, and editorial instructions have been invaluable. I would also like to thank my wife, Elizabeth, for all of her assistance, and my two children, Maya and Dylan, for their independence. I will no longer be able to avoid home projects and repairs by asking the family “to wait until the dissertation is done.”

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## Chapter One

### WASHINGTON'S THEATER: COMMERCE, COMMUNITY, AND PUBLIC

The notion that, among all the arts, theater is the most responsive to shifting societal and cultural trends has become a commonplace within academic theatrical institutions. Indeed, when this maxim is viewed historically, many factors suggest such a connection. On the one hand, commercial theaters with their large auditoriums and expensive stars are dependent on people's expectations and tastes. On the other, neighborhood-centric theaters have never strayed far from the values of their participants, the families and friends who constitute the majority of each theater's audience. Such theaters respond to their communities' hopes and wishes, if not their highest ideals and deepest fears. As such, commercial and community theaters prove the assertion that theaters respond to changing cultural norms and beliefs. Of course, at certain times theaters have not so much embodied the aspirations of their communities as they have the interests of their patrons. Medieval church theaters, for example, furthered the worldview of Catholic Fathers more than the townsfolk who participated in their didactic performances. Yet, insofar as all powerful personages and institutions influence the worlds around them, and the people in those worlds emulate the values and ideals of their symbolic leaders, the maxim remains valid: theater and performances measure the changing attitudes and ideologies of their producing cultures.

Scholars have studied this relationship between society and theater, focusing primarily on periods of significant social and artistic turbulence and the reflexive relationship that theater and performance has with the culture's changing values. In *The*

*Theatre of the French Revolution*, for example, Marvin Carlson explores the power struggle that occurred in the Parisian theater between 1789 and 1799. During the period, “actors became weathercocks” for the ebb and flow of the French Revolution, signaling upheavals in theatrical leadership, style of production, and theme of script.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have also used revolution as a backdrop for theatrical investigations. In *The Theatre in America during the Revolution* Jared Brown examines performances and plays used by British and American loyalists because, as the author himself notes, the period represents “one of the only historical eras in which the theater was used by both sides to help achieve military and political objectives.”<sup>2</sup> Historians have not, however, limited their investigation of the relationship between society and theater to revolutionary periods. Empire and imperialism, revolution’s natural antitheses, have also drawn the attention of scholars. In *Theater and Empire: Great Britain on the London Stages under James VI and I*, Tristan Marshall examines both the politics of nation-building and the representations of empire found in Elizabethan dramatic texts; he concludes that the dramatic texts supported the kings’ desire to construct a United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Janette Dillon explores the same theatrical environment in *Court and City, 1595-1610: Drama and Social Space in London*, analyzing the relationship of Elizabethan theater to court and London politics.<sup>4</sup> Using Henri Lefebvre’s spatial theories, she examines the different

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Carlson, from the memoirs of Abraham-Joseph Fleury, “The Preface” of *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), v.

<sup>2</sup> Jared Brown, “Foreword” of *The Theatre in America during the Revolution* (Cambridge [England] and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Tristan Marshall, *Theater and Empire: Great Britain on the London Stages Under James VI and I* (Manchester [England] and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Janette Dillon, *Theater, Court, and City, 1595-1610: Drama and Social Space in London* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

ways Elizabethans experienced the theater, and then suggests how those experiences influenced their behavior and beliefs.

The theatrical culture of Washington, DC. the District of Columbia, circa 1970-1990, is also suitable for an investigation of the correspondence between a region's changing social, political, and economic structures and its theatrical apparatus. What makes the region particularly appropriate for an inquiry of this nature is that at that time the Capital of the United States actualized both revolutionary turmoil and imperial ambition. On the one hand, like many urban areas during the 1950s and 1960s, Washington's downtown commercial and entertainment center suffered historic declines in investment. These declines climaxed in 1968 during the uprising following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King when many commercial districts were laid to waste. Ironically, however, that destruction would later provide the catalyst for a construction boom in downtown Washington that would alter the region's economy and landscape radically. On the other hand, since the early 1900s, Washington's monumental core, its Federal City, had steadily progressed toward fulfilling its destiny as the symbolic capital of an American empire. Such ambitions not only helped fuel the city's economic and architectural rebirth in the post-Vietnam War era, but also extended the significance of Washington's symbolic capital beyond the city's regional geography. Equally important to this study is the fact that the region's theatrical culture experienced tremendous growth and development over the same two decades. Beginning with the institution of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the mid-1960s and following soon after with the construction of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1971, Washington's theater community grew exponentially, not only

in the quantity of professional and amateur theaters, architectures, and performances, but also in the size and breadth of audiences, patrons, and corporate supporters. Between 1970 and 1990, these factors made Washington a dynamic breeding ground for theater artists and production. Because Washington is both a local municipality and the nation's capital, theatrical production in the metro area made it possible to reconfigure theater's relationship not only to Washingtonians, but also to America's national public and the idea of theater's role in the nation's identity.

This study explores that dynamic period in the history of Washington's theatrical culture. During those twenty years the public's relationship to theater experienced numerous changes in signification. The public's understanding of theater, its meaning and function, altered when the government embraced the idea of public funding for the arts. A public that had become used to understanding its theaters as being either commercial or community organizations had to reconfigure its perceptions. No longer were theaters governed either by the marketplace or by the neighborhood; now individuals, foundations, organizations, corporations, and government agencies could fund and direct the public's experience of performance. As the public's perceptions of theater changed so too did its understanding of theater's significance, both as a cultural force and as a force in the daily lives of people. This study examines Washington's developing theatrical landscape and the changes in the meaning of theater that development provoked.

By the end of the twenty-century the United States had established itself as the hegemonic head of a unipolar world. Capable of fighting two major wars anywhere on earth, it was arguably the first nation with legitimate claims to be a global empire.

Although much has been written about the globalization of American culture, scholars have yet to explore in depth the nation's theater in relationship to its role as superpower. To be sure, theater historians have alluded to the nation's preeminence in the world. In *American Theatre in Context*, Arnold Aronson refers to the "story of America" in its post World War II euphoria as "entering a new phase, possibly a final chapter in which Manifest Destiny was to be achieved. In such a situation theater, indeed all the arts, would play a new role."<sup>5</sup> He speaks of American theater's redefined, yet diminished role in cultural life. No longer a unifier of a diverse people, theater has become a tool for exploring local political and social issues or for entertainment, a "leisure-time spectacle typified by the extravaganzas of Las Vegas, the circus, and theme parks."<sup>6</sup> Although images of Walt Disney's *The Lion King* may invoke cheers to Manifest Destiny fulfilled, it sheds little light on theater as most people commonly experience it. Rather, people appreciate and experience theater within the context of their daily lives; and it is within that context that theater gains its meaning and symbolic significance in the public mind.

Reasons for this void in scholarship are many. Scholars acknowledge that, since the rise of cinema and television, live performance has less importance in American culture than it once did. Artists associated with the Federal Theatre Project, for example, came under intense government scrutiny during the late 1930s because of their ability to mobilize people around dissident ideas—a scrutiny that led to the banning of plays and to the end of the Theater Project.<sup>7</sup> By the early 1950s, Hollywood, represented by the

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Aronson, *American Theater in Context: 1945-Present* in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, eds. Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge [England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998-2000), 87.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> The two most notable banned plays were *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Ethiopia*.

“Hollywood Ten,” became the new focal point of government action, whereas theaters and theater artists slipped, for the most part, out of sight and into obscurity. Theater and the arts have never played a critical role in the development of America’s cultural identity, which has always been decidedly popular in its orientation. Since the revolution, the United States has struggled to define its artistic heritage, so much so that Stanley Katz, former president of the American Council of Learned Societies, described what was most striking about the “history of arts in America” was “the complete divorce between the public and the arts.”<sup>8</sup> That divorce officially ended in 1965 with the establishment of the NEA. Even so, modern art and not theater received the bulk of the government’s attention, illustrating the fact that theater had lost its ability to respond swiftly to shifts in cultural values. Possibly, however, the scholarship void is best explained by a geographic fact. Unlike Paris or London, the United States has no single cultural, financial, and political capital that might measure the country’s geopolitical position and attitudes. Obviously, with its long history of financial and cultural prominence, New York City and Broadway can still stake a claim as the best measure of theater in American culture. Yet, the cultural significance of New York has declined in recent decades, so much so that some acknowledge that it is no longer “the cultural center of America, but the business and administrative center of American culture.”<sup>9</sup> Regardless, even though New York remains the most prominent signifier of American theater, the city has never achieved national or international political status, despite notions to the contrary that some New Yorkers might entertain. Neither can Los Angeles,

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley Katz, American Council for the Arts, *The Arts and Humanities Under Fire: New Arguments for Government Support* (New York: ACA, 1990), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Saul Bellow, BBC radio interview (published in *Listener*, London, 22 May 1969).

despite its growing economic and cultural power, assert that its identity has much to do with national politics. That claim rests solely with Washington, DC., which, since World War I has seen its identity shift from being the seat of a national, isolationist politics to the international iconic center of the “free world.” Yet, historically, the District has lacked an economic and cultural center of gravity that could rival its political identity, a void that prevented scholars from using Washington to gauge the nation’s shifting attitudes.

Over the last century, as Washington’s political capital increased, its economic shortcomings have been gradually addressed—particularly since the end of World War II. With increases in the size and scope of the federal government, the Washington bureaucracy moved from spending roughly 2.5 percent of the nation’s gross national product in 1913 to spending 22.5 percent by 1990.<sup>10</sup> With that increase Greater Washington experienced a concurrent influx of high wage professionals, a boom in downtown and suburban development, and a surge in private and public investment capital. The combined effect of these increases made the Greater Washington region one of the nation’s financial centers.

As Washington’s economic importance to the nation increased, Washingtonians began to witness significant developments in the city’s cultural infrastructure, especially within the theater community. By 1990 Washington had emerged as one of the leading theatrical markets in the country—a phenomenon that may have as much to do with changes in theater’s status locally as with increases in actual theatrical activity. In the

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<sup>10</sup> Randall G. Holcombe, “The Growth of the Federal Government in the 1920s,” *The Cato Journal* 16:2, (Fall, 1996), 175-196.

years prior to the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center, the city's theater community consisted of a number of venues: a half-a-dozen or so touring houses, an abundance of community and children's theaters, cabarets and dinner theaters, burlesques, summer stock companies and musical theaters, educational theaters, and two resident companies. As the 1980s closed, the sheer volume of theatrical activity per capita had probably changed only marginally. Although the number of touring venues had increased, the number of community and children's companies, summer stock and musical theaters had decreased as Washington's traditional summer season ceased to be profitable. Many of the alternative or experimental theaters that had emerged during the late 1960s had also disappeared, though for different reasons. Although cabarets and dinner theaters flourished, catering to urban and suburban clientele respectively, the burlesques had closed when their stripteases moved into smaller, more "intimate" clubs and, in the process, lost theatrical status. Educational theaters were still active, although the spotlight that had shown on them so brightly during the 1970s had dimmed. Government-supported theaters, which began with the opening of Ford's Theater in 1967, still functioned, though their bureaucrats had turned over artistic operations to nonprofit corporations.

The most significant change in Washington's theatrical geography was a dramatic increase in the number of producing theaters in Greater Washington that claimed professional status, from roughly two in the late 1960s to over forty by 1990.<sup>11</sup> These theaters had gained in status, in some cases relying on imported stars for recognition and

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<sup>11</sup> The number of theaters that participated in the Washington Theater Arts Society's Helen Hayes Awards in 1990, a society and awards program committed to the growth and development of professional theater in Washington since 1983.

prestige, while in others nurturing their own homegrown celebrities. In either case, Washington's theatrical culture had come of age. No longer relegated by reviewer, pundit, or the general public to "community" or "experimental" status, by the end of the 1980s area artists and producers could assert claims of prominence. Although such claims did not by any means equate Washington's theatrical prowess to New York's, they did suggest that the city's theatrical apparatus was no longer subservient to its northern neighbor but had achieved an independent identity.

Changes in Greater Washington's theater community, quantitatively and qualitatively, corresponded to the city's changing political, economic, and cultural status. These changes indicate an intricate web of local, national, and international interests and concerns, as well as competing ideas about the public and/or private sphere role that theater should play within Washington. Until 1972, the year that Congress granted the District home rule, not only was the city's local political identity ill defined, but it also lacked a centralized authority, which limited the local government's political agency. The federal government managed the city's affairs while the influence of multinational corporations, many of which had national offices in the District, wreaked havoc on the city's decision-making processes. This interference took place in all aspects of life, from the making of local laws to the assignment of police and firefighters.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the region's theatrical development was not exempt from manipulation by powerful interests. With the establishment of home rule in 1972 came a more concerted effort on the part of the residents of Washington to organize their city around their needs and interests. The identity of the District of Columbia had always been divided between those who asserted

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<sup>12</sup> Even after 1972 and the establishment of home-rule, the District of Columbia regularly has Congress and multinational interests intervene in its affairs.

that the city should only serve a national function and those who demanded that the rights of the local population should be respected. The establishment of home rule, which divided the political power in Washington between a congressional committee and a locally elected mayor and city council, not only made that dual identity more visible, but intensified it as well. The antagonism between the city's local and national purposes played a defining role in the development of the city's theater community.

Conversely, the broader national historical factors that organized changes in the city's theatrical landscape did not in themselves constitute decisive elements in the local construction of theater's significance. These broader forces furnished the context within which the public and theaters operated and responded to one another, and that context is important because it provides a frame of reference for understanding the transformations that occurred in the city's theatrical geography; but the theater's macro economic condition and national aesthetic development did not constitute the signifiers from which local publics constructed ideas about theater's relevance to their lives. When the federal government established the NEA, a process that fundamentally altered the nation's theatrical landscape was set in motion. The NEA and its foundation and corporate partners began the construction of a network of not-for-profit regional theaters throughout the country, The local manifestation of that transformation challenged Washingtonians to reconceive their theatrical universe, which heretofore had revolved around community and commercial theaters. They would now have to view theater as a strange hybrid, neither locally driven Theaters of Community nor large, capital-intensive Theaters of Commerce, but smaller, individually conceived, iconoclastic operations with

unique visions of performance. The construction of meaning depended on the local manifestation and interpretation of those changes.

Although the perceptions of local theater artists who lived and worked between 1970 and 1990 are valuable, particularly in context, they are not reliable sources of factual data about the condition of communities, theaters, audiences, missions, or theatrical achievements. Nor can the perceptions of audience members and/or members of the general public be depended on to provide a frame of understanding. Though provocative and occasionally astute, the ideas of artists, producers, and the general public rarely defined the condition of the medium; like fish describing their bowl, the reflections they see of the “ocean” beyond represent not their circumscribed universe, but their own aspirations, hopes, and desires. For not only did a small percentage of Washingtonians attend the theater, but also theater artists and producers rarely experienced the region’s overall theatrical universe, focused as they usually were on the actions and choices that generated their own theaters and performances. The inclination to reduce the construction of meaning to an exchange between audiences and their theaters and productions must also be resisted.

Rather, to chart the modulating significance of theater in Greater Washington as it developed over twenty years of growth and alteration requires a methodology that not only embraces the totality of Washington and Washingtonians, but also allows for expressions of differences between the city’s many neighborhoods and communities.<sup>13</sup> For each neighborhood related to theater differently, depending in large part on the

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<sup>13</sup> In this study a “neighborhood” refers to a population that is defined by its geography; a “community” refers to a population that shares a geography but that is defined by other attributes; a “public” refers to a population that is defined by particular attributes but that is not limited by geography.

neighborhood's socioeconomic condition, and each community gave theater a different cultural status, depending on that community's theater and performance history.

To arrive at and then decipher those experiences, the study's methodology must explore three correlated domains of interaction. The first domain includes the theaters themselves; they must be investigated as institutions with particular relations to the public and whose performances are acts of agency designed to elicit ideological responses. Their individual histories are less important to this study than their publicly expressed identities. The second domain consists of the social spaces in which the theaters operated, for they form the material foundations for those theaters as signifiers. The social space includes both the areas immediately adjacent to the theaters and the larger spheres of entertainment and social interactions within which theaters were focal points. The third domain contains the discourses, beliefs, evaluations, and representations of Washington's theatrical culture, however misguided or imaginary, that appeared in the public sphere and/or the Washington media.<sup>14</sup> In other words, in order to understand the exchange between Washington's theaters and its many neighborhoods, communities, and publics requires an approach to research that examines the interactions between and among the theaters, their contextualizing social spaces, and the public sphere and local media.

Before proceeding several concepts need clarification, especially the distinction between theater and performance. In this study, which examines the theatrical geography

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The "general public," on the other hand, refers to the Washington populace as it is shaped and defined by the media.

<sup>14</sup> The public sphere and the sphere of the media are two distinct domains of discourse that I explore later in the chapter. Again, as I am concerned primarily with the meaning of theater within the public's consciousness, or the construction of the public meaning of theater within the social sphere, my

of an entire city and region, the term “theater” refers not simply to an institution that engages in the production of performances. Rather, “theater” refers holistically to the entire complex of patterns and behaviors that are attributed to an institution’s sphere of influence. Over time, these patterns and behaviors contribute to the formation of an institutional identity. Thus, a theater’s identity consolidates the meaning not only of performances and programs, but also of a theater’s venue and architectural presence within the larger culture. Constituting that presence is not only the venue’s façade and place within the larger urban design, but also the social activities associated with performances and programs, which include everything from dining out after a show to the appearance of gentrification that accompanies the opening of a new theater. Theater includes audiences that attend individual performances or that participate in specific programs as well as the public that has developed connections to a theater through its presence in a neighborhood. As Dell Upton states in *Holy Things and Profane*, his investigation of Anglican churches in colonial Virginia: “To build a church was to build the world—not a model of the world or an image of it.”<sup>15</sup> In similar ways, to found a theater was to establish a community and to define a public.

In this study the concept of “performance” refers specifically to a theater’s presentation of an imaginary, actor-centered world intended for an audience. Clearly, to treat performance as a sub-set of theater, one element in a broader, more inclusive institutional identity, runs counter to prevailing theories of performance. On the one hand, the choice to limit “performance” in this way is merely practical. Theater refers to

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concern is not so much with the distinctions between these two interacting domains, but rather the fact that these two paradoxical domains interact.

<sup>15</sup> Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia* (New York: The MIT Press, 1986), xxi.

an institution whereas performance to a production. On the other, because this study explores the broader impact of theatrical institutions, spaces, and performances on the public, it is more important to reserve for “theater” those ideas that associate theatrical phenomena to the processes and patterns of every day life.<sup>16</sup>

Because theater includes more than a narrowly defined institution engaged in the production of performances, it is important to consider what is meant by the concept of a corresponding social space. Henri Lefebvre theorized the concept of social space in its subjective and objective aspects.<sup>17</sup> In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre represents “social space” four dimensionally. On the one hand, space is generated through a triadic interaction of material spatial practices, representations of space through various media, and symbolic representational spaces. Lefebvre acknowledges the intrinsic affinity between the structural organization of space and the kinds of human activities that occur within space. He also recognizes that, to understand the impact of social space on subjects, the spatial code that informs an urban geography with meaning must be deciphered. That code “brings together verbal signs (words and sentences, along with the meaning invested in them by a signifying process) and non-verbal signs (music, sounds, evocations, architectural constructions).”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, a social space must be understood diachronically, for it does not exist as a static entity. Space and its definition

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<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, of significance to this study are the performance theories of Erving Goffman, particularly those articulated in *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life* (Garden City, New York: Double Day, 1959) and *Frame Analysis: an Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> Although Henri Lefebvre has written many books dealing with space, the most influential and the one this study uses is *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1991).

<sup>18</sup> *The Production of Space*, 48.

are volatile, as they are constructed in, and through, time.<sup>19</sup> Although spatial designs resist the impact of change, in postmodern capitalist society the manipulation of image and information makes rapid spatial transformation credible. In such an environment, though more rigid than its representation, social space embodies a protean agency. The fact that this study explores the interaction of theater and performance within social space only heightens this protean component. Through performance, a theater manufactures its own temporal imagined spaces that are linked to the larger material space by function. If the symbolic effect of those temporal, performative spaces is great enough, it can have an impact on the larger social space through the psychological subject.

Theater's more permanent iconography, its theatrical architecture, plays a major role in the construction of identity; but when investigating theater within a social space and within a larger theatrical geography, that importance should not be overvalued. In *Places of Performance* Marvin Carlson analyzes the architectural semiotics of urban theaters. Though acknowledging that "the meaning of an event depends to some extent upon its context, the way in which it is related to other events and to a cultural milieu," Carlson focuses almost entirely on the theatrical façade and its "wide variety of social meanings."<sup>20</sup> Architecture is but one facet, however, in the construction of social meaning. Of equal importance are not only the various activities and behaviors of people as they relate to each architecture, but also the value placed on those activities within the city's larger socioeconomic situation. For example, in 1970 only a few high-priced shops and restaurants surrounded the National Theater in a decaying downtown Washington.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>20</sup> Carlson, Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: the Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5 and 8.

Most of the cultural activity in downtown after dark occurred in relationship to the city's booming pornography trade. That spatially associated activity had a profound impact on the National's identity, circa 1970. Conversely, several decades earlier a booming first run movie culture had dominated downtown, generating long lines, celebrity events, and upscale, mostly white audiences. In that social space, the National and its low-key façade projected a different significance, more apropos to its long history of presidential and congressional attendance at nightly shows and special galas. In turn, such images greatly affected the general public's perception of theater as a whole.

Outside the professional theater world, in the basements and community centers that defined much of Washington's, and indeed most cities' theatrical culture, the interpretation of an absent theatrical architecture is more difficult. In these social spaces, the meaning of theater has nothing to do with associations that the public makes to architecture, save for the lone banner or icon placed on a sidewalk window or above a door. In these situations, the theatrical is rendered invisible, save for the activities that theater artists performed for the public in public spaces and the sounds that permeated the walls to the streets outside. The invisibility of theater within its social space cannot be ignored, however; it must be incorporated as a signifier within the construction of meaning.

Because the District of Columbia played a crucial role in shaping the significance of the city's theatrical community, it is important to establish a preliminary understanding of the city's geography and its most important socio-economic indicators. The tension between Washington's function as a national capital and its function as a provider of services to a local population has deep historic and spatial roots. On the one hand, in the

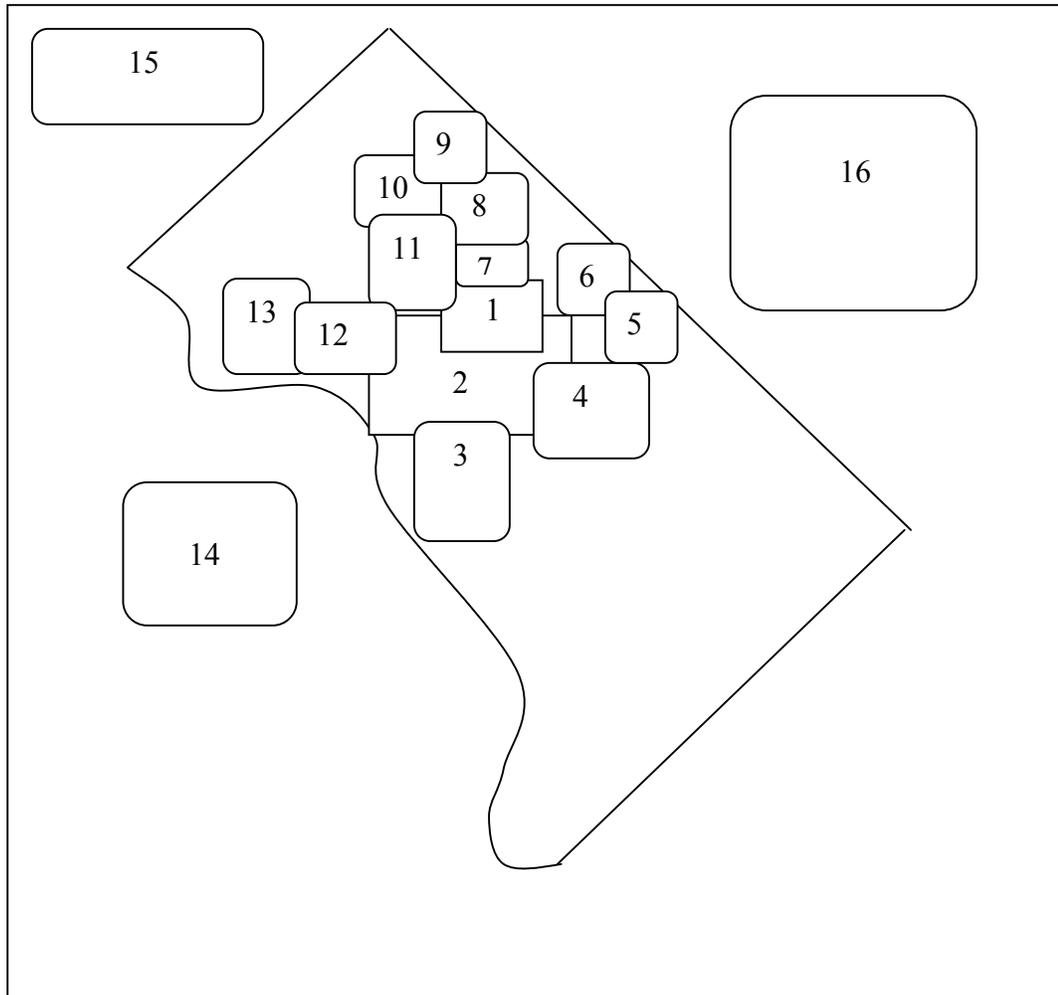
twentieth-century Washington's downtown and federal enclave (or monumental core) signified the Federal City spatially. On the other hand, residential neighborhoods and smaller, more neighborhood-centric commercial districts have embodied Washington's local identity.<sup>21</sup> Although neighborhoods such as Shaw, Capital Hill, Georgetown, and Adams Morgan have played an important role in the growth of Washington's theater community, several other neighborhoods merit special mention. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Dupont Circle, Foggy Bottom, and U Street-Cardozo were identified by the theatrical activity occurring within their borders [See Figure #1].

Although most urban areas struggled with issues of race and class during the 1970s and 1980s, Washington's neighborhoods experienced dramatic changes in their racial and economic indicators. A city that was 64.6 percent white and 35% African American in 1950 became 27.7 percent white and 71.1 percent African American by 1970. When combined with the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, these changes elevated the public's awareness of race not only in the Washington area but also in the nation. The media in particular began to elevate the importance of race as a signifier of neighborhood identity. As Washington became more race-conscious, the city also became increasingly polarized along class lines as well. Because the media focused the public's attention on the city's racial and economic divisions, neighborhoods became associated with these divisions. As a result, during the 1970s and 1980s Washington's theater community responded to the city's racial and economic tensions. Although race and class play a leading role in the construction of identity in this study, their importance

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<sup>21</sup> For more information on the early history of the District of Columbia see Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: a History of the Capital, 1800-1950* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976) and *The Secret City: a History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967).

## Greater Washington



**Figure 1: Selected neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. (Drawing: Michael Oliver)**

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|--------------------------|--|
| 1. Downtown              | 9. Brightwood  |
| 2. Monumental Core       | 10. Adams Morgan                                     |
| 3. Southwest Water Front | 11. Dupont Circle                                    |
| 4. Capital Hill          | 12. Foggy Bottom                                     |
| 5. Brookland             | 13. Georgetown                                       |
| 6. Edgewood              | 14. Virginia: Arlington,,<br>Alexandria, and Fairfax |
| 7. Shaw                  | 15. Montgomery County                                |
| 8. U Street/ Cordoza     | 16. Prince George's Country                          |

does not diminish the significance of other factors in the overall configuration of identity. For example, gender, ethnicity, and (to a lesser extent) sexual orientation were vital factors in the public's and the media's understanding of the city's diverse theater community during the period. Thus, identity becomes a complex quilt of signifiers; though certain signifiers tend to dominate the pattern during certain periods, others continue to influence the overall design. As Lynn Weber states in *Understanding, Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*: "the meaning of race, class, gender, and sexuality is contested in struggles for ideological, political, and economic power and is constructed simultaneously at the macro social structural (society and community) and micro social psychological (family and individual) levels."<sup>22</sup> In 1970 the nation's capital was predominantly African American, female, and economically polarized; its theaters, on the other hand, remained predominantly white, male, and economically privileged. The array of theaters that emerged during the next two decades created a theatrical geography that publicly expressed fluctuations in the race and class tensions embedded in Washington's social space.

The degree to which a particular social space, its theatrical architecture, and its performances allow for the production of public discourse and, hence, public meaning is of great importance to this study. For that reason, public sphere theory informs the analysis of theater's meaning and function in society. Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* demonstrates, in many ways, the demise of the public sphere as a viable force for positive change in contemporary life.<sup>23</sup> The increasing

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<sup>22</sup> Lynn Weber, *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: a Conceptual Framework* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001), 30.

<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989).

totalitarianism of modern capitalism makes a liberated public sphere nearly incomprehensible and unimaginable. In the postmodern world, the basis for rational discourse with universalizing potential has been, for all practical purposes, infected with multiple voices from numerous sectors of the public. Paradoxically, this cacophony of voices has given greater clarity and importance to the idea that the public sphere should not center on a single chord of privileged discourse; in a democratic society it should consist of a multifaceted set of interlocking voices or centers representing publics each with their own concerns and issues. Thus, as many writers have articulated, within these smaller public spheres rational discourses generate the basis for a rejuvenated national politics.<sup>24</sup> The problem arises when that discourse is organized into a socially recognizable national milieu. At such moments, "to privilege the subject, even in multiple voices, is not enough."<sup>25</sup> At such moments, it becomes apparent that the concept of the subject needs to be rethought along intersubjective lines. Those intersubjective lines, however, require a level of sophistication and articulation that society has yet to acquire.

Ironically, the media—both the mass media and, to a lesser extent, the local print media—have become a simulacra of this infected public sphere that is lacking

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<sup>24</sup> See Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1993); Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) and *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, trans. by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> Norma Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism" in Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Ute Foundation Books, 1990), 366.

intersubjectivity and multiple voices, even as it insinuates their possibility.<sup>26</sup> As such the media has become what Habermas describes as “a public sphere in appearance only” because, even though it appears to address the major political issues of contemporary life, it has lost its ability to articulate those issues freely and without constraints.<sup>27</sup> The media’s simulated public sphere does not require the referents that supposedly justify its existence. The media and its machinations have become a hyperreality, a virtual dimension upon which formulations of identity are nevertheless based. Given these attributes, which are truer of the electronic mass media than the print media, the media apparatus becomes a lens in which a person can see the workings of a public sphere even as the meanings and realities of those workings become absorbed by the apparatus. In this sense, what the media produces is no longer representation, but rather simulacra, a depiction that no longer requires the existence of a referent. As the public experiences both theater apparatus and social space primarily through this simulacra, the public’s understanding of theater and social space becomes less about their “reality” and more about their simulation. Hence, the media’s simulation becomes self-referential—a hyperreality upon which the public imagines both theater and performance, objectively and subjectively.

The media’s coverage of Washington’s theaters and the neighborhoods that supported them contributes a crucial element to the triadic structure of social space as well as that of the theater apparatus and the public. Its coverage of those neighborhoods

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<sup>26</sup> Jean Baudrillard defines “simulacra” and “simulation” in “The Precession of Simulacra,” trans. Sheila Faria Glasser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). Simulation refers to “the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” A simulacrum is, on the other hand, the byproduct of that generation. A simulacrum is a model for which there is no original, particularly when the model assumes the authority of an original.

<sup>27</sup> *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 171.

and their theaters through feature stories, interviews, reviews, advertisements, photographs, calendar listings, and the like, established a valuable source for the codification of the theatrical apparatus and accompanying social space. This media milieu gave Washingtonians a mental structure within which to organize their experience of theater, both in relationship to performances and to themselves as theater-going publics. Like a reflection in a fishbowl, however, the face the fish sees does not curve by its own design, but by the design of the glass that confines it. In other words, the media's simulacra—this glass—organized the public's perception of theater and performance; in the process, however, the media influenced the codes that the public needed to understand theater and performance. This reflexive design proved vital to the construction of theater's meaning within social space.

The public's understanding of Washington theater depended to a large extent on the media's theatrical simulacra—a theatrical framework that helped the public differentiate between theaters. This framework worked in conjunction with the various social spaces inhabited by theaters. The framework did not suggest that each type of theater existed estranged from other types or that each social space had no relation to other spaces; but hundreds of theaters were founded, flourished, and died during the twenty years of this study. Each theater had its own set of socioeconomic circumstances; each had its own repertoire of performances and offered its community or public a unique experience of the theatrical apparatus. For example, in 1970 alone, a newcomer to Washington who scanned the calendar listings, reviews, advertisements, audition notices, gossip columns, etc. of *The Washington Post* over a two or three week period would have

encountered an enormous list of theaters.<sup>28</sup> When that activity is viewed without regard to distinctions between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” or “professional,” “amateur,” “dinner,” and the like, the array boggles the mind. In other words, theater existed in almost every neighborhood in Washington and its performances occurred almost everywhere.<sup>29</sup>

The evolving relationship of media to each theatrical instrument and to the social spaces in which performances occurred had a profound influence on the survival of individual theaters. The media must not, however, be treated as a monolithic block. As with Habermas’ concept of the public itself, the idea of a unified, singular media would be both misleading and a canard.<sup>30</sup> For except in homogeneous societies and periods, social structures and their institutions have been relatively fluid. In post World War II

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<sup>28</sup> The following list could have continued for several pages, if I had not decided to hold theater associated with high school and junior high production in abeyance. Back Alley Theater, Fairlington Players, the National Theater, Hartke Theater, Cedar Knoll Inn Dinner Theater, Smithsonian Puppet Theater, George Washington Players, On-Stage Dinner Theater, Colony Seven Dinner Theater, Clendenen Theater, Tawes Theater, Trinity Theater, Arlington Theater Associates, Gayety, Little Theater of Alexandria, Burn Brae Dinner Theater, Black Circus Theater, Arena Stage, Shady Grove Music Fair, Dunbarton Players, Montgomery Players, Children’s Theater of Washington, Olney Theater, Candlelight Cabaret Theater, Theater Lobby, Black Repertory Theater, Ford’s Theater, Earth Onion, Street 70, The Reston Players, Diadem Dinner Theater, Saint Alban’s Repertory Theater, Suburban House Dinner Theater, Foundry Players, Chevy Chase Players, Metropolitan Experimental Theater, Little Theater of Rockville, Twin Bridges Dinner Theater, Mount Vernon Players, Villa Rosa Dinner Theater, Silver Spring Stage, Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts, Washington Theater Club, The Silver Slipper, Mask and Bauble, Polemic Theater, Garland Dinner Theater, Kreeger Theater, Folger Theater Group, Frederick H. Hughes Memorial Theater, Great Falls Players, Adventure Theater, Lisner Auditorium....

<sup>29</sup> Again, theater took place in an array of spaces: in churches, synagogues, and cathedrals, in community centers and basements, in the Halls of Congress, in protest marches, on street corners and on make-shift stages in alleys, in restaurants and warehouses, in carriage houses converted into “pocket theaters” for intimate gatherings, and in structures, i.e., theaters, designed specifically for performances—both on stage and the silver screen. I will discuss the conflation of those two forms in the public mind in Chapter 2.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy Fraser has challenged Habermas’ concept of a unified public sphere. She has theorized the public sphere as a network of counter-publics organized by “opposing social movements with conflicting interpretations of social needs,” Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 135. Many other theorists have also explored a differentiated public sphere. See Craig Calhoun, ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1993).

America, and even more so in Greater Washington from 1970 through 1990, a highly politicized and increasingly multicultural populace defied the veneer of unity. An emergent postmodernism produced dozens of smaller newspapers, weeklies and monthlies, each transmitting a unique perspective to the public at large. As a result, like many other concepts related to the public and to society as a whole, the concept of theater in particular, and of the arts in general, became increasingly contentious. Thus, even though the mass media may have presented the appearance of a unified public sphere, in the case of the smaller print media that appearance had multiple shades and contours in which differentiated voices spoke.

In 1970, the Washington media milieu consisted of three components. Besides the area's major television stations, Washington had three major dailies, *The Washington Post*, *The Daily News*, and *The Washington Star*, which maintained readerships throughout greater Washington.<sup>31</sup> Later, in the 1980s, after *The Daily News* and *The Star* ceased publication, *The Washington Times* began operations. Despite the fact that over the two decades of this study the perspectives of the major dailies have become more nuanced on theater, those perspectives have remained fairly consistent. The major dailies viewed theater as social entertainment, more driven by glitz and celebrity than by art or social concerns. The area's smaller dailies and community weeklies provided alternative perspectives on theater's relationship to society. These smaller presses included *The Washington Blade*, *The Georgetown*, *Off our Backs*, *The Washington Afro-American*, *The D.C. Gazette*, *The Washington City Paper*, *The Informer*, and various Latino

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<sup>31</sup> For the purposes of this study, television and its coverage will be considered in block. Although each of the three major stations (ABC, NBC, and CBS) and the public station had theater critics during the late 1970s and early 1980s the approach of each station tended toward the commercial theater audience. My research concentrates on print media: newspapers and magazines.

periodicals beginning in the late 1970s. Driven by gender, race, ethnicity, and political persuasion as well as local neighborhood interests, they created the appearance of multiple public spheres, distinct from the homogenizing voice of major media. This fabric of voices not only directed and shaped Washington's communities, but also narrated a tale of a diverse theatrical apparatus with many functions and goals.

These multiple perspectives, based on a variety of narrative and ideological factors, create a problem of identification. The intent of this study to examine the function of theater within social space lessens the need for those identifications. To be sure, a medium's presentation of news represents the agency of that outlet and its desired relationship to the public. In fact, a media outlet's simulation of reality has a profound effect on which sector of the public that outlet will attract. When investigating social space, the agency of the public becomes more evident at the local level. As publics choose particular expressions of the media through which to receive their theater, a convergence occurs between the ideologies and narratives of the publics, the theaters, and the media. A self-selection process occurs that renders ideological distinctions less important.

Those sectors of the public who were excluded from the matrixes of theater or media, or who found their interests and identities strangely depicted in either or both, create a different kind of analytical problem. Although marginalized publics can contest for space socially and in the media through protests and other, more provocative devices, they face insurmountable obstacles when their goal is to have their agendas and experiences accepted as more than the grumblings of private or "special" interest groups. Within the context of social space, their exclusion from, or distortion in, the media need

not be problematized, however. For in the context of social space, the representational dimension is an acknowledged aspect of the larger process of identification. Hence, if contradictions exist between a public's or a theater's own understanding of identity, on the one hand, and the media's simulation of that identity, on the other, the construction of the public meaning of theater depends on both dimensions. If a group or a theater had no presence in the media's hyperreality, that absence spoke with equal veracity. The social space in which a theater and a public participated included the agencies of all and, in the process, rendered those agencies equally subjugated within the larger triangulation.

Washington's theatrical apparatus inhabited three distinct spheres of human activity: the sphere of commerce, the sphere of community, and an emergent sphere of the public.<sup>32</sup> Although in 1970 Washingtonians considered the commercial sphere the most legitimate of the three, the community sphere was, by far, the most active. Several national studies of theater in the United States during the 1960s support this assertion of the abundance of community theater, locally and nationally. Both a Rockefeller panel report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects* (1965) and a National Theatre Conference study, *Theater in America: Appraisal and Challenge* (1968) affirm that amateur "theatrical enterprises now number about 40,000 and have increased by about 15 percent in the last ten years."<sup>33</sup> *Theater in America* extended the figure, saying if "all

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<sup>32</sup> My use of "commercial" and "community" as categories of theater and space seems clear enough. My use of "sphere of the public" needs greater explanation, however. By calling the sphere of the public emergent I do not mean to imply that a public sphere was present during the 1970s; nor does it suggest that the theaters necessarily participated in a public sphere. The public sphere articulated by Habermas predates 1970 by 200 years. The idea of publicly financed theater, which was emerging in the late 1960s, indicated the possibility of a re-emergent public sphere. As Theater of the Public reformulated the idea of theater, it offered space for political debate. Additionally, although the use of only three spheres of theatrical activity simplifies the theatrical landscape, I acknowledge a variety of experiences offered by each sphere to both the theater-going and non-theater-going public alike.

<sup>33</sup> *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), 13.

local clubs, churches, camps, social and civic groups, and other organizations that put on dramatic presentations” were counted, the number might very well rise to 80,000.<sup>34</sup>

Those studies, however, bemoan the qualitative condition of American performing arts organizations in general and theatrical organizations in particular. Both studies conclude that without additional resources theater could not advance from amateur to professional status. Moreover, without such advancement, theater would never achieve its cultural and artistic goals, which the studies expressed in both vague and grandiose terms. *The Performing Arts* even borrowed from a speech by John F. Kennedy who said that the goal of the arts was nothing short of the establishment of “the basic human truths.”<sup>35</sup>

Encouraged and supported by these and other studies, and with cooperation and financial assistance from major foundations and corporations, the federal government through the NEA fostered and directed the growth of Washington’s Theater of the Public. Far from being a theatrical desert, as many Washingtonians cried, Washington stood on the verge of a theatrical renaissance that would place the city behind New York and alongside Chicago and Los Angeles as one of the country’s most active theatrical centers.

These three categories of theater—Theater of Commerce, Theater of Community, and Theater of the Public—contended with each other for social and media space throughout the two decades of this study. In the mid-1960s Theater of Commerce and Theater of Community shared Washington’s theatrical geography. Theater of Commerce defined a performance’s relationship to the public in traditional terms as a “night on the town.” Theater of Community’s significance should not be dismissed, however. The

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<sup>34</sup> Robert E. Gard, Marston Balch, and Pauline Temkin, *Theater in American: Appraisal and Challenge* (Madison: Dembar Educational Research Services, Inc. 1968), 40.

<sup>35</sup> *The Performing Arts*, (from a speech by president John F. Kennedy delivered at Amherst College, 1963), 4.

number of people who participated in the various kinds of Theater of Community is significant. At these theaters, non-professionals experienced not just the labor of performance, but also the full meaning of theater as a shared activity. Although Theater of the Public existed prior to 1970, it had not yet entered public consciousness as a substantially different experience. As Theater of the Public emerged during the 1970s, the three types of theater reached a tenuous equilibrium.

Though small in comparison to the other categories, Theater of Commerce consisted of several important institutions. With the National Theater and its then 135-year history of almost continuous performance, the city possessed one of the leading sites for Broadway tryouts and road shows in the country. Its actors, celebrity performers, and audience members captured local headlines and, as a result, occupied theater's inner sanctum in the public imaginary.<sup>36</sup> For years the National had little in the way of competition for the area's commercial theater dollar. The long time home of black vaudeville, the Howard Theater, had struggled for years to keep its doors open despite its neighborhood's economic slump. Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, uprisings devastated the theater's Shaw neighborhood, and Washington's Black Broadway closed two years later. In suburban Maryland, the Shady Grove Music Fair opened under a large tent in 1962. Five years later, it completed construction of a 3000-seat in-the-round theater to house its large-scale events. Although Shady Grove specialized in musical performers and groups, its repertoire included Hollywood stars showcased in Broadway musicals. Finally, white flight from the city, which began

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<sup>36</sup> I use Jacques Lacan's term "imaginary" in coordination with public to suggest a state of consciousness that is normative and everyday, not symbolic or apprehending of the real. Within the imaginary, representations and simulations coexist without regard.

during the 1950s, fueled a nascent dinner theater movement that began in Maryland in 1968.<sup>37</sup> Although dinner theater combined aspects of both commercial and community theater, it primarily fulfilled a commercial purpose. Large-scale performances by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and Walt Disney's IceCapades regularly visited Washington, either at the DC Armory or at the Merryweather Post Pavilion. Though clearly commercial performances, these spectacles were associated not with theaters but with other venues in the Washington area; thus, they are excluded from this study.

Although each Theater of Commerce was different, it is possible to identify certain common characteristics. Theater of Commerce usually presented performances in large theatrical structures that were either situated in downtown and suburban commercial districts or in structures such as sports arenas and performance centers that were microcosms of commercial districts. Usually surrounded by shops and restaurants, this kind of theater provided performances that were part of the traditional "good night out." A meal, a performance that was usually imported, and a few after-dinner drinks constituted the total experience. A fully professional staff, from actors to ushers, insured that well-dressed audiences were offered an evening's entertainment that was organized around celebrities. As "a system for valorizing meaning and communication," the celebrity insured the event's significance even if the public found the celebrity event

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<sup>37</sup> Dinner Theater remains a difficult theater to classify. Although it was, and is, clearly a theater defined by its combination of food and performance, its organizational structures varied widely in the early years, particularly as related to the performance aspects of their organization. Some dinner theaters seemed little different from Theaters of Community; others seemed to share a great deal in common with Theaters of the Public. All were primarily concerned with commercial gains, however, even if that commerce was more deeply rooted in the alimentary aspects of their structures than in their performances.

wanting.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the celebrity's larger-than-life persona guaranteed that the audience would remember the event for many evenings to come. As a category of Theater of Commerce, dinner theater proved the exception in many respects. Though still fulfilling the traditional night on the town, offering dinner and after-show drinks in the same venue, dinner theater did not take place in large venues and frequently did not use a fully professional cast of actors or celebrities. Nevertheless, even with its hybrid nature, dinner theater served a commercial function.

Washington's Theater of Community offered evidence for the claim that "the amateur-volunteer movement is extremely widespread and profuse in the United States."<sup>39</sup> In the 1930s, Washington fostered numerous neighborhood-minded or church-affiliated theaters that drew their inspiration from Theater of Commerce.<sup>40</sup> As the suburbs expanded and the population increased, the public demanded more culture, which led in turn to new Theaters of Community, each serving residents in their immediate vicinity. By 1970 more than a hundred Theaters of Community were spread throughout the metropolitan area with their highest concentrations in middle class urban and suburban neighborhoods. They operated in churches and community centers and even in structures designed for live theatrical entertainment.

Because Theater of Community consisted of such an immense variety of theatrical organizations, it is important to acknowledge and analyze them through a number of sub-categories. First, many Theaters of Community operated in association

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<sup>38</sup>P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), x.

<sup>39</sup> *Theater in America*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> It is important to note that Washington's community theaters were not the amateur theaters envisioned by Robert Gard in *Grassroots Theater in America*. In his concept of community theater local artists generate performances that embody the culture of the producing community.

with or under the sponsorship of a church or institution of government. Those associations affected the public's understanding of them and their significance, making it important to analyze the theater and the sponsor jointly. Second, the largest and most widespread Theater of Community was the traditional community theater. These theaters were usually organized by a group of community residents, who then moved the company into a neighborhood-supported venue. The most successful community theaters founded their own independent venues. The final type of Theater of Community is the educational theater. Like state and church-affiliated groups, these theaters relied on educational institutions to provide them with funding and direction. Most of the oldest producing theaters in the area were Theaters of Community, including the Howard University's Howard Players (1907), Chevy Chase Players (1922), Little Theater of Alexandria (1936), the theater at Catholic University (1937), and the Mount Vernon Players (1937).

Washington's Theaters of the Public emerged in the late 1960s, drawing most of their early public support from Washington's artistic and professional communities and from those segments of the public traditionally excluded from theatrical culture. As mentioned above, public money fueled the formation of a professional resident theater network. Educational theaters were training more directors, actors, designers, stage managers, etc. in the craft of production. The social unrest generated by the Civil Rights and Anti-war Movements fostered a desire for theater associated with social change and identity politics. Finally, and this is particularly true in Greater Washington, the federal government began involving itself in the production and/or sponsorship of theater. Though ill defined in 1970, this new kind of theatrical organization competed with

Theater of Commerce and Theater of Community not just for space in Washington's theatrical landscape but also for prominence. As Theater of the Public found that space, it struggled within itself to construct a coherent, sustainable collective identity out of its many threads.

Like Theater of Community, Theater of the Public consists of a variety of theatrical organizations with a variety of socio-aesthetic visions and functions. As a result, categorizing these theaters into a meaningful arrangement proves difficult. Each theater not only possessed many nuances of purpose but also evolved over time and, in the process, shed one identity only to construct a new one. Nevertheless, a tension emerged between those Theaters of the Public with visions inspired by social concerns and those with visions focused on aesthetic issues. In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* Renato Poggioli describes this socio-aesthetic spectrum as “the relationship between the artistic and political avant-garde.”<sup>41</sup> Although few of Washington's theaters could rightly be considered avant-garde, Poggioli's distinction between art as an instrument of culture and art “as an instrument of social action and reform” proves useful.<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, Theaters of the Public that considered their missions as cultural described themselves in artistic terms. They might have sympathized with—or even participated in—social change; but they sought a theater-going public more appreciative of aesthetic than social factors.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Theaters of the Public that were guided by a desire for social action must be divided into two sub-groups. The first group sought an identity

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<sup>41</sup> Renato Poggioli, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 12.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Although a theater's chosen aesthetic has social ramifications both for the theater and its public, for the purposes of this investigation, those consequences shall not be problematized.

associated with one or another of the counter-publics operating in Washington during the 1960s and 1970s. Their performances were intended to affect social change. The second sub-group was founded by agencies of the federal government. These theaters were committed to serving the interests of the government; they were national theaters designed to construct a national public.

Theaters of the Public organized around aesthetic principles are classified in this study as small theaters because their common aesthetic principle lay in their shared belief in the aesthetics of intimacy.<sup>44</sup> This aesthetic had two important roots. On the one hand, most Theaters of the Public had humble beginnings, founded on the beliefs of relatively few people. As a result, not only did these theaters use small performance venues but also the size of their theater-going publics began, and usually remained, tiny in comparison with larger theatrical institutions. On the other hand, although many of the theater artists who founded Theaters of the Public did not initially understand the aesthetics of intimacy, after several years of practicing it they discovered its benefits and power. Not only did their frequently untrained or inexperienced actors benefit from not having to project great distances, but also, because of the closeness of actor to audience, the details and nuances of live performance could rival those of film. That intensity of experience made the aesthetics of intimacy a unique, identifiable quality that small theaters used to differentiate themselves from both Theaters of Commerce and Community. This study concentrates on a number of small theaters, the most important being New Playwrights Theater, the Folger Theater, Studio Theater, and Source Theater.

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<sup>44</sup> Several Theaters of the Public whose initial public identities were as small theaters did not remain so, over time transforming into larger institutions. I deal with this phenomenon in the body of the study.

This study classifies Theaters of the Public that were organized around counter-publics as identity theaters because of their close association with identity politics.<sup>45</sup> The emergence of identity theaters began in the late 1960s. In these early years, identity theaters primarily addressed the concerns of the Civil Rights, Anti-War, or Women's Movements, from which they gathered much of their energy and support. By the mid-1970s, identity theaters also included companies that addressed the needs and interests of Washington's Latino community. This study focuses on several identity theaters, including the Back Alley Theater, the area's first identity theater, the D.C. Black Repertory Theater, Pro Femina Theater (which later changed its name to Horizons Theater), and Gala Hispanic Theater.

The final category of Theater of the Public is the government-sponsored theater. Fords Theater was the first, opening in 1967; it was followed in 1970 by the Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts. The significance of those two institutions could not, however, rival that of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. As a result, this study deals exclusively with the Kennedy Center.

Washington Theater that operated as an instrument of the public is more difficult to define than either Theater of Commerce or Theater of Community because it was still in an inchoate stage of its development. As a result, this type of theater was extremely protean in its nature as it continually adapted to changing socio-economic circumstances. Nevertheless, certain traits remained relatively consistent over the years. Theaters of the Public operated as not-for-profit corporations. While theaters that acted as instruments of

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<sup>45</sup> For a detailed discussion of identity politics, its strengths and weaknesses, see Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994).

commerce based their decisions on economic viability, Theaters of the Public could more frequently make decisions pursuant of non-economic objectives, depending on the amount of resources they had available through private, corporate, foundation, or government agencies. Theaters of the Public relied on the munificence of the public for donations and volunteerism. Consequently, their theater-going publics asserted a good deal of influence on their decision- making processes. Yet, unlike Theater of Community, which pandered to the tastes and fantasies of neighborhood supporters, Theaters of the Public developed systems of patronage that extended far beyond a theater's immediate geography. As a result, they did not depend on neighborhood residents for support. Rather, they constructed a public based on non-geographical, identifying agents. With staffs consisting of a combination of professionals, apprentices, and amateurs, Theaters of the Public had the freedom and the expertise to explore social, political, and aesthetic contradictions, in the hopes of stimulating rational, enlightened discourse about pressing issues—whether local, national, or global. Without Broadway's mystique or the celebrity it engenders, this discourse presented a significant dilemma: in Washington, the social milieu in which theater functioned was relatively narrow. For the most part it was defined by the dominant Theaters of Commerce and Community and their media allies. Because Theaters of the Public viewed their audiences neither as consumers of culture, nor as participants in the creation of culture, but rather as shareholders in a discourse on culture, if they were to survive those nascent years, they had to reconstruct the public's perception of theater. Such a reconstruction required Theaters of the Public not only to acquire space in the media but also to reorient the social space allowed for theater. In such a reorganized social space, Theaters of the

Public would have a greater influence on spatial practices and on how the media represented space. They would also become representational spaces in themselves. As such, Theaters of the Public would help define the very neighborhoods in which they resided. In a redefined social space, their artists would be seen as more than talented show people adept at dazzling audiences with personality and style. Their artists would function as specialists who portrayed the human condition in all its complexity and, in so doing, were capable of translating the needs and wishes of the public into dramatic potentialities

This study of the transformation of Washington's theatrical geography between 1970 and 1990 proceeds in three parts. In Part I, Chapters Two and Three explicate the framework that shaped Washington's theatrical geography for much of the twentieth century: Theaters of Commerce and Community. Chapter Two focuses primarily on the National Theater, circa 1970, placing Washington's most historic theater within the context of the city's spatial history. Chapter Three investigates the significance of Washington's huge network of Theater of Community.

In Part II, Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven explore the emergence of Washington's Theater of the Public. Chapter Four examines the founding of the Kennedy Center and the impact of that event on the consciousness of Washingtonians. Chapter Five explores three of Washington's oldest Theaters of the Public: Lobby Theater, Arena Stage, and Washington Theater Club. Chapter Six investigates the rise of identity theaters, which began in the years just prior to the Center's founding. Finally, Chapter Seven investigates the city's small theater movement that began near the end of the 1970s.

In Part III, Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten examine the homogenization of Washington's theater community through revitalization, a national theater, and finally a system of local awards. Chapter Eight focuses on the resurgence of the National Theater as a strange hybrid of Theater of Commerce and Public in a rejuvenated and newly gentrified downtown. Chapter Nine examines the Kennedy Center's attempt to redefine itself as a National Cultural Center by founding the American National Theater in 1984. Chapter Ten deals with the establishment of the Helen Hayes Awards in the mid-1980s. Chapter Eleven concludes this study of the transformation of Washington's theatrical geography.

**PART I: THE COMMERCIAL/COMMUNITY PARADIGM**

## Chapter Two

### SHADOWS OF EMPIRE: THE NATIONAL THEATER AND THE CULTURE WARS

In the years following the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington experienced the advent of a theatrical renaissance. That revival was prefaced by a period of conflicting indicators, however. As the vitality of Theater of Commerce declined following World War I, residential neighborhoods spawned numerous Theaters of Community to satisfy people's need for performance. Following World War II, institutions of higher education began addressing in earnest the country's growing need for skilled theater artists. Finally, by the early 1960s, a new downtown and a recently developed southwest Washington became homes to a new kind of theatrical organization: Theater of the Public. Even though much of the talent nurturing Arena Stage and Washington Theater Club came from outside the region, the media and public perceived them as local operations. As such, they also classified them as second tier theaters: a class above educational and community theaters, but still a class below what many viewed as the city's sole surviving commercial professional theater, the National Theater.

To most Washingtonians, because the National imported Broadway and pre-Broadway shows performed by the nation's best actors and celebrities, it represented American theater at its finest. Other venues also offered celebrity performers; for example, Shady Grove Music Fair presented celebrity singers who sometimes used musicals as performance vehicles.<sup>46</sup> Others, such as the Gayety and Silver Slipper,

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<sup>46</sup> As with the combination or star-system, shows were designed around the talent of a single celebrity. At Shady Grove those celebrities almost always had Hollywood credentials.

presented strippers in burlesque performances. Because the National was the only theater dedicated to big musicals and high profile comedies and dramas, it had no competitors in the marketplace of performance iconography; because the public viewed legitimate theater as originating in New York, the National was considered Washington's premier theatrical institution.

The National Theater not only represented the best in theatrical culture; to many, it also symbolized the nation's theatrical heritage. Its very name reflected its iconic status. When combined with its history and geographic proximity to White House and Congress, that name signified more than the theater's owners could have dreamt. Whereas Shady Grove offered audiences celebrity performers, the National cultivated a truly Washingtonian celebrity-milieu, a space where entertainers and politicians regularly mixed. The combination, which was further enhanced by consistent presidential attendance, proved vital to the theater's identity.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the National had been the only professional theater in downtown Washington since the mid-1950s, only increased its status as the president's theater.

Ironically, just when the National's status seemed secure, new factors began to threaten its existence. This chapter explores those factors and their effect on the National's prominence in Greater Washington, circa 1970. The first section deals with the National's spatial significance, which underwent profound changes during the 1960s. Not only did the city's downtown undergo a radical transformation as developers demolished many older theatrical structures, but also, as social protests intensified, the

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<sup>47</sup> According to the National's own press, every president since the Civil War had attended the theater, save President Eisenhower who had attended prior to his presidency. Recently, Linda Byrd and Rob Seargent went to Arena Stage and Olney Theater's summer season, whereas President Johnson limited

Mall transformed from a space for homage to national identity into a space for dissent. The decline of downtown's entertainment-milieu caused an expansion of suburban commercial venues. Section two investigates these venues, both the above mentioned Shady Grove Music Fair and the network of dinner theaters that emerged during the late 1960s. Finally, the liberalization of sexual mores on stage and in film, broadened the public's understanding of acceptable artistic content. By the end of the 1960s, however, the dark side of liberalization, the pornography industry, boomed in downtown movie houses and permeated the public imaginary. The conflation of theater, film, pornography, and social protest made it increasingly difficult for the general public to decode distinctions between these various forms of entertainment and expression. The final section deals with how the National and its New York agents responded to these changes by altering the theater's repertoire, a process that was most fully realized with the presentation of the counter-cultural musical *Hair* in spring 1971.

### *Section I: The National Theater's Dueling Social Spaces*

Since its inception, the National Theater had drawn its identity from two separate and contending spaces: the Federal City, or monumental core, and the city's downtown. Located at their conjunction just southeast of the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue's northern side, the National benefited from a combination of political patronage and commercial investment. As such, the theater developed a dual identity, which for years thrived without much conflict. Following World War II, however, the city's demographics and economy changed, and tensions between those two identities grew.

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attendance to the National. President Nixon did not attend until 1973, after the National stopped showing controversial plays.

During the 1960s, as challenges by civil rights and Vietnam War demonstrators heated up, the National discovered that the social underpinnings of its success had become polarized.

The National rooted the political side of its identity in its geographic proximity to the monumental core: the Mall, White House, and other federal institutions. At its root, that political identity was imperial. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Washington's architect, conceived a federal space reflecting "a magnitude so worthy of the concern of a grand empire."<sup>48</sup> One hundred years later, the Federal City was anything but grand, however.<sup>49</sup> It was not until the United States' victory in the Spanish American war and the acquisition of Puerto Rico and the Philippines as colonies, that the city's leaders took a significant step toward realizing L'Enfant's vision.<sup>50</sup> In 1901 the Senate created an advisory Park Commission, headed by Senator James McMillan. Although the purpose of the McMillan Commission was limited to "a layout of parks in suitable relationship to public building," the plans that it developed extended its scope and led to the creation of the Commission of Fine Arts, whose job was to oversee development of the monumental

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<sup>48</sup> Bob Arnebeck, *Through a Fiery Trial: Building Washington, 1790-1800* (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1991), 58.

<sup>49</sup> Founded by order of Congress in 1790, after ten years the core consisted of only two buildings: an unfinished White House and Capitol, connected by a muddy Pennsylvania Avenue. The Mall was little more than "a wasteland of swamps dotted with clusters of sheds along the canal." The first important architectural development, the Smithsonian Institution, was not completed until 1855. Construction of the Washington Monument had begun in 1848 near to the place where L'Enfant had envisioned his own Washington monument—an equestrian statue of the general-turned-president. Its completion was interrupted by the Civil War, however, as the Mall functioned as a pasture for cattle: its masonry stump in the middle of a pasture a fitting symbol for a nearly decapitated nation. It was finally completed in 1886. Importantly, the slow development of Washington in the early years can be attributed to the lack of federal resources and, thus, the city's heavy reliance on private construction funds. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), 106.

<sup>50</sup> Founded in 1835, the National Theater predates this decision.

core.<sup>51</sup> According to the Commission's own historian, Sue A. Kohler, its goal was to design a city that would manifest "in stateliness and grandeur the emergence of the United States as a world empire."<sup>52</sup> In other words, the McMillan Commission took L'Enfant's designs and transformed his "Venice-like Washington, bequeathed to the city by nature" into an imperial city. Daniel Kiley critiques the new concept for having "a closed, insular design" which abstracts the Federal City, detaching it from the Potomac River and surrounding countryside.<sup>53</sup> Considering the recent closing of America's western frontier, the approach was probably a fitting move, as the nation needed a different version of Manifest Destiny to spur it forward. With its western vistas blocked, the core no longer represented natural space constructed through an interrelationship to the greater region. Rather, it spoke of "a contained, self-completing, and comfortable inward-looking idea," an idea that generalized federal space and the concept of the American nation.<sup>54</sup>

The McMillan Commission was primarily concerned with the creation of a federal space that had a uniform architectural perspective. To accomplish that task the Commission selected "the Classical Revival style," throughout "the whole of the federal

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<sup>51</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green *Washington: Capital City, 1879-1950* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), 135.

<sup>52</sup> Sue A Kohler, Historian of the Commission, *The Commission of Fine Arts: A Brief History, 1910-1990* (Washington: The Government Printing Office, 1991), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Urban Kiley, "A Critical Look at the McMillan Plan" in *The Mall in Washington, 1791-1991* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, distributed by the University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1991), Ed. Richard Lonstreth, 297.

<sup>54</sup> The Commission of Fine Arts controlled the core's growth throughout most of the twentieth century, developing The Mall, L'Enfant's "grand esplanade," as well as adjoining institutions: the National Archives, the National Gallery of Art, the Supreme Court, the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, and a modernized White House. Edmund M. Bacon, *Design of Cities* (New York and London, Penguin Books, 1976), 223.

district.”<sup>55</sup> This style reflected “the taste inculcated at Yale and Harvard, the European influence institutionalized in alumni of the Ecole and of the American Academy at Rome, but most powerfully it reflected the influence of great wealth, particularly in the banking community.”<sup>56</sup> Following the entry of the United States into World War II, government’s role in the economy expanded and governmental institutions proliferated. The Federal presence and Ecole style extended beyond the District’s boundaries, with the building of the Pentagon and Crystal City in Virginia and later with the construction of the National Institute of Health in Maryland.<sup>57</sup>

Although the founders had envisioned the core as a space that would symbolize the nation’s central purpose or destiny, not until the second half of the twentieth century did the core fulfill that function and, hence, amplify the city’s symbolic significance at a national level. As the importance of federal institutions increased following World War II, so too did their presence within the spatial layout of the city’s federal properties. This hegemonic dominance had its price. Jeffrey F. Meyer describes the city in *Myths in Stone*: “What the city lacked in urban liveliness it has gained in symbolic clarity. Images such as ‘temples,’ ‘altar,’ ‘shrine,’ ‘stage,’ and ‘theater’ have been frequently used to interpret its meaning. It is a myth in stone, whose meaning is not fixed but has continually changed in the two centuries since its founding.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> National Capital Planning Commission, *Worthy of a Nation: the History of Planning for the National Capital* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1977), 135.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>57</sup> These areas in Virginia were, however, part of the original District of Columbia; they had been ceded back to Virginia in 1846.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey F. Meyer, *Myths in Stone: Religious Dimensions of Washington, D.C.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 50.

As the nation's "theater," Washington beckons her citizens to its various stages. Whether to stand before the Washington Monument or to ascend the steps at the National Archives to view the nation's two great texts, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the American people descend on Washington by the millions each year. Historian Wilbur Zelinsky says, "one's first pilgrimage to Washington can be a blinding religious experience."<sup>59</sup> Those who have witnessed the parade of tourists during spring and summer would probably acknowledge that words such as "blinding" and "religious" misread the imperative of such trips. Nevertheless, as Meyer claims, the metaphor of pilgrimage is central to understanding the core's identity. Tourists visit Washington's memorials and monuments for reasons different than tourists visiting other cities. Without the sensation of Disney World or the glamour of Broadway, or even the history of a Liberty Bell, the core speaks to a mythic aspect of federalism: that aspect embodied by its presidents, senators, and congressmen. That mythic dimension is not instilled in the places of battle or in the nation's achievements, but rather on the granite and marble imbued with the textual weight of political oratory.

Ironically, as Washington's national importance grew, so too did its symbolic value as a site for dissent. Prior to the March on Washington in 1963, the dominant depiction of America's pilgrims was of them silently receiving the nation's catechism. After that historic march, the Mall reverberated with demonstrations in favor of civil rights. In fact, during the 1960s, over 289 marches in support of civil rights took place on the Mall.<sup>60</sup> Then, as the Vietnam War intensified and the Tet Offensive and My Lai

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<sup>59</sup> Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State: the Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 180.

<sup>60</sup> *Historical Atlas of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1988), 235.

massacre magnified the public's sense that Vietnam was a terrible mistake, the Mall became a staging ground for competing visions of America's international role in the world. By the end of the decade it became clear that, although the core's material substance had not changed, the way Americans used the space was different. No longer a place for silent homage, the Mall had become a place for staging dissident social visions.

In other words, the function of Washington's monumental "theater" had become participatory in nature. Although people from around the country still entered the District as pilgrims coming to witness the guardians of democracy, the country's numerous social movements altered the core's function. A silent patriotism no longer defined spectators. Now voices responded to the stone monuments and, in the process, transformed their meaning. In previous decades others had used the Mall to stage demonstrations; the Bonus Marches, for example, had paralyzed the city during the 1930s.<sup>61</sup> Those marches, which occurred prior to television, focused the country's attention on a narrow issue, however. When Martin Luther King, Jr. stood at the Lincoln Memorial and proclaimed the Civil Rights Movement's challenge to the nation, he popularized the use of the Mall as a stage for dissenting against core American values and myths. Again, quoting from Meyer,

The Mall has gone from being a place where citizens gather as passive spectators, receiving 'instruction' from the noble monuments ... to being a place where active participants struggle to be heard in an agora, a forum where protesting and demonstrating groups contend to make their voices heard at the center of the nation, seeking the right to interpret the American myth.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> In 1932, World War I veterans marched on Washington to demand immediate payment of government certificates given them after their army service. When a bill to pay the veterans was defeated in the Senate, the army was called in to rout the protesters.

<sup>62</sup> *Myths in Stone*. 232.

The myth the protesters sought to reinterpret was the myth of the core itself, the myth of Manifest Destiny and the Commission's vision of world empire. In doing so, protesters subjected Washington to the force of agency: its truths became matters of a people's choice.

These changes in the meaning of the Mall and, hence, the monumental core, affected the National Theater's identity. As long as the representation of the core remained celebratory and homogenous, a space for visualizing the country's imperial ambition, so too could the National present performances void of social critique. When the core's milieu changed from homage to dissent, the Mall assumed its new role, and the harmony between art and politics turned antagonistic. Without the luxury of neutrality, the National had to adjust its repertoire and representation. Whether or not its shows were politically motivated, they became increasingly subject to politicization.

The National experienced not only changes to the core's significance, but also to the city's downtown. Whereas the core experienced changes in how people used and represented its space, downtown underwent drastic modifications to its substantive presence, particularly in its entertainment sector where Washingtonians witnessed the disappearance of numerous historical theatrical venues. Theaters with traditions of both live performance and film were slated for demolition; they were abandoned, boarded up, and filled with debris; they were converted into churches or town halls; or they were transformed from cultural venues to venues for adult films. This transformation of downtown left the National isolated and bereft of a complimentary milieu to support its traditional theater-going public. Without that support, theater-goers at the National became alienated from the ebb and flow of nightlife in Washington.

During the 1930s and 1940s, when large theaters and movie palaces ruled downtown with their voluminous halls, armies of ushers, and long lines of patrons, they operated as a focal point for up-scale restaurants and shops. That role provided theaters and palaces status: they were central to the meaning of a night on the town. Even as ticket prices rose from twenty-five cents to two dollars, making live performances and film a more privileged experience, theater edifices remained very public icons of entertainment. To average Washingtonians, who attended the National either in parties of two or—as was frequently the case—in groups using performances as fundraisers, those edifices signified an escape from the daily grind. People arrived at theaters in their best attire to watch musicals or comedies; they dined at nearby restaurants; and for those possessing an insider’s knowledge of the theater, they even attended after-show parties at the Occidental Restaurant where actors sometimes gathered to unwind and cavort.

Although memories of the heyday of Washington’s grand palaces persisted into the 1960s, as Washingtonians witnessed the demise of their most cherished theatrical icons, even diehard romantics had to acknowledge that the glory days had come and gone. The Gayety (also known as the Shubert), the Capitol Theater, and The Belasco, (formerly, the Lafayette Square Opera House), disappeared under a tidal wave of new parking lots and office spaces. Residents mounted efforts to save these symbols of downtown’s glorious past, but the economic viability of those efforts proved too little too late.

In 1962, the wrecking ball demolished one of Washington’s most historic stages, the Gayety. Although originally a home for burlesque and vaudeville when it opened in 1907, the 2,000-seat theater accommodated both performance and film. In 1950, after the

National stopped presenting Broadway shows in defiance of demands that it open its doors to African Americans, the Gayety turned to live performances. When the National reopened in 1952, the Gayety's financial losses quickly mounted. After its demolition, a burlesque house located one block south acquired the Gayety's name and former reputation, even though its productions were "a burlesque theater of a different sort."<sup>63</sup> In 1979, the new Gayety was also demolished.

Early in 1964 Washington's largest palace, the 3,433-seat Capitol Theater, met a similar fate, save for its ornate façade. The Capitol opened in 1927 as a movie house; even so, vaudeville performed regularly on its 64 by 35-foot stage, frequently prior to the showing of a film. In the 1940s, the Capitol sponsored an annual "stage show for local talent ... called 'Going Native.'"<sup>64</sup> With its "corps of ushers—a platoon of dragoons outfitted like the French Foreign Legion with flashlights and smelling salts"—an evening at the Capitol epitomized Washington's theatrical Golden Age where even "a midnight personal appearance of the Frankenstein monster" might conclude an event.<sup>65</sup>

The Belasco, with its 1,800-seat auditorium, served as "the center for plays, the opera, and ballet in the Nation's Capital" until the Great Depression when financial losses forced it to convert to a movie house.<sup>66</sup> Because the Belasco was within a block of the White House, the federal government purchased the theater in 1940, using it for extra offices and as a warehouse for records of the executive branch. During World War II, the

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<sup>63</sup> James M. Goode, *Capital Losses* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1979), 364.

<sup>64</sup> Robert K. Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.: an Illustrated History of Parlors, Palaces and Multiplexes in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1999), 266.

<sup>65</sup> John Sherwood, "Theater Takes Final Bow," *The Washington Star*, 9 September 1963, 1 (A).

<sup>66</sup> *Capital Losses*, 363.

government “converted it to the Stage Door Canteen,” where it “served more than two million servicemen and women.”<sup>67</sup> The theater served as “Washington’s USO” during the Korean War, which continued to occupy the Belasco until 1964 when it was razed to make way for the United States Court of Claims.<sup>68</sup>

Several other theaters were also demolished during this period. Even though the Metropolitan (1917-1968), the Knickerbocker (1915-1969), and the Savoy (1913-1971) were associated with film, and the latter two were located outside the old downtown, their destruction added to Washington’s lost theatrical heritage. In addition, the Howard Theater closed in 1970.<sup>69</sup> Although its structure was not razed for more office space or for another parking lot, its closure left an empty shell, symbolizing the hollowness of the city’s once abundant African-American commercial theater.

As mentioned above, the conversion of the city’s theatrical heritage into office space, warehouses, and parking lots did not happen without a fight.

It looked like 9<sup>th</sup> Street was going to turn into one long, narrow parking lot. There was nearly a reprieve for the theater [the Capitol] when an anonymous citizen offered to buy the building and give it to the city. At the same time, Morris Cafritz was offering to transfer ownership of the Keith’s Theater Building [demolished in 1978] to the city to be used for opera and dramatic performance.<sup>70</sup>

Not only did federally appointed city commissioners turn down both gifts but they also rejected congressional legislation in 1963 that would have saved the Capitol and Keith Theaters for use as cultural centers. It became obvious to many local residents, such as

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<sup>67</sup> *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington*, 281.

<sup>68</sup> Woody West, “Shed a Tear for the Belasco,” *The Sunday Magazine of Washington Star*, 13 October 1963, 18.

<sup>69</sup> As stated in Chapter One, the Howard was the long time home of black vaudeville.

<sup>70</sup> *Capitol Losses*, 190.

Washington architect and preservationist Floy Brown, that “the city turned it down because the congressmen who were on the committee making the decision thought it would come into direct conflict with the planning then going on for the Kennedy Center.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, Washington’s old downtown and her commercial theaters posed a direct threat, both financially and artistically, to the viability of the recently envisioned National Cultural Center.<sup>72</sup>

Despite downtown’s loss of theatrical architecture and the accompanying economic decline, residents of Greater Washington still trekked to the city in greater and greater numbers because the size of government increased substantially during the 1950s and 1960s. The city’s economy had not been tied to its commercial sector since World War II; thus, downtown’s woes did not prevent a plurality of Washingtonians from working in federal buildings near downtown. In 1970, Washington, D.C. was home to 756,700 people; Greater Washington had over 2,893,500. The federal government was the region’s top employer, with approximately 25 percent going to work in federal buildings.<sup>73</sup> Because Washington’s trolley car system shut down in the early 1960s and the subway system was not yet open, a majority of those hundreds of thousands of workers ventured into the city each day by car or bus. Thus, as the demand for more parking spaces near the monumental core increased, downtown real estate became more valuable as parking lots than as development opportunities. When night arrived, workers ventured out of the city, their pilgrimage mirroring in microcosm the larger influx of

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen Zito, “Broken Dreams,” *The Washingtonian*, March 1979, 233.

<sup>72</sup> Before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Kennedy Center was named The National Cultural Center.

<sup>73</sup> Atlee E. Shidler, ed., *Greater Washington in 1980* (Washington: Greater Washington Research Center, 1980), 9.

seasonal tourists. These workers were not considered tourists, however, because their role in the grand performance was more akin to that of usher, stagehand, or manager than that of audience member.

As parking lots and offices replaced theaters, many businesses moved to promising suburban locations; for that reason, the vitality of the business community diminished and downtown, once identified with white socialites and late night parties, became a war zone. A study of Washington indicates that during the 1950s “only seven private buildings were constructed” in its historic downtown.<sup>74</sup> News reports also described Washington as “a strange and fearful place inhabited by muggers and rapists.”<sup>75</sup> The Broadway-style illusion faded and the fiction of the National as a grand event unifying the city’s diverse publics vanished. Even though the uprising following Dr. King’s assassination affected African-American communities primarily, it also threw this low-intensity decline into crisis. The media’s portrayal of the uprisings as riots heightened their impact and magnified the long-term damage they invariably caused—damage that the National and other businesses could ill afford. With downtown’s façades looking older each year and visitors and workers leaving the area in the evening, the entertainment culture could no longer support upscale restaurants and businesses; according to Stephen McGovern, private investment “in the old business district suddenly vanished” altogether.<sup>76</sup> As the decline continued, even middle class businesses had no alternative but to find new, more attractive locations.

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<sup>74</sup> Nick Manley, *American Photo Album: Washington* (Washington, D.C.: 1980), 31.

<sup>75</sup> Sam Smith, *Captive Capital: Colonial Life in Modern Washington* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 4.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen J. McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 196.

The uprisings of 1968 and the widespread destruction they caused brought into clear relief what many Washingtonians had already sensed. Media coverage of monthly demonstrations on the Mall and elsewhere in support of civil rights portrayed a city whose demographics had changed dramatically. Since the end of World War II, African Americans had been migrating to Washington, D.C., from the South, so much so that in twenty years the city's racial demographics had undergone a complete upheaval. Washington was no longer identified by its Federal City: its expanding African-American community—its “Secret City”—now surrounded its monumental “theater” and homage to America's past.<sup>77</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, the percentage of African-Americans living in Washington had increased by only four percent, so that by 1950, 65 percent of Washington's 800,000 residents were white; of the 35 percent who were people of color only a small number were not African-American.<sup>78</sup> By 1970, those percentages were reversed, “from a city 65 percent white to a city 70 percent black.”<sup>79</sup> Although the uprisings exacerbated the city's economic crisis and enflamed white residents' racial fears, it did not cause white flight, for most of the city's demographic changes had already occurred.

Changing demographics altered the city's political status—or lack thereof—as well. Washingtonians had never had political representation in the federal government. As the city's population increased, pressure to correct this problem rose. The most substantial move toward home rule occurred after World War II. Fresh from victories

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<sup>77</sup> Constance McCloughlin Green, *The Secret City: a History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967).

<sup>78</sup> *Washington: Capital City*, 89.

<sup>79</sup> *Captive Capital*, 17.

over the Axis powers, veterans returned to Washington with new demands for political rights. Although home rule bills were introduced in 1948 and 1949, over twenty years passed before local representation was allowed by Congress. After passage of the Civil Rights Act, Congress found it difficult to deny political rights to a city with a sizeable African-American population. By the late 1960s, with a majority of the city's permanent residents of African descent, issues of racial justice merged with the issue of home rule: by 1972 Washington had not gained federal political representation even though it was allowed to establish its first local government.

In this changed downtown, the National had few options for securing its long term prospects. Within the current milieu a large theater catering to the tastes of a predominantly white, conservative theater-going public had few opportunities to satisfy its mandate because the social space was no longer conducive to a traditional night on the town. In a space informed by an ideology of social justice, integration, economic redistribution, and racial unrest—yet haunted by real and imagined dangers—a theater like the National connoted the values of former generations. That social baggage marked every performance. For the National to reconfigure its public—to become less conservative and less identified with white Washingtonians—it would have to find a way not only to redeem its past, but also to negotiate Washington's racially contentious social sphere. To arrive at such a formula would require the National to solve not only the race puzzle but the economic puzzle as well, as the theater's location and tradition required it to pursue a more privileged rather than a more middling theater-going public.

## *Section II: The National Theater's Suburban Competition*

As the National struggled to renegotiate its relationship with a changing downtown public, it also had to contend with other Theaters of Commerce operating in Maryland's suburbs. On the one hand, the Shady Grove Music Fair raised its big tent in 1962 in Gaithersburg, Maryland. People who desired celebrity-driven musicals discovered that Shady Grove offered a safer, more convenient neighborhood than the District's crime-ridden streets. On the other hand, for middle class suburbanites fascinated by the convenience of one-stop shopping, the phenomenon of dinner theater arrived en masse in 1968; it took hold immediately and spread throughout the region. Although Shady Grove and dinner theater were different from each other, they offered a stark contrast to the troubled National Theater in its historic milieu.

Like the National, Shady Grove promoted celebrity performers and cultivated a clientele eager to see and hear them live. Shady Grove also had a large pool of celebrities from which to draw, perhaps even larger than the National's because its range of productions extended beyond Broadway and theater. Known primarily as a music house, many legends of the music world graced its stage, from Liberace and Fats Domino to Ike and Tina Turner, Steely Dan, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the Allman Brothers, and Bruce Springsteen. Nevertheless, Shady Grove also presented a host of big name Hollywood performers. Mickey Rooney, Lana Turner, Bob Hope, and Ann Margaret appeared at the Shady Grove in a variety of Broadway musicals. In addition to seeing stars perform, "locals got a chance to see these performers ... at the nearby 26-story

Washingtonian Hotel, its restaurant, and golf course.”<sup>80</sup> The hotel’s restaurant and bar no doubt served as the suburban equivalent to downtown’s Occidental Restaurant.

Unlike the National, Shady Grove did not have to contend with a deteriorating social space. Rather, when it opened in Gaithersburg at the intersection of Route 270 and Shady Grove Road, the surrounding space was undeveloped farmland. In its early years, the bustle of summer theater must have looked to passing motorists more like a circus or county fair than a venue for famous entertainers, music groups, or musicals. The family-oriented theater presented shows like Clark Gesner’s *You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown* and Lerner and Loew’s *Camelot*, as well as Saturday performances for children, such as adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. Despite Shady Grove’s remote location and the fact that short runs prevented major dailies from reviewing shows, people drove from miles away to attend. Indeed, attendance was so high that the theater’s owner, Samuel Eig, converted Shady Grove to year-round operation.<sup>81</sup> In 1967, it opened as a hard top 3,000-seat theater-in-the-round. Its repertoire remained constant: musical performers, bands, and Broadway’s biggest musicals, including *Sound of Music*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *George M*.

In contrast to Shady Grove’s big tent, celebrity productions, dinner theater exploited its clientele’s need for show business and the pleasure of over-eating and drinking by combining them under one roof. If dinner theater was unreviewed and under appreciated by critics during its early years, it flourished nevertheless. As *Washington Post* critic Megan Rosenfeld pointed out in 1971, “Four years ago there was one dinner

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<sup>80</sup> Kathy Meany Stobie, “Encore: Shady Grove Music Fair,” January/February 2001. Vertical Files, Washingtoniana.

<sup>81</sup> The Shady Grove Music Fair closed in 1975.

theater in the Washington area. Today there are nine, and by the end of the summer there will be 12.”<sup>82</sup> Most dinner theaters in Washington circa 1970 were located in Montgomery County: Burn Brae Dinner Theater, Burn Brae East, Garland Dinner Theater, Candlelight Cabaret Theater, and Diadem Dinner Theater. Marlborough Supper Club was the first in Prince George’s County.<sup>83</sup> Dinner theater in the District tended toward cabaret in venues such as the Occidental Restaurant and Mr. Henry’s.

Like the traditional nightclub, dinner theater was a hybrid form. For suburban residents who did not have the stomach for inner city danger, dinner theater satisfied not only their desire for commercial-style entertainment and buffet-style comestibles, but also, at a temporal level, their need for community. In fact, dinner theater’s appeal lay in its ability to create in the span of a single evening a sense that a close-knit community was seated around a traditional dinner table. In a rapidly expanding suburban environment, residents uprooted from the District or newly arrived from regions throughout the country sought the familiarity of home.<sup>84</sup> Hence, the producers of dinner theater created spaces where people “by and large, seem friendlier.”<sup>85</sup> Anecdotal evidence does not in itself prove that dinner theaters created a sense of community, but it does suggest that they manufactured a communal atmosphere. As with community

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<sup>82</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Dinner Theater: Package Family Night out,” *Washington Post*, 13 June 1971, 1(K).

<sup>83</sup> Virginia’s one attempt at dinner theater, The Suburban House Dinner Theater, failed because its “narrow banquet room ... might be more wisely used for a Boy Scout meeting.” Bryan Richards, “The Dinner Theater Circuit,” *Washingtonian Magazine*, Volume 5, Number 5, February 1970, 78.

<sup>84</sup> In the next chapter, which deals with Theaters of Community, I investigate the demographic changes in suburbia in greater depth.

<sup>85</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Dinner Theater: Package Family ‘Night out,’” *Washington Post*, 13 June 1971, 4(K).

theater, the illusion of community as much as the illusory world of the show itself, was the commodity on sale to theater patrons.

To create this community-style commodity, the entrepreneur had to locate spaces large enough to house productions and an expanded eating area.<sup>86</sup> Spaces that were identifiable as public places of entertainment were also preferable because they could immediately hail the general public, which, in turn, might become part of the dinner theater audience. Because venues especially designed for live performance were not readily available, many entrepreneurs located dinner theaters in settings with a history of entertainment or recreation. In April 1968, for example, John Kinnamon founded the Burn Brae Dinner Theater at the Burn Brae Swim and Tennis Club in Montgomery County. Using the clubhouse, he constructed a makeshift stage and directed a company of singers and dancers in a production of Lerner and Loew's *Brigadoon*.<sup>87</sup>

Although the theater-going public would have been accustomed to the repertoire of dinner theater, they would have found the experience of dinner theater unfamiliar. The public might have associated dinner theater with community theater; after all, an extensive community theater network existed throughout the suburban metropolitan area. That theater was decidedly amateur in its practices, whereas dinner theater was not, at least in its prices and marketing. Thus, the producers of dinner theater distanced their commodity from that of community theater while at the same time associating it with the larger entertainment milieu.

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<sup>86</sup> Only the Garland Dinner Theater performed in a building designed uniquely for dinner theater.

<sup>87</sup> Later, Burn Brae's sister operation, Burn Brae East, performed the same production at the Colony Seven Motel. The Marlborough Supper Club opened at the county's racetrack, utilizing people's familiarity with the venue to bridge their unfamiliarity with the concept of dinner theater itself.

Dinner theater could not offer audiences real celebrities; it could, however, offer them illusory ones by creating a repertoire that consisted of well-known Broadway and/or Hollywood hits. Area musicals included Cole Porter's *Anything Goes*, Roger and Hammerstein's *The King and I* and *South Pacific*, Meredith Willson's *Music Man*, and *The Roar of the Greasepaint, the Smell of the Crowd* by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse. Comedies ranged from *Everybody Loves Opal* by John Patrick to stage versions of recently released films such as Bill Manhoff's *Owl and the Pussycat* and Abe Burrows' *Cactus Flower*. Neil Simon owned the dinner theater repertoire; indeed, throughout the 1970s one of his comedies seemed to play the area every week: *Come Blow Your Horn*, *Star Spangled Girl*, *Barefoot in the Park*, and *The Odd Couple* were the most popular.

Even with such a popular repertoire, the predominantly amateur actors and singers of dinner theater did not have the presence or the charisma of Broadway performers. Entrepreneurs made up the deficit by having actors and actresses break the fourth wall as waiters and waitresses. As audience members sat in the comfort and safety of family and friends, chatting as if around a dinner table, they were served drinks and gaily entertained by Broadway-bound hopefuls who might one day attain show business celebrity. For, whereas Shady Grove or the National could accommodate 3,000 or 1,600 respectively on a given night, the average dinner theater seated no more than several hundred. In the intimacy of that exchange between performer and audience, with food and drink increasing the allure, the entrepreneur recreated a personal Broadway in the imaginary of each audience member. In the glow of that Broadway, the rustic, makeshift venues of dinner theater were alive with possibilities.

Dinner theater's success in Washington depended upon just such a combination: dinner and show, plus other attractions. What is not clear is the degree to which those other attractions conferred their meaning onto the performance. Clearly they did, given the fact that the elements of dinner theater were completely integrated. During a traditional evening out at the National, for example, dinner, performance, and drinks happened in different spaces. Patrons were allowed to compartmentalize the elements, and the performance maintained its integrity as an object. Dinner theater's patrons were given no such opportunity. Venues provided clientele with all three experiences in the same space. Dinner was served before the show; drinking and/or dancing occurred during intermission and afterwards; but neither the location of the different elements nor the actors, whose dual roles as waiters and entertainers blurred distinctions between them, changed. Thus, in contrast to traditional commercial theater, which the public associated with formality and expensive attire, dinner theater with its pork chops and scotch, in-the-round staging, and "a touch of the make shift," was "nothing more than amateur night with grub."<sup>88</sup> Like Theaters of Community, most dinner theaters operated with actors who were also students, lawyers, or housewives.<sup>89</sup> Yet, by not selling a compartmentalized performance, in which the performance per se was isolated from the other rituals of the theatrical event, dinner theater's packaging became its strength: eating, drinking, befriending, and performing under one roof. That "amateur night with grub" became nothing short of an experience of commodified community. In that symbolic community, patrons hoped to touch, not a celebrity whose face flashed on the

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<sup>88</sup> "Dinner Theater: Package Family 'Night out,' 4 (K).

<sup>89</sup> During those early years, only Garland Dinner Theater had an Equity acting company.

evening news or who held center stage in a distant proscenium, but an actress who, having just served them gin and tonic, might one day dance across the National's stage.

### *Section III: The Changing Definition of Culture*

As dinner theater and Shady Grove claimed a larger and larger share of the area's conservative theater-going public, the National's solitary downtown marquee continued to advertise Broadway shows and tryouts with big-name stars. After all, the theater still had a golden eagle and Louis XIV chairs in the Presidential Box to lend it glamour and stature; it still had a bevy of celebrities and politicians with their historical anecdotes to share with the public during interviews for feature articles; and it still had a legacy of presidential attendance to sell to the media, even if Mr. Scott Kirkpatrick, the theater's manager, had to hearken back twenty years for positive memories.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the National still maintained symbolic value even though that value depended in large measure on a diminished downtown mystique. Not only had that mystique faded in the demolition's dust, but also the National's historic signature was becoming culturally decadent. Downtown's patrons once ventured into stores that catered to their jewelry and cigar desires as well as their need for conventional amusements. Now, as those traditional patrons left, new consumers with less expensive and decidedly less romantic tastes moved in. These new consumers helped to restore what remained of downtown theaters, transforming them into venues for Washington's new, burgeoning pornography industry.

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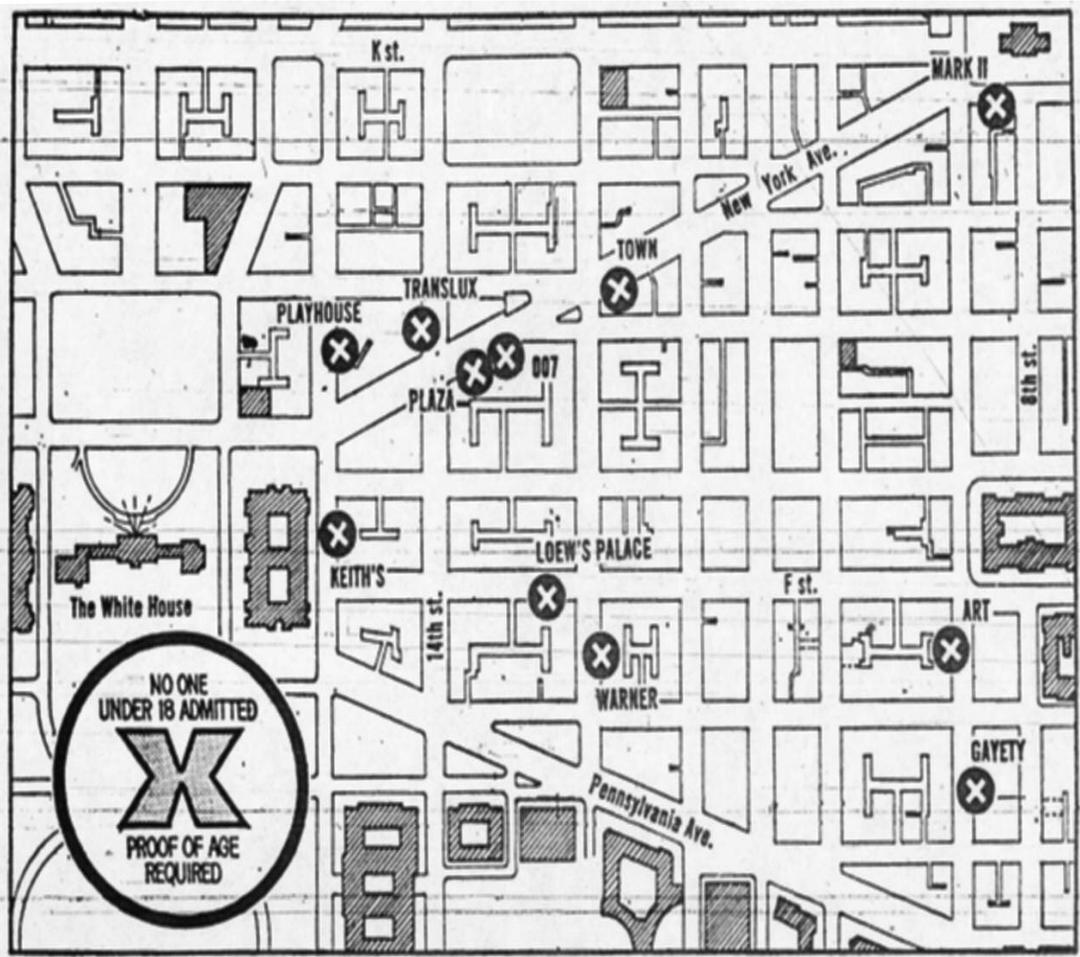
<sup>90</sup> Franklin Roosevelt had been the theater's most regular presidential audience "because he had the most aristocratic background." Harry Truman had continued the tradition, but in accordance with his common man image, he "asked to sit in the orchestra seats." Philip Stanford, "Around the National Theater," *Potomac Magazine* in *The Washington Post*, 27 April 1969, 8.

Although for many years the National enjoyed a dominant role in downtown's theatrical culture, it had to share that spotlight with a host of first-run movie theaters. Now those first-run houses were closed. Before the District's red light districts emerged, visitors would have sensed an anxious disconnect between what they had learned about downtown entertainment and what they now witnessed in its dank and dirty façades. The current downtown articulated a terse set of contradictions between memorialized images associated with an evening's entertainment and the street-level reality of the pornographic marketplace. For downtown was a space still haunted by the frame of its past: at intermission, socialites stood outside theaters in fedoras or styled the latest pageboy and daring décolletage. Now, however, the flashing lights were on a "pre-Vargas honey in mesh stockings" looking down at the seedy store fronts of adult bookstores, prostitutes and johns, and the embarrassed secrecy produced when private acts occurred in public spaces.<sup>91</sup> To the initiated, the National stood out as a surviving exception from those bygone days. After all, distinctions between the symbolic value of X-rated movie houses and that of commercial theaters like the National still existed. Even if the National no longer occupied the neutral space between contending visions of America, it could still claim the uniqueness of live performance. To the general public, however, such a claim proffered uncertain rewards. For by 1970, that downtown movie culture had changed; those first run theaters now offered one or another of the abundant "skinflicks" that, since the mid-1960s, depicted an ever more daring display of explicit sexual acts. A map reveals the National's dilemma clearly. In 1970, downtown associated the National directly with eleven X-rated movie theaters between

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<sup>91</sup> John Sansing, "Take it Off!" *The Washingtonian Magazine*, Volume 8, number 7, April 1973, 70.

Pennsylvania and New York Avenues from 15<sup>th</sup> Street to 8<sup>th</sup> Street northwest (See Figure #2). A few were grind houses with rundown appearances; but several were once reputable palaces. Keith's (1912-1978) and the Warner (1924-present), for example, had “plush upholstery and ornate vaults [and] still manage[d] to exude an air of big time, big



**Figure 2: The map shows the placement of X-rated movie houses in downtown Washington in 1971. The National Theater is located just above Pennsylvania Ave., below Loew's Palace and to the left of the Warner.**

show.”<sup>92</sup> In addition to movie theaters, the Gayety and Silver Slipper contributed to the National’s predicament by offering “burlesk” strippers and X-rated movie stars. The presence of graphic sexual imagery within architectures heavy with nostalgia for the grand performance heightened the sense that Washingtonians had of their entertainment culture’s demise.

As the National struggled to survive its association with the X-rated movie houses, so too did the theater find the ads for its performances similarly surrounded in the simulated space of the media. The National’s non-descript façade, ensconced in its old but elegant urban corner, might have resisted the transformation of downtown. It might also have resisted any description of itself as a “porno” house, if not for the conflation of film and live performance taking place in Washington’s media. On the pages of the three major dailies, display advertising freely mixed live and recorded performances with selling both pornography and first-run films. For example, the National’s display ad for *Hair* in *The Star* was centrally placed near the stage and screen calendar section, “Where and When.”<sup>93</sup> Although Olney’s ad for Noel Coward’s *Hayfever* shared the page with *Hair*, numerous displays for movies, both legitimate and pornographic, dominated the visual image, the largest of which promoted two X-rated films, *A History of the Blue Movie* and *Luscious Lisa’s Temptations* (See Figure #3). *The Post* and *Daily News* similarly conflated live performance with film and more artistic narratives with pornographic ones. *The Star* and *Daily News* lumped both under “Entertainment” while *The Post* designated all performances “Amusements.” In another example, the *Post*’s

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<sup>92</sup> Alan M. Kriegsman, “Tarnished Palaces: Downtown Theaters Hold on by the Skin of their Flicks,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, February 14, 1971, 1-2 (N).

<sup>93</sup> *Evening Star*, 6 June 1971, 15.

display for the National's *The Price* by Arthur Miller and *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Heinar Kipphardt was boxed visually by ads for Wayne's LUV, "DC's Nationally Famous Dating Bar and Discotheque" and three X-rated movies, *I am Curious Yellow*, *Flesh*, and *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* (See Figure #4).<sup>94</sup> The major dailies also immersed calendar listings in a sea of film and pornography. *The Post* encircled its Show Times section with X-rated films, and although other ads were part of the mix, only discerning viewers who knew local theaters would have differentiated their presentation from others. To the less knowledgeable, such random associations and visual confusions blurred distinctions, making the live and the recorded, as well as the artistic and the pornographic, synonymous. Within that process and frame, the National's live performances lost their gravitas.

In addition to sharing the same advertising and geographic space, several other factors contributed to the conflation of live and recorded performance. For almost half a century, the larger movie houses in Washington presented film in conjunction with live performances. Through the 1940s at the Capitol and The Shubert, vaudeville acts were included on evening bills both before and after the movie. More recently, local media used the same reporter to cover both forms. For most of the 1950s and 1960s, *The Post's* Richard Coe reported on both cinematography and theater, as did critics at Washington's other dailies and smaller weeklies and monthlies. By combining the jobs of theater and film critic, the newspapers conflated the forms in the public imaginary. When *The Post* introduced a Style Section in 1969, it altered coverage, allowing Coe to focus on

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<sup>94</sup> *Washington Post*, October 23, 1969, 15 (C).

THE WASHINGTON POST Thursday, Oct. 23, 1969 C15

**OLNEY THEATRE**  
**HAY FEVER**  
 by MEL COMBARD  
 NOW THRU JUNE 20  
 A weekend with the theatre's central family  
 OLNEY BOX OFFICE  
 RESERVATIONS 824-3400  
 Tickets on Sale at  
 Diney Theatre,  
 100 1/2 Street West  
 Washington, Wash. D.C.  
 One Year Charge All  
 Shows Sat at 8:30  
 Sunday 2:30 PM & 7:30 PM  
 FREE PARKING • AIR CONDITIONED

**PALACE**  
**SWEET & SWEETBACK**  
 Features at 12:45, 2:30, 4:15, 6:00, 7:45, 9:30  
 "A sophisticated comedy... designed to be enjoyed!"  
 Los Angeles Times  
**PAUL NEWMAN**  
**ROBERT REDFORD**  
**BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID**  
 PLUS EDISON'S CLASSIC  
**ANCESTOR SHORT**  
**"GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY"**  
**the KEY in GEORGETOWN**  
 Washington's Newest Theatre  
 District Building, 3rd & M Sts.  
 Next to Old State House 202 At St.  
 1:30, 3:35, 5:40, 7:45, 9:50

**EMBASSY**  
**WHEN EIGHT BELLS TOLL**  
 Features at 1:30, 3:15, 5:00, 6:45, 8:30, 10:15  
 "The best British movie in several years!"  
 —Gary Arnold, Post  
**ANDROMEDA STRAIN**  
 A PERMANENT PICTURE  
 6:30, 8:15, 10:00  
**THE CINEMA**  
 LUCHINO VISCONTI'S  
**"The Damned"**  
 7:00 & 9:35 P.M.  
**DUPONT**  
**LAWRENCE OF ARABIA**  
 MacARTHUR  
**"A MASTERPIECE! ONE OF THE MOST TOUCHING FILMS I'VE EVER SEEN! IT MUST BE EXPERIENCED!"**  
 —N.Y. Times  
**"A NOSTALGIC BITTER-SWEET FILM!"**  
 —New York Daily News  
 In everyone's life there's a STRIPPER

**"PETER, THE GREAT!"**  
**THE DOCTOR'S SEX SECRET**  
 --- new double feature every Friday  
 in color! \$4  
**MARK-II**  
 "romantic and glamorous."  
 —Gary Arnold, Post  
**THE CONFORMIST**  
 1st: 1:15, 3:15, 5:15, 7:15, 9:15  
 2nd: 2:15, 4:15, 6:15, 8:15, 10:15  
**JANUS 1 & 2**  
 "A marvelous pleasure."  
 —MacArthur, Star  
**TAKING OFF**  
 ALL 6:30, 8:15, 9:45  
**CERBERUS 1**  
**FINAL DAY**  
**LITTLE BIG MAN**  
 AT 7:45, 9:15  
**TOMORROW**  
 All the W. C. Fields two reel subjects on one program.  
**CERBERUS 2**  
**KEYS**  
 ALL 7:30, 9:15  
**CERBERUS 3**

**THE EVENING STAR**  
 Amusements  
 Washington, D. C.  
 Tuesday, June 8, 1951  
**IN 4 ROLLS, SERVED**  
**The Fishing Stones**  
**GIMME SHELTER**  
 ONE WEEK ONLY!  
 Jack Nicholson  
**"FIVE EASY PIECES"**  
 ONE WEEK ONLY!  
 "An adventure as exciting as any Jules Verne might have invented."  
 Arthur Knight—Saturday Review  
**"A sophisticated comedy... designed to be enjoyed!"**  
 Los Angeles Times  
**PAUL NEWMAN**  
**ROBERT REDFORD**  
**BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID**  
 PLUS EDISON'S CLASSIC  
**ANCESTOR SHORT**  
**"GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY"**  
**the KEY in GEORGETOWN**  
 Washington's Newest Theatre  
 District Building, 3rd & M Sts.  
 Next to Old State House 202 At St.  
 1:30, 3:35, 5:40, 7:45, 9:50

**HAIR**  
**TICKETS NOW!**  
 thru July 11th  
**NATIONAL**  
**SEAN CONNERY**  
**Dr.No**  
**SEAN CONNERY**  
**"FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE"**  
**UPTOWN**  
**Red Sky At Morning**

**Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me!**  
**THE NEW PLAZA**  
 NEW YORK AVE. & 14TH ST.  
**"A sophisticated comedy... designed to be enjoyed!"**  
 Los Angeles Times  
**PAUL NEWMAN**  
**ROBERT REDFORD**  
**BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID**  
 PLUS EDISON'S CLASSIC  
**ANCESTOR SHORT**  
**"GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY"**  
**the KEY in GEORGETOWN**  
 Washington's Newest Theatre  
 District Building, 3rd & M Sts.  
 Next to Old State House 202 At St.  
 1:30, 3:35, 5:40, 7:45, 9:50

**Starts Tomorrow! Exclusive, 2 Weeks Only!**  
**"ONE OF THE YEARS BEST!"**  
 Alex De Renzy's  
**A HISTORY OF THE BLUE MOVIE**  
 AN ADULT FILM  
**the KEY in GEORGETOWN**  
 Washington's Newest Theatre  
 District Building, 3rd & M Sts.  
 Next to Old State House 202 At St.  
 1:30, 3:35, 5:40, 7:45, 9:50

**Starts Tomorrow!**  
**SHE LIVED FOR LOVE AND LOOT...**  
 taking both in fiery, lusty abandon!  
**LUSCIOUS LISA'S TEMPTATIONS**  
 AN ADULT FILM • IN COLOR  
**the PENN**  
**SEAN CONNERY**  
**Dr.No**  
**SEAN CONNERY**  
**"FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE"**  
**UPTOWN**  
**Red Sky At Morning**

**WAYNE'S LOU**  
**DC'S Nationally Famous Dating Bar and Discotheque**  
**Wayne Lue's You**  
 Sun, Mon., Tues., Thurs. 7-9:30  
**60 to 70% OFF ON ALL DRINKS**  
 2153 K Street, N.W.  
 337-2555

**OPENS TONIGHT**  
**Theatre Lobby**  
 presents  
**HOMECOMING**  
 by Harold Pinter  
 Directed by Albert Ihde  
 Thurs. thru Sunday's at 8:30  
 In St. Matthews Court  
 Near Conn. & M  
 behind the Cathedral  
**RESERVATIONS**  
**EX. 3-5818**

**OPENS MON., OCT. 27 THRU SAT., NOV. 8**  
**ARTHUR MILLER'S THE PRICE**  
**"A GREAT EVENING IN THE THEATRE"**  
 —Clive Barnes, N.Y. Times  
 EVES: \$3.00, \$5.00, \$6.50 and \$7.50  
 Matinees: \$1.95, \$3.00, \$4.50 & \$5.50  
 Box Office Open 10 A.M.-9 P.M.  
**SEATS AT SHOW TIME FOR ALL SHOWS TODAY**  
**I Am Curious (yellow)**  
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**DC'S Nationally Famous Dating Bar and Discotheque**  
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**OPENS MON., OCT. 27 THRU SAT., NOV. 8**  
**ARTHUR MILLER'S THE PRICE**  
**"A GREAT EVENING IN THE THEATRE"**  
 —Clive Barnes, N.Y. Times  
 EVES: \$3.00, \$5.00, \$6.50 and \$7.50  
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**2nd BIG WEEK CONT. NOON DAILY**  
**ADULTS ONLY**  
**FLESH**  
**the PENN**  
 12:00, 1:55, 3:55, 5:55 7:55 9:55

**NATIONAL • LAST 4 TIMES!**  
**"America's First Theatre"**  
**PROMPTLY TONIGHT 7:30!**  
 Matinee Sat. at 2 P.M.  
**THE REPERTORY THEATER OF LINCOLN CENTER**  
 presents  
**in the matter of j. robert oppenheimer**  
 Monday Thru Thursday Evenings: \$2.50, \$4.00, \$5.50 and \$6.50  
 Friday and Saturday Evenings: \$3.00, \$5.00, \$6.50 and \$7.50  
 Matinees: \$1.95, \$3.00, \$4.50 & \$5.50  
 Box Office Open 10 A.M.-9 P.M.  
 Student's Tickets \$2.00  
 Unsold seats are available to High School and undergraduate college students with I.D. cards between

**NATIONAL • LAST 4 TIMES!**  
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Figure 3 and Figure 4: These two sets of display ads illustrate the conflation of movies, live performances, pornographic films, and Broadway shows.

Washington's flourishing theater community. Several years later *The Star* followed suit. *The Daily News* ceased operations in 1973 before any such change took place.

Furthermore, print media conflated the two kinds of performance by using the same visual and linguistic signifiers. Readers glancing at theater reviews in any of the three major papers, or even reading diligently through articles, would have found it difficult to decipher whether the actors discussed in the texts were performing live or on film. In *The Star*, reviews and articles about live shows and film almost always led with the word "theater," whereas in *The Post* and *The Daily News* "theater" was usually in the headlines. Columns in all three papers used the same format to present cast lists for both live performances and films; and because photographs of productions were either close-ups of actors or interior shots, distinctions between the artifice of the stage and the artifice of celluloid location shots were nearly impossible to decode. If a member of the public recognized the name of a Hollywood star in an advertisement or in the caption under a photograph placed next to a review, then s/he might make the necessary distinction. Such recognition would have been rare, however; in the two-dimensional world of print, the living world of theatrical performance merged with the celluloid world.

Although this conflation had happened over more than two decades, when the cultural revolution of the 1960s transformed the language and imagery of popular culture, a further conflation occurred. As the media's simulation of sexually explicit cinema slipped the film world into pornographic space, it also pulled live performance and its increasingly provocative sexual parlance into that space as well. This additional conflation led to a blurring of the division between the explicit, and apparently unfeigned

sex of pornography and the simulated sex of theater. Prior to popular culture's acceptance of the pornographic narrative, film and commercial live performance had a set of shared values. They used celebrity performers and scripts that generally supported status-quo social perspectives, which made the conflation of the two media that much easier to affirm.<sup>95</sup> As the pornographic film gained a foothold in the cultural landscape of Washington, the rift between the two media became more apparent. Although live performance occasionally used nudity and sexually provocative situations, not even the risqué performances of "burlesk" could compare to the narratives of pornography. Thus, the conflation continued within the public imaginary, even as the contradictions between the explicit or actual and the simulated or suggested were magnified. In the process, the cultural polarization between those who supported status-quo values and those who struggled for freedom of expression intensified.

The reasons for this shift in performance content in downtown Washington were both economic and aesthetic. The economic factor was undeniable. As one pornography exhibitor said: "It's a simple economic equation; sex is what sells downtown."<sup>96</sup> With downtown's economy in decline, a Broadway-style night on the town with its more romanticized sexuality no longer had enough emotional allure to entice theater-goers out of their comfortable homes, particularly if those homes were no longer near downtown.

The broader cultural dimensions of downtown's transformation were more complicated. Throughout the 1960s, the National found itself at the center of the local and national debate over public decency and art. As downtown's entertainment district

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<sup>95</sup> The McCarthy Hearings of the early 1950s and their blacklists stifled many of the more socially challenging filmmakers.

<sup>96</sup> "Tarnished Palaces," 1-2 (N).

changed from plush palaces to pornhouses, so too had the concept of entertainment changed: a glamorous evening out became instead an adventure in provocation. Complaints about the spread of pornography were widespread throughout Greater Washington, even if most of them simply masked frustration with the slew of changes taking place in the arts community at that time. These changes ranged from sexually explicit imagery, of which pornography was the extreme example, to profanity and graphically violent imagery, as well as political speech that challenged status-quo social doctrines and religion. To a certain extent, Letters to the Editor in the major dailies followed these discussions within the broader public. Among pastors, for example, debate roared for weeks over the failure of the “passion narrative” of *Jesus Christ Superstar* to “include references to Christ’s resurrection.”<sup>97</sup> Or, as evidenced by a flurry of letters in *The Star*, controversy erupted over the merits of a high school production of *The Three Penny Opera*. Offended by the profanity, a writer declared the production “without redeeming moral qualities since the director saw fit to change the ending. A thief, rapist and murderer ... ends up being celebrated and loved by all.”<sup>98</sup> Clearly, the writer did not know Brecht’s script and concluded that the local director, not the international playwright, was guilty of undermining the moral fabric of the nation’s youth. Although letters like these illustrated the regional discourse on free speech and defined Washington’s conservative public, they did little to extend debate because their foundation frequently rested on ignorance and misinformation.

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<sup>97</sup> Reverend John W. Turnbull, “*Superstar*” as Theology,” Letter to Editor, *Evening Star*, 24 October 1970, 7 (C).

<sup>98</sup> Virginia Moore, “X” Rated High School Play?” Letter to the Editor, *Evening Star*, 8 April 1970, 17 (A).

As early as 1962 Washingtonians became aware of the controversy over free speech and nudity and, for the well-read, over legal distinctions between live performance and film. During a “burlesk” at the Gayety, five dancers took off their pasties and made front-page news. Federal agents arrested the dancers for violating obscenity laws; convictions soon followed. Although the Gayety’s status as a legitimate theater had declined even from the days when its shows had “venerable girls and venerable blackouts,” the venue maintained a colorful presence in a faded downtown and continued to earn calendar listings and articles as a theater.<sup>99</sup> In fact, whereas other establishments might have deserved their “strip joint” or “go-go bar” status, the Gayety was “strictly theater; once the show is over you filed out.”<sup>100</sup> The media covered the trial, and the Gayety won its appeal. The Federal Court ruled that the taking off of pasties was a local issue. Judge Andrew M. Hood declared from the bench,

It may be said that such [magazines, books, etc.] have a national character in the sense that they are the same wherever read, exhibited, or shown ... a performance like the one here is strictly local. It may vary from locality to locality, or may vary in the same locality, from day to day or performance to performance. Such a performance ought to be judged by local standards.<sup>101</sup>

The judge’s ruling freed live performances from the threat of federal prosecution because, unlike other art forms with a more “national character,” live shows—with their inherent temporality—existed only in the spaces in which they were performed.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Tom Donnelly, “Who says Washington Isn’t a Theater Town?” *Washington Daily News*, 8 November 1971, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>100</sup> “Take it Off!” 70.

<sup>101</sup> Donald Hizel, “Obscenity Convictions of Gayety Stars Upset,” *The Evening Star*, 14 November 1967, 1(A).

<sup>102</sup> Because of Judge Hood’s ruling that a performance exists only in a particular time and place for a specific community, the concept of “local standards” could easily be limited to the audience in attendance at any unique production. In other words, the community inside the theatrical space on any given night should have the right to legally establish the standards for that performance.

In the late 1960s two Broadway shows, *Oh! Calcutta* and *Hair*, set the standard for theatrical obscenity.<sup>103</sup> Following Judge Hood's ruling, *Hair* fought bans in Boston, Massachusetts, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Six seconds of nudity at the end of *Hair*'s first act provoked protests across the country, and it did not matter that those glimpses of nude actors played only a small part in the protests, for many spectators actually objected to *Hair*'s politics. For example, Apollo 13 astronaut John Swigert, Jr. said after walking out of the New York production, "I don't like the way they wrapped the flag around that guy."<sup>104</sup> In other words, the show's sexual imagery was relatively mild, but because pundits envisioned "couples copulating in the aisles," *Hair* was lumped into the general heap with pornography.<sup>105</sup> In such a charged environment, the conflation of pornography, theatrical nudity, and counter-cultural politics served the interests of cultural conservatives determined to prevent the liberation of speech and art from generations of oppressive politics.

*Oh! Calcutta* played on Broadway for fourteen years.<sup>106</sup> Although it did not tour, in September 1970 *Oh! Calcutta* was set to become the first closed circuit television broadcast of a Broadway show. The use of electronic media opened the show up to federal prosecution, however.<sup>107</sup> In 1970 the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography recommended abolishing legal restrictions regulating an adult's freedom to view both

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<sup>103</sup> *Oh! Calcutta* was written by Robert Dennis, Peter Schickele, and Stanley Walden and *Hair* was written by Gerome Ragini and James Rado.

<sup>104</sup> "Two Astronauts Walk out on *Hair*," *Evening Star*, 6 June 1970, 2 (A).

<sup>105</sup> John P. MacKenynne, "Curious Debate in Court," *Washington Post*, 11 November 1970, 1(B).

<sup>106</sup> *Oh! Calcutta* is a collection of vignettes and skits that explore the sexual mores of the 1960s. Although the production contained nudity and sexual content, it did not represent or simulate the sex act.

<sup>107</sup> The producers of *Oh! Calcutta* followed a tradition established by nearly a decade of televised public broadcasting of live performances. By 1970 the practice had become so successful that a Columbia Broadcasting Service decided to produce a weekly theater show: "CBS Playhouse."

pornography and art; nevertheless, the high profile nature of live performance continued to make it a target of anti-pornography advocates.<sup>108</sup> For years the Broadway run of *Oh! Calcutta* represented just such a target for prosecutors looking to make headlines. When it went national on screens at “an estimated 86 theaters around the nation,” President Nixon’s only appointee to the Commission, Charles Keating, Jr. , filed suit, seeking to pull the plug.<sup>109</sup> On the night of the broadcast, U.S. attorneys and Justice Department personnel proceeded to arrest organizers on charges of “the interstate transportation of obscene material.”<sup>110</sup> In contrast to the ruling at the Gayety, which drew a distinction between live performance and art with a national character, this case demonstrated how a filmed performance crossed that boundary, giving live performance national significance. Although *Oh! Calcutta*’s community was in New York City, when producers converted it to electronic form, it was no longer a local phenomenon. In its electronic form, it acquired national implications, allowing federal officials to intervene in its distribution.

While thousands of Washingtonians awaited *Hair*, which was to open at the National in March 1971, the national culture war was already heating up locally. After President Nixon took office in 1969, he and First Lady Pat Nixon escalated the war by refusing to attend the National. When Mrs. Nixon made the performing arts her issue, she also made it clear that her theatrical tastes were not those of the Nederlander Organization, the company that controlled the theater’s repertoire. She visited circuses and the IceCapades while her husband launched a White House entertainment series,

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<sup>108</sup> President Johnson founded the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1968.

<sup>109</sup> Ken N. Clawson, “Justice Department Views *Calcutta*,” *The Washington Post*, 29 September 1970, 1(B).

<sup>110</sup> “*Oh! Calcutta!*” Indictments,” *Evening Star*, 20 May 1971, 11 (C).

“Evenings at the White House,” which included as its second offering, the popular Broadway musical composed by Sherman Edwards, *1776*.<sup>111</sup> After the show, President Nixon declared the event “a great success even though it [*1776*] has an unpopular subject, patriotism, and has only two women in the cast, both of them are fully dressed.”<sup>112</sup> As more artists and theaters picked up the counter-cultural mantle—however toned down or distorted it might be—this act by Nixon signaled to the arts community in Washington and the nation that his administration saw the on-going culture war as a major front on his political agenda. Thus, even though Richard L. Coe asserted that Nixon’s viewing of *1776* was an example of the triumph of “Art over Politics,” Nixon’s patronage signaled to Washington and the nation that the culture wars had officially begun; and the National was on the wrong side of Nixon’s political equation.<sup>113</sup>

The National could not respond to the collapse of downtown’s entertainment culture or to the changing cultural climate except by altering its conservative repertoire, if ever so slightly. James Nederlander determined the theater’s shows and he was wedded to Broadway; and unfortunately for him, Broadway’s production numbers had been in decline for many years. Thus, when he sat down to decide on a repertoire for the National, his choices were limited. For years the National’s seasons had consisted of Broadway standards such as *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Occasionally, the theater ventured outside the

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<sup>111</sup> Although other presidents had imported scenes and monologues from Broadway shows to the White House’s small stage, this production marks the first time in U.S. history that a president brought in an entire Broadway musical. Production values were scaled down because of the stage’s limited capacity and the audience was limited to “a couple of hundred friends.” Clare Crawford, “Some Lively Ghosts in the White House: Nixon takes Refuge in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Washington Daily News*, 23 February 1970, 18.

<sup>112</sup> Ymelda Dixon, “Old Patriots Return to the Scene,” *Evening Star*, 23 February 1970, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>113</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Spirit of 76 at White House,” *Washington Post*, 23 February 1970, 1(C).

conservative mold; for example, it presented Hansbery's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1960. By the end of the 1960s, however, the theater could no longer justify a predominantly conservative repertoire, so the National presented Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*, which explores the theme of homosexuality. In 1970, the National stepped into the political fray with *Sheep on the Runway* by Art Buchwald. After the show even democrat Ethel Kennedy said, "It cut close to the bone."<sup>114</sup> Reactions by the Republican opposition were not as tolerant: five faithfuls "stomped out in a white rage," one of them declaring, "they can't make fun of us on our own time."<sup>115</sup> Rarely, did the National's performances cut that deep into the country's cultural divide, however; for the theater's success had always depended on political and entertainment celebrities from both sides of the culture war, and too much controversy only undermined that strategy. Yet, with the public increasingly polarized both aesthetically and intellectually, the National found it difficult to straddle the cultural divide. With downtown looking more depressed by the day, the theater needed a hit. With that in mind, Nederlander summoned for *Hair*, a true counter-cultural "celebrity" hit.

Three years after *Hair*'s appearance on Broadway, the show's hippiedome arrived on the National's stage. Its arrival signified the nation's tacit acceptance of counter-cultural values and represented the high water mark for downtown commercial theater during the period. Many local pundits and critics deemed *Hair* "unpatriotic" and "pornographic." Others felt it current and meaningful, while a few considered the show passé. *Hair*'s incredible box office success proved it essential, however, to any critic or

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<sup>114</sup> Isabelle Shelton, "It Only Hurt to Laugh at Barbs in *Sheep*," *Evening Star*, 5 May 1970, 6 (B).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

cultural consumer interested in downtown's economic survival or local theater's commercial viability. Even *The Post's* conservative Richard Coe declared that the show had "quite literally changed the American theater."<sup>116</sup>

The excitement generated by *Hair* in the Washington media had less to do with the show's content than with the economic stimulus its presence provided the city. True, federal government officials had categorized the show using *Oh! Calcutta's* criterion of "obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy," but that categorization said little about content.<sup>117</sup> For those in downtown's business community, *Hair* meant dollars. Struggling restaurants started "licking their chops" in anticipation of a reinvigorated nightlife.<sup>118</sup> For months prior to the show's arrival, feature articles, news stories, and editorials—both in print and on the airways—followed *Hair* across the country, sometimes accompanied by photographs of "young aspirants auditioning for roles."<sup>119</sup> When the show finally opened in Washington, many dreamed of a downtown renaissance, organized not by "crew-cut engineers: but fresh, and possibly longhaired imagination [sic]."<sup>120</sup> For years civil rights and anti-war protesters had disturbed Washington's image, while adding little to the city's economic well being. Now, via *Hair*, counter-cultural forces had an icon of their economic worth. Even inchoate alternative weeklies and monthlies, which typically ignored happenings at the National, gave notice that commercial theater had "one of the

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<sup>116</sup> Perhaps Coe had been swayed by the script's Washington roots—its authors, Gerome Ragni and James Rado, had attended Catholic University. Richard L. Coe, "Hair Roots at Catholic U," *Washington Post*, 7 March 1971, 1(E).

<sup>117</sup> "Indictments," 1 (C).

<sup>118</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Theater Notes: *Hair* in the Fall at the Warner," *Washington Post*, 9 July 1970, 11(B).

<sup>119</sup> Irving Wallace, "How Free Can We Be in this Permissive Age," *Evening Star*, 15 February 1971, 3(C).

<sup>120</sup> "Getting People Downtown," Letter to the Editor, *Washington Post*, 15 April 1971, 18(A).

few alive things in the city.”<sup>121</sup> Progressive organizations like the Urban League, St. Stephen’s Church, and D.C. Student Nurses’ Association—and even fringe groups like the Medical Committee for Human Rights—now sponsored benefits at the show. *Hair* was filling downtown with hope. To be sure, many other forces contributed to the revival; for example, construction of the subway system brought large construction crews to depressed areas. The more visible injection of energy and youth that *Hair* brought to a city still reeling from riots, however, motivated many to wonder: “Can the unlikely combination of a tribal love rock musical and 300 construction workers save Washington’s faded old downtown from dying at night?”<sup>122</sup>

The energy, the action, the vitality of the music produces an illusion of disconnected images that overpower reality.

More than that, *Hair* is myth. The audience no longer responds to the content of the show or the artistry of a given performance. They see only the myth they have been conditioned to expect. They see the Aquarium romanticism of the American Tribal-Love rock Musical that never really existed, and exists less now than ever before.

So the people in Bassin’s [downtown restaurant] ... munch the *soma* of a theatrical message that was not there, tap their feet to the syncopation of music as opiate as any drug, and spin fantasies of love, peace, and understanding rooted in the fallacy of a show business deception.<sup>123</sup>

Another deception was undoubtedly the media’s contention that *Hair*’s cure was anything but temporary. The National’s rejuvenation of downtown lasted four short months. Nevertheless, *Hair* reminded city planners that the health of Washington, both economically and spiritually, depended in no small measure on the city’s theatricality.

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<sup>121</sup> Thomas Shales, “*Hair*: a lewd, joyful, plastic smash,” review, *The D.C. Gazette*, 29 March 1971, 14.

<sup>122</sup> Carl Bernstein, “*Hair*: Metro Construction Resuscitating Downtown After Dark,” *Washington Post*, 13 April 1971, 1(B).

<sup>123</sup> Tim Dowling, “*Hair*,” *The Washingtonian Magazine*, 54

That theatricality, in turn, relied less on artistry than on theater's emotional and experiential connection to people.

#### *Section IV: The Death of Theater of Commerce*

As the National Theater entered the 1970s, it was no longer an icon of the nation's conservative theatrical heritage, signified by presidential attendees, escapist amusements, and celebrity encounters. The National stood at the junction between a downtown, identified by a collapsing infrastructure and a flourishing pornographic marketplace, and a monumental core that served as a staging ground for civil rights and anti-war protestors who were determined to challenge the nation's imperialism with chants of "Freedom and Democracy Now!" This shifting conception of space marked the National as a culturally liberal institution even though the theater tried to avoid the liberal stigma. The theater was no longer free, however, to feign neutrality in a war of competing cultural interests. Thus, when the National's repertoire tentatively touched on an array of social issues, its identity had already lost the conservative stamp. The presentation of *Hair* merely left no doubt on which side of the cultural divide the National stood. The show's success indicated that the number of people wanting to see bare-chested men and women dance on stage or have an American flag wrapped around "angelheaded hipsters" no longer represented, as it had in the 1950s, a dissident fringe.<sup>124</sup> Rather, the show's nation-wide success indicated that the Free Speech Movement had grown so large that even within Washington's teeming bureaucracy, a plurality of citizens was willing to enter the core's agora and contend for the meaning of the American myth.

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<sup>124</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Howl," from *Howl and Other Poems* (City Lights Books: San Francisco, 1956), 9.

With downtown's traditional entertainment iconography all but expunged, the National as a Washington icon, signifying a night on the town, ceased to exist. In fact, the National's death was all but inevitable. Not only was the Kennedy Center a few months from completion, but also the National and the surrounding milieu were still years away from economic development. To be sure, James Nederlander still planned for the theater's future. He put together a 1971-1972 season that would open with Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*. Joan Rivers' *Fun City* would follow; then *Gingerbread Lady*, another Simon; *Purlie*, a musical based on the play by Ozzie Davis; Sondheim's *Company*, and finally a show that Nederlander hoped would repair relations with President Nixon and the Republicans, *1776*. The Kennedy Center's shadow must have darkened his thoughts as he contemplated the theater's future, however. The National Cultural Center must have seemed like a gigantic meteor eclipsing the sun as it descended to earth; its opening would surely throw all Nederlander's plans for the future into confusion. He had no way of calculating the effects of the new Center. Would audiences for competing institutions dry up, as some feared, or would the Center act as a stimulus for Washington's entire theatrical culture, creating a new and invigorated theater-going public? Like other residents of Washington, he would have to wait, hold his breath, and see.

## Chapter Three

### SILENT MAJORITY: THEATER OF COMMUNITY IN A CHANGING CITY

The National Theater and other Theaters of Commerce represented but a sliver of Washington's total theatrical experience in 1970. Undoubtedly, the National's sliver had greater effect on the public's understanding of theater and performance than did those of other institutions. With the National's long history and celebrity power, it received a disproportionate amount of media coverage when compared to other theaters. On the other hand, Theater of the Public constituted a small sector of Washington's theatrical geography. Nevertheless, Arena Stage, Washington Theater Club, Theater Lobby, and other small theaters received the next largest share of coverage.<sup>125</sup> By contrast, amateur theaters associated with residential urban and suburban neighborhoods and the area's many churches and educational institutions received the least amount. Yet, in 1970 there were "more than a hundred little theaters [community theaters] in the Metropolitan Washington area."<sup>126</sup> Even without adding educational theaters to this number, Theater of Community was the most active sector of Washington's theatrical culture. Moreover, some Theaters of Community were the region's oldest arts entities. Considering the depths of their roots, the impact that these organizations had on the public's conception of theater was more profound than their scant media coverage would indicate.

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<sup>125</sup> My analysis of the pre-Kennedy Center Theaters of the Public, spearheaded by Arena Stage and supported by Washington Theater Club and Theater Lobby, constitutes the topic of Chapter Five.

<sup>126</sup> Although little theaters had artistic missions different from Washington's Theater of Community, both shared a vision of community participation. Omer Henry, "On the Town," *Washingtonian Magazine*, 2 February 1971, 16.

The huge number of Theaters of Community did not represent a single homogeneous mass even though they shared common features. As mentioned in Chapter One, Theaters of Community were divided into three subcategories: 1) state and church-affiliated theaters, 2) community theaters, and 3) educational theaters. These categories delineate three types of relationships that Theaters of Community had with the neighborhoods of Washington. An important point of difference between Theaters of Community resided in these connections, for rarely did Theaters of Community exist as independent organizations. Some community theaters achieved autonomy after years of struggle, but most frequently they persevered by working in tandem with larger neighborhood institutions. The impact that these relationships had on Theater of Community's identity was profound, because most neighborhood-centric theaters depended on larger institutions for performance venues. Given the fact that Theater of Community received scant media coverage, performance venues constituted the most important signifiers of identity that the theaters possessed. The relationship between company and venue was not always one of sponsorship. In state and church-affiliated relationships, the larger organization sponsored the theater; thus, the affiliation between the sponsor and the theater was determinative. The same was true about the affiliation between educational theaters and their sponsoring institutions. The relationship between community companies and their venues was usually symbiotic, however, with companies and venues having two distinct identities. To grasp the meaning of theater when the connections is symbiotic requires an appreciation of the power dynamic between company and venue, particularly when the public has no knowledge of the relationship between the two entities. In such cases, the venue shaped public understanding of the

company materially. If a theater continually used a venue operated by another institution, then the venue's architecture and social space conferred its identity onto the theatrical entity even if no legally binding link existed. In other words, the public would assume that the venue's controlling institution had sponsored or, at least, endorsed the theater and its activities, with the venue's social space shaping the theater's identity through its associated meta-narrative.

The first three sections of this chapter correspond to the three categories of Theater of Community. Each section analyzes the social spaces associated with the category, focusing on the interactions between the theaters and their neighborhoods. Theatrical architecture is explored in association with surrounding buildings and concomitant human activity. Each section examines how major and minor media represented the theatrical category in relationship to both the theater's community and to the theatrical culture as a whole. Each analysis concludes with an investigation of the impact that theatrical repertoires had on the public's perception of theater. The theaters selected for this chapter best represent each category or represent a significant variation of the type. For the most part, the theaters chosen have the longest histories and the largest public presence, although in some cases a recently founded theater that had a significant impact on the theater community was chosen. The chapter concludes with a summary of those features common to all three categories.

### *Section I: State and Church-Affiliated Theaters*

State and church-affiliated theaters have had long histories, and the institutions of both state and church have maintained a hierarchical relationship over their theatrical

activities. In the history of both relationships, theaters tended to serve the needs of governmental and religious sponsors. In addition to overt control over the selection of theatrical repertoires, more innocuous interactions have also defined the relationship. For example, even if a governmental entity or a church did not have overt control over the theatrical event, the public would nevertheless associate the venue's symbolic presentation of ideology or dogma with the theater. An auditorium's national flag or stained glass Jesus could mark a theater's performance as definitively as a national anthem or invocation. Whatever the direct presence of the state or church entity was, because the sponsor possessed such a disproportionately greater share of power in the relationship, the theater had little chance of being perceived by the public as an autonomous agent.

Numerous state and church-affiliated theaters existed in Washington, circa 1970; they had a variety of programs, from strictly religious pageants to radical agit-prop productions. Regardless of the theater's artistic mission, the values of the sponsoring institution marked the theater's public significance. The sponsor's principles permeated every performance and, more importantly, the theatrical organization's identity.

During the turbulent 1960s, Theaters of Community with state and church affiliation dominated the District of Columbia's amateur theatrical culture. Urban churches supported the most visible amateur theaters, most notably two of Washington's oldest: the Mount Vernon Players (1937) and the Foundry Players (1947).<sup>127</sup> Such

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<sup>127</sup> The total number of churches and synagogues associated with performance was extremely large, for these organizations frequently sponsored the occasional show. I have limited my discussion to those churches that did more than present a performance or two, but that actually established theatrical entities under their larger umbrella. These theatrical entities projected into the public sphere their own identities. The degree to which these identities are independent of their umbrella organization depended on a number of factors that I will discuss later.

affiliations existed in the suburbs of Maryland and Virginia, but they remained exceptions, as community theaters tended to reside in those jurisdictions.<sup>128</sup> The federal government supported several theaters, but those theaters were not neighborhood-based entities.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, although embassies sponsored performances, they usually did not create theatrical organizations; without a producing organization, even an emergent one, analysis of theatrical identity is impossible.<sup>130</sup> The British Embassy Players was a notable exception to this absence of a theater among the city's many embassies.

For many of Washington's inner-city churches, the era's turbulent social dynamics challenged their continued operation. Like most cities that witnessed upheaval during the 1960s, Washington experienced dramatic shifts in population and capital investment. As discussed in Chapter Two, leery white residents, as well as white-controlled businesses were moving out of the city, with many starting their exodus to suburbia during the 1950s.<sup>131</sup> The exodus changed the racial demographics dramatically. In 1950, the District had 517,865 white residents; in 1960, the number dropped to 345,263; by 1970, the white population had declined to 209,202.<sup>132</sup> Although further losses in the District's population were not registered until the 1980 census, when the

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<sup>128</sup> A significant exception was Montgomery County's Cedar Lane Stage sponsored by the Cedar Lane Unitarian Church, which I cover later in the chapter.

<sup>129</sup> I discuss government-sponsored theater, namely the Kennedy Center, in Chapter Four.

<sup>130</sup> In other words, an isolated performance does not make a theater; without a pattern of performances associated with a specific theatrical entity, the performance's meaning does not resonate substantively beyond its occurrence.

<sup>131</sup> The population of the District of Columbia dropped by 4.8 percent, from its peak of 802,178 in 1950 to 763,958 in 1960.

<sup>132</sup> In the weeks following Dr. King's assassination in 1968, violence and looting acted as further catalysts: the loss of economic and personal security spread to African American neighborhoods. Donald B. Dodds (comp.), *Historical Statistics of the United States: Two Centuries of the Census*, 1993.

population dropped by 15.6 percent, for many residents the alienation had already occurred.<sup>133</sup>

As the infrastructure and racial composition of District neighborhoods changed, the congregations of urban churches changed as well. As a result, theaters sponsored by white churches struggled to adjust as they experienced dramatic modifications to their congregations' demographic composition.<sup>134</sup> As Washington's identity became African Americanized, white Washingtonians who stayed in the city lived either in those areas with high concentrations of upper-class families. Most lived in communities west of Rock Creek Park, along the 16<sup>th</sup> Street corridor in upper Northwest, or in Capital Hill; or in smaller pockets in and around Dupont Circle or in Northeast's bi-racial neighborhoods.

By 1970, Washington's economic polarization paralleled its racial polarization. Eighty-one percent of the District's 16,560 low-income families (with incomes of less than \$5000) lived in either central city neighborhoods or in neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River.<sup>135</sup> These communities also possessed the highest percentage of African American families. By contrast, communities west of Rock Creek Park, which were approximately 95 percent white, supported a high percentage of Washington's upper-income families. In addition, 42 percent of Washington area singles lived either west of the park or in neighborhoods just north of Dupont Circle.<sup>136</sup> The economic disparity in

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<sup>133</sup>In 1970, Washington's population was 756,668; in 1980 it dropped to 638,432. Urban flight exacerbated the movement of investment capital to suburban commercial districts and transferred consumers and their dollars to shopping malls as never before. Thomas Edmonds and Raymond J. Keating, *D.C. by the Numbers: a State of Failure* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 76-77.

<sup>134</sup> Washington's numerous black churches experienced the same intensity of adjustment, albeit in the opposite direction; but they only occasionally sponsored theatrical performances and none created a theater operation with its own identity.

<sup>135</sup> *District of Columbia: ANC Census Report, Selected 1970 Census* (Washington, DC: District of Columbia Municipal Planning Office, 1977), 14.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

communities segregated along racial lines and between poor black families and single white professionals further exacerbated existing tensions.<sup>137</sup>

Church-affiliated theaters that operated in the District during the late 1960s walked a fine line between being oases of reconciliation and bastions of white entrenchment. This struggle was never more evident than in two of Washington's best established churches: Mount Vernon Place Methodist Church and Foundry Methodist Church, home of the Mount Vernon Place Players and Foundry Players. As theaters sponsored by predominantly white churches in or close to devastated African American neighborhoods, the Mount Vernon and Foundry Players were surrounded by communities of Black Nationalism inflamed by decades of systemic racial violence and, more recently, by the assassination of popular civil rights leaders. Given the Methodists' history of segregation, Mount Vernon Place and Foundry struggled to stabilize their congregations and identities.<sup>138</sup> Fortunately, both churches were situated on major Washington thoroughfares, which raised their visibility and their sense of security and safety during troubled times. This factor was crucial to their survival as congregants who relocated into outlying neighborhoods probably used those thoroughfares for their commute.<sup>139</sup> Visibility and security allowed both churches to maintain their populations even as congregants traveled greater distances to attend services and other activities.

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<sup>137</sup> To be sure, the African American middle class had strengthened considerably during the 1960s and 1970s based in large measure on an increase in the number of local and federal government jobs.

<sup>138</sup> The designation of "United Methodist" occurred in 1968 when elements of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church united around calls for racial reconciliation and inclusion. The General Commission on Religion and Race was also formed, officially ending more than a century of segregation within the church. As of 1970 neither Washington church had officially changed its name to "United Methodist."

<sup>139</sup> As mentioned previously, a large percentage of Washington white population had left the city for the suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s. One can surmise that a similar white flight occurred with these two churches.

In the 1950s, the Mount Vernon Players had played a critical role in Washington's theatrical culture. Mount Vernon Place was located prominently on the corner of Ninth Street and Massachusetts Avenue, one of the few arteries traveling the entire length of the city, east to west. Not only was the Hippodrome Theater, Arena Stage's original space, located across the street from the church, but a former Mount Vernon Players' director, Edward Mangum, had co-founded Arena with Zelda Fichandler. Under his artistic direction, the Players helped furnish "many of the carpenters, stage hand, ticket takers and ushers" for the initial season.<sup>140</sup> During the 1960s, despite its central location, Mount Vernon was in a precarious situation, wedged between a riot torn neighborhood to its north, an emergent yet still undeveloped Chinatown to the southeast, and a deteriorating downtown to the southwest.

In 1970, the Players continued to operate in a more professional manner than other Washington Theaters of Community. The Players' director, Robert Gray, was employed by the parish, a practice that had been in place since the days of Mangum. Gray created the impression that the Players were a mission of the church and that the scripts it produced were "in keeping with the teachings of the church," even as the church worried internally about losing control over content.<sup>141</sup> Fueling this concern was the growing disparity between church membership and the Players' membership. During the 1960s, as the church's congregation decreased in numbers, membership in the Players increased, a growth that could be attributed to the general increase in theatrical activity taking place throughout the city. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that as the Players

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<sup>140</sup> Gilbert F. Kloth, "Church Drama at Mt. Vernon Place Church, 1936-1976," chapter 15 in *History, Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church, 1850-1976*, Ed. Royce L. Thompson, (Washington: The Church, 1977), 104.

<sup>141</sup> Sally Crowell, "The Mt. Vernon Players," *The D.C. Gazette*, 4 May 1970, 7.

upgraded the theatrical operation and attracted more non-Methodists to their productions, a diminished congregation felt threatened. Church's leadership could not reconcile the religious mission of the church with the mission expressed by the Players' repertoire. In 1970 and 1971, that repertoire included two Broadway shows, Rick Besoyan's *Little Mary Sunshine* and Patrick Hamilton's *Angel Street*, as well as Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*. The company also produced *Seventeen*, "the simple story of a simple community in which simple people live simple lives."<sup>142</sup> Productions like *Seventeen* as well as the annual pageants in celebration of Christmas and Easter added to the theater's public identity as a church mission. Despite the leadership's concerns about losing control over content, the productions demonstrated that the theater was providing a beleaguered community with a degree of optimism, albeit mixed with nostalgia for a simpler time. Nevertheless, after the 1971 season, the visibility of the church's theater diminished considerably.

Located on 16<sup>th</sup> Street, Foundry Methodist Church's gothic stone façade dominated an entire block of one of Washington's major arteries. 16<sup>th</sup> Street originates at the front gate of the White House and proceeds north, bifurcating the city north/south. Following the 1968 uprisings, economic development slowed; neighborhoods west and northwest of the church entered a state of flux. The predominantly African American residents of Dupont Circle and Adams Morgan watched gentrification inch north. Both Columbia Heights and Adams Morgan, which "once had distinctive shopping and amusement resources," slipped into disrepair.<sup>143</sup> Significantly, nightlife in much of the

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> *District of Columbia ANC Census Report: Selected 1970 Census Data by City, Ward, and ANC*, (Washington, D.C.: District of Columbia Municipal Planning Office, 1977), 118.

inner city at that time had “deteriorated to very marginal levels.” Communities of small businesses and modest townhouses were also experiencing an influx of Latin American immigrants. When combined with gentrification, the demographic change destabilized traditional representations of identity. To Foundry’s east, the uprisings had devastated 14<sup>th</sup> Street, which once served as one of the District’s major commercial corridors. Many establishments were boarded up or in the process of being so. Ironically, however, Foundry’s neighborhood was identified by prosperous homes and major institutions, from the headquarters of local agencies like the Washington Urban League and the Union of Democratic Action to national headquarters, including the Carnegie Institute for International Peace.

Whereas Mount Vernon used theater as an instrument of ministry, Foundry approached theater as an instrument of neighborhood outreach and fundraising. The Foundry Players formed partnerships with a range of community organizations, and box office from their productions was used to support the activities of both the church and the partners. Thus, even though Foundry had more organizational interests to juggle than Mount Vernon, the theater operated more freely and without as much anxiety between church leadership and theatrical practitioners. Although the church did not provide a salaried director, Foundry still earned a reputation locally for high quality and experimental amateur productions. By its own claim, it was the first “Washington area theater group to stage a show ‘in-the-round.’”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Foundry stage the show in 1947, just prior to Arena Stage’s opening in 1950. Foundry Website, <http://www.nbrconsulting.com/foundry/aboutus/index.htm>. 2001.

Foundry's productions traversed a large thematic terrain. In the 1969 and 1970 seasons, the company produced: Tennessee Williams' *A Street Car Named Desire* and *Glass Menagerie*; the hit comedy by Kaufman and Hart, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*; Thornton Wilder's *Skin of Our Teeth*; the popular Christian drama *Christ in the Concrete City* by Philip Turner; Herman Gressieker's *Royal Gambit*; and the Broadway musical, *Guys and Dolls*. Eclectic in appeal, the scripts confirmed that Foundry and its theater-going public were more interested in the act of performance than in theater's evangelical potential. Although neither Foundry nor Mount Vernon selected scripts that dealt directly with the period's array of social concerns, its repertoire signaled growing—and, for church leadership, possibly alarming—independence of the theatrical from the religious.

Not all church-affiliated theaters operated inside the District. Beyond the district's beltway, in the upscale neighborhood of Bethesda, Maryland, members of Cedar Lane Unitarian Church founded Cedar Lane Stage in 1958. Unlike Mount Vernon Place and Foundry, Cedar Lane's neighborhood did not experience the social upheaval and turmoil of the 1960s. In fact, located in a bucolic setting adjoining Rock Creek Park, the Cedar Lane Unitarian Church was visually removed from the images of violence and rebellion occurring on the streets of Washington. People who entered the grounds at Cedar Lane found themselves surrounded by a tranquil grove of trees. Although a city church might provide sanctuary from the tumult, violence was never far removed from the consciousness of congregants and playgoers alike. The voices of the street, the nightly gunfire, and the police and fire sirens resounded inside the hallowed walls. Thus, instead of offering retreat from the world, an inner city church provided shelter, where

the public might spend a moment reflecting on the issues of the world or the self. At Cedar Lane, a more complete disconnect between daily strife and spiritual renewal was inevitable.

In its remote setting, Cedar Lane Stage symbolized the meditative experience, or at least its possibility. The congregation used theater neither as a bridge between contending social classes or races nor as a nostalgic escape from the realities of America in the 1970s. Like Mount Vernon and Foundry, Cedar Lane Stage selected plays that represented its view of the world, politically and intellectually. An offshoot of the District's All Souls Unitarian Church and its progressive, bi-racial congregation, Cedar Lane's parishioners brought with them a commitment to social action. At All Souls, however, spectators had experienced theater that responded directly to the on-going crisis in the country. The All Souls Unitarian players produced more controversial shows including the District's premier of Megan Terry's *Viet Rock*. Though still committed to social change, Cedar Lane Stage took a less confrontational approach, dedicating itself to the performance of "plays of social significance" but with literary merit.<sup>145</sup> Recent productions included Arthur Laurents' *A Clearing in the Woods*, Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and an original creation, *Oh! Kalamazoo* (1969), as well as *The Rivalry* by Norman Corwin, *Everything in the Garden* by Edward Albee and *Exit the King* by Eugene Ionesco (1970-71). Though comparable in diversity to Foundry's list of plays, Cedar Lane's list provided the playgoer with more challenging language, themes, and situations. In fact, for Cedar Lane's congregation, theater seemingly functioned as an instrument of social and aesthetic provocation.

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<sup>145</sup> *Spots*, a Directory of Washington Theaters (Rockville: 1975), 76.

Although the United States government and many foreign embassies sponsored discrete performances, the public experienced those performances in an ad hoc manner not as productions associate with particular theaters.<sup>146</sup> In fact, only the British Embassy organized a community-based theater, the British Embassy Players. The Players occupied the tiny rotunda of the British embassy on Massachusetts Avenue and promoted themselves by taking advantage of England's theatrical heritage and expertise. The association lent them an air of professionalism even if they were amateurs. Immediately after their founding in 1964, the Players gained coverage in the *Star* and *Daily Herald*, which helped to galvanize their theater-going public.<sup>147</sup>

The British Embassy was located west of Rock Creek Park, just north of Georgetown, at the end of Washington's Embassy Row. Constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century, these grand mansions dominated the landscape and were the "Washington equivalent of those [mansions] on New York's Fifth Avenue."<sup>148</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, foreign delegations gradually converted them into embassies. The grandeur of these embassies kept the Row's social space from experiencing the general decline experienced by the city's commercial sector. In fact, as Washington's reputation in the world increased in the post World War II era, the status of Embassy Row rose proportionately.

Paradoxically, the Players' remote location and small performance space elevated the company's status. Not only did the theater exist in the rarified air of international

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<sup>146</sup> Performances sometimes occurred outside the framework of any organizational structure, created in an ad hoc manner on a performance by performance basis. These performances did not acquire theatrical status.

<sup>147</sup> Although reviews were rare, photographs of Embassy Players' productions frequently appeared in the culture sections of both papers.

<sup>148</sup> *Worthy of a Nation*, 155.

political elites, but the Players also assumed the identity of cultural ambassadors. The Players attracted members of the social establishment who preferred British culture to American. By supporting the British Embassy Players, the British government gained an instrument of cultural outreach. When they offered “one night performances” of scripts, like Author Watkyn’s murder mystery *Amber for Anna*, “for various local and foreign causes,” the theater’s magnanimous gesture signified an act in behalf of England.<sup>149</sup> In that same spirit, soon after their founding the Players established the Ruby Griffith Award, which was presented for outstanding achievement in amateur theater. Not only did the award extend the theater’s regional profile and soften its elitest image, but it also elevated the status of the area’s entire amateur theatrical culture.

The Embassy Players did not limit their repertoire to the best of British playwrights, but they also selected scripts that appealed to a broader public. In 1970 they produced another murder mystery, Agatha Christi’s *Mousetrap*. As with *Amber*, this production reached the broader Washington public. Working in collaboration with American University, they staged *Mousetrap* at Dunbarton United Methodist Church in Georgetown. In addition, the Players produced several musical revues, like *An Evening with the Players* (1968), which combined Shakespearean monologues, Noel Coward’s *Hands Across the Sea*, and *A Tribute to the American Musical*. Such shows suggest that the Players were primarily interested in producing entertaining scripts with little controversial subject matter.

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<sup>149</sup> *Spots*, 75.

## *Section II: The Growth of Community Theatrical Organizations*

Although community theaters were found throughout the Washington metropolitan area, most were located in expanding, middle class neighborhoods in Maryland's Montgomery and Virginia's Arlington Counties. As Maryland's Prince George's County and Virginia's Fairfax County developed, they too supported suburban-based companies. The District's community theaters operated in the wealthier, more stable residential neighborhoods of northwest Washington. Without coherent neighborhoods, Theaters of Community struggled to survive; some did, especially those with state or church affiliation or with the backing of educational institutions. As District neighborhoods lost their stability, however, people with neighborhood-centric inclinations tended to organize communities and theaters around more heuristic indicators such as race, gender, or sexual orientation.<sup>150</sup>

Many of Greater Washington's community theaters followed the tradition of the little theater movement, even if the majority came into existence after World War II, when the original spirit of the movement had declined. Unlike state or church-sponsored theaters that were founded with a venue in mind, citizens organized many community theaters before finding architectural homes for them. Prior to 1960, many of the more than one hundred community theaters in the metropolitan area performed in rented school or civic auditoriums, frequently in an ad hoc manner. Eventually, groups developed neighborhood followings, established reputations, and finally moved into auditoriums on more permanent bases. In some cases, civic associations that controlled theatrical

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<sup>150</sup> I will deal with the establishment of Theaters of Identity in Chapter Six.

facilities adopted the companies. If these companies continued to grow, they frequently moved into their own spaces, free from institutional influences.

Regardless of a theater's relationship to its venue, the architecture used for performance and the venue's associated social space influenced the community's experience of the theater and, in the long run, the public's perception of its identity. The fact that many venues used by community theaters were in public school auditoriums or in the auditoriums of larger architectural complexes not identifiable as theaters, meant that the theater's identity existed in association with a complex system of cultural signifiers. If the company used the same venue over an extended period of time, then the dominant institution within that complex framed the public's experience of the theater and its identity.<sup>151</sup>

The boom in suburban community theaters reflected many needs. Changes in the area's demographics, denigration of downtown's commercial activities, and an upheaval in traditional values contributed to a general feeling of instability and rootlessness. Suburban neighborhoods had grown rapidly over the preceding two decades and were being inundated with new residents. In fact, Washington's suburbs grew faster during this period than any other suburbs in the country. Not only had the nation's population surged following World War II, but also the Korean and Vietnam Wars increased the number of military personnel in the greater Washington region. In addition, thanks to President Johnson's Great Society Programs, the size and influence of the Federal government's civilian work force grew. As a result, from 1950 to 1970, Montgomery

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<sup>151</sup> Community theaters that used multiple venues avoided connections between themselves and other institutions but, without identifiable social spaces to frame them, these theaters found it difficult to generate any kind of identity much less one that expressed their intentions. Companies committed to touring create an identity that is rooted in the experience of the tour.

and Prince George's Counties grew from 164,401 and 194,182 residents to 522,809 and 661,719 respectively—increases of over 310 percent in Montgomery and 340 percent in Prince George's.<sup>152</sup> In the suburbs of Virginia, growth occurred most dramatically in counties furthest from the city. In Arlington and Alexandria City, the population grew from 197,236 in 1950 to over 285,000 in 1970, a 45 percent increase. The distant suburbs of Fairfax, on the other hand, grew from 100,523 in 1950 to 477,000 in 1970, an increase of almost 475 percent.

With this dramatic population growth came an equally dramatic change in people's sense of community. As historian Atlee E. Shidler wrote, "What is important to understand is ... that the Washington sense of community has risen and fallen in reverse relationship to the major surges of growth and change in its population."<sup>153</sup> To counter those feelings of estrangement, citizens sometimes turned to institution building: churches and civic associations, as well as community centers. In these institutions, suburbanites often established amateur theatrical organizations. These theaters were active agents in the realization of new, enduring neighborhoods. On the one hand, by participating in performances, new residents established emotional connections to each other and to a recognized neighborhood organization. On the other hand (and perhaps more importantly), residents engaged in a shared experience. In neighborhood-centric theaters, participation in the making of theater and performance allowed transplanted individuals to recover, however temporarily, a sense of common ground. Even if participation by neighborhood residents in a community theater was low in comparison to

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<sup>152</sup> The statistics mentioned in this paragraph are from Thomas, M. Edmonds and Raymond J. Keating, *D.C. by the Numbers: a State of Failure* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995).

<sup>153</sup> Atlee E. Shidler, ed. *Greater Washington in 1980: a State of the Region Report* (Washington, D.C.: Greater Washington Research Center, 1980), 8.

the neighborhood's entire population, the image of a culturally involved citizenry making and attending productions reassured the community that its neighborhood was stable and invigorated. The community theater, as a representation of the neighborhood, elevated the neighborhood's stature and profile.

Community theaters with the most fragile identities were those without an identifiable venue or social space. Following World War II, two Arlington County community theaters were founded in the Pentagon's shadow. The Fairlington Players (1947, since renamed Dominion Stage) and the Arlington Players (1951) performed in church halls and school auditoriums throughout Arlington's residential neighborhoods.<sup>154</sup> As of 1970, neither company was associated with a specific venue. Similarly, the Prince George's Little Theater (1960) opened in a working class Maryland suburb and performed in school auditoriums throughout the decade. Although the nomadic life-style of these companies brought them into contact with a large swathe of the community, it did not give them an opportunity to present a clear understanding of their organizations to the public.

During their early years, all three companies produced repertoires suited to their public school venues. These included Broadway musicals and other types of light fare.<sup>155</sup> During the late 1960s, their repertoires became more daring, as provocative performance became more acceptable. Of the three, the Arlington Players developed the most

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<sup>154</sup> By 1975 the Arlington Players had moved into The Thomas Jefferson Community Center.

<sup>155</sup> Fairlington and Prince George's produced Kaufman and Hart's *You Can't Take it With You*. Fairlington also produced Loesser and Burrows' *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* while Prince George's did Porter's *Anything Goes*. Arlington produced *Sweet Charity* by Neil Simon and Dorothy Fields, *The Fantasticks* by Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones, and Michael Stewart, Lee Adams, and Charles Strouse's *Bye, Bye Birdie*.

adventurous productions.<sup>156</sup> From 1968 to 1970, they produced seasons that included Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Arthur Kopit's *O'Dad, Poor Dad*, *Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*, as well as the difficult Henrik Ibsen classic *Hedda Gabler*. Nevertheless, all three theaters cast adult and teenage amateurs, a practice both appropriate to their public school social space and to their identities as community theaters. Although Prince George's Little Theater's repertoire, which included light pieces like Robert Anderson's *You Know I Can't Hear You when the Water's Running*, varied slightly from the others, evidence suggests that their organization was more inclusive of the community: patrons, sponsors, and the members voted on which productions to produce for each season,. That practice not only guaranteed a strong connection between the theater and the community, but also insured that Prince George's selected "well-known comedies, musicals, and dramas, appealing to community interests."<sup>157</sup>

As suburban neighborhoods stabilized and their theaters matured, community leaders moved to establish more suitable, permanent performance venues. In some cases, companies converted large, abandoned properties into theaters; in other cases, neighborhood associations invested in civic auditoriums or community centers with stages suitable for the production of large scale shows. In 1960, for example, the Garrett Park Players merged with the Kensington Players to form the Kensington-Garrett Players. Like the companies mentioned above, the Kensington-Garrett Players performed in

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<sup>156</sup> The Fairlington Players had also recently produced Joseph Stein's comedy hit *Enter Laughing*, Leslie Stevens' *Marriage Go-Round*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and two original one-acts by Bruce Harrison, a local playwright: "Sleeping Dog" and "What'll We Name the Puppy."

<sup>157</sup> *Spots*, 84.

public school auditoriums until 1966, when they took up residence at the National Guard Armory near the old town of Kensington.

The interaction between the performance venue (and its surrounding social space) and a community theater's repertoire creates a web of signifiers. The Kensington-Garrett Players' repertoire consisted of "everything from Moliere to Neil Simon," but with an emphasis "on modern plays."<sup>158</sup> When the company established itself in the old Armory in Kensington, they produced a similar repertoire. The Armory, however, was nothing like the theater's former institutional public school location. Located in the old town of Kensington, which was established in 1870 as a Victorian summer retreat, the Armory was a two-story structure with the old drill hall on the second floor. Even though it was rundown and slated for closure, the Armory offered the troupe not only a more stable location but also one with a rich historical ambiance.<sup>159</sup> The theater's popular murder mysteries and farces, such as Frederick Knott's *Wait Until Dark* and Georges Feydeau's *Hotel Paradiso*, complemented the town's upper middle class community of Victorian style homes and 1920s bungalows.<sup>160</sup> When the Players produced Friedrich Dürrenmatt's tragicomic masterpiece *The Visit*, the foreboding play must have echoed eerily in Kensington's small close-knit community.<sup>161</sup> The change in venues had altered the significance of the Players' repertoire. When the troupe performed in public school auditoriums, the venue emphasized their amateurism—not the amateurism rooted in

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>159</sup> Within a few years, the old town of Kensington became a historic district.

<sup>160</sup> Recently, Hollywood had produced both *Wait Until Dark* and *Hotel Paradiso*. Thus, both scripts were known by the community, but they also played on different issues, the fear of violence and farcical meaninglessness.

<sup>161</sup> In *The Visit*, a powerful, wealthy woman returns to her impoverished hometown to avenge a betrayed lover.

commitment to community cultural production, but the amateurism that flouts aesthetic process in favor of egoism and affected celebrity. By associating themselves to a particular community, however, the company became an expression of old town's social milieu.<sup>162</sup> In other words, the historical social space gave a deeper resonance to the company's productions.

A theater's decision to move into a venue immediately clarified its identity in relation to the neighborhood. The oldest community theater in the area was the Chevy Chase Players, established in 1922 in the upper northwest quadrant of the District. In the early 1970s, the Players moved into the Chevy Chase Recreation Center.<sup>163</sup> Before the move, the Players performed at Wesley United Methodist Church. The difference between the theater's identity interacting with the church and its identity interacting with the community center is significant. Even if neighborhood residents did not conflate the church and the Players, the company's association with the church venue would have marked them. On the other hand, the Players' move to the community center signaled to the residents of Chevy Chase that the entire community endorsed the theater and its activities.<sup>164</sup> Such an endorsement would have elevated the stature of the troupe's amateurism in the eyes of local residents who heretofore had not known the company,

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<sup>162</sup> In 1974, the Armory closed and the Kensington-Garrett Players moved into the newly constructed Montgomery Playhouse, which they then shared with the Montgomery Players.

<sup>163</sup> Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the city developed an extensive network of recreation centers, but few had facilities large enough to house theater companies. This upscale northwest neighborhood could, however, afford a center with expanded capabilities. The center was later renamed the Chevy Chase Community Center.

<sup>164</sup> Unlike the Kensington-Garret Players, the repertoire of the Chevy Chase Players was not diverse. The company avoided musicals; yet, they produced only the most recognizable of scripts. Between 1970 and 1971 the Players staged plays popularized by films, such as Bran Stoker's *Dracula*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, *Lilies of the Field* by Edmund Barrett and Charlotte Edwards, and Neil Simon's *Come Blow Your Horn*. They also produced *The Curious Savage* by John Patrick; but, again, he was better known as a writer for film than stage. Only Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* did not rely on Hollywood. It is a Broadway play, based on Master's book of poetry, published in 1915.

because now the company's no longer represented the vanity of its participants but the entire neighborhood's performance culture.

Although most community theaters did not recognize socioeconomic differences within their neighborhoods, some acknowledged that their homogeneous constituencies possessed a range of ages and interests. If Theaters of Community wanted to produce anything other than the most generic family fare, they had to structure their activities so as not to offend one sector of the community while pleasing another. In 1968 Washington's newest community theater, Silver Spring Stage, renovated an abandoned bowling alley in the basement of the Woodmoor Shopping Center, just north of the District's boundary. This multifaceted theater attracted a great deal of media attention and became an instant focal point. The theater consisted of four distinct companies: 1) a Children's Theater; 2) a Repertory Company presenting one-act plays "at service clubs, country clubs, churches, schools, and elsewhere;" 3) a Young People's Drama Workshop; and 4) an adult company—The Silver Spring Players.<sup>165</sup> This four-tiered structural approach to theatrical production demonstrated a significant philosophic difference between Silver Spring Stage and other Theaters of Community. During the 1950s and 1960s, Theater of Community tended to produce scripts that reenforced the mythic connections within the nuclear family. Although Theaters of Commerce also valued nuclear families as theater-goers, they focused more on the dollars of adult consumers. As America's cultural landscape changed during the 1960s, a family-oriented approach required theaters to eschew contemporary scripts with social significance because those

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<sup>165</sup> "On the Town," 15.

scripts frequently challenged spectators visually and linguistically.<sup>166</sup> The fact that Silver Spring Stage delineated its repertoire according to age meant that the theater acknowledged a diverse neighborhood constituency. Thus, the Children's Theater appealed to the youngest constituents; the Young People's Drama Workshop addressed the teenagers; and the adult company explored a full range of productions, including scripts that were artistically and/or socially progressive. The fact that the company took up residence in a dingy commercial center was more apropos than ironic, as targeted marketing was rapidly becoming standard.

Although Silver Spring's productions were similar to those at other community theaters, their approach allowed the adult company to focus on higher production and aesthetic values.<sup>167</sup> In addition, Silver Spring initiated a playwright's award for a new script written by a local playwright. The amateur theater community recognized the company's achievement almost immediately with a Ruby Griffith Award in 1970 for excellence in production.

In Greater Washington, the desire to build self-sufficient communities guided the design of many of the area's suburbs. Hence, the civic auditorium became a central organizing feature of community life and an icon of a neighborhood's performance culture. Located ten miles from Washington in a predominantly residential neighborhood, the Rockville Civic Auditorium was a prime example of just such an icon. Founded in 1947, the Rockville Little Theater was the second oldest theater in

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<sup>166</sup> As noted in Chapter Two, the National confronted a similar set of social realities when it attempted to navigate an increasingly polarized Washington.

<sup>167</sup> Popular titles like Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden*, the classic farce *Three Men on a Horse* by George Abbott and J.C. Holm, and *Mousetrap* were mixed with challenging fare such as Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Wilder's *The Skin of our Teeth*, and Jean Anouilh's *The Lark*.

Montgomery County. Prior to the company's move into the newly constructed auditorium in 1960, they performed in Christ Episcopal Parish Hall and Broome Junior High School.<sup>168</sup> Although the auditorium provided the Little Theater with greater stability, it also placed the company under the symbolic umbrella of Rockville. The auditorium was located on a 153 acre park that the venue shared with the historic Glenview Mansion. Upon moving into the Civic Auditorium, the theater became directly associated with the municipal authority, and the public would have seen the company as little more than a state-affiliated theater because the social space's meta-narrative so outweighed the symbolic capital of the company itself.<sup>169</sup>

“If a community theater is, by definition, an amateur theater, then a successful community theater will cease to be a community theater, for its audience will sooner or later professionalize it.”<sup>170</sup> Kenneth MacGowan's pronouncement in 1929 foretold the fate of many grassroots community theaters. When transplanted to the soil of Greater Washington, however, its simple truth becomes uncertain; for although a successful community theater, like a successful church, usually sought a larger, more independent facility, that action did not translate into a professional staff and production team. In Washington success motivated amateur theatrical producers to acquire performance venues free from the control of other institutions; although the acquisition of space required a professionalized staff, it did not necessarily lead to professionalization across

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<sup>168</sup> The auditorium has since been renamed the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theater.

<sup>169</sup> The Rockville Little Theater's repertoire consisted of the occasional musicals and popular melodramas and farces, including Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase*, J. L. Rosenberg's *The Death and Life of Sneaky Fitch*, James Kirkwood's *U.T.B.U (Unhealthy to be Unpleasant)*, and Frank Gilroy's *The Subject was Roses*. For more adventuresome fare, the theater turned to a Noel Coward comedy like *Waiting in the Wings* or William Inge's *Bus Stop*. The Little Theater's repertoire did not contest the effects of its hegemonic setting.

the board. For example, the area's two most successful community theaters, the Montgomery Players and the Little Theater of Alexandria, acquired their own spaces and took the initial steps toward altering their amateur status. Both theaters hired a paid staff to manage their facilities. Their creative personnel, however, remained volunteer and decidedly amateur.

Founded in 1929 in Maryland's Chevy Chase neighborhood northwest of Washington, the Montgomery Players used public school auditoriums for thirty-one years before moving into the Inverness Playhouse in upscale Potomac, Maryland in 1962. The Players benefited from the area's prosperity. Combined with forty-one years of continuous production—except for the World War II years—they had “a subscription audience of 1,500,” plus box office sales that numbered “from 300 to 400 per show.”<sup>171</sup> Nevertheless, the company toured its productions to other locations, including hospitals, schools, and civic organizations. While at Inverness the company produced five-play seasons. They stayed away from Broadway musicals, relying like many community theaters on a mixture of melodrama and comedy.<sup>172</sup> By the end of 1970, the company started construction of its own theater in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Like the Montgomery Players, the Little Theater of Alexandria also disproved the maxim that a successful community theater will inevitably become professional.

Founded in 1935, the Northern Virginia company became one of the area's most

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<sup>170</sup> Kenneth Macgowan, *Footlights Across America: Towards a National Theater* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1929), 91.

<sup>171</sup> “On the Town,” 16.

<sup>172</sup> Productions included the often performed Lawrence and Lee's *Inherit the Wind* and *Wait Until Dark, Luv* by Murray Schisgal, as well as Feydeau's popular farce *A Flea in her Ear*, the little known comedy *Bessie the Bandit's Beautiful Baby*, *Rashmon* by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, and the 1954 comedy *Dear Charles* by Alan Melville, which is remembered because of Tallulah Bankhead's endearing portrayal of Dolores.

successful theaters while using “the second-floor ballroom of historic Gadsby's Tavern, which George and Martha Washington frequented for plays and dances.”<sup>173</sup> Unlike the other companies located in historic areas, the Little Theater coordinated its identity with the historical situation by creating a meta-text to accompany performances. An actor “in the role of George Washington, in full costume,” greeted “theater patrons as they entered the courtyard,” frequently calling out their names.<sup>174</sup> The Little Theater’s idealized, historical image of Alexandria attracted Washington socialites. This success allowed the company to build their own theater facility in the commercial district of old town Alexandria in 1961, thus becoming the first community theater in the region to control its own space.

Since its inception the theater had sought to attract as large a theater-going public as possible by producing an eclectic repertoire. The company produced both predictable comedies, like Coward’s *Hay Fever* and Laurence Roman’s *Under the Yum-Yum Tree*, and more demanding scripts like William Congreve’s classic *Love for Love*. Although the Little Theater always closed the season with a popular musical, it produced challenging contemporary plays such as Albee’s *Everything in the Garden* and Lillian Hellman’s *Toys in the Attic*. Nevertheless, the theater never strayed far from its historical meta-text, not only producing Sherman Edwards’ *1776* on several occasions, but also performing a yearly festival in which it “tried to beget the same mood” found in a Colonial era theatrical event by combining historical recreation and the party.<sup>175</sup> Such a

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<sup>173</sup> Lan Nguyen, “Sixty Years on Stage; Alexandria Little Theatre Thrives as a Labor of Love,” *Washington Post*, 20 April 1995, 1 (VAW).

<sup>174</sup> Gabriel Levenson, “Summer Theater 1967,” *Washingtonian Magazine*, Vol. 2, number 11, 81.

<sup>175</sup> M. M. Flattery, “Revival Time in Alexandria,” *Evening Star*, 21 August 1970, n.p. Washingtoniana.

simulacrum brought together two of community theater's most essential qualities: a community's historical roots and the audience's need for social interaction.

### *Section III: The Challenge of Educational Theater*

Washington's institutions of higher education presented a hybrid class of Theater of Community that both press and public had difficulty cataloguing during the late 1960s. On the one hand, educational theater shared many of the same characteristics as other kinds of Theater of Community. For example, educational theaters served specific geographic communities and existed in hierarchies that placed performance under the domain of larger institutions. Most of their theater artists were amateurs even if they aspired for professional success.<sup>176</sup> Finally, many educational theaters also self-identified with community theaters by calling their companies the Federal City Players, the George Washington Players, and the Howard Players. Because the public had associated the word "Players" with community theaters for a long time, they also associated educational theaters with Theaters of Community. On the other hand, educational theater programs were not amateur in intention. Many had well equipped theater facilities and used their resources to train theater artists with integrity. Although the media classified most educational theaters as Theaters of Community, they acknowledged that several of these hybrid institutions presented superior products that deserved special consideration. As a result, a select number of educational theaters emerged from the media's collective representation to stand alone as educational theaters of a higher caliber.

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<sup>176</sup> Most theater professors had not worked in commercial theater, and Theater of the Public had not grown large or mature enough by 1970 to provide those working in educational theater with professional opportunities.

Although many educational institutions in the Washington area had active theaters, only eight university and college theaters sustained viable public identities.<sup>177</sup> Seven of the eight were located in the District, with one located in Maryland's Prince George's County. West of Rock Creek Park, Georgetown and American Universities inhabited sheltered campuses; Catholic University of America and Gallaudet University had equally cloistered grounds in northeast Washington. North of downtown in the Shaw community, Howard University and Federal City College performed in African American neighborhoods.<sup>178</sup> George Washington University tended to dominate its Foggy Bottom neighborhood while at College Park in Prince George's County the University of Maryland had the most viable educational theater outside the District. These eight programs functioned principally for the benefit of students and staff, as a training ground for theater artists; yet, most sought to extend their missions beyond their geographic boundaries. The media treated three theater programs—at Howard, Catholic, and George Washington—as more professional than the others. In other words, the individual representations of those institutions with identifiable programs, repertoires, and/or state-of-the-art facilities overrode the media's collective simulation of them. As a result, these three institutions came to define the standard by which all educational theaters were understood.

More than other types of Theater of Community, the identity of educational theater was, and still is, shaped by the relationships that the theaters and their venues had

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<sup>177</sup> Community colleges, high schools, and junior high schools presented performances, had theater clubs, and some even had facilities with first class theaters. They are not mentioned here because unlike educational theaters most did not desire to establish independent theatrical identities in the public sphere. An exception to this finding was the Saint Albans Repertory Company, founded by a private high school, the National Cathedral School for Boys, which I deal with in Chapter Seven.

<sup>178</sup> Federal City College later changed its name to The University of the District of Columbia.

to their institutional umbrellas. In this sense, the public perceived educational theater similarly to how they perceived state-affiliated Theater of Community: institutions of higher education sponsored theaters and programs, placing those departments under the universities' supervision. Although the public probably perceived the educational missions of colleges and universities as similarly constructed, those educational institutions possessed unique missions and public identities.<sup>179</sup> An educational theater theoretically fulfilled the mission of its sponsoring university. Hence, the public generally perceived educational theaters as surrogates to their umbrella organization. An educational theater's identity was shaped by several factors, but most importantly by: 1) its affiliation with particular groups or classes of people, 2) its geographic location within Greater Washington, 3) its repertoire and the degree to which that repertoire was marketed to a broader theater-going public, and 4) the social space created by its facility, both within the larger institutional campus and in relationship to the surrounding environment and architecture. These factors played a crucial role in the formulation of the public's perception of educational theater because they simulated the institution's mission spatially, and their combined effect either supported the mission or contradicted it. If a campus was isolated from the larger community, then a theater's presence in that cloistered environment remained isolated from the broader public's concerns and issues. If a theater saw itself serving that cloistered community, then the social space supported the mission. If, on the other hand, a theater opened its productions to the surrounding community, then the social space worked against that intention and created a conflicting conception of identity and purpose. To be sure, activities associated with campus life

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<sup>179</sup> To be sure, institutions of higher education describe their missions in unique and compelling terms, but I am drawing a distinction between how the university defines its mission and how the public

affected the public's perception of the university and its relationship to the larger social sphere. The anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, transformed even the most cloistered campuses into spaces of contending interests.<sup>180</sup> University theaters that participated in outreach to the public similarly changed the public's understanding of educational theater; in effect, by combining attributes of Theater of Community with those of an emergent Theater of the Public, Washington's educational theater community temporarily became a feasible replacement for a declining Theater of Commerce.

The eight programs mentioned above traversed a spectrum of relationships to the broader culture. The Federal City Players were the most integrated into the ebb and flow of urban life; but because they operated out of buildings that the college did not control, they also could not sustain a coherent public identity. Federal City's productions gained a degree of notoriety; yet, the theater failed to achieve a coherent identity in the public sphere. On the opposite end of the spectrum, American, Catholic, Georgetown, Gallaudet, and Maryland had campuses that were isolated from their surrounding neighborhoods. Howard's campus was adjacent to an African American commercial district and, in that sense, had contact with a broader public; but only George Washington's campus sustained a spatially identity even though it was integrated into the architecture and activities of Foggy Bottom's urban life.

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perceives it.

<sup>180</sup> As the Vietnam War heated up and the Tet Offensive contradicted the public's illusions that the conflict was over, Washington's campuses experienced the same types of demonstrations and debates experienced on campuses all over the country: if the campus was not a part of the broader community, student activists did everything possible to bridge that divide. Of course, demonstrations and the like did not alter the material nature of a university's spatial configuration, but one that spilled off-campus into the surrounding neighborhoods temporarily eliminated the imaginary boundaries between campus and town.

Educational theaters that operated on isolated campuses depended on students and faculty for audience, even though they sometimes extended the range of their reception through notices and calendar listings. Although such publicity might have increased audience attendance, it failed to raise the profile of those theaters unless accompanied by an associated identity politics. For example, American and Georgetown's theaters performed at off-campus sites; yet, their outreach did not translate into a larger public presence in the media. On the other hand, because Gallaudet and Howard reflected specific constituencies, they used identity politics to attract the media and consequently large deaf and African American communities to their stages. Thus, although their institutions were isolated spatially, both presented performances that reached thematically and conceptually beyond their walls. In other words, the very alterity of Howard's and Gallaudet's missions helped them to construct a more broadly based public identity.

Of the two, Howard's theater, which had been in operation since the early 1900s, was the most distinguished. Howard University was organized following the Civil War, and its mission focused on the development of African American scholarship and leadership. Since its founding in 1867, the University had recognized the importance of performance; nonetheless, a theater program did not emerge until the turn of the century. The Howard Players attained prominence following World War II when the federal government sponsored the troupe on a goodwill tour of Europe. In 1960, when the university opened the Ira Aldridge Theater, the Players became one of the few companies in Washington, either amateur or professional, with a state-of-the-art facility at their disposal. Although the theater was isolated on Howard's campus, the media highlighted it as one of the focal points of African American culture in Washington. When combined

with the university's reputation as a premier educator of African American doctors and lawyers, this distinction allowed the Players to engage a broad African American public eager for political and cultural recognition.<sup>181</sup>

Through the mid-1960s, the press considered productions by the Players to be among the most provocative in the area. Using an exclusively African American company, the Players produced a wide range of scripts, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* to Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* and Andre Obey's *Noah*. They were also experimental, producing Countee Cullen's *Medea* set in Africa, Archibald MacLeish's *Air Raid*, and Mario Fratti's *The Academy* and *The Return*.<sup>182</sup> Although the productions eschewed material that was too controversial, each touched on an issue important to African Americans.

During the 1960s Howard's community began to decline, however. In the 1940s the Shaw community's robust commercial and entertainment life was acknowledged as a pearl of African American life. Shaw's movie houses, theaters, nightclubs, and restaurants created a culture that the University enhanced by adding intellectual capital to song, dance, and food. As downtown declined during the 1950s, commercial life in Shaw also deteriorated. Fewer people took streetcars through Shaw on their way to and from their places of employment, downtown or in the city's monumental core. The uprisings

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<sup>181</sup> In 1960 nearly 50 percent of the nation's African American doctors, dentists, architects, and engineers and 96 percent of the nation's African American lawyers were Howard-trained (from the "Long Walk," a history of Howard University by Harry G. Robinson III and Hazel Ruth Edwards, Chapter 1, <http://www.howard.edu/LongWalk/lwPg25.GIF>), 2002.

<sup>182</sup> The accolades that the Howard Players received from the press have many sources. Their repertoire and theater facility were indeed noteworthy. The fact that they cast many of their productions cross-racially would have been novel to Washington's theater-going public in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement was gaining strength and racial tensions were mounting throughout the District. African American creative expression was generally viewed by the white establishment in positive terms through the decade even as African American arts declined in professionalism and frequency.

following Dr. King's assassination quickened Shaw's decay, devastating commerce there more than in any other area of the city. Many businesses either burned down or were so badly damaged that they had to be demolished. Set against a neighborhood blighted by economic losses and despair, Howard's Ira Aldridge Theater became anachronistic. With the African American community demanding a more aggressive style of cultural and political response, Howard's repertoire no longer generated the kind of attention and energy that it had earlier in the decade. Although the press still covered the theater, both on television and in print, coverage shifted to recently opened identity theaters with riskier, more professional productions.

Catholic University's theater program had been making "a vital contribution to the community" for over three decades; during the 1960s, however, its reputation and prestige expanded visibly.<sup>183</sup> Catholic was founded in 1887 for the purpose of developing and disseminating Catholic ideas and theology within institutions of higher learning. The campus was located in the city's northeast quadrant in a neighborhood that was integrated and middle class. Catholic's architectural presence in the area was undeniable, as the Catholicism of structures like the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and the area's numerous monasteries permeated the milieu. Nevertheless, residents from surrounding neighborhoods could have driven or walked past the campus; they could have seen one or another of the many Catholic institutions in the area, each with its own grounds, a driveway, and gate denoting an entrance; they could have heard that the University possessed a nationally recognized theater program or that Helen Hayes had performed there—but they would not have known where the theater was because

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<sup>183</sup> Richard L. Coe, "On Stages, Front and Center," *The Washington Post*, 20 September 1964, 1(G).

spatially its architecture was indistinguishable from the campus' other edifices.<sup>184</sup> As a result, the performances that occurred within those walls would have seemed exclusive and intended for students and faculty only. If the theater's isolation from the neighborhood was not complete enough, people from outside the neighborhood would not have been able to identify northeast Washington as anything but residential. The notion that theater and entertainment occurred there would not have entered the public's mind.

Nevertheless, Catholic's theater struggled to counter its isolated identity. Not only did the theater advertise frequently in the major press, but the University also invested in the department. Shaped by the expertise and celebrity of its founder and leader, Father Hartke, the theater program opened Hartke Theater in 1970.<sup>185</sup> As with the Ira Aldridge Theater, because of the scarcity of legitimate theatrical venues in Washington, any state-of-the-art facility attracted the critical spectator on a regular basis. Catholic's theater was no exception, and the media's coverage of the new venue raised the profile of the University's program. Significantly, the press began referring to the program by the name of its facility, the Hartke. Unfortunately, the theater was concealed inside an institutional facade that failed to impart to the public the idea of theater or entertainment. When people approached the Hartke, they saw not a state-of-the-art facility, but rather a rectangular, institutional exterior, similar to the kind associated with any number of offices or educational complexes. Despite these architectural drawbacks,

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<sup>184</sup> The area neighborhoods are Brookland, Varnom, Edgewood, and Michigan Park. Beyond the main complex, Catholic University consisted of numerous colleges—Marist, Oblate, St. Paul's, Trinity, Theological, Augustinian, and Capuchin, as well as several monasteries.

<sup>185</sup> Because of his renown and expertise, President Nixon asked Father Hartke to work on the development of the Kennedy Center.

Catholic promoted its shows to the larger community. For the Hartke's inaugural production, the University brought in national star and Washington native Helen Hayes to play the role of Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Days Journey into Night*. Later that season, internationally known Cyril Ritchard recreated the role of General Burgoyne in Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*.<sup>186</sup> This importation of stars attracted a great deal of media attention and, as a result, Hartke's productions were considered some of the area's best by local critics.<sup>187</sup> With the success of its new space and celebrity performers, Catholic's Hartke Theater remained in the public eye for most of the 1970s.

Of all the theatrical institutions reviewed by *The Washington Post* in 1971, only Ford's Theater received more coverage than George Washington University's theater program.<sup>188</sup> With dual facilities in the heart of the District's Foggy Bottom, no other theater in Washington prior to the opening of the Kennedy Center was capable of handling large audiences and providing professional touring groups with adequate facilities.<sup>189</sup> A variety of companies used the University's Lisner Auditorium. Decidedly different from National's Broadway fare and productions at other educational theaters, shows at the Lisner reflected the University's national and international educational mission. Performances by Marcel Marceau, for example, or by the Comedie Francaise and Mexico's Ballet Folklorico Nacional de Mexico appealed not only to academic interests, but also to the international concerns of an increasing cosmopolitan city. As a

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<sup>186</sup> Cyril Ritchard had performed General Burgoyne at the American Shakespeare Festival at Stratford.

<sup>187</sup> Productions at Hartke Theater were a mixture: Greek and Shakespearean classics, the best in modern texts from the United States and England, and contemporary Broadway musicals.

<sup>188</sup> *The Washington Post, Newspaper Index* (Wooster, Ohio: Newspaper Indexing Center, Micro Photo Division, Bell & Howell Co. 1971).

result, the theater attracted professionals working and living in nearby office complexes, embassies, and residential areas.

Although these imported professional productions constituted a majority of George Washington's repertoire during the period, they were mixed with amateur productions by the George Washington Players, who used a combination of students and faculty. In the years leading up to the founding of the Kennedy Center, the Players produced a variety of work, such as the musical *The Owl and the Pussycat, Futz* (a one-act play by Rochelle Owens), and a 1960s version of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.<sup>190</sup> Although these shows were decidedly less cosmopolitan in content than the professional productions imported to the Lisner, they reflected an eclectic set of interests akin to those at some of the Theaters of the Public that had recently opened in the city.

Although the media's collective coverage of educational theaters did little to distinguish them from either community theaters or from state-affiliated Theaters of Community, those theater programs that earned individual recognition achieved a status akin to that gained by Theater of the Public during the 1970s.<sup>191</sup> Most educational theaters did not overcome the isolation of their social spaces; either their educational missions were inflexible or their repertoires and production schemes too passive. Without links to a broader Washington public, educational theaters could not project to the general public anything other than their role as educators. That role, though noble, left the status of educational theater within the Theater of Community category. George

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<sup>189</sup> George Washington had two stages: the Dorothy Betts Marvin Theater and the Lisner Auditorium.

<sup>190</sup> Based on Edmund Lear's poem, the musical *The Owl and the Pussycat* was adapted by Shiela Ruskin and David Woods

<sup>191</sup> I will investigate the significance of Theater of the Public in the next four chapters.

Washington and Catholic Universities brought professionalism to their theater departments by constructing state-of-the-art facilities and importing professional productions and/or celebrities. Howard University built a state-of-the-art theater and had a mission that actively pursued a broader public. As a result, George Washington, Howard, and Catholic Universities managed a higher status even though the latter two theaters were isolated behind campus walls, which inevitably limited their significance.

#### *Section IV: The Significance of Theaters of Community*

Although the public identities of Theaters of Community varied according to the aesthetic interests and social values of their communities and leaders, the factor determining each theater's public reception was the social space associated with it. Most community and state or church-affiliated theaters presented American or British classics, light farces, and Broadway musicals; a few produced more adventuresome fare. Groups occasionally even engaged in presentations of original works written by local playwrights or invented through collective creation. For the most part, however, community and state or church-affiliated companies reflected the ideals of Theater of Commerce, with some theaters producing the same scripts in the same or following year. Educational theaters, on the other hand, though occasionally staging the same light fare found in community theaters, produced a decidedly more challenging form of classical repertoire, scripts such as Jean Giraudoux's *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General*, and Jean Anouilh's *Becket*.<sup>192</sup> When combined with state-of-the-art facilities, these theaters earned a higher status than other Theaters of Community. Because the Theater

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<sup>192</sup> *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, *The Inspector General*, and *Becket* were produced by the University of Maryland, American University, and Gallaudet University, respectively.

of Commerce/Community paradigm did not recognize theaters that synthesized amateur and professional traits, these educational theaters remained exceptions, however. Their solitary status granted them a reprieve from the constraints of hierarchical social spaces, but in the end their identities as theaters succumbed to the larger, more authoritarian structures of their parent institutions.

Regardless of the methodology or the aesthetic interests of the artists involved, a consistent function of Theater of Community was its importance as a social apparatus. From the beginning, neighborhood theaters acted as “a sociological force as well as a cultural one.”<sup>193</sup> In Greater Washington, circa 1970, however, their significance as engines of culture was already showing signs of decline. As non-profit theaters entered the theatrical culture beginning in the early 1960s, the cultural need filled by grassroots theaters—to produce scripts for otherwise art-deprived people—diminished proportionately. Even here, however, the semiotic relationship between performance and audience and between theater and public depended more on non-theatrical signs than theatrical ones. The audiences who attended a performance at a Theater of Community drew far more meaning from their knowledge of the actors as people than from them as characters. The same is true of the public’s experience of the theater apparatus in its various social spaces. On the one hand, because many Theaters of Community lacked coherent theatrical architecture, their ability to influence social space was weakened. On the other hand, because Theater of Community existed within more dominant institutions, the civic, historical, and educational signifiers tended to overwhelm the theatrical signifiers.

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<sup>193</sup> Robert E. Gard and Gertrude S. Burley, *Community Theater: Idea and Achievement* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1959), 21.

Theater of Community's function as social apparatus formed the foundation of its long history in Washington because that function allowed the theaters to create emotional and kinesthetic bonds to the communities they served. Unlike Theater of Commerce, which relied on celebrity to connect a performance with an audience and the broader public, Theater of Community engaged participants directly in the processes of theater. Community members participated as actors, dancers, stagemanagers, electricians, and singers; and, because of the stage's geographic proximity to residents, those who did not participate witnessed the development of productions in rehearsals or through the tales of friends and associates. In this sense, neighborhood-centric theaters established bonds through an intimate, continual presence. After all, the very existence of these theaters depended on the willingness of residents or students to create a theatrical culture. Although occasionally relying on the imported director or actor, for the most part residents themselves constituted the theatrical artists. As a result, the importance of theater as social activity superseded theater as artistic enterprise.

To emphasize this social dynamic, major dailies and community weeklies and monthlies regularly published the activities of Theater of Community. Using a combination of photographs and announcements, the media's representation focused on their creation of performances and the act of sharing them with audiences. In addition, however, representations at times included references to "several parties a year."<sup>194</sup> Photographs appeared usually twice a week in *The Star's* Arts and "Weekender" sections, celebrating youth's involvement in rehearsals, performances, and cast-parties. Even though these photographs were customarily of high school productions, they nevertheless

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<sup>194</sup> "On the Town," 15.

emphasized the spirit of engagement and collective enthusiasm that the public associated with all Theaters of Community (See Figure #5). In other words, media's simulation of Theater of Community projected an idealized theatrical culture that relied less on the inspiration of artistic achievements or the power of social critique than it did on the vitality of the social apparatus to generate human energy, cooperation, and commitment.

The simulation of Theater of Community did not, however, allow for the critique of performances or for social controversy. Thus, performances presented by neighborhood-centric theaters rarely elicited a dialogic response from audience members or media critics. Major media outlets rarely reviewed productions. Smaller newspapers occasionally did, but they did so for the purpose of publishing cast lists and production staffs. In this sense, performance—the traditional center of theatrical activity—was simply a necessary by-product of theater's more dominant social function. Although Washingtonians wrote and performed some original plays, most were products of Broadway or had been endorsed by Broadway or were part of the established canon of academia. Nevertheless, performances were indigenous, not imported from New York, as was the case with the National Theater and Shady Grove Music Fair.

To re-enforce the simulation of theater as social apparatus, the amateur activities described above were celebrated each year not only with the Ruby Griffith Awards, but also with “the season's two main events:” an annual One-Act Play Tournament and an annual Theater Ball.”<sup>195</sup> In 1928 the District's Department of Recreation and Parks established a one-act play festival for all of the area's little theaters.<sup>196</sup> Although the

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<sup>195</sup> Bonnie Aikman, “Weekend of 2 Big Events,” *Evening Star*, 23 February 1969, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>196</sup> In 1970 twenty-one amateur theaters participated in the forty-first annual tourney.



**Figure 5: Images primarily of young people performing musicals dominated the media simulation of Theater of Community in the Washington area during the 1960s.**

number of participating theaters declined during the 1960s, the status of the event focused the public's attention on the strength of amateur theater. In 1964, community theaters initiated the Theater Ball and, by 1969, thirty-one theaters sponsored the event. The theme of the 1969 costume ball, "World of Music—Stage and Screen," was but another reminder of the conflation of live and recorded performance. Over the next two years, the significance of the Ball increased, as the number of sponsors in 1970 rose to 39. More significantly, in 1971 Pat Nixon accepted the Ball's honorary chair and Washington native Helen Hayes judged the costume parade. The Ball's social function symbolized the significance of Washington's amateur theatrical culture even though its media simulacrum distorted that significance with the presence of national celebrities.

The media's simulation of Theater of Community also tended to blur distinctions between individual theaters. Because most theaters never received feature stories, they relied on coverage in two weekly columns: *The Star's* "Local Drama" and *The Post's* "Theater Notes." Both columns consisted of disparate notices about upcoming auditions and shows: a combination of short announcements dealing with community theaters, educational theaters, dinner theaters, and even experimental theaters. Without descriptions of play titles or of individual theaters, the columns homogenized the Theater of Community, elevating the social function and stripping activities of artistic relevance. Even if performances challenged the theater-going public, the media did not depict that fact within its model.

The only way for a Theater of Community to have aesthetic relevance was either by achieving prominence through production work or by professionalizing its operation

in some significant way. State and church-affiliated Theaters of Community contented themselves with social significance because they could accomplish neither of these objectives. Community theaters that moved into their own venues attained a degree of notoriety, but not as artistic entities. Theater programs at Howard, George Washington, and Catholic Universities distinguished themselves from other Theaters of Community through their theatrical venues and professional affiliations; in that way, they altered Washington's theatrical landscape. By 1970, *The Post* included many of the city's educational theaters in daily calendar listings, thereby granting all educational theaters a higher status within the Theater of Commerce/Community paradigm. In addition, the theaters at Howard, Catholic, and George Washington regularly received reviews of their productions in both *The Post* and *The Star*. The elevated status lasted through the 1970s, until educational theaters were crowded out of their media slot by a more vital Theater of the Public.

This temporary change in status illustrated the importance of architecture, celebrity, and power in the configuration of theatrical identity. It is difficult to evaluate performances at Theater of Community. It is thus impossible to determine the quality of a community theater performance versus the quality of a performance at an educational theater. It is not a stretch, however, to acknowledge that university theater departments understood the power of celebrity and "the importance of bricks," and had the institutional power to act upon that understanding.<sup>197</sup> By creating state-of-the-art theaters such as the Lisner Auditorium and the Ira Aldridge or Hartke Theaters and by importing stars like Marceau and Hayes or productions like those by the Comedie Francaise,

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<sup>197</sup> Richard Coe, "Dramatic Event for Catholic University," *Washington Post*, 11 September 1970, 1(C).

Howard, Catholic, and George Washington elevated their theaters above the media's homogenizing coverage of Theater of Community as a whole.

Also contributing to the elevation of educational theater in the greater metropolitan area was the founding of the American College Theater Festival in 1969. Sponsored by the Kennedy Center two years prior to its opening, the festival brought ten university productions to the city each spring. Significantly, *The Post* and *The Star* reviewed each production. This visibility focused the public's attention on educational theater's growing professionalism.<sup>198</sup> In its first year, the festival occurred over a single week at two locations: Ford's Theater and the Smithsonian Mall Theater, "a canvas and metal frame structure" constructed especially for the event.<sup>199</sup> Though intended for tourists, the Mall Theater's contemporary design—two multisided geometrical structures joined at the seam by an elliptical roof—gave a public presence to the festival that it might not have enjoyed otherwise. The cumulative effect of such media saturation raised the stature of both the festival and the local educational theater community even though local universities and colleges did not participate.

Although Howard, Catholic, and George Washington's theaters established public identities through celebrity and architecture, they could not escape the hierarchical relationship they had with their universities. That hierarchy limited their ability to reshape Washington's theatrical geography at the structural level; thus, by the end of the 1970s, the power of the larger social space drowned out their public identities.

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<sup>198</sup> In 1972, when the festival moved into the Kennedy Center building itself, the nationalizing influence of the Center had a powerful effect on the festival's reception by the public.

<sup>199</sup> "New Shapes on Mall," *Washington Post*, 28 April 1969, 1(B).

Independence alone would not have allowed educational theater to emerge as a more significant theatrical entity. As discussed above, many community theaters struggled to achieve autonomous identities. For most, economic necessity kept them appended institutionally to larger entities; for a few, however, once they established their own venues, architecture seemingly provided them autonomy: the freedom they needed to assert an aesthetic identity. Even then the media did not represent them as independent organizations, but rather embedded the independent community theater within the “apocryphal field of the ‘amateur’.”<sup>200</sup> For within media’s simulacrum of Theater of Community, an amateur theater could not exist for its own sake; it had to exist as an instrument of social interaction. Even theaters like the Little Theater of Alexandria, which achieved autonomy, remained wedded to community through historical associations. At the artistic level, Theater of Community remained inconsequential; for within the media simulacrum and public imaginary creativity was legitimized only at the professional level. Thus, the artist within the educational theater community worked creatively as a volunteer even if he or she was paid to direct, perform, or train students as professional theater artists.<sup>201</sup> In the commercial/community hierarchy, the commercial dominated the aesthetic; creative artists achieved significance only when they were paid for their theatrical acts. Otherwise, the artist remained a person who engaged in the creative activity out of personal or social interests.

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<sup>200</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. John Cumming, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Continuum Publishing Company: New York, 2002), 122.

<sup>201</sup> The Howard Players might be viewed as an exception; then again, the media did not view their creativity in aesthetic terms, but rather as a means of social uplift.

**PART II: THE RISE OF THEATER OF THE PUBLIC**

## Chapter Four

### NOT JUST ANOTHER OPENING OF ANOTHER SHOW: THE INAUGURATION OF THE KENNEDY CENTER

On September 8, 1971, after a series of dress rehearsals and previews, Leonard Bernstein's highly theatrical *Mass* inaugurated the National Cultural Center, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.<sup>202</sup> Since early August, the city's major television stations, its major newspapers—*The Evening Star*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Daily News*—had been preparing Washingtonians for the event. Media outlets devoted hundreds of hours of news coverage and tens of thousands of column inches to the artistic and architectural dimensions of the Center, as well as to its more gossipy aspects. In early August, a photograph depicted corn stalks growing belligerently on the unlandscaped grounds. Later in the month, an article covered Bernstein's birthday party bash, noting the composer's support for the Black Panther Party.<sup>203</sup> On September 1, construction workers hoisted John F. Kennedy's bust from a crate in the Grand Foyer. Photographs of this "Contradiction in Bronze" filled newspapers and flashed on television screens throughout the nation.<sup>204</sup> Several days later, the Center's pipe organ made a pre-Concert Hall appearance on the pages of *The Star*. Meanwhile, debate continued between those who dreamed of a theatrical boon inspired by the Center and those who questioned the Center's remote location, its architectural efficacy, and its purpose for being. As opening day approached, reporters speculated first on Jacqueline

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<sup>202</sup> The complete name is *Mass: a Theater Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers*.

<sup>203</sup> Leonard Bernstein and his wife, Felicia Bernstein, were well known members of what Tom Wolfe named "the radical chic." In fact, Wolfe's report on a Bernstein party for the Black Panthers inspired the name. See Meryle Secrest, *Leonard Bernstein: a Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 320-323.

Kennedy Onassis' reasons for not attending, and then on her possible appearance at the world premier of *Mass*.<sup>205</sup> In the midst of this hubbub, Washingtonians became aware that, whether they liked it or not, a monumental happening was taking their city by media. The resultant white noise left them deaf to other voices and issues. Even the Vietnam War and the nation's spiraling inflation disappeared in the din. Finally, on September 9, front page reviews of *Mass*—performance, audience, building, parking, and even post-show caviar—galvanized the public's imaginary. Drowned in images and text, as well as “the buzz” of the Federal City's political elites, area residents knew that they had witnessed the birth of a super-monument, an icon of America's cultural and aesthetic values.

The Kennedy Center entered a theatrical geography defined by a commercial/community dichotomy. Small theaters, identity theaters, and government theaters were just beginning to take shape in the public's consciousness. Even Arena Stage and the Washington Theater Club, with twenty and ten years of history behind them, remained theatrical anomalies, ill defined and misunderstood. The Center, however, epitomized the conflation of government power and aesthetic capital, and its presence profoundly altered the public's understanding of theater and the arts. For the concept of public support for the arts now had a national icon, and it made no difference that this National Theater of the Public had to use commercial criteria to manage its theatrical activities.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> “Contradiction in Bronze,” *Washington Post*, 8 September 1971, 1(B).

<sup>205</sup> These press rumors persisted all the way up to opening curtain, with rumors spreading that Mrs. Onassis was about to make an appearance. She never arrived, opting to see the revival of *Mass* the following year.

<sup>206</sup> Congress did not allot funding for the Kennedy Center's theatrical endeavors.

The Kennedy Center had an even more concrete effect on the public's relationship to theater in Washington. The public immediately experienced a boost in theatrical activity; and, as stories about the Center and its activities appeared in national publications like *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*, the public also experienced the Center's ability to shine a national spotlight on its productions. More important to this study, however, is the Kennedy Center's effect on the social space of Washington. A blend of geographic and architectural signifiers shaped the Center's spatial design and determined the public's experience of it. Local and national media simulated the Center's architectural presence and symbolic capital inside the city's monumental core. That simulacrum also had a decisive impact on the Center's effect on the public and on Washington's theatrical geography. The Center overshadowed the National Theater's historic relationship to the city. For Washingtonians the National represented a portal to the best in national theatrical culture; for outsiders, however, the theater was just another touring house. The Kennedy Center, however, earned national media attention with dozens of national publications publicizing its inauguration. Thus, when its doors opened on September 9, many Washingtonians mourned the loss of a local historic theater even as they gained the status and visibility of a national cultural icon.

This chapter focuses on the construction and opening of this national super-monument to America's performing arts and explores the impact of the Center on local theatrical culture. The chapter treats the Center's inaugural event as seminal, for its impact on local theatrical geography and for its national symbolic value. Because the media played a heuristic role in the elevation of the event's semiotic significance, the chapter treats the media's simulation of the event and the event itself as synonymous, for

in the public's consciousness "simulation is the master, and we only have a right to the retro, to the phantom, parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials."<sup>207</sup> Whether history will judge the media's elevation as warranted is beside the point. The fact that a panoply of local and national media institutions granted the Center such historic relevance determined its relative position on the map of Washington's and the nation's cultural terrain.

The first section of this chapter analyzes the Center's architectural presence, explicating both its historical development and the product that the public experienced in September 1971. In the process, the dominant images inspired by the architecture and subsequently reflected in the media are investigated. These images encompassed both the Center's monumental exterior as well as its ornate interior. The chapter's second section describes the public that attended the premiere, focusing on how the media perceived and represented that public. The resultant discourse influenced the Kennedy Center's sense of what might constitute a national public. The shape of this national public included both the people who participated in the opening as well as those who were excluded from the event. Finally, the chapter examines the significance of the production of *Mass* itself. Very few theatrical productions, particularly world premieres, receive front-page coverage in countless major newspapers, national weeklies and monthlies, and on national evening news programs. With such resplendent coverage, a question emerges: what impact did the production—seen by fewer than 20,000 people—have on the national public's view of the Center's overall meaning and purpose?

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<sup>207</sup> Jean Baudrillard, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, "The Procession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 39.

### *Section I: The Kennedy Center's Architectural Space*

Occupying a 17-acre tract of land in the prosperous Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, D.C., Edward Durell Stone's Kennedy Center attracted significant local attention during its thirteen-year gestation period. Considering its isolation from the everyday ebb and flow of Washington life, such coverage proved vital to the public's perceptions of it as a major performing arts institution. Beginning with its ideation in the mid-1950s as the National Cultural Center, the project captured the public's attention more in two dimensions than in three. This gestation included Stone's original designs in 1960, his redesign several years later at the bequest of President Kennedy and then, after Kennedy's assassination, the Center's ground breaking as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Construction began in 1967 and continued with consistent media coverage for the next five years. Northern Virginians crossing the Potomac via Route 66 during the morning commute noticed the memorial's massive structure atop the east bank of the river. Numerous photographs of construction workers hoisting huge iron girders and marble slabs into place documented this view. It is ironic, however, that more Washingtonians would see the Center "by driving under its overhanging ledges on Rock Creek Parkway than ever would stroll about at intermission."<sup>208</sup> Even tour buses making daily rounds found the Center's location off the beaten trail.<sup>209</sup> Perhaps, Foggy Bottom's residents ventured to the top of the hill to inspect the Center's view of the river and the capital; perhaps, some even pilfered the Kennedy Center's restroom toilet seats, to collect

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<sup>208</sup> Jack Kneece, "No More Models, Boys! Put Some People in those Plans," *Evening Star*, 7 August 1971, n.p. *Washington Star* Clippings, Washingtoniana, Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library, Washington, D. C.

<sup>209</sup> The Watergate, which had been completed the previous year but had not yet been made infamous by President Nixon's "plumbers," was the only landmark nearby.

as souvenirs.<sup>210</sup> For most Washingtonians, however, this center of national culture remained as much media myth as Lance Armstrong's leap to the moon.

In the media, the Kennedy Center signified Washington's and the nation's performance culture, in the same way the Washington Monument—at the geographic hub of the original ten-square mile Federal City—has come to represent the prime meridian of the world.<sup>211</sup> Locally, the National Theater's commercial apparatus was in a twenty-year spiral of decline; Arena Stage was in a location geographically remote from Mall and downtown; hence, Washington lacked a central expression of its performance activities. Although the Center also existed in a remote location, its historic importance and architectural and programmatic bulk gave it iconographic power. The Center's symbolic potential had attracted the media. The media, in turn, helped the Center bridge the divide between its isolated location and the indigenous public, which was necessary to the Center's economic survival.

The Center's location and appearance were not accidental. A series of governmental decisions resulted in a Foggy Bottom location and a monumental architectural design. When President Eisenhower signed the bill creating the National Cultural Center as part of the nation's vast Smithsonian Institution, he did so using an earlier piece of legislation that had established the District of Columbia Auditorium Commission. Congress authorized the commission to found a National Civil Auditorium so that the city would have a performance venue suitable for larger productions. They had planned to assign the project the plot on the Washington Mall where the National Air

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<sup>210</sup> "The Sacking of the Center," *Evening Star*, 11 November 1971, n. p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>211</sup> In his enthusiasm for the emerging democracy, Pierre L'Enfant declared that the spot in the Federal City that he had picked for the Washington Monument was the geographic center of the world.

and Space Museum now stands. The Museum had several powerful allies, however, whereas the Civic Auditorium Commission had none; so the Museum's allies refused to budge. When the long hoped for civic auditorium was transformed into the National Cultural Center, the government moved the site to a non-river front section in Foggy Bottom near the Center's present location. Eventually, the Board of Trustees and its architect/adviser Edward Stone deemed the site too small for the type of facility they envisioned. After a series of deals and political maneuvers, the board of trustees managed to expand the site and reshape it to include a river front section.

Although Stone's initial sketches depicted a simple three-auditorium configuration with a connecting hall, his second series of designs envisioned a magnificent temple to America's and the West's cultural achievements.<sup>212</sup> These designs consisted of a five-auditorium structure that extended out over the Potomac and included a river landing. The accompanying edifice extended more than a hundred feet over the river. Although it would have been possible for ordinary citizens to approach the Center by land, "the design implied that it would be best approached from the river, perhaps in a festively gilded and illuminated royal barge."<sup>213</sup> Stone's design envisioned foreign dignitaries, after arriving in Washington at National Airport, cruising down the Potomac River to be welcomed at the Cultural Center's monumental plaza.

As the design grew increasingly elaborate and the price tag exceeded \$110 million (more than \$60 million over the budget outlined by Congress), the Trustees realized that

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<sup>212</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the development of the architectural designs of the Kennedy Center see Kristen J. Amundson's thesis, "Of Poetry and Power: Major Policy Decisions of the National Cultural Center, 1958-1964" (American University, College of Arts and Sciences, 1978).

<sup>213</sup> Brendan Gill, *John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1981), 26.

the time designated by Congress to complete the project was running out. The original draft of the act establishing the Cultural Center had allowed the Trustees to “continue in existence until the construction” was completed. In the bill passed in 1958 Congress had allotted only five years.<sup>214</sup> In this time, Trustees not only had to raise all the necessary moneys from private sources to build and operate the Center, but they also had to organize and structure artistic policies with far reaching implications. In retrospect, it is easy to conclude that, given such an impossible series of expectations and deadlines, the historic decision to create the Center was nothing more than a feint. Political forces opposing government support of the arts gambled that in five years the Trustees would fail and Congress would quietly abandon the idea. To insure that fate, Congress included a provision in the bill stating that if the Trustees did not raise sufficient capital to build and operate the Center, the Smithsonian Institution would receive all the funds raised. On September 2, 1961, with very little money raised and time running out, newly elected President Kennedy appointed former real estate developer, fundraiser, and Broadway producer, Roger L. Stevens, to replace Arthur Fleming as Chairman of the Board of Trustees.

Stevens immediately brought a sense of realism to the project. The elaborate National Cultural Center that Stone hoped would “represent 2,500 years of Western Culture” gave way to a more practical, albeit still majestic, series of auditoriums.<sup>215</sup> At that same time, Washington business leaders, acting through the Pennsylvania Avenue Commission, proposed housing the Center along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington’s

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<sup>214</sup> House of Representative’s Report 11985, #458.

<sup>215</sup> Edward D. Stone, “The National Cultural Center,” fundraising booklet, 1960, 4-5 in “Of Poetry and Power,” 45.

old downtown.<sup>216</sup> Their reasons were clear. By using several of Washington's historic theaters, at sites not far from the original Smithsonian location, not only would local Washington history be preserved, but also Washington's business and residential communities would receive an enormous economic stimulus. Those elegant theaters, which had seating capacities of 2,000 to 3,000 people, were clearly suitable, after renovation, to house a national center for the performing arts. Although these arguments might have resonated among the Center's Trustees, they nevertheless decided to place national priorities above the project's economic impact on local residents. If the trustees had decided to locate the Center within Washington's business district, area residents and others would have perceived the institution as fundamentally local in nature. Such a perception would have worked against the government's larger objective, which was apparently to construct a national public designed to promote American's interests at home and abroad. By founding the Center in the Foggy Bottom location, its regional identity would remain abstract and generalized, and its status as a national icon would become possible. As the Center's General Director, William McCormick Blair, Jr., stated emphatically just before opening, "The Center is not a local project. It's a national project."<sup>217</sup> Because of this decision, area businesses had to settle for three-by-five advertisements in the Center's opening night program.

The tension between the Center's federal and local functions was embedded in the congressional action that created the Center. In 1958 two congressional sponsors, Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas and Representative Frank Thompson of New

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<sup>216</sup> See Chapter Two for additional details about the city's hopes to establish the cultural center downtown.

<sup>217</sup> "WM McC. Blair, Jr., and the Arty Battle between Man and Space," *Potomac, the Washington Post's Sunday magazine*, 5 September 1971, 5-6.

Jersey backed the construction of the Center.<sup>218</sup> On the one hand, Senator Fulbright backed the Center because he realized that it could

strengthen the ties which unite the United States with other nations. . . . This is particularly necessary at this time when the Soviet Union and other totalitarian nations are spending vast sums for the arts in an attempt to lead the peoples of the world to believe that those countries produce civilization's best efforts in the fine arts."<sup>219</sup>

Whereas people recognize political and economic acts as instruments of power, cultural events can often operate beneath the level of a citizenry's political consciousness. By creating a National Cultural Center, and through it an agency of cultural hegemony, the United States could enhance its international reputation, which at that time had suffered world wide in the struggle against communism. On the other hand, Representative Frank Thompson focused on practical concerns. Washington needed a venue that could handle a variety of performances. When Thompson supported the proposal, he "had in mind the construction of a comparatively modest multipurpose auditorium," that would not embarrass Washington's political elites when they accompanied foreign dignitaries to performances.<sup>220</sup> Despite the sponsors' differences, when the bill passed, with the conditional backing of both camps, it did not specify how the differences would be reconciled. That process took years of negotiation, orchestrated will, and presidential authority—from three living presidents, as well as a dead, yet powerful fourth.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Roger L. Stevens, Chairman's Message, Inaugural Program of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Concord, New Hampshire: Saturday Review Programs, 1971), 3.

<sup>219</sup> Fulbright Draft of S. 3335, Senate Hearings I, 2, in "Of Poetry and Power," 24.

<sup>220</sup> Representative Thompson Newsletter, 28 March 1961, reprinted in 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, *Congressional Record* 110: 132.

<sup>221</sup> Although Roger Stevens brought considerable expertise and energy to the project, its success remained in doubt. Only the assassination of President Kennedy and the subsequent conflation of a Cultural Center with his Memorial assured the project's completion. I will deal with this aspect in more depth later in this chapter.

Early negotiations resonated with tension between local and national needs, as well as international considerations; but when Cold War politics heated up during the 1960s, the local concerns evaporated. Language in a 1963 version of the bill clarified the intentions guiding the Center's design. "The committee believes that music, art, poetry, drama, and dance transcends [sic] language barriers, and provides [sic] a means of communication between people of different nationalities, which will permit conveyance to people of other countries some of the basic concepts of the American way of life."<sup>222</sup> Though meant as a guide for programming, similar thinking influenced architectural decisions. Stone's grandiose designs were laden with imperial dreams; although the scaling back of that imperialism had economic and practical motivations, it also stemmed from President Kennedy's desire to make the National Cultural Center a more culturally democratic institution. Stone's challenge consisted of synthesizing elitist tendencies with enlightened aspirations. The goal was to create a structure that inspired average Americans toward American cultural hegemony without denying those same average Americans the ability to participate in the creation and/or celebration of that hegemony. When audiences approached the Kennedy Center on opening night, they might have been aware of the larger considerations. The Center's size—the second "biggest building in town," next to the Pentagon—surely would have awed them.<sup>223</sup> As they waited in the long lines of traffic that clogged the streets of Foggy Bottom for hours, they might have noticed how the spotlights transformed the Italian marble edifice into towering gold columns: a spectacular vision of glory. For if Stone wanted the Center to represent the

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<sup>222</sup> Senate Report, 12536, #784, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress.

<sup>223</sup> Wolf Von Echardt, "Kennedy Center: The Monument That Isn't," *Washington Post*, 26 December 1970, 1(B).

nation's cultural ascendancy, then he would have wanted the edifice to be viewed at night, under a halo of gold as if blessed by an invisible deity. In a location devoid of other structures, the Center proclaimed its domination of geography just as it commanded the public's attention. Detached from everyday life, the Center demanded of its citizens: Come! Although not as self-possessed or solipsistic as the marvel envisioned in Stone's most grandiose designs, where apartments, restaurants, shops, bars, and entertainments would have allowed visitors to enter the Center and never check-out, this opening night incarnation still haunted its visitors with apparitions of a hoped for American cultural empire.

The Center's isolated location and monumental design left it open to charges of elitism, however. Yet, critics did not direct their charges against an icon of international cultural hegemony. Rather, the elitism that most concerned the critics was of a domestic variety; they feared that the Center would produce a cultural aristocracy that would elevate the rich and powerful and exclude the middle and lower classes. Ideologically, this fear took many forms and came from many directions. Critics feared that the Center's organizers would exclude people with average incomes, people in poverty, people of color, and people whose vision of America resided outside the ruling establishment's politically acceptable perspective. Initial discussions in the media focused on reactions to the ambiguous nature of the Center's architectural design. If President Kennedy had stuck with Stone's original "water-lily-like" design, or if Trustees had worked with the Pennsylvania Avenue Commission to use historic downtown sites, the architecture and location would have had clearer results.<sup>224</sup> Stone's final design had

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<sup>224</sup> *John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts*, 18.

failed, however, to synthesize imperial impulses with President Kennedy's wish to accommodate the common man. Instead of synthesizing these paradoxical intentions, Stone apparently contented himself with the idea of a muted colossus.

The Kennedy Center that eventually materialized on the Potomac's banks generated comments that it was architecturally incoherent or that it appeared "more suitable for military defense than public accessibility."<sup>225</sup> *The Star's* Smith Hempstone wrote, "the Kennedy Center is pure volkscultur, reducing aesthetic principles to their lowest common denominator, and then compounding the error by attempting to conceal this with the bombast reminiscent of a Soviet war memorial."<sup>226</sup> Indeed, when viewed from a distance sitting atop its hill overlooking the Potomac, the Kennedy Center looked like an enormous but elegant pillbox or bunker. In other words, the Center did little to attract the public to its doors. The culture ensconced inside its marble and gold façade might be safe and secure, but the human spirit whose preservation and maturation its founders proclaimed as essential to its grand purpose seemed ironically absent. Thus, if the Kennedy Center deserved the charge of elitism, it was not because of any genuine demonstration of architectural genius and aristocratic intent. Rather, it earned the charge because of the clumsy attempts organizers made to blend a desire for functionality, which led them to a common-man motif, with a dream of cultural imperialism, which by necessity inspired them to structures more suited to the worship of Divine Right and Manifest Destiny than to genuine reflective artistry.

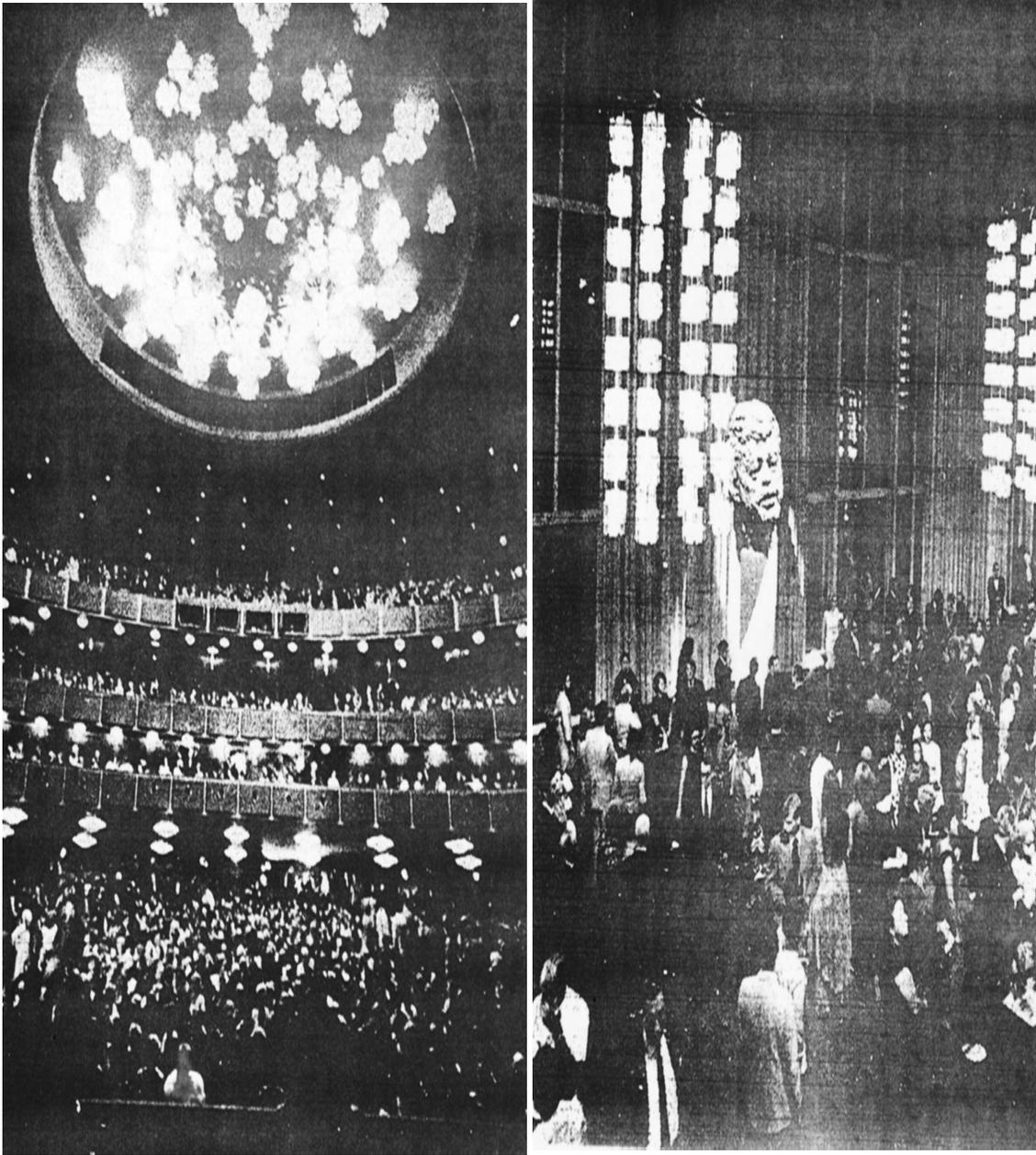
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<sup>225</sup> "How Do I Get to the Place," *Evening Star*, 5 September 1971, n. p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>226</sup> Smith Hempstone, "Speer, Ozymandias and the Kennedy Center," *Evening Star*, 11 September 1971, n. p. Washingtoniana.

Despite the Kennedy Center's muted imperial appearance, on opening day the media pursued its own representations of majesty. It did so by shifting the public's attention away from the exterior architecture. The public had grown accustomed to media representations of the Center's façade. The Center's interior, on the other hand, offered an array of possibilities. Curiously, the media did not focus on the Center's expansive hallways, which were some of the largest in the world. This feature had already received some coverage over the previous months during celebrity tours. Neither did they use the Center's world class stages or the huge eight-foot bronze bust memorializing President Kennedy. Rather, photographs and commentaries in the city's three major newspapers portrayed the majestic, abundant chandeliers that filled the Center's numerous atriums, vestibules, and restaurants, its Concert Hall, Opera House, and Grand Foyer (See Figure #6).

The chandeliers clearly photographed well, refracting light through their crystal prisms dazzling viewers. The Center's high ceilings allowed photographers the opportunity to frame their images from a variety of angles. Some photographs focused solely on the chandeliers as emblems of grandeur while others combined chandeliers with other objects or with people. One, for example, looked down upon the Kennedy bust in the Grand Foyer through a menagerie of crystal orbs—the bust's sole appearance in the local print media opening day. Most photographers placed the chandeliers in direct relationship to the audience, however. They usually situated them directly above the crowd, either during intermission as people chatted with spouses, friends, and colleagues or before the show as they waited for the lights to dim and the orchestra to begin. Whatever the photographers had intended by their choice of iconography, the chandeliers



**Figure 6: Two different views of the chandeliers that were highlighted during the inauguration of the Kennedy Center.**

were a stunning reminder of the Kennedy Center's opulent origins. Moreover, the photographs of the chandeliers were usually accompanied by the names of the European countries that had donated them. Fourteen hand-blown crystal chandeliers were from Sweden, eleven from Norway, two sun-burst chandeliers from Austria, and a single, yet "dazzling Waterford crystal chandelier" from Ireland. As one workman said of the Waterford, "[it sounded] like fairy bells ... like leprechauns from Ireland."<sup>227</sup> These chandeliers represented the United States' immense wealth; but, because other nations had given these chandeliers as gifts, they also signified the nation's and the city's function as the hegemonic center of the western world. Importantly, however, most of the countries had not given these gifts as tributes to the nation's cultural traditions but rather in memory of John F. Kennedy. In fact, in the 1964 act that had changed the name of the National Cultural Center to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Congress had foreseen this international interest in honoring Kennedy. In these snapshot reminders of the opening night celebrations, such offerings appeared tributary, as signs of the United State's cultural awakening, not as expressions of solidarity for a slain leader.

By focusing on the chandeliers, the media exacerbated the debate already raging in Washington about the Center's elitism. The Center's dual purpose, both as memorial for a slain president and as center of national culture, only confused the situation further. Saddled with rising construction costs and facing an increasing array of maintenance bills unrelated to the building's operation as a performing arts institution, Roger Stevens suggested to Congress that it might defer some of the expenses by charging an admission fee to tourists. Columnist Jack Anderson responded in *The Post*, "the ballyhooed

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<sup>227</sup> Michael Bernstein, "JFK Center Makes it under the Wire," *Washington Daily News*, 3 September 1971, 29.

Kennedy Center ... the huge marble palace shaped like a low-rise boxcar, has already cost the taxpayer \$43 million. Yet the public won't even be able to get into the building without paying an admission fee."<sup>228</sup> Stevens replied, shifting the discussion from tourists to theater-going public: "the majority of audiences in this country are made up of people who are willing to make some sacrifices in order to attend good theatrical productions."<sup>229</sup> By referring to the small percentage of people who constitute the theater-going public, Stevens spoke of a public totally distinct from the one to which Anderson referred. Anderson referenced "public" as that vast majority of people who seldom attend expensive theatricals, but who might visit a memorial to Kennedy, even if it existed in an isolated location far from public transportation. Stevens later dropped the idea, but the confusing exchange highlighted the cultural contradictions embedded in the nation's cultural heritage.

The Board of Trustees first wrestled with the question of the National Cultural Center's artistic purpose in the late 1950s, arguing that the nation's political and economic democracy was now secured. For the rest of the twentieth century, therefore, "the main challenge to the United States is the achievement of cultural democracy."<sup>230</sup> The Trustees envisioned an array of performances at the Center, "from the ballads of the Northern lumberjacks to the chanteys of Cape Cod fisherman, the songs of Pennsylvania

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<sup>228</sup> Jack Anderson, "Center for People Is a Palace for Rich," *Washington Post*, 18 August 1971, 11(B).

<sup>229</sup> Roger Stevens, "Mr. Stevens Replies to a Column on the Kennedy Center," *Washington Post*, 27 August 1971, 15(D).

<sup>230</sup> Eric Larrabee, Executive Editor of *American Heritage Magazine*, quoted in *The National Cultural Center: Part I* (United States Government, Washington: 1960), 1.

coal miners and the laments of Texas cowboys.”<sup>231</sup> Such hopes reflected the board’s general lack of artistic knowledge and practical experience because that type of amateur fare had little chance of filling the Center’s expansive—and expensive—halls. Yet, the sentiment embodied the contradictory impulses working beneath the surface of the Center: a nation of folk arts hoping for a world stage. By 1970 government and foundation support for the arts had begun to close the gap between regional diversity and artistic professionalism. Most notably the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities initiated programs to develop and professionalize an emerging regional theater network.<sup>232</sup> The Center’s role as a memorial only made the situation more difficult. Thus, Anderson’s public might have wanted to visit the memorial to a slain Kennedy or to listen to the laments of a Texas cowboy, but it probably would have left the Center without ever asking who Leonard Bernstein was.

These same two publics would have interacted with the Center’s enormous rooms in a similarly contradictory fashion. Photographs of the Center often depicted the first rooms that visitors entered, the Hall of States and the Hall of Nations. In the Hall of States, for those who looked up—a natural response to ceilings looming sixty feet above the floor—the vista included two parallel rows of state flags gracing the apexes. In the Hall of Nations were two rows of flags from every nation with whom the United States presently held diplomatic relations. Both as a monument to a slain President and as the center of national culture, the emphasis was clear: the flags of states and the flags of other nations hung within the hallowed halls of federal power. Like the controversy between

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<sup>231</sup> Carlton Sprague Smith, et al., *The National Cultural Center: Part II*, “What goes into” the National Cultural Center, (United States Government, Washington: 1960), 67.

<sup>232</sup> The Washington manifestation of this regional network will be explored in depth in the next three chapters.

Jack Anderson and Roger Stevens, the question of divergent public responses to the Center's symbolic power emerged. Different audiences and publics responded in distinct ways to the quality of grandeur and awe evoked by the enormity of the halls. For those who, like Stevens, had a sense of personal ownership of the Center, the space they entered and that engulfed them enhanced their sense of self-worth. This national public consisted of those involved in the Center's decision-making processes, those who fundraised for the Center or those who gave or who were associated with corporations and institutions that gave gifts to the Center. Anderson's national public, however, experienced no such identification. For them, the Kennedy Center stood as "the prime absurdity ... [a] marble monument to money and power."<sup>233</sup> Its "huge hallways that dwarf humans by the sheer volume of their cubic feet," acted more as expression of a detached, yet hollow, power structure than as source of inspiration and joy.<sup>234</sup> For them, the "fortress of culture" did not so much nurture the nation's artistic heritage as it protected that heritage from subversion, either by popular or folk cultural traditions that spoke too loudly about the nation's less than honorable acts.<sup>235</sup>

Although the Center's architectural design did not acknowledge dissent, dissent still found a presence (albeit small) within the Center's social space. The various publics who celebrated the nation's cultural tradition probably failed to notice the two innocuous reliefs standing across the street from the main entrance and its Halls of Nations and States. If they had stopped and gazed at "War or Peace" or "Amerika," they probably

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<sup>233</sup> Michelle Murray, Letter to the Editor, *Washington Post*, 4 June 1971, 21(A).

<sup>234</sup> "Kennedy Center: The Monument That Isn't," 1(B).

<sup>235</sup> Antal Dorati, "A Large Center for a Very Large Country," *Evening Star*, 5 September 1971, 2(B).

would not have realized that both reliefs challenged, or subverted, America's cultural hegemony, but in ways that Anderson's vision of the public would never have endorsed. Created by the German visual artist Jurgen Weber and donated to the Center by the government of West Germany, the two pieces represent one aspect of the Center's spatial design that transcended nationalistic concerns so prevalent during that early September. In three separate reviews in *The Star*, *The Post*, and *The News* (each accompanied by photographs), the specter of controversy took center-stage. In "War or Peace" Weber mixed classical and contemporary imagery and portrayed a world "threatened on all sides, by materialism, technology, the military-industrial complex."<sup>236</sup> Yet, the frieze beckoned viewers toward peace. Weber portrayed peace with figures in an amphitheater; they were all associated with the performing arts: classical figures like Pan and contemporary ones like jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong and fictional ones like characters from Bertolt Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera*. The culminating image of "War or Peace" focused on two figures: a mother breast-feeding her child and two lovers dancing nude. In "Amerika," which "deals with America as a German sees it," i.e., with an America whose "democracy suffers badly when people have no food," the imagery depicted a nation of "plump and naked politicians" surrounded by starving multitudes.<sup>237</sup> Expressionistic and tending toward the postmodern, with monster cars and skyscraper façades, with columns of windows marked by the word "softsell," the piece focused on the pitfalls of commercialism in contemporary life. In an interview with Gus Constantine of *The Star*, Weber explained: "I see life as tragedy, and the tragedy of America is the

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<sup>236</sup> Anne Cruther, "War, Peace, and Freedom at Kennedy Center," *Washington Daily News*, 6 September 1971, 15.

<sup>237</sup> Paul Richards, "Gifts of Visions and Memories," *The Washington Post*, 1(B).

tragedy of power, which is always necessary but always a threat to mankind.”<sup>238</sup> It is that tragic vision that disturbed—if ever so slightly—the marble pillars upon which the Kennedy Center rested.

In reviews of the piece in *The Star* and *The Post*, the two reviewers, Gus Constantine and Paul Richards, used different strategies to address the controversy. Constantine alluded to passersby taking offense. Several assumed that the two nude lovers were engaged in sexual intercourse (something Weber had done in other reliefs, but not this one). Another thought that the piece was “a horror story, ugly and not at all uplifting.”<sup>239</sup> Constantine, then, discussed briefly how the Trustees approved the gift from West Germany. Richards’ approached the controversy indirectly. Though clearly ticked that a German portrayed the United States in such an unfavorable light, he held his tongue as he described the Center’s review process. He stated that review committees from both the German government and the Kennedy Center accepted Weber’s work. He then quoted General Director Blair as saying, “the committee has ‘turned nothing down,’” followed by the statement that Blair was “a diplomat” and not a censor. Finally, Richards acknowledged that the Center’s review committee “turned down lots of junk,” before it could be officially rejected.<sup>240</sup> Logically, the review committee could have assumed that a gift offered by a foreign government would have had an acceptable level of professionalism. If that was the case, then the euphemism “junk” must have referred to gifts that the committee deemed inappropriate to the Kennedy Center’s space. Although some Trustees probably sympathized with the civil rights movement and with

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<sup>238</sup> Gus Constantine, “A Tragic Vision of America,” *Evening Star*, 9 September 1971, 18(A).

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Richards, 10(B).

antiwar demonstrators, most were clearly uncomfortable with placing those sentiments center-stage. As future contributors ate caviar and drank French wine at the Grand Scene, the last image that the Center's organizers wanted them to contemplate would have been "plump politicians" surrounded by starving multitudes.<sup>241</sup> Although such images might make great art, they failed to synthesize the Center's dual purposes. Thus, the presence of Weber's work spoke volumes about the ascendancy of critical voices; the fact that a subversive display resided across the street from the Center's doors seemed eerily appropriate. In accepting the art but barring it from speaking inside the Center's walls, the Trustees represented visually the position of criticism nationally. Though accepted as vital to a healthy democracy, contesting voices tended to protest outside the halls of officially sanctioned art.

### *Section II: The Audience at the Kennedy Center*

The concept of a national public played a significant role in the construction of the Kennedy Center as a super-monument and national icon. As Isabella Shelton of *The Star* wrote about the final preview of *Mass*, "It's the Audience that Counts."<sup>242</sup> She could just as easily have used the same headline for the official opening the following day. Not that the world premiere of Leonard Bernstein's "master work" did not garner serious attention as a cultural event; it did. As a Kennedy Center staffer stressed, "This is to be a cultural rather than a social occasion."<sup>243</sup> *The Star* and *The Post* carried front page

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<sup>241</sup> The restaurant, the Grand Scene, was the Kennedy Center's most plush restaurant. It specialized in French cuisine.

<sup>242</sup> Isabella Shelton, "It's the Audience that Counts," *Evening Star*, 8 September 1971, 1(C).

<sup>243</sup> Margaret Crimmins and Nancy L Ross, "Kennedy Center's Opening—It'll be a Starry Night," *The Washington Post*, 5 September 1971, 8(K).

reviews of the performance—a complete aberration in the history of those papers’ coverage of performance and art. As Gregory Peck, movie actor, arts fundraiser, and Kennedy friend, said, “It was the perfect opening for the Kennedy Center, total theater.”<sup>244</sup> Although not Peck’s intent, the idea of “total theater” that he used to characterize the multifaceted *Mass*, was even more true of the evening’s entire spectacle: not only *Mass* and the Center’s architecture, but also its celebrity-filled and polarized representation of a national public.

Despite high praise and universal coverage, the performance could not compete with the front-page press given to the show’s politically potent audience. A dazzling array of audience-profiles explored celebrities’ tastes in fashion and friendships as well as their subjects of gossip and eating habits at after-show parties. The media’s obsession with the audience obscured the performance of *Mass* from public view. What was supposed to have been a major artistic achievement by a major American composer and conductor disappeared beneath the weight of the social apparatus surrounding it. Washington’s NBC affiliate, Channel 4, covered the opening with two “live” half-hour Specials designed to capture “the glamour, color, and excitement of the gala.”<sup>245</sup> At 7:00 p.m. the NBC news team filmed the audience as it arrived at the Center. During the 11:00 p.m. Special, journalists interviewed the audience as they left the theater and mingled in the Grand Foyer. Although the late show included *The Post* critic Richard

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<sup>244</sup> Betty Beale and William Delany, “An Ecumenical Opening,” *Evening Star* 9 September 1971, 1(A).

<sup>245</sup> “The Kennedy Center,” an ad in *Washington Post*, 8 September 1971, 11(B).

Coe's critique of the performance, the massive volume of celebrity footage clearly overshadowed the slight nod given the performance itself.<sup>246</sup>

The audience that so fascinated print and electronic media was not the theatrical audience that is theoretically so important to the function of the actor. Nor was it simply that "celebrity-studded audience" with which Americans have in recent times grown so familiar.<sup>247</sup> This audience "included at least three presumed presidential hopefuls, a quorum of the U.S. Senate, many House members and enough diplomats to run the United Nations."<sup>248</sup> In other words, the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts highlighted in the aggregate the increased significance in American life of the political figure as celebrity. It also made manifest the larger role that politics—local, national, and international—played in the construction of the nation's cultural and artistic identity. As such, the Center's auditorium became the stage for the ultimate conflation of actor and politician.

Such a conflation might have been expected in Washington. After all, ten years earlier Richard Coe had noted that "when it comes to being at home in a human mass actors must yield to politicians."<sup>249</sup> Since that time, the Center and the NEA had assured government's involvement in the arts in general, and in the performing arts in particular. As noted above, political forces supporting the National Cultural Center in 1958 had clashed between those who saw it as an agent of American ideology and those who

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<sup>246</sup> Unfortunately, NBC has destroyed the actual footage of its opening night coverage. All that remains are print advertisements of the coverage and references to the critique.

<sup>247</sup> "Kennedy Center's Opening," 8(K).

<sup>248</sup> Shelton, 1(C).

<sup>249</sup> Richard Coe, "Politicians Upstage Actors in Mob Scene," *The Washington Post*, 17 September 1961, 1(G).

wanted Washington to have a functioning, world-class auditorium. Now, in 1971, with millions of dollars of corporate support of the Center and with the NEA making a concerted effort to nurture corporate giving, political opposition to the government's involvement in the arts slipped from public view.<sup>250</sup> Both the Center and the NEA gave the government a major role to play in decisions related to the creation of art in United States: the role of patron.

A patron's role in theater has always carried a sense of ownership, not only of the theater, but also of the performance and the performer and, in some cases, the audience as well. That ownership allowed patrons to magnify their power and identity. At the Kennedy Center the situation differed only slightly. In the past, a patron's prestige depended on the material existence of the performance. Even if audience members sat on stage or in court boxes, the experience of the performance by the audience still gave the performance the privileged position. Even as audience members watched each other, the material presence of the performance centered the theatrical event. Even if audience members later gossiped about the celebrities who had attended the performance, the penumbra of the show still lingered around the actors' performances. At the Kennedy Center's opening, however, the media's simulacrum overwhelmed the performance occurring on stage and in the auditorium, by actors, singers, dancers, and even by audience members themselves. In this case the media acted as an intermediary between the public at large and the performance, thereby extending the effectiveness of the patron's support. Except for the 20,000 plus audience members who attended the performances of *Mass*, the show remained a private affair and hidden from view. The

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<sup>250</sup> To be sure, opposition to the governments support of the Center and of the arts remained, and still remain, as subsequent battles over public funding would highlight.

only opera glasses the larger public had were those provided by media simulation. Hence, for this public, a virtual performance of *Mass* created by pundits and critics became the only performance that counted, and in that performance the role of *Mass* was that of a minor character.

From the Center's inception, the Trustees understood the important role that the new media would play in the realization of their vision.<sup>251</sup> A study commissioned by the Trustees in the early 1960s stated the situation bluntly. "If the National Cultural Center is to become a truly national development, spreading its influence throughout the United States and sharing its services with all the people—not only those who visit or live in the nation's capital—the new media of communications must play a fundamental role in Center planning, programming, and operations."<sup>252</sup> The report focused on the potential for recording and transmitting performances, not on the role of the mass media in expressing the Center's vision. Because the media had no rights to broadcast the performance of *Mass*, the role of audience in the event became magnified; so much so, that in many ways the audience became self-referential, existing for its own sake. Although writers alluded to the performance that brought this theater-going public together, their coverage de-centered the theatrical event. They created a public that existed for its own sake, performing for itself or, at the very least, for the sake of its attire. As Nina Hyde wrote in *The News* the day after, "The fashion industry here and abroad

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<sup>251</sup> New media included everything from radio and television (broadcast and closed circuit) to all types of recording (film kinescope, tape and disc).

<sup>252</sup> The Office of Education of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *The Role and Function of Radio, Television, Film and the other New Media in the Permanent Program of the National Cultural Center*, a report prepared under the auspices of The Telecommunications Center of The Ohio State University (Washington, D.C.: The National Cultural Center, 1963), 4.

thanks the Kennedy Center for providing this showcase of the best of their art, especially now when the number of occasions for wearing extravagant designs is diminishing.”<sup>253</sup>

The chief protagonist in this virtual performance was none other than the slain President himself. His assassination played a central role in the governmental processes that brought the Cultural Center to realization. His name, and the fire-storm of sentiment surrounding his and his brother’s deaths, ignited the engines of government and corporate America with such force that the Center’s backers were able to overcome the nation’s two-hundred year bias against federal support for the arts. The drama’s leading lady, like its leading man, also made her presence felt, in absentia. After asking Leonard Bernstein to compose a musical work for her husband’s memorial, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis “changed her mind about attending ... after crowds in Warsaw, where she was attending a funeral, chased her across a field.”<sup>254</sup> Rumors of her decision to attend, and then not to attend, and then finally to attend “persisted up until curtain time” when the crew from the Today Show swore that she would be there.<sup>255</sup> Of course, when she failed to arrive, the Kennedy clan filled in as surrogates, chief among them the president’s mother and family matriarch, Mrs. Joseph Kennedy. Though not as alluring as Jackie, when Rose Kennedy left the Presidential Box at show’s end, she “was mobbed by the press, the audience, and tourists who had waited for the hour and 45-minute performance to end.”<sup>256</sup> Such behavior demonstrated just how thoroughly the focus of the theatrical event had shifted

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<sup>253</sup> Nina Hyde, “Plenty of Glitter a Center Opening,” *Washington Daily News*, 9 September 1971, 46.

<sup>254</sup> “Starry Night,” 1(K).

<sup>255</sup> “Evening’s Mood,” *Washington Post*, 9 September 1971, 2(C).

<sup>256</sup> “Night of Celebrating at Christening for the Arts,” *Washington Post*, 9 September 1971, 1(C).

away from the performance of *Mass* and moved in the direction of the audience and its living representatives of a martyred President and the end of Camelot.

If Kennedy's spirit assumed the leading role in the drama of the opening, then the chief antagonist's role was played by another absent national leader, President Richard Nixon. He had elected not to attend the Center's opening, due in part to a tip by J. Edgar Hoover, who warned him that the production "might possibly contain a 'subversive' text."<sup>257</sup> He offered his seat in the Presidential Box to Jacqueline Onassis who surrendered it to Rose Kennedy. Like Onassis, Nixon sent surrogates: John Ehrlichman, H. R. Haldeman, and Henry Kissenger. As these characters took center-stage in the auditorium's larger drama, their political ideologies and affiliations mattered less than their celebrity presence. In this drama, politicians were the celebrity-actors and the public-at-large was the audience. Joining the politicians were, of course, celebrities from the entertainment world. Joining the public-at-large were none other than the members of the public who had tickets and the multitude of tourists waiting outside the Opera House, straining for a glimpse of a famous politician. They caught those glimpses either in person or later on the evening news. Meanwhile, media personnel acted as a chorus, hungering for that dramatic sneer or inadvertent comment made by a Kissenger or a Kennedy, which might then lend meaning to the *Mass* on stage. For in the turmoil of Washington's growing culture war, the object of art mattered less than the spontaneous or planned thoughts and actions of those elected to guard and defend the nation's artistic heritage.

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<sup>257</sup> Paul Myers, *Leonard Bernstein* (London: Phaidon Press Unlimited, 1998), 159. According to Myers, Hoover's suspicions were aroused when Bernstein met with radical priest Father Philip Berrigan. At the time Bernstein had yet to decide on a librettist for *Mass* and he hoped that Berrigan, a figure familiar

Despite Shelton's declaration that "it's the audience that counts," the media simulacrum placed greater emphasis on the dress rehearsal preview for *Mass* than on opening night. This change in emphasis occurred in part because the Center's administrators opened the preview to the larger public, specifically "to dispel critics who felt the massive Center would only be a palace for the elite."<sup>258</sup> At this event, the media constructed the image of an audience both awe struck and curious about the art they had just experienced. To be sure, the celebrity of John F. Kennedy still surfaced, represented that evening by Senator and Mrs. Edward Kennedy, whom tourists and audience members "besieged for autographs" after the show.<sup>259</sup> The media gave this public another dimension, however. Audience members gave Bernstein and company a twenty-minute ovation, after which the emotionally drained composer kissed and hugged everyone in sight, from the cast on stage to associates at after-show parties. In press accounts, this audience concentrated either on the emotional intensity of their experience of *Mass* or on the production's intellectual significance. Instead of obsessing over their own presence or over the presence of celebrity, they left the theater asking questions about the theatrical piece they had just witnessed. One critic described them as "asking total strangers what they thought of the *Mass*."<sup>260</sup> Michael Bernstein wrote that for this audience "the play's the thing ... after the playing of the star spangled banner," of

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with questions of faith and Catholicism, might help him with the selection. No librettist came out of their short meeting at the Federal Correction Institute in Danbury, Connecticut.

<sup>258</sup> Myra MacPherson and Margaret Crimmons, "Kennedy Center Debut: Ovation Went On and On," *Washington Post*, 7 September 1971, 1(B).

<sup>259</sup> Ruth Dean, "Maestro Bernstein's Night," *The Evening Star*, 7 September 1971, 6(B).

<sup>260</sup> "Kennedy Center Debut," 1(B).

course.<sup>261</sup> Organizers had added this patriotic nod to the beginning of *Mass*: a clear indication of the federal government's presence within the halls of culture.

Nevertheless, the media failed to represent this audience and their questions in a coherent manner. Although the experience had clearly moved them, and although the media recognized the intellectual stimulus that *Mass*' performance had engendered, the media did not forge that reaction into a recognizable framework. For the audience, as for critics who had commented on Weber's reliefs, the art provoked reactions that might have identified its members as something more than simply supernumeraries dispatched by absent Kings. After all, the piece boldly mixed elements of the Catholic mass with popular music and jazz; it also contained "the controversial 'sacrilege,' the smashing of the sacramental vessels," which incited the Archbishop of Cincinnati to forbid Catholic attendance.<sup>262</sup> Because of the vagaries of the media's coverage of the piece's content, however, such distinctions were blurred.

As mentioned above, the Kennedy Center inspired controversy about its dual roles. Not only was it supposed to function as a memorial and as a national cultural center, but also its programs were meant to serve both national interests and Washington's own local constituencies. Though secondary, this latter role was essential to the Center's ability to assert a national agenda. Although tourists and dignitaries frequented the nation's capital in great numbers, those out-of-town guests could not keep the Kennedy Center's spaces filled with audiences over the long run. The Center had to cultivate both a local and national clientele. Tension between these two groups

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<sup>261</sup> Michael Bernstein, "The Play's the Thing at the Gala," *The Washington Daily News*, 7 September 1971, 5.

<sup>262</sup> *Bernstein*, 164.

frequently surfaced over the question of elitism. The national constituency that attended *Mass* consisted almost entirely of celebrity political elites and their corporate backers who either lived in the area because of their political and economic interests or who came to town especially for the occasion. The Washington public, like the ones who attended the dress rehearsal, constituted a more traditional theater-going public. Although they might have seen the Kennedy Center as geographically and culturally isolated from the normal flow of everyday life, they attended *Mass* because they desired art and culture, feelings of alienation notwithstanding. Although this local public might not have supported the building of the Kennedy Center with sizable gifts, it flocked to the dress rehearsal of *Mass* and to the opening of the Center. Their enthusiasm was so great that by mid-August Roger Stevens commented on the Center's booming season ticket sales, saying "envelopes with checks in them are falling off the desks."<sup>263</sup> As mentioned above, the media depicted this local constituency as a theater-going public that was interested in performance and that had asked about the significance of *Mass*. The media also presented their manner and style of dress as informal, in stark contrast to the glamour of opening night. Thus, even though this public could afford the Center's ticket prices—the highest in the area—they were represented as average Americans. Ironically, when "these average Americans" came to purchase tickets during the weeks to come, they found that the process established at the box-office to purchase tickets was woefully inadequate. For weeks, letters of complaint filled *The Post's* editorial section about the Center's lack of consideration for local ticket buyers. Letters complained of no seating charts, exceedingly long lines, and no method of informing people when performances of

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<sup>263</sup> "Ticket Sales are Booming," *The Evening Star*, 26 August 1971.

*Mass* were sold-out. Given the attention to detail that the Center afforded the celebrity audience on opening night, this lack of attention to basic box office affairs suggests that administrators had not prioritized the local ticket-purchaser.

The other Washington constituency that had limited access to the Kennedy Center's opening was Washington's majority African American community, or roughly 70 percent of the city's residents. In the 1970s this constituency rarely attended theatrical events, professional or otherwise.<sup>264</sup> As a result, the *Washington Afro-American* ignored the Center's opening altogether, and many African Americans did not step inside the Center for years. To many this lack of interest was not surprising. The recent uprisings had profoundly affected the city and its ability to deliver services to local residents, and many African-Americans in Washington thought that the millions of dollars used to build a palace to the arts could have found a better purpose. As an African-American resident stated only days before the opening, "They should have used the money to clean the city's environment—get rid of some of these rats and roaches, abandoned buildings, and abandoned cars ... that would have meant more to the city."<sup>265</sup>

Administrators at the Center grew increasingly aware of these voices and the need to address publicly the long-term problems that they expressed. Although shielded from charges of racism, administrators grew sensitive to charges of elitism with racial overtones. A year prior to the opening, Robert Hooks, a Hollywood actor and a co-founder of New York's Negro Ensemble Company, met with chairman Roger Stevens to discuss the possibility of opening a national theater for blacks at the Center. Hooks

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<sup>264</sup> I will deal with Washington's African American theaters and theater-goers in Chapter Six.

<sup>265</sup> Michael Collins, "Kennedy Center: Wm. McC. Blair, Jr., and the Arty Battle between Man and Space, *Potomac*, an insert in *The Washington Post*, 5 September 1971, 7.

apparently suggested using the smallest stage, the “Film Theatre, at that time due to be named after Frederick Douglass.”<sup>266</sup> Hooks challenged Stevens, and hence the government, to acknowledge that the National Cultural Center was decidedly white and European in orientation. By housing an African American company, the Center would make an important statement regarding the nation’s commitment to changing the country’s racial injustices. News of the talks reached New York, where stories appeared in *The New York Times* proclaiming the collaboration a done deal.<sup>267</sup> Suddenly, however, discussions ceased. The following summer, the Center’s administrators decided that they would fund Workshops for Careers in the Arts, an educational street theater project. District high school students performed the medieval morality play, *Everyman* ”on the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and T Streets, NW, a few doors from 14<sup>th</sup> Street go-go cabarets.”<sup>268</sup> Peggy Cooper, the Workshops’ development director, said that the Center’s support for her organization demonstrated that it was ready to “fulfill the charges given [it] by the Congress to program for all the people.”<sup>269</sup> Like their sponsorship of the College Theater Festival in 1969, this outreach associated the Center with positive developments in theater education. Yet, by denying Hooks’ proposal while at the same time supporting educational work in the African-American community, the Center also sent a message that professional black artists were not ready for a national stage.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Charles Farrow, “Miracle on the Potomac;” Will Kennedy Center Work,” *The Washington Afro-American*, 26 June 1971, 23.

<sup>267</sup> Paul Delaney, “Black Company Will Be Set Up for Kennedy Center,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1971, 46.

<sup>268</sup> Gus Constantine, “Careers in the Arts,” *The Washington Post* 11 August 1971, 3(B).

<sup>269</sup> “JFK Center to Support Street Theater Event,” *The Evening Star* 27 July 1971, n. p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>270</sup> The D.C. Black Repertory Company would eventual perform its version of Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* at the Eisenhower Theater in 1973.

Although this outreach had positive long-term effects, it did not address the racial divide growing ever more apparent in the Center's national public. Without an artistic program that attracted African-Americans, the Center decided that the appeal of free tickets would have to suffice. In the summer prior to the opening, the Center used money raised from a May gala to establish a program that offered free and half-priced tickets to full-time students, low-income citizens, retired persons on fixed incomes, the handicapped, and military personnel below the grade of E-3. Though not designed to address Washington's African-American majority, the program offered two thousand free tickets for matinee performances of Bernstein's *Mass* to "needy inner city school children."<sup>271</sup> In Washington's racially and economically polarized city, these "needy inner city school children," consisted primarily of children of color, a category that in 1971 consisted almost exclusively of African-Americans. The fact that preview and opening night representations of the audience had conspicuously lacked African Americans spoke volumes. To be sure, Walter Washington, the city's African-American mayor, attended the opening and, in a photograph, was prominently displayed sitting next to Mrs. Joseph Kennedy in the Presidential Box. The media also mentioned Mrs. Washington in several articles, particularly the cumbersome wheel chair that she used because of her broken leg. Other than their presence, and the aforementioned "school children," however, no other manifestation of the city's racial diversity appeared in the simulation of the Kennedy Center's national public.

Nevertheless, local African-Americans attended *Mass*, both at the opening and at matinees to which they had received two thousand free tickets. Charles Farrow, theater

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<sup>271</sup> Hollie J. West, "Free Tickets! Free Tickets!" *Washington Post*, 5 September 1971, 8(F).

critic for the *Afro-American*, remarked that the Center's producers "had created a web of entertainment that they will probably never equal again in life."<sup>272</sup> He continued with a critique of *Mass* saying that the show attempted "to become all things to all viewers ... another star spangled evening with an audience dressed as if there would be no tomorrow." Farrow's description of the event seemed, in retrospect, as much prognostication as objective journalism. His description of the Center's "star spangled evening" drew attention to the event's political nature. His "web of entertainment" made the event seem eschatological, as if it existed in some rarified realm exempt from the ongoing realities of Washington life. Farrow also argued that the performance's universal aspirations—wanting to be "all things to all viewers"—resided in an age of increasing diversification. The event's promise emphasized the long sought after government support for the arts. The event's dangers resided in its unreality, a seeming disconnect between the concerns of people and their communities, and the national culture that the Center celebrated.

### *Section III: The Performance of Bernstein's Mass*

Despite the fact that the Center's elephantine size and celebrity-audience greatly diminished the importance of Bernstein's *Mass* in the evening's festivities, the production's artistic significance spoke across the orchestra pit and beyond the Center's marble fortress. On the front page of *The Post*, a photograph of *Mass* depicted its powerful spectacle in detail. The protagonist, a young priest, knelt on the floor in front of the audience; behind him stood a figure cloaked in flowing garments, with arms raised in

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<sup>272</sup> Charles Farrow, "2000 Tickets Divided for JFK Center Opening," *The Washington Afro-American*, 18 September 1971, 14.

ecstasy. A multitude of aspirants, a chorus of two hundred, surrounded the figure on three sides. Although this image and accompanying commentary did not evoke the piece's essential despair, they did focus public attention on the artistic content that Bernstein had probably intended. The title immediately invoked Kennedy's Catholicism, which the audience would have known even before the curtain opened. The public experiencing the show through the media would have had a similar understanding. The photograph simply clarified the scale and manner in which Bernstein approached his theme.

The photograph and commentary failed, however, to signify the piece's dissident elements. Given Bernstein and his wife's connection to counter-cultural forces in the United States, (i.e., to both the Black Panthers and Vietnam protesters such as Daniel and Philip Berrigan), the media might have expected such elements.<sup>273</sup> Indeed, although reviewers mentioned the dissident elements, they failed to acknowledge the iconic significance of those moments. Hence, those moments were emotionally important, but lacked an accompanying intellectual framework. The media-watching public who read about the show or listened to commentary on the radio or television would not have been able to organize the dissident elements into a coherent whole because media referenced those elements too infrequently, offering only glimpses of protest in cryptic prose.

In *Mass*, Bernstein addressed the escalating culture war taking place in the United States at the time. Most of the media did not, however, represent the production in that light. Bernstein hoped to reconcile the difficulties that so many young people had with national institutions like the church and the federal government. The Latin liturgy of the

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<sup>273</sup> See note 50 regarding Bernstein's meeting with Father Philip Berrigan when the Father was imprisoned with several other peace workers "for allegedly plotting to kidnap Henry Kissinger."

Roman Mass, sung by a formal chorus, propels the script's action. Bernstein and his writing associate, Stephen Schwartz, interrupt the ritualistic chorus by injecting English epistles sung by a secondary chorus. These epistles, some of which allude directly to Father Berrigan's recent imprisonment, speak of the social issues currently tearing at the fabric of the nation's power and status. Initially adored by his followers, the young priest "is attacked and tormented by those he thought were his people.... He hurls the consecrated sacrament of bread and wine to the floor and, in the words of the score, goes 'berserk.' It is a terrifying moment that produces a physical shudder in many who have seen it."<sup>274</sup> What Bernstein asks for is a sacrilege against the altar. The young priest is "ripping up the altar cloths and waving them like streamers in the air. He then leaps up on the altar and dances on it."<sup>275</sup> Bernstein punctuates that moment, which is designed as a gesture of protest in solidarity with people who question institutional authority, with a long, on-stage silence. A single flute eventually breaks the silence. In that silence the piece reaches beyond the stage. As Irving Lowens of *The Star* wrote: "... one becomes aware of the fact that the singers, dancers and players on the stage are, in reality, the surrogates for the people who are not on the stage, for the now people, the flower-children, the soul-brothers, the squares, the protesters, the conformists, for all those who are seeking answers to troubling questions."<sup>276</sup> During the second preview, the silence "was tense and too much for some of the Pols [politicians]" to handle.<sup>277</sup> They applauded

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<sup>274</sup> Paul Hume, "Bernstein's Mass: 'A Reaffirmation of Faith,'" *Washington Post*, 9 September 1971, 1(A).

<sup>275</sup> Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Schwartz, *Mass: a sound recording* (New York: Columbia Masterworks, 1972).

<sup>276</sup> Irving Lowen, "'Mass Trembles on the Edge of Greatness,'" *Evening Star*, 9 September 1971, 1(B).

before the flute could signal the continuation of the action. Such a confused reaction was indicative of the reception that *Mass* received from both celebrities and non-celebrities.

Bernstein himself undercut the more dissident elements of *Mass*, however. In the program notes, he states that the intention of the piece is to “communicate as directly and universally as I can a reaffirmation of faith.”<sup>278</sup> Such a declaration by the author reinforced the iconic weight of the church as a religious institution, not only on the individual but also collectively on the public. In that world, the Roman mass embodies a religious communion between human beings and a deity. When the celebrant priest ritualistically performs the Catholic mass, he reaffirms his subservience to God. When he later commits sacrilege against the altar, he experiences a failure of faith. By reinforcing the idea of faith in the program notes, the failure of faith becomes a failure of the individual to live up to the divine aspirations established by the deity and, thus, by the Church’s institutional authority. Liberation theologians like Father Berrigan asserted the opposite, however; that breakdowns in the social order were not caused by individuals failing to uphold their faith in God, but by the failure of religious institutions to promote societies that manifested the religious beliefs. By asserting a reaffirmation of faith, Bernstein contradicts the effect of the action’s conclusion. The priest “tears off his vestments and throws them to the crowd.”<sup>279</sup> As he descends into the pit, the chorus sings, “How easily things get broken;” *Mass* ends not with an affirmation of faith, but with a declaration that institutions have failed to address people’s doubts and needs.

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<sup>277</sup> Clare Crawford, “Pols take over JFK Center Second Preview, *Washington Daily News*, 8 September 1971, 30.

<sup>278</sup> The Program for *Mass: a Theater Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers*, 10.

<sup>279</sup> *Mass*: a sound recording.

*Mass*' affirmation comes not within the context of the dramatic action; rather, after the climax, which is essentially one of despair, Bernstein returns to the ritualistic meta-text that effectively frames the young priest's story—the Catholic mass itself. The boys' chorus initiates the touch of peace; they enter the auditorium and begin passing the kiss.<sup>280</sup> Such a resolution fulfills Bernstein's own prognostication when he was reported to have said "that he hoped his *Mass* would prompt everyone to hug and kiss each other."<sup>281</sup> This ritualistic act could not have pleased the media more as they depicted the Center with abundant photographs of audience members kissing and hugging one another. As Mrs. Zachary Fisher, wife of a multimillionaire New York builder, said of opening night, "Where else would you get a chance to sit next to such as Gregory Peck or Senator William Fulbright ... John Ehrlichman ... H. R. Haldeman ... or former Attorney. Gen. Ramsey Clark and get a kiss?"<sup>282</sup> As the kiss moved through the crowd, many probably echoed Mrs. Fisher's sentiments; yet, although the "touch of peace" returned the audience to the mass, it did not return them to ideas presented by Bernstein's *Mass*. The story's young priest had descended into the pit with the temple in ruins; the dramatic ground was not prepared for affirmation. Gestures of love were effective imagery and offered, perhaps, an astute counterpoint to earlier torment, but they failed to resolve the conflict between social upheaval and traditional Catholicism refusal to address pressing social issues. Hence, although the "touch of peace" resisted critical debate, it rendered political affiliations stark, particularly if, as rumors persisted,

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<sup>280</sup> The touch of peace was reintroduced into the Catholic liturgy in 1970. The congregation turns to each other and kiss or offer another sign of peace.

<sup>281</sup> "Hugging, Kissing After the Mass," *Washington Post*, 9 September 1971, 2(C).

<sup>282</sup> Ymelda Dixon, "The Audience," *Evening Star*, 9 September 1971 1, 4 (C).

“Republicans shake hands; Democrats kiss.”<sup>283</sup> Regardless, it left *Mass* singular, universal, and unsatisfying; or as *The Star* stated, “Ecumenical.”<sup>284</sup>

#### *Section IV: In Conclusion, Inauguration as Aberration*

Although the production of *Mass* did not elicit favorable responses from the media’s many critics, the event’s “total theater” provoked a slew of commentary about the nation’s cultural and political climate. On the national CBS-TV news the following evening Eric Sevareid referenced the father-figure absent from that Wednesday premiere, President Richard M. Nixon. The following morning at noon Nixon addressed the nation. Sevareid drew the two events together, vividly depicting the larger culture war, a national spectacle fitting for the opening of a National Cultural Center.

The Washington season, political and cultural, has opened with two bangs: Leonard Bernstein, the musician, hired a hall Wednesday night—the newest hall in town—to get his message across; Richard Nixon, the President, hired a hall—one of the oldest in town—yesterday, to get his message across.

This double header neatly polarized philosophy, art and style. It was radical-chic ... it was conservative-drab.... The squares were under the round Pantheon; the with-it people inside the squarish Parthenon.

Mr. Nixon informs politics with religion; Mr. Bernstein informs religion with politics. Mr. Bernstein’s performance was accepted as art; Mr. Nixon’s as strategy....

It was the Kennedy mystique that put Broadway and personality-worship into high politics, so perhaps it was appropriate that the new Kennedy Center would open with Mr. Bernstein, who put Broadway and personality-worship into the higher reaches of music.

Both Mr. Nixon and Mr. Bernstein evoked past Americas....

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> “An Ecumenical Opening,” 1(A).

The President sounded as if the war is all over; the composer sounded as if it will get worse, everywhere, if we don't watch out.

Each had a prescription to offer. The composer said the way to get that generation of peace and pleasure is for everybody to start loving everybody else. The President said the way is for everybody to get to work.<sup>285</sup>

In the end, Washington returned to what it did, and continues to do, best—politick. Perhaps by ignoring the artistic event of that inauguration, the media knew and accepted what theater critics refuse to acknowledge: Art is, for the most part, redundant. It displays political ideology already imbedded in the dresses and the shoes, in the cigars and the bow-ties, in the kisses and in the handshakes of every member of the audience. As such the artistic object is not so much instrumental in the motifs it presents as it is emblematic of a larger set of motifs operating in culture of its producer.

Of course, the war that Severeid connects to both men is really two wars. Nixon's war referred to the conflict in Vietnam whereas Bernstein's war was between two conflicting cultural trends. On the one hand, a rising rebellion of youthful energy and institutional mistrust; on the other, a profound faith in institutional legitimacy rooted, if not in the manifest destiny of the United States' past, then at least in the institution's memory. Although nationally the NEA had operated for several years, the government's influence on the arts had gone relatively unnoticed by the public; for the NEA worked primarily in coordination with preexisting arts organizations. The government's hand remained invisible, acknowledged in program notes or donor lists, but profoundly invisible. The Center's inauguration represented, however, an open and enduring statement that the government recognized the power of performance to shape culture and

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<sup>285</sup> Eric Severeid, "CBS-TV news," 8 September 1971, later printed 9 September 1971 in *The Washington Daily News*, 2(A).

to galvanize and influence public opinion. Oddly, however, the performance that mattered most was not that of *Mass* but that of the mass media that performed its simulation for the larger public. Thus, the service rendered by *Mass* at the opening of the Kennedy Center was somewhat reminiscent of a renaissance festival where “the role of arts and letters in the service of the State” has rarely been more in evidence.<sup>286</sup> In such a situation, the role played by Bernstein was more similar to that of a court functionary than that of an artist. He performed a necessary role in the inaugural event of a supermonument; the requirements of that icon overshadowed the art he created for it as well as the art’s desired intent.

In fact, all the particulars—whether ideological, matters of faith, or familial relations—seemed to disappear in the colossal spectacle of the Kennedy Center’s national spotlight. The biggest particular of all was the Washington community itself. If the openings of the Kennedy Center, Ford’s Theater, and the Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts were suppose to introduce the national public to the idea of public funding for the arts, then the Center’s Italian marble and celebrity parties rendered that idea absurd at best. More likely, it is tempting to speculate that at that moment the concept of public funding for the arts looked to the general public more like an elitist Theater of Commerce than the National ever did. As for local Theaters of the Public, which had only recently begun to receive public funding for their programs, the Center’s opening overshadowed their theatrical activities, rendering them temporarily invisible.

The inaugural event marked a transformational phase in the Center’s identity, a threshold between a pattern of private decision making and the Center’s first public act.

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<sup>286</sup> Roy Strong, *Splendor at Court: Renaissance Spectacles and the Theater of Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 16.

Between the realm of private ideals and the world of public pressures and realpolitik lay a chasm of practicalities and compromises. In the Center's case, those practicalities and compromises included everything from changes in the local and national economy to fluctuations in federal Washington's political will. Those changes and fluctuations altered the original meaning of the Center and its inaugural event, but only marginally. For such changes in meaning only happened after years of repeated challenges to the Center's initial articulation of identity and only within parameters established by the event's architectural design. In other words, the inaugural event opened an architectural space of enormous import to Washington and the nation. The Center's spatial design and that design's place in the social space of Greater Washington represented a legacy more lasting than that of initial, and even subsequent, programming. Future aesthetic and ideological choices affected that initial meaning, which was embedded in social space, but they could not eliminate it. The meaning would endure as long as the stones themselves.

## Chapter Five

### THE ROOTS OF WASHINGTON'S THEATER OF THE PUBLIC

Although the Kennedy Center brought attention to the idea of government support for the arts and for theater, an emergent Theater of the Public existed prior to the Center's opening. By 1970 almost a dozen Theaters of the Public had sprung up in Washington, and even though most of those organizations did not survive the decade, their struggle to promote theater and performance at the local level proved vital to the theaters that followed.<sup>287</sup> Significantly, however, the roots of Theater of the Public in Washington did not begin with the establishment of the NEA; rather, those roots extended into the late 1940s with the founding of two uniquely independent Washington theaters: Theater Lobby (TL, 1948-1973) and Arena Stage (1950-present). Even though TL was amateur and Arena was professional, their approach to performance offered Washingtonians a different kind of theatrical experience. With TL's small 75-seat house and Arena's in-the-round seating, both theaters changed the traditional relationship between actor and audience, offering an experience of intimacy that performance at commercial or community venues could not approximate. In the late 1950s, another theater, the Washington Theater Club (WTC, 1957-1973) joined TL and Arena, offering Washingtonians yet another kind of intimate performance experience. New play development was WTC's specialty, later gaining the company national recognition.

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<sup>287</sup> In addition to the three Theaters of the Public examined in this chapter (Theater Lobby, Arena Stage, and Washington Theater Club), between 1967 and 1970 two government-sponsored theaters were founded (Ford's Theater and Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts), six small theaters (The Folger Theater Group, Saint Albans Repertory Theater, the Metropolitan Experimental Theater, Polemic Theater, Georgetown Workshop Theater, and the Catacombs Theater), and four identity theaters (Back Alley Theater, Earth Onion, the Black American Theater, and Everyman Street Theater).

Together, these three theaters illustrated the kind of eclecticism that became the trademark of Washington's Theater of the Public in the 1970s.

This chapter explores the development of this trio of theaters and their relationship with the Washington media and public. Because TL, Arena, and WTC operated outside the existing Theaters of Commerce and Community dichotomy and were anomalies in the period, the chapter investigates them as individual organizations. Their status as idiosyncratic outsiders was heightened by the media, which tended to focus on their artistic directors—particularly in the cases of Arena and WTC. Section One deals with Theater Lobby's development as an amateur theater in the heart of Washington's new managerial district. Section Two focuses on Arena Stage, both its origins as a Theater of Commerce operating in Washington's downtown and its eventual transformation to not-for-profit status in a newly developed southwest Washington neighborhood. Section Three examines WTC's rapid rise to national prominence in a small building off Dupont Circle and its equally sudden demise at a larger, new location just a few blocks from the recently opened Kennedy Center. Section Four summarizes the traits common to all three forerunners as well as essential differences between them.

### *Section I: Theater Lobby: the Original Pocket Theater*<sup>288</sup>

Although Mary Goldwater and Mary-Averett Seelye founded Theater Lobby in 1948, it was not until 1950, when the theater moved into a small carriage house south of Dupont Circle, that the company established an independent theatrical organization. The space was a godsend, allowing the troupe and their dedicated public to build a coherent

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<sup>288</sup> The *Washington Post* called TL a "pocket-theater" because of its unusually small size.

organization at an identifiable, thriving location. In the post World War II era, a new downtown north-northwest of the White House emerged. The influx of private sector companies that wished to establish offices in close proximity to the agencies of the federal government drove construction. As the size of the government expanded and budgets increased, Washington became increasingly associated with private sector interests, which were driving the expansion of the lobbying industry. TL's home was in the midst of this development, off the main thoroughfare of Rhode Island Avenue and enshrouded by adjacent architecture.

The company's location and spatial affiliation differentiated its amateurism from that of Theaters of Community. As discussed in Chapter Three, Theaters of Community were usually neighborhood-centric and bounded by geographic indicators. Those theaters in more commercial or managerial sectors of the city were sponsored by larger organizations like churches; those few community theaters that were independent achieved that status after years of struggle. TL established its independent, non-residential affiliation immediately. At its location in the city's new downtown, TL could attract a theater-going public that was motivated by social and aesthetic interests, rather than neighborhood identification. As a result, TL played a crucial role in the early shaping of Washington's small theater movement.

In its early years, TL became known for its liberal social agenda, particularly in relation to racial issues. In contrast to most facilities in Washington during the late 1940s and early 1950s, TL's company was integrated. For that reason, the company could not use private auditoriums or public schools. Before finding the carriage house in an alley off St. Matthew's Court, TL "had to be content with appearances in community centers

and progressive churches.”<sup>289</sup> African American soldiers returning from Europe after World War II found a segregated Washington intolerable, however; soon civil rights activists began contesting status quo race relations both locally and nationally. One of the first lawsuits brought by activists in the District of Columbia was against the National Theater’s policy barring African Americans from the theater.<sup>290</sup> Because of the National’s symbolic weight within local theatrical geography, its actions profoundly affected public understanding not only of theater but also of broader social issues, such as race relations. As TL’s founders discovered, many of the city’s performance venues were informed by an equally segregationist policy. In 1948, when the National received an injunction to desegregate, the National’s producers elected to cease theatrical production and opened the theater as a movie house instead. By so doing, the National’s producers left Washington without a Theater of Commerce downtown, thereby declaring that no theater was better than an integrated one. Their action challenged all Washingtonians to accept a segregationist’s vision of their city. Although there is no evidence to suggest that TL was founded as a direct response to the National’s decision, when TL adopted a policy of integration, the public might have assumed this was the case.

Indeed, TL’s idiosyncrasies were both social and aesthetic. On the one hand, the theater’s name immediately brought to mind the recently burgeoning lobbying industry; and, indeed, Mary Goldwater and Mary-Averett Seelye named the company “Theater

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<sup>289</sup> Terry Catchpole, “We have the Freedom to Do Whatever the Hell We Want,” *Washingtonian* vol. 6, number, 3 December 1970, 110.

<sup>290</sup> Although the National Theater did not specifically state that African Americans were not allowed into the theater, in 1947 two African Americans, who had tickets, tried to gain entry and were denied access, instigating the lawsuit.

Lobby” because of the space’s “size and also because in Washington ‘lobby’ is a good word to use,” if the aim is to influence the decision-makers, the political elites, and their friends and allies.<sup>291</sup> On the other hand, TL’s repertoire of avant-garde and absurdist scripts suggests that it did not seek a broad public, but was content to operate as a sequestered, 75-seat Art Theater for aesthetically and socially adventurous theater-goers. Its location bolstered this perception: overshadowed by recently constructed high-rise office complexes and the looming enormity of its neighbor, St. Matthew’s Cathedral, TL’s carriage house theater was invisible to most foot traffic. Even so, its front doors abutted the alley, and its colorful marquee indicated to anyone within eyeshot of the theater’s edifice that a performance company was inside. In other words, TL projected its social and aesthetic vision despite the fact that its space was small and physically invisible.

Nevertheless, TL’s mission was not specifically social. As Mary-Avert Seelye reflected years later, the theater’s purpose was “to bring actors and audiences together, ‘to respond to theater as an art.’”<sup>292</sup> The troupe’s integrationist’s policy might have augmented that aesthetic vision, but the policy did not reside at the theater’s core. Hence, it was not surprising that TL inaugurated the new space with Robert McEnroe’s American comedy *The Silver Whistle*.<sup>293</sup> Although the script could have been performed with an integrated cast, its content would not have addressed the larger issue of segregation. That production, however, was then followed by Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone*.

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<sup>291</sup> Marvin Caplan, “Remembering Theater Lobby’s Days in the Spotlight,” *Washington Post*, 4 December 1986, 3.

<sup>292</sup> “Remembering Theater Lobby’s Days in the Spotlight,” 3.

<sup>293</sup> This Broadway comedy was produced in 1948. The script tells the story of Wilfred Tasbinder, a 47-year-old hobo, who rejuvenates the members of an old folks’ home by posing as one of its members.

Originally produced during World War II in Vichy France, this script contrasted sharply with *The Silver Whistle*. Over the next twenty-two years, a combination of texts from the American and European avant-garde would become a TL trademark.

Although TL steadily built a reputation in Washington as a theater for the serious-minded theater-going public, it was not until the company premiered Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in April 1958 that the theater cemented that distinction. Over the first seven years at its carriage house location, TL's repertoire consisted of such difficult plays as Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, Euripides' *Electra*, Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Anouilh's *Ring 'Round the Moon*, Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, and even Joyce's *Exiles*. Yet, the major press did not review its productions until the presentation of *Godot*. By 1958, Burt Lahr and E. G. Marshall's audio version of Gogo and Didi had already been published; thus, the sophisticated theater-going public was aware of *Godot*'s challenge to conventional definitions of drama. As Richard Coe noted after attending TL's production of *Godot*—his first viewing of the play in a live performance—“I need not now feel hopelessly outcast at the mention of Beckett's contribution.”<sup>294</sup> TL soon produced the area premiere of Beckett's *Happy Days* as well. Arena Stage and Alan Schnieder soon took the Beckett mantle from TL; nevertheless, the fact that an obscure amateur company introduced the internationally famous playwright to Washington not only elevated TL into a unique class of local theater, but also indicated to the average Washingtonian that a theater's professionalism and its ability to contribute to the cultural life of the city were not synonymous. Indeed, TL demonstrated that a committed amateur theater could take

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<sup>294</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Theater Lobby Offers *Godot*,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 15 April 1958, 25(A).

risks that the professional could not afford, and that those risks contributed significantly to the city's artistic growth.

Because of the diminutive size of its space, TL practically eliminated the aesthetic distance between performers and audience, making the carriage house theater the first identifiable small theater in the Washington area in the post war years. TL's space accommodated a twenty by twenty-five foot stage surrounded on three sides by seventy-five folding chairs. The aesthetic power of the space was enormous, especially for audiences accustomed to the grandiose hall at the National, where actors' bodies were viewed in miniature and their faces were all but indiscernible. Numerous reviews of TL's productions during the late 1950s and early 1960s mentioned the "intimate playhouse" and made a particular point of the close relationship between actor and audience. For example, a production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* had to be specially adapted to make its large cast and multiple scenes fit into TL's "intimate room." Richard Coe said that the director, Larry Gleason, had to scale down the play and "restrain its passions. The effect is rather like looking at the play through the wrong end of the opera glasses."<sup>295</sup> To be sure, the intimate playhouse was not new, but for Washington's theater-going public experiencing the details of human behavior within an environment of subdued emotions was unique. Even someone as theatrically savvy as Coe took note of TL's construction of an extremely intimate aesthetic space where even "a viewer's whispered comment can be heard easily by the cast."<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Lobby Adapts O'Neill Deftly," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 5 July 1962, 19(B).

<sup>296</sup> Mary Ann Seawell, "An Actress on Stage and Another in the Audience," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, 15 September 1967, 9(E).

In the absence of public funding, TL seems to have operated throughout the 1950s and 1960s on ticket sales and moneys from the artists' own pockets. The theater's reputation steadily grew, however, until TL became known not only as a place where actors and audience could "respond to theater as an art," but also as a space "where the avant-garde has had the unusual distinction of becoming traditional."<sup>297</sup> TL's reputation for experimental work strengthened during the 1960s, with productions of Ronald Ribman's *Harry Noon and Night*, Fernando Arrabal's *Automobile Graveyard*, Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, Jules Feiffer's *The White House Murder Case*, and others. In fact, rarely did a production that was not cutting-edge by Washington's standards appear on TL's stage. In a single year they

presented three noteworthy American plays: Joseph Heller's *We Bombed in New Haven*, Lanford Wilson's *Rimers of Eldritch*, and Jean-Claude Van Itallie's *America, Hurrah!* And all on a budget of \$14,000 a year, on a tiny stage that lapped at the spectators' feet and with a company of actors who worked regular jobs all day.<sup>298</sup>

After the Washington media finally accepted TL's iconoclastic identity within Washington's theatrical landscape, the public began to realize that despite the company's amateurism the theater occupied a unique position in the city's theatrical community. Not only did its location in the new downtown defy Theater of Community's geographic norms, but also a consistent series of positive reviews elevated the quality of TL's productions in the public eye. Heightened visibility along with the company's avant-garde repertoire challenged the public to redefine TL's amateurism in aesthetic terms. Unlike Theater of Community, TL's function was not entirely social. Its company of

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<sup>297</sup> An *Evening Star* reporter quoted in "We have the Freedom," 111.

<sup>298</sup> "Remembering Theatre Lobby," 3.

actors, directors, designers, and technicians had an aesthetic vision to which they were committed.

TL's committed amateurism made it a profoundly Washington theater; for even though the theater could boast that George C. Scott had once acted on its stage under an assumed name, the company's actors represented a broad cross section of the city's workers.<sup>299</sup> Its actors were lawyers, government workers, store clerks, housepainters, secretaries, and the like. Its amateur status was not viewed as a negative, even though the press categorized the small company as a community theater. As the 1960s drew to a close and the Free Speech Movement began to affect the nation's attitude toward censorship and capitalism, the media began to view the company's amateurism as a sign of its commitment to artistic liberty. An article in the December 1970 edition of the *Washingtonian* defiantly declared, "We have the Freedom to Do Whatever the Hell We Want."<sup>300</sup> The headline's crude vernacular could be interpreted as a critique of the company, as an indication of its libertinism: a small group of committed amateur theater artists with an equally small, yet "integral audience" openly flouts its anti-conventional, anti-establishment socio-aesthetic vision in the shadows of one of Washington's largest Cathedrals.<sup>301</sup> Others, however, could interpret the headline as an expression of the company's artistic freedom. In another headline in the *Washington Post*, the writer

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<sup>299</sup> While employed in Washington in the army, George C. Scott played the father in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* under the name Vic Scott. "Remembering Theatre Lobby," 3.

<sup>300</sup> Terry Catchpole, 110.

<sup>301</sup> Richard Schechner draws a distinction between the "accidental" audience, which goes to the theater because it happens to see an advertisement for the play and an "integral" audience, which attends a specific theater because it sees itself as part of an artistic community. *Performance Theory*, Revised and Expanded (Routledge: New York, 1988), 194-196.

touted TL's ability to take aim "at Society's Conscience."<sup>302</sup> Although different in nature, both headlines indicate that by 1970 TL had become an icon of Washington's small theaters.

After the opening of the Kennedy Center and the proliferation of theater companies throughout Washington during the 1970s, TL found itself increasingly in competition with other small theaters. Not only were more Theaters of the Public recruiting from the small pool of talented, available amateur actors in Washington, but those same theaters were also competing for available space. In June 1973, when the company lost its lease, the leadership elected to close the theater rather than continue. TL had become deeply connected to its tiny theater space, its amateurism, its avant-garde texts, and its integral theater-going public. There, shrouded by the spires of St. Matthew's Cathedral and squeezed among the office high-rises of Washington, the absurd had become traditional. As Stan Page, the theater's long time manager and treasurer said: "The kind of plays we want, serious plays, not those little sketches that are in vogue, are not being written."<sup>303</sup> Without the texts that provided TL's intellectual *raison d'être*, and without the space that had become an artistic haven at the heart of the theater's mission, the will to continue must have simply vanished and the Theater Lobby closed.

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<sup>302</sup> Joan Kramer, "Aiming at Society's Conscience," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 14 August 1969, 11(D).

<sup>303</sup> Richard L. Coe, "A Theater's Survival Instinct," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 1 February 1973, 15(C).

## *Section II: Arena Stage, Washington's Flagship Theater of the Public*

In contrast to Theater Lobby's lack of physical presence and media invisibility, from its founding by Zelda Fichandler and Edward Mangum in 1950 Arena Stage enjoyed an enormous public presence in Washington.<sup>304</sup> Like TL, Arena took advantage of the closing of the National Theater; Arena not only filled the void left by the historic theater, but also became second only to the National (after the landmark theater reopened in 1952) in local prestige and media exposure. Outside the greater metropolitan area, however, Arena soon became second to none as an icon of Washington's theatrical identity. During the 1950s, Arena operated as a commercial enterprise, first occupying the old Hippodrome Theater at the corner of Ninth Street and New York Avenue in downtown Washington, across the street from one of Theater of Community's most successful companies, the Mount Vernon Players.<sup>305</sup> Though very successful as a commercial theater, Arena's 247-seat house could not sustain an Equity company. After a short tenure at the "hospitality hall" of the Heurich Brewery in Foggy Bottom—the site now occupied by the Kennedy Center—in 1961 Arena Stage moved into a newly constructed theater located near the vortex of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, in one of Washington's oldest southwest neighborhoods. At that time, the theater made the transition to not-for-profit status in order to become eligible for millions of dollars in grants from the Ford and the Rockefeller Foundations and to avoid the tax liability that ownership of its own facility would necessarily entail. At its southwest location, Arena continued to grow, completing the construction of an adjoining theater, The Kreeger, in

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<sup>304</sup> In more recent literature, Arena has included Thomas Fichandler as a co-founder.

<sup>305</sup> The Hippodrome was a movie house before it was converted into an arena style theater.

1971. With state-of-the-art arena and proscenium stages, Arena was able to offer Washingtonians a spectrum of aesthetic experiences as well as a “touch of showmanship, sense of drama, excitement and anticipation.”<sup>306</sup>

Upon its founding, Arena’s repertoire established the company as a different kind of Theater of Commerce. Not only did Arena hire its own actors and produce its own shows, but also its script selection did not mirror the Broadway fare Washingtonians associated with commercial theater. Arena opened with Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*, a script identified with the classical canon produced by the area’s University theaters. The fact that Arena’s co-founders, Mangum and Fichandler, had recently come from George Washington and Catholic Universities only strengthened the association.<sup>307</sup> Following *She Stoops to Conquer*, Arena produced a mixture of classic and contemporary scripts: in the first season, the theater presented Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night*, John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, Elmer Rice’s *Adding Machine*, John Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, Nikolai Gogol’s *The Inspector General*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*—all contemporary classics; and three scripts that had recently been produced on other American stages, Tennessee William’s *The Glass Menagerie* and Edwin Justus Mayer’s *Children of Darkness* and *The Firebrand*. The remainder of Arena’s first year consisted of E. P. Conkle’s *The Delectable Judge*, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, Moliere’s

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<sup>306</sup> Wolf Von Eckardt, “Two Architects’ Dramatic Art,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 12 December 1970, 2 (C).

<sup>307</sup> Zelda Fichandler had recently graduated from Catholic University while Edward Mangum had, for several years, been the director of the George Washington Players at George Washington University.

*The School for Wives*, Percy MacKaye's *The Scarecrow*, and Conrad Aikens and Diana Hamilton's *Mr. Arcularis*.<sup>308</sup>

With an initial season of seventeen shows produced with professional actors, Arena stormed onto Washington's theatrical landscape. The theater's unique identity rested not only on its repertoire's literary roots, but also on staging in-the-round.<sup>309</sup> At a practical level, arena staging reduced the need for the elaborate and expensive sets that audiences had come to expect at commercial theaters. Thus, Arena's budgets were greatly reduced. On the other hand, arena staging allowed the theater to create an aesthetic experience that was unique among Washington area theaters. Although not as intimate as TL's 75-seat thrust arrangement, Arena's auditorium brought audience members into visceral contact with both the actors and action of a large-scale production. To be sure, a theater-going public that had long been accustomed to proscenium staging could have rejected the new aesthetic. In an entertainment world increasingly dominated by cinema, however, a theatrical experience that allowed audiences to come into close contact with live performers must have appealed emotionally to the public. In combination with the repertoire's literary merits, that appeal attracted over 70,000 audience members to Arena's more than 290 performances in its first year alone.<sup>310</sup>

Although Arena immediately earned a positive reputation as a theater, the human demands that maintaining a commercial operation placed on its small artistic and managerial staff were enormous. The theater's founding financial backers numbered a

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<sup>308</sup> Conkle's *The Delectable Judge* was a world premiere.

<sup>309</sup> Margo Jones' was using in-the-round staging to great effect at her regional theater in Houston, which she opened in 1947.

<sup>310</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Ed, Mary, and Zelda Bring Theater-in-Round to Life," *Washington Post*, 12 August 1951, 1(L).

mere forty, all of whom were reimbursed after the first year.<sup>311</sup> To accomplish that task, Arena's production team mounted seventeen shows between its opening on 16 August 1950 and the season's completion on 3 September 1951.<sup>312</sup> Of the seventeen productions, Mangum directed ten, Fichandler, seven, and guest director, Alan Schneider, one.<sup>313</sup> Although the theater had a permanent staff of actors and technicians, many of whom had "come to Arena Stage via the stages of other cities," the theater also jobbed in many actors for particular shows. Arena employed local technicians and actors as well, several even coming from the Mount Vernon Players across the street.<sup>314</sup> The stress of mounting large cast shows every three weeks must have reduced the polish on each production. After directing five of Arena's first six shows in its second season, Mangum left the theater to assume the leadership of Hawaii's community theater.<sup>315</sup> If the pressure had been intense prior to his departure, it must have felt overwhelming to the young Fichandler, who was now the sole head of the organization.

Overwhelmed or not, Fichandler guided the theater through the succeeding years, which were marked by enormous success. Attendance increased, so much so that the theater was able to reduce the number of shows each season. It extended production runs, which in turn reduced the pressure on the actors and staff because new shows did not have to be produced as frequently. In fact, during the next three seasons, Arena mounted only twenty-eight productions, or approximately nine shows a year. Even with

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<sup>311</sup> Program for *The Doctor's Dilemma*, 22 October 1957, 3. Arena Stage Archives.

<sup>312</sup> Arena remounted *She Stoops to Conquer*—the season's opener—at season's end.

<sup>313</sup> Mangum and Fichandler co-directed Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

<sup>314</sup> Program from *She Stoops to Conquer*, 16 August 1950, Arena Stage Archives.

<sup>315</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Dark of the Moon Has Pleasing Cast," *Washington Post*, 2 May 1952, 4(B).

fewer shows, during its first four seasons Arena played “nearly 1,500 performances for over 250,000 people.”<sup>316</sup>

Much of Arena’s theater-going public came from the city’s thriving white-collar class, and many were Washingtonians with clout. From the beginning, the company courted people with economic and political influence in the nation’s capital. At the end of the first season, Arena presented a gala performance “before a houseful of District and international officials.”<sup>317</sup> In addition, Arena’s theater-going public did not just consist of Washingtonians. As Richard Coe remarked at the close of the theater’s fourth season: “The group is just beginning to enjoy a national reputation and is, indeed, on the agenda of all theater tourists who come to the Capital of the United States.”<sup>318</sup> Although Coe might have been engaging in a bit of wishful thinking, the fact that Arena’s rise to prominence was so immediate and profound indicated the degree to which the young company had tapped into an unfulfilled need in the Washington area for more meaningful professional theater.

Ironically, during the theater’s early years the perception persisted in the media that Arena was not a fully professional theater. Although the theater operated commercially, because it did not fit the commercial/community paradigm, neither the critics nor the theater-going public knew how to understand Arena’s identity. Even Coe, a critic who recognized the accomplishments of the theater, undercut his praise with

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<sup>316</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Happy Birthday, Dear Arena Stage,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 17 August 1954, 18.

<sup>317</sup> “Ed, Mary, and Zelda Bring Theater-in-Round to Life,” 1(L).

<sup>318</sup> “Happy Birthday, Dear Arena Stage,” 18

frequent references to Arena as a community theater.<sup>319</sup> In other words, Arena was *not* Broadway and, hence, to many of the critics and to a majority of the public, was not fully professional. Because of its local roots, the company remained associated with Theater of Community for many years in spite of its success as a professional, repertory theater.

During its first five seasons Arena's reputation and public support grew so much that, by 1955, the company began looking for new space. Not only was Arena limited by a year-to-year lease of the Hippodrome Theater, which made renovations and improvements unwise, but also Arena's 247-seat auditorium made making payroll an extreme burden, even with sold-out performances. In addition, as mentioned in Chapter Two, Washington's downtown was in flux as racial demographics shifted dramatically following World War II. Arena's predominantly white audience was moving to the suburbs or to the city's more upscale neighborhoods. As racial tensions escalated locally and nationally, trips downtown decreased. At the end of the 1955 season, the theater went dark; it stayed closed until November 1956, when it reopened in the renovated 500-seat Christian Heurich Brewery at 26<sup>th</sup> and D Street N.W.

Although many of Arena's most integral supporters probably followed the company to its new location on the outskirts of Foggy Bottom, the location's relative isolation from other kinds of nightlife reduced foot-traffic and made the new site less than ideal for the cultivation of theatrical culture.<sup>320</sup> As a result, not long after the theater opened at its new space, Zelda Fichandler began investigating the possibility of constructing a new theater space for Arena. The Ford Foundation announced a new

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<sup>319</sup> During Arena's second year of operations, for example, Coe critiqued the theater saying that it was "learning what a *community theater* can and cannot do." Richard L. Coe, "Ed, Mary, and Zelda Bring Theater-in-Round to Life," 1 (L). Italics are mine.

<sup>320</sup> During the 1970s the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts would make a similar discovery.

theater initiative in 1958; under the terms of this initiative, the foundation offered millions of dollars to successful regional theaters so that they could develop a more professional infrastructure. The Rockefeller Foundation soon joined the Ford Foundation, which would make the creation of a regional theater network possible.

Arena's rapid rise to prominence made it a likely candidate for national foundation grants; not only had the theater produced successful shows but it had also cultivated many of the nation's cultural movers and shakers. For Fichandler, the primary question facing Arena was not whether the theater could garner the resources to support a new space, but where such a venue should be built. With the old downtown in a state of decline and the new downtown dominated by high-rise offices and a small number of commercial venues, neither was considered a prime location. Fortunately for Fichandler, a new federally directed renovation project was in process in Washington's southwest quadrant; and, with Arena's connections to both local and federal politicians, a new in-the-round theater complex might be included in the redevelopment efforts. Although removed from the monumental core and downtown, the site offered Arena, which was now a not-for-profit, a new neighborhood in which the theater could become the nucleus of culture and entertainment.

Arena's new space did more than simply help revive a neglected quadrant of the city, however; the new space earned the theater extraordinary local and national media attention. Over sixty years had passed since the city had witnessed "a new playhouse ... built on a new site."<sup>321</sup> More importantly, according to Frederick Gutheim, *The Post's* architecture critic, Arena's new home was "the only theater in the world ever to be built

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<sup>321</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Arena Stage Heralds a Rich New Era," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 29 October 1961, n.p. Arena Stage Archives.

so directly upon the experiences of a functioning theater company.”<sup>322</sup> Most importantly, a city desperate for economic recovery saw signs of revitalization. *The Post* and its advertisers enthusiastically supported the forces of development, as a multi-paged pullout insert from their 5 September 1961 edition affirmed.<sup>323</sup> Entitled “Progress or Decay?” the articles argued in favor of redevelopment despite the mass displacement of African American families that would result from the action. Articles in the inset used headlines such as “New Southwest Rises from Rubble of Slums” and “Sprawls Future Victims are it Defenders.” One story graphically and hyperbolically depicted life in the neighborhood before the neighborhood was “struck down by bulldozers.... More than half of its thousand families lived in some of the most appalling conditions the Nation’s Capital has ever known, without running water, electricity, heat, or gas.”<sup>324</sup> Another headline was entitled “Today’s Dream Can be Tomorrow’s Reality.” The article emphasized the long term nature of the redevelopment issues in Washington and included a drawing of an early circular-designed National Cultural Center with a still very rural-looking Virginia in the background.

In addition to abundant local coverage, Arena also garnered feature articles from dailies and weeklies from around the country. The new space was reported in *Newsweek*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York World Telegram*, *The New York Times*, and many others. *The Chicago Sun-Times* wrote: “This octagonal descendant of the theater-in-the-round stands alone on a small rise just above the Potomac and in the heart

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<sup>322</sup> Frederich Gutheim, “Arena’s Bold Step in Design,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 29 October 1961, n.p. Arena Stage Archives.

<sup>323</sup> The insert was a compilation of a whole series of pro-development stories published in the paper from 20 August 1961 to 29 August 1961.

<sup>324</sup> Morton Mintz, “New Southwest Rises from Rubble of Slums,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 5 September 1961, 5.

of Washington's new Southwest—the former urban backwater which the capital now is converting into a prime community.”<sup>325</sup> *The New York Times* reported in its headline: “Arena Stage Builds an Admirable Theater—but now its in Business as well as Art.”<sup>326</sup> Of course, as a Theater of Commerce, Arena had always been in business as well as art; but now that it owned its own venue in the heart of a federally sponsored revitalization program, a venue which more than doubled its seating capacity, the pressure to attract new audiences and to build Washington's theater-going public escalated exponentially. The theater was well situated to do just that; for, at that time, Washington had “the second highest percentage of college graduates of any American city, and the largest assembly of psychiatrists” anywhere in the world.<sup>327</sup> Accordingly, after moving into its new locale, its season subscribers immediately grew from 2,300 to 6,400.<sup>328</sup>

The redevelopment project had several important consequences, however, that would haunt Arena's identity for years to come. Because of growth in the District's population during and after World War II, the city experienced terrible shortfalls in low-income housing. Hence, the federal government directed its own redevelopment efforts, bypassing private sector investors. Congress acted and authorized their first project, picking “a poor black neighborhood in the southwest quadrant of the city.”<sup>329</sup> Initially, these efforts were slowed by lawsuits claiming that the federal government did not have

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<sup>325</sup> Ruth Moore, “Capital Gets a Dramatic Showcase: All Eyes Are on the Stage in Washington,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 10 December 1961, n.p. Arena Archive.

<sup>326</sup> Brook Atkinson, “Arena Stage Builds an Admirable Theater—but now its in Business as well as Art,” *New York Times*, 24 October 1961, n.p. Arena Archive.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Attendance Records. Arena Archive.

<sup>329</sup> Stephen J McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 195.

the authority to redevelop communities on its own initiative. In 1952, however, the Supreme Court ruled that Congress' Housing Act of 1949 was indeed constitutional, thus allowing federal officials to move forward with their intention to redevelop, which, of course, included a theater for Arena Stage. Federal officials justified their efforts on the grounds that the community's homes were not only dilapidated and in need of renovations but that they were also "embarrassingly close to national monuments" and "within eyesight of the Washington Channel and the area's [upscale] Waterfront Community."<sup>330</sup>

Arena's image as a center of culture in the Washington area obscured the less positive side of its presence in Southwest. When Atkinson described Arena as "a source of life to the community," he was referring to the community of Greater Washington, not Arena's immediate vicinity: a revitalized neighborhood still haunted by the ghosts of the past. African-Americans who had lived in the area their entire lives did not share the sense of embarrassment about their community; nor did they consider their homes dilapidated, even if they needed extensive repairs. Elaine Barker Todd argued that "although their homes were 'blighted,' the residents were proud to be property owners."<sup>331</sup> In fact, their protests led to the Supreme Court case that delayed the federal government's development efforts for a number of years. Although several Washington agencies explored other sites as possible redevelopment locations, "because the federal officials had the money, their views largely prevailed." The government's actions led to a "radical large-scale clearance [and] relocation of the existing population," which in turn

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<sup>330</sup> Elaine Barker Todd, "Urban Renewal in the Nation's Capital: a History of the Redevelopment Land Agency in Washington, D.C. 1946-1973," Howard University, 1986, 132.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

brought about the “design of a large, new, and different community,” with Arena as the neighborhood's cultural hub.<sup>332</sup> Thus, the theater’s presence in southwest Washington was recognized as a triumph for the company and for urban renewal; amid newly constructed high-rise apartments and upscale commercial establishments, the theater seemed a harbinger of future development.<sup>333</sup> As the eight o’clock curtain opened on Arena’s first night in its new southwest Washington, scores of well-dressed, white citizens paraded from parked cars to the theater’s front doors three or four blocks away. On the other hand, vestiges of one of Washington’s oldest African American communities witnessed this pageant of culture and privilege, with the mostly white theater-goers signifying the larger social issues accompanying development. As a result, racial and class tensions erupted between now property-less African American residents and upscale whites who moved into the neighborhood—permanently as part of the larger gentrification effort, or temporarily as spectators attending Arena’s productions.

Arena’s move to its new location and new space, as well as its transformation to not-for-profit status, had a profound impact on the theater and its identity. Fichandler could not ignore the circumstances of the construction of Arena’s new facilities even if Arena’s integral audience preferred a less contentious repertoire; she wanted to address the issue of race. In an era of social upheaval orchestrated in large measure by the Civil Rights Movement, Arena was the beneficiary of substantial largess apparently at the expense of an impoverished African American community and hundreds of families. Throughout most of the 1960s, Fichandler used the theater as a cultural bridge between

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<sup>332</sup> *Worthy of a National Capital*, 314.

<sup>333</sup> Arena’s second stage, the Kreeger, did not exist until 1971; its third stage, a coffeehouse arrangement, the Old Vat Room, did not open until January 1976.

Washington's white and black communities, both in an attempt to reconcile the circumstances of that generosity and as a way of elevating Arena's mission beyond the purely aesthetic. She experimented with an interracial company, which expressed the city's racial demographics visually. Fichandler's experiment with diverse casts resulted in Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope*, the production that established Arena as a producer on Broadway.<sup>334</sup>

On the other hand, in response to other changes in the cultural environment of the 1960s, Arena took a much more provocative stance with regard to social issues confronting the country. Early in the Vietnam war, during Arena's 1965-1966 season, the company made its stance on the war clear with productions of Joan Littlewood's *Oh What a Lovely War* and John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. In the same year that Arena produced *The Great White Hope* (1967-1968), it also produced two other racially charged scripts, Charles Gordone's *No Place to be Somebody* and Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot*.<sup>335</sup> As the 1960s ended, Washington was at the beginning of a theatrical renaissance. With the Kennedy Center only two years from completion, Arena's efforts to produce a more challenging repertoire intensified, reaching a pinnacle in the 1968-1969 season. Although the theater produced Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Piradello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the remainder of the season consisted of Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*, Peter Weiss' *Marat Sade*, Author Kopit's *Indians*, Rich Cluchey's *The Cage*, and *Jacque Brel is Alive and Living in Paris*.<sup>336</sup> Clearly, from the

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<sup>334</sup> When *The Great White Hope* opened in New York, it marked the first time that a production created by a regional theater had moved to Broadway.

<sup>335</sup> Fugard's drama about South African apartheid was particularly scathing of white privilege.

<sup>336</sup> The full title of Weiss' script is *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*. Rich

beginning of the decade to its close, the ratio of European and contemporary classics to new scripts and more avant-garde productions changed radically, in favor of the new and challenging.

In spite of Arena's relative isolation from other cultural or commercial establishments, as the 1970s began the theater had created a broad audience-base and an international reputation in a neighborhood "where community spirit does not noticeably flourish."<sup>337</sup> Some argued that the theater's production choices were "sound rather than daring;" nonetheless, Arena "filled a void" by presenting a variety of aesthetically sophisticated performances "for a middle-income, college-educated audience."<sup>338</sup> For others, Arena had re-invented itself during the 1960s, establishing the reputation of a theater willing to take chances, produce original work and, on occasion, even employ playwrights-in-residence. Before moving to New York, Washington native Alan Schneider cemented his reputation as a skilled interpreter of Beckett's plays while working at the theater. Daring or not, Arena had demonstrated that it deserved *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson's high praise when he dropped into Washington to pronounce Arena "a first-rate cultural institution" and "a source of life to the community."<sup>339</sup>

Whereas TL became increasingly redundant in the Kennedy Center era, Arena discovered that its more provocative repertoire had pushed the theater's older, more

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Cluchey, the actor who rose to notoriety performing Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin prison, premiered *The Cage* as part of its drama workshop.

<sup>337</sup> Henry Hewes, "Arena Stage: Full Speed Ahead," *MultiMedia*, 27 March 1971, 63.

<sup>338</sup> Meryle Secrest, "Arena Stage: 163 Plays Later," *The Washington Post*, 5 July 1970, 1(K).

<sup>339</sup> Thomas Shales, "Whatever Zelda Wants, Zelda Damn Well Gets: That's Why Arena Stage Is America's Number One Regional Theater," *Washingtonian*, October 1970, 68.

conservative audience too far ideologically and emotionally. The theater's 1970-1971 season included Lawrence and Lee's *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, Stanley R. Greenberg's original *Pueblo*, Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, Peter Barnes' satire *The Ruling Class*, Lorraine Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, Clifford Odet's *Awake and Sing*, Eugene Ionesco's *Wipe-Out Games*, an adaptation entitled *Jack MacGowran in the Works of Samuel Beckett*, and Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*. Although such a repertoire would not be considered provocative by European standards, for Arena and Washington the season affronted the senses, particularly given the company's commitment to interracial casting. As the season concluded, Fichandler admitted that Arena's attempt to transform itself into an agent of social change had proved unsuccessful. In an interview she simply said: "some whites in the audience were dissatisfied with the interracial company."<sup>340</sup> That dissatisfaction caused the strong-willed Fichandler to conclude that her experiment was "too far ahead of its time," and Arena retreat from its progressive social ideas.<sup>341</sup>

An investigation of Arena's correspondence with audience members reveals that the dissatisfaction with the repertoire ranged beyond issues of race. Some audience members had aesthetic concerns or were "puzzled and a bit disturbed that there were many empty seats" for *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, for example.<sup>342</sup> A show occasionally aroused disgust, such as when a subscriber attended *What the Butler Saw* and left "at intermission," because the show was "disgusting and offensive to anyone's

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<sup>340</sup> Judy Harkison, "Black, But Not Bleak, Theater Future," *The Washington Post*, 13 August 1971, 1(B).

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Letter from Walter E. Hager, 25 June 1971. Arena Stage Archive.

intelligence and taste.”<sup>343</sup> Most, however, had an accumulated sense of violation, a visceral reaction to the content of Arena’s repertoire. A person who signed the letter, “A Former Subscriber,” said: “We have been raped ... wiped out by the plague ... tortured by Indians ... castrated ... starved in a confederate prison ... exploited by honkies....”<sup>344</sup> Although the writer did not identify who the “we” was, the sentiments echoed two other writers who castigated Arena’s play selection, saying: “I am tired of listening to plays trying to prove that life is absurd [and] that ideals are obsolete” and “I am fed up too with the anti-war, anti-establishment theme.”<sup>345</sup> Of course, these complaints about Arena’s repertoire never reached public scrutiny, and the racial tension to which Fichandler referred was never mentioned directly in the media’s simulation. Indirectly, however, a vocal sector of Arena’s public felt that the repertoire’s challenge to status quo conceptions of history, human rights, culture, and the Vietnam War was beyond the pale. Although they might be able to sit through productions that demonstrated the comic absurdity of life’s lesser characters, when those productions attacked the fundamental ideals of the American civilization, that vocal sector of Arena’s audience rejected not only the scripts but also the theater that produced them. In other words, Fichandler discovered the limits of “what a community theater can and cannot do”—be it professional or amateur. If Arena was going to prosper, the theater could not move too far ahead of its integral audience. In the 1950s Arena had built its reputation on an aesthetically sound and safe repertoire. In the 1960s both social turmoil and Arena’s

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<sup>343</sup> Letter from Mrs. Baxter B. Cramer, 23 June 1971. Arena Stage Archives.

<sup>344</sup> Unanimous Letter, 9 May 1971. Arena Stage Archives.

<sup>345</sup> Letter signed MLW, 11 May 1971; and Letter signed Mr. Frank Kirby, 8 February 1971. Arena Stage Archives.

move to a neighborhood at the heart of that upheaval challenged the theater to speak to the issues, and the company succeeded in attracting a more progressively oriented theater-going public. As the National discovered with *Hair*, however, the city's theater-going public was split along ideological lines; the resulting culture war made controversial shows dangerously polarizing. Arena might attract new audiences with a provocative repertoire but in the process lose its integral one. The safer route for Fichandler to follow was to return to producing performances that were predominantly aesthetic and socially provocative only on the periphery.<sup>346</sup>

Prior to the theater's retreat from its more provocative repertoire, Fichandler increasingly became the subject of media representation. In fact, the more socially provocative the theater became the more the media simulated Arena and its mission through Fichandler's personality. Feature articles extolling her virtues as founder and artistic director appeared in *The Post* and *The Star* as well as numerous regional periodicals. Notably, the *Washingtonian* published Thomas Shales' "Whatever Zelda Wants, Zelda Damn Well Gets."<sup>347</sup> The title foreshadowed the vernacular that the magazine would employ later that year to describe TL's attitude to artistic liberty: "We have the Freedom to Do Whatever the Hell We Want." In Arena's case, however, the focus shifted to an agenda pushed by "Zelda" and not the "we" of TL's small group of amateurs. Although the article's *raison d'être* was the theater's twentieth anniversary season, the text and images focused on Fichandler's personality and her control of the

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<sup>346</sup> It was not until the mid-1970s that the ideological shift of Arena's repertoire became noticeable with productions of safer more established scripts like Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Days Journey into Night*, Büchner's *Leonce and Lena*, and Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *Front Page*.

<sup>347</sup> "Whatever Zelda Wants, Zelda Damn Well Gets," 68.

company's activities. Ironically, in the article Fichandler celebrated the virtue of theaters that employ a community-centric aesthetic, saying that "the real creativity in New York isn't on Broadway" but "in the theaters that see New York as a community."<sup>348</sup> Such an attitude explained Arena's decision to employ an interracial company after moving to its southwest Washington home. Nevertheless, the article steadfastly associated the theater's identity with the personality of Fichandler; neither the theater-going public cultivated by Arena nor the neighborhood the theater occupied were visible in the narrative. In fact, the article did not even mention Arena's struggle to address Washington's racial tensions by integrating the company. Instead, it focused on *Post* critic Richard Coe's objections to Arena's strong directorial visions. The article quotes Coe as saying: "People don't seem to trust the plays any more; all the directors wish to put their own imprints on them. Arena doesn't have the discrimination to take things out; the productions are bloated."<sup>349</sup> In other words, Coe argued that as artistic director Fichandler did not have the aesthetic sensibility required to know when a director should alter the playwright's text; he argued that Arena's approach obscured the playwright's textual signifiers within a set of culturally mixed signifiers constructed by the director. By arguing for the centrality of the text as a set of reified signifiers, Coe was challenging Fichandler's community-centric vision directly; if Arena's vision was going to have any aesthetic significance, the director would have to act as the mediator between the playwright's textual world and the audience's cultural reality. Shales bypassed the fundamentals of the disagreement, however. Instead, he focused the article on the competing personalities of Coe and

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<sup>348</sup> "Whatever Zelda Wants," 100.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

Fichandler, leaving the impression that Arena had sprung Athena-like from the head of its artistic director and local celebrity Zelda Fichandler. As a result, the community with which Arena was endeavoring to create a dialogue slipped into obscurity.

Although the Kennedy Center easily trumped the National Theater as the area's number one venue for Broadway shows, the Center could not match Arena in the local production of plays. In that sense, if the Center's iconography signified a national performing arts culture that was still dominated by the commercial/community paradigm, Arena and other leading Theaters of the Public projected America's regional identities into a national public sphere.<sup>350</sup> Arena's participation in the making of regional theater's national identity began with the building of its theater complex in southwest Washington. The company's national reputation was further enhanced when *The Great White Hope* appeared on Broadway. As Arena retreated from its interracial company and more socially progressive repertoire in the early 1970s, the theater not only reconnected to more conservative audiences but also to national political elites who, in the waning days of the Vietnam era, wanted to project a positive image of America internationally.

Arena solidified its identity as one of the country's leading regional theaters when, in 1973, the theater won the right from the U.S. Department of State and the Soviet Ministry of Culture to tour the Soviet Union. Arena took two productions, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's *Inherit the Wind*, to the Moscow Arts Filial Theater and Leningrad's Pushkin Theater of Comedy and Drama.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> The most notable regional theater was probably The Guthrie Theater that opened in 1963. Joseph Zeigler wrote that the Guthrie gave regional theaters "national attention and introduced the hope of a single National Theater." Joseph Wesley Zeigler, *Regional Theater: the Revolutionary Stage* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977); reprinted (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 170.

<sup>351</sup> The agreement constituted a small part of President Nixon's policy of détente with the Soviet Union.

Arena Stage earned the privilege to be part of this cultural exchange not only because of its reputation as a regional theater, but also because of its connections with important members of the federal political establishment. In addition, both of Arena's directors, Fichandler and Schneider, were fluent in Russian. By acting as foreign ambassadors, they could reintroduce Arena to a national public and, in the process, make a mark on the world stage.

Arena sent two well known American scripts on the conservative side of its repertoire to the Soviet Union. Arena had mounted a successful production of *Our Town* in 1972; combined with the fact that Wilder was much "admired in the U.S.S.R.," this show became an obvious choice.<sup>352</sup> The selection of *Inherit the Wind*, however, occurred only after months of negotiation. Arena submitted almost a hundred titles to the State Department and the Soviet Ministry of Culture; after each discussion, the list was narrowed. Despite the fact that Arena had not produced *Inherit the Wind*, the script kept reappearing on the list. According to Richard Coe, the Soviets liked the script because of the play's central theme—the ongoing struggle in America between scientific theory and an entrenched religiosity.<sup>353</sup> In addition, Lawrence and Lee were well-known in Moscow, making frequent visits to the U.S.S.R. both "privately and as guest lecturers of the State Department."<sup>354</sup> Regardless of the reasons, Arena finally agreed to mount a production, and the theater's tour of Moscow and Leningrad proved a success, not only in the Soviet Union but also in Washington and the nation.

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<sup>352</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Arena on the Move," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 29 July 1973, 5 (L).

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*

Local and national media coverage was extensive and Arena's reputation for excellence catapulted locally, nationally, and internationally. Numerous feature stories highlighted not only the theater and its two productions, but also Fichandler, who was suddenly elevated from artistic director to diplomat. After returning to New York, where Arena was scheduled to perform, she praised her Soviet hosts for their gracious hospitality as well as the accomplishments of the soviet people, saying "Before the Revolution 2 per cent of the people were literate. Now more than 99 per cent are literate."<sup>355</sup> Fichandler also spoke of the Russian theater and the plays that she saw while she was there, and that she now wanted to do at Arena. Although praise for the Soviet Union was ill-advised in Washington's Cold War climate, with federal endorsement of her diplomatic mission, Fichandler must have felt a renewed sense of accomplishment. Twenty-three years after its founding, Arena Stage had reached its pinnacle of acclaim.

### *Section III: Washington Theater Club, New Scripts and Identity Problems*

Between Theatre Lobby's relative invisibility and Arena's prominent place in the region's theatrical geography, the Washington Theatre Club struggled to establish a foothold. WTC began operation in 1957 but did not officially open as an Equity company until 1960. Several years later, the theater hired a professional Artistic Director, Davey Marlin-Jones, who focused the company on the productions of new plays by new playwrights. This work was rewarded in 1968 when WTC received the coveted Margo Jones Award for the production of original work. The theater's rise to prominence during the 1960s led to WTC's expansion. In 1970s they opened a second,

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<sup>355</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Arena Stage, Via Russia: Artistry on the Human Level," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 28 October 1973, 4 (L).

more spacious venue in a brick church in Foggy Bottom, near the Kennedy Center's construction site.<sup>356</sup> At this location, in a rapidly changing cultural landscape, WTC collapsed from a combination of diminishing audiences and ever-increasing debt.

Hazel and John B. Wentworth co-founded WTC in 1957, as an umbrella project of the Washington Drama Center. A former New York actor, John Wentworth's local theatrical roots dated from 1950 when he established the Unitarian Players at All Souls Church in the Adams Morgan neighborhood. While the Wentworths worked with the Players, they discovered that there were many former New York actors in the area, who had left the city because they found the New York life style unbearable; though living in Washington, these former actors still loved to perform. Theaters of Community like the Players provided only a temporary channel for their energies. So, in 1957, when the Wentworths "got an inheritance," they "were faced with either buying a home or buying a theater."<sup>357</sup> They decided to buy the former coach house east of Dupont Circle at 1632 O Street, which they converted into a theater downstairs, and living quarters upstairs. In order to conform to zoning restrictions, they ran the theater as a club with membership dues of five dollars a year. In 1965, when the theater became a not-for-profit organization, WTC still had to maintain its dues, but it reduced them to a token dollar.

From its inception, WTC's vision included both production and educational components. Tucked into three and four-story Victorian rowhouses near the commercial district south of Dupont Circle, WTC's coach house theater seated 145 audience members in a thrust arrangement. Its "no-nonsense post-Civil War architectural style"

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<sup>356</sup> Washington Theatre Club maintained the two spaces for a couple of years.

<sup>357</sup> Richard Lebherz, "Where is the Washington Theater Club Headed," *The Post* (Frederich Maryland), 7 March 1973, 8(A). Washington Theater Club Archives, Gelman Library, Special Collections, at George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

looked more like “a factory, a warehouse, an Old Law tenement, or (most likely) a small-city jail” than a theater.<sup>358</sup> In its small space WTC focused on staging small cast, contemporary plays. In its first summer season in 1960 the company produced Thornton Wilder’s *The Matchmaker*, Michael Gazzo’s *A Hatful of Rain*, Eugene Ionesco’s *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*, and Arthur Laurent’s *A Clearing in the Woods*; as the theater’s repertoire developed through 1961, however, the company revealed a proclivity for European absurdist and existentialist plays, such as Jean Cocteau’s *Intimate Relations*, Jean Genet’s *The Maids*, three one-acts by Samuel Beckett, and Albert Camus’ *Cross Purpose*. Like Arena and TL, WTC appealed to Washington’s increasingly college-educated public; yet, unlike those two theaters, WTC wanted its public to support its activities not only by attending productions but also “by actively participating in ... classes and seminars, or working as a volunteer member of [the] staff.”<sup>359</sup> Even its Equity production team reached out to the community during the theater’s early years, passing out fliers that asked members of the club to “mark the nine plays you’d most like to see here this season ... [or] write your own list on the back of this sheet.”<sup>360</sup> This dual system of offering both productions and educational opportunities allowed the theater to support its small company, despite its small house.

With Arena’s reputation enhanced by state-of-the-art facilities, WTC had trouble during the first half of the 1960s gaining recognition from the media or attention from local and national foundations. One aspect of WTC’s dilemma was rooted in its club status and in its hybrid nature, as both producing theater and educational center. WTC

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<sup>358</sup> Gabriel Levenson, “Off-Broadway in Washington,” *Washingtonian*, 1970, Vol. 1, Number 6, 28.

<sup>359</sup> Promotional Leaflet, 1961, Washington Theater Club Archives.

also recruited actors both locally and from New York. Because local actors were more likely to be viewed as amateurs, this practice confused the media, the funding community, and the general public, thus throwing into question WTC's legitimacy as a professional organization. Arena's new space had clarified its status, elevating its operation into a class of theater unique to Washington and rare in the nation.

Washingtonians could comfortably acknowledge that Arena was a legitimate professional theater even though its orientation was not longer commercial. In contrast, the Wentworths' long standing connections to local Theater of Community impeded WTC's growth as a professional organization.

WTC's decision to hire an artistic director with professional New York credentials for the 1965-1966 season countered the public's perception of the company as amateur.<sup>361</sup> At that same time, John Wentworth disassociated himself from WTC, leaving his wife, Hazel, as Executive Director. The new artistic director, Davey Marlin-Jones, shared WTC's preference for European absurdism, producing plays like Ionesco's *The Killer* and Frederick Dürrenmatt's *The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi*. At the same time, he shifted the company's focus to the production of new plays. Their repertoire consisted of three distinct components: contemporary scripts from around the world; world premieres of original American scripts; and, after 1969, what the theater called its "Second Chance Series"—shows that failed in New York but that Marlin-Jones thought deserved another production. From 1965 through 1969, the theater produced thirty

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<sup>360</sup> Flyer, 1960, Washington Theater Club Archives.

<sup>361</sup> Davey Marlin Jones worked as artistic director of New York's Library Theater prior to his appoint at WTC.

Washington premiers, four American premieres, and ten world premieres.<sup>362</sup> In conjunction with its stage reading series, WTC also introduced Washington's theater-going public to sixty-three new writers, many of them Washington natives. Because of this enormous output, the theater earned local and national recognition, both in the media and from funding organizations, for its role in the development of American playwrights. In 1969, the theater won the Margo Jones Award for the production of original work by a regional theater.

Although WTC built its regional reputation on the production of original scripts, its repertoire reflected an eclectic mix of the obscure and edgy rather than the original. In the late 1960s, as part of its "Second Chance Series" the theater produced a number of obscure comedies like *Before You Go* and *The Wolves* that unfortunately proved the accuracy of their original New York verdicts. WTC also established a reputation for musicals, particularly with its *Spread Eagle* series, a yearly revue of topical skits and songs written and composed by area artists. This show allowed WTC to reinforce its community-centric image and maintain its support for area playwrights within a less risky venue. In 1971 they produced Nancy Ford's rock musical *The Last Sweet Days of Isaac*, which won an Obie as the best off-Broadway musical in 1970. Although WTC continued to produce absurdist scripts like Ionesco's *Exit the King*, their repertoire gradually became more focused on the up-to-date and linguistically risqué. Performances of *Spread Eagle* and the revue *Whores, Wars, and Tin Pan Alley* earned critical commentary such as "even by usual standards of hyperbole, this is nasty bullshit."<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> From the production records of the Washington Theater Club. Washington Theater Club Archives.

<sup>363</sup> Thomas Shales, review of "Whores, Wars, and Tin Pan Alley," *D.C. Gazette*, June 1971, 2.

During the first four years of Marlin-Jones' tenure as artistic director, WTC's season subscription numbers grew phenomenally. At the beginning of his first season, WTC had forty season subscribers. By the time the 1966-1967 season began, the theater had more than one thousand; by the end of that same season, it had more than 2,100.<sup>364</sup> At the beginning of the 1969 season, WTC had 8,265 season subscribers. Although those numbers demonstrate impressive growth in WTC's audiences, by themselves the numbers are deceiving. During the first three years, the theater's integral audience developed steadily around its production of quirky, off-beat original works. The 1969 season, however, marked the first time that WTC allied itself with the Washington Performing Arts Society's "interlocked subscription idea," which Richard Coe called "the most important single factor in developing [WTC's] audiences."<sup>365</sup> With an interlocked subscription, a member bought both the Society's musical concert series and WTC's eight-show season. Thanks to the alliance, WTC went from only 60 percent capacity to nearly 100 percent. Although such immediate positive results must have pleased WTC's artists, staff, and board of directors, those results also concealed the fact that the unique artistic community that the theater had developed during the 1960s had been diluted; for the Society's concert-going public was probably different from WTC's more risqué, avant-garde audiences. Nevertheless, WTC and Marlin-Jones pushed ahead with their development agenda. Following the script laid down by Arena Stage during the 1950s and 1960s, WTC's board of directors courted the city's local and national elites: they

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<sup>364</sup> "Washington Theater Club Fund-Raising Fact Sheet, 1967. Washington Theater Club Archives.

<sup>365</sup> The Washington Performing Arts Society was established in 1965 and was committed to the presentation of world class performing artists to the city, educational programs, and to the development of emerging artists. Richard L. Coe, "A Salute to the Theater Club," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 16 March 1969, E 3.

attracted to their productions and fundraisers “‘bona fide celebrities ... thirty-five diplomats ... twenty congressmen, maybe four hundred journalists, half a dozen of the top broadcasters, Edward P. Morgan, David Brinkley, Russell Baker....’”<sup>366</sup>

Despite the success of WTC at its Dupont Circle location, with “every single evening performance, since the season opened last September ... sold out ... the Club was \$35,000 in debt and sinking deeper every minute.”<sup>367</sup> In the middle of the 1967-1968 season, the theater began searching for larger venues with greater seating capacity. Coincidentally, Ford’s Theater had opened and was searching for a company that wanted to produce in its space. Hazel Wentworth contacted the President of the Ford’s Theater Society, Frankie Hewitt, about the possibility of WTC being that theater. Initial conversations were encouraging, and WTC even composed a proposal entitled “Toward an Artistic Concept” in which WTC presented itself as the theater that could best realize Ford’s vision.<sup>368</sup> Ultimately, Hewitt elected to bring in New York’s Circle in the Square Theater, leaving WTC to sink deeper into debt.<sup>369</sup> Ironically, on a scrawled, unsigned handwritten note, a board member asked: “Did you notice that in [sic] new budget, income is up \$45,000. [sic] Expenses are up \$75,000?” Then the writer got to his essential question: “Will success kill the WTC?”<sup>370</sup> Indeed, the issues confronting WTC were structural. Although the theater was receiving grants and donations from a variety of sources, even maximum ticket sales could not make up the shortfall. The perceived

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<sup>366</sup> Davey Marlin Jones interviewed in “Off-Broadway in Washington,” 28.

<sup>367</sup> Scottie Lanahan, “Theater’s Drama Not All on Stage,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 30 April 1967, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>368</sup> “Towards an Artistic Concept,” 1967-1968. Washington Theater Club Archives.

<sup>369</sup> Circle in the Square produced at Ford’s Theater for only two seasons.

<sup>370</sup> Unsigned note, 16 June 1969. Washington Theater Club Archives.

solution was to move the theater to a larger venue. WTC did so in August 1970, moving into the former Union Wesley Zion Church on the edge of Foggy Bottom, near the soon to be completed Kennedy Center.<sup>371</sup>

If the old space was “jail-like” in appearance, the new space with its institutional cinderblock, made it prison-like and completely lacking in character and history.

Although the theater had a 380-seat house, it lacked sufficient parking. Nevertheless, the theater’s move into a prosperous, revitalized Foggy Bottom neighborhood elevated its media profile, particularly with the Kennedy Center’s opening only a year away. Sensing the impact that the Center would have not only on the area but also on WTC’s future, Marlin-Jones contrasted WTC’s urban sophistication and hipness with the Kennedy Center’s institutional remoteness. He hoped to capitalize on the fact that, unlike “the Kennedy Center which sits pretentiously in isolation from any community,” WTC “resides conveniently in a city neighborhood ... and has potential for a wide urban audience. It can help to revive a sense of the city as a social and artistic center.”<sup>372</sup> That wide urban audience would prove more difficult to attract than Marlin-Jones imagined.

The audience to which Marlin-Jones referred differed from the audience of celebrities mentioned earlier, and that difference between the two publics represented the primary dilemma facing WTC and Washington’s Theaters of the Public in the 1970s. WTC’s primary objective was to build a community-centric theater with an integral audience and “a sense of the city.” To build that public, however, the theater needed the media, whose spotlight attracted a cavalcade of celebrities from Washington’s

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<sup>371</sup> WTC operated two spaces for more than a year.

<sup>372</sup> “A Theater Arrives,” *Evening Star* 11 January 1970, 9.

entertainment and political communities. Although celebrities attracted audiences, would they attract the kind of audiences that wanted to experience the original, avant-garde, or quirky scripts on which WTC had developed its reputation? In all probability, they would not, given the repertoire's controversial nature. In addition, the media's simulation of a celebrity-filled theater-going public conflicted with the Washington-centric image that WTC needed if the company was going to create an integral artistic community. Thus, WTC's survival depended on its ability to attract local and national celebrities to the media's spotlight, but if WTC was going to satisfy this new theater-going public, it would probably have to alter its repertoire considerably.

An integral artistic community was essential to WTC, however, for from such a community came not only economic gifts to the theater's struggling bottomline, but also a standard of aesthetics and professionalism based on that community's own predisposition. In other words, Arena Stage, WTC, TL, and other Theaters of the Public offered patrons an alternative conception of performance. The small theater did not achieve excellence through spectacle and aesthetic distance; rather, like Café La MaMa (now, La MaMa, ETC. [Experimental Theater Club]), LaFayette Workshop, the Open Theater, and the Living Theater, small theaters were evaluated on how deeply their productions resonated within their communities.<sup>373</sup> Although many in the corporate and foundation worlds were satisfied with nothing less than Broadway-style professionalism, theater-goers and artists within the Theater of the Public community formed their own system of aesthetic standards. In the media, the artistic director frequently embodied that system.

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<sup>373</sup> "Whatever Zelda Wants, Zelda Damn Well Gets," 100.

After the theater's move to the new location in Foggy Bottom, the media became increasingly fixated on the alleged lasciviousness of WTC's performances. Concomitantly, the media's simulation of WTC focused more on the personality of artistic director, Marlin-Jones, than on the theater and its ten-year history of performance. Marlin-Jones' personality did not, however, eclipse the WTC company of artists as completely as Fichandler's personality had eclipsed Arena's. Rather, reviewers became more aware of the imprimatur that Marlin-Jones placed on all of the theater's activities. As Thomas Shales pointed out in a review of WTC's production of Thomas' *Adventures in the Skin Trade*,

Theater Club impresario ... Davey Marlin-Jones ... could have supplied us with something better in his program notes than the usual florid gush—specifically more information about the origins of the play and precisely what Thomas material it comes from. Also, it might be nice, if, sometime soon Theater Club offered equal time to an opposing philosophy; the one that finds life not so much the Marlin-Jones idea of delicious ecstasy as plain old pain in the ass. A 'No!' to Davey's 'Yes!'<sup>374</sup>

Although Shales' comments about program notes are relatively insubstantial, the broader implications of those seemingly trivial concerns reveal the all encompassing philosophy that Marlin-Jones brought to WTC's productions and identity. Another more telling example appeared in a *Star* article introducing Washingtonians to WTC's new venue.<sup>375</sup> Reflecting standard procedures for the media during the 1960s and 1970s, the article focused on the idiosyncrasies of Marlin-Jones. Several photographs depicting WTC's thirteen-member company posed in front of the new building's massive brick structure, accompanied the story; in one, Marlin-Jones stood in the center of the group. Most

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<sup>374</sup> Thomas Shales, "Stage: *Adventures in the Skin Trade*," *D.C. Gazette*, 9 March 1970, 29.

<sup>375</sup> "A Theater Arrives," 9, 10.

telling, however, was an interior photograph that depicted Marlin-Jones solo; its caption read, “the Messiah.”<sup>376</sup> This cult-like focus on Marlin-Jones probably had as much to do with the media’s predilection to put a face on any organization as it did with the theater’s own inclination to sell the celebrity of its artistic director. Nevertheless, the result was the same: the creation of a cult of personality around the artistic director, which tended to limit the scope of the theater’s aesthetic practices.

Just when it seemed as if nothing could go wrong for WTC, the bottom fell out of the organization, and “the Messiah” could do nothing right. The theater had experienced five straight years of phenomenal success and recordbreaking attendance; the company had moved to a larger, more spacious venue in an up-and-coming part of town. Although the opening of the Kennedy Center had an impact on everything theatrical in Washington, including WTC and its fund-raising activities, it did not cause WTC’s demise. WTC’s collapse was caused by its loss of focus and identity. As the *Post*’s Richard Leberherz noted: “In re-locating itself geographically into another part of the city, it seemed to have suddenly dislocated itself internally and perhaps even artistically.”<sup>377</sup> What Leberherz’s comments suggest is that the theater’s Dupont Circle location provided the company with a strong, integral audience; but, for some reason, when the company moved across town that audience did not move with them in sufficient numbers. In part, audiences seemed unwilling to venture into a strange part of town that was chronically short on parking. WTC tried to counter this tendency: in literature promoting the new space, the company emphasized that the theater’s new location was only “a three-minute walk from seven parking lots, within five blocks of eight first-class restaurants [and] opposite the third

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 10.

precinct police station.”<sup>378</sup> That a theater would resort to promoting the proximity of the police as a method of allaying people’s fears about an unfamiliar location demonstrated the impact that the recent uprisings had on people psychologically.<sup>379</sup> More importantly, however, WTC “simply did not understand the implications of why it had moved, nor what it meant to them structurally.”<sup>380</sup> As a small theater operating an Equity company, WTC had created an aesthetic of intimacy, a truly community-centric environment where the relationship between the theater-going public and the actor existed within a shared space. In the larger, more institutional setting in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, that sense of shared experience had weakened.

As WTC slipped further into debt, Marlin-Jones came under repeated attacks from the theater’s board of directors. Because the theater’s identity, both practically and in relationship to the media, was built around Marlin-Jones’ idiosyncrasies, the organization went into crisis. When season subscribers declined after the theater moved to its new location, the theater’s board of directors began questioning Marlin-Jones’ script selection.<sup>381</sup> They formed a play reading committee to second guess his choice of scripts. Prior to the board’s interference, however, Marlin-Jones’ own success and local celebrity had begun to distract him from the job of running the theater. He was hired as a movie and theater critic for a local radio and TV station, WTOP-TV, and thus, “gave

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<sup>377</sup> “Where is the Washington Theater Club Headed?” (A)8.

<sup>378</sup> Promotional Flyer, 1969. Washington Theater Club Archives.

<sup>379</sup> For more discussion of the uprisings following the assassination of Dr. King see Chapter Two.

<sup>380</sup> “Where is the Washington Theater Club Headed?” 8 (A).

<sup>381</sup> Subscribers declined from a high of 9000 in 1970 to 7000 in 1972.

proportionately less attention to the theater club.”<sup>382</sup> Eventually, Marlin-Jones resigned as artistic director.

Marlin-Jones’ replacement, Stephen Aaron, immediately changed WTC’s repertoire. Marlin-Jones had designed the 1972-1973 season prior to his resignation, but after several shows failed miserably at the box-office, Aaron made significant alterations in the remainder of the season. He wanted to appeal to “more youths and blacks” by making the repertoire less ‘middle class and middle aged.’<sup>383</sup> To that end, Aaron selected *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* by Lonnie Elders, “the first all black play to be produced by the WTC.”<sup>384</sup> Although the show’s success invigorated the theater, debts continued to mount in inverse proportion to the declining numbers of once loyal patrons. By the end of the 1973 season, WTC’s subscribers had dropped to 1000.<sup>385</sup> In 1974, having lost too many patrons, Aaron and the President of the Board resigned. After a brief merger with the New Theater of Washington, run by African American director Paul Allen, WTC ceased operations and closed.

#### *Section IV: Theater of the Public as Organizer of Identity*

Each of these Theaters of the Public distinguished itself from the National Theater and other Theaters of Commerce as well as from mainstream Theaters of Community. They did so primarily through their repertoires. During the 1950s, TL focused on

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<sup>382</sup> The most dramatic flop was an obscure drama, *The Rapist*, which closed after a week. Tom Shales, “A Theater Fighting Back,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, 3 February 1973, 1 (E).

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Charles Farrow, “Washington Theater Club ‘Snatches the Imagination,’” *Washington African American*, 14 January 1973, n.p. Washington Theater Club Archives.

<sup>385</sup> Tom Shales, “A Dramatic Exit at WTC,” *Washington Evening Star*, 6 June 1973, n.p. Washingtoniana.

existentialist theater and the theater of the absurd, allowing it to make a clear distinction between its amateurism and the amateurism of community theaters. TL's identification with the theater of the absurd allowed the company to create an artistic community with an integral public. Arena's repertoire changed several times over its first twenty-five years and, as a result, its mission modulated. During the 1950s, the theater focused on European and contemporary classics. After it moved to its new facility and made the transition from Theater of Commerce to Theater of the Public, Arena revealed yet new aspects of its vision. In its new location, in a city becoming increasingly African American in character, Arena experimented with interracial casting and a more contemporary, socially provocative repertoire. The combination alienated previously supportive sectors of its public, many of whom were affronted by the interracial, dissident representations of their city. Although this ideological and aesthetic exchange between a theater and its audience exists within Theaters of Commerce, because Arena depended so heavily on an integral theater-going public the shift in its identity had negative effects and the theater had to retreat to a more conservative posture. At its Dupont Circle/Adams Morgan location, WTC and Marlin-Jones produced cutting edge, original work that fostered a young, hip audience. The small, intimate space made the theatrical experience more potent, even if some of the scripts were inferior. When WTC moved across town to a larger environment, not only did the theater lose its intimacy but also the spirit of that artistic community dissolved.

With the downtown commercial entertainment district in decline, these three early Theaters of the Public were isolated from each other and from any cultural infrastructure. As long as they maintained a clear, identifiable mission, they were able to attract a public

large enough to fill their houses. Whereas Theaters of Community frequently depended on parent organizations to lend them significance and support, most Theaters of the Public had no such larger umbrella. During the 1960s they also found themselves surrounded by neighborhoods that had lost their sense of coherence. As the District's neighborhoods fractured, residents no longer understood themselves as living in homogeneous communities with common goals and needs; rather, their sense of space was often limited to the block on which they lived or worked. As a result, Theaters of the Public became organizers of identity. These constructed identities were based not so much on commercial and neighborhood factors—although they still played a role—but rather on shared ideologies.<sup>386</sup> These ideologies—whether based on an identifiable sense of aesthetics, on a clear political agenda, or on specific views on racial, gender, and ethnic factors—brought together individuals who shared a particular theater's social or aesthetic perspective.

TL, Arena, and WTC offered the media and the theater-going public alternative, varied experiences of the intimate performance. On the other hand, TL's tiny space and the level of emotional closeness and familiarity it created could not be equaled by other theaters in the region. On the other hand, through its in-the-round staging, Arena offered the public the paradoxical phenomena of a big show in a small space. Even though it progressively lost that closeness as it moved from the Hippodrome to its southwest venue, it maintained the paradox. WTC built its reputation and identity on a small theater

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<sup>386</sup> I use the word “ideology” cautiously, because the word implies a rational belief system directing images and choices. Most of these theaters did not have such a strict, controlling view of the world. At this particular time in their histories, most Theaters of the Public were more concerned with the narrative construction of identity than the political. Nevertheless, the reason “ideology” might seem more appropriate is because the narratives that these theaters chose attempted to counter mainstream voices, thus making them appear more ideological than not.

aesthetic. When it moved into a larger venue, it lost that aesthetic, which had existed at the root of its identity. Fortunately for all three theaters, enough media critics recognized the value of the small theater aesthetic and, thus, judged those small Theaters of the Public by their own standards.

The media's simulation of TL's, Arena's, and WTC's vision was greatly influenced by the context of their respective social spaces. Although independent Theaters of the Public were free from the decision-making apparatus of other institutions, many cultural signifiers influenced their visions and identities. In fact, precisely because they were independent of other institutions, the public more readily associated these theaters with adjacent cultural icons even if those icons had nothing to do with the theater itself.

## Chapter Six

### THEATERS OF IDENTITY, THEIR RISE AND FALL

After the founding of the NEA in the late 1960s, not-for-profit funding agencies began responding to the needs of a new kind of theater in the Greater Washington area. This new kind of theater not only flourished outside the influence of the National Theater and Kennedy Center but was also beyond the scope of the Lobby Theater, Arena Stage, and the Washington Theater Club. Not invested in Broadway's celebrity or regional theater's idiosyncratic visions, these Theaters of the Public organized around one or another versions of identity politics.<sup>387</sup> To them, theater and performance were not neutral vehicles of entertainment and art; rather, they were constructs shaped by a combination of cultural ideology and collective identity. The producers of theater of identity argued that Washington's theatrical culture had ignored the role of politics, class, race, gender, and ethnicity in the formulation of aesthetic precepts, processes, and tastes. As a result, performance and theater did not play a meaningful role in the lives of many people. In fact, many in the identity theater movement believed that producers of traditional theater usually conceived of performance with a privileged white male public in mind.<sup>388</sup> This focus necessarily left a large percentage of the general public on the

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<sup>387</sup> Identity politics consists of a group of theories that assert the centrality of race, class, gender, and ethnicity in the formulation of political thought and action. For a detailed discussion of identity politics, its strengths and weaknesses see Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994).

<sup>388</sup> Although producers across a range of racial, ethnic, and gender politics would agree that most performances were conceived with the white male gaze in mind, many feminist theater producers actively theorized about the nature of the public attending their performances. They recognized that reception of their performances was directly affected by the constituencies in their audiences. For more on the feminist theory of audience see Charlotte Canning, *Feminist Theaters in the USA: Staging Women's Experience* (Routledge: New York and London, 1996).

margins of the theatrical experience; people of color, women, the working class, and the poor either had to be content with representations of themselves as constructed by privileged white male culture or contemptuous of the hegemonic narratives that minimized and distorted their own perspectives. From the perspective of identity politics, theater and performance in Washington that focused on the white male viewer was particularly fraught with tension because the demographic make up of the city across lines of race and gender left the white male population a powerful, yet miniscule public. For producers of theater of identity, an untapped reservoir of potential theater-goers was simply waiting for a new kind of theater to take root. As theatrical groups began organizing throughout the city, they presented a critical counterpoint to Washington's existing theatrical community. They challenged not only the traditional concept of theater as "a night on the town," which the National Theater had long represented, but also the emerging concept of theater as an expression of cultural and aesthetic values. Publicly supported theaters like Arena and WTC were associated with this concept, as well as the Kennedy Center, which despite its dependence on Broadway shows for its financial survival, remained a Theater of the Public in the minds of most Washingtonians.<sup>389</sup>

Energized in the 1950s and 1960s by various movements for social change, theaters of identity began to organize, and organize around, a new class of spectator after the Washington uprisings of 1968. Unlike the public that attended Theaters of Community in geographically bounded neighborhoods, these counter-publics sought

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<sup>389</sup> The image of the Kennedy Center as a government theater persisted throughout the 1970s and early 1980s even though the Center received no moneys from the government except those used to maintain its function as a National Memorial for President Kennedy. As a result, Roger Stevens, found it

theaters that reflected their experiences and identities.<sup>390</sup> They wanted to witness performances that articulated their social narratives, ideological attitudes, and concerns about politics and history. They also wanted a theatrical culture that inhabited social spaces less marked by mainstream theatrical imagery and iconography. Thus, like Theaters of Community, theaters of identity were located in neighborhoods that supported their visions. Unlike those more geographically identified companies, however, theaters of identity appealed to audiences beyond their immediate geographic location. As a result, producers minimized specific associations between their theatrical operations and their physical location. Whereas producers of community theaters could assume an easy homogeneity between the social spaces in which they resided and the community for whom they performed, producers of theaters of identity could make no such assumption. In fact, because they challenged the presumed neutrality between a performance's ideological narrative and the narratives of the audience, they recognized the socioeconomic stratification of neighborhoods along divisions of class, race, gender, and ethnicity. In addition, identity theaters represented counter-publics that the dominant public had disempowered, culturally, materially, and economically. As a result, they frequently occupied spaces that were not usually associated with theater; in so doing, they redefined the relationship between the theatrical institution and its neighborhood. Because they constructed new audiences from disenfranchised communities, their

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necessary to book major Broadway shows in its large auditoriums, making it little more than a Broadway touring house.

<sup>390</sup> Problematizing Jürgen Habermas' concepts of "public" and "public spheres," Nancy Fraser's theoretical model of multiple public spheres allows for subordinate groups to build "*subaltern* counterpublics" which "permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." In "Politics, Culture, and the Public Sphere: toward a Postmodern Conception" in Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics, eds. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 291.

theaters and surrounding social spaces became an aesthetic representation of the community and its values. This shift in emphasis toward a more socially invested aesthetic identification—a socio-aesthetic, if you will—was the most significant difference between theaters like Arena, WTC, and Lobby, and those that constituted this emergent sector of Washington’s theatrical community.

Washington’s theaters of identity consisted of four distinct categories of theatergoers, which represented a spectrum of counter-publics whose perspectives and concerns about art and its function in society were distinct from those of the dominant Washington theater-going class. The four categories were: 1) a recently energized, politically radical community eager to address a range of social problems that were all linked by the issue of class, 2) an African American population that was relatively united in its desire for socio-political enfranchisement, 3) a rapidly developing white feminist community, and 4) a growing Latin American population that wished to preserve its cultural heritage and language. Although the first group frequently worked in association with the other three, the last three groups rarely crossed the boundaries that identified them as communities or that separated them from each other.

The first category consisted of people driven by the politics of the civil rights and anti-war movement. While they acknowledged connections between discriminatory social practices and the ideologies governing the society at large, their working relationships frequently crossed the lines established by identity politics. If there was a political or socio-economic identity to which they adhered, that identity would have been strongest around issues of class. Three companies represented this perspective: Arena’s Living Stage (1966), Back Alley Theater (1967), and Everyday Theater (1979). Both

Living Stage and Everyday Theater worked directly with youth culture. Their educational missions within institutional settings shielded them from participating in the public sphere, however. Although Back Alley started as a children's theater, within a few years it made the transition into Washington's most visible and eclectic theater of identity, serving the needs of a variety of communities.

Inspired by advances won by the civil rights movement, Washington's majority African American population eagerly moved to secure greater rights and representation. Many African Americans were not, however, comfortable with the wholesale transformation of American life promoted by the Dr. Martin Luther King or by Black Nationalism.<sup>391</sup> To be sure, though many wanted an end to apartheid America, most were not interested in redefining American values and policies. On the other hand, given that the local theater community had ill-served African Americans for decades, the emergence of groups using performance and theater for employment, empowerment, community building, and identity formation was not surprising. African Americans organized numerous theaters during the late 1960s and early 1970s; some made an immediate impact on their community while others either lasted for a short period, or operated for years with extended periods of inactivity. The most significant was The D.C. Black Repertory Company, which morphed into The Rep Inc. in 1977. Two of the earliest companies were the Everyman Street Theater, sponsored by Workshops for Careers in the Arts (1968-1986) and Black American Theater (BAT, 1970-72), whose founder then formed The New Theater and New American Theater (1973-74, 1975-76 respectively).

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<sup>391</sup> Indicative of this split within the African American community were the divisions in the civil rights movement that occurred when Martin Luther King delivered his famous anti-Vietnam War speech in April 1967. Those elements of the movement that supported the war severed their alliance with Martin Luther King and other anti-war leaders.

The feminist community began organizing in the District of Columbia during the early 1970s. Although the women's community, like the African American community, possessed divergent motivations and ideological goals, both in relationship to social change and to theatrical representation, the feminist community was a more self-selecting group. In this period, Washington's feminist theater community tended to focus on issues of women and identity without problematizing factors related to class or white privilege.<sup>392</sup> Founded in 1971, a feminist theater collective called Earth Onion was soon followed by the Washington Area Feminist Theater (WAFT), and then Pro Femina Theater, which emerged in 1973 and 1977 respectively. Pro Femina later changed its name to Horizons: Theater from a Woman's Perspective.

The final category of identity theaters was united by ethnicity. In Washington recent immigrants from several South and Central American countries were particularly active in the creation of such theaters.<sup>393</sup> As early as 1973, Teatro Latino began performing bilingual productions in Adams Morgan and at Back Alley; it survived only a few years, however. In 1976 Grupo de Artistas Latinoamericanos or (GALA) Hispanic Theater emerged. GALA walked a fine line between both political and cultural divides in the Latino community to become Washington's preeminent Latino theater company.<sup>394</sup> In the early 1980s, Teatro Nuestro, a smaller, more politically active company joined the community.

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<sup>392</sup> By the 1980s feminist political theories had grown more sophisticated and had begun problematizing issues related to class, race, and ethnicity.

<sup>393</sup> Although performances of Jewish plays sometimes occurred within the Jewish community throughout the period of this study, the first Jewish Theater company, Theater J, was not organized until 1989.

<sup>394</sup> Although each country in Latin America possesses its own culture and identity, in Washington these theater groups broadened the concept of identity to include as many regions of Latin America as possible.

The impact of these theaters of identity on the overall development of the public's understanding of Washington's theatrical geography can best be investigated historically, even if the stages overlap to a certain degree. Because large numbers of theaters of identity were founded during the period, this chapter considers only those that had a significant impact on public consciousness. Phase One began in 1967 with the founding of two children's theaters, Living Stage and Back Alley Theater. Within several years numerous other organizations were founded. Some focused on the development of youth while others provided performances for the area's African American and women's communities. The next phase began in 1970, when local funding agencies became interested in diversifying Washington's theatrical community. They seeded local, established institutions with outreach moneys or identified and financially backed independent groups with promising programs. One of those promising theaters, Back Alley Theater, acquired space and transformed into a multidimensional social service/theater organization. This second phase lasted until 1976 when the D.C. Black Repertory Company, founded by Hollywood celebrity Robert Hooks, folded after four short years. The founding of Pro Femina Theater and the continued development of Back Alley marked phase Three, a time when both companies became known for their work with new scripts. Pro Femina developed texts improvisationally while Back Alley reached beyond Washington for new works by experimental playwrights. This phase continued through Pro Femina's name change to Horizons and the rapid demise of Back Alley. Although GALA Hispanic Theater was founded in 1976, it did not emerge as a significant Theater of the Public until approximately 1980. Its emergence marked the fourth and final phase in the development of theaters of identity in the District, a phase

marked by the disappearance of most theaters of identity from the local theatrical landscape. Those theaters that remained viable into the 1980s successfully modified their missions, de-emphasizing their connection with identity politics while emphasizing their association with the small theater movement. They evolved out of the pressing social needs of groups that were either underrepresented on local stages or underfunded by local agencies; the establishment GALA and Horizon as identifiable institutions in Washington's theatrical geography marked the transformation of those social needs into material spatial realities. The cost of that transformation is the subject of this chapter.<sup>395</sup>

### *Section I: Phase One: Initial Rumbblings*

The late 1960s witnessed theatrical rumbblings among Washington's two largest, "minority" constituencies: African Americans and women.<sup>396</sup> Because a significant proportion of Washington's African American population lived below the poverty line, issues of class also emerged as formative components. This community organized theaters that remained in relative obscurity until the early 1970s when several became recognizable independent organizations in the public sphere. The origins of Living Stage, Back Alley Theater, and Everyman Theater are located in a crisis among the area's poor and African American youth. Following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, African American neighborhoods around the country and the region experienced a deluge of rising expectations, not just among their adult members but

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<sup>395</sup> I will not attempt to deal with every one of the theaters that I have mentioned. Instead I will focus on those theaters that best exemplify theater of identity's historical development in Washington. I will investigate at least one representative from each type of theater mentioned.

<sup>396</sup> Theater representing Latin America did not emerge until 1973, with Teatro Latino. I cover it and GALA during section 3 of the chapter.

among their youth as well. President Johnson had difficulty meeting these expectations, however; the Vietnam War had escalated and drained away moneys intended for his Great Society Programs. A growing federal debt and deficit made social uplift that much more difficult. With violence, drug addiction, and despair rising among Washington's poorer African American children, artists and educators began using performance as an instrument of social uplift. Theaters soon followed, organizing programs with local NEA money to help the city's disenfranchised youth. In addition to serving the city's youth, as the Black consciousness movement gained momentum during the 1960s, African American theater artists sought to address the increasingly conspicuous fact that the city's 70% African American population did not have a viable theater of its own. The D.C. Black Repertory Company was one of the first of many theaters to respond to this lack of an African American theater.

In 1970, the origins of Earth Onion derived from the gatherings of women who were motivated by the emerging politics of feminism. Energized by the spirit of these gatherings, participants searched for ways to represent their identities collectively. Theater and performance emerged as "well suited to display the intimate connections between the experiences of a single woman and the political issues of all women."<sup>397</sup>

As discussed in Chapter Five, during the 1960s Arena Stage created bi-racial performances that reflected Washington's racially diverse communities. Its audiences remained, however, predominantly white and upper middle class. As a result, the theater created an outreach program designed primarily for African American children and youths. This program was Arena's Living Stage. Robert Alexander, who founded the

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<sup>397</sup> Pattie P. Gillespie, "Feminist Theater of the 1970s," a paper presented at the 41<sup>st</sup> annual convention of the American Theater Association, Chicago, August 1970.

company in 1966, originally directed the actors in traditional scripted performances until he became aware of the estrangement between the company's target audience, "the forgotten people," and their depiction in the pieces the company performed. In 1969 Alexander made a decision: "Temporarily, at least, we have to get rid of the middleman—the playwright."<sup>398</sup> That temporary decision soon became the company's identifying feature, as its interracial troupe of five professional actors abandoned the concepts of playwright, stage, and audience to create improvised, participatory texts that were not only rooted in the lives of the young people with whom they worked but that also responded to the expressed needs of the youthful spectator-actors.<sup>399</sup> Living Stage's style of performance, which was designed to nurture a more positive, hopeful identity among apparently disaffected youths, contrasted sharply with Arena's mostly classical, high-brow repertoire and largely white, upper-middle class, college educated professional theater audience. The Living Stage did not, however, resolve the tension between Arena and the immediate neighbors.<sup>400</sup> Because the company performed at "schools, churches, playgrounds, hospitals, recreations centers, libraries, and even prisons" and not at the Arena itself, its work remained largely behind the scenes and out of the public sphere.<sup>401</sup>

The Living Stage's invisibility had as much to do with the nature of its work as it did with the choices of the company's director, Robert Alexander. For the most part, he

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<sup>398</sup> Alan M. Kriegsman, "The Theater of 'Involvement,'" *Washington Post*, 28 June 1970, 10(F).

<sup>399</sup> Living Stage's performance techniques came to resemble Augusto Boal's community-oriented approach to performance and theater. Boal's spectator-actor does not simply witness and/or comment on the performance but is called on to step into the action to resolve the text's conflicts and dilemmas. See Augusto Boal, trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, *The Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Urizen Books, 1979); Augusto Boal, trans. Adrian Jackson, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (New York: Routledge, 1992), and Augusto Boal, trans. Adrian Jackson, *The Rainbow of Desire: the Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>400</sup> See Chapter Five.

<sup>401</sup> "The Theater of 'Involvement'," 10(F).

eschewed public performances for the troupe, preferring instead to nurture his clientele's sense of identity. Although that invisibility might have magnified the company's commitment to its children and their needs, it weakened the company's impact on the consciousness of the greater Washington public and their sense of theater. Even though Living Stage thrived beneath Arena's large institutional umbrella for more than thirty years, few Washingtonians knew of the company or the considerable significance of its work.<sup>402</sup>

In 1967, Naomi Eftis, the former chairperson of the Congress of Racial Equality's Community Organization Committee and the music teacher at its Freedom School, founded Back Alley Theater in Washington's Capital Hill neighborhood just east of the Capital building. Its name was derived from the fact that the theater's first production was performed in Eftis' garage, with "the orchestra floor a driveway and the troupe a motley of neighborhood kids and friends of the producer."<sup>403</sup> Audience members had to stand in the alley. This space and troupe not only encouraged identification between the performance event and its intended audience, but also revealed theater of identity's original impulse: to make art that eliminated the separation between the aesthetic event and the community for which the object or event was intended. Following the uprisings of 1968, Back Alley's status within the Washington community rose rapidly. In early 1968 it occupied St. Stephen's small Capitol Hill stage with its multi-dimensional program of creative dramatics, playwriting classes, and productions for adults and

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<sup>402</sup> In 1984, when the Living Stage acquired its space on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, its public visibility increased; but, again, because of a scarcity of public performances the theater's identity within the public sphere remained minimal. The Living Stage closed in 2002.

<sup>403</sup> "For Ghetto Kids: Alley Theater Making a Bow," *The Washington Star* 4 September 1967, 2(B).

children. By the end of the year, however, the theater outgrew St. Stephen and moved to the larger Church of the Reformation on East Capitol Street, where it opened with a four play repertoire of original scripts written by area adults and youth.

Although Back Alley's origins in a garage, where they used coffee cans for lights and neighborhood children for actors, contrasted with Living Stage's privileged access to Equity actors and a professional staff, both organizations sought to bridge the divide between theater and a constituency that had been underrepresented in traditional performances. On the one hand, Living Stage used the guidance of professional actors to create new texts for youth within distressed communities; on the other, Back Alley produced texts written by the adults and children who attended their playwriting classes. The rapid rise of Back Alley can be attributed directly to the establishment of the NEA and public funding for theater; more importantly, however, it demonstrated the urgent need after the uprisings for expressions of racial reconciliation within impoverished neighborhoods only blocks from the halls of the federal government.

Washington's Everyman Street Theater was a by-product of the Kennedy Center's need to repair its relationship with the African American community prior to its opening. For that reason, its focus had less to do with identity formation than with training African American youth in the techniques of musical production. With financial assistance from the Center, Workshops for Careers in the Arts founded Everyman Theater as an educational street theater in 1970. Another aspect of its mission was to make professional opportunities available to its youthful African American performers. Although this purpose might situate the theater in direct opposition to social norms concerning race and performance in Washington, the theater did not challenge the deeper

roots of those norms. Rather, Everyman simply wanted discriminatory practices inside the performing arts community to end. To be sure, Everyman Theater was not known for its social activism, but by using a performance model—street performance—that had acquired subversive symbolism on the streets of New York during the 1960s, the company's work assumed social implications, which were frequently more ironic than explicit. For example, by using street corner venues, Everyman encouraged performers and African American audiences to identify with each other; the choice of space, however, emphasized the fact that its performers and performances were denied access to powerful institutions like the Kennedy Center. A further irony resided in the fact that a successful Everyman performer invariably moved indoors, inside those same institutions of power, no longer to perform for the community that made him or her successful to begin with.

Although Everyman Theater reminded people of the absence of black performers on professional stages, it could not address the absence of a viable African American theatrical culture in Washington, D.C. Although African American organizations occasionally produced shows during the 1960s, these organizations did not aspire to become theaters. They were civic organizations, churches, or prison groups that found cause to produce. They picked up the production mantle, presenting Hansberry's *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, the plays of Leroi Jones, and occasionally an original script. Though of merit, these activities were not part of a coherent African American theatrical

culture, and thus could not galvanize the community or satisfy its desire for performance.<sup>404</sup>

The absence of a coherent African American theatrical culture was rooted in a set of related financial and social factors. When LBJ's War on Poverty began during the mid-1960s, local political leaders acknowledged that D.C.'s majority black population was beset by unemployment, lack of opportunity, gun violence, drugs, and little hope of change. In this distressed environment, a theatrical culture required the support of national resources. A committed individual might manage a performance or two; but for that commitment to translate into a sustainable community with a recognizable identity, producers would need to raise extra money through either higher ticket prices or additional benefactors. Higher ticket prices would make building an audience more difficult. While the opening of the Kennedy Center raised the profile of theater and the performing arts throughout the greater Washington region, the establishment of the NEA made it easier for both African American and other theaters to find additional benefactors.

The founding of the D.C. Black Repertory Company under the leadership of Robert Hooks highlighted all the issues of funding a professional theater in Washington's African American community.<sup>405</sup> Although most theaters of identity approached the founding of theater through their communities, Hooks took a decidedly high profile,

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<sup>404</sup> When Arena Stage extended its 1970 production of *No Place to Be Somebody* by Charles Gordone, it demonstrated a growing hunger in the black community for plays that not only spoke to them about their definition of self but that also originated from within their community.

<sup>405</sup> By 1970 the idea of African American theater was "no longer a novelty on the American stage." What began in New York had spread to most northern and to even a few southern cities. In fact, the absence of a viable African American theater in Washington was reflective on the rapid demographic changes in the city's African American population and the subsequent cultural instability such changes caused. See Mance Williams, *Black Theater in the 1960s and 1970s: a Critical Analysis of the Movement* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), 14.

media-driven approach. His celebrity status opened doors that would have been closed to most local theater artists. The largest door that he pushed ajar was the one to Roger Stevens and the Kennedy Center.<sup>406</sup> After discussions with Stevens collapsed, Hooks approached Arena with a request “to use the facilities of the Kreeger Theater.”<sup>407</sup> When that effort also failed, Hooks and associates pressured the Washington elites to support an independent professional African American theater downtown. They entertained “Hollywood film-makers, White House officials, representatives of private foundations, and a host of entertainment world friends ... at the old Sammy Davis Jr. Night Club.”<sup>408</sup> The pressure failed, however, to shake loose enough dollars to create a significant venue from scratch.

As hopes of finding an established theater space faded, Hooks tried a more grassroots approach. This time, he found and renovated the abandoned Colony movie theater in a middle class African American commercial strip along Georgia Avenue in upper northwest Washington. Once there, Hooks discovered what those before him had found: Washington’s disempowered, colonial status had degraded the cultural cohesion of D.C.’s African American community. On the one hand, material neglect had eroded social spaces committed to the production of culture. On the other, an inadequate educational system had rendered the object of culture (in this case performance) conceptually inaccessible to a vast majority of African Americans. As Hooks reported in an article in the *Star*, one day he was talking with some folks outside a Hot Shoppe near the theater; he told a man that “You gotta come and see the play” to which the man

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<sup>406</sup> See Chapter Four for a more detailed account of Hooks involvement with the Center.

<sup>407</sup> Muriel Morisey, “Founding a Black Rep Theater,” *Evening Star*, 19 September 1970, 1(C).

<sup>408</sup> Gus Constantine, “Black Theater is Launched,” *Evening Star*, 26 February 1971, 10(C).

replied, “What’s a play?”<sup>409</sup> This exchange could be viewed as an indication of the educational divide between the two men. More importantly, however, it signified the cultural divide between Hooks, the professional artist who came of age in New York and Hollywood, and the man on the streets of Washington. In other words, in his desire to establish a professional theater in Washington’s distressed soil, Hooks did not consider significantly enough the fact that there was no viable theatrical culture left in Washington’s African American community. When *Star* reviewer Jacqueline Trescott praised the theater’s opening in 1972, she mistakenly called the Lost Colony Theater “the Last Colony Theater,” an unintentional reference to the city’s colonial status.<sup>410</sup>

While the D.C. Black Repertory was in the early stages of finding an appropriate venue for a theater, a feminist theater collective, Earth Onion, began organizing its company even though it had no space. In fact, Onion seemingly preferred a more nomadic existence, thus preserving its freedom to meet and perform where feminists met and organized. Onion’s mission emerged just as the feminist community of Washington began coalescing during the early 1970s. Several members of the troupe “saw a performance of Living Stage ... [and] realized that the distinction between rehearsals and performance didn’t have to be as great as we’d made it.”<sup>411</sup> The eight women “and two scallions (babies)” who made up the collective saw theater as a means of self and group exploration.<sup>412</sup> In other words, Onion saw theater as a method for conceptualizing and articulating the group’s identity. Living Stage’s dramatic techniques allowed the

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<sup>409</sup> David Richards, “Selling the ‘Black Rep’ on Georgia Avenue,” *Evening Star*, 22 October 1972, n.p. *Washingtonian*.

<sup>410</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, “A Bright Opening,” *Evening Star* 9 September 1972, 11(A).

<sup>411</sup> “Earth Onion Scrapbook,” *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 2, Number 2, October 1971, 2.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

company to craft dramatic spaces out of the participatory exercises that they used to explore their relationship to each other, their peers, and the broader society. They then shared these dramatic experiences in group interaction at various feminist gatherings. Like the Living Stage, Onion seemed to eschew performances for a general public in favor of the intimacy of feminist gathering. Unlike Living Stage, however, Onion did not have the institutional protection that Arena's umbrella provided.

The Onion received its first coverage, not in any of the major Washington dailies or weeklies, but in the recently established feminist journal *Off Our Backs*.<sup>413</sup> Earth Onion scored a major article in the journal's October 1971 edition, entitled "Earth Onion Scrapbook." Although the group had done five performances of their improvisational performance-exercises at various locations near their home base in the Dupont Circle area of Washington, the article did not focus on performances, but rather on the lives and personalities of the women who constituted the troupe. The descriptions of the performances that were included had few specific details, which probably reflected both Onion's attention to process over product and the feminist community's focus at that time on consciousness raising. In fact, Onion seemed to employ many of the same techniques used in the feminist movement's consciousness raising sessions. In *Feminist Theater Groups*, Dinah Leawitt discussed how consciousness-raising techniques had "been employed by [feminist theater] groups to facilitate in-group communication."<sup>414</sup> The *Off Our Backs*' article described the troupe's work as an expression of "'hang-ups' and suppressed anger ... when we listened to ourselves at our sisters' urgings and let our

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<sup>413</sup> During the early 1970s, *Off Our Backs* presented a more local, Washington perspective than the one that they acquired in later years.

<sup>414</sup> Dinah Loise Leawitt, *Feminist Theater Groups* (McFarland & Company, Inc: Jefferson, N.C., 1980), 93.

feelings out into our voices, eyes, cheek muscles, tongues, hands, breasts, hips, feet.”<sup>415</sup>

The writer combined process-related descriptions with photographs of outdoor performances on circular stages and of actresses engaged in rhythmic movement. From these elements, readers could formulate a clear impression of just what kind of rituals Earth Onion sought to realize. Instead of telling tales, the troupe itself was the tale in which audiences were expected to participate and, in the process, create a communal space within which both actresses and audiences could transform “neuroses into beauty and strength.”<sup>416</sup>

In a significant sense the absence of scripts, or even play titles, embodied the orality of Onion’s collective experience and was indicative of this early stage of Washington’s theater of identity. For the most part, writing remained the act of a solitary individual. Even the act of transcription would have necessitated an individual editor willing to engage in an act of transformation, shifting the locus of a text from the consciousness of the ensemble to the consciousness of a single individual. Onion’s performances, however raw they must have been, manifested both the troupe’s and the community’s collective identity. Significantly, Onion’s lack of a coherent authorial voice paralleled a similar lack in the feminist community of the early 1970s, which was still struggling to formulate a voice and a precise agenda.

### *Section II: Phase Two: Finding Space*

The second phase in the development of Washington’s theaters of identity began in 1970 when Back Alley found a space in a middle class, mixed-race residential

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<sup>415</sup> “Earth Onion Scrapbook,” 5.

neighborhood in upper northwest. By that time its mission had expanded to include an adult company; that aspect of its operation would soon take on a much more substantial role in the construction of Back Alley's complex identity. Soon afterwards, the Black American Theater and the Black Repertory opened their doors to the south and east, creating for a time a recognizable, if inchoate, alternative theatrical community in an area of the city hitherto devoid of theater.<sup>417</sup>

When Back Alley opened in 1967, it was perceived as a novelty by the press. *The Star* carried a photograph unaccompanied by any text: the handful of adults and children, white and black, stand in an alley, gazing into the lights of the children's production. The photograph engenders curiosity and invokes an urban version of the well-known theatrical yarn of a piano and a barn. In other words, people who want to perform invent stages any time and anywhere. At the same time, the headline of a short article in *The Post* about Back Alley and its garage production began "For Ghetto Kids...." If a reader associated this headline with *The Star*'s photograph—an unlikely scenario given the papers' different readerships—then the disconnect between the word "ghetto" and the image of middle class people, both African American and Caucasian, standing in an alley watching a performance would have been more apparent.

For long time Washingtonians, "Back Alley" would have signified more than what the photograph denoted.<sup>418</sup> For years, an alley culture, rooted in the District's

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>417</sup> This period of community building also saw the emergence of Latino performances by Teatro Latino and of a new women's theater, Washington Area Feminist Theater (WAFT). Both organizations were destined to be short-lived, but they foreshadowed theater of identity's development in the late 1970s and will be dealt with later in the chapter.

<sup>418</sup> The double meaning of the name "Back Alley" is not referred to anywhere in the theater's literature.

slaveholding history, had persisted throughout the city. The white establishment spent years trying to eradicate this culture because of its alleged unsavoriness. During the 1960s, they almost succeeded in bringing it to an end. Thus, “Back Alley” might have struck a particular chord in the progressive and African American communities because it brought to mind the invisibility of African Americans and their struggle for social justice. This invisibility was particularly true of poorer African Americans, who suffered the double indignity of both racial and class discrimination.<sup>419</sup>

Within a few years, Back Alley transformed itself from a bi-racial children’s theater operating out of a garage in Capital Hill into a multipurpose theater company performing a range of artistic and social service functions—and it did so with the urgency of the newly converted. With financial aid from the D.C. Commission on the Arts, Back Alley moved into an apartment complex in a mixed-race residential neighborhood near the corner of Kennedy and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets; the space was “a basement room under a dry cleaners with a thrust stage and about 75 seats.”<sup>420</sup> Back Alley’s thoroughly unique setting highlighted its activism. Although the company’s mission included a range of communities and issues, its location was an important signifier of the theater’s equal emphasis on performance and issues of social justice. In a sense, it desegregated itself conceptually just as the neighborhood desegregated itself racially. In this way, the neighborhood was iconographic of Back Alley’s larger testimony or message. The theater’s success would depend on its ability to attract a variety of communities to its small auditorium. Hence, for the theater to succeed, not only would its productions have

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<sup>419</sup> The assassination of Dr. King had increased the consequences of such invisibility and magnified the need for people to take issues of justice to the streets and demand political rights.

<sup>420</sup> Mary Weigers, “Home is Heaven for Back Alley Theater,” *Washington Post*, 22 January 1970, 1(C).

to provoke discussion about issues of social justice, but also, in the long term, that discussion and the discourse those discussions produced would have to trump the discourse associated with identity politics. If Washingtonians perceived Back Alley as a community theater, as an African American theater, or as a feminist theater, then the theatrical organization would not be able to attract a diversity of counter-publics. The strength of Back Alley and of those counter-publics that formed the community upon which Back Alley built its programs lay in their ability to cooperate with one another.

The nature of Back Alley's space also reinforced the two sides of the theater's identity. On the one hand, its non-traditional theater space was pragmatic. Washington did not have enough theaters, and existing spaces were usually beyond the financial means of middle class producers and audience members. This fact was particularly true of an institution like Back Alley, which did not see theater as a special "night on the town" or even as an aesthetic experience, but rather as a vital center for cultural democracy and consciousness. On the other hand, Back Alley's basement beneath an apartment complex signified just such a space: its utility undercut the glamour that a traditional theater-going public expected on an evening out; the space's anonymity heightened the counter-cultural edge of its intentions, a space where a community meeting might be held away from the eyes and ears at street level.

In its early years, the theater combined its artistic, political, and social service functions by producing two programs, each emphasizing a different aspect of the same socio-aesthetic vision. For example, the company produced five scripted plays in 1970: John Herbert's *Fortune in Men's Eyes*, Irvin Carter's *Bury the Dead*, Terrence McNally's *Bringing it all Back Home*, Douglass Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, and Tennessee

Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*. The repertoire demonstrated a preference for provocative scripts that challenged the public. Yet, with the possible exception of *The Rose Tattoo*, each text addressed a different counter-public (or group associated with a counter-public): *Bury the Dead* and *Bringing it all Back Home* spoke to the anti-war movement; *Day of Absence*, to the African American community; and *Fortune in Men's Eyes*, to the public interested in prison reform. Back Alley's second program offered a much more activist agenda; the company presented a series of theatrical projects that represented the city's diverse counter-publics. These events, entitled for example, "Blacks in Theater," "Drugs in Theater," "Homosexuality in Theater," and "Women in Theater," included a performance followed by an open forum on public policy and related social issues. In one production, the company brought "the head of the District's prison system in as a spectator;" during post-show discussions, he had to listen "to relentless criticism of prison life."<sup>421</sup> Of course, this fusion of performance with dialogue and social action was not new in the history of theater; but, in the context of Washington's theatrical culture, Back Alley's willingness to move its social service and social justice missions from the background to the foreground forced local media to acknowledge that its theatrical identity transcended pure entertainment. Back Alley's identity allowed it to become an agora where issues of importance to the community were witnessed, experienced, and then discussed, sometimes with the appropriate political functionary present in the audience. When Back Alley's performances were viewed individually, each was associated with a specific constituency. When the performances were viewed as a whole, however, they came to represent a coalition of constituencies, not only from across the

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<sup>421</sup> Gus Constantine, "Back Alley Production Takes Aim at Prisons," *Washington Afro-American*, 13 April 1970, 2(C).

spectrum of identity politics, but also from constituencies associated with a variety of political causes, from prison reform and drug abuse to the frustrated anti-war movement. In doing so, the program illustrated visually the role that theater could play in creating a dialogue between artists and activists about issues of concern to them both.

Initially, the media struggled to categorize Back Alley's theater activities. Most outlets categorized the fledgling operation as a community theater even though the major dailies, *The Post* and *The Star* reviewed their productions—coverage not afforded other community theaters. Because Back Alley also focused on contemporary social issues and public policy, some in the press resisted the appellation of “theater” when writing about their productions. *The Star* and *The Post* placed articles on Back Alley's theatrical forums in their “Metro” sections where issues addressed by the company were highlighted. Back Alley enjoyed such coverage because their productions energized sectors of the public who did not traditionally attend the theater. Not until the late 1970s, when *The Post* upgraded Back Alley's status by including its productions in the regular theater listings, did the company's simulation in the media become more conventional.

Certain elements within the media recognized the passion and commitment of Back Alley's performers and producers. In *The Star* Gus Constantine wrote, “As a community theater, Back Alley feels a strong responsibility to perform not only works that are specifically meaningful to the community the theater serves, but also to provide an outlet where social issues ... can be aired through the medium of the performing arts.”<sup>422</sup> Allan Kriegsman followed in *The Post*: “Back Alley may not be the most elegant theater in town, but it continues to prove itself one of the liveliest ... and also

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<sup>422</sup> Gus Constantine, “Back Alley Spells Out Blackness,” *The Evening Star*, 21 July 1970, 1(B).

manages to both entertain and provoke its audiences on a level of sophistication too seldom encountered elsewhere.”<sup>423</sup> Back Alley’s venue enhanced these kind of perceptions; the strangeness of its location created the impression of a committed amateurism. Back Alley’s social space supported its aesthetic standard, which was a standard that the theater deliberately associated with and connected to the community’s narratives and issues. In other words, the media was unable to isolate Back Alley’s productions from their integral publics. In summer 1971 a fire closed Back Alley’s theater. Demonstrating its flexibility, the troupe moved into the District’s parks, where it performed Douglas Turner Ward’s *Day of Absence* until moneys could be raised for renovation.

By 1974, under Naomi Eftis’ leadership, Back Alley achieved institutional stability and become a significant voice in the social change community. At the same time it had “begun the most ambitious season in its eight year history,” introducing audiences to what it called a variety of local firsts.<sup>424</sup> According to its own promotional literature, Back Alley was the first to do plays from the Black Arts Movement and to address homosexual themes; the first to do bilingual theater through its “Teatro Doble” program; and the first to employ non-traditional casting.<sup>425</sup> To be sure, each of these firsts had been done prior to Back Alley’s experience of them. Evidence does suggest, however, that Back Alley was the first theater to make those programs central to its identity. In its small space, the company produced nine shows that year, three of which

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<sup>423</sup> Alan M. Kriegsman, “‘Gay’ Drama at Back Alley,” *The Washington Post*, 17 August 1970, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>424</sup> “Back Alley,” *D.C. Gazette*, November 1974, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>425</sup> The Back Alley Theater, 1974 Season Brochure. Washingtoniana, Vertical Files.

had six-week runs while the other six ran for two weeks. Back Alley also shared its space with other theaters, working in conjunction with Teatro Latino and the Washington Area Feminist Theater (WAFT). As its first season brochure proclaimed, “in contrast to the Kennedy Center, the Back Alley Theater has developed itself from its own Washington grassroots.”<sup>426</sup> Despite its basement location, Back Alley earned coverage in the major print media that rivaled Arena’s Kreeger Theater.

Back Alley led the way in establishing a voice for theaters of identity within the local public sphere, but soon two African American theaters, the Black American Theater and the D.C. Black Repertory, joined in. As with Back Alley, space proved central to their ability to assert themselves organizationally in the public sphere. In contrast to Back Alley, which transformed a basement into a 75-seat theatrical forum, these two companies chose to convert abandoned, 500-seat movie houses into theaters. Differences between the two types of space highlighted a crucial difference between Back Alley’s mission in its community and the African American theaters’ mission in theirs. Back Alley approached the theatrical event as a catalyst, for direct action on specific social issues and as an instigator in the larger process of cultural change. These two African American theatrical operations were focused more on the control of property and space.<sup>427</sup> Former Black Rep director Vantile Whitfield reflected twenty years later about the Rep’s venue: “Black folks want something concrete—if not, to them it is just your

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> By referring to the control of property and space, I do not mean to imply that African American theater artists wanted to purchase their venues. Rather, property and architecture have tangible significance; theatrical activities—the classes and the performances—are fleeting. For artists to take control of space is to prove their commitment to more than just a performance; it is to become a material part of a community.

dream.”<sup>428</sup> As Mike Sell writes in his essay on the Black Arts Movement, the acquisition of identifiable theatrical structures strengthened theater’s ability to “answer specific sociopolitical needs, particularly to a community that is economically distressed and politically advanced.”<sup>429</sup> In other words, control of a theater building suggested more than just performances to a community; it also implied jobs and economic development. Washington had rapidly transformed from a predominantly white town into a predominantly black one. As a result, a disproportionate number of African Americans were poor and without property, which in turn intensified the African American community’s identification of theater with property and economics. The African American population was eager to control property and establish its identity through ownership. Even though the Howard Players was a Theater of Community, it was the only African American company in the city. Since the mid-1960s, African American shows had appeared sporadically at white-controlled venues. What African Americans longed for was control over a traditional theatrical venue, a space where African American artists and producers commanded the representational apparatus. In a city beset by images of African American crime, the production of positive images became paramount. The control of venues was an essential ingredient in the representational equation.

A year before Hooks’ D.C. Black Repertory Theater, BAT opened its doors in a predominantly African American neighborhood. In contrast to the high profile, pre-

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<sup>428</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, “Fade-Out; It Has Talent, Money, a Stable Middle Class. So Why Hasn’t D.C. Had a Black Repertory Company for the Past Decade?” *Washington Post* 7, November 1993, 1(G).

<sup>429</sup> Mike Sell, “The Black Arts Movement: Performance, Neo-Orality, and the Destruction of the ‘White Thing’,” in *African American Performance and Theater History*, edited by Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (Oxford University Press: New York, 2001), 65.

established theatrical venue preferred by Hooks, BAT's location "sadly mirror[ed] many urban streets. The wide vista of Rhode Island Avenue and First Streets reflect[ed] a desolation and dustiness even in the blaring sunshine."<sup>430</sup> Such a space would hardly inspire people interested in a night on the town; but BAT's repertoire, which was not commercial, would not have attracted them anyway. BAT's first show, *El Hajj Malik*, a play about Malcolm X, "slipped quietly into action" on the same night that the Kennedy Center threw an exclusive gala for financial supporters.<sup>431</sup>

BAT's vision concerned social transformation rather than celebration. The members of BAT hoped that their work renovating the old Sylvan Theater, vacant since 1966, would act as a signifier of the artistic work happening inside. Community residents who witnessed the theater's renovation experienced the transformation. "There's a certain lift to everyone's walk who crosses the theater's freshly painted threshold. Passers-by spotting the colorful marquee or hearing the continuous music, peek in and ask ... 'When do auditions start?'"<sup>432</sup> Such energy demonstrated that the presence of live theater in the neighborhood was more important to many of its residents than the productions themselves. In other words, BAT's emerging narrative about resurrecting an old theater in northeast Washington was more significant than a story that the theater might tell on its stage. Their appetite for theater whetted, BAT's theater artists hoped that local residents would become loyal supporters of the company. Later on, BAT's geographic limitations and enormous auditorium proved fatal, however; for, like other theaters of identity, BAT's survival depended on its capacity to reach audiences beyond

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<sup>430</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, "Beauty That Touches the Black Spirit," *Evening Star*, 6 June 1971, 9(H).

<sup>431</sup> Gus Constantine, "More Ghetto Root Planting, Black Theater's Symbolic Parallel," *Evening Star*, 9 June 1971, 20(C).

their immediate geography. That is why BAT's narrative about taking ownership of the space, which neighborhood residents could appreciate, had to translate into performance narratives that were equally engaging. If BAT had found those engaging performance narrative, then those stories might have found expression in the media, and the theater could have reached beyond the confines of neighborhood, attracting African Americans throughout the city.

Thanks to its high profile founder, the D.C. Black Repertory Company had no problem attracting media from around Washington. When the converted movie theater finally opened, "lighting up a darkened corner of Georgia Avenue and a neglected corner of Washington's cultural life," the Black Rep joined Back Alley and BAT to form a triumvirate of challenging new theaters in Washington.<sup>433</sup> Although the Black Rep lasted only a few years, the memory of its existence reverberated throughout the region for decades as the city's most serious attempt to create a professional African American theater.

When Hooks decided to locate the Black Rep in upper northwest in a commercial strip of the African American business community, he had to rethink his original plan, which had called for an established location downtown or in the Kennedy Center or at Arena Stage. Such a prime location would have given the Black Rep instant legitimacy, ala the Goodman Theater in Chicago.<sup>434</sup> With instant legitimacy, the Black Rep would have served as an equalizer between the African American public and Washington's

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<sup>432</sup> "Beauty That Touches," 9(H).

<sup>433</sup> "Fade Out," 1(G).

<sup>434</sup> For a discussion of the founding of the Goodman Theater see Berkowitz, Gerald M. *New Broadways: Theatre Across America, 1950-1980*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982.

existing white, professional theater community. For not only was the Black Rep going to bring the best new African American plays to the city, but it was also going to foster a whole host of young talent. Legitimacy would have given the ambitious Hooks the financial resources required to weather the theater's early years while he nurtured talent and developed an audience. After abandoning his pursuit of an established house and enough funding to support a full Equity theater, Hooks tried to merge his pursuit of instant professionalism with the realities of his community-centric space. Unlike Back Alley, which drew its strength from the grassroots, the Black Rep had "promised something more: a full company of Actors' Equity union players, a regular schedule, a home base and the experience of Hooks, who had been a founder of the Negro Ensemble Company."<sup>435</sup> As a result, just as Fichandler and Marlin-Jones had longed for Washingtonians to see Arena and WTC as community-centric, so too did Hooks want the economically-stressed African American community to see the old movie house on Georgia Avenue as its very own. Unfortunately, whereas Arena and WTC's aesthetic harmonized with its space and public, the professional, moneyed aesthetic Hooks created at the Black Rep conflicted with the impoverished social space around the theater.

Although the theater immediately attracted the attention of local African American actors, dancers, and other theater artists, from the beginning the tension between the Black Rep's aesthetics and the social condition of its community generated concerns. Actors came from around the region to audition for the Black Rep. Those that were not cast in production joined the theater's free training program, which "all the

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<sup>435</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, "Fade-Out; It has Talent, Money, a Stable Middle Class. So Why Hasn't D.C. Had a Black Repertory Company for the Past Decade?" *Washington Post*, 7 February 1993, 11(G).

politicos came out” [and] “especially praised.”<sup>436</sup> Such praise only affirmed what Paul Allen, BAT’s founder, had said about his own life, spent “shuttling between the poverty war and the arts.”<sup>437</sup> He considered both the war on poverty and the pursuit of art “as having a common objective ... to involve the black community ... to develop skills [and] its creative forces.”<sup>438</sup> Although Allen saw the two careers as having the same objective, they apparently could not be done simultaneously as he had to “shuttle between” them. The same duality applied to the two realms in which the Black Rep operated. An exchange between Hooks and a potential patron exemplified this tension. “How’s your theater?” the patron asked. Hooks responded, “It’s not my theater. It’s yours. When are you going to come and check it out?” He later told the reporter: “It’s important that they know it’s owned and operated by blacks and that nobody is getting rich off it.”<sup>439</sup> Although Hooks’ statement was accurate, his hope that residents would perceive the theater as their own was little more than a pipe dream; for, although starving actors may produce a performance, starving audiences rarely see it. People engage in theater after they have lifted themselves out of poverty, unless of course they can lift themselves out of poverty by engaging in theater. For the man on Georgia Avenue to think of the Black Rep as his own, he would first have to see himself as a producer of culture and theater. To see himself in that light, however, he would have to participate in the making of culture and theater, and Washington’s African American community in early 1970 did not have a strong cultural milieu, except within the music industry; for example, it did not

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<sup>436</sup> Joel Dreyfuss, “A Season Postponed,, Black Rep postponed for at least a month,” *Washington Post*, 29 March 1974, 10(D).

<sup>437</sup> Gus Constantine, “Involving Blacks in Theater,” *Evening Star*, 10 November 1970, 41(A).

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>439</sup> “Selling the ‘Black Rep,’” n.p. *Washingtoniana*.

have a Theater of Community upon which to build an understanding of theater as social apparatus. As a result, to survive the Black Rep would have to act as both a professional and amateur theater organization; to do that, the company would have to provide the African American public both a socio-political aesthetic and a social apparatus. The free classes might provide the community with enough of a social apparatus. The challenge lay in synchronizing the social space with Hooks' professional aesthetic vision; for a 500-seat movie house to function as a theater was inconceivable to most area residents. Not only did the local economy render a professional theatrical culture unimaginable, but also the cultural circumstances of Washington's African American community would require a sustained effort by the Black Rep to construct a viable, informed theater-going public.

Despite these challenges, the Black Rep's productions had their intended effect; the company romanced the community with a variety of new scripts, innovative productions of both national and local interest, and splashy uptown pizzazz. On opening night "the Last [sic] Colony Theater, barren for two years after housing second-string, Grade B movies, looked ... like Christmas Eve at Grand Central Station."<sup>440</sup> Inside the theater, the performance of Evan Walker's *Coda* was not nearly so celebratory. The "slice of life" drama depicted the "the social contract" in the African American community as "rotten and [needing] to be changed."<sup>441</sup> Such domestic realism did not, however, become the theater's calling card. A professional dance company helped the theater experiment with a variety of performance styles, as demonstrated by productions like *Changes* by Valerian Smith and *Owen's Song*, conceived and directed by Glenda

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<sup>440</sup> "A Bright Opening," 11(A).

<sup>441</sup> Motojicho ("Coda's director and the theater's Artistic Director) as quoted by David Richards in Backstage, "Provocative Debut" *Evening Star*, 11 September 1972, 12(C).

Dickerson and Mike Malone. Both productions combined poetry and dance to create works that local critics classified as ritual theater.<sup>442</sup>

Although many productions flourished and crowds formed “long and patient lines down Georgia Avenue,” the company suffered “from a search for an identity that has been aggravated by internal dissent.”<sup>443</sup> Internal tensions festered between those on the theater’s board of directors who favored a more realistic style of performance and those who wanted ritual and experimentation. The camp favoring realism did so because they believed that it would appeal to a broader cross-section of African Americans. A community hungry for representation—so their thinking went—wanted realism because its strength lay in its ability to depict life in a seemingly objective manner. The experimental camp, on the other hand, believed that African Americans appreciated ritual and experimentation because those styles of performance separated African American theater more distinctly from the traditional strands of European drama, which depended heavily on concepts of characterization and plot. Despite the Black Rep’s preference for ritual theater, audiences rallied around many of their shows. As Charles Farrow reported in the *Afro-American* after attending the new musical *Changes*: “Something great still happens when you attend a performance at the DC Black Repertory Theater.... People come away positively unglued at the intensity of the

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<sup>442</sup> Joel Dreyfuss, “Success, Survival and the Black Repertory,” *Washington Post* 1 December 1974, 1(G). Other African American theaters were already experimenting with the ritual form. New York’s National Black Theater, founded by Barbara Ann Teer “coined the term ritualistic revivals to describe what they did.” Robert McBeth’s New Lafayette Theater experimented with ritual forms as well. Mance Williams, *Black Theater in the 1960s and 1970s: A Historical, Critical Analysis of the Movement* (Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, 1985), 51.

<sup>443</sup> “Success, Survival and the Black Repertory,” 1(G).

blackness of the production ... so many black people grooving to the same vibrations.”<sup>444</sup> Clearly, Farrow was responding more to the effect of the production on the audience than to the production itself. The experience seemed to have cathartic possibilities. Writing in *The Star* about Arthur Roberson’s *Don’t Leave Go My Hand*, another of the Black Rep’s rituals, David Richards states: “Unlike much black theater, which springs from today’s social and political realities, *Don’t Leave Go My Hand*, is rooted in a purely metaphysical anguish.”<sup>445</sup> Thus, unlike *Coda*, which required African American audiences to observe and think about their “social contract” with the dominant “white” society, ritualistic productions required them to participate in the performance experience itself. More than any other style of performance, participatory rituals require audiences to feel comfortable and liberated. According to Farrow’s account, with many of its productions the Black Rep successfully manifested that spirit of participation and Hooks’ sense of collective ownership. Nevertheless, as Black Repertory’s board member Jack Gibson stated, “Ritual Theater is too heavy.”<sup>446</sup> His underlying message was clear: many in the African American community favored mimetic plays over the potentially cathartic experience of ritual performance.

The Black Rep’s fourth season was its most ambitious, even though the theater itself continued to suffer financial difficulties. In fact, except for theatrical reviews, most of the theater’s press coverage consisted of pleas by Hooks for financial assistance. Unable to garner much government support because of inadequate administrative

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<sup>444</sup> Charles Farrow, “Changes’ Communicates, the Issues are Clear,” *Washington Afro American*, 15 December 1973, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>445</sup> David Richards, “Mad, Eerie Look into a Loveless Universe,” *Evening Star*, 17 June 1974, n.p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>446</sup> “Success, Survival and the Black Repertory,” 11(G).

bookkeeping, at the opening of its fourth season Hooks “appealed for patrons to donate \$100 to the financially troubled theater company.”<sup>447</sup> A cheaply printed subscription brochure announced the theater’s bicentennial season, which dramatized “the historic role played by Blacks in the development of the American Republic.”<sup>448</sup> Productions included *Bacchae of Euripides* by Wole Soyinka, *Swing Low, Sweet Steamboat* by Ron Daniels, *A Day—A Life—A People* conceived and directed by Bernice Reagon, and *The Great Debate*, a dramatization of great speeches by African Americans. Despite the fanfare, the season was a bust.

The theater’s fifth season opened without Robert Hooks and in a theater building a mile closer to downtown. Maybe people hoped that a venue closer to downtown, the traditional center of entertainment in Washington, might be more attractive to African Americans out for a “night on the town.” Unfortunately, the company’s standards had slipped because of the loss of funding, a situation made worse by the theater’s decision to highlight the achievements of its students in its publicity. By December 1976, The D.C. Black Repertory Company had folded.

An avalanche of press analyzed the theater’s demise. Hooks “blamed meager government support, the failure of fund-raising campaigns, and complacency in Washington for the closing.”<sup>449</sup> Some critics blamed the theater’s ritualistic style. Others looked to the African American community itself, saying that underlying the Black Rep’s “sad history is a curious mind-set that still thrives in the black community, where many

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<sup>447</sup> “Working Behind the Scene, Appealing for Theatrical Aid,” *Evening Star*, 9 September 1975, 2(B).

<sup>448</sup> Black Rep Season Brochure for 1975/1976 in Washingtoniana, Vertical Files.

<sup>449</sup> David Richards, “Hooks Disappointed,” *Evening Star*, 11 December 1976, 2(E).

still wait for an imprimatur from the white arts Establishment.”<sup>450</sup> Most, however, blamed the Washington public. Hooks spent six years trying to generate interest in a professional African American theater in Washington. He raised enough funds to begin the project at a minimal level, but he could not create enough support within the donor community. Although productions were well attended by some accounts, far too frequently his 500-seat theater had empty chairs. Hooks could only say: “Washington is a traditional town, a town that has spent very little time dealing with culture. The importance of culture is not felt the way it should be and the priorities here need to be reshaped.”<sup>451</sup> Although Hooks was certainly correct to point out that Washingtonians of all races and classes did not understand the importance of culture in the 1970s, he also bore responsibility for the Black Rep’s failure. He did not reconcile the contradictions between the values of the theater’s social space and those of its integral audience. Although 77,200 people attended the National’s production of *The River Niger*, “the much praised black family drama”—and half of those were African American—such a production did not clash with the National’s environment or its concept of theater.<sup>452</sup> The Black Rep was unable to synchronize its vision of performance with the reality of its social space. If it had, then Hooks would have recognized that “the fundamental struggle of experimental theater groups is not merely to create new forms—they must also pay the rent.”<sup>453</sup> The Black Rep wanted to offer an experience of blackness to an economically stressed African American community that hankered for a celebratory experience, but

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<sup>450</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, “DC Rep Closing Out,” *Washington Post* 9 December 1976, 1(C).

<sup>451</sup> “Hooks Disappointed,” 2(E).

<sup>452</sup> David Richards, “Identity Theater and the Elusive Black Audience,” *Evening Star* 16 December 1973, 1(H).

<sup>453</sup> “The Black Arts Movement,” 65.

could not afford the price of a ticket. As a result, the Black Rep could not pay its own bills, and the amateur African American company, The Rep Inc., was born from the demise.

### *Section III: Phase Three, The Growth and Death of Identity*

From 1976 through 1980, two strong, coherent theatrical perspectives dominated Washington's identity theaters, both of which specialized in the development of original performances. On the one hand, the eclectic Back Alley reached new levels of professionalism as it became a dynamic social service and theatrical organization, focusing on the development of new texts not only by local residents and artists but also by nationally known playwrights. On the other hand, following the demise of Earth Onion and the example of the Washington Area Feminist Theater, Pro Femina Theater emerged in the feminist community as a troupe of actors who created original scripts.<sup>454</sup> By the early 1980s, the company was so successful that it acquired space in an upscale Georgetown church and changed its name to Horizons: Theater from a Woman's Perspective. Shortly thereafter, Horizons stopped creating original texts and focused instead on introducing Washingtonians to women playwrights. The success of Back Alley and Pro Femina can be directly attributed to two factors: 1) their development of new scripts and 2) their close association with the identity politics of the communities that nurtured them. These two factors allowed both theaters to mirror reflexively the constituencies that followed them.

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<sup>454</sup> Pro Femina Theater consisted of an ensemble of actresses who created texts through improvisational methods. The performances themselves were not improvisational, however.

By the end of 1976 the Back Alley had a significant institutional presence in Washington, D. C. According to its vision statement published in a local theater guide:

Back Alley has blossomed into an incorporated community service. Dedicated to celebrate and express the life of the people, Back Alley offers direct participation in every phase of theater to all levels of the community. Its multi-racial and multi-ethnic company casts all shows non-racially, using actors solely for their artistic quality. Back Alley performs experimental original works, which include Theater of Black Experience, Feminist Theater and the Theater of Social Protest. In addition, Back Alley produces children's theater; "Teatro Doble," Spanish-English Theater for Children is a bilingual touring company.<sup>455</sup>

During this period, Back Alley participated in a Washington Theater Festival that included two other small Theaters of the Public, American Society for Theater Arts (ASTA), and Washington Project for the Arts (WPA).<sup>456</sup> Back Alley not only invited Ed Bullins and Miguel Pinero to assist in the development of their new plays, but also organized their actors into a repertory company, albeit an unpaid one. Whereas the Black Rep had overreached in promising a professional theater, Back Alley offered an amateur theater that was deeply woven into the fabric of the community's social life. Through its aesthetic choices and programming, Back Alley projected a clear vision throughout the region.

Paradoxically, Back Alley's success caused tensions within the troupe. In January 1976, Back Alley acquired another performance space as part of the city's plan to bring small theater companies into its depressed downtown.<sup>457</sup> The theater's

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<sup>455</sup> *Spots*, 75.

<sup>456</sup> These theater companies were not identity theaters and will be explored in the next chapter.

<sup>457</sup> As businesses continued to exit in droves, life after office hours declined considerably. The numerous vacant buildings transformed the area into the image of a ghost town, which looked increasingly like an uninhabited area of the city. As discussed in Chapter Two, the drop in real estate prices brought in a seedier element of nightlife. To counter this shift, some real estate moguls offered their nearly condemned dwellings to small, experimental performing arts companies for minimal rent. Back Alley's acquisition fell

residential location signified its commitment to the community. Thus, developing a parallel presence downtown signaled a departure from the company's original mission. On the one hand, the acquisition of new space was simply a byproduct of the city's desire to sponsor theater downtown.<sup>458</sup> The company could then use—or not use—the space as they saw fit. On the other hand, the acquisition forecast a bifurcation of the company between its commitment to community and the theater's growing reputation for excellence in production.<sup>459</sup>

Over the next few years Back Alley became a major player in Washington's theatrical geography. The area's major dailies often praised its productions. Headlines trumpeted "A Searing *Short Eyes*," "An Expressive *Marie*," "The East Coast Premier of another Pinero, *A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon*," and a "Lean, Swift *Soweto Scenes*."<sup>460</sup> As a result, large national donors began to notice the company. They won a Ford Foundation grant of \$4,700 that was earmarked for two original plays: Rose Leiman Goldemberg's *Gandhiji*, a work about Gandhi, and *Tricks*, a black musical by Donald Alexander. A \$4,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation allowed them to invite Pinero as a playwright-in-residence.

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into this category. Most of these companies were aesthetically oriented Theaters of the Public and will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

<sup>458</sup> Because the downtown was so economically depressed, the city frequently offered theater companies like Back Alley the use of uninhabited space for rent of a dollar a year.

<sup>459</sup> Tension within politically successful theaters is, of course, not new; whether that tension manifests itself in nationally known theaters like the Group Theater, which eventually collapsed because too many of its more successful members were lured to Hollywood, or only in locally successful theaters like Back Alley is irrelevant; for the effect on the institution is similar.

<sup>460</sup> *Short Eyes* and *A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon* are by Miguel Pinero, *Marie* is by Ed Bullins, and *Soweto Scenes* is by Steve Wilmer, which Don Shirley of the *Post* called "one of the most graphically disturbing plays to hit Washington. It is also one of the most politically powerful." Don Shirley, "Lean, Swift 'Soweto Scenes,'" *Washington Post* 25 January 1979, 14(B).

This increased praise contributed to a rift in the company between those working in and with the community and those working solely on the stage. The theater's original socio-aesthetic vision had split into two distinct components. While *The Star* declared that Back Alley made "local artistic history with its productions of works by new or little known writers," the majority of its outside funding was supposed to support its socially oriented work with Washington's less fortunate communities.<sup>461</sup> The company won a \$200,000 grant from CETA to train the elderly for new professions in the theatrical arts. They created a new company, SAGE (Society for Artistic Growth of the Elderly). Its goal was to "develop a cross-generational theater company and dramatic material growing ... out of 'cross-generational issues and cross-generational joys.'"<sup>462</sup> SAGE employed between nineteen and twenty-eight people as actors and administrators. Half the company was aged fifty-five to seventy-eight; the other half, between twenty-one and thirty. The company not only worked on mainstage shows but also prepared "a piece, dealing with the problems of the elderly, to perform at local community centers, housing projects and schools." Back Alley hoped that the entire program would "have a snowball effect, with graduates setting up other theater programs for senior citizens throughout the Washington area."<sup>463</sup>

Although Back Alley remained committed to its original mission, these successes revealed an essential contradiction within the organization. Back Alley Theater had always drawn its sustenance from the neighborhood in which it lived and prospered.

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<sup>461</sup> "Back Alley Theater Sues to Regain CETA Job Funds," *Evening Star*, 7 May 1978, n. p. Washingtoniana.

<sup>462</sup> Emily Isberg, "SAGE: Spotlight on Stage Careers for Seniors," *Washington Post*, 26 January 1978, 4(DC).

<sup>463</sup> *Ibid.*

That neighborhood stood at the crossroad between the white and black communities in upper northwest, removed from the monumental core and the old downtown. Back Alley's radical politics and progressive social vision spoke to and about the identity of that emerging community; thus, Back Alley fulfilled its role as a community service organization that used theater as a tool for social change. Indeed, with SAGE, performance as a life activity became Back Alley's most potent method of promoting change. What had long been present within more prosperous areas of Washington—a vital, albeit amateur, theatrical culture—was appearing within lower income communities as well. The major difference between the two forms of theater rested in Back Alley's identity politics. Whereas community theater was little more than a social apparatus for enlivening the neighborhoods that had them, Back Alley used that apparatus as a instrument of self-exploration and social transformation. During the theater's initial years, the vision was funded locally, primarily through grants from the District government. The theater had welcomed all comers on an apparently egalitarian basis. Back Alley had now grown into a respected theater that produced quality experimental, socially provocative scripts. Their productions drew critical and public acclaim. As a result, Back Alley began to receive funds from outside Washington, from major foundations as well as the federal government. Recognition by major foundations and the federal government signified an importance greater than the community Back Alley served. It set the organization apart from its community supporters, not only symbolically, but also materially. The sudden acquisition of \$200,000 clearly sent shock waves through the organization. Long time volunteers were suddenly isolated from paid staff as new people entered the organization as salaried employees.

In Spring 1978 controversy struck Back Alley. Their CETA funding was revoked “due to failure to pay back taxes.”<sup>464</sup> The theater claimed that the government had made a mistake. Although the company eventually proved their innocence and regained the grant, the damage had been done, and CETA moneys ended the following year. Due to lack of funds, many of Back Alley’s community-oriented programs were suspended in 1979, even as the theater continued its mainstage work. Although many shows received poor notices, its production of David Rabe’s anti-Vietnam War play, *Streamers*, earned wide acclaim. The Stadteater of Stockholm even invited the production for a two-week run of 10-performances. The show’s director, Fredric Lee asked the District government for help with travel expenses, but the request was denied; fortunately “the Swedes came up with the money, and the play sold out abroad.”<sup>465</sup>

Ironically, after thirteen years and at the height of the company’s theatrical acclaim, Eftis left. The remaining producers renamed the company The New Back Alley, but without positive results. Having eliminated the social aspects of the company, Back Alley produced seven shows in its final year. Although the theater attempted to keep up with expenses, it could not. By the end of the year, Back Alley closed; its closure marked the end of a decade of socially progressive theater in Washington.

In 1976, as Back Alley built its provocative reputation on Kennedy Street and the Black Rep struggled to survive on Georgia Avenue, Pro Femina Theater began to perform at various locations throughout the city. Prior to Pro Femina, the Washington Area Feminist Theater (WAFT) was already putting a more public face on feminist

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<sup>464</sup> “Back Alley Theater Latest to Lose” *Evening Star*, 19 May 1978, 1(B).

<sup>465</sup> James Lardner, “Theater Notes,” *Washington Post*, 25 October 1979, 7(D).

performance.<sup>466</sup> Although Earth Onion preceded WAFT by several years, Onion's public face rarely emerged from the shadows of the feminist community for whom they performed.<sup>467</sup> The need to give a more public expression to Washington's feminist community was never more evident than in September of 1972, when *Post* critic Richard Coe reviewed the production of Arena Stage's one-woman show, *I am a Woman*. After calling the actress' performance "hollow," he went on to question the appropriateness of "a skin-tight bodice that reveals sagging breasts."<sup>468</sup> Coe's comments ignited a firestorm of controversy. In a series of Letters to the Editor, a writer tried to undermine Coe's credibility, referring to his "deep seated prejudice," while another nominated him for "Male Chauvinist Pig of the Year."<sup>469</sup> A third writer, however, asked the pivotal question: "Is the quality of our theater to be standardized by critics obviously oblivious to the barometric readings" of our times? With *The Star* in decline and *The Herald* defunct, Coe's leverage over the standards of Washington's theater community had reached new heights. By challenging his perspective, letter writers were nudging open ever so slightly the door to greater acceptance of difference, both aesthetic and social.

When Pro Femina emerged in 1976, its public image, like Earth Onion's, was of a collective. Like other feminist theaters during the era had done, Pro Femina attempted to

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<sup>466</sup> WAFT performed at a number of location but primarily in Hand Chapel at Mount Vernon College and on Back Alley's stage. Their repertoire included: "He and She," "Floury Tails," "Calm Down Mother," "Comings and Goings," "Franny Chi Play," "Trifles," "Lorraine, Gloria, and Bootsie," "Approaching Simone," "Quartet," "When Wombs were Tombs," and "Mother's Glass."

<sup>467</sup> In May 1973 Earth Onion produced an improvised script with audience interaction, entitled "'Woman's Potion' . . . a series of vignettes "from a frustrated woman trapped by her role of 'Total Woman' to the awkwardness of an adolescent date." The company also included audience participation. For example, when one audience member suggested, "I'd like to see a scene about a girl getting raped," the company acted it out for discussion. Megan Rosenfeld, "Earth Onion at WTC," *Washington Post* 12 May 1973. In 1977, Earth Onion once again appeared in the *Post*, renamed Earth Onion Women's Theater, performing "a sort of pregnant variation on *Godot*."

<sup>468</sup> Richard L. Coe, Review of "I am a Woman," *Washington Post* 27 September 1972, 1(B).

counter patriarchy and “avoid the problems created by hierarchies in male-dominated organizations,” by seeking “collectivity in group structures.”<sup>470</sup> Upon closer inspection of Pro Femina’s members, staff, and casts, however, only one name continually appeared in its productions, Leslie Bravman Jacobson, who had also been one of the central figures of WAFT. Not surprisingly, she was the driving force behind Pro Femina and Horizons throughout the 1980s. Like Earth Onion and WAFT, Pro Femina had no fixed theatrical venue; their identity as a theatrical organization was based on their performances. They played on small stages throughout the city: the stages at American Society for Theater Arts (ASTA) and Washington Performing Arts (WPA), the American Theater at L’Enfant Plaza, New Playwrights Theater (NPT), and Market 5 Gallery, southeast of the Capitol.<sup>471</sup> Additionally, the company toured to college campuses and conferences. This nomadic existence meant that the public did not identify Pro Femina with a particular location. Rather, in the absence of spatial indicators, Pro Femina relied solely on the credibility of its performances. If the audience identified with a show’s feminist politics and representational practices, when the audience returned to witness a new production, the company’s identity would develop along parallel political and representational lines. This nomadism might have worked to the company’s benefit; potential feminist audiences were not, after all, located in particular geographic locations, but rather dispersed throughout the city. By performing on multiple stages, Pro Femina sought out its public rather than waiting for the public to seek them out.

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<sup>469</sup> Letters to the Editor, *Washington Post*, 8 October 1972, 7(D).

<sup>470</sup> *Feminist Theater Groups*, 5.

<sup>471</sup> ASTA and WPA were producing performing arts organizations. ASTA and NPT will be discussed in the following chapter.

Operating without a named director, each production consisted of between three and five actresses. Guided by Jacobson, each performance text was created improvisationally around one or more issues important to contemporary women. In the first two years, Pro Femina focused on the interaction between mothers and daughters with scripts like *Mother, May I?*, *Motherhouses*, and *We, Our Mother's Daughters*. The focus on the mother/daughter dynamic was so intense, in fact, that *Post* critic Jean M. White, who had reviewed their shows favorably, finally commented, "Certainly other experiences and forces exist within a woman's life that demand equal time and attention."<sup>472</sup> In later years Pro Femina did explore other issues, from the process of aging and the complexity of love to a woman's decision to have a child.<sup>473</sup> A signature feature of a Pro Femina production was the "Sound Off," a technique developed while Jacobson worked with WAFT. Following a show, the ensemble invited the audience to voice its thoughts and feelings about the production and the issues raised by it. Like Back Alley's Forum Theaters, the "Sound Off" encouraged audiences to participate in the content of a production as thinking and feeling agents, thus keeping the reflexive relationship between theater company and community active and vital.

In 1980, the ensemble performed *An I for a You* at the International Festival of Women Artists and at the Annual Meeting of the National Organization for Women, which enhanced Pro Femina's visibility. Although these appearances say nothing about the quality of the ensemble's work, they do attest to the company's growing confidence in the legitimacy of its mission and message, and of the performers' ability to use improvisation effectively as a playwriting tool. In order to increase their new visibility

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<sup>472</sup> Jean M White, "I Remember Mother," *Washington Post* 25 January 1979, 13(B).

and fund more ambitious programs, they held their first fund-raiser in May 1980, the first annual Pro Femina Prom. Besides being appropriate to the season, the “prom” fundraising device may have signified the theater’s mission to promote alternative constructions of femininity. By applying the “Pro Femina” label to such a potent symbol of the traditional male-female relationship dynamic, the feminist theater company was announcing publicly its intention to provide a symbolic space for the performance of that relationship.

The transformation of Pro Femina from a nomadic performance company specializing in improvisation into an established theatrical organization giving public voice to women and their issues began in 1982 when the company moved into its own space at Grace Episcopal Church in Washington’s Georgetown neighborhood. The Georgetown location was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, Grace Episcopal had a socially progressive reputation as well as a history of supporting theater.<sup>474</sup> On the other hand, Georgetown existed in relative isolation from the rest of Washington, an isolation that was amplified when residents rejected the recently opened subway system in favor of maintaining bus service only. Located west of Rock Creek Park along the Potomac, historic rowhouses, small upscale shops and restaurants, river front property, and Georgetown Hospital and University afforded the area an exclusivity unique among the city’s many neighborhoods. In 1970, fewer than 100,000 Washingtonians lived in the neighborhoods west of Rock Creek Park, 95 percent of whom were white.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Titles included *It’s about Time*, *An I for a You*, and *Fertility Rites*.

<sup>474</sup> The most notable theater company to use the church was the Bleecker Street Players, an experimental group that performed original plays during the early 1980s.

<sup>475</sup> There are numerous neighborhoods west of Rock Creek Park. They include Georgetown, Glover Park, Cleveland Park, Friendship Heights, and Tenleytown.

Georgetown's demographics were even more lopsided, as Washington's society registers were filled with Georgetown's residents. Although the membership of Pro Femina was predominantly white and college educated, the company's nomadic existence in D.C.'s inner city had lent the troupe an experimental edge; and, to be sure, its improvisationally created texts warranted the experimental label. Pro Femina's move into Grace Episcopal, into an exclusive, white upper class world overlooking the Potomac, suddenly cast the company into a sophisticated, well-manicured world dominated by expensive shops and restaurants, college students and tourists, and upscale consumers. Ironically, even though a majority of its audience probably came from the city's extensive university system (some from Georgetown University itself), Pro Femina's edgy, experimental identity now seemed out of place.

The effects of the move were immediately apparent. By the end of its first year at Grace Episcopal, Pro Femina produced—for the first time—a script by an established playwright, Elizabeth Diggs. *Post* critic Megan Rosenfeld praised the decision, saying that Pro Femina's production of *Close Ties* showed “a welcome move in the maturation of this small troupe.”<sup>476</sup> Despite the company's success as an experimental feminist company and its growing reputation for effective improvisation, *The Post* declared that abandoning that aesthetic for a more traditional text-based approach demonstrated greater maturity. Such comments revealed Rosenfeld's lack of appreciation for the complexity of improvisation and its reflexive interactions with an audience. Unfortunately, that lack of appreciation pervaded Washington's more traditional theater-going publics. By the beginning of the second year, Pro Femina had also changed its name to Horizons: Theater

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<sup>476</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “The ‘Ties’ that Bind; Despite Predictable Conflicts and Characters, A Touching Family Drama at Pro Femina,” *Washington Post*, 9 June 1983, n.p. Washingtoniana.

from a Woman's Perspective. In the *Post's* "Backstage" column, company members expressed reasons for the change. The name was "confusing. We would say Pro Femina Theater, and people would say 'what?' and 'who?'" or "... people in these times think of us as a radical theater group because of the name, and it was difficult to get grants."<sup>477</sup>

To be sure, by the early 1980s the more radical socio-political perspectives of the Vietnam era had become difficult to argue in the public sphere. In addition, the consciousness raising activities that defined groups like Earth Onion during the early 1970s had given way to a much more practical approach to promoting women artists in the marketplace. At an even more practical level, however, now that Pro Femina had its own space the company needed to generate greater revenues to pay salaries, afford the rent, and build sets and costumes. When the company's identity shifted from a nomadic improvisationally-based troupe of actors to a space-based theater in the most fashionable, commercial, and historic section of the city, the deeply ideological significance of Pro Femina no longer rang true. Pro Femina was now located in Georgetown, in the heart of Washington's oldest patriarchal construction.<sup>478</sup> To make matters worse, Georgetown, as previously mentioned, was Washington's last, and most secure enclave of Caucasian elitism. As feminist communities all over the country began exploring their own racist and classist constructions, how ironic that Pro Femina would transplant itself into such a segregated neighborhood. Nevertheless, the name change had benefits. By 1983, the cultural climate in Washington had changed. Throughout the country, progressive ideas were in retreat; following the Vietnam Conflict, even the public's mistrust of militaristic

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<sup>477</sup> Joe Brown 9/5/83 "Pro Femina announces its name change: Horizons: Theater from a Woman's Perspective. Why?" in Backstage, *Washington Post*, 5 September 1983, 7(E).

<sup>478</sup> Even though Martha Washington has become an American legend, her name has not even secured a street name in Georgetown.

solutions to foreign dilemmas was being defined as a syndrome. Pro Femina and its pro-matriarchal connotations were no longer en vogue. The new name, Horizons, directed patrons' attention away from the present conditions and toward the future, the "horizon" which, from the theater's perch overlooking the Potomac, would have been resplendent at dusk. With its new name, the company that offered performances from a woman's perspective hoped to bridge the contradictions implied by the presence of a feminist theater in the heart of Washington's patriarchy.

Fortunately, members of Horizons did not abandon their mission to produce original work; they simply shifted to the production of scripts by nationally recognized playwrights. In Fall 1983 they produced their last self-generated piece, "Women's Work," a script assembled from interviews with women who worked for the Work Projects Administration during the Depression. David Richards noted that it had "a crisp no-nonsense authority that contrasts pleasantly with the bathetic, inward-looking meditations the troupe has offered in the past."<sup>479</sup> Like Megan Rosenfeld had done earlier, Richards demeaned Pro Femina's past, even though that past established the company as a respected part of Washington's theatrical community. A year later, when Horizons produced *Talking With* by Jane Martin, its first previously produced script, the transformation of the radical feminist troupe was complete. Richards wrote: "The emergence of Horizons as a company worthy of our time and attention is one of the more heartening developments of the theater season. Changing its name ... was a start, but it's a radical policy change that has made all the difference."<sup>480</sup> The radical policy change

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<sup>479</sup> David Richards, Underdone, "Underdone "Women's Work,"" *Washington Post*, 10 September 1983, 9(C).

<sup>480</sup> David Richards, "Expanding Horizons," *Washington Post*, 9 May 1984, 2(B).

referred to by Richards was none other than the gutting of Pro Femina's unique vision as an identity theater rooted to the lives and struggles of its immediate public. This is not to say that Horizons did not produce performances that addressed issues important to women and their identity, for surely it did; but with the name change and its relocation in Georgetown, the theatrical organization abandoned improvisation and the immediacy that such a practice brings. As a result, Pro Femina/Horizons lost its iconographic relationship to radical politics and, hence, its articulation of a feminist politics that challenged patriarchal hegemony.<sup>481</sup>

#### *Section IV: Phase Four, the Survival of Ethnic Theater*

Just as most of Washington's theaters of identity were winding down in the early 1980s, theaters of ethnic identity, especially Latino identity, emerged as a critical sector of the area's theatrical landscape. Grupo de Artistas Latinoamericanos or (GALA) Hispanic Theater was by far the most prominent of these Latin American theaters, and the one that has continued to operate beyond the millennium. Its success had as much to do with the talent of its producers and artists as it did with the company's early decision to make compromises between the needs of its ethnic community and the larger, more traditional theater-going public. In other words, although its base was clearly in the Latino community, GALA also attracted the non-Latino, Anglo theater-going public.

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<sup>481</sup> One could argue that the theater's significance remained the same for upper class college educated women, which has always been its target community. In fact, one could assert that, like with BAT or the Black Rep, the acquisition of space legitimized by previous theatrical occupancy only increased Pro Femina's reputation and, hence, its importance within the theatrical geography of Washington. Nevertheless, the theater's political dimension, its association with a reconfiguring of identity through an articulation of collective performance practices was lost. Horizons became just another Theater of the Public, albeit one from "a woman's perspective."

While the District's overall population had steadily decreased since 1950, its Latino population had steadily increased. Between 1970 and 1990 the city's population dropped by over 20 percent, from 756,666 to 606,900. At the same time, the city's Latino population increased by over 100 percent, from 15,671 to 32,710. Most of that increase occurred between 1980 and 1990 when the size of the Latino population in the District jumped by over 15,000, or from 2.7 percent of the District's population to 5.3 percent.<sup>482</sup> The majority of these new immigrants were from countries in Central America; as a result, a majority was also undocumented, which meant that they were not included in census numbers mentioned earlier.

GALA's operations began when it opened a combination performance space and art gallery in the Adams Morgan neighborhood in 1976. During the 1970s, the majority of the District's Latino population resided in one of four contiguous neighborhoods: Mount Pleasant, Columbia Heights, Cardozo-Shaw, and Adams Morgan. For over two decades Washingtonians had patronized Adams Morgan because of its nighttime entertainment and restaurants. As more and more Latino businesses opened in the area, it became increasingly Latinized. The first annual Hispanic Festival, which was held in Adams Morgan in 1970, confirmed the identity of the neighborhood. It was soon followed by another festival, Adams Morgan Day. Both festivals raised the visibility of Adams Morgan's entertainment scene with its Latino and international flavor. By 1980, Adams Morgan was a popular place not only to spend an evening but also to take up

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<sup>482</sup> Krishna Roy, Ph.D., "A Sociodemographic Profile" from *The State of Latinos in the District of Columbia*, pg. 5 at <http://www.consejo.org/sol/CLA.Ch.1-Sociodemographic%20Profile.pdf>. 2003.

residence. Not only were upscale whites visiting the neighborhood and spending their money, they were also moving into Adams Morgan and gentrifying it.<sup>483</sup>

GALA benefited from this increased exposure and gentrification when it initiated full-scale theatrical operations in 1978. Hugo Medrano, a company founder, discovered a key to GALA's success in Adams Morgan's multi-lingual nightlife. When, in January 1978, GALA opened *Paper Flowers* by Argentinean playwright, Egon Wolff, they offered this "existential 'Looking for Mr. Goodbar'" in both a Spanish language and an English language version.<sup>484</sup> This decision allowed the theater to attract not only members of the Latino community who wanted authentic cultural representation, but also Adams Morgan's non-Spanish speakers who either enjoyed the theater or who wanted to know more about the Latino community. Because GALA adapted each version of the production to its respective audience, the company was able to appeal to differences in each audience's sensibilities. Of course, the decision required the theater to find bilingual actors; and, because bilingual actors were in short supply, some parts were double cast.

Another of GALA's key decisions was to produce plays by Latin American playwrights from a variety of countries, which allowed the company to avoid accusations within the Latino community of favoritism for one Latin American culture over another. A representative sample of their productions includes *The Death Rattle of Don Tino* by Columbian playwright, Estaba Navajas Cortes, *Night of the Assassins* by Cuban Jose Triana, *The Debt Builder* by Peruvian Sabastian Salazar Bondy, and *The Toothbrush* by

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<sup>483</sup> Lois Athey, Ph.D., "Housing" from *The State of Latinos in the District of Columbia*, pg 76 at <http://www.consejo.org/sol/CLA.Ch.4-Housing.pdf>. 2003.

<sup>484</sup> Frederic Lee, "Bilingual Production," *Washington Post*, 26 January 1978, 4 (DC).

Chilean Jorge Diaz. They also produced an eighteenth century Spanish classic, *When Young Girls Say Yes*, by Leandro Fernandex de Moratin. Noticeably absent from the list of countries represented by the repertoire were texts from Central America; although Central American immigrants constituted a plurality of the District's Latino population, they were also its poorest members. In many ways their interests were in opposition to the process of gentrification that assured GALA's success.

This conflict within the Latino community was never more apparent than at the Adams Morgan Day festival of 1978. While GALA and other dance and music groups performed for the thousands of visitors who came to the festival, not only from the neighborhood, but from Virginia and Maryland, and from numerous local universities, "a group of 50 demonstrators marched through the crowd."<sup>485</sup> Protestors objected to the rampant real estate speculation that was driving low-income residents out of their homes and apartments. Fortunately for GALA, the essential character of the neighborhood did not change because the loss of low income Latinos was minimized by substantial rent subsidies in the eastern part of the neighborhood.<sup>486</sup>

GALA's success as a theater of identity was confirmed in May 1981 when the board organized its first fundraiser, which also served as a political coming out party. The fundraiser was held at the Organization of American States (OAS), which is located within the monumental core. GALA's three political constituencies sponsored the event—the OAS secretary general, Alejandro Orfila; one of the architects of Kennedy era liberalism, Sargent Shriver; and the wife of the city's major, Effi Barry, who announced

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<sup>485</sup> Christopher Dickey, "Celebration, Dissent Intermix in Adams Morgan Celebration," *Washington Post*, 11 September 1978, 1(C).

<sup>486</sup> "Housing," 77.

that May 21 was GALA day in the District of Columbia. As Raquel Marquez Frankel, GALA board member and former director of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, said: “We want to get GALA away from being stereotyped as a small Columbia Road theater into a vital cultural resource.”<sup>487</sup> By having sponsors from among local, national, and international political elites, GALA aligned itself with established political culture, thereby making a significant bid for greater respectability and visibility. Because GALA’s artistic community consisted of a great many political exiles, the event’s master of ceremonies announced that “tonight, mostly we honor those who faced humiliation because of their culture.... Tonight we honor those faceless Latinos who labored in periodicos [newspapers], in grupos teatricos [theater groups], so that a torch could be lit.”<sup>488</sup> In other words, GALA navigated a fine line: on the one hand, wooing the political elites of Washington, many of whom supported the oppressive government of South and Central America; on the other hand, maintaining relations with the Latin American dissident community.

Of course, despite the fundraising hoopla, GALA remained a small theater near Columbia Road, a fact that no amount of publicity could overcome. Two years later, GALA left Adams Morgan and moved downtown to the second floor space of the soon-to-be condemned Lansburgh Cultural Center. Fortunately, the company’s stay at the Lansburgh was short as they suffered through poor reviews and poorly attended productions. When attempts to save the Lansburgh for local arts groups like GALA failed two years later, the theater left downtown, returning to the city’s Latino area, the Mount Pleasant neighborhood just north of Adams Morgan. The troupe’s proscenium

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<sup>487</sup> Carla Hall, “GALA Fund-Raiser,” *Washington Post*, 22 May 1981, 4(F).

theater, a first for the company, was in the renovated auditorium of the Sacred Heart Parish School, in a mainly residential area.<sup>489</sup>

### *Section V: The Link between Theater and Identity*

Although theaters of identity failed to create a self-sustaining cultural presence within Washington's overall theatrical geography, they had a profound impact on local theatrical culture. By bringing theater and performance to many of Washington's most dispossessed communities and neighborhoods, theaters of identity expanded the city's concept of culture, its understanding of what constituted a theater-going public, and altered the relationship between theaters and their neighborhoods. Although theaters of identity were unable to reconcile the economic fragility of their target counter-publics with the lure of the professional standards promoted by established centers of theatrical culture, they successfully demonstrated the power of theater to act as a symbolic instrument in the promotion of different voices and issues in the public sphere.

As long as theaters of identity kept their production expenses low and remained low key and out of the spotlight, they not only survived but, within limits, prospered. Success, however, usually brought with it the seeds of an identity theater's destruction; for the costs of running a theater in Washington were—and still are—prohibitive, particularly when the theater challenges the status quo. Washington's theaters of identity never achieved fully professional status. Although many managed to pay their theatrical artist, amounts were small and the artists almost always had to rely on other sources of

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> GALA stayed at Sacred Heart through the remainder of the century, before they moved into their first legitimate theater, the renovated historic Trivoli Theater in Washington's Mount Pleasant community.

income for survival. In this way, the theater artists at Back Alley or Pro Femina, for example, were also employed in other fields, which tended to reinforce their connections to the broader community. When a theater experienced success, the artists associated with the theater frequently equated that success with economic gain; needless to say, they wanted to share in the gain. The internal competition for wages within theaters of identity strained their commitment to creativity.

Success also strained the relationships that theaters of identity had with their counter-publics. For example, as long as Back Alley's relationship with its neighborhood remained oriented toward service, the public's perception of the theater developed positively. Back Alley's success as a theater company not only created the kind of internal tension mentioned above but it also strained the company's relationship with its neighborhood. As Back Alley gained more attention from the media and resources from national foundations and the federal government, its initial community of low income supporters became increasingly estranged. The external and internal tensions ultimately tore the small theater apart. On the other hand, the Black Rep consistently lived beyond its means and the means of its target counter-public. In this sense, Robert Hooks never fully abandoned his early dream of an African American theater associated with the Kennedy Center or Arena Stage. At such august locations, the Black Rep would have been an exemplar of artistic and economic success; not the community-centric organization on Georgia Avenue in a distressed African American neighborhood that it eventually became.

As Washington's population became increasingly polarized along class lines, theaters of identity found economic stability increasingly difficult to sustain. The two

identity theaters that survived and prospered in Washington did so because they compromised their counter-public's cultural and political missions in order to obtain access to better space and to the media. When Pro Femina moved west of the Park into Georgetown's exclusive neighborhood, they changed their small company's mission. The name change to "Horizons" simply signified the spatial transformation that had already occurred. As "Pro Femina" the company had confronted audiences with their feminist socio-political perspective; their nomadic existence allowed the troupe to survive on their artistry alone. As "Horizons" the space signified the company's identity; the implications of "Pro Femina" no longer appeared credible within the safety and security of Georgetown's Grace Episcopal. GALA, on the other hand, began with an explicit intent to attract audiences from both the Latino and Anglo publics. By offering productions in both Spanish and English, the theater satisfied its integral audience's need for cultural representation in its native tongue, even as it provided a mainstream English speaking theater-going public with an image of the Other. In that sense, GALA's location served as an excellent signifier of its identity, as Adams Morgan was already established as the neighborhood that brought people of different ethnicities together.

Finally, although theaters of identity failed to sustain their alternative approach to the theatrical experience, they successfully demonstrated to mainstream culture that Washington's theatrical community had failed to meet an urgent need: the need for theaters to develop stronger, more meaningful connections between their institutional structures and their integral communities. Ironically, as the emphasis on identity as a determining factor in the design of theatrical institutions began to diminish, area theaters like the National, Arena Stage, and the Kennedy Center began producing more plays

based on identity politics. Gradually, small theaters also picked up the identity theater mantle, producing more plays by and about African Americans and women. Although these individual performances directed at particular counter-publics probably satisfied the immediate representational needs of those communities, without the institutional iconography and history of performance that an identity theater would signify in the public sphere, the discourse of the performance generally stopped at the stage's edge.

## Chapter Seven

### THE SMALL THEATER MOVEMENT: IDENTITY AS PROCESS OR ECONOMIC ENGINE

From 1969 through 1989, Washington's small theater movement progressed from an obscure group of theaters operating on the fringe of media and public consciousness to a dynamic subset of Theater of the Public that acted as a powerful social force energizing the Washington area theatrically and culturally. During those twenty years, over thirty small theaters were founded.<sup>490</sup> Although only a few have survived into the twenty-first century, most remained active for between five and ten years. Their emergence not only testified to the abundant financial resources available to Washington artists and their endeavors, but to the need of the greater Washington community for a thriving theatrical culture.

The previous chapter examined identity theaters, which constituted but one strand of the small theater movement's first wave. The other strand consisted of those theaters founded by larger educational institutions, the Saint Albans Repertory Company (SART) and the Folger Theater Group. Although only the Folger survived its first years of operation, it was soon joined by a host of theaters, which, with identity theaters, became a strong voice within Washington's theatrical community. Through the 1970s, Folger, American Society for Theater Arts (ASTA), Washington Laboratory Theater (WLT), and

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<sup>490</sup> This list of small theaters does not include the subset of identity theaters covered in Chapter Six: American Showcase Theater Company, Attic Theater, Bleeker Street Players, Castle Arts Center, Fine Line Actors Theater, Home Theater, Jaya Rama, Metropolitan Experimental Theater, Moving Target Theater, New Arts Theater, New Theater, No Neck Monsters Theater Company, Paradise Island Express, The Polemic Theater, the Potomac Theater Project, Prism Theater, Round House Theater, Sanctuary Theater, Scena Theater, Spheres Theater, Small Beer Theater, Source Theater, Studio Theater, Theater Dejour, Touchstone Theater Company, Washington Jewish Theater, The Washington Project for the Arts, The Washington Stage Guild, Washington Theater Wing, Way Off Broadway Theater, and Woolly Mammoth Theater.

Playwrights' Theater of Washington, which became New Playwrights' Theater (NPT), spearheaded the movement. As the 1970s came to an end, many theaters in the movement's first wave disappeared and several new theaters emerged, rapidly forming the core of the area's indigenous theatrical identity. Founded between 1977 and 1980, Source Theater Company, Studio Theater, and Woolly Mammoth Theater each occupied a unique position within Washington's theatrical geography; yet together, they constituted pioneers of an identifiable Washington theater district. When several of these theaters founded the League of Washington Theaters, they instituted a process that moved them out of the shadows of the Kennedy Center, the National, and Arena and onto center stage to compete, albeit as bit players, for the spotlight of media and public attention.

This chapter explores the shifting terrain of Washington's small theater movement and its attempt to realize an identity for itself that was uniquely Washingtonian in character. The chapter begins with the first wave of small theaters, from 1968 through 1978, which culminated with the establishment of New Playwrights' as a Washington cultural institution. The second section deals with the emergence of Source, Studio, and Woolly as significant theaters in the community, ending with the establishment of the League. The third section continues with the development of Source and Studio, as together they formed the nucleus of a nascent theater district along the redeveloped 14<sup>th</sup> Street corridor. The final section explores the fate of NPT and the Folger as they struggled to survive as small theaters without the cover of either a theater district or the umbrella of a larger institution.

Section I: First Wave, 1968 through 1976

Quoting *Variety* in 1971, Tom Donnelly of *The Herald News* wrote, “The opening of the Kennedy Center and Wolf Trap Farm Park have put Washington ‘prominently on the entertainment map.’”<sup>491</sup> Donnelly went on to disagree, but only slightly. Although Wolf Trap had contributed to Washington’s renaissance, he attributed the impressive rise of the theatrical culture to the existence of seven professional theaters and two semi-professional theaters. Neither Wolf Trap nor the Olney Theater were considered among the nine as both were classified as summer fare. Federally sponsored theaters, the Kennedy Center’s Eisenhower and Opera House and Ford’s Theater, accounted for three of the seven. Arena, with its newly opened Kreeger, accounted for two more. The final two professional theaters were the National, which was soon to be absorbed by the Center, and WTC, soon to be extinct. The two semi-professional operations were Catholic’s Hartke Theater and the Folger Theater Group. That year, however, Hartke returned to producing student/faculty shows without a star. On the other hand, the Folger survived into the 1980s when it then transformed into the highly successful and nationally known Shakespeare Theater.

Opening at about the same time as the Folger was another semi-professional Summer Theater, Saint Albans Repertory Theater. By 1971, however, the theater had succumbed to the pressures of producing live performance. A project of the Saint Albans School (the National Cathedral School for Boys), SART opened in 1969 off Massachusetts Avenue on the grounds of the National Cathedral in northwest

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<sup>491</sup> Tom Donnelly, “Who says Washington isn’t a Theater Town?” *Herald News*, 8 November 1971, n. p. Vertical Files, Washingtoniana.

Washington.<sup>492</sup> SART's affiliation with both the Saint Albans School and the National Cathedral haunted its identity from its inception. Despite a new 276-seat Trapier theater, the new Equity company had "to browbeat the public into realizing that [it was not] a school theatre," as Ted Walch, the company's artistic director, complained to *The Star*.<sup>493</sup> To counter its educational and religious public image, SART developed a diverse repertoire. Over two seasons, it produced seven plays that were decidedly adult and non-religious: two one-acts, *Albert's Bridge* by Tom Stoppard and *Not Enough Rope* by Elaine May; Maxwell Anderson's *I Never Sang for my Father*; Eugene Ionesco's *A Stroll in the Air*; Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*; Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*; and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. Despite the intensity of this repertoire (or perhaps because of it), the presence of the cathedral and boys school overwhelmed the identity of SART, and it died as a regularly producing theater before launching a third season. The fact that its Equity performers taught in St. Albans' eight-week theater school, and that Walch taught in St. Albans English program only added to SART's troubled identity.<sup>494</sup>

Like SART, the Folger Theater Group both benefited and suffered from a close relationship with its parent organization, The Folger Shakespeare Library. Unlike SART, The Folger Library and its trustee organization, Amherst College, supported the theater financially for fifteen years despite constant deficits. The Folger opened in September

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<sup>492</sup> Even though Washingtonians identified Saint Albans School and the National Cathedral as symbols of the elite, their prestige had only increased since 1970. Founded in 1907, the Cathedral had been in a continuous state of construction ever since. Hundreds of thousands of worshippers and numerous local and foreign dignitaries attended services under its dome. Even the Archbishops of Canterbury and presidents of the United States attended ceremonies within its facilities. Although Saint Albans School was not as old or as well known as its sister school, the National Cathedral School of Girls, which had been in operation since 1900, it nevertheless had a reputation as one of the District's best elite private high schools.

<sup>493</sup> Kenneth Ikenberry, "A Repertory Theater Seeks Identification," *Evening Star*, 5 July 1970, 1(F).

<sup>494</sup> Richard Coe, "SART's Second Season," *Washington Post*, 4 June 1970, 6(C).

1970 as an Equity theater. Nevertheless, its association with the revered Folger Library lent the company instant acceptance within Washington's arts establishment. Founded in 1932 by Henry Clay Folger and his wife, Emily Jordan Folger, as a gift to the American people, by 1970 The Folger had become a Washington landmark, noted for its ornate, classical appearance. Though a public institution in the broadest sense of the term, the Library served a small circle of academics and thus projected an elitist image. Located southeast of the Capitol along the edge of the city's historic center, in a Capitol Hill neighborhood dominated by turn-of-the-century townhouses, its classical architecture only intensified this feeling of exclusivity. By establishing the Folger Theater, the Library not only opened its intimate theater to the public but also broadened its conservative image.<sup>495</sup>

Instead of opening with a production of Shakespeare, as one might have expected, the Folger challenged preconceptions by presenting *Dionysus Wants You*, a rock and roll, *Hair*-like adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*. In order to confuse audience expectations further, the Folger used the sanctuary at St. Mark's Church in Georgetown rather than the Library's intimate Elizabethan stage. Whatever associations audience members might have made between the Folger Theater and the culturally conservative Folger Library dissipated. The *Post*'s review of the production juxtaposed a description of the venue with photographs of a longhaired youthful cast. The review and photograph analogized the theater's seemingly antithetical relationship to the Library. Just as an aesthetically radical performance had transformed a classical Euripides, so too had a provocative theater invaded one of Washington's cultural treasures. In the future, Shakespeare's texts

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<sup>495</sup> Prior to the establishment of The Folger Theater Group, the Folger's theater was primarily used for presentations and the occasional amateur Shakespeare production.

would suffer a similar fate, as the company continually performed non-traditional interpretations.

Strangely, however, the Folger became best known for its production of modern scripts, rather than Shakespearean or even Elizabethan ones. From 1970 to 1973, the Folger produced only two Shakespearean plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as another renaissance script, Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Although the production of Shakespearean plays increased after 1973, by 1977 the company had become "best-known for its American and world premieres," not its production of Shakespeare's classics, which rarely received high praise.<sup>496</sup> Its most highly acclaimed productions included Christopher Hampton's *Total Eclipse*, David Hampton's *Teeth 'n' Smiles*, Edward Storey's *The Farm*, Tito Shaw's *He's Got a Jones*, and David Freeman's *Creeps*, which a producer moved to New York "virtually intact."<sup>497</sup> It seems unlikely that O.B. Hardison, the Library's director and one of the theater's primary champions, or Richmond Crinkley and Louis Scheeder, the theater's first two artistic directors, devised this anti-Shakespearean strategy as a way of establishing the theater's identity independent of the Library. More likely, a desire for quality and uniqueness, as well as economic factors, dictated the choice of texts. On the one hand, producing Shakespearean plays with large casts and elaborate sets and costumes while maintaining Equity status would have exhausted the Folger's limited resources. On the other hand, both artistic directors wanted to challenge perceptions and were wary of what Scheeder called the "McDonaldsization of the American theater," where "everybody

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<sup>496</sup> Don Shirley, "Grand Aspirations at the Folger," *Washington Post*, 10 October 1976, 1(F).

<sup>497</sup> Jay Alan Quantrill, "Theater," *Washington Post*, 21 April 1974, 1(E).

does the same plays, uses the same promotion drives, the same people.”<sup>498</sup> Although Shakespearean texts could afford that opportunity, the task would have exceeded the young company’s resources and ability to succeed.

Even though the Folger’s innovative artistry was important to its early successes, the fact of its patronage cannot be ignored: the largess of Amherst College’s trustees, and indirectly, the federal government’s substantial yearly subsidy to the Library for upkeep of the performance space, contributed heavily to the Folger’s professional status.

Through its first four years of operation, the Library not only maintained the theater’s physical space but also contributed 25 percent of the theater’s budget. In 1976, just after the theater moved to full Equity status and joined the League of Resident Theaters, the Library attempted to reduce its share to four percent. Public support for the company had grown so dramatically during its short life that few of the company’s members panicked at the decision. From press accounts, an original subscription list of 99, by 1976 the list had reached 5,200 subscribers.<sup>499</sup> Yet the Library’s auditorium seated only 214, which limited the theater’s ability to raise funds from ticket sales. The company would have to increase fundraising efforts substantially if it were to produce more Shakespearean texts, which the Library had in recent years been pressuring the theater to do. As a result, tension between the Folger Theater and the Folger Library increased. The Library wanted the theater to raise more money, but because the theater existed under the umbrella of a not-for-profit organization that already had a substantial fundraising arm, the theater’s ability to seek funds was handicapped. Nevertheless, the theater experienced limited success. *The Post’s* Richard Coe reported that in its 1977 program

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<sup>498</sup> “Grand Aspirations at the Folger,” 12(F).

for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the company listed its major supporters, as well as a warning:

‘The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Marcus and Harryette Cohn Foundation, D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the Ford Foundation, Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, the Shubert Foundation.’

Then follow[ed] ‘backers,’ ‘sponsors,’ ‘donors,’ ‘contributors,’ and a caution: ‘This year the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Conn., and the D.C. Black Repertory closed their doors. These are but two of the recent professional theaters that have closed due to insufficient subsidy support.’<sup>500</sup>

The message was clear. The dream of a small theater was easy; however, its professionalization demanded resources far beyond the means of artists and managers alone—and perhaps beyond the means of its public as well.

Several years after the opening of the Folger Theater Group, the New Playwrights’ Theater of Washington, co-founded in 1972 by Harry M. Bagdasian and George Holets, ushered in a decade of Washington theater dedicated to the development of original plays.<sup>501</sup> In fact, as had been the case with identity theaters, the development of new texts was a central organizing principle of the small theater movement in D.C. If the production was not a world or American premiere, then it was at least a Washington premiere. In the 1950s and 1960s, Theater Lobby had specialized in introducing Washingtonians to the theater of the absurd.<sup>502</sup> Washington Theater Club had risen to

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Richard L. Coe, “The Well-Seasoned Folger,” *Washington Post*, 18 September 1977, 179.

<sup>501</sup> A series of aesthetically minded Theaters of the Public proceeded and accompanied NPT in the creation of original work. In the late 1960s, Polemic and Metropolitan Experimental Theaters, in the early 1970s, WTL and the Waaay-Off-Broadway Theater, and in the mid-1970s, Bleecker Street Players and Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) each presented original performances; each also led relatively brief theatrical lives. Only NPT endured long enough not only to acquire its own space but also to earn an identity as a developer of new scripts and playwrights.

<sup>502</sup> See Chapter Five for a full discussion of Theater Lobby and Washington Theater Club.

national prominence because of its script development programs. Fortunately, before WTC folded in 1973, several other theaters had formed to fill the void in new script development. As discussed previously, theaters of identity began with a similar focus on new voices. Naomi Eftis founded Back Alley in 1967 to give neighborhood children performance experience and to work with new plays. Back Alley continued that focus throughout the 1970s. The Black Repertory and Pro Femina also focused on the development of original texts for the African American and feminist communities. The Folger's first production had been an original adaptation of a 2000 year-old classic. Soon it produced an array of world and American premieres. By 1976, even Arena Stage had entered the fray with its "Plays in the Process" program.

Despite this wealth of activity related to the creation and development of scripts and playwrights, New Playwrights' stood out as the one theatrical institution that placed the artistic contribution of the playwright at the center of the performance-process. In fact, within the media, NPT became an iconic representation of the pivotal importance of the script-maker. NPT was originally the Playwrights' Theater of Washington, one of several entities established under the corporate umbrella of ASTA.<sup>503</sup> Unlike The Folger Library, whose corporate umbrella cast enormous shadows and financial windfalls on its theater, ASTA had little to offer its affiliates other than the benefits of a shared, albeit cramped, space and the fellowship of other committed artists.

Under ASTA, Playwrights Theater performed at two separate locations, both of which played a critical role in the theater's identity. In his production history, Harry M. Bagdasian writes, "From August 1, 1972 until July 31, 1974 the company operated out of

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<sup>503</sup> American Society for Theater Arts.

4 basement rooms (under a ‘head shop’) at 1724 20<sup>th</sup> Street.”<sup>504</sup> The basement-theater accommodated between 26 and 23 audience members depending on the size of the stage. This extremely intimate space inspired the *Star’s* David Richards, a critic who usually lacked romantic sentiments, to gush that there was “a feeling of discovery in the basement air that compensate[d] for the modesty of means.”<sup>505</sup> It must also have inspired *Post* critic Richard Coe, a champion of the playwright who always placed the playwright at the center of the performance-process, to write that the staged readings were “the essence of ‘Off-Off-Broadway,’ the coffeehouse atmosphere of informal experimentation.”<sup>506</sup> Furthermore, he looked to the readings to uncover unique and powerful new voices: “The unspoken hope is that in these simplified stagings a new play or a fresh voice will be found that will cast a spell over larger, more disparate audiences.” Although the intimate auditorium contributed to this “feeling of discovery,” more importantly, the social space created by ASTA, branded “The Pits” by insiders, established a conspiratorial tone for each performance event.<sup>507</sup> In describing his initial adventure to ASTA, Coe wrote that he “ferreted out a basement room of an old house,” in much the same way one might find an after-hours club—an unadvertised gathering for the theatrically obsessed.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>504</sup> Harry M. Bagdasian, “New Playwrights’ Theater: A Production History, November 1972 – July 1984,” Printed by the author, the Washingtoniana Division of the Martin Luther King Public Library, Washington, D.C., ii.

<sup>505</sup> David Richards, “Promise in a Basement,” *Evening Star*, 19 February 1974, 4(C).

<sup>506</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Giving the Playwright a Chance to be Heard,” *Washington Post*, 11 January 1976, 110.

<sup>507</sup> David Richards, “Harry Bagdasian—Along Way from The Pits,” *Evening Star*, 11 June 1979, 1,2(B).

<sup>508</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Good Times and Small Triumphs on the Experimental Stage: Onward to New York,” *Washington Post*, 13 February 1977, 1(G).

The fact that ASTA and Playwrights' Theater focused almost solely on the development of Washington area playwrights during their first three years of operation also contributed to this informal coffeehouse environment. Although the cost of bringing out-of-town playwrights to Washington contributed to Bagdasian's decision to focus on Washington playwrights, the choice proved fortuitous. Of the 23 productions of 22 new scripts staged by Playwrights' during its first three years of operation, all but one was a one-act play.<sup>509</sup> Organized in evenings of two, three, or four one-act clusters, all but two of the scripts were by playwrights from the greater metropolitan area. None of the playwrights had name recognition, although a few gained recognition by having more than one of their scripts produced.<sup>510</sup> In addition, Playwrights presented thirty-nine readings of new scripts, while the Playwrights' Workshop of ASTA organized countless cold readings of new texts.<sup>511</sup> This atmosphere allowed ASTA to develop a community of like-minded artists and colleagues whose primary goal was "to develop new dramatic voices without the need of 'sell' reviews, and to test and trust the audiences."<sup>512</sup> This collegial, non-commercial space emphasized the process of script development over the finished product of performance. In this space, playwrights, actors, and audience members conspired openly to affect the development of the text.

When ASTA moved to its new location in the heart of downtown Washington at the corner of F and 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Playwrights moved with them. Although the space was

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<sup>509</sup> Compiled from the records in "New Playwrights' Theater: A Production History."

<sup>510</sup> Notably T. J. Camp III had three one-acts and one full-length play staged during those first three years.

<sup>511</sup> At a Playwrights' Workshop playwrights could attend a session with interested actors, directors, and others and submit a script to be read "cold" that evening. The participants would then discuss it.

<sup>512</sup> "The Experimental Stage," 1(G).

considerably larger than the basement, seating between 49 and 60 people, the location in “the dead of downtown after dark” proved problematic.<sup>513</sup> Although the *Post* proclaimed, “Comeback Set for F Street,” ASTA’s move into the converted Beef Feeders Restaurant revealed a far deeper malady than simply poor judgment on the part of artists.

Washington lacked suitable venues for performance. This problem was particularly acute for artists and arts organizations like ASTA and Playwrights’ that placed the development of art above the selling of art as a commodity. Thus, when the D.C. Government’s Redevelopment Land Agency offered ASTA an annual rent of one dollar on the downtown property, ASTA accepted, despite the rather treacherous and bleak location. Similar deals were offered to a slew of other small theaters in need of space, most notably WTL. Midway through a sold out production of its original script, *The Snow Queen*, police and fire officials “entered the theater and ordered the group to shut down immediately because the building did not conform to city codes.”<sup>514</sup> After being evicted from another space offered by the city, WTL shut down operations altogether. In short, due to the high cost of legitimate theatre spaces, ASTA, WTC, and many others were willing to use nearly condemned locations in the deserted parts of the old downtown in order to have larger spaces for their productions.

Discontented with ASTA’s new location and what proved to be “a tempestuous and lack-lustre third season,” Bagdasian moved Playwrights’ out of ASTA in February 1975.<sup>515</sup> He incorporated the theater as the New Playwrights’ Theater of Washington in

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<sup>513</sup> Don Shirley, “Dawn of a New Limelight,” *Washington Post*, 28 October 1977, 7.

<sup>514</sup> Susan Crowley, “Frustrated Actors Seek Support from City,” *Washington Post*, 12 January 1978, 3 (DC).

<sup>515</sup> “New Playwrights’ Theater,” i.

August 1975. By January 1976, NPT had moved into its own space several blocks east of Dupont Circle and south of Adams Morgan, at 1742 Church Street. The former school gymnasium served as home until the theater closed in 1990.<sup>516</sup> Although in need of extensive repairs, the building's 125-seat house not only provided NPT adequate room for expansion, but it also placed them in a neighborhood that was experiencing the first pangs of gentrification. The emergence of a small theater in a densely populated residential neighborhood within walking distance of a Metro station and a thriving commercial district established a pattern that many theaters followed during the 1980s.

Bagdasian inaugurated the new space with a "Dramathon," a fund-raising event intended to help the theater buy its Church Street space. The event also epitomized the theater's identity as a bastion of new play development. The first Dramathon consisted of fifty-three continuous hours of staged readings and workshop productions of twenty-five different scripts, twelve of which were performed twice. Although the two ensuing Dramathons altered the number of hours and performances in one direction or another, their essential qualities remained the same. The success of these events as fund-raisers emphasized the collegial nature of the NPT's community. The clustering together of twenty-five continuous productions de-emphasized the individuality of each production as well as each individual playwright, actor, and director, emphasizing instead the collective nature of the new play process. Additionally, the all-day, all-night affair symbolized the commitment to theater that its playwrights, actors, and even audiences had to have; for the lukewarm supporter of theater would not have tolerated the number

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<sup>516</sup> It had been the gymnasium of the Holton Arms Girl's School.

of failed texts or learning experiences that he or she had to witness or participate in before experiencing a truly worthy performance.

By the end of 1976, questions had arisen among the theater-going public and critics about the nature of small theaters, which seemed to teem from every basement and condemned building in Washington. While Kennedy Center's Stevens and Arena's Fichandler were busy staging patriotic Bicentennial seasons, small theaters like the WPA opened as "A (Counter) Cultural Center." Moreover, as one *Washington Post* critic observed, at the Folger Scheeder "intentionally designed an anti-Bicentennial season: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Medal of Honor Rag*, and *Henry V* all portrayed the destruction of heroes."<sup>517</sup> These moves established a cultural divide between the larger theatrical institutions that either represented or had come to represent the monumental core and the federal government and the newer, smaller theaters born during the cultural democracy movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Many small theaters viewed one of their institutional functions as presenting perspectives that opposed prevailing cultural values. Although they did not overtly present socio-political perspectives as central to their theatrical missions, these theaters frequently expressed political points of view that challenged status quo values. NPT, because of its focus on Washington playwrights and the articulation of a Washington identity, was no exception.

The success of NPT, however, also posed a different, more purely aesthetic question for the media. As discussed in the previous chapter, the media had difficulty categorizing small, amateur theaters and their performances. As long as they remained marginal and unsuccessful in their operation, the difficulty did not reach a crisis. If, on

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<sup>517</sup> Alan M. Kriegsman, "WPA: A (Counter) Cultural Center," *Washington Post*, 16 April 1975, 1(B); and "Grand Aspirations," 12(F).

the other hand, they succeeded like NPT, the old dichotomy between commercial /professional and community no longer seemed viable. The Kennedy Center existed in a class by itself, semi-professional companies like the Folger were becoming professional, and groups like NPT survived solely because amateur actors, playwrights, and designers committed hours of free labor to their cause.<sup>518</sup> Initially, the *Post* granted the Center its own calendar heading, leaving Arena, Ford's, the National, and other professional companies under the title of "Stage." Theaters such as Back Alley, NPT, and ASTA were labeled "Experimental." On the other hand, the *Star* listed theaters alphabetically under the simple heading of "Stage." By 1976, after playing with several variations on this theme, both major papers settled on "Professional" and "Experimental" as the two leading categories of theater, followed by "Dinner" and "University." "Community" as a category disappeared from their pages. In a *Post* article published in February 1977 and written in response to the fact that NPT had just moved a production to New York's Public Theater, Coe doubted the appropriateness of the term "experimental" as a concept defining theater:

Whoever its creators, whatever its budget, wherever it's performed, every play production is 'experimental,' though the term has come to suggest out-of-the-ordinary in out-of-the-way places.

Another term is Off-Off-Broadway, suggesting the Cino-La Mama-Cubiculo-Open Stage-Open Space genre in basements, restored buildings or rookeries where both new and old plays have humble but searching performances at modest prices and no salaries. As protest against established practices and outrageous costs, such groups exist even in cities that have no other theaters, filling the local theater vacuum with industry and hope.

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<sup>518</sup> To be sure, small theaters sometimes arranged for small stipends to actors and designers; sometimes they even arranged to pay an Equity actor a reduced fee under the table. Regardless of these activities, however, most small theaters created performances using unpaid actors, designers, and technicians.

There probably are a score of such enterprises in this area, serving a range from the idealistic to the pretentious; but for integrity of purpose, none is more distinguished than the New Playwrights' Theater.<sup>519</sup>

Although Coe accepted NPT's definition as experimental, by declaring all theater "experimental" at their core he eliminated it as a meaningful category of understanding, except in the sense of space. Thus, if small theaters were "experimental," it was only because they used "out-of-the-ordinary" stages in "out-of-the-way" places. In the same article, he also questioned, albeit through inference, the meaning of the word "professional." He acknowledged that NPT's artists were "ranked as nonprofessionals under some professional guidance." Yet, contradicting that classification, they had taken "off for New York, where ... experimental-minded Joseph Papp will present them in a production he admired in the old gym."<sup>520</sup> As the small theater movement continued to expand and improve in quality, questions of terminology would only intensify.

### *Section II: The Second Wave, Small Theaters Become a Social Force*

As NPT's star was rising on Church Street, two new theaters took root several blocks to the east: Source and Studio Theaters. Several years later, another small theater, Woolly Mammoth Theater Company began operations in a church downtown. Although these three theaters could not have been more different in tone and practice, they came to represent the heart and soul of Washington's small theater movement. In 1983, by forming the League of Washington Theaters, they found an institutional expression for that heart and soul.

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<sup>519</sup> "Good Times and Small Triumphs on the Experimental Stage," 1(G).

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

In many ways, the story of Source and Studio's development as theaters was as much the story of their 14<sup>th</sup> Street neighborhood's development as an upscale, faddish urbanscape. In the 1950s and 1960s, the neighborhood at 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets had been "the gateway to the best of Washington's black community."<sup>521</sup> When the cultural center that had existed to the south around Howard Theater moved north, African American owned businesses moved and thrived with it. At that point, the Shaw area became a desirable place to work and live: "U Street was in the center of town.... Here were people with quality educations, who had high aspirations for their children."<sup>522</sup> Of course, the uprisings of 1968 destroyed that social space; in fact, the 14<sup>th</sup> Street/Shaw neighborhood suffered more than any other area of D.C., and the neighborhood's deterioration continued through the 1970s.

By 1979 media representations of 14<sup>th</sup> Street depicted a world where, after nightfall, violence, drugs, and prostitution ruled the streets:

Aiming the camera at a crowd in the doorway of the old Republic Theater, at 14th and U Streets NW, the policeman illuminated a knot of black men, some wearing faded Army field jackets and berets. Point, hold, shoot. 'Heroin. Nothing, but heroin out here,' the officer said. 'Those are the same people who laughed and cheered when officer Arthur Snyder was killed.... No, they aren't people. They're animals.'<sup>523</sup>

Even in the daylight, however, the groups of unemployed, African American youths or Vietnam veterans standing in front of raucous murals on street corners would have made many urban residents uncomfortable. Of course, images of "a neighborhood full of

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<sup>521</sup> Juan Williams, "14<sup>th</sup> and U," *Washington Post Magazine*, 21 February 1988, 22.

<sup>522</sup> Yvonne J. Carter, "Ideal Place to Live Before the Riots," *Washington Afro-American*, 1 November 1980, 1. The Shaw community is bounded by Florida Avenue on the north, 16<sup>th</sup> Street on the west, Massachusetts Avenue on the south, and North Capital Street on the east.

<sup>523</sup> Courtland Milloy, "River of Darkness, 14<sup>th</sup> Street: Once a Mainstream, Recently a Backwater, Flowing Strong Again, Always a Frontier," *Washington Post Magazine*, 23 November 1980, 14.

abandoned cars where alleys and vacant, partly boarded homes overflow with trash and rats” would have been depressing to even the most urbanized residents. Even long time residents, like Anthony Hillary for example, stumbled “over drug syringes or ... a dead person in back of his house.”<sup>524</sup> Although the *Post* more than the *Star* or the smaller newspapers simulated the 14<sup>th</sup> Street/Shaw area in such a garish and violent light, it was not alone in describing neighborhoods in desperate need of renewal. In addition, with the *Star* all but defunct and the *Washington Times* still several years away from publication, *The Post’s* power to shape public perception was at an all-time high.<sup>525</sup>

By the time Source and Studio moved onto 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the neighborhood was already showing signs of gentrification. Trendy shops were “within sight of the notorious intersection of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets, and within touching distance of the drifting crowds of drug dealers, addicts, and prostitutes.”<sup>526</sup> East of the theaters, in the riot-blighted Shaw neighborhood, urban renewal had begun, albeit too slowly for many residents. As one Shaw resident proclaimed: “I guess [Mayor Barry] had to satisfy the white investors first with the projects downtown before he could ... enlist their help in moving uptown to our areas.”<sup>527</sup> Nevertheless, as early as 1977 the D.C. Development Corporation purchased 42 rowhouses in the Shaw neighborhood and promised that “after they were gutted and rebuilt,” they would be “sold at subsidized prices to moderate income families.”<sup>528</sup> Of course, as any Washingtonian knew, a government project of this magnitude took years

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<sup>524</sup> Patricia Camp, “Area Blighted by Vacant Houses,” *Washington Post*, 6 February 1979, 1(C).

<sup>525</sup> Many of the smaller presses, most notably the *D.C. Gazette*, had also ceased publication.

<sup>526</sup> Linda Wheeler, “Trendy Shops Discover 14<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor,” *Washington Post*, 21 September 1980, 1(A).

<sup>527</sup> Rita D. Chappelle, “Revitalization Plan Kick-Off,” *Washington Afro-American*, 12 July 1986, 1.

<sup>528</sup> Aaron Ruvinsky, “Awards Reflect Vigor of Rebuilding a City,” *Evening Star*, 9 December 1977, 1(E).

to complete and would probably leave the “guttled” homes as shelters for the homeless drug addicts who were turning Shaw into the area’s number one crime zone.

This seemingly uninhabitable cityscape would soon become home to two of the city’s most dynamic small theaters. Founded in 1977 by Bart Whiteman, Source Theatre Company spent its first three years bouncing “from one location in the city to another,” before landing “in a basement room of St. John’s Church, 1525 H St. NW.”<sup>529</sup> During that time, the theater produced an assortment of modern classics, including J. M. Synge’s *The Shadow of the Glen*, Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, Eugene O’Neill’s *The Long Voyage Home*, and August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*. They also performed a bit of “formless improvisational theater,” *Persephone*.<sup>530</sup> By the time Source moved its production of *Henry V* to a 14<sup>th</sup> Street storefront in May 1980, many critics agreed that it was “one of the more encouraging endeavors ... seen this season in those storefront theaters that ... you might call Off-Off Kennedy Center.”<sup>531</sup> Even if Source’s endeavors frequently exceeded its meager human and economic resources, those endeavors brought the new theater to the attention of Washington’s theater-going public.

Studio Theater’s journey to 14<sup>th</sup> Street was not nearly as nomadic as Source’s. Founded in 1978 by Joy Zinoman in association with Russell Metheny (Resident Set Designer), the theater began in a sister relationship to the Joy Zinoman Studio (an acting school) and shared a small studio space near 14<sup>th</sup> Street with two other arts

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<sup>529</sup> David Richard, “Source Theater Gets A for Effort,” *Evening Star*, 8 May 1979, 4(D).

<sup>530</sup> Jean M. White, “Persephone, Energetic and Improvised,” *Washington Post* 4 October 1979, 20(D).

<sup>531</sup> David Richards, “An Excellent *Queen and the Rebels* from a New D.C. Theater Worth Noting,” *Evening Star*, 6 July 1978, 3(D).

organizations.<sup>532</sup> Within the confines of their small studio space, they produced their first three shows: Lanford Wilson's *The Rimers of Eldritch*, Peter Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise*, and Georges Feydeau's *Hotel Paradiso*. This array of styles supported "Studio's stated aim ... to recreate specialized traditions of acting ... with respect and care."<sup>533</sup> These aims were so consistent with Zinoman's acting school that a reviewer of *Hotel Paradiso* speculated that Zinoman had chosen the play because it provided "a maximum number of parts for the members of her acting school."<sup>534</sup> In January 1980, Studio moved into a new space off 14<sup>th</sup> Street on Church Street and built a 100-seat auditorium, just in time "for the final class presentations by fall-term students."<sup>535</sup> To demonstrate its commitment to an array of styles, Studio opened its new theater with a production of a traditional Peking Opera, *Ssu Lang T'an Mu*.

Although both theaters aspired to produce classic American, European, and—in Studio's case—even Asian scripts, in the early 1980s, 14<sup>th</sup> Street was ill-suited to attract those elements of the public who would identify with that kind of performance. Source and Studio soon discovered their joint dilemma, a dilemma best investigated by considering their simultaneous productions of March 1981. That month Source ran a production of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* while Studio ran Anton Chekhov's *Seagull*. For his first few shows, Whiteman's company had "all white members and so [were] most of the people in his

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<sup>532</sup> Studio Theater web site: <http://www.studiotheatre.org/>, 2004. The web site also includes among the theater's founders, Virginia Crawford, stating: "Virginia Crawford, an advocate who shared their vision for a new professional theatre in Washington, DC, joined them [Zinoman and Methany]."

<sup>533</sup> James Lardner, "Striking Scenes of the Radical '30s," *Washington Post*, 20 May 1980, 16(B).

<sup>534</sup> Hank Burchard, "*Paradiso*: Lightly By a Tangled Tale," *Washington Post*, 19 October 1979, 21 (Weekend).

<sup>535</sup> Leah Y. Latimer, "District Weekly, Upbeat," *Washington Post*, 10 January 1980, 5(DC).

audience.”<sup>536</sup> *For Colored Girls* obviously broke with that pattern. As he told a reporter: “Sure it’s a little scary here. But we’re downtown. We can afford the rent, and people are coming to see us.”<sup>537</sup> To the reporter, *For Colored Girls* represented Whiteman’s attempt to identify Source more closely with the African American community that inhabited the neighborhood. She had no way of knowing that the show was an aberration, a singular African American production happening at Source because Frederic Lee, the show’s director, was available following the demise of Back Alley Theater. Zinoman’s company more explicitly catered to Washington’s white theater-going public; as she told a reporter, “We don’t say we’re at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and Church.... We say we’re at 1401 Church Street. By the time the audience finds out, it’s too late.”<sup>538</sup> Her production of *Seagull* with its long retreat to the Russian countryside was not the first of Studio’s shows that had nothing to do with the theater’s environment. Like Whiteman, Zinoman produced Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* the following year. Again, as with Source, Fredric Lee directed, demonstrating that the production of African American shows that would connect the theaters to the historical identity of the neighborhood would be sporadic at best. Nevertheless, as both theaters grew and established roots along 14<sup>th</sup> Street, their artistic directors struggled to make their theaters’ aesthetic missions compatible with their spatial situations.

Dominating Source’s immediate vicinity were storefront churches, automobile repair shops, and corner liquor stores. The human activity was brisk but not with potential theater-goers. Studio was, as Zinoman asserted, on Church Street. Without a

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<sup>536</sup> Judith Gainer, “Theater Grown on Northwest’s 14<sup>th</sup> Street,” *Evening Star*, 12 March 1981, 5 (B, Fairfax Edition).

<sup>537</sup> “Trendy Shops,” 1(A).

14<sup>th</sup> St. storefront, audiences approached the theater from the comfort of Church St. with its residential homes and Dupont Circle association. Yet Studio had no visible presence. A school could tolerate lack of visibility, as students found their way through a maze of non-descript masonite; however, for a theater with a hundred seats to fill, a public architectural expression was paramount.

Source's image on 14<sup>th</sup> St. grew out of its frenetic activity and tendency to overextend itself. Source opened the 1980/1981 season with a production of Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr. Sloan*; and then, as Arena Stage had done during the 1950s, the theater produced a new show every three weeks for the remainder of the season. The repertoire's stylistic variety bore witness to Source's lack of a coherent mission or vision of performance. The 1980/1981 season included Brian Friel's *Lovers*, William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a one-man show entitled *National Electric*, Jean Genet's *The Maids*, a mime performance, Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, an original compilation entitled *Scott and Zelda*, Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Source produced so many plays that the company even had to open an adjunct space, called "The Vault," at 18<sup>th</sup> and Columbia Road. Additionally, during the summer of 1981, as other theaters in town were planning for the upcoming season, Source borrowed from NPT's Dramathon, which NPT had ceased by 1980, and initiated its first annual Washington Theater Festival:

Four weeks of nonstop performances ... 16 plays by local playwrights (and one by a Texas playwright) ... some in full productions and others in staged readings ... two evenings of song, six performances of mime, three new productions of old plays and, to wrap it all up, the Source Comedy Team doing something as yet unspecified.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> Gainer, Fx B 5.

<sup>539</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "Theater Notes, *Washington Post*, 8 July 1981, 9(C).

By the end of the season Source had produced twenty different shows, all of which were reviewed. The theater topped even the Kennedy Center in the amount of press coverage garnered. If bad press was better than no press at all, Source was wallowing in wealth.

Whereas Whiteman had built Source's reputation carefully during its first three years of operation, the acquisition of space brought with it an obsession to produce. On the one hand, Source faced an economic imperative to pay the rent (however, that would not explain the acquisition of additional space to house additional performances). On the other hand, Washington was replete with young theater artists wanting to work. In any event, the critics reacted to Whiteman's obsession with a unanimous voice. Although all recognized that there was "no shortage of ambition over at the Source," they also acknowledged that it was "the city's most erratic theatrical institution, its artistic fortunes fluctuating with a whimsy that makes the barometer appear a model of constancy."<sup>540</sup> One week the theater would receive lavish praise for their risk-taking and daring to go "where more prudent angels of the theatrical variety fear to tread..."<sup>541</sup> The next week, they would be reprimanded for over-reaching their resources and talent pool:

On the other hand, if you decide to tackle Brecht, Shakespeare, Euripides or any of those playwrights who occupy the theatrical peaks, you run the clear danger of perishing on the slopes, long before you've reached the top. This, I fear, is what is happening at Source, where the evening's ambition far outstrips the hard realities on stage.<sup>542</sup>

Whiteman simply ignored the critics, pressing on as never before. In 1982 he stopped producing at The Vault and acquired another space on the same block as the

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<sup>540</sup> James Lardner, "Source's Low-Gear *Rosencrantz*," *Washington Post*, 15 April 1981, 4(D); David Richards, "Blue Ribbon 'Equus': Source's Polished, Subtle Production Raises Its Theatrical Standing," *Washington Post*, 15 December 1982, 1(C).

<sup>541</sup> David Richards, "Sensitive 'Bent': Source's Treatment Of Homosexuality," *Washington Post*, 19 January 1982, 1(D).

<sup>542</sup> David Richards, "Brecht's Slippery Slopes," *Washington Post*, 21 October 1981, 1(B).

Source. He opened the Warehouse Rep with only minimal renovations, which provoked another *Post* critic, Megan Rosenfeld, to quip: “The Source Theater Co., in its continuing effort to produce more plays than anyone else, has opened a new performing space on 14th Street with not one, but three plays rotating in repertoire. The space is simply not ready for public productions.”<sup>543</sup> Unperturbed, in 1983 Whiteman opened a third space, The Resource, one block from his other two theaters. As was becoming apparent to critics and patrons alike, and possibly even to Whiteman himself, Source’s identity seemed driven not by economics but by Whiteman’s desire to transform 14<sup>th</sup> Street into an artistic haven.<sup>544</sup> As Whiteman himself obsessed:

During the past year ... I have produced 28 shows involving more than 120 actors in more than 500 performances, a six-part mime series, a month-long theater festival, several touring productions, monthly free performances at the Martin Luther King Library, a week of live radio theater on WPFW-FM, taught acting and playwriting workshops, sponsored a playwriting contest and nearly drove myself and a few associate mad in the process.<sup>545</sup>

After acquiring space for Source, the desire to do theater had consumed him: to produce it, to perform it, to direct it, and to witness its process of becoming. Unfortunately for Whiteman, the notion that the process of play-making might be an end unto itself was incomprehensible to those theater-goers and critics who attended performances to enjoy the finished product. Nevertheless, as with NPT and ASTA, Whiteman’s Source revealed the imprint of a nascent public sphere, albeit one burgeoning at a frenetic pace. Theaters like Source and Studio were a new phenomenon in Washington, and critical

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<sup>543</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Rotating at the Source,” *Washington Post*, 8 April 1982, 2(B).

<sup>544</sup> Source Theater Program, Charles Fuller’s *A Soldier’s Play*, directed by Michael Johnson, June 12-July 22, 1986.

<sup>545</sup> Bart Whiteman, “Less is More: The Source Experience,” *Washington Post*, 6 October 1981, 7(C).

acclaim was not sufficient for small theaters to succeed; as Whiteman argued, “the public [had] to get into the habit of going to see them.”<sup>546</sup> Because 14<sup>th</sup> St. was also a new place for the public to experience theater, Whiteman figured that by creating multiple venues in a particular area and by producing an extraordinary number of performances within those venues, not only would young theater artists gain from the experience but also the public would develop the habit of going to the theater. As Whiteman later explained: “Every theater in town [was] benefiting from our doing things this way.”<sup>547</sup>

Zinoman approached the development of Studio Theater in a completely different manner, as she combined the activities of her acting school with the cultivation of a theater-going public that could appreciate what she called classically rendered styles.<sup>548</sup> Whereas Source started with a 50-seat auditorium and little backing from foundations or corporations, Studio seated 95 and by September 1980 “found grant money in a city notoriously short of locally-minded corporations and foundations.”<sup>549</sup> As *The Post* reported: “In the four months since Studio began soliciting, Comsat, C&P Telephone, and the Agnes Meyer Foundation have responded.” Thus, while Source started with the pressure of paying rent from box-office receipts, Studio had outside financial support and an acting school that could “pay two-thirds of the rent.”<sup>550</sup> Whereas Whiteman obsessed over the creation of as many performances as possible, Zinoman, “an intensely

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> *A Short History of Source Theater, as Told by Bart Whiteman at Trio's Restaurant, 2 July 1986*, recorded, edited, and bound by Amy Schmidt, 1990, 14. Washingtoniana.

<sup>548</sup> As suggested by the courses in the Joy Zinoman Acting School, the concept of a classically rendered style referred to textual analyses, particularly the realism of Chekhov and the theatrics of Shakespeare.

<sup>549</sup> James Lardner, “The Young Producers: High Hopes, Headaches and Hassles as the City's Small Theaters Keep Growing,” *Washington Post*, 28 September 1980, 1(K).

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

enthusiastic, unabashedly opinionated woman,” focused on perfecting each individual production.<sup>551</sup> Talking to a reporter as she watched the “great brooding hulk of a set” for her production of *Medea* take shape, she said, “The ultimate artistic ecstasy has occurred.”<sup>552</sup> In other words, if Source’s trademark was the swirl of activity associated with its imperative to manufacture manifold productions, Studio’s was the great concentration that it placed on the details of a single production. Zinoman’s challenge lay in building an identity for the theater that was distinct from the school’s, yet in concert with the 14<sup>th</sup> St. neighborhood in which it operated.

Zinoman continued her strategy of offering plays that depicted a variety of performance styles. Over Studio’s first three seasons, it offered Euripides’ *Medea*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit*, William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage*, commedia dell’arte’s *Harlequin Goes to Bologna*, William Mastrosimone’s *The Woolgatherer*, Clifford Odet’s *Waiting for Lefty*, as well as the previously mentioned *A Raisin in the Sun* and Peking Opera. Aside from an absence of original scripts or scripts from Eastern Europe, Studio’s repertoire was similar to Arena’s in diversity of style.

Unlike Source’s productions, which met with a combination of encouragement and chastisement, Studio’s shows received either total rave or rebuke. Shows that failed were the large cast shows; critics tended to reprimand the theater for overreaching and for casting students, or former students, in supporting roles. As David Richards barbed about *Romeo and Juliet*, “many of the cast members are present or former students of hers.

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<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> James Lardner, “A First-Rate *Medea*, *Washington Post*, 7 October 1980, 7(B).

Conceivably, Zinoman can take pleasure in the progress ... they have made in the classroom. The general theater patron cannot lay claim to that satisfaction.”<sup>553</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the mixed reviews, Studio played to “about 65 percent capacity,” with its successful productions playing to overflow crowds.<sup>554</sup> To better accommodate the hits, Studio redesigned its auditorium to fit in an additional fifteen seats.

Within three years, Source and Studio had made their presence felt on 14<sup>th</sup> St., which had “long been known for theater, usually deadly serious stuff of the cops-and-robbers sort.”<sup>555</sup> The neighborhood was changing, however, and the media cited four factors specifically as the cause. First, the city had built the Reeves Center, a new municipal building, at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets; that development had a direct impact on the flow of more upscale people into the area. In addition, changes in the tax law and the designation of sections of the neighborhood as new historical districts encouraged financial investment in the area’s development.<sup>556</sup> Finally, an earlier media prophesy had begun to come true: “someday the avenue's name may conjure up the drama that happens off the sidewalk. Two small companies a few blocks apart, the Studio Theater and the Source, are threatening to make 14th Street a nice place to visit, even after dark.”<sup>557</sup>

As Source and Studio Theaters rose in stature, another small theater emerged in Washington’s downtown. Roger Brady and Howard Shalwitz opened Woolly Mammoth

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<sup>553</sup> David Richards, “Studio’s Florid *Romeo*, *Washington Post*, 10 December 1981, 11(C).

<sup>554</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “The Seating Sweepstakes: Despite Hard Times, Local Theaters Hold Fast,” *Washington Post*, 4 July 1982, 1(H).

<sup>555</sup> Lloyd Grove, “Gems in Unlikely Places,” *Washington Post*, 10 October 1980, 11(Weekend).

<sup>556</sup> J. J. Yore, “Eatery Signals U Street’s Rebirth: Gentrification is Moving Eastward,” *Washington Post*, 22 November 1984, 1(A).

<sup>557</sup> “Gems,” 11(Weekend).

Theater Company in 1981, “two years after its founders came to Washington, and three years after they conjured up the idea.”<sup>558</sup> After investigating the city’s funding streams for two years, they discovered that foundation and corporate support was in fact good. They began working with actors in a pre-production capacity. Finally, they moved into a hall at the 146-year-old Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, 1317 G St. and opened their first evening of shows: two one-acts, Mark Medoff’s *The Froegle Dictum* and an improvised performance-piece, *Fits and Starts*. Unlike Whiteman and Zinoman, Brady and Shalwitz’s vision of theater and performance incorporated instrumentality into aesthetics: “‘If everyone likes us, it’s not a success,’ he [Shalwitz] said. ‘The idea is to make people look at things. If they’re moved, if they’re angry, if they go out and quit their jobs, then it’s a success.’”<sup>559</sup> Shalwitz later described it as “an idea for a new kind of theatre that would shake up the nation.”<sup>560</sup> Shalwitz was espousing a more avant-garde approach to performance, somewhat akin to the politics of a Piscator or Brecht with a hint of Artaud’s irrational “cruelty” added for affect; and the nation’s capital seemed ideal for such a venture to take place.

A church on G Street in downtown Washington, however, did not seem the ideal place for the avant-garde in 1981. The WPA still presented avant-garde arts shows and performance art several blocks to the east, but little else in the church or the adjacent social space supported such a vision. In fact, although the theater was centrally located, not far from the city’s newly opened Metro Center, the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and G Streets after

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<sup>558</sup> Carla Hall, “Live From G Street: It’s Woolly Mammoth Theater Co.,” *Washington Post*, 22 February 1981, 1(H).

<sup>559</sup> Ibid.

<sup>560</sup> Woolly Mammoth’s web site: <http://www.woollymammoth.net>. 2004.

dark was a deserted universe through which audience members had to pass to get from their parked cars to the dimly lit sanctuary of the church. As usual, however, development plans were in the works. In January 1981, the Metro Center design team won approval from the District's Fine Arts Commission for a G Street \$160 million development plan that included a new "Hecht Co. and a 450-room downtown Hilton Hotel."<sup>561</sup> Although Woolly would have benefited economically from improvements in the neighborhood, at that time their theatrical provocations attracted a clientele that neither Hecht nor Hilton would have hailed. Regardless, until construction, Woolly and its patrons—much like the residents of Shaw—would have to live with parking lots, condemned buildings, and oppressive streets not fit for occupancy.

Whereas both Source and Studio presented an eclectic mixture of styles and genres, Woolly's repertoire associated the theater with a particular style of script. As Theater Lobby had done during the 1950s and 1960s, and as Cedar Lane had done in Maryland's suburbs through the 1960s and 1970s, Woolly "followed a refreshingly eccentric course—ranging from early Mark Medoff to ... [the] Polish absurdist epic, *Vatzlav*."<sup>562</sup> As a result, Woolly appealed to a select element of Washington's theater-going public. Woolly's public enjoyed "plays that resist neat conclusions, acknowledge the essential irrationality in human intercourse and picture a world as an emotional mine field."<sup>563</sup> After its initial offering of two one-acts, Woolly produced Jorge Diaz's *The Place Where the Mammals Die*, another Medoff—*The Kramer*, Jean Claude van Itallie's

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<sup>561</sup> Paul Hodge, "\$160 Million: 3-Block D.C Development Is Given Preliminary Fine Arts Approval," *Washington Post*, 14 January 1981, 7(D).

<sup>562</sup> "Pioneer's Place," 1(K). *Vatzlav* is by Slawomir Mrozek.

<sup>563</sup> David Richards, "Bully Woolly! For D.C.'s Offbeat Theater Company, the Future Is Now," *Washington Post*, 27 July 1986, 1(G).

*Mystery Play*, Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*, a world premiere of Carroll Carlson's *Superior Attachments*, Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders*, Sheldon Rosen's two one-acts, *Love Mouse* and *Meyer's Room*, and N. F. Simpson's *Was He Anyone?* Although reviews ranged from raves to reprimands, the general consensus among critics was that Woolly, like a number of smaller off-off-Broadway theaters, was a company "in vigorous pursuit of a singular identity."<sup>564</sup>

With the emergence of these three theaters and the presence of a half dozen other small companies in the Washington area, the debate over their definition, which had only been hinted at during the emergence of NPT, intensified. *Post* critic James Lardner initiated the new debate as early as 1980 when he wrote:

London has 'the fringe.' New York has 'off-off-Broadway.' Chicago has 'the small theater movement.' Washington has ... a terminology gap. 'We should sponsor a contest,' says Bart Whiteman of the Source Theatre. 'The existing categories—commercial, regional, experimental, community, etc. —just won't do,' he complains. 'Call a theater 'experimental' and everybody thinks of leotards, animals suits and strobe lights.'<sup>565</sup>

Lead *Post* critic David Richards began using the term "Off-Off Kennedy Center" in 1981, but he soon found the term unsatisfactory:

While there's no difficulty identifying one end of the spectrum—the Kennedy Center, Arena Stage, National Theatre end—as 'professional,' what do you call the others? Groups like Source and New Playwrights, Pro Femina, Woolly Mammoth, Studio Theatre, The Rep and G.A.L.A.? Off-Off-Kennedy Center really doesn't do it, and most of the other terms—experimental theaters, fringe theaters, small theaters—usually elicit indignant protests on the part of the very groups in question. Experimental, they say, implies inaccessible. Fringe says flaky. And small, by simply not being big, means unsuccessful. Whatever the generic term, it seems to summon up notions of marginality. And that is precisely what the directors and actors and designers in question resent. Here they

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<sup>564</sup> David Richards, "No Mystery in *Mystery*," *Washington Post*, 2 November 1982, 4(D).

<sup>565</sup> "Young Producers," 1(K).

are expending considerable time and energy, often for little financial reward, and they are being told that their efforts are, in essence, minor. Who wouldn't lodge at least a semantic protest?<sup>566</sup>

Since the late 1960s, small theaters had been challenged by questions of identity and legitimacy. Without Equity or LORT endorsement, the small theater community had to rely upon their own internal criteria to establish their artistic credentials with both their own members and their respective publics. Potential funding sources were an entirely different issue. Potential funders who attended a production could decide their support based on their own experiences of the theaters and their performances. Those funders who relied on the traditional grant request were more dubious, particularly when the press marginalized the theaters' activities with inadequate terminology. "Experimental" and "Community" failed to capture the nature of the experience they offered. Even without Whiteman's pejorative use of the term, very few D.C. small theaters were experimenting with performance in the ways that Schechner and Chaikin were doing in New York or that Grotowski had done in Poland. In fact, even WTL's experimental work had not survived Washington's culturally conservative media elites and economically expensive real estate market.<sup>567</sup> When companies did experiment—as with Source's *Persephone*, Woolly's *Fits and Starts*, or most notably Pro Femina's improvisations—critics from the major dailies usually demeaned the attempts.<sup>568</sup> Nor were they Theatres of Community, because their survival did not rely upon a pre-existing set of relationships between theater

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<sup>566</sup> "Pioneers' Place," 1(K).

<sup>567</sup> The founder and artistic director of the Washington Theater Lab had studied under Grotowski.

<sup>568</sup> Jean White and Richard Coe of the *Washington Post* and David Richards of the *Evening Star* rarely gave positive notices to productions in which the theater artists assumed the role of storyteller. Jean White, who reviewed by *Persephone* and *Fits and Starts*, called the productions unfocused. Significantly, she praised the improvisational work of Pro Femina only to have *The Post's* Rosenfeld and Richards demean the theater after their name change. Jean M. White, "Persephone: Energetic and Improvised," *Washington Post*, 4 October 1979, 20 (D); "Mammoth Debut," *Washington Post*, 21 February 1981, 3(C).

practitioners and the public. Nevertheless, these theaters hoped to construct a public of aesthetically like-minded patrons, a hope that Richards argued was not antithetical to their “marginal” classification:

It is entirely possible, however, that the indignation is misdirected. In today's theatrical climate ‘marginal’ may be a much stronger term than we suspect. It may even indicate a theatrical course worth pursuing. Marginal doesn't necessarily mean expendable. The dictionary defines it as ‘occupying the borderland of a relatively stable territorial or cultural area.’ And, frankly, that's just where most of our smaller theaters should want to set down roots.<sup>569</sup>

Although Richards asserted that “marginal” was a useful concept for defining the small theater phenomenon in Washington, he did so because he believed that the public’s attraction to the small theaters existed at the margins of society. Larger theaters, such as the Center, the National, and even (according the Richards) Arena and the Folger, needed to set their sights on Washington’s broader, more conservative theater-going public, because they had larger houses to fill. Although he was quite right that small theaters could survive with a collective audience of 2,000 people for a single show—whereas the Center needed 2000 for a two-night run—the real debate hinged on exactly what Washingtonians considered to be a “professional” or “legitimate” producing organization. Marginal publics attending performances produced by marginal theaters could never provide those theaters with any kind of legitimacy. Furthermore, without legitimacy, those theaters would never produce the kind of effect on their publics that would vitalize the social dimension of their identity, unless of course, those theaters possessed an “art for art’s sake” aesthetic, which clearly theaters like Woolly did not possess.

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<sup>569</sup> “Pioneers’ Place,” 1(K).

In the early 1970s, most Washingtonians were comfortable with the distinction between Theater of Commerce and Theater of Community. Theater of Commerce paid the “professional” artist to do his or her craft full-time, whereas Theater of Community existed because amateur artists donated their time for each production and performance. Creative workers in small theaters, however, did not live in a world of such dichotomies. As represented in numerous feature stories in the *Post*, these artists pieced together the economic aspects of their lives through a combination of jobs, be it Zinoman operating an acting school, Shalwitz free-lancing in “typesetting and graphic design,” Brady working as a part-time employee “for Coors Hobbies and Crafts,” Whiteman teaching classes and workshops, or countless actors, directors, designers, technicians, or carpenters volunteering numerous hours so that small theaters might flourish.<sup>570</sup> This is not to say, however, that the artists involved in these enterprises did not seek to be identified as “professionals,” for they did. In pursuit of this goal they combined their artistic professions with the seemingly full-time pursuit of charitable donations in support of their artistic activities, and they used their current artistic projects as advertisements by which they might realize their aspirations to work on larger stages on Broadway or Hollywood. Those who stayed learned to tolerate uncertainty; the artistry they produced on stage or backstage challenged the public’s—and the critic’s—understanding of what “professional” really meant.

Washington’s small theater movement did not watch the media’s construction of their identity passively. In 1982, six small theaters organized the League of Washington Theaters: the Folger, NPT, Studio, Source, Woolly Mammoth, and Round House Theater

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<sup>570</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “The Making of Mammoth,” *Washington Post*, 21 January 1985, 7(C); and “Live from G Street,” 1(H).

in suburban Maryland. Although twenty years later the League would assert that its mission was “to create greater public awareness, appreciation, and support for theatre in the Washington area,” in its early years, its objective was quite different.<sup>571</sup> In July 1983, the League’s objective was “to get more attention for what [its members] call the ‘small theater movement’ in Washington.”<sup>572</sup> The League scheduled its first fund-raiser to raise \$40,000, half of which would be “spent on public relations efforts.” In 1984, membership expanded to include Arena, The Rep, GALA, and a new theater Paradise Island Express; the following year the media asserted that the League represented “all major nonprofit theaters in the city.”<sup>573</sup>

Although the League rarely entered the public eye, its work behind the scenes had a tangible impact on how Washingtonians came to understand their emergent small theater network. The League sponsored events and benefits, from its own “Suite Life” tour, where Washington’s hotels introduced visitors to the city’s luxury suites, to the annual Holiday Performance to benefit the area’s needy.<sup>574</sup> These events upgraded the image of small theaters from being charities to becoming the supporter of charities. Moreover, because events like the “Suite Life” introduced Washington’s thousands of daily tourists to the city’s theater community, they countered the idea of small theaters as being limited solely to a “marginal” public.

The emergence of the League and its articulation of a more egalitarian understanding of the various theater-going publics also corresponded to changes in the

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<sup>571</sup> League of Washington Theaters web site: <http://www.lowt.org/>, 2001.

<sup>572</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Local Notes,” *Washington Post*, 18 July 1983, 7(C).

<sup>573</sup> “The Making of Mammoth,” 7(C). Paradise Island Express was a small company that performed at various theaters throughout the city during the 1980s and early 1990s.

<sup>574</sup> Joe Brown, “Nice Benefits,” *Washington Post*, 26 March 1984, 7(C).

style and structure of *The Washington Post's* theater listings. From 1979 to 1982, the *Post* organized theaters under three separate headings: “Professional,” “Experimental/Community,” and “Dinner.”<sup>575</sup> By September 1983, it shifted semantically to a geographic organization, listing those theaters that had been “Professional” under the category of “Downtown,” while placing theaters that had been “Experimental/Community” under the heading “Around Town.” The inference remained, to be sure; “downtown” connoted its traditional meaning—“professional”—because *The Post* listed Kennedy Center, Arena, and the Folger, even though they were not technically downtown. League theaters were also still lumped with university and community theaters, but at least the newspaper was not applying labels to them that they felt marginalized their efforts.

Most importantly, the League allowed small theaters to bring the problem of space, or the lack of it, to the attention of the broader public. Since the inception of Washington’s small theater movement, concerns about space had driven producers’ choices. As discussed in Chapter Two, the growth of Washington’s bureaucracy had led to the demolition of most of Washington’s older theater structures. To make matters worse, the endemic lack of a manufacturing-base meant that the city had very few large warehouses or factories to convert into acceptable venues.<sup>576</sup> Studio and Source’s “warehouses,” though adequate for performances, were not acceptable for theaters desiring “professional” status, because they could not seat enough patrons on a nightly basis to generate an adequate income. Finally, Washington’s real estate market suffered

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<sup>575</sup> The last publication of *The Evening Star* was in 1981.

<sup>576</sup> Large warehouses and small factory spaces were commonly used by theaters in other, more working class cities.

from a problem universal to all urban real estate markets: as rundown areas developed, gentrification occurred, which, in turn, drove up the price of real estate. This process left arts institutions, which had helped develop the area in the first place, unable to afford the high rents.

In Washington, however, the problem of space manifested itself as a triple burden. The first was real estate. The second was that Washington artists had always been relegated to working in the poorer, more economically depressed sections of town. Since the 1960s, however, Washington's poorer neighborhoods had been beset by an epidemic of drug-related crime and violence. The public with disposable income for entertainment was also the public least likely to venture into these dangerous areas. The third burden was that Washington was economically polarized around property ownership, or at least the appearance or attributes of ownership. Its theater-going and theater-supporting public, i.e., its professional class, held real estate hierarchically high as an indicator of social status. Hence, those who operated businesses in the city's depressed areas, such as theater owners, were viewed by the professional class—and, hence, the critics—as incapable of representing their sense of identity. This burden speaks directly to the relationship between social space, the aesthetics of identity, and the simulation of both in the media. Small theaters, be they understood as marginal or not, relied upon their ability to organize a public that identified with their aesthetics. If the contradictions between the social space (and its media simulation) and the theater's aesthetics were too great for the public to bridge, then the theater would be unable to construct a lasting bond between itself and its audience.

The League recognized this conceptual dilemma—at least in practical terms—and immediately began the tedious work of solving it. Since the inception of the NEA and the opening of the Kennedy Center, local government and corporate leaders had been interested in making Washington a cultural center. In 1981, the Greater Washington Board of Trade published a report entitled “Downtown: A People Place.” This report asserted that “arts and culture are important economic tools in the revitalization of downtown.”<sup>577</sup> Later that year, picking up on the report’s injunction, the mayor of the District proclaimed before a gathering of local artists and supporters: “We’re going to make Washington, D.C., the cultural capital of the world.”<sup>578</sup> Although such hyperbole was—and remains—standard Washington political speech, the fact that the local business community had endorsed the idea made it all the more feasible. The League began working with government and corporate decision-makers to include theaters within the framework of that pronouncement.

In collaboration with the District of Columbia’s Office of Planning and the David M. Schwarz Architectural Services, The League prepared a study on the desirability, as well as the feasibility, of incorporating theaters into plans to revitalize the city. Entitled “Downtown Stages: New Theaters for Washington, D.C.,” the report called for the creation of an arts district in Washington’s downtown. Although the report’s authors recognized the existing cluster of theaters along 14<sup>th</sup> Street, they urged developers to consider the downtown, because it had the largest potential for the creation of a coherent social space. The National, Warner, and Ford’s theaters existed within a few blocks of

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<sup>577</sup> Wolf Von Eckardt, “People Visions of a New Downtown: Promising a People’s Downtown,” *Washington Post*, 7 March 1981, 1(C).

<sup>578</sup> Carla Hall, “The Art of Politics,” *Washington Post*, 10 December 1981, 19(D).

each other along E Street. Woolly, GALA, and Paradise Island were located downtown, albeit in temporary quarters. An E Street/7<sup>th</sup> Street arts corridor could be created “so that its character attests to its theatrical role.”<sup>579</sup> In other words, such a district with clearly identifiable theatrical signifiers would do for Washington what Broadway had done for New York: by concentrating a sufficient number of theaters within a specific section of the city, that public space would hence be identified by the broader public as a theatrical space in toto. Such a social space was necessary if the city and its leaders were serious in their stated intention to transform Washington into “the cultural capital of the world.” As Kenneth Franklin writes in his essay, “Towards a Critical Regionalism,” spatial identity “can only take place in a domain that is clearly bounded.”<sup>580</sup> Such an identifiable space would allow Washington not just to create a theatrical culture, but also to associate that culture with a unique Washington identity, which could then be utilized to attract a theater-going public from outside the greater Washington area. Without such spatial iconography, local theater would never emerge from the encroaching monumentalization of Washington’s landscape. Nevertheless, Shalwitz, one of the writers of the report, added publicly: “We really need to concentrate on an area of town that is not a parochial neighborhood—one that embraces everyone—and that is downtown.”<sup>581</sup>

Ironically, the parochial neighborhood to which Shalwitz referred was the 14<sup>th</sup> corridor, the very neighborhood that could best afford Washington’s theater community a

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<sup>579</sup> Howard Shalwitz, Mary Ann de Barbieri, Tom Greene, and John Fondersmith, *Downtown Stages: New Theaters for Washington, D.C.* (District of Columbia’s Office of Planning: Washington, DC, 1986).

<sup>580</sup> Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points in an Architecture of Resistance,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (The New Press: New York, 1998), 27.

<sup>581</sup> David Richards, “Study Urges New Theaters, Report Suggests 14 Sites, Construction Incentives,” *Washington Post*, 28 February 1986, 1(D).

unique spatial identity. The “everyone” whom he mentioned were not average Washingtonians but the tourists and the political elites (and their associates) who were increasingly visiting downtown and the monumental core since the area’s economic renaissance of the early 1980s.<sup>582</sup> His use of the word “parochial” brought additional significance to the study’s rejection of 14<sup>th</sup> St. as the space with the most potential for a theater district. The use of the word “parochial” suggested narrow-mindedness and a provincial attitude toward philosophic and intellectual inquiry, like that of a church parish. Yet, the theater-going public who ventured to 14<sup>th</sup> St. was anything but parochial. Indeed, they, like the theater founders who preceded them, possessed a pioneer’s spirit. The parochial, indigenous population to whom Shalwitz referred was most likely the poorer African Americans who were being displaced by the settlers and their gentrification.

Theater artists and their supporters acknowledged that the creation of a theater district would prove critical to the development of Washington’s cultural life. The two competing spaces, the uptown 14<sup>th</sup> Street corridor and the downtown E Street/Seventh Street corridor, represented two distinct interest groups with two distinct purposes. The 14<sup>th</sup> Street corridor served the purposes of Washington’s indigenous political and commercial elites who considered the neighborhood’s potent combination of commercial and residential activities powerful symbols of the city’s growing dynamism. The E Street/Seventh Street corridor served the purposes of those who wanted Washington to act as a bridge between the city’s national political function and its international cultural aspirations. In a national capital eager to fashion itself as a cosmopolitan center, such a

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<sup>582</sup> For a complete analysis of the rebirth of downtown see the proceeding chapter.

cultural bridge was a necessity, for it would soften the edge of the nation's sometimes brute political hegemony. Neither objective would be reached, however, as long as the theatrical community remained fixated on the identity of its individual theaters—its Kennedy Center, its National, its Arena, its Folger—rather than the community's collective identity. Thus far, the theater community had not yet agreed upon the premise of a group identity, much less a strategy for realizing it within the larger social space. The smaller theaters argued that a theater district built downtown around the National, Warner, and Ford Theaters would not, in fact, create a legitimate Washington theatrical identity, because those theaters were known as touring houses. A locally conceived identity had to emerge from the indigenous producers of theater, rather than the presenters of New York productions. Theaters in the small theater movement had an entirely different motive than the designers of Washington's federal establishment for desiring such a district. For them, the acquisition of space meant not only greater artistic freedom but also their survival. A building isolated from the ebb and flow of urban culture was better than no building at all; but a building in the midst of a vibrant artistic culture meant the establishment of what Jane Le Grand of the short-lived Fine Line Actor's Theater called "an alternative audience."<sup>583</sup> Such an integral audience might allow those "marginal" theaters to become vital enough and large enough to support their alternative artistic endeavors in perpetuity.

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<sup>583</sup> "Young Producers," 1(K).

### *Section III: The Third Wave, The Theater District*

Although the League had endorsed the development of a downtown theater district to be spearheaded by the National, Warner, and Ford's Theaters, an emergent theater district already existed on the ground along the 14<sup>th</sup> St. corridor. In 1984, Source operated its three theaters on 14<sup>th</sup> Street; Studio operated its school and 100-seat theater; Living Stage had acquired space a block north of Source; and Theater Dejour, which later became Java Rama, ran a storefront up the street, presenting an array of avant-garde performance pieces and poetry readings. By the end of 1988, Studio had moved to a larger space on 14<sup>th</sup>, Woolly had moved into Studio's old space, and a new group, Moving Target Theater, occupied a church sanctuary two blocks from Theater Dejour. With NPT, GALA, Sanctuary Theatre (another fledgling company), and Horizons (now negotiating space on the same block as Studio), the area laid claim to the hoped for theater district with its alternative theater-going public.

Source's path to survival had always been controversial, but in 1984, after weathering a "long string of crises, which include[d] utility cutoffs, play royalty battles, and a flood," the theater's existence was repeatedly imperiled over issues related to space.<sup>584</sup> The survival of the original space, the 50-seat main stage, was guaranteed when Whiteman's father bought the storefront and then leased it to Source in 1982. However, their larger space, Warehouse Rep, which Source had begun leasing in 1981, became endangered three years later, when area gentrification began moving forward rapidly, stimulated by the completion of D.C. government's Reeves Center. As the dust settled, the Rep, "one of the few inspired mainstays of the neighborhood," was almost

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<sup>584</sup> Hap Erstein, "Source Theater Imperiled by Warehouse Rep Sale," *Washington Times*, 5 June 1984, 13.

lost in a flurry of real estate activity.<sup>585</sup> A company planning to convert the theater into office space put the Rep under contract. Source rallied its friends and supporters, who offered not only to match the offer, which the financially strapped theater could not have done, but also provided a list of alternative but equally viable office spaces to the buyers. A flurry of media coverage followed the story. Behind the scenes negotiating, between District officials and the new owners, who had been hired to do work for the city government, became grist for gossip columns. Megan Rosenfeld reported that “there was an implied threat, although it was never expressly stated, that their contracts might be affected” if they moved forward with buying the space.<sup>586</sup> The buyers backed down when “a community-oriented firm interested in developing the 14<sup>th</sup> Street area” bought the building. It, in turn, leased the building to Source, “with the understanding that the theater [could] buy it in two years at the same price.”<sup>587</sup> Source officials celebrated their success at a Halloween Party fund-raiser turned survival gala. Dressed as “their favorite politician or member of the American electorate,” the 120 guests had been granted a reprieve, which proved only temporary. Source’s third space, the 40-seat Resource Theater, was closed by eviction in March 1985, as the theater owed “more than \$12,000 in back rent.”<sup>588</sup>

Source’s public struggles over space were soon overshadowed by far greater revelations of turmoil and controversy. With the growing success of Washington’s small theater movement came greater media exposure both locally and nationally of the

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<sup>585</sup> Editorial, “On Stage: Source vs. Resources,” *Washington Post*, 6 October 1984, 18(A).

<sup>586</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Backstage: The Source Conflict,” *Washington Post*, 19 November 1984, 7(C).

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>588</sup> Mary Battiata, “Resource Theater Closed by Eviction,” *Washington Post*, 23 March 1985, 8(B).

movement's successes. In August 1986, news of Source's successful production of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* reached New York. Unfortunately for both Source and Bart Whiteman, the theater had not secured production rights, and the New York licensing agency called foul. Its action led to further discoveries that Source had failed to acquire rights to many of its shows. The board moved quickly to suspend Whiteman as artistic director, and the League publicly distanced itself from him.

Without Whiteman, a frenetic producer of performances, defining Source's identity, the theater changed immediately. Company Manager, Patricia Sheehy, assumed the position of managing director that September and began streamlining theater operations, reducing the number of plays produced, increasing preparation time and attention to production values, and cutting back on theater personnel in order to offer competitive salaries. Speaking to the *Post*, Sheehy said, "I continue to keep the philosophy that Source is a productive and wonderfully varied place for theater.... I would like us to continue raising the artistic standards."<sup>589</sup>

Of course, Whiteman viewed the affair differently. For him, the new focus was "on buildings, production values, corporate responsibility, funding, fashion and not on what's happening on stage." He argued, "The problem is, in the midst of all this institutional development and concern over image and finance ... the theater's ability to take risks' [is reduced]."<sup>590</sup> He accused the board of seeking his removal and of using the copyright flap as an excuse to remove him from the theater that he had founded. Brian Foss, who became chairman of Source's board, denied the charges, declaring, "We went

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<sup>589</sup> Joe Brown, "Director Resigns: Whiteman's Departure Follows Copyright Flap," *Washington Post*, 7 July 1987, 3(D).

<sup>590</sup> Hap Erstein, "Source Founder Eyes a Comeback," *Washington Times*, 7 March 1988, 1(E).

through a period where we were offering McSource—if you could throw something together, you could be on stage.... We're ready to launch the new Source Theater. Doing less things better."<sup>591</sup> Clearly, Whiteman's style ran contrary to the institutional image that dominated most of Washington theater. His love of, or obsession with, the act of play-making itself would have left him frustrated had he been working in a theater company that produced four shows a year. Speaking of such a situation, he stated, "It's so precious, that even if it were all brilliant and received nothing but accolades, I would be bored."<sup>592</sup> That was why, even in a 1986, in Whiteman's last year associated with the theater, Source's vision remained "to create new opportunities for Washington theater artists." The theatre program boasted, "Source produces over 30 plays each year in two theaters ... making it Washington's most productive theater company."<sup>593</sup> Yet, such an approach left the theater dependent on ticket sales, because few major corporations would associate themselves with Source's tempestuous image. Foss' response to Whiteman was that the founder had "'obviously never learned his lesson."<sup>594</sup> Sheehy assumed the status of executive director in July 1987 after Whiteman resigned. Under Foss' leadership of the board, Source bought the Rep in October 1987, using a low interest loan arranged from the District of Columbia. Source now committed itself to far fewer productions, and its identity gained respectability and stability.

Studio's development as a Washington small theater took a course different from Source's. As noted above, whereas Source conveyed the image of an impulsive, frenetic,

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<sup>591</sup> "Director Resigns," 3(D).

<sup>592</sup> "Source Founder Eyes a Comeback," 11(E).

<sup>593</sup> Theater Program, Source Theater Company, *A Soldier's Play* by Charles Fuller, Directed by Michael Johnson. Author's personal collection.

<sup>594</sup> "Source Founder Eyes a Comeback," 11(E).

multi-dimensional theater company without discipline or focus, Studio's representation was that of a theater committed to the detail and style of every production, of a theater following a strategic plan. As a result, with corporate and foundation support from the start, Studio built its reputation as deliberately as it did its audience.

The theater's development was marked by three significant stages. First, Studio altered its repertoire to fit its location and public. Second, the theater negotiated a small theater Equity contract that allowed it to hire actors from outside the Washington area. Third, Studio moved to a new location on 14<sup>th</sup> St. These three decisions transformed Studio into Washington's premiere small theater.

The transition within Studio's production repertoire served both to suppress any comparison between Joy Zinoman and Zelda Fichandler (at the more established Arena) and to provide Studio with a more modern, hip, urban image that was better suited to its inner city environment. Initially, Studio Theater's repertoire had reflected The Joy Zinoman Studio's aspirations "to recreate specialized traditions of acting."<sup>595</sup> During its first four years of operation at the Church St. address (1979 to 1983), the company produced scripts representing a variety of styles each season, from Greek and Elizabethan tragedy to French farce and Italian commedia.<sup>596</sup> Beginning with its 1983/1984 season, however, Studio dropped its dabbling in a classic repertoire and focused primarily on contemporary plays. During the next four seasons the theater produced scripts considered modern classics: Carson McCullers' *A Member of the Wedding*, Author Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, Hughes' *Tambourines to Glory*, Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk*

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<sup>595</sup> "Striking Scenes of the Radical '30s," 16(B).

<sup>596</sup> During its pilot season in its studio space, the theater produced two modern plays, Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise* and Wilson's *The Rimers of Eldrich*.

*Wood*, and Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* Not until the 1988/1989 season with Euripides' *Bacchae* did Zinoman once again venture into the realm of the ancient classics. By then, however, the scripts produced by Studio reflected a postmodern, culturally diversified sensibility. From well known African American writers Ntozake Shange, George C. Wolfe, and August Wilson, and Caucasian writers Beth Henley, John Guare, and Terrence McNally to lesser known playwrights such as William Finn and Wendy Kesselman, Studio offered its public a contemporary view of the world. To add a touch of internationalism, Studio even presented Ariel Dorfman and Roberto Athayde. This eclectic mix of playwrights diversified Studio's audience; however, it also made it more difficult to build a subscription audience and a truly loyal and identifiable public. Despite registering over 16,000 audience members in 1985/1986, the theater had only 700 subscribers, which meant that most audiences "turn[ed] up on a show-by-show basis."<sup>597</sup> Studio's public was as diverse as its repertoire. In later years, Studio would rectify this problem through mass marketing campaigns.

In 1985, when Studio decided to negotiate a small-theater Equity contract, it initiated a process that would lead either to its dissolution or to its emergence as a full-fledged Equity company. Economic stakes were high. Although Studio had paid its actors for over a year, it had not paid them a living wage. By agreeing to hire three Equity actors and a stage manager for each show and by paying them the Equity minimum, Studio increased its annual budgets substantially. On the positive side, the benefits Studio gained by using Equity performers were two-fold. The most obvious advantage of having an Equity contract was that the theater could hire from a broader

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<sup>597</sup> David Richards, "Studio's Great Transformations: For the Theater, a Spacious New Home," *Washington Post*, 21 September 1986, 1(G).

pool of talented, experienced actors. No longer did directors have to worry about the quality of available actors, because now the theater could audition in New York. Equally important was the fact that Equity companies could bid on the most up-to-date and successful scripts in the country. As a result, new plays by established playwrights and recently established plays seeking broader audiences and the opportunity to capitalize on their New York success suddenly became available to Studio. For example, after becoming an Equity house, Studio snagged “the post-Broadway rights to [Wilson’s] *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*,” an opportunity that a non-Equity house would not have had.<sup>598</sup>

Studio’s success led to its most daring decision: a one-block move to a spacious new automotive repair shop on the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> and P Streets, which the *Post* called “the boldest undertaking by a local theater group in the past 15 years.”<sup>599</sup> Not since the Washington Theater Club moved from its O Street carriage house to a former church in Foggy Bottom had a Washington theater gambled so heavily on its prosperity. Renovations to the auditorium doubled Studio’s seating capacity to 200. More importantly, the new space afforded Studio a new image. Russell Metheny, co-founder and resident set designer, worked with architects to design a theater that projected an image more in keeping with Studio’s emerging and identifiable repertoire. He hid “the utilitarian past of the building ... by juxtaposing sleek new materials with the existing elements, erecting new glass walls to play off the old cinder blocks, painting the duct work in places and leaving columns raw in others.”<sup>600</sup> With this design, Studio achieved

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<sup>598</sup> “Studio’s Great Transformations,” 1(G).

<sup>599</sup> David Richards, “The Studio Theatre’s Stylish Gamble, Director Joy Zinoman & the Dramatic Boom Along 14th St.,” *Washington Post*, 11 October 1987, 1(F).

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*

what Zinoman had hoped: “to create a hip Greenwich Village-like atmosphere along 14<sup>th</sup> Street.” Speaking to the *Post*, she declared, ““We’re aiming for an urban sensibility.... it should be easy and connected to people’s lives.””<sup>601</sup> Although Studio’s exterior appearance did not resemble a small New York theater in the slightest, its large mural-like actor images facing the sidewalk and scripted neon glowing in the night captured in stylish strokes the more upscale, faddish middle-aged professional that the theater was attracting through its doors.

For Zinoman, however, Studio’s survival could not be gained at the price of its small theater identity. With an Equity contract, a new theater, and escalating budgets, the concern remained: could a small theater professionalize its operation and still “bring actors and audience face to face for the kind of intimate experience Studio specializ[ed] in”?<sup>602</sup> With 200 seats and a new building, Zinoman was betting that she could attract larger audiences and investors with deeper pockets. With the 14<sup>th</sup> St. corridor booming with investment and new businesses, such a gamble seemed well within the odds. In fact, in Spring 1992, the *Post* proclaimed, “The Studio Theatre, the third-largest producing theater in Washington ... announced a \$3.75 million fund-raising drive to purchase and expand its space.”<sup>603</sup> Its major contributors were local foundations and corporate givers.

When Woolly moved its hip and thriving identity into the theater on Church St. that Studio had once occupied, the 14<sup>th</sup> St. corridor could lay claim to seven theater companies, making it, according to *The Post*’s usually staid David Richards, “the

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<sup>601</sup> John Mintz, “Former Crime Hub of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Turns Bohemian,” *Washington Post*, 25 June 1988, 1(E).

<sup>602</sup> Joe Brown, “North Shore Flounders At the Studio, a Sentimental Chowder,” *Washington Post*, 27 October 1987, 3(D).

<sup>603</sup> Jacqueline Trescott, “Expanding The Studio: Theater Seeks Funds For Renovations,” *Washington Post*, 6 March 1992, 2(B).

Washington equivalent of Theatre Row on 42nd Street in New York.”<sup>604</sup> The theater district consisted, at its northern end, of Moving Target Theater; at its center, four theaters, Living Stage, the coffeehouse-performance space Java Rama, the Warehouse Rep, and Source Main Stage; and, then, at the corridor’s southern end, six blocks away, Woolly and Studio. Each theater with the exception of Moving Target, presented a coherent yet contrasting vision of contemporary American life and identity. When, two years later, Horizons negotiated a space just to the south of Studio, dreams of an alternative entertainment district escalated even higher.

The media’s representation of 14<sup>th</sup> Street had completely changed in seven years and spearheading that revolution in simulation were the small theaters that thrived among its small shops and cafes. Not that the “predominantly high density residential ... commercial strip ... along the 14<sup>th</sup> Street corridor” did not carry with it “vestiges of its former self ... boarded-up storefronts, some drug addicts and street people,” for it did.<sup>605</sup> Now, however, among those images of a city’s troubled past, came new residents, particularly young professionals, “especially gays, [who had] integrated its residents in an ever changing blend of races, economic classes and sexual life styles.”<sup>606</sup> As a result, “this one time symbol of D.C.’s urban blight [had] ... become one of the city’s most diverse centers of bohemian culture.”<sup>607</sup> Paradoxically, in defining its neighborhood, the theater community had defined itself, not just by its off-beat, “experimental” theaters that

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<sup>604</sup> David Richards, “Mammoth's New Home,” *Washington Post*, 20 August 1987, 6(C).

<sup>605</sup> “Targeting DHCD Resources Central City CD Area,” *D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development*, 1980, 4; John Mintz, “Theaters’ Debuts Revive 14<sup>th</sup> Street,” *Washington Post*, 14 October 1987, 6(B).

<sup>606</sup> “Former Crime Hub of 14<sup>th</sup> and U Turns Bohemian,” 1(E).

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*

might on a given night attract 500 people to their various stages, but also by the accompanying enterprises that such performances brought to the area. The transformation of a neighborhood by its arts activity was, of course, not new, as it had occurred in various Soho-like communities from New York to San Francisco. What was striking was that it had occurred in Washington. Known for bureaucracies and busy conservative constituencies, rather than artists, Washington's simulations resisted progressive elements almost as vigorously as it did African Americans in times past. In this case, because those "bohemians" were perhaps nothing more than young professionals, who had not only aligned themselves with the engines of economic development but were in fact a major component of that engine, such a transformation of cultural identity could occur.

Of course, not everyone in the area was pleased with the changes. Even the development that had happened drew ire from some residents and certain media (the *Washington City Paper*, for example) who saw the shopping center near 14<sup>th</sup> and U Streets as hiding "behind a blank wall interrupted only occasionally by gunport-like slit-windows."<sup>608</sup> Thus the changes that had occurred were nothing but examples of "war-zone architecture," that had turned a "ghetto by chance" into a "ghetto by design." These comments suggest that, although developers had indeed moved into the neighborhood, they had done so knowing full well that the area was contested and, hence, dangerous. As a result, they had sometimes constructed architecture that implied fortified hamlets designed to protect the residents and shopkeepers, garrisoning what were usually white, middle class enclaves. Nevertheless, despite the presence of iron gates and bars on the

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<sup>608</sup> "Building for the Clampdown," *Washington City Paper*, 3-9 May 1987, n. p. Washingtoniana.

windows, as *The Washington Times* succinctly articulated, “property values [had] tripled in the past year.”<sup>609</sup> With *The Washington Post* trumpeting the area’s gentrification, the voices of dissent remained a minority opinion and would, in time, become even weaker as the gentrification of Shaw and its adjacent neighborhoods dramatically altered the demographic constituency of the area.

Demographically, the theater district had been racially mixed for several decades. Over the decade in which theaters became a significant part of the landscape, however, the percentage of whites to blacks shifted considerably. In 1980, in the six square-block section of Washington bordered by Florida Avenue on the North and Massachusetts Avenue on the South and by 11<sup>th</sup> Street on the east and 16<sup>th</sup> Street on the west, out of that total population of 14,587, African Americans numbered 9,988, or roughly 68 percent of the total.<sup>610</sup> Caucasians, on the other hand, numbered 3,724, or 25.5 percent of the total, with Latinos and other ethnic groups constituting the remaining 6.5 percent. By 1990, not only had the population of the area increased (in a city that lost population overall), but overall racial demographic had shifted as well. Between 1980 and 1990 the population of the area increased from 14,587 to 16,098, an increase of 1,511 people, or 10 percent. When viewed within the context of the District’s decline in population, a drop of 41,231, or 6.7 percent, this increase demonstrated a significant development. Racially, out of a total population of 16,098 in 1990, whites numbered 5,317 or 33 percent of the total. On the other hand, African Americans numbered 8,633, or only 54

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<sup>609</sup> Anne Veigle, “Upscale Proposals for 14<sup>th</sup>, U Corridor Antagonize Residents,” *Washington Times*, 25 January 1989, 1.

<sup>610</sup> All the demographic information in the next three paragraphs are from the 1980 and 1990 United States Census Reports for Washington, D.C. , using tracts 43, 44, 50, and 52.02.

percent; Latinos and other minorities now constituted 13 percent of the total population of the area.

The general demographic numbers only told a small part of the area's story, however. Age and economic shifts in the constitution of the population revealed far deeper changes in life styles and expectations. Of the 14,587 people living in the area in 1980, over half (or 7,893 residents) were between 20 and 54 years of age. In 1990, 10,619 people within that age range lived in the theater district, an increase of 2726 residents or 35 percent. African Americans constituted less than 20 percent of the increase, whereas Caucasians constituted over 64 percent of the increase. Changes in the economics of the neighborhood were even more dramatic. In 1979, the average median income of households living in the four census tracts of the 14<sup>th</sup> Street theater district was \$11,606. By 1989, that average median had risen to \$27,171, an increase of \$15,565, or 134 percent. Even after adjusting the figures for inflation, the economic shifts in the neighborhood demonstrated how successful Washington had been at selling the area's gentrification plans, as households with the most disposable income increased dramatically. In 1980, households earning over \$50,000 numbered 295; by 1990, the number of households earning over \$50,000 was 1,743, an increase of 491 percent. This prosperous community may not have constituted the majority of the audiences at the neighborhood professional theaters but, if media accounts were accurate, their presence influenced the changes in repertoire, management, and facilities that Studio and Source implemented during the 1980s.

Throughout the development of 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the idea of a theater district had been a powerful selling point. Importantly, *The Post* and the television media, which during the

1980s frequently covered Washington's theater scene, including its small theaters, had helped create the importance of the theater district in the public's imaginary. In turn, that media-created simulacrum allowed the theaters in the area to create a theater-going public that was not only a local community, but also one fashioned after particular social and aesthetic expectations. They probably did not seek the glamour of Broadway but rather the eccentricities of New York's off-off Broadway or Chicago's small theater movement.<sup>611</sup> That Washington's eccentricities generally paled in comparison to their New York and Chicago counterparts was easily obscured by media fog, as exemplified by Hap Erstein's commentary after seeing Chicago's Wisdom Bridge's production of *In the Belly of the Beast*: "It is easy to be overwhelmed by an actor in a single emotionally charged performance, just as I am certain that Chicago would be knocked out by a visit from some of our best actors."<sup>612</sup> The fact that the script's emotionally charged socio-political attack on the American prison system had provided the actor with the foundation of his characterization eluded not only Erstein but the rest of Washington's critics as well.

#### *Section IV: Final Wave, Two Destinies—New Playwrights and the Followers*

As the 14<sup>th</sup> St. corridor developed into Washington's long sought after theater district, two of the original small theaters confronted economic issues that pulled at the very roots of their identities. Although NPT and the Folger had become theatrical

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<sup>611</sup> In summer 1985, the Kennedy Center's American National Theater presented a four-show repertoire entitled Chicago Summer in which the Steppenwolf Theater and the Wisdom Bridge Theater, two of Chicago's finest small theaters, were showcased.

<sup>612</sup> Hap Erstein, "Beast: Hard to Take, but Not to be Missed," *Washington Times*, 17 June 1985, 1(B). *In the Belly of the Beast* is an original construction using the letters, trial transcripts, and

landmarks and nurtured substantial public support, their identities as theaters existed in relative isolation from other entertainment or artistic venues. In the mid-1980s, when theaters confronted the fact that as not-for-profits they could not survive without ample charitable support, the question remained: without a theater district or some other kind of entertainment or artistically bounded space and the economic and cultural interactions that such a space invigorated, could successful small theaters even survive?

Under the old model, when Theaters of Commerce and Community dominated the Washington landscape, the notion of theater as a public charity did not exist. Theaters existed as either profit-making enterprises or as vehicles of neighborhood performance. In this emerging sector of theatrical geography, however, theater was both and neither. Small theaters, as Theaters of the Public, represented different theater-going publics within Washington. For the most part, small theaters employed or provided working opportunities for only Washington theater artists, who, in turn, created the characters and expressed the issues identifiable to each theater's audience. Aside from Arena Stage, NPT and the Folger were the leading Theaters of the Public in Washington; yet as they evolved institutionally, their publics evolved with them, becoming increasingly sophisticated about performance. With each stellar production, the artist's and the public's expectations rose. With rising expectations, each theater's production budget grew. With rising budgets, an increasingly larger amount of a producer's time and energy had to be dedicated to the search for public charity. As the reputation and size of NPT and the Folger expanded, the practicality of sustaining that growth placed each of their identities in jeopardy; for a public's charitable support of its artists would extend

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correspondences of convicted killer Jack Henry Abbott, who obtained notoriety after he was released from prison in part because of his correspondence with Norman Mailer. Shortly after his release, he killed again.

only so far, and seemingly not far enough to sustain a successful, professional small theater.

When NPT moved into its Church Street home, it rapidly realized everything that Bagdasian had ever wanted. The theater had its own unique spatial identity:

At the 18<sup>th</sup> Street end [was] St. Thomas' Church, where F.D.R. and Eleanor Roosevelt once worshipped. Only its arches and aisles remain[ed] after a fire set by arsonists. There [were] shade trees, private homes, and the throb of nearby Dupont Circle.

What an individual, raffish entry NPT present[ed]. It [was] in the middle of the block with worn wood, world-weary bricks and, just beyond the entry, an arena where seating [might] be on planks or on chairs arranged in circles, rectangles, ovals, or squares.<sup>613</sup>

In its first full-season as New Playwrights' Theater, it had a hit show head for New York. Joseph Papp attended a production of *Hagar's Children* by playwright Ernest Joselovitz. He enjoyed it so much that he took the production intact to The Public Theater. NPT had a bevy of good playwrights. Although NPT's first successful playwright, T. J. Camp III, had left in search commercial fame, Joselovitz stayed, becoming the theater's playwright-in-residence. Local musician/librettist Tim Grundmann wrote a series of musicals and reviews from 1976 through 1982 that regularly drew large crowds. Most importantly, NPT had "a grand, appreciative audience."<sup>614</sup> Despite the success of *Hagar's Children*, throughout Bagdasian's reign as artistic director, NPT remained focused predominantly on Washington playwrights.<sup>615</sup> As a result, Washingtonians came to NPT to hear what Washingtonians were saying and thinking. Playwrights like Grundmann created "a sort of cult audience with [his] camp farces." One *Post* critic described his appeal as follows:

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<sup>613</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Anything Goes, and Playwrights Are What It's All About," *Washington Post*, 10 September 1978, 4(K).

<sup>614</sup> Richard L. Coe, "More than Needlepoint," *Washington Post*, 27 October 1977, 15(B).

<sup>615</sup> After arriving from California to work with NPT Joselovitz has become a Washington writer.

“The attractions that draw them, leggy hoofers ... rhymes like ‘Walter Winchell ... clinch you'll’ and ‘years of torment ... waging war meant,’ and lines that sometimes rise to the heights of: ‘This dress is so old it votes.’”<sup>616</sup> Like WTC, NPT’s tastes were by no means limited to the highbrow.

Yet with NPT’s success came an inevitable curse. As Bagdasian stated, “But sometimes it seems as though instead of putting every moment and atom of energy into our playwrights, we’ve had to do other things. I’ve learned about real estate and banking.”<sup>617</sup> If founders in the first stage of a small theater’s development obsessed over artistic work, in the second stage they found themselves swamped in the tension that arose between time for creative endeavors and time for solving economic realities. NPT and Harry Bagdasian experienced that tension before the other independent small theaters. Having witnessed the curse of success voyeuristically, those other producers had the opportunity to prepare themselves in advance.

The social space at Church St. had an immediate and profound impact upon NPT. Not only did NPT rapidly become “the closest Washington [had] to Off-Off Broadway without the Off-Off Broadway scuff and grime,” but the space also provoked a shift in the theater’s focus, away from the slew of one-act plays it had produced earlier towards full-length scripts.<sup>618</sup> The success of *Hagar’s Children* inspired this shift to some degree; for at that time New York theater was still the mecca toward which Washington actors, playwrights, and directors turned when they dreamed of success. Hence, to have NPT’s second production ascend to Papp’s Public Theater undoubtedly produced stars in

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<sup>616</sup> Michael Kernan, “Out to a Wacky ‘Lunch’,” *Washington Post*, 22 July 1978, 5(B).

<sup>617</sup> “Anything Goes,” 4(K).

<sup>618</sup> “The Pits,” 1(B).

everyone's eyes. In addition to a shift towards full-length plays, the number of productions and staged readings escalated. NPT scheduled five productions each year with average runs of twenty-five to thirty performances each; although the number of staged readings varied each season, they essentially doubled from ten to twenty. This increase in activity brought with it a disproportionate increase in expenses as a larger space and longer runs required the theater to increase production budgets to cover the costs of sets, costumes, and salaries. A positive result of the increase in activity, however, was that during the late 1970s, no Washington theater outside the Kennedy Center and Arena garnered more media coverage than NPT.

Although NPT remained a Washington institution dedicated to developing local actors and playwrights until 1984, as it grew, it broadened the scope of its endeavors to include playwrights and actors from outside of Washington. To be sure, economics limited those efforts, as the cost of housing playwrights and actors proved challenging. Nevertheless, although only three of the fifteen productions during its first three seasons at its new home were of scripts by non-Greater Washington playwrights, during its fourth season, three out of five productions were by playwrights from Illinois, New York, and New Jersey.<sup>619</sup> During that four-year period, over 30 percent of all stage readings were of scripts by playwrights living outside Washington. In 1980, NPT instituted its first National One-Act Festival, and four out of the six winners were from outside Washington.

These attempts to develop a national reputation placed NPT under a great deal of economic pressure. By 1982, after a decade of growth with its concomitant challenges,

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<sup>619</sup> All the information in this paragraph is from Harry Bagdasian's "New Playwrights' Theater: A Production History, November 1972 – July 1984."

NPT presented Washington with an ultimatum: either pay off NPT's \$86,000 debt or the theater will close forever.<sup>620</sup> Of course, for Bagdasian, money was not the real issue and it never had been. As he once again told David Richards, he was “spending more of [his] time and energy chasing after money than [doing his] real work,” which for Bagdasian had always been about the process of developing the script rather than presenting the realized production. Richards concluded his article by saying, “The \$86,000 Bagdasian is seeking to raise will not necessarily guarantee a masterpiece, but it will permit continuing research.”<sup>621</sup> The Washington community saved NPT, but its board of directors once again encouraged the curse, allowing the theater “to negotiate with Actors Equity to permit the use of one or two Equity actors per show.”<sup>622</sup> After fending off one financial crisis, the theater sowed the seeds of another; union actors would raise standards and expectations while generating more debt and, therefore, an even greater need to raise money. The 1983/1984 season was Bagdasian's last as artistic director.

With Bagdasian's departure, NPT's identity changed dramatically. Bagdasian was a graduate of the University of Maryland and a native Washingtonian. Thus, despite the theater's growing national reputation, he had remained committed to the Washington theater artist. Under the new artistic director Arthur Bartow, the struggling theater reorganized and took a decidedly less process and more product-oriented approach. As a result, the Washington playwright disappeared from the theater's purview.

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<sup>620</sup> “The Pits,” 1(B).

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> David Richards, “NPT Tops Fund-Raising Goal,” *Washington Post*, 13 August 1982, 6(D).

Ironically, NPT's identity as a beleaguered charity continued, as one of Bartow's first acts was another ultimatum: "raise \$250,000 in three months" or fold.<sup>623</sup> In fact, since 1982, economic desperation had dominated the media's simulation of NPT. Between 1982 and 1987, all but two of the ten feature articles in *The Post* covering NPT focused on its economic troubles and threats of closure. The disconnect between NPT's aspirations and its seemingly imminent economic collapse overshadowed the media's representation of its artistic work in much the same way the economic reality had overshadowed Bagdasian's artistic work. When NPT hired its third artistic director in three years, Peter Frisch, he promised big changes. In September 1988, he changed the theater's name to American Playwrights' Theater and shifted the focus "to producing plays that have had productions elsewhere and modern American classics instead of plays by untested authors."<sup>624</sup> The theater closed in 1990, a mere shadow of its former self.

Unlike NPT, the Folger Theater with its institutional support from The Folger Library was able to hide its economic woes for years. When, at the beginning of the 1981 season, Louis Scheeder resigned as artistic director, he said, "I've got the theater I always wanted. It's a very expensive machine, and I don't want to take it apart. They [the trustees at Amherst College] want someone who can build a cheaper machine."<sup>625</sup> His expensive machine would cost \$1,360,000 to run for the season; the trustees wanted him to run a machine for only one million. Most small theaters in Washington would have loved a budget of one million dollars, of course, but none of them had a 230-seat house

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<sup>623</sup> David Richards, "Playwrights' Theater Faced with Closing: \$250,000 Needed to Stay Open," *Washington Post*, 20 January 1985, 1(G).

<sup>624</sup> David Richards, "At New Playwrights: a Change in Direction," *Washington Post*, 2 September 1988, 1(D).

<sup>625</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "Change at the Folger; Louis Scheeder Resigns," *Washington Post*, 12 September 1981, 1(B).

and a mandate to become a nationally recognized producer of Shakespeare. Since 1976, Scheeder had realized that "if you're going to do Shakespeare and classical plays ... you have to do them continually ... the more you explore, the more you find to explore, and the more rehearsal time you want."<sup>626</sup> The necessity to alternate between classical and contemporary texts during a single season interrupted this process: "When you alternate with modern plays, you disrupt continuity. In a way you're starting over each time."<sup>627</sup> As a result, he promised to stop producing as many world and American premieres, ironically the very shows that had identified the Folger for Washingtonians. Despite his promise, in 1979 he initiated a relationship with the Center whereby the Folger would premiere two modern plays a year in the Center's Terrace Theater. This relationship was terminated a month prior to his resignation. Regardless, in order to do Shakespeare well enough to achieve national recognition, he had to employ 20 to 22 actors who could handle the difficult culture and language of the plays. Thus, Folger's budget climbed each year; fortunately, so did the Folger's audience, rising "steadily from 15,000 in 1973 to more than 100,000" by 1981.<sup>628</sup> Nevertheless, the Library constantly had to make up shortfalls. For the 1980/1981 season, they covered a shortfall of \$493,000.<sup>629</sup> The Reagan administration was making cuts to the NEA, and with Washington stuck in a persistent recession, the Library issued its demand to Scheeder to cut the theater's budget to one million dollars, causing his resignation.

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<sup>626</sup> David Richards, "The Tempest at Folger: Budgeting the Bard," *Washington Post*, 20 September 1981, 1(K).

<sup>627</sup> Ibid.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid.

<sup>629</sup> David Richards, "Folger Will Shut Theater: Deficits Called Drain on Library," *Washington Post*, 15 January 1985, 1(A).

In short order, the Library hired British actor John Neville-Andrews as Scheeder's replacement. Neville-Andrews had first come to Washington in 1977, cast as Guildenstern in *Hamlet*. Since then he had appeared in 10 Folger productions.<sup>630</sup> In 1979, he decided to make Washington his home and was directing *The Fantasticks* at the Olney Theater when the Folger offered him Scheeder's job. He immediately spoke of ways to reduce costs:

I once worked for a lady named Joan Littlewood, who taught me that you don't need that fancy costume to act, which doesn't mean I'm going to do Shakespeare in jeans and T-shirts. If the productions are not quite so elaborate, however, you don't need quite so elaborate a staff. A million dollars is a lot of money for four plays and by making minor cuts throughout the organization, I think I can pull it off without sacrificing the artistic quality.<sup>631</sup>

Given the fact that Neville-Andrew never produced a Folger show that even remotely resembled Littlewood's aestheticism, perhaps his comments were nothing more than a hastily prepared response to a reporter's question about how he would solve the theater's economic crisis. In any event, for Washington's more traditional theater-going public, Littlewood's idea of spectacle, particularly in productions of Shakespeare, ran counter to their preconceived—and mistaken—images of Elizabethan decor. Thus, while Neville-Andrews filled in for the departed Scheeder, he cut costs not by reducing spectacle but by deepening Folger's roots in the local theater community. He cast more local actors in productions, rather than hiring out of New York. This practice pleased local talent, who were for the first time being offered performance opportunities at one of the area's larger

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<sup>630</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "Faith At the Folger: John Neville-Andrews' Stormy Year at the Helm," *Washington Post*, 23 May 1982, 1(E).

<sup>631</sup> "The Tempest at Folger" 1(K).

theaters. Yet the Folger suffered in the press and, as a consequence, at the box office.<sup>632</sup>

In the following year, the theater “endured a serious threat of extinction, cutbacks in staff . . . and the prospect of raising more money than has ever been necessary before.”<sup>633</sup>

Thus, in his first full year as artistic director, Neville-Andrews dropped the production of modern plays altogether and hired a resident acting company with deep Washington roots.

By January 1985 the Folger appeared to be once again on secure footing; nevertheless, the Library announced that it was closing the theater at the season’s end and replacing it with a “small scale chamber theater and high school productions.”<sup>634</sup> The Library’s trustees, Amherst College, had based their decision to close the theater on reasons other than purely economic ones. Within hours, the *Post* and the recently formed *Washington Times* ran front page announcements initiating a firestorm of public debate about the decision itself and about the importance of the Folger Theater to Washington and the nation. Over the next two and a half months, the *Post* ran more than ten articles discussing the issue and tracking its development.<sup>635</sup> Local organizations formed that were soon joined by Senators and administration officials. When it was all over, the

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<sup>632</sup> Of course, the change in directors probably contributed to the change in the theater’s fortune. Scheeder had over a decade developed an experience troupe of actors and a sophisticated sense of Shakespearean theatrics.

<sup>633</sup> “Faith at the Folger,” 1(E).

<sup>634</sup> Hap Erstein, “Folger Theater to Close,” *Washington Times*, 30 June 1985, 1(H).

<sup>635</sup> David Richards, “Folger Will Shut Theater,” 15 January 1985, 1(A); Megan Rosenfeld, “Saving Folger Theater: Committee Formed,” 17 January 1985, 9(B); Werner Gudersheimer, “Why We Have to Close the Folger,” 17 January 1985, 23 (A); Richmond Crinkley, “Why the Folger Library Needs the Folger Theater,” 21 January 1985, 21(A); Megan Rosenfeld, “Group Set to Save Folger,” 31 January 1985, 1(B); Megan Rosenfeld, “Keeping the Folger Theater Alive,” 18 February 1985, 7(C); Chuck Conconi, “The Folger Hearings,” 21 February 1985, 3(D); David Richards, “The Folger Get Reprieve,” 1 March 1985, 1(A); Megan Rosenfeld, “Folger Asset Now Liability,” 2 March 1985, 1(G); Editorial, “Long Live the Folger Theater,” 3 March 1985, 6(C); Megan Rosenfeld, “Folger Funds Debated,” 5 March 1985, 12(C). All the above were in the *Washington Post*.

theater had earned a reprieve for two years, allowing it to develop its own independent identity. Senate hearings were held to discuss whether or not federal support for maintenance of the Library's theater and its functions should continue.

The debate revealed the complexity of the issue. Because the Folger was a successful theater, its work had generated a great deal of positive publicity for the Library and its mission—just as the Library had hoped when it originally sponsored the theater. The theater's public performances raised the Library's profile and softened its image: “Even internal reports prepared by the library's various advisory committees conceded[ed] that the theater [had] been largely instrumental in ‘off-setting the widely held image of the [Library] as an ivory tower.’”<sup>636</sup> Yet the cost of such an enterprise had exceeded box office revenues, grants and donations, and projected budgets by an average yearly cost of \$150,000 since 1976.<sup>637</sup> In the Folger's case, the presence of federal moneys, given to the Library because of the historical significance of the theater's architecture, complicated the situation even more. The federal government's annual payments for the building's upkeep and maintenance provoked Richmond Crinkley, the Folger's first artistic director, to ask: “[why]the library would choose to forgo \$350,000 given because (and only because) of the public service of the Folger Theater in order to save \$150,000?”<sup>638</sup> The fact that the Amherst trustees had made their decision from the

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<sup>636</sup> David Richards, “Confronting the Dramatic Dangers: Tremors and Upheavals in Washington's Theatrical Landscape,” *Washington Post*, 3 February 1985, 1(D).

<sup>637</sup> Werner Gundersheimer, Director of the Folger Library, Editorial, “Why We Have to Close the Folger Theater,” *Washington Post*, 17 January 1985, 23(A).

<sup>638</sup> Richmond Crinkley, Editorial, “Why the Folger Library Needs the Folger Theater,” *Washington Post*, 24 January 1985, 14(A).

college's Massachusetts location led Crinkley to declare that the situation served as an "example of cultural colonialism."<sup>639</sup>

Local forces immediately began to organize. Two days after the announcement of the theater's imminent closing, a coalition of Capitol Hill residents and merchants organized a committee to look for ways to save the theater. The committee's spokesperson, Catherine Held, who was also chair of the Folger Theater Guild and secretary of the Capitol Hill Merchants and Professionals Association said to the *Post* that "she was 'devastated' by the news and outraged that the community had not had a chance to save the neighborhood theater."<sup>640</sup> Held's comments served to highlight not only the prominent position that the Folger held in the Capitol Hill area, but also the degree to which even a theater with the Folger's budget and national mandate continued to be identified by local residents as a "neighborhood theater." When democratic Senator Daniel Moynihan and Reagan appointee Elizabeth Dole joined the group, they demonstrated that the theater's neighborhood, because both local and decidedly non-local residents resided there, was also the nation's. Dole said that losing the theater was "a tragedy to the citizens of Washington and the nation;" while Moynihan, who lived near the theatre, expressed a determination to keep classical repertoire theatre in Washington, declaring, "'if it takes money, we'll raise it.'"<sup>641</sup>

Although neighborhood residents rallied to support the theater, it was the Folger's national connections that saved it. By March 1st, the Library had granted the theater the

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<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "Saving Folger Theater: Committee Formed to Look for Ways," *Washington Post*, 17 January 1985, 9(B).

<sup>641</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "Group Set to Save Folger: Moynihan, Elizabeth Dole Heading Effort," *Washington Post*, 31 January 1985, 1(B).

previously mentioned two-year period of continued support, during which time the theater would reorganize as a fully independent corporation responsible for its own budgets and losses. Robert Linowes, a Washington attorney who headed the Steering Committee for the Shakespeare Theater at the Folger Library, said that he expected “a national, not just a local, response to future fundraising efforts.”<sup>642</sup> The Library guaranteed \$300,000 over the next two years, but more importantly, an anonymous donor gave \$100,000 that the theater needed to match three to one. In contrast, the Folger group only raised “approximately \$11,000 in gifts and pledges.” Although *Post* editorials proclaimed that the campaign to save the Folger indicated that “the definition of civic responsibility [was] changing, and for the better,” the disparity between local gifts and pledges and national ones suggested a different prognostication.<sup>643</sup> The historic tension between Washington’s local character and its national function had manifested in its small theater movement. As the Folger had always had a national mandate, which the federal Park Service had supported indirectly through its support of the Library’s building, that mandate became the focal point of a large scale move by its new board to develop a national Shakespeare company.

The transformation of the Folger into an elite, national institution began almost immediately. Folger was reorganized as Shakespeare Theater at the Folger, and John Neville-Andrews’ tenure there lasted only through the 1985/1986 season. That summer Michael Kahn replaced him with great fanfare. Neville-Andrews’ resignation and Kahn’s appointment were seen as “part of an overall effort to upgrade the Shakespeare Theater

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<sup>642</sup> David Richards, “Folger Gets Reprieve: Funding Promised for two more Years,” *Washington Post*, 1 March 1985, 1(A).

<sup>643</sup> Editorial, *Washington Post*, 3 March 1985, 6(C).

and give it the sort of prominence that will attract national funding.”<sup>644</sup> Whereas Neville-Andrews had shaped his reputation working at the Folger, and in the process developed the Folger’s reputation as a Washington institution, Kahn brought with him national credentials that Linowes hoped would translate into the “national constituency” the Shakespeare Theater must develop in the near future.”<sup>645</sup> It did. Shakespeare’s fundraising activities became a part of its public dialogue, and by September, a “\$1,000-a-plate benefit given by Lady Marjory Wright, wife of the former British ambassador, raised \$130,000 to get the season off to a good start.”<sup>646</sup> A year later, the theater initiated the Will Award, the first American award given in recognition of individuals who have made outstanding contributions to classical drama in the United States. Linowes said that he hoped “the Will Award [would] have the same national impact as the Kennedy Center Honors.”<sup>647</sup> A gala dinner was planned, where E. F. Hutton, the investment banking and brokerage firm, underwrote the cost of the event estimated at “between \$75,000 to \$100,000.”<sup>648</sup> Joseph Papp won the first award. By the end of the Kahn’s fifth year, a gala, “which starred former Kahn students Kelly McGillis and Christopher Reeve, was expected to raise more than \$250,000 and attract more than 40 corporate donors.”<sup>649</sup>

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<sup>644</sup> David Richards, “New Folger Director: Shakespeare Theater Names Michael Kahn,” *Washington Post*, 9 May 1986, 2(D).

<sup>645</sup> Michael Kahn was the former artistic director of the American Shakespeare Festival Theater, the current chairman of the acting department of New York’s Juilliard School, and the current artistic director of the Acting Company. He had also directed numerous Broadway and Off-Broadway productions. David Richards, “Michael Kahn, As He Likes It,” *Washington Post*, 6 July 1986, 1(H).

<sup>646</sup> Sarah booth Conroy, “For Kahn & Company: Feting the Folger’s New Artistic Director,” *Washington Post*, 20 August 1986, 2(D).

<sup>647</sup> David Richards, “The Folger’s Will Award: Theater Planning New Honor in Classical Drama,” *Washington Post*, 30 October 1987, 2(D).

<sup>648</sup> Ibid.

<sup>649</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Michael Kahn’s Star Turn: the Man who Made the Shakespeare Theater at the Folger more ... Theatrical,” *Washington Post*, 21 April 1991, 1(G).

In order to attract such a large number of corporate donors, Kahn had to change the theater's image. One of his first official acts as artistic director was to disband the resident acting company, stating that the theater was "called the Shakespeare Theater at the Folger, not the Washington Shakespeare Theater at the Folger."<sup>650</sup> Whereas Neville-Andrews had established the theater's identity by building an on-going relationship between its actors, many of whom were based in Washington, and its audience, Kahn tapped into his deep connections to the nation's classical acting community and employed a combination of national and local talent. For his first show, *Romeo and Juliet*, Kahn hired young actors from The Acting Company and three actors who had been members of Neville-Andrews' resident acting company, as well as Fran Dorn, another local actress, who had worked frequently at the Folger. *Post* critic David Richards recognized the change immediately, noting that the opening production was marked by "a greater abundance of persuasive performances than any of the Folger's past Shakespearean efforts."<sup>651</sup> Equally important to Kahn's strategy for nationalizing the theater's image, however, was the fact that he brought in "the occasional box-office star actor" to work with the regulars.<sup>652</sup> Although quality acting could illuminate a text, it alone could not galvanize the public. Neville-Andrews had created local celebrities, but they had only attracted local audiences; by bringing in national stars such as Kelly McGillis, Stacy Keach, Avery Brooks, and Andre Braugher, the Shakespeare theater's aura suddenly turned a national hue.

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<sup>650</sup> "Michael Kahn, As He Likes It," 1(H).

<sup>651</sup> David Richards, "Romeo: Rich and Riveting," *Washington Post*, 16 October 1986, 1(C).

<sup>652</sup> Hap Erstein, "Setting the Stage for Independence: New Director ready to Battle for Shakespeare at Folger," *Washington Times*, 8 July 1986, 1(B).

The inevitable result of Shakespeare's rapid rise to national prominence was that it no longer fit the small theater space at the Folger Library. In 1991, with an annual budget of almost five million dollars, the Shakespeare Theater announced plans to move out of the Folger and into a new 447-seat theater being built downtown in the Lansburgh building on 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Not only did this development indicate that the city was following through on its commitment to build more theater spaces downtown, but it also punctuated the fact that the Folger/Shakespeare's identity as a small theater would cease to be. Although organized around the intimate exchange between audience and performer, that exchange had proved to be an expensive proposition. In fact, it proved too expensive to be supported by the Washington community itself, particularly if the theater were to fulfill its national mandate. The creation of a national theater out of a small theater proved to be cost prohibitive, as it required courting national and multinational corporate patrons but without sufficient space to house both them and a general theater-going public. To court such corporate clientele required the introduction of national celebrities—actors, designers, and directors—and the creation of a venue large enough to house them.

#### *Section V: A Failure of Theatrical Social Space*

The success of Washington's small theaters dramatically changed the area's theatrical landscape. Washington was no longer understood theatrically by its isolated institutions or by its ability to bring New York touring productions into the National or The Kennedy Center. To understand D.C. in relationship to its theater, one had to see the

city as “a producing center so that things start here and go to the rest of the world.”<sup>653</sup> By the mid-1980s, Washington had become a producing center with its own actors, playwrights, directors, designers, and theater professionals. Its theaters had used those local professionals to gain local legitimacy. Increasingly, Washington theaters projected their image, if not their productions, to the rest of the world. As they did, that local legitimacy began to acquire national certification.

The cost of national legitimacy was indeed high. As small theaters succeeded, the push to professionalize them intensified. By the end of the 1980s, as more theaters negotiated Equity contracts, fewer small theaters employed local actors on a regular basis, except of course, those local actors who gained Equity status. As more theaters sought foundation and corporate money to support their professionalization efforts, the need to portray a clearer, more nationally responsive institutional image also increased. The result was that fewer Washington playwrights saw their works performed on local stages as theaters turned to more established, nationally successful playwrights. Although enough local celebrity playwrights and actors emerged to ensure at least a Washington flavor to the representation of small theaters, their survival remained in constant question.<sup>654</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, after a series of setbacks by theaters occupying the 14<sup>th</sup> St. corridor, talk of a viable theater district diminished considerably. Moving Target could not sustain itself in a church sanctuary located near the corner still recognized as

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<sup>653</sup> *A Short History of Source*, 32.

<sup>654</sup> A few of the local celebrities that emerged during the 1980s were

“the city’s oldest and best known drug market.”<sup>655</sup> Java Rama’s diminutive experimental stage for performance pieces closed as did the Source’s 50-seat Main Stage. In 1989, Horizons’ plans to move to 14<sup>th</sup> Street fell through and their very existence was threatened. And finally, Woolly Mammoth’s co-founder, Howard Shalwitz, still dreamed of a downtown location and the idea of theater being a night on the town, albeit with a quirky twist. Woolly’s stay on 14<sup>th</sup> St. lasted only four years, from 1987 through 1991.<sup>656</sup>

Nevertheless, small theater had survived its infancy in Washington, D.C., in part by forming a strong alliance with the local media. As they moved from basements and church halls, or out of the nurturing confines of larger, established organizations and into the glare of the city’s national culture, they encountered the intractable dimensions of the city’s unique social space, a space governed by historic tensions between federal and local interests. They faced the choice of either changing aspects of their identities to meet those demands or dying. As they shifted their representations, the meaning of the small theater movement became less about the public’s need for cultural representation and more about the needs of the social space itself, a space in rapid transition because of development and population fluctuations. As the small theater community made its transition from a process-oriented, coffeehouse environment to a product-oriented, celebrity-driven environment of established images and voices, its theaters continued to promote intimate spaces shared jointly by their publics and actors in mutual observation of the human dilemma. Although the increasing presence of corporate and media interests had not yet completely commodified this intimate space, commercialism had begun to

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<sup>655</sup> Linda Wheeler, “A Mean Street Resists Change: 14<sup>th</sup> and W Still Waiting for Promised Development,” *Washington Post*, 21 February 1989, 1(B).

<sup>656</sup> In 2005, Woolly Mammoth plans to move into a new, multimillion dollar theater on E Street, downtown, fulfilling Shalwitz’s dream.

rear its head. To survive, the theater community had to temper its more radical elements and assume a more commercial identity; it had become the economic engine which ignited and sustained the forces of gentrification. As an instrument of economic development, small theater—and in fact the entire Theater of the Public—became less about the content of their performances and more about the ability of their institutions to project an image of professionalism and upward mobility. As such,, the nature of the publics they served began to change. That public, with its incessant demand for theater and performance that entertained without disturbing the problematic relationship between the gentrifier and the displaced, invariably changed the character and significance not only of individual theaters but also of the entire theater community.

## Chapter Eight

### NATIONAL THEATER'S STRUGGLE: THEATER OF COMMERCE OR PUBLIC

As Washington's Theater of the Public developed during the 1970s, the National Theater continued its struggles within a depressed and aesthetically dreary downtown social space. The opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1971 immediately changed the area's theatrical landscape. A city that since 1950 had had but one epicenter of theatrical activity now found itself supporting two: the Kennedy Center, super-monument to an assassinated president, perched like Camelot on a remote Potomac hill; and the National, Theater of Presidents, oldest continuously operating theatrical institution in the United States, hanging like a dingy marquee in a dying and dirty downtown. In 1971, Arena Stage, which to some observers deserved a place center stage, remained isolated in its Southwest home with its smallish 750 and 500-seat auditoriums, and a far too discriminating taste for mass appeal despite international acclaim.<sup>657</sup> For the next thirteen years, from 1971 to 1984, these two theatrical powerhouses engaged in a contest for top ranked shows, the lion's share of the area's theater-going public, prestige, media attention, and identification as Washington's—and hence the nation's—stage of choice. For the National, the struggle seemingly took on life and death implications. Although downtown development, with its concomitant promise of a rejuvenated downtown nightlife, was on the government's agenda, within an increasingly federalized metropolitan social space, a theater without governmental association or public financing faced continuous threats to its survival.

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<sup>657</sup> Arena Stage traveled to the United Soviet Socialist Republic in 1974 on a United States sponsored goodwill mission.

The following chapter explores the fate of Washington's last surviving commercial theater: the National. Section I focuses on the years following the opening of the Kennedy Center, from 1971 to 1974, when, after the region experienced a surge in theatrical vitality, the National Theater finally succumbed to the Center's greater economic power and media presence by becoming its adjunct. Section II covers the period from 1975 through 1979, when, after the creation of the New National Theater Company (NNTC), a not-for-profit corporation governed by a board of directors, the National operated under the management of the Kennedy Center.<sup>658</sup> Section III investigates the period from 1980 to 1983, when, even though the National maintained its not-for-profit structure, the board hired the Shubert Organization to take over the theater's management. The final section evaluates the profound effects that downtown revitalization had on the National and on the theatrical geography of the region, both its organization and its meaning.

### *Section I: Historical Landmark or Theater of Commerce*

As the social upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s died away, Washington's city planners focused on ways to rejuvenate the stature of the old downtown and monumental core. The massive demonstrations, which had so signified the previous decade, gave way to more targeted but less agitating actions. After Martin Luther King's murder and the subsequent failure of the Poor People's Campaign to mobilize the nation, the civil rights movement splintered into factions.<sup>659</sup> Additionally, America's involvement in the

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<sup>658</sup> The New National Theater Corporation is now named the National Theater Corporation.

<sup>659</sup> The Southern Christian Leadership Conference had planned The Poor People's Campaign to take place in April 1968. Despite the fact that Dr. King's murder caused riots in more than 120 cities and completely disrupted the Campaign's organization, the march and encampment on the Mall in Washington,

Vietnam War was ending, and with it the draft, which meant that the death of the country's young soldiers no longer saturated the nightly news. As a result, the energy that had motivated protests and sit-ins, marches and flag burnings, gradually diminished. The resulting calm gave business and political leaders an opportunity to study the city's many economic and social problems and to search for solutions.

By the early 1970s, Pennsylvania Avenue, the monumental core's most significant thoroughfare, had for many years "been the drab fringe of a stagnant downtown."<sup>660</sup> The United States Treasury building grounded the avenue's western White House end. Across the street, the historic, once elegant 480-room Willard Hotel had closed in 1968; and although the smaller, 300-room Washington Hotel still operated, a declining Occidental Restaurant, another parking lot, and a vacant lot did little to stimulate human or commercial activity. Across 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the National Press Club, the Munsey Building, and the National Theater, institutions that had been fixtures downtown for decades, were in sound, yet dreary condition. Across 13<sup>th</sup> Street a once elegant Warner Theater attracted large crowds to its hard and softcore pornographic movies. Looking east toward the Capitol, more vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and an oppressive, yet-to-be completed FBI building dominated the landscape. Only a vibrant Pennsylvania Office Building added life to an otherwise dreary urban landscape.

Plans to turn Pennsylvania Avenue "into a 'grand axis' between the Capitol and White House" had begun June 1, 1962, when President Kennedy appointed a President's

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D.C., took place that May. The non-violent protests accomplished little as the legislation, for which protesters pressed, failed to be enacted. The Poor People's Campaign was the last major action of the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>660</sup> Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC), "The Pennsylvania Avenue Plan—1974," (PADC, Washington: 1974), 1.

Council on Pennsylvania Avenue.<sup>661</sup> That council had yielded nothing in ten years, but the aforementioned FBI building and additional studies, so many studies in fact that Wolf Von-Eckardt, the *Post's* architecture critic, pondered whether the downtown would “literally study itself to death.”<sup>662</sup> Within months of Eckardt’s critique, Nixon called for a “New American Revolution,” and said that that revolution should begin “in the Nation’s Capital—and now, in 1971.”<sup>663</sup> Not only did he call for the funding of a National Air and Space Museum, a National Sculpture Garden, an addition to The National Museum of History and Technology, and many other new buildings within the monumental core, he also, by charging the private sector with the task of spearheading the recovery of Pennsylvania Avenue, called for a more direct alliance between federal and commercial interests in the rebuilding of the nation’s capital.

Pennsylvania Avenue constituted the old downtown’s southern face, the face that tourists who visited the Mall and other federal sites experienced every day. By developing Pennsylvania Avenue, the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) hoped to make the avenue “function as a bridge, not a barrier, between the monumental federal core to the south and the city’s downtown to the north.”<sup>664</sup> Investment in the downtown, which had slowed to a trickle during the 1950s and 1960s, ended altogether following the uprisings. Although small shops, which had operated downtown for years, survived, the area’s more expensive stores moved elsewhere. Mass

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<sup>661</sup> Wolf Von Eckardt, “The New Spirit on Pennsylvania Avenue; Enlivening Pennsylvania Avenue; Careful Urban Conservation, Not Cataclysmic Urban Renewal,” *Washington Post*, 21 September 1978, 1(B).

<sup>662</sup> Wolf Von-Eckardt, “As Downtown Lay Dying,” *Washington Post*, 13 February 1971, 1(E).

<sup>663</sup> Richard Nixon, from a speech before Congress on April 7, 1971, as printed in *Washington Post*, “Nixon: A New Revolution for D.C.,” 8 April 1971, 6(A).

<sup>664</sup> PADC, 3.

transit was still years away from completion, leaving a downtown pockmarked by parking lots; so many, in fact, that *The D.C. Gazette* speculated that their owners were content to wait it out for “the big cash” that eventual downtown development would bring.<sup>665</sup>

The previously mentioned pornography industry was the only enterprise that seemed to flourish downtown. Although the increase in businesses providing X-rated movies and books had peaked by 1971, “many investors [had] come to look upon the central business district as a dead horse because of their inability to change the character of the neighborhood.”<sup>666</sup> In the early 1970s, more than thirty adult bookstores, fifteen massage establishments, and forty establishments that featured nude dancing joined the area’s ten to twelve pornographic movie houses; and many of these businesses were located on key pieces of downtown real estate.<sup>667</sup> The problem became so acute that federal FBI agents raided downtown movie houses and confiscated films, charging their owners with the “interstate transportation of obscene materials for the purpose of distribution.”<sup>668</sup> Such tactics succeeded only temporarily, however, as by 1982 and the election of President Ronald Reagan, “a thriving red-light district blinked 24 hours a day,”<sup>669</sup> just a block from the White House.

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<sup>665</sup> In other words, parking lots were a cheap form of real estate speculation. *D.C. Gazette*, vol. 5.5, May 1974, 6.

<sup>666</sup> Thornton J. Owen, president of the Washington Board of Realtors, as reported in “Demise of Downtown Feared by Investors,” by Claudia Levy and Eugene L Meyer, *Washington Post*, 5 April 1971, 1(C).

<sup>667</sup> Juan Williams, “Pornography; Rising Tide of Pornography Worries Local Officials; Officials Step Up Campaign Against Sex Shops,” 13 November 1977, *Washington Post*, 1(A); and Eugene L. Meyer, “A Booming Market for Obscenity, a Booming Market for Pornography, Sex, Nude Bars; Massage Parlors Flourish,” *Washington Post*, 8 January 1978, 1(A).

<sup>668</sup> Tom Shales, “Scaring Off the Sex Films,” *Washington Post*, 27 November 1972, 1(B).

<sup>669</sup> Eddie Dean, “Split Screen: the XXX Files; The Biograph Porn Guys Take their Last Ride into the Blue,” *The Washington City Paper*, 21 June 1996, 1.

Nevertheless, efforts to revitalize the District's downtown continued. A 1972 travelogue produced by the Washington Area Convention and Visitors Bureau proclaimed the area "a great place to visit," describing it as an, "“alive and captivating’ community where many people lived.”<sup>670</sup> Ford's Theater continued to deliver productions, even if their productions were highly erratic in quality; and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, small experimental theaters moved into dilapidated buildings at greatly reduced rates and produced an array of stylistically challenging plays for the more aesthetically daring. As the 1972 elections approached, President Nixon continued to press for a legitimate District government, home rule, and voting representation in Congress. He even touted D.C. as "one of the safest cities in the country," citing statistics that illustrated a decline in every category of major crime.<sup>671</sup> Although he did not include references to the National in any of his major speeches about the District, it figured prominently in the PADC's revitalization plans through a stated goal to maintain the avenue's "historic continuity."<sup>672</sup>

The National Theater entered the Kennedy Center era with this promising, albeit uncertain, future hovering in the foreground. Within a month of the Center's premiere of *Mass*, the National opened its 1971 season with Neil Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, and the show sold out. The theater followed with other successful shows, including *1776* and *Purlie*, as well as a phenomenal run of *Godspell*, for which "a

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<sup>670</sup> William H. Jones, "Washington: A Living City—on Film," *Washington Post*, 14 November 1972, 1(B).

<sup>671</sup> William L. Claiborne, "President Sees City As 'One of the Safest,'" *Washington Post*, 20 April 1972, 1(A).

<sup>672</sup> PADC, 1.

continuous stream of church, synagogue, and school groups ... filled the theater.”<sup>673</sup> The Nederlanders had every reason to feel hopeful about the National’s fortunes. Though outsized by the newer, safer Kennedy Center, the National had its particular historic charms. When asked about the competition between the two theaters, Scott Kirkpatrick, the National’s long time manager, articulated his theater’s perspective: “That’s a war memorial [the Kennedy Center], that’s not a theatuh.”<sup>674</sup> His enunciation clearly defined “theater” in a traditional, more glamorous, downtown light.

The National worked hard to bolster its image by promoting its role as a local historic landmark. As discussed in Chapter Two, a culture war was raging across the country. In the District, the battle manifested itself between those who supported the family-oriented entertainment that still dominated downtown in the mid-1960s and those who supported free speech and thus, by association, the wave of morally challenging movies and plays (of both the avant-garde and pornographic variety) flooding Washington’s marketplace.<sup>675</sup> Nixon stood with traditional values, refusing to attend the National during the later 1960s. Its production of *Hair* in 1971 only worsened relations. Yet when Nixon was campaigning to revitalize the city, he attended the theater’s presentation of *Irene* with Debbie Reynolds, where “he was the unexpected superstar.”<sup>676</sup> By reconnecting to its image as the Theater of Presidents, the National hoped to regain its lost prestige and increase its chances of luring an upscale crowd back to its doors.

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<sup>673</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “The *Godspell* Phenomenon,” *Washington Post*, 7 April 1974, 1(D).

<sup>674</sup> Pamela M Laeroll, “Ideals and Theatuh,” *Washington Star*, 9 April 1972, 5(C).

<sup>675</sup> In “Scaring Off the Sex Films,” Shales explains, “Five years ago, theaters were still trying to pull family audiences to the downtown area. The Trans-Lux, where ‘Hot Circuit’ was yanked earlier this month, was playing a revival of ‘The African Queen’ ... The Playhouse, until recently showing the hardcore ‘Dynamite,’ offered a general audience comedy, ‘The Producers.’”

<sup>676</sup> Clare Crawford, “Nixon Center Stage,” *Washington Star*, 23 February 1973, 1(E).

The National also sold itself as a local cultural institution, in contrast to the Kennedy Center's status as an institution of the federal government. One of the ways it did this was by reaching out to Washington's sizeable African American population, a potential theater-going public that the National had traditionally shunned. During the 1960s, the theater presented *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Dolly* with Pearl Bailey. In the early 1970s, they presented *Purlie*, based on Ozzie Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, and Joseph A. Walker's *The River Niger*, one of the theater's most successful shows during this time period. This family-oriented drama, called a "flagrant tear jerker" and "fuel for the soul" by Charles Farrow of the *Washington Afro American*, brought Black Washingtonians to the theater as never before.<sup>677</sup> The theater even offered its opening night performance as a fundraiser for Robert Hooks' struggling DC Black Repertory Company.<sup>678</sup> The show's success did not, however, signal a sea change in the National's approach to African American audiences.

Despite operating the National at "a small profit," James Nederlander found competing against the Kennedy Center extremely difficult, as he was gambling his "own money against a non-profit institution."<sup>679</sup> The competition flared into public view during summer 1972, when the pre-Broadway tryout of the musical *Pippin* signed with the Kennedy Center after seemingly making an agreement with the National: "The switch was made to the Kennedy Center because it agreed to \$100,000 and a guarantee against

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<sup>677</sup> Charles Farrow, Review of *The River Niger*, performed by the Negro Ensemble Company, *Washington Afro American*, 17 November 1973, 18.

<sup>678</sup> Robert Hooks, co-founder of the Negro Ensemble Theater, came to Washington in 1970 and began organizing the D.C. Black Repertory Company. The struggles of the company were dealt with extensively in chapter six.

<sup>679</sup> Don Shirley, "National-Kennedy Center: The Honeymoon Is Over," *Washington Post*, 12 December 1975, 1(D).

all losses for a four-week Washington run.”<sup>680</sup> As Nederlander explained, ““This is the kind of deal no private entrepreneur can afford to match.”” Clearly, the Center and Stevens had demonstrated their collective power as a booking agency, which had producers “pleading to be booked” into one of the Center’s sizeable venues.<sup>681</sup> The National had no such clout. In fact, when a reporter relayed the National’s charge that the Center had pirated *Pippin* away, Stevens calmly replied, “The National has been a tough and able competitor.”<sup>682</sup>

Despite the National’s occasional successes at the box office, during July and August 1974, discussions between Stevens and Nederlander went public about the possibility of the Center taking over management of the National Theater. Before any such move could be made, issues related to the National’s identity as a Theater of Commerce being run by the Kennedy Center, a Theater of the Public, had to be resolved.<sup>683</sup> Stevens suggested that “local theater buffs” create a not-for-profit corporation that would then “run the theater [The National], in the public interest.”<sup>684</sup> The Nederlander family could then sublease the National to the not-for-profit, which in turn could hire the Center to manage the theater. Besides the economic benefits of such an arrangement, this scheme gave Stevens the added flexibility of a third large house while shielding the Center from the appearance of a direct takeover of Washington’s

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<sup>680</sup> Richard L. Coe, “The Fight Over *Pippin*,” *Washington Post*, 27 July 1972, 11(B).

<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

<sup>682</sup> David Richards, “Center Pirated *Pippin* National Theater Says,” *Washington Star*, 27 July 1972, 8(C).

<sup>683</sup> Legally, the Kennedy Center could not form a direct alliance with a profit-making institution like the National Theater, which at that time was owned and operated by the Nederlander family.

<sup>684</sup> Christina Williams, “Nonprofit Group to Run The National,” *Washington Post*, 18 November 1974, 1(A).

most beloved performing arts venue. Moreover, the National could maintain its identity as an independent arts organization, even as the Center assumed control over the organization's bookings. With a not-for-profit corporation in charge, the theater would also be in a position to raise moneys from foundations and other funding agencies either for capital improvements or for charitable work.

Steven's argument was compelling. Not only did he have "three shows [he] could put in the National right away," but he could also use the National as "a kind of over-flow house," both for shows better suited for the theater's 1600-seat house and for extensions of the Kennedy Center's hits.<sup>685</sup> Secondly, the Center had been "under attack for some of the strictly commercial attractions" it presented.<sup>686</sup> Media critics like the *Star's* David Richards speculated that Stevens would book these shows at the National in the future, thus protecting the Center from charges of commercialism but not the profits that the institution needed for its daily operation.<sup>687</sup> The deal worked for the *Nederlanders* as well. Not only would they sublease the theater for one percent of the gross, but they could also escape the National's dire downtown economic and social situation, which was only exacerbated by the presence of the powerful Kennedy Center and its federal mandate. For the National itself, the move had both dangerous and sensible implications. With Stevens' aid, the theater might be able sustain itself during economically troubled times. Yet by having the National's identity incorporated into the Center's, the theater's

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<sup>685</sup> David Richards, "Kennedy Officials Planning to Run National Theater," *Washington Star*, 13 August 1974, 7(B).

<sup>686</sup> David Richards, "New Life for National," *Washington Star*, 19 November 1974, 10(B).

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*

local reputation as an independent theater could only be damaged in the long run, or overshadowed completely.

The Washington community immediately raised concerns about the arrangement and questioned the “near monopoly by Stevens and the Kennedy Center” on professional, commercial theater in the area.<sup>688</sup> Yet from his perch atop the federal performing arts monument, Stevens seemed unable to understand the concern over a monopoly on theater, as he observed, “There wasn’t any theater in Washington until the Kennedy Center came along.”<sup>689</sup> Such an attitude did little to endear Stevens to local theater artists or to Washingtonians who felt the National deserved a modicum of respect for its 140 years of operation. Months later, on the day Stevens announced the creation of the New National Theater Corporation (NNTC), Thomas Fichandler of Arena Stage, who had originally agreed to serve on the not-for-profit’s board of directors, submitted his resignation in a letter: “I do not believe that it would be in the best interest of theater in Washington to have one management dominating so much of the city’s theatrical operation.”<sup>690</sup> Although Fichandler’s announcement did not prevent the monopoly from forming, it underscored the tension in the Washington theater community over the Stevens-Nederlander decision.

Eventually, after the NNTC hired the Kennedy Center to manage the National Theater, Stevens assuaged skeptical Washingtonians by promising to make the National available to local groups, like the D.C. Black Repertory Company, who wanted to use the popular downtown venue. Stevens also agreed to set aside “50 percent of the moneys

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<sup>688</sup> Williams, “Nonprofit Group to Run National,” 1(A).

<sup>689</sup> Tom Shales, “Negotiating National’s Future,” *Washington Post*, 14 August 1974, 1(C).

<sup>690</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Theaters: Pact and Problem,” *Washington Post*, 19 November 1974, 1(B).

remaining after expenses are paid” for use by local theaters to subsidize their use of the National’s space. Additionally, the Meyer Foundation of Washington granted the NNCT \$30,000 to support the non-profit’s charitable work, “with the understanding that local performing arts groups [would] have first call on the theater.”<sup>691</sup> As the District lacked usable performing venues, particularly downtown, such an offer made Steven’s overall deal all but irresistible to Washingtonians interested in the advancement of local theater. The National would rent for “\$7,000 a week, as opposed to the \$10,000 weekly ‘charity fee’” for the Center’s Eisenhower. The fact that even \$7,000 a week was still probably far too exorbitant for the Black Repertory or any other struggling theater in Washington did not even cross the press’ collective mind. Nevertheless, with the NNCT in place and public opinion assuaged, the NNCT’s not-for-profit board subleased the National from the theater’s owner, the Nederlander family, for \$36,000 a year, plus one percent of the gross. Then, the NNCT hired the Kennedy Center to book the National, and the two epicenters of theatrical activity became one.

### *Section II: Kennedy Center and National, Marriage for Survival and Profit*

The mid-1970s seemed to indicate that, as Wolf Von-Eckardt had predicted, the old downtown would indeed “study itself to death.” The Washington City Council and the newly elected mayor had plenty of plans to consider; however, these plans were mired in competing interests, government bureaucracy, or lack of appropriation. By 1976, only Washington’s state-of-the-art subway—Metro—had arrived, even if two years late. The Old Post Office, on the other hand, scheduled for demolition by Congress,

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<sup>691</sup> Ibid.

suddenly found Nancy Hawks of the NEA coming to its rescue, thus scrapping plans for a new Post Office.<sup>692</sup> In 1975, the FBI building was completed, and although its massive architecture brought people downtown, its style seemed too much like its reputation:

Designed intentionally to compete with the Department of Justice, the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building mimics its counterpart in both mass and stature. Built in 1975 by architect C.F. Murphy the building was intended to represent ‘...the finest in American contemporary architectural thought.’ The result, however, is a stark, cold structure in its materials and lack of detail. The originally planned shops at street level were instead replaced, for security reasons, with barrier-like concrete walls.<sup>693</sup>

Although the slow pace of redevelopment did not exacerbate the National’s situation downtown, the philosophical differences between the Kennedy Center and the National did, revealing the tensions inherent in the new management plan. While the National’s shift from profit to not-for-profit status initially struck observers as merely “confusing,” by the end of 1975, the move had escalated into an economic crisis.<sup>694</sup> In August, Christopher Hampton’s *The Philanthropist* cost the theater over \$67,000. Oddly enough, the same tactic that had allowed Stevens to win the rights to *Pippin*, i.e., a guarantee to the producers against losses, now cost the theater mightily, leading Stevens to proclaim: “In the future ... we’re not going to guarantee anything to anyone.”<sup>695</sup> By the end of the year, according to press reports, the National had lost money on six out of fourteen shows and owed over \$146,000. In addition to the \$25,000 management fee, the theater also owed Stevens \$40,000 for a personal loan.<sup>696</sup>

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<sup>692</sup> A renovated Old Post Office opened in 1984 and played a major role in downtown’s rebirth.

<sup>693</sup> “Washington Places, “The Architecture School of the University of Virginia,” from Claudia D. Kousoulas, *Contemporary Architecture in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1995), <http://urban.arch.virginia.edu:16080/dcplaces/paave/Segment2/900block/900block.html>.

<sup>694</sup> Richard L. Coe, “Theater,” *Potomac Magazine* in *Washington Post*, 7 September 1975, 18.

<sup>695</sup> “Honeymoon Is Over.”

<sup>696</sup> *Ibid.*

On the other hand, the theater's successes were pronounced, as the Center organized the theater's repertoire to appeal both to its traditional conservative audience and to its potential new audience, African Americans. The appearance of Katherine Hepburn in *A Matter of Gravity* epitomized the appeal of celebrity as she enticed sellout crowds to the theater despite its dangerous surroundings. "Never mind the play," intoned Maurice Tobin, the NNTC's President, "people love to go to touch the hem of [her] garment."<sup>697</sup> To be sure, this kind of fetishization of the star was not new, but its intoxicating appeal increased in importance as the National attempted to lure audiences into the old downtown.

For Washington's potentially huge African American theater-going public, the Center imported a series of shows aimed directly at them. Having earned home-rule and just elected their first representative to Congress, Washington's African American population was eager to celebrate, and *The River Niger* had given them opportunity to do so in the very same theater that twenty years ago had refused to seat them in the auditorium. The Center's first "Black" show at the National was Ron Milner's coming of age play, *What the Wine Sellers Buy*. The production prompted Farrow to report in the *Afro American* that the play's negative representation of the Detroit streets "is guaranteed to alienate many black people who refuse to accept this portrayal."<sup>698</sup> Farrow continued to discuss *Wine Sellers*, focusing more on the dialogic effect that it would have on its intended African American public, than on its merits as a play or production. In other words, whereas historically the National rarely inspired post-show discussions about

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<sup>697</sup> Ibid.

<sup>698</sup> Charles Farrow, "Potent 'Wine Seller'," review of *What the Wine Sellers Buy*, by Ron Milner, as performed at The National Theater, *Washington Afro-American*, 11 January 1975, 15.

issues, Stevens seemingly used this production to make the National relevant both locally and nationally. He apparently calculated that although Washington's African Americans were not likely to attend the Center in its Foggy Bottom neighborhood, they demonstrated no such reluctance frequenting the National and its downtown location. Not that all the shows that Stevens offered to the African American community had such issue-based situations—for example, the highly successful, and fluffy *Bubblin Brown Sugar*—but from *Purlie* and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enough* to an all “Black” *Guys and Dolls*, the shows proved that the success of *The River Niger* had not been a fluke. While the National's traditional white theater-going public found the theater's physical condition and its surrounding environment not only distasteful but also frightening, African Americans audiences welcomed the opportunity to go downtown to see shows relevant to their cultural experiences. This transformation of the National's audience was reflected in comments by Maurice Tobin: “they [white audiences] could go to the Eisenhower [or the Opera House] and park their car in the basement and walk down those gorgeous mirrored *allees*.”<sup>699</sup> On the other hand, audiences at the National had to park their cars on the street or in a downtown parking lot and walk to the theater through darkened streets that most suburbanites considered inhabited by rapists and muggers. Prior to the Center's booking of the National, African American audiences had few chances to revel in the big show and the larger than life performer. Although they might also have been leery to go downtown because of concerns about crime, the uprisings of 1968 had not had such a long-term psychological effect on them. Plus, the opening of the smaller uptown Black

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<sup>699</sup> James Lardner, “The National Theater's New Horizons: Restoring the House, the Bookings—and the Reputation,” *Washington Post*, 23 September 1979, 1(G).

Rep in 1972 had kindled their appetite for theater of identity even if The Black Rep had trouble bringing large enough audiences to their own shows.<sup>700</sup> Thus, during the 1975 holiday season, when the Center abruptly shifted a scheduled appearance of Pearl Bailey in *Hello Dolly!* from the National to the Opera House, the NNTC board went ballistic. Not even cash payments by the Center to cover the National's maintenance costs could assuage their sense of that the institution had been betrayed. The ensuing public controversy again captured the attention of the Washington media.

Over the next two years, many of the National's most successful, as well as controversial, shows catered to the city's African American population. One of the most controversial appeared in 1977: Phillip Hayes Dean's *Paul Robeson*. Although Dean probably did not intend the script to provoke protests, it did. Groups organized, including the influential Washington, D.C., Committee to End the Crimes against Paul Robeson, which wrote a petition signed by large numbers of people including 50 high profile African American leaders.<sup>701</sup> The statement read: "Artistically, politically, or otherwise it is not possible to portray this man [Robeson] as a naive, ignoble giant fighter for palliative reforms, which have come to pass, manipulated by individuals and forces beyond his powers to ultimately become a tragic if heroic figure of popular revulsion in a kind of regrettable hysteria."<sup>702</sup> Other groups added their voices, charging the playwright Dean with "a pernicious perversion of the essence of Paul Robeson" and even going so

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<sup>700</sup> The DC Black Repertory Company performed in a 500-seat house off Georgia Avenue. Their difficulties attracting African American audiences are discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>701</sup> Some of the people who signed were writer Maya Angelou, then Senator Julian Bond, Mayor Coleman Young, historian John Henrik Clake, and Mayor Marion Berry.

<sup>702</sup> Roger S. Glass, "Robeson Play: Inspires? Depresses? Theater Production Ignites Protests," *Washington Afro American*, 10 December 1977, 1.

far as to assert that Dean had been duped by the Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>703</sup> Others stated that Dean reduced Robeson “from revolutionary heroic dimensions to manageable sentimentalized use.”<sup>704</sup> The *Afro American* put the protests on their front page but then never carried a review of the production almost as if the newspaper decided that coverage of the performance would imply complicity. In any event, the National probably relished the free publicity; for even though historically the National had a strained relationship with Washington’s African American community, the protesters were not attacking the theater itself but rather the script and its African American playwright.

As 1978 began, the development plans looming in the background finally pushed their way center stage: the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation announced the complete reconstruction of square 254, which was occupied by the National Press Club (the square’s most powerful resident), the historic, turn-of-the-century Munsey Building, and the National Theater. The PADC also included in the restoration project renovation of the Willard Hotel, which became the jewel in the project’s crown. Developers responded in short order, with the proposal of Atlanta’s John Portman—The National Press Club’s favorite—drawing the most media attention. Though similar to the other proposals in relationship to the total number of hotel, office, and retail spaces, this proposal completely eliminated the National from the Washington landscape. After a firestorm of protests from both the NNTC and historic preservationists, Portman altered

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<sup>703</sup> Those claiming that Dean had fallen victim to CIA manipulation based their assertion on the play’s storyline, which mirrored the CIA’s propaganda. The protestors, among them Paul Robeson Jr., pointed out that Dean’s script ignored Robeson’s political dimension. Dean agreed, countering that he had created a fictional portrayal; plus, Robeson’s son had refused him entrance into his father’s archive, thus making it impossible for him to create a more complete representation.

<sup>704</sup> Jean M. White, “The Paul Robeson Dispute: A Dramatic Clash Over the Play’s Portrait,” *Washington Post*, 7 December 1977, 1(B).

the design to include a new National but with only 1000 seats. Additionally, the NNCT would have to raise their own moneys to pay for the construction.<sup>705</sup> A second proposal, by the John Akridge Company, a local developer, also tore down the National, but constructed a new theater with 1500 seats at the developer's expense. A third proposal, by the Marriott Corporation with Quadrangle Development Corporation, saved the old theater, both its interior and façade, but with considerable interior renovation.

A furious debate erupted in the public sphere that the media portrayed as a struggle between Washingtonians (true lovers of theater and historic preservationists) and outsiders (those at The National Press Club and at the Kennedy Center, namely Roger Stevens).<sup>706</sup> The NNCT and its current president, Maurice Tobin, broke with Stevens and cast the outsiders as villains out to destroy the National. They said that because deluxe hotel rooms and office space brought the highest return on a developer's dollar while theater brought one of the lowest, no developer was eager to dedicate space to a theater or the performing arts. Historic preservationists argued that preserving what was left of Washington's theatrical history should trump economic factors, particularly in light of the amount of recently demolished theatrical architecture in the old downtown. Some Washingtonians made the same connection between economics and culture that the League of Washington Theaters would make several years in the future, arguing that although hotels and offices brought people downtown, which, in turn, made retail space attractive to investors, theaters and restaurants kept those people downtown after work or

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<sup>705</sup> After passage of The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, preservationist groups formed throughout Washington. They acted to save both the National and, later, the Warner Theaters from demolition.

<sup>706</sup> The National Press Club was deeply involved in the reconstruction plan because it was the block's largest shareholder and resident.

out and about during the evening hours. Only the National, newly constructed or renovated, could keep the public downtown after dark. The National Press Club and John Portman were accused of shortsightedness. The Press Club retorted in a letter to the editor that the National Theater not only wanted them to “build a new theater, but pay for it as well,” which of course they did.<sup>707</sup>

Stevens’ role in the development issues was more ambiguous. The National had completed its most prosperous year just as the PADC announced its development plans. Debt-free, the theater was preparing to close for several months in order to complete over \$270,000 worth of renovations, including new seating, lights, acoustic material, stage flooring, and dressing rooms. When the theater reopened with “hand-me-down carpets from the Kennedy Center” and a color scheme evoking visual associations with its managerial partner, recriminations between the NNTC and Stevens flew, albeit mutedly, since the development crisis loomed large.<sup>708</sup> More importantly, both partners continued their prosperity with long runs of *Annie* and *Hello, Dolly* starring Carol Channing at the National. Nevertheless, Tobin accused Stevens of seeking the National’s demise by supporting the Portman plan and consulting with the Press Club on ways to fundraise for a new theater. Stevens ignored the acrimony, stating diplomatically, “We need the theater badly.”<sup>709</sup> Clearly not an endorsement of the National in its existing space, his comment bluntly highlighted the NNTC’s most powerful argument.

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<sup>707</sup> Frank Aukofer, Letter to the Editor in “The Future of The National Theater,” *Washington Post*, 19 September 1978, 20(A).

<sup>708</sup> Lardner, “National Theater’s New Horizons,” 1(G).

<sup>709</sup> David Richards, “It’s a New National, but All is not Rosy,” *Washington Star*, 19 May 1978, 1(G).

After everyone agreed that a theater would benefit downtown's prosperity, the central concern facing the PADC was whether the National's architecture was worthy of preservation. The PADC's mandate charged the organization with maintaining the Avenue's historic qualities. Yet according to Benjamin Forgey of the *Washington Post*, "the building that housed The National Theater ... looked like nothing more than a pleasantly nondescript collector for 9-to-5ers on the daily grind."<sup>710</sup> Would a new theater with a new look and an innovative design attract more people through its doors than an old theater with a long sense of history and tradition housed in an unremarkable exterior? Restoration of the Willard Hotel was a certainty. Not only did the hotel have an extravagant history of service to some of Washington's most powerful personages but its highly ornate external design lent enormous character to a section of the city otherwise inundated by prosaic architecture. The National had grandeur, but its character existed behind closed doors, inside its bland facade. Yet Washingtonians, still reeling with regret over the demolition of their palaces, conjured associations to a glorious past. Those emotions brought people to the streets and filled the editorial columns of area newspapers with arguments in favor of the old theater's survival. In addition, it motivated historical preservationists, theater critics, and celebrities as never before. Richard Coe proclaimed, "if ever an American theater merited an official historic landmark designation the National is one."<sup>711</sup> After every performance of *Hello, Dolly* Carol Channing used her celebrity status to plead, "for the National's survival."<sup>712</sup> As the day of the vote

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<sup>710</sup> Benjamin Forgey, "National Theater: Splendor Restored in Turquoise and Gold," *Washington Post*, 15 January 1984, 1(K).

<sup>711</sup> Richard L. Coe, "The National Theater: New Script from Old Playhouse," *Washington Post*, 16 April 1978, 1(K).

<sup>712</sup> Lardner, "National Theater's New Horizons," 1(G).

approached, arguments reached fever pitch, so much so that when Channing addressed The National Press Club, “almost a dozen questions about the fate of the National were screened out by Club officials.”<sup>713</sup>

On October 25, 1978, the PADC voted to save the National Theater from demolition. The Marriott and Quadrangle development plan would put a \$110 million, 16-story building on the block bounded by 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, E, and F Streets, NW. It called for a 830-room hotel, 450,000 square feet of offices, 100,000 square feet of store space, 760 underground parking stalls, and, of course, a renovated National Theater: “The theater, hotel, and retail space will be linked together through an interior court ... an atrium space that will remain active for up to 18 hours each day.”<sup>714</sup> When construction would begin was still anyone’s guess, but at least for this slice of downtown, the prospect of renovation and revitalization seemed excellent. The rest of downtown could expect the best as well, for more important than the specifics of the deal was the fact that developers had wanted to invest in Washington’s downtown at all; that action bode well for the future.

Hardly had the celebrations “for the theater that survived” stopped before tensions once again flared between the Kennedy Center and the NNTC.<sup>715</sup> *A Chorus Line* closed in spring 1979 and the National remained dark throughout that summer, primarily because the producers of the musical *If! If! If!* abruptly pulled the show from Washington, and Stevens did not replace it. NNTC President Maurice Tobin began active negotiations with other producers. At the same time, the Kennedy Center and

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<sup>713</sup> “Save The National,” an editorial of Washington Post, 25 October 1978, 14(A).

<sup>714</sup> Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, “1978 Annual Report,” February 1979, 4.

Stevens came under heavy criticism at Senate hearings. Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey accused the Center of discouraging the “idea of putting shows at the National on a subscription basis, ‘to avoid competition with the highly successful series at the Eisenhower Theater.’”<sup>716</sup> Bolstered by such Senatorial support and convinced that the National’s troubles with bookings had to do with the fact that Stevens’ primary concern was the health of the Center, the NNTC’s board voted to end its arrangement with the Kennedy Center. An additional, if privately held, reason for the termination was the board’s belief that “animosity among certain New York producers toward the Kennedy Center ... [had] rubbed off on the National.”<sup>717</sup> If true, such animosity might undermine the National’s ability to negotiate with other producers, thus forcing the theater to remain in a vulnerable relationship with the Center.

Two months after the National severed ties with the Kennedy Center, the NNTC hired the Shubert organization to book the theater. What followed was a series of legal challenges brought against the Shuberts by the National’s primary lessee, the Nederlander family. The Nederlander organization was one of the most powerful theatrical organizations in New York, second only to the Shuberts in its ownership of theaters, and it was not willing to accept the irony of having sublet away its control of the National to its number one rival. In April 1980, a federal court decided that the Shuberts had won,

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<sup>715</sup> Carla Hall, “A Party for the Theater That Survived,” *Washington Post*, 8 December 1978, n.p. Vertical Files, Washingtoniana.

<sup>716</sup> James Lardner, “Kennedy Center: An Exclusive Club?” *Washington Post*, 15 September 1979, 1(B).

<sup>717</sup> James Lardner, “National Leaves Kennedy Center Fold,” 12 October 1979, 6(B). During the late 1970s many New York producers claimed that Roger Stevens discriminated in his choice of bookings at the Kennedy Center. One of the loudest voices argued the fact that a Neil Simon play had never appeared on the Center’s stage was evidence of favoritism on Stevens’ part.

temporarily, the right to book shows into the National. By June, the court turned its temporary decision into a final one.<sup>718</sup>

Before the courts had settled that lawsuit, the National generated its own suit against the Kennedy Center. In this suit, at issue was \$172,123 that Tobin claimed the Center “wrongfully drew from the National’s bank account.”<sup>719</sup> Stevens had remained quiet about the termination of the Center’s contract. To his credit, the Center never brought legal action against the NNTC, with Stevens acknowledging that “they [the NNTC] had a legal right to terminate the contract ... but not a moral one.”<sup>720</sup> Concerning the legal struggle between Shubert and Nederlander, he thought that the theater’s ownership and booking should be in the same hands, meaning: dissolve the NNTC or let the Nederlanders book the theater themselves. Stevens’ diplomatic demeanor exploded, however, when Tobin brought legal action against the Center. He argued that the National “pulled out from a management contract after the Center had done everything to save the 146-year old landmark.”<sup>721</sup> Furthermore, Stevens said, “Tobin double-crossed him like no one in his whole life has.” Although the suit was settled out of court, with the Center taking \$100,000 and The National \$72,123, the turmoil undercut memories of the theater’s struggle for survival. Over the preceding months the public media image of the National had been that of Washington’s last theatrical landmark engaged in a historic clash against the greed of wealthy land developers. The lawsuits obliterated that sentiment, replacing it with four egos vying for

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<sup>718</sup> Carla Hall, “Theater Ruling,” *Washington Post*, 13 June 1980, 2(E).

<sup>719</sup> Carla Hall, “Kennedy Center Sued: National Theater Seeks Return of \$172,000,” *Washington Post*, 1 April 1980, 1(C).

<sup>720</sup> Carla Hall, “The Man Behind The National,” *Washington Post*, 13 April 1980, 1(K).

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*

control over a small (albeit profitable) piece of theatrical real estate with an even more profitable future. As one NNTC board member reflected to a *Post* reporter in 1982: “We had everything going for us. We had a healthy organization and the major theatrical power in the country coming to book the theater. There was nothing for us to do but enjoy having wonderful shows and concentrate on our public service programs. It was a piece of cake.”<sup>722</sup> And it had been.

Washington underwent profound changes through the 1970s, not only materially, but also in the definition of what a Washingtonian was. In the 1960s, the region witnessed massive increases in the size of the federal government; now, it continued to expand its federal sector while experiencing dramatic growth “in the non-governmental elements of the National governmental system, in international activities, in the services that support the area’s national capital and world capital functions, and hence in the highest paid, and best educated parts of the population.”<sup>723</sup> In other words, more Washingtonians than ever before worked for organizations independent of the federal government but whose main purpose was, nevertheless, rooted in that bureaucracy. As a result, more and more of Washington’s work force engaged in activities designed in one way or another to manage the acts or agency of the government, at both a national and international level. These Washingtonians, better paid and better educated than other workers, not only expected more from the social space, but they were also capable of funding the creation of those services that they most urgently desired.

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<sup>722</sup> David Richards and Megan Rosenfeld, “The National’s Nightmare: The Fight Over the Future of the Troubled Theater,” *Washington Post*, 29 April 1982, 1(B).

<sup>723</sup> Atlee E. Shidler, ed., *Greater Washington in 1980: a State of the Region Report* (Washington D.C.: The Greater Washington Research Center, 1980), 11.

Washington's advanced service economy expanded primarily because of three specific developments: 1) corporations and trade organizations established national offices in the area; 2) area accounting firms either increased in size or were newly established; and 3) law firms established offices in Washington or increased in size.<sup>724</sup> For example, during the 1970s, the number of corporations with national representatives doubled, from 250 to 500, while their staffs almost tripled in size. Equally dramatic, national trade organizations increased from 1,200 in 1970 to 2,000 in 1980. Between 1970 and 1976 alone, "thirty-five new accounting firms appeared on the Washington scene ... and established firms doubled and tripled in size." Although these figures indicate dramatic increases, they pale in comparison to increases in the size of Washington's lawyering class. As more of the nation's largest law firms established branches in the greater Washington area, the number of lawyers employed by those branches increased from 672 to 1,791. Legal organizations litigating in the public interest also established city offices, increasing from 15 in 1969 to 112 in 1979. Overall, "membership in the D.C. Bar nearly doubled from 16,800 in 1973 to 32,000" by the end of the decade. By 1988, one out of every nineteen Washingtonians was a lawyer.<sup>725</sup> New York State had the next closest ratio with one lawyer for every 219 citizens.

Growth in these sectors of the population had a ripple effect throughout the Washington area. During the 1970s, Greater Washington experienced a huge increase in the number of one and two-person households: a sixty-three percent gain in one-person

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<sup>724</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the statistics quoted in this paragraph are from *Greater Washington in 1980*, 11-20.

<sup>725</sup> Thomas N. Edmunds and Raymond J. Keating, *D.C. By the Numbers: A State of Failure* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 185.

household and a thirty-one percent gain in two.<sup>726</sup> Conversely, the area experienced a 24 percent reduction in the number of five-person households. As a result, not only did the number of children in the area decline but also the population aged. Although in 1980 Greater Washington saw an increase in its total population, from 3,040,307 in 1970 to 3,250,921, the number of children below eighteen years of age decreased by almost twenty percent.<sup>727</sup> Conversely, the number of adults eighteen and over increased by almost sixteen percent. This increase in the number of young, working, single professionals coincided with an explosion of incomes. From 1974 to 1977, the number of households with incomes of \$50,000 or more quadrupled from under 20,000 to more than 75,000, or from 1.7 percent of all households in the region to 7.1 percent. Furthermore, the number of households with incomes from \$35,000 to \$50,000 increased from 4.5 percent to 12.3 percent, or from 45,000 to 130,000.<sup>728</sup> As a result, the money available to citizens for entertainment increased substantially from 1970 to 1980.

The National Theater was in a prime location to benefit from these demographic changes. Although redevelopment of downtown had not yet occurred on the ground, by 1980, attorneys, accountants, and their associates occupied “40 percent of Washington’s downtown office space, compared with only 20 percent in Los Angeles and 19 percent in Chicago.”<sup>729</sup> Although it would be inaccurate to say that professionals were moving back to the city, professionals were returning, at least during office hours, to areas closest to

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<sup>726</sup> Unless otherwise noted, statistic quoted in this paragraph are from Dennis E. Gale, *Washington, D.C., Inner City Revitalization and Minority Suburbanization*, Comparative American Cities (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 13-20.

<sup>727</sup> The number of people below eighteen years of age dropped from 985,787 in 1970 to 797,433 in 1980.

<sup>728</sup> Shidler, 15.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

federal power—the old downtown. Having once arrived downtown, the challenge of enticing them to stay and play downtown was infinitely simpler.

*Section III: The National and the Shuberts, A Washington Marriage*

As the squall of lawsuits and accusations settled down and the Shubert organization took control of the National's bookings, the character of the theater began to change. Quality shows began to appear regularly, without extended periods of darkness: *They're Playing Our Song*, *Amadeus*, *Brigadoon*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, a return of *A Chorus Line*, *Children of a Lesser God*, *I Ought to be in Pictures*, *One Mo' Time*, and *Evita!* In other words, after its separation from the Kennedy Center, the National competed for, and often won, big Broadway touring shows. When the shows were not established hits, they were the best of the tryouts, like *Amadeus*, which according to *The Star*, “underscored the most significant shift in the year's theatrical winds.”<sup>730</sup> Based on the Shuberts' first season, Roger Stevens prognosticated that the National's future repertoire would not be daring but “dominated by established—and non-minority—hits.”<sup>731</sup> Whether his prediction would prove accurate or not, the return of a subscription season in 1981 signaled to the area's traditional theater-going public that the Shubert Organization was completely committed to the promotion of the National as an active, viable, independent theater.

The NNTC assisted in this promotional effort. With the opening of the 1980 season, they began a number of outreach projects that reflected the theater's status as a

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<sup>730</sup> David Richards and Jacob Weinraub, “National Set Tone for Change,” *Washington Star*, 28 December 1980, 1(G).

<sup>731</sup> James Lardner, “The Kennedy Center v. The National: The War's Over—Let the War Begin,” *Washington Post*, 7 September 1980, 1(G).

not-for-profit organization. In cooperation with a local radio station, they instituted “Noon at the National,” a program that featured producers, directors, and actors who highlighted the National’s connection to Broadway through their anecdotes. The board also sought to recoup the theater’s long association with Washington’s political establishment. They initiated a Monday evening program entitled “Stellar Statesmen,” during which “congressmen and other political notables” performed free of charge to an exclusive audience.<sup>732</sup> Lastly, the theater began a children’s theater series, “Saturday Morning at the National,” called by the *Post*’s Caroline Stevens, “a sign of [the theater] being born again.”<sup>733</sup>

Most significantly, however, the NNTC and Tobin reinstated the promotional use of the opening night party. The opening night party had long been a staple and venerable tradition in Washington theater, as it had been elsewhere. Tobin saw these parties as more than celebrations, however; he saw them as opportunities to curry favor with some of Washington’s most powerful political players:

To the Shuberts, a free ticket given to a senator is just another free ticket; to Tobin, it’s a connection with power and a tool to woo potential donors and political support. Lavish parties are part of his strategy to make the National an ‘in place.’ ‘Without a party, it [the show] is like a flower in the desert. If we don’t make a thing about it, who will?’<sup>734</sup>

From “his sleek law office overlooking downtown K Street,” Tobin had come to understand the way Washington’s unique universe operated.<sup>735</sup> Unlike other cities, including New York where the metropolis’ commercial foundation counterbalanced the

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<sup>732</sup> Judith Gaines, “Politician Off Music on Monday,” *Washington Star*, 7 May 1981.

<sup>733</sup> Caroline Stevens, “For Choosy Children, An Engaging Series,” *Washington Star*, 5 February 1980, n.p. Vertical Files, “National Theater,” Washingtoniana.

<sup>734</sup> David Richards and Megan Rosenfeld, “The National’s Nightmare: the Fight Over the Future of the Troubled Theater,” *Washington Post*, 29 April 1982, 1(B).

activities of its political players, in Washington, where an independent commercial sector was all but non-existent, political players consistently turned political power into capital.

This formulation was particularly true in the arena of urban development:

Two features, then, distinguish Washington's development from that of other cities. First, as the nation's capital Washington has ... accorded a prominent role to its core of federal buildings.... Second, largely because of the federal presence, urban growth has often proceeded under a managerial political culture characterized by broad state involvement.<sup>736</sup>

For the National to remain competitive in the local theatrical market, as well as sustainable in the long term, the theater's major players had to cultivate the political soil in which the theater grew, and participate in the party life that "at the upper social levels in the nation's capital ha[d] become a corporate enterprise."<sup>737</sup> As New York outsiders, the Shubert Organization could appreciate this intricate and confusing web of corporate and political allegiances and paybacks, but they could not negotiate it as deftly as Tobin.

Unfortunately, as portrayed in the media, Maurice Tobin and his wife Joan, who also sat on the NNTC board, were not as skilled in the art of party courtship as they had been in the craft of legal gamesmanship. Whereas Tobin's legal power gambits proved successful in carrying the National through the turbulent period of the 1970s, his role as abrasive party host seemed out of place in the current era. Perhaps the Tobins' lack of theatrical experience revealed itself most obnoxiously in this most subtle of theatrical events, the after-show party; or, perhaps, the media no longer found the gruff Tobin charming in the post-Kennedy Center era. Perhaps, however, as one close observer

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<sup>735</sup> Hall, "Man Behind The National," 1(K).

<sup>736</sup> Stephen J. McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development: Dynamic Political Cultures in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 193.

<sup>737</sup> Barbara Gamarkian, "Now it's a Corporate-Driven Capital Party Circuit," *New York Times*, 20 March 1987, 105.

noted, “when Stevens ran the National ... Maury would get the back of his hand whenever he spoke up at meetings.”<sup>738</sup> After Stevens’ departure, however, “all of a sudden he was free. He had a theater of his own seemingly with no restrictions. It went to his head.” In other words, Tobin seemingly felt like he owned the National and, hence, alienated everyone around him. In any event, the lavish theatrical party, meant to build the National’s prestige and win favor from local and national political celebrities, in short order turned into a malignant affair.

When *Evita* opened for an extended run at the National in September 1981, outward appearances of a thriving theatrical arrangement disguised a brooding power struggle between the restless Tobin and Bernie Jacob, one of the heads of the Shubert Organization. Tensions had flared weeks earlier when the Shuberts vetoed the NNTC’s “nomination of a congressional aide for the post of general manager” of the theater, an important position that had mysteriously gone unfilled since the Shuberts took control of the National in April 1980.<sup>739</sup> Tobin wanted a person with political connections who would help deepen the theater’s network among the political elite. The Shuberts saw Tobin as a theatrical neophyte who had no understanding of the business of theater; they wanted a general manager who understood the world of theater, not politics.

Enraged by the veto and the subsequent challenge of Tobin’s plan to throw an expensive opening night celebration for *Evita*, the NNTC cancelled their planned extravaganza, even after printing and hand-addressing invitations at a cost of \$1,500. At the Shuberts’ opening night party, Tobin lashed out at the Shuberts: “We [the NNTC] haven’t had the financial support we need. We have gotten only the minimum

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<sup>738</sup> Richards, “National’s Nightmare,” 1(B).

guaranteed—\$100,000. We've never gotten any profits.”<sup>740</sup> Bernie Jacob sat at his table annoyed that Tobin would make such comments publicly about the theater's business dealings, particularly after the Shuberts “made a theater that was a disaster into the most successful theater in town.” Little did Jacob know that his retort would merely feed into Tobin's intense sense of ambition and competition and motivate the K Street lawyer to seek the Shuberts' ouster.

What had become quite obvious to Washington's theatrical observers was the fact that Tobin's decision to become President of the NNTC—possibly an act of unpaid civic altruism in 1974—had become by 1981 a vehicle for personal ambition and achievement. By Tobin's own admission, he did not want to “hang around the National after it's humming and booked and ready to roll. That's no fun.”<sup>741</sup> Yet that was exactly the condition in which the theater found itself in 1980. Having hired the Shuberts and secured the theater's future, the NNTC had placed the National in a “ready to roll” position. Tobin wanted more, however. As another board member told *Post* reporter Carla Hall, “He's attempting to build his own empire.... He's trying to make the National a little Kennedy Center.”<sup>742</sup> On the one hand, of course, such comments indicated the commitment Maury Tobin had to the National and its place in Washington history, a place recently challenged by the emergence of the Kennedy Center. On the other, however, as his wife so clearly expressed, “privately to friends,” she wanted her husband's loyalty to the National to translate into “a monument to Maury.”<sup>743</sup>

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<sup>739</sup> Ibid.

<sup>740</sup> Carla Hall, “The Politics Offstage,” *Washington Post*, 25 September 1981, 10(C).

<sup>741</sup> Hall, “Man Behind The National,” 1(K).

<sup>742</sup> Ibid.

<sup>743</sup> Richards, “Nightmare,” 1(B).

By March 1982, Tobin's empire teetered on the verge of collapse. With the PADC's development plans near enactment, the closing of the National for an extended period of time was inevitable. Tobin and "a few of his lieutenants" engaged in what Washington Mayor Marion Barry described as "guerilla warfare," which left a situation that "even practiced observers of the temperamental theater world viewed as uniquely venomous."<sup>744</sup> In a sabotaging statement, Tobin charged that "the theater was unsafe because of exploding pipes, falling plaster, and an inadequate fire curtain."<sup>745</sup> The charges were refuted by both PADC and Shubert officials, both of whom sent engineers to inspect the theater's various structures and insure their patrons' safety. In response, the Shuberts charged Maurice B. Tobin "with an intolerable interference with effective management of the theater."<sup>746</sup> The Shuberts' reaction sent the rest of the NNTC's board into alarm. Having already alienated both Stevens and the Nederlanders, if Tobin succeeded in driving away the Shuberts, the National "could easily find itself with second-rate touring companies and tryouts."<sup>747</sup>

As Tobin and "his lieutenants" attempted "to negotiate a new contract or a withdrawal from the present relationship" with the Shuberts, other board members, who realized the degree of danger in which Tobin's actions had placed the theater, attempted to right the situation.<sup>748</sup> In June 1982, they succeeded, and Harry Teter Jr. replaced Tobin as President of the NNTC. Teter moved quickly to consolidate his control over the

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<sup>744</sup> Ibid.

<sup>745</sup> David Richards, "National Theater Clash," *Washington Post*, 18 March 1982, 10(B).

<sup>746</sup> Ibid.

<sup>747</sup> Richards, "National's Nightmare," 1(B).

<sup>748</sup> David Richards, "National Theater Board Picks Negotiating Team," *Washington Post*, 19 March 1982. 3(F).

theater. He worked out an agreement with Quadrangle-Marriott Corporation to close the National for one year beginning in August 1982. During its closure not only would Quadrangle-Marriott suspend its \$100,000 rent, but it would also compensate the NNTC \$175,000 “for the loss of profits it might have earned during the upcoming season.”<sup>749</sup> More importantly, Teter revised the NNTC’s “existing agreement with the Shubert Organization, giving them a 20-year contract to book the historic theater.”<sup>750</sup> In return, the Shuberts granted the NNTC a “\$1 million interest-free loan... [to] be repaid out of profits for shows playing *The National* over the next 10 years.” The NNCT could use those funds to redecorate the theater’s interior, a renovation for which they were responsible. Such an agreement clearly demonstrated that hostilities had subsided and that the period where *The National* had served as a “monument to Maury” had ended.

#### *Section IV: The National Reopens, “Downtown is Back”*

On January 23, 1984, the National Theater reopened with a gala performance and party, starring the theater and *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. The audience was thick with celebrities, mostly of a political nature, and the after-show party would have even made Maurice Tobin proud. Senators, like Republican Charles Percy, mingled with Congressmen, like the Democratic Majority Leader, Jim Wright. Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill graced the hors d’oeuvre tray after sharing a theater box with President and Nancy Reagan. Of course, no evening would have been complete without Washington’s own Helen Hayes. Reagan commented to the press how the splendid theater was “a living

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<sup>749</sup> David Richards, “National Closed for One Year,” *Washington Post*, 11 August 1982, 1(B).

<sup>750</sup> David Richards, “National Accepts Shubert Pact,” *Washington Post* 29, October 1982, 1(B).

link with the past.”<sup>751</sup> Hayes admitted to being a bit startled by the theater’s “turquoise and peach with matching turquoise carpet dotted in white.” Yet, she admitted to being “the ultraconservative type.” More importantly, however, she said: “I think this is what theater is about. It should be brighter than life and that’s what this is.”<sup>752</sup> As Hap Erstein of the newly founded *Washington Times* stated, “42<sup>nd</sup> Street has no message to peddle. It merely wants to entertain with excess.”<sup>753</sup> Contrary to Erstein’s assertion, however, the evening did have an important message to peddle: the National and its environs addressed the question of “what theater is” in dramatic, albeit *excessive*, fashion.

No one could question the theater’s financial success—at least in the short term. Having made the decision to cease its days as a tryout house, the transformed theater presented mainly established Broadway hits. Washington’s prosperous, hardworking population had little time to trek to New York. By offering Washingtonians the best shows that New York’s commercial theater could provide, the Shuberts gambled that given an opportunity to step out of their offices and into a comfortable theater seat, these same hardworking, prosperous people would come in droves. For the 1981-82 season, the National Theater enlisted 1,600 season subscribers. In addition, even prior to the opening of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, the National had sold 10,500 single tickets; with these numbers,

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<sup>751</sup> Carla Hall and Elizabeth Kastor, “Curtains Up at The National! A Gala Reopening for the Theater,” *Washington Post*, 24 January 1984, 1(B).

<sup>752</sup> Ibid.

<sup>753</sup> Hap Erstein, “A Glittering, Glorious, Joyful, Extravaganza,” A review of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street by Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble, produced by David Merrick, *Washington Times*, 27 January 1984, 1(B). The *Washington Times* began Monday through Friday publication two years after the demise of Washington Star, in August 1982.

the National's grosses went "from approximately \$6 million in fiscal 1981 to a record-shattering \$15 million in fiscal 1984."<sup>754</sup>

With this financial success, the non-profit NNTC also experienced a windfall. After raising \$320,000 from various national corporations, the NNTC's board reinstated its outreach programs—its children's series and radio show—and initiated a once-a-month Monday night free lecture series, as well as Monday Night at the National, a showcase for experimental theater groups, new works, and emerging performers. With additional moneys pouring in from its profit-making arm, the National had more than enough capital. As a result, many in the theater community hoped that a reborn National would not merely remain a theater with Broadway tastes but develop into "a nerve center, a community crossroads" for theater activity throughout the greater Washington area.<sup>755</sup>

Unfortunately, the NNTC did not realize these hopes. Rather, they wagered their prosperity and clout on lavish parties and expenditures in the name of self-promotion. Even though President Reagan's second term made it difficult for Washingtonians to put together parties with a "splashy guest lists ... that make people gasp and say, 'Look who's coming!'" the NNTC threw one glittery party after the next.<sup>756</sup> The *cause d'jour*: the National Theater's 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday. More extravagant than the parties themselves were the theater's expenditures on "a lavish coffee-table book" and the commissioning of a promotional film at the cost of \$250,000 that portrayed the National as a theater of

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<sup>754</sup> David Richards, "National Theater: Promising Second Chance for the Grande Dame," *Washington Post*, 15 January 1984, 1(K).

<sup>755</sup> Ibid.

<sup>756</sup> Sarah Booth Conroy, "Second Term Slumber Parties: Washington Hosts & the Lame-Duck Entertaining Blues," *Washington Post*, 14 September 1986, 1(H).

“presidents and mink-clad first-nighters arriving in limousines.”<sup>757</sup> Such elaborate self-promotion dashed any hope within Washington’s larger theatrical community that the National would become a nerve center for local theater. Rather, members of the NNTC’s board had to satisfy themselves with celebrities, Broadway shows, and the theater’s newly renovated theatrical architecture.

Indeed, the renovated and refurbished National Theater offered a lot with which to be satisfied. Although its exterior remained uninspiring, it now had an address on Pennsylvania Avenue, as opposed to E Street. The Pennsylvania Avenue address had more symbolic power because of its associations with the political elite. Developers had cleaned its limestone façade and installed new windows. They had hung an enlarged neon sign and marquee. Near a monumental core dominated by impressive, if grandiose, architectural attractions, visibility to passing motorists and pedestrians was essential.

In contrast to its exterior, the theater’s interior had undergone extensive renovation and ironically echoed Tobin’s desire to turn the National into a little Kennedy Center. In addition to changes in its color scheme, the theater’s ground floor lobby was covered in \$40,000 worth of Italian marble. As at the Kennedy Center, foreign dignitaries and companies had donated items for the interior; in this case, a company in Trapani, Italy had donated the marble, with the cost of shipping “borne by the Saudi Arabian Ambassador and Mrs. Faisal Alhegelan.”<sup>758</sup> The amount of space dedicated to lobbies had also increased. Both the street-level and mezzanine lobbies now ran the full

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<sup>757</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Screening of the National,” *Washington Post*, 29 January 1986, 4(B). The coffee-table book was *Stage for a Nation: The National Theatre, 150 Years* by Douglass Bennett Lee, Roger L. Meersman, and Donn B. Murphy (Lanham, Maryland: The University Press of America, 1985).

<sup>758</sup> David Richards, “National to Reopen January 18: Upgraded Theater Set as Kennedy Center Rival” *Washington Post*, 6 September 1983, 1(B).

length of the building. In addition, a much-needed intermission lounge on the second balcony had been carved “out of what used to be a warren of offices overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue.”<sup>759</sup> The National’s patrons surely welcomed such changes, particularly on rainy or winter nights when standing outside the theater was unwelcome. By reducing the number of people moving outside the theater before and during the show, the National decreased the visual impact that a crowd would have had as a signifier of theater’s “brighter than life” inside activities; but then again, such a move seemed oddly appropriate to the new National.

The status given to interior space, at the cost of exterior presentation, ran throughout the National’s new design. This was especially apparent to members of the public that realized that the renovation had made the National but one element of a larger space, National Place. The new space erected by Quadrangle-Marriott consisted of four buildings in one, with the National Theater being the shortest, oldest, and dullest. Tallest among the four was a 16-story, 774-room Marriott Hotel connected to two office buildings: an eight-story building facing Western Plaza (since renamed Freedom Plaza) and a 13-story structure that also contained three floors of shops and restaurants. This architectural structure was, in turn, connected to the National Press Club building by an interior tunnel. The entire complex was connected visually to the reconstituted Willard Hotel. In fact, *Post* architecture critic, Benjamin Forgey, wrote that National Place tried “desperately to defer to the Willard Hotel, its robust neighbor,” which left National Place “at war with itself ... giving off contrary signals. ‘Admire my modesty!’ it seems to

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<sup>759</sup> Benjamin Forgey, “National Theater: Splendor Restored in Turquoise and Gold,” *Washington Post*, 15 January 1984, 1(K).

insist.”<sup>760</sup> Such an aesthetic comparison muted public presentation, meaning National Place, like the National Theater, “shown brightest” inside, in its internal mall.

The National Place’s most interesting feature was the tunnel-like pedestrian walkways running through the building, connecting the Marriott Hotel at one end and a slew of shops at the other. The restaurants and cafes were most important to the National Theater, however; and their composition clearly indicated the upper class clientele the space hoped to attract. From the “luxurious chinoiserie-appointed Celadon (where a jacket is required even before 6:30)” to the National Cafe where patrons were greeted by “armfuls of exotic flowers and blinding expanses of mirrors,” the visual signifiers clearly differentiated National Place from the seedy red light district still bustling just two blocks north on 14<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>761</sup>

National Place may not have achieved the architectural splendor that its designers had intended, but along Pennsylvania Avenue it and the Old Post Office Pavilion signaled the rebirth of Washington’s downtown. Although renewal began in earnest during the late 1970s, visible signs of its vitality did not become apparent until the mid-1980s:

Once ... reserved for presidential parades, Pennsylvania Avenue has begun to take on the cosmopolitan flair of the Champs Elysees. Where there had been a dusty federal enclave ... now open-air restaurants, bars and parks—the result of 25 years of planning ... [have] turn[ed] Pennsylvania Avenue into the heart of Washington’s “living downtown.” And alive it is. From bands to breakdancers, tourists to panhandlers, the new avenue barely resembles its old self. Old hotels and hostels have been replaced with swank new buildings brilliantly lighted and designed to flow along the strip from the White House to the Capitol.<sup>762</sup>

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<sup>760</sup> Benjamin Forgey, “Mixed Signals; National Place: a Block of Contradictions,” *Washington Post*, 4 February 1984, 1(C).

<sup>761</sup> Eve Zibart, “The National Cafe,” *Washington Post* 30, August 1984, 14(DC).

<sup>762</sup> Courtland Milloy, “New Avenue Brings Life to Downtown,” *Washington Post*, 13 August 1984, 1(D).

With these new buildings came people who did not simply work and then leave for their comfortable homes in the suburbs. They stayed, and then they played.

In 1988, Western Plaza's name was changed to Freedom Plaza. Because it was originally designed by architect Robert Venturi to contain two large pillars to frame its view of the Capitol, when the pillars were cut from the design, the plaza became, in Forgey's words, Venturi's "pedestal without a monument."<sup>763</sup> Venturi covered the pedestal's top with quotations from various texts by famous writers and politicians commenting on Washington's historical greatness. Ironically, as people stopped to read the inscriptions, their silhouettes momentarily replaced the absent pillars, turning the people into monuments to the American people. Looking at the Capitol one read: "If Washington should ever grow to be a great city, the outlook from the Capitol will be unsurpassed in the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson. 1843." While standing across from the National Theater one saw: "Enormous spaces, hundreds of miles of asphalt, a charming climate and the most entertaining society in America. Henry James. 1882." These texts and others transformed the plaza: it became a bridge between monumental core and commercial center; but it did not reinvigorate the mall as an agora of dissent as had happened during the 1960s when protestors from around the country gathered on the space to voice their objections to America and her role in the world.<sup>764</sup> Rather, Freedom Plaza reinforced the monumental core's original purpose: a place of homage and celebration. People at the National Theater surely welcomed the return to a simpler time—albeit one with a booming real estate market.

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<sup>763</sup> Benjamin Forgey, "Bare and Square: Robert Venturi's Literary Traffic Island," *Washington Post*, 20 December 1980, 1(D).

<sup>764</sup> The transformation of the Mall into an agora of dissent was described in Chapter Two.

What had begun in the 1970s, when developers from both inside and outside Washington bid for an opportunity to re-design Square 254, had by the mid-1980s made downtown “one of the nation’s hottest real estate markets.”<sup>765</sup> The region’s new workers needed offices that placed them in proximity to the agencies of government and federal power. Because office space was the developer’s best investment, it was not surprising that the availability of downtown office space increased the most dramatically. From 1980 to 1987, available office space increased by almost 80 percent, from almost 14 million square feet in 1980 to over 23 million square feet in 1987.<sup>766</sup> This development also made evident another important change in Washington’s spatial dynamic. Not only were more law firms and lawyers entering the city than ever before, but those large firms that had entered the city prior to 1980 had begun to transplant their practices, initially established west of Dupont Circle in Washington’s new downtown, to offices along Pennsylvania Avenue, east of the White House.

Even the residents of Washington who did not work downtown were beginning to reevaluate their image of the city as a riot-torn metropolis. In a *Post* article, “Downtown Shaking Off Riot Images,” suburbanite David Resse related how his recent trips to the city had “shattered his long held image of downtown as unsafe, desolate, and pretty uninteresting.... ‘It’s really got quite a lot to offer.’”<sup>767</sup> Another suburbanite, Christina Sharon said as she watched skateboards glide across the concrete plaza, “‘I feel safer, mainly because of the amount of people.’” To be sure, most suburbanites continued to limit their trips to the District to institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution, the

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<sup>765</sup> McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development*, 199.

<sup>766</sup> Kenneth Bredemeier and Mary Jordon, “Downtown Shaking Off Riot Images,” *Washington Post*, 8 April 1988, 1(A).

Kennedy Center, the National, and the monuments, but their behavior was beginning to change.

It is difficult to know what percentage of people playing downtown after dark were Washingtonians, but it is certain that a sizeable percentage stayed in one or another of Washington's new hotels. When the Willard and the Marriott opened their luxury hotels near National Place, they were not examples of daring entrepreneurship; they were simply the initial wave of a hotel-building boom: "By 1982 at least 13 new hotels had been proposed or were under construction in the old downtown."<sup>768</sup> Many of these hotels had been completed by 1987, which resulted in a near-doubling of the number of hotel rooms downtown, from 3,248 in 1980 to 6,372 in 1987. Additionally, many of these hotels, like the Willard and the Marriott, were luxury hotels, designed to lure high-end consumers. For example, just north of the National Theater, the 15-story Ramada Renaissance had 800 rooms, plus "116 specially designed executive suites."<sup>769</sup>

This explosion of development pleased many Washingtonians in the downtown business community, but as people began to realize the scope and speed of the changes taking place, some raised concerns about how these changes would affect the economic structure of the District. As the theater community had raised alarms when the National's ticket prices for 42<sup>nd</sup> Street hit forty dollars, so retailers complained when their rents rose dramatically throughout the 1980s. By 1984, almost 400 small businesses, many run by African American entrepreneurs, had fallen "to downtown redevelopment."<sup>770</sup> If the

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid.

<sup>768</sup> McGovern, *The Politics of Downtown Development*, 199.

<sup>769</sup> Downtown Partnerships, Newsletter, Fall 1988. Vertical Files, "Downtown," Washingtoniana.

<sup>770</sup> Clarence W. Hunter, "Downtown Firms Fall Victim to Redevelopment," *Washington Afro American*, 28 July 1984, 1.

small entrepreneurs were not being run out of downtown by high rents, then they were being displaced by construction and forced either to relocate or close shop altogether.<sup>771</sup>

The increase in rents was driven, in part, by the fact that although demand for retail space increased during the period, the amount of retail space remained fairly static, increasing from 5,500,000 square feet in 1980 to only about 6,700,000 in 1987.

Another important factor driving the price of real estate in the area had to do with the style of development taking place. For years, many of the largest developers had stayed away from the nation's capital. During this recent wave, however, several had decided "to make their mark" by designing and constructing high-quality buildings that demanded "top of the line prices for leases."<sup>772</sup> These buildings were not only made of the best materials, but they also created aesthetic experiences that tended to leave lasting impressions on their visitors; and when the aesthetics fell short, promotional material endeavored to fill the gap. For example, the Willard Hotel published a brochure soon after it opened in 1985 that described "the new personalized service" that its hotel guests would experience at its nearby shops:

These shops offer that little extra for your personal shopping needs and corporate gift-giving. To the right of the archway is Harriet Kassman, where fashionable women find the best European and American designers. Across the open court ... is the Occidental Restaurant ... Mondri has a real terrific sportswear collection ... A.B. Hummen with its exquisite collection of hummingbird objects.... Next door, Helga O. has ... stunning designer costume jewelry ... Schwartz & Sons, landmark jewelers, a rare gemstone in a lonely setting or a fine Swiss watch ... from Neuchalel Chocolate ... a specialty of the Bakery de France, a touch of Paris in Washington.<sup>773</sup>

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<sup>771</sup> William Allegar, "DC Ponders How to Save Downtown Core," *Washington Times*, 13 July 1987, 6(D).

<sup>772</sup> Larry Kramer and Anne Simpson, "Boomtown Downtown," *Washington Post Magazine*, 2 February 1986, 108.

<sup>773</sup> "The Willard Collection," promotional brochure, published by the Willard, 1986. Vertical Files, "Willard Hotel," Washingtoniana.

These shops were being sold as part of a package. Though each was different, they provided the consumer with a series of experiences around a single theme: the specialty shop that catered to the needs of individual consumers. In many ways, the entire “new” downtown was conceived of as a package. As a package, the aesthetics of architecture, just like the aesthetics of theater and retail, narrowed the range of participants to those with enough interest and capital to experience the best. This narrowing of focus accomplished a transformation in the identity of visitors to downtown. In his book, *The Experience Economy*, economist Joseph B. Pine describes the dynamics of the visitor’s relationship to a carefully crafted space: “Essential to every transformation, then, is understanding what the customer *truly needs to become* and how far away he is from fulfilling those needs within himself, even if the customer does not realize it or deludes himself about the direction or magnitude of the change required.”<sup>774</sup> At the National Theater, within its National Place, Washington had begun the process of transforming downtown’s nostalgia for a long gone golden age into a new multi-dimensional experience economy driven by its theatrical core. In such an economy, consumers do not simply purchase commodities or services. Consumers purchase commodities and services that have been packaged within certain experiences. Thus, for example, the experience of National Place drives consumption and prices as much or more so than the qualities of the commodities themselves. Similarly, the National Theater with its Broadway allure drives consumerism within an entire redeveloped and re-invigorated downtown: a downtown to be explored and identified with as thoroughly as any space in the city’s monumental core.

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<sup>774</sup> Joseph B. Pine, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 178.

Although the National Theater anchored that experience, it was not alone. As real estate prices climbed, the small experimental theaters left downtown. Nonetheless, the number of theaters in the downtown increased: Ford's Theater was joined in the mid-1980s by the Warner Theater and, in 1992, by Washington's Shakespeare Theater.<sup>775</sup> These theaters gave Washingtonians a downtown alive with theater, although not a theatre district proper. Washington's concept of downtown theater was not defined by traditional theatrical architecture and the performances therein, but rather by audiences and urban space; for whether standing in the middle of Freedom Plaza gazing at the Capitol, peering at fancifully clothed mannequins in display cases at National Place, or sitting in the audience at the National Theater yearning to touch the hem of Hepburn's dress, the orchestration of experience remained eerily the same. In a culture where the spectator was "entertained with excess," the theatre became just another product to consume.

The National Theater had returned to its celebrity identification, surrounded by a downtown teeming with life and glittering with wealth and splendor. To arrive at that distinction, it had survived financial instability and a depressed and decadent social space; it had survived the Kennedy Center's emergence as the "only theater in town;" it had survived demolition in the name of economic progress and urban renewal; and it had survived internal conflict spurred by what the media portrayed as Maurice Tobin's drive to turn the theater into an icon of personal achievement. In fact, the National Theater had

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<sup>775</sup> In 1983, the owners at the Warner, "a prime example of the architecture of fantasy," engaged in their own battle with historic preservation, though in reverse, with the owners fighting in court to stop the then 60-year-old theater's designation as an historic landmark. Having failed to stop such a designation, the owners concentrated on revamping the one time pornographic movie house into second tier touring house, importing musical stars in the late 1970s but then touring shows like *Evita*, *Chicago*, *Peter Pan*, *Othello*, and Athol Fugard's *Master Harold and the Boys*. The Shakespeare Theater would gain a national reputation by the year 2000.

accomplished much more than simply survive; by the late 1980s, it had emerged as “the most successful theater in town.”

The National’s new theatrical landscape, however, no longer resembled the landscape of its past. Once the National’s stature as the Theater of Presidents had positioned it well above other Washington theaters. The National’s struggle with the Kennedy Center for shows and status had occurred isolated from other more dynamic trends in local theater. Small, independent theaters that combined Theater Lobby’s committed amateurism and integral public with Arena Stage and WTC’s professional aspirations and practices were appearing everywhere: in the old downtown’s dingy storefronts, underneath dry cleaners, inside dilapidated warehouses, old movie houses, and even in small progressive churches. As a result, a growing sector of the public no longer viewed Washington’s theatrical culture as homogeneous and hierarchical. The link between a theater’s economic success and its status had begun to fissure. The new landscape had a different kind of topography that recognized the conceptual error within the notion of the “theater-goer” itself.

In the National’s heyday, the concept of “theater-goer” connoted a certain kind of person who simply went to theater, regardless of the content of the script, the style of performance, the location of the company, or the occasion. Like inveterate readers of fiction, inveterate theater-goers allegedly possessed at least a modicum of good taste developed over years of sampling performances. Hence, the theater-goer possessed a palette that could recognize and respond appropriately to quality. The new theatrical landscape emerging in Washington, however, acknowledged that there were as many different kinds of theater-goers as there were theatrical models and social determinants.

Thus, what exhilarated one theater-goer, left another dissatisfied; the difference in their experience was based as much on the performance's hail of the theater-goer as on the theater-goer's response to the performance event through his/her own frame of reference. This multiplicity of theater-goers led to a redefinition of theater as a category of entertainment.

A new world surrounded the historic National Theater on all sides. Inside, in their private space, the National's board of directors could decorate the theater to appear new and untraditional; publicly, however, the National was a museum piece, symbolically expressing a bygone era when downtown entertainment drew a more economically diverse audience to its doors. Now, crouched in an array of expensive luxury hotels, exclusive living spaces, upscale shops, and tourist attractions, the National Theater had changed. With its not-for-profit NNTC, commercial booking agent, and repertoire of successful Broadway shows, the National had become a different kind of Theater of the Public, one that catered to the entertainment needs of an elite clientele. With the Warner and Ford's Theater offering their own selections of sensually delightful performances, albeit at slightly lower prices, the old downtown had solidified its claim to a privileged public with money and time to spend. This kind of Theater of the Public could, as President Reagan jokingly bragged during the opening night celebration, recreate itself "without a penny of government money."<sup>776</sup> No matter how hard it tried, however, it could no longer lay claim to center stage.

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<sup>776</sup> Carla Hall, "Curtains Up at The National!," 1(B).

**PART III: THE MAKING OF WASHINGTON THEATER**

## Chapter Nine

### THE KENNEDY CENTER'S AMERICAN NATIONAL THEATER: PETER SELLARS' BRIEF, REMARKABLE WASHINGTON LIFE

When Roger Stevens announced the formation of the American National Theater (ANT) in 1983, he initiated a process that would have a profound effect on Washington's theatrical landscape. When, more than a year later, he announced that iconoclast theater and opera director Peter Sellars would serve as ANT's artistic director, he challenged Washingtonians to reconceive their understanding not only of the Kennedy Center but of every theater in the region. The Center had been the area's theatrical center of gravity since its founding in 1971, but its influence never quite stimulated theatrical activity in greater Washington, as theater advocates had hoped. Its promise as a national cultural center had never materialized, as Stevens focused instead on its economic survival, presenting mainly commercial fare in order to meet budgetary requirements. As a result, the Center had a somewhat pedestrian theatrical image in the media, which was further marred by continuous coverage of the frequent political disputes that swirled around the institution. The media rarely articulated its national cultural function, choosing instead to highlight the Center's difficulties: its role as both a memorial and an arts institution; its financial troubles related to construction debts; the numerous and varied charges against Stevens; and the problem of congressional censorship and political interference in the artistic process, which supposedly prevented the Center from presenting meaningful works. Far from being a stage for the nation's performances, as Stevens came to rely on the commercial hit to fill his two enormous houses and to bring revenue into the Center's money-starved coffers, the Center became little more than another touring stop or tryout

house for Broadway shows. As a result, as Washington's small theater movement began to develop and strengthen, and as the National Theater experienced a rebirth in a revived, thriving downtown, the éclat of the Center all but disappeared. Stevens' decision to found ANT, and indeed his gamble to appoint Peter Sellars as artistic director, was made in the hope that a monumental theatrical project directed by a formidable artistic talent might reinvigorate the significance of the Center, not just as a Washington institution for a Washington public, but in accordance with its original charter, as a national center of theatrical expression. The fact that ANT and Sellars were artistic and financial busts does not diminish the impact that both had on the significance of theater in the region: the failure of ANT underscored the demise of meaning and content in theater generally not just in Washington's limited public sphere.

This chapter explores the impact that ANT and Peter Sellars had on the significance of the Kennedy Center specifically and on Washington's theater community as a whole. Initially, Section I investigates Stevens' decision to found ANT and the convergence of circumstances that led to that decision. Section II examines Peter Sellars' training and background, his aesthetic vision, his goals for ANT rooted in his experience of Russian national theater, and his representation in the media. Section III analyzes ANT productions and their effect on the Washington theater-going public. It begins with a brief layout of Sellars' plans for ANT and then provides an analysis of the shows, culminating with a thorough investigation of his most renowned ANT production, an updated version of Sophocles' *Ajax*. The final section summarizes the impact that ANT had on the larger theatrical geography of Washington.

### *Section I: Founding the American National Theater*

The dream of an American national theater grew steadily over the course of the twentieth century. As America's image of itself transformed following the Spanish-American War, from an isolated, culturally insecure democracy to a united, developing economic empire, so too did its conception of the arts transform from superfluous enterprise to international envoy of national identity and nation-state. Following Roger Stevens' announcement about the birth of ANT, the *Post's* critic emeritus, Richard Coe, reminisced about America's first attempt at a 'national' theater in 1909 at New York's New Theatre: "E.H. Southern and his wife, Julia Marlow, opened their *Antony and Cleopatra*. Within two years the repertory project collapsed."<sup>777</sup> Coe's warning was, of course, that theater professionals have frequently announced monumental theatrical projects, even organized those projects and begun the hard work of realizing them, only to watch them disintegrate in antagonistic cultural environments. Although Stevens' ANT came seventy-five years later, Coe wondered if the conditions were now more conducive to the birth of a national theater. In the 1930s, the Federal Theater Project and its Living Newspaper, both of which possessed national theater ambitions, survived only four short years, because the FTP was considered a jobs program more than an arts organization by most of its political supporters. Additionally, in 1935 Congress endorsed and President Roosevelt signed into law the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA); however, ANTA never received federal funds. In the early 1950s, using private monies, it bought a theater building in New York on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street and attempted several productions, most notably Harold Clurman's production of O'Neill's *Desire Under the*

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<sup>777</sup> Richard L. Coe, "The Early Stages Of a National Theater," *Washington Post*, 6 November 1983, 1(M).

*Elms*, which received rave reviews. Nonetheless, ANTA failed at the box office and was forced shortly after to acquiesce to public demands for commercial fare. In the early 1980s, Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival and Ellen Burstyn, president of Actors Equity, tossed about the possibility of a new national theater, but never got beyond the ideation phase. Few would disagree that the cultural environment of the 1980s had improved in Washington and in the nation; questions still remained, however, about whether or not this improved cultural environment was suitable for a national theater enterprise.

Regardless of the external circumstances, the importance of a national theater housed at the Kennedy Center had “stayed in Stevens’ mind” since the original founding of the Center in 1971.<sup>778</sup> Thus, no one was particularly surprised when Stevens announced that he had made an executive decision to launch a national theater project. He had previously created production companies within the Center’s cavernous halls that had the potential of evolving into a national theater, notably the American Bicentennial Theater in 1975, and then six years later, a company organized in conjunction with the CBS/Broadcasting Group. Using a large grant from the Xerox Corporation, the Bicentennial Theater began operations with Thornton Wilder’s *The Skin of Our Teeth*; the project ended nine productions later, however, when its artistic director, Richmond Crinkley, left for New York after becoming increasingly disenchanted with Stevens over the direction of the company.<sup>779</sup> The association with CBS began in 1981 when, using monies provided by CBS, the Center developed productions that the television network

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<sup>778</sup> James Reston, Jr., “The Odd Couple,” *Washingtonian* 20.8 (May 1985): 216.

<sup>779</sup> Richmond Crinkley had been the Folger Theater Group's original artistic director.

could then market to its cable division. The new theater survived only six openings before the television network terminated its arts cable division, thus rendering its support for the project meaningless.

Stevens remain undeterred, however. After spending twenty years building a national cultural center, he was not going to surrender the idea of a national theater to the archives of the Library of Congress without a final attempt. His authority was unquestioned, and his connections with corporate America and its reservoirs of money had grown since his direction of the NEA. Yet, the theater producer and real estate entrepreneur knew that his leadership of the Center was nearing its end. In 1982, a heart attack had slowed him down, reminding him of just how demanding booking the Center's many venues was. He had not, however, cultivated the kind of secondary leadership that could guide the Center's artistic development after his departure.

At the core of that artistic development lay Stevens' vision of the Center, one that burned with the notion that a national cultural center had to have a theater producing original performances representing the country and her ideals.<sup>780</sup> When the Center opened with *Mass*, it had exemplified that vision, but since that opening, similar original productions had become financially unfeasible. The Center could import shows from the hinterlands that represented the regional cultures of the American nation, but such productions would not suffice for a national cultural center in the monumental core of the nation's capital. In that space, surrounded by columns of classical revival style architecture, productions needed to reflect the aspirations of an imperial public whose "national interests" were rapidly spreading to every corner of the globe. The American

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<sup>780</sup> Although Stevens undoubtedly was a masterful producer, he had never pretended to possess an artistic vision.

public intuitively understood what Benedict Anderson called “the inner incompatibility of empire and nation,” in the same way the Washington public understood that their Theater of the Public had a distinct local identity that was fundamentally incompatible inside the Kennedy Center’s imperial marble edifice.<sup>781</sup> Those incompatibilities, both locally manifest and nationally imposed, were what Stevens hoped his ANT could overcome.

For a national theater to succeed, several important factors would have to appear and coalesce simultaneously. First, the condition of American nationalism in the 1980s would have to recover from the debilitating trauma of the Vietnam War. Although a national theater might aid in the recovery process, this could only happen if the wound were at least scabbed over. If not, media simulation of a unified American identity might only provoke contestation. Second, a theatrical identity would have to be constructed that fused the grand purpose of a national theater with the public’s revived nationalism. This identity would inevitably have to negotiate issues related to American imperialism. Third, the theatrical community of Washington would have to grow politically and culturally sophisticated enough to imagine its arts community as participating in a purpose grander than the promotion of individualism and entertainment. Finally, given the changing theatrical landscape of Washington, where Theaters of Commerce and Community were giving way to a Theater of the Public, a national theater would have to negotiate the tension between these two perspectives.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nationalism arose as a “new way of linking fraternity, power, and time.”<sup>782</sup> This new way of linking people

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<sup>781</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York and London: Verso, New Left Books, 1991), 93.

<sup>782</sup> *Imagined Communities*, 36.

together politically was through communities imagined by language and iconography. Specifically, the linguistic narratives of the novel and the newspaper provided the material foundation for a fundamental reevaluation of the concept of simultaneity. From this new concept of time emerged Walter Benjamin's notion of, "homogenous, empty time, in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar."<sup>783</sup> In such simultaneity, members of the "imagined community" come to know only a handful of other members. They must imagine the others, each similarly agreeing with the same assumed ideological program. Thus, their unity is not arrived at through acknowledged self-interest or shared space or even shared experiences, but rather, through a mutual imaginary or symbolic dimension. The novel and the newspaper participated in formulating this symbolic realm by creating narratives that allowed for simultaneous action in two or more otherwise disconnected spaces. A national theater could emerge from this imagined community and, in turn, perform for it as well. In the process, the imagined community would thus become reified within the contemporary public sphere.

The Presidency of Ronald Reagan marked the 1980s with a concomitant mythology of rejuvenation and renewal. To many, the Reagan Revolution brought a rediscovery of national and international confidence and a sense that the American century, the twentieth, did not have to be the nation's last. Within a few years, the Reagan administration announced that the Vietnam era and its debilitating syndrome had ended. Years of political and cultural polarization, a lack of patriotism, and a weakening

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<sup>783</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), 265, as referenced in *Imagined Communities*, 24.

of nationalism were over. The United States and her people were once again robust and believed in their ability to overcome any obstacle or enemy. The nation was once again self-assured enough to engage openly in military operations in Central America, Southern Africa, and the Middle East, fulfilling its role as a superpower with global national interests. In other words, the Reagan decade asserted that the 1960s and 1970s did not signify a change in America's destiny but were a mere aberration in the nation's long held belief in manifest destiny. As historian William Appleman Williams writes, "Very simply, Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century liked empire for the same reasons their ancestors had favored it in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It provided them with renewable opportunities, wealth, and other benefits and satisfactions including a psychological sense of well-being and power."<sup>784</sup> In this kind of cultural climate, a national theater could potentially represent those forces, as well as stimulate a debate over the meaning of such images. Such a theater could supercede two centuries of America's inculcated sense of individualism and regionalism and its deep suspicions about federalism and the arts.

The key to a national theater rested on its ability to project a unified American identity in the midst of an emergent postmodern culture. The Kennedy Center's earliest attempt at grand narrative, its production of *Mass*, had not produced the desired results.<sup>785</sup> Bernstein had attempted to reconcile competing strands within the American public, both aesthetic and political: the debates over the Vietnam conflict; civil rights for African Americans, women, Chicanos, American Indians, and other groups; and divergent trends

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<sup>784</sup> William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament Along with a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 13.

<sup>785</sup> The Kennedy Center opened in 1971 with its production of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (see Chapter Four).

in America's popular culture over freedom of music, language, and art. Although its reception was polite, given its association with its namesake John F. Kennedy, the conservative establishment viewed the production's intentions as subversive to Nixon and his administration. Five years later, during preparation for the Bicentennial celebration, their Washington organizers feared that tensions leftover from the 1950s and 1960s would undermine the hoped for patriotic fervor of the activities.<sup>786</sup> Stevens own Bicentennial Theater had opted for decidedly commercial fare without noticeable cultural or historical content. Now that the Reagan revolution was in full swing, Stevens hoped that the tension of those times had subsided enough to make a new effort at a unifying simulation possible.

A new attempt would require more than good intentions, however; namely, it would require a reliable source of revenue. Stevens knew that founding a national theater at the Center constituted an enormous challenge, even in perfect circumstances. His earlier attempts at production companies at the Center had ended in failure because the revenue streams had been tied to commercial ventures that required immediate results. For a national theater to succeed, a dependable source of revenue during its formative years would prove critical. Stevens had long been associated with, and served on the board of directors of, the previously mentioned American National Theater and Academy. Though dormant for years, ANTA still owned its Broadway Theater and still possessed its congressional charter for a national theater. In 1981, Stevens arranged to sell ANTA's theatrical property for an estimated \$5 million.<sup>787</sup> Over the next two years,

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<sup>786</sup> For a complete discussion of the bicentennial and its relationship to national identity see Lyn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), 94-134.

<sup>787</sup> ANTA's theater was bought in August 1981 by Jujamcyn Theaters and renamed the Virginia.

Stevens and ANTA's chairman, Donald Seawell, negotiated the formation of a national theater, using ANTA's capital and charter and the Center's name and venues. A plan was agreed upon and announced in October 1983; in the agreement, ANTA provided ANT with \$1 million a year for five years, while the Center provided the company with the Eisenhower Theater, as well as an organizational infrastructure.

With finances secured, the essential artistic question overhanging the project was whether or not an appropriately national theatrical identity could be conceived within the social space of the Kennedy Center. Although many in the theater arts community argued that New York was the only suitable location for a national theater, in so doing, they ignored New York's long association with Theater of Commerce. Although one could argue that Theater of Commerce was just what America's national theater ought to represent, such cynicism undermined the idealism of the kind of national theater project Stevens had in mind. More importantly, as mentioned earlier, the city's monumental core provided the ideal social space for a national theater: its lack of regional geographic particularities paralleled the emptiness of the linguistic signifiers upon which nationalism is based. In other words, the social space of the Federal City, in which the nation's imperial ambitions appeared naturalized and universal, was perfectly suited for founding a national theater whose purpose was to project to a national public a universalizing image of itself and its "irreplaceable cultural values."<sup>788</sup> In an imperial space such as the Kennedy Center, a national theatrical simulation would attempt to stretch "the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire."<sup>789</sup> Obviously, the skin to service

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<sup>788</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 84.

<sup>789</sup> *Imagined Communities*, 86.

such a task would have to address the tensions within American culture between nation and empire.<sup>790</sup>

The successful navigation and manipulation of those tensions would prove pivotal to ANT's success. Broadly speaking, Stevens had two choices. He could orchestrate a national theater that either addressed the tension between nation and empire directly or one that bypassed the issue altogether, celebrating American mythology instead.

Anthony Smith has asserted that, traditionally, intellectuals and artists "have proposed and elaborated the concepts and language of the nation and nationalism," giving "voice to wider aspirations that they have conveyed in appropriate images, myths and symbols."<sup>791</sup>

As has been discussed previously, the artists of the 1980s could not adopt a celebratory approach, nor could they address the issue directly, as doing so would undermine the very community that a national theater was supposed to help Americans imagine. Again, to quote Williams on the subject:

In that fundamental sense, the cost of empire is not properly tabulated in the dead and maimed, or in the wasted resources, but rather in the loss of our vitality as citizens. We have increasingly ceased to participate in the process of self-government. We have become ever more frustrated and fatalistic, and hence concerned with individual gratification. Finally, we deny any responsibility; and, as part of that ultimate addiction of our birthright, indignantly deny that the United States is or ever was an empire.<sup>792</sup>

In Williams' estimation, neither choice was possible. To avoid the tension would only lead to a deepening of the public cynicism about democracy and self-government. To

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<sup>790</sup> The terms "nation" and "empire" are highly contested. In the context of this discussion "nation" refers to the conception of the United States limited to its states and territories. "Empire" refers to the concept of the United States an international entity, with national interests around the globe.

<sup>791</sup> *National Identity*, 93

<sup>792</sup> *Empire as a Way of Life*, 14.

address the tension and expose the entrenched ideology, however, would surely meet with indignation, anger, and denial.

In relationship to its theatrical community, Washington of the early 1980s seemed primed for just such a dramatic gesture as a national theater. Since 1971, the Kennedy Center had symbolized the national public and its support for the arts. Fords' Theater and Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts only further emphasized the fact that Washington, more than any other city in America, endorsed theater purporting to simulate national unity. Although that public had, for the most part, been associated with more commercial fare, now was the time to alter the image of a national public, providing it with a broader mandate. Beyond the government-affiliated theater community, the NEA had for more than a decade nurtured the city's Theaters of the Public, attracting a collection of powerful corporate and foundation supporters. Stevens recognized that, as a result, the public attending Washington's smaller theaters had grown substantially each year, and this growth was showing no sign of abatement. Even if these integral publics were not, collectively, identical to a national public and even if they were more attuned to issues of identity politics and marginalization, Stevens hoped that with the right kind of approach to aesthetics and publicity, the city's and the country's diverse constituencies might galvanize around the idea of a national theater. For this unification to happen and for a national theater to succeed, both Washington audiences and the broader, national theater-going public would have to grow sophisticated enough to overlook regional and sometimes parochial concerns. They would also have to grow tolerant enough to engage in an aesthetic debate without political rancor and cultural fragmentation.

Although the Kennedy Center might symbolize the nation's performing arts community, given its history of commercial productions, many in the Washington media were bewildered by Stevens' move to create a national theater. By 1983, many Washingtonians saw the Center as "too tightly allied to Broadway interests" for it to have legitimacy as a national theater.<sup>793</sup> After Congress established the Center, they provided it with enough funds to maintain its function as a national memorial to President Kennedy. Its Executive Producer was responsible for procuring the money necessary to keep the Center's performing arts function operational. To do so, Stevens had relied on the hallmarks of his own theatrical experiences. On the one hand, he had "produced more [plays] than any other living American."<sup>794</sup> As a result, he relied not only on his own productions, which he organized through his own independent production company, but also on his extensive network of contacts. Yet his thirty-five-year vitae of productions consisted almost exclusively of Broadway shows; his contacts operated primarily out of New York. Thus, although the Center's charter spoke of presenting regional folk arts and artists from around America, the Center's stages relied on Broadway. Stevens epitomized "the New York system," and, in fact, looked with disdain at "regional productions that pass as 'great drama.'"<sup>795</sup>

Yet if a national theater were to flourish at the Center, looks of disdain directed at regional productions would have to disappear, for by the 1980s, Theater of the Public had challenged, if not replaced, Theater of Commerce as the dominant, most vital theatrical force in the country. Broadway performances generated a large theater-going public by

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<sup>793</sup> David Richards, "Peter Sellars and the Unsolved Puzzle of ANT," *Washington Post*, 24 August 1986, 1(K).

<sup>794</sup> "The Odd Couple," 162.

way of celebrities and their name recognition, but Theaters of the Public had become the source for new script development and innovations in performance. In many ways, the success of a national theater at the Center would depend on its ability to bridge the divide between regional theatres and Broadway. Theater of the Public, which was gaining in audience and aesthetic recognition by leaps and bounds, entertained and enculturated more people than Theater of Commerce, but it had not gained an equivalent symbolic value. If anything, Theater of the Public represented a diversified America, and although the world of Theater of Commerce had lost much of its vitality, it still represented for the American public a singular spirit of theater. In particular, the singular, concentrated allure of Broadway focused the public's consciousness on its symbolic marquee. For a national theater to succeed, it would have to unify Broadway's symbolic theatrical value with Theater of the Public's artistic content and wide regional reach.

To accomplish this transformation, the Center's theater-going public would have to experience a major transformation. Stevens and his staff would have to watch as the theatrical empire they had so painstakingly constructed along the banks of the Potomac was dismantled and replaced. Stevens had fashioned the Center's identity out of Theater of Commerce, and the economic survival of the Center had been Stevens' primary concern for fifteen years. To accomplish this task, he had presented "the commercial tried and true," which filled the Center's coffers but left the institution void of a significant aesthetic identity. Attempting to remedy the situation would be risky, for even in the best of circumstances, significant portions of the Center's audience would not accept a loss of Broadway shows, no matter how interesting or professional the new

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<sup>795</sup> Ibid. 220.

material was. To shape an identity for ANT would necessitate a shift away from Theater of Commerce, toward Theater of the Public, with the goal being the discovery of a new theatrical hybrid that combined the mystique of Broadway with Theater of the Public's innovation and originality. Such a hybrid would not only attract a significant percentage of the Center's current audience but also new audiences heretofore put off by its conservative reputation. In other words, transforming the Center into a national theater with a national identity and consciousness would require realigning the Center's thirteen-year-old identity. Given the convergence of events—the Reagan Presidency, the agreement with ANTA, the vigor of Washington's theatrical culture, and Stevens' poor health—he did just that: he threw the Center into aesthetic chaos.

Washington's media characterized Stevens' decision within the context of the city's dual identity, as both the national capital with a federal function and a municipal entity with more than five hundred thousand local residents. *The Washingtonian* interviewed Stevens who stated that he was no longer interested in pleasing Washington, which he had done for fifteen years with mixed results.<sup>796</sup> ANT, according to Stevens would not be for Washington alone: "I wouldn't want to use up the ANT money just for Washington. I want this to exceed any theater in America, and I want it to inspire life into this old building."<sup>797</sup> Stevens' use of *old* probably indicated just how predictable the Center's repertoire had become since 1971, even if in that time it had built a 15,000 member season subscription audience based largely on the appeal of its concert series and Broadway shows. The Center's ticket prices were the highest in the region; its theater-

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<sup>796</sup> *The Washingtonian* had consistently appealed to Washington's social elite.

<sup>797</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

going public tended to be upper-middle class residents from its own Foggy Bottom neighborhood and nearby Georgetown, or from the economically prosperous suburbs of Virginia and Maryland. This theater-going public was not the same public that was attending Washington's Theaters of the Public. Nor was it the same public that Stevens wanted to attract to the Center. He wanted a larger public from outside the greater metropolitan area. To accomplish that goal, he would probably have to build a company that exceeded "any theater in America."

Stevens' decision to found a national theater at the Kennedy Center did not elicit universal acclaim. His decision to select Peter Sellars as ANT's artistic director only heightened the controversy, stirring disagreement within several camps. New York producers believed that a national theatre should be located in New York City, which they argued was "the nation's theatrical center and therefore the logical location for such an institution."<sup>798</sup> Stevens disagreed with that assessment, pointing to ANTA's difficulties on Broadway and saying that New York had "tried many times to set up a national company and [had] not been successful."<sup>799</sup>

New York was no longer the center of American theater. Although the dream of a national theater had existed for over three-quarters of a century, the emergence of Theater of the Public during the 1970s changed the equation. Many felt that regional theaters best represented America's national theatrical identity. In fact, as early as 1954, John Gassner had written that "only a federation of properly rooted regional theaters growing up naturally out of what we already have and out of the needs we feel ... is the answer to the

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<sup>798</sup> Richard L. Coe and David Richards, "Birth of a National Theater: Company to Reside At Kennedy Center," *Washington Post*, 6 October 1983, 1(E).

<sup>799</sup> Ibid.

hunger we profess for a national theater.”<sup>800</sup> The NEA had planted that network, and it was burgeoning; its members considered the true “national theater” to be their collective body of productions. For them, the idea of a single theatrical entity simulating the nation’s theatrical identity did not concur with the cultural diversity of the United States. As Peter Zeisler, head of Theatre Communications Group, stated: “We are a heterogeneous society.... How do you have a national theater in a culture as ethnically diverse as ours? I wish people would stop talking about a 'national theater.’”<sup>801</sup> Zeisler’s argument was premised on the concept of regionalism, and he failed to address the idea of an imagined community represented by a national public.

Similar concerns also existed among Washington’s own nascent regional and small theater network. Arena Stage was the dominant theater, but the small theater movement had organized the League of Washington Theaters, and the Washington Theater Awards Society was already planning the first annual Helen Hayes Awards.<sup>802</sup> Although Washington’s theatrical community viewed Stevens’ plans with caution, they also recognized that ANT could bolster the city’s theatrical image outside the Washington area. As the city’s theatrical culture searched for ways to increase its tourist audience, it considered ANT. Arena’s Zelda Fichandler encouraged the idea, even if she could barely conceal her annoyance at Stevens’ selection of someone as young and inexperienced as Sellars to head the project: “Peter’s goals for this new theater project are both noble and inspiring. Everyone ... hopes that the culture at large can provide the

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<sup>800</sup> John Gassner, “The American National Theater,” in *Theater in our Times: a Survey of the Men, Materials, and the Movements in the Modern Theater* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1954), 557.

<sup>801</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Sellars’ Plan For Theater Praised: Caution Also Expressed About Project’s Identity,” *Washington Post*, 25 January 1985, 1(C).

<sup>802</sup> The League of Washington Theaters is explored in Chapter Seven; the Helen Hayes Awards will be discussed in depth in Chapter Ten.

means for realizing them. From *our three decades of experience* [italics mine], we know the price tag on his dreams will be high, but worth it.”<sup>803</sup> Other leaders in the theatrical community were more open with their concerns. At that time, the Folger and NPT were struggling with extreme financial difficulties and were on the verge of collapse.<sup>804</sup> The local community looked forward to the attention that Washington’s theaters would receive because of ANT’s presence, but they were also wary:

[That enthusiasm was] somewhat tempered by the recent announcement that two of the cities' [sic] best smaller theaters, the Folger Theatre Group and the New Playwrights' Theatre, [were] threatened with extinction.... ‘I don't know if the money needed for the American National Theater will drain funds away from the others," said Howard Shalwitz ... ‘I hope not.’<sup>805</sup>

In any event, ANT could not afford to be seen as the enemy of local theaters; its survival would depend as much on its cultivation of the city’s theater-going public, as it would on a yet to be garnered national constituency. In order to navigate these pitfalls, ANT had to articulate a unifying vision of America, even as it celebrated the nation’s more culturally diverse regional traditions. To do that within a public sphere growing increasingly commercialized by the media, ANT would have to foster a vision of theater that synthesized the best of America’s performance traditions into a single expression. Such an order seemed too tall for a single imagination.

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<sup>803</sup> “Sellars' Plan For Theater Praised,” 1(C).

<sup>804</sup> See Chapter Seven.

<sup>805</sup> “Sellars' Plan For Theater Praised,” 1(C).

## *Section II: Peter Sellars, the Man and his "Tall" Vision*

Stevens' choice of Peter Sellars as ANT's first artistic director came after more than a year of negotiations with two of American theater's biggest names:

Gordon Davidson, artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, was initially the front-runner (among other things, it was thought that Davidson's California connections would go down well with the Reagan administration). But negotiations dragged on inconclusively for more than a year. Stevens then approached director Harold Prince, who wavered briefly before rejecting the offer. Sellars didn't enter the picture until March 1984.<sup>806</sup>

When Sellars did, he brought with him what seemed like perfect credentials. Whereas Davidson and Prince had more established careers—Davidson in the world of Theater of the Public and Prince in the Theater of Commerce—the young Sellars had established a reputation as an artist capable of working in both the Theater of the Public and Theater of Commerce.<sup>807</sup> In fact, on stage Sellars blended stylistic qualities representative of both worlds, a Sellars' trademark. Although Stevens had wanted a more experienced artistic director, he also recognized that a shift was taking place within the country's theatrical landscape away from Theater of Commerce and towards Theater of the Public. Davidson and Prince could have represented their sectors of the nation's theatrical landscape quite well, but a national theater would have to synthesize paradoxical styles and inclinations. Stevens recognized Sellars' unique proclivity to work with artists from the nation's Theater of the Public and avant-garde communities, as well as artists from Theater of Commerce and Broadway. By bringing in designers and actors from America's diverse theatrical communities, Sellars could begin the task of unifying the nation's theaters.

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<sup>806</sup> David Richards, "Playing It Unsafe: At the Kennedy Center a Bold New Act," *Washington Post*, 5 August 1984, 1(K).

<sup>807</sup> Davidson had been the first and only artistic director at the highly influential Mark Taper Forum since 1967; the Forum won a Tony in 1977 in recognition of its achievement in the theater.

To no one's surprise, the media declared Stevens' choice "the most radical, far-reaching artistic decision Stevens has yet made from his marbled perch along the Potomac."<sup>808</sup> Stevens' decision to hire Sellars, according to the media, had less to do with Sellars' proclivities, than it did with the young director's provocative resume of productions. The media introduced Sellars to Washingtonians by calling him "the 26-year-old directorial Wunderkind."<sup>809</sup> The elevation of individual, iconoclastic directors to celebrity status was nothing new to Washington. Arena's Zelda Fichandler and WTC's Davey Marlin-Jones had experienced such treatment during their theaters' respective rises to prominence during the late 1960s.<sup>810</sup> Their elevation as local celebrities was based, however, on a body of work produced and recognized by local audiences and critics. Sellars' celebrity status differed in that his stature rested on artistic achievements about which few Washingtonians had any direct, first-hand knowledge. In fact, as Peter Sellars himself admitted, "One of the ironies is that I'm one of the best-known directors in American theater and very few people have seen my work."<sup>811</sup> Roger Stevens himself admitted to making a quick decision to hire Sellars, based "largely on 'gut instinct.'"<sup>812</sup> When Washingtonians heard of his impending arrival, they could do little more than imagine what he had produced or what he intended to produce at ANT. They heard that his staging of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* had taken "place in modern-day Japan amid the jangle and glare of advertisements for Sony, Coca-Cola and

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<sup>808</sup> "Playing It Unsafe," 1(K).

<sup>809</sup> David Richards, "Kennedy Center Picks Sellars: Boston Director, 26, Chosen to Lead Eisenhower Theater," *Washington Post*, 31 May 1984, 1(B).

<sup>810</sup> See Chapter Five.

<sup>811</sup> Peter Sellars, from an interview with Arthur Bartow in *The Director's Voice: Twenty-One Interviews* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1988), 268.

<sup>812</sup> "Playing It Unsafe," 1(K).

Seiko;” they heard that his production of Handel's *Orlando* had used the Kennedy Space Center as its locale; they heard as well that a “Lincoln Continental was central to his recent interpretation of *King Lear*.”<sup>813</sup> As Gary Tischler of the *Georgetown* remarked: “Stories about Sellars’ productions abound, and they have about them the quality of legend, handed down from the Greeks.”<sup>814</sup>

In other words, the Sellars that the public knew was little more than a media creation fabricated in magazines, newspapers, and on television. His productions were little more than advertisements still hyping products that were no longer available for purchase. This process of ideologization of people and products had been transpiring in the media and American society since the 1920s but only recently had it escalated in intensity and production. The ideology of consumerism and its “world of the ads” eventually became, writes Stuart Ewen in *Captains of Consciousness*, “the common idiom of popular expression.”<sup>815</sup> Sellars played into this idiom in as much as he was a product of it. As a result, his celebrity represented a “transvaluation of the ‘word’ into a system of ‘credulity.’”<sup>816</sup> As long as that system of credulity sustained itself, Sellars might succeed at revolutionizing the world of theater. Unfortunately, to sustain itself, Sellars would have to avoid the pitfalls of celebrity.

Whether or not the general public would move beyond a knowledge of Sellars rooted in the media would depend upon how that public responded to the Washington

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<sup>813</sup> Ibid.

<sup>814</sup> Gary Tischler, “Peter Sellars: A Promise of Adventure,” *Georgetown*, 15-28 March 1985, 13.

<sup>815</sup> Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (Basic Books: New York, 1976, 2001), 73.

<sup>816</sup> *Captains of Consciousness*, 69. In Ewen’s “the transvaluation of the ‘word’ into a system of ‘credulity,’” he refers to C.G. Jung’s assertion in *The Undiscovered Self* that the western mind has suffered

media's simulation of the man's identity and productions. Because Sellars only existed for most of the theater-going public as a creation of the media, he more than most was subject to the media's power. If the media deemed Sellars' work as credible, then the public would probably accept his productions. If the media did not, then the public would not. Ironically, the media controlled the relationship between the theater-going public and Sellars the same way it controlled the general public's relationship with theater or the theater-going public's relationship with any particular small Theater of the Public. Because a far larger percentage of the public experienced the media's simulation of Sellars and his productions than Sellars himself, Sellars' media personality subsumed him. Early stories about Sellars and his genius had pricked people's curiosity, which was as much as any producer could have asked. The substance of the public's reception of Sellars depended on whether the public deemed the media's simulation of his identity as reliable.

The media's depiction of Sellars focused on his rapid rise to celebrity status, achieved primarily through a combination of precociousness and audacity. Little was said, however, about Sellars' unconventional training and experience, and what he had done to distinguish himself as a twenty-six-year-old theatrical producer/director. His pre-college training was with the Lovelace Marionettes of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he learned the art of improvisation and of creating found texts based on current social issues. Most importantly, he became sensitized to the power of music and began emphasizing "the level on which drama is lyrical and has musicality as its center."<sup>817</sup> As a graduate of

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a split between mind and body, matter and spirit, thus lending language and its symbolic system of values a greater psychological power for truth than the material world in which we live.

<sup>817</sup> Peter Sellars, from an interview with Ron Jenkins, *Theater*, vol. 15, num. 2, 1984, 47.

Harvard, which had no theater department, Sellars had been allowed to construct his own curriculum. He produced an eclectic mix of performances, most notably Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, which also served as his professional directing debut at the American Repertory Theater. Although the media categorized him as part of the intellectual elite, Sellars touted his lack of theatrical training, saying, "I never went to theater class in my life. I had no training.... I had to substitute my own solutions to certain things.... Those solutions make the work interesting and also infuriate traditionalists on both sides of the curtain—audiences and theater workers."<sup>818</sup> In 1982, his audacity earned him his first artistic directorship, at the Boston Shakespeare Company, which led to its rapid revival as a reputable company. Soon thereafter, in January 1983, Sellars received a coveted MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Not only did the grant afford him an annual stipend of \$27,200 for the next five years, it also branded him as "a genius" in the public sphere.<sup>819</sup> Such a title brought with it its share of derision and public scrutiny.

In academic circles, Sellars was known for a complex, postmodern style of production that combined stylistic elements from Meyerhold, Appia, and Brecht. Three important features marked his production style: recurrent use of music, conscious preoccupation with what Sellars called "novelty", and a dissonant aesthetic perspective that reflected a heterogeneous worldview. In an interview with Ron Jenkins, Sellars said, "In the history of Western Drama there have been three important moments: the Greek theater, the Elizabethan theater, and the American musical."<sup>820</sup> Greek and Elizabethan

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<sup>818</sup> Peter Sellars, *Director's Voice*, 270.

<sup>819</sup> The MacArthur Award had become popularly known as "the genius award."

<sup>820</sup> Peter Sellars, from an interview with Ron Jenkins, 48.

theater have long been established as defining expressions of western cultural ideals and aestheticism. Few in academia would accept Sellars' view that the American musical, even during its golden age, represented an important moment. For Sellars, however, the American musical was not important because of its literary power or preformatted excellence. Rather, as a theatrical event combining actors and audience, the musical demonstrated a raw power that cut across class lines. Within this synthesizing experience, Sellars argued that "a nation dreams of itself openly."<sup>821</sup> Sellars confirmed his enchantment with the form by working incessantly within or on the periphery of it. In fact, his vision of music as the loci of the dramatic arts led him to create a musical layer within all of his performance texts. Before arriving at ANT, for example, he produced *Hang On to Me* at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. In the show, Sellars meshed sixteen songs by George and Ira Gershwin with Maxim Gorki's 1904 drama *Summerfolk*. The four-hour production "took place simultaneously in the past and the present, in Russia and in America, and it was entertaining as well as highly experimental."<sup>822</sup> Although *Hang On to Me* drew mixed reviews, it was "nonetheless applauded for its sheer audacity."<sup>823</sup>

Most of Sellars' Washington productions also received mixed reviews, mainly because of his use of "novelty." Sellars' "concept of novelty [and] of a novelty act" synthesized Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* and *gestus* into a single significant moment or image.<sup>824</sup> Novelty was rooted in his contention that novelty within a production's

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<sup>821</sup> Ibid.

<sup>822</sup> Don Shewey, "Not Either/Or But And: Fragmentation and Consolidation in the Post-Modern Theater of Peter Sellars," in *Contemporary American Theater* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 266.

<sup>823</sup> "Kennedy Center Picks Sellars: Boston Director," 1(B).

<sup>824</sup> Ron Jenkins' Interview, 49.

schematic design disrupted an audience's sense of understanding; it provoked them to reconsider the possible meanings of the production, which generated public debate about the performance. If a performance failed to create a discussion about its content, then it failed to fulfill the audience's expectations about theater, because, for Sellars, people came to theater expecting the unexpected: "you have it waiting for them. You make sure that there's going to be something for them to talk about, some aspect of novelty."<sup>825</sup>

One of the inherent qualities of novelty, however, is instability, both in relationship to content and to that ever-illusory idea of entertainment. *Webster's International Dictionary* defines novelty as a "new or unusual thing or event," as well as "a small manufactured article intended mainly for decoration or adornment and marked by unusual or novel design."<sup>826</sup> Both of these definitions proved central to Sellars' understanding of novelty and action. As a production unfolds before an audience, an audience develops an understanding of the performance's plot and characters. By splicing the unusual and/or spatially incongruous action, gesture, or (most frequently) image into the context of the developing story, Sellars prompted the audience to reconsider its understanding of or theory about the production. If, however, the novel choice or novelty act failed to motivate a reconstruction of the audience's reading of the performance text, then it would only lead them to conclude that it was nothing more than decoration meant to confuse or shock them.

In this sense, Sellars conceived novelty as also fulfilling a function within the performance text similar to Brecht's conception of *gestus*. To be sure, Brecht left the

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<sup>825</sup> Ibid.

<sup>826</sup> *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc: 1986), 1546.

idea of *gestus* open to a variety of interpretations.<sup>827</sup> Though clearly more than simple gesture, either by actors expressing individual character traits or imitating conventional behaviors, *gestus* at its most basic animates the dramatic story.<sup>828</sup> At its most profound, as Patrice Pavis states: *gestus* “displaces the dialectic between ideas and actions; the dialectic no longer operates within the system of these ideas and actions, but at the point of intersection of the enunciating gesture and the enunciated discourse.”<sup>829</sup> In other words, the relationship between words and actions becomes normative. *Gestus* interrupts that normative relationship, creating a potential for discovery and new associations. *Gestus* interrupts normative relationships by creating a locus where ideology, status quo perceptions, and individual actions and motivations seemingly fuse, if only for a moment. In that locus, audiences can trace previous strands of contradiction to a normative and, thus, coherent dramatic world as well as project forward new narrative strands, which may or may not encounter another *gestus* in future action. For Sellars, however, the story demonstrated by the actors became less significant than the larger story of the *mise en scene* itself. The infusion of novelty into the performance did not so much occur at the level of story, but rather at the level of the play’s worldview, where the scenographic anomaly displaced the dialectic between the text’s language and the directorial meta-narrative. Whether or not audiences could integrate products of that displacement back

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<sup>827</sup> Bertolt Brecht’s use of *Gestus*, both the social and the basic, evolved over the two decades that he employed the term in his writings. Although his ideas about *Gestus* approached greater clarity over time, the term nevertheless remains vague and contradictory, possessing a number of potential interpretations. What remained consistent about *Gestus* is its purpose. *Gestus* is a theatrical device or moment that provides the audience with an opportunity to witness the social circumstances that shape and determine character and action. To fulfill that goal, *Gestus* alters the audience’s perspective on the performance event, moving them away from a character-centered perspective to a situation-centered one.

<sup>828</sup> The concept of story and its relationship to *gestus* constitutes another term and its correlating meanings that have become problematic among Brechtian theorists.

into a coherent formulation about the purpose and meaning of the production was unpredictable, particularly given the degree to which traditional theater-going publics expected a coherent aesthetic vision with stable signifiers organized logocentrically. The visual novelties that audiences easily appreciated were those placed in the background, “intended mainly for decoration,” not those Sellars moved into central positions of significance. That move to center stage provided just the potential for provocation Sellars wanted, for he did not want the production’s novelty to be pleasantly admired like recognizable pieces of Americana. He wanted novelty to be anomalous and to incite instability.

Because instability increases the deconstructive potential of novelty, it also tends to undermine the reconstructive purpose of *Gestus*. For *Gestus* to stimulate an understanding of the social genesis of human behavior, the performance has to allow the audience to think about the social circumstances in which the characters find themselves; to do that, as Roland Barthes states, “the theater must cease to be magical in order to become critical.”<sup>830</sup> In Sellars’ synthesis, however, novelty both estranges and enlightens. In other words, novelty estranges at the moment it occurs, but then it should haunt the production and the audience in order to provide a critical foundation for reconstruction. Whether a single device can achieve such a dual purpose is subject to debate.

If music and novelty constituted consistent components of Sellars’ artistic arsenal, an inconsistency of aesthetic elements constituted his stylistic mantra. His performances

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<sup>829</sup> Patrice Pavis, “On Brecht’s Notion of *Gestus*,” in *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theater* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 45.

<sup>830</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Brechtian Revolution,” *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 38.

were not inconsistent with respect to expertise and polish, though many critics argued that his style lacked both. Rather, Sellars' style exuded an inconsistency of values, appearances, and metaphors. "There's no uniform theatrical style in my shows," Sellars said, because "we don't live in a period when people have uniform lives. The whole point is that somebody is right next to you in the subway who's not like you, doesn't think the way you do, doesn't have your body rhythms, doesn't listen to the same music you listen to etc., etc."<sup>831</sup> Sellars deconstructed a unitary notion of style, promoting instead a fractious style of performance that better manifested contemporary urban life in America. A majority of the theater-going public found Sellars' disregard for artistic unity dramaturgically disturbing. As the traditional eight-note musical scale and the linear plot had defined musical and dramaturgical excellence in a previous century, so too had a uniform theatrical appearance become a central expectation of the theater-going public.

Sellars' heterogeneous style with its multiple semiotic systems depended on a public that was ready to generate its own evaluation and values from the performance's various interactions. Again, Pavis argues in *Languages of the Stage* that "whereas dramaturgy remains at a very general level in this endeavor, by considering primarily the written text and the textual and scenic macrostructures, semiology attempts the comparative operation at all levels of the performed work, and more particularly at the level of stage systems."<sup>832</sup> In other words, if the theater-going public interacts with a performance at the level of dramaturgy, it proceeds "either from a certain 'world vision'" that evaluates artistic expression using the criteria of that vision, or "from the observation

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<sup>831</sup> "Directing a National Consciousness," 88.

<sup>832</sup> Patrice Pavis, "Discussion on the Semiology of Theater," in *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theater* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 27

of forms to which certain contents are afterwards attributed.” Both processes presuppose “knowledge of the aesthetic or ideological code, according to which the engendering of the message is then explained.”<sup>833</sup> Sellars, on the other hand, wanted the public to engage in a performance at the level of semiology. He wanted spectators to act as collaborators in the construction of meaning, using their own systems of referents to give meaning to the performance’s semiotic content.

At ANT Sellars wanted to create a theater that reflected the postmodern condition of American life. In that theatrical space, he wanted each performance to motivate discussion about the issues confronting Americans and American life. By asserting this purpose for ANT, Sellars asked Theaters of the Public to remember their formative years as participants in a viable public sphere, when their reason for being had more to do with identity formation and the exploration of social issues than with the creation of entertainments. Washington had such a space during the late 1960s and 1970s, but by the 1980s that dynamic public sphere and the debates generated in it had begun to dissipate. Sellars saw theater and performance as offering an antidote for the “nightmare of America,” which he saw in the growing failure to discuss “serious issues,” and the tendency to impose artificially “happy endings.”<sup>834</sup> In this sense, he became Stevens’ logical candidate for ANT’s artistic director. As a theater director, Sellars was committed to shaping a theatrical vision that combined “the clarity of semaphore signals with the mystery of hieroglyphics.”<sup>835</sup> He wanted to ignite a discussion about America’s pressing social and political issues by fashioning a theatrical space in which the public

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<sup>833</sup> Ibid.

<sup>834</sup> “Directing a National Consciousness,” 89.

<sup>835</sup> Ron Jenkins’ Afterward, 51.

might be willing to suspend their sense of division so as to conceive of a national consciousness and/or conscience.

Although many elements contributed to Peter Sellars' idea for a national theater, his experience of Moscow's Taganka Theater during the final days of Yuri Lyubimov's tenure as artistic director had a profound impact upon his thinking about theater and its relationship to a national public.<sup>836</sup> Before going to Moscow, Sellars believed that Russian literature, its great writers and their highest achievements, could serve as definitive examples for American writers on the theme of national literature, particularly in the discipline of playwriting. In a 1998 interview, he reflected: "Russian literature was about the future of the country. Russian literature has deep questions embedded in it—'Where is the country going? How can we help shape it?'—and literature was an active force in shaping a national consciousness, a consciousness of civic identity and civil behavior."<sup>837</sup> He also pointed out how great Russian writers had written for the theater. By contrast, Sellars saw America's greatest writers bypassing the stage, a sentiment that echoed Gassner's comments in 1954: "We have simply lacked dramatists who occupy the same place in our civilization that Emerson, Melville, Poe, and Mark Twain do."<sup>838</sup> As a result, Sellars believed that the American stage had been left to lesser lights. American playwrights wanted to create plays with dynamic issues and characters, but they did not

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<sup>836</sup> Peter Sellars visited the Taganka Theater in March 1984, just after the dismissal of Lyubimov following the death of Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov. Lyubimov had challenged Soviet censors from the theater's founding in 1964, staging many of the classics of Russian prose, poetry, and drama, using a non-realistic style that he called "a theater of buffoonery." Sellars' arrival at the theater corresponded to the installation of a new artistic director, Anatoly Efros; nevertheless, Sellars witnessed many of Lyubimov's "popular and politically" unorthodox productions as they were gradually phased out. See Mark Bly, "Lyubimov and the End of an Era: An Interview with Peter Sellars."

<sup>837</sup> Peter Sellars, "Directing a National Consciousness," from an interview by Mark Bates, *Theater*, (28: 2), (February, 1998), 87.

<sup>838</sup> Gassner, 550.

provide the theater with a national literature whose purpose, Sellars concluded, was to shape a nation's identity and conscience.

Sellars' trip to the Taganka Theater in 1984 brought this perspective into clear relief. Not only did Sellars witness examples of Lyubimov's work, but also he witnessed a public thirsty for performances that would help define their identity. The first show Sellars attended was an adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.<sup>839</sup> The show had premiered at the Taganka more than fifteen years ago, yet long lines still formed outside its doors. One of Lyubimov's signature devices was to situate the author of a masterwork on the stage in some fashion. For example, in his adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, he "had Dostoyevsky onstage the whole evening, setting scenes up for the characters, trying to help them along, and most movingly praying for them."<sup>840</sup> For *The Master and Margarita*, after the show had ended and the actors left the stage, they returned carrying photographs of Bulgakov:

[they placed the photographs] in a ring in the middle of the stage; in the center of this ring they lit a torch in a brazier, and then stood back and we all applauded this very great author who had been silenced for so many years. I was sobbing—I had never seen an act of greater respect toward art or towards an artist who is considered a friend, a friend of the nation. The self-effacement of the actors demonstrated that they were performing willingly, in the service of an author. Theirs was the highest demonstration of respect for a great artist, a situation which we almost don't know in the "Free World," and how tragic for us. The applause that evening for Bulgakov was for each person in the audience, the highest statement of what he believed. It was more than what we think of as a "night in the theater," it was a night in their lives, and it was a night in history.<sup>841</sup>

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<sup>839</sup> Mikhail Bulgakov (1891 – 1940) came to prominence as a novelist and playwright during the early years of the Soviet Union. By 1929, however, Stalin had banned all of his works. *Master and Margarita*, a satiric novel, was Bulgakov's final work, completed several weeks before his death.

<sup>840</sup> Mark Bly, "Lyubimov and the End of an Era: An Interview with Peter Sellars," 10.

<sup>841</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

As Sellars began his work at ANT, he carried that image of Russian theater with him, a memory of a time when performance and theater played a crucial role in the formation of a nation's identity. Ominously, however, he made no reference to the fact that Russia's socio-political situation was vastly different than that of the United States; it was as if, in the ecstasy of the moment, Sellars wanted to transplant his symbolic image of theater in the Soviet Union in toto to the commercialized, polarized soil of America's national capital.

### *Section III: Sellars' American National Theater*

One of the first concerns Sellars had as ANT's artistic director was to reconfigure the Kennedy Center's theater-going public. Productions representing Theater of the Public had seldom played at the Center; even so, Sellars did not consider the Center's commercial public completely unacceptable. Rather, given enough money and time, he hoped ANT could educate that public as the theater reconceived its identity in general. For despite his rather eclectic and dynamic approach to performance, Sellars had, as mentioned earlier, positioned himself as a bridge between avant-garde and commercial tendencies in American theater, a synthesizer who worked in both arenas and with both types of professional artists. According to Don Shewey, Sellars represented "the demise of the 'either-or' proposition ... working 'on Broadway' versus 'off the beaten path', being 'popular' versus 'avant-garde', art versus entertainment, and all that implies."<sup>842</sup> In fact, Shewey's assertion followed Sellars' own belief that non-theater artists (critics and academics) had imposed the "either-or proposition" on theatrical performance, thus,

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<sup>842</sup> Don Shewey, "Not Either/Or But And," 265 – 266.

limiting theater's potential. Sellars said, "We have these ludicrous polarities arbitrarily determined from the outside. Perfectly talented people end up having their work shoved into tiny pigeonholes, when in fact, allowed to grow in some kind of natural environment, their work would blossom in a rather different way."<sup>843</sup> Whether the Center's theater-going public would accept Sellars' style, even if allowed to blossom in a "natural environment", was questionable, regardless of what or where Sellars imagined this natural environment to be.<sup>844</sup> While Sellars' theatrical art might reformulate and synthesize polarities and competing ideas about art and entertainment, would any theater-going public, much less Washington's largely conservative Kennedy Center public, accept an outsider's ideas about the proper relationship it should have with the theater?

*The Post* articulated this quandary in the month prior to Sellars' arrival:

Indeed, Sellars' presence could result in a dramatic revitalization of the Center, transforming it from an essentially conservative institution, more or less beholden to the ways of Broadway, into one both more surprising and creative on the quick and cutting edge of the contemporary theater. Or it could result in catastrophe, alienating the Center's constituency and eroding official support laboriously built up over a decade. Either way ... the landscape will be changed and old equations permanently altered. Nothing less than the often floated, yet-to-be-realized notion of the Center as a theatrical resource for the entire nation is on the line.<sup>845</sup>

By January 1985, Sellars had taken his ideas about theater and its future and translated them into a viable plan for the Center. The plan shook the organization to its core. It moved the Center away from its identity as a Theater of Commerce, where ticket

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<sup>843</sup> David Richards, "Playing it Unsafe: at the Kennedy Center, a Bold New Act," *Washington Post*, 5 August 1984, 1(K).

<sup>844</sup> What Sellars meant by "natural environment" is difficult to fathom, particularly in a world composed of constructed environments. From his various writings on the subject, however, one can surmise that a "natural environment" is one liberated from structures imposed from the outside, either by historical forces or by non-practitioners, primarily theater critics and scholars, who by defining theater in the present, limit its future.

<sup>845</sup> "Playing it Unsafe," 1(K).

income had to match financial obligations, and moved it closer to Theater of the Public, which operated knowing it needed philanthropic support. Sellars' plans represented the first steps in what he saw as, "a five-year program to build a 'heavily subsidized' national theater company on a par with such prestigious institutions as the National Theatre of Great Britain or the Comedie Francaise."<sup>846</sup>

This subsidized national theater would operate both as a producing theater and as a touring house. It would use the Center's Eisenhower Theater for its own productions, which would appeal to a national and a Washington public. As a touring house, Sellars did not want to continue the Center's relationship with Broadway or the Theater of Commerce.<sup>847</sup> He wanted to shift away from New York by showcasing the best of the nation's regional theaters. To realize this goal, Sellars dedicated the recently opened 500-seat Terrace Theater to shows "imported from or developed in collaboration with other theaters across the country."<sup>848</sup> Such a move alienated some of the commercial theater-going public, so Sellars slashed ticket prices by nearly 50 percent, gambling that he could make up the loss by attracting a more economically diverse public to the Center. He also renamed the Center's Lab Theater, the Free Theater, where both art and admission would be free. Additionally, Sellars restructured the Center's subscription plan, not around a season of shows but around packages of performances, either four or six tickets for the same show or for different productions. This decision not only gave the public more flexibility, but also provided Sellars the opportunity to manage ANT

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<sup>846</sup> David Richards, "Peter Sellars, Now, Building the Dream: At the Kennedy Center, Radical Plans for a Whole New American Theater," *Washington Post*, 24 January 1985, 1(D).

<sup>847</sup> Roger Stevens would continue to bring large musicals to the Kennedy Center Opera house so that he could "pay the bills."

<sup>848</sup> "Peter Sellars: Now, Building the Dream," 1(D).

more spontaneously. Hence, on January 24, 1985, Sellars announced ANT's first production, Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I*. Slated to open the last week of March 1985, it was to be directed by his American Repertory Theater colleague, Timothy Mayers.

ANT's inaugural production, Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, failed to put the national theater project on a secure footing. If the choice of a Shakespearean chronicle play for America's national theater was not strange enough, the fact that the production was ill-conceived further jeopardized ANT's chances of success.<sup>849</sup> Perhaps, like a curtain-warmer, audiences would forget *Henry* when the real star, Peter Sellars, staged his production of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. First impressions tend to leave lasting impressions, however, particularly after months of build up with outrageous comments by Sellars like, "The theater is the most depressed art form in America ... we've got to rethink the whole thing from the bottom up."<sup>850</sup> It was not that ANT's opening show had to be an unqualified success that established a lasting footprint on Washington's theatrical geography; plenty of theaters have survived poor or misleading openings. With *Henry*, however, Sellars placed himself in the awkward position of having to explain why Shakespeare was appropriate for an American national theater, which led to his absurd comment that he wanted "to reclaim Shakespeare for Americans."<sup>851</sup> Although critics did not comment on the absurdity of America claiming—or better yet reclaiming—England's Shakespeare, Sellars' statement exemplified the critical territory over which his tenure at ANT would be fought.

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<sup>849</sup> Ironically, the previously mentioned 1909 attempt at a national theater organized by E.H. Southern and his wife, Julia Marlow, also opened with a Shakespearean play, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

<sup>850</sup> "Peter Sellars: Now, Building the Dream," 1(D).

<sup>851</sup> Ibid.

To be sure, Sellars' assertion had a certain obscure justification. Shakespeare was the most often produced playwright in the American repertoire. Of greater importance to Sellars, however, was the idea that even though the bard's text illuminated a social order many centuries old, the focus in a contemporary production needed to be on those parts of the text that continued to speak—or, directorially, might be made to speak—to or for the American public. When Sellars characterized the play as “really, a show about Washington,” he was trying “to raise the level of political discourse [in Washington], to have a poet, not an ad agency or a propagandist, tell us where we stand as a nation.”<sup>852</sup> In other words, with *Henry* and every other show produced by ANT, Sellars wanted to shift the discussion of theater away from the written text, its referents and signifiers rooted in the fixed time and place of the author, and move it toward the performance text, which through the work of the director, designers, and actors interacts with the audience. Thus, in this case *Henry* became a play about American patriarchy in the guise of Ronald Reagan and the return of a more muscular foreign policy.

Unfortunately, ANT's production of *Henry IV* reverberated with little more than disappointment and rebuke; as a result, it established trends in critical and public reaction that plagued ANT throughout its brief life. *Henry* was directed by Timothy Mayer, who called the script “a profoundly motherless play,” whose two father figures reminded him of “a fat alcoholic named Doc who used to take [him] fishing” and his father, whom Mayer characterized as “an industrialist and lawyer.”<sup>853</sup> Mayer's personal anecdotes did little to raise the level of discussion about the performance's thematic content, however.

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<sup>852</sup> Ibid.

<sup>853</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “Playing for the Nation; Cast & Crew of 'Henry IV' Talk About ANT's Debut,” 25 March 1985, 1 (C).

Instead, his personalization of the characters tended to reduce the drama to the level of a family outing with home-movies. The show failed to generate the kind of public debate that Sellars had promised in his pre-show publicity.

In fact, the chief novelty of the production came about “somewhat by accident.”<sup>854</sup> When David Huddleston, who was playing Falstaff, withdrew from the company during the first week of rehearsals, Mayer supposedly had difficulty finding a suitable replacement on short notice. In a moment of inspiration, Mayer cajoled John McMartin, who was already playing King Henry IV, into replacing Huddleston. The double-casting of Falstaff and King Henry was “a feat no other actor [was] known to have tried.”<sup>855</sup> That such a monumental decision was made during rehearsals and for such a trivial reason, gave the critics and the theater-going public the impression that ANT had a frivolous attitude toward its work and its audience. The casual double casting marked ANT as cavalier. As Hap Erstein of *The Times* said, “the doubling of roles could have been a thematic master stroke,” offering the production a potential treasure trove of signifiers.<sup>856</sup> It emphasized the text’s central conflict: “the two father figures in Prince Hal’s life—the one tugging him downward, the other urging him upward.”<sup>857</sup> Having a single actor play both parts synthesized the patriarchal dualism into a single signifier and could have generated discussion about American patriarchy in the time of Reagan, the nation’s first actor-president. Such a choice needed an equally serious directorial plan to justify it. Instead, the happenstance of Mayer’s choice and the somewhat flippant

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<sup>854</sup> Hap Erstein, “An Unroyal *Henry IV* from ANT,” *Washington Times*, 29 March 1985, 5(B).

<sup>855</sup> “Playing for the Nation,” 1(C).

<sup>856</sup> “An Unroyal *Henry IV*,” 5(B).

<sup>857</sup> David Richards, “*Henry*: A Royal Letdown: ANT Debut Breaks No New Ground,” *Washington Post*, 29 March 1985, 1(C).

discussion of its rationale colored the critics reception, allowing the show's skewed history to overshadow its positive attributes. *Post* critic David Richards gave *Henry* the motto, "E Pluribus Multi," given as much for the show's hodge-podge of accents and styles—at least a Sellars' trademark—as it was for its lack of conceptual unity.<sup>858</sup>

Although ANT had many dimensions, from the presentation of original productions to the importation of shows produced elsewhere, the media's coverage of Sellars' productions became its symbolic center. After *Henry IV*, Sellars debuted directorially at ANT with James O'Neill's adaptation of Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He followed that with productions of Anton Chekhov's *A Seagull* and Robert Sherwood's *Idiots' Delight*.<sup>859</sup> His work at ANT climaxed with Sophocles' *Ajax*, adapted and modernized by Robert Auletta. As a dénouement, Sellars produced an evening of vignettes, entitled "Two Figures in Dense Violet Light," which combined Samuel Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu* with poems by Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens ("Tsunemasa" and "Angel Surrounded by Paysans"). Of the five, *Ajax* received international acclaim and served as an ironic culmination of Sellars' ANT narrative. In this sense "Two Figures" served as his dramaturgical dénouement, performed after he had announced his sabbatical from ANT. Together, these five shows proved that the firestorm of controversy Sellars had so hoped to ignite had ultimately consumed the young director in his own arsonist's imagination.

The actors and designers that Sellars attracted to the theatre were rarely subjects of controversy. His production team remained fairly consistent, with set designer George

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<sup>858</sup> Ibid.

<sup>859</sup> In Sellars' production of *The Seagull*, translated by Maria M. Markof-Belaëff, the title was changed to *A Seagull*.

Tsy-pin, lighting designer James F. Ingalls, and costume designer Kurt Wilhelm teaming up on the first four productions. His company of actors, however, changed over the five shows; they included not only some of Broadway's and Hollywood's rising and established stars, but also big-name actors from the avant-garde and smaller theater communities. Celebrity actors who performed in more than one production included Michael O'Keefe, Patti LuPone, and Richard Thomas. Joining that group was the co-founder of Mabou Mimes, David Warrilow, who was also a skilled interpreter of Samuel Beckett's plays. A number of other well-known actors worked for ANT, including JoBeth Williams, Colleen Dewhurst, Stacy Keach, Kevin Spacey, and Kelly McGillis, as well as South African actor Zakes Mokae, National Theater of the Deaf actor Howie Seago, and the African American playwright/actor Samm-Art Williams. Sellars' adept mixing of actors' personalities, styles, and histories allowed ANT to assume an eclectic identity, a true "E Pluribus Multi" of ensemble acting.

At the center of Sellars' controversial theatrical aesthetic was his emphatic use of powerful, discreet metaphoric images of which the actors were only a small part. When taken in the aggregate, they created productions that lingered, as Gary Tischler said of *A Seagull*, "like a dream that you keep remembering differently ... an important memory whose meaning changes with time."<sup>860</sup> Regardless of a show's reception by critics and audiences, Washingtonians could agree that Sellars had a penchant for the audacious.

Writing about his debut production, Joe Brown of the *Washington Post* said:

... *Count* may be worth seeing for its visual wit alone: tossed from the cliff at the cavernous Chateau d'If, the shroud-wrapped Dantes makes his escape, plunging three stories into rolling Mylar waves, creating a pluming

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<sup>860</sup> Gary Tischler, A Review of "A Seagull," *Georgetown*, 20 December – 2 January 1985-1986, 14.

splash of Styrofoam packing chips. Sellars has scattered what's-wrong-with-this-picture anachronisms throughout, like the jarring, garish Constructivist-inspired makeup worn by some of the actors.<sup>861</sup>

Spectacular images alone did not attract Washingtonians to *Count*. Just as many directors modulate the pace and tone of dialogue, Sellars continually varied the density and energy of the scenographic screenplay. In a move Sellars took right out of his experience of Lyubimov's work, during one of the *Count's* prison scenes, Sellars allowed "only the brightly lit heads of Dantes and Abbe Faria to protrude from the stage floor." One reviewer likened this moment to the grotesquerie of Beckett: "The moment seems to be wrenched from Samuel Beckett's *Play*, especially when an immobile Thomas delivers the haunting 'Dark,' a riveting poem of cosmic devastation on loan from Lord Byron."<sup>862</sup> If at times Sellars created moments "where imagination and audacity met with drama and gave it total exhilaration," at other times, he overwhelmed audiences with complex visual compositions, leaving them baffled and confused.<sup>863</sup> At worst, however, critics accused Sellars of using inexplicably provocative images that struck the public as the product of a dilettante out to fool his audience with "pretentious and hollow tricks."<sup>864</sup> The final scene of *Count* provoked just such a reaction, even from those who otherwise seemed receptive to his provocations. The final twenty minutes of the play occurred "in almost total darkness," said Tischler.<sup>865</sup> Tischler did not misread the ending like *City Paper's* Victor Nichols, who said that the ending was "so slow and lifeless as to appear like a

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<sup>861</sup> "Mr. Sellars Storms Onstage," 11 (Weekend).

<sup>862</sup> Sellars added poetry to *The Count of Monti Cristo*, hence the reference to Lord Byron. David Richards, "The Count Unbound: Sellars' *Monti Cristo*," *Washington Post* 20 May 1985, 1 (C).

<sup>863</sup> Gary Tischler, "A Review of *The Count of Monti Cristo*," *Georgetowner*, 24 March – 6 April 1985, 22.

<sup>864</sup> "An Open Letter," 1 (B).

<sup>865</sup> "Review of *Monti Cristo*, 22.

tableau;” Tischler merely chafed under the strain of interpreting the meaning of Sellars’ choice:<sup>866</sup> “It was beginning to feel like torture. Surely, there was a reason for doing things in the dark, to obscure things. But I didn’t know what it was, and not knowing didn’t care.”<sup>867</sup> In other words, even an informed and energized theater-going public eager to embrace Sellars’ novelties was sometimes frustrated by the inexplicable nature of some of his choices. For example, David Richards was enthralled by the production, which he found “obsessed with the notion of redemption” and “the gulfs that fate and human perversity carve between two generations of fathers and sons.”<sup>868</sup> Yet, many viewers like Tischler found those unfathomable choices painful, as if the director-spectator relationship had become symbolically sado-masochistic. Because this relationship was foisted on the public against its will, those that could fight back, the theater critics, did so with scathing criticism. Those that could not fight back, the general public, simply left the Center, probably forever. Such reactions plagued Sellars throughout his short tenure at the Center.

At its best, however, Sellars’ visual choreography created images that were both austere and spectacular, a scenography of signifiers so resonant that, in them, audiences experienced a thematic motif above and beyond the narrow meanings supplied by the linguistic text. Brown of *The Post* spoke eloquently about the scenography of ANT’s *A Seagull*: “A set of battered wooden chairs and a few tables—and, pointedly, the performers—are dwarfed by vast backdrops inspired by Mark Rothko paintings, abstract expanses of light and hue that slowly evolve into cloudlike forms with the changing

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<sup>866</sup> Victor Nichols, “Review of *The Count of Monti Cristo*,” *Washington City Paper*, 22.

<sup>867</sup> “Review of *Monti Cristo*,” 22.

<sup>868</sup> “*The Count Unbound*,” 1 (C).

light.”<sup>869</sup> Just as Sellars had hoped, *A Seagull* provoked a discussion of ideas—albeit about the artistry of the scenography—and that discussion began to percolate not only through the local theater community but through the broader public as well. Even Richards, who argued that *A Seagull*’s actors seemed “to have been sentenced to solitary confinement,” recognized that the production’s visual metaphors revealed “the accumulation of waste, the overlapping futility that ultimately [made] *A Seagull* so heart-rending.”<sup>870</sup> Some critics even recognized the larger theatrical vision projected by Sellars’ production, stating that his theatrical vision reflected life, giving audiences “a sense of the harrowing adventure that life becomes. And, not to understate things, a sense of what is possible in theater.”<sup>871</sup> Of course, the fact that scenography could have this effect on an audience was not in itself unique; in the context of the Washington theater community, however, where many theater-goers, critics, and producers still viewed the director as the playwright’s interpreter, it was.

In the end, Sellars’ provocative scenography turned the media spotlight more on himself as director than on the content of the productions, especially among critics speaking for the city’s theatrically conservative public. As *The Times*’ Hap Erstein carped in an open letter to Sellars published after the debut of *Count*: “Two of the most important collaborators in the theatrical experience are the playwright and the audience. Apparently, you [Sellars] have little respect for either. You have taken a chestnut ... and warped it into a indulgent concept-laden production that all but obliterates its author’s

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<sup>869</sup> “‘A Seagull’ Soars,” Weekend 13.

<sup>870</sup> “*A Seagull* Flies an Odd Course,” 1 (C).

<sup>871</sup> Gary Tischler, “A Seagull,” 14.

intent.”<sup>872</sup> Erstein’s choice of an open letter format over a typical review testified to the fact that he understood Sellars’ challenge to the public. By insisting that the theater-going public discuss the content of theater, Sellars had issued a manifesto not just to Washington, but to the nation as well.<sup>873</sup> He challenged that national public to perceive performances, even “chestnuts,” as narrative vehicles carrying values and expressing ideology. By deconstructing those vehicles, revealing their content, no production remained simply an amusement, void of content. All carried the remnants of an American identity. Sellars gambled that “concept laden productions” launched from a national stage might engage the broader public in an open debate about the country’s narrative future. Such a theater had, until then, been limited to smaller, less nationally visible theaters of identity and their diversified counter-publics. Although Sellars conjured magnificent imagery, without a theater with a history of meaningful productions to lend his performances an experiential frame of reference, he could not control what that imagery might signify to the would-be spectator. As a result, audiences for Sellars’ productions were frequently uninformed and, hence, incapable of responding to his provocations coherently.<sup>874</sup> For example, Joe Brown could acknowledge that Sellars was a director who had mastered his profession:

If you’ve ever wondered just what a director does, the American National Theater Company's exhilarating, exasperating *The Count of Monte Cristo* should clear things up quickly. As directed by Peter Sellars ... [this] romance is a primer in directorial will and skill. It's all taken to extremes,

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<sup>872</sup> Hap Erstein, “An Open Letter to Peter Sellars: In re: *The Count of Monte Cristo*,” *Washington Time*, 24 May 1985, 1 (B).

<sup>873</sup> *Count* had received reviews not only in numerous dailies, such as *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Press Herald*, but also in popular monthlies, *Time* and *Newsweek* to name but a few.

<sup>874</sup> Stanley E. Fish, “Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,” *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 70-100.

but shrewdly controlled, with a remarkable vision of what theater can be.<sup>875</sup>

He would not speculate, however, about the meaning of the production. Instead, he allowed Sellars, the personality, to remain center stage, just as Erstein had done. Although the intentions of Brown and Erstein differed, with Brown praising Sellars' directorial skills and Erstein criticizing his arrogance, both men undercut the content and, hence, the performance's power. By focusing on Sellars' celebrity rather than the production, Brown and Erstein ended up psychologizing the performance-event, transforming its content into an elaborate expression of Sellars' own aesthetic or personal audacity and hubris. In so doing, the content of the artistry was reduced to an expression of Sellars' dilettantism, his pet peeves and pith masquerading as profundity. As Michel Foucault states in his discussion of society's uses of the authorial function: "the author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations."<sup>876</sup> Thus, the author and not the work becomes the subject of critical analysis; but, because the author is a construction of society (or of the writer him or herself), the meaning of the text and its signifiers is controlled. Yet, Sellars wanted his production to generate a "cancerous and dangerous proliferation" of meanings throughout the public. He hoped that by multiplying significations, the undiscussable would find expression in the public sphere. As a result, although Hap Erstein was by far Sellars' most menacing theatrical nemesis, the proclivity of most of Washington's critical establishment to make Sellars—the director-provocateur—the content, proved Sellars' most obstinate challenge.

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<sup>875</sup> Joe Brown, "Mr. Sellars Storms Onstage," *Washington Post*, 24 May 1985, 11 (Weekend).

<sup>876</sup> Michel Foucault, trans. Josué V. Harari, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), edited by Paul Rabinow, 118.

Ironically, one of Sellars' least provocative productions ignited the greatest firestorm. Although Sellars remained the focus of the storm, the collective diatribe revealed the political polarization of Washington's theatrical community as never before. By all accounts, *Idiot's Delight* fulfilled the following dictum expressed by *Post* critic Joe Brown: "The director's role is to serve the playwright and illuminate the work, not stretch it to the breaking point to do your bidding."<sup>877</sup> Yet only Nichols of the *City Paper*, who had panned each of ANT's previous productions, applauded: "Good news from the Kennedy Center. ANT director Peter Sellars finally has a play that can appeal to all."<sup>878</sup> On the other hand, critics who had supported Sellars' directorial mission, Tischler of *The Georgetowner* and Richards of *The Post*, found the production uninspired. Having grown accustomed to Sellars' postmodern style, a discordant mixture of two worlds, the play's and the audience's, Tischler bemoaned the fact that *Delight's* anti-war "sentiments are surely apt today, given the headlines, but the production doesn't remind you of them."<sup>879</sup> Hence, Sellars' most conventional production failed to impress both his harshest and most enthusiastic critics:

To some, he reinvents the classics. To others, he manhandles them. He is innovative or he is self-indulgent. The boy genius or the boy charlatan.... Now just when the arguments are getting hot, along comes Sellars' 50th-anniversary revival of *Idiot's Delight*, about which it is difficult to have any strong feelings whatsoever. The production ... [is] certainly the most straightforward endeavor to come out of ANT. While that may momentarily quiet those who charge that Sellars leaves messy fingerprints on every play he touches, I suspect even they will find this undertaking fairly banal.<sup>880</sup>

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<sup>877</sup> "Mr. Sellars Storms Onstage," 11 (Weekend).

<sup>878</sup> Victor Nichols, "Fool's Gold: *Idiot's Delight*," *Washington City Paper*, 7 March 1986, 25.

<sup>879</sup> Gary Tischler, "A Review of *Idiot's Delight*," *Georgetowner*, 7 March – 20 March, 1986, 10.

<sup>880</sup> David Richards, "Not Quite *Delight* At the Eisenhower: Peter Sellars' Flat Revival of 1936 Comedy," *Washington Post* 24 February 1986, 1 (D).

Erstein of *The Times* elected not even to attend the production. Instead, he sent a surrogate, Richard Grenier.<sup>881</sup>

Grenier's review of Sellars' production of *Idiot's Delight* is a rare combination of personal vendetta and historical overview, with the true target being Sellars' own anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiments. Early in the review, Grenier attacks Sellars as having "a superior person's strategy," meaning that Sellars' production of *Idiot's Delight* meant to deceive the public into thinking that its playwright, Robert Sherwood, was a pacifist.<sup>882</sup> Although Sherwood wrote the play as a pacifist's farce just prior to the outbreak of World War II, his sentiments, according to Grenier, turned anti-pacifist after "the Russians attacked Finland."<sup>883</sup> Because Sellars did not take into account this change in Sherwood's understanding of the world, Sellars was, according to Grenier, guilty of misrepresenting Sherwood's beliefs. After calling the young director "just a plain twit," Grenier proceeded to shame the theater-going public who might have enjoyed either the production or the anti-war sentiments contained within the play: "The true idiots at this production of *Idiot's Delight* are in the audience. You sit there and watch a nonsensical performance of preposterously dated 1930s tat."<sup>884</sup> Although Grenier's review did not constitute what Sellars would have called a genuine debate of the political issues of our time, it expressed in veiled language the debate over Reagan's militarism that was

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<sup>881</sup> Richard Grenier had formerly been a *New York Times* reporter before moving to *The Washington Times*. In 1991, he was to publish *Capturing the Culture: Film, Art, and Politics* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1991), which was a collection of his numerous reviews and articles attacking what he called the cultural left. Robert Bork wrote the book's introduction, in which he praised the book for demonstrating "...the knowledge of history and culture that Grenier brings to the task of exposing and then skewering the cultural left."

<sup>882</sup> Richard Grenier, "The True Delight of *Idiots*," *Washington Times* 3 March 1986, 1, 4 (B).

<sup>883</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>884</sup> *Ibid.*

occurring behind the scenes and on the streets in protests and demonstrations. Erstein's and Grenier's ferocious attacks upon Sellars and his productions only demonstrated how desperate the situation was for those on the political right. Having an aesthetic dissident like Sellars occupying the Kennedy Center's national stage jeopardized their political agenda, particularly if he succeeded in wooing the public into accepting his vision of a national theater. That vision, articulated from that stage, might politicize Washington's entire theatrical landscape and, hence, the broader public sphere itself. Fortunately for the political right, both Sellars and ANT were losing audience members almost as quickly as they were losing the battle for financial stability.

At the beginning of the national theater project both Roger Stevens and Peter Sellars agreed that money would not matter in ANT's development as an institution; what would and did matter was that ANT develop a thriving, exhilarated theater-going public. Stevens supported Sellars' dream of a state-sponsored national theater, as long as there was evidence that the public supported the endeavor by attending performances. "Interesting," asked Lisa McCormack at the cast party for *Count*, "but aren't you [Mr. Sellars] terrified the audience may have had no idea what you're trying to do on the stage?"<sup>885</sup> In the past Sellars would have answered that "a theater audience should be willing to work," but on this evening, Sellars conceded, "It is terrifying.... But that's what theater is all about. Terror."<sup>886</sup> As he spoke, Stevens came into view, looking "like a friendly neighborhood banker—one terrified about his investment."<sup>887</sup> Stevens' terror

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<sup>885</sup> Lisa McCormack, "Spirits mostly High at Cast Party," *Washington Times*, 24 May 1985, 1 (B).

<sup>886</sup> "Review of *Monti Cristo*, *Georgetown*, 22.

<sup>887</sup> "Cast Party," *Washington Times*, 1 (B).

was not, however, rooted in the Center's financial troubles but in his vision of large theaters absent their patrons.

Sellars asserted that audiences wanted novelty and stimulation; he imagined them as wanting to be provoked. From those assumptions, Sellars constructed a vision of a theater-going public that thrived on controversy. Hence, Sellars believed that if he generated enough controversy with his productions, he would attract and keep an audience. Although producers of popular culture had long used the media's concept of "controversy" to increase television ratings and a celebrity's star power, the media's definition of controversy differed from Sellars'. In *Celebrity and Power* David Marshall employs the term "transgression" to describe how film celebrities use controversy. When a celebrity behaves off-the-set in ways that contradict her or his on-the-set celebrity profile, he increases the power and autonomy of his celebrity signifier. In Marshall's words, the act of transgression helps "the actors achieve independence from the ways in which their films have painted them."<sup>888</sup> The celebrity then uses that independence within the context of his or her next film. The key to transgression and its power of renewal, according to Marshall, lies in the transgressor's ability to stay within "normative transgression."<sup>889</sup> If the celebrity acts outside normative morality, or the encoded set of established transgressions, then he risks destroying his celebrity sign. Sellars' transgression of normative Washington standards exceeded Washington's and the Kennedy Center's acceptable levels of controversy. Sellars transgressed aesthetic norms

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<sup>888</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Society* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1997), 106.

<sup>889</sup> Ibid.

when his use of novelty produced more bewilderment than what local audiences were willing to tolerate.

In addition to transgressing aesthetic sensibilities, Sellars transgressed social norms when he addressed American imperialism directly. Although discussions about American imperialism entered the public sphere during the Vietnam era, such discourse never dominated the mainstream. War and violence were still seen by most Americans as acts committed by others, either by the discontented few of America's underclass or by foreigners. Sellars was asking his theater-going public to accept those acts as part of their own identity. With that proposition, Sellars transgressed morally against what a majority of Washington's theater-going public was willing to accept. Many in the audience were willing to work in order to grasp a performance's content. In that labor, they investigated their own subjective experiences—and in this case their experience of America's heritage of war and violence. Those in denial of the country's history of violence quickly found an exit, while those who felt a sense of aesthetic betrayal, "stopped caring," as Tischler stated as he sat in the dark at the end of *Count*. The few who were willing to discuss the country's future in relation to empire did not constitute a national theater-going public.

In the beginning, Sellars challenged not only the validity of Washington's theaters but also the credulity of her social and political elites. He challenged members of the theater-going public to choose sides, wanting them to discuss the political soul of America and those issues that most defined them as people. On the other side of the entertainment world, however, stood the carnival barkers of television and Hollywood offering a kaleidoscope of sensuous images, promising no pain and plenty of happy endings. With each production Sellars brought his challenge to the stage, and each

production failed in what Victor Nichols called “that most desirable purpose of drama—the seduction of the viewer into another world.”<sup>890</sup> Whether because of his aesthetic avant-gardism or his political dissidence, more and more audience members followed the barker and his offer of a pain-free entertainment. The theater-going public’s flight to a “happy ending” left the eleven-hundred-seat Eisenhower Theater increasingly, and desperately, empty.

As a result, before *Ajax*’s opening, ANT’s productions were moved out of the larger Eisenhower and into the much smaller 500-seat Terrace Theater. In the summer, ANT showcased two Chicago regional theaters, Steppenwolf and Wisdom Bridge Theaters. They were presented in the Terrace where they received positive notices. Of course, two of the four shows sponsored by the program (two by Steppenwolf and two by Wisdom Bridge) were offered in the Free Theater. Steppenwolf presented *Streamers* by David Rabe and *Coyote Ugly* by Lynn Siefert, while Wisdom Bridge presented *Kabuki Medea*, a unique adaptation of Euripides’ classic, and *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*, an adaptation of Jack Henry Abbott’s letters, trial transcripts, and interviews.<sup>891</sup> All four shows, which were praised for their artistry, inventiveness, and emotional intensity, echoed Sellars’ insistent message: “... the American National Theater seems intent on teaching Washington ... mere entertainment is not enough.”<sup>892</sup> Whereas such a message out of the mouth of Peter Sellars caused critics like Hap Erstein to roar

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<sup>890</sup> Victor Nichols, Review of *The Count of Monti Cristo*, *City Paper*, 24 May 1985, 22.

<sup>891</sup> Jack Henry Abbott achieved public notoriety in 1981 when his letters to Norman Mailer helped him obtain a parole from prison, where he was serving time for murder. Within months of his release, he killed again, this time a waiter “over a misunderstanding about bathroom facilities.” Hap Erstein, “*Beast*: Hard to take but not to be Missed,” *Washington Times*, 17 June 1985, 1 (B).

<sup>892</sup> Hap Erstein, “*Beast*: Hard to Take, but Not to be Missed,” *Washington Times*, 17 June 1985, 1 (B)

defiantly, when uttered with the intensity of William L. Peterson, who portrayed Abbott, those same critics giggled with praise. The reasons clarify Erstein's central critique of Sellars. Although each show in the Chicago Summer took aesthetic risks, none were what one would consider aesthetically avant-garde. Secondly, only *Beast* had an overtly political message, which was, as Peterson expressed didactically: "to elicit some sort of prison reform."<sup>893</sup> That political message was marginal when compared to the global political critique issued by Sellars. Thus, Erstein praised *Beast*: "It is an intense and visceral punch in the belly, a political outcry against our penal system and a deeply etched portrait of an enigmatic animal. It is, quite simply, the most painful and moving theatrical experience you are likely to have all year."<sup>894</sup> Steppenwolf's two shows were also about the violence of American society, but they were provocative without being overtly political. As Megan Rosenfeld wrote after watching a thoroughly engaging *Streamers*: "Several people left the theater during the last half ... apparently overwhelmed by the all-too-convincing violence. It is not a play for the squeamish."<sup>895</sup>

Ironically, Sellars' production of Auletta's adaptation of *Ajax* was also not a production for the squeamish; whereas Steppenwolf's productions offended sensibilities because of their raw, authentic savagery and depravity, Sellars' more stylized productions overwhelmed and befuddled the public's sense of reason. The production of *Ajax* demonstrated this tendency even as it showcased Sellars as a synthesizer of seemingly incongruous styles. As Richards noted in his review in *The Post*, the show "makes for a

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<sup>893</sup> Desson Howe, "Prisons and the 'Beast': Kennedy Center Reception Makes a Play for Reform," *Washington Post*, 27 June 1985, 3 (B).

<sup>894</sup> "*Beast*: Hard to Take, but Not to be Missed," 1 (B).

<sup>895</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, "Theater, Slam-Bang *Streamers* Explosive: Robust Rabe at the Kennedy Center," *Washington Post*, 1 (B).

curious hybrid, reminiscent by turns of *The Gospel at Colonus*, Robert Wilson's meditative theater pieces, the experiments of the Wooster Group with its [sic] emphasis on electronic technology, and the efforts of the Suzuki Company of Toga to fuse Japanese and western traditions in the crucible of Greek tragedy."<sup>896</sup> The fact that three of the four influences—*The Gospel at Colonus*, Wooster Group, and the Suzuki Company—had recently played in Washington only emphasized Sellars' proclivity to absorb incongruous styles into his own aesthetic vision.<sup>897</sup> Sellars' eclectic style was difficult for an audience to penetrate. Although Sellars' methodology was interactive, continually acknowledging the innovations and contributions of other artists, the final product exuded a certain hermeticism—productions so densely packed with novel connotative imagery and competing semiotic systems that the theater-going public found them profoundly solipsistic.

Although Sellars did not announce his intention to produce *Ajax* until late April 1986, when he did, he declared it his "Washington show," the one that he had "wanted to do ever since [he] arrived in town."<sup>898</sup> *Ajax* earned ANT and Sellars their greatest critical acclaim, although not locally. After a truncated run in Washington, it premiered in Los Angeles at the La Jolla Playhouse before it embarked on an extended European tour, which brought the production to the attention of the academy.<sup>899</sup> Finally, the script's iconic significance as a Sophoclean tragedy excited Sellars in ways his earlier shows had not. Greek theater was, for Sellars, "a popular theater that [was] able to discuss issues

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<sup>896</sup> David Richards, "ANT's Audacious 'Ajax' for the '80s," *Washington Post*, 9 June 1986, 1 (C).

<sup>897</sup> *The Gospel at Colonus* played at Arena Stage and Wooster Group and Suzuki at ANT.

<sup>898</sup> David Richards, "ANT to Present Updated *Ajax*," *Washington Post*, 24 April 1986, 2(D).

<sup>899</sup> The European tour took the production to such cities as Brussels, Amsterdam, Vienna, and Stuttgart.

that [were] very serious and, in fact, would be considered in our day undiscussable.”<sup>900</sup> In addition, he appreciated Sophocles’ portrayal of community, where “the fate of one individual is the fate of a nation.”<sup>901</sup> Thus, *Ajax* would not only represent the conscience of the United States, but through its main character’s suicide provoke a discussion about the “undiscussable” nationalism and militarism ingrained in the American character.

Another reason *Ajax* proved a fitting climax to the short history of ANT and to Peter Sellars’ conversation with the Washington public and its political establishment was the fact that, by doing a postmodern version of Sophocles’ drama, Sellars transformed Ajax’s death by suicide into a symbolic simulation of his own artistic suicide at the Center. Refusing to compromise aesthetically, despite the fact that escalating deficits and poor attendance had strained his tenure at the Center, with *Ajax* Sellars brought his political, anti-imperialistic perspective into the heart of Washington’s monumental core. Following *Idiot’s Delight*, he surely suspected that Stevens was impatient with his failure to generate popular response for the ANT. He must have questioned whether his vision of a national theater was achievable; he may even have questioned the viability of his tenure at ANT. Sellars was either politically naive or he already knew that his stay at the Center was over—so why not, as a kind of parting shot, deliver a broad salvo against the state and its imperial ambitions? Either way, producing his version of *Ajax* on the Center’s national stage, with its explicit linguistic and visual references to the American military’s Latin American adventures and their association with corruption and slaughter, was tantamount to committing artistic suicide.

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<sup>900</sup> Peter Sellars, “Peter Sellars’ Talk at Carnuntum,” in *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, 90.

<sup>901</sup> “Peter Sellars’ Talk at Carnuntum,” 92.

In 1985 Washington entered the second term of the Reagan administration, known euphemistically in the press as “the Teflon Presidency,” because of its ability to avoid public debate about serious issues. In April 1986, with tensions mounting in the Middle East, Reagan launched an airstrike against Libya in retaliation for a bombing at a German nightclub. The United States struck the Libyan capital of Tripoli, killing 39 people, including Omar Qaddafi’s daughter. Despite objections to the bombing by many foreign governments, the US press was “overwhelmingly favorable,” thus limiting any discussion of the legitimacy or wisdom of the attack even after the event.<sup>902</sup> Sellars discussed the event years later:

As a gesture, it [the bombing of Libya] was made without consultation with Congress, without any of the normal kind of discussion that precedes, in our country, a large-scale military gesture. It was an event which made Reagan’s imperial presidency complete, the idea that the President could operate independently of the rest of the government or the rest of the country.<sup>903</sup>

Such circumstances afforded Sellars with sufficient reason to produce *Ajax*. As stated above, Sellars believed that theater should “provide a space for the discussion of questions which politicians have failed to grapple with.”<sup>904</sup> Sellars made this idea explicit on the day of the show’s announcement: “In a very deep way that goes beyond any political point of view, Sophocles looks at the military urge, where it comes from and how we can deal with it. It is very important for us to consider what is and what is not honorable from a military standpoint, especially in these late days of the Libya raid.”<sup>905</sup>

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<sup>902</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors: International Terrorism in the Real World* (New York: Claremont Research & Publications, 1986), 144.

<sup>903</sup> Peter Sellars, “Peter Sellars’ Talk at Carnuntum,” in *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, 90.

<sup>904</sup> Maria M. Delgade, “‘Making Theater, Making a Society’: An Introduction to the Work of Peter Sellars,” *New Theater Quarterly*, 15: 59 (August 1999), 212.

<sup>905</sup> “ANT to Present Updated *Ajax*,” 2 (D).

For Sellars, the show was a vehicle for raising questions about the country's growing militarism. He invoked Reagan's name in the production, not in *Ajax* itself, but in the contemporary satyr play, "The Bob Hope War Zone Special," that followed the show.<sup>906</sup> Noel Gillespie of *The Washington Blade* said of the satyr play: "This is the funniest and most scathing piece of political satire-burlesque to be seen here in years.... The work even treats Reagan's naps as ironic send ups to Hitler's last days in the bunker."<sup>907</sup> Yet in a moment of double irony, Gillespie panned *Ajax*.

As with all of ANT's productions, critics had a variety of reactions to the show, none of which lacked emotional intensity. Sellars' nemesis, Erstein, called it, "Worthy of Scrubbing."<sup>908</sup> He acknowledged Sellars' ability to provoke an audience with his daring theatrical imagination, but damned the show, saying, "If only making theater were as easy as concocting startling visuals...."<sup>909</sup> Joe Brown concurred, but whereas Erstein railed about the production's lack of story-line, Brown focused on its obscurity and lack of popular appeal: "For all its conceptual audacity, technical prowess, and bravado acting, director Peter Sellars' production of the Sophocles' play ... is academic and all but impenetrable."<sup>910</sup> Of course, not all reviews were negative. David Richards' headline read: "ANT's Audacious *Ajax* for the '80s." Richards argued that Sellars' decisions were "pure audacity. His staging ... even more defiantly unconventional [and] his passionate belief that the theater must burrow into the conscience of the community has never run

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<sup>906</sup> "The Bob Hope War Zone Special" was eliminated from the program by the end of the first week.

<sup>907</sup> Noel Gillespie, "Gipper Burlesqued," *Washington Blade*, 13 June 1986, 15.

<sup>908</sup> Hap Erstein, "*Ajax*: Worthy of Scrubbing," *Washington Times*, 12 June 1986, 1 (B).

<sup>909</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>910</sup> Joe Brown, "*Ajax*: A Murky Muddle," *Washington Post*, 13 June 1986, Weekend 14.

quite so deep.”<sup>911</sup> Although Richards did not state what the show’s conscience pricking intentions were, Alona Wartofsky of the *City Paper* did not hesitate to declare that Sellars viewed “Ajax’s descent into madness as paralleling the prevailing American winds of jingoistic nationalism and Ramboism.”<sup>912</sup> After calling *Ajax* “a truly phenomenal evening of immediate errie [sic] theater,” she said that she was gratified to “see these politics at a Washington institution like the Kennedy Center.”<sup>913</sup> As expected, critical reception depended on each reviewer’s political understanding of, and feelings about, American militarism and imperialism. At least one reviewer, however, primarily critiqued the structure of the evening’s performance, while simply jabbing at its political convictions. Tischler acknowledged, “when we first see him [Ajax], inside a glass cage, covered with slime and blood, the image is shattering.”<sup>914</sup> Following that opening motif, however, the production failed to generate anything of comparable appeal; in Tischler’s opinion, the show ended “with a soft interminable dribble.” Finally, Tischler chastised Sellars, saying that the production raised “questions without making any points, except politically naive ones.”<sup>915</sup>

When Sellars commissioned Auletta to adapt *Ajax*, he asked the playwright to transplant Sophocles’ tragedy to the steps of the Pentagon, transforming the Greek Ajax into an American General. Furthermore, Sellars gave Auletta six weeks to develop a workable script. In “Notes on Writing *Ajax*,” Auletta explained the challenges of the task:

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<sup>911</sup> “ANT’s Audacious ‘Ajax’ for the ‘80s,” 1 (C).

<sup>912</sup> Alona Wartofsky, a Review of *Ajax*, *Washington City Paper*, 13 June 1986, 41.

<sup>913</sup> Ibid.

<sup>914</sup> Gary Tischler, a Review of *Ajax*, *Georgetownner*, 27 June-10 July 1986, 10.

<sup>915</sup> Ibid.

Is a massive update all we really need? And what exactly do we mean by an ‘update’? There are a few matters to be considered: first, the chorus. Their language seemed clunky to me, their voices far from our time. And speaking of language—what is it exactly that this play speaks? If we try for high poetry it might turn as purple as an overripe plum, but to head directly for the colloquial might leave us floundering in the mire of the here and now.<sup>916</sup>

Auletta failed to resolve the linguistic tensions in the script between Sophocles’ ancient situation and ANT’s modern treatment. Richards’ described the problem in his review: “[Although Menelaus, Odysseus and Agamemnon] have assumed the titles and trappings of Pentagon brass, they have lost a lot of their reality. Indeed, Odysseus’ vow that if ever he meets Ajax in hell, ‘it will give me great pleasure to kick him in the [private parts]’ is patently laughable.”<sup>917</sup> Even though Auletta/Sellars dropped that particular line from later versions of the production, it did not eliminate legitimate concerns about linguistic incongruities.<sup>918</sup>

The linguistic tension paralleled the situational tension between antiquity and modernity. Such blending of time periods was a Sellars’ postmodern trademark. Thus, instead of vanquishing Trojans, Auletta’s hero subjugated leftist Latin America governments in what Auletta called “the Great War of the Americas ... a fictional war in the near future, a war marked by great competitiveness among factions of the armed forces....”<sup>919</sup> Whereas Sellars referred to the recent raid on Libya in both his pre- and post-show conversations about the show, Auletta drew inspiration from America’s involvement in Central America, most recently during the 1980s. Although the Iran-

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<sup>916</sup> Robert Auletta, “Notes on Writing *Ajax*,” in *Ajax* (Amsterdam: International Theater Bookshop, 1987), 30.

<sup>917</sup> “ANT’s Audacious ‘Ajax’ for the ‘80s,” 1(C).

<sup>918</sup> The line was eliminated in the published version of the script.

<sup>919</sup> “Notes on Writing *Ajax*,” 28.

Contra scandal had yet to emerge, tensions between Reagan's executive branch and the Democratic congress over how aggressively the United States should fight the Sandanista government of Nicaragua had reached a fever pitch. When Auletta created a fictional conquest of the left in *Ajax*, he avoided any references to the ongoing tensions over Central America. More significantly, however, he shifted the thematic focus of the play onto its representation of capitalistic competition over the spoils of war, namely the armor of Achilles—the greatest of the Greek war heroes. This “uncomfortable blend of yesterday and today,” motivated many critics to denounce Sellars' effort, even though such discomfort had been his purpose from the production's conception.<sup>920</sup>

Sellars uncovered or deconstructed the linguistic tension in the script by casting Howie Seago, the deaf actor from the National Theater for the Deaf, as Ajax.<sup>921</sup> As he signed his dialogue, a five-member chorus spoke his words into microphones, which Sellars used as “a Brechtian social gest.”<sup>922</sup> Not only did the microphones augment “the Verfremdungseffekt created by Sophocles' words,” but they also elevated the action symbolically.<sup>923</sup> Sellars associated the microphones, and hence the chorus, with the media and its social function, which is to report or translate the voices of the public's leaders to the public at large. As audience members watched Seago's Ajax sign his thoughts and feelings in a language most of them could not understand, they had to rely on the murmured and sometimes unintelligible chorus to decipher his intentions. In this

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<sup>920</sup> Gary Tischler, 10.

<sup>921</sup> Although Sellars never received any recognition from the Helen Hayes Awards, his choice of Seago earned the actor the Outstanding Lead Actor award.

<sup>922</sup> Kurt Lancaster, “Theatrical Deconstructionists: The Social ‘Gests’ of Peter Sellars' *Ajax* and Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*,” 464.

<sup>923</sup> Marianne McDonald, “Peter Sellars' *Ajax*: The Obsolescence of Honor,” in *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 80.

sense, Ajax's plight mirrored Sellars' own, echoing the fact that few people had seen the work of America's best-known director. It also mirrored Sellars' recent struggles with the media. Within the production's context, the *gestus* focused the audience's attention on what Marianne McDonald calls the media's ability to shape "our thoughts through the value-loaded terms it uses."<sup>924</sup> She continues: "A legitimate protestor, one fighting to reclaim his land, is called a 'terrorist,' whereas, when those in authority do worse than any terrorist, they are lauded for carrying out 'police actions,' or 'making the world safe.'" When Athena masturbated with a microphone as she showed the dead Ajax to Odysseus, the media's symbolic instrument became but another plaything of the gods. Did the chorus, however, relay Ajax's language to the public accurately? Except for the few who could interpret sign language the public had no way of knowing.

Through his use of scenographic indicators, Sellars depicted the media as "a public sphere in appearance only."<sup>925</sup> Yet, Sellars' iconic microphones devoured Ajax's words the way the Washington media devoured Sellars' intentions. In the confusion of sound and image, how did Sellars want the public to respond? Who was Sellars' public? Was it the chorus, whose members now put the microphones to their lips? Or was it the small audiences who attended *Ajax*? Sellars received his share of positive media, both for *Ajax* and for other shows. Arguably, if Washington's theater-going public had found his shows stimulating and conducive to a viable public sphere, ANT could have found its audience. The public, however, ignored Sellars' production just as he seemingly ignored them. As Baudrillard has asked about the relationship between the public and the media:

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<sup>924</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>925</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 171.

“Evidently, there is a paradox in this inextricable conjunction of the masses [i.e., the public] and the media: do the media neutralize meaning and produce uninformed or informed masses, or is it the masses who victoriously resist the media by directing or absorbing all the messages that the media produce without responding to them?”<sup>926</sup> In Sellars’ tautological relationship with the media, where the media created the man whom the public knew, as well as the man whom the public never knew, the only suitable end for both men was “also the end of the medium.”<sup>927</sup> In this case, the end of ANT also meant the end of the media’s coverage of it

The suicide of Seago’s Ajax was at the center of Sellars’ *Ajax*, and although audience members only understood Ajax’s perspective through a mumbling, microphone-distorted chorus, they could comprehend his strong, simple gestures and emphatic expressions. Through those gestures and expressions, the audience was allowed to empathize with the warrior, an empathy that transcended the technologically sterile world of *Ajax*’s mise-en-scène. Ajax’s first appearance shocked: “A shroud is whipped from a glass booth partially filled with bubbling red blood. There, splashing in the plasma and emitting guttural cries, is the demented Ajax.”<sup>928</sup> That image of Ajax remained with each audience member and reviewer long after the show ended. Yet, the lyricism of that image could not convey the story of Ajax’s suicide and, as a result, the story remained untold by the critics and, more importantly, by the production itself. Most were perhaps ignorant of sign language; thus all they saw was a mad and demented Ajax who grew

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<sup>926</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media,” in Jean Baudrillard, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1994), 84.

<sup>927</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>928</sup> Gary Tischler, 10.

madder and more demented as the story unfolded around him in a manner that he was unwilling or unable to comprehend. That is why his suicide was a *fait accompli*, a symbolic shift in power that had already taken place behind the scenes. So Ajax killed himself not because, as McDonald argued, he rejected “a society where compromises and lies are the norm ... where heroism is constructed by the media, by a rigged vote, and by falsifying testimony.”<sup>929</sup> Ajax killed himself not because he refused “to be a hero constructed by the gods, other men, and certainly not by a woman.”<sup>930</sup> He killed himself because he was already dead. When the armor of Achilles bypassed Ajax to be given to Odysseus, the age of the warrior was supplanted by the technological age, where “no-men” are king: the politician, the actor, and the dissembler of words and actions.

Ironically, Peter Sellars and his postmodern style of production fit that bill perfectly: Sellars was not a symbolic, modern-day Ajax—honest and direct—but a symbolic, modern-day Odysseus. His startling scenographies and complex, multilayered semiotic systems beguiled the theater-going public the way Odysseus beguiled a Cyclopes or an adoring public. Whereas in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus re-entered Ithaca dressed as a pauper, swallowing his pride to go unnoticed by the murderous suitors who had taken his kingdom, Sellars entered Washington—no less a treacherous place for would-be theatrical revolutionaries—as a conquering hero. As Stevens had before him, Sellars proclaimed his intent to remake and revitalize the American stage. Erstein prophesied Sellars’ fate after he saw *Ajax*: “Hubris is defined as overweening pride or arrogance. It was the tragic flaw of the ancient Greek warrior Ajax and proved his

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<sup>929</sup> “Peter Sellars’ *Ajax*,” 86.

<sup>930</sup> *Ibid.*

undoing. It may do the same for Peter Sellars and his American National Theater, steeped as they are in an unjustified, arrogant pride.”<sup>931</sup> Even prior to Sellars’ entrance into the Capital of the Free World, his audacious confidence had earned charges of arrogance from critics intent on undermining his vision of a subsidized, consciousness-raising theater. Yet Sellars pressed ahead, refusing to back down from such charges, presenting increasingly provocative and obscure productions. Even before *Ajax*, Sellars must have known, like the Greek hero of his tragedy knew when he witnessed the armor passed to Odysseus, that he had already been undone.

Sellars’ final show appeared not in the Eisenhower or the Terrace, but in the Free Theater during the month of August, a time when many Washingtonians leave the swampy air for healthier environs. The best things in life may be free, but seldom are people around to see them. Such was the case with “Two Figures in Dense Violet Light,” the “brief program of three elegiac prose-poems” that constituted Sellars’ swan song.<sup>932</sup> Unlike his earlier works, “Two Figures” relied almost solely on the spoken text for sensation, unless one considered the “black-clad ushers gesturing silently with flashlights” sensuous as they moved audience members through three distinct rooms. First, the audience heard Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu* whispered in the dark; next, they heard it again in the second room from two “barely discernible sculpture-like figures” who sat at a distance.<sup>933</sup> In the third room, *Tsunemasa*, Ezra Pound’s translation of a Japanese Noh play, and “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” a long poem by Wallace Stevens, were recited. In the stillness and dim light, theater-goers tried hard to fathom

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<sup>931</sup> “*Ajax*: Worthy of Scrubbing,” 1(B).

<sup>932</sup> Joe Brown, “Two Figures’: Whispering in the Dark,” *Washington Post*, 15 August 1986, 9(N).

<sup>933</sup> *Ibid.*

Beckett, Pound, and Stevens, and to experience what David Richards called, “death's doorstep, where man fumbles to find a meaning to his paltry experience and yearns for a salvation that may never come.”<sup>934</sup> Patrons, who later “were wandering around outside, grumbling, scratching their heads in either irritation or amusement,” sat in the dark listening to the sonorous voices of Richard Thomas and David Warrilow as they intoned the texts.<sup>935</sup> For a few die-hard supporters of Sellars, the experience of yearning for meaning in a paltry theatrical world would have been enough. For the others, the salvation for which they were waiting was the curtain itself.

#### *Section IV: Conclusion: the Significance of Failure*

What Roger Stevens called “Peter Sellars’ one-year sabbatical from ANT” closed the door on this incarnation of an American national theater. Sellars never returned and never suggested that he would. The reasons for ANT’s demise were many, ranging from Sellars’ paradoxical postmodern style that sought to provoke a functional public sphere through avant-garde aesthetics, to the preeminent position of the Center’s social space in relationship to ANT’s artistic content. Although the media had made ANT about the “boy genius,” the national theater had never been about the man but about Washington’s institutions and its most privileged residents. Under Roger Stevens, the Center had come to represent Washington’s personal Broadway where Washingtonians might entertain a visiting dignitary or CEO comfortably without fear of political controversy. With the District recovering from two decades of civil unrest and economic deprivation, these

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<sup>934</sup> David Richards, “Leaving Them Wondering: Sellars' Ambitious, Ambiguous Two Figures,” *Washington Post*, 12 August 1986, 1 (C).

<sup>935</sup> *Ibid.*

theater-going Washingtonians wanted the nation's capital to become "a city on the hill," a place where people came to celebrate America's accomplishments. Sellars' dissident vision of the nation undercut the dream and flattened the hill.

Sellars had attempted to change the contours of Washington's theatrical landscape, not by providing that landscape with a different set of signifiers, but by re-focusing the theater-going public's attention on the signified. Sellars was not, however, content to concentrate the public's attention on issue-oriented performances. Rather, performances at Sellars' ANT embodied the nation's post-Vietnam cultural narrative. The public that Sellars hailed was counter in inclination but national in scope, a lethal combination. Clearly, the American public rejected such a national audience and the counter-public sphere that it created; and, as a consequence, ANT's provocation to dialogue. Because Sellars' aesthetic avant-gardism was equally provocative and controversial, the degree to which that rejection was rooted in his anti-imperialism is uncertain. His daringly ambiguous imagery drew tears of frustration from those in the audience who took him at his word: that the purpose of his theater was to create a space to discuss the undiscussable. Sellars' animated poetics left most of his audience wishing that they could have simply enjoyed those theatrics and then gone for cappuccino and cake at an after-show hotspot rather than attempt rational political conversation about the meaning of American identity. Perhaps in Sellars' romanticized "natural environment," which would have been free from media critics, such a debate could have occurred, but not in Washington's highly charged political landscape.

Sellars arrived in Washington as a mythological presence: ironically, that elusive mythological persona both elevated his celebrity in the media and undercut his ability to

fulfill his goal as artistic director. From the beginning, few questioned Sellars' ability to excite the theater-going public with provocative productions:

[Sellars was] an electric, artistic jolt into the theater world of Washington, inspiring perhaps too many expectations, but also resulting surely in often unusual, fresh, and bold theater.... He [Sellars] could excite you about the theater. He could coax actors out of the woodwork to work for him, on reputation alone. He would and could give you unique moments in theater. He would, you believed, try anything.<sup>936</sup>

Although such excitement increased Sellars' celebrity and emphasized the scope of his genius, its effect on ANT's mission was temporal at best and reductionist at worst. Elite Washingtonians understood that. Theater's world of representations could contribute to a public sphere, as many identity theaters had done during the 1970s. Sellars' celebrity status made his contributions to the public sphere, on the other hand, more likely to be dominated by media's obsession with personality. As long as the media and the public concurred over issues and impressions the public sphere functioned, but even then more as a simulacrum of a public sphere than as a real discursive sphere. In this sense, Sellars' celebrity became the means by which the social and aesthetic effects of Sellars' theater were impeded. Instead of his performance-fictions circulating freely through the public, to be deconstructed or recomposed by audiences in creative discourse and dialogue, the simulacrum manipulated the emotional and intellectual responses to performances, hence limiting their potential.<sup>937</sup> These limitations prevented the discursive space that Sellars hoped for from being realized because any public sphere, even a national one, depends on the public's freedom to conceive and to re-conceive ideas to generate meaning.

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<sup>936</sup> Gary Tischler, "Peter Sellars' Swang Song," *Georgetown*, 15 – 28 August 1986, 12.

<sup>937</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author," 119.

In the end, however, the weight of the Center's traditional theater-going public, along with its imperial iconography overlooking the Potomac, stood in direct contrast to Sellars' insistence that theater and performance stimulate conversation about America's penchant for militarism. In a contest of contraries, either ANT's theatrical agency or the space's iconographic symbolism must lose, for they could not survive in tandem for long. Considering the longevity of concrete and the persistence of tradition, ANT's demise was assured on the day Stevens hired Sellars. The Kennedy Center's monumental presence would not vanish into dust of its own accord, and Sellars had not the will to withstand the Center's legions of supporters. That theater-going public found the Center's magnificent halls and crystal chandeliers congenial to their understanding of themselves; conversely, ANT's performances violated their identity. If allowed to continue, ANT's shows, like an act of terror, would have imploded the Center, metaphorically: the audience Roger Stevens had worked so laboriously to create would have fled the wreckage. Strangely, that was exactly what did happen. Had Stevens and Sellars not parted company when they did, the Center might have fallen.

Finally, the sado-masochistic dimensions of Sellars' performance repertoire proved too much for most of the Center's theater-going public to tolerate, except for the few who found pleasure in the hypothesis that from an irrational, avant-garde performance iconography rational discourse might emerge. For those who did not find pleasure in wrestling with such an irreconcilable proposition, they could at least find a glimmer of truth in the paradox of Sellars' anti-imperial provocations blasted from within the halls of America's emblematic center of national cultural hegemony. What made Sellars' work at the Center all the more ironic was that the national theater that Sellars

was hired to create was inextricably linked to the nation's imperial past. In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard makes an alarming assertion about America post-September 11. He proposes that it is the very power of America, both at home and abroad, that mobilizes anti-American forces, both at home and abroad, against it:

The moral condemnation and the holy alliance against terrorism are on the same scale as the prodigious jubilation at seeing this global superpower destroyed—better, at seeing it, in a sense, destroy itself, committing suicide in a blaze of glory. For it is that superpower which, by its unbearable power, fomented all this violence which is endemic throughout the world, and hence that (unwittingly) terroristic imagination which dwells in all of us.<sup>938</sup>

That paradox, like the paradox of power Sellars possessed both to project a national identity and to destroy its very foundation, had to remain unimaginable to the American public. Thus, Sellars' suicide was only symbolic. Stevens remained to engineer the Center's imperial rebirth. Whether a new incarnation of ANT will emerge in the foreseeable future is doubtful, unless that incarnation expressly laud the American Empire and its global hegemony. Then, perchance, it might prosper.

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<sup>938</sup> Jean Baudrillard, trans. Chris Turner, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* (Verso: London and New York, 2002), 5.

## Chapter Ten

### THE HELEN HAYES AWARDS: WASHINGTON THEATER'S CELEBRATORY FICTION

As Washingtonians adjusted to the idea of a national theater operating out of the Kennedy Center, they were also introduced to an equally significant concept: a national awards ceremony honoring local professional theater. For several years, the idea brewed behind the scenes. Not only did New York have its Tonys and Obies, but also Chicago had its Joseph Jefferson Awards. Both cities experienced growth in their theater communities after instituting such awards. With Washington developing its own vibrant, albeit semi-professional theater culture, thinking was that the time had come for a ceremony honoring the achievements of one of the largest theater markets in the country. In 1983, a group of theater aficionados incorporated the Washington Theater Awards Society (WTAS). In 1984, WTAS organized the community around the awards; and, in 1985, “D.C.’s Tonys”—as Megan Rosenfeld of the *Washington Post* iconically called them—or the Helen Hayes Awards as their creator officially named them, were launched.<sup>939</sup> These local awards, because they originated in the nation’s capital in celebration of its theaters, a city with an increasingly significant national public, would become ipso facto a celebration of a national theater.

From its founding, WTAS had four purposes, only one of which was to “recognize achievement in theatrical production and performance through the annual presentation of The Helen Hayes Awards.”<sup>940</sup> As promoted by Bonnie Nelson Schwartz,

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<sup>939</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “D.C. ‘Tonys’: Helen Hayes Awards Set for May,” *Washington Post*, 18 March 1985, 7(D).

<sup>940</sup> WTAS Press Release, “The Helen Hayes Awards,” 9 April 1985, 1. Personal Possession and WTAS Archives.

WTAS' founding director, the primary function of the awards was "to encourage the development of Washington-based theater by bringing it to the forefront of [people's] attention."<sup>941</sup> The people Schwartz was interested in hailing were those in the political, corporate, and foundation communities, both nationally and internationally. To do so, the awards focused on productions created by Washington theaters, not on touring theaters and imported companies. WTAS' other two missions revealed an agenda of a different sort. Far from simply recognizing achievement or promoting productions originating in Washington, the organization's aims were to stimulate the "further development of Washington's professional theater community," and to encourage the growth and stability of theatrical audiences.<sup>942</sup> Although these aims did not in themselves suggest intentions on the part of WTAS that might have negative consequences, they did imply that WTAS wanted to take an active role in shaping Washington's theatrical community, both the nature of its theaters and performances as well as its theater-going public.

This chapter investigates that role, exploring how the "Helens," as the awards became known, influenced the development of theater in Washington. Initially, the chapter analyzes the organization of the awards themselves and how that organization responded to competing interests within Washington's theatrical community, which consisted of theatrical organizations, corporate and foundation sponsors, media and critics, audiences and patrons, and the theater artists themselves. The chapter then examines the first three years of the ceremony and what those years revealed about the tensions underlying the culture of theater in the District. On the one hand, some theaters

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<sup>941</sup> David Richards, "Helen Hayes Awards to Honor D.C. Theater," *Washington Post*, 31 January 1984, 4(C).

<sup>942</sup> Press Release, 9 April 1985, 1.

seemed comfortable with the concept of big-name, national celebrities representing the awards and, thus, the Washington theater scene; on the other hand, many felt that WTAS needed to ground local awards in the dominant realities of local theater. To them, most Washington's theaters were housed in warehouses and basements, storefronts and church sanctuaries in economically depressed neighborhoods, not in the moneyed lodgings of elite celebrity culture. Finally, the chapter explores the evolution of the Helen Hayes Awards through 1994; how the Awards represented Washington's theatrical community; and how that representation affected the continued development of theater in the area.

*Section I: Founding the Helens, Negotiating between Local and National Interests*

The idea for the Helen Hayes Awards originated with two producers, the founders of WTAS, Arthur Cantor and Bonnie Nelson Schwartz. Cantor had produced music and theater on Broadway since the 1940s. In the 1980s, he and Schwartz, a Washington-based producer for television and film, teamed up on two Broadway shows, Ian McCellan's *Acting Shakespeare* and *Pack of Lies*, starring Rosemary Harris and Patrick McGoohan.<sup>943</sup> In 1983, WTAS' two founders convinced *Post* critic emeritus Richard Coe, who had always understood that an aspect of his job as theater critic was akin to that of a promoter's, that a nationally targeted awards ceremony would help professionalize Washington's theaters and expand their community's size and reach. With Coe's assistance, WTAS persuaded Washington's legendary celebrity Helen Hayes to lend her name to the awards. With Cantor and Schwartz's expertise at production, with Coe's connections to the theater community, and with Hayes' wide appeal and name

recognition, locally and nationally, an initially suspicious theater community soon adopted WTAS' Helen Hayes Awards as its own.

From the beginning, the larger, more moneyed Equity theaters dominated WTAS' board of directors. Initially, the society's 11-member board consisted of "delegates from the National Theater, the Kennedy Center, Arena Stage, the Folger Theater, Ford's Theater, and the New Playwrights' Theater of Washington (which [was] representing the city's smaller theaters), and several prominent arts officials."<sup>944</sup> Later, after Harry Bagdasian left NPT, Howard Shalwitz of Woolly Mammoth replaced him as the representative of the small theater movement. The board also had Arthur Cantor, two lawyers, and Richard Coe. Small theaters had little influence on the board because they lacked full Equity contracts and only paid their actors—if they paid their actors at all—a nominal fee.<sup>945</sup> As stated in their list of goals, WTAS wanted to develop professional theater in Washington; thus, even though small theaters would come to represent eleven out of the twenty theaters participating in the awards, their status on the board demonstrated their relative lack of status within WTAS' theatrical paradigm.<sup>946</sup> Ironically, small theaters also constituted eleven of the fourteen theaters that produced locally, which supposedly was the focus of the awards. In other words, the vital center of

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<sup>943</sup> Schwartz was well connected to the Washington cultural community. Not only was she president of the D. C. Chapter of Women in Film and Television, but she was also the producer of the local public television children's series *PowerHouse*.

<sup>944</sup> "Helen Hayes Awards to Honor D.C. Theater," 4(C).

<sup>945</sup> Although designers, technicians, stage managers, and other theater artists were also paid nominally, I have focused on the payment of the actor because WTAS would eventually use the actor's remuneration as a bellwether to determine if a theater had indeed become a professional operation.

<sup>946</sup> The twenty theaters that eventually became participants in the first cycle of awards were: American Sum-Times Theater, Arena Stage, Folger Theater, Ford's Theater, GALA Hispanic Theater, Horizons Theater, the Kennedy Center, National Theater, New Arts Theater, New Playwrights Theater, Olney Theater, Paradise Island Express, Rep, Inc., Round House Theater, Source Theater, Studio Theater, Takoma Theater, Warner Theater, Wolf Trap, and Woolly Mammoth.

the theatrical community did not consist of professional, Equity theaters. Other than Arena, the Folger, Olney, and NPT, the community consisted of struggling small theaters and touring houses. The disassociation between the board's constitution and WTAS' supposed client theaters led Source's Bart Whiteman to pontificate that WTAS was "essentially a group of people working to give awards to themselves."<sup>947</sup> Whiteman's concerns, and the suspicion that WTAS' moneyed interests would skew the awards in favor of larger theaters, was something that WTAS had to work diligently to overcome.

Paralleling this disproportionate representation of the small theaters on the WTAS board was a deepening divide between the image of small theaters in the media and the size of the theater-going public that small theaters served. On a given night, the National or even one of the Kennedy Center's stages entertained a public larger than the public attending Washington's entire small theater community. Yet, as small theaters earned more legitimacy and, thus, more attention in the electronic press and print media, the public perceived them as one of the city's most thriving cultural resources. In this sense, the number of small theaters represented on WTAS' board was proportionate to the number of people served by the theaters in relationship to the number served by the larger institutions. Collectively, small theaters were equivalent to a Kennedy Center, a National Theater, or an Arena Stage. The representation on the board was only inaccurate when one considered small theaters' organizational domination of the theatrical landscape, their production activity, and the number of theatrical artists they engaged on a regular basis.

If WTAS was to allay local fears that the disproportionately high representation of larger, more corporate-driven theaters would lead to a ceremony that reflected only those

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<sup>947</sup> "Helen Hayes Awards to Honor D.C. Theater," 4(C).

interests, they would have to convince a sizeable percentage of Washington's small theaters that the promises and future benefits of such an awards' ceremony far outweighed the negative implications. The idea began to take hold in the theatrical community when local producers became convinced that a ceremony could address the identity problems that plagued the city's theaters.

“Professional theater in Washington is perceived in pieces,” said Richard Bryant, the society's vice chairman, who is also director of public relations and marketing for Arena Stage. “There's the Kennedy Center piece, the alternative theater piece, the Arena Stage piece. This kind of awards program can enhance the profile of the Washington theater scene as a whole, and maybe enhance business as well.”<sup>948</sup>

WTAS' success depended on its ability to manufacture a unified image of the theatrical community. WTAS tried to limit its own membership to theaters fitting a professional image; but even that goal was complicated because, as has been discussed in previous chapters, the idea of “professional” was in flux during the 1970s and early 1980s. To create a unified image of what constituted professional theater in Washington, WTAS had to establish a coherent set of professional and aesthetic standards that all theaters, large and small, could strive for and maintain. A single set of standards necessarily constituted a fiction as small theaters, by the mere fact that they were small and their publics specialized, operated on a set of aesthetic and professional standards that were different from the National's, the Kennedy Center's, or even Arena's. If WTAS achieved its desired goals, however, the fiction that it manufactured and the benefits that pursuit of that fiction would bestow, would lead to a professional community that could confidently assert to a national public a unified identity. As a result, when small theaters agreed to the idea of an awards' ceremony, they did so with a great deal of trepidation; for they

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<sup>948</sup> Ibid.

could not know for certain toward what newly founded icon of theatrical simulation they had agreed to gravitate.

Because Equity's definition of professional would not work within Washington's complex theatrical marketplace, WTAS had to negotiate three crucial decisions if it was to organize an awards' ceremony. It had to decide: 1) what categories of awards would be offered, 2) what requirements theaters and their productions would have to fulfill to be eligible for those awards, and 3) what process would be established to determine which theaters and which productions would be nominated and, then, selected for awards. All three decisions weighed heavily in the fifteen-year debate on what was a professional Washington theater. Again, not only did a disparity exist between the large theaters' extensive board representation and the amount of small theater activity and production in the area, but that disproportional representation contradicted the notion of recognizing achievement for local professional productions, which at that time went largely underpaid and under appreciated. To arrive at decisions that would solve this complex set of issues required all participants to suspend their disbelief in both the short and long term.

For the 1985 awards' ceremony, WTAS decided to offer fifteen awards.<sup>949</sup> Of those fifteen, they gave nine to productions created by Washington's resident theaters. Five went to shows that local theaters imported into the city; and WTAS administered one special award for the best new play, which either a resident production or a touring show could win because any world premiere was eligible. Actors and actresses also figured prominently in the awards with eight of the fifteen going to performers in either lead or supporting roles in resident or touring productions (four for resident and four for

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<sup>949</sup> Unless otherwise noted all the information presented on WTAS and the Helen Hayes Awards comes from records at WTAS' offices or records now in possession of the author.

touring). WTAS limited the three awards for design and the one for directing to resident productions even though WTAS decided to reward the best overall productions in both the resident and touring categories. By weighting the awards in favor of resident productions, WTAS promoted homegrown productions and the idea that good theater was indigenous to Washington. By favoring actors in the awards, they acknowledged that most companies at that time produced minimalist forms of performance with limited budgets for design and related production values. By not offering awards in design and direction for touring shows, WTAS demonstrated not only the reality that designs for touring shows tended to be reduced but also a preference for having celebrity performers, not their more anonymous design counterparts, crossing the stage during the ceremony.

Another vital concern of the theatrical community was the effect that an awards' ceremony would have on its spirit of cooperation. When the League of Washington Theaters was first founded, the League's mission had been to promote the growth of small theaters by emphasizing strength through collaboration.<sup>950</sup> The beginnings of a 14<sup>th</sup> Street theater district had yet to emerge in 1983, and the League's focus on small theaters had not yet become diffused through the inclusion of large theaters into its organizational structure. Neither had the League's decision to favor a large downtown theater district over a more realistic, 14<sup>th</sup> Street, small theater district undermined its original purpose. Small theaters took a non-competitive approach to publicity, believing that the more Washingtonians supported any theater, the more all theaters prospered. They asserted that the theater-going public was not a fixed entity over which each theater had to fight for its portion. When audiences experienced quality performances, the experience

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<sup>950</sup> As discussed in Chapter Seven, when the League was founded its mission was to support small theaters in the Washington area.

encouraged those audiences to attend more performances at more theaters. The more theaters the public attended, the larger the theater-going public became. For theaters to publicize productions of other companies was not seen as advertising your competition but a theatrical compatriot who was also in the business of changing the public's theater-going habits. Because of this cooperative spirit, small theaters feared that an awards' ceremony promoted competition, which in turn represented the theater community negatively. In response to these concerns, WTAS chose to use "outstanding" rather than "best" with each award because the choice of outstanding denoted "a distinction they felt minimized competition."<sup>951</sup> Such a distinction apparently fell on deaf ears as some members of the media continued to write "best resident production" or "Awards Honor Area's Theatrical Best."<sup>952</sup> Nevertheless, WTAS utilized such sentiments in order to orchestrate one of the Helens' defining features, its fiction that the awards fostered egalitarianism among theaters.

The rules for eligibility made the clearest statement about the kind of professionalism that WTAS promoted. Again, WTAS had to consider the realities faced by most of the area's small theaters so as not to establish an ideal that existed beyond their reach. The organization decided that any stage play would be eligible for nomination if it was "presented at a theater that [paid] its performers on a regular basis and if the production [had] a run of four consecutive weeks or 16 performances [at one location]."<sup>953</sup> By defining a theater as "professional" whenever it paid its actors on a

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<sup>951</sup> Megan Rosenfeld and Mike McIntyre, "ANT Tops Helen Hayes Awards: Arena's Execution of Justice Named Outstanding Resident Play," *Washington Post*, 29 April 1986, 1(C).

<sup>952</sup> Marriann Barnard-Ahmad, "Awards Honor Area's Theatrical Best," *Prince George's Post Sentinel*, 15 May 1985, n.p. WTAS Archives.

<sup>953</sup> David Richards, "Hayes Award Created: for Achievements in Washington Theater," *Washington Post*, 30 April 1984, 1(C).

regular basis, WTAS was establishing criteria for professionalism lower than the criteria practiced by Equity theaters. Those guidelines acknowledged local circumstances: most theaters paid their employees a minimal amount. Nevertheless, the Helen Hayes' criteria indicated that the small theater movement had succeeded in getting its proverbial foot in the door of Washington's "professional" theater community. Considering that Equity affiliation had long been the national standard for such status, small theaters could look with some satisfaction at the fact that their professionalism had WTAS' endorsement.<sup>954</sup> In addition, by making actors the focal point of professional eligibility, WTAS elevated their status in the community. The four-week or sixteen-performance criterion addressed a practical consideration in that it provided WTAS with enough time to evaluate each production. By requiring performances to occur at a single location, WTAS excluded touring shows that played on numerous stages, such as a production designed to tour public secondary schools. Secondly, this criterion mandated that theaters wanting to give their productions professional legitimacy needed to follow a unified concept of how long a run should be. Prior to this rule, many local theaters ran productions at variable lengths, depending on a show's potential for audience. Now, longer runs would require longer commitments and more expenditures, more inclusive themes, resulting in larger audiences. If scripts focused narrowly on small counter-publics, producers would have difficulty justifying them for production, unless a theater elected to ignore the awards' system altogether, which no theater consciously chose to do. Together, these criteria generated a unified idea of what professional standards ought to be.<sup>955</sup>

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<sup>954</sup> Also during the 1980s, Equity reversed its policy of not rewarding Equity exceptions for small theaters and showcase productions outside of New York.

<sup>955</sup> Interestingly, WTAS' board excluded dinner theaters from consideration for the first year of awards. WTAS allowed them to compete in the awards' second year.

WTAS created a complex process to determine which productions received nominations and awards. They designed the first stage of that process to guarantee the equal participation of eligible theaters. The initial step required participating theaters to submit the names of two nominators to a pool that WTAS augmented with ten additional nominators. WTAS then selected six nominators from its pool of fifty to attend each eligible production.<sup>956</sup> If a nominator decided that a production or production element deserved recognition in any of the categories for which it was eligible, he or she nominated that show in that particular category.

To ensure a more uniform standard of aesthetic professionalism, WTAS' board created a second tier in the nominating process: the seven judges. They drew judges from the following categories:

a theater critic or other media representative, the President or other representative from the Actor's Center, a university drama teacher or director, an independent director or producer, a patron of the theater from the foundation or corporate communities ... [and] the Chairman or other Board Member from the Washington Theater Awards Society.<sup>957</sup>

WTAS then assigned judges to attend any production that received nominations from at least four nominators. Four out of the six nominators would have to agree that the production was worthy of consideration for an award. Without consulting with the nominators about which categories they had selected, judges made recommendations in the same way that the nominators had. Because WTAS controlled the selection of judges, however, they could select judges who best represented their aesthetic ideology concerning professional standards.

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<sup>956</sup> WTAS did not assign nominators to shows produced by the theaters that they were representing.

<sup>957</sup> "The Helen Hayes Awards," 3.

The final stage in the nominating process occurred at the end of a nominating cycle when WTAS' Executive Director compiled a list of shows receiving nominations in a particular category from both a nominator and a judge. Thus, even shows that had received votes from every nominator would not be eligible if they did not receive an endorsement from at least one judge. The five nominees that received the most votes in each category constituted the list of final nominees.<sup>958</sup> The judges then convened with WTAS' Executive Director to discuss the final nominees. Following the discussion, judges ranked the nominees from best to worst, with a five designating the best and a one, the worst. The nominee receiving the most points from the seven judges was declared the winner in that particular category.

WTAS dominated the process because they controlled the selection of judges, and the judges determined, first, which productions would be excluded from the final list of nominees and, secondly, which productions or people would be declared the winners of the awards. In addition, by mandating a discussion of the final nominees between the judges and WTAS' Executive Director, the awards society provided a final opportunity for judges and the Executive Director to persuade each other of the merits of particular choices. Because WTAS' Executive Director and Chairman of the Board were both present at the meeting, even though the Executive Director did not vote, WTAS constituted a quarter of the people involved in final discussions about merits. Clearly, a discussion of some kind about individual shows was necessary, if for no other purpose than to refresh people's memories about productions that they had witnessed ten to twelve months previously. Such discussions could be used to introduce other factors into

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<sup>958</sup> The list of five could be expanded in the case of ties. A category could also be eliminated in cases where fewer than three shows received the required nominations from both judges and nominators.

the selection process, from obvious concerns about one theater earning too many awards in any given year to more topical aesthetic, social, or political concerns that might be active in the community at any given time.

The process established by WTAS for determining winners revealed the shareholders of the Washington theater community, or at least those shareholders who had enough clout to gain representation in the process. Nominators represented the participating theaters. The fact that each theater presented the same number of nominators to the pool, no matter how large its individual budget or how many shows it produced each year, demonstrated an egalitarian dimension of WTAS' vision of the community. WTAS must have assumed that each theater would select nominators who shared the theater's aesthetic visions and who would consequently nominate shows that actualized that theater's particular blend of socio-aesthetic tastes. Thus, even though nominators could not evaluate shows presented by the theaters that had selected them for the pool, they could evaluate shows by theaters with which they shared particular narratives or ideologies.

The criteria for the judges revealed the theatrical community's various power-centers. Inclusion of a media representative among the list of judges was a given. Not only did the profession provide the critic with an opportunity to attend a great deal of theater, but the media had also expressed interest in a strong theatrical culture for many years. Established in 1981, the Actors' Center represented Washington actors, many of whom lacked New York or Equity affiliation. The high status of the actor in the awards' process was already in evidence. Including a representative of the Actors' Center among the judges demonstrated just how important the local actor had become to the health of

the small theater community. The representation of the foundation and corporate communities was also significant. For over fifteen years the NEA had worked with these communities to coordinate the growth of the arts in Washington and the nation. If WTAS was going to promote professional theater in Washington that was worthy of national attention, then it had to attract foundation and corporate support not just regionally, but nationally as well, and not just for its own survival but also to enhance the economic interests of the theaters participating in the awards. Finally, university participation in the judging demonstrated the increasing power of educational theaters as training grounds for theater professionals.

Even if the awards' process was free from any aesthetic or ideological biases or preferences, an undeniable consequence of its structure was that it subjected each theater to the majority will of the public. The choices made by the Helen Hayes' process demonstrated the values of that majority—whether based on sound aesthetic knowledge, sentimentality, or the grossest of societal prejudices or proclivities (or to prove to the public that the theatrical community did not possess those prejudices). Of course, in a society that supported the democratic ideal, such a value system seemed apropos. For the small theater movement, however, the will of the majority ran counter to its essential qualities. As discussed in Chapters Six and Seven, their audiences were microscopic in comparison to larger theaters, with small theaters frequently appealing to more marginal and/or disenfranchised publics. Even a hit show by Woolly Mammoth or Horizons generated a total audience of no more than a week's worth of performances at a National or Kennedy Center production. When small theaters agreed to be subjected to the socio-aesthetic tastes of the majority, they placed themselves in a position to be judged not by

their publics but by a more general theater-going public. Representing that public were the six nominators; then, if four out of the six nominators deemed the production, or an element of the production, worthy of consideration, five judges visited the performance. WTAS had selected those judges; thus, those judges more likely reflected the aesthetics of the larger institutions. Although many in the arts community might have asserted that a good performance should transcend whatever biases evaluators possess, particularly judges who are allegedly more seasoned, such an assumption was naive. For in the subjective experience of performance, where a performance depends on the identification created between actor and audience, certain subjects and perspectives—no matter how excellently realized—fail to generate sufficient identification with a majority to warrant praise and, hence, nomination. As a result, the Helen Hayes system gradually devolved a diverse theatrical community, with diverse interests and performance styles, into a homogenous theatrical entity that appealed to the tastes of its majority public over its minority. Given the fact that one of WTAS' primary purposes was to sell the local theater community to a national constituency, such a structure proved essential.

*Section II: The First Three Years, A Simulation Fit for a National Theater Culture?*

During the first three years that WTAS offered the Helen Hayes Awards, the ceremony attempted to simulate the vision of their founding producers. The particulars of that simulation, both the distribution of awards to various theaters and the nature of the awards' ceremony itself, proved vital to the Helens' chances for long-term success. A lopsided distribution of awards, for example, would demonstrate that the city's theatrical community was not as healthy as many believed, but rather dominated by a few

respectable institutions. On the other hand, given that one of WTAS' missions was to expand Washington's theater-going public, the ceremony and the national exposure its simulation in the media garnered would provide the organization an opportunity to introduce the city's theatrical culture to outsiders. Many in the city's theater-going public understood that the glamour of the awards' ceremony did not represent the nature of its predominantly small theater community. To members of the general public, however, who constructed their representation of professional theater out of images of Broadway and Hollywood, on the set or in the dressing rooms of celebrity culture, a glamorous Helen Hayes ceremony would epitomize Washington theater. Though not accurate, such a simulation might attract an entirely different public, both as audiences and patrons.

In the first year of the Helen Hayes Awards, WTAS demonstrated just how inclusive and egalitarian the distribution of the awards could be. When WTAS announced the inaugural awards on May 1, 1984 seventeen theaters were participating. By the time the ceremony was held over one year later the number had grown to twenty. Those twenty theaters presented 103 shows that fit WTAS' criteria for professional eligibility. Of those 103 shows, 32 received at least one nomination for excellence in one of fifteen categories. In other words, according to judges and nominators, 32 percent of all professional touring or resident productions possessed at least a single element that judges and nominators agreed deserved recognition for being "outstanding." Of the twenty theaters participating in the awards' competition, eleven received at least one nomination; of the sixteen theaters producing at least one show, seven earned nominations. This broad inclusion of theatrical organizations among the list of nominees guaranteed their continued support of the Helens because it fostered a much-needed sense

of a shared theatrical community, a sense that an exclusive list of large, moneyed organizations would have failed to muster.

As most local resident theaters expected, the thirty-five year-old Arena Stage dominated the evening, garnering more nominations and awards than any other theater. Nonetheless, because small theaters collectively earned more nominations for resident work than Arena, as a group they could claim their ascendancy. Only Arena earned nominations both in touring and resident categories, garnering twenty-five out of a total of seventy-six nominations, or just less than a third of all nominations. Of the fifty-four nominations handed out for work in resident productions, Arena received twenty, or 37 percent. Its next closest competitors in the resident categories were NPT and the Folger, which received eleven and seven respectively. Surprisingly, however, NPT, Studio, Horizons, and Source earned twenty-one total nominations. Arena won five of the ten awards given for resident productions or world premieres. In another surprise, NPT, the theater that had begun twelve years earlier in a basement under a “head shop,” and whose founder and artistic director, Harry Bagdasian, had just stepped down, won four awards. Equally ironic, three of those four awards were for John Guare’s *Lydia Breeze*, their first production that had not been a world premiere. NPT also won in the new play category, for nationally recognized playwright Elizabeth Swados and her musical *The Beautiful Lady*. Studio won the award for outstanding lighting design. Because of its dominance within the resident production categories, Arena came to epitomize the standards for professional excellence that WTAS wanted to promote in the Washington area. Few questioned the veracity of Arena’s supremacy, if for no other reason than for over thirty-five years more people had attended Arena’s productions than any other theater’s. Such

longevity gave the theater-going public greater knowledge of Arena's reputation and work. The collective success of small theaters gave promise, however, to the possibility that a different standard for excellence existed. Rooted in the converted gymnasiums and hot dog warehouses of urban D.C., their standards emphasized marginal audiences, intimate spaces, and the rapport that arises when artists and publics share the performance experience.<sup>959</sup>

Over the next two years, Arena continued its dominance of the awards for resident productions, gaining 42 out of 137 nominations, or 31 percent of the total. Large, moneyed theaters (Arena together with the Folger [later renamed Shakespeare Theater at the Folger], Ford's, Olney, and the Kennedy Center's American National Theater) garnered 118 of 191 nominations (62 percent) handed out by WTAS for resident productions. In fact, over the first three years that the Helen Hayes Awards were offered, the same five wealthiest theaters triumphed in twenty-two of the thirty-four awards distributed for resident productions. Although small theaters made a respectable showing during those first three years, earning sixty-nine nominations or 36 percent of the total, theaters with budgets large enough to draw their acting, directing, and design talent from outside the area established the professional and aesthetic standards for local theaters.

When investigating the differences between the nominations and the awards that theaters received in the acting categories as opposed to those offered for design and directing, however, the statistics tell a different story. Over the first three years of competition, WTAS handed out fifty-three design nominations to seven theaters. Arena, Folger/Shakespeare, ANT, and Olney dominated those categories, earning forty-one

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<sup>959</sup> Studio Theater occupied a former hot dog warehouse.

nominations, or 77 percent of the total. On the other hand, small theaters earned only twelve nominations, with Studio gaining seven of the twelve. Nevertheless, even though most small theaters were ignored in the realm of design, they won three of the nine awards given in those categories over that period.

If small theaters were frequently out-classed—and outspent—in the design competition, they more than held their own in the acting categories. Over the first three years of competition, small theaters received thirty-two of the seventy-one nominations for lead and supporting actors, or 46 percent of the total.<sup>960</sup> They also won four out of twelve acting awards over that same period. This far better showing for small theaters in the acting categories demonstrated that they had an advantage when it came to establishing an emotional rapport between audiences and actors. As has already been addressed, WTAS expressed an interest in making sure local actors received a share of nominations and awards by having the president of the Actors' Center among the judges. At the very least, that presence worked as a reminder to the other judges that members of the local acting community, regardless of their Equity status, deserved acknowledgment and a fair chance to gain nominations and win awards.

Many factors contributed to this advantage but the most important benefit was aesthetic. By the 1980s the public had grown accustomed to the electronic celebrities of film and television. According to P. David Marshall, the film celebrity was “organized around distance and a relatively controlled text” while the television celebrity was

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<sup>960</sup> In 1986 WTAS added two acting awards, one for actor and one for actress in a resident musical; in 1987, WTAS combined the categories, making an outstanding performer for a resident musical. When those categories are added to the statistics, small theaters earn a total of 34 out of 84 nominations, or only 41% of the total.

“constructed around a conception of familiarity.”<sup>961</sup> While the celebrity’s power to engage an audience moved through those channels, as a technical device, the close-up, large and distant on film and familiar on television, embodied the celebrity’s identity. The local Washington theater actor did not, of course, inhabit those same spaces; nevertheless, by virtue of a shared occupation, he or she drew both the benefits and the impediments from the fact that the average theater-goer had become enculturated by the celebrity. Perhaps for this reason, actors in a small theater’s intimate space fared better than actors in the larger venues when put to the challenge of engaging audiences. Such an aesthetic space could be used more effectively to seduce audience members and, thus, nominators and judges into willingly suspending their disbelief. Conversely, that same intimate aesthetic could be used to jar audiences back to an awareness of the performance itself, the visual façade, or the actor as actor. Significantly, the awareness that the public had of the local actor as actor was not an abstract or impersonal concept. To theater-goers who attended performances regularly, local actors were known quantities, the best having their own share of celebrity. Because nominators and judges were also regular Washington theater-goers and, hence, familiar with local actors, they could humanize the local actor far more quickly than the out-of-town actor, particularly if he or she were not a celebrity. For within local theatrical circles, the actor represented not only a character and a celebrity but also a living person. On the other hand, the modern entertainment celebrity existed primarily in an electronic dimension. The living person was replaced by the projected and frequently fixed persona of late-night talk shows. Such a celebrity needed to be shielded from the too close scrutiny of an intimate, humanizing space if he

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<sup>961</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 198.

or she were to maintain the celebrity's power to influence the public charismatically. The out-of-town actor who had no celebrity identity had only the character to offer. Without a celebrity identity or an identity established through frequent scrutiny, this type of actor had trouble building an emotional rapport with the public.

These personalizing variables did not exist as tangents to the aesthetics of acting but, instead, constituted acting and theater at its most essential, where "the minimum preconditions for theater to be theater are that person A represents X while S looks on."<sup>962</sup> For the local actor, when the nominator or judge looked on, he or she was likely to perceive an underdog struggling for legitimacy against a fictitious and powerful celebrity, thus making him or her a sentimental choice at the very least. As with any folk-like performance network, the aesthetics of such a space elevated the possibility that a known actor might be liked and, hence, nominated over an unknown one. Having played multiple roles before a returning public, a local actor possessed both the advantage and the burden of being better known as a person and as an actor. In intimate circumstances, "artistic duplexity acquires great theatrical effect."<sup>963</sup> It reinforced the intimacy that the small theater aesthetic already emphasized.

As if in opposition to this folk-theater mentality, a passel of nationally recognized celebrities serving as hosts and guests upstaged their local theatrical cohorts at the first Helen Hayes' ceremony. Nevertheless, the press covered the event in a subdued manner. Perhaps, the evening's inherent contradictions, i.e., the presence of so many national celebrities at a ceremony honoring local theatrical producers, inhibited the press' ability

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<sup>962</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of the Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>963</sup> Petr Bogatyrev, "Semiotics in the Folk Theater" in *The Prague School*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1976), 48.

to articulate the presence of such paradoxical signifiers. After all, the Helen's stated goal was "to honor artistic achievement in professional theater" in Washington.<sup>964</sup> Local theater for all its successes since 1970 had not generated the type of celebrities on which the ceremony's spectacle focused and, indeed, seemingly depended. WTAS' board was divided on how to handle that lack. As a result,

when the Helen Hayes Awards were taking shape as Washington's answer to the Tonys, two opposing approaches were hotly debated. Start small and grow, said some. No, come on with a big splash, said others. The splashmakers had not only prevailed, but by Monday night they had corralled enough stars so that autograph hounds felt obliged to take up watch under the National Theater marquee.<sup>965</sup>

To be sure, Helen Hayes herself, for whom the awards were named, was a Washington native who had seen her first play at the National, which had given her that "first intoxication of wishfulness about being an actress."<sup>966</sup> In addition, countless celebrities had passed through town, performing either at the Kennedy Center or at the National on their way to, or from, greater national exposure. Arena had also generated its share of celebrities, particularly within area circles; a number of its actors and directors had developed national reputations not only in theater but also in television and film. These successes were not, however, the intended highlight of the awards. The goal of the Helens was to elevate the stature of indigenous achievement. By casting the ceremony with celebrities, even ones who had connections to D.C. theater before moving on to New York and/or Hollywood, the accomplishment spotlighted most was notoriety achieved

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<sup>964</sup> Barbara Gamarekian, "First Helen Hayes Awards Given to Artists in Capital," *New York Times*, 15 May 1985, n. p. WTAS.

<sup>965</sup> David Richards, "Local Theater Gets Its Due," *Washington Post*, 19 May 1985, 1(G).

<sup>966</sup> Helen Hayes, an excerpt from her speech delivered at the National Theater 13 May 1985 for the first annual Helen Hayes Awards, "Required Reading: 'I'm an Award Now'," *New York Times*, 28 May 1985, 6(B).

elsewhere, not in the trenches of Washington's theaters. It could be argued that by conflating the celebrity image with that of the local theatrical worker, the two became one in the public's imaginary. Thus, when former Arena company member Robert Prosky hosted the event, his mere presence elevated the status of all actors based in Washington. Prosky's success at Arena had garnered the attention of national producers; so he had left the company to make films and television shows. How could his leaving, however, even if for reasons of a larger remuneration, greater fame, and/or wider publics, raise the stature of those actors who had not left Washington, either for such offers or because they had received none? An association between the two prototypes seemed difficult to imagine. Nevertheless, after twenty-three years of accomplishments on Arena's stages, his role on the hit TV show, *Hill Street Blues*, had earned Prosky his position as Master of Ceremonies. The celebrities that followed ranged from popular television stars, Linda Carter of *Wonder Woman* and Robert Foxworth of *Falcon Crest*, to even more recognizable movie stars like Maurice Hines and Jose Ferrer. When Joy Zinoman and Howard Shalwitz entered the stage to present the award for outstanding actor in a touring production, Zinoman punctuated the event's underlying contradiction by saying, "by way of introduction, 'We're the locals.'"<sup>967</sup> At the end of the evening, a "brief photo and interview opportunity with the winners and celebrity presentors [sic]" was granted.<sup>968</sup> It served to underscore once again the fact that Washington's stages remained but stepping-stones to artists on the road to New York or Hollywood.

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<sup>967</sup> "Local Theater," 1(G).

<sup>968</sup> Press Advisory, "The Inaugural Presentation of the Helen Hayes Awards, 13 May 1985. WTAS.

WTAS' celebration of the star only intensified over the first three years, culminating in the third year when the awards' ceremony shifted to the larger, more prestigious Kennedy Center Opera House. As already discussed, in the Helens' inaugural year, Robert Prosky served as Master of Ceremonies. Though a star, he remained a folk-hero, if you will, with deep Washington connections. The following year, Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach did the honors. Although Jackson and Wallach were connected to the area through limited stage work at the Kennedy Center, most Washingtonians knew them only through their characters in film or the roles they assumed as celebrities. Despite their charm and relative lack of pretense, their presence emblemized a shift in the aesthetic bar. When in 1987 Hal Prince served as Master of Ceremonies, a celebrity without relationship to Washington, having produced almost solely for Broadway, WTAS' founding producers asserted the representational dominance of Broadway and its celebrity performers over that of local theaters and the personalized actors of the small theater movement.

A similar shift occurred among the invited celebrity guests as well. In the inaugural year Helen Hayes and a few television celebrities had attracted autograph hounds. In 1986, the celebrity list expanded considerably, with such names as Julie Harris, Richard Kiley, Vincent Price, Jose Quintero, Jason Robards, and Rosemary Harris. WTAS went to great lengths to establish their association with area theaters, however, even including a Washington-focused theater-ography in press kits. In that way, locals experienced the awards with a degree of familiarity, at least at the intellectual level. By 1987, however, invited celebrity guests had only the slightest connection to Washington's theaters. Carol Channing, Peggy Cass, and Carol Lawrence had performed

on Washington stages once or twice in their careers whereas co-hosts Mary Martin and Anthony Quinn as well as Karen Ackers had never performed in the city. Justifying their presence at a ceremony designed to honor locally produced theater, Prince told the audience that he was there “to salute Washington’s role in the rich history of the American musical theater.”<sup>969</sup> Embedded in the evening’s entertainment was a revue of twenty of the most famous Broadway musicals from *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Show Boat* to *Gypsy*, *Cabaret*, and *A Chorus Line*. Despite the awkward attempt by WTAS to connect the musical theme to local stages, Washington’s role as a touring stop for Broadway musicals did not make them worthy of inclusion in the evening’s festivities. Local producers in attendance at the Opera House or in their theaters preparing the next production did not believe the association, and tensions that had underscored the awards since their inception emerged into full view.

The tension between the ceremony’s use of celebrity performers and the impoverished realities of the local theater community had long been evident. Most frequently, the tension manifested itself in the contradiction between those who saw Washington as a national and international capital that needed an elite, imperial theater akin to Broadway’s and those who saw Washington as a city like many others that had a theatrical culture with thousands of underpaid but talented workers and artists. At the inaugural ceremony in 1985 when Zinoman barbed, “We’re the locals,” she had brought one dimension of that tension into public awareness. Yet, Zinoman was at least a local celebrity and a founder, with power and clout. As two actors from the area quipped upon being offered reduced-priced tickets to sit in the balcony during the inaugural ceremony:

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<sup>969</sup> Hap Erstein, “Folger, Arena Snare Hayes Honors,” *Washington Times*, 5 May 1987, 1(B).

even those seats were “beyond the means of most actors in the metropolitan area. While the celebrities [were] hobnobbing in their black ties and designer gowns, most of the talent in this city [was] working for less than minimum wage.”<sup>970</sup> By moving the awards’ ceremony to the Kennedy Center, WTAS heightened the disconnect between small theaters, in which the average theater artist lived hand to mouth, and the glamour of the awards’ ceremony itself with its celebrity-studded, national and international aspirations. Even then, what made the tension tolerable to most was the belief—accurate or not—that most locals dreamed of standing in their own celebrity shoes someday; so the paradox and tension that they endured today, at least in their fantasy life, might be overcome tomorrow.

WTAS’ founders surely understood that such tensions existed within the region’s theatrical culture; so their willingness to exacerbate the contradictions by moving the Helens to the Center was probably motivated by their desire to pursue the greater benefits that such a move would gain. At the core of WTAS’ goals was the desire to use the awards as “a unique opportunity to focus national attention on the health of this city’s theater industry—an industry which last year boasted admissions in excess of two million.”<sup>971</sup> The Kennedy Center epitomized that national stage. With ANT no longer in operation and, hence, its venue no longer presenting a conflict of interest, the Helens’ move to the Center’s largest venue made both economic and promotional sense. If WTAS wanted Washington’s theaters to assume national notoriety, the National Theater, even renovated in a newly constructed downtown thriving with new life and commerce,

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<sup>970</sup> Chuck Lippman and Karen Roper, “The ‘Hazy Hayes Awards,” *The Review*, May 1985, n.p. WTAS.

<sup>971</sup> Elizabeth Brown, Executive Director of WTAS, “Helen Hayes Awards to Again Grace National Theatre Stage,” in *Stagebill* Vol. III, #8, April 1986, n.p. WTAS.

could not compete with the Center's capacity to project an image beyond the city's boundaries. Only the Center had the ability to transform a local signifier into a national, or even international icon. If WTAS wanted Washington theater to become a nationally recognized entity, then the Kennedy Center venue had to be its base of operation.

Ironically, two events undermined the Center's allure on the evening of the ceremony. On the one hand, the Center's presentation of the Awards' ceremony was plagued by "technical snafus, time overruns, underrehearsed guest stars mispronouncing nominees' names and an artificial theme [the Broadway musicals] that took the focus off the awards."<sup>972</sup> This sloppiness demonstrated—to the locals at least—that the Center did not take the awards' ceremony seriously, that the Helens were but one small event in a weeks' worth of national culture. On the other hand, small theaters won only two awards that year, the lowest number they had ever earned: one for outstanding new play, a field that they consistently dominated, and the other, for outstanding musical, which proved the most poignant. In an evening celebrating the history of New York's musical theater as seen on the stages of Washington, the award for outstanding musical went to the fledgling Castle Arts Center of Hyattsville in Prince George's County, Maryland, for its production of *Quilters*.<sup>973</sup> The show's director, Antoni Sadlak-Jaworski, said: "What makes it so wonderful ... is that all of the talent in *Quilters* came from the little theaters of Washington.' The remark drew whoops from the [Center's] balcony, where hundreds of members of the Washington theater community had bought reduced-priced tickets."<sup>974</sup>

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<sup>972</sup> Hap Erstein, "Helen Hayes Awards Pay Tribute to Maturing Local Theater Scene," *Washington Times*, 10 May 1988, 1(A).

<sup>973</sup> WTAS added awards for Outstanding Musical and awards for Outstanding Musical Actor and Actress in 1986. In fact, within a few years they would also add awards for direction of a musical and supporting actors and actress.

<sup>974</sup> Mike McIntyre, "*The Miser* Tops Hayes Awards," *Washington Post*, 5 May 1987, 1(D).

Combined, these two actions highlighted the fact that money and status did not always manufacture a better product, particularly in the sentimental eyes of nominators and judges. In circumstances that had been primed by the city's elite for a triumphant celebration, tensions between them and the small theater community repudiated the idea of a happy, homogeneous whole. The Helen Hayes Awards had become the community's primary public representation and, thus, the nature of that simulation became something over which segments of the community were willing to fight.

Over the following year an increasingly negative flow of public discourse about the Helen Hayes Awards flooded the mainstream press. A few days after the ceremony the *Post's* David Richards observed: "Monday's three-hour program at the Kennedy Center Opera House [was] easily the biggest and flashiest so far. Unfortunately, it was also the most schizoid."<sup>975</sup> From his perspective the celebrity and glamour of the Helens fostered unrealistic expectations on the part of the public, because they simulated

an outdated view of theater—the fabled glitter and heartache that was never so much the stuff of Broadway as it was of 1940s movies about Broadway. The vast majority of theater in Washington [was] forged in nonprofit institutions. It [was] acted by ensembles, not stars. And its merit [lay] not in the occasional blockbuster hit, but rather in an ongoing body of work—compounded of success and failure.<sup>976</sup>

Hence, the simulation of theater promoted by the awards did not correspond to the reality experienced by its workers. Not only did local theater lack glamour and celebrity, but the Helens also promoted a different concept of excellence and professionalism. For local theater artists, professionalism did not reside in the particular attributes of a performance but in a cooperative relationship between players and those particulars. The awards

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<sup>975</sup> David Richards, "How the Medium Confused the Message," *Washington Post*, 10 May 1987, 1(G)

<sup>976</sup> *Ibid.*

invariably praised the work of individuals excelling above the ensemble, not the work of individuals excelling because they had related to the ensemble effectively and intimately. As Zinoman articulated a year later, “I don’t like to badmouth it [the awards]. It’s good because it brings public attention to Washington theater. It’s [sic] good or as bad as any awards, I guess; but on a deep conceptual level, I don’t think it makes any sense.”<sup>977</sup>

Thus, theater producers accepted the awards because of the economic gains their theaters might earn even though as artists they understood that the awards presented an image and meaning of theater and performance that contradicted the very work that the awards supposedly supported and hoped to develop. Even larger theaters found reason to look upon the awards with more caution. As Arena’s Douglas C. Wager said, “I can’t help but believe that in some ways the one part of the process I find least healthy . . . the emphasis on choosing a single winner, is what makes the Helen Hayes Awards appealing to the community.”<sup>978</sup> The irony of the awards resided in the fact that their success depended on their competitive nature because the public, and most importantly the foundation and corporate communities, required the winnowing process of winners and losers to help them determine patronage and sponsorship. As Richards said, “Nobody makes it over the finish line first. We [the public] know that, and yet we still demand winners. The suspense can be momentarily exhilarating, perhaps, while we wait for the envelope to be opened. But there’s also a bitter residue to each triumph, a sag of disappointment, the nagging feeling that injustice is also prevailing.”<sup>979</sup>

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<sup>977</sup> Joy Zinoman, quoted in “D.C. Theater Gets Set for its Big Night,” by Hap Erstein, *Washington Times*, 9 May 1988, 1(D).

<sup>978</sup> Wager, “Raising Helen,” 36.

<sup>979</sup> “How the Medium Confused the Message,” 1(G).

Not everyone in the media portrayed the move to the Kennedy Center, or the awards themselves, as misguided. Hap Erstein of the *Washington Times* emphasized the competitive nature of human existence itself, declaring: “Competitive awards, like life, are inherently unfair.”<sup>980</sup> Washington’s non-profit small theater movement might have been born out of the anti-capitalist rhetoric of the 1960s, but such sentiments only worked to undermine the theatrical community’s long term health, which needed the support of wealthy benefactors as well as the massive infusion of funds from national foundations and multi-national corporations. As Leslie Jacobson of Horizons stated, “People are very busy in this town. For those who don’t have the time to do research, this [Helen Hayes Awards’ ceremony] is an outside resource to help them decide which theaters in town are good.”<sup>981</sup> The busy people to whom she was referring were not potential audiences, but the corporate sponsors who used the awards’ ceremony to help them determine which theaters deserved their financial support.

Despite its negative implications, the Center’s bumble underscored a crucial, unavoidable fact: the Helens were but one element in the overall transformation of Washington’s theatrical community into one with national significance. Since 1985 each awards ceremony had begun with a “pre-show celebrity dinner,” which served not only “to heighten the glitz factor,” but also to narrow the divide between the struggling theater community and its wealthy sponsors.<sup>982</sup> The 1987 pre-show dinner began at the exclusive Potomac Restaurant where

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<sup>980</sup> Hap Erstein, “The Critic’s Choice: Winners & Losers in Helen Hayes Awards,” *Washington Times*, 1 May 1987, 4(M).

<sup>981</sup> Leslie Jacobson, quoted in “D.C. Theater Gets Set for its Big Night,” 2(D).

<sup>982</sup> Press Release, “Tickets for the Inaugural Presentation of the Helen Hayes Awards now Available through Ticketcenter Phonecharge,” 1. WTAS Archive. “Folger, Arena Snare Hayes Honors,” 1(B).

Washington's theater leaders and celebrity guests were hosted by Miss Hayes ... at the Sponsors' Dinner. The dinner was preceded by a cocktail reception on the terraces of the Potomac restaurant overlooking the Kennedy Center. Also on hand at the dinner were representatives of the highest levels of the Federal government as well as leaders of Washington's diplomatic, social, and philanthropic communities.

After an exclusive dinner of salmon pate, noisettes of veal, and pommes bordelaise, the Potomac presented Executive Pastry Chef Dieter Schorner's spectacular Surprise Capitol Meltdowns, chocolate shell Capitol domes filled with espresso ice cream and topped with hot vanilla anglaise.<sup>983</sup>

Fortunately for the theater community's workers who sat in reduced-priced seats in the Center's balcony, the ceremony's organizers did not share the menu with the public or otherwise the shabby event that followed might have included references to the care taken on the pre-event meal as opposed to the ceremony itself. Yet, the dinner allowed Washington's corporate sector to acknowledge each other and their achievements. After all, they were responsible for underwriting not only the ceremony but also the very professional aesthetic standards that the awards promoted. This pre-show dinner had the requisite celebrity guests, whose "presence was intended as a lure to corporate sponsors, who bought block seats for \$250 to see and be seen with the likes of Lynda Carter or Rosemary Harris."<sup>984</sup>

WTAS countered the exclusivity of the pre-show dinner by offering at evening's end "Washington's largest cast party" to all guests, regardless of where in the economic pecking order they sat.<sup>985</sup> WTAS had always framed the Helen Hayes Awards as an egalitarian affair. Within the theater, cast parties have traditionally symbolized such sentiments. At the Helen Hayes Awards, however, the cast party served double duty.

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<sup>983</sup> Press Release, "1987 Helen Hayes Awards Presented in Nation's Capital," 3. WTAS.

<sup>984</sup> Hap Erstein, "D.C. Theater Gets Set for its Big Night," *Washington Times*, 9 May 1988, 1(D).

<sup>985</sup> Joe Brown, "The Days of the Hayes," *Washington Post*, 1 May 1987, 11(N).

While supporting the Helens' egalitarian image, it also served as the place where corporate sponsors and theater representatives could meet informally; and, if the theater had earned nominations or awards, they could parlay that success into further communications with potential sponsors. As a result, in a relatively short time, the awards grew "into an important marketing tool for both the affluent and financially struggling performing groups of the Washington area."<sup>986</sup>

As the list of major corporate sponsors of the ceremony grew from an initial eleven to, by 1988, 28 corporations, so too did the number of awards with their corporate names still on them. At the inaugural event two extra awards were granted, both of which lacked corporate names: one, the Sir Thomas Lipton Award "for distinguished volunteer service to the performing theater of the Nation's Capital," and the other, the "Helen Hayes Humanitarian Award."<sup>987</sup> By 1988, those two awards had been dropped in favor of three corporate-sponsored and corporate-named awards: the American Express Tribute "recognizing outstanding contributions to the performing arts;" the Peat Marwick Award "for distinguished service to the Washington theater community," and The Washington Post Award "for distinguished community service."<sup>988</sup> These awards not only highlighted the elite of Washington's philanthropic community, but also gave WTAS a vehicle to invite high profile celebrities to the event, which in turn increased the Awards' notoriety nationally and internationally. For example, the American Express Tribute to James Earl Jones in 1987 for his famous performance in Arena's production of

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<sup>986</sup> "D.C. Theater Gets Set for its Big Night," 1(D).

<sup>987</sup> "Awards Honor Area's Theatrical Best," 14.

<sup>988</sup> News Releases: "James Earl Jones Named Recipient of American Express Tribute, 4 May 1987 and "The Washington Post Presents Award for Community Service," 4 May 1987; "The Helen Hayes Awards Souvenir Program," 9 May 1988, Published by The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., 13.

*The Great White Hope* not only brought the national star to the Center, but announcements of the award were “published in 64 newspapers with a combined circulation of over 6 million.”<sup>989</sup> In his acceptance speech, the famous actor “likened Washington’s ‘multinational, multiracial, and multicultural audience’ to ‘a special tinderbox that creates life, warmth, and combustion.’”<sup>990</sup> Ironically, he alluded to a world beyond the Center’s elitist domain, a world that, for the most part, also existed outside the domain of Washington’s professional theater community, which was predominantly Caucasian. Such a representation might have warmed the hearts of the audience present at the Center that evening, but it also signaled one more level of contradiction between the Helens’ simulation of Washington’s theatrical reality and the public’s actual experience of it.

### *Section III: The Reification of the Helen Hayes Awards*

Even though the Kennedy Center venue would have generated positive long term financial rewards for theater in Washington, the gala returned to the National in 1988. “There were still out-of-town celebrities and a few terrific musical interludes [but] there was no mistaking the point of the event.”<sup>991</sup> Mistress of Ceremonies, Pat Carroll, “who began her theater career as an actress for the late Rev. Gilbert Hartke at Catholic University,” announced the winners; and small theaters came into the limelight as they

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<sup>989</sup> Attached to the *New York Times* press clipping, “James Earl Jones Named for Helen Hayes Award,” 28 April 1987, WTAS.

<sup>990</sup> Barbara Gamarekian, “3<sup>rd</sup> Helen Hayes Awards For Washington Drama,” *New York Times*, 6 May 1987, n. p. WTAS.

<sup>991</sup> Hap Erstein, “Helen Hayes Awards Pay Tribute to Maturing Local Theater Scene,” *Washington Times*, 10 May 1988, 1(A).

never had before.<sup>992</sup> Even prior to the ceremony, the number of nominations earned by small theaters promised a different outcome than in years past. The likes of Studio, Woolly, Round House, and Horizons garnered thirty-nine of the sixty-five nominations for work in resident productions or 60 percent of the total. Arena, the Folger, and the other major institutions earned only twenty-four nominations, or 37 percent, with the other two nominations going to dinner theaters. The winner's circle also reflected this shift in emphasis as small theaters won seven of the twelve awards given to resident companies. Using a combination of local artists and celebrities to make the presentation of each award, WTAS diffused the tension between the star-studded fantasies of past ceremonies and the reality of Washington's poorly funded and aesthetically different small theater community.

Of course, suspicions arose that such a shift in emphasis could not have happened at an awards ceremony meant to honor the area's "best" work. Rather, the Helens honored the work that needed to be awarded in order to keep a fractious theater community united behind the goal of creating a single representation of itself. Thus, while some in the press declared that the results revealed "a developing maturity in the ranks of Washington's resident theaters," WTAS' Chairman of the Nominating Committee, Ron Geatz, explained that the change occurred because the board revitalized the selection process.<sup>993</sup> "As the Awards have gathered momentum, and as they [have] become more important to the community, the nominators have become much more

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<sup>992</sup> Joe Brown, "Hayes Nominees Announced," *Washington Post*, 23 March 1988, 1(C).

<sup>993</sup> Ibid.

open-minded about smaller theaters and much more careful in their decision making.”<sup>994</sup> Geatz did not mention the fact that more small theaters had become members of Equity, even if they had not yet attained full-Equity status. Thus, they were capable of hiring out of New York and elsewhere. Also, as more and more corporate sponsors and national foundations financed theater in Washington, production budgets increased and theaters hired designers with better training, talent, and experience. Finally, after three years the small theaters themselves might have recognized the aesthetic standards that were worthy of awards and, thus, engaged in their own self-improvement. As questions about small theater’s sudden respectability continued to surface, a month later Geatz again explained the change:

In the past we’d go over the nominees at a meeting and then the judges would take their ballots home with them. This year, there was a lot more discussion; we spent a big chunk of the day going over pictures of nominees and really talking about each production. Talking it out refreshes your memory, especially about shows that you might have seen more than a year ago.<sup>995</sup>

Such an extended discussion and refreshment of memory should not have helped the small theaters. It should have strengthened the credibility of the selection process itself; unless, of course, WTAS’ judges and Executive Director used the discussions to promote, at least in a subliminal way, the importance of small theaters to the health and vitality of Washington’s theater community. Again, the reporter did not mention whether Geatz had considered the possibility that small theaters had developed internally, improving their script selection and productions to meet WTAS’ professional standards; if so, they were now more worthy of nominations and awards than in previous years.

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<sup>994</sup> Ron Geatz, Chairman of the Nominating Committee of WTAS, quoted in “Hayes Nominees Announced.”

<sup>995</sup> Ron Geatz, quoted in “Backstage, by Joe Brown, *Washington Post*, 15 April 1988, 11(N).

As the profile of Washington's small theaters rose, Arena's image as the exemplar of professional aesthetics and excellence declined. That decline did not occur immediately. In 1990, Arena earned twenty-eight out of seventy-nine nominations for resident productions, an all time high of 35 percent. In fact, for the Helens' first six years, Washington's oldest resident theater earned 129 out of 409 nominations, or 32 percent of the total. Over the next four years, Washingtonians witnessed Arena's domination of the awards ebb. Arena's decline began in 1991 but did not become officially recognized in the press until 1994 when it earned a low of only ten nominations.<sup>996</sup> Although the theater still earned 74 nominations during those years, its percentage slipped to only 26 percent of a total 360.<sup>997</sup> Arena's decline in awards did not necessarily mean a corresponding drop in its prestige within the mind of the Washington public. What it did indicate was that the rest of the theatrical community was improving not only its standards but also its ability to impress judges and nominators.

Notably, Arena's decline coincided with a general weakening in the prominence of all large theatrical institutions, particularly those that created their own performances. Just as over the last four decades the idea slowly eroded that legitimate theater originated only in New York, so too had the Washington notion that only large institutions could produce quality performances declined. Thus, even though 1988 proved an aberration in the perception that small theaters had suddenly developed a professionalism that could match the larger, more moneyed institutions, by 1992, and continuing through the rest of the 1990s, the small theater movement outpaced the larger institutions in earning Helen

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<sup>996</sup> That same year the Shakespeare Theater became the first theater other than Arena to earn the most nominations.

<sup>997</sup> Arena Stage continued to earn between 10 and 15 percent of the nominations for the rest of the decade.

Hayes Awards and nominations for resident productions. From 1989 through 1991 large theaters commanded the nomination process; over those years, they gained 146 nominations, or 62 percent of a possible 234 nominations, compared to the small theaters' 85 nominations. Conversely, from 1992 through 1994, small theaters earned more nominations than did the large theaters each year, gaining a total of 131 nominations, or 54 percent of a total 241 nominations. On the other hand, large theaters garnered 105 nominations, or 44 percent.<sup>998</sup> As the perception that large, moneyed theaters produced a better quality of performance began to lose its grip on the public's understanding of theater, small theaters' prominence rose.

Although a disproportionate rise in the production budgets of small theaters in relationship to those of the large theaters contributed to this change in perception, equally important were three other factors. First, since the inception of the Helens there had been an increase in the sheer number of small theaters in Washington. Second, small theaters began producing low-budget musicals just as WTAS began emphasizing musical theater categories. This emphasis was in numbers disproportionate to the number of musical productions by local theaters. Because small theaters dominated those categories, they were able to create the impression in the media that they were experiencing a rapid rise to eminence. Third, because of increased budgets and newly acquired Equity status, small theaters were able to hire actors and designers who had previously been hired only by large Equity and big-budget houses. Additionally, now that the Helen Hayes Awards were legitimizing the artists who worked at the small theaters, those artists received opportunities to work in larger venues.

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<sup>998</sup> Dinner Theaters earned to the other two per cent.

Not only was the number of small theaters growing faster than the number of large, but differences in the nature of large and small theatrical institutions also made it more difficult for large theaters to compete representationally with small theaters. With the exception of the Folger (later the Shakespeare Theater) and the brief life of ANT, the number of large theaters in the city remained the same throughout the first ten years of the Helen Hayes Awards.<sup>999</sup> As discussed in Chapter Seven, when the Shakespeare Theater moved into the Lansburgh building, in many ways it realized what its mission had always dictated. Although budgets increased and profiles rose at other small theaters—take, for example, Studio Theater’s move to its permanent 200-seat home on 14<sup>th</sup> Street—neither Studio nor other small theaters demonstrated a desire to become large. Instead, they were committed to the concept of intimacy as an aesthetic choice. Thus, as the number of theaters that WTAS recognized as professional increased over the years, that increase occurred in the realm of small theater. From 1985 through 1989, the number of theaters participating in the awards increased from twenty to thirty-one. Theaters disappeared from the list of participants, either folding entirely or opting out of the professional criteria for inclusion; yet, new theaters arose to replace them. During that time, twenty-three resident theaters earned nominations. Of those twenty-three, five were large theaters and two were either dinner theaters or other commercial operations.<sup>1000</sup> During the next five years, the number of participating theaters continued to rise, from twenty-seven in 1990 to forty-four in 1994. A total of twenty-seven different resident companies earned nominations over that period, and many of them

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<sup>999</sup> ANT had a brief existence and Folger/Shakespeare had always been a big-budget theater in a medium-sized space.

<sup>1000</sup> The Omni Shoreham Hotel produced musicals during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

received multiple awards. Although several of these companies distinguished themselves as independent entities, the public representation of the small theater in the print media remained as a collective group of theaters; and, hence, a group with distinctive features. In this way, each small theater enhanced the collective image of all small theaters even if its life span was a single year. For during that year, the small theater added its identity to the representation of small theaters, thus strengthening that identity as a whole. On the other hand, a large theater tended to represent only itself as an individual entity, because an aspect of its identity embodied the prototypical idea that large institutions are enduring.

Another significant factor in the increasing prominence of Washington's small theater community was the emergence of the low-budget musical. Area theaters did not produce a large number of musicals from 1985 through 1994. Yet, by 1994, WTAS offered four out of fifteen categories for resident productions to musical performances. As a result, an impression was created in the public imaginary that musicals were a vital aspect of the community. Although dinner theaters had produced low-budget musicals for many years, their productions lacked the technical and conceptual dimensions to make them noteworthy. When the first musical awards were added to the list of Helens offered in 1986, Studio won the award with its production of *March of the Falsettos*. In fact, seven of the first nine awards given for Outstanding Musical were awarded to small theaters. Although larger theaters dominated the musical performer categories for the first few years, by 1991, when Woolly Mammoth won with *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, small theaters began to command all the categories associated with musical production. When, in 1992, Northern Virginia's newly founded Signature Theater stormed to

popularity with five Helen Hayes Awards for its production of *Sweeney Todd*, musical theater companies all across the area took note. As Donna Lillard clarified a year later, in an interview with Pamela Sommers, when Signature again dominated the musical theater categories, “I think people here are starting to realize that musicals don’t necessarily need to be done in a huge theater with a \$4 million budget.”<sup>1001</sup>

Finally, small and large theaters began sharing some of the same personnel that the Helens legitimized. As small theaters acquired national foundation and multinational corporate support, they could afford to hire the Equity actors and high profile designers once reserved for the large theaters. Equally important, as local theater artists acquired local celebrity status through the mechanism of the awards, they worked on larger, better-funded and more established stages, like those at Folger/Shakespeare, Arena, and Olney. At first, during the 1980s, the mixing of recognized artists was limited to Arena’s Stanley Anderson, Folger’s Floyd King, and Studio’s Russell Metheny. As the stature of the awards grew, however, and with them the stature of Washington’s small theaters, a host of actors and designers began working for a variety of small and large theaters. Examples of past winners and nominees who worked in both large and small theaters were actors Ted van Griethuysen, Sarah Marshall, and J. Fred Stiffman and designers Nancy Schertler, Daniel MacLean Wagner, and Rosemary Pardee-Holz. The more frequently theaters shared personnel the more rapidly the entire concept of “local” as it had been applied to Washington theater began to deteriorate. Ironically, as that concept lost its meaning, the “local” Joy Zinoman of Studio, who “was not a great advocate” of the awards when they began, announced that she had “been completely proved wrong.

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<sup>1001</sup> Pamela Sommers, “*Hamlet*, Musicals Lead Helen Hayes Nominees,” *Washington Post*, 17 March 1993, 1(B).

They've done a great deal for theater in Washington, and for the people in theater in Washington."<sup>1002</sup> The net-effect of this sharing of personnel between the large and small theaters was a conflation of identities between the two experiences within the public imaginary.

The gradual merging of the large and small theater experiences within the public led to the gradual creation of a homogeneous theater community. To be sure, the public's experience of performance within the two theatrical venues remained distinct. The theater-going public could not equate the small-stage experience and the intimacy of 100 to 200-seat houses with the experience of larger stages and 400 to 500-seat auditoriums. The tactile experience of the two venues was too different. Large venues created greater aesthetic distance that emphasized observing over emotional engagement, while small spaces focused audiences on the nuances of performance. That focus not only allowed audiences to pay closer attention to subtleties, but it also gave them the opportunity to empathize with the characters much more completely. The awards' ceremony glossed over these differences. In fact, given the ceremony's large theater venue, if anything the event's black-tie glitter favored the large theater experience over the small. As celebrity performers gradually returned to their preeminence at the Helen Hayes Awards, a unified image of the Washington theater community emerged. When the ceremony returned to the Kennedy Center in 1996, the intimate experiences disappeared in the excess. Or, perhaps, Washington's theater-going public expected the informality and intimacy of the small theater packaged in the glitter and celebrity of the large.

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<sup>1002</sup> Joy Zinoman, quoted in "Raising Helen," by Bob Mondello, in *Dossier*, May 1989, 32.

One of the consequences of a unified theatrical community was the gradual disappearance of the distinction between theaters as local or national. In the early 1980s, the concept of “local theater” referred mainly to those organizations that used locally trained, inspired, and residing talent. Although Arena had for many years employed artists out of New York, the longevity of some of those company members made them “local” sentimentally. Thus, artists living in Washington were “locals” and Theaters of the Public, particularly small theaters, embodied that understanding. By 1990, a different understanding of “local” began to emerge. This new meaning of indigenous theater referred to any theatrical organization geographically situated in Washington. Even distinctions between locally produced performances and the presentation of touring performances, though important within the Helen Hayes Awards, had begun to lose their meaning for the public at large. This new definition of “local” rendered the question of talent and its identification with the Washington area irrelevant. The transformation of the Folger Theater into Shakespeare Theater at the Folger exemplified this change in meaning.<sup>1003</sup> Prior to reorganization, John Neville-Andrews had made the Folger well known as a local theater because of his commitment to an acting company employing Washington talent despite its big budgets and national mandate. After Michael Kahn took over Shakespeare’s leadership, its representation remained local even though he employed artists imported from across the country. Because Kahn continued to employ key members of Andrew’s acting company, he was able to maintain the theater’s identity as a local theater even as he pushed its image nationally. Those familiar faces sustained Shakespeare’s local identity, even as Kahn employed stars such as Avery Brooks and

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<sup>1003</sup> See Chapter Seven for a full analysis of the Folger Theater’s separation from the Folger Library and its subsequent redefinition as Shakespeare Theater.

Kelly McGillis who had national reputations. By 1994, the very concept of “local” had disappeared from Washington’s theatrical lexicon under the larger umbrella of the Helens’ national capital image.

#### *Section IV: the Nationalization of Washington’s Theaters*

From the beginning, the Helen Hayes Awards had defined Washington theater in egalitarian terms. Members of the theater community had long championed the myth of local theater artists celebrating each other in egoless competition. Even after the awards “attained glamorous event status,” the ceremony “remained quite sentimental, with some of the cozy bonhomie of a family reunion or a bowling banquet, providing a once-a-year opportunity for those in the theater to see each other all together, and sincerely cheer on their own.”<sup>1004</sup> The myth of egoless competition appeared in many forms. For example, when Arena’s Zelda Fichandler accepted an award for Outstanding Director in 1988, she related how her Romanian guest director, Lucian Pintilie, told her that Arena was “the first socialist theater I’ve ever worked in.”<sup>1005</sup> Pintilie spoke of Arena’s system where “the ego was in the work, not backstage.” Of course, the Helens were about more than the work on stage; they were about the competition for patronage. Thus Pintilie ignored Arena’s long list of major multinational and foundation sponsors. So too could Fichandler and the rest of the theater community revel in an awards’ ceremony that looked as if it was meant for everyone. Although it might very well have been true that for local theaters and theater artists “stardom [was] not theirs, nor [was] it necessarily

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<sup>1004</sup> Joe Brown, “Washington Theater’s Night Out,” *Washington Post*, 8 May 1990, 1(B).

<sup>1005</sup> Joe Brown, “Hayes Award to *Crucible*: Big and Small Theaters Share in a Night of Glory,” *Washington Post*, 10 May 1988, 1(E).

part of their dreams,” it was also true that for both individual and organizational nominees and winners of awards, the possible career and/or financial benefits were tremendous, particularly for those theaters seeking funds from “outside the city.”<sup>1006</sup> As a representative of the prestigious Dreyfuss Foundations said:

What differentiates one theater from another? I’m not a critic and smart enough to decide that. So here, I say to myself, is an organization that has received acclaim from laymen, theatergoers, people in the trade. In the overview of a grant request, the validity of the project is the foremost considerations—an evaluation of the management is second. And what makes both of those more credible is the award.<sup>1007</sup>

Thus, although the community enjoyed the myth “that if theater people just put hard work and good intentions under their pillows—poof!—the art fairy will leave them a present,” the truth of the Helen Hayes Awards was that it created a system whereby the competition for foundation and corporate sponsorship became formalized and less combative.<sup>1008</sup>

WTAS’ formalized system for corporate and foundation fundraising altered the identity of Washington’s Theater of the Public fundamentally. In the years leading up to the Helen Hayes Awards, Arena made numerous public pleas for financial support. In the 1980s NPT and the Folger did the same, tantamount to threatening suicide if public support did not ensue. Such behavior codified the idea that Theater of the Public was little more than a charity that would live or die by the good graces of the public and their willingness to make contributions. When a theater found itself in economic difficulty, its only avenue to salvation lay in the media representing it as financially troubled. The

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<sup>1006</sup> Bill McSweeney, President of Occidental Petroleum, quoted in “Raising Helen,” 35.

<sup>1007</sup> Norman Portenoy, Dreyfuss Foundation’s Washington Office, quoted in “Raising Helen,” 35.

<sup>1008</sup> Lloyd Rose, “Helen Hayes and the M-Word: The Egalitarian Fantasy of Washington’s Theater Awards,” *Washington Post*, 5 May 1991, 1(G).

Helen Hayes Awards allowed that representational strategy to fade, as the awards were a structured competition for recognition before an invited audience of corporate and foundation sponsors. In this forum, professional theaters, or aspiring professional theaters, were given space to make their pitch for legitimacy and money. An award or even a nomination meant that a theater received, at the very least, an introduction to potential donors and patrons. After winning several awards for herself and Horizons Theater, Leslie Jacobson stated:

Through the efforts of the Helen Hayes staff and board, theater has achieved a much higher profile in this essentially political city. As artists, we must learn to find our own ways of viewing our theatrical evolution and growth, but these awards, by creating a meeting ground that is exciting and often glamorous, significantly raise the visibility and importance of theater in the community—particularly for a segment of that community that can help support it.<sup>1009</sup>

The price that each theater paid for its seat at the money-trough was nothing more than the willingness to participate in the competition. Participation had its effect on an organization's approach to production and its understanding of itself, both materially and representationally, and if not immediately then at least through a process of slow enculturation. For to participate in the awards process and its ceremony meant that the theater was willing to adjust its cultural representation to the simulation manufactured by the Helens. At the very least theaters had to accept a more glamorous presentation of identity than they had heretofore been willing to afford. Their promotional literature became more stylish and expensive; production teams became more aware of production values and textual themes that had potential with nominators and judges. Most of all, small theaters that participated in the awards' ceremony had to forego scripts and

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<sup>1009</sup> Leslie B Jacobson, Letter to the Editor, *Washington Post*, 22 May 1991, 20(A).

productions that catered to marginal audiences in favor of a more majority-centric theatrical experience. Because it is also true that “changes in audiences lead to changes in performance,” the bonds that theaters nurtured between their audience and their aesthetics, and between their aesthetics and the social and political concerns of their public weakened.<sup>1010</sup> As a result, performances became less controversial and relevant.

In the years following the beginning of the Helen Hayes Awards, the support of national foundations and multinational corporations increased dramatically. With those increases also came a notable rise in the size of Washington’s theater-going public. One of WTAS’ stated aims was to develop theater-going as a Washington habit; and, over the first ten years of the awards, audiences in the city increased from 1,468,564 in 1984 to 2,158,585 by 1993, an increase of almost 47 percent.<sup>1011</sup> Yet, can questions about the kind of audiences that the awards were developing be ignored? These questions are important because, when the Helen Hayes process was instituted in 1984, the theatrical community offered a variety of theatrical experiences to Washingtonians. In its pursuit of national recognition, WTAS wanted to attract a national theater-going public by emphasizing the importance that tourism played in support of Washington’s theater industry. Although no statistics exist on the relationship between tourism and the theater-going public during the 1980s and early 1990s, by 1999 tourism was responsible for 17 percent of Washington’s theater audiences whereas full time residents constituted 74

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<sup>1010</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 16.

<sup>1011</sup> Whether these increases were because of an overall increase in the number of people attending theater or because those that had attended continued to attend, only more frequently, is impossible to surmise.

percent.<sup>1012</sup> Most tourists probably attended productions at the Kennedy Center, the National, or Ford's Theater, given the fact that those venues were closest to the monumental core.

What was most striking about Washington's theater-going public at the turn of the twentieth-century was not that tourism contributed to less than one-fifth of it, but rather that 44 percent of that public had earned professional or graduate degrees compared to only 14 percent of the population at large. In addition, "the average income of theatergoers [was] \$97,800 versus \$76,300 for the metro area population."<sup>1013</sup> In other words, the theater-going public that WTAS and the Helen Hayes Awards developed was upscale, elite, and politically franchised. Though not directly attributable to the presence of the awards, that theater-going public nevertheless appeared similar to the theater-going public that attended the annual Helen Hayes Ceremony itself, an audience sophisticated and cosmopolitan, yet seemingly possessing far less appetite for productions challenging status quo perceptions. As Peter Sellars had discovered with his work at ANT, the content of a performance was irrelevant to its success at the Helens, as their criteria emphasized excellence based on training and skill, not upon a performance's ability to create discourse. As the Helen Hayes Awards became central to the status of each theater, the theater community transformed. On the one hand, theaters were once again defined by the equivocal sounding "amusements" while, on the other hand, they were considerably more professional in their approach to aesthetics.<sup>1014</sup>

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<sup>1012</sup> "League of Washington Theaters, Audience Survey: 2000 and Beyond," Prepared by Shugoll Research, June 2000, Figure 1, Audience Composition: Resident versus Visitor.

<sup>1013</sup> "Audience Survey," 2.

<sup>1014</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, during the 1960s and early 1970s, the print media had identified theater as an amusement.

The transformation of the theatrical community had a great deal to do with its increasing identification with the power of celebrity, a power that the Helen Hayes Awards symbolized to the extreme. When Pat Carroll took over as host of the awards in 1988, a role she repeatedly played throughout the 1990s, she exemplified what WTAS wanted to convey about the region's theatrical identity. Although Carroll left the area to achieve fame elsewhere, she returned to Washington to work and prosper, not economically but as an actor who was finally able to explore her craft in challenging roles.<sup>1015</sup> Through coverage of Carroll in the Washington media throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, WTAS made her celebrity the axial identity of all celebrities attending or participating in the ceremony. As a result, the iconic relationship between celebrities and sponsors, both from foundations and corporations, a relationship in which one wanted to see or be seen with the other, united the city's diverse theater-going public into a single totality. This simulation of the public was not interested in variations in the styles or content of performances, but rather in the excellence of the show. Defining that excellence was not only the awards per se, but also the celebrities, whose very presence at a theater testified teleologically to the excellence of the work. In this simulacrum, the public engaged the theater community not so much as an audience member, but as a patron. The celebrity's subjectivity embodied the individuality of the theater-going public while also representing the individual theater and the theater community as a whole. This simulation was not static; it was dynamic and imbued with cultural power. In fact, the celebrity represented the affective space that housed "both the audience and the institutions that have worked to produce the cultural forms that have allowed the

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<sup>1015</sup> Most notably, while working at the Shakespeare Theater, Pat Carroll played Falstaff in Henry IV.

celebrity to develop.”<sup>1016</sup> Thus, the celebrity performer acted as a channel between the theater-going public and the Theater of the Public. In the subjectivity of the celebrity, a unified, national theatrical identity emerged. The identity of this theater-going public resembled a national public in which the universality of fame and notoriety was substituted for the specificity of theme and action.

This disconnect between the content of performance and the content of the public’s daily life was reflected in the fact that theaters became immune to fluctuations in the local economy. Following the growth of corporate and national foundation support, the number of professional theaters as well as the quantity of their productions continued to grow. Even as attendance numbers dipped during a local recession in 1992-1993, the number of theaters and performances rose relentlessly. Conversely, several years earlier there had been a relationship between audiences and productions. In 1988, attendance soared above two million for the first time. In the following year, a recession caused audience numbers to drop by 300,000; correspondingly, the number of theaters and productions dropped as well, from thirty-one to twenty-seven and from 216 to 136. In 1992, however, when another economic recession caused attendance to drop from 1,902,086 to 1,637,568, a drop of over 260,000 people, four new theaters were founded and the total number of productions rose from 169 to 206, an increase of 37 productions, or 22 percent.<sup>1017</sup> In other words, the economic support of national foundations and corporations immunized the theater community from the effects of the local economy. As the health of the city’s theatrical community became less dependent upon the

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<sup>1016</sup> *Celebrity and Power*, 73-74.

<sup>1017</sup> “Theater Attendance Numbers: 1984-1993.” WTAS Archives.

economic health of its local population, theater came to signify a life wholly separate from that of most Washingtonians.

Although most Washington theaters agreed that the Helen Hayes Awards had elevated the profile of the theater community in general, those theaters rarely scrutinized the real cost of that elevation. As a result, even when the awards' ceremony slipped back into the Center in 1996, no one raised a murmur of concern. One reason was the internalization of values that had taken place during the intervening years. In his book addressing the corporate takeover of culture, Howard Schiller discusses the corporate-dominated media's systematic blurring of historical differences during the 1980s to make a larger point about the corporate world's appropriation of public expression in general.

He states:

It is not necessary to construct a theory of intentional cultural control. In truth, the strength of the control process rests in its apparent absence. The desired systemic result is achieved ordinarily by a loose though effective institutional process. It utilizes the education of journalists and other media professionals, built-in penalties and rewards for doing what is expected, norms presented as objective rules, and the occasional but telling direct intrusion from above. The main lever is the internalization of values.<sup>1018</sup>

Although motivations underlying corporate control of historical information during the 1980s operated at a national level and therefore were far more weighty than motivations guiding WTAS and its supporters, the main lever of control in both processes remained similar: the systematic internalization of values. The absence of protest by theater artists and workers of the small theater movement typified that process of internalization. A move that nine years earlier had generated concern, outrage, and public debate now

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<sup>1018</sup> Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture Inc., The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8.

spoke—albeit in silence—volumes about how the area’s theatrical community had internalized the values of corporate America.

Of course, the construction of events and processes like the Helen Hayes Awards were not exceptional on the part of Washington’s political and economic elites. Wherever the public sphere operated, it responded to workers and artists with palliatives, designed to persuade them that the benefits of socio-political action not only outweighed the costs but generally had no costs associated with them. Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt argue that the construction of culture by the culture industry provide the public these palliatives without offering “any real change in the class situation, the semblance of the human as a separate product.”<sup>1019</sup> As the city’s theater community became less entwined with the living conditions of its populace, transforming from a culturally parochial capital to a city with national and international dimensions, that community reflected “the culture industry’s pauperism.”<sup>1020</sup> In Washington, that pauperism was made all the more apparent within the small theater movement. The history of city’s small theaters consisted of episode after episode of images of determination and struggle, not only to realize an ambition but also to address an intrinsic social idealism. Their labors were not driven by images of wealth and glamour, but frequently by obsession with the work itself. The Helen Hayes Awards contradicted the experience of local theatrical workers, negating the values expressed by their labor. It also overshadowed the authenticity of their experiences, for although those laborers donned the attire of celebrity

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<sup>1019</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>1020</sup> Ibid.

elites but once a year, the internalization of the values of celebrity culture ultimately undermined the ability of the city's theater community to create meaningful work.

## Chapter Eleven

### NATIONAL THEATER, PUBLIC THEATER: WASHINGTON'S THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE

Between 1970 and 1990 the theatrical geography of Washington, D.C., was transformed fundamentally. Following World War II, Theater of Commerce and Theater of Community dominated Washington's theatrical landscape. In the 1960s, several Theaters of the Public emerged; within a few decades, however, the region's not-for-profit theater community had developed into one of the country's largest theater markets. By 2003, *Variety* reported that theater in the greater metropolitan area had surpassed Los Angeles as the second largest producer of professional theater in the country.<sup>1021</sup> These changes in the city's theatrical landscape have not been simply structural; they have also been spatial and symbolic. As the twenty-first century began, Washington's theatrical building boom intensified. The Kennedy Center's \$400 million building campaign, which spearheaded the boom, includes a pedestrian plaza that connects the isolated national cultural center to the city and its reinvigorated nightlife. Arena Stage and Shakespeare Theater also have \$100 million building plans in the works, each envisioning facilities that expand the institutional reach of their entertainment centers. Although not as grandiose in scale as those of the city's three most prestigious theaters, other companies have also constructed (or are constructing) new spaces, renovating old ones, or adding to existing facilities: Woolly Mammoth, Gala Hispanic, Round House, Signature, Studio, and the Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts. If Richard Coe's comment in 1971 equating the "importance of brick" with cultural permanence still rings true, then

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<sup>1021</sup> Paul Harris, "D.C. Turns up the Heat: Despite Fiscal Fears, Legit Expansion Continues," *Variety* 7 April 2003, 1.

there can be little doubt that Washington's theatrical renaissance is both legitimate and permanent.<sup>1022</sup> Although few would claim that Washington's theatrical community rivals New York's—either symbolically, aesthetically, or practically—there can be little doubt that the Federal City has attained high status not only as a locus of national political and financial power, but also as a leading national cultural center. When this manufactured cultural identity is combined with the city's enormous political capital and financial resources, Washington's ability to project power is arguably unrivaled.

Although the success of Washington's theatrical community is unquestionable, the significance of that success invites quantitative and qualitative evaluation. For during this process of growth, the significance of Washington's theater community, both to its local residents and to its national constituency, has changed and evolved. As the city's social space was transformed from an economically depressed and socially stigmatized environment into a vital, culturally energized corporate milieu, the media's simulation of the city and its theatrical community changed as well. A theatrical culture that, in the 1960s, was portrayed by local media as dominated by light entertainment and amusement emerged as a diverse collection of theatrical entities, each of which approached not only the art of performance differently but also the business of audience-building and community relations. Using a variety of venues, performance techniques, and post-show forums, identity theaters and small theaters served an array of distinct publics all over the city. The media attempted to represent this new theatrical landscape, but they struggled with the meaning and importance of these unique Theaters of the Public. In the process, for a brief period during the 1970s and early 1980s, theaters and their constituencies

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<sup>1022</sup> Richard Coe, "Dramatic Event for Catholic University," *Washington Post*, 11 September 1970, 1(C). He made his comment after the opening of Catholic University's Hartke Theater in 1970.

helped to define their communities in the public sphere. Not only did performances give voice to political issues and social concerns but theatrical institutions also gave concrete, iconic expression to the identities of previously invisible publics.

Although identity theaters diminished in importance during the 1980s, the idea that theaters could serve as signifiers of neighborhood identity continued. In fact, theaters' function as an instrument of identity soon acquired both metropolitan and national implications. As the 14<sup>th</sup> Street theater district grew, the media portrayed its small theaters as engines of social change and economic development. Concomitantly, the producers of the small theater movement organized the League of Washington Theaters in order to give the impression of a unified identity. Theater producers saw not only the economic benefits of such a move, but also the positive cultural possibilities. By unifying, the city's theaters might strengthen their indigenous connections and, ironically, become nationally significant. As a result, a drive to unify swept through the theater community, culminating in the birth of the American National Theater and the Helen Hayes Awards.

Those two projects suffered dramatically different fates. ANT failed in its bid to generate a national theater-going public, collapsing in less than two years. In contrast, the Washington Theater Awards Society's Helen Hayes Awards, which just completed its twentieth year, significantly altered the perception and meaning of the theater community both nationally and locally. From the beginning, the awards attracted the attention of local and national media, national foundations and multinational corporations, and a plethora of television, movie, and theater celebrities. Although this annual gathering of theaters and their potential benefactors proved beneficial for the economic health of the

city's struggling theaters, the resultant media simulacrum obfuscated the city's theatrical diversity. Thanks to that obfuscation, much of the dynamism of Washington's diverse theatrical culture was no longer visible to the public. As the media's simulation of Washington's theater-going public shifted from a diverse set of communities to one community—a community of increasingly sophisticated cultural consumers—the city's theaters faced growing pressure to compromise, replacing their own social and aesthetic concerns with the concerns of their national patrons. Although Washington's theater artists continue to resist those demands, the socio-aesthetic implications of their work rarely is heard in the public sphere.

Throughout the twentieth-century, Washington developed materially and symbolically; concomitantly, its national and international significance escalated. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, the federal government began construction of its long neglected national capital: the monumental core grew significantly, erecting symbolic spaces dedicated to the institutions and personages at the heart of American political power. People from around the country flocked to Washington to celebrate its mythic identity. Following World War II, the city became an economic force as well. As the size and scope of the federal government increased, the government took control of a significant percentage of the country's gross national product. Trade associations, law firms, and multinational corporations established offices in Washington for the purpose of lobbying federal agencies. The region's economy reaped the benefits of this largess as federal and local bureaucracies expanded their employment opportunities, making Washington a nerve center of the nation's economic infrastructure. Because of the city's growth and the nation's developing international role, the country's leaders decided that

the nation's capital needed to become a cultural force, both nationally and internationally. By the late 1950s, the government planned for a national cultural center, which was soon followed by plans for a National Endowment for the Arts.

As the 1960s ended, Washington's theatrical landscape still consisted primarily of Theater of Commerce and Theater of Community. Despite two notable Theaters of the Public, this commercial/community paradigm dominated the region's theatrical landscape and public consciousness. Broadway's commercial mystique as organized and presented by the National Theater and its celebrity stars resided at the center of the paradigm. In support of this mystique, Theater of Community created indigenous productions, but these theaters functioned more as social apparatuses than as centers of performance. The media differentiated between professional and amateur theater communities by disassociating theater's entertainment function from its social one. The media attributed the entertainment function to performances presented at the National and the Shady Grove Music Fair, while the social apparatus was the purview of Theater of Community. Shows performed at the National and at Shady Grove, however, originated outside the city, frequently in New York, the icon of American culture. As a result, the legitimacy of Washington theater did not derive from its own activities. Dinner theater had just begun in the area, but its commercial status derived more from its combination of dinner and a show than from the quality of its performances.

Arena Stage and the Washington Theater Club produced shows locally and established reputations for operating theaters with aesthetic missions. By the mid-1960s Arena and WTC had earned national recognition for their work. Because these theaters existed outside the commercial/community paradigm, however, the local media and the

theater-going public understood them more as expressions of strong, determined individuals than as reflections of a fundamental aesthetic change occurring in the city. Because Arena and WTC offered the public fewer than a thousand seats on any given night, few spectators developed an understanding of how their missions were different from those of Theater of Commerce. In addition, the artists associated with these theaters—the designers, directors, and actors—had for the most part honed their talents elsewhere. Thus, even though some theater-goers probably appreciated the indigenous intentions of these not-for-profit theaters, they would also have asserted that imported talent was necessary to the realization of those intentions.

For years the public and the media were comfortable with their understanding of the theatrical landscape. The commercial/community dichotomy followed simple economic criteria: theater either functioned according to economic, professional interests in the commercial sphere or served the needs and values of community in the domain of amateurism. During the 1950s and 1960s, Washington's local commercial sphere and financial and entertainment centers collapsed after decades of neglect. This economic deterioration was accompanied by transformations in the city's theatrical iconography. The city's downtown, including much of its architectural and theatrical heritage, was demolished to make room for expansion of the city's public sector. The number of private sector agencies in direct support of, or with the purpose of lobbying the government's expanding bureaucracy grew. As the private sector constructed more office buildings and parking lots, nightlife disintegrated; restaurants and bars closed or moved, leaving the center of metropolitan life hollow, save for the city's booming pornographic marketplace. Concomitantly, the city's demographics changed: the

population went from 65 percent white in 1950 to 70 percent African American in 1970. The uprisings that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became the symbolic focal point for white flight, thus, defining the plight of Washington's downtown throughout much of the 1970s.

Although the National Theater remained a powerful symbol of Washington's theatrical identity, its Broadway tryouts and current Broadway hits could do little to stop the city's entertainment culture from hemorrhaging. Even when shows were financially successful, they brought only temporary relief to a city suffering from a spatially rooted cultural collapse. The Shady Grove Music Fair, a host of dinner theaters, and a vibrant Theater of Community operated in the surrounding suburbs. They not only offered more shows to a theater-going public that was fearful of downtown, but also provided more amenities and more seats than the National and the small, ill-defined Theaters of the Public that inhabited a handful of soon-to-be condemned downtown dwellings. Even though the National garnered substantially more media coverage than any other theater in town, its ability to define Washington's theatrical culture had declined. In fact, because the prosperous, celebrity-driven nightlife of downtown Washington had been replaced by the seedy semblances of the pornography industry, the National was in a precarious position. The theater could either reorganize its conservative identity around a more provocative repertoire, which meant it would risk losing its connections to the political establishment, or it could suffer through a devalued downtown commercial sphere and press for revitalization. Under the best of conditions, revitalization would take a decade or more to accomplish, so the National was left with only one viable option: testing the waters of the counter-cultural by presenting *Hair* in the spring of 1971. Although the

production was overwhelmingly successful both economically and as a source of cultural energy, the theater discovered that shows like *Hair* were Broadway anomalies. The downtown social space had deteriorated to such a degree that a counter-cultural repertoire (even if there had been such a thing) could not sustain a commercial theater. As a result, when the Kennedy Center opened the following year, the National retreated from counter-cultural issues, returning to more conservative entertainments built around celebrity performers. Within a few years, the National's theatrical operations were subsumed by the Kennedy Center.

Gutted of its vital commercial district, Washington's Federal City, or monumental core, filled the vacuum. Since early in its history, Washington, D.C., has been two cities: one shaped by its federal national mandate and the other by its concerns for the local populace. The National Theater had always addressed both of these identities. Over the course of the twentieth century, as the United States' role in the world expanded and intensified, the balance of these competing agendas shifted toward the national mandate. The political unrest over the Vietnam War redefined America's identity and reconfigured America's foreign policy; the social unrest of the 1950s and 1960s realigned the relationship between state and federal power, with the United States government asserting more control over an entrenched system of States' rights. President Johnson's Great Society Programs established a national agenda and increased the size and scope of the federal bureaucracy. Although the District won home rule in the early 1970s, without a functioning, independent commercial district, the power and reach of the federal government over local affairs increased both materially and symbolically.

Within Washington's theatrical geography, the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts exemplified a dramatic shift in the city's identity away from local control and concerns and toward a set of national priorities. Washington's theatrical epicenter was no longer the National Theater located in the old downtown, near the apex of local and federal space; the new epicenter was located at a federal site overlooking the Potomac. The inauguration of the Kennedy Center symbolized the emergence of a new kind of theatrical culture supported in part by public money and in part by the munificence of multinational corporate-giving. The Center's mission was to help foster and organize a national performing arts culture in hopes that a national theater-going public would emerge in the process. At the time, the Center's isolation from the downtown proved fortuitous because the Center could create a spatial identity without a deteriorating entertainment iconography. Unfortunately, the Center's social space was isolated from the comings and goings of the general public as well, particularly the African American public that rarely frequented the Center's Foggy Bottom neighborhood. That isolation contributed to the failure of the Center's architectural presence to exude a sense of cultural democracy; instead, the Center's bulk iconically presented a sort of common man's Imperial Palace. Although a super-monument to the nation's acceptance of the performing arts, locally the Kennedy Center only emphasized the growing polarization of the city's population along lines of race and class.

Although the Kennedy Center symbolized the birth of a new paradigm based on Theater of the Public, its theatrical identity was quickly mired in the requirements of survival. Instead of nurturing a national theatrical performing arts culture in the aftermath of the world premiere of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, the Center imported

Broadway shows to fill its large houses. In other words, qualitatively the Center perpetuated the old commercial paradigm. By representing the American people on a national scale, however, the Center was successful quantitatively.

It was not until the mid-1970s that Theater of the Public emerged as a sufficiently powerful cultural force in Washington to challenge the city's longstanding commercial/community theatrical dichotomy. Although Theaters of the Public respected economic concerns and were mindful of people's community needs, in their initial incarnation they usually pursued aesthetic and/or socio-political interests that were designed to provoke discussion or re-evaluation of existing norms. Inhabiting an array of architectures in diverse social spaces, the more successful of the early Theaters of the Public resisted the media's tendency to catalogue them along the existing commercial/community continuum. Some Theaters of the Public resisted the community theater label by paying actors, designers, and directors, sometimes from outside the Washington region but frequently from within the city's own talent pool. Even if they did not offer a professional wage to theater artists, they provided enough remuneration to establish a distinction in the media between themselves and the existing world of amateur theater. Theaters of the Public also resisted the commercial label by drawing their repertoires from an array of texts, most of which were decidedly not suitable for Broadway and its large auditoriums. The media had grown accustomed to Broadway tours and tryouts; they also represented the general theater-going public's entertainment tastes. The city's Theaters of the Public created original productions that were frequently designed with the city's diverse, indigenous population in mind; thus, these theaters represented a diverse aesthetic perspective, which only added to the media's difficulty in conveying a clear

picture of what these theaters were. Theaters of the Public attracted an array of audiences to their small auditoriums, publics with specific interests and tastes. The media elected not to characterize these theaters by their publics, however, or by their repertoires, which were usually complex and difficult to categorize. Rather, the media represented the significance of the more successful Theaters of the Public in terms of their idiosyncratic artistic directors. In the early years, Zelda Fichandler and Davey Marlin-Jones became local celebrities whose personal tastes defined the directions of Arena Stage and the Washington Theater Club. Later, the personalities of Robert Hooks, Louis Scheeder, Joy Zinoman, Bart Whiteman, and Michael Kahn defined the aesthetic choices of the D.C. Black Repertory Company, the Folger Theater, Studio Theater, Source Theater, and the Shakespeare Theater respectively. In other words, according to the media's simulacrum, the idiosyncrasies of the artistic directors determined the theaters' seasons and programs, not the ideologies and social narratives of theaters' boards of directors, the theater artists, the theaters' missions, nor the audiences.

Ironically, the smaller, less financially successful theaters sometimes managed to subvert the reductionism of both the commercial/community dichotomy and the media, which tended to limit the significance of a theater by focusing too narrowly on the company's artistic director. The small, amateur 75-seat Theater Lobby was one of the first Theaters of the Public to have an aesthetic voice in the media. When the company produced the local premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1956, they escaped the invisibility of amateurism by earning reviews in the major dailies. In addition, by continuing to produce scripts in the absurdist style throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, they also established the reputation of an aesthetically viable theater. The

absurd became the company's trademark. Later, other small theaters also managed to establish their own voices in the public sphere. Woolly Mammoth, for example, picked up the mantle of the absurd or quirky in the 1980s, while New Playwrights Theater shaped its identity around the creation and production of new scripts, particularly by Washington playwrights. Most importantly, however, theaters of identity extended the significance of theatrical culture by including particular counter-publics in the formulation of their missions. Although most identity theaters with strong counter-cultural perspectives had died out by the early 1980s, many Theaters of the Public were increasingly identified by their neighborhoods, not just as performance centers but also as engines of economic development. In those cases, the media's simulation of a theater's identity and public was used to characterize the aspirations of an entire neighborhood, both its residential and commercial sectors.

Hence, nurtured by the early examples of Theater of the Public, during the 1970s Washington developed an indigenous theater community. The missions of indigenous theaters were not limited to the aesthetic. Harnessing the energy and ideologies of the socio-political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, theaters of identity were shaped by specific socio-aesthetic agendas that appealed not to the city's general public, but to an array of smaller counter-publics. As a result, these theaters of identity created spheres of public discourse about contemporary social issues that galvanized the city's politically dissident communities as well as its African American, feminist, and emerging Latino communities. Although the media was determined to simulate Theater of the Public as the product of artistic directors with strong, idiosyncratic personalities, this media-driven culture of individualism was undercut by this subset of not-for-profit identity theaters. In

confronting status quo conceptions about the role of theater in people's lives, theaters of identity challenged the media to reevaluate their aesthetic criteria. Theaters of identity altered the definition of performance by connecting performances more closely to the constituencies whom they served. In so doing, the performances they created could not be judged by a set of universal norms; the role of the integral audience became a crucial piece of the criteria. Even though Arena, WTC, Studio, the Folger, and even Woolly Mammoth appealed to different publics, they attracted college-educated audiences who were generally more interested in an intellectually challenging evening than in performances designed to disturb the social status quo. Arena, for example, established an interracial company and a more provocative style of performance during the 1960s; it achieved national significance and even moved a show to Broadway as a result. When Arena's integral audience began to abandon the theater, however, Fichandler made the decision to reverse course, returning to less provocative productions and a quieter public. Theaters of identity captured the attention of the media and the public by presenting a different idea of theater's significance. If that attention was not always positive and enthusiastic, it did generate symbolic space in the public sphere. That space helped theaters of identity spearhead a wave of theatrical activity that emphasized the indigenous nature of performance. In the process, Washington theater became about Washington—its people, its neighborhoods, and its unique concerns and ideas.

During the 1970s, theaters of identity fundamentally shifted the significance of theater. No longer was legitimate theater viewed as originating from outside the city. Instead, the media, and subsequently the general public, began to recognize theater's ability to organize and shape identity, not only the identity of its audiences, but also of

the city itself, both at the neighborhood and community levels. The theater-going public recognized that theatrical organizations could be centers of a network of counter-public spheres; spaces not just for enjoying simulations of life, but also for influencing the meaning and shape of communities and their aspirations. As centers of an emergent public sphere, these theaters possessed a unique vibrancy: not only did the content of their performances reverberate beyond the stage, but the meaning of their organizations also helped structure audiences into more coherent constituencies.

Although theaters of identity still depended to a certain degree on the quality of their artistry to maintain and develop their publics, what constituted aesthetic quality began to change. Some in the media reevaluated their criteria for theatrical excellence. They no longer determined a theater's or a performance's quality solely by the professional training of its actors, directors, and designers. The ability of a performance to galvanize an audience or of a theater to motivate a public was understood as a component of aesthetic evaluation. In this sense, the criteria for judging artistic quality became more democratic, as sectors of the media recognized that each community or public had its own set of standards; they challenged the idea that a universal criteria for excellence should not be applied to the evaluation of a performance as because each performance was presented to a unique public with its own historical development, norms, and issues. Equally important, some elements of the media even recognized that each theatrical organization existed within its own social space, and a theater's relationship to the surrounding environment established the aesthetic milieu within which the performance's artistry resonated—or perhaps failed to resonate. Media that ignored those extenuating circumstances risked being castigated by the theater-going public

because they did injustice to the temporal nature of the performance or to the theater as an institutional aesthetic object.

The life of Washington's theaters of identity (and its small theaters) during the late 1970s was tenuous, however. Funding sources were difficult to find and sustain, particularly for theaters with counter-cultural agendas and aesthetics. Although the economic depression of Washington's downtown made acquisition of alternative theatrical venues easier, attracting audiences with disposable incomes to those depressed areas was challenging. Most importantly, however, theaters of identity often organized communities without the economic resources needed to sustain them; thus, to survive, these theaters had to look outside their communities. In looking outside their communities, however, theaters of identity became vulnerable to the socio-aesthetic criteria of others. As the 1970s ended, theaters of identity either closed down entirely or morphed into more financially viable organizations with more socially agreeable agendas. When identity theaters with counter-cultural agendas disappeared, a throng of new small theaters replaced them. These theaters' missions eschewed direct appeals to socio-political agendas; this change in focus led to the birth of Washington's small theater movement.

Between the early 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the process that best defined the small theater community was the production of original scripts. If theaters of identity produced original scripts, so too did many small theaters. New Playwrights' Theater, which had been founded expressly to develop new scripts and Washington playwrights, led the way. Part of a larger national trend encouraged by the NEA, which recognized the need of regional theaters for original scripts, NPT's work placed the

process of script production directly into the public sphere. The reasons for this emphasis are manifold. Larger theatrical institutions were generally too cautious to produce original work. The Kennedy Center, for example, was portrayed in the media as the epicenter of most things theatrical in Washington, even though it was operating as little more than a touring house for Broadway shows. The public did not, however, identify the Center with new play production; if anything, after its world premiere of *Mass*, the public associated the Center with conventional plays, musicals, and concerts. Although Arena Stage occasionally produced world premieres, those shows were usually incubated elsewhere.

Along with theaters of identity, NPT helped to make the small theater movement the central force behind local development of new plays and playwrights. Because the downtown was no longer Washington's entertainment center, small theaters appeared throughout the District in basements, warehouses, storefronts, and abandoned sanctuaries; they produced an array of scripts, tailoring each production to a particular constituency. Finally, critics helped this process along, especially *The Post's* Richard Coe, who loved new scripts and playwrights and who actively disdained directors who altered texts with production concepts. Critics like Coe motivated Washingtonians to support a host of new dramatic voices.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, theaters used the instrument of performance and the image of the playwright to bring issues and ideas directly into the public sphere. The plays were read and discussed, performed in stage readings or in workshop productions, and occasionally given full-scale productions. An aspect of the process, however, was a thorough discussion of the script's content and effectiveness. Although

not the coffeehouse culture of Habermas' public sphere, this dynamic, script-oriented culture was a vital breeding ground for an indigenous theatrical culture.<sup>1023</sup> As Washingtonians imagined themselves as playwrights, actors, and directors, with lives and issues worthy of the stage, so too could they imagine a theatrical culture indigenous to their city that was imbued not only with artistic sensibility but also with theatrical legitimacy. In other words, theater and performance became signifiers of a local Washington identity; identity theaters cultivated particular counter-publics, while NPT and other small theaters defined what it meant to be a Washingtonian.

This cultural vitality motivated Washington's small theaters to pursue a rigorous agenda of self-definition as indigenous theaters. By the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, small theaters dominated the city's theatrical landscape, not because of the number of performances they offered or the total number of audience members they attracted, but because they offered the theater-going public a different kind of aesthetic—the intimate theatrical experience. Although theaters of identity offered a similar type of intimacy, the media usually overlooked the unique attributes of intimacy in favor of provocative content. The intimate theatrical experience played a crucial role in the development of Washington theaters and their sense of identity. Because small theaters offered the public a limited number of seats for each performance, the media's representation of a show took on a greater degree of importance in the theater's overall

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<sup>1023</sup> In *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas discusses the origins of the seventeenth century public sphere. One of its sources was the coffeehouse culture of Europe “where literature had to legitimate itself.” In these democratic venues “critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes....” *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), 33.

identity. Indeed, the media's simulacrum reached far more people than the actual performances, even in the case of a highly successful show.

Although the old paradigm of Theaters of Commerce and Community still existed in Washington in a weakened and modified form, by 1980 a new paradigm orchestrated by a growing Theater of the Public began to reshape the theatrical landscape. This paradigm combined several aspects of the commercial/community dialectic. As not-for-profit entities, these theaters built community-centric institutions that specialized in locally produced shows. By mixing Equity and non-Equity artists, they struggled to decouple the connection between local theater and amateurism. If, under the old paradigm, legitimate theater existed only outside the metro area in places like New York, under the new paradigm indigenous production gained in both value and relevancy. Although the new paradigm recognized the economic worth of the city's larger institutions, those theaters had difficulty sustaining their connections to communities; for that reason, small theaters trumped the larger venues on socio-aesthetic grounds. As a result, distinctions between commercial and community, and professional and amateur diminished.

During the 1980s, the importance of indigenous production as a signifier of cultural value grew substantially. Ironically, as the importance of Washington-centric theater increased, greater awareness of distinctions between small theaters and large theatrical institutions also developed. As various large and small theaters jostled for space in the city's competitive real estate market, the historic tension between the city as a Federal District and the city as a local metropolis intensified. Although Theater of the Public blurred distinctions between professional and amateur artists, it emphasized differences between publics and counter-publics. These distinctions became particularly

acute when, during the early 1980s, national and international investment in Washington's downtown returned. A revitalized commercial district gave the theater community hope that the city could re-create its entertainment district. Most of Washington's small theaters were located elsewhere, however. The 14<sup>th</sup> Street corridor nurtured a particularly diverse group of theaters that was playing a central role in the revitalization of the neighborhood. The League of Washington Theaters was originally founded as an association of small theaters; thus, one of its primary goals was to promote theater as a means of neighborhood development. Renewed focus on the development of downtown, however, benefited the larger theatrical institutions, because their identities were more directly associated with Washington as a Federal District. Because of their location, large theaters were also more closely tied to the development of a national theater-going public. Because the Kennedy Center and the re-vitalized National Theater were associated with the monumental core and with Washington's hotels and tourists, the media portrayed their publics as more national in scope. The American National Theater and the Helen Hayes Awards materialized this tension as both institutions sought to synthesize these competing theatrical narratives. Under the direction of Peter Sellars, ANT hoped to merge the city's diverse publics with segments of the Center's commercial audience. The Washington Theater Awards Society instituted the Helen Hayes Awards to celebrate the accomplishments of the indigenous theater community. By so doing, WTAS hoped to nurture the professional and aesthetic development of Washington theater, giving those heretofore struggling theaters a forum not only to compete for status in a more media friendly way, but also for the attention of major national contributors.

As more and more small theaters dotted Washington's theatrical landscape during the 1970s and early 1980s, they began to organize. In 1983 they founded the League of Washington Theaters. Initially, the League hoped to counter the cultural and media hegemony of the city's larger theatrical institutions, including the Kennedy Center, the National, and even Arena Stage (albeit to a lesser extent). Shortly thereafter, however, the League was transformed from an organization that functioned as a counterweight to more powerful theatrical establishments into an organization that represented the entire theater community, including the Center, the National and, of course, Arena. With the League operating in the background, Theater of the Public emerged as Washington's defining theatrical signifier. A complex network of small theaters emerged, each with a clientele that was not only uniquely suited to the theater's repertoire but also representative of the theater's social space. Even the National, which had acquired not-for-profit status during the 1970s, was portrayed by the media as just another theatrical organization catering to a specific sector of the public.

This renaissance of theater in the Washington area resulted from the fact that the NEA, major charitable foundations, and multinational corporate headquarters were establishing roots in the city. There is no evidence that these forces had a specific mandate to create such a renaissance in the capital of the free world; nonetheless, as links between economic and cultural development became closer during the 1980s, the city experienced enormous theatrical growth. The number of theaters in Washington, D.C., grew in large measure because of their ability to sell themselves as engines of economic development. The rebirth of the National Theater within a revitalized downtown or the development of Studio Theater in a rapidly gentrifying 14<sup>th</sup> Street corridor exemplified

theater's connection to the process of economic development. In order to become that economic engine, theaters had to do more than simply generate audiences; they also had to generate cultural consumers who went to restaurants, bars, and nightclubs after the show. That kind of theater-going public had more disposable income than many of the marginal publics who frequented the small theaters. As a result, the media's simulation of Washington's theater-going public became more prosperous and upwardly mobile.

As the city's theaters became associated with prosperity and redevelopment, the media's simulation of theater once again became more about theater architecture and the performance product than the development of original scripts. In an effort to ensure the longevity of their theaters, producers and boards of directors sought to create their own theater spaces. Indeed, during the 1980s, Washington experienced a theater construction boom that resulted in the establishment of a permanent theatrical culture. As a result, the media no longer depicted theaters as artistic gathering places, which ironically the dearth in theatrical architecture had not only allowed but made necessary. Indeed, discourse between theater artists and publics was essential to theaters that could not offer their audiences or the media much in the way of production values. By the end of the 1980s, theater reflected what the larger social space had become: a consumer-driven commercial space. The new play remained a part of this more product-oriented theater, but its development was hidden because the protean nature of the new play contradicted the idea of the finished product.

By the early 1980s theater in Washington stood at a crossroads. On the one hand, Theater of the Public had lost much vital energy as it made the transition from a community-centric to a professional theatrical culture. On the other hand, as the culture

pushed toward higher production values, theaters were strained financially. Theaters like Arena, New Playwrights and The Folger pleaded continuously in the media for money. They asked the public to step forward and support their operations with financial gifts and pledges. What soon became clear to the public at large, but not necessarily to the theaters themselves, was that Washington's Theaters of the Public operated at a financial level that exceeded the public's willingness to support them. Because of their excesses, these theaters approached the public time and again with demands for money and support. During the early 1960s, the Ford and Rockefeller foundations believed that as not-for-profit theaters became institutionalized, their activities would generate a stable stream of financial support. As the 1980s began, however, that belief no longer seemed credible. If the city's theaters were to survive, they would have to become permanent charities; and if they were to become more professional, they would have to seek contributions beyond the local citizenry. For that reason, national corporations and foundations became increasingly important as theaters had to broaden their appeal beyond the indigenous population.

In 1984, Roger Stevens established the American National Theater under the artistic direction of Peter Sellars. In so doing, he hoped not only to create that national theater-going public, but also to realize the Center's original mission, which was to become a national stage for a network of regional theaters. When Sellars organized ANT he created a National Theater of the Public that would serve—or so he hoped—as a focal point for Theaters of the Public nationally. For Sellars, a national theater needed a national public sphere. Its performances would act as stimuli, invigorating discourse on important social and political issues related to American identity. In this sense, Sellars

hoped to rekindle the original idea behind Theater of the Public, which was to redefine the significance of theater and its relationship to the American people. Realization of this vision of ANT would take an enormous amount of money and patience. Although the public willingly accepted the idea that theaters needed charitable contributions in order to achieve professional status, they were less willing to accept Sellars' idea of a fully state-supported theater—at least not theater asking the kind of questions Sellars envisioned.

The failure of ANT marked the failure of Theater of the Public to redefine theater locally and perhaps nationally as well. Unfortunately, that failure probably had more to do with Sellars' political and aesthetic naivete than with the idea of a state-supported theater itself. To be sure, the Center's isolated social space and imperial design would have made any version of ANT difficult to realize, but Sellars' failure to understand the Washington public and its socio-aesthetic relationship to the world left him and ANT vulnerable to serious misconceptions. The city's diverse constituencies might have supported a national theater that reflected their diversity. Instead, this potentially integral audience was forced to accept a diet of Sellars' own productions. These productions displayed not only Sellars' unique vision of theater, but also his idiosyncrasies, which unfortunately played into the media's tendency to portray Theaters of the Public through the characteristics of their artistic directors. As a result, Sellars, the idiosyncratic genius who expressed his vision of America on stage, embodied the media's simulacrum of Theater of the Public. Paradoxically, ANT's Chicago Summer, four productions from Chicago's regional theaters, provided a brief respite from that diet of Sellars and proved highly successful. ANT's implosion after only eighteen months quite possibly marked the symbolic end of Theater of the Public's challenge to America.

WTAS and its Helen Hayes Awards rushed into the vacuum left by the monumental collapse of ANT. Although the awards and ANT were organized during the same period, WTAS long outlived ANT. WTAS influenced local theater on two different levels. Its rules for the awards emphasized aesthetic excellence, without consideration of a performance's ability to provoke discourse. Second, the media's representation of the awards ceremony as the world's largest cast party turned a private, usually egalitarian celebration historically associated with theater technicians and artists and their patrons into a public event. That public simulacrum of the world of theater, hosted by a plethora of local and national celebrities, obscured the most essential characteristics of theater as theater artists and technicians practiced it. Although tensions between national and local celebrities hampered the awards during their formative years when many theater artists resisted the misrepresentation of the theater community by the media, a generally positive, homogeneous acceptance of them had evolved by decade's end.

The success of the awards helped to transform the media's simulacrum of the theater-going public. No longer did the media represent each theater as a distinct gathering place for like-minded individuals; now, the media depicted the community as a unified mass that offered the theater-going public an array of cultural commodities. During the 1960s, the theater-going public represented a more or less middle class population that was eager to escape the pressures of daily life. During the 1970s, the public diversified as more and more marginal or counter-publics appeared at theaters throughout the city. As represented at the awards ceremony, however, the theater-going public appeared more upscale and elite; many were members of the city's professional class. Less prosperous Washingtonians and members of more marginal counter-publics

might still appear at such gatherings but only occasionally. Because one of the primary purposes of the Helen Hayes Awards was to promote Washington's theaters to a national public, the Helens achieved what ANT had failed to accomplish: the creation of a national theater-going public. As a collective body of theaters, unified in the media's simulacrum, Washington's Theater of the Public expressed its identity as a national capital theater iconographically. The Helen Hayes Awards had effectively shifted the focus from the content of performance to an expectation of professionalism. To the general theater-goer, that expectation redefined excellence in the media. An opening had occurred during the 1970s and early 1980s as the media struggled to describe a diverse public with a diverse set of aesthetic criteria. As the Helen Hayes Awards became more accepted as a universal standard, however, theatrical excellence became little more than a demonstration of technical expertise, reducing theatrical spectacle to a set of production values without concept.<sup>1024</sup>

By 1990, the city's theatrical culture had increasingly become an instrument of gentrification; it was a means of attracting high-income residents to the city and its suburbs. The commodities sold by the theaters—that is, their productions—did not function, nor did the public treat them, like other commodities. They did not make a profit for the theater or for the many supporters who gave time and money to them. Rather, theater commodities were expected to solidify a certain kind of upscale consumer identity. Because an audience did not own a theater commodity, but experienced it, those commodities had to entice the theatrical consumer to seek restaurants, bars, nightclubs, or

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<sup>1024</sup> WTAS has attempted to deal with this issue. In 2003 they restructured their nomination process, eliminating the two tiered system of nominators and judges. Instead, fifty judges evaluated shows. Whether such a system addresses the fundamental problem of single standard for excellence is doubtful, however.

other spaces where the culture of enjoyment might further stimulate his or her need for simulations. As a result, theater-going publics no longer saw the stage as a place where human behavior was acted out. Perhaps, people did not wish to see themselves acted out on the stage. Indeed, the manufactured world of media's electronic simulacra was better able to produce a comfortable experience of human beings than the sometimes harsh material realities of the theater.

The speed with which Washington's theatrical landscape was transformed into one that symbolized the global hegemony of the United States, is indeed noteworthy. Nevertheless, the transformation has not been without consequences. As Stuart Ewen points out, "the eradication of indigenous cultural expression and the elevation of the consumer marketplace to the realm of an encompassing 'Truth'" are central to the spread of consumer ideology.<sup>1025</sup> Although some of the city's professional theaters are still identified with particular localities, most are local in appearance only. In 1985, for example, local producers could still stand on the National's stage and declare themselves, "the locals." Although many might still have claimed a local identity when it served the interests of their theaters or financial backers, by 1990 such an identification belied the facts. Most local theaters have budgets enhanced by national, multinational, and even international funding sources. The fact that those multinational organizations had Washington offices suggests that perhaps the city's historical schizophrenia no longer had material grounds. Perhaps, according to the city's new narrative, Washington no longer had a national mandate and a local populace. In the new narrative, the Washingtonian was no longer the inhabitant of a particular geography; now s/he was the

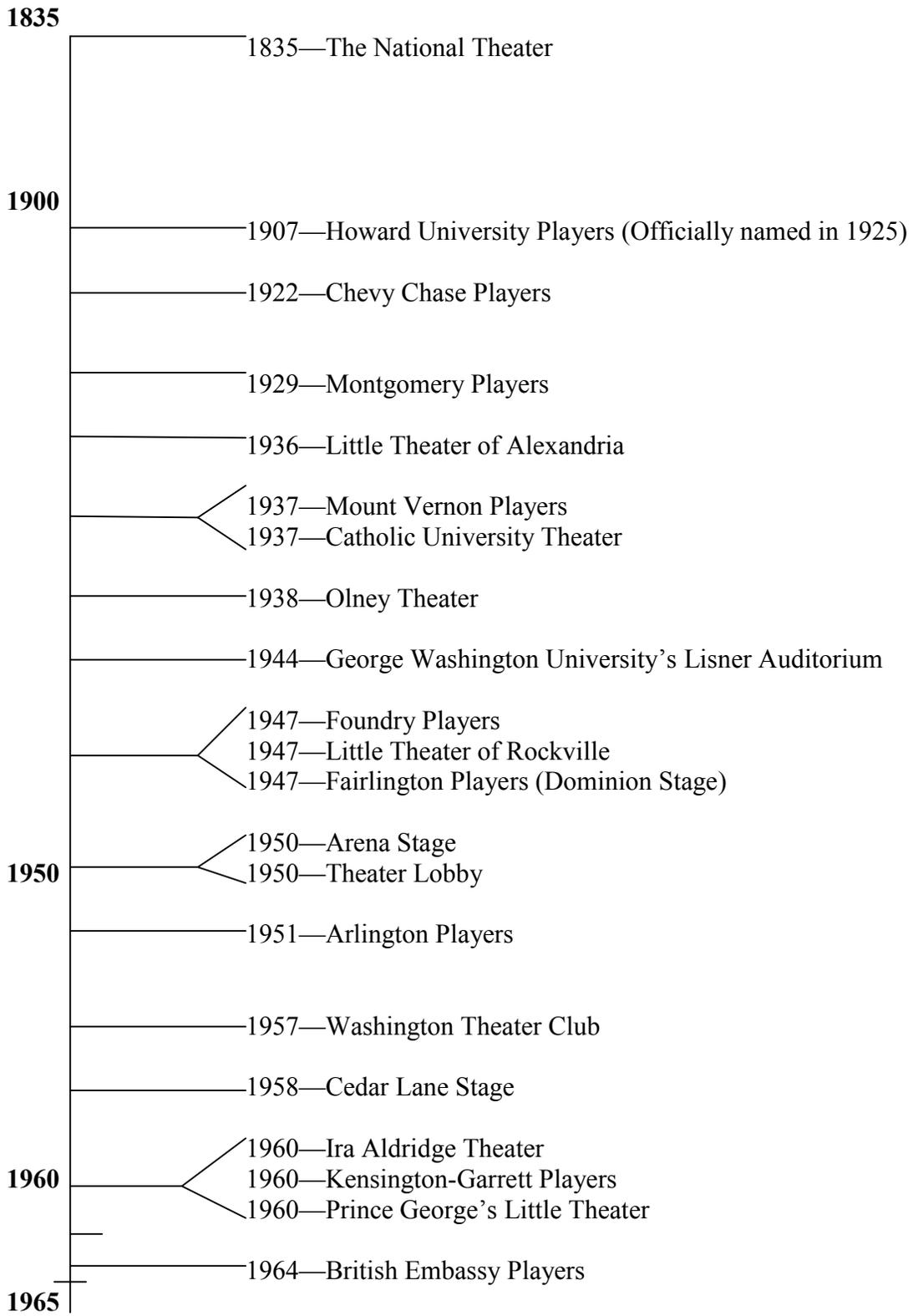
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<sup>1025</sup> Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 67.

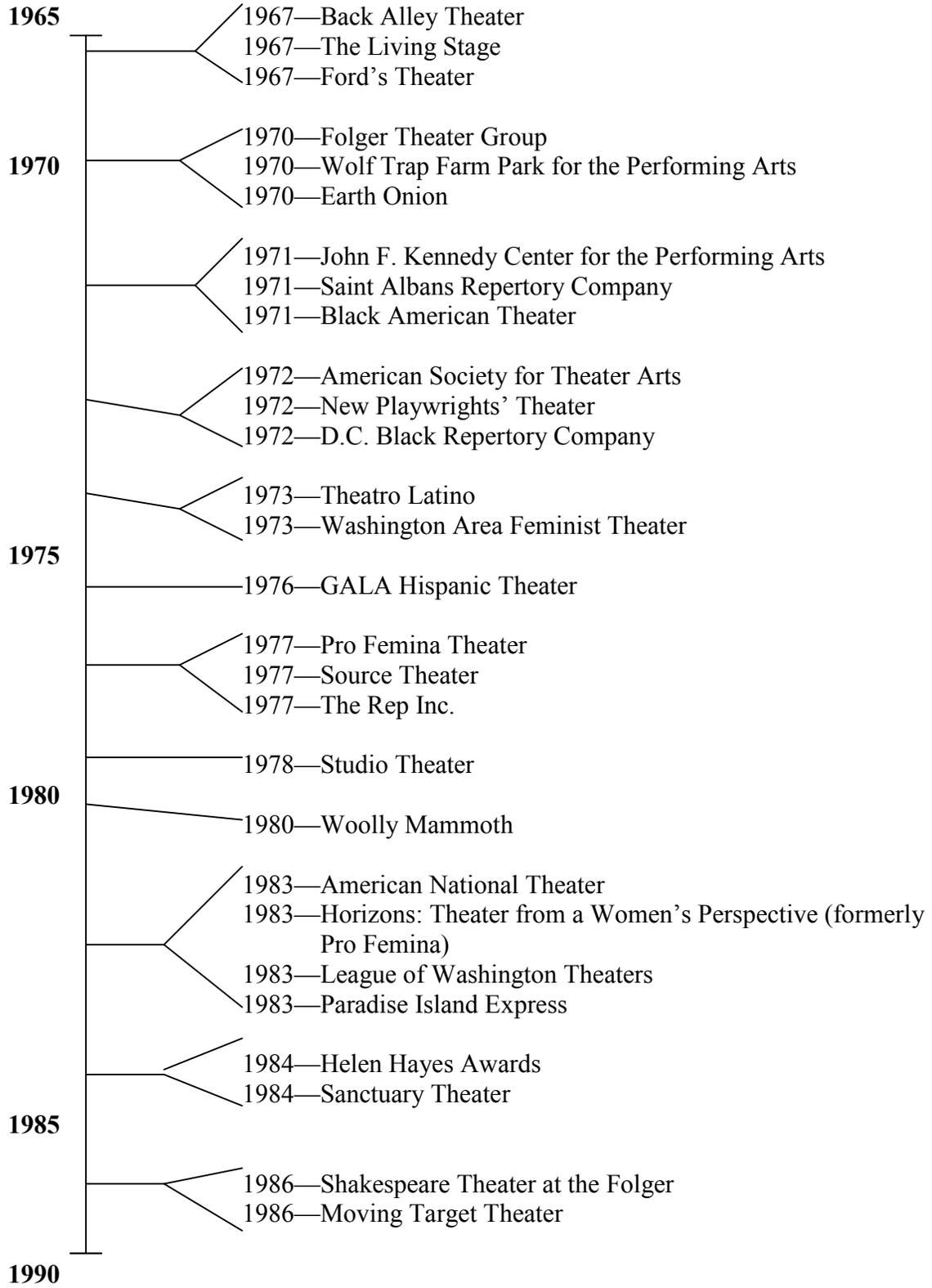
symbolic citizen of a national capital. In such a simulacrum, the theater-going Washingtonian became a cultural consumer of performances with little reference to life as citizens knew it elsewhere.

## Appendix

Timeline of Selected Washington Theaters and Theatrical Organizations



Timeline of Selected Washington Theaters Continued



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