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City University of New York PH.D. 1986

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THE CIRCLE REPERTORY COMPANY

THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS

by

Mary S. Ryzuk

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1986

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosohy.

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Abstract

THE CIRCLE REPERTORY COMPANY

THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS

by

Mary S. Ryzuk

Advisor: Professor Vera Mowry Roberts

This history traces the evolution of the Circle Repertory Company, co-founded by Marshall W. Mason, Rob Thirkield, Lanford Wilson and Tanya Berezin, from its innocuous beginnings in an uptown loft in 1969, to its fifteenth anniversary year as a critically acclaimed Off-Broadway theatrical institution in 1984. It attempts not only to place the CRC within the context of Off-Off Broadway where it was born, the Off-Broadway milieu in which it came to full fruition, and contemporary American theatre in general, but also to place it within the broad, ever-changing sociological environment it so clearly reflects. This is done by chronicling the adventure of the company's development from its inception as a dedicated, idealistic group of young hippie-like artists in the tumultuous, war-torn, drug-laden climate of the 1960s--reached its artistic turning point during the me-generation atmosphere of the 1970s--and finally became institutionalized and part of the establishment during the conservative aura of the 1980s. It shall be shown that although the company is best known for lyric realism, categorizing lyric realism as the identifiable style of the CRC is, in fact, not accurate and represents only a small portion of the company's output.

However, once the CRC achieved much of its high visibility through its chief resident playwright, Lanford Wilson, whose plays became closely identified with lyric realism, the term itself became inseparable from the host company.

The following patterns will be traced: 1) CRC's philosophy, which began as a company created by and dedicated to the artists, with the primary focus on the actor; 2) The astonishing specific that the CRC was the only company that insisted on performing in the realistic genre during the exteme avant-garde impetus of the nineteen-sixties; 3) The fact that CRC is not only one of the few *companies* in existence--a distinguishing feature--but the only one that concentrates on new American plays; 4) CRC's *process for discovery* in which the developmental pursuit itself is more important than the "success" of the end product; 5) How critical enthusiasm changed the emphasis from the actor to an extensive concentration on new plays and new playwrights; 6) How, in this context, critics play a significant role in determining the direction in which a company will grow, not only by demanding new plays, but also by laying the foundation for future funding--the essence of survival. 7) How success, in a sense, can spoil the very process that creates success; no longer permitted to fail, experimentation is greatly reduced and "hits" are sought, thereby forcing the non-profit CRC into the same flop-hit syndrome of commercial theatre.

In essence, this history shows how the CRC evolved from a free-spirited ensemble of actors with playwrights in residence, to a major developer of new plays and new playwrights, and back to a revolving repertory ensemble, well funded by grant monies, trying to recapture its original philosophy of a theatre by the artists for the artists.

Preface

I first became interested in the Circle Repertory Company in New York City when I was asked to direct Slippers in a Cage for the Barn Theatre Guild in Montville, New Jersey. The play was written by Peter Dee, a Circle Rep Lab playwright, and was produced in 1982 by the Barn Theatre Guild in cooperation with the Circle Repertory Company.

As part of my background research for the play, I began inquiring into the history of the Circle Rep which was celebrating its fifteenth anniversary year. Although the company was a vital contributing force in contemporary American theatre with much critical coverage of its work, not only as a developer of new American plays but as a working ensemble unique in theatre, I found there had been little written about how the company had evolved to such prominence in the hazardous theatrical milieu that was the New York City theatre. The idea of writing a history of the company to fill in the gap was thus born.

And so began an adventure of discovery for me, not only of the company's birth and growth, successes and failures, joys and sorrows, but the rediscovery of the varied and impactful sociological implications of the nineteen-sixties, seventies and eighties -- the three decades the company has spanned, influenced and been influenced by. It has also been a warm adventure of friendship and discovery of the many people who have been intimately involved in the company's evolution and who have given of themselves so freely and willingly in personal interviews and epistolery contributions to this history: first and foremost to the four co-founders, Marshall W. Mason, Artistic Director;

Rob Thirkield, actor, director; Lanford Wilson, playwright; and Tanya Berezin, actress.

Also my sincere appreciation and thanks to all of the company members who participated: Kathy Bates, John Beaufort, John Bishop, Peter Buckley, Jordan Charney, Jeff Daniels, Alan Feinstein, Richard Frankel, Mari Gorman, Bruce Gray, Michael Higgins, Ruby Holbrook, Daniel Irvine, Toni James, Ken Kliban, Bob Le Pone, Christie Peck, Ari Roth, Richard Seff, Michael Skelly, Ted Sod, Milan Stitt, Tom Thompson and Peter Weller. My most particular appreciation goes to Rob Meiksins who spent many precious hours in discussion with me during the course of my research, and to B. Rodney Marriott, who during his tenure as Acting Artictic Director, so generously opened the files of the Circle Repertory Company to me for study, and the doors of the company's private readings, rehearsals, labs, etc., for direct observation. Direct acknowledgement is made to all of these people during the course of the book for their contributions.

I must also express my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Vera Mowry Roberts of Hunter College of the City of New York, who so generously agreed to chair my doctoral committee and who has been a constant source of inspiration, encouragement and direct editorial participation throughout the entire course of the year it took to write this book; to Professor Charles Gattnig of the City College of New York, whose friendship and kindness have always been the inspirational foundation of my happy studies with him; and to Professor Stanley Kauffmann of the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York

whose stature as a drama critic lends such eminence and dignity to the work he has graciously agreed to committee.

The adventure has been a fulfilling one. What started out merely as an attempt to fill a void in contemporary American theatre history ended up by being a labor of love as well.

Mary S. Ryzuk

New York City, N. Y., 1986

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CLIMATE

An historical note in the Circle Repertory Company's program reads:

> Circle Repertory Company, a not-for-profit institutional theatre was founded in July, 1969 in a second floor loft at Broadway and 83rd Street by director, Marshall W. Mason, playwright, Lanford Wilson, director, Rob Thirkield, and actress, Tanya Berezin. Their goal was to establish an on-going ensemble of artists--actors, directors, playwrights and designers--who would work together to create a living play.

In essence, this objective has been accomplished. However, behind these statements lies the story of four young, talented people who came to New York City in the early sixties from the far reaches of America with--except for Rob Thirkield--little more than enthusiasm jingling in their pockets. Each came with his own perception of New York theatre as it should be and with his own perception of New York theatre as he actually found it. New York theatre being, for most intents and purposes, was still considered by many to be all of American theatre at the time.[1]

It is the story of a long struggle fraught with determination and continuous financial peril. The terse little note in the Circle program does not even hint at the eight years it took Marshall Mason to realize his vision of a company, for although it was Lanford Wilson who wanted to keep the actors together after the extraordinary ensemble work of Balm in Gilead in 1965 and who therefore,

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[1] According to Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 3rd Edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon,Inc., 1977), p. 605, it wasn't until 1966 that regional theatres were once again a prominent force in America, reminiscent of the nineteenth century. Under the impetus of sizeable Ford Foundation grants in 1959 to small companies throughout the nation, it was possible by 1966 for more actors to be employed outside of than in New York City.

suggested starting a company, there is little doubt that it was Mason's and Thirkield's dream as college roommates and Mason's unfaltering vision that finally brought it together in that inauspicious loft over a Thom Mc An shoe store in 1969.

The growth of the company is a wonderful adventure. It is not merely the story of one small theatre company that "made it" in New York City--it is the history of an era, of a particular wrinkle in time, of an intense "feeling" that was generated out of the sixties. Theatre reflects life and life reflects theatre; they are particularly inseparable when the feelings are so powerful.

As Lanford Wilson says:

> Interesting talking about feelings and the times and all that stuff about the sixties. Marshall, a skinny, penniless kid out of Texas--Rob who was a rich kid--Tanya, who had the most plausible upbringing in Philadelphia--me with a background so different from that drug scene and all that stealing. We came from such a different scene together here to make theatre and our reaction was a little removed. We didn't really participate. We recorded it. We had to go on field trips to learn how to play Balm in Gilead. Not a single actor had ever seen anyone on heroin. They had to go on field trips to restaurants and all-night cafes to study these people because they didn't know them--because we all came from such a different place from the wildness.[1]

In a sense, their narrative parallels the history of American theatre in the past fifteen years, especially as it progressed through the turbulent seventh

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[1] Lanford Wilson interview, New York City, April 11, 1984. This brief statement serves as an excellent introduction, not only to Wilson's unique shorthand style of speech, which to the listener can build into a highly emotional experience, but also the shock that must have been experienced by provincials who came to New York City in the sixties. Much of the sixties counter-culture ambiance is reflected in Balm in Gilead which captures not only the drug scene and criminal elements to which Wilson refers, but the individual despair and loneliness of those who lived and died through it.

decade of this century. The true mirror of American theatre was being held up with an almost romantic zeal by Off-Broadway to reflect the times. But as the decade progressed and the Vietnam war took its tremendous toll stateside as well as overseas, the romantic fervor of what was hailed as the most idealistic generation in the history of America soon deteriorated to open rebellion and deliberate obscenities. The revolution of the young had begun without fanfare, without an open declaration, and had spread almost unnoticed at first, throughout academia, from the college campuses down through the junior levels. Youth was on a rampage far beyond the usual adolescent passions. The uniform of the rebellion would soon be easy to spot: military fatigues, tie dyes, and long hair. There was a definite androgynous overtone-unified, unisexed, and becoming increasingly colorblind.

Mason, Wilson, Thirkield, and Berezin could not possibly know what lay ahead of them when they arrived in New York City in the early sixties. They were in their early twenties, enthusiastic, full of visions for their theatrical futures, and about to grow up in the explosion of the Off-Off-Broadway movement as societal changes with far-reaching consequences were happening all around them.

The Civil Rights Act of 1960 was signed into law by President Eisenhower in May, 1960. It set off a myriad of reactions from zealous support to out-and-out murder. The unexpurgated version of Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover was ruled "not obscene" by the United States Circuit Court of Appeals in New York in March of 1960; the lock was off the door. It would be a short jump to overt pornography and an even shorter leap to "opening up" live theatre with ever-increasing challenges to the meaning of obscenity and the very core of

"morality." With meanings once so clear, now the very words became difficult to define; as never before, they were suddenly open to wide differences in subjective interpretation. The disagreements persist today. In May of 1960, Enovid had been approved by the Federal Drug Administration as the first safe method of birth control, and while the scent of a new freedom was palpable, few could foresee the extent of the sexual revolution at hand. Ernest Hemingway's suicide in July of 1961 figuratively closed a door on an earlier era of "the lost generation." At almost the same moment in history, a young, vibrant, new president was in the White House giving birth to a new generation of idealists; executive spirit and idealism created the Peace Corps, and inspired young Americans were setting out in great numbers to aid the underprivileged of the world. Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, orbited the earth, Alan Shepard became the first American astronaut in space, John Glenn quickly followed with the first American orbit--"Out in space!" "Out of sight!" "Next stop, the moon!" Anything seemed possible. Desegregation was being tested in the south by the Freedom Riders, James Meredith attempted to enroll in Old Miss., Roger Maris hit his sixty-first home run, and although the four hundred American Combat troops sent to South Vietnam by JFK in December of 1961 had risen sharply to eleven thousand military personnel and technicians by December of 1962, the alarm had not yet sounded in the American conscience with any force, and anything indeed did seem possible. Everything was turned on high. Few had " dropped out" yet.[1]

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[1]I am indebted to the "Yearly Calendar" in The Sixties, edited by Lynda Rosen Obst. Designed by Robert Kingsbury (New York: A Random House/Rolling Stone Press, 1977) and to Gerald Howard, ed., The Sixties (New York: Washington Square Press/Pocket Books, 1982), pp. 505-514.

It is difficult to encapsulate a decade but important to show, even in broad strokes, the vital activites and energies which formed the soil for the Circle Repertory Company's nurture and growth.It was not long before the euphoria of the early Kennedy years disintegrated in ever-increasing violence and with ever-increasing graphic coverage by the media. The colorful canvas suddenly turned black. It became the decade of assassinations and assassination attempts. Beginning with President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the shootings continued and the mighty fell: Martin Luther King, Jr. Malcolm X, Governor George Wallace, Senator Robert F. Kennedy. It was the decade of violent anti-war demonstrations, the murder of Civil Rights workers, the immolation of little black girls in a church bombing in the south and the drug-induced deaths of such high-profile performers as Lenny Bruce, Jimi Hendrix, Janice Joplin, and Marilyn Monroe.[1] It was the decade of long hair, flower children, the pill, hippies, "pigs," communes, and a heavy drug culture that threatened to deepen the abyss between the growing disillusioned and the fading establishment until touching hands was no

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[1]My thanks to Obst's calendars and Howard's chronology for the following:

9/7/63 - Four black girls die in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.
11/22/63 - President John F. Kennedy is assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas.
8/4/64 - Bodies of Civil rights workers, Chaney, Goodman and Schwermer are found buried in Philadelphia, Miss.
8/5/65 - Marilyn Monroe dies of a drug overdose.
8/3/66 - Lenny Bruce dies in New York City of an overdose of heroin.
4/4/68 - Martin Luther King, Jr. is murdered in Memphis, Tenn.
8/6/68 - Robert F. Kennedy is assassinated in L.A. after winning the California presidential primary.
9/18/70 - Jimi Hendrix dies in London of a drug overdose.
10/4/70 - Janice Joplin dies in Hollywood of a drug overdose.

(Although Hendrix and Joplin both died in 1970, they surely were heirs and victims of the sixties culture.)

longer possible. It was a time when college professors like Timothy Leary swore by LSD and extolled its mind altering virtues to hungry escapists. Drugs were no longer relegated to the ghettos and the back streets of urban Amercia but had tenaciously appeared in the hands of suburbia's children. A stunned middle-class America looked on, often helplessly, as it buried its children from self-inflicted drug overdoses. The young were "turned on," "tuned out," and with alarming frequency, they "dropped out," all too often permanently.

Zita Litvinas, Marshall Mason's wife, was one of the drug-related statistics of 1964. "I loved her," he says, "and I took care of her for a year after we divorced. Then she went to Spain to live, got involved in the drug scene, became dependent of LSD and speed and went crazy. She came back to Chicago and jumped off a roof."[1]

It is little wonder then, in the face of such a staggering chronology of violence to the individual as well as to the national psyche, that when Time Magazine asked, "Is God Dead?" on its red and black April 18th, 1966, cover, many serious people seriously pondered the unthinkable.

It would be difficult to construe or even recognize the shattering experiences of the sixties by looking at the establishment theatre. Broadway continued to present the traditional fare of comedies--Mary, Mary; Never Too Late; Cactus Flower; Entertaining Mr. Sloan; 3 Bags Full; The Impossible Years; Slapstick Tragedy, Generation--big money musicals-Bye, Bye, Birdie, My Fair Lady; Mame; On a Clear Day You Can See Forever; Sweet Charity; Fiorello!--and an occasional, difficult to find, serious drama--Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf; The

[1]As told to Christopher Sharp in "Mason Encircles City," Women's Wear Daily, April 12, 1974.

Homecoming; A Day in The Life of Joe Egg. It was Off-Broadway that was, once again, reflecting the true pulse of the times. Plays like The Connection (1959), The Blacks (1962), The Brig (1963), In White America (1963), and America Hurrah (1966), were all presented Off-Broadway. It was like the netherworld of commercial fare. Off-Broadway was violent, wrenching, angry theatre, the kind of theatre to which we have almost become immune in the eighties through over-exposure to the issues. But back in the sixties it was new, explosive, and effective--the kind of theatre that almost demands converts rather than audiences.

Not only was Off-Broadway flourishing with activity, but by the mid-sixties Off-Off-Broadway would come into its own with recognition of its activities, its own label, and its own cultural standards.[1]

It is always risky to try to categorize an era or try to trace evolutionary patterns of development, growth or merely change, and place them in cause-and-effect relationship. But the sixties was a wildly rebellious decade. It is not surprising that in 1969 at about the time Mason, Thirkield, Wilson, and Berezin were recruiting everyone they could find for their new "great theatre company," Jerry Rubin's book, Do it! which the reader is seriously urged to read while stoned, boldly declared, "Money is shit. Burning money can get you high," and "All money represents theft. To steal from the rich is a sacred and religious

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[1] "The first use of that term, (Off-Off-Broadway) is generally attributed to The Village Voice critic Jerry Talmer, who was trying to call attention to a wide range of theatrical activity in New York City in 1960, 'theatres and productions with little in common beyond obscurity, poverty and inexperience." Gerald Berkowitz, New Broadways, Theatre Across America 1950-1980 (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), p. 96.

act."[1] Although it may be true as Gerald Howard suggests in his introduction to The Sixties that Rubin's rantings were in the line of "American braggadocio," it is also true that the Vietnam war and the drug scene had pervaded all levels of society to such an extent that Rubin's anarchistic statements barely raised an eyebrow of protest. It seemed that Rubin, "one of the Katzenjammer Kids of the revolutionary media theatre of the sixties,"[2] along with Abbie Hoffman could go pretty far without giving rise to indignation.

It is only natural that this pervasive attitude should be reflected on the small experimental stages. Traditionally steeped in poverty, they had little to lose and much to gain by deliberately seeking notoriety. Just as the early days of Off-Broadway before World War I when groups like The Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players were in revolt against the commercialism of "uptown" theatre, just as values were being questioned then, so too were similar revolts taking place in the sixties and similar hopes and questions being raised. The roots of all Off-Broadway movements are always nurtured by a sense of rebellion, but despite the many similarities--the greatest one being that once again Off-Broadway represented the best hope for the American playwright, there are some major differences that should be noted.

The early Off-Broadway movement was comprised mostly of literary minded Villagers, few of whom relied upon theatre for their personal incomes. Although

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[1]Jerry Rubin, Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969; New York: Balantine, 1970), Copyright page.

[2]Ibid., p. 1.

they aspired to professionalism and polish in their work, they were mostly amateurs who jealously protected this spirit of amateurism which they felt kept them free of commercial considerations, and intimate with the pulse of current writing. There was an air of literary and theatrical revolt in Greenwich Village before World War I as well as a climate of new political and social awareness. The "new" Freudian psychology encouraged the recognition of and emancipation from sexual and social inhibitions. Liberal ideas of release from past restrictions were in the air. It was a new Bohemia that in a very private way was a precursor to the "roaring twenties." Mostly, however, the new Bohemia was restricted to the physical geographical location of the Village itself. The lifestyle of the poets, would-be poets, radicals and writers such as John Reed, Max Eastman, Theodore Dreiser, Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, etc., did not affect the everyday life of common America; mostly these people were insulated from the general public.

Not so in the sixties. The sixties were flaming with dissidence and banners and new angry voices far beyond the considerations of the *literati* of the day. The stakes were elevated to a life-and-death status. The new pervaders of Off-Broadway theatre made no attempt to isolate themselves from the public. Fanned by the media, their movement did not represent the revolution of the Bohemian few but of the masses--most particularly, the very mobile middle-classes.

The theatrical revolt against "uptown's" commercialism was still in progress and probably always would be. But even more important, the revolt centered upon presenting the "true issues" of the day with a gut and gutter honesty and a hard-nosed rejection and defiance of traditional values as

represented by the establishment.

Off-Broadway, and perhaps even more particularly Off-Off-Broadway, loudly voiced this counter-culture of drugs, sex, hard-rock music and the scorning of such traditional institutions as marriage, motherhood and the nuclear family. It proposed in its place the "alternative lifestyle" in its "alternative theatre" which, with the pendulum theory in full operation, now accepted everything from sado-masochism and the unclosetting of homosexuality, to wife-swapping, draft-card burning, swinging and communes.

By 1969, the year the Circle opened at the loft on Broadway and West 83rd Street, John Willis in reviewing the 1969-70 New York season stated:

> The state of the theatre in New York was grim. Attendance was decreasing. Increasing were production and ticket costs, vulgarity without humor, nudity without artistry and obscenity without shock value. Onstage nudity, homosexuality and vulgarity reached the point of absurdity. Broadway's first all nude play was quickly dumped with other rubbish. Except for individual performances, impressive sets and excellent revivals, there was little during 1969-70 in New York's theatres that was not mediocre, depressing and unrewarding.[1]

What was astonishing was that the Circle Repertory Company eventually turned out to represent one of the few "sane" voices from the Off-Off-Broadway movement of the sixties that survived. Many theatre groups were springing up all over New York City as the Off-Off-Broadway movement began to soar. While many more continue to pop up yearly, few of the original ones have remained. In its early heyday Off-Off-Broadway groups were deeply interested in presenting plays wherever space could be found, usually on infinitesimal budgets. Many of these plays were incoherent. The styles that

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[1] John Willis, The Theatre World--1969 Season Vol. 26 (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1970), p. 6.

were so right for depicting the ferment of the times eventually faded when the relaxing of war tensions weakened the exigency of confrontational theatre; audiences showed signs of exhaustion at "being yelled at" constantly.

Even then Circle Rep's goals were more oriented to the written word, unlike, for example, La Mama's productions. Ellen Stewart, founder, became one of the most prolific Off-Off-Broadway producers, beginning with her activities in 1961. She opened the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club with a heavy commitment to new plays and new playwrights. Many young playwrights would not have been heard had it not been for Ellen Stewart's enthusiastic and generous support. "By 1967 she had produced 175 plays by 130 writers. During the season of 1969-70 La Mama alone produced more plays than were seen on Broadway."[1] It was at La Mama that Lanford Wilson's Balm in Gilead, generally considered Off-Off-Broadway's first full-length play, premiered under the direction of Marshall Mason in 1965. It was the first time they would work together and marked the beginning of an extraordinary twenty-year working relationship perhaps unmatched in American history. Thirty-five productions later, the relationship shows little sign of abatement.

By 1968-69, La Mama's main focus shifted to directors; many of the only partially scripted plays seemed to demand intense director involvement. Tom O'Horgan was one of La Mama's most controversial directors.[2] He was highly experimental in his approach to staging with his choral speaking, dance, mime,

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[1] Brockett, pp. 597-8.

[2] Director of Hair, Futz, and Tom Paine.

frantic physicalization and pulsating electronic light and sound effects, all of which tended to deemphasize written scripts even further.

Nor could Circle Rep identify with the environmental approach of Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre, founded in 1961, in which trying to conjure up transformations through dreams and myths during performance was a high exploration priority. Much improvisation and free movement in large, open spaces was part of the Open Theatre's workshop approach, as playwrights structured the improvised material into plays, occasionally with stunning results.[1] However, it was not common for many plays of an enduring quality to result from this approach. Most of the work was very contemporary, out of the moment, for the particular time out of which it was created.

Much of this theatre did not speak to Marshall Mason who, despite his belief in the essential aspects of experimentation, was a traditionalist at heart. There was much experimentation, exploration and risk taking, especially in the early days of Circle Rep's operations; but most of it was in terms of theatre and theatre styles rather than in terms of challenging society to scrutinize its perceptions or challenging theatre itself to scrutinize its role in society. In this sense it was diametrically opposed to the philosophy of the Living Theatre, a high profile group of the time. Margaret Croyden's negative assessment of the theatrical fruits of the sixties could almost have been written about the Living Theatre alone:

> As is the case of movements composed of all kinds of personalities, and especially where personality was itself supposed to be an artistic vehicle, some individuals lost sight

---

[1] Viet Rock by Megan Terry was created in this manner in 1966 at the Open Theatre.

> of their original aim of building an authentic new theatre and got caught up in all sorts of fads and ego trips . . . untried techniques were grafted into undigested philosophies, the gestalt theories mixed with R. D. Laing, confrontation politics with Artaud, consciousness expansion with Yoga, spontaneity with disciplined exercise, guruism with collective living, freakism with simplicity.
>
> A serious problem . . . was the experimentalists' reliance on self-expression as a predominant aesthetic--the old romantic tenet. Self-expression became the answer to all arguments and served to hide a dearth of shallow ideas and unworkabletheatrics . . . it cultivated an intense and limited subjectivism and bred . . . a new anti-intellectualism.[1]

By 1969, the Living Theatre, under the leadership of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, was a highly political, activist theatre, one of the most antagonistic of the "alternatives" that demanded intense audience involvement and almost always evoked extremely critical responses. Except for such productions as Brecht's Man is Man and In The Jungle of Cities, critics knew they were not going to see a "play" in the ordinary sense of the word when they went to see a Living Theatre performance. In seeing one that truly represented the Living Theatre philosophy which in their own words, " . . . overturned classic and experimental dramatic forms to replace them with political protest and moral anarchy,"[2] they knew they were in for an evening that at best resembled a politcal rally, at worst would assault their sensibilities to the point of exhaustion.

Robert Brustein wrote upon seeing The Brig in 1963, directed by Judith Malina, that it was not a play but a punishment, like the sadistic punches in the stomach repeatedly suffered by the terrorized prisoners onstage:

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[1]Margaret Croyden, Lunatics, Lovers and Poets: The Contemporary Experimental Theatre (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974), p. 228

[2]Carlo Silvestro, ed., The Living Book of the Living Theatre (Greenwich, Conn., New York Graphic Society, Ltd. 1971), approximately p. 40. (There are no page numbers.)

> I don't suppose I will ever spend a more disagreeable evening in the theatre. Instead of organizing a dramatic work, Kenneth H. Brown, the nominal author, has chosen to function as an absolute mute witness to a typical day in the infernal regions, the only departure from this terrible realism being the compression of time. . . . Visually, there is plenty of excitement in the way Judith Malina has drilled her company into a stolid automatism vibrating rhythms of pain; but aside from this, there is nothing to break the monotony of the proceedings, where even brutality and violence soon grow dull and routinized. One leaves the theatre with a headache and jangling nerves, having shared all the agonies of the prisoners except their physical torments.[1]

Deeply influenced by Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, the Living Theatre made a sharp deemphasis of written scripts in their philosophical presentations and a heavy emphasis on mime, ritual, incantation and stage movement repeated to the point of entrancement and "exorcism" *a la* Artaud. Other critics were equally appalled, although Brustein reacted with some disdain for Howard Taubman and Walter Kerr when Taubman called for a "presidential investigation" noting that The Brig is a "far cry from drama," and Kerr sympathized with any audience forced to suffer this "hoosegow."[2]

Whether or not what they were reacting to so strongly was "a play" is not important. The production represented a severe point of view and set the tune for a good deal of Off-Off-Broadway theatre. The Living Theatre was the best known, the most influential and the most copied group by the end of the sixties. They had also been around the longest, having started in 1946. Their theatre was startling, astonishing, different and quintessentially Off-Off-Broadway, although such a term did not yet exist. The audience was invited to view their

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[1]Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions 1959-65 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), p. 80.

[2]Brustein, p., 81.

communal lifestyle with its nudity, use of drugs and free sex, led by more of a guru-type figure in beads than an artistic director. In The Living Book of The Living Theatre one is immediately struck by the religiosity of the long list of "I believes"[1] which if incantated, sound like prayers. Onstage one could not help being aware of the missionary zeal beneath the confrontational explosions; there was the ever present, unspoken, "Join us."[2]

In Brustein's final assessment of The Brig, he is one of the few critics willing to put aside his jangled nerves and acknowledge the bottom line morality of this approach:

> With this ruthless documentary, the Living Theatre confronts you with the thing itself, trying to break through the crust of indifference which Americans have developed in the face of evil; and the mere staging of the work becomes an act of conscience, decency and moral revolt in the midst of apathy and inertia. Whether the revelation of these conditions will affect that bureaucratic mechanism which creates them, I cannot say. But if you can bring yourself to spend a night in The Brig, you may start a jailbreak of your own.[3]

All of this was far, far removed from Marshall Mason's vision of theatre which by contrast must be called a more gentle one; he was not a revolutionary. Not unaware of Brecht and Artaud, Circle Rep was much more influenced by the Chekhovian world of realism, mood, profound characterization and most importantly, language. No great playwright could evolve out of the Living Theatre philosophy or any of its imitators. By the end of the sixties the influence of the Living Theatre began to wane after more than twenty years on the scene.

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[1]Silvestro, approximately p. 49.

[2]Ibid., approximately p. 50.

[3]Brustein, p. 81.

Mason was disappointed with theatre at the time, especially with the non verbal and avant garde that was so prevalent:

> There was no theatre in America. Nearly all theatre on Broadway was imported from England. Harold Pinter was the reigning great playwright in America at the time. Joe Chaikin was doing very well with his Open Theatre, but again it was all non-scripted. Grotowski was very much in . . . La Mama was flourishing but flourishing in non verbal theatre. It was all very experimental, very interesting but not interesting to me. I had always sort of been in the mainstream. I do experimental theatre—Untitled Play was an incredible experiment that worked. Others do not. That is the nature of experimentation. It's absolutely essential to have that freedom to fail. I used to think experimental theatre meant a certain kind of theatre. I think all theatre is essentially experimental. The form-play may be traditional but within that you have to create new life. Otherwise it's more of a museum piece.[1]

This author suggested to Mason that most people think of experimental theatre as out of the realm of realism--avant garde--very difficult to comprehend. He agreed.

> I know, and that gets formalized and regimented in exactly the same way that realism does. I think by the late sixties it really had begun and you knew exactly what they were going to do. . . . Whereas realism, which had been abandoned for a number of years, really held as we subsequently found out when we reintroduced it to the theatre. There was a lot of vitality in it yet and people have responded.[2]

Lanford Wilson was of a similar view. Wilson, who had such a responsive ear to the music of language and was intent on becoming a playwright, wanted no part of the non-scripted aggressive approach of the Living Theatre. He basically kept far away.

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[1] Marshall W. Mason interview, New York City, November 11, 1983.

[2] Ibid.

> I'll tell you my experience with them. I went out to Brooklyn to see one show, Frankenstein. It was the only time I'd left Manhattan Island in five years. It was really interesting. It was very good in that it created a monster. It was just amazing. They had the passport scene--or whatever that was--the rubber stamp scene--'State your name and take them to the cell block,' the whole rigamarole. This is what I remember--the monster and that section. The repetition, by the fourth one, is very effective. I do that too. And then they went about ten more, and I said, they're not proving anything. It's not really effective anymore by doing that. Then they did about twenty-five more and I got very bored. . . . Then I got back into it and broke down completely. Because it had finally elevated beyond any intellectual understanding. It suddenly became about the whole world and about everyone and about me. So I remember that experience very vividly.[1]

It was very important basic research for Wilson. He was not sure how he could use it but it meant something theatrical to him. Although he often used repetition, the kind of repetition that bludgeoned the senses was new to him. It was a theatrical experience that was reflective of the "craziness" of the times. But Mason and Wilson both wanted to develop different experiences out of the same times. Wilson admits to the visceral experience and the technical idea of Frankenstein, all valuable, but he also consciously rejected the intensely subjective lifestyle that was at the core of the Living Theatre philosophy. It became difficult even to sit around at parties on the floor with a jug of wine with them. Wilson says,

> And then the word around the Village at the time was they were the most arrogant, impossible, unclean people that anyone had ever been near in their life. They stank and they were so arrogant about, 'We're the Living Theatre!' It was like, 'We are the only art.' So I decided that these people were not for me. They were not the sort of people I enjoyed talking with. I found the play very effective, but it's not the kind of

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[1] Wilson interview.

theatre I wanted to do—no.[1]

He was much more in tune with Circle Rep's credo as articulated and pioneered by Mason and partnered by Rob Thirkield—an ongoing company of artists dedicated to growing together and dedicated to the development of new American stage literature. As their program states, they were looking for an environment in which a group of artists could create independent of outside pressures, and in which an audience could experience a theatre event that was moving, real, and reflective of the human dilemma, rather than politically rallying or cathartic. Through this policy, Circle Rep's voice became so sane and comparatively so quiet for the times in fact, that its work eventually had to be labeled and categorized apart from other Off-Off-Broadway theatre as "lyric realism" to point up its difference. Although there were other Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway groups that were presenting realistic theatre, (mostly revivals or imports) Circle Rep became high profile with their presentations of original, realistic, American plays, and was, therefore, looked upon as an exception. In Edwin Wilson's review of Edward J. Moore's The Sea Horse directed by Marshall Mason at the loft on upper Broadway, he speaks of Circle Rep's continuing position of presenting new works that are "not experimental" in style as had come to be expected of so much Off-Off-Broadway. He felt that this clearly made Circle Rep "an exception."[2]

It had become one of the few successful voices of realism and poetry in a

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Edwin Wilson, The Sea Horse review, The Wall Street Journal, April 19, 1974.

sea of absurdists, avant-garde and highly political activist theatre. This voice, which clearly distinguished the Circle Repertory Company, is due in no small part to the plays of Lanford Wilson and to the interpretation of these plays by Marshall W. Mason.

CHAPTER TWO

The Four Founders---Plus "Joe"

Marshall W. Mason was born in 1940 in Amarillo, Texas, which is in the center of the Texas Panhandle. The Panhandle, which juts sharply to the north, almost crushing Oklahoma into Kansas, is in the northwestern part of the state. West Texas is mainly open-range cattle country. The city was built in great part on the prosperity of the cattle industry and in part on the piled up hides of slaughtered buffalo. The glamour of the old west clings with echoes of buffalo hunts and the presence of Texas Rangers still stationed in Amarillo, but Mason holds few affectionate memories for the city of his birth and even less allegiance. His father had been adopted when he was a child by the Masons, a poor, honest, childless couple. By the time his own son, Marshall, was born, he too was poor, honest and working as a salad chef for Texas A & M University.

When Marshall was four years old, his parents divorced. He continued to live in Amarillo for the next two years with his mother and Sam Feutral, the Air Force man she married almost immediately after the divorce. At the age of six and a half when Mason was in the second grade, and his half-brother, Sammy Feutral, had just been born, the Air Force transferred his step-father, to New Orleans. Mason remembers:

> My mother had her hands full with two kids and her husband in the Air Force. She didn't know where she was going exactly, setting up household in the middle of New Orleans.[1]

The boy, Marshall, was therefore dropped off with his adopted paternal

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[1]Mason interview.

grandparents in Luling, south Texas, where he was to finish the second grade. When he went to live with them, his grandmother was seventy-two years old and his grandfather was seventy-six. The plan was that Marshall would join his mother in New Orleans when she settled in, but Mason loved Luling and refused to go. As it turned out his mother was in New Orleans only temporarily. It was not long before she separated from Feutral and moved to San Antonio, no more than fifty miles from Luling. Mason would visit, spend weekends, and babysit for his half-brother, but he always went back to Luling where he was being raised as an only child and admittedly being spoiled by the two elderly grandparents. His father lived nearby and would come to visit whenever he could. Mason says,

> He was working in some town in south Texas as a short order cook. I'm trying to remember. . . . I don't remember. I would see him from time to time and I would see my mother from time to time, but mostly I lived with my grandparents. My father's actual name before he was adopted by the Masons was Thomas. . . My bloodline is actually Thomas. When either my mother or father came to visit me it was always a special treat. My father always brought me presents. Books, mainly. . . . The only time I remember missing them significantly--that it was a really painful time--was when events like PTA meetings happened. I didn't have any parents to go.[1]

Mason does not remember being lonely as a child. He had a very close friend in the second grade, Gene England, who remained a friend to adulthood. They would go to the serials every Saturday morning. His grandfather gave him an allowance of twenty-five cents a week. The movie was 9 cents, popcorn was a dime, coke was a nickel, and there was a penny left over for some bubble gum. Afterwards, the two boys played a good many imaginative games mostly based on

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[1] Ibid.

the exciting adventures they had just seen on the screen. It was not long before Mason knew that he would be in theatre; there was never any doubt; there was never any alternative thinking. As a child, he would sit in a darkened movie house feeling the frustration of passively watching child actors on the screen and instinctively feeling that he could do better. There was a tremendous impatience inside the boy to grow up quickly and begin his career as an actor despite the fact that he was persistently warned by his pragmatic elders that his dreams were unrealistic, the odds were too great and he would never make it as an actor. Rather than discourage him, Mason's impatience only deepened.

By the 6th grade, his grandparents decided to move to Mullen, a tiny town of 600 people situated in an isolated section of the middle of Texas. Mason disliked the quiet town intensely. There simply were not enough opportunities for a boy with his imagination, energy and drive. Now began a period of transience in the young boy's academic as well as home life that was stimulated as much by his own determination as it was permitted by his grandparents' permissiveness. Since his father, who had never remarried, had moved back to Amarillo in northwestern Texas, Mason decided to move in with him for the 7th grade. By the end of the 7th grade, his grandparents had moved back to Luling, the town that Mason really considered his "hometown." Once again, Mason decided to move back to Luling with his grandparents where he completed the 8th grade. By the time he was ready to start high school he was fortified with comparisons of Luling, which was a small town, Amarillo, which was a big city, and Mullen, which "was nothing," he says.

. . . and it was clear to me that the opportunities of a large

city were really advantageous.[1]

The impatience that would make him take summer courses in order to skip the eleventh grade, bringing him a year closer to the beginning of his career, was at play.

> So even though I loved my grandparents very much, and loved living in Luling, I really felt the opportunites were better in Amarillo. I went back for the 9th grade.[2]

It is obvious that Mason led a scattered childhood that was marked with a good deal of reliance upon his own resources for at least his emotional survival. Although it had never been stated, there was little room for him in his mother's life. She married a total of six times by the time Mason was in his twenties. There had not been much stability in terms of roots during his high school years in particular. Although Luling was his hometown, he spent his high school period shuttling from one school to another; the 6th grade in Mullen, the 7th in Amarillo, the 8th in Luling and the 9th back in Amarillo. There had never been a sense of sibling or family ties with Sammy Feutral, his half-brother, never having lived together or shared the experiences of growing up together. Basically, his brother grew up with his mother. Nor had there ever been much money living with his grandparents, who, between the two of them, earned approximately one hundred dollars a month. However, growing up without money, his values never became intimately involved with it. It simply was not very important. Even much later when critics opened avenues of financial success for him by recognizing and praising his directorial work, he most often

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

did not avail himself of the burgeoning opportunities. He preferred to remain close to the work he was most interested in, particularly if it had to do with the Circle Repertory Company, even if the recompense there was comparatively light.

It has been written, that Mason left Amarillo at the age of seventeen and never returned. Even though there is a touch of novelistic type romance in the vision of the young man leaving the scene of his childhood, never to look back, it simply is not true; he went back for the burials. Both of his grandparents died while he was at college.

> I was with my grandmother when she died of cancer after my freshman year. She was at home when it happened and I was with her. My grandfather died about two years later. I wasn't there when he died. He died in an old age home. . . I went back again in May of 1969 to bury my father. He died suddenly, unexpectedly. It wasn't a long illness, a ruptured spleen, something weird. It just happened. My mother came from California and joined me in Amarillo. I flew his body back to Luling to be buried with my grandparents. I chose for his tombstone a quotation from Hamlet: "He was a man. Take him for all and all. We shall not see his like again." Which was what Hamlet said about his father. I haven't been back to Luling since.[1]

Mason is not fond of Texas. Since he has been in New York, he has returned twice, both times to Dallas to do a Director's Colloquiem. Mostly he avoids returning. "I find myself artistically, politically, socially, and every way else so in another place," he says. It is a part of the world in which he feels he does not belong.

> I'm a real New Yorker. I love New York. I don't like the criticism I feel inherent in Texas of anything liberal or humanitarian. The real preoccupation with anything

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[1] Ibid.

economic is distasteful to me...So....[1]

It is easy to say, he left Amarillo at the age of seventeen and never returned. In a sense, that is true.

He attended Northwestern University in Illinois where he became a protege' of "the great Alvina Krause" whom Mason felt was pure in her artistic beliefs. "To work with her for four years was to absorb some of those ideals."[2]

It was at Northwestern University that Mason first met Rob Thirkield, the "rich kid" who attended as a graduate student from Wesleyan University and who was so profoundly instrumental in the development of the company. Thirkield was already at Northwestern when Mason arrived. Thirkield remembers him as, " a tall, gangly guy with thick glasses, a Texas accent and a very high, squeaky voice."[3] Thirkield had gone to Northwestern to earn his Masters and continue his studies with Alvina Krause, with whom he had spent two summers at Eagles Mere Playhouse in Pennsylvania acting and designing sets while still attending Wesleyan. At Northwestern, Mason and Thirkield roomed together. Mason immediately set about working on the pitch of his voice and getting rid of his accent. "Now," Thirkield says appreciatively, "he almost sounds English."[4] They basically lived a simple collegiate life, spending a great deal of time talking about the theatre which was a mutual love and became the basis for a strong bond between them. Certainly their personalities and backgrounds were different

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[1]Ibid.

[2] Marshall W. Mason, "On Eleven Seasons," Circle Repertory News, (Spring, 1980), p. 5.

[3]Rob Thirkield interview, New York City, November 18, 1983.

[4]Ibid.

enough to presuppose there could not possibly be a mutual ground for friendship to develop.

Although Rob Thirkield grew up in Brooklyn with his parents, he was born in Glen Cove, Long Island on July 29, 1936. His father, whom he remembers as very business-like, was a banker who served as Vice President of the Brooklyn Trust Co. His mother was a very beautiful woman. Her father, Thomas Leeming whose family owned Ben Gay, was head of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Thirkield's mother's family was very interested in opera and always had four seats reserved at the Metropolitan Opera House. As a child, Thirkield remembers many an evening when great singers from the Metropolitan would come over to their house and sing. Eventually, his grandfather sold the Leeming Company to the Pfiser Corporation which now has a Leeming Division. His grandmother's house in Glen Cove, which he refers to as "rather nice," was really quite palatial, with many rooms, huge white columns and a brilliant white portico; it has since been sold and now serves as a private children's school. Thirkield spent a good deal of time at his grandmother's house as a child. It was a wonderful house for fantasies, with its many balconies, nooks and crannies that could be transformed into just about anything a little boy's imagination might conjur up. Since his sister was six years older and his brother was four years older, Thirkield spent a good deal of time by himself, most of which he filled with play-acting. There was only one cousin, now eighty-nine years old, who was in professional theatre and had appeared in the original production of Petrified Forest. Thirkield had always been attracted to theatre. He remembers:

> We had this old cedar closet full of Japanese costumes, and I'd come running downstairs and start jumping around in a Japanese costume. And my parents said, "Oh, that's very nice.

> Now go back to your room." I always loved the theatre, and I always had puppets for whom I would make scenery. In school, I always acted in the Christmas play and I was told by my teachers that someday I would be an actor. But my family always said, "Be a lawyer. Be a doctor. Anything but an actor." But that's what it was for me right from the beginning. My parents went along. No major problem. But not tremendous encouragement either. I never really studied anything else but acting. At Northwestern I took a theatre architecture course, and my parents said, "Oh! You can be an architect," and I said, no . . . no I couldn't.[1]

Like Mason, money was never very important to Thirkield either, perhaps because, in his case, it was always there. He never even knew how wealthy the family was until his father passed away and he helped his mother settle the family accounts. He came away from the settlements white with the discovery of the family's worth. His money would eventually play an important part in the creation of the Circle Rep. He was the only contributor in the beginning. Even after the Circle received its first grants at the end of the first year, Thirkield continued to contribute at least $20,000 a year for the first ten years and often bailed out the company when it ran into its many financial difficulties.

Mason and Thirkield studied acting together at Northwestern and then directing as a supplement. They remember Ms. Krause as a brilliant woman and an inspiring teacher who concentrated on plays by Chekhov and Ibsen. The traditional thrust of Mason's theatrical views was being nourished plentifully. Thirkield would eventually branch out in different directions. Working closely with Tom O'Horgan at La Mama in his early days in New York and stimulated by Grotowski's "Poor Theatre," Thirkield would lean toward the avant-garde while this would never be Mason's main interest.

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[1]Ibid.

Mason recalls that at the end of his sophomore year, he asked Ms. Krause to take him to Eagles Mere for her summer playhouse season. She took her best students, including Thirkield, with her every year. She turned Mason down.

> I was so depressed. I absolutely believed and trusted Miss Krause. If Miss Krause didn't take me, it meant that I was not one of the best actors at Northwestern. I said, well if I can't be a great actor, I'm not going to stay in theatre. I'm going to do something else. I considered transferring to Pre-Law.[1]

Ms. Krause's associate, Professor Jim Gousseff, realized that Mason was deeply discouraged by what he perceived as total rejection. He was also aware of what a loss it would be if he did transfer to another department. Gousseff took the depressed young man to his home, made him drink a great deal of wine, and tried to convince him that the theatre needed serious theatre people like himself. He should not consider transferring out of the department. Even through the blur of too much wine, Mason was adamant; if he could not be a great actor, what was the point? And then Gousseff said, "Have you ever thought of directing?" Mason thought for a moment. Finally he said, "There is a play I'd like to direct. There's no part in it for me, and I really feel this play, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." [2] Then Gousseff made a deal with him. Northwestern's summer repertory theatre was doing Oedipus, The Rivals, St. Joan, and Midsummer Night's Dream. He assured Mason that he would get good parts if he remained, took a few classes and directed Cat On A Hot Tin Roof in the fall. "Think it over. Don't transfer."[3] Sophocles, Sheridan, Shaw and Shakespeare, Mason thought. He decided to

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

remain.

When Thirkield heard of Mason's plans to direct Tennessee Williams' play, he clearly remembers saying, "Oh sure, Marshall. Go ahead. Lots of luck!" Although they had studied directing together, Thirkield looked upon Mason basically as an actor. He was not aware that Miss Krause had turned him down for Eagles Mere.

Mason had a very clear vision of the play and how to direct it.

> I found that what I disliked about directors was that they often superimposed an idea on the actors, and as an actor I had resented this a great deal. I felt that the objective was to get the play to really live and breathe and the way to do this was to work with and through the actors and not on the actors. I felt more like the author of the play; I didn't think of it as being the director. Maggie was very real and palpable to me through the actress I was working with. So were Brick and Big Daddy. All of these people were my people. I felt the play was almost Greek in its size. I used the people sort of as Chorus. They watched everything. There was never a sense of privacy in the house. They were always being watched. That's an element in the play, "These walls have ears." It was very useful. There was a ghost haunting the play and watching. I felt more like a playwright; the play was there, Tennessee wasn't and I was responsible for it. The play was such an organic part of my sense of the world and what I wanted to say about the world. . .[1]

Mason really had a chip on his shoulder with Miss Krause because of the rejection he felt, even though the vision he had of what a director does on a play was totally copied from her. She came to see a dress rehearsal and told him it was very well staged. And he said,

> What do you mean, 'staged!' It's not staged at all. The whole thing is organic. I didn't impose any blocking on it at all. And she said, "Well, I just meant that it's very logical and nice

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[1]Ibid.

work."[1]

At the end of the performances at Northwestern, Miss Krause always gave a critique. There was a full house for Cat. She described the play and said wonderful things about each of the actors. And then she said, "And I assume that everyone is aware of the superlative direction." [2] The audience stood up and applauded. Mason was nineteen years old. He received the 1959 Award for Best Director at Northwestern University that year. "But it wasn't something I chose to do," he insists, "or intended to do, or ever do again," even though he suddenly found himself in everybody's eyes as a director. Although Thirkield had been highly skeptical at first, by the end of the production, he clearly recognized the innate understanding, attention to detail, and sensitivity that Mason brought to the multi-layered script, and he just as clearly remembers saying to himself, this time with renewed respect, "My God, he is a director."[3]

Now Miss Krause invited him to Eagles Mere for the next two summers where he directed Mary Stuart, Cyrano de Bergerac and The Doctor's Dilemma.

In 1961, Mason graduated from Northwestern University and headed for New York City while Thirkield left to serve two years in the army between the Korean and Vietnam wars. The list of classmates from Northwestern is impressive. Along with Claris Nelson and Dennis Parichy who would come to New York and work closely with Mason and Thirkield at the Circle Repertory Company, Northwestern also graduated Tony Roberts, Richard Benjamin, Larry

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Thirkield interview.

Pressman, Penny Fuller, Marcia Rodd, Karen Black, and Paula Prentiss, to whose Cleopatra Thirkield had played Caesar. It was surprising when Mason ruefully pointed out how many Northwestern alumni had gone on to become famous except him. There is still a touch of the melancholy of a rejected young actor in the statement that does not take into account the assessment of those who perceive his relationship to American theatre.

Like many young hopefuls who arrive in New York to begin careers in theatre, Mason had his share of frustrations. Not only were there no jobs to be found, either in acting or directing, but just when he thought he could practice his art, serious theatre as he appreciated it, disappeared from New York. "Miller and Williams were no longer producing a new play each season,"[1] he says. They had almost fallen aside under the negative banner of "old fashioned" and an increasingly harsh critical view that their major work was behind them--even though Miller had yet to write the controversial, After The Fall and Incident at Vichy in 1964 for the short-lived Repertory Company of Lincoln Center. At the present time serious theatre in New York seemed to be represented by the British playwright, Harold Pinter, who was then the critical rage.

One of the earliest plays Mason saw on Broadway was Pinter's The Caretaker, which bothered him. The young man felt that all the critics and reviewers were excited because they could not understand what Pinter was talking about.

> It might have illustrated nothing so much as their lack of intellectual capacity. They were turned on by what is the *meaning* of Pinter. Pinter is a poet if anything. He had them

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[1] Ibid.

all fooled. They thought he meant something.[1]

But Mason felt that Pinter's meaning was very existential and was meant to be sensed rather than understood. Agreeing that the acting by Donald Pleasance, Robert Shaw and Alan Bates was brilliant and that the production values were exceptional, he nevertheless felt cheated that he could not really get emotionally involved.

> I want to get something out of a play when I go to it. I do not want to leave the theatre saying, "What do you suppose that meant?"[2]

It did not matter that he admitted he had not understood the play. In fact, that was the whole point.

For a young man just starting out in a big, unfriendly city that had little room to nourish his ambitions, he had strong, passionate views; but even then he could not be intimidated into changing his opinions by those who had the power to establish criteria. His opinions, at the time, were based on emotion rather than a basically intellectual assessment. Right or wrong, they were the driving force that would establish his artistic direction. All of his feelings about "real" drama were solidifying almost unconsciously. These were the feelings that would translate into the conscious objectives that he would bring to the Circle Repertory Company and that would contribute directly to the attention to realistic detail, and the very style of lyrical realism. He had an almost missionary zeal to re-introduce realism into the flood of avant-garde absurdism.

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[1] Mason, p. 5.

[2] Ibid.

Though he felt a bit uncomfortable in rejecting the current dramatic interests, Mason hated Theatre of the Absurd. He was not interested in the absurdity of the human condition presented against an indecipherable cosmos. The metaphysical aspects took the human condition out of the realm of identifiable human experience, thereby losing his interest. With no plot to speak of and no "real" characters in conflict, the situations were simply not dramatic to him. He felt that Edward Albee grew out of a sea of absurdists and inherited much of the grotesqueries. Although Mason could relate to The Zoo Story and Who's Afraid of Virgina Woolf (more the exception in Albee's repertoire than the rule), The American Dream, presented the year Mason arrived in New York (which Albee stated was intended as an American version of Ionesco's The Bald Soprano) left Mason cold. To someone with his proclivities, The American Dream could only be a stark landscape populated by symbols rather than people.

When he did respond to the absurd play, it had to be packed with emotion--though understated--such as Beckett's Waiting For Godot. It is easy to see how Mason might be attracted to one absurdist play and not another. The important ingredient is obviously the humanity and emotional impact, for despite its comic aspects, Waiting For Godot, is an extremely emotional drama of human despair. The very structure of Godot's dramatic action, starting with "Nothing to be done," is theatre in which the importance of sequential events is immediately made irrelevant. The oft repeated words, "Nothing to be done," is a painful refutation of man's ability to shape his own destiny. Vladimir and Estragon talk of repenting having been born, of the crucifixion, of waiting for Godot; they contemplate suicide, wonder what they will ask Godot when he comes, eat a carrot, all of which demonstrates that the action is really only one--to wait.

This, then, is basically static action. There is no "story" in the usual sense, but rather a series of images designed specifically to show man's alienation from reality, an alienation that produces the lethargy and anxiety that can result when he feels surrounded by an incomprehensible world. Mason does not feel that Vladimir and Estragon are "symbols."

> They are real people. Very detailed, very rich human beings. Their context is a bit strange. The universe against which they are presented is, perhaps, not a realistic universe, but they are real people. And their despair is monumental.[1]

Ionesco was another matter. Ionesco commited the unpardonable sin of not moving him. To Mason, theatre has never been an intellectual game. It has to "hit you" on all levels. Mason insists:

> It has to have something for the mind, but it also has to move you. It has to be meaningful in human experience terms. Ionesco doesn't write about real people. He writes symbols. When you get so off into the absurd thing, you get into a style that does not interest me![2]

But at that time these were the reigning kings--Pinter, Beckett, Ionesco and Albee. Out of sync with what was the current mainstream, all of Mason's thoughts about theatre were being challenged. If there had been a balance between realism and absurdism, he may have leaned more to one without consciously rejecting the other. But with realism almost non-existent, he was forced to sort out his feelings and come to a conscious decision about what he wanted to pursue, and whether or not there was room for the kind of theatre he wanted. To him, the greatest playwrights were Euripides, Shakespeare, Molière and Chekhov, all of

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

whom wrote about the human experience. The contemporary writers he read and loved as a young man growing up in Texas were Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Robert Anderson and William Gibson. Plays like All Summer Long, Tea and Sympathy, and The Miracle Worker, were not only accessible but "spoke to him." He unabashedly admits that growing up in an area removed from live theatre, his idols were Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift. To him, these people represented the highest form of art that could be accomplished in films. Behind them he keenly felt the presence of the Actors Studio approach with its Americanized Stanislavski method, and Elia Kazan, the director who became hero and idol to him.

He had the mid-westerner's expectations of Broadway as the highest criteria of American theatre. When he found it bereft of the kind of theatre to which he could respond, he gravitated toward the Actors Studio where he hoped he could work with Kazan, but Kazan had already moved on to the experiment of the Repertory Company of the Lincoln Center. In the meantime, he studied directing with Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, whose techniques were basically traditionalist and fit in with his own needs. Mason worked mostly in theatre-related odd jobs in order to support himself: he got a job as an assistant stage manager at the Phoenix Theatre which, in his own words, "led nowhere," acted as treasurer at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, and as an independent electrician.

In 1962, within one year of his arrival in New York, Mason found the Caffe' Cino. It was here that this tall, friendly, impoverished young man with passionate views sank his roots deep into the soil of the Off-Off Broadway movement where, despite scarce audiences and scarcer funds, there was an

abundance of experimentation and an inexhaustible degree of enthusiasm. Mason had stumbled into the forerunner of the workshops, showcases and laboratories that would comprise the Off-Off Broadway scene. Although by 1975 Marion Fredi Towbin would call Off-Off Broadway "the source--the lifeline--of American theatre,"[1] in the early sixties it was new and had a low profile. Mason had never heard of the Caffe' Cino which, by the time he got there, had been giving plays since 1958, called itself an "art center," and was already considered an establishment by the *conoscenti*. Mason immediately availed himself of Joe Cino's generous policies and began directing again.

By the time Thirkield returned from the army and was directed by Mason in Claris Nelson's play, Medea, at the Cino, Thirkield was keenly aware of the artistic change in Mason. There was no doubt left in Thirkield's assessment that his friend had made the transition from actor to director with a conviction and artistic vision that encompassed not only the immediacy of directing, but goals for the future. These goals revolved around the company of artists they both had always envisioned while working together on "real" plays at Northwestern.

It was not long before Mason and Thirkield got together with Claris Nelson and Dennis Parichy, fellow graduates from Northwestern University, and organized their first company, appropriately called, Northwestern Productions. Although they would work mainly at the Caffe' Cino and Cafe La Mama, they did branch out to Off-Broadway. Mason directed Claris Nelson's The Rue Garden, The Clown and Medea before directing Ibsen's Little Eyolf at the Actors' Playhouse.

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[1] Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., ed., The Best Plays of 1975-76 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1976), p. 36.

Little Eyolf received fairly good reviews from all the critics except Walter Kerr of The New York Times who disliked it intensely. The impact left by Kerr's review and the succeeding production of Shaw's Arms and The Man, which Mason considered unsuccessful, brought an early end to the neophyte Northwestern Productions.

It was at this time that The Cino was presenting some one-act plays by a young playwright, Lanford Wilson. Mason had seen him around and was wary of what he perceived to be Wilson's "hyperactivity." Basically, he remained removed from him, although privately he expressed an interest to Thirkield that he would like to direct one of Lanford Wilson's plays. However, apart from one quick, cursory introduction in which each had measured the other in terms of external appearances, Mason and Wilson had still not met. Mason knew little of the playwright except that he had originally come from some little hick town out west.

The tiny town of Lebanon is almost dead center on the Ozark plateau that stretches across all of southern Missouri. This massive hill country maintains an untamed wildness about it that has challenged three centuries of man's ingenuity to force it to his personal use. The last near-destruction to this end was by the booming logging industry in the latter part of the nineteenth century until ecological sanity forced a program of conservation. It took almost fifty years to erase the barrenness that was left behind, but as if by way of retribution--a sort of reclaiming of the soil despite industrial ravages--the Ozarks is one of the few places in the country that is actually decreasing in

population according to a 1980 census.[1]

Richard Rhodes, who has made an intensive study of the Ozarks, has written that most people conjure up visions of barefoot children, feuding hillbillys and illegal moonshine at the mere mention of the word, "Ozark."

> . . . native chroniclers have built careers on its passing folkways, congealing them into cliche' and fostering a tradition of condescension that is both misleading and damaging. It makes the Ozarks seem merely a quaint outcropping of the culture of Appalachia and it forces the remarkable Ozark landscape to retreat behind a fictional screen of tumble-down cabins and leaning outhouses embellished with leering crescent moons.[2]

Putting aside the distortions of cliche's and bearing in mind that few areas within the confines of the Ozarks are further than ten miles from a road--a fact which has long brought its inhabitants within easy access of town and civilization--we can dispel some of the folksy preconceptions about them, look back at Lebanon, Missouri with new perceptions, and appreciate the mid-western soil out of which one of our most prolific "New York" writers sprang.

It was in Lebanon, Missouri that Lanford Eugene Wilson was born on the 13th day of April, 1937 to Ralph Eugene Wilson and Violetta Careybelle Tate Wilson. He was the only child of what would turn out to be an unhappy and unenduring marriage. As he remembers it, they were "very, very poor," a fact which could not have helped the security of the young family and could only add to its discomfort. The boy was small and thin and even at that time, his face

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[1] Richard Rhodes, ed., The Ozarks - The American Wilderness/Times-Life Books (New York: Time/Life Books, 1980, Times Inc.) p. 22.

[2] Ibid., p. 29.

with its perennial pallor, was dominated by the crystal-clear blue eyes that would always be the first thing one noticed upon meeting him, even as an adult.

Although he lived in Lebanon only until he was five, certainly before the age of good recall, he would vividly and warmly describe early recollections of the little town in an interview with William Sibley forty-two years later:

> It's a very small dusty town with some nice people and some frankly uninteresting "frank" kind of architecture. . . . The roads weren't paved where we lived out in Old Town--the black community. I remember ice trucks going by and kicking up the dust that lasted for hours at a time. I spent some wonderful summers in Lebanon as a kid. Gateway to the Ozarks, you know. The sign at Claxton's Texaco says, "5,000 Friendly People Welcome You To Lebanon."[1]

By 1984, Lebanon's population would not even have doubled. Its only claim to tourist fame, besides being Wilson's birthplace, is the Laciede County Museum which until 1955 doubled as the county jail, and now, for a modest donation, can be seen between 10 and 3 P.M. from April to September.

When Wilson was five years old, his parents divorced. Not only was his family suddenly "gone," but his entire world was dirupted. Violetta took the boy to Springfield, Missouri, fifty miles south of Lebanon. Ralph Wilson, who had worked as a cobbler, immediately departed for San Diego, California. It would be twelve years before Lanford would see his father again--twelve years that to a small boy would seem like a lifetime.

Even with much of the male population away for the duration of World War II, Springfield was a booming metropolis compared to Lebanon. In 1942, when

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[1] William J. Sibley, "Lanford Wilson - Off Broadway: a founder and number one playwright honors the Circle Repertory Theatre on its fifteenth anniversary," Ladies Home Journal, Spring, 1984.

mother and son arrived, the work force was considerably depleted by conscription. Violetta had little trouble getting a job in a garment factory. It was one of the many menial labors Lanford would watch his mother endure. He even clearly remembers helping her make up beds in a fancy hotel.

The years passed rather quickly at this time with that peculiar combination of isolation and togetherness that is often imposed when a young mother with a young child is forced to support them both.

Between the ages of five and eleven, Lanford lived only with his mother. It was not until she remarried that a man once again became a daily presence in his life. Ralph Lenhard was a Wisconsin dairy farmer who brought two daughters from a former union to the marriage. Suddenly, after six crucially formative years alone with his mother, Lanford was surrounded by a full family--a mother, a step-father and two step-sisters. He felt the new members were "no relation to him at all" for about two years, the length of time it took to settle into some sense of belonging together. Trust and friendship eventually developed between them, but Lanford was always plagued with a sense of rootlessness. The ambiguity of wanting a family and at the same time having to share his mother had to create a dichotomy of feelings that would be difficult for any eleven year old to sort out, especially one of Lanford's sensitivities.

After the marriage, the new family moved ten miles south of Springfield to a small rented farm in the tiny Missouri town of Ozark--population 1,500. They were still in the Ozark highlands--still in the "dead center" of the country as Wilson likes to think of it, and still surrounded by the singularly mid-western rhythms and sounds that he would one day depict so clearly. It was in Ozark that he first saw the large old meandering house that would become the setting for

the Talley trilogy years later. The house was up on Harper's Hill overlooking the town. It seemed awesome, full of secrets, so completely inaccessible to the local children that they endowed it with a world of mystery. As Mel Gussow has pointed out in acknowledging the structure's importance:

> As an adult, Wilson has begun to populate the structure, the "Talley house" of his theatrical imagination, with a rich and luxuriant tapestry of people.[1]

Undoubtedly, Wilson began to populate it in his imagination even earlier, as a boy, long before he had any thought of becoming a playwright. Ozark, the smallest of his hometowns, remained the closest in his conscious memory. The idols of his teen years, all the schoolmates of promise who seemed to have their lives structured with clear plans founded on position and bolstered by wealth, could already have been residents of that early "Talley house." In his mind they were, but years later when he returned to Missouri, it was a disillusioning blow to find out that:

> . . . these heroes of his youth, the "hotshots of Ozark," had had terrible lives filled with divorce, impotence, alchoholism, murder and suicide.[2]

The third of the Talley trilogy, The War in Lebanon, was planned to honor the memory of these lost heroes, for the heroes of one's youth are not easily dispelled by reality. In Lanford's case it was to be a catharsis by pen. However, the third play in the trilogy became A Tale Told instead, leaving past idols to be put to rest another time.

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[1] Mel Gussow, "Lanford Wilson on Broadway," Horizon, The Magazine of The Arts, (May, 1980): p. 30.

[2] Ibid., p. 32.

Wilson, whose personal life is the rich wellspring of all of his work, openly admits to writing many of the people he has known into his plays. His particular ability to capture and orchestrate the feelings and sounds about him makes his stage come alive with his own reality--a reality based on passions deeply felt. It is obvious that he often reacts to people, and thus the characters he creates, through the perception of his own pain which makes him particularly sensitive to that of others. "We're so easily hurt by all these damn things," he says, "and yet we come back and we really know what we're doing."[1] It is interesting to note that although he readily admits to the autobiographical source of much of his material--most overtly, Lemon Sky, a fairly direct account of his meeting with his father in San Diego, he has "never written his mother." He has, however, used many facets of her in various characters; there was a washerwoman character in A Tale Told that was derivative of her many working-woman occupations. There was a character in the CBS-TV play, The Migrants, who cleaned houses for wealthy Talley-type families, much as his mother did during the lean years; the character was even called "Viola," but he has never truly written a Violetta yet, or fully probed her personality or their private relationship onstage.

As the new family settled into the routine of farming, the years once again passed quickly. This time the sense of isolation was camouflaged by the number of people about every day. Although the family remained poor, Lanford remembers these years as relatively happy ones. He continued his education in

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[1] Wilson interview.

Ozark's public schools, became a member of the 4H Club and Future Farmers of America and even came in among the top three in a cattle-raising competition one year. "I'm really a country boy at heart," he notes of himself. "I learned to milk cows before daybreak."[1]

Unlike Mason, who could not wait to depart from Texas, Wilson developed a profound love of the soil of the mid-west that he would later render into the deep-rooted settings for most of his plays. This love was also obvious in the seriously cultivated garden in the backyard of the old house in Sag Harbor, Long Island he would one day buy, although he would be quick to point out that part of this appreciation can be attributed to the influence of his maternal grandmother. She was part American Indian and enormously important to him in his developmental years. It was she who taught him to raise chickens and pick wild greens in the woods while his mother worked. Interestingly, she is another important woman in his life whom he has not yet "written."

Wilson was popular in school. He had a keen interest in sports which led to a position on the track team, and an even keener interest in art which he was sure would translate into a career someday. Although he had always wanted to paint, art was also a conscious way of identifying with his natural father whom he was told had "a native talent for it." For the longest time he was positive that art would play an important role in the choice of a future career and throughout high school he trained toward this end. Unlike Mason and Thirkield, who instinctively knew the direction in which they had to shape their destinies from the time they were very young, theatre never once entered into Wilson's plans.

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[1] Emory Lewis, "Lanford Wilson," The Record, 2/28/73, p. B-13.

This is not overly surprising; the creation of an artist is often a long arduous road of self-discovery. In no way was Wilson certain of the direction of his life as were Mason and Thirkield. However, there was obviously a need in the youth for the fantasy world of make-believe. Like Mason, this need was nourished by films. The opportunity to see live theatre did not present itself very frequently in Ozark but films were readily accessible in every corner of the country to anyone with the price of an inexpensive admission. Still, for better or worse, every year Wilson sat through the junior plays at school, and after doing some acting himself with the encouragement of his high school English teacher, his interest began to be fired by the live stage. However, it was not until Wilson saw a touring company's production of Brigadoon that he completely shifted his inner devotion from films to the stage. After the magic of seeing the sleeping little town of Brigadoon come back to life onstage, he has happily admitted films could no longer compete with the excitement and sorcery of live performances; his heart forever belonged to the theatre although he still had not the remotest idea that he would one day write for the medium. He was happy enough to spend his interest in acting. One of his most memorable roles was that of "Tom" in The Glass Menagerie. Little could he imagine that he would one day collaborate with its author, Tennessee Williams on the CBS-TV play, The Migrants and write the libretto for Lee Hoiby's opera of Williams' Summer and Smoke. Wilson has often been acknowledged to be the spiritual heir of Williams, "the poet of lost souls." Like Williams, much of Wilson's work deals with the vagaries of the losers of the world, except that with Wilson it is so obvious that much of his love goes out to them. It is this love that is the most important facet of his character work and takes all his fugitives from life out of the arena of loss and places them in the

spotlight of hope, despite the tremendous odds he often stacks against them.

It is possible that part of this underlying compassion and determination to make potential winners out of life's losers can be traced back to an incident in Ozark High School. This is speculative, but many incidents in early years can haunt for a lifetime and actually determine the flow of dreams and the force behind one's actions. In describing it even today, Lanford's passion is heatedly aroused again, for it is obvious that vulnerable spots were touched.

> The professor who was the most important then goes back to high school. His name, I believe, was Alan Klapp. Mr. Klapp got fired for playing with one of the girls. He pretended to come in with liquor on his breath and he was so "erudite" that we just said, "Please." Rex Bauer replaced him. Bauer was the English teacher who got me interested in theatre. Klapp said when I was a freshman in high school--going back that far--to the stupidest boy in class who came and told me, "Klapp said Lanford Wilson will never be worth a damn for anybody." And that burned me for twenty years. To hear that and say, "But God!" It engendered an ambition that I think is necessary for an artist in this atmosphere. Or certainly in that atmosphere when you go back every damn day and just get the energy to get things on, and time and energy to do things to begin with. . .A rebellion. I'm going to shove those words right down that drunk's throat! Down that drunk lecher's throat! That negative feed did better than all the encouragement I could have ever had and really helped me to get through. I discovered that I wasn't actively angry anymore along about--after I'd bought my house in Sag Harbor, after Hot L Baltimore. Along about then I discovered I'm not being driven by that anymore. . . .Then it got more difficult.[1]

It is interesting that the force of the negative drive was dispelled only after an Obie Award and the glow of public recognition gave The Hot L Baltimore, a stamp of approval. It also says something for the depth of the boy's courage that he did not accept the teacher's words as an indictment but rather as a challenge. A lesser youth, condemned so thoroughly by an authority figure,

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[1] Wilson interview.

might have collapsed and given up to the leering ridicule of classmates. He did not--and yet the sting has remained and has translated into a deep compassion for the losers, the ones who "will never be worth a damn for anybody," and become in Wilson's own words, "the losers who refuse to lose." The reflection of his life is clearly to be seen in his plays. The many similarities to Marshall Mason's own history of early family separation begin to reveal how the two young men could develop into kindred spirits. One day they would work together in rich collaboration as though pulling their understanding of each other from the same subtle sense of isolation they had independently endured as children

By the time Wilson graduated from Ozark High School in 1955, and had completed one unsatisfying term at Southwestern Missouri State College, he felt restless and uncertain about himself. There was a growing urgency to fill the void that remained when his natural father left, a void felt all the more keenly since he was beginning to flounder badly from lack of a goal-directed course. Needing to make contact with this memory that in some ways might offer answers, he departed for San Diego. The distance in miles was easier to cross than the distance in years. The reunion turned out to be an unhappy one, difficult for both of them; it was less a reunion than an introduction to a man who was essentially a stranger. They did not get along at all. Perhaps expectations had been too high; perhaps the breech created by twelve years was too wide to bridge. Ralph Wilson had reestablished himself with a new wife and two young sons. Once again, Wilson was on the fringe of an established family circle. He got along well with his step-mother and acted the role of big brother to the two boys with ease, but he often refers to the relationship with his father at this time as a "total disaster." Ralph Wilson worked in an aircraft factory as an

engineer with "so much seniority he sat around drinking coffee all day." Apparently it was enough seniority to get young Wilson a job as a riveter. He disliked the work as much as his father disliked the idea of his writing stories. But despite the unspoken objections, Wilson enrolled at San Diego State College (now University) and began writing what to his teachers and classmates seemed like exotic stories about the Ozarks of Missouri. It was here that he discovered his ability to write strong, naturalistic dialogue out of an ear for speech patterns he did not even know he possessed.

Not finding the sense of belonging he was not even fully aware he was seeking, he remained in San Diego for only one year. The rejection he felt from his father was a bitter disappointment to one who had travelled so far and with such hopes of finding a missing link. He later explored and perhaps exorcised these feelings through his play, Lemon Sky, an overtly autobiographical work about a boy who seeks a reunion with his father after a long separation and finds rejection instead. Despite the fact that familial wounds have healed and father and son now have a workable relationship, it took more than twelve years before Wilson could translate the painful experience into a play.

When he departed San Diego, he headed home to the mid-west again. On his way he stopped in Chicago to visit a friend for a few days and was immediately taken with the wild independence of the city. "A few days" turned into six years. When he arrived in Chicago he was only nineteen and completely on his own for the first time in his life. Like Mason he was forced to support himself. Unlike Mason, who worked in career-related jobs, survival took top priority over career considerations for Wilson. But inexperience forced a series of quick turnover jobs. He was fired from the first one as an office clerk for tardiness. Then in

quick succession, he took an apprenticeship at Fuller, Smith and Ross Ad Agency to capitalize on his art background, worked at the Artists Guild for several years and later at a personnel agency for commercial artists--all of which he disliked intensely. Now he was viewing art from a different vantage point, one from which he could see the continual wear and tear on creative people who were often forced to see their work compromised by those who held the power of decision, a power rarely earned by creative insight. Youth often makes one a purist; the thought of compromise over artistic values was intolerable. This presumed compromise presented an unexpected problem for Wilson for although he did not know what he wanted to do, he knew only that art no longer held the allure it once did. Painting had long since gone by the wayside. Perhaps he knew that he too would be forced to compromise and was unwilling to endure either the pain or the frustration. Perhaps he knew it was unlikely that he would ever earn a living with paint and canvas. Perhaps he had abandoned painting in reaction to the unhappy reunion with his father whose image had originally stimulated the interest. Whatever the reason, when he was no longer in jeopardy of dismissal and his job took on a steady daily routine, he returned to writing consistently. Despite the usual rejection slips--not one of his stories has ever been published--he continued to write. It did not matter whether or not he could earn a living writing; writing itself was becoming the need, not the need to sell.

It would be easy to indulge in snap analyses of this need to write. He was only nineteen when he arrive in Chicago, without family and basically alone. It was at this time in his life that he began experiencing the cheap hotels and rooming houses that were the only places he could afford and that would become grist for the future mills; the seediness of the hotel in The Hot L

Baltimore was already subconciously rooting in the back of his mind. Much has been made of the fact that the lonely often turn to the quiet act of writing away their solitude in stories and journals, sharing feelings to the internal confidante exposed in the very act of writing--but then again, so do born writers whatever their backgrounds.

The moment of illumination, when it became clear to Wilson that he was a playwright, occurred when he was working at the ad agency. At first he answered phones--typed correspondence--designed boxes. Eventually, as he says, he would paste up photographs and

> . . . that sort of thing. I was going to be an illustrator first and then a layout artist. And then working for a while I decided I didn't want any of that. But I was writing at the time--short stories. Then I came across one that I thought should be a play and I said, "What do you know!" Then I discovered that all along my dialogue had been good and the narrative qualities of my stories had been terrible but I didn't know it. Halfway through the first page I said a dozen times, "What do you know!" By the second page, I knew. This is what I am. This is what I am going to do.[1]

It was reminiscent of Thirkield looking upon Mason in a new light and saying, "My God, he's a director." Mason had been just as startled at this self-discovery as Wilson was.

It had never occurred to Wilson in San Diego when he first became aware that he wrote good dialogue in his short stories that plays were all dialogue and that if he concentrated on writing plays, he would have the advantage of dealing mainly with his strengths. It was a discovery twice made but the second time it came to him quite unexpectedly, like a revelation. It was at this point that Wilson

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[1]Wilson interview.

in the flush of discovery, began telling everyone he met that he was a playwright even though he had not yet written one scene--but he knew.

> Once I decided that's what I was going to do, the frustrating, grinding, awful, horrible feeling of working just for security's sake fell behind me. I eventually took any job as long as it left me free to write. My only goal was to be a really super playwright.[1]

He immediately signed up for a playwriting class at the University of Chicago-Downtown Center, " . . .and learned what a play was and how to construct it if you wanted to construct it that way. . . "[2] which he did not. From the very beginning he wrote mostly on impulse. He came to the theatre scene through the standard American play and now through the standard playwriting course. But from the beginning he had his own ideas of what theatre should be. He wanted to write plays as though they were a three-ring circus with everyone talking at once, blending together in a manner similar to musical harmony. He immediately broke all the rules of structure which would serve him well with the open context of such plays as Balm in Gilead, which takes place in an all night cafe and follows the vague existence of many characters, but would subtly plague him in such works as The Mound Builders. Even Wilson acknowledges that the first twenty minutes of the play could be better structured. Though The Mound Builders was beautifully written, Wilson was developing the characters lyrically, almost letting them develop themselves before he even knew what the plot was going to be. This created a lack of cohesion in the early scenes and a lack of

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

linear progression. The Circle Company's first dramaturg, resident playwright Milan Stitt, who often worked as Wilson's dramaturg, noted that the same plotlessness and vague dramatic structure plagued the early versions of 5th of July and The Hot L Baltimore where the major dramatic question and lines of tension were introduced too late. Wilson finally took the time later in his career to seriously study and understand classical structure, but in the early days of discovery, he was basically too excited and too impatient to allow himself to be restricted by rules.

The impatience to surrender to the lure of New York City left him with only enough time to take one writing course in Chicago. It would be the only writing course he would ever take even though he enjoyed it enormously--not only the excitement of the certainty of having found himself, but the thrill of hearing his words come to life for the first time. Actors from the Goodman Theatre came into class to act out the student-scenes, adding more fuel to an already stimulated young playwright who began directing all of his energies toward writing plays. He,

> . . . learned what conflict was and all those things. Fundamentals. And wrote a play that is very bad indeed with all those fundamentals in it. And a one-act that was our final. And as soon as I finished that, I came to New York.[1]

The Dreamer Cometh and The Hourglass were two one-act plays that came out of the couurse that Wilson would just as soon forget. They were significant only in that they are the first works he wrote specifically for the theatre.

It was the summer of 1962. He came to New York City with a young man

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[1] Ibid.

called Dean Morgan whom he has since lost track of, and Michael Warren Powell, who eventually did very well in New York, first acting at Ellen Stewart's Cafe La Mama, then becoming assistant to Theoni Aldredge, and finally pursuing his major interest in sculpting. They came with seven dollars among them. By an almost prophetic coincidence they slept in Tiompkins Square Park in the East Village directly across from where Marshall Mason lived, on their first night in New York. The three young men spent the next night in Central Park. It was not long before the romantic adventure of coming the New York took on the bleak burden of cheerlessness that poverty can cast. It was Dean Morgan who finally wired home for some money and was the first one to get a job. He had worked at a hotel reservation desk in Chicago and managed to get a comparable job in New York working, "that God-awful shift."

"There's magic in the air right over the island," Wilson had said to Alan Wallach. "I was in New York walking all over the Broadway theatre district absolutely gaga, and at the same time bought a typewriter and started writing another one-act play, because I thought I must start right now."[1]

He was sure that this is where a playwright should be, but despite the "magic," he was keenly aware of the dichotomy of emotions regarding New York--from wide-eyed awe of the constant stimulus to abject fear of the streets.

Out of work for three months and not having enough money to afford better lodgings, he moved into a seedy hotel on the upper West side which, like the rooming houses in Chicago, would translate into the setting for The Hot L

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[1] Alan Wallach, "The Long Island Review," The Long Island Record, April 29, 1973.

Baltimore. Out of desperation, he lied his way into a job as a waiter in a Cobbs Corner restaurant and was fired before breakfast had been completely served. In the next few months he took a variety of jobs--none having to do with theatre, all having to do with pure survival. After Cobbs Corner, there was a job in a fly-by-night furniture house as "the entire office" handling all the correspondence and all the customer complaints. Hating it, he found another job at the Americana Hotel as a reservations clerk. Although it would turn out to be his last non-theatrical job, he found himself disenchanted with New York City. He was seriously beginning to be sorry he had made the move. "I realized that no one gave a damn for you in New York," he said to Steven Grover of The Wall Street Journal, "and I wasn't sure I had enough strength for it."[1] In addition, distinctly echoing Marshall Mason's own feelings upon first viewing theatre in New York, Wilson became quickly disillusioned with what he saw on Broadway. He had saved up his money and had seen everything that he could. Seats were relatively inexpensive in the early sixties, particularly balcony seats; or he would go to the box office and ask for whatever seat they had available for the evening's performance. He saw A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum from " . . . the absolute last row, last seat on the right, jammed up against the wall," he recalls. The actors were all about an inch high but he could hear every word clearly, and loved every minute of it, although "loving it" was more the exception than the rule. Mostly he hated everything he saw even on the few times he was lucky enough to get a last minute front row seat. When he came to New York, he was sure he would find plays like O'Neill's The Hairy Ape in one

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[1] Steven Grover, "Little White Way," The Wall Street Journal, 8/21/79.

theatre and Williams' The Glass Menagerie next door. All of New York was going to demonstrate a serious celebration of America's finest playwrights; it was to be an artistic and intellectual mecca. It was extremely discouraging to find he hated most of what he saw with the possible exception of A Man For All Seasons which he readily admits he did not fully understand at the time. The Broadway marquees boasted a veritable musical bonanza: Bye, Bye Birdie, West Side Story, My Fair Lady, The Music Man, La Plume de ma Tante, Gypsy, Fiorello!, Take Me Along,--some of which were holdovers from the fifties--were all playing to capacity audiences at the opening of the sixties. This bonanza may have guaranteed delight in enthusiasts for one of America's native genres but could hardly inspire joy in a burgeoning young playwright.

It was not long before Wilson began gravitating toward Greenwich Village where, when asked what he did, he would respond that he wrote plays. A composer he met took him at his word and asked if he would be willing to try a collaboration on a musical revue for Joe Cino.

"Joe Cino?" Wilson had never heard of the man who would be responsible for ending his New York City wanderings, "No problem," he told the composer, adding that he had already written a series of sketches for Second City. In the usual insecure manner of one who feels compelled to amplify his experience because of the very lack of it, he neglected to mention that the sketches had never been done because he had never had the nerve to show them to the producer of Second City. They had originally been written for Upstairs At The Downstairs and were in his own estimation, "sort of sweet and nice." After glancing at his work, the owner of Upstairs At The Downstairs put it aside and suggested that he act instead in a new show he was casting. Wilson was appalled

at the thought of taking an acting job when he had come to New York with two actors who were still unemployed.

"Your material is just not for us," the owner told him. "Come tonight as my guest and you'll see what I mean."[1]

It was immediately apparent to Wilson.

> Four lines out of their mouths, and I heard this sophisticated, biting, cutting, material--and my stuff was all warm and gushy and sweet. I was in awe of that but I couldn't do it then and I probably still couldn't."[2]

Although the musical revue was written, it was never produced. The important fact was that Wilson went down to the Caffe' Cino to see what it was all about and discovered a new world. He had been unaware of the "theatre" that was being generated in the small coffeehouses, lofts, storefronts, churches, tabernacles, and basements all over the city that would become Off-Off Broadway. He did not even know Off-Off Broadway existed. These were the experimental, non-commercial, enthusiastic, anyone-could-have-a-chance type of "playhouses" that offered an enormous range of styles that could never be duplicated by any commercial endeavor. Wilson says:

> When I first went to the Caffe' Cino, the room was about thirty by twenty. It's still there--an office, but you can't go in there now. I think it's Mafia. We could crowd thirty people in there. It was just a little coffeeshop, very Italian looking. Blinking Christmas tree lights, layers upon layers of posters and material that Joe thought was nice, stapled to the wall one on top of the other. Glitter all over the floor. Every table was a different height and a different kind of table. All the chairs

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

> were different just because he got what he could find. They had pastries and sandwiches that were very good and an espresso machine, and an area set aside that was usually in a different place for each show. His friend, John Torrey, who was a lighting designer and had lit the first poetry reading, set the different areas with lights.[1]

The first night Wilson walked in, there were about fifteen or twenty people seated at little tables. He got himself a pastry and a coffee and sat waiting. The "stage" was made out of milk crates covered with pieces of carpets, all of which had been salvaged off the streets.

What he saw that night was a ferocious, pirated version of Ionesco's 1950 play, The Lesson. Unlike Mason who was always a bit annoyed with Ionesco, it was to be a pivotal experience for Wilson. By the end of the evening he would know where he wanted to work.

> I have never seen an Ionesco play before. I don't know if I even knew who he was. My European theatre history was non-existent. I was blown away. It was the funniest thing I had ever seen.[2]

It is not surprising that Wilson, who came from traditional theatrical concepts, would be so affected by something so different. There is usually a great deal of laughter at an Ionesco play. Ionesco himself refers to his plays as "tragic farces." The laughter comes even chokingly when one realizes that the derision of man's essential emptiness is the integral tragedy of the farces. Wilson vividly recalls his reaction.

> The most ghastly ending. Brilliantly done. The actors were incredible. I laughed so hard my sides ached. And it was the first theatrical experience I'd had in New York City. That is what I thought theatre was going to be, not Broadway. I didn't *know* that's what I thought theatre was going to be. But it was the first

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

> time I was engaged by something and probably the madness of that play influenced my plays at the Cino a little bit--because it was so vivid. Maybe not, maybe so.[1]

Wilson is certainly not an Ionesco-type writer but there is a fierce craziness in The Madness Lady Bright and Home Free! that is not typical of his later work. Knowing that he was writing for the same space in which he had just seen The Lesson could very easily have influenced the more bizarre aspects of the two one-acters. Wilson began frequenting the Caffe' Cino on a regular basis from that point on, ostensibly because of the musical revue he was co-authoring.

Although the beginnings of any movement are always difficult to pinpoint exactly, it is probably safe to say that the Off-Off Broadway movement began officially at the Caffe' Cino, 31 Cornelia Street, Greenwich Village, New York City in 1958.

> Joe Cino was an overweight ex-dancer, a homosexual, an alchoholic, a drug taker and a flamboyant Greenwich Village "character." Having given up his stage ambitions in 1958, he opened the Caffe' Cino, one of the many coffee houses that sprang up in the Village in the late 1950s.The Caffe' Cino quickly became a haven for other outcasts, misfits and failed would-be performers; the long, narrow storefront cafe had a tiny stage in the middle, where the loving host let his guests live out their fantasies by performing for each other and for any unsuspecting tourists who wandered in. Eventually some of the Cino regulars put on a play and Off Off Broadway was born.[2]

Of course, none of the young people who worked at the Cino considered themselves outcasts and misfits. They were poor but they were separate from the others who merely came to watch or hang around, and at the same time, they were a part of them. They had, in essence, found a place to work. Tanya Berezin's

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Berkowitz, p. 95

recollections of the Caffe' Cino were vivid. Berezin, with her warm smile and dark, piercing eyes, whom Wilson would later describe as having had "the most normal upbringing in Philadelphia," began frequenting the cafe in 1962 when she first came to New York City, long before she had met any of the people with whom she would later work so closely, and long before she would realize that the Caffe' Cino would eventually represent quintessential Off-Off Broadway.

Looking back on it, she calls it,

> . . . fabulous. A true artistic haven. Joe Cino was Italian, gay, chubby, generous and caring. He was an ex-ballet dancer and was in awe of all ballet, had no particular power trip or ax to grind as far as theatre was concerned. As a producer, it was just his place. And the theme of the place was, "Just do whatever you have to do." I remember going there before I knew any of these people and asking if I could work there. I was very young and he said to me, "Do whatever you have to do, honey," and me thinking that meant get out of my cafe, not thinking that it was an invitation and an opening, which I realized later that it was. It was up to me to use it or not. He gave you the room. The rest was up to you.[1]

Wilson's recollections of Joe Cino's apparent external needs were much the same as Berezin's.

> He was a ballet dancer--or rather, wanted to be, and he was ashamed of himself because he was too fat. There was a point at every party when he would start stripping and doing a ballet dance. It was very exciting to see, except that we'd as soon he'd not strip. He was a good dancer but he was too heavy to be a dancer.[2]

Generosity seemed to be an inherent part of Cino's personality. The very fact that he would open up his cafe to let people "do it!" demonstrated the generosity of his heart if not the discrimination. Very rarely did he actively take

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[1]Tanya Berezin interview, New York City, December 7, 1983.

[2]Wilson interview.

a personal interest in the quality of the presentations or even directly involve himself in the productions. He only wanted to make sure that his cafe was available to those who were able "to make things happen" and he wanted those "things," whatever they were, to happen at the Caffe' Cino. It was not so much that he was enthralled with theatre or with poetry readings, which is the way his open policy began; rather, as Wilson would point out,

> He was these people. His enthusiasm and protectiveness and concern, once you were there, was very mother-hen. If you were his--you were golden. Even people who were God-awful bad--the doldrums.[1]

And there were many who were "God-awful bad." The Caffe' Cino presented more "non-writes" and more fifteen minute plays than one could imagine. Some of the actors would hang around because they could not get work any place else. According to Wilson, the talented actors at the time mostly would not go near Off-Off Broadway because, "A) you had to pass the hat around. And B) it had a bad reputation of being real slummy. Amateursville.[2] The desire to work, no matter how highly motivated, did not automatically produce great theatre; nor did shoe-string budgets or experimentation with the unknown rudiments of theatre craft. Much of the work was crude, lacking not only skill but talent. However, when the work was good, the freedom from commercial considerations became an important factor in its development. Financial failure was virtually implicit in the system, and thus, accepted without condemnations. Without the onus of commercial success, artistic freedom was a high priority and an important bonus

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

to the talented who truly wished to experiment with new visions.

Berkowitz presented much the same conclusions in his fourth chapter of Off Off And Other Alternatives when he summed up the Caffe' Cino's importance.

> Despite its enormous output (a new play every week or two for almost ten years,) the Caffe' Cino did not produce many plays or artists of particular merit. Lanford Wilsons' The Madness of Lady Bright, Sam Shepard's Icarus' Mother and Tom Eyen's The White Whore and the Bit Player stand out, and director Marshall W. Mason served part of his apprenticeship at the Cino. Generally, though, Joe Cino's determined lack of objective standards--he put on what he liked or what his friends wanted to do, and his tastes and his associates ran to the outlandish and extravagant--made the Caffe' Cino one of the more self-indulgently amateurish of Off-Off Broadway venues. Its importance, even at the time was largely symbolic: it was *there*, and its continued operation in spite of zoning laws, financial pressures and creative failures seemed to prove that some unquenchable artistic force was present and had chosen Off-Off Broadway as its home. The Cino proved that a theatre of experiment, of violated rules and of personal vision could still exist after Off Broadway had become commercialized; and even its coterie quality allowed for positive interpretation, suggesting that drama and theatre could be a vehicle for communal unity and expression.[1]

Not only had each of the co-founders of the Circle Repertory Company found the "place to work," when they independently discovered the Caffe' Cino, but they had also found the nurturing environment that was so important to them and that they would later recreate within the very environmental structure of the early Circle Repertory Theatre on 83rd Street. Wilson agreed with this observation.

> We knew everyone. We didn't really trust people from the outside, because as soon as they decided to do our play, they'd get a commercial and have to fly down to Tampa to do a shoot on the beach, and we were "going on" in three days. They didn't care. This wasn't something outsiders were really committed to. And

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[1]Berkowitz., p. 98.

> also, they couldn't possibly afford to turn anything down. We were only making $16 a week--that was our average. I figured it out by passing the basket and dividing it up amongst the actors and the playwright and the director. Everyone got the same. About $16 a week--which was enough. Joe gave us sandwiches and scrambled eggs and coffee. Most of our meals were on him and we ate all the pastries at the end of the day because he got fresh pastries every day. So we got food.What more do you need? We weren't living very high on the hog but we had someplace to work.[1]

And they had the nurturing environment that has often been referred to as "the family." Marshall Mason would agree, but to him the family aspect was important only in that it encouraged a sense of comfort. He understood only too well when he first discovered the Cino a year before Wilson saw The Lesson, one of the most important aspects for him was the right to experiment without the pressures of commercial considerations, and the right to fail without shame. Only a comfortable "family" environment free of undue criticism and financial considerations could offer such possibilities. There was no money to speak of. There was no commercial ambiance. There was simply the never-ending support of Joe Cino himself, the by-now legendary Village character, who kept encouraging Mason to do his work and gave him the place in which to do it with absolutely no strings. Mason has often given unqualified commendation to Cino for the essential artistic freedom he made possible. Whatever the problem, Cino would quite simply say, "Do whatever you have to do."

Although, as stated by Berkowitz, much of this *laissez-faire* attitude generally made Cino's theatre extremely undisciplined, in Mason's hands, the free rein also included the freedom to be highly disciplined,as Mason was. It is difficult to assess whether or not Cino knew the difference. To him theatre was

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[2]Wilson interview.

"Magic time!" and he wanted his cafe to be used to create this "magic."

Just as important as the magic Cino needed, he also encouraged the many different groups of people that gathered regularly at the Cino. He obviously needed to surround himself with all the private little cliques that developed at the Cino independently of one another, from the "Andy Warhohl crowd" to "Mason's crowd" from Northwestern University. In a sense they were all extensions of Cino's multi-faceted interests.

Lanford Wilson recalls the dance group that often came over from the Judson Poets comprised of seven or eight dancers. The group would sometimes perform dance shows based on what Wilson considered very "experimental, odd things." He clearly remembered one which involved moving all the people and all the tables to one side of the room and then moving them all back again. "And you had to get up and walk around and move the chairs, and who cares!" he says getting caught up in the vivid memories of the Cino. Just a mention of what in essence turned out to be ground work for the multi-layered fabric that encompased Off-Off-Broadway, and Wilson speaks at great length, recreating the short-lived bygone world in rich strokes of personal memory:

> I never spoke to any of those dancers--hardly at all. Although I knew Al Carmine and Larry Kornfeld who worked at the Judsons Poet Theatre, I didn't know the dancers. A whole part of that world was Joe's. There was the opera-queen crowd. They would get dressed up once a week and go to the opera--his Italian background. I hated opera with a passion that was undying--so I didn't know any of that opera crowd. There were about fifteen of them. They would sit around and I would just move to another table when they were talking about opera. They could relate. I don't know what Joe did on the way to the opera and on the way back when he was with those opera queens and they were singing all night long until seven in the morning because I didn't see it. There was a sex crowd that I was certainly in on, that was, you know, horny, rub-a-dub-dub and we would close down the place and be there all night. That was more or less my part of

> the crowd and it was very, very small. And then the realistic, poetical writer thing that Marshall (Mason), Claris (Nelson), David (Starkweather) and Sam (Shepard) were in on. Sam was never really a part of the Cino's. He had his own crowd. He was part of the Theatre Genesis, but he came around a lot. And Robert Patrick. These were the playwrights and their immediate actors and directors, and Neil Flanagan, and all that. Rob (Thirkield) and Tanya (Berezin) were not a part of it yet. There was Marshall's crowd from Northwestern. Claris was sort of under his wing all the time. There was my crowd at the Cino, and there was--unbeknownst to me and to Marshall and to most of our crowd--there was a rather heavy drug scene that Joe was into. A few people crossed over into that, like Eric___, who was sort of half into playwriting and half into drugs, although not seriously into drugs.[1]

It astonishes Wilson and Mason to this day that they were not really aware of the extent of the heavy drug scene encircling them. It would eventually contribute directly to Joe Cino's undoing, but at the time that it was going on, there seemed to be a naive blindness that accompanied the enthusiasm for their own work and distorted the dark reality of the drug-related lifestyle that underlay the Caffe' Cino.

Besides the different 'regular" groups, there was the usual Village clientele that would buy the espresso, the capucino, the "great" sandwiches, and to whom the hat was passed after each production.

By the time Tanya Berezin started working at the Cino, it was in full operation. She vividly recalls passing the hat.

> That was for the actors," she says. "The actors weren't paid except from the hat. The playwrights were not usually paid anything. Joe made money through food and coffee, and the actors made theirs through the hat. Most of the clientele were people who were involved there--theatre people from everywhere--from all over town. Young people and a few Village beatnik, hippie, cafe-hanger-out type of people. But

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[1]Ibid.

> the reputation spread quickly and people started coming down. And that's where you got to know people.[1]

Interestingly, it was not considered a place to "make contacts" in the 1984 sense of the word. Apparently such language did not exist at the Cino which was becoming legendary even in the early stages of its operations, and would soon be overtly copied all over the Village. Ellen Stewart's early Cafe La Mama, begun in a basement in 1961, was a frank imitation of the Caffe' Cino. By the time the Cafe La Mama became La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, Stewart had developed her own standards for production, but she credits the Cino with paving the way and inspiring much of her own legendary enthusiasm. Ellen Stewart did not hide the fact that she was deeply stimulated by the very *idea* of the Cino. Despite the obvious self-indulgence, Joe Cino was instrumental in capturing and promulgating an irrepressible artistic force that needed the controlling restrictions of a steady environment. It was because people successfully got together to "make something happen" as Joe called it, that the Cino's reputation spread throughout the community as the place where new theatre happened that had nothing to do with "showcasing" either material or performer for uptowners. Tanya Berezin is most emphatic on this point.

> You did the place to do the plays. The whole Off-Off Broadway scene in those days was not career or success oriented. People were simply working with people. Marshall had not a penny. Lanford had not a penny. They would build their sets and they would scrape together money and they would borrow money from Rob and get something on and, of course, never pay Rob back. Whoever had the money at lunchtime would pay for lunch. Completely different heads than the world is now and than the theatre is now. You didn't invite agents down to the Cino's to see a play. You didn't think of any of that as making contacts. You

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[1]Berezin interview.

worked with people because you wanted to do the play.[1]

It was customary in the early days for anyone who was involved theatrically to see everything that was being done. Since there was no charge for any of the productions and the Off-Off Broadway fare was still fairly thin, it was possible to take in its entire offering with ease. Much of what Tanya Berezin relates could apply to Off-Off Broadway in general and would eventually be an accurate assessment of the early Circle Repertory Company itself, but at this point she was speaking most particularly of the Cino. She says enthusiastically,

> It was really an artistic community. It was actors, writers and directors working together for an event. It was incredibly unselfish. The only selfish thing was the work. People didn't leave rehearsal to go to a commercial audition. They do that now at every Off-Off Broadway theatre. It was just a completely different head. There was a sincere artistic commitment to the work that was being done and the work was never seen as a stepping stone to doing O'Neill, for instance. The work was explored and created for itself--truly for itself--as Sam Shepard was doing things at La Mama at the time.[2]

Of the four co-founders of the Circle Repertory Company, no one more openly credited Joe Cino for the stimulation he provided than Wilson. There is no sadness in his reminiscences, only boundless appreciation of Cino's particular gifts:

> After I decided I was a writer and fell into that blessing of discovering what you should do--I found Joe Cino at just the right time--and that atmosphere. That uncritical, "Do it!" "Put it on!" "Go for it!" He's the one who started, "Do your own thing!" That was all from Joe Cino. Joe's came before, "Do your own thing" Joe's was, "Do what you have to do!" And this was wildly encouraging--I can't tell you. He was the only one who matched my energy. He quadrupled it. I can't tell you how

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

> huge the man seemed to me. I don't see anyone like that now. There hasn't been anyone like that since. Ellen Stewart had that same madness--that same mad drive--that same mad encouragement. Gertrude Stein said "Artists don't need criticism, they need approval." That incredible approval was half of the stimulus, and wanting to get something on--wanting to do something else. And being stimulated by all the other things that were being done Off-Off Broadway in other places--and all the people we ran into.[1]

A year before Wilson first saw The Lesson, Marshall Mason had already worked the Caffe' Cino. Mason's repuation as a director on the Off-Off Broadway grapevine was excellent. He had left Cino's in order to direct Ibsen Off Boradway. Anyone who was able to make the leap from Off-Off to Off Broadway was considered "successful," and Wilson had heard of Mason before he caught his first glimpse of him. However, Wilson's first impressions were less than overwhelming. Wilson recalls:

> He came in back then--had the worse teeth in the world. Tallest, thinest thing you've ever seen in your life. Bright yellow hair. His cuffs came up to here like this, halfway up his arms because he had outgrown all of his clothes. And his pants cuffs were halfway up his calfs, which was ridiculous. None of his clothes fit. And he wore tight, tight, tight, tight pants. He came in just looking like an idiot, I thought. Very pretentious, very much. I mean--that was my first impression. And I was introduced. *That* was the Marshall Mason who the year before was everything at the Cino.[1]

The contrast between the two of them must have been startling. Although they were both tall and thin almost to the point of being gaunt, Wilson was a mass of energy--"The Mad Aries," as Joe Cino dubbed him. Photographs of him at the time show him to be approximately one hundred twenty-six pounds. He was

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[1] Wilson interview.

[2] Ibid.

all eyes, with bursts of bushy eyebrows and huge circles under his eyes. He had an electric energy that apparently frightened or made some people nervous. Although he never used drugs of any kind, he was often suspected of being "high" because he always spoke very quickly and very loudly. This was not the same Lanford Wilson who had come to New York City such a short time ago. The gangling Missourian now responded in like energy to the hectic rhythm of New York which was "five times as fast" as anything he had ever seen before, as though the city were "on a different speed--78 instead of 33." The hyper energy he exuded was a result of the creative response to all the theatrical activity in which he had immersed himself.

Mason, on the other hand, was soft-spoken and appeared to be mild of manner. While Wilson's eyes darted everywhere, Mason's eyes lingered more and missed nothing. One of the interesting things about Mason is that one thinks of him as "always smiling" at the very same moment one thinks of him as "always frowning." There is a magnetic quality about him that makes one automatically dismiss everything else in the room and concentrate only on him. It seems necessary to lean in toward him when he speaks even though he projects clearly. When he speaks, and it is apparent that his attention is one hundred percent on what he is saying, it also seems that there is a part of him--revealed by the way he looks across a room or stares into a crack in the floor--that is elsewhere, seemingly refuting the totality of "one hundred percent." It is easy to believe that there is a secret Mason, even though he is very open and quite friendly.

While Mason and Thirkield had been temporarily away from the Caffe' Cino with their first company, Northwestern Productions, Wilson had been taking

giant steps at the Cino. He was correct in his own self-appraisal that he had found the Cino at precisely the moment in his life when it could make the most impact.

> After the floundering, I mean the *floundering* of not knowing I was a playwright--that's what I am! That's what I'm going to be, and that's what I'm going to work on! That is complicated enough so that I'll never be able to get it right. So I can devote my life to it.[1]

Wilson is the type of artist who must always strive for something more. He is not of the temperament to be satisfied with what has just been done. It is a testament to this temperament that after a shaky beginning, he has proven to be one of the most fertile of the young writers to come out of the early Off-Off Broadway movement with almost fifty plays--his volume matched only, perhaps, by Sam Shepard. Part of the artistic temperament was based upon the fact that he enjoyed the intense complication of writing plays. This was part of the stimulus. The fact that he was sure he would "never be able to get it right," never be thoroughly "satisfied with his work," meant he had found something to which he could devote his life--the unravelling of the complications in order to "get it right."

"We sort of bogged down in rehearsals," he says of the musical revue that had been responsbile for introducing him to Cino, until Joe Cino finally said to forget about the musical and write a play instead. No words could have made Wilson happier since he was already at work on the one act play, Home Free! He immediately completed the play and gave it to Cino, Wilson recalls:

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[1]Ibid.

> Joe almost never read anything. He didn't read closely or well, but he did read Home Free! and he said, "Lanford, I don't know. All of this bippity-boppity, poo, and this, 'Sweetie-this' and the 'honey.' It's just a little too—it's too precious. I mean it's so sugary. I mean, I can't read plays, so I gave it to a director, Neil Flanagan." My God! That was a star! That was the one I'd see in The Lesson and the following week in Who's Afraid of Edward Albee, David Starkweather's play—which had been another miracle. By this time I'd seen some really rotten things down at the Caffe' Cino, but every third one was a miracle all over again. The others were so bad, you started to look at the door.....Neil came in with my play under his arm and said, "Joe, I really don't know how I feel about this play because I'm Catholic and this is the most immoral play I've ever encountered in my life." Of course, Joe was blown away. He thought it was the sweetest thing in the world—"precious." And the world the characters create *is* precious in a way. It just happens to be incestuous and private.[1]

Home Free! is a play about an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister in which she gets pregnant. It is a strong, vital, original play with a very different voice than the two one-act plays Wilson had written in Chicago. By this time Wilson had consciously decided that he wanted to capture the sounds of characters in contrapuntal rhythms and was working in a very different manner than the way he had started. Most of what he had written before was the complete fabrication of an active nineteen-twenty year old imagination, but in Home Free! he wrote about four poeple he knew and blended them into the two characters in the play. They had a very specific world of their own. Wilson captured this world which they transformed into something magical, private and insular so that it did not relate to the outside world at all.

By the time Cino convinced Neil Flanagan to do the play, Wilson had already submitted it to Giancarlo Menotti at the Spoletto Festival. Since the Festival only considered unproduced plays, Wilson wanted to wait for Menotti's response. Six

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[1] Ibid.

months passed before Wilson discovered that Menotti had liked the play but lost it before he could give it to the Judges.

Glen DuBose, the director who had been working on the musical revue suggested to Wilson that he write another play for Flanagan. Since he had been working on a little play called The Bottle Harp with which he was not pleased, he set it aside, sat down with "another idea," and "in five hours flat" wrote So Long At The Fair. In a Wall Street Journal article in 1979, Wilson described the play as a "silly little comedy," but it would be responsible for his making his New York writing debut in record time. It opened at the Cino in August of 1963 to good critical reception. Michael Smith of The Village Voice in his review of August 29, 1963, called it a tense little comedy and praised the "exactness and inner logic" of the dialogue, "which, at its best, springs half-thought-out from the characters lips." Unfortunately, there is no existing copy of the script. Glen DuBose, who acted as dramaturg, had the only completed script which has since been lost.

In speaking of the early working days at the Cino, words pour out of Wilson almost torrentially.[1] In glowing terms of appreciation, he describes the stimulus, excitement and energy that produced the ensuing prolific parade of plays, beginning with Home Free! Wilson had written the leading role for Michael Warren Powell.

> He was a friend and I wanted to give him something to do. They all liked Michael. An incredibly personable man, but it turned out that the director went through hell with him. I think Michael was "acting" acting. And I had imposed the actor on the director. So I thought I'll write another play for you that you

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[1] In order to capture the personalized, true flavor of the boundless activity and energy that substructured the creation of Off-Off Broadway by a young man who had played a very active part, this section of the 4/11/84 interview with Wilson has been transcribed almost verbatim.

> can direct and cast and do anything you want to do. So I wrote No Trespassing for Glenn and he hated it with a clean, pure, white loathing. He didn't want to do it at all. Very funny. A play I'd given him with no strings. In the meantime I found out that Spoletto had lost Home Free! and the Festival was over. Glenn didn't know Home Free! but Neil Flanagan, the original director, loved No Trespassing. So Home Free! and No Trespassing were done simultaneously. One would play the 9:00 slot and the other would play the 11:00 o'clock. Then they would reverse. Like a one-act rep for all the weeks that they ran. No Trespassing was a horrible flop but everyone loved Home Free! a lot. It moved over to La Mama's because they had a cancellation. And that's the first time I saw La Mama. I had never heard of it before. Ellen saw the play; everyone saw everything in those days. There wasn't that much to see, so everyone went back and forth. So Ellen saw it and said, "Oh could you bring that over and save me, because I don't have a show. The show that I had was going to move tomorrow but the girl got a job and had to move off somewhere." So we actually got to run it for two weeks--an unheard of joy. The space was comparable. A funny little stage.
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> I still had not met Marshall.
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> One thing stimulated another. In interesting ways. You'd have something on and have it running. You'd go through rehearsal periods as the play is running. You get so excited and another idea would come to you, and so you'd write it and in another week you'd start rehearsals. I was very prolific. I was just so stimulated by the entire scene.
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> By this point I was working at the American Hotel on the Reservations office where they had a typewriter. I was on the night shift so there weren't many calls, but the typewriter was on all night. So it was very lucky for me.

Contrary to some reports, this is not where he met the model he used for the his one act play, The Madness of Lady Bright. Wilson admits that he does not know how the assumption ever got started.

> It isn't true. I don't remember who was on the desk then. How it came about--just to show you impulses--how everything feeds everything; I was still great, close friends with Glenn DuBose.I went first to a show and then to his house just to sit and drink. And I had seen Kennedy's play Funny House of A Negro. For some reason, it just had not done a thing for me. I don't know why. It should have. Now, of course, I love it. I just didn't in that particular production. It was very removed and cold. That night at Glenn's house, upstairs from him, I'd seen a total queen--tall, thin, aging queen, who was hysterically funny. Always kept me in stitches. I never paid any attention to him at all except that

he was hysterically funny--one of the happiest people I'd ever met, always with something cutting or outrageous to say. Always on top of everything. Someone said somebody was going down to the trucks, and this queen said, "I never go down to the trucks, not even for an ice cream. My second husband was killed by a truck." We all screamed with laughter. And he said, "He really was, you know. I'm not making it up." And we just screamed. Then we went into the next room, all except him. Then I went back because I had forgotten a fork and the guy was looking out the window and crying because he was remembering this guy. I sneaked out real quick because it was a very private thing to have invaded.

In the next room, talking about Funny House of a Negro, trashing it, seeing this silly black girl flip out in her room was the most uninteresting idea. I'd just as soon see some screaming faggot go mad, and I said, "Wait a minute! What an interesting character." That's when I thought of it. And of course, the guy upstairs didn't know he was being used. He never went to the theatre. I don't think he ever saw a play.

And it wasn't just him. I used people I knew in Chicago; they're much queenier than the queens I knew in New York. Makeup on the street and all--back then, anyway. You didn't see that here.

The next night I went to the Americana Hotel and I knew that the queen broke down completely. I knew it was all about youth and loneliness and losing that "beauty" and facing a future. It started as, "Will somebody please escort Miss Bright to the lounge.," which is going to be the last line of the play. That's all I had. It was never changed from the first draft--hardly a word. I wrote the first fifteen lines and I thought, " Oh my God, this is very wild." I called Neil Flanagan and I asked, "Neil, what exactly can we get away with at the Caffe' Cino? Can we do anything that enters our head, absolutely anything?" And he said, "Like what?" And I said, "Can we have an absolutely screaming, raging queen going hysterically mad on stage right before our eyes. But really, can we show that queen in absolute, no-holds-barred, uncensored,." And he said, " Well, write it and we'll see." I wrote it in two nights, I think, and brought it in. As I said, we were very stimulated. Home Free! and No Trespassing were still playing. And so, while I watched Home Free! Neil and his wife, Jackie, read it.

Neil came back and said, "We have to get absolutely the best director we can possibly find for this." And I said, "Oh...I was hoping you'd like it well enough to direct it yourself." And he said, "No. I'm going to play it." And I said," You're not at all what I had in mind." And he said, "I know. That's why we have got to get the best director we can find for this."

So we got Dennis Deegan. I don't know what happened to him. Sort of drug culture, jet setter. I wonder what happened to

> him because he was real good and did a stunning production of it. Neil gave a classic portrayal of an aging transvestite. That's when Joe calmly told the next show that he didn't want them there; The Madness of Lady Bright was going to run.[1]

It ran for an unprecedented two hundred and fifty-four performances in two separate runs and was credited as being the Caffe' Cino's first major success.

Spurred on by the additional stimulus of Lady Bright's unheard of triumph, Wilson continued to produce one one-act play after another which were presented at the Cino throughout 1965 and 1966; Ludlow Fair is a delightful and completely realistic play of two lonely young women, Agnes and Rachel, one sardonic and down to earth, one romantic and foolish, whose dreams of romance are repeatedly frustrated; This is The Rill Speaking which later became The Rimers of Eldritch is an autobiographical impression of small town life in the Ozarks. Six performers, who play seventeen characters, play out scenes that Wilson heard in his own kitchen; Days Ahead is a middle-aged man's monologue. He speaks throughout to his (absent) wife whom he abandoned twenty years earlier because he was afraid that if he remained he would spoil their perfect love. It was a play full of fear of the future and lack of trust in commitment; and Wandering, an Ionesco-type short play in which three characters recite the life of one of them and mime its emotions. Starting with So Long At The Fair, Home Free! and The Madness of Lady Bright, which was one of the first plays about homosexuality, Wilson continued to produce. He did not know it, but he was growing up in the Off-Off Broadway movement which received its official name at about this time from Jerry Talmer of The Village Voice. It was beginning to feel like a theatre revolution. They were all beginning to sense the creativity

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[1] Wilson interview.

and experimentation that was being encouraged in what was becoming the precious laboratories of new ways to approach theatre. No one felt that it was meant to be a tributary theatre that would lead to the apex of Broadway. It was definitely a completely alternative theatre that was, as Wilson would tell Emory Lewis, in many ways, "a superior theatre."[1] Superior or not, there were nights when nobody came. On those nights, they performed just for Joe.

In 1965, the Caffe' Cino presented a revival of Home Free! which Mason came to see. Afterwards he came over to the table and was introduced to Wilson. Wilson had rewritten the play and was quite happy with the new version. It was the first time he had ever done a revision on a play that had already been produced. He told Mason he wished he could have seen the original version becuase he felt that now it was quite exciting. But Mason said, "I saw it the other way and I think you've ruined it." That was the first thing he ever said to the man with whom he would share a very long collaboration.

Wilson was devastated.

> I thought he was absolutely horrible. I thought he was a terrible bitch and just awful and wrong![2]

But it did not matter. It was the first step toward a new appraisal of each other.

For several weeks Wilson had been working on a new one act play called, The Sandcastle, about strong family conflicts that takes place in San Diego. Mason was now back at the Cino after the demise of Northwestern Productions. He was

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[1] Lewis, p. B-13.

[2] Wilson interview.

rehearsing a new Claris Nelson play. The same night Mason and Nelson came into the cafe to take measurements for their production, Wilson was present telling Joe Cino that he had just finished The Sandcastle and was anxious to have Cino read it. Typically, Cino insisted Wilson read it aloud to him.

To Wilson's dismay, Cino gathered Mason and Nelson after the evening's show and insisted that they listen to Lanford Wilson's new play. With six people now sitting around a table waiting for him to read aloud--there were Marshall Mason, Claris Nelson, Joe Cino, Dennis Parichy and Cino's friend, John Torrey, present--Wilson felt commited to proceed. It took one hour to read the play; he does not remember who else was present because Mason's reaction was so vivid. After he finished, Wilson looked up and waited, and Mason said that it was the best original play he had ever heard. Still wary of Mason, Wilson asked, "Not to be picky, but how many original plays have you heard?"

"All of mine," Claris Nelson answered for him and Wilson realized that the "quiet" Texan had loud views and was extremely outspoken when it came to expressing them. It was actually to be a strength in their relationship. One could never be in doubt as to where Mason stood on an issue of theatre.

The two men were beginning to assess each other more realistically now. Wilson had seen Mason's production of Claris Nelson's Neon In The Night and admitted to himself that he had really appreciated the way Mason had used the cafe; it was solid, a "real piece." The actors were made very conscious of the space and the emotional regions from where they were to come under Mason's detailed direction.

Now Mason was beginning to fully appreciate the high degree of personal intensity Wilson injected into his plays. He expressed a strong desire to direct The

Sandcastle, but Wilson, no longer rankling over the stinging comment on the last version of Home Free!, offered another play that he would rather have done. It was a full length play entitled, Balm in Gilead, which he felt was closer to completion that The Sandcastle.

After Mason's reaction to The Sandcastle, Wilson was anxious to have him read Balm in Gilead. It was late into the night but neither of them could sleep. The mutual stimulation that was to be one of the important factors in the success of their association was already at play. Wilson invited Mason to the two rooms he shared with Michael Powell. Each had a bedroom. There was no living room, no kitchen--just the two bedrooms and a bathroom, nothing else. Wilson sat in one room while Mason sat in the other and read the slightly unwieldly fifty-five character play. When Mason finished, thinking it was "the most incredible play" with literally four or five scenes going on at once, he returned to Wilson saying, "It's going to require a very good director. Thank you for letting me read it, but it's going to require a *very* good director."[1]

And he departed, leaving Wilson to believe that the play had failed completely, that only a very good director would be able to make something out of it, because whatever was needed was not on the page. He did not realize until Michael Powell accosted Mason on the street, that Mason had not only loved the play but had decided that *he* was going to have to direct the play or it would never turn out to be what it was meant to be.

Misunderstandings quickly put aside and taking full advantage of the swiftness with which decisions were made, they were casting the play within

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[1]Wilson interview.

one week. The casting took place in Mason's apartment overlooking the park where three young men from Chicago had spent their first night in New York City three years earlier.

Mason decided they would rehearse Gilead at the Actor's Studio and present it at La Mama which had an opening slot for it. It was the first full-length Off-Off Broadway play ever produced; it would be the first Off-Off Broadway play ever published. From start to finish, it was an exciting adventure of discovery for everyone concerned.

Rob Thirkield, Claris Nelson, and Michael Powell were in the play with Dennis Parichy's designs, bringing sharp echoes of Northwestern University and Northwestern Productions. Wilson did not argue when Mason cut the characters down to a more manageable thirty-five. His greatest discovery during the play was Marshall Mason himself, once again eliciting ardent streams of vivid recollections:

> When someone asks me how to select a director, I've developed this answer: Give him your play, let him read it--respond to it. Then say, please describe my play to me. And if he describes what you've written as you understand it, then you're beginning to reach a relationship--an understanding. Marshall described Balm in Gilead to me--every toenail that I tried to put into it. The sociological importance of the play. The whole thing about buying and selling. With different language it would be about Wall Street, which is what I had in mind from the beginning.
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> Of course, he approached things from the Actors Studio kind of acting which I'd never even heard or seen, and I was enthralled by it. I think I had been up to Actors Studio already but I didn't know what they were taking about until I heard Marshall explain it.
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> On the first day of rehearsal he said he was going to break the play down into beats--fifty-one beats, or something like that. And he did. Every single--*mf* inner beats. We hadn't talked about this at all. It was just the way he worked. I started looking forward for the next beat position and I couldn't do it fast enough for the next beat division. Every single time, he

> was right! Every single time, and one of them was right in the middle of a line that I had already decided that was where the change was. And he hit it! It was exactly right. It was phenomenol. That blew me away. I didn't get over it for a week. So I was just his from then on. I sat in awe of what he was doing with some of the actors--exercises he made then do if they were too phoney and he wanted to "real" them up a bit. Back then the people we could get who would commit to doing a play for three weeks rehearsal and one week of shows--some of them were not that good. So a lot of rehearsal time was acting lessons--teaching. That's one of the reasons he wanted to develop a company.[1]

Balm in Gilead is an extraordinary revelation of a particular slice of New York-Sixties-culture to which Mason brought an acute sensitivity and understanding through his interpretation. It was written by a young man who had the ability to capture the madness almost without recourse to plot, for there is very little plot in Balm in Gilead: A lonely girl comes to New York from Chicago, meets a pusher in an all-night coffee shop and attaches herself to him until he is killed.

Much of Wilson's earliest life in New York is revealed in this play. Living on the upper West side in a cheap hotel crowded with a bizarre assortment of "outcasts," he often visited an all-night coffee shop that was the habitat of pimps, prostitutes, pushers, junkies, and the seedier of the gay world. These were the night dwellers who came out when the rest of the city slept. Wilson was terrified but felt almost compelled to record it. "A very vivid memory sitting there in that all night coffee shop below where I lived," he says. "Copying down everything that was said. That's how Gilead was written. It was a heavy, heavy drug scene."[2]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

It would have been extremely easy--an almost natural progression--to fall into drugs, so completely surrounded was he, but mostly he kept himself rigidly free from use and often acted the role of one-man emergency squad.

> I came as a sane person from a very ordinary kind of lower, middle-class upbringing I came as an outside observer seeing this--writing my reactions to this craziness. Balm in Gilead. I sat there fearing for my life half the time, falling into half the scene very easily but not the drug scene. The drugs scared me to death.I didn't know for six months that there were drugs except that you stepped on a syringe on your way to the bathroom in that hotel. I knew there were prostitutes. That's not difficult to see; they're jingling their change at everyone that goes by. And I knew there were queers and drag queens and dykes because I'd seen that in Chicago. That was nothing new to me except that these were wilder. I found out after six months that they were wilder because they were all on heroin. I started asking questions the way Little Tim asks questions or the way Darlene did coming from Chicago as an "innocent" dying to be a prostitute like her sister had been. I came so from the outside of that situation that the one time I'd smoked hashish it didn't affect me much. Maybe I'd done it wrong. Everyone else at the party got so stoned that they were turning to ice and not making any sense at all. They were all on very bad trips and having a terrible time and I was the nurse for about six people, giving them tea and telling them it was going to be all right. It was just hashish but they acted very wildly. Later on, when I did have something that made me space out and trip--it frightened me so much that I never went near it again. I was so horrified that I was losing it. I remember crossing the street in traffic. Next thing I knew I was in my hotel room. Then the next thing I knew I was back in the park. I was completely losing control and I said, "Oh honey, no thank you, darling." I like to have control. I'm held together by a thread and don't muck around with that thread, because if that goes, *I* go.....I've always felt that.[1]

Balm In Gilead, then, portrayed the tragedy and waste of this netherworld. In a forlorn setting of grime, graffiti amd cigarette butts, the nocturnal

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[1]Ibid.

community comes to life--just as quickly comes to death--and finally to acceptance and apathy. The characters seem to be locked into the street rituals, strange loyalties and harsh rules that can bring swift, violent death to anyone with the temerity to break them.

The play, presented at La Mama, caused a sensation. While Ellen Stewart argued at the door with fire marshalls who complained of overcrowding and violations, doors had to be locked to keep out the many theatre-goers who could not be accommodated in the little space. The production became a private memory to the relatively few who had seen it in the two weeks of January, 1965. It was not to appear again in New York until the extraordinary revival in 1984 by the Circle Repertory Company in conjunction with the Chicago Steppenwolf Company, directed by John Malkovich. Although Mel Gussow, who had only read the play, "never realized the work's hallucinatory energy until seeing it,"[1] Rob Thirkield believes that nothing could ever compare with the power and breadth of the production Mason originated; it grew directly out of the immediacy of the world just beyond Stewart's locked door. Gilead was written in an open free style that was full of risk-taking, a free experimentation, and a Wilson style of overlapping dialogue and contrapuntal rhythms that he would continue to develop until his work would often be described in musical terms. Mason understood perfectly the kind of orchestration this instantly recognizeable world needed, for while Wilson may have sat at the counters and moved from table to table, "listening to the wistful stories and remembering

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[1]Mel Gussow, "When The Playwright's Life Is Visible In His Work," The New York Times., (August 26, 1984): p. C-6.

everything--the writer as shameless spy,"[1] it was Mason who poured the coffee, lit the joints, and burned the hamburgers--the director as creative hierophant.

Mason was not alone in judging it to be a landmark production, but despite enthusiastic support, it was over almost before it began. It represented a major transition in the creative lives of both Mason and Wilson and had finally introduced Wilson and Thirkield into their first working relationship as well. However, it could hardly impact a theatre world that was going through many transitions of its own, most of which could be directly related to the energy and sociological discontent of the mid-sixties.

There was a tremendous surge in absurdist revivals at the time, with characters like "Winnie" submerged in sand up to her breasts in Beckett's, Happy Days, or peeking out of giant urns as in his Play. These plays were being produced with increasing regularity. There were also chronic revivals of Albee's The Zoo Story, and The American Dream, both in the absurd tradition. Albee was becoming increasingly abstract in new plays like Tiny Alice, which critics like Robert Brustein called "camp" and led him to question the "author's sincerity."[2] There were also new plays such as William Hanley's Slow Dance on The Killing Ground and Le Roi Jones' The Slave and The Toilet, all of which Brustein found very disconcerting. These were the current plays; these were the playwrights who represented the new young dramatists of the day and were, according to Brustein, ". . . all possessed of a subterranean nihilism."[3]

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[1]Gussow, p. C-6.

[2]Brustein, p. 310.

[3]Ibid., p. 307.

By 1965 it was obvious that the Repertory Company of the Lincoln Center was in a state of collapse. Kazan and Whitehead had resigned and Brustein dreaded, " . . . the nightmare that is coming to take its place. Must we choose between a discredited establishment and a careerist avant-garde?" he asked in Seasons of Discontent. "Are the only alternatives to be between the collapsed idealism of the old and the secret cynacism of the new?"[1]

There seemed to be little alternative to the "alternatives."

By this time The Living Theatre had also closed its doors. Its directors, briefly imprisoned, had now expatriated themselves to the "freedom" of Europe, while Poland's Jerzy Grotowski came to America to expound his minimalist approach to theatre. Grotowski stripped his theatre of all that he considered unessential " . . . where the personal and scenic techniques of the actor is at the core of theatre art."[2]

Not everyone was impressed. John Simon was still intimating as late as 1970 that Grotowski was a theatrical fraud. On seeing Grotowski's adaptation of Juliusz Slowacki's adaptation of Calderon's The Constant Prince, he wrote, "The five men and one woman in the cast cavort, contort, skip, wallow, prance and dance about. They shrill or rattle off words unintelligibily even for Poles; they sound like human hurdy-gurdies, whining, shrieking, chanting, howling."[3]

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[1]Ibid., pp. 310-311.

[2]Jerzy Grotowski, Toward A Poor Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 15.

[3]John Simon, Singularities, Essays on The Theatre 1964-1975 (New York: Random House), p. 150.

In this case, Mason seemed to be in tune with Simon. However, there were those who were convinced that Grotowski had made an important contribution to a theatre that could absorb a multiplicity of approaches. Joseph Chaikin, for example, was eventually influenced by Grotowski's Open Theatre and broke down the traditional theatrical realism that Mason was creating in such intimate detail in Gilead. While Grotowski minimized the importance of language and realism, Mason worked on the extensive monologue Wilson had written for Darlene with a sincere appreciation for the language and the truth of interpretation that seemed almost out of step with the times. There was much about the ambiance of Gilead's coffee shop that could have been interpreted in a non-linguistic manner, but Mason was not a Grotowski enthusiast and took great care to give the overlapping dialogue considered emphasis so as not to lose any of it.

Equally visible at the time was Joseph Papp who was taking Shakespeare to New York neighborhoods in 1964, and Ellis Rabb's APA, now merged with the Phoenix Theatre and presenting revivals of mostly European imports--Shakespeare, Chekhov, Shaw, Ionesco, Pirandello.

Although Balm in Gilead reflected the times, the production reflected Mason's ultra-realistic approach--an insistence upon the exactitude of scenic design and an exploration of the relationships with an insistence on truth worthy of a psychiatrist. Everything had to create the reality of the total picture. One could almost hear echoes of Harold Clurman--theatre is a collaborative art between all theatre disciplines in which every facet is brought to bear to create the total picture. This was Mason's approach. It was more than realistic; it became a naturalistic slice-of-life. Even the coffee smelled stale.

And here, perhaps, is the point--the very thing that separates the artistic

direction of the Circle Repertory Company from all the other Off-Off Broadway theatres of the late sixties: the style of production was intense realism brought to bear on a slightly mad play that had been sliced out of the sixties drug culture. This was at a time when practically everyone about them was reverting exclusively to the security of revivals from the past, or exclusively to wild abstraction and experimentation that, though often theatrically exciting, were bizarre and often had a strong element of nihilistic anti-theatre. Mason's style which would lead directly to the "lyric realism" rubric, made his artistic vision clearly an exception to almost everything else that was happening around them.

The last human ingredient in the founding of the Circle Repertory Company is Tanya Berezin who did not really enter into the picture until 1967. Two years after the production of Balm in Gilead, Rob Thirkield went to the Catskills to do a season of summer stock and met her. They immediately fell in love. Thirkield recalls:

> Then the next play I did was Rimers of Eldritch. Lanford had written the part of "Skelly" for me. Marshall wanted a bigger space than La Mama to do it in; it was just upstairs in a little coffee shop with just a bunch of platforms. Lanford wanted to see it on so he directed a small production of it. I knew an actress who could play the role, my girfriend Tanya. So she came two days before opening. She barely got her lines in two days and screamed them all. She'll tell you today that she was just awful. But that's where she became known to the rest.[1]

Tanya remembers the time quite well. Although Tanya is now a leading actress with the Circle Rep and has made a career out of creating new roles, the

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[1] Thirkield interview.

experience of her first appearance still stings.

> The day that changed my life was the day I met Marshall. Rob said he wanted me to meet his friends and had told me all the wonderful experiences he had with Balm in Gilead. And it's very funny because he had described this wonderful production which was the first full-length at La Mama and Off-Off Broadway. How wonderful it was that there were all these people talking onstage at the same time, and there was this real life going on, and how fabulous it was. Then I spoke to a friend of mine who was a director who had gone to see it and said it was ridiculous, with all these people talking at the same time. So, I thought, who am I to believe?
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> When we got back to town, Rob took me over to Marshall's apartment to meet him. They were at the time doing a play at the Cino of Claris Nelson called, The Clown. It took place in Renaissance time. So I walk into this apartment--one of these high rise things. And there was an archway. And Marshall was leaning up against the archway reading The Hobbitt aloud. The room is filled with all of these playwrights, Lanford, Claris, Ron Link and they were all in there sewing sequins on these costumes while Marshall read aloud because couldn't sew. So that was his contribution, to read aloud and keep them entertained. My mouth just dropped open. I didn't know anything like this existed. I didn't know an artistic community existed within the theatre. I was astonished. I fell in love with these people immediately. Lanford and I got along right off the bat. For a long time, Marshall viewed me as Rob's girlfriend and obviously of no value. The first time I worked with either of them was on Rimers of Eldritch, the original production which Lanford directed. They had to fire an actress and I stepped in. I was very young and the part was a mother--I'm probably right for her now. I just learned lines, got up there and screamed. Rimers is a play where everyone is onstage all the time. So if you make a terrible mistake in your scene, you can't leave the stage to recover. You have to stand there and be humiliated. It ran for two weeks at La Mama and I couldn't wait for it to be over. Then I worked with Lanford again in This is the Rill Speaking--a one act play. It's a wonderful play. It's part of what later became Rimers of Eldritch but it's a very different play. Then they were doing the second production of The Sandcastle which I adored, and Marshall was going to direct it. And I knew he had no respect for me as an actor. Marshall was all over the place doing different things and I followed him--called him. He wouldn't even return my calls. So I followed him all over the village and waited in doorways outside for him. I finally got him and said I wanted to read for The Sandcastle. He said, "Okay, come on," and I said, "Not now. I want to go home and work on it." So we made a date. I read for

> it and he gave me the part. And we just kept working together.[1]

The four people--Marshall Mason, Rob Thierkield, Lanford Wilson and Tanya Berezin--who would co-found the Circle Repertory Company, had finally met and were working together. The year was 1967.

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[1]Berezin interview.

CHAPTER III

The Core of a Company - 1965-1969

> Basically the company started very naturally for all of us, Marshall, Rob, Lanford and myself, because we had worked together before Off-Off-Broadway and had gone to London with some of Lanford's plays. So a company was a natural progression. In a sense it had an artistic core to become a theatre. There was an artistic focus in terms of values--what we were after.[1]

The natural progression to formalizing what in essence already existed began immediately after the production of Balm in Gilead and can best be seen as taking place in the five distinguishable phases to be discussed: the success of Gilead in January, 1965, the change in Off-Off-Broadway's communal thrusts by 1967, the group's first trip to Europe in 1967, the highly successful trip to London with the American Theatre Project in 1968, and Mason's quitting theatre after returning to New York.

The four and a half years immediately following Gilead saw the continued organic growth of the embryonic company with both its built-in euphoric highs and calamitous lows. But despite the emotional turmoil of this see-saw existence, Mason and his entourage were becoming an easily recognizable insular group in the already insular environment of Off-Off-Broadway itself. Off-Off-Broadway increasingly reflected the wide-spread use of drugs, and strong anti-war, anti-establishment sentiments. In retrospect, it appears that, in a theatre that

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[1] Berezin interview.

was increasingly confrontational, Mason, Thirkield, Wilson and Berezin were holding out for a kind of theatre that was held together by the tattered threads of lyric realism. They were the local dinosaurs.

But there were a few voices other than their own that were not all-consumed with the singular approach of the avant-garde and that looked to a new realism. In 1968, John Simon, for example, railed against the "shabby view of reality . . . with its depoetization of reality."[1] In the chaotic rebellion against the establishment, however, Simon perceived that there might be a light of realism trying to gleam through--one that spoke of:

> . . . a language and reality beyond realism and superior to mere window-smashing or opting out . . . There are playwrights around today who have a highly specialized yet potentially universally significant view of reality.[2]

To illuminate this thought, he pointed to Sam Shepard, John Guare, Israel Horowitz, Lanford Wilson, and to some productions of the emerging black theatre. He hoped that these contemporary young playwrights would be able to create, " . . . a new dramatic reality---or, failing that, a new, honest and timely realism."[3]

Three short years earlier, when Balm in Gilead had been produced, few voices called for realism. Gilead was lauded more for its avant-garde approach--its expressionism, its overlapping scenes--than the naturalism of the

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[1]Simon, p. 91.

[2]Ibid., p. 92.

[3]Ibid.

way in which it was presented or the intense realism of its contemporary themes.

Immediately after Balm in Gilead, Mason directed Wilson's Home Free! at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village. With the interchangeability of personnel on Off-Off-Broadway, it was not unusual that the bill included Balls, a play by Paul Foster who was President of La Mama, and Up To Thursday by Sam Shepard from Theatre Genesis. Stephanie Gordon, an early Circle Rep member who has remained with the company through the years, was in the Shepard play.

In the summer of 1965, the momentum that seemed to start with Balm in Gilead continued with Mason's production of The Sandcastle, the play he had initially heard Wilson read at the Caffe' Cino at Joe Cino's beaming insistence. The one-act play about the internal conflicts of a family in San Diego had its premiere showing in August, 1965 at the Cafe La Mama, and although it had been fairly well received, it had left Mason with a strong sense of dissatisfaction. Wilson felt the production's problems were intrinsic to the play itself, but Mason believed that it was essentially the production that had failed. Not only was the set color "all wrong," Mason says, but he had permitted Wilson to influence him too much regarding how the lead actress, Joyce Aaron, was to play her role. Wilson was willing to play into her inhibitions, which kept the play in a totally realistic mode when it required a certain theatricality to remove it from the arena of soap opera, even if it meant requiring the actress to do something she felt a bit uncomfortable with. Almost before the closing curtain at La Mama, Mason was already plotting new directions for a second production of a play he essentially believed in--this time as he envisioned it without interference, even

from the playwright.

Continuing to work with Thirkield, Nelson and Powell, Mason, in a burst of directorial activity, did a series of short plays by Michael Matthias, Blind Guy, Lethma and The Bottled Room, quickly followed by Beckett's, Krapp's Last Tape, David Starkweather's, The Love Pickle, Tennessee Williams', The Mutilated and another Wilson one-act, the Ionesco-like, Wandering which was actually a short section of The Rimers of Eldritch. Working wherever he could find the space, he continued this prolific pace with Donald Kvares', One Room With Bath at the tiny 70-seat Thirteenth Street Theatre between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Once again he worked with Claris Nelson, Michael Powell and other members from the original Balm in Gilead cast who continued to stay together as though unwilling to allow that particular experience to disappear in time.

It is clear that the roots of the Circle Company are a direct outgrowth of Balm in Gilead despite its very brief initial run. It was a landmark production not only for Off-Off-Broadway itself, having been its first published play as well as its first full length production, it was also a landmark experience for those who had been involved. The ensemble spirit generated was such a strong, positive one that they continued to work together developing ever stronger social and working relationships that would be at the very foundation of the Circle when it finally formalized into a company in 1969. The tendency to work with the same people again and again through the years marked one of the features that would contribute considerably to its success as a company. Although the preference to work with known entities is hardly unique to this particular group of artists, the desire to explore together and grow together as a

group, while still encouraging a very strong minded individualism, is a constant thread throughout the early evolutionary process of the company. It was a direct contributing factor to the growth of their ensemble playing--the most important aspect of their work as a group--the aspect that was immediately communicated to an audience. Everything about their commitments to each other as individuals, as artists, as friends, as lovers, contributed to the strong sense of breathing in and out together that distinguished some of their work from that of other groups. This closeness cannot be emphasized too strongly; the ensemble playing would be one of the most important elements in bringing them fame, one of the most important nurturing aspects in their individual development as artists, and would be at the very core of the Circle Repertory Company's credo when Marshall Mason found it necessary to formally state one. It is when the ensemble spirit was lacking in the eighties, sacrificed to the contingencies of commercialism and lost to the very size of a company blown up by its own success, that the company experienced some of its major problems as we shall subsequently see.

While Mason confirmed that the roots of the company stemmed from the time of Gilead in 1965, he feels that the turning point for all of them began in 1967 during their trips to Europe.

Early in 1967, Ellen Stewart invited Mason to tour Europe with her; she had been taking the La Mama troupe abroad since 1964. But Mason, busy with projects of his own that interested him more than Stewart's less-verbal approach to theatre, refused her invitation. It is interesting that she felt obligated to ask his permission to take four of "his people" with her--Lanford Wilson, Rob Thirkield,

Claris Nelson and Michael Powell. Although they did not have a theatre or a company of their own, a unity was being felt in the Off-Off-Broadway community where they were already recognized as a contained group with Mason at its head. To break up this working bond, even for a brief period of time, almost required Mason's sanction. Naturally, Mason did not feel that the four people Stewart wished to include in her tour "belonged" to him, no matter how others in the community perceived the relationships, and he was quick to encourage what could only be a broadening experience for all of them.

The four young artists were quick to accept Ellen Stewart's generous invitation. To go with the La Mama troupe seemed like a natural thing to do. It was not unusual for participants in the early days of Off-Off-Broadway to switch from one group to another. The entire community was essentially so familial that going from one to another was analagous to going from one room to another in the same house. Because of this effortless shuttling back and forth, it is easy to see how the early days of the Circle were deeply intervoven with the Cafe La Mama as well as the Caffe' Cino, the Judson Poets Theatre, the New Dramatists, the Open Theatre, etc., even though loyalties often leaned more toward one group or another. For example, Rob Thirkield's loyalties were deeply involved with Marshall Mason and the original group from Northwestern University no matter where they worked. But teaming up with the La Mama troupe in the early days and working so closely with Tom O'Horgan accelerated the development of Thirkield's avant-garde leanings. (Thirkield played the title role of Tom Paine Off-Broadway and the role of Father Satz in the original Futz ,both stage and film versions, all directed by O'Horgan.) It was as early as this that differences with

Mason began to emerge. Thirkield was less a traditionalist than Mason and more open to the wildly stylistic theatrical interpretations and devices that would mark O'Horgan's controversial career. However, these very differences would prove to be mutually beneficial and broadening for Thirkield and Mason.

Mason remained behind in America as the La Mama troupe went to Europe. While they were gone he directed a second production of Wilson's The Sandcastle at the Cafe La Mama in which Tanya Berezin played a major role. This time the production was remarkably successful considering that there had been few script changes. Following his original instincts, Mason emphasized and developed the theatricality rather than the naturalistic aspects of the play. It no longer seemed dark, somber or melodramatic as had the first production.

The working relationship between Mason and Berezin which had gotten off to such a shaky start as a result of her being miscast in The Rimers of Eldritch, became strongly cemented during this production and marked the beginning of another long working relationship that has endured to this day.

By this time, word had gotten back from Wilson that he was dissatisfied with the course of events in Europe. He had written Untitled Play in a lushly anti-realistic style, specifically for the La Mama troupe in order to take advantage of their particular strengths. But months had passed and they had not yet begun to work on the play. Wanting Mason and Berezin to join them, Wilson and Thirkield sent them ticket money, and in mid-1967 Mason and Berezin caught up with the travelling troupe in Copenhagen.

Since Mason wanted to see Europe and Wilson was still upset over the lack of commitment to Untitled Play, the two of them left the troupe to head for southern

Europe. At the time, Wilson was writing the libretto for Lee Hoiby's opera version of Tennessee Williams' Summer and Smoke. After travelling to as many major cities as they could on the limited budget they had, Wilson finally finished the prologue to Summer and Smoke in Rome. It seemed a wonderfully apt locale to write about Williams' kneeling angel, inspirationally surrounded as they were by an abundance of ancient statuary.

They finally wound up their travels back in London where the La Mama troupe was enjoying huge success which added immeasurably to Stewart's international reputation.

The director of the International Theatre Club in London, flush with the success of the La Mama Company, suggested to Mason and Wilson that they remain in London in their respective roles as director and playwright to do one of their own plays at the Mercury Theatre. London was being quite receptive to Americans at this time since American productions, in general, were enjoying success and were, therefore, easy to sell. However, despite the temptation to seize new opportunities, it was not possible for Mason and Wilson to remain in London on such short notice. Nurturing the possibility of returning the following spring, they repatriated in the fall of 1967 unaware that the English invitation had placed them on the threshhold of the genesis of the Circle Repertory Company. It is only in retrospect that one can see that the invitation was the beginning of the turning point for them. Even Mason was not aware of it at the time.

Back home, Mason continued working with actors from the original, production of Balm in Gilead in his next project. Moving away from the

traditional approach he was most attuned to, he mounted a highly experimental production of Wilson's Untitled Play which was one of the first plays to display total nudity onstage. The play was a departure in genre for both of them and served as another step in their creative development as artists.

By the spring of 1968, Mason was ready to return to London with plans to produce Wilson's plays Home Free! (with its strong theme of incest) and The Madness of Lady Bright (with its gripping portrayal of the emotional disintegration of an aging transvestite.) Wilson, who does not fly, chose not to return. Thirkield, who was still touring with the La Mama troupe, could not participate in this latest project. This time it was Tanya Berezin who would return to London with Mason along with Claris Nelson, Charles Stanely, David Grogh and Michael Powell. The need for some kind of formalization in order for the six of them to return to London as a group spearheaded the formation of "The American Theatre Project," which Mason and Berezin coordinated. It was the actual forerunner of the company that would emerge a year later as the Circle Repertory Company.

Thus it is, that the roots of the company can be traced back to Balm in Gilead in 1965; that a significant turning point happened in 1967 during the first trip to Europe; and that there was a transition toward new directions to 1968 with the formation of the American Theatre Project. They returned from Europe heady with the euphoric success they had experienced there only to find painful situations awaiting them. In 1967 after the first trip, they had returned to an Off-Off-Broadway scene that had altered drastically in less than six months. Although the change ironically forced a forging ahead instead of a return to the

communal comfort of the Off-Off-Broadway spirit that had served to nourish their earliest ambitions, it was a change that precipitated a deep sense of loss; for Joe Cino had died. Although Cino had died before they had embarked, it wasn't until they returned that his absence was truly felt. With Joe Cino gone ,the entire *elan vital* of Off-Off-Broadway seemed to have died with him.

The end for Cino had come abruptly at the Caffe' Cino where he slashed himself to death to the music of Maria Callas' singing. "He died in April of '67," Mason recalls. "He committed suicide on April 1st, even though he survived for a few days. April 1st was the day he committed suicide because it was his lover's birthday. John Torrey."[1]

Lanford Wilson admitted that Cino "seemed old to us," but in reality , at the age of thirty-six, he had been in the chronological prime of life when he died. The manner of his death was talked about with incredulity for years to come. It almost took on mythical proportions reminiscent of the ancient Roman tradition of slipping into a tub of warm water and cutting open main arteries in order to bleed to death. "It really happened," Tanya Berezin says quietly and unemotionally, although there was little romance in the violence of the bizarre suicide. It did not seem possible that Cino could slash himself a hundred times during a ritualistic kind of death-dance, but he had.

> He slashed himself until, I guess, he couldn't slash himself anymore. Why?--Pain. Life. Drugs. John Torrey--a lighting designer--went out of town to light a show and was electrocuted and killed.[2]

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Berezin interview.

Driven by visions of Torrey's hideous death, unable to cope with the personal loss, and equally driven by drugs, Cino took a violent knife to himself. "A lot of bad things came down with drugs and non-theatricality and star trips, and things that were going on at the time, and the drug scene was very heavy at Cino's," Berezin adds.

The death of Joe Cino had a profound effect on their lives that is still evidenced today. Wilson, who made a point of saying he did not want to discuss it because the visions were so frightening, actually spoke at some length about his reactions and how the suicide has adversely affected him even to this day.

> No such thing ever crossed my mind--suicide. I didn't know it existed. I didn't know any rational person who would do something like that. I had seen Joe in very bad shape. I knew he was having difficulties and being a little crazy. This was in reaction to his Torrey's death and drugs--the amphetamines and the speed. And we were completely devastated. We vowed that the Cino would go on. Everyone came and said, 'Oh my.' Everyone went to the hospital and said, Oh my.' Then when he died after we thought that he was going to recover--they got everything working again, they got him all stitched up, and then his heart failed. It was a massive blow. He did himself in--cut himself everywhere. Immediately after, it put suicide in my mind and it's never been out since. I started getting terrified by everything. I don't think I had a phobia about knives before--I do now. I cannot have a knife around me. Scissors, razors, nothing. So it affected me psychologically so deeply that that's why I don't want to talk about it--because those things are there now, and I start talking about them and I want to jump out the window or something. And I'm not joking. I mean I really have strong self-destructive impulses that I never had before. I have no idea if it was Joe's suicide that awakened these impulses in me and I don't intend to explore it either. I just know it changed me completely and I hate it. It made it much more difficult to live.[1]

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[1] Wilson interview.

Mason, on the other hand, was visibily unemotional about it, even though he was no stranger to suicide. In the past he had demonstrated a hesitancy to discuss what he considered pathological behavior, having personally known three people who had commited suicide, including his wife, Zita. The third was Jim Tuttle, an acting teacher at Neighborhood Playhouse who had been very important to the Circle Rep in the first few years, working with them, teaching for them. "How do you deal with something like that?" Mason asks even though he has obviously absolved himself of any feelings of culpability.

> I think in the long run, suicide is a matter of choice. I think it's a mistake for anyone else to feel responsible. If someone decides to kill himself, I think it's very much his decision--I respect it. I don't have any problem with suicide in a sense that it's been around a very long time. The Romans regularly got into a bathtub and slit their wrists. When Joe did it, the revival of The Madness of Lady Bright was playing at the Cino. We were in rehearsal to bring back Claris' play, The Clown, which Joe had requested we do.[1] We were all here when it happened.[2]

It is hard to assess the true impact of Cino's death on Off-Off Broadway itself except in personal terms and how those personal terms translated into actions. Charles Stanley, an early Circle member, tried to keep the cafe open without

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[1] The revival of The Clown occurred at the Caffe' Cino approximately one month after Joe Cino died. In it were Lanford Wilson, David Starkweather, Michel Warren, Robert Patrick, Claris Nelson and Marshall Mason.

[2] Mason interview.

much success. Plagued by financial problems despite benefits by friends to raise money, the cafe was eventually forced to close its doors.It almost seem ordained; without Joe Cino there would be no Caffe' Cino despite all good intentions to keep it alive. It was left to Robert Patrick, another early Circle member, to keep the memory alive with his constantly revived play, Kennedy's Children, about the early days at the Cino.[1]

"That depicts the suicide," says Mason who directed the first production. Based on his personal knowledge of the man, he staged Cino's final moments with as much truth as possible.

> I believe that is pretty much the way it happened. He put on a record of Maria Callas singing Norma. He was alone, but I know Joe quite well and I know the sort of thing that he would do. It's very vivid in my mind the sort of thing that would happen. It was a very definite decision. It was a very extravagant suicide.What he would call, 'High Kaya.' A mad crazy thing. He was a dancer, you know. And I feel quite sure that the stabbing he did of himself, which was repeated, was ritualistic and extended and enjoyed to the fullest. The thing is 'High Kaya.' It's a term Joe used all the time. He had a whole private languge that you can only understand from context. I would really be hard-pressed to define 'Kaya.' A mood of exultation, probably--either positive or negative. The extraordinary transfiguration that one can experience in great artistic performances, for instance. Or, if someone is in high dungeon, screaming out of his mind, you would say 'He's in high Kaya today.' It's when a person is beyond himself in

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[1] The first production was directed by Marshall Mason at the Caffe' Cino. It has since been made into a film for CBS-Cable TV. The film was shot in the Caffe' Cino with Michael Warren Powell. As extras, Mason cast Johnny Dodd, a co-founder and dishwasher of the Cino, and Kenny Burgess, who was the artist who had done many of the drawings on the walls of the cafe.

a high, emotional state.[1]

In addition to the shock of Joe Cino's death which has remained with those who knew him best, there was also the void left by his loss. As Wilson says,

> When your father and boss and preacher kills himself, you find yourself without much to believe in. Everyone--except Joe--knew that he was creating new theatre in America. His excitement was responsible for half of the vitality of Off-Off Broadway, and his death heralded the end of free activity. After Joe died, Off-Off Broadway got less communal, more competitive.[2]

Marshall Mason agrees. Difficult to assess in terms of concrete effects, he feels that those who had worked the early days of the Cino had been through an extraordinary era that was marked by the vitality of Cino's boundless enthusiasm and energy. Mason continues,

> It was very innocent before Joe died. There were really only the Cino, La Mama's and Judson Poets Theatre. New Dramatists and Theatre Genesis were there but they were never a powerful force on Off-Off Broadway. They were specifically about play development, whereas Off-Off Broadway was about the experience of theatre.[3]

After Joe Cino died, La Mama grew larger and other people began emulating the Cino concept. More people emulated Ellen Stewart than Cino, but she had imitated Cino, "So Joe was really the beginning of Off-Off Broadway," Mason says.

> It changed a great deal after he was gone. A great many little groups sprang up all over the place. Off-Off Broadway became more oriented to growth and being discovered by The New

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Wilson interview.

[3] Mason interview.

> York Times. Equity became important. Joe had never wanted to get bigger. He had his little place and that was it. When it burned down in 1966, we had a big benefit to rebuild it; I was the Artistic Director for it. Edward Albee came down and spoke. We had the opportunity to buy the place next door and make it bigger, but Joe didn't want it.[1]

Cino had never taken the time to wonder whether or not he was creating new theatre. He was too busy violating rules, encouraging experimentation, taking care of "his people," insisting upon, "Magic time!" and thumbing his nose at commercial considerations, making theatre more of a communal event than a commercial one. Cino's death ushered in a new age of competition. It was clear to Mason that the era of free-spirited communal participation was virtually at an end.

Similarly in 1968 when The American Theatre Project came back to America, they had walked into a new world of intense competition in which the changes were eminently obvious. For Mason, there were other, even more personal reasons that would alter the manner in which he perceived his own involvement within the Off-Off Broadway structure as it was to evolve. Outwardly, the direction of his life had seemed to be in an upward swing. In February, 1968, he directed Wilson's The Gingham Dog at The New Dramatists while the play was still in its early stages of development. It was a strong two-character play about the final hours of an interracial marriage in which the young husband and wife were unable to surmount their differences. Mason's dramaturgical skills during the course of directing the play greatly aided its development before its

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[1] Ibid.

Broadway premiere in 1969. This profound collaboration with Wilson would be at the core of their long association and a constant source of encouragement to Wilson, whose work was being treated with such care.

The heady sense of growth continued into the Spring. By March of 1968, Mason, Tanya Berezin, Claris Nelson, Michael Powell, David Groh and Charles Stanley were rehearsing Wilson's Home Free! and The Madness of Lady Bright aboard the luxurious Queen Elizabeth en route to London. Aware that American actors sometimes had difficulty getting work permits to perform in England as independents, Mason thought it best to "put something American" in their covering name to reassure the British powers-that-be that they were a visiting troupe that had been invited to perform as short-term guests artists. They chose to call themselves The American Theatre Project to emphasize the "guest" aspects of their visit and to point out that they considered themselves a "working project" and were to be perceived as such. Although the name had little evolutionary significance in their development, that they had a name at all, did. It was the first time that the informal group of artists that had worked together since 1965 had any name at all that formalized it into a recognizable, cohesive, self-contained unit.

Wilson's two plays, Home Free! and The Madness of Lady Bright, rehearsed amidst the silken surroundings of the Queen Elizabeth, opened at the Mercury Theatre in London to outstanding reviews. Not only was the critical reception enthusiastic about the plays themselves (despite the ever-present possibilities of censorship regarding the themes,) but the critiques were equally rhapsodic about the productions. The London journal, The New Statesman hailed their

project as "the most brilliant, imaginative and ambitious American company seen so far," and called Lady Bright the finest performance to be seen in London. Working together had become almost second nature to the young artists and the ensuing ensemble work was becoming a distinguishable feature. Working under Mason's detailed direction stimulated some of their best efforts and doing Wilson's plays was familiar and comfortable territory for them. The familiarity of working together was an important factor since it translated into an ensemble style of performing that would be a solid foundation for The Circle Repertory Company when it materialized.

It was during this heady time in London that they first decided, a bit precipitously perhaps, that they were indeed a company in actuality as well as in name and were going to come back to New York to prove it. However, good reviews notwithstanding, they had not set down the principles upon which they would base their efforts. Articulation of their purpose and direction was necessary and, as yet, not forthcoming, not even from Mason, who was too preoccupied with doing the best work he could to really delve into how good work happens. As Tanya Berezin says,

> We went as The American Theatre Project and we were this big, big, big hit, and we decided to come back to New York and be this big, big, big hit," realizing only too well with the benefit of maturity as well as hindsight, that "you don't do something merely to be successful.[1]

Mason sounded bitter as he recounted the next series of crucial events,

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[1] Berezin interview.

events that would propel him to give up theatre altogether despite what had begun as an exceptionally productive period in his life, rather than fight any longer against, "whatever it is in this country that seems to damn creativity at every turn," he says.[1]

The first play he directed in New York under the banner of The American Theatre Project was Billy Hoffman's[2] Spring Play. Billy Hoffman was an early Circle resident playwright and Spring Play was a fairly solid piece of work that Mason was anxious to explore. Full of boundless enthusiasm and flush with the success they had enjoyed abroad, Mason approached Jules Irving at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in Lincoln Center about the American Theatre Project. Mason was convinced that they were ready to "mainstream" and was also fully aware that Irving was sitting with an empty theatre space on his hands. Irving, impressed with their zeal and not unaware of their past history, gave them the space that they needed for Spring Play at Lincoln Center. They rehearsed at The Forum, the little theatre downstairs that had a small stage and was a suitable space for the group and the play. But it was not meant to be; they would never open at the Forum. The project that started with high hopes turned out to be a disillusioning experience for all of them, but most particularly for Mason.

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] This is the same William Hoffman whose play As Is moved to Broadway in the Spring of 1984 after its premiere at the Circle Repertory Theatre.

> Jules Irving said we could use the Lincoln Center. Equity said we could not and prevented us from performing at The Forum. They sent us instead to a theatre across town with three hundred seats, a proscenium and long rows of seats. We were on stage for one and a half hours and couldn't be heard past the sixth row. We had not rehearsed in that kind of space. It was a disaster.[1]

Thirkield and Berezin remember the frustrating experience well. Not only was the production a disaster, but even more discouraging, no one other than they cared one way or the other. By this time Mason was expecting stateside acknowledgment of the value of his work. In order to be able to continue in a profession in which emotional blows are a built-in hazard, some kind of formal recognition was becoming necessary for the healthy functioning of his creative psyche. This was not the time to deal with failure. However, Thirkield, knowing how depressed Mason was, was unwilling to concede even a slight measure of defeat. Rather, he was thinking about how to solve the perennial problem of where to perform. It was a problem in the new competitive atmosphere of Off-Off Broadway that was becoming more acute and one that would have to be solved in order to continue functioning. Thirkield recalls:

> We tried to do Spring Play in another theatre where there was a set for Scooby Doo or something, and that didn't work at all. So I knew we had to get our own place.[2]

Wilson had been talking about their own place since 1965, but Mason resisted for a long time. Wilson says:

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Thirkield interview.

> I just wanted to hold them together. I had read the book about the Group Theatre. Marshall didn't want to read it because he was afraid that it would all fall apart. I don't know if he's read it yet. I know I spoke about a company in '67 with Untitled Play. Marshall wasn't quite ready yet. I had said it with Balm in Gilead. I said it when he was working with the box office at the Actors Playhouse. I'd come and sit on the steps with him there. And I kept saying, "Marshall, we've got to start a company that we can work with and that we can depend on all the time." And Marshall kept moaning, "I know, I know."[1]

But Marshall was struggling with his own private demons. He was vulnerable at this particular time in his development as an artist. He did not feel like accepting the total indifference to which they had returned in the United States, especially after the enthusiastic reception they had received in London. Yet it was not so much that they had had a taste of success, but the knowledge of how well they were capable of functioning given the right set of circumstances. It did not matter to him that they had not performed well with Spring Play. Even Berezin admits that it,

> . . . was a good play that we did badly and for the wrong reasons. Because we were successful in London, we decided we would come back to New York and be successful. We'd show everyone. We learned from that.[2]

What mattered most was that the understanding of the right to fail as well as to succeed was denied them through the rejection of indifference. More than ever Mason was aware of a new set of rules. The communal spirit, the comfort,

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[1] Wilson interview.

[2] Berezin interview.

the familiarity, the support--all important ingredients in the working surroundings he was so careful to create for others, were gone. Now what was left seemed to be a bureaucratic set of priorities that had little to do with creativity and everything to do with the rules of a game that should be kept free of restrictions. Specters of Joe Cino's "Magic time!" only added to the growing conviction that a supportive environment was a necessary component in the nurturing of creativity.

Much was brewing in his mind. Although these frustrations would translate into a clear set of working standards for his own company, at the moment he was too frustrated with the experience of Spring Play's demise at the hands of Equity to think in any other terms than that he had had enough. He remembers saying,

> To hell with it! I don't need a life in the theatre. I'll do something else! . . . I was really upset and felt that I couldn't keep creating miracle after miracle. I had been doing good work for a long time. I had no money and no one knew us, especially in a material sense. We were better known in England than in New York after four years of hard work here . . . After I had done the fiasco [Spring Play]---it was a terrible production. It didn't work. It was the wrong theatre and it was a mess---well, I said, I can't go from place to place and produce great theatre.[1]

There seemed to be some justification for Mason's disheartened position. He had produced a body of work which, in retrospect was significant, but few people outside of a very small, insular group of direct participants knew about it. There had been Wilson's plays--Balm in Gilead, Home Free!, The Sandcastle, The Madness of Lady Bright, The Gingham Dog--all of which Mason had not only

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[1] Mason interview

directed but worked on in close collaboration with Wilson. With his particular brand of encouragement, he had undoubtedly helped enormously in the early development of a young man who would eventually prove to be one of America's more prolific and gifted playwrights. There was also Robert Patrick's most performed play, The Haunted Host which Mason premiered, and Claris Nelson's plays, The Rue Garden, The Clown, Medea, Neon In The Night, The Girl On The B.B.C., and many other original works that he had directed all over Off-Off Broadway. Success or failure had never been the important factors, although he had always been more successful than not and had built an extraordinary following in his own small, relatively unknown world.

Now he was exceptionally frustrated with the failure of Spring Play because its failure was so unneccesary. He remembers feeling that he could not do it anymore.

> After all, I'd been trying since 1961 to 1968, determined that I didn't want to be one of those people who fools himself all his life saying, well I'm talented and they'll certainly recognize it--and suddenly find myself at the age of forty with no talent, no money and no career. So I just backed away from the theatre completely.[1]

The American Theatre Project disbanded.

Even though Mason pulled back and claimed he was through, he began to think aloud what it takes to develop a serious company. Pulling away was more than an emotional reaction to disappointment; he needed time to reorganize--rethink--regroup. Deep in his heart he knew that the only answer

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[1] Ibid.

to his own artistic needs as well as those of all who had remained loyal to him, was a permanent company with a permanent home. He had been resisting such a commitment for a long time. He was keenly aware that The Group Theatre of the thirites had disbanded despite the impressiveness of the accumulated talent. Even if he patterned his company after The Moscow Art Theatre, he was almost positive that such a venture could not succeed in this country. But little by little, the need to create a theatre company became more important than the feeling such a company was probably doomed to a fate similar to that of Northwestern Productions and The American Theatre Project.

None of his friends pressured him as he "quit" the theatre and went into creative isolation for six months. Thirkield knew he was rethinking his position and he took the opportunity himself to think about what the needs of a company would be.

After all the thinking, after giving up the idea of abandoning theatre, after all the discussions, Mason and Thirkield knew they had to go ahead with their persistent dream to start their own company. The hiatus led to the first formal articulation of their artistic purpose:

> To make the action of the play the experience of the audience.
> To contribute to the future of Theatre Arts through the exploration of our contemporary world by the finest writers of today.
> To preserve the great traditions of the past through a Permanent Repertory Ensemble that embodies the discipline of the classics and the imagination born of experiment.[1]

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[1] From an early Circle Repertory Theatre brochure.

However, these principles did not begin to describe what was to be the true meaning of the Circle Repertory Company. They could almost serve as the artistic credo for any number of groups. What distinguished the Circle more than anything else was the constant reference to the human experience in terms of content, and the *process* that created the environment that would accomplish the stated artistic goals. It had to do with getting a group of actors who had trained together in the classics to work on plays of resident playwrights who would write specifically to their particular talents, not once, but again and again with all of the ensuing benefits of mutual familiarity. It had to do with intensive Labs and Workshops in which actors, directors, playwrights and designers worked together as a unit as well as individuals, practicing and learning each others' di ciplines in order to cultivate better understandings. It had to do with Marshall Mason's strong sense of what he calls "the native American voice" that is inseparable from realism. It was a voice he wanted to reintroduce to an American theatre that was currently permeated with the avant-garde. At the same time, the realism itself had to be permeated with an open-minded experimentation as well as a love of language that would lead to the rediscovery of lyric realism---thus recycling the entire process back to the native American voice. And most important, perhaps, it had to do with the careful construction of a nourishing environment in which the artist would feel free enough to experiment, safe enough to fail, and comfortable enough to work in any genre including the classics.

In essence, it had to do with an on-going permanent company. There were no real groups functioning in New York City at the time. Even La Mama, which by

now was calling itself the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, or L.M.E.T.C., was basically a place for experimental theatre. It was mainly for playwrights. The playwright was always the most important aspect at La Mama. Even after the impact of O'Horgan, when the emphasis shifted to directing, it was always a place in which new plays could be tested, each with a new cast selected on an ad hoc basis to fulfill the requirements of the particular play and then disbanded. The play was the primary function of the L.M.E.T.C. and always had been. It did not have a company, nor did the other other groups that were functioning at the time. The Circle was the only company in town.

In retrospect, it can be seen that the eventual success of the company would be due to a particular combination of fortuitous circumstances. It helped that the earliest resident playwrights were of the caliber of Robert Patrick, David Starkweather, William Hoffman, Claris Nelson, and most particularly, Lanford Wilson who was, and continues to be, the company's main resident playwright. It helped that Tanya Berezin was a young actress of great potential who, as co-founder and a leading company actress would eventually set a standard of performance for all involved. It helped that Rob Thirkield's enthusiastic embrace of the experimental techniques of such innovators as Grotowski, his disciple, Eugenio Barba, and Tom O'Horgan, created an ambiance in the workshops in which a variety of seeds could be planted. On a more pragmatic note, it also helped that Rob Thirkield had the money to support the company for well over a year until the grants started coming in.

And lastly, it helped that Marshall Mason's vision of what a company should be was so unswerving. It was clear that what would be different about them was

not only the formation of a permanent theatre company, but Marshall Mason himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Company Is Born - July, 1969

At this point in his life, Rob Thirkield was seeing Dr. Harry Lerner, a psychiatrist. Dr. Lerner was a man of broad interests. Not only was he a consultant to the World Federation of Mental Health, but he also had a keen interest in the arts. He was the Executive Director of the World Cultural Center and the Executive Director and founder of the Coordinating Committee for the Utilization of the New York City World's Fair. This project led to the formation of the Metropolitan Area: Council for International Recreation, Culture and Lifelong Education--or--C.I.R.C.L.E.

C.I.R.C.L.E. was essentially an ambitious world peace movement that was meant to bring together many different kinds of people. Part of the formula for so doing was to create a theatre, a dance group, an art group, etc., with the genuine belief that the universality of the arts could dispel artificial boundaries between people of different backgrounds.

Through Thirkield, Dr. Lerner knew that he and Mason, who had also been a patient of his at one time, were Theatre-less artists who were looking for a home in which to finally start their company. It was perhaps fateful that Mason, Thirkield, Wilson and Berezin were together at Rob and Tanya's apartment on Bank Street discussing what they would need in order to go ahead with their plans, when Thirkield received a phone call from Dr. Lerner. Lerner had come across a space on the upper West side that he thought might be adaptable to their needs. He invited them to look at it and to consider starting their company under the auspices of C.I.R.C.L.E.

Mason, Thirkield, and Wilson took a taxi uptown and pulled up in front of a rather shabby building on West 83rd Street and Broadway that was old enough to have been declared a landmark and charmless enough to make one wonder why. Finding a home is one of the most important problems to solve in starting a company, for the home has to be able to fill all, or at least most of, the company's major requirements. Unfortunately, everything was wrong with the loft Dr. Lerner had sent them to inspect, including the location. "No one goes that far uptown," Mason had said. It was on a second floor over a Thom McAn shoe store and it had a rough external appearance. The building had been through many transitions, each of which had left its mark. At one point it had been a warehouse; at another, it was spiritually uplifted to house a men's chapel; it was later downgraded considerably to a pornographic film club; most recently it had served as a now-defunct recording studio.

As they stared up at the enormous flat soundboards hanging from the ceiling--remnants from the latest incarnation--Wilson optimistically thought it looked interesting but Mason was already shaking his head. Besides the seediness of the building, the space itself was the wrong size and shape. It was long and narrow and worst of all, had resounding echoes. Mason was convinced they needed something better. The loft had too many inherent problems to overcome. But when Mason called Dr. Lerner to tell him they were "sorry" but "not really interested," the doctor told them he had already leased the loft since it was so inexpensive. If they wanted it before he set up his own various offices for C.I.R.C.L.E., all they had to do was take up the lease. They could then produce their theatre under the aegis of C.I.R.C.L.E., which would give them immediate

not-for-profit tax benefits as long as Dr. Lerner maintained his position as Executive Director of the World Cultural Center. For him it would be the first step in the realization of his desire to bring together various arts groups for his world peace movement; for them it would be the first space that was totally their own.

Despite misgivings, Mason finally said, "Oh the hell with it. Let's do it!" clearly holding out the option to vacate the loft without recriminations once he found the "right" place. Rob Thirkield took the lease from Dr. Lerner and began paying the rent out of his own pocket--$300 for the first two months, then $400, finally escalating to $500 per month. It was the first step in Thirkield's personal financial support of the company on a monthly basis.

Dr. Lerner's influence, then, was considerable. The fact that he was a good friend who believed in them was a very important boost to their confidence. The fact that he took the space, imperfect though it was, without waiting for approval, *forced* them to take their first formal step. The fact that Dr. Lerner gave them an immediate ready-made tax umbrella by allowing them to operate under C.I.R.C.L.E. made it possible for them to receive much needed donations. Because of Dr. Lerner's interest, the company had finally emerged out of the discussion stages. They were now paying rent; they now had to produce.

Mason was quick to acknowledge Lerner's all important contributions despite the fact that they did not always agree.

> Dr. Lerner did two good things for us and one bad. I was the one who kept saying we can't keep going around--one performance at La Mama, another one at the Caffe' Cino next time. He was the one who found us the place and gave us the tax umbrella. Those were the two good things. The bad thing

> was that he insisted we change our name to the Circle Theatre. We called ourselves the American Project at the Circle Theatre. Dr. Lerner said that was too confusing. He insisted that if we were going to stay there, we change our name to Circle Theatre. We sort of had a fight over it. I was concerned with the confusion with Circle-in-the-Square. And I didn't really want to name it Circle Theatre especially because it was a "project." We didn't really have any idea we would start out as a full-blown theatre. We were a project--a theatre project that would someday, perhaps, grow into a theatre. But then I said, "What's in a name?" It was not too much of a compromise. So I said, "Okay, let's change it!" We became the Circle Theatre.[1]

Even though they had disbanded the American Theatre Project after Spring Play, they were still an informal group of about ten people who had spent the last four or five years working together again and again--Marshall Mason, Rob Thirkield, Lanford Wilson, Tanya Berezin, Stephanie Gordon, Claris Nelson, Jane Lowrey, Michael Powell, David Groh, Charles Stanley, Dennis Parichy and several others from Northwestern University. Loyalties were enduring. As Mason points out,

> Take Dennis Parichy. Not only did he light Little Eyolf, the first play I directed in New York, he also did Balm in Gilead. His roots go all the way back then. This was a period of time when Dennis could not afford to live the life of a Bohemian artist. He had a wife and child. For a period of time--about three or four years--we were out of touch. He was making a living lighting ballets and operas and working in schools. Then he rejoined us once we set it up.[2]

However, they knew they needed more people involved in order to run the many aspects of a formal theatre within a set plant. They made phone calls to

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Ibid.

virtually everyone they knew in New York who was connected with theatre. Literally hundreds of calls went out with invitations to attend a combination party/meeting about a "new theatre."

Tanya Berezin recalls, "Marshall simply said, 'Whoever wants to come can come. Whoever stays is the company.'"[1]

The "big meeting" that ensued, which in the retelling has assumed legendary proportions, occurred on July 14th, 1969 in the second story loft on West 83rd Street and upper Broadway. Many responded to the calls--some seriously interested, some merely curious, some looking for any excuse to party. Most were college age, in their late twenties or in early thirties.

Berezin remembers,

> At that first meeting there was something like sixty-five people. And Marshall has always been very pie-in-the-sky. His ideas have always been enormous. And he's standing up there, poor as a church mouse with his pants above his ankles, telling people he was going to start a great theatre. And a lot of people laughed at him and didn't come back. Some of us were already a part of him. And then, some others who were brand new didn't laugh. Some people joined because it was an opportunity to work for free. We never charged anybody. Some people joined because of focus. Some people just hung around. The company was formed out of the people who showed up.[2]

Mason was a startling figure as he announced his intention to start a new theatre. At twenty-nine, he was still extremely thin with long, slender, bony

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[1] Berezin interview.

[2] Ibid.

hands and long, straight hair that hung well below his shoulders. First he spoke to those who remained. Then Thirkield spoke to them. Next Mason and Thirkield took turns reading passages out of Stanislavsky's An Actor Prepares. Then Mason began to outline the public goals they envisioned. It was their intention to begin a theatre in which people could work together in an ensemble and be trained in the classics. Once such a classical ensemble was trained, it could then be made available to a group of new American playwrights who would be in development and in residence and write specifically for the company.

This was essentially a revolutionary concept in America despite the fact that permanent resident companies[1] and permanent combination companies[2] were common in late 19th century America. Some had manager-dramatists or actor-dramatists who wrote plays to add to the standard repertory fare which usually consisted of Shakespeare and melodrama. For example, Dion Boucicault (1822-1899) perhaps the most successful dramatist of his day wrote prolifically for his company in the 1850s to 1880s (between 1853 and 1860 in America);

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[1] Repertory stock theatre companies were standard theatrical organizations which flourished between 1850 and 1870 and virtually disappeared by 1900, undermined mostly by the advent of combination companies and the the long-running play.

[2] Combination companies were acting companies that travelled with a star and a full troupe of supporting actors. Dion Boucicault claims to have originated combination companies around 1860 in England although there is evidence to indicate that they were already in existence in America as early as 1852 with the Howard-Aikens company production of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. The expansion of the railway system made the transportation of full combination companies easier and more feasible so that by 1886 there were as many as 282 combination companies on the road.

Augustin Daly (1836-1899), known best for establishing the director as a major force in theatre, owned his own theatre and toured his company as far as England. He wrote many adaptations of European plays for the company he founded in 1869 at The Fifth Avenue Theatre; Steele McKaye (1842-1894), best known for his inventions and his training programs which led to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, wrote or adapted nineteen plays for his company in the late 19th century; even David Belasco (1853-1931), the most important American producer in the early 20th century, wrote plays for his company. However, there had never been a *permanent company of professional actors* in this country that concentrated almost exclusively on original material and worked in a *continuing* process with a *group* of resident playwrights who were *carefully developed* and who created material specifically for the company actors out of their own personal lives, talents and strengths.

This did not even happen with the Group Theatre of the thirties. In an attempt to keep all options open, such an idea there had been strongly resisted. Harold Clurman, one of the founders of the Group Theatre, wrote:

> Years ago when I spoke to the governing board of the Theatre Guild about the possibility of developing dramatists for the company that was to become the Group Theatre, I suggested that we make young writers part of the organization—even assign them jobs. The response was something like outrage. "You mean you want dramatists to write with your actors in mind?" I pointed out that Rostand had written Cyrano de Bergerac for Coquelin with a by no means deplorable outcome. I might have even more pedantically mentioned that Shakespeare and Moliere had written certain roles with particular actors of their permanent companies in mind.[1]

[1]Harold Clurman, On Directing (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1972,) p. 22.

Clurman demonstrated, the often divergent points of view between a governing Board of Directors and a creative staff. When the Group Theatre was formed in 1931 under Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford, there was no resident playwright in their group. They produced plays by Paul Green, John Howard Lawson, Dawn Powell, William Saroyan, Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Kingsley and Eugene O'Neill,[1] none of whom was a Group Theatre member, before they discovered Clifford Odets[2] Waiting For Lefty. Odets was a young actor who had been invited to join the company and then discovered that he could write. He became a major voice of the Group Theatre as well as a prominent spokesman for the decade by the accidental combination of talent and opportunity, not by the conceptual design of the company.

But Mason had a very definite conceptual vision: the needs of the new company were to be based on the relationship between the actor, playwright and director. A major goal was to create a theatre for the artist. In no way was their main objective to create a mechanism that would merely insure the opportunity to work, although that was certainly a part of it; artists must practice their craft

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[1]Harold Clurman, The Naked Image (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966) pp. 152 and 296.

[2]It is not true as stated in Foster Hirsh's book on the Actors Studio: "In the vast panorama of the American theatre, [Clifford] Odets is the only true company playwright, a writer with a theatre of his own." pp. 98.99. Lanford Wilson has been working with "his own" company for almost fifteen years while Odets' major contributions came pretty much within a one year period; in addition, every other resident playwright at the Circle has the same luxury of working within their own company setting.

and Mason wanted to make sure he would always have the opportunity to direct. Once they were a company, however, they were really interested in the kind of work they could create together. From the beginning, the often stated aim was quality. Of course, "As Stanislavsky told Norris Houghton, no one has ever deliberately tried to found a bad theatre."[1] But for them it was more than just doing "good" theatre. A very definite part of the goal was to improve as artists. They wanted to grow better than they were. They wanted to challenge each other as they had never been challenged before. They wanted to explore the human experience in order to create living theatre. Mason meant this very seriously. They were young, idealistic, enthusiastic, full of dreams, wanting to startle the world, wanting to make an impact, and in so doing, startle themselves as well. As Mason pointed out ten years later:

> It was, after all, the late sixties and we thought and still feel we could accomplish things together that had never been accomplished.[2]

To Mason, the recurring goals and values were independence, unity and a passion for excellence. And so, after much thinking and many discussions, most particularly with Thirkield, Mason could begin to delineate their concepts for the kind of theatre they envisioned which may best be synthesized in the following way:

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[1]Clurman, The Naked Image, p. 148.

[2]Marshall W. Mason, "On Eleven Seasons," Circle Repertory News, Spring, 1980, p. 5.

The common goals were:

1) To create a theatre for the artist.
2) To improve and grow as artists.
3) To break down the walls between the various theatre disciplines.
4) To explore the human experience without embarrassment.
5) To create a theatre event as a living experience for the audience.

The methods would be:

1) A permanent company managed by the artists (e.g., on the Board of Directors.)
2) Extensive ensemble training, particularly in the classics, through Workshops and Labs.
3) Playwrights-in-Residence writing directly for the company.

They would value:

1) A community-style environment with rights, privileges and obligations.
2) An ideology based on the self.
3) A protective, nurturing environment.

In short--a theatre for the artist in order to create a theatre event. The theatre event was the "living play" they strove for. It was the living play that they wanted the audience to experience.

It was to be a way of life.

The idea of creating a company is hardly unique even though at this particular time in history it is almost economically impossible. What *is* unique is the idea of creating a theatre first and foremost for the artist. In 1898, The Moscow Art Theatre--shining example for all who venture into such territories--declared its objectives to be the designing of a theatre for the educated working

populace and the middle-class intelligentsia. In keeping with this, their first theatre was called The People's Art Theatre. The Group Theatre of the thirties had visions of becoming a national theatre, but became instead the political pulse and emotional temper of the times, acting like a social mediator. The short-lived Repertory Company of Lincoln Center of the sixties also had primary ambitions of becoming a national theatre. With enormous resources of both private and public funds available, it seemed that the realization of these ambitions might have been possible had it not run into such a great deal of critical pressure regarding artistic differences. The Circle Theatre, with the Group Theatre as its spiritual forebears and the Repertory Company of Lincoln Center its pragmatic forebears, was designed primarily and most specifically to fulfill the day-by-day needs of the working artist.

This concept has never changed. Fifteen years later in a Circle Showbill for Levitation, Mason would restate this premise:

> The needs of the artist were the last things considered in the commercial theatre. When a production finishes, the scenery is burned, the cast is dispersed, and the commercial theatre starts again in a totally different context. Whatever you might learn happens individually and not collectively. I felt this was like General Motors firing everyone at the end of each year and starting off with new designers.[1]

In a theatre for the artist, for example, the playwright and the playwriting process are treated with extraordinary care. Before the play is "ready" for a major production, it becomes part of the life-stream of the company. It is read

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[1] As quoted to Gerry Stern, "Good Enough to be True," article in program for the Spring, 1984 Circle Rep production of Levitation by Timothy Mason.

aloud by and for the company members. It is discussed, reshaped, developed, given intensive detailed attention. It might be given a workshop reading with an audience symposium, then rewritten, reshaped, another workshop, etc. The playwright is never completely isolated during this period of writing. This care is given not only because the playwright's contribution is so important, but because the very nature of his contribution makes him the most vulnerable. His work must be protected in order not to block growth. Mason becomes heatedly compassionate on this point as he demonstrates in a discussion with Paul Gardner of The New York Times in 1976.

> Of all the people in the theatre writers are the most tender. They put themselves on the line, sharing their perceptions of reality with us. They are very easily damaged. The American theatre chews up writers, gnashes them badly. Look what happened to Tennessee Williams, our greatest living playwright. His Red Devil Battery opened in Boston. It wasn't ready. He was butchered. . . Clifford Odets, William Inge—they were chewed up . . . Often it's hard to tell when the production is at fault and not the play. Even the critics can't make the seperation. The playwright takes the fall.
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> Once the play flops on Broadway, it's dead. It's like a disease no one wants. It has been stigmatized. When a playwright is with a rep company he's protected from the hit-flop syndrome . . . In the commercial theatre, two Broadway flops and you've got not only a couple of dead plays, you've got a dead playwright. No one will finance him and he can't write anymore. He's blocked.[1]

If everything works according to design, this understanding and care given the playwright is a part of the typical attention that should be paid to each

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[1] As quoted to Paul Gardner in "The Man Who Keeps Circle Rep Rolling," The New York Times, 10/3/76.

theatre discipline. Ideally, each artist can expect to have the right to be "selfish" about his creative needs, to have the community privilege of acceptance, freedom to work, expectation of being treated seriously, and the concomitant obligation to afford the same nurture and care to other participating members.

Mason was aware that he was setting up a different ideology, one based on the "self." He knew it would be met with wide-spread disagreement, often by the most respected figures in theatre. Critics with the stature of Robert Brustein believed that individual ambition could be fatal to a repertory theatre since it was his feeling that by its very nature repertory companies had to be based on cooperation, selflessness and humility:

> For if a repertory company is ever to function properly, its members must subordinate their own aspirations to the demands of the company, working in perfect harmony for the sake of a balanced unified whole.[1]

Mason was absolute in his insistence that his had to be a theatre for the artist full of the self before it could be a theatre for anyone else. This was the basic, though controversial, ideology. It was a courageous stance to adopt in the "togetherness" atmosphere of the sixties in which strong communal thrusts were being felt throughout society, and urged in order to exist within the group. The La Mama troupe, for example, as though literally following a credo set out by theatre statesmen like Brustein, ran on a kind of enthusiasm that was strongly propelled by an everybody-for-the-group philosophy. The Circle Company was to do the exact opposite. Everybody for themselves! It was a philosophy based on "no

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[1]Brustein, p. 211.

self-sacrfice." Mason was surprisingly willing to declare "selfish" objectives as well as encourage them in others, in order to build a healthy larger structure. He believed that what on the surface could be interpreted as selfish could open a very powerful means to offering the truth of themselves *unselfishly*.

> Because if you are insistent on your right and need to grow as an individual artist, then you can truly recognize other people's needs. And from that kind of selfish point of view, we can build something together that we can't build separately. So we never encouraged people to sacrifice themself to the interest of the group.[1]

Even though this philosophy can create a liberating reciprocity, it is unpopular to state it in a society that has often had difficulty distinguishing between what is selfish and what is right for the self; it is nevertheless, profound. It is also in direct opposition to the philosophy of the Group Theatre, the Circle's spiritual forebears. The Group, following the more conventional approach to the issue of service to the company, had difficulty with its application. Ruth Nelson, an actress with the Group Theatre, claims that the Group actually "wrecked some people's lives " because of its insistence on total service to the company. "We didn't join to serve ourselves; we served the playwright; we served the theatre."[2] This can be destructive as well as counter-productive when the individual artist is made to feel insignificant by insisting that he is to function more as a servant to the needs of other artists

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Foster Hirsch, A Method to Their Madness, The History of the Actors Studio. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984,) p. 73.

than as master of his own. Mason wanted his artists to expect that their needs as artists would be continually nourished. It is not only the secret of a successfully functioning artist, but the secret of a successfully functioning community. As he says,

> It's really a community. A community in which we have rights, privileges and obligations to each other that are based on mutual respect for one another and the fact that we share the same goals. Nobody is trying to become a star at the expense of someone else which is the way it usually is in other groups.[1]

As Brustein warned, with some justification, individual ambition could be fatal to a repertory company. Perhaps so, *if* it is ambition of the wrong kind. The most important thing then is to be able to differentiate between the two kinds of ambition. If it is an ambition to become a "star," it has no place in a repertory company. If it is an ambition to do the best work one is capable of, then it is greatly encouraged, for in the end, that kind of uncompromising "selfishness" can be highly beneficial to the entire group. In such a context, selfishness takes on a different meaning than the negative one with which it is usually associated.

Wary of the hazards of failure with its depressing aftermaths, and equally wary of the seduction of success with its ever-present threats to artistic integrity, Mason wanted to build a foundation in which both failure and success could be endured. One of the ways to insure taking care of the emotional needs of the company was to create a supportive environment in which to experiment

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[1] Ibid.

freely without fear of rejection. It is because of the nurturing aspects of this ambience that the company has often been referred to as a family, recognized as such even by Mason. As Colleen O'Connor pointed out in Manhattan Catalogue:

> Mason's sentences often turn around the words "family" and "home." To the artists, feeling at home is integral to freeing the top-grade stuff. "There are so many sacrifices you must make in order to be an artist in contemporary America and so much discouragement, that the more encouraging our atmosphere is, the better it is for the artist. We try to encourage . . . the use of artistic imagination. Contemporary society is a hostile environment to the creative imagination. The artist needs to practice but often can't because of fame or money pressures. We're different because we try to see everything in terms of the particular problems of the artist, which are unique."[1]

The major nourishment came through the workshops run by Mason and Thirkield in which everyone was expected to participate and everyone's needs were examined. One of the important goals was to break down the walls between the various theatre disciplines. For example, because the play is the starting-off point, the play and the playwright, historically speaking, have always been all-important. However, the theatre event can only be created when there is complete collaboration between the playwright, the actor, the director, the designer, etc. Collaboration begins with understanding. It is Mason's contention, and one (whether historically accurate or not) which guided much of his handling of the company, that the emphasis has always been much too much on the playwright and still is in commercial theatre—that there is a naive belief

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[1]Colleen O'Connor, "Marshall Mason: Why Success Hasn't Spoiled Circle Rep," Manhattan Catalogue December, 1979.

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that if a playwright comes along with a "great" play, everything else automatically falls into place. However, it should be remembered it was not until Stanislavsky discovered how to play Chekhov that The Sea Gull was appreciated (by the critics at least, if not by Chekhov himself.) The Sea Gull's first production had been a total failure and almost ended a brilliant playwright's career before it had begun.

This is what Mason hoped to achieve with his clear understanding of the symbiotic attachment between the playwright, the director and the actor. Only a company that is truly connected to a playwright and his work can fully realize the playwright's vision.

Fifteen years later, Tanya Berezin would reiterate Mason's belief in an unswerving approbation.

> The actor who is a member of a company is constantly investigating what makes a playwright's material work. When Marshall says that the Circle Rep does what the Moscow Art Theatre did for Chekhov or Burbage did for Shakespeare it sounds very easy. But it is exactly what he is talking about. Performing artists—actors, directors, whatever—have to learn what Lanford Wilson is, what John Bishop is, what Milan Stitt is. They have to make the play work. For example, Ed Harris and Cathy Baker know about Fool For Love. They know Sam Shepard. We had to have auditions to replace and understudy them. Some of the actors who auditioned were off the wall. The wrong-headedness about the play is astonishing since we now know what the play is supposed to be. Now we say, how can they not know it—see it. They can not see it because they are not connected to the playwright.[1]

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[1] Berezin interview.

Lanford Wilson passionately agrees. There are moments when the actors realize a play far beyond the playwright's most hopeful expectations. According to Wilson, this is the most satisfying kind of collaboration possible. In order to achieve this collaboration there has to be communication with even the most basic elements of theatre, for example, the technician. As Mason points out,

> It has always been divided into "Us" versus "Them." It happens even in academic theatre in which actors see the technician as someone who's going to get in the way and the technician sees the actor as someone who breaks props. So there's very little communication. We were determined to undo that. We were also determined to make playwrights understand what actors were about, and actors understand what directing was about so that everyone could work for the common goal.[1]

If everything falls into place properly, the ultimate goal is the living experience for the audience. The idea is to create a living script in which the harmony between the spoken word and the experience of the audience occurs through the live actor with the resulting humanism that this can create. Implicit in this is the belief that theatre can uniquely bridge the distance between people because it can best show the workings of the human spirit through human behavior in the here and now, so that the experiences are live and happen at the exact moment of creation. Theoretically, there is an almost built-in domino effect at work which may be described in the following manner: 1) A theatre for the artist results in, 2) an atmosphere where the artist's best work is possible, 3) which translates into the all-important theatre event, 4) which culminates in the common goal--a living experience shared with the audience.

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[1] Ibid.

Was it all policy fanfare? Was it a search for a "home" they had somehow personally lacked? Belonging instead of gypsy-acting? Succour instead of criticism? Undiscriminating support instead of truth? Or were they in the process of discovering what Harold Clurman called the fundamental "Idea" of theatre?[1]

Questions are always being asked by critic and scholar alike about what constitutes a true theatre. Clurman, co-founder of his own company, respected director, and one of the finest critics of his day, was no exception. His critiques, though sometimes devestating, were nonetheless sparked by the generosity of understanding born of the working theatre artist who had broken down the walls between theatre disciplines. After having worn various hats himself, he was sure he knew what constituted a true theatre. In The Naked Image he quoted Vachtangov[2] who, given his work with Stanislavsky and the the Moscow Art Theatre, became one of the heroes of the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio.

> The answer, once given by the great Russian director, Vachtangov, was couched in the special jargon of his time and place (Moscow, 1919) but it is nonetheless exact: "A theatre is an ideologically cemented collective."[3]

Clurman agreed with Vachtangov but took it out of the abstract by itemizing what he considered four essential ingredients which can be summed up thus:

1) A true theatre must create an identity.

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[1]Clurman, The Naked Image, p. 149.

[2]Clurman spelling 'Vachtangov.' Sometimes seen as 'Vakhtangov.'

[3]Clurman, pp. 151-153.

2 It must produce its own native playwrights.

3 It must be a creative organism rather than an interpretive one.

4) It must have an esthetic and philosophical attitude.

The new Circle Theatre seemed to fit Clurman's criteria of what constituted a true theatre. It had created a unique identity in that it was a theatre of the artist, by the artist and for the artist; it was dedicated to the development of its own native playwrights which made it a creative rather than just an interpretive organism; despite an open willingness to experiment, esthetically it leaned toward realism and the rediscovery of the native American voice, while its philosophical ideology was dedicated to the celebration of the human spirit through human behavior.

Enthusiasm was high—so high that Mason was unembarassed when he said,

> I hate to say something as naive and as obvious as saying part of the goal was to become a national theatre. But if we were as good as we hoped we would become, that was inevitably where we were headed.[1]

Perhaps, like their predecessors, it was inevitable that theatre artists should dream in terms of a national theatre. Perhaps, also, only the very young would not place realistic restraints on their dreams even in the face of the overwhelming odds against a national theatre ever becoming a reality in America. No one was more aware than Mason that the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center under the leadership of one of his early heroes, Elia Kazan, had just died. Beneath all the heady enthusiasm of dreams, they were all keenly

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[1] Ibid.

aware that their company was coming directly in the aftermath of the Lincoln Center Repertory fiasco in which the Board of Directors, comprised of lawyers, bankers and other non-theatrical personnel, had not only tried to replace Robert Whitehead behind his back, but had just fired him as well as Elia Kazan.

With a pragmatic approach to history as the greatest teacher of all, Mason and Thirkield tried to envision all the pitfalls suffered by the Lincoln Center in an attempt to block a reoccurance in their company. They had looked to the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center with great hopes for the American theatre. In some respects they wished to emulate them. The end of the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center was a warning signal to them; they could see the danger signals popping up. Pitfalls, both obvious and subtle, had to be recognized and avoided if they were to survive in such a hostile environment. For they believed that the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center was destroyed by people who thought a working company could evolve overnight, and by people who demanded instant "smash hits." Although Robert Brustein was more realistic in his expectations and against the very concept of "smash hits," he nonetheless, condemned Kazan, Whitehead and Miller to failure in his Foreword to Seasons of Discontent even before they had opened their doors or planned their first production. The reason for this harsh prediction was that he considered them to be "the very people responsible for the theatre's collapse," [1] in the first place. To put them in charge guaranteed dismal failure, "this time under the dignified aegis of subsidized culture."[2] In the hostile environment created by this kind of

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[1]Brustein, p. 18.

[2]Ibid., p. 19.

attack on one side and the Board's demand for financially solvent "smash hits" on the other, the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center did not have even the remotest possibility of succeeding.

The attitude of the Circle Theatre regarding the demise of the Lincoln Center company was passionately synthesized by Tanya Berezin, for even though the Circle did not have even one small percent of the Lincoln Center company's financial backing, the identification factor with the ill-fated older company was powerful. As she says,

> The Circle Rep didn't pop out of Jupiter's thigh in 1969 and produce a smash. As Marshall, Lanford, Rob and I were together, the Lincoln Center had Bobby Lewis, Kazan, Whitehead and Arthur Miller--people who had natural experience in the past, trying to pass that on and share it with young actors and mature actors alike. They had never before worked in a committed way together but they had a natural artistic affinity from the fifties.[1]

The Circle Theatre had a very low profile in the beginning, whereas the Lincoln Center Repertory Company had a very high profile. The Lincoln Center Repertory Company could not fail even in the smallest measure. They were not permitted to either fail or experiment. Although Brustein condemned them for bringing commercial theatre sensibilities to the Lincoln Center Repertory Company, they were nonetheless being judged by the criteria of that same commercial theatre. Either they were a tremendous "hit" or they were a complete "flop." There was no in between. As Berezin continues, they were not given time to grow:

> They could have been given time to grow. They had lots of

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[1] Ibid.

> money. They had lots of power behind them. They didn't have to succeed immediately. It was just the mentality of the Lincoln Center Board that said they had to. They could afford to lose a lot of money. Part of our opportunity was our low profile because when we failed, and we did, our Board of Directors was us. When we lost money, we lost $14. But you see, they did not have to make money. That was not what they were there for. They had all the money in the artistic community behind them. They should have been allowed to lose millions. They should have been prepared to lose a lot of money. The Royal Shakespeare Company lost money when it started. They all lose money. It's something this country is not prepared to do. I think that given time they would have worked. They were different people from us--other voices, but strong voices.[1]

In The Naked Image, Clurman condemns what he called an American characteristic which frustrated the hopes for new theatre--impatience.[2] Its apparent simplicity is very interesting. He had urged patience in regard to the Lincoln Center Company and warned against foolish expectations grounded in the impossible hit/flop syndrome that characterized the commercial theatre of Broadway. He was absolutely correct in asserting that the founding of a *theatre* is" not the same as setting up a series of productions."[3]

But despite such warnings, Daniel Blum summed up the Lincoln Center Repertory Company's first two seasons in several flippant phrases in Theatre World:

> The Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center was off to a bad start with "After The Fall," a revival of Eugene O'Neill's "Marco's Millions," and "But For Whom Charlie," a new play by S. N. Behrman. "After The Fall" caused much argument, but the

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Clurman, The Naked Image, p.148

[3]Ibid., p. 164.

> major opinions were that it was inferior Arthur Miller and in very bad taste. The controversy made for Box Office appeal. The other two productions were dismissed as unworthy. The acting company was, for the most part, hopelessly inadequste. The Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center was, in all respects, a disappointment in its first year.[1]

Blum summed up their next season with a two sentence indictment:

> The Repertory Company of the Lincoln Center in its second season of offerings, failed again to achieve its anticipated success. Differences of opinion, resignations, and changes in management and artistic direction were not helpful in producing a successful season.[2]

Harold Clurman was one of the few who held out for a saner approach to the successful development of a repertory company. With insights honed by direct knowledge of the struggles involved, he insisted that no theatre could look forward to a secure future when it was expected to prove a "smash" with its initial production. "The theatre is not a merchandising business any more than is a library, a museum or a symphony orchestra."[3]

Taking a sad lesson out of the painful experiences of the Lincoln Center Repertory Company, the Circle Theatre decided that their Board of Directors would be comprised of the artists themselves. They hoped thus to avoid the major pitfall of an artistic clash with the differing objectives of a Board primarily geared toward fiscal solvency.

Although more directly influenced by the Actors Studio, the founders of the Circle Theatre were deeply inspired by its parent, the Group Theatre, and keenly

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[1]Blum., Vol. 2, p. 6

[2]Blum., Vol. 3., p.7.

[3]Clurman, The Naked Image, p. 150.

aware that despite its enormous impact on American theatre it had only survived for approximately ten years, a long time by critical standards, a short one by historical standards.

Mason, speaking of the Group notes, "that even with its extraordinary vision and vast reservoirs of talent it survived only ten years before succumbing to whatever it is in America that seemed to doom every living, artistic thing." [1] He admits that in some ways he was subconsciously emulating the Group, partly because of the romance of their relatively brief but exciting life and partly because the personnel went on to contribute so profoundly to modern theatre: Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, Elia Kazan, Stella Adler, Lee. J. Cobb, John Garfield, Morris Carnovsky, Franchot Tone. Out of the Group Theatre came the Actors Studio with its revitalization of realistic American acting, the legacies of Marlon Brando, James Dean and Montgomery Clift, a new approach to scenic design.

In Mason's view, Hollywood contributed a great deal to the collapse of the Group Theatre, and here was another danger to avoid. Not only did Hollywood have the huge sums of money to entice the Group's major playwright, Clifford Odets, into writing for films, but it also drained the company of many of its best actors, all of whom wound up with excellent careers in films but left the Group bereft of the necessary personnel to continue. Mason felt that a good part of the company's dissolution was due to ambition and greed and he took another huge lesson from its experience. "We have always encouraged people," he says. "Yes, go out and make the money, and *then come back*. That way everyone will grow

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[1] Mason interview.

and we will all be stronger."[1]

Indeed, Christopher Reeve, Judd Hirsch, Beatrice Straight, Richard Thomas, Tony Roberts, Fritz Weaver and William Hurt--to name a few high profile company members--have all gone on to successful careers in film and television and have periodically returned to work with the company over the years.

Mason was also aware of the models from the more distant past and consciously looked to pattern themselves,in part,after the Moscow Art Theatre. The M.A.T. was originally privately funded. Stanislavsky came from a wealthy family, as did Rob Thirkield. Stanislavsky privately supported the M.A.T. at first, as Thirkield supported the early Circle. The interest of the Czar was eventually stimulated by the M.A.T.'s excellence and innovations in acting. It was then that the M.A.T. was subsidized by the government. Mason hoped to achieve the same quality of excellence so that the "modern days czars" would not be able to overlook their work and would come forward with subsidies in the way of grants.

It is ironic that while they looked to the inspiration of the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavsky in particular, the first director ever to center his work on the actor, the Moscow Art Theatre came to the United States to lukewarm critical reception. At the time, 1964, the Circle was in its earliest stages of development. The M.A.T. came to America on its second tour in forty years bringing Mikhail Bulgakov's Dead Souls and Chekhov's two plays, The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard in repertory. The Stanislavsky acting system which had revolutionized Western theatre now seemed a bit musty and old fashioned to critics more currently accustomed to the Strasberg "method." This

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[1] Ibid.

Americanized version of Stanislavsky's system, with its intense concentration on naturalistic behavior and psychological truth, often at the expense of articulation, clashed with the open, direct style the M.A.T. brought to America in 1964. With pats to the head for the "glories of the past," Robert Brustein put the Moscow Art Theatre out to pasture and called on America to "break the bonds of naturlistic truth and psychological reality" lest it get mired in the rear guard along with the Moscow Art Theatre.[1] This at a time when Mason's eyes gleamed toward a new realism!

But it did not matter. The new Circle Theatre was lucky.

They did not have the Moscow Art Theatre's glorious past to live up to. They did not have the Group Theatre's fame. They did not have the publicity of Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center. The Circle had no hot spotlight. No one cared whether or not they succeeded except themselves. No one demanded instant achievement. No one pointed an accusatory finger at the red ink in the credit column. They had a strong Clurmanian "Idea" and a definite philosophical point of view. While critics demanded novelty fron the M.A.T. and instant fruits from the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln, the Circle Theatre had the comfort and time to nurture the tree itself and the environment in which it would grow. It is most fortunate that they did not receive strong public recognition at first. By the time they achieved their "overnight success" in 1973, they had been working together for almost ten years.

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[1]Brustein, p. 274.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EARLY DAYS

Mason predicted from the first that it would take twenty years to build a great theatre company. Whether or not this would prove to be prophetic, the new Circle Theatre Company was now, at least, at a tangible beginning with its first home at 2307 Broadway, between 83rd and 84th Streets.

Although Thirkield would say in his easy-going manner that he was "kind of taking care of the technical end," Marshall was "pretty much the Artistic Director," Tanya Berezin was "sort of running the business end of it," and Lanford was "pretty much staying out of it,"[1] it was officially listed on letterheads and in brochures that Rob Thirkield was the Managing Director, Marshall W. Mason was the Artistic Director, Tanya Berezin was the Administrative Director, and Beverly Landau, an Off-Broadway producer, was the Executive Producer. The company indeed was to be run by the artists themselves as planned. Although Wilson was listed as one of the company playwrights along with Robert Kesser, Helen Duberstein Lipton, Matthew Silverman, David Starkweather and Doric Wilson, Lanford had very little to do with the actual start of the company with the exception of a secondary kind of support. He was occupied elsewhere with the production of his plays, Serenading Louie, Lemon Sky, and Gingham Dog.

The initial company roster consisted of twenty-five members:

Tanya Berezin	Marshall W. Mason
Beth Bowden	Henry Mellor

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[1] Thirkield interview.

Patricia Carey
Mona Crawford
Linda Eskansas
Michael Feisenmeier
Robert Frink
Stephanie Gordon
Spalding Gray
Ellen Gurin
Carl David Jessup
Jane Lowry
Sharon Ann Maddon
Roddy O'Connor
Bill Oxendine
Burke Pearson
Suzanne Pred
Bob Shields
Maria Stefann
David Stekol
Tony Tenuto
Rob Thirkield
Alice Tweedle

There were also thirteen Associate Members in addition to John Dowling acting as Company Artist, John Deans as Company Architect and Alonzo Levister as Company Composer.

The loft on upper Broadway proved to be a decent place to work. It was clean and large enough to accommodate the twenty-five to thirty people who showed up on a regular basis to participate in the workshops that Mason and Thirkield began coordinating.

The first eight months were spent exclusively in workshop training. The workshops were broken up into two separate areas—the Methods Workshop under the direction of Mason and the Exploration Workshop under the direction of Thirkield. As in the Stanislavsky tradition, the immediate focus was primarily on the acting. The actor is, and always has been, the crux of theatre, but in a company dedicated to the celebration of classics as well as contemporary plays, the actor, perforce, is the pivot around which this broad range of goals would succeed or fail.

The earliest goal of the work was pragmatic—to establish a vocabulary that would be familiar to all. The ultimate goal was to establish an ensemble that had trained together to such a point that it would be impossible to tell where the written word ended and the acting began. Training *together* was the key.

Everyone participated in the workshops--actor, director, playwright and designer alike. In fact, Mason and Thirkield participated in each other's workshops. It was only when the boundaries between the theatre disciplines were truly crossed that the ensemble began to feel real; it was more than mere training in acting. Most of the people who came already had some theatre training in their backgrounds. Now, in sharing mutual experiences, the company created a mutual language. Although Mason would often say that there was no specific method that they taught, and upon examination this proved to be true, the Circle approach was a way of pulling many styles together with an embrace that developed its own unique identity.

During the first eight months each workshop met three times a week for three hours at a time so that those who availed themselves of both workshops--and most did-- actually found themselves working together every day for a solid period of eight months. Even the Group Theatre had only ten weeks to get to know each other. When the Group first started out, they established a commune in Brookfield Center, Connecticut, deliberately distancing themselves from the theatrical mainstream. Even though they spent part of the time "developing a common technique through Strasberg's instruction in the Stanislavsky system,"[1] they spent most of the time rehearsing The House Of Connelly by Paul Green which they presented at the Martin Beck Theatre in September of 1931. The first eight months of the Circle's existence on the other hand, were spent in purely exploratory training. Such an extended period of training was an unheard of luxury in any Off-Broadway or Off-Off Broadway

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[1] Hirsch, p. 74.

theatre, let alone the commercial theatre. However, it must be remembered that at this point, the Circle's expenses were minimal. There was no wolf howling at the door. They did not have to cover expenses by forcing immediate income-producing productions before they felt ready. Whatever expenses they did have were basically covered by Thirkield, who believed so deeply in what they were doing, he was willing to finance it completely. He was a very serious theatre artist dedicated to the development of the company and the conceptual principles he and Mason espoused. These dedicated beliefs combined with Mason's strong vision, made their partnership mutually inspiring. They felt that they were definitely on the threshhold of creating the kind of environment which would nourish their own creative needs—a very important point—as well as those of the company they formed around themselves. It was in their workshops, with their emphasis on individualism, that paradoxically the seeds for true ensemble and interaction were being sown.

From Mason's point of view, the training was done very much in terms of the classics. It was always his intention to reflect the contemporary world first through the mirror of the classics, hoping to bring the wisdom of playwrights such as Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, etc., to illuminate the timeless dilemma of the human condition, and secondly through contemporary plays, hoping to attract playwrights to write real plays about real people for their company. The contextual fabric of the plays chosen would have to do with the human factor. While Harold Clurman called for the Group Theatre to express the voice of the thirties, Mason's call for humanism encompassed a broader scope than illuminating a selected period in time; the philosophy of humanism never diminished.

The means of accomplishing these goals were very definitely centered about the workshops where the ensemble consistently worked together. While Mason spent the time vigorously training in the classics, Thirkield spent his workshops in Grotowski and various other experimental methods. They seriously explored the experimental alongside the traditional theatre, feeling that one did not necessarily negate the other--that the two could co-exist in the same environment side by side. As Mason says:

> For a long time that was one of our hallmarks. We didn't recognize any limitations in terms of what we were exploring at this time. We believed whatever works for an individual actor is good.[1]

This certainly seemed to be true, especially in the beginning, and a broad range of theatre traditions was explored to do so. There is a looseness and freedom in this approach that is not in the "classic" tradition of training that is based more on the step-by-step conservatory approach. There has always been a feeling in critical environs that this kind of looseness may be one of the reasons Americans have a difficult time performing the classics--that they are too self-indulgent and not willing to do something that does not come directly out of their own personal psyches. But Mason does not agree. Whatever techniques an actor has learned that will work for him to create the kind of expression he needs to do his best work is a good technique.

Most of Mason's training has been in terms of Stanislavsky through Strasberg, having studied at the Actors Studio. However, the Actors Studio does not teach the Stanislavsky system which, for example, is geared to sensory

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[1] Mason interview.

memory. Rather, it concentrates more on the "other branch" of Stanislavsky, according to Mason's observations, which was geared more to the stimulus-response orientation that became the foundation for the Neighborhood Playhouse. Both sensory memory and stimulus-response are inter-related, having a strong common base in the Group Theatre but the differences between them point out the multi-directional approaches of the Group's alumni. Out of the Group Theatre came Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio, Stella Adler's extended approach, and Sanford Meisner with the Neighborhood Playhouse. Mason embraced them all:

> Meisner's direction has to do with spontaneous imaginative response to what is actually happening onstage. Stanislavsky called it, "doing the physical action," and it really means to bring it down to the here and now basis which the Neighborhood Playhouse concentrated on. More important than the sensory work and the imaginative work that the Actors Studio did, was the relaxation, concentration and imagination in the here and now. But we don't really subscribe to any one theory. All is important. All. I certainly know enough about the Actors Studio to be able to say to Kathy Cortez, who is oriented to their method, things like, "You're not relaxed enough," or, "You need a more personal objective." Or, when I'm working with Trish Hawkins or Tanya Berezin, whose backgrounds are from the Neighborhood Playhouse approach, then we work more in terms of independent activities and objectives, and try to get the action in the here and now.[1]

In the Methods Workshop, Mason taught Stanislavsky/Strasberg exercises and techniques in a setting reminiscent of a classroom. In addition to the on-going exercises, the actors prepared individual scenework in out-of-class rehearsal and then presented the scenes within the workshop for evaluation and

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[1]Ibid.

support. Mason also worked on particular acting problems in terms of performance, and specific problem-solving in terms of interpretation. Sometimes, he would have the actors concentrate on only one line from a play. For example, there is a particular problem called, "a line out of nowhere." In the opening of The Three Sisters, the first line is, "Father died just a year ago, on this very day."[1] What makes Olga say that line at this point? Suddenly something has reminded her that father died at this time last year. The required imagination to make a line out of nowhere real to the actor and believeable to the audience can call upon a lifetime of experience.

Little by little, during the course of those first eight months, Mason concentrated most of the Methods Workshop on The Three Sisters which turned into extensive background work on it as the first production he would eventually direct at the new Circle Theatre.

While Mason ran the Methods Workshop, Thirkield simultaneously ran the Exploration Workshop. There was an unplanned but fortuitous balance between the two workshops. The Exploration Workshop was an attempt for each actor to discover who he was as an artist and how, as Mason would express it, they were going to operate in a country that is basically hostile to the arts--one of Mason's obsessive concerns.

In the Exploration Workshop, the goals were a bit less structured than the usual acting systems. After having consciously applied acting techniques to exercises, the goal now became to free the imagination from the conventional

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[1] Constance Garnett, translator, Four Great Plays by Chekhov, (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971), p. 121.

techniques in order to develop individual methods of expression through the voice, the body and the personal psychology of each actor.

Like Mason, Thirkield brought a rich background of acting training into his workshop. His was an eclectic mixture of the more unconventional styles that contributed greatly to the highly experimental nature of his workshop. While touring Europe for two years with the La Mama troupe, he had studied in Denmark with Eugenio Barba who had been a devoted disciple of Jerzy Grotowski. Thirkield freely used Grotowski's techniques as well as Barba's extensions. Barba was a self-proclaimed psychic who approached acting through an intensely personal, internal view. At the same time, since Grotowski was Barba's base, the minimalist approach was in evidence. The actor was trained to rely more on himself and his body in motion, than on the external accoutrements of set, costume, decor, and even, in some respects, the play. In addition to the influence of the La Mama troupe itself and his work with Tom O'Horgan, Thirkield had the bedrock traditionalism of Alvina Krause at Eagles Mere and Northwestern, as did Mason.

At opposite ends of the spectrum, Thirkield assimilated the "wildly wonderful movement improvisations"[1] from his dance therapy studies with Blanche Evan, which both he and Mason felt helped the actor develop the elasticity necesary to playing a multiplicity of roles. As if this were not eclectic enough, Thirkield also introduced exorcistic-type vocal experimentations reminiscent of Artaud, and even the Yoga-like body control of headstanding. As he explains it:

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[1]Thirkield interview.

> The standing on the head was simply to help the body find its own balance. I found that similar to playing a big moment in a play. Instead of getting all tense about it, just do it. Let it happen.[1]

This might have all proven highly confusing except that Thirkield, although basically an actor and director, was a born teacher perhaps more than anything else. He had an extraordinary "way" with people and he had the ability to inspire trust--perhaps one of the most important prerequisites to teaching. The actors trusted him enough to try anything, even something they were positive they could never achieve, such as headstanding.

> At first they were sure they couldn't. They couldn't even touch their toes. Then, after two weeks, they're touching their toes, standing on their heads--and everyone cheers.[2]

Thirkield has a truly artistic nature. He is a hoarder of information and enjoys "investigation" immensely. Perhaps this is why he was never satisfied to stay with one acting "method" and felt he had to personally explore as many as he could. He spent three years studying with James Tuttle, a disciple of Sanford Meisner, whom he claims was a,

> . . . fantastic teacher of the Meisner method. Be yourself. Relax. Look at the other person. Play off him as much as you can. A whole different thing for me. I was feeling very phony as an actor. Now I was beginning to feel real.[3]

Even though Thirkield admits that the Strasberg method is important and should be explored by every serious actor, he never completely trusted it because of the many negative aspects h e perceived in the approach. The relaxation

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

techniques are exceptional, but he feels the sense memory can have a great many painful side effects:

> I've seen many actors from the Actors Studio who have auditioned for me. They were very relaxed, but they also feed themselves very painful memories in order to relive them. Whereas in the Meisner method, the emphasis is on getting *out* of yourself. Certainly you can feed yourself something from your own past to get your emotions cooking, but mainly, you get your attention off yourself and onto the other actor and let it rip. When you finish performing, you feel as though you've expressed something from your own experience--it's quite real and very believeable, and it's much healthier.[1]

Originally, the "method" or "system" referred to the Stanislavsky codified acting technique. In this country, however, it came to mean Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio. Strasberg, who was so instrumental in bringing wide-spread acceptance of the Method to the West, basically owed his Method to Richard Boleslavski's dissemination of Stanislavski's System in 1923-4, long before Stanislavski's first book, An Actor Prepares appeared in America.[2] It was Boleslavski who, remaining in America after the Moscow Art Theatre tour in 1923-4, brought the System to American actors. In 1923, he founded the Theatre

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[1] Ibid.

[2] The first of Stanislavy's three books on acting techniques, An Actor Prepares, written in 1928, was not available in America until 1936; the second was Building a Character and the third was Creating A Role which did not appear in translation until as late as 1961.

Arts Institute[1] for:

> . . . young American actors like Stella Adler who wanted something "bigger" than what the commercial American theatre offered . . . it aimed to be a theatrical holy ground, a place where the spirit dwells and is given flight. As such, it was a significant first step in translating Stanislavski's ideas into an American idiom.[2]

Thirkield was aware of Boleslavski's "soul exercises" in relaxation, concentration and effective memory, and that Boleslavski stressed the actor's spiritual training as the most important part of the work.[3] He was also aware that Strasberg had become ingrained in his own version of the System. It moved away from sense-memory and dealt more with the voice and body movement. While Stanislavsky had eventually asked, "What is your action?," a great deal of Strasberg's Method had remained in the "How do you feel?" stage which, in some interpretations, including Thirkield's, is only the preparatory stege for creating a role. Obviously, Thirkield was more in tune with Stella Adler, the second leading teacher of the Stanislavsky System along with Strasberg during the thirties and forties. She disagreed with what she perceived as the limitations of

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[1] Referred to as The American Lab Theatre by Harold Clurman in The Fervent Years. The Lab disbanded in 1933 but not before Boleslavski had published a book of his famous lectures, Acting: The First Six Lessons. It was the first book to bring Stanislavski's System to America in print. The subjects of Boleslavski's first six lessons were, concentration, memory of emotion, dramatic action, characterization, observation and rhythm.

[2] Hirsch, p. 59.

[3] Ibid., pp. 63-4.

Strasberg's Method; this disagreement created a passionate, major controversy between the two famous teaching alumni of the Group Theatre.[1] She believed that the actor was encouraged by Stanislavski to use his imagination and encouraged to find universal truths by going beyond the strictly personal memories rather than putting only himself and his own personal experiences as the sole core of every role. She said:

> At this point in his work, he [Stanislavsky] no longer emphasized effective memory. Instead, he concentrated on the given circumstances supplied by the playwright . . . And he stressed what was called the method of physical actions . . . planning it [a role] in terms of a series of actions . . . He led me to use the physical stage, the physical circumstances. We did exercises to make it clear--to help me *use* the circumstances of the play.[2]

As late as 1976, Stella Adler was still firm in her beliefs. As she said in an interview with The New York Times, "The real thing will limit your acting and cripple you." It was with this point, in particular, that Thirkield firmly agreed:

> I've seen many actors who keep dredging up all the painful stuff and it's not very healthy. Eventually they hate to act because it's too painful. Acting should be enjoyable.[3]

It is not important to assess who is "right" or "wrong." Ostensibly, a good case can be made for each, and, under the circumstances, Mason's view, "Whatever works for an actor is good," seems appropriate. Certainly,

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[1] The controversy between them developed mainly after Adler had visited Stanislavsky in Russia with Harold Clurman (her husband at the time) in 1934 and had come home with what she believed to be the continuation of the System.

[2] Hirsch, pp. 78-9.

[3] Thirkield interview.

extraordinary naturalistic acting came out of the Actors Studio: Marlon Brando, James Dean, Montgomery Clift, Shelly Winters, Rod Steiger and Maureen Stapleton are only a few of the famous alumni who have given inspiration. Just as certainly, many members of the Group Theatre, where Strasberg began relying on effective memory and improvisation to stimulate the actors' feelings, found the Strasberg technique too painful to endure. Actor, Morris Carnovsky, eventually dismissed it as he found it very "harmful."[1] Actress, Margaret Barker, says she thought she "was going to crack"[2] in being urged to relive her roommate's death over and over again in order to effectively use her pain. Actress, Phoebe Brand, claimed that, "Lee crippled a lot of people . . . acting should be joyous, it should be pleasurable and easy if you do it right."[3] And this was exactly Thirkield's philosophy: Acting should be enjoyable. He would never waver from this philosophy whether he was dealing with an acting workshop, an audition, or directing a play.

This philosophy would be an important contributing factor to the overall symmetry Mason and Thirkiled brought to the Circle with their individual personalities and different approaches to theatre. Thirkield says:

> Both Marshall and I believed in the concept of the Circle very strongly. We saw the same thing. A good part of that vision came from Northwestern where we roomed together and became involved with the classics, thinking how wonderful

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[1] Hirsch, p. 76.

[2] Ibid., p. 77.

[3] Ibid.

they could be for both actor and audience alike.[1]

But while both of them had the same vision of what an acting company should be, their personal manner of dealing with day-to-day realities would act as an important element in shaping a company texture rich in diversity.

> Marshall had the 'pure' vision, and was so wonderfully able to write all these things down on paper and send them to the National Endowment to get money. He was just so above everybody--in his personality. He had these great ideas in theatre. For a while he was copying Alvina Krause who was very queenly; Marshall was very princely. Very. Which made it a bit difficult sometimes for people to talk to him. Whereas, I was sort of a humanizer. That was my contribution. I was able to talk to people and get a nice, warm relationship going. I wanted whoever came to work in our theatre to feel welcomed. I wanted them to feel relaxed and at home--enjoying themselves and not worrying. I knew they all wanted to please Marshall because he had such high ideals, and I said, "To hell with all those. Just work with what you have now. Eventually you'll get there." It was a balancing act that Marshall and I did, but the main thrust of the theatre was basically both of us. We approached it differently, that's all. He always was, and still is, a fanatic for details and artistic integrity, where I tend to say, "Relax. Do what you can. Don't work so hard for results."[2]

Thirkield felt that it was wonderful and important to have high artistic ideals, but that they had to be brought down to a pragmatic level. Somebody has to be available who is very real. Thirkield served that function fully. He sees Mason as very genuine and one of the "nicest human beings one could hope to meet," but he is aware that actors *are* sometimes inhibited by him.

> It's inevitable, I guess. Marshall has so much power. He can do so much for them. He can cast them in plays. He knows he has

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

> that power. At times I find him a bit aloof with people--not with me, but with other people.[1]

Although in one way, even Mason finds it a burden to know people are intimidated by him, in another way, he believes he has to be Captain of the ship with the kind of separation that that implies. Again, the balance was in the fact that Thirkield was not interested in that kind of position, nor could his temperament support separation. He says:

> My thing is, "No, no, relax!" People come to audition for me and I have them do their scene a couple of times, which stuns them. Nobody's ever done that. It's always, "Next!" I want to tell them they're terrific and that their work is wonderful. I think it comes from my being an actor. Actors have enough rejection as it is.[2]

Toni James, one of the Company Lab actresses, enthusiastically confirms Thirkield's unorthodox approach to auditions:

> I auditioned for him about eight years ago. I had studied with Sandy Meisner amongst others and had experience, but I was nervous. I did a scene with a friend of mine from Of Mice and Men, and it turned out to be the most incredible experience! Usually, after five minutes of 'showing your wares,' all the while dying--dying--it's over. But Rob said, "That was very nice. That was wonderful." Then he said, "Now do it again, and take your time." I thought this man must be insane. It was fabulous! After the audition, we just talked about the roles, the play, the place. We talked about what we wanted. We talked about Meisner and Tuttle and Esper, who teaches at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Rob was talking about all the techniques that I knew. I felt very confident. When I walked out of there, I didn't think about the Circle. I didn't think about getting into a show. It was the best experience I've had in the theatre.[3]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Toni James interview, New York City, November 28, 1984.

No one worked harder than Thirkield to develop the togetherness that would be at the very core of the true ensemble. His own private needs for interaction translated into an encouragement of all the self-exploration in the acting sessions that deeply resembled encounter groups. This, perhaps more than anything else, represented the true legacy from the sixties culture with its concentration on encounter groups, group therapy, marriage encounters, communes, Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, and so on--all of which, when brought into the workshops, created an atmosphere where any exploration was possible once the mutual rapport had been established. They did a great many trust exercises, most of which were reminiscent of the kinds of exercise that were going on in encounter groups. Mason says of Thirkield's workshop:

> . . . touch, feel, and explore what your body is. Putting yourself in your mind and imagining yourself going through your bloodstream. . .[1]

In the drug experience going on around them, barriers were being broken down. It was part of their pioneering spirit to break down the barriers between the actors and explore who they really were and what their true potentials were. The barriers that the drug culture broke down through chemically induced stimuli were now being broken through trust. This was an interesting translation of the contemporary trends to delve into the psyche and apply it to their work. The Circle's approach, and Thirkield's in particular, was deliberately geared to getting the actors to such a point of trust, that opening up to each other personally, and by artistic extension to their scene work, was a natural

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[1] Mason interview.

evolution.

It has always been easy to see that a character in a play is an extension of the environment of the play. It is a little more difficult to understand that the artists in a company are an extension of the environment in which they work. Therefore, creating a comfortable environment was essential to releasing creativity and allowing it to grow. This was a profound part of the "group therapy" aspects that underlay all of the workshop training. Thirkield's broad system, in combination with the essential traditional methods in Mason's workshop, created a very eclectic approach to the intense training they were all willing to endure, from Stanislavsky's system and Strasberg's Actors Studio method, to Grotowski's Poor Theatre, Blanche Evan dance therapy, Artaudian vocal exercises, Yoga derivatives, and the here and now of the Neighborhood Playhouse.

Thirkield's work in the Exploration Workshop eventually led to the first production of the Circle Theatre Company: A Practical Ritual to Exorcise Frustration After Five Days of Rain by David Starkweather, a playwright from the early Caffe' Cino days. Rob Thirkield directed, with sets by Lanford Wilson, masks by playwright Doric Wilson, and theatre stages designed by Marshall Mason. Thirkield gives a soft extended scream to the ceiling when he thinks about the first production. Then he grins broadly.

> It was actually a wonderful play for the Circle at that point . . . especially because of my workshop. In the workshop I had them all running and jumping and dancing and standing on their heads. This play had a looseness about it that fit.[1]

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[1]Thirkield interview.

Actually, it brought many of the workshop techniques into sharp, pragmatic focus through the discipline of actual production.

> It was about Noah and his sons, and they were on the ark for ages. It took place in the past, but kind of in the present as well. We had all kinds of stuff going on--a radio, rock music--all of these scenes between the sons and their wives. David had these little characters running around doing all kinds of weird things. There was a weatherman (played by Burke Pearson, who is still with the company today) who kept saying that the rain was going to continue, while he walked around with a chart of the human body. It was a very far-out play.[1]

Despite problems with Starkweather, who saw the casting differently--"We battled all the way," Thirkield recalls--it was quite successful and well received.

Thirkield's favorite story about the production, however, and one which he tells with a huge grin, had little to do with the reception or with lofty goals and concepts.

> We were about to open Starkweather's play. We had no electricity. We had a lighting board but no electricity. So we said, "How are we going to do this? We don't have any money for electricity in the budget." Sharron Maddon, who was in the play, had a friend who was an electrician. He was called in a hurry and he came right in with this huge cable which he ran out of the window and down the side of the building. I thought he plugged it into an outside wire. I didn't think too much about it. The lighting board worked and that's all that mattered. But a year later, when we could afford a better hookup, the electrician said, "Oh, you've been hooked up to Thom McAn downstairs." The big story! Thom McAn supported us for a year without knowing it.[2]

Critics from many West side newspapers came to their opening. They

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

thought the production was very exciting and that there was a new company on the upper West side that should be watched. With Thirkield's production of Starkweather's play, all indications seemed to point to what would be a very experimental new theatre group. In some respects this was almost true, for several months later, the Circle presented two versions of Chekhov's The Three Sisters, both directed by Mason, one of which was highly unorthodox. The two versions which were presented on alternate nights, came directly out of the background work that had been done for the past eight months in Mason's Method Workshop. Mason directed one version in the traditional manner, and the second version in a completely experimental style with no scenery, no props, modern dress and only two A-frame ladders. As Mason, himself, points out:

> If you were traditional, as I am, it was shocking in a way. This was the first experimental Chekhov I'd ever heard of. Shakespeare was experimented with all the time, but I'd never seen it done with Chekhov. As far as I know, we did the first one. Now, it's commonplace. But at at the time, it was a wild, experimental thing to do, and frankly, I wouldn't have undertaken it if it hadn't been for the fact that we had a wonderful traditional production on alternate nights. You want to see The Three Sisters done right? Come see our traditional production. You want to see what Chekhov sings to our times specifically in a kind of sorrowful way? Come see our experimental production.[1]

Mason recalls that at one end of the loft was a traditional proscenium stage which they had built. On that stage he presented the traditional version in which the performances were very strong, thanks to the workshops, and the costumes and scenery were very rich, thanks to the APA. The Association of Producing Artists had recently folded. The last production they had presented was The

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[1] Mason interview.

Cherry Orchard with beautiful, first-class, velour flats. The flats were stored in New Jersey. For the mere price of transportation, the Circle was able to acquire them; they were retrieved from storage, cut down, and redesigned into four beautiful sets for the traditional proscenium production. As Mason recalls:

> The traditional production really was amazing because we were doing it in June-July. We had no air conditioner and the temperatures were above 90 degrees--on a couple of occasions, close to 100 degrees in that space. Our costumes came from the American Costume Company in San Francisco. They were wonderful costume. Heavy coats and uniforms--authentically beautiful. Russian bear hats. The play went up at eight and came down at midnight. It was four hours long. The actors were up there "freezing" to death in the Russian winter. We seated a hundred people, sold out every performance and never lost a single person before the final curtain despite the heat. Nobody ever left. We only played twelve performances, but still, it gives you the idea of the power of this production.[1]

Then there was the experimental version. A program note on the experimental production explained:

> Chekhov wrote this play in 1900--twenty-one years after the assassination of a benevolent liberal Czar, Alexander II. He wrote it under the repressive right-wing rule of Nicholas II --the last Russian Czar. He wrote it only five years before the abortive Russian Revolution of 1905. We perform this play today under similar circumstances. The extent of the experiment is to explore the relevance to today's world. To us this has meant simplifying everything in the production to capture the essence of Chekhov's messages and the central void of living in today's world.[2]

Although the Circle Theatre Company was, and still is, apolitical, one of the reasons for the experimental approach to Chekhov was to try to find the parallel

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Program for the Circle Theatre's production of The Three Sisters, 6/70.

between what was happening in Russia at the time and the United States currently. It was impossible to remain totally apolitical in the face of the accumulating tragedies that had befallen the country. The times were sorrowful and dangerous. Within a two month period of time, American combat troops had entered Cambodia, a Greenwich Village townhouse on West 11th Street (a cover for a Weatherman Bomb Factory) was demolished by explosion, four students were killed by the National Guard at Kent State University, and two black students were killed while nine others were wounded by police gunfire at Jackson State College in Mississippi.

At the Circle, the feeling was strong that if ever there was a need for the arts to make a statement, this was the time. As a group, they joined a 400,000 person march to Washington, D.C. protesting the invasion of Cambodia. Their participation in the march was partly to research the play they were performing and partly a sad demonstration against the tragic side effects at home of the Vietnam war.

The experimental production of The Three Sisters reflected much of what was happening at the time. The last line of the program note read:

> The guideline for the experiment was the question: How would Chekhov make use of modern theatre techniques if he had written this play about our own revolutionary times?[1]

Opposite the proscenium, they had erected a diamond shaped thrust for the experimental production. Stretching between the proscenium and the thrust, they erected a long runway that could be put in place when the experimental

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[1]Mason interview.

version was being performed. The audience sat on either side of the runway on pillows. A few sat on the visible traditional set in the middle of "Prozov's living room" facing the thrust. Most were sitting on the floor. No one seemed to mind; it was, after all, the age of the hippie--a young blue-jeans and sweat shirt crowd. Typically, the economic level was low-income. As Thirkield says,

> These kids came in from the street--from the neighborhood. They had never seen a play in their lives. We did it very hippie--sort of Woodstock. I don't think they would have watched the traditional version but they watched the entire experimental production.[1]

As Mason describes it:

> Our Russian army in the play was made up of hippies with tie-dye uniforms. Joe Butler, who was the drummer for "The Loving Spoonful,"[2] played Vershinin. At the moment where Vershinin says, "Just imagine what it would be like, what people would think. . ." he stepped down on the runway, lit a joint, and passed it around to the kids who were sitting around on the pillows. He talked to them and it was incredible. I vividly remember the moments we used to interpret rock music--the appropriate moments. I remember using Jimi Hendrix's "The Star Spangled Banner." At the closing of the play when Masha and Vershinin are parting, they climb up the A-frame ladder for their last scene. They touch at the top of the ladder; he starts down to leave her and the ladder absolutely parts them. Meanwhile, the soldiers were singing Paul Simons' "Homeward Bound." All that was in the play. The soldiers were singing--the band was playing--the soldiers were marching off to war.[3]

The two simultaneous productions of The Three Sisters presented an almost prophetic view of the future of the neophyte Circle Theatre Company. Oddly,

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[1] Thirkield interview.

[2] A Rock and Roll band.

[3] Mason interview.

enough, it was the traditional version that was at the heart of the direction they would pursue, for although the experimental production created most of the attention with its controversial contemporary explorations, it was done not in place of, but in addition to the realistic version one usually expected of Chekhov. In this manner, the Circle graphically stated that although experimentation is essential, tradition is valuable; although avant-garde is loosening and unshackling, realism can synthesize traditional values into easily recognizeable real plays about real people with humanistic concepts, and should always be preserved. Although the play used for this demonstration was not new, the same concept would be used with original material as the seasons progressed. It was almost as though they were saying in effect, yes we rebel--yes we experiment--yes, the times are ugly--and yes, we reflect them as all theatre should reflect its contemporary realities, especially in times of severe strife. But at the same time, we will not eliminate the beauty of tradition; we do not forget the values of the past; we cannot forego the poetry of language no matter how powerful the images of visual theatre can be. There is something profound in this underlying concept, for when the dust settles, as it inevitably does, what is good about the past has been preserved at the same time that contemporary approaches have been explored. Nothing has been destroyed in the necessary search for the new. At a time when establishment values and traditions were being almost totally discarded by a young revolutionary generation, this quiet measure of concern in a loft on upper Broadway to preserve what was valuable about the past was an important contribution to theatre, if not to society.

The Circle Theatre Company presented a total of thirty public performances during its first year. Despite such a minimal output, however, by the end of the

season, the Circle was awarded a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts for the excellence of the work created in the traditional version of The Three Sisters. Simultaneously, the Circle received a grant from the Peg Santvoord Foundation for the experimental version. The Santvoord Foundation, whose sole interest is in experimental theatre, continued to award grants to the Circle for almost a decade in recognition of the persistent experimental thrusts in their work.

The sanction and approval demonstrated by this immediate recognition of their efforts not only boosted the confidence of the young company, but made increased production activity financially feasible. During the ambitious second season, 1970-71, six major productions were presented, offering a challenging range of theatrical genres: Dylan Thomas' The Doctor and The Devils, Witold Gombrowicz's Princess Ivovna, Samuel Beckett's Waiting For Godot, Ronald Mele's Paderewski and The Garbage Thieves, Eugene Ionesco's The Future Is In The Eggs, and Moliere's The Doctor in Spite of Himself.

Not only did this represent a doubling of the Major Production load of the first season, but concurrently, a workshop production program was developed in which four workshops were interspersed with the Major Productions: Lanford Wilson's one-act Sextet (Yes), an experimental version of August Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata, an adaptation of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, and Helen Duberstein's new play, Time Shadows.

By this time, Dr. Harry Lerner had slipped into the background. He and members of C.I.R.C.L.E. acted like Board members of the theatre company, offering suggestions and criticisms of the operations, none of which were taken seriously. Basically, Dr. Lerner had stepped back to enjoy the glory of the acting

company he had helped to launch as part of his world peace movement. He was happy to collect and quote reviews to his friends, demonstrating the pride he felt in the company. The theatre was the only one of the art, music, dance and theatre groups that had materialized out of Lerner's original dreams. That it was demonstrating signs of endurance was astonishing considering the odds and the realistic obstacles usually common to such ventures. Neither Lerner nor his organization had ever been able to raise money to aid the growing company. Financial support came solely from Thirkield until the grants began to enrich Thirkield's yearly support.

By the end of the season, there was a good deal of frustration within the group regarding perceptions of the future. Most of the twenty-five members were interested enough in the company and caught up in its movement to want it to develop further. The ten productions of the second season had only whetted hungry appetites. With the summer months stretching before them, Thirkield came up with an idea that would eventually develop into a summer tradition for the company. He had once had a house in Woodstock, New York, in a lovely, quiet area away from theatrical mainstreams. It was decided to take the entire company to the same area in Woodstock for a full summer of work and reacquaintance. This was very reminiscent of the Group Theatre's summer at Brookfield Center in Connecticut in 1931 where work, relaxation, lectures and rehearsals determined the philosophy of the company and integrated the members into a solid working unit.

At his own expense, Thirkield rented a huge ten bedroom mansion. A cook was hired who made steak every night. They had several "company cars" at their disposal. Mason recalls with amusement that a group of "drop-outs" from Hair

was living down the road from them in a *real* commune at the time that they were actually living quite well. Mason says rather candidly, "Fortunately, Rob Thirkield had the money."[1]

The summer was a consolidating experience for a company that was trying to sort out its feelings about the importance of its work. The surroundings were luxurious but the work was intense. They worked from early morning until late at night on improving themselves as artists. During the day they did their exercises out in the sun on the grass. At night, the group improvisations indoors sometimes continued into the early hours of the morning. As Thirkield recalls:

> We had a wonderful experience in Woodstock which I will never forget. We were rehearsing a play in the house. We finally got to the third act at three o'clock in the morning. There was a fire--people from the town to take care of--a doctor. I was playing the doctor. I got Tanya and some whiskey and went down to the basement. Then when the time came, Marshall banged on the floor and I came up and saw all these bodies lying around the living room being bandaged--terribly hurt. And then I went to Irena's room, washed my hands in the sink and started crying. I mean--we were living the role. Then I came down against all these bodies. They kept calling, "Doctor, Doctor . . " It was wonderful. An incredible experience. How to recreate that . .[2]

Although they rehearsed entire plays, they did not perform in Woodstock at this time. They reworked The Three Sisters, a constant source of inspiration. They improvised on The Ghost Sonata, its very nature making it easily adaptable to experimentation. The time spent in Woodstock helped to strengthen not only their combined working methods, but their spirits as well.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Thirkield interview.

They came back to New York with renewed energy and did their next season based on the work they had done in Woodstock. The 1971-72 season presented a new adaptation of Chekhov's The Three Sisters, an experimental version of Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata, Berilla Kerr's new play, An Elephant in The House, and Helen Duberstein's Time Shadows, this time as a major production. In addition, they played a series of workshops: Richard Steele's Denim and Rose, Boris Vian's The Empire Builders, Conchatta Ferrell's Danny 405, and a revival of Lanford Wilson's one-act, Ludlow Fair, for Wilson, suffering from a severe writer's block, had finally come uptown to the loft to "hang around."

CHAPTER SIX

THE TURNING POINT -1973

Lanford Wilson, who had enthusiastically supported the concept of a company and had often prodded a reluctant Marshall Mason toward such a goal, was not involved in the actual setting-up of the new company. At the time that the Circle Theatre was forming, Wilson, now 32 years old, had three major full-length plays in production: The Gingham Dog, Lemon Sky, and Serenading Louie. It was both a very productive period for Wilson in terms of exposure and a devastating one in terms of "success."

The Gingham Dog, a play about the marital break-up of a black social worker and a white lawyer, had its premiere performance at the Washington, D.C. Theatre Club in 1968. Coming out of Wilson's work at the Actors Studio where he was keenly aware of the polarizations between the whites and the blacks, the play originally showcased under Mason's direction at the New Dramatists in New York. The excitement of having it picked up for his first Broadway experience starring George Grizzard and Diana Sands--both of whom were commended for the sensitivity of their portrayals--was quickly dispelled when it closed after only five performances at the John Golden Theatre following unfavorable notices in March of 1969.

Lemon Sky, Wilson's autobiographical account of the reunion with his father, had opened at the Studio Arena Theatre in Buffalo before it was brought to the Off-Broadway Stage Arena a year later in March of 1970. Although Clive Barnes, then with The New York Times, had reviewed the New York production favorably, it, too, closed quickly:

> On many levels, Lemon Sky is a play very well worth seeing. It has the immediacy of the way we live and something of the smooth-spoken hysteria.[1]

It is even more painful to "flop" when the notices are favorable and always difficult to attempt to discern the reasons for the failure. Wilson recalls,

> We opened in a new theatre way over beween 9th and 10th Avenues and no one knew where it was. It was revieved as a 'generation gap' play and that was the last possible day you could have said 'generation gap' and gotten away with it; the term was so overused. No one wanted to see another God damned generation gap play. That had been a catch word for the last three years. It was very well received but it wasn't advertised strongly and nobody came. It closed after seven performances.[2]

Once again, sensitive performances--Christopher Walken as the son and Charles Durning as the father--could not save the play. Its failure had been particularly painful since it had been a difficult play to write. The gestation period had been a full ten years before it finally became possible to sort out the unhappy early experiences with his father. The autobiographical nature of Lemon Sky made criticism more difficult to bear than usual. Even when the play had been done earlier at the Studio in Buffalo, it had elicited an outraged letter from a woman who had seen it and was appalled at the "smut" being screamed from the stage. This was Wilson's life the lady was speaking of, but all she heard was "smut." It is easy enough to pretend this kind of attack can be dismissed. The artist may defend himself as Wilson did in "Damnit [sic] Lady,"[3] a magazine article, but at the same time, the true artist hears every word. Something had

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[1]Clive Barnes, The New York Times, May 18, 1970.

[2]Wilson interview.

[3]Lanford Wilson, "Damnit Lady," Performing Arts, The Music & Art Magazine, August, 1973/Vol. 7, No.8.

moved the "Damnit Lady" enough to sit down and write a letter. Wilson himself interpreted her complaint as a longing for a theatre that "reflected the aspirations of our pioneer fathers and how we have embodied and made manifest those high dreams."[1] But whatever it was, her open letter was not a positive affirmation of a play that was particularly close to the author. The letter stung enough to elicit Wilson's defensive response in Performing Arts Magazine, the gist of which was, "Dammit Lady, that's all I ever try to do."[2] Wilson could find nothing positive to glean out of the failure of Lemon Sky. There seemed to be little, if any, support from the producers; the stigma of losing money in commercial theatre is too great. What Wilson did not fully realize at the time was that working in commercial theatre was a very different experience from working in places like the Caffe' Cino or La Mama where money was never a major factor outside of operating necessities. Also, even in the best of circumstances, the sense of non-participation that occurs when a playwright hands his material over to a producer, was a new experience. The vacuum created by non-participation was painfully sudden to Wilson who had been in the habit of constant and complete communication with his directors and casts.

Nor was the experience any better with Serenading Louie. It opened two months after Lemon Sky at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. in May of 1970. Once again Wilson was shut out of the kind of participation theatre that so nourished him. Serenading Louie is a chilling four-character play about the simultaneous collapse of two marriages and the ultimate murder in one. Wilson

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[1] Wilson interview.

[2] Ibid.

watched rehearsals from the back of the theatre with little rehearsal input. Serenading Louie successfully straddled the fence between realism and theatricalism--something Wilson was experimenting with--and was an artistic achievement in this sense; but it did not approach the commercial success it would achieve in its 1983 revival in New York. For Wilson, at this time, it represented another failure--three in quick succession. There was an obvious stabilization of what was developing into a recognizable Wilson style of writing. However, four years of hard work had come to an ignominious end, despite the positive reinforcement of some of the critiques. Both Gingham Dog and Lemon Sky displayed much of the simultaneous action and dialogue that has come to characterize a good deal of his work. Tensions almost mounting to the point of hysteria are created in both plays with this collage technique, moving back and forth between past and present and, as Mel Gussow points out about Lemon Sky

> . . . counterpointing conversations, directly addressing the audience in the middle of scenes so that the play became a mood-filled overlapping sea of impressions.[1]

The pain Wilson had to endure as a result of these three failures was all the more keen since he had been consciously attempting new directions. Not since Balm in Gilead had he concentrated on the full-length format. Never before had he made such a serious attempt to delve deeper into his characters. Never before had he deliberately tried for such important plot thrusts in his work. It is obvious that he has always tried to understand his characters--to know their

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[1]Mel Gussow, "Lanford Wilson on Broadway," Horizon, The Magazine of the Arts, May, 1980-, p. 34

defects and their weaknesses as well as their goals in his previous plays. Most of his plays deal with characters deeply embedded in the atmosphere of their environment. Now he wanted them to be intensely delineated within the atmosphere of the lyrical mosaics he created so effortlessly. He wanted, as he would point out himself, "well rounded, interesting people who *want* something and are trying to get it."[1] By the time he started writing The Gingham Dog, he felt that his work was becoming too facile and that he was not developing his characters as thoroughly as he might. By having too many characters, (Gilead had started out with fifty-five,) the possibility of deep investigation was limited. Therefore, in The Gingham Dog he deliberately dealt with fewer characters. The moment he did this, the sets became more realistic and the play became more literal. Wilson felt that even Lemon Sky was,

> . . . sort of a throwback. I already had the plot and the story. I just hadn't been able to write it. I was very reluctant to go back to that kind of style because I felt it wouldn't develop. So it straddles the fence--half realistic, half theatricalized.[2]

This style was artistically more exciting, though not exactly what he was striving for. In recognition of this, he deliberately strove for another fence-straddler in Serenading Louie; there are long scenes that take place in a realistic set. And yet, even in realistically investigating the four characters in marital discord, there is a continued musicality to the movement of the dialogue that is often directed at the audience, taking it a heavy notch out of the realm of total realism with the sudden disappearance of the 4th wall.

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[1] Wilson interview.

[2] Ibid.

These are the intense efforts of an artist in growth, some successful, some not. But throughout, the one common element is the beauty of the language. It is developed from the inner rhythms of the characters and is generally in juxtaposition to another character's inner rhythm, creating a different melody from that of the first character. This lyricalization of the dialogue creates the effect of a heightened form of realism--more in terms of a poetic aura that is difficult to pinpoint, than in terms of specific lines that can pragmatically be assessed out of context.

Since all three plays in discussion were produced in immediate succession, Wilson found himself in one rehearsal period after another with little time to recoup losses or reflect the reasons why. His intense efforts to grow were met first with the heady success of production--including one on Broadway--followed immediately by commercial box-office failure and, paradoxically, the kind of critical acclaim that is laced with enormous expectations.

> There were all the reviews for Lemon Sky saying all of these incredible things. Saying all "this gift," all this everything. And it was absolutely clear that the next thing I had to do was write the great American play. It was a setup. 'Watch this person!' I could just put a piece of paper in the typewriter and write, 'The Great American Play' by Lanford Wilson. As soon as it was set up like that, I couldn't write a word. I had not an idea in my head after Lemon Sky in 1970. It came from the "Oh my God, we can't wait for his *next* play'" kind of thing. What a kiss of death![1]

And it was; in his own retrospective assessment, he could not get away from it. This was when he began to seriously flounder. Not since the early days in Chicago, when he did not know what to do with his life, had he floundered so

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[1] Ibid.

badly. The writing block was total; he felt crushed.

It was at this time that he began "hanging around" the new theatre company his friends had started uptown. At first he offered only encouragement. Then he began participating in the workshops like everyone else. He sat in on rehearsals, helped with the box office, scrubbed down floors and walls, and spent a great deal of time answering the phone. Then, taking advantage of the six years he had worked in an artistic capacity in Chicago, he designed posters, helped paint and even design sets. All of this busy-work was in keeping with the early spirit of the group in which everyone chipped in and did whatever had to be done, partly because "doing everything" was a legacy left over from the participation theatre of the Cino days, partly because everyone was young and enthusiastic and wanted total involvement, and partly because they could not afford to hire outsiders.

After several months, Mason decided to produce two one-act plays by Wilson that he had never directed before: The Great Nebula in Orion and Ikke, Ikke, Nye, Nye, Nye. They were to constitute the 5th major production of the Circle Theatre's third season. The Great Nebula in Orion is a melancholy reunion of two Bryn Mawr college friends, one of whom is a lesbian who has just been jilted. Ikke,Ikke, Nye, Nye, Nye , about a secret telephone breather, is in Wilson's own estimation, a "silly little farce--but great fun." The bill featuring the two short plays had a bittersweet tinge to it, but together they did not constitute a full evening. Wilson recalls,

> Marshall decided to do those two because he had the right actors for them, but he also had this company. The others won't have anything to do, I thought, so I wrote an acting exercise for them, The Family Continues, to fill out the

evening.[1]

It was so similar to an acting improvisation that Wilson did not even realize it was the beginning of the crack in his two-year writing block.

> In writing The Family Continues, I did the same thing I'd done for Wandering, so I didn't have to worry about format at all. I just wrote this round and it was more like a problem of how to get all these lines to answer each other correctly because it's almost like a group sing-along. It's just ridiculous. It goes back into itself again. So it's just a problem. And it's very, very short. And I wrote it straight out like a puzzle and I gave it to Marshall, and he said, "Oh what fun!" I didn't even know I'd written a play.[2]

Mason sensed that Wilson's writing constrictions were coming to an end even before Wilson did. Participating once again in the familiar group ambiance was the stimulating factor. Mason immediately announced to the company that the Circle Theatre was going to produce a new full-length Lanford Wilson play the following season. With a production date in sight, it suddenly seemed possible for Wilson to write plays again.

He started work on The Negro Plot, a play which had been in the back of his mind for a long time. It was based on a true incident that took place in 1740 in which 150 negro slaves in New York were killed—mostly burned at the stake--following suspicions of rebellion and potential uprising. It was a "black theme" that Wilson felt was pertinent to contemporary America. Before long, however, he began distrusting his own motives for writing it--feeling that he was attempting it because it was very popular to write a black play at this particular time; he abandoned the project.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

Now, ironically, Wilson was anxious and ready to write again but had no actual project in mind. Once again, following a pattern that seemed to be repeating itself, Mason was present and influential at an important moment in Wilson's life. As Wilson recalls,

> So on that famous night that Marshall and I were painting the risers and getting high--we were using shellac and getting so high on the fumes. We had to go out of the theatre every five minutes into the office or faint. I was never on drugs, but that night I did sniff glue or shellac. In between the fumes, I was telling Marshall that I was a train freak--not one of those who knows the name and time schedule of every train and what the conductor's name is. There are people who really know all that.[1]

The play was beginning to form. One of the people would be the seventeen year old call girl, a resident of what had once been an elegant hotel. The girl was already in Wilson's mind--not as a realized character yet, but more as an inner part of himself that he was sharing that night.

> I am a train freak because I'm afraid of flying. I like going from city to city on a train, seeing all of these old buildings because I'm an architect freak also, especially of antique homes and buildings. And you'd see some of the best buildings in a city abandoned--beautiful old train stations. They would stand abandoned while newly erected little ones stood in front, which were awful. I walked through any number of empty old stations. One could get in and wander through them--or maybe basements were still used and the entire upstairs was abandoned.[2]

While Marshall and Lanford continued to paint the risers, an old song came on the radio, "The City of New Orleans," coincidentally a song about riding on a train.

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[1] Wilson interview.

[2] Ibid.

> And I said, "Oh my God," I've been thinking of doing a play--a long aching lament for the lost railroads." And Marshall said, "Write that then if you're not getting anywhere with the other one." I said, "The play would take place in a hotel near a train station, and there would be this train freak and this engineer." And Marshall said, "Write it. Start it." So I said, "Okay. I'll work on that." And I started working on it. I was using the hotel I used to live in, the Balm in Gilead hotel.[1]

Wilson wanted the new play to follow along the pattern of Gilead. He wanted to write a similar play but with all the sado-macochism he had left out of Gilead.

> I was going to write a real hard hitting play about that, which I did not understand at all, but thought I did. I had this guy kicking the coke machine and trying to get something out of it...And this railroad engineer comes in. He had been out flagging the train all night but he was really retired and wasn't supposed to be there anyway. He just does it to stay in practice. . . . And he's frozen and they give him coffee...And then they go off and someone else came down...and it went on like that. Then "Milly" comes on and it goes on for a while. Then 'April,' the big fat whore comes in. And I said, good, that'll be fun. She comes on saying, "Come on, what the f--- is this?" And I knew the whore, and I said, I know this play. I'd been floundering around but as soon as 'April' came in I knew! It's a whore's hotel. I was going to write this fifteen years ago when I was in Chicago, about the hotel that was shared half by whores and half by elderly people. And I said, "Got it!" Then 'Mr. Morse' comes automatically and 'Milly' has a reason to be there. But I didn't really know what the play was about until 'April' said, "What the f--- is going on now? Last night the boiler broke. The night before that..." You know! Got it! Got it! And then it just started to fly through.[2]

While Wilson was working on the play he went out to Sag Harbor, an old town on Long Island, in which he had bought an aging house that had been previously owned by a whaling captain. The house had four apartments, several of which were occupied with tenants. He moved into one of the apartments and

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

did not have the heart to ask the tenants he had inherited to move out. He wanted them all to move because he could not bring himself to collect the rent. He hated being paid with a passion. It seemed to him that he had not done a thing to earn the money.

> It was the most awful, grubby feeling I've had in my life. And the first time the guy asked me to write a receipt for the rent, I almost said that they could live rent free. I couldn't deal with it.[1]

Despite the fact that money was scarce, the Protestant ethic was stronger than the need to supplement a playwright's thin income. It was a feeling strongly rooted in the ethos of profit-is-sin unless something physical is done for it. Wilson was being paid solely because of ownership not because he had earned the money by "digging" or "sweating" and he "hated it!"

> I'm a late riser. There is a crazy guy--one of the three bums who had the upstairs back apartment. I had seen him and then he vanished. He was probably thirty but he looked very old. One of the guys was about sixty-five, and the other was the hugest, fattest guy in the world; he was about fifty. His name was Ace and they all lived in the upstairs back apartment. One morning, I'm awakened by this little white-haired woman who is a vacuum cleaner salesman in Sag Harbor--door to door. She's Ace's mother. I'm awakened by this 'knock, knock, knock,' and then she's sitting at the foot of my bed. I don't wake easily. I tried to focus on her. And she's saying, "Mr. Wilson, you're not going to kick Ace out are you? I've got a thing from a psychiatrist that says he's practically normal. And you're not going to kick him out are you?"And she went on and on and I just wrote it straight down the next day. Ace's name became 'Horse' and she became Mrs. Bellotti. I was taking anything and everything that happened.....So much of my life.[2]

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[1] Wilson interview.

[2] Ibid.

It took Wilson only three months to write The Hot L Baltimore. As in Balm in Gilead, the dramatized incidents comprise a fabric of atmosphere rather than plot. The dramatic action is presented as a series of thematic motifs returning in variations which create a certain musicality within the structure reminiscent of a sonata. The play takes place on Memorial Day in the lobby of the once fashionable Hotel Baltimore. There is very little, if any, reduction in time. It is a sad hotel that has seen prouder days--days before the "e" in the "Hotel" sign had disappeared into the abyss of neglect--days before the caliber of the tenants, once elite, was reduced to prostitutes, drifters and the impoverished elderly, all of whom were destined to fall into the same pockets of disregard as the hotel itself. Hanging over the building is the prospect of demolition similar to the fate suffered by the Pioneer Hotel up the street that is currently under the ball of the wrecking crews. Nineteenth century "palaces" such as these were fated to disappear into the world of nostalgic memories similar to the trains whose whistles were still occasionally heard in the distance but had basically succumbed first to the diesel age and ultimately to the air age. It is this--the end of an era--that is the major theme of the play. A bitter-sweet nostalgia permeates throughout, but at the same time that Wilson mourns that which is forever lost, he celebrates it.

There is very little plot in The Hot L Baltimore and what little there is is drawn very loosely. In this sense, it is quite Chekovian. It is the idiosyncracies of the tenants of the hotel--the dreams, the foolishness, the hopefulness--the very character of the inhabitants that is the story. Chekhov also dealt more in character and mood than in plot; he often dealt with people whose lifestyles were on th e threshhold of fading into the past. Wilson simarily deals with the

dispossessed and the dreamers who live in a world that is quickly vanishing and who should have little reason to hope. However, where Chekhov dealt mostly with Russian gentry in a fading agrarian setting who had lived off the land and could not cope with the changing times that were making them a class of the dispossessed, Wilson deals with the more common elements of society in a fading urban setting--prostitutes who live off themselves, and the drifters and the elderly who have even fewer resources. However, there are strong parallels in the evocation of mood as well as in theme.

Wilson's characters are very personally drawn--people that made up his own world not only when he lived in shabby hotels in the mid-west, but also when he first came to New York and was forced to live in even seedier hotels on the upper West side. There were the elderly pensioners---from "Milly," who claims she can sense the presence of ghosts and never had an interest in being part of the real world, to senile old "Mr. Morse," who sings at the top of his voice on his "doctor's orders," (a notion that is dotty, charming and at the same time laced with a certain profundity.) Then there are the prostitutes. There is a seventeen year old "Girl", who can identify distant trains by their whistles and bemoans their oncoming obsolescence in an air age. She has a great desire to make everyone happy and to meet Milly's "ghosts."

> GIRL: I want to see them and talk to them---something like that! Some miracle! Something huge! I want some major miracle in my lifetime." [1]

Then there is "April," who is a brassy and down-to-earth prostitute who

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[1] From The Hot 1 Baltimore.

has seen better days. And there is "Suzy "who looks like a Jewish Marilyn Monroe and always seems to have her head in the air. It is she who inadvertently states the theme of displacement when she wonders what will occupy the "space" that is currently filled by her room once the hotel is torn down.

What story line there is comes through "Paul Granger III" who has come to look for his grandfather, a former tenant of the hotel, and the tough-talking "Jackie." She is deluded enough by her great need to have something that belongs to her and her mildly retarded brother, "Jamie," that she buys a "farm" through a radio ad. She's "got dreams" of their own place to grow garlic organically so that it can be used as a natural pesticide.

By the end of the first act, Katz, the hotel manager, tells all the tenants they will have to leave because in one month the hotel's demolition will begin. This announcement sets the stage for the act's closing scene as the frightened occupants act out their dilemma. The Girl and Bill, who works the front desk, pick this moment to argue over his genuine disappointment upon discovering that she is a prostitute; Jackie and Mr. Morse fight about which of them really has the "big plans" for the blurry future they are now forced to face; April declares to Katz that she will remain until the very last possible moment; Suzy enters wearing nothing but a towel, screaming that her john has beaten her up, and while April taunts her, and Paul wakes up crying that this is not a hotel but a "flop house," Katz tries desperately to get the half naked Suzy upstairs.

It is here that Wilson uses his technique of overlapping dialogue like lines of musical counterpoint weaving in and out of one another. All of the characters are basically reiterating already stated positions. Now they swell

together like a harmonic chorus toward the act's climax. This technique is reminiscent of the second act of Chekhov's, The Three Sisters as each character speaks of the subject that is most on his mind. Although their monologues do not overlap, neither Vershinin, Masha, Tusenbach nor Irina hears what the other is saying. In this sense a verbal counterpoint is created that has a similar kind of musicality in its parallelism.

Wilson has presented the same theme throughout the first act in variations--things that die, vanish, become lost to time, or decay: the Pioneer Hotel up the street swallowed up by progress, ghosts from the hotel presented as documentation of those who have come, gone, and left only a spirit of themselves. Like a recurring musical motif, the trains represent a variation on the theme of what is gratuitously passing into obscurity. Now the once elegant Hotel Baltimore is joining the list of things that are fading into the past---and perhaps even more important, so too are the current inhabitants.

Paul's grandfather, a retired railroad engineer, is one of the first to be sacrificed to the discarded side of the human ledger. When he retired, Paul's parents had not wanted him; they had no room for him. He is the first person in the play to have literally disappeared and faded into the past. Jamie will be the second. He has been abandoned by his sister, Jackie, whose dreams have also been in line for the wrecker. Finding out that the location of her "farm" is nothing but a salt-desert wasteland that will grow nothing, she walks out, shedding her responsibility for Jamie, and he becomes another of the discarded people of the world--another of the dispossessed.

By the third act, the tenants are packing up their belongings and leaving one by one. There is little to indicate that they will be moving on to a better

life--rather the reverse, but there is no bemoaning of their fate. They look to the future as though it holds bright promises for them. Their human vitality cannot be suppressed. Suzy goes on to a "new life" with a pimp, blindly clutching great expectations of happiness. Milly "senses" that Paul's grandfather is still alive. The Girl refuses to give up the search for him ("It's really chicken not to believe in anything.") even though Paul has lost interest. Jamie, now a drifter on his own, is learning to dance with April, who insists that it doesn't matter how well he dances as long as he "moves." . Not only do they refuse to give up, they refuse to give up hope. These are the future ghosts of the Hotel Baltimore whose spirits will have a permanent place after the demolition dust has settled. By rights, these characters should be filled with terror. Had they been written by Chekhov, they might have been charged with a sense of futility. Had they been written by Tennessee Williams, they might have been overcome with a sense of doom. As written by Wilson, they simply refuse to lose.

With Hot l's structural resemblance to The Time of Your Life, and Wilson's particular sensitivity to Americana and idiosyncratic characters, he is often compared to William Saroyan. With his special tenderness for lost causes and unwanted people--the quietly alienated, the psychically wounded--he is reminiscent of Tennesee William's deeper tradition of America's fugitives. With his skill for orchestrating multiple scenes and evoking intense nostalgia for a way of life that is fading into the past, one can not help thinking of his European counterpart, Anton Chekhov. Generally, Wilson is most often compared to Williams and Chekhov, and although we would need the bulk of his work to justify the comparisons, we can see the beginnings with The Hot L Baltimore. Indeed with his own lyricism, as demonstrated here, he would appear

to be spiritual heir to the poeticised realism that sparked such individuality in Chekhov and Williams. However, despite major differences, there are many thematic and stylistic similarities as well.

Chekhov, who wrote with nineteenth century sensibilities, mostly depicted the life of the landed Russian gentry who were being dispossessed by virtue of the fact that they could not adjust to changing times and new lifestyles. Steeped in memories of lost grandeur, to them the future could only seem bleak and frightening. Despite his lyricism, Chekhov's plays unveil a profound, though understated, psychological feeling that the inevitable destiny of man is a tragic one. In Ivanov we have the idle and ineffectual life of a landowner who is ruined by changing times and debt. In The Sea Gull we have the underlying theme of loneliness and isolation as each character fails to achieve his private dream, and each feels his loneliness differently. In Uncle Vanya we see a very subtle form of dispossession as each character loses his hopes and dreams. The tragedy of the individual, as personified in the hopeless quality of the unrequited love all the characters feel for one another, is a palpable one. In The Three Sisters the great underlying current is, once again, one of dispossession, this time a concrete one. We see people who live in a sterile, empty, changing world, who continuously talk but never listen to each other, who in the absorption of their own thoughts, manage not to hear anyone else. And finally in The Cherry Orchard, an entire generation is being turned out, dispossessed by a changing world that no longer has any room for them. We witness the passing of a graceful era and the inappropriate responses of the preoccupied characters as they helplessly witness the disintegration of their world. They talk and talk but they never do anything. The dramatic action is established at once -

to wait, perhaps even more pointedly, to avoid any action at all. As the passing gentry, doomed to the inevitablity of an oncoming revolution, clutch a heavily mortgaged estate, we see that theirs is a world of illusion. All of these plays convey Chekhov's deep sense of the tragic destiny of man.

It is easy to see why Wilson is often compared to Chekhov. Not only is Wilson similar to Chekhov in his general plotlessness, but also in terms of content and the themes he chooses to dramatize. Wilson, too, speaks of the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the lost, even though his characters have been imbued with a different breath of life. Chekhov's characters basically do nothing while Wilson's characters are always doing something. They, too, talk and talk, and even spur each other on. They just do not seem to get anywhere, e.g., buying a "farm" to grow garlic in a salt desert that will yield nothing. Where Chekhov's characters demonstrate childlike responses to their situation, either bursting into tears or bursting into laughter while their world disintegrates about them, Wilson's characters are as busy as ever, unrealistically planning their futures while their own world disintegrates around them. In Chekhov's world, the characters' illusions that somehow something will happen only add additional futility to an already stagnant environment. This is not so in Hot L. The inhabitants of the hotel are survivors. They do not even sense their stagnation.

Another interesting comparison can be made between Wilson and Tennessee Williams, the poet of lost causes. His preoccupations have always been with society's fugitives--those who are psychologically maimed, (Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire) or physically deformed, (Laura in The Glass Menagerie.) to the point that their view of the world is often filled with terror. Williams

spoke with a sense of the mores of the forties and fifties, often attacking the underlying hypocrisy he perceived, though in disguised form. Homosexual themes such as the subtle undercurrent of Cat on A Hot Tin Roof were never stated openly. Williams' own homosexuality was kept a secret for a long time. Wilson, on the other hand, had no such restrictions placed upon either his personal life, nor the lives of the characters he created. Wilson's characters have the no-holds-barred, open-door freedom that came directly out of the sixties' culture. Despite the underlying lyricism, many of his most memorable characters, though treated with great warmth and understanding, are contemporary, sometimes foul-mouthed, and could even be considered the dregs of society---pimps, prostitutes, junkies and pushers.

In Williams, usually one character stands aside from the rest. By virtue of being different he can see the world with a clarity (and usually a horror) reserved only to him. This character never quite belongs wherever he is, e.g., Blanche, in A Streetcar Named Desire, Laura, in The Glass Menagerie, Alma, in Summer and Smoke, Val, in Orpheus Descending. They seem to come from another time--another plane of feeling, with the souls, if not the occupations, of artists. Wilson, on the other hand, has no characters who stand aside from the rest. They are almost indistinguishable from one another. Except for individual idiosyncracies, no one character truly stands apart. They are all threads of the same fabric. It is *together* that they comprise a communal difference from the rest of the world. It is in this respect that they stand apart and see the world with their own vision, as a group rather than as individuals. Unlike the horror behind the perceptions of William's characters, their vision may be warped by a bizarre hopefulness, but it has its own clarity. It is a clarity which invests them

with a deep-seated ability to survive despite the most awesome obstacles.

Each of them-- Chekhov, Williams and Wilson--was bent on depicting what he perceived as the true human experience. The most striking similarity is the lyricism overriding the realism, and the ability to create the entire fabric of a particular moment in time with such an exquisitely painful sense of truth. They all present masterful pictures of nostalgic moods, although Wilson's pictures--perhaps because of the contemporary quality--are a little less delicate than those of his forebears.

Not only would The Hot L Baltimore break Wilson's writing block, but it would prove to be the critical turning point in the fortunes of the tiny Circle Theatre as well. The transition for the company from the anonymity of relative obscurity to the spotlight of public attention came in 1973, almost four years after the company had begun its operations. The Hot L Baltimore was critically and publically received so well that after its brief initial run at the loft, producers Kermit Bloomgarden and Roger Ailes, transferred the play to the downtown, Off-Broadway Circle-in-the-Square on Bleeker Street, on March 22, 1973.

Rob Thirkield sums up how the extent of Hot L's success took them all by surprise:

> Lanford, who hadn't been able to write anything except these one-act plays for two years, just sat down and--shoom!--wrote Hot L Baltimore for the company. So we did it and it was very strange; we just weren't sure. Lanford's agent came in and *he* wasn't sure. Then some critics came and said, "You're going to move this to Broadway, aren't you?" And we said, "Sure, I guess so." So we took it to the Circle-in-the-Square with the

> original cast. It took the entire cast to move the play downtown.[1]

Once again, it was directed by Mason, with sets by Ronald Radice, costumes by Dina Costa and sound by Chuck London.

The play had been written for company members. This was not the first time Wilson had written roles with particular actors in mind. (He had written the role of "Scully" in Rimers of Eldritch for Rob Thirkield.) However, this production would establish him as a playwright-in-residence at the Circle in actuality as well as on paper. From the beginning his name had been in the Circle's programs as one of their playwrights although he had not written anything for the company until now. From this point on, however, writing for specific members of the company became an established part of Wilson's creative thinking.

The original cast was as follows:

Bill Lewis	Judd Hirsch
Girl	Trish Hawkins
Milly	Helen Stenborg
Mrs. Bellotti	Henrietta Bagley
April Green	Conchatta Ferrell
Mr. Morse	Rob Thirkield
Jackie	Mari Gorman
Jamie	Zane Lasky
Mr. Katz	Antony Tenuta
Suzy	Stephanie Gordon
Suzy's John	Burke Pearson
Paul Granger III	Jonathan Hogan
Mrs. Oxenham	Louise Clay
Cab Driver	Peter Tripp
Delivery Boy	Marcial Gonzales

Only Tanya Berezin of the original founding four did not participate directly in

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[1]Thirkield interview.

this production; as Mrs. Rob Thirkield, she was on maternity leave.

For Wilson, after three successive commercial failures and a devastating slump, the success of The Hot L Baltimore had, in his own words, "saved his life." He would be eternally grateful to the Circle Theatre and company, but most especially to its artistic director, Marshall Mason, whose encouragement was so instrumental in causing the breakthrough. Not only was it possible to write again, but the reception to the play served to soothe a slightly damaged ego. Wilson was working within his element again.

Marshall Mason recalls the production with genuine pride:

> The Hot L Baltimore was a big event.It could still be argued that it became the longest running American play in the history of Off-Broadway at the time. Vanities, which actually played longer, had an interruption in its run and normally, when there's an interruption in a run, it is not considered to be the same run when it comes back. But for some reason, with Vanities it was still counted as one run. But Hot L was the longest *consistent* run. About 1200 performances. It was a big event and Clive Barnes wrote a review of Hot L in The New York Times claiming that it was the herald of a new era.[1]

Clive Barnes' reference was to the fact that the play originated Off-Off-Broadway which was quite unusual, not only for a play of its genre to have originated Off-Off-Broadway, but to have successfully upgraded to Off-Broadway. After it transferred to the Circle-in-the-Square for its extended run, Barnes wrote:

> One interesting economic point. This play was first produced Off-Off-Broadway where it had considerable success with both critics and audience. Now it is moving to Off Broadway as a tried and proved product. It has a cast of fifteen people. I do not for one moment believe that even with Mr. Wilson's

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[1] Mason Interview.

> considerable reputation behind it the play could have been staged in New York without this kind of Off-Off-Broadway try-out first. Here could be a herald of new patterns.[1]

Mason, never one to hide his feelings where theatre is concerned, says that although the Off-Off-Broadway "try-out" for the play was true,

> . . . I was offended by Barnes' attitude toward it because he was seeing it as an historical thing--an economic phenomenon. I was saying the hell with economics! Look at the work. Harold Clurman was pointing out that this was a real theatre company with a real ensemble. I was looking for people to look at the Circle artistically.[2]

Marshall had no need to be impatient. The reviews were generally excellent and even though the Circle was never conceived as a production house, it was historically interesting that it was being perceived as an in-town tryout for Off-Broadway as well as for Broadway in place of the more common out-of-town tryout. In retrospect, it can be seen that the in-town tryout of new plays was unusual enough to warrant comment by critics like Barnes, and with a successful precedent set, would become a common occurrence by the 1980s.

However, for Mason, the company of actors working together as an ensemble was the reigning consideration. He was not interested in setting new economic production patterns, but in achieving continuing artistic growth for the entire company of artists. But like it or not, they were in the vanguard of the Off-Off-Broadway movement that was being perceived as a growing force in New York, much as the Off-Broadway movement had grown to critical prominence in the early fifties. Until the establishment of the Circle Theatre, and several

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[1] Clive Barnes, The New York Times, 3/23/73.

[2] Mason, ibid.

years later. Playwrights Horizons, the only Off-Off-Broadway had traditionally been the Cino--now gone--La Mama and the Judson Poets Theatre. The Circle was the first major Off-Off-Broadway theatre that was attracting prominent critics by providing, as we shall see, a series of new American plays for Off-Broadway after their premieres at the loft. This was an important contribution.

The reviews for The Hot L Baltimore were almost unanimously good. Michael Smith and John Lahr of The Village Voice, Mel Gussow, Walter Kerr, Guy Flatley and Clive Barnes all of The New York Times, Jeff Street and Alan Wallach of Newsday, and Martin Gottfried of Women's Wear Daily, were unanimous in their positive reviews, not only of the play but of Mason's direction and the ensemble playing of the company as well. No longer was the Circle being reviewed only by the little neighborhood newspapers as had been the case when they first opened their doors to the public with David Starkweather's play in 1969. Now all the major reviewers were making the trek uptown to see what was going on in the little loft space that held no more than 100 seats.

The reviews covered all aspects of the play. For example, Clive Barnes, comparing Wilson to Saroyan, concentrated much of his review on what to him was so important--the ensemble playing which was "quite lovely."[1] This was only the first of many references to the Circle's ensemble playing as the company grew. Guy Flatley spoke of Wilson's "losers who refuse to lose,"[2] a

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[1]Barnes, Ibid.

[2]Guy Flatley, "Lanford Is One "L" Of a Playwright," The New York Times, 4/22/73.

phrase of Wilson's which Flatley felt captured the overall nostalgia of the play. Michael Smith spoke of the reappearance of the craft of playwriting which he believed had sadly gone out of practice until the moment he saw it reinstated in Wilson's play, and summed up his review with an appreciation of Wilson's:

> . . . taste for sweetness of what is lost in another time not wanting to have it but loving to mourn it because its lostness gives pretext and form to melancholy, make it a pleasure . . . He has a special tenderness for lost causes and lost people, but no false hope. The play isn't in fact a slice of life but of American pie.[1]

There are many references to the musicality of the play. Smith called it, "pure theatrical music."[2] Walter Kerr wrote that the "sharply defined speech patterns functioned like musical counterpart."[3]

Of course there were a few dissenters. John Simon led the minority with a negative verdict for New York Magaine. William Glover of The Evening Times called it "the arena of nonevents."[4] William A. Raidy of The Island Press complained of a "lack of any real structure."[5]

However, most of the reviews were like Martin Gottfried's in which he states, "Wilson's writing is simply superb, a triumph of inspiration and

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[1]Michael Smith, "Theatre Journal, "The Village Voice, 2/8/73.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Walter Kerr, "The Crazies Are Good To Listen To," The New York Times, 3/4/73.

[4]William Glover, "The Hot L Baltimore," The Evening Times, 2/8/73.

[5]William A Raidy, The Long Island Press, 2/5/73.

craftsmanship."[1] The important issue is that The Hot L Baltimore created landmark changes in the phenomenon that was Off-Off-Broadway. This could easily be seen in the discernible upgrading of the Circle's own status. After the success of Hot L, all new productions the Circle were taken with a new seriousness and were awaited with great expectations. Anticipations had been raised regarding all future works, not only of Wilson's plays, but of the Circle's future role in theatre as well. It was a role that the critics would insistently guide more and more in the direction of play development. At this time, however, the most important aspect is that after four years, they were finally being taken seriously as artists by the most influential critics in New York with the concommitant assurances that their work would be viewed very attentively from now on--something that they welcomed with confidence. It is doubtful that the Circle could have withstood this kind of intense scrutiny and attention to its every activity if it had not already had a solid base of work as a unified company that stretched back to 1965.

Two other important developments can be traced back to Hot L:

For the first time there was an awareness of the way of life the Circle tried to create for its artists and the effect such an environment could have on play development. The principle had been stated clearly four years earlier by

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[1]Martin Gottfried, Women's Wear Daily, 2/5/73.

Mason--playwrights-in-residence writing directly for the company in a community-style environment with all of the protection and nurturing implicit in such an arrangment. It was Emory Lewis of The Long Island Record who recognized the value of such an arrangement and wrote that Wilson was once again writing in the element that was most conducive to inspiring his particular talents:

> Lanford Wilson is now playwright-in-residence at the Circle Theatre and that is good news indeed. He writes plays that have real resonance and dimension. Here he can work with a large and experienced cast without the hit-flop pressures of Broadway.[1]

The second development was the enthusiasm with which the critics recognized and responded to what in essence was a reintroduction of realism in American theatre. It was Alan Wallach of Newsday who singled the Circle out as one of the few, if not the only Off-Off-Broadway theatre, working in a realistic genre; he also singled Wilson out as a contemporary playwright who was willing to explore realism again:

> One of the qualitities that distinguishes Lanford Wilson from the other young playwrights to emerge from the Off-Off-Broadway scene in the last decade is his willingness to work within a conventional framework exploring relationships between recognizable people in believable situations.[2]

Realism is neither new nor surprising. What is interesting is that reviewers, steeped in expectations of the avant-garde, or the bizarre, or the highly

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[1]Emory Lewis, "Lanford Wilson," The Long Island Record, 3/9/73.

[2]Alan Wallach, "Switched Off," Newsday, 2/8/73.

experimental, or the blatantly confrontational approach every time they set foot in a non-Broadway house, were so surprised to see realism, not only alive, but exciting, vibrant and in one of the most unlikely places to find it, Off-Off-Broadway.

The Hot L Baltimore would win the first in a long list of Awards that would come to the Circle Theatre and its members over the ensuing years of production. Wilson won the 1973 Outer Critics Circle Award, the 1973 OBIE for "Best Play," the 1973 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for "Best American Play," and was in The Ten Best Plays Annual of 1973.

Marshall W. Mason won the 1973 OBIE for "Distinguished Direction."

Mari Gorman won the 1973 OBIE for "Distinguished Performance," the 1973 Drama Desk Award for "Best Performance," the Theatre World Award, and the Clarence Derwent Award for "Best Performance."

Trish Hawkins won the 1973 Drama Desk Award for "Most Promising Performance," and the Theatre World Award.

However, even though one play might be able to raise critical consciousness to a theatre's existence and even establish its reputation, one play alone could not maintain a theatre's standing for very long without a backup that indicated a continuum of achievement.

Fortunately, the success of Hot L, now comfortably ensconced at the Circle-in-the-Square, was quickly followed by the very successful, When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder? by Mark Medoff, and the equally successful, The Sea Horse by Edward J. Moore. With three successive "hits" the Circle was now officially "on the map." Awards, recognition, public acclaim, grants and, not

insignificantly, the ability to produce two highly successful additional plays in immediate succession, established the theatre as a significant presence on the New York theatrical scene.

When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder? was directed by Gene Frankel who, having staged Mark Medoff's The Wager at the Cubiculo Theatre in New York City in 1972, was an established associate of Medoff's. Continuity of artistic association was encouraged by the Circle whenever realistically possible.

The play takes place in New Mexico in a run-down diner on a lonely desert highway. While it raises an interesting contemporary question--where have all the heroes gone?--it thematically deals with the manner in which people handle their fears when they are confronted by violence and intimidation.

Moore's The Sea Horse, a two-character play, followed under Mason's direction. It is about Harry, an engine-room seaman back from the sea, who is determined to marry his huge, tough-talking girlfriend, Gertrude, who runs a waterfront bar. Gertrude, unwilling to risk tenderness, is equally determined to throw Harry out. Under Mason's direction, whatever sentimentality might be in the script is skillfully turned into believable vulnerablity and conviction as the two lovers reach out to each other.

Red Ryder and The Sea Horse were important in establishing that the Circle's success with Hot L was not a fluke. In fact, they added to the list of Awards the Circle Theatre was accumulating:

The 1974 Outer Critics Circle Award to Medoff's When You Coming'Back, Red Ryder? for "Distinguished Play," the 1974 Drama Desk Award as "Outstanding New Playwright," and the play was included in The Ten Best Plays -Annual of 1974.

The 1974 OBIE for "Distinguished Performance" and the Drama Desk Award for "Outstanding Performance" went to Kevin Conway for Red Ryder.

The 1974 OBIE for "Outstanding Performance," the Drama Desk Award, and the Theatre World Award went to Conchatta Ferrell for The Sea Horse.

The 1974 OBIE for "Distinguished Performance" and the 1974 Drama Desk Award for "Outstanding Performance" went to Elizabeth Sturges for Red Ryder.

By the time the Off-Off-Broadway Circle Theatre received the 1974 Drama Desk Award and The Vernon Rice Award for "Outstanding Contribution to *Off*-Broadway," (italics mine) Clive Barnes' stated observation about the Off-Off-Broadway Circle Theatre providing new plays for Off-Broadway,("Here could be a herald of new patterns") seemed prophetic. Both When You Comin' Back Red Ryder? and The Sea Horse would follow The Hot L Baltimore's lead and make the move to Off-Broadway after their brief premiere runs at the loft. Red Ryder opened at the Eastside Playhouse, 334 East 74th Street in March and The Sea Horse opened at the Westside Theatre, 407 West 43rd Street in April.

Thus, within a twelve month period of time, the Circle had three new American plays upgraded to Off-Broadway houses. These were the big three that forever changed the complexion of the tiny company. That they surprised most of the critics is evidenced by Christopher Sharp's article in Women's Wear Daily:

> Marshall Mason can laugh now, but the effort hasn't come easily. The Texas-born artistic director of the Circle Theatre is well ahead of his timetable to take over New York. His production of "The Hot L Baltimore" was the first big surprise to emerge from the 100-seat, virtually unknown Circle Theatre. That was almost 18 months ago, and "The Hot L Baltimore" is still flourishing in The Circle-in-the-Square. So is "When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?" at the Eastside playhouse--another original Circle production. On April 17, a

> third Circle play, "The Sea Horse," will take up residence at the Westside Theatre. Meanwhile, the Circle will launch a new production, e.e. cummings' "Him." In effect, the Circle will then be responsible for four simultaneous theatre productions...[1]

In retrospect one can see the presentation of these four plays not only as a phenomenon of achievement by the Circle company but one that caused reevaluations of Off-and Off-Off-Broadway as well as the reintroduction of realism itself as a viable contemporary genre.

Reviewing The Sea Horse inspired Edwin Wilson of The Wall Street Journal to make a broad summary of the development of Off-Broadway in its role as an answer to the increasing costs of Broadway productions. When Off-Broadway became a victim of its own success and was "beset by the same problems of steep production costs which it had been created to solve,[2] it spawned Off-Off-Broadway which developed to fulfill the function Off-Broadway once filled. In speaking of Off-Off Broadway's offerings, he writes:

> As might be expected, the quality ranges from the stimulating and exciting to the awful. As for the types of offerings, they generally fall into one of two categories. The first are revivals, including everything from Medieval mysteries to Moliere to Somerset Maugham. The second category included avant-garde or experimental works which by definition thrive best in the informal atmosphere of coffee houses or converted warehouses.[3]

The most interesting aspect of Wilson's view is that he recognized the Circle

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[1]Sharp, 4/12/74.

[2]Edwin Wilson, "A Dockside Romance," The Wall Street Journal, 4/19/74

[3]Ibid.

as an *exception* to the usual offerings one could expect from either Off or Off-Off Broadway.

> An exception to these general practices of Off-Off-Broadway is the Circle Theatre, a group which has come to prominence in the last two years for plays which are neither revivals nor experiments but new works in the solid, realistic mold so popular earlier in this century. Three plays which received enough critical and popular acclaim to move successfully to longer runs Off-Broadway.[1]

Edwin Wilson goes on to compare the three plays to earlier plays in the 20th century: He compares The Hot L Baltimore to Saroyan's work of the thirties; this is a comparison that is difficult to justify since Saroyan, who deals mostly with themes of childlike goodness triumphing over evil, is often guilty of saccharine sentimentality, and Hot L is neither saccharine nor sentimental despite its aching lament for the lost beauties of the past. Edwin Wilson compares Red Ryder to Robert Sherwood's The Petrified Forest; this comparison appears to be a bit more justified, since both are similar in setting and both deal with a group of people held hostage and humiliated by a vicious bully. And he compares The Sea Horse to early O'Neill with strong echoes of Anna Christie and The Hairy Ape. Once again this is difficult to justify except in terms of waterfront flavor; there is very little similarity either in terms of characters or themes. Although the comparisons fall short, what *is* true is that realism suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, was seen as a prominent feature of Off-Off-Broadway. Although the Off-Off-Broadway movement was still quite young, dating back only to the

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[1]Ibid

early sixties, generally speaking there had been no realistic theatre to speak of. Edwin Wilson closed his review with the following:

> Realistic theatre has been the predominant mode in the Western world for the last 100 years, but there have been times when it seemed to be in eclipse. Just at such a moment, a theatre like the Circle demonstrates that realism still makes a strong claim on theatre audiences even as we approach the last quarter of the 20th Century.[1]

The important thing to note is that the Circle Theatre was recognized as an exception to the usual fare produced Off-Off-Broadway. Not only were they the only company in town, but they were the only theatre group that was presenting realistic original plays.

These assessments are interesting, since the Circle would quickly become known as the sole consistent purveyor of lyric realism, a realistic style of play and production that is distinguished by its lyricism and poetry. It is from this time that the Circle was labeled as a generator of lyric realism, a term that has clung tenaciously. The critics were beginning to speak of a Circle style that seemed to be apparent in these three productions. For example, in his review of The Sea Horse, Mel Gussow speaks of a recognizable unifying naturalistic Circle style in this production.[2]

However, Mason is quick to point out:

> We didn't choose this style. We didn't say, well, we're going to do American realism. These were our roots. These were the

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Mel Gussow, "Stage: 'The Sea Horse,' The New York Times, 4/16/75.

> plays that interested us. Our style, the lyric realism, comes from growing up on Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Robert Anderson.[1]

Even so, this was hardly all they did. As Tanya Berezin says:

> In the beginning we did a lot of experimentation, a lot of testing. There were no set boundaries. We didn't have a term like lyric realism at that point. That's a PR term. We do not function with it. We never functioned out of it. There were no limitations. There are no limitations now except money. Lyric realism is a term that is used to describe us. It is not something that we seek to be. And then, it had to do with artistic excellence. The first play we did was A Practical Ritual by David Starkweather who was a very abstract playwright and very allergorical. I don't think we set out for a style. What we set out to be was a company capable and available to a playwright's imagination. The plays that were successful defined whatever style they thought we were. But we did all sorts of different things in all sorts of different styles.[2]

However, lyric realism would be what the Circle Company would be most famous for even though, as Berezin justifiably points out, there had already been a history of experimentation in many of their productions. There has always been a high degree of experimentation in much of their general approach to theatre as well, especially in the highly eclectic training the company members received in the workshops under Mason's and Thirkield's tutelage.

But, like it or not, it was the high-profile "hit plays" that brought them recognition. Without the "hit plays" which happened to be of the lyric realism

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[1] Mason interview, 11/11/83.

[2] Berzin interview.

genre, it is doubtful whether the Circle would have received all the attention that brought it to prominence. Although much well-deserved praise was lavished upon such production aspects as Mason's extraordinary detailed direction, the tight ensemble acting, the set designs, the critics were mostly responding to the new plays. It is not usually a company of actors that brings a critic into the theatre, unless it is a highly publicised one like Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre; the controversiality itself compels a review. It is not even the conceptual idea of a new company, unless it is something like the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center with all of its advance press and all of the enormous expectations. There has always been an abundance of new theatres in New York City, or groups that call themselves "companies" that open and close. There are many that remain in existence despite continuous financial peril without ever stirring up much interest. Apparently, what most interests the critic is what a theatre or a company can produce, and even though the productions of a revival house or an import house will be given attention and if warranted, even lavishly touted for excellence, it is the new plays that create the most stir, either positive or negative. The excitement becomes great indeed when a new play is reviewed positively since a really good play is extremely rare.

One of the reasons for all the attention heaped upon the Circle Theatre was that the critics recognized what seemed to be the spark of a return to a native American voice in the American theatre. After a 1960s plethora of abstract, absurdist and direct confrontational theatre, The Hot L Baltimore, When You Comin' Back Red Ryder, and The Sea Horse seemed to indicate a resurgence of the kind of realism of O'Neill, Odets and Williams. It was as though the heirs of

these playwrights had finally matured and their own voices were equally reminiscent of the roots of an American theatre that had once been firmly established in the tradition of realism. This apparent return to realism appeared to be welcome. The critical reception to the Circle's new offerings seemed to indicate, not only an appreciation of the quality of the plays themselves, but that it had been a long, dry spell of anti-realism. The timing seemed right for plays that could artistically measure up enough to fill the void.

It is more than likely that one of the reasons the term lyric realism stuck to the Circle was because of Lanford Wilson's plays and the fact that he continued to produce one successfully received play after another in this genre. Even though all of his plays do not necessarily reflect this lyricism, (especially his early one-act plays, Home Free!, The Madness of Lady Bright, Wandering, Untitled)

> It's something the critics used to describe Lanford's writing and because we're Lanford's company, I think we're described as that, but it's not everything we do. Not now, not then. It was not a style. It was something that can describe plays like Hot L and 5th of July and Chekhov. But it's not an artistic style that anyone strived for. We used the term ourselves because it sounded so good and it was rather apt to describe the kinds of plays we've done that have been successful. But it's not, nor has it ever been, an artistic standard.[1]

By May of 1974, Mel Gussow also acknowledged the sudden successful reappearance of realism on the New York scene if only in a tiny, innocuous uptown loft. In "Suddenly Real Plays About Real People," Gussow wrote a lengthy article in The New York Times about the tiny OOB company that had "given birth

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[1]Tanya Berezin interview.

to three of the best plays in town."[1] It is an impressive article that takes in, not only an historical sweep of the company from the early days at the Cino, but outlines Mason's personal background as well, dating back to pre-Cino days at Northwestern University; it included Mason's ambitions to start a "great" theatre company. The article is an important recognition of the Circle's artistic achievements as well as an important step in being accepted as serious artists. Just as important perhaps was the recognition that they were instrumental in providing new American plays. New plays had never been Mason's and Thirkield's primary concern but would evolve into a major expectation on the part of the critics and, therefore, have to become a major developmental concern of the Circle Theatre as the years progressed. Although new plays were important and from the earliest concepts, the company was to be available to playwrights-in-residence, the major emphasis in the beginning was on the actors; the actor was the major focus of all the workshops. It wasn't until later that workshops for developing playwrights began. In Gussow's article he pronounced the introduction of new plays to be a major consideration in his concept of the group and a primary expectation:

> The Circle Repertory Theatre Company in a second floor walkup theatre on Broadway and 83rd Street (geographically about as Off Off Broadway as you can get) has in the past year become the *chief provider of new American plays to the New York commercial theatre* (Italics mine) After short runs in the company's 100-seat home theatre, three Circle productions have moved Off Broadway to become critical and popular successes. The man most responsible for the Circle is

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[1] Mel Gussow, "Suddenly Real Plays About Real People," The New York Times, 5/12/74.

> the company's co-founder and artistic director, the lanky, soft-spoken, 34-year old Marshall W. Mason. He directed both Hot L Baltimore and The Sea Horse.[1]

There is little doubt that Gussow's underlying message is the interest in the new plays. Now the expectations would be to continue discovering new plays - to continue in the rediscovery of the "native American Voice."

The turning point for the Circle Theatre not only brought them recognition but was about to dictate a new direction--the nurturing and development of playwrights who would supply the new plays that were suddenly expected of them. There was to be a subtle shift in emphasis from the actor to the playwright. It is difficult to escape the point of the enormous importance of the plays despite the fact that the actors are crucially important to the success of a play. At the Circle Rep, in particular, the actors' contributions are exceptionally significant, not only in the actual production, but often in the developmental process as well; the entire ensemble concept of the company is geared on the mutuality of development and contribution. However, the Circle's future depended on continued seasons of well-received plays. When the plays are not reviewed well by the critics, the season dies, even though the personnel (e.g. the actors, directors, etc.) remains the same and the season is pre-sold to subscription.

The pressure on the Circle fostered by their own success, though subtle at first, is nonetheless a significant one. To be labeled the "Chief provider of new American plays" inadvertently sets pressures towards a new direction. To be

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[1]Ibid.

labeled thus at a time when the very flavor of American society was changing added an additional dimension to the pressure. For the America of the seventies was changing in a great many subtle as well as obvious ways. A decade had passed since the enthusiastic young artists who founded the Circle Theatre began working together in 1965. By the mid-seventies, the broad tides of societal changes that influenced America politically, socially and economically, naturally swept over the Circle as well, and in turn, influenced the work they presented. The Hot L Baltimore, When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder, and The Sea Horse, were a far cry from the explosion of experimentation and confrontational theatre that had identified much of the troubled sixties. Comparatively, they reflected a marked conservatism, not only in style, but in subject matter as well. The Circle Repertory Company seemed to have found a form for which the theatrical community was hungry; it had its finger on the new pulse and temper of the times, as the sixties were laid to rest and the seventies were fully at hand.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHANGING TIMES, A CHANGING REP AND UNLIMITED GROWTH

The 1970s were just as remarkable as the 1960s in terms of the scope of changes that created troubling new approaches to everyday life in America. Hardly anyone remained untouched or aloof. America's theatre, Off-Off Broadway in particular, would record the emotional pulse of the times with journalistic vigor; there was much to consider. Politically, the nation was in great flux. There had finally come an end to the most divisive foreign war in the history of the nation, but the American soldier returned to silence rather than ticker-tape parades; the shame of defeat colored all aspects of post-war rehabilitation. As though by deliberate conspiracy, an enormous concerted effort was made by ordinary citizens to push the Vietnam war into quick obscurity and go on to other things. The hard-sought cessation of hostilities came shrouded with bitterness rather than joy or anything remotely akin to pride.

The end of the war also helped to bring about a deep economic recession which, in turn, spawned the onset of a quiet stabilization of sexual mores. According to sociologists, it appeared as though the sexual revolution of the sixties was over. Sociologist Seymour Lipset of Stanford Hoover Institute felt that the "destabilization of belief systems" brought on by the Vietnam war had helped propel the sexual revolution of the sixties. By the mid-seventies, the end of the war and the onset of a recession brought "a movement back to more stability and a turn

away from the far-out sex."[1] The flower child in tie-dyes was virtually gone. One of the most idealistic generations in the history of America had suddenly transformed into the "me generation" of the seventies. The make-love-not-war philosophy became the philosophy of self-fulfillment-first. Living for others was now seen as a trap. The underlying bitterness inherent in the philosophy of "taking care of number one" was shrouding everyday business interactions as well as personal ones. According to sociologist Daniel Yankelovich, living for the self became part of the self-fulfillment ethic that had been confined to the college campuses during the late sixties but had spread to society at large by the seventies. He wrote that the "rage for self-fulfillment... had now spread to virtually the entire U.S. population"[2] evidenced by its preoccupation with courses, classes, seminars and hundreds of self-help and pop-psych books.

In keeping with the self-interest trend, liberalism seemed to have faded into the background while an appreciable swing toward political conservatism emerged that would flourish even more fully in the eighties. It was doubtful that sexual mores would ever revert to the tight constrictions of the forties and fifties, but it did appear that the excesses of the sexual revolution inflamed by an unhappy war were at least abated if not completely over. The surge of social diseases that followed in the wake of variegated sexual adventures accelerated the trend toward conservatism. Although not openly admitted, there were many who believed that

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[1] John Leo, "The Revolution Is Over," Time Magazine, April 9, 1984, as reported by: J. Madeline Nash/Chicago, and Elizabeth Taylor/New York.

[2] Daniel Yankelovich, "New Rules," as noted by Leo, p. 76.

wide-spread diseases, such as herpes, was a moral punishment for promiscuity. Despite intellectual acceptance of the new sexuality, many decades of puritanical heritage were difficult to dispel emotionally, particularly in times of crisis. Homosexuality, which had become increasingly tolerated if not totally accepted once it had emerged from the closet, came under moral scrutiny again as the fatal AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) began to make a tragic impact on the homosexual community. The disease added fuel to the quietly growing belief that some sort of overall grand punishment was at work for sexual mores that were rooted not only in "unnatural" behavior, but in a sexual philosophy that was perceived as promiscuous in its most basic concept.[1]

The 1970s also witnessed the extraordinary rise of the women's movement with all of the broad ramifications implicit in the sudden prominence of an entire population that had always been in a subservient role. Women's roles were being re-determined and given the status of discussions in prestigious open forums such as the hearings on "Women's Role in Contemporary Society" that were held from September 21 to September 25, 1970 by the New York City Commission on Human Rights. This presented a "striking and historically important documentation of the problems of women in a male-dominated society."[2] The women's movement cut deeply into cultural and ideological questions far beyond the practical everyday one of jobs which was the major focus of discussion at the hearings. By entering the realm of sexual identity "that probes more deeply into

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[1] Many plays would deal with this issue in the 1980s; e.g., CRC's As Is.

[2] Robert D. Marcus and David Burner, editors, America Since 1945, Second Edition, p. 312.

the status of women and the discrimination against them,"[1] the movement helped not only the sexual revolution but a dramatic reevaluation of the entire structure of male-female roles that had dominated past generations. These reevaluations would make strong erosions into every corner of life in America and be clearly reflected in all forms of theatre.

The seventies also witnessed a marked erosion of American institutions, most notably that of the presidency of the United States. The Watergate crisis was perhaps the greatest bit of political theatre ever to discolor American history. With the sensational daily media coverage of the break-in, the wiretaps, the Senate hearings, the "President is not a crook" speech, and the ultimate resignation of the President of the United States under heavy threat of imminent impeachment, there seemed to be little that could recreate or recapture the faith of the newly disillusioned. The unfulfilled "me generation" was here to stay for a while and would eventually emerge in the 1980s transformed into the Yuppies and Yumpies.

It would be difficult to pinpoint the exact moment of disintegration of the particular brand of idealism generated by the sixties. However, in retrospect, it would appear that the most lethal blows came with the killings of the Kent State University students in May of 1970, and the erosion of honor and credibility attached to the office of the presidency itself during the Watergate episode.

Ironically, it was in this unsettled, transitional atmosphere that the Circle Theatre, now in obscure existence for five years, would find its artistic voice.

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[1] Ibid.

Rather than be swept away by the explosion of change, the Circle reflected and took advantage of the swing toward general conservatism. The subtle undercurrents of realism in much of the company's training, even when they were at their most experimental, were beginning to be looked upon with a new appreciation by outsiders. It was almost as though the need for something "real" had finally caught up with what had always been at the artistic core of the company's explorations. The timing was finally right. The Circle Theatre had been started, at least partially, in reaction to the less realistic presentational formats of the 1960s theatrical explosion of experimentation. Mason had always felt that, all too often, only ideas were being presented, not experiences that happened in the present tense with the audience as witness and participant. With the kind of attention and critical approbation that came with such articles as Mel Gussow's "Suddenly Real Plays About Real People," it was becoming increasingly clear that the Circle had found its artistic stride. It had succeeded in carving out a niche for itself in the mass of New York theatrical presentation as the home of realism in New York.

In reviewing the first fifteen years, it is clear that there have been four major stages in the development of the company that can be categorized individually:

1) 1969 to 1973 is the period of greatest experimentation before the company became well-known

2) 1973 to 1976 is the period in which the company found its artistic stride and was beginning to gain acceptance by the critics as well as the public

3) 1976 to 1980 is the period of expansion and growth that maintained and secured the theatre's reputation as the home of new American plays

4) 1980 to 1984 is the period in which artistic as well as financial problems became paramount.

During the first period, (1969-1973) one of the external factors that influenced the Circle's operations was the founding of the Off-Off-Broadway Alliance (OOBA) in 1972 as a central service office. Not only did it encourage the exchange of information and ideas among its two hundred member theatres, but it lent credibility and accessibility to Off-Off-Broadway as a united entity with a definite position and voice of its own.

During the second period, (1973-1976) several important factors affected the Circle not the least of which were the increased expectations from the public and critics. The constant critical analysis of the health of the Off-Broadway theatre with its soaring costs, diminishing number of productions, and even fewer "hits," created a great deal of speculation as to whether or not Off-Broadway was "dead."[1] Concommitantly there were continuing observations that Off-Off-Broadway was growing in leaps and bounds and was replacing Off-Broadway as the arena for vital experimentation and growth. The atmosphere for serious critical attention and discovery of Off-Off Broadway was never more ripe.

One definite sign that Off-Off Broadway was growing was that Equity was becoming increasingly interested in its activities. A staggering number of plays were produced--548 in approximately 150 theatres during the 1974-75 season

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[1] Mel Gussow, "Whither, Off Broadway?" The New York Times, 1/27/75.

alone.[1] Mel Gussow claimed that with at least fifty shows per weekend, it was becoming impossible for a critic to review everything that was happening.[2] Off-Off Broadway was the new hotbed of creativity; the sheer bulk of it was its highest recommendation. It also led to a highly controversial new Equity Showcase Code for OOB issued on August 4, 1975. Jerry Arrow, Executive Director for the Circle Rep at the time, felt that had it been in effect in 1969, the Circle would not be in existence in 1975. "By trying to make Off-Off Broadway a closed shop," he said, "when it is not even commercial is silly as well as destructive."[3]

At the center of the dispute was the conviction of playwrights, directors and even actors, that not only was the revised code unrealistic and impractical but that it would kill the vital experimentation that distinguished the Off-Off Broadway movement. Interestingly, while Equity was negotiating with the OOBA for what essentially amounted to control, Kevin McCarthy, who played the leading role in CRC's Harry Outside, spoke, in an interview with Tom Buckley, of receiving a bare $5 per day for rehearsal and $12 per performance, which he willingly accepted in order to do the play. McCarthy felt that it was only on OOB that a play such as this was possible. Commercial theatre would not be able to take the risk.[4]

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[1] Mel Gussow, "The Quicksilver World of Off-Off Broadway," The New York Times, 10/30/75.

[2] Ibid.

[3] David Vidal, "Equity To Meet In New Code Today," The New York Times, 8/25/75.

[4] Tom Buckley, "About New York," The New York Times, 5/16/75.

One of the major battles erupted over the new provisions that called for, 1) the mandatory use of Equity actors and stage managers, 2) minimum reimbursements for travel, and 3) setting aside part of the Box Office receipts to defray additional expenses. William Lieberson, a playwright with the tiny Quaigh Theatre, claimed that the code could not possibly work for them. Despite the fact that their 64-seat theatre was filled to capacity every night when they produced the Pulitzer Prize winning Street Scene, they still found themselves $600 in the red after paying the rent. They would not be able to exist if they had to add the additional five or six hundred dollars to their expenses that the new code would mean.[1] Even more controversial in the new code was, "a proviso that all members who rehearsed four weeks or less in a showcase production would automatically become owners of 2% of the present and future rights of the show, this share to rise to 8% under certain conditions.[2] Robert Moss, Director of Playwrights Horizon and President of the Off-Off Broadway Alliance, was quoted at the 8/25/75 meeting as saying that the Code was "turning Off-Off Broadway, which is a developmental situation, into a horse race where you bet on winners,"[3] while Terrence McNally, author of the then current Bad Habits that had made the long transition from Off-Off Broadway to Off Broadway to Broadway, argued that it would be the playwright who would have to share future profits;

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[1] Vidal.

[2] Louis Calta, "Equity Is Accused on Theatre Code," The New York Times, 2/23/76.

[3] Mel Gussow, "Showcase Code Is A Standoff," The New York Times, 10/2/75.

this would force many playwrights to use Non-Equity members during the early stages of a play's development.[1]

Donald Grody, Executive Secretary of Equity did not believe that the new code could ruin OOB as so many claimed. He felt that the financial stimulus of Grants changed the economic structure of Off-Off Broadway by making much more money available.[2] This was arguable since production costs for Off-Off Broadway were rising at the same rate as Off Broadway and the projected inflationary trends of the Carter administration were causing corporate funding to diminish to such an extent that the Off- Off Broadway Alliance was trying to raise working funds collectively. Collective fund raising was an innovative idea. So, too, was the possible creation of an Emergency Fund to rescue the theatres that were already in imminent danger of closing down.[3] However, crucial to Donald Grody's position was the belief that the actor made an important contribution to the success of a play and should have a piece of the pie if a non-profit play became a hit. This was a highly inflammatory issue and would become a major battleground in the playwright's boycott of the Code in 1980-81.

Six months after the new Code was presented, the controversial issues

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Robert Berkvist, "Notes: Wooing Big Money For Off Off Broadway," The New York Times, 2/22/76.

remained unresolved. Amidst proposals and counter proposals for modifications pending further investigation, the new Code had been voted down by Equity members.[1]

However, the issue of the Showcase Code for Off-Off Broadway eventually became a moot point for the Circle Repertory Company. In 1976, the Circle signed a Mini-Equity Contract and moved up to an Off-Broadway status, placing them in another category and marking the beginning of their greatest period of expansion and growth, 1976 to 1980.

By the time of The Hot L Baltimore in 1973 more than half of the company, which now numbered twenty, had been with the Circle since the beginning. Loyalties seemed to be enduring in both directions. However, the time had come for some basic changes within the structure of the company. Mason and Thirkield wanted to set out in the new directions opening up to them with a renewed sense of freedom. It was at this time that they decided to buy out the C.I.R.C.L.E. Their independence cost a great deal of money but Rob Thirkield felt that it was worth it:

> We didn't really get anything from them. They acted like Board members, but they only provided a tax shelter.[2]

However, with loyalties dying hard, it had taken four years before they decided to get out of their commitment to the C.I.R.C.L.E. In 1972 they became a separate corporation under the name of The Circle Repertory Company, Inc. Another, even more basic change was imminent--one that would affect every

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Thirkield interview.

phase of their operations. The five-year lease on the loft theatre was due for renewal in June of 1974. Despite the success of The Hot L Baltimore, Thirkield remembers that they,

> . . just kind of hung on there. We had two more plays to do and no actors, so we grabbed people from the street and put them into the next couple of plays.[1]

However, it seems that success created some unwanted attention as well as the desired critical regard. Thirkield continues:

> By then we were in our fifth year. A clothing store was downstairs and since Hot L was doing well, the owners were saying, "Okay, your rent is now a thousand dollars. And, also, you have to make it a legal theatre with the right fire exits" — things we had never bothered with. At this point, a big decision had to be made. Do we stay or leave? I decided we should move downtown to the square. The rent was $2,000 a month but it was a real theatre and a nice location. So we moved downtown.[2]

Thirkield, in his usual easy manner, makes the decision to move sound like a simple one but it was hardly that. The Circle knew that it was becoming too big to continue in such a small, out-of-the-way theatre; the Upper West Side has never been a theatrical haven even for a theatre at is classified as Off-Off-Broadway. However, there were inherent risks in a move at this critical point in their development. First, there were some additional changes that were suddenly being thrust upon them. Even though they were positive ones, they were creating a certain amount of upheavel within the company. Now the commercial theatre world was beckoning; producers were coming to scrutinize

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

each new Circle presentation for additional commercial "moves." The Hot L Baltimore was being filmed as a situation comedy by Norman Lear, and already TV had stolen several of the original actors from the Circle production who would return only sporadically.[1] On a philosophical note, the company had to question if it would be able to maintain the personal sense of identity that had always been a part of its credo, but had only recently been subjected to open scrutiny. On a pragmatic note, they had to consider if they would even survive the move as a company. First of all, physical upheaval could be dangerous to their comfortable sense of ensemble at a time when outside scrutiny and commercial lures made the necessity to tighten up the ranks even more important than ever. Secondly, and just as important to survival, they had to consider whether or not a move downtown would cost them the audience it had taken them five years to create. These were all very important considerations, but philosophical discussions had eventually to be put aside, risks had to be taken, and a decision had to be made. Perhaps the only thing they could directly analyze was their audience. A great deal of time was spent going over subscription lists before the decision to move was finalized only one and a half weeks before the opening of Tennessee Williams' Battle of Angels on November 3, 1974. Inevitably, there were some defections by subscribers who lived on the upper West Side. According to Mason:

> A few people did not want to come 'all the way down to the Village.' But . . . only about a fourth of them lived in the West 70's and 80's. The others were from all over. Even from Upstate and New Jersey. There were many Villagers who ventured 'all the way uptown' to see us.[2]

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[1] Mari Gorman and Conchatta Ferrell.

[2] Mason, as quoted by Paul Rawlings, "Mason Directs Sheridan Circle," The Villager 11/14/74.

Eventually, it was obvious that the defections were more than balanced by new subscribers and that the advantages of a move back to the Village far outweighed any negative possibilities. On October 23, 1974, Thirkield signed a ten-year lease on the Sheridan Square Playhouse.

The building they were to transform into the Circle Repertory Company home had been built in 1919 in what has now become an historic landmark district. It had originally been built as a garage. In the late 1920s it became famous as Billy Rose's "Nut Club," although the club was actually owned by Meyer Horowitz and later by Bernard Bernardi; Billy Rose was only one of the frequent patrons.

After the heyday of the Nut Club, the building was refurbished as the Sheridan Square Playhouse. When the Circle Company took over the theatre in 1974, they exercised great care in handling the much needed renovations, always remaining mindful of its importance as an historic landmark. The facade of the building had taken on the grimy appearance of more than fifty years accumulation of New York City soot. At a restoration cost of at least $3,000, they sand-blasted down to the original brick, discovering in the process the original blue mosaic rectangle sign over the door which read, "Garage." Reminiscent in its design of Florentine house numbers, it can still be seen behind the huge red Circle banner that waves outside the building. The seating capacity was 160 with flexible seating options possible. The playing area was equally flexible (e.g., proscenium, thrust, round) and could be placed anywhere in the theatre. Unlike the earlier days at the loft, Thirkield remembers that the theatre, which was air-conditioned and advertised as semi-accessible for the handicapped, looked pretty much the same as it does today except for cosmetic refurbishings. The

seating capacity was 160 but the beauty of the theatre was that the seating was so flexible; the stage could be placed anywhere in the theatre. Eventually, the stage near the dressing rooms seemed to be the most convenient so it has remained there, but the ability to switch the playing area around within the interior is still possible and is often adopted.

For a brief while, there were offices behind the theatre. Then the offices were moved because of the need for additional space. They were set up on 111 8th Avenue for several years before moving permanently to 161 Avenue of the Americas in 1976. The separation of the administrative offices and the theatre created unexpected problems. As Rob Thirkield remembers,

> What was so wonderful about being uptown at the loft was that you could come in and say, "Hi!" to the people in your office and go directly into the theatre. The separation made a great many strangers within the company. [1]

It is obvious that as soon as the physical separation took place, the sense of "family" began to suffer.

The first play the Circle Repertory Company presented at Sheridan Square was Tennessee Williams' Battle of Angels. It had been written by Williams in the Autumn of 1939 making it one of his earliest full-length plays and had originally been produced in Boston in 1940. It was written under the auspices of a $1000 Grant from the Rockefeller Foundation after winning a play-writing contest that had been sponsored by The Group Theatre. When first produced in Boston by the Theatre Guild in 1940, it starred Miriam Hopkins, was

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[1] Ibid.

directed by Margaret Webster, and ran for only two weeks before closing. On March 21, 1957, it was finally brought into New York's Martin Beck Theatre under the title of Orpheus Descending. The play was completely revised and was presented under the direction of Harold Clurman. The next version was brought to the screen in 1960 by Sidney Lumet as The Fugitive Kind starring Anna Magnani, Marlon Brando, Joanne Woodward and Victor Jory.

Battle of Angels was a much lighter play than the two versions that followed. As originally written, it received its New York premiere at the Circle Repertory Company on November 3, 1974. It was directed by Marshall W. Mason with set design by John Lee Beatty, lighting design by Dennis Parichy, costumes by Jennifer von Mayrhauser and music by Norman L. Berman.

It seems that one of the most difficult things during the rehearsal period was to maintain an ongoing relationship with Williams. He seemed a very frightened man to Tanya Berezin who admits she could not get to know him very well personally; his sensitivity and fear always seemed to be the most prominent aspects of the relationships he permitted. It is not surprising that a great deal of caring went into working with him, not only because of the stature of his talent and reputation, but because his fears made him so vulnerable. Although Williams seemed to enjoy the experience of working within the structure of the supportive environment that was the Circle's trademark, and even permitted a Friday reading of some of his work, he basically did not have a great deal of trust for anyone. His past intruded on his ability to accept completely the kind of working relationship that was being offered to him. Although he worked with the group several times, he was never formally a playwright-in-residence at the Circle; he was not expected to participate in the playwriting process that a

resident playwright would ordinarily undergo in the open environment of the company. It was difficult, therefore, to assess how much value, or even enjoyment, Williams actually got out of the minimal Circle process he would permit himself to accept.

One person who did manage to get fairly close was young Daniel Irvine who was acting as Marshall Mason's directorial assistant on Battle of Angels. Irvine, who is now in charge of the Labs at The Circle Rep, was only twenty years old at the time. He had been a visual artist who had made the transition to theatre when he volunteered his services to the young company on 83rd Street and found himself being hired instead. It was Irvine who became actively involved with Tennessee Williams during Battle of Angels. Irvine recalls that one of his first assignments as Directorial Assistant to Mason, in addition to taking Mason's notes during rehearsals, was to keep Tennessee Williams company. Irvine recalls:

> It was quite wonderful. Williams would go from one bar to another and I had to make sure his mink coat was not ripped off. And the man still owes me money! He played a lot of pinball and never had any change. Quite wonderful for me. So many prominent theatre people, including Tennessee Williams himself, in so short a time in New York.[1]

The reviews for Battle of Angels were uniformly good though not ecstatic. The production was also noted for the Circle's customary attention to detail. Just as one could sense that the bar in The Sea Horse could actually have served drinks, the "Terrence Mercantile Store" in Battle of Angels, "was reproduced down to the jukebox, pinball machines and shoeboxes filled with dowdy shoes."[2]

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[1] Daniel Irvine interview, New York City, November 18, 1983.

[2] Gussow, "Battle of Angels," The New York Times, 11/4/74.

The Circle was applauded not only for the rediscovery of a Williams' play that deserved a life, but also for the newly restored little playhouse on Sheridan Square--a welcome addition to the Off-Off-Broadway theatrical scene.

Tanya Berezin remembers,

> We had a nice time with Battle of Angels. The production revived the play so it was a very positive experience for Tennessee. But then he went away. Last year, [1983] we wanted to do a revival of his Iguana. We thought Bill Hurt would make a wonderful Shannon. The women parts have been played fantastically, but Shannon never was. We talked to Tennessee and his agent, but Tennessee was more interested in his new play.[1]

The play Berezin referred to is the autobiographical Something Cloudy, Something Clear. She continues,

> We did a Friday reading of it that was really astonishing. He was supposed to make arrangements to go into rewrites for a production, but that was right before his death.[2]

Once Williams had died,[3] the Circle Rep pulled away from the project. "You can't do rewrites without a playwright," Berezin finishes.

Battle of Angels began the Circle Repertory Company's 6th Season. Throughout the year they continued to present new plays in major productions, as well as new plays in workshops. Although Thirkield felt they were still a "classical-contemporary" company and that working in both genres was extremely beneficial for the actors, a discernible important trend away from the

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[1] Berezin interview.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Tennessee Williams, 3/26/11 - 2/25/83.

classics can be seen by recapping the past seasons; not only was the stress clearly to be on new plays as the years passed, but more importantly, on new American plays.

Although the Circle Company, with its nominal subscription prices and relatively modest production costs, was not immediately affected by the Post-War recession, commercial theatres were forced to raise ticket prices in order to accommodate the ever-increasing costs of production. Higher ticket prices made 1970-71 one of the highest grossing commercial seasons ever, but less money was available for production. Less money almost always meant less risks were likely to be taken. It is not surprising to note that most of the quality shows on Broadway, such as Home, The Philanthropist, and How The Other Half Lives, were imports from England with good advance notices and an already proven track record. None of the plays reflected an awareness of the transitional social trends that were beginning to happen in America. Even Off-Broadway, usually a barometer of the times, was not reflective of the pulse of change. This was the year of Miss Reardon Drinks a Little, and Lenny, both of which made powerful statements regarding what now seemed the almost antiquated close-mindedness of an earlier era. Even John Guare's The House of Blue Leaves which won the New York and the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play of 1970, was sharply and terrifyingly focused on the private and personal interaction within a family structure, and Paul Zindel's 1971 Pulitzer Prize winning, The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the Moon Marigolds was thematically about the inability to survive a monstrous family life except in a mutated state. Similarly, The Circle's 1970-71 slate demonstrated a turn away from current American social preoccupations and looked mainly overseas for

inspiration.

After the brief first season with Starkweather's play and the two versions of Chekhov's The Three Sisters, of the six major productions produced by the Circle during their second season -1970-71- five were written by foreign playwrights:

The Doctor and The Devils - Dylan Thomas - Major Production
Princess Ivovna - Witold Gombrowicz - Major
Sextet (Yes) - Lanford Wilson - Workshop
The Ghost Sonata - August Strindberg - Workshop
Waiting For Godot - Samuel Beckett - Major
The Hot I Baltimore - Lanford Wilson - Major Production
Death of a Salesman - Arthur Miller - Adaptation, Workshop
The Future is in The Eggs - Eugene Ionesco - Major
The Doctor in Spite of Himself - Moliere - Major
Time Shadows - Helen Duberstein - Workshop
Sextet (Yes) - Lanford Wilson - Film
Kit's Play - Berilla Kerr - Videotape

The season reflected the desire to work with classics and with a wide range of genres from the tender absurdism of Beckett, to the nightmarish expressionist fantasy of Strindberg. The Ghost Sonata's journey through the subconscious, making it more a state of mind than a play, and the sparcity of situational development in Waiting For Godot, preclude any of the structural strategies of realism, or the verbal requirements for lyricism, or even any Aristotelian logic. Very little lyric realism is seen in this ambitious slate; the determination of a single style or identifying trademark was not only unimportant, but not even a consideration. What did seem to be a consideration at this time was the growing relationship with the audience. The most important aspect of the first season had seemed to be the preoccupation with finding the actors and creating a common language - in short, developing the process through which to work and grow. In the second season the emphasis seemed to shift towards sharing the working

process with the audience. There were many more presentations before an audience. Now, in the second season, six plays were performed as major productions; with four additional workshops, one video and one film, the second year was very busy indeed. It demonstrated a mix of traditional, farce, modern classics, and new plays by unknown playwrights such as Ronald Mele. Although the play selection for the mainstage demonstrates a willingness to experiment in terms of style and form, plays that were being developed in workshop for future projects, such as Duberstein's and Wilson's, show that the relationship with the audience was being encouraged in a participatory capacity. This is significant in that, even at this early stage, the seeds were being sown for the formal play development programs that would later emerge as Projects-In Progress (PIPS) and Extended Readings (ERS), long before the Circle Company thought of itself as "play developer." Equally significant was the fact that the workshop process, which continued at great pace, was being done now with an "end product" clearly in mind for the next season.

The company worked hard and long hours without complaint and without pay. Individual payment seemed hardly important when so much exciting theatre was happening. Professional acting, however, was very much affected by the economic crunch of the Post-Vietnam War recession. According to Equity, only 14% of its members had worked during the season with an average income of $2,500.[1] Only Joseph Papp and the New York Shakespeare Festival seemed to have come out ahead. Papp's problems over permanent theatre space were resolved when he worked out a deal with the city of New York to rent the Astor

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[1] Gussow, 10/30/75

Library, an historic Village landmark on Lafayette Street, for the token sum of $1.00 a year in 1971. The Public Theatre reflected the alleviation of financial pressures by creating the greatest amount of activity during the 1971-72 season. Two of its plays, Sticks and Bones by David Rabe and Two Gentlemen of Verona (Shakespeare) made the transition to Broadway.[1]

None of the financial hazards affecting most of the theatres around them seemed to bother the Circle Theatre or its members at this time even though when the company returned from Thirkield's Woodstock retreat to their third season, there were some noticeable changes on the theatrical scene. Black theatre was increasing; the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center was receiving better critical acclaim for quality of production but suffering through tempestuous managerial controversy. Although twenty-six new plays appeared on Broadway, no Pulitzer Prize was awarded at the end of the season; Off-Broadway had fewer productions and lower quality than the previous season with only forty-six openings and no "hits," while Off-Off-Broadway had its most prolific year, totaling more productions than Broadway and Off-Broadway combined.[2] For the Circle, however, experimentation during 1971-72 was still the catchword:

The Three Sisters - Adaptation - Major Production
Ghost Sonata - Experimental Major Production
The Elephant in The House - Berilla Kerr - Major Production
Howie's - Richard Steele - Workshop
Denim and Rose - Richard Steele - Workshop

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[1] Willis, Vol. 27, p. 6.

[2] Ibid., p. 6.

Time Shadows - Helen Duberstein - Major Production (last year's workshop)
Three New Plays - by Lanford Wilson - Major production
The Empire Builders - Boris Vian - Workshop
Danny 405 - Conchatta Ferrell - Workshop
Ludlow Fair - Lanford Wilson - Workshop

The classics had taken a secondary position. Of the four Major Productions, three were original works by contemporary playwrights. Once again the style within the season varies widely, from strict realism, to farce, to reinterpretations of the classics. Although the season was not as active as the previous one, several workshop productions were open to the public, and like the major productions, the play selection for the workshops was extremely varied: Ludlow Fair by Lanford Wilson, two plays by Richard Steel, Denim And Rose and Howie's, and two rather interesting projects, Boris Vian's The Empire Builders and Conchatta Ferrell's Danny 405. With Boris Vian, Mason and The Circle turned again to a modern European writer of the absurdist tradition. Although he came later than Ionesco and Beckett, Vian is still in the modern French tradition of experimentation in form and style, breaking down the walls of realism both in the theatre, and as interpreted in everyday life. The pattern of turning to modern young European writers seemed to be developing at the Circle, in that the following season, a workshop of Peter Handke's Offending The Audience was presented. However, with growing expectations for new American plays, this pattern soon ended. By the second period of its development, 1973-76, the company began to focus almost entirely on new plays by American writers. Later, when turning again to Europe for plays, it would be only for the classics.

The other workshop of interest, Danny 405 never went on to major production. However, because it was written by an active company member, Conchatta Ferrell, it was deemed important to give her the opportunity to work

on it. This workshop is notable in that it gives yet another example of how much the Circle Rep was committed to the growth of its member artists, the process being, once again, more important than the product.

More so than any other season thus far, the third season at the Circle was devoted to a combination of classics and new plays. Productions were experimental, traditional and conservative. The workshops found new plays, and tried old ones in new ways. This was the last year in which the balance of experimentation and traditional presentation was so complete in both the mainstage and workshop seasons. Significantly, it was also the last season that the Circle did not have heavy critical attention since, as stated previously, it was during the following two seasons, 1972-73 and 1973-74, that the Circle began to appear in the critical consciousness with increasing frequency and scrutiny. As evidenced by the fourth and fifth season slates, the company was entering the mainstream; by the end of 1974, they were firmly placed within the context of New York theatre.

1972-73 SEASON:

Three New Plays by Lanford Wilson - Major Production (Last year's workshop.)
A Road Where The Wolves Run - Claris Nelson - Major Production
Canvas - David Roskowski (Later, David Ives) Workshop
The Hot 1 Baltimore - Lanford Wilson - Major Production
Icarus Nine - Bruce Serlen - Workshop
Peace At Hand - Richard Wolf - Workshop
When We Dead Awaken - Henrik Ibsen - Major Production
Offending The Audience - Peter Handke - Workshop
The Tragedy of Thomas Andros - Ron Wilcox - Major Production
Mrs. Tidings' Mason-Dixon Medicine Man - John Heuer - Workshop
Smith Here - Ed Greenberg - Workshop
Snow Angel - Lewis John Carlino - Workshop
When You Comin' Back Red Ryder? - Mark Medoff - Workshop

1973-74 SEASON:

When You Comin' Back Red Ryder? - Mark Medoff - Major Production (Last year's workshop.)
Straights of Messina - David Starkweather - Workshop
Prodigal - Richard Lortz - Major Production
The Amazing Activity of Charlie Contrare and the Ninety-Eighth Street Gang - Roy London - Major Production
Hothouse - Megan Terry - Workshop
The Sea Horse - Edward J. Moore - Major Production
him - e.e. cummings - Major Production
The Persians - Aeschylus - Major Production
One Person - Robert Patrick - Workshop
When Everything Becomes The City's Music - Lance Belville - Workshop
Not Enough Rope - Elaine May - Workshop
The Summer Solstice - Doug Dyer - Workshop
Busy Dyin' - Shiela Quillen - Workshop

All of this activity kept the Circle Company of actors very busy at a time when 75% of Equity actors were chronically unemployed, only 22 of 95 Broadway productions presented over the two year period survived their openings, and the Repertory Company of Lincoln Center gave its farewell performance (1972-73.)[1]

The twenty-six presentations by the Circle over the same two year period demonstrated a willingness to explore different types of plays as fully as possible--original, revival, American, foreign--and in so doing explore a wide variety of theatrical genres. They went from the somewhat realistic, A Road Where The Wolves Run, and the highly impressionist, Canvas, to the classical tragedy, The Persians, the avant garde, him, and the poetic realism of When We Dead Awaken. The many and varied workshops, although remaining with the contemporary, followed the same pattern of diversity and also demonstrated a continued encouragement of member expression---all of this at a time when

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[1] Willis, Vol. 29, p. 7.

economic factors made 1973-74 the year of revivals on Broadway.[1]

In later years it would often be said that the kind of play produced at the Circle was in the style of "lyric realism," the phrase coined by Mason early in the company's development. However, if one scrutinizes the 52 separate presentations over the first five years, both major and workshop, only five or six could convincingly fall into the category termed lyric realism, including The Hot l Baltimore, When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?, and The Sea Horse. Lyric realism had originally meant a production style, and could more readily be found in Marshall Mason's directorial approach which he described in 1974:

> Engage the actor's imagination . . . do the circumstances, and let the audience provide from their experience the understanding of the situation. I want the audience to say, "That really happened to me, right here and now." The Circle is based on the real principle of art, on the idea of making the action of the play become the experience of the audience.[2]

Mason's approach is the major focus of all the work done at the Circle, both in terms of the workshops given for the actors and writers, and now also in terms of the experience for the audience: to make what happens onstage happen in the present tense, thereby letting the audience experience the present tense and become a part of it. This directing approach, however, does not in any way refer to a preferred style of writing. At least, not yet. Instead, the aim to make the audience participate in the theatrical experience by making it "real" in the present tense, is seen as the job of the director and the actor. It

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[1] Ibid, Vol. 30, p. 7.

[2] Mason, as quoted by Gussow, 5/12/74 .

does not matter which play is being approached. It has already been noted how this could have affected Mason's production of Waiting For Godot. It is significant to remember even at this early stage, that as the Circle achieved its success through the presentation of new plays, there would be increasing focus on the realistic genre of writing at the expense of some of the more experimental, though possibly artistically unsuccessful, plays. As we have seen, categorizing lyric realism as the identifiable style of The Circle Repertory Company is, in fact, not accurate and represents only a small portion of the company's output.

However, once The Circle achieved much of its high visibility through the plays of Lanford Wilson, which in turn became closely identified with lyric realism or lyric naturalism, the term itself became inseparable from the host company.

By the beginning of the 1974 Season, with the move to Sheridan Square, the placement of the company in the larger context of theatre through the attention of the critics, and the production of Battle of Angels, The Circle was entering the theatrical mainstream. Now they were working directly with, and as equals to, one of the greatest playwrights the American theatre has seen. Tennessee Williams' output over the past twenty-five years, beginning with The Glass Menagerie in 1945, had been a major contribution to American theatre literature as well as an awesome personal achievement. Working directly with Williams--one of the early personal idols of the four founders-- was a major accreditation of themselves as artists that not even the critics could match. In a sense, they had left their theatricial adolescence firmly behind them.

It was a good time. Once again a set of fortuitious circumstances were subtly at play giving the Circle an edge during this important transitional period

in its development. At the time that they were trying to decide whether or not to expand their operations, the very business of theatre had been picking up throughout New York. The computerized box-office system known as Ticketron created almost one hundred new outlets for selling theatre tickets, not only in New York, but in New Jersey and Connecticut as well; new and younger theatre-goers were standing in line at the outdoor box-office on Times Square, and despite the fact that the top ticket price had reached an all-time high of $15, sales were surprisingly brisk. According to John Willis, the season which began June 1, 1974 and ended May 31, 1975, was suddenly so active that it experienced,

> . . . the first booking jam in several years, and made it necessary for some productions to wait for others to close. In the deepest national and economic recession in 30 years, the theatre experienced an increase in financial and artistic success that was a surprise to almost everyone.[1]

Many theatre goers were turning to the alternative theatres as well, not only to take advantage of the less expensive prices but because it was predominantly in this arena that the new American plays could be seen. Broadway was producing mostly imports, revivals and musicals with popular and critical successes such as Equus, The Wiz, Shenandoah and Gypsy and an occasional commercial hit like, Same Time, Next Year. Although Off Broadway was a bit of a disappointment to the critics this season, there were the notable exceptions of The Public Theatre's A Chorus Line, The Roundabout Theatre's What Every Woman Knows and The Circle Repertory Company's Battle of Angels. The center of creative experiment, however, was perceived to have shifted to Off-Off

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[1] Willis, Vol. 31, p. 8.

Broadway with its ever increasing number of original productions.

After The Hot L Baltimore, The Circle was looked upon as a bit of a phenomenon, but fame did not automatically yield a harvest of money to accompany its glitter. Even though the few salaries that were being paid were modest and the Circle's biggest hit, The Hot L Baltimore, was brought in for a nominal $1,000 budget, the 1974 season ended with a $15,000 deficit. However, since financial peril was a given, no one was particularly surprised or unduly upset. Cushioned by the enthusiasm engendered by their first taste of recognized artistic success, they applied for funding assistance from the National Endowment for The Arts, moved the company downtown to Sheridan Square, and planned their next season:

1974-75 SEASON:

Battle of Angels - Tennessee Williams - Major Production
Innocent Thoughts, Harmless Intentions - John Heuer - Workshop
Fire in the Mindhouse - Lance Mulcahy, Arnold Borget & Dion McGregor - Workshop
St. Freud - David Roskowski - Workshop
The Moundbuilders - Lanford Wilson - Major Production
Down By The River Where The Waterlillies Are Disfigured Every Day - Julie Bovasso - Major Production
Scandalous Memories - Harvey Perr - Workshop
Afternoon Tea - Harvey Perr - Workshop
Harry Outside - Corinne Jacker - Major Production
Springs Awakening - Frank Wedekind - Workshop
Not To Worry - A. E. Santaniello - Major Production

As noted, by the end of 1974, The Circle Rep was being hailed in The New York Times as one of the "chief providers of new American plays," not only for its original major productions, the most important of which were The Mound Builders and Harry Outside, but this time also for its series of three consecutive original workshops that would play for two weeks apiece, Innocent Thoughts,

Harmless Intentions, Fire In The Mindhouse and St. Freud.[1]

It was inevitable that the next season would reflect the growing critical attention given to play development. A staggering total of twenty-three separate productions were presented at the Circle: seven Major Productions, three Special Events, ten Workshops, and three After Pieces.[2] This demonstrated how the company concerns were radically changing to accommodate the growing demand for new plays:

1975-76 SEASON

The Elephant in The House - Berilla Kerr - Major Production (Revival)
The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year - John Guare - Special Event
Overruled - George Bernard Shaw Special Event
Dancing For The Kaiser - Andrew Colmar - Major Production
Knock, Knock - Jules Feiffer - Major Production
Who Killed Richard Cory - A. R. Gurney, Jr. - Major Production
Cavern of The Jewels - John Heuer - Major Production - Children's Show
Serenading Louie - Lanford Wilson - Major Production
The Lesson of The Master - Richard Howard - After Piece
When I Dyed My Hair in Venice - Helen Duberstein - Workshop
Solo For Two - Juliette Bowles - Workshop
The Magic Formula - Sidney Morris - Workshop
Terminal - Corinne Jacker - Workshop
Night Thoughts - Corinne Jacker - Workshop
The Confirmation - Howard Ashman - Workshop
Prague Spring - Lee Kalcheim - Special Event
Fog and Mismanagement - Jeff Wanshel - Workshop
Home Free - Lanford Wilson - Workshop
Winners - Brian Friel - Workshop
Wildflowers - Richard Howard - After Piece
Dark Room - David Epstein - Workshop
Mrs. Murray's Farm - Roy London - Major Production
Listen Please - Robert Abrami - After Piece

It is probably accurate to surmise that the sheer bulk and diversity of

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[1] Louis Calta, "News of The Stage," The New York Times, 12/1/74.

[2] The After Piece was a new late night event, initiated by director Daniel Irvine, that would become The Late Show.

the season's presentations were, at least partially, in response to the growing search for the new works needed to fill the growing demand. The little Circle Theatre was an extraordinary beehive of non-stop activity, energy and drive. It was during this season that the workshop program was expanded and named the PIPS, an acronym for Projects-in-Progress. During the PIPS, new plays would be read or partially staged for the Circle audiences in order to garner their reactions. In their roles as participators in the play development process, the audience was expected to work; many enjoyed the responsibility. Originally, the PIPS had been designed to give experience to talented new directors,[1] but eventually, the directors also found themselves placed in the position of concentrating more particularly on developing the material itself.

Reviews for the season's products were varied although they showed an appreciation of the Circle's heavy concentration on new materials. In revieving Elephant in The House, Michael Feingold of The Village Voice, appreciating how the Circle had first struggled with European plays, classics, and difficult new American plays before finding its "style in Lanford Wilson's work,"[2] made much of the sensitive nuances and shadings in Mason's direction of Kerr's play. However, he now felt that the Circle had to "go on to greater writers rather than backward to small imitations."[3] He berates the Circle for not exploring "great playwrights" which is a bit difficult to understand considering that the Circle

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[1] According to Daniel Irvine, Lab Director.

[2] Michael Feingold, "Not All Great, But Great," The Village Voice, 7/7/75.

[3] Ibid.

was now a leading force in making a prioritized effort to find exactly that. Feingold's observations are even more puzzling since practically everything about the 1975-76 season had to do with new dimensions, and a new focus dedicated to new works. Elephant In The House was the only revival presented and it had been reworked and reexplored for production. Essentially, success or failure in a non-profit developmental situation should be important only to the playwright. Allan Wallach understood the importance of the developmental process in his review of Dancing For the Kaiser. Although he felt the play was too melodramatic to be significant, he recognized the playwright's potential and believed that the play deserved production if only to aid the playwright's development, an extraordinary position for a critic to take in a society usually geared toward the end result. He praised the Circle Rep as one of the most ardent pursuers of that "most elusive quarry, the important new American play,"[1] knowing full well that such a reason for production could only occur in a situation in which financial or critical considerations were not the determining factors for a company's viability. Although other reviewers did not necessarily stress the developmental aspects of the company, they too were, nonetheless, directing their attention predominantly to the original works. In reviewing, A. J. Gurney, Jr.'s Who Killed Richard Cory, Emory Lewis called the Circle the "home of hits,"[2] even though he felt that the play did not measure up, while Howard Kissel stressed that the stylized nature of the writing and acting helped to add another "intelligent new American play to the Circle's "already

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[1] Allan Wallach, "Newsday Stage - New, yes; important, no," Newsday, 12/16/75.

[2] Emory Lewis, "Onstage," The Long Island Record, 3/11/76.

impressive roster."[1]

At this point in the Circle's own developmental process, the pursuit itself was more important than the "success" of the end product, which meant that the black and white aspects of success-failure diminished in significance. Developing the *process for discovery* was the most important issue--at least at this time. Certainly there was great joy when a play was received well, but whether it was or was not, the financial structure of the company was not affected; subscription monies were already received, an audience was assured, and plays were not expected to continue beyond the normal one-week preview, six-week run. This was an excellent position for any company geared to experimenting with plays that had no previous track record even though an assured audience did not account for enough revenue to survive.

Regardless of the fact that audiences were finally assured, an important point was emerging. Critical enthusiasm was an important factor in the continuing success of the company. Despite what often amounted to contrasting tastes, the critics were unanimously enthusiastic regarding the type of product, if not always the quality; they found it refreshing to see such an extensive concentration on new plays and new playwrights. In this context it is beginning to be clear that the critics can play a significant role in determining the direction in which a company will grow despite all arguments to the contrary. Without critical acceptance, any non-profit group or company which is institutional in nature, can survive only if it has an unlimited source of private funds and can spend monies to create its own private audience. Without

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[1] Howard Kissel, Women's Wear Daily, 3/12/76.

an unlimited source of private funds, a company has to depend for a major portion of its subsistence on public or corporate grants and fellowships which grow or diminish in proportion to the prevailing economy. In this context, the critic can perform an important function, acting almost like a company's conscience. By giving critical credence to a company's work--pointing out the quality of the work and the importance of its contribution within the context of theatre in general and American theatre in particular--the critic helps to lay the foundation for future funding, and external financial support is what all non-profit theatres need in order to survive. Although Robert Brustein may call it an "obsessive preoccupation with money,"[1] the fact of the matter is that existence or non-existence is almost always determined by the amount of public or corporate subsidization a group can effect. The search for federal or private funding is never-ending since the professional non-commercial theatre's "activities were begininng to outstrip their subsidies,"[2] at an extraordinary rate of growth and diversity. Therefore, since the critics not only affect immediate solvency, but future funding as well, playing to their expectations becomes part of the game.

Now we can begin to perceive a definite shift in the company's focus which would affect much of the company's operations, from a much more difficult audition process (admittance to the company had become extremely difficult) to a

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[1] Robert Brustein, "Art Versus Arts Advocacy In the Non-Commercial Theatre," The New York Times, 7/4/76.

[2] Ibid.

much greater need to please others, perhaps, before themselves.

The original hope had been for a full-fledged repertory acting company, but a true repertory style of playing was not always feasible. There was little room for storage at the small theatre and the very nature of the heavily detailed physical productions they presented usually made repertory playing impractical. The first five years of the Circle's existence had been focused on the acting; most of the major emphasis within the group had always gone to the development of the actors' craft. Now there seemed to be little doubt that the emphasis would have to shift to the plays. Even though the acting was almost always unanimously applauded as excellent and one of the truest ensembles in New York, the major portion of critical attention given the company was clearly to the plays. There was a built-in inevitability in this shift as the pattern of expectations increased. This shift in emphasis was evidenced by the fact that almost every mention of the Circle Repertory Company at this time pointed to the role they were playing in bringing new plays to the theatre. For example: On January 15, 1975, in announcing the opening of Wilson's new play, The Mound Builders, The New York Times stamped the Circle Rep as a "...major producer of new American plays."[1] On March 13, 1975, in reviewing Harry Outside, Mel Gussow also referred to the Circle's new role as producer of new plays. He wrote that on the strength of the first season at the former Sheridan Square Playhouse, "and on its previous work, the Circle is a match for any

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[1] "Briefs on the Arts," The New York Times, 1/15/75. (No By-line)

institutional (and more highly funded) theatre in the country."[1]

The increased attention had changed the Circle's status. They felt obligated to meet the growing expectations, but Off Broadway expenses were much greater than Off-Off Broadway expenses had been, and were also soaring in consonance with the current inflationary economic trends. Now the Circle was finding itself in the position of being in constant serious financial peril; public recognition had brought expensive demands in its wake. It would not be long before the "business" of theatre would emphasize the constant struggle between the integrity of a play versus commercial considerations.

It is clear to see that with the advent of business priorities, many who had participated within the original structure of the company were going to become disenchanted with the institutionalization of the Circle. Rob Thirkield, for example, was clearly worried. Once the closeness of the family feeling began to erode through the very nature of institutionalization, a definite void of enthusiasm was becoming apparent. For someone of Thirkield's disposition in particular, theatre was more a place to celebrate an event than a place to make money. To Thirkield, theatre was more than a play or acting; it was a communion with an audience; it was a group of people who care enough to relate to each other on the most intimate of terms and transmit their connections to an audience. Commercializing the process took away a great deal of the joy and although the intimate creation of a shared event may sound idealistic, this had been the driving force behind the original concept of the group. Now with such

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[1]Mel Gussow,"Harry Outside Enjoys Naturalism at Circle," The New York Times, 5/13/75.

a heavy critical concentration on the product, the company was unwittingly becoming part of the disposable society. The joy of creation and exploration was no longer enough; now the plays had to be produced to please the critics in order to keep themselves fiscally alive.

Of course the company was producing work that was excellent enough to warrant a great deal of critical attention. However, there is another side to the coin of success; success is, in a sense, the very thing that could spoil the process that had created the success. They had approached the fine line where they could no longer be permitted to fail. Such a situation immediately precludes too much experimentation. Lack of experimentation drastically alters the environment. Once the environment changes into one in which "hits" are being sought, like it or not, the company has been forced into the flop-hit syndrome.

The continuous financial need had never propelled the Circle's Board of Directors actively to promote its plays to Broadway, even though doing so is often an extremely viable way to survive. For example, Ain't Misbehavin' became a substantial subsidy for the Manhattan Theatre Club for several years, and A Chorus Line and The Pirates of Penzance have proven to be enormous endowments for Joseph Papp. Taking a cue from the MTC and The Public Theatre, when a play at the Circle has a large critical response and it is thought that it might have a larger audience than can be accommodated by 160 seats a night, the question now comes up of either a transfer to Broadway, a larger Off Broadway house, a tour, and sometimes, even television. Jules Feiffer's Knock, Knock which was perceived as a "kooky, laugh-saturated miracle play in the absurdist tradition," played by a "splendid cast" and moved at a "rocketing pace"

by Mason,[1] was moved intact to Broadway immediately following its brief initial run at the Circle Rep. It opened on February 24, 1976 in time for the Tony nominations. Marshall Mason was nominated for his first Tony Award for his direction. The committee also nominated Jules Feiffer for Best Play, and Daniel Seltzer for Best Actor. At the same time, Judd Hirsch won the Drama Desk Award for Best Supporting actor as Knock, Knock's "Wiseman." For all intents and purposes the successful Off Broadway Circle Rep production had transferred to Broadway with critical acceptance from within the industry as well as excellent reviews. And then came one of the most astonishing incidents in the history of American Theatre. The prevailing story had it that:

> . . .two new-breed producers moved the successful Circle production of "Knock, Knock" to Broadway where, with Feiffer's consent, they hired a new director and cast, including a glamorous star, and, overnight, turned the downtown hit into an uptown flop.[2]

Mason bristles a bit when he hears this version of the story repeated since it is historically inaccurate. The transferred Circle production, complete with original cast, was hardly a flop. It ran on Broadway successfully for five full months during which time it had received its Tony nominations--certainly an indication of its continued energy and effectiveness. However, Mason says,

> After the Tony Awards were over, the producers said we were not sustaining the play. With the notices we were getting, we should be selling out. Instead we were doing approximately 70% capacity. The producers said they would not continue with the play unless we consented to replace the actors with stars. The playwright came to me and made this demand, and I

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[1] T. E. Kalem, "Kooky Miracle," Time Magazine, 2/2/76.

[2] Paul Gardner, "The Man Who Keeps Circle Rep Rolling," The New York Times, 10/3/76.

> said, "In no way am I going to replace this successful production with stars." I urged Jules not to listen to them. I was confident that the play would run, that it was going to do very well, especially after the Tony nominations. But he would not listen to me. He went along with the producers. So I said, "Then you will have to find another director to do it." So I became the only director, as far as Iknow, in the history of the American theatre who was replaced after receiving the Tony Award nomination for Best Director.[1]

The producers brought in director, Jose Quintero and a new cast headed by Lynn Redgrave. It was the new version that failed; it ran for two weeks and closed.

Mason felt that the producers had been wrong and had made a mistake since the play had already been running successfully for five months but he did not seem bitter about the experience. Nor did he change any of his basic concepts of theatre. If anything, it only emphasized his beliefs in company values, not the least of which was the acting ensemble; he continued to stress the experience of what is happening for actors as well as audiences as happening in the present tense--a good depiction of directorial lyric realism. He continued to stress the importance of the treatment of the writer in order to nourish his creativity. In seeming testimony to this philosophy, the current commercial season had introduced several talented new playwrights all of whom had basically been developed and nurtured through regional companies: Michael Cristofer, (The Shadow Box,) Preston Jones, (The Texas Trilogy,) David Mamet, (American Buffalo,) and Albert Innaurato, (Gemini.) The Shadow Box, American Buffalo and Gemini all went on to commercial productions. That 5th of July,

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[1] Mason interview.

Talley's Folly and Serenading Louie were all created within a company setting only stressed Lanford Wilson's own belief that the future of playwriting was within the structure of a company. By October of 1978, an editorial in Other Stages[1] discussed the advantages and pitfalls of moving plays from Off-Off Broadway and Off Broadway to Broadway. All indications seemed to be that Broadway was relying more and more on the non-commercial theatre to supply plays that had already broken the ice with the critics. Obviously, as evidenced by Knock, Knock, making the move was not always completely productive.

The experience of Knock, Knock also cemented Mason's belief that the collaborative ensemble of directing and acting could make or break a play even though it is often the "playwright who takes the fall"[2] with the critics, and that "The key to ensemble acting is that the actors have to share the same goal--the play."[3] As Paul Gardner wrote shortly afterwards:

> [The] Circle won't be changing its style to accommodate commercial success or its new position as one of Off Broadway's leading theatres. "Good reviews give us more artistic freedom," Mason said, "and, sure, I'd like to see another play of ours move to Broadway. But when I start directing that's never in my mind. If somebody wanted to move us uptown permanently, I wouldn't take the offer."[4]

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[1] Editorial, Other Stages, Vol. 1 No. 2, 10/17 - 10/31/78.

[2] Mason, as quoted by Paul Gardner in, "The Man Who Keeps Circle Rep Rolling," The New York Times, 10/3/76.

[3] Mason, as quoted by Gardner.

[4] Ibid.

However much artistic integrity may sometimes be at odds with commercial considerations, the fact remained that the Circle's budget was growing enormously. By the 1976-77 season, the Circle's budget for six productions had reached $300,000. The price to a subscriber was a modest $27.50 for a full season of six plays, plus workshops, while commercial theatre had reached an all-time high of $20 per ticket. With such an awesome budget, fund raising had now become a full-time preoccupation at the same time that the concentration on play development expanded, the two seemingly disparate pursuits becoming increasingly inseparable.

The 1976-77 SEASON:

The Farm - David Storey - Major Production
A Tribute to Lili Lamont - Arthur White - Major Production
My LIfe - Corinne Jacker - Major Production
The Passing of Corky Brewster - Jerry L. Crawford - After Piece
Gemini - Albert Innaurato - Major Production
For Love or Money - Jay Jeffries & Jason Mc Auliffe - After Piece
Suicide in Bb - Sam Shepard - Play-in-Progress
Allegra - Allan Bates - Play-in-Progress
To The Land - Claris Nelson - Play-in-Progress
Exiles - James Joyce - Major Production
Fat Chances - Charlie Peters - Play-in-Progress
Cabaret/New York Times: A Review - James Tobin - After Piece
What The Babe Said - Martin Halpern - After Piece
Mrs. Tydings Mason-Dixon Medicine Man - John Heuer - Play-in-Progress
Celebrations Off River Street - James Tobin - Play-in-Progress
The Brixton Recovery - Jack Gilhooley - Play-in-Progress
Unsung Cole - Cole Porter & Norman Berman - Major Production

During the 1976-66 season there were six Major Productions, four After Pieces and seven Plays-in-Progress (PIPS). Only two of the major productions were written by company playwrights, Corinne Jacker and Albert Innaurato, neither of whom was seriously active within the structure of the company; Innaurato spent most of his developmental process with Playwrights Horizon.

The search for new plays was extending beyond the limits of the existing company list of resident playwrights to a greater degree than ever before.

Although the 1976-77 Season would see the last of the After Pieces (which would emerge the following year as "The Late Show Series,") the new Plays-in-Progress series was introduced as a very important part of the play developmental process that was emerging almost organically at the Circle. The PIPS were staged readings of plays by resident playwrights, such as John Heuer, or visiting playwrights, such as Sam Shepard, that were not felt to be completely ready for production but eminently ready for the acid test of audience reaction. Of the six Major Productions, four were new American works and one, Gemini, moved on to Broadway creating instant recognition for its author, Albert Innaurato. The Circle can readily claim Gemini as one of its own, even though its first workshop production had been given at Playwrights Horizon, an Off-Off Broadway house. However, it was not until Innaurato brought the play to the Circle, making several important cast changes along the way (e.g., Danny Aiello, Jonathan Hadary), that the comedy achieved its full potential.

The Farm initiated a season that was not only full of new works but studded with actors who were growing in national recognition. The cast of Corinne Jacker's My Life had William Hurt, Christopher Reeve, Jeff Daniels, Tanya Berezin, Roger Chapman, Douglass Watson, Jo Henderson, Nancy Snyder and Claire Malis. A Tribute to Lily Lamont was noteworthy mostly because Mason had assembled an excellent cast in Leueen McGrath, William Hindman, Helen Stenborg and Burke Pearson. Not only was Mason an actor's director, it was much to his credit that The Farm, by English playwright, David Storey, inspired critical celebrations. With its terse but poetic language covering up the state of quiet

inertia in which the characters lived, The Farm was directed with the rich sensibilities that Mason could so readily bring to a play with such a Chekhovian spirit.

The beginning of the 1977-78 Season was notable because of the funding breakthrough in which three major New York Off Broadway theatres received Ford Foundation grants for the express purpose of producing new American plays: The Circle Repertory Company, Manhattan Theatre Club and Playwrights Horizon. Of the three theatres, only the Circle was an acting company with resident actors and resident playwrights. However, knowing that the bulk of foundation money was being channeled only toward the encouragement of new American plays, Marshall Mason banded together with Lynne Meadows of The Manhattan Theatre Club and Robert Moss of Playwrights Horizon, with astounding success in one of the first attempts ever to break through the barrier of corporate funding. A total of $1.4 million dollars was granted to theatres that were doing new American plays.[1] This was an extraordinary financial boon to all three. For the Circle, it was also a cementing of the direction in which they had been heading. If there had ever been any question, there could be no more doubt that their major concern had to be dedicated to the development of the new American plays that were playing such an important part in attracting the necessary funding to continue, even though, as we shall see, there are still company members who deny that this is so.

By the 1977-78 season, the Late Show Series had been developed: it was the

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[1] Mel Gussow, "Three New York Theatre Companies Get Ford Grants," The New York Times, 10/6/77.

brainchild of Daniel Irvine, Mason's young assistant. In 1973-74, Irvine had been doing a little bit of everything including acting as head of the informal Literary Department. It was in logging and reading many of the unsolicited manuscripts that arrived, that he first thought of taking advantage of this wealth of material. Many of the manuscripts were one act plays, not the form usually presented at the Circle. The thought occurred to Irvine to present original, full, one-act plays as late night events adapting the existing set of a play already in production and presenting the new work as the reverse of a "curtain raiser." Mason, always in tune with new ideas, encouraged Irvine to work out the details. Assembling a staff of designers with the creativity necessary to adapt a new play to an existing set with minimum modifications, Irvine initiated and directed the first After Piece. The Passing of Corky Brewster by Jerry Crawford was presented on the set of Corinne Jacker's, Harry Outside, the current Major Production. It was the beginning of four continuous years of presenting premieres of hour-long new one-act plays on a very modest production budget of $150 each. They started at 11 PM after the main production had ended. Sometimes the already existing audience took a break and returned; sometimes the one-act play attracted a totally new audience. By the next season, the name had formally been changed to The Late Show Series. It was not long before the series of original works attracted major critics like Clive Barnes, Mel Gussow and Douglas Watt. It was welcomed unquestioningly as an important and innovative addition to the New York theatrical scene as one of the few places to see a continuing flow of new one act plays.

> One of the most laudable aspects of the Circle Repertory Company's series of late-night productions of one-act plays is that the plays--at least the first two in the series, Lanford

> Wilson's "Brontosaurus" and John Bishop's "Cabin 12"--really are one-acts. These are not unfinished full-length plays or close-ups from a larger canvas, they are the theatrical equivalent of short stories or character sketches.[1]

Both the company actors and company playwrights became excited about the project. Lanford Wilson wrote Brontosaurus especially for the first Late Show to be played by Tanya Berezin, Jeff Daniels and Sharon Madden; it was presented in the "silo" from the Feedlot set. Resident playwright John Bishop's, Cabin 12, was written for and played by Edward Seamon and Jonathan Hogan. Resident playwright Robert Patrick came up with My Cup Ranneth Over for Nancy Snyder and Amy Wright.

There is little doubt that the addition of the Late Show Series was in keeping with the Circle's growing image as a house of original plays, be they full length, one-act, mainstage, workshop, PIPS, After Pieces, or Special Events. As can be seen, the emphasis has now gone almost completely from the actor to the playwright, a case in point for the inability to play the game outside of the critical expectations. Although no one argues against the necessity for new plays, this had not been the main point of interest in the beginning. However, the purity of artistic credos is often sacrificed to the demands of outside expectations particularly when survival is at stake. As long as the grants kept coming for the new plays and as long as the critics continued to cheer only when the new plays were "hits," the Circle was forced to follow the lead of these expectations. The group of actors that was going to make itself available to playwrights was still there and still available. They helped to realize the new plays, all the time maintaining the playwright's vision and integrity. This basic,

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[1] Mel Gussow, "Stage: Bishop One-Acter at Circle Rep," The New York Times, 1/6/77.

original concept had not changed. What had changed is that the plays became more important than anything else by virtue of two simple facts: first, good plays were rarer than good actors, and second, it was the plays that brought in the subsidies.

The 1977-78 season presented only ten events:

Feedlot - Patrick Meyers - Main Production
Brontosaurus - Lanford Wilson - Late Show
Ulysses in Traction - Albert Innaurato - Major Production
Cabin 12 - John Bishop - Late Show
Lulu - Frank Wedekind - Major Production
Two From the Late Show - Lanford Wilson, John Bishop - Major Production
5th of July - Lanford Wilson - Major Production
The Living Hand - Mark Stevenson - Special Event
My Cup Ranneth Over - Robert Patrick - Late Show
Pushing 30 - Jonathan Hadary - Late Show

The artistic failure of the production of Frank Wedekind's seventy year-old naturalist/expressionist drama, Lulu, seemed almost prophetic in the current atmosphere of searching for the new. Wedekind had adapted Lulu from his Earth Spirit,[1] written in 1893, and from his Pandora's Box,[2] written in 1903. The sexually honest exotic tale by the 20th century pioneer of German expressionism does not always fare well in a translated production. Ironically, its failure at the Circle would serve to point out an important developmental concern within the company. Never before had the Circle received such blistering attacks by the critics. The production, adapted from 180 pages of text, incurred all of the negative eloquence of the critics. Condemnations ran heavy, most particularly

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[1] Although Earth Spirit was written in 1893, it did not realize full production until 1898.

[2] Pandora's Box was produced privately in Vienna in 1905.

heaped upon the head of Rob Thirkield who had directed. Only once before was it recorded that Lulu had been performed in New York--ironically enough on the same site, the former Sheridan Square Playhouse--and it had opened and closed in one night, March 27, 1970. Few recognized the courage in Thirkield's attempt to revive the difficult play, mistaken though the production might have been. Experiencing such heavy critical disapproval served to point out a very important difference from the early days at the uptown loft; the freedom to fail at the Circle Repertory Company was over. Most particularly, the freedom to fail and still be able to walk away with a sense of accomplishment in a difficult artistic attempt would, most likely, never return. Failure was no longer acceptable in an atmosphere thick with critical scrutiny. The Circle Repertory Company now had a position to maintain.

In a very strange way, this new position was at complete odds with the original philosophy of the company. The failure of this production would prove to be the beginning of the end of Rob Thirkield's direct participation in the company. Lulu was produced shortly after his divorce from Tanya Berezin. As he remembers it,

> Something strange happened then. I wasn't that happy with the production, but it was wonderful for the company. The actors were all exceptional in it, and the audiences were completely freaked out. It turned out to have the best box-office of any play that year which was surprising considering the reviews were so terrible. But that was the year the Circle ran out of money, which was the main reason we closed the play. It had so many people in the cast we couldn't afford it. But it was a weird point for me. I felt I didn't do very well. And all the actors in it felt, well I guess Rob wasn't that good a director. I waited for the next thing to come

along to direct, and nothing came.[1]

The heaviest irony was that no one had had more to do with creating the comfortable, pressure-free environment for the company than had Thirkield. It was he who constantly supported the actors through all the ego-shattering growing pains that were so often an integral part of development; it was he who preached that there was no such thing as total failure, that even a box-office or commercial failure could have its value in terms of growth. But even in Thirkield's wounded state, the same support did not seem to be forthcoming for him. He continues:

> It was a sort of turning point for the theatre. They started saying we ought to be a little more careful about the plays we do from now on. They started doing small plays with limited number of characters. Lulu was the last large cast until the revival of Gilead. I felt myself out in the cold a bit.[2]

It was Lanford Wilson's 5th of July that stood out as the one major critical event of a particularly uneventful season in which the addition of the Late Show series was the major innovation. While reviewers like Rex Reed were beside themselves with "genius raves" for all involved, on a more sedate level, critics like Harold Clurman, Edith Oliver and Mel Gussow were enthusiastic, if more careful in the use of superlatives. More and more the collaborative nature of Mason's directorial work with Wilson's plays was being recognized; the smoothed plot seams from an earlier version, the clarified character relationships, a calming of the play's overly comic aspects, all of which lent a more Chekhovian

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[1] Thirkield interview.

[2] Ibid.

air to the most current version, was directly attributed to the freedom to work out the play in a company atmosphere, and to the long standing working relationship between Wilson and Mason. In addition to the recognition of this important collaboration, the acting ensemble was being perceived as inseparable from the play, so much so that when Mason says, "It is the company that has inspired Lanford,"[1] his meaning becomes more apparent.

> One of the reasons Lanford is here writing is because he is inspired by the actors to investigate particular things. If he were off writing by himself alone, as he did earlier---and I'm not taking anything away from him when I say this; he's a wonderful playwright---but the balance gets so off.[2]

The true essence of the nature of collaboration in theatre is truly explored in this manner--doing it, working it, feeling it, seeing it come to life, and not being isolated in a creative vacuum. The breathing back and forth is very stimulating and one of the phenomonal aspects that is not generally appreciated by the public regarding an acting company that has resident playwrights. As Mason points out,

> Harold Clurman said it so well about Hot L. He said you could not tell where the writing ends and the acting begins. I've literally experienced this with Hot L when returning from seeing a production of it in California to seeing our own production again in New York. People came downstairs and wandered about. And Chatty Farrell was so big and fat, and she'd slide over a chair and sit down because she looked like she couldn't stand anymore. I had no connection that I'd told her to do that. It was the same thing with the lines. They came spontaneously. You never had the sense that they were written down. That's what happens to plays that are successful. You lose the sense of the script. What Clurman

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Ibid.

calls the true play.[1]

The same sense of interrelationship occurred with the production of 5th Of July. Although the play always belongs to the playwright, the co-authorship of the *production* becomes patently obvious when the script has intermeshed with the directed creation of the actors to a degree that something totally three dimensional is born; and it is born every night anew with a different audience. It is a bit ironic that while there was an intellectual understanding of this point, the major focus of the company's activities was turning almost exclusively to the creation of the new plays with the continued motivation of external financial support. Soon it would not even be important whether or not the plays had been developed within the structure of the company itself. However, the need to recreate the kind of mutually inspiring stimulation of a 5th of July was not lost on Mason; it was obviously being directly sought for through the growing company participation in all the new writing development events, (the PIPS, the Friday readings, the Labs.)

In 1974, the Circle had been presented the Drama-Desk Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Off-Broadway Theatre. Now, the Circle was presented with the Margo Jones Award for Most Significant Contribution to the American Theatre-1977, and the Outer Critics Circle-Joseph Kaye Award for Distinguished Contribution to the American Theatre-1978. Soon it would not even be of primary importance whether or not the plays had been developed within

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[1] Ibid.

the structure of the company itself although this was still the stated and most desired goal. Beginning its tenth season in the fall of 1978, Mason wrote in an open letter to the company:

> Circle Repertory will continue its leadership in continued commitment to the discovery and nurturing of the American writer. Circle Repertory is the only permanent professional New York acting company since the Group Theatre to work with a resident ensemble of artists placed at the service of America's major playwrights, eleven of whom are in residence. Based on the concept that the action of the play should be the experience of the audience, Circle Rep attempts to bring this concept to life through the imaginative interaction of the ensemble of actors with the resident playwrights . . . Circle Repertory remains the standard bearer for the new American play.[1]

To date, the Circle had presented sixty-nine world premieres. The company playwrights included:

John Bishop
Julie Bovasso
James Farrell
Martin Halpern
Albert Innaurato
Berilla Kerr
Roy London
Patrick Meyers
Claris Nelson
Milan Stitt
Lanford Wilson

The ensemble of actors included:

Michael Ayr
Tanya Berezin
Roger Chapman
Jeff Daniels
Jack Davidson
Brad Dourif
Conchatta Ferrell
Neil Flanagan
Staphanie Gordon
Mari Gorman
Bruce Gray
Trish Hawkins
Judd Hirsch
Zane Lasky
Marion Levine
Bobo Lewis
Sharon Maddon
Debra Mooney
Edward J. Moore
Burke Pearson
Joyce Christopher Reehling
Timothy Shelton
Nancy Snyder
June Stein
Helen Stenborg
Danton Stone (continued)

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[1] Marshall W. Mason, "Open letter to the company," Circle Repertory News, 11/78.

Jonathan Hogan	Elizabeth Sturges
William Hurt	Douglass Watson
Nancy Kilmer	Jimmy Ray Weeks
Ken Kliban	Amy Wright

The company directors were:

Neil Flanagan	Marshall Ogelsby
Daniel Irvine	Terry Schreiber
Marshall W. Mason	Rob Thirkield

The company designers (including sound and music) were:

John Lee Beatty	Charles London
Laura Crow	Norman L. Berman
Dennis Parichy	

Whether or not company participation directly influenced the 1978-79 season, one of Circle Rep's most golden years, is difficult to assess, but it would seem that everything in the way of expectation and development had at least been pointing in the direction of encouraging increased writing activity.

1978-79 SEASON:

Glorious Morning - Patrick Meyers - Major Production
Stargazing - Tom Cone - Late Show
In The Recovery Lounge - James Farrell - Major Production
In Three Easy Lessons - John Calene - Project-in-Progress
Total Recall - Martin Halpern - Late Show
The Runner Stumbles - Milan Stitt - Major Production
The Human Voice - Jean Cocteau - Late Show
Minnesota Moon - John Olive - Late Show
Winter Signs - John Bishop - Project-in-Progress
Winter Signs - John Bishop - Major Production
The Deserter - Norman Beim - Late Show
Perched on a Gabardine Cloud - Steven Braunstein - Project-in-Progress
Talley's Folly - Lanford Wilson - Major Production
Life And/Or Death - Herb Gardner - Late Show
Van Zandt Ellis Piano Recital - Special Event
A Woman's Life in The Theatre - Rita Gardner - Special Event
Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein - Marty Martin - Special Event
Buried Child - San Shepard - Summer Major Production
Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein - Marty Martin - Major Production

Of the seven Major Productions, five were enormously successful; and two were brought in to mixed reception. Glorious Morning opened the season happily. Though the play strained credulity with its bizarre characters, it was the quality of the production that brought the melodramatic aspects of the play up to the quality of the "rattling good dialogue" that John Simon applauded.[1] There was the the frightened but feisty mother who was dying of cancer, played to such breathtaking perfection by Tanya Berezin, that Tich Dace wrote, ". . . such performances demand to be seen and relished and treasured,"[2] while Howard Kissel wrote, ". . . her characterization is so complete it does not seem to begin or end with the play; every gesture seems drawn from a whole life."[3] The Circle was credited with giving Meyers' play a nearly perfect production, ". . . and even if the situations and motivations are apt to be unconvincing, the characters have a thumping theatricality that keeps us steadily interested, even if only intermittently involved."[4]

In The Recovery Lounge - by James Farrell, is a play about a nurse and her patients in which the Circle production was again rated superior to the play itself, most particularly Tom Lynch's hospital setting, but this time could not save

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[1] John Simon, "Theatre," New York Magazine, 11/13/78.

[2] Tish Dace, "Glorious Acting In Morning", Other Stages, 11/2/78.

[3] Howard Kissel, "Glorious Morning," Women's Wear Daily, 11/2/78.

[4] Simon.

the play. Only Clive Barnes, now with The York Post,[1] was "outrageously amused by this hospital farce" with its "unusually witty script" in which Marshall Mason, the director, "has done a great job of placing the play right inside the audience."[2] Even Barnes felt that the playwright was helped by an exceptional production, but he was alone in his positive critique of the play.

However, the poorly received play was immediately obscured by a revival of Milan Stitt's powerful court-room drama, The Runner Stumbles, about a Catholic priest on trial for the murder of a young nun of his parish. The Runner Stumbles, a moral and psychological study as well as a court-room drama, was an extraordinarily successful revival of the very successful 1976 Broadway production that had been directed by Austin Pendleton. Besides being very successful, this production was important because it introduced Milan Stitt directly to the Circle audiences. Stitt, who at Mason's invitation had just joined the Circle as its official playwright-dramaturg, was to contribute substantially to the Circle's playwriting development over the next several years. The play was also directly responsible for bringing B. Rodney Marriott into the company. Stitt had discovered several changes while writing the screenplay for Stanley Kramer's film version of the script that he wished to incorporate into the

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[1] During the 1977-78 season, Martin Gottfried resigned from The New York Post as drama critic, at which time Clive Barnes moved from The New York Times to become drama critic for the New York Post while Richard Eder suceeded him on the New York Times.

[2] Clive Barnes, "'The Recovery Room' dispenses many a laugh," New York Post, 12/8/78.

revival. When Austin Pendleton did not wish to create another version that would necessarily force comparisons with his original production on Broadway, Stitt thought of Marriott who had successfully directed a production of The Runner Stumbles at Yale University and asked him to direct the new version. In Marriott's own words, "The experience was one that was rich and wonderful for me."[1] He came from Exeter College where he had been teaching to direct the second New York production of an established play and was thrown into working with some of the best actors in New York, not the least of which was William Hurt.

The desire to find another work forced the premature production of the fourth Major Production, Winter Signs, by John Bishop, which was not received well. It is possible that the Circle may have gotten too excited about this talented writer whose plays, The Trip Back Down and Cabin 12, had shown such merit and originality. Martin Gottfried was one of the few who recognized that the company may have prematurely produced Bishop's play Winter Signs before it was ready, thereby aborting any possibility for the necessary development it required. Gottfried's observation is quite astute since Winter Signs was surprisingly produced immediately after it had been given a PIP. Usually a PIP receives a longer period of gestation before it moves on to a major production no matter how promising the play may appear in workshop.

Then came the major event of the Circle's season, another Lanford Wilson play, the two-character, Talley's Folly. The simplest, most lyrical of all of Wilson's

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[1] B. Rodney Marriott interview, New York City, December 3, 1983.

plays now emerged as part of a trilogy about the Talley family of Lebanon, Missouri, which Wilson had begun the previous year with 5th of July. The character, Aunt Sally, of 5th of July who carried her beloved Matt's ashes around, is now seen as Sally Talley in 1944. Thirty-three years younger, she is being courted by the same Matt Friedman. The Jewish accountant from New York City determined to win her, and the mid-western spinster equally determined to hold herself in strict reserve against his persistent charm and humor, are two seemingly disparate souls whose human affinities eventually erase all external barriers. Faultlessly directed by Mason and beautifully played by Judd Hirsch and Trish Hawkins, the play was extremely well received by all the major New York critics--Clive Barnes, Walter Kerr, Mel Gussow, Jonathan Beaufort, Harold Clurman, and even John Simon, who wrote: "Wilson is the only playwright I can think of who is steadily growing, improving, paring himself down to essentials."[1]

Capping off a rich season were two summer productions, Sam Shepard's 1979 Pulitzer Prize winner, Buried Child, and Marty Martin's one-woman play, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, with Pat Carroll's tour de force performance. Like Gemini and The Runner Stumbles, both had been developed elsewhere. Buried Child had originated at San Francisco's Magic Theatre under the aegis of director Robert Woodruff, who interacted with Shepard in a similar

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[1] John Simon, "Folie A Deux," New York Magazine, 5/79.

manner that Mason interacted with Wilson It had a brief run at The Theatre for The New City on Second Avenue before moving to a major summer production at the Circle. It is not surprising that the Circle would produce one of Shepard's plays, particularly such a powerful one. Shepard, a quintessentially American playwright with mid-western roots, was an old friend from the early days at the Cino; he still considered The Circle Rep his New York home. In Buried Child he plunged, once again, into a favorite theme of his with stunning success--that of empty homes in a rich but barren America, this time presented in a bizarre, almost surrealistic manner. The Circle would continue to produce Shepard's New York productions (e.g. Fool For Love in 1984.) It was a little more surprising that the Circle would present a play by Marty Martin, a twenty-six year old playwright from Austin, Texas who had no connection at all to the company. Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein was a completely independent production. Produced by Mary Ellyn Devery for The Sea-Ker, Inc. with Milton Moss as director, it was sought for summer presentation by the Circle in its entirety, fitting in only with the Circle's image as the home of new plays. Since there were many resident and Lab playwrights available with less tested material, it is possible that the burden of the hit/flop syndrome that has always plagued commercial theatre was beginning to have its effect on non-profit theatre as well. Profit theatre could not afford to nurture a growing playwright; commercialisn often negated the possibility of experimentation with the unproven. It was the old story that risks were not likely to be taken when the stakes were too high. Non-commercial theatres like the Circle could afford to

nurture the playwright and take the chances, but as more and more attention was placed on them to find the new plays to move to Broadway, treating them like experimental production houses rather that a totally alternative theatre unto themselves, the inability to nurture could be catching. This situation was creating an interesting dichotomy; the demand for the new was never-ending while the arenas to create the new were shriveling under the heat of categorizing into the hit/flop columns.

Unfortunately, the contemporary need for that which is new could create myopic visions of the very nature of theatre itself as witnessed by Martin Duberman's indictment of the American theatre in the May, 1978 issue of Harpers. Duberman felt that the bicentennial celebration had led to the Golden Age of American plays. However, according to him, American drama had been "pretty thin' and mostly "terrible." In the sixties, he contended, it seemed possible that theatre might "get better; black theatre had some hope."[1] The physical theatres of the sixties--the Open Theatre, the Living Theatre--"were good" but now they were all gone. The writers of the sixties, such as John Guare and Sam Shepard, had not lived up to expectations. Duberman felt it was all "facile theatrics," and that the newest trio, Babe, Innaurato and Mamet, were also thin and facile. Only the Circle Repertory Theatre was labeled as "the theatre with the most distinguished record for new plays."[2] Although this was a form of

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[1] Martin Duberman, "The Great Gray Way," Harpers, May, 1978.

[2] Ibid.

praise for the Circle, it was becoming increasingly and alarmingly clear that in many views, not only were new plays sought, but unless a theatre produced *great* new plays, it was considered insignificant, even though "great" is extremely rare and most efforts fall into the very wide chasm between "great" and "terrible." To seek only the great is an exercise in frustration and in destruction of potentially good playwrights. Unfortunately, too many people believe that if a play is not great it does not deserve to exist. In England, at least, it is almost expected that a new play will not be great because the measure is so extraordinarily Olympian; Shakespeare is difficult to match. Therefore, the lights can be dimmer and still cast a glow. In this country, even though our heritage is in English theatre, we do not have an Olympian backlog. Perhaps we are still looking for the American equivalent of Shakespeare; anything less produces cranky critics.

However, arguments like Duberman's applied subtle pressure and made it appear as though the sole pressure of theatre was to create new plays. Such a concept is an almost total negation of one of the primary reasons for theatre, the event itself--the performance, the acting, the audience involvement, the celebration, the sheer enjoyment of spectacle, even the religiosity of it, which is at the primary root of its earliest origins. Although new and original work is of extreme generational importance--each generation needing to stamp its identity on the broad context of theatre history--sometimes it is forgotten that the entire experience of theatre can occur even with a 2,000 year old play. The only acting company in town that had started out in celebration of a less channeled direction of activity, had just about relinquished the classics by 1979, delegating them to

perhaps one a season. As previously mentioned, concentrating on new plays is not necessarily bad, only a deviation from original intents. The Circle had always acknowledged the importance of encouraging new works; that is why they had originated their company with playwrights already in residence. The difference is that they had become caught up almost exclusively in the search for the new. To this end the Literary Department was created.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LITERARY DEPARTMENT AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The formal creation of the Literary Department of the Circle Repertory Company occurred in 1977, eight years after the company began. It was created to formalize a series of procedures and programs that had already been informally established but had never been run on a regular basis. For example, Workshop Productions had been presented since 1969 but were not part of a consistent developmental program; readings of new plays were held frequently but with no formal or regular scheduling; unsolicited manuscripts were accepted without restrictions but were read only when someone in the company managed to "get around" to them.

The goals and aspirations of the Literary Department have always been far-reaching, idealistic, and full of hope. There is an optimisim at the heart of the department which seems always to have been embodied by the people who worked in it as though it were a necessary prerequisite for the job. There seems to be an undying love of process, of development, and of growth for growth's sake. Since in the world of theatre, there are many groups dedicated to the continued development of professional playwrights, Circle Rep's desire to create a nurturing and comfortable environment in which artists can develop theatre literature may be equaled elsewhere, but certainly it is unequaled anywhere in its humaneness. In addition, there are few groups that demonstrate a similar dedication to the unknown artist. It is most particularly in this context, the

service it performed for unknown playwrights, that the importance and uniqueness of the Circle Repertory's Literary Department is apparent. Thousands of unsolicited manuscripts were received every year by the department, and each and every person who submitted a manuscript received a well-thought-out personalized letter of critique and encouragement.

Literary departments, literary managers and dramaturgs are a new breed in American theatre, even newer than the professional director who has been in existence approximately 110 years. The first formal dramaturg in theatre history, Gotthold Ephrain Lessing (1729-1781) worked for the Hamburg National Theatre in the late 1700s. Lessing was also a resident playwright.[1] He began the tradition of having a playwright fill a staff position called "Dramaturg" or "Literary Manager," a tradition that continues to this day. Literally, a dramaturg means a "maker of plays," or playwright, so this tradition is very much in keeping with the origin of the word.

Lessing represents the high point of the German Enlightenment, and his work can safely be categorized as the beginning of the modern era in German drama. As a writer-in-residence at the Hamburg National Theatre, he had a large role in the theatre's management. To this day, it is in Germany that the role of the dramaturg has the most importance. The theatre company is split between the Director, who controls the actual production aspects, and the dramaturg, who controls play selection. In addition, it is the Dramaturg who seems to provide the artistic, theoretical overview for the company. As a playwright, critic,

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[1] Lessing is the author of Miss Sara Sampson, 1755, Minna von Barnhelm, 1767, Emilia Galotte, 1772, and Nathan der Weise, 1779.

theoretician and scholar, Lessing initiated the era of dramaturgy.

In the English-speaking theatre, it was Kenneth Tynan who convinced Laurence Olivier that there should be a critic in residence at the founding of the National Theatre in England. However, unlike in the German model, Tynan does not seem to have had any real artistic control. He did not control the play selection process, nor did he have any great effect upon the artistic vision of the theatre. Instead, he assisted those writers who were rewriting, and he provided a great deal of research for the ongoing productions. This configuration is far more in keeping with the American version of the position of Dramaturg, particularly as defined by the Circle Repertory Company.

Although dramaturgy is a priority function of the Literary Department at the Circle, there are many aspects that fall far afield from pure dramaturgy. A quick and easy umbrella definition of the Literary Department's role at the Circle is that it is in charge of all scripts, solicited, unsolicited, in-house, out-of-house, in development, already completed, classics, etc. "In charge of" means running the processes, the evaluations, the photocopying of mainstage scripts for the actors, buying copies of classics that are to be done, or researching script material.

Also under the same defining umbrella, if the Literary Department is in charge of all scripts, then, too, the Literary Manager is in charge of the developmental processes involved in them. This consists of overseeing the running of the developmental programs such as:

Script Evaluation Service
Friday Readings
Projects-in-Progress (PIPS)
Extended Readings
Playwrights Lab

Play selection for all developmental programs
Reading scripts and holding script conferences with writers
Attending outside readings and productions
Maintaining supportive contact with member writers
Finding new writers

The ultimate goal of these tasks is to develop a series of plays that are then "put on the menu" out of which selections are made for mainstage presentation. The most basic of all day-to-day tasks of the Literary Manager, however, involves the process of evaluating the more than 2,000 unsolicited manuscripts that are received by the company each year. This task involves.

Prioritizing the reading process
Finding outside readers
Reading plays and holding script conferences with selected writers
Contacting agents
Writing letters of critique

As a member of the artistic staff, the Literary Manager has direct input into the decision-making process: unlike persons in other management staff positions, only the Literary Manager is able to remain solely artistic in temperament. Because the department is not concerned with fund raising or with a product that is judged immediately by an outside audience, the artistic voice of the Literary Manager can remain "pure," an extremely important stance. Often, it means that the Literary Manager becomes the "loyal opposition," - to use a parliamentary term; that is, it is the Literary Manager who will point out that a particular policy is not exactly in keeping with the artistic goals and philosophy of the company. Thus, ideally, within the Artistic staff, the Literary Manager at all times questions, advises and cajoles. On this adversary level, the task of the Literary Manager is to keep the company "honest."

Even before the Literary Department was created in 1977, the company was famous for premiering the works of such future luminaries as Lanford

Wilson, Mark Medoff, Albert Innaurato, Jules Feiffer, and John Guare. Indeed from its founding, the role of the playwright has been central to the development of the company even though most of the focus was on performance. Lanford Wilson often filled the same role for the theatre that Lessing did for the Hamburg National Theatre. As a resident playwright and a supposed co-founder, he found himself acting in the capacity of advisor in all matters pertaining to playwriting. This self-initiated involvement in plays that were not his own was a natural evolutionary step. It came directly out of the participation theatre that had traditionally begun with Joe Cino's famous opening, "It's magic time!" When Wilson became active at the Circle, he brought not only the same kind of infectious energy that had sparked the early days at the Caffe' Cino but the same habit of filling in and doing whatever had to be done. According to Mason, Wilson was often present during the rehearsal process of any play being readied for the mainstage. It would be Wilson who would take aside the author of the play and discuss possible revisions based upon his own reactions to the rehearsal. Toward the end of the rehearsal process, Wilson would also assist by talking to Mason about the direction of the play. Almost all of these functions are traditionally filled by the dramaturg of a theatre company. However, at the time, it was an unofficial position that Wilson assumed arising purely out of what he perceived to be a need within the company.

It was only when Marshall Mason returned from a State Department tour of Germany in 1977, where he saw dramaturgs in action, that he felt the need for a formal, staff position to encourage and promote play development through all of its necessary stages. Although it was obvious to him that Lanford Wilson had been performing many of the functions of a dramaturg, and that this was a

great help, it was also obvious that it would be more productive to have a staff person involved in such matters on an ongoing basis with responsibility not only to see the procedures through to the end, but to create new opportunites for play-development on a regular basis.

Although most of the duties of a dramaturg had been getting done somehow, the next step in stabilizing the theatre was to create a formal play development program in the form of a Literary Department with a dramaturg at its head.

In the summer of 1977 after returning from Germany, Mason invited playwright, Milan Stitt, to be Circle Rep's Dramaturg. After giving Stitt some scripts to read, Mason realized that he had found not only a kindred spirit in terms of taste, but a man who was very knowledgeable and skilled in the techniques and structure of writing realism. The choice was an obvious one; in September of 1977 Stitt became the official Dramaturg of Circle Rep.

> I came in 1977. The Circle was getting a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts for a Dramaturg. . . Actually I was Dramaturg for three months. I believe I received payment for one month; we didn't get the grant. The fellow who was making the decisions at the New York State Council didn't think a playwright should be Dramaturg, and of course, the Circle couldn't afford to pay me.[1]

There is little doubt that Stitt welcomed the opportunity Mason offered him Even though his official tenure was a very brief one, his presence was constant and far reaching despite the lack of payment. Not only was he a working playwright in need of an artistic home for his own development, but as such, he understood the needs of other playwrights to find a similar haven. A short

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[1] Stitt interview.

tenure with a company such as Circle Rep is all that is needed for some playwrights to understand how much can be gained from a continuing artistic relationship with a company. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, companies such as the Circle Rep are few. The needs far outweighed the opportunities for a developing playwright, the critical concept being that playwrights do not develop in a vacuum. Most playwrights need direct interaction. The very nature of the work--a presentational one--negates the usual solitude attributed to an author. There has to come a point with a play, when it is taken over by others and performed aloud. It is in this context, that the company environment with its personal connection to the playwright, becomes of crucial importance. The availabilty of such environments is negligible. In his report to the company, Milan Stitt, well aware of this problem, wrote:

> It seems to me that the majority of our playwright encouraging theatres, including the admirable Playwrights Horizon and Manhattan Theatre Club, offer mainly single-shot opportunities to the playwright, complete with the assumed advantages of commercial type-casting but without the advantages of a continuing artistic home with a company. At the bottom line , these theatres, along with regional theatres, offer playwrights only production opportunities and administrative continuity; this is a good deal, of course, and as much as some playwrights require for their work. I was looking for a home that would allow a writer to develop his work when it was ready for development.[1]

It has been noted earlier how recent a development dramaturgy is in America. Research indicates that many of the dramaturgs who are active in this country are keenly aware of the European model and the crucial differences in their functioning in the United States. The differences are not only with

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[1] Milan Stitt, "Report From a Playwright-Dramaturg," 1978, p. 3.

European dramaturgy but within the many definitions attached to the term in this country. Despite overlapping duties, and definitions, many titles are given to jobs with similar functions in many American theatres: Literary Manager, Dramaturg, Literary Advisor, Script Development Director, Writer Development Director, etc. Although this catalogue may seem like an exercise in semantics, the subtle differences are very important.

Although the title of Dramaturg implies active participation in play production, Literary Manager implies a far more bureaucratically oriented position. Stitt himself was very aware that the playwright as Dramaturg was still another variation of a complicated process that had European precedents.

Originally, Mason had it in mind for Stitt to act very much as Wilson had done, spending most of his time in the rehearsal hall. But Stitt did not devote a great deal of attention to rehearsals for mainstage productions, relying instead on the continuing tradition of the director basically acting as dramaturg on his own productions. Rather, Stitt looked upon the appointment more as an opportunity to expand the company's existing work with playwrights. He devoted most of his attention in the beginning to formalizing the existing play development program with consistent expectations and schedules. This emphasis would lead to a rift between the mainstage productions and the development program that has never been adjusted. At the same time, Wilson became less actively involved in the rehearsal process; there was, therefore, no active "playwright's eye" on the rehearsals for mainstage productions. As the Literary Department grew, two separate jobs developed - a Literary Manager and a Dramaturg, with the former taking on the jobs that Stitt had done, and the latter defining an entirely new area of responsbibility.

The growth of the Literary Department was a major step in the institutionalization of the company, for the increased activity instituted by the Literary Department made the smooth operation of the Company much more difficult and, concurrently, absolutely essential. It became inevitable that Stitt would find it increasingly difficult to be both a full time dramaturg and an active playwright. It was at this time that Porter Van Zandt was brought into the company as Managing Director. Van Zandt, who entered this position in the midst of all the increased activity, felt that in order to solidify the institutional groundwork that had recently been laid, it was becoming necessary to hire a full-time managerial staff. In an echo of this move, Stitt convinced Mason to hire a professional Literary Management staff. It is at this time that B. Rodney Marriott, (who had been brought into the company to direct the revival of The Runner Stumbles,) was asked to remain. On sabbatical from his teaching post at the Exeter Academy, he had already been asked to join the Playwrights Workshop as a writer. Now, in the summer of 1979, Marriott was asked to remain and take over the duties of Literary Manager while Milan Stitt was retained as the company's official Dramaturg.

Precisely at this point, the two positions became institutionally divided each with specifically defined individual duties. The position of Dramaturg at the Circle Rep is filled by a senior member of the Playwriting Company such as Milan Stitt or John Bishop, (who replaced Stitt from 1981 to 1984) and is a position on the Artistic Staff. In John Bishop's words,

> The Dramaturg is a member of the Artistic decision-making staff, who provides a long term overview of the goals of

playwriting at Circle Rep.[1]

In other words, the dramaturg is the member of the Artistic Staff, who makes sure that the playwrights' needs are taken into consideration when a policy decision is being made. It is also the senior dramaturg who presumably collaborates on mainstage productions. On the other hand, the position of Literary Manager as defined by the Circle Rep involves the day-to-day work of running the many and varied functions of the department, and on the other, it involves a constant theoretical reappraisal not only of the Research and Development aspects of the Literary Department but of the theory and practice of the company philosophy as a whole.

Eventually the separation between dramaturgy and literary management would translate into an isolation of the Literary Department that placed it in an ivory tower of theory and of play development purely for the sake of play development. As things evolved, it was the dramaturg, usually a mainstage playwright himself, who directly participated in mainstage work. When dramaturgical expansions began in 1982, Literary Department personnel, such as assistants or interns, were assigned dramaturgical responsibilities to PIPS and Extended Readings, as much to train the personnel in dramaturgy as to assist in development of the works in progress. Thus, although the Literary Department worked completely to feed the mainstage, it actually had very little practical participation in the mainstage production aspects of the company. This separation was far from the original intentions of hiring a dramaturg even though theoretical considerations were inherent in the position.

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[1]Bishop interview.

One of the first roles that the Dramaturg/Literary Manager has always filled at the Circle is that of the company "philosopher" or "dreamer." David Copelin, who had functioned as Literary Manager of the Mark Taper Forum, the New Dramatists and the Phoenix Theatre, has said that the Literary Manager is the "conscience" of the theatre; it is his job to spend almost half of his time thinking about the goals of the company and how they can be met. Although Stitt was happy to assume the subtitles of "philosopher," "dreamer," and "conscience," he was much more interested in how Mason's goals for the company could be met in practical terms. Mason had said that his goal was to create a company of national renown that would perform classics as well as new plays written for and developed by company members in a true rotating repertory. The programs developed by Stitt went a long way toward the realization of this goal. Just as a constant reevaluation and reinterpretation by each succeeding generation of artists is required for the classics, so too is it required for new plays after their initial runs. It was strongly believed that there can be a life for a new play even after its initial production, and this is where Stitt came in. He felt that a play should be produced again and again, applying fresh insight and interpretation to it each time. To this end, Mason and Stitt agreed to the idea of producing not only one classic and four new plays each year, but also one revival of a recent American play. The concept was that theatre literature is a living thing--a resource to be drawn upon for the expression of human truths through exploration with actors, involving both classics *and* new plays, contemporary plays receiving the same treatment as classics.

This concept meant a subtle shift in the philosophy of the company. The company had set as its task the job of finding plays that could be performed and

developed by member actors who explored the texts and themselves in a constant search to find fresh insights into the human condition. Although the search for human truth still applied in rehearsal practice, it appeared that the company philosophy was changing. At approximately this time, (1977) began the direct and forceful influence of Porter Van Zandt's reorganization of the structure of the company into a well-staffed, smoothly functioning business organization, and Van Zandt's equally forceful influence on Marshall Mason to focus the company's direction toward a mainstream position of commerically viable material. It was probably to this end that Mason selected Stitt's own, The Runner Stumbles as the first entry in this contemporary revival program even though it had not been developed at Circle Rep. The Runner Stumbles had already been successfully produced on Broadway and had additionally been made into a Stanley Kramer film. For a variety of reasons, mostly to do with critical expectations and the insistence upon discovering "new" American plays, The Runner Stumbles remained the only entry in this program until the 1984 revival of Lanford Wilson's Balm in Gilead was presented in co-production with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre.

Another idea was to keep the Circle Repertory work alive by having a series of productions of Circle Rep's own "classic" plays in strict rotating repertory at one theatre while the mainstage season of new plays and regular classics was continued at another. The plan was for milestone productions such as The Hot L Baltimore, When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?, The Seahorse, Talley's Folly; in short, plays that had made Circle Rep's reputation, to have a continued life. In this manner, important seminal productions were to be kept alive long after their initial runs, which adheres to a more traditional system of

repertory playing. Although continuing the perennial search for the new, the theatre was now to be firmly concerned with existing theatre literature while at the same time trying to add to it. This plan was not Stitt's only philosophical contribution, although it was probably his most successful; it would be a perennial undercurrent of Circle Rep's production concept despite the fact that the plan to revive their own classics had yet to come to full fruition.

Script Evaluation Service:

One of the first things Stitt did during his tenure as official Dramaturg was to take on a group of people to act as readers and to help sort out the mountains of scripts that had been sent to the Circle Rep by hopeful writers. Stitt's hiring of readers began the process of reading all the unsolicited manuscripts and led to one of Circle Rep's most unusual and unique offerings: the "Script Evaluation Service." Each script was read and evaluated by a member of the literary staff. Unless completely hopeless, each play was given a written, in-depth analysis and commentary by a staff member. Although the Literary Manager's name[1] was at the bottom of each letter, the letters were actually quite a collaborative effort, starting with the reactions of the first readers and ending with those of the Literary Manager, always taking care to complete the process as humanely as possible. The feeling was that even if the news was "bad," the written comments often gave the writer a sense that someone had indeed read the play and taken the time to think seriously about it; the letter would often be the starting-off

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[1] Whoever the current Literary Manager was--first Milan Stitt, then B. Rodney Marriott, then Robert Meiksins, etc.

point for a revision. Most New York theatres do not accept unsolicited manuscripts, let alone critique them, and when replies are sent to the playwright, they are usually sent through printed form letters. In the beginning, before the process flowered into the Script Evaluation Service for which the company was to become famous, form letters were also the case at the Circle; any play that was not being considered for development was returned to the playwright with a terse, polite note over Milan Stitt's signature. By 1984, however, when B. Rodney Marriott was Acting Artistic Director, he was emphatic in his desire to provide American playwrights with a personal response to their work despite the tremendous amount of time, thought and money involved in critiquing each play. When a play was considered particularly promising, a staff member met with the playwright to offer suggestions for further development. As B. Rodney Marriott says:

> No script can be written adequately if the author feels he is writing in a 'vacuum.' Our script evaluation process is designed to give all playwrights who submit their work a reaction from the Circle Rep.[1]

As mentioned above, this personalized attention to the unknown playwright was unique, but it was this kind of dedication to the playwright and to the craft of playwriting that was at the core of Circle Rep's Literary Department. This care is one of the best examples of the Circle Rep's concern for artists, even those it did not know and whose work would most likely never be done by the company. Not surprisingly, results began to show; plays were being resubmitted

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[1] B. Rodney Marriott, as quoted in, "Playwrights Don't Grow on Trees," a Circle Rep brochure.

with excellent revisions and were often selected for Friday Readings and PIPS. The greatest benefit that resulted from the unsolicited manuscripts, however, was twofold: on the one hand the majority of playwrights who were selected for the Playwrights Workshop were discovered through this process; on the other, and a far more mundane benefit, was that this process gave the Circle Repertory Company a wonderful reputation among playwrights and the theatre community as a whole. The benefits of this last point are, of course, difficult to measure.

In short, a sincere, concerted effort was made to insure that every play was thoroughly read, that an intelligent, informed evaluation was made, and that no script would pass through the department unnoticed, particularly good ones. Ari Roth, Assistant Literary Manager, related that during the first seven or eight years, before there was a Literary Department, unsolicited manuscripts would be thrown into a cabinet until someone could get to them. According to Roth, when Milan Stitt became Dramaturg and a general cleanup was ordered, they discovered the original manuscript of Hair in the pile that had never even been read.

The ratio of good scripts was approximately 1:3; that is, at least 1/3 of all scripts received had some merit and were to be encouraged. Only a handful, approximately twenty per year, would actually become part of the developmental program such as the Readings or the PIPS. Most Readings and PIPS came from in-house writers whose work was supposedly given priority treatment.

It must be pointed out that statistically, the unsolicited manuscript process actually had limited success in terms of immediate result and product. During the five years of the Literary Department's heyday, only two unsolicited manuscripts

ever made it all the way to mainstage production. These were, Threads, by Jonathan Bolt, submitted in 1979 and produced in 1982, and Levitation, by Timothy Mason, submitted in 1982 and produced in 1984. However, the Circle Rep has long been known as the leading provider of new American plays. This is not only in the sense meant by Louis Calta,[1] but also in the sense of trying to get as many Circle plays produced as possible. Marriott says that since there are only five mainstage slots in one season, with the sixth usually reserved for a classic, he tries to work very closely with Literary Managers in other theatre groups to try to encourage productions of as many well-developed, deserving Circle plays as possible.

What can be said of Stitt's tenure as Dramaturg is that he made sense of what had been an extremely haphazard developmental system. The formalization of existing programs and the innovations Stitt instituted had far reaching effects. He created and maintained programs and systems that were specifically designed to help playwrights develop their skills as well as their plays. All playwrights who were associated with the company went through the process to some extent, from Lanford Wilson with his solid company foundation, and Tennessee Williams with his worldwide reputation to the most innocent beginner. It was a truly nurturing process charged with excitement and a genuine love of process that became the foundation for what in some quarters was to be considered one of the most active play developmental programs in the world.

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[1] Calta, December 1, 1974.

Friday Readings:

According to Stitt, much of what he wanted already existed informally at Circle Rep when he took on the position of Dramaturg in 1977. For example, Wilson had been writing for the company for nine years. Although it had been an informal process, such as waylaying whoever happened to be in the hallway to hear how a particular speech sounded, Wilson had been having early drafts of his plays read by and to the company for the trusted, affectionate and hard criticism he needed. As a playwright himself, Stitt understood only too well the value of live readings of works-in-progress:

> Until I hear the actors for whom I'm writing speak the words, it feels as if I'm writing in the air. After a Friday reading of a first draft, the work becomes concrete, somehow more real, and the possibilities and enthusiasm for a rewrite expand.[1]

A top priority was to make the readings accessible and scheduled with a high degree of dependability. As Stitt pointed out,

> The process involved having company members do readings of rewrites; and finally seeing his work realized in full production by the actors for whom he had written . . . Formalizing Wilson' s informal process,I introduced Friday morning readings as a regular part of the acting company's work. (Other mornings are devoted to work on classics, vocal training, etc.)[2]

Company playwrights had always been able to organize a reading of their own plays as the need arose. Now the readings were turned into a regularly

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[1] Milan Stitt, as quoted in, "Playwrights Don't Grow on Trees."

[2] Stitt, p. 4.

scheduled Friday morning event in the presence of the artistic staff, company members, and often, the administrative staff as well. The idea was to insulate the process as much as possible so that, although there might be critical reaction to the piece, it would be from a supportive community. The New York theatrical community was often quite eager to hear the readings and at first, it was invited to attend in order to swell the ranks. However, to insulate the process further, the readings were closed to the public in 1982.

Since the readings were of full plays, not excerpts, the ten to fifteen playwrights-in-residence could not possibly supply enough plays to fill a weekly schedule. With this series, then, many outside playwrights were brought in to participate in the Friday readings and have their plays read to the company by Circle Rep actors. Sometimes the playwrights were invited on the basis of an unsolicited manuscript, sometimes on recommendation, occasionally on the suggestion of an agent. For outside playwrights, it was a fortunate expansion of the Circle Rep's play development program. The readings were essentially unrehearsed, but many plays and playwrights were being "discovered" through this process, (e.g., Jonathan Bolt, Timothy Mason.)

In theoretical terms, the Friday Readings were intended to be a kind of two-way street. On one side the reading process was structured to help the playwright in every way possible, most particularly with direct input from company playwrights to determine how best to serve their own needs. On the other side, *every* project developed by Circle Rep began with this program. For the period between 1978-1983, there were no exceptions to this rule.

The company input to the readings was felt to be vital; so much so, that until 1982, the policy was that no company rehearsal was to be held during the readings so that all company actors, playwrights and directors would be able to attend. Additionally, the readings were an important weekly gathering place for a company that, more and more, was being scattered about the city trying to find additional theatrical work.

In the first year and a half of Stitt's unofficial but active tenure as Dramaturg, thirty-seven playwrights, in addition to the Circle's core of eleven resident playwrights, heard their work read. Most felt that the process was exciting, electric, and central to their artistic development. In his company report, Stitt wrote:

> Resident playwright, John Bishop, has recently heard three readings by the actors for whom he is writing his new play, Winter Signs. Bishop has found the readings and the subsequent company discussions essential to his work. Like many playwrights, he is able to cut the dishonesties, tricks which he's not "getting away with" as soon as he hears them coming back at him live. He has found the deadline of a scheduled reading useful to keep him at the desk when the temptations of New York beckon. Most importantly, each reading had proven to be a stimulus for a significant rewrite.
>
> Resident playwright, Julie Bovasso, requested only to hear praise at one reading. She had temporarily lost her way in the maze of work and needed to know that it was still worthwhile to go on.[1]

As could be expected there was some criticism regarding the efficacy of this wide open approach even in its insular environment. Irish playwright, Michael Skelly, thought it might be worthwhile to pay attention to a negative aspect he had observed:

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[1]Stitt, p. 6.

> I have a sneaking suspicion that the acid test of a reading as applied at the Circle might not be good for every play. There are certain plays that have a strong actorial, directorial and production influence and strength that it is only the "full shillin" that will tell you whether they are stageable or not. Decisions on these particular plays should therefore be made by a strong directorial and artistic eye rather than the circus gathering of a reading.[1]

However, the general benefits seemed to be so overwhelmingly unarguable that by 1979, both Marshall Mason and B. Rodney Marriott (at this time, Literary Manager,) felt that the Friday Readings were to be at the heart of what the Circle Rep did, and occupied much of the day-to-day planning. The first developmental step for any play of interest, whether member-authored or unsolicited, was a company reading. *No* play was ever considered to be ready for production until it had been fully tested through the various developmental stages. Whether this process was instituted because it was felt to be impossible for a play that was fresh from a typewriter, to be "right," or whether because a serious attempt was being made to minimize the risks of failure in a highly critical, commercial atmosphere is immaterial; more than likely, both reasons applied equally.

Although, technically, company member playwrights had access to the series at any time, ultimately, the selection of the plays that were to be read each week was made by the Literary Manager. He would "put plays on the menu" from which selections for further development were made by the Artistic Director.

A typical Friday reading would be like the following:[2]

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[1] Michael Skelly, letter dated January 5, 1984.

[2] Observations noted by this author, having attended one full season of Friday Readings in researching material for this book.

November 3, 1984, 3:00 P.M. -- Birdseeds, Wolfgang and Whales, by Marian Wagman. The reading takes place in Rehearsal Room #1 at the Administrative offices.

It is a large "L" shaped room with a high ceiling, cracked plaster on the grey-white walls. Suspended from the ceiling are white-painted radiators and a sprinkler system from which stage lights are hung. A grand piano sits silently, pushed off to the farthest corner of the room; a rolled up Oriental rug flung over an old piece of furniture and a folded bridge table; chairs piled atop one another; an old rattan easy chair atop a white prop table, disgarded remnants of an old production waiting to be resurrected again.

There are four wooden tiers pushed up against the widest wall holding forty-five metal back chairs. In the center of the room eight chairs are placed in a semi-circle facing two microphones attached to a waiting tape deck.

The personal belongings of the actors who will read today are piled up behind each of the eight chairs in the center--briefcases, pouches, purses. Unbound pages of manuscript wait on each chair.

Slowly, the company files in from the green room across the narrow hall. An actor who read last Friday sits in the second row and pulls out some papers while he waits for the reading to begin. Oddly enough, the first three people to enter speak in whispers, as though a sacred rite were to be performed and only whispers were considered respectful to the occasion.

More company members enter; the room fills up. Berilla Kerr throws a multi-colored plaid overcoat across a chair, claiming it in reserve, and leaves to get a cup of coffee. Now the talking becomes louder--normal; there is much laughter. One is immediately struck by the camaraderie, the same kind one senses in a cast that is working together on a play, except that these company members are not now in the process of rehearsal or production; rather, they have come together to read and help develop a new play. There are about thirty-five people present.

B. Rodney Marriott, Acting Artistic Director, enters and shuts the door. He introduces the play and the playwright, Marian Wagman, who travelled from California to attend this reading. He makes several company announcements and invites all to remain for a glass of wine and some cheese to be served in the green room after the reading. He sits with his notebook open, and the reading begins.

The stage directions are read by Literary Intern, Ari Roth.

> The actors take their work very seriously. The reading is given with flair and flavor; there are no editorializing comments to be discerned in their interpretations that could possibly give away their own personal feelings about the material; they could have been reading Ibsen or Shakespeare, so intense was their concentration. The company listens with equally intense attention; some take notes.
>
> After the reading, there is the customary applause. Then Marriott takes his place as moderator and the discussion begins.
>
> All of the comments for Birdseed, Wolfgang and Whales are basically supportive--supportive in the sense that the needs of the playwright are obviously understood:
>
> --The characters explained themselves away. I would have preferred.....
> --It seemed to me that the major confrontation occurred offstage. This is an important scene to see.....
> --(The actor who played the role agreed.) I felt as I was playing the character that an important scene was missing.....
> --Why can't we merely see them suffering? Does everything have to be presented in purely confrontational form?
> --That's the essense of drama...of theatre.....
> --The main character was intensely interesting to me.....
> --I must remark on the beauty and strength of the language.....
> --Act Two lost me completely because.....
>
> And so on.

It was a productive session even though the general consensus was a negative one. However, on the whole, the Friday afternoon discussions were quite intelligent and for the most part, helpful and supportive; this reading was no exception. As Robert Meiksins, Assistant Literary Manager, said afterwards:

> It's a crowd that is used to talking to artists, so nothing terribly damaging ever gets said. Most people are supportive. People dumped pretty heavily on Birdseed, Wolfgang and Whales because it didn't work structurally. People were attacking it because they felt that there was something in the play that still needed work, but they believed in the play. So Marian Wagman came away feeling, "Okay, I've got problems, but there's something there." She came away feeling that she had been supported, rather than

destroyed, despite all the negative comments.[1]

The playwright had obviously been served well. She had received the benefit of a company of artists, each with his own area of expertise, each seriously interested in the complete development of the work. One point must be made: although the techniques for discussion were similar to those of a workshop, a lab or even a classroom, the plays that were presented in the Friday Readings had already been through some form of development and revision--if not in a workshop, then with the Literary Manager--before they were briefly rehearsed by a cast of professional actors and read before a company of professional theatre artists. Also, the quality of plays ranged from unknown playwrights such as Marian Wagman, to plays by established writers such as Lanford Wilson, Milan Stitt, John Bishop, and as mentioned, even Tennessee Williams.[2]

Although the readers were unpaid (until 1984, a nominal fee of $5.00 was paid to each participating actor,) actors were quite willing to take part in the series. They were always cast very carefully, first by the Literary Manager, later by Tanya Berezin when she was hired as Associate Artistic Director in charge of casting in 1982. In a sense, a very difficult balance had to be found; the playwright had to be given a good, clean, clear, intelligent reading that would insure the play's integrity and come close to realizing what he intended his play to be; the actors had to constantly be given new challenges to explore their

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[1] Robert Meiksins interview, New York City, November 19, 1983.

[2] Tennesee Williams' last play, Something Cloudy, Something Clear was read at a Friday Reading just before his death in 1983.

talents. Within the structure of the company, the Friday Readings had become one of the few places where the actors were not being overtly "judged," so there was a greater sense of freedom in taking risks and in experimenting without fear. It is obvious that at the heart of the Friday Readings, was the same philosophy which was at the heart of Circle Rep itself--that of nurturing its artists, whether playwright or actor.

One series of statistical notes regarding the readings is of interest. There were 40 Friday Readings per year during the five-year period between 1979 and 1984. In the 1979-80 season, with Marriott in his first year as Literary Manager, 32 readings were held of 40 plays (some readings were of more than one one-act plays.) Of these, five have gone on to mainstage production by the Circle Rep--Threads, by Jonathan Bolt, The Woolgatherer, by William Mastrosimone, Snow Orchid, by Joe Pintauro, The Diviners by Jim Leonard, Jr., and Am I Blue by Beth Henley. Another 9 plays read that season have gone on to first-class production at other theatres. So, at least 14 of the 40 plays that were read that season have been produced. So far, the most successful reading series has been during the 1980-81 season in which there were 38 plays read, 19 of which have had major productions either at Circle Rep or elsewhere. The 1982-83 season, with Robert Meiksins now as Literary Manager, may prove equally successful; so far, 12 of the 39 plays that have been read have been produced--four at the Circle Rep, eight elsewhere--with several more possibilities. Although there is much justification to look upon these statistics in a positive light, it is almost impossible to gauge the success of this series. Who is to say that a worthwhile play might not have gone on to production whether or not it was given a Friday Reading at the Circle Rep? It can only be assumed that since the process was so supportive and

humane, the readings did prove helpful and that the plays that were given readings were in some way improved through the process.

The ultimate goal of the program--to introduce plays to the company that could be selected for production--did succeed. Of the 150 plays read between 1979 and 1983, 20 have been or will soon be produced by the Circle Rep on the mainstage; this number equals more than three full season's worth of plays.

Projects-in-Progress

Another important part of the developmental program is the Projects-in-Progress Series, or PIPS, which is held at the mainstage theatre, usually with script in hand. This is the only stage of the developmental process that is open to the theatre's subscribers and the public in general. The PIPS have been an established part of the developmental process at the Circle Rep for some time, but from 1977 on, at about the same time that the Circle was becoming more institutionalized, the process took on a definite structure:

> When a play's growth requires in-depth workshop development with a director and cast, a Project-in-Progress may be scheduled. The PIPS program gives the playwright the benefit of a brief rehearsal period and audience reactions to the project. The Play is first performed twice with each performance followed by an open discussion led by a member of the artistic staff.
>
> The playwright is then encouraged to make revisions before the play is again performed in a final week of PIPS.[1]

The PIPS are also the most widely advertised of Circle's Rep's activities. At the bottom of the program for each PIP, a short paragraph reads:

> The Projects-in Progress series is an essential part of the play development process at Circle Rep. PIPS are rehearsed for two weeks, and are presented with minimal props and scenic

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[1] Circle Rep Brochure.

> elements. The PIPS program is designed to provide the playwright, director, and cast with information that can be garnered only with the help of an interested, critical and supportive audience.[1]

The original idea was to have the audience participate in the post-performance discussions very much in the same manner as the Friday Readings.

By 1976, ten to fifteen writers comprised the official list of company playwrights including: Julie Bovasso, John Heuer, Berilla Kerr, Roy London, Claris Nelson, Milan Stitt, Tennesee Williams and Lanford Wilson, all of whom had had plays produced by the Circle Rep, and who were supposedly actively involved in the day-to-day business of the company. The PIPS were more formal than such impromptu gatherings and the Friday Readings, and were held at the Sheridan Square theatre at regularly scheduled intervals.

As with the Friday Readings, there are supposedly two reasons for giving a play a PIP: one is to develop the writer by affording him the opportunity to work on his play in depth; the second is to develop the play for full mainstage production.

At the PIP stage, Circle Rep is beginning to invest money in the material. The average Friday Reading cost $50, whereas the average PIP cost $2,000. Therefore, for a play to receive a PIP, it should ideally be under serious mainstage consideration. For example, John Bishop's Winter Signs was presented as a PIP in 1978 and then almost immediately remounted as a mainstage production when the reaction was good despite the fact that the play could have benefited from further development. More than likely, this precipitous push to

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[1] Circle Rep PIP program.

formal presentation, which resulted in a poorly received mainstage production, occurred because there was still no formal program for play development at that time that might have been pursued with less urgency.

Upon close examination, it can be determined that the PIPS demonstrated the very best and the very worst of the institutionalization processes that occurred at Circle Rep in its never-ending search for supportive ways to find new plays and new playwrights. By examining how the PIPS were first received by the audiences, and then perceived by the major participants, the working structure of the Circle Repertory Company itself can be seen in microcosm. Easily perceived are the enormous benefits that came from working in a company environment as well as the persistent problems that surround creativity in such a setting—what can be called a double-edged sword of results. Within a short period of time after formalization of the process, the PIPS became a major problem in the substructure of the company. The double-edged sword, consisting of an equal number of good and bad consequences, became sharply defined.

The fact that the audience for the PIPS was made up of ninety percent Circle Rep subscribers added a pressure to the series that the Friday Readings did not have, and that the PIPS were never intended to have. Subscribers began to realize that by attending the PIPS, they could get a preview of the plays under consideration for the following mainstage season. The Circle audience is different from the average theatre audience. It is much more willing to accept new things. It is not looking for re-runs. The very fact that it subscribes to a theatre dedicated to the new American voice demonstrates that it is looking for something it has not seen before, something that it can be a part of in a

developmental way. Even the Circle's mainstage productions are still often considered in a developmental stage. Therefore, the audience knows it is going to see something new, something it can be a part of. The PIPS were the only point in the relationship between subscriber and theatre company where the audience could give direct feedback to the people responsible for presentations. Rob Meiksins appreciated the needs of the audience members, as though the Circle's nurturing process extended even to them:

> The good thing about the symposiums is that they give people a chance to talk. The theatrical experience is such a strange thing. You go to see a play, then talk about it to your friends but you don't necesarily get the chance to explore or participate in the process. So the symposiums can be good in giving people a chance to do that--to air their thoughts about what they have seen.[1]

However, somewhere in the heady process of participation, it was often forgotten that the series was basically a research and development program, so that comments were often too harsh, sometimes destructive, and always judgmental. At the same time, unlike the professional theatre people who attended the Friday Readings, the audiences were not always knowledgeable. Yet, the playwrights whose work was produced in the PIPS readily admit that the concept is a valid one. Playwright John Bishop candidly pointed out that one of the most valuable aspects of the PIPS was merely placing a play in front of an audience without necessarily paying attention to anything it had to say:

> They already come with a decision in their minds that they're coming to "fix the play." So their perception is different. I never stay for the discussions of my plays. I have always found the PIPS valuable to do but, on the other hand, most of the conversations afterwards are ridiculous. Let the director

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[1]Meiskins interview.

> stay, or the dramaturg. I don't want to hear what they have to say. It's too destructive to me. A playwright is hard on himself anyway. I only hear the negative things, so I have to protect that. That's why I don't go. The important part of the PIPS is getting it read in front of an audience and hearing your play through an audience. You can hear everything that's wrong with it. Usually I get confirmation of problems. You can just sit there and watch them. You don't have to hear their comments. You can look at them when it's being read and you can see where it's not working.[1]

Ari Roth confirms Bishop's statements with his own observations during his tenure as both Associate Literary Manager and Literary Manager. He found that most playwrights did not find it important to listen to the comments of the audience; rather, they used the audience's carefully observed reactions as a barometer. It is obvious that some playwrights can not hear enough about their work no matter who is commenting, but they all recognize that there are different kinds of reactions from different kinds of audiences. Obviously, at a Friday Reading the company is usually looking at a play from a different point of view from that of the average subscriber and the reading will evoke a very different kind of criticism. From the writer's point of view, the audience is the least integral part of the development process. Roth went on to say:

> PIPS please no one. They don't please the actors because they are basically readings; the actors don't get to do much work. They are like guinea pigs for the playwright. The playwright likes PIPS because he can do some revisions, but he certainly doesn't get to see his play mounted or staged one bit, and the Circle is not making a commitment to produce the play. So in artistic terms, the PIPS are in the middle ground. It's even more frustrating for the director. We're not doing real theatre with them, just a little bit of script work, but it's not as intense as most people would want right now. It has become a safe kind of program. It's a placating device for people we owe things to; in a way, people we want to string along. This is a backlash. It never, ever was

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[1] John Bishop interview, New York City, April 18, 1984.

intended to be this way.[1]

As in any institutional setting, political considerations also arise. In the case of the PIPS, the Literary Department gets caught in the middle. There are many writers who wait their turn--writers to whom the department owes favors--and although the Literary Department is committed to performing ten PIPS a year, this number is often cut down to six or seven due to financial considerations. There is never a way to satisfy all the hunger. Many plays are PIPed even though they will never be considered for mainstage, simply to repay obligations. Obviously, the Circle's philosophy of nurturing is not always successful for everyone.

The fact that there was no real commitment behind the PIPS was an even more serious problem, one that created deep-seated erosions into the very concept of family and company. There is still little doubt that what was perceived as a lack of commitment was antagonizing a good many of the playwrights. However, there is equally little doubt that commitment to a family of writers and commitment to the very best play are two quite different things. As Ari Roth said:

> We created this expensive developmental machine to find the great American voice. Therefore, the Literary Department has gone off in one direction with its very conscientious and idealistic reports while the company ideology, as it panned out, has gone off in a somewhat different direction. Or, at least, they are not walking in step with each other.[2]

Rob Meiksins was quick to point out that he felt the Literary Department was "finding the plays," although, of course, there is always a difference of

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[1] Ari Roth interview, November 29, 1983.

[2] Ibid.

opinion as to which are the best ones. He felt that part of the growing antagonism was that the company was "rule and regulating the playwrights to death."[1]

> They have to go through this process of Readings, PIPS, Extended Readings, but we will cast from within the company far sooner than we will pick a play from within the company. There is a rule that fifty percent of the roles are guaranteed to be cast out of the company actors. We don't do that for playwrights. We don't say that fifty percent of the plays we're going to do will be out of company playwrights.[2]

It is doubtful that it could ever be a feasible approach to production to say that fifty percent of the plays would be selected from the company playwrights. Such a policy would be a severe limitation if the quality of the plays did not measure up to the excellence the Circle continued to strive for and the plays were selected merely to fill a quota. Meiksins, however, felt strongly that the playwrights were not always well served on this issue:

> On the other hand, we're asking them to commit to us--to give us their work first--to write for our company of actors. We're asking them to join the Playwrights Lab, sit in on Friday Readings and discuss with us. To be dramaturgs on PIPS. We're asking them to do a lot. But they don't get our commitment back. What we give them is a place to develop their plays but stop short of production. We have writers in this theatre who are very good. I pride myself in this last year. We brought in a lot of good talent. We've brought up the level of writing. So we have the writers but we are not commiting to them. We would rather, in a sense, go for the "star" writer.[3]

Once again, company playwrights and the "best" play were not necessarily

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[1] Meiksins interview.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

consistent. Many of these playwrights, no matter what their potential, were still in development and could not be considered the top writers. There had to be a distinction between the company and the Lab playwrights where mainstage production was concerned.

But the search for plays was non-ending, and the top writers were being PIPed as well as outside writers who showed "star" qualities even though there were never enough production spots for all of them. One of the negative aspects of Circle Rep system was that there were always a great many plays that were ready enough for production consideration but too few available slots in which to place them. Because of this situation, the playwrights were often kept waiting an inordinate amount of time before production was possible. At the same time, the nature of the theatrical business was such that the Circle was unwilling to officially release their plays. Even plays that appeared to be set for either PIP or production would often fall through at the last minute for a variety of frustrating reasons. To strike a balance, the Literary Department in the 1981-82 season created what was tantamount to a PIP Contract. More of a Letter of Agreement than a contract, the most interesting clause was that the Circle had one month following the date of the last PIP performance to inform the playwright in writing of its choice of one of the following options:

1) To produce the play in a specific season.
2) To request a further revision while maintaining an expressed interest in the play
3) To express no further interest in the material and release it

In this manner, as long as the play was being PIPed, Circle Rep was assured of first option without feeling pressured. Too often in the past, a play not under contract would be snapped up by an outside producer so that the money invested

in the PIP by Circle Rep would be lost.

One such case was Spookhouse by Harvey Fierstein, which was given a PIP toward the end of the 1981-82 season. At about the same time, Fierstein was beginning to experience some success with Torch Song Trilogy, which moved to Off-Broadway and then to Broadway while Spookhouse was at Circle Rep. After its PIP, Circle Rep expressed interest in the play but it was clear at this point that Fierstein had a commercial future. He and his agent refused Circle Rep the rights to the play which subsequently opened on Off-Broadway in a commercial production in 1984, starring Anne Meara.

Spookhouse was a landmark PIP in more ways than one in terms of the development of the PIP process, although for negative reasons. This was the PIP that proved the need for a PIP Contract. It was the first PIP to be done in a theatre outside of the Circle's own Sheridan Square Playhouse. It was also the PIP that used inordinately elaborate production elements for a workshop thereby motivating a more conservative approach in subsequent seasons. Up to this point, the theory of a PIP presentation had always been that the playwright and director would do what they felt minimally needed to be done to give the play the best reading possible. Production elements would be determined solely by what would be imperative to clarify the play in a reading. Mostly, this involved staging some scenes that by virtue of their obtuse nature required more than a sit-down reading to elucidate them. For example, in a PIP of Jim Leonard, Jr.'s The Diviners, one sequence involved the use of alternating slow motion and normal speed acting and a rather stylized sound tape. It was felt that since the scene was so central to the structure of the play, it would be useful to see this section staged. The actors were requested to memorize the scene which was fully and effectively

staged. In Spookhouse, however, staging was taken to an extreme point. Not only was a great deal of staging done, but since the play takes place in a spookhouse on the Coney Island Midway, the director, George Ferencz, and Fierstein felt it was essential to display some representative spookhouse paraphernalia. Bill Stabile was hired to create several paper mache' displays. Given the intricate use of lighting and staging, as well as other set pieces Ferencz utilized, the PIP was as close to a full production as possible. With the limited rehearsal period, however, the result was that the play was presented in a never-never-land situation; it was neither workshop nor full production. But because of the excessive production values, the audience found it difficult to perceive it as a work-in-progress and expressed extremely negative reactions. Lack of rehearsal only weakened the play further by charging it with lack of professionalism. Thus, the PIP process was not a positive one for Fierstein at all--a possible reason for his taking the material elsewhere.

The opposite extreme of this was a PIP of Marsha Norman's 'night Mother directed by Jeremy Blahnick who decided that the focus would be on the relationship between the two women. She left the two actresses seated at the kitchen table and only suggested what the play would look like by dressing the set with minimal but critical props such as the candy eaten by one of the characters. In this way, the audience was aware of the activity and staging possibilities while remaining keenly aware of the workshop nature of the reading.

After Spookhouse, it was determined that the form designed by Blahnick and Norman would be the standard PIP procedure. Very little staging would be permitted. However, if a Diviners situation arose again, the director and

playwright were requested to divulge their staging intentions beforehand for approval by those who were in charge of the program.

As the seasons progressed, the subscribers attendance was so regular that an entire four-performance PIP run could easily be sold out almost as soon as the seats became available, thus leaving little room for the company to attend. It also became policy by 1983 that company members were seated on a second priority basis. This policy meant that the company's participation in the selection of PIPs-to- mainstage was minimal. By the 1982-83 season, ten PIPs were scheduled; even in an ideal season, only five of these would be able to make it to mainstage. But, in fact, the 1982-83 season had already been selected from the previous season's PIPS. Also, the 1983-84 season was being filled very quickly with a number of special projects: Sam Shepard's Fool For Love was imported from San Francisco; The Sea Gull was selected as the season's classic; Full Hookup by Conrad Bishop and Elizabeth Fuller (to be directed by Mason) had already been produced in Louisville and did not need to be PIPed; Levitation by Timothy Mason, which had already been PIPed in the 1982-83 season; John Bishop's new play, The Harvesting, which had been PIPed before the 1983 season began; Wilson's Balm in Gilead, a revival production in conjunction with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre; and Marsha Norman's The Shaker Project which had been written on commission (but did not materialize during that season.)

Thus, the nine PIP slots would be for plays that would have to have mainstage consideration postponed for a full season at the very least, by which time is was pretty obvious that other special projects would be developed jeopardizing their possibilities for mainstage production even further. It is easy to see why enthusiasm for the PIP series would seriously begin to lag--so much

so, in fact, that one PIP slot was dropped entirely, and another was filled with two unrehearsed plays that were admittedly of limited interest to the company. They were read only because the obligation to subscribers who had already reserved theirs seats for a PIP had to be fulfilled. As could be predicted, this presentation spelled the beginning of the end of the heyday of the Literary Department. It was not perhaps a direct cause of the end, but it was certainly symptomatic of what was the worst aspect of the department and why changes had to be made.

Extended Readings:

Extended Readings is the newest aspect of all the developmental programs. Never having been clearly defined, it has never clearly succeeded nor clearly failed. During Marriott's tenure as Literary Manager, it became increasingly obvious that further work and revisions might be necessary on a play even after it had received a PIP. The company might require further time to review the material, particularly if radical changes had been made. To address this growing concern, Marriott and Mason created the Extended Readings. They were structured with one week of rehearsal for director and cast, but unlike the PIPS, revisions were not encouraged during the rehearsal process. Initially, this program had been designed as an intermediary step between the informal Friday Readings and the more formal PIPS; in such a capacity the program could have served as a clearing house for plays of marginal interest to the company. In fact, the first two plays given Extended Readings were Gas Station by Shelby Buford, Jr. (a company playwright) and The Bone Garden by Peter Maeck (a Lab Playwright), both plays being admittedly of borderline possibility for the mainstage. They were wildly different from the lyric realism style that had come

to be associated with Circle Rep. Marriott felt, however, that both plays were well written and he wished for an opportunity to hear them read aloud before a decision was made whether or not to give them a workshop production. Ultimately neither play was done in workshop, although both went on to full productions in other theatres.

Soon, however, Mason decided that the program could be used to greater benefit. If it were defined as an intermediate step between a PIP and a mainstage production, a number of tasks could be performed: a play was given an Extended Reading if the company wanted one last look at the play before deciding whether or not to produce it, or, if it was clear that the play was going to be a mainstage production but the author wanted a chance to hear a new draft one more time before production. To avoid possible pitfalls, however, Meiksins successfully argued that the program should be utilized only when needed. Thus, although specific times would be set aside within the season for Extended Readings, and up to seven were budgeted, they would be used only when directly needed.

The success of this program is almost impossible to judge. Each Extended Reading, with up to twenty hours of rehearsal, would be presented only once for an audience made up entirely of Circle Rep company, staff and friends (approximately fifty people) who would, as always, remain for a discussion. Probably the greatest shortcoming of the program was that it was neither a cold reading, nor was it rehearsed enough to give it an adequate representation. The actors were usually anxious to get on their feet to stage some of the action, thereby finding the seats a constraint. The author was not permitted to revise the play during this period, so that if problems became obvious during the rehearsal,

he was not encouraged to deal with them. The danger then, was that the discussion after the play would only confirm problems that the author already knew existed. From this point of view the process was not highly productive.

For Circle Rep's purposes, however, the program was undoubtedly of great value. It gave management the opportunity to hear a play one more time before decisions had to be made. The Literary Department is the only office dedicated to the ideal of nurturing which, as noted many times, is as the heart of Circle Rep, but the Extended Readings demonstrated one of the few times that pragmatic production considerations were more obviously important than the needs of the artists.

Playwrights Workshop/Playwrights Lab:

By the fall of 1978, continuing the process of formalizing existing programs, Stitt formed a Playwrights Workshop for those he considered to be the most promising and talented. The workshop has continued to grow during the past eight years numbering at least twenty who meet bi-weekly with the Literary Manager and the company's resident playwrights. Of the writers who participated in Stitt's original workshop, most have successfully progressed to productions either at the Circle or other New York theatres. The initial group included James Farrell, whose play, In The Recovery Lounge was produced by the Circle Company in 1978, and who was commissioned by the company in 1984 to write, Bing and Walker (poorly received); Mick Casale whose play, Elm Circle won the EDG/CBS Award in 1984 and was produced by Playwrights Horizon in May of 1984; Ralph Pape, who had a long-running Off-Broadway hit with Say Goodnight, Gracie; Joseph Pintauro, who has had two novels published to critical acclaim,

and whose play Snow Orchid was produced by the Circle Rep to poor reviews after an extraordinarily well-received PIP presentation; and Joseph Mathewson who also had two novels published and an Off-Broadway production of his play, Man Proposing, during the 1984 season. Of this group, James Farrell and Joseph Pintauro have become members of the Circle Rep Playwriting Company. Another Stitt discovery, although he was not a part of this early group, was Bill C. Davis, whose play Mass Appeal had originally been given a Projects-In-Progress production at the Circle Rep and went on to become an Off-Broadway as well as a Broadway "hit."

The Playwrights Lab, as it is now called, is by far the most popular and effective of all the developmental programs run by the Literary Department. It was created by Stitt as a way of developing and grooming talented writers for potential membership in the playwriting company. The Lab writers under Marriott and Meiksins were mostly younger writers whose future was of interest to the company. Most were found through the unsolicited manuscript process. In general, the theory behind the Lab was that a writer who had talent, even though unrefined, would still be a valuable member of the theatre, if not Circle Rep. By making him a member of the Lab it would be possible to keep a close, interested watch on his work. Obviously the hands-on approach is always stimulating and a playwright would more than likely feel loyal toward a group to which he belonged. A Lab playwright would more than likely give the group top priority on all of his new work, an inexpensive way for Circle Rep to find good plays and good writers.

Workshops for playwrights have a long history and almost always reflect well on the company that creates them. Obviously, the success of the workshops

is determined by the talent of the writers who participate. One famous workshop was run by the Royal Court Theatre in London in the late 1960s. The members of the Royal Court Theatre Writers Workshop went on to considerable renown even in America, including David Edgar (Nicholas Nickleby,) David Hare, (Plenty,) Stephen Poliakoff, (American Days,) and many others. Most of these writers now make up the leading playwrights of the English theatre. Whether or not Circle Rep Lab playwrights will enjoy the same celebrity as their English counterparts is, as yet, too soon to tell. So far, the members have had a certain amount of success, with productions at Circle Rep and at many other theatres around the country.

Originally called the Playwrights Workshop, the structure of the Lab has remained intact since it began in 1977. The idea was to provide an isolated, insulated forum to which writers could bring their work however long, short, or even short sections. In the three-hour sessions that were held every two weeks, the pieces were read aloud by member writers and discussed. Here, however, the attempt to protect the writer was not as strong as at a Friday Reading or a PIP. The Lab reading was perhaps the only place at the Circle where a writer might be told that his piece quite simply did not work and perhaps should not even be written. The Lab was a community of writers who were theoretically not in competition with each other even though some were established and some were beginners. It was organized to provide writers with a sense of belonging to a theatrical community. The value lay in being able to have the comments of their peers in an insulated environment that permitted only playwrights and a member of the Literary staff.

As the years progressed, the membership of the Workshop grew from the

original five under Milan Stitt to twenty-five under Meiksins. This size made it increasingly difficult to accommodate the needs of all who wished to have their work read. To relieve the pressure, only small pieces were worked on during the sessions. To be able to read full-length plays, however, a series of weekend retreats throughout the year was created. There would be at least three or four such weekend retreats, most of which were held on Long Island at Sag Harbor, New York, which was where Lanford Wilson, Tanya Berezin and many other friends and members of Circle Rep lived. Approximately thirty-five people could easily be housed in the various homes. These weekends would last for three days with three or four plays featured every day. At these meetings full-length drafts would be read to acquaint the Lab members with the plays that would then be worked on in sections during the bi-weekly meetings. Attendance by the more established playwrights was somewhat erratic, but many were in evidence and most used the Workshop and the Weekend retreats as a resource for the development of their own work. The benefit for the young writers, obviously, was the opportunity to have their plays critiqued by some of the more famous and established writers in the company. For the most part the process was perceived as morale boosting. Julie Bovasso was very active in this regard, constantly reaffirming the playwrights' sense of pride in being artists, and always insisting upon maintaining the integrity of the individual artist's work amidst all the critical analysis. The other company playwright who was most active in this capacity was Lanford Wilson who while bringing his own work periodically to the workshop, for the most part contributed a great deal of critical input and morale. In a fund-raising letter, young playwright Bill Elverman wrote:

> I think mentors help insecure beginners enormously . . . We were out at one of our weekends in Sag Harbor last year, and two other beginning writers and I had our scripts read aloud. We went back to his [Lanford Wilson] house. He got out a bottle of Pernod and we sat around discussing how to open a play . . . Lanford explained the problems he had with the opening of his own favorite play The Mound Builders, and asked our advice. We spoke as four equals. There was Lanford Wilson, the Pulitzer Prize winning playwright among us . . . It made me feel important and worthwhile and helped me to attack my writing, after waiting on tables the following week.[1]

It is difficult to measure the benefits of this type of personal support. However, it is certain that the Playwrights Workshop was a very positive environment and the playwrights who were a part of it felt they were a part of a community of people who cared for them.

In the Literary Department, then, there is the keenest example of the double-edged sword. It is undeniable that the amount of work covered in its five years was extraordinary: more than 10,000 unsolicited manuscripts read and evaluated with letters of critique returned on each one; more than 200 plays given readings; approximately 40 plays given PIPs, etc. It is a staggering amount of work and it is difficult to see how this kind of work will continue to be accomplished without the Literary Department. And yet, this was the first department to suffer extensively from the budgetary cuts of 1984. By its very nature, the Literary Department is an investment in the future. Without the research and development it represents, the company will more than likely suffer from lack of the explorative efforts for which it has become well known.

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[1]Bill Elverman letter dated, March, 1982.

And yet, according to many people within the company,[1] a severe credibility gap had developed within the department as it pertained to the operating structure of the Circle as a production house. The beginning of this gap was in the origins of the Literary Department in 1977 when it became clear that what had originally been expected of Milan Stitt and what he actually focused his attention on were two quite different things. It seemed to have been painfully obvious to everyone involved that the Literary Department had been cut off from the mainstage almost entirely. This was and is a serious problem. Mainstage play selection has always been handled by the Artistic Director who was, by definition, responsbile for the artistic content of the company. Thus, the focus of the Literary Department became only to "put plays on the menu," a deep background type of functioning which is difficult to justify considering the activity of the developmental system itself. A great many plays were being directly affected in that they were being developed by a department that could not fulfill the promise inherent in a development program. There was, rather, only the vague hope that Mason (or later, Marriott) would like a play well enough to produce it. But from the playwright's point of view, the play was being developed by the department towards production. The only way to bridge this gap would have been for the department to fulfill its original role by acting as dramaturg for the mainstage. However, most of the Literary Department personnel, except for Marriott, had difficulty getting into the mainstage arena of activity.

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[1] This became quite clear to me during the course of interviews with company personnel.

In 1984, there was a shift in attitudes. Meiksins had stressed the play selection aspect of the department's connection to the mainstage and tried to impress his views on Marriott, then the Acting Artistic Director. Meiksins actually takes credit for only one play that was chosen during his tenure as Literary Manager: Corinne Jacker's Domestic Issues, although it is almost certain that he did have some choice in the selction of Full Hookup. Both plays were critical failures but do reflect Meiksins' love of plays with relatively dark themes. When Meiksin was laid off as part of the budget cutting, Roth became the Associate Literary Manager and said:

> I've been making a positive initiative to get more involved in the pre-production work on mainstage productions. I did research for John Bishop for his play The Harvesting. That's where the work is. And when we [Circle Rep] need to go searching for the brand new play again, we'll be there for that too.[1]

In other words, it is imperative to make inroads into the rehearsal hall if the Literary Department is to remain alive.

The double-edged sword aspect of this, then, is that this department which was, perhaps, the truest artistic expression of the nurturing aspects of the Circle Rep, became so involved in nurturing that it was removed from the mainstage, and became isolated. And yet, ironically, isolation was exactly what was needed to create the kind of environment that would best allow for the nurturing. But isolation meant that the department had no input into play selection or into development of the final product; thus, in a sense, leaving its work to be solely theoretical. Therefore, the department that was the most popular with the outside

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[1]Roth interview.

world was the first to be cut when a financial crisis hit. Playwrights loved it because it gave them good, caring feedback about their work; audiences loved it because it afforded them a rare opportunity to participate in the process of play development; actors loved it because it gave them the chance to work on many different kinds of plays and roles, thus enhancing their personal artistic growth. But in the final analysis, the department was not sufficiently product-oriented to warrant the financial investment it required to remain fully operational, and it was, therefore, substantially cut and rendered almost impotent.

Beginning with the winter of 1984, some drastic changes were evident in the way the company operates. The position of Literary Manager will eventually be phased out altogether. Along with the position of Literary Manager, the process of reading, evaluating, and returning unsolicited manuscripts with personalized commentary will be phased out as part of the budget-cutting process. Until the phasing is completed, the department will still look at all the scripts that are sent in. Any that are of inherent interest (revisions of encouraged plays, or plays of authors that are well known to the Circle, or plays submitted by an accredited agent,) will be read in the usual manner. All unsolicited manuscripts will be returned to the author unread with a cover-letter explaining the financial difficulties that make it unfeasible to continue the costly process.

As of the winter of 1984, it would seem that Mason intends to cut the Playwriting Company down to approximately five writers per year who will be

commissioned to write for the company.[1] The rationale behind this severe reorganization was that Circle Rep had become such a highly visible institution over the years, and that the New York theatre scene was so critically competitive, it was no longer possible for the company to produce a writer for the first time. Too much had come to be expected, and any writer being premiered at the Rep would automatically be reviewed harshly by the critics, a situation ultimately hurting rather than helping the development of the writer. Thus, although Circle Rep will continue to produce new plays, it will no longer be the function of the Literary Department to discover *new* playwrights, a major change in the company's philosophy and operations.

The future of the Playwrights Lab is also uncertain. It is possible that it will continue to exist as it has since 1977. It is also possible that, because of the strong family feelings within the Lab, it will continue as it stands now, but as an independent writers' workshop outside the bounds of the Circle Rep. But it is difficult to determine its future with any certainty; one cannot second guess what Mason's ultimate decisions will be. As Ari Roth has said:

> The message that has come down from on high is, 'You guys have done a great job in the past but the past is over. We're going in a different direction.[2]

Throughout its history, Mason deliberately set out to establish Circle Rep as a major force in American Theatre. He did so systematically and, it seemed, quite logically. However, Mason did not control the growth of his company and

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[1]A separate $6,000 Full Commission Program which had been set up by the Literary Department in 1983-84,was also canceled during the huge cutbacks.

[2]Roth interview.

permitted it to expand under a management staff that was isolated from the artistic content of the company. The company's talents seemed to be spread too thin and subsequently the quality of the product declined. Frequently, the Circle was gently reproached by those who had always been its greatest champions. Peter Buckley, in a May, 1980 article in Horizon worried whether the Circle was becoming a victim of its own success. On March 14, 1982, Jeremy Gerard wrote an extensive article in The New York Times, "Will Success Spoil Circle Repertory." Although he itemized much of the obvious increased activity from the Circle's classics (Hamlet, Mary Stuart, Richard II) to the Young Playwrights Festival, he worried that all the activity might be diluting the company's effectiveness since the 1982 season had been uneven despite some of "the most prolific talent around."[1] He pointed out that Threads by Jonathan Bolt had been well-liked by subscribers, but had perplexed the critics. Patrick Meyer's K2 was dropped. It was to have been co-produced with the Phoenix Theatre, but the two companies were unable to work out a fiscally equitable way of dealing with a $60,000 set, two subscription lists and a limited run. Dropping the production, however, left holes in both groups. Gerard continued his assessment by accusing the Circle of filling in with a tepid evening of one-acts to accommodate its subscribers.

Mason, however, defended the company's position:

> Over the thirteen years, it's been a matter of expanding and contracting a number of times. At the moment, I guess you could say we're expanding. It may be too much. The larger you are, the bigger the problems. Maybe I've forgotten how difficult it is when nobody knows you, but I don't believe anything gets easier. I must say I don't think we're doing badly. Our production of

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[1] Jeremy Gerard, "Will Success Spoil Circle Repertory," The New York Times, 3/14/82.

Richard
risks.[1]
Richard II definitely demonstrates that we're out there taking
risks.[1]

Gerard never answered the question posed by the title of his article but he recognized that the company activity reflected Mason's enthusiasm for trying new things. Mason himself, contemplating the company's expansion, did not know if the expansion period was over but he did not feel that the company had suffered artistically.

It is obvious that the company had moved toward growth almost organically. It had been caught up with and absorbed into the intensely involved mechanism of institutionalization almost beyond its desires and, most particularly, beyond the realm of its original concepts. As stated, the late seventies was the time of the Circle's greatest growth. It was also the greatest period of growth for the Literary Department which extended into the eighties. Milan Stitt's programs were continued and nourished and grew almost organically once the processes had been established. Every year something new seemed to have been added to the entire Circle Rep process; these new things should be itemized in order to get the full scope of activity:

In 1977 - The Friday morning Readings were formalized in an ongoing process. Script readers were hired to help with the growing volume of unsolicited manuscripts. On September 27, 1977, Daniel Irvine presented the first Late Show.

In 1978 - The Projects-In-Progress (PIPS) program was begun in conference with the playwright members - again, to formalize an existing program. The

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[1] Mason as quoted by Gerard.

Playwrights Workshop was formed with Joe Mathewson, Mick Casale, Jim Farrell, Ralph Pape, Joe Pintauro and Rod Marriott. By the Winter, Jim Farrell was hired as an Assistant Dramaturg.

In 1979, with the revival of Stitt's The Runner Stumbles, the idea of creating a season of four new plays, one revival and one classic was instituted. Stitt also worked out a plan to have a true revolving repertory system. By the summer the literary staff was swelling: James Farrell had succeeded Stitt as Acting Dramaturg even though Stitt officially remained as Dramaturg. B. Rodney Marriott was hired as Literary Manager; Mary Robinson, a former reader, was hired as Assistant Literary Manager, and by the Fall, Robert Meiksins was hired as a Literary Intern. A new Playwrights Workshop was begun under Marriott's leadership, with Joe Mathewson, Mick Casale, Jonathan Bolt, Joe Pintauro, Ellie Jones, Ben Siegler, Bill C. Davis and Bill Elverman. Now Friday afternoons were reserved for Readings.

During the 1979-80 Season, there were 32 readings of 40 plays. Of these, nine received major productions elsewhere while five received full Circle productions. In addition, five PIPS were presented: Mass Appeal, Threads, Some Sweet Time (later Elm Circle), The Diviners and The Woolgatherer.

In 1980, the First Annual Circle Rep Festival of One Acts began in May. By the Fall, Robert Meiksins was hired as a full time Literary Assistant. Extended Readings were begun as a step between a Reading and a PIP. The first two were Bone Garden, by Peter Meck and Gas Station by Shelby Buford, Jr. Now all reading of unsolicited manuscripts was done by outside readers. For the first time, accurate archives were begun. Karen Gellman and Peter Oberlink were hired as Literary Interns. Jim Farrell was commissioned to write Bing and Walker

with funds from the Drama League. It was determined that if an actor was auditioned for a PIP role, the role had to be offered to the actor if CRC produced the play on the mainstage. (This rule was changed in 1982 when Tanya Berezin took over as Casting Director.)

During the 1980-81 Season, there were 34 Readings of 38 plays. Of these, 11 received Major Production outside CRC while eight were produced by CRC. Five PIPS were presented.

In 1981, by the Spring, the Extended Reading program was changed to be a step between a PIP and a mainstage. In the Fall, Charles Kiselyak was hired as a Literary Intern. Daniel Irvine became Director of Labs. The Playwrights Workshop was now called Playwrights Lab. The membership was up to 20. Outside regulars were permitted to attend. The Friday Readings were cut off from the Lab members. John Bishop was taken on as official company Dramaturg. Second readers were now being paid. It was determined that Dramaturgs should be assigned to PIPS on a regular basis selected from the Literary Department's personnel. The planned December Festival of One Acts fell through.

During the 1981-82 Season there were 31 Readings of 33 plays. Of these, four received production outside while six were produced by CRC. There were seven PIPS and two Extended Readings, after which the ER Program was terminated.

In 1982, movement within the department continued with unslackened pace. Jonathan Kalb was hired as a Literary Intern. Tanya Berezin was hired as Associate Artistic Director to cast the PIPS. B. Rodney Marriott became Acting Artistic Director to replace Marshall Mason as he departed for a two year Sabbatical. Rob Meiksins became the Literary Manager. Janet Grillo, a former reader, became Assistant Literary Manager. Ari Roth was hired as a Literary

Intern. Now the Extended Reading Series was reinstated, but was to be held only when needed (up to seven). Dramaturgs were assigned to every PIP and every ER for the first time. A Directors Lab was formed. Patrick Meyers was awarded the largest commission ever, $2,500, to write Dysan. The Playwrights Lab which now had a membership of 25, was run by Rob Meiksins.

During the 1982-83 Season, there were 34 Readings of 39 plays. Of these, seven received outside production while four were produced by CRC. In addition, there were eight PIPS and six ERs.

1983 was the last year of growth for the Literary Department. In the Winter, Robert Meiksins acted as Dramaturg for mainstage production of Corinne Jacker's Domestic Issues. The Playwrights Lab was closed to outsiders. In the Spring, the One Act Festival was held out of the Directors Lab. There was also a Playwright Support Fund Benefit at Lortel Theatre on May 9th, which included world premieres of 11 new plays. The process of reevaluation of Playwrights Lab membership was begun. In the Fall, Ari Roth was hired as Assistant Literary Manager. Jackie Kanner was hired as Literary Intern. Now 3,000 unsolicited manuscripts were received. Tanya Berezin took on Casting for Friday Readings while she and Ari Roth acted as Dramaturgs for the mainstage production of The Sea Gull. At the same time, Berilla Kerr was nominated as Playwrights representative. Nancy Donahue was commissioned to write Beachhouse with Drama League Funds. Plans were made for a Lab Workshop Production Series to be held in the summer of 1984 while John Heuer was commissioned to write Rameau Labesque. Lab membership changed; new members were brought in. It was determined that Dramaturgs should work on all mainstage productions.

The beginning of the 1983 season showed a full commission program of

$6,000; One commission was to be awarded to an outside writer for $2,000. Three $1,000 commissions or six $500 commissions were to go to inhouse writers to create new work.

However, the commission program was cut during the big January/ February, 1984 budget cuts which included: 1) The position of Literary Manager to be phased out. 2) Unsolicited manuscripts to be returned unread. 3) Circle Rep to be no longer active in the search to discover new playwrights. 4) Reading and evaluating plays to be cut out almost entirely. 5) The Playwrights Lab to be phased out during the 1984-85 season.

Why? 1984 was not a year of great success and stability. Instead, the fifteenth anniversary year marked the beginning of some very radical and sweeping changes in the company, all designed to bring back some of the success and vitality that had been so obvious during the late seventies. 1984 was a disappointing year all around for the company which was suffering one of the worst financial crises of its existence, and which was meeting with critical dissatisfaction with the product. Circle Rep seemed to be suffering not only a budget deficit but an artistic deficit as well, even though during the period between 1974 and 1984 the Circle grew both in size and reputation. It grew in terms of the number of subscribers; it grew in terms of the number of artists who called it home; it grew in terms of the number of projects being developed at one time; it grew in terms of management, staff, and so on. In this sense, this ten year period was an exciting and productive one, but it was also a period in which the product was simply not meeting the standards that critics had come not only to expect, but to demand of Circle Rep. Thus, with Mason's attempt to create a living theatre of major importance, he eventually found that artistic

quality had been sacrificed. This is the double-edged sword of growth and deficit that the Circle Rep underwent. It led to the major transition in company policy that began with the extensive budget cuts in 1984, which decimated the Literary Department programs and personnel. The Literary Department had been created essentially to fulfill an idealistic goal. Because of that optimism, it did not have the political effect it could have had within the company. Although it had been created to participate in the mainstage, it never filled that goal. It became, in the final analysis, dispensable.

CHAPTER NINE

TRANSITIONS AND THE CHANGING CLIMATE OF THE EIGHTIES

Despite the severe problems that befell the company in 1984, the tally sheet still looked positive at the end of 1983. At that time, fifteen years after Circle Rep organized as a company on 84th Street and upper Broadway, it had experienced considerable and continual success. For one thing, it had accumulated an impressive record of Awards: The Pulitzer Prize, two Tony Awards, two New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, 12 Drama Desk Awards, 27 Obie Awards, seven inclusions in "Ten Best Plays" Annual, four Theatre World Awards, five Outer Critics Circle Awards, two Clarence Derwent Awards, 13 Villager Awards, The Vernon Rice Award and The Margo Jones Award.

The list of successful plays was equally impressive, including such works as Talley's Folly, The Fifth of July, and A Tale Told,[1] which make up the Talley Trilogy, Gertrude, Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, The Hot L Baltimore, When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder? Gemini, The Sea Horse, The Mound Builders, Serenading Louie, and The Diviners, to name just a few of the outstanding plays.

In addition, by 1983 the company had a roster of members that would make an old-time studio proud.[2]

Still, despite what was phenomenal success for a company in a tiny 160-seat theatre in an industry fraught with artistic hazards, and perennial

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[1] Revised and produced again in 1985 as Talley and Son.

[2] See Appendix, p. 441 for complete company roster.

financial ones, major upheavals were in the wind. Many of the company's activities were being reassessed regarding how appropriate they were for the goals that were still important to the CRC. The conflicts within the leadership had placed Circle Rep at a crossroads. It is obvious that everyone felt the tug of the imminent changes that were perceived as necessary in the face of often itemized problems that had mutiplied with success and growth:

> Any artistic divergence or crossing of paths that have happened within the last few years, I think, come from conflicts in the masterminds at Circle; what they see as the guiding artistic force. By that I mean, we are committed to both an idea of family and one of excellence. We are committed to the idea of putting on the best possible play. That's one of the reasons we have a Literary Department; to continue looking for the great American voice.[1]

And yet, with the institutional growth of the theatre, much of what had been considered valuable--most particularly the intimacy--was gone.

> I think those of us who were there very early and those of us who came during the real growth period - which was the late 70s - see the Circle more as an institution now and sort of mourn the passing of the smaller theatre[2]

Equally important, the direct approach of the early days had been dispersed into an all-inclusive shotgun effect that concentrated heavily on "the plays" without fully determining which plays were the most important ones to develop. As Richard Frankel, General Manager, noted:

> We are still trying to figure out what we want to be doing and what is important to us. Are all new plays important to us? Are only American plays important to us? Or new plays by new playwrights? Or is it new plays by our resident

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[1] Roth interview.

[2] Bishop interview.

> playwrights that are important to us? Do we do only classic classics like Chekhov and Shakespeare? Or, what about our own classics? Do we do Hot L Baltimore? Would that be just regurgitating old stuff or do we have a legitimate responsibility to our own legacy.[1]

It was Marshall Mason, however, who pinpointed without hesitation what to him was still the most important aspect of the Circle Rep—the excellence that could rank it as a national theatre.

> I would be less than candid if I didn't admit that from the very beginning, the idea was to create a theatre of such startling excellence that sooner or later, by way of acclamation, theworld, as it were, would come to us and say, you will be our theatre in the United States - a National Theatre. I would love to be deserving of having accomplished enough of importance to be considered the best America has to offer. We have not accomplished that yet. When I started in the beginning, I said it would take twenty years to build such a theatre - to build a great theatre. What I meant was the kind of theatre whose excellence is so clear that it would become a leader to everyone else.[2]

Now, at the end of the Circle Repertory Company's fifteenth year, the company is in the process of a reorganization that will result in a major operational transition.It will be a change that, in many ways, will take the company back to its original concepts, most particularly those of ensemble and revolving repertory. Despite original intentions, after the first two seasons on 84th Street, the company has only sporadically played in repertory before slipping into a regular play-by-play subscription season: Hamlet and Mary Stuart were played in revolving repertory, (1979-80) as was Twelfth Night with The Beavercoat (1980-81) and The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohlar with

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[1] Richard Frankel interview, February 10, 1984.

[2] Mason interview.

Richard II, (1981-82.) Now fifteen years old, after having witnessed the company grow in size to near-industrial proportions, Circle Rep will cut out a small, select group of actors and playwrights from the 100-member existing company and revitalize, not only its dream of playing in revolving rep, but the original concept of the company's ensemble derivations. In 1983, the National Endowment For the Arts announced a $1,000,000 major grant to be awarded to five ensemble theatre groups in the country. It was a grant that Zelda Fichandler of Arena Stage characterized as the most important made in the history of the National Endowment.[1]

Circle Rep's new ensemble will be made possible by the grant it received from the National in the sum of $260,000 for the first year of a five-year program beginning with the 1985-86 season. This first year grant is to cover 75% of Circle Rep's annual budget. The next year the National Endowment will supply 50% of the money, the following year 25%, and so on. The remainder of the operating funds will have to be raised by Circle Rep.

The company's transition to this new phase of operations is philosophical in nature as well as organizational. Demonstrating the unswervability in his artistic commitment, Mason outlined his goals and beliefs in the Artistic Director's Statement made to the NEA in his application for the grant:

> As Artistic Director, I am eager to engage our staff in redefining their own motivations for working in the theatre, and to eliminate what I have perceived as a drift away from

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[1] Marshall W. Mason, "#5. Changes in Current Operations," in Grant Proposal, p. 5. (This is Marshall W. Mason's artistic statement which was submitted to the National Endowment for the Arts in support of the Circle Repertory Company's application for its Ensemble Grant.)

sensitivity to the principles on which we are founded.[1]

As has been pointed out, in creating an institution to protect the creative process, the emphasis shifted dramatically from the actor to the writer. In the process of discovering and nurturing the new writer, the company became "increasingly dispirited at being relegated to a secondary position,"[2] even though much new and exciting work was either developed or discovered: Mark Medoff's, When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?, Edward J. Moore's, The Sea Horse, Jim Leonard's, The Diviners, Sam Shepard's Buried Child, and Fool For Love, Lanford Wilson's, The Mound Builders, Serenading Louie, 5th of July, Talley's Folly, A Tale Told, Milan Stitt's, The Runner Stumbles, Back In The Race, Marsha Norman's, 'night Mother, The Holdup, The Winter Shakers, John Bishop's The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler, Winter Signs, The Harvesting, Albert Innaurato's, Gemini, Ulysses in Traction, Jules Feiffer's, Knock Knock, and many more. Yet, after fifteen years, there was a strong feeling that a change was imperative to: 1) preserve the company's original objectives which had never been found to be faulty, 2) to sustain the group's compelling image as one of the few companies in the nation with strong ensemble concerns, and 3) to insure the company's health in an unrelentingly hazardous environment.

After countless high level meetings and discussions regarding fiscal possibilities and financial peril as well as a need for reaffirmation of artistic commitments, it was determined that part of the CRC's yearly functioning would finally operate as a true ensemble in a true revolving repertory system. The

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[1] Mason, p. 7.

[2] Ibid., #3, The Artistic Director's Statement, p. 4.

scale of this operation was determined by the generous National Endowment grant. It was the second largest of eight grants made to nurture distinguished ensembles throughout the country, the largest going to the Arena Stage in Washington.[1] As of the time of the grant, Circle Rep's new operations would be centered around a limited season of 25 weeks at another theatre of larger capacity and greater storage area than the Sheridan Square Playhouse. This separate season would consist of twenty-five actors and four resident playwrights all of whom will be be expected to participate in daily exercise, communication, development, and production. Without the usual rush to production, the Ensemble will develop classics as well as new works written for them by the resident playwrights. For this total commitment, each participant will be paid $500 per week. As Mason pointed out in his grant proposal:

> We need developmental time with our major artists at levels of remuneration that reflect the dignity of their artistic commitment. We need the NEA support to buy us the time to build a genuine repertoire that we can sustain over a period of years, instead of wastefully releasing our creations to commercial managements who exploit the harvest with no thought of enriching the artistic soil from which it came.[2]

Always striving toward the excellence he cherishes, Mason continued:

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[1] Within the confines of this funding, an interesting combination of experimental and traditional groups received Ensemble grants from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1985: The Arena Stage in Washington, which has the core of a company but wants to create a full company, The Circle Repertory Company, The Wooster Group which has been a highly experimental company in New York City, The Spanish Repertory Company which is a genuine repertory company operating within a Spanish area, The Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island under Adrian Hall, The San Francisco Mime Company, and the Milwaukee Repertory Company.

[2] Ibid., p. 6.

> In the process, the Circle LAB will continue to explore for the discovery and development of new playwrights, actors and directors, while the Circle Rep Company will focus on the mature artists -- a company that shares the goal of leading the American theatre to new heights of excellence. [1]

Depending on who the four resident writers are at the beginning of the 1985 season when the NEA Grant is in effect, the actors will be engaged seasonally as in the Royal Shakespeare Company. They will perform all roles in a three play repertoire which will include a classic, a revival of a previously produced Circle Rep play which was considered exceptional at the time it was initially produced, (e.g. The Hot L Baltimore,) and a new play that will be written especially for this select company. The three plays will play in nightly rotation, and each actor will play a variety of roles, challenging all to stretch beyond the types demanded by commercial casting. In addition, according to Marshal Mason, roles will be assigned to be performed by more than one actor, endowing each performance with a "freshness and vitality unimagined"[2] in the limited runs that have been the norm of theatrical tradition in the United States.

The remainder of the existing company will continue operations as usual. Out of the developmental processes, it will be responsible for supplying the two "bookend" productions that, though not performing in repertory, will round out the season.

The new project made possible by the National Endowment, is very reminiscent of the early days of the company when the family of artists

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[1] Ibid., p. 7.

[2] Ibid., p. 5.

numbered 30 actors and five resident playwrights. It is also reminiscent of a similar project in 1978, when the New York State Council on the Arts provided Circle Rep with enough funds to attempt a similar experiment on a smaller scale: At that time, the CRC was able to designate 16 actors for a limited 20-week season. The resident company members, who were paid a bare $150 per week for a full time commitment, nevertheless included an impressive array of talent: Michael Ayr, Tanya Berezin, Joyce Reehling Christopher, Jeff Daniels, Jack Davidson, Jake Dengel, Stephanie Gordon, Trish Hawkins, Jonathan Hogan, William Hurt, Ken Kliban, Sharon Madden, Burke Pearson, Nancy Snyder, Danton Stone and Jimmie Ray Weeks.

Despite strong indications of success and even stronger feelings that this was a solid direction in which to move, the 1978 project was dismantled after two years due to the perennial problem of lack of funds. However, it had produced some important results:

> In the two years of this experiment of solidifying the ensemble, we created 5th of July, Patrick Meyers' Feedlot, Albert Innaurato's Ulysses in Traction (which prompted Walter Kerr to wonder if a production can be too good for a play) and Talley's Folly which received the Pulitzer Prize. Artistically very exciting, this experiment culminated in the rotating repertory of Mary Stuart and William Hurt's Hamlet. But because the stipend was so small, the actor's elected to return to the "by-production" remunerative system. The meager paycheck too strongly resembled the dole, and the actors preferred the dignity of a higher salary for short engagements to smaller pay for a guaranteed period of time. Nevertheless, this experiment whetted the aesthetic appetite of the Company in a way that none of our commercial successes have. It created a hunger for sustained working conditions that would stimulate the creative spirit of collaboration in this artistic community.[1]

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[1]Ibid., p. 4.

The funding provided by the National Endowment is exactly what is needed to continue in the tradition of the 1978 project. Now it can no longer be called "an experiment," but rather a proven method of company functioning in which the best work seems to emerge. Although there is, perforce, some insecurity on the part of the actors as to the selection of the newly designated ensemble, there was a great deal of enthusiasm for the artistic concept of the "new" operation. In idealistic terms, it is possible to perceive the philosophical aspects of the latest transition not only as the conclusion of one era leading to a new beginning, but as a retrospective observation that all of the past operations have been prologue to the new moment. The CRC was originally created as an ongoing ensemble of actors who, from the start had shared the common vision of creating a new aesthetic together: the complete integration of text and performance into a living play. The achievement of this goal was realized within the fourth year of operations when the company produced Lanford Wilson's The Hot L Baltimore which was unquestionably confirmed by the New York theatre critics as an achievement of the company's basic aesthetic goal. Now, at the end of the Circle's fifteenth year in operation, the NEA Ensemble Grant has given Circle Rep the monies that will make the continuation of this aesthetic goal an ongoing reality.

In the new program:

> The four playwrights will be commissioned to develop new plays specifically for members of the ensemble to perform. They will each receive the same amount as an actor, totalling $12,500 for each commission. The writers will attend working sessions with the acting ensemble, and will develop plays for the following season.
>
> While we might expect considerable continuity in the composition of the resident ensemble from one season to the next, there will also be an opportunity for change, allowing other members of the Circle Rep to participate from year to

> year. Four different playwrights will be commissioned each season, which should result in a rich fund of material available for our repertoire -- 20 new plays will be commissioned over the period of the grant.
>
> In addition to the 80 actors designated as members of the Circle Repertory Company, we will also have the potential to attract other artists who share our vision of theatre and who are able to commit to a residency for a six-month season.[1]

It remains to be seen whether or not twenty new commissioned plays will add up to twenty of the best plays the CRC could possibly find, and whether or not the elitist procedure of designating performers in the existing company and/or hiring outside guest artists will add to the sense of dispirit that plagued the company during the last few years of its operations. For every positive step, there is a potentially negative one: another double-edged sword.

There were many reasons for Circle Rep's application to the NEA. The company had been mainstreamed, socialized and institutionalized, but the most important reason had to do with finances. At the fifteen year mark of operations, Circle Rep's budgets had increased enormously. Within the last five years alone, the operating budget had escalated an astonishing 400 to 450 percent, this, despite the fact that company members do not receive compensation unless directly involved in a production. Part of the increase was inflationary in nature--everything cost more in 1983 than it did in 1978--but part of it was also due to Circle Rep's increased activity. The greater budgets were made possible by a variety of means. In 1978, subscription revenues were approximately $22,000. By 1983, the substantial increase to $504,000 was directly attributable to an increase in subscriber membership from 700 to 6,000. Higher

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[1]Ibid., #2. The Ensemble Project, p. 3.

revenues could also be traced to an increase in non-subscribtion individual ticket prices from $7.00 in 1978 to $22.50 in 1983. Although these figures may indicate substantially higher revenue, what did not change over the years was the constant fact that the money that came into the company has always been slightly less than the money that went out. What was a crippling debt of $30,000 ten years ago was proportionally just as crippling at $400,000 in 1983. The only thing that ever changed was the decimal point. As Richard Frankel candidly points out,

> The desperation is continual. We have a plan to try to pay down the debt systematically. To keep our expenses below our output. One thing that's good about us now is that larger amounts of money are generated. If something works we may make thirty, forty, or fifty thousand dollars on it. There are opportunities to take large chunks out of it. We're committed to doing it. We have to do it. We cannot function carrying this kind of debt . . . To me, it's continual peril. It's a very perilous business. We have debts, and we have change in artistic needs, and we have change in people, and people who are now 45 instead of 28, who want to live differently now than they did back then and do different kinds of work and make more money. The artist doesn't make much money here.[1]

Not only is it time consuming and energy sapping to continually have to juggle financial obligations, but with accumulating interest payments and penalties for being in arrears on outstanding debts, it is also very expensive to be poor. In addition, and perhaps even more important to continued operations, "People become reluctant to give you money."[2] Donations and grant monies have always had to be a part of the company's subsistence. In the past, most of it had been seed monies. However, by the 1980s, it had become virtually inconceivable

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[1] Frankel interview.

[2] Ibid.

to structure a solvent, non-profit theatrical existence without some kind of major outside support money. It was the NEA's announcement of its $1,000,000 grant that forced Circle Rep to act upon the major changes it had already perceived as necessary to its continued artistic and financial survival.

In one way it is surprising that such major monies would be made available to the theatrical arts from a government organization at a time when the United States economy of the immediate past still raised specters of the recession and inflation that had almost crippled the nation. The two in combination--recession and inflation--created the doubly lethal economic effect that demanded the coining of a new word, the "stagflation"[1] syndrome of the Nixon and Ford administrations. The inflation brought about by the governmental wage and price controls of 1971 was a chronic fact of American life by the end of the decade. Although inherited by President Carter in 1976, his administration had little success in stemming the desperate economic tide and, in fact, witnessed the inflation factor soaring to double-digit, accounting for much of the financial problems of all of the arts, not only those of non-profit organizations like Circle Rep. But it is hardly surprising that the arts suffered as they did when the very economic backbone of the nation was jeopardized by the steady devaluation of the dollar. The steel, automobile and housing industries were suffering their greatest economic setbacks since the Great Depression of the thirties; the tax burden was ever-increasing; the American voter was perceivably becoming more angry than at any time since the sixties. Further indications that the system itself was in trouble could be seen through the

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[1] Stagnant economy and rising inflation.

nagging doubts about the viability of Social Security; rather than securing a sense of well-being for future retirees, Social Security contrarily was raising the *in*security levels enormously. The program was accurately perceived to be virtually running out of funds; many tax-payers, despite years of heavy contribution, felt the program would be completely bankrupt when their turn as benefit-recipients came due. This perception "contributed to the tax revolt of the seventies."[1]

Not only were economic factors so unsettling by the beginning of the eighties but international terrorism--much of it directed against the United States--was becoming a daily concern of the American citizen as well as his government. The Iranian hostage situation under the Carter administration equally angered and embarassed an American populace that felt increasingly helpless under the siege of a terrorist Iranian government.[2] There was a debilitating sense of helplessness in the growing perception of a weakening of the American position in foreign affairs. Much of it was born out of frustration and exasperation over the unfamiliar feeling that America was no longer "Number 1" either in military strength or in world leadership. Not only were the American hostages held in captivity in Teheran for 444 media-drenched days but despite protests and overt threats by the United States, Russia invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979 with complete equanimity and, with an assessment that proved accurate: little to fear from actual reprisals. The

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[1] Rowland Evans & Robert Noval, The Reagan Revolutions, (E. P. Dutton, New York: 1981,) pp. 15-16.

[2] On November 4, 1979, the U.S. Embassay in Teheran, Iran was seized by terrorists.

substantial new political force that had quietly begun to take shape in the late seventies ushered a new wave of conservative political influences into the nation at the onset of the eighties. With Ronald Reagan's 44-out-of-50-state presidential victory in 1980, Liberal Democrats were swept out of both the Senate and the House; "bleeding-heart Liberals" were out; the New Right, often colloquially identified as the Moral Majority, was in.[1] As never before, under the lead of Rev. Jerry Falwell, (12 million consistent viewers of his *Old-Fashioned Gospel Hour*) the "electronic churches" (a very powerful form of theatre had plunged headlong into political endorsements to substantiate their beliefs.[2]

It was little wonder that Ronald Reagan's election was a landslide. The American vote in the 1980 presidential elections had taken on the aspects of righteous bullets shooting away the incumbents who were unanimously faulted for the painful political and economic trends. According to Evans and Novak,

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[1]This is actually inaccurate. The Moral Majority is a religious group not the political New Right. However, according to Evans & Novak it is a part of the New Right.

[2]"This force was created by banding together and solidifying a large segment of the American population, Christian Americans. Turning various diverse groups into a single political voice was not a new political tactic. In fact, in the past, the Democratic Party had been successful by striking a coalition of voters that included such diverse portions of the population as members of labor unions, blacks, Hispanics, Jews, and other minorities.

But never before in modern times had an attempt been made at molding conservative, God-fearing, "born-again" Christians, mostly Protestants, into a unified block of voters. Never before had there been such a huge and powerful block ripe for organization, for it is variously estimated that this religious, largely churchgoing group numbers anywhere from forty to eighty million Americans. Obviously, even if only a portion of those Christians could be moved to the polls to vote together on issues and candidates, they would have an effect and influence of great magnitude." L.B. Taylor, Jr., The New Right , (Franklin Watts-An Impact Book, New York/London/Toronto/ Sydney, 1981.) pp. 3-4.

Reagan's "drastic policy changes constituted a revolution."[1] "The New Deal of 48 years earlier could not compare with the revolutionary portents of Reagan's arrival in Washington,"[2] with his systematic tax cuts; trade-offs of less conservation for more energy; unprecedented rise in defense spending to effect a military balance with the Russians; less courting of the third world powers with a concomitant lessening of interest in human rights issues while strengthening traditional friendships with foreign countries; and of course, a different approach to social issues: opposition to abortion and public school busing, slower movement on affirmative action and a strong position in favor of school prayer while the laws to protect social causes such as school lunches, housing subsidies and environmental protection, had been put on an almost permanent hold by the Reagan administration due to a lack of funds for enforcement. In this context, justifiably or not, "Reaganomics" was held responsible for all the financial cutbacks that plagued the social perceptions of the early eighties still reeling from the effects but still demanding the benefits of the welfare state.

The social and sexual revolutions of the embattled sixties and early seventies had withered along with the open face of the counterculture. A new generation that hardly remembered the Vietnam upheavals was now voting alongside an older generation that remembered the good old graffiti-less days with a burning nostalgia. Bare feet, tie-dyes and long hair were replaced by the

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[1] Evans & Novak, p. 11

[2] Ibid., p. 3

well-cut three piece suit, while getting a solid college education that led to a good job was definitely back in.

The Arena Stage in Washington and the Circle Repertory Company, the two largest grantees, have demonstrated considerable longevity in the face of the wide sweeping social, economic and political changes. Idealistically speaking, it is almost a wonder that the Circle went after the Federal money at all, but Circle Rep has always followed the money--not a small survivability component in its longevity factor. Although money is always important, in many respects it did not matter in the minds of individual company members who cared deeply about their artistic integrity. It was important only in that money made it possible to operate independently of financial pressures. Fulfilling a social function and fulfilling their own needs as artists without compromise were two difficult goals to correlate effectively. Once again it is the double-edged sword that creates an almost schizophrenic company personality. This personality is enhanced by an environment that is not only "hostile to the arts," as is Mason's conviction, but increasingly is becoming more and more expensive. However, following the money, no matter how necessary, could be interpreted as evidence that a great deal of lip-service was given to "artistry versus commerciality" while the company quietly sought the established route of the system. On the other hand, Mason believes unswervingly everything that he says regarding the issue of artistry versus commerciality. In a sense, he has one foot in the world of the establishment and another in the counter-cultured soil that first supported his ambitions. Perhaps this split-personality aspect of the company is exactly what is necessary to maintain viability in an artistic world where aesthetic principles often have to give way to conventional commericality.

In order to win the grant from the existing social and political system, Mason had to prove that the company was fulfilling a useful function to society and was indeed operating as a full-fledged ensemble. Much of the Ensemble Grant Proposal had to do with the extraordinary number of well-known "hit" plays the company had developed during the past fifteen years. It is a sign of the company's chameleon adaptability that when the Ford Foundation Grant was available for the development of new American plays, Circle Rep could easily apply. Much of their developmental program was for exactly such purposes; when the New York State Council on the Arts Grant was available for tradtional material, a good deal of the Circle's major work was perfectly suitable for qualification; when the Peg Santvoord Grant was offered to encourage experimental works, the Circle could accept with equal equanimity, legitimately holding up much of its experimental work for inspection. It would not be inappropriate to state that if a grant were made available to companies that dealt in classics, or companies that nurtured new actors, the Circle could just as easily fulfill the necessary requirements with complete legitimacy. Now, with the National Endowment giving supporting grants for Ensembles, Circle Rep could apply, pointing, once again with complete justification, to its own ensemble origins. Every single one of the grants can be considered thoroughly justified. This adaptability is a strong testament to the company's survivability in the face of statistically-stacked odds against survival, despite excellence. When the CRC's ensemble evolved at the end of the sixties, the day-to-day aspect of its operations was more in the manner of a communal thrust that grew out of a sixties sociological rejection of the nuclear family. Now in the eighties, the chameleon factor is still operative; the cloak of the company has changed colors by

throwing aside the institutional element and once agan embracing the more intimate ensemble aspects of the company. The "ensemble" is, and basically has always been, the very foundation of the company's existence. The development of new American plays and new American writers was always meant to be a side product:

> Nowhere in our original credo did we say we wanted to discover new playwrights or the next big star or any such thing. We wanted to establish an environment for the nurturing, growth and maturuation primarily of the actor. [1]

By the eighties, Circle Rep was becoming very conservative in its approach to theatre and its position in the mainstreamed community of theatre itself. It is difficult to assess whether the CRC was merely reflecting the changes or in the vanguard of them.

The eighties represented the reawakening of the age of individualism, the age of capitalism and conservative attitudes in general. The CRC seemed to be articulating aspects of the larger environment, if not in the actual plays it presented, at least in its relationship to the environment. The very act of turning to a government institution like the NEA for funding can be interpreted as being politically conservative. There has been an increasing concern with and an increasing interest in money. There has been the growing sense that it is perfectly legitimate to talk about money, to deal with it openly, even to go after it aggressively. In the sixties nobody at Circle Rep ever worried about money, but they were younger then. Of course there is the natural process of becoming more conservative in general as one gets older. Yet, it is no longer only that

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[1] Mason interview.

they are older now and want more, but the communal attitudes of the sixties have disappeared along with the end of the Vietnam era. As Lanford Wilson said in the sixties when Joe Cino generously supplied sandwiches and left-over pastries every day, what more did they need? At that time, not much, but times change, and Circle Rep has changed with the times, as has the nation. There has been the coming of age of political knowledgeability; not only knowing which political levers to push or pull in order to effect changes but demonstrating a willingness to use them. In his proposal to the NEA, Mason "demanded" the right to continue the work the Circle had begun in 1969. However, the transition back to the original concepts of the company was not due only to the available funding of the eighties. There were other factors that affected it. There was idealism versus the realities of pragmatism. Financially, the grant represents a respite from desperation, a return to the idealism of youth, as well as a coming of age. Going after this money is part and parcel of being mature artists in their forties who can no longer live on the dole. Coming of age implies an advance from adolescence and an acceptance of adulthood with some of its more dour aspects; there still is the need to give an apologetic accounting for the admission of at least needing, if not necessarily liking, money.

Circle Rep has now fully become a part of the system by the very act of applying for the NEA grant. Their image has changed. Just as one of Ronald Reagan's stated priorities has been to "restore" America's image, the Circle's Marketing Director, Tom Thompson, openly admitted that he was interested in "improving the Circle's image"[1] and bringing it to as mainstream a position as

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[1]Tom Thompson interview, New York City, February 9, 1984.

possible--a very "eighties" attitude. It is interesting to note that at the company's origins, it stood far outside of the establishment. Now, ironically, the only way it could go back to its origins was to become a part of the establishment. Even though it is now the day of "individualism" again, the day of the rugged individualist is over. Now it is more valuable to survival to learn how to play the system--to learn how to play the political game--a stance which states a great deal about how theatre survives in America and how Circle Rep, in particular, was held together; talent is not enough. The bottom line pervasive factor is money, which translates into funding. The CRC has finally learned how to play the political game to its maximum effectiveness. It never had consistent troubles with the artistic ones. Periodically the CRC has come up with the winners, but the political money game is the one that is going to keep them alive, not the artistic one. This conclusion may be a sad commentary on the arts in America, but it is a valid assessment. Their adolesence is over. They have stopped rebelling against the establishment and have become a solid part of it. As Marshall Mason says,

> This grant is such an important thing in my life because it's the biggest, most solid and substantial commitment in history of an artistic idea in this country; the idea of creating theatre through ensembles. By the time we add together the $260,000 we get from the government, the $135,000 that comes from the regular government program, and about $125,000 from the State Council of the Arts, it's over $500,000 that they've given to this tiny little theatre with 160 seats to realize our artistic dreams. They are saying, "Okay, you say you can do this. Do it." I think the challenge is tremendous. [1]

One of the major goals of this new direction will be to try to remove Circle Rep from the tyranny of the hit/flop syndrome that plagues so much theatre in New York. As Mason says:

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[1] Mason interview.

> It's not just here in New York City under the scrutiny of the major critics because that is both a strength and a weakness. But it's also the American culture which wants something new without revering and nurturing what is valuable about yesterday. We are really a disposable society. . . Finding a management and a structure that will help us to grow in that environment is very difficult. People are attracted to plays that will transfer to Broadway.[1]

Do grants like the NEA signify a strengthening of the theatrical fabric in America? Does the transition itself signify a decline or a step forward for the Circle Repertory Company? It is more than likely that it will turn out to be beneficial for Circle Rep but not a factor for theatre in general. The important thing to see here is what the grant represents to Circle Rep in terms of freedom to pursue original objectives, freedom to maintain artistic integrity in a commercial environment, and most important perhaps, freedom from financial pressures—at least temporarily. It might be an oversimplification to look upon the transition in terms of either advance or decline. It would be difficult to come up with any conclusive thoughts about it before the fact. Circle Rep seems to be heading back toward its original concepts which, in one way, has to be looked upon in a positive light, at least from an artistic point of view. The original concept represented a unified ensemble behind the resident playwrights, which often translated into their peak plays, performed at an achievement of peak acting through cohesive ensemble interaction for an audience that seemed to be starved for what the Circle was offering.

While the elitist group of twenty-five actors begins its twenty-five weeks of intimacy, the remainder of the company ostensibly will continue in the

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[1] Ibid.

manner in which Circle Rep has been operating for the past years despite the fact that much of the company functioning, as it had been known, would be phased out. The new group will move on to a recreation of the original concepts of the company. A decline? A move forward?A move backwards? Better? Worse? Only time can be the final judge. Despite the 1978 precedent which, in effect, succeeded but had to be abandoned, the new 1985 project is still an experiment. But it is an experiment that is being tackled with great enthusiasm. Company members seem to feel that the only way new theatre with the "experience in the now," as they like to call it, can be created, is through a true company setting. The very environment is conducive to creation. There is no such thing as "one person creates theatre." It is definitely a collaborative art, and when the collaborative parts are in a unit that is functioning together in a controlled environment, the best work is done. It is this controlled environment that they are attempting to recreate. In it they feel the acting gets more forceful, the writing grows in strength and perception, the intensity of participation becomes more palpable, the focusing gets sharper. There is a communion that takes place which is what happened in the early days when the company members were idealistic, poverty-stricken little hippies walking about in pants that did not fit well.

But back in the sixties, the ensemble happened as a natural evolutionary process born of the chaotic and hungry times. Now in the eighties, they are forcing the issue of the togetherness an ensemble implies. It is not the same spirit nor the same hunger that is moving them. Nor, no matter how much money they are awarded, can they ever have the same artistic freedom they had in the beginning when they were unknown and unencumbered by financial or

critical considerations. It could very well happen that the new plays which are now commissioned rather than naturally evolving out of the communal ensemble environment as it did in the sixties, turn out to be duds.

One of the strong points in the new projects' favor, however, is that Marshall Mason is enthusiastic about it. This enthusiasm lends a great deal of weight to the project's potential success since Mason has always been, and still is, the guiding force at Circle Rep. It is amazing how, over the years, his fundamental vision has not altered regarding theatre or his own personal feelings about the ensemble itself. Personal considerations and a great deal of flak within the company destroyed the joy of it for him for a while and he departed on a two-year sabbatical. But he returned to the company in 1984 with renewed vigor and reaffirmed vision. The entire concept of taking the company back to its stated origins without the financial hassals pressuring him have given Mason a strong boost; he is greatly stimulated by the challenge and the vote of confidence the NEA grant signifies. Mason has repeatedly demonstrated that his leadership is effective and loyalty-provoking. If anyone can move the company in the right direction, he can. When he is on target, completely focused on what he is creating and not distracted by emotional problems or financial pressures, his enormous talent and his truly extraordinary qualities as a human being can seem to accomplish anything.

On the other side of the ledger, however, there is always the danger of trying to place a plastic bubble around the group in order to preserve that which has made it special. But one never steps into the same stream twice even if the stream is in the same place. The attempt to recreate what had originally been done--in a sense to make it hallowed--could be an exercise in frustration as well

as a giant step backwards. Then again, there is some justification in the cry that for years, critical expectations more or less demanded that the company withdraw from its primary ensemble focus. This time they are not only following the dollar; they are genuinely trying to get back on a course they felt they had somehow lost.

In many ways it sounds like a back-to-basics movement, a return to roots, which has parallels in the very strong back-to-basics movement that is happening in much of education in the eighties. The similarity here is that Circle Rep truly mirrors the times today as it did in the sixties and seventies, just as education mirrored them. In the 60s there was a great deal of experimentation with teaching techniques and particularly with the introduction of exotic subjects, all forced by the external demands for more "interesting" and "pertinent" studies, which is analagous to the external demands for product-orientation forced upon the CRC. Now, education has reversed its position and gone back to teaching the basic courses in reading, writing and arithmetic. Taking the analogy one step further, going back to roots can be perceived as the "spiral effect." In education there is a spiral curriculum in mathematics, for example, that has had ascendance in the last ten years. Simply stated, this means that the number theories are not taught only once, but as the grades continue, are taught again and again at higher planes with enriched levels of experience. Circle Rep has reacted in a similar spiralling effect, which goes along with the image of not stepping into the same water twice. They do not come back to the new ensemble as they were; they come back to it greatly enriched and refreshed by having effectively lived through fifteen years of experiences. In a sense, the evolutionary aspects of the spiralling effect whether

or not it is deliberately cultivated as in education, can be just as effective be it in education or theatre or life itself.

The NEA grant and the transition it will provoke stimulates the need to emphasize one more important point, i.e., the CRC's continuing ability to survive. The Circle's current position is not quite as simple as the image of the beautiful, unified organism they first created that had gotten pulled and distorted into another direction, and now with the advent of the Grant would be able to go back to its roots. That sounds almost too biological. Theatre groups go under when they too rigidly define their roles. When the role begins to be seriously out of step with the times, then there are few ways to survive. Maybe one of the ways is for a theatre to have extremely broad missions. Circle Rep's mission could be interpreted as an emphasis on acting, an emphasis on playwriting, an emphasis on experimentation and an emphasis on ensemble--each individually rich enough to sustain a theatre company's entire philosophy. Together they represent an elasticity that has been implicit in the company's very longevity. It is a broad range of adaptable goals and another way of saying that perhaps in order to survive, a great many roots are needed. They somehow managed to acquire a very rich concoction of them. In other words, if NEA was bestowing grants for developing in-house plays, they could justifiably apply and qualify. "That's where our roots are. That's what we started out doing. That's exactly what we have been all about all this time." It seems that they have been "all about" a great many things and for a wide cacophonation of reasons have been very successful; all of which adds up to a very talented group that correlates well with the image of an animal that is very adept at surviving even in an environment that is hostile. It is part of being a successful company; the ability to become a

part of its environment. That quality of adaptability is very important and is one of the strongest reasons why Circle Rep has survived fifteen years. What is required is not a rigid over-definition of what the company is about but something more elastic and much richer.

The transition, then, does not seem to be either a decline or an advance. It is to soon to tell, but if analysis were necessary, it appears more to be merely another chapter in the continuing effort to survive, and to survive with all the things one normally needs to survive; not necessarily by maintaining the highest level of idealism.

In recapping, it is obvious to see that there were many reasons for the change in company operations. Within the company itself, there have been many subtle manifestations that a change was necesary as well as imminent. In a broad sense, development stopped when the Friday Readings and the Projects-in-Progress lost their impact. The trappings were still there, but the actual development was not. It is almost as if the body was there but the heart and soul were missing. The hunger was gone. Once the hunger, the soul, the desire, that spirit of excitement was gone, the work became a job,and as soon as theatre becomes a job, something happens to it. It loses its undercurrent of excitement. Once the excitement is lost, a great deal of the company's impetus diminishes.

The Circle had been mainstreamed into the establishment, socialization processes were having an effect as members expected more for their devotion and commitments. Institutionalization itself, had taken away much of the family feeling that had been such an integral part of the entire developmental process;. The constant battle between idealisism and commercialism had taken its toll in the heavy emphasis to produce "hits." Lack of operating funds placed the

company in a constant struggle for survival, and, perhaps just as importantly, the National Endowment Grant for Ensembles finally *forced* the perennial issue of needed change to a point of decision. It was Richard Frankel who pointed out that the needs of the company were such that even if the funds had not been granted, the project as outlined would have been put into effect anyway, though, perforce, considerably scaled down.

Removing the weight of government from the shoulders of American citizens notwithstanding, which is a distinct part of the 1980s ideology,[1] the public and private foundations are no longer merely providing seed monies. The fact that we deny but in actuality are lending substantial support to at least a few companies, demonstrates the same schizophrenic societal style that the Circle has been forced to adopt.

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[1] "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem." From Ronald Reagan's 1980 Inaugural Address.

CHAPTER TEN

STRENGTHS AND FAULTS

In the face of the National Endowment Grant and the transition to new but old dimensions, the more important question becomes, not whether the transition represents a step forward or a step backward, but whether the Circle Repertory Company can continue to succeed with old ideas and renewed ideals in a new structure. The answer depends on the force of Circle Rep's strengths and the extent of its faults, both of which it carries forward. How well will it stand up under new scrutiny; how serious have been the problems in the past, and how serious will the problems be in the future? It is important to try to understand the company's strongest and weakest points as they have materialized and evolved over the history of its first fifteen years.

One of the great strengths of the CRC is the combination of Marshall Mason, the man with integrity and unswervable vision, and Lanford Wilson, the playwright whose plays have brought so much attention to the company.

However, Circle Rep has never adequately progressed beyond those successes, and has even been unable to rid itself of the confining label of "lyric realism." Critics have perceived Circle Rep as a bastion of lyric realism despite the fact that experimental theatre has always been an integral part of the company and divergence from this style has been persistent. Lyric realism has certainly been one of the company's strengths, but to speak of lyric realism is really to speak of Wilson and the interpreting style of Mason. It is interesting to note that the very strengths of the company can paradoxically often translate into weaknesses, sometimes in the least expected manner; a case could conceivably be made that one of the Circle's faults is that it is *too* much Lanford

Wilson and Marshall Mason.

Mason's working relationship with Wilson is one of those miraculous kinds of creative marriages that always produces the best work. Elia Kazan had it with both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, creating, in critical retrospect, what can safely be judged as some of the best work they ever produced. Mason has the same working intimacy with Wilson, having directed more than twenty of his plays. No one understands Wilson's ear for the music of language better than Mason. There is little doubt that one of the major strengths of Circle Rep has been the creative association between them, but there is a negative factor. Mason had developed *a* way of working with *a* playwright that did not necessarily work for other playwrights. It is conceivable that the theatre as an institution of broader scope and variety might have been stronger if there had been more resident playwrights in the early days when creative muscles were in their greatest period of development. Having many playwrights at Circle Rep is a relatively recent phenomenon. Originally, there were only three, two of whom were not high profile. Milan Stitt has suggested that, "If the other two had been stronger, it would have helped Marshall; he would have developed even more muscle. So maybe the theatre would have been better without Lanford."[1] Since Stitt has worked very seriously and selflessly with Wilson, this statement should be interpreted solely as a sober contemplative assessment regarding the strength of the theatre company as a unit rather than in terms of any one individual artist.

Would the Circle have been stronger in the beginning with more

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[1]Stitt interview.

playwrights of Wilson's strengths but different sensibilities? The answer has to be, of course; that any company would benefit from such abundance. But extraordinary talents are difficult to find and to develop.

Would Circle Rep have been stronger without Wilson? It is an intriguing question, but the answer would have to be that it is doubtful the company would exist with the same degree of visibility without him. As has already been noted, much of the theatre's success has been identified with the work of Wilson; much of the critical interest in Circle Rep has been the interest in his work, most of which has been received with enthusiasm. Even with all of his success, there are expectations that he is still growing and probably has not yet written his masterpiece. Undoubtedly, without Wilson, Circle Rep would still be one of the premiere acting companies in America, and in Marshall Mason, it would still have one of the nation's premiere naturalistic directors—one need only study Mason in rehearsal, with the superlative results he evokes from his actors and the intense attention he gives to the most intimate of details, to conclude soberly that his is an extraordinary talent—but it would lose much of its artistic vibrancy.

However, Circle Rep has been operating in a critical ambiance in which "the play" is given unparalleled importance. Even though the resonance of Wilson's work has been the backbone of the company writing, Circle Rep's strengths result from a combination of factors. Mostly, the success has been due to Marshall Mason's artistic concept; to a great extent it has been due to persistence and hard work; and to some extent, accident and luck have played a part. But the genius factor is more than necessary both in the writing and in the

interpretation.

Unfortunately, however, as noted, in many ways the CRC has not gone beyond Lanford Wilson and not surprisingly, the theatre is virtually controlled by his works. This can be a severely limiting feature even though Wilson seems to be greatly respected by the other company playwrights. John Bishop, for example, was quick in pointing out with the sensibilitites of a playwright, his belief that:

> The most important contribution the Circle Rep has made [to theatre] is Lanford Wilson. I don't think it would exist without Lanford even though it is Marshall's theatre. I think it was a perfect coming together of two people--Lanford and Marshall. But still without Lanford--without the words.....[1]

It is felt that what Wilson does, he does better than any other playwright now living. It is not surprising, therefore, that Circle Rep tends to select plays that are heavily influenced by the style of Wilson's work. The Sea Horse, The Diviners, and Levitation all had a familiar overlay of lyricism as a stylistic component. It is a company joke that at least once every season there will be one, if not two, sets that will have a front porch, a swing and a kitchen sink that works. Despite denials, there is an undercurrent of enthusiasm and eagerness to have all the plays follow in the direction of lyric realism. This tendency can be considered a major fault even though, as B. Rodney Marriott points out, with seventy actors, twenty playwrights and twenty more in the Lab, there are more than 100 artists with voices going in many directions. However, there is little doubt that lyric realism is the fundamental core from which extends Circle Rep's

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[1]Bishop interview.

many other parts. The "kitchen-sink" argument is defensible and can be construed as a fault in that this facet of the Circle Rep "style" is still very much in tune with William Inge, a playwright who dates back to the fifties, rather than with Tennessee Williams, the playwright with whom the company prefers to identify. These could be fundamental reasons why people like Peter Buckley who, although championing the Circle in many ways, nevertheless feels that in " . . . New York alone, Circle has been outstripped in writing . . . by Playwrights Horizon and Manhattan Theatre Club (even by the late Phoenix.)"[1]

Since, except for the plays of Lanford Wilson, John Bishop, and Milan Stitt, all the plays virtually begin with the Literary Department, the department takes part of the responsibility for the combination of departmental successes and failures. Ari Roth claimed that the Literary Department has rebelled at the idea that the Circle Repertory Company has *a* "style of play" that channeled them into one category. For example, Rob Meiksins, who had been with the Literary Department for five years, had a different orientation than the Circle Rep old guard. Meiksins' point of view, which strove for the more challenging plays, was strongly motivated by a political bent--hardly an ingredient of lyric realism. And yet, despite the rebellion, there was little doubt that a Circle Rep "style" could be articulated since, in many cases, it was deliberately sought out. As Roth points out:

> I've been here long enough to know what gets people excited--the play that makes people say, "Wow, this is a play for us!" It's a play which uses humor - an important part - and presents us with really full characters--a full psychological definition. And it evokes a very specific environment, however

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[1] Peter Buckley letter to this author dated, January 23, 1984.

> idiosyncratic it may be. It should really make us feel that we're there and that we know everything about what's wonderful and horrible about this environment. If it takes place in a whorehouse, we have to know everything that takes place in a whorehouse - what's neat about it - what it's really like to be there. We really want to be there, to be absorbed in the people's lives, and we want to see ongoing drama. [1]

Intimately involved with the Circle Rep "style" is regionality. The plays that are the most successful happen to be very strongly regionally oriented. The individual strengths of the four founders when blended together create a unified strength for the theatre. It is difficult to assess whether or not the theatrical regionality imposed by their personalities is one of the company's strengths; it is certainly one of their peculiarities. Even though the Circle Rep theatre is in one of the most sophisticated metropolises in the world, the plays often pick up and introduce a heavy orientation of regional experiences. At a time when air travel has diminished the very size of the world and much in America is becoming more homogenized--McDonalds is taking over the countryside alongside of Coke--there seems to be less of a sense of regional identity and regional experiences in everyday lives. The mostly midwestern roots of the founders have found fertile soil in New York City which, despite its cosmopolitanism, responds to the strong nostalgia factor in the regionality of the plays.

This specificity is not peculiar to the Circle Rep The plays of both Chekhov and Williams, for example, were strongly regionally oriented to a place and a time when a rural setting was beginning to decay along with the lifestyle that had been enveloped by it. Capturing the locale in all its idiosyncratic

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[1] Roth interview.

distinctiveness seemed to have greatly encouraged the action within the plays, whether the plays took place in Chekhov's rural Russia, Williams' decaying south, or Wilson's disappearing mid-America. It is almost as though finding the right location that is in a state of transition is a primary prerequisite for the overlay of nostalgia so prevalent in lyric realism.

It has to be pointed out that while Circle Rep is still one of the few actual companies in the country, and one of the few theatres that is dedicated to presenting new American plays (a very decided strength in that it has never varied from this position) it is still doing a great deal of the kind of work that made them "experimental" in the sixties--traditional, regionally oriented kitchen-sink realism. Now, oddly enough, the strength of the sixties might be one of the weaknesses of the eighties. One of the problems with this kind of theatre is that it is not always very theatrical nor is this genre best developed on the stage. This kind of realism can be achieved with far greater effect and immediacy through the medium of film. One of the things that keeps live theatre vibrant and exciting is its theatricality. If it becomes mired in the realistic mold, with the fourth wall, living room, kitchen, or one-set concept, as Circle Rep has done almost exclusively, it can be seen as a serious problem from the point of view of advancing what *live* theatre is all about; the theatricality inherent in the very process of live actors performing in front of live audiences is only one part of it. Whether or not one appreciates Peter Schaffer' Equus, for example, it is a highly theatrical play. When the tall "horses" on stage stomp their hooves and begin prancing about, it is an astonishing theatrical moment that is totally lost in the realism of films. The point can be clearly seen if one substitutes the musical theatre as a live example of theatricality. Musical theatre is probably the

most overtly theatrical of the genres. It is because of this high degree of theatricality and the built-in audience response it evokes that musical theatre has continued to exist despite the enormous commercial perils of the modern American musical stage. It is easy to examine the argument by reversing the logic; many musicals lose a great deal of their charm, their allure, their very theatricality, by being transferred to films.[1] The screen robs them of much of their magic and immediacy. By reversing the logic again, film, with its vast scope and close-up explorative camera, can do for realism, whether lyrical or straight out of Emile Zola, a great deal more in detail, nuance and ambiance than the stage can do in which everything is, perforce, perceived in a perennial "Long Shot." The very genre of realism, which of course includes lyric realism, can thus be seen as being better served in films. This would create a strong sub-current of weakness in the style Circle Rep has become associated with if the style were not also coupled with content.

Probably the most important part of Ari Roth's definition of the "Circle Rep style" was continued in the second part of his analysis, that which spoke to content:

> We want the play to be about people first and foremost, but also about the world. What kind of a statement is it making about the human condition. In some ways that's the archetypal good American play. It's a Tennessee Williams play. If you have to take a founding father for Circle, I'd say it

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[1] In my opinion, for example, Man of La Mancha, Hello Dolly, Mame, Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum lost a great deal in their translations to the screen. Even Fiddler On The Roof lost much of the impact of its opening sequence in the film version. Others, like West Side Story, Oliver, and My Fair Lady, in my opinion worked just as well on the screen as they did on the stage.

> would have to be Tennessee Williams. And that's because Lanford Wilson and Marshall Mason come out of that ilk. That's the kind of theatre that they would most want to emulate--what lyric realism would be. Those are the concrete things we look for in a script. We want to be transported to that world and become involved, and care and find it meaningful to be with them. And it comes to mean something in terms of what life is about. A full experience. That's what's great about the theatre. You become involved in a very personal way. I can tell you quite honestly, that's what gets people excited here.[1]

Therefore, once again, the most important element is the content. The kind of play that Roth described both in terms of ambiance and content, was the readily identifiable "Circle style." Without the fully experienced human content and the profound explorations of the universal human condition, there is no "Circle style."

None of this is to suggest that other kinds of plays presented at Circle Rep can not be equally successful and exciting. Sam Shepard's Fool For Love, for example, was on a different level. It was theatre of a slightly more bizarre sensibility, in which reality was transcended to the point of characters existing in a self-imposed dream world. But Roth candidly pointed out that Fool For Love came to the Rep already having been fully developed in San Francisco:

> If Sam Shepard hadn't written and directed that himself -- given the way we work here, where we come from and the way we go about giving criticism to playwrights--we would have said, "Sam, we need a little bit of work here" That's the way I perceived it, anyway. I can honestly tell you if the definition I've been giving of what makes good, exciting theatre sounds conventional...it nevertheless is what people here like. They like real, honest-to-goodness plays.[2]

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[1] Roth interview.

[2] Ibid.

To be challenged, to feel involved, to feel there is some kind of magnetism with the people on stage is important and can be achieved in a variety of ways. John Bishop, for example, has experienced much success with plays like, Confluence, The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler and The Harvesting, even though his outlook is a little more hard-boiled than that of Lanford Wilson. Ari Roth would also like to think that one of the most important ingredients in a typical Circle Rep play involves a certain identifiable theatricality; he would like to think that not everything has to be a typical fourth wall realism with perfect unity of time, place and action.

> We use lots of ghosts, different sets, light tricks, different locations at one time—all of which is heightened poetic theatre.[1]

However, this variety is not clearly to be found as Roth would like to think, and when it is present, as in Patrick Meyers' Dysan, it is not always successful as a sensitive statement about the human condition, the most important component of Circle Rep style.

In continuing to turn the coin over in the perennial search to identify the other side, another problem emerged. Until 1985, when Circle Rep would embark on a revived ensemble company, it could not seem to establish a consistent policy regarding play development. They had not been able to determine whether they wanted to use the elaborate developmental system they had achieved to develop new American plays by their resident playwrights, or new American plays by established non-Circle playwrights (such as Sam Shepard or Jules Feiffer,) or new American plays by burgeoning Circle Lab playwrights, or to search

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[1] Ibid.

throughout the entire nation to find the as yet unheard "new American voice." Although it is a good artistic policy to keep the doors open to new artists, this "shotgun approach" when it comes to creating new theatre, can debilitate the entire process and can be considered one of the Circle's major faults involving a dissipation of control, too wide a sweep of objectives, and not having the time to fully develop the existing talents. Included in the negative assessment of this approach is that it creates much dissension within the ranks of both resident playwrights and, most particularly, Lab playwrights who feel they have Circle Rep's commitment up to, but not including actual production.

It is obvious that the most important aspect of Circle Rep as perceived by the members themselves is the company itself, or the "ensemble." Maybe Circle Rep had exaggerated one side of development for a long time--that of finding a play and putting it on, but it was the combination of play development and ensemble performance that made Circle Rep the group that it has become and the ensemble process had to feed on something. None of the company's major successes resulted from feeding on the classics or a second or third-rate play. They have always been a result of a first rate new play in and of itself. But "in and of itself" would happen less frequently without the ensemble. The perfect play simply does not emerge out of the typewriter. The company input very often adds the additional ingredients necessary to full realization. At times there seemed to be a sense of developing a play "in committee," but even so, as long as it "worked," it did not matter; the play always came first. This point was stressed a great deal in the Directors Lab as well as the Writers Lab, but the importance of the play, as noted, was certainly not the major focus of attention at the original

creation of the group. Now it has evolved to this point to such an extent that new members like Ted Sod, who became a member in June of 1983, feel that play development is important above all other company considerations.

However, it is the ensemble that draws the greatest support from the members. This support is nowhere to be seen more clearly than through the eyes of the members themselves who view the ensemble from a variety of personal viewpoints. The insecurity of a profession that can subject its artists to the degradation of "cattle-call" auditions and continual rejection in the face of the overwhelming numbers of actors waiting to fill the relatively few professional jobs available, is softened greatly by the sense of "belonging." [1]

Repeatedly Circle Rep was seen as a homebase with the inherent security "homebase" implies--a familiar, comfortable locale in which to work with intimate and trusted co-members. In this context, Circle Rep was repeatedly referred to as a "family" with the connoted deep feelings of the security and

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[1]With much loyalty, a strong sense of commitment and even candor in discussing internal problems, the Circle members articulated through their own deeply committed personal perspectives what they felt the strengths and weakness of the company were in letters to this author:

Kathy Bates, letter dated, November 28, 1983.
Jordan Charney, letter dated, December 20, 1983.
Jeff Daniels, letter dated, December, 1983.
Michael Higgins, letter dated, December 18, 1983.
Ruby Holbrook, letter dated, January 9, 1984.
Mari Gorman, letter dated, November 14, 1983.
Bruce Gray, letter dated, November 8, 1983.
Ken Kliban, letter dated, November 7, 1983.
Tony Roberts, letter dated, November 22, 1983.
Richard Seff, letter dated, November 3, 1983.
Ted Sod, letter, dated, November 18, 1983.
Peter Weller, letter dated, January, 1984.
Michael Skelly, letter dated. January 5, 1984.

In addition the author conducted telephone interviews with:

Alan Feinstein, December 4, 1983.
Robert Lu Pone, January 10, 1984

acceptance of a family. For example, actress, Mari Gorman, wrote glowingly of what a positive experience working with the Circle Company has been both professionally and personally. Even while living in Los Angeles, Miss Gorman was still made to feel a part of the company.

> It is a family. I know of no other "company" that constantly lives up to that appelation. Working at Circle Rep is a luxury in this business in that the atmosphere is completely stimulating, intersupportive and totally focused on the work.
>
> The "system" of the Circle is just that by their constant communications to the members it is possible to see the system functioning as well as feel a part of it.
>
> I believe this rare loyalty which the Circle has is one of the reasons why those who now have considerable success elsewhere feel loyal towards the Circle in return.
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> I have learned a great deal as an actor in the process of working with the Circle, perhaps, as I have said, because of the purely artistic atmosphere. This too is always a draw for *anyone* with *any* degree of success *anywhere*![1]

Actor Ken Kliban stressed the value of the familierity factor within a "homebase" structure. Getting to know and work with the same people over a period of time stimulated the foundation for a true ensemble with all the value of intimacy a true ensemble implies. "People who know and like each other learn to understand how to work together most productively;"[2] while actor Richard Seff noted along the same lines of accord, that the "base" from which to work was something very few actors in this country have.

> On a much less lucrative scale, it must be something like what actors felt when they had contracts with the major studios --except we're not exclusively committed to the Circle, and we are free to accept engagements elsewhere.[3]

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[1] Gorman, letter, *see*, p. 355

[2] Kliban, letter, *see*, p. 355

[3] Seff, letter, *see*, p. 355

All of the actors indicated that they felt stimulated by the advantages of daily developmental programs which led to taking greater risks in a greater variety of characterizations. All actors need the constant growth process. They correlate the lack of growth to stagnation which is perceived as detrimental to craft and art. That their personal growth and development as actors had been greatly advanced through the wide variety of roles encouraged by a company enviroment cannot be overstressed and was best exemplified by Bruce Gray:

> It was an honor to be a part of the company. Marshall Mason and the other founders were very creative and supportive, and truly important members of the theatrical scene. What turned out to be so marvelous, on top of all the classes and readings and camaraderie, was the diversity of roles that I was given to do. Over the years I played a Shavian Englishman, an Elizabethan fop, an alchoholic teacher, a burnt-out writer, the ghost of a recently deceased choreographer, an English officer circa 1776, a terminally ill cancer patient, Oscar Wilde, Richard Cory (based on the well-known poem), etc. Now I usually play middle of the road leading men (mostly on daytime TV, a few in films) and it was a wonderful stretch for me to play this myriad of characters. It extended the boundaries of the characters I usually play.[1]

Not to overlook the pragmatic benefits of critically highlighted involvement in a well established company, Ken Kliban admitted that membership had furthered his career, "to the extent that it is a fairly reliable showcase where people in the business know I can be seen."[2] In the same vein, actress Stephanie Gordon felt that the experience not only kept her "alive and creative," but enabled her to establish strong ties with the artistic staff which helped to

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[1] Gray, letter, see, p. 355

[2] Kliban, letter, see, p. 355

further her career.[1] Equally important, many spoke of how much they had learned at Circle Rep, from a better understanding of how to read a play as a totality through its component parts, gaining a better appreciation of the other theatrical disciplines through participation in the many workshops--e.g. being more aware of a director's "concepts"-- to actually learning the craft of acting. For example, actor, Bruce Gray wrote:

> To be directed by Marshall Mason has been a real value to me. He has helped me realize that through simplicity and moment-to-moment "being there" I can more readily achieve a real heart-to-heart contact with my fellow actors and the audience. He has helped me take the "acting" out of acting and made it a more relaxed and pleasureable experience.[2]

While actor Jeff Daniels exemplified the value of his long company association by writing that he was actually trained at the Rep: "Marshall for acting, Chuck Jones for voice, Rob Thirkield for movement - I learned things from them that aren't being taught as effectively anymore."[3]

One of the most important aspects of this combination of wealth referred to by the actor members is the actor-involvement in the development of new Circle Rep plays. Certainly the acting is the foremost component of the success of the ensemble, but there is another developmental aspect of the working ensemble that is above and beyond the aspects of performing. Only rarely is a script considered "frozen" at the time of production; the production itself is part of the

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[1] Stephanie Gordon, quoted by Gary Stern, "What's The Lure of Rep?" Backstage, 12/2/83, p. 64.

[2] Gray, letter.

[3] Daniels, letter, see, p. 355

developmental time which, in turn, adds additional importance to the performances as part of the developmental process. Most often, however, the developmental process includes the actors' work before actual production. During the intensive analytical discussions following company readings, the knowledgable, artistic input of the ensemble becomes a profound aspect of development. The selflessness about this creative input is a live demonstration of Mason's words, "We have no egos here. Whatever is good for the play is good."[1] This selflessness may seem idealistic, but in a sense when this aspect of development is working at its best is when the best work is produced. It does not matter who makes the suggestion for improvement. Just as part of the success of the acting ensemble is the training together that creates the rapport and familiarity so necessary to establishing the very sense of ensemble on the stage, the same process occurs with the writing during the various play developmental processes. The writing is actually fed by the acting during the long, developmental process--readings, PIPS, Extended Readings, etc.-- and is one of the advantages of writing for specific actors. The soul and talent of the actor helps to define the stretches of the character the playwright creates.

It is also a great sense of joy and accomplishment for the actor. As Richard Seff points out:

> I've spent months in a workshop with Jules Feiffer helping him develop material that was embryonic with him when he came to us asking for help. The Circle offers a great many resources/outlets for work and development to the artists if the artists are willing to take advantage of them. The family of artists comes together more than once in their lives to do a

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[1] Mason interview.

> play. Everyone wants to make the play work. We have been bound by the philosophy that the play comes first.[1]

This philosophy is a compelling company component for member-playwrights. The advantages to them of working within a company situation are supremely significant since the company often acts as a stimulus and a primary source of inspiration. Wilson would be the first to point out the myriad benefits not the least of which was to know that his work will be performed, read, appreciated; that he no longer had to send scripts to an unknown producer and wait months for a response; that, upon acceptance, he did not to have to turn over his material to a producer and sit back while his work was taken over and interpreted--often without consultation--by "strangers," (the unhappy experience of Lemon Sky remains a vivid one.) Most writers in the company would agree. Few playwrights have the luxury of a company setting to take the "stranger" out of the process of production, with the exception perhaps of Sam Shepard, with his Magic Theatre, and David Mamet who keeps returning periodically to his Chicago homebase. This aspect of play production was one of the things Jordan Charney would attempt to emulate for his own writers in his new theatre. Charney, who had been an active member of Circle Rep, was recently named Artistic Director of Actors Alley, an Equity-waiver theatre in Sherman Oaks, California.

> The playwright is the beginning of all theatre -- and it is therefore vital to nourish him. Circle Rep is a prime example of the care and time taken on the development of a piece of literature to a work of dramatic credibility.[2]

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[1] Seff, letter, see, p. 354

[2] Charney, letter, see, p. 354

The actors strongly feel the importance of the plays and the play development. It was quietly understood that in creating an institution to protect the creative environment, produce plays, and qualify for grant monies, the emphasis had to shift from the acting company to the discovery and development of new writers. But selfless though the actors' participation was, the ever-widening focus of attention on the plays in turn created an increasingly dispirited group of actors who found themselves relegated to secondary position in a company they knew had originally been established to nurture the actor. However, there was no question as to the importance of groups like Circle Rep in the development of drama in America. As exemplified by actor Richard Seff, most members were ultimately proud to be counted a part of the process:

> The list of plays that have had a long and successful life after early days at Circle is becoming almost endless. From an actor's point of view, I've had limited experience. But the joy of working with Marshall Mason and Lanford Wilson on Angels Fall is immeasureable. To be listed in the published version of the play as the actor who created one of the leading roles is very gratifying. But the work itself - Those pressured weeks in the spring and summer of 1982-- The privilege of introducing new material almost nightly so that Lanford could hear it played -- rare and to be treasured. As I see it, the writer creates it, the director shapes and moulds it, and the actor delivers it to the audience. You may feel freer with writers like Chekhov who aren't around to argue with you, but there is a genuine joy in knowing you are a part ofthe creation of a piece, and that what you are doing is influencing the writer. For always, whenever you read the play again, you will remember the process that led to the final printed page.[1]

In summary, the plus side of the member-evaluation included strong

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[1] Seff, letter.

responses to:

1) A homebase
2) A sense of family
3) A variety and diversity of roles
4) Personal growth and development as actors
5) Participation in the development of new plays
6) Actors acting as a stimulation and inspiration to playwrights

Actor Michael Higgins' letter to this author, reproduced in full, summarizes and eloquently reflects the positive position taken by many of the actors regarding their feelings about their work at the Circle.

Dear Ms. Ryzuk,

The strength of the Circle Rep Company is in dealing with so many plays each season, and then processing them with as much intelligence and spirit as the Circle Rep. can muster with its dynamic, versatile people. Nobody knows what makes a play good; but there is a craft involved, as in every art. And craft is what Circle Rep is all about.

There is no question in my mind that an actor's career is formed by only one person - the actor. It is the choices that the actor makes during the course of his lifetime which creates the commercial hack, or the serious artist. I believe that most actors have ideals and wonderful aims when they first approach the Theatre. When I was 13 years old I wanted to do Shakespeare; I found a company and I did some forty roles in four years. It was a great joy. I was lucky. I was doing what I wanted. No pay - living at home; but I was hooked on Theatre.

What is a "commercial" actor? We've seen the formula: he receives offers to do Hollywood stuff, and he goes. But he always has in mind to come back to the Theatre. The love affair is never broken. It's serious. It's lovely. It's craft. It's work. It's a gamble. Why leave Hollywood to return to off-Broadway? There is the challenge. The live audience tells you something every night. There is also a chance that they will beat your brains out. Circle Rep is me, my fellow actors, backstage crew, the office staff - all. It is work, awareness, love, affection and a consummate imagination of how those words written by the playwright will appear on stage. Generally you can tell genius right off. But realistically it's enough to see good craft and possibly the seeds of a fine writer.

How did the Circle further my development as an actor? It gave me joy. An example: I worked for four months with some 20

other Rep. members of our Shaker project. We had a love affair with a group of people that lived in the middle of the last century - the Shakers. We created them. We became them. We went to Kentucky where they had lived, and we loved their way of life, their songs, their dances, their vivid imaginations. Unfortunately, people don't live that way anymore; but for a few months we were that Shaker community, and that remains within us. You will see the final creation on stage - a musical[1].

I have been involved with some 50 new plays in my 4 years with the Circle Rep. This could not have been possible without a group of people with artistic energy. During that time I also did Broadway plays, TV, and films. My life has been full, my purse light, and my heart - joyful.

Good luck and joy to you in your work.

Peace,
Michael Higgins

However, despite the seemingly unanimous kudos, there were some very real dangers creeping in to jeopardize the security of the insular little company. The negative side of member evaluations encompassed some very real and well articulated disadvantages of working within a company milieu.

It was often felt that being a member was *too* safe; that one of the major disadvantages was the strong possibility of parochialism; that despite the diversity of creation, the overall developmental scope had become too narrow and even provincial; that not all plays were best developed "in committee;" and that the "star system" was creeping in, eroding the very ensemble spirit that had set the company apart and elevated it to recognition and prominence. Even Mason would admit that there was a serious problem in members feeling "too safe."

One becomes isolated from the real world in certain cases. The vicissitudes of being an artist in America, the difficulties of our

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[1] This project, written by Marsha Norman, was temporarily abandoned during the budgetary cutbacks of January - February, 1984.

> lives as such, which as artists, is based largely on insecurity. And suddenly with a company, there gets to be a kind of laziness that comes from the security of, "Oh well, I've been a member of the Circle Rep company for ten years; they wouldn't dare kick me out." As a result, there can be the attitude, "Somebody has written this play for me and so I don't have to reach or explore or discover anything new."
>
> If it gets too closed, too intimate, too self-involved, it becomes a real danger. I try to keep this stored up by, first of all, constantly returning to the classics to sharpen the instruments. No one can become complacent regarding the classics - they are almost impossible to "master." Also, by bringing in new people from time to time, and by encouraging people to go on to other places.[1]

On a consistent basis, Circle Rep invites its people to leave periodically to work elsewhere whether in films, on Broadway, in television or regional theatre. No one has been able to earn a living working exclusively at the Rep, a reality which makes outside work essential to financial survival. Additionally, and just as important to the artist, the broadening aspects of artistic diversification has been a primary ingredient in helping to keep the relationships within the company fresh.

Many of the company actors were having considerable success both in Hollywood and on Broadway, which meant that many of the Rep's leading actors spent half of their time on the West coast, coming back only for special projects of limited duration.

> So the strong ensemble spirit that has resulted in our most satisfying work has dispersed into individual careers, which, while it has strengthened the mainstream of the American entertainment industry, has progressively weakened our artistic development. Circle Rep's journey from family, to community, to institution to industry has dissipated some of the dreams which have fueled the significant contribution to the American theatre we have sustained for the past 15 years.[2]

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Mason, "Ensemble Grant Proposal: The Artistic Director's Statement."

Much of the significant contribution Mason speaks of has been the new plays. The Circle Rep and theatres like it are essential to the process of discovering new plays, but even in this, a negative aspect appears in that the company situation can encourage a narrowness within the very selection of the plays. Playwrights like Michael Skelly, who have participated in the process but can stand completely outside the group, have observed not only the provincialism, but have come away with a feeling that not all plays are best developed in what he called the "circus" atmosphere of a company reading; he suggested that attention should be paid to the fact that some plays have strong directorial or acting components within their structure and are not always best served in a simple reading.

Michael Skelly is an Irish playwright who was brought to the Circle in 1979 by Milan Stitt after he had read Skelly's play, Constellation. Since there are no international boundaries on art ,Stitt had gone to Dublin,in 1979 with the express purpose of expanding Circle Rep's role by actively involving other companies such as the famed Abbey Theatre in a professional cultural exchange program.Stitt's main objective had been to broaden Circle Rep's horizons. However, an international program such as this did not fall into any of the guidelines of application for the Grants so necessary to the Circle's existence. The program had to be abandoned, but not before Skelly had the opportunity to briefly compare Circle Rep to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. He found many similarities in the playwriting groups of the two companies and much of the same values. As Skelly pointed out, sounding very much like his American counterparts,

> How else can a playwright develop his plays without the pressures, usually commercial, from outside? It also gives the playwright the feeling of vocation even though he may not

> yet have been produced and as you know one can go on for years not being produced but yet be very much of a writer and playwright.[1]

While Skelly was "eternally grateful" for the help and encouragement particularly in regard to re-writing, ". . . not to be afraid of re-writing, to keep on going until one has uncovered all that there is; in fact, to arrive at the essence,"[2] there was a definite warning signal in his observations.

> Circle Rep has done very well. It is now established and therein lies the danger. We witnessed the same thing in Ireland with the Abbey Theatre. In its heyday it set out just like the Circle but when it became established it became very parochial and national in the worst sense of that word in its taste. This led to production of inferior works because they were representative of a certain life-style rather than a true critique of changing life and times.[3]

Circle Rep has similarly been accused of parochialism and a narrow stylistic approach to new drama in its attempts to recapture past successes. The need for financial stability, which unfortunately determines much of the company's artistic and managerial policies, is the very same need that insidiously creates a star system about which many of the actors complained. Although often hotly denied by management, the star system appears to have subtly invaded an atmosphere in which the policy of displaying its casts in alphabetical order had always been operative. The need for the big name to insure box office has been perceived by some as creating a "New Rep" in place of the "Old Rep." It seems to be indisputable that in many ways Circle Rep had indeed fallen into the "star system." However, it does not appear to be big names from the outside that have been sought, but actors from within the company who

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[1]Skelly, letter, see p. 355.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

have become well enough known to carry abundant "star" value on their own, e.g., William Hurt, Judd Hirsch, Christopher Reeve, Tony Roberts, Fritz Weaver, Barnard Hughes, Lindsay Crouse, Beatrice Straight to name a few. Although each has gone on to considerable success, most of them still consider themselves part of the company. At the same time, the company wishes to maintain their high-profile names on company rosters.

However, many actors in the company who have been with Circle Rep a long time, do not necessarily become stars and therein lies part of the internal problem a star system ignites. The issue is always heavy at company meetings. Not one actor spoke harshly about the Rep; not one seriously complained about their treatment. However, there were grievances and the major one was the difference between the Old Rep and the New Rep as it fell into the star syndrome; some of the old guard felt left behind and deeply insecure regarding their shaky status within the company.

Actor Jeff Daniels who has since gone on to become a "star" in his own right (starring in such films as Woody Allen's, The Purple Rose of Cairo with Mia Farrow and Terms of Endearment with Shirley McLaine) did not always enjoy such a highly-visible status with audiences. His letter to this author, written after he had already achieved stardom, demonstrates the well-remembered dispirit that plagued the company over this issue.

> Dear Mary,
> I really don't have a lot to say about Circle Rep. I haven't been active down there for about three years, by choice. And I'll tell you why.
> I think the Circle Rep that everyone holds up like a flag faded out around 1978-79. The workshops ended, the ensemble-no stars productions ended, and the general feeling that this is where you wanted to be all the time, doing a reading, rehearsing a new play, just working on a scene with another member of the company to get better as an actor - that's all changed. Oh they still have the

> Lab and the readings and the Pips and the mainstage productions, but it's a different Rep now. Not necessarily all bad, just necessary.
>
> They got into debt, deeper than usual, and then Porter Van Zandt came on the scene and the little company of actors, directors and playwrights expanded into a larger company of guest artists, stars and more commercial plays, or at least, the dollar became the bottom line. It no longer was a theatre where you could afford to fail.
>
> Because the theatre was strapped financially, making money became the first priority. Trouble was, they were right. The debt was ridiculous and they had to find a way out of that position. Goodbye safe, secure little family of artists. Hello all your long lost relatives, and some you didn't even know you had.
> Stars, plays written for stars, productions cast outside of the company when there were actors who perfectly fit the role except they weren't a name.
>
> And you didn't expand your subscription ticket sales unless you had name actors in your acting company. It made perfect sense - except to that little family, some of whom still exist there.
>
> You could see what was happening. I feel like one of the lucky ones. I learned the Circle Rep acting style from Marshall through his workshops and rehearsals. . . Then when the emphasis turned to Names in Name Plays and getting Circle back on its feet, here's what it was like:
>
> It was like waking up one morning at Circle, having it announced that it was time to play the "name game" and quickly the meeting was adjourned, and they left you sitting there asking yourself, "Am I enough of a name to still play leading roles here?" None of us were. Not the core of that place at that time. Then the names started coming into the productions over the next couple of years and all of a sudden doing scenes in the workshops, working hard on a role for a Friday play reading, participating in the fund raising by asking your "ten friends" for contributions to a theatre that seemed to be going outside the company to cast its leading roles, that had Name Actors all over the yearly brochure — all of a sudden, it was a different ballgame.
>
> It should be called the New Circle Rep. It will only be the Old Rep when all of a sudden they cast a play down there and about halfway through the first week of rehearsal, everyone will turn around and realize there isn't a "guest artist" in the room.[1]

Whatever negative feelings Jeff Daniels expressed regarding the company, he was just as quick to point out the very many positive aspects. It was as

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[1] Daniels letter.

though it was always his "family" no matter what the grievance, and there was a deep unshakeable love involved in all of the various perspectives with which he looked at it:

> The Rep system is the ensemble, no star turns. . . Making it believable and honest is what I got out of Marshall's system. If it's truly happening on that stage that night, you won't have to worry about the audience.
>
> Well-known actors return because it's a quick commitment in a leading role in a theatre that loves to cast "well-known actors" in leading roles. For those of us who may someday become names or are already, who weren't necessarily known as a "well-known actor" in 1978, it's a coming home.
>
> For me the Circle Rep was Basic training. Everything you learned was something you had a feeling you needed to know. If not now, later.
>
> And finally, the Circle Rep is very important. It would be more important if by some miracle they had more money than they could ever use each and every season which would allow them to go back to being "the theatre of the new American Playwright."
>
> I've made a lot of friends at the Circle Rep, I've learned what it means to be an artist. I care about the place. I think that's another reason why people keep coming back to it after working elsewhere. They still care about it even if it's changed into something else. Whatever Circle Rep is now or will be in the next fifteen years, I'll remember it as the place where I learned to be an actor.
>
> Good luck.
> Jeff Daniels.

Despite the feelings of many of the actors as illustrated so well by Jeff Daniels, Tanya Berezin believes that the case is overstated. She could not think of one star from outside of the company, and even though "names" like Pat Carroll did appear in Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, for example, Berezin is essentially correct. As Casting Director, no one was in a better position to know who and why people were cast in the various shows.

> In terms of all the processes, PIPS, etc, I help find the actors - the right actors from the company. Part of it is, when we don't have an actor who can best serve the play, to find someone from the outside, but that's wonderful, because that's how we get new people in the company. I am also part of the process for selecting new actors for the Lab. Getting new,

> young people that we're interested in - to work with them and develop a future with them.[1]

Berezin suggests that the big names that were used were from *within* the company--people who had gone on to outside success and recognition and still considered themselves a part of the company. The actor who has achieved recognition will often wish to return. Berezin continues on this point.

> I'll tell you, for me it has focused in this sense, I think the Circle serves the same purpose in terms of artistic needs to all members of the company. It just operates differently. . . . Whether Bill Hurt gets what he needs from the company is another question. The Circle is a haven in which he can work, unpressured, solely from his artistic principles and create something which is uncompromised by outside business needs.[2]

Working solely from artistic principles is the ideal situation but, as noted, the artistic needs are often compromised by the business needs which by their very nature have to take precedence as the company continues to grow.

> There used to be sixty-five members of the company. Now there are something like eighty-three. There is not enough work for everybody. There have been rare times when we have been asked for stars by outside groups we were planning to work with. For example, Saratoga Springs. They have been incredibly patient with us in terms of their loss of money every summer trying to build up an audience for Circle up there. At the end of Angel's Fall, they said what was really needed up there to make it work was a name. They would be able to sell a classic and they would be able to sell a name.[3]

And they were right. The Sea Gull with Judd Hirsch and Richard Thomas began in Saratoga and proved to be extremely well-received. As Berezin noted,

> I think that the company, in terms of looking to Circle to satisfy their needs, will often be terribly disappointed and will

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[1] Berezin interview.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

> sometimes be thrillingly surprised. I don't think that we can supply the needs of every actor in the company as fully as they need it. I wish we could. I'd like it if everybody in the company played a lead every season, but we can't. I don't think we function at all from a star system.[1]

However, Rob Thirkield disagreed. He believed that there was a star system at play as never before, probably to the detriment of the company.

> Circle was going up to Saratoga for several summers to teach and perform. They were asked for stars. So we got Richard Thomas, Tony Roberts, Judd Hirsch. I feel this is being done a great deal at the Circle too, not only in Saratoga. If they do Richard II, they get Bill Hurt. It's true that he started at the Circle, but he is a name now and it was felt that that should be used. "Let's have Richard II with Bill Hurt. That'll bring in the audiences." But there are plenty of people in the company whom I believe would be better Richard IIs, but they are not stars, so they are passed over.[2]

And yet, it is true that Bill Hurt was part of the company originally. He was not only brought in for Hamlet as a star, but as a star member of the company, who left to do other assignments, most particularly in films. The same applies to Christopher Reeve. According to Thirkield, Reeve had originally performed an insignificant little role in a minor play. He officially became part of the company after he became a "name." He was cast in 5th of July when it transferred to Broadway after he had become a name. Bill Hurt, who had originated the role, was not as big a name as Reeve at the time and was left behind even though in all candor, Thirkield believed that Bill Hurt was much more effective in the role of Kenneth Talley, Jr. "I'm not sure what went on there, but Chris is very good looking."[3]

There seemed to be a striving for commerciality with the search for star

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Thirkield interview.

[3] Ibid.

actors as well as star playwrights, although Thirkield did not see it exactly in that light. In his opinion it was not necessary to please all of the subscribers all the time. In the beginning Circle Rep had only 100 subscribers or so. Now, with successful major campaigns and promotions, the subscriber list numbers approximately 6,000. A solid argument could be made for people to go to Broadway if they wished to see stars. Yet, Judd Hirsch, as a name member of the company was called in to do Trigorin in The Sea Gull because he had starred on the TV series Taxi for five years, and people would come just to "see" Judd Hirsch in person, whether or not he was the most suitable company member for the demanding classic role.

The casting machinations seem to be a striving for a mainstream image, despite denials, as well as a monetary consideration--mainstream implying a high degree of visibility. When Circle Rep produced Hamlet, it was definitely stated that it was not selected as a star vehicle for Bill Hurt. Yet, when the posters were designed for the production, Hurt's name was isolated from the remainder of the company for the first time in the company's history. Ordinarily, the entire company would be listed alphabetically under Mason's direction. This time, it was decided that Bill Hurt's name had to be displayed prominently since it could easily be overlooked if it were placed in it's alphabetical place with the entire company.

Lab Director Daniel Irvine, who often worked closely with Tanya Berezin as Co-Casting Director, admitted that the star system was true at least on one level:

> . . . not on all levels. We did a benefit last year (1982) that I produced called, "The First Annual Playwrights Festival". I directed one of the pieces as well as produce. I had a real problem with management wanting only stars to do the plays. Eventually I did get Judd Hirsch, Chris Reeve, Swoozie Kurtz and Barnard Hughes. Our play-to-play subscription season does not have to depend on stars. But I'm now

> producing the 15th year benefit. What's the first thing management says? Get the stars involved. Get them in it. But the star system is not necessarily true for all productions. We cast the best actors and these people with names are good actors. We helped build their careers. Bill Hurt and Chris Reeve were both in a play that launched their careers, Corinne Jacker's My Life.[1] When people came to see the play it was felt that they were witnessing the birth of two major stars. Bill is a great actor and Chris is very good. He has personality. Chris knows what we offer and he's back here with us. He knows he needs to work and come back to the stage - but now we have a built-in problem because he's such a big name. What do we find for him to do?[2]

This is an interesting point. Hurt returned to play the roles of Hamlet and

Richard II. There has not been anything suitable for Chris Reeve since he became internationally known, (e.g. through films such as Superman.) But as Irvine points out quite justifiably, "If you put Chris in something that is not suitable, he is going to be ripped to pieces."[3]

As noted, the stars referred to are the stars who came from the Circle itself; it is in this sense that Tanya Berezin can legitimately claim there is not one star from the outside. Even though the stars are company members in the deepest sense of the word, the company members who work at the Circle on a day-to-day basis feel the heavy weight of insecurity in that they have "not arrived" yet and that for many reasons, justifiable or not, the company will hire the successful, well-known actors before hiring them. This feeling is not due solely to insecurity. They have actually assessed the situation accurately. That this is true is once again confirmed quite openly by Irvine:

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[1] Opened at the Circle, January, 1977.

[2] Irvine interview.

[3] Ibid.

> We are doing a play now, Full Hookup and you offer it to Bill Hurt first because he's an incredible actor. Now if he will come back and do it--great--because then we are assured of a really good actor. We are also assured of interest and publicity. We don't *need* stars since we have a built in subscription membership and can not even get people into the theatre sometimes because of subscribers. But you go with the best actors first--so you ask Bill, but in doing that you have alienated the company for "going after the stars." What they do not understand is that the Circle Rep has helped to create them and they still belong to us and should still have a loyalty to come back and work on the stage. That's what it's all about. Marshall says, "Go out and then come back. We'll all be better for it."
>
> So in our day-to-day, play-by-play system, we cast the best actors and get the best directors we can. But on a benefit, they want to make a lot of money. So we go after the names that will bring the people in
>
> And so it goes on.[1]

It is a very interesting problem. In a good many cases, actors go beyond the Rep and never return. But there are a significant number of well-known actors who choose to return repeatedly. The reasons are varied but the underlying core of values always encompasses the sense of family, the security of a "homebase," and the integrity of the work. When the well-known actors do return, the regular company members suffer the pangs of being forced into a subsidiary position. Repeatedly they see the choicest acting roles offered to the returning stars making fear and alienation a certainty for members who work almost exclusively within the company.

The official posture regarding this delicate issue was stated clearly in the program for Levitation:

> By the late 1970's Circle could no longer be considered an unknown, poverty-stricken company, but a well-respected theatre that was having growing pains. One of the Circle's main problems, Mason declares, involves scheduling since so many of its "star" actors like Hirsch, Hurt, Crouse and Reeve have moved on to Hollywood films.

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[1] Ibid.

> One reason why the Group Theatre did not last beyond 1941, a span of ten years, stemmed from the fact that its actors longed for recognition and a salary that only Hollywood could satisfy. Realizing this, Mason tells Circle actors, "The way you can do the best for the theatre is to do the best for yourself. If you demand your own right to grow as an individual artist, you'll benefit the theatre."
>
> And these Hollywood actors do return to Circle as Judd Hirsch and Richard Thomas demonstrated in the company's opening presentation of its 1983-84 season, Chekhov's The Sea Gull. "They keep coming back because of what we do, not to make money," Mason asserts.[1]

Those who were willing to discuss it felt that the values of the issue were deeply dichotomous. As a company member, playing Hamlet was a wonderful way for Bill Hurt to experiment and to grow in a role he would most likely never get the opportunity to perform professionally anywhere else. For Hurt, this has to be considered one of the great advantages of an intimate association with a company like Circle Rep. He had the freedom to go to Hollywood to make films like Altered States and Body Heat, and then return to the Rep to play a classical stage role that would not ordinarily be a likely choice for him. From an actor's point of view, this can be one of the most profoundly satisfying aspects of Circle Rep. As actor Richard Seff says:

> Well known actors return to the Circle to refresh and restore themselves without having to commit for months or years, which Broadway would require of them. When Judd Hirsch finishes five years of "Taxi" on television, how lovely to be able to play Trigorin for three or four months. And should some major project come up, Circle is always ready to understand and release him. Richard Thomas is currently playing in The Sea Gull too but a film commitment is forcing his early departure from the run, and he will be replaced by Robert Joy. What a rare and ideal opportunity for a star.[2]

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[1] Gary Stern, "Good Enough to Be True," in Levitation program, 1983.

[2] Seff, letter.

This opportunity can be considered one of the professional reasons actors keep returning. Whether or not it is a strength of Circle Rep to do so is another matter. A good case can be argued for Circle Rep never to do classics again; that although the classics are extremely beneficial from the point of view of exercise and growth potentialities, they are most usually beyond the reach of most American trained actors. As Peter Buckley wrote:

> The Circle Rep must never touch foreign plays again - be they Shakespeare, Chekhov, or Pinter (I shudder to think of a Joe Orton play at Circle Rep) - but stick to true blue Americana, contemporary or revival. I would love to see them do O'Neill or Saroyan or Wilder or Williams or especially Inge- but never Barry or Kaufman.[1]

Buckley, of course, is casting the Circle's lot almost exclusively with lyric realism with such a statement and for every critic who believes this, there will be another who opines that they are too deep into this particular stylistic groove and must experiment in order to lift themselves above such realistic restrictions.

In the advent of another Circle Rep classical play, however, another case could be made for not resorting to the economic pressures of casting a star, as the star may not always be the best or even most logical casting choice from within the company's ranks. In Rob Thirkield's opinion, although casting stars is good box office, he feels that the practice is decidedly a mixed blessing.

> I think Marshall wanted Bill Hurt. Thought he would be perfect as Hamlet. I think Bill wanted to be asked to play Hamlet. He enjoyed playing it. I don't know how deep his Hamlet was. He was pretty casual. He may have gotten something out of it in the way of growth. I don't know. It certainly didn't affect his movie making.[2]

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[1] Buckley, letter.

[2] Thirkield interview.

Many well-known actors wish to return to the Circle stage for reasons other than classical roles. For example, Tony Roberts, who has had an extensive career in both films and the stage wrote:

> The CRC has provided an opportunity for me to participate in the kind of theatrical experience that I was taught early in life to revere, respect and love. Its goals challenge my devotion and my talent. I am proud to be among the ranks of so many believers and grateful that they have seen fit to include me. The health of CRC is important for the health of my actor-soul, my growth as a performer, and as a community for support and regeneration. Thank heaven and Marshall Mason it exists.[1]

Ruby Holbrook expressed a commonly held belief that it was the quality of the new plays that drew the actors back like magnets:

> Reputable actors return to the Circle Rep because it continually searches for plays that have something to say about the human condition - and they do not "gloss over" the reality for commercial reasons as the majority of New York theatres are forced to do for economic reasons.[2]

Actor Alan Feinstein's letter demonstrated that he believed economic pressures were such at the Rep that they could still afford to take a great many chances and could even afford to fail. This was a common perception that was no longer as true as it had been in the early days.

> Actors will take a shot no matter how it works out. The financial structure is such that it affords them a chance to fail. All actors are excited about going back onstage. There are no big city rep theatres around other than Regional - too often stuck in "star" packaging. At the Rep, acting is creative-time. On TV, e.g., there is no creative time. Actors make a living in TV, (Soaps) and TV is a marketplace. - Can't make a living in feature films or stage. There are far more

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[1] Roberts, letter, see p. 354.

[2] Holbrook, letter, see p. 354.

> actors than there are jobs.
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> Circle is the ideal place to develop your craft. I see good actors at the Circle all the time. That is an opportunity to learn in itself. I have to be honest in my work at all times. There is no alternative, and that honesty/truthfulness is made easier because I've spent so much time with the Circle family of actors, playwrights, directors, etc.[1]

All of the foregoing demonstrates that the security a company affords an artist is important for continual development of his/her skills, and that this fact can never be overstated. The needs of the company and the needs of the individual artists are so intimately co-mingled that they will always be strongly tied to one another despite the dispirit it may cause in some of the company members who have not been fortunate enough to achieve stardom. Economics also play a major factor in the issue of the Old Rep vs. the New Rep and the star-system that has come to take the place of the free-style ensemble that used to be the trademark of the CRC. It is doubtful that these issues can ever be adequately resolved to everyone's satisfaction. It is clear that the tendency toward name performers will persist as long as the use of names help financial viability and continues to strengthen ties to commercial theatre.

Since play production is such an integral part of the Circle's existence, it is important to determine exactly how tied to Broadway are non-profit theatre companies like Circle Rep upon which rest many of the expectations for the future of American theatre. What do they need to continue in such a transitory milieu as New York theatre with its 'here today, gone tomorrow' syndrome?

New York is the theatrical center of the nation. Commercialism separates New York theatre from all other theatre in the nation. There is little, if any,

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[1] Feinstein interview.

commercially oriented theatre in Chicago or Los Angeles, for example, whereas in New York, it is an actual, articulated, multi-million dollar industry that influences theatre all across America. Many playwrights prefer to open their plays regionally which permits the plays enough life to earn their authors a living before being moved to New York City. Eventually, however, most have to endure the impact of New York City critics in order to qualify in a highly competitive milieu as bonafide playwrights.

The commercialism of the New York theatre industry applies great pressure on non-profit theatres like the Circle Rep. They are forced to operate under the same rules and critical influences as the Broadway system. No less than one hundred and twenty critics previewed 5th of July, despite the fact that it was an Off-Broadway offering under a not-for-profit charter.

As Tom Thompson says,

> The public has no interest in plays that are not commercial in one way or another. So New York has to be very careful and savvy about the commercialism of theatre. We at Circle Rep have had to take a really close look at what we do to make ends meet.[1]

In essence, Circle Rep is forced to deal with the commercialism of the city in which it operates not only to survive financially, but in order to take its place in a theatrical hierarchy into which it was absorbed almost unwittingly. More and more frequently, little companies within the city itself are becoming the testing grounds for Broadway. Some plays meant for the commercial stage begin out-of-town, but out-of-town tryouts are not as common as they used to be. To move shows is exorbitantly expensive; often now, new plays have lengthy

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[1] Thompson interview.

previews within the city limits. Companies like Circle Rep are expected to provide new material for Broadway acting almost in the capacity of an in-town, tryout production house. As soon as Frank Rich of the New York Times said to B. Rodney Marriott when he was Acting Artistic Director, that he was not fulfilling his function at the Circle to "feed" Broadway--that he was, in essence, "killing" Broadway by insisting on doing plays that were not Broadway material--intimidation was an absolute; Frank Rich has the power to sink any play produced on or off Broadway. A suggestion by Frank Rich, therefore, is tantamount to a royal command. Although the CRC was chartered as a not-for profit, professional *alternative* theatre, not an in-town, tryout production house for the glorious invalid that is Broadway. Rich is being realistic in one way with his demands. By "feeding Broadway" a theatre such as the CRC is more likely to get funding through grants and private donations. As Milan Stitt points out:

> That is what is happening to this kind of theatre (CRC). In a way it *is* our job to feed Broadway. We receive more funding when we've had a Talley's Folly on Broadway the season before. Private donations are greater also, even though the company needs less when it has a hit running on B'way.[1]

Too much emphasis by the press also creates expectations that are too heavy and too unrealistic; an environment is created in which fear plays a major and debilitating factor and artistic problems are created. The commercial theatre has never been Circle Rep's goal nor was a profit motivation ever written into its charter. When the company started to feel the pressure that one of its functions--if not the major one--was to feed the commercial theatre, and that

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[1] Stitt interview.

doing so was a direct line to the grant monies it desperately needed to survive, the broad scope of the work changed; the Circle Rep began looking for "hits."

Although artistically looking for hits may occasionally prove to be a weakness, from a pragmatic point of view, it is a strength to be able to recognize and deal effectively with the commericiality of theatre despite the real danger of being in the center of a commercial environment. If too many critics like Rich Brustein, Simon, or any who are critical powerhouses in the theatre keep implying that Circle Rep is not living up to its promise, the resulting damage could be great. In the beginning, before fame set it up to such critical attention, no one really cared what the Circle Repertory company did. It had the freedom to fail, the independence to experiment, the opportunity to grow, and the courage to lose the little money it had. Now there are enormous amounts of money involved; the stakes have changed dramatically. Mason agrees that this is a highly significant component in the future of the company:

> You hit upon it. The money that's at stake. That's the other potential failure. I can tell you for sure, despite all the ideals, we have not been able to match the artistic vision in this theatre ever. As a result, we carry a $450,000 deficit. The sheer weight of the money gap could be the thing that destroys us in the long run. The Moscow Art Theatre would never have become the Moscow Art Theatre if it hadn't been for the government throwing millions of rubles into that company.[1]

To expect the Circle to remain idealistically pure in the face of such pressure is naive and in itself a form of idealism. And yet, though no one else would insist on purity, it seemed to be an expectation of their own. When reviews from the commercial world devastated some of their artistic efforts, internal

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[1] Mason interview.

reevaluations became exhaustive.

The fifteenth aniversary year that created a poor season had to deal mostly with poor reviews for Full Hookup and The Sea Gull.[1] These reviews, added to an already enervated company spirit, created a serious crisis of faith. It is therefore important to recognize how intricately woven commercialism is into the Circle's daily operations despite its non-profit charter.

The CRC opens its new productions to an international press which creates too much emphasis on the results. This pressure can easily be perceived as a serious problem translating into an operating fault in that it does an immense disservice to the playwrights the CRC has dedicated itself to serve. The lack of balance between emphasis on end product and the needs of the playwrights is an issue that has never been satisfactorily resolved. Opening to the press sometimes occurs after only three weeks of rehearsal which is an "impossible" situation according to Milan Stitt.

> Marshall doesn't like previews. We used to open to the critics on the first Sunday which was the company opening. We'd play Thursday, Friday, Saturday and open on Sunday. Marshall still likes that. I fought to extend the preview time for a number of reasons. Now that we have subscribers who buy tickets in advance, I don't know why we open so fast. We're always opening shows when we've only just frozen the script and the actors aren't even sure if something is still there or not. We have to find a way that we don't have critics. We have to find a way that a critic will never see a show at the Rep. And occasionally, as Joe Papp does, they're invited. Which is one of the plans with the new Repertory system.[2]

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[1] Chekhov's The Sea Gull was directed by Elinor Renfield. Full Hookup, by Conrad Bishop and Elizabeth Fuller, was directed by Marshall Mason.

[2] Stitt interview.

Milan Stitt and Tom Thompson were the only ones who openly admitted that there was also a secret desire to do plays that made money. In the perennial struggle between idealism and commercialism, this admission was almost heretical. However, it was cloaked in truth as witnessed by the change in company philosphy after 5th of July. Immediately after the play's success, Circle Rep turned into a company that was trying to create hits. After every show, the big questions at company meetings became, "Will it move?" "Can it move?" "What will Frank Rich say?" "Can we raise money to move this to Broadway?" More talk seemed to go into that aspect of production than any other, despite denials, and there were many. General Manager, Richard Frankel, for example, denied that there was a search for plays that would make money. Trying to do so was, in his opinion, "stupid." The only feasible and acceptable method of play selection was to go for "the best" play possible.

> First of all, nobody really knows what will work. The only thing you know is that you have to be true to yourself and just do the best work you can and do the best theatre you can. And if something works commercially, fine. But to go try and second guess the public and the critics and to do something you don't really believe in because you think it will be a hit is not only not the way we want to lead our lives, it is also ineffective. It doesn't work. What works is to be true to yourself. It is basically art, and good art is the best that the artist can produce. And artists don't produce the best work when what they are chasing is profit. You chase art and the profit will come - maybe. You figure out a way to live whether the profit comes or not. We don't think the way to work in the theatre is to chase profit. That's what they do uptown and it doesn't always work.[1]

The denial of the search for "hits" becomes a fault in its essential dishonesty. Every playwright wants his play to move to Broadway; to wish for

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[1] Frankel Interview.

anything else would be unnatural and untrue. The best of the work that has been produced by CRC has always moved to Broadway for a further professional run. However, Frankel's point is well taken. It is true that trying to do something strictly for success may not always work. Full Hookup was a perfect example. It was exactly the search for "hits" that prompted Circle Rep to produce Full Hookup in the first place, but it turned out to be one of the 1984-85 season's major disappointments. Full Hookup was the primary hit of Louisville's season in the Great American Play Contest. Even though it was a director's piece and Mason obviously believed in the play, there was much dissension within the company regarding its production, starting with the fact that it was not a Circle Rep play and ending with the opinion of some members of the Literary Department staff that it was not a very good play. However, even though Mason had a few problems with the play, it presented many interesting directorial challenges, had a high degree of theatricality in its production aspects, and had good roles for the company actors--a major consideration.

The critics applauded the production but disliked the play. Although it was not in Mason's usual repertoire, the direction was greatly appreciated. However, there was violence onstage and a social message implicit in the violence that while it might have stirred an impressionable collegiate audience, it did little for a secure New York audience. The audience, like the critics, resisted what two or three years earlier might have appeared breathtaking onstage. As Ari Roth points out:

> The Great American Play Contest of Louisville had been riding on top of the wave with a new version of violent theatre in which you could do rapes and wife beatings on

stage.[1]

While on stage violence may raise a great many moral issues, it is theatrically very exciting. But on stage violence was becoming commonplace. As with any kind of saturation, the public became tired of it. In the case of Full Hookup, it was difficult to care about violence that emanated out of characters for whom one had little basic sympathy or empathy. It would seem that by 1984, content and fullness of character was much more important than the excitement-value of witnessing violence on stage. Additionally, in many ways the premise of Full Hookup ran counter to everything Circle Rep stood for, starting off with the fact that it was developed elsewhere, and ending with the recognition that it was unlike the plays that the Circle usually did. It was a very dark play; the premise and the motivations under which it operated ran counter to Circle Rep style. It was a non-realistic, expressionist presence. The characters were fundamentally operating out of a negative impulse--that the underlying bedrock of life was misery and, this was how people behaved when life was a misery. That the play was different in style and content, of course, did not necessarily negate its value as theatre. As Ari Roth justifiably points out, the experience could be refreshing:

> . . . if the company is aware that that's why they're doing something. That they're exploring something within themselves--including our identity as a company--that we are exploring the underside. Not everything has to be searching for that positive dream. Not every conflict has to come out of love between a mother and daughter.[2]

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[1] Roth interview.

[2] Ibid.

But Roth was just as quick to point out that the company was not closely knit anymore. Not everybody was involved in the decision making process that brought the play to the Circle--a full company decision which could have cemented their support of the play as an artistic challenge.

However, even with the disappointment of Full Hookup, the crisis of faith would not have occurred had the following production of The Sea Gull done well--had it even broken even--had it reaffirmed the Circle Repertory Company as a living theatre where there is fine ensemble acting. The negative critical reaction was a shock since the production had done extremely well in its run at Saratoga, New York, its own out-of-town tryout. Ari Roth recalls that:

> Everyone was upset. We knew when we saw the company opening with Judd Hirsch doing this strange little accent, that it was lacking immediacy. It was sweet--a little slow. It wasn't electric theatre but it was good work. Everybody was shocked when people came down so hard on it. Universally so.[1]

New York is quintessentially an American city where only the brightest star is sought even though it is ultimately thrown away, victim of the disposable society syndrome that is part of the hostile environment to which Mason frequently refers. Being "thrown away" often occurs with movie stars and rock stars . It was essentially done with Arthur Miller and even Tennessee Williams to some extent. It is done even with new ideas, and political and social trends as well, unlike Europe where there is a certain bedrock-continuity of underlying values, ideas or aspirations passed on from generation to generation.

> Mel Gussow as a reviewer seems to be a lot nicer, a lot more supportive and less effusive in a way. He seems to be a little more fair, and yet he remains a second stringer with the New York Times maybe because of it. He doesn't feel the star factor.

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[1] Ibid.

It's hype but it's also pursued for the "great" American play.[1]

And Roth may have a point. What is America if it cannot produce the greatest, the biggest, the most successful? No one wants to see a revival of The Sea Gull if it is only "good"; they want to see it only if it is going to be superlative. Not only is there so much to choose from in New York City, but the high ticket prices make one less likely to accept anything that does not fall close to the glowing category of superlatives, particularly with a classic. But superlative productions are few and far between. It was Harold Clurman who said that most productions are neither "great" nor "terrible;" most fall somewhere in the vast between.[2] Part of the problem, ironically enough, is the Circle's own commitment to excellence as Roth candidly admits:

> We didn't get Richard Thomas and Judd Hirsch for The Sea Gull just for their "star" value; we didn't get them for the money. We wanted to do it because it would be spectacular. We could have hired anybody from our company. We have the "stars" just as much as anybody else. We have this ambition to be excellent--to stand out--and we want to get tremendous reviews.[3]

But Frank Rich did not like Circle Rep's production of The Sea Gull and no matter how a review may be truncated for promotional purposes, the public always knows the underlying truth. The Sea Gull was victim of the very commercialism Circle Rep has always tried to negate. It might not have been on

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Clurman made the point to this author during a personal discussion at Hunter College in the fall of 1978.

[3] Ibid.

the block of the flop/hit syndrome if it had been promoted as art for art's sake, or interesting for interesting sake and had opened in a loft or Circle Rep's own tiny Sheridan Square Playhouse. Instead it opened at the American Place Theatre, a 300-seat space. To open at the American Place Theatre with high-profile stars like Judd Hirsch and Richard Thomas was a deliberate marketing strategy. It proved to be a risk that backfired and demonstrated how often theatrical success or failure depend on untheatrical matters. Roth continues:

> It [The Sea Gull] was revved up too much. If it had been done in a loft and the press happened to stumble onto it, it might have been a different story. As it was, the expectations were too much. It had been a success at Saratoga. We thought it was a good production and that it could make a lot of money. It wasn't a commercial success. It wasn't an artistic failure. But with all the advance publicity, the critics held the production up against heavy artistic standards regarding a classic. We were hoping to make money on it. That's why we got a bigger theatre space. We got American Place Theatre which turned out to be a disaster. We had a lot of problems with the theatre itself. It was in the basement - had a restaurant on top that hadn't used a grease trap in 12 years. They were flushing the grease down the toilet. We had to cancel performances because one day, the pipe ruptured and sewage spilled all over the stage. It was not as intimate as our theatre space. Perhaps it would have been a different kind of production if it had been. But we were hoping to make money. It was a 300 seat theatre and we booked it for twice the normal run (10-12 weeks) Because of the catastrophe of the pipe - what we did wrong, we had to delay the opening until Thanksgiving, until the very last day of the subscriber run. We basically had four weeks of previews and our built-in audience was used up before the reviews came out. So everything was pending on the reviews. If the opening had been two weeks earlier when we still had the cushion of the subscribers and word of mouth, we would have been able to run. But instead we said we were playing from the 31st of December which is a long time for people to wait to buy their tickets. We didn't say "Limited engagement." Then the reviews came out. Some were complimentary of some aspects. Basically - they thought it was a mediocre-to-good production of a classic that all critics think deserves to be great, and if it's not great, why bother seeing it. Because you can see mediocre Chekhov anytime. So there was no reason to come see it. Word of mouth was not bad.

> The audiences did not hate it. But it was not true ensemble work. The blame here was shouldered by the director. She didn't really hold things together. Didn't really create an ensemble. Didn't communicate the vision of the play. Someone always gets blamed.[1]

The Sea Gull lost a great deal of money. This loss was one of the primary causes of the huge cutbacks during January and February of 1984 that precipitated the serious crisis of faith within the company and the evolving transition back to ensemble origins. Not only were many secretarial and clerical positions terminated, (the work being relegated totally to unpaid interns,) but even Tanya Berezin, the company godmother, was "temporarily" relieved of a salaried position. As previously noted, most of the cutbacks, however, occurred within the Literary Department despite the fact that the department has always controlled play development, one of the company's most important functions. Rob Meiksins, Literary Manager, was "laid off" and, although Ari Roth became Associate Literary Manager, Meiksins essentially was not replaced. It was not long before Ari Roth was let go also. During the resulting reorganization, the search for hits continued. Intimately involved in this search, is the search for star playwrights. Playwrights like David Mamet and Sam Shepard have been brought in. This policy will undoubtedly continue even though neither one of them has a genuine desire to write specifically for the company. Instead, Circle Rep brought in their productions from other theatres and called them their own, (e.g. Buried Child, Fool For Love) but Sam Shepard is not a collaborative artist to begin with, nor does he have a particular allegiance to the Circle Company despite the ties of friendship that date back to the Cino days.

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[1] Ibid.

Although courting high-profile successful playwrights is good business, the ensemble spirit gets seriously distorted when there are "stars," whether they are star actors or star playwrights. However, the need for hits is an absolute in a modern day economy and therefore, the search for star playwrights will continue. Richard Frankel was very candid regarding how the managerial approach has changed. They have gotten far more sophisticated about deals with playwrights since in the past the contract deals were very unprofitable for the Rep.

> The plays went on and we didn't make very much. Now if the plays are successful, we do very well. The playwrights contract is now 27 pages. It used to be three. If there are European disc sales we've allowed for that. There never are so it doesn't make any difference. We made a lot of money from Fool For Love. We made more from that than anything else. 5th of July ran for a year and a half on Broadway. We made more from Fool For Love although that's an odd example. We made more because we own it. It's capitalism with the others—when you're taking a royalty from the originating party but other people put up the capital. In America, people who put up the money earn the profits. We put up the money for Fool For Love. It was a very small play and it was doing well. We put up the money to move it and run it, so we made the profits. Plays can be more profitable Off-Broadway than on Broadway. It's very hard for a play to be profitable on Broadway. When a play is profitable it may make $100,000 a week profit, but more likely it makes five, loses two, loses ten, makes three depending on the week. Off Broadway you can consistently make several thousand dollars a week for a long period of time, plus your investment. You don't have to pay back a half a million dollars that's been invested. It's more like $40,000. So in many ways Off Broadway is much more commercially attractive to us than Broadway. I would much rather have a hit Off-Broadway than on Broadway — well — I would much rather have a hit Off-Broadway than a move and a possible hit on Broadway. Commercially, we're better off.[1]

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[1] Frankel interview.

The conflicts between idealism and needs, whether commercial or personal,have never been adequately resolved during the long process of institutionalization, and in Mason's own estimation are a key to the CRC's faults:

> I can tell you right away where the flaws are. I don't think it is in the ideals. The conflict between the institutionalization of those ideas and need for constant personal involvement, is one of the basic conflicts that if not resolved, will ultimately destroy everything that we are trying to accomplish. That's the key thing. We can look at the Group Theatre and say that greed destroyed them. I don't think greed is going to destroy us, but ironically, I think a theatre that is humanistic and sensitive to everybody's needs--it may be that very sensitivity and responsiveness, in the long run, that wears people down to the extent that they become insensitive and intolerant. It's peculiar. I wonder if the trap isn't there.[1]

Being worn down may be one of the traps, but an even greater trap may be the fact that many of the established resident playwrights feel that the company has been lost to its own success. After Circle Rep went through its early stages of adolescence during the sixties and travelled the cycle to full maturity in the eighties, it is astonishing to hear that many of the resident playwrights feel that they are serving a company that no longer exists, given all that the Circle Rep stands for. However, it is an important and interesting point to explore through the surprising litany of complaints: not only does the company "not exist" anymore, but the actors who are available to the playwrights are the ones no one really wants; many of the actors who remain are the ones who "did not make it;" the CRC has become a company of supporting actors, (which works very well only for Lanford Wilson's large cast shows); the actors who have the charisma to carry a play, for the most part, are gone; the company stars are seldom

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[1]Mason interview.

available. When they are, they are reserved for special projects such as Bill Hurt being saved for Hamlet rather than being asked to be in Back in The Race by Milan Stitt which was written especially for him after The Runner Stumbles.

This long list of negative observations might be the regurgitation of sour grapes from some playwrights who ride a distant second to Lanford Wilson, Circle Rep's star playwright, but much of the criticism is founded in truth. There are some who even feel that it would be better if the entire company process itself *were* lost, either to success or otherwise, in order for the CRC to move forward artistically. Peter Buckley has come to feel that the insularity of the,

> . . . family atmosphere is not necessarily the best thing for producing exciting art, and has led the Circle Rep into a bit of a self-congratulatory position. They tend to use the same friends over and over again, often to the disservice of the production.[1]

Buckley feels that this position leads to a rigidity of approach; that they have become too comfortable with their well publicized "lyric-naturalism" which often makes them seem "stuck in another generation. . . . Circle Rep has become a bit stodgey, the old maid of the group" of New York theatres,[2] these observations from the man who in the same letter suggested Circle Rep do only true, blue Americana. It may seem contradictory and perhaps it is. But on the other hand, Buckley also believes that all Circle Rep needs is "fresh blood, fresh wind, and a fresh breeze to lift aloft its lyric-naturalism since it *is* America's foremost exponent of this type of theatre and it is a form of theatre with which

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[1]Peter Buckley, letter to this author dated January 23, 1984.

[2]Ibid.

we desperately need to keep in contact."[1]

Perhaps the Circle does need fresh breezes but there is still much to be said for the "Circle Idea."

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[1]Ibid.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSIONS AND THE "CIRCLE IDEA"

Circle Rep has many characteristics that distinguish it from other theatre groups in New York as well as in the nation, the most important of which is that it is a cohesive, on-going *company* of actors who specialize in an ensemble approach to theatre. Another equally distinctive characteristic is the way Circle Rep is perceived by critics in relation to the kind of theatre for which the ensemble is noted. In a May, 1980 article for Horizon, Peter Buckley had called Circle Rep the most important regional theatre in America.[1] He claimed that the number of plays it had generated was very impressive and had established the Circle as the primary generator of lyric realism. At the time, Buckley noted with complete justification that Circle Rep was the only institutional theatre in the country with resident playwrights creating for resident actors. In retrospect, it can be determined that when Circle Rep started in 1969 it was in the vanguard of the search for the new American play. Concomitant with this search was an intense interest in the revival of the native American voice interpreted by Circle Rep as realism which, in turn, was brought to the plane of lyric realism through the work of its major playwright, Lanford Wilson.

The critical emphasis brought to bear on the significance of the company as the primary generator of lyric realism as well as its importance in searching for new American plays would make it appear that the company existed primarily to service and nurture the playwright. However, Circle Rep was also

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[1] Peter Buckley, "Circle Repertoty Theatre - A regional troupe that's generating excitement," Horizon, May, 1980.

in the avant-garde in its devotion to the idea of the company of actors itself, so that while the playwright wrote for the specific actors, the relationship was mutually symbiotic in that they were all trained toward the idea of working together for a common goal: the theatre event and the audience experience. Familiarity between playwright and actor made the writing more intense as it was attuned to the individuality of each performer. Familiarity also made the actor's direct contribution unique in his knowledge of the nuances of the playwright, thus cementing the symbiosis. As Mason notes:

> Circle Rep has demonstrated again and again that you can have a pretty decent theatre experience with a play that if it were not done brilliantly would be just a so-so experience. How it is done, plus what happens between the actors and the audience is also terribly important.[1]

Mason feels that the emphasis is much too much on the playwright in commercial theatre. This emphasis creates the illusion that if someone comes along with a great play, the rest simply falls into place without adequate acknowledgment of the immense and important contribution of the actors, directors and designers to the total experience of the theatre event. Circle Rep's most distinctive characteristic is that there has been no other American acting company dedicated to the creation of new American plays since the Group Theatre of the thirties.

There are, and have been, many other theatre groups in existence across the nation, each with its own artistic product, none of which is a company devoted particularly to the American play. The CSC in New York, for example, is a full-fledged company, but it is oriented almost exclusively to the classics. The

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[1]Mason interview.

Association of Producing Artists (APA), which disbanded in 1970, also had a company that performed classics. The Actors Theatre of Louisville sponsors a yearly festival of new plays for which it hires a company that disperses at the the end of the Festival. As previously noted, although playwright, Sam Shepard uses the Magic Theatre in San Francisco as an on-going relationship to premiere his work, the Magic Theatre does not have a resident company. La Mama no longer exists as a company as it did in its early days of the sixties when it had taken a strong emulating cue from Cino's Caffe' which had a small family of artists who were so consistently on hand that their allegiance to the Caffe' resembled the foundations of a company. La Mama exhaustively presents a variety of new American plays, but it also presents new European and Asian plays. Without a doubt these plays should have a hearing. However, exclusivity and patriotism often play a jealous role in the bestowal of grants. According to Mason, a good friend of Ellen Stewart, La Mama lost some of its federal funding when it came under criticism by the National Endowment for not concentrating on American work. Playwrights Horizon, Manhattan Theatre Club and The Public Theatre which are heavily involved in the development of new playwrights, do not have on-going companies; there is no artistic continuity in that sense. Although they often deal with the same people who are brought together for a particular production, when it is over, they go their separate ways. Any company that is put together on an ad hoc basis, essentially deals with actors who are forced to take their lives off the shelf and make them available to the extent that it is safe for them to do so at a given moment. A director who is working within such a situation is essentially constantly training his actors into working with the same artistic goals. Mason is quick to point out the great

advantages of a true company situation.

> When you have a company, it is like owning a Stradivarius violin that has been made by hand and crafted specifically for your use. The people become so attuned to the nuances, not only of the director's work, sharing the same vocabulary, but also to the playwright's work. They understand the music, for example, of the languange that Lanford writes and I think they are able to give it to him in a way that strangers simply could not do.[1]

They also become attuned to each other as actors having worked together and trained together over an extended period of time. It is analagous to the difference between musicians who congregate for the first time to play and musicians who have been rehearsing and playing together for a long period of time. There is no comparison to the comfort and sense of belonging, sharing of dynamics and almost instinctive anticipation of each other's swells and shading. This kind of artistic interplay is most obvious in musicians who "jam" together on a steady basis.

There are a number of extraordinary playwrights who are associated with theatres like Manhattan Theatre Club and Playwrights Horizons, such as Christopher Durang, Pete Gurney, Albert Innaurato and David Rabe, some of whom had also been associated with Circle Rep. For example, Innaurato's Gemini was presented originally at the Rep. Mason also points out that when Pete Gurney writes a play for the Circle Rep, the Circle does it; when Gurney writes one that is not for Circle Rep, Playwrights Horizon presents it. It need not be a play that is written for Playwrights Horizon, "merely one that is not

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[1] Ibid.

written for the Circle Rep company of actors."[1]

Joseph Papp at the Public Theatre also has extraordinary playwrights and an extraordinary mechanism for supporting their work. Thomas Babe and David Rabe are two in whose work he intensely believes. Papp has successfully produced a series of their plays, but there is no company as part of his producing mechanism. Although all artists continually call upon past associations out of loyalty and familiarity as well as an inner sense of continuity that most admittedly need, each product that is presented at the Public, in essence, has to begin production work from step one.

In its capacity as an ongoing company, Circle Rep has tried to maintain a certain amount of artistic integrity that does not have to do solely with the issue of developing new American plays. A new word--"mature"-- has come into the company's vocabulary during the last year. They are keenly aware that beyond the boundaries of development, the mature artist needs a place to work. And this is very true. There are few places for the mature artist to work in this country on a continuing basis. He has to find a play--a "starring vehicle," whereas at the Rep, as noted, William Hurt, e.g., who had often worked at the Rep before becoming a Hollywood star, came back to play Hamlet. The play was presented in revolving repertory with Mary Stuart in which he played a bit part. Whether his Hamlet was a great portrayal or not is not the important issue. What is important is that he had a place in which to work. His willingness to appear in a bit part in the accompanying play was also wonderfully supportive for the other actors; to know that a star of Hurt's caliber was playing a supporting part to

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[1] Ibid.

their leading roles. That kind of mutuality and reciprocity is what a company is all about.

The interesting issue to be determined is whether or not Circle Rep is substantially more creative for the fact of its being a cohesive acting company. Gerald Berkowitz in New Broadways has suggested that much of the success of Wilson's plays, for example, comes from his close connection with Circle Rep as a company.[1] Not only has he the "luxury" of writing with particular actors in mind whose work he knows intimately, but Circle Rep's special strength lies in the ensemble playing, which can be attributed to a closely knit company with its synchronous understanding and ability to perform the "quietly evocative romanticism"[2] that Wilson's plays demand.

Historically, writing directly for ongoing ensembles is not unusual. In both the near and distant past, some of the acknowledged great playwrights operated in ensemble settings. Shakespeare, Moliere, Chekhov, and Odets each had the luxury of writing for full-fledged "companies" of actors. To some extent, even Eugene O'Neill experienced the same sense of continuity with the Provincetown Players, a small, intimate, private group. While Wilson's association with Circle Rep has been essential to the company's success, conversely, a large measure of Wilson's success can be attributed to the company according to Mason.

> The reason we have a Lanford Wilson is because we have a company. And I *really* think that's the distinction.[3]

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[1] Berkowitz, p. 262.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Mason, interview.

Wilson would be the first to agree. He has often attributed his artistic life to the very existence of the Circle Repertory Company in whose nurturing atmosphere he not only lost a debilitating writing block, but now writes prolifically.

As previously noted, historically, Circle Rep is reminsicent of both the Group Theatre and the Moscow Art Theatre in its company orientation. It is also similar in its devotion to a Stanislavskian-based method of acting, which is the foundation of what is essentially an eclectic approach. In terms of thematic content it is safe to assess that Circle Rep leans heavily toward the humanist Chekhovian influences --another distinctive characteristic in today's modern world. However, the similarities with the two older companies end abruptly when one compares Circle Rep's apolitical posture to the Group Theatre's political orientations, or compares Circle Rep's constant financial perils to the Moscow Art Theatre's heavy financial subsidy by its government.

The idea of a company is hardly unique. It has, however, gained in credibility and feasibility due to the success of Circle Rep. According to Mason, who has kept an ongoing association with many theatre groups around the nation, the Empty Space in Seattle has admitted being influenced by the idea of a company; the Cricket Theatre in Minneapolis has looked to Circle Rep and actually voiced the thought that it might be time to consider forming a company of its own instead of merely doing plays; even Joseph Papp, with his considerable success at the Public, has admitted to Mason that he is thinking in terms of a company. Besides the established groups considering a change, new companies with similar goals are now opening throughout the country. The Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago is a prime example. Their devotion to the

ensemble work, their level of artistry, and their standards of excellence in terms of what they are trying to accomplish, is extremely reminiscent of Circle Rep's banner. Mason was so impressed with the Steppenwolf Theatre during a recent visit to Chicago, that he called it, "a real echo of Circle Rep's heart," and brought John Malkovitch's production of Wilson's Balm in Gilead to the Circle Repertory's Sheridan Square Playhouse in 1984.

Then there are the new companies that openly admit to emulating the Circle. Former company member Jordan Charney's association with Circle Rep has helped to formulate the direction that he wanted his new theatre in Sherman Oaks, California, to take.[1] In speaking of his dedication to providing opportunites for actor-members of the company to stretch their artistic muscles through classes, labs and workshops in addition to public performance, he spoke of making a concerted effort to attract new writers to the theatre in order to "establish a creative marriage between us. Only through an arduous process involving much labor pains can we hope for the continued birth of new and meaningful drama."[2] Charney's entire theatre philosophy could be considered a restatement of Circle Rep's own philosophy. His devotion to CRC ideals is one of the more obvious examples of Circle Rep's influence on other theatres.

It is not really surprising that those who were familiar with Circle Rep's company process often tried to duplicate it. The "Circle idea," as playwright Milan Stitt called it, was one of the distinctive characteristics that separated it from

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[1] Charney's letter to this author, December 20, 1983.

[2] Ibid.

other groups.[1] Not only were other theatre groups consciously trying to emulate it, but Circle Rep itself was trying to recreate its own original premise from which it has deviated over the last five years, leaving in its wake a company that was suffering from fundamental dissatisfactions and debilitating enervation. The most astonishing conclusion is that, in many ways, Circle Rep was no longer an environment in which to work once it became a production house looking for hits. Now half of the members do not know each other. Most who attend the Friday Readings are Lab members and interns rather than company members; company members no longer regularly attend if at all. Tony Roberts, for example, is listed as a company member but it is doubtful that he would recognize 95% of the company members if he ran into them on the street. The sense of company no longer exists in 1985 except in name and desire. The Circle Idea had been lost to its own success. Stitt felt that Circle Rep had a "great idea" that had been achieved twice.[2] It had been achieved the first time when the original company worked essentially for nothing and, out of the hardships, developed the sense of comraderie and ensemble spirit that has been the bedrock for everything that has happened since. It achieved it the second time in 1978 when, due to the New York State Council on the Arts Grant, a small, select group of company members was paid $50-100 per week each and could once again fully operate within the company concept--or the "Circle idea." On both occasions, Circle Rep was a truly functioning company under Mason and Thirkield that was

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[1] Stitt interview.

[2] Ibid.

meeting consistently; it was under the spirit of communal exerises and mutual nurturing that the company flowered to prominence. According to Stitt, the communal spirit disappeared during the eighties. "If we can regain that and learn from the mistakes we've made, and continue to grow, then I think we can once again be an important theatre."[1]

Stitt is intensely interested and involved with the Circle Repertory Company. Perhaps it is difficult for loyal company members to admit to the company's failure in having lost some of its prominence as an important theatre company. It is a strength, however, to recognize the enervation of the company that has to be "recreated," in order to guarantee its very existence as a company and its continued importance as a theatre. The very recognition of this need turns a problem--an enervated company--into a strength--the desire to recreate. The NEA Grant is affording Circle Rep the freedom to do it all over again, a rare opportunity that most companies, let alone individuals, ever have.

On retrospective inspection, it can be seen that Stitt's assessment can be substantiated with a fair degree of accuracy. Each time the "Circle idea" was fully operational, the energy and enthusiasm that was generated was not only abundant and infectious, but lasted for several years. There was an appreciable rise in the quality of the work during these periods. It was when the company idea was working at peak capacity that the theatre produced some of its most important works such as: The Hot L Baltimore, The Sea Horse, When You Comin' Back Red Ryder, The Mound Builders, Knock, Knock, Serenading Louie, 5th of July, Gemini, The Runner Stumbles, Talley's Folly, The Woolgatherer, The

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[1] Ibid.

Diviners, A Tale Told, The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler, Angels's Fall, and 'night Mother. It should be noted that of the sixteen plays mentioned, seven were written by Lanford Wilson who, perhaps more than any other resident playwright, operates so well in a company milieu. One of the greatest strengths of the CRC is the sense of helping each other--an integral part of the developmental process within a company environment when it is truly operating well. Very often there seems to be a melting away of personal egos when this concept is fully operational.

For example, Lanford Wilson, whose background in the elements of playwriting consisted of an evening course in playwriting in Chicago, wrote instinctively. He did not always fully understand dramatic structure despite his talent. Milan Stitt, on the other hand, held dramatic structure as one of his strong points. As dramaturg, Stitt immediately went about working with Wilson on 5th of July when it was in its earliest drafts. Stitt gave very little, if any, thought to the fact that Wilson was Circle Rep's "star" playwright and to help him improve his plays might in some way diminish his own standing within the structure of the company. In fact, Stitt considered that his work with Wilson on dramatic structure was one of his most profound contributions to Circle Rep and was a quintessential example of the "Circle Idea" at its best.

> When we did a reading of 5th of July, it turned out that although it was because the house was for sale that the couple had come, it wasn't mentioned until the last scene of the play. And I said that that was really a major dramatic question and tension line of the play; the last scene was a little too late to introduce it. So by the time we opened the play at the Circle, the question about the house was introduced in the first scene of the 2nd act which is still not correct. Lanford's talent is so great in introducing interesting people, that audiences don't mind too much. But critics, particularly those like Walter Kerr, were very much aware of these matters. When the play

> went to California, Lanford got it to the point where it was in the middle of the first act. When the play came successfully to Broadway, the question was in the first scene: "Will I sell my house or won't I?" This was the controlling factor in the play.
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> Another example in which Lanford's dramatic structure is faulty is Hot L Baltimore in which the question is, will the boy find his grandfather? During intermission, the boy decides he doesn't care any more, which caused Walter Kerr to write that the most interesting things that happen in the American theatre increasingly happen during the intermissions.
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> Talley's Folly started with Judd (Hirsch) saying, "I know she can't have children so this marriage is made in heaven." It made us hate Judd. He was this snip who was going to put this woman through this awful memory so he could marry her. Once we got rid of that line, I thought the play worked charmingly.
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> With A Tale Told, Lanford wouldn't listen right along. He got very defensive, not in a verbal way, but you always know when someone is not listening. But through my initial work with him on 5th of July, he knew there was something more he needed to know about and he really got into reading about dramatic structure. Now he probably knows more than I do.[1]

Stitt freely admits that Wilson has always helped him as well when he was in the midst of one of his own plays. Wilson acted in the same dramturgical capacity for him. In the same spirit of reciprocity as well as respect, John Bishop and Milan Stitt have often acted as dramaturgs for each others plays. That is what the developmental process is all about in a company in which the work is the most important aspect of its functioning. The process embodies the pure ensemble concept of the perfect Circle idea which, when functioning at its best, is highly conducive to the stimulation of an artist's peak performance:

> Marshall has a wonderful saying: "We have no egos at Circle Rep. In other words, if you have an ego problem, you should get therapy. The theatre is not the place where one works out an ego problem. What we do here is something magical. We transfer our egos into something called, "the show." It doesn't matter who thought of the line. It doesn't matter who thought of the cross. What matters is that the show is the very best we

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[1] Stitt interview.

> can make it. For example, the times when everyone goes to Lanford's rehearsals and contributes is when it is all working. That is when everyone is contributing their best criticism--which unfortunately we think of as a negative word--but their best support. "Wouldn't it be better if...."[1]

Stitt feels very strongly that Circle Rep has to get "back to the core" in order to achieve new directions back to its origins. He believes there is a great need for a reaffirmation of a living-theatre ensemble. It is impossible not to wonder whether or not they should go back to their tiny concerns. A small company interested in serving its own needs can easily be seen as having a selfish point of view. Or is that the only way for them to maintain true artistic integrity thereby best serving the needs of drama and theatre itself? There was a certain strength and vitality during the original days of the CRC that could probably be attributed to a confluence of artistic, social, economic and political forces that emanated out of the turmoil of the sixties. It might do well to try to recapture that vitality. Although in its artistic content Circle Rep was swimming against the philosophical tide, there is little doubt that their development as a company emanated directly out of the powerful communal, togetherness syndrome of the sixties. It is not likely that could have emerged out of the soil of the forties with its Pre and Post World War II attitudes creating such strong patriotic and social bonds throughout the nation. Nor could it have emerged out of the fifties with its surface innocence and growing middle-class affluence, even though it was out of these times that the *idealism* of the founders had been born--an idealism that was imbedded deeply in the company's psyche. It was an interesting combination of schizophrenic-like forces--idealism out of

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[1] Ibid.

the forties and fifties--communal behavioral patterns out of the Greenwich Village of the sixties.

Most important, was the fact that Marshall Mason, the strongest philosophical force within the company, has been able to articulate his early visions and has been in the position to put them into effect:

> Early in my teenage years when I was going to the theatre, it was very clear to me - my vision. I wanted to make the theatre a better place than I found. By that I mean that I wanted to contribute to the illumination of the human condition as one thing the theatre can uniquely do--in a way that would significantly alter people's understanding of themselves. When I was about nineteen or so I saw Marlon Brando in the film, The Young Lions. It was a splendid film, beautifully acted. Most especially Brando. For the first time I saw and understood how anyone could be a Nazi. Hitler was a madman and I could not understand how people could follow him. And I saw in that film a young, blond, God of war--how idealistic he could be--how he believed--the economic reality of Germany at that time. He found himself taking one step at a time by first getting into the army--how he reached the point of complete realization and was finally shot and killed. For me it was a wrenching moment. For me, it was a profoundly cathartic experience. I saw and really understood for the first time, what a great evil war is. I *experienced* it. This was World War II when there really were things that were worth fighting for--even giving up your life for. Nevertheless, even so, what a tragedy it is for the human being. And so, it changed my life. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to do things on the scale of The Young Lions --take a kid from Texas and make him understand that war is evil. [1]

There is a grandiosity about Mason in the very best sense of the word--one that co-mingles with the sense of responsibility felt in the desire to share his powerfully felt early visions. There are moments in each life when certain peaks of understanding are reached; it does not happen frequently, but when it does it

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[1] Mason interview.

is impactful. Mason is committed to his convictions that theatre can *make* these moments happen in the actual experience of the audience; that theatre can aspire to these heights of elevated understanding.

> I don't mean just a single work or even a body of work for that matter. Different plays will affect people in different ways. We all have different hidden, psychological triggers within us. It's not the same for everybody. The same thing will not illuminate for everyone. I do not have a vision of what that one thing is. But I deeply feel that theatre is remarkably, uniquely capable of illuminating the human experience as no other art form can. In the present tense. It is the only art form where the act of creation is occurring at the moment the actor creates it. The only one. In dance, for instance, it is trying to duplicate exactly what was done the night before. It is trying to create a perfection. In the theatre we are not as interested in perfection. We're trying to be truly and totally alive. And yes, we're trying to be the same as we were last night, but not really. It's more important to be alive than to be the same.[1]

It is interesting that in Circle Rep's development as a company, there has been such a strong parallel with the Group Theatre of the thirties. The CRC developed at a particularly difficult historical period just as the Group Theatre developed out of a similarly difficult period and stood against it with the same ideological intensity. The CRC's relationship to the sixties with its rebellious anti-war, anti-establishment spirit, paralleled the intensity of the Group Theatre's strong relationship to the hard times of the Great Depression, but with different results. The Group Theatre was actively looking to change the political establishment of its day with such plays as Clifford Odets' Waiting For Lefty and Paradise Lost, for example. Circle Rep, on the other hand, though participating in Civil Rights and anti-War demonstrations, was basically apolitical in its play

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[1] Ibid.

content from the very start. Mason does not believe in the Brechtian didacticism the Group Theatre's ideology represented.

> I have always believed that the artist should steer clear of seeking mere political solutions to problems inherent in the human condition, and I still believe that the theatre is not the most effective way to instigate activity or sponsor political theory. Essays, demonstrations, marches, speeches, voting -- these are more direct means of achieving action in the political arena for policies that address the needs of our society. When the artist turns to politics, he or she is often being used to promote the limited aims of propaganda.[1]

Even though they seem like two ideological extremes, the Group Theatre and the Circle Repertory Company had developed during highly profiled sociologically and politically chaotic times. Both theatre companies had survived well and done something to become cohesive forces during these very stressful times. The lure of simple answers compels the question: do the times create the force? Did the particular forces of the thirties or the sixties respectively create the environments in which the Group Theatre and the Circle Rep could succeed?

Although social and political forces are always present and play a major factor in determining goals and directions, it does not appear likely that these forces alone were enough to create outstanding theatre companies. There were other theatres during the thirties that tried but did not succeed in surviving just as there were many theatres and theatrical communes that started during the sixties with similar bursts of enthusiasm that were forced to terminate their operations. In addition, there were others, such as the Living Theatre, which flourished during the fifties, that already had a longevity factor playing in its

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[1] Marshall W. Mason, "Observations From The Sabbatical," Circle Repertory Company, Digest of Company Meeting, 9/10/84, p.1

favor and still wound up closing during the sixties

As the years passed, the sentiments and issues of the sixties cooled considerably until, by the eighties, there was a marked conservatism in the air that would no longer tolerate the passions of an anti-war generation. Once again, theatre had slid more firmly into the realm of entertainment than political forum and once again, Circle Rep's luck had worked remarkably in its favor. One of the reasons Circle Rep has lasted so long is that it has always tried to deal with social issues in terms of their human realities rather than their political content or sociological implications; doing so is a very humanist concept that is applicable to any age.

In terms of being a true theatre--what Harold Clurman himself had called the philosophical attitude and "Idea" of a theatre-[1]-humanism represented the philosophical thrust accurately for Circle Rep, both in the beginning and in the eighties. In a sense it was always a conscious factor in that content and style were so intimately related. As Mason says:

> I thought of it more as style, I suppose, because I'm interested in real human beings. I celebrate the theatre in particular because I think it's the art form in which we can best understand the workings of the human spirit through human behavior. Particularly in relation to the problems of theenvironment in the sense that there is great focus on the human being. That leads one philosophically to the importance of being human. A kind of humanism sociologically speaking.[2]

But as is observed in his notes from his sabbatical, Mason had begun to

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[1]Clurman, The Naked Image, p. 149.

[2]Mason interview.

question whether what was a very genuine impulse and a unified approach, both philosophically and esthetically, had not over the years drifted away from the humanitarian content to a kind of easy acceptance of style as a substitute.

> . . . it is the duty of dramatic art to hold "the mirror up to nature; to show the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure." I am concerned that it is very difficult -- particularly with the success we have enjoyed over the years -- to avoid becoming complacent with the depth of our concern about human problems. Neither the actor nor the playwright should attempt to prescribe solutions for the complex problems facing our world, but it is our duty never to avert responsibility of investigating, portraying and dramatizing those problems. In other words, we must guard against the temptation to elevate style over content.[1]

Mason is certain that the new wave for the future of Circle Rep will be content over style without resorting to political thrusts as Clurman's theatre did.

> I don't see political solutions to human conditions as being very practical. As such, I think the theatre is the wrong place to explore political concepts.[2]

Even though political concepts have been explored in the theatre throughout history, such exploration does not interest Mason.. What arouses Mason's interest and sense of responsibility are the plays that raise questions of concern and value in terms of the human experience--plays that delve deeply and ask tough questions that do not necessarily have answers. This tendency, along with the emphasis on the ensemble and on the actors is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Circle. It is more than possible that one of the reasons they have survived for fifteen years is that they are not political in content. The Group Theatre became too political and dissipated; this is not to suggest that that

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

was why the Group Theatre dissolved but the time did come when their voice was no longer the voice of the depressed times. The Living Theatre became too politically and socially controversial; they self-destructed by creating too much political controversy to be permitted to continue functioning unharrassed by political considerations. When a theatre identifies too much with any one particular point of view their longevity and very existence become seriously jeopardized. Mason's humanistic approach, on the other hand, includes a multiplicity of viewpoints thereby cloaking itself in a universality that encourages longevity. It is one of the reasons why the company survived in a difficult world that discourages artistic staying power. Certainly, part of their survivability factor is their ability to attract funding, but a good part of their survivability is the ideological implications behind much of their work.

Interestingly, most of Circle Rep's plays are not about New York. The plays are not about life on the upper East Side, or what it is like to be single in New York, or suddenly have a building convert to co-op leaving one with the decision to either buy or be evicted. It does not deal with New York issues or New York life as, for example, the New York Yiddish Theatre did in its heyday. Mostly, Yiddish Theatre put on plays about Yiddish life in New York City in its playhouse on Second Avenue.[2] Circle Rep was not even conceived or created by New Yorkers. Maybe what was needed to create it as well as sustain it was the psychological undercurrent of wide-eyed innocents coming into the city to conquer the town. It

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Now the Entermedia Theatre on Second Avenue and 12th Street.

takes courage to leave home - to leave one's background - to leave all that is familiar, whether happy or not, and on top of such wrenching adjustments, to do it literally on a shoestring. It also takes a tremendous desire and hunger for greater things. It is reminiscent of the immigrants who left their homelands to come to a new land and start afresh with nothing but a promise of better things and their own great needs to sustain them through the hardships. No matter how dispossessed, the backgrounds are always retained under the surface of new sophistications. Dealing mostly with what they knew personally, the founders of CRC brought much of their mid-America style with them--not a style superimposed over a New York setting, but a style complete with its own regional flavors kept intact. It obviously appealed, even to people in New York.

There is always a different cycle and type of play that the public and artist want to see at any one given time. A great deal is a reflection of the times, giving credence to the oft stated precept that art reflects life. Sometimes it might take a long time for art to raise the banner of consciousness; sometimes it precedes all of the variables that serve as catalysts. It is a basic contention that not only is art concerned with lofty ideas but it also reflects the concerns of average people. However, there can be an inherent criticism in this approach of American lyricalism as practiced by Circle Rep: it can be argued that much of it is *too* exclusively concerned with interpersonal relationships, so much so that it does not seem to handle the big tragic themes or the great issues of the day. And yet, Circle Rep has always dealt with plays about real people and real issues that intimately address contemporary times. The only difference perhaps, is that it is directed toward the human and personal side of these issues.

To illuminate this point, let us take the example of William Hoffman's As Is,

under the direction of Marshall Mason.[1] In As Is, Hoffman and Mason were not dealing with the issue of AIDS as a negative social force; nor were they dealing with the fact that homosexuals have been the primary targets of the syndrome; or that there has been a decided lack of public and political support for research. They were not dealing with any of the burning issues that surround such a horrific syndrome. As Is is a very present-tense play that offers no solutions; instead it focuses on a human need - which is, how is death to be dealt with, whether it comes from the bubonic plague as in the 14th century, or the AIDS epidemic which can be correlated as the much smaller, though rapidly increasing, present-day plague. As Is deals with the human issues involved with the sudden recognition of a terminal illness; the impact, the horror, how two lovers deal with the realization that death will soon take one away. It is a story of conditional love turned unconditional when the finality of death makes all other personal considerations diminish to the point of obscurity by comparison.

It is typical of Circle Rep to let others fight the sociological battles. They do not adhere to Brechtian didacticism in their approach to theatre. They are more interested in what the disease means in basic human terms. In such a way, the issue of facing death can be universally applied to any disease and any situation in which two people, whether they be homosexual, heterosexual, married, lovers, relatives, or simply friends, are faced with the painful prospects of terminal separation, and how they must come to terms with and deal with these prospects. As Mason says,

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[1]It should be noted that William Hoffman who wrote As Is, produced in 1985 also wrote Spring Play and has been a resident playwright since the company's beginnings. The creation of As Is was very much a product of the "Circle idea."

> Those terribly traumatic times focused on the human dilemma of dealing with our own mortality. I think it's a very important and human play and that we should be doing plays that arouse our strengths and values as human beings and also the limitations and fears that we share.[1]

The next step in Mason's vision of theatre is to translate the exploration of the human condition into the exploration of tragedy itself.

> I think until we really take on that kind of obligation, our contemporary American theatre will not reach the heights of tragedy that Shakespeare did. When Shakespeare says, "To be or not to be," it really takes on suicide on a basic level. You read those words and you say, "God, somebody else has experienced exactly and put into words what I know to be the case. Or even more profoundly, in a different sense, Claudio is sentenced to die in Measure For Measure. It is not of his own volition that he is to die and his sister is trying to convince him that it will be all right. And he says, "Aye but to die and go we know not where." In a sense, it's the same thought as in Hamlet. But it's a cry of agony and a real fear that Shakespeare really encountered, took on, and immortalized in words for us. Until we can squarely face those kinds of issues, we're not going to create real tragedy and great drama in that sense. I think that's the challenge of the future. That's what we've really got to come to.[2]

Mason emphasizes here again that theatre should dramatize societal problems without necessarily offering solutions. It is a possibility that one of the reasons we do not have much "serious" drama is because we cannot face the issue of our own mortality. Mason does not believe that playwrights are exploring human mortality adequately. Even acting performances are not fully exploring that reality. All seem to be too easily satisfied to dig just so far and no further. There is, thus, an avoidance of the genuinely heroic or tragic.

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[1] Mason interview.

[2] Ibid.

> It strikes me that the real drama that is happening around us--the shooting of Indira Gandhi, for example--is far greater than anything that is happening on the stage. Are we holding a mirror up to nature? How can we enlarge ourselves enough as artists and take on the gigantic dramas that are around us? I don't know that there is an answer to the world nuclear problem or the nuclear confrontation that is going on between the United States and Russia. Trying to deal with the nuclear issue is a serious political problem. Does it belong in theatre at all? Probably not in the sense that we do not have the answers. But I think Angels Fall very successfully, in a comic way, gives us the environment against which human lives are lived out. Big issues which are almost beyond our control. Nevertheless our choices in day-to-day matters are made in view of the fact that Reagan is going to be President for another four years, or in view of what is happening every day in Nicaragua. Every day it's something new and it's something for us to react to, and it's something in terms of our moral choices. And that's what the focus of Angels Fall is. [1]

Mason would be the first to admit that the audiences were less than completely fulfilled by Angels Fall because they were concerned with a larger issue than Lanford Wilson was prepared to deal with at the time, that issue being the fundamental question: what can the individual do about these enormous forces around him? Mason uses the example of King Lear to press his point: King Lear is destroyed by the forces around him. He is on the heath with thunder and lightening surrounding him saying, "Blow winds. Crack your cheeks. Rage. Blow." It is the tragic height of man flailing against the imponderables that were not completely addressed in Angels fall.

> I'm not criticizing the lack of content. Playwrights like Wilson are doing what we should all be doing more of. It's a sense of responsibilty for ourselves, with the full knowledge that theatre cannot be performed in isolation and the equal security in knowing that an audience will always respond to great theatre. In a fundamental sense, great theatre is a

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[1] Ibid.

religious event.[1]

There is little doubt that the plays presented have been influenced by the environment and by their relationship to it. The "environment" has been how the outside has impinged upon them. Now the call to content is a way of impinging on the world outside of theatre. And yet it is nothing new. The call to content, so prominent in the eighties, is a reaffirmation of past beliefs. It is an old story that can be traced back to Mason's formative teen years and to the original Circle Rep concept of the theatre. The objectives of the actor/artists were to be prepared well enough to perform the "great theatre" Mason discusses.

> I don't want the call to content to be misunderstood as a call to politics but I do think that that was the thing that Clurman's theatre had that was very, very important. It had a purpose for being which for its time shocked and rejuvenated and shook up the art and made it address the social reality of the day. Maybe we look back on it now and find it a little dated. To me, that theatre got too political which was a limiting factor. It may be that the MAT, as a result of the Revolution stopped the potential growth with Chekhov. He was a very great writer. No other writers really came out of the MAT. Of course how many Chekhov's will you have at any given time, and how many Lanford Wilson's will you have at any given time either? I think what we have in common with the Group and the MAT is the Stanislavsky tradition. The Actors Studio was really kind of an abberation; it veered off in one direction and was never fulfilled. The Group came closest to fulfilling it. Neighborhood Playhouse became a school. Clurman became a critic and part-time director. Elia Kazan became the "big" director in taking forward that particular vision of theatre with its relevance to people in terms of his expertise, his ability, his talent. So you have Streetcar Named Desire or On the Waterfront in which Kazan is really at the peak of his powers in terms of human beings. There is something about the depth and honesty that Brando achieves in Streetcar and On The Waterfront which James Dean also achieves in East of Eden becoming the symbol for a whole generation. Kazan used the texture of their lives as a way of illuminating our times. Are we reaching for that kind of depth today? I don't

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[1] Ibid.

> know that we are. I think that we must. I think we have the potential.
>
> Could Bill Hurt be the spokesman for our times? I think he would be perfectly willing to be the artist of our time. I think he has a great fear of publicity, of the height, and all the nonsense that surrounds it. He wants to be an artist. He has a very pure sense of being an artist.[1]

Through the years, rather than concentrating on a message or a theme, Circle Rep has focused on the kind of artistic purity Mason has always demonstrated. It is doubtful that this focus will change. On the contrary, the National Endowment funding is going to enable the company to work on the reactualization of the original 1969 concept despite the pressures of expectations and commercialism.

In order to appreciate fully the possible future direction of the company, it is necessary briefly to reexamine its initial goals. The key to Circle Rep has always been in its attempt to create a lasting theatre by and for theatre artists. It was created in reaction to two major themes on the New York theatrical scene of the sixites: the flop/hit syndrome, and the undirected and self-destructive experimentation of Off-Off Broadway. The company started as "experimental" because it insisted upon a traditional approach in a densely untraditional Off-Off Broadway world. As was to be expected, there was success and failure within each season; the success was applauded, the failure was not only tolerated but accepted as an almost necessary part of the process.

In the light of the critical attention given to the company, Mason and Thirkield proved correct in their assessment that traditional realistic theatre--their own realism superimposed over the "experience of the now"--was

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[1]Ibid.

still eminently viable, and in fact was what the public seemed to want.

In the ever vigilant eyes of the critics, by the late seventies, Circle Rep began to have an obligation to produce new American plays. Added to this new obligation was the Rep's own internal obligation to produce a certain high quality of play. It was living up to the first obligation perhaps, but not to the second. Quality had too often been sacrificed to commerce and the courtship of critical approval.

By 1979-80 the CRC's existence was no longer in reaction to something, i.e., commerciality, but had become the very establishment it had circumvented for so long. Through Porter Van Zandt's influence, institutionalization of the theatre gave it critical standing and expanded the scope of the work. It had also helped to keep Circle Rep alive and stable. However, institutionaltization had taken the hunger away. Circle Rep ceased to experiment and grow; it merely produced more and more of the same instead of continuing to learn, develop and expand. Critical pressure would not allow experimentation on the mainstage, while stabilization led to the loss of the workshop stage in which to experiment. As has been noted, experimentation in the eighties is no longer the catchword or the name of the game as it had been in the late seventies, the greatest period of growth. The catchword became "caution." Experimentation was replaced by the PIPS which although they were called Projects-in-Progress, in actuality, were not workshops at all but had become auditions for the mainstage. Whatever the negative aspects of high exposure, critical attention and stablization had made it possible for the theatre to last so long, but now the expectations have been laid out with a new set of inflexible rules. Failure, one of the measures by which success is determined, is no longer acceptable or tolerated on any level. Even

Rob Thirkield, one of the original founders, and probably without whom the theatre would never have endured financially past the first year, was practically out of the picture after he directed the eminently worthwhile but critically unsuccessful Lulu in 1978. His absence raises an interesting question: where does the company's responsibility actually lie as "people" to "people" in a nurturing environment? Circle Rep probably would have gone the sad route of many enthusiastic but underfinanced theatrical endeavors, and been forced to close if it had not been for Thirkield's generosity. There can be no underestimating the extent of the support he gave to the group, not only in the beginning, but throughout the years.[1] And yet, Thirkield is no longer actively functioning with the company in an artistic capacity. He is still active on the Board of Directors at Circle Rep, but he has not been directly involved in Circle production since the last role Lanford Wilson wrote for him, that of the old man in The Mound Builders, a role he did not particularly like.

> I felt, oh this horrible old man. He's so cold. People who saw it thought it was wonderful. Everyone was so emotional but here was this old man who does not feel much. It was a very tough role.[2]

It is not that Thirkield has given up theatre. On the contrary, he is very active with River Arts Repertory, a new company he helped to create in Woodstock, New York.[3] It is difficult to pin down the dissatisfactions. Simply put, Thirkield has

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[1]Typical of Thirkield, it was not he who revealed the extent of his support during the hours spent with this author. In fact, he barely mentioned it. It was Mason and Wilson and several others who established the importance of Thirkield's support.

[2]Thirkield interview.

[3]River Arts Repertory Theatre is at Byrdcliffe Theatre in Woodstock, New York, former home of the American Lab Theatre.

slowly come to feel left out of the Circle Repertory Company. He essentially departed the company and never really returned, although it seems that he lost interest due to the same kind of well-articulated dissatisfactions of many of the members. It might be more accurate to say that he lost heart. After spending years in a nurturing-teaching role, personally helping many of the members over the difficult creative times, the "right to fail" as a normal part of artistic life seemed to apply to everyone but him. One of the important criteria that had been set up by Circle Rep was the right to fail as part of the growth and experimental process. However, from the time of Lulu, Thirkield was looked upon askance. This treatment of a man who had contributed so much of his energy, as well as his money, could be considered grossly unfair; he was, and is, an energetic, vital, warm and highly competent teacher as well as a very talented actor. The virtual discarding of Thirkield as an active member could be considered a tremendous human fault on the part of a company that prides itself on its supportive philosophy. Perhaps Thirkield should have received the same support and nurture in his difficult times as he had doled out throughout his extensive involvement with the company actors. But the experimental attitude that adopted the, "if we fail, we'll try again" ideology is gone, lost to the pressures of money and commerciality, as well as lost to its own success --that of being a high-profile organization whose work is put under the microscope and, endlessly, sometimes mercilessly, scrutinized by critics each of whom has his own personal set of expectations. Nevertheless, to be able to experiment and even have the right to fail is a very important part of Circle Rep's artistic credo. This in no way is similar to the absolute necessity of ridding the company of some of its lesser functioning members. Loyalty notwithstanding, the most talented

people are selected to be members of the company--those who are the most likely to contribute and develop as part of the group. It was Milan Stitt who pointed out that it is the "no matter what" aspect of company loyalty that is the general company problem regarding these matters.

> It's Marshall's taste as to who will ultimately deliver the goods and ultimately make some kind of contribution to the theatre. Marshall's deficit in that area is his inability to cut his losses with people. There are some who will never do anything, but he's really a decent man in terms of human beings and he doesn't want to hurt anyone. Cause you hurt yourself. I don't know of anyone for whom it is more painful to fire someone than it is for Marshall. It's one of the problems and it works as well as your good taste in your first selections, or your ability to say, 'this was a mistake.' On the whole, I think Marshall does about as well as one could do with what is an impossible situation.[1]

Although it is always possible that Thirkield might return, (and indeed has recently broached the subject of directing again at Circle Rep to Mason, which Mason viewed positively), it was Thirkield himself who ultimately cut his own losses with the company and chose to concentrate on River Arts Repertory in Woodstock. Personalities and diverse lifestyles may have been deeply involved in the decision as well. Thirkield is heterosexual. This orientation could have put him a little bit on the outside of the inner circle. This possible assessment is not a judgment since it would be difficult to support with evidence. However, Thirkield was one of the few interviewed who insisted that homosexuality within the company should be dealt with in any analysis of the group since it was a

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[1]Stitt, interview.

factor that often affected who was admitted into the group and who remained.[1]

One of the recurring problems with being a company is the "human" aspect involved in the day-to-day interactions of such an intimate profession. The attachments that, in essence, make the company work best are often what make the loyalties to person and company difficult to separate and detrimental to the Circle Rep process. For example, Roy London was one of the original playwrights. The Circle produced his play, In Connecticut, (1980-81 season) which turned out to be a critical failure. More than likely the play should not have been produced but Mason's loyalty was the determining factor in the decision to do so. One of Porter Van Zandt's functions when he was first brought into the company as General Manager, was to be ruthless and rid the company of the accumulating dead wood that had been hanging on since it was commonly known within the company that Mason had difficulty doing so.. (According to inside sources, much of it has slowly returned like driftwood; it is difficult to break up the "family.")

A good argument can be made against what some anonymously refer to as the "pretend, phoney, family stuff." Perhaps even Mason fools himself when he says there is a common artistic goal. It has been said that the only time the

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[1] The Circle Rep is not a gay theatre and should not be thought of as such even though homosexuality is one important part of the theatre's lifestyle. However, since it does not seem to be any more important at Circle Rep than it is in the American theatre in general (other than that the lifestyle becomes a kind of subsidy to the arts,) and does not seem either to contribute or detract from the *quality* of Circle Rep's work, it is not dealt with as an issue in this work .

company members really mesh together is the important time when they are working on a show. At the Circle Rep there is a tendency to believe that it is important to the creative process for everyone to feel a beloved part of the "family." As one writer who disagreed says,

> I don't think I should feel a part of the family. I don't think they should either. It's our work. We work together to accomplish it. To a degree the socializing and buying houses next to each other in Sag Harbor may contribute to it but it's not an important part of it. They used to always have Christmas together with a big Christmas party. Marshall would be Santa Claus. But that's all just gilding. If you need it, it's nice. Some people do need it and that's fine. That's good. But it's not what makes a company work. It's super-talented people moving, even *abrasively* with each other towards the goal of putting on the best possible production. That's what makes a company work.[1]

Under the intensely personal currents of involvement, Marshall Mason and Rob Thirkield went about creating one of the most important Off-Broadway theatres of the past fifteen years and although they succeeded in creating a stable institution that can grow, and indeed has demonstrated that it has grown almost organically, there was much to be sacrificed during expansion that was not expected. The sacrifice was sometimes artistic quality and often the freedom to experiment, the two most fundamental qualities for which the company was originally formed in order *not* to ever have to sacrifice.

At first, the critical reception was very positive and supportive—"a chief provider of American plays"[2]—"real plays about real people"[3]—"one of our best

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[1]Prefers to remain anonymous.

[2]Peter Buckley, "Circle Repertory Theatre - A regional theatre that's generating national excitement," Horizon, May, 1980.

[3]Mel Gussow, "Suddenly Real Plays About Real People," The New York Times, 5/12/74.

theatres."[1] Unfortunately, the theatre was in a constant waltz with the critics in order to remain fiscally solvent. Critical expectations remained high and demanding, but the critics were not getting what they wanted. The theatre began to spread itself too thin in an attempt to gain approval. Mason departed on a two year sabbatical at the end of 1982, following a season of high activity and little commercial success. Although it has been suggested that Mason left because of mounting personal and emotional problems, (indeed, his sabbatical was even privately construed by some as a way of "easing" him out of the company,) it is more likely that Mason left in order to regroup, rethink and reassess the entire process of the Circle Idea. He obviously returned in 1984 refreshed, full of vigor and ready to tackle the company problems with reaffirmation of his original concepts. This time he would have to do it alone-- Rob Thirkield was pretty much out of the active picture--and in a totally different social environment.

One of the differences between the sixties when it all started, and the eightie, is the kind of people who are attracted to New York. In the sixties there were many who could "make do" on the fringes, earning a living in marginal kinds of ways (e.g., passing out pamphlets, posing for artists, etc.) Part of the survivability was the youth factor. Every age has its young people who "make do" until they grow older and say, "I want more." Increasingly now, there seem to be fewer people who come to New York with the attitude that "making do" is sufficient. They are the mid-twenties to mid-thirties generation of Yuppies. They make their living by cleverly figuring out the eighties system and doing

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[1] Jeremy Gerard, "Will Success Spoil Circle Rep?" The New York Times, 3/14/82.

something that the system recognizes and rewards. In many ways that is exactly what the *new* Circle Rep is doing. Circle Rep began as something very distinctive. It went through a long period of adolescence when it was more than willing to "make do." The inchoate organization--the Caffe' Cino with its togetherness, ensemble spirit, experimenting, smoking marijuana with the audience-- was gone now, transformed into something that could be easily recognized by a society geared to the establishment; now they could almost be called the Yuppie of the theatre. Circle Rep's relation to the larger world has changed. Its way of making money and sustaining itself has changed. It is no longer part of the makeshift, make-do, ad-hoc, fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants, hand-to-mouth times of the romantic Cino days. Circle Rep is definitely part of the mainstream now and increasingly looking to the establishment for continued funding as its natural due. It has become a very different kind of financial survivor now. It is not only that money is essential in order to remain in the business of theatre but the change is increasingly obvious in the manner in which they figure out how to obtain it. The company has demonstrated the ability to transform itself into something that can appeal to whoever has the money.

In essence, what Mason and Thirkield developed with Berezin and Wilson over the years was tantamount to an unacknowledged mini-national theatre. These are unsubsidized, underfinanced American theatres, sometimes resident, often regional, which on their own, ideologically assume the national responsibility for new American drama as well as the preservation of the old. Circle Rep has become one of the many unacknowledged mini-national theatres

in the country which have existed partially on private funding and could include, for example, such theatres as the Arena Stage in Washington, the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, the Alley Theatre in Houston, the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco and the Actors' Workshop, also in San Francisco. The Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center was the closest thing to a national theatre in New York City during the sixites. One of their mistakes was that they began operations with overt expectations of becoming *the* national theatre.[1]

Mason has always had the desire for Circle Rep to become a national theatre. From the very beginning it has been an articulated dream, if not an actual goal, to have Circle Rep earn the right through the recognition of its excellence, to be declared one of the national theatres in the United States. To be a national theatre would mean to be guaranteed a continuing yearly government subsidy (federal, state, city, or a combination) with the lessening of financial pressures such subsidies guarantee. The arts, in the truest sense of the word, have to be patronized; they usually cannot exist for very long otherwise. But the United States population is not very homogeneous. Different theatre appeals to different people--e.g., urbanites, villagers, out-of-towners--without even touching upon the many layers of diversity that ethnicity stimulates. Such diversity makes it questionable whether there can be a public national theatre at all, despite, perhaps, the artistic need for one. Then again, since a national theatre does not have to support itself, it does not have to please the largest audience in order to remain solvent. However, the problem is not what a

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[1] See discussion on p. 132 of this text.

national theatre should be, should produce, or should respresent. The problem is that everyone usually thinks in terms of "a" national theatre. Because of that, there is hardly any agreement as to what a national theatre should be or what kinds of works should be presented. But if the idea of a national theatre were spread out across the land representing different regional elements and different creative aspects of this country, it would be a different story. The ideal would be that the national theatres of America would be located in the great urban centers--e.g. New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, Houston, Chicago, Atlanta--each subsidized by city, state and federal monies to spread the growing abundance of American work that should be preserved and toured throughout the nation and throughout the world as the culturally rich expressions of a multi-faceted nation. It is into this ideal that Circle Rep wants to fit as one of America's national theatres.

There cannot be only one national theatre in America just as there is not only one in England or France or Germany,[1] for example, even though they are small countries compared to the expanse of the United States, with more nationally homogeneous concerns and attitudes than the United States. London alone has three subsidized theatres: The National Theatre of Great Britain, the Royal Shakespeare Co. and the English Stage Company. (often referred to as the Royal Court.) France boasts The Comedie Francais, (Theatre de France) and The Theatre National Populaire among others. In Germany, although the most theatrically active centers are in Berlin, Munich and Hamburg, virtually every town of any size has a state subsidized theatre. Italy has eight major resident

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[1]Using the criteria of government subsidy to qualify as a national theatre.

national theatres in such cities as Milan, Genoa and Turin. In Moscow, there are three well known nationally subsidized theatres, ranging in concerns from the museum-like Moscow Art Theatre with its heavy emphasis on preservation and scenic design to the less stylized Contemporary Theatre and the Moscow Theatre of Drama and Comedy (Taganka). In Czechoslovakia, besides the Prague National Theatre, the government created the State Theatre in 1962, a studio designed specifically to assist experimental groups.

As noted, in the United States there are too many major regional forces and too much fundamental diversity to support one theatrical view. However, it does not really matter. Our theatre is still young as Harold Clurman so often pointed out,

> If it is correct to speak of our theatre as having been "born" forty-five years ago, we must agree that compared to the French neo-classical stages, the recently founded British National Theatre, our theatre is in its infancy.[1]

It is not surprising that America is still in its theatrical infancy since so much of its early sociology was determined by the Puritan ethic and theatre was looked upon as sinful by the Puritans. Thus, the rich European legacy of theatre was slow in developing in America. There is, therefore, not as rich a dramatic literature in America as in Europe. As Clurman noted:

> Countries which have long theatrical histories may maintain theatres especially designed to preserve those traditions. This is the chief purpose of the Comedie Francaise, and to some extent this was and is the purpose of the Old Vic and of the Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-on-Avon. It is largely true of the various state or municipal theatres in Germany. Most European countries have produced dramatic literatures rich

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[1]Clurman, p. 164.

enough to sustain such theatres over the years.
America has not.[1]

It might still be early in its theatrical evolution for the United States to have a national theatre at all, particularly if it follows the snail-like pattern of its English predecessor. Despite a rich theatrical heritage in England which spanned centuries, it was not until after World War II, in the late forties, that Parliament finally approved funding for a National Theatre of Great Britain. Even so, it was not implemented until 1963 when "the Old Vic company was dissolved and its building assigned to the new troupe.[2] With Laurence Olivier as Artistic Director to a company of 51, and Kenneth Tynan as Literary Advisor, they presented an eclectic choice of plays and production styles; Great Britain finally had its national theatres. America has yet to follow.

Circle Rep now has behind it the NEA Ensemble Grant which represents a respite from the financial concerns that plague all theatre in the nation. The goals five years into the future have not been articulated. The five-year grant will culminate the twenty years Mason has always said it would take to build a great theatre company. At the end of this period, if the work proves to be substantial enough, they will more than likely want to continue in the ensemble manner with a revolving repertory system of performing as described. However, it will be as impossible for Circle Rep to sustain itself financially through repertory without continued financing--not a uniquely American problem. The National Theatre in Great Britain, for example, works in repertory as does the Royal Shakespeare Company. They are competitive and richly praised, being

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[1]Clurman, p. 149.

[2]Brockett, p. 590.

called from "good," by Harold Clurman[1] (who reviewed their productions as works of art "rather than as a series of great shows," [2]) to "ambitious, well-financed, idealistic and talent-laden,"[3] by Martin Gottfried. But it is the high degree of government subsidy, and only that, that keeps both companies fiscally intact. As drama critic, Stanley Kauffmann, points out,

> There is no question as to whether repertory can pay its way in Great Britain: it can't. Both of these companies and others (like the rep theatres of the continent) are kept going by government subsidy far beyond anything the United States has ever given to the theatre. Still, they have had considerable public support and have, additionally, become tourist attractions.[4]

American national theatres would need just as much financial support as their European counterparts as well as critical encouragement. But who will decide which companies should be so designated? There is a kind of egalitarian, commercial attitude in this country which permits the market to decide who will survive and who will succumb. There is no authority vested in a group or organization that will determine which companies might be one of a series of representative national theatres. Using England again as an example, the establishment may decide the national concerns, the establishment consisting perhaps of a combination of people who have been through the private school system, a contingent of Oxford dons, Shakespearean scholars and politicians

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[1]Clurman, The Naked Image, p. 187.

[2]Ibid, p. 193.

[3]Martin Gottfried, Opening Nights--Theatre Criticism of the Sixties, (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons,1969,) p. 275.

[4]Stanley Kauffmann, Persons of the Drama--Theatre Criticism and Comment (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976,) p. 358.

operating in a class system defined by heritage and education. In America it is the critics who would have to declare a company's worth in order for the Federal government to subsidize continued work since everyone is going to want to be declared a national theatre.

An American national theatre would have to do American "classics," not European classics, as , for example, the RSC supports the work of Shakespeare as only they can and the Comedie Francaise does similar preservation of Moliere. There is no American national theatre that preserves that which is best about American drama even though, as Clurman says, " . . . there are more American plays worth revival than we suppose."[1] But in our disposable society, many fine plays are given a six-week run and then they disappear. They are not financially lucrative enough to be performed in commercial theatre and therefore not available to the public. Few individuals, groups, or organizations, whether public or private, are doing anything tangible to make sure these plays are kept available let alone preserved. Perhaps one of the points of the NEA grants was to encourage American theatre groups to try to build a network of national theatres across the country. Perhaps it is also a way of building and training audiences around the country; the public has to be taught to appreciate plays other than those of Neil Simon. This comment is not meant snidely; Simon is a prolific genius in his own way--the Moliere of his day who has mastered the American well-made play as few others have. But since we are still in the process of building up a theatrical heritage, an American national theatre would also have to concentrate heavily on new drama and the new artist. This kind of

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[1]Clurman, p. 149.

concentration takes time and money and most of all, patience, although it is the money that will say it all.

To some extent the bestowal of the grant monies is political. The National Endowment itself is open to congressional pressures which leads many to cynically feel that federal money could never create a national theatre--that the politics and special interests would create too much of a problem--that the money has to be distributed through a maze of backtrading behind the scenes. Is NEA giving more to the East or the SouthWest? Is the South being cheated of its fair share, "fair" implying equality in accounts above quality in product. The regional special interests in such arguments could be one of the reasons America does not have a national theatre; all of the private-interest considerations make the nature of distribution difficult to cope with. But problems are inherent in any system that involves federal monies to the arts, all of which are starving for recognition. Taking a cue from Europe, one can see that the concept *can* be made to work despite problems. In France, for example, there was much dissatisfaction with the way the government was distributing subsidy to the many theatrical factions in state theatres and cultural centers--most particularly about what was considered the state's arbitrary assignment of directors and subsidies. Problems were also rampant in Germany, where in West Germany alone there are more than 200 state subsidized theatres. In Germany, one of the major problems was the unlimited power to make decisions given to *intendanten*, the state appointed theatre managers.[1] Nevertheless, for better or worse, the system *does* work. It is doubtful that

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[1] Brockett, pp. 583-4.

anyone in Europe would ever wish to return to a box-office support system.

It is fear of these kinds of problems alongside of all the political pressures that lead some to believe that only private money can truly subsidize the arts with freedom. Too much state involvement goes against Circle Rep's original concept of a theatre of "artists for artists" which was carefully created in buffer-reaction to the dismissal of Whitehead and Kazan from the Repertory Theatre of the Lincoln Center.[1] But only when theatre is federally funded will a national theatre truly work, taking it out of the realm of the entertainment market alone, and putting it squarely within the scope of art for arts sake. However, since there is no national theatre in America as yet, companies like Circle Rep still have to make it mostly on their own and have to institutionalize in order to do so.

We have already discussed what it means to be a company; it does not have so much to do with success or failure as it has to do with sociological factors. Does it take one genius to hold it together? It is doubtful than Lanford Wilson would be able to hold the company together; he is a writer interested in his own concerns. Is it that a vision is needed--one person like Mason to keep making it real--to keep articulating how it can be made to work and where? One part seems to be visionary--what is the idea or ideal? The other part is pragmatic--how can it be made to work? How important is the organizational influence of someone like Porter Van Zandt who insists that only by

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[1] Refer back to p. 132.

institutionalizing the ideals can they be protected. Does it have to do with size - with location? All of these are intimate factors that have to do with what it means to be a company. It does not have to do only with why Circle Rep survived for fifteen years because those responsible could have been successful and then decided to abandon it and go to something else as so many in the Group Theatre had done. Circle Rep has been an ongoing organism for a long time and that in itself is a distinction; but sociological factors, or the times, or the particular set of circumstances that played into the creation of the company notwithstanding, it is the particular combination of *people* that made it all possible. The individual strengths of the four founders when blended together created a unified strength for the theatre. As Wilson says:

> It's difficult to say where it would be without any one of us because we *are* the company. It's not as though we were hired. It's me and Marshall and Tanya and Rob. Marshall has always taken care of the actors' growth, and Tanya the truth, and me the writing and Rob the teaching. It's Marshall's eye for physical details that gives us that incredibly professional, detailed finished look that we have.[1]

But each would agree that it is Mason who has been the greatest strength behind the theatre. Throughout the years he has never altered his vision even though he has grown and matured and accepted the establishment. His basic fundamental vision of what he wants to do, where he wants to go, what it all means has never changed. A company has to have a certain kind of vision that is strong and permeating. If Marshall Mason were to leave Circle Rep tomorrow for good, and the company advertised in The New York Times for a new Artistic Director, Circle Rep would continue its operations as an institution. There is little

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[1]Wilson interview.

doubt of that. It is an institution that has the ability to support a season and produce plays on a regular basis. But it would not be the same place. A new director would come in with his own set of ideas, with his own vision, his own preference for plays, his own style of directing. It would include different kinds of people. It might still be a successful company but a different one. The soul of Circle Rep has always been and still is Marshall Mason.

And yet, even so, it has been more than one person. The ideas grow and take on a separate life of their own beyond those who dream them until they stand on their own. It looks at though Circle Rep will continue to thrive and still has a long way to go. But there are many danger signals that are beginning to flash. For example, the company could be seen as moving backwards to original concerns rather than moving forward no matter how rationales may be applied. The loss of Rob Thirkield's experimental nature can be keenly felt in an underlying status quo and stodginess that creeps into play selection at times. The greatest value and impact of the company has been the discovery of all the new plays. Although this will continue, at least for a while, there is a genuine danger in cutting back the Literary Department which essentially handles the research and development of the future. The cutbacks in this department in particular, is a concern that troubles many within the company as well as outside. Peter Buckley, in a letter to this author, addressed this very issue without being aware of how jeopardized the Literary Department actually was.

> The true impact of a company such as the Circle Rep is that it does concern itself with new plays, something on the order of 500 a year, that are seriously read - often out loud and in staged readings - and evaluated, and passed on. Its opinions are sought and respected; it encourages and suggests, even when it is not further involved: and it does produce - albeit sometimes badly - new works that might otherwise be lost.

> Without companies such as the Circle Rep - and there are dozens of them around the country that must not be discounted - the American theatre would be in even worse shape than it is, and it's in pretty bad shape as far as new works. But then why should a writer work for a year on a play for $5,000, when he/she can do a movie-of-the-week for $50,000? Because that same writer can, and does, do a couple of movie-of-the-weeks for the bucks and then returns to Off Broadway (or to the regionals) with that subsidy and to a place like the Circle Rep (or Playwrights Horizons or the Manhattan Theatre Club or the Arena Stage or the ART) for the play. But without that place to place the play he/she might very well stay in the mire of television. Without these companies, all of which are underfunded, the spoken word would really disappear; now, it's only in temporary trouble.
>
> We do, of course, need a national repertory theatre of the highest quality - and with the highest budget - based in Manhattan (and there can be no argument on that)[1] but with touring companies throughout the country. Until we finally get that, we're still theatrical novices. But as for now, the Philstines are hammering at the gate, but so far we've held them at bay, and it's companies like Circle Rep - perhaps the leading American company at Philsitine beating-back - that have kept us slightly civilized. Now, however, it is time to move forward.[2]

And move forward the Circle Rep has through the necessary heavy institutionalization of its dreams. The institutionalization process had been going on since 1974 but had really began in earnest in 1978-79 when Porter Van Zandt brought in the specialists to head the various departments. It was at that point--the ten year mark--that Mason, Thirkield, Wilson and Berezin started to be relieved of the actual running of the theatre. Now the major issue has become how to support the company's operations. As Richard Frankel says:

> Right now, in terms of transitions, we are in the middle of what is a ten year process of institutionalization. I would think that in another five years, we will either be an organization that will survive the people who started it, or it will be closed. That is my guess. That process is going to take a

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[1] I have already made my argument on this issue.

[2] Buckley letter.

> full ten years. Right now, we have the structure, the machine that can produce plays--crank them out. We can produce four, five or six at a time here. There are many plans and project for the future but we don't have the financial resources to support it at this point. Either we're going to build a financial structure to support it or we're not.[1]

Circle Rep may survive the people who started it. More than likely it should and will. However, there is little doubt that without Marshall Mason, it would be a decidedly different place. There are few who are involved with the company who would disagree. Tanya Berezin, so intimately involved with the entire operation from its embryonic state on, has always felt that the Circle Rep *was* Marshall Mason.

> Circle Rep as an institution, as a theatre, is Marshall. It was his vision. And the thing I've always admired most about Marshall, and the thing that has the greatest effect on the theatre, is that not only does he have convictions, but he has the courage of his convictions. He always goes back to his relationship to the work. And all decisions eventually are made from what we set out to do. So that he has never lost his artistic impulse. And I think he has kept it alive. And as much as he likes success, and he does as much as anybody else--he will go anywhere to accept an award--I have never seen him truly compromise himself and his integrity to what he believes is true to the art of the theatre. He's unswerving. We've all made mistakes here and there, but he's unswerving.[2]

From the General Manager to the most eager intern, everyone seemed to agree.

In Mason's "Observations From The Sabbatical," he wrote:

> I remind myself that when we started the Circle Rep, I predicted that it would require 20 years to build a great theatre. I recommit myself to the 20 years it will have taken.[3]

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[1] Frankel interview.

[2] Berezin interview.

[3] Mason interview.

In the theatre that Mason knew in the late fifties when he first came to New York, Elia Kazan had been his model.

> Kazan probed deeply into the human experience and revealed things to me through Brando's and Dean's acting and the Actors Studio and the Stanislavski approach. They were the lifelines that I had towards accomplishing the kinds of goals that I had in mind, but the theatre that I saw around me was a theatre that was quite external and superficial and sentimental. I would put in that category, Inge, the preachiness of Odets, the glibness of Broadway comedy at that point--Under The Yum Yum Tree and The Moon Is Blue are my favorite targets. I wouldn't be in the theatre if that's what I would have to do. But these goals about illuminating humanity, lofty as they are...how do you do that? I felt that maybe that's where I could make my contribution. I'm still struggling with that. How do I put into words the principles that I have learned about directing so that others may use them. I believe that is a major duty--to find that out. In the meantime, for a while, we're going back to where we started. For a while my main contribution was in directing. I now feel it's going to be in creating a theatre that will allow many other artists to make similar kinds of contributions. So, I guess to answer the question now--simplistic as it is--I want to leave the theatre a better place than I found it. I want it to be a deeper place, a truer place, a more entertaining place and a more celebrated place than when I found it. I'm spending my life doing that.[1]

The most astonishing thing is that Mason has never changed. So many people start off in wonderful directions and then for whatever reason--ordinary need, greed, artistic changes, commercial considerations--they deviate. Perhaps the principles were never that strong to begin with or their goals were never that clear in their minds, or the idealism dissipated through the difficulties of simply living. Mason has grown but he has never changed; this is meant most seriously and most kindly. The most difficult courses to stay on are the idealistic

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[1] Mason interview.

ones. Mason has made it very clear that he has a profound conviction that idealism is worthless unless it becomes action.

> Once you begin to accomplish your ideals in terms of your day-to-day life and the things that you do, it doesn't do any good to believe that it's harmful to kill people if you don't do something about it. Even if it's only to vote.[1]

It almost seems as though the first portion of his life was in preparation for what is coming up next. Theatre was the vehicle, the means through which he would accomplish, and directing was the "learning process" of getting to the point to be able to finally start--the past as prelude and prologue. He nods thoughtfully and says, "It's hard to know. I do feel on a new threshhold."[2]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

APPENDIX I

THE COMPANY

THE FIRST COMPANY ROSTER - 1969

FOUNDERS

Marshall W. Mason
Rob Thirkield
Lanford Wilson
Tanya Berezin

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Marshall W. Mason

MANAGING DIRECTOR

Rob Thirkield

ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR

Tanya Berezin

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Beverly Landau

COMPANY MEMBERS

Tanya Berezin
Beth Bowden
Patricia Carey
Mona Crawford
Linda Eskansas
Michael Feisenmeier
Robert Frink
Stephanie Gordon
Spalding Gray
Ellen Gurin
Carl David Jessup
Jane Lowry
Sharon Ann Maddon
Marshall W. Mason
Henry Mellor
Roddy O'Connor
Bill Oxendine
Burke Pearson
Suzanne Pred
Bob Shields
Maria Stefann
David Stekol

Tony Tenuto
Rob Thirkield
Alice Tweedie

PLAYWRIGHTS
Robert Kesser
Helen Duberstein Lipton
Matthew Silverman
David Starkweather
Doric Wilson
Lanford Wilson

COMPANY ARTIST
John Dowling

COMPANY ARCHITECT
John Deans

COMPANY COMPOSER
Alonzo Levister

THE COMPANY ROSTER AS OF 1984, THE FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY YEAR

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
Marshall W. Mason

MANAGING DIRECTOR
Richard Frankel

ACTING ARTISTIC DIRECTIOR
B. Rodney Marriott

ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
Tanya Berezin

COMPANY MEMBERS

Samatha Aitkins
Michael Ayr
Kathy Bates
Tanya Berezin
Jacqueline Brookes
Timothy Busfield
Roger Chapman
Jordan Charney
Joyce Reehling Christopher

Katherine Cortez
Lindsay Crouse
Jeff Daniels
Jack Davidson
Jake Dengel
John Dossett
Conchatta Ferrell
Neil Flanagan
Stephanie Gordon
Mari Gorman
Bruce Gray
Lindsey Ginter
Charles T. Harper
Trish Hawkins
Jo Henderson
Judd Hirsch
Jonathan Hogan
Ruby Holbrook
Michael Higgins
Laura Hughes
Barnard Hughes
William Hurt
Nancy Killmer
Swoozie Kurtz
Ken Kliban
Zane Lasky
Bobo Lewis
Robert Lu Pone
Ken Kliban
Sharon Maddon
Debra Mooney
Edward J. Moore
Burke Pearson
Lisa Pelikan
Christopher Reeve
Tony Roberts
Edward Seamon
Richard Seff
Timothy Shelton
Ben Siegler
Nancy Snyder
June Stein
Helen Stenborg
Danton Stone
Beatrice Straight
Elizabeth Sturges
Brian Tarantino
Rob Thirkield
Richard Thomas
Douglas Watson
Fritz Weaver
Jimmie Ray Weeks

Peter Weller
Patricia Wettig
Amy Wright

PLAYWRIGHTS

John Bishop
Jonathan Bolt
Julii Bovasso
Shelby Buford, Jr.
James Farrell
John Heuer
Corinne Jacker
Berillas Kerr
Jim Leonard, Jr.
Roy London
Terrence McNally
Patrick Meyers
Edward J. Moore
Claris Nelson
Marsha Norman
John Olive
Joseph Pintauro
Sam Shepard
Michael Skelly
Milan Stitt
Lanford Wilson

DIRECTORS

Neil Flanagan
Tony Giordano
Daniel Irvine
B. Rodney Marriott
Marshall W. Mason
Marshall Ogelsby
Elinor Renfield
Terry Schreiber
Rob Thirkield
Porter Van Zandt
R. Stuart White

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

John Lee Beatty - Set Designer
Norman L. Berman - Composer
Jody Boese - Stage Manager

Laura Crow - Costume designer
Chuck London -Sound Designer
Dennis Parichy - Lighting Designer
David Potts - Set Designer
Fred Reinglas - Stage manager
Jennifer von Mayrhauser - Costume Designer

APPENDIX II

SEASONS

1969-70

A Practical Ritual To Exorcise Frustration After Five Days of Rain by David Starkweather - Major Production
Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov - Major Production
Three Sisters by Anton Chekkov - Experimental Major Production

1970-71

The Doctor and The Devils by Dylan Thomas - Major Production
Princess Ivovna by Witold Gombrowicz - Major Production
Sextet (Yes) by Lanford Wilson - Workshop
Waiting For Godot by Samuel Beckett - Major Production
The Ghost Sonata by August Strindberg - Workshop
Paderewski And The Garbage Thieves by Ronald Mele - Major Production
Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller - Adaptation, Workshop
The Future Is In The Eggs by Eugene Ionesco - Major Production
The Doctor In Spite of Himself by Molière - Major Production
Time Shadows by Helen Duberstein - Workshop
Sextet (Yes) by Lanford Wilson - Film
Kit's Play by Berilla Kerr - Videotape

1971-72

Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov - Major Production
The Ghost Sonata by August Strindberg - Major Production
The Elephant In The House by Berilla Kerr - Major Production
Howie's by Richard Steele - Workshop
Denim And Rose by Richard Steele - Workshop
Time Shadows by Helen Duberstein - Major Production

The Empire Builders by Boris Vian - Workshop
Danny 405 by Conchatta Ferrell - Workshop
Ludlow Fair by Lanford Wilson - Workshop

1972-73

Three New Plays by Lanford Wilson - Major Production
A Road Where The Wolves Run by Claris Nelson - Major Production
Canvas by David Roszkowski - Workshop
The Hot 1 Baltimore by Lanford Wilson - Major Production

Icarus Nine by Bruce Serlen - Workshop
Perace At Hand by Richard Wolf - Workshop
Great Jones Street by Richard Serlen - Workshop
When We Dead Awaken by Henrik Ibsen - Major Production
Offending the Audience by Peter Handke - Workshop
The Tragedy of Thomas Andros by Ron Wilcox - Major Production
Mrs. Tydings Mason-Dixon Medicine Man by John Heuer - Workshop
Smith Here by Ed Greenburg - Workshop
Snow Angel by Lewis John Carlino - Workshop
When You comin' Back, Red Ryder? by Mark Medoff - Workshop

1973-74

When You comin' Back, Red Ryder? by Mark Medoff - Major Production
Straights of Massina by David Starkweather - Workshop
Prodigal by Richard Lortz - Major Production
The Amazing Activity of Charlie Contrare And the Ninety-Eighth Street Gang by Roy London - Major Production
Hothouse by Megan Terry - Major Production
Him by e.e. cummings - Major Production
The Persians by Aeschylus - Major Production
One Person by Robert Patrick - Workshop
When Everything Becomes The City's Music by Lance S. Belville - Workshop
Not Enough Rope by Elaine May - Workshop
The Summer Solstice by Doug Dyer - Workshop
Busy Dyin' by Sheila Quillen - Workshop

1974-75

Battle of Angels by Tennessee Williams - Major Production
Innocent Thoughts, Harmless Intentions by John Heuer - Workshop
Fire in The Mindhouse by Lance Mulcahy, Arnoild Borget & Dion McGregor - Workshop
St. Freud by David Roszkowski - Workshop
The Mound Builders by Lanford Wilson - Major Production
Down By The River Where The Waterlillies AreDisfigured Every Day by Julie Bovasso - Major Production
Scandalous Memories by Harvey Perr - Workshop
Afternoon Tea by Harvey Perr - Workshop
Harry Outside by Corinne Jacker - Major Production
Spring's Awakening by Frank Wedekind - Workshop
Not To Worry by A. E. Santaniello - Major Production
TheMound Builders by Lanford Wilson- Video Tape Production

1975-76

The Elephant in The House by Berilla Kerr - Revival - Major Production
The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year by John Guare - Special Event
Overruled by George Barnard Shaw - Special Event
Dancing For The Kaiser by Andrew Colmar - Major Production
Knock Knock by Jules Feiffer - Major Production
Who Killed Richard Cory? by A. R. Guerney, Jr. - Major Production
Cavern of The Jewels by John Heuer - Major Production - Children's Show
Serenading Louie by Lanford Wilson - Major Production
The Lesson Of The Master by Richard Howard - After Piece
When I Dyed My Hair in Venice by Helen Duberstein - Workshop
Solo For Two by Juliette Bowles - Workshop
The Magic Formula by Sidney Morris - Workshop
Terminal by Corinne Jacker - Workshop
Night Thoughts by Corinne Jacker - Workshop
The Confirmation by Howard Ashman - Workshop
Prague Spring by Lee Kalcheim - Special Event
Fog And Mismanagement by Jeff Wanchel - Workshop
Home Free! by Lanford Wilson - Workshop
Winners by Brian Friel - Workshop
Wildflowers by Richard Howard - After Piece
Dark Room by David Epstein - Workshop
Mrs. Murray's Farm by Roy London - Major Production
Listen, Please by Robert Abrami - After Piece

1976-77

The Farm by David Storey - Major Production
A Tribute To Lili Lamont by Arthur White - Major Production
My Life by Corinne Jacker - Major Production
The Passing of Corky Brewster by Jerry L. Crawford - After Piece
Gemini by Albert Innaurato - Major Production
For Love Or Money by Jay Jeffries & Jason McAuliffe - After Piece
Suicide in B^{b} by Sam Shepard - Play-in-Progress
Allegra by Allan Bates - Play-in-Progress
To The Land by Claris Nelson - Play-in-Progress
Exiles by James Joyce - Major Production
Fat Chances by Charlie Peters - Play-in-Progress
Cabaret/New York Times: A Review by James Tobin - After Piece
What The Babe Said by Martin Halpern - After Piece
Mrs Tydings Mason-Dixon Medicine Man by John Heuer - Play-in-Progress
Celebration Off River Street by James Tobin - Play-in-Progress
The Brixton Recovery by Jack Gilhooley - Play-in-Progress
Unsung Cole by Cole Porter & Norman Berman - Major Production

1977-78

Feedlot by Patrick Meyers - Major Production
Brontosaurus by Lanford Wilson - Late Show
Ulysses In Traction by Albert Innaurato - Major Production
Cabin 12 by John Bishop - Late Show
Lulu by Frank Wedekind - Major Production
Two From The Late Show by Lanford Wilson, John Bishop - Major Production
5th of July by Lanford Wilson - Major Production
This Living Hand by Mark Stevenson - Special Event
My Cup Ranneth Over by Robert Patrick - Late Show
Pushing 30 by Jonathan Hadary - Late Show

1978-79

Glorious Morning by Patrick Meyers - Major Production
Stargazing by Tom Cone - Late Show
In The Recovery Lounge by James Farrell - Major Production
In Three Easy Lessons by John Calene - Project-in-Progress
Total Recall by Martin Halpern - Late Show
The Runner Stumbles by Milan Stitt - Major Production
The Human Voice by Jean Cocteau - Late Show
Minnesota Moon by John Olive - Late Show
Winter Signs by John Bishop - Project-in-Progress
Winter Signs by John Bishop - Major Production
The Deserter by Norman Beim - Late Show
Perched On A Gabardine Cloud by Steven Braunstein - Project-in-Progress
Talley's Folly by Lanford Wilson - Major Production
The Poet and The Rent by David Mamet - Major Production - Children's Show
Life And/Or Death by Herb Gardner - Late Show
Van Zandt Ellis Piano Recital - Special Event
A Woman's Life In The Theatre by Rita Gardner
Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein by Marty Martin - Special Event
Buried Child by Sam Shepard - Summer Major Production
Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein by Marty Martin - Summer Major Production

1979-80

Reunion 3 Plays by David Mamet - Major Production
Mass Appeal by Bill Davis - Project-in-Progress
Some Sweet Time by Michael Cassale - Project-in-Progress
Hamlet by William Shakespeare - Major Production
Mary Stuart by Friederich von Schiller - Major Production
Threads by Jonathan Bolt - Project-in-Progress

Innocent Thoughts, Harmless Intentions by John Heuer - Major Production
Child Of The Clay Country by Marshall Ogelsby - Project-in-Progress
Back In The Race by Milan Stitt - Major Production
Spooky Lady by Barbara Baxley - Special Event
In Vienna by Roy London - Project-in-Progress
Box Office by Elinor Jones - One Act Festival
On The Side Of The Road by Gordon Dryland - One Act Festival
Diary of a Shadow Walker by Shelby Buford, Jr. - One Act Festival

1980-81

The Diviners by Jim Lenard, Jr. - Major Production
Diary of a Shadow Walker by Shelby Buford, Jr. - Project-in-Progress
On Wayward Wings by Barbara Baxley & Michael Liebman - Special Event
Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare - Major Production
The Beaver Coat by Gerhard Hauptmann - Major Production
Gas Station by by Shelby Buford, Jr. - Extended Reading
Snow Orchid by Joseph Pintauro - Project-in-Progress
The Bone Garden by Peter Maeck - Extended Reading
Childe Byron by Romulus Linney - Major Production
Say it With Music by Rita Gardner - Special Event
The Great Grandson of JedediahKohler by John Bishop - Project-in-Progress
In Connecticut by Roy London - Major Production
Charlie McCarthy's Monocle by Maxine Fleischmann - Project-in-Progress
A Tale Told by Lanford Wilson - Major Production
It's Only a Play by Terrence McNally - Project-in-Progress
The Diviners by Jim Leonard, Jr. - Summer Major Production

1981-82

Threads by - Jim Leonard, Jr. - Major Production
'Night Mother by Marsha Norman - Project-in-Progress
Bing and Walker by Jim Farrell - Project-in-Progress
What I Did last Summer by A. R. Gurney, Jr. - Project-in-Progress
Confluence - Three One Act Plays - Major Production
    Thymus Vulgaris by Lanford Wilson
    Confluence by John Bishop
    Am I Blue by Beth Henley
Presque Isle by Joyce Carol Oates - Project-in-Progress
Cat And Mouse by Claris Nelson - Project-in-Progress
How Women Break Bad News by John Bishop - Project-in-Progress
Snow Orchid by Joseph Pintauro - Major Production
Richard II by William Shakespeare - Major Production

The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler by John Bishop - Major Production
Spookhouse by Harvey Fierstein - Project-in-Progress
Young Playwrights Festival Dramatists Guild Special Event
Screaming Eagle by Shelby Buford, Jr. - Project-in-Progress
A Think Piece by Jules Feiffer - Major Production
Double Album by Claris Nelson - Project-in-Progress
Foxtrot By The Bay by A. M. Appleman - Major Production
Johnny Got His Gun by Bradley Rand Smith - Summer Major Production
The Holdup by Marsha Norman - At Saratoga Performing Arts Center - Saratoga, N. Y. - Major Production
Angels Fall by Lanford Wilson - At Players State Theatre, Miami Florida, and at
The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler by John Bishop - Extended Reading
5th of July by Lanford Wilson - Video Production

1982-83

Angels Fall by Lanford Wilson - Major Production
Rock County by Bill Elverman - Project-in-Progress
The Paper Boy by Jonathan Feldman - Project-in-Progress
Home Base by Jim Leonard, Jr. - Project-in-Progress
Black Angel by Michael Cristofer - Major Production
In Place by Corinne Jacker - Project-in-Progress
What I Did Last Summer - by A. R. Gurney, Jr. - Major Production
Levitation by Timothy Mason - Project-in-Progress
Domestic Issues by Corinne Jacker - Major Production
I Won't Be Here Forever by Milan Stitt - Project-in-Progress
Young Playwrights Festival - Special Event
The Cherry Orchard, Part II by William Hoffman and Anthony Holland - Project-in-Progress
Faded Glory by Timothy Burns - Project-in-Progress
Fool For Love - by Sam Shepard - Major Production
The Sea Gull by Anton Chekhov - Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Saratoga, N. Y. - Summer Major Production

1983-84

Dysan - by Patrick Meyers - Project-in-Progress
The Harvesting - by John Bishop - Major Production
Listen To The Lions - by John Ford Noonan - Project-in-Progress
Danny and The Deep Blue Sea - by John Patrick Shanley - Project-in-Progress
Full Hookup - by Conrad Bishop and Elizabeth Fuller - Major Production
The Sea Gull - by Anton Chekhov - Major Production
Save The World - by Berilla Kerr - Project-in-Progress
Levitation - by Timothy Mason - Major Production
Hubbard, Ohio - by Steve Nelson - Project-in-Progress
Danny and The Deep Blue Sea - by John Patrick Shanley - Major Production -

Co-Produced with Circle-In-The Square Theatre of New York City
The Early Girl - by Caraline Kava - Project-in-Progress
Balm in Gilead - by Lanford Wilson - Major Production - Co-Produced with Steppenwolf Theatre of Chicago
A Little Going Away Party - by Sybille Pearson - Project-in-Progress
Circle Repertory Theatre's 15th Anniversay Benefit - Special Event

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