

WTCText022023
23077 words

Experimental Theater in Community Service:

**A History of the Washington Theater Club,
1957-1974**

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ABSTRACT: This article surveys the history of the Washington Theater Club, a professional theater company in Washington, D.C. operating between 1957 and 1974. Over the course of a decade-and-a-half, the Club staged ninety Equity (union) productions and ten non-Equity shows, including ten world premieres, four American premieres, and thirty Washington premieres. During the mid-1960s, the company produced up to one quarter of all new works staged in American regional theaters. The Club served as a proving ground for actors starting their careers, including several who would come to dominate the American stage and screen. Founded as an artistic expression of social activism, the Club promoted Black theater and Black writers and artists. Despite artistic success, the Club succumbed to financial constraints, internal conflicts, and the hostility of a local pre-home rule regime accountable to Congress rather than city residents. The Club's history is one worth recounting at a moment when the performing arts once again seek to tell the story of diverse communities.

U.S. Congressman Gilbert Gude was riding high in 1970. Well into his second term, the Republican from suburban Maryland enjoyed his growing power as fellow Republican Richard Nixon seemed to strengthen his hold on the White House. Born in Washington, Gude had attended public schools in nearby Rockville, Maryland, and graduate school at the George Washington University. As a member of the Congressional District Committee responsible for overseeing the capital district in the era before Home Rule, Gude could make Washingtonians jump at his slightest whim.

Sometimes, his initiatives demonstrated an interest in the greater regional good – as in his sponsorship of legislation creating the Washington Metro System and his efforts to establish the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Park. Other times, his demands pointed to interests distinctly petty and personal. In May 1970 Gude contacted Mrs. Lillian Miller, head of the Public Relations Department at the popular-yet-diminutive Washington Theater Club, to complain about the shabby grounds around the company’s new theater in a converted church at 23rd and L Streets NW.¹

Located in the long-time African American working class West End neighborhood, Union Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church had been a fixture in its community in various sanctuaries since moving from Georgetown in 1846. With urban renewal – first in the form of a proposed “inner-beltway” and later through rapacious developers’ efforts to create an urban “new town” in the West End – the church followed its displaced congregants to Michigan Avenue NE.² The Washington Theater Club, on the prowl for a new home larger than its original 1632 O Street NW carriage house, leapt at the opportunity to convert the church into a theater.³ Within a couple of years, the Club would itself be driven into the ground by unpaid property tax and other levies.⁴

All these developments lie in the future as Congressman Gude puffed himself up and launched into his diatribe about the unfinished state of plantings around the new Club theater. Conveniently, Gude noted, his brother Adolph ran the family landscaping business and would be ready to take on the business of replacing the straggly plants left over from before.

As Mrs. Miller patiently explained in her response, the Club already was working with notable Georgetown landscape architect Eric Paepcke together with the hardware company owned and run by the husband of Board Chair Mrs. Hechinger. In the end, the Club relented to a partnership among Adolph Gude, Eric Paepcke, and John W. Hechinger to ensure that the grounds looked well-tended by the time the new theater opened later that summer.

Ever appreciative for the unrequested attention of such a powerful figure as Congressman Gude, the Club commemorated this agreement in a plaque approved by the Congressman for the theater's lobby. "The Washington Theater Club," it began, "is deeply pleased to express its gratitude for the contributions of: Congressman Gilbert Gude (Maryland), a member of the District of Columbia, for his valuable suggestion regarding a cooperative landscape project, which has enormously improved the grounds of our theater; Mr. Eric Paepcke, noted landscape architect, for his beautiful creative design and his devoted interest in the work; Mr. Adolph Gude, President of Gude Nurseries, Rockville, Maryland, in grading the land, supplying and planting hundreds of shrubs and providing a three-man team for a full week of arduous labour involved therein; The Hechinger Company of Washington, D.C. for its gift of various supplies; Mrs. Lillian Miller, a member of the WTC Board and staff, for her inspiration in calling upon Congressman Gude, then enticing Mr. Paepcke, Mr. Adolph Gude, and the Hechinger Company to contribute their skills, materials, and time to install the gardens of the Washington Theater Club -- adding to the dignity, prestige, and beauty of our playhouse. We hold all of them in deep affection."⁵ Mrs. Miller

simultaneously reached out to the *Washington Post's* Architectural Editor to request coverage of Congressman Gude's munificent act.

No job, it seems, was too small for powerful members of the Congressional District of Columbia Committee prior to home rule; except, perhaps, alleviating racial and economic inequalities, substandard housing, despotic policing, and substandard public health. If a Congressman wanted his brother to win a landscaping contract, so be it. As Club founders Hazel and John Wentworth had learned long before, they ignored the capriciousness of local potentates at their peril. Indeed, the Club would not survive fickle politicians, judges, and tax authorities despite its well-earned national reputation for artistic excellence.

Theater enthusiasts Hazel and John Wentworth had opened the Washington Theater Club during the late 1950s in a cozy carriage house at 1632 O Street NW. The cottage-sized O Street stage remained the club's signature venue for much of its existence.⁶ Located between Dupont and Logan Circles, the theater was next to a large church along a short residential block. The building had moved beyond horses, carriages, and automobiles to become a non-descript warehouse. The carriage house offered just enough room for an Elizabethan-style thrust stage surrounded on three sides by 142 seats.

The site carried various encumbrances, which would shape the theatrical venture in unexpected ways.⁷ The ever-creative couple launched a theater club to own the building. That club, in turn, rented the space to the Washington Drama Center, which formally operated the theater during its early years. The Club eventually reincorporated as a standalone non-profit organization in 1963, claiming an educational purpose as justification for tax-exempt status. Such arrangements necessitated "members," so the company charged subscribers and other patrons a \$1 annual "membership fee" above and beyond the official ticket price. Many theatergoers initially found the space to be "sweet," "intimate," and "endearing," with positive reviews following.

Hazel and John were hungry for innovative drama of a sort absent in Washington. They established their group to promote fresh dramatic forms, to present new ideas, and to support novice playwrights and their work. John Wentworth already had directed the amateur Unitarian Players and looked to expand his presence on the city's professional stage. Hazel would assume leadership for the group following the couple's divorce during the 1960s.

The Wentworths further sought to present quality productions performed and enjoyed by diverse casts and audiences outside the noisome racial boundaries and Jim Crow customs that still marred the city. They nurtured a slightly bohemian tone, often presenting non-mainstream works such as poetry readings accompanied by modern dance tied together with contemporary drama such as Ionescu's *The Lesson*.⁸

Washington's local zoning regulations and building codes at the time remained uncongenial for theater companies. The Wentworths experienced any number of petty interventions by local authorities, as in July 1962, when the Metropolitan Police shut down a performance of Tennessee Williams' racy farce *Period of Adjustment*.⁹ The police cited occupancy permit violations and non-enforcement of club membership fees, explanations that failed to convince disbelieving journalists and theater mavens.

Quirkily extravagant Midwesterner Davey Marlin-Jones came from New York to take over the company as its artistic director in 1965.¹⁰ Over the seven years before his 1972 departure, the club mounted some of its most ambitious productions.¹¹ He generally was well regarded for leveraging his at-times-showy personality to win friends for his theater, and the arts.¹²

Shortly after settling into his position, Marlin-Jones published a manifesto for his theater in the *Washington Post*.¹³ His vision aligns with the founding goals set by the Wentworth, while promising to lead his audiences in new directions.

While noting that the company could never generate sufficient income from its 142-seat theater alone, he praised his audience for remaining committed to the kind of theater the Club presents. Indeed, for Marlin-Jones, a loyal audience offered an essential condition for success. “We have,” he noted, “an energetic, responsive, growing audience for new and exciting theater.” So too, the Club attracts the talent gathered on stage that was the same “we would buy if we were rich –we’d just play them more.” This is because the company “do the plays we want to do.”

Marlin-Jones expressed pride in the support the company had given to new playwrights and original plays. These programs, in his view, cultivated important writing talent for all American theater. Similarly, he praised Mrs. Wentworth’s long-standing commitment to education and to nurturing new talent through the Club’s various training programs.

Finally, he noted “the sense of pizzazz that charges the atmosphere on a typical day at the WTC is incredible.” Consequently, he concluded, “Washington will also become a city with a strong local culture and a supporting audience for the arts.”¹⁴

In 1968, Marlin-Jones and the company became the first Washingtonians to receive the coveted Margo Jones Award honoring pioneering leaders in American regional theater.¹⁵ Marlin-Jones remained in town as art critic for the CBS-TV affiliate (presently WUSA-TV) until 1987, when he moved to Las Vegas.¹⁶

An Idea and a Dream

At its height, the club attracted around 10,000 subscribers, nearly all of whom paid an extra dollar each year to retain membership. For much of its existence, the company offered actor training to children and teens as well as professional training for adults.¹⁷ The Club remained dedicated to children’s theater, and to promoting puppetry and mime.¹⁸ As the *Washington Post* noted in Spring

1968, “While suburbanites are sleeping late, anticipating a Saturday of shopping, golf, gardening, or just resting, the Washington Theater Club springs into action with all the energy of a superhero. It gets underway at nine am with over 150 teenagers charging in for a full day of acting, speech, fencing, and dance.”¹⁹

The Club’s commitment to music ran equally deep. Its chamber music ensemble – the Theater Chamber Players founded by Leon Fleisher and Dina Koston in 1968 -- served long-term residencies at the Smithsonian Institution and the Kennedy Center; and remains active to this day.²⁰

Before too long, the diminutive O Street carriage house became “cramped,” “uncomfortable,” and “confined.” “Old as charming” transmuted into “old as dilapidated.”²¹ Zoning regulations impinged on the club’s attempts to grow into a dramatic arts center and school. Such disquiet led the club to overextend its financial reserves for a second stage. Meanwhile, the original venue remained much beloved by many; and, continued to serve as a home to children’s productions, poetry readings, dance, and music performances as well as puppet-theater.²²

The Club, which proudly declared itself for years to be the smallest professional repertoire company in America, looked to expand. When 1969 became 1970, as evident in the exchange with Congressman Gude, Hazel Wentworth moved primary operations to a remodeled African American church in the city’s West End.

The Club’s move became a centerpiece in local enthusiasm over a Washington theater scene that seemingly had turned a corner to exciting times.²³ As *Washington Post* critic Richard L. Coe told his readers on the eve of the opening of the Kennedy Center a year later: “Picture Washington in the winter of 1947. It had no stage for opera or ballet performance. The Actors Equity and the Dramatists Guild had declared that their members would not appear after Aug 1, 1948, in the city’s sole legitimate theater, the National, because of the theater’s policy of racial

discrimination. Lisner Auditorium's awkward stage, when available between large George Washington University classes, could not fly scenery and had no dressing rooms...

"Arena Stage didn't exit, nor did the Washington Theater Club. Ford's Theater was a warehouse, the Shubert Theater now a parking lot was then the Gayety Burlesque. The Washington Auditorium, an earlier dream that failed, served as a government office. The Capitol Theater's stage would occasionally attempt serving large companies, but it was gone with the '40s... That was the beginning of an idea and a dream."²⁴

With three-times the number of seats and plentiful backstage space the expanded Washington Theater Club was very much part of that dream. The new home suited the company well. A once noteworthy, predominately Black, blue-collar neighborhood, the West End had fallen into disrepair after plans for an inner beltway circling downtown targeted the area for demolition. The district came "on-line" once highway planners lost their battle to plough an interstate highway through the theater's lobby. The neighborhood renewal plan released in 1972 envisioned an upscale urban "new town for the West End."²⁵ A Ritz Carlton hotel now stands on the site of the Washington Theater Club's final home.

Between 1957 and 1974, the Club staged ninety Equity (union) productions and ten non-Equity shows, including ten world premieres, four American premieres, thirty Washington premieres, and works by 64 writers who had not been performed previously in the Washington region. The Club served as a proving ground for actors starting out their careers, including several who would come to dominate the American stage and screen, such as Ned Beatty, James Broderick, Eleanor Bron, Roscoe Lee Browne, Adolph Caesar, Mary Jo Catlett, John Fortune. Charles Gordone, Micki Grant, Bill Gunn, Gene Hackman, John Hillerman, Yaphet Kotto, Joshua

Mostel, Lester Rawlins and Billy Dee Williams. From the beginning, the Club promoted Black theater and Black writers and artists.²⁶

Among its noteworthy productions were future Tony Award winning actor Lester Rawlins' 1965 turn as Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; Billy Dee Williams' performance later that year in William Hanley's *Slow Dance on a Killing Ground*; the 1968 world premiere of future Pulitzer-Prize winner Landford Wilson's play about interracial marriage, *The Gingham Dog*; and the 1973 world premiere of Arthur Laurents' *Enclave* featuring Peg Murray and Hal Linden. George Faison brought his new work *Inner City* even as the company faced imminent eviction.

Such success attracted new opportunities.²⁷ The company explored joining with Arena Stage and Olney Theater to assume artistic management of the recently re-opened Ford's Theater after national companies backed out of doing so. The proposal fell apart under the weight of the Federal Government's management of Ford's, thereby bringing to a close an opportunity for cooperation within the Washington theater community of the era.²⁸

The Club's declaration that it offered educational opportunities eventually became its undoing. In the early 1970s, various courts rejected the assertion of educational status, leaving the club with an expensive property tax bill that it could not cover. Bankers foreclosed on their loans.²⁹ Internal turmoil – artistic, professional, and personal – roiled the company as well. Shortly before the Club folded in 1974, an inside observer noted that nothing less than a three-volume novel would be required to set out the group's inner tensions.³⁰

During the previous decade-and-a-half, the Wentworths and their Washington Theater Club presented some of the era's most experimental theater while continuously reaching out to D.C. communities for ideas, support, and inspiration. The Club's history is one worth recounting

at a moment when the city's performing arts once again seek to tell the story of the city and its communities.

Origin Tales

John B. Wentworth seems always to have been a bit at odds with life.³¹ A direct descendent of William Wentworth (1615-1696) -- who arrived in Boston in 1636 and joined a few years later with John Wheelwright and Anne Hutchinson in founding Exeter, New Hampshire, as a refuge from the Puritan theocracy of the Massachusetts Bay Colony— John seems to have absorbed some of his family's combination of belief-in-self and seditiousness. Never quite at ease with the country that emerged from a colonial past his ancestors helped create, John turned to two great passions – theater and activism – to sooth the contradictions churned up by his internal uncertainties. For a while, he did so in partnership with his wife Hazel, who would assume control of his theater company following their divorce.

At first, John banded together with like-minded parishioners at the historic All Souls Unitarian Church to create an ambitious amateur acting group, The Unitarian Players. Such spontaneously formed companies came and went. They peppered a local theater scene bereft of professional theater in the wake of on-going protests and boycotts by the nation's leading theatrical figures over Washington's Jim Crow practices.

All Souls was – and remains – one of the capital's leading progressive congregations. Located since 1924 at the corner of 16th and Harvard Streets in Northwest Washington near where the Mt. Pleasant, Columbia Heights, and Adams Morgan neighborhood converge, All Souls has a history of liberal Christian thought almost as old as the city itself.

President John Quincy Adams, Vice President John C. Calhoun, and Capitol architect Charles Bulfinch founded the congregation as the First Unitarian Church of Washington in 1821. Located for nearly a century at 6th and D Streets NW, the original sanctuary proudly rang a bell cast by Paul Revere's son Joseph. Within a few years, the congregation was known for its prominent abolitionist ministers such as William Henry Channing, as well as for its support of women's rights. The congregation's universalist beliefs in the sanctity of all human souls led to its renaming as All Souls Church in 1877 in anticipation of its move to 14th and L Streets NW a year later.³²

By the mid-twentieth century, All Souls had long served as a gathering point for the city's progressives. The church pursued its ministry through the arts, hosting racially integrated music groups, leading jazz musicians, and visual artists. Most famously, in 1962, Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd recorded their album *Jazz Samba* in the church's Pierce Hall introducing Americans to the cool sounds of Brazil.

Wentworth naturally found like-minded artistically inclined social activists among All Souls parishioners. Background material in the June 3, 1953, program for a production of Philip King's *See How They Run* at St. George's Episcopal Church Parish Hall tells the story: "The Unitarian Players Group has expanded rapidly from the handful of enthusiasts of 1949 to the proficient and hard-working group of 1953. Though sponsored as a church activity, all who are interested in the theater and its many facets of production are welcome in the group..."

"Most of us are Unitarians; like to work on shows; at All Souls Church because we believe in the kind of ideas the church stands for; four major productions per season, three performances per production. Our programs are aimed at variety – not the show business magazine but the stuff that is the spice of life. Each year, we've mixed comedy with serious drama. Our basic fare has

been contemporary, with a seasoning of the so-called 'Classics'. Theater in the western world got its start from churches... Live theater offers church people a creative outlet. We need audiences... Membership \$3 per year."³³

Over the course of a decade, the Unitarian Players presented nearly three-dozen works, usually in brief weekend-long runs at various churches and clubs around the region. The shows, for the most part, presented light fare, often with a contemporary bent. Significantly, for what would follow, Wentworth developed a program of memberships and nurtured teen-age theater.

As a December 12, 1954, letter about the group's youth theater from Department of Health Education and Welfare Under Secretary Nelson Rockefeller emphasized, Wentworth's ambitions were constrained by his affiliation with a church.³⁴ He and his wife Hazel would have to go it alone to achieve loftier goals.

Finding a Home and a Voice

Ever more ambitious, John acquired a two-story former carriage house at 1632 O Street NW in January 1957. He and Hazel converted the ground floor into an air-conditioned auditorium with seating on three sides of the stage, a foyer, business offices, rehearsal space and a prop room. They placed the dressing rooms and additional storage space in the basement while setting the second floor aside for costume storage and their home.³⁵

The living arrangements later became a point of contention. Following the Wentworths' divorce, John moved across the street and later to upper northwest Washington. The company continued to pay him rent to use the facilities. Inability to always pay John the agreed rental fees on time led to ongoing legal and financial spats.³⁶ John's increasingly radicalized politics similarly

became a point of contention as the Club sought to disassociate itself from his ever more outspoken positions.³⁷

These initial start-up months set a pattern of financial and legal wrangling which undercut artistic vitality. When the Wentworths applied to the Zoning Board for a variance to operate as a public hall, for example, District authorities turned them down. A follow-on appeal carried the day by noting that the Club would operate the theater rather than the Wentworths themselves. The court documents filed by the Wentworths noted that Washington “lags behind other cities such as New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Erie, and others which have fine professional companies, integrated with schools, using local people and playwrights in so far as possible.”³⁸ In the end, the Club’s educational outreach activities appear to have released the necessary licenses so that, in the summer of 1960, the Club could premier its first season.³⁹

The Wentworths found themselves embroiled in legal disputes with the powerful First Baptist Church next door (President Harry S. Truman had been among its parishioners only a few years before). These squabbles got an important relationship off on the wrong foot. Shortly after the Wentworths acquired the carriage house, First Baptist took down a party wall abutting the theater. In June 1959, a Kerosene lamp in front of the theater set fire to the Church. In the end, a judgement of \$4,270 was levied against First Baptist. Ill will, including further bouts of litigation, continued for as long as the Club remained at 1632 O St.⁴⁰

Despite such legal, administrative and logistical concerns, the Club moved to establish its bone fides as an artistic innovator by holding a playwrighting contest leading to five performances over the course of 1959.⁴¹ Such support for amateur playwrighting would continue into the future.⁴² Simultaneously, the Wentworths launched workshops for adults and a teen theater. “Journeyman Workshops” directed by Logan Ramsey reached out to universities to draw student theater artists

from Catholic, American, and George Washington universities as well as from military personnel stationed in Washington.⁴³ The teen theater drew local high school students and eventually became a mainstay for the Washington Drama Center (which the Wentworths, as noted above, established in 1963 to circumvent zoning and tax regulations)⁴⁴ These efforts solidified the Club's connection to Washington and helped to raise funds through tuition, fees and club membership dues.⁴⁵

Having cleared away the bureaucratic, legal, and financial underbrush, the Club turned its attention to its artistic agenda. In an unwritten statement from the time of its opening, the Club set down a vision for its future: "What is its goal in Washington? To provide professional, legitimate theater setting where the community can come alive with live theater."⁴⁶ The time had arrived to put on plays.

A New Stage for American Writing

The Wentworths opened their new theater to the public in July 1960 with a pair of plays – Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* and Michael Vicente Gezzo's *A Hatful of Rain* – featuring Broadway actor Jan Henry, film actor Norman Belkin, and Martha Graham Dance Company alumna Donna Carnegie.⁴⁷ Both works date from the mid-1950s, representing the company's interest in broadly contemporary works. The edgier accent put forward by Gezzo's play – a tale of drug addiction – announced the company's concern for works examining the social problems of the day and proved a purposeful contrast to Wilder's traditional farce.

The opening night program contained a mission statement, which was very much an extension of the goals first set by the Unitarian Players. These objectives established the company's tone throughout the duration of its existence. The Washington Theatre Club, the declaration announced: "is a center for drama and all the performing arts. We have built it as a gathering place, workshop and showcase for you the people of the Washington area: theatre lovers

and those we hope will come to love theatre as we do, young people and adults with a serious interest in acquiring theatrical skills, and – most important – our many local professional actors, directors, and playwrights. Our first aim is to build and maintain a professional residential theater in Washington... We very much want you to feel that this is your club and seek your participation in every way possible.”⁴⁸

The critics and audience were kind, welcoming both the company and the productions. The *Washington Post*'s Coe focused his remarks primarily on Gazzo's play. “The three major roles are most ably done by players whose grasp and training are far more suited to Michael Vincente Gazzo's realistic melodrama about a dope addict than this new group's opening production of Thornton Wilder's highly stylized farce, ‘The Matchmaker’.”

Turning initially to the club itself, Coe described the new venue's theater-going experience. “John B. Wentworth's O Street ‘club’, financed by members and students, seats 145 in a well if noisily airconditioned auditorium. A stable and carriage house have been renovated for classrooms, and a pleasant lobby. One enters the auditorium at the back of the buildings quite awkwardly, however, across one side of the stage to raised tiers of comfortable seats. This placing of the audience is, I think, a drawback.

“The stage thus becomes a flat floor with settings occupying the wall to the audience left and the wall through which one has entered. In a sense one might call it arena-style without an arena, though at the two lesser productions I've attended there the audiences also could be seated on the sides.”

Turning to the production, Coe noted that, “While ‘A Hatful of Rain’ has never been a favorite of mine since its Shubert premier in 1955, it does afford three theatrical roles which from time to time have scenes of telling power. The central role of the junkie is a thankless one; only

from others can we glean compassion for him. But Craig Jackson succeeds in conveying the taut, nerve-wracked shell with ultimate conviction.

“His brother is the happier role, the part Harry Guardino took over so effectively when Anthony Franciosa was ill that opening night in 1955. The part gives us non-addicts something to hang onto and Ralph Lee plays him with manly appeal, striving to tell us what the playwright has obscured in his jumble of reasonings. Lee is an interestingly aware, fairly assured actor.

“Donna Carnegie makes a loving, baffled wife a staunch character and her training in the modern school (I glean from the program notes) gives her far deeper understanding of the part than she had of playwright Wilder’s milliner.”⁴⁹

Coe’s comparison with Arena Stage, while perhaps inevitable, set up a dynamic of friendly-yet-competitive relations between the two companies that would extend throughout the Club’s history. Zelda Diamond Fichandler, her husband Tom, and her graduate school professor at George Washington University Edward Mangum had joined together to launch a new theater company in 1950. Finding space at the Hippodrome Theater, a former burlesque house near Mt Vernon Square, the Fichandlers and Mangum struggled to configure a stage that would fit into the old auditorium’s shell. Having been taken with the success of Margo Jones’ theater in the round in Dallas, which opened three years previously, Mangum suggested a stage surrounded on all four sides by 247 seats. “Arena Stage” was born.

The new company moved in 1956 to the former Olde Heurich Brewery in Foggy Bottom. Along the way, the Fichandlers transformed their for-profit theater company into an educational not-for-profit organization to enable acceptance of foundation grants. By the summer of 1960, as the Wentworths launched the Washington Theater Club, the Fichandlers were building a larger

theater-in-the-round in the new Southwest Development project. They opened their stage on Halloween 1961.

The Fichandlers experienced their own struggles with unsympathetic local zoning, taxation, and fire authorities. Indeed, the original Arena at the Hippodrome almost never opened. The Fichandlers received final occupancy approval from a fire inspector only after Zelda had jumped into the sidecar of the inspector's motorcycle just hours before opening night to run down to the District Building (Washington's city hall) to explain that Arena did not require a fire curtain as it was a "stage" and not a "theater." Like the Wentworths, the Fichandlers sought to avoid any number of bureaucratic pitfalls by reconstituting their venture as a not-for-profit educational organization. Unlike the Wentworths, Tom Fichandler's experience as the financial officer of a large foundation guided Arena through the perilous waters of local pre-home rule authorities and regulations. Arena secured its legal and tax status whereas the Washington Theater Club failed about a decade later.⁵⁰

Hunting Rhinoceroses

Programmatically, the Wentworths were drawn to newer, edgier, and more unconventional theatrical fare that the Fichandlers were presenting at Arena. For the Wentworths, the new Bohemian "Off-Broadway" scene taking shape in lower Manhattan offered a model to follow. From the very beginning, the Washington Theater Club sought to present new works by as-yet unknown authors. However legendary they would become, playwrights such as Eugene Ionesco, Albert Camus, Edward Albee, and Harold Pinter remained largely unknown and unproduced on the American stage when the Wentworths offered them the first Washington venue to show their work.

Critic Leo Sullivan from the *Washington Post* caught the connection within weeks of the company's opening play by Franco Romanian author Eugene Ionesco, who was gaining notoriety following the 1959 premier of his play *The Rhinoceros*. Commenting on an August 1960 production of two Ionesco plays – *The Lesson* and *The Chairs* – Sullivan seems more taken with the Club's performances than with the playwright's scripts. Declaring that the Club has become a showcase for Ionesco, Sullivan describes the company as a “wholly creditable off-E Street playhouse at 1632 O Street.” He continues to categorize both plays as “comedies which earn laughs but, of course, in neither play does much happen.” His take on *The Chairs* – “The play makes its point about the lack of stimulation found in most human associations, and that may be its whole point. I don't know.” – suggests some of the challenges the Wentworths faced in finding a loyal audience.⁵¹

Critics and audiences warmed to the Club's productions of Ionesco plays over time. William Rice found Davey Marlin-Jones 1967 direction of Ionesco's *The Killer* a “totally absorbing theatrical experience.” He described the play to be both comedic and dark. “There is comedy in ‘The Killer’,” he writes, “though much of it evolves around Berenger's mischievous, evil companion Edouard, and consequently does little to brighten the proceedings. The comedy of language is satire, but the comedy of the action is slap stick.”⁵²

For Rice, the company's staging of the play was a major achievement. Additionally, he praised the Company's performances, making particular note John Hillerman's portrayal of Berenger. Hillerman, a member of the Club's repertoire company at the time, was beginning a noteworthy career that would include successful turns in film – including *They Call me Mr. Tibbs!*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *Paper Moon* -- and on such television shows *The Betty White Show* and *Magnum, P.I.*⁵³

Ionesco was no longer a mystery by the time of Davey Marlin-Jones's 1970 production of *Exit the King*, featuring a cast of six including future Hollywood star Ned Beatty.⁵⁴ Beatty toiled on the Washington stage at the Club, Arena Stage, and elsewhere for several years before catching a wave to success with his performance in the film *Deliverance* less than two years later.⁵⁵ The *Washington Post's* Coe told all who would listen prior to opening not to miss Beatty's performance. "Ionesco's 'Exit the King,'" Coe informed his readers, "is a strikingly imaginative work on life and death, and in the title part, created by Alex Guinness, Ned Beatty, onetime Arena Stage player, will have his chance in a rich role."⁵⁶

Other critics were less taken with the actual production. Coe's *Post* colleague Meryle Secrest, for example, concluded, "I would like to report the play succeeds. It doesn't, for the most part, though there are stretches and snatches which work, like a light flickering on and off."⁵⁷ Other local critics concurred.⁵⁸ Diverse productions drawing on mid-century French playwriting included a notable 1968 production of Albert Camus's *Caligula* featuring Hillerman in the title role and African American actor Damon Brazwell.⁵⁹

The Wentworth's and long-time director Davey Marlin-Jones's interest in cutting-edge works extended well beyond the French avant-garde. Marlin-Jones's 1966 production of young British playwright Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* became something of an "event" for attracting Winston Churchill's nephew John Spencer Churchill to the opening while he was in town for the unveiling of a bust of his uncle at the British Embassy.⁶⁰ The production promoted an increasingly fresh approach to theater rarely seen in Washington previously.⁶¹ It also revealed how the Wentworths worked with embassies around town to leverage the diplomatic corps' social cachet.⁶²

Once again, reviews of *The Birthday Party* were mixed, though audiences proved enthusiastic. An unsigned review in the *Washington Post* captured a growing, though cautious, acceptance of the era's contemporary playwriting as well as an enhanced appreciation of the Club's efforts to bring such works to the local stage. "The Birthday Party," it began, "which opened Thursday night at the Washington Theater Club, was funny – very funny – up to a point. Its young English author, Harold Pinter, has said that life follows the same parabola: funny – very funny – up to a point.

"That point is the void, where silence or madness or violence are the only protections against the complete dissolution of identity. For a company of actors to imitate that parabola on stage, in the compass of two hours, requires of them more tact and sheer intelligence than we have any right to expect. Nonetheless such tact and intelligence – and sympathy – are being exhibited at the O St. Club in abundance.

"In any Pinter play, the substance of the drama is the words, what they don't mean and what they should like: their absurd irrelevancies and illogical inflections. The playwright's ear is uncanny; better than any man alive he can reproduce the cadence and the inflection of the non sequitur.

"But picking these words off blank paper and convincing an audience that they are squeezed from a human voice requires miracles of timing. The miracles are so luxuriously forthcoming in Davey Marlin-Jones' production that it is impertinent to single out for praise a single actor.

"Nonetheless, John Hillerman, in the lead as Stanley, demands such attention. Playing the guest in a shabby seaside boarding house, he rocks the theater with laughter during the first act with his perfectly carved facial expressions and verbal deflations of the motherly homilies spread

like butter across the action by his housekeeper, Meg, played by a splendidly slovenly and intellectually disordered Sue Lawless.”⁶³

Throughout its life, the Washington Theater Club continued to stage important new works by now-legendary authors such as Ionesco, Camus, and Pinter. A 1967 production directed by Marlin-Jones of Edward Albee’s *Tiny Alice*, then only two years from its initial New York run, illustrates the Club’s impact on Washington critics and audiences.⁶⁴

Alan M. Kriegsman’s review in the *Washington Post* captures the moment. “Just the blazes is ‘Tiny Alice?’,” Kriegsman begins. “This is the question that trails you out of the theater after seeing Edward Albee’s befuddling play and is apt to tickle your noggin well into the night. For ‘Tiny Alice’, which began its run at the Washington Theater Club Thursday night in Davey Marlin-Jones’ taut, adroitly staged production, is mostly enigma.

“You may recall when deciphering T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Cocktail Party’ was the intellectual rage. ‘Tiny Alice’ has the some sort of vexing fascination. It is as tantalizing as a Chinese puzzle, and it also crackles – if fitfully – with Albee’s well-known theatrical fireworks.

“All the same, one concludes reluctantly that it flunks as serious drama, which it certainly intends to be. The reluctance stems from the realization that Albee is an extremely gifted playwright, and that he has posed problems worthy of deep concern. These are reasons why you want to see ‘Tiny Alice’, even if you end up agreeing that it fails. Albee’s failures are surely more compelling than the successes of hacks...

“What, if anything, does all this mean? The lines of the play are strewn with clues, too many in fact, all of the unconsummated symbols. Albee leads the mind to another cul-de-sac. There is also, inevitably with Albee, the erotic aspect to be considered. The entire script drenched in a Wagnerian blend of sacrament and sex.

“The construction of the play is ingenious, and Albee has concocted plot, characters, and atmosphere with the deft brilliance of his best previous work. But at the foundation is nothing more than a fuzzy groping for an idea. It is possible too that Albee is guilty of a not so tiny malice in subjecting us to these mystifying conundrums, in place of the religious illumination he sought in vain to find.”⁶⁵

Kriegsman captured to ambiguity of the moment, both inside the club and outside. Many theatergoers evidently shared the questions haunting the reviewer; so many in fact were moved to write letters concerning the production to the Club and to local newspapers that the Club sponsored an essay contest on the topic of the play’s meaning. The winners won two subscriptions to the balance of the season.⁶⁶

The reception of Albee’s *Tiny Alice* highlights the Washington Theater Club’s numerous accomplishments. The Wentworths and Marlin-Jones were punching well above their weight by the late 1960s. In less than a decade they had brought a new style of theater to Washington, attracted a dedicated audience, turned themselves into something of a place for socialites to be seen, while stimulating a deep engagement between theater and community. Productions of works by authors who would become celebrated performed by young actors who would find fame in New York and Hollywood are but the most visible manifestation of the Club’s impact. Their long-standing engagement with the issue of race proved to be of greater importance.

Shutting Down Jim Crow

Washington’s Jim Crow traditions and policies cast a long shadow over the city’s theatrical life during the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁷ In 1946, Ingrid Bergman and Sam Wanamaker, performing the pre-Broadway tryout of *Joan of Lorraine*, threatened to walk out in protest over the exclusion

of African American patrons at George Washington University's new Lisner Auditorium. The show went on as scheduled so as not to violate contractual obligations, while both Actors' Equity and the Dramatists' Guild began picketing this and other local productions. The next year national theater leaders declared a boycott of both the National Theater and Lisner Auditorium triggering a national embargo against the city's professional stages that lasted into the 1950s.

In 1951, Sir John Gielgud agreed to coach young Earl Hyman in a summer production of *Hamlet* on the Howard University campus. Gielgud, Hyman, and director Owen Dodson met at the Greyhound Bus Station which offered the trio one of the few integrated places to have lunch together.

A few theater notables defied custom and opened up performances to integrated audiences. In 1944, future Pulitzer Prize winning critic Walter Kerr, then teaching at Catholic University, integrated both the production and audiences of his patriotic extravaganza celebrating American folks songs, *Sing Out, Sweet Land*. Catholic University's Father Gilbert V. Hartke integrated audiences when he took over management of nearby Olney Summer Theater in Maryland following the war.⁶⁸

The Fichandlers opened Arena Stage to integrated audiences from the very beginning in 1950. By the 1960s, Arena would engage the city's racial divide, eventually bringing African American theater artists to their stage as they presented powerful works examining racial themes beginning in the mid-1960s.⁶⁹

Most shamefully, very few members of the White Washington theater community paid more than the scantiest of attention to the historic and innovative African American theater taking shape around Howard University throughout the early twentieth century.⁷⁰ This ignorance

deprived Washington theater artists and audiences access to theater in their own backyard that has exerted national and international influence until today.

Emerging from the community of activists at All Souls Church, the Wentworths connected their theatrical endeavors to the challenges of race from the beginning. Like the Fichandlers, the Washington Theater Club served integrated audiences from its first performance; and went further.

The Wentworths steadfastly sought to engage the Washington African American community by opening their theaters to jazz concerts and other community events.⁷¹ They did not limit their outreach to the stage, but engaged Black theater artists and musicians in all aspects of their operations (including bringing songstress Roberta Flack onto their Board of Directors).⁷² In 1963, they invited African American dancer, choreographer and educator Katherine Dunham to joint with novelist James T. Farrell to discuss “the repeating cycle of artistic inspiration.”⁷³ In 1972, they hosted benefit performances to support Black theater nationally.⁷⁴

Additionally, African Americans appeared on the Washington Theater Club stage in plays, lectures, and musical performances from the beginning. Bill Gunn is the first African American actor in the Club’s records as having appeared as a cast member. He played in the Club’s seventh production, Michael Shurtleff’s *Call Me By My Rightful Name*.⁷⁵

Shurtkeff’s play was “suggested” by Shirley Pfoutz’s novel “The Whipping Boy” about Columbia University roommates Doug, who is White, and Paul, who is Black. A bout of jealousy prompted by the unexpected visit of Doug’s brother’s girlfriend Chris combined with a night of bountiful alcohol consumption to destroy what had been a model relationship between the two roomies. The *Post*’s Coe was underwhelmed, writing, “while not satisfying, the play is infinitely better dramatic writing than today’s average, and the production does credit to O Street’s little theater.”⁷⁶

The play was one of the first performed in Washington to explore the dynamics of inter-racial relationships in an every-day manner. Shurtleff was a powerhouse in the New York theater world of the era, serving as primary casting director for producer David Merrick and writing the “casting bible” *Audition*.⁷⁷ Noteworthy acting coach Geoffrey Horne played David; and Collin Wilcox, on the eve of her breakout performance as Mayella Violet Ewell in the version of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, was Chris.⁷⁸

Unsurprisingly, Coe found Gunn’s performance “fine.” Gunn was well into a distinguished career as a playwright, novelist, actor and film director. He would win an Emmy Award a decade later in 1972, developed a cult following with his 1973 horror film *Ganja and Hess*, and became a mainstay of the New York arts community throughout the 1970s and 1980s. His appearance in this Club production established a pattern of the Wentworths – and later Marlin-Jones – providing invaluable opportunities to aspiring African American artists.⁷⁹

The Wentworths did not limit Black actors to plays about race relations. In April 1963, the Club hosted an integrated touring company from New York performing various autobiographical writings by Berthold Brecht, *Brecht on Brecht*.⁸⁰ More a set of readings than a play, George Tabort’s translations of Brecht’s musings about himself proved an entertaining evening.⁸¹ So much so, that the Club held the play over for several weeks with its actors popping up at numerous events around town.⁸² Cast members included now legendary Black actors Roscoe Lee Browne, and Micki Grant together with notable performers Logan Ramsey and Dolores Sutton.

Browne returned in March 1974 to perform in what became the Club’s final production, *Behind the Broken Word*, in which he paired with film actor Anthony Zerbe to read contemporary poetry of special meaning to both actors.⁸³ Coe found their readings highlighted “the sheer beauty of words, their soundings and meaning,” which, he lamented, “have been out of our lives for too

long.”⁸⁴ The *Star-News* critic David Richard told his readers that the actors “are engaged in a quiet form of seduction.”⁸⁵

In another example of bringing Black actors into the company for plays that were not about racial themes, the Club’s 1965 production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is best known for Lester Rawlins’ magisterial turn as Prospero, a performance that passed into Washington theater lore.⁸⁶ The *Post*’s Coe heaped individual praise at the time on newcomer Adolph Caesar’s “superbly realized Caliban.”⁸⁷ Caesar remained part of the Club’s Resident Company, perfecting the craft that would make earn him Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations and several other awards over a celebrated career.⁸⁸

The Wentworth’s also made their stage available to African American companies performing works of their own. These plays, such as the 1970 production *The Black Experience*, were not affiliated with the Club directly. The Club’s willingness to make their facilities available to Black theater artists (albeit for a fee) helped such works exploring the Black experience expand the reach of theater in Washington. In this instance, *Post* critic Tom Zito found the show’s free-flowing format enhanced by an excellent jazz group and powerful dance numbers to have expressed “the feelings of the actors to most of the audience, regardless of their color” quite effectively.⁸⁹

These productions reveal a dedication to exploring race relations through theater at a tumultuous moment in the city’s history. Such engagement proved even more powerful when the Club’s productions explicitly focused on the question of race in America, and beyond.

French playwright Jean Genet’s *The Blacks: A Clown Show* was a perfect play for the Club. An absurdist satire in which Black actors – some in “white face” -- portray the murder of a white woman before a kangaroo court, *The Blacks* opened in Paris in October 1959. It travelled across

the Atlantic to a famed Off-Broadway production opening at the St. Mark's Playhouse in May 1961 for a run of over 1400 performances. The New York show is remembered for the future stars who appeared over the course of its long run, including James Earl Jones, Roscoe Lee Browne, Louis Gossett Jr., Cicely Tyson, Godfrey Cambridge, Raymond St. Jacques, Maya Angelou, and Charles Gordone.⁹⁰

Robert Hooks, writing on the eve of a later production at his DC Black Repertory Company and subsequently at the newly opened Kennedy Center, recalled that, upon seeing the 1961 New York show, he “left the theater completely hypnotized by the powerful statement I had just witnessed. But how, I wondered, could Jean Genet, a White writer, capture so vividly the unique feelings of an oppressed non-White people?” Hooks concluded that Genet was an outcast, whose mental, physical, and artistic shocks gave him “the sensitive and profound insight into our – the Black man's – bitter struggle against worldwide oppression.”⁹¹ Robert Hooks' production marked a high-water mark for his DC Black Rep, a company of considerable artistic achievement which, like the Washington Theater Club, succumbed to Washington's inhospitable bureaucratic and financial environment for theater.⁹²

The play seemed somewhat dated by the time Hooks took to the stage in 1973 after a decade of racial unrest and the rise of a more radical Black Arts Movement. Critics also found Genet's play “too European.” Such “Europeanness” would have been a recommendation to the Wentworths. Directed by Gene Frankel, the Club's production opened in September 1964 with a cast that included several veterans of the still fresh New York production.⁹³ Billy Dee Williams joined with Len Scott, Charles Gordone, Nick La Tour, and Adolph Caesar (who was becoming a Club regular). The production opened just a handful of weeks following the signing of the Civil

Rights Act of 1964, making a powerful statement about the need for Washington theater to engage issues of race relations.

Three months later, the Club presented another explosive work examining race relations, this time in South Africa: Atholl Fugard's *The Blood Knot*.⁹⁴ Directed by Edmund Cambridge of the Negro Ensemble Company and featuring Yaphet Kotto, who was just starting his extended and illustrious career, the play focused around two half-brothers. Both born of an African mother, one brother had a White father, and the other, a Black father, setting up a painful exploration of South Africa's Apartheid regime.

Coe's review in the *Post* was particularly brutal, concluding, "several respected critics considered 'The Blood Knot' last season's finest New York play and for that reason one enthusiastically welcomes the Washington Theater Club's run. At the same time, one regrets that it takes some patience and imagination to grasp why Fugard's drama captured such praise."⁹⁵ In response *Post* reader T. J. Ross wrote: "I think it is important that someone defend the off-Broadway production of 'The Blood Knot', the South African play that has come to the Washington Theater Club. Your drama critic Richard L. Coe, with an impatience worthy of Alexander faced with the Gordian knot, took a heavy broad sword to the play in the same week he embraced a slight Broadway comedy called *Any Wednesday*... Mr. Coe does a disservice to "The Blood Knot" and his own perception as a critic. I hope despite his review that people in Washington who take theater seriously will see this exciting and thought-provoking play. For Mr. Coe, seats to 'Any Wednesday' every Wednesday for at least a year."⁹⁶

Presumably, the Wentworths were pleased by this contretemps. Dating back to the Unitarian Players, they saw value in theater as entertainment; and more. Theater presented a means

for social engagement around an agenda for change. Moving forward, they never backed down from controversy when it came to race relations.

Audiences as Classy as their own IQ Average

New Director Davey Marlin-Jones jumped right into the topic of race relations upon his arrival in 1965.⁹⁷ As the *Post* recorded at the opening of his first season, “Before an audience as classy as its own IQ average, O Street’s intimate 145 seat Washington Theater Club opened its sixth professional season with a capable performance of William Hanley’s ‘Slow Dance on a Killing Ground’.”⁹⁸

Hanley’s play premiered in New York a year earlier, creating considerable critical clamor.⁹⁹ The story transpires in a run-down Brooklyn candy store as three disparate characters find refuge and share their terrible secrets. An older German immigrant and a young streetwise African American try to calm an anxious young woman who has discovered that she is pregnant. The immigrant’s secret is that he had been a victim of German concentration camps; the young Black, that he is on the run; the woman, that she is looking for the address of an illegal abortionist. Their stories unfold as each character circles, threatens, and ultimately discover their shared sadness.

Marlin-Jones chose the work as his first production because it was unknown to Washington audiences, provided an intimate scale suited the Club’s small stage, and engaged with social concerns.¹⁰⁰ The production brought Billy Dee Williams back to join with Club stalwarts John Hillerman and Sue Lawless. The critics were decidedly mixed in their reviews.¹⁰¹

The Club and Marlin-Jones returned to racial themes two years later at the start of its 1967 season with David Westheimer’s *My Sweet Charlie*.¹⁰² The play was an early example of Marlin-

Jones bringing a new work unsuccessful in New York to Washington for a new start. In this instance, the gambit worked as the play would become a made-for-television movie in 1970. The story of a Black who has accidentally murdered a young Southern White girl delves into how we all can come to live together through dialogue. *Washington Daily News* critic Bob Todd found Damon Brazewell's turn as the Black Charlie superior to the New York original production.¹⁰³

The following fall, Marlin-Jones opened his season with a world premiere of a work – *The Gingham Dog* -- destined for Broadway success a year later. A then unheard of thirty-year-old playwright -- Lanford Wilson – had penned the play as he stood on the verge of untold success.¹⁰⁴ The play was precisely what the Wentworths and Marlin-Jones sought: an important new American work by a previously unknown author interrogating some of the most lethal social issues of the day.

Wilson tells the story of the tortuous break up of an upwardly mobile interracial couple, Gloria and Vincent, who have been living in Harlem. They had grown apart over the course of their three-year-old marriage with Gloria finding new meaning in her life through Black activism, while Vincent, a liberal White Southerner, slipped into disillusionment with his grey-flannel life. Wilson places the action during the tumultuous period when Vincent decides to move out; a time when mutual recriminations and accusations fly as they divide their possessions.¹⁰⁵ Critics greatly anticipated the opening and found Robert Darnell and Micki Grant's performances as Gloria and Vincent exceptional.¹⁰⁶ Others saw its Washington premiere as further proof that the center of American theater's creative energy was flowing from New York.¹⁰⁷

On the day of opening night, the *Washington Post* ran an interview with Wilson by Jim Laurie, then the theater editor for the Arlington-based radio station WAVA and later well-known international correspondent covering Southeast Asia and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Visiting

Wilson in his Greenwich Village lair, Laurie thought Wilson looked more like 18 than nearly 30. He placed Wilson among an important group of “under thirty” writers gathering in the cabarets, lofts, cafes and garages of lower Manhattan including Israel Howovitz, Sam Shepard, Juan Guare and Rochelle Owens. Wilson explained that the play’s title comes from the childhood verse “The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat” that ends with both eating the other up. Wilson clarified further that his works speaks to the real problems of real people rather than “phony problems in a phony way and coming up with phony solutions” as happens on Broadway.¹⁰⁸

Marlin-Jones returned to issues of race relations later that season with writer Alexander Panas and William Goldstein’s new musical *Mr. Tambo, Mr. Bones*.¹⁰⁹ Panas, an actor and writer best known for his contributions to *Miami Vice* and *Escape from Hell Island*, created a minstrel show taking place within the mind of John Wilkes Booth as he plots to assassinate President Lincoln. Mr. Tambo, a stock minstrel character who plays the tambourine, and Mr. Bones, known for rattling bones, appear in black and white face. Goldstein – who scored over 50 major film and television shows over his long career -- set this phantasmagoria to music. John Hillerman played Booth; Bob Spencer, Tambo; and Bryan Clark, Bones.¹¹⁰ The play received a great deal of press attention – mostly negative -- in part because of the importance of Lincoln and his legacy in a city still reeling from the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King just months before.¹¹¹

The *Post*’s Geoffrey Wolff’s scathing review suggests that Marlin-Jones was overreaching the limits of theater’s capacity to engage social issues. “The play is a hodge-podge of avant-garde signatures...,” Wolff lamented. Despite a splendid collection of actors, Wolff notes, “it feeds at the innovations of Brecht (especially in its songs), Beckett (a pair of minstrels), Genet (the masks) and Pirandello (the conscious artifice of the pretended action). If it mixed these resources for good

cause or to good effect, no one could object. But they are simply thrown in, seemingly merely for the hell of it.”¹¹²

One additional masterpiece concerning the question of race relations lie ahead. In 1973, the Club presented Lonne Elder III’s Pulitzer Prize-nominated play about a Harlem barber and his family, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*.¹¹³ Elder’s play was coming off of a much-praised initial production at New York’s Negro Ensemble Company, which opened in 1969 and ran for 320 performances.¹¹⁴ Elder became a mainstay of the New York theater scene until his death in 1996.¹¹⁵

Elder was the first African American writer to be nominated for an Academy Award for his screenplay for the film *Souder* just prior to the play’s opening in Washington (Jeremy Lerner eventually won for *The Candidate*). Bette Howard, later founder of the prestigious Black Spectrum Theatre Company of Queens (New York), directed the production. Sheila Johnson, later co-founder of BET and the first African American woman to attain a net worth of one-billion dollars, made her stage debut. Other cast members included William T. Newman, Jr. and Frank Adu. Unsurprisingly given the talent involved, the play was held over, moving from its West End location to the O Street Playhouse, and attracted the largest audience in club history for any show (14,500 with over 1,000 unfulfilled ticket orders).¹¹⁶

The critics were equally generous in their response. Charles Farrow of *The Washington Afro-American* noted that “Black theater is handled on a non-nonsense, professional level both as entertainment and as a mirror held up to reflect the pathos of the black experience.”¹¹⁷ The *Post*’s Coe reported “a fine, stirring production of a first-rate drama.”¹¹⁸ Annie R. Crittenden, writing in the *Washington Post*, used the production as an opportunity to address larger issues surrounding Black theater at the time. Crittenden noted that “the litmus test for understanding black theater such as ‘Ceremonies in Dark Old Men’, which opens here Wednesday night, is knowing if the play

is revolutionary, folk or educational: for these are points of view that today most often prevail.” After a quick tour of the Black theater landscape, Crittenden observed that *Ceremonies* “is an ideal folk play... Although there is much humor in the play, the serious efforts that blacks must make simply to exist is not lost on the audience.”¹¹⁹

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men captures the Washington Theater Club at its best. The production brought new American playwriting talent addressing important social issues to an audience that embraced both Whites and Blacks. Unfortunately, the Club’s death sentence was being served by tax authorities and creditors just as it achieved its founding objectives. Hazel Wentworth already was reaching out to Paul Allen, founder of the Black American Theater, for support.¹²⁰ This gambit bought both Wentworth and Allen some time. Their alliance led to one final spectacular examination of race in America, this time in the form of a musical: Even Merriam and Helen Miller’s *Inner City*.¹²¹

Inner City was not, strictly speaking, a Club production. Instead, Paul Allen’s Black American and Ebony Promptu Theater Companies used the house under an agreement with Wentworth. The mimeographed program explains that the production began as a “street cantata” based on Eve Merriam’s *Inner City Mother Goose*, which was adapted for Broadway by director Tom O’Horigan, with music by Helen Miller and lyrics by Eve Merriam.¹²² The production was more than a stage rental, as it opened doors to several “what might have beens” had the economics of theater not worked out differently.

Miller was already a major songwriter with several hits to her name and more to come; Merriam was an accomplished author of children’s poetry. Choreographer George Faison was on his way to becoming a dance icon. A graduate of Washington’s Dunbar High and Howard

University, he already was working on Broadway at age 28.¹²³ The production included 28 “neighborhood characters” and several musicians and evolved from the first run to the second.

Coe of the *Post* urged his readers to “rush – don’t wait – to the wingiest, zingiest, dancing show in years, the New Theater’s new ‘Inner City’ at the Washington Theater Club.” He was particularly taken with the dancing. “And what dancing this is,” he continued. “Superbly disciplined and choreographed for all sorts of moods. Faison’s company is so strong, facile and graceful you could watch these young bodies all night. With 10 of his own company, 10 more from Allen’s and a striking Hope Clarke heading them, Faison has welded an ensemble of great vitality.”¹²⁴ Clarke, who was a principal dancer with the Katherine Dunham Company and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, was a native Washingtonian.

The Wentworth-Allen alliance might have saved both companies had it been formed earlier.¹²⁵ Allen’s company grew into the New Theater of Washington and continued the outreach initiatives that had been so important to the Wentworths.¹²⁶ He eventually moved into the Club’s original O Street theater, remaking it as the Paul Robeson Center focusing on community theater.¹²⁷

Grasping the New

The Wentworths’ – and later Marlin Jones’s – dedication to new American plays drove nearly everything the Club did. As noted, the Club’s first season began with a playwriting contest for local authors and, shortly thereafter, launched its “On-the-Spot Playmaking” series which promoted improvisational theater.¹²⁸ The Club promoted the work of young authors from the beginning, later adding a series of Monday Night Readings for works in progress.¹²⁹ Club productions included both premiers that subsequently would make their way to New York – such

as Lanford Wilson's *Serenading Louie*; and recent New York works that traveled to Washington for local premiers – such as Paul Zindel's *The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*.¹³⁰ Marlin-Jones purposefully sought out New York flops such as Lanford Wilson's *Lemon Sky* that, in his view, merited a second try.¹³¹ These efforts caught the eye of the Margo Jones Award committee, who, as mentioned earlier, recognized Marlin-Jones for the Club's contributions to new American theater in 1968.¹³²

Marlin-Jones, speaking shortly after the opening of the Kennedy Center, explained that the moment justifies “the take-a-chance policy that is our reason for being.” He continued that, “Washington is a festival of prejudices, dramatically speaking, and that enables us to do the kind of plays we are doing.”¹³³

From the vantage point of a half-century later, this strategy launched several important American plays, playwrights, and actors. The Club's seasons offered a mix of established contemporary works together with plays that had never been seen before in Washington (and, sometimes, anywhere).

During the Club's initial season, the Wentworths brought a work fresh from Off-Broadway's St. Marks Playhouse, Lonny Chapman's *Cry of the Raindrop*.¹³⁴ Chapman was – and remains – best known as an actor garnering numerous guest appearances on such well-received television series as *Gunsmoke*, *The Rifleman*, *Mission Impossible*, *Perry Mason*, and *NYPD*. He also would produce and direct dozens of plays in regional theater, particularly in New York's Hudson River Valley.¹³⁵

The play revolves around four characters in an Oklahoma small town: the protagonist nonconformist returning from reform school, his respectable brother and sister-in-law, and the wife's piano student.¹³⁶ Louis Antonio – who would go on to appearances in a wide range of

television series and films including *The Naked City*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and *Star Trek* – played the social outcast Clay, while Ellie Wood – best known for her later appearances in films including *Easy Rider* and *Wonder Woman* -- played his sister-in law.¹³⁷

More than the play, Washington critics and gossip columnists focused attention of Jenny Hecht, who played the piano student. The 17-year-old Hecht was the daughter of writer Ben Hecht, which made her something of a sensation at the time.¹³⁸ She would perform in other Club productions over the coming months before moving to Hollywood. Tragically, a drug overdose cut her life short a decade later.¹³⁹ Critics ignored the novice actor playing the respectable brother: Gene Hackman.¹⁴⁰

John Wentworth continued to mix more established contemporary works with premiers of new fare up to 1965, when Marlin-Jones arrived. In 1962, he joined with Sam Rosen to direct a well-received production of Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie* featuring Anne Revere as the Mother.¹⁴¹ Having premiered in 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* had a secure place in the American repertoire. Anne Revere – a Tony Award winner whose career had suffered from the sharp criticism during the McCarthy era from the House Un-American Activities Committee – remained a draw. She and her husband, Director Rosen, were something of political celebrities at the time (always a plus in Washington).¹⁴² Her presence seems to have attracted newcomers to the Club's playhouse.¹⁴³ Some among those audiences returned for new works, such as an October 1964 bill of two one-act plays by local authors, Ed De Grazia's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and John Wentworth's *The Yellow Bicycle*.¹⁴⁴

Tennessee Williams remained a talisman for the Club, a lucky charm to call upon when attendance was falling off. In 1973, with the company teetering on extinction, Hazel Wentworth presented *Something Wild*, an evening of selections from three Williams works featuring Mary Jo

Catlett of future *SpongeBob Pants* fame.¹⁴⁵ Well received, the production failed to help the company stave off creditors.¹⁴⁶

The Club's commitment to new American plays intensified following the arrival of Marlin-Jones. Several important new works appeared during his tenure, including those of Lanford Wilson. In addition to the above-mentioned production of *The Gingham Dog*, Marlin-Jones directed Wilson's *Serenading Louie* in 1970 and *Lemon Sky* in 1972.¹⁴⁷

Washington critics frequently reacted to new works with skepticism; much less so when Marlin-Jones directed new works by Wilson. The often hard-to-please Coe informed his readers in the *Post* that, "Having furrowed fruitlessly all season for a worthwhile new script, the Washington Theater Club at last comes up with one, Lanford Wilson's 'Serenading Louie'. Faultlessly acted by a cast of four, this observes the young marrieds settled long enough to beware that they're kids and wary of mocking their elders in whom they see hints of their own futures.... Wilson is not concerned with dramatizing the externals of this foursome; he is absorbed with what is happening, has happened inside of them."¹⁴⁸

Unlike *The Gingham Dog* and *Serenading Louie*, which premiered at the Club prior to New York runs, *Lemon Sky* had opened first in New York. Coe was less impressed, finding the play as "essentially juvenile and for all the playwright's adroit sprinklings of novelty – the accepting stepmother, the two girls, the peculiarities of Southern California – there always is a too-derivative strain running through. Either the playwright's too insistent on his literary memoir vein or he still rages at his father."¹⁴⁹

Some, but not all playgoers, shared Coe's dyspeptic reaction. A post-show discussion among students invited to a preview performance broke out into arguments over whether or not the play contained bitterness. When someone in the audience said, "I sort of resent your saying

that you don't recognize neurosis. Are you saying this is the way life is? Are you condemning all this?" The director snapped in response, "Isn't that interesting. We have to keep putting cute, slick little labels on everything. Condemn or condone has no bearing on the play, and that kind of question seems totally irrelevant."¹⁵⁰ Everyone – critics and audience members alike – seemed to have found memorable James Broderick's performance of the father. Broderick's break out performances in *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* and *Dog Day Afternoon* would soon follow.¹⁵¹

Paul Zindel's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* had just closed on Off-Broadway after having premiered in Houston when Marlin-Jones brought it to Washington.¹⁵² It subsequently found its way to Broadway and to Hollywood, in a 1972 film directed by Paul Newman starring his wife JoAnn Woodward and their daughter Nell Potts.

The American theater community celebrated Zindel as a welcome new voice at a time when theater appeared to be losing its way. As Coe observed in the *Post*, the play's "honors, it seems to me, are less of a compliment to Mr. Zindel than a statement on our theater's lean and hungry times. Quite possibly, the honors have come because the play offers a long overdue statement of affirmation that even in the most weed-choked garden a flower of hope can bloom."¹⁵³

The Washington audience's positive response to Zindel's work stood in stark contrast to how critics received new American plays of the era. A year later, for example, critics panned the Club's production of a new work by Edward Albee, *All Over*.¹⁵⁴ Tom Donnelly writing for *The Washington Daily News* told readers "Edward Albee has managed to trivialize great themes to an extraordinary degree. 'All Over' is graceless, inert, and inept, and makes almost any episode of any TV doctors-and-nurses series seem, in contrast, brimful of ultimate truth and moral beauty."¹⁵⁵

The sorts of work that inspired enthusiasm for their unexpurgated portrayal of American life in the 1960s were no longer as welcome in the 1970s. *Gamma Rays* arrived at this moment of transition.

Zindel grew up in a broken home on Staten Island, was educated as a chemist, and worked as a chemical writer for Allied Chemical. He discovered playwriting having taken playwriting courses in college with Edward Albee. He later would become a successful writer of young adult fiction often focusing on misfits such as his younger self.¹⁵⁶

Gamma Rays, Emmerson Beauchamp wrote in *The Evening Star*, “comes to town loaded down with awards and, for once, it’s hard to quarrel with New York prize-givers.”¹⁵⁷ The anticipation became amplified as the Club celebrated its tenth anniversary with a special preview performance for its most dedicated donors.¹⁵⁸ Such were the times – and such was Hazel Wentworth’s and Davey Marlin-Jones’s company – that top donors celebrated with an edgy work about the troubled relationship between a widow and her scorned daughter who has just won a school science prize for her experiments with radiated marigolds. One more American play about monstrous mothers at a time of intensifying generational conflict, it seemed, struck just the right note.

Coe was so taken with the hubbub surrounding Zindel that he sought him out for an interview. Meeting in “the darkest corner of Circle One” (a hangout across the street from the theater), Coe described how Zindel greeted him “with a firm handshake, a smile that quickly turned into laughter and several hours of shared enthusiasms and concerns.”¹⁵⁹ Among Coe’s discoveries was that the “rather jovial young Don Quixote” had, according to Zindel’s own description, looked like “a rather tall chicken” in childhood. These childhood experiences, it seems, joined together with the difficulties in bringing his plays to life – *Gamma Rays* required more than a half-dozen

years before its initial production took to the stage – to nurture a playwright who wrote the “intimate, even short play[s]” too long absent on American stages.

Marlin-Jones’ production won praise from critics and audiences. His cast -- which included two film and television regulars Helena Carroll and Francesca James – gathered as many kudos as the play itself. As Coe noted, this *Gamma Rays* was a “small play, delicately wrought and finely cast.”¹⁶⁰

The Club’s next production – Marlin-Jones’s take on Gretchen Cryer and Nancy Ford’s rock musical *The Last Sweet Days of Isaac* – similarly arrived from New York following an award winning Off-Broadway run.¹⁶¹ This time, the Washington critics were less enchanted. Donnelly, in the *Daily News*, “thought I understood the first part, but the second part baffled me and made me feel I probably only thought I understood the first part.”¹⁶² Beauchamp in the *Evening Star* reacted similarly, writing, “In truth, the first half of the show is so good that it’s a shame that the second half is no better than it should be.”¹⁶³ Coe was unforgiving in the *Post*. “Viewing ‘The Last Sweet Days of Isaac,’” he wrote, “reduced me to a state of total apathy. Many have admired this two-character rock musical, still continuing in New York after capturing an Obie last season as its best Off-Broadway musical, but to me the experience was like eating lavishly sugared jellyfish.”¹⁶⁴ New works, regardless of their New York pedigrees, could be hard sells in Washington.

The Club’s production of Elaine May and Terrence McNally’s *Adaptation/Next* in autumn 1971 brought celebrities to town.¹⁶⁵ May had achieved stardom in her comedy act with Mike Nichols a decade before; McNally was already being described as “one of the greatest contemporary playwrights the theater world has yet produced.”¹⁶⁶ Director Joel J. Friedman combined a one-act play by each into a memorable evening of theater.

The *Post's* Coe found that Friedman and actors Armand Assante and Benjamin Stack transformed both works from sketches of “our mechanical, impersonal world” into an evening of hilarity bound together by “a common subtext of contemporary despair.”¹⁶⁷ May’s *Adaptation* led off, using the hackneyed television gameshow format to turn a hopeless contestant’s biography into a “Game of Life” that cannot be won. McNally’s *Next* recreates the induction indignities of military life back to the Greeks into a series of vaudeville skits. Donnelly of the *Daily News* found the result to be “an entertaining farcical package,” though “rather lumpier than it ought to be.”¹⁶⁸

Even as Coe found laughter to be “the dominant vein of both,” he worried about what the evening revealed about the contemporary American theater. “That these 45-minute plays are slight indeed is worthy of note,” he wrote, continuing, “That they were included among Guernsey’s ‘Ten Best’ New York plays three years ago reflects the frail state of our playwriting. If these are among the best, our theater surely gasps in dire paucity. All things being relative, however, we can rejoice that humor isn’t really dead.”¹⁶⁹

High Comedy Advocacy

Hazel Wentworth continued John Wentworth’s and Davey Marlin-Jones’s commitment to new works after Marlin-Jones left the company in 1972; a time when the Club’s struggle for existence intensified. Unable to reel in a new artistic director for a sustained period, Wentworth began to look for projects that had been developed elsewhere, as had been the case with Paul Allen’s *Inner City* mentioned above. Two such plays presented during the spring 1973 reveal that initiative at its finest: Arthur Laurents’ *The Enclave*, and George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.¹⁷⁰

Laurents is best recalled for his collaboration with Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, and Jerome Robbins on *West Side Story*, as well as for such other hits as *Gypsy* and his film scripts

for Alfred Hitchcock. His unpleasant imbroglio with the House Un-American Affairs Committee late in the McCarthy era provided material for his hit movie *The Way We Were* starring Barbra Streisand.¹⁷¹ By the early 1970s, he was intent on reinvigorating “high comedy” on the American stage; and, on integrating homosexual characters into his works as fully-formed individuals rather than as clichés and “freaks.”¹⁷² *The Enclave* -- which Laurents wrote, cast, and directed—was part of those efforts.¹⁷³

As Laurents told the *Post*'s Donnelly, “High Comedy makes enormous demands on the performers and American actors aren’t trained for it...I didn’t want stars, I wanted actors and I’ve got some very good ones. New York actors, as Hollywood calls them. They came down here for no money because they love the play and they love theater.”¹⁷⁴ Among those “very good actors” were Tony Award winning Broadway stars Hal Linden and Peg Murray; television and film’s Jack Betts, Donald Gantry, Laurence Hugo, Rochelle Oliver, and Ann Sweeny; plus, The Negro Ensemble Company’s Charles Turner.¹⁷⁵

The play, as Laurents told Donnelly, is “about a group of friends who have banded together to protect themselves from the garbage dump of the city.”¹⁷⁶ Three middle class couples and their good male friend Ben, all in their forties, join together to establish a residential enclave in which they can find safety from the hostile streets beyond. The action moves along humorously until Ben invites his young male lover to join in a celebration to mark their shared lives. The once seemingly liberal and tolerant couples react with acrimony and mortification. As Laurents put it, “People are perfectly willing to accept what they don’t have to look at, but just don’t bring it home with them. All this talk about sexual permissiveness and the big sweeping changes in society simply isn’t true.”¹⁷⁷

Post reviewer Tom Shales found the production to be disappointing. “It is a comedy of ordeal,” he wrote, “and in its present form, the ordeal frequently, and finally, overtakes the comedy. Laurents,” he continued, “has stocked his characters with believable and pungent outbursts and stocked his play with enough waspish bitchiness to make it almost always entertaining. Occasionally, the observations even seem profound; audiences may applaud them before they stop to think that little has really been said. This is no great injustice. Flimsier philosophies have gotten heartier approval in this theater and others.”¹⁷⁸ Such critical baying aside, Laurents presented *Wentworth* with a uniquely important theatrical opportunity. One which was not lost on her Club’s ardent supporters.

Just a few weeks later, George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* starring Academy Award nominated Chief Dan George provided another opportunity for the otherwise beleaguered Club. The play arrived at a moment when the Club believed (falsely) that it had successfully navigated hard times. “The Washington Theater Club,” Megan Rosenfeld wrote in the *Post*, “has announced that it’s well on the way towards financial security, having raised \$75,000 of its \$120,000 goal.”¹⁷⁹ Some key grants were on the horizon, helped along by the good press surrounding Laurents and *The Enclave*.

The company presented a work which Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau proclaimed as “the greatest accomplishment in a century of Canadian theater,” starring a widely recognized cultural icon, the actor Chief Dan George.”¹⁸⁰ The play’s origins prompted merriment among some critics as several commentators could not disguise their amused condescension about Canadian cultural achievements.

Julius Novick began a particularly offensive piece about the play in *The New York Times* by lampooning Trudeau’s prideful boast. Novick wrote, “‘Canadian playwright.’ These words

seem a little incongruous, like ‘Panamanian hockey-player’, almost, or ‘Lebanese fur trapper’. But Canadians are now paying more attention than ever before to the question of what it means to be Canadian. A new ‘cultural nationalism’ is being felt and expressed, and young Canadian playwrights have begun to appear. Americans, of course, traditionally pay little attention to what goes on north of the border (Quick! Can you name three Canadians? Any three Canadians at all?) But a play by one of the young Canadian playwrights – perhaps best known of all recent Canadian plays – has lately been given its American premiere at the Washington Theater Club (which is not a club at all, but a professional theater of some repute).¹⁸¹

Washington critics were more sensitive to the achievements of those living beyond Manhattan. Tom Shales, in the *Post*, whined about “advocacy theater” before noting that “the Theater Club production brings it off expertly.”¹⁸² David Richards, in the *Evening Star-News*, found the play to be “a spellbinding beauty.”¹⁸³

Ryga -- the son of Ukrainian immigrants who grew up in Athabasca, Alberta before moving to the provincial capital Edmonton -- is remembered for his poetry, popular songs, and especially this play.¹⁸⁴ His works focused on the displaced, reflecting Western Canadian angst over the country’s elites to the east. The play brought the difficulty facing the country’s First Nations as they navigated an increasingly urbanized Canada. In this instance, Rita Joe, an indigenous Canadian, is brought down after moving to the city by a series of misfortunes. The police arrest her on charges of vagrancy and prostitution and bring her before a magistrate primarily intent on clearing his docket for the day. The action takes place in court, and in flashbacks following Rita Joe’s path from the Reservation to skid row.¹⁸⁵

Donnelly, writing in the *Post*, was unmoved, telling his readers, “to be fair, and considering how really bad living theater can get, it may be more accurate to say that Ryga’s first act is tedious,

meandering, heavy-footed, and structurally speaking, an artsy-crafty amalgam of the more ubiquitous playwriting devices of the past couple of decades.”¹⁸⁶ Audiences were more forgiving, piling in to see then-celebrity Chief Dan George at close range.

The 74-year-old George had just come off playing Old Lodgeskins in the popular film *Little Big Man* starring Dustin Hoffman, earning him an Academy Award nomination.¹⁸⁷ George began acting at the age of 60 having tired of working as a dockworker and in construction. He turned to Canadian theater a decade before the 1970 Hoffman film, which brought wide acclaim. George leveraged his newfound fame to advocate for native peoples, telling the *Post*'s Shales, “In Canada, they're [Indians] are second class people. I don't like that. We want to be treated as equals in every way.”¹⁸⁸

Washington audiences passed over the snarky and imperious evaluations of the New York and Washington critics and filled the Club's West End theater providing Wentworth with hope that the company could still make a go of it. Looking back to the early years when Hazel ran the company with her husband John, she recalled how theater was about more than advocacy. Part of her company's reputation lies in memories of theater as sheer fun.

A Comedy Tonight

Washington was not as funny a place as it would become. Comedians came and went, yet the notion of a comedy cabaret had not quite caught on when the Wentworths opened their theater club. Political humor certainly existed, and the newspapers and airwaves were full of chuckles about what transpired in Washington. Venues devoted to laughing at politicians, by contrast, had yet to last.

Within a few years, political comedians such as Mark Russell established long-running shows around town; comedy ensembles such as today's The Capitol Steps blossomed. Washington grew into a good city for stand-up comedy clubs. The Washington Theater Club contributed to these developments.

In putting the 1962-1963 Club season together, the Wentworths turned to a visiting quintet of young British satirists who had caught fire at Peter Cook and Nicholas Luard's *The Establishment* club on Greek Street in London's Soho.¹⁸⁹ John Bird, Eleanor Bron, John Fortune, Jeremy Geidt and Carol Simpson had moved from clubby King's College, Cambridge, to London's nightclub revues and on to the BBC. They now next set their sights on the US and arranged for runs in New York and in Washington at the Club. Geidt met his future wife during the Washington show and eventually stayed to take up faculty positions at Yale and then Harvard. The others became mainstays of the British comedy scene in the years ahead.¹⁹⁰

The Establishment's brand of humor seemed perfectly suited for the Kennedy years. Mark Russell was still performing in New York and had not set up permanent shop yet in Washington.¹⁹¹ Vaugh Meader gained fame by impersonating the first family on records. As the Wentworths appreciated, the time was ripe for satire in Washington. *The Establishment's* five-week run proved a roaring (and lucrative) success.¹⁹² CBS-TV even filmed one of the group's sketches for broadcast on its highly rated "Eyewitness" show.¹⁹³

The group's attraction reflected a combination of familiarity and difference. British comedy has succeeded in America for as long as there has been a British presence here. That approach to comedy, however, evolved into something quite different there than here. As Secrest described to her readers in the *Post*, "In England, a queen with a little girl voice or a bumbling prime minister are targets of their satire, along with Ban the Bomb marchers and miscellaneous

manifestations of social mores, religion, sex, or what have you.” The United States was dissimilar, Bird told Secret. “I get no feeling of connection with it. It’s partly because of this fantastic feeling everyone has that communism is the deadly enemy. Either we are going to win or lose. You find it everywhere.” Fortune was more direct, in telling Secret, “Americans don’t ridicule their own society; they take it very seriously.”¹⁹⁴

One lesson drawn by the Wentworths from *The Establishment’s* Washington success was to build ridicule and satire into the Club’s upcoming seasons. Eventually, after a few years, the Club launched its *Spread Eagle* series to do precisely what Fortune observed Americans did not do: ridicule American society and politics. Over the course of the next seven seasons, the Club presented a new satirical revue each year – initially during the summer off-season and later over the year-end holiday season.¹⁹⁵ The revues eventually became the dominion of Sue Lawless, one of the Club’s stalwart artists. By the time the series came to an end in 1972, Washington, the United States, and American satire had transformed beyond recognition.

The initial revue was an improvisation prompted by a monetary shortfall. As Marlin-Jones later told Secret, “We were like a ‘spread eagle.’ (Webster: ‘to sprawl’, stretch out into the position of a spread eagle).”¹⁹⁶ The search for original material to avoid having to pay royalties while occupying the otherwise dark summer season led Marlin-Jones to future Pulitzer-prize winning columnist Russell Baker, and renowned Broadway lyricist Yip Harburg.¹⁹⁷ Opening night brought out a who’s who of Washington media and cultural figures including *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker, British cultural commentator Alastair Cook, and political cartoonist Herb Block.¹⁹⁸

This initial effort set a high bar (unfortunately, too high a bar to be replicated) for the subsequent reviews to follow as “fast, light-hearted, witty, and seasoned with a generous dose of

political satire.”¹⁹⁹ The run sold out and was extended providing a quick solution to the Club’s constantly anemic bank accounts.

Son of Spread Eagle – A Topical Revue followed in May and June 1967. This time, Marlin-Jones pulled material from twenty different authors focusing primarily on politics.²⁰⁰ Critics found the results uneven. William Rice writing in the *Post* suggested that the revue “sparkles from time to time, but too rarely to be anything more than an amusing diversion.”²⁰¹

Amusing diversion was sufficient to attract summer audiences.²⁰² Alternating days and evenings with highly successful children’s productions, such as Sue Lawless’s energetic take on *The Brentown Musicians*, once again allowed the Club to refill its coffers with ticket sales from highly popular summer fare.²⁰³

Son of Spread Eagle was part of a successful 1966-1967 Washington theater season. As Coe wrote it, “Put no credence in the canard that Washington is a bad theater town.” The season, he observed, had been “its liveliest ever.” Yet, for all the plays, few were hits.²⁰⁴

The Club continued to present its annual reviews, at first during the summer and later at differing times during the year. Audiences and critics welcomed productions involving dozens of writers and performers with diminishing enthusiasm. As Beauchamp put it in his review of the 1969 *Spread Eagle IV*, the revue’s “wingspan narrows.”²⁰⁵ Kriegsman was more picturesque in the *Post*, writing: “Revue’s are like jelly apples – they’re a lot of fun, but there are a few bad spots in the best of them. ‘Spread Eagle IV’ is no exception. It soars but it also dips now and then. On balance, though, there’s more than enough madness and merriment for an evening of light diversion.”²⁰⁶

The fifth and sixth reviews in 1970 and 1971 took place during the Christmas Holidays and managed a bit of a revival despite a myriad of logistical trials.²⁰⁷ Sue Lawless mastered the process

of pulling together the works of multiple writers responding to current events at the last moment. Some submissions appeared weeks before opening night, while others reacted to the headlines of the day. New York actors – such as Joshua Mostel and Marcia Lewis – joined in the fun from time to time.²⁰⁸ Marlin-Jones, Lawless, the actors and writers fought for inclusion right up to curtain time. The trick was to gather sufficient timeless material ordered in advance to fit around current events.

The shadow of the Viet Nam War and the emerging Watergate scandal darkened American politics so that the task of making Washington audiences laugh grew more challenging. Writing in the *Post*, Rosenfeld recorded that, “The curators of ‘Spread Eagle’ have found that it’s getting harder and harder to make people laugh. Audiences have seen everything and know everything, and they’re used to television variety shows, where speedy transitions can be accomplished by splicing tapes together and laughs can be produced with a sign than says ‘laugh’. In the theater completeness must be achieved honestly.”²⁰⁹

In autumn 1972, Wentworth struggled to put together a new season following Marlin-Jones’s departure. Looking to fill space in the schedule before other works could be booked in, she turned to Lawless to generate one more episode of the *Spread Eagle* saga. This time Lawless drew on the works of forty-seven writers, composers, and lyricists. Reflecting the imbroglio over the Pentagon Papers taking place at the time, she titled this edition the *Spread Eagle Papers*.²¹⁰ The critics agreed that the cast out shown the script.²¹¹ The result was more than a placeholder as the production garnered positive reviews and large audiences alike. For Coe, “the most welcome effects are strikingly zany. Zaniness actually is essential to humor, loose, seemingly unpremeditated, and wholly illogical. Everyone contributes moment in that genre.”²¹²

Later that season as Wentworth desperately tried to keep her company going, she turned to the lighter side of theater once again, this time with a frothy period comedy, *Lady Audley's Secret*.²¹³ Mary Elizabeth Braddon's dark romance with Gothic overtones has inspired films, plays, and television productions for nearly two-centuries. Douglas Seal adapted Braddon's sensational 1862 novel about bigamy at the sixteenth century English country estate in Ingatestone, Essex as a musical comedy.

Seal's version, produced in partnership with Chicago's Goodman Theater, included a cast of eleven led by Donna Curtis and Russell Nye performing under music director Salli Parker's baton to the choreography of Mickey Hartnett, music of George Goehring, and lyrics by John Kuntz.²¹⁴ An extravagant production for a theater company teetering on extinction, *Lady Audley's Secret* represented the sort of gamble that produced melodrama on and off the stage. In this instance, the bet paid off.

Washington's critics were wild in their enthusiasm. Coe in the *Post* recorded that, "When you're not smiling over the 19th century conventions of 'Lady Audrey's Secret', you're relishing the songs appended to this old melodrama or the swell cast holding the Washington Theater Club's stage."²¹⁵ Frank Getlin, writing for *The Evening Star*, observed that "the play is played without a shred of camp... We do laugh at the Victorians but we do so because they are funny;" while Milton Berliner's review in the *Washington Daily News* proclaimed "A 'Secret' You Should Share."²¹⁶

Nye's connections with Washington society's leading hostess Perle Mesta added to the excitement.²¹⁷ The opening night gala at the Sheraton Park Hotel included Broadway icon Ethel Merman among the guests.²¹⁸ Hazel Wentworth and the Club were playing at a different level than ever before. Ticket buyers pushed the company to extend the run into mid-July.²¹⁹ In what would prove to be one last time, the stars aligned to give hope for the future.

Whenever the time arrived for celebration, Hazel Wentworth turned to comedy. Having learned from *Spread Eagle's* holiday successes, she decided to open her new theater officially in December 1969 with a sophisticated musical revue poking fun at the world through Cole Porter's urbane and wicked lyrics. That season's production of *The Decline and Fall of the Entire World as Seen by the Eyes of Cole Porter* captured the Club's efforts at comedic revues at their best.²²⁰ Ben Bagey's fast-moving show included a cast of five directed and choreographed by Darwin Knight.²²¹

The opening of the Club's new West End stage became one of the most talked-about happenings of the season. Suzanne Fields, in the *Washington Star's Sunday Magazine*, provided the background: "The Washington Theater Club has not completely lost its humble style, although it is now operating full-time at two houses, the old one at 1632 O Street NW and the new one – a reconverted church building – at 23rd & L Streets NW." The expansion is timely, she continued, after an "enormous and largely unplanned increase in subscription audience last year from 2,800 season ticket holders to this year's 9,200." She praised Marlin-Jones as "a crusader against the 'Hello, Dolly!' syndrome of theater" in his promotion of new work, noting that the Club had produced one quarter of all new works in American regional theaters the previous season. She concluded by cautioning presciently that the benefits of the larger seating capacity may be undercut by rising costs.²²² Coe concurred in the *Post*, using the event to celebrate the growing maturity of the Washington theater scene.²²³

Mayor Walter Washington and Mrs. Washington presided over the opening evening, fittingly so as their daughter had once spent her weekends studying dance and drama in the Club's many youth programs.²²⁴ In January, President Nixon invited the cast to perform at the White House.²²⁵ For Coe, the new theater together with the delightful weaving of Cole Porter tunes

presented Washington with “a glittering Christmas gift that’s only just been opened. It should be producing surprise packages for some years to come.”²²⁶ Unfortunately, this was not to be.

Curtain Time

Theater as art and theater as activism were always tied closely together in John Wentworth’s mind. That connection remained strong throughout the evolution of his and Hazel’s theater company from the time it took the All-Souls stage as the amateur Unitarian Players until its final performances as a regional theater two decades later. Such unity of purpose combined with John’s inherent feistiness and sense of hereditary privilege to generate conflict with neighbors, local police, and other officials, within the company, and ultimately between he and Hazel.

Hazel’s efforts to keep the troupe alive approached the heroic, particularly following her divorce from John. The Club retained ardent fans and munificent donors until the end. Their foes eventually had the final say in the form of a judicial ruling against their repeated petitions for non-profit status.

Perhaps the ending could have been different had Congress granted Washington home rule a few years earlier. The city’s emerging democratic institutions might have provided pathways for rallying support against hostile municipal administrators. Absent even the faintest trappings of democracy, the city’s Congressional overseers blocked channels of relief that might have been open elsewhere.

As it happened, suburban Congressmen could “suggest” the Club hire his family’s landscaping firm, powerful neighboring churches could work behind the scenes to limit favorable zoning rulings, and a rapacious local government could deny the Club – and other arts institutions – the tax-exempt status necessary to make ends meet. Arena Stage bucked these trends; the

Wentworths could not, even as they tried to follow Arena's successful roadmap to educational non-profit status. These defeats were not for the absence of trying.

The Club was not alone in facing grasping tax authorities. The District government operating under congressionally appointed commissioners and Congressional oversight authorities denied performing arts institutions – both for-profit and non-profit – relief from new taxes imposed on admission to entertainment in all forms at the end of the 'sixties. Arts organizations from the National Theater and the National Symphony to Arena Stage and the Club protested to no avail. Either they absorbed the new tax, or passed it on to their ticket holders.²²⁷

The Club's challenges were deeper. Having been unable to secure a designation as an educational non-profit organization, the Club became exposed to property taxes assessments on quite a different scale from the proposed admission tax. By the early 1970s, the Club faced the imposition of real estate taxes on two properties. Those taxes briskly increased, especially for the 23rd Street theater which stood at the center of a West End neighborhood with rapidly escalating property values.²²⁸

Hazel continued to find new ways forward. She began to book productions fully formed elsewhere, sought new foundation grants with some success, continued to try to land an appropriate successor to Davey Marlin-Jones, and searched for an effective sales manager and managing director.²²⁹ The Club had some success renting out both houses on O Street and 23 Street for various performances.²³⁰ Actors and staff even stood outside the theater for hours trying to collect loose change from passers-by on foot and in their cars.²³¹

The Club seemed to have turned a corner by 1973, with sales, donations, foundation grants and a radio advertising campaign combining to increase revenues nearly to the break-even point.²³² The Club's above-mentioned partnership with Paul Allen's New Theater featuring African

American productions benefitted both companies; at least for a while.²³³ Their joint production of *Inner City*, as noted above, created a buzz that gave the impression that all was well. Allen supported several Black theater initiatives in subsequent years.²³⁴ Eventually, he, too, fell on hard financial times.²³⁵

By 1972, all ways forward rested on the Club's ability to secure a tax-exemption as an educational non-profit organization. Absent a definitive decision, Hazel held out diminished but continuing hope that the Club would survive. Then, she and the Club encountered Judge W. Byron Sorrell, of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia.

Many city officials seem to have thought that the Club had stretched the limits of regulatory appropriateness from the beginning. As discussed above, in winning early court cases against First Baptist Church next door the courts approved a settlement that barely covered the Club's legal costs. DC Police remained so skeptical of the company's club status – a maneuver initiated to bypass zoning regulations which otherwise would have prohibited public gatherings -- that they instigated the above-mentioned raid in 1962. Court cases continued throughout the Club's existence, as did requests for zoning variances, conflicts with First Baptist, and squabbles over tax-exempt status. Beyond John Wentworth's litigious personality lie an apparent belief among city officials that the Club was a professional commercial theater masquerading as something else.

The Wentworths and their lawyers presented themselves with situational awareness. To the national theater community, they claimed to be the smallest professional regional repertoire company worthy of the sort of admiration due David in his contest with Goliath. To local tax and zoning authorities, they were institutional weaklings deserving special treatment. Loss of the company's tax-exempt status freeing it from property taxes posed an existential threat.

For years, the Wentworths had followed Arena Stage's lead in claiming to be an educational not-for-profit. As already mentioned, Arena founders Zelda and Tom Fichandler creatively transformed their company from a commercial theater to an educational non-profit to secure foundation grants. The Fichandler's gambit required Congressional legislation as well as a fulsome commitment to youth and other educational programs. The Wentworth's case similarly rested on their long-standing and active programs engaging the Washington area's youth. These activities continued at the O Street theater following the move of the Club's mainstage to 23 Street.

In September 1972, Judge Sorrell ruled that the Club had failed to justify an exemption from real estate taxes for its 23rd and L Streets.²³⁶ The Court instructed the Club to pay \$30,000 in back taxes and interest to the District covering the period July 1970 through June 1973. Sorrell wrote in his opinion that the Court "simply cannot find a generally recognized relationship of teacher and student existing between petitioner's paying audience and actors on the stage."²³⁷

Charles Duncan, a former D.C. corporation counsel, represented the Club and cited previous cases and opinions in favor of theater groups similar to the Club, particularly to Arena Stage's non-profit status. Ironically, the club had enrolled 250 students into its classes for the 1972 fall semester and was supporting the graduate work of more than fifty students enrolled at area universities. Its faculty included more than a half-dozen recognized theatrical instructors, including Stephen Aaronson who had taught at New York's Julliard School).²³⁸

Sorrell remained unmoved, pointing out that Arena, "although relying on professional actors, had an agreement with Actor's Equity Association which allowed students to participate in its stage productions." In contrast, the Club "is solely a professional theater with the use of students on the stage minimal at best."²³⁹ Subsequent appeals, and an effort to push legislative remedy through Congress (which still served as the City's governing council in this pre-home rule

era) to protect the Club, failed.²⁴⁰ Connecticut Democrat Congressman Robert Giaimo's effort to push tax relief for Washington theaters eventually fell short on the floor of the House.²⁴¹

Allen moved his New Theater of Washington into the O Street building, which he rechristened the Paul Robeson Center.²⁴² City authorities placed a lien on the 23rd Street building, which forced the Club's creditor banks to foreclose on their loans, eventuating in the building's sale to new ownership.²⁴³

Some, such as Club actress Lucy Brightman, attempted to put a happier face on these events. Brightman told the *Washington Post* that the Club was not dead just because it had lost its building. The company attempted to mount a new season on borrowed stages but failed.²⁴⁴ Meanwhile, First Baptist exacted its final revenge, purchasing the O Street building, tearing it down for a parking lot (which it remained for half-a-century).²⁴⁵

A Problem Larger than the Washington Theater Club

The demise of the Washington Theater Club, like its birth, is a complicated story full of twists and turns in which Club leaders made their share of mistakes. Viewing the Club's collapse as a consequence of ill-considered individual measures is mistaken. The entire Washington theater scene was under pressure in a city not-yet-recovered from the 1968 civil disturbances following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Furthermore, one which Congressional mismanagement had yet to give way to meaningful, if flawed, home rule.

The *Post's* Donnelly seemed particularly pessimistic, writing "with plays like 'The Prodigal Daughter' and 'Full Circle' Washington isn't exactly in the midst of a theatrical renaissance. That's what some people said was going on here a little over two years ago. Starry-eyed, they were, with dreams of a new font of culture at the Kennedy Center and talk of

Washington's numerous 'professional stages': National, Arena, Kreeger, Washington Theater Club, etc. Now there are people who are saying the whole culture scene has gone bust; instead of another 'Pippin', at the Center, we've got a slightly arthritic revival of 'The Pajama Game'."²⁴⁶ The malaise descending over the Washington theater scene appeared more pronounced than a few worthless plays. Nationally and locally some of the highest rates of inflation in recent memory were eating away of the capacity of theaters to survive.²⁴⁷ Foundations and corporate donors were recalibrating their philanthropic strategies moving away from the arts toward social causes.²⁴⁸

These national trends proved more pernicious in Washington. Of five Washington organizations included in a national Ford Foundation survey of the health of arts providers, "the National Ballet has already folded. A second, the Washington Theater Club, has failed to put on a season this year and is in grave financial difficulty. A third, the Opera Society of Washington, has apparently missed a Ford Foundation grant because of money problems. The two other Washington organizations included in the study were Arena Stage and the National Symphony were holding on."²⁴⁹

Donnelly's *Post* colleague Shales set forth the peculiarities of Washington that accelerated the era's mix of financial challenges. "Within past weeks," he began, "the National Ballet company folded, the Washington Theater Club all but ceased to exist, and the Opera Society of Washington apparently lost a \$38,000 Ford Foundation grant because it couldn't come up with adequate matching money of its own. In addition, the D.C. Black Repertory Company suffered – though apparently survived -- crucial financial crunches [*B.R. - and would not survive another two years*], the American Theater in L'Enfant Plaza flopped after one season as a legitimate stage, and the management of the National Theater said it wasn't sure what the next season would bring – or even if there will be one." The arts nationally are in a bind, he continued, exacerbated by inflation.

However, Shales continued, “For Washington arts groups, the financial squeeze is more stifling than in other cities because this one has no industries to help pay the bills. The only game in town – the federal government – doesn’t do much more for the arts here (through the National Endowment for the Arts) than it does in all the non-federal cities of the nation. And the District of Columbia offers no help. In fact, until it was prodded out of lethargy last January, the D.C. Commission on the Arts hadn’t even bothered to apply for \$150,000 in federal funds that were waiting to be disbursed to local organizations (the commission was since reorganized).”

“Worse,” for Shales, “the District levies a 5 per cent amusement tax that must either be added to the price of theater tickets – thus further discouraging sales – or taken out of the receipts. The federal government gives us about \$100,000 and the District takes \$50,000.”

By contrast, “attendance is not a problem for the most part,” Shales noted. “‘They’re storming the doors!’ says the ever-ebullient Hayes. Arena Stage is winding up one of its best-attended seasons. Wolf Trap Farm Park in suburban Virginia has started off its summer – sold out months ahead for the Metropolitan Opera – with 66,000 admissions in the first month up \$26,000 from the same period last year.”²⁵⁰

Writing to the *Washington Post* from her position in Dallas, Roselee Blooston scorned Washington for not doing more to save the Club. Blooston was already a prominent writer, actress, teacher and arts administrator who would later win more than her share of awards in all these endeavors. A native Washingtonian, she felt a special sense of betrayal when learning of the Club’s travails. “The City of Washington,” she wrote, “owes it to the people of the entire metropolitan area to buy the Washington Theater Club as a theater with a future. It would be an act of faith in the Theater Club’s continued possibilities and one which the Club would, in turn, have to work hard to repay. But such an act on the part of the city would be all the incentive

necessary for the Washington Theater Club to get back on its feet, in reciprocal service to the community.”²⁵¹

The story of the Washington Theater Club is one of missed opportunities, chances passed by in part because of the absence of a local government which cared first and foremost about the city it managed. Pre-home rule Washington was run by and for the Federal government and not its residents and home-grown institutions.

The story similarly is one of great achievement, creating a theater of high artistic standards that engaged the leading challenges facing its community. From bringing new works to the American stage to focusing on African American authors, artists, and works; from entertaining audiences to taking Cole Porter’s biting lyrics to Richard Nixon in the White House, the Wentworths, Davey Marlin-Jones and everyone else associated with the Washington Theater Club created a legacy worthy of notice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Leah Richardson, Special Collections Librarian, and the staff of the Special Collections Research Center at The George Washington University Gelman Library for their assistance in this research. I also would like to thank Derek Hyra and his colleagues with the American University Metropolitan Policy Center for their enthusiastic support of this work.

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