

*An Oral History of the Gilbert Theater ~ Part XII*

*September 15, 2015*

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[Musical introduction---gong sounds three times]

Jason: Good evening once again, ladies and gentlemen. This is Jason Wetzel from scenic and historic downtown Fayetteville. And Lynn Pryer, the artistic and creative genius of the Gilbert Theater. Lynn, what's in store for us tonight?

Lynn: Well, first of all, Jason, I have to make a correction to something I said last week. Someone who listens to these oral histories is probably finding mistakes all over the place. Well, I found one from last week when I listened to the tape this week talking about "Friendly Fire" by Chris Canfield. That was the play that we did downstairs and took to competition, and I remember that I said that we came in second with entries all over the state and one of the judges said we should have won. But I said at that time that it was a Viet Nam story. I'm having synapses in my mind that are not firing! Listen to what I'm going to read to you here.

"'Friendly Fire', a reprise of last season's premiere, directed by Michael Brocki. Small-town life is disrupted as a Gulf War veteran struggles with the darker side of human nature in this psycho-drama set in Chapel Hill. Contains strong language and adult themes." Yeah, it was based on a true event in Chapel Hill.

Jason: Listen, when was the play; what year?

Lynn: In the mid-'90s.

Jason: Mm-hmm.

Lynn: Well, I'm going to read this; I didn't read this earlier. This is from Greg Hathaway. "Greg Hathaway and the Gilbert Theater are proud to announce the Grand Opening of Fayetteville's newest theater, located at Gallery 122 on Maxwell Street."

Oh, for heaven's sake, I'd forgotten about that. There was a time when we were welcome at Greg Hathaway's wonderful building there on Maxwell Street. It says, "To launch our new theater properly, a festive dance is planned after the performance on November 1st. The Art Center's great room, 301 Hay Street, is the stage and you are the actors in eye masks and party attire. We will also be wishing our cast and crew to break a leg. Days after closing, the company will travel to Asheville to enter "Friendly Fire" in the North Carolina Theater Conference Community Theater Competition. If you would like to attend the performance and/or the party," and so on.

So, I'd forgotten about that. That was very lovely of Greg to do that.

James: There was a time when the Gilbert was referred to as the "Gilbert Gallery Theater."

Lynn: The Gilbert Gallery Theater---yes, thank you---I get by with a lot of help from my friends. [Laughter] When we left here; we haven't begun to leave here yet in this oral history.

Jason: Right.

Lynn: When we leave here, we go down to the Arts Council Great Gallery and that building is the former post office, built in 1910; beautiful building. And since we were then performing in this thing that ordinarily was an art gallery, we called it the Gilbert Gallery Theater. So thank you, James, for reminding me of that. A bit early, but nevertheless, it'll bear repeating, I'm sure.

You know, once again, Jason, I just went through the scrapbook, pulling things out and I'm glad you weren't there, because I was damaging some of those original . . .

Jason: Oh-h-h.

Lynn: . . . the original backing paper---you told me that that huge, eight-year-long, forty-nine-play scrapbook should never have been in a 1913 ledger and I couldn't agree with you more. And it's all yellow and crinkling, but in order to share it, it is so big. It's a huge fan now and I had to read something by putting my head down at a ninety-, some-kind-of-degree angle to read it, and then if I want to use it for the show, I have to take it off, and that's what I've been doing. But we will return those pieces later.

But here's something that I found. "Gilbert Theater, 647 Brandts Lane, presents a theater party." Yes, in those early days, not wanting to annoy the neighbors too much, I called things "theater parties," and this particular card, which was sent to---oh, wonderful - to Mrs. Beth Johnston, who was our photographer for years and years and years. A wonderful photographer. She gave of her talent so frequently. Thank you, Beth, if you're listening to this. Anyway, this was your card. Somehow I got it and slapped it into the scrapbook.

But what we were doing that night was we were doing a reading, and we used to do a lot of readings. When we didn't have a play going on, we would just squirrel in a Saturday night or something during rehearsal or a Sunday afternoon, and sit on black stools. I bought eight or ten tall stools, painted them black; flat, matte black. And I have several of them still downstairs to this day, and they're back and forth to the existing theater whenever they need a stool. And we would sit there and we would do a play reading; not a stage reading in which you get to do some moving, but this Christmas we read *A Child's Christmas in Wales* by Dylan Thomas.

It says, "*A Child's Christmas in Wales*, a reading, December"---oh, it was two nights---"December 13th and 14th, 8:00 P.M.. *Repondez s'il vous plait*" and so on. And you can bring one guest.

Jason: And how was that received?

Lynn: Well, they were all loved, if I do say so myself. And who could lose on that one? What you do for those readings; you would rehearse two or three times. You'd get some fine people together, sit on a stool. And "you're going to do this part," and "you're going to do this part," and "you're going to do this part." And assign them like that, hand out the scripts, practice a couple of times, and then invite your friends. And it was always just lovely. And then we would have Christmas desserts and drinks and go up to the living room and have a fire in the fireplace and sit in front of the tree.

Jason: What you're describing goes back two hundred years in America. This was how people entertained themselves.

Lynn: Yes---yeah, yeah. Well, you know, entertainment is entertainment. We should still be doing it. I mean, just anybody can do it. I mean, you don't have to have a theater background. You can just---

When I was in Berkeley, I was part of two play reading groups and, oh, I enjoyed that so much, and it was very, very simple. You'd go there and, say, seven o'clock in the evening, this wonderful Julia Morgan building near the UC campus called the Berkeley City Club; go to the beautiful room with a fireplace. And Marge. I'll never forget Marge Gilchrist would say, "Here's the name of the play." She would choose---nobody had any input---she would just choose the plays and say, "Lynn, you're going to read this part," and "you're going to read this part," and "you're going to read this part." And then we would just read them. And then we would choose one of the plays---we'd do it once-a-month---choose one of the plays to turn into a stage reading at Christmas time for club members in this absolutely gorgeous Julia Morgan building---room; building and room---big fireplace, roaring fire; incredible, fifty-foot-tall tree, and then do the stage reading there. Those were great days, but nothing is greater than our lives right now, I must say.

But here---one of the things that happened Christmas after Christmas in that very same room, with lots of people invited, friends and family---I would read Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory." And what makes me think of it is---I have a card here---no, I do remember. I did it two or three times here in the living room. Here is what it says: "Gilbert Theater, 647 Brandts Lane, presents Truman Capote's 'A Christmas Memory,' a reading. If you would like to attend, call this number to reserve a seat for the date of your choice. Admission is free. Reservations required."

Now, this really wasn't part of the Gilbert; it wasn't part of the Gilbert Theater. We say the Gilbert Theater. It really was my own Christmas party. And I would read the "Christmas Memory" for my friends and I loved doing that.

Jason: That would be a nice tradition to start.

Lynn: And I have this wonderful script I used. You could do it. Now, you know, we really, really enjoyed doing monologues. I think we must have done under my aegis six of them. One of them was "Talking With," and this was written by Jane Martin. And I tore the---[laughs]---Jason is looking at the program I took out of the---please forgive me, I taped it up here. Anyway, I had to have it in my hands because I wanted to read these things.

"About the author: 'Jane Martin,' a pseudonym for an anonymous Louisville playwright, may be a male or a female; we don't know. What we do know is that he or she writes quirky plays about feisty women." "Vital Signs," that's one of the plays we did here, as well. I really wanted to do "Cementville," but that was with a bunch of roller derby-skating women who would curl your hair if you heard them talk.

So we did "Vital Signs" by Jane Martin, but we also did "Keely & Du" and we'll get to that perhaps next week. That is a play that needs talking about at length. But Jane Martin---I do know who it is; a man, and he was artistic director at the Louisville Playhouse for years, and his name escapes me at the moment. If he's listening, that's what you get for not using your real name. [Jason laughs]

So these were---let's see---one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven different monologues. Some of them were ten minutes-long; others were fifteen or twenty. And I'm just going to hit a few of them here. "Clear Glass Marbles" by our wonderful Jane Moran. She hasn't been on the Gilbert stage enough in recent years. But it was all about marbles and we had hundreds of marbles that she would hold up to the light in this container. I kind of forget the story that she was telling. And then, somehow she drops this container with the marbles, and all of them just roll all over the place. Then she goes around and picks them up and is continuing with the story.

Well, I'm telling you, we found marbles. [Jason laughs] Sometimes you really lost your marbles around here, but we'd find them months and months later. Someone would step on one and practically break their neck. Anyway, I do remember that very clearly. Oh, and our wonderful Nancy Roach. Oh, what a fabulous actress she was; is. She was a rodeo girl. Rhonda Brocki did something with a twirler---what do you call it?---baton! She twirled the baton and with her dance movements she did that, but she told her story while twirling this baton.

During the story time earlier this evening, the Theater Stories, I mentioned this one, but this was with the wonderful Ann Tosco---"Lamps." We were talking about spectacle on stage. Well, each one of these was just a spotlight on the stage with these eleven people. Most or all were women, telling these stories, and Ann's story was about lamps. How she loved lamps. There were a dozen. She would hold one up to the light and say something about it. I'm telling you, I just love the monologue format, where you get a bunch---we did so many wonderful---

Then Marcela did one called "Marks." Marcela Casals, one of our best actors and directors and theater-lovers, and best friend of so many of us. She was a woman who had tattoos and she put them on with henna. And so she sat there in the little triangle downstairs with a spot on her, where she talked about how this one came about, and how this tattoo came about, and this one and that one; just unforgettable. So that was "Talking With."

I'm telling you, I'm having more fun, Jason, going through these, uh . . . So, here's the postcard that we sent out for "Talking With." "Jane Martin's 'Talking With.' Eleven women of all ages and backgrounds share their lives in compelling monologues." Another one was a woman---I should mention this---it was about a woman who---a handler. Her father, whom she talked about, handled rattlesnakes in the mountains of Tennessee and other places. Oh, it was chilling. She had a box with a rattlesnake in it.

Jason: A live one?

Lynn: No. But she, I think, if memory serves, she's holding the box, it's closed. But she said, "Now if you believe enough in God; God's protection, you can put your hand in there and you won't be bitten. This goes on to this day. And so she puts her hand in the box and it's bitten. No, I'm telling you, this is good theater, folks. This is very, very good theater.

All right, "Talking With," directed by yours truly; dates and times, 8:00 drinks. Did I mention this last time? I did, I think.

Jason: Not "Talking With."

Lynn: No, I meant drinks. Forgive me if I did.

Jason: Do it again.

Lynn: Well, anyway, all our early invitations said, "Here's the time. Arrive at Brandts Lane for drinks."

Jason: People got upset.

Lynn: Yes, people got upset. I don't remember any of the patrons; they were coming and they were drinking the wine coolers and sangria. But I had some actors who would say, "I really"---in fact, our wonderful woman who put these programs together. She did this absolutely marvelous job. And she said, "Lynn, do you really have to put it like that?" And I said, "Yes, I do, because I want this, communicating---you're going to get here at 8:00 and you're going to have some wine."

Oh, and then here at the bottom---this is a very important note. "Please do not park on Brandts Lane." At first I was going in twenty different directions. People would be parking up and down the lane and I said, "So what?" Well, some neighbors found this difficult; I mean, it shouldn't be happening. So that's when I started doing this, and to this day I have people who will---pouring-down rain, it's snowing. They've come for tea or something and they don't park on Brandts Lane. "I remember, you can't park on Brandts Lane." And I said, "Well, I didn't mean one person coming for coffee couldn't park on Brandts Lane." But these traditions just still hang in there, don't they?

And I'm going to share one more thing tonight. It's a wonderful garden show. A children's play. We did such wonderful children's work, if I do say so. This was "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown." Here I'm opening the program. Those were the days that we had "Friends of the Gilbert," where we honored all of the people who gave money. And so reading those names takes me back twenty years.

But let's get back to "Charlie Brown." Charlie was the wonderfully talented Kevin Hight, who earlier played one of the characters in last week's play that we talked about, "Crisis at Trinity." Remember that? We talked about "Crisis at Trinity."

Jason: Yes, yes.

Lynn: And then one of the most talented actors ever played Snoopy. Sam Williams. I'd like to know where he is today. He did stand-up like nobody I've ever known. James, you knew him.

James: Oh, yeah.

Lynn: He graduated from Methodist and left us. Yes, he was a theater major at Methodist. One of the most brilliant actors in stand-up. One Christmas party about two in the morning we all stood around this table and Sam Williams stood there and did stand-up as good as anything you would see on television. Marvelous.

Then---let's see, who else? My wonderful Mimi Carter played Patty. She was a big person in our lives here at the Gilbert. Then Lucy was played by Marcela, who was marvelous as Lucy. But picture this: We had a dog house out there---it's a musical---we had these adults dressed up like the children. Then people are walking in; families; children galore with picnic baskets and blankets; as many as a hundred-and-twenty people watching this wonderful show. I'm very, very proud of the shows that we did for children. We'll talk about more of them as the weeks go on, Jason.

Thank you so much for---I want to thank Mary McGee, that long-suffering audience member here in our studio, and our new audience member, Brenda Alt, tonight. And we thank you, Jason, for hanging in and probably saying to yourself as you look at that script, "We have just got started."

Jason: We're just starting. [Clapping]

[Music trails out]