

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

*December 15, 2015*



[Musical introduction---gong sounds three times]

Jason: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Jason Wetzel from historic, downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina, with Mr. Lynn Pryer, creative genius of the Gilbert Theater. Good evening, Lynn.

Lynn: Good evening, Jason. Here we are, one week later, around the table. I'm just loving every minute of this. We're sitting here with this green felt on top of the table. Why? Because James got after us months and months ago because we were making too much noise. And so I bought this green felt and I hope it's helping. And then you're drinking this color-coordinated---even though my speech is not coordinated---these beautiful deco glasses---

Jason: Art deco, yes.

Lynn: I'm telling you, this is all too gay for words! [Laughter] Anyway, it just doesn't stop. I was so thrilled last week, you know. We talked about my finally finishing the removal of all the ephemeral aspects of our early eight years. They're all safely in these envelopes, but I failed last week to put things about Marilyn Sachs back in the envelope and there was a glass of water there, and you were about to have a fit that I was going to knock it over and ruin that. You are constantly reminding me, with good reason, to please be careful with these things. They are irreplaceable.

Jason: This is North Carolina theater history.

Lynn: People may come and go, but ephemera in the right hands lasts forever. I think I'm turning that around.

Jason: I like that; I like it, I like it.

Lynn: But now, I'm very eager to talk with you about what is next. You've given me these archival boxes with the archival paper, but do you want me to take the contents out of the envelopes and lay them out in these special boxes and separate things with the---

Jason: Right now, I would say leave them where they are. Put the envelopes in the archival boxes, 'cause that'll diminish the moisture from getting to them; that will help. So just take the envelopes and put them in the boxes. Put them all in as many envelopes as you can load up in there and that keeps the moisture and humidity away from them.

Lynn: All right, all right.

Jason: But, it's interesting that we will take these in a year and get a grant written and have these digitally produced; put on a database in North Carolina museums, where people all over the world could then search the database for what it was like in the twentieth century; late-twentieth-century Fayetteville. What was the theater scene; community theater? That's where we're heading with this.

Lynn: Well, thank you for reminding me that even though when some of us leave this mortal coil sooner or later, our work lives on. And so, thank you for that, Jason. So, I think that was my last question about that.

Now, I had such fun finding this and that over the last few weeks. And here, I just have to show this photo to you and I want James to see it, also. This is a picture; I think perhaps it's the only one we have, of our miniscule light booth, which would seat two people very, very intimately, and I think I described months and months ago what our lighting setup looked like.

Jason: If you could do that again . . .

Lynn: Well, it was---we had track lighting for the stage; it was all I could afford. There hadn't been one grant, I'm telling you. Not one penny. In those early days, I was paying everything myself and happy to do it. But, we had track lighting. And then we had those sliders in the light booth; all the lines came into the light booth, of course. And then you can see here this panel with sliders we all used to have in our homes. You had these track lights and some of them were dimming and so on, up and down, up and down. The kids would play with them and all.

Well, I put a whole panel of them, about ten or twelve of them, all together and the light person---here you see this person with a headset, looking very professional with a beard and all. I can't remember who this person is. But you sit there and when they needed a light change, you just moved the sliders up and down. But when you wanted a special effect, and it had to happen all at once, the person designing the lights would take a piece of cardboard and cut pieces out, little rectangles, so that if you put the board on top of the sliders and pushed it down all together, some sliders would stay up; others would come down. Can you picture that?

James: Very good, very good.

Lynn: I mean, I think cavemen had similar---[Laughter]. Anyway, that's what we had at first. And you can see here; you can dim the house lights right here. Here's the dimmer for the house lights. Did I tell the story about---after I seated people, 'cause you know I was the usher. I was the custodian, I was the usher, I was the artistic director, third in importance.

Anyway, when it was time for the show, when I got everyone seated, separating couples if they were different heights and all that, I would knock on the door gently to tell the light person that we were about to start. Then I would sit down on the actor's bench



and watch the play, wringing my hands or pacing or whatever, depending on the play. A few James was in. And I was pacing, no doubt.

Anyway, so I sat down, but nothing happened; nothing happened. And finally--- James is going to have to blurb this out---I said, "Oh, [expletive], I'm in this play!" [Laughter] And I forgot! [Laughs] So I had to dash by, walk in front of the whole audience, go around back, go through the priest hole into the dressing room. 'Course, all the other actors were standing there, all ashen; "What's happened? We were given places, you know, five minutes ago, ten minutes ago!" And I said, "Well, I was having problems!" I don't know how long it was before I told people that I said, 'Oh, that's right, I'm in this play!" [Laughter] So, that gives you an idea of why---that was probably my last stage performance. Too pathetic for words.

But what I really wanted to talk about this time together is play-readings. *I love play readings*. Well, of course, theater people do. But people love stories and one way of getting them is to have an evening of reading a play. When I was in Berkeley, for years I was in two play-reading groups. One of them, I would leave my apartment at 7:00 in the evening and walk over just one block from the University of California campus, and go to this beautiful Julia Morgan building and meet with friends in a beautiful room with the fireplace. And this is how we organized our play-readings: Marge was in charge of choosing the play. Marge would get the number of copies that we needed and then we would all sit down and wait for Marge to tell us what to do. We would just sit there.

To folks listening, this is one way of doing this. There are dozens of other ways, b but this is how we did it. It was successful. Someone has to be in charge of these things, right, with good taste? She would choose marvelous plays and she would say, "Tonight's play is blah-blah-blah," and sometimes---once I remember it was Oscar Wilde---oh, what was it? It'll come to me in a minute. And "Lynn, you're doing this part, and Mary, you're doing this part, and Bill, you're doing this part." And just literally toss the scripts to you. Talk about a cold reading, I mean.

But anybody listening to my absolutely lousy reading of poetry and bits from newspapers in the last six months, wondering, as I said earlier, how did he ever get in this job?; I was very good at cold-reading. People complimented me. Anyway, so Marge would then give some background about the play and say a little bit about the plot and all. Then we would start reading. And we had not read it before, and these were all skilled readers. And sometimes we'd have an audience; a husband would come or a wife would come, and just sit there. But we just simply were reading plays. And, by and large, if memory serves, we did not stop for any reason.

Oh, and then Marge would read the stage directions that were applicable. And we would just go through it like this and gradually warm to the character and so on. But there's something very, very---I mean all actors should do this whenever they can. For the last twenty-one, -two years, I've threatened to start a play-reading group and just do it this way; sit around this very table and do just as I'm describing it. It hasn't happened; I don't know why. But then, of course, we did this on stage; invited audiences, you know. We've done that in the Gilbert several times and I just loved it

But, anyway, once a month we'd all get together and do that; I just loved it. Then, once a year we would all choose a play that we were going to do for an audience as a stage reading. The stage reading, for the listeners who don't know, is a cross between---

you still carry the script, but you're not sitting on stools or on chairs around a table or whatever. But you're on your feet; perhaps going back to a stool or whatever, back and forth. There's some blocking, in other words, and you do some stuff; maybe with a few props or something. But, a stage reading is you're holding the book. And they're wonderful, because if you feel the impulse---hey, I want to get out of the chair here and start moving a bit---so we would choose one of our plays out of the eleven for that previous year and do a stage reading. We would have forty or sixty people up there in this gorgeous room with the huge fireplace and the Christmas tree. And just do that. And then have refreshments afterward, and it was a wonderful evening.

Jason: How did you get motivated to warm to the character and how long did it take?

Lynn: Well, of course, when you're doing it month after month, you just dive in and read. Maybe Marge would have said a little bit about the character and you read the description. Maybe give you five minutes or something to read about your character, and she would have given us plot points and so on. But very soon, you're just swinging with it. It was just marvelous.

Then I was in a second group in Berkeley. These were professors, a very intellectual group, and I didn't enjoy it nearly as much. The plays were very esoteric and once I suggested a play, and of course, everyone turned in horror. [Laughs]

Jason: What did you suggest?

Lynn: Oh, I forget what it was. But it was something that was not erudite enough, as I remember. And a play reading---I'm wondering, anybody listening to this out there; you know, we have listeners from all over the world, including the UK, James tells me, and I have a suspicion who they are.

Jason: Yeah?

Lynn: But, whatever. Perhaps this will plant a seed and we might get some people organizing play-reading around the world. You can't beat it for socializing and for just good, clean fun!

Now, as I pick up my glasses, you see what was going to be the second thing on our topic this week; foreign language plays. Out of the hundred and twenty that we've done, if I can pronounce this, "oeuvre," body of work, we did one foreign language play, in Spanish. And I re-discovered it this past week, as I'm saying. This past week has been one discovery after another. I felt like a foreigner in a foreign land, I mean, and I'll read the program and it'll say, "Lynn Pryer, director," and I'll say, "Lynn Pryer can't even remember this play." No, that's not true, but I did not direct this foreign language play; I think Marcela did. I know she did, and it was marvelous. But I would encourage companies out there in our community and our county to think about that, because we do have a large Spanish-speaking population, don't we? And we need to be thinking about that and not always just expecting them to join our world with our language.

Any questions, Jason?



Jason: Well, I want to know; the Spanish play, what type of---what was the play?

Lynn: It was---I'm going to have to pull it out.

Jason: That's all right; that's okay.

Lynn: Okay. It was, uh . . .

Jason: That's all right. What was the reaction of the audience? What type of audience did you have?

Lynn: Well, a lot of Spanish-speaking. And I'm so glad you asked me! It was just wonderful. They felt like "Someone is really doing something for us." They were sitting and smiling and laughing, as I remember. Yeah; yeah, it was very, very rewarding.

Jason: 'Cause I don't remember anything being done in Fayetteville like that.

Lynn: As far as I know, it hasn't; right. Jason, thank you so much for being the impetus of this week's---this whole thing about the oral history of the Gilbert; putting up with my blathering on. So, I'll see you next week.

Jason: We'll look forward to it, Lynn.

[Music trails out]