

ACT II

**THE STORY OF
RICHMOND CIVIC THEATER
1959 — 1979**

By
GEORGE T. BLAKEY

INTRODUCTION

"What tomorrow will bring to Richmond Civic Theater depends on varied factors - the genius of the director, the physical facilities, the wisdom of the Board and their devotion to their task, and the continued large membership and participation . . ."

Opal Thornburg
*Their Exits and Entrances, The
Story Of RCT, 1941-1959* (p. 91)

Opal Thornburg's judicious history of RCT's first eighteen years is a chronicle of infancy, growth, anticipation and hope. The story of a small group of believers who established a community theater, turned its membership tickets into coveted prizes, and drew national attention to the quality of its productions is a story to inspire and instruct. Although their "exits and entrances" from stages at Earlham College, McGuire Hall, and the Indiana Theater might have created an illusion of instability, the guiding genius of Norbert Silbiger provided stability and artistic continuity to counterbalance RCT's migratory production patterns. At the end of nearly two decades, his paternal guidance had nurtured RCT into a healthy young adult whose past and present were impressive, and whose future, Thornburg speculated, "may be even better than we have dared to dream."

Act II covers the next two decades of RCT's history and is a story of maturity, sporadic growth and periodic decline, and adult responsibilities and anxieties. To strain the the human analogy, it is a story of "mid-life crisis," during which RCT learned to live with home ownership and mortgage payments, mourned the loss of its father, endured the rebelliousness of its children, and accommodated itself to altered expectations both within the family and in the community. Laughter, tears, comedy, suspense and tragedy; that's what theater is about, and RCT experienced them all in full measure from 1959 to 1979. Ultimately, *Act II* is the story of RCT's survival, a bit tattered, perhaps, but triumphant.

To attempt a twenty-year history of RCT in these few pages is an act of presumptuousness which I accept as a given condition. Beyond the obligatory review of approximately 150 plays, this chronicle must include many other aspects of the RCT experience: real estate management, maintenance engineering, personnel recruitment, fund raising, and public relations. In an increasingly transient society with rapidly changing tastes and accelerating costs in the arts, RCT has made many crucial decisions since 1959. Its continued existence on Richmond's cultural scene has depended on the foresight and wisdom of those decisions. *Act II* will try to place those decisions - artistic, financial, and sociological - in a perspective which relates the theater to its community. Equally presumptuous is to follow in the footsteps of Opal Thornburg, and to strive for comparable standards in recapturing RCT's past. A restatement of her goal in 1959 is appropriate again in 1979. "... the author asks the indulgence of readers for errors in fact, in interpretation, or in emphasis. The intention has been to tell the story accurately, without bias, with the keen appreciation of one who has loved Civic Theater and gained from it vast enjoyment over the years..."

George T. Blakey
Richmond, Indiana
December, 1979

CHAPTER I 1959-1962 - THE END OF AN ERA

Continuity rather than change characterized the 1959-60 season. Norbert Silbiger began his nineteenth year as director and maintained his successful tradition of selecting plays and casting them without tryouts. The Indiana Theater, leased yearly from the Robert Quigg family, hosted productions for the eighth season in a row. Gordon Bringle, a veteran performer and supporter of the theater, became president of the fifteen-member Board of Directors and inherited a healthy financial situation. RCT enjoyed a savings account of approximately \$18,000, and while a small deficit of \$763.00 carried over from previous seasons, the Board pledged frugal measures to pay it off by the end of the year. The major anticipated expenses in the annual budget of \$30,000 included \$7200 for rent, \$6500 for salaries, and \$5,000 production costs. Although rented storage and work space remained a problem, the general mood of the Board at the beginning of the season was optimistic. President Bringle announced in the program of the opening play that RCT had the "largest membership in our history," drawn from Richmond and thirty-four surrounding communities. Exceeding 2900, and selling at \$10.00, these memberships gave credibility to the Board's optimism for a successful and solvent season.

Productions for the 1959-60 season also provided continuity with RCT's past. Familiar performers and dependable backstage crews offered traditions and momentum for newcomers to the stage. For the season opener, Silbiger had picked Irving Berlin's rousing musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and had selected Richmond High School Choral Director, David Davenport, to help direct. Geneta Kern, remembered for her portrayal of Nellie in RCT's *South Pacific*, played the sharpshooter from nearby Darke County, and used Annie's original gun, on loan for this production. A big number from this play, "There's No Business like Show Business," referred to more than footlights and applause for Roy Doty, whose job each night was to provide a fresh pigeon for one of the shooting sequences. More than 100 people participated in putting *Annie* on stage, and the *Palladium-Item's* Carolyn Maund found the effort "tremendously successful." A comedy, *Who Was that Lady I Saw You With*, followed, and Charlotte Sweet Hessin made the most of the female lead, capturing the Best Actress award at season's end. Byron Maple and Tom Culbertson's sets were, according to a later program note, "The most complicated... ever attempted on our stage." To the delight of the audience, the set and scene changes occurred with a raised curtain to display backstage techniques. This pleasant experiment probably helped convince the judges to award it the Best Technical Production prize.

The season's third offering, *Say Darling*, was a lightweight comedy about the production of a musical show. It featured two RCT favorites, Ned Berheide and Bill Woehrmann, who shared generous applause with a painted backdrop of an airfield. RCT ushered in the new year appropriately with several young people in *Blue Denim*, a sensitive story of adolescence and generation gaps. Audiences had to brave zero temperatures to see the comedy-mystery, *The Gazebo*, but were rewarded for their efforts with an elegant living room set and an award-winning performance by another RCT veteran, Max Clevenger. *Tall Story* introduced sixteen new people to the stage in April and allowed Dick Tiernan to take a busman's holiday from high school athletics to play a befuddled college basketball coach. The seventh and closing production, *Third Best Sport*, poked fun at corporation executives during a Palm Beach convention. Charlotte Sweet Hessin gave her second strong performance of the season, and "Smiles" Frankel contributed her usual zest and stage expertise, much to the audience's delight.

At the season's conclusion, President Bringle declared it a success,



Max Clevenger in "The Gazebo" (Pyle Photo)

both artistically and financially, and most evidence agreed with his assessment. A sell-out crowd of 500 had enjoyed the annual Awards Banquet at Earlham College, production costs had been less than anticipated, and the budget contained an operating surplus in excess of \$1,000. The Indiana Theater had survived a brief scare from the Fire Marshall, but the Board's Building Committee recommended that RCT should not seriously consider purchasing the theater due to its high purchase price and maintenance costs. Instead, the Board negotiated another one year lease. Voicing its vote of confidence in the Director and its continuing anxiety about physical facilities, RCT awarded Mr. Silbiger a two year contract, contingent on the availability of a theater building.

Led once again by President Bringle, the 1960-61 Board faced some perennial problems and some new challenges. Five new members were elected to the Board during the Annual Meeting in 1960, thus providing the required one-third change of membership yearly. Season ticket sales again passed the 2900 mark, forcing the Board to declare memberships "sold out" for lack of additional space - a pleasant problem, indeed! This situation permitted slight increases in the annual budget, and circumspect expenditures resulted in another operating surplus at season's end of approximately \$2600. "Smiles" Frankel assumed leadership of a committee which attacked a long-standing problem, that of outdated and unattractive dressing rooms. Her group supervised considerable renovations over the next several months. Producing play programs which were both informative and entertaining fell to Kay Cloud and Sue Peters; their editing chores maintained an RCT tradition of sprightly pamphlets worthy of keeping after the final curtain. The obvious successes enjoyed by RCT this year prompted an invitation to present productions in New Castle, a request which had to be rejected for a number of logistical reasons.

Director Silbiger began his season with Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*, and was assisted again by David Davenport. Gloria Dixon, local dance teacher, provided the choreography for this ambitious musical, and Mrs. Leon Cox supervised the creation of 102 extravagant costumes. A large cast of veteran performers including Geneta Kern, Galen Miller and Max Clevenger romped through this tribute to Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and pleased receptive audiences. Opening night of the second production, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, had to compete with election returns from the Kennedy-Nixon presidential race. Many in the audience carried transistor radios with them, but fine acting by Helen Bringle and Joe Crist managed to transport them from counting votes back to a small Oklahoma town in the 1920's. *The Golden Fleecing* found Ned Berheide appearing in his third consecutive show for the season, a frothy farce in which navy men try to break a casino bank in Venice. Roger Gale's painted backdrops of St. Mark's Square drew comment and warm applause during the show.

Look Homeward Angel, adapted from Thomas Wolfe's novel by Ketti Frings, had won a Pulitzer Prize during its New York production. When its RCT performances ended in January, the Gant family - Eliza, W.O., and Gene - had become memorable characters for Richmond audiences, and three of the year's four acting awards would go to "Smiles" Frankel, Deskin Jones and Bill Stephenson, who played them. Lighter fare appeared with *The Marriage-Go-Round*, in which Sarah Murray and Richard Brown acted out and lectured on the art of international seduction. Mr. Silbiger's desire to give local audiences the best



"Look Homeward Angel" with Smiles Frankel and Bill Stephenson (Pyle Photo)

of recent Broadway bore fruit with *Send Me No Flowers*. RCT's production of this comic spoof of hypochondria was the first by any community theater after its New York run. The season reached a hilarious and stylish finale with *Auntie Mame*. Jane Kemper took on the role already made famous by Rosalind Russell and convinced the audience that Sue Peters was correct in calling this RCT trouper "one of the reasons for Civic Theater's wonderful success." Kemper had to fight for stage space, however, as Mary Helen Backmeyer and Joan Vigran made the most of their roles as Agnes Gooch and Vera. Very few RCT regulars were surprised when *Auntie Mame* received the award for Best Technical Production of the year.

Dr. Richard Brown assumed the Presidency for the 1961-62 season, a year which started with continued growth and success, but ended with shock and anxiety about the future. Ticket sales maintained their capacity level of nearly 3,000, and the annual budget of \$31,500 reflected slight increases for production costs and salaries. In February of 1962 the familiar "INDIANA" sign was removed from the front of the theater. This huge vertical sign had lit the corner of 10th and Main during the twenty years the building had been a movie house, but it no longer advertised the live productions of the past decade. So thoroughly had RCT impressed its personality on the site since 1952 there was even talk of re-naming the building to reflect its current function. There was an equal amount of discussion, however, of the building's inadequacies and of the need to look for better facilities for the future. Self-congratulation reached a peak in March when the *Saturday Evening Post* featured RCT in an article on "Stagestruck Americans." The piece by James Maxwell surveyed community theaters around the country, but focused on RCT and two of its productions for the year, *Oklahoma* and *A Majority of One*. Included were two large and complimentary photographs. Tempering this applause in the month of its appearance was Norbert Silbiger's announcement that his health would not permit him to continue in the director's position for another year. This season would be his last. Richard Brown had appeared in the 1941 production of *Our Town*, Silbiger's first show for RCT, and now as President, he would preside over the director's final show and the passing of an era.

Rogers and Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma* inaugurated the 1961-62 season, and once again Silbiger solicited the musical and choreographic assistance of David Davenport and Gloria Dixon. Filling the stage with veteran performers such as Geneta Kern, "Smiles" Frankel, Phil Shinness and Joanne Schube, Silbiger produced a popular show which played to standing room audiences and drew literary bravos from the *Saturday Evening Post*. Bill Woehrmann's permanent wave for his Curley role and Ned Berheide's outrageous checkered suit were topics of local comment for weeks following. RCT moved from Oklahoma to San Francisco for its second show, *The Pleasure of His Company*. A small but seasoned cast had fun with this romantic comedy about a wayward

father attending his daughter's wedding. *A Majority of One* was a good choice for the Christmas holidays. Large audiences left the theater feeling inspired by this play which triumphed over the prejudices of age, race, religion and nationality. Mary Helen Backmeyer captured the Best Actress award for her portrayal of the Jewish widow, and Eric Curtis' Japanese Businessman reminded many of his past successes on the stage.



Eric Curtis and Mary Helen Backmeyer constitute a "Majority of One" (Pyle Photo)

The Andersonville Trial offered RCT an opportunity to join in the nation's celebration of Civil War Centennial activities. Set and properties crews used old photographs and documents to faithfully recreate the Court of Claims room for this re-telling of the 1865 court martial of Henry Wirz. Carolyn Maund, who had been reviewing RCT productions in the *Palladium-Item* since the 1940's, felt the all-male cast was "splendid" and that Arthur Little as Henry Wirz was "one of the finest actors to appear" on the local stage. The judges apparently agreed, and gave him the Best Supporting Actor award, and to his prosecutor, John

Owen, the prize for Best Actor. *Janus* provided a light entertainment in February. Starring President Brown, this comedy about collaborating authors in New York was quite a contrast to the drama it followed and the mystery it preceded. *Monique* allowed Galen Miller to prove he was as adept in thrillers as he had already proven to be in musicals. It also allowed James Hardman to display his talent for spectacular lighting and sound effects, a talent developed in his nine years of service to RCT. Production #156 exuded nostalgia and farewell; *Harvey* was Silbiger's valedictory show. Deskin Jones and Mary Helen Backmeyer both recreated their roles from the 1951 production, Bert Keller, Jr. played the part originally performed by his father, and Esther Nusbaum's whimsical painting of the imaginary rabbit appeared again on stage. Fran Eward's tribute to Silbiger in the play program assessed his impact on Richmond audiences: "Always, those of us to whom good theater is meat and drink will remember him with profound gratitude."



"The Andersonville Trial" with John Owen and Arthur Little (Pyle Photo)

The annual Awards Banquet continued the tributes to RCT's director of twenty-one seasons. The Board announced that it had created a \$1200 retirement fund for Silbiger and requested Boards in the future to perpetuate the pension. Silbiger received many accolades

and gifts, including travel funds for a visit to his native Austria, which he immediately contributed to an RCT Building Fund. In 1959 Opal Thornburg had projected, "... it is inevitable that in time he too will leave the stage, and it is highly important to realize this and to resolve that Civic Theater can and will go on." Silbiger's imminent departure - RCT's first major break in continuity - was at hand.

CHAPTER II

1962-64, NEW DIRECTIONS

The search for a new director took precedence over all other problems in the Spring and Summer of 1962. President Brown had appointed a committee in March to recruit and evaluate candidates for the position. Consisting of himself, Gordon Bringle and Robert Baer, all Board members, the committee screened applicants and, by August the Board accepted its recommendation of Hubert Rolling as the new artistic head of RCT. Rolling arrived in Richmond in August ready to select a slate of plays for the rapidly approaching season, and to provide guidance for a group which had never known leadership other than Silbiger's. In his thirties, of medium height, with dark hair and a neatly-trimmed mustache, Rolling projected a debonair appearance which complemented his urbane background. Born in France and educated in New York at City College and Columbia University, he brought with him considerable experience in summer stock and community theater acting and directing. A quiet - almost shy - demeanor and a solitary life-style belied his tenacious ability to fight for firmly held principles. This trait, as events later showed, would create problems for him and the theater.

President Brown's second year as President of the Board provided other breaks with tradition besides a new director. At the annual meeting in May, 1962, a controversy revealed some discontent among the membership concerning the slate of nominees for Board positions. Several "write-in" ballots, which were disqualified, suggested alternatives to the candidates offered by the Nominating Committee. James Hardman later explained to the Board that this unusual occurrence was a protest from backstage workers who felt that the Board did not adequately represent the needs of technical crews and that better communication was called for. A dramatic breakthrough in this direction came later in the year with the purchase of T. B. Jenkins' warehouse for set construction and storage. Located at 12th and "B" Streets, only four blocks from the theater, this building could solve many of the space problems which had plagued RCT workers for years. The Board authorized \$8400 for its purchase, and later, additional amounts for renovations and heating. Norbert Silbiger's contribution of his travel funds to an RCT Building Fund was the catalyst for another controversy - whether to purchase the Indiana Theater as a permanent home or look for another facility. The Board created two committees to pursue these options, and among their various activities during the season were: seeking a professional appraisal of the building and polling the RCT membership for opinions on the two options. The results of the latter, as might have been predicted, were mixed.

Artistically, Rolling's first season at RCT departed from past traditions, introduced different techniques and utilized both old and new talent on stage. His rushed arrival in Richmond necessitated one break from a four-year tradition, that of opening the season with a splashy musical production. A comedy with a small cast would have to suffice until time permitted the mounting of a complex musical for the second offering. A change of his own design, however, was the institution of "tryouts" for casting plays. This seemed a logical innovation for a newcomer with little knowledge of available talent; the reasons were also philosophical. His concept of community theater was decidedly more democratic than the somewhat more authoritarian outlook which characterized his predecessor. A small cast of veterans, ably supported by seasoned backstage crews, helped make Rolling's initial effort a success. Richard Brown as a terrible-tempered musician, and Geneta Kern as his wife, drew laughs for *Once More With Feeling*, and complimentary, yet cautious, reviews for the new director. His second show, the long anticipated *Music Man* by Meredith Willson, had complicated sets, colorful costumes, musical direction by Manfred Blum, and enthusiastic performances by RCT favorites such as Jane Kemper, Charles Matthews, James Peelle, and Bill Woehrmann. All these combined to produce a hit which drew unqualified raves from the *Palladium-Item*. As well as confirming Rolling's credentials as Director, the *Music Man* made the name of another newcomer to Richmond, Bob



Joyce Eilar and Bob Sizemore star in "The Music Man" (Pyle Photo)

Sizemore, synonymous with talent. When Sizemore completed his five performances as Professor Harold Hill, RCT had an instant veteran in its midst.

Period of Adjustment, RCT's December holiday entertainment, proved to be less than a festive occasion. This recent work by Tennessee Williams had been approved by the Board in early September as part of Rolling's seven-play season. By the end of that month, however, several Board members had second thoughts about its appropriateness for Richmond audiences, and a special meeting of the Board discussed whether a substitute should be found for the play whose subject matter, moral tone and language fit into the category of "delicate." Since the play had already been cast, it remained on the schedule, but the issue of censorship had been broached. In the November play program, Rolling defended Williams and the play, pointing out that "it is not only proper but necessary" to present this play and that he believed Richmond was adult enough to understand Williams' "heartfelt cry for human compassion." A smaller than normal audience saw James Peelle, Max Stanford and Martha Rantanen work their way through a series of Christmas Eve marital problems, and the Board appointed a special committee which would read all plays suggested in the future by the Director, prior to Board approval.

The next two shows allowed veterans Gordon and Helen Bringle to star in a pair of starkly contrasted plays and produce two award-winning shows. Gordon's *Five Finger Exercise*, a serious "problem" play, won best technical production of the year, and Helen's *Everybody Loves Opal*, captured the Best Actress prize. In addition to Helen's interpretation of the odd-ball recluse, many remembered her junkyard apartment whose moose head bore Christmas tree ornaments. The sixth show found Rolling broaching "delicate" subject matter again, this time suspected homosexuality in the sensitive Robert Anderson play, *Tea and Sympathy*. The *Palladium-Item* declared it one of the season's "most memorable," and felt performances by Bill Hickman, George Porter and Charles Matthews were "outstandingly fine." Hearty laughter and generous applause closed the season and rewarded the large, all-male cast in *No Time for Sergeants*. James Peelle as Will Stockdale carried off the Best Actor prize for his evening's work of military malaprops such as having a line of toilet seats salute an officer.

RCT's first season "without Norbert" had been uneven, but successful. Memberships had again pushed 3,000; an operating surplus in excess of \$4000 remained in the budget; and a new \$500.00 stage curtain was on order. Program editor, Sue Peters, congratulated Rolling for his "exceptionally fine job of carrying on the high standards," and the Board renewed his contract for another year.

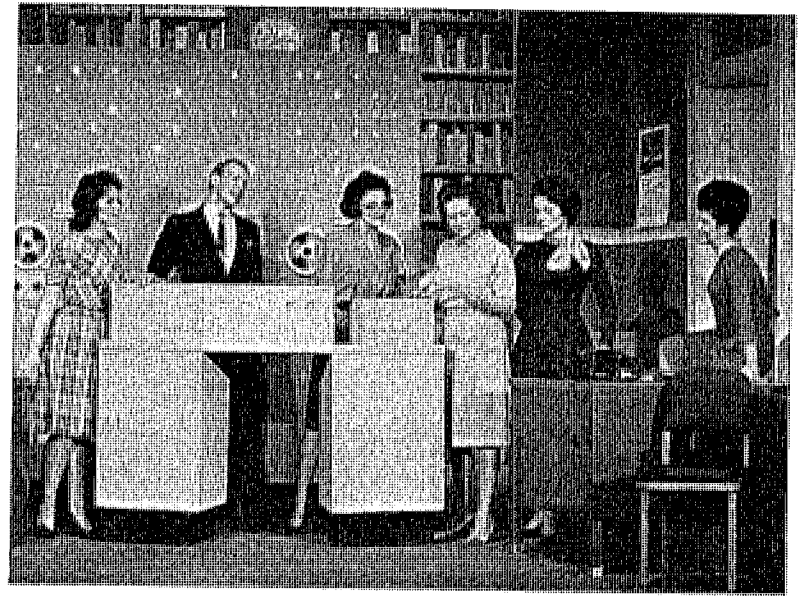
Rolling returned from a summer Shakespeare festival in Colorado and inaugurated his second season with *Li'l Abner*, the musical based on Al Capp's comic characters. This show marked the fifth musical for

Manfred Blum and the sixth for choreographer Gloria Dixon. Many new faces appeared on stage as inhabitants of the mythical Dogpatch; among them being Harold Harper as the title character. His previous chores as a Jaycee usher for RCT had made him familiar with the theater if not the stage. Jean Clark also moved front stage after ten years of painting sets and donned grease paint as Mammy Yokum. Production #165 offered unique challenges to RCT actors and technical crews. Rolling had solicited untried scripts from aspiring writers and had selected *Eclipse Day* by Bernard Sabath, a professor at Northwestern University. The script provided an intriguing study of a 1938 solar eclipse and its impact on a small town in Iowa, but did not provide many guidelines for set and lighting design or stage directions. Therefore, this was to be a premier production in more ways than one. Appropriate hoopla surrounded its November opening, complete with the author in attendance and pre-show music by the Peffect Circle Band. The intricate sets which revolved on turntables drew more positive comment than did the play itself. Several in the audience found the play reminiscent of *Our Town*; some enjoyed the status derived from a premier performance; a few appreciated the experiment in "new" drama; but many regarded it as a mistake, difficult to sit through.

Two pressing problems in the Fall of 1963 dominated the October and November Board meetings and clouded the first year of the new president, Ray Zaleski. Membership sales, while holding their previous level during the past year, had fallen off by approximately 300; in October they stood at 2677. This decline particularly distressed the Board since negotiations for purchasing the Indiana Theater were pointless if RCT's health remained precarious. The Quigg family's initial selling price for the building was \$60,000 and successful fund-raising would be contingent on a large and supportive membership. At the November 18 Board meeting discussion of this dilemma and related problems produced a resolution that any fund-raising campaign be shelved until "we have taken some steps to reverse the tide of objections" recently directed at RCT. Rolling told an Executive Meeting that same night that although memberships were down, he was unaware that the theater was in a "decline" and cited a survey from the past year which showed general satisfaction among the audiences with the productions. A special meeting of the Board in late November again addressed these problems. Some members had received many critical comments on play selection and questionable casting in the recent past. Others felt that the alleged "decline" and criticism were normal and predictable phenomena following Silbiger's departure.

Despite the Autumn unease within the Board and the mixed reactions to *Eclipse Day*, RCT enjoyed a delightful *The Desk Set* in December. Helen Bringle starred in this comedy which pitted humans against machines in a newly automated office. Her rival for applause was "emmarac," a dramatic computer fashioned by Barney Maple which

blinked its Christmas tree lights and spoke to the cast in their own pre-recorded voices. RCT displayed a remarkable example of technical work in the January production of *Career*. Eight sets on two turntables



Helen Bringle reads the printout from Emmerac in "The Desk Set" (Lynxwiler Photo)

helped Charles Matthews move through flashbacks on the twenty-five year career of a small town actor seeking success in New York theater. Depressing, although well staged, the play revealed that the anticipated similarities between the RCT actor and his role were more apparent than real. Another comedy, *Take Her, She's Mine*, dealt with the trials of sending a daughter off to college and introduced several new actors to the stage, such as Connie Slish and Tala Smock. Rolling directed his second Tennessee Williams play in as many years with *Summer and Smoke*. Little controversy surrounded this offering, however, and the show won Best Technical Production of the year. Nance Carlson made her RCT debut in this show, cried real tears as she was torn between her minister-father and physician-neighbor, and captured Best Actress award for her efforts. *Stalag 17* brought the season to a close with an all-male cast including John Hedges and James Peelle. Set within a prison camp barracks, the play required the large cast to develop character tensions in very cramped quarters. None of them endured as much as Bruce Dailey whose nightly bath in a tiny tub produced a very large cold by the end of the run.

The question of whether the Indiana Theater should become RCT's permanent home remained unanswered, but alive during the early months of 1964. In the January play program, Director Rolling argued the advisability of purchasing the Indiana and renovating it. This could be done, he estimated, for approximately \$150,000, which would include the \$60,000 purchase price, new seats, carpeting and ventilation. A new facility would cost approximately \$300,000 and would not have the tradition or location of the current building. He elaborated on these estimates at the March Board meeting and explained that RCT could pay this amount over a fifteen year period and rent the unneeded parts of the building for extra income. President Zaleski concluded his remarks on the subject by saying it would be "unwise and impossible" for RCT to undertake the project. Further discussion of the matter was tabled until a new Board could take office later in the year. Rolling continued the debate, however, in the May play program, stating that RCT would never realize its full potential until it found a permanent home.

This division of opinion between the Director and part of the Board reflected deeper differences on other concerns and a special meeting of the Board on April 1 resolved them. By a vote of eight to five, with two abstentions, the Board voted to not renew Rolling's contract at the end of the season. Secretary Donna Cox summarized the reasons to Rolling at the regular Board meeting on April 6: objections to play selection and casting, lack of communication between Director and Board, and the Director's poor job of selling himself and RCT to the community. Considerable dissent greeted this decision, particularly from several stage crew members, and President Zaleski was obliged to defend the Board position at the Annual Meeting later in May before a record turnout of members, some of whom expressed their disapproval. It was perhaps inevitable that RCT's second Director would find it difficult, if not impossible, to succeed Norbert Silbiger. Rolling's choice of plays differed greatly from his predecessor's, and had displeased many people in many ways; his "problem" plays replaced the traditional "best-of-recent-Broadway," and the newcomer's casting of parts had not always found favor either. He had also inherited an awkward situation for asserting his leadership at RCT; Silbiger accepted a position on the Board and frequently attended rehearsals at the theater. Disagreement over style and substance was unfortunate, but predictable, between the two men and among their followers. Program editor Joe Kaiser, who was also a Board Member, diplomatically bid farewell to the Director in the season's final program with this assessment of Rolling: "above all else he is a gentleman - never harsh, never crude, never malicious; always patient, understanding, and kind." Good character traits to possess. But apparently not enough to guarantee job security at 10th and Main in 1964.

CHAPTER III

"1964-1967, Reasons for Celebration"

Clevenger's Smorgasbord on Richmond Avenue hardly seemed a likely location for RCT to inaugurate its 24th season, but it was the site where several auspicious decisions took place which molded the immediate future. An award-winning actor and member of the Board of Directors, Max Clevenger hosted a special meeting of the Board at his popular restaurant on May 25, 1964. His jovial presence set the tone of the meeting, which contrasted sharply with the rancorous annual membership meeting of the previous week. Ray Zaleski received a vote of confidence by being re-elected to a second term as President, and despite the decline in membership and loss of a Director, the Board knew that the situation was not as bad as it might appear on the surface. An operating surplus of nearly \$4,800 from the past season created a nice buffer for starting a new year and *My Fair Lady* would be an impressive way to start it. The problem of a new Director was soon to be solved by the special guest present at the Smorgasbord, Chris Ringham, a candidate for the position. Following an interview with Ringham and his wife Kathy, the Board voted unanimously to hire him as the theater's third Director.

Chris Ringham brought to RCT a quality of flamboyance heretofore unknown. Unpredictable and talented, he ingratiated himself with many and commanded their passionate loyalties. He also alienated many others who did not regret his departure at the end of three turbulent years. This new director was a fair-haired native of Minnesota and had studied speech and theater at the University of Minnesota before compiling considerable acting and directing experience. Among other positions in his background was the eight-year stint as Director of the Kanawha Players in Charleston, West Virginia. In contrast to the somewhat passive and methodical Hubert Rolling who preceded him, Ringham's directing style was demanding, imaginative, filled with bursts of inspiration and last minute changes. He required total commitment and long hours from his actors and crews; one of his loyal fans remembered later that he "lived and breathed" theater and often lost track of time and reason in his complete involvement with it. Again in contrast to the previous Director, he was gregarious, social, and seemingly always "on stage" wherever he was. His post-rehearsal discussions with cast members became almost legendary as he laughed, cried and acted his way through his "notes" on the production. His wife Kathy soon drew attention to her own acting abilities, and assisted with publicity and theater promotion. With his expressive features, volatile personality and frequently bizarre clothing, Chris Ringham elicited extreme reactions which ranged from exhilaration to exasperation. From 1964 to 1967 RCT both liked and lamented his presence, but it could never ignore him.

The season opened with a display of total showmanship. More than \$2,000 was invested in the first show, *My Fair Lady*, and the results were obvious. Complex sets, elegant drops, lavish costumes - some rented from the original New York production - and an enlarged orchestra under the direction of Manfred Blum, all combined to do justice to Lerner and Loewe's long-awaited musical adaptation of Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Many RCT veterans crowded the stage; Eric Curtis used his native British accent to good advantage as Professor Higgins; Arthur Little's beard helped transform him into the "hairy hound" Zoltan Karpathy; Galen Miller played five roles; Jane Kemper, Charles Matthews and Bill Woehrmann all assisted in changing Marjorie Barker from the guttersnipe Eliza into the polished lady who would win Best Actress award at the end of the year. The *Palladium-Item* judged the production "professional in every respect" and many in the audience remember it as one of the finest shows in RCT's history. Television station WCPO from Cincinnati filmed segments of it for a feature on Richmond, and a later RCT play program sustained the applause by reminding members of the "new high standard" set in September.



Flora Hughes and Eric Curtis admire "My Fair Lady," Marjorie Barker (Wallace Photo)

Gore Vidal's *Visit to a Small Planet* followed and set another standard. Director Ringham played a small part, becoming the first RCT director to appear in his own play. This unusual comedy about Kreton, a visitor from another planet, allowed program editor Joe Kaiser to play his first lead. The play also challenged Pat Barton's properties crew to "float" guns and vases through the air. Most of the audience was amused by the production, but some dissent appeared in the Letters to the Editor section of the local paper, protesting Vidal's "unpatriotic" tone. Hardly anyone could fault the December show, *The Miracle Worker*, and its overall quality earned it the Best Technical Production of the year. Becky Endicott, as the young Helen Keller and



"The Miracle Worker" with Faith Pearce and Becky Endicott (Wallace Photo)

Faith Pearce as her teacher, both gave memorable performances, and despite the costume department's padding under their clothes, both sustained several bruises from their lengthy on-stage fight. Byron Maple's set crew also provided a water pump which worked for the climatic scene at the end of the play.

Ringham undertook an amazonian project in January, *The Women*, a bittersweet drama by Clare Boothe featuring 44 female roles. The play was a three-hour pastiche of individual parts and pieces which the director had to mold into a dramatic whole with the assistance of area lighting, skeletal sets and fast paced stagecraft. The farce, *See How They Run*, brought Marjorie Barker back on stage and into another English setting, this time a vicarage filled with real and bogus Anglican clergymen. Two of the roles were repeat performances; Smiles Frankel had played her part previously in Florida and Gene Schroeder had performed his in a California theater. A low-budget production (\$309.00) and largely unheralded, this play drew sustained laughter and applause. Another British play followed and provoked a different response from RCT audiences. *Ladies in Retirement* featured Jane Kemper as a mysterious murderess, Lois Overton as a blood-curdling screamer, and a huge stone fireplace which dominated the eerie set.

The seventh show set several precedents. *Damn Yankees* was a musical, the first time RCT had staged two in one year. This was made possible, in part, by John Hedges, a Board member, who agreed to be musical director without charging the usual \$550.00 fee. The show was also an experimental promotion - purchasers of new memberships for the next season would get to attend this production as a bonus. *Damn Yankees* also marked the first assignment as choreographer for Charlotte Norman, but her cast of 50 read like a rollcall of RCT musical history: Geneta Kern, Galen Miller, Joyce Eilar, and Bob Sizemore. As Applegate, Ned Berheide was a debonair devil and won Best Actor of the year. Audiences were quick to recognize the voice of the announcer during the baseball game sequences; WKBV's Phil Stigleman needed no introduction to sports fans. *Damn Yankees* set another precedent for RCT in that its production was the first musical to have its performance recorded and sold as an album, a project undertaken by Parker Records.

May's annual meeting contained a large amount of self-congratulation and with some justification. President Zaleski reported that the season had ended in the black financially in spite of two musical productions. Even more encouraging was the fact that memberships had climbed back up to 2750 which exceeded the past year by approximately 100. The building had benefitted from the generosity of West End Building and Loan, which had donated five air conditioning units to the theater. RCT had to supply the installation costs but the gift would provide greater comfort during the Spring and Fall performances. Zaleski singled out Ringham for praise and repeated his earlier

comments in the May play program in which he complimented the Director for improving the theater from all standpoints. The President reiterated that Ringham's contract had been renewed for another year. One innovation during the season that drew favorable comment was the policy of inviting groups to the dress rehearsal of a play in which they might have a particular interest. The Richmond Ministerial Association, for instance, had attended *The Miracle Worker*, and area cosmetologists were invited to *The Women*. Both as public relations and audience development this appeared to be paying off.

One of the busiest summers in RCT history was the one of 1965. A record \$35,000 budget for the forthcoming season reflected George Porter's ambitious plans for celebrating RCT's Silver Anniversary. Gala opening night activities for *A Sound of Music* would usher in the 25th season, and the Beaux Arts Ball would add glamour to the December holidays. A new women's organization under the leadership of Jane Kemper called itself the RCT Guild and pledged a variety of activities to promote the theater. Reviews of the past quarter century would appear in a compiled photo-history and in Terry Schuckman's serialized chronicle in the 'play programs. President Zaleski, now in his third term, agreed with the Board that the celebration justified spending \$1,500 to paint the old green auditorium a fresh white with gold trim. Among other renovations to the building was the construction of new front doors which extended the lobby to the sidewalk. Previously the box office had been the outermost part of the lobby, projecting into a covered enclave at the front of the theater. During the hectic summer of planning, cleaning and repairing, loyal volunteer Carl Cook "discovered" the original 1909 fire curtain lost high in the fly space. When dislodged, lowered and cleaned, the painted pastoral scene and the gilded emblem of the old Murray Theater appeared almost new. Raised sometime in the 1930's and unused during the movie days of the Indiana Theater, the curtain had been forgotten until these anniversary preparations.

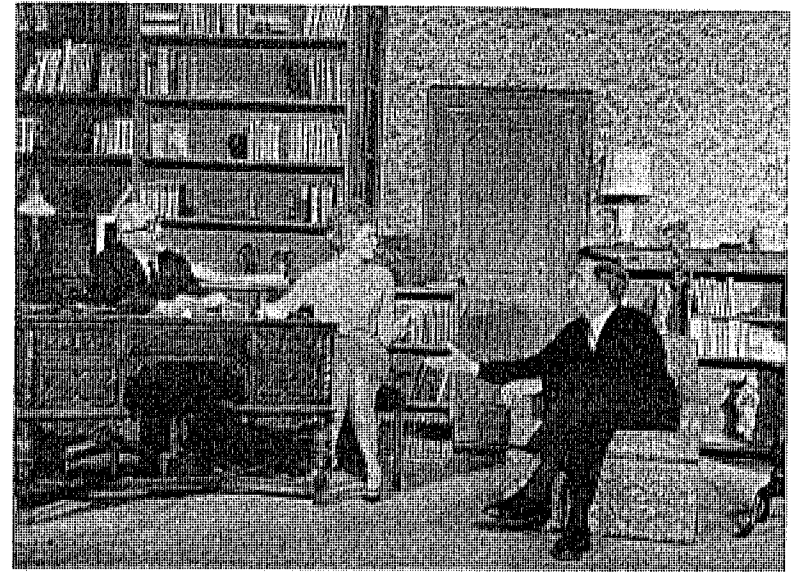
Excitement generated by the opening of the Silver Anniversary season was a combination of RCT's self-promotion and community tributes to a major part of the local cultural scene. The *Palladium-Item* published an eight page tabloid featuring the history of RCT and its impact on the area. Accompanying this pictorial review was an editorial, "Salute to Civic Theater" which praised twenty-five years of "first-rate live theatrical entertainment." The *Cincinnati Enquirer* contributed a laudatory story with six columns of headlines, complimenting the recent refurbishing of the theater and previewing the forthcoming plays. Mrs. June Tripp's opening-night festivities for *The Sound of Music* included: Jaycee ushers in red jackets who opened car doors for arriving guests, Richmond High School Band which played Austrian music and a special fanfare at the arrival of former director Norbert Silbiger, and a three-tier birthday cake crowned with a gilded "25." On-stage tributes

by Mayor Edward Cordell and Earlham College President Landrum Bolling added nostalgia and stature to the occasion.

The production of Rogers and Hammerstein's moving story of the Austrian Trapp family also rose to the occasion, and cost, appropriately, \$2,500. More than 200 people worked on and in this show, revealing, if nothing else, that RCT was genuinely a community theater. Joyce Eilar and Charlotte Norman contributed their musical and dancing skills to assist Ringham in directing this highly regarded show. Richmond High School student, Sharon Flaherty made her debut with the lead role of Maria and was assisted by the familiar John Owen and Marjorie Lohman. The massive efforts in mounting this show and its ancillary events paid off in several ways. A special children's performance brought in a sizeable "donation" to the year's budget, and *The Sound of Music* won Best Actress award for Miss Flaherty and Best Technical Production for the stage crew. And the Board of Directors found itself facing an unprecedented and gratifying problem - a record 3300 memberships had been sold by the end of the play's run. Therefore, a sixth performance, a Sunday matinee, was added for each successive show to accommodate the audience.

Never Too Late provided this massive new membership easy laughs as Deskin Jones played his seventeenth role, the expectant father who is over sixty years old. *Peter Pan* followed and transformed the stage into James Barrie's children's fantasy world. Priscilla Porter as the perpetual youth led the Darling children through imaginative cartoon sets by Don Clay, flew across stage aided by special harnesses and wires operated by Carl Cook, and tossed fairy dust created by Helen Sizemore from tinsel, sawdust and fluorescent paper. Perhaps more than any other show, *Peter Pan* displayed the backstage magic of RCT's technical crew. A large crowd in a similar fantasy mood attended the Beaux Arts Ball at the Leland Hotel in December. RCT members dressed as Hamlet and Cinderella, Abe Lincoln and Hattie the Witch danced the Frug and the Jerk with Mrs. Bert Keller and her successful Ball committee.

Jean Kerr's comedy hit, *Mary, Mary*, offered Joyce Ware a vehicle in which to use an acting talent only hinted at in last season's *The Women*. James Davie also excelled as Mary's estranged husband, and James Burdett made an impressive debut. An unintentional miscue by the lighting crew contributed additional laughs to one performance of this production. At one point Mrs. Ware was to walk across the stage turning on three lamps in succession; no light appeared, however, as she switched on the first two lamps, only a murmuring of nervous laughter from the audience. As she switched on the third lamp, all three suddenly illuminated. Mrs. Ware blew a kiss to the lighting booth and the crowd roared its approval. Director Ringham also suffered a miscue in his scheduled fifth play, *The Visit*. Unable to cast the female lead in this drama, he asked the Board's approval to substitute the French mystery, *Catch Me if You Can*. George Porter, Ned Berheide and Kathy Ring-



Bob Law, Joyce Ware and James Davie in "Mary, Mary" (Wallace Photo)

ham teased the audience with clues through this stylish whodunit and then admonished them after the curtain not to reveal the tricky ending to future audiences. The April show, *Papa is All*, introduced a large number of new actors in this unusual comedy about a Pennsylvania Dutch family. William Lowe, a Richmond newcomer, made the most of the authoritarian father, and RCT made the most of its versatile membership; this play found the entire cast of *Mary, Mary* working backstage at a variety of chores. The Silver season closed with *The Boy Friend*, a musical spoof of the 1920's. The show was particularly strong on costumes and choreography and allowed Gayle Juerling and Charlotte Norman to display their talents in those areas. Eloise Beach, reviewing for the *Palladium-Item*, declared this final production a "pure delight" and "an audience pleaser."

The annual Awards Banquet, sponsored by the Jaycees at Earlham College, climaxed this year of celebration with highlights of a quarter-century of entertainment, new awards, and a surprise announcement. The program, "Those Wonderful Years," was a showcase of dramatic and musical vignettes from the past which prompted Vic Jose to comment in his weekly *The Graphic*, "what an asset Richmond has in its

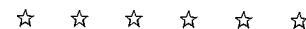


"The Boy Friend" with Galen Miller, Nina Follien, Joan Vigran, and Bob Sizemore (Wallace Photo)

Civic Theater." In a long-overdue recognition of its technical and backstage workers, RCT instituted annual awards for Costumes, Properties, Lighting and Sound, Set Design and Construction, and Musical Contribution. Another new award, sponsored by *The Graphic*, honored Congeniality, and could have been called the Tenacity and Longevity award since its recipients usually were amiable survivors of many RCT experiences. President Zaleski surprised the audience of 450 at the close of the show by announcing that the Quigg family had agreed to sell the theater building to RCT for \$42,000. RCT now had a home! Mr. Silbiger offered a figurative benediction for the occasion by proclaiming the transaction "a dream become a reality."

The reality of the building at 10th and Main fell somewhere between a dream and insomnia. It provided the long-desired permanent residence for one of America's outstanding community theaters; it would also provide a never-ending drain of revenues for maintenance, insur-

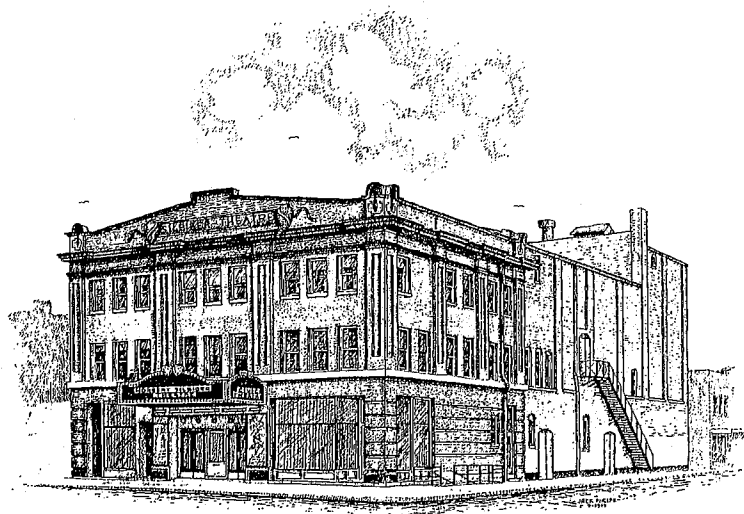
ance, renovation and security. This purchase had been considered for years, but serious negotiation had begun the past July at a special Board meeting. Then the Board met with James Quigg, representing the theater's owner, and several invited businessmen such as Arthur Vivian, Stanley Vigran and Luke Ware. The concensus of this meeting was that although the Quigg family was willing to sell, RCT could and should not pay the asking price of \$60,000. Moreover, if RCT did purchase the theater, it should contract for professional architectural assessments of the necessary renovations. Between that July meeting and Zaleski's announcement in May, much discussion transpired to arrive at the final agreement: \$10,000 down with the remaining \$32,000 to be financed by a mortgage loan from the First National Bank payable over ten years at 6% interest.



ARCHITECTURAL INTERMISSION

Built and owned by one family from its origins in 1908 until its purchase by RCT in 1966, the theater had housed many functions and played an integral role in the changing cultural life of Richmond. O. G. Murray, a local theater manager and businessman, commissioned Ohio architect, Fred Elliot to design the Murray Theater as one of the safest and most modern vaudeville houses in the Midwest. With a seating capacity of 800, a color scheme of ivory, green and gold, marble wainscoting in the lobby and brass railings throughout, the theater cost \$40,000 and "would shine as a gilded palace" speculated the *Evening Item*. When it opened on October 11, 1909 to two capacity crowds in one evening, the *Palladium* called it "A credit to the entire city."

From 1909 until 1930, the Murray brought to Richmond audiences a vast array of talent from different vaudeville circuits and traveling stock companies. Jack Benny, the Marx Brothers, Alfred Lunt and the John Philip Sousa Band appeared as luminaries on stage but had to share the bill with such acts as Nanyon and her Trained Tropical Birds, Blackstone the Magician, Zilla the Singing Dog, Gertie and Elizabeth Kolp's Dancing Revue, the Harry Frankel Minstrels, and movie shorts and features. Although Mr. Murray specialized in live entertainment, he recognized the rapidly growing audience for movies and opened his Murette Theater next door in 1912. An ornate cinema palace with an arched facade, this "Little Murray" gained its name from its smaller capacity and from Mr. Murray's young daughter, Maxine, who would later become Mrs. Robert Quigg, the second owner of the properties.

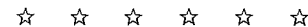


The Murray-Indiana-Silbiger Theater, 1909-1979
 Drawing by Jack Phelps

The Great Depression and changing tastes in entertainment closed the Murray in 1930. It re-opened the following year as the Indiana Theater, a movie house, operated by Robert Hudson, Sr. and his family. They made major renovations in the building, including a new marquee and sign with 1400 lights. Auditorium sight lines were improved by replacing several vertical balcony support posts with a horizontal steel beam. A fresh coat of Spanish-style stucco covered the marble walls, and small tiles spelled out "Indiana" on the lobby floor. From 1931 until 1952 the Indiana presented "family" movies with an infrequent live act or touring group. Double-features, singing cowboys, slapstick comedies, Tarzans, musicals and second-run features dominated the fare. An occasional "Great Movie Series" would offer Olivier's *Hamlet* or *The Red Shoes*, but for the most part, the Indiana did not pretend to be a first-run house. Bob Hudson, Jr. presided over "Ladies' Night" on Fridays and awarded dishes, groceries and hosiery to lucky female winners. But even these bonus prizes could not rescue the failing Indiana from the inroads of television and drive-in theaters, and it ceased operations in May, 1952.

When RCT became a tenant of the building in the autumn of that year, it shared a heritage with a wide variety of other renters. 10th and Main had been a home to far more than theater activities. O. G. Murray's shaving mug occupied a permanent spot in the barber shop on the corner, legal and dental offices came and went upstairs, an ice cream parlor, coin shop, beauty salon and dry cleaning establishment plied their trades on the first floor, a Turkish bath was an underground feature just off 10th street, and many families rented the third floor apartments. Now that RCT had purchased the building and intended to use the entire facility, the last tenants were ordered to vacate by September 1. For the first time in its fifty-seven year history, the building would be a theater, exclusively.

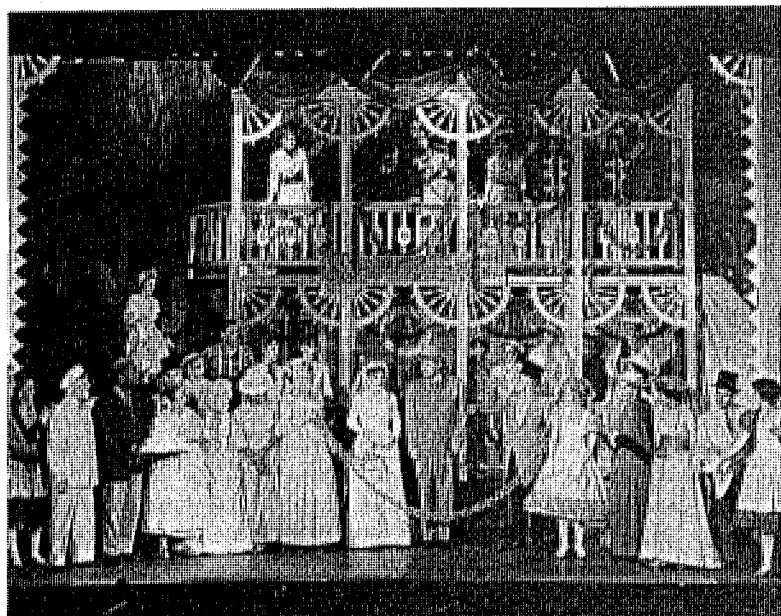
END OF ARCHITECTURAL INTERMISSION



George Porter graduated from being Vice President and Chairman of the Silver Anniversary celebration to the presidency for the 1966-67 season. Ownership of the theater added new dimensions to the Board's responsibilities, and new directions had to compete with old traditions. Luckily the membership momentum continued, and despite a price hike to \$12.00, more than 3300 individuals again subscribed, providing the needed funds for operations and productions. Little time was lost in spending some of this revenue on the building; immediate roof repairs took \$1500 and a new gas furnace cost another \$4,000. The Board

agreed to pay \$1500 to local architect John Simons to study the building and recommend changes for its most efficient and productive use. Before the season was over, Simons would declare the building structurally sound and worthy of several renovations which could cost as much as \$150,000. One of these was completed during the year, the expansion of the central lobby to the two adjoining rooms, east and west. The women's RCT Guild continued its work with the coat-check service, and supervised the moving of the costume collection to its new location on the third floor. Chris Ringham had returned for his third season by unanimous consent of the Board and provided artistic continuity in the midst of all the change.

For its first show in its own theater, RCT launched *Showboat* in September, and the play program proudly announced on the cover "We Own The Building!" John Juerling's massive sets drew immediate applause and were enhanced by scrims decorated with carnival silhouettes. Bob Law, Bill Woehrmann, Darlene Druley and Terry Splitstone did justice to Kern and Hammerstein's memorable score, but a Richmond policeman, Charles Givens, created an "unforgettable moment" for the *Palladium-Item* when he sang "Ole' Man River." Later, another



All Aboard the "Showboat" (Honan Photo)

audience demanded an encore when he picked up his Best Supporting Actor award at the annual banquet. The next two plays shared a large number of coincidental similarities. Both were comedies, both took place in New York City apartments, and both were Broadway hits in 1964. *Absence of a Cello* poked fun at conformity within the corporate structure and allowed John Caron, Jacky Rosenberg, and James Burdett to draw chuckles with its lightweight script. A small cast of veterans such as Eric and Esther Curtis, Nina Follien and John Owen, made the most of mistaken identities and addresses with *Any Wednesday*.

Ringham directed very few serious dramas in Richmond, and *All the Way Home* was only his second in three years. Tad Mosel's Pulitzer Prize winning adaptation of James Agee's novel probed the impact of a father's death on the immediate family in Tennessee in 1915. James Peelle and Joan Vigran achieved a good balance of laughter and tears, and Elizabeth Kolp, as Great-great-Grandmaw, proved she still knew her way around this stage, on which she had danced in 1912. *The Ponder Heart*, based on an unusual story by Eudora Welty, challenged Deskin Jones to develop an exotic elderly gentleman into a memorable character, something Jones had been doing for many years at RCT. Production #190 offered an example of fine ensemble acting in an American classic, *The Glass Menagerie*. Norbert Silbiger had directed this play in 1949 with Charles Matthews playing Tom; this time Matthews played the same role to Smiles Frankel's Amanda and Marjorie Barker's Laura. Matthews recalled that Ringham inspired an entirely different interpretation of the play, and probably a richer one, managing to find moments of humor in the pervasive tragedy.

The original choice for the season's finale was *Funny Girl*, although its selection had caused division within the Board as early as December. Problems with its preparation in March prompted the Board to substitute *Guys and Dolls*. This turned out to be a good alternative and Bob Sizemore took the Sky Masterson role and give it an award winning performance. This musical based on Damon Runyon's underworld characters lent itself to imaginative sets and choreography, especially in the sewer crap game, and the production carried off several prizes for its staff. A special performance to benefit the American Cancer Society created considerable good will and honored Runyon, a cancer victim.

The past three seasons had been artistic and financial successes and RCT had grown in many ways; Ringham's personal fortunes, however, had not paralleled the growth of the theater and 1966-67 was his final year as Director. His creative demands of volunteers usually produced good results, but, increasingly, veteran workers began to complain of being "used." Most people accepted his volatility and emotional outbursts as occupational temperament until one recipient of his wrath filed suit, claiming to have been publicly humiliated and physically hurt during a dress rehearsal argument. After months of legal maneuvering and damaging publicity, the case was settled out of court for \$500.

Divorce proceedings during his second year at RCT diverted Ringham's time, energy and attention from his directing. These strained circumstances were particularly poignant during rehearsals of *Mary, Mary*, which extracted comedic situations from a failed marriage and an estranged couple. In his final months as Director, Ringham took a melodramatic stand on the principles and techniques of family support payments and spent some time in jail. Luckily the rehearsing cast of *The Glass Menagerie* was resourceful and survived his brief incarceration. In October, 1966, following the success of *Showboat*, Ringham informed the Board that he would resign at the end of the season. By February 6, 1967, however, he indicated in a letter to President Porter that he wished to be considered for re-appointment. Another change of mind caused him to withdraw his candidacy in April. He indicated in this final letter that while "I have enjoyed most of my work and most of the people in this theater," his departure was best for RCT. The Board obviously agreed and looked for someone to inherit his flamboyant and erratic legacy.

CHAPTER IV

"1967-70, A THEATER FOR ALL SEASONS"

Unexpected changes altered the social climate during the next few years for America and Richmond. These were more dramatic than the changes which characterized RCT during 1967-1970, but they foreshadowed new challenges and altered expectations for the theater. The nearly completed Interstate highway around Richmond gave local citizens easier access to shopping and entertainment alternatives in Dayton and Indianapolis. Richmond's already troubled downtown received a devastating blow with the 1968 explosion whose redevelopment after-effects dislocated Main Street economic traffic for many months to come. A new Democratic administration in Richmond and a new Republican government in Washington, D.C. offered different concepts of leadership for local and national goals. In this era of rapid change RCT responded with several innovations to meet the shifting demands of its membership.

The most immediate priority for Bob Sizemore's new presidency in the Spring of 1967 was to secure a director. The Board rejected another last-minute request to consider Ringham for the position and, by June, had selected from several candidates the name of Charles Stilwell. A native of Indianapolis, Stilwell had graduated from California's famous Pasadena Playhouse and held a master's degree in dramatic arts from New York University. His directing experience included several plays on Off-Broadway stages and community theaters in North Carolina and Iowa. Like his predecessor, Stilwell's credentials were enhanced by a wife who possessed both interest and talent in the theater. Pat Stilwell's acting abilities were matched, if not exceeded, by her expertise in costume research, design and creation. The new Director frequently indulged his appetite for food and acting, and his costume size increased along with the number of roles in which he appeared on stage. His attention to the dramatic aspects of directing over the technical side of the job reflected his natural preferences and his strengths. Some seasoned actors felt they received more careful direction and character motivation under his guidance than previously; some backstage workers, on the other hand, felt either slighted by his inattentiveness to their needs or disappointed by his lack of experience in their areas. This personal predilection would sometimes result in shows that presented polished acting but an unfinished appearance in the over-all production.

Brigadoon inaugurated the 27th season with a flourish of musical fantasy and transformed the stage to a mythical Scottish village. As program editor, Mrs. Bert Keller captured the flavor of the production

with a Scotch-plaid program cover, and as one of a large costume crew, Margaret Lowe made twenty kilts for the village dancers. Such attention to detail brought the show several awards in addition to Best Technical Production. Richmond newcomer, Edwin Eby, had little difficulty establishing himself as musical director since his cast included such musical stalwarts as Galen Miller, Marjorie Barker and Louis Weber. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in The Sun* shifted the scene from the Scottish highlands to a Chicago slum and challenged RCT on several levels. Could the local theater cast the predominantly Black roles with inexperienced actors and actresses, and would the local audience find a play dealing with racial tensions acceptable following 1967's "long hot summer" of urban riots? The answer to both was a resounding affirmative. Joe Bennett, Ruth Clark and Daphne Floyd won enthusiastic applause for their performances, and large crowds responded to them and to an additional benefit performance to aid the Mary E. Hill Nursing Home. The benefit show raised approximately \$900.00 for the local charity and one director of the nursing home wrote to the *Palladium-Item* of the "goodwill, generosity and brotherhood" associated with the occasion.



"A Raisin in the Sun" with Charles Miller and Ruth Clark (Wallace Photo)

RCT presented its first Neil Simon comedy in December - the first of many to follow - and *Barefoot in the Park* proved a delightful outing for oldtimers and newcomers to the stage. John and Marilyn Simons played the newlyweds whose sixth-floor apartment became a high-traffic area for Jane Kemper, Bill Bone and others. Mrs. Simons then displayed her versatility by coordinating costumes for the next play, Jean Anouilh's *The Lark*. A stark black set with inclining ramps set the scene for this unique version of Joan of Arc's 15th century heresy trial. Jacky Rosenberg's powerful interpretation of the role won her the Best Actress award at the end of the season. This play also featured both Stilwells in small parts. James Burdett picked up the Actor award this year for his highly satisfying portrayal of Felix, who was one half of *The Odd Couple*, the other half being played by James Peelle. Casting a vote for relevance during an election year, RCT presented Gore Vidal's *The Best Man*, a dramatic contest between liberal intellectuals and power-hungry candidates. James Davie, Gordon Bringle and Roy Sutphin competed for votes and principles on stage while outside, Earlham students distributed pamphlets for their best man, Eugene McCarthy, a real candidate in the Democratic primary that Spring.

The Pajama Game was Stilwell's seventh show and introduced Winchester businessman, Harold Zaltsberg, to the RCT stage amidst a crowd of musical veterans, Louis Weber, June Bartlemay and Ned Berheide. The cast romped all over the auditorium during the big picnic number, and Edwin Eby's orchestra delighted the audience by appearing in pajamas for the second act. The Saturday evening performance of this production provided a packed house for an anticipated tribute to former director, Norbert Silbiger. Earlier in the Spring the Board had passed a resolution to perpetuate the memory of his RCT accomplishments by renaming the theater at 10th and Main, THE NORBERT SILBIGER THEATER. President Sizemore presented him a plaque, Mayor Byron Klute declared May 11 "Silbiger Day" in Richmond, a host of former RCT officials and actors toasted him at a reception, and Mr. Silbiger summed up the festive event by declaring, "If I had realized I was so great, I would have asked for more money."

This new Silbiger Theater hosted the fifteenth annual Jaycee awards program the following week. Traditionally held as a part of a banquet, it was appropriate that this year's event be held at the theater. The program "Dream the Impossible Dream," directed by Helen Sizemore, paid tribute to the building by evoking memories of the old vaudeville and movie days in addition to RCT activities. Architect John Simon's drawing of a slick new facade for the building graced the program cover to remind the membership of the many ambitious plans for the building which had been discussed since its purchase in 1966. The RCT Guild brought the evening and the season to a close with a dance and breakfast following the awards ceremonies.

Celebrations, crowds and tributes at the end of the 27th season were a

festive facade disguising some genuine problems. Expenses had exceeded income, forcing the Board to borrow \$3500 to finish the season. Part of these higher expenses had been anticipated, such as the \$300 increase in Silbiger's pension and a higher salary for the Director than had been paid the previous year (\$8250). But one expense, approximately \$2,000 in property taxes for the theater had not been expected and drained the yearly budget. After considerable negotiation and appeal, RCT's non-profit status prevailed and circumvented any future property taxes. Compounding these expenses was the disturbing situation of a membership reduction of 300 and consequent revenue shortfall of \$3,600. Stilwell was a matter of concern as well. Although the Board had renewed his contract in March, the renewal had not been unanimous or enthusiastic. His working rapport with many backstage volunteers was less than ideal and he appeared to spend only a perfunctory amount of time at the theater. The Board encouraged him to be more aggressive in promoting RCT activities in the community and in assuming more control over theater productions.

The theater had remained "dark" during the summers since RCT's first tenancy in 1952. Theatrical seasons had incorporated only the autumn, winter and spring. Several factors combined to change that in 1968. A summer show would provide continuity, generate extra income and might recruit new members by allowing open admissions for this special production. Now that RCT owned the building, extra rental fees would not be a consideration. As an experiment, James Davie and Kathy Judge become chairmen of a Summer Show Committee to see if a "between seasons" show would work. The result was *Good-Bye, Charlie*, a modern farce which played two evenings in August as production #199. Patricia Barton directed, in Stilwell's absence, and revealed that her years of experience at RCT had not been wasted. Miss Barton had served in almost every capacity on and backstage and had been Assistant Director for *The Ponder Heart* with Chris Ringham. Her small cast, led by James Burdett, Marilyn Simons and James Davie pleased an audience totaling 650 in spite of the fact that Martha Raye had appeared in the same play two weeks previously in Dayton's Kenley Players. At \$1.25 per ticket, the show netted a profit of approximately \$430 for RCT. It seemed that summer theater had a future in Richmond.

Financial woes during the 1968-1969 season posed a frustrating dilemma for RCT. Declining memberships and additional expenses for the theater building diverted revenue and attention from the primary goal of a community theater, that of producing good entertainment. The price of season tickets had risen to \$14.00 and their sale had fallen to 2700, down 300 from the previous year. A survey of previous members to determine their reasons for non-renewal produced a variety of responses: disapproval of the plays, rising cost of tickets, desire for open admission rather than closed membership, and uncomfortable or

poor selection of seats. The Board realized that some of these problems were valid and others were matters of personal preference; still, the non-renewals represented a continuing source of concern and loss of revenue. A new, but small, source of funds helped to ameliorate this situation when the RCT Guild assumed control of selling concessions during show intermissions. Now profits from this service would come to RCT rather than to the Jaycees who had been in charge in the past. An additional gift from the Guild, added to the profits from the summer show, paid for painting part of the theater's exterior. John Simons admitted full responsibility for selecting the controversial "titanic green" paint. Another financial burden was lifted when RCT sold its warehouse on 12th and "B" Streets. The building had become an albatross of maintenance and security problems, but even its sale for \$6,600 did not prevent another deficit season, and some funds from the sale of the next year's tickets had to be used for current expenses in the spring.

Improvements to the theater also posed a dilemma. Responding to the architectural recommendations of John Simons, the Board authorized the expenditure of approximately \$15,000 for new restrooms, roof ventilators, and a trapdoor to the basement work space. As necessary or attractive as these improvements were, the cost proved to be a debilitating experience. RCT's initial fund-raising attempt was full of good intentions and high expectations, but produced less than \$1,500. Board member Bob O'Maley declared the attempt a "fiasco" at the end of the season, but President Sizemore felt that it had been a learning experience and the membership had been further educated as to the needs of the theater.

Director Stilwell returned from a summer in Michigan to begin his second season with RCT and displayed a greater enthusiasm for the theater's ancillary activities than in the past. He offered acting lessons and workshops, welcomed the Junior Players into their new occupancy of the theater, and joined the festivities surrounding the 200th production. Huge silver numerals on the building's facade lit up Main Street in October, reminding the community that *Carousel* was RCT's 200th show and that membership purchases would be appreciated. Veterans Ann Fox, Darlene Druley and Galen Miller led a large cast through this familiar Rogers and Hammerstein musical, and Sara Stoner and Sharlene Oler directed the spirited dancing. One musical number, "It was a real nice Clambake," set the tone for the pleasant show, and it later won Best Production for the year.

A Man for All Seasons offered a variety of challenges to RCT and the *Palladium-Item* found the responses "magnificent." Serious acting by Stilwell, James Davie, James Peelle, John Owen and Joan Vigran brought to life the story of Sir Thomas More and 16th century England. Steve Duning's striking sets were manipulated for scene changes in full view of the audience, and Patricia Stilwell's opulent costumes compli-

mented the quality of the production. In the following show, *A Thousand Clowns*, the cast had to overcome a different set of challenges to finish the show's run. A furnace malfunction left the auditorium chilly for opening night, and sewer gas fumes frightened part of the Wednes-



Janis Cole, James Davie, Charles Stilwell, Joan Vigran, and James Peelle in "A Man for All Seasons" (Wallace Photo)

day night audience out of the theater. The memory of the April, 1968 explosion was powerful enough to turn this minor event into a major scare. In spite of these disruptions, James Peelle and young Scott Lehman won acting awards for their valiant efforts. The season's fourth show, *Wait Until Dark*, forced Kathy Judge to do considerable homework before she tackled the role of the blind woman besieged by criminals. Mrs. Judge worked with Beatrice Tyler, a visually handicapped resident of Richmond, to learn proper techniques and responses. Her homework received good marks and she won Best Actress of the year. Carl Cook's special lighting effects contributed to the effectiveness of the thriller and won an award for his work.

Laughter was the common denominator for the three final shows of the season. *Come Blow Your Horn* represented Neil Simon's third play in two years at RCT and it won hearty laughs for Ned Berheide, Doug Van Middlesworth and Harold Zaltsberg. But the audience reserved its warmest applause for Mary Helen Backmeyer who returned to the stage after an absence of seven years. *Tunnel of Love* featured WGLM radio

personality Roy Boesch in a spoof of suburban life and infidelities, and *The Fantasticks* closed the season with a light-hearted fantasy. Earlham senior Dan Fredricks provided the musical direction and received much assistance from other college staff and students for this unpretentious and delightful Off-Broadway musical. Charles Matthews and Harold Zaltsberg used their brief "Episode" number to provoke a riot of laughing and helped contribute to a successful benefit performance for Green Acres School. The Jaycees Award show was again at the theater and again provided entertainment almost as extravagant as a regular season production. "Potpourri," written by Carl Cook and directed by Patricia Barton, was an original and funny show which overshadowed the actual awards ceremony.

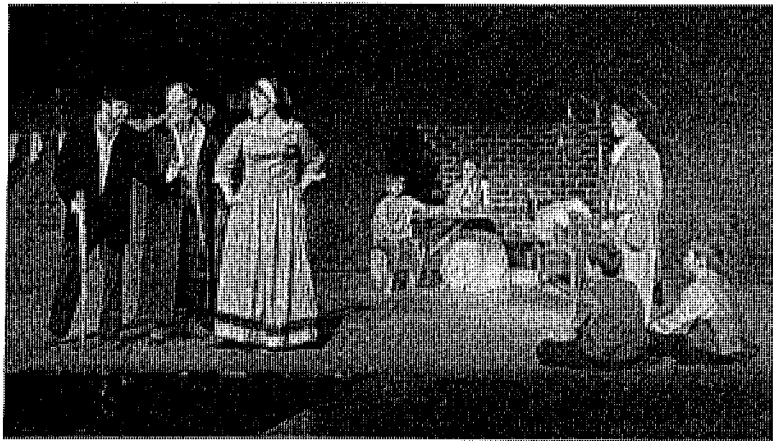
One artistic triumph during the season in which President Sizemore took great pride and remembered fondly was the area conference of the Indiana Theater League hosted by RCT on May 4. The conference offered seminars and workshops on various aspects of community theater, and held competitions for excerpts from plays presented by theater groups from Marion, Anderson, Muncie, and Winchester. A cutting from RCT's *A Man for All Seasons* defeated four other entries for the best production, and John Owen captured Best Actor for his role as Cromwell. Darlene Druley revived her role of Carrie from *Carousel* to win the Best Actress prize. RCT also received high praise for its conference arrangements from the visiting theater participants. Later at the state convention of the Indiana Theater League, *Seasons* repeated its victory in the final competition and Joan Vigran and James Davie brought home acting awards.

In a continuing effort to generate additional income and membership, RCT sponsored the Summer Season of 1969. Stilwell agreed to direct three shows and be paid on a profit-sharing basis; the first \$500 net profit from each show would be his, the remaining profits would be split between RCT and the director. *Luv* featured the Stilwells and James Peelle in an unusual comic love story of marriage, divorce and suicide in New York City. At the invitation of the Randy Players, *Luv* traveled to Winchester for another performance. There was something for everyone in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* - music, satire, comedy and a large cast in togas fracturing ancient history. *Thurber Carnival* finished the summer with a collection of whimsical skits which took place among cartoon cut-out sets. Each production played for two weekends and the average audience size for *Thurber* was fifty; the other two plays enjoyed slightly larger houses. RCT lost nothing in the venture, but Stilwell had earned less than \$500 for his summer's labor. He assessed the experience diplomatically as, "disappointed, but not discouraged."

RCT's 29th season continued some traditions and experienced some changes. One unfortunate tradition which continued was the accelerating decline of membership. Ticket sales amounted to only 2250 during

1969-1970, which was 400 below the past year and 1100 below the peak of 1966. The resulting loss of income forced RCT into a financial deficit for the third straight year and again required the use of next year's income to meet operating expenses. The new President, John Owen, compiled statistics of 28 other community theaters which showed that most of them had membership, financial or other problems that clouded their futures. While this information did offer cold comfort to RCT's Board, it did not supply the needed solutions. By November, several members of the Board had decided that a new director might be a partial solution. A majority of the Board concurred by December and they and Stilwell agreed mutually that his contract would expire at the end of the season. Another recent tradition continued, but with a new name. The Guild became The Muses and its members maintained their work with concessions and coat checking at RCT performances.

Judging from the success of *Oliver* as a season opener, a stranger to RCT would never have known that the theater was experiencing any of its current problems. In this musical tribute to the Dickens' novel, Charles Matthews dominated the stage, picking pockets, stealing scenes, and capturing the Best Actor award as Fagin. A special Saturday matinee drew over 700 young people to the theater and created a massive traffic jam at 10th and Main as parents arrived and departed with their children. If that same hypothetical stranger had attended the second show, however, he might have surmised some of the problems. Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* was the overwhelming winner in a later



Louis Weber, Charles Matthews and Sue Gowan in "Oliver" with all the little dickens (Wallace Photo)

poll which gauged the productions RCT audiences had "disliked" and "hated" the most. Even Eloise Beach, whose kindness as a reviewer in the *Palladium-Item* was legendary, could find little other than sets to compliment.

RCT presented the community two Christmas gifts in December. The first was a high-quality production of *The Lion in Winter* in which Arthur Vivian and Jane Kemper portrayed King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Their superb acting, matched by "finished" technical work and costumes, reminded the audience of how good RCT could be, and then won three awards at the end of the year. A cutting from this play also won the Best Play award and the Best Actor Award for Vivian in competition at the state convention of the Indiana Theater League. The fact that this convention was held at the Silbiger Theater was another reminder that RCT commanded widespread respect. That



"The Lion in Winter" with Jane Kemper and Arthur Vivian (Wallace Photo)

these awards and this respect did not revive membership sales continued to frustrate the Board of Directors. RCT's second gift to the community was the nativity pageant or "living tableau" presented free at the theater. Under the direction of Bob and Helen Sizemore musicians, actors, crew and live animals combined to dramatize the Christmas message for approximately 250 guests.

Stilwell started off the new year with *Star-Spangled Girl*, his fourth Neil Simon Play at RCT. James and Terry Davie and Bill Morgan

breezed through this light comedy about liberal and conservative conflicts. G. B. Shaw's *Misalliance* produced good acting by both Stilwells and Jacky Rosenberg, but seconded the motion made by the earlier Noel Coward show that "talky" British plays do not find receptive audiences in Richmond. Good reviews and laughs greeted *Cactus Flower*, however, and Joyce Ware, John Owen and James Burdett changed their character personalities almost as swiftly as the intricate sets which revolved on turntables. The closing musical was Stilwell's final show for RCT and he ended on a high note. The fun which Darlene Druley, Bill Woehrmann and a large cast were having with *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* was infectious, and the story of a girl with psychic powers pleased the springtime audience. Rhea Parshall and Dorothy Turrill extracted good work from their musicians and dancers, and Marlene Beard's properties crew forced flowers to grow on cue.

The annual Awards show moved back to a banquet at Earlham in 1970 and the Evening Lions Club became its sponsor, replacing the Jaycees. The recent tradition of presenting an ambitious production continued, however, with Helen Sizemore's *No, No, A Million Times, No*. This "musical mellerdrammer" proved to be a durable item and was repeated later at the state convention of the Indiana Theater League and again as a membership promotion entertainment.

Gypsy, the 1970 summer show, took Richmond by surprise. Its two directors had volunteered to mount the show for no pay as an experiment. Bob Carver was well known at RCT for his years of musical services, and Mike Hengstler's dancing talents were impressive although new to the local stage. When they had completed their work and *Gypsy* Rose Lee's musical biography had finished its four day run, there was much discussion about the injustice of excluding summer shows from annual award competition. A huge cast had performed with unusual degrees of energy and talent, and Joan Vigran finished her powerful "Rose's Turn" number to a standing ovation. No one could remember this ever happening before at RCT and its proud recipient recalls it as "one of the high points in my life." *Gypsy* played to an audience larger than the previous four summer shows combined, and netted a profit of \$2600, which was divided between RCT and the directors. Turning people away from *Gypsy*'s final sold-out performance was the kind of problem RCT would have enjoyed having more of instead of the ones it had.

CHAPTER V

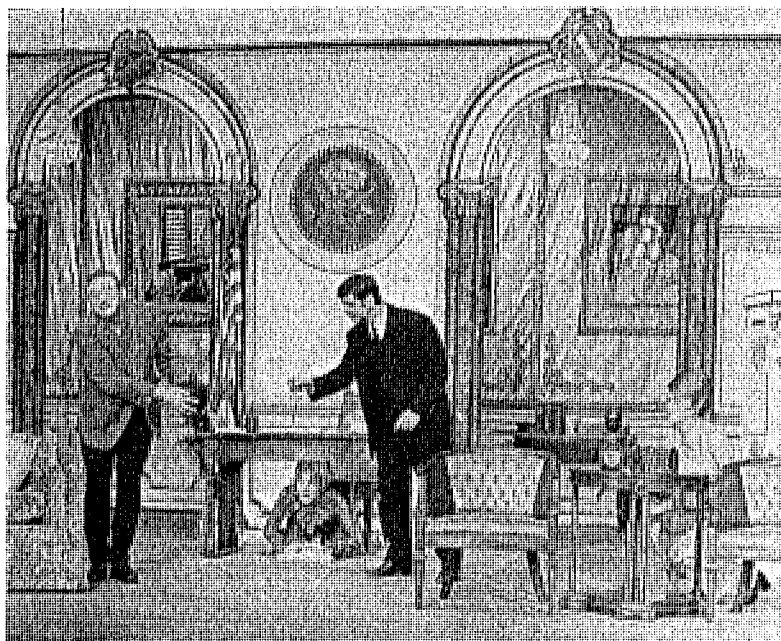
"1970-1973, Three Years in Search of a Director"

Gypsy's unqualified success in the summer of 1970 helped to offset the recent downward momentum. Despite three consecutive seasons of membership decline and deficit budgets, RCT could look with pride at some genuine artistic triumphs. It had produced some distinctive plays, had dominated the competition in the Indiana Theater League, and as President Bob Sizemore said in the September play program, community theaters around the state marveled that "we own the building, that we have a professional director, that we have an entire third floor practically filled with our own stock of costumes. . . ." This positive attitude welcomed Richard S. Stevens to Richmond in the summer of 1970 to become RCT's fifth director.

Arriving from a U.S. army base in Colorado, this new director brought with him a different kind of dramatic background than RCT had yet experienced. For the past ten years Stevens had been Entertainment Director at military posts throughout the United States, Europe and Vietnam. Prior to that he had attended many schools and acted and directed in Chicago, Pittsburgh and Hollywood. While his contact with community theaters was limited, perhaps his new viewpoints might be the spark RCT needed to solve some of its problems. Within weeks of assuming his new job, Stevens convinced the Board that the sale of general admission tickets to non-members would generate extra income and might recruit members by allowing new people to see single productions. This radical innovation divided the Board members, some of whom felt that it would erode the sense of exclusivity that many RCT subscribers had always been proud of, and might lead to a further loss of season ticket holders. A compromise resulted: non-reserved tickets would be available at the box office only on the evening of the performance and would be priced at \$3.00 for musicals and \$2.50 for non-musicals. This controversy was the first of many which would cloud the relationship between the director and the Board.

Mame opened RCT's 30th season with a musical splash and indicated that some of Stevens' ideas worked. His directing showed flashes of imagination and skill, memberships declined at a slower rate, and nearly \$600 came in from open admission tickets. Nancy Wright, a newcomer to Richmond and one of the people turned away from a sold-out performance of *Gypsy* a month before, took the *Mame* Dennis role and quickly established herself as a major talent. Jane Kemper had played this part in RCT's 1961 non-musical *Auntie Mame*, and now gave the role of Vera a memorable interpretation. John Trammel played the young Patrick Dennis, a task done by his older brother in the

same 1961 production. Many veterans, both on and backstage, helped turn this ambitious show into an entertaining one and their efforts were rewarded at the end of the year with seven awards, including Best Technical Production. An excerpt from the show also captured first prize for musicals at the regional conference of the Indiana Theater League in April.



Harold Zaltsberg stars in "Don't Drink the Water" (Wallace Photo)

Woody Allen's *Don't Drink The Water* allowed Harold Zaltsberg to make the most of a slapstick comedy and introduced another bright talent to the stage, newcomer Nancy Laine. In this play, Don Clay's meticulously crafted set of an American embassy drew spontaneous applause and won an award at the end of the year. Agatha Christie's *Mousetrap*, which had been playing to English audiences since 1952, found a receptive audience in December. Rhae Stevens, the Director's wife, made an auspicious debut in this thriller, and Dr. Sydney Isaacs impressed his clients with his graceful entrance on a pair of snow skis. RCT continued a recent tradition by presenting the Nativity Pageant again in December, this time to an audience of approximately 900. The

living tableau became a community affair under the direction of Helen Sizemore with several musical groups participating and some of the narration being done by Mayor Byron Klute.

The new year of 1971 began with a revival of *The Rainmaker*, done earlier by RCT in 1956. James Peelle and Linda Ostermeier replaced Bill Woehrmann and Jo Jordan in the roles of Starbuck and Lizzie in this story of geographical and emotional drought. Director Stevens' idea of skeletal see-through sets permitted the light crew to flood the stage with "sunlight," thus intensifying the symbolism. For his local debut in *The Rainmaker*, Don Good took an old theater cliché literally and appeared on stage with a broken leg, the result of an ice-skating accident. A play about the theater drew many veterans to the stage in February. Smiles Frankel, James Davie, Kathy Judge and others turned *Critic's Choice* into a pleasant evening which the *Palladium-Item's* critic found full of talent, style and ability.

In February the Board made a tentative commitment to renew Stevens' contract as Director for the following year, but events in March and April brought a reversal of that decision. The two remaining productions were the focus of several scenes more dramatic than those which appeared on stage. Stevens, apparently pre-occupied with personal and health problems, had difficulty casting Arthur Miller's *The Price*, appearing at rehearsals and getting the production ready on time. The Board refused to postpone its opening date and *The Price* opened on schedule but unready. Despite strong performances by Jacky Rosenberg and Charles Matthews, audiences remembered the unprecedented sight of an actor reading lines from a script. Unanticipated production costs compounded this problem. Stevens' recent experience with guaranteed operating budgets on military posts had not prepared him for the financial restrictions at RCT. Misunderstandings, unwarranted expenditures and wasted materials eventually amounted to production cost overruns of approximately \$3,000, an amount the Board had to borrow in order to complete the season. Problems with the final show, *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, convinced the Board that its recent decision to rehire the director would have to be changed. After many complaints from cast and crew about Stevens' temperament and handling of *Molly Brown*, the Board visited a rehearsal, helped organize the final days of preparations and cancelled the director's new contract. The unpleasantness surrounding these events produced considerable rancor among RCT members and crew, some of whom felt the Board's actions were too abrupt and possibly wrong.

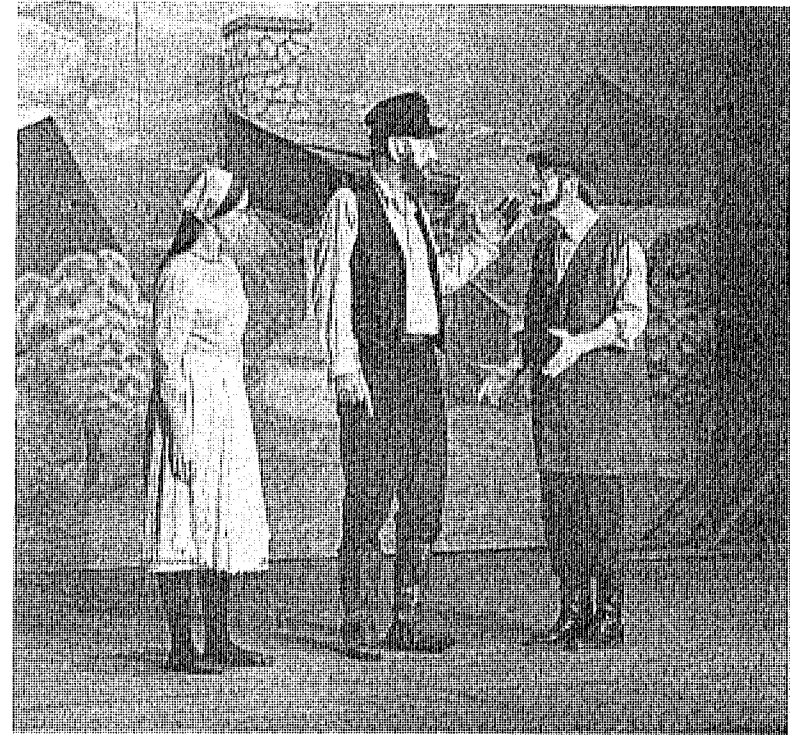
For the audience unaware of this situation the season finished with a pleasant flourish. *Molly Brown* was a survivor of the Titanic and society wars in Denver, Colorado, and her musical biography overcame its RCT production problems. Michelle Hall made her debut and proved as unsinkable as the heroine she played. This show also featured Sue Peters, an RCT charter member, daughter of a Board president, and

after years of service to the theater, finally an actress on stage. Joyce Eilar's musicians for *Molly Brown* enjoyed the luxury of additional space due to a newly enlarged orchestra pit. Howard Toney had supervised the restoration of the original Murray pit which had been altered during the movie days of the Indiana Theater. This improvement also benefited Jack Everly's musicians for the summer production of *South Pacific*, a revival of RCT's first musical show. Veterans such as Galen Miller, Bob Sizemore, Nancy Laine and Maxine Eby breathed new life into this Rogers and Hammerstein classic for sizable audiences in July. RCT's ailing air conditioners, unfortunately, did little to detract from the tropical setting of the show.

Nostalgic events of the Spring served to counterpoint the personnel problems. In April RCT unveiled its Memory Room, the space just east of the main lobby. Newly refurbished and decorated with the assistance of the The Muses and Don Clay, the room housed mementos of past seasons, photographs of earlier productions, and provided a comfortable meeting room. The Board also announced the establishment of a new acting award, the Helen Bringle Award for juveniles, in honor of Mrs. Bringle whose work for the theater would be missed and remembered. Continuing in this reminiscent mood RCT announced in May that Norbert Silbiger would become Managing Director and would direct a few shows for 1971-1972. Both nostalgic and practical, this decision filled several immediate needs. Silbiger had agreed to serve for no salary, thus alleviating some of the financial problems, and his presence would provide artistic stability until the Board could find another fulltime director. And perhaps his leadership would generate new community enthusiasm for RCT. The momentum of deficit budgets and membership decline had to be reversed.

The RCT which Norbert Silbiger returned to guide in 1971 was a different organization than the one he left nine years previously in 1962. He had been a member of the Board during those years, so he was fully aware of the changing community, membership, and financial conditions. Policy making, play selection and real estate management were now normal transactions for the Board of Directors, in contrast to the less active role it had played during Silbiger's earlier tenure. Unforeseen business commitments forced the new President, Richard Norman, to relinquish his office to Les Hilbert who acted as president for the latter half of the season. The two men presided over a theater caught awkwardly between old and new traditions. Silbiger returned to the custom of casting his plays with no tryouts, but "guest directors" did hold tryouts for their shows. This inconsistency was a matter of some concern, as was the new ticket policy. Non-reserved tickets would be sold only for balcony seats and only to students this year. Additional non-membership seating would be restricted to guests of members who had paid an extra \$6.00 for "patron" status. The confusion which resulted from this change was partially offset by the income which it

generated. The return to "exclusivity" also may have played a part in the stabilization of subscriptions; approximately 2100 people bought tickets for the season, almost the same number as the previous year. This stability and the absence of a director's salary to pay enabled the Board to repay the \$3,000 loan from the past season and end the current season with a favorable balance of approximately \$2,000, the first surplus in five years.



Michelle Hall, William Romey and Jack Truitt in "Fiddler on the Roof"
(Wallace Photo)

"One of the finest productions ever staged by RCT" is what Colleen Culbertson recalled about *Fiddler on the Roof* in a later play program. Many people agreed with her assessment of this season opener. William Romey, a local businessman with musical talent never before displayed

on the RCT stage, played the role of Tevye, the dramatic focus of the doomed Jewish village in Russia. Joan Vigran, an RCT stalwart, became his wife Golde, who helped maintain family and community traditions. Manfred Blum's orchestra and Charlotte Norman's choreography, combined with a moving story and score, produced a memorable entertainment which provoked laughter and tears from an appreciative audience. The *Palladium-Item's* Eloise Beach praised the show and complimented the "new vitality" of the theater in September.

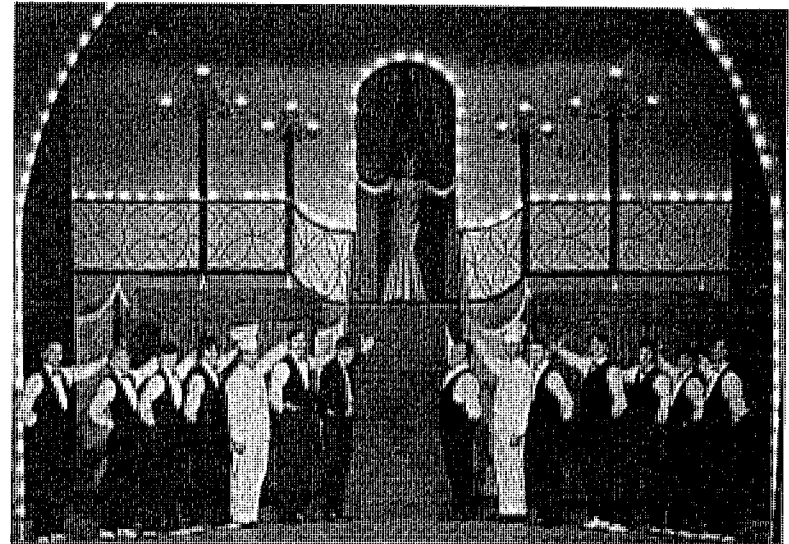
Silbiger continued with revivals of two plays which he had previously directed at RCT. *Detective Story* returned after twenty years and presented a police station filled with alleged and convicted criminals. Veterans James Burdett and Joyce Ware carried the serious story nicely, and RCT's official photographer, Bill Wallace, appeared on stage briefly and appropriately as a photographer. *The Silver Whistle* had been produced in 1950 with Smiles Frankel and Howard Toney in the cast. They appeared again in this version with much assistance from Bob Sizemore, Deskin Jones, Joe Koch and others. The gentle and humorous story of youthful hope in a retirement home was just as popular the second time around and won three awards at the end of the year.

A Shot in the Dark introduced the first "guest director" of the season, Barbara Friedman. Miss Friedman was a protegee of Professor Arthur Little and a recent graduate of Earlham College who had gained additional dramatic experience at Northwestern University and several theaters in New York. For this comedy mystery she recruited Earlham students, faculty and staff to supplement RCT regulars and Diana Bartlemay. A Richmond native, Miss Bartlemay had recently acquired acting experience in California and on television. Her professionalism showed in the sprightly performance she gave in this French thriller. In the fifth production, *All My Sons*, Silbiger called back Arthur Vivian and Jane Kemper, the battling couple from *The Lion in Winter*, for another attempt at married life. They were joined by three other award-winners, Charles Matthews, Marjorie Barker and Doug Van Middlesworth for this Arthur Miller drama of family recriminations in the aftermath of World War II. The result was a show filled with serious and skillful performances which revived the old Silbiger adage, "There are no small parts, only small players."

Plaza Suite produced more than just the predictable Neil Simon laughs; it revealed much about the state of community theater in Richmond. Silbiger again drew from his extensive stable of oldtimers, such as Mary Helen Backmeyer and Phyliss Worl for dependable performances. Tom Peters, in a small part, provided proof that Richmond's oldest performing arts group was now three generations old; his grandfather Fentress Tucker had been president of the RCT Board in 1943, and his mother Sue Peters currently edited the play programs. One of the three playlets which constituted *Plaza Suite* was directed by the season's second guest director, Helen Sizemore. She had acted and

worked at RCT in many capacities, but was perhaps best known for directing Awards shows. This production revealed her talent in "legitimate" theater.

The 31st season closed with a rousing production of *Hello, Dolly!* and guest director Bob Carver proved that his success with *Gypsy* had not been just a happy mistake. His many years with RCT musical productions and his concern for detail combined to present a "finished" show. A large cast led by Nancy Wright and Harold Zaltsberg wore lavish costumes, danced around ambitious sets, and sang from an expensive script, all of which totaled more than \$3500. *Dolly* was an artistic success and soon became a financial one also. The Rose Festival Committee requested additional performances in June which netted a \$200 profit for the theater. This show was the thirteenth which Charlotte Norman had choreographed, and many in the audience felt that the dancing waiters were her finest effort.



Everyone says "Hello, Dolly" to Nancy Wright (Wallace Photo)

The season also closed with the announcement from the Board that the following year would continue the pattern of the current one. Mr. Silbiger would be Managing Director again and guest directors would fill out the season. This decision had required months of study and debate, and no one was completely satisfied with it. It admitted that RCT's financial situation was not sound enough to permit the hiring of

a full time professional; it perpetuated the troublesome inconsistencies of multiple directors, and it deepened some already serious divisions within the Board. Some felt that Silbiger's leadership was geared to the repetition of past successes rather than planning for the future, and that he appealed to and demanded loyalty from an insular group of followers. As deeply felt as these opinions may have been, the present state of the theater demanded that they remain just that, opinions.

A varied summer season provided Richmond audiences with three productions directed by three guest directors. If the past two summers could be used as a guide, the summer of 1972 should have been popular and profitable. Jane Kemper directed a delightful *Arsenic and Old Lace* and played the role she had played in the 1943 and 1950 versions of the same comedy. Alex-Michael Hoehne portrayed a "chilling" *Dracula* in Les Hilbert's production of that classic thriller, and Carl Cook assembled a stage full of young talent for *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. The *Palladium-Item* reviewer enjoyed all three shows but lamented the "pitifully small house[s]" which witnessed most of the performances - an average of 200 per show. The summer season ended sparsely attended and financially embarrassed. Apparently one blockbuster musical might be able to lure audiences into the Silbiger Theater for a semi-air-conditioned summer evening, but three less ambitious productions did not have the necessary appeal.

1776 did have the necessary appeal and the 32nd season began with applause and compliments. Joan Vigran as guest director brought acting, directing and promotional experience to the job and mounted a blockbuster musical which won the year's Best Technical Production



"1776" with James Beier, Bob Sizemore, Jack Truitt, Roy Boesch, and Bill Morgan (Wallace Photo)

award. Architect John Simons transformed the stage into an imaginative Independence Hall and veteran performers such as Bill Woehrmann, Roy Boesch, James Beier, Bob Law, and Bob Sizemore became believable Founding Fathers. Mark Wheeler's powerful "Molasses to Rum" solo earned the newcomer instant acclaim, and the dramatic signature scrim and tolling bell drew the July 4th finale to a visual and aural climax not soon forgotten.

A rhetorical question posed by John Adams in 1776, "Is Anybody there, Does Anybody Care?" was pertinent to the RCT situation at the beginning of the season. Membership Promotion Chairman Bev Woodring had waged an aggressive campaign and managed to boost memberships to 2400, up slightly from the past year. But this increased revenue barely covered the \$1200 loss from the summer season and the recent \$2,000 painting bill for the building. 1200 people attended the annual Christmas pageant, but these were free admissions and did not solve any financial problems. Royalty fees and production costs were going to be higher this season and the anticipated insurance and utilities bills totaled almost \$9,000. Rumors of a Dinner Theater at the local Ramada Inn also posed a threat to RCT's future. New Board President Helen Sizemore faced obstacles off stage almost as challenging as those confronting the Continental Congress on stage in 1776.

The next two shows demonstrated skills at which Norbert Silbiger had become a master. He recruited seasoned players who possessed talent and motivation of their own to compensate for his failing energies. *Forty Carats* allowed Joyce Ware and James Burdett to deliver polished performances and serve as foils for Smiles Frankel's comedy lines. Arthur Vivan, Kathy Judge and John Owen subsequently starred in *The Country Girl* and provided smooth ensemble acting in this Clifford Odets drama. In both productions Silbiger relied on the technical talent of Byron Maple and Carol Van Middlesworth to design, build and paint attractive sets. Their dependable skills would make them recipients of the Silbiger Award for special contributions to the theater. Many regretted that Van Middlesworth's painted drop of a Greek harbor in *Forty Carats* turned into a dingy brick wall for *Country Girl*, but scenes change and sets recycle rapidly backstage.

Bob Carver proved his directorial competence again in January with *Last of the Red Hot Lovers*. This was RCT's sixth Neil Simon comedy and the fourth in which Harold Zaltsberg had appeared. As a bumbling middle-aged Romeo, Zaltsberg's Barney careened from one botched affair to another. Nancy Wright, Marilyn Simons, and Jacky Rosenberg supplied additional laughs in this slickly produced show.

A cooperative venture with Earlham College resulted in larger audiences and financial profits in February and March. *West Side Story* was a mixture of the talents and facilities of RCT and the college's Mask and Mantle program. Directors Arthur Little and Charles Combopiano arrived from the Drama and Music Departments, several students

played major roles, and an additional performance accommodated the college crowd which came to see a polished production of this Bernstein and Sondheim musical. RCT regulars such as Michelle Hall Avery and Mark Wheeler merged their talents with the younger performers and the result, according to the *Palladium-Item*, was a "high level of artistic achievement" which won six awards. Henry Merrill's scaffold sets and Charlotte Norman's modern choreography added to the stark realism of the urban-ethnic clashes on stage. This cost-and-profit-sharing venture produced a \$400 bonus for RCT, thus enhancing the artistic success.

Inherit the Wind had created a mild sensation when RCT presented it in 1958. The court room confrontation based on the 1925 Scopes trial offered a vehicle for Charles Matthews, Norman Cook and Ray Imperial to display their dramatic skills under Silbiger's direction. Again under Silbiger's direction, the play allowed James Peelle, Gordon Bringle and James Beier to bring those same legal conflicts to another Richmond audience. The huge cast provided a figurative farewell salute to Silbiger in this his second valedictory show. Appropriately the sets were executed by two of his favorites, Byron Maple and Carol Van Middlesworth. Silbiger's assistant director for this show was Alex-Michael Hoehne, a young German immigrant and Earlham graduate whose presence offered nostalgic symmetry to the occasion.

The season's finale, *Where's Charley*, was more than a light musical entertainment. Its production became an unofficial tryout for the position of RCT Director for 1973-74. The Board had decided that fulltime professional leadership would help solve some of the image and financial problems, and two candidates were under active consideration for the job. Bob Carver's talents had been amply demonstrated with *Gypsy*, *Hello, Dolly!* and *Last of the Red Hot Lovers*. Mark Wheeler had impressed audiences with his performances in *1776* and *West Side Story*; now his directing skills were on trial with this play. Assisted by his wife and the proven talents of Diana Bartlemay, Charles Matthews, Harold Zaltzberg and Louis Weber, Wheeler created a commendable show with fresh dances and costumes to spice up an old story. The audience had fun, but the Board offered the position to Carver instead.

Bob Carver's ambivalence and courage in accepting the job of Director probably came from his intimate knowledge of the RCT situation and his desire to test his abilities in a full time capacity. A product of Richmond and Indiana University, he had been active in RCT productions for many years and was responsible for several of its artistic triumphs. As a member of the Board and editor of the play programs for the current season he was fully aware of the financial conditions. Just how ready was RCT to pay him a \$7,000 salary when the present season could not be completed without the aid of a \$5,000 loan? Some partial answers to the question might be found with more aggressive membership recruitment, tighter accountability on production costs and program advertising, and by reducing the number of productions from

seven to six. The 33rd season would be considerably more streamlined than had been the case previously. The fate of the 1973 Summer Show could only have deepened Carver's doubts about accepting his new job in the fall. Carl Cook's *Chase Me, Comrade*, while directed with energy and acted with verve by a seasoned cast, played to only 229 people and lost approximately \$200. Fully aware of these present realities and the theater's heritage, could this new Director who had grown up at RCT reverse the traffic flow at 10th and Main?

CHAPTER VI - 1973-1977

TRIUMPH AND TROUBLE AT TENTH AND MAIN

The four RCT seasons within the 1973-77 years did not exist in a vacuum of time or temperament. Radical, almost violent, shifts of mood characterized these years in America and Richmond and affected the membership, productions and future of the local theater as well. Watergate brought a sequence of recriminations and temporary loss of faith in leadership. Somehow, the celebration of America's Bicentennial managed to shrug off the national malaise with a patriotic sense of well being. In Richmond, voters counted three mayors in as many years, and the loss of Avco - once the largest local employer - created considerable anxiety about the area's economy. But this dislocation was partially alleviated with the successful opening of a major department store on the new downtown Promenade. People and institutions changed; old problems sought new solutions; some innovations worked, others didn't. In this milieu RCT experienced an almost Pavlovian four years of challenge, response, success, and failure which tested its ability to survive, let alone prevail.

RCT's first local director, Bob Carver, led the theater for two years, worked with two Board presidents, produced thirteen shows, and exited the position with the same ambivalent attitude which had characterized his entrance. On assuming the directorship, Carver had expressed his trepidations about the difficulty in recruiting and keeping volunteer assistance, about the unclear lines of responsibility between Director and Board, and about the transitory nature of the Board which prevented RCT from operating as smoothly as it might. None of these situations improved during his tenure, and despite some real artistic triumphs on stage, Carver and the Board parted company in the summer of 1975 in disagreement over RCT's policies.

Opening the season with a popular musical was an RCT tradition aimed at boosting membership sales. *Promises, Promises* offered a great deal of potential for this purpose. Written by the fail-safe Neil Simon, with music by America's favorite contemporary composer, Burt Bachrach, the play offered something for everyone. Carver again made good use of his *Gypsy* partner, Mike Hengstler, who both starred in and choreographed this production. Mike's wife, Vicki, had been appearing on the RCT stage since the age of three and now joined a host of other veterans such as Galen Miller, Bob Sizemore, Bill Jacobs, and Harold Zaltsberg, a predictable fixture in Simon shows. Ralph Phillips' orchestra contained a delightful innovation, four human voices to supplement the usual instruments. Despite the laughs and applause which greeted this show, it did not fulfill its expectations, and membership sales barely passed 1900, down approximately 500 from the past season.

The next two shows were also products of the 1960's, and both had small casts, but they appealed to entirely different audiences. *Butterflies Are Free* featured a young blind man torn between his protective mother and his permissive girlfriend. Earlham student Curt Williams developed the lead character with sensitivity and won an award for his acting. In December Marjorie Barker and Robert Godsey comprised the entire cast of *I Do, I Do*, an intimate musical. They sang and acted their way through fifty years of married life on a virtually bare stage, but talented work by Patricia Barton and Dee Ball with their props and makeup created the illusion of scene changes and the passage of time. The earlier play took an almost cynical view toward middle class morals and family traditions while the latter was an affectionate tribute to them.

Life With Father was the only revival of the 33rd season and its only play written prior to the 1960's. Carver had consciously selected modern plays in an attempt to attract more young people to RCT. Presented in 1948 with Harry Bangert in the classic role of the father, this production offered Carl Cook his first major part, after years of technical work, directing, and minor acting roles. The Victorian costumes and set made the show a singular contrast to the rest of the season. A smooth job of building audience tension was apparent in the mystery, *Night Watch* and Kathy Judge and Alex-Michael Hoehne were masters of this genre. Their convincing deceptions were probably heightened by the fact that Carver had denied them the final crucial page of their scripts until the last rehearsal. The season concluded with a modest but highly successful musical, *Dames at Sea*. This Off-Broadway spoof of musical films from the 1930's featured a young and talented cast including Vicki Hengstler, Curt Williams, Lois Overton and Robert Wilber who gave the audiences a slick display of nostalgia, dancing, satire and theatrical razzle-dazzle which left them clapping their enthusiastic approval.

But things are not always what they appear to be on stage and President Helen Sizemore pointed out in the December play program "things are not as good with the theater today as they were in the past." The membership shortfall meant reduced revenues, and a defective furnace boiler had to be replaced for an unanticipated \$4,000. This amount roughly equalled the season's budget deficit and had to be borrowed from the sale of tickets for the next season. At least twice this season the Board had been unable to transact official business due to lack of a quorum. This laxity continued into the next season and revealed a developing corporate instability. The instability increased with the revelation in February that RCT was in imminent danger of losing its tax-exempt status because it had failed to file the proper tax forms for the past decade. Thanks to the expertise and friendship of local accountant Luke Ware, RCT retained its tax-free classification after many anxious months of appeal.

If problems could be dissipated with high levels of optimism and

energy, then the activity at RCT in the summer of 1974 should have accomplished it. The summer show, which proved to be RCT's last one, was difficult and demanding but also stylish, popular and profitable. *George M!*, the musical biography of George M. Cohan, allowed young Phil Kaler to act, sing, and dance all over the stage and occasionally off the wall to the spontaneous cheers and applause of the audience. Bob Sizemore and Charlotte Norman were naturals as his stage parents, and the colorful array of costumes and flags fit naturally into the July calendar. The *Palladium-Item* reviewer declared that the show warranted a full house every night, and it came close to achieving that.



Phil Kaler is "George M" without a flag (Woodring Photo)

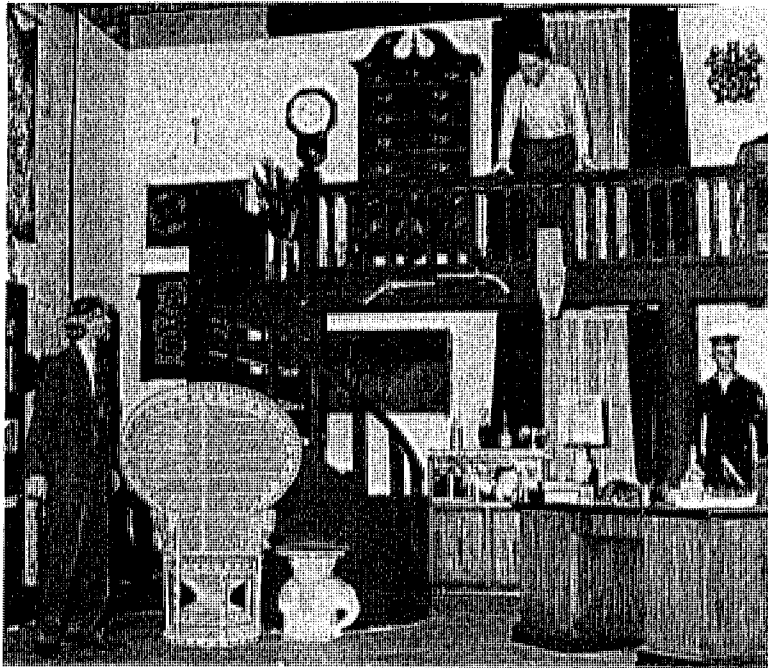
After expenses, *George M!* earned a profit of \$1200. It also earned Kaler an acting award; his performance and the new eligibility of summer shows coincided conveniently. With this momentum underway Dr. George Porter agreed to organize special activities to celebrate the next season's opening play, RCT's 250th production. Many people remembered the successful 25th anniversary activities which Porter had coordinated in 1965 and the membership upsurge that accompanied those activities. Close observers would have noted that the past season had ended with production #249, and forthcoming *No, No, Nanette* was to be #250. It was necessary, therefore, to deny *George M!* a number in the sequence of productions in order to schedule the celebration at the desired time. Bob Sizemore also contributed his energy to promote memberships, and with a variety of techniques boosted ticket sales back up to approximately 2200. The membership drive slogan was both symbolic and real, "We can't go on without you."

Carver feared that his star for *Nanette* would not be able to go on, but loyal trouper Joyce Ware survived her September auto accident with only bruises and the show went on as scheduled. *No, No, Nanette* had been a Broadway hit in 1925 and again in 1971. Now the frothy revival became an RCT showcase for Don Clay's bright sets and Dennis Hengstler's tap-dancing choreography. One of its songs, "I Want to be Happy," encapsulated the causes for celebrating the 250th production, and the audiences were greeted outside the theater with searchlights, inside with a huge birthday cake, and a pre-performance slide show of RCT's heritage. Energy, optimism and celebration, however, did not generate the desired ticket sales and performances for all subsequent productions were reduced from six to five in a cost-saving retrenchment.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds polarized opinion when it appeared in November; audiences either loved it or hated it. The story of a neurotic mother, her daughter's school science project, and the mutating effects of poverty and frustration on the human spirit was stark and depressing. RCT Judges found the acting of Barbara Berndt, Linda Adelsperger and Lisa Lowe worthy of awards and the play 'the best of the year, but an audience questionnaire declared it the season's least popular show for a very large number. The criticism which greeted this play was reminiscent of that which greeted some of Hubert Rolling's "problem" plays in the early 1960's. One RCT stalwart recalled that this show, as much as anything, probably cost Carver his job at the end of the season.

Contemporary plays of an entirely different mood found a warmer reception. *Play it Again Sam* presented Tim Jacobs as the spirit of Humphrey Bogart teaching Michael Harris how to be suave and romantic. The results of his coaching were as entertaining for the audience as they were fun for the cast. Neil Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* explored the paranoia of an unemployed executive played here by James Burdett. Unlike Simon's seven other plays at RCT, the laughs were bittersweet, having been wrung from situations not altogether funny. The season's fifth play, an intricate mystery called *Sleuth*, pitted an author against his house guest in a series of sinister games. The acting by Alex-Michael Hoehne and Tom Garrow and the English country home set by John Juerling drew descriptions of "excellent," "extraordinary," and "splendid" from the *Palladium-Item* reviewer, and the audience and judges agreed in general if not in exact detail.

The season's finale and Carver's final show for RCT was *Company*, and this musical revealed much about the state of the local theater in 1975. *Company* was selected, in part, because its contemporary setting could be accomplished without the high costume and set costs musicals usually required. Although the cast consisted mainly of familiar faces such as Charles and Michelle Avery, Galen Miller, Jane Stephenson and Louis Weber, the story was urbane, sophisticated and brittle. Carver and the cast censored some of the more delicate segments but several



Alex-Michael Hoehne and Tom Barrow star in "Sleuth" (Woodring Photo)

members of the audience complained of offensive material. Ralph Phillips' orchestra and Jeanne Whitney's singers worked well with Stephen Sondheim's relatively unfamiliar music, but, again, many in the audience felt more disappointed than entertained. Apparently Richmond's tastes were not ready for this recent Broadway hit.

A recent questionnaire and the financial situation at RCT revealed even more about the troubles at 10th and Main. Barbara Price, an Earlham student, conducted an "audience development study" of RCT for her senior thesis in the spring of 1975. She had discussed the theater with Carver, Board President John Brant II and other involved individuals, and had collated the responses to approximately 1,000 questionnaires which had been distributed in January. The results of her work were compiled in a 25-page study. Although not startling or original her report offered more thorough and systematic statistics than RCT had ever utilized and it confirmed the opinions of many. Compressed to its bare essentials, Miss Price's study asserted that: the original RCT had

been run by Norbert Silbiger and a tightly-knit group beyond which the theater had been unable to grow effectively; as this group drifted away from active involvement in the theater, an inadequate number of participants replaced them; for a community theater, a disproportionate number of members were in the upper age brackets and the attrition rate was high; the Board and Director were currently doing a poor job of public relations; large blocs of the membership wanted single admissions tickets, more musicals and comedies and fewer plays with controversial or risqué themes, and a more attractive building with comfortable seats. These depressing conclusions ran in tandem with recent fiscal reports. Paying off the 1966 building mortgage in December was a short-lived triumph because in March the outstanding bills exceeded RCT's bank account. A new mortgage loan of \$16,000 in April prevented a short-term deficit but created a long-term debt which many on the Board doubted the theater would be able to pay. Last minute appeals for donations from Patrons (\$25+), Sponsors (\$50+) and Angels (\$100+) did provide additional revenue, but impressed some individuals as an act of desperation.

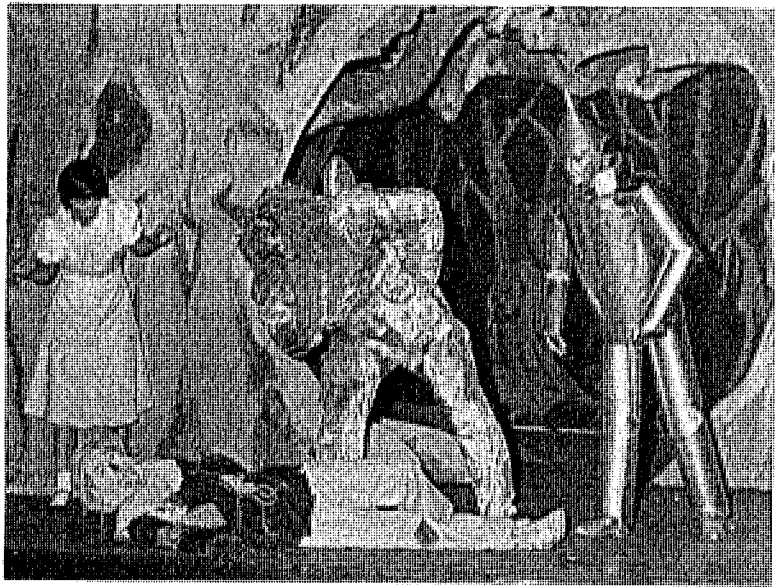
With the season finished, the questionnaire digested, and the financial picture understood, the Board met in June and July to determine the immediate future of RCT. No membership drive for the next season had begun yet; neither had a slate of plays been selected. Although Carver had been re-hired, he was unhappy about the unclear areas of responsibility for Director, Board and Committee chairmen. A few members of the Board felt that RCT had exceeded its useful lifespan and should be allowed to expire, but most felt that new direction would give it new life. Considering the criticism of several recent plays, the need for more aggressive community salesmanship, several complaints about Carver's exacting demands on the diminishing supply of volunteers, and concern over the Director's seeming inability to dispense gratitude or apologies with sufficient speed or finesse, the Board decided to ask for Carver's resignation and seek a replacement. The exit was late, awkwardly arranged, and left much unresolved.

RCT replaced Carver with Ron Wachholtz in the summer of 1975 and the contrast between the two directors reflected the Board's internal divisions, both spoken and unspoken. Carver had proven his ability to direct plays; he had not solved some of the problems such as fund-raising, public relations and membership development, which he regarded as Board responsibilities. The young Wachholtz appeared to be eager and willing to tackle these problems with an aggressive energy. At twenty-eight years old he held degrees from Wayne State College in Nebraska and Indiana State University, and had already proven his entrepreneurial capacities as director and producer of the growing Nettle Creek Players in nearby Hagerstown. His talent was obvious, as were his ambitions, brashness and ability to convince people that his goals were realizable. For some of the Board he seemed to be the

answer; for others he was a charming Starbuck who would deliver illusions rather than rain.

With a director's salary budgeted at \$9,000 and a membership list that barely exceeded 1400, immediate innovations were necessary to gain revenue and cut costs. Wachholtz instituted or supervised new policies which altered the tone of RCT very early in his tenure. The open sale of tickets for single performances after members had reserved their seats became general policy. A government financed C.E.T.A. employee replaced the hired custodian and saved the theater approximately \$1,000 per year. Wachholtz also devised a systematic rental program for theater equipment and costumes which generated another \$1,000 the first year. Grants from the Indiana Arts Commission and a local benefactor of \$1,000 each raised expectations for even more successful fundraising in the future. While not all of the Board members agreed with these activities, there was no denying that their new Director had taken control and that a new momentum was in process.

The first season under Wachholtz's direction displayed several distinctive characteristics: a high level of originality in play selection and direction, plays with large casts aimed at getting more people involved in the theater, and the presence of many new and young faces on and



"The Wizard of Oz" shows off its costumes. Teresa Keith (Dorothy), Morris Gordon (Lion), David Eilar (Tin Man), Barry Harrison (Scarecrow) (Woodring Photo)

backstage. A familiar *Wizard of Oz* quickly became a showcase of special effects and clever costumes and makeup. Young Teresa Keith did an award-winning job as Dorothy but was frequently overshadowed by dancing munchkins, flying sorceresses, and singing scarecrows, woodmen and lions. Rose Patti as the Wicked Witch of the West all but stole the show with her fiendish cackle. The production was hastily put together but was an infectious and promising opener. *You Can't Take it With You* proved equally original. Revived for the second time at RCT, this story of the carefree Sycamore family starred Bob Law and introduced eleven new faces such as Ruth Lee and Jack Leer to local audiences. Galen Miller's fussy set and Tom Wright's zany props matched the unorthodox plot lines of this popular show. For a Christmas offering, Wachholtz presented a musical *Scrooge* which he had adapted from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. His musical director, a Massachusetts friend, H. Duane Claussen, wrote most of the music and lyrics himself, making this production almost a premier. Conrad Yungbluit managed to give the character of Ebenezer Scrooge redeeming qualities and the special area lighting and split-level sets kept the stage from appearing as crowded as it really was with the enormous cast.

Richmond's (American Revolution) Bicentennial Committee donated \$200 to assist with the production of *The Patriots* in early 1976. This celebration of the founding fathers was unabashedly patriotic and established the new nation without the aid of John Adams, in contrast to RCT's earlier 1776 which gave him primary credit. Mel Preston portrayed a convincing Thomas Jefferson and the familiar Becky Miller, who appeared as his wife onstage, had recently become Mrs. Wachholtz offstage. *The Sunshine Boys* appeared in March, making Neil Simon the most produced playwright in RCT's history, and allowing Harold Zaltsberg to have fun as a retired vaudevillian. Wachholtz finished his first season with a musical biography of Fanny Brice, *Funny Girl*. Michelle Avery led a cast of forty-seven through this ambitious chronicle of theater history, and *Palladium-Item* reviewer Norma Carnes praised them for "acting, singing, dancing their hearts out." The big Ziegfeld Follies number featured lavish sets and costumes by Diane Preston and Tom Wright which reached a new high of extravagance on the RCT stage.

Although the \$6,000 gained from general admissions tickets during the past season was gratifying, it was only a small asset in a season plagued with old and new liabilities. Three musical productions and large casts had required large expenditures, and RCT had to borrow a considerable amount from its earlier mortgage loan. While less expensive play programs did save money, they were bland, even to the point of being dull and repetitive. The use of C.E.T.A. employees expanded from custodian to incorporate jobs which had previously been done by RCT volunteers, such as publicity, concessions, box office, and some set construction and painting. This shift of responsibilities created consid-

erable consternation within the Board, some members feeling that paid workers violated the spirit of community theater, diminished the sense of loyalty to RCT, and created conflicts in judging technical work for awards at the end of the season.

The problems and conflicts notwithstanding, the majority feeling at the end of the 35th season was congratulatory and optimistic. President Evan Farber told those attending the Annual Meeting that concerted efforts had "halted the decline and possibly the demise of RCT." Wachholtz seemed satisfied with the new policies at the theater and was pleased with the increased "noise" and fun which was apparent. The local Whitewater Opera Company had moved from the Earlham campus to the theater for its annual production, and had planned three operas for the coming season. This would tighten production schedules for all parties but would contribute additional rental revenue. During the summer Bob Sizemore supervised fifteen young workers from another government-funded program in a comprehensive refurbishing of the building. Approximately 1,000 people then took guided tours of the theater in September to view the freshly exposed marble wainscoting in the lobby, the repaired marquee, and other renovations.

Wachholtz returned from his summer with the Nettle Creek Players and a New York show to lead RCT through a season even more innovative, and ultimately troubled, than the previous one. His late return in the autumn was one contentious episode in a long series of misunderstandings and disagreements. The Board had agreed to expand the productions from six to eight, including two experimental or "adult" plays. Members could purchase season tickets to either the regular six plays for \$17.00 or to the full eight-play slate for \$22.00. Some confusion resulted from this option, but memberships did climb slightly to 1600. To reduce the number of "dark" days at the theater, performances would be split over two weekends rather than spread over the traditional five day run. The Board also agreed, albeit with strong minority dissent, to employ an Assistant Director who would share some of the artistic chores, and thus permit the Director to devote more time to fund-raising activities. Their \$9,000 salary would be divided on a 5-4 ratio and Wachholtz would also receive 50% of all RCT revenues in excess of \$40,000. This new position went to Noel Rennerfeldt, another product of Wayne State College and the Nettle Creek Players and a veteran of *The Patriots* and *Funny Girl*.

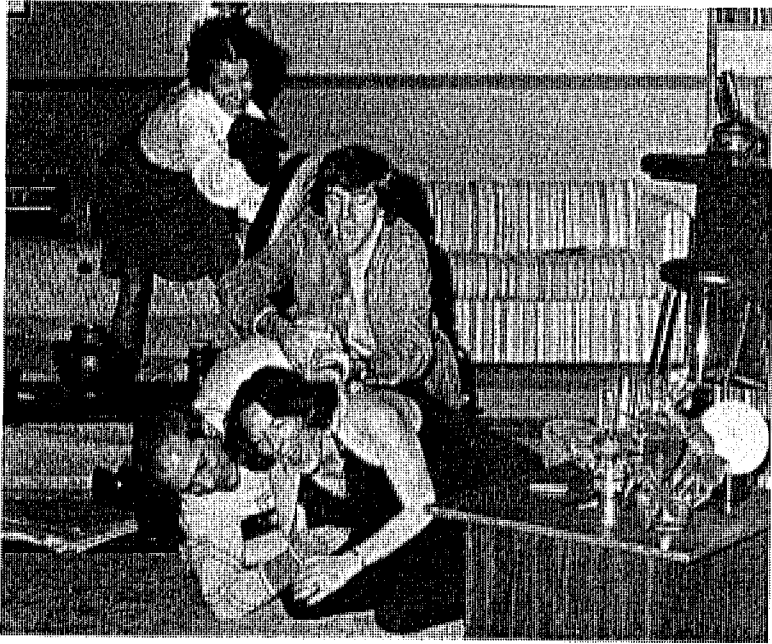
The season opened with a revival of *The Sound of Music* and Jewell Sherrow received an acting award for her performance as Maria, as had Sharon Flaherty in the 1965 version. Jeanne Whitney's orchestra and Dot Toney's costumes graced this familiar show, but, unfortunately, the audience could not ignore some of the sets which were obviously unfinished and precarious. In contrast, handsome sets dominated the second show, *Night Must Fall*, which was Rennerfeldt's directing debut.

Tom Wright took a small part in this English mystery and stole the show with his amusing eccentricities.

Lysistrata, the first "adult" offering of the season, was highly original, energetic, and unsettled the RCT membership. Wachholtz took Aristophanes' Greek classic, enhanced its themes of women's liberation and anti-war protests, added a group of anachronistic Keystone cops, and presented the show "in the round," with the audience on bleachers encircling the production. Many people enjoyed the experimental liberties taken with the play and the rowdy interpretation of the youthful cast; others felt assaulted by the raucous themes and techniques. Judging from the sold-out performances of the second weekend, more people were pleased than displeased. The stage returned to normal in December with a revival of *My Three Angels*. William J. Smith thoroughly entertained the holiday audiences with his ingratiating performance of an escaped convict full of Christmas spirit.

Blizzards, sub-zero weather and inexperience disrupted the production schedule of Rennerfeldt's second show, *Wonderful Town*. Valiant efforts by Amy Eilar and Sheila Case in this musical version of *My Sister Eileen* could not conceal the unfinished quality of this show. A small audience endured the cold and the *Palladium-Item* reviewer offered more compassion than criticism. The following show also played to small audiences and produced violent extremes of audience reaction. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* subjected ticket holders to bleacher seats on the stage again for RCT's second experimental show of the season. It also subjected the audience to four hours of perhaps the most demanding theater ever presented in Richmond. Edward Albee's controversial play threw four strong characters against each other in a series of eviscerating word games which left them intellectually naked and the audience emotionally drained. Bill Jacobs, Dee Ball, Jay Hernly and Mary McCoy displayed extraordinary dramatic skill in these confrontations, but the audiences grew smaller after each intermission. Some vowed never to return to RCT while others agreed with Wachholtz that the production was the finest they had witnessed at the local theater.

The last two shows of the season were a triumph in that they were presented at all. RCT was virtually bankrupt and the play programs for the final three productions were one-page flyers which apologized for the "financially distressed season." *The Mouse That Roared* had a thin plot about a fantasy kingdom at war with the United States. The directors had to substitute at the last minute for the ailing lead actor, and the sets were more suggestive than substantial. Obvious economies had been taken in the production, but the large youthful cast radiated a cheery determination in compensation. Reviving *Teahouse of the August Moon* was another economy measure which replaced the usual closing musical. Galen Miller, as Sakini, gave what many considered to be his finest performance in a long career at RCT, and the sets and costumes were surprisingly effective for a theater in such difficulty. An Army jeep



Bill Jacobs, Dee Ball, Jay Hernly, and Mary McCoy attack "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (Woodring Photo)

and a goat on stage added to the charm of this show and it captured the Best Production award of the year.

What had happened to bring RCT to a state of virtual collapse in the Spring of 1977? The financial crisis was genuine and of long duration. Fund-raising had fallen far short of expectations, the severe winter was devastating the utilities budget, production costs were higher than necessary under the circumstances, and the play programs were losing money due to uncollected advertising fees. In February, three Board members - Jerry Woodring, Barry MacDowell, and Barbara Klemann - presented a special financial report. It documented the current problems and declared that RCT had been living in "a fool's paradise" by accepting unrealistic goals and blithe projections of solvency. The report predicted that even with tight controls over the final three productions, RCT would have a record deficit at the end of the season. The last three shows were done with spartan restrictions; *Virginia Woolf*, for instance, spent less than \$50.00 above royalties. And the final deficit of \$3600, while not a record, was large.

This fiscal situation was only an outward sign of an internal civil war which had been developing for many months. It was obvious that the

Director and his retinue of friends and C.E.T.A. workers had assumed many of the responsibilities once managed by the Board and volunteers. It was also obvious that some of these activities were not operating as smoothly as they might. Season tickets and scripts had been ordered late; sometimes theater employees went unsupervised and appeared to be redundant occupants of the building; and a series of thefts from box office and concession funds raised unanswered questions. Also unresolved was the controversy over loans of costumes and equipment to the Nettle Creek Players. A real conflict of authority between Director and Board had developed and many Board members were unsure about their jurisdiction and the theater goals. Board meetings frequently were marked by personal recriminations and resignations. During a sequence of special meetings in February, Wachholtz declared that his goals for a professional theater and the goals of RCT for a community theater were incompatible and offered his resignation. It was accepted, but a subsequent suggestion to accept the resignation immediately rather than at the end of the season failed. Bob Sizemore, active at RCT since 1962 and now serving his fourth term as President, did not like the course which the theater was taking, but seemed unable to change it. The Board rejected his proposal to cancel the remainder of the season and start fresh with new personnel in the fall. In March the Board adopted the long-awaited revision of RCT's By-Laws (See Appendix I); Sizemore had previously objected to some of the revisions and this action could have been interpreted as a vote of no confidence in his leadership. George Sowers became President in the first election under the new By-Laws, an event which ran concurrent with Sizemore's resignation from the Board. The standing ovation given to Wachholtz at the Awards Banquet in May and the incredulity with which several Board members witnessed the ovation, symbolized the divisions and turmoil that had characterized the past four years.

CHAPTER VII

"1977-1979 - VOLUNTEER RENAISSANCE"

President George Sowers welcomed audiences to the theater in September of 1977 with this comment: "By opening this season, Richmond Civic Theater [has] survived the severest crisis in its 36 year history." He did not exaggerate. If the financial crisis, membership decline, and Board instability were not enough to cloud RCT's future, the building itself almost prevented a theatrical season at 10th and Main. A long history of warnings from the fire marshal had prompted many changes and repairs, but age and neglect had created a building declared unsafe by local authorities in the Summer of 1977. Until major and expensive renovations were completed, the theater would be officially closed. Immediately Joan Vigran, Bill Jacobs, John Juerling and John Simons launched a crusade of community spirit and physical grit which accomplished the highly improbable. They organized weekend work days of volunteers who carted away mounds of inflammable debris, solicited aid from local electricians who donated their skills for rewiring, and convinced obituary writers that reports of the theater's demise were premature. In late August the Board held its collective breath until the fire marshal determined that Norbert Silbiger Theater could host the 37th season.

To say that RCT presented *Man of LaMancha* as if the theater's life depended on it is both cliché and truth. At its September opening the theater had approximately 700 members, the lowest number since 1941, and many people still viewed the building as unsafe. If those people could not be lured to the box office for this show, RCT could not guarantee a second show, let alone a complete season. Volunteer director Joan Vigran had a distinguished record of acting, administration and directing, and she dared "to dream the impossible dream" with this show. By the end of its second weekend of performances, the cast had learned to expect standing ovations and unashamed weeping from the large crowds. Charles Matthews won the award for best actor with his portrayal of Cervantes' befuddled knight and at the awards banquet he paid tribute to John Juerling's stunning dungeon sets by saying he had never before been upstaged by a fire escape. The show also captured six other awards, including acting trophies for Michelle Avery, Bill Smith and John Lee. Vigran received the coveted Silbiger Award at that same banquet in honor of her Herculean efforts to "save" the theater. And perhaps of greatest importance in 1977, *Man of LaMancha* took in \$3500 at the box office and generated the sale of another 300 memberships.



Charles Matthews is the "Man of LaMancha" with Michelle Avery, Bill Jacobs, and Bill Smith (Woodring Photo)

The new RCT By-Laws had radically reorganized the Board and it now contained 23 members, many of whom were new to the theater. They had determined that unpaid volunteer directors would be a financial necessity for this season, that fund-raising would have to produce larger gifts than ever before, that the play programs would have to show a profit with advertising, and that production costs would be held to firm ceilings. By the end of the season the Board congratulated itself on accomplishing all of these goals, and added to the list of triumphs a substantial savings on utilities and record income from costume rentals.

Internally, RCT had learned to manage its affairs through a combination of desperation and determination. Aiding this process was Charles Brown, the theater's first paid Business Manager. This musician and former director of Earlham College's student activities center was brought in as a part-time employee to coordinate the physical, financial and scheduling activities for RCT. The Board subsequently rewarded his efforts by expanding his position to a fulltime job.

Jean Kerr's comedy, *Finishing Touches*, allowed Nancy McDowell to prove her versatility as a director. She had previously directed productions for Mask and Mantle, Junior Players, and the Whitewater Opera Company, and now RCT enjoyed the effects of her work. The play exposed generational gaps on a college campus and, appropriately, Earlham supplied much of the cast. Bill and Jane Stephenson, in particular, performed with ease and polish. For the holiday show RCT presented *Silent Night, Lonely Night*, a poignant story of two lives seeking new hope on Christmas Eve. The unfamiliarity of the play kept many people from seeing the production, but the small audiences in attendance witnessed Marjorie Barker's third award-winning performance, a promising debut by RCT business manager Charles Brown, and a display of consummate directing by Ruth Lee. Mrs. Lee, although a relative newcomer to Richmond, was a veteran performer and director who brought fresh talent and energy to the local theater. The Great Blizzard of 1978 cancelled the first weekend of *Black Comedy* in January and it, too, played to a small house. RCT jack-of-all-trades, Carl Cook, directed and H. Price Glazer starred in this slapstick depiction of electrical outages and burglary in contemporary London.

The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail set several pleasant precedents. Board member Barry MacDowell had convinced the Indiana Commission for the Humanities (ICH) to grant RCT \$8500 for an experimental project. Using the play as a focus, a pre-performance lecture and post-performance discussions pursued the dilemma of individual dissent against majority trends. Morrisson-Reeves Library contributed meeting space and bibliographies for the program and large crowds attended and participated actively. The success of the experiment pleased the ICH, and *Thoreau* received additional exposure in a later Commission publication. Randall Cline, another new Board member, made an impressive directing debut with this show and David Cobine's *Thoreau* and James Beier's *Emerson* made the production a memorable excursion into intellectual history.

A subsidized musical brought the season to a successful finale. The First National Bank had contributed \$1500 toward producing the Spring show, but some Board members feared that *Godspell* might be too avant-garde for RCT audiences and this was not a good year to offend anyone. A modern and musical rendition of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, *Godspell* accentuated humor and youth, burlesque and vaudeville, and the RCT version made the most of all of them. Set

against a chain-link fence and featuring carnival-like costumes and makeup, this show frequently brought the audience to its feet, clapping in unison with the final number. Jeff Wood's interpretation of the Christ figure, Joan Lemoine's imaginative direction, and Lynn Kennedy's musicians created a demand for more of all their talents in the future. The *Palladium-Item* reviewer concluded her glowing comments with "See it!" Many people did, including extra audiences during the Rose Festival. Sue Peters reported in *The Graphic* that she agreed with several others who felt the show was "one of the greatest productions" in RCT's history.



The gospel according to "Godspell" (Woodring Photo)

Dee Ball and Beth Hernly, as editors, had restored attractiveness and originality to the play programs in 1977-78. Their benediction for the season appeared in the final program and summed up the feeling of the Board.

They said it couldn't be done,
and we said, "You wanna bet?"
They said we'd never open,
and we said, "We ain't down yet!"

RCT had survived its most severe crisis and had presented a full and

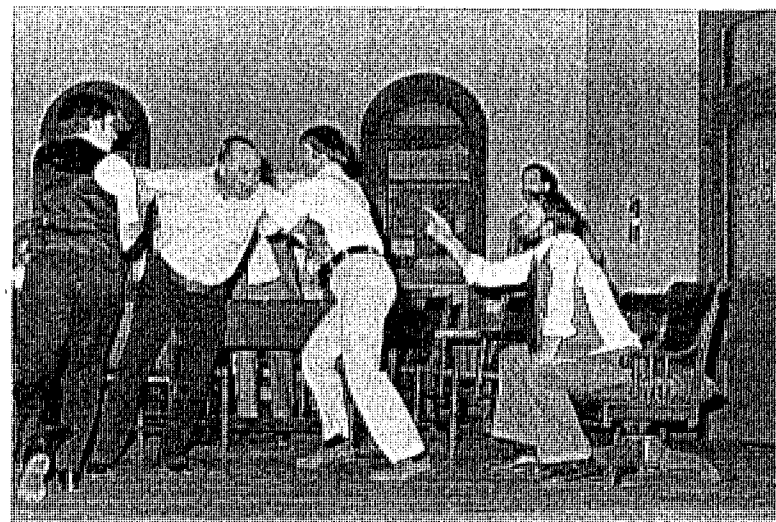
largely successful season. With tight budgeting, unpaid directors, and ambitious fund-raising, the theater had not only paid off its deficit, it had ended the season with an operating surplus of approximately \$3,000.

The 38th season found RCT continuing and expanding what it had learned to do the previous year. Volunteer directors tapped local talent and saved money; aggressive fund-raising required diplomacy and planning; disciplined budgeting and management relied more heavily on the full-time business manager; and the slate of plays had to be chosen with an eye for balance, cost, casting, and audience appeal. While the community did express its renewed confidence in the theater by purchasing approximately 1100 memberships, box office ticket sales would continue to be a necessary revenue supplement. Junior Players maintained their residence at Silbiger Theater and presented three productions as did the Whitewater Opera Company. RCT eased the scheduling difficulties of the three companies by altering its production runs. Musicals would continue to have six performances spread over two weekends, but non-musicals would have only four performances running Thursday through Sunday in one week.

Can Can kicked off the season with a dancing show by Abe Burrows and Cole Porter. New Board member Bob Van Schooneveld co-directed this musical and it was appropriate that his partner should be Charlotte Norman. Mrs. Norman had staged 26 previous musicals and this production would be a climax and culmination of her choreographic service at RCT. Veterans Louis Weber and Linda Hays led a large cast through the Parisian artistic life, and the original costumes by Dot Toney and Joan Rutledge prompted an instant demand for rentals. In November Joan Vigran directed *Twelve Angry Men*, a tense juryroom drama. She created a community event of considerable moment by casting local lawyers in ten of the twelve roles and taping the voice of former Judge and RCT President Gus Hoelscher for use during the play. Two of her cast, Doug Van Middlesworth and Bill Jacobs won acting awards for their onstage jury duty. For Christmas, RCT revived *Curious Savage*, previously done in 1951. Bob Van Schooneveld directed his second show of the season, proving himself equally adept with comedy as with musicals. Nancy McDowell took the idiosyncratic part of Mrs. Savage, played earlier by Mary Helen Backmeyer, and convinced the audience that people inside mental institutions are frequently more likable than those outside.

The inevitable happened in January of 1979; Norbert Silbiger made his final exit at the age of 83. Since 1941 this founding father of RCT had been either Director or member of the Board, and had found himself immortalized in 1968 by having his name given to the building now owned by his "children." One measure of the esteem in which he was held could be seen in RCT's refusal to default on the small pension granted him in 1962. Even during the theater's most financially trou-

bled days, the Silbiger check got written, when many others did not. His ability to amuse and manipulate carried over to the memorial service following his death. Always the director, he had left instructions selecting the participants and musical numbers to be used; they paid tribute to his Austrian birth, Jewish faith and talent for bringing down the final curtain with a dramatic flair.



Randall Cline, Raymond Knoll, Steven Hunyadi, and Doug Van Middlesworth are four of the "Twelve Angry Men" (Yarian Photo)

A revival of *Blithe Spirit* in February played to a small but loyal band of Noel Coward fans, proving again that English comedies are not Richmond's favorite cup of tea. Recent Earlham graduate Pamela Oths, as director, demonstrated her resourcefulness as did the technical workers, whose props, lights and makeup conjured up departed spirits for Amanda Fraser, and won awards for it. *An Enemy of the People* repeated the successful experiment which had been initiated the past year with *Thoreau*. Again the recipient of a generous grant from the Indiana Commission for the Humanities and the hospitality of Morrisson-Reeves Library, RCT created a series of lectures and discussions which focused on the play's theme of personal integrity in conflict with community profit. Ohio resident and RCT veteran Ed Brooks directed this Ibsen play and used most of his talented family to engineer a distinctive multimedia production. David Jetmore and Alex-Michael Hoehne effectively

developed the conflicting leads and George Porter made a welcome return to the stage in a smaller role. The post-performance audience discussions frequently became as lively and diverse as the issues in the play.

In the season's closing musical, Tim Jacobs commuted from Bloomington for a one-night, stand-in role for Ed Christian who had to miss one performance. Jacobs had a good reason for accepting this arduous assignment; he recalled that he couldn't resist "working with some of the funniest people in Richmond." A veteran of many shows with Junior Players and RCT, he correctly guessed that Ruth Lee's cast would turn the rowdy *Once Upon a Mattress* into a hilarious finale. Dee Ball, Bill Jacobs, Joan Vigran, Jay Hernly, Jack Leer, and Harold Zaltsberg led a crowd of oldtimers and newcomers through this musical farce which captured eight awards at the end of the season. The First National Bank had sponsored the production of *Mattress* with a \$2,000 donation and Board member George Blakey contributed to the insanity of the Saturday evening performance by thanking the wrong bank for the gift. For this mistake he received the Boner of the Year award, newly created to honor the season's most notorious foul-up.

Thankfully, RCT had committed few such boners during 1978-79 and the theater's gradual renaissance continued its momentum. Generous grants from the Gannett Foundation and the Indiana Arts Commission had permitted an architectural study of the Silbiger building by Woolen Associates of Indianapolis. Their evaluation showed that the theater was structurally sound and worthy of maintaining. The report also offered ambitious and expensive options for renovation which now await artistic and financial verdicts from the community. Less grandiose but nonetheless worthy refurbishments made the theater a more attractive facility during the 38th season. New carpeting, plastering, painting and redecorating were physically necessary and aesthetically pleasing. RCT finished the fiscal year with its second operating surplus in as many years, and felt secure enough to put a new roof on the building and enter the next season with current policies. In a celebratory mood, the Board staged a birthday party in September called "70 Years of Applause" to honor the seven decades of entertainment in the Murray-Indiana-Silbiger Theater. This nostalgic review of vaudeville, cinema and theater paid tribute to a building and to an institution which had survived.

EPILOGUE

RCT ended two decades where it had begun, at 10th and Main, but it had traveled far to stay there. In 1959, the theater's operating budget was \$30,000; twenty years later it exceeded \$50,000. At the beginning there were a director's salary and rent payments; by the end a Business Manager and mortgage loan occupied those budget slots. 2900 exclusive members paid \$10.00 to see seven shows in 1959-60 and they made RCT self-sufficient: 1100 members paid \$19.00 twenty years later to sit next to non-members at six shows which were made possible with supplementary gifts and grants. Inefficiency was not the villain in this piece, although it did play a minor role. Costs of the arts by 1979 far exceeded box office revenues and performing groups everywhere were forced to admit their dependence on philanthropy. The arts in Richmond had also become more diverse, competitive and democratic. There appeared to be no return to a better or easier time; the only course was to cope with new challenges. To fulfill its purpose during these years RCT had employed many directors, purchased a permanent home, made and spent nearly \$1,000,000, produced 147 shows, wept, laughed, and applauded as thousands of volunteers provided entertainment to a temporarily fickle, but ultimately faithful, community. By the end of its 38th season, RCT was mature, stable, responsible, and successful on a plateau somewhat less grand than previously, but still successful. George Sowers ended his two years as RCT President in the summer of 1979 by thanking the community for its renewed confidence and support and by asserting that RCT had "once again become a dynamic organization that can look to the future with optimism."