

CENTER ©
CITY

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MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

JANUARY 15, 1975

CIRCUIT PLAYHOUSE

In time, from the chaos of disconnected materials, came combinations, the limitations of which are called the laws of nature; and with the advent of man came interpretation and speculation as to the possible relationships of these things, which he called ideas. From these origins emerged beings who could become many, representing several sets of ideas juxtaposed in such a way as to endow them with social significance; they were accompanied by others desirous and capable of mediating these ideas through affected expression. And so it was, that theatre became the reflection of its parentage in the art and folly, and aspirations of men.

During the reign of Front Street in the realm of Memphis Theatre, a small group of high school students who had worked with and greatly admired that company banded together to form a theatre group called the Circuit Players. Eventually, they attracted others from their community and performed 1 or 2 plays a year for a period of about four years. Little did this troupe of fledglings and other community performing groups know what would ensue upon the portentous year of 1968, a year rife with curses for Memphians. In that year Memphis forfeited its three predominant, professional theatre companies in succession – Front Street Theatre and two dinner theatres – leaving in their stead but these community organizations to assume the task of continuing the tradition of theatre in the locale of Memphis.

According to Jackie Nichols, General Manager of Circuit Playhouse and one of the principal founders of both the Circuit Players and the Circuit Playhouse, those involved with the Players realized in 1969 that it was time for them to charter. They formed a 10 person board of directors, comprised of persons who actually worked in the theatre itself. Then they sought a building: “Getting the building is very important to establishing an identity; I [Jackie Nichols] think having a building is important to a theatre company”; they moved into a building on Walker Avenue which seated 100 people. For their first production they had Barry Fuller direct a rock version of “The Fantastics”, signaling to the community that they were going to do something different but with reputable standards.

JACKIE NICHOLS:

“I had learned and made all my mistakes—learned things to do and not to do—while working with the Circuit Players those first four years. Those were very good years; they gave me a chance to learn and grow and make mistakes. About at that point, on Walker, when we settled down, I quit performing myself, because after I spent about eight years acting, dancing and singing, I realized that I didn’t have any talent—which can really be a startling revelation if you’ve spent all that time, money and effort and then realize that there are people better than you are who can’t get jobs. But I was

satisfied just working in this capacity [General Manager].”

The present facility of the Circuit Playhouse, on Poplar across the street from Overton Park, also seats only 100 people. Each and every production must in some way present a certain challenge as to how to utilize the compact stage and the uncommon proximity of the audience. CENTER CITY asked Jackie what was currently meant in theatre by the term “audience participation”: does it mean that the actors go out and require, or at least solicit, the audience’s actual participation in a production, and if so, is not this demand antithetical to the general character of a Memphis audience?

JACKIE NICHOLS:

“I think it means more of an intimacy. We do shows that pull the audience into involvement with the production. It’s done in different ways. There’s only been one or two shows that we’ve done where there’s actually been contact between the audience and members of the stage, as far as physical touching. But, it’s just as good physical contact when you’re here face-to-face, a couple of feet from the audience, talking to it.”

CENTER CITY:

Do you think there’s an inherent danger of that contact degenerating into mere gimmickry, or making the viewer feel so self-conscious as to no longer be absorbed in the action on stage?

JACKIE NICHOLS:

“Sure, I think people can feel too self-conscious. I know I’ve seen shows - I saw the Rocky Horror Show recently in London where they use ushers who just freak out the audience, like jumping in somebody’s lap--it was a campy horror show. But as I think back on it, it loosened the audience up. A Memphis audience would be very self-conscious - I think that’s bad; it’s a shame that people have to be that way, because that’s one of the involvement things. You can do some very interesting things, but I’m sure if you did a lot of that stuff you would alienate the audience. But maybe this is one thing live theatre has to offer. It can’t give you the spectacle that film can give--that’s too expensive.”

CENTER CITY:

So, one can make the audience part of the spectacle, overwhelming them that way.

JACKIE NICHOLS:

“It’s just that contact that counts.”

Circuit Playhouse offers a different approach to theatre, but they also perform a number of the classics, which don’t appear to have a wide appeal in Memphis. And they do Black theatre too, because “that’s a large segment of this city and they deserve to be represented in the theatre.”

With the many tasks to be done, neither the actors, the theatre staff, nor the production staff is paid for their efforts. Sometimes the Playhouse can offer a place to stay and some food, and an environment to its actors and staff; but for the permanent staff, the persistent demands of the Playhouse must be met just as if they were being paid. Jackie said that if Circuit Playhouse were just forming today it would probably be a losing proposition. They really don’t aspire to expansion, for then many of their jobs would be reduced exclusively to business.

JACKIE NICHOLS:

“I can’t say that the Circuit Playhouse was started to entertain the city of Memphis. We try to enlighten the audiences. But we’ve done it to build up and improve the quality of actors. Memphis State is now getting actors from Circuit. An actor wants to get out and act. Memphis State has some very childish rules about not allowing their students to act outside Memphis State. Sometimes then, they use community actors over students. You can only learn so much in the classroom without acting. Memphis is really fortunate to have good community theatre.”

CENTER CITY:

Does Memphis have good community theatre because that's all it's got in the way of theatre? Isn't it difficult to retain good actors when there's no professional company to promote to?

JACKIE NICHOLS:

"True, but Memphis attracts good professional actors to its community theatre who end up staying here."

CENTER CITY:

What are the prospects of professional theatre in Memphis?

JACKIE NICHOLS:

"One out of every ten persons would rather see a live show. It's cheaper to stay at home and watch TV. I've really turned against TV - it's gotten to where it rots people's minds away."

To an extent, each of the other projects of Circuit Playhouse - Theatre II, the Workshop, and the Youth Theatre - are autonomous. But a theatre company requires that someone be available and capable to make major decisions and uphold theatre standards; in Circuit Playhouse that person is Jackie Nichols.

Circuit Playhouse is a non-profit, tax exempt organization. For enquiries concerning auditions, contributions and/or production scheduling call 726-5521.

CIRCUIT PLAYHOUSE STAFF

- General Manager..... Jackie Nichols
- Production Manager..... Mike Bothne
- Stage Manager..... Annie Hutkin
- Public Relations.... Buddy Bernstein, Debra Triplett
- Theatre II Manager Walker Lowe
- House Manager Kathy Irvin
- Gallery Manager..... Doug Cupples
- Workshop Directors..... Bill Baker
- Executive Secretary Diana Nichols



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*YOU'RE
A GOOD
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CHARLIE
BROWN*



THEATRE PRODUCTION SCHEDULING

Circuit Playhouse

- January 30-March 2 - "Look Back in Anger"
by John Osborne, directed by Harvey Huddleston
- March 13-April 13 - "The Taming of the Shrew"
by William Shakespeare, directed by Buck Clark
- Summer 1975 - "Oliver"

Theatre II

- January 31-February 22 - "The Empire Builder"
by Boris Vian
- "Butley"
- "The Firebugs"
- "The Imagining Invalid"

MEMPHIS FILM SERIES

Lyceum Film Theatre

January 21 - "The Visit"

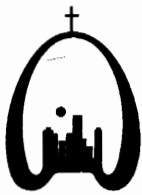
UT-Center Film Society

January 31 - "Citizen Kane"

The Long Life Video-Discussion

Subject: Aging

On January 15, at 3:00 p.m., "The Physician and Aging" will be the topic of discussion in the auditorium of the Main Library. And on January 22 the program will be on "Senior Citizens."



Most of the people that visit First Presbyterian Church do not come to worship, but to participate in one of the many programs that make up the church's "open-door ministry."

*Persons are helped through the "clothes closet" located at the church, and others are helped by referring them to the Church and Social Services agency.

*Special Task Forces use the Conference Room regularly for luncheon meetings.

*The National Organization of Women hold a regular meeting every month in the Fellowship Hall.

*The Fellowship Hall is used for some wedding receptions for couples married at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church.

*Various other activities have been held in the building for senior citizens.

*Church Women United made use of the First Presbyterian facilities last October for their triennial meeting. In December the American Guild of Organists held a dinner meeting at the church.

*The church is also used by the Foster Parents organization. In co-operation with the Center for Advanced Study and Continuing Education in Mental Health, the Foster Parents organization is sponsoring a series of training sessions for foster parents on January 23, April 11, 12, 18 and 19.

And of course, First Presbyterian Church houses the daily lunch program of the Civic Center Community Culinary Club, a Day Care Center, Project First Offender and the Counseling and Assistance Center, and the Civil Service Commission.

Groups interested in using the facilities are invited to contact the Church Administrator, Jerry Evans, at 525-5610.

Center City

First Presbyterian Church
166 Poplar Avenue
Memphis, Tennessee 38103

To those who responded with a spirit of co-operation to the move to utilize the church's parking lot for the staffs of First Presbyterian and First Methodist Church, and the staffs of programs using the two churches, we would like to thank you. For any who may not have heard, the increased number of staff persons of the two churches make it no longer possible to accommodate those desiring to use the parking facilities.

Beginning Friday, January 10, Mr. Ernest Mellor will spend each Friday at the church for the purpose of offering professional pastoral counseling to those in need. Mr. Mellor was pastor of the Germantown Presbyterian Church before entering into a private counseling practice. A fee will be charged for this service.

For the month of January oil paintings by Gladys Breeding will be on exhibition in the lobby of the Sterick Building.

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink

MENU FOR JANUARY 16 - JANUARY 24

THURSDAY, JANUARY 16

Ham, Sweet Potatoes, Lima Beans, Rolls

FRIDAY, JANUARY 17

Turkey and Dressing, English Peas, Cranberry Sauce, Rolls

MONDAY, JANUARY 20

Salmon Croquettes, Hash Browned Potatoes, Tossed Salad & Rolls

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21

Roast Beef, Whipped Potatoes, English Peas, Rolls

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, French Bread

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23

Fried Chicken, Rice and Gravy, Squash, Rolls

FRIDAY, JANUARY 24

Meat Loaf, Potatoes Au gratin, Lima Beans, Rolls

*Second-class
postage paid at
Memphis, Tennessee*