

CENTENNIAL CUR

Celebrating 100 Years of Purdue Theatre

BY DAVID M. WILLIAMS

From the long-forgotten *The President of Oolong* to the October 2007 production of *Six Degrees of Separation*, students at Purdue University have spent a century entertaining the campus and surrounding communities and finding outlets for their creativity. Although Purdue Theatre was not a separate academic unit until 1967, Purdue students began a tradition of theatrical endeavors 60 years earlier. Like ivy on an old brick wall, Purdue Theatre took root and grew into today's theatre division in the Patti and Rusty Rueff Department of Visual and Performing Arts, with a dynamic undergraduate liberal arts curriculum and a professional training program at the graduate level. Now housed in the Yue-Kong Pao Hall of Visual and Performing Arts, the story of Purdue Theatre's evolution over the past 100 years involves a cast of thousands, all of whom played a role in building, maintaining, and advancing its tradition.

The Early Years

In 1907, noted author, playwright, and Purdue alumnus George Ade was in the audience for one of the Harlequin Club's first performances and agreed to write the following year's production himself. In 1908, he produced the script for *The Fair Co-Ed*.

Other clubs soon began forming, including the English Department Players and the Little Theatre Players. They produced straight drama while the Harlequin Club focused on musical theatre.

By 1925, the Little Theatre Players had absorbed the English Department Players and was competing with the Harlequin Club for campus supremacy in providing extracurricular activities. Financial troubles led to their merger in 1930.

Purdue Playshop

By then, a new organization had emerged. In 1928, the Purdue Forensic Council — which was part of the Department of English and responsible for the University's debate activities — sponsored two plays under the direction of John A. McGee, an English department faculty member who also taught the University's only theatre-

related course offering, Play Production and Stagecraft. Out of this grew Purdue Playshop.

"Purdue Theatre truly finds its roots in Playshop," says Russ Jones, who has served as chair of Purdue's theatre division since 1998. "There was no theatre major at the time, but many of those who participated in Playshop still consider themselves theatre folks because that's where they really felt connected.

"When you do theatre," he adds, "you expose a side of yourself that doesn't always come out in the real world. It creates a special bond."

Darleen (Andrews) Nelson (BS '50, Interior Design) is a perfect example of this phenomenon. While at Purdue majoring in interior design through the School of Home Economics, she was active in Playshop and remains involved in the Chillicothe (Ohio) Civic Theatre. "I joined Playshop as a sophomore and performed in three musicals," she recalls. "It was considered an extracurricular activity, but I always felt I got just as much out of it as I did from my classroom experience."

The Soaring '60s

Playshop truly flourished under the guidance of Ross D. Smith and Joe Stockdale, who oversaw its transformation from an extracurricular activity to an



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TAIN CALL



Playshop Costume Service, 1959



Leave It to Jane, 1969



The College Widow,
Hansen Theatre, 2006



Of Mice and Men, 1967,
starring James Earl Jones

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- 1907** The Purdue Minstrel Association changes its name to the Harlequin Club and performs *The President of Oolong*.
- 1914** The English Department Players form and produce a series of one-act plays.
- 1916** Women first allowed on stage. Previously, all female roles had been played by men.
- 1917** The Little Theatre Players form and eventually absorb the English Department Players (1921).
- 1927** Little Theatre Players expands to become an official Purdue University activity, rehearsing in the Tower Room of the Purdue Memorial Union.
- 1928** The Purdue Forensic Council sponsors two plays. Admission is 35 cents.
- 1929** The Purdue Forensic Council changes its name to Purdue Playshop, which is meant to serve as an extracurricular activity.
- 1929** Purdue offers its first official theatre course, Play Production and Stagecraft, which remains the only course offering through 1937.
- 1930** The Harlequin Club and Little Theatre Players merge to form the Harlequin Players.
- 1932** The Harlequin Players disband.
- 1937** The Playshop receives performance space in Eliza Fowler Hall.
- 1939** The Laboratory Group, which would eventually become known as the Experimental Theatre, is created to perform prospective Playshop material before invitation-only audiences.
- 1952** Eleven theatre courses are available through the Department of Speech.
- 1956** Playshop is recognized as a curricular activity in the Speech department.
- 1957** Playshop performances move to Elliott Hall of Music.
- 1958** Loeb Playhouse opens with a production of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*.
- 1958** The Experimental Theatre — located in the sub-basement beneath the Loeb Playhouse auditorium — opens with a production of *Northern Lights*, giving Purdue Theatre two performance venues.
- 1960** Beginning of Purdue Summer Theatre.
- 1966** University Theatre becomes a division of the new Department of Creative Arts, which eventually becomes the Department of Visual and Performing Arts.
- 1967** Summer Theatre becomes Purdue Professional Theatre Company.
- 1976** MFA program for graduate students developed for Purdue Theatre curriculum.
- 1994** Purdue Professional Theatre Company becomes inactive.
- 2001** Construction begins on new Visual and Performing Arts building, the planned home of the four divisions that make up the Department of Visual and Performing Arts: art and design, dance, music, and theatre.
- 2002** Gift from Carole and Gordon Mallett funds the Carole and Gordon Mallett Theatre, a flexible performance space with a seating capacity ranging from 100 to 150 depending on the stage configuration.
- 2003** Gift from former Purdue President Arthur G. Hansen in tribute to his wife funds the Nancy T. Hansen Theatre, a 300-seat proscenium theatre.
- 2004** Department of Visual and Performing Arts named in honor of Patti and Rusty Rueff.
- 2004** Visual and Performing Arts building opens as construction continues.
- 2005** Yue-Kong Pao Hall of Visual and Performing Arts is officially dedicated in honor of a Chinese business leader whose two daughters graduated from Purdue University.
- 2005** Last of the Experimental Theatre's more than 245 productions is Jose Rivera's *Marisol*.
- 2006** First production in the Nancy T. Hansen Theatre is Purdue alumnus George Ade's *The College Widow*. First production in the Carole and Gordon Mallett Theatre is Jacquelyn Reingold's *A Story About a Girl*.
- academic discipline with a full curriculum offering BA, MA, and PhD degrees and the formation of a full Actors' Equity Association (AEA) professional company. Smith, who came to Purdue in 1942, joined the Navy as an officer during World War II and was appointed head of Purdue Theatre in 1949, a position he held for more than 20 years. Stockdale was hired in 1950 and remained at Purdue through August 1975.
- "I was hired as a designer/technical director, but I wasn't much good at it," Stockdale recalls. "Ross soon had me directing productions because my background was as an actor and my interest was in directing and playwrighting. He felt I brought energy and enthusiasm to my work."
- On May 10, 1958, Playshop opened the Loeb Playhouse with a production of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* and the 176-seat Experimental Theatre with the premiere of *Northern Lights*, a student-written play by Douglas Denbow (MS '58).
- During the decade of the 1960s, in addition to graduate-student productions, the University Theatre produced five plays a year in the Loeb Playhouse, and some 65 productions in the Experimental Theatre. Of that total, Stockdale directed 62.
- "The smaller theatre was based on a Robert Edmond Jones design, originally to be built at Harvard," Stockdale recalls. "Somehow Sam Marks, head designer and technical director, managed to get it built at Purdue."
- The opening of the theatres in Pao Hall marked the end of the Experimental Theatre's days as a public production space. Stockdale notes, "There seems to have developed a prevailing sentiment that the Experimental Theatre was not a very good venue. This may be because of its location down two flights of steps to the sub-basement in the bowels of the Stewart Center, plus the fact that it had limited state-of-the-art technical equipment, but for actors and audiences it was absolutely superb."



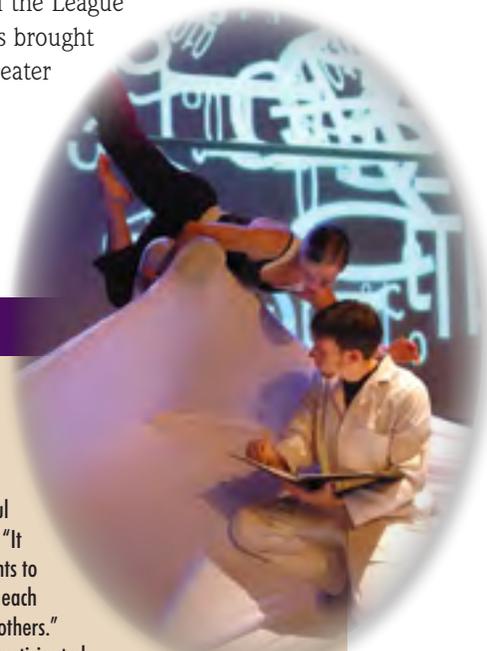
Loeb Playhouse opened in 1958 with a production of *Caesar and Cleopatra*.

Howard Bay, Robert T. Williams, Stuart Wurtzel, and John Boyt; Academy and Tony Award-winning actress Anne Revere; legendary screen and stage actress Frances Farmer; and Larry Kert, star of Broadway's *West Side Story*.

"All of these people really helped raise the profile of Purdue Theatre while providing a tremendous confidence boost to the students," says Mennen. "And they aided students — such as Tom Moore, Peter Schneider, Mark Andrews, and Dan Von Barga — in their transition from college to the professional theatre."

Perhaps Purdue Theatre reached its apex in 1967 when the School of Humanities, Social Science, and Education introduced the Purdue Professional Theatre Company as a member of the League of Resident Theatres. This brought professional theatre to Greater Lafayette for a summer season, as well as a

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"There was an intimacy to that theatre that made it feel like the audience was on stage," adds Professor Emerita Dorothy Mennen (MA '64), who established the voice curriculum in what was then the Department of Creative Arts.

The summer of 1960 marked the beginning of Purdue Summer Theatre, which called upon student, faculty, and community talent. By 1964, it had evolved into a fully accredited Equity theatre, incorporating graduate students.

In 1961, guest artists were first invited to work with the University Theatre. Some of the more prominent professionals to spend time at Purdue during the 1960s include Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights William Saroyan and Marc Connelly; New York set designers

Purdue Shines in Prague Spotlight

Its performance of *Labcoats on Clouds* at the Prague Quadrennial, the world's largest international stage design and architecture event, placed Purdue's Patti and Rusty Rueff Department of Visual and Performing Arts on a global stage last June.

A collaborative effort between the areas of dance, art and design, theatre, and computer graphics technology, the project involved six graduate students, an undergraduate student, and a recent graduate, along with David Sigman, head of the Visual and Performing Arts; Fabian Winkler, an assistant professor in art and design; and Laura Arns, assistant professor of computer graphics technology and associate director of the Envision Center.

Co-directed by Carol Cunningham, chair of the dance division, and Richard Thomas, professor of visual and performing arts and a specialist in sound design, the performance piece was inspired by the event's theme of Babel and explored communication and the creation of civilizations. The 30-minute work featured one male and one female who interacted with other dancers, as well as computer-generated and controlled images and sound.

"This performance was created knowing that anything we used had to fit in our suitcases," Cunningham says. "As a choreographer and dancer, the challenge was to find a balance between visual graphics and dancers in competing for the audience's attention. In the end, we were very successful at balancing all of the elements."

According to Sigman, the Purdue contingent received quite a bit of publicity for its efforts.

"There were 10 local newspaper articles done on the event and Purdue was featured in two of those," Sigman says. "There was also an article in *The New York Times* that published on June 10, just as we were

preparing to leave on the trip. It was billed as a major theatrical event, which really helped validate what we were doing.

"Overall, this was a wonderful educational experience," he says. "It was an opportunity for our students to build a piece of work, learn from each other, and share their work with others."

The Purdue contingent also participated in a new event called Laptop Connections as one of six teams at the Masarykovo Railway Station recording sounds sent to collaborators in California, France, and Germany. The teams and collaborators compiled and processed the sounds to create sonic works of art involving travel and transit that were then relayed to the railway station's pedestrians.

Participating graduate students were Matt Brisbin, a computer graphics technology student from Wabash, Indiana; Jason Ducat, a theatre sound design student from Bowling Green, Ohio; Robert James, a sound design and technology student from Salt Lake City, Utah; Jason Knox, a theatre sound design student from LaCrosse, Wisconsin; Ingrid Shults, a fine arts student from Tempe, Arizona; and Onur Yazicioglu, a visual communications design student from Ankara, Turkey.

Ron Shoemaker, a theatre sound design senior from Lafayette, Indiana, was the undergraduate student, and Christy Jacobs of Augusta, Georgia, began working on the project prior to graduating in December with a BA in interior design.

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12-week fall and spring season. It was Indiana's first resident professional theatre. As executive director, Smith's goal was to merge the personnel and resources of the professional company with the educational offerings of University Theatre.

Arguably the most memorable production to emerge from this arrangement was *Of Mice and Men*, which starred James Earl Jones and his father, Robert Earl Jones, marking the first time that father and son had ever shared the same stage.

"We had something really special," Stockdale recalls. "Our students were working with professional actors and actresses. The only other school doing anything comparable was the University of Minnesota. I remember one review by Charles Staff in *The Indianapolis Star* noting that the best theatre in the state was at Purdue."



A Story About a Girl, Mallett Theatre, 2006

winner of five Tony Awards and the leading scenic artist of his era, designed his last show, *Marathon 33*, at Purdue.

Phillips was one of nine people in 11 years to chair Purdue's theatre division, serving as the interim chair prior to Dale Miller's arrival just as the MFA was introduced. Over the next 28 years, Miller worked to provide

Modern Facilities

An MFA program for graduate students and an undergraduate interdisciplinary program in engineering and theatre were developed for Purdue Theatre's curriculum in the mid-1970s under Van Phillips, director of theatre and technology design, and first offered in fall 1976. Phillips also was instrumental in bringing legendary designers to campus. Lee Watson, who wrote a seminal text on lighting design, joined the faculty. Jo Mielziner,



Marisol, Experimental Theatre, 2005

a steady influence while campaigning for facility upgrades.

"My greatest accomplishment may be that I was able to get a sign put up on the side of Loeb Playhouse that said 'Purdue Theatre.' Until that happened, you could have been standing right beside it and not even known you were there," he says.

Miller passed the baton to Jones in 1998. By then, plans were in the works for the \$43.4 million Yue-Kong Pao Hall of Visual and Performing Arts, the home of the four divisions that now make up Visual and Performing Arts: art and design, dance, music, and theatre.

"At that time, the architect had just been hired," Jones says. "The faculty had a lot of input in planning the facility; we were involved in everything from designing the theatres and the layout of the office space to selecting the equipment."

The new facility boasts two separate theatres: The Carole and Gordon Mallett Theatre, a flexible performance space with seating for 100–150, and the Nancy T. Hansen Theatre, a 300-seat proscenium house.

Both theatres staged inaugural productions in 2006. George Ade's *The College Widow* made its debut in the Hansen Theatre directed by Miller, while a new work in progress, *A Story About a Girl*, by New York playwright Jacquelyn Reingold opened the Mallett Theatre.

According to Jones, Pao Hall promises to provide a great springboard into the future for Purdue Theatre.

"It is helping to raise our profile both nationally and globally," he says. "Word is spreading of Purdue Theatre's first-class facilities, training, and professionalism."

David M. Williams is a freelance writer for Purdue Marketing Communications.

PURDUE THEATRE ALUMNI

Where Are They Now?



Tom Moore

(BA '65, Theatre, Honorary Doctorate Recipient '95, Liberal Arts)

A two-time Tony Award nominee with a lengthy theatre resume, Tom Moore (pictured with Cindy Miller Raff) may be best known as the director of the original Broadway production of *Grease* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning 'night, Mother. He also owns directing credits in film and television and received Emmy nominations for his work on episodes of *ER*, *Mad About You*, and *L.A. Law*.

Why did you pursue a theatre major at Purdue University?

"I had originally planned on becoming a lawyer, so I was majoring in political science and minoring in speech, thinking these would be helpful in the career of law. Midway through my junior year, I realized this was not my passion, so I switched my major to speech and my minor to political science."

What is your most memorable Purdue experience?

"It was an incredibly stimulating time in my life. Today, I still remain connected to many of the same people with whom I shared these early experiences."

How has Purdue played a role in your professional career?

"Any success I've had professionally evolves from those early years and the people who surrounded me at that time. I was very fortunate to have been taught by some great people. Learning from gifted and talented people like Joe Stockdale, Dorothy Mennen, Ross Smith, and Wayne Lamb gave me my foundation for the future."



David Potts

(BA '72, Theatre; Distinguished Alumnus 2007)

David Potts recently completed his first season as art director for HBO's *John From Cincinnati* and is currently art director for NBC's *The Watch*. In 2005, he won an Emmy for his work on HBO's *Deadwood*.

Why did you pursue a theatre major at Purdue University?

"I was a landscape architecture student and found out about the field of theatre scenic design after I tried out for a play as an extracurricular activity. I changed majors, moved to New York City for a year and worked for a well-known designer there before going on to Brandeis for my MFA."

What is your most memorable Purdue experience?

"There are so many! But I do vividly recall sitting in the Experimental Theatre with a couple of my theatre professors looking at my first realized set design — for *Boys in the Band*. They were very supportive and encouraging. I knew then that I had found my life's work."

How has Purdue played a role in your professional career?

"My four years at Purdue are incalculable toward my success as a set designer in theatre and art director in television and film."



Kristin Graham

(BA '93, Theatre)

Kristin Graham is associate producer of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, with which she is about to begin her fifth season.

Why did you pursue a theatre major at Purdue University?

"I went to Purdue planning to become a chemical engineer. Once I started taking classes, I found myself getting bored and wanted to pursue something more exciting, dramatic, and adventurous. I took one theatre class and was instantly hooked."

What is your most memorable Purdue experience?

"I really loved doing Purdue Summer Theatre (inactive since 1994). It was a true bonding experience with professionals and really prepared me for what I encountered in the real world. I would love to see it brought back. The equity actors who participated really taught me a lot as far as what would be expected of me as a professional stage manager."

How has Purdue played a role in your professional career?

"My experience at Purdue gave me strengths such as the ability to recognize, analyze, and solve problems in on-the-job crisis situations. As (former Theatre Chair) Dale Miller would say, 'If you can be unflappable and see the big picture, then you can accomplish almost anything.'"



Gerritt Vander Meer

(BS '96, Engineering, BA '96, German, BA '97, Theatre)

Gerritt Vander Meer is currently playing a recurring role on the FX television series *Rescue Me*.

Why did you pursue a theatre major at Purdue University?

"Mine was a pretty typical case of frustrated engineering student turned theatre major — except that I waited until my senior year to do it. I actually graduated from both schools."

What is your most memorable Purdue experience?

"You'd never print it."

How has Purdue played a role in your professional career?

"Purdue gave me so much — theatre, study abroad, Purdue Musical Organizations, fraternity life, friends. It still feels like home. I don't think they have quite figured out how to get rid of me."