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Theatre Arts

Donna Campbell
University of North Dakota

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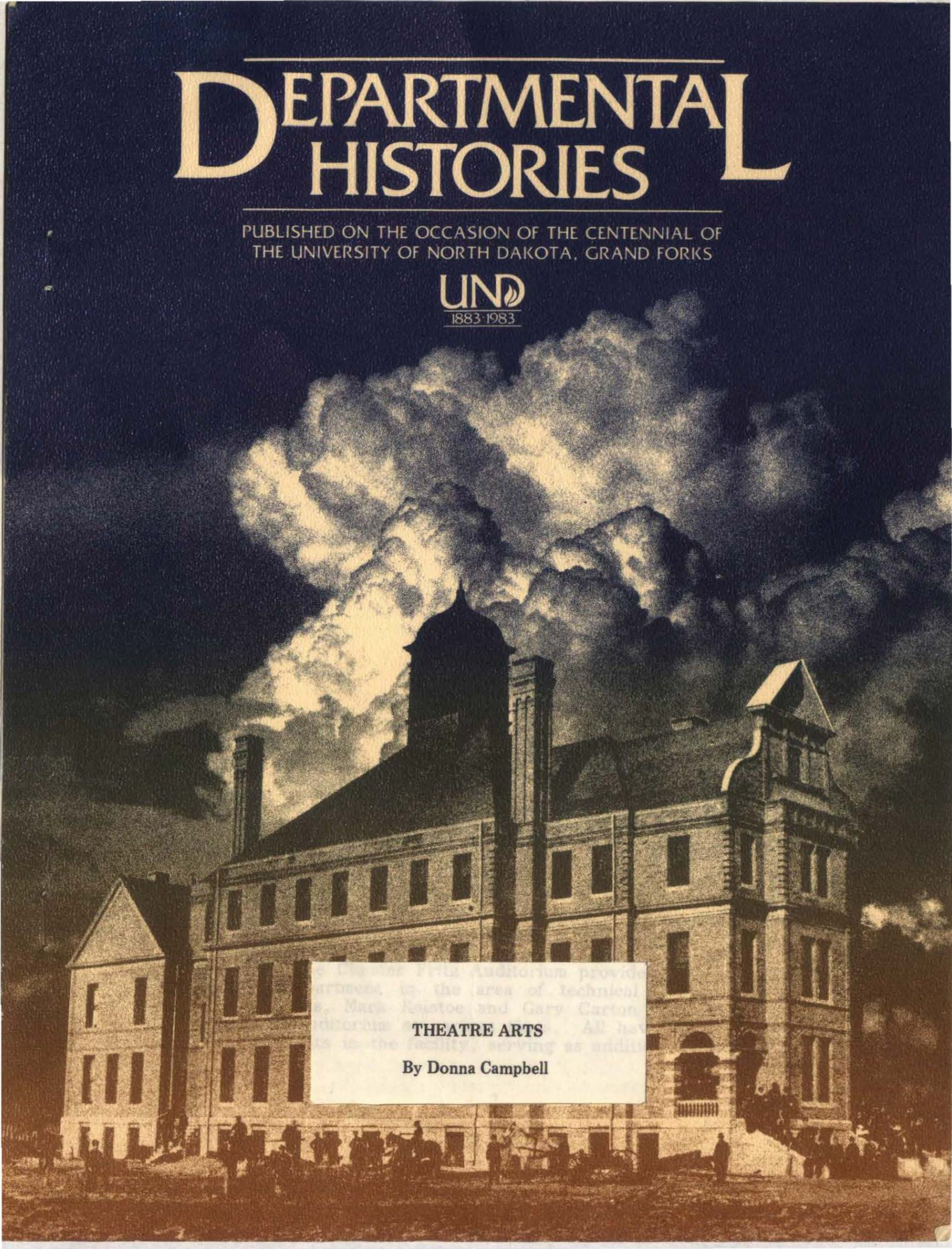
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THEATRE ARTS

By Donna Campbell



HISTORY OF THE THEATRE ARTS DEPARTMENT

by
Donna Campbell

The University of North Dakota has long been a leading force in drama in the state of North Dakota and the Upper Midwest. As early as 1910, Professor Frederick H. Koch of the English Department organized the Sock and Buskin Society, renamed the Dakota Playmakers in 1916, which introduced a strong tradition of quality theatre to the UND campus and communities in eastern North Dakota. Each season the group presented a number of popular plays, gradually developing a reputation for excellent drama.

The UND theatre arts program is a relatively new department on campus. Before 1971, theatre arts was affiliated with speech. At that time, planning began for a new building to house the newly created College of Fine Arts. Theatre arts was included in the College of Fine Arts with music and visual arts, though the new department remained housed in Merrifield Hall. Dr. Ron G. Engle was selected as chairman of the Theatre Arts Department. Other faculty were Suzanne Bennett, Lawrence J. Hill and Sandra Norton. All had been on the theatre arts staff as part of the Speech Department.

The formation of the new department required revision in the curriculum with increased emphasis on theatre arts and related areas of study. In addition to those courses obviously related to theatre, oral interpretation was moved to the Theatre Arts Department. It is still an important feature in the theatre arts program.

Children's theatre was part of the theatre arts program before the department's formation. It was organized under the direction of Sandra Norton who held a part time theatre arts position and a part time position in the New School which became the Center for Teaching and Learning in 1974. Norton was responsible for the formation of the Burlap Bag Players, a children's theatre touring group. Members of the group came from both theatre arts and CTL. Their name was derived from the burlap bags that potato companies donated to carry properties and costumes. Norton's work with the touring group and the papers and workshops that she presented while at UND brought national and international recognition to the University's children's theatre program.

The first year of the department's existence was highly successful and that autonomy was reflected in increased student participation and audience attendance. Box office attendance at Burtness Theatre during the main season was a record 12,049. The summer season was expanded and three shows were produced with a total attendance of 3,070. The children's theatre program achieved a high level of cooperation with area elementary schools, and several thousand children were bused to attend the production of The Little Prince, directed by Bennett.

In 1972, Bennett established the Northern Plains Interpretation Festival as an annual event. Nine colleges attended the first three-day festival which included readings and performances by individuals and groups from the various colleges. The festival is still the only interpretation festival in North Dakota,

South Dakota and Montana and is supported by Canadian colleges as well. Each year a guest critic is invited, often a well-known author or performer. The festival currently alternates between UND and St. Cloud University.

Choreographer Raymond Goulet was hired as a guest artist in 1972. Goulet served as part time choreographer for University productions and as ballet master and creative director for the North Dakota Ballet Company during his two-year residency.

Norton took a leave of absence at the end of 1973 to finish her doctorate and ultimately resigned her position. Her work in children's theatre was continued by Jacqueline Davis, a part time instructor in the Theatre Arts Department, with the assistance of Judi Rucker who was hired that fall. Patrick Rucker also was hired in 1973 as an assistant professor to teach acting and directing, and Charles Gilroy was hired for a one-year appointment as technical director, replacing Hill who was on leave for doctoral work. Gilroy designed sets and lights for all mainstage productions and supervised the installation of the new sound system and lighting boards in Burtness Theatre. Hill finished his studies in 1974 and resumed his position at the Theatre Arts Department.

In 1973, Engle coordinated the first annual One-Act Play Festival for area high schools. Eight schools attended the first year. Each performed a one-act play which was evaluated by theatre arts faculty. In later years, guest critics have been invited to judge entrants and present workshops. Charles Gilroy and Patrick Rucker conducted workshops at the 1973 contest.

The 1974-75 season was a period of stabilization for the Theatre Arts Department. The reorganization of the department council increased the effectiveness of decision-making in the department. The council was divided into the academic council and University Theatre council, providing greater student involvement in both the making of decisions and their implementation.

Part of the education of students in the arts comes from providing them with an opportunity to work with professionals in their fields. The Theatre Arts Department has tried to provide as many of these opportunities as possible for their students. Actor Alec Murphy was actor-in-residence for the role of Artie in The House of the Blue Leaves, directed by Bennett during the 1974-75 season. Murphy conducted workshops on make up and acting for the University and for area schools. His appearance was made possible by a grant from the North Dakota State Arts Council and the College of Fine Arts Visiting Artist Fund.

The Hughes Fine Arts Center was completed in 1974, and Sam Smiley from Indiana University was invited to dedicate the new building. While at the University, he conducted a two-day seminar in playwriting and dramatic literature.

The Theatre Arts Department summer season has grown steadily since the birth of the department. The 1974 University Festival Theatre involved more students than any previous summer. Over 90 students participated in the three productions at Burtness Theatre. Because of audience demand, an additional performance of the musical Godspell was held.

Bennett completed her doctoral work in 1974 and was tenured during the 1974-75 academic year. Hill was tenured the following year.

The revision of the BFA curriculum was concluded in 1974, greatly strengthening the professional and academic standards of the department. The revised curriculum structure provided the student with a clearly defined plan of progress through the requirements of the degree.

During the 1974-75 academic year, the Theatre Arts Department office and faculty offices were transferred to Chandler Hall behind Burtness Theatre. Increased faculty size necessitated the move to a building with more and larger offices. Additional classrooms also were available, as were needed storage areas for scenery and properties. Moving these materials from Burtness allowed the expansion of the costume shop.

Jacqueline Davis and the Ruckers left the department in 1975. The growth at the graduate and undergraduate levels made additional faculty necessary. A full time acting and directing instructor, Gordon Hayes, and a part time costumer, Margarete Hayes, were hired in the fall of 1975. A permanent position in the children's theatre program was created with the hiring of Helene Rosenberg.

As part of the Bicentennial celebration, the Theatre Arts Department sponsored a national American Revolution Bicentennial Playwriting competition. The project, coordinated and directed by Engle, was funded by a grant from the North Dakota American Revolution Bicentennial Commission and the College of Fine Arts Cultural Affairs Fund. The winning play, A Dusty Echo by Ev Miller of Bismarck, toured 19 cities in North Dakota.

Increased funding allowed the guest artist program to continue during the 1975-76 season. The fourth annual Northern Plains Interpretation Festival hosted eight universities and colleges for three days in April. The highlight of the festival was the appearance of Peter Schumann of the Bread and Puppet Theatre who directed and appeared in a production with UND students presented in Burtness Theatre. The Metro Theatre Circus was in residence at UND for one week. The company gave workshops and performances at UND and within the public school system and gave two public performances at the end of residency. Author Peter S. Beagle attended the world premiere performance of an adaption of his novel, The Last Unicorn. The novel was adapted by theatre arts major Sue Pratschner and directed by Bennett. Delbert Unruh from the University of Oklahoma resided three weeks at UND to design the set and lighting for The Congresswomen, directed by Engle.

The attempt to balance teaching loads continued with the addition of Charles Gilroy as adjunct professor in the fall of 1976. Gilroy had returned to the University to serve as technical director at the Chester Fritz Auditorium and continued the ongoing practice of the use of the auditorium's personnel to assist the department's program.

The building of the Chester Fritz Auditorium provided a positive effect on the Theatre Arts Department in the area of technical theatre. In addition to Gilroy, Ned Collins, Mark Kolstoe and Gary Carton have served as technical directors at the auditorium at various times. All have assisted the department by training students in the facility, serving as additional resource personnel in

design and technical theatre and serving as adjunct faculty. The auditorium provides additional training for students and exposes them to professional skill levels in dance, performance and theatre crafts.

Gordon and Margarete Hayes left the University in 1977. David Sederhold was hired to teach acting and directing, and Karen Thornburgh was hired to fill the part time costuming position. Artist-in-residence for the 1977-78 season was Dr. Lee Hudson from the University of Texas. During her second semester residency, she taught courses and directed her prose theatre production of My Dear Watson in April.

The combined BA in English and theatre arts was the product of student demand. The research into such a program was completed by a theatre arts student with an emphasis in oral interpretation. It was because of her interest and resourcefulness that the program was formalized and accepted in 1978. It is under the direction of Bennett.

The department has achieved state-wide recognition with the extensive touring of their productions. In 1978, for example, they were invited by the Speech Communications Association to tour a production of Peter Hanke's Sorrow Beyond Dreams, directed by Bennett, to the national convention in Minneapolis. The same year a production of Androcles and the Lion toured five North Dakota cities.

Rosenberg left the department after the 1978 summer season. Her work with the children's theatre program was continued by Lee Beger. James Seeman also joined the department in the fall of 1978 as artist-in-residence, serving as technical director and special designer for all mainstage shows while Hill completed his dissertation on a partial leave of absence.

The 1978-79 season featured actor Donald May in the February production of Equus, directed by Sederholm. May is a popular daytime serial star and also has appeared on both the stage and in film in various roles.

The following year, 1979, a two-thirds time shop foreman position was created, and Tom Truax was hired to assist Hill. This addition gave the department the resources of four people in design and theatre crafts. The 1979 summer theatre productions were performed in the City Center Mall in downtown Grand Forks. The department's resources were the basis for developing a greater involvement with all of the Greater Grand Forks arts groups.

In 1980, Engle became founding editor of a new scholarly journal titled Theatre History Studies. Engle was named editor of the new annual national journal by the Mid-America Theatre Conference and supporting scholars at various universities. The journal is devoted to research and excellence in all areas of theatre history, with the aspiration to represent a wide range of theatre history research for diverse and international fields of interest. Editorial Board members include Weldon Durham, University of Missouri-Columbia; Felicia Londrè, University of Missouri-Kansas City; Tice Miller, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Harold Nichols, Kansas State University. Bennett is a consulting editor for the journal.

Bruce C. Jacobsen was selected as dean of the College of Fine Arts in 1980. Jacobsen is a full professor on the theatre arts faculty and in that capacity directed Arms and the Man in November of 1981.

In 1981, Sederholm assumed the duties to chairman. University funding restrictions forced the department to reduce its emphasis in creative dramatics and children's theatre the same year.

Since the introduction of summer theatre, there has been a need to develop a formal program. One of Sederholm's first activities after assuming the chairmanship was the creation of the Summer Theatre Festival Company. A paid core company was hired for the two-month season for acting and technical positions in the production of three shows. Additional roles and positions were filled with volunteers. Guest artists David Pichette and Kathy Danzer were hired to perform in the first two shows of the season. The first season was highly successful, raising summer attendance significantly.

The honorary dramatic fraternity, Alpha Psi Omega, was created in the spring of 1982 because of student interest and initiative. The purpose of the society is to recognize outstanding theatre students and provide an additional avenue of creativity and social activity relating to theatre. The first project of the organization was to sponsor a trip to Denver to the United States Institute of Theatre Technology convention.

The 1982 Summer Theatre Festival was organized along the same lines as the previous summer and with continued success. Actors Pichette and Danzer returned to work with the company for the first two shows of the season.

The Theatre Arts Department has successfully provided the state and region with services and its expertise since its inception. As the first theatre arts department authorized in the state, the department has taken its program out into the state with its tours and by present workshops for high schools and community theatre. Its faculty has been committed to the program and establishing its visibility by their regional and national activities as members of boards, as writers and speakers and as artists. This provides the department's students a faculty maintaining their expertise and involvement in a constantly changing discipline. The future of the program is rooted in continuing this type of professional involvement and regional support.

The following is a list of productions mounted by the UND Theatre Arts Department since its inception through the summer of 1982 in Burtness Theatre (B), in the Burtness Studio Theatre (studio), in the Hughes Fine Arts Center (HFAC) and for touring (tour).

1972-1973

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds (B)

The School for Scandal (B)

The Fantasticks (B)

Death of Artemio Cruz (B)

The Little Prince (B)

Ghosts (studio)

The Architect and the Emperor of Asseria (studio)

Deathwatch (studio)

Summer 1973

Dracula (B)

Madwoman of Chaillot (B)

The Taming of the Shrew (B)

1973-1974

The Empire Builders (B)

The Flowering Peach (B)

The Shoemaker's Holiday (B)

The Caucasian Chalk Circle (B)

The Indian Wants the Bronx (studio)

What the Butler Saw (studio)

Chamber Music (studio)

The Brompton Musicians (B)

Prosperity: Just Around the Corner? (studio)

Summer 1974

Godspell (B)

Bertha the Beautiful Typewriter Girl (B)

Twelfth Night (B)

1974-1975

Rain (B)

Peter O'Hey (studio)

Short Straw (studio)

House of Blue Leaves (B)

Patchwork Quilt (B)

Peer Gynt (B and tour)

Summer 1974

Mousetrap (B)

The Lady's Not For Burning (B)

1975-1976

The Importance of Being Earnest (B)

Peter Pan (B)

Marat Sade (studio)

The Last Unicorn (B)

I Rise in Flame Cried the Phoenix (studio)

A Dusty Echo (B and tour)

Summer 1975

Fashion (B)

The Real Inspector Hound (B)

1976-1977

Kennedy's Children (B)

Five Minutes to Morning (B)

The Hostage (B)

The Congresswomen (B)

Kiss Me Kate (B)

Summer 1977

Hay Fever (B)

Aladdin (HFAC)

The Tiger and the Typists (studio)

1977-1978

Hedda Gabler (B)

Story Theatre (B)

The Underpants (B)

My Dear Watson (B)

Summer 1978

The Good Doctor (B)

Vasilis (HFAC)

Frankenstein of The Man and the Monster (B)

1978-1979

When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder? (B)

Step On A Crack (B)

Vanities (B)

A Midsummer Night's Dream (B)

Summer 1979

Little Murders (B)

La Ronde (B)

1979-1980

Three Sisters (B)

Wiley and the Hairy Man (B)

Equus (B)

Born Yesterday (B)

Summer 1980

All performances were at the Greater Grand Forks Center for the Arts and Humanities in the City Center Mall.

Thurber Carnival

Arc Light and You Know

The Oldest Living Graduate

1980-1981

The Threepenny Opera (B)

Reynard the Fox (B)

The Waves (B)

The Curse of the Starving Class (B)

Summer 1981

Catch Me If You Can (B)

Getting Out (B)

Company (B)

1981-1982

Company (B) (revived)

Lemon Sky (B)

Arms and the Man (B)

Something's Afoot (B)

Victor or Children Come to Power (B)

Summer 1982

A Flea in Her Ear (B)

Blithe Spirit (B)

Gemini (B)