



THE CLEVELAND PLAY HOUSE AS AN INSTITUTION

In the Fall of 1915, Charles and Minerva Brooks met with 8 friends to talk about theatre. Out of this meeting, The Play House was formed. That November, the group elected Raymond O'Neil as its director and this "group of businessmen and bohemians" met every Sunday night to drink beer and talk Theatre. Dues were \$1.00 a month.

Early 1916, Francis Drury offered the members the old Ammon House to use. This site is where we are located now, across Euclid Avenue from the Drury's property. Tunnels, now closed off, remain under the street that connected the Play House with the old Drury property. The first production was a marionette show, *The Death of Tintagiles* by Maurice Maeterlinck.

In 1917, among the additions to the company was none other than the Wicked Witch of the West herself, Margaret Hamilton. Now with 127 supporting members, the Play House needed a larger facility, and despite war times, purchased the Lutheran Church at East 73rd Street, designed by Cleveland architect Charles Schweinfurth, for \$7,000, spending an additional \$2,000 to renovate the facility that had a seating capacity of 160 people. Tickets were 25 cents.

The Twenties were indeed "roaring." Ripe with New American playwrights who would revolutionize American

theatre - among them, Eugene O'Neill. His *Beyond the Horizon* opened the 1921-22 season. Raymond O'Neil announced his retirement in February of 1921. His successor, Frederick McConnell, was recruited from the Pittsburgh Guild Players. His first season included 12 major plays, two marionette shows and a burlesque review. The theatre company added an annex for dressing rooms, a scene dock, light bridge and a green room. From 1921 to 1923, attendance grew from 4,000 to 40,000. Puppets returned to the stage during the 1924-25 season, when an empty storeroom on E. 77th became what is believed to be the first puppet theatre in the nation. Their masterpiece production was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The puppets are housed in our Shubert Library on our third floor.

By 1925, the theatre had once again outgrown its facility. Inspired by a visit to the dual theatre/opera house in Stuttgart, Germany, McConnell had a vision for the new building. Francis Drury gave the Play House the land on which the current Play House facility is housed. The company broke ground for the new facility on June 1, 1926 and the formal dedication was Saturday, April 9, 1927. Violating their request for anonymity, Charles Brooks, then board president, named the new theatre the Francis Drury Theatre. The Brooks Theatre was dedicated to Mr. Brooks on June 8, 1928.

The first “professional” actor, Jacob Ben Ami, a member of the Actor’s Equity Association, was hired during the 1928-29 season to play “HE” in Andreyev’s *He Who Gets Slapped*. The first subscription drive began in the fall of 1929. Despite the stock market crash that year, the Play House ran for 42 weeks with an attendance of 119,000.

The theatre first engaged in a relationship with Case Western Reserve University – then known as Western Reserve University – in the summer of 1931. A six-week theatre course was the first venture between a professional theatre group and an educational institution. The Play House now offers a Masters of Fine Arts graduate program with CWRU.

The theatre survived the depression through the efforts of volunteers and salary cuts. The Women’s Committee formed in 1932, to sell subscriptions, promote openings and provide invaluable public relations in the community. Free tickets were given to out-of-work men and women – a practice the theatre repeated in 1982 with the United Labor Agency when Cleveland again experienced a rise in unemployment.

At the height of the Depression, the Play House founded its Children’s Theatre program. In November of 1933, the first “Curtain Pullers” classes were offered. Among its alumni are Joel Grey, Paul Newman, Jack Weston and Joan Diener. Also, mainstage student festivals – matinees offering a discounted ticket to students – were initiated and continue to this day.

The theatre’s 25th anniversary coincided with the beginning years of WWII. In November of 1948, the Play House converted the 77th Street Church into a theater and school, known as the Euclid-77th Street Theatre. It opened with a production of *Romeo & Juliet* in 1949. A false ceiling was added in 1953 to help with the acoustics. The lobby was an art gallery.

In 1958, The Play House officially became a union house – using only actors from the Actor’s Equity Association. Prior to 1958, it had been the only professional non-Equity theatrical group in the U.S. The Ford Foundation gave the Play House \$130,000 – its first grant to a theatre, allowing the Play House to form a touring company of professional actors. It’s also what prompted the theatre to become a union house.

In 1959, K. Elmo Lowe replaced McConnell after his 36 years as director, and the Play House opened a supper club – the Play House Club – in its 77th street location, enhancing the theatre-going experience and bringing added income to the theatre. The focal point of the dining room, which now is in the club at its present location, is a stained glass window proclaiming the word “love” – which had been prominent in the 77th Street location when it was a Christian Science Church. Its success led the theatre to consider consolidation. Philip Johnson was recommended to design the new facility, however racial tension postponed his involvement for 13 years, when on March 2, 1982, the company broke ground for its present facility at 8500 Euclid Avenue. The Play House Club, designed by Peter van Dijk, opened September 16, 1982 but was closed in 2007. The space is now owned and operated by The Sweetwater Group as Stages Restaurant, open to the public. The Bolton Theatre, named for Kenneth C. Bolton, opened in the fall of 1983.

In 1970, Lowe, who was brought to the theatre by McConnell at the beginning of his tenure, retired. When his successor, William Greene died in 1971, Richard Oberlin became Artistic Director. Oberlin, who first came to the Play House in 1955 as an actor and director, served as AD until 1985. William Rhys was Artistic Director from 1985 to 1988, replaced by Josie Abady in 1988, who guided the theatre until 1994. Peter Hackett served as Artistic Director from 1994 to 2004. The Play House’s current Artistic Director, Michael Bloom, arrived in August of that year.