



## 25 YEARS AND COUNTING

BY RICHARD WATTENBERG

A little more than 25 years ago, in the May 8, 1979, issue of *Willamette Week*, there appeared an item of special interest to theatre-goers. Under the heading “Introducing ‘the Willies,’” one reads: “*Fresh Weekly* wishes to announce the nominations for its First Annual Awards for Excellence in Theater—the Willies—to be presented by *Willamette Week* at an invitational cocktail party at the Mallory Hotel at 6 pm on May 22.” A list of three to five nominations in each of eight categories followed.

Thus was Portland’s yearly springtime theatre bash launched. What began as an “invitational cocktail party” has become an annual public gala where members of the

local theatre community and interested others hobnob and schmooze as well as honor the outstanding theatrical achievements of the past year.

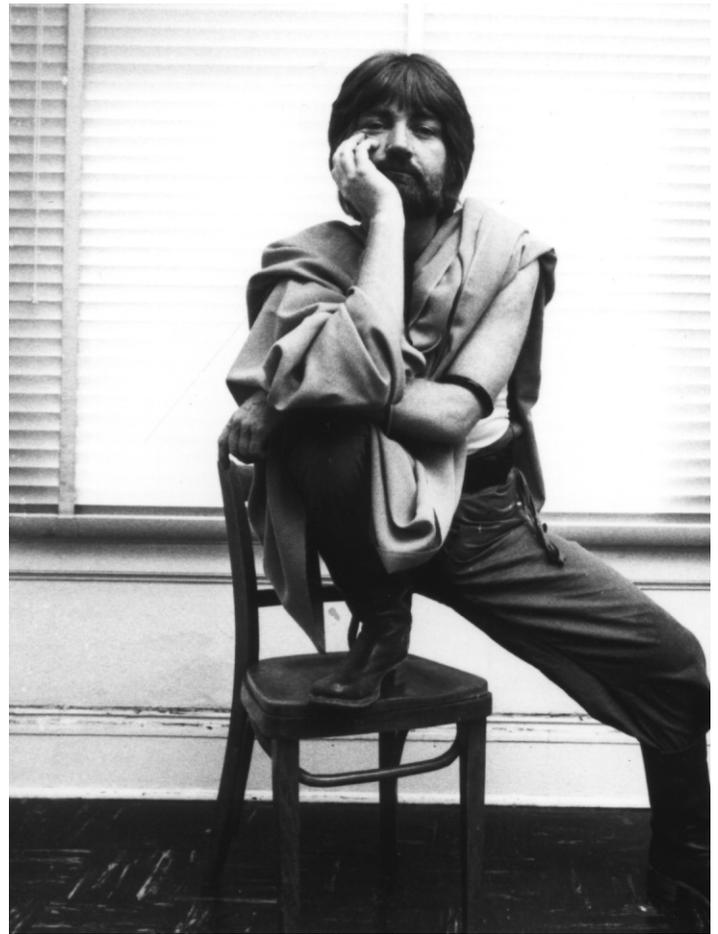
Initiated by *Willamette Week’s Fresh Weekly* editor, Stephanie Oliver, and theatre reviewer, Bob Sitton, the Willies were fashioned after *The Village Voice* OBIE Awards, which celebrate New York City’s adventurous Off and Off-Off Broadway theatre.

The OBIE model was especially appropriate during the 1980s when Portland theatre was energized by a number of cutting-edge artists and non-equity companies. This was the heyday of Storefront Actors’ Theatre.

Established in 1969 in an empty store (hence the compa-

ny’s name) at North Interstate and Russell Street, the theatre moved in 1979 to the Theatre Paris just south of Burnside in Portland’s Old Town. During the ‘70s and ‘80s Storefront was the home-base of the extraordinarily imaginative director/designer Ric Young. Described by Steffen Silvis as “a fabricator of Decameronic dreams and vaudevillian terrors...the Diaghilev of Burnside,” Young captivated Portland with magical spectacles, including unforgettable productions of *Salome* and *Camille* as well as *The Passion for Fresh Flowers* (1988) and Yeats’ *The Cuchulain Cycle* (1989), co-written with Van O’Brien.

If, as Bob Hicks has written, “Young carefully cultivated his reputation as...the anarchic



bad boy who scattered glitter and naked bodies across Portland's stages in an orgy of sensual decadence," he was certainly matched by another driving force in the Portland theatre of the '70s and '80s. Actor/director Peter Fornara held audiences spellbound with tough, gritty productions of modern American plays by Sam Shepard and David Mamet, as well as powerful productions of Ibsen, Rostand, Shaw and Shakespeare. Fornara claimed he liked plays that "come at you like a hammer," and this intensity seemed to characterize his work. With Actors Production Company, Sirius Productions and a number of other companies, he collaborated with many of Portland's top thespians, including

Gaynor Sterchi, Kelly Brooks, Victoria Parker, Jim Caputo, Sam Mowry and Joe Cronin.

Other new companies like the New Rose (founded in 1979, by a group of Minnesota transplants led by Gary O'Brien, to present innovative productions of classical works) and Artists Repertory Theatre (founded in 1982 and led in its early years by Rebecca Adams) also invigorated the Portland theatre scene during the 1980s. But not all the best work of the '80s was staged by new or fringe companies.

Theatre Workshop, founded in 1949 and directed by Steve Smith from 1970, was engaged in theatre education as well as production and in 1983 spawned the Musical Company. Perhaps even more

significant was the grandam of Portland theatres, the Portland Civic Theatre, which dated back to the 1920s. Led by Isabella Chappell, PCT in the '80s was a beehive of activity with two performance spaces, the Mainstage and the intimate Blue Room, as well as a year-round performing arts school for children and adults.

In a city lacking an established professional theatre, PCT took a step toward becoming a professional company when it launched the Summer Repertory Onstage. Founded in 1973, this off-season company, under Managing Director Bill Dobson and Artistic Director Glenn Gauer, paid its summertime artists to produce popular hits. Another attempt at

FIRST PAGE: Judges Bob Sitton, Pauline Peotter, Bob Jackson, Stephanie Oliver and Jonathan Nicholas in the first years of the Willie Awards.

TOP LEFT: Gaynor Sterchi holds the record for winning the most Willies and Drammys for acting.

TOP RIGHT: The "Diaghilev of Burnside," Storefront's Ric Young.

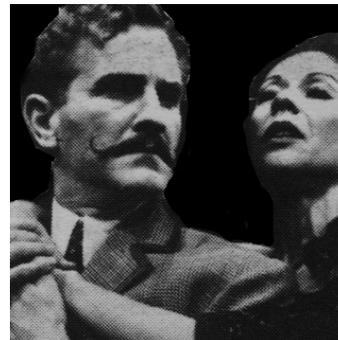


TOP: The building of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts changed the landscape of Portland's theatre community.

RIGHT: Demetra Pittman, an Ashland favorite, won Best Actress in 1989 for OSF Portland's production of *Heartbreak House* (1989).

FAR RIGHT: The original "Willie" Award.

BELOW: Ted Roisum and Keith Scales helped make Storefront's *Greek* the Best Production of 1987.

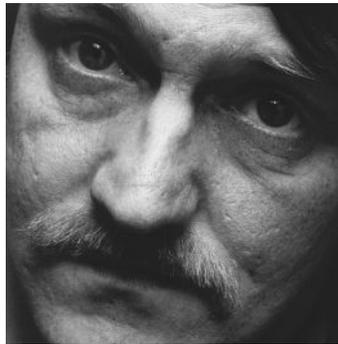


establishing a professional company came with the Oregon Contemporary Theatre in the early '80s. OCT used many of Portland's finest actors as well as bringing in such talents as Emily Mann, Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn.

A further stride toward professionalization was taken in the mid-80s by the onetime Mark Allen Players, which moved into the Willamette Center Building (now Portland's World Trade Center) to become Willamette Repertory Theatre. In 1985, this company which was later to become the Portland Repertory Theatre, negotiated a modest equity contract whereby each production would employ two union actors and one union stage-

manager. Portland theatre's progress towards professionalization culminated with the completion of the Performing Arts Center in 1987 and the arrival of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival/Portland under artistic director Dennis Bigelow in 1988—an event that represented a significant turning point in the history of Portland theatre.

As true professional theatre was establishing itself in Portland, a change took place in Portland's springtime awards festivities. During the summer of 1989, the awards nominating committee, originally sponsored solely by *Willamette Week*, reorganized itself to become an independent board, the "Portland Drama Critics Circle." The clever little puppet-like Willie



awards designed by Joan Gratz of Will Vinton Productions gave way to the less whimsical Drammy trophies and plaques.

Given the recent arrival of a professional theatre on Portland's Broadway, it may not be entirely coincidental that the new Drammys were introduced by *The Oregonian* on June 10, 1990, as "the Rose City's own version of Broadway's Tony Awards." Although the OBIE model yielded to the mainstream Tony prototype, the intent was still to celebrate outstanding work by Portland theatre artists, and that work was not limited to big equity venues.

The early '90s were, however, a period of adjustment as smaller companies adapted to the presence of a fully profes-

sional theatre in their midst. The desire to join the OSF/Portland in Portland's Center for the Performing Arts and establish the little Winningstad as a home had troubling effects for some of Portland's more innovative companies. Storefront and New Rose seemed to lose their way, and both closed in the early '90s. Similarly, other once-vigorous theaters like Portland Civic Theatre and the Columbia Theatre disappeared at the start of the decade. Even more tragic were the deaths of Ric Young in 1992 and Peter Fornara in 1994, from AIDS, losses that seemed, for a time, too difficult for the local theatre community to overcome.

Portland theatre still, however, carried on and remained

LEFT: The legendary Peter Fornara, three-time Best Actor winner in the 1980s.

RIGHT: Karen Boettcher-Tate as Frankie and Allen Nause as Johnny in Artist Repertory Theatre's revival of *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair De Lune*, 1993.



vital. The Portland branch of the OSF became Portland Center Stage, an independent theatre, in 1994. In 2000, Chris Coleman took over as that theatre's fourth artistic director and infused the city's largest professional theatre with a vigor not seen under his predecessors.

Artists Repertory Theatre has grown steadily since Allen Nause took its helm in 1988. In 1998 ART moved out of YWCA's 110-seat Wilson Center into the new Reiersgaard Theatre. In the 2001-2002 season, ART opened a second stage at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center in North Portland. PCS followed suit in 2003, offering productions in both the Newmark and Winningstad Theatres.

Certainly, other companies haven't done as well—going the way of the old Storefront and New Rose. Portland Repertory Theatre, Tygres Heart Shakespeare Company, Musical Theatre Company and Other Side Theatre are just a few of the once-vital theatres that have disappeared in the past 10 years. Yet, around the PCS/ART core, Portland nevertheless has a rich array of active theatres. Now, 25 years since the first awards celebration, there's still much to celebrate on Portland's stages. So here's a toast to all the theatre artists of the past 25 years and to all the work we have to look forward to in the next 25. Cheers. ■



TOP LEFT: Doug Miller and Drammy-winner Christine Calfas in *Richard III*, 1997.

TOP RIGHT: David Ivers and Gretchen Corbett in 1998's *Molly Sweeney*.

ABOVE: Imago's *Frogz*.