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**THE WASHINGTON THEATER CLUB:
A CAUTIONARY TALE OF CULTURAL INNOVATION
AND BUREAUCRATIC INTERFERENCE, 1957–1974**

**ВАШИНГТОНСЬКИЙ ТЕАТРАЛЬНИЙ КЛУБ:
ПОВЧАЛЬНА ІСТОРІЯ ПРО КУЛЬТУРНІ НОВАЦІЇ
І БЮРОКРАТИЧНЕ ВТРУЧАННЯ, 1957–1974**

УДК 792(73)(091)“1957/1974”

DOI: 10.31500/2309-8813.21.2025.345538

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Анотація. Between 1957 and 1974, a small professional theater company in Washington, D.C. staged ninety Equity (union) productions and ten non-Equity shows, including ten world premieres, four American premieres, thirty Washington premieres, and works by sixty-four writers whose works had not been performed previously in the Washington region. The Washington Theater Club staged new works by several of the era's leading English-language playwrights. The club also served as a proving ground for actors starting out their careers, including several who would come to dominate the American stage and screen. By the time the club closed, it had played a far more important role in the evolution of American regional theater than its diminutive size might suggest.

Theater enthusiasts Hazel and John Wentworth opened the Washington Theater Club during the late 1950s. Hazel and John were hungry for innovative drama of a sort absent in Washington. They established their group to promote fresh dramatic forms, to present new ideas, and to support novice playwrights and their works. They nurtured a slightly bohemian tone, often presenting non-mainstream works.

The Wentworths viewed their theater's mission to rise above artistic achievement to embrace social activism. They sought to present quality productions performed and enjoyed by diverse casts and audiences outside the restrictions of Washington's racial segregation of the period. From the beginning, the Club promoted Black theater and Black writers and artists.

The club's story also is one highlighting the destructive power of bureaucratic and political petty tutelage. Washington remained under the direct control of the U.S. Congress throughout this period. The commissioners and bureaucrats charged by Congress to run the city remained unaccountable to the city's residents. In the end, a tax code unfavorable to cultural institutions undermined the club's survivability. Various courts ruled against the Club, leaving the club with an expensive property tax bill that it could not cover. Bankers foreclosed on their loans.

The rise and fall of the Washington Theater Club offers a cautionary tale of what can happen when a community's fate is left in the hands of those who have little connection to it. This loss of accountability can breed oppression, servility, cruelty, and loathsome in its own way, idiocy.

Keywords: Washington Theater Club, regional theater, cultural innovation, bureaucratic interference, racial integration, American drama, theater history.

Bringing Theater to a Political City. Washington Theater Club founders John and Hazel Wentworth established their company within the community of civil rights advocates at All Souls Unitarian Church. For the Wentworths, their actors, audiences, and donors, theater served as a form of activism. Their deep commitment to bringing new American works and to promoting African American theater artists flowed as much from a social agenda as from a search for artistic innovation. Consequently, productions carried a sharper edge, drawing an infamous police raid and complaints from city leaders in a Washington directly subordinate at the time to Congress.

The Wentworths and their team were unstable managers, setting an artistic course before dealing with the practical fallout later. Their universe included leading social activists rather than foundation executives. The archives reveal a distinct absence of tact in their dealings with bureaucrats. All of these factors undoubtedly contributed to their demise.

The rise and fall of the Washington Theater Club offers a cautionary tale of what can happen when a community's fate is left in the hands of those who have little connection to it. The Club played a far more important role in the evolution of American regional theater than its diminutive size might suggest. The company brought verve, innovation, energy, and excellence to Washington audiences stretching from the White House to the city's most troubled neighborhoods. In the end, it could not survive.

Theater enthusiasts Hazel and John Wentworth opened the Washington Theater Club during the late 1950s in a cozy carriage house at 1632 O Street NW. The cottage-sized O Street stage remained the club's signature venue for much of its existence [40, 224]. Located between Dupont and Logan Circles, the theater was next to a large church along a short residential block. The building had moved beyond horses, carriages, and automobiles to become a nondescript warehouse. The carriage house offered just enough room for an Elizabethan-style thrust stage surrounded by 145 seats.

The site carried various encumbrances, which would shape the theatrical venture in unexpected ways [30]. The ever-creative couple launched a theater club to own the building. That club, in turn, rented the space to the Washington Drama Center, which formally operated the theater during its early years. The Club eventually reincorporated as a standalone non-profit organization in 1963, claiming an educational purpose as justification for tax-exempt status. Such arrangements necessitated "members," so the company charged subscribers and other patrons a \$1 annual "membership fee" above and beyond the official ticket price. Many theatergoers initially found the space to be "sweet," "intimate," and "endearing," with positive reviews following.

Hazel and John were hungry for innovative drama of a sort absent in Washington. They established their group to promote fresh dramatic forms, to present new ideas, and to support novice playwrights and their works. John Wentworth already had directed the amateur Unitarian Players and looked to expand his presence on the city's professional stage. Hazel would assume leadership for the group following the couple's divorce during the 1960s.

The Wentworths further sought to present quality productions performed and enjoyed by diverse casts and audiences outside the noisome racial boundaries and Jim Crow discriminatory customs that still marred the city. They nurtured a slightly bohemian tone, often presenting non-mainstream works such as poetry readings accompanied by modern dance tied together with contemporary drama such as Ionesco's *The Lesson* [27, 178].

Washington's local zoning regulations and building codes at the time remained uncongenial for theater companies. The Wentworths experienced any number of petty interventions by local authorities, as in July 1962, when the Metropolitan Police shut down a performance of Tennessee

Williams's racy farce *Period of Adjustment* [9, 44, 123, 159]. The police cited occupancy permit violations and non-enforcement of club membership fees, explanations that failed to convince disbelieving journalists and theater mavens.

Quirkily extravagant Midwesterner Davey Marlin-Jones came from New York to take over the company as its artistic director in 1965 [228]. Over the seven years before his 1972 departure, the club mounted some of its most ambitious productions [194]. He generally was well regarded for leveraging his at-times-showy personality to win friends for his theater, and the arts more generally [27, 31, 149, 157].

Shortly after settling into his position, Marlin-Jones published a manifesto for his theater in the *Washington Post* [160]. While noting that the company could never generate sufficient income from its 145-seat theater alone, he praised his audience for remaining committed to the kind of theater the Club presents. Indeed, for Marlin-Jones, a loyal audience offered an essential condition for success. "We have," he noted, "an energetic, responsive, growing audience for new and exciting theater." So too, the Club attracts the talent gathered on stage that was the same "we would buy if we were rich –we'd just play them more." This is because the company "do the plays we want to do."

Marlin-Jones expressed pride in the support the company had given to new playwrights and original plays. These efforts, in his view, cultivated important writing talent for all American theater. Similarly, he praised Mrs. Wentworth's long-standing commitment to education and to nurturing new talent through the Club's various training programs.

Finally, he noted "the sense of pizzazz that charges the atmosphere on a typical day at the WTC is incredible." Consequently, he concluded, "Washington will also become a city with a strong local culture and a supporting audience for the arts" [160].

In 1968, Marlin-Jones and the company became the first Washingtonians to receive the coveted Margo Jones Award honoring pioneering leaders in American regional theater [62, 227]. Marlin-Jones remained in town as an art critic for the CBS-TV affiliate (presently WUSA-TV) until 1987, when he moved to Las Vegas [21].

An Idea and a Dream. At its peak, the club attracted around 10,000 subscribers, nearly all of whom paid an extra dollar each year to retain membership. For much of its existence, the company offered actor training to children and teens as well as professional training for adults [24, 26, 28, 51, 52, 56, 58, 115, 129, 176, 205, 222, 228, 230]. The Club remained dedicated to children's theater, and to promoting puppetry and mime [36, 37, 91, 191, 195, 196, 197, 208]. As the *Washington Post* noted in Spring 1968, "While suburbanites are sleeping late, anticipating a Saturday of shopping, golf, gardening, or just resting, the Washington Theater Club springs into action with all the energy of a superhero. It gets underway at nine am with over 150 teenagers charging in for a full day of acting, speech, fencing, and dance" [203].

The Club's commitment to music ran equally deep. Its chamber music ensemble—the Theater Chamber Players founded by Leon Fleisher and Dina Koston in 1968—served long-term residencies at the Smithsonian Institution and the Kennedy Center; and remains active to this day [12, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 150, 151, 153, 154, 164, 189, 233].

Before too long, the diminutive O Street carriage house became "cramped," "uncomfortable," and "confined." "Old as charming" transmuted into "old as dilapidated" [241]. Zoning regulations impinged on the club's attempts to grow into a dramatic arts center and school. Such disquiet led the club to overextend its financial reserves for a second stage. Meanwhile, the original venue remained much beloved by many; and continued to serve as a home to children's productions,

poetry readings, dance, and music performances as well as puppet-theater [12, 14, 50, 73, 74, 152, 162, 208].

The Club, which proudly declared itself for years to be the smallest professional repertoire company in America, looked to expand. When 1969 became 1970, Hazel Wentworth moved its primary operations to a remodeled African American church in the city's West End [75].

Between 1957 and 1974, the Club staged ninety Equity (union) productions and ten non-Equity shows, including ten world premieres, four American premieres, thirty Washington premieres, and works by 64 writers who had not been performed previously in the Washington region. The Club served as a proving ground for actors starting out their careers, including several who would come to dominate the American stage and screen, such as Ned Beatty, James Broderick, Eleanor Bron, Roscoe Lee Browne, Adolph Caesar, Mary Jo Catlett, John Fortune, Charles Gordone, Micki Grant, Bill Gunn, Gene Hackman, John Hillerman, Yaphet Kotto, Joshua Mostel, Lester Rawlins and Billy Dee Williams. From the beginning, the Club promoted Black theater and Black writers and artists [235: B 1–22, F 1–590; 235: B 26, F 649–658].

Among its noteworthy productions were future Tony Award winning actor Lester Rawlins's 1965 turn as Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; Billy Dee Williams's performance later that year in William Hanley's *Slow Dance on the Killing Ground*; the 1968 world premiere of future Pulitzer Prize winner Lanford Wilson's play about interracial marriage, *The Gingham Dog*; and the 1973 world premiere of Arthur Laurents's *The Enclave* featuring Peg Murray and Hal Linden. George Faison brought his new work—*Inner City*—even as the company faced imminent eviction.

The Club's declaration that it offered educational opportunities eventually became its undoing. In the early 1970s, various courts rejected the assertion of educational status, leaving the club with an expensive property tax bill that it could not cover. Bankers foreclosed on their loans [235: B 71, F 1106]. Internal turmoil—artistic, professional, and personal—roiled the company. Shortly before the Club folded in 1974, an inside observer noted that nothing less than a three-volume novel would be required to set out the group's inner tensions [106, 131, 200, 215, 221, 238].

John B. Wentworth seems always to have been a bit at odds with life [235: B 70, F 1093]. A direct descendant of William Wentworth (1615–1696)—who arrived in Boston in 1636 and joined a few years later with John Wheelwright and Anne Hutchinson in founding Exeter, New Hampshire, as a refuge from the Puritan theocracy of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—John seems to have absorbed some of his family's combination of belief-in-self and seditiousness. Never quite at ease with the country that emerged from a colonial past his ancestors helped create, John turned to two great passions—theater and activism—to soothe the contradictions churned up by his internal uncertainties. For a while, he did so in partnership with his wife Hazel, who would assume control of his theater company following their divorce.

At first, John banded together with like-minded parishioners at the historic All Souls Unitarian Church to create an ambitious amateur acting group, The Unitarian Players. Such spontaneously formed companies came and went. They peppered a local theater scene bereft of professional theater in the wake of on-going protests and boycotts by the nation's leading theatrical figures over Washington's Jim Crow practices.

Wentworth naturally found like-minded artistically inclined social activists among All Souls parishioners. Background material in the June 3, 1953, program for a production of Philip King's *See How They Run* at St. George's Episcopal Church Parish Hall tells the story: "The Unitarian Players Group has expanded rapidly from the handful of enthusiasts of 1949 to the proficient and

hard-working group of 1953. Though sponsored as a church activity, all who are interested in the theater and its many facets of production are welcome in the group...

"Most of us are Unitarians; like to work on shows; at All Souls Church because we believe in the kind of ideas the church stands for; four major productions per season, three performances per production. Our programs are aimed at variety—not the show business magazine but the stuff that is the spice of life. Each year, we've mixed comedy with serious drama. Our basic fare has been contemporary, with a seasoning of the so-called 'Classics'. Theater in the western world got its start from churches... Live theater offers church people a creative outlet. We need audiences... Membership \$3 per year" [235: B 70, F 1093].

Over the course of a decade, the Unitarian Players presented nearly three-dozen works, usually in brief weekend-long runs at various churches and clubs around the region. The shows, for the most part, presented light fare, often with a contemporary bent. Significantly, for what would follow, Wentworth developed a program of memberships and nurtured teenage theater.

As a December 12, 1954, letter about the group's youth theater from Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Under Secretary (and future American Vice President) Nelson Rockefeller emphasized, Wentworth's ambitions were constrained by his affiliation with a church [235: B 70, F 1093]. He and his wife Hazel would have to go it alone to achieve loftier goals.

Ever more ambitious, John acquired a two-story former carriage house at 1632 O Street NW in January 1957 [235: B 70, F 1094]. These initial start-up months set a pattern of financial and legal wrangling which undercuts artistic vitality. When the Wentworths applied to the Zoning Board for a variance to operate as a public hall, for example, District authorities turned them down. A follow-on appeal carried the day by noting that the Club would operate the theater rather than the Wentworths themselves. Despite such legal, administrative and logistical concerns, the Club moved to establish its bona fides as an artistic innovator by holding a playwriting contest leading to five performances over the course of 1959 [34, 235: B 70, F 1094]. Such support for amateur playwriting would continue into the future [76].

Simultaneously, the Wentworths launched workshops for adults and a teen theater [235: B 70, 1094]. The teen theater drew local high school students and eventually became a mainstay for the Washington Drama Center (which the Wentworths, as noted above, established in 1963 to circumvent zoning and tax regulations) [35, 235: B 70, F 1095]. These efforts solidified the Club's connection to the city and helped to raise funds through tuition, fees and club membership dues [235: B 74, F 1140/41].

Having cleared away the bureaucratic, legal, and financial underbrush, the Club turned its attention to its artistic agenda. In an unwritten statement from the time of its opening, the Club set down a vision for its future: "What is its goal in Washington? To provide professional, legitimate theater setting where the community can come alive with live theater" [235: B 70, F 1094; 235: B 1, F 1–4]. The time had arrived to put on plays.

Promoting the Unconventional. The Wentworths opened their new theater to the public in July 1960 with a pair of plays—Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* and Michael Vincenzo Gazzo's *A Hatful of Rain*—featuring Broadway actor Jan Henry, film actor Norman Belkin, and Martha Graham Dance Company alumna Donna Carnegie [235: B 1, F 5–6]. Both works date from the mid-1950s, representing the company's interest in broadly contemporary works. The edgier accent put forward by Gazzo's play—a tale of drug addiction—announced the company's concern for works examining the social problems of the day and proved a purposeful contrast to Wilder's traditional farce.

The opening night program contained a mission statement, which was very much an extension of the goals first set by the Unitarian Players. These objectives established the company's tone throughout the duration of its existence. The Washington Theatre Club, the declaration announced: "is a center for drama and all the performing arts. We have built it as a gathering place, workshop and showcase for you the people of the Washington area: theatre lovers and those we hope will come to love theatre as we do, young people and adults with a serious interest in acquiring theatrical skills, and—most important—our many local professional actors, directors, and playwrights. Our first aim is to build and maintain a professional residential theater in Washington... We very much want you to feel that this is your club and seek your participation in every way possible" [235: B 1, F 1].

The critics and audience were kind, welcoming both the company and the productions. The *Washington Post's* Richard Coe focused his remarks primarily on Gazzo's play. "The three major roles are most ably done by players whose grasp and training are far more suited to Michael Vincenzo Gazzo's realistic melodrama about a dope addict than this new group's opening production of Thornton Wilder's highly stylized farce, 'The Matchmaker'."

Artistically, the Wentworths were drawn to the new Bohemian "Off-Broadway" scene taking shape in lower Manhattan. From the very beginning, the Washington Theater Club sought to present new works by as-yet unknown authors. However legendary they would become, playwrights such as Eugene Ionesco, Albert Camus, Edward Albee, and Harold Pinter remained largely unknown and unproduced on the American stage when the Wentworths offered them the first Washington venue to show their work.

Critic Leo Sullivan from the *Washington Post* caught the connection within weeks of the company's opening play by Franco-Romanian author Eugene Ionesco, who was gaining notoriety following the 1959 premiere of his play *Rhinoceros*. Commenting on an August 1960 production of two Ionesco plays—*The Lesson* and *The Chairs*—Sullivan seems more taken with the Club's performances than with the playwright's scripts. Declaring that the Club has become a showcase for Ionesco, Sullivan describes the company as a "wholly creditable off-E Street playhouse at 1632 O Street." He continues to categorize both plays as "comedies which earn laughs but, of course, in neither play does much happen." His take on *The Chairs*—"The play makes its point about the lack of stimulation found in most human associations, and that may be its whole point. I don't know."—suggests some of the challenges the Wentworths faced in finding a loyal audience [224].

Critics and audiences warmed to the Club's productions of Ionesco plays over time. William Rice found Davey Marlin-Jones's 1967 direction of Ionesco's *The Killer* a "totally absorbing theatrical experience." He described the play as both comedic and dark. "There is comedy in 'The Killer'," he writes, "though much of it evolves around Berenger's mischievous, evil companion Edouard, and consequently does little to brighten the proceedings. The comedy of language is satire, but the comedy of the action is slap stick" [183, 235: B 6, F 231–237].

For Rice, the company's staging of the play was a major achievement. Additionally, he praised the Company's performances, making particular note of John Hillerman's portrayal of Berenger. Hillerman, a member of the Club's repertoire company at the time, was beginning a noteworthy career that would include successful turns in film—including *They Call Me Mister Tibbs!*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *Paper Moon*—and on such television shows as *The Betty White Show* and *Magnum, P.I.* [130].

Ionesco was no longer a mystery by the time of Davey Marlin-Jones's 1970 production of *Exit the King*, featuring a cast of six including future Hollywood star Ned Beatty [235: B 15, F 442–448].

Beatty toiled on the Washington stage at the Club, Arena Stage, and elsewhere for several years before catching a wave to success with his performance in the film *Deliverance* less than two years later [234]. The *Washington Post's* Coe told all who would listen prior to opening not to miss Beatty's performance. "Ionesco's 'Exit the King,'" Coe informed his readers, "is a strikingly imaginative work on life and death, and in the title part, created by Alec Guinness, Ned Beatty, onetime Arena Stage player, will have his chance in a rich role" [68].

Other critics were less taken with the actual production. Coe's *Post* colleague Meryle Secrest, for example, concluded, "I would like to report the play succeeds. It doesn't, for the most part, though there are stretches and snatches which work, like a light flickering on and off" [207]. Other local critics concurred [17, 178]. Diverse productions drawing on mid-century French playwriting included a notable 1968 production of Albert Camus's *Caligula* featuring Hillerman in the title role and African American actor Damon Brazwell [235: B 9, F 284–291].

The Wentworths and long-time director Davey Marlin-Jones's interest in cutting-edge works extended well beyond the French avant-garde. Marlin-Jones's 1966 production of young British playwright Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* became something of an "event" for attracting Winston Churchill's nephew John Spencer-Churchill to the opening while he was in town for the unveiling of a bust of his uncle at the British Embassy [117]. The production promoted an increasingly fresh approach to theater rarely seen in Washington [235: B 4, F 172–178].

Once again, reviews of *The Birthday Party* were mixed, though audiences proved enthusiastic. An unsigned review in the *Washington Post* captured a growing, though cautious, acceptance of the era's contemporary playwriting as well as an enhanced appreciation of the Club's efforts to bring such work to the local stage. "'The Birthday Party,'" it began, "which opened Thursday night at the Washington Theater Club, was funny—very funny—up to a point. Its young English author, Harold Pinter, has said that life follows the same parabola: funny—very funny—up to a point.

"That point is the void, where silence or madness or violence are the only protections against the complete dissolution of identity. For a company of actors to imitate that parabola on stage, in the compass of two hours, requires more tact and sheer intelligence than we have any right to expect. Nonetheless such tact and intelligence—and sympathy—are being exhibited at the O St. Club in abundance.

"In any Pinter play, the substance of the drama is the words, what they don't mean and what they should like: their absurd irrelevancies and illogical inflections. The playwright's ear is uncanny; better than any man alive he can reproduce the cadence and the inflection of the non sequitur.

"But picking these words off blank paper and convincing an audience that they are squeezed from a human voice requires miracles of timing. The miracles are so luxuriously forthcoming in Davey Marlin-Jones's production that it is impertinent to single out for praise a single actor.

"Nonetheless, John Hillerman, in the lead as Stanley, demands such attention. Playing the guest in a shabby seaside boarding house, he rocks the theater with laughter during the first act with his perfectly carved facial expressions and verbal deflations of the motherly homilies spread like butter across the action by his housekeeper, Meg, played by a splendidly slovenly and intellectually disordered Sue Lawless" [175].

Throughout its life, the Washington Theater Club continued to stage important new works by now legendary authors such as Ionesco, Camus, and Pinter. A 1967 production directed by Marlin-Jones of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice*, then only two years from its initial New York run, illustrates the Club's impact on Washington critics and audiences [235: B 6, F 217–223].

Alan M. Kriegsman's review in the *Washington Post* captures the moment. "Just what the blazes is 'Tiny Alice?'," Kriegsman begins. "This is the question that trails you out of the theater after seeing Edward Albee's befuddling play and is apt to tickle your noggin well into the night. For 'Tiny Alice', which began its run at the Washington Theater Club Thursday night in Davey Marlin-Jones's taut, adroitly staged production, is mostly enigma.

"You may recall when deciphering T. S. Eliot's 'The Cocktail Party' was the intellectual rage. 'Tiny Alice' has the same sort of vexing fascination. It is as tantalizing as a Chinese puzzle, and it also crackles—if fitfully—with Albee's well-known theatrical fireworks.

"All the same, one concludes reluctantly that it flunks as serious drama, which it certainly intends to be. The reluctance stems from the realization that Albee is an extremely gifted playwright, and that he has posed problems worthy of deep concern. These are reasons why you want to see 'Tiny Alice', even if you end up agreeing that it fails. Albee's failures are surely more compelling than the successes of hacks" [149].

Kriegsman seized on the ambiguity of the moment, both inside the Club and outside. Many theatergoers evidently shared the questions haunting the reviewer; so many in fact were moved to write letters concerning the production to the Club and to local newspapers that the Club sponsored an essay contest on the topic of the play's meaning. The winners won two subscriptions to the balance of the season [57].

Embracing New American Works. The Wentworths'—and later Marlin Jones's—dedication to new American plays drove nearly everything the Club did. As noted, the Club's first season began with a playwriting contest for local authors and, shortly thereafter, launched its "On-the-Spot Playmaking" series which promoted improvisational theater [218]. The Club encouraged the work of young authors from the beginning, later adding a series of Monday Night Readings for works in progress [181, 185].

Club productions included both premieres that subsequently would make their way to New York—such as Lanford Wilson's *Serenading Louie*; and recent New York works that traveled to Washington for local premieres—such as Paul Zindel's *The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* [235: B 15, F 408–414; 235: B 16, F 437–444]. Marlin-Jones purposefully sought out New York flops such as Lanford Wilson's *Lemon Sky* that, in his view, merited a second try [80]. These efforts caught the eye of the Margo Jones Award committee, who, as mentioned earlier, recognized Marlin-Jones for the Club's contributions to new American theater in 1968 [62, 227].

During the Club's initial season, the Wentworths brought a work fresh from Off-Broadway's St. Marks Playhouse, Lonny Chapman's *Cry of the Raindrop* [235: B 1, F 5–11]. Chapman was—and remains—best known as an actor garnering numerous guest appearances on such well-received television series as *Gunsmoke*, *The Rifleman*, *Mission Impossible*, *Perry Mason*, and *NYPD*. He also would produce and direct dozens of plays in regional theater, particularly in New York's Hudson River Valley [217].

The play revolves around four characters in an Oklahoma small town: the protagonist nonconformist returning from reform school, his respectable brother and sister-in-law, and the wife's piano student [226]. Louis Antonio—who would go on to appearances in a wide range of television series and films including *The Naked City*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and *Star Trek*—played the social outcast Clay, while Ellie Wood—best known for her later appearances in films including *Easy Rider* and *Wonder Woman*—played his sister-in-law [235: B 1, F 5–11].

More than the play, Washington critics and gossip columnists focused attention of Jenny Hecht, who played the piano student. The 17-year-old Hecht was the daughter of writer Ben

Hecht, which made her something of a sensation at the time [16, 38, 165, 172]. She would perform in other Club productions over the coming months before moving to Hollywood. Tragically, a drug overdose cut her life short a decade later [242]. Critics ignored the novice actor playing the respectable brother: Gene Hackman [235: B 1, F 5].

John Wentworth continued to mix more established contemporary works with premieres of new plays up to 1965, when Marlin-Jones arrived. In 1962, Wentworth joined with Sam Rosen to direct a well-received production of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* featuring Anne Revere as the Mother [235: B 2, F 37–43]. Having premiered in 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* had a secure place in the American repertoire. Anne Revere—a Tony Award winner whose career had suffered from the sharp criticism during the McCarthy era from the House Un-American Activities Committee—remained a draw. She and her husband, Director Rosen, were something of political celebrities at the time (always a plus in Washington) [122]. Her presence seems to have attracted newcomers to the Club's playhouse [65, 41, 42, 43, 89, 118, 121, 169, 225]. Some among those audiences returned for new works, such as an October 1964 bill of two one-act plays by local authors, Ed De Grazia's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and John Wentworth's *The Yellow Bicycle* [182].

Tennessee Williams remained a talisman for the Club, a lucky charm to call upon when attendance was falling off. In 1973, with the company teetering on extinction, Hazel Wentworth presented *Something Wild*, an evening of selections from three Williams works featuring Mary Jo Catlett of future *SpongeBob SquarePants* fame [235: B 25, F 637–644]. Well received, the production failed to help the company stave off creditors [187].

The Club's commitment to new American plays intensified following the arrival of Marlin-Jones. Several important new works appeared during his tenure, including those of Lanford Wilson. In addition to the production of *The Gingham Dog* in 1968 discussed below, Marlin-Jones directed Wilson's *Serenading Louie* in 1970 and *Lemon Sky* in 1972 [235: B 15, F 408–414; 235: B 19, F 528–537].

Washington critics frequently reacted to new works with skepticism; much less so when Marlin-Jones directed new works by Wilson. The often hard-to-please Coe informed his readers in the *Post* that, "Having furrowed fruitlessly all season for a worthwhile new script, the Washington Theater Club at last comes up with one, Lanford Wilson's 'Serenading Louie'. Faultlessly acted by a cast of four, this observes the young marrieds settled long enough to beware that they're kids and wary of mocking their elders in whom they see hints of their own futures... Wilson is not concerned with dramatizing the externals of this foursome; he is absorbed with what is happening, has happened inside of them" [67].

Unlike *The Gingham Dog* and *Serenading Louie*, which premiered at the Club prior to New York runs, *Lemon Sky* had opened first in New York. Coe was less impressed, finding the play as "essentially juvenile and for all the playwright's adroit sprinklings of novelty—the accepting stepmother, the two girls, the peculiarities of Southern California—there always is a too-derivative strain running through. Either the playwright's too insistent on his literary memoir vein or he still rages at his father" [79].

Some, but not all playgoers, shared Coe's dyspeptic reaction. A post-show discussion among students invited to a preview performance broke out into arguments over whether or not the play contained bitterness. When someone in the audience said, "I sort of resent your saying that you don't recognize neurosis. Are you saying this is the way life is? Are you condemning all this?" The director snapped in response, "Isn't that interesting. We have to keep putting cute, slick little labels on everything. Condemn or condone has no bearing on the play, and that kind of question seems

totally irrelevant” [219]. Everyone—critics and audience members alike—seemed to have found memorable James Broderick’s performance of the father. Broderick’s breakout performances in *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* and *Dog Day Afternoon* would soon follow [22].

Paul Zindel’s Pulitzer Prize winning *The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* had just closed on Off-Broadway after having premiered in Houston when Marlin-Jones brought it to Washington [235: B 16, F 437–444]. It subsequently found its way to Broadway and to Hollywood, in a 1972 film directed by Paul Newman starring his wife Joanne Woodward and their daughter Nell Potts.

The American theater community celebrated Zindel as a welcome new voice at a time when theater appeared to be losing its way. As Coe observed in the *Post*, the play’s “honors, it seems to me, are less of a compliment to Mr. Zindel than a statement on our theater’s lean and hungry times” [70].

The Washington audience’s positive response to Zindel’s work stood in stark contrast to how critics received new American plays of the era. A year later, for example, critics panned the Club’s production of a new work by Edward Albee, *All Over* [235: B 19, F 509–517]. Tom Donnelly writing for *The Washington Daily News* told readers “Edward Albee has managed to trivialize great themes to an extraordinary degree. ‘All Over’ is graceless, inert, and inept, and makes almost any episode of any TV doctors-and-nurses series seem, in contrast, brimful of ultimate truth and moral beauty” [111]. The sorts of work that inspired enthusiasm for their unexpurgated portrayal of American life in the 1960s were no longer as welcome in the 1970s. *Gamma Rays* arrived at this moment of transition.

Zindel grew up in a broken home on Staten Island, was educated as a chemist, and worked as a chemical writer for Allied Chemical. He discovered playwriting having taken playwriting courses in college with Edward Albee. He later would become a successful writer of young adult fiction, often focusing on misfits such as his younger self [11].

Gamma Rays, Emerson Beauchamp wrote in *The Evening Star*, “comes to town loaded down with awards and, for once, it’s hard to quarrel with New York prize-givers” [18]. The anticipation became amplified as the Club celebrated its tenth anniversary with a special preview performance for its most dedicated donors [69, 70]. Such were the times—and such was Hazel Wentworth and Davey Marlin-Jones’s company—that top donors celebrated with an edgy work about the troubled relationship between a widow and her scorned daughter who has just won a school science prize for her experiments with radiated marigolds. One more American play about monstrous mothers at a time of intensifying generational conflict, it seemed, struck just the right note.

Coe was so taken with the hubbub surrounding Zindel that he sought him out for an interview. Meeting in “the darkest corner of Circle One” (a hangout across the street from the theater), Coe described how Zindel greeted him “with a firm handshake, a smile that quickly turned into laughter and several hours of shared enthusiasms and concerns” [58, 71]. Among Coe’s discoveries was that the “rather jovial young Don Quixote” had, according to Zindel’s own description, looked like “a rather tall chicken” in childhood. These childhood experiences, it seems, joined together with the difficulties in bringing his plays to life—*Gamma Rays* required more than a half-dozen years before its initial production took to the stage—to nurture a playwright who wrote the “intimate, even short play(s)” too long absent on American stages.

Marlin-Jones’s production won praise from critics and audiences. His cast—which included two film and television regulars Helena Carroll and Francesca James—gathered as many kudos as

the play itself. As Coe noted, this *Gamma Rays* was a “small play, delicately wrought and finely cast” [70].

The Club’s next production—Marlin-Jones’s take on Gretchen Cryer and Nancy Ford’s rock musical *The Last Sweet Days of Isaac*—similarly arrived from New York following an award winning Off-Broadway run [235: B 1, F 445–452]. This time, the Washington critics were less enchanted. Donnelly, in the *Daily News*, “thought I understood the first part, but the second part baffled me and made me feel I probably only thought I understood the first part” [109]. Beauchamp in the *Evening Star* reacted similarly, writing, “In truth, the first half of the show is so good that it’s a shame that the second half is no better than it should be” [19]. Coe was unforgiving in the *Post*. “Viewing ‘The Last Sweet Days of Isaac,’” he wrote, “reduced me to a state of total apathy. Many have admired this two-character rock musical, still continuing in New York after capturing an Obie last season as its best Off-Broadway musical, but to me the experience was like eating lavishly sugared jellyfish” [72]. New works, regardless of their New York pedigrees, could be hard sells in Washington.

The Club’s production of Elaine May and Terrence McNally’s *Adaptation/Next* in autumn 1971 brought celebrities to town [235: B 18, F 500–508]. May had achieved stardom in her comedy act with Mike Nichols a decade before; McNally was already being described as “one of the greatest contemporary playwrights the theater world has yet produced” [179]. Director Joel J. Friedman combined a one-act play by each into a memorable evening of theater.

The *Post*’s Coe found that Friedman and actors Armand Assante and Benjamin Stack transformed both works from sketches of “our mechanical, impersonal world” into an evening of hilarity bound together by “a common subtext of contemporary despair” [77]. May’s *Adaptation* led off, using the hackneyed television gameshow format to turn a hopeless contestant’s biography into a “Game of Life” that cannot be won. McNally’s *Next* recreates the induction indignities of military life back to the Greeks into a series of vaudeville skits. Donnelly of the *Daily News* found the result to be “an entertaining farcical package,” though “rather lumpier than it ought to be” [110].

Even as Coe found laughter to be “the dominant vein of both,” he worried about what the evening revealed about the contemporary American theater. “That these 45-minute plays are slight indeed is worthy of note,” he wrote, continuing, “That they were included among Guernsey’s ‘Ten Best’ New York plays three years ago reflects the frail state of our playwriting. If these are among the best, our theater surely gasps in dire paucity. All things being relative, however, we can rejoice that humor isn’t really dead” [77].

These new American works highlight the Washington Theater Club’s numerous accomplishments. The Wentworths and Marlin-Jones were punching well above their weight by the late 1960s. In less than a decade they had brought a new style of theater to Washington, attracted a dedicated audience, turned themselves into something of a place for socialites to be seen, while stimulating a deep engagement between theater and community. Productions of works by authors who would become celebrated performed by young actors who would find fame in New York and Hollywood are but the most visible manifestation of the Club’s impact. Their long-standing engagement with the issue of race proved to be of greater importance.

Shutting Down Jim Crow. Washington’s Jim Crow discriminatory traditions and policies cast a long shadow over the city’s theatrical life during the mid-twentieth century [201]. In 1946, Ingrid Bergman and Sam Wanamaker, performing the pre-Broadway tryout of *Joan of Lorraine*, threatened to walk out in protest over the exclusion of African American patrons at George Washington University’s new Lisner Auditorium. The show went on as scheduled so as not to

violate contractual obligations, while both Actors' Equity and the Dramatists' Guild picketed this and other local productions. The next year national theater leaders declared a boycott of both the National Theatre and Lisner Auditorium, triggering a national embargo against the city's professional stages that lasted into the 1950s.

In 1951, Sir John Gielgud agreed to coach young Earl Hyman in a summer production of *Hamlet* on the Howard University campus. Gielgud, Hyman, and director Owen Dodson met at the Greyhound Bus Station which offered the trio one of the few integrated places to have lunch together.

A few theater notables defied custom and opened up performances to integrated audiences. In 1944, future Pulitzer Prize winning critic Walter Kerr, then teaching at Catholic University, integrated both the production and audiences of his patriotic extravaganza celebrating American folk songs, *Sing Out, Sweet Land*. Catholic University's Father Gilbert V. Hartke integrated audiences when he took over management of nearby Olney Summer Theater in Maryland following the war [174].

Zelda and Thomas Fichandler opened Arena Stage to integrated audiences from the very beginning in 1950. By the 1960s, Arena would engage the city's racial divide, eventually bringing African American theater artists to their stage as they presented powerful works examining racial themes beginning in the mid-1960s [124].

Most shamefully, very few members of the White Washington theater community paid more than the scantiest of attention to the historic and innovative African American theater taking shape around Howard University throughout the early twentieth century [201]. This ignorance deprived Washington theater artists and audiences access to theater in their own backyard that has exerted national and international influence until today.

New Director Davey Marlin-Jones jumped right into the topic of race relations upon his arrival in 1965 [235: B 4, F 135–142]. As the *Post* recorded at the opening of his first season, "Before an audience as classy as its own IQ average, O Street's intimate 145 seat Washington Theater Club opened its sixth professional season with a capable performance of William Hanley's 'Slow Dance on the Killing Ground'" [55].

Hanley's play premiered in New York a year earlier, creating considerable critical clamor [178]. The story transpires in a run-down Brooklyn candy store as three disparate characters find refuge and share their terrible secrets. An older German immigrant and a young streetwise African American try to calm an anxious young woman who has discovered that she is pregnant. The immigrant's secret is that he had been a victim of German concentration camps; the young Black, that he is on the run; the woman, that she is looking for the address of an illegal abortionist. Their stories unfold as each character circles, threatens, and ultimately discovers their shared sadness.

Marlin-Jones chose the work as his first production because it was unknown to Washington audiences, provided an intimate scale suited to the Club's small stage, and engaged with social concerns [54]. The production brought Billy Dee Williams back to join Club stalwarts John Hillerman and Sue Lawless. The critics were decidedly mixed in their reviews [55, 108].

The Club and Marlin-Jones returned to racial themes two years later at the start of its 1967 season with David Westheimer's *My Sweet Charlie* [235: B 7, F 260–268]. The play was an early example of Marlin-Jones bringing a new work unsuccessful in New York to Washington for a fresh start. In this instance, the gambit worked as the play would become a made-for-television movie in 1970. The story of a Black who has accidentally murdered a young Southern White girl delves into how we all can come to live together through dialogue. *Washington Daily News* critic

Bob Todd found Damon Brazewell's turn as the Black Charlie superior to the New York original production [231].

The following fall, Marlin-Jones opened his season with a world premiere of a work—*The Gingham Dog*—destined for Broadway success a year later. A then unheralded thirty-year-old playwright—Lanford Wilson—had penned the play as he stood on the verge of untold success [235: B 10, F 312–317]. The play was precisely what the Wentworths and Marlin-Jones sought: an important new American work by a previously unknown author interrogating some of the most lethal social issues of the day.

Wilson tells the story of the tortuous break up of an upwardly mobile interracial couple, Gloria and Vincent, who have been living in Harlem. They had grown apart over the course of their three-year-old marriage with Gloria finding new meaning in her life through Black activism, while Vincent, a liberal White Southerner, slipped into disillusionment with his grey-flannel life. Wilson places the action during the tumultuous period when Vincent decides to move out; a time when mutual recriminations and accusations fly as they divide their possessions [240]. Critics greatly anticipated the opening and found Robert Darnell and Micki Grant's performances as Gloria and Vincent exceptional [3, 59, 60, 64, 170, 186]. Others saw its Washington premiere as further proof that the center of American theater's creative energy was flowing from New York [36, 127].

On the day of opening night, the *Washington Post* ran an interview with Wilson by Jim Laurie, then the theater editor for the Arlington-based radio station WAVA and later well-known international correspondent covering Southeast Asia and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Visiting Wilson in his Greenwich Village lair, Laurie thought Wilson looked more like 18 than nearly 30. He placed Wilson among an important group of "under thirty" writers gathering in the cabarets, lofts, cafes and garages of lower Manhattan including Israel Horovitz, Sam Shepard, John Guare and Rochelle Owens. Wilson explained that the play's title comes from the childhood verse "The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat" that ends with both eating the other up. Wilson clarified further that his work speaks to the real problems of real people rather than "phony problems in a phony way and coming up with phony solutions" as happens on Broadway [158].

Marlin-Jones returned to issues of race relations later that season with writer Alexander Panas and William Goldstein's new musical *Mr. Tambo, Mr. Bones* [235: B 12, F 332–340]. Panas, an actor and writer best known for his contributions to *Miami Vice* and *Escape from Hell Island*, created a minstrel show taking place within the mind of John Wilkes Booth as he plots to assassinate President Lincoln. Mr. Tambo, a stock minstrel character who plays the tambourine, and Mr. Bones, known for rattling bones, appear in black and white face. Goldstein—who scored over 50 major film and television shows over his long career—set this phantasmagoria to music. John Hillerman played Booth; Bob Spencer, Tambo; and Bryan Clark, Bones [235: B 12, F 332]. The play received a great deal of press attention—mostly negative—in part because of the importance of Lincoln and his legacy in a city still reeling from the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King just months before [2, 147].

One additional masterpiece concerning the question of race relations lay ahead. In 1973, the Club presented Lonne Elder III's Pulitzer Prize-nominated play about a Harlem barber and his family, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* [235: B 23, F 598–607]. Elder's play was coming off of a much-praised initial production at New York's Negro Ensemble Company, which opened in 1969 and ran for 320 performances [235: B 23, F 598]. Elder became a mainstay of the New York theater scene until his death in 1996 [128].

Elder was the first African American writer to be nominated for an Academy Award for his screenplay for the film *Sounders* just prior to the play's opening in Washington (Jeremy Lerner eventually won for *The Candidate*). Bette Howard, later founder of the prestigious Black Spectrum Theatre Company of Queens (New York), directed the production. Sheila Johnson, later co-founder of Black Entertainment Television and the first African American woman to attain a net worth of one-billion dollars, made her stage debut. Other cast members included William T. Newman, Jr. and Frank Adu. Unsurprisingly given the talent involved, the play was held over, moving from its West End location to the O Street Playhouse, and attracted the largest audience in Club history for any show (14,500 with over 1,000 unfulfilled ticket orders) [167].

The critics were equally generous in their response. Charles Farrow of *The Washington Afro-American* noted that "Black theater is handled on a non-nonsense, professional level both as entertainment and as a mirror held up to reflect the pathos of the black experience" [119]. The *Post's* Coe reported "a fine, stirring production of a first-rate drama" [90]. Annie R. Crittenden, writing in the *Washington Post*, used the production as an opportunity to address larger issues surrounding Black theater at the time. Crittenden noted that "the litmus test for understanding black theater such as 'Ceremonies in Dark Old Men', which opens here Wednesday night, is knowing if the play is revolutionary, folk or educational: for these are points of view that today most often prevail." After a quick tour of the Black theater landscape, Crittenden observed that *Ceremonies* "is an ideal folk play... Although there is much humor in the play, the serious efforts that blacks must make simply to exist is not lost on the audience" [107].

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men captures the Washington Theater Club at its best. The production brought new American playwriting talent addressing important social issues to an audience that embraced both Whites and Blacks. Unfortunately, the Club's death sentence was being served by tax authorities and creditors just as it achieved its founding objectives. Hazel Wentworth already was reaching out to Paul Allen, founder of the Black American Theater, for support [220]. This gambit bought both Wentworth and Allen some time. Their alliance led to one final spectacular examination of race in America, this time in the form of a musical: Eve Merriam and Helen Miller's *Inner City* [235: B 25, F 645].

Inner City was not, strictly speaking, a Club production. Instead, Paul Allen's Black American and Ebony Impromptu Theater Companies used the house under an agreement with Wentworth. The mimeographed program explains that the production began as a "street cantata" based on Eve Merriam's *Inner City Mother Goose*, which was adapted for Broadway by director Tom O'Horgan, with music by Helen Miller and lyrics by Eve Merriam [235: B 25, F 645]. The production was more than a stage rental, as it opened doors to several "what might have beens" had the economics of theater not worked out differently.

Miller was already a major songwriter with several hits to her name and more to come; Merriam was an accomplished author of children's poetry. Choreographer George Faison was on his way to becoming a dance icon. A graduate of Washington's Dunbar High and Howard University, he already was working on Broadway at age 28 [101]. The production included 28 "neighborhood characters" and several musicians and evolved from the first run to the second.

Coe of the *Post* urged his readers to "rush—don't wait—to the wingiest, zingiest, dancing show in years, the New Theater's new 'Inner City' at the Washington Theater Club." He was particularly taken with the dancing. "And what dancing this is," he continued. "Superbly disciplined and choreographed for all sorts of moods. Faison's company is so strong, facile and graceful you could watch these young bodies all night. With 10 of his own company, 10 more from Allen's

and a striking Hope Clarke heading them, Faison has welded an ensemble of great vitality" [102]. Clarke, who was a principal dancer with the Katherine Dunham Company and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, was a native Washingtonian.

The Wentworth–Allen alliance might have saved both companies had it been formed earlier [103]. Allen's company grew into the New Theater of Washington and continued the outreach initiatives that had been so important to the Wentworths. He eventually moved into the Club's original O Street theater, remaking it as the Paul Robeson Center focusing on community theater [232].

The Wentworths steadfastly sought to engage the Washington African American community by opening their theaters to jazz concerts and other community events [236, 237]. They did not limit their outreach to the stage, but engaged Black theater artists and musicians in all aspects of their operations (including bringing songstress Roberta Flack onto their Board of Directors) [235: B 75, F 1154]. In 1963, they invited African American dancer, choreographer and educator Katherine Dunham to join with novelist James T. Farrell to discuss "the repeating cycle of artistic inspiration" [8, 49]. In 1972, they hosted benefit performances to support Black theater nationally [220].

Additionally, African Americans appeared on the Washington Theater Club stage in plays, lectures, and musical performances from the beginning. Bill Gunn is the first African American actor in the Club's records as having appeared as a cast member. He played in the Club's seventh production, Michael Shurtleff's *Call Me By My Rightful Name* [235: B 1, F 18–24].

Shurtleff's play was "suggested" by Shirley Pfoutz's novel *The Whipping Boy* about Columbia University roommates Doug, who is White, and Paul, who is Black. A bout of jealousy prompted by the unexpected visit of Doug's brother's girlfriend Chris combined with a night of bountiful alcohol consumption to destroy what had been a model relationship between the two roomies. The *Post's* Coe was underwhelmed, writing, "while not satisfying, the play is infinitely better dramatic writing than today's average, and the production does credit to O Street's little theater" [39].

The play was one of the first performed in Washington to explore the dynamics of interracial relationships in an everyday manner. Shurtleff was a powerhouse in the New York theater world of the era, serving as primary casting director for producer David Merrick and writing the "casting bible" *Audition* [29]. Noteworthy acting coach Geoffrey Horne played David; and Collin Wilcox, on the eve of her breakout performance as Mayella Violet Ewell in the film version of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, was Chris [105, 125].

Unsurprisingly, Coe found Gunn's performance "fine." Gunn was well into a distinguished career as a playwright, novelist, actor and film director. He would win an Emmy Award a decade later in 1972, developed a cult following with his 1973 horror film *Ganja and Hess*, and became a mainstay of the New York arts community throughout the 1970s and 1980s. His appearance in this Club production established a pattern of the Wentworths—and later Marlin-Jones—providing invaluable opportunities to aspiring African American artists [122].

The Wentworths did not limit Black actors to plays about race relations. In April 1963, the Club hosted an integrated touring company from New York performing various autobiographical writings by Berthold Brecht, *Brecht on Brecht*. [235: B 14, F 69–77]. More a set of readings than a play, George Tabori's translations of Brecht's musings about himself proved an entertaining evening [48]. So much so, that the Club held the play over for several weeks with its actors popping up at numerous events around town [1, 10, 25, 46, 47]. Cast members included now legendary Black actors Roscoe Lee Browne, and Micki Grant together with notable performers Logan Ramsey and Dolores Sutton.

Browne returned in March 1974 to perform in what became the Club's final production, *Behind the Broken Word*, in which he paired with film actor Anthony Zerbe to read contemporary poetry of special meaning to both actors [235: B 25, F 648]. Coe found their readings highlighted "the sheer beauty of words, their soundings and meaning," which, he lamented, "have been out of our lives for too long" [99]. The *Star-News* critic David Richards told his readers that the actors "are engaged in a quiet form of seduction" [188].

In another example of bringing Black actors into the company for plays that were not about racial themes, the Club's 1965 production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is best known for Lester Rawlins's magisterial turn as Prospero, a performance that passed into Washington theater lore [235: B 3, F 125–134]. The *Post*'s Coe heaped individual praise at the time on newcomer Adolph Caesar's "superbly realized Caliban" [53]. Caesar remained part of the Club's Resident Company, perfecting the craft that would earn him Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations and several other awards over a celebrated career [146].

The Wentworths also made their stage available to African American companies performing works of their own. These plays, such as the 1970 production *The Black Experience*, were not affiliated with the Club directly. The Club's willingness to make their facilities available to Black theater artists (albeit for a fee) helped such works exploring the Black experience expand the reach of theater in Washington. In this instance, *Post* critic Tom Zito found the show's free-flowing format enhanced by an excellent jazz group and powerful dance numbers to have effectively expressed "the feelings of the actors to most of the audience, regardless of their color" [242].

Hazel Wentworth continued John Wentworth and Davey Marlin-Jones's commitment to new works after Marlin-Jones left the company in 1972; a time when the Club's struggle for existence intensified. Unable to reel in a new artistic director for a sustained period, Wentworth began to look for projects that had been developed elsewhere, as had been the case with Paul Allen's *Inner City* mentioned above. Two plays presented during the spring of 1973 reveal that initiative at its finest: Arthur Laurents's *The Enclave*, and George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* [235: B 24, F 608–617; 235: B 24, F 627–636].

Beating More Barriers. Laurents is best recalled for his collaboration with Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, and Jerome Robbins on *West Side Story*, as well as for such other hits as *Gypsy* and his film scripts for Alfred Hitchcock. His unpleasant imbroglio with the House Un-American Activities Committee late in the McCarthy era provided material for his hit movie *The Way We Were* starring Barbra Streisand [7]. By the early 1970s, he was intent on reinvigorating "high comedy" on the American stage; and, on integrating homosexual characters into his works as fully-formed individuals rather than as clichés and "freaks" [112]. *The Enclave*—which Laurents wrote, cast, and directed—was part of those efforts [91].

As Laurents told the *Post*'s Donnelly, "High Comedy makes enormous demands on the performers and American actors aren't trained for it... I didn't want stars, I wanted actors and I've got some very good ones. New York actors, as Hollywood calls them. They came down here for no money because they love the play and they love theater" [112]. Among those "very good actors" were Tony Award winning Broadway stars Hal Linden and Peg Murray; television and film actors Jack Betts, Donald Gentry, Laurence Hugo, Rochelle Oliver, and Ann Sweeney; plus, The Negro Ensemble Company's Charles Turner [235: B 24, F 608].

The play, as Laurents told Donnelly, is "about a group of friends who have banded together to protect themselves from the garbage dump of the city" [112]. Three middle class couples and their good male friend Ben, all in their forties, join together to establish a residential enclave in

which they can find safety from the hostile streets beyond. The action moves along humorously until Ben invites his young male lover to join in a celebration to mark their shared lives. The once seemingly liberal and tolerant couples react with acrimony and mortification. As Laurents put it, "People are perfectly willing to accept what they don't have to look at, but just don't bring it home with them. All this talk about sexual permissiveness and the big sweeping changes in society simply isn't true" [112].

Just a few weeks later, George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* starring Academy Award nominated Chief Dan George provided another opportunity for the otherwise beleaguered Club. The play arrived at a moment when the Club believed (falsely) that it had successfully navigated hard times. "The Washington Theater Club," Megan Rosenfeld wrote in the *Post*, "has announced that it's well on the way towards financial security, having raised \$75,000 of its \$120,000 goal" [198]. Some key grants were on the horizon, helped along by recent good press.

The company presented *Rita Joe*, a work which Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau proclaimed as "the greatest accomplishment in a century of Canadian theater" [171]. The play's origins prompted merriment among some critics as several commentators could not disguise their amused condescension about Canadian cultural achievements.

Julius Novick began a particularly offensive piece about the play in *The New York Times* by lampooning Trudeau's prideful boast. Novick wrote, "'Canadian playwright.' These words seem a little incongruous, like 'Panamanian hockey-player', almost, or 'Lebanese fur trapper'. But Canadians are now paying more attention than ever before to the question of what it means to be Canadian. A new 'cultural nationalism' is being felt and expressed, and young Canadian playwrights have begun to appear. Americans, of course, traditionally pay little attention to what goes on north of the border (Quick! Can you name three Canadians? Any three Canadians at all?) But a play by one of the young Canadian playwrights—perhaps best known of all recent Canadian plays—has lately been given its American premiere at the Washington Theater Club (which is not a club at all, but a professional theater of some repute)" [171].

Washington critics were more sensitive to the achievements of those living beyond Manhattan. Tom Shales, in the *Post*, whined about "advocacy theater" before noting that "the Theater Club production brings it off expertly" [213]. David Richards, in the *Evening Star-News*, found the play to be "a spellbinding beauty" [186].

Ryga—the son of Ukrainian immigrants who grew up in Athabasca, Alberta before moving to the provincial capital Edmonton—is remembered for his poetry, popular songs, and especially this play [116]. His works focused on the displaced, reflecting Western Canadian angst over the country's elites to the east. The play brought the difficulty facing the country's First Nations as they navigated an increasingly urbanized Canada. In this instance, Rita Joe, an indigenous Canadian, is brought down after moving to the city by a series of misfortunes. The police arrest her on charges of vagrancy and prostitution and bring her before a magistrate primarily intent on clearing his docket for the day. The action takes place in court, and in flashbacks following Rita Joe's path from the Reservation to skid row [113].

Donnelly, writing in the *Post*, was unmoved, telling his readers, "to be fair, and considering how really bad living theater can get, it may be more accurate to say that Ryga's first act is tedious, meandering, heavy-footed, and structurally speaking, an artsy-crafty amalgam of the more ubiquitous playwrighting devices of the past couple of decades" [113]. Audiences were more forgiving, piling in to see then-celebrity Chief Dan George at close range.

The 74-year-old George had just come off playing Old Lodgeskins in the popular film *Little Big Man* starring Dustin Hoffman, earning him an Academy Award nomination [214]. George began acting at the age of 60 having tired of working as a dockworker and in construction. He turned to Canadian theater a decade before the 1970 Hoffman film, which brought wide acclaim. George leveraged his newfound frame to advocate for native peoples, telling the *Post's* Shales, "In Canada, they're (Indians) second class people. I don't like that. We want to be treated as equals in every way" [214].

Comedy as Social Activism. Looking back to the early years when Hazel ran the company with her husband John, she recalled how theater was about more than advocacy. Part of her company's repute lies in memories of theater as sheer fun.

As Hazel desperately tried to keep her company going, she turned to the lighter side of theater once again, this time with a frothy period comedy, *Lady Audley's Secret* [235: B 21, F 564–574]. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's dark romance with Gothic overtones has inspired films, plays, and television productions for nearly two centuries. Douglas Seal adapted Braddon's sensational 1862 novel about bigamy at the sixteenth century English country estate in Ingatestone, Essex as a musical comedy.

Seal's version, produced in partnership with Chicago's Goodman Theater, included a cast of eleven led by Donna Curtis and Russell Nype performing under music director Salli Parker's baton to the choreography of Mickey Hartnett, music of George Goehring, and lyrics by John Kuntz [235: B 21, F 564]. An extravagant production for a theater company teetering on extinction, *Lady Audley's Secret* represented the sort of gamble that produced melodrama on and off the stage. In this instance, the bet paid off.

Washington's critics were wild in their enthusiasm. Coe in the *Post* recorded that, "When you're not smiling over the 19th century conventions of 'Lady Audley's Secret', you're relishing the songs appended to this old melodrama or the swell cast holding the Washington Theater Club's stage" [83, 84]. Frank Getlin, writing for *The Evening Star*, observed that "the play is played without a shred of camp... We do laugh at the Victorians but we do so because they are funny;" while Milton Berliner's review in the *Washington Daily News* proclaimed "A 'Secret' You Should Share" [20, 126].

Nype's connections with Washington society's leading hostess Perle Mesta added to the excitement [95]. The opening night gala at the Sheraton Park Hotel included Broadway icon Ethel Merman among the guests [163]. Hazel Wentworth and the Club were playing at a different level than ever before. Ticket buyers pushed the company to extend the run into mid-July [192].

In what would prove to be one last time, the stars aligned to give hope for the future. Hazel decided to open her new theater officially in December 1969 with a sophisticated musical revue poking fun at the world through Cole Porter's urbane and wicked lyrics. That season's production of *The Decline and Fall of the Entire World as Seen by the Eyes of Cole Porter* captured the Club's efforts at comedic revues at their best [235: B 14, F 382–392]. Ben Bagley's fast-moving show included a cast of five directed and choreographed by Darwin Knight [235: B 14, F 382].

The opening of the Club's new West End stage became one of the most talked-about happenings of the season. Suzanne Fields, in the *Washington Star's Sunday Magazine*, provided the background: "The Washington Theater Club has not completely lost its humble style, although it is now operating full-time at two houses, the old one at 1632 O Street NW and the new one—a reconverted church building—at 23rd & L Streets NW" [120].

The expansion is timely, she continued, after an "enormous and largely unplanned increase in subscription audience last year from 2,800 season ticket holders to this year's 9,200." She praised

Marlin-Jones as “a crusader against the ‘Hello, Dolly!’ syndrome of theater” in his promotion of new work, noting that the Club had produced one quarter of all new works in American regional theaters the previous season. She concluded by cautioning presciently that the benefits of the larger seating capacity may be undercut by rising costs. Coe concurred in the *Post*, using the event to celebrate the growing maturity of the Washington theater scene [133].

Mayor Walter Washington and Mrs. Washington presided over the opening evening, fittingly so as their daughter had once spent her weekends studying dance and drama in the Club’s many youth programs [65, 66]. In January, President Nixon invited the cast to perform at the White House [169]. For Coe, the new theater together with the delightful weaving of Cole Porter tunes presented Washington with “a glittering Christmas gift that’s only just been opened. It should be producing surprise packages for some years to come” [65]. Unfortunately, this was not to be.

Curtain Time. Theater as art and theater as activism were always tied closely together in John Wentworth’s mind. That connection remained strong throughout the evolution of his and Hazel’s theater company from the time it took the All Souls stage as the amateur Unitarian Players until its final performances as a regional theater two decades later. Such unity of purpose combined with John’s inherent feistiness and sense of hereditary privilege to generate conflict with neighbors, local police, and other officials, within the company, and ultimately between him and Hazel.

Hazel’s efforts to keep the troupe alive approached the heroic, particularly following her divorce from John. The Club retained ardent fans and munificent donors until the end. Their foes eventually had the final say in the form of a judicial ruling against their repeated petitions for non-profit status.

The Club was not alone in facing grasping tax authorities. The District government operating under congressionally appointed commissioners and Congressional oversight authorities denied performing arts institutions—both for-profit and non-profit—relief from new taxes imposed on admission to entertainment in all forms at the end of the sixties. Arts organizations from the National Theatre and the National Symphony to Arena Stage and the Club protested to no avail. Either they absorbed the new tax or passed it on to their ticket holders [61, 63, 64].

The Club’s challenges were deeper. Having been unable to secure a designation as an educational non-profit organization, the Club became exposed to property tax assessments on quite a different scale from the proposed admission tax. By the early 1970s, the Club faced the imposition of real estate taxes on two properties. Those taxes briskly increased, especially for the 23rd Street theater which stood at the center of a West End neighborhood with rapidly escalating property values [239].

Hazel continued to find new ways forward. She began to book productions fully formed elsewhere, sought new foundation grants with some success, continued to try to land an appropriate successor to Davey Marlin-Jones, and searched for an effective sales manager and managing director [85, 89, 93, 193, 211, 215]. The Club had some success renting both houses on O Street and 23rd Street for various performances [6, 12, 104, 114, 156]. Actors and staff even stood outside the theater for hours trying to collect loose change from passers-by on foot and in their cars [155].

The Club seemed to have turned a corner by 1973, with sales, donations, foundation grants and a radio advertising campaign combining to increase revenues nearly to the break-even point [4, 723, 93, 94, 198, 212]. The Club’s above-mentioned partnership with Paul Allen’s New Theater featuring African American productions benefitted both companies; at least for a while [94, 95,

103]. Their joint production of *Inner City*, as noted above, created a buzz that gave the impression that all was well. Allen supported several Black theater initiatives in subsequent years [104]. Eventually, he, too, fell on hard financial times [199].

By 1972, all ways forward rested on the Club's ability to secure a tax-exemption as an educational non-profit organization. Absent a definitive decision, Hazel held out diminished but continuing hope that the Club would survive. Then, she and the Club encountered Judge W. Byron Sorrell, of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia.

In September 1972, Judge Sorrell ruled that the Club had failed to justify an exemption from real estate taxes for its 23rd and L Street properties [86]. The Court instructed the Club to pay \$30,000 in back taxes and interest to the District covering the period July 1970 through June 1973. Sorrell wrote in his opinion that the Court "simply cannot find a generally recognized relationship of teacher and student existing between petitioner's paying audience and actors on the stage" [86].

Charles Duncan, a former D.C. corporation counsel, represented the Club and cited previous cases and opinions in favor of theater groups similar to the Club. Ironically, the club had enrolled 250 students into its classes for the fall semester of 1972 and was supporting the graduate work of more than fifty students enrolled at area universities. Its faculty included more than a half-dozen recognized theatrical instructors, including Stephen Aaronson who had taught at New York's Juilliard School [87].

Sorrell remained unmoved [86]. Subsequent appeals, and an effort to push a legislative remedy through Congress (which still served as the City's governing council in this pre-home rule era) to protect the Club, failed [216]. Connecticut Democratic Congressman Robert Giaimo's effort to push tax relief for Washington theaters eventually fell short on the floor of the House [95].

The demise of the Washington Theater Club, like its birth, is a complicated story full of twists and turns in which Club leaders made their share of mistakes. Viewing the Club's collapse as a consequence of ill-considered individual measures is mistaken. The entire Washington theater scene was under pressure in a city not-yet-recovered from the 1968 civil disturbances following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Furthermore, Congressional mismanagement had yet to give way to meaningful, if flawed, home rule.

The story of the Washington Theater Club is one of missed opportunities, chances passed by in part because of the absence of a local government which cared first and foremost about the city it managed. Pre-home rule Washington was run by and for the Federal government and not its residents and home-grown institutions.

This tale is about the at times fraught relationship between politics, bureaucracy, and the arts. When governing institutions lose accountability to those whom they regulate, such unaccountability at its most expansiveness can breed oppression, servility, and cruelty. More likely, and loathsome in its own way, such a want of answerability can breed idiocy.

The story similarly is one of considerable achievements, creating a theater of high artistic standards that engaged the leading challenges facing its community. From bringing new works to the American stage to focusing on African American authors, artists, and works from entertaining audiences to taking Cole Porter's biting lyrics to Richard Nixon in the White House, the Wentworths, Davey Marlin-Jones and everyone else associated with the Washington Theater Club created a legacy worthy of notice.

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ВАШИНГТОНСЬКИЙ ТЕАТРАЛЬНИЙ КЛУБ: ПОВЧАЛЬНА ІСТОРІЯ ПРО КУЛЬТУРНІ НОВАЦІЇ І БЮРОКРАТИЧНЕ ВТРУЧАННЯ, 1957–1974

Анотація. У 1957–1974 роки невелика професійна театральна труппа у Вашингтоні, округ Колумбія, поставила дев'яносто спектаклів за участю акторів профспілки та десять позапрофесійкових вистав, серед яких—десять світових прем'єр, чотири американські прем'єри, тридцять прем'єр у Вашингтоні та твори шістдесят чотирьох драматургів, чиї роботи раніше не ставилися в регіоні. Вашингтонський театральний клуб поставив нові твори кількох провідних англомовних драматургів того часу. Клуб також став майданчиком для молодих акторів, які розпочинали свою кар'єру, з-поміж яких були й ті, хто згодом здобув широку славу на американській сцені та екрані. До моменту закриття клубу його внесок в еволюцію американського регіонального театру виявився набагато значнішим, ніж можна було би припустити, зважаючи на його невеликий розмір.

Театральні ентузіасти Гейзел і Джон Вентворти відкрили Вашингтонський театральний клуб наприкінці 1950-х років. Вони прагнули бачити у Вашингтоні новаторську драму, якої тоді не вистачало. Подружжя створило театр, щоб підтримувати свіжі драматичні форми, презентувати нові ідеї та допомагати молодим драматургам. Їхня діяльність мала дещо богемний характер, часто виходила за межі мейнстріму.

Вентворти розглядали місію свого театру не лише як художню, а й як соціально активістську. Вони прагнули створити якісні постановки, які б грали й дивилися різноманітні актори й глядачі — поза обмеженнями расової сегрегації, що панувала у Вашингтоні того періоду. Від самого початку клуб активно підтримував афроамериканський театр, афроамериканських драматургів і митців.

Історія клубу також є свідченням руйнівної сили бюрократичного та політичного контролю. Протягом усього описуваного періоду Вашингтон залишався під прямим управлінням Конгресу США. Комісари та чиновники, яким Конгрес доручив керувати містом, не несли відповідальності перед його жителями. Зрештою, податковий кодекс, несприятливий для культурних установ, поставив під загрозу існування клубу. Судові рішення були не на його користь, і внаслідок цього клуб мав виплатити непосильний майновий податок. Банки відібрали майно через несплату кредитів.

Злет і занепад Вашингтонського театального клубу — це повчальна історія про те, що може статися, коли доля спільноти опиняється в руках людей, які не мають з нею жодного зв'язку. Втрата відповідальності здатна породити гноблення, жорстокість і безглуздість.

Ключові слова: Вашингтонський театральний клуб, регіональний театр, культурні новації, бюрократичне втручання, расова інтеграція, американська драма, історія театру.