THEATRE FOR YOUNG AMERICA: A HISTORY

A THESIS IN

Theatre

Presented to the Faculty of the University
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

by

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B.F.A., Kansas University, 2003

Kansas City, Missouri
2014
In the spring of 1974, a family of actors has recently landed in Kansas City, Missouri. Father, Gene Mackey, is working for one of the area’s four professional dinner theatres and has been authorized by his employer to mount a children’s play in response to Mackey’s research which reveals widespread support in the community for a dedicated children’s theatre. Though personal interviews and a review of print sources, this thesis will examine the founders’ backgrounds, the inception of the company, and the production history of Theatre for Young America. This thesis will recount the resilience, adaptability, and dedication of a family that has left a lasting impression on Kansas City in the form of a professional theatre for young audiences that recently celebrated its 40th anniversary.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Theatre for Young America: A History,” presented by Anthony John Bernal II, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible were it not for the dedication of those pedagogically minded individuals in my life. The role of the teacher is naively underestimated and criminally undervalued in today’s society. I dedicated this paper to the teachers I have known and who I count among my heroes.

Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant, the founders of Theatre for Young America and life-long educators, have committed themselves to presenting poignant, resonant theatre to young audiences; often challenging and always entertaining. I credit them with teaching me the value of hard work and the benefits of curiosity. Valerie Mackey, Theatre for Young America’s current artistic director, displays a passion and commitment that I strive to emulate. As my very first acting teacher, she taught me to listen, really listen, to my fellow actors. This singular skill, one of many Valerie taught me, is of inestimable significance in my day to day life.

Dr. Felicia Hardison Londré has graciously shepherded me through my graduate-studies and lovingly cultivated my fledgling skills and talents. Under her tutelage, I have grown to understand that anything worth knowing is worth going to great lengths to understand and worth reporting with precise accuracy. Dr. Mechele Leon, professor of theatre at Kansas University, once asked us, a group of Dr. Londré’s students, how we are able to write for a woman whose output and rate of publications place her as one of the most prolific theatre historians in the country. Quite simply, Dr. Londré wants us to write: write well and write often. She is very encouraging and never one to squelch an interest or an opinion she does not share. She is the personification of fair mindedness
and academic integrity. For these reasons, it is an honor, an education, and a privilege to write for her.

The role of educator is perpetually and increasingly hampered and taken for granted: these are crimes against the inheritors of our planet. I have known many teachers in my life, loved a handful, frustrated more than a few, but respected all. I present this history of one “teaching” institution as a small gesture of gratitude to the multitude of pedagogues who generously invested in this one, not always eager, learner.
INTRODUCTION

Writing the history of Theatre for Young America was a particularly enticing prospect for me in that this is the theatre provided many of the important firsts in my life: my first job, my first acting classes, my first group of friends, and, most importantly, my first sense of self worth. Many of the attributes of the adult artist I have become can be traced directly back to my time at TYA. It is a company that has never enjoyed a revenue stream that could be described as ample, but anyone who has ever been associated with the theatre has learned to wear many hats, stayed as late as necessary, and done whatever it took to get the show up. I take great pride in my work ethic and intellectual flexibility both of which are firmly rooted in my experiences at Theatre for Young America.

The founding family, Gene Mackey, Sheryl Bryant, and Valerie Mackey, and I have spent many hours in discussion and pouring over their own archive of reviews, press coverage, and photographs. My own survey of Kansas City, Missouri’s historical archives—as well as archives housed in Illinois, Arkansas, and Texas—have contributed to this paper. This history is intended to provide a lens into the people and philosophies that coalesced to create the region’s longest continuously operational theatre for young audiences.

I suppose, every act of creation is in some small way an exercise in self-examination. In the beginning, I set out to write this history in honor of the Mackey family and the theatre I hold so dear. What I discovered at every turn was an illumination of many parts of myself. My time at TYA was brief but it occurred right at the most impressionable moment in the development of my intellect and personality.
My objective was to provide the theatre and its founders the opportunity to tell their story. What follows here is a summary of a life, that which came before it, and what is hoped for its future. As is the case with any biography, the resulting written record is grossly insufficient when compared to actual experiences of those who contributed to it. My hope is that the reader will get a glimpse into the events and personalities that gave rise to Theatre for Young America and that have sustained its continuing operation for nearly half a century.
CHAPTER 1

THE FOUNDERS

Gene Mackey was born and raised in Rogers, Arkansas, about twenty miles north of Fayetteville and two hundred miles northwest of Little Rock.¹ At the time, Rogers was a quiet town of about three thousand.

Mackey’s father was a realtor and insurance agent, which took him out on the road frequently, but he was never a particularly successful businessman.² Edwin Ford Mackey had attended college briefly but was called back home to take care of his mother after his father died. He was an avid reader and would pass on to his son this love of reading great literature as well as a desire to write. When he was away for business, he would write to his family back home about his travels. Mackey says his father would have been perfectly content to be a writer.

Mackey’s mother had been an actress in school but made a name for herself as an artist: a painter. Naomi Ruth Ivie Mackey became known as NIM of the Ozarks and was celebrated in the region for her landscapes and for images of historical locations.³ Another artist in nearby Eureka Springs had been a somewhat prominent artist in Chicago and took a liking to this young painter and gave her some instruction. After she married Mackey’s father, she started signing her paintings “NIM.” A reporter once referred to her

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¹ Gene Mackey (foundin artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, September 11, 2014.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.
as “NIM of the Ozarks.” Ivie-Mackey liked this moniker and the name stuck. Though she had not studied formally – Ivy-Mackey had longed to attend the Kansas City Art Institute but never got there – she had her own studio in Rogers where she offered classes in painting. In fact, when Mackey began studying theatre at the University of Arkansas, his mother decided her studio could offer acting classes. Naturally, interest in these acting classes ebbed up and down so when enrollment was particularly thin, even Mackey Sr. got invited to take his son’s classes and offered up what Mackey remembers as a delightful and blustery Falstaff.

Mackey’s first job was at an ice-cream shop run by an older Greek gentleman who represented the only racial diversity Mackey can recall about Rogers. Much beloved by the town and Mackey’s family, this little shop sold sundaes, malts, shakes, and a myriad of homemade European-style candies. Additionally, the shop carried a wide array of magazines and paperback books. Part of Mackey’s job was removing the covers from unsold volumes so they could be sent back to the publisher for a credit. When business was slow, Mackey would spend many hours reading all the magazines and books he had access to: Mackey points out that in the 1950s, even great literature was available in mass-market paperback and he absorbed all he could.

All through his childhood, Mackey was a lover of books and a good student. He was a National Merit Scholar and even began college during his senior year of high school.

I hated this because, you know back then, to be a boy and be thought of as a ‘brain’ guy wasn’t cool. I tried to play football but I wasn’t very good at that. It

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4 Ibid.
took me till I was a senior in high school before I had the guts to not play football.\(^5\)

In high school, Mackey had an English teacher who was elated at the fact he pronounced words properly, and she thought he should be in their production of *She Stoops to Conquer*.\(^6\) Mackey was not particularly interested in acting. He did not audition for the play. But this English teacher cast him anyway in the leading male role. Mackey found the whole prospect of learning lines and doing love scenes daunting and nerve wracking. On opening night early in the play, when his character first meets his love interest, Mackey got his first ever-in-his-life laugh. “It was like a drug,” is how he, and probably every actor ever, describes the sensation he felt which was far more rewarding than any experience he ever had on the football field.

After high school, Mackey went on to the University of Arkansas to study theatre.\(^7\) The university had an impressive arts center that contributed in part to the attraction of some notable faculty such as George R. Kernodle, the noted theatre historian, and Cleveland Harrison, a published author and theatre scholar. Mackey points to his time at this college with this faculty as truly formative to his ideas and practices as an artist. He would spend a year and a half at the university.

In 1963, feeling that nearly two years at a state college surely was sufficient, Mackey took some time to work as surveyor so as to make some money to move to New York. He had applied to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts™ and was accepted

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
“contingent upon audition.”8 Before he would go however, he accepted a residency at the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, to study creative writing. The Instituto Allende was an art colony in this mountain village where many U.S. ex-patriots had landed. Mackey describes this wholly romantic and Hemmingway-esque picture.

It was so cheap, you know. Even with the little money I saved from my surveying job, I was able to go down there and... I was fine. I spent the whole summer there by myself. Many many Americans there, North Americans, I mean: many of them were artist, many of them were writers. There was a little bar there and you go and it was just like in *A Movable Feast*. All sitting around and talking great literature and art and all of that. It was a wonderful summer. I would have loved to have just stayed.9

Late in 1963, after having returned from Mexico, Mackey took a 24-hour bus from Rogers, Arkansas, to New York City where he gave his audition for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and was accepted.10 He took classes in the evening and worked during the day at E. J. Korvette’s corporate office.11 When he first arrived, Mackey lived with a family with whom his parents had been friends back in Rogers. They were living near Sherman Square on the Upper West Side of Manhattan while the father attended classes at Columbia University. When they moved out to Long Island, Mackey was able to find lodgings in the Sherman Square / Verdi Square right were Broadway intersects 72nd Street. Mackey describes the area at this time as tumultuous due to its moniker of “needle park” and the frequent presence of drug dealers and addicts.

8 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, September 11, 2014.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Mackey describes E. J. Korvette’s as a discount department store, in a way, the Walmart of its day.
Mackey was called up for the draft in late 1964. He passed all the physical assessments and was considered to join intelligence operations because he had scored high on the cognitive evaluations. But feeling strongly that this was not a desirable path, he enrolled at New York University in order to secure a student deferment.¹²

At NYU, Mackey made life-long professional connections including a friendship with playwright Lowell Swortzell whose plays Mackey would later produce.¹³ He also garnered an Off-Broadway credit in Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* at the Provincetown Playhouse. He had been working at Provincetown as an usher and when one of the actors dropped out of the play, Mackey took over the role because he was about the same size. He was paid $25 a week and had to pull the curtain at the end so he did not take part in the curtain call. Additionally, it was Mackey’s responsibility to distribute flyers for the show during the day. It seems that he was willing to do anything in service of the theatre that was asked of him.

While the travels and experiences Mackey was enjoying would prove to be enormously instructive, he found himself taking the same courses repeatedly at different institutions and they never quite added up to a degree.¹⁴ So he decided to head back to the University of Arkansas to complete his B.A. where it was more affordable. Further, the draft for the Vietnam War was ramping up and Mackey’s parents felt he stood less chance of getting called up if he were enrolled in school full time.

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¹² Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.

¹³ Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, September 11, 2014.

¹⁴ Ibid.
In the spring of 1965, Mackey was taking classes, working as a surveyor, and found himself cast in the university’s production of Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.\(^{15}\) He played Freddy Eynsford-Hill. The first actress to play his sister Clara dropped out and was replaced. That actress then resigned from the show and was replaced by sophomore Sheryl Bryant. Mackey had seen Bryant in a dance performance of a suite from Prokofiev’s *The Love for Three Oranges* and generally around the theatre department, but had not gotten to know her prior to *Pygmalion*. According to Mackey, neither had any idea just how perfectly matched they were for each other.

Sheryl Anne Bryant grew up in Nevada, Missouri, a little less than 100 miles south of Kansas City and a little less than 150 miles north of Fayetteville, Arkansas. Hers was a very agricultural family; both of her parents’ families had worked in agriculture but also had been business owners.\(^{16}\) Though Nevada was a small, rural Missouri town, the Bryants lived close enough to Main Street to be considered “townies”. They had started out in the country but when Bryant and her brother came along, mom and dad decided it was safer closer to town. They purchased a large piece of land at the south end of town, just across the street from a sheep farm, which Mr. Bryant eventually parceled off for development of a subdivision.

Bryant’s mother, Ruby Ellen Markley Bryant, unlike many women of the day, had been to business college and worked most of her adult life.\(^{17}\) Bryant recalls a few

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 18, 2014.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
friends whose mothers worked but, by and large, the women of this time and place were stay-at-home-home moms. Bryant’s mother had served as the Vernon County Deputy Clerk, the County Treasurer, and intermittently keep the tax rolls for the County Auditor which she would tend to at home in the evenings. Since her mother was usually working, Bryant and her brother did a great deal of the housework, and Bryant herself was often expected to have dinner ready for when her mother and father returned home from work.

Miss Ruby, as she was known in town, was a very independent woman; this may have been due to the fact that she had been orphaned at an early age and was moved around amongst her extended family. Bryant remarks on the dichotomy of this independence and the fact her mother never drove a car. This was a time when the automobile was transitioning from professional utility and rich men’s toys to household necessity. Even in small towns like Nevada, a taxi service was a common and economical option for all classes; Nevada even had two taxi service companies. Bryant volunteers that a gentility presided, at least in part, over her mother’s sensibilities: she called for a taxi rather than driving, she always wore high heels, always wore an apron around the house and was one of the last holdouts to put on a pair of pants in her later years. It seems that Bryant learned early on that adaptation and evolution is more desirable than compromise. Miss Ruby could hold several jobs and remain active in the community while maintaining herself as a lady. Undoubtedly, this concept would contribute greatly to Theatre for Young America’s longevity as well as Kansas City’s affection and support of it.

18 Ibid.
Bryant’s father had been a farmer but opened a feed store at the suggestion, Bryant supposes, of his wife. Bryant imagines that her mother proposed to Mr. Bryant the idea of taking his knowledge from farming and putting it into a business where she could handle the books. Bryant credits her father with instilling in her a solid work ethic as well as an entrepreneurial instinct. To this day, Theatre for Young America sends out postcards to announce individual shows and classes. Bryant recalls her father’s great success with this advertising strategy. Rather than spend lots of money advertising in the local paper, Mr. Bryant would purchase penny postcards and use those to send out notice that this cow feed was on special or that grain was being liquidated.

Bryant’s first performing experiences came as soon as she started school. In the first grade, she was in her class’s presentation of *Mother Goose* in which she played the title character. This meant that she would have the most stage time as she would serve as narrator for all of the nursery rhymes. Bryant does not specifically recall getting her first laugh, but she distinctly remembers the feeling of acceptance and inclusion she experienced when a laugh would wash up from the audience. Through much of her childhood, Bryant remembers having a “lazy” left eye. Though she often wore a patch over her good eye, an effort to encourage use of the weaker eye, and did eye exercises, Bryant often appeared to be “cross eyed”. Bryant believes this must have led to a feeling of being different; a feeling that folded when confronted by a laughing or applauding audience.

Naturally, Bryant gravitated to all manner of performing opportunities—such as school plays, plays with the Girl Scouts, and singing in the choir at her family’s

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19 Ibid.
Methodist church—and even would make her own opportunities; Bryant recalls her elderly neighbors having a large picture window installed in front of which she would perform pantomimes and songs to the exuberant applause of the undoubtedly appreciative couple. But Bryant mostly credits her mother’s best friend for deepening and broadening her interests in the performing arts. Bernice Ball was a local music teacher, she gave Bryant her first piano lessons, but also an enthusiastic patron of the arts. When Bryant was in middle school and high school, Ball would frequently invite Bryant along when she went to shows at the local college. Bryant recalls specifically the accompanying Ball to the theatre on the evening of November 22, 1963.

We saw *Oedipus Rex* the night Kennedy was assassinated. Broadway, the lights were off: they cancelled the shows that night. And I thought they’d cancel the touring show at Cottey [College] and Bernice called and said, “It’s on… let’s go.” And so we did. She said, you know, we could stay home and cry, because that’s what everybody was doing [that night], or we can go to this and be with people. And so that’s what we did.

In high school, Bryant was under the tutelage of Gordon Rogers who served as the high school’s drama teacher as well as the debate and forensics coach. Bryant involved herself in all of these activities and developed a great admiration for Rogers and his wife who occasionally would coach Bryant on her forensics speeches.

Bryant’s parents were clearly supportive of her artistic interests but were not very participatory. It seems that, from their perspective, working was the chief characteristic of an adult life and therefore one had little free time, went to bed early, and arose early.

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20 Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.

21 Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 18, 2014.

22 Ibid.
Bryant was never quite sure if all the outings to the theatre with Ms. Ball were entirely Ball’s idea or at the encouragement of Bryant’s mother. It was a stern upbringing, as she recalls. Decorum was paramount and the flamboyance of the theatre seems to have been acceptable as long as it remained remote or innocent. Bryant recalls playing Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* and the disturbing impact it had on her father.

> When my dad saw me in *The Glass Menagerie*, he cried so much that he said he didn’t think he could ever see me in another play because it just bothered him so much. He couldn’t recognize that was just Cheryl playing a character. He ‘leapt’ so much that for that time, I was that woman who had that horrible existence.\(^{23}\)

Great writing can certainly elevate a performer, but surely there must have been a sincerity and a naturalism that Bryant brought to the role which unsettled her decorous father and impacted him so.

As Bryant progressed through high school, her saturation in the performing arts persisted and began to show portents of a profession. Growing up in the Bryant household meant that choice of vocation was extremely important. Though her parents did not wholly approve of the life in the arts, Bryant was determined.\(^{24}\) She had great admiration for her high school drama instructor, Gordon Rogers, who had studied at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Bryant was convinced that if she could study at the same institution, she could make a career in the theatre, get out of Nevada, and maybe even make it to New York City. But, this would mean her parents would have to pay out-

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\(^{23}\) Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 18, 2014.

\(^{24}\) Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
of-state tuition. They eventually acquiesced and Bryant matriculated into the university within days of graduating from high school.

As soon as Bryant arrived on campus in 1965, she saw audition notices for the university’s production of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. Looking back on this time, Bryant volunteers that the thinner campus population contributed to her securing a role, albeit a small one, in the play. Nevertheless, it was just the jolt of confidence she needed as an entrée to the college. Though future roles did not come nearly as easily, she certainly auditioned for everything and involved herself in the theatre department every way she could.

Bryant toured with the University of Arkansas’ Drama Wing. Drama Wing was a special and specific kind of troupe that presented plays that could be used as a teaching tool. A social problem would be the thesis of a play, then the performance would conclude with a discussion of the preceding. This experience would prove foundational to Bryant’s later role as Education Director for Theatre for Young America.

In the spring of 1966, Bryant got a phone call from Dr. George R. Kernodle, the noted theatre historian and Shaw enthusiast, who had recently begun rehearsals for the university’s production of *Pygmalion*. Dr. Kernodle said that he had tried two other actresses in the role of Clara Eynsford-Hill but that neither had worked out and he would

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25 Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.

26 Ibid.

27 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America) and Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 22, 2014.
now like to try Bryant. She agreed and went to her first rehearsal that very evening where she met, for the first time formally, Gene Mackey who was cast in the role of Clara’s brother, Freddy Eynsford-Hill. Mackey of course had just arrived back in Fayetteville after having been in New York City studying at American Academy of Dramatic Arts, studying at New York University, and performing at the Provincetown Playhouse. Bryant, along with her classmates, was most impressed with Mackey and his recent experiences but did not initially feel that the two of them quite belonged in the same sphere.

At the time, Bryant was dating Mackey’s best friend, Mickey Cottrell, and the three of them became a social trio attending parties and theatre department functions together.\(^{28}\) When Mickey took an internship at the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock, Mackey began escorting Bryant home from rehearsal and social functions. The two discovered they had quite a bit in common and were very like-minded on matters of politics, art, and their general perspectives on the world. It wasn’t long before they became romantically involved.

By the summer of 1966, Mackey and Bryant were very much in love and Bryant was pregnant.\(^{29}\) They both had secured summer acting jobs at the Rackinsack Summer Theatre in Hot Springs, Arkansas. On their way to Hot Springs, they took a detour over to Nowata, Oklahoma, to get married; there was a waiting period for marriage licenses in Arkansas but none in Oklahoma. So with their friend and fellow actor, David Rice, as a

\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
witness, the two married and spent the summer performing together in *Death of a Salesman*, *The Mousetrap*, and *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*.

After their stint at the Rackinsack Summer Theatre, and with a baby on the way, Mackey and Bryant felt the need to have an income was more compelling than completing their degrees. Mackey had read about the teacher shortage in California and thought he could make some money out there working as a substitute. So the two moved to Alhambra, California, on the north east side of Los Angeles. By the time they had arrived, Mackey had lined up the full fall semester with teaching assignments and, shortly thereafter, Bryant had found a job at the Broadway Theater, a small movie theatre in Alhambra. In December, Bryant gave birth to their daughter, Valerie.

The Mackeys decided to return to the University of Arkansas in the summer of 1967. They had proven that they could be on their own, working and with a child, without support from either of their parents. Further, it seemed a good idea to finish their undergraduate degrees. They were welcomed back with great affection from both family and friends. Right away, they were put into the University of Arkansas’ summer production of *Carnival!* where Bryant was a Bluebird Girl and Mackey was Marco the Magnificent, a magician. By that fall, they were re-enrolled, finishing the last little bit of required course work, and considering graduate programs. They had decided against any

30 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America) and Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre For Young America), in discussion with the author, October 22, 2014.

31 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 8, 2014.

32 Ibid.
more survival-type jobs and felt that graduate work would help in the pursuit of serious legitimate artistic careers. They applied to Kansas University and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. They were accepted to both programs but Illinois offered them full fellowships which came with one stipulation: they were required to audition for all the plays.

In the fall of 1968, Bryant and Mackey matriculated into the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.\(^{33}\) One of Mackey’s first roles was in the university Young People’s Theatre’s presentation of *Androcles and the Lion* which was directed by Roman Tymchyshyn. Tymchyshyn, who started the Young People’s Theatre just three years prior, was a respected scholar of theatre for young audiences who believed that theatre has a unique capacity to interface with education.\(^ {34}\) Partially due to his fascination with the genre, and partially desiring the capacity to someday involve his daughter in his work, Mackey decided to join Bryant, at her suggestion, in taking all of Tymchyshyn’s courses. This did not wholly change Mackey’s educational and professional trajectory at the time but went a long way to opening his mind to the possibilities in children’s theatre. Theatre for young audiences was, at this time, coming into its own and not just existing as community theatre or secondary programs in professional companies.

By the summer of 1970, Mackey and Bryant were nearly finished with their course work and so their time at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign was quickly coming to an end. The time had come to consider where to begin their careers.

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\(^ {33}\) Sheryl Bryant (foundiing education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.

They had found, in a theatre periodical, an opening for a Resident Director at the Casa Mañana in Fort Worth, Texas.35 Mackey knew he wanted to move forward as a director, though he had not done much directing. The position was primarily to oversee the for-young-audiences series that occupied the Casa Mañana’s main stage during most of the year.36 Mackey knew he was not interested in working on museum presentations of the standard repertoire, and children’s theatre offered him the laboratory for experimentation he longed for. At Roman Tymchyshyn’s encouragement, Mackey applied for the position at Casa Mañana.

Much to their surprise, the theatre flew Mackey down for an interview. Mackey feels that the administrators at Casa Mañana probably viewed him as “Yankee” but, as he made such a good showing as a young and wholesome recent graduate, the theatre made him an offer.37 Mackey immediately asked what, if anything, might be available for Bryant. Casa Mañana was not in the market for an actress or a teacher but they did say they were in need of a costumer. Though she had very little experience or formal training in costuming, Bryant immediately began work on a special costuming project, Mackey reported back to Casa Mañana that Bryant just happened to be a costumer, and the theatre offered her a position as well.

There must have been some haste to the proceedings because Mackey was asked to direct the very first production of the 1970-1971 season and had to work on the script

35 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, September 11, 2014.

36 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 8, 2014.

37 Ibid.
on the drive down from Champaign to Fort Worth.\textsuperscript{38} As previously mentioned, Mackey had limited directing experience up to this point so he was committed to being as prepared as possible for his first production.

Casa Mañana was a large professional theatre in Fort Worth, Texas, whose main auditorium seated more than 1,000 patrons in the round.\textsuperscript{39} The theatre’s format offered a summer season of adult theatre presentations of musicals and comedies and starred such notables as Patsy McClenny\textsuperscript{40}, who later changed her name to Morgan Fairchild, and a young Betty Lynn Buckley.\textsuperscript{41}

During the school year, the theatre was dedicated entirely to children’s programming. Mackey was to direct all of the year-long season’s productions, and he ended up writing several as well. Though the theatre was not as fully staffed from September to May, Mackey still had full access to the theatre’s production capacities. Naturally, the children’s programming also did not enjoy the same financial support as the summer shows, but with unrestricted use of the costume and property stores, production values were quite high. Further, he could hire union actors and each production was professionally supported by a union stage manager and union stagehands.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, September 11, 2014.

\textsuperscript{40} Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 8, 2014.

\textsuperscript{41} Jan L. Jones, \textit{Renegades, Showmen, and Angels} (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2006).
Additionally, Casa Mañana had a thriving educational division called the Casa Mañana Playhouse which began operation in 1964 as the Merry-Go-Round School. Though Mackey did not oversee this component of the theatre, Theatre For Young America would similarly have a school to compliment its performance series: classes for students of all ages were offered after normal school hours during the week and on Saturdays. The Casa Mañana Playhouse offered classes in acting, movement, stage management, and technical disciplines. Not long after arriving at Casa Mañana, Bryant was offered some teaching opportunities. As her teaching experience increased, Bryant’s organizational skills caught the eye of the theatre’s executive director, Sharon Benge, who began asking her to author some curriculum. Eventually, several of the teachers would come to rely on Bryant for lesson plans each week. This of course would serve as the foundation of her fund of knowledge when she was to set up and direct Theatre for Young America’s educational programs.

Mackey was, in actuality, fully prepared for this position at Casa Mañana, but was somewhat apprehensive about the dedicated children’s programing which he was to supervise. He drew confidence, however, from his studies with Tymchyshyn and the graduate production of Androcles and the Lion, but this was the extent of his for-young-audiences experience up to this point. Nevertheless, he leapt right into it. He did not initially approach the directing of a children’s play any differently than he would have an adult production. In the broadest terms, he felt the theatrical telling of a story was not fundamentally different to an adult audience than it was to a crowd of children. Mackey

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42 Ibid.
feels that this is a valid and effective approach but volunteers that, for him, it did evolve over the years.

I thought a play is a play, you know, an audience is an audience and to a degree that’s right and I think that’s a good approach. Looking back, it’s clear that there are some differences: attention span is shorter, you cannot rely as much on verbal information getting across to children, a lot has to be communicated visually; you have to acknowledge that. 43

Further, this was the perfect laboratory to explore the experimental capacities of the theatre.

I was drawn to the field right away because you could do anything. You could experiment and you did not have to go to a cocktail party and explain yourself to people who had studied theatre and knew what was “right.” 44

Mackey found children’s theatre to be very “open,” as he described it, at the time. Young imaginations are less bridled and allow for more trial and error than adults who might have read Aristotle, had even cursory studies in drama, or have any preconceptions as to what theatre ought to be.

Mackey and Bryant completed their first season at Casa Mañana in the late spring of 1970. They split their summer between the Fort Worth and Dover, Delaware, where their graduate-school classmate, Lawrence Wilker, invited them to do some work at the Delaware Center of the Performing Arts of which Wilker was one of the founders. 45

They would repeat the same schedule the next summer.

43 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 8, 2014.

44 Ibid.

45 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America) and Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre For Young America), in discussion with the author, October 22, 2014.
By the end of their third season at Casa Mañana, Mackey went alone to Delaware and Bryant stayed behind in Fort Worth. That summer, 1972, Casa Mañana presented a landmark production of *Porgy and Bess*. But it was the Actors Equity strike that closed *The Student Prince* for one performance.\(^{46}\) The union was seeking a 17 percent raise in salaries to accommodate the increasing cost of living on the East Coast; Casa Mañana had been hiring greater numbers of East Coast actors in the preceding years. The theatre’s board claimed to be abiding by a federal mandate to keep salary increases to 5½ percent. Bryant would frequently telephone Mackey about the goings on and send him newspaper clippings. Though the two parties came to a compromise, Mackey and Bryant could smell the bigger trouble coming and began to consider what their next move might be.

Shortly after the beginning of 1973, Casa Mañana informed Actors Equity that the following summer season would be non-union.\(^{47}\) The resulting flurry of newspaper advertisements placed by the union threatening to close the theatre, made for wholly awkward and bitter atmosphere within the company. Many of the theatre’s resident and staff artists began abandoning the theatre.\(^{48}\) The growing unrest led Mackey and Bryant to the conclusion that they might be soon out of jobs, and they decided to hand in their resignations. Executive Director, Sharon Benge, was not pleased with the decision but did understand it.

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\(^{46}\) Jan L. Jones, *Renegades, Showmen, and Angels* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2006).

\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, September 11, 2014.
In May of 1973, a full contingency from the New York City office of Actor’s Equity descended upon Fort Worth. Right up to opening night of *South Pacific*, the union and the theatre tried to come to a compromise. On the night of May 21, 1973, the season opened with a picket line of 150 circling the theatre led by the likes of Rip Torn and Geraldine Page. *South Pacific* received generally good reviews and the company’s administration collective gave a sigh of relief. But Equity’s barrage of full-page newspaper advertisements was unrelenting and the theatre quickly began hemorrhaging sales. Ultimately, the theatre was forced to close the season mid-stream on July 14, 1973. Further evidence of the theatre’s foolish stubbornness and needless loss of revenue, jobs, and image, Casa Mañana came to terms of agreement with the union just two days later. The public’s impression of the theatre was so marred by the affair, even the following season’s opening with two previous runaway hits, *Fiddler On the Roof* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, attracted the worst attendance in the theatre’s history. It would take the theatre nearly a decade to fully recover its subscription base.


51 Jan L. Jones, *Renegades, Showmen, and Angels* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2006).
Mackey and Bryant spent the summer of 1973 in Austin, Texas, at the E. P. Conkle Workshop for Playwrights. Bryant was in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Mackey played the lead in *Modigliani*. Once the workshop closed, Mackey and Bryant made their way to New York City. Bryant had always wanted to make an attempt at being a New York actress and Mackey had left out of necessity, though he really would rather have stayed.

They found an apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey, and Mackey set out to look for work. He was able to pick up the odd job, such as selling magazine, just to have some money. The American Musical and Dramatic Academy offered him a teaching position but the salary wasn’t nearly enough to be worth the commute. Though they did enjoy being close to Manhattan and all the theatre and museums, as the winter drew near, the lack of gainful employment began to weigh heavily on the family. Young Valerie was just starting school and their cat was doing his best to dispatch the rats that were nearly his own size.

At some point, Mackey picked up a copy of *Show Business*, a weekly trade magazine for actors that was in direct competition with the still active *Backstage*. The publisher, Leo Shull had recently written a book and was publishing it in chapters as a serial in the magazine. The book was entitled *How to Break Into Show Business* and each

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52 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America) and Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 22, 2014.

53 Ibid.

54 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
chapter was dedicated to Shull’s advice, what Mackey describes as “fortune cookie” advice, for specific jobs (e.g. actor, comedian, producer, director). The title barely grabbed Mackey’s interest but there was one article that made a lasting impact. Mackey remembers the main message:

To make a living in the theatre, you have to make your own opportunities. Essentially, don’t wait for somebody else to discover you or find you or offer you a job: make your own job. And living in a crummy little basement in Hoboken, that rang a bell.\(^{55}\)

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER 2

MAKING YOUR OWN BREAKS

For all their determination and resilience, the Mackey’s situation was looking rather bleak as the autumn of 1973 drew in. Father, Gene Mackey, was having no success in securing a job and mother, Sheryl Bryant, was pretty well tied to getting daughter, Valerie, to and from her first year of school; with no local family support, Bryant had a schedule that few, if any, employers would have been willing to work around.¹

Ever since reading that article by Leo Shull in Show Business advising fledgling artists to make their own opportunities rather than waiting for a producer or impresario to discover you, Mackey was gripped by the proposition.² Having spent nearly 4 years as the director in residence at a large theatre for young audiences, directing all the productions and writing many, Mackey was certain he could use that structure to start his own company; he just did not know quite where or how to begin. The confluence of circumstances that followed that would guide the Mackeys back to the mid-west and toward what would become their legacy.

¹ Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 28, 2014.

² Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
In the early fall, Mackey received a letter from his brother, Wayne, who was a professor of mathematics at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. Having surely been aware of his brother’s frustrations with finding employment in New York, Wayne Mackey suggested the family move to Kansas City which was currently enjoying a boom in its local dinner-theatre market: four professional dinner theatres were currently in operation. The opportunities for work, as well as the prospect of having a family support structure, were very attractive to the Mackeys.

It was about this same time that Dr. John Ahart, from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, contacted Mackey about coming back to the university to play Willie Loman in Ahart’s production of *Death of a Salesman*. Ahart’s father had recently passed away and he wanted, or needed perhaps, an actor he trusted to not only play the lead role but also to be a friend, not a student, throughout the production. The play was presented outside of the university’s regular subscription season and Mackey appeared as a special guest artist by permission from Actors’ Equity. The university had never executed a guest-artist contract with Equity and had to purchase a bond in addition to paying the salary, insurance, and pension fees. But Ahart, already a respected member of the faculty, felt strongly about bringing Mackey coming in to do the part and made it

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3 Gene Mackey (foundin artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundin education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 22, 2014.

4 Ibid.

5 Gene Mackey (foundin artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 22, 2014.

6 University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, The Illio 1974 Yearbook, (Champaign, IL: Graduating Class of 1974, 1974), Library of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, vol. 81, pg. 239.
happen. Mackey did relate to the role because his father had been a traveling salesman and suffered many of the same issues and insecurities.

Mackey’s mother, Naomi Ruth Ivie Mackey, had died tragically in an automobile accident in April of 1972. That same year, Mackey’s paternal grandmother had also passed. So, having lost both his wife and his mother in such close proximity, Mackey’s father, Edwin Ford Mackey, was not faring well. Living on the east coast, Mackey’s means of keeping in touch with his father were proving insufficient. It seemed more and more clear that staying in the New York area was not viable for the Mackeys, and a move was inevitable.

In October of 1973, the Mackeys decided to make their way to Kansas City. Mackey would take the role at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Bryant and Valerie would drop Mackey off in Illinois on their way to Kansas City. This news came at the just right time for young Valerie who had recently picked an apple from a tree on the campus of the nearby Stevens Institute of Technology and had been convinced, by the other children in the neighborhood, that it was only a matter of time until the authorities caught up with her.7

Mackey arrived in Champaign, Illinois, and was housed at home of Dr. Ahart’s mother. Mackey wasn’t much older than the students in the productions and felt as though he was back in school. But being a father, and having been out working for several years, Mackey found the role a refreshing departure from the leading man and

7 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 28, 2014.
young-love interest for which he was usually hired. Rehearsals ran for three weeks and the performances were in November.\textsuperscript{8}

While Mackey was in Illinois, Bryant and young Valerie settled in Kansas City. Wayne Mackey’s family was instrumental in the transition.\textsuperscript{9} Before they arrived, Wayne and his wife, Sheri, helped Mackey and Bryant secure a house to rent in the Ruskin Hills neighborhood of Southeast Kansas City with their same landlord and just blocks away from their home. Shortly after landing in Kansas City, Bryant found a job in the box office at the Off-Broadway Dinner Playhouse, where she worked during the week from nine to five. Wayne’s wife, Sheri, offered to bring Valerie home with her from school every day, with cousin Shannon, until Bryant was finished with work. Bryant was even able to go out and audition for plays. Very quickly she was cast as Madge in the Jewish Community Center’s production of William Inge’s \textit{Picnic}. Bryant feels it was very clear she and her family were guided to Kansas City.

In November of 1973, when \textit{Death of a Salesman} was ready to close, Bryant and Valerie headed up to the Champaign, Illinois, to see the show, and Mackey came with them back to Kansas City. Not wasting any time, he hit the streets looking for work all the while keeping in mind this idea of starting his own company. His friend and mentor, John Ahart, came to Kansas City for a visit during which he and Mackey discussed starting a theatre company. This never materialized but Mackey’s enterprising energy

\textsuperscript{8} University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, \textit{The Illio 1974 Yearbook}, (Champaign, IL: Graduating Class of 1974, 1974), Library of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, vol. 81, pg. 239.

\textsuperscript{9} Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 28, 2014.
must have been infectious: Ahart went on to found the Great American People Show, a theatre dedicated to presenting stories of America’s historical figures, just a few years later. Mackey also became good friends with actor Clancy Hathaway with whom he discussed starting a company. This too fizzled out but the two remained good friends over the years. Hathaway even won Theatre for Young America some of its most glowing reviews, as we will see later.

All of this discussion of a new company was important for Mackey’s development as an administrator and entrepreneur but, of course, brought the family no additional, and necessary, income. Mackey’s brother, Wayne, had a friend who worked at the local Sears office and was confidant he could help get Mackey a job there. Being in as dire a situation as he ever had been with needing a job, Mackey applied. Sears called to make Mackey an offer and he asked for some time to think about it: they gave him 24 hours.

It was about this time that Mackey came to the attention of Richard Carrothers and Dennis Hennessy, probably, as Mackey recalls, at an audition. Carrothers and Hennessy owned and operated two professional dinner theatres in Kansas City, Missouri: Tiffany’s Attic and Waldo Astoria which had just opened the previous summer.

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11 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 28, 2014.

Carrothers did not have an acting job for Mackey at the time but was looking for someone to manage the recently opened Waldo Astoria. Mackey was not particularly interested in this: it was more akin to managing a restaurant. But through their discussions, it came to light that Carrothers was interested in doing some programming for young audiences. He had been bringing in some children’s programming, puppet shows and the like, and found there was a market for such presentations. So, from Carrothers’ perspective, it could be a viable business. Mackey admitted to Carrothers his desire to start a new company and the two began discussing the possibilities.

It was an afternoon in January of 1974 that the phone call from Sears came with the employment offer and Mackey and Bryant agonized over the discussion.\footnote{Ibid.} They decided that if he took the position at Sears, he would not be able to give the children’s theatre the time it required. Though it was wholly frightening prospect, Mackey turned down the job at Sears.

Luckily, Carrothers was sympathetic to the anxieties and risks of a new business venture: he and Hennessey had, after all, been in the same position when starting their own theatres. So Carrothers offered Mackey a part-time position doing publicity for his two theatres.\footnote{Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 25, 2014.} An actress by the name of Molly McGreevy had been charged with such duties but, being a part of an old and wealthy Kansas City family, she did not really require employment. Mackey was set up with a folding card table and a phone in the corner of Carrothers’ office. Carrothers’ and Hennessey’s business has always been theatre that is “star driven” meaning that, as long as they were affordable, every show had
a “star” in the it either from television or movies; Mackey was privy to more than one colorful negotiation as he worked in Carrothers’ office. Eventually, Mackey would come to understudy at Waldo Astoria and Tiffany’s Attic as well as stage manage some productions. All were efforts on Carrothers’ part to provide Mackey with some income while he worked to get the children’s programs up and running.

From his little card table, Mackey wrote press releases for the dinner theatres, arranged publicity engagements, and did old-fashioned advance work for the children’s theatre. He put great effort into researching what the area schools would entertain in the way of cultural field trips. He would go and meet with educators and administrators with some materials and literature to drum up interest.

When I looked around, Kansas City had no professional theatre for children to speak of. Nothing regular. Now and again UMKC would do something or the Junior League would do these amateur productions, and now and then a professional company would do something that was for the family, but very little.

It quickly became clear that there was tremendous interest and equal goodwill toward this endeavor and it wasn’t long before Carrothers and Hennessey green-lighted the first production.

The children’s theatre would be allowed use of the Waldo Astoria stage but they were not allowed to move the scenery. Staging at the Waldo Astoria Dinner Theatre was intentionally flexible to accommodate the many occurrences that went into an evening. Before a performance, there would be a cocktail hour, a pre-show review that lasted

15 Ibid.

16 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
about 20 minutes, and the dinner buffet would be set up on the stage. Once dinner was
over, a large Austrian curtain would descend, the buffet would be cleared, and the set for
performance would be moved out.\textsuperscript{17} So, allowing performances in the space when it was
not being used seemed like an easy accommodation.

Carrothers and Hennessy allotted a $500 budget for the first production. Mackey
remembers that he was able to pay the actors something but it was quite modest.\textsuperscript{18} Being
new to town, Mackey did not really know any actors in Kansas City.\textsuperscript{19} Carrothers gave
Mackey a stack of resumes to review and provided a lot of guidance with regards to
casting. Back at the Casa Mañana, he had made friends with Johnny Simmons who had
written children’s plays and musicals. Mackey was particularly fond of Simmons’s take
on \textit{Pinocchio} in a commedia dell'arte style for which the performance rights could be had
for very little. As this was something of a pilot production, Mackey was paid nothing for
producing and directing it and props and costumes were largely pulled from the dinner
theatre’s existing stores. The company acquired a large bolt of blue circus-like fabric to
cover the set of the theatre’s currently running show.

\textsuperscript{17} Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant
(founding education director, Theatre For Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic
director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 28, 2014.

\textsuperscript{18} Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion
with the author, October 25, 2014.

\textsuperscript{19} Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant
(founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic
director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 28, 2014.
On April 28, 1974, the Kansas City Star announced that *Pinocchio* would be presented at the Waldo Astoria.\(^{20}\) Thanks to Mackey’s advance efforts, public and school performances began selling right away. Pat Jeffcott, Dennis Hennessy’s twin sister worked in the box office at Tiffany’s Attic and handled all the sales for the children’s theatre.\(^{21}\) At that time, reservations and sales were taken on paper and whenever Mackey would go to Jeffcott’s office for sales matters, she would jovially hold all the reservations aloft and exclaim with great delight they were “driving her crazy.”

The entire week-long run of *Pinocchio* sold out. It was clear that dedicated-for-young-audiences programming was needed in the area and that the partnership between the Waldo Astoria and the Mackey family could make it happen. Carrothers and Hennessy gave Mackey authorization to mount a full season. The Waldo Astoria Professional Children’s Theatre would make 7428 Washington, Kansas City, Missouri, its home for the next two and a half years.

\(^{20}\) “Waldo ‘*Pinocchio*’ for kids,” *Kansas City Star* (Kansas City, MO), April 28, 1974, 2F.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Pinocchio was very much a trial for the children’s-theatre productions. The budget was low, production values were modest, and there was no attention paid to any relevance to school curricula. Director Gene Mackey also allowed the material to do most of the “comedia work” so the costumes merely required suggestions of the commedia dell’arte style; in subsequent productions, the commedia style would be much more fully developed.

But the production was not without theatrical merit. Mackey was able to assemble a young, agile, even athletic, cast that easily conjured up the physical, slapstick comedy. A great challenge to any theatre’s Pinocchio is famous nose that grows when Pinocchio tells a lie. Mackey invented a simple attachment for Pinocchio’s mask which was a thin wooden dowel with adding-machine paper wound around it. When Pinnocchio would lie, Jiminy Cricket would simply pull on the dowel and Pinocchio’s nose would grown. At the end of the play when, Pinocchio becomes a real boy, his “nose” is cut off with a pair of scissors.

Mackey was also driven to establish certain aesthetics and principles for the company even with this first offering. Influenced by the writings of the British

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1 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 4, 2014.

2 Ibid.
playwright and director, Brian Way, Mackey was particularly interested in the
spontaneous, versus instructed, involvement of the child audience. Way and his
colleagues developed what came to be known as “Participation Theatre” which sought to
exploit a child’s tendency to vocally or physically involve his or her self in the
performance.3 Mackey gives the famous example of Peter Pan where Peter instructs the
audience to clap for Tinkerbelle in order to save her life. Mackey wanted to see the
audiences insert themselves of their own volition.

[In Pinocchio] There were humongous chases and Pinocchio was a kind of mixed
hero / villain because he was mischievous. Kids, especially young ones, five, six,
seven years old, are very moralistic. If he’s doing something bad, he should get
punished. So they would sometimes help Papa find him. ‘He’s over here!’ or ‘He
went that way!’ 4

Mackey was also committed to showing children that shows in the theatre were
different from shows on television or in a movie theatre: that the performance was that of
living and breathing human beings rather than an image on a screen. These chase scenes,
which would later become something of a trademark of the company, required the actors
to negotiate the fairly treacherous terrain of the Waldo Astoria Theatre, which was
riddled with tables, stairs, and hallways instead of side aisles. Mackey was insistent that
the actors not shy away from making contact with the audience or dealing with them
directly if the opportunity arose. It is easy to imagine a chaotic rampage through the
audience coming to an abrupt halt for an actor to calmly ask a child, for his or her own
safety, to keep his or her feet out of the aisle: a gentle expression of gratitude, then a
sudden return to bedlam. Thusly, even in a lesson in theatre etiquette could be fun.

3 Jed H. Davis, “Beyond Pinocchio: Stylistic Developments in Plays for Young

4 Ibid.
*Pinocchio* ran for a full week in May of 1974 and was a resounding success. Wasting no time, and eager to further establish its aesthetic identity, the Waldo Astoria Professional Children’s Theatre put up another production right away. Brian Way’s *Mirror Man* was a largely unknown play but very much embodied the objectives and aesthetics Mackey wanted to promote.

This is the story of a Toymaker who has a doll—that-can-walk-and-talk. One day, his life is suddenly interrupted by his reflection, the Mirrorman, who needs help and protection from a witch who is determined to steal his Book of Spells.5 Throughout the play, the audience is involved in the action. The Toymaker creates a magical doll that moves according to suggestions from the audience. The children are also asked to hide the magic book of spells from the wicked witch. In this way, the audience does not passively experience a wholly predetermined presentation, but is drawn into, and becomes a part of, the piece.6 Most importantly, this participation is not confined to a tangential part of the play but rather affects the central plot and overall outcome.

*Mirror Man* did not sell quite as well as *Pinocchio* but this was probably due to the lack of name recognition. With the blessing and commitment to funding from the Waldo Astoria’s owners, the children’s theatre quickly began assembling its first full season.7 Mackey drew up a formal budget and the theatre held general auditions. This

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7 Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundling education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 4, 2014.
was Mackey’s opportunity to at least begin to familiarize himself with the local talent pool outside of the handful of individuals he and Bryant knew personally or with whom they had already worked.

The season opened with Johnny Simmons’s adaptation of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Simmons’s musicals always posed a special problem: Simons did not, it is unclear if he could not, write out the music. So, for both *Pinocchio* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Simmons provided Mackey with recordings of Simmons himself playing and singing the songs.\(^8\) The cast and musicians for *Pinocchio* simply learned the music by rote. But for *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Mackey had scores prepared. The score was characterized by easy shifts between major and minor sonorities. A melody could be lightly going along, quite happily, then take a short detour into a darker tonality. Valerie Mackey distinctly recalls this and how it colored the town of Sleepy Hollow as a quiet and pleasant village with a secret.

*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* proved to be enormously popular. This is likely due, in no small part, to the realization of the Headless Horseman. The production was otherwise modest, even stark, in its production values. But the Horseman stopped the show and required three actors.\(^9\) The enormous structure needed one actor to serve as the tail end of the horse, another the front end, then one more on the shoulders of the front-end actor, inside a kind of headless armature for the horseman, and holding a pumpkin. Utilizing strobe lights and music from Prokofiev’s *Hamlet*, Mackey remembers the effect being scary for audiences but enjoyably so.

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\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.
The theatre finished out the year with *Raggedy Ann and Andy*. Though it ran during the holidays, it was not a holiday-themed piece; the Mackeys made efforts over the years to steer clear of religiously-oriented material especially over the holidays, so that everyone felt welcome. Mackey wrote this adaptation from Johnny Gruelle’s stories and was able work in some of the Brian Way style participation moments. For example, Raggedy Ann and Andy are being pursued by a witch, and a wizard helps them to get rid of her. The wizard reads the ingredients for this magic potion but, in the middle of making it, he forgets some of the ingredients. Without prompting, children in the audience would shout out reminders and the wizard would graciously thank them for their help.

As this was early in the theatre’s existence, each production surely came with a degree of education for the Mackeys and the other administrators. 1975 opened with *The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew* by Robert Bolt, famous for *A Man for All Seasons*. The play called for no women and, as this was fledgling company doing a famous writer’s material, some top-shelf actors made themselves available. Mackey remembers that the company fought and bickered non-stop throughout rehearsals and the performance run. He concludes that mixed company and variety can go a long way to fostering an amicable work environment and never again, at least to his recollection, did he cast all men or all women in a play. Even doing pieces that called for an all-female cast, *First Lady Suite* for instance, he found a way to put a male actor in the show: perhaps in drag for a laugh.

*The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew* had several elements working against it. It was set back in an Arthurian period and Valerie Mackey recalls it being a somewhat formal play. The fact that it did not sell particularly well, combined with the constant
unrest amongst the actors, leads the Mackeys to “not shelve this one” alongside the successes of their early productions.

The theatre capped its season with an original work by Mackey called *Three by Three*. This too had its problems but Mackey claims he might not feel this if he had not recently considered reviving it. The original production was very dynamic and the Mackeys remember some excellent comic talent in the cast. But ultimately, Mackey recalls the fault lay primarily in the script. He was trying to cast a satirical light on the children’s television programing of the time. Mackey volunteers that satire rests on a strong reference, which he had, but not a reference the audience would hold dear.

I was trying to do some satire of that [children’s television programing] and satire is hard to sell to sell with young audiences. I was attacking stuff they thought was fun. I didn’t think it worked at all and I wouldn’t have said that had I not pulled it out not too ago and thought about doing it again. And I read it through and thought ‘Oh no, this needs a lot of work.’

Looking back on the first full season, the company was generally successful. There was certainly an audience; the company sold over 16,000 tickets that first season. Even though there was the odd misstep, such failures were very instructive to Mackey’s playwriting. So Mackey and Bryant took the next six months to give some staff at the dinner theatre some time off from work, Mackey performed in the Waldo Astoria’s production of Molière’s *The Miser*, and they went about planning their sophomore season.

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10 Ibid.
The 1975-1976 season would be somewhat focused on Americana folklore.\textsuperscript{11} The October opening, which has become standard practice since, was only three months prior to the United States bicentennial year. Also, since their inaugural season had not ended quite as strongly as they would have liked, Mackey drew together all his literary forces and aptitudes for their first offering, \textit{Johnny Appleseed}.

Bryant recalls that a lot of research went into this script and what may have been their first Leader Guide; this is what they called the handbook they would publish for each play that would promote the piece’s academic merits and any links to curriculum. It was based on the real life of John Chapman, utilized the Vachel Lindsay poem \textit{In Praise of Johnny Appleseed}, and incorporated some First Nations elements. So it was rich with historical references and literary tie-in for teachers.

One of Mackeys proudest moments was when the cast would go scattering apple seeds, made of paper, into the audience. He had written two child characters into the script who would pantomime growing, as if out of a seed, into an apple tree when seeds were thrown at them. On many occasions, children in the audience would, hesitantly, follow suit and grow into tress when seeds landed in their vicinity. But one performance in particular saw the entire audience on their feet and the entire theatre became an orchard of apple trees.

The fall of 1975 was also when the company started offering classes. An educational division, just like the one at the Casa Mañana, had always been part of the plan but Mackey and Bryant were not quite sure when that would be initiated. Bryant recalls a Girl Scout leader contacting her to do classes for her scout troupe. So Bryant,

\textsuperscript{11}“Waldo to Offer Children’s Plays,” \textit{Kansas City Star} (Kansas City, MO) September 21, 1975: 4D
who would always serve as the theatre’s educational director, developed a curriculum and the Girl Scouts paid for once-a-week classes and paid a per-student fee. Hennessy and Carrothers, always eager promote a new revenue stream, authorized the program’s expansion, as it was quickly gaining momentum. Before long, Bryant was offering Saturday classes and even got Carrothers to lease space across the street from the theatre so as not to stifle the growing schedule of offerings.

The children’s theatre closed the year with Magic Mirror of Toy Land, Mackey’s hybrid of Babes in Toyland and Brian Way’s The Mirror Man, and opened 1976 with the very apropos Stuck a Feather in His Hat, also written by Mackey. Mackey had been wanting to write something based on American history ever since he had been in the Casa Mañana production of 1776.12 Stuck a Feather in His Hat started at the very beginning and came all the way up through Jimmy Hendrix’s Star Spangled Banner and the resignation of President Nixon. Mackey recalls that the piece was somewhat controversial but also that few, if any, parents made mention of it. As the play sold exceptionally well, it was a celebratory kick-off to the country’s bicentennial for the young company.

The Mackeys regularly attended children’s-theatre conferences at this time and Flora Atkins’ Golliwhoppers! was, and still is, one of the most widely produced plays for children which they discovered at one of these conferences.13 It is a collection of

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12 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.

13 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 4, 2014.
American fables in various styles of “tall tales” told in a story-theatre format by which the audience is led along by a narrator; this was, in fact, the first time the company presented a story-theatre play.

Four regional tales of America's earlier days are brought to life in this adaptable style: a whopper in the backwoods tradition, a nature myth of Southwest Indian tribes; a cante-fable of the Alabama swamps, and an Appalachian mountaineer romp styled in square dance rhythm.\(^\text{14}\)

The play was a particularly strong choice, as the theatre was building a strong roster of versatile performers who were very physical and had musical talent.

The 1975-1976 season wrapped up with Johnny Simmons’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. The Mackeys made frequent use of Simmons’s plays because he was a friend and also because he had a unique lens into the mind of a child. His turn of phrase could seem odd, even a little twisted, to an adult but fail-proof laughs evinced his connection to a child’s unbridled imagination. For example, a line such as “It’s like a bunch of hot wet rats in your underwear” could make the entire auditorium of kids laugh as if on cue. Also characteristic of Simmons’s sensibilities was that *Connecticut Yankee* called for the use of a live pig. Simmons must have understood that such devices were effective but also could be distracting to children. So his use of the pig was judicious; it appears only briefly on stage.

The 1976-1977 season opened with Charlotte B. Chorpenning’s *Cinderella*. Chorpenning had a style that was very reverent toward the original material she adapted. Further, she was very respectful of child audiences and vehemently opposed “talking

down” to children.\textsuperscript{15} Mackey regarded the script as very strong and extremely well written. He also wanted to include some more classical children’s theatre to add to the variety of the season. Even though the production sold reasonably well, Mackey found the dialogue to be a little old-fashioned and stilted for his audiences and did not use Chorpenning’s version again.\textsuperscript{16}

The company ended the year with Moses Goldberg’s \textit{Wind in the Willows} and Lowell Swortzell’s \textit{A Partridge in a Pear Tree}. \textit{Wind in the Willows} was based on the book by Kenneth Grahame and was very much an allegorical tale wherein the animal characters represent people: Toad lives in a large manor house and drives, or wrecks rather, big and fancy cars and his friends are constantly bailing him out of trouble.\textsuperscript{17} \textit{A Partridge in a Pear Tree} took the famous medieval carol and used it tell the story of a young bride who simply wants to wed her beloved bird seller but her overbearing mother has specific plans and ideas for the celebration.

For a time leading up to the end of 1976, it was becoming clear that the Waldo Astoria Professional Children’s theatre was going to burst its banks. Most plays were well attended and several could easily have enjoyed longer runs. But the dinner theatre was reluctant to surrender too many of its own established matinee slots on Wednesdays,

\textsuperscript{15} Charlotte Chorpenning, \textit{Twenty-One Years With Children’s Theatre} (Anchorage, KY: The Children’s Theatre Press, 1954), 110.

\textsuperscript{16} Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Saturdays, and Sundays. Further, the classes were being forced into the lobby and into the larger dressing rooms because those were the only available spaces. Even the box office was beginning to feel somewhat overloaded due to the complexity of large-group reservations and the sheer volume of them that had been coming in.

In late 1976, Dennis Hennessy suggested to Mackey that the children’s theatre should consider becoming its own autonomous company; he even had a location in mind. It must have been *A Partridge in a Pear Tree*, and its sale of over 10,000 tickets that pushed the issue to the foreground. The Overland Theatre, located at 7204 West 80th Street in Overland Park, Kansas, was tapped to be their next home but the theatre was being used as a political campaign headquarters at the time so the Plaza Theatre came to the company’s attention as a temporary venue.

Though this move out from under the auspices of the dinner theatre was unquestionably amicable and harmonious, it was clear that a rebranding was in order so the company could begin to establish a wholly held identity. With much of the country still hopped up on bicentennial patriotism, the Mackeys wanted a name accordant with this energy. Further, a nationally-resonant name surely buoyed their aspirations to tour the states with their offerings. In February of 1977, Theatre for Young America opened *Spaceship Earth 77* at the Plaza Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri.

The Plaza Theatre was very pleased to have Theatre for Young America (TYA), but the space was not ideal for theatrical presentations. *Spaceship Earth 77*, written by

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18 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.

19 Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
Mackey, had a great many technical requirements such as a rather well developed sound design and moving scenery. When the play opened, Mackey positioned himself upstage behind some rotating panels to run the sound cues; the theatre’s projection room could not accommodate TYA as a control booth and there was no wing space either. Having never had a full technical rehearsal, he could not have foreseen that as the moving panels rotated, they revealed him completely to the audience.

Flora Atkins’ *Tarrididdle Tales* worked perfectly, by contrast, in their interim venue. Presented in story-theatre style, the play was a collection of short stories that took place all over the world. The use of a trunk, which contained masks, costumes pieces, and props, put the production in a kind of caravan-troupe format: transitions were musical, costume changes could take place right in front of the audience, and locations were merely suggested.

TYA presented a total of five plays at the Plaza Theatre. Each production had its own start-up capital, in a way. Even though the theatre had officially broken off from the Waldo Astoria Dinner Theatre, there was still half of a season of subscription ticket sales for the children’s productions. So, Mackey made an arrangement with Carrothers and Hennessy that the remaining revenues from subscription sales would be divided into five disbursements to TYA as each of the remaining five plays went into production. In this way, the theatre both enjoyed the income they had already earned and was not having to incur debt or sign contracts on speculation of box office sales.

In June of 1977, TYA’s 1976-1977 season, as well as their time at the Plaza

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20 Gene Mackey (found ing artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (found ing education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.
Theatre, came to an end with a production of Mackey’s first collaboration with composer Cheryl Benge, an adaptation called *The Hare and the Tortoise*.²¹ Benge had appeared in several of the company’s productions. Mackey had written a somewhat long “at rise” description of one of the scenes which one of the actors, Tommy Taylor, had found quite beautiful and wanted to deliver to the audience. Benge decided to take it one step further and set it to music. The resulting song was a resounding success and marked the birth of a collaboration that would span nearly a decade.

The Overland Theatre in Overland Park, Kansas, was a movie theatre. Moreover, it was a movie theatre that was egregiously short of compliance with safety and fire codes.²² The entire interior of the building had to be retrofitted in order to repurpose it as a live performance venue. Luckily, the Mackeys had an overwhelming wave of goodwill from their colleagues, friends, and family. They came with sledgehammers; they came with pizza. They came with lumber; they came with Chinese from the recently opened Dragon Inn just down the street. They came with the soundtrack of *Rocky*, which had just been released the year before, fresh in their minds and fueling their efforts. A few saw this ad hoc rehabilitation from beginning to end but most just gave their few spare hours when they could. In the end, the enterprise epitomized the adage “many hands make light work.” One of the upstairs offices became the control booth and looked out from the very back house-right side of the auditorium. The existing projection room became a dressing room. The fact that more people would be working upstairs meant that a second-floor egress had to be installed. Actor and friend Dale O’Brien volunteered

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²¹ Ibid.

²² Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, June 26, 2014.
to take a sledgehammer and knock a hole in the east wall for the second-floor fire escape. The technical director from the dinner theatre, Van Ibsen, built the audience seating over the existing auditorium floor. The original theatre’s seating was sloped toward the movie screen, but the grade was too shallow for audiences that would be primarily made up of children. So Ibsen built a riser system of bench style seating that rose eighteen inches with each row offering even the smallest child an unobstructed view of the stage.\(^{23}\)

On September 11\(^{th}\), 1977, Bryant took Valerie, now eleven years of age, to retrieve the theatre’s remaining stock from the Plaza Theatre. Leaving behind only a piano, which they could fetch later, they headed back to the Overland. Over the next thirty-six hours, the Kansas City Metropolitan Area would receive record-breaking amounts of rainfall: on average more than ten inches within the city limits.\(^{24}\) Brush Creek, which runs along the southern edge of the Country Club Plaza overflowed its banks and completely flooded the area. The Plaza Theatre was on the northern edge of the flood border and the most of the lower levels were destroyed including TYA’s piano.

For their first season in their new home, TYA decided to open with \textit{Winnie the Pooh}. John Quinn, a friend of the Mackeys and Kansas City theatre enthusiast, was a contributing writer for \textit{Variety} at the time. Quinn felt that a professional theatre for young audiences with a union agreement and their own building was worthy of national

\(^{23}\) Gene Mackey (foundin artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundin education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.

attention. He wrote a story on TYA and the Mackeyes and it made the front page of of *Variety*. Amid the mad shuffle of getting the theatre up and operational, one little bit of business got overlooked: Mackey had not chosen, or secured the performance rights for, a script for *Winnie the Pooh*. Mackey knew a script was available: he had directed it at Casa Manaña. As dumb luck would have it, Dramatic Publishing controlled the rights to the only authorized dramatization of *Winnie the Pooh* available in the United States; this made tracking any rogue productions easy work. Shortly after the *Variety* article appeared, Mackey received a rather curt letter from Dramatic Publishing informing him that he had not secured the rights to produce *Winnie the Pooh*. Mackey executed the royalty application right away.

*Winnie the Pooh* did well at the box office. *The Three Sillies*, one folk tale told three times in three different styles, did not do quite as well but this is likely due to the fact that audiences were holding out for the holiday play, *Raggedy Ann and Andy’s Yuletide Adventure*. This was Mackey’s and Benge’s second collaboration and it was a runaway hit. Stephen Rose, former Associate Publisher at Sun Newspapers, remembers his three-year old son treating him to a performance. Rose was astonished at how the performance gripped the largely pre-school and kindergarten aged audience.

Kids were screaming for Raggedy Ann to “Run! Run!” When Raggedy Ann could not find a way out, the audience yelled for her to try the door. She did, thank goodness, escaping the grasp of the wicked witch.25

In his article for Sun Newspapers, Rose recounted Mackey’s thoughts on professional theatres’ programming of children’s material. It was Mackey’s impression that most

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theatres would plan for-young-audience offerings as ancillary to a main-stage lineup. “The basis of Theatre for Young America is to do live theatre for children with the same quality as theatre for adults.” Rose likened TYA to Disney as a purveyor of “Good fun. Clean fun. Wholesome fun. Family fun.”

1978 began with *Sherlock Holmes*, which was a little bit of a disappointment as far as sales, and *The Legend of Paul Bunyan*. *Paul Bunyan* was Mackey’s opportunity to employ the devices he learned from Brian Way but take them a step further and actually coax some willing audience members to come up on stage. In the play, the cook, Cookie, has to feed a massive number of people breakfast so he calls for some help. He would say “Would you come flip the pancakes?” to some children near him and one or two brave souls would come on stage and pantomime flipping pancakes.

Mackey and Bryant recall hitting a stride with this first season. They averaged a new production every month during the regular season and decided to offer a summer season of four or more plays. Their programming was including more adaptations of literature to strengthen the connections with local schools’ curricula. That spring alone, the theatre produced *Sherlock Holmes, Pippi Longstocking*, and *Tom Sawyer*. Naturally, Bryant’s study guides went out to all the school and they proved to be just as much an effective marketing tool as they were educational resources.

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26 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 4, 2014.

27 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.
Now that TYA had its own space, the Mackeys felt obligated to fill every bit of available time.\textsuperscript{28} This meant using the summer months to offer a kind of theatre camp: what would later become known as the Theatre Arts Project. This was a class that older advanced students could take which culminated in public performances for paying audiences. Classes and rehearsals would last two intense weeks, then the play would run for one week. An additional early benefit was that adult professional actors would take certain roles. The summer productions proved to be enormously popular drawing an attendance of over 4,000 the first year they were offered.

The 1978-1979 season opened with \textit{Heidi} running concurrently with \textit{Dracula}, the first in a long standing tradition of evening presentations and special events for Halloween. \textit{Pocahontas and the Pilgrims} came next and the year closed with another holiday-season smash hit, \textit{Babes in Toyland}. This was another piece by Johnny Simmons but contained very little music aside from the famous Victor Herbert tune “Toyland.” \textit{Babes in Toyland} sold over 11,000 tickets.

Most theatres reserve the time just after the new year for pieces that are anticipated to not sell very well: the piece is new and has little name recognition, it is an experimental work that is likely to confuse critics, or generally the one get-out-of-jail-free card the marketing office allows the artistic office. But in 1979, TYA decided to start the year with one of the shows that would become one of their most beloved and signature pieces. Joseph Robinette’s adaptation of E.B. White’s \textit{Charlotte’s Web} is the only authorized dramatization of the book available in the America. Unfortunately, according to Valerie, the script was not very good and took some significant liberties in

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
departing from the original story.\textsuperscript{29} So, Mackey paid the royalties for the Robinette version, but then proceeded to mount a production of his own script which was ultimately faithful to the book. Mackey remembers attending a children’s-theatre conference some years later with a group of artistic directors from all around the country. He recalls that every one of them had done this same thing with one script or another. According to Mackey, the children’s theatre world was much smaller thirty-five years ago. These days, writers are less likely to surrender exclusive adaptation rights to the first playwright who expresses interest in setting their story for the stage. Mackey must have been in full command of his playwriting abilities by this time: \textit{Charlotte’s Web} was one of the best sellers that season and has proven to be popular over the years.

Over the next several months, the theatre continued to crank out a new production every month. The last play of the regular season was Ellsworth Schave’s \textit{The Riddle of Rumpelstiltskin}. While the play was well attended, Nancy Miller of the Kansas City Star felt Schave might have been more faithful to the original tale than was appropriate for a young audience. Before the Queen married the King, she was his prisoner who is made to spin straw into gold while in captivity. The title character agrees to help her with this task if she will surrender to him her first-born child. She agrees but when he comes to collect one year later from the now queen and mother, she cries and he discharges the debt. “… Schave gives us a story of greed rewarded. [R]umpelstiltskin isn’t really a bad fellow—certain viewers may find themselves rooting for him. The King is a paragon of

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
selfishness, his queen a blatant opportunist.” The Mackeys all like the script and praise it for its fidelity to the original story.

The 1979 summer commenced with another round of theatre-camps which started with TYA’s first presentation of the Prince Street Players’ adaptation of Cinderella. This version, which they would come to use ever after, was by Jim Eiler and Jeanne Bargy. Valerie recalls this version, told in the British Christmas Pantomime style, was very funny and expert in its use of music. Like the best Broadway musicals, the songs further the plot rather than bringing the story to a halt.

In July, Mackey allowed Clancy Hathaway, a friend and regular player at TYA, to direct his own script of Raggedy Ann and Andy’s Circus Adventure. John Bush Jones of the Kansas City Star was clearly a fan of Hathaway’s and praised both his writing as well as his training and direction of the students in the play.

Hathaway has not only written a script that’s a verbal version of his silliest stage self, he also has managed to instill a good deal of his comedic sense into a young and hard-working cast.

Jones was further impressed by the performances of the adult actors. He remarked that the entire audience around him, made up of nearly equal numbers of children and grown-ups, seemed to be enjoying the performance immensely. He concluded by saying simply, “Go enjoy, have fun.”

30 Nancy Miller, “‘Rumpelstiltskin’ Version Unoriginal, Depressing,” Kansas City Star, May 2, 1979, page 7A

31 Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundling education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.

Jones was not a fan of such circus elements as mime and clowns. But the summer of 1979 must have changed his mind to some degree as he attended, and clearly enjoyed, TYA’s *Circus Berzerkus*. This special mid-summer evening’s offering ran Fridays and Saturday nights from June through August.

The show, as its name suggests, is a wacky 1½ hours of pseudo-circus routines performed in pantomime by a company of four splendidly outrageous clown suits and makeup… And given their opening show, entertainment is truly the name of the game.33

As with *Raggedy Ann and Andy*, Jones was impressed by the show’s ability to appeal to both child and parent.

The 1979-1980 season opened with a highly unusual, even experimental *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Valerie recalls it as an organic or “found” play. The theatre purchased performance rights for a version written by Robert Rafferty but probably only used that script as a guide. The actors, notably the fearless Clancy Hathaway, developed much of their own dialogue. Hathaway would even take opportunities during performance to improvise. Fellow actor Dean Vivian recalls having to step in occasionally to bring Hathaway back to the story.34 The set resembled a junkyard, which served as the stores from which props and costumes emerged. John Bush Jones’s review of the play was most complimentary. He made a point to express his astonishment at the rapt attention of the young audience. Clearly Theatre for Young America was establishing itself not only

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34 Dean Vivian (former company member, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, October 4, 2014.
a means of entertainment for children, but a place where artists could truly stretch their abilities.

It was one of those things where… It was like my acting teacher used to say that if you’re lucky, once every five years, if you’re lucky, you’ll get to do art. So that became kind of sacred. Now I look back and see nineteen, twenty, somewhere around there, total in my entire career… there was something special about it.\textsuperscript{35}

Early in the 1979-1980 season, TYA purchased and worked up \textit{The Metric Show}, a live performance intended to help children, and generally the country, transition from the customary units to the metric system of weights and measures. This was TYA’s first teaching play, that is to say the first time they produced a piece that was essentially “storyless” and that had the sole purpose of teaching an idea or concept. The theatre’s box office records for \textit{The Metric Show} are conspicuously empty but, this is no small wonder given its campaign’s ultimate fate.

The fall continued with another special Halloween presentation of \textit{Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde} and a revival of \textit{Wind in the Willows} with Clancy Hathaway playing a little more sympathetic Toad. The year wrapped up with record-breaking sales of \textit{The Snow Queen}, which helped the young company reach a total audience of nearly 130,000 in its first five and a half years.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

AN OVERLAND PARK INSTITUTION

From the theatre’s inception, Gene Mackey was committed to telling truthful stories. However fantastical or absurd the details or circumstances, he wanted to always stay true to root material and, most importantly, respect his audience. He wholly subscribed to Charlotte B. Chorpenning’s admonishment that children’s theatre should never talk down to its audience. Mackey’s truth-telling campaign had deeper, and taller, roots than Chorpenning. He also championed Bertolt Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt* and its characterization of “pretty” stories as tools of oppression. Time and again, Theatre for Young America has, at least its leadership believes it has, successfully conveyed the truth to its audiences in fun and entertaining ways.

TYA began 1980 with what must have been a particularly dark rendition of *Hansel and Gretel* by Madge Miller. John Bush Jones, a contributing reviewer for the Kansas City Star was astonished by the hold the play maintained on the audience.

… children seem to hunger more for the gripping and suspenseful than the humorous and silly. This is typified by Saturday’s opening-morning audience at Theatre for Young America, which was served up a “Hansel and Gretel” that was not only the Grimm fairy tale, but a grim fairy tale. And the kids ate it up.²

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¹ Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.

This is a stellar example of Mackey’s truth-telling endeavors. There are plenty of opportunities to “make the play more palatable for child audiences,” though “make the play more marketable to those purchasing the tickets” is probably a more accurate characterization of such efforts. Hansel and Gretel’s mother had abandoned them and their father: she wasn’t killed or taken by some terrible illness. The insatiable and cannibalistic witch is not reformed at the end of the story: she gets her— I beg your forgiveness— just desserts. In this way, kids get up close and personal with the harmful results of gluttony and selfishness.

In the later spring of 1980, TYA offered up its first production of *The Pecos Bill Show*. Iconic of the American tall-tale canon, *Pecos Bill* has made several returns to the TYA stage due in no small part to the story’s presence on many a school curriculum’s reading list. Presented as a vaudeville or music hall show, another collaboration of Gene Mackey’s with composer, Cheryl Benge, Bill weaves the story of being born to a family with seventeen other children, raised by a coyote, and throwing a lasso around a tornado. Mackey was intrigued by the old-west show wherein the famous hero was the star; he points to the likes of Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill. Nancy Miller of the Kansas City Star encouraged parents to take their young ones for an energetic edification on the tall tale and likened the style to “The Muppet Show.”

One of the TYA “family” was Van Ibsen, the technical director who had come along from their days at the Waldo Astoria. He directed and acted some but really put his

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3 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 11, 2014.

4 Nancy Miller, “’Pecos Bill’ offers rip-roarin’ time for all,” *Kansas City Star*, April 6, 1980, page 34A.
heart into technical production.\textsuperscript{5} His special effects were particularly appreciated in the spring of 1980 when TYA put on \textit{Aladdin and His Magic Lamp}. TYA has yet to enjoy a production budget that would be described as ample, but ingenuity has often made up for any lack of funds. In \textit{Aladdin}, Ibsen made expert use of black light, real fire, trap doors, and flashpots. In his review for the Kansas City Star, Robert Butler described Ibsen’s work as “sumptuous” and “just about flawless.”\textsuperscript{6}

The 1980 summer season included another round of theatre-camp shows, with students playing alongside professionals, and the fall opened with Mackey’s adaptation of \textit{Paddington Bear}. Mackey knew that an animal character living with humans was ripe for farce.\textsuperscript{7} So, being a big fan of the British television series, \textit{Fawlty Towers} and the venerable John Cleese, Mackey included many farcical devices; for example, Paddington eats his meals on the floor and the father has a silly walk.

\textit{Paddington Bear} was followed by a revival of Johnny Simmons’s \textit{The Legend of Sleepy Hollow} and a special evening presentation just for Halloween, \textit{Quoth the Raven}. This was probably TYA’s first production that had a non-linear structure.\textsuperscript{8} Essentially, it was a collection of Edgar Allan Poe poems. Mackey’s brother, David Mackey, had very much enjoyed TYA’s Halloween shows and suggested something based on the works of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Robert W. Butler, “‘Aladdin’s Lamp’ lights the stage with magic,” \textit{Kansas City Star}, May 4, 1980, page 4B.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 11, 2014.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Poe. *Quoth the Raven* ran for only a limited engagement but sold nearly a thousand tickets.

The 1980-1981 season was when David Meyer came to TYA’s attention and he served as their technical director for a time and occasionally staged managed. Meyer was particularly inventive at creating special effects and would get fixated on them; the set might not be completed until the day the play opened even though fabulous effects had tested and perfected. Meyer built a telescoping turret for TYA’s 1981 production of *Rapunzel, Rapunzel*. He also created a talking tree, a stone that glowed as a warning to Rapunzel, and installed fire-flash and smoke effects for the demise of the evil mother. All of this greatly impressed Robert Eisele, reviewer for the Kansas City Star, who described the production as imaginative and which was “greeted with wide-eyed wonder by the receptive audience.”

The 1981 production of *The Elves and the Shoemaker* was TYA’s first presentation of Mackey’s adaptation of the old fable; it would become a staple of their repertoire. The story is somewhat unusual in that the plot is fairly straightforward, but the protagonist is not a child. Mackey remarks he was taught that children’s theatre is most successful when the principal character is a child. However, the shoemaker is very childlike. Though he makes his living as a cobbler, his hobby is making toys for children and he often procrastinates the shoemaking. It is easy to imagine kids identifying with such distractions and so they see a reflection of themselves in the child the shoemaker was before he had to grow up. Mackey could also take advantage of having an elderly

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couple and the comedy that could be mined therein. Many children have that couple in their lives, either grandparents or family friends in the community, who can be somewhat sharp with each other but in a loving way. True to the tradition of TYA’s runaway-holiday hits, *The Elves and the Shoemaker* sold nearly 12,000 tickets.

David Meyer returned to stretch his special-effects legs with the TYA’s *Beauty and the Beast* in February of 1981. In Mackey’s adaptation, the Beast had powers such as the ability to magically move objects. Meyer engineered levers and pulleys under the stage to make tables move about and to rig a chess set at which the Beast pays with an invisible opponent.

*Beauty and the Beast* was certainly one of Mackey’s more cerebral scripts. He points specifically to the influence of Bruno Bettelheim, the noted child psychologist. Mackey saw *Beauty and the Beast* as an exploration of Bettelheim’s concept of the eternal triangle comprised of the parent, the child, and a spouse as well as the struggle of each party in perpetuating the triangle.¹⁰ Robert Butler, the Kansas City Star’s Arts and Entertainment Editor at the time, complimented the literary nature of the play but also took the opportunity to express his opinion that the script might be “a bit too talky” for a child audience.¹¹ Interestingly, Butler directly contradicts his own criticism by recounting the “surprising little restlessness exhibited by the youngsters attending.”

*Beauty and the Beast* was followed by *Androcles and the Lion*—a musical written by one of the leading playwrights for children at the time, Aurand Harris—and *The Tale*

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¹⁰ Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 11, 2014.

¹¹ Robert W. Butler, “‘Beauty and Beast’: Fun for all ages,” *Kansas City Star*, February 8, 1981, page 44A.
of Benjamin Bunny. Benjamin Bunny marked Mackey’s first collaboration with composer, Rita Lovett, who had a talent for writing songs for very young children. Mackey recalls that Lovett was also particularly interested in the fact that the central character, Benjamin, grew up surrounded by sisters. The play was simple and stayed true to the original Beatrix Potter story, which was another paramount campaign for the theatre.

That was our other principle. When we did an old fable or when we did a folk tale, we said the original piece has to be embedded in there, in tact, and authentic, true to itself... It leaves that little jewel right there in the middle and so you expand around it a little bit.\(^\text{12}\)

The Tale of Benjamin Bunny sold over 11,000 tickets. Closing with Treasure Island, the 1980-1981 season again beat its predecessor in sales hitting nearly 65,000 tickets sold.

The summer of 1981 began with The Wizard of Oz. The Kansas City Star’s Robert Butler was astonished, as were several of his colleagues, at TYA’s ability to show adults a good time as well as the children.\(^\text{13}\) Butler also remarked at TYA’s deftness at contending with the classic 1939 film.

The musical version of “Wizard” that opened Saturday at the Theater for Young America in Overland Park succeeds because it does not attempt to duplicate the film. It develops its own style and plot twists and features a new score. The results are guaranteed to please children and parents.\(^\text{14}\)

The summer season continued with The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and closed with a very ambitious production of Mary Poppins. Mackey had adapted P.L. Travers’s books for the stage when he was at Casa Mañana. He recalls the deal struck with Travers

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Robert W. Butler, “Clever ‘Wizard of Oz’ has courage all its own,” The Kansas City Star, June 21, 1981, page 31A.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
by Casa Mañana’s executive director, Sharon Benge, which allowed the theatre to develop the script but it could not be published. Even in the early 1970s, when this agreement was made, a live stage musical, based on the 1964 film, was being discussed; it would be another three decades though before the first tryouts of the production. The story takes place in many locations, which is difficult for any live theatre, and calls for a number of magical effects. Valerie recalls the production being somewhat easier at Casa Mañana due to the cast of nearly forty on a large arena stage. For TYA, this would be a bold undertaking. In addition to the many locations, at one point the children took laughing gas, which made them float, and a kind of teeter-totter lifted each child into the air. Of course, there is the central premise that Mary Poppins can fly. For this, Sheryl Bryant, in the title role, was strapped into a window-washer harness then attached to traveling curtain rod. When I asked about how successful they felt the special effects were, Bryant replied, “Well, it got a lot of laughs.”

The early 1980s were characterized by Theatre for Young America solidifying its position not only as a go-to source of entertainment for families, but also as an ancillary component of many reading curricula in the area’s schools. The relationships Mackey had forged with local teachers and administrators, when the theatre was founded the previous decade, had been maintained or passed on to successors. The resulting year over year increase in sales was undoubtably reassuring to the Mackeys and inspired their unwavering dedication and commitment.

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15 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 11, 2014.
This was also a time when the theatre was developing a solid repertoire. Believing a truly great script should be revived for each new generation of its audience, which naturally came every few years, meant they could return to their stock of original and most successful works. 1982 kicked off with Mackey’s latest collaboration with composer, Cheryl Benge, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, which would prove to be one of the theatre’s strongest additions to its catalog. If the old adage “great writers write what they know” is true, then the success of *Goldilocks* can be directly attributed to its unintentionally autobiographical source, the Mackey family. Mackey dedicated the script to Valerie who was thirteen at the time and, as he recalls, trying to find herself. The Mackeys had established themselves as a Shawnee Mission, Kansas, family, even purchased a house near the Overland Theatre, but never really felt like true suburbanites. So the story of a young girl who feels stifled by her immediate surroundings and wants to go out looking for adventure was very much a part of Mackey’s life at this time. Interestingly, or rather unfortunately, Valerie never played the role.

Mackey’s collaboration with Benge on *Goldilocks* was a highlight for both of them. Mackey felt that Benge, who had grown up in rural Nebraska, had a simple but authentic musical style that leant itself to songwriting for children, which must be very straightforward and clear in intent. When they worked together, Mackey would write the script and the lyrics to the songs then hand it off to Benge. Benge would then go home, a block from the Mackey’s house, and set to writing. Mackey recalls Benge’s

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16 Ibid.

17 Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundling education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 8, 2014.
frequent complaining, in a funny not sincere way, about how his lyrics would not easily pair with a melody. All in good fun, he insisted she make changes necessary. Benge recalls laughing a lot when working Mackey, more so than at any other job she would ever hold. Though Benge and Mackey collaborated several time, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* stands out as Benge’s favorite.\(^\text{18}\)

Theatre for Young America has never been a company to shy away from the adverse or challenging. It has broken many of the rules of children’s theatre, but never with out a very good reason for doing so. It was widely understood that there were three subjects forbidden to theatre for young audiences: sex, politics, and death. Well, TYA has, over the years, tackled them all. In 1982, SuEllen Fried, president of the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, and Helen Swan, of the Johnson County Mental Heath Center, approached Mackey about writing a play for children about sexual assault.\(^\text{19}\) Climb Theatre—a children’s theatre company in the suburbs of Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota, that was founded a year after Theatre for Young America—had been the first theatre for young audiences to tackle the subject but theirs was more a classroom lecture that used ancillary theatrical devices.\(^\text{20}\) Mackey was not interested in this approach. He felt a theatre should use its own tools to tell stories and teach lessons. Climb Theatre was very protective of their piece and even though Mackey’s play would

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\(^{18}\) Cheryl Benge (former actress, music director, and composer, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 14, 2014.


\(^{20}\) Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 11, 2014.
in no way even resemble Climb’s, he entered into what would become an extensive
dialog with Climb including legal representation from both sides.

As Mackey set to writing the play, he settled on three specific points he wanted to
address that would serve as the guiding messages of the piece.

We wanted children to understand exactly what a forced sexual touch is. We
wanted to change their attitude so they know sexual abuse is not heir fault and
they have the right tell someone, to tell more than one person if they are not
believed. Finally, we wanted to be positive about the right kind of touches.21

Mackey created a character names Bub from the planet Bullylonia. On Bub’s planet, all
the inhabitants live their lives each encased in a bubble, which prevents them from every
experiencing touch. So Bub travels to the planet Earth to learn about it. Mackey got a
taste of what it must be to write for big movie studios with all the executives wanting
their input included in the play. He met with the leadership of the National Committee
for the Prevention of Child Abuse all of whom had editorial comments and even
criticisms of the choice of certain prepositions. But Mackey stood strong and
*Bubylonian Encounters* is still produced today across the country.

In the fall of 1982, TYA’s regular season opened with one of Mackey’s crowning
achievements, *Peter and the Wolf*. Using Sergie Prokofiev’s music, Mackey’s script was
inspired by actual circumstances surrounding the piece’s beginnings.22 In this tale, it is
1936 in the Soviet Union and a new play with music, by one of the country’s preeminent
composers, is about to open. Natalia, the theatre’s director and appearing as the duck,

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21 Victoria Melcher Houston, “Handle with care,” *The Kansas City Star Magazine*,
August 1, 1982, page 7.

22 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant
(founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic
director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 11, 2014.
stalls the questioning by the Soviet secret police who have arrested her husband on allegations of treason. Mackey uses the wolf in the story as a metaphor for Soviet oppression under Stalin and, therefore, the celebration of wolf’s capture can be a symbol of the celebration of freedom. Robert Butler, in his review for the Kansas City Star, praised Mackey’s script as intelligent and sophisticated enough to stand sturdily as theatre and not just for children.

All the magic of the original tale is present in this performance, but beneath it all there is an undercurrent of tension… I simply can’t overemphasize how good this production is… This “Peter and the Wolf” is a triumph. Go and see it—even if you don’t have children.²³

The next year began with another masterstroke by Mackey and Benge, The Three Little Pigs. On this particular project, it seems that Mackey and Benge and truly hit their stride. Valerie recently uncovered an old copy of the script with Mackey’s penciled-in lyrics and they are verbatim what ended up in the final version. Mackey feels by this time he had a clear understanding of how Benge would set the text to music so the collaboration seemed seamless. Again praising the theatre capacity for entertaining parent and child alike, Robert Butler’s review of the production makes a point to compliment Mackey on his ability to tell a story that is true to its origins but also uncover its “untapped riches,” as he put it.²⁴ Confident in their collective skills, Mackey and Benge breezed right through their next project, an adaptation of Chicken Little, which was ready for production the very next fall.


1984 began with another courageous production to fly in the face of the verboten children’s-theatre subjects, a play which brought the death before its audience. Aurand Harris’s *The Arkansaw Bear* addresses an event that most parents face but few can bring themselves to discuss truthfully with their children: the death of a grandparent. Harris, already a prolific author when he set to writing *Bear*, took great pains to research child physiology as he prepared to work on this script.\(^\text{25}\) The result is a play about death, yes, but young kids just take away a story about a dancing bear who has to teach his dance steps to Young Bear before the Ringmaster has to come take him away. In his review for the Kansas City Star, Robert Butler admires the play as not only entertainment for the whole family, but perhaps a necessary experience for a family to have together.\(^\text{26}\)

Theatre for Young America was quickly becoming known for its audacity and success in tackling prickly issues with young audiences. In the spring of 1986, TYA presented *The Toughest Kid in the World*, a new play written by Mackey in support of the STOP Violence Campaign.\(^\text{27}\) Once again teaming up with SuEllen Fried and Helen Swan, *Toughest Kid* attempts to serve as a counterbalance to America’s ever growing appetite for violence. Many local news broadcast companies operate under the unwritten principle of “if it bleeds, it leads.” Innumerable films romanticize the role of violence and a person’s capacity for it is portrayed as masculine and attractive, even for female characters. Even the campy world of professional wrestling now has a half-century


\(^{26}\) Robert W. Butler, “‘Arkansaw Bear’ prances into our hearts,” *The Kansas City Star*, January 16, 1984, page 4B

history and enormous following. *Toughest Kid* shows the life of a modern-day kid who is dealing with real-everyday problems such as feelings of anger, peer pressure, and domestic violence. It then attempts to show Tough Kid negotiating new ideas of violence prevention and conflict resolution. In an interview with Michael Devery of the Kansas City star, Mackey explained, “I tried to give children a new definition of tough. You can still be tough and choose not to fight.”

*The Toughest Kid in the World* also marked Mackey’s first collaboration with Molly Jessup, one of Kansas City’s most celebrated music directors, composers, and musicians. They teamed up again for the 1989 production of *Gruff! The Three Billy Goats*. By this time, Cheryl Benge had moved on to other theatres and other projects. Benge’s music was always delightfully simple and straightforward in a way that was indicative of style all her own. By contrast, Jessup, a classically-trained musician and singer, was very versatile and could compose music in a variety of styles. Valerie recalls Jessup’s music being more mature and, and times, very demanding of the performer. Mackey liked working with Jessup because his imagination was free to explore more vivid and specific prescriptions for the music. If he had the idea that a song might in a blues style, he had no idea what that might entail but Jessup could easily come up with something he felt was perfect.

The 1980s, as the Mackeys recall, were characterized primarily by the sheer volume of their productions. Sheryl Bryant remarks that they did begin producing more and more revivals and remounts of their best scripts as a means of saving on costume and

28 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 11, 2014.
prop production; I personally recall the theatre having very limited storage space. But it was also a time wherein TYA established itself as an institution within the community. The coming decade would be a turbulent one for the theatre and shake the theatre’s confidence in its long-dedicated audiences.
By January of 1990, the Waldo Astoria Professional Children’s Theatre, now called Theatre for Young America, had served an audience of over 750,000. They had secured a place in the hearts and minds of their child patrons and students. Area schools could look to TYA for solid and relevant programming that was both substantive and entertaining rather than merely anesthetizing.

The theatre’s reputation was due in no small part to the literary and dramaturgical principles which guided the development of new plays and programming selections. In the case of adaptations, maintaining the integrity of the root material was paramount: no tinkering with major plot points or smoothing sharper edges to “make it nicer.” So, Roald Dahl’s own adaptation of his *James and the Giant Peach* seemed a particularly astute choice. Dahl’s stories are famously dark and *James* is no exception: the play opens with a rogue rhinoceros gobbling up the principal character’s parents and he is left in the care of two horribly abusive aunts. The story is one of self-reliance and ingenuity, one of founding artistic director Gene Mackey’s favorite messages.

It’s like those characters in all those mythological [stories] who faces incredible obstacles. All of his resources, personal, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, all of those are there, are required. That’s the real lesson of these kinds of stories. It tells kids that it’s an exciting and adventurous world out there, but it’s going to take everything you’ve got to prevail and come out better on the other end. And it’s wrong to tell them anything else.1

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1 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 15, 2014.
In his review for the Kansas City Star, Robert Butler praises TYA for presenting a play that would “prove liberating for all those who thought children’s theater must be sickeningly sweet.”

Continuing this theme of the resilient and industrious lead character, TYA began the 1990 summer season with Susan Nanus’s adaptation of *The Phantom Tollbooth*. This is also the summer when my own memory of Theatre for Young America begins to materialize. I have intermittent “snapshot” memories of this production, such as the lithe Dodecahedron clad in a black unitard and the twelve-sided object around her torso, but it is the obsession with the story the play ignited in me that I recall more vividly. Since it was summer, I spent a great deal of time at the public library. I checked out every version of the book the Johnson County Library at Antioch Road and Shawnee Mission Park had and requested several from other branches. I also discovered a mostly animated film version which I watched several times in quick succession. This tale of a boy’s humdrum eventless life that is then interrupted by a journey to a land of outrageous characters, seemed to mirror my own existence of having few to no interests, then suddenly discovering Theatre for Young America.

*The Phantom Tollbooth* was a favorite story of Sheryl Bryant, TYA’s founding educational director. The fact that Milo, the principal character, takes a significant personal journey was important to Bryant. Here is a kid who really just bored with life and would rather be anywhere else than where he is. Through his odyssey, he discovers his own talents and resilience. Valerie Mackey, TYA’s current artistic director,

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2 Robert W. Butler, “‘Giant Peach’ isn’t sweet, but it’s fun,” *The Kansas City Star*, January 19, 1990, page 22D.
particularly appreciated the fact that the adults in *The Phantom Tollbooth* may be misguided but still had valuable knowledge and insights to impart. From her perspective, so much of today’s entertainment for children portrays adults as either stupid or adversarial figures.

Early in the spring of 1991, TYA produced Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. This play had an enormous impact on me in that it was the first time I recall my own preconceptions did not withstand being challenged. Until this time, my childhood had been dominated by Disney films and the like. Even the plays I had seen at TYA up to this point had been relatively light and comedy driven. This piece had no catchy songs or brightly designed characters but was still engaging. My father was a policeman and had many fireman friends whom I admired. But the “firemen” in *Fahrenheit 451* were malicious because they started fires as an instrument of oppression. This was the first time I can recall being presented alternatives to my own beliefs and understandings; not to say I grew to detest animated films or became an authority-defying adolescent. The impression was more abstract, a kind of intellectual independence; the idea that there was more information out there than what was being made available to me at the time. Mackey subscribes to the idea that theatre, particularly theatre for children, is subversive. It is clear to me now that Theatre for Young America was instrumental in my achieving intellectual independence as an adult.

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3 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundling education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 15, 2014.

4 Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundling education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 4, 2014.
Fahrenheit 451 was put into the season initially at the request of local teachers who had been teaching it in fifth-grade reading. The curriculum eventually moved on to other examples of science fiction and TYA never remounted the piece.

Late in the spring of 1991, TYA presented Suzan Zeder’s Mother Hicks. The early nineties was a time when Theatre for Young America was emboldened to present material that could inspire some controversy, but Mother Hicks came loaded with a problem that Mackey and the staff did not foresee. The story centers on a homeless orphan known only as “Girl” who is passed from household to household in Ware, Illinois, at the height of the Great Depression. High on a hill, outside of town, a boy who cannot speak lives with Mother Hicks whom the townspeople believe to be a witch. The townspeople observe Mother Hicks going into the cemetery at night to perform incantations and communicating with the boy using “satanic” hand gestures. The point of the play is that of course the townspeople’s impressions are wholly inaccurate: Mother Hicks goes into the graveyard to visit the grave of a loved one and she and the boy communicate using sing-language because he is deaf. Nevertheless, parents would leave in the middle of the show and the theatre received countless phone calls and letters furiously condemning the presentation of devil worship and magic to children. Bryant recalls that Christian children who had been homeschooled, of which there were many in their audiences at this time, were particularly sensitive.

[Christian] homeshoolers were scared of everything. Even the Rapunzel that we’ve talked about, with the hair and the telescoping tower, they didn’t like the

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5 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 18, 2014.
witch. If it had a witch in it, they weren’t going to come because that was “devil worship.”

While TYA’s choice of play or editing of plays never completely submitted to the whims of fringe groups, they did take public sentiments into consideration. Unfortunately, Mother Hicks was never again produced.

It was about this time that Theatre for Young American had been working to upgrade and expand the Overland Theatre where they had been performing since 1977. The theatre had contracted an architect, Majid Amirahmadi, who had put together some designs and done come up estimates. Throughout the process, a particular city-council member had been encouraging the Mackeys to dream big and include everything they could want in the design. This is also the prevailing mentality when applying for grants, at which the Mackeys were quite practiced, wherein you ask for moon knowing that in reality you will only get a slice of it. So when the estimates from Amirahmadi came in higher than anyone anticipated, the city-council members who had kept their opposition to the project to themselves broke their silence and began campaigning against the project.

The Kansas City Star printed a story on August 18, 1991, which chronicled the saga of the theatre’s expansion and painted the theatre as highly irresponsible. It stated, inaccurately, that the theatre had sold the building to the City of Overland Park in order to raise funds. In truth, TYA had never owned the building. The Dickinson Group

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid

leased the theatre to TYA and it was the Dickinson Group from which the City acquired the building; TYA never saw any money from the transaction.\(^9\) Four days later, another article appeared in the Kansas City Star conveying the final demise of the theatre’s expansion: two proposals, the original and its scaled-down version, to renovate the building were voted down. The writer, Robert Trussell, does bring to light some adversarial forces TYA encountered.\(^10\) Apparently, Wade Williams III had presented to the Overland Park City Council a plan to acquire the Overland Theatre, rename it The Rio, and turn it into back into a movie theatre. Contemporaneously with this inquiry, the City received an unsigned fax calling for the theatre’s books to be audited and accusing TYA of squandering a large grant from Hallmark Cards. Though the fax was discovered to have come from Williams’s fax machine, he disavowed any connection to it. TYA never received any grant from Hallmark and a subsequent audit revealed no improprieties on the part of the theatre.

In January of 1992, TYA presented *Donny’s House*, a play that focused on not a controversial subject, but harsh and difficult one, drug addiction.\(^11\) The play was written by Judi Ann Mason, famous for *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit* and sitcoms such as *Good Times* and *A Different World*. She had been roommates in college with Jacqee Gafford,

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\(^9\) Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America) and Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America) discussion with the author, November 15, 2014.


\(^11\) Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 18, 2014.
who directed this production. The story is of a young black girl whose mother is addicted to an unnamed substance; a silver-from-head-to-toe dancing flute player is the visual representation of the addiction. Mackey uses the word “tough,” as in resilient or stubborn, to describe the piece: a tough girl in a tough world dealing with a tough adversary. Even the look of the play, as I recall, used hyper-saturated colors that resembled an over-exposed photograph. Robert Eisele of the Kansas City Star wrote that the production was “unrelentingly bleak” but nevertheless powerful in conveying the dangers of drugs.\(^\text{12}\)

1992 was also the year TYA began presenting a trilogy of plays based on Greek mythology. The Kansas City, Missouri, School District had embarked on an ambitious program of building Classic Greek Magnet Schools.\(^\text{13}\) These were to revive inner-city-school buildings and to infuse diversity into the nearly all-black populations. The schools would offer a vanguard computer curriculum and focus on the ancient Greek principle of “a sound mind in a sound body.” The intended addition of expansive athletic facilities, again focusing on the Greek model, for swimming, weight lifting, track and field, and wrestling came with a hefty price tag and drew substantial criticism. Theatre for Young America was approached by the school’s administrators to provide programming that would support the Classical Greek curriculum.

*In the Labyrinth of the Minotaur* opened in the spring of 1992. Set on the island of Crete, the play tells the story of the birth of the Minotaur, its subsequent imprisonment

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in the labyrinth designed by Daedalus and his son Icarus, and their flight on wax-fixed wings during which Icarus comes to his famous demise. Mackey, who wrote and directed all three plays in this Greek trilogy, had several challenges when it came to staging. For example, Mackey was rather anxious over the mating of the Golden Ox and Minos’s wife and the resulting birth of the Minotaur. To my recollection, this ended up as a kind of dance with an elaborate, stylized embrace and a moment later a doll-sized Minotaur appeared. Also, the journeys through the labyrinth presented a particularly delicious test of theatrical ingenuity. Mackey had the idea that the chorus of actors would hold a white rope that would represent the walls of the labyrinth. The actors would then move about holding the rope to create the different shaped halls and rooms of the maze. Even though none of the plays in the trilogy would ever be revived, Mackey purposefully limited the stage directions he included in the script so as to encourage future productions to develop their own devices.

As the 1991-1992 season was drawing to a close, it was clear that relations with the City of Overland Park had irreparably soured. Though the season had progressed with no interruptions to business, TYA’s board of directors convinced the Mackeys that a new venue was in their best interests. Mackey and Bryant had resisted this notion but in end saw eye to eye with the board. Mackey asked the board’s chairman, Roy Gunter, to write the letter to the city council notifying the city of the theatre’s decision, which he graciously did. At this time Doug Alpert, who had purchased the building that contained the old Waldo Astoria Theatre, came to the attention of the theatre. Mackey recalls

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14 Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundling education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 18, 2014.
Alpert had a child enrolled in one of TYA’s classes at the time, had heard about the theatre’s troubles, and approached the Mackeys about occupying the space. Alpert’s idea was to establish a neighborhood arts center. In February of 1993, the Theatre for Young America’s final production at the Overland Theatre, *Starring Abe Lincoln*, closed. Classes were already up and running at the Waldo and the opening for TYA’s first offering was set for March 10, 1993.¹⁵

Theatre for Young America opened at their new, old home with *The Adventures of Madeleine*. This was also Valerie Mackey’s first time directing on her own. Her take on the visual world of the play was inspired by the illustrations from the famous books. She had the idea of using two-dimensionality as a theatrical device.¹⁶ Many props essentially were elaborately drawn cutouts and there was a projection screen up-stage center upon which were displayed drawings indicating locations, done in the style of the book’s illustrations. It was important to Valerie that the audience visually recognize the stories they knew and loved.

*In the Sunlight of Athens*, the second play in the Greek trilogy, was TYA’s next offering and my last production with the theatre. This was the story of Theseus who travels from his homeland of Troezen to Athens and, with assistance from the goddess Athena, slays the Minotaur. In contrast to *In the Labyrinth of the Minotaur*, Valerie

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¹⁶ Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (foundling education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 18, 2014.
recalls this piece as much grander in scale, both the story and the staging. The stage at the Waldo Astoria, a kind of proscenium thrust, was larger than at the Overland. Mackey was able to use the large expanse of space for the main action of the play. He then put Athena high up on a platform just up stage of the proscenium arch behind a scrim, as if high in the clouds.

Trouble with the Waldo Astoria, both the space and the owners, began almost immediately. The stage manager’s control booth was located at the very back of the balcony and Valerie recalls feeling the floor move when the balcony was full to capacity. As an old building, it also had something of a pest problem. Jacqee Gafford, while standing on her high platform as the goddess Athena in In the Sunlight of Athens, skipped an entire transitional speech because a winged cockroach flew into her mouth. Ever the professional, she swallowed the thing and delivered her final line so as to cue the stage manager to continue. Tensions between the theatre and Doug Alpert began to ramp up when he booked other events into space at the same time TYA’s performances were scheduled. Mackey recalls contacting a friend at the Kansas City Star who subsequently ran a story about Alpert bumping performances of the children’s theatre, which required all the confirmed school groups be rescheduled. The Mackeys also would frequently find beer bottles and condoms after rave parties Alpert would book into the space at night. Though they had intended to stay at the Waldo Astoria long term, TYA’s occupancy of the space was not even a full season. Determined to not interrupt their schedule, Theatre for Young America once again set out to look for a home.

17 Ibid.

18 Jacqee Gafford (former company member) in discussion with the author, October 4, 2014.
TYA’s new president of the board, David Watkins, suggested the relatively new Mission Center Mall. Watkins contacted Copaken, White, and Blitt, which owned the mall, about the prospect of having a live theatre in the mall. The owners liked the idea and the theatre began yet another relocation. The Mackeys secured the services of their friend and architect, Majid Amirahmadi, who was drawn to the challenge of turning a retail store front into a live performance space. Eager to vacate the Waldo Astoria as quickly as possible, but needing time for construction, TYA put up *The Legend of Paul Bunyan* in a close-by retail space that had just been vacated by Gantos, a women’s clothing store. The front cashier’s desk was used as the box office, and the fitting rooms served as storage space. The walls were covered in massive sheets of black plastic, as were the room’s many mirrors. Through *The Legend of Paul Bunyan* did open a couple days late, audiences were undeterred. Mackey was committed to sticking to the published schedule not only for the sake of the audiences but also so he could keep revenue flowing to meet payroll.

As *The Legend of Paul Bunyan* was closing, the theatre itself was quickly taking shape. One major advantage of leasing space in a mall is that tenants usually come in with very specific aesthetic needs. What the mall provides them is basically an architectural shell that can become anything. So, even though space was limited, TYA had *carte blanche* to shape the space however they needed. Additionally, walls and floors could be painted and repainted whenever necessary. They also acquired the space directly behind the stage. This was used to hold classes and, in later years, allowed for the back wall of the stage to be moved to add another six feet to the upstage playing area. The Mackeys particularly remember being a part of a kind of neighborhood within the
mall. With displays and tenants on a steady rotation, leftover building materials, fabrics, and miscellaneous consumables were constantly being generated and the mall’s maintenance technicians would always offer these to the theatre rather than disposing of them. The staff became friendly with the employees of Dillard’s, the neighboring nail salon, and the downstairs coffee shop. Some of these people would even become volunteers at the theatre.

Theatre for Young America opened its new space with *The Velveteen Rabbit* and followed that with the third of the Greek-play trilogy, *In a Greek World*. The 1993-1994 season closed with remounts of *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *Aesop’s Fables* and the Mackeys set to fine-tuning their new home for its first full season.

The 1994-1995 season was mostly a string of favorites out of the theatre’s existing repertoire. One exception was *The Boy Who Talked to Whales*, written by Webster Smalley, the playwriting professor from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Mackey and Bryant’s graduate school alma mater. Mackey liked the idea of producing his past teacher’s plays as a kind of return on his investment in them. The main message of the play was that how a society treats its animals is a direct indication of that civilization’s morals. Mackey used recorded whale song to give the atmosphere something of a haunting quality.

As TYA settled into its new digs, the theatre began exploring ways to diversify its programing. The Overland Theatre was right in the middle of Overland Park, Kansas, the wealthiest city in the state, which was in Johnson County, Kansas, one of the wealthiest

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19 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America), Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America), and Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 18, 2014.
counties in the country. The Mission Center Mall, by contrast, was in the northeastern corner of Johnson County close to the boarder with Wyandotte County, Kansas, and Jackson County, Missouri. Also, the mall was less than ten minutes from the Kansas City urban core. This made the theatre accessible to a much wider and more diverse range of student populations.

The 1994-1995 season presented *Frederich Douglass*. This play was born out of Mackey’s previous work, *Starring Abe Lincoln*. Frederich Douglass, the noted orator and contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, makes only a brief appearance in that play but the actor, Arthur Newton, did great deal of research on the man and had many discussions about him with Mackey. The result was what Valerie regards as Mackey’s finest script.

In the 1995-1996 season, TYA produced Martha Hill Newell’s *Phillis: A Life of Phillis Wheatley*. The play is based on the life of a girl born in Senegal, kidnapped by slave traders, and purchased by a cultured Boston family. Set in colonial America, Wheatley’s story is remarkable because she learns English, among other languages, very quickly at a time when slaves were not allowed to read or write. Although she died at the young age of thirty, she is most known for her poetry, much of which has survived. In addition to its contributions to the diversity of TYA’s offerings, *Phillis: A Life of Phillis Wheatley* also fit into Mackey’s campaign of presenting stories about young people who are able to achieve success even when up against great obstacles.

The Mackeys’ efforts to present multi-cultural seasons continued with *In the Footsteps of Harriet Tubman* in 1997 and *Scott Joplin, King of Ragtime* in 1998. In

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20 Ibid.
1999, the theatre produced the first of its several production based upon the West African
deity, Anansi the Spider.

As the Mackeys look back over the 1990s, the thing that strikes them the most is
the dedication of their audiences. Teachers would call to book season tickets when the
future of the theatre’s location was in question, but the teachers purchased their tickets
anyway. Audiences had always come. Even when the company was just an experiment
by a commercially driven dinner theatre in the mid-seventies, there was a clearly need
and desire for children’s theatre programing. The turn of the millennium would serve
the theatre one more storm with which to contend. But they would land safe and sound at
a permanent home with well-maintained facilities and caring administrations. And, of
course, an unwavering patronage.

21 Ibid.

22 Gene Mackey (found ing artistic director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion
with the author, June 26, 2014.
CHAPTER 6

"THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME"

Theatre for Young America’s residency at the Mission Center Mall was, by all accounts a dream come true. Here was a truly customizable space which the theatre could continue to adjust as necessary. Further, it was safe and meticulously maintained. Even their long tenure at the Overland Theatre had, at times, seemed precarious due to the age and disrepair of the building. Each of the Mackeys, the theatre’s founding family, speak of their time at Mission Mall with great affection and quickly place the location on the theatre’s lineage of home bases.

January 1, 2000, the turn of the millennium, had not brought any of the economic, climatory, or tectonic upheavals so many people had anticipated: computers booted up, water flowed clear from taps, and ATM cards worked just fine; even the internet was still “standing.” So to did Theatre for Young America continue with business as usual. That month, TYA presented The Legend of John Henry based on the life and times of the steel-driving tall-tale hero. Roy Gunter, the president of TYA’s board at the time, had seen musician and actor Danny Cox perform The Ballad of John Henry in a show at Missouri Repertory Theatre and suggested to Gene Mackey a show based on John Henry with Cox’s involvement. Sheryl Bryant thought a formal introduction was in order. She contacted Daniel Windham, head of Kansas City Young Audiences at the time and tennis partner with Cox, to set up a lunch at which she and Mackey could meet Cox and pitch
him the project.¹ Unbeknownst to Bryant, Mackey took the initiative and called Cox on the phone. Cox needed no convincing and agreed to join the project forthwith. Cox brought along a wealth of knowledge of African American music and performers and even brought movies to play during lunch breaks. As the composer for the piece, Cox provided original songs as well as his version of the Ballad of John Henry which had inspired the project.

The 1999-2000 season wrapped up with Ron Simonian’s Mother Goose Y2K and was TYA’s first collaboration with the theatre department at Avila University. Avila had been, and still is, on a campaign to expand the theatre department’s facilities and course offerings. Robert Foulk, Director of Performance Studies at Avila, served as the director of Mother Goose Y2K. The production was offered as a class and rehearsed primarily at the college then transferred to Theatre for Young America for the performance run.

Mother Goose Y2K was something of an education for the Mackeys. They trusted themselves to break the rules and tenets of children’s theatre but were cautious when it came to new works by authors outside the company. Simonian’s sense of humor, even though it was intended for children, made everyone a little nervous: for example, his treatment of the Three Blind Mice could have been taken as making fun of sight-impaired persons. However, Mackey decided, probably because he too is a playwright, that the material was not wholly offensive and it was prudent to let the audience decide. Mother Goose, with its script fully intact as Simonian intended it, played its full run to uproarious audiences and marked the beginning of a long partnership with Avila University that continues to this day.

¹ Sheryl Bryant (founding education director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
As TYA moved into its 2000-2001 season, the campaign to program multicultural plays continued. In the fall of 2000, the theatre presented *El Gato Sin Amigos* (*The Cat with No Friends*), a play with English and Spanish dialogue intertwined. Mackey co-directed this play with his new friend and collaborator, Danny Cox, who had lived for seven years in Guadalajara, Mexico. The play makes rather ingenious use of its dual-linguistic structure. According to Valerie, the play starts out translating almost all of the Spanish into English but eventually stops the constant reiteration and is able to rely on context and only occasional translation to convey meaning.\(^2\) One challenge to this bilinguality was the diversity of Spanish speakers in the cast. Mackey recalls that one cast member taught Spanish literature and her pronunciation was quite classical and standardized. Another actress was from Argentina and her dialect was quite different from everyone else’s. While this undoubtedly led to some hilarious misunderstandings in rehearsal, it surely added great vividity to an already colorful theatre experience.

In the spring of 2001, TYA produced *Africa’s Daughters* which Mackey co-authored with Jacquee Gafford. Mackey got the idea for the play from the theatre’s own female African-American students. More than one had told him they were sick of plays and stories about black people who were slaves or destitute. *Africa’s Daughters* opens with a young African-American girl upset because she has to write a term paper and does not want to write about slaves and poor people. At the encouragement of her wiser mother, she goes online to search the internet for alternative topics. She falls asleep and the Queen of Sheeba comes out of the computer to begin the young lady on a journey through time to meet some of the most powerful and famous black women in history.

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2 Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
including leaders of the civil-rights movement and Billie Holiday. The girl awakens energized with a new-found pride about which to write.

The 2001-2002 season kicked off with The Hobbit, which was a remount, and Lily’s Purple Plastic Purse, what Valerie refers to as one of the “rock-star shows” or shows with unusually large child fan bases. Missy Koonce, one of Kansas City’s most dynamic and beloved theatre artists, directed the piece and Valerie provided all the design elements. Mackey was drawn to the story because it fell in line with his promotion of empowerment in young people, particularly girls.

I love these stories where kids are treated within the world of a kid with all its real anxieties and pains and drama and trauma taken seriously. Lily gets in trouble, real trouble, with her teacher at school and she’s heartbroken. Valerie recalls the audiences for Lily’s Purple Plastic Purse being especially exuberant and many members even dressed up as Lily.

TYA began 2002 with another take on the Anansi stories, African Tales of Anansi. The theatre had done an Anansi play before with a script by Linda Daugherty but decided this time that Gene and Valerie Mackey would co-author it. Valerie additionally did the costumes and recalls especially enjoying researching this design. All of the clothes were made of natural materials with many of the fabrics evoking traditional African weaving. She used died flowers, fruits, and vegetables to be elephant ears, hornet hears, and other prosthetics.

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3 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.

4 Valerie Mackey (artistic director, Theatre for Young America), in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
For the holidays, TYA offered up Mackey’s adaptation of *The Cricket on the Hearth* by Charles Dickens. In discussing this adaptation, Mackey and I discussed his adapting process. My misconceptions on the enterprise led me to conclude that it would take no small amount of arrogance to adapt one of the finest writers of English prose. Mackey revealed that he does little to the existing text. If there is any dialogue in the book, he uses it almost verbatim. Anything else he extracts from goes largely untouched as well.

Where I think people are wrong, is when they say ‘well, I’m going to take this and rewrite it.’ I always think that’s a mistake. Anytime you can use the actual language, especially if it’s Dickens, for Pete’s sake, you use it.\(^5\)

Actors tended to be in short supply when Missouri Repertory Theatre’s *A Christmas Carol* was operational, but TYA was able to book some top-flight talent and secured the services of director Sidonie Garrett, artistic director of the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival.

As happy as Theatre for Young America was domiciled at Mission Center Mall, the price tag on the lease was just beyond that which they could consistently handle. By the fall of 2002, TYA was little by little getting behind in their rent. The Mackeys recall reassurances from the leasing agent Chuck Oglesby, that the owners wanted the theatre to remain and insisted any outstanding rent could be paid back over time. Mackey was reluctant to renew the lease under such circumstances but did end up renewing so as not to render the theatre homeless.

It was about this time that Rainbow’s End, an independent theatre for children, came to Oglesby’s attention looking for a new home. Mark Price, producer and music

\(^5\) Gene Mackey (foundling artistic director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
director, and Vernon Quinzy, Price’s partner and the theatre’s founding artistic director, had been using space in the Blue Ridge Mall in Kansas City, Missouri, for Rainbow’s End’s performances but were wanting their own space without the need to share with other groups and organizations.\textsuperscript{6} Quinzy was at the time working for Valerie at the recently renovated Union Station; Valerie had taken a job with Science City in its live-event division. She found it odd that Quinzy seemed very interested in the specific details of TYA’s space at Mission Center Mall. Sometime later, members of TYA’s board, some of whom were well connected within Kansas City’s philanthropic community, would discover that many of the people and organizations which Rainbow’s End had publicized as financial contributors, such as Julia Kauffman and Jeanette Nichols, had in fact never given a dime to the company.\textsuperscript{7}

Quinzy and Price won an audience with Oglesby, offered to pay higher rent for TYA’s space, and seduced him into believing that Rainbow’s End could bring in bigger audiences than Theatre for Young America could. Even though Mackey had officially renewed the lease with the understanding that outstanding rent would be paid over time, Oglesby took advantage of the total circumstances and the mall evicted TYA. In June of 2003, Rainbow’s End took possession of the space that the Mackeys had built, literally with their own hands, but this may have been a blessing in disguise. Even by the time Rainbow’s End attained occupancy, Mission Center Mall was having difficulty retaining


\textsuperscript{7} Sheryl Bryant (founding educational director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
tenants. Within the next two years, the mall would announce its sale and scheduled demolition. By the summer of 2006, Mission Center Mall no longer existed.\(^8\)

TYA’s eviction from Mission Center Mall was not widely known at the time. To the public, the theatre seemed to be thriving and needing to expand. The Dickinson Top Two Theatre in Mission, Kansas, previously known as the Fine Arts Theatre, was under new ownership. The Mackeys approached the new owners about hosting TYA during the day while still running movies in the evenings.\(^9\)

Mackey had also been talking with the management of the H & R Block City Stage at Union Station. The refurbished train station had installed Science City as an attraction for kids and families and thought a resident live theatre-for-young-audiences company would be a beneficial accompaniment. Initially, programming for the H & R Block City Stage was intended to be focused on educational tie-ins: two of TYA’s first shows at Union Station were \textit{Wings of Wonder}, based on the first flight of the Wright Brothers, and \textit{Monarchs of KC} about Negro League baseball. The H & R Block City Stage was very much an auxiliary to the Dickinson Top Two Theatre which would serve and TYA’s main space and base of operations.

The Mackeys knew their residency at the Dickinson Top Two Theatre was temporary; they really had their hearts set on relocating entirely to Union Station. This coupled with the prospect of operating two spaces simultaneously meant that the 2003-

\(^8\) Michelle Burhenn, “Mission Center Mall’s doors closing today,” \textit{Kansas City Star}, February 18, 2006, front page

\(^9\) Gene Mackey (founder and artistic director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
2004 and 2004-2005 seasons would be primarily drawn from the theatre’s existing repertoire with only the odd new work to address Union Station’s educational desires.

One of the gems to come out of this “pressure cooker” of a time for the theatre was The Monarchs of KC, a tribute to Kansas City’s Negro Leagues baseball team The Monarchs. Mackey had been introduced to Bob Kendrick, former marketing director and current president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, some years before as someone who might be a resource for the theatre as a marketing consultant. Mackey, a man who always had the next project in mind, had other ideas and eventually approached Kendrick about consulting on a play about the Monarchs.

The story of The Monarchs of KC is of a modern-day family recalling the time they snuck into the long abandoned Municipal Stadium at 22nd and Brooklyn in Kansas City, Missouri, before it demolished. Husband, wife, and son remember finding their way to the locker room and before long start hearing voices. Suddenly, the ghost of Andrew “Rube” Foster, legendary player and team manager, appears and mistakes the family for players saying “You better get into your gear.” The family begins to open the lockers to discover freshly laundered uniforms for each of them. Even the mom finds a uniform for Toni Stone the female second baseman who played for the Monarchs.

The play was directed by Jacqee Gafford, and Danny Cox starred as Rube Foster and wrote original songs for the piece. Bryant recalls that John “Buck” O’Neil came up to Cox after the first performance, hugged him, and told Cox “You got it right!”

10 Ibid.

11 Sheryl Bryant (founding educational director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
became a fixture at performances of *The Monarchs of KC* and would participate in the post-show discussions.

Buck O’Neil was very helpful. He came to the shows and after every show he would stand up, six feet two inches, and talk… you know, very imposing impressive guy, funny. And he would sing, you know, and he would talk to the kids, and they were just mesmerized, and the teachers were too. It was the famous Buck O’Neil.12

During the 2003-2004 season, Bob Crane, former entertainment manager at Union Station, was working with TYA in an attempt to house the theatre permanently at Union Station. That season’s attempt to operate two spaces simultaneously proved to be more than the Mackeys could handle. Having secured a space on the second floor of Union Station’s administrative offices, TYA committed to moving to Union Station. The 2004-2005 season was made up entirely of remounts from the theatre’s catalog and did not continue the two-venues operation: only the first and last two productions would be presented at Union Station. In the Spring of 2005, upon completing the regular season with *Go, Dog. Go!* at the Dickinson Top Two theatre, the Mackeys made one last move, they hoped, to the the H & R Block City State at Union Station. With dedicated office space, a state of the art theatre, storage space, a scene shop, dressing rooms, and, to the Mackey’s great relief, a janitorial staff, Theatre for Young America quickly began settling into its new home. After a quarter of a century on the other side of the nearby state line, and weathering many a “storm,” the Mackeys landed the theatre they had built, literally with their own hands and several times over, in the city of its birth. TYA opened the 2005 summer season with *The Wizard of Oz*. And with that, they weren’t in Kansas anymore.

12 Gene Mackey (founding artistic director, Theatre for Young America) in discussion with the author, November 19, 2014.
EPILOGUE

On November 19, 2014, I sat down with the founding family of Theatre for Young America in the lobby of the H & R Block City Stage at Union Station in Kansas City, Missouri, to discuss the decade since the theatre’s residency there began and to discuss what the future holds.

When Theatre for Young America took up residency at Union Station in 2005, the theatre and its staff breathed a great sigh of relief. Here was a space with facilities TYA did not have to maintain, restrooms the staff did not have to clean, and an administration passionate about programs for children. Further, because Valerie Mackey had been working for Union Station’s entertainment division for several years, she had made many friends within the organization and knew how to physically maneuver around in the accesses and back hallways.

The gift that was this permanent home did not come without its share of concerns and fears for TYA. The public had seemed squarely behind the renovation of Union Station but were, by this time, at best dubious about the choices beyond the refurbishment that were being made. I personally recall the rancor that had surrounded the installation of Science City as an auxiliary to the facility. Rumors went around about the failure of similar attractions in Saint Louis, Missouri, and other cities. The use of the space certainly provided many comforts and capacities the theatre had never previously enjoyed, but also the anxieties and precariousness the theatre seemed to perennially suffer. Gene Mackey recalls articles in local newspapers constantly questioning whether or not Union Station and Science City could survive.
Valerie also recalls a certain apprehension at having to operate within the corporate structure of Union Station. Advertising materials were required to include Union Station’s insignia and required approval of the marketing staff. Valerie feared that Union Stations administration might be encroaching on TYA’s autonomy.

There were also significant challenges that arose from the fact the H & R Block City Stage did not wholly belong to Theatre for Young America. Turner White, former president and CEO of Union Station, would cancel TYA’s performances so that he could book corporate events into the space. To this day, the floor of the stage cannot be painted, which makes impossible the immersive and environment-design approaches of many scenic artists and which is also so effective in children’s theatre. The set of any play must be able to disappear after every performance for corporate events and the many performing companies that are allowed to rent the space in the evenings.

Mackey knew the key to staying at Union Station, and beginning to approach the kind of operation he desired for the theatre, was a slow and methodical establishment of Theatre for Young America as the resident children’s theatre company for Union Station. Through the years, TYA had made great strides in this direction including official designation as Union Station’s resident theatre company sans the “children’s” qualification. Theatre for Young America is consistently the top-selling attraction in Union Station and this has garnered the theatre great clout. Now, in 2014, the Mackeys have great confidence in Union Station’s administration, which has expressed its appreciation of TYA in return. A recent TYA production of *Junie B. Jones and a Little Monkey Business* broke Union Station’s box office records. The CEO, along with several other administrators, brought TYA a cake to commemorate the achievement.
On Saturday, October 4, 2014, Theatre for Young America celebrated forty years of continuous operation as a theatre for young audiences. As the Mackeys look to the future, the sustainability of the company is very much on their minds. When TYA was founded, both Mackey and Bryant had completed bachelor degrees, graduate work, and worked professionally for a number of years. Now, forty years later, succession is imminent and necessary.

Mackey is cognizant of the challenges the theatre faces in identifying individuals to carry on what he and Bryant have built. His and Bryant’s daughter Valerie Mackey has stepped into the role of artistic director. Having grown up in and around Theatre for Young America and the Kansas City theatre community at large, Valerie has witnessed firsthand the work of the community’s finest and most established artists. The education she gleaned from being surrounded by her parents’ colleagues, as well as her conservatory studies at Webster University, has certainly given her the skills and abilities to lead a theatre company but has also established within her a loyalty and a passion for the work going on at TYA. Valerie has enjoyed some success in commercial acting and touring musicals that have often supplied her with a steady income. Like most actors, she has turned down highly desirable roles simply because the job in the “fluffy” musical review would allow her to pay her bills. However, she has always returned to her home at Theatre for Young America. Valerie is committed to this concept of an artistic home. When the theatre began, it did not have a resident company per se but it certainly had its core group of actors and artists who could count on having a job be it on a production, teaching, or working in the box office; even the press frequently referred to the theatre as a troupe. Valerie desires a return to this structure. She remembers the caliber of work
that was born of production teams and casts that had some loyalty to, or longevity with, the theatre. Under her leadership, Valerie Mackey envisions a company rooted in its own heritage, pushing boundaries, continuously challenging its audience, and anchored by a core group of artists who share a passion for the theatre’s mission and its role in the community.

While the artistic integrity of the company appears to be secure, it is the executive leadership of TYA and the directing of the educational components that seem to be taller orders. Theatre for Young America, however beloved and cherished by the community, is not a particularly prestigious institution. The theatre is not able to offer salaries that would attract qualified individuals from outside the region. Currently, Mackey and Bryant have decided that training and promoting from within the company is the safest way forward at this time and have tapped a couple of individuals to whom they can begin passing the administrative duties. A major advantage to this approach is the continuity of relationships within the community that have been cultivated over the years. Mackey and Bryant have deep friendships with area schools and administrators and credits those connections with much of the theatre’s longevity.

The Mackeys have many hopes for the future. They hope that someday an endowment might be established to, if nothing else, ease anxieties when the inevitable dips in sales occur. They hope to find those individuals to succeed their respective positions so the company has a chance to continue after they no longer can. But most of all, they hope the children still come, laugh, think, wrinkle their noses, and, in the end, clap. Maybe then, just maybe, those kids will grow up to be more open minded, more tolerant, and more inventive. They might even buy a ticket once in a while.
CONCLUSION

Theatre for Young America is one of the three oldest professional theatre companies in Kansas City. The other two, Missouri Repertory Theatre (now called Kansas City Repertory Theatre) and Unicorn Theatre, boast equally impressive longevities but also thirty or more years operating out of the same location. It is likely that many theatres come to the brink of demise yet are able step back from it. But few have had to start from scratch with each reprieve. Gene Mackey points to each of TYA’s relocations as a time when the company could have folded and yet, with each move, the Mackeys gathered their courage, got out the drills and sledgehammers, and made themselves a home. When I first met with Sheryl Bryant, I asked her how the company has persevered. She replied simply, “I love what I do.” Even though she did not have a Theatre for Young America when she was growing up in Rogers, Arkansas, she did have theatre experiences; and these memories of the theatre comprise many of the highlights of her upbringing. For Bryant, failure was not an option because those childhood-theatre-going experiences were so important that she is compelled to provide the same encounters for her audiences.

If purpose fueled the Mackey’s devotion, how did it manifest? What inspired the audiences to follow the theatre to no less than seven addresses? I propose it was TYA’s unwavering respect for its audience. Following the scholars, teachers, and mentors that came before them, the Mackeys never spoke down to the children; they never prettied up a story to make it “nicer” and they certainly never took their audience for granted. Not once did any of TYA’s staff ever suggest, “Oh, the kids will come.” Quite the opposite.
TYA made painstaking effort to mitigate any confusion or frustration associated with its wandering. Valerie Mackey affectionately recalls one teacher completely dismissing any issue with the uncertainty of the theatre’s future location, “She still wanted to book her four shows.”

As Theatre for Young America marches into its fifth decade, the audience that has joined the Mackeys on this journey seems squarely behind them. With some young and up and coming staff members, the future is not entirely certain but exciting and promising. In the meantime, six days out of every week, TYA offers kids and parents alike the opportunity to learn, empathize, imagine, question, and, most importantly, laugh. For forty years TYA has offered these services. Call it an investment in the inheritors of the planet, if you like: with inestimable return potential.
Appendix A
Production History
WALDO ASTORIA CHILDREN’S THEATRE
at the Waldo Astoria Dinner Theatre
7428 Washington, Kansas City, Missouri

1974-1975
Pinocchio
Mirror Man
Legend of Sleepy Hollow
Raggedy Ann & Andy
Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew
Three By Three

1975-1976
Johnny Appleseed
Magic Mirror of Toy Land
Stuck a Feather in his Hat
Golliwhoppers
Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court

1976-1977
Cinderella
Wind in the Willows
Partridge in a Pear Tree

THEATRE FOR YOUNG AMERICA
at the Plaza Theatre
4704 Wyandotte, Kansas City, Missouri

Spaceship Earth 77
Tarrididdle Tales
Alice in Wonderland
Pinocchio
Musical Storyland (tour)
The Hare & the Tortoise

THEATRE FOR YOUNG AMERICA
at the Overland Theatre
7204 W 80th Street, Shawnee Mission, Kansas

1977-1978
Winnie the Pooh
The Three Sillies
Raggedy Ann & Andy’s Yuletide Adventure
Christmas Carol (special holiday evening show)
Sherlock Holmes
Legends of Paul Bunyan
Sleeping Beauty
Pippi Longstockings
Tom Sawyer
Snow White (1978 summer season)
Aesops Fables (1978 summer season)
Oliver Twist (1978 summer season)
Twelve Dancing Princesses (1978 summer season)

1978-1979
Dracula (special evening presentation)
Pocahontas & the Pilgrims
Babes in Toyland
Charlotte’s Web
Happy Birthday Honest Abe
Contact from Outer Space
Tale of Peter Rabbit
Rumpelstilskin
Cinderella (1979 summer season)
Raggedy Ann & Andy’s Circus Adventure (1979 summer season)
The Hobbit (1979 summer season)
Circus Berzekus (1979 summer season)
Get the Hook (1979 summer season)
Jack & the Beanstalk

1979-1980
Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde
The Metric Show (tour)
Wind in the Willows
The Snow Queen
The Mummers Christmas Play (tour)
Hansel & Gretel
Little Red Riding Hood
The Hare and the Tortoise
Pecos Bill
Aladdin and His Magic Lamp
Alice Through the Looking Glass (1980 summer season)
Ten Nights in a Barroom (evening workshop)
Dr. Doolittle (1980 summer season)
Swiss Family Robinson (1980 summer season)
Secret of the Hidden Nugget Mine (1980 summer season)

1980-1981
Paddington Bear
Legend of Sleepy Hollow
Quoth The Raven (special Halloween presentation)
Rapunzel
The Elves and the Shoemaker
Pinnocchio
Beauty & the Beast
Androclese & the Lion
Pecos Bill (tour)
The Tale of Benjamin Bunny
Treasure Island
The Wizard of Oz (1981 summer season)
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1981 summer season)
Mary Poppins (1981 summer season)

1981-1982
Pippi and the Policeman
Sorcerer’s Apprentice
Johnny Appleseed
Hans Brinker & the Silver Skates
Goldilocks and the Three Bears
The Emperor’s New Clothes
The Ugly Duckling
Charlotte’s Web
Winnie the Pooh (1982 summer season)
Alice in Wonderland (1982 summer season)
Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1982 summer season)

1982-1983
Peter & the Wolf
Cinderella
Rip Van Winkle
Goldilocks and the Three Bears (tour)
Raggedy Ann & Andy’s Yuletide Adventure
The Three Little Pigs
King Arthur & the Magic Sword
The Velveteen Rabbit
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe
Rum-Tum-Tugger (tour)
Wizard of Oz (1983 summer season)
Huck Finn (1983 summer season)
Jack & the Beanstalk (1983 summer season)
Sleeping Beauty (1983 summer season)
Little Red Riding Hood

1983-1984
Chicken Little
Babes in Toyland
The Arkansaw Bear
The Little Prince
The Tale of Peter Rabbit
The Cricket in Times Square
The Hare & the Tortoise (1984 summer season)
The Princess & the Pea (1984 summer season)
Aladdin (1984 summer season)
The Frog prince (1984 summer season)
Br’er Rabbit (1984 summer season)
Pinocchio

1984-1985
Paul Bunyan
Hansel and Gretel
The Snow Queen
Puss-n-Boots
Step on a Crack
Paddington Bear
Heidi
The Wizard of Oz
Wind in the Willows
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

1985-1986
Johnny Appleseed
Wiley and the Hairy Man
Pick a Play
The Elves and the Shoemaker
Snow White/Red Rose
Benjamin Bunny
Toughest Kid in the World
Cinderella
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Snoopy!!!
The Prince and the Pauper

1986-1987
The Ugly Duckling
The Pied Piper
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever
Amelia Bedelia
Goldilocks and the Three Bears
Raggedy Ann and Andy
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe
A Midsummer Night’s Dream
Young Sherlock Holmes
The Princess and the Pea

1987-1988
Chicken Little
Young Mozart
A Partridge in a Pear Tree
Ramon and her Father
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
The Tree Little Pigs
The Velveteen Rabbit
1988-1989
The Legend of Sleepy Hollow
Rumpelstiltskin
Christmas all Over the Place
A Wrinkle in Time
Charlotte’s Web
Peter and the Wolf
Gruff! The Three Billy Goats
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
The Time Machine
The Story Teller

1989-1990
Jack and the Bean Stalk
Beauty and the Beast
The Elves and the Shoemaker
James and the Giant Peach
A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court
The Hare and the Tortoise
Pippi Longstocking
The Phantom Tollbooth
Revenge of the Space Pandas
Tom Sawyer (Theatre Arts Project)

1990-1991
The Wizard of OZ
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
3 wise Cats from the East Side
Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing
Fahrenheit 451
Peter Rabbit
Mother Hicks
Little Lulu

1991-1992
Pecos Bill
Cinderella
Donny’s House
Don Quixote
Goldilocks and the Three Bears
In the Labyrinth of the Minotaur
Br’er Rabbit
Junglebook
Alice in Wonderland

1992-1993
Pinocchio
The Snow Queen
Starring Abe Lincoln
THEATRE FOR YOUNG AMERICA
at the Waldo Astoria Theatre
7428 Washington, Kansas City, Missouri

The Adventures of Madeleine
In the Sunlight of Athens
Heidi
Young Sherlock Holmes

1993-1994
The Life and Times of the Three Little Pigs
Donny’s House
The Three Wisecats

THEATRE FOR YOUNG AMERICA
at the Mission Center Mall
4818 Johnson Drive, Mission, Kansas

Paul Bunyan
The Velveteen Rabbit
In a Greek World
The Phantom Tollbooth
Aesop’s Fables

1994-1995
Chicken Little
Partridge in a Pear Tree
Frederick Douglas
Curious George
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe
The Boy Who Talked to Whales
The Princess and the Pea
Ha Ha Holidays

1995-1996
The Legend of Sleepy Hollow
Hans Brinker & the Silver Skates
Phillis: Phillis Wheatley
Gruff! The Three Billy Goats
The Magician’s Nephew
Journey to the Center of the Earth
The Princess and the Pea
Laughing Matters

1996-1997
The Toughest Kid in the World
The Wizard of OZ
The Little Snow Girl
The Wise Men of Chelm
The Footsteps of Harriet Tubman
Charlotte's Web
Cinderella, or, It’s Okay to be Different
Rumpelstiltskin
Anne of Green Gables

1997-1998
The Hare and the Tortoise
The Life & Adventures of Santa Claus
Scott Joplin, King of Ragtime
The Tale of Peter Rabbit
Ramona Quimby!!!
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

1998-1999
The Toughest Kid in the World
The Legend of Johnny Appleseed
The Three Wisecats
Anansi, the African Spiderman
Goldilocks and the Three Bears
Maggie Magalita
The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood
Little Red Riding Hood

1999-2000
The Toughest Kid in the World
The True Pocahontas
The Elves and the Shoemaker
The Legend of John Henry
The Magic Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle
Tales of a 4th Grade Nothing
Dick Whittington and his Cat
Mother Goose Y2K

2000-2001
The Toughest Kid in the World
The Ugly Duckling
El Gato Sin Amigos
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever
The Odd Potato
Africa's Daughters
The Tale of Benjamin Bunny
A Midsummer Night's Dream
Aesop's Fables

2001-2002
The Hobbit
Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse
The Boxcar Children
The Toughest Kid in the World (tour)
A Partridge in a Pear Tree
African Tales of Anansi
Journey with Barbara Jordan
The Life and Times of the Three Little Pigs
Pinocchio
The Revenge of the Space Pandas

2002-2003
Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse
The Toughest Kid in the World (tour)
Chicken Little
The Cricket on the Hearth
In the Footsteps of Freedom with Harriet Tubman
Curious George
A Wrinkle in Time

THEATRE FOR YOUNG AMERICA
at the Dickinson Top Two Theatre
5909 Johnson Drive, Mission, Kansas

and

at the H & R Block City Stage at Union Station
30 W Pershing Road, Kansas City, Missouri

Cinderella (summer season at the Dickinson)

2003-2004
Goldilocks and Three Bears (at the Dickinson)
Wings of Wonder (at the H & R Block City Stage)
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever (at the Dickinson)
The Three Wise Cats (at the H & R Block City Stage)
The Monarchs of KC (at the Dickinson and the H & R Block City Stage)
The Velveteen Rabbit (at the Dickinson)
The Lewis and Clark Show (at the H & R Block City Stage)
Miss Nelson is Missing (at the Dickinson)
Curious George (at the Dickinson)
Young Sherlock Holmes (summer production at the Dickinson)

2004-2005
Amelia Bedelia (at the Dickinson and the H & R Block City Stage)
Toughest Kid in the World (touring production)
The Tall Tale of Pecos Bill (at the Dickinson)
The Snow Queen (at the Dickinson)
Frederick Douglas: Deliverance from Chains (at the Dickinson)
The Magic of Mrs. Piggle Wiggle (at the Dickinson)
Go Dog Go! (at the Dickinson)

THEATRE FOR YOUNG AMERICA
at the H & R Block City Stage at Union Station
30 W Pershing Road, Kansas City, Missouri

The Wizard of OZ (summer production)
The Time Machine (summer production)

2005-2006
Trains Across America
Charlotte's Web
The Toughest Kid in the World
The Elves and the Shoemaker
African Tales of Anansi
Junie B. Jones
Winnie the Pooh

2006-2007
Go, Dog. Go!
The Adventures of Paddington the Bear
The Toughest Kid in the World (tour)
Christmas All Over the Place
The Legend of John Henry
Gruff! The Three Billy Goats
The Boxcar Children: Mystery of the Lost Village
The Hare and the Tortoise

2007-2008
The Life and Times of the Three Little Pigs
The Toughest Kid in the World
Hansel and Gretel
In the Footsteps of Freedom with Harriet Tubman
Miss Nelson Has a Field Day
If You Give a Mouse a Cookie
Tom Sawyer

2008-2009:
Busy Town
The Toughest Kid in the World
The Little Snow Girl
Africa’s Daughters
Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe
Treasure Island

2009-2010
Goodnight Moon
The Toughest Kid in the World (tour)
Madeline’s Christmas
Nate the Great
Junie B. Jones and a Little Monkey Business
The Monarchs of KC
Robin Hood
Triple Play One (tour)
Triple Play Two (tour)
Goodnight Moon (tour)
2010-2011
The Dinosaur Play
Junie B. Jones in Jingle Bells, Batman Smells
Toughest Kid in the World
Anansi, the Spiderman of Africa
Goldilocks and the Three Bears
The Little Engine That Could
Snoopy!!!
Dramatic History with Danny Cox (tour)
Toughest Kid in the World (tour)
Triple Play (tour)

2011-2012
If You Give a Mouse a Cookie
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever
Bully Bot the Robot and the Gang of Geeks
Black Cowboy in the Old West
Diary of a Worm, a Spider, and a Fly
Young Mozart (Folly Theater)
Pinocchio Commedia
The Adventures of Pippi Longstocking
Fair Ball: Negro Leagues of America

2012-2013
The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley
Junie B. Jones in Jingle Bells, Batman Smells
Bully Bot and the Gang of Geeks
Anansi and the Middle Passage
Chicken Little the Musical
Go, Dog. Go!
The Boxcar Children

2013-2014
How I Became a Pirate
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe
Harriet Tubman: In the Footsteps of Freedom
Junie B. Jones and a Little Monkey Business
No Dogs Allowed!
Cinderella

2014-2015
The Adventures of Nate the Great
Jingle ARRGH the Way! A Christmas Pirate Adventure
The Toughest Kid in the World
Starring Abe Lincoln
Charlotte’s Web
If You Give a Cat a Cupcake
The Princess and the Pea
Appendix B
Production Photographs
Fig. 1 - Photograph of 1974 production of *Pinocchio* by John Simons. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 2 - Photograph of Dodie Brown as the evil fairy Mordra in the 1978 production of *Sleeping Beauty* by Charlotte B. Chorpenning. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 3 - Photograph of 1986 production of *The Ugly Duckling* by Gene Mackey. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 4 - Photograph of 1989 production of *Charlotte’s Web* by Joseph Robbinette. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 5 - Photograph of 1976 production of *Cinderella* by Charlotte B. Chorpenning. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 6 - Photograph of 1978 production of *Babes in Toyland* by John Simons. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 7 - Photograph of 1979 production of Charlotte’s Web by Joseph Robbinette. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 8 - Photograph of 1981 production of Androcles and the Lion by Aurand Harris. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 9 - Photograph of 1984 production of *Br’er Rabbit* by R. Eugene Jackson. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 10 - Photograph of 1984 production of *The Arkansaw Bear* by Susan Zeder. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 11 - Photograph of 1986 production of *SNOOPY* by Larry Grossman and Hal Hackady. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 12 - Photograph of 1987 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* adapted by Gene Mackey. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 13 - Photograph of 1989 production of *Gruff! The Three Billy Goats* by Gene Mackey and Molly Jessup. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 14 - Photograph of 1994 production of *Cinderella* by Jim Eiler. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 15 - Photograph of 1999 production of *Toughest Kid in the World* by Gene Mackey and Molly Jessup. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 16 - Photograph of 2001 production of *Benjamin Bunny* by Gene Mackey and Rita Lovett. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 17 - Photograph of 2002 production of Chicken Little by Gene Mackey and Cheryl Benge. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 18 - Photograph of 2003 production of Goldilocks and the Three Bears by Gene Mackey and Cheryl Benge. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
Fig. 19 - Photograph of 2004 production of *The Monarchs* by Gene Mackey and Danny Cox. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.

Fig. 20 - Photograph of 2013 production of *A Boxcar for Children* by Barbara Field. Photograph courtesy of Gene Mackey and Sheryl Bryant.
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VITA

Anthony J. Bernal II was born on April 8, 1979, in Kansas City, Missouri. He attended Saint Joseph’s Grade School in Shawnee, Kansas and went on to graduate from Shawnee Mission North High School. He received a voice scholarship to Kansas University in Lawrence, Kansas. He left his junior year to accept a National Scholarship to the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City wherefrom he graduated in 2002 with an Artist Certificate in musical theatre. He returned to Kansas University to complete his Bachelor of Fine Arts in voice performance and theatre and graduated in 2003.

After working as a professional actor, singer, and accompanist for several years, Mr. Bernal began the master’s program in theatre history and dramatic literature at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Over the years that he has worked on the degree, he has worked as an actor, director, producer, and pianist as well as a paralegal. Currently, he designs and certifies continuing education for practicing physicians and specializes in neurology. Upon completion of the degree requirements, Mr. Bernal plans to pursue any artistic appointment that will have him.