

THE COTERIE THEATRE'S TRANSITION FROM CHILDREN'S THEATRE
TO MULTIGENERATIONAL THEATRE: 1991-2014

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by
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ABSTRACT

The programming of The Coterie Theatre of Kansas City, Missouri, under Artistic Director Jeff Church, was studied from September 1990 to August 2014. The works researched included world, commissioned and American premieres of plays for young audiences at the theatre. These plays were chosen in proof of the hypothesis that Jeff Church's programming played a primary role in the theatre's transition from a children's theatre to a theatre for young audiences and then to a multigenerational theatre. The findings strongly suggest that not only is the hypothesis correct but Church's programming contributed to The Coterie Theatre's rise to national prominence.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “The Coterie Theatre’s Transition from Children’s Theatre to Multigenerational Theatre: 1991-2014” presented by Danielle M. Trebus, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1979 Judith Yeckel and Vicky Lee, two graduate students in theatre from the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), founded The Coterie Theatre. The theatre then as now is housed on level one in Hallmark's Crown Center shops. It had migrated between several storefront spaces there until finally settling in its permanent location in the late 1980s. The theatre, offices and classrooms now span almost four storefronts. Over the past 30 years, The Coterie has given nearly 6,861 performances of 215 productions through 2008, playing to approximately 1,500,000 people (Coterie Theatre).

Artistic Director Yeckel established a mission for The Coterie that has held firm to this day: to open lines of communication between races, sexes and generations. Kansas City actor/director Jim Tibbs became Artistic Director through 1988, following Yeckel and Lee's tenure. Jim furthered the mission of The Coterie by providing classic and contemporary theatre, which challenged both the audience and the artists. After Jim's death, Pam Sterling then served as Artistic Director for the next two years (Coterie Theatre).

In 1990, Jeff Church joined The Coterie as Producing Artistic Director. He came from The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., where he served as a director and a playwright-in-residence. Over the past 24 years, Jeff's goal has been to transition The Coterie programming so as to make it a "multicultural" and "multigenerational" theatre, redefining it to include families and diverse audiences (Coterie Theatre).

The brief history above summarizes developments prior to Jeff Church's tenure as Artistic Director of The Coterie Theatre. It also stands as the pretext to the significance of

this research. As a member of the Kansas City community since 1979 and as an actress, director, playwright and lover of children's theatre, I have witnessed the founding and growth of The Coterie. I auditioned for and attended productions there during the Yeckel and Lee years. My own children became my audience partners in the 1980-90s. Under the leadership of Jeff Church, I continued to watch the theatre grow and change. It was during this time that I came to admire the new trail he blazed within the genre of "children's theatre."

By 1990 I had moved to a job teaching university theatre at what was then Saint Mary College, my alma mater. The Director of Theatre there was a former adjunct faculty member during my undergraduate days, Van Ibsen. He too loved children's theatre and after college I joined his touring company, Fundamental Theatre, which featured adults performing for children. We were a good team, each complementing the other's skills and our season at Saint Mary included a family Christmas production and eventually included a spring tour of a children's play. But what we were producing as "children's theatre" was very different from the "children's theatre" of Jeff Church. We were producing popular adaptations of well-known fairy tales and children's stories. Church was pushing the boundaries of this norm by maturing the idea of "programming" for children. I was intrigued with how his programming of plays at The Coterie was aiding this idea and his mission of providing "multicultural" and "multigenerational" theatre.

Church's career with The Coterie is marked by many of the experiences that crowded his early life and the beginning of his professional career. He has managed to integrate acting, playwriting as well as technical and stage direction under the title of "artistic director" and to use them to mature "children's theatre" into "theatre for young

audiences” and now “multigenerational theatre.” All of this Church has accomplished with a vision and a promise to change the way theatre for children was perceived. The result of this is that The Coterie Theatre is nationally recognized as an innovator in this programming. Jeff Church is similarly recognized as a driving force in this innovation. This contribution to theatre history deserves to be acknowledged and thus is the goal of this thesis. To this end, one essential question arose: can Church’s vision be charted in The Coterie Theatre’s programming since his tenure as artistic director in 1990?

The following chapters will chart in detail the theatre’s changes in programming. This in-depth analysis of Church’s programming spans seasons 1991-2014 as 1991 was Jeff Church’s first season of programming for The Coterie and 2014 is the present season. I have chosen to use the programming listed on The Coterie website under the titles “World Premiere,” “Commissioned World Premiere,” and “American Premiere” (Coterie Theatre). These particular plays seemed to demonstrate a decidedly different emphasis in the theatre’s programming since its beginning in 1979.

It was discovered during the first weeks of research that the topic, The Coterie Theatre, had no previous history in children’s theatre books. There existed an extensive compilation of online information and periodical articles about The Coterie Theatre but neither its history nor any critical review of its programming was in evidence. Therefore, this thesis breaks new ground with this research and is one, which will critically examine the theatre’s programming in light of the essential question. The following is a discussion of the research materials. It includes the identification of materials, the dates of research and the authority of these sources as well as their objectivity and results.

The literature researched for this thesis is identified as primarily original source materials most of which are periodicals published locally in the Greater Kansas City Metropolitan area, with some published nationally, either in print or online. The primary source is The Kansas City Star. Whether local or national, the materials vary in type from newspaper and magazine articles, reviews, commentaries and informational pieces to press releases, websites, a master's thesis, personal interviews and e-mail.

The authors and publishers of these source materials are prominent and well recognized names in the newspaper and magazine industry as well as the fields of theatre, theatre criticism and in particular the genre of theatre for children and young adults. The bibliography is extensive and spans twenty-three years (1991-2014) of The Coterie Theatre's life. These publishers and authors contributed work over this time which demonstrates their respected positions both as authorities and accurate historians of trends in the field.

With regard to the objectivity of the publishers and authors, including myself, it is offered that appreciation of art of any sort is subjective. It is subject to the author's experience with and knowledge of it—what we might call taste. However, as stated previously the authors and publishers of my research materials are considered recognized names in the field of theatre, so their commentaries or tastes, influence and guide the public's taste. Therefore they are considered authoritative. One may also conclude that because they are considered authorities, they serve as creators and recorders of trends and history. Accuracy is then difficult to definitively assess but some expectation of it can be assumed.

CHAPTER 1

SEPTEMBER 1991-AUGUST 2000

Mr. Raccoon and Neverland were the world premiere plays at The Coterie Theatre during the 1991-92 season. Jeff Church, the company artistic director, commissioned both works specifically for The Coterie. The theatre company had long had a tradition of including world premieres on its season. But these plays were the first to enjoy the distinction of “commissioned” world premieres.

The first play, Mr. Raccoon, was adapted by Lisa Cordes from a book of bedtime stories written by former U. S. senator Eugene McCarthy: Mr. Raccoon and His Friends. It had its first world premiere performance on April 28 and ran through May 24 of 1992 (Wickman, “Get a move on!”).

Jeff Church had already written a scenario for the adaptation a long time ago . . . so the adaptation is based on the book, plus Jeff’s treatment . . .” Lisa Cordes explained. “I decided what his book had to say wasn’t so much about politics but about coexistence . . . about this community of animals trying to govern itself and they have to surmount all of these problems of coexistence and, ultimately . . . achieve a single goal in order to survive. I thought that was a pretty important lesson to pass on.

Lisa Cordes went on to say that the play was not only in response to McCarthy’s book, which he created for his own children, but also who he was as a political visionary, poet and naturalist. She felt the character of Mr. Raccoon was Eugene McCarthy and this was an equally important historical lesson to pass on. “if kids think this play’s about politics, that’s great . . . you know what politics is . . . coexisting together in harmony” (Trussell, “‘Raccoon’ embodies”). Not only would Mr. Raccoon be celebrated as a world premiere but it would also provide The Coterie with an opportunity to raise funds.

Eugene McCarthy travelled to Kansas City that April to attend the world premiere of his play and promote a new edition of his book. He was the guest of honor at a reception and dinner to celebrate the premiere and raise money for The Coterie. The benefit featured a reception at a private south Kansas City residence and dinner at the Classic Cup on the Country Club Plaza. An excerpt of the play was performed at the reception to applause and warm laughter. “There’s only one thing that can save you now” explains the Dilemma Beast to Mr. Raccoon just after the animals declare him mayor, “the viable alternative” (Lambe, “McCarthy mystique”). The play and the benefit were both great successes. Kansas City Theatre critic Robert Trussell described the play as “skillfully staged by The Coterie’s artistic director, Jeff Church” and “an enjoyably wistful show that can be appreciated on a literal level by younger children and by their parents for the insights it brings to the political process” (Eisele, “Give three cheers”). This successful first “commissioned world premiere” paved the way for the next: Neverland.

The Adventures of Peter Pan & Wendy: Neverland was the next main-stage production to hit The Coterie stage that year. It made its premiere in mid-June and ran until mid-July. The play was adapted by Patricia Ludwick from the J.M. Barrie classic and while the content remains the same, director Jeff Church reimagined the staging. Brad Shaw’s neon-colored, environmental set included a trampoline, a trapeze, gymnastic rings and monkey bars. Together with Church’s frenetic staging, it made good use of The Coterie’s limited playing area (Eisele, “There’s never been”). “We designed the production around the abilities of some of the actors,” Church explained. “When Peter gets his shadow back, he performs a series of stunts on the trampoline.” There were also times throughout the play when the characters flew not by the use of wires and pulleys but by mounting miniature

replicas of each character to the tips of long sticks that each actor illuminated by flashlight (Trussell, “Coterie’s ‘Pan’”). All in all it was a very contemporary and popular retelling of the story.

Mr. Raccoon and Neverland were the first two in a long line of commissioned world premieres at The Coterie. At this point, Jeff Church was only two years into his tenure as the company’s artistic director but, with these firsts, he was breaking new ground in Kansas City theatre for young audiences. He would continue to forge this path with the next world premiere: *Oliver Twist* in January of 1993.

Terry O’Reagan, a frequent actor with The Coterie as well as other Kansas City theater companies at the time, adapted the bare bones play that was touted as both “remarkably audacious and theatrical.” For this depiction of 1830s London, Jeff Church assembled a mix of professional actors and third-year graduate students from the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) Department of Theatre. The mix was said to be “one of the strongest ensemble casts theatergoers are likely to encounter at The Coterie or elsewhere.” Jeff Church’s imaginative staging, Brad Shaw’s utilitarian set design of wooden ramps and platforms and Patrick Shanahan’s wild costumes created “an engaging work designed to stimulate the imagination.” But the performances were said to have been the real show. Cast members played multiple roles, and their ability to sharply delineate the characters in a little over an hour’s time was impressive. Theatre critic Robert Trussell closed his review: “this is a remarkable production. The images, the commitment to convincing drama and the sheer talent on stage give viewers much to relive after the house lights come up” (Trussell, “A memorable ‘*Oliver Twist*’”).

With this production Jeff Church once again partnered with the UMKC Professional Theatre Training Program to cast a Coterie production. This partnership would continue to grow over the coming years. It would offer the students in the program another theatrical venue within which to gain professional experience. Church was not only establishing The Coterie as a willing participant in the growth and training of new actors but as stimulator in the growth of the Kansas City artistic community. Many of these students would remain in Kansas City after graduation to continue to build their careers. It would not be long before a stronger theatrical community would emerge, for Church also brought former friends and colleagues to The Coterie to design. The costume designer on *Oliver Twist*, Patrick Shanahan, is just one example.

Jeff Church met Patrick Shanahan when they were both students at Colorado College. Shanahan said that when Church called him about designing he jumped at the chance. The costumes were a bit more grim than those of the popular movie musical. Shanahan said that he welcomed the challenge to explore a darker side of Dickens's England. "I approached it more like a Brecht play or a realistic drama of very poor people" (Trussell, "Costume designing with a 'Twist'"). Shanahan's contribution to *Oliver Twist* certainly added to its popularity and success but it also demonstrated that Jeff Church was proving to be a theatrical entrepreneur: an artistic director with an eye always on the future and one who possessed a keen sense of how to build a company and a community to serve it. Twelve months later Robert Trussell, Kansas City's theatre critic, would say this: "The Coterie again confirmed its place as perhaps the most adventurous theater in town with . . . *Oliver Twist*, a creative adaptation of the Charles Dickens novel that made good use of several UMKC graduate acting students" (Trussell, "Not bad but"). But before this end of

the year theater review would hit the streets, The Coterie would bring two more world premieres to the stage: *Wolf Child* and *Blazing the Outback*.

Wolf Child: The Correction of Joseph, The Coterie's third commissioned world premiere, would open March 9 and run through April 4, 1993. The play would be well attended and earn good reviews. But the development of the play was as interesting as the production itself.

In November of 1992, the play was in development, at the University of Texas Theatre Department. As part of the development ten actors were assembled to participate in a workshop which included a visit to the home of a couple who owned two hybrid wolves. It would be essential for the actors to have interaction with the wolves as the author, Edward A. Mast, had used as a basis for the play one of the most enduring myths associated with wolves: the notion that they have raised children in the wild. One of the actors would recall that "the specificity of the (actors') physicalization of the wolves was so much more precise after working with them . . . wolves have their own specific behaviors" (Trussell, "Taming the wild child"). Now, fast forward to March of 1993. The play was in rehearsal at The Coterie and the author explained what was gained through the Texas development workshop.

My first idea was that it was going to be from the boy's point of view . . . More and more it's become a play about education—that there is more than one way to civilize a cat, as it were. And what happens in the play is that the boy is educated without any real regard for what is individual and unique about him . . . It's much more a play about how an education process can suppress uniqueness, can suppress the value of the individual . . . That's the theme that developed." Mast would go on to say that he admires theaters like the Coterie that tend to shy away from the traditional fairy-tale-bunny-suit type of theater for young people. "There are ideas...that I can pursue, particularly at a place like the Coterie, that doesn't condescend. (Trussell, "Taming the wild child")

Clearly Jeff Church had his finger on the pulse of evolving trends in American theatre for young audiences with his commission of *Wolf Child*. The author, Edward A. Mast, who had two previous works produced at The Coterie, *The Jungle Book* in 1987 and *Dinosaurius* in 1991, was a proven playwright. To commission a work from such a playwright helped to establish Church as a driving force within the national young audiences' community. Over time, this national distinction would continue to nurture the future he envisioned for The Coterie. Meanwhile, he would continue to lay the groundwork by strengthening the Kansas City young audiences' community. The next world premiere at The Coterie, *Blazing the Outback*, is proof of this point.

Marlo Morgan, a Lee's Summit chiropractor, adapted *Blazing the Outback* from her controversial book *Mutant Message Downunder*. She starred in a limited run of the one-woman story performance, "each Monday and Saturday through March at The Coterie." The performance, directed by Jeff Church, was Morgan's story of how she gained spiritual enlightenment as Australian Aborigines led her on a 1,400 mile trip across the outback. The truthfulness of her account had been called into question in 1992 when the book was published. Many claimed her anthropological depictions were off the mark and thus doubt was cast upon the educational value of the book. In an official statement Church said, "Morgan's tale is so remarkable that its veracity has been questioned. I think, however, no one has questioned the fact that her story contains a lovely, thought-provoking message" (Trussell, "Controversial tale"). And, as Robert Trussell pointed out in his review,

And to be honest, it's tough to imagine the mild-mannered and middle-aged Morgan being hardy enough to handle a four-month trek through the outback, surviving on insects and leaves . . . But this is story-theater, not nature documentary. Whether Morgan experienced any aspect of the story she relates, she tells an absorbing tale. (Trussell, "Be it fact or fiction")

Further, he agreed with Jeff Church about the message, “we are all one with the universe and that we should respect even the most lowly creatures, not to mention our fellow human beings . . . Nothing wrong with that ecologically sound message—even if she made it all up” (Trussell, “Be it fact or fiction”).

The world premiere of *Blazing the Outback*, was a savvy move for The Coterie on several levels. The author was from the area and the controversy that the book stirred could not but pique the public’s interest in the performance and thus boost ticket sales. At the same time, because of the controversy, there was risk in producing the story. It seems apparent that Jeff Church felt the message outweighed the risk. Yet, the decision to produce the piece had one more benefit: it opened the doors of The Coterie to other local artists in the community. The production of Morgan’s story-telling play was a signal that Jeff Church was open to the discovery of new works for young audiences from diverse sources—his adopted hometown included. It would be January of 1994 before another world premiere graced The Coterie stage but Church’s “open door” would bring an adaptation by a distinguished member of the Kansas City theatre community.

The Pearl, John Steinbeck’s timeless parable of a poor Mexican fisherman who finds a pearl that he hopes will be the answer to his prayers but which instead tangles him in a web of greed, was adapted from the novel by Dale AJ Rose, director of performance training for the UMKC professional actor training program. Rose reworked a reader’s theatre version he had written previously that incorporated storytelling techniques. Church said, “So we have his version, which is very interesting . . . It’s almost classical . . . We’ve kept so much of the Steinbeck language and it’s amazing.” Church would also comment on another key contributor to the production: Louis Colaianni, resident vocal coach at Missouri Repertory

Theatre. “He has helped us with the style of the voices in the play because you almost have to hear the muscle in the words of Steinbeck’s language” (Trussell, “Steinbeck tale opens”).

Although the review of the play was “mixed,” it seems the reason Church chose to produce the play was exactly what the reviewer observed and admired about the young artistic director. “In his tenure as The Coterie’s artistic director, Church has admirably sought to expand the boundaries of the young-audiences theater company by offering unconventional material and imaginative staging ideas . . .but (this time) technique overshadows narrative and meaning” (Trussell, “Dramatic luster”). Yes, the adaptation was unconventional but Church was not only expanding the boundaries of Coterie but also expanding the boundaries of the audience. By exposing them to new styles outside of their comfort zone, Church was, in fact, teaching the audience to accept the unconventional as conventional. Such uncomfortable lessons are not easily learned in one sitting but, rather, gleaned in steps over time. One might offer that the production of *The Pearl* was just another step.

Following *The Pearl* were three, back-to-back, “commissioned” world premieres in 1994: *The Hobbit*, *The Very First Family*, and *Oz*. Commissioned works take time and must be planned, sometimes, years in advance. Choosing what material is appropriate, not to mention matching that material to a particular playwright may take days, weeks often months. Even if the play is submitted to The Coterie, as was *The Very First Family*, making a choice of this sort takes great care and deliberation. So it is to Jeff Church’s credit that three such commissions, in succession, fell together in one season.

The Hobbit was a new adaptation by playwright Ed Mast. It premiered at The Coterie in March. While not given a formal review, the show was written up in a Kansas

City Star March 27 general theatre article by Robert Trussell. He gave kudos to Mast's admirable adaptation of Tolkien's tale of dwarves, magicians and dragons as well as his well-crafted dialogue. He also commended the co-directors', Jeff Church and Sidonie Garrett, inventive staging and use of the confined performance space. The notable performances of William Harper and George Mount were given particular mention as well as the wild and wonderful costumes by Patrick Shanahan (Trussell. "Stage veterans"). It would seem that *The Hobbit* was another very successful commissioned world premiere for The Coterie theatre. Jeff Church's planning was producing tangible results. Immediately following *The Hobbit* came the premiere of *The Very First Family*.

Loosely based on the stories of Rudyard Kipling, *The Very First Family* had its premiere in May. It featured a Neolithic family and their fanciful dreams. Central to the play is the budding romance between a prehistoric girl and boy who hold no language in common and must communicate through pictographs. This commissioned world premiere was a musical by Florida playwright Phillip Hall. Hall was born and raised in Florida and studied English and theatre at the University of South Florida where he met the director of the play Dale AJ Rose. Jeff Church commissioned the play after reading a shortened version that Hall had submitted to the theatre. Hall, a talented songwriter, provided the play with an "infectious calypso-flavored score." Rose had fun directing a talented cast that included Danny Cox and Karen Cline-Wright. Howard Jones deployed his considerable talents to grace the production with an exceptional prehistoric set design (Trussell. "Irish award winner").

The Very First Family, a submission turned commission, proved a delightful asset to the growing list of Coterie world premieres. It also served to demonstrate how skillful Jeff Church was in mining the artistic talents of a diverse group of Kansas City theatre

professionals. The cast, director and designer were, at the time, some of the most well respected theatre artists in the city. Church's skill was further demonstrated throughout the third offering in the "commissioned" trilogy: Oz.

Patrick Shanahan wrote Oz, which was a new twist on the famous L. Frank Baum tale The Wizard of Oz. The play debuted in June and was a unique look at how the author created the classic (Trussell. "Oh my, what to do"). The premise of the play depicts the author's struggle to find the narrative and the characters of his story. He is aided by a little girl named Dot. Together with the housekeeper, they work out the key scenes. What the audience found most engaging was the way in which household objects were used as props within the scenes. A bear rug became the Cowardly Lion's mane and the Scarecrow was just a lampstand with a birdcage. It was said that the actor portraying Baum received a "phenomenal aerobic workout" in the role. In fact he played all of the choice roles: Lion, Scarecrow, Tin Man and Wizard at a "breakneck speed with sustained energy" (Trussell. "It's a hard workout").

Jeff Church commissioned Oz from Patrick Shanahan who also created the costumes for The Coterie productions of Oliver Twist and The Hobbit. Church also cast actor William Harper in the role of Baum. Harper was a veteran of many previous Coterie productions. With these decisions Church was once again making use of multi-talented Kansas City theatre professionals. But, more than that, he was growing and evolving them as theatre artists. Shanahan became a playwright and Harper was able to portray an array of diverse characters. Thus, these three commissioned world premieres, The Hobbit, The Very First Family, and Oz, while adding to The Coterie's commercial and artistic success, also proved

that Jeff Church opened doors of opportunity for Kansas City theatre artists to practice and enrich their craft.

In December of 1994, The Coterie presented the world premiere of *The Little Prince*. The play was adapted by Jeff Church from the famous story by Antoine de Saint Exupery. Church also directed the production that was described as “ambitious,” “impressive” and “handsome.” Good acting and exciting visual effects were also said to have excited the audience of prepubescent viewers, yet critic Robert Trussell thought it a bit dull. *The Little Prince* which this year replaced The Coterie’s annual production of *Winnie-the-Pooh* was perhaps too ambitious a choice for an audience used to its traditional offering (Trussell. “If we can’t sit still”). Audiences and critics become resistant to change even when it might have been in their best interest.

Still, when one looks at The Coterie 1993-94 season in review, one cannot help but notice that it was a stellar year for world premieres. There were four of them to be exact: *The Pearl*, *The Hobbit*, *The Very First Family* and *Oz*. *The Little Prince* was the only world premiere of the 1994-95 season. But the 1995-96 season would include five world premieres, two of which were commissioned: *Alicia in Wonder Tierra*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Across the Plains*, *Anne Frank and Me* and *A Wrinkle in Time*. *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* opened the season which The Coterie self-titled “A Coterie of Cultures.” From the titles it is apparent that the season had a theme.

Sylvia Gonzalez S. the Oregon based author of *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* was born in the San Fernando Valley to Mexican immigrant parents. She described the play as a combination of the absurd antics of *Alice in Wonderland* and the enchanting travels of *The Wizard of Oz*. Gonzalez S. originally wrote *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* for adults but

refashioned it for a younger audience and submitted it to the Kennedy Center which, at the time, was seeking plays and ideas for scripts aimed at young audiences. To her surprise she received a staged reading. Jeff Church attended the staged reading and thought it a perfect opening production for “A Coterie of Cultures” season. Church then applied for a grant to fund the production and The Coterie was awarded more than \$71,000 from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest New Works Young Audiences Fund (Trussell. “Only her subconscious”). The grant helped to bring Jose Cruz Gonzalez, director of the South Coast Repertory’s Hispanic Playwright’s Project, to Kansas City to direct the production.

Alicia in Wonder Tierra premiered in October of 1995. It was the story of the cultural awakening of Alicia, a typical American teenager with no interest in her Mexican heritage. When she and her mother visit a curio shop full of Mexican crafts, Alicia breaks a piece of pottery. She then descends into a nether world of puppets that come to life, horny toads and talking armadillos. With Ramon, a marionette in vaquero attire, Alicia visits the Distorted Memory Forest, the Tree of Stereotypes, the Maze of Velvet Paintings, an Aztec temple and encounters a variety of creatures including a talking skull, a cactus man and a ventriloquist. Phillip blue owl Hooser and Richard Augustine were singled out for their inventive performances as were the designers: Howard Jones, set; Linda K. Myers, costumes; Art Kent, lights and Greg Mackender, sound, for creating an indelible atmosphere” (Trussell. “Retelling rivals bizarreness”).

Though none of the research surrounding this play pinpoints an exact date for the Kennedy Center staged reading of Alicia in Wonder Tierra, it is obvious from the bits of information contained within, that a length of months or perhaps a year or more passed between the reading and the premiere. Grants are submitted on a strict schedule and awarded

on one as well. The grant would also have to be received and used within a specified length of time. So, the timing of when and how the play would be produced had to have been in development for almost two years. It is readily apparent that Jeff Church must be in a constant state of development. This means he is always accepting new works, searching for works to commission and writing grants for The Coterie. Jeff Church is always preparing for the future.

Finally, it would be unfair to ignore the diversity of the esteemed Kansas City and visiting theatre artists that Jeff Church assembled to produce *Alicia in Wonder Tierra*. His vision of multicultural programming was firmly rooted in this choice. Once again the names were locally and nationally recognized professionals but with an emphasis on diversity. With this one production, Jeff Church raised the cultural stature and national presence of The Coterie by assembling collaborators of this caliber. He would continue this practice with the next world premiere: *Green Eggs and Ham*. Church would produce it first as a “museum piece” and then present it along with other selections in a longer stage version at The Coterie.

Robert Kapilow, the composer and musical commentator who became a favorite of Kansas City’s Friends of Chamber Music with his series “What Makes it Great,” scored *Green Eggs and Ham* for “soprano and boy soprano and nine instrumentalists . . .” In late November, this concert version was conducted by Kapilow, directed by Jeff Church and produced by the Nelson Gallery in Atkins Auditorium. It was presented in tandem with the fully staged production of *Green Eggs and Ham* that was running at The Coterie. The “museum piece” featured actor Andy Gilchrist and soprano Rebecca Lloyd. These

performers were also heard in a musical version of the play that had just been released on a “Koch International compact disc (3-8900-2)” (Cantrell. “Silence greets news”).

The production of *Green Eggs and Ham* at The Coterie was the first fully staged version of Kapilow’s musical. It was based on the 1960 Dr. Seuss classic, about an impish youngster who tries to convince a grumpy grown-up to sample a plate of said breakfast. The theatre company was lucky to be able to do the material because the only other authorized theatrical adaptation of a Dr. Seuss book was a 1994 production of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* staged by the Children’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis. International Creative Management, the “gatekeeper” for all Seuss adaptations, granted The Coterie rare permission to not only produce Kapilow’s concert version but to present, along with it, an adaptation of the 1961 Seuss story: *What Was I Scared Of?*. This story served as a curtain raiser performed by actor Walter Coppage as a frightened Sneetch pursued by a pair of green pants. But that is not all. Sandwiched between the two Seuss stories was an interactive family workshop hosted by Coppage, who emphasized the “try-it-you-might-like-it” moral of *Green Eggs and Ham*. Jeff Church put these three pieces together and, by doing so, blazed a trail for other theatre companies. He commented that “I’ve already had offers to direct it in Louisville and other places” (McTavish. “Where would you eat”).

Church approached the direction of Kapilow’s piece as a complete musical experience.

Let’s face it, this is basically a children’s opera. . . This is what I think is going to be influential in the children’s theater industry . . . We set movement to every measure of that music. It’s the closest thing I’ve done to ballet. When I direct it elsewhere, I will use this as a blueprint of movement.

The cast and crew of Green Eggs and Ham demonstrated his commitment to this idea. Besides actor Walter Coppage playing roles in parts one and two of the play, soprano Rebecca Lloyd played the grumpy adult in the musical third. Church explained, “Rebecca is a very legitimate, up-and-coming, important soprano in the city” (McTavish. “Where would you eat”). The role of Sam-I-Am was shared by Andy Gilchrist and Milton Abel II. Both Gilchrist and Abel were no strangers to the stage either. They had been seen in Missouri Repertory Theatre’s A Christmas Carol as well as previous Coterie productions but Milt’s father was local jazz legend Milt Abel. Milt said, “It’s kinda like all types of music . . . and that’s a real neat sound . . . It’s very groovy” (White “Coterie’s ‘Eggs and Ham’”). So the cast of the production was dramatically and musically strong. Yet, with puppets and gizmos created by Paul Mesner, an up-and-coming local puppeteer, Church had created another production full of Kansas City professional theatre artists. However there is one more point that has come to light with this production. The most surprising part of the whole Green Eggs and Ham endeavor is that Jeff Church was sowing the seeds of what would become The Coterie Lab For New Family Musicals. It would be a decade before he would found this arm of The Coterie theatre but what he accomplished with this production would serve him well in the future.

January of 1996 brought the world premiere of Across the Plains to The Coterie stage. The play was commissioned of Missouri playwright Sandra Fenichel Asher and was a recreation of the travails suffered by a real-life family as they made their way west along the Oregon and California Trails. It was adapted from the diary and letters of 12-year-old Virginia Reed. Virginia becomes the narrator of the play and her excitement at the beginning of the great adventure quickly turns to “fear, horror and anger” as her father accidentally

kills a man and is banished from the wagon train, which leads her and her mother to become stranded in the mountains without food. There is a daring rescue in the end but the reviewer felt that the direction by Amie Brockway made the play “very dull.” He did say that the cast had its moments and made particular mention of Kelly McMahan, who portrayed Margaret Reed, as having turned in “a good performance” (Trussell. “Across the Plains”). In any theatre season it is always quite difficult to follow a highly inventive and successful production with one that will live up to or exceed its predecessor. Green Eggs and Ham created large shoes to fill. Would any production short of another Seuss have sufficed? It is hard to say and leaves one to wonder whether more objective eyes would have found the positives Jeff Church discovered and thought worthy of The Coterie audience. Yet, to be fair, it is well-known that not every play is a winner. If that is the case with Across the Plains, the following world premiere, more than held its own against Green Eggs and Ham.

Jeff Church directed *Anne Frank and Me* which made its professional debut in March, 1996. The play was written by Cherie Bennett with Jeff Gottesfeld and addressed the ignorance and denial of the Holocaust—a rising and popular belief at the time. Church produced it in partnership with the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education. Bennett and Gottesfeld were husband and wife, but it was Bennett who wrote the script and Gottesfeld who did the historical research that surrounded the play.

While participating in a survey of Nashville schools sponsored by the Tennessee Holocaust Commission, Gottesfeld found that a third of participating students hadn’t heard of Anne Frank; seventy-five percent didn’t know millions of Jews were slaughtered and fifty percent couldn’t identify the death camps of Auschwitz or Dachau. Because of these results, Bennett decided to begin the story of the play with a girl named Nicole who was just like the

contemporary audience. Nicole, wasn't the "prettiest or ugliest, the smartest or the dumbest." She had a crush on a guy at school and was assigned *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Nicole also echoes her parents' doubts that the Holocaust took place. After suffering a blow to the head, she is transported through time and awakes to find herself a member of a Jewish family in WW II Paris. As the play goes on, the realities of Jewish persecution become painfully clear to Nicole. She meets Anne Frank on a train bound for the death camps (Trussell. "Couple brings reality").

Anne Frank and Me was very well received as several local Kansas City schools attended and the students' and teachers' reactions were highlighted in newspaper articles that appeared during the run (Adler. "The reality of Anne Frank"). After each Sunday performance, The Midwest Center for Holocaust Education arranged for Holocaust survivors to discuss their experiences (Trussell. "Couple brings reality"). There was also a run of the play display at The Coterie which represented the 20,000 children killed at the Treblinka death camp. Students from Beth Shalom and Ohev Shalom synagogues as well as other area schools participated in coloring the figures. When the play closed the display moved to the Jewish Community Campus (City Star. "Remember them").

It is very interesting to note the number of events that coincided with the play: the partnership with the Holocaust center, the Sunday post-show discussions, published audience reaction and the Treblinka display. Preparation and coordination, as pointed out earlier, takes time. Again, months of development must have gone into this production. The community outreach efforts alone would have made a full-time job. Jeff Church explained the theatre's efforts were well worth what would be gained, "Holocaust denial is not the greatest problem . . . The grave problem is Holocaust apathy and ignorance" (Adler. "The

reality of Anne Frank”). Many Coterie plays yet to be produced would receive this style and synthesis of effort and each time one did, the Kansas City community would be richer for it.

Coyote Mischief Tales was written by Philip blue owl Hooser who was the perfect playwright for The Coterie’s next “commissioned” world premiere. Hooser was a member of the Choctaw nation. The play, directed by Jeff Church, featured Coyote, a trickster who told centuries-old American Indian stories with a modern twist. His entertaining tricks lead to lessons or “medicine.” “It’s good medicine because it makes you laugh,” explained Church. In one story Coyote searches for a new name. In another, he loses an eye and receives the loan of one from a buffalo. Throughout, Coyote gets himself into all sorts of trouble and his elaborate plans to rescue himself backfire. The American Indian “medicine wheel,” an important aspect of their culture, was the inspiration for the setting. Designed by Hooser, the space was reconfigured into a theatre in the round. The round shape was authentic to American Indian storytelling tradition and also symbolized the circle of life that they live by. Hooser also helped to design the costumes and performed in the show (Rizzo, Margaret Schmitz. “A mystical, mischievous adventure”). Then in November, it was reported that Coyote Mischief Tales would be produced in November of 1997 at the Smithsonian Institution’s Discovery Theatre; Hooser would direct and use his designs first seen at The Coterie (Trussell. “Revived Quality Hill”). The national profile and influence of The Coterie on theatre for young audiences was definitely on the rise with this news. This was only Jeff Church’s fifth season as artistic director and he seemed to be taking the world of children’s theatre by storm. He would bring the 1995-96 season to a close in July with yet another commissioned world premiere: A Wrinkle in Time.

Edward Mast, who had written and/or adapted other plays produced at The Coterie, also adapted this version of *A Wrinkle in Time*—a book by Madeleine L'Engle. The story is about two children who travel through time to find their father who has encountered difficulties in his top-secret scientific work. They are assisted by two bag ladies, each of whom possesses very specialized information about the relationship between time and space. The play sounds very engaging but once again the review was mixed. The reviewer enjoyed good performances from Kurtis Armstrong, Sidonie Garrett, Karolyn Grimes Wilkerson and the children Milton Abel and Loretta Ross. But he felt that Mast mixed scientific mumbo-jumbo with serious childhood issues and unsatisfactory attempts at humor. He felt the play was not fully developed and left the actors in the end awkward and tense (Trussell. “*Wrinkle in Time*”). While this particular play may not have hit the mark, it would seem that the number of commissioned and world premiere successes during Jeff Church’s five seasons far outweighed the flops. One can take it as a sign that The Coterie was indeed on the rise. However, it would be more than a year before another commissioned world premiere would find its way to The Coterie stage. It was Lisa Cordes’ *Little House Christmas at Plum Creek*.

Lisa Cordes not only wrote the stage adaptation of the Laura Ingalls Wilder book, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, she also directed the production which had its debut in November of 1997. Cordes had previously adapted many successful stories and plays for The Coterie to great success. This particular production was commissioned on the strength of the previous year’s sold-out holiday offering: *Little House Christmas* (Rizzo. “*Christmas like it used to be*”). Cordes’ sequel, *Little House Christmas at Plum Creek*, seemed exactly what the theatre company was looking for—another Kansas City tradition comparable to Missouri

Repertory Theatre's A Christmas Carol. The play depicts the neighborly visits paid to the Ingalls cabin on Christmas Eve and a blizzard that separates Pa Ingalls from his family. The message was clear: "We don't need 'stuff' to appreciate the important things in life" (Trussell. "'Little House'" gives the gift").

Cordes staged Little House Christmas at Plum Creek on the same one-room set used the previous year and the actresses playing the Wilder sisters Laura and Mary, Samantha Barrett and Hilary Clemens, returned to take up where they had left off. Cordes' two children, Emma and Sam, also had roles in the production as the children of neighboring families. Ma and Pa Ingalls were played by Anne Dillon and Kevin Fewell, Kansas City theatre professionals who were on the rise during this time. A lovely sense of nostalgia for the simplicity of the past seemed to be evoked by this play. At a time when the internet, cell phones and computers were shaping the future, to view a play that advocated "no holiday gifts," playing in a shopping mall during the busiest retail sales time of the year, was amazing (Trussell. "'Little House'" gives the gift"). Much has been said about the world premiere plays staged at The Coterie and how they were contributing to the national identity of the theatre company, but those plays were also fulfilling the mission as well. The premieres told diverse cultural stories not only about who we were at the time but who we would like to be. Little House Christmas at Plum Creek was one more example of a Coterie world premiere that served a dual duty.

There were many more exciting plays on the 1996-97 season as well as the next in 1997-98. But The Coterie would not stage another world premiere until the 20th Anniversary season of 1998-99. That season was titled "Great Books/Banned Books: Celebrate the Freedom to Read" and would include three premieres: the world premiere of Mark Twain on

Mondays, the commissioned world premiere of *Little House Christmas* in the Indian Territory and an American premiere of *Lord of the Flies*. The story of these three plays begins with the courageous title of the season.

Armed with a \$20,000 grant from The National Endowment for the Arts, The Coterie opened its 20th Anniversary season in October of 1998 to coincide with America's Banned Book Awareness Week. Artistic director Jeff Church would explain the season title in this way, "We're doing a banned-book season and people wonder, does this mean we're doing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*? No, we're doing material that would be appropriate for The Coterie to do within our mission." When asked how he chose what to present on the theatre's season, Church had this to say, "I personally was shocked at the amount of choice I had once I decided to do a banned-book season . . . There were hundreds of titles to choose from." He would go on to further comment that he believes children are best served by giving them access to books and theater.

We're in a protectionist era but to ban a classic gets you nowhere . . . Librarians are on the firing line of groups that . . . think that taking the book away is some sort of favor to their kids and that these books in some way are irresponsible. In fact the books are actually the most humanizing thing you can give your child.

When asked if he considered removing the controversial elements of his choices, Church replied, "I will not tell you it's not a risk to program this material," but he said he never considered removing a word, "because they're integral to the plot." Finally, Kevin Dowd, president of the Greater Kansas City Coalition Against Censorship would applaud The Coterie season, "I like what Jeff and those folks are doing down there. They could take the easy way out and still do fine plays" (Trussell, "The Coterie: uncensored").

With titles that included: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men* and *Free to Be ... You and Me*, The Coterie season of “Great Books/Banned Books: Celebrate the Freedom to Read” looked to be very exciting indeed. That being said, the three plays that would premiere alongside them, played a significant role in the success of this remarkable season. *Mark Twain on Mondays* would be the first to debut. Cal Printer, chairman of the UMKC theater department would be featured in this solo performance piece that would be scheduled on selected Mondays throughout the fall. The show incorporated readings from Twain’s writings including *Huckleberry Finn*, which had been repeatedly banned since its publication in 1885 and its first ban in Concord, Massachusetts, as “trash and suitable only for the slums.” Though now considered a classic, the book’s repeated challenges point to Twain’s focus on racial epithets and his depiction of Jim, the adult slave who accompanies Huck down the Mississippi (Trussell. “Coterie puts banned books on stage”). How appropriate it was to include a Twain selection so generously sprinkled throughout the beginning of the banned-book season. The next premiere was another “*Little House*” commission from actress/playwright/director Lisa Cordes, just in time for Christmas.

Ticket sales were brisk for *Little House Christmas in the Indian Territory*, which made its debut at The Coterie that November of 1998. In a *Kansas City Star* article, Amy Tonyes, a spokeswoman for the theatre company explained it in this way, “People really respond to the pioneer lifestyle and what it was like in a simpler time.” The article also went on to explain that in the early 1990s, Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* was banned in a Sturgis, South Dakota, elementary school and challenged at Lafourche Parish elementary school libraries in Thibodaux, Louisiana, because of a comment made by a character in the book about Native Americans. Tonyes would explain,

It is obviously the way he [the character] feels about Native Americans, but not how the book feels about them. This is something that Laura Ingalls Wilder would have been proud of . . . It accurately reflects the book. It almost brings the book alive. (Rizzo. "What's hot: Midtown production")

It is hard to imagine that a "Little House" book would be banned anywhere. The popularity of the television program alone would have made one think Wilder's books to be on every library's "best suggested" list. Robert Trussell's review of the production provided some additional insight into its "banned" rationale.

Trussell wrote that Cordes's second adaptation of a book by Wilder, *Little House Christmas in the Indian Territory*, "is a sparse, elliptical work whose low-key approach sneaks up on the viewer . . . is less a conventional narrative than it is a sort of mood piece that approaches poetry." The play was directed by Jeff Church and staged with simplicity, which produced a "refreshing, unassuming production" with many admirable qualities. The story of the play is told in flashback. The Ingalls family are living in Kansas near an old trail heavily trafficked by various American Indian tribes. The family is visited one day by an Osage who attempts to communicate in French. Although he and Pa Ingalls share no common language, they have a sociable few minutes together. The proximity of the "savages" is more the unease of the neighbor Mrs. James who fears and distrusts them because of a bloody encounter in Minnesota. Pa believes there is no difference between white settlers and indigenous peoples and while Ma and Mary are unsure, Laura is fascinated by the Indians and welcomes contact with them. While Trussell credited the entire cast, which included Kansas City actors Brian Paulette, Teri Adams, Robert Asante and Gail Bronfman, with portrayals notable for their directness and clarity (Trussell. "Homespun 'Little House'"), it was the girls who shared the role of Laura Ingalls, Margaret

May and Lauren Lindsey, who received the spotlight in another newspaper article about the play in late December. The article would also mention that the girls might have a chance to perform in the production again when the play toured to Emporia, Kansas, in April of 1999 (Bigus. "Girls share lead"). Following the next production at The Coterie in January/February, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, was the American premiere of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. This was yet another impressive title that graced the 20th Anniversary season "Great Books/Banned Books: Celebrate the Freedom to Read" and one that might be seen as the most courageous choice on the slate.

Lord of the Flies was the United States premiere of Nigel Williams' adaptation of William Golding's novel for the Royal Shakespeare Company. The Coterie cast included area professionals, students from the University of Missouri-Kansas City theatre department and local high schools. Williams' adaptation was said to have been every bit as unsettling, sobering and haunting as the novel which depicts a group of English school boys stranded on an island after a plane crash struggling with the impulses of the civilized and the savage. In keeping with Golding's intentions, director Jeff Church and his cast "conspire . . . to create a microcosm of society in which we view the boys not as children but as little adults" which makes the tale all the more harrowing. Church aided the conspiracy with the help of some fine performances and several months' work with Louis Colaianni, Missouri Repertory Theatre's resident voice coach. The rewards were "significant." The actors spoke in several credible British accents and though the production was an ensemble effort, several standout performances were mentioned: Zach Christman's Jack, Erik Wetz's Ralph, Kyle Lamont Cooper's Piggy and James Robert Lendman's Roger (Trussell. "Transcendent"). A

subsequent Kansas City Star article written by a “Teen Star” reporter revealed some interesting peer impressions about this Coterie American premiere.

The first thing one notices walking into the theater is the impressive set erected by resident designer Eliza Cain. This jumble of steel is used during the entire play and is an example of brilliant design, believable as plane wreckage at first and later as part of a mountain. (McDaniel. “Coterie captures”)

Kevin McDaniel, TeenStar reporter and Rockhurst High School junior, would also mention the acting was strong and singled out the same actors as his adult compatriot Robert Trussell, although he also noted that Kyle Lamont Cooper was making his professional acting debut. Overall, McDaniel very much appreciated the production’s attention to detail from the dusty clothing to the difference in British and American military salutes. He went on to say,

Church and his cast have done well to capture the theme of the play and end up with a very moving product. This 75-minute journey into the chaos at the heart of humanity is well worth the time, both to those familiar with the novel and those who are not. (McDaniel. “Coterie captures”)

This review by a member of the target audience Jeff Church and cast were performing for not only demonstrates just how successful the production was but how courageous a choice as well. Church cannily understood that producing such challenging material for young audiences who were struggling with the same moral and ethical questions as the characters would be a tough lesson the audience might find difficult to accept. What is evident is that he found the right balance of compelling story and characters through a first-rate adaptation, mixed them with a highly experienced production team and sprinkled the cast with professional and local talent with whom every audience member could identify. Jeff Church was closing in on his tenth year as the artistic director of The Coterie and it is clear that he knew his audience well.

Lord of the Flies was not the final production of that amazing “Banned Books” season but it was the final play labeled a “world premiere.” That it was also an American world premiere is of note as well. Jeff Church seemed to be widening his reference base with regard to new works. He was now searching globally and the play would hold the distinction of several “firsts.” Yes, it was the first U.S. professional premiere of the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford upon Avon production of the play. However, of more significance to this document is the fact that Lord of the Flies was the first American premiere of a play in the history of The Coterie theatre. The play was a very strong debut to a list of plays that would include many equally impressive titles in the future but it was the 1999-2000 season that would bring a controversial commissioned world premiere that would thrust The Coterie into the national spotlight. The play was *The Wrestling Season* by Laurie Brooks Gollobin (who now writes under the name of Laurie Brooks).

In late January of 2000, the first media buzz for the play began with a newspaper article that introduced The Coterie production of *The Wrestling Season* as addressing homophobia, peer pressure, sexual harassment and violence within a group of high school students. It stated that MOCSA (Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault) would conduct workshops in schools before and after performances and The Coterie would provide interactive post-show forums at every weekend performance. The author would also report that after The Coterie run the play would go to Washington D.C. in May for a Kennedy Center New Visions/New Voices premiere. Finally it introduced the cast of young actors most of whom were third-year acting students in the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (Thorson. “Top of the week” 7 Mar).

Pre-production news of the event continued the following week and informed Kansas City that the play was commissioned of New York playwright Laurie Brooks in response to Coterie requests for a production focused on teen dilemmas. Jeff Church explained,

One of the things educators have asked us to do is to provide them with plays that would help start a dialogue that has to do with everything from harassment issues to peer pressure issues, as well as some serious issues about isolation. We hope the kids do deeper thinking than they ever have done before on some of these issues . . . We hope the forum will spark dialogue—the kind that is healthier and a lot less hate-oriented. (Rizzo. “Teen angst drama”)

The play would then open and run through mid-February but the media chatter continued throughout.

TeenStar reporter Kevin McDaniel, now a Rockhurst senior, interviewed the playwright Laurie Brooks. She described her play as having to do with identity and rumors and the consequences and damage of those rumors. She saw the play as a metaphor for the idea that we all “wrestle” with big questions. Brooks hoped that it would start a dialogue. She wasn’t looking to provide answers just open discussion. When asked why she chose the conventions of a referee and post-show forum she explained,

the referee is the only adult in the play, and he’s outside the action . . . so he can step back and comment on what’s happening. The interactive forum, I hope, just gives people a chance to look deeper into the play and have a conversation in a little larger group . . . you can hear what other people have to say about what happened. (McDaniel. “TeenStar goes one-on-one”)

McDaniel asked Brooks what the inspiration was for the play. She told him that a lot of what is in the play came from her work on human rights and tolerance with young people as an artist-in-residence over a two-year period. The underlying message for her is the importance of how we treat each other. The biggest challenge for Brooks was to not make

the play preachy or patronizing. She wanted the audience to understand that she feels the biggest problem facing youth today is pressure.

Pressure to succeed. Self-imposed pressure, pressure from parents, pressure from teachers, pressure from society . . . You know, kids (are) falling apart because they're not thin enough. They're thinking they're not smart enough . . . this enough or that enough . . . it's more important that you be who you are than you be this model we'll hold up . . . that you have to achieve. (McDaniel. "TeenStar goes one-on-one")

Two days later in another TeenStar article, McDaniel offered more praise for *The Wrestling Season*. He applauded the direct audience input at the end of the play as "an interesting step in youth theatre" and heralded the play for its "creative use of unusual conventions." He liked that the play was never resolved but progressed to a certain point and then stopped. At that point the audience was asked to interact with the characters, approve or disapprove of their actions, offer them advice and listen to the characters' responses. Also of interest were the conventions of the referee as observer and the slow-motion climactic wrestling scenes. McDaniel reiterated his approval of experimenting with a character as "observer" and concluded that though the slow-motion scenes were at first shocking and thought cheesy, he would admit in the end, they were performed with such skill that they did indeed work to heighten the tension of the final scenes (McDaniel. "Thoughtful 'Wrestling'"). What an impressive move by *The Coterie* to allow, once again, a member of the target audience for the play to make several major contributions to the play's promotion in the media.

Robert Trussell added his applause not only to the play but to *The Coterie* for keeping to the longstanding tradition "of producing theatre for young audiences that takes on serious issues without flinching." He went on to explain that the themes within the play

include identity crises, sexuality and the pressure to succeed. These issues clearly mark *The Wrestling Season* as “not a kiddie play.” Trussell also enjoyed the “pointed and amusing observations” of the referee, delivered in the “clipped jargon of his trade.” Kudos were given to director Jeff Church who staged the action “inventively and economically” but especially enjoyed the “elliptical” yet “revealing” aspects of the production. “Elliptical” because everything about adolescence is hard to understand and “revealing” because the ambiguity of the ending and the audience response shows the deft construction of Brooks’s play: no one individual is at fault and no one is guiltless. Trussell concludes his review with applause for the UMKC graduate-level actors, the “elliptical,” setting of the wrestling mat and the “vivid theatricality” of the slow-motion wrestling sequences (Trussell, Robert. “Scoring points”). Yet that was not all Trussell had to offer about this play. He showered it with more praise and also featured its author in a subsequent article two days later.

Along with once again lauding the play as “inventive” for its use of post-performance forums, Robert Trussell praised Jeff Church for producing “youth-theater” that exposed his audience to stories with challenging themes such as those presented in *The Wrestling Season*. Church would observe that “Adults seem to want to talk about what’s going on in the lives of teen-agers every bit as much as teen-agers.” Yet the real focus of the article seemed to be the playwright, Laurie Brooks Gollobin. As mentioned earlier, her work had been in play development for several years. During that time she was also given staged readings of the play at the Kennedy Center and New York University. Brooks remarked,

the Coterie has fulfilled all of my hopes in terms of realizing my vision for the play . . . I think theater for young audiences should be every bit as mysterious, artistic, and challenging as theater for adults . . . They’re a really tough audience. They don’t let anything get by.

She believes that plays written for ‘children’ should address reality and that kids should not be undervalued. Brooks felt that this idea helps to explain a trend toward more serious subject matter in youth-theater. She said, “I think theaters are more willing to take on more challenging stuff.” Trussell would conclude his article by reminding one that the play would get a full staging in May at the Kennedy Center’s New Visions/New Voices forum but he would also add that the current cast of UMKC MFA students would be retained (Trussell. “It’s not just kid’s play”). You would think this would be the end of the news regarding *The Wrestling Season* but it was not. Several more articles by theatre critic Robert Trussell would appear in 2000 beginning with one written from Washington D. C. during the play’s Kennedy Center production in late May/June.

This first article reported that the Kennedy Center Festival of New Visions/New Voices was a merger of two biennial events: New Visions reading series begun by the Kennedy Center in 1991 and the One Theater World festival organized by ASSITEJ/USA (a French acronym for the International Association of Children’s Theatre for children and Young People). This merger allowed participants from all over the world to view works in development as well as finished plays. *The Wrestling Season* by Laurie Brooks (as she was now known) was a production that was originally presented as a New Visions reading where Jeff Church first encountered the play. Church commented, “the festival could point the way to the future.” The play was so well received that he was immediately asked to direct it for Seattle Children’s Theatre. Church further remarked,

I feel it does have the potential to be a watershed event . . . I have been at the Coterie 10 years this year . . . A lot of our colleagues in the field know of us by our programming and through readings at New Visions, but to have the chance for everyone in your field to actually see your work is the climax of 10 years of (effort).

Trussell concluded his live observations by reporting that the “Festival audiences were impressed with the quality of the play and the performances” (Trussell. “Not just child’s play”). A second article would appear in November of 2000 and highlight a national recognition of the play and The Coterie theatre.

American Theatre Magazine published by Theatre Communications Group had a long tradition of publishing complete texts of new plays, exposing the work to a large audience of theater professionals. The complete text of *The Wrestling Season* appeared in its November 2000 issue. Accompanying the text were photographs of The Coterie production. In the introduction to his magazine article, Russell Scott Smith wrote, that children’s theaters grapple regularly with sensitive issues—racism, poverty, death— “one taboo has held fairly firm: sexuality. That changed last February when Kansas City’s Coterie Theatre presented the world premiere of *The Wrestling Season*.” Church said he thought

The *Wrestling Season* was emblematic of the Coterie’s work. We’re nearing 25 years now, and I’ve been with the Coterie 11 of those years, and we’re trying to give the Coterie an identity both locally and nationally and this is a big contributor . . . It will have multiple productions, some of which will be by regional theaters that happen to have perhaps one youth-theater piece in their season, and it will be courageous of these regional theaters to pursue that play . . . Laurie (Brooks) tells me there’s already, because of American Theatre, a very strong bid for a film option because teenage material (is wanted) in Hollywood . . . It’s fascinating for us to watch how this goes. (Trussell. ‘*Wrestling Season*’)

With this single yet singular production, Jeff Church did indeed see the fulfillment of his first ten years work as artistic director of The Coterie theater. The theatre company had gained national attention through American Theatre Magazine and the Kennedy Center New Visions forum. The breadth and depth of the publicity in Kansas City as well as the national spotlight would firmly establish The Coterie as an innovator in youth theatre and in the minds of its citizens, an asset and a jewel in its crown. Yet those achievements only

scratch the surface of what was truly gained. Quietly generous, Church also gave the cast and University of Missouri-Kansas City the same national and international spotlight The Coterie was enjoying when the MFA graduate program students remained through the Kennedy Center production and had their photos published in American Theatre Magazine. What a feather in the university's cap and what an impressive credential those grad students now possessed for their resumes.

The "big picture" Church had in mind for The Coterie was coming into sharp focus with this production as well: multigenerational programming. It would seem that he was planning to serve not only Kansas City and the national youth theatre movement but the more indefinable and yet higher calling of the theatre: to reflect the current social climate and encourage change. This last is the hope of all theatre professionals but only consistently achieved by few. Church had only been with The Coterie a little over a decade, just enough time to establish a firm foundation and win a seminal victory. It is clear that he knew it was folly to rest on such laurels. His work would have to continue in order for this event to hold its luster. Church wasted no time. He quickly proved that world, commissioned and American premieres would continue to be his consistent pursuit as he evolved young audiences programming to include older generations. The following Coterie season, 2000-2001, opened with a world premiere sequel to their 1988 production titled Gatherings from the Graveyard.

CHAPTER 2

SEPTEMBER 2000-AUGUST 2010

The Coterie, now in its 22nd season, opened with the sequel, *Gatherings in Graveyards II*, in early October 2000, just in time to stir pre-Halloween excitement. The play was developed by the director, Cynthia Levin, the cast, which included, Robert Gibby Brand, Cheryl Weaver, George Forbes and Jonathan Young and the designers. With the “guiding vision” of the collaborators “belief in the power of the word, enhanced by visual and aural images, to create suspense,” the script offered theatrical adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-tale Heart”, Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” and W. W. Jacobs’ “The Monkey’s Paw” (Trussell. “Suspense builds”). Director Cynthia Levin would explain in a subsequent *Kansas City Star* article, “Our goal is to provide responsible terror. The stories will be told in a naturalistic style, but certainly not realism” (Rizzo. *Midtown what’s hot*” 2 Feb.). However, theatre critic Robert Trussell would write that the play was “an awkward fit. The Coterie simply lacks the resources to provide the visual flash we expect from dramatizations of the macabre,” he would give praise to the cast and the choice of material, especially framing the show with two Poe pieces: “The Conquering Worm” and “A Dream Within a Dream” (Trussell. “Awkward fits”). While the production obviously did not thrill the critic, for expectations were running high after *The Wrestling Season*, it would seem that Jeff Church was in planning mode once again and probably had the next two commissions in development. They both would premiere on the 2001-2002 Coterie Season. The first was a world premiere by a Kansas City native.

In July of 2001, a Kansas City Star article introduced us to the play *Sacagawea: Breath of an American Spirit* and the playwright Christina Anderson. Christina and her play were in Greenwich Village at the legendary Provincetown Playhouse where it received a staged reading directed by Jeff Church. The reading was part of the theater's annual series "New Plays for Young Audiences at the Provincetown Playhouse," sponsored by New York University. Anderson was, at the time, working on her undergraduate degree at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, and she was being interviewed not only for this article but for a PBS documentary on black playwrights. She defined herself as "a poet who happens to write for the stage." Her influences were spoken-word artists, rappers, singers and other poets. In *Sacagawea* a young black poet, immersed in the hip-hop culture, becomes fascinated with the story of the American Indian woman who accompanied Lewis and Clark's expedition. Church found "a fusion of history with a contemporary sensibility that could hook kids." The founder of the annual play-reading series, Lowell Swortzell, said he didn't hesitate to bring Anderson's play to New York. "I didn't even ask to see the script . . . If he (Jeff Church) believed in it, then obviously I wanted to support it." What made this statement understandable was the fact that *The Wrestling Season* had also received its first public reading there just two years prior. With that play's success Church's reputation was now preceding him. Also of note was that The Coterie's education program, Young Playwrights Roundtable, had nurtured the budding playwright as a child (Trussell. "The Coterie in New York").

Christina Anderson grew up in Kansas City, Kansas, and started writing as an eighth grader at West Middle School, but it was as a freshman at Schlagle High School that she participated in The Coterie Young Playwrights Roundtable. The Roundtable was, and still

remains, an annual workshop that brings together talented high school writers from the metro area. Christina spent her first and second years in the program writing scenes and receiving feedback. Jeff Church's repeated encouragement to "keep going" and "you have to open it up, you have to develop it" finally hit home during her junior year when she also attended a young playwrights' conference in Minnesota and learned the basic rules of playwriting. She credits Lisa Cordes as a major influence, as Cordes did performance art and spoken-word theater which started Anderson trying to connect poetry and theatre in a dramatic form. This led her to write a musical with Cordes and Michael Piane called Robert's Room which was staged as part of The Coterie's annual Young Playwrights' Showcase. Her talent won her the support of the Kansas City theatre and writing communities, which allowed her to transfer from Schlagle, graduate from the private Barstow School and attend Brown University. Anderson would say, "a lot of stuff that's happened to me thus far is because a collection of people . . . believed in my work and felt like I had something and they wanted to nourish that" (Trussell. "The Coterie in New York"). She went on to relate the opportunities that her association with Jeff Church and The Coterie afforded her on her wild ride to Providence.

Several pivotal events in 1999 put Anderson's name in front of the national not-for-profit community and she credits all of them to Jeff Church and The Coterie. She was profiled in American Theatre Magazine as one of 15 young artists likely to shape the future of theater and she performed an original monologue, "Construction of a Black Diva" in San Francisco at the Theatre Communications Group convention. Then she was asked to perform the monologue in Los Angeles as a part of the Mark Taper Forum's annual Blacksmhyth Juneteenth reading series, which led to another performance for the National Playwrights

Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in New London, Connecticut. Before she knew it she was being categorized as an "African-American female playwright" (Trussell. "The Coterie in New York"). This lengthy introductory article was setting the stage for the fall premiere and warming its audience with a grassroots story. It was no surprise then when the play premiered in October that it was met with much praise.

The play would make its debut with an inverted title: *Breath of an American Spirit: Sacagawea*. The Kansas City theater critic would say that the play offered the audience a question: "to whom does history belong?" The possibilities are then explored through a teenage beat poet, history-book authors, frontier expedition leader Clark of Lewis and Clark, whom the history books love, and Sacagawea. The question is never answered but the audience is urged to document its own history. It was credited with a strong cast, "Energetic and urgent" and "contemporary enough to be palatable for a younger generation" (Green. "Coterie play delivers"). It is fascinating to learn how early and skillfully Jeff Church created a perception in the public's mind of an upcoming Coterie event. The lengthy and very interesting lead newspaper article in July supplied the Kansas City community with a "hometown-girl-makes-good" success story that would keep tongues wagging until the play's opening in October. Yet, even better than that was the success this now young woman shared with a generous and nurturing Kansas City theatre community. Jeff Church, once again, in his own quietly generous way let the greater community emerge as the heroes in the story. Jeff Church taught Roundtable classes but Lisa Cordes's influence would be mentioned as well. The writers and theatre people who were involved in Anderson's transfer from Schlagle to Barstow, and finally Brown, most likely included Church but no particular names were mentioned and the strongest evidence of his own generosity is revealed in the

number of pivotal events she mentions leading up to her play reading at the Provincetown Playhouse. The most pivotal of these was his phone call to the leader of the play-reading series who accepted Church's request to give Anderson's play a place without ever having read it. Yes, Jeff Church's reputation was growing as a nurturer of new playwrights, young playwrights and plays that would challenge the old ideas about children's theatre. He was building a major, national youth-theatre company one play and playwright at a time. The next world premiere would follow this outline and keep true to the Christmas Little House tradition that was begun six years before.

Little House by the Shores of Silver Lake was commissioned of playwright Philip blue owl Hooser, directed by Sidonie Garrett, and made its world premiere in late November of 2001. It is a long flashback by Mary Ingalls about the family's move to Silver Lake. Pa has taken a job with the railroad and so the nomadic Ingalls must move west yet again. Mary recounts her bout with fever, subsequent blindness and how her sister Laura became her eyes. Many colorful characters are met along the way. Theatre critic Robert Trussell said, "it's a gentle reminder of the challenges people dealt with in the 19th century" (Trussell. "Little House' slowly reveals charms"). The show would mark the second appearance of Margo May as Laura Ingalls. She was then a sophomore at Shawnee Mission South High School and had previously shared the role of Laura Ingalls with Lauren Lindsey in the 1998 Coterie production of Little House Christmas in the Indian Territory.

The Coterie tradition of a Little House Christmas play was growing ever firm with this latest offering. So, too was the fact that the company was establishing itself as a veritable conservatory for new talent. Margo May grew up in The Coterie system just as Christina Anderson did. Margo first appeared there while in elementary school, then high

school and also as a member of the Young Playwrights showcase. She would then go on to appear in *Hello, Dolly!* at the New Theatre Restaurant and in *Annie* at Theatre in the Park. It would be fun to find out where she and Anderson are now and how their incubation at The Coterie impacts their life to date (Deslatte. “SM South sophomore stars”). It is clear that Jeff Church was reaping the rewards of his first decade with the company from successful student actors and playwrights to new Christmas traditions and national recognition. His carefully crafted plan would continue during the 2002-2003 season which held two more world premieres, another American premiere and major expansion of the theatre space on the lower level of Crown Center Shops in mid-town Kansas City.

Frankenstein opened the season in late September, 2002. The adaptation of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel was a collaborative development by writer Ric Averill of Lawrence, Kansas’ Seem-to-Be Players, director Cynthia Levin, and the cast which included Charles Fugate as the scientist Victor Frankenstein and Kyle Mowry as the Creature. Jeff Church invited the Midwest Bioethics Center (MBC) to participate in post-performance discussions about the ethical issues raised in the play. Actor Charles Fugate would conduct the forum in character as a modern version of Victor Frankenstein and the audience, with members of the MBC, would be cast as ethicists stimulating discussion about the ethical issues raised by the play. Church commented,

You can look at the play as entertainment, and you can look at the play as a strong tool for educators . . . That’s when I think the Coterie is at its best: when we find the right blend.

To achieve the “right blend,” Averill, Levin and the cast decided to compress the novel’s many serious themes. Averill explained, “We’ve taken that big sprawling novel and reduced it to about six characters in a week and a half.” He also said that the process was so

collaborative that his script became raw material that was reshaped during the rehearsal process. He would come to rehearsals and hear his lines reorganized in creative ways (Trussell. “A classic resurrected”).

In his review of *Frankenstein*, Kansas City Star critic Brian McTavish would applaud Averill’s “efficient adaptation,” the dark costumes and “industrial music.” He also mentions favorably director Cynthia Levin’s “appropriate tone of impending doom,” Kyle Mowry’s ability to convey the Creature’s “powerfully felt emotion” but says,

Gary Wichansky’s reversible turntable set might be the real star . . . One side could pass for a Goth hair salon, with its stark, concrete-like walls and weird, blown-up portraits of central characters. The other side is a true Halloween treat, showing off *Frankenstein*’s bizarre laboratory, replete with sparkling tubes, crazy dials and jumper cables—yes, jumper cables—connected to a lidless coffin. (McTavish. “Play, good, talk, good”)

Gary Wichansky studied scenic design under John Ezell at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He not only designed the set for *Frankenstein* but also designed the “theater machine” lobby. He was given one general guideline by artistic director Jeff Church: not to create a lobby aimed at children. Church said,

One of our goals was for it not to be so juvenile . . . It took six months of prep work on Gary’s part to come up with the ‘creativity machine’ concept . . . The thing I am so proud of is that Crown Center allowed us to use our own designer who knows us.

Wichansky had this to say about the design:

I knew I wanted the machine to have a beginning and a middle and end, but not so obvious that you look at it and it’s labeled . . . I wanted people and kids to think about it and really use their imaginations . . . But I wanted it to feel like it had flow.

About 60% of his original design remains in the realization and the rest was created during construction. All of the gadgets and gizmos were culled from various junk yards, salvage yards, garage sales and many were simply “found objects.” As Wichansky and the crew

worked, they gave names to the various elements that were taking shape such as The Boiler, the Bubbler, the Sky Tube, and the Eye in the Sky. He said nothing was chosen at random. “We couldn’t just throw junk in here . . . It had to be a clear idea.” So there are “things that are symbolic . . . items meant to reflect cultural interpretation . . . (and) ingredients used directly in the creation of theatre.” Church said he was impressed with how well Wichansky and his crew worked with the subcontractors at Turner Construction. Jim Curtis, project manager said that, “Gary and his people were great to work with . . . he had his work planned out very well . . .” (Trussell. “Opening act”).

The complete renovation project had a \$400,000 price tag that included raising low-hanging pipes in the theater ceiling, widening the stage, providing a green room for the actors and creating classroom space that would allow the company to offer on-site classes for the first time in its history. \$300,000 was a grant from the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation and the remaining \$100,000 was of in-kind services from Crown Center: the gift of two retail spaces to accommodate the new lobby and classrooms. The improvements had been on-going since early May of 2002 and culminated with the lobby. Church said of the entire project,

Joette and I used to say you felt like you were very much in the basement of Crown Center. That’s no insult, that’s just how it was. Now it feels like a destination . . . I feel like we finally have a facility that matches the quality of programming. (Trussell. “Opening act”)

A subsequent Special to The Star article by Kate Beem said that the issues raised in Shelley’s novel

remain as fresh and relevant to society today as they did near the turn of the 19th century . . . With debates about stem-cell research, cloning, even in-vitro fertilization, all a part of everyday conversation, parallels to the famous novel are inevitable. (Beem. “Bioethics of ‘Frankenstein’”)

She noted that Frankenstein was the first play to be presented in the theater's newly remodeled Crown Center space, that the Midwest Bioethics Center helped to create the study guide that accompanied the play and that for the first time The Coterie would offer Friday night performances (Beem. "Bioethics of 'Frankenstein'"). It would seem, from the tenor of these articles, that the play and the renovation project were very successful. Not only did the play tackle current social issues through the voice of a time-honored classic but The Coterie matched it with a local agency to help educate the audience. The major renovation to the theatre space that debuted alongside the production served to further demonstrate The Coterie's success and dedication to producing high quality theatre for not just youth, but with the advent of Friday evening performances, a more diverse and multigenerational audience as well. The newly designed lobby also served to raise the visibility of The Coterie with Crown Center visitors and the fact that Crown Center management gave the company more space proved itself not only a good faith gesture to a valued tenant but an investment in the theater's future. To Jeff Church this must have seemed a welcome vote of confidence and an endorsement of his work. That being said he offered another premiere immediately following Frankenstein which carried forward a Christmas tradition and brought back to The Coterie an esteemed playwright.

A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas by Laurie Brooks was the commissioned premiere of The Coterie's now-traditional Christmas series in November of 2002. The play was Brooks' second to be staged by the theatre since her much acclaimed premiere of The Wrestling Season in 2000. In this annual holiday production, Brooks explored a little-known chapter of the well-known "Little House" characters. The play, set in the bleak winter of 1876, unfolds in the wake of a double tragedy: the death of infant Freddy and the loss of the

Ingalls' farmland home. The family has moved to a hotel in the city where Pa now works as a handyman. The lonely wife of the town doctor, sensing the family's financial straits, offers to adopt Laura. Unbeknownst to her parents, Laura overhears the proposal but misses her mother's rejection of the plan. All is straightened out on Christmas day when Ma and Pa announce another baby is expected in the summer and the doctor's wife has agreed to help the family when the baby is born. Robert Eisele of The Kansas City Star said,

Brooks has admirably avoided the usual clichés of voice-over narration, choosing instead to allow exchanges of dialogue and occasional flights of fancy to relay the characters' innermost feelings . . . it never succumbs to the sticky sentimentality that was the hallmark of the weepy TV adaptation of Wilder's books.

He called the cast "first rate," applauded guest director Scot Copeland from the Nashville Children's Theatre with "focusing on emotional truth rather than elaborate stagecraft" and gave kudos to Jason Harris' "weathered" setting augmented by Art Kent's "evocative" lighting (Trussell. "A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas"). The play was another successful premiere for The Coterie and author Laurie Brooks. However, Jeff Church had not only commissioned this play from Brooks but another that would premiere in the same season. It seemed as though Brooks was becoming every bit the tradition that "Little House" was.

Laurie Brooks' *The Tangled Web* made its debut in March of 2003. It was a drama about lies, loyalty and love in a teen's life. The play exists in two versions, tailored to two different cultures: America and Ireland. The American version made its premiere at The Coterie. Brooks said the title was taken from the adage, "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive," but the story was "entirely inspired by 'Faust.'" "The heroine of the play, like the character Faust, wants to better her life situation . . . and she's willing to give up everything to do that." Just as with *The Wrestling Season*, *The Tangled*

Web was followed by post-performance discussions involving the actors and young audience members. Brooks explained,

The idea really is to extend the life of the play and do some responsible processing with young people because if you're going to raise these issues, we just want to give these young people a chance to discuss them before we turn them loose. (Trussell. "Playwright casts cautionary 'Web'")

This article would go on to describe the origin of the play and one difference. In 1998, Brooks had written a play titled *Deadly Weapons* for Graffiti Theatre, a young-audiences touring company in Cork, Ireland. Jeff Church had travelled there to see the play and one night over dinner at the home of the artistic director, Emelie FitzGibbons, the discussion turned to *Faust*. It was the initial spark from which Brooks wrote the Irish version which Graffiti Theatre produced in 2000. FitzGibbons was in Kansas City to see the American premiere and commented that, "In essence, it's the same . . . It's the same dilemma for the teen-agers, the same questions about responsibility and consequences they face if they decide to take a chance." One of the differences between the versions is that the American includes a brief scene in which a central character goes to an abortion clinic. Ireland does not have abortion clinics but that version does raise the issue of abortion. Brooks also said that if her plays seem "authentic portraits" of adolescent life, it is because she eavesdrops on her daughters and their friends, listening for the issues that are important to them (Trussell. "Playwright casts cautionary 'Web'"). Several days after this lead article Robert Trussell wrote a review of the play and had this to say in its praise:

Like *The Wrestling Season*, *The Tangled Web* refuses to pander to its audience and acknowledges that "happy endings" are the stuff of storybooks, not necessarily real life . . . each performance is followed by an exercise . . . designed for viewers to offer opinions on the culpability of each character . . . Listening to the undiluted opinions of young theatergoers . . . it was clear that this play had struck a chord. What better argument for the relevance of theater? Presented in the right way at the

right time for the right audience, theater is more meaningful than anything you can see in a movie theater or on television. (Trussell. “Well-acted ‘Web’”)

What now becomes evident is that Jeff Church had his finger on the pulse of the growing tide to change the image of “children’s theatre” to “theatre for young audiences” from its beginnings. He not only travelled nationally but internationally to view the plays of the emerging playwrights of the trend. Church found something in Laurie Brooks’ plays that, just as Trussell said, “struck a chord” with him and one he knew would reverberate with his ever diverse audience. He would continue the company’s association with Brooks during the following season by producing yet another of her thought-provoking plays but this time in repertory with another play from a young playwright previously spotlighted. However, before that event, The Coterie 25th anniversary season of 2003-2004, offered two additional premieres, one that followed what was becoming a Halloween tradition and one that took an intriguing look at one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays.

Edward Mast’s *Gatherings in Graveyards III* made its debut in early October 2003. His play included adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Cask of Amontillado*, Mark Twain’s *The War Prayer* and Shirley Jackson’s *The Lottery*. This was the third installment in The Coterie’s Halloween Gatherings series. Kansas City critic Robert Eisele said that “atmosphere is everything” and credited director Jeff Church “and his extraordinary team of designers (who) manage to work their theatrical mayhem through the power of suggestion rather than resorting to the graphic realism so familiar to modern moviegoers.” He also gives praise to Jason Harris’ “adaptable set design . . . that allows for smooth transitions among the show’s varied settings, and to Jennifer Myers Ecton’s evocative costumes” (Eisele. “In a spooky mood”). Edward Mast had previously written three plays for The Coterie which

enjoyed much success: *The Jungle Book*, *Dinosaurus* and *Wolf Child*. So, the fact that Jeff Church would offer another of his works at The Coterie is no surprise. Clearly Church had enough experience with Mast to know a good playwright when he read one and he kept the bond between them strong with periodic collaborative work. This was just the latest demonstration of Jeff Church's business acumen. Every successful businessperson leads by surrounding him/herself with experts in the field, with whom he/she can collaborate. Church was building quite a roster of masterful playwrights that fit the description perfectly and Edward Mast was just one of many.

January of 2004 brought the next Coterie premiere. This time it was an American premiere of a sequel to a Shakespearean classic. At the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, the star-crossed lovers are dead, the Capulets and the Montagues are grief-stricken and the audience is left with several questions: do the families realize their foolishness and will they learn to get along? Sharman Macdonald answers these questions in his play *After Juliet*, a Coterie and Heart of America Shakespeare Festival co-production in January of 2004. The play was commissioned by England's Royal National Theatre and The Coterie production was the play's American premiere (McTavish. "Wherefore art they now?"). The idea that drove Macdonald's play was speculation about what could have befallen the peers of *Romeo and Juliet* in the wake of the lovers' demise. At the center of the plot is Rosaline, Juliet's cousin who is still bitter and angry over the theft of Romeo, and Benvolio, Romeo's best friend who is achingly in love with her. The idea of making a play about the spurned Rosaline was the suggestion of the playwright's daughter, Keira Knightley. Her father was commissioned to write the play by the Royal National Theatre as part of "Connections," a program started eleven years earlier to develop plays for young audiences and young actors. In an e-mail

response to *The Coterie*, Suzy Graham-Adriani of the National Theatre's education department said,

There was and is a dearth of well-crafted scripts for young people to perform. Unlike in the world of teen novels and films, established playwrights don't automatically write for this age range. It seems to make sense to ask the best writers around to write for this market.

The commissioned playwrights were asked to write plays as they would normally. "We weren't asking for plays with a message or . . . designed to teach us something . . . We wanted brilliant plays that didn't patronize." The "Connections" program generated about 70 plays from such esteemed playwrights as Patrick Marber, Mark Ravenhill, Richard Nelson, Horton Foote and Dario Fo (Trussell. "The sequel to 'Romeo and Juliet'").

Although a great success in Britain, *After Juliet* was not staged precisely as written. One scene was cut because it was considered too British for young American audiences. Some of the strong language was adapted as well. Director Sidonie Garrett explained, "It could get into a 'bad language' humor that would detract from the play." Artistic director Jeff Church added that Macdonald's play with its ambitious themes, reflects the differences in British and American attitudes about theatre for young audiences. "They consider young adult theater to go clear through college. We have children's theatre, and then we sort of have high school theatre, and then . . . after that it's adult theater" (Trussell. "The sequel to 'Romeo and Juliet'").

Robert Trussell's review of the play was lukewarm at best. He saw the play on opening night and felt that

with a cast dominated by third-year graduate students from the University of Missouri-Kansas City theater department . . . most of them . . . clearly hadn't found their comfort zone with the dialogue . . . These performances are not sufficiently detailed to capture the play's nuances. (Trussell. "A look at youth of yore")

What Trussell said may have been true, but every audience member receives a play differently and his review was ultimately his own subjective perception. Through someone else's eyes, *After Juliet* might have been a clever, thought-provoking sequel to a timeless classic. Nevertheless, what is in evidence is Jeff Church's commitment to co-producing plays with the UMKC graduate theater program and his dedication to teaching. He teaches all the elements of theatre from acting to the technical. By giving those young actors a chance to create another role, he was providing them with an opportunity to become better actors or one with more experience that would help them transition to the world of professional theatre. As most theatre professionals would agree that experience was and is their best teacher, Jeff Church continued to provide avenues for not only UMKC's young actors but for playwrights both young and seasoned. This was no more evident than in the next two plays to premiere. The plays debuted in rotating repertory in honor of The Coterie's 25th anniversary. One playwright was still a relative rookie and the other was a veteran of theatre for young audiences.

Breath of an American Spirit: Sacagawea by Christina Anderson and *Everyday*

Heroes by Laurie Brooks were chosen to appear in rotating repertory because,

We plan about a year-and-a-half or two years in advance and as (executive director) Joette (Pelster) and I were doing the season planning, we realized we had two plays we wanted to do and that they both had casts of six characters with the same number of males and females . . . We thought this would be a terrific opportunity to do this.

This was also a milestone for children's theatre in Kansas City. Other local theatre companies had produced plays in rotating repertory, but not The Coterie. Missouri Repertory Theatre had a long history of producing true repertory seasons and the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival had produced plays performed on alternate nights. So it

seems that Jeff Church was forging new ground with this decision (Trussell. “Joining the rotation”).

Both plays had been commissioned by The Coterie and even though the company had staged a production of *Sacagawea* in 2001, Church said that Anderson had rewritten the play.

It’s a full rewrite. We did *Sacagawea* two years ago with a different draft of the script, but we made a vast number of improvements on what we were doing scenically. It’s kind of a stylized piece using contemporary language. *Everyday Heroes* is more of a drama.

Sacagawea revolves around a girl’s research into the life of the American Indian woman who was guide to the Lewis and Clark expedition and the historical ambiguities surrounding her. Ultimately the girl concludes that if you don’t write down your own history someone is going to write it down for you. In *Everyday Heroes*, two brothers are portrayed as heroes by the news media after a fire. As the play unravels they are caught in a deception and the way the brothers cope is the crux of the play. A female firefighter mentors the boys and tries to help them as they negotiate the mess they have created. Each show used the same actors with two exceptions: Scott Cordes appeared in *Sacagawea* and his son Sam played a key role in *Everyday Heroes*. When asked to describe the challenge of directing two plays at once, Church replied,

Shifting your mind and switching gears has proved to be the thing we’ve really had to learn to do well—how to give one play your full attention, then stop in the middle of the day with a break, and then turn your full attention and energies to the other one. (Trussell. “Joining the rotation”)

The plays premiered in early March of 2004 and ran through the month. Kansas City critic Robert Eisele reviewed both plays and had this to say about *Sacagawea*:

Director Jeff Church allows the action to unfold seamlessly on an elevated circular platform, constructed by set designer Gary Wichansky to resemble the oversized head of a drum. A panoramic Scrim is unfurled at the rear of the stage to approximate the wide-open vistas of the frontier, illuminated in various hues by Art Kent's atmospheric lighting . . . The young cast is absolutely first-rate, with (Angela) Polk and (Andi) Meyer anchoring the action with their ingenuous and unaffected performances as the disenfranchised young women who reach out to each other across two centuries of American history . . . (Richard) Stubblefield and (Heidi) Van Middlesworth turning in not only skilled comic performances as the historians . . . but subtly darker portrayals of the French trader Charbonneau and one of Sacagawea's fellow tribe members, respectively. (Eisele. "'Sacagawea' tells")

Eisele's review of *Everyday Heroes* would reveal a "thought-provoking" but at times "talky script" about brothers Win and Kurt whose mother dies in their house fire behind a locked bedroom door. Eisele said,

Heroes provides a virtual showcase for (Sam) Cordes, whose multi-layered performance effectively plumbs the depths of Win's conflicted emotions. He is matched by Stubblefield's skilled portrait of Win's equally troubled brother, who hides his wounded feelings in a swaggering haze of teenage machismo . . . The supporting performances were all first-rate, with Andi Meyer turning in a detailed character sketch as a firefighter whose gruff exterior hides a caring soul. Angela Wildflower Polk makes a wonderfully goofy love interest for Win . . . Sam Wright and Heidi Van Middlesworth are all teeth as and vacant smiles as a pair of empty-headed television newscasters . . . director Jeff Church keeps the action flowing smoothly throughout . . . All six cast members seated on stage for the show's entire running time, the fluid scene transitions are made with subtle changes of Art Kent's lighting or a simple re-arrangement of chairs and stools. (Eisele. "'Heroes' rises")

But Eisele would also say the script had some problems,

which about two-thirds of the way through sinks into a preachy stretch of psycho-babbling, movie-of-the-week style character analysis that seems false and stunted . . . But a smart production and talented cast manage to rise above the shortcomings of the material. The performers' intelligent choices ring true, even when the sometimes hackneyed dialogue does not. (Eisele. "'Heroes' rises")

All things being equal, the first repertory production at The Coterie seems to have been very successful based upon excellent casting and production design. Jeff Church continued his commitment to nurture new playwrights with the rewrite of a previously staged play by one

of his own students and he strengthened a bond with a veteran playwright by producing her newest play. It would be revealed in September of 2004 that this veteran, Laurie Brooks, would be serving as an artist-in-residence at The Coterie for the 2004-2005 season. She would be finishing her newest play slated to debut in March of 2005. But there was another premiere that opened the season in October and more national attention in November that took focus during the interim.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was the American premiere of Pauline Flannery's adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic tale. Jeff Church based the staging on Flannery's direction of the original production for the Edinburgh Festival in 2003: a cage on wheels is pushed to different parts of the stage by the actors who are, in a way, cutting from one scene to the next. In praise of the production, critic Robert Trussell said,

Flannery's adaptation was crisp and economical . . . Church has assembled a superior cast . . . velvet-voiced Walter Coppage as Dr. Jekyll. . . Scott Cordes at his brutish best, plays Mr. Hyde . . . Matt Rapport turns in a solid, nuanced performance as Utterson, Jekyll's lawyer . . . And Vanessa Severo demonstrates . . . her versatility in a range of supporting roles . . . Flannery's script is literate and requires younger viewers . . . to adjust their collective ear to Victorian English's eloquent cadences, which were enunciated beautifully by the actors. (Trussell. "Dr. Jekyll")

Trussell would go on to say, "Stevenson's story could be interpreted in many ways: a metaphor for "drug addiction," a parable about the capacity for "good and evil" within each person or a "cautionary tale" about the price paid for science that leads us astray." At the question and answer session that followed the performance he attended, Trussell heard a largely teenage audience conclude "that most people have an animal side, that most people would do that which is forbidden if given the chance and evil is stronger than good" (Trussell. Dr. Jekyll").

From what the critic had to say, one surmises that the production of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was successful. Again, Jeff Church had assembled an excellent cast to tell a good story adapted by a first-rate playwright. He had also gone globally, once again, in search of people and works that were on the rise as well as on the cutting edge of theatre for young audiences. His tireless commitment to this mission did not go unobserved by the national media. *Time* magazine published an article, in its November 15, 2004 issue, heralding *The Coterie* as the number three children's theatre in America, placing *Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis* and *Seattle Children's Theatre* as numbers one and two respectively. *Time's* critic said, "Jeff Church runs one of the nation's most respected children's theaters" (Zoglin. "STAGE FOR KIDS").

Richard Zoglin, *Time's* lead theatre critic, had visited *The Coterie* in March to see *Breath of an American Spirit: Sacagawea* and returned in October to see *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Although his article appeared in the November 15 issue, in a *Kansas City Star* article published November 10, *Coterie* executive director, Joette Pelster, had this to say with regard to Zoglin's ranking of the theatre company as number three, "This validates all the risks *The Coterie Theatre* has taken to build a great theater for children and young adults." Church said that it felt great to be recognized with two top theaters that had budgets significantly larger than *The Coterie*. "We got to the forefront without a lot of money." Yet Church could not deny that it may have been Laurie Brooks' *The Wrestling Season* that set the stage for the "*Coterie's* breakthrough media moment." Zoglin's article spent time featuring the play and its controversial story of teen sexuality. It also included a production photo. So Church went on to reason,

We commissioned and premiered *Wrestling Season* . . . We took it to the Kennedy Center. I directed it at Seattle Children's Theatre. That's a moment where some people have pointed to us moving the field ahead, because it was slaying the last impossible topic . . . Until then, children's theater had tackled divorce, death, AIDS and sexual abuse . . . But there was always this one sort of ignored thing . . . teenage sexuality. (McTavish. "Take a bow")

He summed it up this way:

How much are we on people's radar screens (in Kansas City)? . . . Maybe this Time magazine piece will remind people that we're an entertainment option that isn't TV or a movie, but something live that people can connect with. (McTavish. "Take a bow")

Zoglin's article did more than validate the risks The Coterie had taken during the years since Jeff Church assumed the role of artistic director. It also validated Church's vision of theatre for young audiences. Whether locally or nationally, the public attended and responded favorably to the plays Church produced. He was expanding and redefining the definition of American children's theatre and led the way with productions that embodied this definition. And, Church and Laurie Brooks looked to be the "dynamic duo" in this venture. He had, by this time, produced a handful of her plays to great success and offered her an artist-in residence position for the current season. He was obviously hoping to continue a mutually beneficial collaboration, which the publicity in Time magazine only strengthened. Brooks' new play would be the next world premiere staged by The Coterie in March of 2005.

Between Land and Sea: A Selkie Myth by Laurie Brooks was commissioned of the playwright-in-residence in an effort to afford her the opportunity to expand a play she had written several years before. Brooks discovered many variations on the selkie myths but chose to focus the play on the version found in the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland. She had visited the islands three times since the mid-1990s to learn about the myth

of sea creatures who take the form of gray seals and can, once a year, transform themselves into humans. Brooks said she went there to learn the language, hear the stories and research the history. She met local historians, visited libraries and travelled by pontoon boat to view the seals. Brooks described them this way, “They’re huge, like a sea lion. And they make a sound that’s like keening, a wailing, and I think that’s part of the reason they’re thought of as human.” In the play, a farmer sees the female selkies come ashore, shed their pelts and transform in to humans. He falls in love with one and steals her pelt making it impossible for her to return to the sea. He makes her his wife and they have a daughter who eventually discovers her mother’s pelt and takes to the water on a journey of self-discovery. It was this journey that Brooks wanted to explore in the expanded version.

I always wanted to go back inside and discover what would happen . . . when she goes below the sea . . . That has been an amazing journey for me as a writer. I’ve rewritten the ending three times . . . It’s just been a gift. Moment to moment, as the actors discover the script, I discover it all over again through them. The play takes place 150 years ago, but I’m hoping that it asks people to think about...the way that man and nature co-exist, and the way we make judgments about what is worthwhile in nature and what is expendable. (Trussell. “New Coterie show”)

The Coterie also pulled together a unique creative team for the production. Russell Ferguson, assistant professor at the Kansas City Art Institute, designed the scenery and props; Scot Copeland, producing director of the Nashville Children’s Theatre, directed; Paul Carrol Binkley, also of Nashville, composed the original score and costumes were by Georgianna Londre, a Kansas City designer.

After theatre critic Robert Trussell saw the play he wrote that the performances in the play were “first-rate” and for the most part the play was “a thoughtful and compelling piece of theater.” He felt the director “captured several potent theatrical moments” and that the “abstract scenic design” and ‘Celtic-flavored music” were both “a big plus.” However,

over-all he felt that the “underwater neverland” scene was a “major derailment” and an almost impossible challenge for the costumer (Trussell. “Diluting the ‘Myth’”). After reading the review one might choose to think that the successful collaboration between The Coterie and Brooks had hit a snag. But a subsequent Kansas City Star article featuring Brooks and a group of high school girls, discussing body image, overshadows the critic and reveals why Jeff Church continues to collaborate with Laurie Brooks: she asks all the tough but right questions.

Playwright Laurie Brooks had visited Notre Dame de Sion High School the week before *Between Land and Sea: A Selkie Myth* premiered to launch a series of drama workshops encouraging discussion about body image, one of the central comments made by her play. She asked the girls “What is ‘beautiful’ today and why?” The girls responded,

All girls feel self-conscious about the way they look . . . and you don’t really know where you belong. Pretty has always counted. But today’s cultural icons are skinnier, richer and blonder than ever . . . this generation’s standard of beauty.

Brooks then asked, “Where does that leave (you)?” One girl replied, “It’s really hard if you’re not white. I’m not considered beautiful or whatever, but I don’t really care.” Others felt that magazines preach to be happy the way you are and at the same time feature the latest makeup and ways to lose weight. They felt that it is a lot easier for boys to “cuten themselves up.” All they have to do is lift weights. The girls felt that although they could change the way they dressed they could not change what boys notice most: “boobs and butts . . . Guys are terrible!” Brooks replied, “If guys are terrible what about girls?” They all agreed that in an all-girls school, they constantly compare themselves to one another. Brooks then asked them to write down ten things they liked about their physical selves. The girls struggled and when she asked why the question was so hard to answer, the girls were quick

to answer. “We don’t think we look good. We’re told we don’t. There’s always going to be someone better looking than you. We’re our own worst critics.” Then Brooks asked, “what society’s “beauty” message is and what people do to achieve it.” The answers came back, “Be like somebody famous, skinny, hot, no zits, perfect, clear skin, blonde hair, show a lot of skin . . . Become a party animal, buy expensive clothes . . . drinking . . . anorexia . . . plastic surgery.” The group discussion was eye opening for the girls. They heard the popular girls admit to feeling unattractive and unsure, and this brought the group closer together. One thought they all agreed on was “That it’s not what’s on the outside that counts” (Gutierrez. “What is beautiful?”).

Yes, Laurie Brooks’ plays had been asking the tough questions since the 2000 premiere of *The Wrestling Season*. Her post-show audience discussions, meant to open dialogues and increase our understanding of each other as individuals and a society, were doing just that. This type of meaningful audience interaction kept Jeff Church asking Brooks for more. Her plays were breaking barriers and leading the charge of a new genre of theatre for young audiences. Whether the latest of her plays, *Between Land and Sea: A Selkie Myth*, was perfect in its revision, it remains true to what seems to be her mission: opening young minds.

The following season, 2005-2006, would feature two plays in the now long-standing tradition of Coterie premieres. The first was a world premiere for which the theater received a \$25,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant to develop a play in the category of “Access to Artistic Excellence.” It was a play about the civil rights movement (Trussell. “KC arts awarded”). The second was an American premiere of play based on Homer’s *The Odyssey*. In his preseason *Kansas City Star* article of September 2005, Robert Trussell

would call The Coterie “the artistically ambitious children’s theater at Crown Center” (Trussell. ““Birmingham”). These two titles would demonstrate, yet again, that Jeff Church was not afraid to take a risk for his art.

Kevin Willmott, author of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*, adapted his play from the award-winning novel of the same title by Christopher Paul Curtis. The play made its debut at The Coterie in late September of 2005. The amusing story of the “funny, fictional Watsons,” an African-American family traveling to visit grandma, “intersects with the real-life racial bigotry that resulted in the fatal bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in the summer of 1963 in Birmingham Alabama.” Willmott, an accomplished screenwriter/director from Lawrence, Kansas, who at the time taught film at the University of Kansas, felt that it was vital to remember the events of the civil rights movement as the memories erode with subsequent generations who have never experienced direct discrimination. He said that “In Kansas City, there is an enduring legacy of segregation . . . It is my hope that the play will teach young people about a time when people tried to change that” (McTavish. “Serious entertainment”).

In another Kansas City Star article, Willmott would relate a story about his young cast members who were unable to identify a picture of Medgar Evers, a civil rights activist of the same era as the play. “It just lets you know that there’s so much that’s important that we don’t educate our kids about, that’s not really taught in schools, so new generations just won’t get that info.” Willmott also related that several years prior he had rewritten a screen adaptation of the book that was never produced and that the stage play was actually an adaptation of that version.

The way the story is told, it really makes the history real for the kids . . . Even though they're a black family, it's a universal story . . . You're hoping you can put a human face on the reality of what this is and that people will walk away thinking, "Well, I never knew how bad the Birmingham bombing was." (Trussell. "History lesson")

After viewing a performance of the play, theatre critic Robert Trussell would say "It's a bittersweet tale with a clear social message." He would also praise Willmott's direction and casting of the play plus previous "outstanding productions" he directed for The Coterie, including Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Minstrel Show and an all-black production of The Glass Menagerie.

Willmott has brought together some of the best adult actors in town for this show: George Forbes as Dad, Lynn King as Momma, Queen Bey as Grandma Sands and Harvey Williams as Mr. Roberts, Grandma's companion . . . The youngsters are clearly talented . . . Donnelle Saunders plays Kenny, the show's narrator . . . Frances E. Buren is refreshingly unaffected as Joetta and Nicholas Alexander brings a muted hip-hop sensibility to Byron.

Trussell also mentioned the major technical contributions of scenic designer Emily J.

Cramer:

whose nonrealistic set serves the actions well . . . costume designer Georgianna Londre, whose clothes evoke off-the-rack styles of the '60s with subtlety . . . (and lighting designer Art Kent's work . . . depicting the aftermath of the bombing. (Trussell. "'Watsons' is admirable")

Clearly, the risk of producing a play with an all-black cast at The Coterie had been taken before, as Robert Trussell told us in his review. Yet it is easy to surmise that Jeff Church felt the acceptance of these previous plays opened the door to more that presented the social issues affecting the African-Americans in his audience. He was still leading the way in terms of the diversity of themes and multicultural topics depicted in his choices of plays to produce for young audiences and the American premiere of The Search for Odysseus was no exception.

During my research for The Coterie production of *The Search for Odysseus* by Charles Way, I discovered that in the Kansas City print media at the time little information was available about the author and the previous productions that would explain this particular presentation's designation as an "American premiere." But there was a wealth of information to be found on the web. At the website *Plays for Young Audiences*, I discovered that the play had previously been produced by the Wales Stage Company, UK, in 1993 and that the company was now defunct. It was later named Made in Wales Stage Company. Mr. Way's web page (Charles Way.) also revealed the author's theatrical drive with the following personal statement:

If you have found this website it probably means that you are interested in theatre and in particular theatre for young people, children and their families and I bid you welcome. Here you will find information about the plays I have been writing over the past thirty years, including plays for adults, adaptations and musicals. There are synopses of the plays and information about how to get hold of scripts, either for professional or for amateur use. I have spent all my working life in the professional theatre and believe in its power to affect not only individual lives but also, and Young people need theatre and all it can offer, both as participants and as audiences, more than ever. In the theatre one can reshape the world for a time and examine it from different points of view in a safe and socially cohesive environment. I try to create work that does not preach, that examines the pressures under which we live through story and metaphor, that is fun, sometimes dangerous, but always I trust, humane and hopeful.

Further, the website, *doolee.com* provided more of Way's impressive credentials: Charles began writing plays professionally in 1978 when he joined Leeds Playhouse TIE team. He has now written over forty plays, many of them for young people, and his work has been produced all over the world. These include *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Search for Odysseus* and *A Spell of Cold Weather*—which were all nominated as Best Children's Play by the Writer's Guild of Great Britain. He has recently published his 'Classic fairytales, retold for the stage' which includes *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, which were

specially commissioned by the Library Theatre Manchester. His play about the percussionist Evelyn Glennie, which was first produced at the Polka Theatre for Children, was nominated as Best Children's Show by the TMA. Other plays include the Flood, Red Red Shoes, [Unicorn Theatre] One Snowy Night [Chichester Festival Theatre] The Tinderbox [Gwent Theatre] and The Night Before Christmas. [Polka Theatre]. He was recently commissioned by the National Theatre to write Alice in the News, which children all over Britain have performed. Charles has won several awards and was last years recipient of the 'Children's Award' given by the Arts Council of England for 'Red Red Shoes' [Unicorn Theatre and the Place] as best play for young people 2004. His play Merlin and the Cave of Dreams, for Imagination Stage, was nominated for a Helen Hayes Award for the 'Outstanding New Play of 2004' . . . In Wales he has had long associations with Gwent Theatre, the Sherman Theatre and Hijinx Theatre, for whom he has written In The Bleak Midwinter, and Ill Met by Moonlight, both set on the welsh borders. Recent new plays include, Still Life, about genetic science for the Plymouth Theatre Royal; The Long Way Home, for New Perspectives Theatre in collaboration with the CIAO festival, which has been performed in Croatia and The Dutiful Daughter which has been performed in China. Charles has written many plays for radio, and a TV poem for BBC2, No Borders, set on the Welsh borders, where he lives and has spent most of his creative life.

This information gives one a clear perspective into why Jeff Church chose this author's play for an American premiere at The Coterie. Charles Way was/is a prolific and proven playwright in the "young audiences" genre in the United Kingdom. At the time, not many of his plays had been produced outside of his country. Church constantly seeks plays that push the boundaries of what was once thought of as "children's theatre" and he found

that in this author's work. Of course, he would produce one of Way's plays at The Coterie. When the play made its debut in early March of 2006, The Kansas City Star critic Brian McTavish wrote that the audiences at The Coterie's production of *The Search for Odysseus* should "expect lots of self-discovery" within the play and that it was

Peppered with nifty swordplay . . . dynamic masks and larger-than-life puppetry (that) . . . has a son (Telemachus) striking out after his father and having his own epic adventures . . . encounter(ing) beguiling goddesses and the gargantuan one-eyed creature known as the Cyclops . . . it's the universal story of a boy growing up. (McTavish. "Odysseus' son")

This description fit Church's prerequisites for new works especially a young person's self-discovery and the action-adventure aspect. But would the risk of producing a play written for a Welsh audience be worth its transfer to America?

In his review of *The Search for Odysseus*, critic Robert Trussell proclaimed that the play's co-directors, Jeff Church and Martin English:

put together a talented young cast in an effort to charm viewers with humor and whimsy . . . Doogin Brown plays Telemachus . . . the goddess Athene (Vanessa Severo) . . . The excellent Heidi Stubblefield is double cast . . . as an elderly house servant . . . and later as a princess . . . As Odysseus, Ralph Prosper brings appropriate regal bearing . . . Competent support is offered by Andi Meyer as Penelope and Richard Stubblefield as the sole suitor . . . and (he) registers his most memorable moment as the Cyclops. (Trussell. "An Odyssey for kids")

Kudos were also given to William Hill and Georgianna Londre's costumes that he said evoked "images of Kabuki theater" (Trussell. "An Odyssey for kids"). From this review one may surmise that the play made an excellent transfer and was well worth the risk as it was also well-received by The Coterie's American audience.

The following season, 2006-2007, gave The Coterie another National Endowment for the Arts grant in the same category: "Access to Excellence," this time in the amount of \$28,000 for a co-production and tour with Accessible Arts Inc. *The Country of the Blind*

would bring back Martin English, this time as sole director of a play and would shine the spotlight on the well-respected local playwright, Frank Higgins (Horsley. “\$18,000 grant”).

Again, little information regarding the history of the production can be found in Kansas City’s local print media. But the local media web source www.infozine.com would reveal much more about the play and its subsequent Kansas tour. Karen VanAusdale, author of the web magazine article dated March 2, 2007, revealed that Frank Higgins had “adapted the famous short-story by H.G. Wells into a play that is a ‘theater first’ in which audio description is integrated into a script giving both non-sighted and sighted audiences full access to the live performance.” The play debuted at The Coterie Theatre on March 13 of that year and ran until April 1. In this article, Higgins would explain,

Pitched into a different kind of world, the play questions who really is disabled—who really is blind? Placed in a different situation—what is blindness really? I went back and reread the story. It is ‘overwritten’ in a 19th century way, so I could see why no one had yet adapted it. In late spring of 2004, Jeff Church, Coterie producing artistic director, and I were talking about my work and he was intrigued by this idea. So I did a couple of drafts and Jeff arranged two readings so that we could hear the script. The audio describer (The Storyteller) was in the original version, but when Martin English, director of Accessible Arts and play director, got involved, it was his idea was to make it an interpreted character in the play.

VanAusdale went on to relate that the character of the Storyteller (Dale Westgaard) told the story of Eduardo (Lucian Connole), the poor farmer blind in one eye, who fell in love with Median (Vanessa Severo) and discovered the process of learning to live with his own disability—vision. The production incorporated live music and actor-created sound effects to enhance the storytelling. Making their professional theatre debuts were a blind actress, Shannon Curry and a visually-impaired actress, Alex Espy. The Country of the Blind was the third of three in Coterie’s Preteen/Young Adult Series that year and was

produced not only with funding provided by a prestigious grant from the National Endowment for the Arts but also grants from the Missouri Arts Council and AbilityArts.

The co-producer of the play, Accessible Arts, toured the production to communities in Kansas in April 2006. The organization, a non-profit agency, was established in 1988 to champion the arts for children with disabilities and to advocate access to the arts. It educates professionals and families about the need for access to the arts for children with disabilities; promotes arts programming that incorporates participation of children with disabilities; and advocates access to arts venues and community arts programming for children with disabilities. Martin English served as Executive Director of the organization at the time. He is currently Executive Director of Kansas City Young Audiences.

The artistic and production company included Martin English (director), Jon Cupit (set designer/properties), Georgianna Londre (costume designer), Art Kent (lighting designer), Kit Bardwell (music director), David Kiehl (sound engineer), Kristen Koehn (production assistant), Amy Abels Owen (stage manager), Scott Hobart (technical director) and Andi Enns (production intern).

On opening night audiences were invited to a free post-performance reception with director and cast members. Free question and answer sessions about the show and “how it’s done” took place after the 2 p.m. performances March 17 and 18. In addition, a special Viewer Guide featuring background about the play and playwright, discussion questions and activities, was included in each program. In addition, audiences at the Saturday performances received one free copy of *The Country of the Blind* with each ticket order, courtesy of Target.

In a subsequent Infozine article of March 25, 2007, author and reviewer, Jeannine Chatterton-Papineau said she enjoyed the incorporation of Audio Description into the play. In the past when theatres wished to make the action of a play accessible for non-sighted audience members, they traditionally provided those visitors with a head set and a speaker gave the audio description. In this production, for the first time ever, the audio description was incorporated into the play and narrated by the Storyteller. Chatterton-Papineau felt this [playwriting] and presentation technique was very successful. She said, “Had it not been pointed out to me, I would not have been aware of it.” The storyteller not only described the action on stage but occasionally acted as a force to slow or speed it. She went on to say that the program notes and teacher’s resources focused on several ideas such as “fitting in, being different, when apparent disabilities might be regarded as advantages, and inclusion, both in the arts and in main-stream life” (Chatterton-Papineau. “New Frank Higgins Drama”).

Frank Higgins is a prolific and nationally recognized playwright and poet, who makes his home in Kansas City. As adjunct instructor of playwriting at UMKC, he has a special relationship with Coterie Theatre and four of his plays have premiered there: *Dead Connections* (with Stuart Boyce 1978), *The King of Lemonade* (1980), *Never Say Die* (1985), and *Heartland* (1986). These and many of his other plays for youth are published and available for production (Chatterton-Papineau. “New Frank Higgins Drama”).

Robert Trussell’s review of the play in the *Kansas City Star*, dated March 19, 2007, said he caught a Friday, noon performance packed with school children and the fact that they were “minimally responsive” left him wondering of the play was “really connecting” the way the creators had intended. He felt “There was nothing particularly wrong with the show” [but] “reminded me that sometimes kids can be a tough crowd.” Trussell also thought

that though the Storyteller, who narrated the action, made an admirable attempt to make the play palatable to a non-seeing audience, “the tumultuous action onstage” at times drowned out his narration and disrupted the timing throughout (Trussell. “‘Blind’ never finds”).

After reading these mixed reviews, one is reminded that audiences are diverse and everyone views the production in very different ways. One sees “a very satisfying play” and another sees a play that is not “really connecting.” Such is the nature of live theatre and the difficulty of believing as “fact” the subjective views of a few audience members/critics. Yet, what is evident is that Jeff Church was continuing to find new works both locally and globally that would enhance the diversity of the plays The Coterie would offer on its seasons. The theatre was poised to present its 30th anniversary season in 2008-2009 and would continue the tradition of offering “world premieres” with “artistic innovation” and “bold programming” just as founders Vicky Lee and Judith Yeckel had done. The mission of the company had remained clear from the beginning and Jeff Church proved himself an excellent custodian of the vision for twenty years. The theatre’s thirtieth year would bring back both founders and Coterie favorite playwright, Laurie Brooks (Trussell. “Celebrating its 30th”).

During the summer of 2008, The Coterie hosted a gala celebration commemorating its thirty years of success. In attendance were founders Vicky Lee and Judith Yeckel. Both were living in the Pacific Northwest at the time. They said that they continue to be very proud of the theatre they established here and equally so of what the theatre became after they left. Lee commented, “All I can say is we wanted to do new ideas or projects that had an issue or a message . . . We weren’t your formula fairytale theater.” Yeckel and Lee

agreed that they were most proud of “The Coterie’s continued dedication to the values they espoused from the beginning.” Yeckel further explained,

Maybe that is the heart of why it is around after 30 years . . . I think Jeff and Joette have done a remarkable job of zeroing in on issues of importance to young people, issues of race, issues of gender . . . One thing we never wanted to do and they never do is condescend to the audience.

Yeckel and Lee were speaking of The Coterie’s artistic director Jeff Church and executive director Joette Pelster. The founders felt it was their leadership that had brought the company this far. Lee said, “In the world of nonprofits, that a theater has a 30-year life is miraculous” (Trussell. “Celebrating its 30th”). That expert leadership was in full evidence with the next world premiere to grace the stage of The Coterie that milestone season.

Award-winning playwright Laurie Brooks, whose *The Wrestling Season* had brought both The Coterie and herself mutual success and national attention in 2000, once again debuted a new play at the theater in March of 2009, titled *Atypical Boy*. Six of Brooks’ plays had been produced by The Coterie since *The Wrestling Season* and she had a reputation for writing serious works that tackled topical issues facing youngsters and teens. But *Atypical Boy* was different. It was a comedy, “calculated to make audiences laugh.” Brooks explained, “We had this idea that this play could be created that would help people understand something about the concept of invisible disabilities . . . And often they are deeply misunderstood.” The play was commissioned by the Jim Eisenreich Foundation, founded by former Kansas City Royal Jim Eisenreich to spread awareness of Tourette’s syndrome, a disorder that most often results in physical tics. A Coterie board member knew Eisenreich and got him interested in the project. But Brooks felt she had to be honest with the foundation about her play.

I'm a playwright who is deeply interested in style and in pushing the boundaries of (young-audiences theater) . . . I wasn't going to write the story of Jim Eisenreich, nor was I going to write a play about a little boy with Tourette's syndrome. And they were totally on board with the idea that I would come at this through the back door with some pretty challenging stylistic elements and comedy that I hoped would reach middle-schoolers. So style and wackiness are part of this play.

Brooks said she was grateful to the foundation for their funding. "It's kind of unusual for an organization to commission and support the creation and production of a play" (Trussell. "Coterie's 'Atypical Boy'").

The story focuses on the protagonist, Boy, who is unable to conform in a world of absolute conformity and is therefore shunned. Everyone around Boy wants to "fix him," and he cannot be fixed and so disappears into a strange new world where he is torn between choosing to become what he has been labeled, a monster, or who he is, a human. Brooks said, "This is a fable. A cautionary tale, really" (Trussell. "Celebrating its 30th"). She also commented in an interview with Jackie Kappes for her TYA/USA blog,

Many of my plays are inspired by young people who find themselves on the outside and, through their own determination and tenacity, overcome the obstacles life throws them . . . I write stories that ask questions, stories that ask the characters to make choices, good and bad, and then let audiences decide for themselves how they think and feel about what they have seen. I like to use storytelling to explore issues of character, morality and ethics.

An article by Kenneth Jones for playbill.com includes the following comment by The Coterie theater,

. . . when the story reaches its highest point, playwright Brooks stops the action and lets the audience interact with the characters onstage . . . the audience gives the characters advice . . . theatre patrons contribute to the ending!

In order to produce the challenging style of the play, Church chose a co-director, Heidi Van, who had extensive credits with The Coterie in acting and also professional experience in clowning as a graduate of the prestigious Dell' Arte International School of

Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California (www.dellarte.org). He explained that “In the first part of the play everything is high form, heightened action . . . And in the second part . . . the movement is anime based . . . Everything is just a little bit bigger than life.” The performance style, developed by the cast, which included Van, was broad and incorporated clowning (Trussell. “Celebrating its 30th”). The ensemble cast featured Alex Espy, Heidi Van, Martin Buchanan, Matthew Jayson Weiss, Corrie Van Ausdal, Meghann Henry, Jennie Greensberry and Jason Loverde. The artistic and production company included Jeff Church (director), Scott Hobart (set designer, technical director), Georgianna Londre Buchanan (costume designer, puppetry designer), Art Kent (lighting designer), Matt Hill (puppetry design), David Kiehl (sound designer), Amy M. Abels Owen (production stage manager) and Meghann Henry (assistant director, properties) (Jones. “Coterie Will Premiere”). The entire production was filled with seasoned veterans of The Coterie’s successful past from the playwright and the cast to the crew. The reviews were glowing.

A review by Kansas City Star critic Robert Trussell was quoted on Brooks’ website, “This wacky romp incorporating clowning technique and unorthodox storytelling mixes imaginative writing with serious questions . . . a rare example of interactive theater that actually works.” Karen VanAusdale of the online magazine Infozine had this to say, “An entertaining fable about the beauty and danger of being different in a world where conformity is valued and individuality is feared.” But Steve Shapiro’s comments in Kansas City’s online journal of the arts, KCMetropolis were the most telling,

Watching this play unfold I not only saw the exploration of acceptance with those who have disabilities—invisible or otherwise—but also struggles with any sort of difference from gender identity, to sexuality, to learning disabilities like dyslexia. Brooks has created a story that everyone can identify with regardless of life’s experiences . . . As the play was reaching its climax, The Ordinary (a character)

stopped the action and asked the audience what we thought was happening . . . And here was an opportunity for us—the audience—to share our feelings about the action thus far. This critic has never participated in this kind of theatre and it was powerful.

The Coterie formula for success: combine a noted playwright who writes about serious issues concerning youth with a well-seasoned, professional director, cast and crew, was proven yet again with this production. This was a clear demonstration of why The Coterie made it to thirty years thriving. The following season, 2009-2010 would produce two more plays in the same vein, this time with strictly Kansas City roots.

Kicking off the season in September of 2009 was the premiere of *Tell-Tale Electric* Poe conceived and adapted by Jeff Church from three short stories and three poems by Edgar Allan Poe. He and actor Bruce Roach then edited them and Rex Hobart provided live accompaniment on electric guitar and keyboards. Roach, who had done one-man shows before, but never the works of Poe, said that he and Church “had to find ways to make the individual stories and poems more theatrically active.” To help realize this, some creative editing was done to the stories but surprisingly little to the poems. Roach also created a different persona for each piece. “I don’t think I’m playing Poe [but] . . . six separate sides of myself” (Trussell. “The Coterie plugs into”).

Hobart not only provided the attendant music but designed the multilevel madhouse setting of oddly raked platforms and warped perspectives. It included a cellar area, a couple of “staircases to infinity” and an attic area where he performed the music. Hobart said that the set was inspired by “the look of some of the Tim Burton movies.” The color palette was what he called “old, dilapidated house.” It had four different levels, no true 90-degree angles, some forced perspective and he said “it plays tricks on you.” As for the score, it was a mix of set musical pieces with extended improvisation. Hobart also created sound effects

with his “sound guitar” and produced unusual sounds by combining instruments in new ways such as drawing a violin bow across a cymbal (Trussell. “The Coterie plugs into”).

Karen VanAusdale of Infozine said, “The production overflows with poetry, riffs, ghosts and morbid prose floating in an atmospheric setting.” She also related that Tell-Tale Electric Poe was the first production in The Coterie’s Preteen/Young Adults Series and funded in part by the Missouri Arts Council and the ArtKC Fund. VanAusdale included kudos for the production company as well: Jeff Church (director), Scott “Rex” Hobart (composer/set designer/technical director), Georgianna Londre (costume designer), Jeffrey Cady (projection designer), Art Kent (lighting designer), David Kiehl (sound designer), Amy Abels Owen (stage manager), Ron Megee (properties), and Rachel Cain (production assistant and house manager). Diane Thompson of KCMetropolis described the production in this way: “This thrilling and unique rendition of classic Poe may not be for the very young, but it is for everyone else. Tell-Tale Electric Poe is a visual and musical spectacular— a must-see this season.” However, Alan Scherstuhl of the Pitch best described the production in his review.

Roach does all the talking, but Church has fashioned Tell-Tale Electric Poe as an unorthodox duet. Looming from a balcony on stage right, local country music dynamo Scott “Rex” Hobart lays down raw and continuous electric guitar accompaniment. He offers feedback poems, a fog of music that suggests a world going mad, licks and drones that — like Art Kent’s lights — pull off that keyed-to-our-emotions feat. But he also frays at those emotions, heightens the tensions, tickles at the frets for pizzicato horror when the rats swarm. (Hobart designed the set, too. It’s a knockout.)

Roach’s slow burn throughout Poe’s The Tell-Tale Heart will probably come to mind every time I encounter the story from now on. He and Church have cooked up several fine gross-outs appropriate to a theater for young people, but that duet is what makes this so memorable.

What more could one ask for from a season-opening production? From the reviews it was clear that it was a success with both young and old. So, it was no surprise to find that another world premiere immediately followed.

Maul of the Dead by Mitch Brian, a local Kansas City screenwriter, was commissioned by The Coterie and directed by Ron Megee for the “Coterie at Night” series. The play made its debut October 16, 2009. It boasted the largest cast in Coterie history with two rotating groups of community zombies. Brian had supported himself as a screenwriter for years but this was the first time he had written anything for the stage. What led to this began the year before when he watched his daughter in Megee’s production of Night of the Living Dead, also at The Coterie. He attended it multiple times in support of his daughter and soon started to note the similarities and differences between it and the 1968, George A. Romero classic horror film of the same name. “I saw it a bunch of times and was fascinated.” Yet he was quick to point out that Maul of the Dead was not Dawn of the Dead, the sequel to Romero’s Night of the Living Dead. “There are echoes . . . but . . .It’s really an homage to the 70s.” And, frankly, Brian was unprepared for the respect that he received as a playwright.

The truth is that in Hollywood . . . the writer is the most disposable person on the production. You know you’re going to get rewritten. The studio execs think they know more than you do, and you won’t be there if the director doesn’t want you there.

But, Megee and Church invited him to sit in on auditions and rehearsals. Megee said, “One day I turned to him and said, ‘Can we reverse those two lines?’ And he said, ‘You’re asking me’” (Trussell. “Beware: Zombies”)?

Scott Hobart (known as Rex Hobart onstage) again designed the setting. It was the interior of a 1978 J.C Penney store with the then popular orange-and-brown palette. There were period mannequins and shag carpet, plus a mall with an Orange Julius, a Musicland and a Hickory Farms that could be seen through a giant plate-glass window. Megan Turek created the costumes and the “zombie look” while Kimberly Queen, a member of the cast, designed the make-up and hair. Cody Wyoming, a “musical zombie,” performed a live score. Megee started the show with zombies ascending the Crown Center escalator outside of the Off Center Theatre while theatre-goers were still milling around the lobby. then he had two SWAT officers rush in and hustle the audience into the theatre where they found themselves trapped in the retro J. C. Penney store. Megee said, “it sounds like infectious lunacy, but Brian has written actual characters, people who change during the course of the show.” Brian said the difference for him between stage and screen was “In movies, action and pictures are more important than words . . . In plays, the dialogue is the action . . . It’s absolutely crucial to moving the story forward” (Trussell. “Beware: Zombies”).

The reviews were a bit mixed but for the most part positive. Robert Trussell, critic for the Kansas City Star said that “Director Ron Megee is a talented man, and he knows how to fill a stage but there were times in the first of two performances Saturday night when I didn’t know where to look, especially during zombie attacks.” But he did praise Mitch Brian for his “good use of the vast reservoir of 70s trivia and movie lore . . .” Trussell also enjoyed the “retail environment” which created “jokes and amusing incongruities” as well as Brian’s channeling of movie clichés and providing character back stories. Although he felt that some of Brian’s jokes got lost amid the “mayhem,” Trussell gave kudos to Megee’s direction, Hobart’s “great set design” and Art Kent’s lighting (Trussell. “Coterie at Night’s

‘Maul’”). Diane Thompson, in her review for KCMetropolis, described Maul of the Dead as a “spoofy tale of apocalypse and hilarity with blood spatter a-plenty.” She very much enjoyed Megan Turk’s costume design that “left no doubt, it was the 70s, baby, and all hell was breaking loose.” Thompson also praised the “cast and zombie crew” who kept the audience “laughing and gasping out loud until; the very end.” She ended with, “it’s a wild night at the mall . . . definitely worth checking out . . . probably more than once.”

With these two premieres, Tell-Tale Electric Poe and Maul of the Dead, Jeff Church continued to apply his formula for success, this time turning the spotlight on local Kansas City theater professionals. Both shows were conceived, written, directed and produced with local talent, a practice which The Coterie had nurtured since its earliest seasons but especially under the tutelage of Church. The combination of local, national and international artists’ works was raising the prestige of The Coterie in the genre of theatre for young audiences and now with its “Coterie at Night” series, adults. Church’s multigenerational vision was coming into sharp focus and this series would debut yet another world premiere on the 2010-2011 season. Many of the same members of the production team reprised their roles but the show was produced both at The Coterie and at another local venue.

CHAPTER 3

SEPTEMBER 2010-AUGUST 2014

A tribute to horror films of the '80s, *Sorority House of the Dead*, opened in late October of 2010. The production ran at The Coterie and The Living Room with evening performances at 7:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. respectively. The Living Room Theatre (www.thelivingroomkc.com), located at 1818 McGee Street, is “an unconventional art space in the Crossroads Arts District in Kansas City, Missouri.” It is “Dedicated to creating an atmosphere that allows the audience to abandon their perception of ‘The Theater,’” [by] “creating new and engaging performance spaces, to present thought-provoking works by local and published playwrights.” The theatre, founded in 2010 by Rusty Sneary and Shawna Journagan, was originally an auto showroom. The three story building was transformed into a performance space by the founders friends and family in the KC community. “Aside from the unconventional playing space (which changes from show-to-show), what makes The Living Room unique is that the audience lounges in vintage chairs and couches while enjoying progressive and provocative performances.” The addition of this venue to the performance schedule for this “Coterie at Night” series offering, widened and strengthened the audience base of both theatres for a show that local critic Robert Trussell said “isn’t for kiddies” (Trussell. ““Sorority House”). This decision fit not only the intention of the new Coterie series but allowed another theatre to benefit as well. Jeff Church was still making collaborative friends all over town and proving that in a healthy arts community what was good for one was good for all.

The story of the play, again commissioned of and written by Mitch Brian, was an ode to '80's vampire movies. Three rushees stumbled into a sorority house inhabited by bloodsuckers. Brian, a writer of film and television, told *Broadway World Kansas City*,

I have been thrilled to have this chance to explore how the conventions and characteristics of movies translate, argue and meld with theater in unexpected and fantastic ways . . . My script for last year's *Maul of the Dead* was homage to disaster films and 1970s pop culture with lots of zombies. This year's play plunges us into the gaudy, glamorous and grotesque 1980s while resurrecting the perennially popular (and truly undead) vampire tale.

In the same interview director Ron Megee quipped, "We have middle ground vampires—more violent than *Twilight* vampires, but much campier than *Dracula*."

Once again, reviews were mixed but over-all very positive. *Kansas City Star* critic Robert Trussell called the show "a chaotic affair, full of shouted jokes, over-the-top mock violence, eccentric choreography and hilarious isolated moments." Yet he praised the "formidably talented" cast and the "creative and appropriate" directing and design work of Ron Megee (director, set designer/properties), Scott Hobart (set designer, technical director), Megan Turek (costume designer), Moose Werks (lighting designer), David Kiehl (sound designer), Kimberley Queen (make-up designer), Megan Engstrom (stage manager), Jay Akin (fight, special effects), Kerry Miller (deputy costume) and Cody Wyoming (live musical score). He went on to say that it "invited spectators to sit close to the stage in a "splatter zone" where they could enjoy the experience of being sprinkled with phony blood" (Trussell. "Sorority House"). This was something *JLIN* of *KCStage Magazine* found disappointing. ". . . the space had a splatter zone in the front row. The audience was not warned of this until the house manager started passing out plastic to hold in front of them. I heard several complaints from these patrons who wouldn't have minded sitting in a splatter

zone, if they had only been aware . . . beforehand.” However, Jennifer Bhargava of The Vignette gave it a clear thumbs up.

. . . the main character of the show is blood. Well, fake blood. The liquid showers the front-row audience at several points during the production, much to the delight of easy-going theater-goers . . . If you love cheesy eighties music, have a soft spot for gory horror films and wouldn't mind seeing catty sorority girls mauling each other in pajamas, the Coterie Theatre has a treat for you. Their campy tribute to eighties vampire flicks, “Sorority House of the Dead,” is bound to put a smile on your face this Halloween weekend.

While reviews are part of the business of live theatre they are, as pointed out previously, the subjective view of a few audience members. Clearly the production that was co-sponsored at two venues was successful because the “Coterie at Night” series produced yet another world premiere in the same vein on the 2011-2012 season with yet a different local theatre venue.

The Just Off-Broadway Theatre, located in Kansas City's Penn Valley Park at 31st street, was the site of The Coterie world premiere production of Children of the Damned Corn in October of 2011. In 2000, the Kansas City Parks Department built a “black box” theatre inside the still-standing limestone walls of their original 1910 Operations Building and opened it as the Just Off-Broadway Theatre. It operated for ten years with approximately forty companies producing “more than 1000 performances of 180 shows during that period.” From 2009-2010, funds were raised for a “Completion Project” that included “an enlarged lobby, box office and concession facilities, Equity Standard dressing rooms, increased storage/work areas, producer's office and a multi-purpose space called the Penn Valley Room. Construction began in January 2011 and was completed August 1, 2011.” The theatre reopened on September 12, 2011 and Children of the Damned Corn was the second production to be staged at the newly renovated theatre (justoffbroadway.org).

The play, *Children of the Damned Corn*, created by director/playwright Ron Megee, was “a blending of *The Village of the Damned* and *Children of the Corn* because both relate to children ruling the world in any means that they can—killing, mind-manipulation, etcetera . . . Though our show is funny at times, the town folk massacre scenes are beyond belief. Adults beware!” Set in the 1950s, the plot concerns Milt and Betty Hartman who on their way to California suffer a car accident in the small Midwestern town of Gatlinville. This town was once the home of the “World’s Largest Cream Corn Factory.” Now the factory is a church run by a crazy child leader named Malaki. The production includes 44 extras who represent the various youth and residents of Gatlinville, Nebraska. Audiences saw one of two rotating groups of 22 extras at each performance, plus the eight principals in the cast who included: Martin Buchanan, Kimberley Queen, Pete Weber and Cody Wyoming. The artistic and production company included Ron Megee (director, co-set designer/properties), Scott Hobart (co-set designer, technical director), Megan Turek (costume designer), Art Kent (lighting designer), David Kiehl (sound designer), Megan Mayo (stage manager), Anna Comiskey (production assistant) and Kristina Banton-DeMaree (intern) (News Desk BWW. “Children of the Damned”).

Reviews were good for this production which was intended for adults and teens. A KCStudio web article called *Children of the Damned Corn*, “1950’s B-movie horror at its finest . . .” (<http://kcstudio.org>). Kansas City Star critic Robert Trussell called the production a “calculatedly ridiculous send-up of bad horror movies” that “delivers its share of crazy gags and jokes.” He praised director Ron Megee’s “clever sense of satire” and his choice to have audience members “walk through a maze of “corn” to get to the lobby.” Trussell was equally impressed with not only the principal cast members, “Weber . . . delivers a quirky,

agreeably eccentric performance . . . Bankston . . . finds a way to be both cartoonish and precise” and “Buchanan performs with crazed energy,” but the 44 extras that “are divided into two groups so that a mere 22 of them are at any given performance. That’s a lot of folks for the little Just Off-Broadway space, and the sheer number of bodies adds to the barely controlled chaos.” He also added kudos to the designers: costumes, lighting and sound (Trussell. “Children of the Damned”).

With the production of Children of the Damned Corn, The Coterie at Night series was continuing in fine fashion. The series strengthened and expanded its audience base with another offering for an underserved group from ages thirteen to adult and at a location that would give that audience a taste of theatre in a venue other than The Coterie. This served to highlight Kansas City’s growing theatrical community and provide more opportunity for collaboration within it. The Coterie continued its tradition of theatrical “win-wins” with the production of Slashdance! Ron Megee would once again serve as director/playwright in what he called “the basic plot of Flashdance” combined “with a horrifying survival tale involving virus-infected cannibals” (Trussell. “Coterie to open season”). This Coterie world premiere would not make its debut until the 2012-2013 season. This time the production went up in March instead of October and was produced for The Coterie stage. It also opened as part of the “Coterie Theatre’s Pop Culture Serie”’s under its new “Coterie Ignites” banner (formerly known as “Coterie at Night”) (Trussell. “Ron Megee sinks his teeth”).

The play was set in “a futuristic Kansas City after the apocalyptic Flesh Wars,” said Megee. It tells the story:

...of female dynamo, Alexis Bowens, who is a true maniac: welder by day, dancer by night. Her dream is to get into a real dance company though, and nothing’s going to get in her way—not even a giant herd of fast-moving, virus-infected human

cannibals... or her boyfriend's lack of support. Not only will she finally get her big break, but killing cannibalistic hoards is even better for her abs than Pilates!

Slashdance! featured several songs from the Flashdance, 80s-defining soundtrack which Megee also thinks is “one of the best albums of all time . . . who doesn't love Maniac and What a Feeling?” He went on to describe his idea for the show.

My inspiration for Slashdance! was thinking about a post-apocalyptic Kansas City and how people, given their instinct to survive, would continue on with their lives and still be able to dream of a better future. This is so much of the appeal of the movie Flashdance—but I imagined them dreaming of this future while fighting flesh-eating cannibals!

But Megee also spoke of wanting to surpass his past Coterie at Night productions.

I wanted to go to a new level with our attackers, past the zombie phase, and step into a more terrifying flesh eater. Cannibals were the next step. They move really fast (appearing out of nowhere), are cunning, and are out to eat flesh... at all costs. (News Desk BWW. “Slashdance”)

Just as Children of the Damned Corn included 44 extras, ,Slashdance! featured 31 extras who represented the cannibals over-running Kansas City. They appeared as “two rotating casts” that performed with eight principal actors including: Ashley M. Otis, Kenneth Personett, Kimberly Queen, Jordan Spatz, Mandy Morris, Martin Buchanan, Keith Smith, and Damian Blake (KCSTAGE. “Music is not the only thing”). Robert Trussell called the cast “a virtual who's who of local alternative theatre stars.” Otis had been featured in Steven Eubanks productions, Morris at the Living Room and New Theatre, and Blake at the Fishtank (Trussell. “Ron Megee sinks teeth”). The artistic and production company included many returning veterans of The Coterie at Night series as well as some first time artists from the University of Missouri-Kansas City graduate program in theatre: Ron Megee (director/set/properties designer), Megan Turek (costume designer), Art Kent (lighting designer), Daniel Warneke (sound designer), Kimberly Queen (makeup designer), Matthew

Mott (effects makeup designer/design assistant), Fiona Carmody (stage manager), Luci Kersting (production assistant/deck manager), Scott Hobart (technical director/master carpenter), and Ashley Otis, Mandy Morris, Kenneth Personett, and Jordan Spatz (choreography) (KCPRESS. “Coterie: Music is not the only thing”).

Slashdance! opened in mid-March of 2013. KCPRESS said that it was “a hilariously grisly parody that pits the iconic ‘80’s movie ‘Flashdance’ against cannibalistic hoards” (KCPRESS. “Coterie: Music is not the only thing”). Robert Trussell, Kansas City Star critic wrote that “Among the show’s chief attributes: A star turn by Ashley M. Otis, doing a deadpan delivery as Alex that conflates every kick-ass action-flick heroine we’ve ever seen; an exceptional comic performance by Mandy Morris . . . and athletic dance routines attributed to Otis and three other choreographers.” Trussell also enjoyed the set design: “an agreeably chaotic assemblage of steel fencing and platforms;” the costume design: “Megan Turek’s costumes are a hoot;” and “Art Kent’s lighting is a major plus” (Trussell. “‘Slashdance!’ delivers”).

It is easy to see from the reviews that the world premiere of Slashdance! was yet another successful production in The Coterie’s then 34-year history. The show was appreciated by Kansas City audiences and as evidenced by the cast of “31 extras” and “eight principals,” stirred a wealth of support from the local professional and non-professional theatre communities as well. But, the production premiered at the same time as a “rebranding” campaign was launched by the theatre company. In a Kansas City Star article published at the end of March 2013, critic Robert Trussell explained that the recent Coterie rebranding was an effort to demonstrate the company’s growth and maturity “from a no-budget store-front operation . . . to one of Kansas City’s established companies, providing

employment to scores of actors and other theater artists each year and attracting tens of thousands of viewers during a typical season.” Thus the “Coterie at Night” series was rebranded as “Coterie Ignites” (Trussell. “Multi-faceted Coterie”).

The article went on to say that while the rebranding campaign included an improved website, a new logo, a new tagline (“No small characters”) and a mobile app for easier ticket sales, one of its primary functions was to let people know that The Coterie had “a lot of components . . . it’s not just a place to see shows based on fairy tales.” Jeff Church explained that

We have the largest AIDS conversation project in the region. And we do plays for little kids. And we do a series at night for pop culture . . . Plus we have a theater school . . . It’s been hard for people to understand that we’re programming for a wide range of youth. We start serving kids at five and basically go through college age . . . You always hope you’ve made yourself and your story even clearer to your current audience and potential audience members but . . . People still say, “We just thought you did shows for little kids. (Trussell. “Multi-faceted Coterie”)

So, Jeff Church took a cue from the corporate sector to solve the dilemma: rebrand yourself (Trussell. “Multi-faceted Coterie”).

Joette Pelster, Coterie executive director, went on to say “With all our various activities, we were having a hard time bringing them all together under one image or tagline . . . We needed focus, and we needed outside help.” The company turned to VML, “a Kansas City-based digital marketing and advertising agency with 17 offices around the world” who performed the work pro bono. The Coterie board formed a marketing sub-committee, under the direction of vice president, Susan Johnson, that spent months planning the new vision before approaching VML. Susan Johnson and VML president and CEO, Jon Cook, had known each other since high school but Cook said that VML had done “pro bono work for a number of local nonprofits, including arts organizations.” Johnson said of the partnership,

“VML took that vision and really brought it to life in ways we didn’t even expect” and answered the basic question of how to make The Coterie not seem childish? VML creative director Michael Eppelheimer said the new tagline “No Small Characters conveys the idea that it might be for children and teens, but it’s anything but childish” (Trussell. “Multi-faceted Coterie”).

It is interesting to note that the article also mentioned that a conversation about how The Coterie at Night series fit in with other Coterie offerings was the driving force behind the move to rebrand. That “intellectual exercise,” about a series that grew and developed the theatre’s offerings, pushed the company to not only rebrand but redefine itself for its current and future audiences (Trussell. “Multi-faceted Coterie”). That being said, the next world premiere at The Coterie was a commissioned play which made its debut in September of 2013. It was a new play that dealt with the realities of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but drew on the Stephen Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage* for inspiration. Although The Coterie had staged a version of the play in the early 1990s, this one would capture and redefine the current realities of American troops at war, even as it fell into perfect alignment with its rebranding.

The play was titled *The Red Badge Variations* and its author was New York-based playwright Melissa Cooper. She stated at the time that neither she nor Jeff Church wanted a straight adaptation of the novel but her first step was to reread it. Decades had passed since she had read it and her second reading had been met with difficulty.

I’m a huge reader, but I actually had a time getting into it initially . . . You know, sometimes books seem opaque and at other times in your life you walk right in . . . The third time approaching it, the doors flew open and I was inside it . . . then I started researching everything . . .

Cooper's research included not only Stephen Crane and the novel but memoirs of soldiers from the Civil War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. She also watched video documentaries of the wars plus raw combat footage shot from current American troops helmet cameras. But the greatest contribution to the play's authenticity was made by Logan Black, an Army veteran who served in both theaters in 2006 and 2007 (Trussell. "Multi-faceted Coterie").

At the time, Black was a third-year student in the University of Missouri-Kansas City's graduate acting program. He became a consultant to the production team. Playwright Melissa Cooper described Black as "amazing as a consultant . . . The play is such an ensemble piece, and these guys have a limited amount of rehearsal time . . . they have to become soldiers." She was referring to Black's drill sergeant role during cast rehearsals. He would order them "to do push-ups and a range of taxing exercises" as he walked "around the room using his drill sergeant's voice, telling them stories about his own experiences." In addition to putting the cast through "mock basic training," Black also made suggestions that allowed Cooper to refine the script. But from the beginning Black said the play had a high level of authenticity.

I related very heavily to it. I identified instantly with the survivor's guilt . . . I identified with the individual soldiers because I knew them to various degrees in my own service . . . that made the play profound. (Trussell. "Coterie's 'Red Badge'")

Cooper described *The Red Badge Variations* as a

compression of a 10-month deployment. There are five guys . . . But there is a character who brings *The Red Badge of Courage* as a book into the combat zone, and his name is Henry Fleming. However he is not literally modeled on (Crane's) character. It all take place in a remote outpost . . . The place is never named, but it's basically Afghanistan . . . We see them getting ready for battle . . . returning from battle . . . killing time . . . laughing and fighting. (Trussell. "Coterie's 'Red Badge'")

Steve Walker of UMKC Today said, “To help with the production, The Coterie received a substantial special project award from the National Endowment for the Arts, which recognized the script for its ‘serious, exceptional and rigorous aesthetic value’” (Walker. Coterie Theatre production explores”). Broadway World News said it was

A National Endowment for the Arts award-winning world premiere by Melissa Cooper and directed by Kyle Hatley . . . The play commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Civil War . . . A Coterie Sparks series production intended for preteen through adult. (News Desk BWW. “Red Badge Variations, Chitty”)

The Red Badge Variations opened The Coterie’s 35th anniversary season in September of 2013 to rave reviews. David Golston of INFOZINE called it “an emotional and thought-provoking new play . . .” (Golston. “The Coterie Theatre Stages”). Bob Evans of the Kansas City Performing Arts Examiner said,

The tough yet tender fiber of the human heart comes to the forefront as the soldiers examine their strength of character, their friendship, their past, their current circumstances, and their hopes . . . Applaud The Coterie for educating, entertaining, and challenging their audiences with Red Badge Variations . . . The play provides The Coterie the opportunity to expand its reach with new, fresh material. (Evans. ““Red Badge Variations’ updates”)

Liz Cook of the Pitch described it this way, “Red Badge Variations works as an authentic examination of combat. Crane’s Henry Fleming foolishly believed that battles were nothing more than ‘crimson blotches on the pages of the past.’” Cooper’s Fleming reminds you that the stains don’t fade (Cook. “Red Badge Variations”). Lindsay Adams of UMKC NEWS gushed, “Red Badge Variations is a gripping, touching and frequently hilarious story of five young soldiers who have to adapt to a brutal new world without losing themselves completely” (Adams. “The Coterie’s World Premiere”). And, The Kansas City Star’s Robert Trussell said the production “proves to be an absorbing 70 minutes of theater.” He also offered this:

Plays about war are tricky. You can't really show any fighting, but you can certainly show its effects. And those plays can wrestle with the central question of most war narratives: What is the meaning of life when life is so expendable? Cooper eloquently addresses the question in a play that sticks with you. (Trussell. "Coterie's 'Red Badge Variations' uses")

All of the reviews give great credit to the ensemble cast: Jacob Aaron Cullum (as Henry), Matt Leonard (as Wilson), Matthew Joseph (as JC), Francisco Javier Villegas (as Tat), and Jake Walker (as Doc). They also mention the considerable creative talent of the production team: Melissa Cooper (playwright), Kyle Hatley (director), Eryn Bates (composer), Scott Hobart (technical director & co-set designer), Paul Joseph Barnet (co-set designer), Georgianna Londré Buchanan (costume designer), Art Kent (lighting designer), Ron Megee (properties), Joe Concha (sound designer), Amy M. Abels Owen (production stage manager), Luci Kersting (production assistant), and Logan Black (military consultant). Bob Evans passed out,

heaps of credit to the creative team whose set designs, sound design, props, stage management, lighting design, and directing keep the audience focused and involved as the play unfolds. The seating design puts the audience at the edge of the action and creates an intimacy that makes the audience feel they are in the war zone as well. The close confines assist in bonding the audience with the characters throughout the play. Creative minds working together created a beautiful theatrical experience. (Evans. "'Red Badge Variations' updates")

Cook said,

Hatley keeps the script taut, choreographing smart physical business to set the high adrenaline of combat against the disorienting boredom of a long deployment. Joseph Concha's sound design does the heavy lifting in battle scenes, making us feel as surrounded and exposed as the soldiers. Concha's sounds shape a dream world in one moment and whiplash us back to the present in the next, our ears ringing. (Cook. "Red Badge Variations").

Finally, Robert Trussell offered this: "P.J. Barnett and Scott Hobart have co-designed an unusual but effective set consisting of raw floorboards, sandbags, a little piece of open

ground and a bunk area. Different seats may offer radically different visual perspectives” (Trussell. “Coterie’s ‘Red Badge Variations’ uses”).

What is there left to say about *The Red Badge Variations*? It was a play that brought accolades from all the reviewers in print and on the web. Their comments stand as evidence of the power of the subject matter and Jeff Church’s expert timing of its presentation. Clearly, all involved, from cast to crew to audience, were ready for the message. For Jeff Church and *The Coterie*, 35 years of success is proven once again, to be all in the timing.

Continuing the tradition of excellent timing, Church commissioned his next world premiere from Laurie Brooks, a playwright who since 1999 had been a frequent collaborator with the theatre company. Her latest play, *Afflicted: Daughters of Salem*, began as an idea instigated by Church. This was an unusual occurrence in their collaborative history, as Brooks usually pitched the ideas. But this time, Church’s interest in the Salem girls, what led them to become accusers and the circumstances leading up to the trials piqued her interest. Church had always thought those girls were an intriguing mystery and he knew there was no theatre-for-young-audiences play about them. So Brooks ran with the idea and began research.

Brooks found lots of research and what she found interesting was that the historical record had very little about the girls’ emotional makeup. There was a lot of information about the social norms and climate of Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 but very little about the girls themselves. She liked this aspect as it left her lots of room to create the girls’ very different personalities. Brooks also found that after she sifted through the tons of existing research, the play virtually wrote itself. It became for her an examination of society and how the girls responded to it.

The society of the place and time was oppressive, patriarchal and religious. Puritans believed the devil was everywhere: in failed crops, disease, and sin. This culture of fear was oppressive for the adults, so Brooks conjectured that it must have been ten times as oppressive for the rebellious teenagers who were also under the control of those adults and the church. She began to think about what avenues were open for those powerless teens and how they would acquire power. Brooks focused on the accusers, the five Salem girls who brought about the witch trials and what the girls might have done to gain that power. She knew from her exploration of these ideas in several of her other plays that girls take power differently from the way boys do. Girls are manipulative, they lie and they take and give power. Often times relationships are broken. With these ideas in mind, Brooks quickly gave shape to the first draft of the play.

Church and Brooks then took the draft to Arizona State University in November of 2013 (lauriebrooks.com). After a week of development, they were satisfied that it was ready to be staged. The setting was a birch forest on the outskirts of Salem. The play depicted the accusers, Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam, Mercy Lewis, Mary Warren and Betty Paris as well as Tituba the slave from Barbados who told the girls stories of witches and devils. Just as with her first play for The Coterie, *The Wrestling Season* in 1999, Brooks once again asked her audience to participate in the play in a unique way. The written ending of the play came to a close but the actors remained on stage to let the audience contribute their thoughts to the characters in the style of a forum. Church called it “her trademark.” The audience was invited to formulate their own conclusions through reflection on questions posed by the actions of the characters (Trussell. “Lots to look forward to”).

In a KCUR interview Laurie Brooks put her “forums” in perspective. She said that the forum puts the climax of her plays into a transaction between the actors and the audience in which they find grayness, nuance and ambiguity in the issues, not a black and white answer. The play then resembles more closely their own world.

After the play was developed, it was reported in December of 2013 by the Kansas City Star that The Coterie had been awarded a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to support its production of *Afflicted: Daughters of Salem* (Trussell, “NEA grants”).

A press release by David Golston for The Coterie added an interesting note: the play marked the continuation of The Coterie-UMKC co-production tradition started in 1992 with *The Red Badge of Courage*. Since that time the university had enjoyed participating in an annual production that provided practical, professional experience on stage and behind the scenes (Golston. “The Coterie & UMKC”).

Bob Evans of the Examiner made this fact clear in his review of the production by including much praise to Jeff Church for assembling the excellent cast, crew and production team members. He said *Afflicted: Daughters of Salem* featured Equity actor Emily Shackelford (as Ann Putnam), as well as UMKC graduate acting students Nicole Greenberg (as Abigail Williams), Emily Nan Phillips (as Mercy Lewis), Jessica Jensen (as Mary Warren), Alisha Espinosa (as Tituba), and Logan Black (as Voice of Reverend Parris). The cast also included a young professional actor, Hannah Thompson (as Betty Paris). Evans said everyone gave “outstanding and well-conceived performances.” The artistic and production company included Laurie Brooks (playwright), Jeff Church (director), UMKC graduate designers Jeff Ridenour (set designer), Kristopher Kirkwood (lighting designer),

Tyler Wilson (costume designer), Sarah Putts (sound designer), Bret Engle (properties), William J. Christie (Coterie production stage manager), Kaleb Krahn (UMKC technical director), Scott Hobart (Coterie technical director), UMKC faculty, Erika Bailey (dialect coach), Jennifer Martin (movement consultant), and Kelsey Brennan (Coterie production assistant) (Evans. “Afflicted”).

Robert Trussell’s review for the Kansas City Star called the production a “sharp looking show” thanks to Jeff Ridenour’s atmospheric design that suggested a claustrophobic forest. He very much enjoyed the “dynamic” lighting of Kristopher Kirkwood and the costumes by Tyler Wilson. He also mentioned that the sound design by Sarah Putts made an important contribution to the mood. Trussell praised the actresses for their focused and vivid performances. He especially appreciated Alisha Espinosa’s charismatic depiction of Tituba. Overall, Trussell found plausible Brooks’s defiant girls sneaking off to create their own society only to claim they were afflicted when caught, and he felt the dramatic elements were well-balanced by the educational value: “This show really packs a punch.” The show ran through February 23 at The Coterie Theatre (Trussell. “‘Afflicted’ at The Coterie”).

Karen Hauge had some interesting remarks in her KCMetropolis review of the play. She said that the intriguing thing about this play for her was that it was a snapshot of how social pressures and fear can cause unconscionable actions in any time period. Hauge felt that a tense atmosphere was created very simply with close, focused lighting and haunting voice-overs from Reverend Parris’s sermons, which effectively set the tone of the society gripped by strict Puritan social law. She went on to say that Brooks captured a wide variety of possible Salem personalities in the six female characters, emphasizing that citizens of Salem Village felt many kinds of pressure: the pressure to marry well and do good, the

pressure to be humble and God-fearing and the most potent of which being the idea that the Devil, not God, was all around, and must be resisted at every turn, or villagers would risk punishment both legal and corporal from church authorities. Hauge believed Brooks created the pressure cooker of Salem Village that would have forced these five girls to feel no other option than to accuse others of witchcraft, lest they themselves be punished or killed.

Hauge also valued the subtle social tensions of the group that were captured in the costuming. Ann, Mary, and Betty's dresses were clearly finer and more expensive than those of Abigail, Mercy, and Tituba, which demonstrated that even in a Puritan society that forbids vanity there are ways of showing that some people are better than others. Hauge appreciated the unique ending of the play as well. She enjoyed the fact that the characters and audience were allowed to discuss the true blame behind the witch trials, and to draw clear comparisons to modern-day conflicts among friends and societies. "Afflicted is a powerful and compelling story of what might have been during one of America's most haunting times." (Hauge. "Afflictions of Salem").

Finally, a Washington Post article had some interesting thoughts on why there seemed to be so many playwrights exploring the Salem witch trials for contemporary retellings at this particular time. Columnist Celia Wren had been tracking the numerous plays that had evolved recently out of the Salem witch trials and asked the question of all of the authors, "Why now?" (Wren. "Salem witch trials").

Several authors speculated that contemporary social conditions spurred the look back at Salem and how these conditions influence people's behavior. Others like Brooks felt the world these days is full of fear and oppression just as it was back in 1692 Salem. Fear and oppression require relief through rebellion and these are ever present in Salem and

contemporary society especially the Middle East. Other authors felt it mirrored capitalism in competition for property and resources reflecting the Occupy Wall Street movement. Still others felt that female empowerment remains an old and continuing issue. Jeff Church thought that society was and is dealing with the idea of being complicit in evil and the implications of collective responsibility in current tragedies. But Laurie Brooks thought the trial revisits were directly connected to the recession.. She said “people are scared” (Wren. “Salem witch trials”).

It is clear that Jeff Church remains ahead of current social trends when choosing programming for The Coterie. He also continues to engage experienced and talented playwrights like Laurie Brooks in producing thought-provoking plays based on these trends. Whether Church has enjoyed this innate ability since childhood or sharpened it over his 35+ years as The Coterie’s Artistic Director is hard to know, but however it happened it serves The Coterie well.

The final world premiere of The Coterie 2013-14 season was *Geek Mythology: I was a Teenage Immortal*. In an interview posted on The Coterie website, playwright Jeff Carey talked about the musical geared for grades 5-9 and its accompanying play, *Zeus on the Loose* for younger grades. When asked what the plays were about, he said “lightning, love, life, death, and rock-and-roll” (Coterie Theatre).

Zeus on the Loose was originally written for a school tour for Creede Repertory Theatre in the fall of 2009. The Kruger Foundation, whose goal was to promote literacy, underwrote the tour. Carey said his goal was to give children a taste of mythology and a theatrical experience that would excite them about theatre. He felt that in both plays the Greek mythology though epic and essential was secondary to the story of two humans

coming together to create something. His plays demonstrated that the myths still endured because they contained truths about relationships, emotions, life and death (Coterie Theatre).

Carey was asked why his play *Geek Mythology: I was a Teenage Immortal* was set in the 80's. He told the interviewer that he matured during the 80's and loved the music of that time but more important than that was his idea that setting the story in a time period removed from his own would allow him and the composer Jessica Jackson to perceive the myths in a fresh way. Carey concluded the interview by saying that both plays held themes about friendship. He said that friendship occurs when two people hold a shared vision about the world or discover someone more interesting than them and while often a struggle, friendship is worth fighting for (Coterie Theatre).

Geek Mythology: I was a Teenage Immortal opened at The Coterie Theatre February 28, 2014. The play was a grade-school rock opera with book and lyrics by Jeff Carey and music by Jessica Jackson. It was directed by Tosin Morohunfola. Set in 1983, the production takes place in the gymnasium of Dionysus High School. Donnie, the guitar playing geek and master of Greek mythology has been convinced by his classmates to compose and perform all the music for the high school prom. But the prom is one night away and he has only written one song. Cindy, the new girl, has arrived at the gym to audition for the school play but is a week early. Donnie convinces her to assist him with his composing and the two unite to complete the music for the prom (Wilson. ““Geek Mythology””).

The play featured actors Marcus Mull and Linnaia McKenzie. The two actors were not only performing *Geek Mythology: I was a Teenage Immortal* at The Coterie Theatre in Crown Center but they were touring *Zeus on the Loose* and *Geek Mythology* to schools in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area. McKenzie estimated that they had appeared about

fifty to sixty times in the month and a half they had been in town. The set for *Geek* at The Coterie was designed by Scott Hobart and was taken on tour when they performed outside of the theatre. (Wilson. “Geek Mythology”).

Bob Evans of the Examiner said that the author, Jeff Carey, attended the opening of the play, which received a standing ovation during the finale. He also said the play moved quickly, inspired laughs and introduced audiences to Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite, Apollo and Poseidon. Evans concluded that the show had a strong message of friendship: a geek breaks out of his mythological world to develop a real relationship with another person (Evans. “Geek Mythology”).

There was no Robert Trussell (Kansas City Star) review of this production to be found. It is sad to end this chapter without a final comment from a pivotal contributor to the history of this theatre company. Jeff Church sums up Mr. Trussell’s contribution this way.

Robert Trussell is one of the few theatre critics to treat TYA theatre just like any other theatre. He uses the same yardstick to measure us as he does anyone else. Interestingly, he doesn’t take our young audience much into account if he doesn’t like the play. He just responds to what HE thinks of the play. It can be frustrating if he doesn’t like our younger kids shows (as they are less to his taste), but fair is fair. He sees his job as looking at us like any other theatre—and I’ve always appreciated that. (Church. Email)

What an interesting choice this production was for The Coterie. It served the home audience able to attend the theatre in Crown Center and it served as outreach by touring to venues with audiences unable to travel. But that was not all. The author had a second show on the same theme geared to younger viewers ready to travel with the first; thus The Coterie served an even larger audience. The Coterie is leading the way in conquering an economic problem facing all arts groups today. Rising gas prices have forced these groups to find new

ways to continue to serve audiences that are now unable to attend due to high transportation costs. The Coterie demonstrated one way to solve the dilemma: take the art to the audience.

Touring goes back to theatre's origins. The art originated in the company of its audience in informal community gathering places and strolling players have been taking it to the street and countryside for centuries. It comes as no surprise then, that Jeff Church, a man steeped in theatre for most of his life; who began a theatre in his small Colorado hometown as a junior high school student, should offer his public a tour. To him it obviously made perfect sense. What is even more amazing is that Church should have the foresight to seek a playwright perfect for the job. It would seem that his timing continues to serve as an asset to The Coterie's success.

At the time that Jeff Church joined The Coterie Theatre in 1990, it was still considered by many a fledgling "children's theatre" company even after ten years of survival. When he assumed the post of artistic director, The Coterie found an experienced leader dedicated to theatre for young audiences who understood that growing a theatre company takes hard work, a strong board and both artistic and community partnerships. His vision for the company was clear from the beginning: The Coterie needed to become both multicultural and multigenerational in its programming and to also garner national attention with that programming that would change what the theatre world knew as "children's theatre" forever (Church, Jeff). Church said in a 2010 interview with *KC Stage* that he was "interested in trying to redefine traditional notions of children's theatre and turn those notions on their head and make some new rules, standards and goals" (Jennings).

While charting the course of Church's changes in The Coterie's programming, the first thing Church said he did to realize his vision for the growth of The Coterie was to fill

the position of “executive director.” He knew that he needed someone with strong skills in building community partnerships. Joette Pelster was the perfect candidate. She came to The Coterie in 1993 with just what the company needed, for she had honed her community partnership skills while managing the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey. Church credits her with moving the organization’s annual budget to over \$1.3 million, serving 82,000 patrons each year. Pelster has been instrumental in promoting such community programming as The Coterie Acts; The Dramatic Health Education Project: STDs, HIV; Reaching the Write Minds/Young Playwrights Roundtable and Festival and, Project Pride. She also helped to secure partnerships for Coterie productions such as Carlyle Brown’s *Buffalo Hair*, which merged the histories of the Buffalo Soldiers and Native Americans and brought these communities together under one roof; Laurie Brooks’s *The Wrestling Season*, for which the Metropolitan Organization to Combat Sexual Assault (MOCSA) provided valuable pre-performance workshops, and Ric Averill’s *Frankenstein*, whose education partner was the Midwest Bioethics Center which delved into the science and ethical issues raised in the play. But one pivotal and long-standing relationship that has benefitted both partners in countless ways has been with the MFA Theatre Training Program at UMKC. Faculty professionals work alongside student actors and designers who produce work at The Coterie in their final years of training, marking their professional debut to the community (Coterie Theatre). These programs and partnerships are a testament to Pelster’s expertise in outreach. It is evident that she has been pivotal in The Coterie’s success since her hire.

The road to making The Coterie programming multicultural was not difficult but timely. Church told me that at the time he became artistic director in 1990, audiences in Kansas City had grown tired of the programming they had seen, not just at The Coterie but

at other so called “children’s theatre” venues in the city. The programming wasn’t challenging. It consisted of fairy tales and popular stories adapted into plays such as Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Winnie the Pooh and Charlotte’s Web. The target audience was preschool through about the sixth grade. Thus attendance was waning. But what Church noticed was that though Caucasian audience members were fewer, racially diverse audience members were growing. The increasing diversity of the Kansas City community was showing up in his audience demographic and he recognized this trend and seized the opportunity to begin to challenge the status quo of programming for 1990s children’s theatre. He added plays that featured diverse protagonists from African Americans in *A Woman Called Truth* (1991) and *The Meeting* (1992) to Mexicans and Native Americans in *The Pearl* (1993) and *Coyote Mischief Tales* (1995) respectively. These plays set the stage for what would eventually become a tradition at The Coterie: diverse and challenging programming. Church said that it wasn’t long before the audience who had left The Coterie not only returned but grew as well. At first they were curious but over time they too were thirsty for the new plays The Coterie offered that pushed the envelope on the idea of what everyone had thought theatre for children should be (Church. Interview). The second part of Church’s vision took more time to develop. It was 1999 before he really broke ground on this programming. Multigenerational programming meant exploring plays with themes that were more mature and that could draw audiences older than the sixth grade: middle school through college.

Jeff Church saw these young age groups as forgotten audiences in the theatre. There was plenty of professional theatre for children and adults but almost nothing for teens, pre-teens and early 20-somethings. This situation had persisted since his own youth in La Junta,

Colorado. So, just as he had started his own theatre company for this age group in his hometown, he would once again focus his attention on this audience and create programming just for them in his adopted hometown. But the challenge was to find playwrights already writing or willing to write the sort of plays this age group demanded. The plays Church sought had to be honest, not patronizing or moralizing, and real world. At the time there were very few playwrights who fit that mold. Thus he began to commission plays of playwrights he had successfully produced at The Coterie in hopes he would find someone to fill the niche. The list included Lisa Cordes and her Little House plays (1996-1998) and Edward Mast and his adaptation of *A Wrinkle in Time* (1996). While all of these plays were very successfully produced at The Coterie, they still did not entirely fit the type of play Church felt necessary to serve this audience. So, he pushed the envelope once more by programming the 20th anniversary season of The Coterie in 1998-99 as a “Great Books/Banned Books Season.” It included such plays as *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. All of these titles were dynamic choices with themes that stretched and challenged the audience but once again were plays adapted from novels; not original plays that dealt with real world situations. Where was the playwright with a play on the tipping point of this new genre (Church. Interview)? Enter playwright Laurie Brooks and her brilliant play *The Wrestling Season*. Not only would this play begin a multigenerational explosion of productions at The Coterie but, it would begin a partnership with the groundbreaking playwright that continues to this day. Curious to know how their collaboration began, Jeff Church answered the question of how he met Laurie Brooks.

At first Church was a bit hesitant to begin but soon started by saying that it was actually a friend and fellow theatre artist, Phil Kinen, who suggested that he contact Laurie

Brooks. Kinen had heard good things about her from other mutual friends in theatre and told Church that she was writing plays for the audience demographic he wished to serve. In fact, she was currently in staged readings at the Kennedy Center for a play called *The Wrestling Season*. Church did not say why he really wasn't interested in following up on his friend's suggestion; he just said that eventually he did. Church called Kim Peter Kovac, a former colleague at the Kennedy Center, and asked if she would set up a meeting with Brooks and she graciously agreed. So, Jeff Church met Laurie Brooks at the Kennedy Center after he attended a staged reading of the play. Church was impressed with the reading. The play addressed homophobia, peer pressure, sexual harassment and violence in a group of high-school teens. Here were real world problems dealt with honestly and without moralizing in a new play with an open ending that encouraged interactive post-performance forums. These forums allowed the young adults in the audience a chance to discuss and reflect on what they saw while it was still fresh in their minds. Teachers had been asking Church for such opportunities for their students and here it was already built into the writing. To make sure that she was truly as good as her play suggested, Church steered their conversation toward Brooks's ideas about the purpose of theatre for young audiences and he found they were of like minds. They both believed that plays written for children should address reality and be every bit as artistic and challenging as theatre for adults. Laurie Brooks was the playwright Church had been waiting for. With the production of her play *The Wrestling Season*, Church not only realized the beginning of part two of his vision for *The Coterie*—multigenerational programming—but the play would vault *The Coterie* into the national theatre spotlight (Church. Interview).

The Wrestling Season made its debut at The Coterie Theatre (February 2000) to great success. Then three months later it appeared as part of the Kennedy Center Festival of New Visions/New Voices play festival. This provided the chance Church called “the climax of 10 years of (effort)” (Trussell. “Not just child’s play”). It gave his colleagues in the field a chance to actually see his work. The play was so well received that Church was asked to direct it for Seattle Children’s Theatre. But what pushed The Coterie to true national recognition was a subsequent article in American Theatre Magazine (November 2000) which published the complete text of the new play with pictures of The Coterie production. The article declared that with The Coterie production of The Wrestling Season, the last taboo of children’s theatre—sexuality—was shattered (Trussell. “‘Wrestling Season’ gives Coterie). Then in November 2004, Time Magazine’s Richard Zoglin honored The Coterie as the #3 Children’s Theatre in America and highlighted its production of Laurie Brooks’s The Wrestling Season as part of a “growing up” trend in what was now called “theatre for young audiences” (Zoglin. “STAGE FOR KIDS”). Thus, with this play, Church garnered national recognition for the theatre and its programming. This part of his vision for The Coterie Theatre was now achieved. But as Church was quick to point out, his vision continues to challenge season programming to this day (Church. Interview).

After the enormous success of The Wrestling Season, Church continued to program multicultural and multigenerational plays within Coterie seasons. Such plays as *Breath of an American Spirit: Sacagewea* (2001, 2004) and *The Country of the Blind* (2007) were about the Native American and the Hispanic cultures, while *Maul of the Dead* (2009), *Sorority House of the Dead* (2010) and *Slashdance* (2013) were about the current trend of zombie fascination experienced by older teens and 20-somethings. Church and Laurie Brooks

continue to enjoy collaboration through her plays: *Between Land and Sea*, *A Selkie Myth*, *Atypical Boy* and *Afflicted: Daughters of Salem* (Coterie Theatre). When asked what keeps him going from year to year, he said it's because "the theater is largely changing, there's more shows for older ages now" and that The Coterie is "always open for change, and has become a place where you don't have to be a kid to enjoy the shows" (Jennings).

Jeff Church's career began as a grade schooler in La Junta, Colorado. The high school drama teacher, Mickie Miller-Knight, cast him in several high school productions and those experiences started him in theatre. Church founded The La Junta Children's Theatre which produced plays with casts entirely of children and young adults and which survived under that name until 1990. While in high school he contributed to the growth of La Junta's community theatre the Picketwire Players by serving as an actor, technician, director and playwright. Church studied theatre at Colorado College and graduated with a degree in theatre. He moved on to become Playwright-in-Residence at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. From there Church joined The Coterie in 1990 and that is where he remains to this day.

The results of this research as concluded above, after 24 years under Church's direction, are that The Coterie Theatre has transitioned from a children's theatre to a theatre for young audiences and is now continuing to break ground as a multigenerational theatre. Further, Church's programming was not only instrumental in the rise of the company to national prominence but has forever changed the genre of what was once known as "children's theatre."

APPENDIX A

JEFF CHURCH

Jeff Church grew up in La Junta (Spanish for “the junction,”) Colorado. It is a small town south of Colorado Springs and directly east of Pueblo. La Junta’s Wikipedia page describes it as resting at the “intersection of the Santa Fe Trail with the Arkansas River.” The town had an Army Air Force training base close by that housed a detachment of the Strategic Air Command from World War II through the early 1980s. The geography of La Junta is listed as “high plains terrain, dry with short grass prairie and sagebrush.” So it comes as no surprise that the city was the site of several Westerns in the 1970s: Terrance Malick’s film *Badlands*, and a movie titled *Mr. Majestyk* starring Charles Bronson. La Junta also served as the backdrop of the first episodes of the television miniseries *The Chisholms* in 1979, which starred Robert Preston. The city’s “Attractions” include: Bent’s Old Fort, a major trading post on the Sante Fe Trail; Koshare Indian Museum at Otero Junior College which holds a collection of Native American artifacts; the Purgatoire River, site of one of the largest dinosaur tracks in North America and Picketwire Center for the Performing Arts, home of the local theatre company, the Picketwire Players. Born in La Junta were such “noted residents” as Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and Tippy Martinez, a baseball pitcher who set a major league record by picking off three base runners in one inning (La Junta, Colorado).

La Junta, Colorado, as described above, does not seem extraordinary to the average person. Many small towns across America have enjoyed fame in one way or another; as a film location; as the birthplace of a star athlete; as a landmark in our nation’s history or civilization. But it was in this small town that Jeff Church, future Artistic Director of The

Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri, grew up. It was there that the seeds of his passion for theatre were fertilized, watered, took root and grew into his desire to be a director of theatre for young audiences. Little did Church know that the early years he spent in La Junta doing theatre, would not only ripen his experiences into a career but would also help to nurture the innovator he became within the genre of what was known then as “children’s theatre.” Thus, what seemed a rather ordinary description of someone’s hometown proved itself significant to me under that heading of “Attractions.” The fact that the Picketwire Players were considered something to see in La Junta made me curious (La Junta, Colorado). Did this theatre company exist during Jeff Church’s formative years? If so, what impact did the company have on Jeff Church’s career?

The answers to those questions came from the Picketwire Players website. The heading “Our History” provided some initial and essential information under the subheading “Picketwire Participants.” This page asserts that the “Picketwire Players have performed 132 productions since 1968” and that 1798 individuals have participated since that time. The page also provides information on all the said participants, compiled and archived over the years by several of La Junta’s citizens and a member of the city’s newspaper staff. Instructions for an archive search offer one a chance to search for information on a particular participant by first and/or last name. When Jeff Church’s name is entered, the archive yields a very detailed answer. Not only was Jeff Church involved in the Picketwire Players history but he held diverse positions within the company productions from 1975-1981. He was an actor, technician, stage manager, playwright and director (Picketwire Center).

According to the Picketwire Players archive, the first production Jeff Church appeared in, as an actor, was *Showboat* (1975), the company’s eleventh production. He

appeared as an actor in four subsequent shows: *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1976), *The Mousetrap* (1977), *The Lion in Winter* (1977) and *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1978). Church served as a technician on six productions during this time as well. But, the shows for which he was stage manager: *Peter Pan* (1977), playwright: *Mary Poppins* (1980 by rare special permission from Pamela Travers and Disney), and director: *Bye, Bye Birdie* (1981) give keen insight into the theatre roots that shaped his career path (Church); (Picketwire Center). These three plays launched Church into the future and paved his way to The Coterie where he has achieved both national and international renown.

Church began his career as an entrepreneurial fifteen-year-old in his hometown of La Junta by starting La Junta Children's Theatre "where kids could be in the plays;" continued that path through his years at Colorado College as a performer; progressed to a position as a Playwright-in-Residence at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., and finally became the Artistic Director of The Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri. Church's 24-year tenure with The Coterie would integrate the experiences of the stage manager on *Peter Pan*, the playwright of *Mary Poppins* and the director of *Bye, Bye Birdie* with the college performer and the Kennedy Center playwright. From this integration, Church emerged as a savvy and skilled artistic director who shaped The Coterie into a world-class theatre for young audiences. So, the Picketwire Players did exist during Church's formative years, and the company, founded by Mickie Miller-Knight, had a profound impact on his career. Now, I wanted to know more about Miller-Knight and how the company started. I went back to the Picketwire Players website and searched the "Our History" tab once again. The information there as well as what was discovered under the subheading, "Founder Mickie Miller-Knight," did not disappoint (Picketwire Center).

Mickie Miller-Knight was the speech and drama teacher at LaJunta High School. She had begun her teaching career in Texas and then moved with her rancher husband and their herd of cattle to the Arkansas River valley of La Junta, Colorado. Church credits her as the person “who got me started in theatre by casting me while I was in grade school in *Half a Sixpence* and *The Hobbit*” (Trebis). In 1968 she and a board of directors, filled with set designers, costume designers, business owners, and theatre supporters, created the Picketwire Players (Picketwire Center). That same year, Miller-Knight and the company’s first board president, Reverend Will Bingham, presented the Picketwire Players to the community with their first production, the melodrama *Laura of the Shadows* in the La Junta High School auditorium. The company would continue to perform there and at the Otero Junior College until 1975 when the La Junta school board leased an abandoned school auditorium to the Picketwire Players for \$1/year and then subsequently approved its sale (10-year note for \$5000). In 1986 the mortgage was paid in full and celebrated with a ceremonial mortgage burn on stage. Many grants and fundraisers were held over the years by such community groups as the La Junta Lions and Rotary Clubs, and now the Picketwire Center for the Performing Arts, at Eighth Street & San Jaun Avenue, enjoys new seating, a new roof, a “Big Red Barn” for on-site storage of scenery, set and hand props, new lights and an updated electrical system. These are only a few of the major capital improvements the old abandoned building underwent under the direction of the Picketwire Players’ board. But it was Picketwire’s Director, Miller-Knight, whose hard work during her tenure, produced the company’s first 40 plays; whose “magical powers” converted that old WPA school building into a theatre, trained hundreds of actors and entertained thousands of audience members (Trebis). On the Picketwire website Miller-Knight is described as “a

force of nature” and “a dynamo of a woman.” She understood that “good theatre” was hard work. Her words are a testimony to her work ethic and, it is said, they still resound within the walls of the Picketwire Players theatre: “pick up the pace,” “you have to project to the back row,” and “baby, this isn’t good enough.” The Picketwire Players are alive and thriving today. Coming attractions in 2015 include *Steel Magnolias* and *Into the Woods* (Picketwire Center).

The start and growth of the Picketwire Players was an incredible journey for the community of La Junta, Colorado. Jeff Church worked alongside the members of his community to help build that fledgling theatre company. He said “I spent many volunteer hours over the course of a year (along with a couple of others) to help paint and get the interior finished for use.” The early lessons Church learned there under Miller-Knight: acting, directing, playwriting, stage management and theatre management, he learned best for he wasted no time in carving a career path in the type of theatre he enjoyed most, theatre for young audiences. In an interview with Anna Jennings of *KC Stage*, Church said “I think it’s interesting that I have always been specializing in theatre for young audiences or children’s theatre in some form . . .” He went on to say that when asked why he cares so much about theatre for the young he had a two-fold answer. The first was personal. Church was disappointed that the only play we as a nation can recall as a children’s play, not an adaptation of a children’s story, is *Peter Pan*. The second was one of opportunity. He said, “There’s obviously a lot of room for growth” (Jennings). It was this type of opportunity that led him to accept the title of Artistic Director of The Coterie Theatre in 1990.

APPENDIX B

PRODUCTION HISTORY 1978-2014

*World Premiere **Commissioned World Premiere ***American Premiere

2013-14

Red Badge Variations **

Dracula: The Journal of Jonathan Harker

The Wiz

Afflicted: Daughters of Salem **

Geek Mythology: I Was a Teenage Immortal * (at The Coterie)

Geek Mythology: I Was a Teenage Immortal * (Tour)

Zeus On the Loose * (Tour)

Schoolhouse Rock Live!

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang * (Premiere theatre for young audiences version)

2012-13

Spring Awakening

Dear America: Across the Wide Lonesome Prairie

The Presidents (Tour)

Shrek The Musical * (Premiere theatre for young audiences version)

Number the Stars

Tell-Tale Electric Poe (see premiere, 2009)

Slashdance **

Bud Not Buddy

Young Playwrights' Festival 2013

Lyle the Crocodile

Victoria Martin: Math Team Queen (KC Fringe Festival)

2011-12

The Outsiders

Children of the Damned Corn **

Seussical * (see 2004)

The Wrestling Season ** (see premiere 2000)

Freedom Sisters

Lucky Duck (at the Folly)

Lucky Duck (at the New Victory Theater, New York)

James and the Giant Peach

Young Playwrights' Festival 2012

Once Upon a Mattress * (Premiere theatre for young audiences version)

All of Us (KC Fringe Festival)

2010-11

Science Fiction Triple Feature

Sorority House of the Dead *

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

Bridge to Terabithia
 The Greek Mythology Olympiaganza (at The Coterie)
 The Greek Mythology Olympiaganza (Tour)
 Ben Franklin's Apprentice
 Young Playwrights' Festival 2011
 The Wiz (Theatre for Young Audiences version)
2009-10
 Tell-Tale Electric Poe **
 Maul of the Dead **
 Little House on the Prairie
 Life on the Mississippi *
 Spooky Dog: A Scooby-Doo-Like Mystery (Improvised, Plagiarized, Not for Kiddies)
 Young Playwrights' Festival 2010 *
 Frindle
 Lucky Duck * (Premiere Theatre for Young Audiences version)
2008-09
 And Then They Came for Me: Remembering the World of Anne Frank
 Night of the Living Dead
 Seussical (see premiere, 2004)
 Our Town
 The Breakfast Club - Live Mondays
 Atypical Boy **
 Roald Dahl's The Witches
 Young Playwrights' Festival *
 U: BUG: ME *
2007-2008
 A Star Ain't Nothin' But a Hole in Heaven
 Night of the Living Dead
 The Happy Elf **
 In Spite of Thunder: The Macbeth Project
 A Separate Peace
 Sideways Stories From Wayside School
 Young Playwrights' Festival *
 Once On This Island * (Premiere Theatre for Young Audiences version)
2006-07
 With Their Eyes: The View of 9/11 from a High School at Ground Zero
 Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing
 The Giver
 The Country of the Blind *
 Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters
 Young Playwrights' Festival *
 Twice Upon a Time: Dr. Seuss' The Lorax and The Emperor's New Clothes * (Premiere double bill)
2005-06
 The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963 *

Stuart Little
 The Witch of Blackbird Pond
 The Search For Odysseus ***
 Ferdinand the Bull
 Young Playwrights' Festival *
 Geppetto and Son *
2004-05
 The Strange Case Of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde ***
 The Night Before Christmas
 Selkie: Between Land and Sea *
 Holes
 The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales
 Young Playwrights Festival *
 The Dinosaur Musical *
2003-04
 Gatherings In Graveyards III *
 Sarah Plain And Tall
 After Juliet ***
 Everyday Heroes / Breath Of An American Spirit: Sacagawea ***
 The B.F.G.
 Young Playwrights Festival *
 Seussical * (Premiere Theatre For Young Audiences Version)
2002-03
 Frankenstein *
 A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas **
 Zorro
 The Tangled Web ***
 Schoolhouse Rock Live, Too!
 Young Playwrights' Festival *
 The Hundred and One Dalmatians
2001-02
 Breath of an American Spirit: Sacagawea **
 Little House On The Shores Of Silver Lake **
 Playing For Time
 Black Butterfly, Jaguar Girl, Pinata Woman and Other Superhero Girls Like Me
 The Wind in the Willows
 Young Playwrights Festival *
 Alexander And The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day
2000-01
 Gatherings in Graveyards II *
 Little House on the Prairie
 Great Expectations
 Glass Menagerie
 Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day
 Young Playwrights' Showcase *

A Little Princess

1999-2000

Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show

A Little House Christmas

The Wrestling Season **

Young Playwrights' Showcase *

Island of the Blue Dolphins

Really Rosie

Little Women

1998-99

20th Anniversary "Great Books, Banned Books Season"

To Kill A Mockingbird

Mark Twain on Mondays *

Little House Christmas in the Indian Territory **

Of Mice and Men

Young Playwrights' Showcase *

Lord of the Flies ***

Free to Be... You and Me

The 7 Dwarfs

1997-98

The Lilies Of The Field

Evester Roper, Storyteller

Little House Christmas at Plum Creek **

A Village Fable: In the Suicide Mountains

Buffalo Hair

Young Playwrights' Showcase*

Schoolhouse Rock Live!

Pippi Longstocking

1996-97

Beyond The Miracle

Machisma... Voices of the Past

A Little House Christmas

Whale

Young Playwrights' Showcase *

Valley Song

The Reluctant Dragon

Lyle, Lyle, The Crocodile

1995-96

Alicia In Wonder Tierra *

Maxine Maxwell, Storyteller

Green Eggs & Ham *

Across the Plains **

The Very First Family ** (Tour)

Anne Frank and Me *

Coyote Mischief Tales **
Young Playwrights' Showcase *
Rocky & Bullwinkle
A Wrinkle in Time **

1994-95

The Former One-On-One Basketball Champion
The Little Prince *
The Meeting (Tour)
To Be Young, Gifted & Black
Darkside of the Moon
Young Playwrights' Showcase *
Lyle, Lyle, the Crocodile
Mr. A's Amazing Maze Play
Animal Fair

1993-94

My Children! My Africa!
Winnie-the-Pooh
The Pearl *
A Woman Called Truth (Tour)
The Hobbit **
The Very First Family **
Young Playwrights' Showcase *
Oz **

1992-93

The Meeting
Winnie-the-Pooh
Oliver Twist *
Wolf Child **
Blazing The Outback *
Bunnacula
Dinosaurus
Anne Of Green Gables

1991-92

A Woman Called Truth
Winnie-The-Pooh
Dennis, The Musical
Red Badge of Courage
Most Valuable Player
Mr. Raccoon & His Friends **
Neverland **
The Red Sneaks

1990-91

Doors
Winnie-The-Pooh
We, The People (Tour)

Amber Waves
Amelia Lives
Dinosaurus
Charlotte's Web
The Secret Garden
1989-90
Great Expectations
Winnie-the-Pooh
Laughing Matters (Tour)
Animal Farm
Most Valuable Player
The Ugly Duckling
Laughter in the Rafters
Nate The Great *
1988-89
Gatherings from the Graveyard *
Pooh!
The Odyssey
Takunda
Dirty Beasts *
Laugh-A-Lot
Ransom Of Red Chief
1987-88
Slapstick! *
The Best of Pooh
Laughing Matters
Dragons *
We, The People *
The Wind In The Willows
Pinocchio
Triple Play
1986-87
Fiddlin' Around *
Pooh
Monkey & The Golden Sunrise
The Diary Of Anne Frank
Circus Home
The Jungle Book
Three For All
1985-86
Kid's Ink *
The World Of Pooh
Kid's Ink * (Tour)
Huck Finn
To Kill A Mockingbird

Charlotte's Web
Beauty & The Beast
Laughing Matters
1984-85
Chalkboard Secrets *
Pooh!
Merlin
Tommyknockers
Charlotte's Web
1983-84
Zounds, A Phonic! *
Hums Poems Of Pooh
Monkey, Monkey
Rotten Apples *
The Miracle Worker
1982-83
Step On A Crack
House at Pooh Corner
Phantasmagoria *
Harbledown! *
1981-82
Hurdles *
Winnie-the-Pooh
Act Your Age *
Me, Myself & I *
1980-81
Mugnog
The Velveteen Rabbit
Many Moons
Finders Keepers *
1980
Onions in the Ice Cream *
Butterfly Ball *
1979
Incorporation year
Homemade Magic *
1978
Hums & Poems Of Pooh *

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VITA

Danielle Marie Trebus was born on May 4, 1955, in St. Louis, Missouri. She was educated in local parochial schools and graduated from Rosary High School in 1973. She received a Catholic Schools Scholarship to Saint Mary College in Leavenworth, Kansas, from which she graduated in 1977. Her degree was a Bachelor of Science with majors in biology and theatre.

After graduation Ms. Trebus worked to build the stage, seating and tech booth for Theatre for Young America in Overland Park, Kansas. She served as the theatre company's first stage manager and acted in its productions until April of 1978. She then married and moved to New York City, New York. There she acted in productions at the Village Children's Theatre and Theatre for the New City.

In 1979 Ms. Trebus moved back to Kansas City, Missouri, and joined a touring Children's theatre company called Fundamental Theatre managed by Van and Susie Ibsen. She toured with the company until 1985. At that time she joined Actors Equity on a tour for Theatre for Young America. Then in 1986-87 she toured with the Equity children's theatre company of Lawrence, Kansas known as The Seem-to-Be Players.

Ms Trebus accepted the job of Administrative Assistant to the Director of the Theatre Program at her alma mater Saint Mary College in 1989. Over the next 25 years she designed costumes, make-up and props for the theatre program; directed main stage productions; became the Artistic Director of the College's touring children's theatre company The Theatrical Company; and was promoted to Lecturer in Theatre in 1999. In January 2006 she began work on her M.A. in Education at the University of Saint Mary, formerly Saint Mary College, and received her degree in May of 2007. Upon her graduation

the university promoted her to Instructor of Theatre. and she became a member of Delta Epsilon Sigma, National Scholastic Honor Society, Alpha Lambda.

During the summers of her 25 years of teaching, Ms. Trebus became involved in Gladstone Theatre in the Park, a community theatre in Gladstone, Missouri, that has produced two musicals each summer since 1988. She has served the company as an actress, technician, costume designer, choreographer, director and as president of its Amphitheatre Board of Directors. She also founded and directed from 1991-2005, the summer musical theatre camps for children and youth ages 5-16 at Ibsen Dance Theatre in Gladstone Missouri.

From 2002-2006 Ms. Trebus reestablished the musical theatre program at Trinity High School in St. Louis, Missouri, formerly known as Rosary High School, her alma mater. She directed the first five annual productions before turning the program over to a group of alumni. The program continues to this day.

Ms. Trebus directed the Equity touring production and world premiere of the play *The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel* by Stephen Emerson for Accessible Arts of Kansas City, Kansas, in 2002. She subsequently directed the revival and second tour of the play in 2004. She has designed costumes for the Oklahoma City Repertory Theatre Company productions of *Hay Fever* (2010) and *November* (2012).

In the fall of 2012 Ms. Trebus began work toward her M.A. in Theatre at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Before completing her degree she assumed the position of Director of Theatre at Staley High School (North Kansas City) in the fall of 2014. Upon completion of her degree requirements she plans to continue her career in secondary and post secondary education while pursuing professional interests.