

THE UNICORN THEATRE:
A BRIEF HISTORY 1974-2020

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Theatre

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MASTER OF ARTS

by
SARAH JEAN HAYNES-HOHNE

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THE UNICORN THEATRE: A BRIEF HISTORY 1974-2020

Sarah Jean Haynes-Hohne, Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree

University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2020

ABSTRACT

The Unicorn Theatre was originally founded under the name Theatre Workshop in 1974. It was a theatre company formed by three UMKC graduates, Jim Cairns, Rohn Dennis, and Liz Gordon who wanted to create an Off-Off-Broadway theatre in Kansas City. Their work focused on experimentation and using theatre as a political statement for social change. For years, the theatre operated as a community of people who wore many hats and performed many functions. In some ways, this still remains true. However, the theatre made a significant shift in its goals and future when they joined Actors' Equity Association in 1984 shortly after Cynthia Levin was named Producing Artistic Director. The company has operated out of four different locations over the past 45+ years, but it has been in its current location at 3828 Main Street, Kansas City, MO since 1986. Many expansions and financial campaigns have contributed to the success of the theatre, which now houses two stages, The Levin Stage and The Jerome Stage. The Unicorn Theatre now operates under the vision of producing "Bold New Plays" and thrives on a mission that revolves around inclusion and diversity.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the Conservatory have examined a thesis titled “The Unicorn Theatre: A Brief History 1974-2020,” presented by Sarah Jean Haynes-Hohne, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Felicia Hardison Londré, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of Theatre

Carla Noack, M.F.A.
Department of Theatre

Frank Higgins, M.A.
Department of Theatre

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Campos Ortega at Missouri State University and she has been one of my biggest supporters for the past ten years. She is one of the reasons I chose to continue my education in theatre and she is my biggest inspiration. She is the best actor and most talented person I have ever met and I am honored to have her as my fierce and loyal advocate.

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My time as a Master of Theatre student at UMKC would not have been complete without my cohort of fellow M.A. students: Mary Allison Joseph, Gabriel J. Livingston, and Dakotta L. Hagar. They have been the truest friends, the finest scholars, and the strongest support system for me through this journey. Their love and commitment to theatre is inspiring and I hope to work with each of them in the future as colleagues, as well as great friends.

PREFACE

I was drawn to write about the history of the Unicorn Theatre after meeting with Dr. Londré about my options. After months of trying to come up with a fully-realized concept on my own, I turned to Dr. Londré for advice. I came into her office with a backpack full of my favorite plays and laid them before her. I pulled out plays such as *Rabbit Hole* by David Lindsay-Abaire, *Proof* by David Auburn, *Fabulation or, the Re-Education of Undine* by Lynn Nottage, and *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel. Searching for a through line or a connection of any kind on which I could build a thesis, Dr. Londré pointed out that she thought the Unicorn Theatre had produced almost every single one of those plays. My passion for contemporary plays was laid out in front of me and the answer became clear. I was going to dedicate my research to learning about the history of the Unicorn Theatre.

The first show I saw at the Unicorn was *The Effect* by Lucy Prebble at the start of their 2018-2019 season. The show addressed complicated questions about medical morality that I had never thought about before. I knew that the Unicorn Theatre was the kind of theatre that produced new work in order to make their audience consider atypical topics, but I didn't know how the theatre started. I saw every show that season. The Unicorn Theatre also offers "Pay What You Can" shows every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night that opens their work to a more diverse and young audience. This offering was one of the main reasons I was able to see every one of their productions.

The Unicorn Theatre currently has two stages, two bars, a large box office, offices for the full-time staff, a board room, two sets of gender neutral bathrooms, an archival room, and two lobbies. The theatre I was introduced to was a very different theatre than the one I discovered as I dug up their history. Their first space was in an old warehouse, the second in

a dank garage basement, the third in a make-shift classroom, and finally a partially finished theatre space that had been transformed into what it is today. The Theatre Workshop started as a project for volunteers to experiment with new work and give new perspectives to classic pieces and was for the most part, without support. The founders were on their own and struggled a lot in their early years. The only other theatre companies in Kansas City at that time were doing classical works or commercial comedies, so the Theatre Workshop was really taking a risk by producing new works. They played with improvisation, mime work, and sought out one-act plays by local authors. Eventually they narrowed down their selection to new works and focused on development. But there used to be nights where an audience wouldn't show up. Some nights friends had to be called to come watch a show so they could deliver a performance. The Unicorn Theatre has come a long way in its almost fifty years.

In January 2019 I was given the opportunity to work as a dramaturg on Carla Ching's *Nomad Motel* with the Unicorn Theatre through UMKC's M.A. Theatre program. I received an email from Dr. Londré asking all of the M.A. students if they were interested and I jumped at the chance. I had only briefly met Cynthia Levin during intermission at *The Effect* and I was anxious to work with her professionally after seeing how beloved she was by the patrons. I was given clear instructions by the literary manager, Hannah Taylor, who told me I would be paid \$100, and she sent me the script immediately. I got to work. I created an actor packet, with the help of Mary Allison Joseph and Dr. Felicia Hardison Londré, that I was proud to present and delivered a nervous presentation to the actors, co-directors, playwright, and production team. I wore my glasses, so I was sure to look as smart as possible and a white turtleneck cable-knit sweater to convey that I was professional, but also approachable. I really wanted to make a good impression.

With shaking hands I worked my way through my visual aids and notes, made references to my thoroughly-researched actor packets, and gained confidence as the playwright, Carla Ching, nodded her head in support of the facts I was sharing with the group. Most of my work as a dramaturg was done before the first table-read, so I was relieved to be done with my big moment. I was much more comfortable during the rest of the process as I sat in on rehearsals about once a week and worked on writing the dramaturgical essay for the program. I was able to witness the co-directors, Ian Crawford and Andi Meyer, shape the show and collaborate with designers to answer questions like, “Can the actors actually climb down that?” I am grateful to the Unicorn Theatre for giving me the opportunity to work as a dramaturg for the first time and to witness the inner workings of a Small Professional Theatre.

When the time came to choose a topic for my thesis, the Unicorn Theatre made perfect sense. They had provided me with a gift and I felt obliged to return the favor. Ultimately, I chose the Unicorn Theatre as my topic because I love the type of plays that they produce, I respect their mission statement of diversity and inclusion, and I felt a responsibility to record their history.

Notes on Research

During my time searching for the three founders of the Unicorn Theatre I ran into a few challenges. Rohn Dennis still lives in Kansas City, was readily available, and willing to speak with me about his involvement with the founding of the theatre. After months of trying to track Jim Cairns down, I was finally able to reach him by phone through Mary Wilkens. He was incredibly generous with his time, memories, and documents. The only founding member I was unable to speak with was Liz Gordon as she passed away in 2014.

DEDICATION

To my forever theatre date, Jack Armstrong Haynes-Hohne.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Unicorn Theatre was described as “a bunch of people trying hard to say something they can’t say anywhere else” by one the early founders, Rohn Dennis, in 1974. This group of founders was made up of three UMKC graduates, Rohn Dennis, Liz Gordon, and Jim Cairns. They called their company the “Theatre Workshop” and worked out of a warehouse in Kansas City’s historic River Market. In 1981 they officially renamed themselves the Unicorn Theatre and in 1983 Cynthia Levin was named the Producing Artistic Director. In the fifteenth season’s pamphlet, Levin wrote that they were “embracing a non-commercial approach to theatre.” It has always been a part of their mission to produce diverse, inclusive, and new work. The Unicorn Theatre is currently in its 46th season and strives to produce “Bold New Plays.”

The Unicorn Theatre/Theatre Workshop had has four physical locations over the years. After the theatre was forced to abruptly evacuate their warehouse location in the River Quay in 1976 they moved into an old garage space near 46th Street and Main. Frank Higgins recalls that this space “had that Off-Off Broadway feel.” It was near Kansas City’s plaza located down an alley in a basement with an uneven floor and an exposed drain. In 1979 they moved to another intermediate space in a former school called the Norman School that was located on Jefferson Street near Southwest Trafficway. At the Norman School location they used classrooms as performance space. Diana J. Mange, an early artistic director, recalls “it still smelled like a school.” Periodically they even had to feed the boiler in the basement of the school. Patrons could enter on a door on the south side of the building, go up steps, and purchase their ticket at a little box office. There were built-in risers with seating for audience

members. There was a make-shift proscenium built in the classroom and the actors used two old classrooms as dressing rooms. When the Unicorn moved to its current location on Main Street in 1986, it transformed an old garage into an intimate theatre space that could seat 150 patrons.

Even in its early years Rohn Dennis felt confident that the Unicorn Theatre was something special. He felt the theatre could even be a rival to the Missouri Repertory Theatre. He knew it was a space for a younger audience and suspected the theatre would soon be “a force to be reckoned with.” However, without Cynthia Levin, there would not be a theatre today.

The transition from workshop to professional theatre began to solidify when the organization joined Actors’ Equity Association, the labor union that represents professional actors and stage managers, in 1984. The theatre went through many different stages during its developing years. The Unicorn produces plays that highlight marginalized people by hiring disabled actors, choosing plays written by and about African-Americans, and sharing plays about gay people and AIDS. The Unicorn Theatre also became one of ten founding companies that created the National New Play Network in 1998, making it a priority to develop new plays and produce work by new playwrights. The Unicorn was able to expand in 2008 by opening The Jerome Stage, named after benefactor Norge Jerome, with the assistance of the Kresge Challenge Grant Match and the theatre’s most successful capital campaign. In 2014, another capital campaign allowed the Unicorn to purchase the building in which it had been residing since 1986. In 2014 the board voted to surprise Levin by naming the larger space The Levin Stage. Levin was recognized for her career dedicated to producing

diverse and inclusive plays in 2018 when she received the Kathryn V. Lamkey award that recognizes such representation on the stage.

Cynthia Levin's lifetime efforts to produce diverse and inclusive work starts with the play selection process. Much of Levin's time is spent reading plays. Her staff now helps her to carry this large load, as well as volunteer readers who help to narrow down the reading process to plays that are appropriate for the Unicorn. They look for plays that are diverse, have a small cast, and convey some kind of social message.

The Unicorn Theatre has also been a home for many emerging actors. Actors such as the late Deb Bluford, Don Richard, Becky Barta, and Arliss Howard (who is now married to Debra Winger) all got their feet wet at the Unicorn. Bluford was a star for Kansas City's New Theatre, Richard starred in *Urinetown* on Broadway, Barta toured the United States in a Patsy Cline show, and Howard is a successful actor in many feature films including *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and *Moneyball*.

The Unicorn Theatre is now in their 46th season and although there has been a pause because of COVID-19, they remain dedicated to producing bold new plays. Levin's perseverance and focus will take the Unicorn Theatre into their next phase and they will continue to produce some of Kansas City's finest contemporary selections.

Timeline and Map of the Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre's Locational Changes

Notes from Cynthia Levin on locational changes. Exact addresses vary from early members' memories.

'74 3rd & Delaware

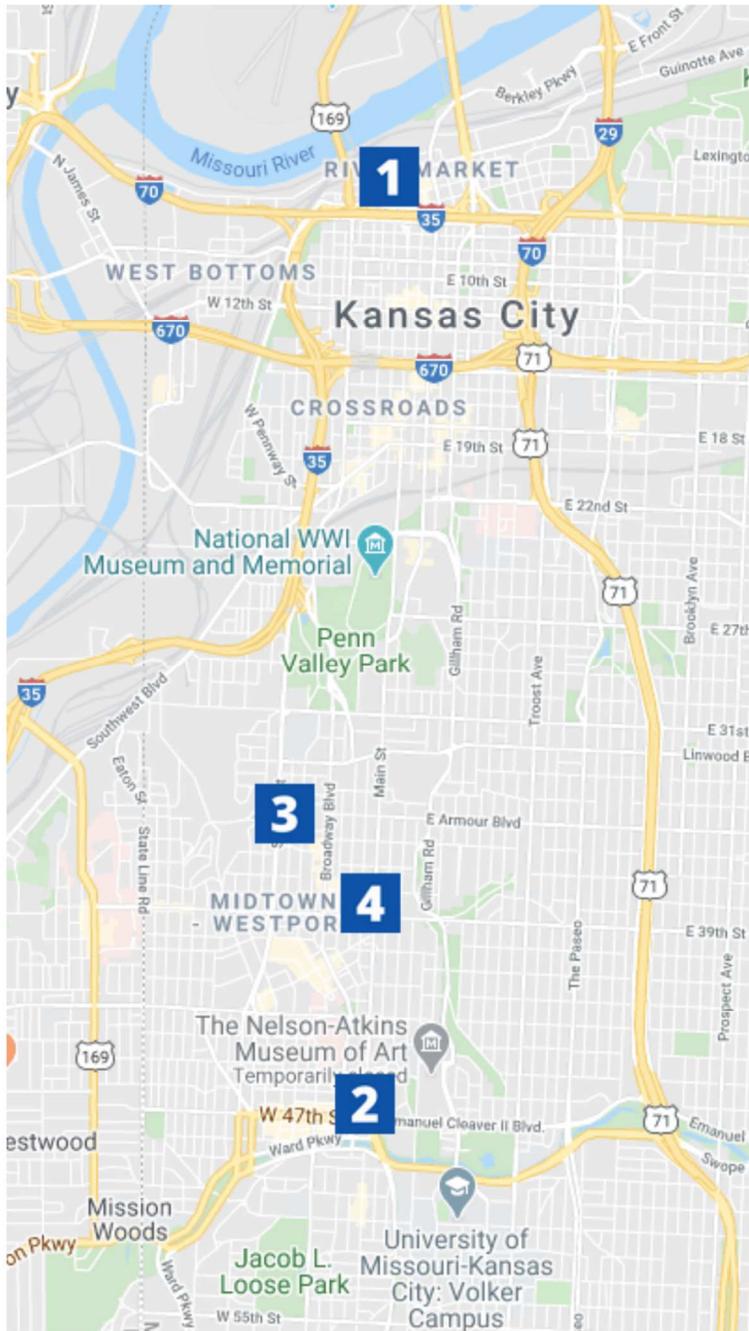
'76 was the move to Main Street between 45th-46.

'79 was Norman School

'86 the move to the back half of what was the Belman Garage (actually 3820 Main).

'98 addition of the offices and conference room when we expanded & took over the building next door. And '08 we finished the Jerome when we expanded & took over the rest of what was the Belman Garage!

Jim Cairns remembers the first location of the Warehouse to be located at 208 Delaware Street. Below is a map and a legend that give a general idea of the locational changes that occurred over the years.



Key

1
 Delaware St. & W 3rd St.
 Kansas City, MO 64105
 Warehouse Location
 1974-1976

2
 4600 Main St.
 Kansas City, MO 64112
 Second Location
 1976-1979

3
 3514 Jefferson St.
 Kansas City, MO 64111
 Norman School Location
 Valentine Neighborhood
 1979-1986

4
 3820 Main St.
 Kansas City, MO 64111
 Belman Garage
 *1998- Internal expansion
 to include building next
 door; new combined
 address: 3828 Main St.
 *2008- Jerome Stage
 Expansion
 *2014- Became owner of
 the building

Figure 1. Map of Locations

CHAPTER 2
INTERVIEWS WITH MAJOR PLAYERS

Notes on Interviews

All quotes that are without citation are from the person with whom the interview was conducted.

Interview with Jim Cairns

Jim Cairns, one of the three founders of the Unicorn Theatre, currently resides in the Wisconsin Green Bay area and considers himself a retired activist. After quite some time of trying to track him down, I was finally able to reach him through a mutual acquaintance, Mary Wilkens, who had worked with the Unicorn Theatre during some of their early years. Cairns spent fifteen years working with the Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre from its inception. His memories from these early years help to document the history and illuminate what it was like to create the foundation of this 45+ year old company.

Jim Cairns, Rohn Dennis, and Liz Gordon had all worked together on theatre productions at UMKC during their time as students and they all graduated in 1973. After graduation, Cairns had decided he wanted to pursue his M.F.A. in Directing at the University of Texas at Austin. He was interested in being a student of Dr. Francis R. Hodge, who wrote Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style, and Cairns considered it the best directing book he had come across. Cairns attended his first directing class with Dr. Hodge, but was one of a few students who was pulled aside after class. Dr. Hodge had promised those slots to previous students and he was not going to be able to teach them all. He had a strict maximum number of students that he could teach in each class and Cairns was going to

have to wait a year until space opened up. Upset and disappointed, Cairns was not going to accept this option. Dr. Hodge asked him, “Well, what are you going to do?” and Cairns impulsively replied, “I’m going to go back to Kansas City and start a theatre.”

There was a decision that had to be made between Jim Cairns, Rohn Dennis, and Liz Gordon when choosing a name for their theatre company in 1974. After some back and forth, they agreed on “Theatre Workshop”. They all felt that Kansas City was ready for an Off-Off-Broadway type of theatre. During the mid-1970s there was an energy of experimentation, counter culture against Nixon, and anti-Vietnam War support. The founders wanted to harness this energy in their theatre and Cairns felt that if they got the ball rolling, people would come. Cairns had a particular interest in theatre being used for a political statement or as a social justice media. He wanted to produce plays that spoke out against the Vietnam War as well as other social concerns; such plays were being produced only in Chicago, Seattle, or Off-Off Broadway in New York.

The first physical space where the Theatre Workshop produced work was in a warehouse at 208 Delaware Street, in the River Quay, which is now called the River Market.¹ Jim remembers that they moved out of the River Quay into the basement garage location near 4600 Main Street in 1976. Then they moved to the third location in the Norman School in 1979. The Unicorn Theatre’s final move was in 1986 to the 3800 block of Main Street in the Belman Garage.

The Theatre Workshop’s first location in the warehouse district of Kansas City was received eagerly by the building owner. They were given a discounted deal to rent the

¹ Cynthia Levin remembers the warehouse location to be at Delaware and 3rd Street.

building, including three months of free rent and a low monthly rate of about \$250 per month. It was a four-story building with a basement, loading dock, freight elevator, and a huge amount of space. “It was a great environment. But, after we had been there for a few years the Mafia got involved in trying to get some of their space back.² Things started to happen. In the span of about three months there were a few buildings that had been burned down and a few killings.”³ Cairns was actually sleeping on a cot inside the warehouse space when an explosion woke him up. This type of action kept people from coming to this area and it quickly became evident that their theatre could no longer survive there. Cairns also received mixed messages about to whom he was supposed to pay rent. “This is why we moved in a hurry. We just showed up with a couple of pick-up trucks and moved in one weekend.”

Cairns worked with the Unicorn Theatre for fifteen years and was able to see the company in every location. When asked what his role was, Cairns sighed and said, “A little bit of everything. I directed, I acted, I was mostly the lead person in terms of managing the day-to-day finances. I worked closely with the Board of Directors, I cleaned up, [and] I sold

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/04/19/archives/violence-destroys-a-boom-in-kansas-citys-old-section.html>

³ In March 1977, explosions destroyed two nightclubs at Fourth and Wyandotte streets, Pat O’Brien’s and Judge Roy Bean’s. That July, an explosion leveled Uncle Joe’s. In August, another man was killed by a car bomb. In September, a fire was set at the Godfather Lounge on Fourth Street. By the end of the decade, the River Quay, once so promising, had become a ghost town. <https://www.kansascity.com/article705600.html>

tickets. In the early years we were a pretty lean operation.” Cairns recalls that there was a Board of Directors formed early on because the theatre formed as a non-profit. The first Board members were the three founders.

Liz Gordon was the first lifeline for immediate financial support for the Theatre Workshop. She was married to a doctor, Dr. Richard Gordon, and when they needed something, such as paint, props, or other supplies, it would show up the next day. The Missouri Arts Council was another significant financial resource for the young theatre. Each of the three founding members also invested their own money to start the theatre. They each contributed \$333.00 so that they could start the theatre for under \$1,000.00. That was their seed money. When they started selling tickets the price was around \$5.00 per ticket. It was similar to the way a co-op worked with much of the labor for a while. Over the first five years they began to gather costume inventory, money from the Missouri Arts Council and started to turn into a more legitimate Off-Broadway theatre. Still, no one was being paid.

Community support helped the Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre stay alive. Mayor Charlie Wheeler (mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, from 1971 to 1979)⁴ was an advocate for the arts, a doctor, and free spirit. He would call Cairns early in the morning and ask, “What are you doing for breakfast?” They would meet for coffee and Wheeler would often bring along someone whom he thought Cairns should know and who might be interested in the Theatre Workshop. “In some case those people became board members or funders.” Corporate and foundational support was important in the financial success of the theatre. Cairns felt that Kansas City was a conservative area, especially in the late 1970s, and he was

⁴ <https://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article68713222.html>

grateful to have financial support for an Off-Off-Broadway type of theatre. However, these financial backers were not present during the first few years. The foundational years were much more frugal and sometimes money came from unexpected places.

Dan Hall and Miller Aldridge had a law firm called Aldridge and Hall. They both went to law school around the same time in Boston. They enjoyed going to the theatre together in the Boston area and when they came to Kansas City they had started to attend shows at the Theatre Workshop. One day when Cairns was opening the mail, there was a letter from the Aldridge and Hall law firm that was intimidating at first. Cairns had no idea why he might be receiving a letter from a law firm. To his surprise, the letter was from Dan Hall expressing an interest in becoming a monthly financial donor. Along with the letter was a \$500.00 check made out to the theatre. “The checks just kept coming.” Dan Hall joined the Board of Directors shortly after and became a great resource for the theatre. This connection helped to facilitate the relationship between Mayor Charlie Wheeler and the Theatre Workshop as well as financial support from the Hallmark Foundation.

There was enough money being generated that the Theatre Workshop decided to hire a stage manager in 1979. Cynthia Levin joined the staff of the Theatre Workshop as their third employee. Every person who worked for the theatre wore many hats. Levin worked as a stage manager, designed sound, directed plays, assisted building scenery, helped build costumes, and served as a member in the community-style theatre. Levin graduated from Park College before she joined the Theatre Workshop. “I can’t remember exactly what her pay was, but I guarantee you, it was not a lot!”

In 1981 the Theatre Workshop officially changed its name to the Unicorn Theatre. Cairns remembers that the name was changed due to confusion from the public. “Theatre

Workshop” was a generic enough name that if acting workshops were held by other theatres, there was confusion. There was a legal process that needed to be followed and the papers were filed. The decision to choose the name Unicorn Theatre escapes the memory of Jim Cairns slightly. There is a part of him that believes it came from a reference to *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams in which the glass unicorn was used both as a symbol of the character’s fragility as well as a physical object that unintentionally shatters. He is not sure of how exactly the name was chosen, but he does know that there was vote to choose the name.

The Unicorn Theatre had a big decision to make in 1984. Levin felt strongly that the Unicorn Theatre needed to join Actors’ Equity Association (AEA) and become a professional theatre. Cairns was hesitant. He was focused on balancing the budget and paying the bills, so he was concerned with the inevitable additional costs. The Board of Directors voted in favor of Levin’s stance to join AEA.

That was probably one of the few times where I was a little bit hesitant that the support was going to be there for whatever additional amount of money was going to be required to keep an Equity theatre going. In some cases, it opens you up to additional grants and National Endowment for the Arts money, but when it comes time to write the checks and the money might not be there, it’s a scary proposition. I love theatre, but it’s not a solitary art. There’s not a good way to do theatre without a community and without space.

Cairns felt that the theatre wasn’t quite ready for that big a step, but the Board came through and the money that was required became available. “I’m pleased that the energy and the financial support has been there to keep the Equity Theatre going for another 30 years. Cynthia has always been a person who valued the artists and the people that are involved in the process. I think she’s to be admired for that.”

Jim Cairns left Kansas City around 1989. When he left the Unicorn Theatre, their annual budget was around \$200,000 per year. Now their annual budget is closer to \$1,000,000 per year. Cairns moved to Memphis to serve as the General Manager at the second largest community theatre in the country, Theatre Memphis.⁵ He worked there for 10 years. When he started working there, their budget was around \$1,500,000 per year. He was doing the same kind of work, but on a larger scale. The auditorium seated 494 audience members and it had a larger main stage proscenium theatre. Most of the works produced were main stage shows, but there were one or two plays a year that had a bit more of an edge. The Unicorn Theatre had an audience that was usually people under 40 years old, while the Theatre Memphis had an audience with people over 40 years old. He enjoyed his time working there. After his daughter was born he decided to pursue a more lucrative career and switched to a job in sales for the next 20 years. He was able to translate his theatre skills of being able to speak in front of people and being social into a sales career. He now resides in the Green Bay area.

Some of Cairns' favorite productions that he directed at the Unicorn Theatre were *Fool for Love* by Sam Shepard and *A Lesson from Aloys* by Athol Fugard. He intermittently acted, but he enjoyed directing most. Cairns estimates he directed about fifteen plays during his time working at the Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre. There was an energy and vitality about the theatre and the actors that kept Cairns interested. One of the actors that Cairns enjoyed directing was Arliss Howard⁶ who has gone on to have an extensive career as an actor in Los Angeles. Although Howard was not classically trained, Cairns was impressed

⁵ <https://theatrememphis.org>

⁶ https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0397124/?ref_=vp_back

with his work at the Unicorn Theatre. “He had raw talent.” Howard played the lead character in Carson McCullers’s play *Ballad of the Sad Café* in 1979 that was directed by Cairns.

There were a few different types of theatre being tested out under a couple of umbrellas under the Theatre Workshop during their early years. There was an improvisation group in which many of the members of the Theatre Workshop were involved called The Given Circumstances. This workshop was funded by a six-week grant and a core group of members stuck together afterwards. “There were about six or eight of us that performed around the city for a number of years.” They performed at schools, senior citizen centers, art fairs and Crown Center during their annual arts fest. Cairns remembers that Arliss Howard was a master of this improv group.

In the early years of the Theatre Workshop they also had a children’s wing called The Hermes Players. “We were maybe a buffet in the early years. We had comedy and children’s theatre and Shakespeare. And those are being put together right up next to plays written by Sam Shepard. It might have been hard to buy a season ticket because you weren’t going to get the same type of menu.”

Jim Cairns retired in October 2016 and “proceeded to be horrified in November of 2016 when we elected the current President.” Cairns continues to work for social justice causes. He is involved in several groups including the ACLU, a church based prison-reform organization, and a voting rights groups whose goal is to overcome gerrymandering in Wisconsin. He considers himself a “retired activist.”

Interview with Rohn Dennis

Rohn Dennis was one of the three founding members of the Unicorn Theatre in 1974. The idea began when he had a discussion with Jim Cairns, one of the founding members,

about how he was fed up with people having to leave Kansas City to practice theatre. Dennis posed the question, “Why isn’t there someplace where people can try their stuff, and even if they don’t succeed, at least they can pick themselves up and try again?” Dennis and Cairns had an urge to produce substantial theatre. Cairns called Liz Gordon, another founding member, and she found a building for them to view in the River Quay area as a possible theatre space. Dennis was shocked by how fast action was being taken. When Cairns called Dennis to inform him of the possible space, he thought to himself, “Oh, shit. What have I done?”

The feeling of needing a communal theatre space was shared. At the time, Liz Gordon was working with an amateur theatre group called the Coach House Players which operated out of the All Souls Church. They were a group of people who produced entertaining and poignant theatre, so Gordon was familiar with the type of theatre that Dennis and Cairns were eager to create. Gordon, Dennis, and Cairns went to look at a specialty warehouse space in the River Quay that had an upstairs section that had stored lumber, and was a space that could be used to house lights and a lighting booth. It was perfect. They had nothing, but they were just going to make it happen. At the time, rent was \$100 per month, utilities included. They were able to afford it and moved in. Their first show had to be pulled together by everybody pitching in and helping. Dennis wanted to use his experience with kids and the handicapped community to create a children’s show. They found three actors who agreed to be in the show. Dennis remembers that one of the actors would say, “Oh, what fun!” They bought cheap folding chairs and were barely able to heat the space, so winter coats still had to be worn. The City Union Mission also lent blankets for the audience members to use.

They called themselves the Workshop Theatre. This name only lasted for four or five days when Jim Cairns went to obtain a license. The city wanted to charge them two or three hundred dollars for a license, which was far outside their budget. So, Cairns spoke to the city license employee and found out that if they changed their name to the Theatre Workshop instead of Workshop Theatre, their license would only cost twenty-five dollars. For some government reason that Dennis never fully understood, the semantics of changing the words in the title of their theatre made a difference. The name had been decided and they used a black star as their symbol. Dennis hand-painted their first sign and hung it outside the warehouse.

Opening a warehouse theatre on a non-existent budget proved to teach the three founders many lessons about how to “do it yourself.” They installed one male/female restroom where Dennis and Cairns taught themselves how to install a toilet and a sink. They had to regularly oil the floors because of the nature of the specialty warehouse flooring. The work was hard and the attendance was meager, so they decided to reach out to the community. They invited the handicapped children that Dennis knew from his previous work, knowing it would be their audience’s first time to see theatre. However, there were about eight steps up to the theatre, so it was not handicap-accessible. Dennis arranged for volunteers to come to lift the wheelchairs into the theatre. Looking back on it, Dennis said, “Oh my god, we could never do that now. We obviously broke the law.” But, this allowed 40-50 children to see live theatre for the first time in their lives: “This is what theatre is about. It’s about giving to do something. Making statements.” All the first shows had moral statements and taught lessons. The Theatre Workshop charged about \$2-\$2.50 per ticket. *Children’s Christmas Story Book* opened on 5 December 1974 and then they started to look

forward to what they would produce next. “Theatre is always ahead of things. It almost predicts the future.”

Cecile Burton and Art Ellison were two older and experienced actors in Kansas City who could draw an audience just from their names. The Theatre Workshop organized a fundraiser at which Burton and Ellison performed together. Dennis recalls that the two actors felt excited to perform in these roles because in the past they had seen younger actors wearing stage makeup to age themselves instead of casting older actors. This was an opportunity that the Theatre Workshop gave them to play roles written for their age. He remembers Burton saying, “As a matter of fact, I’m trying to make myself look a little bit younger.” Cecile Burton held herself with the air of a Grand Dame, carrying a cane with a little hanky on it. Dennis commented, “Anyone that knew her knew that she was quite a character.”

Vincent Dowling⁷ (1929-2013) who was the Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre in Ireland (1987-1989) came to host a night of readings at the Theatre Workshop as a part of their fundraiser. A lot of people were trying to help them succeed at the beginning. A local theatre critic attended many of their productions and decided to write an article about them after they had been producing shows for four or five months. This helped bring exposure to their new theatre.

Dr. Patricia McIlrath⁸ (1917-1999), fondly known as Dr. Mac, came down to the Theatre Workshop’s warehouse and looked around and smiled. She gave them a check for

⁷ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/vincent-dowling-83-dies-after-distinguished-career-in-theatre-1.1390797>

⁸ <https://www.umkc.edu/news/posts/2019/march/Patricia-McIlrath-SWHOF.html>

\$100. It felt like \$1,000 to Dennis at the time. It was a full month's rent and instilled confidence in the founders. It was as if Dr. Mac was saying to them, "I have faith in you guys. I have a belief that something's going to happen and I'm putting my money where my mouth is."

While much of the community was supportive of the Theatre Workshop, Dennis also felt disappointed that none of their UMKC professors or anyone who worked in the technical shop came to see the work they had done. Dennis, Cairns, and Gordon were trying to create a theatre that was open to everybody. They wanted to feel support from everybody in return. Much of the financial burden of opening a new theatre fell onto the shoulders of the co-founders. They were using their personal money to fund its opening. Liz Gordon's husband was a doctor and was willing to donate money as a tax write-off. They were registered as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization and were allowed to receive tax-deductible contributions. A lot of people were helping them out. The River Quay was helping by allowing them to promote the Theatre Workshop at local bars. Dennis knew they needed to make more money and decided to produce a vaudeville show.

Dennis auditioned dancers, comics, and full acts. All he had to do was piece the individual talented performers together by creating an olio to tie them all together. A local dance studio lent them costumes. They were trying to evoke a Las Vegas like-show. The cast was large and Dennis figured that if every cast member brought five audience members, they would have a good turn-out. There was no way to offer free tickets at the time, so they were relying on family and friends of the cast to pay to see their show. In order to attract a larger audience, Dennis asked three of the female cast members to walk through the River Quay area in their vaudeville costumes and hand out flyers to advertise the show. "They were like

three or four peacocks going down the street.” They used their best Mae West impressions saying, “Come on down and see us sometime. Tonight.” That was the first time they sold to standing room only. Liz Gordon was worried when they sold out all the seats, but Dennis encouraged her to sell the standing room seats for one dollar each.

Dennis notes the notoriety that producing Arthur Schnitzler’s *La Ronde* gave the theatre company in 1976. The use of full nudity started to build the Theatre Workshop a bold reputation.

Rohn Dennis often found himself in a liaison position between the staff and the actors when they “weren’t as professional as they should have been.” Jim Cairns had a temper and Liz Gordon would pamper the actors when conflict arose. Rohn Dennis asked, “Can I step in?” He was able to say the right things to smooth things over. While Dennis took the actors out for coffee, Cairns and Gordon both agree that when issues like that came up, they would turn to Dennis because “he would say the right thing.” They each felt they had their roles: Liz Gordon took care of marketing and house management, Jim Cairns was the director, and Rohn Dennis built and maintained relationships with cast members and the community. They all worked tirelessly to build the Theatre Workshop. Some nights they would even sleep at the theatre.

Their money problems were omnipresent. They were hungry and poor, but one morning they decided to pool their money and go get breakfast together at the market across the street from the warehouse. Dennis took off his hat and set it in the chair next to him and people walking by dropped money into his hat. He went inside the restaurant, looked at himself in the mirror and thought, “All our money problems are solved!” He told Gordon and Cairns how he had been mistaken for a homeless person and they all laughed. He thought,

“Oh my god. Do I look this bad?” There were days when they barely had time to run home, change their clothes, or eat. They spent their lives at the theatre.

Towards the end of the 1976 season, Jim Cairns wanted to produce Gertrude Stein’s *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*. Virgil Thomson⁹, an internationally renowned Kansas City-born composer, supported their idea to produce this show. They used the entirety of the warehouse space. When audience members arrived Mephistopheles was there to greet them at the freight elevator that was lit by red lights and guided them into the theatre. Rohn Dennis played the dog who could only say, “Thank you.” There was an actress with red hair who performed her scenes from a catwalk. She eventually jumped into a net that caught her above the audience. Dennis thought it was all spectacular. As this wonderful production was going on, Gordon and Cairns were trying to figure out a way to tell Dennis that they had run out of money. Liz decided they should wait to tell him until after this production because he loved it so much. During this time, there were a few lawyers who came to see the show. They wanted to meet with the Theatre Workshop founders afterwards and they said, “We’re looking to put our money into something because we’ve never seen theatre like this before. It’s really creative. We don’t have much to give, but we have a kitty through our law firm that gives money out two or three times a year to an organization that we want to support. It’s not much. It’s only going to be two or three thousand dollars.” Jim dropped his head down and Rohn looked at him. The lawyer said, “I know, I understand it’s not a lot. We’ll throw in a little bit more if that helps.” Rohn said, “I think that would work. Don’t you all think that

⁹ <https://pendergastkc.org/article/biography/virgil-thomson>

would work?” He was so excited and thought to himself ‘don’t pee on yourself.’ “That allowed us to continue on.”

The Theatre Workshop was able to do another children’s production and stick with a few classics. Vance Jones played a dragon in the children’s show that spooked Dennis out at times. Kids loved it. Susan Sylvia Scott, a storyteller, got involved with the Theatre Workshop and did a few things for them.

“I felt alive on stage. It was a safe place for me as an actor.” Dennis earned his B.A. in Theatre from UMKC, but he started as an artist at the Art Institute. While he was there he was earning average grades. His parents asked him, “What do you want to do?” The only thing Dennis could think of was performing. All he had ever wanted to do was be in show business. He didn’t know much about theatre at the time. His step-father told him, “Go where your passion is. If you don’t do what you’re passionate about you’ll never be happy.” He decided to go to school at the University of Missouri - Kansas City. He grew up in Kansas City, Kansas, and was familiar with the area. When he started school, he met Marilyn Lynch, who had just come off tour from playing Dolly in *Hello Dolly!*. He felt inferior and became overwhelmed by how little he knew about theatre compared to his classmates. He was shy and quiet around them until he finally came out of his shell at a party where he was delivering one-line comedy and performing for them. He finally felt that he belonged at UMKC. Lynch confessed to him that she also felt as if she didn’t know what she was doing and was terrified as well. She said, “We were all scared, but so afraid to admit that. We all thought everybody else knew way more than we did.” Marilyn Lynch is still performing in Kansas City today. Dennis was able to get the training he required to help him build confidence as a performer. He would rehearse by himself for hours at a time even after class.

In October 1977 Rohn Dennis decided to take a break from the Theatre Workshop and headed to New York City. He wasn't sure how long he would be gone. He got a job at Theatre for the New City where he met and worked with many people who were an influence on his future career. He met a couple who worked for the Living Theatre, which he had recently learned about in school. He learned that they were also struggling and he felt at home there. Dennis began to help at Theatre for the New City by answering the phones. He was soon offered the Assistant General Manager position. Later he was asked to help pick the plays. He was able to learn how a theatre worked during his time with the Theatre for the New City. He met Joseph Papp (1921-1991), the founder of the Public Theater, James Earl Jones, and Edward Albee (1928-2016). Albee told him, "Everybody writes different." One of his biggest lessons from his time in New York City was "you did everything." He brought this mentality back with him to the Theatre Workshop when he returned nine months later.

Dennis served on the Board of Directors, which formed when they were operating out of the Norman School. Rohn Dennis worked with the Unicorn Theatre for thirteen years. He left when they made the move to 39th street. He saw the direction it was heading and he knew it needed people who had a specific expertise that he didn't have. He was ready to move on to a job that could offer him a retirement and was happy to hand the reins over to a younger group. He worked as an elementary magnet school teacher. "I'm real glad to see where the Unicorn is now and where Cynthia has taken it. A theatre succeeds not for what you necessarily did, but for what the next person who takes it over can build on it. If you don't have a foundation they fold."

Liz Gordon had a strong presence in the theatre until they moved to the space behind the Plaza near 46th and Main Street. "That came about because trouble was brewing in the

River Quay... Jim got a call one night. The caller told him it would be wise of him to move the theatre. So, at 2:00am on a Saturday in the pouring rain, he and a few others moved the theatre out the back door. It wasn't long after that that the first bombing occurred." Dennis didn't stay away from the Theatre Workshop for long. He returned to Kansas City at the end of their 1978 season when they were producing Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*. Although he didn't expect them to hold a job for him during his absence, he was welcomed back by Jim Cairns and Liz Gordon.

The Theatre Workshop was renamed the Unicorn Theatre in 1981.¹⁰ Rohn Dennis was in New York City when the theatre changed its name, but he heard that the new name was chosen due to free paper that was donated to the theatre. Apparently, the paper's letterhead had a unicorn printed on it, and so the theatre adopted the name the Unicorn Theatre. The theatre has resided in four different locations. It began at a warehouse in the River Quay, then moved to a space behind Café Trio, then they moved to the Norman School where Cynthia Levin joined them, and finally they moved to their current location at 39th and Main Street in 1986.

"The arts have to be free. We have to be able to say what we have to say." The first time Dennis saw a show directed by Cynthia Levin was in their 1980 season when the Unicorn Theatre produced *Uncommon Women and Others* by Wendy Wasserstein. Dennis thought, "Oh, what a good director." She opened the show by asking the audience, "Women are revolting. Why aren't you?" Controversial productions like *Bent* by Martin Sherman, which was staged in 1983, helped the theatre grow.

¹⁰ Unicorn Theatre website

Rohn Dennis was taught by Gaylord Marr how to socialize with his peers in order to create a working relationship. “You want to be liked by others. You want people to want to work with you.”

Rohn Dennis currently resides in Kansas City, Missouri, and works with a public radio theatre on a production called Shots in the Night for which they write and perform their own shows. It’s a group of twelve people who collaborate with KKFI. “It’s like an adult Saturday Night Live.” Dennis still has a mind for how to fund and create theatre.

Memoriam in honor of Liz Gordon (1919- 2014)

Liz Gordon was one of the three founders of the Theatre Workshop in 1974. She was a graduate of UMKC, along with Rohn Dennis and Jim Cairns. Marilyn Lynch remembers Gordon as a “good stage manager for whom she had a lot of respect.”

Cairns remembers Liz Gordon fondly. “She loved theatre. She worked with Dr. Patricia McIlrath as an associate at UMKC while she continued her education.” Gordon directed a play at UMKC called *Moonchildren* by Michael Weller in which Jim Cairns was the stage manager and Rohn Dennis acted. They formed a bond from working on this successful production together. Cairns recalls that when he had the idea to start a theatre company, Gordon and Dennis were two of the first people he spoke with and they were both excited to join. Liz Gordon directed some plays, designed costumes, and ran any and every errand necessary for the Theatre Workshop. Gordon had closely cropped silver hair and acted as the house manager during shows, speaking to audience members, informing them of intermission times, etc. Gordon was also interested in classical work and directed *Romeo and Juliet* in their 1976 season in a contemporary setting. Liz Gordon also served as the front of house manager of the theatre and enjoyed welcoming guests on performance nights. Gordon

and her husband, Dr. Richard Gordon, were a fundamental element in helping to build a strong foundation for the Theatre Workshop. They pitched in money where and when it was needed.

The Theatre Workshop did many different types of theatre work in their early years, but they started to focus on more contemporary and edgy work after a few years. By this time Gordon was ready to move on. She worked with the Theatre Workshop for about five years.

In 2014 Liz Gordon passed away at age 95 in Kansas City, MO.

Interview with Diana J. Mange

Diana J. Mange served as the Artistic Director of the Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre from January 1977 to December 1982. She graduated from Avila University in the spring of 1976 with her B.F.A. in Theatre Arts. She learned of the Theatre Workshop because they were seeking new playwrights. Mange had written plays and was excited to share some of her work. The Theatre Workshop did a reading of her play *Speak to me Softly... Like the Rain* and decided to produce it in the fall of 1976. She quickly joined the theatre company and became a member on the Board of Directors.

Mange recalls the battle over space in the River Quay that was happening in the 1970s. The Theatre Workshop was forced to quickly re-locate from their warehouse location in 1976. "The Italian mob took over the River Quay and they wanted that building." The Theatre Workshop moved over the weekend using Jim Cairn's truck, Mange's vehicle and there was an older couple, including Betty Kaiser, who was working with them who also helped. They grabbed as many supplies as they could and got out. They moved to a basement garage near 4550 Main Street underneath a Sub Pub and other shops. There was also a furniture store and a little deli shop above them. It was truly a garage space and now they had

the challenge of setting up a theatre. The winter months were upon them and the cold was setting in. There was no heat in the basement and they had to create a bathroom area and transition the garage door into an entrance. An attic-like ladder dropped from above that led to a small closet space that they could use as an office and helped them escape the cold.

“It was pretty much Jim and I and Betty Kaiser that literally turned that place into a theatre. We worked constantly.” Mange was asked to be the Producing Director, which served as an artistic director in early 1977. Jim Cairns acted as the Managing Director, or business manager. They were eventually able to create a performance space in the basement on 45th Street and Main. The Theatre Workshop also found other spaces in which they could perform while the space was being renovated. The Theatre Workshop produced Diana J. Mange’s play *Genesis, Etc.* in the spring of 1977 with a mime company called Mimewock to generate some money while they built the Theatre.¹¹ It was a one-woman show that incorporated mime work and they produced it in Mimewock’s studio. “It was well attended by an albeit small, but enthusiastic audience.” The Theatre Workshop also collaborated with other organizations, including the Art Institute. After they had raised enough money, they were able to work in their basement location for about two years and produced show after show before the space became untenable. Kansas City flooded in mid-September 1977 and caused problems for the theatre.

Hardest hit by the flooding was the Country Club Plaza area, a nationally known cluster of shops, restaurants and apartment buildings catering to the affluent. Water and mud caused severe damage to the stocks of several stores in the area: a fire triggered by what a deputy fire chief called a "terrific explosion" caused by leaking

¹¹ http://members.tripod.com/kiko_mime/who.html

gas destroyed at least six business in one block. There were reports of scattered looting, and police with rifles moved into the plaza area Monday night.¹²

In September 1977 Kansas City was ravaged by a torrential flood that left 18 dead. For the Theatre Workshop, it meant that they were stuck. The night the flood hit they were in rehearsal at their basement location. Water was rushing down Main Street and they couldn't get out. They all had to spend the night inside the theatre.

“We really started a theatre movement. There weren't many theatres at the time. There was nothing, nothing like the Theatre Workshop.” Both Diana J. Mange and Jim Cairns began to earn an income for their work in 1977, which increased steadily over time. Their audience base was starting to grow and they knew they had to get out of their basement location. They began to scope out options and found the Norman School. Located near 35th Street and Jefferson, the abandoned grade school had classroom and office space that they could use. This move ignited the thought that they needed a name change. They were no longer a workshop, but an Off-Off Broadway theatre. They were producing original scripts and hosting the national playwright competition. Other theatres in Kansas City around the late '70s/early '80s included the Missouri Repertory Theatre, Starlight Theatre, dinner theatres and community theatres. There was simply nothing like the Theatre Workshop around. They were a unique theatre that deserved a unique name. One of the board members, perhaps Jenny Yeo, suggested the name Unicorn. It was unique and ethereal and the board agreed upon the name change.

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/09/14/18-die-as-heavy-rains-flood-kansas-city/cb8d4e1f-2031-4e60-a440-34d8d028dba3/>

They started to refer to themselves at the Unicorn Theatre after they moved to the Norman School in 1979. They were producing six to eight shows a year and Mange was directing two or three of them while Cairns was directing one to two. They also brought in a guest director who was allowed to choose whichever show they would like. They produced many plays and got very strong during this time. Mange continued to serve as the Artistic Director of the Unicorn until December 1982. Even when money was tight, Mange never considered closing the theatre. “I never thought about the theatre ‘not making it’. When there, I was directly involved in all daily aspects and had little time to think about anything but the project at hand, whether I was directing it or not.”

The Unicorn Theatre was a movement. It was a place for everybody. Mange was initially drawn to the theatre because they wanted to produce one of her plays. It was the kind of theatre that was open to new playwrights and wanted to experiment. The members of the Unicorn Theatre felt the need to escape the cut-throat type of theatre they had experienced in the past. Mange recalls her mentor and the artistic founder of the American Heartland Theatre, Jim Assad¹³ saying to her, “Theatre is a really mean business. It’s cut-throat and mean. If you want to have a nice business go into politics. At least those people are elected. You don’t have to put up with people who will be there until they die.” Mange laughed at this memory and said, “Little did he know! That’s kind of how politics are now.”

Sensitivities tend to run high in artistic environments and tensions can easily arise. This was one of the contributing facts to why Mange decided to leave the Unicorn Theatre. Mange remembered that there was a moment in the late ‘70s when they were still renovating

¹³ <https://www.kcur.org/arts-life/2013-04-05/american-heartland-theatre-to-close-at-end-of-season>

the basement location on Main Street that stuck out to her. She and Cairns were in the warm office space together when they heard the owners of the sub shop above them. The two men were in the back parking lot slap-fighting each other because they were so upset. Mange remembers turning to Cairns and saying, “I will never fight you for this theatre. I will never ever try to take it away from you.”

As the years went on the theatre was becoming quite successful. The plays were being well-attended, they were producing work Mange was proud of, and they were gaining new board members. It was at this point that Mange was “encouraged to try to move Jim out.” Mange couldn’t do it. She would sooner leave than push Jim out of his own theatre. “Jim may not even know. He probably would have been very hurt. To this day he may not even know because I told no one.” So she stayed until the end of the 1982 season. She put in place the 1983 season, gathered board members of her choosing who she thought would keep the theatre going and then she left. “Sometimes you have to walk away from things you love.” She simply couldn’t do something that she felt wasn’t morally right.

Mange wanted to stress that when she left the Unicorn Theatre the foundation of the theatre was there. “I helped form the foundation of a real theatre movement.” When they started this movement they had youth on their side and were willing to make no money. They put everything they made back into the theatre. It was about the process for them. The creative process of the members was center to their mission.

Mange remembers her time at the Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre clearly. She outlines some of her thoughts by saying:

From 1977-1982 as producing director I oversaw the selection and production of 48 plays, most of which were KC premiers; including *Hot l Baltimore*, *Transformations*, *When You Comin’ Back*, *Red Ryder?* *Marat/Sade*, *The Mad Woman of Chaillot* and

others. Many of these were too controversial and/or “difficult” that MO Rep, Starlight and the community theatres would not touch them.

I designed (sets and lighting) and constructed scenery for most of the 48 productions. I designed (sets and lighting), constructed and also *Directed* 10 of the productions including the new plays: *Calling It Off* by Nancy Lenau (winner of our first MO playwrighting competition) and *Mount Up With Wings Like Angels* by Meredith Portman (winner of our first National playwrighting competition). I was instrumental in starting both the Missouri and National playwrighting competitions to encourage budding playwrights and to bring in new plays. During that time I also directed, etc. several noteworthy, first-time-seen in Kansas City productions; including *Uncommon Women and Others*, by Wendy Wasserstein (yes, I actually directed that one), and *Getting Out* by Marsha Norman. I was directly involved in all aspects of every production from 1977 to 1982 and even did maintenance and custodial duties to keep the theatre space presentable and clean for our audiences and performers.

As the first Producing Director of the premiere avant-garde theatre in Kansas City I, of course, oversaw all productions, while serving on the board of directors, writing grants to receive funding from the MO Arts Council, (there is an amusing/interesting story which points out politics in the arts), organizing and scheduling the seasons, communicating with guest directors and playwrights, and of course encouraging local talent to stay in KC. Busy times!

It was through my connection with Dan Hall, of Aldridge and Hall Law firm, that their donation checks began to arrive. (I went to high school with Danny Hall and Becky Cort-Hall). Becky and I reconnected during a psychology class at UMKC and she said her husband and his partner were looking for a creative not-for-profit to support. After chatting with me, she said she was anxious to give Dan the Unicorn Theatre’s information.

My tenure with The Theatre Workshop/Unicorn may have been brief in the whole scheme of things, but it was essential in cementing the foundation. In December of 1982, I did not “walk out” from a board meeting nor a “party” *in a huff*. I walked away (as I explained), which is very different. I have always believed drama belongs on stage.

By the time I left, the foundation of the organization was clearly rooted in reputation and funding sources. I made certain the theatre was strong enough to continue.¹⁴

Since Mange left the Unicorn Theatre in 1982 she has earned her M.A. in Counseling Psychology, worked with at-risk kids at Kansas City Academy of Learning, worked at

¹⁴ Mange, Diana J. Email communications, 11-16 June 2020.

Starlight Theatre for three years, briefly worked at a dinner theatre, was an artist in residence at Johnson County Community College, served as Technical Director at Park College, and for the past 18 years has worked at an agency, which she founded, that helps people with developmental disabilities and the elderly. Her agency, The Holbrook Sisters assists people in their homes and takes care of them. She was inspired to start this agency in honor of her Aunt Betty Jane and Aunt Norma Lee, “both of whom had been marginalized due to ‘mental retardation’ and had been separated for 40+ years.” Mange located her Aunt Norma in 2002 and reunited the sisters. “Sometimes our creative souls manifest in unique ways.” Mange is now retired and lives with her partner of almost 40 years, Mary Lynn McCarthy. They now live in their “forever home” that Mange designed and had built.

Interview with Cynthia Levin

Cynthia Levin first became involved with the Unicorn Theatre in June 1979. She heard that the Theatre Workshop was looking to hire a stage manager. She went to ask about the open position and found that they were looking for somebody who could do a little bit of everything. She was asked, “Can you stage manage?” and she replied, “Sure!” even though Levin had never stage managed a day in her life. But, she was confident she could do the job. She said, “I got through school where I’d made a prompt script and run lights or sound. I’d seen what the stage manager does.” She was hired. The job truly was doing a little bit of everything. She helped build sets, she designed all of the sound, and wrote music. Levin worked either as an actor, stage manager, or director for every single show since she began working at the Theatre Workshop for fifteen years.

Levin moved to Kansas City from Washington D.C. when she decided to attend Park College, now Park University. She graduated in 1977 with a degree in theatre. She worked at

the UMKC box office, the Missouri Repertory Theatre, and other local Kansas City theatres. Levin also worked at the Coterie Theatre, formed in 1979, as a sound designer for their first fifteen years as well. She designed sound for every single one of their shows during this time. She began by assisting their property designer and formed a relationship with the Coterie. This strong relationship between the Unicorn Theatre and the Coterie lives on today and is one of many collaborative connections the Unicorn Theatre has formed with other professional theatre companies in Kansas City.

Levin knew that dedicating her life to theatre meant that she had to accept most jobs as a freelance artist. However, she didn't like most shows that came along. "I felt them meaningless or offensive." She realized that her love for theatre was not unconditional. "I love what theatre has the potential to say." She came from a background of political activism and had spent her high school years protesting the Vietnam War in Washington D.C., where she grew up. She protested with her guitar on the front lines of every protest. Music was her art and her tool for change. She was a musician before she was a thespian and wanted to use her skills for change in the world. She knew she wanted to work in theatre that was socially relevant and had something to say. "Finding an artistic home wasn't really a plan. My plan wasn't to be an artistic director. My plan was just to be an artist."

Grant money from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was awarded to the Theatre Workshop, which allowed Levin to be hired as the stage manager. CETA was a federal jobs program that allocated funds for visual and performing arts in the United States of America in the 1970s.¹⁵ However, these funds did not last long. When the

¹⁵ <https://forecastpublicart.org/looking-for-ceta/>

Theatre Workshop lost the grant money about five months after she was hired, Levin planned to move back to Washington D.C. Fate stepped in. A phone call from Diana J. Mange informed Levin that the money had been replenished. “When we lost the CETA money, I went back to DC in preparation to move. I received a call at my parent's home from Diana Mange, (then the Artistic Director) telling me they got the money and to come back.” This news allowed Levin to remain in Kansas City and work for the Theatre Workshop. “I don’t believe in luck. But, I sure believe in hard work and fate. Nobody ever thought I would stay in Kansas City. And two and half years later I became the Artistic Director.”

Levin stepped into a leadership position at the Theatre Workshop in December 1982. The Artistic Director at that time, Diana J. Mange, walked into a board meeting and said, “I quit” and walked out. Everyone in the room sat in silence for a moment until Levin raised her hand and said, “I’ll do it.” The board agreed to make her interim Artistic Director and that was it. “That was it.” She felt prepared to take on this role. She had also been working as a director for a feminist theatre company in Kansas City for three or four years and knew what it meant to be the person making all of the decisions. She credits this experience of directing as part of how she learned to lead. Her experience as a stage manager also taught her how to take responsibility for other people. “You know, you learn it bit by bit.” When Levin took over the Unicorn Theatre, which received its official name change in 1981¹⁶, she decided that they would only be about new plays. In the past, the seasons had been made up of children’s shows, Shakespeare, and a little bit of everything. But other theatre companies were forming in the area and creating strong identities as specific theatre makers. The Coterie Theatre was

¹⁶ <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/>

focused on young audiences, the Missouri Repertory Theatre was doing Shakespeare, and Levin decided that her expertise and love of new plays would become the Unicorn's mission.

Cynthia Levin's love and passion for pets is evident. Her pets have shown up in cast photos and rehearsals since she has been Artistic Director of the Unicorn Theatre. As a child, Levin grew up with dachshunds in her home and she has never been without a dog for her entire life. She used to bring home mutts and often had two or three dogs at a time. When she moved to Kansas City for college, she had a dog that drove with her from Washington D.C. She has always had at least one dog, and very often two. So, when she became the Artistic Director at the Unicorn Theatre, they were part of the package. The Unicorn Theatre was a small business and required a leader who was willing to work for twelve hours a day, seven days a week. She took that on. "So, every one of my dogs had to be with me. I mean, there's no way that couldn't happen. They learned that this was their home." Although the demands as the Artistic Director of the Unicorn Theatre are not as overwhelming now as they were for the first twenty-five years of the job, Levin still considers the theatre a home for her current dog, Zia. "So you know, it's gotten a little better. I have a lot of people that take on a lot more responsibility than they did twenty-five years ago." But, like any small business, it took years of dedicated work to reach the current financial stability. In the past, Levin and the Board President would have to go to the bank and get a loan in order to make payroll. Difficult moments like this would continue for several decades. "I was just determined to keep it going because I thought it was important."

There were pivotal moments in the history of the Unicorn Theatre that propelled the company forward. The first show that Cynthia Levin directed as Artistic Director was Lanford Wilson's *5th of July*. The show sold out. The success continued in 1983 with *Bent*

by Martin Sherman and *Talking With* by Jane Martin in 1984. These two shows were such a hit that Levin decided to bring them back in repertory. *Bent* is a play with twelve male actors and *Talking With* is a play with twelve female actors and they performed the two plays in a shared space every other night. This catapulted the Unicorn Theatre to start looking for a space to move. During this time they were in the Norman School that could seat about seventy audience members. “We sat about seventy in a classroom without air conditioning. We started looking for a place to move because everything started selling out.” The Unicorn Theatre moved in September 1986 to an eighty-year old Belman Garage, which is their current location.¹⁷ They transformed the space into an intimate thrust theatre that could seat 150 patrons.

Six Women with Brain Death Or Expiring Minds Want to Know by Mark Houston is a musical that was another pivotal moment for the Unicorn Theatre in 1986. The collaborative experience began in the Norman School with Mark Houston and the six actresses who helped to write all of the vignettes. They produced the world premiere workshop of this play. The show moved into the new space with the Unicorn Theatre and was performed three more times. It was a huge success and the Unicorn had helped create it. “The play has since been produced over a thousand times in almost every country in the world. I mean, it’s just craziness. We helped in its success.”

In 1987 the Unicorn Theatre was contacted by the national branch of the Easter Seal Society. One of Levin’s goals for the new space of the Unicorn Theatre was to create a completely accessible space for any physical handicap. “And that’s how I built it. It included

¹⁷ <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/>

the entrance, backstage, the dressing rooms, and the ramp to the backstage theatre.

Everything about it is ADA.” The Unicorn Theatre was one of the first theatre companies to make accessibility a priority. The Easter Seal society proposed a partnership to assist in making the Unicorn Theatre accessible. *Doing the Reality Rag* by Lawrence Perkins had its world premiere in the 1986-1987 season at the Unicorn Theatre. It was a huge success. The show caught national attention when the Unicorn Theatre was on CBS Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt because of this show. “That’s when it started to change that we were getting more national press than local.”

Levin was ignited by the success of the *Doing the Reality Rag*’s world premiere and wanted to continue to produce plays for the first time out of New York. She was able to produce some of her favorite plays, such as *Burn This* by Lanford Wilson and *Beirut* by Alan Bowne. “*Beirut* was really weird and really tough and the most the actors ever wore was underwear. It was about the future demise of civilization as we know it. I love apocalyptic things. I loved this show.” The critics were not so sure. Levin recalls that Robert Trussell, a long-time theatre critic for the Kansas City Star, hated it. “The reviews either loved it or hated it and that was how I sold the play.” She asked audience members to decide for themselves. “That kind of thing has happened so often. You either love our shows or you tend to leave at intermission. You have a very strong feeling and opinion. Because it makes you feel something. People are used to not feeling something. We are the place you come to think about things, not to stop thinking.” Levin does not believe in entertainment as a form of escapism from the real world. She wants to confront her audience members with the reality of the world and deal with tough issues. Although it’s always great for Levin to find a great comedy, she finds it hard to unearth a comedy that isn’t written at the expense of another

person. “It’s not why I’m in the business.” Levin does not feel the pressure to sell to a mass audience or compromise her beliefs in order to have a successful theatre company.

The Unicorn Theatre was the first theatre company in the midwest to produce a play about AIDS. Their first production featuring the topic was *As Is* by William Hoffman in 1987. It taught Levin a lot. She didn’t know much about AIDS at this time and producing this show gave her the opportunity to learn. This is when many people, including herself, began to learn about the life-threatening condition. Later, *Falsettoland* by William Finn caught Levin’s attention in 1991-1992. By this time Levin had already lost friends to the syndrome. *Falsettoland* was a two-part play about a man who leaves his wife because he falls in love with a man. “It was about AIDS and HIV. It was about family and extended family and your family by blood and the family you choose. They were Jewish. It had to do with a bar mitzvah. It was every single thing I wanted in one play.” The whole show was sung as an opera and Levin knew that if you sing about certain topics, people will come. She was able to secure the rights to this play right before it was taken to Broadway. The Unicorn Theatre’s production of *Falsettoland* premiered in June 1992 right after it had won the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical and Best Original Score Written for the Theatre.¹⁸

The season previous to the premiere of *Falsettoland* was a difficult time for the Unicorn Theatre. The National Endowment for the Arts was being threatened¹⁹ and the theatre community was suffering. The Board members at the Unicorn Theatre wanted to do something smaller and argued that they didn’t have the budget for a musical. Levin refused.

¹⁸ <https://www.broadwayworld.com/tonyawardsshowinfo.php?showname=Falsettos>

¹⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1990/12/30/nea-1990/7b32b5d2-d941-4aa0-8908-d51edd632cff/>

She believed in the future success of *Falsettoland*. The show sold out every performance and it had to be extended three times. The profits from the show paid off the theatre's debt and paid for the following year's budget. Her advice to anybody is, "Go with your gut. You have to have instinct and gut in this job." Levin does not choose her productions by popularity or what people want to see because she chooses work that is new. *Falsettoland* ran so long that Levin had to step into one of the acting roles towards the end. It is the last show where she worked as an actor. This show changed everything.

The Unicorn Theatre's next big success came when they chose to produce *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* by Tony Kushner right after its New York performance in their 1995-1996 season. Nobody thought the Unicorn Theatre could produce the show because it was a large-scale production on Broadway. "I realized that what you see on a huge stage is not the same experience as when you see it in a theatre like the Unicorn with 150 seats. It's almost immersive because you see the people's faces. You see their eyes." They closed their 1995-1996 season with a huge success and opened the 1996-1997 season with part two: *Angels in America: Perestroika* by Tony Kushner.

Levin has made it part of the Unicorn Theatre's mission to produce plays by and about under-represented groups of people. She sought out plays by women, and people of color, and especially plays by women of color. In 1998 the Unicorn produced *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* by Emily Mann that is based on the lives of Sadie and Bessie Delany.²⁰ Levin spends a lot of her time reading manuscripts and looking for

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/07/theater/theater-review-having-our-say-a-visit-with-two-indomitable-sisters.html>

work by women and minorities. But it's difficult to find work by women of color because a lot of their work is unpublished.

Levin also remembers producing *Crowns* by Regina Taylor in 2005, a musical about the hats that African-American women wear and the stories that they tell. This show sold out and she also brought it back the following year at the Gem Theatre in downtown Kansas City.

The justice system has always been something that stands out to Levin. From a young age she was aware that the justice system does not treat everyone equally. Depending on your race, income, and background, the justice system treats people differently. She was given the opportunity to produce *The Exonerated* by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen in the 2004-2005 season. The play was written in a documentary style from stories that had been collected about real people on death row who had been exonerated. Levin found three men in Kansas City who had been exonerated. These three men came to the Unicorn and told their story. "This play showed me why I do what I do." She had the men come to talkbacks and speak to audience members after the performance of *The Exonerated* about their experiences in prison and what it was like to be falsely accused of a crime they did not commit. One of the men had been on death row for thirty years before being released only four months prior to this production. During one of the talkbacks where audience members are encouraged to ask questions, a woman sitting in left section in row A raised her hand. Levin called on her and the woman said, "I believed in the death penalty before I saw this show. Now I'm not so sure." Levin stressed, "That is why I do what I do. Theatre has the ability for us to change the world."

Every season there's a show that stands out as a winner for Levin. The show could be considered a win to her whether it sells tickets well or even if means it was something they created when she wasn't sure it was possible. The co-production with UMKC Theatre Department, *Men on Boats* by Jaclyn Backhaus from the 2017-2018 season stands out to Levin as a win. It presented many obstacles, including having ten female actors play ten historical male figures, all of whom are in four boats on the rapids. "But, we did it. And we did it well! I love that play. If I find something and I don't know how to do it, then I do it. I don't want to do something I already know how to do." Levin understands the finite and temporal quality of theatre by saying, "We build something that is meant to vanish." It has taught her to let go and move on. For the past forty years she has always been in rehearsal or performance and doesn't like to spend time reflecting on the past. Her mind is focused on the future and what's next for the Unicorn Theatre.

Levin's management style has played a huge part of the success of the Unicorn Theatre. Her father was a lawyer and an accountant, so she learned a lot from him about the law and budgeting. As a teenager she worked for him and was able to later apply this knowledge to running a theatre company. She is also a believer in allowing artists to be artists and allowing administration and fundraising to be handled by business people. In her past experience, she noticed that many artists were fulfilling both the roles of artist and administrator. She decided to make a change because it was important to her to have an administrative team so that the artists were free to do their work. The decision to add an administrative team meant Levin had to find another way to cover the cost, but it was important to her that these two jobs remain separate. She wrote and received a grant that

covered the cost of the additional staff. In 1981 there was also a switch among the members of the Board of Directors from actors to business community members.

In 1984 Levin wanted the Unicorn Theatre to join Actors' Equity Association, the labor union that represents American actors and stage managers.²¹ She met opposition from the managing director, Jim Cairns, because becoming an Equity theatre company meant that they would have to pay artists and they would have to purchase insurance. Levin strongly believed it was in the best interest of the Unicorn Theatre to become professional and pay artists for their work. However, she was not able to convince people with opposing views, so the issue was brought to the Board of Directors for a vote. The Board of Directors voted in favor of joining the union. This was when the Unicorn Theatre made a commitment to pay artists. This was also when the Unicorn signed a contract with the Small Professional Theatre (SPT), which is an agreement with Actors' Equity Association for theatres outside of New York and Chicago with fewer than 350 seats.²² Without this agreement, they would not have been able to join the union. It allowed the Unicorn Theatre to continue to grow.

Levin's commitment to artists continues in her selection of plays. When the Board of Directors tried to push for more commercial plays and wanted to create a committee for play selection, Levin stood firm in her mission for the Unicorn. "I understand if the Unicorn had to change to become a more successful business or more commercial, but it would have had to happen without me. I could not have done it." She felt that there were enough people who

²¹ <https://actorsequity.org>

²² <https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/contracts/SPT/>

cared about the type of plays she chose for the Unicorn Theatre that they could survive. Her passion and vision for the Unicorn Theatre was unwavering.

Levin's approach to management style is also very hands-on. She felt that she was becoming the face of the Unicorn Theatre to the community and she needed to know about everything that was going on. Her constant presence in the theatre allowed community members to approach her with any questions or comments about the theatre. Her biggest pet peeve is when she is approached with an issue or comment by a community member that she is not already aware of inside the theatre. "I better know what's going on because I am the one people will complain to, come to, ask about, have a suggestion." She spent ten years trying to allow other people to take over and help with some of her responsibilities, but she found it very difficult to let go of the work. She still wants to see every press release, every postcard, and anything that goes out to the public because it's usually in her voice.

The popularity of the Unicorn Theatre in the Kansas City community began to grow. It was time to expand their space. They occupied the back-half of their current location at 3828 Main Street, Kansas City, Missouri, and decided to expand into the front of the current building. "In 1997 the Unicorn expanded their space with interior improvements including a new box office, lobby, rehearsal space, administrative office and Main Street Entrance."²³ They also needed another stage because shows were selling out. Levin also prefers to have rehearsals held on the actual stage where they will perform. So, she started raising money to build the Jerome Stage, add a big entrance, and a front box office. She only spent the money when she had it, so it took three years to complete the project. She never borrowed any

²³ <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/#vision-mission>

money for an expansion. Levin only called the contractor to do one step at a time when they had the money. The Jerome Stage was opened in February 2008 with no debt. When the United States economy tanked later that same year, the Unicorn was able to stay open because they didn't owe any money to lenders. Then, in 2014 the Unicorn Theatre purchased their building.²⁴ For years, they had been investing money into a building they did not own, but now it belonged to them. Levin went to the owner of the building with \$25,000 that had been gifted to the Unicorn Theatre and asked him to hold the building for them for one year because she planned to organize a fundraiser to raise one million dollars. She wanted to purchase the building and she wanted to fix everything, including a leaking roof. Eleven months later she had the money. Now, the Unicorn has no debt and they have no rent.

The freedom from financial stress allowed Levin to hire a managing director, Jason Kralicek. She was worried that she wouldn't be able to give up part of her responsibilities to this new partner. "It was like a fairy tale. It was the best thing that ever happened. I finally had a partner." Aside from the very early years when Levin was still working with the founders of the Unicorn Theatre, she had been running the theatre by herself. Although she doesn't like to think of herself as a "micro-manager", she does credit her hands-on management style to much of the theatre's success.

Auditions are a major part of the casting process for the Unicorn Theatre. Once a year there is a huge audition for actors, although Levin is actively searching through a diverse group of people, who are sometimes not actors in order to produce plays with diverse casts. For instance, in 2005 when the Unicorn produced *Crowns*, Levin cast from members of her

²⁴ <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/#vision-mission>

church community. Hiring directors and designers works a little differently. “I choose my directors from people who I’ve seen their work or I know. I don’t think I would hire a director or a designer if I had not seen their work or that I did not know.” When casting shows, she usually casts individual actors alongside the director for that specific show. She likes to mix in new actors alongside actors who work for the Unicorn Theatre every year. Levin also likes to cast locally or hire people who are from Kansas City. She loves to hire people who have a connection to the community. For example, Doogin Brown, who is from Kansas City and lives in Chicago comes back about once a year to work at the Unicorn Theatre. This past year he came back to act in *Bernhardt/Hamlet* by Theresa Rebeck.

Criteria for play selection falls under a few parameters. The play must be new to the midwest region or it can be brand new and never been produced anywhere, it must be less than five years old, and it must have an accessible playwright. “I don’t want to make something over and over again just because someone will buy it.” Although Levin understands why other theatres choose to produce “cash cows”, she admits it would make her miserable. She wants to produce new plays that people have most likely never seen before. She has to believe and love every single play she chooses. The reasons can vary, but she must feel passionate about producing the play. “I want to learn something new from every single play.” She often has to fight for the rights to produce many of the plays she selects because they are not from a catalogue. She also stresses that she will not produce a play with a large cast because it won’t fit in their budget. Levin amasses all the plays she loves throughout the entire year. She estimates the play selection process takes up 60-70% of her job. Levin reads a lot. She reads about plays and she reads a lot of plays.

The Unicorn Theatre was one of the twelve founding members of the National New Play Network.

National New Play Network is an alliance of professional theaters that collaborate in innovative ways to develop, produce, and extend the life of new plays. Since its founding in 1998, NNPN has supported more than 250 productions nationwide through its innovative National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere program, which provides playwright and production support for new works at its Member theaters. Additional programs - its annual National Conference, National Showcase of New Plays, and MFA Playwrights Workshop; the NNPN Annual and Smith Prize commissions; its residencies for playwrights, producers and directors; and the organization's member accessed Collaboration, Festival, and Travel banks and online information sessions - have helped cement the Network's position as a vital force in the new play landscape. NNPN also strives to pioneer, implement, and disseminate ideas and programs that revolutionize the way theaters collaborate to support new plays and playwrights. Its most recent project, the New Play Exchange, is changing the way playwrights share their work and others discover it by providing immediate access to information on more than 30,000 new plays by living writers. NNPN's 31 Core and over 90 Associate Members - along with the nearly 300 affiliated artists who are its alumni, the thousands of artists and artisans employed annually by its member theaters, and the hundreds of thousands of audience members who see its supported works each year - are creating the new American theater.²⁵

In 2000, representatives from each of the twelve theatre companies came together in Chicago.

The hand-picked theatres include Actors Express (Atlanta); Actors Gang (Los Angeles); Annex Theatre (Seattle); Borderlands Theatre (Tucson); The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center (Waterford, Conn., the only non-producing member); Horse Chart Theatre (Denver); InterAct Theatre (Philadelphia); Kitchen Dog (Dallas); Mixed Blood (Minneapolis); Prop Thtr (Chicago); Unicorn Theatre (Kansas City); and Woolly Mammoth Theatre (Washington, D.C.).²⁶

²⁵ <https://newplayexchange.org/organizations/1693/national-new-play-network>

²⁶ <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/centerstage-developing-new-plays-nurturing-network-37955/>

George White, the founder of the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center²⁷, and David Goldman, the president of the NNPN²⁸, thought the best theatre in the country was being produced in mid-size theatres. White and Goldman saw this as an opportunity to create a network of theatres who were all dedicated to producing new plays and who could host playwrights during the rehearsal process. With this network, they hoped that new plays could survive past their initial runs. Seth Rozin, the producing artistic director of InterAct Theatre in Philadelphia, said, “The Network has the potential to raise the perception of new plays – from something that’s ‘dangerous’ and ‘negative’, to something that’s exciting, adventurous, and rewarding.²⁹” Levin was experienced with working with new plays, but she was new to the development aspect that this new group required. She remembers that she was the only woman in the room during their first meeting in Chicago. Although each of the theatre companies was located in different geographical locations throughout the United States, they all shared a passion for producing new work that had an opinion politically, socially, or said something in a new way. Each of these twelve theatre companies was around the same size as well, so they were all looking for plays that had less than twelve actors.

It was amazing. Now it’s 125 theatres strong. And it has the best website in the country that’s resourcing new plays and playwrights. I can’t even believe what’s happened with this organization and all of the programs that we now have like the Rolling World Premieres. Instead of a playwright getting one world premiere, they now get three. And up until this current year, I’ve sat on the board for twenty years.³⁰

²⁷ <https://www.theoneill.org/staff>

²⁸ <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/centerstage-developing-new-plays-nurturing-network-37955/>

²⁹ <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/centerstage-developing-new-plays-nurturing-network-37955/>

³⁰ Levin, Cynthia. Interview.

The board for the National New Play Network recently re-organized itself in an effort to allow more people of color to sit in those positions. There are no longer any founding members on the board.

The Unicorn Theatre has also made a point to collaborate with the University of Missouri – Kansas City (UMKC) and their theatre department. This relationship formally started in October 2007 under departmental chair Tom Mardikes and they have produced a show together at least once every year since then. The Unicorn has also sporadically collaborated with other theatre companies in Kansas City over the years, like Kansas City Actors Theatre, The Black Repertory Theatre of Kansas City, and The Coterie, but the relationship with UMKC is their most consistent collaboration.

The Unicorn's relationships with UMKC students also remains strong through their volunteer reader's program called the In-Progress New Play Reading Series. Before the NNPN's website, the Unicorn used to receive around 1,000 play submissions per year. It simply wasn't possible for Levin to tackle this job herself. She had help from a retired theatre professor for many years. But, in January 2013 Levin hired Amanda Dawson (Boyle)³¹, an alum of the M.A. Theatre program at UMKC, as the Literary Manager/Resident Dramaturg. This is when the In-Progress New Play Reading Series began. This new system allowed volunteers, usually UMKC M.A. Theatre students, to read a certain number of plays that had been submitted to the Unicorn, enter a score based on select criteria, and then the highest scoring plays would get passed along to Cynthia. The responsibility of reading plays and the

³¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/amanda-dawson-4b41759/>

assignments given to volunteers through the reading series is managed by the Literary Manager and two literary interns.

Besides her choice to produce all new plays, Levin also prides herself on progressive casting decisions. Two of her stand-out moments include *Waiting for Godot* and *How I Learned to Drive*. When the Unicorn produced Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in their 1990-1991 season, Levin chose to cast each of the main characters with female actors. This was in direct conflict with Beckett's copyright stating the roles must be played by male actors. Consequently, she received a cease and desist letter from Samuel French, inc³². Levin worked with the Unicorn's lawyer and they responded with a letter that stated that the Unicorn had no intention of changing the meaning, set design, stage directions, or text of the play at all. They wanted to respect the work of the playwright and produce his place exactly as it was written. The only exception was that the lead characters would be played by female actors, a decision they argued was well within Levin's artistic license. The lawsuit was dropped. "When this started, it was all about non-traditional casting. For a long time that was gender. That also meant casting black men in roles that were not traditionally played by black actors." Levin remembers casting Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* in their 1998-1999 season with a black actor, Walter Coppage, as the Uncle character. In her memory, this was the first time a black actor had ever been cast in this role. She also made a point to hire all of the designers, technicians, and the rest of the cast with people who identified as female for this production. Levin directed this show. Coming from a feminist background, this instinct

³² <https://www.concordtheatricals.com>

for “rule-breaking” started for Levin with gender. This idea has expanded and now includes race.

Having regrets in life is not something to which Levin subscribes. Experience has taught her everything she wishes she had known earlier, but working through challenges was the only way her confidence was able to grow as an artist and leader. In her youth as a director, she always tried to have an answer and know how to solve every problem. Now, she knows that if she assembles a great team and asks questions, it will result in a successful production. Her confidence now allows her the freedom to let artists explore, play, and collaborate. She had to learn how to listen to other people’s input and in the end, be the one to make a decision. “Everyone should have a voice.” Levin strives to always be honest and fair. She believes firmly that no matter what happens, that when she is wrong, she has to be able to apologize. “I will let go of most things as long as they can be talked through. If someone does something wrong and we talk about it and they say they’re sorry then we move on.” These are the kind of people that Levin hires and likes to work with. “You’ve just got to learn to be kind and generous. Which is something I will continue to work on for the rest of my life. But, having dogs helps!”

The Unicorn’s philosophy has melded with the voice of Cynthia Levin. The two are inseparable in mission. Giving a voice to the marginalized and under-represented is vital to the heart of the Unicorn Theatre’s mission. “I want people to come into the Unicorn and learn about something they didn’t know before. Or be surprised in some way. Or be treated well.” The experience for the Unicorn’s patrons is very important to her. She wants everyone to feel like they are walking into her home and are welcome. Levin believes in being informal, comfortable, eclectic, creative, and surrounding herself with the best people.



Figure 2. Levin and her dog Zia Levin-Gil (who is the official Unicorn Theatre Safety Coordinator.) Photo credit: Manon Halliburton³³

³³ <https://www.inkansascity.com/arts-entertainment/theater/by-the-numbers-unicorn-theatres-artistic-director-cynthia-levin/>

CHAPTER 3

REVIEWS, PRODUCTION PHOTOS, AND PROGRAMS

Many of the sources found during the research of this thesis are in the form of newspaper reviews, production photos, and programs from the shows. Attached are photo copies of the findings. These are from Franks Higgins' personal collection, the collection in The Patricia McIlrath Center for Mid-American Theatre, archived by Dr. Felicia Londré, and the Unicorn Theatre's archives.

THE UNICORN THEATRE PRESENTS
 THREE ONE ACT PLAYS FOR MATURE AUDIENCES
 PERFORMED by "THE SUMMER CLOUTHOPE"

BOOS
 By FRANK HIGGINS

TATTY'S TAXI
 By LEONARD MELFI

PRECIOUS ORGANS
 By JIM GEOGHAN

AUG 2-3, 8PM
 AUG 4, 2PM

531-PLAY  UNICORN THEATRE
 3514 JEFFERSON ST.
 KANSAS CITY, MO.

Made possible by a special grant from
 The Municipal Arts Commission of Kansas City, Missouri

Figure 3. Program (and ticket) for One-Act plays at the Unicorn Theatre located at the Norman School.

SPRING ————— UNICORN THEATRE 1983 SEASON ————— FALL

THE FIFTH OF JULY

By Lanford Wilson, author of *THE HOT LIPS* and *MOORE*. Alternately funny and moving, *THE FIFTH OF JULY* deals with a group of former student activists and live-theater junkies who have been wrought in their lives and attitudes in the years since leaving college.

"This is one of the most incredibly written, profound and moving and often hilarious plays it has been my pleasure to see in the American Theatre" - Rex Reed, N.Y. Daily Mirror

Directed by Diana J. Mange

Sun.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
	17	18	19
	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
20	24	25	26
3:00 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.

BENT

Martin Sherman's controversial and deeply moving play about the persecution of homosexuals in Germany. Moving from a Berlin flat in 1934 to Hitler's camps, the play stirs audiences, revealing a little discussed horror of European history.

The play opened to extraordinary acclaim on Broadway. Rex Reed called it "Shattering, Hypnotic, and gripping". Arthur Bell declared *BENT* "the most powerful play since Albee stunned us with *Virginia Woolf* 17 years ago."

Directed by Beverly Shatto

Sun.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
	4	5	6
	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
10	11	12	13
3:00 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.

A LESSON FROM ALOES

By internationally acclaimed playwright Athol Fugard, author of *BOESMAN AND LENA*, *SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD* and *THE ISLAND*. Clive Barnes calls Fugard "South Africa's greatest literary artist".

A LESSON FROM ALOES is a searing drama about three victims of psychological and social repression in apartheid society, who insist on surviving. The setting is Port Elizabeth, South Africa; and it is 1963.

Directed by Jim Cairns

Sun.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
		22	23
		8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
	23	24	25
	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
1	5	6	7
3:00 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.

NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHT COMPETITION

Winning script to be announced in July. Selected from scripts submitted from all parts of the U.S.

This is our third annual contest, following *MOUNT UP WITH WINGS LIKE ANGELS*, winner 1981, and last year's successful *TAP DANCING ACROSS THE UNIVERSE*.

Director to be Announced

Sun.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
		21	22
		8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
	23	24	25
	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
27	30	31	
3:00 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.

LIKE WATER OFF A WHALE'S BACK

Missouri Original script by William Clause of Kansas City

Dora is a writer, a creative thinker, a compassionate humanitarian, and fat. In spite of her other attributes, her physical appearance dominates her existence. She and her bosom buddy (who, of course, is quite thin) struggle to come to terms with the fate life has dealt them.

This satirical comedy deals with values, both universal and individual. It probes insecurities of the body, mind and soul, while allowing the audience to laugh at their own short-comings.

Directed by Deborah Craig-Claar

Sun.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
		3	4
		8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
9	10	11	12
8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.

THE DAYS AND NIGHTS OF BEEBEE FENSTERMAKER

By William Snyder.

The heroine is a young, ambitious, romantic girl just out of college and established in her first tiny apartment. She is writing a novel, but when her savings gives out she is forced to get a job, hopefully one which 'won't drain her too much' and which will leave her time for her 'creative' work. *Herald Tribune*: "Beebee Fenstermaker is a solid, intelligent piece of work with an acute sense of what it means to be alive in this moment."

Directed by Diana J. Mange

Sun.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.
		7	8
		8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.
14	15	16	17
8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	8:30 p.m.

Figure 4. 1983, Season Program.



Figure 5. 1985, *Bangs and Whimpers* by Bryan Williams (World Premiere).

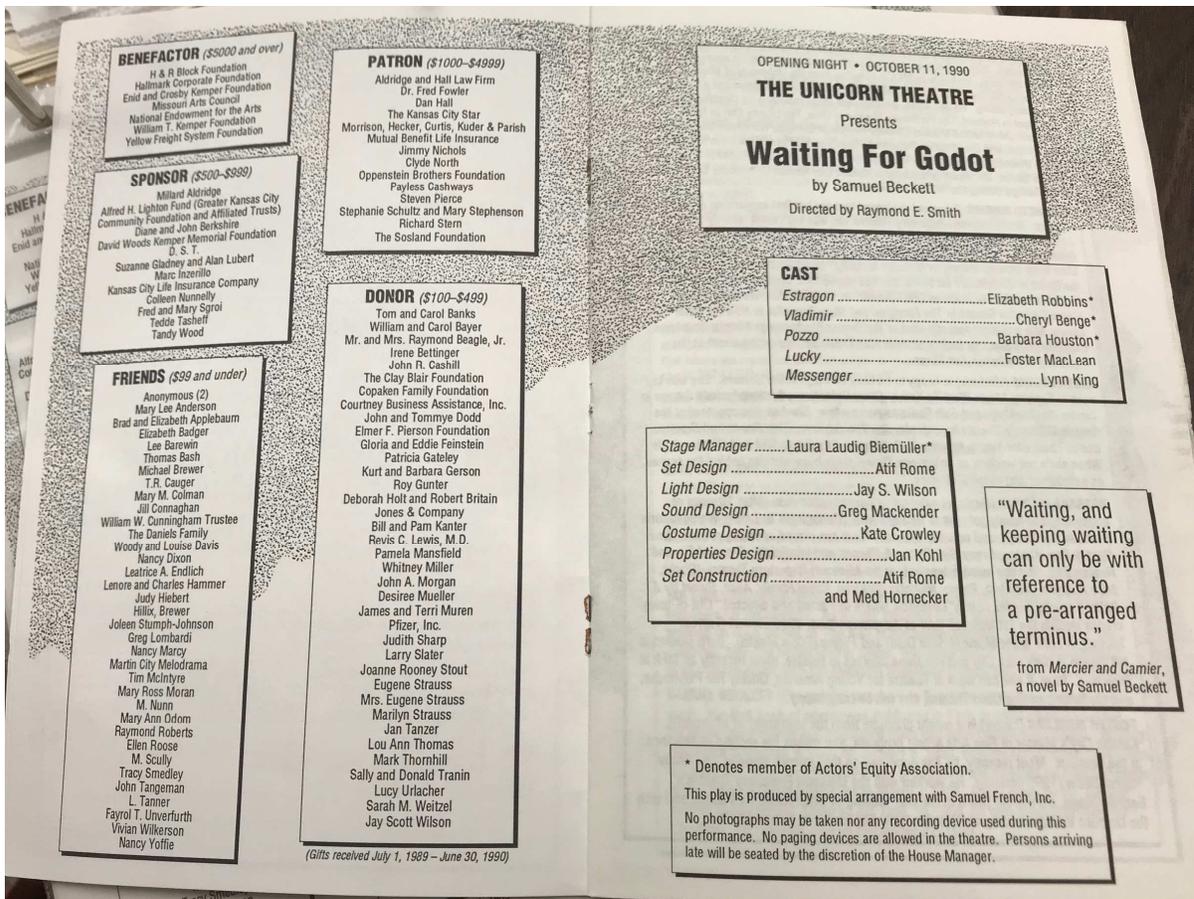


Figure 6. 1991, Program for an all female cast of *Waiting for Godot*.

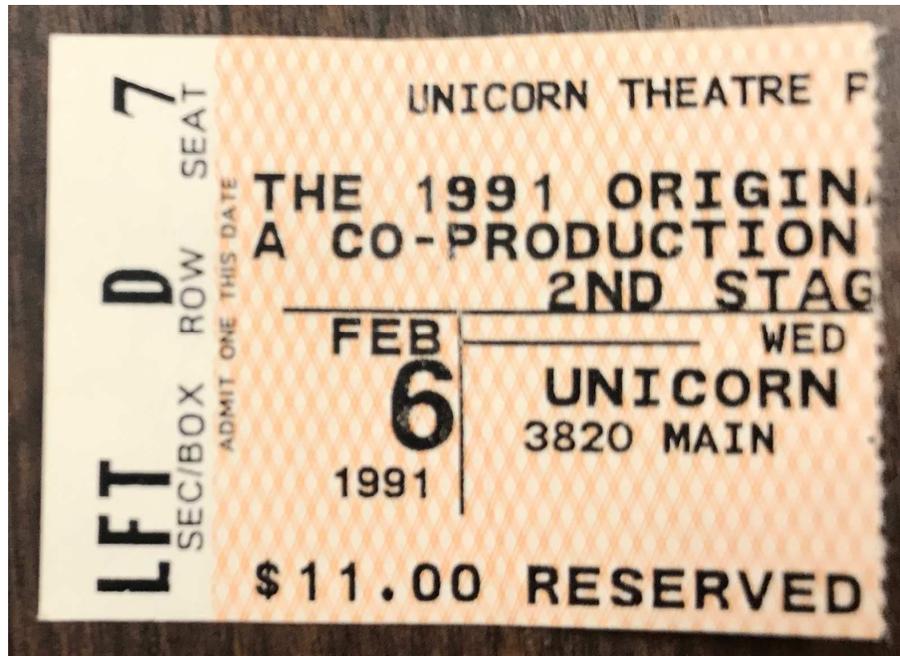


Figure 7. A ticket in 1991.

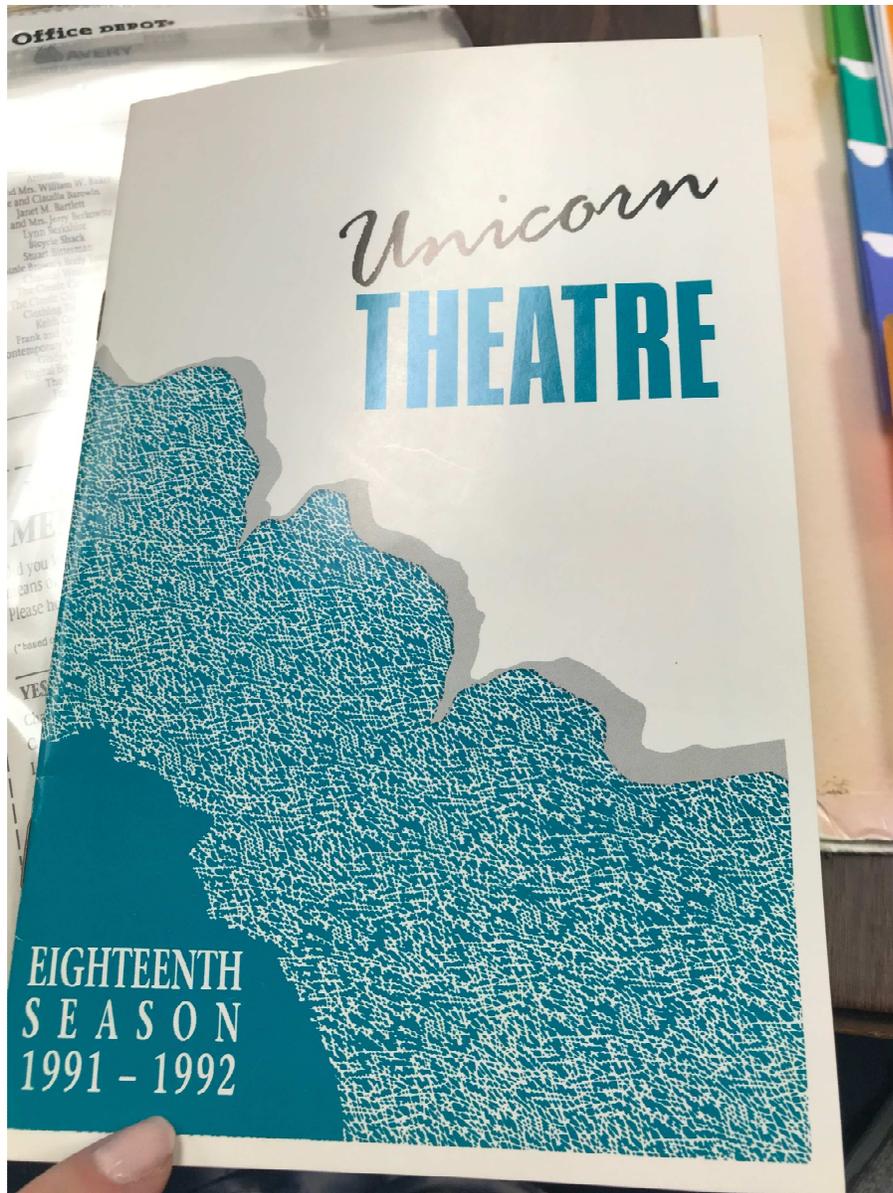


Figure 8. The Unicorn Theatre's eighteenth season 1991-1992.

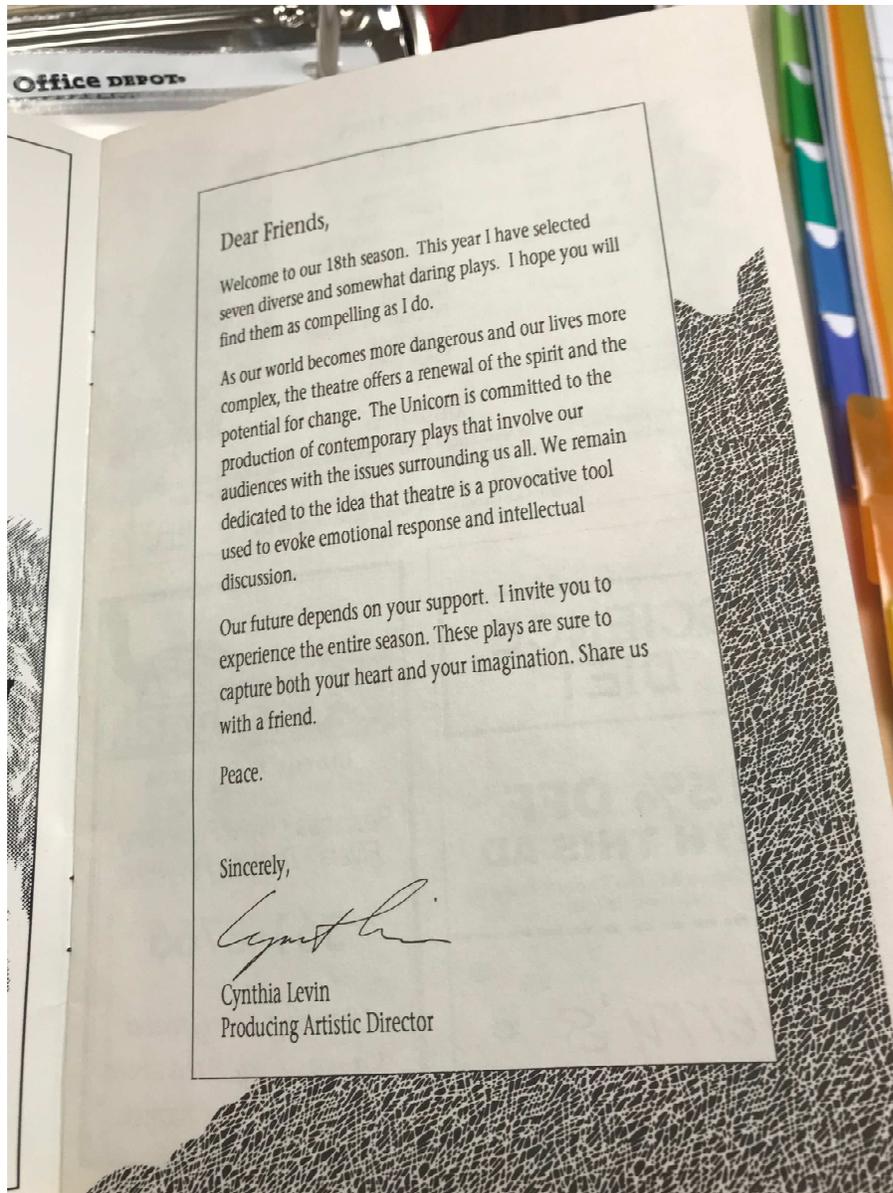


Figure 9. 1991-1992 note from Cynthia Levin inside the season's program.

OPENING NIGHT • JUNE 4, 1992

UNICORN THEATRE
Presents

Falsettoland

by William Finn and James Lapine
Music and Lyrics by William Finn

Directed by Cynthia Levin
Musical Direction by J. Kent Barnhart

CAST (in order of appearance)

Mendel Kip Gibson
Marvin Don Richard*
Jason Drew Schiller
Trina Becky Barta*
Whizzer Michael Jokerst*
Dr. Charlotte Debra Bluford*
Cordelia Deborah Ausemus

Teeny Tiny Band

Piano J. Kent Barnhart
Synthesizer Charlie Schmidt
Percussionist Michael Middleton

Stage Manager Jan Kohl*
Set Design Atif Rome
Lighting Design Art Kent
Costume Design Gregg Benkovich
Properties Design Nancy Wagner
Set Construction Carol Branson and Atif Rome

TIME: 1981-82
PLACE: New York City

Produced by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc.
Off-Broadway production directed by James Lapine.
Originally produced by Playwrights Horizons, Inc. Produced off-Broadway by Maurice Rosefield and Lois F. Rosenfield, Inc., with Steven Suskin. Michael Starobin, Orchestrator.

There will be no intermission.

*Denotes member of Actor's Equity Association.

No photographs may be taken nor any recording device used during this performance. No paging devices are allowed in the theatre. Persons arriving late will be seated by the discretion of the House Manager.

Figure 10. *Falsettoland* program from the 1991-1992 season.

More than just a 'women's slot' of a play



DAVID PULLIAM/Special to The Star
Kathleen Warfel plays the title role in "The Heidi Chronicles."

'Heidi Chronicles,' a Pulitzer winner, comes to Unicorn.

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
Theater Critic

Tonight the Unicorn Theatre opens its final production of the 1992-93 season with a play by the rarest of creatures, a Pulitzer Prize-winning female playwright.

No question, the list of dramatists who have won the Pulitzer reads like the roster of a men's club with a few token female members. Some of the boys — Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, August Wilson — have claimed more than one Pulitzer, while such talented women as Lillian Hellman ("The Little Foxes") and Lorraine Hansberry ("A Raisin in the Sun") are not listed among the winners named since the first award was handed out in 1918.

"The Heidi Chronicles," the Unicorn production, claimed the 1989 prize, allowing author Wendy Wasserstein to join Beth Henley and Marsha Norman as ex-

amples of a remarkable — but possibly fleeting — surge of national recognition for female playwrights in the 1980s.

The Pulitzer, of course, is not necessarily a guarantee of quality, but the dominance of men among the winners says a lot about playwriting and theater.

"The Heidi Chronicles" traces a woman's coming of age in the 1960s and '70s and her journey into middle-aged yuppie-dom. The play has been produced widely across the country but has taken its time getting to Kansas City. That fact alone points to the infrequency with which plays by women, rare though they may be, are staged.

Here's what Wasserstein had to say on the subject earlier this spring when she attended the William Inge Festival in Independence, Kan.:

"What's upsetting, I think, is if you look at all the seasons at regional theaters in America you would come across a large percentage of those seasons that aren't

See **WOMEN, F-3, Col. 3**

Figure 11. Newspaper theatre review by Robert Trussell on the Unicorn's 1992-1993 production of Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*.

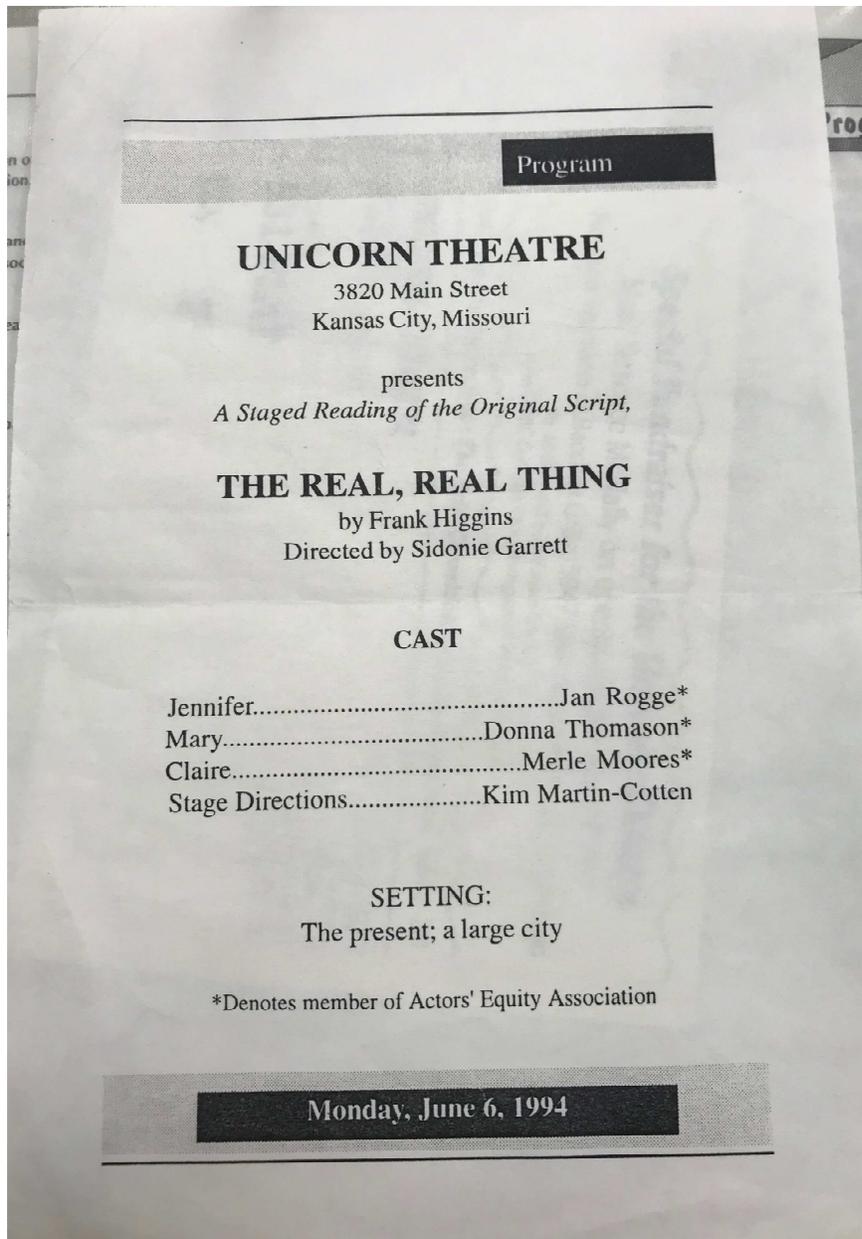


Figure 12. 1994, The Unicorn Theatre's program for *The Real, Real Thing* by Frank Higgins.

ANGELS IN AMERICA

Part 1: Millennium Approaches
 "The greatest cliff-hanger in Broadway history."
 --The New York Times

What happens next?
 Bring on Part 2: Perestroika!

Part 2: Perestroika

Coming to Unicorn Aug 28 - Sep 29.
 Wed - Sat 8 p.m. Sun 3 p.m.

"Not only a stunning resolution of the rearing
 human drama of Part 1...but also a true millennial
 work of art, uplifting, hugely comic, and
 beautifully rendered."
 --The New York Times

Save on Perestroika and get 7 exciting shows
 with Unicorn's season subscription

	Perestroika	7 Show Season
Any night (Includes Fri & Sat)	\$19.00	\$108.00
Wed, Thur, or Sun	\$17.00	\$95.00
Previews	\$13.00	\$71.00

To Order Call: (816)531-PLAY, Ext. 10

The Program

Opening Night
 JUNE 7, 1996

UNICORN THEATRE
 presents

ANGELS IN AMERICA
Part One: Millennium Approaches

By Tony Kushner
 Directed by Cynthia Levin

CAST

Hannah Pitt, Rabbi, Henry, Ethel.....MERLE MOORES*
 Roy Cohn, Prior II.....DAVID FRITTS*
 Joseph Pitt, Prior I, Eskimo.....MILES McMAHON
 Harper Pitt, Martin.....MELISSA FLAUM
 Louis Ironson.....BRIAN BARNHART
 Prior Walter, Man in the Park.....LANCE HARSHBARGER*
 Belize, Mr. Lies.....BRAD SHAW
 The Angel, Emily, Sister Ella,
 Woman in the Bronx.....TESS BRUBECK*
 Stage Manager.....ROBERT FOULK*

DESIGN STAFF

Set Design.....ATIF ROME
 Lighting Design.....SHANE ROWSE
 Costume Design.....GREGG BENKOVICH
 Sound Design.....ROGER STODDARD
 Properties Master.....MARIANNE S. ROWSE
 Properties Assistant.....SHANE ROWSE

THE SETTING

New York City, Salt Lake City and Beyond
 October 1985 - January 1986

There will be two 15-minute intermissions.

*Denotes member of Actors' Equity Association.
 Produced by special arrangement with Broadway Play Publishing.
 No photographs may be taken nor any recording device used during this performance. No paging devices
 are allowed in the theatre. Persons arriving late will be seated at the discretion of the House Manager.

Figure 13. The Unicorn Theatre's 1996 program for Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

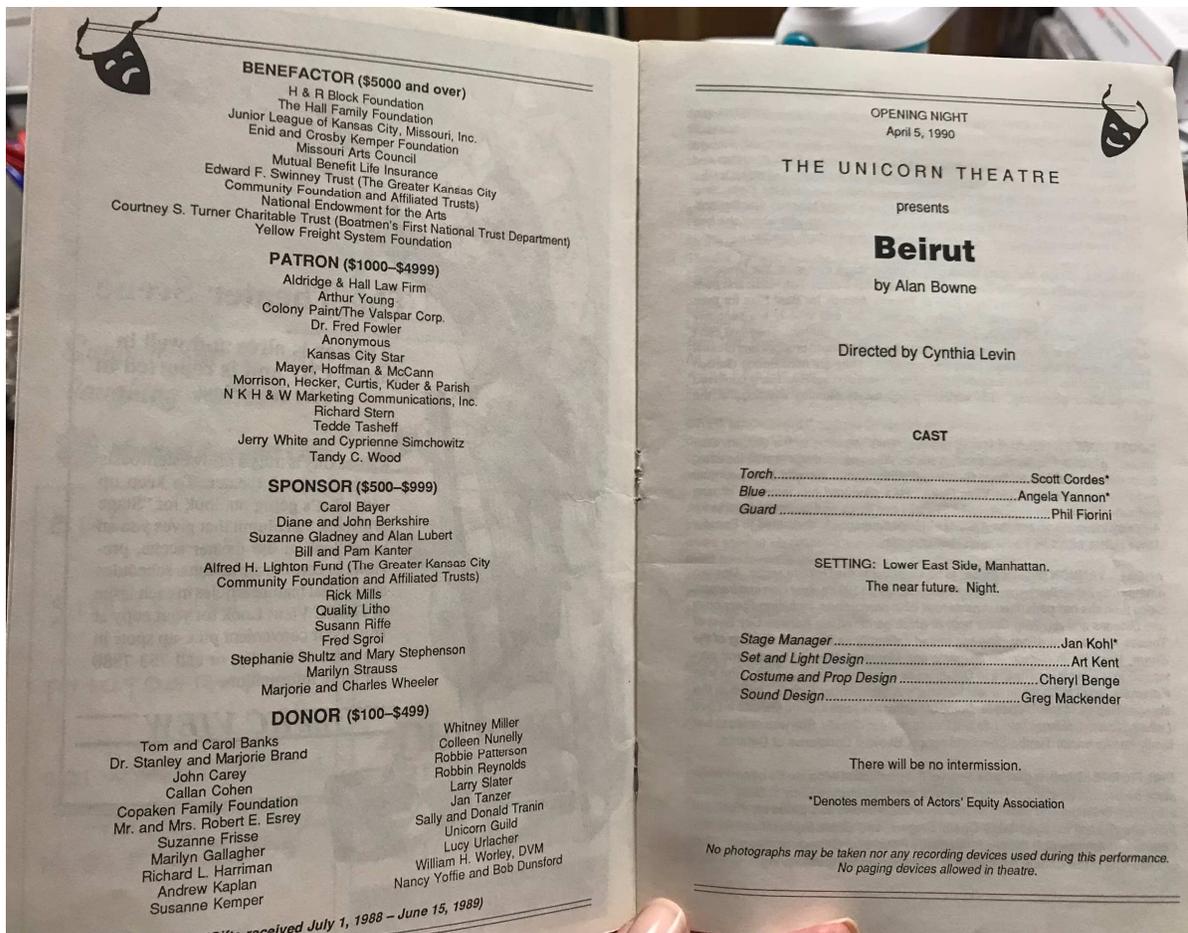


Figure 14. 1990 Program for *Beirut* by Alan Bowne directed by Cynthia Levin.



UNICORN STAFF

Producing Artistic Director Cynthia Levin
Business Manager Wendy Hardy
Technical Director Art Kent
Production Manager Jan Kohl
Marketing Director Kip Weiner
Production Photographer Bud Simpson

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President Daniel C. Hall
Vice President Tandy C. Wood
Chairperson, Fundraising Tedde Tasheff
Chairperson, Administration Colleen Nunnelly
Chairperson, Program Development Tom Banks
Chairperson, New Plays Marilyn Strauss
Chairperson, Guild Dr. Fred Fowler
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 Whitney Miller

Jennifer Phelps
 Susann Riffe
 Fred Sgroi
 Jan Tanzer
 Sally Tranin
 Dr. Charles B. Wheeler, Jr.
 Jerry White
 Nancy Yoffie

AFFILIATIONS

The Unicorn Theatre is a constituent of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers; and the Theatre Communications Group, a national service organization for non-profit professional theatres.



Financial assistance for this event has been provided by
 The Missouri Arts Council
 and The National Endowment for the Arts



Figure 15. Staff and Board of Directors in 1990.

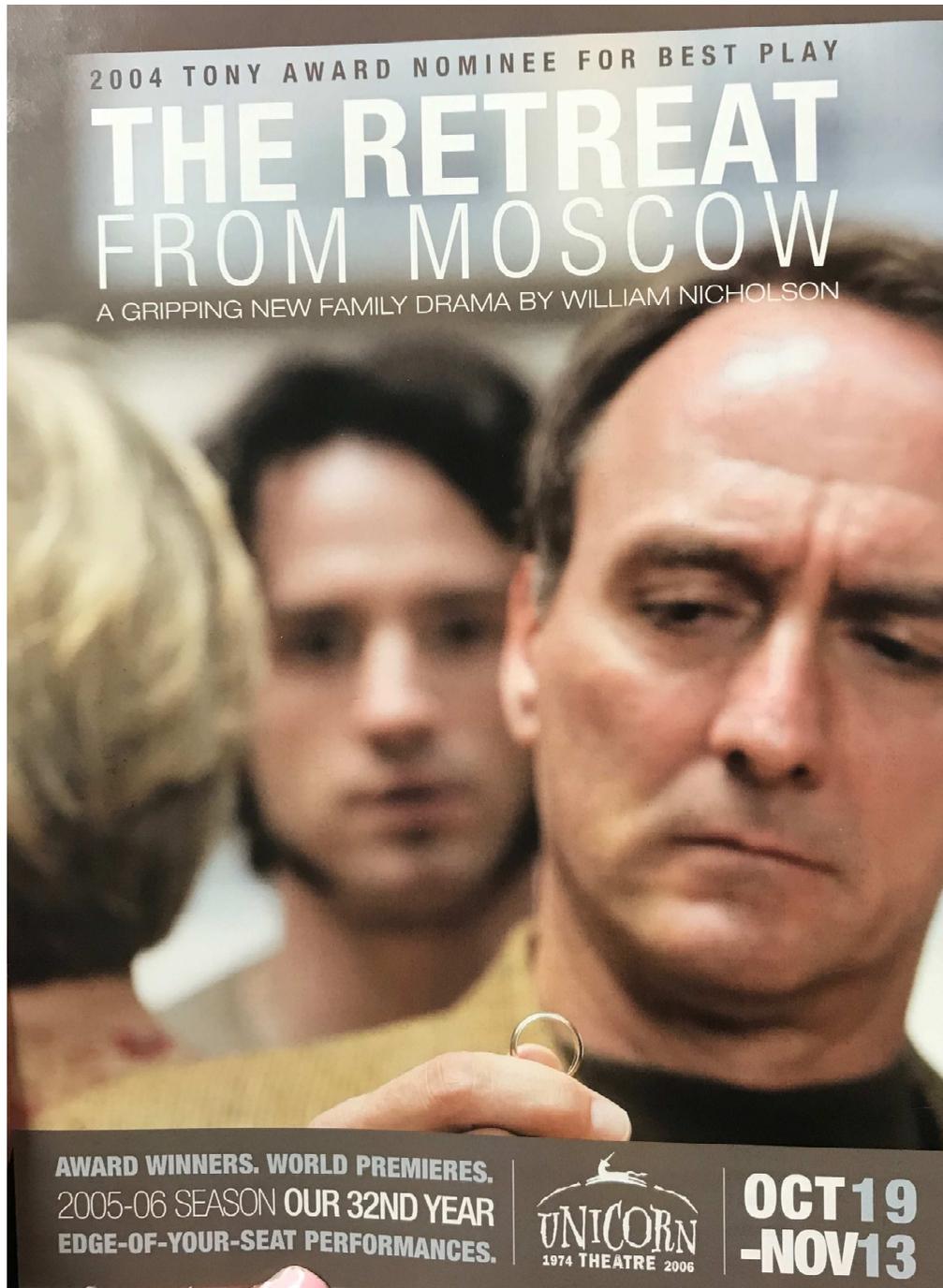


Figure 16. 2005-2006 Season Flyer.

PLAYBILL

A PACK OF WARRIORS



THE WOLVES

by SARAH DELAPPE NOV 28 - DEC 30

DIRECTOR HEIDI VAN | STAGE THE JEROME STAGE | CO-PRODUCED WITH LINK C theatre

Figure 17. 2018 program for *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre came from nothing and became an established Equity house that showcases local actors. They were producing plays that no one else wanted to do and developing original work. No other theatre companies in the area were willing to take the risk of producing bold new plays. The kind of work that the Unicorn has produced challenged their audience and has pushed them in ways that haven't always been comfortable. The Unicorn Theatre asks its audience to rise to the occasion and lean into the discomfort so that they might learn something new or grow as a person.

During my time working as a dramaturg on *Nomad Motel* by Carla Ching with the Unicorn Theatre in early 2019 I saw what it means to work on a new play. The work is hard and doesn't stop. *Nomad Motel* is about homelessness in America and the staggeringly disproportionate rates at which it occurs among minorities. This topic is complex and uncomfortable, but that is one of the reasons the Unicorn chose to produce this play. When we listen to underrepresented voices we shed light on the lives of people who might otherwise pass by us unnoticed. Representation matters and the Unicorn Theatre uses their platform to produce work that amplifies the voices of underrepresented people.

My experience working with the Unicorn Theatre was professional and aspirational. The board room where they held the first table-read for *Nomad Motel* can seat about twenty people comfortably, allowing for full production meetings and presentations. The room had a clear sense of leadership and direction. Cynthia Levin is obviously in charge. She moves things along at a swift and purposeful pace, asks questions to the room, and sets a tone of professionalism that everybody in the room respects. Levin balances her always-moving

work mind with an air of compassion. Her gentle side follows her most literally in the form of her dog, Zia. This senior mutt is never far from Levin's sightline and is constantly there to greet every member of the team into the room.

The Unicorn Theatre can now be found at 3828 Main Street, Kansas City, Missouri 64111. There is an attached parking lot, hired security for evening performances, a large entry-way that is wheel-chair accessible off of Main Street under a large neon sign, and Zia is always in a matching costume on opening night for whatever play is being performed. The box office is staffed by the friendly and helpful Daniel Harkins. The literary manager, Hannah Taylor, writes many of the dramaturgical essays as well as spearheads the volunteer reader program which helps the Unicorn narrow down their play selection process. Taylor was incredibly kind and helpful to me as I worked as a dramaturg for the first time. I have loved many of the shows I've seen at the Unicorn, including *Bond* by Logan Black and *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage. While I haven't loved every show I've seen, I have always left the theatre thinking and feeling challenged in a way that I think has helped me grow.

The Unicorn Theatre is now a staple of the Kansas City theatre community and they continue to lead the way in their production of contemporary plays. Their use of local talent is vast and has contributed to the success of several actors such as Deb Bluford, Don Richard, Vanessa Severo, Arliss Howard, Robert Brand, and Dennis Hennessy. They have also helped to propel the work of several scenic designers, including Sarah White and Kelli Harrod. Many theatre professionals owe the start of their careers to the Unicorn Theatre.

When Cynthia Levin stepped into the role of Artistic Director she had learned most of what she knew about how to run and operate a theatre from learning on the job. The Unicorn Theatre came from a humble background and weathered many storms. Many theatre

companies their size have not made it through hard-times, but the Unicorn Theatre has always found a way to stay afloat. They managed a frantic move away from a mob-ridden River Quay, waded their way out of the 1977 plaza flood, and held steadfast through the 2008 financial crisis. The Unicorn is currently fighting another battle against the pandemic of COVID-19, which has essentially closed all theatres across the world. The theatre has been through many financial difficulties, but this new challenge comes with a new set of problems.

Levin comments by saying:

There have been several times I thought the Theatre might not survive. Money problems in the first 20 years, censorship issues at the NEA (90s), and numerous cash flow restrictions along the way. At the downturn of the economy (2009), I went without a paycheck for 6 weeks. The problem was never about the work, it was about the finances. I always felt that the Unicorn had to survive and if I just worked hard enough, it would. Now, it's a totally different problem. What do you do when you can't do the thing you are supposed to do? To have no control of the situation is a reality that I have never lived in. We continue to raise money to keep the staff going until we can perform again. Right now, we are alive but if it goes on another 6 months, that's going to be really tough. Trying to think of things that we can do to keep connected with our audience and artists until then.

They are resilient, creative, and strong, but this may be their biggest challenge yet.

Interview with Ian Crawford

Ian Crawford has been the Associate Artistic Director of the Unicorn Theatre since May 2018.³⁴ His first day working at the Unicorn Theatre was in the summer of 2012. He was hired as an electrician to work on the Levin stage's renovation. He found the work through the company Fire Designs, which was run by lighting designer Alex Perry.³⁵ Crawford remembers that first week at the Unicorn as extremely hot, especially since there

³⁴ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ian-crawford-02044b3/>

³⁵ <https://www.kcur.org/post/unicorn-theatre-got-upgrade-now-designers-can-sculpt-light#stream/0>

was no air conditioning. “It was a really hot summer. I was up on scaffolds rewiring pig-tails all week. But, that was the first time I worked at the Unicorn.”

Crawford earned his Bachelor of Arts in Theatre: Directing from Fordham University in New York City in 2006.³⁶ Crawford was interested in performance at first, then was introduced to design, and eventually took a directing class that sealed his fate. He felt connected to directing in a way he didn’t quite find with acting. But, he was able to use his acting training to inform his directing. “It felt right and I never looked back.”

There were a few reasons Crawford and his husband Vincent Wagner decided to move to Kansas City. Wagner is from Kansas City and was drawn to UMKC’s Theatre Acting graduate program. Wagner knew the program well and was familiar with the Kansas City Repertory Theatre and the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival from his childhood. Wagner applied to UMKC, got in, and asked Crawford, “Hey, do you want to go to Kansas City?” Crawford replied, “Is there theatre there?” Wagner assured Crawford that he would love the Unicorn Theatre and that they would only be in Kansas City for a short time.

When he first moved to Kansas City he wrote letters to each of the city’s artistic directors and only heard back from Levin. They met and looked over his portfolio together and she encouraged him to work in town. He was used to making his own work in New York City and was eager to put in the work.

The Unicorn Theatre was producing work that Crawford loved when he moved to Kansas City. He was able to see shows at the Unicorn that he had just seen in New York City. “I almost always preferred the Unicorn’s productions because they were so intimate and

³⁶ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ian-crawford-02044b3/>

less over-produced.” He remembers seeing *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* by Alex Timbers, music and lyrics by Michael Friedman, on Broadway and “it felt like someone else’s inside joke.” But, at the Unicorn the same show felt rye and funny to him because he was right there in the show instead of in the nose-bleed section in a large theatre. The first year he was in Kansas City he also saw *Time Stands Still* by Donald Margulies. Carla Noack, the Associate Professor of Theatre in Acting at the University of Missouri – Kansas City, performed in this show and Crawford said, “I was totally blown away by her.” In that same 2011-2012 season he also saw *Everyday Rapture* by Dick Scanlan and Sherie Rene Scott, which he admits made him doubtful. He and Cynthia Levin share a skepticism for musicals. They both feel that musicals can tend to be “fluffy” or don’t have a strong message. *Everyday Rapture* proved him wrong. The show was simple but clever, impactful, and carried an emotional punch. “All of these plays added up to the kind of artistic work I was interested in and surprised to find in Kansas City under one roof.”

Crawford often worked at the Unicorn Theatre through his employment with Fire Designs. He remembers working closely with the Technical Director at the time, Em Swenson. Crawford helped finish the sets, cleaned up before tech, and was generally around the theatre frequently. Luck struck when he was on top of a ladder hanging lights in the theatre one day. Levin walked in, looked up, and asked him, “Do you want to direct a reading?” He jumped at the offer and was soon asked to design costumes for *Water by the Spoonful* by Quiara Alegria Hudes. Being around the theatre offered Crawford the chance to start at the bottom and get to know Levin and the rest of the staff.

The first show he directed with the Unicorn was *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* by Rajiv Joseph in 2014, which was a co-production with UMKC Theatre. He saw a production

of the play in Chicago by Lookingglass Theatre with Ted Swetz and Carla Noack. They all fell in love with the show. Swetz played Tiger and Crawford directed. “It was a really special production. The script is so special and haunting and I was really proud of the work we did on that show.”

During an annual check-in, Crawford and Levin agreed that the fundraising work he was doing wasn't his strength. They discussed the possibility of a new position and went to funders who helped support his new role of Associate Artistic Director for the first three years. The funders included the Hall Family Foundation and the Rodenbaughs. This occurred right before the production of *Hir* by Taylor Mac toward the end of the Unicorn's 2017-2018 season.

For Crawford, the mission statement and vision of the Unicorn Theatre means supporting artists and fostering the next generation of artists and art administrators. It reminds him that “the silent life-blood of the Unicorn Theatre is the relationships that have been forged over years and decades and has allowed, in many ways, Kansas City to be a place where artists can stay and work and do great work.” The Unicorn is also a home for new plays, but the thematic issue-driven work of supporting artists at all stages is where Crawford finds the most meaning.

The Unicorn Theatre's current mission statement is:

Unicorn Theatre enhances the Kansas City community by developing and producing high-quality, thought-provoking plays that have never been seen in the region. We illuminate social issues by shining a light on diversity and inclusive stories which include race, religion and gender identity. Unicorn creates opportunities for the advancement of emerging and established actors, directors, playwrights, designers, technicians and administrative staff.³⁷

³⁷ <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/#vision-mission>

The Unicorn Theatre's current vision is:

By producing provocative new plays Unicorn Theatre fosters the next generation of great American writers and artists, creating innovative and intimate theatrical experiences that transcend the ordinary. We inspire the community to think and feel deeply; to see the world in new and different ways. Unicorn strives to be one of the preeminent homes for new plays in the country.³⁸

The Unicorn is one of the founding members of the National New Play Network and Levin had been a board member since its inception. Recently, the network has restructured itself. Many of the core members gave up their board seats in an effort to diversify leadership. These are the kinds of moves that the Unicorn Theatre supports.

Crawford views the audience of the Unicorn Theatre as smart, thinking people. He believes they are people who want to be challenged. The theatre continues to draw young people, who are sometimes tricky to engage.

The history of the Unicorn strikes Crawford as having a “punk rock start and heart.” He acknowledged Levin's love and commitment as one of the main factors in the success of the theatre. She is agile, always changing, and not afraid to live in uncomfortable moments.

The future of the Unicorn for Crawford means continuing to give life to new plays. The Unicorn Theatre plays an important role within the Kansas City community and will continue to produce high-quality work with a scrappy soul.

³⁸ <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/#vision-mission>

Supplementary Commentary

This section includes supplementary commentary from other people who have been involved with the Unicorn Theatre including Carla Noack, Jan Rogge, Raleigh Miller, Mary Wilkens, Em Swenson, Robert Trussell, Shon Ruffin, Tanya Brown, Michael Hogge, Robert Elliott, and Frank Higgins.

Frank Higgins

Frank Higgins moved from San Diego to Kansas City in 1969 when he was in high school and he later attended the University of Missouri – Kansas City, where he earned both his B.A. in English and his M.A. in English with an emphasis in creative writing. His first involvement with the Theatre Workshop was in 1978 when he saw their ad in a newspaper asking for one-act plays from local playwrights. Higgins sent in his one-act play *There Came Forth from Darkness* to Liz Gordon. A few weeks later Gordon called Higgins and expressed interest in directing and producing the play at the Theatre Workshop. In the summer of 1978 the Theatre Workshop was functioning out of their second location at 46th and Main in a dank garage basement when they produced his one-act play. This was Higgins' first play ever produced.

Right before the premiere of Higgins' one-act play in 1978, the Theatre Workshop produced *An Evening with Pinter* by Harold Pinter and they were struggling to bring in audience members. *An Evening with Pinter* had an evening performance at which nobody showed up. Not one single audience member was in attendance. Since Higgins' play was slated next, Gordon knew she could call on him for support. She called him the next day and asked, "Can you come to the show tonight?" Higgins agreed and went to the show that night

when 3 or 4 people were in attendance. “The cast, when they took their curtain call, outnumbered us.” This was the first time Higgins had seen the theatre space.

The 46th and Main Street garage basement location had an Off-Off Broadway feel, which included an uneven floor and a smell that is distinctly basement. Higgins’ one-act play, *There Came Forth from Darkness*, is set in a police department where the police captain, played by Frank Benge, sat in a rolling office chair. When the police captain needed to move across the stage, Benge simply lifted his legs and rolled over. “It was hilarious, but it also told you some of the challenges they were dealing with. There was no mistaking we were doing theatre in a basement.” Sirens could be heard in the background if an ambulance drove by and the only door to the space was through a back door located off Broadway Street.

Since the playwrights were local, the one-act plays had a much better audience, bringing out about twenty-five to thirty people. However, the theatre was working on a shoe-string budget and probably wasn’t able to pay any professional staff. Higgins recalls one night during a performance when this became a problem. During intermission, one of the Theatre Workshop’s lightboard operators stepped out to get a drink at a bar located above them, and never came back. This was one of Higgins first experiences working in a theatre and remembers thinking, “Is this the way theatre is?” This experience embodied the spirit of this Off-Off Broadway theatre and its “funkiness.”

Higgins’ next involvement with the Theatre Workshop was in 1980 after they had moved to their third location, inside the Norman School. He wrote another one-act, *The King of Lemonade*, which was being produced among a night of one-acts. Arliss Howard was cast as the lead role in this play. Since they were functioning as an Off-Off Broadway and actors

were not paid, there was a really hectic rehearsal schedule. Scenes were often rehearsed around different actors' work schedules and it was common to not have all the actors together until one or two rehearsals before the show opened. At this time, there wasn't a lot of theatre in Kansas City. There was the Missouri Repertory Theatre and a few dinner theatres, including Tiffany's Attic and Waldo Astoria. At this time the Missouri Repertory Theatre was producing period-piece plays and the dinner theatres were producing commercial comedies. The Theatre Workshop was producing cutting-edge work in 1980 with plays such as *Camino Real* by Tennessee Williams and *Only Human* by Bob Evans. Frank Higgins was a loyal audience member to the Theatre Workshop because "their plays were different. They were doing plays you couldn't see anywhere else."

Higgins' next involvement with the Unicorn Theatre was in 1985 when they produced his play *Never Say Die*. It received its first production in New York City in 1982 and was locally premiered at the Unicorn in the Norman School. *Never Say Die* is about a Kansas City minor baseball team and as luck would have it, the Kansas City Royals won the World Series in 1985, bringing the play local television coverage. The Unicorn Theatre also produced Higgins' play *Heartland* in 1986, which was the last show produced at the Norman School. The Missouri Arts Council awarded a \$5,000 grant to the Unicorn Theatre in 1986, which allowed both a developmental workshop and a polished production of *Heartland*.

Higgins remembers seeing the Unicorn Theatre's first show at the Belman Garage space in 1986, *Quilters*, where there was a wagon scene with a carousel stage that moved. It was such a different experience from the basement floor with an exposed drain where Higgins had his first one-act produced. The new space at the Belman Garage had a theatre

with a stage, but was still attached to what used to be a pool hall for some time. Over time, the Unicorn Theatre acquired the rest of the building.

Higgins has since traveled to premiere his plays around the country, but remembers his days working with the Theatre Workshop/Unicorn Theatre fondly. For the first time, Higgins was able to learn more about his craft as a playwright and see his work on stage. “It was a valuable experience in 1978 when Liz Gordon produced my one-act. It was a big deal. It helped me make my transition from poet to playwright. Everything I have is based on being a writer. If not for Theatre Workshop, who knows?”

Carla Noack

Carla Noack came to Kansas City in the late 1980s to attend UMKC’s graduate acting program. She saw every show the Unicorn Theatre produced when she was a student and was enthralled by the intimacy of the work. “Many of the actors and Cynthia were my heroes at that time. They gave me a sense of the kind of work I wanted to do when I left graduate school.” The all-female cast production of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett stands out in Noack’s memory as one of her favorite productions she saw as a student. She also remembers *Reckless* by Craig Lucas. “I was given the most amazing role models – Cheryl Benge, Betsey Robbins, Kathleen Warfel – strong, brave artists.” The intimacy of the space allowed her to see – up-close and personal – the strength of the acting.

Noack left Kansas City after she graduated with her M.F.A. acting degree in 1992, but has been back for the past ten years. She is currently the Associate Professor of Theatre in Acting at the University of Missouri – Kansas City. Since her return she has steadily worked with the Unicorn Theatre. She has acted in many of their productions, including *Hir*

by Taylor Mac, *Men on Boats* by Jaclyn Backhaus, *Lasso of Truth* by Carson Kreitzer, *Bernhardt/Hamlet* by Theresa Rebeck, and *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe. Noack describes Cynthia Levin as passionate and fierce. “There is fierceness in what she stands for, her boundless energy, and her love for collaboration with artists.” Noack trusts Levin to guide her and her fellow actors through dark moments of the soul and she thinks Levin is a compassionate and strong woman.

Noack views the Unicorn Theatre as a place where stories reflect and challenge its community. “You go to the Unicorn to see, not to be seen.” She also admires the theatre’s commitment to accessibility through their “Pay What You Can” policy, which sends a clear message that all are welcomed and wanted. Noack also appreciates the unique role the Unicorn plays in the development of future artists. “The Unicorn Theatre’s collaborations with UMKC student actors, designers, and technicians are opportunities for everyone involved to grow as artists and humans.”

Jan Rogge

Jan Rogge graduated from UMKC’s M.F.A. acting program in 1988. She has worked as an actor at the Unicorn Theatre in plays such as *Savage in Limbo* by John Patrick Shanley, *Breaking the Code* by Hugh Whitmore, *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire De Lune* by Terrence McNally and *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage. During Rogge’s time working with the Unicorn Theatre, the space has improved to include a board room, a second theatre, and a liquor license. Rogge thinks Cynthia Levin is a tenacious, high energy, and smart leader. Levin helps challenge people who work for her and is a great role model. Levin creates a real family and Rogge enjoys working with her.

Shon Ruffin

Shon Ruffin is an actor whose first experience working with the Unicorn Theatre was in 2016 in a large-cast musical. She had an amazing and collaborative experience. She felt taken care of as a professional and is grateful to Cynthia Levin who gave Ruffin the opportunity to earn her Equity card. Ruffin continued to work as an actor for the Unicorn Theatre and also worked as an assistant director on *Babel* by Jacqueline Goldfinger in their 2019-2020 season. Ruffin also directed a reading of a new work called *Mustard Seeds* by Michelle Tyrene Johnson at the Unicorn through their In-Progress New Play Reading Series³⁹. She enjoys working with the Unicorn Theatre because they draw outside the lines of traditional theatre. They go against type-casting and give actors more of an opportunity to be seen and actually use their talent. “I love the Unicorn.” Ruffin recognized the inclusivity, not just on stage, but also in their choice to use non-gendered bathrooms. She started working with the Unicorn Theatre because they produce black playwrights. Ruffin does not audition at every theatre, but the Unicorn Theatre is one she supports. “I want to be represented and not play a stereotype.” Ruffin’s impression of Cynthia Levin is that she is a boss of a woman. She’s kind, honest, open, and defies labels. She makes people want to keep coming back. Ruffin also notes, “You can’t work at the theatre if you don’t like dogs.” Levin’s dog, Zia, is a major part of the Unicorn Theatre. Zia is part of Levin’s life, therefore Zia is a part of the Unicorn and often serves as the theatre’s mascot.

³⁹ <https://unicorntheatre.org/in-progress-new-play-reading-series/>

Raleigh Miller

Raleigh Miller worked for the Unicorn Theatre for two years as the Development Director. His job focused on the Unicorn's budget, grants, donations, and fundraising efforts. He remembers seeing his first show at the Unicorn when he was in high school in the fall of 2001. He saw *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman and got a "sense that the Unicorn was where it was at." Miller had a ticket for the night of 11 September 2001. The tragedy of 9/11 informed Levin's decision to host an impromptu talkback after the show that night. The show ended with a feeling of strength of community and coming together.

Miller describes his time working for Levin by saying, "As a leader, she is decisive, has an indefatigable spirit, and she is incapable of growing weary or tired. She is humane and always responds well to specific and unique needs." He said that Kansas City audiences have "an endless appetite for Cynthia Levin." He feels lucky to have worked with Levin and is most impressed by her vision of Kansas City as the premiere midwest home for new plays.

Mary Wilkens

Mary Wilkens auditioned as an actor for the Theatre Workshop when they were in their first location at the warehouse in the River Quay. She got a part in *Adaptation* by Elaine May which was directed by Liz Gordon. Wilkens remembers working with Jim Cairns and Arliss Howard in *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss in 1978. She also remembers that "Jim [Cairns] and Diana [J. Mange] were a tandem pair for the Theatre." Wilkens recalls that the theatre Workshop's second location was in the basement garage near 4550 Main Street and their third location was near Southwest Trafficway in the Norman School. Wilkens even met her husband, Howard Wilkens, at the Theatre Workshop working on *Oliver Twist* by Charles

Dickens in 1979. She was also involved in the improvisation group, Given Circumstances, in which many of the actors from the Theatre Workshop were involved. Wilkens also served on the board in the late 1970s for a few years. She remembers when Diana J. Mange suddenly quit. Wilkens recalls that Mange stood up and quit during a party.

Em Swenson

Em Swenson is currently the Director of Production at the Unicorn Theatre. Swenson remarks, “As a founding member of the National New Play Network, Unicorn Theatre has been on the front lines of new plays in the U.S. since its inception.” They love working for the Unicorn and feel supported by the entire staff. Swenson has a great deal of freedom in how they structure their day and accomplish projects. They were drawn to the Unicorn because “I love new plays. The idea of working somewhere I would never have to work on antiquated work excited me.”

Robert Trussell

Trussell began reviewing theatre in Kansas City in late 1989. The Unicorn Theatre occupied a unique scene in those days. “The Unicorn became a place to go to see contemporary theatre.” He noted that they were doing work that nobody else was doing. Their plays were sexually frank and pointedly political. They were producing work by playwrights such as David Mamet and Terrence McNally, which no other theatre companies in the area at that time would dare touch. The Unicorn Theatre featured plays focused on gay identity, gay rights, and HIV/AIDS. Before he was a critic, Trussell saw his first Theatre Workshop production at the garage basement space on Main Street. Trussell feels that Levin

deserves credit for keeping the theatre going because she helped to develop a loyal audience. His overall impression of the Unicorn Theatre's work over the years is, "Some was great. Some disappointed. Some was in between." He recognized that theatre is not an easy undertaking because it takes a lot of time and is expensive. Trussell applauds the Unicorn Theatre for doing shows that nobody else wanted to do and developing new work in Kansas City.

Tanya Brown

Tanya Brown has been a stage manager at the Unicorn Theatre for the past fourteen seasons. She moved to Kansas City in 2001 after attending school in southern Missouri and working in New York City. Brown has worked as the stage manager for two to four shows every year for the Unicorn Theatre, until recently. For the past four years Brown has served as the resident stage manager at the Unicorn for seven out of their eight shows per season. When she started working at the theatre, things just clicked. She felt part of the team and felt valued for her input. Brown loves working on new plays because she enjoys working with new playwrights. She is proud of the work that the Unicorn produces because it makes their audience think.

For a Small Professional Theatre (SPT) Brown feels the Unicorn has great recognition around the country. "We're a tiny little theatre that's known on the coast." Currently the Unicorn Theatre is working on contingencies to continue to function during the coronavirus pandemic. They have plans to live-stream productions and offer restricted seating in the future. Brown looks forward to her fifteenth season with the Unicorn Theatre.

Michael Hogge

Michael Hogge worked as an actor and volunteer with the Theatre Workshop in the late 1970s. He performed in Lanford Wilson's *Hot I Baltimore* and Shakespeare's *King John*. Vincent Dowling⁴⁰, a prominent director brought to Kansas City by Patricia McIlrath, was the director of *King John*. Dowling later became the artistic director for the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival, where he hired and directed Tom Hanks. Hanks even mentioned Dowling in his acceptance speech for his first Oscar. Dowling also served as the artistic director of the Abbey Theatre from 1987 to 1989. It was a big deal that Dowling agreed to direct a show at the Theatre Workshop and Hogge was very impressed. Hogge was also an actor in a Frank Higgins' one-act play at the 4550 Main Street garage basement location. Hogge recalls that the theatre space was located under some shops on Main Street, including a sub shop, a bar, and an art gallery.

The first show Hogge saw at the Theatre Workshop was at their first location in the River Quay in which he remembers seeing the actor Mary Wilkens. He also remembers that Diana J. Mange ran things for a while. Hogge also enjoyed speaking with and watching the actor Arliss Howard perform at the Theatre Workshop. Liz Gordon directed Hogge in *Dead Connections* and he remembers that she was well-organized. "It was more of a community theatre back then. No one was paid and we were encouraged to help build scenery. Although people were concerned about the Unicorn changing from a community theatre to a professional theatre, the Unicorn has really grown."

⁴⁰ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/vincent-dowling-83-dies-after-distinguished-career-in-theatre-1.1390797>

Robert Elliott

Robert (Bob) Elliott was a professional actor at the Missouri Repertory Theatre and a part-time teacher at Park College in the 1970s when he met Cynthia Levin. Elliott remembers directing Levin in a production of *Hamlet* at Park College where she played a lady in waiting. "I hope that I played some kind of influence on Levin's long and successful theatre career." He has worked several times with Vincent Dowling over the years and recalls when Dowling directed *A Wilde Night* at the Theatre Workshop in 1978. After the Unicorn Theatre joined Actors' Equity Association in 1984 Elliott enjoyed working as an actor in productions such as *Veteran's Day* in their 1988-1989 season. Elliott has worked for over fifty years as a professional actor and currently resides near Pomme de Terre Lake with his blonde labrador retriever, Molly. Molly has played "Candy's Dog" in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and has also been in *A Christmas Carol* for the past three years at the Arrow Rock Lyceum Theatre in Arrow Rock, Missouri. "She's a star."

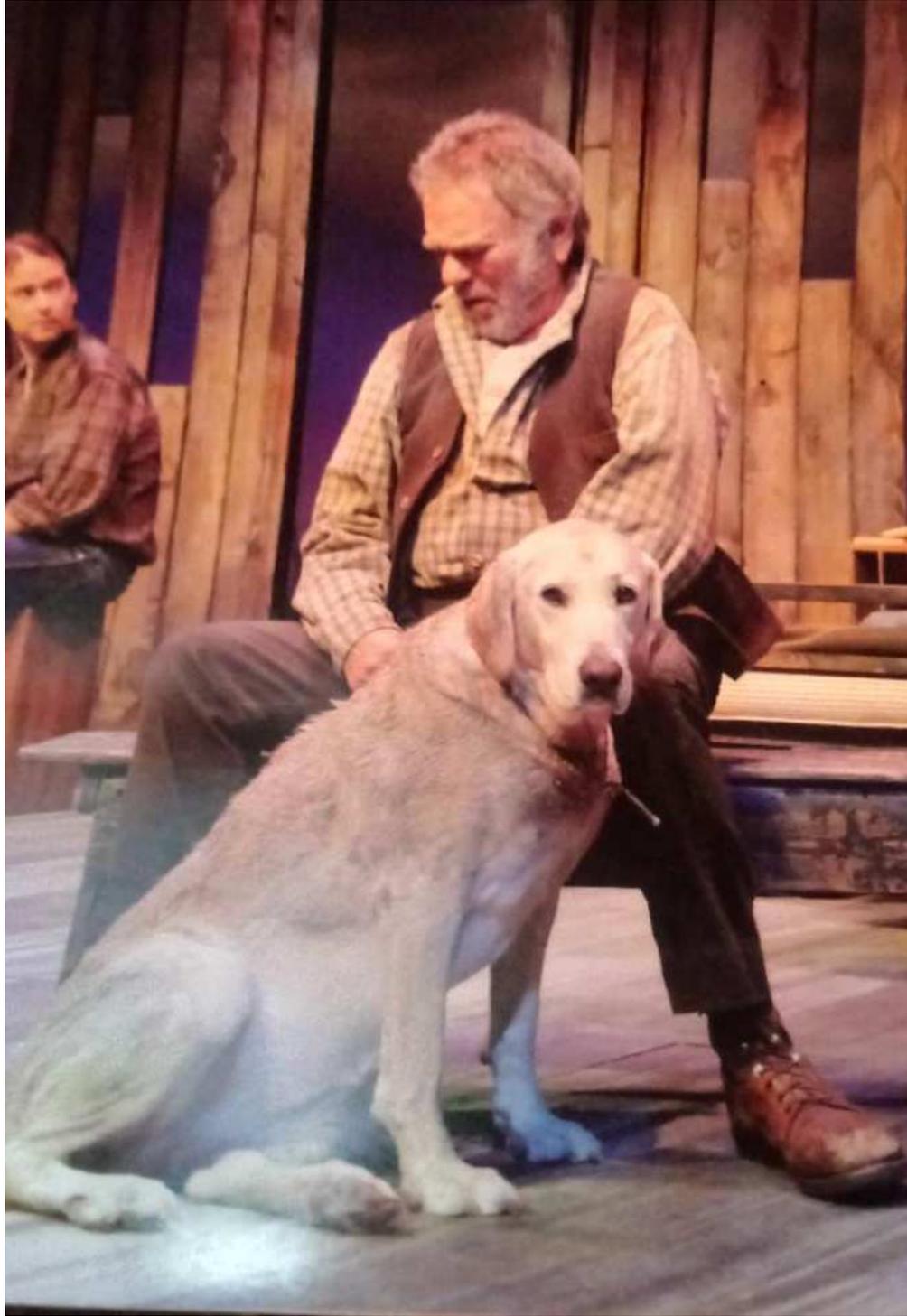


Figure 18. Photo courtesy of Bob Elliott of Molly as "Candy's Dog" in *Of Mice and Men*.

APPENDIX A. Production History⁴¹

1974 – INAUGURAL SHOW
CHILDREN’S CHRISTMAS STORY BOOK

1975 SEASON
ADAPTATION by Elaine May
PHASES OF THE MOON by John Loven
A NIGHT WITH VINCENT DOWLING
THREE ONE-ACTS by Anton Chekhov
MUSE OF FIRE – scenes and sonnets by William Shakespeare
MENDACITY – with Tom Gruenwald and Bob Scoggins
HOW TO TALK TO A DRAGON
VAUDEVILLE 75
THE MAIDS by Jean Genet
TENN – one acts by Tennessee Williams
CAGES by Lewis John Carlino
CRYSTAL AND SCARLET

1976 SEASON
THE OPERATION by Larry Vincent (World Premiere)
VAUDEVILLE ’76
LA RONDE by Arthur Schnitzler
SPRING STORY BOOK by A.A. Milne
ROMEO AND JULIET by William Shakespeare
CHARLOTTE’S WEB by E.B. White
OPENING THE WINDOWS by Patricia Baker (World Premiere)
CHAPEL by Anna Hull (World Premiere)
SPEAK TO ME SOFTLY...LIKE THE RAIN by Diana J. Mange (World Premiere)
*There is a Tennessee Williams short play that has a similar title. Williams’ play is titled *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let me Listen*.
A BREEZE FROM THE GULF by Mort Crowley
DR. FAUSTUS LIGHTS THE LIGHTS by Gertrude Stein

1977 SEASON
GENESIS, ETC by Diana J. Mange (World Premiere)
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE by Tom Stoppard
HOT L BALTIMORE by Lanford Wilson
EVERYTHING IN THE GARDEN by Edward Albee
TRANSFORMATIONS by Anne Sexton
MADWOMAN OF CHAILLOT by Jean Giraudoux
A DOLL’S HOUSE by Henrik Ibsen

⁴¹ <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/#production-history>

HEIDI adapted by Diana J. Mange

1978 SEASON

A WILDE NIGHT WITH VINCENT DOWLING

KING JOHN by William Shakespeare

LIVE AND IN COLOR (variety show)

IN CELEBRATION by David Storey

WHEN YOU COMIN' BACK RED RYDER by Mark Medoff

AN EVENING WITH PINTER by Harold Pinter

An evening of three one-acts directed by Liz Gordon:

 THE SWAN KILLERS by Matt Davison (World Premiere)

 DEAD CONNECTIONS by Stuart Boyce

 THERE CAME FORTH FROM DARKNESS by Frank Higgins (World Premiere)

MARAT/SADE by Peter Weiss

70 GIRLS 70 by Fred Ebb and John Kander

LITTLE WOMEN by Louisa May Alcott

1979 SEASON

LAUGH by Geoff Moyer (World Premiere)

BLITHE SPIRIT by Noel Coward

BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ by Carson McCullers

LOOT by Joe Orton

A THOUSAND CLOWNS by Herb Gardner

IN THE BOOM BOOM ROOM by David Rabe

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR by Lillian Hellman

OLIVER TWIST by Charles Dickens

1980 SEASON

CAMINO REAL by Tennessee Williams

ONLY HUMAN by Bob Evans (World Premiere)

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD AND OTHER BUSINESS by Arthur Miller

HANGED IN THEIR OWN FAMILY TREE by Richard Dunlop (World Premiere)

THE KING OF LEMONADE by Frank Higgins (World Premiere)

UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS by Wendy Wasserstein

NIGHT WATCH by Lucille Fletcher

ROBIN GOODFELLOW by Aurand Harris

1981 SEASON

CALLING IT OFF by Nancy Lenau (World Premiere)

THE MOUND BUILDERS by Lanford Wilson

MONSTERS by Charles Gorden (World Premiere)

TREVOR by John Bowen

MOUNT UP WITH WINGS LIKE ANGELS by Meredith Portman (World Premiere)

AMERICAN BUFFALO by David Mamet

1982 SEASON

PROMISE by Nancy Lenau (World Premiere)
PRISON GAMES by Susan Yankowitz
ROAD MOVIE by Brian Hohlfeld (World Premiere)
TAP DANCING ACROSS THE UNIVERSE by Bill Borden (World Premiere)
GETTING OUT by Marsha Norman
LETTERS HOME by Rose Leiman Goldenberg

1983 SEASON

5TH OF JULY by Lanford Wilson
A LESSON FROM ALOES by Athol Fugard
LIKE WATER OFF A WHALES BACK by William Clause (World Premiere)
GEMINI by Albert Innaurato
BENT by Martin Sherman
SECRET by Wendy MacLaughlin (World Premiere)

1984 SEASON

KID PURPLE by Donald Wollner (World Premiere)
TALKING WITH...by Jane Martin
TRUE WEST by Sam Shepard
SUMMER ONE ACTS by various writers
P.S. YOUR CAT IS DEAD by James Kirkwood
BENT / TALKING WITH... (in repertory)
THE BONNE CHANCE MOTEL by John Denham (World Premiere)

1985 SEASON

FOOL FOR LOVE by Sam Shepard
WIN / LOSE / DRAW by Mary Gallagher and Ara Watson
BANGS AND WHIMPERS by Bryan Williams (World Premiere)
SUMMER ONE ACTS by various writers
EXTREMITIES by William Mastrosimone
'NIGHT MOTHER by Marsha Norman
ANGELS FALL by Lanford Wilson
NEVER SAY DIE by Frank Higgins (Local Premiere)

SPRING 1986 SEASON

PAINTING CHURCHES by Tina Howe
SHUFFLE OFF THIS MORTAL BUFFALO by Richard Natale (World Premiere)
STILL LIFE by Emily Mann
HEARTLAND by Frank Higgins (World Premiere)

*Unicorn Theatre moved from Norman School to Belman Garage.

1986-1987 SEASON

QUILTERS by Molly Newman & Barbara Damashek
EXPIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW...by Mark Houston (World Premiere)
ORPHANS by Lyle Kessler
AS IS by William Hoffman
THE LAST GOOD MOMENT OF LILLY BAKER by Russell Davis (World Premiere)
AUNT DAN AND LEMON by Wallace Shawn
DOIN' THE REALITY RAG by Lawrence Perkins (World Premiere)

1987-1988 SEASON

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS by David Mamet
THE KISS OF THE SPIDERWOMAN by Manuel Puig
EXPIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW...by Mark Houston
JULIUS AND ETHEL by Loren Reher (World Premiere)
JITTERS by David French
THE REAL THING by Tom Stoppard
THE DINING ROOM by A.R. Gurney
HUNTING COCKROACHES by Janusz Glowacki

1988-1989 SEASON

TALK RADIO by Eric Bogosian
CATS PAW by William Mastrosimone
THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW by Richard O'Brien
VETERANS DAY by Donald Freed (World Premiere)
ON THE VERGE by Eric Overmeyer
THE ILLUMINATI by Levi Lee and Larry Larson
WOMAN IN MIND by Alan Ayckbourn

1989-1990 SEASON

BURN THIS by Lanford Wilson
SAVAGE IN LIMBO by John Patrick Shanley
EXPIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW...by Mark Houston
TEN BELOW by Shem Bitterman (World Premiere)
BEIRUT by Alan Bowne
BREAKING THE CODE by Hugh Whitmore
THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW by Richard O'Brien

1990-1991 SEASON

WAITING FOR GODOT by Samuel Beckett
FRANKIE AND JOHNNY IN THE CLAIRE DE LUNE by Terrence McNally
LIVING IN EXILE by Jon Lysky – (World Premiere)
ELEEMOSYNARY by Lee Blessing
RECKLESS by Craig Lucas
SPEED THE PLOW by David Mamet
CLOSER THAN EVER by Richard Maltby, Jr and David Shire

1991-1992 SEASON

THE LISBON TRAVIATA by Terrence McNally
THE IVORY ALPHABET by B. Burgess Clark (World Premiere)
EASTERN STANDARD by Richard Greenberg
TWO ROOMS by Lee Blessing
VITAL SIGNS by Jane Martin
GROTTESCO SHORTS by Theatre Grottesco
FALSETTOLAND by William Finn

1992-1993 SEASON

CHANGIN' LANES by Mark Houston (World Premiere)
THE SWAN by Elizabeth Egloff
FIVE IN THE KILLING ZONE by Lavonne Mueller (World Premiere)
DAYTRIPS by Jo Carson
LIPS TOGETHER, TEETH APART by Terrence McNally
THE HEIDI CHRONICLES by Wendy Wasserstein

1993-1994 SEASON

MARVIN'S ROOM by Scott McPherson
MAD FOREST by Caryl Churchill
QUILTERS by Molly Newman & Barbara Damashek
THANATOS by Ron Simonian (World Premiere)
SIGHT UNSEEN by Donald Margulies
THE BALTIMORE WALTZ by Paula Vogel
KEELY AND DU by Jane Martin

1994-1995 SEASON

A PERFECT GANESH by Terrence McNally
PATIENT A by Lee Blessing
AND THE WORLD GOES ROUND by John Kander and Fred Ebb
BETRAYAL OF THE BLACK JESUS by David Barr III (World Premiere)
UNIDENTIFIED HUMAN REMAINS...by Brad Fraser
RED SCARE ON SUNSET by Charles Busch
JACK AND JILL by Jane Martin (World Premiere)

1995-1996 SEASON

THE SISTERS ROSENSWEIG by Wendy Wasserstein
ARMS AND LEGS by Ron Simonian (World Premiere)
RUTHLESS by Joel Paley and Marvin Laird
INNOCENT THOUGHTS by William Missouri Downs (World Premiere)
SUBURBIA by Eric Bogosian
JAR THE FLOOR by Cheryl West
ANGELS IN AMERICA: MILLENNIUM APPROACHES by Tony Kushner

1996-1997 SEASON

ANGELS IN AMERICA: PERESTROIKA by Tony Kushner
AT THE FEET OF DOVES by Ron Simonian (World Premiere)
ALL IN THE TIMING by David Ives
FLYIN' WEST by Pearl Cleage
LOVE! VALOUR! COMPASSION! By Terrence McNally
MERCY KILLING by Stephanie Keys (World Premiere)
SYLVIA by A.R. Gurney

1997-1998 SEASON

QUILLS by Doug Wright
MOLLY SWEENEY by Brian Friel
THE SALVATION OF IGGY SCROOGE by Larry Larson and Eddie Levi Lee
BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY by Pearl Cleage
THE WAITING ROOM by Lisa Loomer
ZONE 3 by Ron Simonian (World Premiere)
AMERICAN DAUGHTER by Wendy Wasserstein

1998-1999 SEASON

HAVING OUR SAY by Emily Mann
SKYLIGHT by David Hare
AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN by Douglas Carter Beane
MOJO by Jez Butterworth
HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE by Paula Vogel
THE JUDAS KISS by David Hare
EV'RY TIME I FEEL THE SPIRIT by David Barr III (World Premiere)

1999-2000 SEASON

THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE by Martin McDonagh
OLD WICKED SONGS by Jon Marans
PRELUDE TO A KISS by Craig Lucas
THE OLD SETTLER by John Henry Redwood
WIT by Margaret Edson
SIDE MAN by Warren Leight
LIGHT:DAMAGE by Alan Brown (World Premiere)

2000-2001 SEASON

HOT 'N' THROBBING by Paula Vogel
ART by Yasmina Reza
HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH by John Cameron Mitchell
THE SANTALAND DIARIES by David Sedaris
SLIGHT DEFECT: A DESERT HOLIDAY by Ron Simonian (World Premiere)
CLOSER by Patrick Marber
MUD, RIVER, STONE by Lynn Nottage
GENE POOL by Christi Stewart-Brown

2001-2002 SEASON

THE LARAMIE PROJECT by Moises Kaufman
BECAUSE HE CAN by Arthur Kopit
THE SANTALAND DIARIES by David Sedaris
FUDDY MEERS by David Lindsay-Abaire
IN THE BLOOD by Suzan-Lori Parks
SPINNING INTO BUTTER by Rebecca Gilman
PROOF by David Auburn
FULLY COMMITTED by Becky Mode

2002-2003 SEASON

DIRTY BLONDE by Claudia Shear
THE SHAPE OF THINGS by Neil LaBute
BAT BOY: THE MUSICAL by Keythe Farley and Brian Flemming
THE SANTALAND DIARIES by David Sedaris
LOVING LUCY by Philip blue owl Hooser (World Premiere)
THE MEMORY OF WATER by Shelagh Stephenson
BEE-LUTHER HATCHEE by Thomas Gibbons
BAT BOY: THE MUSICAL Music and Lyrics by Keythe Farley, Book by Brian Flemming

2003-2004 SEASON

LOBBY HERO by Kenneth Lonergan
YELLOWMAN by Dael Orlandersmith
THE MINEOLA TWINS by Paula Vogel
HOW HIS BRIDE CAME TO ABRAHAM by Karen Sunde (World Premiere)
THE GOAT, OR WHO IS SYLVIA? By Edward Albee
BLUE/ORANGE by Joe Penhall
TAKE ME OUT by Richard Greenberg

2004-2005 SEASON

BRIGHT IDEAS by Eric Coble
TOPDOG/UNDERDOG by Suzan-Lori Parks
CONVENIENCE Book, Music and Lyrics by Gregg Coffin
PERMANENT COLLECTION by Thomas Gibbons (World Premiere)
OMNIUM GATHERUM by Theresa Rebeck & Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros
THE EXONERATED by Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen
BUG by Tracy Letts

2005-2006 SEASON

I AM MY OWN WIFE by Doug Wright
THE RETREAT FROM MOSCOW by William Nicholson
PAINTED ALICE by William Donnelly
FROZEN by Bryony Lavery
CROWNS by Regina Taylor
NEXT OF KIN by Ron Simonian (World Premiere)
TICK TICK BOOM Book, Music and Lyrics by Jonathan Larson

2006-2007 SEASON

THE PILLOWMAN by Martin McDonagh
ORSON'S SHADOW by Austin Pendleton
THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAILER PARK MUSICAL Music and Lyrics by David
Nehls, Book by Betsy Kelso
RABBIT HOLE by David Lindsay-Abaire
NICKEL AND DIMED by Joan Holden
CROWNS by Regina Taylor
IRON KISSES by James Still
INTIMATE APPAREL by Lynn Nottage

2007-2008 SEASON

LA CAGE AUX FOLLES Music and Lyrics by Jerry Herman, Book by Harvey Fierstein
THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE by Martin McDonagh
RIGHTNEXTTO ME Book & Music and Lyrics by Gregg Coffin (World Premiere)
A HOUSE WITH NO WALLS by Thomas Gibbons (World Premiere)
Heather Raffo's 9 PARTS OF DESIRE
THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED by Douglas Carter Beane
FAITH HEALER by Brian Friel
WELL by Lisa Kron

2008-2009 SEASON

RISING WATER by John Biguenet
MAURITIUS by Theresa Rebeck
SISTER MARY IGNATIUS EXPLAINS IT ALL FOR YOU by Christopher Durang
THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE Book, Music and Lyrics Tim Acito
THE VELVET RUT by James Still (World Premiere)
THE CLEAN HOUSE by Sarah Ruhl
BARE by Jon Hartmere and Damon Intra Bartolo
SPEECH & DEBATE by Stephen Karam

2009-2010 SEASON

MY FIRST TIME Written by Ken Davenport and Real People Just Like You

FARRAGUT NORTH by Beau Willimon

MISS WITHERSPOON by Christopher Durang

GREY GARDENS by Doug Wright, Scott Frankel and Michael Korie

GREEN WHALES by Lia Romeo (World Premiere)

AND HER HAIR WENT WITH HER by Zina Camblin

2010-2011 SEASON

[TITLE OF SHOW] Music & Lyrics by Jeff Bowen, Book by Hunter Bell

THE SEAFARER by Conor McPherson

DISTRACTED by Lisa Loomer

A VERY JOAN CRAWFORD CHRISTMAS by Jeff Church & Ron Megee (World Premiere)

IN THE NEXT ROOM OR THE VIBRATOR PLAY by Sarah Ruhl

TWO JEWS WALK INTO A WAR... by Seth Rozin

RUINED by Lynn Nottage

2011-2012 SEASON

RED by John Logan

GOD OF CARNAGE by Yasmina Reza, Translated by Christopher Hampton

THE SALVATION OF IGGY SCROOGE Book by Larry Larsen and Eddie Levi Lee, Music by Edd Key

NEXT FALL by Geoffrey Nauffts

HUNGRY by Lia Romeo (World Premiere)

TIME STANDS STILL by Donald Margulies

EVERYDAY RAPTURE by Dick Scanlan and Sherie Rene Scott

2012-2013 SEASON

MOTHERF**KER WITH THE HAT by Stephen Adly Guirgis

BLOODY BLOODY ANDREW JACKSON by Alex Timbers, Music and Lyrics by Michael Friedman

INSPECTING CAROL by Daniel Sullivan and The Seattle Repertory Theatre

THE SOUL COLLECTOR by Ron Simonian (World Premiere)

BLACKTOP SKY by Christina Anderson (World Premiere)

GOOD PEOPLE by David Lindsay-Abaire

MY NAME IS ASHER LEV by Aaron Posner

THE MOUNTAINTOP by Katori Hall

2013-2014 SEASON

VENUS IN FUR by David Ives
SEMINAR by Theresa Rebeck
CLYBOURNE PARK by Bruce Norris
GROUNDED by George Brant (World Premiere)
OTHER DESERT CITIES by Jon Robin Baitz
WATER BY THE SPOONFUL by Quiara Alegria Hudes
BY THE WAY, MEET VERA STARK by Lynn Nottage

2014-2015 SEASON

HANDS ON A HARDBODY Book by Doug Wright, Lyrics by Amanda Green, Music by
Trey Anastasio & Amanda Green
BAD JEWS by Joshua Harmon
BENGAL TIGER AT THE BAGHDAD ZOO by Rajiv Joseph
I'LL EAT YOU LAST: A CHAT WITH SUE MENGERS by John Logan
LASSO OF TRUTH by Carson Kreitzer (World Premiere)
WOMEN PLAYING HAMLET by William Missouri Downs (World Premiere)
COCK by Mike Bartlett
TRIBES by Nina Raine

2015-2016 SEASON

THE OLDEST BOY by Sarah Ruhl
THE BROTHERS SIZE by Tarell Alvin McCraney
MR. BURNS: A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY by Anne Washburn, Score by Michael Friedman,
Lyrics by Anne Washburn
BUYER & CELLAR by Jonathan Tolins
HOW TO STEAL A PICASSO by William Missouri Downs (World Premiere)
THE WHALE by Samuel D. Hunter
THE GHOSTS OF LOTE BRAVO by Hilary Bettis (World Premiere)
HEATHERS: THE MUSICAL Book, Music and Lyrics by Laurence O'Keefe and Kevin
Murphy

2016-2017 SEASON

HAND TO GOD by Robert Askins
THE WAY WE GET BY by Neil LaBute
AN OCTOROON by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins
APPLICATION PENDING by Greg Edwards & Andy Sandberg
HOW TO USE A KNIFE by Will Snider (World Premiere)
ECLIPSED by Danai Gurira
I'M GONNA PRAY FOR YOU SO HARD by Halley Feiffer
PRISCILLA QUEEN OF THE DESERT: THE MUSICAL book by Stephan Elliot & Allan
Scott

2017-2018 SEASON

MEN ON BOATS by Jaclyn Backhaus
DISGRACED by Ayad Akhtar
STUPID FUCKING BIRD by Aaron Posner
CHESAPEAKE by Lee Blessing
PROJECT DAWN by Karen Hartman (World Premiere)
INFORMED CONSENT by Deborah Zoe Lauffer
VIETGONE by Qui Nguyen
HIR by Taylor Mac

2018-2019 SEASON

THE EFFECT by Lucy Prebble
SWEAT by Lynn Nottage
THE WOLVES by Sarah DeLappe
NOMAD MOTEL by Carla Ching (World Premiere)
THE HUMANS by Stephen Karam
BOND by Logan Black (World Premiere)
THE REVOLUTIONISTS by Lauren Gunderson

2019-2020 SEASON

WHO'S YOUR BAGHDADDY:OR HOW I STARTED THE IRAQ WAR Music and Book
by Marshall Paillet, Lyrics and Book by A.D. Penedo
A DOLL'S HOUSE, PART 2 by Lucas Hnath
BERNHARDT/HAMLET by Theresa Rebeck
BABEL by Jacqueline Goldfinger
AMERICAN SON by Christopher Demos-Brown

*The run of *American Son* was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It opened on 7 March, 2020, and Kansas City theatres closed on 12-13 March. The rest of the season was cancelled. The Unicorn Theatre plans to begin their fall season in September with *The Lifespan of a Fact*.

THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT by Jeremy Kareken, David Murrell, and Gordon Farrell,
Based on the Book by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal
ADMISSIONS by Josh Harmon

APPENDIX B. Timeline of Major Events⁴²

1974: Three UMKC Department of Theatre graduates rent an old warehouse in the historic River Market area, call it Theatre Workshop and produce the first show.

1975: KC Star drama critic Giles Fowler writes, “There is something about the place – something about the spirit and gut – that make you want to see it thrive.”

1976: Theatre Workshop has produced 28 plays, including four world premieres by local playwrights, and is recognized by the Missouri Arts Council with an Artist-In-Residence grant.

1979: Cynthia Levin joins the staff as resident director, stage manager, sound designer, and sometimes actor.

1981: The name changes from Theatre Workshop to Unicorn Theatre and receives Missouri Arts Council funding to stage an original script.

1983: Cynthia Levin is named Producing Artistic Director.

1984: Unicorn joins Actors’ Equity Association, the union for professional actors and stage managers.

1986: Unicorn moves to current location, an 80-year-old Belman Garage transformed into a modern, intimate theater with a thrust stage and seating capacity of 150.

1987: World Premeire of *Doin’ the Reality Rag*, utilizing the talents of five disabled actors and featured on CBS Sunday Morning.

1992: *Falsettoland* breaks box office records and fills the company deficit for two years.

1994: *Thanatos* by Ron Simonian plays to sold out houses, then moves to Off-Broadway.

⁴² <https://unicorntheatre.org/about-us/#unicorn-history>

- 1996: Unicorn solidifies their position as the only professional theatre company in Kansas City to consistently produce plays by and about African-Americans. Unicorn also became the first theatre in the region to obtain the rights to produce Tony Kushner's epic *Angels in America*.
- 1997: Unicorn expands their space with interior improvements including a new box office, lobby, rehearsal space, administrative office and Main Street Entrance.
- 1998: Unicorn becomes one of ten founding theatres of the National New Play Network, formed to promote the development of new plays and playwrights.
- 2002: Three productions extend: *The Laramie Project*, *Proof*, and *Fully Committed*.
- 2005: Unicorn produces the regional premiere of *The Exonerated* about people on death row with collaboration of four local exonerated inmates.
- 2006: Regina Taylor's *Crowns* sold at 104% capacity and is brought back the following season at the Gem Theater.
- 2007: *La Cage Aux Folles* opens the 34th season and becomes the highest grossing show in the company's history.
- 2008: Unicorn expands by opening the Jerome Stage (an intimate 120-seat black box theatre), a new box office, coffee bar and entrance after completing their most successful capital campaign to date, including a Kresge Challenge Grant Match.
- 2009: Season subscriptions reach another all-time high despite a national economic crisis. The company rebrands itself as the theatre that presents "Bold New Plays" in Kansas City.
- 2010: Unicorn obtains a liquor license and opens to lobby bars.

2014: Unicorn executes a successful capital campaign to buy their building. Unicorn produces its 300th play *By the Way Meet Vera Stark* and its 60th World Premiere *Grounded*, which went on to Off-Broadway's Public Theatre starring Anne Hathaway. The board voted to rename the larger theatre after Levin and surprised her with the tribute.

2018: Cynthia Levin receives the Kathryn V. Lamkey award for a career celebrating diversity inclusion, and representation on the stage.

2019: Cynthia Levin celebrates 40 years with the Unicorn.

2020: The run of *American Son* is cut short due to COVID-19 and the rest of the season is postponed. *American Son* had its official opening on 7 March, and Kansas City theatres closed 12-13 March.

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VITA

Sarah Jean Haynes-Hohne was born in Lee's Summit, Missouri, and grew up in Sedalia, Missouri. Sarah Jean graduated from Sacred Heart High School in 2009 at the top of her class and continued her education at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. She received her B.F.A. in Theatre Acting in 2013 and moved to Chicago to pursue an acting career. While working as an actor and continuing to take acting classes, Sarah Jean became the General Manager of a popular Chicago restaurant called Cheesie's Pub and Grub. She managed over 50 employees and soon joined the corporate team to assist with expansion. She gained invaluable experience as a manager and leader, but it was time for a change.

Sarah Jean moved to Kansas City in 2017 and after meeting Dr. Felicia Londré quickly applied for UMKC's Master of Theatre program. Her career and theatre goals were back on track. During her time at UMKC Sarah Jean served as a dramaturg, director, and actor. Her education grew exponentially and she taught several semesters of an introduction to theatre course to undergraduate students. Her love for theatre and teaching began to meld into a clear career path. After graduation, Sarah Jean plans to pursue a career in theatre education.