



Winging It



The National Society for the Preservation of Tent, Folk and Repertoire Theatre

**SPECIAL
POINTS OF
INTEREST:**

- Final Curtain
Brooks McNamara
- Fall 2009 Visitors
- Kansas Opera House Book
- At Chautauqua
- Call for Papers - Help Us Celebrate Our 25th Anniversary!

F I N A L C U R T A I N

B R O O K S M C N A M A R A

Brooks McNamara, theater historian and long-time member of the National Society, died on May 8, 2009 in Doylestown, PA at the age of 72. The immediate cause was pneumonia but he had been suffering from a degenerative nerve disorder for some time.

McNamara was born in Peoria, IL and graduated from Knox College in Galesburg, IL. He received an M.A. from the University of Iowa and earned a Ph.D in theater history from Tulane University. He taught at the University of Delaware and moved to New York University in 1968. His academic specialty was popular entertainment, an area he felt was often neglected by scholars. In 2001 he wrote in an article in *The Drama Review* "The theater in any time is not exclusively made up of high art, but a complex of related forms: popular and amateur entertainment, and, in the 20th century, to a great extent, radio, television, motion pictures and the Internet. Until recently most of these have been ignored by historians of theater and drama, though they are important influences on the theater and are influenced by it."

From 1976 to 1999 Brooks McNamara, who was at that time, professor of performance studies at New York University, worked with an archivist and graduate students on the Shubert archives. He retired as the director of the Shubert Archive in 1999. He and Caroline Schaffner became acquainted in the 1980s.

McNamara wrote about medicine shows, minstrel shows, medicine shows, pageants, and the 19th-century gathering spots known as concert saloons. He was the keynote speaker at the 1988 Theatre History Seminar and discussed his recently published book *Step Right Up*, a history of medicine shows and the performers who went from town to town "selling snake oil." He continued to talk about the Theatre Museum to a number of people; often visitors would mention that they heard about the Museum from Brooks.

He married Nan in 1962 and is survived by her, a daughter Jane of Queens, a son Whitney of Brooklyn, four grandchildren, and a brother Scott of Tucson, AZ.

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FALL 2009 VISITORS

The Theatre Museum continues to have visitors by appointment during the fall. One group chose us as their stopping place when they were driving from Kansas City to a suburb of Chicago. They were given the curtain tour while they were eating lunch. (In February the Museum will be the lunch stop for a group from Wisconsin who is going to Branson, Missouri.)

A second group came at the suggestion of one of its members who had been here before. They were members of a Missouri chapter of P. E.O., a philanthropic educational organization founded in Mount Pleasant, and were visiting local historical sites. Since one of them was related to James Harlan, they also went to see the Harlan/Lincoln home. Some of them had seen tent shows in their younger days.

One Sunday a tour was given to Janet Fritz Maas, her husband, and two Fritz relatives, one from Austria and the other from Germany. They especially wanted to see the drops on the main floor that we use to demonstrate "front room, back room, timber, and town." Five of the drops came from the Fritz Opera House in Blakesburg, Iowa. Janet is the daughter of Edward Fritz who donated the drops to the Museum in 1976. Her grandfather had built the hardware store in the 1890s and the second floor was opened as an Opera House in 1904. Janet told me that Hugh Lanning who was a Stage and Side Show painter from Ottumwa, Iowa and whose name is on the front curtain also painted a scene on the ceiling of the Opera House. Her grandfather's store ad is on the left side of the front curtain; one of her mother's relatives advertised that his specialty was shorthorn cattle on the right-hand side.

Janet mentioned that Neil and Caroline Schaffner had performed there while touring troupes still put on performances there. After that time, movies were shown in the opera house area. The building was torn down in the mid-1970s.

Kim Marra, from the Department of American Studies at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, is doing an excellent job of tooting our horn and bringing us visitors who have theatrical backgrounds. In October Grace and Martha had the pleasure of introducing the Museum to Tracy Davis, Barber Professor of Performing Arts and Professor of Theatre and English in the Department of Theatre, Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She is also the current President of the American Society of Theatre Research. Grace and Martha were quite a tag team, batting information about the place back and forth. Tracy was especially complimentary about the Research Library and how well we were keeping the materials organized.

KANSAS OPERA HOUSE BOOK

I am delighted to report that my book *Kansas Opera Houses, Actors and Community Events 1855-1925* was selected as a 2009 Kansas Notable Book at the State Library of Kansas. This competition was for books about Kansas or by Kansans. There were 90 entrants and 15 selected, so I was very pleased. They had a ceremony for us at the capitol in Topeka and we each received a medal. The books selected have been widely publicized in libraries across the state. I have also been selected by the Kansas Humanities Council to be a part of the 2010 Speakers Bureau, another great way to spread the word about Kansas rich cultural and theatrical heritage. The 158 page book is filled with photos, statistics and in-depth histories.

Jane Rhoads

For more information contact Jane Rhoads at Wichita State University

A D L I B S
B Y
G R A C E S W A N K - D A V I S

Greetings from beautiful downtown Mt. Pleasant, Iowa!

We had great weather for the Old Threshers Reunion in August. The crowds were big and we had SRO at our nightly shows at the museum. This year we did Neil and Caroline Schaffner's *Jittering Spooks*. I think I had written before that we were going to do *The Vulture* but we ended up doing a later rewrite. Advisory Board member David Wagaman directed the show this year. It was his first venture directing for us and he did a great job! Thanks for your hard work, David! Advisory Board member and trouper Billie Henderson Schuller did a specialty after the second act. She sang and danced to a song titled "I'd Liketo Do It Again." She got a standing ovation and even though she is my aunt, I didn't start it!

We had a great monthly meeting in September. Advisory Board member Roberta Wilkes joined us from Bonner Springs, Kansas. Bill Claus comes up from Payson, Illinois each month and Gene Biby, as always, comes down from Janesville, Wisconsin. The museum is lucky to have such dedicated members. Others present were Martha Hayes, Michael Kramme, David Wagaman and yours truly. We spent a large amount of time making plans for the next seminar in April, 2010.

Our website, www.thetheatremuseum.com is finished. There may be some tweaks to be done here and there but for the most part it is done. Can we get some feedback? We have a forum that you can post a comment or ask a question on. Our web designer just taught Martha and me how to manage it so post something. We need the practice.

Bill Claus has been finding more names to go on the museum's veteran's list. If you have a name that you think should go on the listing, please e-mail us or use the website.

The museum has about 28 boxes of duplicate scripts left over from the Sherman Collection. We have been looking for some institution, college or library who would be interested in taking part or all of the scripts. Through the efforts of David Wagaman, we have sent four boxes to the theatre department at Vassar College. We had to go through all 28 boxes and alphabetize them. David came to our rescue and spent about five days going getting them all in order. He did a great job and we are very grateful for his efforts.

We received the following note from Advisory Board member Mickey Lacey.

"I drove to Tahlequa, OK, to catch Roberta Wilkes premier of her new one person show. She had a great format I thought and presented it in the "old trouper" manner. Used a lot of old original routines and gags from the day. Complemented by her own recorded music of the era, by her husband Bill Dunn and she on piano. Had a good crowd and kept them laughing all the while. I tend to watch faces of the crowd during performances of such. They were (actually) spellbound waiting for the next lines. It was great to see. Roberta did a superb job bringing and selling originality to an audience that we all have been faced with at one time or another. You all know the type; "Make Me Laugh".....well, she did. She even conducted the "Candy Sales," which was also a pretty good donation for her church where she performed. In her slide presentation, she even showed a picture of the Theatre Museum, with its location. Very well done, Roberta! The troupers that have gone before us (and I) would be proud."

Mickey Lacey

We just got word as we were going to print that our V. P. Gene Biby has put the museum on Facebook. If you have a Facebook account, put The Theatre Museum in the search window and you will go right to it. We have had people go to the website after finding us on Facebook already!

Well, that's all for now, remember you are always welcome on the lot.
Grace, Spencer, Hila, Baxter & Murphy

AT CHAUTAUQUA

When I was a little boy in the 1920s, Chautauqua came every summer to the small prairie town in South Dakota where I lived. A marvelously big tent would be erected near the high-school playing field, and once I was taken to watch, in the early morning, the tough-looking roustabouts raising the tall poles and hoisting the billowing canvas atop them. Inside was a wooden stage about six feet high, with a proscenium framing a roll-up canvas curtain, emblazoned with gaudy illustrations of such scenes as Niagara Falls, and with the names of some local businesses. Facing this were rows of backless wooden benches. In good weather the canvas sides were rolled up to allow whatever breezes there were to cool down the perspiring audiences. In bad weather, the rain drummed down on the canvas above, often all but drowning out the actors' voices.

I was usually taken to a matinee by my grandfather, a small man with the dignity befitting the president of the local bank. I sat on his lap, and was allowed to fish from his vest pocket a stick of Juicy Fruit gum, to undo the green-and-white-striped outer wrapper and then the pink inside one, and to chew to my heart's content through the entire performance.

The show was usually a sort of vaudeville or variety bill, with both tap and ballroom dancers, solo singers and such rarities as the spangle-bedecked lady who could imitate any known bird named by an audience member, and could whistle one note higher than the top note on the onstage piano. But the most wonderful thing of all occurred during a performance of the old Jane Cowl vehicle *Smilin' Through*. The first scene showed actors in front of a snow-laden brick building, and then suddenly, magically, we were inside a handsome manor hall. Now I know that the front scene was a scrim, which seemed to vanish when the lights came up behind it. That transformation has remained to me the epitome of theatrical legerdemain, and I shall never forget it, or the Chautauqua which brought that to me.

(Ed. Note: Written by National Society member Robert Neff Williams, October 2009. Williams has been on the faculty of Julliard School, Voice and Speech Department, Drama Division since 1970. He has also been part of the Theatre Division faculty at Columbia University during much of the same time.)

" SILK NIGHTGOWNS AND LONG UNDERWEAR " AT UW-ROCK COUNTY

November 5-8, 2009 saw the premiere of the Neil and Caroline Schaffner play, "Silk Nightgowns and Long Underwear" at the University of Wisconsin - Rock County in Janesville, Wisconsin. I saw this comedy a couple years ago at the Theatre Museum and thought the show would be received well in our community. It proved to be quite a success! One woman who attended sent me a note after the show telling me that she had seen the Brooks Stock Company several times as a child and that this show evoked fond memories for her.

I assumed correctly that many folks in our town did not know about tent shows. Our local paper provided a great write-up of the show along with some tent theatre history. In addition, I did a guest lecture on campus about tent shows which included pictures and some "bits" performed by the students who were cast in the show.

For each of the performances I arranged for pre-show and intermission entertainment. Along with the specialty acts I also included a candy pitch which went over quite well. In fact, we sold over 140 boxes of candy throughout the run of the show!

H. Gene Biby

NATIONAL THEATRE SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS REVISITED

(The following appeared in the Fall 1995 issue of Winging It and is being reprinted because the materials are being offered again.)

The National Theatre Society now offers a manuscript compiled and edited by William L. Slout expressly for the organization: *Plays of Repertoire and Stock, 1920-1930*. The over 100 pages include an introduction by (then) President Joe Mauck, three essays by Slout—"Tent Rep: Broadway's Poor Relation," "Traveling Repertoire: From Shakespeare to Sherman," and "Popular Literature of the Dramatic Tent Shows"—and four groups of play lists, as well as 19 illustrations...For members who are exploring the decades of the 1920s or for those who want to relive the era of tent and opera house dramatics, the pages of the book will satisfy the need.

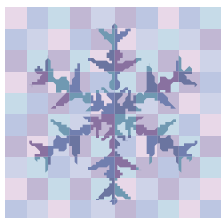
There are three lists of plays of the 1920s. The first is alphabetical by title and includes the playwright and date of either copyright or first year of performance. The second lists plays alphabetically by playwright. The third lists the plays, their frequency of use by year and the type of company using them.

The project was undertaken to serve as a fund-raiser for the National Theatre Society, as well as to document useful information of the past. All money from the sale goes to the organization. The selling price is \$15 plus postage and handling. It can be ordered by letting the Museum staff know.

Some of the newsletter readers may not be aware of this publication so the Society decided to reissue it. We didn't raise the price.

We also have available William Slout's *An Illustrated History of the Slout Players*, an over 200 page history of a long-time theatre company that is being sold for \$25 plus postage and handling.

As the past newsletters were being searched for the above article, it came to me that some of our members may not be aware that we have a file of back issues of *Winging It* and an index of topics covered. The Ad Libs started in 1974 and the Premier Issue of *Winging It* was launched in November of 1987 with George Glenn as Editor. Other Editors who have contributed much to the success of the newsletters are William Slout, Sarah Blackstone, and Gene Biby. Billie Turley was the Editor of the early Ad Libs. (It is fun and enlightening to read the past stories of the organization and the people who are or have been part of this special time in history.)



Contact Us!

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Museum's email address:

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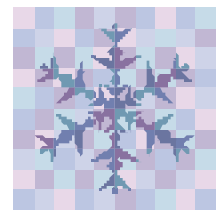
Midwest Old Threshers phone number:

319-385-8937

Midwest Old Threshers fax number: 319-385-0563

Midwest Old Threshers email address; info@oldthreshers.org

Our New Web-site: www.thetheatremuseum.com



- Ladies and Gentlemen -
 - Members of the Advisory Board -
 - Friends of the Theatre Museum -
 - Troupers of All Ages -
- We Present to You

The 25th Anniversary Theatre Seminar

The Museum of Repertoire Americana
Mount Pleasant, Iowa issues a:

Hurry!

Hurry!

CALL FOR PAPERS

"Step Across the Footlights and Join Us"

The seminar will focus on the variety of entertainments that toured or were indigenous to small town/rural America. Paper topics might include:

Tent Shows
Circle Stock
Chautauqua

"Uncle Tom" Shows
Tab Shows
Showboats

Minstrel Shows
Airdomes
Vaudeville

A \$100 scholarship will be awarded to the best paper presented by a college or graduate student!

Please send proposals/papers to:

**The Theatre Museum
Attn: Michael Kramme
405 E Threshers Road
Mt. Pleasant, IA 52641**

**Deadline: March 1, 2010
Seminar Dates: April 23, 24, 25, 2010**

