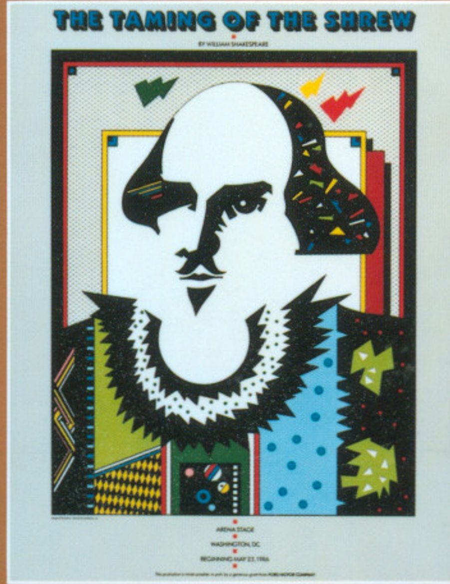
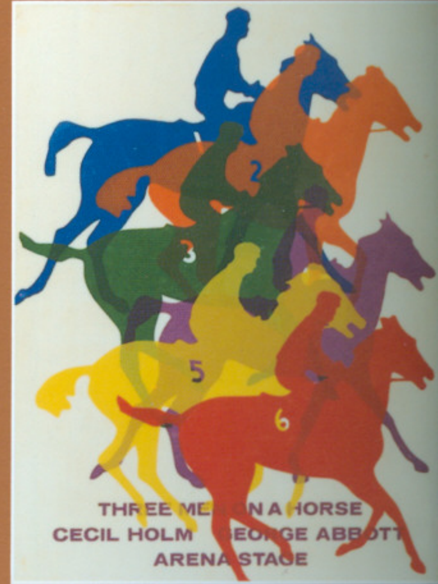
THE ARENA ADVENTURE
THE FIRST 40 YEARS

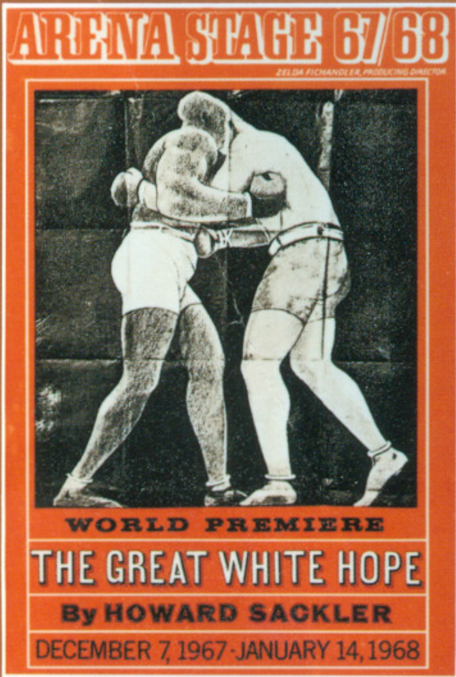
Foreword by
Arthur Miller
Introduction by
Zelda Fichandler

A publication of
ARENA STAGE

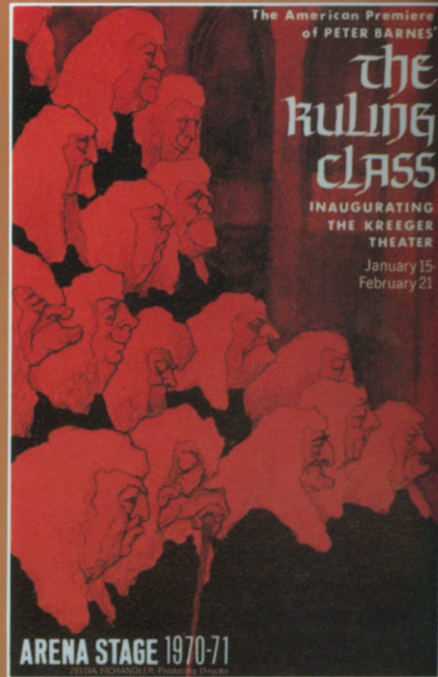
As You Like It
by William Shakespeare


THE TAMING OF THE SHREW
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
ARENA STAGE
WASHINGTON, DC


HORSE
CECIL HOLM
ARENA


ARENA STAGE 67/68
ZELDA FICHANDLER, PRODUCING DIRECTOR
WORLD PREMIERE
THE GREAT WHITE HOPE
By HOWARD SACKLER
DECEMBER 7, 1967-JANUARY 14, 1968

the crucible
by ARTHUR MILLER


The American Premiere of PETER BARNES'
The Ruling Class
INAUGURATING THE KREEGER THEATER
January 15-February 21
ARENA STAGE 1970-71

THE ARENA ADVENTURE
THE FIRST 40 YEARS

Foreword by
Arthur Miller

Introduction by
Zelda Fichandler

Edited and Written by
Laurence Maslon

Associate Editor: Cynthia Burns
Assistant Editor: David B. Feiner

Designed by Suzanne Stanton Chadwick
of Chadwick Design Incorporated

Art Director: Regan M. Byrne

Photo Editor: Patricia M. Hill

Contributors:
Cynthia Burns, Tracy Burns, Patrick J. Cribben,
David B. Feiner, Margaret Hahn, E. Garland Scott

A publication of

Zelda Fichandler, Producing Director

PREFACE

How to use this book:

The story of Arena Stage is an easy story to write because it's a good one. Besides the level and nature of Arena's achievements, the story is intriguing because the theater's history can be read as a paradigm of the history of the resident theater movement and, to a lesser degree, the trials and tribulations of any cultural institution in this country since World War II. It is hoped that this book will be of interest to anyone concerned about the role of culture in our society.

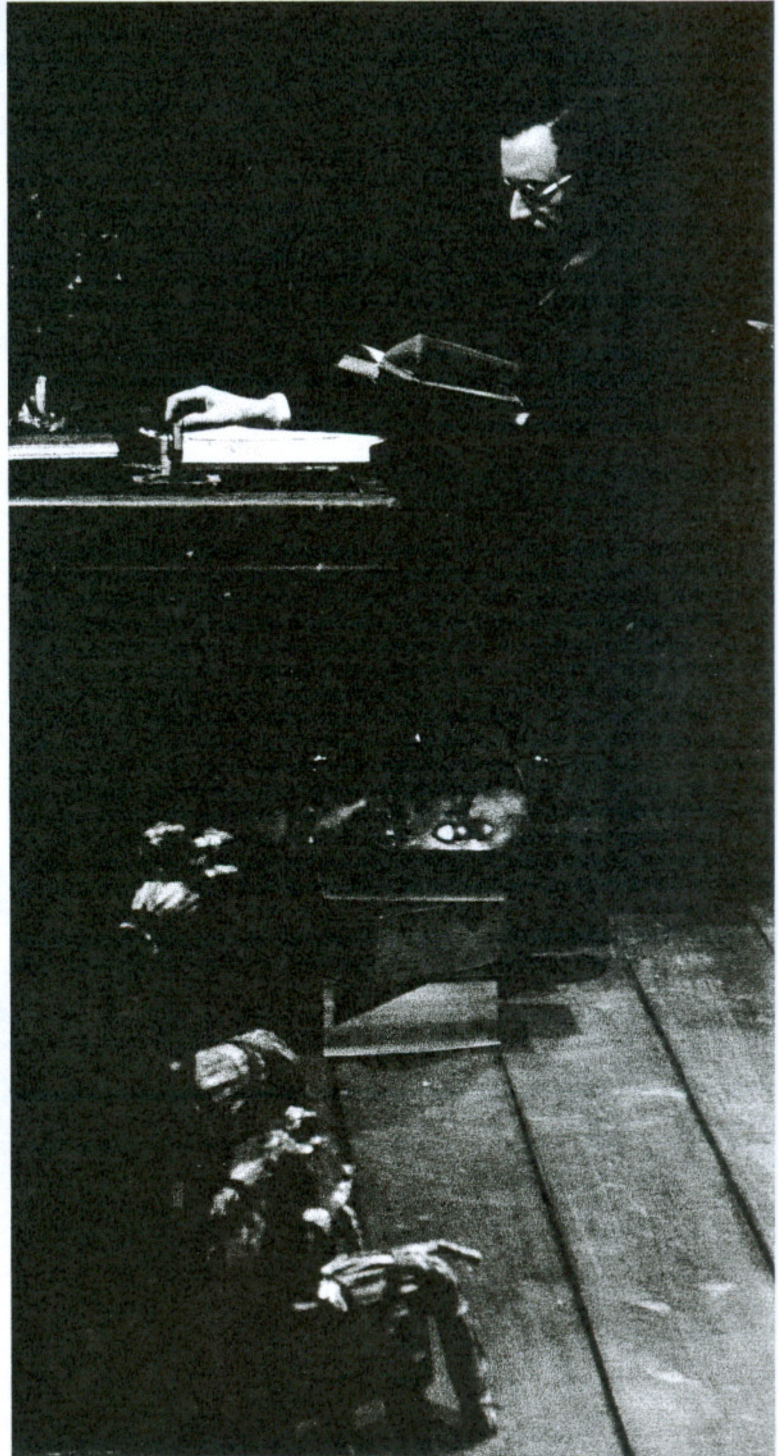
The book can be read in several ways. There are four decade essays which give an overview of the theater's journey in its forty years. There are an additional seventeen essays about events, movements, programs and trends that have been significant to Arena's artistic and financial growth. These twenty-one essays constitute a narrative history and can be read in sequence.

The season-by-season production history focuses on the artwork of Arena. Several shows are spotlighted for each season; those chosen were selected because they were either artistic successes, box office successes, of historical significance, or some combination of all three. It was difficult to choose only 100 plays out of four times that many—we apologize if we left out a particular favorite. The Chronology is a brief running commentary of events that described or affected the institution in any given season.

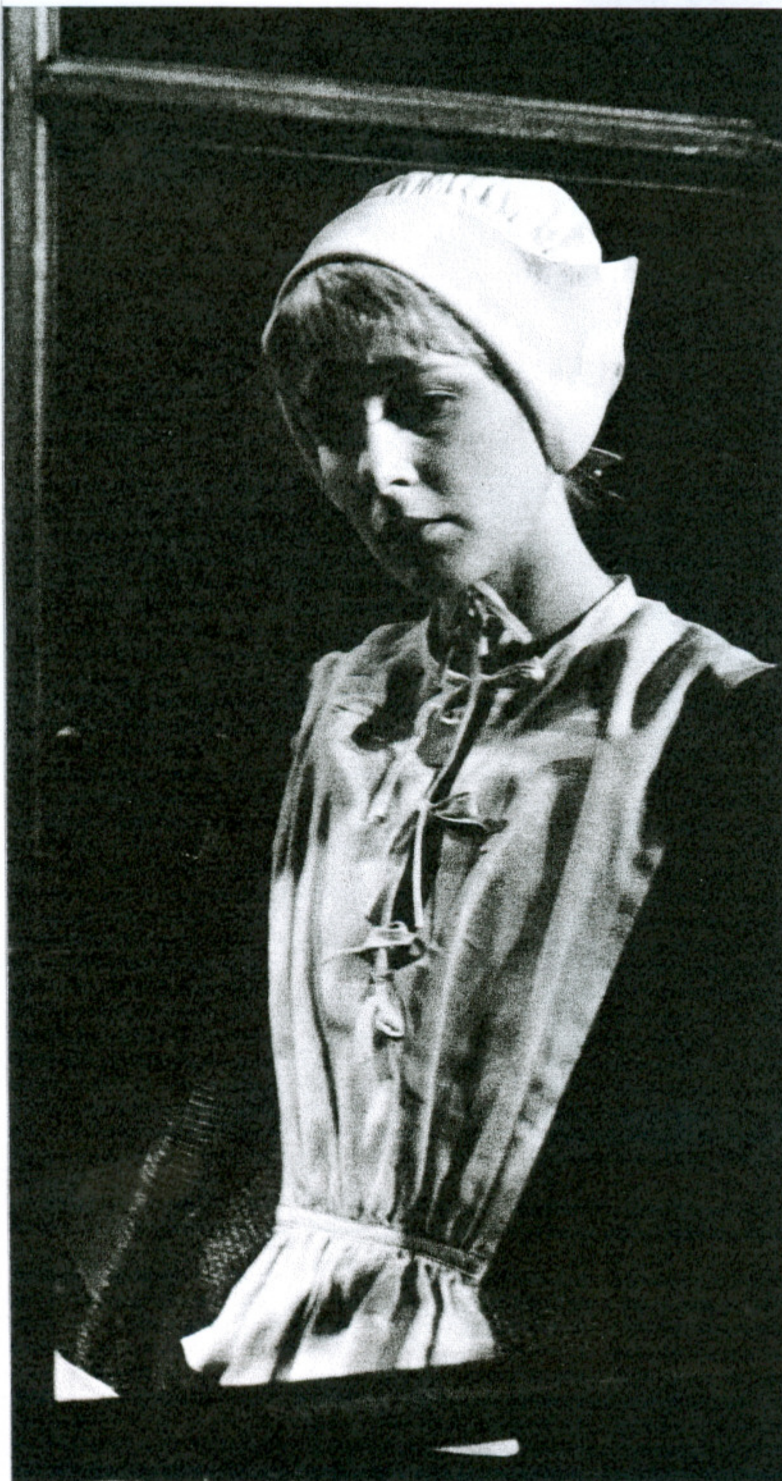
Arena has had three separate homes over the years. After it moved into its permanent home at Sixth and Maine Avenue, Southwest, it opened two other theaters in addition to its arena space. After 1970, in the production list that begins each season, there are symbols after each listed production. The symbol for the Arena space is (A); the Kreeger is (K); the Old Vat Room is (OVR); and the twice-used Scene Shop is designated as (SC). The shows are listed in order of their opening nights. There is also the designation of (SP). This stands for "special production," a full run of any production which was neither on our subscription season nor part of our new play programs. Some of our special productions were completely produced outside the building and brought in to the theater; others were almost completely produced by Arena. The (SP) designation covers these and every possible combination in between. There is also an essay in the book describing more fully how these special productions have rounded out our seasons.

That should be all one needs to know about how to journey through these pages. Just one more thing—enjoy it.

Laurence Maslon
Literary Manager/Dramaturg



Henry Strozier as Torvald in Zelda Fichandler's 1990 production of *A Doll House.*



At the risk of immodesty, I report that I write this having just returned from London where new productions of *The Crucible* and *After The Fall* are running at the Royal National Theatre, and *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, which I last saw forty-six years ago, at the Young Vic Theatre. The point in mentioning this is to indicate why I, like other American playwrights, lament the absence in this country of a national theatre subsidized at least partially by government, capable of doing first-class productions of large works, old and new.

I learned in London that the National has done nine productions of my work, more than those of any other playwright except Shakespeare. And now I realize, as I glance down the production record which has been sent me for the purposes of this foreword, that Arena Stage has given my work nine productions, many directed by Zelda Fichandler. Moreover, I saw her *Salesman* production with Bob Prosky back in 1974 and it was unforgettable, first-class.

Can it be that we have the beginnings of an American version of a national theatre without being aware of it? I am speaking, of course, of the regional theatres in the United States of which Arena is certainly one of the oldest and finest.

Perhaps we do in the sense that regional theatre has been first in discovering new playwrights like David Mamet and Sam Shepard and numerous others, and has done remarkable productions of new and classic plays. What the regionals do not yet have is sufficient backing to create the kind of continuity which the British National has been able to forge over two decades. It isn't that they do not come up with clinkers now and then, but that they are demanding of themselves a level of performance and a clarity of purpose which only a stable leadership can provide.

It is unfortunately necessary to add at this date, however, that much like Arena and other regional American theatres, they are close to desperation financially. The reason is really quite simple in both countries, and indeed everywhere that subsidized theatre exists. No matter how many sellout shows you have, the cost of theatrical production is greater than any box office can possibly take in, and subsidy has to make up the difference.

I find that after all these years many people are still not sure why theatre has the right to ask for subsidy when a certain kind of theatre can still make a lot of money with no government or outside support. Again, the answer is obvious; a commercial management puts on a hit and makes a mint and disappears into the bank. But an art theatre, even when it has a hit, is obliged to go on producing other plays which by the law of averages will not make much or any money. To put on valuable plays that are not necessarily widely popular is part of the art theatre's reason for existence whereas it is definitely not part of the commercial management's ideology at all.

For example, a commercial management is not likely to produce a revival of an American play no matter how beloved it may be unless a movie or TV star is willing to be in it. Only then can any revival hope to make a profit.

There is thus a choice facing the society, whether to consign old plays to a decent burial, or to keep them before the public through partially subsidized theatres.

We subsidize libraries to keep old books alive for new generations to read and subsidy is accepted as the only way to keep ballet and symphonic music from disappearing. Obviously, theatre is not really very different, but there is still great resistance to the idea of supporting it. Again, the reason seems to be that *some* plays still make a lot of money in commercial theatre while no symphony orchestra or ballet or museum or library does or can.

Years ago at Brandeis University I was asked the gut question by a man in the audience at a lecture I had given; "I manufacture shoes,"

FOREWORD

BY ARTHUR MILLER

he said. "If I don't sell enough shoes on the market to keep my factory going, why shouldn't I have the right to ask for subsidy if theatre has that right?"

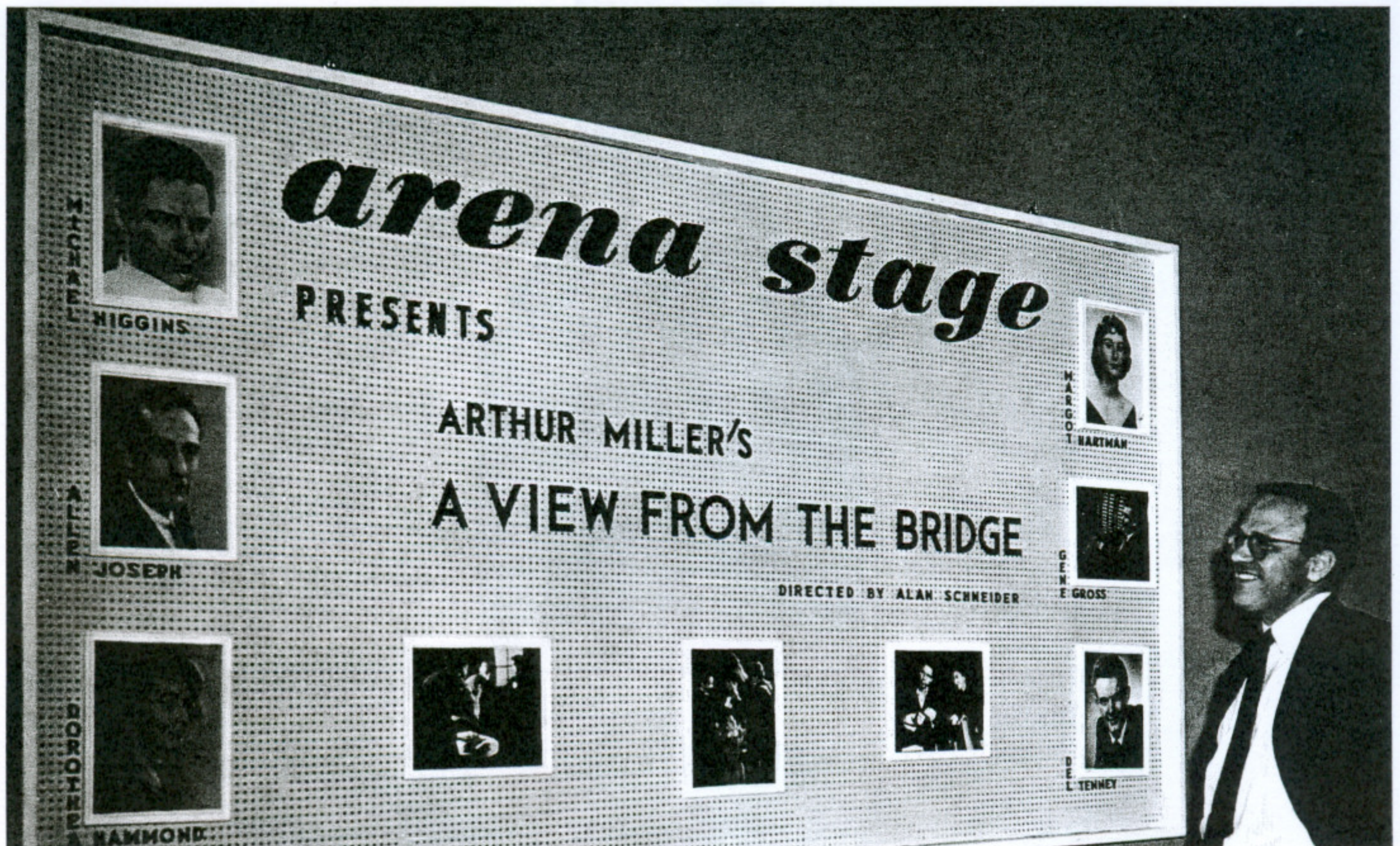
Good question, I thought. I had no answer, at least none that would make sense as long as I stayed on the market level of the issue. In some desperation I said, "I don't know the answer to that except to ask you a question—can you name one great classical Greek shoemaker?"

It was an unfair answer, I thought, but life is unfair; theatre is a thing of the spirit, and things of the spirit achieve a sublime status in the human mind where corporeal things do not. A real theatre entertains, to be sure, but it is as well a society talking to itself in search of its own image, and—yes, some meaning for its existence. A good pair of shoes, necessary as they may be, does not have that capacity. That is why we need theatre in a very different way than we need shoes, and why we should be willing to pay for it differently.

Facing page: Heather Ehlers as Abigail Williams in Zelda Fichandler's production of *The Crucible,* which performed at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem in 1987 and then returned for a successful summer run at Arena.

Top right: Arena has staged nine productions of works by playwright Arthur Miller.

Bottom: In 1956, Alan Schneider directed the first full-length version of *A View from the Bridge* which opened Arena's second home, The Old Vat.



Top: Arena Stage co-founder and producing director, Zelda Fichandler.

Bottom: Zelda in front of Arena's first home, the converted Hippodrome movie theater, the week before the theater's opening on August 16, 1950.

Facing page, left: Zelda on the set of her 1983 production of István Örkény's *Screenplay.*

Top right: Zelda in her first office under the bleachers of the Hippodrome.

Bottom right: Zelda and Tom Fichandler.

Everything should belong to whoever is best for it—
Children to the motherly, so that they shall thrive,
Wagons to good drivers, to be well driven,
And the valley to those who will water it and make it fruitful.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle, with which Arena chose to launch its Fortieth Anniversary Season, is based on a fourteenth century Chinese play attributed to Li Hsing-tao, but the test of the chalk circle is found in an ancient Chinese legend as old as the biblical story of Solomon. In the original it's the natural mother who wins the child, but Bertolt Brecht has politicized the ending, giving it extraordinary meaning. The idea being, of course, that things belong to those who raise them up—ownership is not a matter of genetics, but of labor and of love.

Arena returns to this theme, so vividly embodied by Brecht, for the third time. Its first production, the American premiere of the play, opened the new Arena building on October 30, 1961. That was the year the Berlin Wall went up and there was some consternation about picking this particular then-avant-garde play by this particular East German writer for so spotlighted an event. There was another production in the seventies with the extraordinary company actor Robert Prosky in the role of the maverick judge Azdak. And now, as the Wall comes tumbling down, and with a multicultural company that speaks to and of our times, we revisit, within the circle, by means of the circle, some of Arena's defining themes.

The theory of relativity tells us that time passes more slowly for an object in motion than for one at rest, so the reader will understand that as I look back through the years, I have a sense of events that took place within an infinitely long arc of time, eons of time, a geological age ago, perhaps, one that might even merit its own name! My subjective experience is an illusion, however, and the theory of relativity applicable only in an imaginative way. For the reclamation of the American theater to ownership by its communities (a movement in which Arena was a premier pioneer) has, in actual fact, taken place very swiftly—in less than fifty years—a mere blink of the eye as these things go. The American resident theater, as a continuing collective of artists and administrators, existing for and engaging with audiences who not only attend it but take responsibility for its nurturance and survival, whose purpose is not to make money but to make art, has been, in terms of calendar years, the fastest-growing artform in American history!

The journey has seemed so long because Arena went on every leg of it—from the $1.98 file box in which it collected its few planning papers and lists of actors to the three-theater complex in southwest Washington and a budget pushing $10 million a year. And because, despite all that money, we still can't afford to hold on to those treasures that come along, a couple almost every year, to keep "in repertory" as our artistic signature to show again to the people who live here and who come to our Capital City. Nor, indeed, is there the habit, as there is in European cities, to revisit beloved theatrical experiences. So, in the American way, productions are scrapped (how terrible the sound of the set being smashed on closing night!) and each season, forty of them now, we start afresh. In those years, Arena has produced over four hundred plays (sometimes we call them "works" instead of "plays"): gathered the production forces, chosen the artistic point-of-view and manifested it concretely by means of the various arts of the theater, marketed it to an audience, and turned impossibility into possibility (the essence of the creative

INTRODUCTION

BY ZELDA FICHANDLER

process). Four hundred times. Four hundred worlds have been discovered, uncovered, for our audiences, before our audiences. And that, believe me, has taken some running just to stay in the same place!

The Arena halls, shops, offices and rehearsal rooms are quiet; one finds no hysteria with us. But it is the quiet of intense concentration, of problems seeking solutions Now. Life is time and time is life and we know that the Fifth Freedom, the freedom to fail, while it is another linchpin in the creative process, is not one we can lean against too heavily. There is definitely the sense of being ''an object in motion,'' I'll confess it.

A theater is a space, no more than that. Ah, but it is a special space, a magic space, a place of the imagination where anything can happen! It's a place where we can set up any rules we like, much as children make up their games, and take on roles and play out scenes and act out deeds and tell stories—wonderful, engrossing stories about our dreams, and what we do in the daytime, and what we would like to have happen and hate to have happen and how things turn out when we decide them this way or that. Theater is a space where we test out and witness what it means to be human; in finding these meanings, we become still more human. The need for this imagined, moral space is so deep and so urgent that it seems almost biologic. We have evidence that when the rituals of theater disintegrate, the very patterns of human interchange die out at the same time; that what we recognize as a ''society,'' as civilization, cannot exist without some formal practices of making theater.

The art of the theater was never meant to exist for the purpose of making a profit—in the economic sense, of course; its profit is of another kind. ''As the eye is formed, such are its powers,'' wrote William Blake. The theater is capable of showing us our own face, plumbing for us the human heart, leading us to the edge of our own mind. And this capacity so intrigued and compelled us that we wrenched ourselves away from the force that is Broadway (a force that is weaker but still exists today), became non-profit in structure, and set ourselves down in community after community after community all over the United States, in large communities and small,

until we exist in over 350 of them, play to over nineteen million people a year, create most of the new work coming forward, produce most of the classics, and develop most of the acting, directing, designing as well as playwriting talent that is making the American theater the most energized it has ever been in its history and the object of admiration of the entire world.

When I say "non-profit" I don't mean "outside the money circle." Money is still a big deal with us. I am talking about the central intention of an institution, the direction the arrow of its energy points, how its decisions are made and for what reasons. I'm talking about a value system. It's very expensive to do all that Arena does. It usually has 175 people on its payroll, sometimes more, and salaries that account for over 60% of its outlays. A little over half of its money goes directly to the art, to what you see on the stage. The rest goes to maintaining the surround—the institution—that enables us to get the art there (what we roughly call "administration," though in my books that's an art, too).

We earn two-thirds of what we spend the easy way—from what we produce, from the art itself. The hard part is ironically called "unearned income"—income from a small endowment, grants and gifts from government, foundations, corporations, and from individuals. Almost one-third of unearned income comes from our ticket buyers. Arena is a populist theater and popular in its hometown. And I see no contradiction in calling it an elitist theater as well—in the old meaning of the word, one that is self-chosen by those who work in it and those who come to it. Money is always a consideration but never the determinant, and I think that's what "non-profit" means in the real world today. Of course, if we charged Broadway prices (roughly double ours) we wouldn't have to raise so much money. But then we wouldn't have the audience we want to talk with, and/or we wouldn't have them as often.

The tenuousness of the situation with the National Endowment for the Arts as I write this has everyone in the theater world alert and uneasy. It's not simply the NEA dollars themselves (which are meagre by world standards; only sixty-four cents per taxpayer per year); it's the support from other sources that a policy of federal support engenders. In 1988, $119 million in NEA grants generated over $1.36 billion in private funds. Talk about making money work! Arena operated for fifteen years without government support and twenty-five years with it and I don't know if we could ever go home again.

The community ringed around the theater circles a community within the theater. The people without, as well as the people within, constitute the theater in its fullest sense. And when things are as they should be, the theater owns its idea of itself. When you lose subscribers, you lose part of the idea. You have to win them back. Small audiences are not necessarily a sign of artistic failure, but they are a sign that there is some failure in the continuum of communication, and the issue has to be addressed and not ignored. The arena stage symbolizes the relationship of the audience to the work. Events are not merely looked at, they are surrounded and absorbed. And the actors reach the audience through a circle of concentration with their fellow actors that is their way of being on the stage, their style.

While the audience comes to visit, to partake, to enjoy and to learn, for the artists, the theater is their artistic home. It is their way of life. I include administrators as artists, although their art is of a different kind. Arena is an ensemble theater. We do what we do "ensemble"—together—and that is not an abstraction at all, but a reality of our daily life. In that sense, I believe Arena to be an ideal community, with much it could teach the world about consensus, centrality of intention, leadership from above/down and leadership from below/up, the sustaining of effort, taking responsibility—owning—one's actions, and commitment to the overall objectives of the enterprise. Arena is a cultural institution and, at the same time, has its own institutional culture—a particular way that it functions and regards itself. Again, a value system. I'm proud to have been its leader for these decades, I admire it and the people it attracts.

At the very center of the circle stands the actor and the means by which the actor prevails, the acting company. How could it be otherwise for us? If we are engaged in a dialogue with you about this journey between two darknesses that we call life, about the various and miraculous ways in which the human species comes to terms with the events of this journey, who but the actor can stand in for you, there upon the stage? Who but the actor can perform the deeds on your behalf? Laugh and cry for you? Struggle and suffer and be foolish and fight and triumph and perish and struggle up again for you? Since only a man can represent a man, of course the art of the theater, at the moment when it is an art, in the moment of exchange between the stage and the audience, finds its source in the real-life/make-believe of the actor.

And since a play is its own world and since the chief ingredient of any world—fictive or real—is the pattern and timbre of its human relationships, who better can show you that world than a group (a team, an ensemble, a company) whose members know each other, relate to each other, are not strangers to or afraid of each other, have found a way of thinking and playing together (a play is play), and have a shared artistic and personal past?

The largest circumference of the circle is the world the theater lives in, which it connects to through its deep interest and concern and which it tries to penetrate with its knowledge and understanding: the concrete, transitory, political world which changes from decade to decade and from year to year and the psychological world which never changes and remains ever-elusive and resistant to solution and any kind of ultimate resolution. Playwrights of both worlds have interested us and, in particular, the truly great playwrights—Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, Arthur Miller—who live in both worlds at once and whose works, therefore, can, as the world turns, be looked to again and again for fresh meanings from their depths that were not seen before.

The largest circumference of the circle is the world the theater lives in and that is a multicultural world, a world defined by the multitudinous ways in which our species expresses the universal themes. It is a story of infinite richness and variety. Arena has always been a theater of multicultural expression and now it is even more so in the awareness that the further it can extend its reach, the richer it will become; the more it can encompass, the denser and more complex its art. Multiculturalism at Arena is not a social program but an aspect of its artistic expressivity.

"When the wind blows, it blows through every crack and cranny," writes Brecht in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. At the root of the act of theater is empathy. Compassion. To play a character, the actor must walk in the shoes of another, see the world from another's point-of-view. To view a play, the audience enters into, breathes with, empathizes with, the life on the stage. Without our capacity for empathy, there could be no experience of theater. If we need to be told it, the theater tells us that we're all in this together. The more we can feel and take in, the deeper our art, the richer our life. Viewed in this way, art and life are indissolubly linked, belonging to each other, one nourishing the other, one giving substance to the other.

It's worth another forty years, at least.

IN THE BEGINNING

ESSAY

In the beginning, there was only Broadway and the "Road."

In the years after the Second World War, America had two major forms of professional theater: the New York-based world of Broadway, which produced the first and best productions in the theater, and the "Road," or theaters across the country which booked in the second (and by no means the best) companies of the plays that premiered on Broadway. There were exceptions to be sure—the Cleveland Play House, the Alley Theatre in Houston, Margo Jones' Theatre 47 in Dallas—but few cities played host to any real kind of indigenous theater.

In Washington, D.C., the situation was even worse. In 1948, the National Theater, a touring house, closed its doors rather than integrate. There were several earnest playmakers eager to fill the vacuum, but the most vibrant and successful were a teacher and a student from the graduate drama department of George Washington University. Edward Mangum was the professor who ran an amateur theater group called the Mount Vernon Players. He was bemoaning the lack of real theater in Washington to his most gifted student, the twenty-four-year-old Zelda Fichandler, when it occurred to them that the simplest solution was to start one of their own.

Theater—on- and off-stage—had played a major role in Zelda's make-up. At Rose Robison Cowen's Children's Studios of Speech and Drama she played Helga in *Helga and the White Peacock*, an otherwise unremarkable piece of dramatic literature, in which, according to Zelda, "I got marvelous notices." Fascinated by the theater, Zelda cut a dramatic figure while studying Russian language and literature at Cornell University before attending George Washington. While there, she met Thomas Fichandler, born of a theatrical and musical family, who came to Washington to be a New Deal economist. While working for the Twentieth Century Fund, he took Zelda to see a "corny" play called *Kiss And Tell* and they were married in 1946.

The idea of starting a theater seemed a natural one for Zelda: "Everything seemed to come together—my political conscience, my interest in literature, my dramatic sense, my curiosity about people." But the aesthetic for the theater would be as important as the notion to start one, and it was the embracing of a different aesthetic that would make Arena unique. Mangum had seen Margo Jones' theater-in-the-round in Texas and convinced Zelda of the form's power and possibilities. "The idea was to take the theater back to its tribal beginnings," said Zelda, "when someone said 'Gather round me and let me tell you how it happened.' We wanted to go back to uniting audience and play in one room, in one emotional environment."

Finding the one room proved more difficult. Mangum and the Fichandlers spent eighteen months looking at various sites, garages, warehouses, churches. Some theaters have been built on air, but Arena was almost built on water; at one point, a 327-foot excursion boat called the SS *Potomac* was acquired for a $429 towing fee, but this idea was abandoned when no suitable harbor was found. So, like Noah, they were back on dry land.

The biblical patriarch might have been a bit abashed by the eventual site: the Hippodrome Theatre, at Ninth and New York Avenues, N.W., a former burlesque and "art" movie house. In order to purchase and renovate the theater, the group formed Arena Enterprises, Inc., a profit-making stock company, and raised shares from a group of forty Washingtonians composed of ambassadors, carpenters, housewives, and a tennis pro. They raised $15,000 and began the arduous task of making an arena stage out of a dark, chewing-gum bespattered movie house.

There were problems, of course. On opening day, a city inspector came around, asking for an occupancy permit. The group hardly knew what it was, let alone where to get it. But Zelda jumped in the sidecar of the inspector's motorcycle and zoomed down to City Hall and came back, hours later, permit in hand. More disconcerting had been the city inspector's refusal to license a theater unless it had a traditional asbestos fire curtain. As this was an impossibility for a theater-in-the-round, a clever resolution was found: the word "theater" was to be eliminated from all promotion and advertising. And so, the would-be Arena Theater became forever after Arena Stage.

Eventually, 247 seats were installed in seven rows on two sides and three rows on the other two sides of a sixteen-by-twenty-foot rectangular playing area. A resident company of eight actors was hired, and ticket prices were set at $1.90 for evenings and $1.50 for matinees. Mangum and Zelda made $65 a week, the actors made $55, and the pay scaled down from there. It started to feel like home, or at least *a* home. But, as Tom Fichandler pointed out, the Hippodrome, situated in an unpleasant neighborhood, was not really made to accommodate the problems of a theater: "One night, we were doing *Alice In Wonderland* and all the actors were dressed in very weird costumes—rabbits, turtles, that sort of thing. It was raining and I had to escort them from backstage into the theater with an umbrella. That night we ran into two winos in the alley. I never saw a reaction like that. I'll bet we cured them better than Alcoholics Anonymous ever could have."

Still, on August 16, 1950, the theater had its first night with a production of *She Stoops to Conquer*. In the program was the following note:

> Arena Stage plans to bring to its audience the best of plays both old and new as well as worthwhile original scripts on a permanent, year-round repertory basis. Local in origin, it was founded in the belief that if drama-hungry playgoers outside of the ten blocks of Broadway are to have a living stage, they must create it for themselves. Arena Stage was financed by Washingtonians—students, teachers, lawyers, doctors, scientists, government workers, housewives—who love theater and who want to see it flourish in the city in which they work and live. Its permanent staff of distinguished actors and technicians, many of whom have come to Arena Stage via the stages of other cities, now all call Washington their home.

Forty years later, the same philosophy still holds true.

Edward Mangum and Zelda look on as Arena sells its first ticket, August 16, 1950.

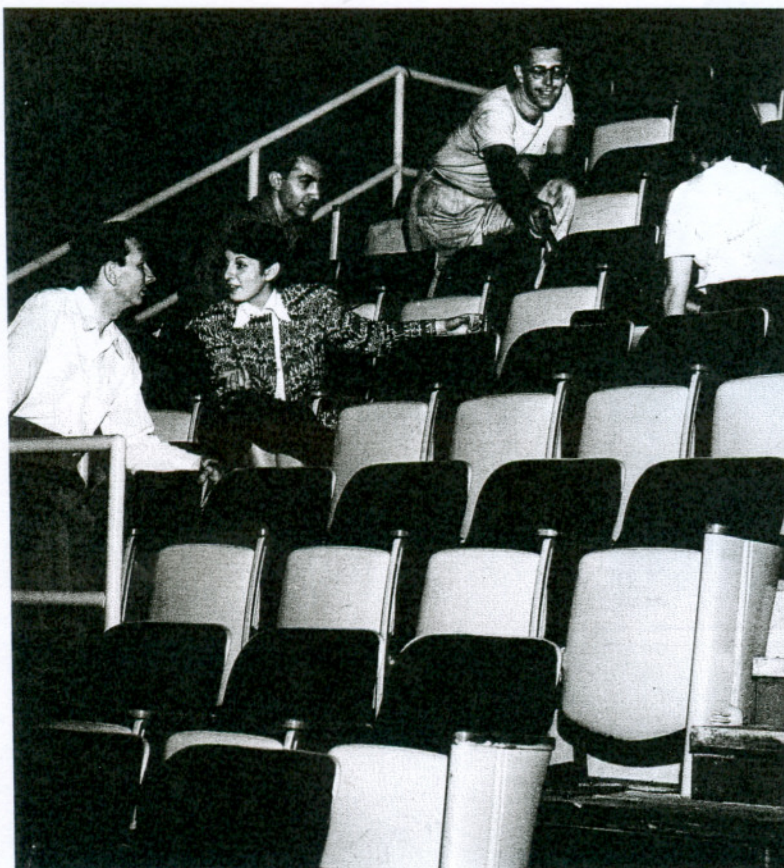
It was a decade that began with a ground-breaking idea—the notion of a resident theater in the nation's capital—and ended with an actual ground-breaking, an incontrovertible sign that in ten years Arena Stage had found its way and found its home.

The first half of the decade, spent at the converted Hippodrome Theatre, was truly the stuff of backstage legend. A group of young theater artists, guided by Zelda Fichandler, with no national reputations and little ready cash, worked round-the-clock to supply a steady stream of intriguing plays in a unique physical aesthetic, the arena space. The early years were marked by an earnest desperation. The first season contained seventeen different plays, to this date the largest season repertoire. The plays themselves lived by the seat of their pants: shows that didn't catch on were promptly yanked from their scheduled runs. Likewise, successes such as *Summer And Smoke* and *Room Service* added additional weeks if the audience demand warranted it. The schedule may have been fluid, but the choice of plays remained remarkably consistent with Arena's ongoing mission: classic plays in inventive and illuminating productions, strong American voices of brand-new or recent origin, and the reexamination of international plays that were not commercial successes on Broadway. This last category, in a way, was most significant for Arena's growth. It proved that life—indeed, redemption—for plays could exist beyond Broadway.

The work, of course, could not have been accomplished without the efforts of a young and committed Arena staff and company. Working behind the scenes with Zelda and co-founder Edward Mangum was Thomas Fichandler, who supplied much-needed support and financial acumen as associate producer. Alan Schneider, a drama professor at Catholic University, came to Arena and through his disciplined and sensitive direction of American and new works helped create an aesthetic for the theater and launched his career as one of the major American directors of the post-war years. Technical support was supplied by designer Walter Stilley and lighting designer Leo Gallenstein, who worked wonders on the theater's limited budget and resources.

Many familiar faces got their starts on the Hippodrome stage. The young actors, many from nearby Catholic and George Washington Universities, learned their craft by making major leaps of characterization and inspiration. Their performances were praised by local critics like Ernie Schier, Jay Carmody, and Tom Donnelly, and, in an era when Washington had four newspapers, their support and enthusiasm helped the theater to attract a loyal audience. Richard L. Coe of the *Washington Post* was particularly helpful, pushing Arena's "low ticket-prices, air-conditioning, good play choices, and good performances."

But even as attendance and enthusiasm increased, they were outpaced by rising costs, even with a new $2.50 top ticket. The Hippodrome, with its 247 seats, could not supply enough income and the theater nearly went bankrupt at the end of the 1953-54 season, until Zelda's production of *Room Service* arrived just in time. The handwriting was on the wall: "Everyone is overworked and chronically tired," said Zelda. "Our schedule keeps us on a merry-go-round." So,



in July of 1955, in the middle of a successful run of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, the theater closed for a year to find a new home and to reorganize itself financially.

Zelda knew what she wanted: ''Arena will continue to operate basically in the theater-in-the-round form. But, if possible, the new building should provide for adaptation to three-sided staging, area staging, and other variants.'' The theater should also be located downtown and, most importantly, provide for five to six hundred seats. The converted Hospitality Hall of the Old Heurich Brewery provided a temporary new home in November of 1956, at the cost of a $40,000 renovation. The Old Vat, as it had now been dubbed, provided a new level of comfort and theatrical charm for its audience, which responded to the change of scene with an unprecedented 2,300 subscriptions at the end of the first Vat season and an increase of $36,000 in income.

Artistic achievement was high at the Vat, as if the increased stability of the new home made things less desperate and allowed the theater to grow and experiment with its work. Larger plays, larger casts, and broader views of the material characterized the productions of Shaw, O'Neill, O'Casey, and Chekhov as well as new writers. There was cohesion and adventure, and these days would be remembered fondly by the staff and the audience. It was an era of outside confirmation of Arena's shining example of solid theater-making. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* was an early supporter, writing ''Arena Stage is the resident theater that provides Washington playgoers with drama of literary and intellectual distinction, as well as the unpretentious entertainment now and then. It is invaluable for theatergoers with taste.'' The other important outside contribution came from the Ford Foundation's Humanities and Arts Program, headed by W. McNeil Lowry, whose first grant of $10,000 in 1957 began a long-term symbiotic relationship between the Foundation and Arena, each growing from each other's experience, feedback, monetary, and artistic contributions.

But with increased artistic expectation, and still under the Damoclean threat of the wrecking ball in The Old Vat, Arena knew its only way to grow was to find a new, permanent home and an efficient way of increasing income. The solution to the latter problem was an extraordinary one. In October of 1959, at an emotional meeting, the Board of Directors voted themselves out of their directorships, dissolved Arena Enterprises—Arena's parent stock company—and transferred its assets in the form of loans and gifts to the Washington Drama Society, a newly-created non-profit organization that was able to receive further gifts and government grants. The non-profit theater, truly existing for the phrase ''art for art's sake,'' had come into being for the first time.

The move enabled Arena to negotiate for a waterfront site in the redeveloped southwest section of Washington and to receive financial support from the public and private sectors. The story of the new home is recounted in another essay, but the decade really closes in October of 1960, at the ground-breaking ceremony at Arena's present location. Having broken the first shovelful of earth, Zelda said:

> Our aim is no less than this—to bring life to life—and by this aim we are urgently and indissolubly connected to the world we live in and to the people we live for. We are a theater for audiences. We are not an idle or esoteric experiment. We live to illuminate life and make it more meaningful and more joyful.

Facing page, left: Edward Mangum, Zelda, Tom Fichandler and two volunteers renovate Arena's first home, the Hippodrome.

Facing page, top right: the cast of the 1957-58 production of *The Doctor's Dilemma* leaving rehearsal; from left to right, Louis Edmonds, Allen Joseph, Tom Bosley, Astrid Wilsrud, Peter Breck, Lois Alexander, and Michael Lewis