

The ritual dramas of Thomas a Becket's martyrdom echoes through the vaulted glory of Emmanuel Church's Lindbergh Chapel.



Sen O'Connor has produced numerous TCB plays; and she and Director David Wheeler (below) are among those responsible for the company's special sense of style.



'So far as the intellectual climate is concerned, this is a great town. In terms of community support, dollars and cents, Boston is terrible'

The Theater Company: acts of faith

Story by Robert Taylor
Photos by Gilbert Friedberg

BROADWAY has been the American theater's hardened artery so long that death has blown his lines. After the worst season in memory, next year looks bleaker still. (Tight money? Shoddy goods? No playwrights? Union scales? Boxoffice?) Whatever the reason, or complex of reasons, Broadway seems as remote now from the theater that produced O'Neill, Williams and Miller in their prime, as The Poet's Corner of Forest Lawn Cemetery. Indeed the sole element lacking is a memorial service featuring an all-star chorus of "Hello Dolly!" and moneys of cactus flowers.

Replacing Broadway theater are sundry brands of contemporary jargon: university theater (Sack & Boskin present "Corbodu"), off-Broadway (a mulligataway of the marvelous and the miserable), cultural-center troupes ("Cymeline" with an extinct Hollywood star to hype the gross), various schools of political propaganda and group therapy (guerrilla, alley, street and living theater), environmental theater ("Silent Flows the Sky") and, of course, the catchpenny pretense of present-day Broadway.

THE Theater Company of Boston doesn't fall into any of these categories. The omnibus designation "regional theater" covers it, though what that term signifies — since TCB has never dabbled in local color — depends knoweth not. Regional theater around here would embrace many companies. The Charles Playhouse which antedates The Theater Company, The Proposition's long-running hardboiled, the Craft Experimental Theater, The Caravan Theater, The Hub Theater, and others.

But the problems of TCB are perhaps emblematic of the plight of the decentralized stage during the wake of Broadway. Like the Charles and the Trinity Playhouse in Providence, it is a fully-professional company employing Equity actors. Several of the players have become better-known in other contexts, thus proving the heavy axiom that you have to leave Boston to get recognition in the arts: Dustin Hoffman, Rhyne Danner, Paul Benedict and Jon Voight, the midnight cowboy. From time to time some alumnus makes vague noises about returning to Boston to stretch his artistic reach with the Theater Company. To date, Benedict is the only one who does, but you never can tell.

SINCE its first production (a double-bill of Albee's "The Sandbox" and "The Death of Beale Smith" at the Hotel Bostonian in the Summer of 1963), the company and the founder and director, David Wheeler, have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for selecting scripts, plays that were obscure or neglected, and which have subsequently made an impact.

Consider rare categories. American premieres (the catalogue of Boston premieres would usurp too much space). The Theater Company of Boston staged the first American performance of:

- Ann Jellicoe's "The Knack" (After the Boston production in the Fall of 1963, the play was done off-Broadway and made into a film.)
- Harold Pinter's "A Slight Ache" (Fall, 1964), and "The Dwarf" (Fall, 1967).
- Slavomir Mrozek's "Charlie" (Spring, 1965) and "Tango" (Summer, 1967).
- John Arden's "Live Like Pigs" (Winter, 1965), "Armstrong's Last Goodnight" (Fall, 1966) and "Left-Handed Liberty" (Spring, 1968).
- Gunter Grass's "The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising" (Summer, 1968).
- Heathcote Williams's "The Local Stigmatic" (Fall, 1967).

Together with the American premieres which were also world premieres by such writers as Geoffrey Bush, John Hawkes, Adrienne Kennedy, James Leo Herlihy, Sam Shepard, Rosalyn Drexler and Frederic Kimball, all this has earned kudos. David Wheeler received the Rodgers and Hammerstein award for his contribution to the American theater; three times the Rockefeller Foundation bestowed grants, first for a Festival of New American Plays, then for a series of staged readings of new works, and finally for the training of black talent. The National Council on the Arts and Humanities chipped in \$22,500.

IN ANY other municipality of the country, The Theater Company of Boston would be among the chief civic adornments. It is, given the intelligent and sensitive people who do provide support, considered an adornment here. Yet the regional definition of regional theater is "in Boston,

a luxury." Bernard Taper, for example, in his detailed and authoritative new book "The Arts in Boston," which ought to be required reading for anyone concerned with specific support of culture, eventually concludes that the best bet for local subsidy lies in "art activities clearly aimed at the population of Boston's inner city." A worthy enterprise. Where does it leave, however, a company that by its nature is less involved with social amelioration than with art?

I cannot resist quoting in this regard from Taper. An excerpt from his book, reprinted in the March issue of "Boston" magazine, states the impasse of the arts in this city clearly.

"(Boston) restricted by political boundaries, is yet expected to offer to the suburbanites and the exurbanites, as well as the numerous visitors from beyond, all the facilities, opportunities and delights that only a metropolitan center can provide."

Certainly the arts in Boston are of metropolitan importance. Yet within the city proper, the arts have, so to speak, scarcely any political constituency. One has only to compare statistics as to the composition of the audience at a typical Boston Symphony Orchestra concert with the vital statistics for the population of the city of Boston to be struck by how different these two constituencies are."

Taper cites a survey which revealed the median income at a Boston Symphony Orchestra concert to be \$12,300, with more than 67 percent of the male respondents — they were professionals or artists or in a managerial capacity — having done graduate work. By comparison, the last census shows the median family income for Boston to be \$5747 and the median education to be 11.2 years of schooling. Only 2 percent of the Boston Symphony listeners consisted of blue-collar workers; only 4 percent of the persons who live in Boston have incomes above \$10,000. Forty-six percent of inner-city citizens have not completed high school.

SUPERIMPOSE upon statistics the nomadic history of the Theater Company of Boston. TCB has traveled from a diminutive 95-seat auditorium in the Bostonian to a larger theater in the Hotel Touraine, then to the former Fenway Theater which was remodeled at a cost to the company of approximately \$40,000. The Fenway, owned by Bryant & Stratton business

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These kids go through life never knowing what it is like not to be hungry. They subsist day after day on a few greens around noon and some pinto beans in the evening. Nothing more. Nothing different. And not even enough of that.

It sounds incredible because it's taking place right now...in the midst of the good life so many of us are living in America. But walk down the back roads of most any Mississippi Delta town and you'll see tenant farmers, field hands, seasonal workers...and their children...with stomachs bloated, eyes dulled, feet swollen, arms and legs matchstick thin.

The irony is that they aren't starving at a rate dramatic enough to arouse the indignation of the nation and the world. Otherwise something would have already been done.

One of the programs that is aiding many of these families is the federally sponsored Food Stamp Plan. Under this plan a needy family can convert a 50¢ food stamp into as much as \$12.00 worth of food. The problem is getting that 50¢, because many families have no income at all.

The NAACP Special Contribution Fund is conducting a nationwide drive to help thousands survive. If you can do with one less "dinner out" this month, the money can mean a month's supply of meat, milk, and bread for a family of five. Just \$10.00 buys up to \$240.00 in food stamps.

If you would like to contribute to this fund, please send your tax-deductible check, for as little or as much as you can, to the NAACP Emergency Relief Fund.

Thank you.

Your \$10 Gift to these hungry kids can bring them \$240 worth of meat, milk and bread.



NAACP Emergency Relief Fund, Dept. 4 M, Box 121, Radio City Station, New York, N.Y. 10019

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'There's a tradition here of private patronage, and most of that goes to the Symphony or the Museum of Fine Arts'

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college, supplied a three-year respite, but Bryant & Stratton needed the premises for expansion, and the Theater Company, after an amicable parting, re-commenced its rambles. Fortunately, Alvin Kershaw, the rector, and John Greely, the associate minister of Emmanuel Church, offered office space and, in the Leslie Lindsey Memorial Chapel, an ideal setting for the performance of T. S. Eliot's "Murder In The Cathedral."

Although the condition may be resolved by the time this account appears, TCB was again homeless, and at a moment when two other cultural institutions, The Boston Opera Company and The Boston Ballet, were similarly displaced. The signs looked ominous. Was it the fate of Boston artists to forever knock on doors? And could one fault Boston? Patchwork metropolitan planning not only affects social and political issues, but the entire cultural structure, for theater and ballet and opera really relate to the bourgeoisie of the suburbs, who are more often than not inclined to use cultural resources without reckoning the role these assume in determining the quality of regional life. At any rate, it seemed a good time to approach The Theater Company of Boston, between engagements.

"LET'S discriminate between Boston's intellectual climate and the social climate of support," said Sara O'Connor.

She is a tall brunette, and the co-producer of "Murder in the Cathedral." We stood amid the deep-traceried Gothic splendors of the Leslie Lindsey chapel, the Travertine marble, the medieval misericordia stalls, the carved bosses, pendants, saints and angels. The stained glass windows cast an aqueous shimmer on the relief carvings of the reredos.

"So far as the intellectual climate is concerned this is a great town. In terms of community support, dollars and cents, Boston is terrible."

Like many key figures connected with culture and cultural institutions here, Sara O'Connor feels that Greater Boston business exploits the existing set-up. "We're acting as free advertising for the personnel departments of the firms along Route 128," she said. While corporate support of the arts has increased nationally, assuming the responsibilities of the tycoons and old families who once underwrote the cultural deficit, Boston corporate giving is only one-half the national average.

"It's particularly hard on what you might call the 'middle-group' — well-established companies like ours or The Charles Playhouse or, in other areas, the Institute of Contemporary Art or The Boston Ballet. There's a tradition here of private patronage, and most of that goes to the Boston Symphony or The Museum of

Fine Arts. No one would deny the value of either: but this leaves the rest of us on a shoestring."

THE Metropolitan Cultural Alliance, which is a sort of mutual fund of the arts, pooling support for all, may help alleviate the imbalance. Meanwhile, the Theater Company of Boston isn't singing the desolation blues. Three years ago a do-or-die crisis occurred when the Touraine went bust and no other space seemed available.

"The Theater Company of Boston almost became the Theater Company of Buffalo," Miss O'Connor said. She stared pensively down the vaulted nave where a few of the actors had begun rehearsing. "We had a firm offer from Buffalo to re-locate there. In spite of our problems, nobody wanted to move: it's that intellectual dimension, aware audiences in Boston: so, in desperation we wrote Mayor Collins's office. We never received a line in reply."

It is hardly surprising that with only a handful of city voters able to support the arts, the arts should occupy the bottom of a political list of priorities. The crisis, though, is less acute today: the Theater Company has a few options.

"There's a possibility of a university affiliation, a place in the proposed South End Cultural Center, the waterfront, or the BRA Flower Mart."

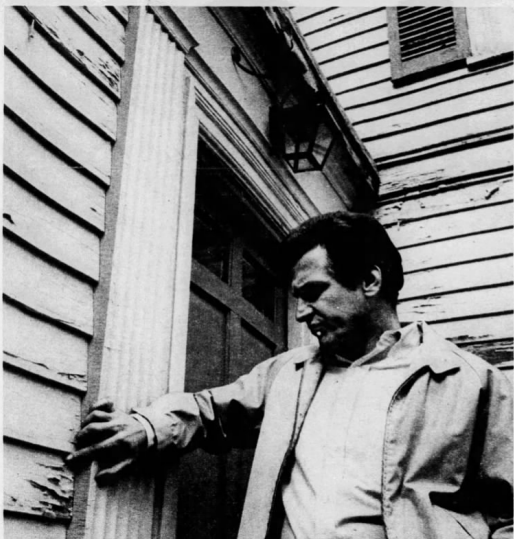
NO alternatives seemed open until the Fenway Theater settled the previous crisis. Furthermore, the present season began with an unexpected commercial success, a double bill of Elaine May's "Adaptation" and Terence McNally's "Next" which played four months. The payroll of The Theater Company fluctuates between two and four thousand dollars a week and an actor may gross \$142, in some cases more. The box office isn't enough to support the enterprise, however. An average season costs about \$140,000. Box office receipts will account for \$70 thousand to \$75 thousand; the remainder comes from grants and private support. Last year major grants accounted for \$42,000, local grants for \$5,000. There is always a deficit, the price of privately-supported art in America.

The foundations are generous, Sara O'Connor said, but not for building theaters. "If we don't find a place we can afford, we'll tour."

Such a decision is one of the small, bitter wisdoms that cultural institutions distill from experience in Boston.

"We had to decide who we are and what we're doing. The last time we were out of a theater was a time of considerable soul-searching. We came to the conclusion that what matters is the company, not the real estate."

continued



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To support the extra cost of touring, there is generally support from the colleges and a sympathetic response from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities which likes to see — as in their Theater Environment series — community involvement. Since there is none of the upkeep of a regular theater, touring can even cut costs. That the Theater Company should resort to desperate expedients has its melancholy side. Bostonians are notoriously unacquainted with the conditions of art in other cities such as Louisville where breweries and banks enthusiastically support the city's Actors Theater. The Theater Company of Boston derives one-quarter of one percent of its income from corporate sources.

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WHAT TCB will do with commendable pride is point to the qualitative record. The range of productions, rich and varied, can hardly be matched by any theater in the past decade — one-quarter of them new plays. (In contrast to "Murder In the Cathedral," for instance, the formal Anglicanism of Eliot, tradition's received values, the TCB's succeeding work is "The Peacemaker," by Carl Oglesby, who became national president of the SDS after he wrote the drama.) Pinter's "The Dwarfs" and Geoffrey Bush's "A Celebration For William Jennings Bryan" have been seen on national television. When Irving Wardle, the Times of London critic, toured the U.S. theaters two years ago he reported that the Theater Company's production of James Leo Herlihy's "Stop, You're Killing Me" was "the finest new play I saw in America." Recently, the company, which has always demonstrated a keen interest in black playwrights, has been working with the New African Company formed by James Spruill and Gus Johnson. Staged readings of new plays are still presented free to the public on selected nights.

So as we observed rehearsal and actors swarming through the nave of Emmanuel's Lindsey Chapel, it was easy to imagine Broadway as cold as an effigy on a sarcophagus ... and what of the living theater? Art is supposed to thrive on adversity, according to romantic cliché. The annals of art in Boston would seem to verify it. Looking at The Theater Company of Boston, however, and the illustrious record, a more rational view would seem that, thanks to a dedicated few, we get the kind of theater we don't deserve.