

A VIEW OF THE THEATRE FROM THREE SEATS IN THE HOUSE

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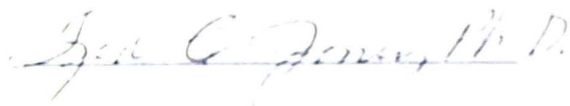
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A VIEW OF THE THEATRE FROM THREE SEATS IN THE HOUSE

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed at discovering how to start and operate a successful, small theatre troupe in America today. The conclusions of this study will actually be applied to the founding of The Southwest Rural Theatre Project (SRTP), which will be located in that region of the United States, for the purpose of bringing a live theatre experience to rural areas of the Southwest. This work is a paradigmatic approach to starting a specific type of theatre, in this case a not-for-profit, rural, Southwestern repertory theatre company.

A brief overview of the steps to be followed in starting a theatre company, with a few historical observations that point to the artistic atmosphere prevalent in the country today, will provide a background for the study. Three oral interviews comprise the body of the investigation, based on a prepared “script” of questions. The results of these interviews are then applied to plans for the specific project.

In conclusion, the research indicates that there is need for a regional theater and outreach such as the proposed SRTP in the target area. This research has contributed many answers, and a few unanticipated questions, that will help SRTP, or any similar endeavor, become a reality.

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Introduction

Act I, Scene 1 • Setting the Stage

This research is aimed at discovering how to start and operate a successful, small theatre troupe in America today. The proposed endeavor is to be called The Southwest Rural Theatre Project (SRTP) and will be located in that region of the United States for the purpose of bringing a live theatre experience to rural areas of the Southwest. The conclusions of this study will actually be applied to the founding of the SRTP.

This project is unique in some ways: First, it serves a rural area rather than a metropolitan one where theatre is more readily available. This aspect offers obvious demographic challenges, but it also offers an audience whose possibilities have not previously been fully explored. Second, the project will support a traveling troupe as well as a home repertory company. The traveling troupe and the home company can then generate interest and support for each other.

Available literature on the subject of starting and running a theatre company is meager and more general than specific. This investigation seeks to document some specific examples of what works or does not work – especially what works outside New York City. As the 21st century begins, it seems that the preservation of this part of our cultural heritage is crucial and should be aggressively pursued.

The production practices employed in the last half of the 20th century encompass such great variety and diversity that it is not possible to arrive at a single formula for success. This work is a paradigmatic approach to starting a specific type of theatre: in this case, a not-for-profit, rural, Southwestern repertory theatre company.

What follows is a brief overview of the steps to be followed in starting a theatre company with a few historical observations that point to the artistic atmosphere prevalent in the country today. This overview will provide a background for the study. Three oral interviews follow with an analysis of the transcribed responses. The results of the entire study are then directly applied to the proposed Southwest Rural Theatre Project.

Act I, Scene 2 • Literature Review

Theatre has been a part of American history since before the Revolutionary War. It is a part of our culture that reflects the mood of the people and the atmosphere of the country at any given time in history.¹ Theatre has served to give a sense of unity to community and country. There have been times in our history when this integral part of American culture struggled to survive and eras when it flourished.

Prior to the Great Depression, 20th century American Theatre was centralized in New York. Broadway, off-Broadway, and the resulting tours were where professional theatre could be found.² Gradually, amateur theatres began to crop up across the country. As professional theatre production companies dwindled in New York City after 1930, amateur theatre prospered. These theatre companies are as diverse as the country they represent.³ Community and educational theatres became more numerous. Brockett and Findlay noted, “Community theatre mushroomed after WW1 . . . similarly, theatre was increasingly introduced into the curricula of colleges and universities.”⁴ These two categories include all forms of theatre produced, directed and performed without paid personnel. Community theatre is principally produced by and for local community members, while educational theatre is institutionally based, supported by the academic community. Regional theatre companies are mostly made up of professionals and operate on a not-for-profit basis, while commercial theatre companies are also professionals but are aimed at making a profit. America has recently seen an increase in companies of theatre

¹Grose, D. & Kenworthy, F. (1985) *A Mirror to Life: A History of Western Theatre*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. p. xi.

²Toll, R. (1982). *The Entertainment Machine: American Show Business in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 4.; Brockett, Oscar G. & Findlay, Robert. (1991) *Century of Innovation; A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since the Late Nineteenth Century*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon. p. 91.

³Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 553.

⁴Brockett, Oscar G. & Findlay, Robert. (1991) *Century of Innovation; A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since the Late Nineteenth Century*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon. p. 293.

professionals aimed at giving to the community rather than focusing on profit. These have been termed, “decentralized, professional, non-commercial theatres.”⁵

These not-for-profit professional theatres, now past the early stages of development, have become an accepted part of our national culture.⁶ Stephen Langley, in *Theatre Management and Production in America* notes, “It has even been said that nonprofit professional theatres, collectively, form a national American theatre – since they represent all the cultural, social, ethnic, political, aesthetic and philosophical diversity that constitutes America in a way no single national theatre company ever could.” This assessment sounds positive for current theatre practitioners, but there is some concern about the future of this new theatrical form. Today’s constant changes in federal, state, and local government grant policies are a cause for concern since the arts are often the last to receive funding consideration. Of the government funds available, only 18% went to theatre and opera combined, and “By the late 1980’s slightly more than half of not-for-profit theatres were running deficits.”⁷ Not-for-profit professional theatre “plays” on a shaky stage in America today. It remains to be seen whether, in the future, such threatened fare can achieve stability, or perhaps even flourish.⁸

The general agreement in the literature suggests that a theatre company must begin with an idea or goal, usually formulated by one person.⁹ This basis seems logical and has support in biographical accounts from people who have started well-known, successful

⁵London, T. (1988). *The Artistic Home: Discussions with Artistic Directors of America's Institutional Theatres*. (Intro by Lloyd Richards) (Foreword by Peter Zeister). New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc. p. xii.

⁶London, T. (1988). *The Artistic Home: Discussions with Artistic Directors of America's Institutional Theatres*. (Intro by Lloyd Richards) (Foreword by Peter Zeister). New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc. p. xi-xii.

⁷Brockett, Oscar G. & Findlay, Robert. (1991) *Century of Innovation; A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since the Late Nineteenth Century*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon. p. 440.

⁸Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 197.

⁹Green, J. (1981). *The Small Theatre Handbook*. Harvard, MA: The Harvard Common Press. p. 2; Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 6-7.; Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening; A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 12-13.

theatres across the country.¹⁰ Once the vision is articulated, the next most important step is a mission statement. Most organizations have a mission statement or the equivalent of one, i.e., a general statement of the goals of the group or organization.¹¹ In the case of SRTP, the mission statement is the equivalent of a director's "production concept." The mission statement describes the vision that individuals in the organization will work toward as a group. The success or failure of the company will depend on how well the goals set out in the mission statement are achieved, so it is crucial to state them as simply and concisely as possible.¹²

Although several steps must be taken to start and run any nonprofit theatre company, the timing and order of the steps can be determined, to a certain degree, by the resources available to the individual company. It is important for the company to gain not-for-profit status from the government for tax purposes, thus allowing the organization to accept tax-deductible donations and grants from corporations and foundations. It is recommended that an attorney be consulted to help with the application for incorporation.¹³ The organization can then request tax exempt status as a not-for-profit corporation with a 501c3 form.¹⁴

Financial constraints can put a damper on the free expression of artistic vision.¹⁵ Most theatre companies seem to operate, chronically and perpetually, on the brink of financial

¹⁰Epstein, H. (1994). *Joe Papp: An American Life*. Canada: Little, Brown and Company. p. 81

¹¹Green, J. (1981). *The Small Theatre Handbook*. Harvard, MA: The Harvard Common Press. p. 3.

¹²Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 8.; Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening; A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 19.

¹³Green, J. (1981). *The Small Theatre Handbook*. Harvard, MA: The Harvard Common Press. p. 3; Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 178.

¹⁴Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 177.; Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening; A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 23; Farber, Donald C. (1990). *Producing Theatre: A Comprehensive Legal and Business Guide*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 35-36.

¹⁵Craig, E. (1957). *On The Art of the Theatre*. Great Britain: Butler and Tanner Ltd. p. x; London, T. (1988). *The Artistic Home: Discussions with Artistic Directors of America's Institutional Theatres*. (Intro by Lloyd Richards) (Foreword by Peter Zeister). New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc. p. xi.

disaster.¹⁶ Times of feast, even of sufficiency, are rare; and there is never a guarantee of financial security. Acceptance of this as a fact of life seems the only sensible course, allowing a focus on the important part of theatre – performance as an artistic endeavor. There are many sources of income for a theatre, but no one source is sufficient. It is necessary to seek funds from as many sources as possible and on an ongoing basis. If the organization includes a board, one factor to consider when selecting members is that individual's fund raising abilities and prospects. It has been noted that it is even more important to focus on the financial aspect of running a theatre today than it was as little as twenty years ago.¹⁷

There is no right or wrong place for a theatre company to look for support. What works for most theatre companies may not be useful for all. It is best to explore the entire range of possibilities, then to focus on the most effective. Some common sources are: ticket sales, donations (public and private), corporate sponsorship, government grants, foundation grants, state and local community support, fund raisers and community outreach programs.¹⁸ The possibilities are endless, and surely some remain to be discovered.

Funding is an important consideration for the new company's options regarding theatre building space. Some companies never have an actual home of their own and rent a public or privately owned building.¹⁹ Other companies find the funds to build their own theatre while still others find and renovate an existing building.²⁰ Ideally, the company owns and controls its own space. Ownership allows the company to schedule rehearsals

¹⁶ Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 285.; Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening: A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 78.

¹⁷ Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening: A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 132.

¹⁸ Green, J. (1981). *The Small Theatre Handbook*. Harvard, MA: The Harvard Common Press. p. 23; Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Pproduction in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 363-420.; Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening: A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 146-150.

¹⁹ Green, J. (1981). *The Small Theatre Handbook*. Harvard, MA: The Harvard Common Press. p. 34.

²⁰ Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 56-58; Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening: A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 37.

and performances to suit itself. The theatre company's director is also free to explore whatever vision he (or she) chooses, limited only by his (or her) imagination. Renting a space can become a problem and is never a secure alternative. There have been cases where theatres placed in public buildings were maintained by the city in exchange for a percentage of ticket sales, but care should be taken in these situations. Usually the city maintains a certain amount of control over what is produced in the building, and this control can become a form of censorship, the result of which might be the sacrifice of artistic vision.²¹ In the end, the building used by a theatre company will depend on many unforeseen variables. A compromise regarding space may be necessary, but it is helpful to keep in mind that if the medium is the message, theatre in a church sends a different message than theatre in a barn. As Langley notes, "The place for the performances is a fundamental element that will deeply and unequivocally influence every other aspect of the operation."²²

Once the theatre company has acquired not-for-profit status, funding, and a building, the next consideration is the work that it wishes to produce. Choosing a play or a season of plays requires careful consideration.²³ Plays must be selected that will attract an audience. Once a season is chosen, the next element of production needs to be added – the ensemble.

Producing theatre requires many people working toward one goal: the founder's vision. The founder should cultivate relationships with the people needed to help accomplish this vision from the beginning.²⁴ Finding the cast, crew, and personnel to produce professional theatre is an ongoing process for any theatre company. Change is

²¹Epstein, H. (1994). *Joe Papp: An American Life*. Canada: Little, Brown and Company. p. 260.

²²Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 61

²³Green, J. (1981). *The Small Theatre Handbook*. Harvard, MA: The Harvard Common Press. p. 47-49.

²⁴Langley, S. (1990). *Theatre Management and Production in America*. New York: Drama Book Publishers. p. 7-8.; Farber, Donald C. (1988). *From Option to Opening; A Guide to Producing Plays Off-Broadway*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. 74; Farber, Donald C. (1990). *Producing Theatre: A Comprehensive Legal and Business Guide*. New York: Limelight Editions. p. xiv-xv.

inevitable, and a good thing; but it is important that everyone continue to work toward the goals outlined in the mission statement of the organization, no matter who is involved.

Method

Act 1, Scene 3 • Building the Set

The method used in this research included oral interviews. Before the first interview, I compiled a set of general questions (*Appendix A*). These questions were then tailored to suit each of these different situations (*Appendices B, C and D*). I then conducted three interviews. The interviewees are currently working in the professional theatrical world, so their experiences with today's audiences, specifically, and the societal atmosphere, in general, are invaluable. The information gathered from these interviews is more applicable than that gained from any amount of reading or other research. It comes from reliable, experienced sources, and the body of literature currently available offers very little specific information for a project like SRTP. The interviews were conducted orally and recorded on audio cassette for comparison. They were casual due to the fact that all the participants are friends or acquaintances of the interviewer. This relationship put the interviewees at ease and contributed to a positive atmosphere. Open and candid answers were needed in order to compare the relevant information.

After the interviews were recorded, they were directly transcribed, scripted, and lightly edited for readability. The Wesner interview produced additional information that was not connected to the original interview questions (*Appendix E*). A chart was compiled, using the original general interview questions as a guide. The chart was then used to compare and contrast the applicable information.

Act II, Scene 1**David & Barbara Wesner****former operators of the****Off West Broadway Theatre****New York, NY**

David and Barbara Wesner now reside and work in Clarksville, TN, as theatre instructors. They operated an Off Broadway theatre company for three years, which began as a small project in a black box theatre. The interview was conducted in the living room of their home in Clarksville. Both subjects poured forth volumes of interesting anecdotes as well as supplying applicable information and advice.

Leslie: What year did you actually open your theatre?

Barbara: 1992

Leslie: How many years were you open?

Barbara: Three.

Leslie: What were your original plans? Did you know what kind of theatre you wanted to produce when you first started? You knew that you wanted David to write originals.

David: Yes, and we wanted – if you read our proposal – family oriented material, and that was a real plus in NY City.

Leslie: So, in what ways were you able to achieve those goals as far as being able to have that outreach?

Barbara: They were certainly realized.

Leslie: Did they change in any way?

David: We have such great stories about . . . we had one guy who was on heroin when he started with us, and got off heroin. That same guy . . .

Leslie: That was in the . . .

David: The mission statement. We talked about helping actors. We were literally ministering . . .

Barbara: We kind of had a dual focus, I think. We wanted to minister to – we called it minister to – aid, help, whatever, the audience and the actors.

Leslie: And you were kind-of based with a church.

Barbara: We were not associated with any faith.

David: We couldn't even call ourselves a church.

Barbara: We weren't a church.

David: There were different rules; 501c3, which is your non-profit [not-for-profit] status – there's a little dividing line between churches, who are also 501c3's, and literary – which is what we were.

Barbara: We were a literary organization.

David: We were non-evangelical – we could not cross that line – there were some things we couldn't do.

Barbara: We couldn't preach, we couldn't take up offerings . . .

David: We didn't intend to. . .

Barbara: We didn't intend to do that either. The only way our church background influenced what we did was, we wanted to be morally correct with high ethical standards. We wanted to talk to families. None of our plays, for example, had any profanity in them at all.

David: Fortunately, I write that way.

Barbara: But that was the standard that we decided to stay with. We were only criticized for it once – when we did a piece about Vietnam and the Vietnam War. The focus came back and one of the reviewers said that it was improbable that these guys wouldn't be swearing like sailors. Yet David would use other words like “dog breath” and “dog meat.”

David: One time I had one woman who came up to me one night after the show and said “This one character, if he said one more curse word I was going to go crazy,” and I said “Well, he didn't use any profanity at all,” and she was, like, “Oh, yes he did.”

Barbara: Because he was saying all these foul things without using profane words. I didn't see that it was a problem because we got really high marks on that show from the audiences except the one person – and another person walked out of one of our shows.

David: But our vision didn't change.

Barbara: But our vision stayed the same. And, I'll tell you, I think that's really important. You get the concept – it's like you get the vision and you have to go with it. I think you have to be . . . you have to be sold on it, because you will have so many people attack you, criticize you, come at you . . .

David: Try to change you.

Barbara: Try to change your mind.

Barbara: I think you have to stay true to what you feel you're about. And I don't mean to the point of not taking counsel from anybody. And let me tell you Leslie . . .

David: That's really true. No one else will see it like you see it.

Barbara: We tried to turn this over to the person who was our right-hand person in the city when we left. She worked beside us day and night. She shared our vision.

Leslie: She knew what your vision was.

Barbara: She knew what it was and when we left she couldn't keep it going because . . .

Leslie: It didn't have you guys. You were the energy and the vision.

Barbara: That's right. She didn't have that burning picture – and you've got it.

David: And the other part is about audience development. If you begin developing an audience, you are developing a certain mind set and if you change on those people in the middle they are gonna . . .

Barbara: "I thought we . . . what happened?"

Leslie: "What happened to our relationship?" basically.

Barbara: Yeah, exactly.

Leslie: I guess you felt that your location was advantageous.

David: It got better for us when we moved uptown.

Barbara: We were in two different places.

David: We were way downtown, in what they call the lower area of Manhattan. What it meant was if you came to see us on a Friday or Saturday night you had to kind-of go out of your way. Not in a dangerous way 'cause this was actually . . .

Barbara: Up-and-coming yuppie place.

David: What's his face . . .

Barbara: Robert Deniro studios was two blocks away.

David: He literally was developing this area down there and so it was becoming very shi-shi, like Soho.

Barbara: I think that the person who was walking the streets, looking for something to see, would not have found us.

David: That's right, because we were off the beaten track.

Barbara: We were in the theatre guides and stuff, but if you didn't know about that you still wouldn't find us. When we moved to Times Square we were very visible. We were right there in Times Square. You could walk by the street and . . .

David: Everything changed for us.

Leslie: When did that move happen?

Barbara: After two years.

David: And what happened was, the church was about to lose their back building. They weren't using it any more. It was draining them financially. We were barely breaking even down there.

Barbara: We paid our rent the second year.

David: That was exactly what was hurting us. We were paying rent. So then, a large theatre called the Lambs, who is quite well known – *Painting Churches* and several big plays were done there.

Barbara: *Godspell*. Well, *Godspell* didn't start there.

David: The revival was there. They came down and they saw us. This is the guy we were saying that I couldn't read very well. They came down and saw a production that we did, liked what we did, brought us uptown and gave . . .

Barbara: Said "We're gonna give you this theatre."

David: We went from a space that rented for fourteen hundred dollars a month, to a space that rented for fifteen hundred dollars a week.

Barbara: But they didn't charge us a penny. They just wanted us in the building – it hadn't been used – that space was kind of dark . . .

David: And we were doing what they wanted. This family value stuff really appealed to them. So the moment we went up there everything changed. We started getting agents like crazy, advertising like crazy . . .

Leslie: Now was that already a theatre?

Barbara: Yes it was, and it was a well known theatre. It's been well known since about 1950-something.

David: It's two theatres, actually.

Barbara: They had two theatres. A gigantic theatre upstairs that seats over 300, and a bottom theatre that seated over 100. In fact, we had to take out 39 seats . . . or 51 seats. So that we would have only a ninety-nine seat house. That way we could stay non-equity.

David: But our stage was 20 x 20.

Barbara: And we went from arena to proscenium.

Leslie: How many shows a year did you produce?

David: We did three downtown and four uptown.

Barbara: We did four . . .

Leslie: So when you moved, you added a show.

Barbara: Four major productions; two concerts.

David: We did a lot of little stuff.

Barbara: We did, like, a Christmas concert; something around Easter. We opened it to persons who wanted to do one-person shows; where they would put together an hour, or hour and a half show of themselves. All we would do was produce it. We would say, "We'll give the technical support, you have to foot the bills and advertise . . ."

We just gave them the space, and we split the box office sixty-forty or something like that.

David: Something like that.

Leslie: [to Barbara] And did you direct all of the shows?

Barbara: I directed all the shows.

David: The main stage shows.

Leslie: [to David] And were they all written by you?

David: Yes.

Leslie: They were all original works?

David: Yes. We produced I guess 11 shows all together?

Barbara: Three seasons? Three, six, yes – 11 shows.

Leslie: About how long were your average runs?

Barbara: We were bound by equity rules

Leslie: Which were?

David: Four weeks of three performances a week.

Barbara: We performed Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. No . . .

David: No, we went to Wednesday night.

Barbara: No we didn't.

David: You could do sixteen performances.

Barbara: Sixteen.

Leslie: Any days you wanted?

Barbara: Yes

David: Yes

Barbara: No more than four weeks.

David: You could get dispensation, which we did, to extend it. You could only get it extended for one week at a time. I think that happened to us twice.

Barbara: We extended *Bunkers* and we extended *Gardenias*. But we were limited to sixteen performances, not twelve, if we played four nights for four weeks. And you can't go longer than four weeks – that was the deal – so, when they gave us dispensation we backed it up to Wednesday, and played Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Because we couldn't go longer than four weeks.

David: I thought they gave us another weekend.

Barbara: Only with *Bunkers* when the snow was so bad.

David: I couldn't remember that.

Barbara: Natural disasters, bombing of the World Trade Center, stuff like that. But we found that we had to do a Sunday matinee. We found that a great deal of our audience would be older folks who didn't like to be – and living in New York City we had to be very aware . . .

Leslie: They didn't want to be out at night.

Barbara: Right. But you know, I direct at Clarksville High School right now, and I find that even in this community here, that a matinee really appeals to older folks. So, much as I don't like doing matinees, that is something that you should think about.

Leslie: So, a lot of people that would normally not come in the evening will come to a matinee.

Barbara: And they'll be faithful, too.

Leslie: When I performed in the Engine House Theatre melodramas it was like that. We would do a show in the day and an evening show; and the matinee was really popular. You started realizing a profit practically immediately?

Barbara: Yes, immediately yes. But then when we had to start paying rent. The rent we were breaking even.

Leslie: You still have to pay for the set and pay the actors.

David: But I was real resourceful, too. For example, because I worked in Public theatre, the first summer we were doing it the outdoor theatre in central park – I knew this because of the guys. I knew they do two shows a summer and I knew when the first show closed they would be throwing away about a million dollars worth of lumber.

Barbara: Throwing it away.

David: Seriously about fifty thousand dollars worth of lumber.

Barbara: Just throwing away lumber.

David: So I went up there with a truck. I said, “Hey guys, how are you doing?” I said, “Can I go through your dumpster?” They were, like, “Right.” I pulled out about twenty-five sheets of 3 x 4. That truck was so loaded – I filled it all the way to the top. I used that wood for the next three years.

Barbara: One of the shows . . . we had to build a farmhouse and we had a friend who went around looking – we lived on Staten Island at the time – and she just started looking at neighborhoods, and houses that were condemned, and she found this one house that was perfect and said, “When are you tearing it down?” and the family said, “Well, the bulldozers are coming in next week.” And she said, “Can we have the house?” They said, “You can take as much of the house as you want.” We went in a whole crew of us – all of our friends, with a truck. We pulled off piece by piece, board by board, we took that house apart.

David: Siding, windows, doors.

Barbara: We took doors, windows, gutters . . .

David: We put it back up and we had a farmhouse. It was gorgeous!

Leslie: You just put it back up in the theatre – rebuilt the house.

Barbara: On top of three-quarter inch plywood. And it was magnificent.

David: It was. People walked in and they couldn't believe the set.

Barbara: Right. We took the garage doors – I mean we rebuilt this house. Of course, it took a lot of labor. So, if you keep your eyes open you get a lot of stuff like that; and that saves you. The hardest thing about the third year was, that was the first year that both of us were having to be paid a salary. When we started drawing a salary, it wasn't the salary that killed us, it was the taxes and social security.

David: We had to find a lot of perks – legal perks – for ourselves. Paying insurance.

Barbara: To get the company to pay for things for us so that we didn't have to get the income to pay for it. We had a lawyer who gave us *pro-bono* work too.

Leslie: David told me that was very important for my project.

Barbara: You'll find it. There are lawyers who do community work.

David: It's a community thing, see. They are involved in the community.

Leslie: OK, so did you have any season ticket holders? Did you sell season tickets?

David: Yes, yes we did.

Leslie: Can you give me some idea what percentage?

Barbara: It was really high for the first year.

David: We did tons of mailing.

Barbara: The percentage decreased as the years went on because our public appeal was greater; so I can't say really that we lost memberships. It's just that the new people who would come to see us would not buy memberships. They would just come per show.

David: And our mailing decreased. We stopped pushing for subscriptions when we began to be able to support ourselves.

Barbara: That's what we did. We sold seats and memberships early on to help us kick off the first show. That's how we got our money.

David: We had a fund raiser at the end of the year.

Barbara: Oh, this was so much fun, Leslie – an academy awards. There's [indicating statuette] our little Owbie. We called them the Owbies because we were the Off West Broadway Theatre Company.

David: This was made by the guy who makes the Tony's. We had him make these.

Barbara: So, what we did was, we had entertainment. We had people present the awards. We had dinner.

David: Tuxedos.

Barbara: We had tuxedos, gowns, the whole community came up. Some people came in limousines. It became a real thing at the end of the year. I think Tommy and John [Roxy Theatre] do something like that.

Leslie: They do something similar.

Barbara: When you talk to them, you'll get the same kind of thing. If the communities are really involved with you, it's a fun thing to do for them. It's a formal night out. The way we got our winners, was, we sent a ballot to all our season subscribers and they got to vote. They voted, and we didn't even know who was going to win. Then, those

ballots came back from our season subscribers only. So one of the things we would say – as a season subscriber they got in for ten dollars a show instead of twelve-fifty. They had the first choice of seats, but we didn't have numbered seats. We could get them a seat whatever night. They got to vote for the Owbies. I think that's it. Oh, they got a t-shirt the first year.

David: So that was front money, see.

Barbara: That's right, I forgot we did do that.

Leslie: And that's how you funded your next show.

Barbara: That's exactly right. We had that money ahead. And, we had a thing where they could give donations. Anybody who donates a hundred dollars is an angel and so on. We had it in every program and we had it on our brochures that we did a mailing from. So we had a lot of donations, and we were 501c3's so their donations were tax deductible.

Leslie: A little change of subject. What type of play did you feel the audience attended in your area? I know you were doing original plays, but did you feel there was more interest in well known material?

David: We did real well with the originals. Now, I can tell you that, in terms of what we wrote, my comedies drew better than the serious pieces. I had one bomb, and that was a history play. Worst thing I ever could have done .

Barbara: They didn't respond well to it.

David: But the comedies . . . In fact, when we first opened at the Lambs I wrote a comedy/mystery – that sucker sold out every single night. We made a ton of money on it.

Barbara: The comedy/mystery. That's the one that got published.

David: I just got that published. Right.

Barbara: As far as other showcase theatres of our size producing in New York, there were very few of them doing original things.

David: Well they were, but they were so outlandishly offbeat. A lot of nudity, a lot of crazy stuff – bizarre things.

Barbara: I have to say we were probably in the top two percent of how well attended our theatre was.

Leslie: You felt like comedy was probably the most popular thing?

Barbara: It's kind of like the mind set – nothing against dinner theatre, but it was kind of like the mind set of dinner theatre people. We would appeal to that crowd that would go in and, say, make me laugh – make me have some fun. So, they appreciated the quality of work in the serious dramas, but they were much more enthusiastic about the comedies.

David: They just wanted to laugh. The entertainment, that was the deal.

Barbara: We got big responses on any kind of musical revue we did. They loved music. We never did a full scale musical.

Leslie: But would you bring in musical acts?

David: Yeah. And our actors that the audience got to know – many of them were singers and dancers. We let them do things. See, people would already know them.

Leslie: Did you have a slow season or busy season?

Barbara: No, it was consistent.

David: Thursday nights were not that great, for whatever reason.

Barbara: Thursday was a slow night.

Leslie: And Sunday matinees were good?

Barbara: All of them. Friday and Saturday were, of course, the best. Thursday was probably our slowest night, but even then a slow night began to be not-so-slow when we started getting a reputation.

David: Once you've got that reputation . . .

Leslie: That's why I was asking about your season ticket holders because you can know that you have this base to rely on.

Barbara: They didn't always show up for a show.

Leslie: They would buy the tickets and then not show up?

David: Yep.

Leslie: When you first started your mailing list, did you just have everyone who came in the door fill out something?

Barbara: They signed a register when they came in. We kept a guest book with their name and address – and many times they would move. Of course, New York city is full of very mobile people. But, we started with the churches in the city, so we could get the congregations. We wanted the people that liked what we were doing, so we went to different congregations – and that's where we started.

Leslie: You tried to target your audience.

Barbara: We did a lot of mailings in the beginning, just to let them know we were there. Once they knew we were there, we didn't have to do that any more.

David: But we were targeting, again, people that we felt would be interested in our stuff.

Leslie: Did you have a core group of people and you two were the only actual paid employees? I know you paid the actors to travel, and stuff like that.

David: We were the only two paid employees.

Barbara: We were the only two people on payroll – and we would occasionally have to pay an equity expense. The one hundred dollars, that was a blanket understanding. Most of the actors that we paid the hundred dollars to, would give it back to the theatre as an offering.

Leslie: Okay, you two basically ran everything.

Barbara: I took care of all the business.

Leslie: You didn't have somebody else helping you?

Barbara: No, except for our lawyer.

Leslie: Did you have core players that you used on a regular basis?

Barbara: Definitely, but then there weren't that many. We probably had about twelve that would come back and work again.

David: I think it was actually higher than that. I think it was about twenty people, and twice a year . . . didn't we have auditions?

Barbara: Open auditions, yes.

David: We did. We would try to bring in at least one to two new people a year.

Barbara: Just so our audience wouldn't get bored. The same person wouldn't show up . . . well, one time Gino was playing three of the four shows in the season – but he was such a talented, talented guy. He would be so extremely different in each one, that you wouldn't even realize you were looking at the same actor.

David: And what began to happen is, once we got that core of actors, I began to write for those people.

Barbara: Another thing is, that core of actors wanted to stay involved – so sometimes if they weren't acting they would be working lights or sound or something else so thatprops, they were working the show.

Leslie: Well part of the SRTP plan is that it needs people who can do more than one thing.

They can act, and they can do something technical. One – or even two – people in charge can't do it all.

Barbara: That's right. David and I are capable of doing everything except making costumes, just the two of us together, but time itself doesn't allow it. We had a guy, a carpenter, who just volunteered for us all the time.

David: And a sound guy who was brilliant.

Barbara: A sound guy who would just do it. We had all kinds of people just coming out of the woodwork. "Let me do sound . . . let me do props."

David: We trained two, maybe three, people on lights. And over the course of three years, those three guys – and one woman I think – took care of our lights almost every time.

Barbara: And wanted to! You know, they just wanted to be there. As they saw the success of the theatre happening, more people wanted to come on board. That's what will happen to you [SRTP]. "Can I do anything for you?" "I've got these chairs, can you use them?"

David: And again, because we were trying to reach out to these people, there really was a relationship that began to develop among all of us.

Barbara: Among the group.

David: It turned into sort of a support group, if you will. Where we really could encourage each other. There are four women in New York right now, who are best friends because of our theatre company. They still hang out together, one gets married, they all go – all kinds of things.

Barbara: And yet one could move away, and say good-bye, and another one could come in – so it wasn't like these are the people and no more.

David: It wasn't like a clique.

Leslie: Did you ever do any type of children's theatre at all?

Barbara: No. But it was not part of our vision. We could have easily worked into it. We could have been persuaded to go in that direction – because of the kinds of things we were doing – but I knew it was not part of my vision, so we had to say “no” to that. We were actually approached about that when we moved uptown, but I just couldn't do it.

Leslie: So, you charged for general admission when you first started . . . four dollars?
Five dollars?

Barbara: That was when we were a part of the church and we really hadn't broken apart yet.

Leslie: Then, when you first started the black box?

David: Twelve-fifty.

Leslie: And by the end of the third year?

Barbara: Twelve-fifty, but we were going up to fifteen. But, we were bound by equity.

Leslie: Because of the size of your house?

David: Right.

Barbara: Because of the equity rules.

Leslie: Did you use any other methods to raise funds? Other than your box office, how did you raise money?

David: Advertisement.

Barbara: Selling ads in programs.

David: Yeah, we did a lot of that.

Barbara: We had a really good way of getting programs. They were slick, too. They were books. We had pictures of the actors, and they were sent to a printer who put slick paper in it. We made it look, like, showy – but we went to a small printer and kept our expenses down. We sold ads. That’s a great way to do it. And you can sell the ad for a season. You don’t have to do a new layout – all you have to fix is the new program. You make your prices high. You go into your people, and say you’re going to get this kind of exposure – we anticipate so many people seeing it. Five hundred dollars for the year . . . three fifty for the year. You can start low if you want to, and take it up. It costs you three hundred dollars to print your programs, and then you’re set. We put our logo at the top all the time, and then a computer genius did our layouts for free.

Leslie: What types of organizations were your biggest supporters? Did you have any organizations, or was it mostly individuals?

David: It was individuals. Though for example the Lambs were quite supportive – our church – and we got one grant ABC for capitol cities and that was wonderful. We also had Gavin Macleod.

Barbara: Captain of *The Love Boat*.

David: They supported our theatre – and often came.

Barbara: And constantly gave us money.

Barbara: I think what happened though, is we didn’t have a lot of support in the beginning. And as we grew people would say, “I believe in what they’re doing, so I’m going to put money in.” But it would be after we started.

David: Again, that’s audience development. You develop a trust, and they expect a certain thing – and they get it, so they want to support that.

Leslie: Did you have a board of directors?

Leslie: How many board members did you have?

Barbara: Four.

Leslie: And were you on the board? The two of you and then two other people?

Barbara: Yes. We were recommended not to have an even number on the board because if there is a tie vote.

David: That was your 501c3. We also had a board of directors.

Barbara: That was our official board of directors before . . .

David: What was that second group then?

Barbara: That was our artistic advisory.

David: Advisory, that's what we called it.

Barbara: We had two different boards. One had to be done legally, for our 501c3., and we had four. There was no limit – you could have as many as you wanted. Our lawyer advised us that we have an odd number – in case you had to vote on something and the vote turned out to be tied.

Leslie: Can you have as few as you want?

Barbara: I think you have to have three, because Jerry, when he formed the church, had to have three. Because you have to have President, Vice-President and Secretary. Those are the three elected members. We had President, Vice-President, Secretary and Cindy – whatever Cindy was. But we had four people. Then we had an artistic advisory board, which we formed too early. We brought in too many people, too soon. That was one of our mistakes – but that advisory board was designed to help us brainstorm and get things . . .

Leslie: More brains, and more ideas.

Barbara: Yeah, and it did help in that respect.

Leslie: Generating new interest.

Barbara: That [the Advisory Board] was very positive in that respect, but some of those people thought they had more power than they did.

David: When you write up your charter, you have to be careful with that language and say, “These people will only have so much power. They will never have power to stop it – change the organization, change the vision.”

Barbara: You only want three voting members in the corporation. That’s what it’s called. As far as your theatre runs, if you want to have an artistic advisory board, they can give you input – and you can take it or not take it. You are the boss.

Leslie: You are the boss. So you need to be careful who you choose for your board members for your non-profit [not-for-profit] status.

Barbara: See, we had two thirds of the vote, and we knew that nobody could override us.

Leslie: Other than your programs, what types of media did you use to advertise?

David: It was too expensive for us.

Barbara: But we found two publications that we could be a part of in the city. Of course, New York is so weird. We hooked into them – they were free. It was free advertising, just because we were there.

David: *Theatre Week* was one.

Barbara: *Theatre Week* was one – where all we had to do was submit to the magazine, and we would get a listing in the back.

David: And what you do is a tiny little ad.

Leslie: A tiny little thing that says, 'We're here!'"

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Barbara: We joined the Alliance of Resident Theatre.

David: That was a big boost – huge boost.

Barbara: It cost us a hundred dollars a year or something like that. We joined the Alliance of Resident Theatre. in New York City, which gave us access to a publication which came out monthly. And all we did was put our shows and the times – stuff like that.

David: Having that handle on your theatre meant you were legit.

Barbara: And people picked up this publication if they wanted to go see a show in the city. I think . . . *Password to Off-Off Broadway*. I think that's what it was called.

David: They published it. We were just in it.

Barbara: We didn't have to pay anything.

David: So when tourists came to New York looking for Broadway and Off Broadway shows, they got our name.

Barbara: We were involved in a whole bunch of other things, but we didn't have to pay for that. Just by being a member of that organization, we were for free.

Leslie: So, you didn't do any other advertising, like TV, Radio . . .

Barbara: We did flyers, we did word of mouth. We did billboards on our building.

David: We did do billboards. In fact I do have a picture of that.

Barbara: When we were downtown, we had coverage. We had window space, and then we had to close them because we needed a dark space – so we just put sheets of plywood up and advertised on that. When we moved uptown, we had the marquee. So if you . . . just in front of the theatre. We couldn't afford television.

David: This [showing photograph] is actually outside our building – one of the windows that we did. We had all four windows – two corners –North, South, East, and West; you could see the billboards.

Barbara: They were big. We had our season in two windows, and then we would advertise the current show. We would blow up different things. But we did that thing like the marketplace that lists stuff on TV – you know . . . remember, they would do that, where they scroll the events of the city. We were on that. Now you should be able to get in the local newspaper, too.

David: When I was directing community theatre, I was on every single edition [TV].

Leslie: Did you ever take any of your shows on the road?

Barbara: No. We were asked.

David: A couple times.

Barbara: Our sets were so enormous.

David: It's about sets and lights. It isn't about people standing in the middle of the road doing a show. You know what I mean. It's about all the things.

Barbara: And we didn't design to tour, so our sets were permanent. So, there was no way we could just rip up this farmhouse and move it. We were asked "Could you tour?" We didn't. I don't know if it could have been part of our future, but it wasn't then. I think we would have had to scale the shows differently – design them differently.

Barbara: We did mount one show three different times. Once at the church, once at our theatre, and once up at King's College. We did sort of three separate productions of it. They liked the script, so it was done three different times – but it was not a tour thing.

Leslie: My last question. Did you ever encounter any legal problems when you were operating your theatre? I know you had an attorney who was working for you *pro-bono*.

Barbara: We would run everything past him – and he was good.

David: He really had a heart for us.

Barbara: He liked what we were doing. He believed in what we doing. He walked in off the street one day and said “What is this?” And I explained what we were doing, and he said, “I’d like to help you,” and I said, “Oh,” and he said, “I’d like to give you some *pro-bono* work.” And I went, “Oh my gosh!” And at that point we were . . .

David: At that point we were just starting, and we didn’t know how much we needed a lawyer.

Barbara: I had run upstairs and said to David, “David, David, we have a lawyer”

David: I said, “Fine, why do we need one?”

Barbara: And I said, “I don’t know, but we’ve got one.” He helped us with that 501c3 license.

David: It normally takes a year – he got it in three months.

Barbara: Three months, and we had it.

Leslie: Thank you very much.

Act II Scene 2
Cliff & Edie Cato
Engine House Theatre
Madrid, NM

Cliff & Edie Cato own the Mine Shaft Tavern, the Engine House Theatre and the Old Coal Mine Museum in Madrid, New Mexico, located on South Highway 14 between Santa Fe and Albuquerque. The interview was conducted in the living room of their home, overlooking the village. Madrid is quaint – an abandoned coal mine and a little town that still has some of the original buildings, now revitalized, as well as the mine itself and much of the equipment used at the time. There is even a steam engine parked, on tracks, outside the theatre facing the audience. It is sometimes used as part of a scene, coming into full view as the upstage doors open to reveal it to a (usually gasping) audience.

The Engine House Theatre presents classic Victorian-style Melodramas, using the stylized gestures of that genre. The audience is encouraged to participate by cheering the hero, sighing for the heroine and – for the ever-present villain – a "Hiss," or "Boo." As a special treat in extreme cases, the audience may cast marshmallows at the dastardly dude!

The questions for this interview differ from the preceding one because the Wesner project is in the past, while the Engine House Theatre is currently operational.

Leslie: In May, 1997, your theatre had its 15th season. Edie, I understand this started with your vision. Cliff joined you a few a years later. Can you each tell me some background information about yourselves prior to the opening of the Engine House Theatre?

Edie: We converted the engine repair building in 1982 and opened our first season in '83.³²

There had previously been melodrama in the east mountain area. In the Ortiz mountains in Cerrillos, back when Hank and I were married and he had owned the Palace Hotel in Cerrillos – and it was actually his dream to bring back melodrama and the preservation of a real American theatre art form to this area. So we evicted the pigeons, shoveled out many truck loads of pigeon guano, covered the old grease pit, left the tracks that run down the middle of the aisle there, and in '83 had our first season of melodrama.

Leslie: So you built the stage and the balcony and everything. It was just the bare building.

Edie: Balcony, stage, flooring, everything was constructed – it was recycled from railroad ties, railroad tracks, and everything was built from things that were on the grounds.

Cliff: As for myself, I kind of stumbled into the whole situation already in progress. It was funny; I got interested in theatre when I was in high school and had done community theatre in and around, well from Scottsdale, Arizona to Fayetteville, North Carolina. It was just a real satisfying way for me to relieve stress and get away from everything; but I got really tired of chasing the God-almighty dollar so I thought I'd chase my dream and chase the theatre around. I moved to Albuquerque for the express purpose of doing community theatre, and various other types of theatre, after researching and finding out that the Albuquerque area had more theatres per capita than anywhere else in the Southwest; and I just felt really comfortable with staying in the Southwest. Moved to Albuquerque, started doing theatre there – actually I did fourteen productions in two years, so I got really tired there for a while. When I got off my six-month hiatus, I took a friend of mine out auditioning because he had been out of the theatre for a while also. We started hitting every audition that was available that weekend. We auditioned for a group called the Madrid Opera House, and not being familiar with the term at the time I thought Opera was Opera and I said, "Well we'll be

spear carriers in an opera.” I can’t sing or dance but what the heck. So we auditioned at West Mesa High School, and met a man with a dream of having a core group of professional-style or semi-professional actors that would be available to do any type of theatre, but basically melodrama theatre for . . .

Edie: And that man was Bill Davenport.

Cliff: . . .for the theatre here in Madrid that Hank and Edie had started. Came up on callbacks, met Edie, if there was ever a true love at first sight that was it. She walked into the room and lit up what was a very dark, dingy day – just lit up that whole room. Developed a . . . well we ended up getting married and running the theatre together.

Leslie: What year did you officially open your theatre? Can you tell me that year again?

Edie: ’83.

Leslie: What type of theatre are you operating now?

Edie: Exactly the same – preserving the history of melodrama.

Leslie: So that was your original plan and you knew what you wanted when you started.

Edie: Authentic classic Victorian Melodrama, without the schluff [this is Edie’s word for farcial or sloppy presentations].

Leslie: So you didn’t find that you had to change in order to realize that vision?

Edie: Absolutely not. It just improved upon it, I think.

Cliff: Right. Being that we only run it during the summer months it has just continued to grow every year. This year we have been very fortunate not to have played to a really small audience. Every show, we’ve had a really good audience, and we’ve already had two standing-room-only sellout situations.

Edie: We’ve become an overnight sensation in sixteen years.

Cliff: Right.

Leslie: What disadvantages or problems, if any, have you encountered due to the location of your theatre? By location I mean the town itself as well as the region around the town.

Cliff: The Southwest region – well, the Albuquerque area, does not have a strong theatrical following. It is difficult to bring patrons to any theatre. Ours was a little more difficult because in the early years the back road, highway fourteen, was not very popular. People were a little bit leery of going through a section of the area that had a bad reputation. We had a very limited budget so we could not advertise to the extent that we would have liked, to try to draw the crowds. Of course the theatre being a tin shed, and again not having enough finances to make an official, insulated, hard-core building out of it – it was kind of funky. People would come in and say, “Oh my God! This is nothing but a tin shed – and look at all the coal dust.”

Leslie: And it's hot.

Cliff: And it's hot.

Leslie: What advantages, if any, have you discovered to your location?

Edie: With the growing popularity of the Turquoise Trail and this area, people are traveling the trail more. And enjoying the scenic drive between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, and getting off of I-25. The Turquoise Trail has been advertised, popularized and glorified over the last fifteen years.

Leslie: So that helped get the word out there that you're here.

Cliff: Absolutely.

Edie: And the town of Madrid has become a very popular little artist's colony.

Leslie: A stop along the way to buy art work or look at art work.

Cliff: It started out with the attraction of Madrid being listed as a ghost town. Which it was in the early seventies, late sixties. In fact it was basically an old west ghost town, an abandoned mining community. So people started coming out to see that. Then in the mid- seventies, as the artisans moved in, it became more popular for the arts and crafts crowd. The Turquoise Trail Association was big on promoting Highway 14. And Madrid, being right in the middle of it, was the only major “watering hole” as it were – halfway between Cedar Crest and Santa Fe – just became a natural stopover. This all helped draw the type of people that would enjoy melodrama. The whole aspect of stepping back in time was what we were looking for. This was what we had tried to maintain, and this was what the draw has worked out to be.

Leslie: And it appears that there has been more and more interest as the years go by – that you’ve managed to find another little way to get out the word that you’re here.

Cliff: Always trying to figure out a way to reach out and touch someone.

Leslie: How many shows a year do you produce now? I know this is different from what it was. So can you go over that a little bit with me?

Cliff: We are actually doing three different productions each year, each one running approximately seven weeks in length, weekends only. So we are looking at 21 performances of three shows, 63 to 65 performances.

Eddie: That’s between Memorial Day and Columbus Day.

Cliff: We have extended the season. We used to close on Labor Day weekend. Now we don’t close until October.

Eddie: Until after the Balloon Fiesta.

Leslie: And the tourists still keep coming through during that time, right?

Eddie: The Balloon Fiesta is a big time.

Cliff: The whole season has extended for tourist travel through Madrid – and our theatre, of course.

Leslie: Okay, are you an equity or a non-equity house? Do you have to deal with that at all?

Cliff: We are strictly a non-union house. We do not have to deal with it except for many of the auditioners who are equity actors come in and find out that we're not, and they can't work for us. The union will not allow them to work for us.

Leslie: I was told in my previous interview that you can get dispensation at times and do that, but it has to be a special permission thing.

Edie: Absolutely. We have had actors who will waive their equity status in order to perform with us.

Leslie: As a non-equity house you can have as many performances of a show as you want, you're not bound by equity rules because you're a non-equity house, right?

Cliff: That's correct.

Edie: We describe ourselves as semi-professional because we do pay our actors.

Leslie: Have you ever taken any shows on the road?

Cliff: Have we ever. We have been called upon to take shows up to Raton and down to Socorro.

Edie: We were the first performance at the Garcia Opera House in Socorro after its renovation. After it had been used as a warehouse and cattle yard – I don't know what else – but it had not been used for any performances up until its renovation, and we were its opening performance. And, we've been to the Shuler in Raton. [the Shuler is an historic Theatre, recently restored and owned by the city of Raton, New Mexico.]

Leslie: Were those performances successful?

Cliff: Oh yes, extremely successful in all cases.

Eddie: In Socorro there was a cube that wrapped the park. It was standing room only.

Leslie: Did you only do the one performance then?

Eddie: We did three at the Garcia opera house and two at Shuler.

Cliff: Besides doing special performances for groups in Albuquerque . . .

Eddie: And Lamy.

Cliff: And Lamy.

Leslie: How long did it take you to be profit-making?

Eddie: When did we start that?

Leslie: Okay, so sixteen years into it you still are not realizing any kind of a profit from this.

Are you non-profit [not-for-profit]?

Eddie: It wasn't planned that way.

Cliff: We are not non-profit [not-for-profit]. The theatre in the past few years has paid its own way.

Leslie: That is what I'm trying to get at. You manage to pay your actors and pay for the set and run the show out of your ticket sales.

Cliff: Exactly. We have no uh . . .

Eddie: Outside support.

Leslie: That was my next question. No grants? You don't write for grants, you have no financial backing other than complete ticket sales?

Cliff: We don't even have membership seats in the theatre sponsored.

Leslie: No season ticket holders, no sponsoring. Do you have a mailing list and send out a newsletter.

Edie: Newsletter no.

Cliff: Well, we were doing a newsletter.

Cliff: Through *Stages*.

Leslie: A theatre magazine?

Cliff: It supports the theatres.

Edie: And what is our mailing list?

Cliff: Our mailing list is now probably only around 600. We don't have a quote- unquote sign-up mailing list. We take it from our reservation sheet. But we have twenty-five hundred tour operators who express an interest in what we're doing up here constantly. Not being non-profit [not-for-profit], not having the financial support from anywhere else, you're talking thirty-two cents for every mailing, I don't care if it's a flyer or what. It gets really expensive. Advertising, of course, is a major concern. It takes a lot of advertising to draw people up to Madrid because of the back entrances. People who live in the city want to be in the city.

Edie: But there are a lot of other things to do around here. To make us special enough to pull people it takes a lot of PR.

Cliff: Besides set building, and the costs of printing, there are so many expenses involved. For it to come out basically paying its own way after we pay the performers.

Leslie: I think that's a really good thing and I was going to ask you about that. You managed to be able to pay your actors from the beginning, out of the ticket sales, whatever they were. So as you grew, it grew.

Cliff: Right.

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Edie: Tour groups are our bread and butter. We seat 140 people. If we can get two busloads, 80 people pre-paid, then the walk-ins and the other reservations are the thing that put us over. That's why we target the tour groups and the senior citizens groups. We arrange for them to come every year from Albuquerque.

Leslie: You definitely need that because Madrid is such a small community – it's not like you can be community-supported at all. There is hardly anyone here to support such a thing.

Cliff: Exactly.

Edie: However, as another incentive we sell a "Heroin Addict" T-shirt, and then offer a four dollar discount if they wear them back to any show as long as we have anything to do with the theatre.

Leslie: Oh, that's an interesting incentive. Years ago, along with the melodrama, you did do some dinner theatre. You no longer do that at all, right?

Edie: No.

Cliff: We had the facility of the restaurant at that time. The restaurant grew in popularity and it became very difficult to close it down and do dinner theatre in that setting.

Edie: Dinners became more and more popular with Friday or Saturday evening diners and it was tough to tap them on the shoulder at six and say either you're staying or you're out.

Cliff: That [Dinner Theatre] gave us the opportunity to get away from melodrama and do some other things. I prefer to stay with things that are entertaining rather than, shall we say, quote-unquote, realistic plays of modern theatre. I love to do adult comedies, *The Odd Couple*, *Same Time Next Year*, we've even had a few written especially for dinner theatre, *Dracula*, *Requiem* . . .

Cliff: *Horroresque*, that were just – they were wonderful pieces; entertaining – because we don't want to go and pay x-amount of dollars to go to a theatre and come out and be depressed.

Leslie: Yes, I can sit home and do that.

Cliff: But we loved doing the other theatre, too.

Edie: Besides preserving a really – basically an American theatre form – like jazz is to music melodrama has become to America, the virtue triumphant.

Leslie: It makes you feel good – good triumphs over evil . . .

Edie: You got it. 'Cause it don't work that way.

Leslie: Right, life isn't like that and part of going to the theatre is to get away from . . .

Edie: Escaping.

Leslie: Do you ever employ people in more than one capacity at the same time? For example, an actor as costume designer as well, or other things?

Edie: Yes. Our stage manager may pull the curtain or may be an actor, depending on stage time. We have actors and actresses who have helped me with costume and make-up.

Cliff: Running crew, set changes, fetching, props expert.

Edie: It becomes very family and we have more and more actors who come back and audition year after year. Like you and your mom. It's happening now with people involved that they like it so much that they come back every year – every show even – or ask to be cast in two shows. They say, "I've got early summer open and late summer open," and they come back and audition because they want to be a part of it. They get bitten by the bug.

Leslie: That's great for you, too. Do you have a core group that you always pull from and⁴¹
then go out into the community, or do you always have open auditions?

Edie: Open auditions always. I don't care how many years you've been with us it's still
audition because we need to see how people interact with each other, not just their
particular talent.

Leslie: Do you have any volunteers that you rely on for your average production at all?

Edie: Our volunteers are the local kids, which is a far better place for them to hang out.
They've got chores to do; it's more of an apprentice situation. And we've had more
than one kid come up from being in a playpen during rehearsal, to being on stage or
working tech.

Leslie: Have you ever done any type of children's theatre, and if so how successful was it?

Edie: Never.

Leslie: None at all.

Edie: No. It's been in the planning – in our heads. We've never done it yet, but we do have
an informal apprentice program.

Leslie: Have you ever produced any new works or worked in collaboration with a
playwright, and if so, how successful were those productions?

Edie: Once, yes, and very very well received. Especially this last season with Elaine
Conway's work of The Cerrillos Coal Mine, called *The Ruined Woman's Revenge*.
We had rave reviews, and plus, we had support of St. Johns College where she is
doing advanced work now. In the past we have had a couple of other melodramas
written for us that were okay, but Elaine Conway's was classic. We are always open
to any local playwrights who want to show us their work. We've screened a lot of
them, and we felt that for one reason or another they weren't for us.

Leslie: You are always looking for new stuff.

Edie: As long as it is in the classic style.

Leslie: Have you tried to integrate all the different cultures that are represented in your area into your productions?

Edie: As much as they are in the classic scripts. We haven't gone out of our way, but if it . . . for instance, in the Cerrillos coal mine we had various ethnic groups represented because they were a part of that scene.

Cliff: There have been some that we would not ask them to do because the characterizations of their particular ethnic group would be . . .

Edie: Too stereotypical. Even though that's the way they were portrayed then.

Cliff: It is not today, and it is not enjoyable for . . .

Edie: It's offensive – potentially offensive.

Leslie: What did you charge for general admission when you first started?

Cliff: Three dollars.

Edie: I think it was five for adults and three for children under twelve. And we're now at nine for adults, seven for seniors, and four for children under twelve. And, of course discounts. We give individual dispensation to educational groups, organizations and halfway houses. We give comps or give them reduced admission – people with disabilities.

Leslie: So you do give some discounts.

Edie: We're softies.

Leslie: Can you go over again what kind of media you are using to advertise.

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Cliff: It's all print media at this point. We have used radio, and we have been promoted on television but most of the media now is in print. We have had write-ups in *American Theatre Magazine*, *The Hilton Guest Bulletin*. We've been featured in US. West . . .

Eddie: And just this season two television coverages on things like, "what you can do on a day trip," or "what you can do on a tank of gas," and the melodrama has been featured.

Leslie: So basically, they come looking for you rather than you paying for it.

Eddie: Our advertising budget is fairly high for our situation, but the things we get results from . . .

Leslie: That's what my next question was – is, what has been successful?

Eddie: Radio and TV.

Cliff: The written word and word of mouth is the slowest, least expensive way to make your theatre grow. It's going to be a long, long process.

Eddie: The Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau is one of our biggest promoters because of the Turquoise Trail brochure. Anytime they get an inquiry at the ACVB for anything in New Mexico, one of those brochures goes out with it.

Leslie: I guess the proximity of those cities – of Santa Fe and Albuquerque – being just thirty minutes away is kind of a big help to draw.

Eddie: Albuquerque has been the easiest draw. Everybody goes North. If you're going to get out of town you go North, so this is North for Albuquerque. Santa Fe is a little elitist – it's been a harder draw until Santa Fe decided we were something found; that they found us. Albuquerque – we have many repeat people, and if anyone comes to

visit them from out of town – uncles, aunts, friends – they bring them here. Something they don't get at home. 44

Leslie: Approximately how much money or time do you actually spend for PR?

Eddie: Always, on time.

Leslie: Constantly. Do you do all your own PR or do you have someone helping you do it?

Cliff: We have hired PR consultants from time to time with about the same results as us doing it ourselves, except finding enough time to do it ourselves. The budget that we have for advertising has been rather high-end. We are looking at roughly fifteen to twenty-five percent of our gross has been going out to . . .

Eddie: And tracking whether advertising is working is the most difficult thing. We had the two most wonderful reviews on the television this season. We had a television spot. One of these little travel things. All of a sudden the phones started ringing and we said, "Wow, that was really great." We asked every reservation, "Where did you hear about it?" and they said, "Oh, I picked up this guide about five years ago on 'cheap thrills' and you were listed in there." If we involve tourism and travel, people send for things two years before they go and they cut it out, saying, "Well, if I get there I would like to do this – it's one of the things on my list."

Cliff: Be sure, whatever you do, that every arts calendar has your press release because that is where the people look it up. They can see it on TV., they can hear it on the radio, they can see a flyer, but I'll be dog-gone if they don't pick up that paper, the entertainment section, and see what's happening; what time – what's the schedule. Forty percent of our tracking comes from the calendar. One calendar or another, whether it's the [*Albuquerque*] *Journal* or the "Trib" [*Albuquerque Tribune*]. And if you can establish a mailing list with a newsletter type of thing it's appreciated – but I'll tell you what.

Edie: We have people who do make a point to come to every show but that's two or three people. Maybe they bring one or two people with them, but it certainly isn't because of a monthly newsletter.

Leslie: Do you feel that New Mexico as a state is supportive of the arts?

Cliff: New Mexico as a state is middle-of-the-road at best. In education they don't at all. The general public is no longer as supportive as it used to be.

Edie: A small fraction of the concentration's in Santa Fe and Albuquerque who really care about the arts.

Leslie: Do you think that is simply a matter of not having been exposed to the arts in any way and not being educated to it? Or do you think it's just a matter of, they don't care and never will?

Edie: Lack of exposure – and the fact that they have canceled so many dramatic arts programs in the schools.

Cliff: It has always been one of these – well, when money gets tight that's the first one that gets dropped is the dramatic arts situation. The other aspect, too, that I think affects theatre a lot is the economy of New Mexico. The economy of New Mexico, as has been well published, is not one of the top ten money makers in the world – or in the United States either. It's way down on the scale. It has a lot to do with how much people want to pay. That's why we try real hard to keep our attendance cost within what we consider a pocket change situation. Some of the more elite theatres that charge higher prices have had as tough a time as we have, if not tougher than we have. We've lost a lot of theatre groups that had a lot of potential, just because of the fact that they overpriced themselves. Just priced themselves right out of the market.

Edie: I think that's one of the reasons we are now the longest continuously operating theatre [in New Mexico].

Leslie: One of the focuses of this project is to be able to find funding in other places, and ⁴⁶
not totally rely on ticket sales. In order to get this out there and expose people to it,
sufficient immediate funding will be needed. What can you tell me about grants, etc?

Cliff: It's gotten to the point, now, where corporate grants and corporate funding are easier
to get than state funding through the arts situations, or federal grants. These types of
things.

Leslie: Family foundations and things like that seem to be . . .

Cliff: Corporations such as Nations Bank who came in and immediately gave themselves a
black eye are now supporting all kinds of community efforts in order to cover
themselves – "See, I am giving back something to the community."

Edie: The one time we did apply for a state grant we were told that we were not *avant garde*
enough. We were not on the "cutting edge."

Leslie: How do you feel about the current regional and national support for the arts?

Cliff: This [SRTP] would be the best thing that could happen. There is not a regional
theatre situation happening in New Mexico or anywhere near. With our melodrama
we are bringing people in from Colorado and from Texas. We're doing regional
theatre in some sense. Yes, there is a market for people who will do it.

Edie: Absolutely a need.

Leslie: There is a need that isn't being filled.

Cliff: There are a lot of groups that are trying to establish themselves as such.

Edie: There are more going out of business than there are starting up.

Leslie: The ones that do start – it seems like they give up before they give it a good shot.

Like you guys, it took you sixteen years to get here.

Edie: They haven't been able to financially hold on.

Cliff: Their budget has to be really stretched and comprehensive.

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Edie: To me the key is in the educational system. I think it is essential that every child that goes to school, whether it is in Las Cruces or Truchas, needs to have the exposure to theatre. As Cliff found out, he could get away with things on stage that he could never get away with in real life – and to boot, he got applause for them. The building of self-esteem, confidence, appearing before the public is so essential to life, whether they pursue acting or not – it is so essential.

Leslie: To end the interview I would just like to know where you see your theatre five years from now, or ten years from now.

Cliff: Five years from now we will be working at having a theatre that is insulated – so that we can be doing evening shows into the winter. Eventually, we will be able to run the theatre five days a week and be a full-time theatre.

Edie: Oh, dear God!

Leslie: Well, by that time someone else will be doing a lot of the work.

Edie: In fact our co-director, who has been with us for five years now – started as an actor – works with Cliff. They share responsibilities directorially. He took the middle show himself, and then they co-directed the first and third show. It made sense bringing in somebody else because we have three other businesses to run.

Leslie: Thank you very much.

Tom Thayer

Roxy Regional Theatre

Clarksville, TN

Tom Thayer and his partner John Macdonald run the Roxy Regional Theatre in Clarksville, TN. The Roxy was a community theatre for many years, but started out as a dinner theatre. The city of Clarksville is located less than an hour's drive North of Nashville on I-24. It boasts a military base as well as a university, and the resulting transient population presents special challenges.

Unfortunately, John McDonald was not available for the interview, which took place in the lobby of the Roxy Theatre.

Leslie: What year did you first open your theatre?

Tom: 1983.

Leslie: What type of show are you currently producing?

Tom: Right now we're producing musicals, classics, comedies, new scripts; a variety.

Leslie: What were your original plans for your theatre company? Did you know what type of show you wanted to produce?

Tom: Originally we planned to produce dinner theatre, but unfortunately the market for dinner theatre pretty much dried up in this area. At that point we eliminated the dinner theatre and did straight theatre.

Leslie: In what ways did you achieve your original goals at all? You didn't have any idea in mind of doing any other type of production?

Tom: No, other than doing theatre that we felt was good. Unfortunately, when you're dealing with dinner theatre, that draws a certain clientele who expect certain types of shows. Unfortunately, those types of shows we did not want to produce. Therefore . . .

Leslie: So you changed your idea of what you wanted to do from your original plans?

Tom: You got it.

Leslie: Why did you choose to start a theatre company in Clarksville?

Tom: It was my hometown.

Leslie: What disadvantages or problems, if any, have you encountered due to the location of your theatre building?

Tom: Pretty much Clarksville as a location, the only problem is the fact that the population is very transient and as soon as you build an audience you're losing them and having to constantly rebuild. That's really the only problem.

Leslie: What advantages, if any, have you discovered with your location?

Tom: The same advantages – the disadvantages are the advantages.

Leslie: How many shows a year do you produce on an average?

Tom: On an average, 12.

Leslie: And when you first opened it was fewer, or?

Tom: It was actually the same.

Leslie: You've always produced 12 a year, approximately?

Tom: Yes.

Leslie: I understand that you have built an additional playing space in the balcony. I

assume that this has enabled you to broaden the scope of your productions. Can you tell me some of the good and bad things about this new addition?

Tom: It really wasn't *per se* to broaden the scope of our productions so much as it was to have another space for people who are new – new directors, new playwrights, new performers – to have a space that we are willing to go out on a limb for. Our main stage – we can't do that.

Leslie: So you gave the community an opportunity to have a space.

Tom: You got it.

Leslie: How long are your average runs?

Tom: They can go anywhere from two weeks to six weeks, depending on the show.

Leslie: Are you bound by equity rules in how many performances you are allowed to have?

Tom: Yes.

Leslie: Is that because you are located in Tennessee?

Tom: It's because we're non-equity.

Leslie: You are a non-equity house. So you can have as many performances of a given show as you want.

Tom: You got it. [Thayer's statements regarding equity rules for non-equity houses are contradictory and confusing, and indicate a need for further investigation.]

Leslie: Are you a non-profit [not-for-profit] organization now?

Tom: Yes.

Leslie: And you started as a non-profit [not-for-profit]?

Tom: No. Started as a for-profit, and it ran as a for profit organization for two years.

Then we turned that into a non-profit [not-for-profit].

Leslie: What made you decide to do that, was it economics?

Tom: Yes.

Leslie: What percentage of your business comes from season ticket holders?

Tom: 15% maybe.

Leslie: So, not a very large percentage at all. What type of show do you feel the audience likes to attend the most?

Tom: That's hard. That's really hard. Because you would think that large, very well known musicals, in this area, would draw the most. Unfortunately that isn't always the case. The classics seem to draw better than anything else we do.

Leslie: As in Shakespeare.

Tom: As in Shakespeare, as in adaptations of books . . .

Leslie: People tend to come more if they are familiar with the show?

Tom: Or if there is a reason. Usually people will come if there's a reason, i.e. they've read it, not necessarily they've seen it. *Damn Yankees*, for instance. I was worried that we were going to fall into the 'anything goes' category. [he does not expand on what he means by this] However, three fourths of the cast in *Damn Yankees* is new; therefore that brought a new audience.

Leslie: When is your slowest season? If you have one.

Tom: January and May are the two worst months.

Leslie: When is your busiest season?

Tom: Busy seasons run generally March, April, and then October, November, December.

Leslie: Approximately how many core people, or paid employees, do you use to keep things running?

Tom: Three paid employees.

Leslie: Approximately how many volunteers do you rely on getting for an average production?

Tom: For one production?

Leslie: On an average. I know it's a hard question.

Tom: I would average, you know anywhere from 20 to 35 or 40, it depends on the show.

Leslie: Do most of these people repeat? Come back to you time and again?

Tom: The majority, yes.

Leslie: Have you ever done any type of children's theatre?

Tom: Children's theatre, as in children performing or adults for children?

Leslie: Either one.

Tom: Both.

Leslie: You've done both. How successful was that for you?

Tom: We always do children's theatre every year at Christmas time because it is very profitable – especially during the Christmas season. Shows with kids tend to be less profitable, however we feel as an outreach to the community we must give the children of the community something. Therefore, we must do that.

Leslie: What did you charge for general admission when you first started?

Tom: I think tickets were, a low ticket would have been \$13 for a Sunday brunch and a high ticket was probably about \$18-19 for dinner, actually.

Tom: Right.

Leslie: Once you stopped doing the dinner theatre?

Tom: We started, I think we started with like an eight dollar ticket and then over 14 years have grown to a \$12 ticket which is a high and a five dollar for students is a low.

Leslie: Okay, and do you offer senior discounts?

Tom: Yes, we always offer senior, students really are the bottom price structure, seniors are in the middle and then a general adult.

Leslie: As a non-profit [not-for-profit] organization, what methods do you use to raise funds, other than ticket sales?

Tom: Other than ticket sales? Just general soliciting.

Leslie: Within the community?

Tom: Yes, within the community.

Leslie: So you've never attempted to get grants or foundation money?

Tom: Yes, we do grant writing. Very difficult to find those avenues, but we do.

Leslie: Do you think it's because of the area you are in or just in general?

Tom: I think, in general, grant writing is extremely difficult because there are so many out there and you really have to have a full time person who is looking for a specific grant.

Leslie: You're biggest supporters then?

Tom: We run about 45% ticket sales and the rest is donations.

Leslie: From businesses?

Tom: That's businesses, corporate, state and federal funding.

Leslie: How many board members do you have?

Tom: 15.

Leslie: Is that what you started with?

Tom: Pretty much, the board averages usually between nine and 15 on any given year. It just kind of depends.

Leslie: What types of media do you use to advertise?

Tom: Primarily we just use the *Leaf Chronicle* [local paper], simply because we got corporate donation from the Chronicle, therefore we are bound by their . . .

Leslie: You guys are hand in hand.

Tom: You got it.

Leslie: So mostly just the *Leaf Chronicle*. What about flyers?

Tom: Direct mailings, newsletters.

Leslie: For the newsletters you have a mailing list that you – how did you compile the mailing list? People came in and you just had them sign?

Tom: Pretty much from day one. Right now, it's grown to include the Montgomery County teachers as well. We just feel that this is something they should be aware of.

Leslie: How much money or time do you spend for PR?

Tom: PR is pretty much twenty-four hour, seven days a week, constantly dealing with PR.

Leslie: So, you don't have anyone who's taking care of that for you, it's basically . . .

Tom: Yeah.

Leslie: Have you ever taken any shows on the road?

Leslie: How successful was that?

Tom: That was very successful, simply because that was a market that we went into; a proven market. We were taking in something that we knew that they would want. So that one instance proved very profitable.

Leslie: Have you tried to integrate all the different cultures that are represented in your area into any of your productions?

Tom: Every group says, "Yeah we include this, and blah, blah, blah." To actually be able to do it is another thing. Every culture in this area, and you're going to find this everywhere, they are their own community; and it is extremely difficult to break into that community. Have we made an active effort to do that? No, I don't think anybody does. Nor do I think those communities make an active effort to break into our community. While we say, "Yes, we include them." We've got an Hispanic girl in one of our shows, and all her Hispanic friends came to see the show. Will they be constant theatre-goers?

Leslie: So you feel that one of the factors that contribute to non-inclusion is their lack of enthusiasm as much as anything else.

Tom: It's not just their lack of enthusiasm. I think it's just – and I don't want to say culture as in culture in the arts – I want to say that their culture does not include the arts.

Leslie: Where do you see this theatre in five years?

Tom: Physical structure?

Leslie: Period, just the whole project.

Tom: In five years I would really like for us to be a fully equity house; augmented by the community so that it is not a shut-out type of thing. I strongly feel that community

members can learn from professionals; professionals can learn from community members. We have always tried to integrate professionals and community constantly. And I feel in five years that there is really no reason why we couldn't become an equity house. Our professional company shows that we do right now, we're already paying higher than equity scales. We're already basically equity approved, so it's just a matter of making sure that funding is there. Once you go into equity it's major funding problems, and lots of paperwork. So we would have to make sure that everything is in line to do that.

Leslie: Thank you very much.

Tabulation

Act III, Scene 1 • The Climax

Questions	Wesner	Cato	Thayer
Age of Project	3 years	15 years	15 years
Vision?	Moral/Ethical Plays	Melodrama	Dinner Theatre
Changed?	No	No	Yes
Current?	None	Same	Regional Theatre
Profit after?	None	None	None
Core/Auditions	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes
Paid Employees	2 (after 2 years)	Yes	3
Board Members	4	3	9-15
Fundraising Methods	Ticket Sales Program Ads. Indiv. Donations Award Show One Grant	Ticket Sales Donations Program Ads	Ticket Sales Comity Don. Businesses Corporate State & Federal Grant Writing Award Show Program Ads
Beginning Admission	\$4-5	\$3-5	\$13-19 (Incl. meal)
Current/End Admission	\$15.00	\$4-9	\$12 (no food)
Season Tickets	High to begin, then a decrease	Tour Groups	15%
Advertising Media/ Success (\$/0)	Word of Mouth Marquee/Billboard Theatre Pubs (0) ART \$100 Fliers Public TV Events Mailings expensive	Print (\$) Radio (0) TV (0) Am. Th. Mag Hilton Guest Bltn. Turq. Tr. Broch (0) Arts Calendar (0) Word of Mouth Mailings (\$)	Local News (0) Direct Mailings (\$) Newsletters
Time for PR	N/A	Always	24 hrs/day
Geog. Loc. Problems	N/A	Off Main Route	Transient Population

Act III, Scene 1 • The Climax (continued)

Questions	Wesner	Cato	Thayer
Types of Shows/ Favorites	Original Plays Orig. Comedies Music	Melodrama Escapist	Musicals Classics Comedies
Children's Theatre/ Success	No	No, but Apprentices	Yes/ Successful
New Works/ Success	Exclusively/ Very	Yes/ Some	N/A
Road Shows/ Success	No	Yes/ Very	Yes (1)/ Yes
Productions/Season	3-4	3 (Summer Only)	12
Production Runs	4 weeks (3x wk=12)	7 weekends	2-6 weeks
Slowest Season	None	N/A (Summers)	Jan. & May
Busiest Season	Consistent	Summers Only	Mar./April, Fall
5-Year Projection	N/A	Year Round Sched.	Full Equity House with Comty. Suppt.
Extras			
Equity?	No, but bound (NY)	No (Semi-Prof.)	No
Non-profit?	Yes	No	Yes (after 2 yrs)
Din. Th. Fail/ Reason	N/A	Yes/ Displ. Diners	Yes/ No Market
Actors/Crew Doubling	Yes	Yes	N/A
Bonuses			
Regional Need		X	
Home in Beginning	X	X	X
Pro Bono Attorney	X		
Creative Acquisition	X		
True to Vision	X		

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Summary
Act III, Scene 2
The Plot

The first of these interviews was with a couple who now reside and teach theatre in Clarksville, Tennessee, but at one time ran a not-for-profit theatre company in New York. David and Barbara Wesner offered much valuable input on the how-to's of starting a theatre company, but the location of their project made some comparisons irrelevant to rural application. The second interview was with Cliff and Edie Cato. The Catos operate a small, semi-professional theatre in Madrid, New Mexico. Located in the south central part of the state, Madrid is a very small former coal-mining town turned tourist attraction. The last interview was with one of two director-managers of the Roxy Regional Theatre. Tommy Thayer and John Macdonald run a well-established not-for-profit company in Clarksville, Tennessee, northwest of Nashville.

The Wesners' Off West Broadway Theatre lasted only 3 years (1992-95), while the Catos' Melodrama and Thayer's Roxy Theatre have both operated for 15 years and are still going strong. It is interesting that both of the presently operating theatre companies are still in the hands of the people with the original vision, while the Wesners' theatre company faded shortly after they left it in the hands of an able (and presumably) equally motivated assistant. Also, even though the original vision changed in the case of Thayer, his theatre company is successful. The Wesners' response to my questions about their vision was directly to this point. Barbara noted, "I think you have to stay true to what you feel you're about," and David added, "That's really true. No one else will see it like you see it."

None of the interviewees said their theatres ever achieved an actual profit, although the Wesners and Thayer managed a few paid employees. The Catos, who define their theatre company as "semi-professional," use the proceeds from ticket sales to pay the actors and crew for their productions. Cliff Cato pointed out that, "We are not non-profit. The theatre in the past few years has paid its own way." Although all three organizations enjoyed a

"core" of both actors and technical crew, who return again and again, they all use open auditions for casting their productions.

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The structure of each organization affects the size of the board. For instance, the Wesners and Catos were concerned about maintaining control of their vision; therefore, they chose to have small boards of 3-4 people. Also, during the period of time that the Roxy was a community theatre, Thayer's board numbered 9-15 members; thus increasing support through influential community members' fund raising.

All three interviewees noted that ticket sales were their biggest single source of income, with donations spread across the board. The Catos relied mostly on ticket sales with few donations, while the Wesners credited a few generous donations of money and equipment. Thayer said, "We run about 45% ticket sales, and the rest is donations . . . that's businesses, corporate, state and federal funding." Another common source of revenue is the sale of program advertising, which more than pays for the printing costs. An annual award show presented by the Wesners and Thayer, gives both loyal patrons and company members a chance to dress in their finest formal attire and show support for their favorite shows while at the same time raising funds for the next show.

Another potential source of income is state and federal grants; however, all agreed that grant writing is difficult, time consuming, and often unsuccessful. In three years, the Wesners were able to obtain one grant. Thayer, expanding on this subject, said, "I think, in general, grant writing is extremely difficult because there are so many out there and you really have to have a full time person who is looking for a specific grant." Thayer did say that they do keep trying. Cliff Cato explained, "It's gotten to the point, now, where corporate grants and corporate funding are easier to get than state funding through the arts situations, or federal grants."

Admission prices, while similarly structured, varied geographically from the Catos' \$3 beginning, to a high of \$15.00 in New York City in 1995. Season tickets accounted for 15% of the Roxy Theatre's audience, while the Off West Broadway Theatre reported,

“It was really high for the first year,” then, “The percentage decreased as the years went on because our public appeal was greater; so I can’t say really that we lost memberships. It’s just that the new people who would come to see us would not buy memberships. They would just come per show.” The Catos rely on arrangements with tour groups because, “Tour groups are our bread and butter. . . . we target the tour groups and the senior citizens groups. We arrange for them to come every year from Albuquerque.”

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When asked about the time dedicated to PR, interviewees gave two responses that were immediate and to the point: The Catos, “Always,” and Thayer’s, “24 hours a day,” said it all. The Wesners, while never directly asked about PR, supplied an overwhelming amount of information on how to accomplish it on a budget. When asked about types of media used to advertise, David Wesner said, “It was too expensive for us.” The Wesners went on to list several cost-free methods that they used.

In all three cases, the most successful PR was the kind that did not have to be purchased. Local arts calendar listings, TV, Radio, and Chamber of Commerce publications, all cost-free, were cited as top examples. Tour guides are especially valuable to the Catos, who are located off the beaten track. Mailings were said to be the least effective, due mainly to postage costs. “I don’t care if it’s a flyer or what. It gets really expensive,” Cliff Cato observed; and Barbara Wesner added, “We did a lot of mailings in the beginning, just to let them know we were there. Once they knew we were there, we didn’t have to do that any more.” Both The Wesners and Thayer have used newsletters to target specific groups, with varying degrees of success.

Comedies top the list of audience favorites, with musicals second. Melodrama, offering both comedy and music, is the obvious favorite in Madrid, NM. Thayer adds classics, “As in Shakespeare, as in adaptations of books.” When asked about children’s theatre, only Thayer claimed experience. “We always do children’s theatre every year at Christmas time, because it is very profitable – especially during the Christmas season.

Shows with kids tend to be less profitable; however, we feel as an outreach to the community we must give the children of the community something.” Although the Catos do not specifically produce children’s theatre, they described an “informal apprentice program . . . Our volunteers are the local kids, which is a far better place for them to hang out. They’ve got chores to do; it’s more of an apprentice situation. And we’ve had more than one kid come up from being in a playpen during rehearsal, to being on stage or working tech.”

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The Wesners offered an exclusive variety of successful original shows, all written by David and directed by Barbara. The Catos have done a few original pieces, and, “We are always open to any local playwrights who want to show us their work.” The Catos have also taken a few of their summer shows out of town, and they found these very well received. Thayer, while claiming only one road show, called it a success. Both Thayer and the Catos confirmed that they try to integrate cultural and ethnic groups but only when the script is appropriate. The Catos observed that care must be taken to avoid casting someone in a role that would be insulting or too stereotypical.

Production schedules offered no usable information due to the diversity of the theatre companies’ programs. Wesners’ NYC company, although a non-equity house, was still bound by equity rules regarding the length of their runs, which were limited to 4 weeks of 3 shows a week. The Catos fit their three shows to fill a summer-only schedule, and Thayer’s runs vary through twelve shows a season. The Roxy is a non-equity house; however, equity rules for his location limit the number of weeks the show can run, but not the number of performances per week. Seasons seem to have little effect in NYC, while Thayer’s slow time is January and May. Spring and Fall provide the largest audiences in Clarksville, Tennessee.

The two still-operating theatre companies both have big plans for the future. Thayer hopes to operate a full equity house, “We’re already basically equity approved, so it’s just a matter of making sure that funding is there,” although he plans to keep the community

involved. "I strongly feel that community members can learn from professionals – professionals can learn from community members." The Cato's vision? "Five years from now we will be working at having a theatre that is insulated – so that we can be doing evening shows into the winter. Eventually, we will be able to run the theatre five days a week and be a full-time theatre."

Conclusion
Act III, Scene 3
Dénouement

The Wesner interview provided much valuable information and many useful examples for anyone starting and operating a small theatre company, even though the Off West Broadway Theatre company was only active for five years. The Cato interview added much insight into the general atmosphere of the area and region of the country where the proposed Southwest Rural Theatre Project (S RTP) is to be located. The Thayer interview provided a view of production practices outside the sphere of New York City. The two still active companies are examples that small theatre can successfully be produced, given a little luck, plenty of dedication, energy and the willingness to forego financial gain. Each company drew on fifteen years' experience and offer hope for the future to anyone beginning a theatre company. All three interviews contributed information that, properly applied, can represent the difference between success and failure.

It seems that staying true to the vision for the organization is essential to the endurance of the company. Even when changes must be made to the "script," the focus of the "show" remains strong and steady only when those who hold the vision are involved. This consistent vision is evidenced by the demise of the Wesners' project in New York after they left, as well as by the success of the Catos' melodrama due to their commitment to their vision. This outcome also confirmed my preliminary investigation results. Another similarity to the original research was the lack of profit reported by all three companies. All are constantly searching for funds just to cover production costs.

Corporations, businesses and individuals seem to be the sources of support to seek, while grant writing currently appears to be less fruitful and very time consuming. Locating

the SRTP in a small city will add to the challenge of finding support. The Wesners had 65
much good advice on creative ways of finding needed resources, both financial and material.

Although ticket sales provided the major single source of support for all three subjects of this study, ticket prices are difficult to predict since they change from year to year. Geographically, ticket prices are lower in the Southwest than at either of the other two locations. Ticket prices for the SRTP must be carefully considered to achieve sufficient support without pricing itself over the market and off the stage. Although the SRTP can probably rely on ticket sales to support a local company, a projected companion project, a rural outreach program, will most likely need outside support as well. The goal for this companion project will be to offer a live theatre experience to the broadest possible audience in their home area, regardless of income level or cultural background.

All three subjects used open auditions while also pulling from a core group of players. This casting approach seems the only logical process. Producing theatre requires the efforts of many people, and it is important to encourage a regular infusion of new talent and interest. This approach to casting would apply to the home shows for the SRTP, however the goal of a traveling repertory company would require a more permanent core group. Such an ensemble must be able to stage a number of productions on demand, with only one or two pickup rehearsals and, of course, be free to travel. Potential members of this repertory core should surface through the screening process of auditions and home shows, although they may have to be actively recruited. The Wesners and Catos gave examples of actors doubling in technical positions, which would be an ideal situation for the SRTP.

Another important consideration for the SRTP will be the type of show produced. In order to stimulate audience interest in this rural area, it will be important to offer productions that are popular or familiar enough to draw the largest possible audience. Classics, musicals, and comedies were cited by those interviewed as being audience favorites. At the outset, SRTP will have to produce smaller shows until there is enough involvement

generated for a larger cast and crew, so the small cast classics and comedies will have first⁶⁶ consideration.

Children's theatre is not a focus for any of the theatre companies in this study, and little experience with it was reported. However, because it is usually part of outreach or educational programs, children's theatre will be included in the SRTP repertoire, not as a complete focus but certainly as a component of the rural outreach program.

None of the subjects had a great deal of experience with road shows. The Catos did offer examples of being well-received the few times they packed up a show and took it to another town. This indicates a positive reception for a traveling troupe in the Southwest.

Original works were presented exclusively by the Wesners' company, and the Catos produced a few, mostly with success. SRTP, while not actively seeking new works, may consider doing some, especially if the scripts reflect regional cultural values. The Southwest is rich in ethnic history and tradition, and a play set in a familiar atmosphere should have wide appeal among people not normally drawn to experience live theatre.

Both the Catos and Thayer reported dinner theater projects that were unsuccessful for one reason or another. SRTP will not consider doing dinner theatre.

Public relations is an important aspect of theater production that needs constant attention according to the Wesners and the Catos. Cost-free methods of making the project visible to the people seem to be the most effective. Since cost will be of great concern to the project, particularly in its infancy, it will be important to have someone who has the time and the expertise to publicize the theatre effectively. Everyone interviewed offered valuable suggestions for accessing cost-free avenues such as newspaper, radio and television PSA's, news stories and tour brochures.

Due to the dynamics of the interviews, a few unanticipated extras and bonus bits of information emerged which provided some answers, and more than a few areas surfaced that require further investigation and planning.

One thing that all three theater companies had in common was beginning with a space⁶⁷ to use; in some cases, a theater, and in others, a converted building or space. Lack of a 'home' may be a handicap for the SRTP, if it must start out as an organization without one.

Two of the subjects were not-for-profit and paid only one to three staff members, while the third, although it made no "profit," paid its way and paid the actors. The long-term goal of the SRTP is to pay its way and offer a small, core group of people a stipend. It appears that the best course of action for any new theatre company is to operate on a not-for-profit basis, at least in the beginning. SRTP will begin by seeking not-for-profit status.

The legal and financial structure of the organization will have a profound effect on the success of the company. A not-for-profit company must follow certain rules regarding a board of directors, and file the necessary forms and applications. Finding an attorney to work *pro bono* had not previously been considered but will be pursued by SRTP.

It seems that a smaller board of directors is preferable initially, ensuring that control of the project remains with those who share the vision. Possibly, as the needs of the theatre project increase, a larger board could be assembled, consisting of members who have demonstrated fund-raising abilities. It may be important, however, to limit the power of this larger body to prevent artistic interference.

The Wesners introduced the subject of Equity, and explained what rules they were bound by in New York. Apparently, the rules change according to geographic location, the size of the house also being a factor. Equity rules governing shows produced by a not-for-profit company in the Southwest must be investigated.

The Catos emphatically stated that there is need for regional theater and outreach programs such as the proposed SRTP in the target area. The vision is there, and this research has contributed many answers, and a few unanticipated questions, that will help SRTP become a reality. The consensus of practical advice will help inform each decision, thus aiding in the assembly of the proposed project.

For long-term success, one vital point of emphasis — stay true to the vision.

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APPENDICES

General Interview Questions

1. When did you start your theatre company?
2. What were your original plans for your theatre company? Did you know what kind of theatre productions you wanted to offer?
3. What type of theatre company are you operating now?
4. Did you achieve your original goals or did they change and evolve?
5. How long did it take you to become a profit-making business?
6. Approximately how many core people, or paid employees, do you use to keep things running?
7. Approximately how many volunteers do you rely on for an average production?
8. How many board members do you/did you have?
9. How do you feel about current regional and national support of the arts?
10. What methods do/did you use to raise funds?
11. What types of organizations have been or are your biggest supporters?
12. What did you charge for general admission when you first started?
23. What do you charge for general admission now?
14. What percentage of your business comes from season ticket holders?
15. What media do you use to advertise?
16. How much money or time do you spend for PR?
17. What disadvantages or problems, if any, have you encountered due to the geographic location of your theatre company?
18. What advantages, if any, does your geographic location offer?
19. What types of plays do you feel the audience likes to attend the most?
20. How many shows do you produce a year?
21. How long are your production runs?

22. When is your slowest season?
23. When is your busiest season?
24. Do you ever do any type of children's theatre and if so how successful is it?
25. To what do you attribute this success (or lack of success)?
26. Have you ever produced any new works and, if so, how successful were they?
27. Have you ever taken any shows on the road?
28. Have you tried to integrate the different cultures in your area into any of your productions?
29. Do you feel that you are well integrated now? What factors do you feel contribute to the integration, or lack thereof?
30. Where do you see this theatre company in five years?

Interview I Question Plan
David and Barbara Wesner
Off West Broadway Theatre Company
New York, NY

I know that you no longer have your theatre company but I felt that your experiences could give me some valuable insight into establishing an running a theatre company. Can you tell me a little about the events that led up to the opening of the Off West Broadway Theatre Company?

1. What year did you open your theatre company?
2. How many years were you open?
3. What were your original plans for your theatre company, as in, did you know what kind of production you wanted to offer?
4. In what ways did you achieve your original goals or did your goals change and evolve?
5. What disadvantages or problems, if any, did you encounter due to the geographic location of your theatre?
6. What advantages, if any, did you enjoy due to your location?
7. How many shows a year did you produce?
8. How long were your runs?
9. How long did it take you to become a profit-making business?
10. What percentage of your business were season ticket holders?
11. What types of plays do you feel the audience attended the most?
12. When was your slowest season?
13. When was your busiest season?
14. Approximately how many core people, or paid employees, did you use to keep things running?
15. Approximately how many volunteers did you rely on for an average production?

16. Did you ever do any type of children's theatre and if so how successful was it?
17. To what do you attribute this success or lack of success?
18. Did you ever produce any new works, and if so how successful were they?
19. What did you charge for general admission when you first started?
20. What did you charge for general admission in your last season?
21. As a non-profit organization, what methods did you use to raise funds?
22. What types of organizations were your biggest supporters?
23. How many board members did you have?
24. What media did you use to advertise?
25. How much money and/or time did you spend on PR?
26. Did you ever take any shows on the road?
27. If so, how successful was it, and why?
28. Did you ever encounter any legal problems while you were operating your theatre?

Interview II Question Plan**Cliff and Edie Cato****Engine House Theatre Melodrama****Highway 14, Madrid N.M.**

In May 1997 your theatre had its 15th season. Edie, I understand this started with your vision. Cliff joined you a few years later. Can you each tell me some background information about yourselves prior to the opening of the Engine House Theatre?

1. What year did you officially start your theatre company?
2. What type of theatre company are you operating now?
3. What were your original plans for your theatre company, as in, did you know what kind of production you wanted to offer?
4. In what ways did you achieve your original goals or did your goals change and evolve?
5. Why did you choose Madrid for your company location?
6. What disadvantages or problems, if any, have you encountered due to the location of your theatre? By location I mean the town itself, as well as the region around the town.
7. What advantages, if any, have you discovered to your location? For example, I assume the tourist trade is a pretty large audience pool.
8. How many shows a year do you produce?
9. How long are your average runs?
10. Have you ever taken any shows on the road?
11. If so, how successful was it, and to what do you attribute the success or lack of success?
12. How long did it take you to become a profit-making business?
13. Did you start out as non-profit, or community supported theatre at all?
14. Do you now or have you ever received grants for your theatre company? If so, what type of grant?

15. What percentage of your business comes from season ticket holders?
16. I understand that summer is your busiest season. Is that right?
17. Approximately how many core people, or paid employees, do you use to keep things running?
18. Do you employ people in more than one capacity? For example an actor as costume designer as well?
19. Approximately how many volunteers, if any, do you rely on for an average production?
20. Have you ever done any type of children's theatre and if so how successful was it?
21. Have you ever produced any new works, or worked in collaboration with a playwright? If so, how successful were those productions?
22. Have you tried to integrate the different cultures in your area into your productions?
23. What did you charge for general admission when you first started?
24. What media do you currently use to advertise?
25. What media have you used in the past? Can you give me some examples of what seemed to work and what seemed less successful?
26. How much money or time do you spend on PR?
27. Have you ever tried other theatre genres besides melodrama?
28. Do you feel that New Mexico, as a state, is supportive of the arts?
29. How do you feel about the current regional and national support of the arts?
30. Where do you see this theatre company in five years?

Interview III Question Plan

Tom Thayer

Roxy Regional Theatre

Clarksville, TN

1. What year did you first open your theatre company?
2. What types of theatre production do you currently offer?
3. What were your original plans for your theatre company, as in, did you know what kind of production you wanted to offer?
4. In what ways did you achieve your original goals or did your goals change and evolve?
5. Why did you choose to open a theatre company in Clarksville?
6. What disadvantages or problems, if any, have you encountered due to the location of your theatre company?
7. What advantages, if any, have you discovered to your location?
8. How many shows a year do you produce on an average?
9. I understand that you have built an additional stage space in the balcony of your theatre building. I assume that this has enabled you to broaden the scope of your productions.
Can you tell me some of the good and bad things about this new addition?
10. How long are your average runs?
11. How long did it take you to achieve for-profit status?
12. What percentage of your business comes from season ticket holders?
13. What types of plays do you feel the audience likes to attend the most?
14. When is your slowest season?
15. When is your busiest season?
16. Approximately how many core people, or paid employees, do you use to keep things running?

17. Approximately how many volunteers do you rely on getting for an average production?
18. Have you ever done any type of children's theatre, and if so how successful was it?
19. To what do you attribute this success (or lack of success)?
20. Have you ever produced any new works, and if so how successful were they?
21. What did you charge for general admission when you first started?
22. What do you charge for general admission now?
23. As a non-profit organization, what methods did you use to raise funds?
24. What types of organizations have been or are your biggest supporters?
25. How many board members do/did you have?
26. What media do you use to advertise?
27. How much money or time do you spend for PR?
28. Have you ever taken any shows on the road? If so, how successful was the trip?
29. Have you tried to integrate the different cultures in your area into your productions?
30. Do you feel that you are well integrated now? What factors do you feel contribute to the integration, or lack thereof?
31. Where do you see your theatre in five years?

Extras from Wesner Interview

The Wesners poured forth advice before the interview even began. As a result, much applicable information was obtained outside of the planned questions. Although it is not considered in the present study, this information has been noted, as it may be valuable as a reference in the future

Leslie: I know that you no longer have your theatre company, but I felt that your experiences could give me some valuable insight. Can you tell me a little about the events that led up to the opening of the Off West Broadway Theatre Company?

David: Well, this was you're idea.

Barbara: It was. I had the vision for it. I was in a church at the time in New York City, and they had a building with a sanctuary and a large stage. We were in bible school at the time, sort of like a seminary, and one of our projects before we could graduate was a community based outreach. We were supposed to take something in us and turn it into some kind of outreach into the community. The only thing we had ever known was theatre so – and David is a playwright – and so I said, “David, I know what our outreach project is going to be. You’re going to write a show and I’m going to direct it and then we’re going to put it on.” We did that. It was something we knew and it was so easy for us. Here we were at the end of three years of study and we wanted something easy. What we did, the very first production we did, was inside the church building itself. We mounted one of his original pieces. I held open casting. I had people from all New York city. Hungry actors coming in to read. It was not a religious play but it was a morally challenging play, kind of. Ethical standards.

David: Right, in fact it was about . . . one guy was a druggie and his roommate wasn't and the guy got further into drugs and this guy began to see how much trouble his roommate was in.

Barbara: So anyway that was the story, and we had overwhelming success with this thing. We charged or didn't charge for that show? I think we took an offering. 80

David: Yeah I think it was about four bucks or something like that.

Barbara: I don't know. It was really inexpensive, but we just did it to offset our expenses.

David: We wound up with about five hundred people.

Barbara: We couldn't believe the response, in New York city, for something that was in a church.

David: Very little advertising. Word of mouth only.

Barbara: I started thinking about it. It was about a year after that, our church had a second building which was a five or six story office-type building, I guess it was five stories. They were using floors two, three, four and five. But the first floor, ground level, store front looking, big windows – big huge windows, six of those on the street – it was just being . . . it was a storage room. I thought – I just had this flash in my head of a little black box. Nothing like what you propose [SRTP]; it was nothing so extravagant. This was just a room. What were the dimensions?

David: I think it was – from wall to the wall we put up – I think was thirty-five feet and the actual room itself was twenty-six feet wide.

Barbara: It was twenty-six by thirty-five, the space that we could use.

David: And it had a fourteen foot ceiling.

Barbara: And we had another little space that we could use for an entryway, and a little corner of the space that we could use for a lighting booth. I just had . . . “this could work as a black box theatre.” This is what I said, “we could do arena theatre, we could build platforms for levels seat sixty people and have a twenty by twenty stage . . .” which is what we ended up with. We bought piping and . . .

David: Actually, it was thirteen by about eighteen.

Barbara: I don't know. It was really small, but we knew we would have exclusive use of the space 81
so we could run indefinitely – so if we packed them out, thirty-sixty people a night we could
play . . .

David: Prior to this, you know, I had been working in the public theatre for twelve years.

Barbara: This was the biggest advantage.

David: When I left the public theatre, I didn't know I was going to start this. See, we went into the
ministry. I was associate pastor of a church and Barbara was the emancipator. So, I left theatre
to go into the ministry.

Leslie: But you already knew all these people.

Barbara: Yes.

David: So, when I left the public theatre to go into the ministry, Joe Papp gave me about fifteen
thousand dollars worth of lighting and sound equipment.

Barbara: Dimmers, board . . .

David: Dimmers, lights, cables . . .

Barbara: . . .one hundred and twenty instruments, cabling . . .

David: Yeah. It was quite impressive. He [Joe Papp] knew – I didn't know at the time – he knew he
was dying, for example. I didn't know that.

Barbara: So, finding this black box that was not being used by the church, we went to the main
pastor and said “Can we have this space? Can you front us some money that we can pay back
out of our box office receipts?” Because it was going to take us about two thousand dollars to
set up.

David: We bought risers for the seats

Barbara: We projected what it would cost.

Barbara: We did buy seats – we bought half of the seats. We were able to get some old furniture, which was our seating. We built platforms. We had the lighting, but we had to buy the hardware to get the lights up.

David: Oh, yeah. I built a grid structure, because you see that was my background. So, I built a pipe structure around all the walls. There was a pipe going all the way around all four walls and I hung lights all the way around. When you first walked in, it was pretty impressive. Most small black boxes didn't look like that. You know, they had a couple little bars up there. This baby was well lit. When I turned the lights on, oh my gosh!

Barbara: So we bought rigging, and we bought lumber, and we bought paint.

David: It was about two thousand or so dollars.

Barbara: It was about twenty five hundred dollars. We had contracted with the church to pay them back over time, out of our box office receipts. We did not need to draw a salary from the theatre at the time.

Leslie: Because you were working.

Barbara: We were still employed elsewhere.

David: They were picking up the tab of the rent which was fourteen I think . . .

Barbara: They gave us the space. We didn't have to pay for the space.

David: It was fourteen hundred dollars a month for that space.

Barbara: David was writing, so we didn't have to pay royalties, and in New York that's really important. The royalties are a lot higher in the city, and getting rights – just getting rights to do it. So we were doing original stuff, which was really good for the New York area, because nobody really wants to go see *You Can't Take It With You*; because they could see it any time. So in order to be a distinct showcase theatre, which we were, we were doing original works.

And that was really exciting, because people would come out and see that. So, our only expenses were the expenses for the production – we tried to keep them at fourteen hundred dollars – and we made money. Our tickets – we could not charge over twelve fifty a ticket, because that was the top price you could charge according to equity. Top price we could charge for a showcase theatre.

David: What that did was, it allowed us to use equity actors; they gave us approval to use equity actors. We had to set up a ticket price. We could only run so long.

Barbara: Twelve performances.

David: Twelve performances – we could get that extended – and a couple times our shows ran so well we did get it extended. We had to pay our actors a certain amount for expenses.

Barbara: Travel.

David: Travel.

Barbara: We had to pay them like a hundred dollars a show. But if we didn't have . . .

Leslie: Those were the equity rules?

David: Yes, and we couldn't have more than seventy-five seats.

Barbara: But if we didn't have equity actors we were bound by nothing. So, if we had a show that we could cast without equity actors . . .

Leslie: You could be a non-equity house because you were making your own decisions.

David: That's right.

Leslie: Now, this is off the subject a little bit. Are the laws different in different states?

Barbara: I think they are the same.

Leslie: Like, if a theatre project is in a non-equity house, it is not allowed to use equity actors?

David: You can use equity but you have to get a waiver from equity to use actors in a non-equity house. 84

Barbara: Which you probably can get, because Cal theatre got it easily.

David: The moment you leave NY City it ain't a problem.

Barbara: Because there's no theatre out there [outside NYC].

David: They know that their actors are dying.

Barbara: So, their actors are dying to work. I don't know if the rules are the same. I don't know if you can play only twelve performances.

Leslie: The SRTP will need to research the rules for a non-equity house.

Barbara: We were a non-equity house and we didn't have to use equity technicians. We never did use equity technicians or union technicians.

David: In fact, the equity contract really doesn't even . . . where we were, it really doesn't even hit until you are in a one hundred seat house. Not above ninety-nine seats.

Leslie: There's a certain number?

David: It all has to do with seats; 400, 300, 200 – all those are different tiers.

Barbara: So the SRTP . . .

Leslie: Right, say it has 450 seats.

Barbara: It'll be in a different tier.

David: You'll just go over like the fourth tier.

Leslie: A lot will depend on the size of the space, then.

Barbara: I mean, that's something you can deal with as you go along. You may not have equity actors in the beginning.

Leslie Joy Coleman was born in Long Beach, CA, on June 1, 1963, and has been involved in community, academic, and professional theatre since she was a child. She began her undergraduate work at New Mexico Highlands University where she was president of the theatre club for two years. While at New Mexico Highlands University she was awarded student of the year in Theatre for 1991. Leslie transferred to New Mexico State University where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre in 1995. Leslie attended Austin Peay State University from 1996- 1999 completing course work for a Master of Arts in Speech Communication and Theatre.

Leslie is currently employed as Technical Director of the Theatre Department and Ilfeld Auditorium at New Mexico Highlands University.