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**Tyrone Guthrie and the American Regional Theater Movement**

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by

**Hannah Alice Schneider**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Abstract:

In the past 50 years regional theater has grown tremendously in America. This thesis will connect the origins of the regional theater movement to the role played by Tyrone Guthrie in it's founding. While many of Guthrie's ideas are still resonant today, his vision was not always successful. But the regional theater movement learned a great deal from his experiences and transcended them to develop the vibrant scene we see today. His concepts of developing an intimacy with the audience and actors, or development of a resident company with a repertory program and a cohesiveness that resembled family and his ideas about play selection for a season are all relevant. He was a pioneer and many others followed. This exploration of his contributions should deepen our understanding of the regional theater movement; it's origins and the elements of its success.

## **Dedication Page**

To my parents, for always supporting me in all of my adventures.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

In the past 50 years regional theater has grown tremendously in America. This thesis will connect the origins of the regional theater movement to the role played by Tyrone Guthrie in its founding. This thesis will show the importance of Guthrie's creative ideas about regional theater and explain his critical contributions to the regional theater movement in the US, as well as the application and constraints of his ideas.

Guthrie was born in Ireland in 1900 and worked for almost forty years as a theatre director, and innovator. He began his career in radio at the British Broadcasting Company. He later moved on to live theatre and worked at the Old Vic and the Shakespeare Repertory Company in London. From these experiences he formed his theories about national theatres and resident companies. Guthrie considered ways and means to structuring new theaters from the ground up. His book Theatre Prospect, published in 1932, contains many ideas and methods that challenged commonly held views on theater management and artistic direction. While some of his contemporaries and successors disagreed with his ideas and approach, particularly with new play development, his ideas for guiding the development of regional theaters continue to have validity today.

In his forward to Joseph Zeigler's book Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage, Alan Schneider reflects on the various labels used to define what came to be known as the American Regional Theater Movement. According to Schneider none of the labels in use at the time including tributary, regional, residential, and repertory, were entirely accurate, for these theaters were "not bound up in New York's traditional processes and attitudes" (Zeigler viii). Schneider reflected on the attitudes about regional theater. He described the



ways that audiences and the public at large often criticized regional theaters with every move they made. If they are too connected to the community, then they are “too provincial or too folksy” (ix). If actors spent more than one season at the same theater they are “encouraging mediocrity” (ix). If the theater casted for individual productions then they were “selling out to the Broadway system”(ix). For Schneider, ‘we’ as the public, harshly judge the intent and work of regional theaters. He noted that Zeigler’s work provided a record of regional theatre’s “pioneering age” documenting origins, struggles and successes. Schneider also commented that Zeigler had an optimistic view about the future of regional theater, which Schneider shared. Schneider’s view is illustrative of the complicated nature of the regional theater movement, which is discussed in this thesis.

Zeigler reported that many actors in the 1960s and 70s chose to work in regional theaters instead of New York and ‘Broadway’. Zeigler pointed out that, “These theatre people are settling down in regional cities, buying houses, raising families, joining the PTA, becoming politically active and in general taking responsible places as citizens of their communities” (1). The desire for a stable life and a place to build a family continues to be something that can be difficult to achieve with the unstable financial life of working in theater. For example, sometimes a contract may only last three months and then end and the artist must move on and sometimes traveling long distances for the next paycheck. To retain high quality work, the commitment of the actors and technicians needs to be matched by the commitment of the community that they are in (1). The community supports the theater by buying tickets or subscriptions, volunteering as ushers and having school fieldtrips to see the productions. The sense of community and reciprocal

relationship between the theater practitioners and community plays an important role in developing and sustaining regional theater and is discussed further in this thesis.

The Theater Communication Group (TCG) used a tree analogy to describe different types of regional theaters. Theaters that begin small and are solely the brainchild of the artistic community are acorn theaters. Ones that have the community leaders more involved and may skip over the fits and starts that can plague the acorn theaters are called saplings. Ones that are big, have a lot of support either financially or socially, have beautiful new buildings and famous names attached, like the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, are called Oak Trees. Guthrie's was not as focused on the growth of his regional theater as he was on establishing a vibrant regional theater outside of New York.

Before Guthrie began work in America, Margo Jones was laying the groundwork for professional regional theater in the US. A review of her work helps us understand Guthrie's contributions. She was one of the first American theater artists who presented ideas on developing and sustaining regional theater in America. Zeigler considered her as the beginning of American regional theater and said that she "served as high priestess of the movement and measure for all others" (17). She began her work by grappling with ways to sustain community theater but then moved on to creating a permanent professional theater. On June 3, 1947 Margo opened her theater in Dallas, Texas. She named her theater, Theatre '47. For every year after, the year was included in the name of the theater as a tribute to the year of its founding. Theater '47 was set up as a theater-in-the-round. Jones believed in this style of theater not only to save money but also to create an intimate environment with the audience. Her goal for the theater was "to find good plays and

present them in Dallas, to do something about the unhealthy centralization of the theater in New York” (Sheehy 130).

Jones had a way of motivating people to be totally committed to her and her theater. Jones also had a passion for new plays and unknown playwrights. She saw the search for new plays as an adventure and as a mission to introduce those plays to the nation as a whole. Her literary mission played a vital part in cultivating playwrights such as Tennessee Williams and William Inge (Zeigler 20).

With Jones’ emphasis on new plays, she was constantly fighting a battle against apathetic and disinterested audiences. Jones’ passion was for new plays, not necessarily one style or theme or even philosophy. She saw the theater in Dallas as the beginning of a trend but also saw the importance of establishing a national theater in America. Jones believed “that the greatest strength of the commercial theater of her day was the ease with which it could introduce important new playwrights to the nation as a whole”(20). Jones had very concrete and structural ideas about regional theaters. Her vision was that there would be a network of theaters in the major American cities. The theaters involved in the network would “belong to its specific community and would grow out of its [the city’s] society” (22). Along with the network, Jones wanted a central office that would also be a policy-maker for the network. Her desire for a network came out of her own wish to share her experience and expertise with others. Zeigler pointed out that it “is a natural human need, for all creative people to seek creative proof that they are moving in the right direction” (22).

Jones was the tour-de-force behind her theater. After her unexpected, early death in 1955, Jones’ theater disbanded. Fortunately, Jones’ legacy has far surpassed her own

unfortunate fate and the fate of her theater. In the late 1940s, she was one of a few individuals to create a professional theater outside of New York.

Tyrone Guthrie's turn as the force behind a theater was in many ways similar to that of Jones. Ironically, Guthrie's involvement in the regional theater movement in the US came out of his interest in national theater as an idea. He had been a part of the National Theater in England and was happy to be a major part of the Stratford Festival in Ontario Canada, which has become like a national theater for Canada, from its founding in 1953(Forsyth). While serving as artistic director for the Stratford Festival, he continued to consider ways to develop small regional theaters. He wanted to form a professional theater with a devoted group of actors in a community that would not only support the theater institution but would be able to support the actors as well.

After a failed attempt in New York in 1955, (Forsyth) Guthrie was approached by Peter Zeisler, a well-known theater manager, and Oliver Rea, a Broadway producer, to start a resident, regional theater (Forsyth). Peter Zeisler and Guthrie had worked together on the original production of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. At its opening in New York Guthrie and Zeisler both agreed that they did not want to work in New York anymore and both desired to do something new. At this point Guthrie told Zeisler, "think about what you want to do and write me" (Zeisler). Zeisler and Guthrie had a long relationship. Rea was a well respected as a Broadway producer credited with producing with Judith Anderson's *Medea* and Carson McCullers' *Member of the Wedding*. Each man brought with him knowledge and expertise that would later prove to be decisive in the establishing of a successful regional theater, The Guthrie Theater, in Minneapolis, MN., in 1963.

Guthrie had spent over forty years developing and implementing his ideas about how theaters should be organized. He wanted his theater to be the first in the US to successfully have a resident company. Resident companies, up until this time, had had very little success. He had very specific ideas about what kinds of plays should be produced and the creation of a season. Guthrie viewed theater artists as being part of a family and strove to create a place for his theater family.

## Chapter II Writings and Theories

*"I maintain that without that spontaneous sincere appreciation, without the proper relation between stage and audience, no production can fully come to life" (Guthrie, Theatre Prospect 16)*

### Relationship with the Audience

In his book Theater Prospect, Guthrie's most important literary work on the theater, he discusses his views on how a theater should be set up and run. Theatre Prospect was written thirty years before the establishment of the Guthrie Theater. In it Guthrie laid out all of his ideas about building relationships with audiences, building a company, and programming a season. Perhaps the most important of these was developing a relationship between the actors and the audience. The rise and popularity of cinema posed a challenge to live theater. Guthrie recognized the advantages of cinema, or "canned drama" as he called it, because film gave everyone a good view of the actor's facial expressions and actions. There is nothing to pull ones focus away from what the director wants the audience to focus on. Guthrie also recognized that the 'canned drama' had larger budgets, and the drama can be more 'real' by filming in actual places. Compared to this, Guthrie said, "the background and characters alike are photographs of the real thing" (11). He also

posited that despite all of the advantages of film what the viewer saw was the same every time whereas live theater was different every night. The fact that the audience was different every night also changed the performance. In other words, the audience's energy and reactions elicited different performances from the actors at each performance. This was a distinct advantage for live theater over film.

Guthrie noticed the reciprocal nature of what was happening between the audience and the actors. Guthrie noted how the shape of the stage could further heighten audience experiences with the performance. That is why he believed in the Elizabethan theater set up. The established Elizabethan Theatre used a thrust stage, which has the advantage of bringing the actors physically closer to the audience. Guthrie, inspired by the theater of Shakespeare believed that "the great appeal of the theatre is the contact, not with the creatures of an author's imagination, but with the vivid personalities of those *who interpret them*" (22).

### Building a company

In his writings Guthrie discussed how to build an acting company, especially a repertory company. Performing in a repertory had certain advantages, which he felt would work well for small companies. In a repertory company actors learn from each other and create work as a team. While it may take some time for actors to get accustomed to each other's work. The repertory system allows the actors get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses as well as their processes as actors.

Being an actor in a repertory company meant that the actor had some sense of security as well (Guthrie, Rep). Guthrie believed that despite the potential for 'typing' into roles, "if an actor is to learn his craft, he simply must play a variety of parts and express the

widest possible range of human experience” (Guthrie, Rep). In addition, the actor must play the parts in front of the public. “School and studio performances are better than nothing but they are not the real thing” (Guthrie, Rep). Performing before a live audience is the real thing. By doing that, actors develop relationships with the audience. Guthrie believed that in New York it was not possible to receive “an adequate grounding in the craft of acting” (Guthrie, Rep). He found that while it was easy to acquire experiences and roles over time that may at some point be useful in the future, nothing could substitute for “a quick succession of well contrasted parts” that the employment in a repertory company could provide (Guthrie, Rep).

Guthrie discussed the idea of dramatic schools connected to theaters. He saw that there were no schools, in his experience, attached to a particular theater except for the Old Vic. He saw schools as places to find new talent as well as giving work to past students. But he saw schools as separate from the theaters and in no way an automatic route to employment to the company. The greatest advantage, in Guthrie’s view, was to train the students to be more attuned to the particular style of the company that they are training with. The drawback to including students in a professional performance was that it could make the performance look amateurish.

### Programing a Season

*Theatre Prospect* addressed the different methods of programing a season. Specifically, Guthrie spoke to the decision making process in regard to choosing new plays vs. classical revivals. Guthrie laid out three types of programs: purely classical revival, all new plays, and a mixture of the two. If purely classical revivals are chosen the audience is almost built in due to familiarity of the work. Also, a classical revival would be

“unimpeachable on the grounds of taste” (Guthrie, Theatre Prospect 38). Conceptually taste was open, fluid and subjective. The taste of a particular theater can change based on the artistic director or if the theater is catering to a specific audience or theater community. Guthrie generally did not cater to others and chose to focus on what he thought was in good taste. The issue with a classical revival, according to Guthrie, was that there would be no expression of contemporary thought or technique and “would not attract the support of youthful and enterprising spirits” (38). In contrast, a season of all new plays, Guthrie believed, would present far greater drawbacks and would be much riskier not only financially but also in the theater’s reputation. His viewpoint was, new plays were untested while classic plays had traditions that can be used as guidepost in planning and presenting the productions to audiences who have some familiarity with them it. Even when presented in a new way, the story line and words of a classic would provide a familiar foothold for the audience. The last concern that Guthrie had with a season of new plays was that, while the theater would attract the young and enterprising with a season of new plays, it would lose the patronage of older and more loyal audience members. There needed to be a balance to attract new audiences and retain established audiences. Therefore, to Guthrie, a combination of both new work and classical work in a season seemed to be the best and wisest choice. He said that a combination of classic and new work “affronts neither conservative nor radical taste” (39).

In selecting plays for a season it is common for one individual, such as the artistic director, to decide, but in his book Guthrie explored the option of a group deciding which plays to produce. When a group or committee decides the plays, “Their choice tends to represent that to which no one of them very strongly objects, but which equally, no one of



them very strongly desires” (40). When an individual chooses, that person would have to have superhuman qualities of being “adequately critical and yet betray no prejudice” (ibid). Guthrie appears to believe that the wisest path would be a combination of the two where the committee serves as advisors to the individual choosing the plays.

Although he wrote about the benefits of a repertoire that was a mixture of classical and new work in Theatre Prospect, he later wrote in the *New York Times* about the benefits of a purely classical repertoire. In an article entitled “If a Theater is to Prosper...” that Guthrie wrote in 1963, he stated that live theater has to provide “better” entertainment than television and movies. When he says better he meant classical plays. He believed that classical plays were a standard that had stood the test of time and were therefore better than the ‘popular’ programs of television and cinema. The plays also elevated the audience’s critical eye and sophistication about theater and while television programs and movies were usually topical in nature they would not “stand a chance of impressing a discriminating taste once it has ceased to be topical.” (51). Guthrie’s arguments of the survival of plays in a world of television and movies could also, though, be applied to new works as well.

Guthrie was skeptical when it came to new work. “Scripts which seemed excellent when read have turned out poorly when perform[ed]” (Guthrie, *A New Theatre* 40). This can be the fault of the casting or the acting, but it may be the script or choice of script that determines whether a production is a success or a flop. The test that Guthrie applied was time – time for the play to be performed and revised as needed to make it a success for audiences. For his namesake theater, Guthrie says, “Our programme would be classical;

only those plays would be chosen which had seemed, to discriminating people for several generations, to have serious merit; which had, in fact, withstood the test of time” (41). Although Guthrie preferred classical plays, he continued his ideas for his theater by saying that, “Later on, when both management and audience know better what we can and ought to attempt and also what we can a ought to afford, then we may take the risk of producing and possibly commissioning new work” (181). Guthrie’s ideas about teaching theater and training and nurturing good actors and well-rounded theater artists laid the groundwork for new play production.

His theater, The Guthrie, was different from other regional theaters in its conception as a whole. Before its creation, regional theaters were small and then later expanded after receiving grants and community support. Tyrone Guthrie sought out a city that would suit his needs. For the regional theaters that were established before the Guthrie, like Alley or Arena, the founder was a local artist or benefactor who had the dream to create art for the community that they came from. These artists also had the motivation to create it.

Guthrie’s ideas and experiences in Minneapolis can helped guide new theaters particularly in developing a season that is most cohesive for the company and compatible with the community’s sensibility and interest.

### Chapter III Tyrone Guthrie and Resident Theater

In 1952, prior to the establishment of his American regional theater, Tyrone Guthrie received an offer to consult on a new national theater project in Canada. The Canadians wanted a Shakespearean Festival based in Stratford, Ontario, and a theater that would attract local audiences as well as actors. Stratford capitalized on the apparent

connections to Shakespeare all over the city. For example, “a river – well almost a river – ran through it called the Avon. The wards of the town were called Falstaff and Romeo and there was a street called Hamlet” (Forsyth 223). Guthrie jumped at the offer but only “if they were prepared to do something of significance, in the Art of Theater and the presentation of Shakespeare” (227). Guthrie’s intrigue with the festival was not just for the significance of building a national theater, but also for the opportunity to build a theater where the audience and actors were close enough to truly interact with each other. He wanted the theater not only to be truly Canadian in the casting, but also in the production team, thus giving a national grounding to the enterprise. There were some exceptions to this because there weren’t any production houses in Canada at the time, so some British professionals were brought in to launch the project. Tanya Moiseiwitsch was one of those British professionals, a production designer that Guthrie had collaborated with for a long time in England. Together they had dreamed of the stage that Guthrie was now building. They agreed, “while conforming to the conventions of the Elizabethan theater in practicalities, it should not present a pseudo-Elizabethan appearance” (Guthrie, *A Life in the Theatre* 319). One of the conventions they spoke about was the closeness between audience and actor. The close proximity created the relationship that Guthrie was striving for.

By the end of World War II, theaters had competition from movies. The high costs of theater production and competition with movies created many challenges to serious theater. Producing live theater became more expensive; resulting in rises in ticket prices. Going to the theater became an occasional activity instead of something for regular

patronage. This in turn led to the production of lighter, more frivolous plays to attract a wider audience. Guthrie was upset by this and wanted to find a new direction.

Guthrie's innovative desire to create a theater in America that had a resident company producing and performing works of literary value, much like the resident theaters of Europe. This idea came from his work with the Stratford Festival. Ontario, Canada, was he experimented with his developing ideas about resident companies. Guthrie was attached to the idea of national theaters based in part on his experiences with the National Theater in London. He believed that such a theater can better relate to and reach potential audiences. Theater in the US, he believed, would need to do this to flourish.

After the success of Stratford, Guthrie focused more keenly on founding a resident theater of true repertory in the United States. He based his ideas on the European model but in ways for him uniquely American. He wanted the theater to be of national importance, something that had always failed before in the United States. Guthrie knew the competition with other forms of entertainment and commercial theater was much tougher in America. In England the theater was more widely dispersed, not concentrated solely in London. England also had a longer and more established theater tradition. In the fall of 1955, Guthrie was thinking about an "All-the-year-round repertory, and in a theater not specifically designed for Shakespeare" (Forsyth 252).

In 1955, he wanted to turn The Phoenix, a theater in New York City, into the regional theater of his dreams. He was working at the Phoenix directing his version of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. But he found he did not have the time and energy to create the company he had in mind. Guthrie consistently pressed Norris Houghton, one of the Phoenix's founders, with all of the potential advantages of a regional theater company

they were missing out on, especially the establishment of a permanent company and the high hopes he had for it. Guthrie recognized that in New York, there was no institution that allowed actors to focus on something more than their own careers. There was no institution that demanded the loyalty and focus of the people who belonged to it. Members of Actors Equity had a degree of economic security, but it was never meant to provide the artistic or idealistic cohesion that a repertory company would provide. A repertory company could guarantee some financial security and provide a variety of parts. It would give actors the chance to grow as a member of a team that included technicians, playwrights, artistic directors, and dramaturgs and could foster a sense of loyalty to the company and theater. Unfortunately, such jobs were only for a few dozen actors and technicians, particularly in the large theaters in New York City

The Phoenix, although it had a lot of potential, was focused on commercial productions. Guthrie realized that a regional theater in New York would never have the community support that Guthrie envisioned. His experience at The Phoenix convinced him that he would have to look outside New York to create the theater he was looking for.

#### Chapter IV U.S. Repertory Campaign

In July 1959, Guthrie, Peter Zeisler, and Oliver Rea met at Guthrie's Irish estate. They came together to create a plan for a repertory theater in the U.S. Guthrie agreed that both London and New York had an abundance of theater. However, Guthrie had a different kind of theater in mind. He discussed his experiences in Stratford in order to explain his vision. "Their theatre and company should be "provincial," should relate to another part of the map altogether than New York or the big cites on the East Coast" (265). Guthrie wanted the theater "to relate to a real community, not a metropolis" (265). Guthrie refused to

discuss the budget until they agreed on the policies of the theater. Before Zeisler and Rea had even arrived in Ireland they had already agreed on a regional theater with a resident company and a repertory. The team began by trying to answer the question: What kind of repertory would be produced? They agreed on a few fundamentals. The first was that it would be a “classical” repertoire. They agreed that “classical” would mean that they would also “accommodate modern American masterpieces liable to become ‘classics of our time’” (266). They also agreed on a rolling repertory where a number of plays would be performed in a week. This would provide them with the opportunity to get rid of a production that did poorly while promoting one that was more successful, thus guarding against financial loss.

The group had chosen a few cities to look at as the potential location for the new theater and word spread. “Guthrie was out to establish a new theatre in whatever city he considered to be the best bidder” (266). He was not only looking for the best financial support but also the amenities of the city itself. They visited four cities: Cleveland, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and Detroit.

While on the tour, something was brewing in a city not on their list – Minneapolis. Some of the citizens of Minneapolis, and its twin city St. Paul, had read Atkinson’s article on Guthrie’s ambitions and realized that their ambitions were similar. The main force behind the Minneapolis campaign was the director of theater at the University of Michigan, Professor Frank Whiting. Whiting and Guthrie also shared many similar ideas regarding theater innovation. Years before, Guthrie had an idea to create a riverboat theater. Whiting took that idea and made it a reality. His riverboat was moored to the bank of the Mississippi and Whiting’s students performed on it. Whiting wanted Guthrie’s new theater

to be built for the community but on the college campus. This connection was also something that interested Guthrie: creating a relationship between the academic theater and professional theater. He wanted to keep the younger generation attending theater. Because of this feeling of community and family that Whiting expressed about Minneapolis, Guthrie put it on the list. As the tour ended, Guthrie consulted with Rea, Zeisler, and others to narrow down the choices to three, Milwaukee, Detroit, and Minneapolis. Guthrie was leaning towards Minneapolis “because it was a large enough ‘circle’ of community to support the theater he had in mind, but small enough to have its own integrity” (267). The major issue was finances. Minneapolis would have to stretch their budget to match the amount Detroit offered. Despite these concerns, Minneapolis, showing great faith in itself, formed a committee headed by the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* president John Cowles Jr.

Although no decision had formally been made, Minneapolis chose a site for Guthrie’s theater. They were also very close to gathering all of the essential funding. The site the committee found was neither on a university campus or a remodeled theater in town as Rea, Zeisler, and Guthrie originally envisioned. They had found a new site next to the Walker Art Center, their civic art gallery. All were convinced it was the ideal site.

For the theater design, the chair of the architecture department at the university, Professor Rapson, was asked to create some sketches. The design Rapson came up with would cost a few thousand dollars over their budget so changes had to be made. The new design cut a large number of cubic feet from the backstage area, which meant that the future backstage workers would be in a windowless room, but it had no effect on the public areas. This disappointed Guthrie as he was still striving towards a true familial environment. He even pointed out that the public was only in the theater for part of an

afternoon or evening whereas the backstage workers were there all day, everyday. The minimizing of the backstage areas also reduced the numbers of employees that worked there.

In April 1959 Guthrie wrote an article in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled “Repertory Theatre – Ideal or Deception?” The article outlined all of his ideas about Repertory Theater. He began by defining what a repertory campaign was. Then he asked if such an institution could even exist in New York or if Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts could really create and maintain such an institution. He focused on New York City not only because he was writing *for The New York Times Magazine*, but because New York City was the Mecca of American theater at the time. He asked two questions: “Is such an institution really desirable?” and “If established, will it succeed?” (Guthrie, RepTheatre 37). The questions didn’t have a simple yes or no answer. He acknowledged that his answers might not be the right ones, but that they were from first-hand experience and therefore true in some respect.

Guthrie examined repertory companies from an actor’s point of view. As he pointed out in his *New York Times Magazine* article for an actor, repertory companies offer security, which is a rare commodity. Actors have to continually go “door to door seeing theatrical managers, directors and agencies and trying to sell your own services when nobody wants them” (37). Actors are given any number of excuses and “with each refusal you [the actor] become more uncertain of the vocation which once seemed so clear” (37). Guthrie explained that an actor’s future is never certain. One may be in a production that only lasts a week before it closes or another that goes on for months. There is no intermediate degree of success. “Consequently, it simply is not possible for a young actor to appear



before the public in a number of different parts each season” (37). He further observed that if an actor is successful then that person is “typed” into roles. A repertory company would afford actors many opportunities to explore and take on roles that might not have otherwise been offered or available

## Chapter V The Journey to Minneapolis

In 1961, Guthrie was constantly planning for the Minneapolis theater. Not only were they planning the building and fundraising but Guthrie also had to keep the peace between Tanya Moiseiwitsch and Ralph Rapson so that the design for the auditorium and stage were up to the desired standards. Moiseiwitsch worked on the new stage design and seating. The stage was to be “an irregular ‘thrust’ with an adjustable back wall which could swing away to let trucked scenic elements come through on the stage” (278). The stage could be thought of as a platform for performance and as a theatrical space. The Guthrie Theater’s seating created a more informal space than the severe amphitheater in Stratford. This space created more intimate space for the plays and the physical closeness that Guthrie wanted between audience and actor.

The seating was also asymmetrical. One side “swept steeply straight up from the stage to the back wall, while for the rest of the house the seating was divided into main seating and separate gallery” (279). The audience was physically close to the actors. They could see every expression and eyebrow raised by that the actors.

In 1962, Guthrie signed a contract with the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre Foundation of Minnesota. He was designated Artistic Director of the “Repertory Theatre Company.” The first season consisted of *Hamlet*, *The Three Sisters*, *The Miser*, and *Death of a Salesman*. *Death of a Salesman* was a contemporary play, first produced in 1949 and winner of the

Pulitzer Prize that year. At the time of The Guthrie Theater's production it was a relatively new play. Though Guthrie was skeptical about producing new plays because they were untested, *Death of a Salesman* might have been an exception because of its critical acclaim and the Pulitzer. Guthrie was very focused on the success of his regional theater. He understood that once they had a base of support in the community they could still attract an audience with new plays. But to build the base of support he relied on classical work. Douglas Campbell would direct *The Miser* and *Death of a Salesman*. As Artistic Director Guthrie chose the season in consultation with Campbell, who was also Guthrie's protégé.

The opening was four months away. The building continued on as a legion of women sold tickets. Zeisler and Rea and the committees handled administration issues.

Looking for the actor to play Hamlet was a difficult process. Surprisingly Guthrie chose George Gizzard, a young actor had never spoken a single verse on stage before. Guthrie and Campbell had seen Gizzard in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They felt Gizzard was intelligent, witty as well as modest, and would be able to "suggest a Prince" (277). Gizzard so desired the part that, most importantly to Guthrie, he was willing to work incredibly hard.

The core members of the company were to be Hume Cronyn, his wife Jessica Tandy and Zoe Caldwell. These actors not only had strength but also possessed intelligence and experience. Actors were attracted to the theater because of the variety of parts they would get to play within a season. When formed, the company was to be 35 actors strong. Twelve local actors were to be brought in as student apprentices on the technical and writing side.

In addition to the daily rehearsals, daily movement and fencing classes were held along with twenty minutes of choral recitation of the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm is the

description of a thanksgiving ritual of the King in precession towards the Temple and the people imploring God's help when under hostile attack. This may have been a metaphor for giving thanks for theater and proceeding towards their "temple," the theater itself. The recitation of the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm was not just to prepare for the dedication ceremony but also to get the company thinking along the same lines and speaking the same language.

*Hamlet* and the *The Miser* were to open the season. *Hamlet* was to be in twentieth century dress. Many of the patrons of the theater would not have seen a professional production of any Shakespearian play. The patrons probably expected to see traditional Elizabethan costumes. Guthrie explained that a *Hamlet* in modern dress would be better suited for American actors. He felt they might be less comfortable with "period" plays than their British counterparts. Guthrie also thought that it was not his job to protect Shakespeare and that it seemed like a good idea to dress characters in a manner that accorded to the text in terms of character, not with stereotypes of dress. He wanted to make it more accessible.

The dedication ceremony for the theater was held on May 5, 1963. The production of *Hamlet* opened two nights later on May 7<sup>th</sup>. The celebrity audience sat through the nearly four-hour production of the longest Shakespeare play. They were there to celebrate that the theater was finally open. "This was the start of a long-term repertory theatre – not just a summery seasonal affair" (280).

When the reviews came in, they were not all positive. If this production had opened in New York it would have closed in a week. This *Hamlet* was different from other productions because it wasn't just a one-time production where afterwards the actors and production team would go their separate ways. This was the first production for a new

company and a new theater. The company and the theater were to grow and, as predicted, suffered some growing pains. *The Miser* opened next and the critics were even more critical in their comments. Claudia Cassidy wrote a review in her column, "On the Aisle." She had high expectations, which were not met. Cassidy did not "consider a city really civilized without such a theater on a high level" (Cassidy E9). Cassidy had attended the productions at the Guthrie and hoped that the directors would energize "what looked from the outside like a fairly pedestrian troupe" (E9). She thought instead that, "Sir Tyrone gave crucial product a queasy start with a singularly cheapened *Hamlet*, and Mr. Campbell beat *The Miser* to a simpering froth of surface slapstick" (E9). Cassidy felt the productions of *Hamlet* and *The Miser* were staged "to hide the meagerness of their acting resources." While she understood that Minneapolis did not have the resources that might be had in New York or London, that did not mute her disappointment. Cassidy felt that the interpretations of *Hamlet* and *The Miser* had "highly personal interpretations by the directors" (E9). She described *Hamlet* as "iterminable" and *The Miser* as "bumpkin fare". Cassidy felt that the "whole thing [Guthrie Theatre] is miles from what I [Cassidy] mean[t] by a resident theater worth cherishing" as well as "a long, long way from the Tyrone Guthrie who has refreshed the theater scene" (E9) Cassidy believed that Guthrie's fame created extremely high expectations that perhaps were too high for a new endeavor that had not been tested before. She suggested that Guthrie's fame was a hinderance to the growth of the theater.

Through *Hamlet* and *The Miser*, though the company was finding its feet and truly forming the company that Guthrie had envisioned. *The Three Sisters* opened five weeks later, to a rather different reception. There was almost unanimous agreement that the

company in *Three Sisters* was a true ensemble. They were “what a repertory was all about” (Forsyth 281). As Forsyth observed, “ here was the greater informality, greater community ‘companionship’ of the new theater [was] beginning to pay off with ‘the family play’” (281). This production of *The Three Sisters* also began Guthrie’s love affair with the plays of Anton Chekhov. Brooks Atkinson waited to see the entire season before forming an opinion. He tried to be honest and constructive as well as unbiased in his evaluation of the theater and their season. He conceded that it was perhaps the style for the productions not the stage that was at fault. He said, “Everyone has long agreed that repertory develops the range and sensitivity of actors and also relieves them of the sterile monotony of playing one part for months,” but Atkinson also expressed that repertory system results in compromise; “Compromise between perfect casting and the best casting that is possible at the moment.” He believed that the greatest success for Minneapolis was the audience itself. The audiences had “been not only consistently large but attentive and responsive” (Atkinson). Atkinson added that “We will be lucky if New York audiences support all the Lincoln Center productions with as much hospitality and taste” (Atkinson).

Guthrie knew that theater had its ups and downs and that critics were important to the business of theater. He knew, just as Atkinson described, that this was only the first step and it would take five years for a repertory company, such as this one, to fully mature. The theater in Minneapolis proved “the worth of its service to the community and justifying the courage and faith of so many of that community” (Forsyth 283).

Guthrie was the Artistic Director for The Guthrie Theatre from 1963 until 1966. During this time, he finally realized his vision of a true resident company with a repertory

season. For the three years following his term, although having no direct role with the theater's administration he did return every year to direct a production.

Guthrie realized that a permanent repertory company would not be without its problems. The tension, along with intrigue and factions that are created in a company, could be far larger than could ever happen in the "casual and brief professional contracts." (283). On the other hand the close proximity could create a fierce loyalty as well as a symbiotic dependence. He saw this type of permanent repertory company as analogous to a family unit. Actors in the company would develop trust and loyalty to one another and to the company. At the same time, Guthrie expected conflict to occur as in a family. This family cohesion helped create a depth in the performance Guthrie wanted that for his company.

Guthrie and Rea both left in 1966 along with the core actors from the initial company. Peter Zeisler had only ever been the technician of the group was suddenly managing the theater all on his own. Zeisler worked with Douglass Campbell, Guthrie's successor. He "shared his mentor's imposing manner but not his largesse of talent or his ability to command and lead" (Ziegler 73). The company and theater that Guthrie envisioned slowly fell apart. The Guthrie did not take steps to continue its resident company past the original members. There was no real mission statement to guide the future artistic directors and no training program in place to train young actors that eventually would become full company members. If these programs had been in place perhaps the Guthrie Theater would not have struggled the way it did.

Despite his endorsement in 1932 in Theatre Prospect, in practice, the two theaters that Guthrie was most involved with had no training schools associated with them. In

Minneapolis he did hire twelve local apprentices but they were technical and administrative apprentices, not actors. This left a major hole in the company when key members of the company moved on. There was no one waiting in the wings that had been learning from these actors to take over. With the lack of these training programs in place the company stumbled where others succeeded.

While in theory Guthrie supported a collective approach to play selection, for his own theater Guthrie believed that he himself was the best person to choose productions. In regional theater, the company often suggests plays to the artistic director who makes the final decisions on the theater's season. At his theater, Guthrie took a more autocratic approach. He chose the plays he wanted and the company members went along with him.

This could be considered a weakness of Guthrie's practice and that provides an example of the dangers of relying too much on the force of personality. However, there is still a lot that can be learned from Guthrie's innovations. The training that he had his company members go through created the familial bond that a resident company needed. Future companies might not have had the same training but they still tried to create the familial bond by living together and by implementing other company activities. Guthrie's emphatic insistence on family made it fundamental to all future resident companies. The Guthrie eventually regained some of its success but only with the acceptance and addition of a second space dedicated solely to new works.

## Chapter VI Conclusion

Tyrone Guthrie was a major influence in the development of regional theater in America. Although there was a false start at The Phoenix, his ideas about repertory

companies were truly realized in The Guthrie Theater. He created an environment for his actors to feel comfortable and grow not only as actors but also as people. These actors and theater technicians were to work together on every production, allowing the actors to develop skills and range that they had not previously acquired. There was no way to be “typed” into a role in a well-chosen season at a repertory theater. Guthrie laid the foundation that regional theatres strive for. He developed a theater that was about the community in which it resided and about the people working in the theatre.

The regional theater movement got a huge boost from Guthrie’s work. His innovative choice not to use New York as his base legitimized theatre in other parts of America.

While his work was not always successful, and his ideas were sometimes controversial, his successful establishment of The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, created a model for other regional theater companies to follow. Since that time, the regional theater movement has blossomed. It owes a great debt to Guthrie and many cities around the US now have a vibrant theater scene rooted and supported by the communities they inhabit. Regional theaters have gone in new directions beyond Tyrone Guthrie’s original scope, but his vision lives on.

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