

# BROADSIDE

NEWSLETTER OF THE THEATRE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Vol.24, No. 3

TLA's 60th Anniversary Year

Winter 1997

## The New York Public Library Experience: *A Reminiscence Upon Retirement* by Richard M. Buck

When I left The New York Public Library at the end of November 1996, I had been a staff member of the largest public library system in the world for thirty-seven and a half years. I was able to accomplish so much in the library world because of the uniqueness of this library. To be elected to the Council of the American Library Association for four terms over 20 years; to be an activist in Intellectual Freedom matters for a quarter of a century; to spearhead the efforts to "save" the Research Collections of the Performing Arts Library in the 1970s; and to be the facilitator for most of the activities of the Theatre Library Association for the past twenty years -- none of these accomplishments would have been possible without the prestige and support of this greatest of Libraries. All of this is in addition to the workaday duties through which most of my colleagues at NYPL knew me.

When I arrived in New York City from Albany in 1958, I had been teaching history in the Albany public school system. I enrolled in Columbia University's graduate history department; my intention was to earn a Ph.D. and teach my chosen subject at the university level. Through a quirk of fate, I was relieved of a part-time position at a mid-town art gallery, and, in April of 1959, took a part-time clerical job at the Washington Heights Branch of NYPL, under the tutelage of the great and generous Regina Andrews. By early 1960, Mrs. Andrews and two other of my Branch Librarian mentors, Catherine McManmon and Eileen Riols,

aware of my dissatisfaction with my progress at Columbia, convinced me to change disciplines from history to library

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science. I received my MLS in 1961, and became a Librarian I, serving in various branches in Manhattan and the Bronx from then until November of 1965. At Woodstock, I opened up the garden in the rear of the building and made a quiet outdoor reading oasis; at Ottendorfer, where Mercy Kellogg taught me how to be an Assistant Branch Librarian, I was immersed in the hippie generation of St. Mark's Place and developed a great interest in the Off and Off-Off Broadway theatre movement; at Muhlenberg, where I had my first great experience of closing a branch for refurbishing, I developed an interest in the Chelsea area of Manhattan, especially the Hotel Chelsea, which nurtured my fascination with the performing arts world of the 1960s.

When I became the Adult Book Review Specialist for the Branch Libraries Book Order Office in 1965, I had found my real niche -- every new title that needed to have a review inserted for book

selection passed through my hands, from esoteric science to "questionable" eroticism. Those were the days of *The Carpetbaggers*, *The Story of O*, and the beleaguered Henry Miller novels. Here two great ladies of the Library, Catherine O'Brien and Cassindania Eaton were my mentors. With their help, I was able to get all the questionable titles, except *The Story of O*, approved for purchase. When the President of the Library read in *The New York Times* that *The Story of O* was "pure pornography," he refused to acquire it for the Branch Libraries.

In the summer of 1967, the in-house advertisement appeared for the position of Assistant to the Chief of the Performing Arts Research Center at Lincoln Center. Although I had dreamed of becoming the Branch Librarian of the newly opened Jefferson Market Branch and returning to Greenwich Village, where I thought I belonged at the time, I decided to try for the position at Lincoln Center. Most of my colleagues said it was foolish to try; after all, they were looking for someone with a solid performing arts background, with educational and/or professional experience, or both. But all of this time, I had been exploring the New York theatre world, especially that of the downtown "avant-garde" scene and the Broadway musical. By the summer of 1967, I could safely tell Thor Wood in my interview for the position, that I had more first-hand background on what was happening in New York theatre than almost anyone on the staff of the

Theatre Collection. This, and my eagerness to develop new approaches to the position, seemed to convince him. Later I discovered that the clincher in his decision was that job I had held at the art gallery in 1958-59. Thor had been a client of the gallery and the owner told him that I was an excellent bulwark against unannounced visitors to the office. At that point, Thor decided that I was the best candidate for the position.

I came to the Performing Arts Library immediately after Labor Day in 1967; until 1971, life at work was rather serene; we made some changes, I maintained the "front office," along with our devoted secretary, Florentino Casile, and developed a stronger relationship with the Branch Library downstairs and with the Shelby Cullom Davis Museum and its exhibition program. Then in 1971, with the City of New York in the midst of a financial crisis, the Board of Trustees of the Library announced that, as an economy measure, it would close the Performing Arts Research Center at the end of the year if \$250,000 was not raised. In those days, before the Library had a Development Office, this seemed a formidable task. Upon consultation with the research divisions, Thor and I began to mobilize the performing arts community to come to our aid. Not really knowing any persons of high visibility, I simply sat down and made lots of phone calls, using the plight of the Library as my opening ploy. We began with the people who had given material or whose work I had admired and who might be sympathetic to our plight. From the first event, the 40th Anniversary of the Theatre Collection, in October 1971, at which celebrities from Edward Albee to Gloria Swanson helped us conduct an auction in Astor Hall; to January 1972, when Betty Comden and Adolph Green performed an "Evening" in the Juilliard Theatre, we

raised \$246,000. In between, we developed a cadre of volunteers for the Performing Arts Research Center, headed by Amy Lynn and Betty Chapin, both departed from us now, whom I considered my co-workers in our endeavors as long as both of them were alive. We met so many people who were to become staunch allies in our efforts over the years: Gwen Verdon, our spokesperson at the press conference/rally at Sardi's announcing our fund drive; Hal Prince who has become one of the most loyal, long-standing supporters of the Library; Jim Lipton, who hosted the most successful of our series of "Crisis Concerts" with Gwen; Tony Randall, who helped at several Celebrity Auctions and hosted the Performathon for us many years later; Andre Watts, who played a benefit concert for us in Avery Fisher Hall; and a host of others who helped at auctions, performed, or spoke for us on many occasions during those years. Although the auctions continued until 1983, the highlight of our efforts was the "Star Spangled Gala," produced and directed by Jim Lipton at the Metropolitan Opera House in June 1976. I was the Library coordinator of the event, strongly supported by the indefatigable Amy and Betty. The sold-out house earned us \$105,000; Clive Barnes called it "the best three evenings of theatre" he had ever seen. The performance lasted well over four hours; performers ranged from classic dancers to Broadway pop stars, one of the largest rosters of such talent ever to appear on one stage.

To many of my NYPL colleagues, the Annual Giant Bazaars that I organized from 1972 until 1996 will be my legacy. These grew out of the 1971 Astor Hall auction, when some of our staunchest longtime Theatre Collection volunteers experimented with two tables of duplicates on sale for the auction goers. The items sold immediately, and the rest

is history. The Bazaar bloomed from that tiny bud to the gigantic annual event that it has become, netting nearly a million dollars in the past quarter century.

Despite the "notoriety" of the Bazaar, my greatest satisfaction during the 1980s were the exhibitions that I curated, especially the ones on the great commercial theatres of New York and the Caffe Cino, both of which gained much from my saturation in the theater world during the 1960s and 1970s. Also, through exhibitions, I got to know the two Dorothy's of the musical theatre, Rodgers and Hammerstein, among my most cherished friends. I worked with Pamela Harriman on the exhibition honoring Leland Hayward, her late husband. Through the Hayward connection, I was a guest at a reception at the Residence of the U.S.' Ambassador to France, after President Clinton appointed Mrs. Harriman to the post.

Yes, I have seen and done things undreamed of by a boy growing up on a farm in upstate New York, much as a result of my work for this great Library. The Library connection also led me to my choice of retirement home. During the American Library Association 1994 Annual Conference in Miami Beach, the last Conference of my fourth term on the ALA Council, I fell almost immediately in love with everything about that small city that is so separate from mainland Miami. It was my first time in Florida, but everything from the art deco architecture to the proximity to the beach conspired in my decision to look for a new home in that demi-paradise where I could retire, and never see snow again. Within a few months, I bought a condominium five blocks from the Convention Center where I had first formed the desire to resettle.

There are many opportunities to explore

my interests in a new setting. There is volunteerism in the public library (they need advice with book sales, among other things), with the Design Preservation League (leading art deco tours and organizing the annual Art Deco Weekends), and with several museums (both as a docent and in gift shops). Of course, the beach, one block away, will be the biggest lure, but there are times when even I find the South Florida sun too much to bear, and then

volunteering in air conditioning will carry the day.

Friends and colleagues tell me that I will miss New York and the Library; to a certain extent, that is true. But not that much. Long ago, I gave up on the theatre -- too expensive, and mainly boring. A little later, I gave up on the city -- too inconvenient and too crowded. And now, I am giving up on the Library -- for many reasons, but

mainly because I feel my work is done. The niche that I created for myself has become mostly unnecessary, or superseded by the activities of others; the needs now are different, and at this time of my life I do not feel I can change enough to support the differences. It is time to move on.

If anyone wants a taste of that demi-paradise, come and visit me in Miami Beach.

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## MEMBER NEWS

**James Fisher (Wabash College)** recently published *Eddie Cantor. A Bio-Bibliography* (Greenwood, 1996) and an article "The Angels of Fructification': Tennessee Williams, Tony Kushner, and Images of Homosexuality on the American Stage," in *Mississippi Quarterly*, Winter, 1995-96, Vol. XLIX, No. 1, pp. 13-32. He has written 22 entries (including Duse, Fay Templeton, Lillian Russell, William Powell, & Josh Logan) for the *American National Biography*,

**Christopher Innes (York University)** has recently been appointed distinguished research professor at York. He has published essays on "After Two World Wars" for *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, and "The Politics of Drama Today" in *Contemporary Drama in English*. Innes also gave a series of public lectures at the Universities of Mainz, Saarbrücken and Tübingen.

**Stephen Johnson (McMaster University)** delivered a paper on "The Performance Text" at a conference at

the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, University of Toronto, and one on "Return of the Wild Men: Deformity and Difference in the Canada West of 1862," at the Association for Canadian Theatre Research annual conference in St. John's, Newfoundland. His play *Six Puppets and a Fish: An Environmental Folktale*, was produced at the 1996 Summer Arts Festival in Hamilton, Canada, and he recently wrote and directed a one-act play, *Juba*, based on his research into the 19th century dancer, for the Festival of Original Theatre and The Edge, both in Toronto.

**Donald J. Stubblebine** is about to have his third book on sheet music published, *British Cinema Sheet Music*, a comprehensive listing of 80 years of published sheet music from the United Kingdom. His earlier books were *Cinema Sheet Music* and *Broadway Sheet Music*.

**The Theatre on Film and Tape Archive (TOFT)** of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts has enlarged its holdings and now consists of

3,537 videocassettes of Broadway, Off-Broadway and regional theatre performances as well as dialogues, seminars, panel discussions and theatre-related film and television programs. Of these, 2,002 are productions videotaped during performance. The 2,000th taped performance was the Long Wharf Theatre production of Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca* starring Julie Harris. (Coincidentally, the 1,000th taped production, *Lucifer's Child*, also starred Ms. Harris).

**Al Weissberg** is preparing to publish *Broadway Sweetheart: The Al Woods Story*. His articles on Milton Cross, Etienne Girardot, Leslie Howard, and George Odell were accepted for the *American National Biography* (Oxford).

## QUERY

**Peggy Hopkins Joyce**. In connection with a bio of Joyce, the much married Ziegfeld girl/actress of the '20s and '30s, I am trying to locate a copy of her novel, *Transatlantic Wife*, published in 1933. Contact: C. Rosenblum, Box 02-0109, Brooklyn, NY 11201-0109.

## CALENDAR

**May 30, 1997 TLA-Freedley Awards** and annual meeting of the Theatre Library Association. Lincoln Center [SEE BOX]

**June 30, 1997 TLA at ALA.** TLA, ACRL Arts Section & the Dance Discussion Group will co sponsor "From Documentation to Access." Catherine Johnson (Dance Heritage Coalition) will chair. Panelists include: Margaret Norton (SFPALM); Willie Walker (SFPALM); Janice Ross, critic.

**November 13-16, 1997, The American Society of Theatre Research-Theatre Library Association** meeting in San Antonio, TX. Eight seminars. "No Theme" conference. TLA will hold board meeting at conference.

**TLA-FREEDLEY AWARDS and  
ANNUAL TLA BUSINESS MEETING**

**Friday, May 30, 1997**

**Bruno Walter Auditorium**

**The New York Public Library  
for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center.**

Annual Business Meeting (open to ALL  
TLA members): 4:00-5:00PM.

Awards Ceremony, 5:30-7:30PM

(Awards presentation promptly at  
6:00PM).

Presentation followed by a reception in  
the Amsterdam Gallery.

*Call for Papers!*

**PLEASURE GARDENS  
and OTHER OUTDOOR AMUSEMENTS**

Parks and gardens; band shells and gazebos, human, animal  
and mechanical entertainments; musical, botanical,  
zoological, historical and futuristic themes; 19th, 20th and  
21st centuries; American or European (unless you have  
something terrific like Kubla Khan's mighty pleasure  
dome).

For **Performing Arts Resources (PAR)**, v.21.

Submit proposals before **JULY 1st** to: Publications  
Committee, c/o Maryann Chach, Shubert Archive, 149  
West 45th St., NYC 10036

Officers of the **Theatre Library Association** (founded 1937): President, **Geraldine Duclow**, Head, Theatre Collection, Free Library  
of Philadelphia; Vice President, **Susan Brady**, Yale University; Executive Secretary, **Maryann Chach**, Shubert Archive; Acting  
Treasurer, **Jane Suda**, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

**Broadside** ISSN: 0068-2748, published quarterly by the Theatre Library Association, c/o Shubert Archive, 149 West 45th St., New  
York, NY 10036, is sent to all members in good standing. Editor: **Maryann Chach**. TLA membership (annual dues: \$20 personal,  
\$25 institutional) also includes *Performing Arts Resources*, published annually. Current members may purchase past issues of *PAR*,  
\$10 prepaid, and *Broadside*, \$2 prepaid.

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**Theatre Library Association**  
111 Amsterdam Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10023

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Ms. Annette Fern  
45 Lowden Avenue #2  
Somerville, MA 02144-2119