

1939-2014

C E L E B R A T I N G **75** Y E A R S

W I S C O N S I N   U N I O N   T H E A T E R

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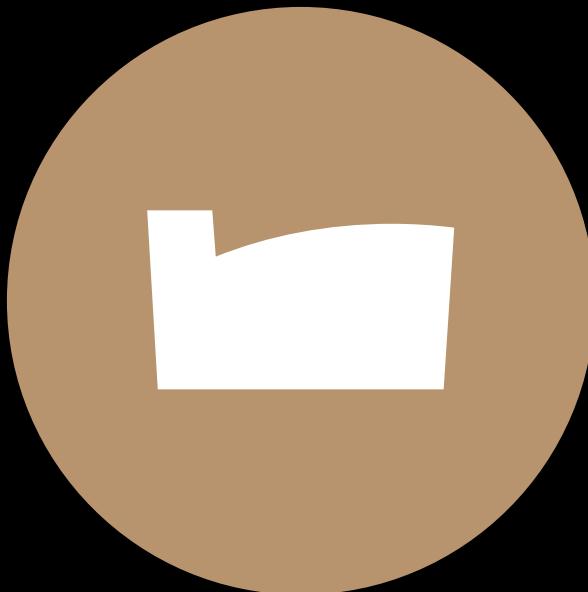
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This commemorative book is dedicated to the students, staff, performers and audiences whose passion for the arts nourished the Theater's celebrated history.

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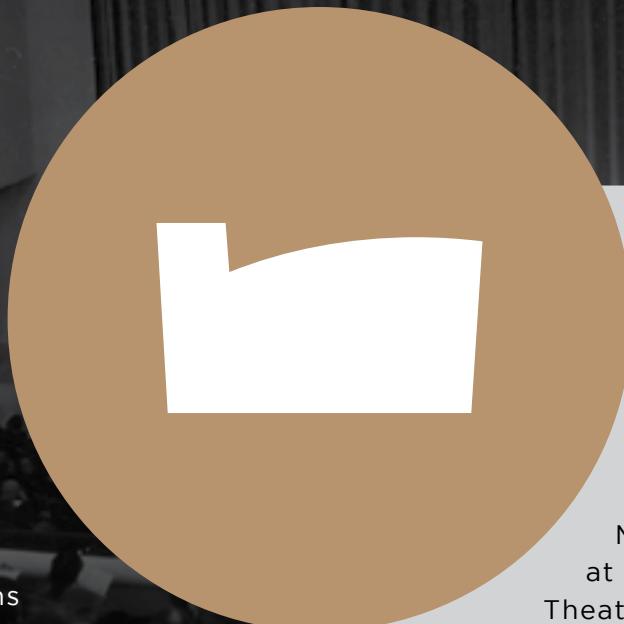
# PROUD HISTORY—BRIGHT FUTURE:

## 75 YEARS AND JUST GETTING STARTED

Ingratiating décor, smoothness of operation and ongoing excellence in programming, the key elements of the synergy that has long characterized the Wisconsin Union Theater, have all been enhanced by renovations completed in time for the Diamond Anniversary season.

From the outset, the theater was envisioned as an integral part of the intellectual, cultural and social life of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and for three quarters of a century it has successfully fulfilled its mission. Now, even as we celebrate its extraordinary past, the Wisconsin Union Theater promises to be, in the words of Wisconsin Union founding Director Porter Butts, a place where people “might gain strength through cultural and creative activity.”

Here's to the next 75 years!



### A MEMORABLE SPACE

On February 6, 1985, the acclaimed American actress and film star Mercedes McCambridge appeared at the Wisconsin Union Theater in a touring production of Marsha Norman's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *night, Mother.* As she walked the stage checking her props before the auditorium opened, she looked out into the distinctive hall and said, “I've been in this house before.” Knowing that this was her first Madison appearance, Theater Director Michael Goldberg asked her when she'd been in the theater. She replied, “When I was studying acting in Chicago in 1939, my roommate and I took the train to Madison to see Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in the production of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* that opened the hall. I remember the space. That was 46 years ago.”

# “NOTHING BUT THE BEST”

An Unwavering Commitment to Excellence and Leadership in Arts, Entertainment and Cultural Programming

In the fall of 1964, the Directorate programmers at the Wisconsin Union Theater scheduled a concert for October 2nd by the *Foggy Mountain Boys*, luminaries of bluegrass music, featuring virtuosos Lester Flatt on guitar and Earl Scruggs on banjo. Shortly after the concert was announced, an irate patron stormed into Theater Director Fan Taylor's office to protest the appearance of these “yokels” and their “hillbilly” music in the “palace of culture.” Director Taylor's response was swift and unequivocal:

“What matters is not what kind of music you present; what matters is that what you present is the very best, and this band is the very best.”

Quality has been the hallmark of the Wisconsin Union Theater programming from the day it opened and that commitment to artistic excellence has never wavered.

## THE CONCERT SERIES

The cornerstone of Wisconsin Union Theater presentations has been the Concert Series, which began in 1920, nineteen years before the theater opened. Originally sponsored by the University Men's Union, the standard was set at the inaugural concert on November 5, 1920, by international violin superstar Fritz Kreisler. For the next 95 years the



“NOTHING BUT THE BEST”

Concert Series, with its core of recitals and chamber music, has presented a veritable cavalcade of the world's greatest artists.

The list of violinists alone constitutes a succession of greatness—from Yehudi Menuhin, Georges Enesco and Jacques Thibaud to Henryk Szeryng, Isaac Stern, Itzhak Perlman and Hilary Hahn. The same is true for cellists (Leonard Rose, Gregor Piatigorsky, Lynn Harrell, Yo-Yo Ma); guitarists (Andres Segovia, Julian Bream, Alexandre Lagoya, Sharon Isbin); pianists (Emanuel Ax, Valentina Lisitsa, Josef Lhévinne, Artur Rubinstein, Dame Myra Hess, Vladimir Horowitz, Rudolf Serkin, Andras Schiff, Garrick Ohlsson); flutists, string quartets, trios. In fact, almost every important concert artist and chamber ensemble of the 20th and early 21st centuries that ever toured the United States has appeared in the Concert Series.

Vocal recitals have been the special highlight of countless seasons, featuring a succession of stars from Lotte Lehmann and

Internationally acclaimed violinist and violist Pinchas Zukerman and his piano collaborator Mark Neikrug were performing a recital on the Wisconsin Union Theater Concert Series when they received the following note backstage at intermission:

**AFTER THE CONCERT  
BACH, BOOZE AND BROADS  
437 W MIFFLIN STREET**

To the astonishment and delight of the senders, Zukerman and Neikrug put in a brief appearance at the party, enjoyed a beer and bid thanks and farewell to the smiling revelers.

Kirsten Flagstad to Samuel Ramey, Barbara Bonney, Thomas Hampson and Dawn Upshaw. Indeed, the five-event Concert Series that opened the Wisconsin Union Theater in 1939-40 featured not one but two of the world's most acclaimed singers: bass baritone Ezio Pinza and contralto Marian Anderson.

*"What matters is not what kind of music you present; what matters is that what you present is the very best, and this band is the very best."*

- Fan Taylor

Filling out the bill for the 20th annual Concert Series, and the first in its new Wisconsin Union Theater home, were cellist Emanuel Feuermann, violinist Joseph Szigeti and pianist Robert Casadesus. Total fees for the five artists combined were \$6,000.

Over the decades the Concert Series has gone through many changes, as has the world of classical music. From the mid

1950s to the early 1970s demand exploded and the Concert Series expanded to a double, "Red and White" series of five concerts each. The same artists performed different repertoire on consecutive nights, enabling subscribers to attend both programs with no repetition of works. Then as audiences began to "gray" and attendance declined,

**"N O T H I N G   B U T   T H E   B E S T "**

the series reverted to a single, seven-concert subscription package with a growing emphasis on individual sales.

Of course, one of the many arguments for building the Wisconsin Union Theater was the creation of an appropriate space to showcase the Concert Series. The series had led a nomadic existence on campus from its inception, with concerts staged in the Stock Pavilion, Old Music Hall, 262 Bascom and even the Armory (the “Red Gym”). Finally in the fall of 1939 the Concert Series found a home: the Wisconsin Union Theater opened, and so did a world of arts, entertainment and ideas that has characterized the cultural life of Madison and the university ever since.

## FAMILY TIES

On November 9, 1979, beloved violinist and Wisconsin Union Theater favorite Isaac Stern, appearing on one of nine occasions over five decades, received a note at intermission from a student named Barry Stern. It said that in order to impress his date for the evening, Barry had told her that the acclaimed musician was his uncle, and asked Mr. Stern to “play along” with the charade. As the public greeted the artist backstage after the concert, theater Director Ralph Sandler pointed out the young man and the gracious Mr. Stern walked up to his faux ‘nephew,’ embraced him and exclaimed affectionately, “... Barry, boychik, how’s the family?” The young woman was duly impressed.

## MUSIC! MUSIC! MUSIC!

Over the years the nationally acclaimed Concert Series has comprised only a fraction of the Wisconsin Union Theater’s classical concert offerings. From grand opera to great orchestras to gamelan to Phillip Glass, every conceivable musical genre has been represented.

During the 1970s and early 1980s the Wisconsin Union Theater enjoyed a special relationship with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and it continues to be the Madison destination for frequent visits by the Milwaukee Symphony. Along the way there have been countless offerings by world renowned orchestras from Boston, Chicago, London, Dresden, Los Angeles, Minnesota, Moscow and Salzburg – some of them held in the University Pavilion (better known as the Stock Pavilion) and led by such venerable conductors as Leopold Stokowski, Erich Leinsdorf, Seiji Ozawa, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Jean Martinon, Michael Tilson Thomas and Eugene Ormandy.

## INCLUSIVE FROM THE START

In 1996 UW Professor Sandra Adell, while researching the eminent African-American singer, actor, athlete and political activist Paul Robeson, came to the Wisconsin Union Theater seeking information, having heard that Robeson had appeared in the theater. As it happened, the controversial Robeson had performed in vocal concerts several times (1929, 1933, 1940, 1946) and acted the title role in an acclaimed production of Shakespeare’s Othello that featured Madison native Uta Hagen as Desdemona and José Ferrer as Iago.

“ N O T H I N G   B U T   T H E   B E S T ”

# LOUIS ARMSTRONG



and his  
Famous  
ALL-STARS

VELMA MIDDLETON  
THUMMY YOUNG  
EDMOND HALL  
BILLY KYLE  
BARRY DEEMS  
SCOTT GERSH

Thursday, Sept. 26. 7 & 9 p.m.

7 P.M. — \$1.75, 1.25, 1.00\*, 1.00\*  
8 P.M. — \$2.25, 1.75, 1.00\*, 1.00\*  
(Subject to mandatory State Tax First)

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Music Committee

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UNIVERSITY STOCK PAVILION

As Professor Adell and Theater Director Michael Goldberg perused the theater's archives, seeking information on Robeson, Adell exclaimed, "What's that?" "That" turned out to be a program file for a 1959 performance by jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald. Other files featured composer and orchestra leader Duke Ellington (1954, 1956, 1972); trumpeter Louis Armstrong (1953, 1955, 1957); opera singers Leontyne Price (1971, 1981) and Shirley Verrett (1962, 1964, 1966, 1969, 1977); pianist Erroll Garner (1961); dancer and choreographer Pearl Primus (1948); band leader Count Basie (1958); Miles Davis (1971); McCoy Tyner (1973); the Leonard De Paur Infantry Chorus (1948, 1950); B. B. King (1968)...and on it went. It turned out that over the decades the Wisconsin Union Theater had been a regular showcase for the premier African-American artists of the 20th century.

An interesting thing about this dazzling parade of acclaimed artists is that it occurred before ideas about multiculturalism began to be articulated on campuses and in public discourse around the country. Wisconsin Union Theater

programmers were simply pursuing the Theater's historic and resolute commitment to artistic excellence in arts presenting, regardless of race, gender or political stance. By doing right they were also doing good.

## WE ARE THE WORLD... AND ALL THAT JAZZ

Long before the proliferation of arts festivals in the 60s, 70s and 80s, the Wisconsin Union Theater was a pioneer in the presentation of artists from the worlds of jazz and international touring. Today the Madison World Music Festival, World Stage Series, Isthmus Jazz Series and Isthmus Jazz Festival are centerpieces of the theater's ongoing commitment to showcase the best of a rich and diverse world of arts and entertainment.

But long before Anoushka Shankar, Angelique Kidjo, Mariza and Zap Mama, the theater presented Ravi Shankar, Indrani and Dancers, Les Ballets Africains and Shanta Rao.

"NOTHING BUT THE BEST"



*Music, dance, theater, film—for three quarters of a century the Wisconsin Union Theater has hosted a panoply of arts and entertainment from around the world, enriching the cultural, emotional and aesthetic lives of generations of audiences.*

Dave Brubeck, Sarah Vaughn and John Coltrane were filling the Wisconsin Union Theater with the sounds of jazz decades before Esperanza Spalding, David Sanchez and Jane Monheit were born.

With Union Directorate student programmers attuned and attentive to new and emerging artists, and with professional staff closely networked with the leading arts industry agents and managers, the theater continues to lead the way in jazz and world music programming. Annual festivals attract ever-growing audiences, casting a bright spotlight on two historically popular genres.

### SHALL WE DANCE?

The Wisconsin Union Theater's beautifully proportioned proscenium opening, combined with spacious, comfortable seating, make it an ideal showcase for experiencing both classical and contemporary dance. Indeed, from the time it opened, the theater's student programmers and staff have presented the best that the world of dance could offer. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Martha Graham Dance Company appeared numerous times in the 1940s, 50s and 60s while more recent engagements of *Streb* and *Alonzo King Lines Ballet* all cemented the Wisconsin Union Theater's reputation as presenting the best in dance. Still, they only begin to convey the pivotal part that the theater has played as a leader in the

presentation and the advancement of the art of dance in Wisconsin and across America.

The inventive five-week-long residency in 1978 by the Alwin Nikolais Dance Company, as well as the leading role that the Wisconsin Union Theater played over the five-year history of the innovative Wisconsin Dance On Tour Project (featuring the Eliot Feld Ballet, David Parsons Dance Company, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and Ballet Hispanico) broke new ground and created unique models for the presentation and commissioning of works by the leading dancers and choreographers of our time.

### WE ARE THE WORLD

A unique program that was conceived by the Theater's Assistant Director, Jim Wockenfuss, in 1959 had its genesis in the 1940 series of "travelogues," first introduced to Madison by the intrepid filmmaker and world traveler Burton Holmes. Seven decades later, a special blend of live narration, personal anecdote and cinematic beauty makes the Travel Adventure Film Series one of the Wisconsin Union Theater's most beloved traditions. Experienced globetrotters and arm-chair travelers alike continue to traverse the planet from the comfort of their seats, led by personable and talented filmmakers as tour guides, as they lead rapt audiences on extraordinary journeys, visiting fascinating people and exotic lands both near and far.

**" N O T H I N G   B U T   T H E   B E S T "**

## A TRADITION OF SERVICE

"It's All Show Business To Us"

**W**hen Theater Director Michael Goldberg left the Union in 2003, a farewell reception and open house was held on the theater stage. A highlight of the afternoon was a surprise appearance by the University's beloved Pro Arte Quartet with a performance of a Mozart string quartet as a going away gift.

Looking around at the gathering of well-wishers, University Vice Chancellor Lamar Billups observed, "Everyone is here!" When asked to elaborate he noted that many of the people in attendance were not just from the campus performing arts and programming communities. Rather, there were representatives from almost every sector of the university: the Business School, the Carbone Cancer Center, liberal arts departments, the sciences, central administration, public radio and television—a cross section of the entire UW-Madison—as well as representatives of community organizations and the general public.

Why such a broad and varied cross section? The explanation was simple enough. At some

point in time, all of them had needed the Wisconsin Union Theater—and the theater, in turn, had served their needs. A lecture, a convocation, a special event or occasion—for all of them the Wisconsin Union Theater had served as a destination and a welcoming space to serve their needs and interests.

In most cases the event or program was a unique something outside of the sponsoring department or organization's customary activities and requiring the special or unusual staging and production capabilities that only a real theater could provide.

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*...the (theater) had served as a destination and a welcoming space to serve their needs and interests.*

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Of course, there were the uses that one would expect: the University Theatre's—previously Wisconsin Players—large scale musicals and plays requiring a proscenium setting which the department's Vilas Hall facilities lacked; a School of Music

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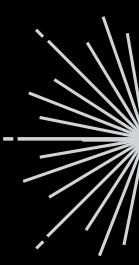


At the direction of the Memorial Union Building Committee, "in the dark days of the depression," with hopes of using private funds and federal Public Works Administration (PWA) dollars, Director Porter Butts begins architectural planning for the theater wing and engages theater consultant Lee Simonson.

November 5, 1920

Acclaimed violinist Fritz Kreisler inaugurates the Wisconsin Union Concert Series.

1920

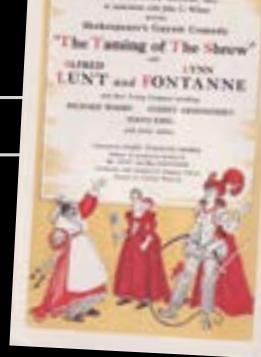


The university approves the idea of building a campus community center as a memorial to World War I with an auditorium as "one of the principal elements".



October, 1928

The Memorial Union opens without its intended Theater.



May 20, 1953

Jazz legend Louis Armstrong at the first of three Wisconsin Union Theater engagements demurs when asked to autograph his piano. He finally relents, signing it simply "Satchmo".

October 9-11, 1939

Four inaugural performances by the first couple of the American theater, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, in Shakespeare's *"The Taming of the Shrew"*.

The theater is built without the use of state funds at a cost of just under a million dollars.

1938-1939

December 4, 1944

*Othello*, starring Paul Robeson, Uta Hagen and José Ferrer.

1939

1944

1949-1950

1928

1937

1939

1940

1948

1950

June, 1937

University President Clarence Dykstra appoints a Wisconsin Union Theater Building Planning Committee. Within two days architect Michael Hare presents sketches and floor layouts.

April 23, 1940

Marian Anderson performs on the 20th annual Wisconsin Union Concert Series.

September 25, 1948

The theater's season opens with a concert in the Stock Pavilion by the New York Philharmonic, where Music Director Leopold Stokowski declares how pleased he is to perform in a venue "named for my friend and colleague, the distinguished conductor Friedrich Stock".

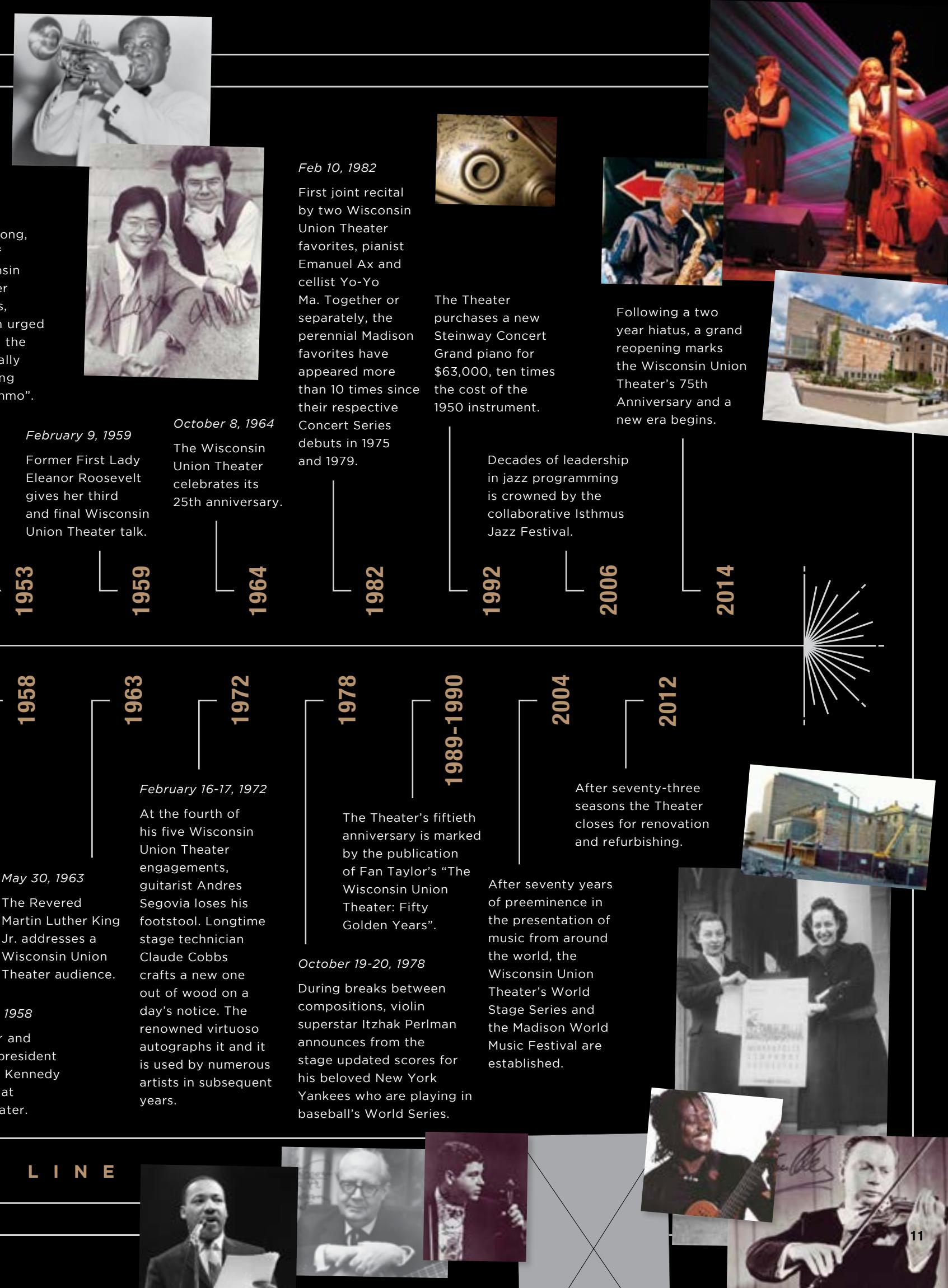
June 17, 1950

The Theater purchases a new Steinway concert grand piano (for \$6,000!) and on December 13, 1950 the esteemed British pianist Dame Myra Hess begins the tradition of artists autographing the harp inside the instrument.

May 16, 1963  
Senator John F. Kennedy speaks at the theater.



TIME





... Continued from page 9

convocation for an audience that exceeded the capacity of Mills Hall; a University Opera that called for a larger venue than the Bolz Auditorium in Old Music Hall; accommodation for numerous local arts organizations, from the Madison Savoyards to Four Seasons Theatre.

But then there was the time that the School of Music hosted the annual gathering of the International Double Reed Society with a convocation featuring over one hundred bassoon and oboe players concertizing together on the Wisconsin Union Theater stage.



There was a Taliesin Festival performance by an ensemble of "architect-dancers" from the Frank Lloyd Wright studios in Spring Green, Wisconsin; a *Time Magazine* award ceremony for former vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro; a 1992 "town hall" meeting for presidential hopeful Bill Clinton; a UW Carbone Cancer Center "Kids with Courage" celebration featuring supermodel Cindy Crawford.



There have been talks by countless speakers from the worlds of politics, literature and science: civil rights crusader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; a young senator John F. Kennedy; former presidential candidate, the Reverend Jesse Jackson; physicist Niels Bohr; Native-American novelist N. Scott Momaday; First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt; Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. The decades-long list is endless. While many of these events were sponsored by the student programmers of the Wisconsin Union Directorate, others were hosted by various academic departments and community organizations.

In every instance the Wisconsin Union Theater and its professional administrators, stage technicians and student stagehands were there with the necessary presenting skills, stagecraft and experience to make the event a success.

Bringing people together for extraordinary experiences has been central to the theater's mission of service to the university and the community, right from the day it opened. For audiences, the Wisconsin Union Theater is a place for special occasions, but for the student programmers and professional staff that make the theater work—concert after play after lecture, event by event, year after year for three quarters of a century—it's just business as usual—and "it's all show business to us".



## A TRADITION OF SERVICE



# YOU WHO CHOOSE TO LEAD MUST FOLLOW

**S**ince it opened in 1939, the Wisconsin Union Theater has had five directors. Each of them—Fan Taylor, Bill Dawson, Ralph Sandler, Michael Goldberg and Ralph Russo—was blessed with outstanding teams of marketing, operations and production personnel; each enjoyed a national reputation for success and innovative leadership in the arts management and presenting field; each benefitted from the position and functioning of the theater within the administrative and operational framework of the Wisconsin Union; and each enjoyed the unqualified support of three outstanding Wisconsin Union Directors—Porter Butts, Ted Crabb and Mark Guthier.

Each theater director worked in a situation that distinguished them from their professional industry colleagues around the country and made them unique in the world of non-profit performing arts center management. They were accountable to, and had their programming budgets approved by a student programming board.

It was Porter Butts, one of the founders of the College Union Idea in the United States, who first articulated and created this singular governing structure. From the outset, Butts foresaw a theater as central to the life of the University of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Union and the education of the complete student. He anticipated it as a venue serving as a community gathering space for performances, meetings, creativity and artistic expression, the lively exchange of ideas and of shared experiences. And it was Butts who persuaded the Board of Regents to designate the Wisconsin Union as the Division of Social Education, with student leadership, and the Wisconsin Union Theater as a cornerstone of its success.

## DIRECTORS

Fan Taylor worked as the Wisconsin Union Theater's first publicist, then its first Director, from 1939 until 1966. To this day, she is regarded as one of the key founders of the not-for-profit arts

Y O U   W H O   C H O O S E   T O   L E A D  
M U S T   F O L L O W



presenting industry in the United States, having run the presenters' professional association (now the Association of Performing Arts Presenters) for many years from her Wisconsin Union Theater desk. She served as the organization's first Executive Director, and she inaugurated and directed both the Music Program and the Office of Program Information at the fledgling National Endowment for the Arts in Washington D.C. in the 1960s and 1970s. Taylor set the extraordinarily high standards for excellence, innovation and diversity in arts programming at the Wisconsin Union Theater that succeeding generations of staff and students have

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*It was Porter Butts, the founder of the college union movement in the United States, who first articulated and created this singular governing structure.*

---

worked to maintain and that millions of audience members have appreciated and come to expect.

Bill Dawson and Ralph Sandler made the Wisconsin Union Theater a pioneer in the development of performing arts residency and outreach programming. Now ubiquitous on campuses and at performing arts centers nationally, these activities integrated visiting professional artists and performers of national and international stature into the cultural and educational life of campuses and communities. The artists don't just entertain and inspire new generations of arts lovers through performances, but also collaborate with local artists and audiences through master classes, workshops, and the commissioning and performance of new works.



The traditions of artistic quality, variety and innovation—including the commissioning by the Wisconsin Union Theater of new pieces by acclaimed composers and choreographers like William Bolcom,

Roscoe Mitchell, Eliot Feld, David Parsons and Bill T. Jones—continued under the leadership of Michael Goldberg

and Ralph Russo, with Russo overseeing many advances in jazz and world music programming.

And through it all, it has been the student leaders of the Wisconsin Union Directorate—the Union programming board—who have been in the programming vanguard. Inspired by Porter Butt's vision, generations of student programmers have validated the unshakable belief, long confirmed by history, that when charged with responsibility, empowered with authority and given astute guidance and the room to succeed, students quickly turn into the leaders that their teachers, mentors and advisors have always believed they are capable of becoming.

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M U S T   F O L L O W

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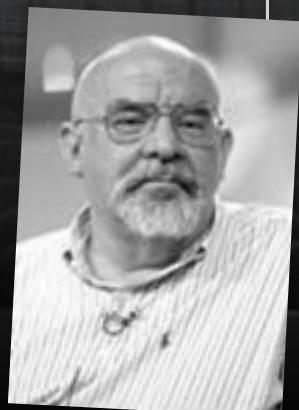
# THE GREAT NUDE PETER PAN ESCAPADE

In September of 1968 UW student Stuart Gordon, an aspiring young theater director, conceived a stage adaptation of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* as an allegory for the political, social and racial turmoil of the times. He was able to persuade a group of undergraduates that dancing nude under strobe lights to the music of rock band Iron Butterfly's hit song *In A Gadda Da Vida* in the middle of the play, would serve as a perfect metaphor for the idealism, anxieties, hopes and disappointments of their generation.

In order for rehearsals to take place in the Play Circle after regular building hours, a Wisconsin Union Theater staff member close to the theater troupe stayed on hand after closing. One night, at about 1:30 AM, during a rehearsal of the dance sequence, the staffer was standing at the back of the Play Circle when a Union custodian quietly pushed his housekeeping cart into the theater's back cross aisle for the post-MovieTime cleanup. The somewhat

bewildered housekeeper looked up to see half-a-dozen coeds dancing stark naked on the stage. He stood there for about thirty seconds with a perplexed look on his face and then, rather nonplussed, he very quietly turned around and gently pushed his cart out again.

There are conflicting versions of what later transpired. Word gradually got around that the show featured nudity and a preview performance was held for Directorate programmers, Union staff and city officials. Several of the original cast members withdrew. (One who did not was a young André De Shields, who has since achieved great acclaim as a Tony-Award nominated Broadway star, UW-Madison commencement speaker and recipient of a UW Distinguished alumni Award). Wisconsin Union Directorate student leaders and then-Theater Director Bill Dawson came down on the side of



THE GREAT NUDE  
PETER PAN ESCAPADE

## LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Dialogue backstage in the dressing room after a Wisconsin Union Theater recital by superstar Yo-Yo Ma, in which he performed on a priceless 18th century Stradivarius cello:

Lowell Creitz, retired faculty cellist with the Pro Arte Quartet: *"I see you finally got the new cello."*

Ma: *"Would you like to try it?"*

Creitz plays the cello.

Pary Karp, current faculty cellist with the Pro Arte Quartet, to Creitz: *"How was it?"*

Creitz: *"Glorious."*

Ma to Karp: *"Would you like to play it?"*

Karp plays the cello.

High school student Miriam L. (who has met Ma before) to Ma: *"The new instrument sounds beautiful!"*

Ma: *"Would you like to play it?"*

Miriam, a very tall young woman, wraps her arms and legs around the cello, closes her eyes and plays ecstatically.

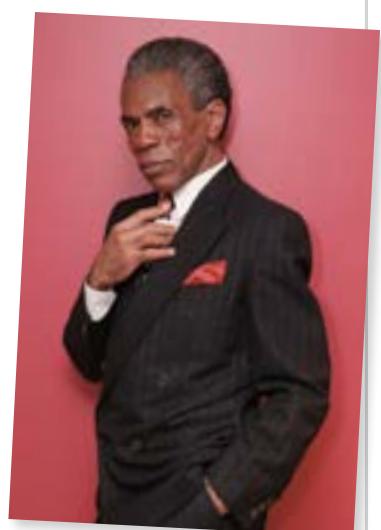
Miriam's mother, observing the dreamy look on Miriam's beaming face, to Ma: *"I'm not sure I like what's going on between my daughter and that cello!"*

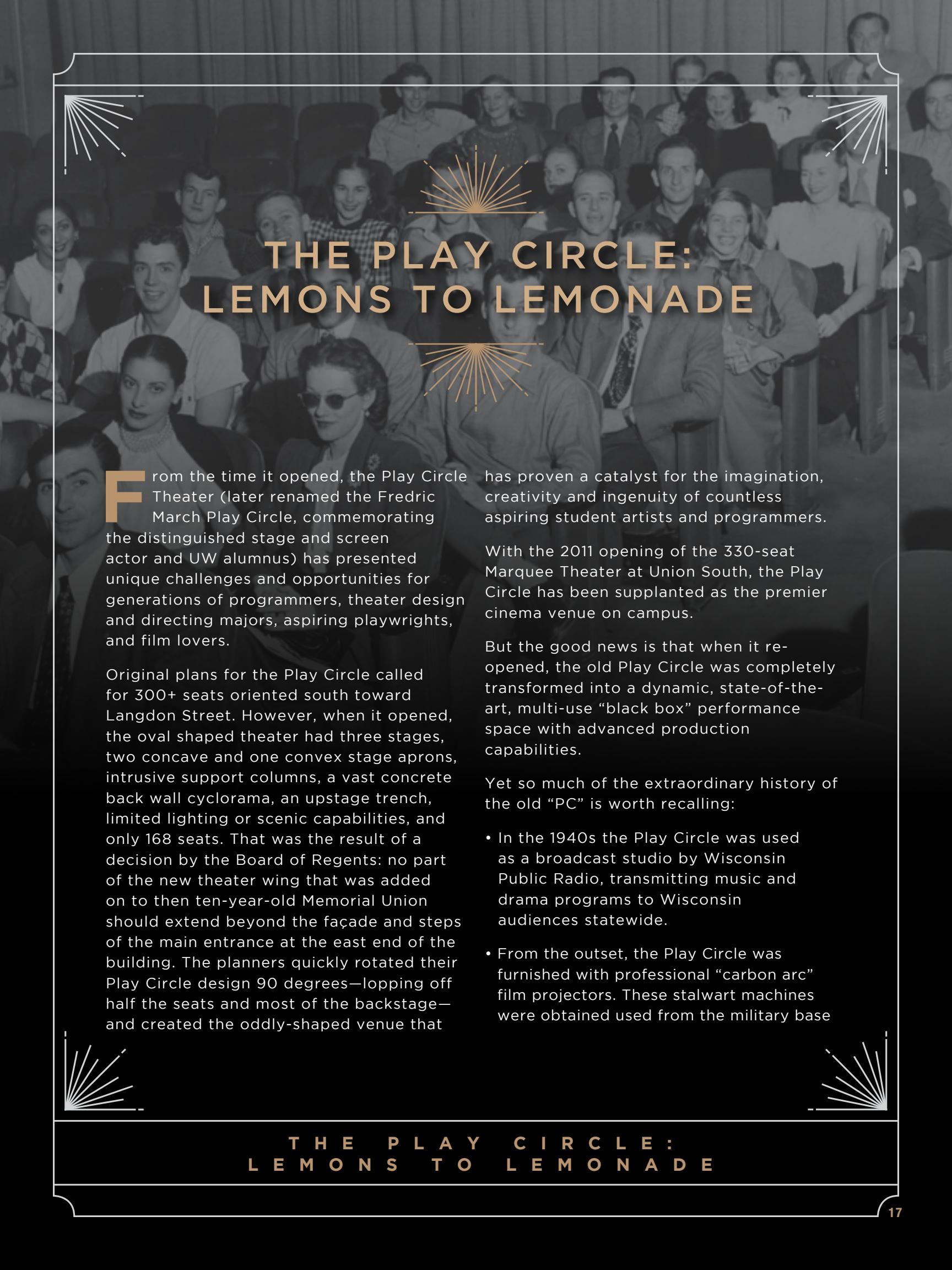
freedom of artistic expression. However, when District Attorney James Boll, who was running for office, announced that members of the production would be arrested for public lewdness, Union staff, invoking the principle of *in loco parentis* ("in the place of a parent"), decided that they could not let the show go on.

The subsequent performances were eventually staged in a different space on campus. The "nude Peter Pan" briefly made the UW-Madison grist for the late-night national television comedy mill. Charges were brought against Gordon and his soon-to-be wife, Carolyn, and were later dropped. Gordon has gone on to great acclaim during a long and successful theater and film career in Madison, Chicago and Hollywood and he was eventually invited back to Madison in 2000 as a UW Artist-in-Residence.

The then-controversial play would probably seem tame by contemporary standards.

One little known fact about the episode is that, following the preview performance, a now-deceased Theater staff member, upon learning of the district attorney's intention to prosecute, surreptitiously gathered up and disposed of all the printed programs so that the DA would not be able to identify and round up the participants.





## THE PLAY CIRCLE: LEMONS TO LEMONADE

From the time it opened, the Play Circle Theater (later renamed the Fredric March Play Circle, commemorating the distinguished stage and screen actor and UW alumnus) has presented unique challenges and opportunities for generations of programmers, theater design and directing majors, aspiring playwrights, and film lovers.

Original plans for the Play Circle called for 300+ seats oriented south toward Langdon Street. However, when it opened, the oval shaped theater had three stages, two concave and one convex stage aprons, intrusive support columns, a vast concrete back wall cyclorama, an upstage trench, limited lighting or scenic capabilities, and only 168 seats. That was the result of a decision by the Board of Regents: no part of the new theater wing that was added on to then ten-year-old Memorial Union should extend beyond the façade and steps of the main entrance at the east end of the building. The planners quickly rotated their Play Circle design 90 degrees—lapping off half the seats and most of the backstage—and created the oddly-shaped venue that

has proven a catalyst for the imagination, creativity and ingenuity of countless aspiring student artists and programmers.

With the 2011 opening of the 330-seat Marquee Theater at Union South, the Play Circle has been supplanted as the premier cinema venue on campus.

But the good news is that when it re-opened, the old Play Circle was completely transformed into a dynamic, state-of-the-art, multi-use “black box” performance space with advanced production capabilities.

Yet so much of the extraordinary history of the old “PC” is worth recalling:

- In the 1940s the Play Circle was used as a broadcast studio by Wisconsin Public Radio, transmitting music and drama programs to Wisconsin audiences statewide.
- From the outset, the Play Circle was furnished with professional “carbon arc” film projectors. These stalwart machines were obtained used from the military base

THE PLAY CIRCLE:  
LEMONS TO LEMONADE



at Madison's Truax field. They were lovingly cared for and maintained by student projectionists, including Madison's first female film projectionist, functioned faithfully through thousands of showings for generations of moviegoers over seven decades, and remain operative today.

- The Play Circle was able to accommodate 35mm screenings – the film industry standard – thanks to a full-size perforated screen that was brilliantly designed and constructed by longtime Wisconsin Union Theater technical director and Professor of Theatre Fred Buerki. Not only could films be watched in full cinema scale in an intimate space that was more like a private screening room than a movie house, but the entire screen could be collapsed and stored out of site to clear the stage for countless other uses.
- From the beginning, the Play Circle exhibited contemporary as well as classic movies. In the late sixties and early seventies especially, during an explosion of interest and innovation in film, the Play Circle became a mecca for cinema enthusiasts, many of whom went on to prominent professional careers in the movie industry. Film critics, historians and reviewers Larry Cohen, Mike Wilmington and Joseph McBride; producers and directors Stuart Gordon, Jim Abrahams and David and Jerry Zucker; film editor Mark Goldblatt and screenwriter Dennis Paoli are among them.
- One year, Wisconsin Union Directorate Theater Arts Chair and flute major Anita Thiesen introduced a student musical composition competition. Though short lived (for practical reasons relating to available musician performers), it was transformed by Directorate student committee member Todd Bachman into



a student playwriting competition, something previously sponsored by the Theater and Drama Department but long abandoned. Thanks to a gift from a UW alumna and playwright, the annual contest is now known as the Marcia Légère Student Play Festival.

- Well before the playwriting competitions, however, the Play Circle had long served as a training ground for students aspiring to careers as scenic designers, actors and playwrights.

MFA-candidate students like Daniel Boylan, Nicholas Bryson and James Wright, under the tutelage of acclaimed faculty members such as John Ezell and John Wright Stevens, bravely confronted the physical challenges and limitations of the space by creating elaborate and innovative stage settings.

One undergraduate, David Elliot, went on to a distinguished career as a lighting director and designer for the American Ballet Theater, Pennsylvania Ballet and numerous other companies. For an "in-the-round" setting for the play *Aton* by then aspiring playwright and present day author Lenny Kleinfeld, Elliot unbolted three rows of seats from the floor and placed them on the Play Circle stages. (That one-act play starred a young actress named Ina Jaffe, who went on to a distinguished career as a correspondent for National Public Radio.)

With the 75th anniversary renovation of the Wisconsin Union Theater, the new Fredric March Play Circle's enhanced production and performance capabilities promise a bright future of new student artist and audience experiences and achievement.



## THE PLAY CIRCLE: LEMONS TO LEMONADE





# NO PLACE LIKE IT

“The theater is in a class by itself.” — Conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos  
“...one of the finest legitimate theaters in America...” — The New York Times  
“The acoustics are marvelous.” — Actor Alfred Lunt



**T**here are simply no other performance spaces quite like the Wisconsin Union Theater. The elegant ceiling, arcing gracefully forward; the acoustically tuned, convex side walls, undulating toward the stage; the improbable, enveloping salmon color; the beautiful, understated architectural accents; the lovely curves and the absence of sharp angles—all combine to draw and direct the attention and awareness of the audience into and through the elegantly proportioned proscenium.

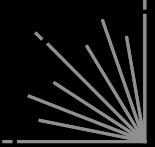
Conversely, generations of performers have benefited from the unique focus and energy that emanates from the onstage perspective, enabling them to achieve the subtle effect of embracing every corner of the auditorium while simultaneously “playing” to the entire audience, both collectively and individually.

The happy result is a venue where the most robust declamation and the softest stage whisper, the most thunderous fortissimo and the quietest, lingering pianissimo, the most extravagant movement and the subtlest gesture, are conveyed to every person in the audience with its full measure of power, nuance and intensity.

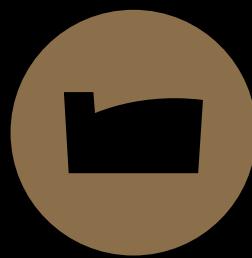
For performance and production purposes, the Wisconsin Union Theater, conceived and

executed by architect Michael Hare together with theater consultant Lee Simonson, is a model of compactness and efficiency. The original, brilliant 1939 layout has been integrated for the 75th anniversary with up-to-date lighting, rigging, along with acoustical and spatial enhancements. Other upgrades to the theater and its newly designated Shannon Hall include a conveniently resituated box office, curbside loading doors still within just a few feet of the stage, dressing rooms in close proximity to the acting area, the capacity of the orchestra pit increased, and a handsome new lakefront reception space added. With all of these, future generations of Wisconsin Union Theater users will continue to enjoy excellent interior sound lock and light lock between auditorium and lobby, energy efficient and noiseless mechanical and HVAC systems, stunning vistas through the exterior windows onto beautiful Lake Mendota—with the sun setting majestically behind Picnic Point—in short, a performance facility to rival any in the world.

A theater is really just a big empty space, filled with nothing but possibilities. It comes to life when imagination, creativity and intellect are manifested in front of a live audience. Some theaters are uniquely designed to realize dreams. Truly, the Wisconsin Union Theater is an extraordinary place in which to come together and experience the arts and ideas that are the hallmark of our collective humanity.



N O P L A C E L I K E I T



# WISCONSIN UNION THEATER

WISCONSIN UNION THEATER 2014

SHANNON HALL

FREDRIC MARCH PLAY CIRCLE

SHANNON SUNSET LOUNGE

FESTIVAL ROOM

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