

# The Critic, the Witch, and John Lithgow

Not all the good  
Cleveland theatre  
stories happen on  
the stage

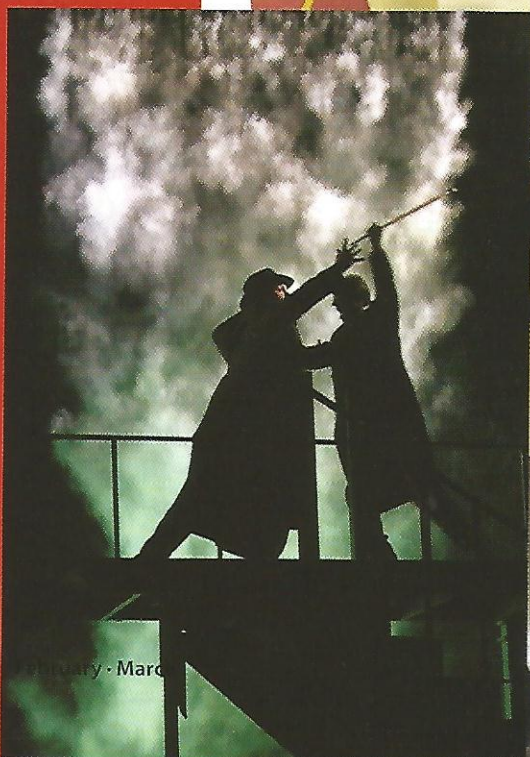
What is your definition of a great theatre town? Is it that it must have great spaces? Talented actors? Polished production personnel? Homegrown talent? Daring theatre companies?

Well, Cleveland has them all. No matter your definition, Cleveland is a great theatre town. But what marks a place as a truly great theatre town is the stories – both on and off the stage.

The ones that happen offstage are sometimes the more interesting ones.



by Noell Wolfgram Evans





## THE BEGINNINGS

Cleveland audiences – whether it's their mixed ethnic-influenced backgrounds, hearty weather-infused tolerance levels, or some unknown innate presence – have been asked to preside over some world-premiere pieces. If Cleveland likes it, it goes on; if Cleveland doesn't, well then, better luck next time. While there are a number of stages that premiere the work of up-and-comers, Cleveland has been host to premieres by such talents as Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Hammerstein II, Alan Ayckbourn, Arthur Miller, Langston Hughes, and Bertolt Brecht. More recently, Disney Theatrical Productions chose The Palace Theatre as the launching pad for *On the Record*, a new touring musical.

## THE ULTIMATE CRITIC

Usually, when audience members don't like a show, they tell a few friends and then move on. Unfortunately, some critics go much further.

*Hair* has been called the ultimate 1960s musical for its sex, nudity, drug use, and anti-war leanings. So when the play came to the Hanna Theatre in 1971, it was immediately denounced by several local groups. The public, though, was not deterred – just under 100,000 people came to see the show.

During its run, productions were interrupted by bomb threats; the cast received a constant barrage of angry, hate-filled messages; and, tragically, seven people (including family members of the actors) died in a nearby hotel fire. Everything culminated on the final day of the run, when passengers from a passing car tossed a bomb at the theatre. The marquee was badly damaged and windows were blown out around the block, but thankfully there were no injuries.

## WE'RE NUMBER ONE!

Cleveland is home to many "firsts." On the theatrical side we have the country's first (and longest-running)

regional theatre – The Cleveland Play House. A regional theatre is essentially a professional theatre that is dedicated to creating and supporting new American drama along with maintaining a classic repertoire. Opening in 1915, The Cleveland Play House has provided (by their own count) over twelve million Clevelanders with some theatrical enjoyment. When you then factor in their impressive education programs and public enrichment initiatives, it's not hard to see how the theatre became, and remains, at the head of the class.

## WE TAUGHT HER TO BE MEAN

Margaret Hamilton (a Cleveland native) will forever be linked to her most famous role – The Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). And why not? She played the role perfectly. Part of that was pure acting, but part could have been experience – Hamilton played the role twice in separate Cleveland Junior League stage productions before landing the Hollywood role.

One other Hamilton story. You may or may not realize that Cleveland is a cradle of theatrical talent (Howard Da Silva, Bob Hope, Paul Newman, and Ray Walston, for example) but perhaps what's less well known is the connections between them. For example, before her acting career took off, Margaret Hamilton was a teacher, and one of her students was noted actor Jim Backus.

## OPERA IN THE OUTFIELD

Many theatre patrons overlook opera as a dramatic art form – it's often seen as "too musical." So to get around that misperception, opera companies try innovative ways to attract an audience. The Cleveland Opera was one of the first to play off of the old adage of taking it to the people. In 1931, as the fabled Municipal Stadium was still solidifying its steady tenants, the opera scheduled two full seasons of productions there. This helped to make opera more accessible and brought it back closer to its original roots. These seasons included a world premiere and an appearance by Jules Bledsoe as Amonasro in

*Aida*. This was the first time the role was performed in this country by an African American.

## "THE JOHNNY APPLESEED OF THEATRE"

One of the city's most popular theatrical events is the Great Lakes Theatre Festival, a festival that was started, in many ways, by accident. The festival started in 1962 with the marriage between

the Lakewood Civic Auditorium and former Antioch College Professor – Arthur Lithgow.

Arthur had been traveling the state,

trying to get the theatre community excited about Shakespeare. The arrangement in Lakewood would be a dream come true. From the beginning the newly named Great Lakes Theatre Festival had far-reaching plans – one of which was to become a regional Shakespearean powerhouse. The success of the group was due in part to the broad thought and planning of the founders and to the talent of the early acting pool, which included the professor's son – John Lithgow.

## YOU GOTTA START SOMEWHERE

Another familiar face at the Great Lakes Theatre Festival (GLTF) was two-time Academy Award winner Tom Hanks. In 1977, Hanks came to GLTF to take on an internship. He started behind the curtain but very quickly found himself at the footlights. His work here was a foreshadowing of things to come as he was awarded the Cleveland Critics Circle Award for Best Actor.

## ALL ABOARD

This past summer *The Lion King* came to town courtesy of twenty-three semi-trucks along with other vehicles carrying cast members and production personnel. In earlier times a theatre, for instance the Gordon Square, would have a railroad spur linked directly to its docking area for ease in loading and unloading scenery, props, and equipment.

