



# Class Act

## CATCO founder Geoff Nelson takes a bow as company merges

By Lia Eastep

Geoff Nelson has a big head. Literally, not figuratively. The ball cap he is frequently seen wearing, with the words "Think Big" embroidered across the front, is a size 7 7/8. Delighted at his luck in finding it in a big-and-tall shop a number of years ago, he bought a few and has been wearing them ever since. This blend of optimistic pragmatism seems to characterize this man to the right degree.

Nelson, who founded the Contemporary American Theatre Company in 1983, will be stepping down as Artistic Director and into an emeritus position at the end of this season. In July of 2010, the Contemporary American Theatre Company (CATCO) and The Phoenix Theatre for Children will merge into a single organization, retaining the CATCO name. Phoenix Artistic Director Steven Anderson will replace CATCO founder Geoff Nelson, bringing along his experience in both adult and children's theater. Pooling artistic, financial, and human resources will allow both companies to broaden programming and better serve Central Ohio theater goers. While talk of a merger had been common knowledge around both organizations, very few knew the details until the announcement was made in October.

While the decision may not have been his, Nelson has chosen to view the situation as a liberating experience.

"Over the years, I've turned down offers to do outside work," he told me when we spoke on the phone one night. "Now I can. It's time to rebuild some bridges." This work will include directing and developing new plays, as well as writing some of his own.



CATCO founder Geoff Nelson

Photo courtesy of Geoff Nelson

In our interview, Nelson described the origins of CATCO, offering a context for its inception. In the mid-1980s, the Junior League published a study that concluded that the one thing missing from making Columbus a major metropolitan city was the presence of a professional theater.

"So there was a real desire to create one," said Nelson. "The commitment of the people involved and the excitement of creating a brand new artistic resource for the community was very contagious."

At the same time, it was announced that the Verne Riffe Center would be built and house a 900-seat production facility. While Players Theatre ultimately occupied that space in 1989, CATCO began carving a niche for itself (and routinely selling out performances) in their 175-seat Park Street location. When Players suddenly folded in 1993, Nelson and company eventually took on the role as Columbus' sole professional theater, moving into the Riffe in 1997, where they reside today.

"The initial impulse," explained Nelson, "was to provide a theatrical voice to Central Ohio talent." CATCO stages plays by strong contemporary playwrights like David Mamet, Sam Sheppard, Jane Martin, Christopher Durang, and Paula

Vogel. These were the plays I was being exposed to in my final years as a theater major in college, but not seeing performed anywhere.

When asked what accomplishment he is most proud of, Nelson answers quickly.

"Developing new works, for sure. Producing the Shorts Festival has given me great satisfaction." Starting in 1999, CATCO put out an open call for entries to be produced "as an anthology of short plays by Ohio writers." When asked why it has not run since 2006, Nelson explained that the impetus of the festival - to showcase new work - has evolved into the inclusion of full-length new plays into the theater's season; *Pierce to the Soul* by Columbus playwright, Chiquita Mullins Lee, will world premiere in April of next year. Nelson cited three productions as personal favorites - *A Christmas Memory* (an adaptation of the Truman Capote classic), *Blackbird* (for its controversial overtones), and 2001's staging of *The Grapes of Wrath* (its cast of 25 being an epic feat unheard of in an age of tight budgets and even tighter staging restrictions).

Despite the size of his actual cranium, Nelson has managed to stay humble. In the world of theater, where public displays of histrionics are commonplace, this is quite an accomplishment. When I attended the CATCO's annual Christmas potluck, Nelson was swarmed with people vying for his attention. This may seem commonplace for someone in a position such as his, but standing there next to him, watching him give instructions to a young technical crew member or field a drive-by hello from an important board member, I couldn't help but notice a consistent thoughtful calmness that Nelson seemed to bring to all of his exchanges.

Jonathon Putnam, resident actor and Assistant Artistic Director put it this way: "[Geoff's] even temperament is reflected throughout the company and has kept us buoyant during some difficult times. We don't panic," he said. "Also, as a result, prima donnas will not find a home at CATCO."

Geoff Nelson, on the other hand, will surely make a home of wherever he decides to go.

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