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*The Arts in Columbus and Central Ohio*

# MIAMI

“The first year, I did an original script. I was told, it’s not gonna sell. We made a very large profit that summer.”

*True confessions from a theater town*

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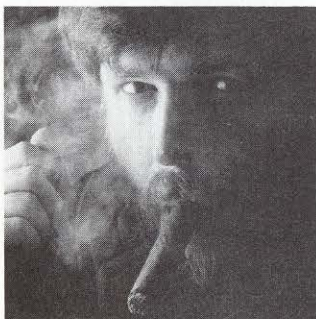
A highly selective guide to arts events in Central Ohio, August 16-November 15. Compiled by Lynn Stan

# Fall 1988

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Cover  
photo of  
CATCO's  
Geoffrey  
Nelson by  
Barbara  
Schwartz



# Curtain Up

By Deborah Wasserman  
Photographs by Ted Rice

Four years ago seeing a play in Columbus, Ohio, meant choosing from either student productions or re-staged Broadway warhorses. Opportunities for actors came solely through community theaters and the papers ran articles discussing whether the town could support a professional company.

But today, five theater companies are making dramatic changes in the Columbus theater profile. From back-alley warehouse stages to newly constructed electronically controlled performance halls, Columbus is acquiring the trappings of a theater town.

Players Theatre, the sixty-odd-year-old community theater, has changed its name to Players Theatre Columbus and is "going Equity," as they say in the business. The company is transforming itself from community to professional theater status, employing members of the Actors Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers. With a move into the three new theaters in the state office tower, Players assumes the role of Columbus' premiere professional theater.

But there's more. Contemporary American Theatre Company—known popularly as CATCO—Actors Repertory Theatre, Reality Theatre and the Theatre Project—all call themselves professional and all have arrived on the Columbus theater scene within the past three years. All have year-round seasons and pay local performers, designers and directors to work on productions.

Reality producing director Frank Barnhart explains how the new theaters distinguish themselves from the community theaters that, along with the college and university productions, have dominated the Columbus theater scene thus far. "Community theater," he says, "focuses on providing a theatrical outlet for a particular section of the community." The product is often highly professional, but the organization's priority remains focused on opening the door for auditions for any and all would-be performers. Rather than providing acting opportunities for amateurs who typically have other careers, professional theater provides artistic opportunities for artists.

Some observers of the theater scene would say only Players, by virtue of its Equity contracts, might be considered professional, defining the other theaters as semiprofessional.

But Players' managing director John McCann disagrees. He defines an organization as professional "if all its facets—its board, its productions, its pay scale, its management, et cetera—conduct themselves toward the betterment of the artists." Concurring with McCann, the new companies' members prefer the professional label, distinguishing themselves from theaters that feature hobbyists.

The recent proliferation in Columbus theater has been brewing for quite a while. At the time when support for such major arts organizations as the symphony, the ballet and the museum began to grow and expand, the absence of a resident professional theater became apparent. A 1977 "Cultural Explorations" study conducted by the Junior League concluded that "the establishment of a resident professional theater company (is) by far the most important priority" in the creation of professional dance, opera and theater in Columbus.

While Opera/Columbus and Ballet Metropolitan were becoming part of the cultural establishment, such companies as Slice of Life, Kenyon Festival Theatre

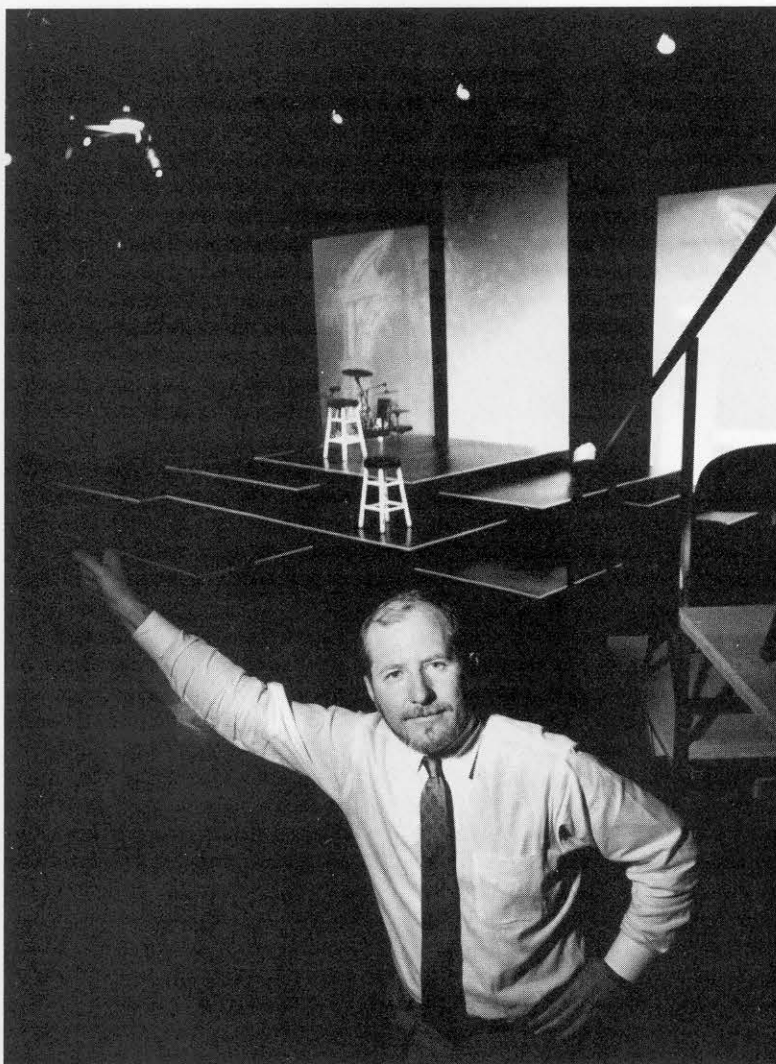
and Columbus Ensemble Theatre attempted—and failed—to fill the professional theater void.

Part of the problem was the lack of appropriate downtown space for theater, explains Lori Robishaw, CATCO co-founder who left Columbus to receive graduate degree in theater administration at Yale's School of Drama. Both the Ohio and Palace theatres were too large. The Southern wasn't and still hasn't been renovated and therefore is unusable. Furthermore, she adds, the resident theater movement has been around for only twenty-five years and the community still has difficulty distinguishing between a resident professional theater and the other theater groups performing in town—professional road companies performing Broadway hits, theater produced in academic settings and community theaters. The difference, Robishaw says, "has a lot to do with intent, with making a living, as opposed to doing it avocationally and just for fun."

Players Theatre producing director Ed Graczyk offers further insight as to why initial attempts failed.



Geoff Nelson



*John McCann*

"Everyone was eager to grab on (to the professional theater bandwagon) because that's what everyone (in the city) wanted," he theorizes. "Each announced they were professional before they did their work. But once they performed, the work wasn't up to the level their promotion promised."

The smaller companies seemed to have sprouted in the shadow of the larger companies' attempts to fit the professional theater bill.

As Kenyon Festival in Gambier was foundering with a failed Columbus season, and Columbus Ensemble Theatre was lining up subscription-ticket buyers and corporate donations, Lori Robishaw was assisting Geoff Nelson as he directed a production of "South Pacific" for Pontifical College Josephinum. Each night as they drove back and forth from Josephinum, they bemoaned the lack of theater opportunities in Columbus. "There was no one doing new work," Nelson recalls. "I tried to alter that." His company, CATCO, is the result.

During the same years that Nelson was conceiving CATCO, Frank Barnhart was studying theater at Ohio University, in the summers performing and

directing at "Trumpet in the Land," an outdoor drama production in New Philadelphia. After graduating, he came to Columbus and practiced his art in various community theaters. But in each he was expected to recreate work that had been done elsewhere.

"It was always important to make (the production) the same," he recalls. "They wanted you to do it like someone else. That always offended me." Barnhart wanted the opportunity to do something new. Focusing on the creative process and experimentation, he and two colleagues, Holly Heil and Dee Shepherd, in 1985 opened Reality Theatre in an old warehouse on Pearl Street in the Short North area.

Concurrently another group of actors, under the direction of Michael Hobbs and with the help of director Michael Bailey, were creating an opportunity for local actors to perform roles different from those in which they had been typically cast. Their efforts would evolve into the Theatre Project.

Consumed by the tremendous energy required to begin a theater company, the founders of the new company were unaware of each other's endeavors.

"We all went to work and one day opened the paper, and said, My God, look what's here," recounts Russ Phair, the Theatre Project's music director.

The youngest of the four companies is Actors Repertory Theatre, now embarking on its second season. Seeking to establish an "actor's theater," Denver Garrison and Gail Griffith branched off from Reality and together formed an ensemble company in which actors could have continual opportunities to perform major roles and concentrate on acting rather than having to *also* build sets and design costumes, arrange music and develop special effects.

Meanwhile, Players has been slated to fill the role of Columbus' large-budget theater institution. The challenge facing the company, now in its second Equity season, becomes clear with an explanation of regional theaters and the technicalities of professional theater contracts.

Whereas some companies focus on one aspect of theater, emphasizing the actors, the playwrights or the designers, a regional theater's challenge is to coordinate all those factors, providing area residents with the broadest possible theatrical experience of all types of theater—the classics, the comedies, the musicals and the serious dramas. They employ union designers, technicians, actors and directors to mount full-scale productions. In their often lavish sets, costumes and lighting, they can resemble Broadway productions.

But while they often restage Broadway hits, they also provide an avenue for full-scale production of new scripts, some of which find their way to Broadway, others to the regional theater circuit, and some even becoming material for alternative theaters such as the four new Columbus theaters.

In order to employ Equity actors, a professional theater contracts with the League of Resident Theaters, the collective bargaining arm of the non-profit regional theaters. It thereby agrees to various stipulations, including paying union wages, providing safe and sanitary working conditions, employing a certain ratio of union actors and stage managers for each production and producing a certain number of shows per week and weeks per run. Such obligations commit the company to a hefty budget and the administrative support systems that can generate financial backing.

But having a LORT contract is not a goal, explains Players' McCann. "The goal is to do exciting and innovative theater for as many people as possible. Doing that requires a stronger board (of trustees), larger facilities and a wider pool of actors to draw from"—and that involves hiring Equity actors.

LORT companies enjoy the advantage of having first dibs on plays by established playwrights. While rights to those plays are more expensive, they are usually easier to acquire because playwrights prefer giving rights to those companies that can guarantee the finest productions and the greatest exposure.

LORT companies also maintain daytime rehearsal schedules rather than the late nights kept by other theaters in which actors must support themselves with other jobs. Shows are cast in New York from a wide pool of actors.

Producing director Ed Graczyk has been with Players since 1973, with a brief sabbatical in the

early 1980s. Like those who have founded the alternative theaters, he has set his sights on producing new American plays. But doing so is more difficult for Players than for smaller theaters.

"Right now we're in a very weird position," he says. Presenting new works requires a loyal audience that will allow the company to take the risks new works demand. As an example, he cites CATCO's production of David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Glengarry Glen Ross," which has an abundance of offensive language. It's a play Graczyk would have liked to do, he says, "but we have to play to a lot of people." Instead, in the meantime anyway, he will select safer plays as he builds an audience base to support his company's large-scale productions and a budget expanded from six hundred thousand dollars in 1986 to almost two and a half million dollars this year.

On the other hand, going Equity presents new opportunities for Graczyk. "The quality of the work has soared," he says. "I have more chance to direct and not teach acting." Also, because he has a wider selection of actors, Graczyk is able to produce shows he was unable to cast when Players was a community theater.

But from the actor's point of view, being accepted into the union is not always beneficial.

"There's nothing worse than getting your Equity card when you're not ready," explains CATCO's Nelson. "It closes you out of a lot of work and you spend most of your time waiting tables." Equity News, the union trade publication, reported that in the year spanning 1986 to 1987, only eleven and six-tenths percent of Equity members were employed in their profession.

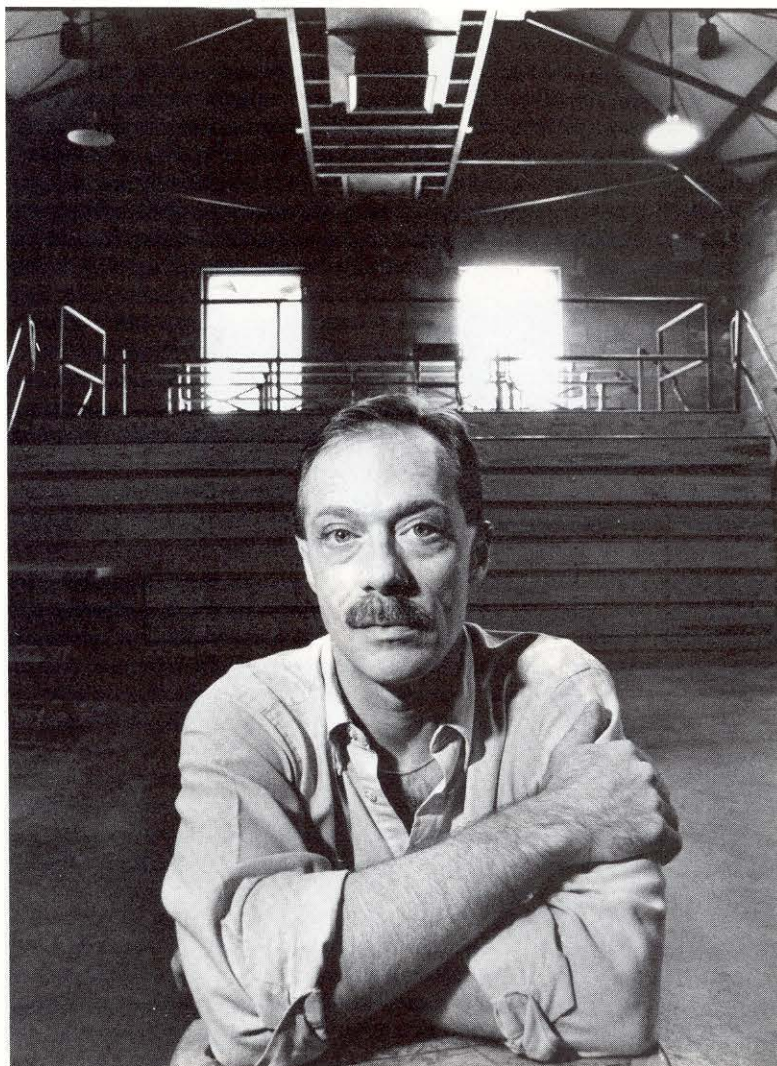
The problem is especially severe for actors who choose to live in smaller cities such as Columbus where Equity opportunities are slim. Consequently theaters that hire all non-Equity actors meet an important need in the theatrical world.

The CATCO season brochure refers to the company as "The theater alternative in Columbus"—in other words, the alternative to Players.

The brochure demonstrates artistic director Geoff Nelson's commitment to proving his professionalism *before* making promises. It carries the message of a no-frills theater involving serious artists. Diligent attention to the process of making good art seems to be Nelson's secret to steady growth and acceptance into the arts community as he works toward his goal of becoming an Equity theater.

"Let's start small and do a one-time project," Lori Robishaw recalls suggesting, as she and Nelson discussed an alternative to the dearth of theater opportunities in the city. A first production of "Mass Appeal" by Bill Davis at the YWCA in January 1985 met with enough success for Nelson to pursue two more shows that summer.

In the fall of the same year the company moved into an empty warehouse on Park Street, just southwest of the Short North area. Nelson has renovated the warehouse space, adding amenities one by one. Initial installation of built-in risers on three sides of the playing area provided good seating and sightlines. Air conditioning for summer and insulation for winter were added last season.



Michael Bailey

*"A lot of the scripts we look at are not very good. But I do know there are good ones out there."*

Recently added acoustical panels have improved the sound and a redecorated lobby adds to the air of professionalism.

Nelson's choice of plays makes the theater distinctive. "The first year, I did an original script," he recounts. "And I was told, It's not gonna sell. We made a very large profit that summer."

Nelson also took a risk with the production of Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross." Many predicted that the play's crude language would offend the CATCO audience. But, as it turned out, they loved the play.

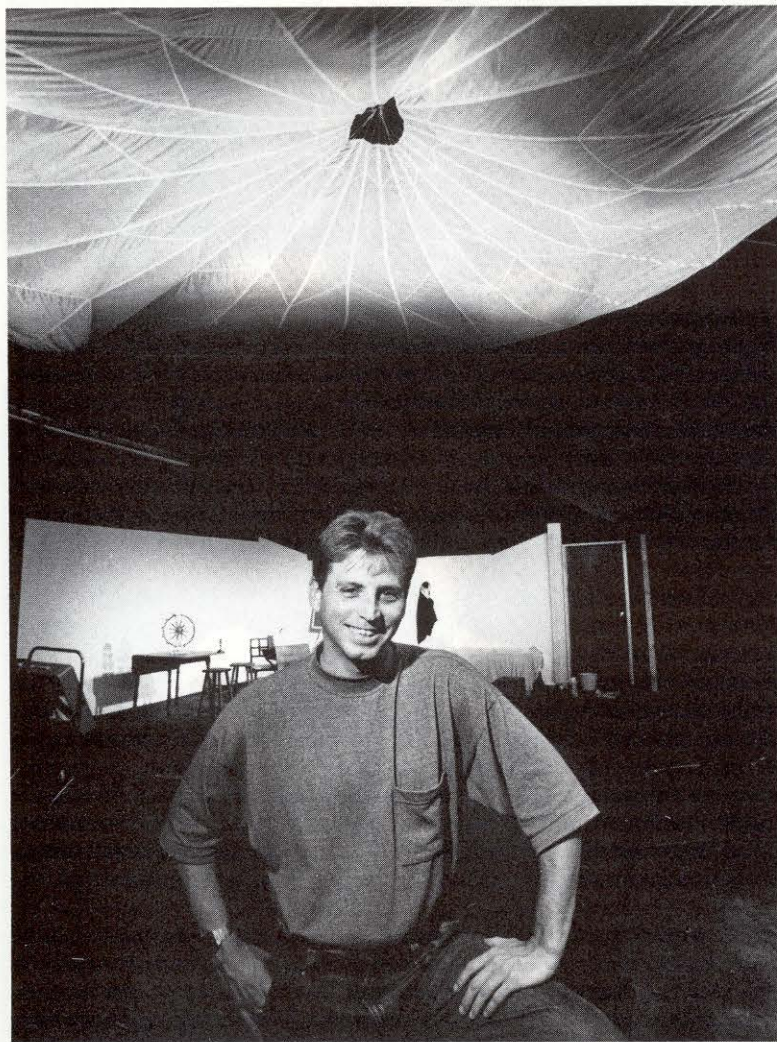
"You just never know," Nelson adds, still surprised by the results.

He describes his choice of plays as coming from an affinity for black, sardonic humor, saying, "We're a theater for people who say, Life's a bitch and then you die." The Off-Off-Broadway type plays he produces tend to focus on social issues rather than the slice-of-life portraits of individuals.

As he speaks, CATCO general manager Bill Goldsmith interrupts. A man on the phone is asking about CATCO's upcoming production of Christopher Durang's "The Marriage of Bette and Boo," a comedy about a family's devastation wrought by guilt and lack of communication. The caller wants to propose to his girlfriend and wonders if the CATCO production would provide an appropriate setting. An ironic smile comes to Nelson's face. "Tell him yes," he laughs. "I want them to see this (play) and still say yes afterwards."

"Our plays bring up topics you don't want to think about," he continues. "We're kind of lucky. There aren't more than one or two theaters in the country who could do a season like we do."

In his dedication to new American plays, he has been encouraged by the Drexel Theatre and Drexel North's success showing foreign and lesser-known movies. "Columbus is simply much



*Frank Barnhart*

more sophisticated than people give it credit for," he says.

Located in the South Side Settlement house on Innis Avenue, the Theatre Project trades performing space for classes and workshops. Its repertoire consists of new and seldom-seen works, focusing primarily on as-yet-to-be-produced playwrights.

"Reality, to whom I think we're closest, is developing new shows (through improvisation) but not new scripts," says the Project's artistic director Michael Bailey. "CATCO produces new (plays headed toward) Broadway or Off-Broadway but not necessarily new playwrights. I want to see the development of new playwrights. I want to be giving those artists a chance."

Bailey also recognizes the risks he runs. "A lot of the scripts we look at are not very good," he says. "In fact, many are just bad. But I do know there are good ones out there."

"Artistically working with an original production is a wonderful opportunity," says the Project's music director, Rus Phair. "You don't have anything (previously produced) to fall back on or compare it to; it's a totally new experience." For the director, it's a bigger challenge to

creativity, being freed from feeling audience expectations—or relying on them.

Some audiences choose not to attend performances by unknown playwrights, fearing that the risk of disappointment is higher. Others, however, know the thrill of following a company through the gamble of producing new work and the excitement of stumbling across a gem.

In its renovated Pearl Street warehouse, Reality, an ensemble of 20 actors under Barnhart's direction, maintains its experimental flavor in the plays it presents and the style of the presentation.

In its ensemble-generated scripts the company functions more like a dance company than traditional theater, developing a performance from improvisation off a given theme.

Barnhart has no interest in recreating another director's production, even if it's brilliant.

"From an artistic standpoint, there's a safety in that but not a value," he says. "Audiences have to be willing to let the arts explore. Otherwise they get stagnant. And the arts have to be willing to do that kind of exploration. You can't establish your own self unless you experiment."

Beginning with a basic concept—ter-

rorism and nuclear war are two that have been used in the past—the company members brainstorm all possible associations with the topic. Months later they begin the six-week improvisation process.

Many of the Reality performers have been with the company since its inception in 1985. As they continue to work together, their collaborative efforts mature, making Reality a theater that has ripened with age.

But faced with the reality of paying the bills, Barnhart can't be as experimental as he might like. As he describes his own situation, he thinks of Players' Graczyk who, he says, has to spend two to three years building his audience before he can produce the kinds of plays he wants.

"We're all guided by that a little bit," he continues. "You have to spend time doing things—not that you don't want to do—but not take as many risks as you may want to."

Barnhart began his theater three years ago as Columbus' experimental company. This season, the company's fourth, he's dropped the word "experimental" from the company promotion and has planned a safer season. Yet in each of his productions of previously produced plays, he tries to bring a new perspective.

In the company's production of Michael Cristofer's "Shadow Box," for instance, Barnhart strayed from a standard interpretation of the play, focusing on life and the living rather than on imminent death.

"We look at how open to new ideas and innovation a particular script could be," he says. "We examine it to see what kind of approach we could take and not be like any performance anyone has seen before. Some scripts are very cut and dried and not open to other directions. Those aren't the plays we're interested in doing."

With so much attention to presenting new works, an important body of theater work—the classics—has been left wanting.

"I hope something arises to fill that gap," says CATCO's Nelson. If he were starting a theater now, he adds, he might be tempted to focus on such noted playwrights of the past as Chekhov and Brecht.

Each of the new companies began with individual groups of actors filling their own needs for challenging roles, creative opportunities and theatrical diversity. In the case of the Theatre Project, a nontraditional casting policy also helped motivate its inception.

"A lot of talented actors are excluded from other companies," Michael Bailey says, "people who haven't fit into the stereotypes and therefore haven't been able to get lead roles." As an example, he refers to himself. "I'm too short for a romantic lead. So I, for one, am committed to nontraditional casting all the way."

Bailey believes that good acting will overcome any preconceived notions a person's physical appearance might bring. He casts without regard to race, color or physical handicap. Black actress Mattie Wakefield-McNaboe performs regularly with the company.

"If it weren't for the Theatre Project, the only other theaters who would consider using her are Reality or Center Stage," Phair says, referring to the

black community's theater.

"Part of our expectations are subliminal," he continues. "Movies, for instance, are still very white dominated. We still have musicals geared toward one color or one race. We're trying to blend that together so people don't pigeonhole."

Just as musicians become the tools of the conductor or dancers the tools of the choreographer, in some theaters actors and designers are the tools of the playwright or director. Other theaters are more collaborative, with the actors and designers playing an equal role. At Actors Repertory Theatre, the actors come first. The script, the set, the props, the music, the lighting, even the director, all serve the purpose of refining the actor's art.

Each of the theater's ten ensemble members reads and critiques two to four plays each week while rehearsing every night.

"That's a hell of a commitment from the artists," Garrison says. "With how hard we work, we've got to have something we want to work on." Therefore, he selects plays with only two or three actors so that all the performers have a major role.

To further emphasize the actors, ART employs minimal, abstract set design and chooses plays that allow the company to "cheat on the glory of technical theater and still give the people their money's worth," Garrison says. In last season's one-act play festival, for instance, the sets consisted only of hanging banners. Besides focusing attention on the actors, such a simple design made for easy set changes between the eight one-acts plays, two on each night of the run. This style of presenting shows in repertory provides another opportunity for actors—the challenge of playing more than one role at once.

Five professional and semiprofessional theaters and more than a dozen community and academic theaters provide Columbus audiences with more theater opportunities than ever before.

"I would like to see all the companies feeding off of each other and doing different things," says Players' Ed Graczyk. Encouraged by an article in a Cleveland newspaper about six Equity theaters that were all outgrowths of the Cleveland Playhouse, he is confident the same thing can happen here.

"It's pretty clear, there's not going to be a professional theater (in Columbus), but several," predicts Nelson. "What will separate them is their philosophy, their vision of what life is, their time-honored values. Just like there's a difference between Hitchcock and Truffaut, each director will treat a work differently."

Continued growth depends largely on the success of Players, Nelson contends. "There's worry among the rest of us," he says. "If they (Players) fail, people have to step in and bail them out." Another failure would reinforce the notion that professional theater has little future in Columbus. Contributors would hesitate to continue support for any of the emerging companies. "If they make it," he continues, "it helps us all a lot."

Meanwhile, Players' future remains tenuous. The company's LORT agreement commits the organization to continual annual increases in money allotted to artist and technical fees, working conditions and the ratio of Equity artists employed per show. Players' John McCann emphasizes that this is a negotiated contract reflecting growth the board and

the staff believe is best for the theater.

"These are goals imposed by ourselves and the quality we want to be here. And quality costs a certain amount of money," he says.

Still, maintaining the commitment is crucial. Once the company signs the agreement, it is committed to the increases.

"It's no different than paying the water bill," he says. Should Players be unable to keep its LORT commitments, no Equity contracts would be approved.

"We can't afford to slip," says P. Susan Sharrock, Players' company manager. "We have slipped before—mostly during times of new management. There have been slips and skids, but the community has remained faithful. They trust they'll get a general healthy diet of theater. But we can't so much as trip here."

Recognizing their interdependence, all the theaters—the community and the academic as well as the professional—have begun to cooperate. When the Theatre Project produced Bertolt Brecht's "Moth-

er Courage," two academic college theaters were also producing Brecht plays at the same time. The interest in Brecht was piqued and the Theatre Project's audience grew.

Company directors, through an organization called the Theatre Roundtable, are considering cooperating to sell sampler tickets so that the companies can "cross-fertilize," as Nelson puts it, and patrons have the opportunity to experience the various approaches to theater.

But Reality's Barnhart warns that expectations need to be properly aligned when theater goes hop from one theater to the next.

If audiences walk into Reality expecting full-scale productions, for instance, they will be disappointed. On the other hand, their expectations will be more closely met there if they are looking for unusual, informal or novel theatrical approaches.

"When you compare theaters," Barnhart says, "it's apples and oranges."

DEBORAH WASSERMAN IS SENIOR WRITER FOR ACCLAIM MAGAZINE.



Denver Garrison/Gail Griffith

### *To further emphasize the actors, Actors Repertory Theatre employs minimal, abstract set design.*