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DRAMATIC FLAIR

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Life, like theater, includes drama and comedy, plot twists and unexpected challenges.

Geoffrey Nelson, founder and artistic director of the leading professional theater in central Ohio, provides an example.

When he began dreaming of starting a theater company, the Maine native didn't expect to do so in Columbus -- or to cover the costs of the first few shows of Contemporary American Theatre Company with his credit card.

"I wasn't anxious to be in debt the rest of my life, and that's why the first couple of productions were cheap," said **Nelson**, laughing.

Nor did he imagine that, after 20 years of growth, the company would have to be reorganized and launch a campaign to address financial problems. Or that his health would suffer, with a significant loss of weight from a thyroid condition that took months to diagnose.

After forging an administrative partnership with the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts and retiring much of the deficit, CATCO completed an acclaimed 20th season -- bracketed by crowd-pleasing performances of *Dirty Blonde* and *Arsenic and Old Lace* .

"Just staying around for 20 years is a milestone," **Nelson** said, "because so many theaters have begun and died since I've been here."

Veteran associates credit his vision and leadership for the troupe's ability to survive and even flourish in hard times.

Nelson had a "vision for the theater," actor Jonathan Putnam said -- "where the artist comes first and audiences can enjoy a diverse season."

"Geoff has a reputation for being aloof," Putnam added, "but in 20 years I've only seen him lose his temper once, back in the old space (at 512 N. Park St.), when he got frustrated by a technician. His feathers don't get ruffled easily."

Actress Linda Dorff agreed.

"With all the ups and downs, Geoff has been the glue holding CATCO together and leading it to new dimensions."

Fred Holdridge, who met **Nelson** in the late 1970s and led CATCO's board in the 1980s, describes him as a "state-of-Maine conservative" who does his job "without a lot of hoopla" but with "quietly effective leadership."

The early years

Nelson was born in Bangor, Maine, and grew up during the 1950s in Lincoln, a small working-class town with a paper mill but no community theater.

When his family moved to California for a year, 5-year-old Geoff fantasized about becoming Roy Rogers' TV sidekick on *The Roy Rogers Show*.

He did become a theater impresario at an unusually early age. He caught the "acting bug" in grade school, where the only theater program was an annual

Christmas play produced by his homeroom teacher. The fifth-grader persuaded the teacher to let him produce, write, direct and cast it.

But inspired by a John Barrymore silent film, he chose an unlikely subject: his adaptation of the Classics Illustrated comic book version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

"It was a weird Christmas play; I should have done a Halloween production," **Nelson** said.

Borrowing a cape for his starring double role, he used Alka-Seltzer as the magic potion Dr. Jekyll drinks to transform himself into a monster.

"I did the role the way Barrymore did it: I went down choking behind a table, and came up with contorted features."

"My mother was beaming away, but the other moms sitting at those tiny desk-chairs were staring at me like I was the weird kid in the neighborhood."

Nelson saw his first full-scale theater production when he was in high school, during a drama-club field trip to the University of Maine to see a British drama.

"It was much richer and a much more immediate emotional experience seeing live actors," he said. "It was just much more daring. . . . If they made a mistake, they made a mistake."

He majored in history at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, with a hazy expectation that he would become a lawyer because he enjoyed reading, researching and "arguing."

Yet his spare time was filled with acting and directing, starting in his freshman year with a role in an Eastern European political satire and a job directing a one-act play.

"I don't think I had much understanding of what a director did, but I started to get it. When the actors were doing a scene, I was able to spot the problems and envision different ways to approach it. . . . Like history, figuring out how to put the facts into some kind of rational interpretation was exciting."

As he became more serious about theater, **Nelson** spent two summers performing in Shakespearean repertory for the Theatre at Monmouth, a fledgling professional company in Monmouth, Maine.

"That was an exciting idea, to be able to create a theater company rooted in the community. We didn't have that in the town I grew up in or in the town I went to college in."

The Columbus years

After college, **Nelson** started graduate studies at Indiana University and transferred in 1976 to Columbus to become a teaching assistant and pursue a doctorate at Ohio State University.

He expected to return home after graduation to forge a theater career as a director and teacher. But after another group founded the first professional theater in Portland, Maine, **Nelson** began looking for a similar opportunity in Columbus.

Meanwhile, he developed acting skills, playing the king in OSU's *The Lion in Winter* under Ionia Zelenka's direction and spending two summers at Montana Shakespeare in the Park, where he appeared in *The Miser*, with future film star Bill Pullman in the title role.

Nelson also freelanced as a director and actor and served in 1980 as artistic director of Newark's Weathervane Playhouse, where he first worked with Putnam.

"I was probably disappointed by everything I did then. I'm my own best critic," **Nelson** said.

"As an artist, you come to a point where (that) doesn't make you uncomfortable. . . . Theater is like life: It's never perfect."

By the early 1980s, **Nelson** was supporting himself part time as a morning-show producer at WOSU (820 AM).

Meanwhile, his plan to launch a major theater company grew stronger and clearer.

"I'd noticed there were a lot of good actors around Columbus but no professional opportunities, just community theaters with a couple of good actors surrounded by less-experienced people.

"I thought I could produce some things and hand-pick a cast of equals."

Yet his initial 1983 effort to stage *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, starring Zelenka, came to naught.

Contemporary American Theatre Company -- originally dubbed the Columbus Theatre Project -- finally made its debut in 1985 at the YWCA, where Joe Hietter and Michael Harper co-starred in *Mass Appeal*.

"We did it in early January because nothing else was going on and we figured we'd get good coverage," **Nelson** said.

But a preview was undercut by a blizzard. **Nelson** also expected a "disaster" for the final show because of bad weather, but 200 people arrived, allowing **Nelson** to pay his bills.

"What I learned from *Mass Appeal* is that there's a crisis every day of some sort in the theater. You almost have to get blase about the stress, because it's constant."

For its first full season in 1986, CATCO rented OSU's Stadium II (later renamed the Roy Bowen Theatre) to stage three summer shows. During June rehearsals, a cash-strapped **Nelson** asked cast members to donate "25 bucks" each so he could pay for building the sets and publicizing the shows.

As an "alternative" to then-leading Players Theatre, CATCO didn't receive much corporate support during its first decade.

"It was really the artists who made the theater by their willingness to work at extremely low wages," he said.

A family affair

During his years as a graduate student and "apprentice starving actor," **Nelson** was "subsidized" by his parents, he said. More recently, his own family has provided support.

Nelson married Ann Hall in 1991. Hall, now an English professor and dean of graduate studies at Ohio Dominican University, served as CATCO's education director from 1991 to 1994. She also frequently fills the role of CATCO dramaturge, but her primary way of helping the theater has been less visible.

"Having a family is a great support for an artist," **Nelson** said. "When I'm off rehearsing, Ann pretty much takes over the domestic workload."

The Nelsons have a daughter, Sarah, born in 1993 the day after the opening of CATCO's *The Homecoming*, and a son, Zachary, born in 1994.

Watching Sarah react to new situations, **Nelson** said he "stole" several expressions and gestures to play the childlike Lennie in CATCO's acclaimed *Of Mice and Men* (1994).

In a broader context, **Nelson** finds parallels between raising a family and raising a theater company.

"When you're trying to grow an institution or a family, you become a lot more conscious of the need to work for the group's greater good," he said.

"It opens you to the pleasures of seeing other people grow. Their enthusiasm is infectious."

Hall agreed.

"Geoff likes to build on the strengths of his children and his performers with encouragement and constructive criticism, and that allows them to be the best they can be," she said.

Support from his family and his CATCO "family" became even more meaningful about a year ago, when **Nelson** began to lose a great deal of weight.

"At first, I thought with everything going on at CATCO (the deficit-reduction campaign and budget-tightening) that it was job stress," he said.

"I've always struggled with weight, and it was a very strange thing to be eating a lot, hungry a lot and still losing weight."

Soon after **Nelson** underwent surgery for a hernia in June 2003, doctors diagnosed his condition as hyperthyroidism.

"They don't know what causes it, but part of it is your immune system working overtime. You end up burning everything. It was difficult in terms of my energy . . . (but) everybody was very supportive."

Nelson has gained back about half of the 65 pounds that he lost and said the "very treatable" condition is no longer an issue, but coping with his first notable illness since grade-school tonsillitis has forced him to face mortality.

"At the best of times, it makes you alert to get the best out of everything you do and try to do the best job you can," he said.

Today, at 53, **Nelson** finds that he appreciates life more.

"When I was younger, I was pretty cynical. . . . I've been producing theater for a long time, and there's plenty to be cynical and jaded about, but I find that I'm more optimistic, more idealistic, maybe more tolerant."

Although he expects to remain at CATCO's helm for another decade or more, **Nelson** looks forward to finding time for other projects.

"I've put my traveling-actor-and-director hat aside 20 years ago when I started the company and haven't had a chance to put it back on," he said.

He also wants to complete his unfinished OSU doctoral thesis, teach theater and write a play.

"As I've gotten more white hairs, people credit me with more authority and competence than they did when I was 30-something and starting (CATCO). That's sort of nice, but I don't think of myself as older. I forget I'm in middle age."

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