THE PAUL BUNYAN PLAYHOUSE: A FORTY-YEAR PARTNERSHIP OF COMMUNITY AND PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

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In 1991, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse (PBP), located 229 miles northwest of Minneapolis/Saint Paul in Bemidji, Minnesota, celebrated its fortieth anniversary. This investigation probed the history of the PBP via articles appearing in newspapers, books, magazines, playbills, programs, and interviews conducted in Bemidji to determine the elements contributing to the enormous longevity of the PBP. It was determined that the success of this organization, the oldest continuously running, professional summer theatre in Minnesota, resulted from a combination of elements of community theatre, manifested by a devoted group of residents comprising the board of directors, and professional theatre, as evidenced by the high standards introduced by professional artistic directors, actors, and ever-improving technical facilities. These developments either originated from or paralleled major trends in the American theatre.

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CHAPTER I

THE FORMING OF THE PAUL BUNYAN PLAYHOUSE

In 1991, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse (PBP) celebrated its fortieth anniversary, firmly establishing it as the oldest continuously running, professional summer theatre in Minnesota. Throughout its history, the PBP presented its seasons at a resort outside of a small but active town, Bemidji, 229 miles northwest of Minneapolis-Saint Paul.

It is the intention of this study to demonstrate that the PBP, throughout its growth and development, has possessed elements of both the nonprofit professional and community theatre movements, and that this success and growth, evidenced by its longevity and the recent developments of 1992 (to be discussed in the section on the future of the PBP) are due in large part to the interesting and dynamic intermingling of these elements. This current investigation of four decades of success revealed the sources of the PBP's very strong theatrical foundation and revealed information that could benefit practitioners and historians of theatre in this country.

The story of the PBP's development; of the growth of the board of directors; the influence of the professional artistic directors, actors, and technicians; and the ever-improving technical facilities reflected major trends of modern American theatre. What follows is a brief discussion of the major movements in this country that spawned the forming impulses of the PBP.

Activities on Broadway contributed a great deal to theatrical development in the United States. The number of productions[1] as well as the number of theatre weeks[2] increased steadily from 1910 to around 1931. New productions[3] and number of theatre weeks[4] both began to decline after 1931 and continued to do so up until the creation of the PBP in 1951.

Summer theatre, however, experienced a gain in popularity as the century progressed. Summer theatres had been around since 1890, when Elitch Gardens started producing plays in Denver, Colorado.[5] In the 1920s, the movement began to pick up momentum. These stirrings were the result of the practice Broadway theatres had of closing up from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Not many touring companies operated either.[6] By the mid-1930s, summer activity had increased in popularity enormously, and the term "straw hat" theatre was often applied to these theatres. In regard to the 1949 summer season, 125 professional repertory companies and about the same number

of amateur groups performed in barns, tents, resort hotels, and theatres.[7] By 1950-51, the phenomenon had taken hold, and the summer theatre movement, in combination with Broadway commercialism, became the spark of creation of the PBP.

The commercial/professional Broadway theatre was one factor contributing to the forming of the PBP. Historians have documented the growth and development of the amateur producing spirit in the United States. Historians have offered theories for the impetus of the movement. Several have concurred with Brockett, who assigned 1915 as the point of departure in the American theatre scene.[8] Americans began to realize the artistic innovations occurring in Europe, namely the free theatres like England's Independent Theatre, the Moscow Art Theatre, and France's Theatre Libre. Wilson described the events in this country as a "theatrical renaissance at the turn of the century."[9] Poggi took an economic stance to his description of the rise of the amateur producing spirit in the United States. He dated the impulse of the movement around 1910 and characterized these theatrical occurrences as efforts by their producers to organize themselves on different economic patterns from the ones used to produce on Broadway. He stated that "the art theatre or little theatre that developed in this country usually [was]

distinguished from the commercial theatre by its reaction against the major economic developments within the commercial theatre."[10]

From December 1, 1928, through May 1, 1929, Kenneth Macgowan traveled about 14,000 miles all across the country surveying this movement. In his book Footlights Across America, he freely interchanged the terms "community theatre" and "little theatre" in several sections.[11] Using the developing mass of literature that classified theatre groups as noncommercial, questions arose when comparing groups like the Provincetown Players with other community groups that also qualified as noncommercial ventures. Wilson postulated that, in the "middle to late years of the century, the two often became partners."[12] In the most current edition of Brockett's text, this statement occurs: "After 1920, the little theatres began to be indistinguishable from the community theatres."[13] At the 1992 Popular Culture Convention, Anna Dittmar, of the University of Southern Utah, presented a paper entitled "The Small Theatre Movement in Los Angeles." When I asked her to clarify a few terms, she hesitated at times in her responses in delineating between such phrases as "small theatres fighting for legitimacy" and "community theatres in economic upheaval."[14] This issue has two applications relevant to the study of the PBP.

One of the influencing factors important to the growth of the PBP was the amateur producing spirit that infected the country. This spirit was common to various organizations. It represented people producing plays for their own enjoyment, without the constant concern of making a profit. In another respect, however, to describe the PBP as having operated between 1951 and 1991 as a noncommercial community theatre that regarded itself as, and indeed was, a professional theatre would be misleading.

The most recent development in American theatre history contributing to the clarification of terms that not only identify the forming influences of the PBP, but also result in clearer references made in classifying it, was that of the resident theatre movement. This movement also was spawned in the reaction against commercial Broadway. As this statement implies, the goals of these theatres existed and still exist outside the realm of maximizing profit for a producer. A consensus among scholars places the formal birth of this movement, which represented a distinction from the amateur spirit of which it has roots, between 1947 and 1950. In 1947, Margo Jones formed Theatre 47 in Dallas, Texas. This sparked the movement of developing professional resident theatres in major cities throughout the United States. In the same

year as Theatre 47 was formed, Nina Vance founded the Alley Theatre of Houston. In Washington, D.C., Zelda Fichandler started the Arena Stage three years later. The resident theatres produced classic and popular plays in an attempt to bring culture via the live theatre experience to the particular cities and communities in which they operated. With the rise of the resident theatres, the noncommercial theatre further dichotomized and developed into the current American theatre scene, which encompassed the birth and development of the PBP.

In 1968, Gard, Balch, and Temkin provided more precise distinctions between both the operations and philosophies of the resident and community theatres. The main point of similarity was that both the community theatre and the resident theatre were closely involved in and supported by the communities in which they resided. Each served the function of bringing live theatre to the area. The major difference, however, was and is the fact that resident theatres, although classified as nonprofit, employed people who usually made a living practicing one of the various aspects of theatre.[15] The community theatres used volunteers for the execution of all functions; therefore, they were often subject to lower standards of production. Since both originated from similar impulses, it stands to reason that they possess certain elements of similarity in regard to practices,

operations, and problems. However, Langley continued this trend of classification by labeling the resident theatres as nonprofit professional, with the enormous community theatre movement in this country remaining largely amateur.[16] These terms provide the operational definitions that will be used in discussing the elements that compose the PBP. The resident theatres, including the Guthrie, Alley, and so on, employ paid, professional personnel. The community theatres, sharing the same nonprofit status, use volunteers from the area in which they occur.

Currently in the United States, summer theatres' distinctions include nonprofit professional and nonprofit amateur, or community. Some members of the second category use all amateurs, and others bring in an occasional professional. Still others use mostly professionals for the substantial roles and fill in what remains with community locals. In 1992, the PBP was listed in the Guide to Summer Theatre as nonprofit, employing equity and nonequity personnel. Although the majority of the actors employed by the PBP over the years have not been members of the Actors Equity Association, they have received remuneration for their services and have made a significant portion of their income practicing their craft in other professional and nonprofessional

theatres. The same applied to those in technical work and stage management. The PBP, then, during the years of 1951 and 1991 that encompass this study, operated as a nonprofit, professional summer theatre.

Despite possessing major characteristics of a nonprofit professional organization, the PBP does not fall completely into this category. Because it has employed professional production staffs and its operations occur in and are produced and managed by a community theatre board, the PBP is a mixed-genre theatre. Each section that follows will deal with an aspect of this combination process and how it affects play production and community response. The community theatre influence is manifested by the local management/production of each season by a group of community members who comprise the board of directors. These individuals, described as the "heart and soul" of the PBP, possess enormous drive, contribute great amounts of time, and receive no financial remuneration for their efforts. To produce the plays, however, they hire professional staff members, which makes the theatre resemble a resident professional theatre. Also influential as a source of much talent over the years was the Twin Cities area, nationally recognized as a major theatre center that developed as professional theatre spread across the country.

The professional artistic director directed plays and governed the artistic shape of each season, which was always subject to board of director approval, with all of the considerations of the social standards of the community that went with it. For the most part, the actors and technicians whom the artistic directors selected were professionals as well. At times, amateurs from the community were used in various production aspects. As will be demonstrated, however, this practice was extremely limited by the board of directors as a predilection for high-quality professional entertainment developed. Developments in the physical plant and the technical aspects of production mirror this trend and further demonstrate that the community-based board of directors, true to the nonprofit professional ideal and the level of quality it demands, desired their facilities and technical effects to exist at a level consistent with professional artistic management and acting.

This study will demonstrate that the longevity of the PBP is due to a partnership between a devoted community theatre structure and a quality professional theatre. The community influence and support structure, manifested by the board of directors, will be divided into successes and failures of that group. The artistic director's role in the development of the PBP represents professional theatre. Professional acting and the ever-improving

technical facilities also have contributed to the success of the PBP and will be covered in separate sections. The period of investigation covers the forty years the PBP operated at its original site of inception. The activities of the artistic directors and the board form the foundation of the PBP's success. Incomplete records make a perfect chronological account impossible. The first season will be treated separately because it did not conform to the pattern that emerged but reveals what the PBP did not want to be.

Notes--Chapter I

[1]Variety, 7 June 1967, p. 64.

[2]Burns Mantle, ed., The Best Plays of 1919-1920, and yearly through 1946-1947 (28 vols.) (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1920-1948).

[3]Variety, p. 65.

[4]Mantle.

[5]Gerald M. Berkowitz, New Broadways: Theatre Across America (New Jersey: Roman and Littlefield, 1982), p. 55.

[6]Robert E. Gard, Marston Balch, and Pauline Temkin, Theatre in America: Appraisal and Challenge (Madison: Dembar Educational Research Services, 1968), p. 139.

[7]Berkowitz, p. 56.

[8]Oscar Brockett, History of the Theatre (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987), p. 626.

[9]Garff B. Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bard and Ye Cubb to Chorus Line (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982), p. 197.

[10]Jack Poggi, Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 99.

[11]Kenneth Macgowan, Footlights Across America (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), p. vii.

[12]Wilson, p. 197.

[13]Brockett, p. 627.

[14]Anna Dittmar, "The Small Theatre Movement in Los Angeles" (paper presented at the Popular Culture Association National Convention, Louisville, Kentucky, 21 March 1992).

[15]Judith A. Katz, The Business of Show Business (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 13.

[16]Robert Gard and Gertrude Burly, Community Theatre: Idea and Achievement (New York: Duell, Sloan and Peane, 1959), p. 6.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST YEAR

In 1949, more than 250 summer theatres were in operation. For a time, many of the larger professional summer theatres engaged in the practice of bringing in a big-name staff to boost business. What was called the "package show" later replaced many of the single-star touring operations. In this system, entire productions traveled from venue to venue. The distribution of these groups, however, was not even. One-fifth of them were in the state of New York, and almost all the rest resided in northeastern states.[1] Robert Gaus, a New York producer, noticed this trend and decided that he wanted to increase summer activity in an area outside of New York. The result of his actions created the Paul Bunyan Playhouse. Although Mr. Gaus was producing theatre in New York at the time, he was no stranger to Minnesota, having graduated from the University of Minnesota. He became aware of the fact that, during the latter years of the 1940s, very limited summer theatrical activity took place in Minnesota.

At that time, he developed and executed his plan to bring summer theatre to Minnesota. He began in 1950, with an experimental season of summer theatre at the Pine Beach Peninsula, located in the resort area of Brainard, Minnesota. The trial season consisted of Born Yesterday, The Drunkard, The Hasty Heart, and concluded with And Years Ago. According to Mr. Gaus, "the response to the season was immediate and wholeheartedly enthusiastic, and the eight week season ended 'in the black.'"[2] Professional actors were used, and the season was directed by Kendrick Wilson. This success provided all the motivation that Mr. Gaus needed to begin to implement his plan. The next year, in 1951, another theatre was added to Minnesota's summer theatre venue, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse. The site he chose was another popular resort area, Bemidji, located 96 miles northwest of Brainard and 229 miles from the Twin Cities in the same direction. This season in Bemidji further set into motion Mr. Gaus's "dream of theatre in the north"[3] and the beginnings of the intertwining of professional theatre with the community of Bemidji.

Mr. Gaus wanted this theatre in Minnesota to be professional. He established this with success in Brainard and continued it in Bemidji. The combination of the Pine Beach Playhouse and the Paul Bunyan Playhouse, billed as its sister theatre, was termed "the 1951 Paul

Bunyan Summer Theatre Festival."[4] The name of the legendary lumberjack was used because both the communities of Brainard and Bemidji claim close ties to it and use it in promotion for tourists. The fact that, specifically, the Bemidji operation was titled the Paul Bunyan Playhouse, using the name as a great many local businesses had, helped tie the organization in with the community. The season program for that year expressed the mission of the Festival:

> Resident acting companies, consisting of professional New York Equity players, will be brought to Minnesota each season to appear in top Broadway plays of the current, and recent season(s). New York directors, designers, and other administrative personnel will also be engaged to assure Minnesota's play-goers a yearly entertainment season comparable to those presented in the finest eastern straw-hat playhouses.[5]

The two theatres would eventually lead to the development of similar theatres in other Minnesota resort communities, including Alexandria, Detroit Lakes, Park Rapids, Duluth, and Grand Rapids. Mr. Gaus's goal was to complete the circuit by 1954, and with it, "the national spotlight will turn to this part of the country, and we will come into our own as an entertainment and cultural center."[6] For this first season, following the trends of the package-show system that eastern summer theatres engaged in, an entire production would switch places with the Brainard playhouse in rotating fashion throughout the summer. Mr.

Gaus's selection of professional company members established this practice for the next forty years.

With the professional component in place, the community element next entered the organizational scheme of the PBP of 1951. On Monday, June 4, 1951, the Bemidji Playgoer's Association was formed during a meeting of "community leaders in the Markham Hotel."[7] The Association adopted a number of major tenets in regard to its role with the PBP. Although professional artists were to be employed in the actual execution of the productions, the PBP and the Association were to be nonprofit. Unlike the major nonprofit professional theatres that were developing around the same time, the community element in Bemidji took the form of a governing board of thirty or more directors. They, not the artistic director, had final authority. Their responsibilities included strengthening the ties of the PBP with the community and working "in close cooperation with the producers in planning each series of plays."[8]

Mr. Gaus himself convinced one of these community leaders, Don Ruttger, owner of the resort, to allow the PBP to set up its operations on his property. Mr. Ruttger was receptive to the idea of having a theatre on his grounds and agreed to remodel a vacant building that had been used mainly as a recreation hall and convention center into roughly a 300-seat proscenium theatre. By

agreeing to pay the entire bill for the remodeling, Mr. Ruttger not only created the home of the PBP for the next four decades, but also continued to strengthen community support and commitment, which would be tested severely later that year.

The ramifications of the creation of the Association were two-fold: the infusion of the professional theatre in Bemidji and the injection of the community value and support system in the professional theatre. The Association reserved the right to police the plays that were produced to make sure they fit into the community value structure and demonstrated receptiveness to the idea of high-quality, professional theatre. With Wilber Lycan as president and Ruth Wilson as vice-president, the Festival stood ready to commence with the first season of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse.

The forty-year history began on Monday, June 25, 1951. That night, 250 people attended a performance of An Inspector Calls.[9] Filled to 83 percent of capacity, the PBP seemingly headed for a season of success, much like the season in Brainard. However, after only four weeks, the young PBP ran into grave financial trouble. The entire budget had been used up barely half way into the season. Money was owed to several Bemidji merchants, including Mr. Ruttger, whose remodeling expenses were to

be repaid through ticket sales. The debts incurred outraged the community and motivated them into action. Their activity during this crisis formed the strong community element of the PBP that would continue for decades. Some community members suspected that Mr. Gaus had attempted to cheat Bemidji out of the money activated for the project, and "there was talk of suing."[10] These rumors were dispelled, however, after a brief investigation revealed that Mr. Gaus had been honest in his attempts to bring theatre to the northwoods.

The events that followed this brief investigation firmly began the process of community involvement. This initial activity can be greatly attributed to one enthusiastic Bemidji resident, Mrs. Rowena DeWeese. She valued highly the presence of live theatre in the area and decided that she and some of her friends who felt the same way should do something to continue it. With the help of these friends, she "went downtown and called meetings and got business men together and went around and called on everybody in town."[11] She requested two things from the local business people: "Her question was whether or not they would allow the Playhouse to finish the season if she were to assume complete responsibility for it in the future. She also asked for financial donations to support the final three weeks of the season."[12] With the fund-raising drive a success, the PBP continued the season and

produced the last three shows. Mr. Gaus and his company agreed to finish the season for room and board and plane tickets home. Due to poor record keeping during this first year, specific details of each play's run could not be collected.

What factors contributed to the initial failure of the 1951 season? The town newspaper attributed the failure to "unseasonably cold weather and resulting lack of tourist trade," as well as the "failure of the directors to anticipate all the costs involved in launching the new project in Bemidji."[13] Perhaps the most plausible aspect of this interpretation was the idea of the lack of planning or even knowledge of what to expect in Bemidji. An interview with Rowena DeWeese revealed some of the methods used by Mr. Gaus and his company. For example, the company business manager, who had promptly left town when the trouble started, "had kept no books. . . . Everything was written on pieces of scratch paper in a box. . . . That was their only book work."[14] Much of the financial and managerial work was handled by the company.

The community and its leaders held a relatively passive position in regard to the actual execution of the season. In 1991, Rowena DeWeese, one of only two original members of the Association who was still active on the

board of directors, touched on another aspect of community involvement that was not present, or had not had time to develop--a regular group of audience members. She talked of nights with as few as twenty-five audience members present, a marked and steady decline from the promising opening night. It appeared that, after the novelty wore off, the people stopped coming. Perhaps the low tourist trade that year came into play in that there were not any people to fill in for the missing community members. This theatre was a new kind of experience for the residents. Referring to the professional New York company, Mrs. DeWeese commented that "Bemidji was not used to legitimate people."[15] In her statement, "legitimate people" referred to professional theatre people.

The crisis of 1951 drew the community to more active and committed participation in the operation of the PBP. Local business people not involved in the Association became more aware of and interested in the PBP as they were approached by those explaining the situation and asking for help. The PBP became talked and read about as local press coverage intensified, another trend in the history of the PBP that would continue for the next decades. The community of Bemidji, and especially Rowena DeWeese, who had offered to take full responsibility for the PBP in the future, had a much greater stake in the PBP. More intense and serious planning as well as

restructuring and goal orientation was to take place after this disastrous but significant first season, as community members became more involved. The community members of Bemidji wanted to keep live theatre present in the town, and from that point on they decided to insure its success themselves.

Notes--Chapter II

[1]Berkowitz, p. 56.

[2]Paul Bunyan Playhouse Season Program for 1951, p. 5.

[3]William Joseph Grivna, "The History and Development of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 1968), p. 1.

[4]Program for 1951, p. 3.

[5]Program for 1951, p. 5.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., p. 6.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Grivna, p. 4.

[10]Ibid., p. 5.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., p. 6.

[13]Bemidji Daily Pioneer, 23 July 1951, p. 1.

[14]Grivna.

[15]Rowena DeWeese, personal interview, 22 August 1991.

CHAPTER III

THE COMMUNITY INFLUENCE: THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Successes

The crisis and tension of the 1951 season served several crucial functions in the future development of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse. It revitalized the community's involvement with the PBP. This initiated rethinking as well as restructuring the role the community would play in the operation of the organization. The community's efforts to save the PBP had given it a rebirth. The following four decades of its growth were characterized by situations attributable to both the positive and sometimes negative aspects of community theatre organization. Now falling directly into the hands of the board of directors was the task of drawing the community into the attendance support structure and, in that way, making certain that what happened in 1951 would not happen again.

In the case of the board of directors, each decade of their operation contained events, activities, and innovations, initiated largely by the board, that contributed to a particular milieu for the given period. The period to 1960 was characterized by much

organizational activity during the fervor of the early years. Once firmly established, the board continued to refine and develop the identity of the PBP as a sense of community pride started to develop in the 1960s. During the 1970s, the PBP found its place in history and began to use its longevity in promotion. Trends of modernization, experimentation, and change that had started earlier gained momentum in the final decade of the 1980s. This period, continuing into 1991, developed into a period of charged emotions that was much like the early period of bankruptcy and reorganization.

The community involvement and the development of organizational structure, which had begun with the efforts of Rowena DeWeese and the others, started to become formal policy on June 30, 1952. It was then that the PBP received the Articles of Incorporation it had applied for from the state of Minnesota, officially establishing it as a nonprofit organization. In a preface to the Articles, the board of directors pledged itself to this status: "We, the undersigned, for the purpose of forming a corporation under and pursuant to the provisions of the Minnesota-NonProfit Corporation Act, do hereby associate ourselves as a body corporate and do hereby adopt the following certificate of incorporation."[1] The board renamed itself to better signify the new role and commitment of the community, changing from the Bemidji

Playgoer's Association to the Paul Bunyan Community Theatre Association, Incorporated.

In the Articles, the board stated its goals, with the central mission being "to encourage and cultivate a taste for music, literature, and the arts." Members of the corporation, including the board of directors, "shall not afford pecuniary gain, incidental or otherwise, to its members, and its plan of operation shall be by acceptance of contributions and memberships from those who are interested in the corporation's purposes."[2]

The new corporation was to be managed by a board of directors, which could contain a minimum of five members and a maximum of seven. Corporation members, those donating a minimum of five dollars, elected the board. The board then chose the officers of the corporation, consisting of a president, a vice-president, a secretary, and a treasurer. Board members were to be elected to one-year terms. The organization also put out information for distribution among its members detailing the duties. Here began the process of intermingling a community theatre structure with the nonprofit professional sector of the theatre industry.

In their circular, "Basic Concepts and Functions and Memberships of the Board of Directors, Executive Director, Artistic Director and Staff," the precepts of community

theatre production entered into the working body of governance: "The basic working premise of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse Board of Directors is that the Paul Bunyan Playhouse is a total community endeavor which promotes the performing arts normally associated with a community theatre."[3] Although the board selected an artistic director to handle production management, they were to handle and promote the off-season activities, such as fund raisers and bookkeeping. They, not the artistic director, would have the final say as to whether or not a play suggested for production fit into the community value system. With a new organizational structure in hand and a tighter grip on operational procedures, the board prepared for its second season in 1952.

Under the auspices of the community structure and the commitment it entailed, the board allowed Robert Gaus to act as producer for the season. The board exercised its new power as it carefully monitored the decisions of Mr. Gaus, whom they had faith in as a producer. For example, Mr. Gaus was very enthusiastic about hiring Hal Holbrook as artistic director. The board denied this action and chose, under advisement, one of their own, Charles Avery. During this year, the PBP was connected in promotion with its sister theatre, the Pine Beach Playhouse in Brainard. The season was billed as a "Festival of Favorites." The concept was to produce revivals of Broadway successes from

the preceding fifteen seasons. As it turned out, their strategy paid off, and the season ended "in the black."

Efforts to increase community participation had also been successful. A writer from the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune visited the PBP and wrote, "You feel there have been plenty of local helping hands behind the production."[4] The writer based this statement on more than just a feeling, as he had talked to some of the community personnel who shared what activities they had engaged in.

For the 1953 season, Charles Avery was again hired as artistic director. The PBP continued to infiltrate the community that year, mainly through its association with Bemidji State Teachers College. The board had previously enlisted the services of Mr. Glas, a Professor of Business Studies at Bemidji State College, for financial advice. Mr. Glas favored association with the college. He believed that the association between the two would lend legitimacy to the PBP, thus eliciting more trust from the area residents. At the same time, college students, many future teachers potentially engaging in theatrical activity in schools, could gain experience in the dramatic arts. In addition to an added and enthusiastic work force, the PBP gained use of the college's facilities for rehearsal and set construction.[5] Mr. Glas also worked

with the United States government's work-study program, whereby apprentices could receive credit as well as salary for their participation at the PBP.

To aid in maximizing efficiency and developing a stronger organization, the board made the decision to begin affiliation with another educational institution, the University of Minnesota, located in Minneapolis. They decided to enlist the services of the University of Minnesota Drama Advisory Service. At the time, this action seemed like a minor development. As the years progressed, however, the events that followed this initiative resulted in a great many developments that affected how the PBP was run.

In 1953, the board handed over authority to the Advisory Service in hopes that it could build up a stronger foundation for the PBP. The Advisory Service experimented and created the new position of the company manager. "It was his responsibility to have complete administrative charge of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse, to be responsible for workshop coordination with the college, and to teach the summer workshop course at the college."[6] During the reign of the Advisory Service, however, the position was discontinued "due to difficulties in pin-pointing responsibility."[7] The duties of the company manager became fused with those of the artistic director. Because the Advisory Service was handling much of the

preseason planning, the board found their role in this function diminished. They still, however, exerted the power to reject any play or company member they might have opposition to, keeping in mind the sensibilities and needs of the community. Although their role may have been diminished during the years of involvement with the Advisory Service, 1953 through 1956, it was the foresight and sensitivity of the board of directors that enabled the PBP to continue to develop.

The association with the University of Minnesota started an infiltration of the Twin Cities theatrical and public relations community, for the Drama Advisory Service would hire talented directors from the Twin Cities area, a tradition that would continue well into the 1970s and 1980s. With these professional directors came their Twin Cities networks of actors, designers, and technicians. A current board member described this association with the Twin Cities that would continue all throughout the PBP's history: "The PBP joins the Minneapolis community with the Bemidji community."[8] If one of these former PBP actors obtained an outstanding role in the Twin Cities area, people from Bemidji, usually board members, began the practice of making the five-hour trip to view and support him or her. The development of this relationship between the town and actors presents another interesting

scenario and will be discussed in a following chapter. While the Drama Advisory Service organized the artistic functions of the PBP in Minneapolis, certain duties, such as bookkeeping and supervision of play selection, did remain in Bemidji.

During the 1950s, it appeared that these functions were carried out by only a few active board members. This handful, however, initiated a phenomenon that would insure continued success, link the next decades together, gain the PBP statewide attention, and increase its reputation as a quality summer theatre. In 1961, Cammie McMahon acted in the function of publicity director for the PBP. That year, in honor of its tenth anniversary, she prepared a five-page circular detailing the beginning, development, and current status of the PBP. This set the precedent for the celebratory type of literature that appeared from that point on to share the heritage of the PBP.

Twin Cities newspapers, many using this and similar circulars, at the same time promoted the PBP as a strong and quality organization. Such an article appeared in the Minneapolis Star, entitled "Bemidji Theatre Rallied From Near Collapse." It stated, "Now a going concern with loyal town support and a strong attraction for vacationers, the Playhouse in a decade's time has become a model for sound management and high artistic standards in

the community theatre field. It also stated that the PBP "has become one of Bemidji's proudest cultural assets."[9]

The Minnesota newspapers, as they chronicled the growth and place of the PBP in the state summer theatre scene, increased the reputation and popularity of the organization. In 1965, the Minneapolis Star printed a calendar of summer theatre in Minnesota. Thirteen other groups were listed along with the PBP. Ten offered only four or fewer productions. In that year, the PBP offered nine full productions. Only one other theatre in the state offered more productions throughout the summer, the Theatre L'Homme Dieu in Alexandria, which offered ten.[10] Although number of productions is no guarantee of quality, it demonstrated a courageous undertaking in Bemidji. Three years later, however, commentary on quality was made in the Minneapolis Tribune, which published in 1968 a four-part series of articles highlighting summer theatre in Minnesota. The first words of the article were, "The best summer theatre I found throughout the state was way up north in Bemidji."[11] The strength, reputation, and quality of the PBP had now come to statewide attention largely through the efforts of the promotional program that the board initiated.

The opening week of the 1971 season epitomized the decade of the 1970s, as it began in amazing fashion. Confidence and attendance continued to grow, as Lilies of

the Field opened. That week, 300 to 400 people were turned away. Director Terry Markovich recalled one evening in which "the audience was so jammed in, an actor dropped a cup and an audience member picked it up for him."[12]

Local newspapers and letters highly publicized these events. As civic and historic pride grew, board members started including short accounts of the PBP's rise from bankruptcy to success in programs and promotional items. Philosophical descriptions appeared as well, describing this history. In an article appearing in 1971 celebrating the PBP's twentieth anniversary, it was written that a spectator can "go through the doors of the Playhouse to that magic world where truth is sometimes brighter, funnier, sadder, where the family of man comes together with its heartbreak, nostalgia, laughter, compassion, and understanding."[13] By this time, almost all articles, letters, and program inserts declared that the PBP was the oldest continuously running professional summer theatre in the state of Minnesota.

Toward the end of the 1970s, fourteen people comprised the board of directors. Distinction was not clear, however, as to the division of duties. According to the Articles of Incorporation that were drawn up in 1952, the board was to consist of at least five members,

but no more than seven. It appears that violation of this rule had no ill effects on the operation of the PBP, as it continued to flourish.

Several other important developments in regard to board member sensibility and practice occurred during the waning years of the 1970s. Along with an increased consciousness of the PBP's continued operation came a similar promotion of the importance of community support by those attending plays and/or donating services or money. Acknowledgment appeared in season programs as well as in newspaper articles, such as one account that appeared in the same article as the poetic description of the PBP:

> Well-wishers emptied their closets for costumes, stripped their living rooms for stage furniture. Margaret Thornbeck wrote feature stories, Barb Powell and Grace Teries drove around the country distributing posters, Pery Patterson built sets, Sarah Thoreson donated antiques. Ila Moe Talley and Betty Sauer added artistic touches to the lobby and theatre. [sic]

These people were not all board members, but they were definitely recruited by the board. In this way, the community element began to include more of the residents of the area. The article acknowledged volunteers who had not been listed. "Neither is history all remembered and recorded, and many people who have given much of themselves to keep the Paul Bunyan Playhouse a continuing professional theatre are not listed here."

Success motivated the board. They printed a new message that appeared in the season program for 1977: "In the past few years, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse strived even harder to gain a more secure foothold."[14] Efforts were also made to refine and modernize the image of the PBP. Programs, posters, and billboards were redesigned to look more professional. The logo no longer appeared to look hand-drawn but rather machine-produced. This atmosphere led into and characterized the next decade of development, which would again be filled with success, change, and crisis.

"Excitement, anticipation, respect. . . . These are just a few of the sensations the Paul Bunyan Playhouse has generated among its visitors over the past 29 years."[15] This statement began the season program for 1980. The theme for the season was "a season of change . . . a season of growth." As it turned out, this slogan, substituting the word "decade" for "season," would apply to the period of the 1980s through the 1990s. Through the efforts of the board, the PBP had solidly attained community support, which was manifested by volunteerism, audience attendance, and statewide attention. The factors that contributed to the uniqueness of the 1980 season fell into two categories, business and artistic.

During the remaining years of the 1970s, the board had increased its activities to prepare for the 1980s.

Fulton Galagher, then acting as executive director of the PBP, took it upon himself to try something different with the 1980 season. While in Dallas, Texas, he attended a play at the Dallas Theatre Center. He was so impressed with what he saw that he approached the management and asked whether they would consider putting a summer season together in Bemidji. He turned artistic control over to the company, and they agreed.

During this season, several business innovations were incorporated to help the PBP run more efficiently. In this year, the board perceived that the solid patron network that had developed was in need of subscription seating. It was "designed to provide a major convenience for the serious theatre-goer."[16] To coordinate the new system, a professional box office person was hired from North Dakota. The "Friends of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse" was also established during this year to facilitate ease in donating money. According to the system, a donation of $1,000 qualified one for entrance into the Gold Club, and $500 allowed one to be in the Silver Club. Patrons could donate $50, and a Donor could give any amount less than that.

During the 1982 and 1983 seasons, the tone would be set for the rest of the PBP's existence at the Ruttger's facility. Long-range planning sessions had been

initiated. These sessions, such as the one that concluded January 15, 1983, were intended to identify "major concerns and possible solutions" for the remainder of the decade. In addition to maintaining a functionally sound theatrical facility and maximizing its resources, its commitment to the community continued to grow. The board sought to encourage community involvement and to promote the arts in general in the Bemidji area. This type of dialogue represented a new way of thinking by the board of directors in that they had begun active planning for the future. During the rest of the 1980s and on into the 1990s, this new way of thinking was interwoven among the changing organizational patterns and often polemic relationships with the resort management, which also took on a new aura, as the resort was turned over from Don Ruttger to his son Randy in a gradual process beginning around 1980.

Supercharging and epitomizing the atmosphere of the final decade at the Ruttger's facility was the success of the 1986 season. Self-praise and the sense of history that began earlier reached a peak during this season. Gloria Westerdahl-Goodwin, acting president of the board, wrote in a memo to fellow members, "Fortunately, we have the opportunity to become the 'master' in the summer theatre field."[17] The reputation of the PBP had continued to rise since the early 1980s, as the alliance with Twin

Cities theatre critic Mike Steele started to grow stronger. He even went to Bemidji one summer to direct a show. Jack Rueler, artistic director of the Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, stepped in for Mr. Steele to write a review in the Minneapolis Tribune describing the relationship of that event: "So actor-turned-director-turned-producer Michael Brindise became the boss of critic-turned-producer-turned-director Michael Steele and director Mike Steele became the boss of actor Michael Brindisi."[18] For the 1986 season, the board enlisted the services of Bemidji State University professor Dr. Kay Robinson to compile a more detailed than usual synopsis of the history in celebration of the thirty-fifth anniversary. She put together a seven-page booklet entitled "Northern Nights." Dr. Robinson continued in promoting the PBP the next year in Montreal, Canada, where she presented a paper based on her research at the 1987 Popular Culture Convention. The following year, an article appeared in the magazine Hollywood Midwest, stating, "The theatre enjoys broad community support and a distinctive national following as well."[19] That same year, the PBP joined the Theatre Communications Group. In 1991, the Saint Paul Pioneer Press published a profile of summer theatrical activity in Minnesota. The PBP made a strong showing, as it had in a similar article in 1965.

Again, only one theatre offered more productions than the PBP, which was described as being "the closest in spirit to a traditional stock troupe."[20] Pride and reputation had swelled to an all-time high, and in 1986, the local newspaper proclaimed, "With such a theatre to love, the energy level at the Paul Bunyan Playhouse is reportedly running very high."[21]

With the onset of long-range planning during the 1980s came intensified examination of the physical plant. Toward the end of the decade, the board became convinced that some action had to be taken to remedy the situation of the deteriorating theatre and auditorium, now almost seventy years old. As the process of choosing a solution continued into the 1990s, tension developed among board members and between the board and Randy Ruttger, who was beginning to be portrayed as a community member who was unsympathetic to the needs of live theatre in Bemidji. The development and nuances of these relationships will be covered in the next section.

Despite these developments, the board of directors and the community once again were successful in making and executing a decision that would allow the PBP to continue operations. In a meeting during October 1991, after facing all financial possibilities, the board agreed to put all its finances and effort into moving into and remodeling the Chief, a vacant movie theatre in downtown

Bemidji. According to Chris Keenan, "What it came down to is this; we can afford this."[22] Not only had the PBP accrued $20,000 in savings, it had no debts. The move also was facilitated by the owner of the Chief, Bud Woodard: "I'm 100 percent in favor of the move. It has been my long desire since I've known the Chief would be vacated as a movie theatre that the Playhouse would be able to use it."[23] He agreed to sell the building for $60,000 with a down payment of $10,000. He had held off more profitable bids that might have led to the conversion of the space to office buildings.

With the decision made, the community rallied, much like it had in 1951, to support the move. The board adopted an enthusiastic and committed attitude to make the move a reality. PBP treasurer Karen Moe put it in these terms: "The 1992 season will be at the Chief or nowhere . . . but we aren't admitting the nowhere yet."[24] The Downtown Development Association supported the move also; as one of its members stated, "The consensus among the business community is one of overwhelming support. I think it is a very positive thing for downtown."[25]

With this development, the somewhat negative views of Randy Ruttger subsided. Views of him changed from a person who did not care about live theatre to a businessman who was doing what he thought he had to do to

get by, much like the PBP had. Mr. Keenan, whose views remained relatively unchanged throughout the entire process, described Mr. Ruttger as having taken an "economic stance." "He was a young businessman that inherited a huge lump of stuff that needed repair." The president of the board summed up the views of most when she issued the following statement along with the decision to move: "We owe a lot of respect and gratitude to Randy and to the Ruttger family for everything. Without their cooperation, we wouldn't be forty years old."[26] Mr. Ruttger, in turn, has wished the PBP continued success.

Even some of the board members who were steadfast in their desire for the PBP to remain at Ruttger's Resort supported the move. One of the strongest proponents of staying at Ruttger's was original board member, Philip Saur. In a letter to the editor of the Bemidji Pioneer, he wrote, "Despite my forty years of activity at the old location, I became convinced we had to move. I am therefore urging everyone to support the activities of the Playhouse Board at the new location."[27] On February 1, 1992, the contract was signed. This marked the official end of the PBP in its original facility.

Problems

These years of development of community support and the PBP's reputation did not proceed without problems, as

evidenced by the situations brought on by the move to incorporate the help of the Drama Advisory Service and the transfer of administrative power that incurred. In 1953, a problem started to develop that would plague the board of directors at various points throughout its history. Current community theatre theory recognizes this situation, which involves the role of the director of the theatre. If one is not available and is hired from outside the area, displaced from the community, "there may be frequent gaps in local leadership."[28]

Early research revealed this effect on the board of directors and interpreted it as "board inactivity" and "waning enthusiasm."[29] The Advisory Service pointed out in recommendations to the board of directors that they needed to spread the duties over more individuals because the board then contained only several members who performed them. Indications of what was going on in Bemidji were contained in letters from administrators in Minneapolis to various board members. In 1956, the consultant to the Advisory Service experienced difficulty in determining and contacting the chair of the board for a period of four months. When he discovered who the chair was, it turned out to be someone else than he thought it to be. He replied to this development: "But that is neither here or there, as there was no correspondence existing anyway."[30]

This situation, reflective of the community theatre environment, continued to develop in the remaining years of the 1950s and into the early 1960s. A system of play selection had been set up in which a play chosen by the artistic director was to be screened by a community-based play-reading and selection committee. Lee Adey, artistic director of the PBP from 1957 through 1963, experienced difficulty with the board as a member of the Drama Advisory Service. When Mr. Adey contacted the board of directors the winter before he was to start, "only one member of the play reading committee had read one play, and another had read one-half of a play, from all the plays suggested."[31] He remained in active contact with only three members of the board and commented that a few of the board members did not even attend the plays.

An earlier researcher termed this inactivity "operational stability."[32] Mrs. DeWeese and Mr. Adey each offered their own theories about this situation, which they believed to manifest itself in a less-interested and therefore less-active board of directors. Mrs. DeWeese attributed this perceived lack of enthusiasm to "increasing family and social obligations," and especially the fact that the PBP did not face the challenges and crises it did during the years of its beginning.[33] Mr.

Adey's theory commented on the social structure of the community.

During Mr. Adey's years with the PBP, he noticed the effort of the board to spread interest among the community. He labeled the recruitment activity as effort to "get new blood." In his estimation, these attempts were unsuccessful. His theory was that a "class consciousness" existed in Bemidji between the board of directors and the other townspeople. "It was not that anyone was deliberately aloof, but merely that the various social factions never mingled."[34] The board had been made up of professional people or their spouses from the community. Although their own by-laws and articles never specified such qualifications, the sense of an exclusive club may have been presented by the media. Most of this coverage, for example, made a point of mentioning that Mrs. DeWeese was the wife of a local physician and that, in 1951, she had enlisted the help of prominent business men and women.

This mentioning of occupation occurred in the Twin Cities papers as well. When the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune reported as early as August 17, 1952, on those people who were helping out in Bemidji, Margaret Lycan was identified with her husband, Wilber, the owner of the local Markam Hotel and former president of the Bemidji Playgoer's Association. The final paragraph of the

article continued in the same vein: "John Glas, of Bemidji State Teachers College, is business manager; Dick Bassett, owner of a weekly newspaper, plays roles. So does Mrs. Charles Vanderlius, wife of a local physician; Art Schomp, insurance man, and many others."[35] The "many others" included mostly people of the same professional status within the community.

Caution should be applied to placing too much emphasis on any one of the theories offered. Most likely, they worked in some combination to produce the "inactive board" effect. The board had successfully aroused the concern and interest of the community. In the early years, however, it appeared that it had only reached the professional community that was to be responsible for implementing the PBP. During the 1960s, the PBP used what seemed to be a successful formula for operation, as the memories of the financial crash of 1951 started to fade permanently. With the hiring of a talented director each season, "the Playhouse had almost come to the point of operating itself."[36]

Because the production aspects of the PBP operation fell under the domain of the nonprofit professional organizational structure, and the support system was mainly community based, it was natural that it would experience a few of the problems common to both, and, "as

groups evolved into institutions, and as founding artists departed, the leadership role was sometimes up for grabs."[37] In the case of the PBP, the founding artists did depart over the years. Evidence suggests that "board inactivity" continued into the later 1960s. During these years, two artistic directors identified the phenomenon. Jay Hornbacker experienced difficulty with selection of his season. According to the reports, Mr. Hornbacker sent many letters to Bemidji for feedback on the plays he had selected for the season. Response from Bemidji was poor. "However, only three weeks before the season's opening, a board meeting was held. Mr. Hornbacker was called and informed that two of his proposed plays were unacceptable."[38] The board for some time had had the plays in their possession. His involvement influenced him to describe the board at this time as a "board of directors in name only."[39]

In regard to the organization of the PBP board of directors, two major trends developed from the mid-1980s on. It experienced an increase in sheer numbers. Twenty-one board members were listed for the 1984 and 1985 seasons. This number would later increase to twenty-six in 1989 and reach an all-time high of twenty-nine in 1991. The governing officers of this ever-increasing board also increased. More than two or three dynamic individuals ran

the board during this period. In 1984, a president, vice-president, secretary, executive director, and associate executive director were listed as the officers. In 1989, an extra treasurer was added. By 1991, this number would again decrease to three, a president, vice-president, and treasurer. While only these three official officer positions existed, at least four or five other board members contributed a great deal of time to running the PBP. Despite the large number of individuals who were listed as board members, attendance at official board meetings usually ran about ten to fifteen. This practice became accepted among the board members. Roles became defined, and people excelled in their various positions.

During the long-range planning sessions that began the decade, concern started to mount about the deteriorating physical plant, which was now close to seventy years old. Discussions of how to remedy this situation placed growing tension and controversy among board members and between the board and the Randy Ruttger Resort into major concern and debate. In 1986 the board realized that action soon had to be taken. The board of directors started to entertain serious discussion of how to solve the problem of the deteriorating building.

All the publicity and success had identified the PBP with its locale on the grounds of Ruttger's Birchmont Lodge, located five miles outside of Bemidji on the shores

of Lake Bemidji. Dr. Robinson had commented on this identification in her presentation in Montreal: "Part of what makes the playhouse special to the artists who work there and keeps bringing them back is the locale and 'ambiance.'"[40] Community theatre scholar Robert Gard acknowledged this powerful component of some community theatres as well: "I know that a great deal of joy I have felt as a worker in back-country American theatre has sprung from my feeling for places."[41]

The board deepened this identification process when it adopted a new logo and symbol change. The new logo encompassed three green brush strokes symbolizing a pine tree painted on a weathered structure of boards. From this point on, the PBP was to be referred to as "Not Just Another Theatre in the Woods." The stories, articles, and promotions that followed, many in the aforementioned publications, referred to this identification. Phrases such as "in the heart of the beautiful northwoods country"[42] and "summer stock lives in the north woods"[43] appeared. The 1991 profile of summer theatre listed the PBP as "the only one located on the grounds of a private resort."

The second characteristic of this ever-growing board was the infusion of new, dynamic, and young individuals. In 1991, only two of the original board members still

served on the board, Rowena DeWeese and Philip Saur. These two had stepped down from the executive positions they once held to allow new members to take over. Some of these new recruits, however, held the philosophies of Mrs. DeWeese and Mr. Saur. These two groups would soon divide the board.

The options available to the board to solve the physical plant issue were to remodel, rebuild, relocate, or cease operations. This process of identification with the locale of the resort, however, now forty years old and just recently formally adopted, tainted the decision-making process of the board. A "stay at Ruttgers at all costs" mentality had finally set in during the closing years of the 1980s. The only two options that were considered by many board members were to remodel or rebuild.

Architect's plans for a completely new, $500,000 complex were drawn up. The whole process depended on obtaining a long-term land lease from the Ruttgers. This, in fact, could have occurred. In 1986, Don and Randy Ruttger drew up the plans for a lease the board was asking for. Father and son were involved because full control of the resort had not yet been transferred to Randy Ruttger. In attempting to come to agreement and execute a plan, "the board was slow, and it took three years instead of the three months it should have."[44] At this time, the

plans for the new complex seemed highly impractical and out of reach. By the time the board motivated itself to finalize the long-term lease, Randy Ruttger was no longer willing to offer a plan that the board thought protected their best interests if they were to put a great amount of money into remodeling.

Perhaps the delay was in part caused by the growing schism between two groups on the board. One group, headed by original members Rowena DeWeese and Philip Saur, thought that leaving the resort atmosphere would prove too costly in terms of getting people to attend and "luring" top-quality actors from the Twin Cities to come to Bemidji for the summer, since they had been privileged to full use of the resort's facilities. Board technical advisor, Chris Keenan, remembers one board meeting in which someone stood up and said, "The worst thing I can imagine is heading into Bemidji in the summer."[45] The remaining board members actively encouraged considering options of leaving the resort in search of a new facility.

According to the new long-term lease offer, presented to the board of directors by Randy Ruttger at a meeting on September 19, 1991, the PBP would not be allowed to undergo major remodeling in its current site and obtain a lease for the amount of time they requested:

> Since the present theatre building and dorms are located almost exactly in the center of the property,

> and since we cannot anticipate what we may want to make of this property 50 to 80 years from now, we would not approve major remodeling or construction on that site.[46]

The site Mr. Ruttger would allow the PBP to build on was located in another spot of the property farther away from the lake.

What ensued could be described as a media blitz initiated by the board, using the press to exert pressure on Mr. Ruttger. Articles appeared in abundance in local, Twin Cities, and nearby newspapers. Typical headlines read, "Uncertain Future for a Playhouse in the Woods."[47] Most of these articles contained statements from the board members to the effect that the playhouse might have to fold because the resort management was not offering a suitable long-term lease. The final statewide article was to appear in the Minneapolis Tribune with the dramatic title, "Is Curtain About to Fall on Resort Theater?"[48] It featured a full-page, color layout, with text by the premiere Twin Cities theatre critic, Peter Vaughan. He reported that the board had decided to make a decision by October 1991. He mentioned the split in the board of directors and also announced that the board was considering the new option of moving into and remodeling the Chief in downtown Bemidji.

The fact that such a consideration was being entertained came during a period of heightened drama. Due

to the increased publicity, the state fire marshal had become aware of the situation of the PBP and the state of decay of the theatre. He informed the PBP that, if it chose to stay in the old site for even one more year, expensive work would need to be conducted to bring the theatre up to the new fire codes that came into effect in 1991. This meant that, if the PBP decided to examine its options while producing one more season at the old site, it would have to invest a considerable amount in a building that it could not modify under the conditions of the new lease offer. At this point, the majority of board members came into agreement, as options appeared to narrow to one: The PBP would move into Bemidji.

The board of directors had done much to improve the PBP. Both attendance and reputation had grown over the years as a result of their activities, such as self-promotion. Community pride increased as the PBP gained statewide and national attention.

This growth, however, was accompanied by various problems that often are associated with community theatre organizations. The board appeared to be inactive at times, with confusion surrounding the roles of the leaders. Later, as the issue of the physical plant rose into the agenda, the board became split into those who wanted to stay at Ruttger's and those who at least considered moving to a new location. In the final

analysis, however, the board once again pulled together to solve the problem.

In forty years, it is obvious that the Paul Bunyan Playhouse had a large and vital community theatre component. They were the ones deciding the future, making the decisions, and, in many cases, introducing innovations. The community aspect, however, does not fully explain the history and development of the PBP. One author described summer theatres in general: "Many of these companies are shoestring operations, with actors doubling as scene crew, house staff, and box office help."[49] From the very beginning of the PBP, however, the board of directors wanted to present the highest quality entertainment that could be called anything but shoestring.

Notes--Chapter III

[1]"Articles of Incorporation of Paul Bunyan Community Theatre Association, Inc.," 1951, preface.

[2]Ibid., Article III.

[3]"Basic Concepts and Functions and Membership of the Board of Directors, Executive Director, and Staff," circular by and for board members, 1952.

[4]"Northern Notes," Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, 17 August 1952.

[5]Grivna, p. 12.

[6]Ibid., p. 13.

[7]Ibid., p. 14.

[8]Robert Scriba, personal interview, 24 March 1992.

[9]John H. Sherman, "Bemidji Theatre Rallied From Near Collapse," Minneapolis Star, 26 June 1961.

[10]"Calendar: Drama," Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, 6 June 1965.

[11]Mike Steele, "Theatre Blossoms in Northland," Minneapolis Tribune, 27 July 1968.

[12]Terry Markovich, personal interview, 17 August 1991.

[13]Rowena DeWeese, "Playhouse Celebrates Anniversary," The Pioneer Weekender, 7 August 1971.

[14]Paul Bunyan Playhouse Season Program for 1977.

[15]Paul Bunyan Playhouse Season Program for 1980.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Anne Louise Meyerding, "Paul Bunyan Playhouse No Ordinary Summer Stock," The Pioneer, 1986.

[18]Jack Reuler, "Turnabouts Play Becomes Fair Game," Minneapolis Tribune, 14 August 1983.

[19]"Paul Bunyan Playhouse Announces Summer Fare," Hollywood Midwest, 1 July 1988.

[20]Roy M. Close, "Summer Stock," Saint Paul Pioneer Press, 4 August 1991.

[21]Meyerding, 1986.

[22]Keenan, 1992.

[23]Tom Robertson, "Playhouse Move Could Give Boost to Downtown," Newsline, 6 November 1991.

[24]Karen Moe, personal interview, 28 December 1991.

[25]Robertson, 1991.

[26]Donna Houser, "Paul Bunyan Playhouse Moving to Chief Theater," The Pioneer, 1 November 1991.

[27]Philip vonRohr Saur, letter, The Pioneer, 8 March 1992.

[28]Langley, p. 243.

[29]Grivna, p. 15.

[30]William F. McKereghan, letter to Agnes Bassett, 4 May 1956.

[31]Grivna, p. 19.

[32]Ibid., p. 25.

[33]Ibid., p. 26.

[34]Ibid., p. 27.

[35]"Northern Notes," 1952.

[36]Grivna, p. 31.

[37]Langley, p. 173.

[38]Grivna, p. 31.

[39]Ibid., p. 32.

[40]Kay Robinson, "The Paul Bunyan Playhouse: Just Another Theatre in the Woods?" (paper presented at the Popular Culture Association Convention, Montreal, 1987).

[41]Robert Gard, Grassroots Theatre (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), p. 3.

[42]Hollywood Midwest, 1988.

[43]Robert Collins, "Open-Air Stagecraft," Twin Cities Reader, 7 June 1989.

[44]Chris Keenan, personal interview, 24 March 1992.

[45]ibid.

[46]Randy Ruttger, letter to Paul Bunyan Playhouse Board of Directors, 19 September 1991.

[47]Kevin Bonham, "Uncertain Future for a Playhouse in the Woods," Grand Forks Herald, 2 August 1991.

[48]Peter Vaughan, "Is Curtain About to Fall on Resort Theatre?" Minneapolis Tribune, 8 September 1991.

[49]Peter Arnott, The Theatre in Its Time (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1981), p. 507.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROFESSIONAL THEATRE INFLUENCE: THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The community influence, manifested through and developed by the activities of the board of directors, gained strength as the history of the PBP unfolded. The other main element was present from the very beginning in full strength and influence as well. The role of the artistic director resembled the resident theatre ideal in two respects: The PBP had nonprofit status, and, as a major cornerstone of its success, it had the influence and skill of professional theatre workers, under the guidance of a professional artistic director.

From the inception of the PBP, the board of directors desired to hire the professional artistic director. His duties were very similar to those of artistic directors in major resident theatres as well as other professional theatres for and not for profit. These directors were "theatre men" who not only delivered the high-quality results the board of directors and community demanded, but also offered valuable suggestions and initiated changes that would ultimately keep the PBP alive, professional,

and on the road to forty years of success. (The term "men" was used because, throughout the history of the PBP, which enlisted a total of sixteen artistic directors, only two were women.)

Although almost every artistic director initiated some form of change in various areas, the eight that best denote the time period in which they operated, and produced the most significant advancements, will be discussed. Evidence suggests that three decades of the PBP's history contained the majority of activity initiated by the artistic director, the position at the PBP that held the responsibility of suggesting and then shaping and guiding the various plays of the season, usually directing most of them. From the early 1950s to the early 1960s, Charles Avery and Lee Adey made suggestions and submitted proposals to the board that would structure and form the direction of the PBP.

During the period of the early 1960s to the early 1970s, relatively few changes at the hand of the artistic director occurred, as the PBP tested the formula for its operation that had developed. In the mid-1970s, however, Terry Markovich and Rustin Green began changes that preceded and led into the final decade of the PBP. The experimentation and change that they helped to spark came into fruition in the 1980s as the PBP entertained growth, the addition of new board members, and once again, crisis.

The tradition of the managerial influence of the artistic director began in 1952 and 1953, when Charles Avery held this position. During his directorship, the PBP produced a season of ten plays, which would continue only until 1955. At the conclusion of the 1952 season, Mr. Avery submitted a forty-page report to the board of directors, assessing the season and offering suggestions.[1] He suggested a season of plays with small costs in order to save money. He also helped create the promotional identity of the PBP in 1953 when he advised the board to adopt a logo for the PBP. These suggestions set the tone for the artistic director who served the most years at the PBP, Lee Adey, who ran the production end of the PBP from 1957 to 1963.

Under the guidelines of the old Playgoer's Association, the goal of production was to produce "family entertainment." Mr. Adey, however, wanted to bring the Bemidji audience something more. When Mr. Adey was hired in 1957, the board "recommended highly" that he produce "family entertainment on the level of comedy."[2] In his season, however, he introduced an Agatha Christie murder-mystery, Ten Little Indians. In a poll conducted to determine which show had been the favorite of the season, this show received the most responses. It was reported that he used this as a "lever" to introduce more dramatic

works in the future.[3] This persuaded the board to alter its policy and offer one serious or "offbeat" play each season.

Mr. Adey also introduced the musical into the season's offerings in 1961. Mr. Adey's contributions crossed over from the artistic decision-making process to acting and technical areas, but these will be covered in following chapters. He helped strengthen the community's involvement with the PBP. During his early years, he was responsible for promotion and box office management. As he gained experience at the PBP, he hired community residents to perform these functions. It was this type of initiative that characterized the significance of the professional theatre practitioner. Not only were town members involved in these tasks, which they would perform for years to come, but it freed him and future artistic directors to concentrate on creating a high-quality production. He also further eased the burden of the artistic director with another of his innovations, employing a second director to direct some of the season, with the artistic director always monitoring the quality of the season.

In his final years, Mr. Adey employed Bill Phelps to direct the last half of the season, usually four of the nine plays. These innovations enabled the PBP to run more smoothly and professionally--so smoothly, in fact, that in

the rest of the 1960s and early 1970s, little change accompanied the operation of this successful formula as the PBP began to grow in areas of attendance and publicity. In the mid-1970s, however, the board would again be challenged.

It was under the directorship of Terry Markovich in 1971 that the PBP experienced phenomenal success. The board and the community grew to trust and admire Mr. Markovich. Mr. Markovich, too, worked on community relations, as evidenced by his actions concerning Asa Cooper. Mr. Cooper, a free-lance photographer who volunteered his services to the PBP, became ill and confined to a wheelchair during one season, the season in which Fiddler on the Roof had been selected as the musical. Mr. Markovich took the entire cast over to his house, and they sang for Mr. Cooper every song from the musical. Word of this act blitzed through the community, and Mr. Markovich's popularity rose. At the peak of his popularity in 1973, Mr. Markovich presented a rather unusual season, breaking out of the "family entertainment" model that had been established and only moderately challenged years earlier. During that season, he presented Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris, Dracula, All the Way Home, and Othello. This amounted to half of the season, which had been dropped to

eight shows in 1963. Rustin Green took over his position the following year and included Arthur Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad. He also included Three Penny Opera and Romeo and Juliet in the season. This led to a decade of continued growth and experimentation in the 1980s.

In 1985, the article "The Changing Face of Summer Theatre" reported that "the most enterprising and successful summer theatres have turned to more demanding material."[4] The PBP, through the efforts of the artistic director, appeared to lead this trend in the 1980s, an extension of what was attempted in the mid-1970s. At the start of the decade, the board was more committed than ever to produce professional entertainment. In their long-range planning session, they desired "to encourage high quality and professionalism in theatrical offerings."[5] They stated this in a season program: "As Minnesota's oldest continuous-running, professional summer theatre, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse has a reputation of excellence to maintain."[6] The board's choices of artistic directors over the next ten years would help them achieve their goal as well as foster many improvements.

In 1981, eight highly qualified artistic directors were interviewed. When asked "Why do you think you should come to the PBP?" the person chosen that year responded, "Because I'm damn good." Michael Brindisi served from

that year until 1983. During that period he initiated several important developments. He put into action a seasonal approach that restructured planning to take into account the entire season. He started to look at aspects like the total number of actors needed for every show and how casting could maximize efficiency. For example, to facilitate more preparation for the musical, he produced smaller shows just prior to it. He also met with the board at the end of each season to discuss the season's proceedings. He was described as a man of "1000 ideas." "Some were ignored . . . some saturated through."[8]

This decade of change continued with the hiring of the first woman artistic director in 1984, Laurie Grossman. She continued to challenge audience members and the board. She limited the season to seven shows to allow more time to work on shows she believed to be more challenging. In her season she included And a Nightingale Sang, 21A, and Revenge of the Space Pandas. 21A had tremendous success in the Twin Cities. The PBP production was sponsored by a Region 2 Arts Council grant provided by the McKnight Foundation. This season was such a success that it prompted the new logo and image change. Another woman artistic director was hired in 1987, Pamela Nice. Under her directorship, the role of the artistic director introducing more demanding material reached its peak, as

this role became publicized and verbalized by the director. Ms. Nice was described as "not afraid to stretch her audiences' horizons." According to her, "I see my role, as it evolved, as the pusher, prodding them in different directions."[9]

She included A Shayna Maidel, a play involving Holocaust survivors. Talking Pictures, a one-person monologue written and performed by a Twin Cities native, was selected to open before the musical, and Moliere's The School for Wives preceded it. She also attempted to begin a tradition of presenting a new play by a Minnesota playwright each season.

As the 1991 season began, the crisis of whether to move or not was in full force. In cooperation with the board of directors, artistic director Michael Kissin assembled a season consisting of three hits from the PBP's past and three recent Broadway successes. Mr. Kissin served the function of executing this season amid the stress and tension. His professionalism and reserved approach produced a calming effect, as the PBP experienced another successful season, what would be its last on its original site. He also commented on why he felt the position of artistic director had been so appealing over the years to various artists: "The job of artistic director doesn't come along all that often. It's really a lot of fun to put a season together."[10]

The two previous artistic directors had also made similar comments, but they went on to say that they perceived the PBP operation to be unique. Ms. Grossman had described it as "not just regular summer stock--it's more exciting."[11] Ms. Nice believed the PBP was "where theatre is created in a style all its own. . . . Spontaneous combustion is what I'd call it."[12]

Interesting conclusions can be drawn by examining the artistic directors of the PBP over the years. Documentation of each individual artistic director has not been complete. However, some basic information provides insight into the nature of the professional experience imported to Bemidji. Due to the affiliation with the drama advisory board, artistic directors associated with the University of Minnesota in the capacity of teacher, student, or guest artist worked at the PBP continuously from 1954 to 1972. More recently, from 1981 to 1991, artistic directors were selected almost exclusively from the Twin Cities area. Judging from testimony of board members and townspeople, it is certain that other artistic directors from the Twin Cities worked at the PBP as well.

This involvement with Minneapolis/Saint Paul artistic directors has several ramifications. It reflects the nature of directing that occurs in the professional theatre in the Twin Cities. These artists directed and

often acted at the most prestigious theatres in the area, including the Guthrie and Penumbra Theatres. Many of the artistic directors who have worked in Bemidji, especially the ones profiled in this section, seem to have common traits. They have viewed the PBP experience as enjoyable and special, often returning for additional seasons. They have been interested, concerned, and very proud of the development of the PBP. While some gave more than others, almost every artistic director in the history of the PBP has offered suggestions or introduced innovations to enable the PBP to run more efficiently and professionally. This professional commitment and skill played a role as crucial in the longevity of the PBP as the devoted community and board of directors.

During the final years at Ruttger's, audience members filled the house to almost 90 percent of capacity for each performance. As Ms. Nice put it, "Their standards are so high up there. They expect a professional-quality product on five days' rehearsal."[13] The community had developed a taste and a pride for professional theatre. To produce such high-quality productions required the services of professional actors as well.

Notes--Chapter IV

[1]Grivna, p. 10.

[2]Ibid., p. 18.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Jeremy Gerald, "The Changing Face of Summer Theatre," New York Times, 16 June 1985.

[5]Curt Lambrect, letter to the Paul Bunyan Playhouse Board of Directors, 15 June 1983.

[6]Program for 1980.

[7]Scriba, 1992.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Collins, "Open-Air Stagecraft."

[10]Close, "Summer Stock."

[11]Meyerding, "Paul Bunyan Playhouse No Ordinary Summerstock."

[12]Nice, Program for 1990.

[13]Collins, p. 30.

CHAPTER V

THE PROFESSIONAL THEATRE INFLUENCE: THE ACTORS

The tradition and influence of the professional artistic director were of crucial importance to the development of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse. The artistic director, alone, however, did not represent the sole influence of professional artists in Bemidji. An important and interesting relationship developed between the community and the professional actors. From the very beginning, the board of the PBP proudly announced that it made use of professional talent. Their first road sign featured the words "professional cast." The same message appeared on playbills well into the 1970s, accompanying photographs of the actors. This fact was publicized in articles, as well. Mike Steel, in his article in 1968 proclaiming the PBP to be the best summer theatre in the state, put it bluntly: "The actors are paid and they are professional."[1]

To deliver the quality of theatre the community demanded, professional actors had to be used. Local actors always have appeared in minor roles, however. This

illustrates an interesting blend of the community acting influence with the professional. More often than not, however, the principal roles have been played by the professionals. This relationship between the actors and the community manifested itself in how the community reacted to them on and off the stage.

While the community of Bemidji has developed a predilection for professional acting, the actors themselves have developed a special liking for performing at the PBP and being able to enjoy its surroundings. The directors over the years have realized this as well. Dr. Robinson commented that "the theatre professionals thoroughly enjoy the easy availability of swimming pools, tennis courts, the quaint rustic main lodge, and the lake, with all its boating, fishing, and water-skiing."[2] This was another reason many on the board of directors were in opposition to moving away from the resort. Michael Kissin, artistic director in 1991, felt that moving "might cost it the services of Twin Cities actors willing to work for low pay in exchange for a couple of weeks at a lakeside resort."[3] This issue received much discussion in and out of board meetings. Many members agreed with Mr. Kissin and feared that the PBP would no longer attract Twin Cities actors.

The community of Bemidji developed an interesting relationship with company members. For a time, the townspeople reacted with much surprise to the "less than

conservative behavior of professional actors from urban areas."[4] Early on, the actors were housed in the main lodge. "Noise was inevitable, and it raised havoc with the paying guests."[5] Sometime later, Don Ruttger called a board member to inform the board that "guests were getting upset because two of the actors, of opposite sexes and unmarried, were showering together in the hotel floor bathroom."[6]

Various events of this nature occurred throughout the history of the PBP. A more recent event was conducted by actors from the 1990 season. Calling the event "ugly day," the company members donned the most bizarre clothing they could find in the costume shop or from their own collection and headed out to a local bar/restaurant. According to the reports, the group was not well received by other patrons, especially the Bemidji State hockey team, which happened to be having a dinner at the same establishment. These incidents, however, never appeared too serious. Through the combination of board social events and the close working environment, friendships developed between community members and the actors.

Another aspect involves the community members performing in roles. The community approved using locals for small roles because it saved money and encouraged involvement. As board member and Bemidji State theatre

instructor Robert Scriba pointed out, however, the community did not want to see these locals in the lead roles. "They want professionals all the time."[7] During the mid-1980s, a few board members questioned this practice, worrying that the community would lose touch if the locals were allowed to play only these smaller roles.

Toward the end of the decade, this philosophical issue was resolved in a number of ways. A community theatre group separate from the PBP, but containing some of its board members, had developed. Also, a stepping-stone effect was occurring with a handful of local actors, who received increasingly more substantial roles as the years progressed. These elements appeared to satisfy the community's desire to see locals performing in the shows. The professional influence would continue and remained closely tied with the artistic director, as he or she was responsible for hiring the actors. Depending on the director, actors usually came from Minnesota or other areas, especially New York.

During the first half of the PBP's forty years, the principals came from outside of Minnesota, beginning in 1951 with "professional New York Equity players."[8] This tradition continued under Charles Avery in 1952 and 1953. During this time, a rigid system of hiring three men and three women to act in the lead roles of the season was followed. Apprentices were also used during these years.

They performed in small roles and carried out some technical duties, but they received no salary. They earned their room and board by working part time at the lodge. Lee Adey, from 1957 to 1963, did not limit his choice of actors to New York, but hired them from all over the country. He used people from colleges and redefined the role of the apprentice. Also, the practice of hiring three men and three women was discontinued. From this point on, actors were hired according to the demands of the particular season. The work load of the apprentices at the lodge was decreased during this time. In this way, the apprentices could better serve the needs of the PBP.

In 1964 and 1965, Jay Hornbacker made unique actor selections, representing the only time when students performed in most of the major roles, possibly representing a decline in the professional quality that year. In 1964 he hired four graduate students from the University of California-Berkeley. Several of the actors were older than he was, and he thought they resented this fact. Later in the season, an actor hired from New York had to be fired because of his attitude and behavior. The experiences of this season prompted Jay Hornbacker to assemble another unique company in 1965. That year, he hired an entire company of undergraduate students in hopes that these younger company members would be "willing to

work harder"[9] for him. The following year, six of these company members returned, and four the year after that.

In the early years of the 1970s, Terry Markovich continued to hire the majority of his principals from New York. He also held auditions at the University of Ohio and the University of Minnesota. A few years earlier, the actors began to be housed in cabins outside of the lodge. He recalled an unusually cold season and remembered snow in July. During his production of The Prime of Miss Jean Brody, many of the actors were sick with bronchitis and pneumonia. The board of directors promptly followed his suggestion of installing heaters in the cabins.

Later in the 1970s, artistic director Gerald Koch began a tradition that would continue to grow through the 1980s. From 1984 on, Twin Cities actors were hired almost exclusively. This practice was initiated by artistic directors who were based and worked intensely in the Minneapolis/Saint Paul area. Michael Brindisi formally began the process, as he "knew Minnesota theatre upside down."[10] Laurie Grossman, from 1984 to 1986, continued this practice. By the late 1980s, the casting of Twin Cities actors had developed into a strong tradition. Pamela Nice, serving from 1987 to 1990, praised the quantity and quality of these actors: "The talent pool here is tremendous. I could have cast each role several

ways. It is wonderful for a director to have that choice."[11]

In the words of Kay Robinson, this actor/community relationship was an intense one: "When a theatre survives 35 years, it takes a proprietary interest in the many artists who work in the theatre, and in their careers when they leave the PBP."[12] As actors returned as many as four seasons in a row, they often came to be recognized in the town. The newspapers facilitated this effect by printing articles like "McCormick Returns to Playhouse," which gave detailed information about the actors' lives and careers, as well as affirming and celebrating the town's own affection for them.

As with the case of the Twin-Cities-based artistic director, the performing company members of the PBP have reflected the talent pool of the Minneapolis/Saint Paul area. The positions at the PBP have been highly sought after over the years. Some years, almost 100 actors auditioned. However, the professional actor has developed a relationship with the community, especially the board of directors, that is different from that of the artistic director. The board worked more closely with the artistic director, as such issues as censorship had to be dealt with. Tempers flared often. The actors, however, seemed to have had a less substantial relationship with the board and townspeople. Subsequently, quaint little notes,

newspaper stories, and fond memories of some board members make up the bulk of historical information.

Technical personnel, although following similar patterns of selection, will not be discussed for several reasons. Because these artists, with the exception of the scene designers, did not appear in the public eye as frequently as the actors, their history is much less documented. They developed a somewhat different relationship with the community, one of respect unintentionally garnished with anonymity. Various articles have appeared throughout the PBP's history that have demonstrated the community's pride in hiring professionals in technical areas, such as "Professional to Design Summer Theatre Scenery"[13] and "Creating Settings for Plays an Art in Which Playhouse Technical Chief Excels."[14]

In technical production and facilities, as well as in the acting, the board of directors desired the highest possible level of professionalism. This desire was mirrored by the ever-improving scenery and facilities throughout the PBP's history.

Notes--Chapter V

[1]Steele, "Theatre Blossoms in Northland."

[2]Robinson, "The Paul Bunyan Playhouse: Just Another Theatre in the Woods?" p. 6.

[3]Close, "Summer Stock."

[4]Robinson, p. 4.

[5]Grivna, p. 23.

[6]DeWeese, "Playhouse Celebrates Anniversary."

[7]Scriba, 1992.

[8]Program for 1951.

[9]Grivna, p. 29.

[10]Scriba, 1992.

[11]Collins, "Open-Air Stagecraft."

[11]Collins, "Open-Air Stagecraft."

[12]Robinson, p. 4.

[13]"Professional to Design Summer Theatre Scenery," Bemidji Daily Pioneer, 1 June 1955.

[14]"Creating Settings for Plays an Art in Which Playhouse Technical Chief Excels," Bemidji Daily Pioneer, 29 July 1955.

CHAPTER VI

TECHNICAL FACILITIES AND PRODUCTION: INCREASING QUALITY VIA GROWTH AND BOARD ACTIVITY

The entire forty-year history of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse transpired in the original site at Ruttger's Birchmont Resort. Often with limited finances, the board of the PBP did what it could to maximize the quality of its theatre building and scenery-construction capabilities. As the years have progressed, the board of directors and various artistic directors have concentrated on obtaining a level of professionalism in these areas that was similar to the high-quality acting. During the 1950s, this basically took the form of work on the theatre building to make it more comfortable for the theatre-goer. In the 1960s, as a successful formula for operation began to develop, efforts were made to make the building look more like a theatre. During the 1970s, with the organizational aspect of the PBP firmly established, improvements were made in regard to facilities for scenery construction. With the onset of the tumultuous 1980s, finishing touches were made on the establishment to allow the PBP to run more smoothly and professionally.

The history of the PBP's technical undertakings falls into two basic categories, those involving the scene shop and quality of scenery and those pertaining to the building that housed the stage, auditorium, and lobby area. As in acting and stage direction, the board demanded professional standards.

In 1951 and 1952, scenery was constructed immediately behind the theatre in the open air. The scenery was very basic during the early years of the PBP. Often three or four walls would be erected to form some variety of a box set. Affiliation with Bemidji State teachers college in 1953 allowed the PBP to use the college's facilities for set construction. This function returned to the grounds of the resort later. It is estimated that sometime during the 1960s, set construction was carried out in a twenty-foot by twenty-four-foot horse barn located on the grounds about one-half mile from the theatre building. As the budget increased during these years, so did the quality of the scenery.

The biggest advancement in the technical area took place in 1973. With the help of a local contractor and the "cement class" of Bemidji College, $5,712.66 was spent on an addition to the stable, measuring thirty feet by forty feet. It consisted of a concrete slab, cement walls, and a tin roof. The facility also was equipped with a paint sink and a sliding garage door to load

scenery out. The vast improvement of the on-site facility, along with growing attention to technical areas, helped increase the quality of the scenery, which was built at the shop and transported by truck. Technical directors, such as Joel Janke, started to produce "fantastic, detailed sets."[1] The only other improvement to the scene shop occurred in 1986. During this year, a concrete slab measuring sixteen feet by thirty feet was added to the front of the scene shop. This greatly extended the work area of the shop to the outside area and worked especially well for laying painted scenery out to dry. This took advantage of the many hot summer days in Bemidji. Previously, construction efforts outside of the shop had to be conducted in the dirt.

Technical directors in the decade of the 1980s began incorporating advancements in set construction to the scenery at the PBP. Twin Cities scene designer Thomas Barrett, who served in this capacity from 1989 to 1991, played a large role in this, as he introduced construction practices that had not previously been used at the PBP. In the construction of his musicals, for example, he liked to use "hardcover" or "Hollywood" flats for most of the scenery. These units were covered with wood as opposed to the muslin that was traditionally used in "soft cover" flats. Mr. Barrett created one of the most talked-about

designs in PBP history when he used tobacco cloth, a form of heavy gauze, to construct the walls for The School for Wives. This enabled him to create lighting effects from the back. In his design for West Side Story, he used steel in the construction of some units.

Lighting instruments and boards had been borrowed from Bemidji College over the years. As funds accrued, the PBP began to purchase its own equipment, including a twenty-four-channel dimmer board. Growth in the quality and quantity of shop tools also occurred, peaking in 1988. Before this time, not much money was devoted to building up a stock of tools. Under the guidance and motivation of Chris Keenan, a local contractor, the board started to add to and upgrade its shop equipment. In 1988, the PBP purchased its new radial-arm, table, and band saws. It is not clear what was used before the arrival of such tools, but estimations exist to the effect that cheaper and older versions of the same were in use.

While it appeared that large gaps in periods of development occurred in regard to the advancements of these areas, work on the theatre itself was ongoing. The building had been a recreation and convention hall. To prepare it for the first season, several modifications were made. A stage measuring forty-five feet from wall to wall, and thirty feet deep, was created. The proscenium opening was twenty-four feet wide and ten feet high. At

this point, no dressing rooms were included, and the actors used temporary facilities located at the rear of the stage.

Decoration of the auditorium and lobby was accomplished by Fred Wuntch, a leading interior decorator from New York City. To improve sight lines, a graduated series of tiers was constructed for the patrons to sit on. The lobby was described as "large and airy," decorated "along a stylized summer garden theme."[2] Other improvements were added during the later years of the first decade. The inside of the theatre was painted for the first time in 1957. It was reported that, up until this time, the shuffle-board markings had been visible on the floor.[3] During this time, a large mural, painted by local artists, occupied one wall of the lobby. It depicted Paul Bunyan working puppets. In 1958, the wooden benches that had been used for seating were replaced with folding chairs obtained from the college.

Many improvements were initiated in 1959. That year, with the support of Don Ruttger, air conditioning was installed. This would prove to be very valuable in the years that followed because of the often severe humidity the area experiences. The lobby floor was redone with tile, and the light booth was moved from the back of the stage to the back of the house.

In the 1960s, the PBP continued with such developments to produce a more theatrically sound environment. An actual box office was built in 1965 in the lobby. A pay phone was also added to the lobby that year. Don Ruttger again lent money to the PBP, this time for paint. Around 1967, the lobby was repainted in "bright new colors," covering up the mural of Paul Bunyan. For the first time the backstage area was painted black. The auditorium, stage, and side proscenium also were painted. Not much development took place in the 1970s. An important one, however, occurred in 1977 when actual folding theatre-style seating was installed.

The 1980s saw an increased concern with the building, now close to 70 years old and in major decay. Randy Ruttger was in full control of the resort at this time. He was aware of the state of the building and told Peter Vaughan, "The roof looks like an old horse. I don't think it's going to fall down and kill anyone. It's going to fall down in winter. There will be a big blizzard and there won't be any playhouse."[4] For reasons mentioned earlier, he did not approve of major remodeling. Estimations never coming to fruition included an entirely new complex ($500,000) and a rehearsal hall ($55,000). Pam Nice declared one year that she would not return the following year unless the plans for the rehearsal hall

were carried out. She did return the following year, although the plans were never activated.

In the final year of occupancy at the resort in 1991, during the climax of the issue of whether to move or stay, Michael Kissen instituted two important innovations. He began the practice of importing one or two complete sets from one of his various connections in the Twin Cities. These high-quality sets received much praise, and at the same time allowed more time and money to be spent on scenery built on site at the PBP. He also imported the designer of the sets to be the technical director for that particular show. This relieved stress on the other technical director, and his carpentry skills could be used more in the construction of scenery he designed.

Over the process of forty years, the technical aspects of production at the PBP steadily improved. As the PBP developed, talk around the town usually consisted of the shows and specific performances. One such example is a performance that has attained legendary status and "is recalled with gusto by all who saw it."[5] In this performance, Wendy Lehr, who performed four seasons at the PBP, ate a banana while swinging out over the audience upside down on a trapeze. Talk of this nature referring to scenery began in the 1980s. As one person put it, "the sets put up out there are just wild."[6] Over the years, technical production at the PBP had grown to mirror the

high standard of acting and positive reputation that such quality elicits. In this case, the board's desire for professionalism, in combination with technical directors and designers possessing drive and ever-improving technology hired by the artistic directors, worked together to increase quality.

Notes--Chapter VI

[1]Markovich, 1991.

[2]Program for 1951.

[3]Grivna, p. 23.

[4]Peter Vaughan, "Is Curtain About to Fall on Resort Theatre?" Minneapolis Tribune, 8 September 1991.

[5]Robinson, "Northern Notes."

[6]Keenan, 1992.

CHAPTER VII

THE FUTURE

Summer theatre in the United States remains popular despite the current state of economic affairs. In the Summer Theatre Directory for 1992, 386 theatre companies are listed.[1] This is only a drop of one from 1991. In 1992, the Paul Bunyan Playhouse will begin a new era, as it moves into its new facility in downtown Bemidji. This was a brave undertaking by the board of directors, as the goal of fundraising was set at $300,000. The sweeping results of the activity that resulted from the decision support the portion of the hypothesis that describes the PBP as having an extremely strong community support structure, and the developments are exciting.

Similar to the reaction in 1951, when the PBP faced the crisis of bankruptcy, the community and board of directors of today have been motivated to creative and successful activity. The board of directors has become fully operational. All of the members listed in 1991 were divided and have worked on ten separate committees to participate in fundraising, promotion, artistic programs, building and the transition to the Chief Theater, and

public relations. The response from the community, according to treasurer Karen Moe, has been "absolutely astonishing. I can't believe the amount of individuals and businesses that have contributed to the Founders Wall." The Founders Wall is one of the fundraising techniques that allows an individual or couple to have their name put on a plaque in the new space if they donate $500. Businesses can also be included. As of May 14, 1992, the total number of donors in this program has reached 180. Banks in Bemidji alone have donated a total of $19,000. The PBP also has received grants from the Neilson Foundation for $25,000, and $10,000 from the Region 2 Arts Council to hire a part-time administrator to coordinate this third beginning in the history of the PBP. The now-thriving community theatre in Bemidji, which is composed of many but not all board members, is in full support of the move, as they have performed benefit plays and even look forward to using the facilities. This has the potential to increase the quantity and quality of the community theatre productions. Also, Bemidji State University theatre students will have another venue. In the past, the community theatre has been able to use the BSU facilities only on quarter breaks. Now they can produce whenever they like, except in summer, and especially when most of the BSU students are still in town and now away on term break.

While the Bemidji community theatre has the potential to expand its horizons, the PBP has an equal opportunity to prosper as a nonprofit professional summer theatre with a very strong community support network. Michael Kissin, artistic director of 1991 and one of the many concerned about the ability of the new facility to lure quality actors to Bemidji, was easily able to cast a professional company consisting of some actors from previous seasons as well as new ones to perform in the season of six shows.

Remodeling of the facility will easily be completed by the goal of May 25, 1992, with the first show of the new era, The Foreigner, to open June 16. The new theatre will seat 320, an increase of 100 from the old space. New seats from a theatre that failed to open also were purchased. The PBP now has a unique thrust stage measuring thirty-eight feet wide by twenty-five feet deep. It is not a true thrust, however, as no seating is located on the sides of the stage. This will encourage new developments in scene design, breaking out of the old popular and functional practice of using box sets. On July 7, due to the increase in size, specifically vertically, the PBP will debut its first-ever full two-story-house design for Broadway Bound. The future looks promising and exciting for the PBP, as professional theatre in Bemidji will continue.

Notes--Chapter VII

[1]Jill Charles, ed., Summer Theatre Directory (North Adams, Mass.: Lamb Printing, 1992), p. i.

[2]Moe, 1992.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

A fascinating piece of theatre history has transpired in Bemidji, Minnesota, over the past forty years. A summer theatre faced crisis and controversy, and yet survived and is going strong into the 1990s. Without a doubt, the interplay of two factors has contributed to this success.

"I am convinced that it is the involvement with--and the commitment to--the community which made this professional theatre a special one."[1] The community, through a dedicated board of directors and a myriad of volunteers, has fostered and cherished the growth of this summer theatre. Rowena DeWeese, a board member since 1951, gets frustrated sometimes when names are mentioned in conjunction with the volunteer service performed, as many names are inevitably left out. "So many people have worked so hard," she exclaimed. In regard to the success of the PBP, Mrs. DeWeese holds the same sense of astonishment as many community members: "It's incredible to me."[2] Theatre instructor Robert Scriba shares her enthusiasm for this success: "Every season is a miracle.

I'm truly amazed with it, and I'm not amazed by too many theatres."[3] In an interview in 1961, Mrs. DeWeese referred to the PBP as a hobby. In 1991, she responded to this comment with a smile, saying, "It's much more than that now." The people of Bemidji have been "caught up in theatre in the northwoods."[4] Chris Keenen commented on this issue of the appeal and quality of theatre, explaining the nature of theatre and its effects: "Nothing else would get this group of people together than something as bizarre as theatre."[5]

This thought process of the community members, steeped in tradition and pride, may indeed qualify the PBP as special. As Stephen Langley pointed out, "There is a big difference between the dedicated amateur and the dabbling dilettante." He went on to say that "theatre-going is a habit and, generally speaking, the more that theatre is available to the public, the more theatre-going will take place."[7] This theatre had been going on for more than forty years, and it appeared that a habit had formed. In 1968, attendance averaged around 75 percent. In the final years of the 1980s, this number rose to around 90 percent.

The habit that the community had developed was watching high-quality, professional entertainment. The artistic directors and actors have at times consciously challenged the audience of Bemidji by producing "risky"

shows and practicing such techniques as reverse gender casting.

It is accepted that many summer theatres are engaging in the practices mentioned above. Usually, unlike the professional resident theatres that have more artistic freedom because they are located in large urban areas, summer theatres must offer fare with wide popular appeal. Many, like the PBP, still practice this in the majority of their play selections. Like the PBP, whose existence is largely supported through box office receipts, it is simply a matter of survival. What appears to be happening to the PBP is a slow infusion of more demanding material into seasons based largely on plays with popular appeal. In this way, the PBP continues to reflect national trends. "More and more, in other words, the summer theatre scene is beginning to resemble the theatre scene everywhere else."[8] But if summer theatres are behaving more and more like other theatres these days, they continue to have qualities distinctly their own. The PBP's distinct quality has been this coalescence of community and professional theatre.

Possibilities also exist for further areas of study. It would be interesting to examine more closely the backgrounds of the various artists who worked at the PBP in order to make interpretations not covered in this

investigation, especially regarding the type of training engaged in before the PBP, for example. It might also be interesting to conduct a survey determining where the artists have worked after the PBP and how they felt about their experience in Bemidji. Since the PBP in essence is starting over again, the opportunity exists to remedy the problem of insufficient records of activity in the new facility if careful attention is paid from the very first season. As the PBP forges on into the 1990s, this relationship is likely to continue. The PBP stands as a solid model of the combination of professional and community-involved theatre. The success of this relationship has the potential to inspire and educate all those involved in theatrical organizations. Michael Kissin, 1991 and 1992 artistic director, summed up the condition of the Paul Bunyan Playhouse and exemplified the tone that the community and professional sects of theatre in Bemidji and the Twin Cities have adopted as the challenges and growth await:

> Nothing has stopped the Playhouse: recessions, wars, droughts, floods, tick and mosquito plagues have had no effect. Generations of audiences and actors have passed through, supported as always by an active involved Board of Directors and the large community of Bemidji, and on the PBP chugs full-steam into the 90's.[9]

Notes--Chapter VIII

[1]Robinson, "The Paul Bunyan Playhouse: Just Another Theatre in the Woods?"

[2]DeWeese, 1992.

[3]Scriba, 1992.

[4]DeWeese, 1992.

[5]Keenan, 1992.

[6]Langley, p. 248.

[7]Ibid., p. 251.

[8]Close, "Summer Stock."

[9]Paul Bunyan Playhouse Program for 1991.

APPENDIX

PLAYS PRODUCED AND SEASON ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

1951

Clutterbuck	Bill Butler
Light Up the Sky	
Blithe Spirit	
The Heiress	
She Loves Me Not	
An Inspector Calls	
The Corn Is Green	
Candida	

1952

See How They Run	Charles Avery
Claudia	
Harvey	
Outward Bound	
Born Yesterday	
Two Blind Mice	
Years Ago	
Clarence	
Angel Street	
Ladies in Retirement	

1953

Happiest Days of Your Life	Charles Avery
Morning's at Seven	
Laura	
The Old Maid	
The Male Animal	
Pygmalion	
Second Threshold	
Bell, Book, and Candle	
The Man	
There's Always Juliet	

1954

Papa Is All	Philip Smith
Late Love	
The Happy Time	
Charley's Aunt	
The Two Mrs. Carrolls	
The Four Poster	
Come Back Little Sheba	
Hay Fever	
The Hasty Heart	
Buy Me Blue Ribbons	

1955

Hobson's Choice	Philip Smith
Time Out for Ginger	
My Three Angles	
Papa Is All	
Dial M for Murder	
Stalag 17	
The House of Bernarda Alba	
Sabrina Fair	
King of Hearts	
Lo and Behold	

1956

Great Big Door Step	Philip Smith
The Curious Savage	
Night Must Fall	
Love Rides the Rails	
The Tender Trap	
The Caine Mutiny	
Festival	
Rainmaker	

1957

Arsenic and Old Lace	Lee Adey
Solid Gold Cadillac	
Janis	
Ten Little Indians	
Mr. Roberts	
A Roomful of Roses	
Born Yesterday	
Bus Stop	
The Happy Time	

1958

Minnesota Morning	Lee Adey
Kind Sir	
The Matchmaker	
Teahouse of the August Moon	
Harvey	
Loud Red Patrick	
Witness for the Prosecution	
Bernadine	
Visit to a Small Planet	

1959

The Reluctant Debutante	Lee Adey
Toward Zero	
See How They Run	
Our Town	
The Great Sebastian	
The Moon Is Blue	
Three Men on a Horse	
The Mousetrap	
January Thaw	

1960

White Sheep of the Family	Lee Adey
An Inspector Calls	
The Torchbearers	
Diary of Anne Frank	
Mad Woman of Challot	
The Four Poster	
Under the Gaslight	
Arms and the Man	
The Gazebo	

1961

The Pleasure of His Company	Lee Adey
The Flowering Peach	
Of Mice and Men	
The Boyfriend	
Private Lives	
The Rain Maker	
Three for Dreams	
The Drunkard	
Personal Appearance	

1962

No Time for Sergeants	Lee Adey
Fool's Paradise	
Glass Menagerie	
Taming of the Shrew	
Guys and Dolls	
Send Me No Flowers	
Streets of New York	
The Spider	
The Importance of Being Earnest	

1963

Good Night Ladies	Lee Adey
The Miracle Worker	
Everybody Loves Opal	
The Music Man	
Come Blow Your Horn	
Blood, Sweat, and Stanley Poole	
Angel Street	
Room Service	

1964

The Loud Red Patrick	Jay Hornbacker
Misalliance	
Gigi	
Death of a Salesman	
A Thousand Clowns	
Our Town	
Let's Get a Divorce	
Sherlock Holmes	

1965

My Three Angels	Jay Hornbacker
Pygmalion	
Haunting of Hill House	
Fantastics	
Summer and Smoke	
Under the Gaslight	
Take Her, She's Mine	

1966

Thieves' Carnival	Don Ruble
I Am a Camera	
Poor Richard	
Hay Fever	
Billy the Kid	
Diary of Anne Frank	
Oklahoma	
Charley's Aunt	

1967

Period of Adjustment	Don Ruble
Barefoot in the Park	
Come Blow Your Horn	
Private Ear and Public Eye	
Babes in Arms	
Waltz of the Toreadors	
Private Lives	

1968

Two for the Seesaw	Don Ruble
Blithe Spirit	
Star Spangled Girl	
Generation	
Spoon River Anthology	
Peg O' My Heart	
The Boy Friend	
The Miracle Worker	

1969

Rape of the Belt	Carl Pistelli
The Absence of a Cello	
The Subject Was Roses	
The Odd Couple	
Monique	
Glass Menagerie	
Damn Yankees	
Luv	

1970

Philadelphia, Here I Come	Terry Markovich
You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running	
The Impossible Years	
Passion, Poison and Petrification	
Antigone	
A Thousand Clowns	
Guys and Dolls	
Black Comedy	

1971

Lilies of the Field	Terry Markovich
Plaza Suite	
Arsenic and Old Lace	
Cactus Flower	
Three Men on a Horse	
The Prime of Miss Jean Brody	
The Music Man	
The Price	

1972

Butterflies Are Free	Terry Markovich
Never Too Late	
Wait Until Dark	
The Lion in Winter	
Mary, Mary	
Last of the Red Hot Lovers	
Fiddler on the Roof	
The Rose Tattoo	

1973

Othello	Terry Markovich
Man From La Mancha	
The Matchmaker	
Private Lives	
Four Poster	
Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris	
All the Way Home	
Dracula	

1974

Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I Feel So Bad	Rustin Greene
The Subject Was Roses	
Luv	
The Tavern	
Night Watch	
Star-Spangled Girl	
Threepenny Opera	
Romeo and Juliet	

1975

Barefoot in the Park	Rustin Green
Angel Street	
The Only Game in Town	
The Owl and the Pussycat	
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde	
Hay Fever	
Ten Little Indians	
My Fair Lady	

1976

Solid Gold Cadillac	Gerald Koch
Stop the World	
Harvey	
The Mousetrap	
Spoon River Anthology	
The Odd Couple	
Love Rides the Rails . . . or Will the Mail Train Run Tonight?	
Kiss Me, Kate	

1977

Never Too Late	Gerald Koch
The Boyfriend	
Diary of Anne Frank	
Mary, Mary	
Shot in the Dark	
Oh, Coward	
Bus Stop	
Sunshine Boys	
The Calder Company	

1978

Life With Father	Gerald Koch
Charley's Aunt	
In Old Kentucky	
Dial M for Murder	
Plaza Suite	
A Doll's House	
The Good Doctor	
Oklahoma	

1979

Pippin	Greg Lee
A Thousand Clowns	
Vanities	
Sleuth	
That Championship Season	
Visit to a Small Planet	
J.B.	
How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying	

1980

I Remember Mama	Zak Herring
Wait Until Dark	
The Death and Life of Sneaky Fitch	
The Amorous Flea	
Death of a Salesman	
The Importance of Being Earnest	
Same Time Next Year	
Something's Afoot	

1981

No Sex Please, We're British	Michael Brindisi
Chapter Two	
Pygmalion	
On Golden Pond	
Side by Side by Sondheim	
Two for the Seesaw	
Lion in Winter	
She Loves Me	

1982

Once in a Lifetime	Michael Brindisi
The Glass Menagerie	
I Ought to Be in Pictures	
The Hound of the Baskervilles	
The Four Poster	
110 in the Shade	

1983

The Matchmaker	Michael Brindisi
Luv	
I Never Sang for My Father	
Death Trap	
Blithe Spirit	
Talley's Folly	
Carnival	

1984

Harvey	Laurie Grossman
Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris	
Reynard the Fox	
How the Other Half Loves	
The Little Foxes	
The Dining Room	
Sea Marks	
Pirates of Penzance	

1985

You Can't Take It With You	Laurie Grossman
Crimes of the Heart	
The Red Shoes	
13 Rue de L'Amour	
The Diviners	
The Innocents	
Educating Rita	
Guys and Dolls	

1986

Arsenic and Old Lace	Laurie Grossman
Revenge of the Space Pandas	
Isn't It Romantic	
The Foreigner	
And a Nightingale Sang	
21A	
Grease	

1987

The Man Who Came to Dinner	Pam Nice
Wiley and the Hairy Man	
Stage Struck	
Brighton Beach Memoirs	
The Miss Firecracker Contest	
Exile From Main Street	
Man of La Mancha	

1988

Enter Laughing	Pam Nice
Pinocchio	
Angel Street	
The Nerd	
The Middle Ages	
Eleemosynary	
Camelot	

1989

Ah! Wilderness	Pam Nice
Mother Hicks	
A Shayna Maidel	
Daddy's Dyin' (Who's Got the Will)	
The School for Wives	
Talking Pictures	
Kiss Me, kate	

1990

The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940	Pam Nice
The Boys Next Door	
Greater Tuna	
Arms and the Man	
Steel Magnolias	
West Side Story	

1991

On Golden Pond	Michael Kissin
How to Improve Your Golf Game	
Wait Until Dark	
The Mystery of Irma Vep	
Driving Miss Daisy	
She Loves Me	

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