

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Trumbull New Theater Project

History of the Theater

O. H. 613

FRANCES PENDLETON

Interviewed

by

Beth Kantor

on

February 9, 1984

## FRANCES PENDLETON

Frances Pendleton was born on February 1, 1912 in Detroit, Michigan. She was the daughter of William Charles and Margret MacGergor Manchester. She attended school in Birmingham, Bay City and Ann Arbor Michigan. She graduated from high school in Ann Arbor. She attended the University of Michigan and received an A.B. in history and English in 1934. Mrs. Pendleton's first job was with the Battle Creek Theater Company where she was the civic director. She stayed with them for three seasons (1936, 1937, and 1938).

In April 1938 she married Thorn Pendleton. They had three children: Austin, Alex, and Margret. Mrs. Pendleton was one of the founding members of the Trumbull New Theater located in Niles. She has been very active in this theater group and this is her main hobby. She has also directed plays at Hiram College.

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INTERVIEWEE: FRANCES PENDLETON

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kantor

SUBJECT: People involved, building of the theater

DATE: February 9, 1984

K: This is an interview with Frances Pendleton for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Niles, Ohio, by Beth Kantor, on February 9, 1981 at 1:00 p.m.

Why don't you start off by telling us about the founding of TNT (Trumbull New Theater).

P: It was founded by a woman named Dorothy Gmucs. She never had any real theater experience. When she came here she went down to the YWCA and they let her start an interest group in theater. She told me her tale of woe and she knew that I had been a director before and she asked me if I would help. I told her I would help and to call me sometime. That night she called. I was fascinated by how brash they were. They would use my house to rehearse in. I had a few standards of my own that they had to follow though. One was that they had to have money in the bank to put on a show. Each time they met each member put in twenty-five cents. It took them two years to get together \$60, which would pay royalties on three one-acts. For that whole two years they rehearsed the plays. They did them in our living room and we passed the hat and collected \$60 just to replace it. We had enough to go on and it just worked and developed with that kind of dedication.

Dorothy was a very talented girl. She was bold. She did exciting things. She wanted to do things like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, which in those days were considered pretty racy. I insisted that they could not have censorship; if they wanted to do Tennessee Williams they should do it.

K: What was the average age of somebody involved?

P: They went from eighteen to thirty. It was a real community theater. The way it got its name was that we couldn't get any publicity out of the newspaper. Theaters had come and gone. One thing that had actually existed here was that theaters in all of Trumbull County had a terrible reputation with the brokers that rent plays. They would pirate plays; they would change the title. Other theaters that had gone before us just didn't bother to pay their bills. So the newspapers were just not interested in us. They had a wonderful business director; her job was treasurer. Her name was Janet Michaels.

K: When did you get your building?

P: It took almost ten years. First we were in the high school and then we moved to the junior high school. Next we got a loft on Main Street. We turned that into a little theater that held 35 people. We were getting along swimmingly and we even did "Streetcar Named Desire."

We started with just the Lock-rib building; it was built by Inland Steel. They let us have it for nothing because Tom Schroth figured out how to insulate the building. Tom Schroth designed the theater. Then the people who made the insulation gave it to us because a man's wife in New York was a theater nut anyway. One thing after another was given to us.

We went out and tried to raise money and all we could raise was \$8,000 in donations. We had about \$25,000 in it. My husband set up a \$17,000 loan at that bank. That was an awful lot of money for those kids to pay off, but they were determined and they actually built the building themselves. The cement finishers as a donation poured our floors. The community and the area and the whole town were very proud of it.

K: What was the first show that you remember that you put on in the new building?

P: The very first show we put on was "Seven Year Itch." It was the most extensively rehearsed show that there ever was because we thought we would finish by September and didn't end up finishing until March. Then we did a murder mystery after that.

K: What shows sold in the early 1960's?

P: The shows that you wouldn't think would sell, like the Tennessee Williams, those are the one's that sold. The "Seven Year Itch" show sold because it was the first show that we did. We had a marvelous cast. The musicals, unfortunately, sold well. I have very mixed feelings about those because you get away with third grade work there.

K: What started happening in 1970? Your first ten years were very good.

P: The theater matured. A lot of the original members had moved away. Warren is a transient town. I never had any trouble with any of my productions. Nobody wanted to help build sets anymore.

K: Can anybody still join?

P: Oh, yes. Anybody can go out there and work who wants to. Anybody can go out there and get a part by trying out. I have never cast a show where I couldn't see a way clear to casting a couple of the important parts.

I quit the theater after being there 37 years. I raised most of their money and have been in charge of it. They need somebody now who can go in and start asking for more money. I had to give up all other volunteer work because directing for twelve weeks is a big job.

K: What year did you actually quit?

P: I quit right after I did "Taming of the Shrew."

K: Can you tell a little bit about when they added on?

P: First it was just a half circle, and then they added the lobby because there was really not enough room for the audience to flow out during intermission. Then they built two garages, the back one for set pieces and the other for a dressing room. They were just cheap garages that were prefabricated from Sears. Fortunately, some pyromaniac burned them down and we had the insurance money so we built a back stage.

K: Can you tell a little bit about the seats?

P: The original seats we bought for one dollar apiece from a movie house downtown. They were taken apart and redone. Then when the seats needed redoing Stan Killingsworth took over the job. He had the idea of selling them for \$75 apiece, and anybody could buy a seat and have it dedicated to somebody else or to themselves.

K: What do you see for the future of TNT?

P: I think that depends on the young blood coming up. If they really want a theater they can roll up their sleeves and they have got it.

K: Do you have young blood?

P: Yes, we have some very exciting young blood out there.

K: I want you to tell why it was called TNT.

P: We had to have a name that would get attention. The original group of sixteen people were sitting around very early in the formation of it and they decided that Trumbull Theater was sort of obvious. They thought Trumbull New Theater was good, so we called it TNT. An interesting story about that is that Tom Schroth got a call one day and someone asked what happened to the theater. He asked why and they said the headline in the paper said, "TNT Explodes."

END OF INTERVIEW