

Barter Theatre Typical American Success Story

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 the ancient and honorable custom of bartering services rendered for commodities? Thus was born the institution now known throughout the nation, and in Europe, as the Barter Theatre.

Leading a band of 22 hungry actors, Porterfield chose Abingdon, Virginia, as the scene of his daring experiment. Abingdon was the first town settled and founded west of the Alleghenies, and is located in the southwest corner of Virginia among the beautiful Appalachian Mountains. Following the old Wilderness Road like a modern Daniel Boone, Porterfield and his bold band brought nothing with them but their talents, zeal, enthusiasm and a great determination to bring the living theatre to the people. Their only other piece of equipment was a beaten-up, discarded stage setting which they used in all their early productions. Each week they would scrape the paint off it and repaint it on Sunday, using paint that had been bartered in exchange for tickets to the previous week's show.

The city fathers and townspeople of Abingdon came to their assistance generously. The original Barter Theatre company was housed in what had once been the lovely home of General Preston and was later occupied by the Martha Washington College for girls, until the depression forced it to shut its doors. The kind citizens of Abingdon came to their aid by contributing china, cutlery, sheets, blankets, pots and pans and even some cast-off clothing, not to mention beds and other essential furniture. The Abingdon City Council also turned over the Opera House, constructed in 1830, to the Barter Theatre and all their productions have been staged in it ever since. The building which houses it also houses the Town Hall and is the seat of government of Abingdon. Underneath the Barter Theatre's auditorium is located the town jail. Occasionally, on a Saturday night, Barter actors have been known to compete with the happy carolings and shouts of incarcerated town drunks.

The Barter Theatre was officially born on the night of June 10, 1933. Its first play, directed by and acted in by Bob Porterfield, was John Golden's "After Tomorrow." They did not know it then, but those still-hungry actors—it had been a long, long time between Broadway engagements—were destined to make theatre history. During the course of the next 17 years they and Porterfield were to prove that the American people craved and demanded good theatre and would flock to see it, if it were provided them in an artistic, capable and entertaining fashion. The ancient mouse-trap theory was once more vindicated.

Since that historic night there have been more than 200 different productions of classics, new plays and famous Broadway hits. The word "barter" has taken a new meaning in our language and now stands for an institution that is not only known throughout the United States, but in Europe as well. It is the only American theatrical company to have been invited to perform Shakespeare's "Hamlet" at Elsinore Castle, which was the scene of the Melancholy Dane's original tragedy. The Barter Theatre company played there during the summer of 1949 and its production was acclaimed by the Danish press and public. Following its appearance in Denmark, it toured various army camps and posts in occu-

ped Germany at the invitation of the State Department and the Department of the Army.

From its original "small but noble band" of 22 actors, Barter Theatre has grown to a company that now numbers well over a hundred. From its ranks have "graduated" such now famous actors and actresses as Gregory Peck, Jeffrey Lynn, Lisbeth Scott, Charles Korvin, Patricia Neal, Frank Lovejoy, John Dall and Hume Cronyn.

In 1946, returning from four years of service in the Army, Bob Porterfield found that his Barter Theatre was practically non-existent. A tornado had demolished its workshop, partially wrecked the actors' dormitory and splattered his painted scenery all over Virginia's beautiful natural scenery. But with characteristic grit and determination, he set out to rebuild and renew the institution he had founded and developed through a dozen difficult years.

He turned for help to his legion of friends, among them the Virginia State Conservation Commission, which gave him and the Barter Theatre a grant of \$10,000. That was an important piece of help not only financially, but also in that it led to the realization of one of his most cherished ideas—to make the Barter Theatre truly a people's theatre. For years, Porterfield had believed in and worked for a theatre that would be free of the chains of Broadway. In countless lectures, magazine articles and newspaper stories he had preached the gospel of "decentralization." The living theatre, he kept saying, belongs to the people. There was no reason why it should all be concentrated in New York, and it was unhealthy, stultifying and killing, as it has, the growth of it. Thus, he was delighted when he received the \$10,000 grant because it helped to solve

his immediate financial problem and also made Barter the official State Theatre of Virginia—the only institution of its kind in the entire United States. Partly as the result of this assistance, the Barter Theatre's scope is no longer limited to just Abingdon or even the Commonwealth of Virginia. During the winter months its troupes, numbering as many as three and four at a time, are busy barnstorming all over the country, reaching as far as Texas and Arizona, Minnesota and Wisconsin, as well as the entire South and much of the north-

eastern section of the nation. Like the pioneers of covered-wagon days, the Barter Theatre's hardy crews have been carrying the name and fame of Barter and the Commonwealth of Virginia far and wide throughout these United States. It might well be said, as some have already said, the sun never sets on Barter's empire.

Before embarking on his Barter Theatre experiment in 1933 Bob Porterfield had enjoyed a successful career on Broadway. He had appeared

with such stars as Walter Hampden, Sidney Blackmer, Clark Gable, Lenore Ulric, Peggy Conklin and the late Leslie Howard. He has appeared more recently in several Hollywood movies, most notably with Gregory Peck in "The Yearling" and with Gary Cooper in "Sergeant York."

The Barter Theatre's outstanding success over the past 17 years has clearly proven the rightness and soundness of Porterfield's original idea. The American people want live drama with competent live actors in

it and nothing will take its place, neither radio, movies nor television. At the end of its first summer season the Barter Theatre wound up with a surplus of \$4.35 in hard money and a barrel of jelly. In the interim, however, its actors had gained a total of more than 400 pounds on the hoof and were happy and well-fed. As Fred Allen once remarked about the Barter Theatre, "Along about Labor Day, if Bob Porterfield wants to tell if he's had a successful season, all he's got to do is weigh his hams."

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