

Cleveland

Since turning my back on New York, I had received a paycheck each and every week, and I was once again focused and confident on stage. Was this the beginning of what could become a whole career in the regional theaters of America? Was this a lofty goal? I didn't know, but I had the patience to see where it might lead. Instead of pursuing the Broadway dream, I would take things as they came, one year at a time.

One year at a time! What a difference in an actor's personal philosophy to be thinking in terms of years instead of the next audition. In New York, an actor works hard at lining up audition after audition, hoping to make the short list to be "called back" for a role in a scheduled Broadway show. This is followed by a series of intense readings to persuade director, producer, and playwright that he is the best available in the city for that role. Four times out of five, the actor doesn't get the role. Then it's back to acting class to stay sharp for the next opportunity. The actor who is cast usually signs a run of the play contract, meaning that whether lead or walk-on, interesting role or not, the actor is wedded to it eight times a week, as he adds the play to his list of achievements on his resume.

Occasionally, the actor gives a standout performance, is noticed, can even achieve a kind of stardom (which in the theater does not mean the celebrity status that goes with the films or pop music)—but most often, after a good "run" the play quietly closes and the actors go back to lining up auditions again. When there are one hundred talented actors for every role, being between engagements is the norm.

In the 1960s, the regional theaters in the United States had the money and were in the habit of hiring a company of actors who could expect to be challenged in six or seven plays during the year. The actor would be assigned roles and would perform in one play at night while preparing the next play during the day. A play was usually scheduled for performances from four to six weeks, and then on to the next production. This limited run allowed enough performances to satisfy the theater's subscription audience and was short enough to avoid boredom for the actor. He perfected his performance at night and was breaking new ground in the daily rehearsals for the upcoming play.

I found that this structure suited me well, and I looked forward to each new assignment. The roles were cast within the company, so I usually competed with one or two staff actors, not hundreds as was the situation in New York; and, whatever the outcome, I got paid on Fridays.

I reported early for work my first day at the Cleveland Play House. Again, all the doors were locked. As I waited, a pickup truck entered the circular drive and came to a stop. A man in a plaid shirt jumped out, took my hand and introduced himself as David Hager—one of the five theatrical directors on the staff. He was a boy wonder who also excelled at designing and building sets and who occasionally acted. Hager and his wife, actress Sally Noble, had been employed by the Play House for several years, and both oversaw the national tour that the theater was developing in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation. They represented an exclusive breed of performer—the regional theater artist who signed up season after season. For these two, life revolved around the Play House. They were part of a “family of artists,” some of whom had been on staff for twenty years.

As Hager gave me the guided tour of the building, he explained that I was already cast in a comedy which would launch the 1962-1963 season. The opening play was one that I wasn’t familiar with—*Under the Yum Yum Tree*. I was given a featured role and was thrown in with the theater’s “big guns,” Bill Patterson and Bob Allman.

I came to view this “first time ride” as an education. The script was lightweight, but the amount of acting skill on stage was formidable. Patterson was a master at phrasing a line so that the audience enjoyed the full comic impact of it—their appreciation of him grew so that during the evening they became partners with him in relishing the words and ideas. The craft he exhibited using his vocal instrument, his eyes and his timing made me appreciate just how skilled my new colleagues were. In Erie, audiences laughed and enjoyed, whereas at performances of *Yum Yum Tree*, people exploded with laughter, sometimes lasting several seconds. It wasn’t the writing, it was the performing—truly a tribute to the talents of these men. I soon came to realize that if I kept my eyes and ears open and studied the experienced men around me, I would improve faster than I had expected.

Hager took me under his wing, and explained he wanted me to join his touring unit for that winter. I would play smaller roles

and learn to operate our portable light dimmer. I wanted big roles but I held my tongue. We headed West playing colleges and little towns, opera houses and downtown theaters where our name was sometimes up in lights. The tour was the result of the Rockefeller Foundation taking on the mission of providing to large and small towns complete professional productions of plays by world-renowned playwrights. Much of the cost was paid for by sizable grants to the Play House, and the benefit was that audiences everywhere in America could experience professional theater without leaving their community.