




Wendy
Lehr

2013 Distinguished Artist

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION



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Bone Dry, Jungle Theater, 2005. Photo © Michal Daniel



The House of Blue Leaves, Jungle Theater, 2006. Photo © Michal Daniel

Introduction

There is only one Wendy Lehr, but—as Walt Whitman might have put it—she contains multitudes. During what she fondly calls her “long apprenticeship” as an ensemble member of the Children’s Theatre Company (CTC) in Minneapolis from 1966 to 1986, she played more than 100 roles that endeared her forever to Minnesota theatergoers of all ages. In the years since, she has created indelible portraits of dozens more women, all memorable, who range from a senior-citizen cardsharp to an eccentric blueblood reigning over a crumbling mansion in the Hamptons.

No matter what the role, Wendy disappears into it. “It’s not that I think an actor should give up his personality,” she once told a documentary film crew, “but that it’s best to be able to neutralize all of the things that are specifically you so they don’t get in the way of playing a character.” Wendy proves her skill by so thoroughly inhabiting the disparate parts she chooses—mothers, daughters, rag dolls, wicked stepsisters, chickens—that she has never been in any danger of being typecast.

Wendy Lehr, in other words, is the consummate actor. But she is also much more. In fact, she says that she has four different résumés: one as an **actor**, one as a **choreographer**, one as a **director**, and one as a **teacher**. Dance was the art form that first riveted her, and she has kept up a disciplined practice as a dancer and choreographer since the days of childhood lessons in Pennsylvania with her adored Miss Arta. Lehr began to direct during her CTC days, to the delight of her fellow actors, who appreciate her empathic focus on assisting the performer’s process.

But because theater is an ephemeral art form, it is as a teacher of generations of actors that Lehr may leave her most lasting legacy. In the late 1960s, when CTC added an educational component to its mission, Wendy was a reluctant teacher. A perpetual student herself, she blossomed into the part so completely that in 2005 she helped to found the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists charter high school (which named its theater for her in 2010). Today, her former students routinely make their own indelible artistic marks in productions all over the country.

Wendy has worked and traveled widely, most significantly spending a few years in Arizona in the late 1980s, but she always comes home to the colleagues, students, and audiences who love her here in Minnesota. Actor, choreographer, director, teacher: she continues to play countless roles in our community, and we are endlessly fortunate that she has chosen to make a life as a Minnesota artist.

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Artist's Statement

The older I get, the more artistic statements I tend to make. Some are more thrilling than others, and it depends a lot on who is receiving the statement. Here is one: **I believe in the arts**, and theater is the art I am fortunate to have spent my life practicing.

Here's another: I believe that theater strives to show us the truth about ourselves—beauty, warts, and all. **It makes us consider the miracles around us** while we are busy getting and spending and laying waste our powers.* We, actor and audience, get to participate in huge emotions, hilarious miscalculations, the deaths of kings, the scariness of the unknown. On both sides of the footlights exists a safe arena for contemplating everything the artist's imagination has to offer.

It can be life-changing (and not always in immediately obvious ways).

It can be entertaining. The fourth definition of “entertaining” in *Webster's New World Dictionary* is “to allow oneself to think about.”

It can be completely and inexplicably stirring, and can reduce us to tears of laughter, joy, or pity—sometimes all at once. And we come together to participate—an act of community, from the word “commune” (*Webster's* again): “to talk together intimately, to be in close rapport.”

I love my friend Tom Olson's story of his “aha moment” in the theater: In *Cinderella*, the Fairy Godmother appears in the kitchen and says to Cinderella, “Come to the garden.” Cinderella rushes to the door. The Fairy Godmother says, “No, not that way . . . this way.” The scrim wall of the kitchen disappears instantly with a lighting change, revealing the breathtaking, snowy, sparkling, moonlit garden. Not by the mundane but by the magical can we recognize our heart's desire. This power obliges us to be serious about our work. Like Cinderella, we must believe in the magic for it to occur. We must embrace discipline and find the joy in hard work and courageous exploration.

The theater has been my continuous education. It has made me a student of history, psychology, art, music, literature, fashion, culture, anthropology, ethology. (That last one I just discovered in *Webster's*: “study of the characteristic behavior pattern of animals.” On various occasions I have shared the stage with nervous dogs, diarrheal kittens, a Shetland pony, and a jaguar with a bowling ball for a toy.) **Everything in my life is material for my work, and my work profoundly affects my life.**

It was not always thus. One begins in the theater for a set of reasons and stays for other reasons entirely. Along the way, you encounter those forces that will set your course. I have not spent a great deal of time in contemplation of the past, but I move forward with the knowledge that I ride on an ocean of influence. With this gift of looking back, I have so many people to thank for so much inspiration along the way. My teachers have been my colleagues and my colleagues have been my teachers.

These are the words I use as guideposts
in working with young people:

Imagination

See it, be it. Don't let a camera do the work for you. Read.

Encouragement

Be courageous. Don't edit yourself with
judgment and expectation.

Confidence

From the Latin *con fide*, meaning "with faith."
Believe in the process.

Appreciation

Know what to value. Let it grow in value.
Love the gifts you are given.

I did not discover the power of these concepts on my own. They have been iterated to me in infinite variety by so many mentors.

An interviewer asks, "Is there anything you would have done differently?" We discuss the "butterfly effect," and short of saying that it is an irrelevant question, I say—and mean—"no." **I think I arrived at this point in my life by saying "yes" to almost everything.** It is the first rule of improvisation. I have often thought, "Sure, I'll do it. I could be dead by then," only to find myself on a plane going to work in Hungary or—even scarier!—singing in 7/4 time.

My résumés (I have four: actor, director, choreographer, teacher) are vast and very eclectic. Not everything was a roaring success, God knows. It is not easy to learn from your "failures"; that takes perspective. Experience grants perspective. And my life has not been without sorrow. You can't be an actor without embracing your whole humanity. But as I get older, the longing and regret parts seem to have faded considerably. With any luck, I won't retire. The rehearsal hall, the dressing room, and the stage are like home to me. Directing is a great playground, and I will share in the classroom when asked. (Familiar cultural references for the teenaged, however, are fast eluding me: "You don't know Buster Keaton?!")

I took a Japanese dance class at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, one summer. After spending the first two weeks learning how to put on a kimono, we started to learn one dance. The teacher told us that in Japanese dance you learn one dance wholly, and then you may become a dancer. In a summer of study, we learned less than one minute of the dance.

There are only so many lessons to be learned in art, but we revisit them time and again with more presence, experience, and a deepening understanding.

And now, the world is too much with me, late and soon.* I really can only say, on this occasion, thank you, thank you, my friends.

Wendy Lehr Minneapolis, July 2013

*William Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much With Us"

Straight On Till Morning

by Graydon Royce

Her first name is Sheila. This surprises most people because we all know her as Wendy. She is the actor Wendy Lehr, the dancer Wendy Lehr, the choreographer Wendy Lehr, the director, the teacher, the administrator Wendy Lehr.

And, of course, she is the artist Wendy Lehr—**that rare individual whose work triggers within us “aha moments” of understanding, who has transformed countless spirits over the past 50 years and made the burden of being human a little lighter.**

We know her as Wendy because her grandmother, she says, “thought Sheila sounded like a movie star’s name.” Wendy, her middle name, was gentler, less brassy. It also is the name of the youthful heroine in J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, and it seems too perfect, too pat, that this artist who introduced so many thousands of children to the dazzling world of make-believe should be known by the name of a girl who resisted adulthood. Wendy (Lehr, that is, not Darling) has created memories—striking and fond and overwhelming—that even today haunt us with the sweet song of youth.

I close my eyes and think of Wendy—and her mates at the Children’s Theatre Company long ago—and I return to that quaint auditorium where they made magic. I think of Wendy and I see in my mind’s eye a snowy December day, my brothers and my sister running up the steps of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts to see *Cinderella* for the first time. I feel the warmth of the lobby; I smell the oranges being hawked in the aisles; I hear the carols being sung between acts; I remember these vivid and astonishing actors playing out a story that I knew by heart but which felt entirely new. I never wanted that Sunday afternoon to end.

Wendy is the portal through which I can recover those memories—scenes in my subconscious where I can again embrace all that was simple and innocent in my world.

So it is something of a shock to my system that Wendy Lehr is honored as a McKnight Distinguished Artist, an Ivey Lifetime Achievement winner, and the namesake of a theater in St. Paul. Are these not accomplishments that are bestowed only on eminent folks who are, shall we say, *full of much life*?



The Cookie Jar, Children's Theatre Company, 1972

I resist these facts because if Wendy is old and distinguished, then I must have gotten old, too, and that simply cannot be. Please, Wendy, tell me we are still young. Tell me that we were never reckless enough to get old. Unlock the door to my memories and let me know that it’s OK to live in the past. Let me see you again onstage acting the clown or breaking my youthful heart.

Please, take me and all the lost boys to Neverland, and we will never grow old.

I

There is just enough order among the ivies, hostas, flowers, and small shade trees to convince a visitor that Wendy Lehr’s backyard was intentionally planned. It is a raffish patch of ground that aptly complements what she calls the “dignified decay” of the charming south Minneapolis cottage that she shares with her partner, the singer/actor/director Gary Briggie.

We sit at a small table in the middle of this cool, green arbor, she with a small glass of water for refreshment; me with lemonade. As we begin to chat, I find myself the victim of creeping anxiety. Previous visits with Wendy have been easy to pigeonhole since they were all about the necessities of the ham-and-egg profession of journalism: There was space to be filled in the Sunday paper, or the Friday paper, and Wendy was a great subject. The math worked.

But what is my purpose now? Am I writing her life story—again? Am I asking questions to which I already know the answers? Or am I pursuing something deeper, a reflection on the career of someone I have admired for decades? I suppose that gets closer to it. Still, this essay depends on mere words, and words feel insufficient for my definitive testament on what the artist Wendy Lehr has meant to this community.

I have been at this game for many years. In 2001, Wendy was directing Linda Kelsey in *Biography* at Park Square Theatre, and I was sent out to interview them. I felt a bit like the eager kid in second grade who raises his hand and blurts out with excitement, “Miss Lehr, Miss Lehr, I saw you in that one show that one time. I was there and I saw you onstage.”

My seminal Wendy Lehr biography (everything that would fit into a 450-word newspaper story) came a few years later and felt quite special to me. Then other reporters on different occasions recited the same raft of facts and places, and this exercise lost its salt.

Mere journalism could not honestly convey the feeling of the scene, the happening, the zeitgeist that even today shivers with youth and fresh creativity. Wendy and her CTC collaborators in the 1960s and '70s were not just actors going through the paces of kitchen-sink dramas. They were the high priests of a beautiful ritual that transcended theater. And I was there to see it, to hang around the fringes of it.

I expressed my frustration to Wendy's longtime friend and mentor John Clark Donahue—that I simply cannot relate with my words the images and memories I see in my head. *The truth can only be grasped by corporeally existing in that place and time, participating in the incantations. It can only be experienced through the fierce audacity of youth.*

Donahue smiles knowingly.

“See, that's so important. You were there,” he says with an understanding of that moment. “You really had to be there to understand what we were doing.”

Yes, thank you. That's it. The story of Wendy, John, Bain Boehlke, Jack Barkla, Karlis Ozols, Gene Davis Buck, and all those others cannot breathe through verbs and nouns. I can only hope to open the banks of my subconscious and travel back in time to that crazy CTC bohemia—a heady salon of artists who believed in what they were doing and got high on their creativity.

Words fail to get at the heart of that night in February of 1973, the opening of Donahue's epic *The Netting of the Troupial*. My buddy and I, both aspiring actors, sneaked into the balcony of the Crawford-Livingston Theater in St. Paul and were blown away by this bizarre, messy, and stunning artistry. There were pigs onstage, live vultures picking at corpses, actors hanging in nets, Bain Boehlke in total body paint, his head shaved, Wendy looking at the scene impossibly bug-eyed, snakes slithering across the bare chests of women. What in the hell was going on? It was the real deal. A groove.

We crashed the cast party later just to get close to the artists, who on that night were the coolest people in the world.

Do you remember that night, Wendy? Do you remember seeing a skinny blond kid at the party taking it all in? Please, I need you to say that you witnessed that. I need you to remind me that I was that young, that full of awe and possibility.

II

I know that Bain Boehlke has written something for this McKnight book, so when I sit down with him in the Jungle Theater lobby, I ask about it—just so I don't repeat any of his material.

“Would you like to hear it?” he asks. “It's just upstairs.”

He returns and reads to me aloud, laughing at a few of his jokes, and at the conclusion his voice clutches with emotion. It is such a sweet moment, one that speaks to the relationship between two people thrust together first by chance and then by choice.

Today, their history together seems like fate as they catch a second wind (or is it a third?) on their ride into the eternal sunset. There is no actor other than Wendy who could have performed *The Gin Game* with Bain, and vice versa. Next season, their dance will continue with *On Golden Pond*. Their chemistry goes beyond acting, into simply being. It is the kind of ease that can only be built through 50 years of life together onstage.



He Who Gets Slapped, Children's Theatre Company, 1975



The Gin Game, Jungle Theater, 2008. Photo © Michal Daniel

"There was something about playing for young people," Boehlke says about their days in the creative playground of Donahue's CTC. **"There's this magic that young people bring to the theater, a heart that they bring."**

Of course, Bain and Wendy were part of a young cohort themselves.

"We created rock 'n roll!" he says, declaring the shibboleth of a generation that believed it would never grow old. He then launches into one of those Boehlke monologues that I never tire of hearing because he is so passionate and earnest.

"We were children of the '60s," he starts. "There was a profound transformation seeded in the culture with these dimensions of cultural enlightenment. It was an unbelievable decade to be a human being. It was a social earthquake."

Wendy Lehr eagerly jumped into the chasm left by that earthquake. Born in Easton, Pennsylvania, and raised in St. Louis, she went to study theater at Drake University in Des Moines ("I wanted to be Julie Harris," she says). On a trip to Drake, director Karin Osborne recruited Wendy for her Theatre On-the-Road troupe in Minnesota, and once the youngster saw the nascent 1960s theater scene in Minneapolis, there was no returning.

"How you gonna keep them down on the farm?" she says. "These people were so brilliant and bright. And they were older and more experienced."

For a dollar a day, plus room and board ("that wasn't too bad in those days"), Wendy was thrilled to ride an old bus and put on shows throughout Minnesota. She beefed up her résumé in Bemidji at the Paul Bunyan Playhouse and went to the University of Minnesota, where Donahue fell in love with her performance as a flapper. He and Boehlke just had to have her for their Moppet Players, then a ragbag of artists making theater in a West Bank storefront.

"Her birth as an artist and a person happened here," Boehlke says, explaining how a girl born on the East Coast could have such Midwestern sensibilities. "We were sort of fabled, truly original. We were creating something that was the real deal, and we were inspired by our imagination."

Work was being built out of art, ideas, movement, myth, paintings, improvisation, fables.

"Everyone was on the endorphin rush of this discovery," Wendy says.

She was keenly aware of the distinction of being the only woman who was a principal factor in the company, but she will not betray any sense that it was uncomfortable.

"You gotta have a woman in the club if you're going to do theater," she says. "They were very generous to me, and I never felt I wasn't part of the gang."

CTC was not the largest theater in the Twin Cities, but it was the most alive, with programming for children and adults alike. It was as if Diaghilev had been reincarnated to inspire a latter-day Ballets Russes with its wild air of creativity.

But in 1984, that raffish bohemia crashed up against the large and public institution that CTC had become. The gang was dispersed. Wendy remained as the standard-bearer, but she was more like the last one left at the party when the morning sun hits the front window. **Life would never feel that young and carefree again.**

Wendy has never shared her opinions on the troubles that forever changed CTC. All she will say—and perhaps this is all we are entitled to know about her personal feelings—is that she felt a great loss. She left CTC in 1986—left those wonderfully imaginative stage portrayals, those jewels for youngsters—and retreated to the desert, where she found a renaissance at the Arizona Theatre Company.

"It was so interesting to go to a venue where no one knew me, to see what they thought," she says. "And they were offering me these great parts. It was like they had set this huge plate of fabulous pastries in front of me and said, 'Take what you like.'"

She flourished in Arizona but returned to CTC under its new artistic director, Jon Cranney, a few years later. Somehow, for those of us of a certain age, it wasn't the same. She was still playing some of the same roles, but the building was new, the vibe was off.

It wasn't her fault. It was ours. **We youngsters who had fallen in love with CTC had gone and done a stupid, silly thing. We had become adults.**

Wendy, though, had found a way to stay young, with a new generation eager to learn from her. She had always taught, but in her reincarnation at CTC, she attacked this with the zeal of youth.



The Emperor's New Clothes, Children's Theatre Company, 1968



The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant, Children's Theatre Company, 1981

III

“She came to this thing about fostering the spirits of young people,”

Cranney says. “She didn’t just teach. She believed it was a mission, a calling, and that makes her unique in the theater world.” (This is particularly funny because Wendy admits that in the early days of CTC, when everyone was expected to work with children, “I would always ask Bain to teach my classes.”)

Music director Anita Ruth, who was in the studio with Wendy in the 1990s, says that **“she has an old-school sensibility about theater. She teaches physicality.”**

That starts with the body—the actor’s most important instrument. How do you stand onstage? How do you hold your head? How do you turn? When you walk, how do you walk as a specific character—as a princess (pronouncing it *prin-CESS*), as an 18th-century peasant?

And always, she would say, let the energy flow out the ends of your fingertips.

Wendy would lead by example as young actors searched for the body vocabulary of being young, old, nimble, achy, bored, excited—because she could be all of those things.

“It was like going to Juilliard, the education that those kids got,” Ruth says.

Wendy continued to indulge her passion for education and training as the founding artistic director of the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists.

“Teaching is just sharing your experience,” she says matter-of-factly (you will wait many hours to hear Wendy speak with convoluted philosophy). “I remember the great Uta Hagen would say, ‘Whenever you enter the stage, ask yourself, Where have you been? What do you bring with you?’

“When I worked with young performers at Bloomington Civic [directing *On the Town*], these two actors were having a hard time with a scene, so I asked them, ‘The last time we saw your characters, it was 10 in the morning; now it’s 4 p.m. What have your characters been doing all day?’ And they said, ‘Oh.’”

Wendy and I have crossed paths many times. Generally when we meet, she is onstage and I am in a darkened theater watching her eyes, her mouth, her arms and legs, her torso—looking for her reactions, listening to how she talks and sings.

Journalists have often written a phrase like this about Wendy’s career: “She plays crones, harridans, lumpy and fantastic creatures, daft fairy-tale jesters, and sad little clowns.”

No, she doesn’t. She never plays types that can be labeled with generic shorthand.

Wendy plays people, with names; whether they are real or not, they are real to her. She plays Pearl, Big Edie, Diana Dumbstrut, Strega Nona, Bananas, Queen Elizabeth, Fonsia, Madame Arcati, Amanda Wingfield. She is the person, not an approximation, and this is why her work has transformative strength.

When she portrayed Big Edie in *Grey Gardens* a few years ago, I experienced one of those moments that open the doors of perception. It seemed to me that the actor had in her memory all of Edie’s youth. She could see in her head the beaches where Edie swam; she could remember her debut, her prom, her wedding day.

I sensed that Wendy knew what Edie ate for breakfast on that very day, what time she would be feeling hungry again, when she expected the raccoons to poke their heads into the bedroom. If it appeared that her legs were stiff and her back ached, she would be able to tell you precisely what caused those pains. She knew how Big Edie buttoned her sweater, how she tied her shoes, where she put her glasses overnight.

There was nothing casual in that performance, and yet it all seemed so casual and natural. That was the genius of it. She was not playing a “harridan.” She occupied the person who was known as Big Edie.

This native ability was honed through years of practice. As a little girl, Wendy would watch movies and then mimic the characters for her family. There is nothing like a friendly audience to stoke the performer’s spirit.



Mr. Pickwick's Christmas, Children's Theatre Company, 1982

Romeo and Juliet, Children's Theatre Company, 1977



A Wedding and Variations, Children's Theatre Company, 1969



Variations on a Similar Theme, Children's Theatre Company, 1968

“The wellspring of an actor is imagination,” she says as I sip my lemonade. “If you are playing a prince, pretend you are a prince. That’s the first acting lesson. The other thing is empathy. Imagination and empathy.”

Perhaps her favorite notion, though, is the idea that “it’s not linear.” Wendy may find clues to a person in photos, in history, in fiction, in her personal life. The first idea may be last and the last first. It matters not. **Art is not linear.**

Armed with her research, she slips inside the character and begins to build, from the interior to the exterior. Wendy approaches her characters with the heart of Stanislavsky and finishes her performances with the physical acumen of Nijinsky. The creation—in its entirety—can be devastating.

“Did you ever see her in *A Wedding and Variations*?” Jon Cranney asks one morning over coffee. He describes the specific scene, the one that everyone who saw that Chekhov show at CTC knows. Wendy is a woman at a party, playing pin the tail on the donkey, and she is slowly abandoned by other guests.

“Oh, my God,” Cranney says, shaking his head. He stares out the window, still visibly moved by a performance from more than 40 years ago.

John Clark Donahue mentions the same play as he sifts through his favorite Wendy stories. There was a theatergoer who fell on the floor in tears, he says. **She can just ruin an audience.** In *He Who Gets Slapped*, Wendy filled the role of a lion tamer with bravado and courage—with a real (caged) lion. Even in her first role for the Moppets, Donahue says, he remembers how completely Wendy dwelled within the role of a chicken. He picks up an old photo.

“There she is,” he says, pointing to this creature, crouched meekly off to the side of the stage with a face that can only be described as the face of a chicken.

“**She is totally willing to go wherever she needs to go,**” says director Gary Gisselman, the longtime friend who lured her to Arizona and later worked with her again at CTC. “When she did Pearl [in *Cinderella*], she did the splits because that was what the character would do and she was the character. She does what’s required.”

The interesting thing is that for all the characters she portrays—all those named people with histories and personalities—she is never Wendy Lehr.

“**I cannot stress this enough,**” Donahue says. “**There is no Wendy Lehr type. She disappears. She is different every time.**”

This might be the single truest statement that gets at Wendy's essence as an actor. Many of the greats cannot hide themselves behind a performance. You might see old Charlie onstage and comment that he is giving a splendid performance tonight. You hardly recognize him in the wig and beard, but you know it is old Charlie because he is acting just the way old Charlie always acts.

Wendy Lehr disappears. She is an avatar who has found the spirit, the voice, the body, the movement, accent, and history of a specific person or creature—a life form with its own integrity. She climbs inside the skin and feels her way forward.

IV

There is a part of me that wishes Wendy Lehr were a porcelain doll that I could keep on a shelf, a gift from an indulgent uncle long ago. Each day, I would take her down and gently wind the key in her back. She would then give a performance. It wouldn't really matter what it was; it would only matter that it was the same performance she had always given—and it would matter that this perfect, immutable doll never grew any older.

As she performed, I would drift back in a trance, close my eyes, and see the images of where I was, what I was wearing, whom I was with, what I was thinking the first time I watched this doll. I could believe that I was a child again.

But even in *Peter Pan*, the girl grows old, and Wendy Lehr will have none of this nonsense. She allows herself to be hedged in on all sides by mortality. She accepts the vicissitudes of flesh and mind—the mortal elements of our eventual demise—and she has no time for the sentimental maunderings of a middle-aged man suspended in a haze of nostalgia.

“I am not the keeper of the past,” she says. “I did not go to my 50th high school reunion. I occasionally catch up with kids from CTC, but I don't look through old scrapbooks. **I ride forward.**”

Wendy speaks these words as evening closes in on her green garden, and my sentimental heart winces at her brisk pragmatism. I feel fragile and almost embarrassed because I really did want her to take me back to my youth.

Please, Wendy, couldn't we go back one last time? Tell me the old stories about the first time you did the splits as Pearl. Please do it for the kid in me. Can't we go back?

She is unmoved, and I come to accept that her valedictory is best appreciated as a dish of tough love. Wendy Lehr cannot live in the past because she is staying young in the present. She persists in the hard work of living in the theater. She is still studying and researching, memorizing lines over her morning granola, still inviting the discovery of new truths.

Wendy Lehr, at age 70, is still punching the clock, still teaching us about living with purpose, meaning, and discipline. Her work transforms us with its diligence and with a steely sense of determination that reckons every day a present challenge.

Wendy breaks us free from the prison of memories that were grand and glorious landscapes of experiences and people and places that shaped our youth—but that do not exist on the hard Earth of today. She beckons us from our immaturity to recognize that the task is at hand. Even as she continues to inhabit characters that exist in fantasy, she transforms us with the real humanity of her work.

Her life has become her art.

It is her life that forces us to ask ourselves whether we can bring the same elegance of effort, the same honesty and wisdom, to our own work.

To be old is a scary thing. But to be old with someone who refuses to be old in her work and still bravely moves forward to explore the mystery of our humanity—with the same zest she displayed 50 years ago—to be old with such a person is to be transformed by her hope, her work, her optimism.

Thank you, Wendy. You have made me feel young again.

Graydon Royce is a theater critic and fine-arts reporter at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. He has served on The McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award selection panel since 2008.



Dear Wendy

by Bain Boehlke

Wayne
and
Bendy

The Fourposter, Children's Theatre Company, 1974

Can you believe that we have known each other more than half a century? How wild!

We first met in the early '60s (you in your black plaid coat—was it fall?) on the West Bank of Minneapolis at the intersection of Riverside and 19th, when the Foshay Tower was the tallest building in the Twin Cities; when the Children's Theatre Company was still the Moppet Players, housed in an abandoned police station just across the street from the notorious Triangle Bar. The stripper Janney Charles held forth at the Excuse Club on the corner of Cedar and Riverside. Across the street at the Holland Bar, the lesbians held forth until at midnight an old black piano player led everyone in singing "Oh yes, He knows! Oh yes, He knows! Your Heavenly Father, He knows just how much you can bear!" Those were heady days, those early days of revolution.

You had been discovered at Drake University by director Karin Osborne, who brought you north to act in her new company, Theatre On-the-Road (named after Kerouac's novel—the little book that was a harbinger of the social transformation that in the next decade would rock the country). America was on the move! In our little way, so were we, playing as we were in every town hall, church sanctuary, and theater in every little town throughout the Midwest. John Donahue saw you in a 1964 University of Minnesota production of *Sing Out, Sweet Land* and, **enthralled by the modest human scale of your performance, recognized your genius.** Then, as fate would have it, in the mid '60s we Theatre On-the-Roaders (you, me, Karlis Ozols, Roberta Carlson) joined forces with John when the Moppet Players moved to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Children's Theatre Company was born.

The rest is simply one of the great chapters in the annals of Twin Cities theater history. In the hotbed of social revolution, we played in marvelous and brilliant creations that avalanched from John's incredible theatrical imagination. He always said that he wrote for the living actor, for the artist at hand; that your genius inspired so much of his writing. Inspired by your artistry, he wrote incredible roles for you, roles that you realized with such humility and sheer beauty. **You inspired us all to seek greater truth and poetry in the art of acting.** You set the bar so many of us aspired to.

During this period, of course, it was all Bain and Wendy, **"Wayne and Bendy."** **Our chemistry infused the theater's work with the essence of ensemble.** Somehow, we just clicked. I loved it. What poetry, what comedy, what living drama! What fun! We played everything from the two "thieves" in *The Emperor's New Clothes* (were they thieves? I can't remember!), to Ichabod Crane and the Widow

Weintraub in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, to Old Kieg and Mrs. Souss in John's wonderful *Old Kieg of Malfi*. I can't help but remember the last scene of that show, which featured Roberta's fantastic arrangement of Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" played and sung by a band in the orchestra pit while, simultaneously, a choir of sopranos seemed to soar from the back of the theater singing "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" (they share similar chord structure) as Mrs. Souss and Old Kieg left this world, surrendering it to the stronger hands of an emerging and hopefully enlightened youth. If my recollection serves, the production was dedicated to the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., who had just been assassinated.

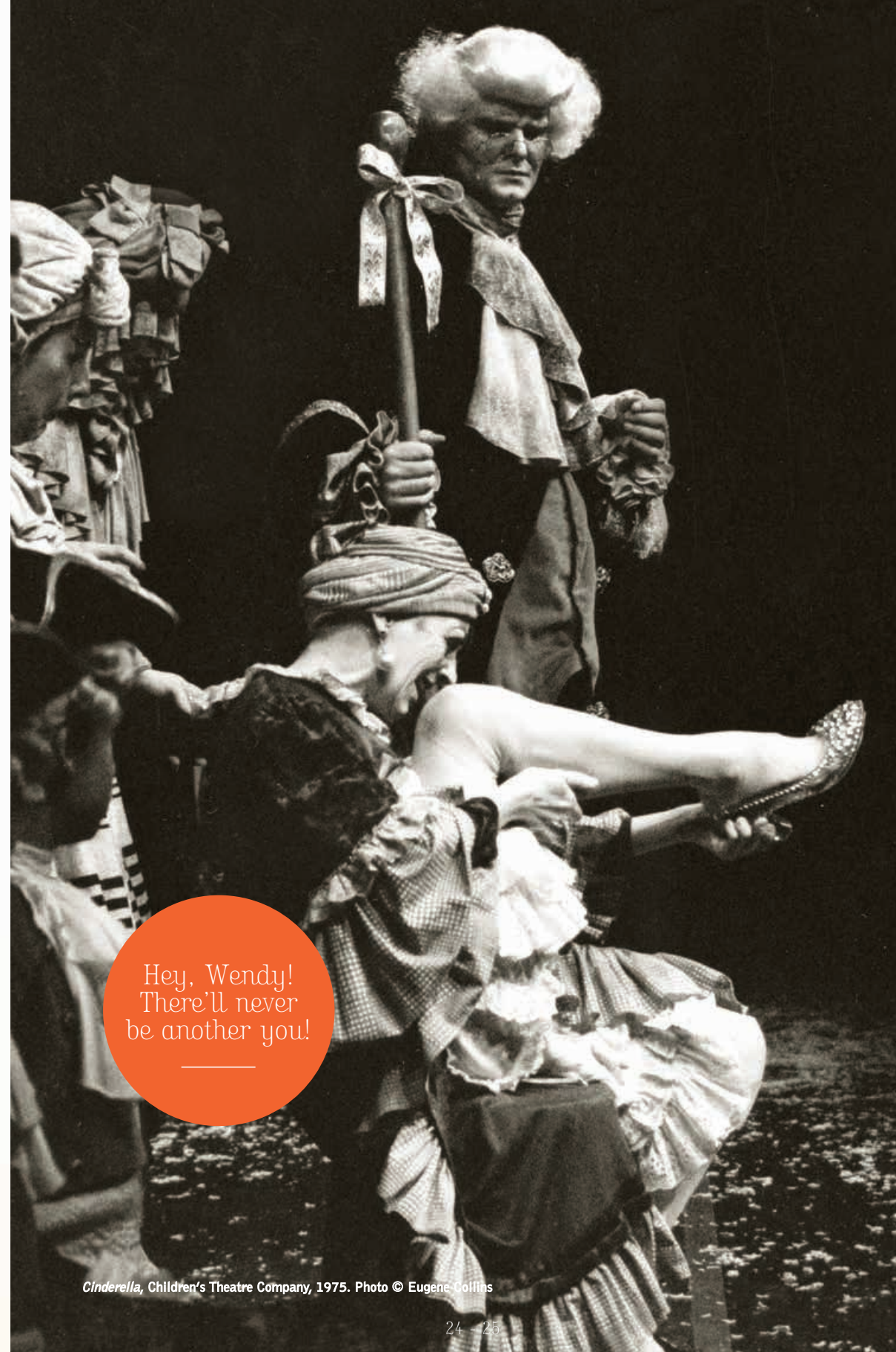
It seemed that every spring in those years at CTC we played in a Donahue-created show that set the whole town buzzing, dancing. Uncle Harry and Mrs. Panky in *Hang On to Your Head*, the Onion-Head Lady and the Old-Fashioned Man in *How Could You Tell?* And on and on. But I guess for all of us the most spirited, the most hilarious, the most heartfelt, the most memorable, was *Cinderella*, that legendary concoction of English panto, olio acts, comedy, and tears. You were absolutely, sensationally hilarious as my daughter Pearl Cramp (I know you have never forgotten me, your mother, the ugly Cinderella's wonderful stepmother, Rose Cramp). People still rave on and on and on—froth, even—in delighted remembrance of your shoe-fitting scene! Those were the days that gave birth to your legendary career in this city we call home. A sheer avalanche of art!

And now, these days, you have chosen to flaunt your genius at the Jungle: Bananas in *The House of Blue Leaves*, Fonsia in *The Gin Game*, Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. This holiday season you will enchant with *Driving Miss Daisy*, and next year we will once again tread the boards together in *On Golden Pond*. It's not over yet, girl! Cool!

As an actor, I love inhabiting the stage with you: Whenever I look "over there," **I always see a fully realized, living human being.** Never do I see empty style, but **always the simply (incredibly) heartbreaking, nuanced symphony of a brilliant woman being creative (inspiring, generous, beautiful).** Your subtlety, your wit, your joy. **You are the "always new."** **You are my forever choice of a dance partner at this incredible grand ball we call theater!**

Bain
Minneapolis, July 2013

Bain Boehlke was the associate artistic director of the Children's Theatre Company from 1965 to 1978 and founded the Jungle Theater in 1991. He was the 2009 McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist.



Hey, Wendy!
There'll never
be another you!

Cinderella, Children's Theatre Company, 1975. Photo © Eugene Collins



Notice the River

by Brian Goranson

Wendy is the founding artistic director of the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists (SPCPA), a public arts high school in downtown St. Paul. She brought to the school a strong passion for what she called “authentic training.” Her vision was to offer students of all ability levels a pre-professional program taught by current working professional artists. Wendy had much to offer the world of public education: levity, spontaneity, and perhaps most of all, perspective. She used to joke that the chapter in her memoirs about her time as a public-school administrator would be entitled “Important/Not Important.” (Or perhaps she meant “Important? Not important!”)

I shared an office with Wendy for one year at SPCPA. We had a lot of laughs. She taught me much. She had a knack for the pithy phrase that captured perfectly whatever we needed to accomplish. “Leave room for inspiration” was one of her favorites as she encouraged us all to stop trying to control things. I remember once, out of nowhere, and after a long silence as we were both banging away at our computer keyboards, she blurted out, “We’re always just fine until we start to believe that we are the ones who are making things happen.” And then she kept on working. She was likely just thinking out loud, reminding herself of something. She didn’t know it, but it was exactly what I needed to hear at that moment.

When you are with Wendy, she is totally present with you. There is not a part of her mind that is wandering off somewhere else; she gives you her whole self. I believe it is what makes her such an extraordinary performer—that ability to filter out the past and future and be with her scene partner. “That’s all we’ve really got, you know,” she used to remind me, “right now.”

Wendy would take the bus to St. Paul each day from Minneapolis. I don’t recall how it came up in conversation, but she talked about her ride from city to city and how she made it a point to remember to notice the river every time the bus crossed the Mississippi. It was a discipline. Then she said something like, “You know, you get caught up in your head, thinking about the things you need to do that day, worried about what hasn’t gotten done yet. It’s all just non-stuff.”

Her story stuck with me. Notice the river. Wendy shared that story once with the students at SPCPA, and it stuck with them, too. In fact, for a couple of years it became a kind of catchphrase for many of those young actors. When they observed somebody not being fully present in a scene or rehearsal, they’d say to each other, “**C’mon, notice the river.**” And though a part of Wendy’s legacy lies in this school she helped found, that lesson that she modeled—being present—continues to resonate there as strongly as any curriculum she ever created.

Brian Goranson, artistic director of SPCPA, has acted in and directed many productions on local and national stages and taught for seven years at the University of Minnesota. He served as chair of the SPCPA Theatre Department when the school was founded in 2005 and assumed his current role in 2010.

Fellow Explorer

by John Clark Donahue

Oh dear, sweet Wendy,
sweet lovely little gift,
as I think back some 50 years,
thousands of memory petals whirl and swirl
and collect upon the journey’s ground,
and still give so rich and deep a fragrance,
what a pleasure to be found.
Yet I struggle
to choose some handfuls
now to share, lest I, walking the road getting older
leave out some of the magic and wonder
that you have given.
Oh, what a nourishment profound!



The Red Shoes, Children's Theatre Company, 1983



Old Kieg of Malfi, Children's Theatre Company, 1968.
Photo © C.T. Hartwell

The first time I saw Wendy Lehr onstage was in a production of *Sing Out, Sweet Land*—a student-directed show at the University of Minnesota in November 1964. I watched with a kind of stunned delight as this bold-faced, painted flapper madly swept me along with dance and song, wit and wow! “Who is this creature?” I thought. “I have got to meet her: I need to tell her, ‘I want to work with you!’” From her student days to the present, Dame Lehr and I have been friends, fellow artists, teachers, improvisers, music lovers, happy cooks in the theater kitchen—but most of all, fellow explorers, prospecting for (and sometimes hitting) gold.

As a director, designer, and playwright with visions and dreams of magic possibilities onstage, I have been given the rich, fearless, multifaceted, tireless artistry of Wendy Lehr. *She is the clay, the paint, the medium for the moment* who can take my quick-hit impulses in rehearsal and run with them, *giving them life and substance, depth, and range* that give me the courage to pursue the vision and the inspiration, to know I will not be alone. What more can I ask for? The kaleidoscopic beads of her talents and skill seem to have no end.

In roles ranging from rag doll to mermaid to princess, from queen to hag-bag to angel, Wendy has drawn screams of joy and laughter, waves of tearful empathy, breathless anticipation, shouts of advice and support. A vast bouquet of characters so deeply realized, from the Brothers Grimm, Charles Dickens, Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, Hans Christian Andersen, Mother Goose, Maxim Gorky, Edward Albee, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dr. Seuss, and on and on. *Over and over, we tell stories of which part she played that was our favorite . . . but who could possibly choose?*

After a performance of *Raggedy Ann and Andy*, a little girl cried out to Raggedy Ann, “I have you at home on my bed!” Wendy, from inside her rag-doll head, replied, “Yes! And I’ll be on the bed when you get home!” So alive! **We are touched . . . we are moved . . . we are grateful.**

Director, set designer, and playwright John Clark Donahue founded the Children’s Theatre Company in 1965 and was its artistic director until 1984.

A Wonderful Conspiracy

by Thomas Olson



Raggedy Ann and Andy, Children's Theatre Company, 1972

No matter what, Wendy will always show up. She’s there. With you. Beside you. For you. A human being absolutely, utterly, completely present. As an actor, I find it’s such a challenge—but always a pleasure—to meet her character onstage and share in what she always seems to approach as a wonderful conspiracy.

When I first joined the Children’s Theatre Company as a novice teenage actor, I never dared suppose I would one day actually share the stage with this preposterously talented woman. But it came to pass, many times. My first experience in close company with Wendy was in a 1972 production of *Raggedy Ann and Andy* at the “old theater” in the auditorium of the museum. Wendy played Ann, of course, and I alternated with Myron Johnson in playing the part of Henny, the Dutch doll.

At the top of the show, Wendy and I entered together from the downstage left wing. I’ll never forget standing beside her at 10 in the morning (a performance for school groups), waiting for the house lights to go down. A deep sigh came from Raggedy Ann’s smiling, painted face, followed by the sweetest doll in the world muttering, “God help us, it sounds like a barnyard out there.” Then she whirled onto the stage, and let me tell you, if candy valentines could exude from a human being, they were there soaring out into the audience from Wendy.

Or, rather, from Raggedy Ann. Because Wendy wasn’t Wendy anymore. I, however, hadn’t yet completely transformed into a Dutch doll and was laughing behind my mask at the absurdity of the whole situation.

Indeed, our work was often absurd. And really quite challenging. In those days, we existed as a year-round performing troupe, an enormous production company, a training academy, and also a laboratory for the creation of new works, constantly coming up with new scripts. Another of my fondest memories was when we embarked on the dramatization of a story Wendy herself had imagined. It was a Nancy Drew sort of mystery, wherein a young girl sleuth, in the late 1920s, was crossing the Atlantic on a cruise ship and stumbled upon a dastardly plot of international intrigue. By that time, I had assumed the mantle of resident playwright with the company, and it was my great pleasure to work with Wendy and our director, Rich Ramos, in adapting Wendy's scenario into an actual script. The three of us spent several days together going through my draft line by line—and **all I remember from those days is laughter. Tears-rolling-down-your-cheeks laughter.** Who else can say that about their job?

Every single memory I have of Wendy—acting alongside her, observing her patient work with the many students who crossed our paths, collaborating on a script as co-authors, the numerous times she also served as the director of one of my plays—invariably produces a smile. And for (can it be?) 50 years now, we've been blessed to have her here in our artistic community. With us. Beside us. For us. I feel truly blessed to have been there, too.

Thomas Olson was part of the Children's Theatre Company—as resident playwright, dramaturge, actor, director, and more—from 1974 to 1990.



Soul of an Actor

by Gary Gisselman

The Minneapolis and St. Paul theater scene in the 1960s and '70s was an exhilarating school for a young director, alive with the energy of Tyrone Guthrie, Ed Call, Michael Langham, The Firehouse, Mixed Blood, and Theatre de la Jeune Lune. Most enchanting of all, there was a remarkable company of artists creating magic at John Clark Donahue's Children's Theatre Company—and at the center of that company, Bain Boehlke and Wendy Lehr.

Wendy was a revelation. Others will testify to her ability to transform, her great teaching skills, her inspiring direction—but what was clear then and has become more transparent with time is the astonishing emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and moral soul at the core of this talent.

In time, I got to work with Wendy, and here are some things I know about her: First, no one works harder. Yes, she has unique instincts, but they are instincts that have evolved out of hours and years of dedication.

Second, if she is in a production you are directing, she will make everyone working on the production better—including you. She sets the bar high and she is fearless. And you will laugh a lot in the rehearsal room, for **she is one of the funniest spirits I know.**

Finally, audiences not only fall in love with her; they believe that they know her, that she is their best self. In Minneapolis and St. Paul, and again in Tucson and Phoenix, it was clear patrons wanted to see her, be by her, know more about her, and be delighted by her in every production.

Two of my most memorable moments in theater were with Wendy: one when as a maiden aunt in Chekhov's *A Wedding and Variations* she thinks she is at the center of the game of pin the tail on the donkey, only to remove her blindfold and find herself alone onstage; and the other when as Mrs. Souss in *Old Kieg of Malfi* she packs herself in a cardboard box and mails herself away, thinking that she has outlived her usefulness. The lightning that lit those moments was Wendy Lehr.

Now, the thing I do not know about Wendy is how she does it, though I have watched her create for many hours. It is a mystery. I always feel she knows something that we all need, a secret she is always about to share. Both of the above moments reveal something about the ephemeral and phosphorescent nature of both theater and our lives, how brief and how brilliant and how it all does “melt into air, into thin air . . . and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”* Wendy knows about this, is this, and I am eager to see her reveal it again and again.

Gary Gisselman is the artistic director of St. Olaf Theatre in Northfield, Minnesota, and previously served as the founding artistic director of the Chanhassen Dinner Theatres, artistic director of the Arizona Theatre Company, and member of the artistic staff of the Children's Theatre Company.

*William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV, Scene I



The Art of Transformation

by Gary Briggie

Rehearsing the roles of King and Queen
in *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella*,
Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, 2011

Imagine spending your life with the artist you most respect and admire. The artist who is also your most revered teacher, a wise and intrepid soul mate who is your intimate confidante and steadfast companion on The Journey . . . pure joy!

I met Wendy in 1972 when the Children's Theatre Company was in residence at St. Olaf College, with John Clark Donahue creating an original poetic fantasy in Kabuki style. *Memory Petals* featured an inscrutable Bain Boehlke as the Narrator, with Wendy as an elusive, alluring, mysterious Beauty. As she glided across the stage, her downcast eyes lifting to peek from behind fluttering fans, every exquisite kimono-clad gesture spoke volumes to the fascinated Sailor (Myron Johnson) captured by her irresistible enchantment—yet none was more captivated than I. The feeling holds true for me to this day.

Attending CTC's spooky production of *A Christmas Carol* the following season, I was enthralled once again by Wendy's richly detailed embodiment of several contrasting characters—and I discovered a defining quality of her artistry: the gift of transformation.

Wendy's extraordinary ability to completely inhabit every breath, gesture, physicality, vocalism (is there a voice more clear, true, resonant, and musical?), as well as the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual landscape of another human being, is nothing short of miraculous. She slides into another person's skin with ineffable grace, compassion, empathy, and insight, calling upon her vast theatrical and personal experience, in concert with her seemingly limitless imagination, to flesh out a playwright's ideas and a character's feelings and behaviors with complete commitment—working both from the inside out and from

the outside in to leave no detail unexamined. Wendy calls herself an impressionist, an interpreter of others' thoughts and feelings, and she does in fact seem to disappear into her creations, illuminating them from within.

I marvel at her limitless range—from the petulant Pearl Cramp (whose shoe-fitting scene remains my single favorite display of her comic virtuosity), to a haunting Miss Havisham, adorable Dolly Levi, tragic Big Mama, heartbreaking Bananas, loving Amanda, ethereal Ariel, earthy Strega Nona, dotty Madame Arcati, piquant Fonsia, deluded Big Edie, wisecracking Jeanette—to name only a small portion of the galaxy of memorable portrayals she has imbued with her unique and astonishing artistry.

Although I pay very close attention, I have no desire to know just how Wendy works her magic; to do so would be to pluck out the heart of the mystery, to paraphrase Shakespeare—and, as Magritte noted, “Art evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist.”

After more than 30 years together, comparing notes about work over Wendy's splendidly prepared gourmet meals, I still couldn't begin to describe her process, except to note that it is thorough, joyful, intuitive, and just might have something to do with her Buddhist practice. I do know that there is no ego involved, no expectation or anticipation about what her probing explorations may yield. She has often observed that “the theater is not the place for exemplary behavior.” While there is no judgment in her process, there is a finely tuned critical faculty.

It has been painful for me to observe, being unable to advise or console, that Wendy's intrinsic, fundamental humility can leave her occasionally vulnerable to faltering self-confidence . . . but only momentarily. She is reassured by the fact that the word “confidence” actually has its roots in the Latin *con fide*, “with faith”—and faith she has, unquestionably, immeasurably.

So, my dearest darling Wendy, please forgive me for conjecturing that your gentle yet unwavering strength of mind, body, heart, and spirit, brilliantly complemented by your innate humility, may be one of the keys to your transformational artistry. This I do know:

You have transformed the lives and raised the consciousness of the countless audiences and students who have been fortunate to receive your selfless gifts.

Similarly, with the sacred gifts of your sublime self, you have transformed my life—our life—into a little bit of heaven. I adore you, Wendy. Always have, always will.

Gary Briggie began his career as a member of the Minnesota Opera Company and has served as director of opera at the University of Iowa, artistic director of Lyric Opera Cleveland, and artistic associate at Seaside Music Theater. He was a resident ensemble member of the Arizona Theatre Company and the Children's Theatre Company, and is currently on the faculty of the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists.



A Life in the Theater

by Myron Johnson

Sleeping Beauty, Children's Theatre Company, 1971

When I first saw Wendy, I was eight and she was onstage at the Moppet Players as some sort of chicken character in some sort of *Wizard of Oz*-like story. I had been in the Moppets for a year but had never seen her before. I was mesmerized. She didn't seem human to me at all. I actually thought she was a chicken woman. When we met backstage, she said to me, "Oh, hello, My," gave me a big hug, and walked on. That was the beginning of a 50-year relationship, both on and off the stage.

In those days, we studied and rehearsed all day and well into the early morning of the next day. She taught me by being an example. I would sit in the wings and watch her every move, see her develop a character, feel her energy on the stage (which I realized later is a force very few can summon), learn my discipline by trying to please her. I always wanted to make her proud. She complimented me by putting her arm around me in the wings, giving me a hug before we went onto the stage, or grabbing my hand as we came off, smiling at me as we went back to the dressing rooms.

I have had many teachers in my life, but no one as silently powerful as Wendy—and no one else whose lessons have lasted me a lifetime. By the 1980s, she and I were friends and colleagues. We transitioned effortlessly from a student-teacher relationship, yet somehow she never stopped teaching me. I was a very serious child and young man, but Wendy taught me to enjoy the theater and every moment spent in it. I have laughed and cried so hard with Wendy in rehearsals that I thought I would get sick.

I was her student, then her colleague, and eventually her director, but all the while we have been explorers together on a mission. **"Go there," she'll say. "Be there. Don't be afraid. If you can see it . . . make it happen!"** That's the lesson that has made me who I am and helped me to be an artist. I owe Wendy much. She has held my hand for half a century.

As time went on and I created my own life in the theater, I got to watch Wendy teach hundreds of other young people the same lessons. I like to think that our time together was unique, but there you go. She keeps teaching me.

Choreographer Myron Johnson joined the Moppet Players at the age of seven, was a longtime member of the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis, and founded Ballet of the Dolls, the Twin Cities' first year-round dance-theater program, in 1986.





Notes

from Friends
and Colleagues

Can one be a grande dame of the theater at the age of 25? Wendy Lehr was. I spent two seasons with Wendy at the Paul Bunyan Playhouse in Bemidji in the late 1960s. I remember that we celebrated her “quarter-century” with reverence for that milestone of maturity.

Wendy could do anything. The “grande dame” title perfectly suited her divine portrayal of 50-something Judith Bliss in Coward’s *Hay Fever*; in which I played Sorel, her daughter. A few weeks later I played mother to her mercurial, touching Sally Bowles in *I Am a Camera*. Her range was astonishing.

Each summer, we would do an old-fashioned melodrama for which we would create olios—entr’actes that were complete non sequiturs performed in front of the curtain as the scenery was being changed behind it. Wendy was always the inspiration for these hastily contrived moments of idiocy. A particularly stunning one involved Wendy playing a caterpillar, dancing balletically to a German version of “Shine, Little Glowworm, Glimmer, Glimmer,” metamorphosing into a butterfly, and left dangling from a rope suspended from the flies. She did Isadora Duncan justice.

Wendy’s claim to grande dame status went beyond her glorious talent. It was and is more than justified by her commitment to her craft, her unfailing generosity and respect toward her fellow artists, and her utter grace as a human being.

MARTI MARADEN

ACTOR, DIRECTOR, AND FORMER ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ENGLISH THEATRE
NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE, CANADA
STRATFORD, ONTARIO, CANADA

My favorite Wendy Lehr role is her next one. I’ve watched her, in various guises, for 50 years, and I can’t honestly say that she’s grown as an actor. She’s always been at the top of her form, perfectly in sync with the character (from Cinderella’s meanest sister at the Children’s Theatre to the addled wife in the Jungle’s *The House of Blue Leaves*) yet lightly stamping each role with an “X” quality that would make it hers forever in my mind, no matter how many other people would play it. It’s not that Wendy transforms herself into a character; rather, she transforms the character into herself—not the Wendy we know, but the one she might plausibly have been, given these particular circumstances. She believes it; you believe it. There’s a magic here that goes deeper than “star power,” but let’s keep that cliché for a minute, because a star is what she is and what she has always been, not merely a versatile actor, a boon companion, etc., etc. Can you visualize Wendy as Lady Macbeth? I can, and it shivers my timbers.

DAN SULLIVAN

PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA SCHOOL
OF JOURNALISM & MASS COMMUNICATION
MINNEAPOLIS

I first met Wendy in the early days of the Children's Theatre Company. I was a fledgling actor, straight out of college, and we were cast as sisters in *Beauty and the Beast*. As an actor, I found watching Wendy to be a revelation. I learned about economy, truth, and taking chances. She paints in bold colors and with an expansive palette, but the work is always grounded in humanity. Since then, I've had the pleasure of being directed by her and acting onstage with her, and it's always been a banquet.

There are countless moments of breathtaking originality I've witnessed from Wendy, but one of her most understated performances stands out in my memory: Fonsia Dorsey in *The Gin Game* with Bain Boehlke at the Jungle Theater. It was an experience of seeing a master at the height of her game. Certainly, her long professional relationship with Bain created a delicious chemistry—but for me, watching Wendy was seeing a kind of alchemy. Her years of experience, fresh approach, ability to access emotion, and deep understanding of the role created what can only be described as magic. She accomplished that thing that every actor hopes to attain: she became someone else. And for that time, I forgot she was Wendy. It remains in a handful of the most memorable experiences I've ever had in the theater.

LINDA KELSEY
ACTOR
MINNEAPOLIS

Summer stock, final dress, hours to opening night: Onstage, Wendy runs up the set's flight of steps, slips into a crevice, and slashes her thigh. Twenty stitches and she's back in time for curtain, skipping up that flight of steps in high heels throughout the two-hour play, without flinching or dropping a line.

I was an astonished 17-year-old apprentice, nearly missing my cues in the light booth. Then and now, Wendy shrugs, "no big deal." She was 23. I was weeks out of high school, passionate for a life in theater, and being there that summer at the Paul Bunyan Playhouse in Bemidji was the most thrilling gift I'd ever been given. I watched Wendy closely, awed, aspiring, absorbing whatever I could: her no-nonsense professionalism and playful, joyous invention onstage; offstage, her curiosity and open glee in momentary pleasures.

I wept, gawped in wonder, or laughed to tears at the fearless choices she made onstage every week. I'd seen great actors at the new Guthrie, but here, sharing a cabin with me, was this peerless performer! (Unrivaled and still modest these decades later.) Equally marvelous to me, she was a generous teacher and respectful of my extreme naïveté. Even in the midst of handling a leading role each week, she'd take time to teach me dialects for my small parts, or the tricks of character makeup. But the incomparable lesson, I knew even then, was observing how to live a life.

HEATHER LYN MACDONALD
FILMMAKER
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Of course Wendy is a hilarious comedienne and brilliant actor . . . the world is in agreement about that. But those aren't the first adjectives that come to my mind when I consider my friend, my pal. I think of Wendy first as elegant and principled.

Wendy and I teach at a summer music theater camp for children. We've been doing it together for years and years. Everyone's crazy about her, kids and staff alike. Each day, right after lunch, she spends about an hour choreographing the 25 sugar-high students in a large-group finale. It's a time when normally one's fellow teachers would be in the lobby, catching up on phone calls or emails. Not so at our camp. We all sit in the theater just to watch her work her magic with the children. None of us can take our eyes off her for fear we might miss a riotously funny piece of physical comedy as she demonstrates how not to do something. And all of us hang on her every word lest we miss the latest Wendyism (e.g., "it's like teaching a bunch of eels how to can-can"). As she bobs and weaves and gently places children in their new positions, as she demonstrates how to properly execute a lift, as she encourages, cajoles, and instructs (all of it done with gentle humor and loving respect for her students), we realize that we're in the presence of a true master teacher—one who can not only do everything she asks of her students but who can inspire all of us fortunate enough to be in her presence to be the very best people we can be, and who teaches us how by her magnificent, elegant example.

I love listening to Wendy speak. Her beautiful diction! Her thoughtful, well-chosen words! The elegance of her language (salty as it can sometimes be, her rapier wit always at the ready) is a reflection of the elegance of her spirit. Wendy walks the talk. Whether she's trekking by bus around the Twin Cities or preparing an incredibly delicious and beautifully presented meal, whether playing bridge with her cronies or doting on her beloved Gary, hers is a life well lived. Her elegant, principled spirit shines through no matter what she's doing, where she is, or with whom she's doing it. One can't be exposed to Wendy for very long without realizing that hers is a unique and wonderful soul. Never insipid, never fawning, ever brilliant, ever honest, she is beyond the best. No one—absolutely no one—is more deserving of this honor.

JANIS HARDY
SINGER AND TEACHER
GOLDEN VALLEY, MINNESOTA



Lettice and Lovage, Theatre de la Jeune Lune, 2005. Photo © Michal Daniel



The Importance of Being Earnest, Children's Theatre Company, 1976

I did a Fringe show at the Jungle Theater, and the attendance was very light, but Wendy was there. Later, as I drove by Wendy's bus stop, she yelled to me, "You were fabulous!" I cannot begin to describe how encouraging that was, but that's how Wendy is.

Wendy was in the first play I did at the Children's Theatre Company in 1966. That was when I discovered that she can work with anyone, in any venue, with actors of any range, and bring out the best in them. Watching her as the bewildered mother in *Hang On to Your Head* in 1967 **brought tears to my eyes and inspired me to join the company.** Since then, I have been fortunate to have Wendy play my wife, my lover, and my daughter.

While directing, Wendy would always say, "Who has the acting flag?" This way of focusing actors on the key moments onstage has enlightened so many actors, myself included. Simple and yet profound.

"Wendy Lehr saved my life," a former student of hers told me. "I mean, she really saved my life. I was in a terrible auto accident, and while I was lying in my car I kept thinking what Wendy said in class years ago: 'Breathe, just breathe, relax and breathe.'"

GERALD DRAKE
ACTOR
MINNEAPOLIS

Wendy Lehr has the ability to set you off on the kind of laugh that makes you hold your sides and wipe tears from your eyes. This is a person you want around if you work a lot with teenagers, and we share this privilege, delight, honor, and occasional exasperation with her.

We were working on "America" from *West Side Story* with 25 girls. "This needs to be more south of the border," she said. "We need to be in Puerto Rico by showtime, and we've only made it to Bloomington." Later, to guffaws: "I'd settle for Des Moines at this point."

Wendy, who has played her share of queens, is the queen of the bon mot. On the spur of the moment, she manages to say exactly the right thing to break the tension, to encourage, to redirect, to uplift. A couple of weeks ago, the teenagers were working on mastering a jazz square. "If you do it like that," she said, "people will just think you are adjusting your underwear." Hilarity reigns, adults and teens together.

She is the best of all possible colleagues, expert at shiatsu when needed, and so gracious as to step back despite her brilliance and knowledge and let us less able-bodied take the lead. When she begins to voice an opinion, though, the room falls silent because we know that what is coming is exactly, succinctly right. We cannot imagine a more spectacular colleague and friend to share time and a pop with . . . and, oh my gosh, she cooks, too. (By the way, **she is also a breathtaking motivator:** the *West Side Story* cast made it way farther south than Des Moines.)

MANON GIMLETT AND THAXTER CUNIO
DIRECTOR AND MUSIC DIRECTOR
PRELUDE: SINGER-ACTOR PERFORMANCE LAB AT MACPHAIL CENTER FOR MUSIC
MINNEAPOLIS

I've had the great good fortune to be Wendy's friend for more than 40 years. In that time, we have seen each other through questionable hairstyles, strange fashion choices, and the vagaries of a career in the arts. We have seen each other through the emotional ups and downs that come with the process of becoming functional adults, and rejoiced with each other as each of us found "The Right One." She has a sweetness and a generosity of spirit that are a joy to all of us honored with her friendship. (That's not to say that there haven't been enough hilarious misadventures to fill the book that neither one of us would dare to write and that I promised not to mention in this tribute.)

Wendy's work is her gift to all of us. As an actress, she plumbs the depths of any character she portrays with humor, understanding, and a remarkable insight into the physicality of the character—even if that means doing the splits in *Cinderella* at an age when some of us might think twice about standing for extended periods. And as a director, she can sum up the essence of a problem: "The orange backdrop is very inventive, but I think perhaps we need something a bit more . . . *subdued*."

I cite humorous instances, because it is harder to express the moments of genuine and sometimes painful beauty (such as in Chekhov's *A Wedding and Variations*: alone onstage as the blindfolded victim of a group of partygoers who have abandoned her). **Wendy's integrity and compassion illuminate her work and enlighten the hearts and souls of all of us privileged to have worked with her or seen her onstage.**

ROBERTA CARLSON
COMPOSER
MINNEAPOLIS

Most of what I can claim of craft comes from Wendy, who was one of my teachers at the Children's Theatre Company. I studied mime and other movement forms with her, and had the distinct pleasure of spending my teen years onstage with her or watching her from the wings—essentially a master class. **As a teacher she was compassionate and firm (she didn't just look at you, she looked *into* you); as a performer, generous and devoted.** Wendy is a maestro of emotional and physical clarity, expansion, and precision, whether she's breaking your heart or making you laugh. She shared her dedication with students and collaborators, leading warm-ups in the green room before every show, using images to communicate. I remember how my hands felt after she said they were tied to balloons, or how it felt to draw a circle the size of a plate while rolling my head. This warm-up ritual imparted to me that artists are daily called upon to prepare themselves to do what they love. I learned from her that being a performer is an honor, and that humility in the face of the craft is good and right. Not false humility, but true humility: to know what you know and to know what you don't know, without judgment regarding either, because both are fluid.

ANNIE ENNEKING
ACTOR/FIGHT DIRECTOR/SONGWRITER
MINNEAPOLIS

When I first arrived in Minnesota, every person I met asked me if I knew Wendy Lehr. I had seen her impish face and read about her skills in places like *American Theatre* magazine, but it took a few weeks before we actually came face to face. She was legendary, and although the legend spread far and wide, she very specifically rooted herself as a Minnesota artist. In Minnesota, she has blossomed and thrived.

When we finally met, she was even more charismatic and beautiful than described. There is an unusual electricity in the air when she is around, and always an element of mischievous surprise. She is a true woman of the theater, an artist who has explored acting (comedy and tragedy), directing, choreography, teaching, and mentoring, and occasionally you can even convince her to bring all of her precious gifts to musical theater. From the moment I met her, I experienced her deep knowledge and dedication to craft.

We became instant comrades and finally got to work together on a quirky musical called *Grey Gardens*. In the rehearsal hall, her modesty was overwhelming because, as far as I was concerned, she could do no wrong. She was not an actress playing a part; she *was* the part. Every breath she took, every note she sang, was truthful and undeniably coming from the mouth of the character she was playing. It was stunning, and it was a privilege to collaborate with her.

By now, I've seen Wendy in many productions, and inevitably she always transforms herself into another unforgettable character filled with details, eccentricities, a textured human life—and yet, all of them are so vividly her own. They are Wendy. That's her genius. **Whether she is acting, directing, or being your friend, she is present and breathing her life into the moment.**

JAMES ROCCO

VICE PRESIDENT OF PROGRAMMING AND PRODUCING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR,
ORDWAY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
ST. PAUL

Theater is all about play and Wendy is pure play. Even the tragedies she performs are playful . . . which, of course, makes them all the more tragic.

In 2005, I asked Wendy to join me in my company's production of *Letitice and Lovage*. For the



Letitice and Lovage,
Theatre de la Jeune Lune, 2005.
Photo © Michal Daniel

most part, it was just the two of us onstage. Rehearsals and performances lasted several months, and during that time I had the gift of watching her brilliant and fearless creativity at work. In the show there was a suspended "staircase to nowhere" that hung from the 45-foot grid, and every night she ran up those stairs like a gazelle all the while speaking Peter Shaffer's text. Amazing.

Wendy understands that the precision of a movement, the twist of a wrist, the stillness of a moment, or a leap up a suspended staircase while speaking a monologue makes the magic of theater happen. Wendy is not only a gifted source of the art of theater and education in our community; she is a national treasure. Anyone who shares the experience of theater with her, whether onstage or as an audience member, is truly lucky.

BARBRA BERLOVITZ

CO-FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, THEATRE DE LA JEUNE LUNE
MINNEAPOLIS

Wendy Lehr is a human kaleidoscope, a multidisciplinary artist and educator. At the Children's Theatre Company, she taught mime (oh, how we would laugh! So would my sister when I showed her "what we did today!"), oral interpretation, movement, yoga, breath control . . . She modeled an insatiable curiosity and a killer wit that resisted gravity and despair. She plunged with us into *Spoon River Anthology*, Bertolt Brecht, silent tension, Shakespeare, and questions like, "Wouldn't this Yogic stuff about chakras be interesting to apply to our characters?"

And then to work with her onstage and watch her embody her teachings, showing up before a performance a blank canvas: sweatpants, kerchief, humility, and a playful fearlessness. In *The Little Match Girl*, the audience would first see her onstage as a wizened, tiny grandmother. Ninety seconds after her exit, she'd enter as a queen, regal and radiant.

What we saw backstage was the alchemy. She didn't just do a quick costume change; she rearranged her molecules. She puffed up like a Macy's balloon and entered the stage a different person. She grew six inches and inflated into a gorgeous queen. That she would perform this magic after a 10-show week was an example of her joyful discipline. That she would do it while leaning over to us and wisecracking, "I feel like I just walked to Benares on my tonsils!"—well, that's pure Wendy.

Stages and screens around the world are peopled with talent she has fostered. We all have our stories. And we all laugh at the memories and love her dearly.

DANE STAUFFER

ACTOR/SINGER/WRITER/EDUCATOR
LOS ANGELES AND MINNEAPOLIS

When I sign up to do a show with Wendy Lehr, I always know that I am in for a fun ride. She is truly a Renaissance woman of the theater—a wonderful director, a terrific choreographer, a great dramaturge—who can create an entire culture onstage just by the way the characters walk and cock their eyebrows. She knows how to create terrific stage pictures with actors, sets, costumes, and lights.

She is also one of the best actresses the Twin Cities (and elsewhere) have ever seen. Probably because she spent much of her career with the Children's Theatre Company, she is an amazing physical actress. Having just done a '40s period show with her and a young cast, I still delight in remembering her demonstrating for the actors: With complete abandon, she would suddenly throw herself across the floor during rehearsal to show them how to do a "drunk walk" or how to be on the end of a leash of an imaginary dog gone wild. The looks on the cast's faces were priceless, and of course the rest of us in the room were rolling on the floor because she was so funny.

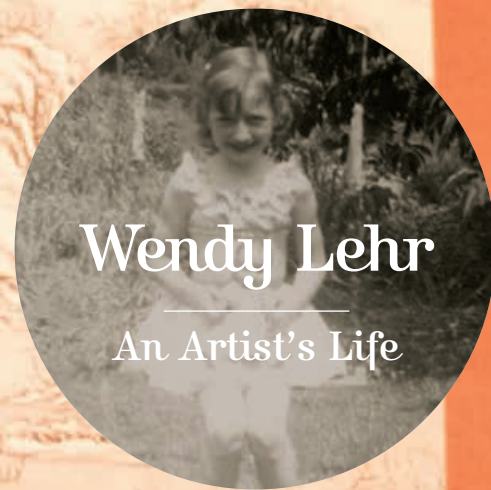
Outside of the theater, Wendy is just as funny as at rehearsal. So many social gatherings, opening night parties, dinners—and so many great one-liners. Wendy, on the occasion of describing a particularly raucous dinner party, said that "everyone was laughing so hard the wine came out their noses!" You know what? At every Wendy-fueled occasion for laughter, that's honestly almost the case.

ANITA RUTH

MUSIC DIRECTOR
MINNEAPOLIS



曉窗風流未改
幽素今古只
如斯可知學士
玄谷畫便是相
公得畫詩
乾隆甲子楊
月漸鏡



Wendy Lehr

An Artist's Life

Prologue

I constantly remind my students that you don't get to call yourself an artist. The title is bestowed on you by others who presumably know what constitutes that distinction.



Wendy Lehr

An Artist's Life



The Lehr family, 1946: Philip, Charles, Sheila, Wendy, Mary, Bonnie



Wendy, age 6

Chapter 1

1942-48

Born in Easton, Pennsylvania, in 1942, I am the third child of Mary and Charles. My brother and sister, Phil and Bonnie, cast me in their film-inspired plays, performed on weekends for a captive audience of relatives. My sister directs, my brother is special effects, and I get to act. My sister cuts my hair to make me look more sophisticated for a courtroom drama. We do site-specific events such as an all-children wedding procession through town and Esther Williams-inspired water spectaculars under the swing set in the backyard. We read and are read to voraciously. When I am four-ish, we see the ballet in New York (the Sadler's Wells company, I think). Suddenly, **I see my fantasy world made manifest, and I know I must study ballet.** We all take classes from the beautiful Miss Arta.

Chapter 2

1949-55

We move from the town to the country. I suffer a setback in health, but **I keep reading and study the stars. I want to be an astronomer.**



Miss Arta's ballet class: Wendy, first row left

Chapter 3

1956-59

My father is transferred to St. Louis. At Webster Groves High School I walk into the 99-seat "Little Theater" and smell the greasepaint. For almost four years, I do everything humanly possible to live in the theater. I know with the implacable certainty of a teenager that this is my calling.

Chapter 4

1960-61

I go off to Drake University for no particular reason, but it is here that the vital connection is made. Karin Osborne, the director of Theatre On-the-Road, comes to Drake in my sophomore year and offers me a job.

Thank you to my parents, who say yes, and I find the place I am meant to be: Minneapolis.

What a place, what people, and I get paid room, board, and a dollar a day!



Pygmalion, Paul Bunyan Playhouse, 1965

I transfer to the U of M. I am a terrible student, but I meet Bain Boehlke, Roberta Carlson, and Karlis Ozols, and I continue to tour with Theatre On-the-Road. Heady times: George Grizzard is playing Hamlet at the Guthrie and reads *The Prophet* after hours in my University Court apartment.

Chapter 5

1961-66

I see *The World of Mother Goose* at the Moppet Players with John Donahue directing and performing. I have a profound experience. Here I am, wanting to have a career, and Mother Goose sings to a young boy, **"Where Are You Going, My Little One?," and that was the question. The answer: I am going to John and the Children's Theatre Company.**



The Princess and the Pea, Children's Theatre Company, 1984

After a couple of detours to summer stock in Bemidji and a number of months working in a gift shop in Princeton, New Jersey, where my parents were then living, I arrive in 1966 to assist the one-year-old Children's Theatre Company as ticket seller, bookkeeper, props builder, costume assistant, and actress. This is the beginning of my apprenticeship.

Chapter 6
1966-86

I have a 20-year apprenticeship with CTC. I learn, oh how I learn, about everything under the sun. John tells the company they must teach. Teaching, while at first confounding, helps me articulate my process. It is as profound a practice, in its way, as performing.



Children's Theatre Company staff, 1969.
Row 1: John Jenkins. Row 2: Gerald Drake, Jack Barkla, Wendy Lehr, Bain Boehlke, John Clark Donahue, Terry Crabb. Row 3: Karlis Ozols, Frank McGovern, Linda Jenkins

Chapter 7
1986-90

In 1986 we (my darling Gary Briggie, John, Bain, and others) pack up and join Gary Gisselman at the Arizona Theatre Company. Gary G. generously offers me role after role to challenge and engage my development. In the summers, I direct operas and get thrown into the world of musical theater. We make so many new friends from around the country.



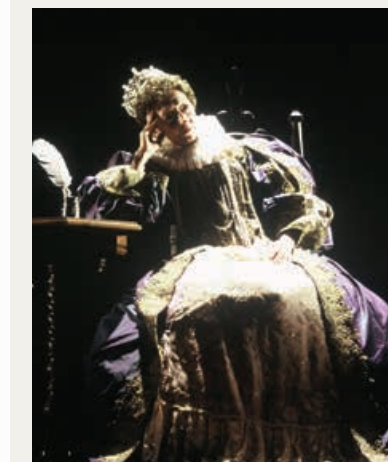
A Thurber Carnival, Theatre On-the-Road, 1964



Master Class, Seaside Music Theater, 2001.
Photo © Daytona Beach News-Journal

Chapter 8
1990-98

Many theater companies begin to struggle financially. We leave the comfort and stability of Arizona and head back to Minneapolis. I take the position of associate artistic director/director of education at the Children's Theatre Company. *Being in charge, I no longer have the luxury of someone else making the decisions.* I learn again; this time, it is a new set of skills. I direct, teach, administrate, and too rarely act. I try not to disappoint Artistic Director Jon Cranney's faith that I can do it all.



Mary Stuart, Park Square Theater, 2003.
Photo © Petronella Ytsma

Chapter 9
1998-2005

I leave CTC (although I return for one more beloved *Cinderella* and will return again in 2012 to act in *Mercy Watson to the Rescue*). *I learn what most younger actors know: how to freelance.* This time is a crazy quilt of work. Stalwart friends extend enough invitations to keep life interesting and viable. I have a fabulous seven years of directing and acting at Park Square Theatre, mostly with Linda Kelsey.

Chapter 10
2005-13

I help create a curriculum and an artistic direction for a new charter high school, the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists. I use everything I have ever learned anywhere to do this job. I am assisted by the most talented, dedicated, compassionate artists/teachers, and after five years can hand the reins to Saint Brian Goranson.

My acting and directing career has a surprising revival. I play in *Lettice and Lovage* with Barbra Berlovitz at Theatre de la Jeune Lune; *The House of Blue Leaves*, *The Gin Game*, and *Blithe Spirit* at the Jungle Theater; *Grey Gardens* (for which I thank James Rocco) in an Ordway Center/Park Square Theatre co-production; and (oh what fun!) *The Full Monty* with Theater Latté Da.

I receive more recognition than anyone could hope for:

The 2008 Ordway Center Education Award for Vision

The 2008 Sally Irvine Award for Commitment

The 2010 Ivey Lifetime Achievement Award

Dedication of the Lehr Theater at the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists

And now . . . the 2013 McKnight Distinguished Artist Award!



Driving Miss Daisy, Jungle Theater, 2013. Photo © Michal Daniel



Ivey Awards, 2010

Chapter 11

To be continued . . .



The Productions

Sweethearts Death Takes a Holiday The Importance of Being Earnest The Man A Phoenix Too Frequent The Glass Menagerie Bull in a China Shop The Rope Dancers Hippolytus John Brown's Body Sing Out, Sweet Land *As Director* Spoon River Anthology The Importance of Being Earnest Five Finger Exercise Bell, Book and Candle A Cup of Trembling A Thurber Carnival Prodigal Lazarus Laughed My Three Angels Pygmalion The Fantasticks Under the Gaslight The Haunting of Hill House Summer and Smoke Thieves' Carnival Hay Fever I Am a Camera Billy the Kid The Diary of Anne Frank Oklahoma! Charley's Aunt Barefoot in the Park Waltz of the Toreadors Private Lives Come Blow Your Horn A Period of Adjustment Babes in Arms Two for the Seesaw Peg O' My Heart The Miracle Worker The Boy Friend Spoon River Anthology Blithe Spirit Oliver Twist The World of Mother Goose Beauty and the Beast Old Kieg of Malfi The Emperor's New Clothes Variations on a Similar Theme Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves A Christmas Carol The Little Mermaid How Could You Tell? Johnny Tremain Chekhov's A Wedding and Variations The Legend of Sleepy Hollow Cinderella Kidnapped in London Good Morning, Mr. Tillie Alice in Wonderland Goldilocks and the Three Bears and Little Red Riding Hood The Lower Depths Rip Van Winkle The Little Match Girl Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme *As Director/Choreographer* The Three Little Pigs and the Three Billy Goats Gruff Jerusalem Little Women The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn A Wall *As Director/Choreographer* Peter and the Wolf and The Ugly Duckling Under Milk Wood Sleeping Beauty Hansel and Gretel School for Scandal The Cookie Jar The Sitwells at Sea A Suitcase and Variations *As Director* The Boy Friend Raggedy Ann and Andy Sicilian Limes The Steadfast Tin Soldier The Netting of the Troupial Johnny Appleseed Rutabaga Follies Babes in Arms The Legend of Sleepy Hollow A Christmas Carol The Nightingale The Boy Friend The Fourposter Memory Petals Pinocchio Ukrainian Tales Three by Chekhov (A Celebration) Cinderella He Who Gets Slapped *As Director/Choreographer* Peter and the Wolf and The Ugly Duckling The Imaginary Invalid Treasure Island The Seagull The Little Match Girl Mother Goose The Snow Queen Twelfth Night Paul Bunyan Meets His Match The Adventures of Tom Sawyer The Importance of Being Earnest Cinderella The Dream Fisher Romeo and Juliet Oliver! A Suitcase and Variations Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp Thieves' Carnival The Little Match Girl Beauty and the Beast The Rivals Sleepy Hollow Hansel and Gretel A Christmas Carol The Little Mermaid Good Morning, Mr. Tillie The Green Beetle Dance The Sitwells at Sea Treasure Island The Emperor's New Clothes Sleeping Beauty The Hound of the Baskervilles Falling Moons Dr. Seuss' The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins Moon Over Rio The Festival of Our Lord of the Ships The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant Cinderella The Three Musketeers The Clown of God The Marvelous Land of Oz Puss in Boots The Little Match Girl The Cookie Jar Phantom of the Opera Alice in Wonderland Dr. Seuss' The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins Mr. Pickwick's Christmas Pippi Longstocking The Red Shoes The Adventures of Tom Sawyer The Secret Garden The Adventures of Babar Cinderella Frankenstein The Legend of Sleepy Hollow The Little Match Girl The Mystery of the Tattered Trunk The Adventures of a Bear Called Paddington *As Director/Choreographer* Goldilocks and the Three Bears and Little Red Riding Hood Harold and the Purple Crayon Strega Nona The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant *As Director/Choreographer/Actor* Cinderella *As Director* The Little Match Girl Beauty and the Beast *As Director/Choreographer* The Jungle Book The Velveteen Rabbit The Wonderful Wizard of Oz *As Director/Choreographer* The Legend of Sleepy Hollow Linnea in Monet's Garden *As Director/Choreographer/Actor* Cinderella *As Director/Choreographer* Animal Fables From Aesop Tomie dePaola's Mother Goose *As Director/Choreographer/Actor* The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant *As Director/Choreographer* Peter Pan Cinderella *As Director* Great Expectations *As Director* The Diviners *As Director/Choreographer* Quilters *As Director/Choreographer* When Ya Comin' Back, Red Ryder? *As Director/Choreographer* Working Mercy Watson to the Rescue My Fair Lady *As Director* Crimes of the Heart On the Town Under Milk Wood Postcard From Morocco The Lulu Plays My Fair Lady The House of Blue Leaves The Marriage of Bette and Boo

The Matchmaker You Can't Take It with You Candide Great Expectations On the Verge The Tempest Dreamers of the Day Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Under Milk Wood Arms and the Man The Importance of Being Earnest HMS Pinafore The Pirates of Penzance *As Director* The Abduction from the Seraglio *As Director/Choreographer* La Rondine *As Choreographer* Orfeo et Eurydice Into the Woods Cabaret *As Choreographer* La Belle Helene Into the Woods The King and I *As Director/Choreographer* The Nightingale The Princess and the Pea The Man Who Came to Dinner Rags Arsenic and Old Lace HMS Pinafore *As Director/Choreographer* A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum *As Choreographer* Street Scene Master Class Great Expectations *As Director/Choreographer* Tomie dePaola's Strega Nona Eternity *As Director* The Secret Garden *As Choreographer* Alice Through the Looking Glass *As Choreographer* Falstaff *As Director* Riding the Rails *As Director* Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) Eleemosynary Biography Dancing at Lughnasa Mary Stuart Noises Off *As Director/Choreographer* Oh, Coward! A Little Night Music A Christmas Carol (x 3) What's the Word For Lettice and Lovage *As Choreographer* The Pirates of Penzance A Delicate Balance Bone Dry The House of Blue Leaves The Gin Game The Glass Menagerie Blithe Spirit Driving Miss Daisy The Pirates of Penzance *As Director/Choreographer* Quilters Ragtime Grey Gardens Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella The Full Monty *As Director* Crimes of the Heart *As Choreographer* The Geriatrical Theatrical Driving Miss Daisy

The Places

Webster Groves High School, Webster Groves, Missouri
Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa
The University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
Theatre On-the-Road, various Minnesota venues
Paul Bunyan Playhouse, Bemidji, Minnesota
Children's Theatre Company, Minneapolis
Bloomington Civic Theatre, Bloomington, Minnesota
Chanhassen Dinner Theatres, Chanhassen
Center Opera Company of Minnesota, Minneapolis
Arizona Theatre Company, Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona
Lyric Opera Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio
Seaside Music Theatre, Daytona Beach, Florida
History Theatre, St. Paul
National Arts Centre, Ottawa, Ontario
Stratford Festival, Stratford, Ontario
Sacramento Opera, Sacramento, California
SteppingStone Theatre, St. Paul
Park Square Theatre, St. Paul
National Theater of Hungary, Miskolc
Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis
Illusion Theater, Minneapolis
Theatre de la Jeune Lune, Minneapolis
Dayton Opera, Dayton, Ohio
The Jungle Theater, Minneapolis
Kansas City Repertory Theatre, Kansas City, Missouri
Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists
Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, St. Paul
Theater Latté Da, Minneapolis
Hamline University Theatre, St. Paul
Plymouth Playhouse, Plymouth, Minnesota

About the Award

The Distinguished Artist Award recognizes artists who, like Wendy Lehr, have chosen to make their lives and careers in Minnesota, thereby making our state a more culturally vibrant place. Although they have the talent and the opportunity to pursue their work elsewhere, these artists have chosen to stay—and by staying, they have made a difference. They have founded and strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, and attracted audiences and patrons. Best of all, they have made wonderful, thought-provoking art.

Minnesota thrives when its artists thrive. McKnight supports working artists to create and contribute to vibrant communities. As an artist and administrator, Wendy was instrumental in the success of the Children's Theatre Company, one of our state's most beloved arts institutions; as a teacher at CTC, the Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists, and elsewhere, she has helped to train hundreds more artists who enrich our community beyond measure every day.

This award, which comes with \$50,000, goes to one Minnesota artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. The panel that selects the recipient is made up of five people who have longtime familiarity with the Minnesota arts community.

Our thanks go to panelists Philip Bither, Walker Art Center's senior curator of performing arts; Graydon Royce, theater critic at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*; Stewart Turnquist, former coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; 2001 McKnight Distinguished Artist Dale Warland, founder of the Dale Warland Singers; and 2002 McKnight Distinguished Artist Emilie Buchwald, founder of Milkweed Editions. Their high standards and thoughtful consideration make this award a truly meaningful tribute to Minnesota's most influential artists.

Vickie Benson | Arts Program Director, The McKnight Foundation

PAST DISTINGUISHED ARTISTS

Dominick
Argento

1998

Warren
MacKenzie

1999

Robert
Bly

2000

Dale
Warland

2001

Emilie
Buchwald

2002

Mike
Lynch

2003

Stanislaw
Skrowaczewski

2004

Judy
Onofrio

2005

Lou Bellamy

2006

Kinji
Akagawa

2007

Bill Holm

2008

Bain
Boehlke

2009

Siah
Armajani

2010

Ranee
Ramaswamy

2011

John Caddy

2012



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The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, the Foundation uses its resources to attend, unite, and empower those it serves. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Foundation had assets of approximately \$2 billion and granted about \$85 million in 2012, of which about 11% was directed to support working artists to create and contribute to vibrant communities.

The McKnight Foundation is committed to the protection of our environment, a philosophy that underlies our practice of using paper with postconsumer waste content and, wherever possible, environmentally friendly inks. Additionally, we partner with printers who participate in the PIM Great Printer Environmental Initiative. This book was printed with soy-based inks on recycled paper containing 30% postconsumer waste.

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