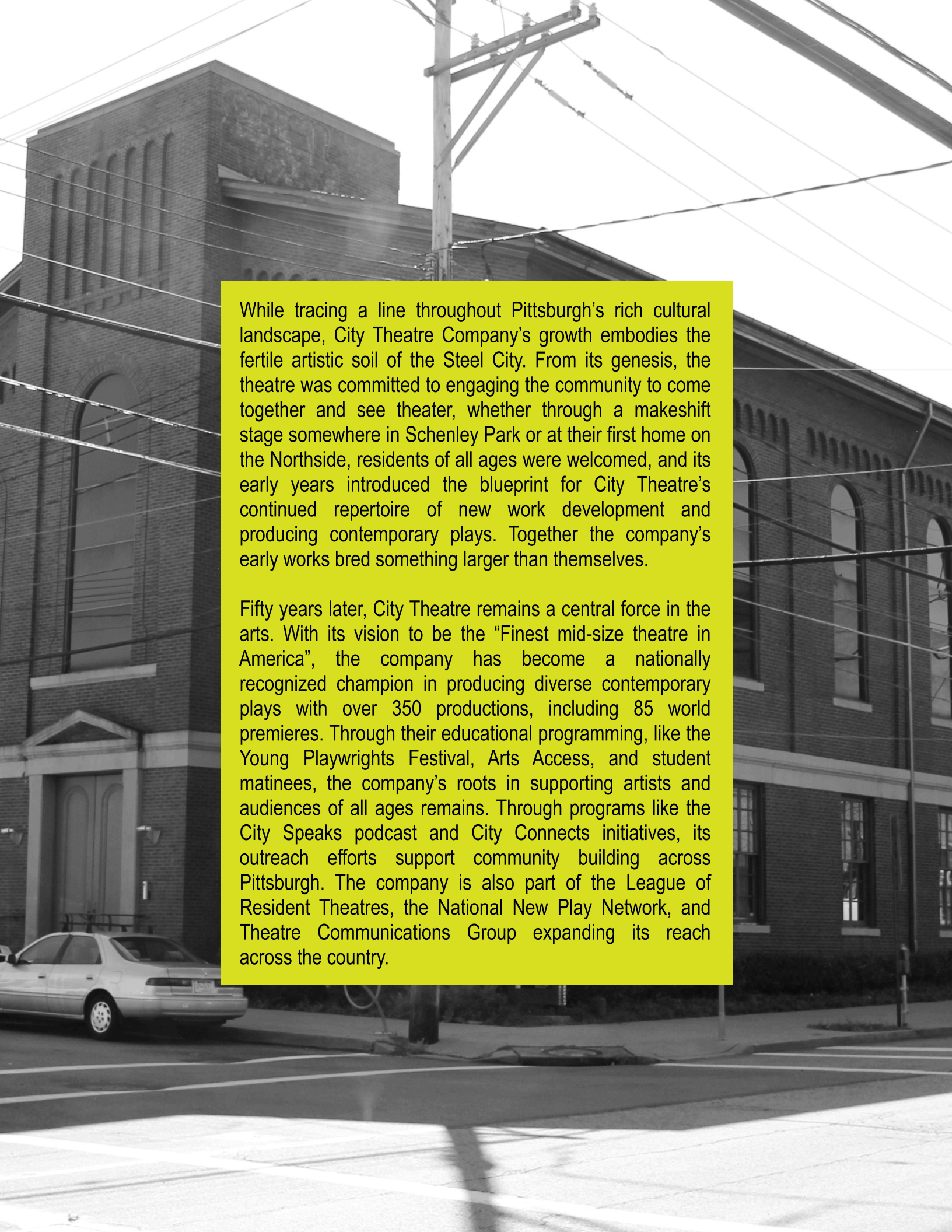
CITY
THE
50
ATRE



While tracing a line throughout Pittsburgh's rich cultural landscape, City Theatre Company's growth embodies the fertile artistic soil of the Steel City. From its genesis, the theatre was committed to engaging the community to come together and see theater, whether through a makeshift stage somewhere in Schenley Park or at their first home on the Northside, residents of all ages were welcomed, and its early years introduced the blueprint for City Theatre's continued repertoire of new work development and producing contemporary plays. Together the company's early works bred something larger than themselves.

Fifty years later, City Theatre remains a central force in the arts. With its vision to be the "Finest mid-size theatre in America", the company has become a nationally recognized champion in producing diverse contemporary plays with over 350 productions, including 85 world premieres. Through their educational programming, like the Young Playwrights Festival, Arts Access, and student matinees, the company's roots in supporting artists and audiences of all ages remains. Through programs like the City Speaks podcast and City Connects initiatives, its outreach efforts support community building across Pittsburgh. The company is also part of the League of Resident Theatres, the National New Play Network, and Theatre Communications Group expanding its reach across the country.

PITTSBURGH CITY PLAYERS

By the 1970s Pittsburgh's steel mill industry was in decline, and the arts became a response to the economic upheaval. Funding was given to arts initiatives to build a stronger foundation for the city's continuing prosperity. Funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, allowed the Pittsburgh Department of Parks and Recreation to launch their Free Theatre initiatives starting in 1971, with a series of programs that made theatre and theatre education more accessible to Pittsburgh residents. Two of these programs included the Park Players and Park Classes Program(s), which hosted events led by teaching artists at various parks throughout the city. This garnered a large, and growing, enthusiasm for existing theater initiatives, prompting the Pittsburgh Parks Department to commission the creation of the Pittsburgh City Players under the condition that all their productions be free and open to the public. The group's initial artists were composed of several alumni from Carnegie Mellon University's School of Drama, who named Marjorie Walker as their first artistic director. Through the help of the Department of Parks and Recreation's Director, Louise R. Brown, they acquired federal funding from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), allowing the City Players to hire professional actors and begin their work. In 1975, the City of Pittsburgh allocated funds to support staffing the Allegheny Community Theatre in North Side, which became the first home for the company's initial residency.

In a letter from Marjorie Walker, she described how she found a desire to attend theatre from old and young audience members alike, sharing that the "precious relationship between the company and the audience must be developed". Under Walker's leadership, the Pittsburgh City Players gave away thousands of free tickets and bussed in senior citizens to shows. During the creation of the City Park Players, a myriad of notable theatres popped up alongside City Players. These included the Kuntu Repertory Theatre, founded by Dr. Vernell Audrey Watson Lillie, and the Pittsburgh Public Theater, founded by Joan Apt and Margaret Riec. These partnerships were monumental to the future of City Theatre.

By October 1975, the Pittsburgh City Players succeeded in launching the company and reaching audiences. The fledgling company managed to hold workshops ranging from theatre games to stage combat to miming to new play development in 16 high schools and elementary schools. During their first summer of performances as a troupe, approximately 10,000 students ages 7-17 were in attendance, and 1200 participated in summer workshops. This takeover of park summer theatre initiatives ran from late June to August of that year. The troupe spent their time touring and hosting workshops in the fall and winter seasons. Carnegie Mellon University's School of Drama and the City of Pittsburgh Parks and Recreation co-produced and co-sponsored the City Players in the Park.

Pretend-Time in the City Parks

By JANE SHAW
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

"We pretended stuff. We held hands and twisted in different shapes and forms. We learned how to exercise and how to relax."

Eight-year-old Scott Kearney was explaining what he did in the Park Theater classes last summer and why he's happy to be back in the program this year.

"We pretended giving a dog a bath. I was the dog. I would like to be a dog."

His sister 10 year old Carol Kearney gave the bath. She too is among the 250 children who are participating in the program again this year.

The Park Theater Classes which will continue through August 18 are sponsored by the City of Pittsburgh Department of Parks and Recreation with the cooperation of the drama department of Carnegie-Mellon University.

Classes are free and open to any child between the ages of nine and 17 who lives within the City of Pittsburgh.

This year the classes have expanded to incorporate singing and dancing.

* * *

SARAH SCHMERTZ, 12 and in the older group, thinks she might like to go on to become an actress.

Last year she had a part in a production of "Alice In Wonderland" given by the class.

"If some of the children

—Post-Gazette Photo by CHARLES STUEBGEN

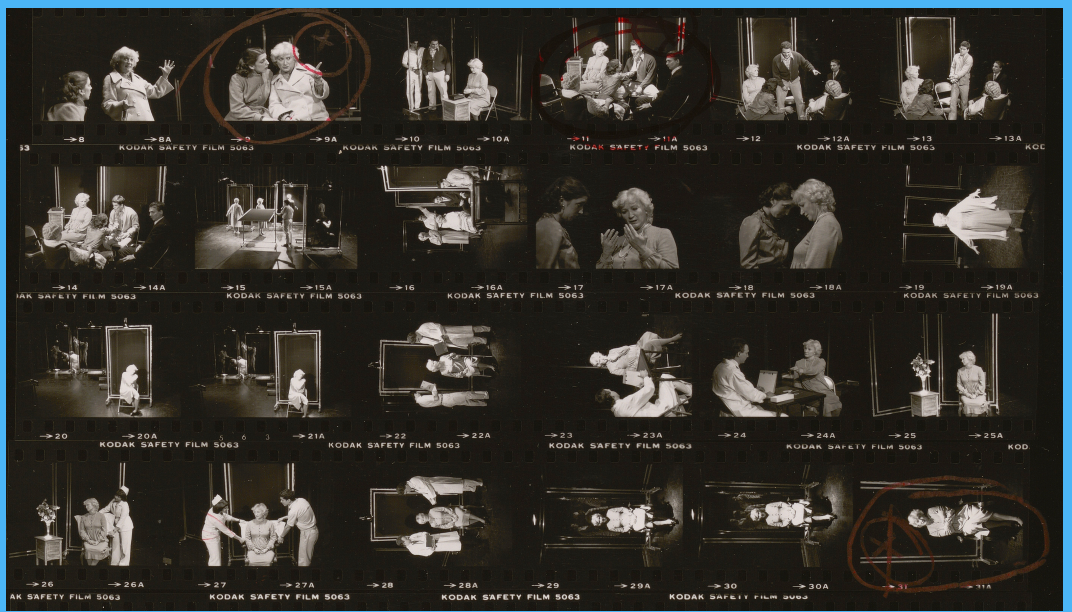
Richard Isackes, right, teaches (left to right) Carol Kearney, Scott Kearney and Sarah Schmertz some make-believe magic.

children who want to go be- head of the CMU department performances are well at- day and Thursday. The Fest

In their first year, the troupe was comprised of ten official full-time members: seven actors, and three technicians. To help employ them, the company received a $100,000 federal grant through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). The City Players shared residency with the Pittsburgh Public Theater at the Allegheny Community Theatre located in North Side, now known as the New Hazlett Theater. True to its current mission, the troupe produced their inaugural show *The Life and Death of Sneaky Fitch*, a satire on Western melodramas about a drunken cowboy. The play was written by former head of the Carnegie Mellon School of Drama's Graduate department, James Rosenberg, and co-directed by Geoffrey Hitch and Jan Kirschner. That production was followed by *Dracula*, written and adapted by Geffrey Hitch. When the shows premiered, many audience members expected to see a movie but were surprised when met with a live performance. The show received a resounding response from audience members, which led them to return with new theatergoers to performances, and at times overflowed the seats.

The following year, in 1976, the troupe broadened its repertoire with a production of Moliere's *The Misanthrope* coupled with five premieres of new American plays, that played to over 50,000 audience members. While the Pittsburgh Public Theater was staging shows in the summer, the Pittsburgh City Players toured around the city to schools, retirement homes, and more. Under Walker's leadership, she kept pushing for increasingly professional productions, allowing the City Players to flourish into a more codified and respected role in the theatre scene, realizing a vision of "want[ing] our new audience to grow with us." By 1977, Marjorie Walker and her husband Jewel Walker moved to the University of Wisconsin and appointed Mark Leone as the next artistic director. By 1979, the Pittsburgh Public Theater was granted a nine month lease at the Allegheny City Theater, resulting in the City Players returning to its roots as a touring company. After this, Mark Leone stepped down as artistic director and Steve Wyman took over his position.

The company was briefly itinerant until offered a home by the University of Pittsburgh. City's move to the University of Pittsburgh began with the inaugural season of the Three Rivers Shakespeare Festival, including productions *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*, which played to capacity audiences. City Theatre was absorbed into the University of Pittsburgh, allowing them to utilize their performance spaces at the basement of the Cathedral of Learning, and later a refurbished bar turned university space called the "The Annex". In 1981, Marc Masterson took over the company as the fourth artistic director, navigating City's relationship with Pitt. That relationship lasted until 1989, when City Theatre established itself as a separate entity and ultimately moved into its own performance venue in the South Side.



City Theatre Company Records, University of Pittsburgh Library System

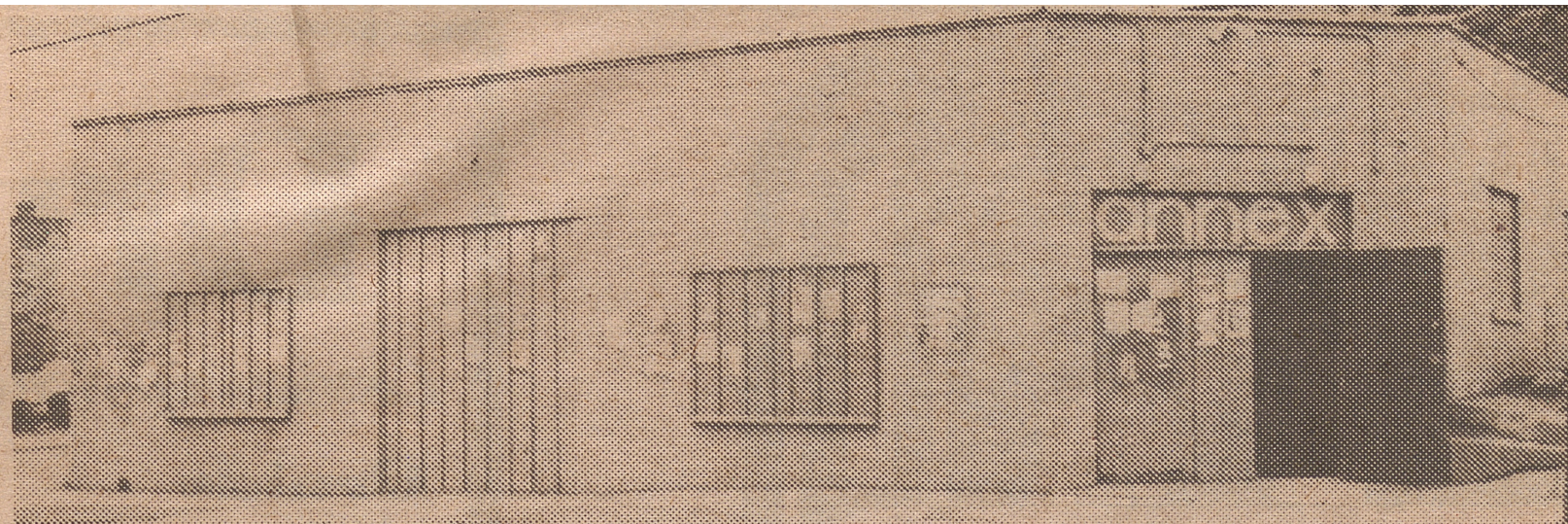
A CHANGE OF SPACE

North Side

The City Players began as a touring company, continuing the pre-existing theatre initiatives to access intergenerational audience members. Together their legacy started through hosting workshops and touring productions at parks, schools, and zoos.

City's first home resided in "the beautiful, air-conditioned, City-owned Allegheny Community Theater at the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh's North Side". There, they shared space equally with the Pittsburgh Public Theater. As founding member Randy Kovitz described, "Confusion between us and Pittsburgh Public Theater stops when you realize our performances are free". The company stayed there for two and a half years, while their residency was slowly being cut as the Pittsburgh Public Theater expanded. In 1979, City returned to its status as a touring company.

Within a year Attilio "Buck" Favorini, the University of Pittsburgh's Theatre Arts Department offered City Theatre a residency. Despite being housed by the university, the City of Pittsburgh still funded the company. Through this residency, City Theatre began performing in the Studio Theatre in the basement of the Cathedral of Learning, starting with *Wings*. The company then took up residence at the Annex, formerly Bimbo's Bar located on South Bouquet and Sennott streets in Oakland. Where City adapted the space into a 115-seat performance space. Eventually, City Theatre outgrew its space in South Bouquet street and began the search for a long-term home.



South Side

In 1991, thanks to the leadership of the theatre's board alongside Artistic Director Marc Masterson, City Theatre moved to its current location in the South Side, refurbishing the Bingham United Methodist Church into a performance space, designed by Leonard Perfido. The main church was built in 1857, having outgrown its 1937 founding space next door where the Lillie Theatre now sits. The theatre space can be transformed from a proscenium to a thrust, with a 247 seat capacity. The impulse to shift the company's new home into a church was born from the recognition that places of worship were at the center of the myriad of ethnic communities in South Side. These places were hubs for storytelling, community building, and knowledge sharing helping residents make sense of the world. For Masterson, it was a clear decision to build a home at this location but he recognized "there is an important difference: churches provide answers, theaters ask questions…where a church or a synagogue or a mosque looks to God for inspiration, the theatre worships creativity. By participating in theatre, even by attending it, you become part of the creative act where the possibility of skill and wonder is on display."

In 1998, City Theatre purchased the Pittsburgh Irish Club and transformed it into the Charles Morris building– which houses a costume shop, paint and prop shop, rehearsal halls, as well as long term tenant Copies at Carson. During the theatre's 25th Anniversary season in 1999-2000, they received a generous gift from long-time supporters Ira and Nanette Gordon that allowed for the creation of the Gordon Lounge, in the lobby. Through the company's New Ground Capital Campaign, the theater renovated the then Hamburg Studio in 2014 and most recently completed construction on the Philip Chosky Production Center in 2019.

In 2020, City Theatre's Lester Hamburg Studio Theatre was renamed the Dr. Vernell Audrey Watson Lillie Theatre, in honor of Dr. Lillie, founder and artistic director of the Kuntu Repertory Theatre and long-time collaborator with City, who passed away in May 2020. Dr. Lillie's prolific legacy included co-founding the Black Theatre Network, and serving as a professor of Africana Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Upon City's inception, Marjorie Walker consulted Dr. Lillie reguarding the company's formation.

"Dr. Lillie was a pioneer. She created a path, she created opportunities – specifically for Black artists and Black people who didn't realize that they were artists until they tapped into that strength inside of them," said City co-artistic director Monteze Freeland, who first worked with Dr. Lillie in a production of August Wilson's *Radio Golf* in 2010. "Dr. Lillie was an encourager; she taught me – and told me – that I needed to love myself and she led by example: No one else was going to knock her down."

THROUGHOUT

1980s

Artistic Director Marc Masterson & City Theatre Members

Following their inception, City spent the majority of this decade in residence with the University of Pittsburgh, under Artistic Director Marc Masterson. Notable productions an emphasis on contemporary work like *Curse of the Starving Class* by Sam Shepard, *Baby With the Bathwater* by Christopher Durang, and the world premiere of *Lovers and Keepers* by Maria Irene Fornes.

In 1987, the company transformed from a University of Pittsburgh program to its own independent non-profit producing organization. They began the search for a permanent home. **sentence on last prod @ pitt*

1990s

The 90s were defined by the company's move to its permanent location in a refurbished church in South Side Flats. The first show to play at the new space was *Bricklayers* by Elvira DiPaolo. Throughout the decade City Theatre expanded its reputation and began partnerships with other well-known theaters. In 1992, SITI Theatre Company, founded by Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki, toured a production *The Medium* which was later revived and toured during City's 2021-2022 Season to commemorate the SITI's sunsetting. Notable productions included a world premiere co-production of *Complete Female Stage Beauty* by Jeffrey Hatcher, which received an American Theatre Critic's citation and was later adapted into a film. Additionally, 1999 marked the beginning of the company's Young Playwrights Festival, which began as a program where students would collaborate with local artists to turn their work into a radio play.

If We Are Women by Joanna McClelland Glass

*F*** 7th Grade* at the drive-in at Hazelwood Green

The Rivers Don't Know by Jim McManus

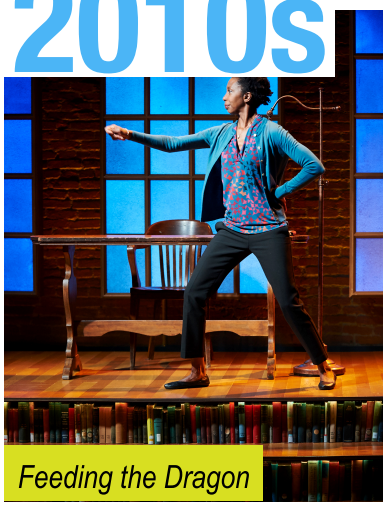
THE DECADES

2000s

Pyretown by John Belluso

The decade began by commemorating City Theatre's 25th Anniversary, sharing its quarter-life celebration with Kuntu Repertory Theatre. They joined together to stage a production of Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, which was coincidentally celebrating its 40th milestone anniversary. In August 2000, after 20 years at the company, Marc Masterson announced his departure to become the Artistic Director of Actors Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky, prompting the search for a new artistic director for the company. In 2001, it was officially announced that Tracy Brigden would be Masterson's successor. Brigden's time at City Theatre codified the company as a champion of new work development that rivaled that of New York, including launching the company's Momentum Festival. This four-day new play festival, born in 2003, showcased "new plays at different stages". This festival was integral in helping City Theatre solidify its national reputation as a home for new plays, with world premieres including Anthony Rapp's *Without You: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and the Musical RENT*. Many of the plays and musicals developed at the festival became main stage productions, produced in different cities across the country, and even abroad. Other notable productions included *Opus* by Michael Hollinger, which won an ATCA citation, as well as plays by Christopher Durang, Billy Porter, and Adam Rapp.

2010s



Feeding the Dragon

City Theatre Company had numerous accomplishments during this time. In 2015, Clare Drobot joined the company as the Director of New Play Development, Reginald L. Douglas joined as Artistic Producer, and James McNeel joined as Managing Director. In 2016, City Theatre produced *Hand to God* by Robert Askins, which became the company's highest-grossing production. This decade marked many world premieres including *Feeding the Dragon*, *Nomad Motel*, *We Are Among Us*, *Sam Bendrix at the Bon Soir*, and others. Other notable performances include the 2017 production of PigPen Theatre Co.'s *The Old Man and the Old Moon.* The collective is the musical force behind Broadway's 2024 *Water for Elephants*, Company. Following Tracy Brigden's departure in 2017, Marc Masterson returned to the company in 2018 after having served as the Artistic Director of Actors Theatre of Louisville and South Coast Repertory.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, City Theatre produced the Drive in Arts Festival, making it one of the first theatre companies to present live theatre in the country. They re-opened their doors with a production of *The Rivers Don't Know* in collaboration with Cornerstone Theater Company and multiple community partners at Point Park University's Pittsburgh Playhouse. This production was supported by Allegheny Regional Asset District's RADical ImPAct program. In September 2021, City Theatre introduced an Artistic Director Co-Leadership model with Marc Masterson, Monteze Freeland, and Clare Drobot serving alongside Managing Director James McNeel In 2024, Marc Masterson retired for a final time. City Theatre is excited to look ahead to its next 50 years.

Throughout the past 50 years, City Theatre has held fast to its values, love for its audiences, and for telling impactful stories. It has built a reputation as a landmark in Pittsburgh's cultural landscape. Thanks to the dedication and artistry from thousands of staff, board members, and patrons. As the company prepares for the next 50 years of transitions and triumphs, with every generation it will continue to strive to serve audiences and artists alike, bringing and amplifying bold new work in Pittsburgh.

Written by literary intern Jacey Lozada, with special thanks to Bill Daw and the University of Pittsburgh Library Archives and Special Collections.