

A BRIEF AND SUBJECTIVE HISTORY OF THE
SKYLIGHT BY COLIN CABOT

The Thirty Years War?

Three
Decades
At
The
Skylight



Clair Richardson with the cast of *Cosi fan Tutte* in front of the original "Skylight," June, 1960.

At the end of the fifth act of *Hamlet*, Horatio sums up the previous three hours of strutting and fretting upon the stage by telling Fortinbras why there is a pile of dead bodies around him:

"Let me speak to the yet unknowing world
 How these things came about: so shall you hear
 Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
 Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;
 Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
 And in this upshot, purposes mistook
 Fall'n on the inventors' heads."

When considering this small and personal history of the Skylight Theatre, Horatio's catalogue sprang to mind. (The name Skylight Comic Opera, Ltd. wasn't conceived until the company went non-profit in the face of bankruptcy in 1962.) I realized that chronicling thirty years of Skylight histrionics would include everything from low comedy to high tragedy and might be as long as a Shakespearian evening in the theatre. Certainly the history of a theatre should be as colorful as the plays and players that are viewed through its missing fourth wall. I am happy to say that the Skylight's past is a story, though not without gall and rancor for some, which celebrates an idea and its successful implementation in a way that has refreshed the dry places in the spirits of thousands.

Perhaps Horatio's speech, had he been talking about the Skylight, would have gone as follows:

"Let me speak to the as yet unknowing world
 How these things came about: so shall you hear
 Of carnival, lusty, and artistic acts,
 Of accidental brilliance, maverick genius;
 Of hits put on by airships and hard work,
 And, in this upshot, musical theatre
 That does Milwaukee proud."

All of us who work at the Skylight, from the artists and the staff to the boards of directors of the Skylight Comic Opera, the Skylighters (nee Clarion Society), and the Advisory Board are devoted to the Skylight because it represents something important to us; not that without the theatre our worlds would fall apart, or that other things—God and family among them—don't need to be taken more seriously, but that somewhere deep inside, in an almost necessarily inarticulate place, we all feel a need to commingle in a crowded, poorly ventilated, uncomfortable space for several hours at a stretch to watch people labor under incredibly adverse conditions to convince us they are people living the lives of characters other than themselves, feeling and responding to big emotions, and transporting themselves and all of us to a place where our spirit can be touched and moved. The extraordinary thing about this experience is that it is accomplished collectively and regularly and in a converted tire recapping garage in Milwaukee. What prompted this phenomenon? Why the Skylight Theatre?

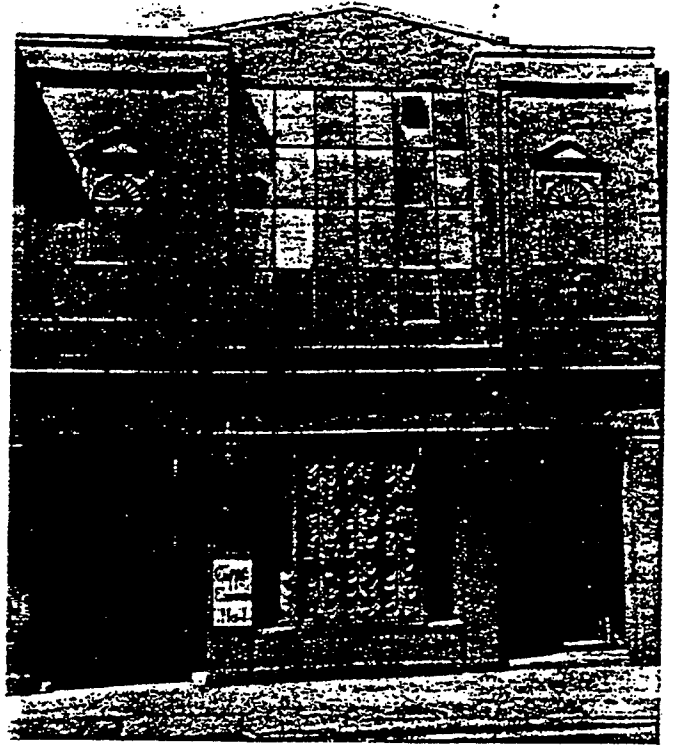
Accidental Brilliance

That the Skylight was born at a party is an undisputed fact. Exactly which party it was born at is not, however, clear, though perhaps the lives of the principal players who conceived the idea for the Skylight may have been lived as one, extended party. In the summer of 1959 several friends, who were of the opinion that cities like San Francisco and New York showed more cultural vitality than Milwaukee, began to discuss the possibility of doing something in their home town about what one of them has called "a context of extreme cultural poverty."

To be sure, they were already involved in, among other things, the creation of the Milwaukee Pops Orchestra (now the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra), the Fred Miller Theatre (now the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre), the Bel Canto Chorus (at that point a thirty person part song chorus that performed once a year at the Pabst Theatre) and the Milwaukee Zoo. But Sprague Vonier, the program manager at WTMJ television, had a different idea.

It was the era of the beat generation—Jack Kerouac and the guys on the beach were all the rage—and Vonier had spent a lot of time in San Francisco at places like The Hungry Eye (I?), a coffeehouse that featured "canvas chairs, a very confined platform for the performer (or performers if there were more than one of them), a special atmosphere all its own, and a terrific interaction between the audience and the players." He and Clair Richardson, a flamboyant and wildly creative Milwaukee public relations man who had succeeded in alienating all his accounts, talked often of the idea that Milwaukee would benefit tremendously from the establishment of a coffee house like those in San Francisco. They talked of starting a chess club, of folk singing, of beat poetry. Because they were working together on a project to form a network out of radio stations along the new interstate highways being built during the Eisenhower administration, they spent a lot of time in Richardson's office above a lamp store on Jackson Street (where the Juneau Village Liquor Store now is). Next door was a building, vacant since the thirties, that had been alternately a funeral parlor, a bootlegging joint, and an architect's office.

At the head of the stairs stood a plaster replica of the Venus de Milo. Legend has it that every apprentice's first duty on reporting to work was to wash off the messages scrawled on the statue's abdomen. Unfortunately the statue was gone before the theatre arrived.



The original Skylight Theatre on Jackson Street.

Vonier leased the building for \$75 per month and asked Steve Gagliano, who was in the process of losing a tavern on the West Side, if he was interested in renting the ground floor to make a killing in the coffee house business. In a large unimproved space with a huge skylight at one end, Vonier reserved the right to produce entertainment upstairs for the coffee house below. Gagliano agreed and soon there was a sign in the downstairs window that read "Caffe Espresso Numero Uno."

The initial capitalization for the Skylight Theatre was \$2,000. Vonier put up \$500 himself and talked famed weather girl Judy Marks' husband, ad man Budde Marino, out of another \$500. Mildred Lindsay, the theatre's future angel and an important community leader who had herself been a performer put up a third \$500. Richardson was supposed to contribute the final \$500; whether he actually did or not was overshadowed by the enormous amount of sweat equity he contributed to the renovation of the space. The others on the original board of directors included Ms. Florence Campbell, Dave Miller, whose costume shop was on the same block, and Shirley Ernisse, Richardson's inamorata of the moment.

Early Skylight casts took great delight in monitoring the ebb and flow of Richardson's dalliances. It was a regular occurrence after their tiffs for Ms. Ernisse to call a cab to take Richardson's feather pillow and over-size can of talcum powder from her small apartment near Saint Paul's church back to his office near the theatre. Apparently he had no home of his own.

Richardson had been hired to manage the Bel Canto chorus and had come up with the idea of creating a celebrity series to raise money for the transformation of the part song chorus into an oratorio society. At a party after one of these events (some say it was during a tremendous thunderstorm in Door County at a house Mrs. Lindsay had rented during the Fish Creek Festival, and others that it was at a big house on Lake Drive after a Bel Canto Messiah performance), and with the help of much "chemical inducement," Jim Keeley and Ray Smith, two very serious young church musicians, sat down at the piano and gave what is reputed to be "an incredible, impromptu performance" of music from the works of Gilbert & Sullivan.

Richardson motioned to Vonier and said: "Do you want to have some real fun?" "Sure" was the response. "I'll get these two guys to put on a show in that empty space upstairs." And the Skylight Theatre was born.



James Keeley and Ray Smith in An Evening With Gilbert & Sullivan.

Airships and Hard Work

Vonier says that Richardson had an incredible ability to get things done. "Between an idea and its execution, sometimes there would be no more than a few minutes. Richardson's motto seemed to be 'Ready or not, here we go!'" A few phone calls later Richardson was on his way to Kenosha to pick up 99 canvas director's chairs—he paid \$4.50 apiece direct from the factory. There were to be only 99 seats because not only would the space be exempt from the requirements of a theatre license and concomitant code compliance but it was also easier to avoid the copyright holders represented by CESAC, BMI and ASCAP, and the actor's, stage-hand's and musician's unions.

Richardson heard that the Astor Hotel was replacing some of its carpets, and that the old carpet could be had for nothing as long as it was picked up immediately. He and Vonier filled up a station wagon and hustled the carpet up the stairs to the new theatre that evening. Vonier, copying what he had seen in off-Broadway theatres in New York, installed all of the track lighting system himself and then called an electrician to hook it up. The board of directors, consisting of the original "investors," painted the place and did whatever had to be done "bare knuckle style."

Richardson made things happen so fast that the theatre was ready before Keeley and Smith were. During December a group of puppeteers from Waukesha put on a holiday puppet show that packed in audiences, but nothing like what was to happen when *An Evening with Gilbert & Sullivan* premiered. Gerald Kloss, then the drama critic for the *Milwaukee Journal*, called the show "the most expert, felicitous and entertaining two hours produced by local theatrical and musical talent in a long, long time... It is the reviewer's possibly immoderate opinion that this show could go on a national scale—an hour on a network TV show, for example—and claim the highest plaudits. At any rate... it simply should not be missed."

The show ran for thirteen weeks, and was scheduled to run another month. The actors had packed their bags and Richardson had taken an option on an off-Broadway theatre in New York. But tragically Ray Smith died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

The theatre had caught on and the audience clamoured for more. Almost immediately a revue called *Operetta Holiday* opened. A program called *Guitar Marmalade* featuring folk song, the blues and a dancer, appearances by Richard Dyer Bennett, Tom Glazer, a flamenco guitarist, and a one man show called *An Evening With Lucifer*, all played with varying degrees of success in the tiny theatre.

During one of his stays at the Algonquin Hotel in New York, Richardson had encountered Merle Puffer, Jim Billings and Leslie Loosli, three singers who were free lancing on the east coast. Keeley suggested that what Milwaukee audiences needed more than anything else was an intimate production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. For some reason or other, Richardson invented a title for the group, calling them the Boston Comic Opera in residence at the Skylight Theatre. With Keeley at the keyboard and Milwaukee singers Betty Gilchrist, Kate Hurney and basso Charles Koehn rounding out the cast, the show opened in the attic theatre in June of 1960. The *Journal* review of the performance included the following:

"Singing in a thimble does not, to be sure, require any substantial volume of tone, but it does call for grace. The company was a bit lavish at the opening, but when restraint is applied, everything will surely go well. All the voices employed are well trained and all have character. Dexterity and sparkle are what count most and in these respects the small cast is most adroit."

But Richardson wasn't content with just one theatre. In one of his typical meanderings he acquired the rights to a load of rubble from one of the Blatz Brewery buildings that was being demolished near the river. He rented a truck and went to the Rescue Mission where he asked if there were any farm boys on the theory that if you were raised on a farm you had to learn how to do everything. After several recruits had been hired—he and Vonier called them "airships" because all they seemed to do was float around—they retrieved an enormous load of cream city bricks and transported them to the street outside the theatre. The airships chipped off the old mortar and painstakingly laid the cleaned bricks as a floor in the old coach yard behind the theatre building. Richardson had discovered a thirty year old volunteer grape vine growing underneath the accumulation of junk in the yard and managed to attach it to the wall of the building next door where it looked as if it had been growing forever. The theatre's seamstress sewed a series of vaguely heraldic banners which projected from the other wall of the coach yard and a stage was constructed on the back alley. Its back wall was constructed out of peg board, an unusual material for theatrical construction, but, like the bricks and the grape vine, probably the price was right.

The first performances in the coach yard were a double bill of *Il Campanello di Notte* by Donizetti and the *Secret of Suzanne* by Wolf Ferrari followed by hugely successful productions of *Die Fledermaus* and *The Mikado*. A roof had to be built over the stage and an awning stretched over the audience, not only to protect against the elements but also to deter the occupants of the neighboring tenement buildings, who were definitely out of cultural sympathy with what was going on below, from throwing garbage out their windows. In order to get from one side of the stage to the other the actors had to run through the alley into Jackson Street around the building next door and back into the coach yard.

Billings and Puffer became Milwaukee's favorite comedians and those who were there say that Miss Loosli's vocal endowment was only matched by her physical charms. The vacant garage at 813 N. Jefferson Street was pressed into service to make room for the growing audience and the onset of cold weather. H.M.S. Pinafore opened the third theatre on November 22, 1960, less than a year after Richardson had invited Vonier to have some real fun.

Maverick Genius

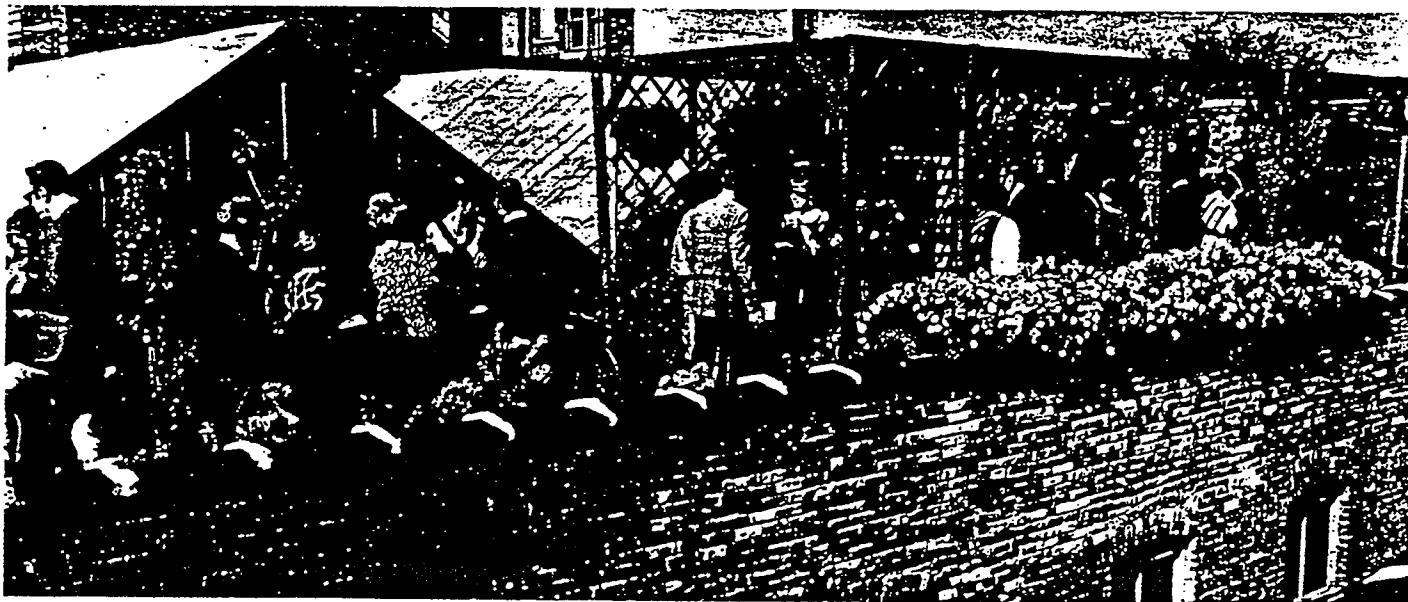
The two posts in the garage theatre served as masts with the audience arranged in more canvas chairs on three sides. During his brief career as a theatrical impresario, Richardson had discovered that every show has to have a "high point," a completely unexpected surprise that will stay with the audience long after they leave the theatre. In a production of *The Gondoliers* he managed to rig up a motorized gondola that entered the coachyard on its own power carrying Keeley and another cast member down the aisle to the stage. The day before the opening of the garage theatre he rented a jack hammer and opened a hole in the ceiling of the theatre so the cast could enter down the rigging of the ship. The same hole was later used to draw air out of the theatre and into the greenhouses on the roof of the theatre. The theory was that the carbon dioxide exhaled by the audience below would nourish the plants growing two stories above. The last time we used the hole which is now partially covered by an air conditioning duct was for Sweeney Todd's return to London in our 1987 production.

The pit for the hydraulic jack to lift the cars in the former garage was expanded to serve as a combination orchestra pit and trap room. Bill Wenzler, the architect of record on the job, stopped by one day to inspect the progress of Richardson and his airships. To his horror he discovered that in their eagerness to dig deep for art the crew had undermined the footing of the building. Hastily they built a form for a new footing and called for the delivery of a load of cement. The form broke, spilling several yards of wet cement all over the theatre's basement. With typical resourcefulness and lack of forethought, Richardson had the airships shovel the wet cement into the bottom of the freight elevator shaft, and, like a naughty boy trying to hide a disaster by sweeping it under the rug, brought down the elevator on top of and into the cement. Sure enough, when the useless elevator shaft was removed in 1982 to make way for a new fire stair, the airships' handiwork was revealed in all its glory.

On December 23, 1962 the following item appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal*:

"The Skylight Theater closed Saturday night with a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*." The theater opened December 21, 1959. Clair Richardson, Skylight manager, said he would try to raise enough money to reopen the theater in January."

The initial blush of enthusiasm had worn off. What had started as two friends having fun had changed to an undertaking that would need more than one man's energy to stay alive. A year before, Richard Davis had postulated that Richardson could make money in show business: "All you need to do is to meet the public's fancy, do most of the countless managerial jobs yourself and carry a potent horseshoe in every pocket."



A rooftop greenhouse cocktail party above the garage theatre.



Clair Richardson and Mildred Lindsay in the lobby of the garage theatre.

The Boston Comic Opera singers had gotten fed up with poor wages, gone on strike and refused to sing. Keeley had been unable and unwilling to give the amount of time that would have been necessary to keep up the pace established during the first two seasons. Vonier had returned to his more than full time job at the TV station. Gagliano was suing for his share of the proceeds from the coachyard productions. And the Department of City Development condemned the Jackson Street Theatre to make way for the Juneau Village Liquor Store. But Richardson had found his place, his avocational chance to make a personal statement. As Keeley remembers, Richardson had learned to “exploit the rage people have to get up in front of people and make fools of themselves.” Richardson was fond of approximating Moliere: for him the theatre took place wherever you can assemble an audience, a few boards and a passion or two.

Despite a general feeling in the community that the theatre was a shady profession, rife with licentiousness and corruption, and that the Skylight was no exception to the rule, there was also a feeling that the Skylight had already given Milwaukee much to be

grateful for. After only three years it was possible to claim that “Nothing quite like the Skylight exists anywhere else. The number of weeks of opera and operetta it has done can be equalled by no other small theatre in the nation...”

Mildred Lindsay saved the day by raising \$12,000 for a new non-profit corporation, the Skylight Comic Opera, Ltd., with the help of the executive committee of “Friends of the Skylight” which included Mrs. O.W. Carpenter, Miss Paula Uihlein, Atty. Clark Hazelwood, Clinton E. Stryker, and A. Paul Jones.

Though it was never articulated in words, Vonier remembers that the Skylight was founded in response to the environment at the time. For the two founders television represented a surrender of the individual to the mechanics of society. Live theatre, as an alternative to television, gave people the chance to respond and interact with the ideas they were presented with. The theatre was always in “the betting stage.” Somebody could drop dead on stage or the audience could interfere. You never knew exactly what was going to happen.

Carnival, Lusty and Artistic Acts

Wonderful chaos has happened at the Skylight over the years:

On one Pirates of Penzance opening night Major General Stanley sang most of his first patter song in the dark because the lighting board failed, giving delightful added meaning to his first line following the song: "And now that I've introduced myself, I should like to have some idea of what's going on."

Many years later a cardboard tree collapsed during a scene between Dale Gutzman and Steve Jones. The embarrassed Jones struggled to set it right while Gutzman ad-libbed: "Two's company, tree's a crowd."

In a performance of Donizetti's Viva La Mamma baritone Kurt Ollmann accidentally sat through an old bent wood chair that was on its last legs; the process of separating singer from chair resulted in the longest laugh I have ever heard in a theatre.

Angry at what he perceived to be a religious slur, one of the patrons stomped out of the theatre on the opening night of Jacques Brel's *Is...* only to return to collect his wife a minute later. As he left for the second time he turned in the middle of Norman Moses' song and shouted at the audience "This is a vulgar Play!" The entire place was up for grabs.

For the next several years, Richardson built on his past achievements; he traveled to Europe and came back with new ideas for set designs and innovative stagings for a Mozart cycle that he produced in the garage theater. He began to visit the Santa Fe Opera every summer, looking for new young American singers who he might cajole into spending a winter in Milwaukee as resident artists. After the American Opera Company (a national touring company set up by Sarah Caldwell) collapsed, he hired four of its artists to form a core company in Milwaukee.

He expanded the Skylight's repertory beyond Italian opera and the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas to include many Milwaukee premieres of works such as *Werther* by Massenet, *Wozzeck* by Berg, *Dialogues of the Carmelites* by Poulenc, *Lost in the Stars* by Kurt Weill (a production that stirred up some controversy because it had an all-black cast) and vintage musical comedies like *Oh Lady, Lady* and *Leave It To Jane* by P.G. Wodehouse, *Guy Bolton* and *Jerome Kern*. These musicals were particularly well suited to the tiny Skylight because they were originally produced in the Princess Theatre in New York during the First World War when most men were overseas and not much money was available for lavish scenic effects. Consequently the shows didn't need a male chorus and could be produced cleverly on the Skylight's short shoe string.

Richardson also isolated himself from other developments in town. He spurned inclusion in the Performing Arts Center, because, as he unabashedly professed, he wanted to control his own destiny; and he made sure not to do the shows that Melody Top and the Florentine Opera essayed. His philosophy was to avoid comparison with his peers at any cost and do the best possible job using the least possible resources.

Circumstances changed dramatically for the little Skylight when it was decided that the first summer of the new Performing Arts Center would feature a locally produced operetta festival. Richardson assembled a board of directors to raise money, and struck a deal with Sormani Scenografia in Milan, Italy to ship old-fashioned soft goods scenery across the Atlantic.

He booked stars of the Vienna Volksoper and hired a Polish ballet company from Warsaw in an attempt to make the operetta carnival as authentic as possible. The idea never really caught on, and, after three years of ups and downs, was given up.

Backstage stories from the operetta carnival period are hard to believe. One production of *The Merry Widow* opened without ever having rehearsed the fifth act; the principals saw the scenery for the first time on opening night, and to their horror discovered that the door upstage center through which they planned to exit was painted in beautiful false perspective on the canvas, but not practical. The Viennese were not used to such circumstances and had a hard time coping with the need to punt when in trouble. (Later that summer, Richardson was quoted in the paper, saying, "When in trouble, don't punt; do Gilbert and Sullivan.") Another opening night featured a chorus of military officers who were blocked to march back and forth across the stage in formation. However, because the costumes didn't fit all of the cast members—especially the larger ones—several jackets had to be split up the back in order to button up the front, which meant that the larger chorus men had to march back and forth facing the audience at all times.

Communication is an extremely important element of theatrical production. The operetta carnivals began with a severe handicap, in that only one person—the stage manager—spoke all the languages that the company featured: Polish, Austrian, English, and Italian. His name was Hans Hortig, and he was an assistant of the director, Herr Pischler, who was prone to extravagant European temper tantrums. Hortig was extremely competent, but excessively high-strung. Between them, operations backstage in Uihlein Hall, with union crews standing idle, would grind to a halt with increasing frequency, until the stress got so great that Richardson began to suffer heart attacks. In 1968 he required open heart surgery. Newspaper coverage of the benefit to raise money for his heart surgery stressed that he had buried the hatchet with the various unions necessary to put on the performance. He was photographed with stagehands' and musicians' union officials, as well as the rear end of the cow from *Land of Smiles*. Uihlein Hall was filled to capacity with donors of blood and

money for the operation, and Richardson returned to the theater in a rickety cane-backed wheelchair, which he said was there not because he needed it, but because he needed to be reminded that he was human.

In 1974, I finished graduate school and began to look for a job in the theater. Everything I could find was either too limited in scope to satisfy my appetite for getting my hands dirty, or too short-lived in schedule to justify setting up residence in a community. After meeting with Archie Sarazin of the PAC and Charles McCallum, who was then the Managing Director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, my mother-in-law-to-be suggested that I talk to Clair Richardson: "He's on the wrong side of the tracks, but he knows everything that's going on in Milwaukee."

Three extraordinary occurrences then took place. First, I reached Richardson by phone (usually he was up in the greenhouses on the roof of the theatre watering his plants); second, he remembered the date of my appointment and actually met me at the side door to the theater on Jefferson. I was appropriately dressed for a serious interview, wearing a three-piece suit and carrying a translation of an Offenbach operetta under my arm, with my resume featuring a fancy east coast education. As I crossed the lobby, I couldn't help but notice bolts of fabric, old props, and pieces of stage equipment strewn in seeming disarray, covered with cobwebs. I later learned that anything that could be sold had been sold at a disaster sale, to pay off debts from the operetta carnivals. Richardson took me into the ladies' room for our interview, and, with a twinkle in his eye, explained his action by saying that it was the only room in the theater that had a carpet. He wouldn't show me the theater, or the upstairs shops, when I asked him, saying that the lights didn't work. The third extraordinary occurrence was that although he lost my resume and followup letter he didn't forget who I was marrying. His offer for a job reached us in Europe in a telegram from my mother-in-law.



Clair Richardson with cast members from Vienna and Milwaukee assembled in Magin Lounge at the Performing Arts Center before a rehearsal for the summer operetta carnival.

During our first conversation, I realized that we shared a passion for witnessing performers connect with an audience. (It is a producer's curse to not be able to connect with a performance first, but only after the rest of the audience is taken in.) Richardson explained that the only staff member at the theater was Kurt Holzhauser, the technical director, who several years earlier had begun his years of involvement with the Skylight by sweeping up after performances. During the Vietnam War, Richardson was his sponsor as a conscientious objector, and later loaned him a house to live in; though he characteristically reneged on a promise to leave the house to Holzhauser in his will. Holzhauser was a veteran of the operetta carnival years, and singlehandedly built sets, hung and focused the lights, and stage managed all the Skylight productions, while not ever having gotten away from the chores of sweeping up after performances. I took the job of assistant to the managing director not because I thought that I would spend 14 years at the Skylight, but because I thought that I could learn more from Richardson than I would in any other theater, because he knew how to do it all. I wasn't wrong, but I learned a lot more about life from Richardson than I did about the theater.

He had two outfits in his wardrobe: in winter he wore a dark brown wide wale corduroy suit that he claimed was a French painter's uniform topped by a Greek fisherman's hat, and in summer he wore a denim shirt, a tennis cap, white duck trousers, and hushpuppies. He had a particularly recognizable saunter that was complemented by the angle of the large cigar which he always smoked (sometimes even in rehearsals, to the horror and dismay of his singers) and he was fond of draping himself in picturesque poses around both objects and people he ran into.

Our relationship was stormy, to say the least, and involved several highly dramatic moments. The first was on the opening night of *El Capitan*, by John Philip Sousa, in September of 1974. It was my first show at the Skylight, and I was excited by the prospect of showing an audience what we had been working on in rehearsal for the last month. Not having anything to do during the performance, I paced back and forth outside the lighting booth; when the first intermission came, being an eager sort of person, I threw the switch to turn on the house lights on the wall just inside the doors to the theater. When the intermission was over, I turned it back off, and the second act began. Now, in the program, the space between the second and third acts was defined as a pause, not as an intermission. Not knowing the theater's protocol, I again threw the switch for the houselights at the end of the second act. Richardson stormed out of the booth and turned the lights off again, saying what I understood to be, "Not during applause!" When the applause had died down, I turned the switch back on again and, in the dead silence that

ensued, Richardson grabbed me by the collar, slammed me up against the wall, and said, "You punk! You're fired! Get the hell outta here!" What I realized, somewhat later, was that he had said, "Not during a pause!"

Somewhat shaken, I didn't return to the theater until noon the next day, and was greeted by Richardson, wreathed in smiles, who chided me for keeping several members of the Clarion Society, whose primary function was selling plants that he grew on the roof, waiting. I remonstrated that he had fired me the night before, but he brushed the incident aside. In another one of our arguments, he clutched his chest, moaning, "You give me chest pains! You're gonna put me under! Where are my nitroglycerin pills?" Knowing full well that he had them in his pocket, I explained that threatening to die was an unfair tactic in arguments (I had seen him pull the same trick many times before). In an instant, his anger and frustration with me passed, and, with the same twinkle in his eye, he leaned close to me and said, "When I do die, I'm gonna be buried underneath the Skylight stage, so that it can be said that what goes on on the Skylight stage goes on over Clair Richardson's dead body." Much to my surprise, his widow told me after he had died the same thing, and his ashes rest in a distinguished pewter box provided by George Watts, on a pedestal in the orchestra pit that probably was built by one of those airships.



The brown French painter's uniform goes walking in Cathedral Square.



Clair Richardson caring for his plants atop the theatre.

Richardson died on September 12, 1981, during his second open heart surgery operation. Doug Armstrong, who covered the arts for the Milwaukee Journal during the years of the operetta carnival, says that Richardson was very concerned about the survival of his theater, and wondered, often, whether it would outlast him. The theater was in remarkably good financial condition at his death, but suffering from artistic inattention. At the time we felt that we were theatrical pirates, providing the best ticket value in town. We were proud of our occasional flashes of brilliance and felt it was perfectly acceptable if one show in every nine was inspired and exhilarating. What more could you expect? What we lacked in funding we made up for with imagination and hard work.

Without Richardson's vision to fuel our enthusiasm and to provide us with an excuse not to upgrade our standards, the Board of Directors began to grapple with the issue of whether or not the theatre's shoe string

practicum could be developed into a fully professional institution. A curious coincidence occurred: the day that Richardson died was also the deadline for application to the city for funds to bring the garage theatre into compliance with the code requirements regarding access for the handicapped. Although Richardson himself had been opposed to pouring money into the old garage building, we went ahead with the project. Once the grant was secured from the city, the theatre's Board raised enough money to build bath rooms off the lobby, put a new glass front on the building, recondition the basement into a rehearsal hall, and build new offices, a costume shop, and a scene shop on the second floor. In addition a fire stair was added where the freight elevator used to be. The theatre, however, remained unchanged both in spirit but also in degree of discomfort. Although new seats with red upholstery replaced the old, dilapidated movie theatre seats that Richardson had installed in 1963, they were new only to the Skylight, having been salvaged from the balcony of a fifty year old Sheboygan movie house being converted to a triplex.

To Do Milwaukee Proud

Two operas that Richardson had always wanted to see produced in Milwaukee were scheduled for the 1981-82 and 1982-83 seasons: Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea* ("The principal action takes place in bed! What more couldja want?") Richardson would leer with characteristic twinkle) and Janacek's *The Makropoulos Affair* ("It's about a woman who doesn't grow old, howdja like that?") The stage directors for these two pieces were Stephen Wadsworth and Francesca Zambello, both of whom were at the beginning of their careers as directors. Although *Poppea* was the first opera he had ever staged, Wadsworth had been an editor of *Opera News* as well as teaching acting for singers at the Metropolitan Opera. Zambello's training had included an internship at Bayreuth, apprenticeship with Nathaniel Merrill, and assistant direction at companies like the Lyric Opera of Chicago—her ability to prattle fluently in eight languages including Russian, Greek, and Icelandic made her invaluable.

The shows they produced for the Skylight stretched the staff in a way that gave us a glimpse of a potential that we had not considered before. The old attitude of making do with whatever materials happened to be at hand and trusting to the gods of the theatre to make the results magical gave way to a concentrated consideration of the process of making things work at a standard that brooked no compromise. With *Poppea* and *The Makropoulos Affair*, all things musical and theatrical were given equal weight and scrutinized intensely. The company began to push itself beyond the old yardstick that one in nine had to be spectacular.

For me this new level of aspiration caused no end of problems. I didn't know how to find or judge singers of the calibre the Skylight needed to find. Don St. Pierre, the theatre's music director at the time had so elevated our musical values that my status as an amateur musician would have driven them away by displaying my ignorance. But I did know how to produce shows in the old garage and I knew the audience because I greeted them in the role of ticket taker for every performance. One particularly frigid February, I presented the Board of Directors with three options: close the theatre and liquidate our debts, go back to the Richardson days by directing and designing everything myself, or raise money to permit artists to conceive productions without making those artists be their own technicians. (One's creativity is somewhat restricted by the knowledge that choosing a difficult costume, scenic element, or lighting effect may well result in one's staying up all night to make sure it works.) With some trepidation the Board chose the latter option.

Hearing of my proposal, Wadsworth and Zambello made an extraordinary offer: to serve as Artistic Directors for the Skylight without pay until the company was able to develop adequate resources to support a new artistic standard. Their first season was 1984-85. Since then the theatre has slowly, organically adopted several principles, which, although never articulated concisely, inform all artistic decisions made by the Artistic Directors.

First, the theatre is committed to its audience. What is presented must be presented so well that no apologies need be made. There are no requirements made of or condescensions to the education or lack thereof that might be assumed of an audience. The experience of a Skylight show is thereby made direct, personal, and immediate. The point is to communicate as if to a peer and not to preach, an activity which presupposes that a body of knowledge can only be communicated through an interpreter.

Second, the theatre is committed to its artists. No actor, singer, director, designer, musician, or technician is only that thing. Rather, the people who choose to give flesh to their imagination on stage are always artists. Artists are constantly evolving. Their craft, sensibility and self image are never static and thus they cannot be considered as commodities, like sheets of plywood or cans of paint that can be taken or left depending on the market for paint and plywood at the moment. Choosing or being chosen to work at the Skylight thus requires an understanding of the context of the artist's life in the community. Not only does the Skylight think of involving every artist it employs in more than one production but also what the theatre can do for the artist's evolution and how best to strengthen the artist's craft, sensibility and self image in a society which gives little credence to the value of artistic work.

Third, the theatre is committed to its community. For every theatre patron there are hundreds who don't, for a multitude of reasons, come to the theatre. The work we do is specialized and isn't driven by a demand in the marketplace. Yet we must thrive at the box office if we are to survive. Therefore we are trying to strengthen our ability to convince people to join with enthusiasm in exploring that indefinable place where, sitting in a crowded, poorly ventilated, darkened room, the spirit can soar. After thirty years of acceptance in Milwaukee, it is clear that there is no place like home.

These principles make the Skylight behave like a family. After thousands of performances of hundreds of productions there is an undeniable history of audiences connecting to performances, of people giving time, energy and money to make sure that something they care about deeply is nurtured and not left to languish through inattention. Like all families, the Skylight's is evolving; its dreams are different now than they were when the theatre started, or when the P.A.C. was built. But the current set of dreams is still true to the original impulse to do something of artistic worth for a Milwaukee audience by using talented performers.

So, if, in the next year or so, you hear me, or the Artistic Directors, or Christine Voigt, the theatre's new General Manager, or someone on the Board of Directors waxing eloquent about the need for a bigger theatre space without posts and with an orchestra pit that retains the Skylight's special intimacy, please remember that moment in 1959 when Clair Richardson motioned to Sprague Vonier during Keeley and Smith's impromptu romp through the works of Gilbert and Sullivan and said "Do you want to have some real fun?"

The answer is yes.

Colin Cabot
September, 1988