

Asheville Community Theatre



More than you can imagine

1940s

In 1946 World War II had recently ended; life was returning to a new “normal.” The Players Guild, a handful of people who kept a theatre organization alive against many odds, including the Great Depression and World War II, had

disbanded. A June 1946 notice in the Social News of the Asheville newspaper called for all persons interested in forming a community theatre to meet the next night, and Asheville Community Theatre (ACT) was born!

1947 saw the first community theatre production of



In 1947 Forrest Wood, gifted performer and board member, was dispatched to New York City to “bring back someone who would put Asheville on the map.” Charlton and Lydia Clarke Heston (pictured above) arrived in Asheville shortly after.

Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*.

1950s and 1960s

By the 1950s membership reached 2000, and ACT co-sponsored its first Beaux Arts Ball as a reward to volunteers.

In 1960 ACT took over 120 College Street for rehearsal, office, shop, and storage space.

Production of *South Pacific* in 1962 began an annual tradition of producing a major musical.

ACT was without a permanent home for many years. Performances were given in various locations throughout the city, including the old city auditorium, the William Randolph School on Montford Avenue, and an old beer warehouse on Biltmore Avenue that had been converted into the Thomas Wolfe Playhouse.

1970s and 1980s

When the city condemned the Playhouse in 1970, ACT built its own theatre. William A.V. Cecil chaired the construction and steering committee.

ACT opened its new theatre in 1972 with *Camelot*.

In 1982 the theatre building’s mortgage was retired 15 years early.

1990s

In 1991 the ACT Endowment Fund was established to provide funding for programs that explore and preserve quality community theatre. The Hestons returned in 1992 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of ACT’s Walnut Street building, performing *Love Letters*. The same year, the Annex next to the theatre was donated to ACT by the Blomberg family. It was the former gas station of Harry Blomberg and currently serves as the costume and prop storage area.

ACT represented North Carolina at the Southeastern Theatre Conference in Washington DC in 1993 with *The Boys Next Door*. In 1995 ACT won the Community Theatre Award for outstanding achievement from the North Carolina Theatre Conference. An Urban Trail Marker was located in front of the theatre in 1996.

2000s

35below, a small black box theatre, was added in 2002 under the Mainstage thanks to a grant from the Janirve Foundation. 35below will be replaced with a new larger capacity theatre in 2017. ACT produced world premieres of several plays, including *Dearly Beloved*, *Christmas*



Groundbreaking for 35 East Walnut 1971: Left to Right, Mayor Richard Wood, Herschel Ponder, and William A.V. Cecil.



Curtain Calls, a marker on Asheville’s Urban Trail, was dedicated in memory of local composer, vocal coach, jazz pianist, and singer Ann Sternberg (1933-1975).

Belles, *Southern Hospitality*, and *Bachelor Pad* on the Mainstage. 35below had the Southeastern premiere of *Backyard Fruit* and N.C. premieres of *Miss Gulch Returns!*, *Limonade Tous Les Jours*, *The Gimmick*, and *Chipola*.

ACT celebrates its 70th anniversary as a thriving theatre group poised for a major expansion in 2016.

ACTers

The theatre is more than the building. Volunteers are motivated by their love of the arts, as expressed through:

acting, working backstage, artistic lighting, planning costumes and makeup, taking photographs, selling tickets, handling props, and doing whatever else it takes to support a production.

Many participants have worn several hats, from acting and directing to serving on the Board of Directors, or helping backstage and in the box office. Some couples have volunteered together, including Nancy and Charlie David, John and Katherine Hunter, Herschel and Eleanor Ponder, and Jim and Virginia Hamilton. It was not unusual for singles to meet at ACT and marry, like Herbert Wadopian and his wife Currie in the 1950s and Stage Manager Cindy Baldwin and her husband Bob more recently.

Multi-generational involvement is common at ACT, also. Once, a family participated in *The Wizard of Oz*, both onstage and backstage, including their dog as Toto. ACT has also served as a launching pad for participants who have gone on to illustrious careers in the arts and other fields.



ACT premiered several Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope, and Jamie Wooten plays, including *Dearly Beloved*, *Christmas Belles* and *Southern Hospitality* (pictured above).



Spamalot (2014).

TOP PHOTO BAR - LEFT TO RIGHT:

Dark of the Moon (1946) • *The Wizard of Oz* (2005) • *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1970).

PANEL CREDITS:

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For additional information about Asheville Community Theatre, visit www.ashevilletheatre.org.