

The Cornerstone

The Newsletter of the Rice Historical Society

Vol. 19 No. 1
Winter/Spring 2013

In This Issue



All the Campus is
A Stage: A History
of Theater at
Rice University 1



Trauma on
the Trinity 12

Join the Rice Historical Society or
Give a Gift Membership to a Friend

**Newsletter • Projects • Programs •
Special Events • Field Trips**

One-year membership categories:
\$25, \$50, \$100, or other gift

Send name, address, telephone number,
and payment to:

The Rice Historical Society—MS 43
Rice University
P.O. Box 1892
Houston, TX 77251-1892
713-348-4990 or 1-800-225-5258

Under the IRS guidelines, the estimated value of any benefits received by you is not substantial; therefore the full amount of your gift is a deductible contribution. Employees of a corporation that has a Corporate Matching Gifts program will receive membership credit for the total amount of personal and company contribution. Please obtain a form from your company's personnel department.

All the Campus is a Stage: A History of Theater at Rice University

by Nicole Pariseau

From its beginning, Rice University has been seen as a school focused on the sciences and engineering, an elite training ground for its innovators and leaders of the natural and mechanical world, with a benign neglect towards the arts. Yet, it has almost always had theater. In spite of perceptions, Rice is home to both the oldest collegiate theater troupe and the longest-running annual Shakespeare festival in Houston, and it is a school that produces more plays in any given year than most surrounding universities that boast stronger, more firmly established theater departments. Though Rice was the last major university in Houston to establish a formal theater program and degree, the fierce dedication and enthusiasm of its students to the production of ambitious and progressive pieces allowed the growth of a deep and lasting theater tradition at Rice University.

Rice theater finds its roots in the Dramatics Club, formed shortly after the conclusion of the First World War, which started the traditions that have remained a part of Rice's theatrical identity throughout its history. Though theater existed on campus before the rise of this new club, with an annual production by the Young Women's Christian Association following their first play, "Green Stockings," in 1918 and the occasional show by other groups on campus, the Rice Dramatics Club became the first organization solely focused on creating theater at Rice. With their preliminary plans laid out in 1921, the group premiered a festival of one-act plays at Autry House that fall, a successful production that gained the support of students and the greater Houston community. By 1923 the club was invited to perform for the Rice Alumni Association's annual reunion, an honor that "marked the first official recognition of the Dramatics Club as an important phase of Rice activities." Though



Program cover, "Romeo and Juliet," 1995



"Green Stockings," 1918

THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PURPOSE

To collect and preserve for the future the history of Rice University

BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2012–2013

OFFICERS

Helen L. Toombs '79
President

Nancy Burch '61
Vice-President

Lee Pecht
Treasurer

Kerry Goelzer '70
Recording Secretary

Lynda Crist, '67
Corresponding Secretary

Mary Dix
The Cornerstone Editor

BOARD

Sandy Benak
John Boles '65
Maydelle Burkhalter '53
Stephen Fox '73
John Gladu
Doug Killgore '69
Quin McWhirter '62
Joyce Winning Nagle '44
Karen Hess Rogers '68
Joan Schell
Alan Shelby

The Rice Historical Society welcomes letters to *The Cornerstone*, its official newsletter. Rice alumni and friends are encouraged to contribute photographs and remembrances of historical interest that may be used in future issues of *The Cornerstone*. Items cannot be returned and will be donated to our archival collection.

Newsletter designed by
Starfall Graphics.

All the Campus is a Stage: A History of Theater at Rice University (continued from page 1)

other groups continued to dabble in Rice theater, from this point forward, the Rice Dramatics Club was the dominant producer of plays on campus.

Though the beginning of the Dramatics Club included significant faculty involvement, as the club gained strength and confidence, it shifted to focus on student involvement and leadership, establishing a strong student presence in Rice theater. The club was initially governed by a council of two students and one faculty member who were changed for each production. The club was open to "all interested members of the Rice community," allowing for the appearance of Rice faculty and students in the same production, a rare occurrence in university theater at the time. Club members were selected based on auditions at the beginning of each term, with those considered of adequate talent accepted for a year of probationary membership. The club itself rarely met beyond these initial auditions and gatherings to select plays for production, but productions found their cast and crew from among club members. In these early years, the major faculty advisor was John Clark Tidden, a professor in architectural drawing and painting who frequently served as the company's director. His talent and dedication to the group during the organization's first years ensured that the club had a firm foundation, which allowed the group to continue on student initiative following Tidden's departure from Rice in 1925. Though other faculty sponsors would step in to serve as directors and advisors, the club had become entirely a student affair. The trend towards a more student driven organization continued with a restructuring of the club in 1933, which established a traditional officer structure of



John Clark Tidden



"Naked Boy," 1921



"Rose of the Southland," 1933

leadership and divided the club into eight departments focused on different production elements such as acting, directing, costuming, and playwriting. With the new organization, students, rather than faculty, established themselves as the leaders who would define an emerging theatrical tradition at Rice.

This tradition focused on creating a professional environment under which students could produce progressive and innovative plays. The club operated with almost no budget; the productions were funded by modest dues paid by members and the small amount earned in ticket sales. They performed most of their productions at Autry House, where sets had to be taken down and tucked away when the club was not rehearsing or performing, and the plays often lacked a rehearsal space altogether. With limited supplies, space, and budget, students were often forced to be creative, leading to a greater willingness to experiment and innovate. Nevertheless, the group was known for putting on plays of the “highest artistic production [standards] and standard of acting.” The progressive nature of the Dramatics Club, however, eventually led to some controversy around their productions. Most notably, the announcement of a production of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in the fall of 1933 caused an uproar from the Harris County Council of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who opposed the idea of the play being produced in a “southern institution,” considering the source material as “one of the causes of the Civil War.” They filed a court suit in an attempt to stop the production from going forward. The judge threw out the case as absurd, leaving the decision of the play’s future up to the Rice Institute. The Dramatics Club decided to instead present a production of the burlesque musical “Rose of the Southland, or the Spirit of Robert E. Lee,” which provided an even greater commentary of the South, as a further dig at the Daughters of the Confederacy. In 1936 the Dramatics Club decided to rent out the old Palace Theater for a performance of “Waiting for Lefty” to prevent a kerfuffle with the administration over the piece’s mentioning of the Communist Manifesto, which “gave it the potential to be deemed an inappropriate topic for a play on campus.” Fortunately, neither controversy made an impact on the growing tradition for innovation in theater that was being established by the Dramatics Club members.

With America’s entrance into the Second World War in 1941, however, campus activities, including those of the Dramatics Club, were halted, leading to the decline and eventual end of the theater group. Even with the end of the war in 1945, the Dramatics Club did not immediately reappear, with students waiting until the spring of 1947 to reorganize. Despite the years of dormancy, the club quickly rebuilt itself and gained prominence on campus once



“Earth Spirit,” 1955

again. This was not to last. In the early 1950s, the school’s authorities banned the club from campus following their destruction of the wooden floor in their theater in Lovett Hall during a thunderstorm. Without the funds or space required to continue productions, the group was forced to undergo a significant reorganization, which caused the club to become essentially defunct, creating a period of stagnation in student theater. Nonetheless, with their strong dedication to resourceful and ambitious productions, the Dramatics Club laid a firm foundation that defined the promising future for theater at Rice.

The eventual completion of the Dramatics Club’s reorganization by a group of dedicated students a couple of years after its collapse resulted in the formation of Rice’s second major theater club, the Rice Players, an organization that, from its beginning years, continued the innovative practices of its predecessor. The birth of the Rice Players was largely due to the help and guidance of Dr. Willard Thorpe, a visiting professor in American Studies from Princeton University who served as the first faculty advisor. Rather than instituting a traditional officer structure for the new organization, the club’s founders

established a system of governance based around a group of student coordinators who would handle the managerial duties necessary to keep the club running, including budgeting, publicity, and play selection. The initial reception of the administration to the group was “cool, if not downright hostile,” and, at first, the Players received no financial support from the university. The club had no constitution, by-laws, or dues; it depended solely on the enthusiasm and dedication of its members. Nonetheless, in their first year the Players presented a series of one-acts, performing both in the Fondren Library basement and on the Autry House stage. Their final production of the season, an outdoor Shakespeare festival on the lawns of Rice, would soon become an annual tradition. The scenes traveled throughout the campus, from the steps of the Chemistry Lecture Hall to the grassy area between Lovett Hall and the Physics Building, with audience members being led by torchbearers and musicians and the technical equipment moved from set to set by a specially equipped truck. By the mid-1950s, the Rice Players, who had established themselves as a legitimate theater organization, began to receive some funding from the university and gained a permanent home upon the completion of Hamman Hall in 1958. Formulating themselves early as a distinctly student-based organization, the arrival of the Players marked a reinvigoration of student interest and involvement at Rice.

In the 1960s, campus theater experienced a major turning point with the arrival of Neil “Sandy” Havens as the permanent professional director and head of the Rice Players. Before this, Rice Players’ productions relied almost primarily on student directors, with faculty sponsors occasionally filling the directorial role. The quality of these productions, as a result, varied greatly from play to play. It was truly “amateur” theater. In 1962, the coordinators hired their first professional free-lance director. The resulting rise in professionalism of the Players’ productions was such that, two years later, a proposal was made to the dean of students and the Board of Governors that funds be made available to hire a drama assistant. Around the same time, after hearing from a friend that a permanent directorial position with the Players might become a reality, Havens contacted Wilfred S. Dowden, the chairman of the English



Adrian Neil “Sandy” Havens

Department which had jurisdiction over the club, about the possibility of a job. Havens, a Rice alumnus and founding Rice Player, had graduated from Indiana University with a Master of Arts, and, during a brief stint in New York City, had earned two Broadway credits: assistant stage managing the Irving Berlin musical “Mr. President” and stage managing “Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright,” the company’s next production. At the time he applied for the directorial position, however, he had just spent two years as a buyer for boy’s clothing at Bloomingdales and was ready for a change and a return to the theater. A few months after expressing his interest in directing the Rice Players, the Dean of Humanities brought Havens to Houston for an interview. The interviewing process included a meeting with Rice President Kenneth Pitzer, the Dean of Humanities, and, most significantly, the students of the Rice Players. The students’ questioning of Havens lasted for several hours as they probed all aspects of his background, his interest in theater, and his philosophies on teaching. Their thorough and lengthy interviews with Havens and the other candidate presented the Players with the unprecedented opportunity to provide the final say in the appointment of their director, and Havens emerged as their clear choice. Havens, unlike any faculty member before him, was hired by the students. With a permanent director, the Rice Players entered a new era of professionalism in 1964, creating high-quality theater that would gain recognition throughout the Houston area.

Havens’ arrival had consequences that extended beyond raising the professionalism of the Rice Players, however, as aspiring student directors turned the residential colleges into a new venue for theatrical production and the tradition of college theater as an entirely student-driven endeavor began. In the fall 1964, the same year that Havens came to Rice, Lawson Taitte broke with the Rice Players to form Baker Theater-in-the Round, producing Eugene Ionesco’s “The Lesson” in the fall and “Waiting for Godot” in the spring. Though the initial season achieved “great acclaim” at both Baker and beyond, the program folded on Taitte’s departure the following year. Nevertheless, the idea of theater in the colleges was planted in the minds of enterprising students. The following year, Roger Glade proposed the establishment of Hanszen College Theater; the cabinet, unwilling to advance the necessary funds, rejected Glade’s elaborate plan. Wiess College, on the other hand, supported the proposal, and gave Glade the funds he needed to establish a theater in their commons. Unlike Taitte, who had simply been



Roger Glade

looking for an opportunity to direct, Glade hoped to establish a permanent theater program at Wiess that would last beyond his tenure at Rice. In the fall of 1965, the Wiess Tabletop Theater, so named for the use of the college's tables to provide elevation for audience seating, presented its first production, Sophocles' "Antigone," directed and produced almost single-handedly by Glade. After scrapping a spring production of "Six Characters in search of an



"Hello Hamlet" publicity photo, 1967

Author" to prevent the collapse of the program under the weight of a bad show, the Tabletop Theater entered its second season in fall 1966, producing "Dr. Faustus" and, in the spring, "The Alchemist." With the success of each production, Glade gained greater support from the rest of Wiess and, by the end of the 1966–67 school year, the college began introducing permanent physical facilities designed to make theatrical production there easier in the future. In fact, when the Wiess Commons underwent later remodeling, a lighting booth and trusses for a theater were built into the new commons to "assure that Tabletop would continue." Nonetheless, after Glade's graduation, Wiess Tabletop Theater faced potential collapse when its entire budget was appropriated and spent on a student-written musical; the program's future became entirely dependent on the success or failure of the show. This musical, entitled "Hello Hamlet," a parody of the classic Shakespearean tragedy, also depended almost entirely on a single student, George Greanias, who not only wrote and directed the piece, but starred in the title role. The show was, fortunately, a roaring success, and Greanias produced the show for a second time in 1970, his senior year. Since then, it has become a tradition at Wiess, with the play revived once every four years.

With the invention of college theater and the introduction of Sandy Havens to the Rice Players, the 1960s and '70s were marked by a period of experimentation within Rice theater as each group grew into its identities and found its place among Rice students. The success of Wiess Tabletop inspired other college theater programs to form at many of the other residential colleges of Rice. As colleges attempted to establish their own unique character, they began to specialize in the types of shows produced, and most of the colleges became known by their specific niche. Hanszen started with minstrel shows, "a type of burlesque with racial undertones," but soon transitioned into the production of an annual musical. At Jones, this period was dominated by

melodramas. In 1970, Baker College, in conjunction with its festival each spring established a tradition of putting on an annual Shakespeare play. Still in existence today, Baker Shakespeare has become the longest-running annual Shakespeare festival in the greater Houston area. The colleges quickly became the "community theater" of Rice, the place where students less serious about theater could get involved. Though college productions varied greatly in quality and in dedication, the vast

availability provided by the enormous number of productions being held on campus spread theater to all strata of the Rice student body.

The Rice Players, on the other hand, took the hiring of their permanent professional director as a cue to elevate the quality and professionalism of their productions, taking on newer, more ambitious shows and establishing themselves as the elite theater group on campus. With Baker taking on an annual Shakespeare production and the overall growth of theater in Houston outside of Rice, the Players began to move away from producing the classical plays that had filled their earlier seasons, making their mark in Houston by showing more contemporary works. By the mid-sixties at least three of their four annual productions were "Houston premiers," and, in this period, the Players introduced Houston to playwrights such as Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett, and Tom Stoppard. Mostly through the efforts of the Players, Rice became "the hot bed of radical theater" in the late 1960s, and there was often controversy over the explicit language and sexual situations that would sometimes appear in Players' shows. The administration, however, supported the Players under Havens, never attempting to oppose a production that might cause a tumult on campus or in the community.



Jean-Claude DeBremaecker with students at protest, 1969 (left)
Masterson Affair, 1969 (right)

Strangely enough, the largest stir created by the Rice Players in this period came entirely by accident. In February 1969, the Board of Trustees announced that Dr. William Masterson would replace Dr. Kenneth Pitzer as the president of the university, acting without consulting the faculty or the students. The decision outraged the members of the Rice community, many of whom approved neither the choice of candidate nor the method by which he was selected. For the entire weekend following the announcement, there were college and faculty meetings, debates, and protests throughout campus. Meanwhile, the Rice Players were in the midst of dress rehearsals for their latest production, a play called “The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade,” which was opening the following Monday. The play itself had been labeled as controversial after a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company had featured nudity, one of the first instances of it on the stage, garnering some attention for the Rice production after an article was published in a local Houston newspaper about the possibility of its appearing again in the Players’ piece, a concern which proved unfounded. More importantly, however, the play was concerned with the French Revolution, a fitting topic for the revolution that was currently occurring on campus. The entire next week, as the Board of Trustees was forced to reverse their decision and Masterson withdrew his name from consideration, the auditorium of Hamman Hall was filled, a five-hundred seat theater, with standing room only. The production, through a complete coincidence, managed to embody this incident experienced by the entire Rice campus. It also stands as an accurate reflection of the work being done by the Rice Players in this period. With a smaller professional theater presence in Houston at the time, the Players were able to establish themselves as a competent, solid organization with a consistent level of performance that matched many of the outside theater companies in the area. With frequent reviews by the three major newspapers in Houston at the time, the *Press*, the *Post*, and the *Chronicle*, the Players were known well beyond the hedges of Rice and had a regular following among members of the Houston community. Though Hamman Hall was not always sold out, the large audiences seen in the “Marat/Sade” production were not unique in the Players’ experience in this period. In fact, in 1976, the university, feeling that the organization had become financially self-sufficient from box office returns, halted funding for the Players with the understanding that the administration would not let the group fail if they ran into trouble with money, an occurrence which the Players have only experienced twice in their history due to the popularity of the group’s productions. In this way and

many others, the period of the late 1960s through the early 1980s can be considered as the height of the Rice Players as an organization and as a theatrical company.

The arrival of a professional director for the Rice Players also brought about the introduction of educational theater at Rice. As a member of the faculty, Havens was expected to teach in addition to his duties as the director of Rice Players. Considered a member of the English department upon his arrival, his first year was spent teaching public speaking and a basic English course for scholarship athletes, filling in for a professor on leave. In his second year, Havens transferred to the newly established Fine Arts Department, leading some students to suggest the creation of a course in theater at Rice. In the fall of 1966, Theater 300 and 301 appeared in the *General*



“Marat Sade” Program, 1969



Rice Players, 1972



"Close of Play" by Simon Gray, 1982

Announcements for the first time as a course titled "Introduction to Theater," and several years later, Fine Arts 450 was added as a "Special Problems" course which was designed by students with Havens to meet specific interests in theater. It became a common course for coordinators and other students heavily involved in Players to survive their massive time commitments to the organization. Throughout his time at Rice, however, Havens considered his greatest teaching tool to be the stage rather than the classroom. At one point, Havens worked with Nina Vance and Iris Siff at the Alley Theatre in Houston to put together a proposal to establish a school of theater at Rice in conjunction with the Alley's company. The proposal fell through, but the relationship between the Players and the Alley remained, and the Rice Players became the only outside theater group to perform on the Alley's main stage. Throughout this entire period, however, Havens never attempted or wanted to develop a theater department or theater major at Rice. He felt that the establishment of a formal theater program would take away opportunities from engineering, humanities, and science majors who wanted to be involved in extracurricular theater in favor of those who were training to enter into it professionally. The Rice Players, despite only being an extracurricular activity for its members, was sufficient in its professionalism and

reputation to provide those who wanted to pursue a career in theater the opportunities they needed to succeed.

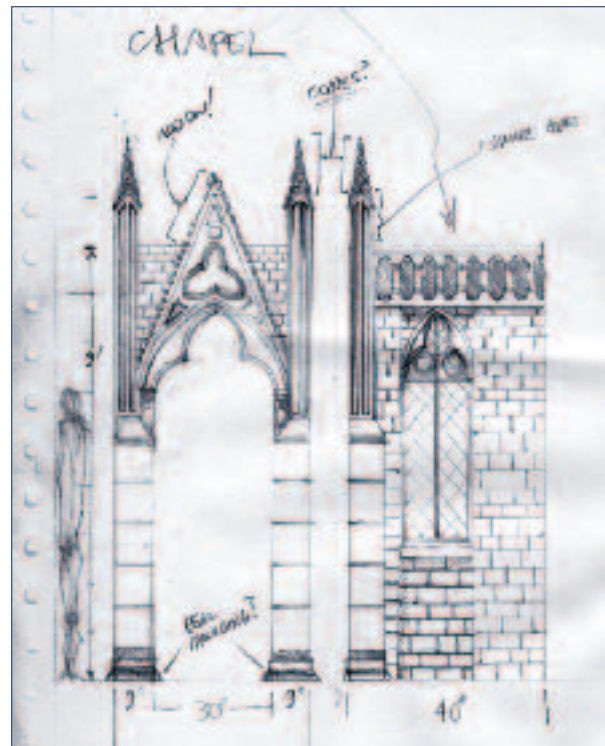
Despite the presence of a faculty director, the Rice Players remained a student-run and student-driven organization. By this point the coordinator system had expanded from three students to a group that ranged anywhere from four to ten members. Becoming a coordinator required a level of dedication to the organization that caused distinction, as new coordinators were selected at the end of each year by Havens and the existing group. Havens recognized, from the process of his hiring and his own experiences as an undergraduate, that his position as the director of the Rice Players did not grant him control of the organization. The students, as always, were the primary drivers of the company, and Havens remained very open to cooperation and collaboration with his pupils. Beyond the administrative duties involved in running an organization, the coordinators were involved in play selection, casting, and, frequently, the important roles required for productions, such as design and stage managing. When the Players began producing an annual "Evening of One-Acts" in the spring, directors were often pulled from among the coordinating team. Opportunities were also open for non-coordinating students, but, with the strong presence and overwhelming dedication of the coordinators, as well as with the highly professionalized productions that were being put up by the organization, the Rice Players began to be seen by the student body as intimidating and exclusive, causing many aspiring to participate in theater to turn to the colleges rather than make the commitment required by the Players. In a certain regard, this strengthened the organization as it became populated by the best and most enthusiastic thespians at Rice.

By the 1980s, as professional theater became more readily available throughout the greater Houston area and the amazing output of new plays seen in the 1960s and 70s finally slowed, the Rice Players noticed a natural decline in audience sizes and student support; nonetheless, with its base of dedicated students under the guidance of Havens, it remained an organization committed to the production of serious, innovative, and ambitious theater through the end of the millennium. Though the Players still remained committed to producing new plays, the growth of theater in Houston, both on other university campuses and in the professional sphere, limited their options on new plays, especially as professional theaters were usually given preference to premiere a piece. As a necessity, the Players were forced to coordinate with the other, surrounding theaters to create a season that was distinctly unique in order to attract an audience. At the same time, the Players lost a significant source of publicity as Houston newspapers began to turn their focus away from university

productions. The organization itself, however, was thriving, maintaining its innovative practices in theater. With the completion of the Farnsworth Pavilion in the Rice Memorial Center in the late 1980s, the Rice Players began to experiment with theater-in-the-round. They constructed a series of platforms for seating that conformed to the octagonal shape of the room, creating a theater that could seat about 130 people with a stage space in the center, a setup that was later transitioned to the Hamman Hall stage. In 1991, when the Shepherd School of Music moved into their new space in Alice Pratt Brown Hall, the Rice Players were left, for the first time, with sole jurisdiction over Hamman Hall, which they essentially ran as a “rental hall” when not using the space for their own productions. Havens served as the building manager, and many of the Players acted as hall technicians, taking care of equipment and working tech for concerts and outside shows. This offered a new opportunity for education among the Rice Players, as they learned “what life in the theater was like” as well as “real life collaboration experience.” Most importantly, however, the students in Players learned how to run a theater. By the late 1990s, a greater proportion of Rice Players went to reputable training programs to pursue professional careers in theater than in any era past. In many ways, in this period, the lack of a formal theater department proved more beneficial to the students involved in Rice Players than a program involving a theater degree would have been.

In 2000, after 36 years as the director of the Rice Players, Sandy Haven retired, inducing a major shift in the Players as a new set of directors, with different backgrounds and visions, came to head the organization. The retirement of Havens prompted the formation of The Future of Theater Committee, which was led by Dr. Dennis Huston, one of the campus’s leading advocates for theater, and included two Rice Players coordinators among its member. Formed to explore the possibilities of Rice theater, the committee began officially searching for directorial candidates in February following the approval of President Gillis and the Dean of Humanities to hire two faculty members to replace Havens. The university hoped that dividing Havens’s technical and directorial duties between two jobs would bring more theater expertise to the Rice community and so make available to more students the possibilities of learning about theater. The first position, the director, would, like Havens, serve as the head of the organization and provide artistic direction for the majority of the shows produced by the Players. The assistant director, on the other hand, would take over the management of Hamman Hall and only occasionally act as a director for the Rice Players’ shows. With the division of the position, the committee also envisioned expanding the number of theater classes offered at Rice. A technical

theater course and a class on directing were considered as viable additions to the program. After months of searching, bringing in each of four final candidates to teach one-hour directing and acting classes and then meeting with the Players coordinators and Havens in order to get an idea of how they would fit in the organization, the committee selected Mark Ramont as the new director and Trish Rigdon as the assistant director of the Rice Players. Before coming to Rice, Ramont had served as an artistic director at the Hangar in New York in addition to directing in Houston at the Alley Theatre and Stages Repertory Theater. He also had the necessary background in education, having taught theater at Sam Houston State University and Southwestern University. Rigdon, on the other hand, had broad expertise in not only technical theater, but also design and administration, and had impressed the committee with her initiative in getting involved with the Rice Players. However, despite the enthusiasm of the new directors, the departure of Havens still marked a blow to the organization as a whole. The constant presence of Havens throughout his long tenure offered a cultural continuity that was critical for the organization’s identity, stabilizing the constant flux of new and graduating students while providing institutional memory and long term guidance. The Havens era of the Rice Players was finished, ushering in a new period that would ultimately result in the establishment of a formal



Sketch of scenery, “A Man for All Seasons,” 2000

theater program, with a theater major, for the first time at Rice.

With the arrival of Ramont and Rigdon, the Rice Players noticed an inevitable shift as the new directors took their place at the head of the organization. With backgrounds rooted outside of Rice, both Ramont and Rigdon sought to run the theater program with similar rigor to degree granting programs and with aspirationally professional standards. They had more direct oversight of the coordinators and the program and quickly tried to apply models of professional theater practice to the organization, a move that caused occasional strife among the coordinators who had worked with the more lenient Havens. The coordinators, however, still maintained their dominant role in the organization, serving in major production roles, including producer, and handling budgets, building maintenance, and play selection. During this period, the coordinators organized themselves into committees, which focused on jobs ranging from publicity to recruiting to facilities. In 2002, the position of Managing Coordinator was created to run meetings and head the committee system. However, despite the increase in the organization within the coordinating system, the momentum of the Players began to slow, and the production schedule decreased from two shows per semester to one. The Players, nevertheless, continued their commitment to produce professional quality theater while exploring works that pushed and challenged the audience, and this period was characterized by many abstract and edgy productions, such as Paula Vogel's "Baltimore Waltz" and Keith Curran's "Walking the Dead." At first, Ramont acted as the primary director for the Players' productions, while Rigdon served as a bookkeeper and building manager, but Rigdon soon began to push to direct more, a move the Players' coordinators had mixed feelings about as they found her to be a polarizing figure within the



Smash Rice Players, 2001

organization. Unlike Havens, Rigdon seemed eager to establish a formal theater program and major at Rice, an idea that alienated many of the coordinators who preferred the student-run basis of Rice theater. This conflict between Rigdon and the Players was exacerbated when Ramont left Rice to pursue other prospects in the professional sphere in 2004. Rigdon replaced Ramont as the director of the Rice Players, while a new faculty member Matt Schlieff was brought in to manage Hamman Hall and act as the technical director. In the fall of 2004, the Players' production of "The Laramie Project" was widely considered a company disaster, with a large amount of conflict between Rigdon and the actors. By the spring of 2005, following the significantly more successful production of "Equus" by guest director George Brock, the coordinators put forth a proposal that would give them more control over the organization, forcing Rigdon to apply like other directors instead of getting to automatically direct at least one play per year. The measure left Rigdon with little job security and provided her with the impetus to create an alternate theater company through the university. In 2006, the theater program through the Visual and Dramatic Arts Department was formulated, and, for the first time in its history, a degree in theater was offered at Rice.



"Equus," 1985

The emergence of a theater degree program marked another turning point in the history of Rice Players and campus theater. In the beginning, the conflict that drove the formation of the theater program resulted in a tenuous relationship between the new department and the existing Players. Finding themselves having to share their space for the first time in a decade, the coordinators became focused on strategizing about how to protect their rights to Hamman Hall from the encroachment of the theater program. In 2008 Trish Rigdon left Rice to pursue a career in professional costume design, and the tension between the new program and the Rice Players eased with her departure. Rigdon was replaced by Christina Keefe, and important restructuring occurred in the department. Keefe, as the director of the program would not automatically serve as the director of the productions, and, more importantly, she would not be considered the head of the

Rice Players, as Havens, Ramont, and Rigdon had been. Instead, Matt Schlieff, as the manager of Hamman Hall, would take over the faculty sponsorship, and the Players were left to choose their own directors. Keefe recognized the importance of a university-wide, student-run theater troupe and strove to improve the relationship between the department and the Players. The program began to collaborate with the Rice Players on productions, first in 2008 with "Private Eyes" and again in 2010 with "Noises Off," in an attempt to foster cooperation and trust between the two organizations. Though the strain between the program and the Players was reduced, it did not disappear entirely. In the spring of 2010, following an incident in which a light board was left on overnight by the Players, Keefe and Schlieff imposed a contract with new measures that restricted the Players' use of Hamman Hall, including a clause that required that a VADA professional be present at every Players function, including rehearsals, with payment coming from the Players budget. The measure lasted for a semester before it was revoked. Nevertheless, in the years since Rigdon's departure, the efforts of Keefe, Schlieff, and the current Players' coordinating team have vastly improved the relations between the Players and the theater program, and Keefe and Schlieff have become trusted mentors and advisors for the student-run troupe.

Despite the drama of its inception, the introduction of a theater major to Rice has provided many benefits to students, but it has also forced a redefinition of the place of student-run theater on campus. With the new program, the availability of theater-based classes expanded enormously in order to fill the needs of the theater degree. Majors are required to complete work both backstage and onstage, taking classes in design, acting, and technical theater and running crew for VADA productions, as well as taking electives from other artistic disciplines, such as drawing and film-making, and the classes remain available to interested non-majors. Theater education at Rice has expanded vastly with the new program. Despite Sandy Havens' fears that a theater department might lead to a neglect of the non-major thespians of Rice, the small size of the program, with seven majors in 2008 and close to twenty today, has prevented the exclusion of non-majors from productions. Whether that will remain true with the continual growth of the program has yet to be determined. Even with its small size, the theater program has already had a lasting impact on the Rice Players and on student-run theater. With a larger, university-sponsored budget and the department name to attract professionals, the theater program quickly began producing shows of very high



Faculty, Visual and Dramatic Arts, 2010

quality, superseding the ability of the Rice Players and taking their place as the professional theater group on campus. The Players became smaller and less ambitious as the coordinators struggled to find their new place and purpose. Though the volume of college theater had decreased, with Wiess Tabletop and Baker Shakespeare the only remaining college theater that was consistently produced, the other colleges presenting shows sporadically based on interest, college theater's presence on campus remained thriving, and, in many cases, it filled the want for student-run theater; it was theater produced for the sake of tradition and fun, and it had the base support of the residential colleges. The Visual and Dramatic Arts Department, on the other hand, began to take over the need for a professional training ground, the place previously filled by the Players. As a result, the Rice Players have been forced to settle in the middle, serving as the bridge between the community theater in the colleges and the professional theater being produced by the department, advertising themselves as a theater company where students perform in a professional space, design with professional equipment, while under the guidance of a professional director, without having to commit to the time and dedication required for a VADA show. Additionally, with students still at its head, the Rice Players remains one of the best places on campus to learn the aspects behind running and organizing a theater.

As with many of the activities at Rice, theater has always been a student affair. Sometimes with the help of a strong faculty advisor, and other times on their own power, the budding thespians of Rice drove the creation of a strong tradition of innovation and ambition as the university continually produced shows that matched surrounding schools and, in some cases, the professional

theaters of Houston in quality and merit. Pushing the boundaries and its audiences, Rice theater continued to introduce new ideas and playwrights to the people of Houston and established itself as an essential part of the campus and the community at large throughout its existence. At its height, Rice theater was producing close to fifteen shows per year, shows which were produced and run almost entirely by students. With the professionalism of the Rice Players program, students were able to pursue careers in the theater regardless of their graduation degree, and many of the top theater organizations in Houston and the United States count former Rice Players among their

members. From the rise of the Dramatics Club in the 1920s to the birth of the Rice Players in 1952, from the formation of college theater in the 1960s to the introduction of the theater program under VADA in 2006, Rice has created a tradition by which an astonishing amount of theater is produced, more than at most other universities, with involvement across the student spectrum, from those who desire to pursue it professionally to those who try it for fun. Though at its core, it may be a school focused on science and engineering, Rice has never neglected the arts.

Trauma on the Trinity, 1933–34

by Anna Margaret Fooshee Alexander '33, who just turned 100 in January



Anna Margaret Fooshee

My first job out of Rice was teaching in Romayor, Texas, a “gravel-pit-stop” hidden right on the banks of the Trinity River in the Big Thicket halfway between Cleveland and Liberty. It was a Southern Pacific railroad “stop” only if the train was flagged down or had to let off a passenger. The train went from Austin to New Orleans. The tracks were between the school grounds and downtown Romayor. The trains passed through twice during the

school day and caused a great uproar, especially during outdoor recreation. The town consisted of a general store with a post office, a feed and hardware store, a barber shop, the constable’s office, a filling station, and a wooden two-story eight-room hotel built in 1910, all on a gravel street. There was a mile-long railroad spur from the school to the gravel pit station, a site that had company houses, a superintendent’s office, and a commissary, all amid dozens of old gravel pit lakes full of perch and trout. These were enjoyed by many fishermen at sunset and on weekends. It was really a beautiful East Texas setting with woodlands full of red oaks, yaupon, and holly trees in winter and abloom in dogwood, redbud, wild azaleas, and magnolias in the spring. Every company house had big hydrangeas blooming in the yards. I had the choice of living in the hotel where three other teachers lived (with boarding house type meals) or boarding with the commissary manager and his wife a mile away in the gravel pits. The wife prepared a superior lunch for all personnel and visiting business men from Houston, so the choice was clear. I walked the spur track one mile to school, two miles home for lunch, and one mile back in the afternoon (four miles total).

I had a light, airy room in a typical company house; the windows were just six feet from a pretty, small lake. Across the tracks by the superintendent’s office was a swimming pool fed by artesian water shooting out from a big pipe about eight feet above the waters—a real waterfall and such fun! There were interesting people from the outside world to play with and walk in the woods. I had three superior meals and a pleasant “family” for an incredible \$18 per month for 10 months, \$180 annually!

I read a lot, wrote letters, made lesson plans, and played with the housedog. We had no television or long distance telephone. I wrote and got lots of letters.

The school itself was a shock—a big wooden building with four classrooms, an office, and a big auditorium with a stage; it had a wide center hall and outdoor “facilities.” It was built high off the ground in case the river flooded. The front and back doors locked with big old fashioned Yale locks. There was no janitor, so the high school boys’ punishment was to sweep the floors after school. Three times during the year all of the brooms were stolen!

Then, as winter rains set in in January, I decided that I would seek out another school the next year and went home to Houston every Friday at 2 p.m. It rained so much, the banks of the Trinity overflowed and the roads were impassible and two weekends we had to take the train to Cleveland and be picked up there (55 miles from Houston).

One of my first “reality experiences” occurred the second week of school. A group of seniors were openly eating candy in English class, so I had five of them stay after school for about 30 minutes to write a story. They left and when I gathered up stuff and went to door, they had locked me in and there wasn’t another soul around. The windows were too high to jump from so I yelled at someone across the street. He went to the principal’s house

and the principal came and unlocked the door and “freed the hostage.” I was rather embarrassed to face my classes the next day as they all knew the story. But we were all forgiving and I treated it as an adventure!

Another adventure I had: The edge of a big pond was a few feet from my bedroom window. Since we left windows open for ventilation and my side of the house seemed remote, I felt my privacy was secure. Imagine my shock and embarrassment when one day I got my mail and read this letter before class began as the big seniors filed in: “Dear Miss Fooshee, I thought you would like to know that a bunch of boys are sneaking by the pond and watching you undress at night. A Friend.” How could I teach diagramming sentences when I was numb?

Since this was years before mosquito control, practically everybody had malaria; the children would attend spasmodically. Friends would say, “this is Jamie’s fever day.” Chilly days they came to school and shivered in class. The teacher had to come early and start a big coal-fed stove in the middle of the room. By midwinter, I started many a fire with ungraded papers. I told them later I gave an “A” to every paper I burned. We had spelling bees and geography bees and played indoor games and sang songs in bad weather. We played dodge ball, softball, and basketball in good weather. The principal, Mr. Webster taught science, math, history, and social studies. His wife taught first, second, and third grades; other teachers taught fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. I taught seventh grade English, grammar, reading, spelling, and English and Spanish in eighth, ninth, and 10th grades. I also taught extemporaneous speaking. We went to interscholastic competitions in spelling, speech, debate, and essay writing. The students played volleyball and softball 45 minutes every day and had one hour for lunch. There was a platform in the rear of the school

with a barbed wire fence about eight feet from the wildest forest and underbrush. We would eat lunch there sometimes and wild javalinas would come to the fence and students would throw food to them and often we often saw deer and raccoons—nature in the raw! I had about ten students each in the ninth and 10th grades and 20 in the seventh. The principal had “whipped” the wrong boy the third week of school (the son of an executive) and after the storm had passed, he announced it was his last year in education. He told me that he had trained his last “inexperienced” teacher. True to his word, he left me alone and I left him alone. Now I see that it was a fine arrangement. I used my intuition, laid-back personality, and hopeful attitude, and along with a few books, notebooks, and pencils, made it through that year. In the contract we agreed to stay in Romayor three weeks out of four, attend church, funerals, and all other town activities, so I went home twice before Christmas.

Archives Alert

The Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, would like to have additional copies of the 1916–1920 *Campaniles* for its collection as well as Archi-Arts costumes and photographs.



In Memory of Greg Davis '51

We lost a good friend, talented photographer, and loyal member of the Rice Historical Society when we lost Greg Davis. The two photographs from the dedication of the Lovett statue were taken shortly before his death.

At right:
Statue of Edgar Odell Lovett dedicated
October 13, 2012.

Below:
President David Leebron, sculptor Bruce Wolfe,
Chairman of the Board of Trustees Jim Crownover,
and Rice history professor John Boles



Photos courtesy of
Greg Davis