





# Past to Present: Round of Applause

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Where do I begin to thank everyone who has contributed to FSLT's 75th Anniversary and the milestone it represents?

Let me start by recognizing those who served on our Anniversary Committee. Their efforts provided celebratory activities as well as documentation of our colorful past. Seventy-five years of history was organized and archived. All available cast photos and show programs were digitally preserved and made available for viewing on our website. Virtual scrapbooks were compiled using written and photographic memories submitted by our patrons and volunteers.

Pulling from all that content, this publication was then compiled for your enjoyment. Although there was a vast amount of material to review, the research was fascinating. The story printed here is a brief summary, and the photos merely a sampling of those who played a part. Hopefully, you'll forgive any errors or omissions and just enjoy the walk down memory lane.

Exploring the past has reminded us of the immense effort that has gone on behind the scenes. Countless volunteers have given their time and talent to participate in FSLT productions over the past 75 years – actors, directors, costume makers, ticket sellers, stage managers, set builders, toilet plungers, floor moppers, and coffee pourers. Some names were on the crew list for show after show, but they were only pictured on the back row of cast photos. Out of the limelight, they did not take a bow, but every last one deserves a standing ovation.

I also want to recognize the individuals and businesses that have made it possible for FSLT to offer live theatre at an affordable price.

Donations, grants, service discounts, program ads, show sponsorships, memorial gifts and more – our community has been supportive of our theatre from day one, and that generosity blessedly continues today.

But without all those who have attended our performances, there is no need for any of the others. An actor lives for applause, to see shapes of an audience in the shadows, and to hear collective laughter and sighs – and to know that in our gathering, entertainment was offered, received, and remembered. Thank you to everyone who filled a seat. You made it all worthwhile.

It would be impossible to list the names of everyone who was in some way a part of these 75 years. Instead, here is a round of applause for you all – and a toast to those who will bring community theatre to life for the next 75!

– *Carole Rogers,*  
*Anniversary Chairman*



*Calendar Girls (2018)*

**“Exploring the past  
has reminded us of  
the immense effort  
that has gone on  
behind the scenes.”**

## 75th Anniversary Celebration Volunteers:

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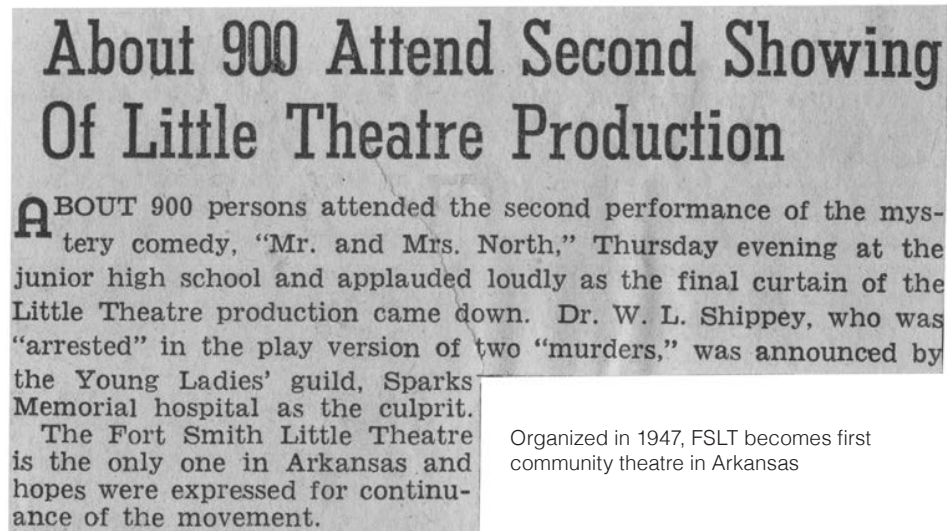


# 1947-1951: The Founding Years

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James Carney, Mrs. Steve W. Creekmore Jr.,  
Robert Cutting *John Loves Mary* (1948)



Organized in 1947, FSLT becomes first  
community theatre in Arkansas



*See How They Run* (1950)



When members of the Young Ladies Guild of Sparks Hospital met on May 6, 1947 at The McCartney House, it is doubtful they could have foreseen the impact of their actions. But after Mrs. J. Burton Gregg's installation as the new president and her announcement of committees, a decision was made that literally "sparked" the formation of the Fort Smith Little Theatre.

It began with a proposal by Mrs. James W. Pattee, Jr. Having earned a degree in dramatics at Northwestern University, Florabell (Flo) Pattee (*shown right*) had performed professionally in New York before returning to her hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana.

Flo traveled to Fort Smith to visit her sister whose husband was stationed during WWII at Camp Chaffee, a nearby military base. On that visit, she met her future husband, James, another serviceman stationed at the Camp. They married and had one

5-7-47

## Sparks Guild Sponsors Little Theatre Here

**N**OW Fort Smith's to have a little theatre.  
It's to be sponsored by the Young Ladies Hospital guild of Sparks hospital.

Decision to undertake the project was reached Tuesday morning at a coffee, at the last meeting of the guild before suspension for the summer. Plans yet are vague, but will be worked out during the summer by the project committee, Mrs. Mose Smith Jr., and Mrs. A. K. Orr the publicity chairman, Mrs. J. L. McAleeb, said.

Mrs. James W. Pattee Jr., who has had experience in professional theatricals, and who is a member of the guild, will assist. She spoke in the interests of the movement, explaining briefly some of the general problems involved in establishing a theatre.

**T**HE meeting was held at the McCartney house, 500 South Nineteenth street. Mrs. Thomas H. Hurt, after a short talk as out-going president, turned the gavel over to the new president, Mrs. J. Burton Gregg.



theatrical group. The project was approved, and the rest is history.

It was decided that this would be a community project sponsored by the Guild, but with a separate governing board. At an organizational meeting at the Goldman Hotel, a constitution and bylaws were approved for the new group and a 15-member Board of Directors was elected: Mrs. Thomas Foltz, President; Lawrence Tennant, Vice President; Miss Annis Lick, Recording Secretary; Mrs. Packard Porter, Corresponding Secretary; and R.A. (Dick) Delong, Treasurer. Board members included:

Sam Phillips, Mrs. William Eads, Mrs. J. Burton Gregg, Mrs. J.C. Alexander, Mrs. Ander Orr, Mr. Mose Smith, Jr., Mrs. James W. Pattee, Jr., Mrs. Burley Johnston, Jr., David Boatright, and James Elmore.

A local newspaper reporting on the Guild's new venture stated, "Little Theatres are springing up across the country," and "The Fort Smith Little Theatre is the only one in Arkansas."

daughter, Penny, but Flo had energy to spare. Soon this new Fort Smith resident brought her theatrical experience to the table and proposed that the Guild sponsor a Little Theatre. Seventy-five percent of the proceeds from performances would be used to purchase surgical equipment for Sparks Hospital, and the remainder would help launch the



**MR. AND MRS. NORTH**, played by James Pattee Jr., and Mrs. Porter Gammill, search for clues to solve a murder in a scene from the Little Theatre play to be given Wednesday and Thursday nights at the junior high. They are assisted by Detective Williams (left), played by Jimmy Elmore, and Lieutenant Weigand, who is David Boatright. (Staff photo).





**CHECKING SCHEDULES** concerning publicity for the Fort Smith Little Theatre, Inc., production, "Blithe Spirit," are the above committee heads. Left to right, Mrs. Marvin Altman, business manager; Mrs. J. S. Southard, newspaper publicity chairman; Mrs. John D. Olson, ticket chairman; Mrs. Albert Kopert, posters; and Mrs. James C. Deare, radio publicity. The play, sponsored by the Young Ladies Guild of Sparks hospital, is to be given in two performances, the nights of March 16 and 17 at Junior high school. (Staff photo).

As their project for the year the Young Ladies Guild of Sparks Memorial Hospital has chosen to sponsor a Little Theatre Group in Fort Smith. We trust this initial effort will convince the people of Fort Smith that we should join the many cities of the United States that have a permanent organized Little Theatre Group.

Mrs. J. Burton Gregg, President

Excerpt from show program *Mr. and Mrs. North* (1948)



*Two Blind Mice* (1950)

President Foltz was quoted as saying, "The Little Theatre is open to anyone in Fort Smith who is interested in it." Now 75 years later, the resulting community theatre is still fueled by open public auditions and manned by volunteers.

The group's first production, directed by Flo Pattee, was *Mr. and Mrs. North*. The comic mystery was performed for more than 1,500 attendees on a Wednesday and Thursday in February 1948 at Fort Smith Junior High School (now known as Darby Middle School). A list of contributing patrons printed in the program included more than 400 individuals and 85 businesses.

According to press reports, Dr. Tommy Foltz was the "corpse" who tumbled from the closet in the North's New York apartment. The murder victim's identity was kept a secret until curtain time, even from members of the cast. While the production received excellent reviews, there was one significant disappointment reported by the press, "Because of rain, few people attending were in evening dress."

Following this inaugural production, Mrs. Ander K. Orr was elected President of the Board. She served in that capacity for four years.

The Little Theatre had become the talk of the town. In a newspaper article entitled "Well, What Is A Little Theatre Anyway?" Mrs. Pattee explained, "Little Theatre really means that the community is growing up – that it is striving for cultural attainment – and there is no class distinction in the Little Theatre. There is a place for

Southwest American, Fort Smith, Ark.

## Chaffee Recruits Guests Of Little Theatre

June 10-49

HUNDREDS of recruits from Camp Chaffee were guests of the Little Theatre Thursday evening at a preview of the stage play, What a Life, three-act comedy to be given Friday and Saturday nights at 8:15 o'clock at junior high school. An estimated crowd of 1,000 was present. In the cast are, Mary Lou Jones, Dave Spear, Mary Elizabeth Sims, Gordon Rickard, Charles Dixon, Miss Helen Maxwell, Morris Henry, Mrs. Jesse W. Winner, Reba Kasten, Larry Tenant, Bill Center, Mary Jule Ross, Sally Crampton, Dick DeLong, Mrs. C. B. Marquis, Carl Hawk, Mrs. James C. Deare, Jay Wooldridge, Sally Lick, Virginia Cliff, Patsy Malone and Jeanne Jamell.

Because of the informality of the theme of the play, from which the Henry Aldrich series stemmed, and because of the warm weather, the Little Theatre director, Mrs. James W. Pattee Jr. and the Little Theatre association membership are inviting the public to "come in informal dress."

"Men needn't wear coats."

everyone. A grocer can paint scenery and a girl who works at her typewriter by day can act at night." This is another element of the originally conceived organization that has remained unchanged for 75 years.

Seven productions were successfully presented by the Little Theatre under Sparks Young Ladies Guild sponsorship. Those in attendance often included soldiers from Camp Chaffee. Although WWII had ended, the Camp continued to house new recruits and convalescents. The Little Theatre provided the soldiers with complimentary tickets to their shows and performed a private military benefit production.

Young Ladies Guild members had conceived, organized, promoted, and helped staff the burgeoning theatrical troupe, and as a result,

**A "Little Theatre" Triumph**

It seems to us the "little theatre" movement and its sponsors here have won an initial triumph which should go a long way toward assuring it a permanent place in the city.

When the movement was started here, a number of months ago, there was an initial burst of enthusiasm--and then it sort of simmered down and the town at large became doubtful.

"That sort of thing is just hard to put over here," was a comment frequently heard.

Only a small group of enthusiasts remained sure of their idea and its worth and stuck with it.

And, from what we hear around, the first performances last week more than justified their faith.

Criticism has been almost nonexistent--praise has been lavish.

Many persons have remarked that the performances were the equal of the best road shows which come here--and better than a lot of them.

And the fact that the audience for the second show was half again as large as that for the first tells a story of its own.

It would be a good thing for the town if the "little theatre" became a permanent fixture.

Prospects now seem at least brighter than before--due to the faith and enthusiasm of a small group which refused to become discouraged.

thousands of dollars had been raised for Sparks Hospital. The Little Theatre was gaining traction and the Guild's goal had been achieved. So in June 1950, the Fort Smith Junior Chamber of Commerce assumed sponsorship of the fast growing group under an agreement whereby the theatre received



See How They Run (1950)

sixty percent of the net profits.

From the beginning, all shows had been performed on the Junior High's traditional proscenium stage until *Southern Exposure* in 1951 introduced actors and audience to the experience of a more intimate setting. This show was performed on an improvised stage in an



Marjorie Johnston and Hub Lowrey rehearsing *Blithe Spirit* (1949) on the stage of Fort Smith (Darby) Junior High

upstairs ballroom at the elegant Ward Hotel. They built risers, borrowed folding chairs, and constructed portable lights to be placed around the perimeter of the room. Heavy equipment and sets were hoisted in through a second floor window. The room was set up as a theatre-in-the-round with the audience only a few feet from the stage. When interviewed by the newspaper, Director Flo Pattee explained, "The cast has to learn that the audience isn't 'out there'. It's right on the stage with them. And the audience is no longer on the outside looking in."

The concept of an intimate stage setting was so well received that it would become a hallmark of design for FSLT's first theatre home, as well as FSLT's current facility.

**Southwest American**

**Little Theatre To Use New Type Stage Plan**

When the Fort Smith Little Theatre opens the fall-winter season, Nov. 4, at the Ward hotel, local theatre-goers will be introduced to a new type of stage-audience setting, a "production in the round" - a center stage surrounded by the audience.

The Gold room's to be the theatre.

Mrs. James W. Pattee Jr., Little Theatre director, explained that the opening show, a three-act comedy, "Southern Exposure," is to be given in four shows, a matinee Nov. 4, at 2:30 p.m., and night shows on Nov. 5, 6 and 7, and that additional shows will be given if the attendance warrants it. The Gold room will seat approximately 140.

**she continued.**



# 1952: Achieving Autonomy and a Home

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Lobby hospitality table on North O. Stained glass windows were later relocated to North 6th Street theatre



Ron Watson paints scenery on wall behind theatre seats for *Little Mary Sunshine* (1963)



*There's Always A Murder* (1953)



The Little Theatre had come of age. In 1952, the Fort Smith Junior Chamber of Commerce sponsorship arrangement was dissolved, and *One Foot in Heaven* was performed as the first independent production of the Fort Smith Little Theatre, Inc. The next goal was for FSLT to have a home of its own.

It had become increasingly difficult and expensive to rent the city's Junior High stage. As the only large performing facility in town, it stayed fully booked. FSLT performances were generally limited to weeknights when the school auditorium was not in use. Additionally, sets had to be constructed in one or two days and torn down at night after the last show to make the venue available for another use the next morning.

Early in 1952, the Board of Directors voted to offer \$15,000 to purchase an empty grocery store at 3800 North O Street – provided sufficient funds could be raised. With a donation of \$2,000 from Miss Ed Louise Ballman and many smaller gifts, FSLT was able to make a down payment of \$3,525 on The Baby Grand Grocery. But securing a mortgage for the balance proved to be a challenge, for most lending institutions were hesitant to loan money to a young, all-volunteer theatrical group. Fortunately, a theatre patron who sat on the Board of a Savings and Loan stepped up and arranged for the loan. Records show it was paid off with never a late or missed payment.

The building had not the slightest resemblance to a theatre. The FSLT Board President stated, "It will require a lot to convert the building from one used to sell groceries to one of displaying 'hams.'" It was decided to lay out the big open space as a theatre-in-the-round. While this would create the desired intimate setting previously experienced in *Southern Exposure*, it would also require actors and set designers to work around the building's support

poles located on the stage. But to the clever band of thespians, this was just another challenge.

With the exception of electrical work, volunteers did all the remodeling themselves on nights and weekends. Money was tight; enthusiasm was high. Used theatre seats were purchased for \$5 each. Stage lights were made from plywood, coffee cans, and inexpensive electrical fittings. They patched together electronic parts to build a light board and sound equipment. Men and women whose only qualifications were energy and the willingness to try became adept as painters, carpenters, and even plumbers. Construction went on for months; pandemonium reigned supreme. Hammering went on right through the night of dress rehearsal, but on October 13, 1952, *Skylark* opened on time. It was the first production in the new playhouse, and the last one directed by Flo Pattee.

Flo Pattee had initially proposed formation of the Little Theatre, nurtured its early growth, and directed all productions with the exception of one. Now she was leaving Fort Smith. This excerpt from the *Skylark* program explains the changes and challenges ahead.

"We of the Little Theatre proudly and gratefully acknowledge that this organization could neither have come into being, nor so firmly have established itself, without the Pattees. Flo as director, and Jim as production chief and leading man, have been our mainstays since the curtain went up on *Mr. and Mrs. North* in 1948. Tonight the curtain rises on Fort Smith Little Theatre's first production in our very own building. Our city's population will soon be less by three as Flo, Jim, and Penny leave us for Louisville. But there is no way of counting our real loss. Frankly, the news of their going was and is a staggering blow to

the Little Theatre. We shall more than ever need the loyal cooperation of the many of you who have helped make dreams come true. Truly, the curtain is going down on Act One. But the plot has been skillfully laid out, and the show will go on."

This sudden change could have put an end to the young organization, for the Pattees had been performing many roles; but it did not. Faced with the challenge, other volunteers stepped up to help and fill the void in order to keep the Little Theatre going. Over the years, this has happened time and time again.



The Baby Grand Grocery, 3800 North O Street, was converted into FSLT's first playhouse



*Skylark* (1952) was the first performance in the North O theatre

# 1953-1974: Playing in the Playhouse

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Jerry Keithley operates homemade light and sound system for *An Inspector Calls* (1958)



Tom Pryor and Lois Wanslow in *Candle-Light* (1956)



Pat England and John Forsythe in *The Male Animal* (1958)



The stained glass sculpture known as the Harlequin Man became a well-recognized symbol for FSLT

The theatre's new home had a limited seating capacity of 164. This necessitated performing each production for five nights rather than the customary two of previous seasons. With an ever-growing number of volunteers and performances, the new playhouse became a perpetual beehive of activity.

Newspaper accounts often revealed behind the scenes activities as well as production details. One story titled "Work Plus Play Equal Theatre Production" explained the practice of securing stage furniture. One volunteer stated, "At one time my living room was barren. All the furniture was on the Junior High School stage for the production." She also stated "Rehearsal doesn't necessarily mean all work and no play. It's a meeting place as well. We've had romance spring up in the ranks." Highlighting the eclectic array of persons involved, another article reported, "The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker – they're all acting in the forthcoming Little Theatre production. Or if they aren't, a closely related occupation is represented. In a cast of 16 persons, 16 different occupations are represented – occupations ranging from radio broadcaster to lawyers to teachers."

Many years have passed since those newspaper stories were published, but the same articles could be reprinted today. Furniture borrowed for sets, budding backstage romances, and cast members from all walks of life are still common at FSLT.

Enthusiasm by patrons and performers remained high, and flourishing Season Ticket sales allowed for facility improvements. In 1954, at a cost of \$3,000, two dressing rooms and a small storage area were added to the building. Gradually, professional lighting and sound improvements were made. Even a payphone was added to the lobby – a decision that sparked lots of Board discussion since it would cost the theatre 29 cents per day. Hospitality service at intermission was also improved as the purchase of a silver tea and coffee service was

made possible with S&H Green Stamps collected by Board members. But it was the addition of air-conditioning that made the biggest change in this era. At a cost of \$2,200, this installation allowed for as many as six productions per year, including summer performances. As part of this expanded schedule, in cooperation with the Fort Smith Service League, Children's Theatre performances were presented on the FSLT stage.

The Little Theatre amateur thespians continued to produce well-received shows, including melodramas with piano or organ accompaniment. Full houses were the rule, not the exception. The organization continued to grow, so in 1960, it was decided to grow the playhouse again. At a cost of \$10,000, the lobby was remodeled, public restrooms increased, and additional storage was added.

As part of the renovation, stained glass was added to the lobby windows, and light fixtures designed by Ron Watson as comedy and tragedy masks, illuminated the exterior. In addition, Al Reis, owner of Reis Art Gallery and School, and Jay Anderson, one of his instructors, created a unique piece of stained glass sculpture to stand outside the theatre entrance. Through the years, the sculpture known as the Harlequin Man became a well-recognized symbol for FSLT.



North O Street Green Room *My Three Angels* (1954)



Ron Watson, Ed Drimmel, and Carl McCauley construct a set around one of the building's support poles located on the stage



In rehearsal for *The Desperate Hours* (1972)



# 1975-1985: Outgrowing North O

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Linda Raymond, Paula Sharum, and April Retzer Meacham  
*Vanities* (1979)



Bob Hughart and Cinda Bell *Evening of Cole Porter* (1984)



Johnny Landsverk and Carl McCauley *Ten Little Foxes* (1984)



Britt Crews, Betty Klusmeier, and Soni Foti *Mad Woman Of Chaillot* (1980)

0-A Southwest Times Record—Fort Smith, Ark. Wednesday, Jan. 11, 1978



### Fire!

There was a hot time in the Fort Smith Little Theatre as officers burned the building's paid out mortgage. Officiating at the ceremony are 1978 officers. from left.

Ed Drimmel, president; Tammie Finsel, vice president and Paula Sharum, secretary.

During more than twenty years of performances, the North O theatre had witnessed murders and sheltered sleuths. Lovers had been lost and found on that stage, and laughter had shaken the walls. But in the mid 1970s, it became evident that additional space and better technical tools were needed, so FSLT considered a move.

At that time, there was also an idea germinating in town for one comprehensive arts complex to house both the visual and performing arts. Supported by local business leaders and the community's artistic segment, The Center, Inc. was formed to bring the idea to fruition. With FSLT participating in the joint venture, plans were made, money was raised, and leaps of faith were taken. Land was purchased on North 6th Street in the Belle Grove Historic District.

Although fundraising efforts were insufficient to build the original concept, two significant projects were financed with the help of funds raised by The Center, Inc. The Fort Smith Art Center already occupied the Vaughn Schaap House located adjacent to The Center, Inc. property. In 1984, their historic facility was renovated and additional gallery space constructed.

The following year, the cornerstone was laid for a new theatre building on another portion of the land. Plans would incorporate needs such as modern stage lighting, increased capacity, handicap accessible seating, and a dedicated box office. In the spring of 1986, the new facility with almost 8,000 square feet was complete. Shortly after, The Center, Inc. was dissolved.



Connie Freeman, Janie Glover, Brad Kidder Sr., Ed Drimmel at a cast party



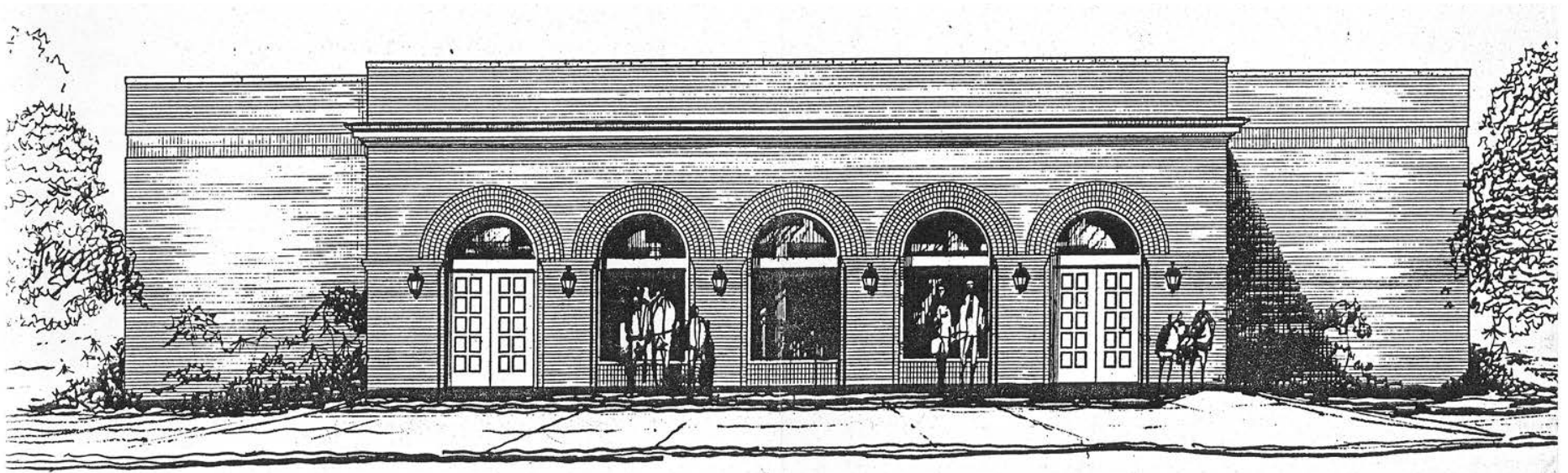
Cindy Clark and Jim Baker *Private Lives* (1978)

While continuing to produce one theatrical hit after another, FSLT volunteers had dealt with fundraising challenges, design decisions, and construction frustrations. It had been a stressful decade.



# 1986: A New Chapter Begins on North 6th

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Artist's rendering of the North 6th Street Theatre



In April 1986, Brad Kidder Sr., an active thespian since 1958, delivered the last lines spoken on the North O Street stage in *Born Yesterday*. Brad had been a cast member in the 1959 production of the same play. Two months later, the new location for the Fort Smith Little Theatre at 401 North 6th Street resounded with song and dance as a large cast presented *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*. FSLT had a new home.

The new facility featured approximately 200 raised seats that surrounded a thrust stage on three sides. This layout provided the close intimacy between actors and audience that FSLT productions were known for, plus more flexibility than North O Street's theatre-in-the-round.

Used stage lights were obtained from local auditoriums being remodeled, but the theatre seats were brand new. Donations were solicited for this major

purchase, and brass plates mounted on the seat backs recognized each donor. Stained glass from the lobby on North O was incorporated into windows for the new theatre. The Harlequin Man also made the move after a FSLT patron cleaned, stabilized, and repainted the sculpture so it could be placed in the new lobby.

Since its inception, FSLT had been frugal. For this amateur troupe, standing center stage was risky enough; they wanted to avoid the risk of heavy debt. So while the new theatre was a substantial improvement over the North O Street facility with support poles on its stage, it was significantly smaller than the originally planned design. Wardrobe storage, backstage restrooms, and set shop workspace were omitted from the structure so the new building could be constructed to fit available funds. It would be more than twenty years before those eliminated spaces would be built.



Final North O Street production, Darla Simmons and Duff Taylor  
*Born Yesterday* (1986)



Installation of new theatre seats was funded by donors whose names appear on brass plates



First North 6th Street production *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1986)

# 1987-2004: Settling into the New Theatre

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Rehearsal for musical *No No Nanette* (2004)



Lindy Cotner and Nikki McDaniel *The Foreigner* (1988)



Kameron Dewitt and Sally Wahl *Brighton Beach* (1989)

Ahh – you could almost hear a collective sigh. The last decade had been punctuated by squabbles, stress, and strain to bring the new theatre from dream to reality. At last the thespians and their patrons could enjoy it.

The new space seemed to unleash creativity. With lighting and sound improvements, a higher ceiling, and five points of entry for actors, larger and more complex sets could be designed. This led to a broader selection of shows and more performances being scheduled. When one show ended, the next production started rehearsal right away – a year-round pattern of scheduling that continues today.

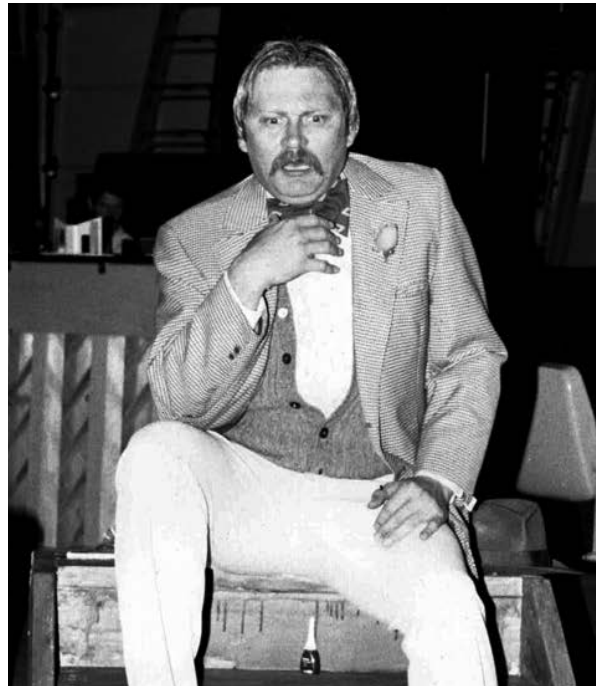
During this era, the group also took steps to improve their financial footing. Although they had been operating profitably, there had not previously been a concerted effort to fund future facility projects. FSLT had a new building, but it would take scheduled maintenance and a savings plan to keep it in good repair.



Carole Rogers and Joe Hobson *Social Security* (1992)

The promotion of Season Tickets was increased to yield stronger ticket sales. Added income also came from selling exclusive performances. Program ads were sold and patrons were asked to contribute to an Annual Fund Campaign. Through these and other efforts, funds were gradually collected for future building repairs and improvements.

In 1996, FSLT put a significant amount of those funds to good use. The existing parking area featured potholes and gravel as well as a river of mud when it rained. Using savings and contributions from generous donors, the parking area was paved and lighting was installed. To maximize the paved parking available to patrons, FSLT also made improvements to adjacent gravel lots owned by the Fort Smith Art Center.



Ray Coleman *Little Shop of Horrors* (1987)

FSLT took another financial step forward in 1999. To plan for the future, a permanent endowment was established under the management of the Arkansas Community Foundation, Inc. The purpose was not to replace traditional funding, but to endow a perpetual fund to support and expand theatrical programs, meet facility demands, and ensure affordable ticket prices.



Sami Sue Welch and Meredith Dye  
*Sanders Family Christmas* (2002)



## 2005-2019: Completing the Plan – And More

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Eric Krigbaum, Sarah Curlin, and Benjamin Baldwin  
*My Fair Lady* (2018)



*Seven Brides For Seven Brothers* (2009)



Nancy Blochberger, Eric Wells, Shannon Stoddard, and  
Jessica Smith *9 to 5 The Musical* (2014)

When the North 6th Street theatre was built in the 1980s, backstage workspace, restrooms, and storage had been cut so construction would fit available funds. As a result, cast and crew, often totaling 50 or more, shared one toilet backstage. Costumes, props, and furniture were stashed in attics all over Fort Smith, and sets could not be stored for reuse. There was simply no place to put them. The answer was to build an addition to the back of the North 6th Street building. Between 2005-2006, a successful capital campaign funded the construction that, after 20 years, would finally allow FSLT to complete the facility's original design.

A broad inventory of costumes and props could now be housed in one place. Cast members who came to rehearsal straight from work could heat



The Harlequin Man stained glass sculpture was moved to a place of prominence when lobby remodeling was completed in 2013

their dinners in the new kitchen, and set builders had space to build and paint. But perhaps the most appreciated improvement was the addition of two backstage restrooms. The expansion addressed a lot of needs, and thanks to a generous community and the theatre's conservative fiscal policies, the project was fully paid for upon completion.

2009 brought an unexpected opportunity. FSLT's neighbor, the Fort Smith Art Center (now the Regional Art Museum) was relocating. To guarantee future access to parking, FSLT needed to purchase five of the Art Center lots. Once again, theatre patrons provided financial assistance to fund this important project.

Then came 2012 when the Fort Smith Little Theatre marked two significant events: continuously operating for 65 years and performing in the North 6th Street facility for more than 25. In celebration of these milestones, FSLT conducted a capital campaign to fund a two-prong project. It involved organizing and preserving the photos and documents of the group's long and colorful past. At the same time, it would renovate the lobby public restrooms, light booth, and box office, and prepare the facility for future years.

As part of this project, the stained glass Harlequin Man and symbol of FSLT was moved to a place of prominence in a lobby center window. The comedy and tragedy masks that had hung on the exterior of the old theatre building on North O Street were refurbished and installed in the remodeled lobby. Cast photos were digitally preserved to be displayed on large lobby monitors and posted on the theatre's website for everyone to enjoy. Without expanding the footprint of the building, every inch of space in front of the auditorium was maximized. The extensive changes required more than a year of fundraising and a construction schedule that worked around productions. Once again, cooperation from vendors and public support

made it possible for FSLT to complete the project and pay the tab in full.

During this time, technology was changing rapidly; in just a few years, the world had embraced smart phones and began purchasing online. As part of the recently completed lobby remodeling, FSLT had designed the box office with a future online ticketing system in mind. In 2018, the time had come. During that busy year, FSLT selected a vendor, trained box office volunteers, educated patrons, and launched online ticketing for season 2019. The change was massive for volunteers and patrons alike, but the implementation was well received. The ticketing system was running smoothly and more than 900 Season Tickets were being sold annually; things were looking good.

Then came 2020.



A capital campaign in 2012 funded remodeling of public spaces and expansion of mezzanine storage

# 2020-2021: The Long Intermission

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*Glitter Girls* was performed February 2020 before the pandemic arrived



The off-season production, *Radium Girls*, was performed in early March 2020 just before COVID-19 darkened the stage



After 18 long months, FSLT reopened in September 2021 with *Clue*



It was a year we want to forget, but one that will always be remembered. FSLT performed *The Glitter Girls* in February, then an off-season production, *Radium Girls*, before being forced to close in March 2020. The COVID-19 virus had invaded.

In the following months, pandemic conditions and state-mandated directives were closely monitored. Under government regulations regarding crowd limitation and social distancing, it was not fiscally or physically possible for FSLT to have performances. Productions were cancelled one after another. Then in September 2020, as the coronavirus continued, FSLT regrettably announced that the theatre would remain shuttered until further notice. There was no indication when, or if, FSLT would be allowed to reopen.

There were numerous problems at hand. COVID-19 had removed FSLT's ability to produce ticket income. It had not, however, removed ongoing building maintenance and business operation costs. 2020 Season Ticket patrons who had pre-paid for admission to six productions had only attended one before the stage was forced to go dark. Season 2021 had been planned, but it was unrealistic to sell Season Tickets without a firm date for reopening. The only thing certain was uncertainty.

While the stage remained eerily dark, generous support arrived. More than 90% of Season Ticket patrons donated the value of their unused 2020 tickets, and generous businesses fulfilled pre-planned sponsorship commitments, paying for shows that were never performed. With strong community support, FSLT would be ready to reopen; the question was when.

Finally, vaccinations became available, government restrictions were removed, and reopening plans were announced. After 18 months of forced closure, FSLT performed *Clue* in September 2021 followed by two other productions that fall. It had been a long, long intermission.



The stage remained dark for 18 months due to the pandemic



John Hall and Emilee Dale performed in *Parfumerie* (2021) after the reopening of the theatre



Health and safety protocols were implemented for reopening in September 2021

# 2022: FSLT Marks 75th Milestone

The Fort Smith Little Theatre was the first community theatre in Arkansas and is the oldest continuously operating troupe in the state. This often brings the question: What has made this community theatre survive to the ripe old age of 75 when others across the country have fallen away?

Some might say being resourceful has been a contributing factor. To quote a local businessman as he handed over a contribution check, “I don’t know of any other organization that can do so much with so little.”

And speaking of donors, community cooperation has certainly been important. Businesses and individuals, as well as the media, have given their support to FSLT time and time again.

And who can forget all the audiences? They were certainly important. While some had theatrical backgrounds, others who initially came to support a



Gary Cameron constructs the set for *Smoke on the Mountain* (2022)



Lora Rice adds decorative paint to costumes for *Beauty and the Beast* (2019)

friend or neighbor at their on-stage debut, grew to appreciate the experience of live theatre. The most loyal attendees were often those converts.

Talent must also be acknowledged. Fort Smith is not a huge market, so it seems unlikely that a deep pool of talent would be present, and yet it continually appears on FSLT’s small stage.

But, surely, volunteers headline the list. From the beginning, they have been the arms, legs, brains, and backbone of this organization. Seventy-five years of success has been built by the unselfish donation of their time. It is highly unusual for a non-profit group to have reached this major milestone without paid employees. Having volunteers who swept floors when they weren’t bowing center stage has reduced operational costs and ensured affordable ticket prices. That’s the real story behind this anniversary celebration.

**“Having volunteers who swept floors when they weren’t bowing center stage has reduced operational costs and ensured affordable ticket prices. That’s the real story behind this anniversary celebration.”**

So what will the next 75 years bring? We have no crystal ball, but whatever path this theatre takes in the years ahead, we can only hope it is motivated by the same desires and ambitions that moved that small group in 1947 to offer live theatre to the community and participate in its creation.

Perhaps an article from the FSLT archives said it best, “The Little Theatre has but two purposes: To provide entertainment to Fort Smith and to have a good time doing it.” May it be ever thus.

“What is Past is Prologue”  
– *The Tempest*, Shakespeare







**Leave A Legacy** | The Fort Smith Little Theatre Endowment Fund is a perpetual fund established to support theatrical programs, meet facility demands, and maintain affordable ticket prices. When you review your estate plan, please remember that even a small bequest to our endowment will help FSLT provide entertainment for generations to come.



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