

Project Abstract: A Fabulous Era:  
the story of theatre in northwestern Pa.

"A Fabulous Era" involves the production of three half-hour radio programs--"Frank Coltman, trouper from Tidioote," "Michael V. Ball, passionate playgoer in Warren," and "T.H. Lloyd, manager of St. Petersburg's opera house"--in a projected series of fifteen programs.

Most evidently our bias is regional, but it is our thesis that the story of theatre in Pennsylvania's Oil Region is substantively the story of the great American road, 1875-1915. To make our point we examine the local opera house as a national institution even as we consider its manager, audiences, and those attractions, appearing for One Night Only!, that reflected the prejudices, predelictions, and preconceptions of Americans at large in the period under consideration.

Scripts will be prepared by Dr. John L. Marsh and reviewed by Dr. Douglas McDermott--both nationally recognized as publishing scholars in the area of the nineteenth century American theatre. The three programs will be produced by Dr. Gary Christensen, a competent specialist in educational communications. Once prepared the programs will be aired to an audience of 250,000 potential listeners.

Program Description

background; and objectives

The project has grown out of the research effort of Dr. John L. Marsh, Professor of English at Edinboro State College, Edinboro, Pa. For a decade Dr. Marsh has pursued his interest in the nineteenth century American theatre by researching the story of theatrical activity throughout Pennsylvania's Oil Region. This effort, in turn, led Dr. Marsh to publish monographs and articles dedicated to recreating the look and feel of theatre in its fabulous era.

In response to the publicity attendant on his publications, many of the region's historical societies asked Dr. Marsh to present programs at their annual or seasonal meetings. These presentations provoked the interest of area radio stations, one of which aired a program devoted to theatrical activity in northwestern Pennsylvania. Very evidently an interest existed on the part of the public in Dr. Marsh's materials, and in response to it, he met with Dr. Gary Christiansen, head of the production facility at Edinboro State College. Together they agreed to collaborate in the production of a series of half-hour radio programs if adequate funding could be secured.

As matters now stand, Drs. Marsh and Christiansen have agreed on the subject area of three initial programs and have projected an additional twelve scripts to complete a series of fifteen programs. "Frank Coltman, trouper from Tidioute," "Michael V. Ball, passionate playgoer in Warren," and T.H. Lloyd, manager of St. Petersburg's opera house," have been selected as the target

for potential funding.

The first of the programs, "Frank Coltman," recreates the career of a long forgotten player whose career provides a case study of the combination system at work: the opportunities it provided, the hardships it virtually mandated, and the taste in theatre it fostered, at once in the actors themselves and most certainly in their audiences. "Michael V. Ball" looks at the viewing experience of a most unexceptional playgoer from Warren. Extracts from his diaries tally the national taste for scenic spectacles in which yards of canvas and box-cars of special effects sold the show, for soulful dramas whose every scene was a domestic sermon, and for black-face minstrel entertainments promising a plethora of individual talent.

Just how such attractions reached playgoers like Ball is subject matter for the third program, which takes a look at the local opera house manager. T.H. Lloyd, the individual in question, managed St. Petersburg's opera house from 1876 to 1883. The faded and cramped entries in his account book not only reflect the kind of fare that Warren viewers enjoyed but recurring references to Sam T. Jack, the creator of the Oil Region Circuit, make possible an enlightened look at just how attractions like the Buffalo Bill Combination were secured by managers of small houses like Lloyd. And it is in such houses and the attractions they offered that one finds the meanings of labels like "The Confident Years" or "Our Age of Innocence."

centrality to the humanities

A series of programs devoted to the American theatre in a given time frame has an obvious relationship to the humanities, and never more so than in the period between 1875 and 1915 when theatre-going was the great American pastime. Virtually everyone--a handful of the morally alert excepted--patronized the theatre on a more or less regular basis--in tank towns and in metropolitan centers. And to meet the demands of this national audience popular playwrights fashioned vehicles that supported cherished concepts of home and hearth, domestic virtues and filial responsibilities, private property and corporate profits.

Such plays, whatever their aesthetic limitations, met the demands--moral and intellectual--that audiences required of them. Moreover, they reflected some of the most cherished wish-fulfillments of the generation associated with the Gilded Age. And though dramatists certainly did not mirror life as it was lived by the generality of men, their creations were a reflection of life as many in the audience wished it might be; and, in fact, believed it to be--at least for the evening. Many a youth even attempted with more or less success to model his life upon the behavior of the stage's most heroic stereotypes. as the program devoted to Michael V. Ball makes clear.

To be sure our particular theatrical sample is regional in its bias, but the story of theatre in Pennsylvania's Oil Region is substantively the story of theatre in Cohoes, New York, or Butte, Montana. For, in the days of the road, it was not

necessary for the audience to travel to the theatre; rather the theatre travelled wherever there were rail lines. The known and the unknown, the memorable and the ephemeral criss-crossed the land; and though the major figures of the day, given their choice, would have preferred a succession of split-week stands, the economics of the road dictated that they fill in the distances between population centers with one-night stands. Thus the theatrical world came to country doorsteps and satisfied audiences by the degree to which it reflected the preconceptions, predelictions, and prejudices of a national audience. In a very real sense it was a mirror of the audience of our grandparents' generation.

#### working relationships

In the preparation done to date Dr. Marsh and Dr. Christiansen have established a working relationship not only with one another but with other key participants in the projected project. Should funding be secured, Dr. Marsh would prepare the first of three "working scripts." Once completed, it will be reviewed by Dr. Christiansen and his production staff for comment as to its presentational possibilities and technical demands. Comments supplied by these professionals will be incorporated into a "proof script" that will be sent to Dr. Douglas McDermott, Professor of Drama, California State College, Stanislaus, a recognized scholar in the field of nineteenth century American theatre. As well, two co-participants in the audio presentation--Professor Jack Tohtz and Professor Richard

Andersen, will have an opportunity to comment on the script's readability from their point of view.

The return of the script by Dr. Mc Dermott will provide the occasion for a conference involving the immediate principals, Dr. Christiansen and his production staff together with Dr. Marsh and Professors Tohtz and Anderson, who will be involved in the audio presentation. They will review all comments and, working from their guidance, Dr. Marsh will prepare a "final script." When completed, it will be typed, duplicated, and distributed to all concerned. Readers for dramatic inserts will be recruited as needed to join the program's three principals and Dr. Christiansen will establish rehearsal and taping dates. It is anticipated that much the same course of action will prevail in the implementation of programs two and three.

#### evaluation procedures

Evaluative procedures proposed are two fold. First, management level personnel at WQLN-FM, Erie, Pa., have agreed to critique programs strengths and weaknesses as examples of public broadcasting. Secondly, a plan has been devised whereby contact will be made with historical societies in the area of the broadcasts. Specifically, the executive directors of these organizations will be asked to furnish the names of a least three individuals competent to critique the programs from the standpoint of local history. At least one individual in each area will be asked for his comments on the programs. Such critiques will be utilized not only to guide and shape the current programs but in the

planning and production of the remaining twelve programs.

participating personnel

John L.Marsh, series creator

Dr.Marsh (PhD,Univ.of Penna.,American Studies) is the author of book-length monographs and articles devoted to the history of theatre in the golden days of the road.Periodicals that have published his work in this area include DRAMATICS, PLAYERS,JOURNAL OF POPULAR CULTURE,EDUCATIONAL THEATRE JOURNAL, THEATRE SURVEY,MARQUEE,MONTANA the MAGAZINE OF WESTERN HISTORY, WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE AND THE PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY.In fact,many of the scripts in the proposed series will be developed from materials published in the journals noted above.

Dr.Marsh,a professor of English at Edinboro State College, served as the chairman of his department from 1967 to 1970.Today the senior professor of the department,he teaches courses in American literature at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. For twelve years he was the commander of the 308th Military Intelligence Detachment,USAR,which was repeatedly designated a "Superior Unit" by the Secretary of the Army.Upon his promotion to full colonel,USAR,he was assigned to the Defense Intelligency Agency, where he occupies a Joint Staff assignment at DoD level.

Gary Christiansen, series producer

Dr.Christiansen (EdD,Univ.of Pittsburgh,Educational Communications) is an Associate Professor of Radio and TV

at Edinboro State College. As well, he serves as the director of a remote studio for WQLN, FM, Erie, and in the past four years he has been responsible for the production and supervision of more than 2000 hours of programming.

#### Series Talent Staff

Prof. Jack E. Tohtz (MA, plus, Univ. of Minnesota, English) is presently an Associate Professor of English at Edinboro. He has been a major participant in EDINBORO ON THE MOVE, a series of 25 half-hour TV programs broadcast over Channel 24, Erie, Pa., and he was a co-participant in the late 1960's in an educational TV series devoted to the study of English and American literature that attracted approximately a thousand students a semester.

Prof. Richard Andersen (MA, plus, Pennsylvania State Univ., Dramatics) is an Associate Professor of English at Edinboro. He has been a full time radio announcer for WGAL, Lancaster, Pa., and a full time director for WNBF, Binghamton, N.Y. Since joining the Edinboro faculty, he has served as a drama coach, and we anticipate that Prof. Andersen will recruit actor/readers and supervise the inclusion of dramatic inserts in our projected series.

#### Series Secretary

Mrs. Joan Lindred (BA, Wellesley, Psychology) has served as an academic/literary typist and editorial consultant over the



past fifteen years for faculty and students at more than twenty colleges and universities.

#### Production facilities

The Radio-TV Center, Edinboro State College, consists of a stereo-audio studio devoted, in part, to the production of broadcast quality radio programs aired via a remote arrangement with WQLN-FM, Erie. The manager and associate manager of the center are recipients of doctorates in educational communications with over twenty-five years experience in educational broadcasting. They are supported by a staff of four technicians (3 electronic equipment technicians and 1 photographic specialist).

This staff is not only competent to produce the programs proposed for funding but the entire series of fifteen programs. As well, the drama department at the college has among its faculty and students sufficient talent to support the undertaking with dramatic readings.

#### Target Population and publicity materials

The planning that has gone into the proposal to date has been extensive and the materials themselves have been tested before live and radio audiences and met with considerable interest. As well, we have contacted area radio stations and had positive responses from general managers and program directors. To us it

it seems evident that we will be able to air our programs to a potential audience of 250,000 listeners.

Obviously not everyone will be interested in our subject matter but our materials, focusing as they do on the area in which our listeners reside, have a built-in appeal. Then, too, because of our focus on the local, we expect newspapers and radio stations will use publicity materials we will prepare. Once the listener has tuned in, we hope to hold his attention by recapturing something of the drama, color, and excitement that prevailed when troupers--strangers from strange lands--appeared For One Night Only!