

**The story of Theatrical Outfit from 1995 to 2020:
What it was then, and what it became, and why all of that mattered.**

In the spring of 1995, Theatrical Outfit had thrived for almost 20 years as an adventurous, robust, and innovative ensemble, taking on classics, collaborations, and new works with intelligence and passion. Beginning in 1976, it was the third oldest professional nonprofit theatre in residence then in Atlanta. The theatre had no debts. Their reputation was solid. And, its fifth excellent Artistic Director, Philip DePoy, was leaving.

The board of directors recognized that it could be a time to close the company with pride and gratitude for all it had achieved. The challenges to continue were significant. The company had lost its celebrated space (and parking lot!) at 10th and Peachtree in the old S.H. Kress & Co. five-and-dime store building. TO and other companies could only rent one of three theater spaces in the 14th Street Playhouse, competing with other companies for the best programming dates. In this kind of “Mall of Theater,” it was difficult, if not impossible, to create a separate identity there--critical to attracting a targeted audience and donor base.

Also, there was no middle class in the Atlanta nonprofit professional theater of the time. That is, there was the Alliance with a budget of \$8.5 million, and then there was the rest of us, about seven theaters with budgets from under \$100,000, to \$250,000 at most. The small companies were extremely vulnerable and many closed. As Chris Coleman said in an AJC interview as he was leaving Actor’s Express, the company he founded, to take the leadership of Portland Center Stage, Oregon’s flagship company: “In Atlanta theater, it’s three strikes and you’re out.”

One of the fiercest headwinds at the time for nonprofit professional theaters was the 1995 effort by the new Republican majority, led by Speaker of the House, Georgia’s Newt Gingrich, to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts. The bipartisan legislation creating the NEA was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, just 31 years before TO began. It was certainly one of the most foundational funding sources to make the expansion and stabilization of nonprofit professional theaters possible in America.

The 1995 argument against the NEA was based on fears that government-funded art might create work considered obscene, indecent, and/or sacrilegious; and that it might spread state propaganda disguised as art. The NEA was not abolished, but it was diminished. Its budget was cut by 40% and individual NEA fellowships were soon eliminated.

It was not just the loss of funding that was a threat to the nonprofit professional theater movement in America. It was the consequences of the divisive legislative and political battles over the NEA that left many Americans with serious doubts about the value of the arts in public life, and also Americans who completely lost trust in arts institutions to receive any government funding dispersed by non-elected officials.

Fortunately for all of us, TO made the decision to continue, and to do so with audacious hopes for the future. When I was being interviewed in the summer of 1995 for the position of TO’s sixth Artistic Director, I presented to the board of directors three goals which I felt would be essential for us to pursue in order that TO not just survive, but thrive. The first was to increase the salaries of artists by nearly three fold; the second was to build TO’s first permanent theatrical home; and the third: to coalesce in support of a mission that would inspire and guide the company, not just in my tenure, but beyond for generations yet to come.

After long, meaningful, and robust conversations that summer with the board of directors and TO staff, we reached an agreement to proceed with these objectives. In hindsight, some board members, funders, and staff, believed such goals were aspirational; others were afraid such ambitious goals would take TO over the cliff into bankruptcy; and then there was “we happy few,” ready to embrace those goals as make-it-or-break-it commitments. I was certainly of the latter group, but I was way off in my projected timing on how long it would take. I thought we’d have achieved it all in three to five years at the most. Actually, it was more like 25 years—a quarter-of-a-century-long adventure.

1995 to 1998 at the 14th Street Playhouse proved, thankfully, that raising the salaries of artists would not bankrupt a theatre. In fact, the ticket sales and funding for TO more than doubled.



Our first thirteen productions in that time and place included O’Neill’s *Ah, Wilderness!*; NEA Fellow Tom Huey’s new play, *Mortal Acts* and his short play, *It Ain’t the Heat, It’s the Humility*; the newest installment of Tom Edwards’ *Della’s Diner No 6*; the Atlanta premiere of Tom Stoppard’s *The Real Thing*; a continuation of Philip DePoy’s *Appalachian Christmas Homecoming* for two productions; the Atlanta premiere of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*; the regional premiere of Flannery O’Connor’s *The Displaced Person*, adapted by Cecil Dawkins; my adaptations of the world premieres of Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and *Lost in the Cosmos, The Last Self Help Seminar*; and the Atlanta premiere of Athol Fugard’s *Blood Knot*.

The two-character play *Blood Knot* was directed by David Bell with Kenny Leon as

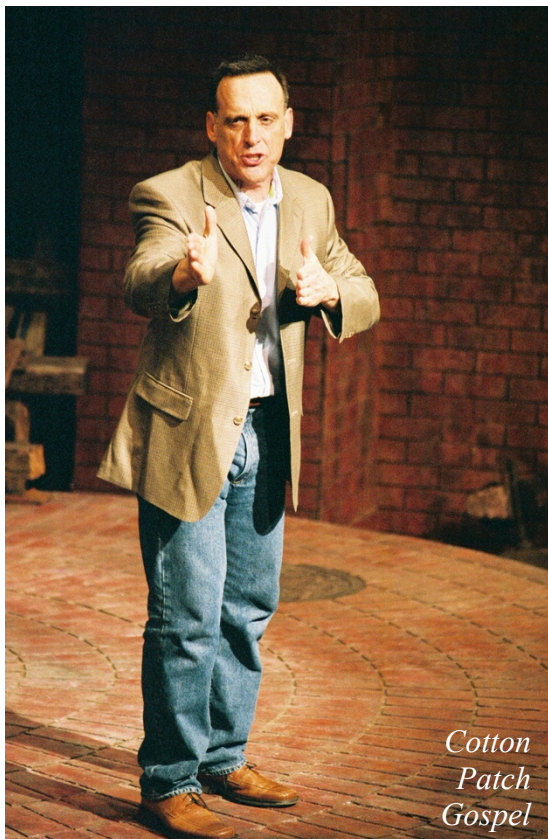
Zachariah and me as Zachariah’s half brother, Morris. One of our patrons had seen the play in London and when we announced it for the 1997-1998 season, she was confounded. Her memory of it was as a “boring four hour slog.” Fortunately, she and thousands of other Atlanta theater goers embraced the play—it didn’t hurt that the play’s running time was less than half of the London production. It was an event that felt like a breakthrough, an elevation of TO’s mission, and its impact on the community.

By 1998, it was clear to us that in order to keep the momentum of our growth going, we needed to move on from the 14th Street Playhouse, and begin stepping toward a building of our own. But every foundation whose support was needed to conduct such a capital campaign, had some version of this to say to such a proposal: “The 14th Street Playhouse was a theater building built and paid for the Academy Theatre to move into in 1987 because the Academy was willing to move from their previous location, a block away at the intersection of 14th Street and Peachtree Street, allowing real estate development there. In 1990, after just three years in the new paid-for building, the theater had to close operations. What makes you think Theatrical Outfit can build a building and last longer?”

Good question. It engaged a great year of discussion in 1998 for TO's future. After lengthy thought and research we made a decision. TO was going to move to downtown for reasons both practical and principled. The practical opportunity was in the remaking of downtown Atlanta to host the 1996 Olympics, including especially the renovation by Georgia State University of the Rialto Movie Theatre into the beautiful 800 seat Rialto Center for the Arts as a live performance hall. GSU welcomed us as a tenant, and we were excited to have a new place to perform. We would still be renting, and still not in control of available time slots to program, but this time it would be a limited endeavor in order to demonstrate to the funding community that we could attract a major audience downtown.

The principled thinking was to recognize that: as the center of the city goes--so goes the city. If we really believed that this art form can drive public discourse, and that this art form builds community with stories that matter, then we needed to make it alive and well downtown.

So, for our first production at the Rialto, we chose Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, and marketed it with the theme: "It's not Midtown, it's not the Metro Area, it's Our Town." When actors playing Grover's Corners' citizens ask questions of Editor Webb, we invited Atlanta celebrities in the audience to take one of these scripted questions, and the most exciting cameo performance was played wonderfully by Congressman John Lewis, who stood and asked, "Is there much drinking in Grover's Corners?" The thrill of his voice almost stopped the production



The next production was Theatrical Outfit's first presentation of *Cotton Patch Gospel*, and it set an all time box office record for TO with ticket sales over \$330,000. The premiere Rialto season ended with smaller casts (*The Belle of Amherst* by William Luce, *Master Harold... And the Boys* by Athol Fugard, and a Reader's Theatre presentation of Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory*), and thankfully they were also warmly received by our growing audience.

This first season was then a strong start in our new location. We received our first generous grant from the Woodruff Foundation to support our marketing the move downtown. Just as we opened, so did a 24 Hour diner right across the street. It was exciting to be part of the revitalization inspired in the neighborhood by the Olympics.

In the following seasons, some production highlights included: the world premiere of Walker Percy's National Book Award Winner, *The Moviegoer*, that I adapted for the stage; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, cast with members of the Dad's Garage Improv Company; another Fugard, *The Island*; two Readers' Theatre productions of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *The Magician's Nephew*; and David Gow's *Cherry Docs*, a

brutal and astonishingly relevant drama to be the production that opened just weeks after 9/11.

In 2000, we developed our first 5 year strategic plan, and its main goal was that by 2005 we would be opening our own permanent theater home downtown. We looked at over twenty possible places to purchase and renovate as a theater. At the time, other theaters in Atlanta had capital campaigns that ranged from \$500,000 to \$1.5 million. We made a case for a campaign over \$5 million. The reasoning, supported by many of our neighbor institutions, was that Atlanta had world class hotels, restaurants, conventions centers, concert halls, and more, but lacked the addition of a world class theater downtown.

Of all the places we explored, the one we kept coming back to was the old Herren's Restaurant building at 84 Luckie Street. It had the size we needed for a 200 seat theater, dressing rooms, a rehearsal hall, a staff office, box office, and a lobby. It was right next door to the Rialto so that it would be familiar to our audience. Thanks to a lead gift by Bill and Peg Balzer to purchase the building, a challenge grant from the Woodruff Foundation, and over 300 generous donors, the campaign was completed and the first show, *Ain't Misbehaven* opened on target in January 2005—and as Fats Waller might have described it, "The Joint was Jumpin'"!



The lead architect, Tom Little, with Surber, Barber, Choate + Hertlein, and Tommy Herrington, the Project Manager with Gay Construction Company, designed and built the beautiful, celebrated, space with perfect acoustics, and a placement of audience-to-actor that was ideal, both intimate and powerful. It was awarded the Urban Land Institute's Project of Excellence Award and the Award of Excellence from the Atlanta Urban Design Commission. Thanks to The Kendeda Fund, the building became the first Leed Certified Green Theater in the USA. Having ushered hundreds of people into the theater for their first look, I can witness that their first word would most almost always be, "Wow!"

It's important to note that the Herren's Restaurant building possessed great civic value. It was a place that mattered to Atlantans. The food was wonderful of course. The setting and service was first class. And in 1963, in spite of death threats and at the risk of the building being bombed, Ed Negri and his wife, Jane, welcomed their first Black customers, Dr. Lee and Delores Shelton, to dine at

Herren's, becoming the first Atlanta restaurant to voluntarily desegregate. It was a brave and gracious decision for the Negri's and Sheltons. The lunch went well and the restaurant continued, creating a model of peaceful integration for our community and beyond. Eighteen years after Herren's Restaurant closed in 1987, the Balzers reunited the Sheltons and the Negris in 2005 to come to Theatrical Outfit in its new home, The Balzer Theater at Herren's—it was the Balzer's choice to include the restaurant in the naming of the building. The Sheltons, still living locally, became subscribers and donors. In the heat of the civil rights movement, Herren's became one of the many places where citizens took a small but critical step to making our world a better place.

We hoped too that our new theater on Luckie Street in downtown Atlanta, would be a constant source of community sustenance, bettering and centering our community on stories—stories that reveal that what we have in common is far greater than what divides us, and that we belong to one another. Taking on our new home with many more responsibilities, more productions, upkeep of the space, and funding our largest annual operating budget ever—becoming owners instead of renters—pressed us continually to trust the power of our mission, “Produce world class theatre that starts the conversations that matters.” Our mission had coalesced, and it endures.

The next fifteen years, from 2005 to 2020 presented naturally our greatest challenges and our most lasting rewards. There were of course set backs, failures, mistakes, and crises. The scariest was the Great Recession that began with a shock in 2008. In its long wake, Atlanta lost two of its best theaters, Georgia Shakespeare Festival and Theatre in the Square. This to us was like two untimely deaths in the family. During this time, the Metropolitan Atlanta Arts Fund conducted a rigorous assessment of the financial condition of Atlanta’s small to medium size theaters and it was shocking how little cash reserves any company possessed. If a major donation was rescinded, or just late, or if a show fell greatly in projected ticket sales, many theaters wouldn’t be able to hold on more than a week or two. Soliciting emergency loans or delaying payments would just make the situation worse. That is, it was normalized for a nonprofit theater company in Atlanta to exist on the edge. There could have been more who had to close. It could have been us.



*The Young
Mam From
Atlanta*

Creating stories that came to life for us, was what sustained us. It’s what sustains a community. Here are some trends and some particular productions that were significant for sustaining and growing our theater in its next fifteen years: of the 96 productions produced at The Balzer Theater at Herren’s, 54 were set in the American South and/or by a playwright/composer from the American South; in conversation with Horton Foote (“the Chekov of the American South” Frank Rich in *The New York Times*) TO presented three of his plays in their Atlanta premiere (*The Chase*, the Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Young Man From Atlanta*, and *Dividing the Estate*, named “Best Production” for the 2013-2014 season by ArtsATL); Thomas Ward’s world premiere of *Keeping Watch* was named *Creative Loafing’s* “Best Production” for the 2005-2006 season, and proudly represented TO at TCG’s first national convention in Atlanta; TO produced four plays in their Atlanta premieres (*Shiloh Rules*, *Gee’s Bend*, *Southern Comforts*, and *Pure Confidence*) which were originally commissioned and given their world premiere at The Alabama Shakespeare Festival as part of their Southern Writers Festival; in the 2008-2009 season, TO’s production of *Big*

River was the first production, other than an Alliance production, to be awarded the Suzi Bass Award for Outstanding Production of a Musical; in 2009, *Blood Knot* was produced again, this time at the Balzer Theater at Herren’s, in a co-production with True Colors Theatre Company, with the same cast, and directed by Susan V. Booth—its relevancy to our audience was even more apparent; Lauren Gunderson’s *Silent Sky*, *The Book of Will*, *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley* (co-authored with Margot Melcon), and *The Wickhams: Christmas at Pemberley* (co-authored with Margot Melcon), were every one, joyful, imaginative, theatrical feasts—Lauren is not merely America’s most produced playwright, she’s our friend, our steady companion to make the art form matter; if there were a contest

for who did more to “start the conversations that matter” at TO, that would go to Atlanta playwright, Janece Shaffer, whose world premiere of her hilarious and profound play, *Brownie Points*, was produced by us with her condition that after every performance there would be a twenty minute post show discussion moderated by trained members of the Anti-Defamation League—they were revelatory conversations about race that would be a model for the power of civil discourse; and in 2019, we did something in our last season that I don’t believe would have been possible without the benefit of the previous decades of the evolution of Theatrical Outfit—we produced on the same set, and with the same ten actors, a repertory of Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project’s *The Laramie Project* with Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, an endeavor that was so luminous and so cathartic, it gave further credence to the notion that Theatre is a sacred event.

In 2017, the board and I agreed that my last day at TO as Artistic Director would be June 30, 2020. In the final three years, we launched The Heart of the City Capital Campaign that included a fantastic building exterior and lobby renovation designed by Cooper Carry and Gensler; and thanks to The Abraham J. & Phyllis Katz Foundation, established TO’s first endowment, a \$1 million fund to support training for the next generation of artists. When the board told me that they were going to name it the “Tom Key Arts Leadership Apprentice Program,” I have to admit that I was overwhelmed with gratitude—I still am. To meet these young artists year after year and watch them grow, is an inspiration I never imagined.

Also, I couldn’t imagine what a more perfect successor we could have found for TO than Matt Torney. Theoretically, I knew that it would be inevitable for him to encounter his own headwinds. But, it would never have occurred to me that it would be a global pandemic. Still, after seven years of watching Matt and his team succeed in the flourishing of Theatrical Outfit, I know that the next 50 years for TO are going to be astonishing.

I’ve seen evidence to support such a knowing as that.

For example, years ago, when Lauren Gunderson asked me if I could have coffee with her at the downtown Starbucks. What did she ask of me? “Do you have any advice on how I can get my plays produced?”

Yeah. This wonderful thing we do. It matters.

Tom Key August, 2026