The Kress Years 1982-1989

* see addendum for production credits



The late 1970s were incredibly important culturally. Atlanta developed a younger, more experimental arts community with support from federal arts funding, activist artists, city government and universities. Venues around Midtown and Peachtree became hubs for counterculture, LGBTQ nightlife and live music giving Atlanta a more cosmopolitan image than many Southern cities at the time.



While parts of Midtown were run-down, with many vacant lots, adult bookstores and decaying mansions, a revitalization movement was beginning. In 1978, local business leaders formed what became the Midtown Business Association which planted the seeds for Midtown's later corporate boom and arts district development. The atmosphere was ambitious, entrepreneurial, racially transformative, culturally experimental and physically under construction. By the early 1980s, Atlanta was becoming the center of the "New South". Mayor Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first Black mayor, serving through much of this era, oversaw tremendous growth and set a course for Atlanta as an international business center.

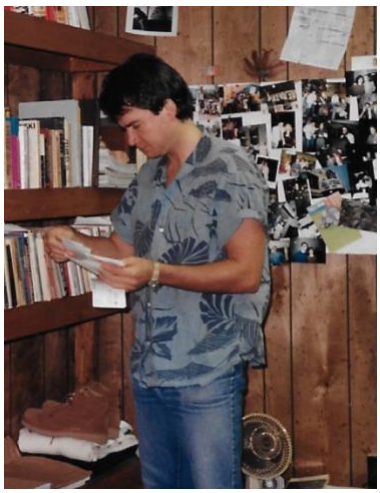
At this very moment, the Theatrical Outfit was getting attention from both press and audiences for its original and innovative work. In mid 1981, Public Relations executive Paul Sanger decided to leave the Alliance Theatre's board and put his efforts into bolstering what he saw was a struggling young company with tremendous potential, and whose adventurous work filled a gap in the Atlanta theatre scene. Immediately, a young, forward-looking board of affluent professionals was recruited to help move the company into the future.



Pamella O'Connor and Al Garrison in *The Unseen Hand*

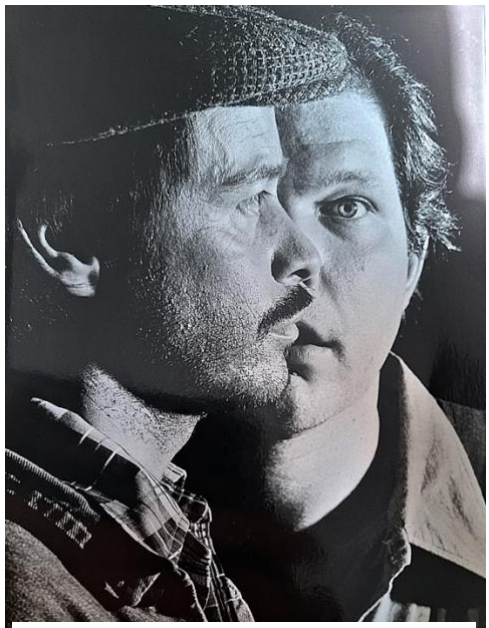
At the end of the 1981-82 season Marianne Fraulo left the company, having programmed *Elizabeth I* and *Crime on Goat Island* for the ensuing season as

her final contribution to the company's artistic vision, and David Head and Sharon Levy became Artistic and Managing Directors respectively. The first order of business was to find a new venue to increase audience size and allow the company's operations to be conducted under one roof. In the spring of 1982, Theatrical Outfit signed a lease on an old Kress 5 & 10 store at Peachtree and 10th St and began renovations to create a black box theatre with a spacious lobby fronting Peachtree St, a scene shop, dressing rooms, offices, and a basement running the full length of the building for rehearsals, and prop and costume storage. Many actors and designers brought their skills and helped build out the new theatre. In the summer of 1982, the Theatrical Outfit moved from the 2,000 sq ft Performing Arena into the 20,000 sq ft former Kress store.



David Head in his office

This new iteration of the Theatrical Outfit under Head and Levy brought with it the ethos and passions of the founders – multi talents and skills, improvisation, experimentation, energy, inclusion, and cutting-edge programming choices, now with the ability to be more professionally produced. The stated mission at the time (paraphrased) was to "produce intimate and insightful theatre, a broad range of literature, integrating various forms and styles, tuned to the modern temper. To entertain by challenging the intellectual, spiritual and emotional parameters of the audience, to speak of a truth through which we may find greater understanding, to nurture a community of artists working toward the rediscovery of the human spirit common to us all, with the focus on acting and directing." The belief in it was wholehearted and everyone involved worked tirelessly to make it manifest, and as inclusive as was humanly possible. All were welcome.



David Milford (foreground) and Stacy McDaniel in *Of Mice and Men*

The staff now also included permanent professional positions for production management, stage management, PR & marketing, box office & ticket sales.



Jon Goldstein, stage manager, w/Julius Squeezer, the snake in *Holy Ghosts*



Therra Gwynn (Jaramillo) running concessions

Everyone worked at capacity producing new work, late night shows, summer block busters, an art exhibit in the lobby which changed with each show, subscription sales, and the ever-present need for fundraising to support it all. Many wonderful, dedicated people helped make the Outfit run - Beverly Price, Dorothy Walker, Hale Pettit, Stacy Pike, Judith Rachels, Marjorie Davis, and Therra Gwyn (Jaramillo), among others, who over the years served in almost every position there was to be had at the Theatrical Outfit in both production and administration.

The Outfit's move to the Kress building also completed the arts district corridor which stretched from the Alliance Theatre and Walter Dallas' Proposition Theatre at the Woodruff Arts Center at Peachtree and 14th at the north end, to the Fox Theatre at Peachtree and Ponce de Leon on the southern end, with the Academy Theater and the Center for Puppetry Arts at W. Peachtree and 13th St, also home to Jomandi Theatre Company, Just Us Theatre at the Peachtree Playhouse and the Theatrical Outfit at Peachtree and 10th. In between were bars, restaurants, jazz clubs and discos which stayed open late, providing nightlife for artists and audiences after the curtain came down.



Bernardine Mitchell in her dressing room

The 1980s were a fertile time for new, notable Off-Broadway plays so there was a rich variety of interesting, scripted work to choose from and easily license. By now, a critical mass of actors and creative artists transplanted from cities across the US, were gathering in Atlanta and making their mark. The atmosphere was open, and unrestricted. Actors, musicians and designers from other theatres and a variety of genres came to work at the Outfit. And while not a resident company, an unofficial ensemble, an esprit de corps, was forming with many actors performing multiple times and finding an artistic home on the Outfit stage – Jessica Phelps (West), John Ammerman, David Milford, Pamella O'Connor, David de Vries, Marianne Fraulo, Bernardine Mitchell, Michael Keck, Kenny Raskin, Al Garrison, Rebecca Wackler, Don Griffin, George Nikas, Mary Lynn Owen, Suzi Bass, Christian Hesler, Crystal Fox, Bill Yates, Bruce Evers, Rosemary Newcott, Nita Hardy, James Mayberry, Buck Newman, Wendy Herzog, Stacy McDaniel, Stuart



L-R Jessica Phelps (West), Joseph Wilkins, Rosemary Newcott, Stephanie Kallos in *On The Verge*

Culpepper, Michael West, Megan McFarland, Gordon Paddison, Jessica Klarp, Eddie King, Ray McKinnon, Kent Whipple, Alan Duane, Janet Metzger, Ted Manson, Brad Dayan, John Courtenay, among others. Michael Keck, Dennis West, Philip Depoy, and others



L-R Buck Newman, Michael Keck, George Nikas in *Rashomon*

brought their musical talents, composing and directing music for the stage. Many designers worked repeatedly – Hal McCoy, Liz Lee, Jeroy Hannah, Stanley Poole, Monty Schuth, Johnny Thigpen, Fannie Shubert and Luis Maza among others, as did stage managers Jon Goldstein and Gail Bast, and Production and Technical Directors Mark Loring, John Scott Ross, Cindy Dimmitt, Jeff Odem and Brian Borchers, among others. In addition to David Head and Sharon Levy, Joe Feldman, Stuart Culpepper, Bill Yates and Skip Foster directed multiple times.



John Ammerman and Jane Berman in *Crime on Goat Island*

Atlanta actor and theater critic Stuart Culpepper, in an article in the Atlanta Gazette in 1983 entitled The Emergence of Atlanta Theater, wrote, "Lighting up the southern end of Peachtree's theatrical sky is the Theatrical Outfit.
Veteran theatregoers tend to agree that two of the most rewarding and exciting shows produced last season were at the Outfit: Elizabeth I and Crime on Goat Island … sparked by the imagination and vision of David Head, a courageously rambunctious new board of directors, and tenacious manager Sharon Levy, the Outfit seems well on the way to even greater heights this season."

Over the first several seasons, the stage was reconfigured for work to be presented in a variety of ways – in the round, on three sides, two sides, or as a more traditional proscenium, according to which made most sense for the performance. In the early days it was changed for each show. Eventually that became too labor intensive and too expensive, so it happened less often.



David Head in *Killers Head*

In 1984 The Outfit negotiated the first Actors' Equity Association, Small Professional Theatre (SPT) contract in the Southeast, requiring at least two Equity members to be hired for each show. This provided a framework for The Outfit to cast its net even wider, without restrictions on who it could hire, at a rate it could afford. It also provided the means for many local actors to join the union, with its attendant life-long benefits.

An enormous amount of work was produced in this period - a subscription season of 5-6 productions plus additional fare such as late-night shows, readings, and other events. The space was also rented out to other companies producing their own original shows such as Dark Night Theatre.



David Head and Marianne Fraulo in *Fool for Love*

In 1984, TO co-produced *The Rocky Horror Show* as a summer musical with Bill Yates and Pamella O'Connor, featuring an unknown Ru Paul in the role of Riff Raff. Ru was a ubiquitous presence in midtown Atlanta in those days, ultimately living up to the promise on the flyers he stapled to telephone poles all over the neighborhood, which said "Ru Paul is Everything".

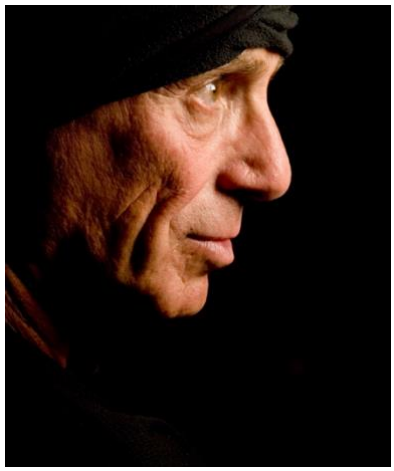


Ru Paul Charles in his dressing room



Karen Kandel, Ruth Maleczech, Greg Mehrten from Mabou Mines in *Lear*

Ticket lines stretched down the block, and the show was extended several times, pushing back the opening of the 84-85 subscription season as long as possible. Its success led TO to follow up the following summer with *Little Shop of Horrors* in collaboration with the Center for Puppetry Arts. The next summer, 1986, saw a new version of an Atlanta favorite *Della's Diner: Blue Plate Special*. TO also presented outside work for the first time; the Negro Ensemble Company's *A Soldier's Play* in 1985; Mabou Mines *Cold Harbour* in 1986 and *Lear* in 1988, with New York's renowned avant garde company Mabou Mines in residence for several weeks to develop and rehearse its gender-reversed adaptation of Shakespeare's King Lear, with Macarthur Genius director Lee Breuer at the helm.



Lee Breuer

The Theatrical Outfit's choice of work and casting reflected the changes that were afoot in Atlanta, with more and more inclusion of artists of color. Many shows featured multi-cultural casting before there was a word for it, before it was expected, or required, (and then derided).



The cast of *The Shaggy Dog Animation,* L-R, back row, Jon Goldstein, JR Hawkins, Ru Paul, Bernardine Mitchell, Mose Davis, Stephen Peabody, center, Rita Carter, Eric Ferguson, Linda Marr, Miriam Must, front, Therra Gwynn (Jaramillo), Tracy Reynolds, Stanika Clay, Arwen Carter

Rocky Horror featured an interracial Brad and Janet (Christian Hesler and Crystal Fox). In 1988 Lee Breuer's *Shaggy Dog Animation*, in a co-production with Red Eye Collaboration from Minneapolis, featured a multi racial cast, including Bernardine Mitchell and Ru Paul returning to the Outfit stage. In *Rashomon*, in 1988, a trans actor, Eliane Valadon played the Medium. It felt natural and obvious - not doing it would have meant ignoring some of the best talent that Atlanta had to offer. It was diverse and immersive.



Carol Mitchell-Leon and Jessica Phelps (West) in *Rashomon*

These years also saw devastating losses in the artistic community due to the AIDS crisis which took so many, way too young, many at the peak of their creativity. It put a damper on the freewheeling atmosphere of the times but also shone a bright light on the fact that life is short, so it lent an even greater urgency to the work.

From 1986-8, Atlanta playwright Bonnie Pike was the Outfit's resident playwright. Two of her works were produced during this time – *3 Brass Monkeys* (an earlier version was produced at the Academy Theatre) and *Sweet Sweet Auburn* written with composer Michael Fauss and featuring Atlanta's iconic songstress Bernardine Mitchell with the Mose Davis Trio. The story was set in the present day on Atlanta's Auburn Avenue and included a messy interracial romance. Perhaps not surprisingly, it roiled some feathers and was a reminder that, despite having made serious strides, Atlanta, "the city too busy to hate", wasn't quite there yet.

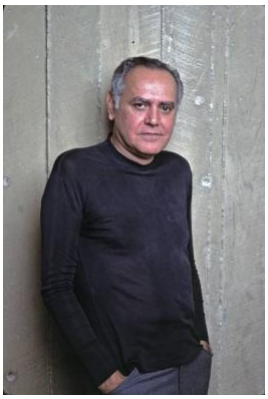
Theatrical Outfit was well and truly fulfilling its promise of creative excellence, attracting audiences, critical praise, sponsorships and increasing government funding, but after years of steady growth there was a need for a shift in organizational duties. In 1987 former actress Lynn Fitzpatrick was brought in as Executive Director to handle more of the administrative duties, with Levy focusing more on the stage, becoming Producing Director. Fitzpatrick was succeeded by Piet Knetsch in 1988, who was hired as the Business Manager.



Sharon Levy – Producing Director and Jessica Klarp - Rocky Horror actress backstage

After a consequential and transformative five seasons as Artistic Director, in late 1987 David Head took a leave of absence. Much was said and written about the reasons why. Some in the press speculated that that there was a power struggle between Head and Levy, or that an overly active and powerful board pushed him out to bring in someone with national experience. Neither was true. The fact was that Head, who had been working intensely and with an increasing public presence, was burned out and needed a break. The ethos of the 80s was such that it was considered a weakness to talk about work-life balance or the need to rest and replenish. At the end of that time, he opted not to return, and the board began an AD search. Ultimately Sharon Levy, who had been directing at TO more and more, (*Sea*

Horse, Entertaining Mr. Sloane, Rashomon, Woolgatherer et al), was named Artistic Director. Piet Knetsch was promoted to Managing Director and in 1988, NY Producer Ken Marsolais joined TO as Producing Director to bring more national attention to the company's work.



Jose Quintero

In early 1989, Marsolais and Levy produced a week of readings (with local actors), films and workshops to celebrate Eugene O'Neill's 100th birthday with Tony award-winning director Jose Quintero, celebrated expert on Eugene O'Neill.

Growth in Midtown Atlanta had by now increased to such an extent that Peachtree and 10th had become a coveted location, and TO found itself in a standoff with developer LJ Hooker over the terms of a buyout of its lease while the rest of the block was being demolished for its Gateway Center project. There was uncertainty as to whether or not the 1988-89 season could be done in the present location. The opening was moved back several times and eventually the season was able to proceed while negotiations continued.



In early 1989, Levy moved to New York to start a production company to develop new work www.dovetailproductionsinc.com. Eddie Levi Lee was appointed as Artistic Director and took the reins in the summer of 1989.

In Memoriam: Jim Ashley, Suzi Bass, Stuart Culpepper, Cindy Dimmitt, Alan Duane, David Head, Al Garrison, Don Griffin, Christian Hesler, Edward Jefferson, Chris Kayser, Larry Larson, Hal McCoy, Lynda Macaluso, Ted Manson, James Mayberry, David Milford, Carol Mitchell Leon, Buck Newman, Bill Nunn, Bonnie Pike, Beverly Price, Paul Sanger, Martin Swinger, Jean Sterrett, Dennis West, Kent Whipple, Bill Yates. And all the artists taken way too early by the AIDS epidemic that ravaged our community in the 1980s and 90s.

Production History 1982-89 (Credits incomplete)

1982/83 **The Royal Hunt of the Sun** by Peter Shaffer directed by. David Head, w/ John Ammerman, Lane Anderson, Kent Whipple, Magilla Shaus, Jim Ashley, Wally Wulff, Mary Lynn Owen, Hal Pierce, Robert Jackson, Alan Duane, John Ferguson, Brad Dayan, John Liles, Rick Rogers, David de Vries, Thomas White, Byron Van Buren, Christian Hesler, David Durham, Sidney Rhee, 'Mango' Anderson, Natalie Osofsky, Connie Spearman
Elizabeth I by Paul Foster, directed by David Head w/Jessica Phelps, John Ammerman, David de Vries, Christian Hessler, Pamella O'Connor, Suzi Bass, Mary Lynn Owen, John Courtney, Rick Rogers, Thomas White.
Crime on Goat Island by Ugo Betti, directed by David Head w/John Ammerman, Pamella O'Connor, David Milford, Mary Lynn Owen, Jane Berman.
Tennessee Williams One Act Festival – Lady of Larkspur Lotion, 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, This Property is Condemned, directed by Robert Lott w/Suzi Bass, Robert Crofford, Janet Metzger, Daniel Burnley
Killer's Head by Sam Shepard, directed by Sharon Levy w/David Head
The Unseen Hand, directed by Bill Yates w/Al Garrison, Pamella O'Connor, Dale Belt, Brad Sergi, David Head

1983/84 **Of Mice and Men** by John Steinbeck, directed by David Head w/David Milford, Stacy McDaniel, Al Garrison, James Mayberry, Alan Duane, Ted Manson, Rick Rogers
The Lion in Winter by James Goldman, directed by David Head w/Stuart Culpepper, Laura Whyte, Jessica Phelps, John Ammerman, John Courtney, Bill Yates, David deVries
Silent Snapshots – a one-person mime show w/John Ammerman
Tom Paine, by Paul Foster, directed by David Head w/David Milford, Pamella O'Connor, Kathleen McManus, Ned Bridges, Stacy McDaniel, Don Finney, Dan Byrd, Jessica Phelps
Rasputin by Robert Donnan, directed by David Head w/Sharon Levy, Pamella O'Connor, Bill Yates, Robert Todd, David Milford, Janet Metzger
Holy Ghosts by Romulus Linney, directed by David Head w/Jessica Phelps, John Ammerman, David Milford, Kent Whipple, Alan Duane, James Mayberry, Tom Turbiville, Wendy Herzog, Becky Harris, Louise Lee, Kevin Black, CP Munro, Theresa O'Shea, Willie Woods, Julius Squeezer (the snake).
The Sea Horse by Edward J. Moore, directed by Sharon Levy w/David Head & Suzi Bass

1984/85 **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf** by Edward Albee, directed by David Head w/Stuart Culpepper
Laundry & Bourbon and **Lone Star** by James McLure directed by Joe Feldman w/Rebecca Wackler, Wendy Herzog, Deborah Anderson, Eddie King, Ray McKinnon, Stacey McDaniel
Desire Under the Elms by Eugene O'Neill, directed by David Head, Stuart Culpepper, Judy Leavell, w/special guest Colleen Dewhurst
Entertaining Mr. Sloane by Joe Orton, directed by Sharon Levy, w/Pamella O'Connor, Hall Hunsinger, Jim Peck, David Milford
Three Brass Monkeys by Bonnie Pike, directed by David Head w/Suzi Bass, Marian Bolton, Suzanne Calvert, Stacey McDaniel, Eddie King, Kent Whipple, Marc McPherson, Wendy Herzog, Mildred Skelton

Othello by Wm Shakespeare directed by Joe Feldman, music by Michael Keck, w/Michael Tatman, David Head, Jessica Phelps (West), David Milford, Nita Hardy, Kent Whipple
The Rocky Horror Show by Richard O'Brien, co-produced with Bill Yates & Pamella O'Connor, directed by Bill Yates w/Gordon Paddison, Megan McFarland, Ru Paul, Crystal Fox, Christian Hesler, Jessica Klarp, Bryan Mercer, Stuart Culpepper, Allen Jowers, Lulu Downs, Sonny Goff.

A Soldier's Play by Charles Fuller. TO presents The Negro Ensemble Company.

I Never Saw Another Butterfly – directed by Rose Kessler. A collection of Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942–1944 \
Cold Harbor by Dale Worsley w/ Bill Raymond. TO presents Mabou Mines

1985/86 **Fool for Love** by Sam Shepard**,** directed by Skip Foster w/David Head, Marianne Fraulo, Ted Manson, Peter Thomasson. Followed by midnight shows of **Cowboy Mouth** by Sam Shephard directed by Eddie King
Three Brass Monkeys by Bonnie Pike, directed by ??? w/ w/Suzi Bass, Marian Bolton, Suzanne Calvert, Stacey McDaniel, Eddie King, Kent Whipple, Ted Manson, Jill Jane Clements
The Guitarron by Lynne Alvarez for the Atlanta New Play Project, directed by Sharon Levy
Terra Nova by Ted Tally directed by David Head, w/Stuart Culpepper,
Lysistrata by Aristophanes directed Sandra Hughes, music by Michael Keck, w/ Rebecca Wackler, Geoff McKnight, Lorna Howley, Amanda Graham, Ray Beane (McKinnon), Ron Brooks, Kevin Chrysler.
The Woolgatherer by William Mastrosimone, directed by Sharon Levy w/John Ammerman & Suzanne Calvert
Little Shop of Horrors by Howard Ashman & Alan Menken, directed by David Head w/ Michael West, Jan Milner, Stanton Cunningham, Jack Gordon, Bobby Box, Crystal Fox (extended twice)

1986/87 **The Hobbit: Return to Middle Earth** directed by Rose Kessler w/Stuart Culpepper

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men by Lonne Elder III the Negro Ensemble Company presented by TO

Split Second by Dennis McIntyre, directed by Sharon Levy w/Kenny Leon, Donna Biscoe, David Milford, John Lawhorn, Michael Keck, Bill Nunn.
The Actor's Nightmare and **Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You** by Christopher Durang directed by David de Vries w/Theresa O'Shea, John Ammerman, Marianne Fraulo, Nita Hardy, David Milford, Sergio Aguirre
A Moon for the Misbegotten by Eugene O'Neill directed by David Head, w/Suzi Bass, Buck Newman, David deVries, Mike McGehee.
Sweet Sweet Auburn by Bonnie Pike and Michael Fauss, directed by David Head w/Bernardine Mitchell, Donald Griffin, Jo Bell, Crystal Fox, Bryan Jones and the Mose Davis Trio.

Summer 1987 **Della's Diner: Blue Plate Special** book Tom Edwards**,** Lyrics Mary L. Fisher, music Harris Wheeler, co-produced w/Gordon Paddison w/Megan McFarland, Gordon Paddison, Tom Edwards, Jerry Homan, Libby Whittemore, Nancy Jane Clay.

1987-88 **What the Butler Saw** by Joe Orton, directed by Stuart Culpepper w/Simon Reynolds, Jessica Klarp, Ellen McQueen, Brad DePlanche, David Milford, Allen O'Reilly
Michael West: Together At Last written by and starring Michael West, directed by David Head
Corpse! By Gerald Moon
Rashomon by Fay & Michael Kanin, directed by Sharon Levy, music by Michael Keck & Dennis West, w/Jessica Phelps, John Ammerman, Buck Newman, Michael Keck, George Nikas, Carrol Mitchell-Leon, Bruce Evers, Ryohei Hoshi, Eliane Valadon
The Shaggy Dog Animation by Lee Breuer, (with Red Eye Collaboration), music by Jimmy Harry, directed by Leslie Mohn, w/Bernardine Mitchell, Ru Paul, Miriam Must, Stephen Peabody, Tracy Reynolds, Arwen Carter, Stanika Clay, Linda Marr
Lear, a gender reversed adaptation of Shakespeare's King Lear directed by Lee Breuer, featuring Ruth Maleczech w/the company in residence w/ work-in-progress showings

1988/89 **Hamlet the Musical** adapted by Levi Lee & Rebecca Wackler, music by Philip Depoy, directed by Rebecca Wackler w/Scott Depoy, Megan McFarland, Donald Griffin, Kenny Raskin, V.J Trimble, John Forrest Ferguson, Glen Rainey, Philip Depoy, Heather Heath, J.R Hawkins
On the Verge by Eric Overmeyer, directed by Sharon Levy, music by Philip Depoy, w/Jessica Phelps, Rosemary Newcott, Stephanie Kallos, Joseph Wilkins
I'm Not Rappaport by Herb Gardner, directed by Piet Knetsch w/Kenny Raskin, Rob Cleveland, David de Vries, Heather Heath, Jonathan Davis/Jon Goldstein, Yetta Levitt, James Mayberry

Eugene O'Neill's 100th birthday A week of readings, films and workshops w/guest director Jose Quintero