

From Indiana, to New York, to Cape May
Article written by Gayle Stahlhuth
For the April 2016 Edition of the on-line magazine
Soul of the American Actor

From an early age I was smitten by storytellers and storytelling. Whether it's intelligent conversation, singing, dancing, small screen, big screen, live theater - I enjoy it. Throughout the years, I've performed, written plays that have been produced (some that have not), directed, designed and hung lights, designed and built costumes, designed and created sound effects and music tapes for shows way before there was iTunes and CDs.

My family's first television set entered our Indianapolis home soon after I was born. There weren't many channels, but I enjoyed the Busby Berkeley musicals, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. I was taking tap and ballet lessons by age five.

I saw my first film in a movie theater when I was also five. Dad took me to see "Friendly Persuasion." Wow! A movie on a *really* big screen.

On two vacations to the East Coast to, mostly, attend the World's Fair, I saw my first professional theater anywhere, and it was Broadway's "110 in the Shade" and "Funny Girl" with Barbra Streisand. Another Wow! What an exchange of energy from performers, to the audiences, and back again.

When Clowes Memorial Hall on Butler University's campus in Indianapolis opened in 1963, concerts and tours crossing the country now had a place to perform in my hometown. When asked what I wanted for birthday and Christmas presents, that was easy - theater tickets. My parents, bless them, gave me tickets, and drove me to the theater and picked me up. I was fine on my own watching "Oliver!" and Alfred Drake in "Kismet." Soon after, I became an usher at Clowes so I could see as many shows as possible and make money besides. Fortunately, a fellow usher lived near us so I could hitch a ride. I couldn't drive yet. I continued working here throughout high school, when I wasn't rehearsing and performing in a school production. The Metropolitan Opera, dance companies, rock bands, plays, musicals - all came to Clowes. I saw Mary Martin and Robert Preston in "I Do! I Do!," John Raitt in "Carousel," Johnny Carson, Marcel Marceau, and Judy Garland. Clowes was also the home of the Indianapolis Symphony.

Even after I left Indy, whenever I visited my folks, the house manager invited me to shows. It was at Clowes where I saw my first one-person productions: Hal Holbrook in "Mark Twain Tonight" and Siobhan McKenna in "Here Are Ladies." Since front-of-house and backstage crew at Clowes knew me, I was allowed access everywhere. I was young and curious, and not afraid to start a conversation. These two actors, and others, allowed me to talk to them after performances, often in the dressing room.

During the summers, my parents and I attended at least one show, yearly, at Avondale Playhouse. It was theater-in-the-round, outside, under a big blue tent. An off-time for television production back then, stars of the small screen, most of whom also had Broadway credits, took to performing throughout the country in the "tent circuit." We saw the likes of "Mrs. McThing" starring Ann B. Davis and Eddie Bracken in "Teahouse of the August Moon." I interned and played small roles during the theater's last two seasons. In 1966, we had a big bonfire when the big tent was burned. Not all of it, however. I kept a piece, and I'm sure others did, too. Indiana is hot in August and patrons were heading towards air-conditioned venues.

It was the demise of the tent circuit and the rise of regional playhouses and dinner theaters. Two dinner theaters started up in hotels in Indianapolis, and I performed comedies in both locals. David Letterman actually performed at one of them, too, while he was television's favorite local weatherman.

Going back in time, a bit, I performed in local commercials that were filmed at a local television station. This is where I met Frances Farmer. I was only ten and didn't know her back story. I knew her as the host of my favorite television show, "Frances Farmer Presents." Like today's Robert Osborne on TMC, she talked in-depth about the films being shown, and occasionally interviewed guest celebrities. She saw me watching her getting ready for the show in the studio, and said "hi," and we had a lovely conversation. I asked her how she ended up in Indianapolis. She said her closest friend lived here and it seemed like a good place to be. From then on, I tried to schedule any commercial shootings when I knew she'd be there. This wasn't difficult. Her show was on at 4:30pm, after school.

When she played the lead in "The Visit" with Purdue University's Equity company, under the direction of the head of the theater department, Joe Stockdale in 1965, I asked my parents if we could

go. I still couldn't drive long distances until I was 16. Her performance was incredible and I wanted to work with Stockdale. I attended Purdue's theater workshop program in the summer of 1967, and was a freshman in the theater department in 1968. The schedule was incredibly busy but thrilling to be performing in small roles with the Equity company while doing student productions.

Then *Man Walked on the Moon* in 1969, and funding for much of the theater program was diverted to the engineering program at Purdue. Stockdale was looking to move, and did, to SUNY Purchase in New York. My friends at Clowes Hall, many students at Butler, suggested I attend Butler, and I did. But after a year, these friends were graduating and the head of the department decided to move back to New York.

With all college credits moving with me, I then moved to Indiana Central University (now Indianapolis University) and graduated still, in the usual four years. Through this school, I spent a semester at Oxford, England, and was allowed to run my own theater company in the basement of one of the men's dormitories. Producing wasn't new to me. In high school, when I was a senior, I was granted permission to form a four-person company to perform scenes from Shakespeare to take to senior citizen's homes several times a month during class times.

After graduation in 1972, I moved to New York City, and am fortunate to be able to say that most of my time has been devoted to the arts. I performed in off-off-Broadway, off-Broadway, regional and dinner theaters, and bus-and-truck and national tours in such shows as "Cabaret," "Fiddler on the Roof," "Lovers and Other Strangers," "The Rainmaker," "Company," and plays and musicals that never have been seen again. Some deserved a wider audience. Alas, others did not. I also worked in soap operas, television, film, and radio.

In the early 1980s, I applied to the New York Foundation for the Arts to be an artist-in-residence, and was accepted into this new program. By now, states were figuring out that most of the arts had been taken out of schools, and it was time to get art back into them with visiting artists. I traveled to schools throughout the state teaching acting and playwriting, and sometimes directed full productions. I then pursued placement on the artist-in-residence rosters in New Jersey, Utah and Wyoming. (I like the Rocky Mountains, hence Utah and Wyoming.) Having been fortunate in my youth to be exposed to theater, I am always eager to spread the word to youngsters.

But again, backing up a bit. In the 1970s, there began an abundance of one-person shows on Broadway. Julie Harris shined in "Belle of Amherst" and James Whitmore starred in one after another: "Will Rogers U.S.A.," "Give 'em Hell, Harry" and "Bully." I, along with many others who wanted to take more control of their careers, decided to write and perform a one-person show.

I'd always been interested in the Transcendentalists in Concord, Massachusetts in the 1800s, and so began researching Louisa May Alcott. The New York Public Library with *Patience and Fortitude* (two lions) guarding the entrance was an integral part of the research. Before the Internet, it was the best place to go. I asked Richard Harden to direct, as the script went through its various stages, and when I thought the show was ready, started sending out information. The first booking was at St. Leo's College in Florida in 1980. Other performances followed at the Smithsonian Institution, the Arvada Center in Colorado, etc. Arthur Shafman included "Lou: The Remarkable Miss Alcott" among his touring shows.

The next self-generated production was "Not Above a Whisper," a two-person play I performed with my husband, Lee O'Connor, about Dorothea Lynde Dix's struggles and triumphs in seeking better treatment for the indigent mentally ill. This was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery, and traveled throughout the country.

"Eve's Diary" was next based on Mark Twain's several writings about the Original Woman. It started in NYC as part of Womenkind's one-woman festival.

After "Lou" was performed at several Chautauquas, the Illinois and Missouri Chautauquas asked me to write about someone who was relevant to the 1920s. I chose Edna Ferber, and another one-person show was created. In 2000, as part of a two-hander for East Lynne Theater Company (ELTC), I created a one-person play about Catharine Beecher, to compliment Emma Palzere-Rae's one-person show about Harriett Beecher Stowe.

But, again, I must back up to go forward, since I've been the artistic director of ELTC since 1999.

Back in 1980, I received a phone call from Richard Harden, saying that a friend, Warren Kliever, had a show cancel on him due to an actor's ill health. Harden thought "Lou," would be an excellent replacement, and suggested this to Kliever, who booked it. Kliever was the founding artistic director of ELTC.

I wouldn't have believed anyone if they'd told me I'd still be part of ELTC thirty-five years later. I served on the board for ten years, and my husband stage managed for, and I acted in several productions. It was due to this company that we first came to Cape May, NJ and bought our West Cape May home in 1993. When Kliewer lost his battle with cancer in 1998, Board President Frank Smith asked me to become the next artistic director. I was writing a musical and involved with other projects at the time, and had not been on the theater's board for several years. I'd produced before and at first turned down the offer.

In 1980, Warren Kliewer founded ELTC after extensive research and the discovery that there were no professional theater companies in this country dedicated to the performance, study and preservation of America's 200-year-old theatrical heritage. He named his Equity professional company after a popular late-nineteenth century American play. Based, ironically, on an English novel, "East Lynne" was the "Downton Abbey" of its day.

Kliewer wrote, "In almost any other civilized country in the world, audiences can see performances drawn from the 16th century -- even farther back in some countries. But no other company in the United States is attempting to revive plays and entertainments of our own past."

A Mennonite, born in Mountain Lake, Minnesota in 1931, Kliewer already had a career in teaching, acting and directing, with several published plays, short stories, and poems to his credit, prior to ELTC. From 1970-1973, he served as production director for the National Humanities Series, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, in Princeton, NJ. His extensive acting work included the only New York production of Peter Weiss's "The Investigation."

The name of the company can be confusing, with comments from patrons that it must have "originated in Connecticut -- perhaps?" As it turns out, since ELTC has called several places "home," it's a good thing the company is not linked to a town. For four seasons, it operated year-round in the Five Corners Library in Jersey City before moving to The Williams Carlos Williams Center in Rutherford, NJ.

From the beginning, touring productions were always part of ELTC's programming, with shows going to other theaters, museums, and libraries as far west as Colorado, down to Florida, and up to Maine. Mid-Atlantic Center for the Arts and Humanities (MAC) in Cape May, NJ contacted Kliewer about booking shows for special events, and in 1987, the musical "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and "Yellow Wallpaper" based on the novel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, first appeared in this seaside resort. My own one-woman "Lou: The Remarkable Miss Alcott," through ELTC, was brought down by MAC the following year.

At the suggestion of MAC's executive director Michael Zuckerman, Kliewer brought ELTC to Cape May in 1989 for its first full season. The company performed in a variety of Cape May venues. All the while, productions still continued at The Williams Carlos Williams Center in Rutherford through 1997.

Since 1999, thanks to the hospitality of The First Presbyterian Church of Cape May, ELTC has been able to continue to perform in this seaside resort. The company has pursued several possibilities for a home of its own, including the old Methodist Church on Lafayette Street which now houses three condominiums.

The plays of O'Neill, Crothers, Kaufman, and other worthy American writers of over eighty years ago continue to grace our stage, as well as thought-provoking world and New Jersey premieres based on American history and literature. Over eighty different shows later, for me as artistic director, I've not exhausted the exciting repertoire that's out there. I don't have the luxury, like many artistic directors, of seeing a show on Broadway and then remounting it a few years later. Like Kliewer, I'm more of an archeologist -- digging into archives and researching and reading, sometimes thinking I've found a script only to discover that I've only found a fragment of a script, and the search continues.

Also, like Kliewer, I search for the relevance for today, of a play originally written decades earlier or of a new play based on past events. As always, a good script is a good script and can stand the test of time. If this were not so, we would no longer produce Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekov, and Shaw. But there is also worth in American plays written by Langdon Mitchell, Alice Gerstenberg, and John L. Balderston, all of whom have been represented by ELTC.

ELTC's shows for 2016 include "Mr. Lincoln" written by Herbert Mitgang and starring Tom Byrn. Due to its successful run last year, it's returning for two weeks in May before it goes to Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble in Pennsylvania. Up next is "Rodgers' Romance," a musical revue of the songs of Rogers and Hart, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, conceived and directed by David-Michael Kenney; "Dracula" (1927) by Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston (American) based on the novel by Bram

Stoker; "Biography" (1932) by S. N. Behrman; and our NBC radio-style productions featuring detectives Sherlock Holmes and Nick Carter.

Since 2007, I've adapted the Christmas stories of American writers and performed them in storytelling fashion for the annual holiday show. In 2016, the title is "Yuletide Tales." Not sure exactly which stories yet, but probably Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain will be represented. I usually end up taking on at least thirty different roles.

Lee and I divide our time between our apartment in New York City and the house in West Cape May.

Just like when I was five years old, I relish seeing the works of others.