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'Look at the Moon:' Hunter Hills Theatre; Outdoor Drama in the Smokies"

Theatre Symposium, 2008

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and

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The Prologue:

We spent our summers/Singing dancing growing up/Emoting romancing living
hard/Spilling our guts dropping our guard/Shaking our butts underneath the stars/
Boys and girls together/A little faster in stormy weather . . .

These are lines from the poem “We spent our summers: An elegy to Hunter Hills” by Jon Lutz, and they capture something of what it was like to be a part of the remarkable experience that was Hunter Hills Theatre. This summer program left a lasting legacy in the annals of outdoor drama, because this grand experiment was unique. Many colleges have operated summer theatre programs, but none had a program of the scope, artistic vision or operational format of Hunter Hills Theatre. It was a fabulous showcase for the talent of the University of Tennessee theatre program. It was also a very ambitious and complicated program to run.

How the University acquired the theatre is an interesting story, and that background will set the stage for the through line of this essay. Hunter Hills Theatre was built in 1955 for *Chucky Jack*, an outdoor drama about the first governor of Tennessee, John Sevier, and was portrayed in 1957 by John Cullum, a Knoxville native. The Maples family of Gatlinburg had built the theatre hoping to keep tourists on the west side of the Smokies rather than having them go over the mountains to Cherokee and to *Unto These Hills*. The outdoor drama limped along for a few years and in 1959 finally closed. Several factors caused its demise. According to Bill Morgan, who worked in the University of Tennessee Development Office during the Hunter Hills Theatre years, the play opened to mixed reviews and at nearly three hours long was simply too long, but Kermit Hunter refused to cut a word (Morgan).

Chucky Jack may not have been successful because the story of the show was not strongly linked to “hallowed ground.” At the 2008 Theatre Symposium, Mark Sumner, director emeritus of the Institute of Outdoor Drama, made a convincing argument about the essential link

between success of an outdoor drama and its association with “hallowed ground.” Examples of this concept are the two outdoor historic dramas at Snow Camp, North Carolina, *Sword of Peace* and *Pathway to Freedom*. Snow Camp is one of the historic Quaker settlements in North Carolina, and the location of the theatre is in the heart of the settlement. That land is in a real sense “hallowed.” Moreover, the historical story of John Sevier certainly was not as well-known to tourists as mythical figures like Daniel Boone or the melodramatic story of the Trail of Tears, for example. Tourists came to Gatlinburg to see the Smoky Mountains in a generic way, without any specific historical motivation. Also, *Chucky Jack* lacked the sure-fire religious appeal of *The Book of Job* in Kentucky or one of the Passion Plays.

After *Chucky Jack* ceased operations the space was then used as a rental venue housing music events--one summer the Washington Ballet used the facility, and Union college performed there another summer. It was dark a couple of seasons, then the Maples family gave the theatre to the University of Tennessee as a tax write-off. In December of 1965, Dr. Edward Boling, Vice-President of Development for the University of Tennessee announced the gift of Hunter Hills Theatre to the University by Mr. and Mrs. R. L. Maples. The gift was valued at \$300,000.

In 1966 Department of Speech and Theatre mounted the first productions. From 1966-1977, the University of Tennessee produced a variety of plays, from musicals such as *The Sound of Music*, *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, to plays such as *Everyman*, *Dark of the Moon*, *Indians* to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, and a legendary, one-night stand of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*.¹ The productions of well-known Broadway musicals intended to appeal to the broad population of tourists. This strategy made sense. The Smoky Mountains National Park has long been the most visited National Park in the United States, so the artistic director of Hunter Hills Theatre, Fred Fields, was counting on sheer volume of potential audience to carry the operation along to financial success. Furthermore, the opportunities for night life in the Gatlinburg area were very limited at that time, for the town offered only a few small venues for dancing, bluegrass music, children’s entertainment, and one licensed tavern. The theatre offered a family-oriented evening of entertainment to a vast audience of tourists looking for something to do after a day of exploring the Smokies or strolling along the streets of Gatlinburg. The theatre also intended to appeal to supporters of the university who lived in the region.

Most years, Hunter Hills Theatre operated with a rolling repertory season with performances Tuesday through Sunday, and the repertory plot called for each show to run at least twice per week. Typically, a season included two musicals and *Dark of the Moon*. Along with the artistic director's decision to anchor each summer season with major Broadway musicals, the rolling repertory format made sense. It was intended to capture the maximum attendance from tourists who visited the area for several days to a week. With the rolling repertory format the theatre could turn their patrons into "repeat customers" by offering a variety of productions during any tourists' stay in the Smokies. If they liked *Oklahoma*, for example, then they might come back the next night to see *Dark of the Moon*. Ticket prices were modest, \$5.00 general admission, and there was ample parking on the theatre property. The University of Tennessee staged thirty-two productions using more than five hundred actors and technicians (most of whom were UT students) during its twelve years of operating Hunter Hills Theatre. Fred Fields was managing director of Hunter Hills for eleven of those twelve years. He was assisted by many artists and artistic organizations during those years--choreographers, music directors, costume and scenic designers. The theatre played to many thousands of tourists over the years.

As a setting for any theatre production, the facility was perfectly situated in an isolated setting on the fringes of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with the audience facing a wonderful vista of Mount LeConte out over the stage. Very little ambient light or sound intruded into the space (compared to facilities such as the Harrodsburg, KY downtown setting for *The Legend of Daniel Boone*). A buffer of trees surrounded the facility on three sides, and the sawdust stage complemented the setting of productions such as *Dark of the Moon*, *Oklahoma*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *South Pacific*, *Carousel*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and *Li'l Abner*.

The theatre offered three vertical playing levels (stage, blockhouse and upper stage) plus a grassy "pit" situated between the audience and the stage that could serve as a possible fourth level. (The productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Agamemnon* did use this fourth playing level, for example.) The theatre also featured three horizontal playing areas across the main stage level—the center stage and two turntables left and right. This provided no less than five playing areas at any one time. The two turntables created two or more additional playing areas, as needed. Turntables were a popular form of stage machinery in the 1950s. They offered a theatrical flair to productions (*Hello, Dolly*), but more importantly they made the staging of

multiple productions in a repertory schedule more easy to manage (*Oklahoma* in combination with *Sound of Music* and *Dark of the Moon*).

The amphitheatre seated about 1600—a smaller venue than several of the other Sumner/Hunter summer theatres. The rake of the amphitheatre was very low, compared to other outdoor facilities such as *Unto These Hills* or the *Black Hills Passion Play*, and this presented some acoustical challenges. To compensate, an improvised system of sound amplification and monitors was rigged for the three main playing areas and for the orchestra. The original design of the theatre included two light towers situated on the far left and right sides of the amphitheatre, about two-thirds of the way up the slope. There were wing positions for instruments situated backstage left and right. Two much larger light towers were added in the early 1970s, centered in the amphitheatre. The positioning of these towers, combined with more modern lighting instruments and circuitry, greatly improved the quality of lighting for the productions. These towers did cut off about five hundred seats in the uppermost section of the amphitheatre, seats that were rarely filled during the ten years of performances in the 1960s and 1970s. The loss of these empty seats was more than compensated by the improved lighting capabilities.

The artistic director assembled the artistic staff and student company primarily from the UT theatre program. This created a cohesion and stability in personnel and artistic vision. Hardly any other outdoor theatre operation has ever used this model. The staff included the artistic director, one costume designer/costumier, one lighting/sound designer, one technical director, one food service manager (reassigned from the university's on campus food service), one box office/publicity manager, one music director/conductor, one choreographer, and a resident facilities manager employed through the university's Physical Plant office on a twelve-month contract. In some years, the artistic staff included one scenic designer and a company manager. Typically, many of these artistic staff positions would be filled by graduate students or recent graduates of the program. These artistic leadership positions provided valuable experience for many of these young artists' future success. The company of performers typically included twenty to twenty-five students, two or three paid professional performers in principal roles, two or three local high school students to handle landscaping and concessions, two cooks (reassigned employees from the university's on campus food service), and two or three professional instrumental musicians.

The artistic director cast the company during the spring on the university campus in Knoxville. Rehearsal began immediately thereafter and continued through early June on campus. This meant that most of the rehearsal and some production work was completed prior to the summer. Hardly any other outdoor or summer theatre operation used this model. The operations moved to Gatlinburg at the conclusion of the spring quarter in early June. The company quickly built the shows and conducted dress rehearsals through mid June. By the last week of June all the productions for the summer had opened, and the season ran until late August or even until Labor Day.

The operation provided all needs to the company—housing, food, wages—so that everyone could focus on the artistic work of the theatre. From 1967 through 1974 all company members received room and board in the Gatlinburg-Pittman High School, conveniently located just beyond the theatre's parking lot. The company used the school's locker rooms for showers and the kitchen and cafetorium, where four meals per day were served. Occasionally, a singer or two was hired and these professional performers and musicians were paid to perform and did no other work. No students were paid for their performances, but student company members were paid between \$1.25 and \$1.65 per hour to work during the day on activities such as building scenery and costumes, conducting publicity activities and serving on box office shifts, laundering and maintaining wardrobe, rotating sets, and cleaning the theatre facility daily. Students could earn up to six hours of university credit most years. The facility included storage space for costume stock, scenery stock, company bed frames, mattresses and wardrobes. Hunter Hills Theatre enjoyed access to a variety of the university's resources. This included at least two vehicles, access to the Department of Speech and Theatre's scenic and costume stock and studios, recycled construction materials, tools, bedding, and furniture.

Considering the burgeoning operation that involved rental of housing facilities and the expense of providing board for a large company, it was not surprising that the production budget remained lean over the years. Costumes received the bulk of the production budget, for that element provided the most exciting spectacle on stage. Scenery was sparse, but monumental and versatile. Scenic units were reworked and used in many shows over the years. Season selection also played a role in stretching the production budget. Since *Dark of the Moon* was produced nearly every year, for example, there was a stock of costumes and scenery that stood ready to

support that show over time. Musicals such as *Hello, Dolly* or *Oklahoma* typically ran for two years in order to get a return on the substantial investment in their costumes and scenery.

While each season would be dominated by productions of large, popular musicals, the artistic director, Fred Fields, made Richardson/Berney's *Dark of the Moon* the "signature" show of Hunter Hills Theatre. Starting in 1967, it was produced every year including a one night stand of the play in 1973, performed especially to honor Mr. Fields when the show was not included in the regular repertory of productions. This play dramatizes the traditional ballad of Barbara Allen, weaving the ballad with legends of mountain witches, folk drama, and the local color of the Appalachian setting. In directing the script, Mr. Fields took a few liberties with the original text, setting the action at an inexact time in the distant, misty past. For example, the original text refers to a "social worker," and that became "school marm." Mr. Fields also deleted the embarrassingly stereotypical dialogue about moonshine. Most significantly, Mr. Fields incorporated much music into the play. While it was never *Dark of the Moon, The Musical!*, it was definitely *Dark of the Moon*, a drama enhanced by music. The Hunter Hills Theatre version of the script began and ended with "Down in the Valley," and the other music ranged from a rollicking "Wildwood Flower," "One Morning in May" (accompanied by a country folk dance), to the melancholy "Lesson too Late for the Learning" to the cluster of hymns in the emotionally-driven revival scene: "Golden Bells," "Just As I Am," "No, Never Alone," "Rock of Ages" and others. To this day, put a group of cast members together and we can drop into four part harmony with these songs.

One cannot imagine a more perfect environment for a production of *Dark of the Moon* than Hunter Hills Theatre. Those most ancient of mountains, the Smokies, were in actuality the backdrop for the play. On the nights when the real moon came out from behind the clouds in the final, climactic scene on top of the mountain, the effect seemed indeed miraculous. When these theatrical and natural phenomena converged as if on cue audible gasps were heard from audience members. Written in 1942 at the University of Iowa, the play uses the traditional tune of "Barbara Allen" with rewritten lyrics; it weaves in superstition, witches, and religion in an Appalachian setting. John, the Witch Boy, has become enamored of the sensual Barbara Allen. Through a spell by the Conjur Woman he is transformed into a human. He will remain human as long as Barbara is true to him for a year. If she is not, he will revert back to a witch and her death

is the price of her unfaithfulness. As a witch he will have three hundred years and then he will become fog on the mountain.

The title of this paper is taken from the final moment of *Dark of the Moon* when John the Witch Boy stands over the dead body of his wife, Barbara Allen. After living as a human with her for a year, he is now transformed back to a witch. During his time as a human, John had not been able to see the moon, because of the spell cast upon him by the Conjur Woman. Now a witch again, his final words of the play are “Look at the moon!” (Richardson and Berney 76).

Dark of the Moon has received mixed reviews as a play since its first production in Iowa. Legend has it that Richardson and Berney wrote the play as satire. Over the years, countless community theatres, high schools, and colleges have produced the piece. In some cases, there has been community outrage that a local school was producing a play about witches. Field’s vision of the play was on the opposite end of satire. With the magnificence of the Smokies surrounding the theatre, with the authentic sound of Appalachia in most actor’s ears and voices, and with Scots-Irish ancestry running in the blood of many of the actors, there was a sense of respect and wonder in the cast. If anyone had ever tried to ridicule a character, Mr. Fields would have stopped that interpretation. The University of Tennessee’s production of *Dark of the Moon* came the closest to claiming the Hunter Hills Theatre as “hallowed ground.” In a way, this signature piece was much closer to the Appalachian spirit than *Chucky Jack* could ever be².

Mildred Dunnock, the original Linda Loman in the Broadway production of *A Death of a Salesman*, was a guest at the Tennessee Theatre Association convention in Gatlinburg in 1969. Mr. Fields asked the Hunter Hills Theatre cast to return on a September night following the season to present a special performance of *Dark of the Moon* for Ms. Dunnock and the convention attendees. Afterwards, Ms. Dunnock spoke to the cast about what a special evening it had been for her and the rest of the audience. Her praise confirmed what we already knew. Many of us have experienced theatre magic in various forms, but the blend of the natural beauty of the setting, all that talent, coupled with that play and Mr. Fields’ vision for it, expanded with music and dance, was hard to top. For some of us, it is still a benchmark of excellence.

Fred Fields provided overarching artistic and executive leadership to the Hunter Hills Theatre venture, and he guided all aspects of the operation to attain that benchmark level of excellence. The opportunity to work in rolling repertory format was invaluable for the students. It was not unusual to have four plays in one’s head, and few undergraduates have ever had this

kind of training and the experience of running a play for thirty or more performances. Moreover, virtually all the productions were directed by Mr. Fields, and his directorial vision provided an artistic unity to the productions. Rehearsing the productions on campus in a large classroom, Mr. Fields could visualize a plan to transform each theatrical moment to the various playing areas of the Hunter Hills space—main stage, grassy field in front of stage, two side stages on turntables (four scene set up), and two raised stages. He also used entrances from the woods surrounding the theatre, especially the stage right area. Throughout the rehearsal process Mr. Fields gave very few notes, but one learned to listen to the notes he gave to others, which really would inform any performance. Lorraine Dowell, long time costumer, referred to him as the “kid glove director.” His gentle style worked well for guiding young performers. He had an uncanny ability to cast well and he created beautiful stage pictures, using the stage, the actors, movement, music, and, of course, the Smokies to tell the story. A former Air Force officer, Fields maintained an aura of the military about him that inspired loyalty to his values, respect for his expertise, and confidence in his vision.

While Fred Fields achieved success with his artistic vision and educational mission at Hunter Hills Theatre, he was less successful at making the operation a popular, successful entertainment venue in Gatlinburg. It never attained attendance levels or local support to match its competitor on the other side of the mountains in Cherokee, North Carolina. Attendance at Hunter Hills Theatre peaked at about 1200 per night for *Sound of Music* in 1971. For other productions, houses usually were between 400 and 600 on any given night. The theatre’s disappointing track record over the years might be explained at least in part by the cool relationship between the theatre and the local Gatlinburg business community. Pat Conroy in *Prince of Tides* describes the difference between mountain people and island people: “mountaineers are isolates; islanders are citizens of the world. An islander greets the stranger with a wave; a mountaineer wonders why he came” (Conroy 94-95). Bill Morgan asserts that the relationship between *Chucky Jack* and the community of Gatlinburg was not strong in the 1950s, and Gatlinburg natives--the old timers--had always been suspicious of the University. Morgan believes that the skepticism generated among Gatlinburg natives by the *Chucky Jack* experience also tainted their attitudes towards the University’s venture a decade later. He believes that the lack of whole-hearted local support from the very beginning contributed significantly to the ultimate demise of the University’s program. Without the direct, active, enthusiastic support of

the local business community, the theatre never was able to generate revenue at a level that could justify its long-term survival to university administrators. Former Dean of the College of Liberal Arts (later the College of Arts and Sciences) Lorayne Lester recounts that “Hunter Hills was funded directly from the Chancellor's Office (Jack Reese), so no one in the Department knew much about their finances. . . . All the department did was pay Fred a summer stipend. . . .” (Lester). While the university chancellor and other university leaders generously sustained the Hunter Hills Theatre operation for over a decade, they eventually had to direct always-finite resources elsewhere. In a recent message, Tom Cooke, former chair of the theatre program at the University of Tennessee and artistic director of Hunter Hills Theatre for its final season, reflects upon the theatre’s financial weaknesses:

No one knows all of the many considerations that went into the decision to close Hunter Hills or who made those decisions. The company of [1977] knew the fate of the theatre had been decided and that we were just doing one more summer to meet obligations the university had made. . . . The rains came, and came, and, in spite of the best efforts of . . . a fantastic company, we lost money and probably confirmed feelings that the theatre would always be a financial drain. There had been complaints for years and I guess cost will always be the bottom line with administrators. But I believe it would have been difficult for them to close it if Fred [Fields] had remained healthy. His tenacity had seen the theatre through some very difficult times. (Cooke)

Indeed, Fred Fields had committed himself passionately to the success of Hunter Hills Theatre for over a decade. He *was* Hunter Hills Theatre. When Mr. Fields was no longer able to direct Hunter Hills Theatre after 1976, no one remained to advocate to administrators or to the Gatlinburg community on behalf of the theatre. In Knoxville, the new chair of the theatre, Ralph Allen, had ambitious goals for the theatre program that were focused on the Clarence Brown Professional Company. Without support from the Gatlinburg community or university support at the department or administrative level, Hunter Hills Theatre was destined to close. Bill Morgan writes of the closing:

Gatlinburg still would not buy into encouraging a continuation of the program, both because it would require money and a final putting aside of deep-set suspicions that remained from the very beginning. . . . And finally, as things came

to critical point, the State of Tennessee hit one of its down periods and tax collections and higher education, along with all state programs, had to eat some of the costs that had originally been budgeted. In the end it pretty much came down to money. . . . But no one could find the money. (Morgan)

For those of us fortunate to work at this theatre we recognize that it shaped our lives in very special ways. We were more or less isolated in the beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains. We were housed and fed, and most of us had technical or management assignments as well as our performance duties. We lived together; we ate together; we performed together. We had to learn to co-exist. The experience at Hunter Hills Theatre propelled alumni on to Broadway, film, television, and into the teaching profession all over the country. All of us can point to the lessons we learned during those glorious summers—lessons of team work, responsibility, cooperation, ensemble, endurance, fortitude, hard work, and the meaning of rain pace.

In writing this paper, we reached out to the alumni of Hunter Hills, and we received dozens of responses. Ginny MacColl was a college freshman in 1969 when she was cast as the Dark Witch in *Dark of the Moon*. She made the Knoxville papers when she scratched her corneas and danced blind on top of the upper stage which was about twenty feet off the ground. She writes:

I realized I'd have to do it blind! Everyone pitched in to make it work. Everyone was there behind me, helping me, watching out for me. And we pulled it off with just a slight brush across the log on center stage as we leaped across it. There's no limit to what actors will accomplish to get the show on! And speaking of *Dark of the Moon*, who wouldn't have etched on their memory the sight of the moon coming out behind the clouds just as Ben said, "Look at the Moon" and the audience all let out a collective gasp. Such a haunting show!

I loved being there. And of course, it shaped my whole life, as I went to NYC to continue dancing and broadened out from there. I worked with Bob Fosse in *Pippin* as a dancer and understudy to Fastrada on B'way. Then branched out to TV commercials and did over 100 National and regional spots. (MacColl)

Richard Stafford, a director and choreographer in New York shared these thoughts about the Hunter Hills experience:

I count this as my first paid, professional theatre experience and it helped pave the way or at least further my love of musical theatre. I went on to study acting at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, moved to NYC and have continued to have a career, first as a performer and now as a director and choreographer. The seed was planted at Hunter Hills--I learned how to be a professional there--working as a team to get each show up, stitching costumes, set building and cleaning toilets. I also learned a lot about living 24/7 with those that I was working with which really helped me in my early touring days. It was a tremendous experience that I look back on with great affection. (Stafford)

Again from New York, Stephanie Weems, General Manager of the Magic Circle Opera, Shares her thoughts on her time in the mountains:

My life and theatrical experiences at Hunter Hills UT Summer Theater Program during the 1960s were pivotal in the development of my career as an artist. . . . With stars in our eyes and stars in the skies, we sang our hearts into the vast expanse of Hunter Hills amphitheatre and dreamed of becoming professional performers. For many of us, our dreams came true and for all of us, we were part of a "magical" artistic community that taught us virtuosity, discipline and the ability to become unstoppable in all aspects of our lives.

From the long hours of rehearsal in the hot sun to the chill of the evening filled with mosquitoes and unexpected storms, we learned to transform our diverse talents and skills into a competent ensemble capable of creating a "real world" on stage. In every drama - onstage and off - we grew-up kicking and screaming, into stronger individuals. These cherished experiences became invaluable lessons that have assisted me throughout my life long professional career as a singer, actor and arts administrator. (Weems)

From Susan Kempainen, manager of video production studio of a major hospital, are these comments:

I'd say that one thing I honed at HH was (given my role as PR coordinator) my organizational skills and a realization of nothing ventured nothing gained. At 20, I was far too young to know what I was doing in the world of public

relations...creating brochures, calculating the number needed to print, talking with businesses to bring in 'restaurant runs', organizing squads of Munchkins to promote *The Wizard of Oz* on the streets of Gatlinburg, etc. Being short of theatrical talent, I came to know that I was talented in other ways that were just as useful to a theatrical company or any organization for that matter.(Kempainen)

And finally, a note from Dan Owenby, retired teacher, director, and actor who says:

I was such an innocent when I went to HH, but when I left after two summers I had such confidence and such a wealth of friends who loved theatre like I did. It was a paradise, a party, a place to become what you always wanted to be, a real actor. If I had the chance and the health to do it today, I'd look at my wife and say, "See ya, honey!"(Owenby)

As alumni from different summers of Hunter Hills Theatre and as theatre historians, working directors, and academics, we want to ensure that the very special story of Hunter Hills Theatre is preserved. The following is a version of the Hunter Hills Toast which was composed for the first Hunter Hills Theatre Reunion in 1986. This version is from the most recent reunion in 2006:

With the waters of the Smoky Mountains,
We toast the 50 years of Hunter Hills,
That magical mountain home that first brought us together
and brings us together now.
We toast its memory and our future.
We toast those who cannot be with us,
And those who have gone before us.(Lutz)

Jon Lutz ends his long poem about Hunter Hills with these lines:

“We spent our summers learning what makes a friend/We spent our summers not knowing how few here were to spend/We spent our summers like they’d never end/Like no one would ever have to count them/Like none of us would ever be/Just smoke on the mountain.”³

Notes

¹“And whatever else might be said of Hunter Hills, . . . *Agammenon* was a unique theatrical experience: brilliant acting, directing and the visual effects were so powerful they left the audience breathless for that theatre on that night.”(Lester).

² In June of 1969, six year old Dennis Lloyd Martin vanished in the wilderness area of Spence Field in the Smokies resulting in one of the largest man hunts in Appalachian history. According to papers at the time, it was as if the mountains had simply swallowed him. To date, no trace of him has ever been found. His disappearance has not been the only case; see *Unsolved Disappearances in the Great Smoky Mountains: True Mysteries of Persons who Vanished without a Trace and Other Disappearances* by Juanita Baldwin and Ester Grubbs, 1998.

³ A good source of information on the subject of the Hunter Hills Theatre is the Master of Arts thesis of Mr. Gary Buttrey, *A History of Hunter Hills Theatre 1956 - 1977*, March 1978, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

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