Guide to

MS 39

Phoenix Little Theatre Records, 1922-1994

Bulk Dates 1955-1993

Accession Numbers 1988.20, 1988.75, 1995.12, 1999.74, 1999.75

27 linear feet, 6 inches

Prepared by Lisa Jaarsma June 1999

Donations by Audrey Katsensmith and Mark Kellenberger, Director Phoenix Little Theatre, 1988, 1995, and 1996.

Citation: Phoenix Little Theatre, 1922-1994, MS 39, Library and Archives, Central Arizona Division, Arizona Historical Society.

Library and Archives Arizona Historical Society Central Arizona Division

HISTORICAL NOTE

The Phoenix Little Theatre's roots lie in a thespian group known as the Phoenix Players. In the early 1920s they put on many performances wherever they could find a decent stage or front yard. In 1924, Maie Bartlett Heard, wife of Dwight Heard, the owner of the Arizona Republic, offered an old stable located on the A.C. Heard property at 100 East McDowell. The "Old Coach House", served as home to the Phoenix Little Theatre until 1951 even though the facility was closed down several times by the fire inspector. A Board of Directors was named for the 1924-25 season and Articles of Incorporation were drawn up during the 1928-1929 season. Phoenix Little Theatre at the time had a membership of 424 with 100 active participants. The theatre produced six to eight productions a year and offered theatrical classes for children and adults alike. Programs were printed for each production eventually, and new seats and a heating system were installed in 1938. Heading into the 1940s, the PLT was beginning to make plans to build a new facility.

However, World War II deeply affected the theatre. Plans to build were put on hold as fundraising for such a project did not seem appropriate during war time. A November issue of the Arizona Republic reported, "Because first things must come first, the Little Theatre will have no major productions, at least not early in the season." A shortage of male actors limited the number of productions and encouraged PLT to search for plays with all-female casts. Clare Booth Luce's play *The Women* included 35 female cast members and was staged in Phoenix in 1944. Reading and discussion groups sustained the theatre and allowed it to continue operations during the war making it the longest continuously run theatre in Arizona and one of the oldest in the United States. The arrival of Luke Air Force base in the Valley in 1941 breathed new life into the theatre as new performers and audiences became available. PLT even took productions on the road to Tucson and Yuma to entertain the troops. In Phoenix, people in uniform were given free tickets and preferential seating for performances.

By the end of the war, the Old Coach House had been condemned once again and the decision was made to proceed with the postponed fund raising efforts. The Civic Center complex, funded by bond sales, opened in April 1951 and included a brand new home for the PLT. The new facility boasted 394 padded seats and air conditioning. Several other new opportunities arose for the theatre in the 1950s. The First Nighters Organization began during the 1956-57 season. Its purpose was "to promote enthusiasm for the glamour and glitter of the opening nights of PLT productions." These women also served coffee and sandwiches to cast and crew during rehearsal, poured coffee during intermission, and assisted in typing, mailing and telephone chores of the PLT. By 1959-60, the Phoenix Little Theatre had 1400 subscriptions and was producing eight plays a vear.

Dr. Alfred Knight's dream of a festival in the Valley to honor the works of William Shakespeare was finally realized in 1957 with the first of six annual Shakespeare Festivals hosted by the PLT. The last festival was held in 1962. Three plays were produced for each festival by different theatre organizations in Arizona. In 1964, the last year of the festival, the plays were performed by a Shakespeare company from England. This event was cohosted with Tucson's Shakespeare on the Desert.

During the 1960s, a professional acting troupe, the Arizona Repertory Theatre was formed. Sensing that theatre on a bigger scale was feasible in the Valley, PLT and ART joined forces along with the Phoenix Children's Theater to form the Phoenix Theatre Center. A bond was passed and an addition was built on the existing PLT facility to accommodate the growing need for stage space. Unfortunately, scheduling conflicts, a lack of leadership, and disagreement in the combined board of directors created an irreconcilable split in the Center. The union dissolved and PLT was left with the majority of the center's significant debt.

The PLT, determined to get out of the red, almost exclusively scheduled revenue building comedies for a number of years. This, combined with a rapid succession of managers damaged the theatre's reputation and took years to rebuild. One positive development during this time was the opening of Theatre One. This stage allowed for less known plays and playwrights to be performed to appreciative audiences.

The late 1970s saw an influx in revenue thanks to funding from CETA (Comprehensive Educational Training Act.) This new funding allowed the staff to expand into a workable sized staff until the funding was abruptly cut back and the staff was forced back down to pre-funding size. Rocky times for the theatre followed as five managers turned over in nine years. This lack of stability did little to increase the confidence level or attendance at the struggling theatre. Finally the theatre found direction in the 1980s under the leadership of Tom Oldendick. A successful season formula that opened with a popular musical (usually one by Rogers and Hammerstein) followed by a combination of comedies and one or two dramas started at the beginning of the decade and continued through Oldendick's tenure. The Sound of Music, starring local television personality, Mary Jo West, experienced tremendous success and was extended and had to be moved to a new venue to accommodate ticket requests. A few other big shows helped PLT rise from the brink of bankruptcy. Staff and budget increases allowed Phoenix Theatre grow again and it finally found itself solvent and hopeful.

The Cookie Company, a children's theatre troupe, began in 1981 and still is in existence today. The Phoenix Little Theatre (named "little" to connote community involvement) changed its name to Phoenix Theatre during the early 1990s and continues to serve the community with the best in old and new entertainment. In 1997 the theatre celebrated 75 years since it first pulled the curtain. Although many professional troupes have formed over the past years, PLT has continued to provide a stepping stone for many talented professional actors such as Nick Nolte and Steve Allen.

SERIES DESCRIPTION and SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTES

The Phoenix Little Theatre Records are arranged in 11 series:

Series 1. Administrative, 1947-1993, 12 inches, 32 folders.

This series consists of paper work and office files of the Phoenix Little Theatre. It includes Board of Directors' minutes and financial reports. It also houses information about the Shakespeare Festival of 1959 and the 65th Anniversary celebration of 1985. This series concludes with information about PLT's First Nighters.

Series 2. Programs, 1930-1993, 4 feet, 7 inches, 90 folders.

This series consists of play bills and programs for PLT productions and those of other companies. While a few programs have survived from the 1930s and 1940s, a larger number remain from the 1950s and 1960s. This collection contains an almost complete run of programs from the 1980s and early 1990s.

Series 3. Press Clippings, 1898-1994, 1 foot, 6 inches, 47 folders.

This series consists of press clippings about the Phoenix Little Theatre, its productions, and its sub groups such as the Cookie Company and First Nighters. A second part of the series contains press clippings about other troupes, theatres and productions across the valley. Folders are arranged chronologically but articles within the folders are not.

Series 4. Promotional Materials, 1955-1993, 10 inches, 37 folders.

This series consists of press releases, flyers, and mailings sent out by the Phoenix Little Theatre. Try-out bulletins, production advertisements, and notices announcing changes in the season schedule make up the bulk of this series. The files are arranged chronologically and include PLT materials as well as the Cookie Company and other Arizona troupes.

Series 5. Production Notes, 1976-1989, 8 inches, 14 folders.

This series consists of material directly related to the running of PLT productions. It includes cast lists, schedules, correspondence, original artwork and copy for promotional materials, as well as director's comments. This series is arranged chronologically by season. The run of this series is short, but many productions during those years are covered.

Series 6. Books, 1891-1988, 6 feet, 9 inches, 100 books.

This series is made up of playbooks and reference books related to Phoenix Little Theatre. Many of the books are from the early years of the Theatre, but every decade of the theatre is covered in one way or another. The books are arranged in bibliographic order either by author or title when no author is available.

Series 7. Scrapbooks, 1922-1994, 6 feet, 6 inches.

This series consists of scrapbooks created by the Phoenix Little Theatre. These scrapbooks cover the Shakespeare Festival, and tell the history of many productions of the Theatre over the years through programs, press clippings, and photographs. The books include materials from the Cookie Company as well as the PLT.

Series 8. Photographs, 1922-1994, 3 feet, 9 inches, 108 folders.

This series consists of photographs from the Phoenix Little Theatre. Most of the series is made up of still shots of productions but there are a few candid shots and portraits. Many of the photographs were taken by Bob Davy and Gene Botsford and were used for promotional material and programs. An attempt has been made to present the photographs chronologically at least by season, but that is not always the case. Due to several different accession numbers, some duplicate photographs exist in more than one place although an attempt has been made to note this in the image database.

Series 9. Negatives, 1922-1994, 5 inches, 35 folders.

This series of negatives often duplicates the photographs in the collection. However during the 1980s many of the productions are represented only by negatives and contact sheets of those negatives. Whenever possible, photographs have been matched to their corresponding negative.

Series 10. Slides, 1980s, 15 inches.

The slides in the Phoenix Little Theatre Records cover a wide variety of activities and productions even though the numbers are few. Many were not labeled and so references are unknown. Some slides were taken for historical resources and show old programs and reprints of old photographs.

Series 11. Media, dates unknown, 3 inches.

This series contains media sent out by PLT to radio stations and copies of media about PLT. Three reel to reel tapes used for public service announcements, a cassette recording of excerpts of a play, and a beta tape recording television reviews and bloopers make up this series.

PROVENANCE

These records were accumulated by the Phoenix Little Theatre. On March 2 and May 18, 1988, Audrey Katsensmith donated part of the Phoenix Little Theatre Records and on March 16 and September 14, 1985, and March 5, 1996, Mark Kellenbergber donated the other part of the Phoenix Little Theatre Records to the Arizona Historical Society, Central Arizona Division.

RESTRICTIONS

There are no restrictions on this collection except for a temporary restriction on Scrapbook 2 until conservation work is done.

LITERARY RIGHTS STATEMENT

Permission to publish material from the *Phoenix Little Theatre Records*, 1922-1994, must be obtained from the Library and Archives Department at the Central Arizona Division of the Arizona Historical Society.

NOTES TO RESEARCHERS

With the exception of the conservation work done to a moldy Scrapbook 2, very little was done to alter this collection. Scrapbooks remain intact including the last few which were never bound. The collection that arrived in no apparent order was arranged into the series listed below and filed together despite the collection having five different accession numbers. Basic conservation work such as staple and paper clip pulling was done but press clippings remain in newsprint form. A few pages of one of the scrapbooks were photocopied and placed in the book due to the high acidity of the paper they were glued onto. An attempt was made to put all series in chronological order at least by season. Due to the nature of contact sheets, in which negatives may be developed out of order or haphazardly on the sheet, descriptions from contact sheets run right to left and top to bottom.

CONTAINER LIST

Box · Folder

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1	:	2	Board Minutes,	1947-1958
1	:	3	Board Minutes,	1947-1958
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- Board Minutes, 1978-1979 : 5 1 Board Minutes, 1981-1982 : 6 Board Minutes, 1992-1993 1 : 7 Board of Director's Data, 1980
- 1 : 8 Financial Statements, 1982-1983
- : 9 1 Correspondence
- 2 : 10 Annual Report, 1984-1985
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- 2 : 12 House Manager Reports, 1988
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- 2 : 14 Shakespeare Festival, 1959
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- 2 : 19 Written History of Phoenix Little Theatre
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- 2 : 26 Arts Resource Guide, 1989/90, Peoria
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SERIES 9: NEGATIVES, 1922-1994

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SERIES 10: SLIDES

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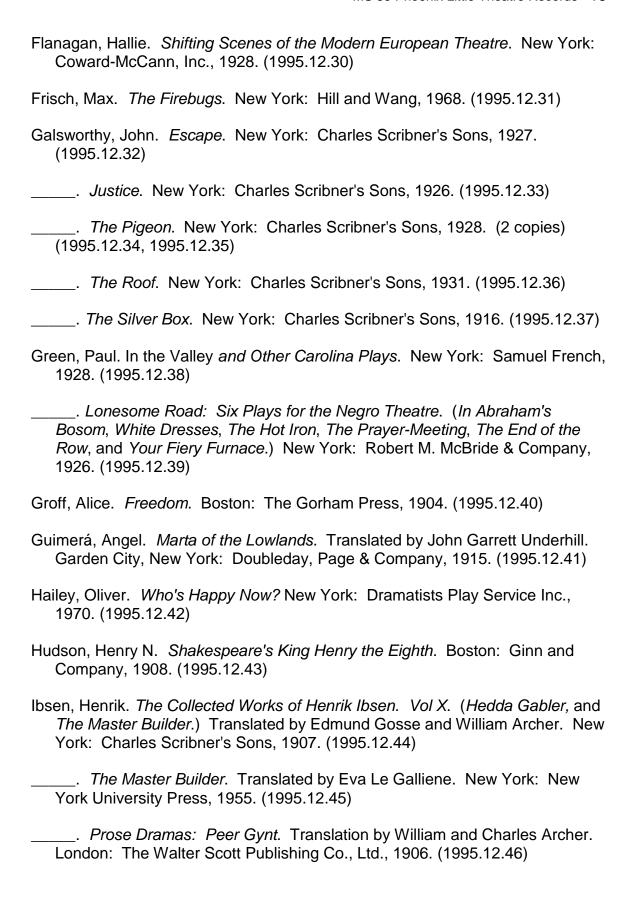
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