

# National AACTFest History

1957 - 2005

The Festival Commission of the  
American Association of Community Theatre  
(AACT)



## AACT/Fest History



AACT/Fest had its beginnings in 1957. At that time, the first World Festival of Amateur Theatre (Le Festival Mondiale du Théâtre Amateur) was held in the principality of Monaco under the high patronage of Their Serene Highnesses Prince Ranier and Princess Grace. The World Festival of Amateur Theatre was, and is, the official competition of the International Amateur Theatre Association (IATA). “Amateur” is used in this context of “to love”; thus, an amateur is one who does something for love and pleasure rather than for monetary remuneration. The typical American definition of amateur, implying a relative lack of skill, is not accepted by IATA. While IATA handles the international aspects, the festival itself is an almost entirely Monégasque production organized by the Studio de Monaco, home of the Cercle Artistique Monégasque d’Amateurs de Théâtre. Random theatres from the American scene took turns representing the U.S. at this quadrennial international event.

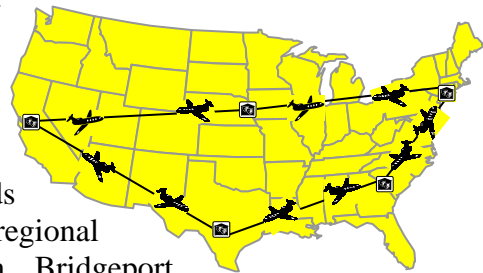
After eight years, the World Festival organization contacted the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA). Through the offices of Princess Grace, ANTA was asked to provide input as to what theatres from the U.S. should attend the World Festival. ANTA felt it would be more appropriate to pass the invitation on to the American Community Theatre Association (ACTA). ACTA was the community theatre division of the seven year old American Theatre Association (ATA) umbrella organization. (In 1965 ACTA consisted of approximately 12 to 14 community theatres and had a membership of 40 to 50) Howard Orms, the President of ACTA, contacted several theatres with no success. But no one wanted to refuse a princess! Finally, Art Cole of Midland (TX) Community Theatre agreed to take a production of Albee's *An American Dream* to the 1965 World Festival as the U.S. representative.

The happenings in Midland are almost a story unto itself. Art Cole made his proposal to a less than enthusiastic board of directors. At one point his plan was that he would do it on his own. At that point in time the Monaco festival would give free lodging to ten company members for three days and \$1,200.00 for travel expenses. So the plan was to find a one act play that could be cast with three or four people willing to pay their own way for a chance to perform at the Monte Carlo Opera House. The Midland Community Theatre Board of Directors eventually realized that this was “not the way that Midland or the United States should be represented” and pledged to support the entire project.

On the return flight from Monaco, while pondering the entire experience, Art came to a conclusion. “That’s a lousy way for the United States to be represented in a world event. There ought to be some sort of qualitative selection process to pick the theatre which will represent the US and then that theatre should not have to pay its way.” But what would that process be? A national festival? He states he knew nothing about how to run a festival but knew that something had to be done before 1969 and the next Monaco festival. For practice he began with a West Texas Festival in 1966 with theatres coming from five other cities to perform for one hour (ala Monaco). He followed that up in 1967 with a Texas festival using one of the first grants given by the Texas Arts Commission.

Art's next endeavor was not as successful as some of his prior ones. His plan was to establish a national festival that would take place in Washington DC at the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts. This venue would allow community theatres to showcase their talents for congressmen and other funding sources. He traveled to Washington to try to interest the State Department to sponsor the "international cultural exchange". His comments on the experience? "Came away with my head bloodied and bowed. I soon discovered that amateur (or community) theater was almost a dirty word when it came to raising money." A trip to New York to interest airlines in funding the project also came to naught.

By now it's 1968 and the proposal for one festival in Washington had been dropped. If the theatres couldn't come to a festival, they'd take the festival to the theatres. Jim Cavanaugh of the Omaha (NE) Playhouse agreed to chair the project. He contacted interested theatres and set up a loosely structured festival to be held in five regions. Some 49 theatres participated, performing plays by American playwrights, as a salute to our national cultural resources. Three judges, Art Cole (president of ACTA), Kay Fliehr of Minneapolis and Norman Nadel drama critic, Scripps-Howard, NY, traveled 11,000 miles in five week-ends viewing the entries. The five theatres hosting the regional festivals were: the Polka Dot Playhouse in Bridgeport, Connecticut; the Abbeville Little Theatre in South Carolina; the San Antonio Little Theatre in Texas; the Stockton Civic Theatre in California; and the Omaha Community Playhouse in Nebraska. They selected *Chamber Music* by Arthur Kopit, produced by Entr'actors of Worchester, MA to represent the U.S. in Monaco in 1969.



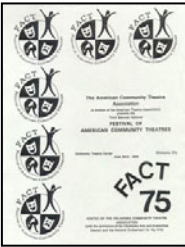
Relying upon assurances from the Executive Secretary of the American Theatre Association (the umbrella group for ACTA) ACTA had made assurances that they would pay most of the winner's Monaco expenses. However, after the winner had been selected, ATA informed ACTA that they "hadn't gotten around to raising any money". ATA's executive director advised Entr'actors to cancel the trip. Art Cole, having given his word that there would be money for the winner, took out a \$5,000.00 personal loan to fund *Chamber Music's* travel. Fortunately for Art a number of generous donations helped repay the loan

Following that, ACTA organized nine festival regions and set up operating rules, following the international regulation of 60 minute productions. It was decided to hold an official ACTA National Festival every two years, with participants moving from state to regional to national, and every four years to the international festival at Monaco. This system was inaugurated in 1971 based on the international sixty minute time limit.

The first National Festival of American Community Theatre (FACT) was held at the Theatre of Western Springs, IL. Top honors went to the Tulsa (OK) Little Theatre for its production of Holman's *The Baptizin'*. Judges were Henry Fonda; William Glover (New York drama critic), and Michael Langham (Artistic Director of the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, MN). Kay Fliehr was the festival chair.



In 1973, at the festival held at the Lincoln (NE) Community Playhouse, Theatre-in-the-Round Players of Minneapolis was selected to represent the U.S. in Monaco with its production of an original play *The Unknown Soldier* by Warren Frost. Judges were Barry Nelson (Los Angeles), Norman Nadel (Scripps Howard drama critic); and Richard Christensen (drama critic, Chicago, IL). John Wilson, the Lincoln Community Playhouse director was the festival chair.



Theatre Memphis' (TN) production of Bovasso's *Schubert's Last Serenade* received top honors at the 1975 FACT in Oklahoma City's Theatre Center. Judges were Jerome Lawrence (playwright), Edgar A. Wright (actor-director of Hollywood, CA), and Lloyd Richards (Hunter College, NY). The festival chair was Betty Wagner from Stillwater, OK. The Oklahoma festival was honored by the attendance of the members of the International Amateur Theatre Association's (IATA) Governing Council, which held its official meetings prior to the festival events. Immediately following FACT, the international visitors attended one of the first world amateur theatre festivals in the United States in Detroit, Michigan, where the International Theatre Olympiad was held. Theatre Memphis presented its festival production as one of the 30 theatre performances in eight different theatres, with nine international companies participating. Chair of the Olympiad '75 was Shirley Harbin, assisted by Chancey Miller, both AACT members.



The 1977 FACT at Spokane (WA) Civic Theatre received \$10,000 in funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The Footlighters of Cincinnati (OH) was named as the Monaco representative with its production of Hoffman and Gasman's *What's a Nice Country Like Us Doing in a State Like This?* Judges were Rosemary DeCamp (Hollywood), Ronald A. Willis (University of Kansas), and David Ball (Lawrence University, Appleton, WI). The festival chair was Betty Tomlinson of the Spokane Civic Theatre.



The 1979 FACT was held at Theatre Memphis (TN) co-chaired by Mickey Laukhuff and Bea Miller. This festival also the recipient of a \$10,000 dollar grant from the NEA, the last money received from the National Endowment as they had decided to fund only “professional” endeavors. First honors went to Topeka (KS) Civic Theatre's production of Neil Simon's *The Good Doctor*. Judges were Barbara Cason (Los Angeles), Theodore E. Kalem (Time Magazine, NY) and Craig Noel (Old Globe Theatre, San Diego; CA). With FACT '79 came a concerted effort to provide the "non-Monaco" year's winner an opportunity to participate in an international festival. Thus began FACT's increased involvement with festivals around the world. 1979's winner went to Dundalk, Ireland; a runner-up went to Villach, Austria.



In 1981, the festival host was Kalamazoo (MI) Civic Players with Jim Carver, Managing Director of the theatre chairing the event. Judges were Richard Hamburger (Julliard Center), Davey Marlin-Jones (film critic, Washington, DC) and Edwin Procnier (University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario). Their Monaco choice was Theatre Tulsa's (OK) production of an original script, *Stations*, by James Vance. The second place production of *Suicide in B-flat* by the Garrett Players (MA) represented the United States in Finland.



In 1983, the National FACT was held at the Chilkat Center for the Arts in Haines, Alaska, hosted by the Alaska State Community Theatre Association and chaired by Mimi Gregg of Haines. The decision to hold the festival in Alaska was somewhat controversial at the time due to the anticipated costs. However, the festival raised enough money to pay all the travel expenses for all the participating companies and a large portion of the expenses of the ACTA board of directors. Adjudicators were Ella Gerber (New York), John Going (Anchorage, Alaska) and Ronald T. O'Leary (University of Maryland). The winner was Omaha (NE) Center Stage's production of the Fats Waller musical celebration, *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Runner-up was Kalamazoo (MI) Civic Players' production of the Neil Simon comedy, *Fools*. Omaha became the United States representative at the international festival at Toyama, Japan, while Kalamazoo was invited to perform in Manchester, England. 1983 also saw the beginning of the Community Theatre Foundation. Owing to the extreme success of the festival's fund raising, the Haines festival produced a comfortable profit and issued a challenge grant to ACTA for \$3000 to create a separate entity which would raise, invest and distribute money to groups competing at the national festival.

In February of 1985 the Community Theatre Foundation was officially incorporated and the ACTA board members pledged enough to match the \$3000 Alaska challenge grant. A policy regarding distribution was also adopted – no principal would be spent and no interest would be spent until the foundation had at least \$30,000.



The 1985 National FACT was hosted by the Racine Theatre Guild in Racine Wisconsin. JoAnne Nissen chaired the festival with Art Cole (Director Emeritus of the Midland (TX) Community Theatre), N. Richard Nash (author of *The Rainmaker*), and Richard Coe (Critic Emeritus of the Washington Post) as adjudicators. The winner, which went on to Monaco, was the production of James McLure's *Lone Star* presented by the Mummers Theatre of Oklahoma City (OK). Also receiving international invitations were the second place production of *Bubbling Brown Sugar* by the Bonfils Theatre of Denver, Colorado and Topeka, Kansas' third place production of *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It On the Road*. At the festival, it was announced that the fledgling Community Theatre Foundation had already received over \$20,000.

In 1986, the American Theatre Association dissolved as an entity. Along with this dissolution went both ACTA and the FACT name. Rising from the ashes like the fiery phoenix however, was the American Association of Community Theatre (AACT). Taking up the torch where ACTA had left it, AACT continued the FACT tradition with AACT/Fest.



The first AACT/Fest was hosted in 1987 by the Oklahoma Community Theatre Association under the joint chair of Mary S. Patterson and Gregory Kunesh at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, OK. Judges were Suzanne Bennett (Literary manager of the Women's Project at the American Place Theatre, NY), Jim Carver (Managing Director of Kalamazoo Civic Players) and Jack Wright (Artistic Director of Theatre at the University of Kansas). Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek's *Quilters* presented by the Laguna Moulton Playhouse (Laguna Beach, CA) triumphed and represented the U.S. in Dundalk, Ireland. Second place went to Black Liberated Arts Center of Oklahoma City with their production of *Blood Knot* written by Athol Fugard. They represented the U.S. at Montreal's national Multicultural Festival.

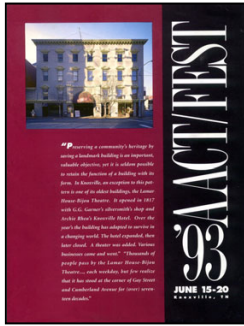


The second AACT/Fest was held in 1989 at the Omaha Community Playhouse, co-chaired by Jon Kerkhoff and Ginny Winsor. The judges in Omaha were Patton Campbell (Associate Professor, Columbia University), Martha Wadsworth Coigny (Director of the International Theatre Institute) and Edwin Procnier (Professor Emeritus, University of Western Ontario). First place at AACT/Fest '89 went to the Spokane Civic Theatre's production of *Getting Out*. This work by Marsha Norman was the 1989 United States performance at the World Festival of Amateur Theatre in Monaco. Toyama, Japan was the next stop for the second place production by the Encore Theatre Company from Washington, DC. They traveled with a production of *Home* by Samm-Art Williams.

In June of 1990, the Community Theatre Foundation reached its milestone of \$30,000 and announced that it would distribute \$3,000 at the next national festival.



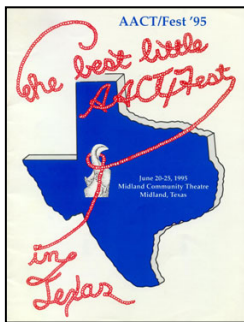
1991 saw AACT/Fest being held in Overland Park, Kansas at the Johnson County Community College. Festival chair Gerald Snider and his team brought in as adjudicators, Jerry L. Crawford (Professor of Theatre, University of Nevada - Las Vegas), Mona Synoground Poehling (Former Executive Director, Oklahoma Community Theatre Association) and Ron O'Leary (University of Maryland). The first place production was Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's *Into the Woods*, presented by the Footlite Musicals from Indianapolis, Indiana. Topeka Civic Theatre was the runner up with their production of *The Taffetas* by Rich Lewis. After AACT/Fest, *Into the Woods* was invited to Toyama, Japan and *The Taffetas* were invited to Aruba. The first funds were distributed from the Community Theatre Foundation, \$100 to each company participating at the national festival with an additional \$500 to the second and third place productions and an additional \$1000 to the first place company.



AACT/Fest traveled to Knoxville, Tennessee in 1993 to be hosted at the Bijou Theatre Center. Festival chair Stephen Krempasky was assisted by Mary Louise Smith with the Tennessee Theatre Association as a co-host. Adjudicators were Terrance McKerrs (freelance director), Malinda Pacha (scenic and costume designer with the University of Detroit, Mercy) and David Young (former producing director of ACTF at the Kennedy Center). The Vokes Players of Wayland, Massachusetts was awarded first place, with their presentation of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The Cheyenne (WY) Little Theatre production of *Terra Nova* by Ted

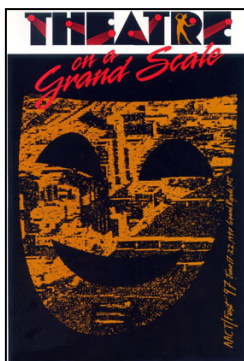
Tally received second place honors. The majority of the theatres were given the opportunity to represent the USA at an international festival. The Community Theatre Foundation distributed \$3000 using the same guidelines as it had at the 1991 festival.

In 1994, the trustees of the Community Theatre Foundation decided to dissolve as a separate legal entity and convert the foundation funds into a separate, legally protected endowment fund within the AACT structure



AACT/Fest 1995, “The Best Little AACT/Fest in Texas”, was hosted by Midland Community Theatre in Midland, Texas. The festival chair was Don Bachmann with Marilyn Allen as honorary chair. Adjudicators were Kent Brown (professor of drama at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville), Ron Cameron (academic coordinator for the music theatre department at Sheridan College in Oakville Ontario, Canada). David Young (former producing director of ACTF at the Kennedy Center) was a last minute substitution for Gresna Dody (alumni professor and former chair of

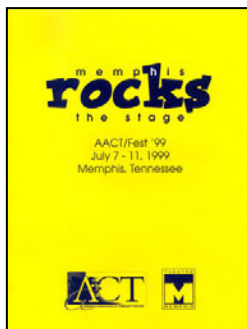
the Department of Theatre at Louisiana State University) who became ill before the first production. The Oak Ridge (TN) Community Playhouse took first place honors with William Finn and James Lapine’s *Falsettoland* and accepted a bid to a festival in Aruba. Out North from Anchorage (AK) took second place with *The Mommy Dance* by Jill Bess. The Kalamazoo (MI) Player’s production of Brian Friel’s *Dancing At Lughnasa* received third place accolades and represented the United States in Monaco. \$3000 was once again distributed from the AACT Endowment Fund to the participating national companies. The fund had now grown to \$70,000 with a goal of \$100,000. The policy was adopted to distribute not more than 60% of the accumulated interest, rolling over the other 40% to help build the corpus.



“Theatre on a Grand Scale”, AACT/Fest 1997 was co-chaired by Randy Hoekstra and Jill Patchin in Grand Rapids, Michigan at the Grand Rapids Civic Theatre. The adjudicators for the festival were Annette Procnier (director and designer from Ontario, Canada), Brid McBride (freelance journalist and art critic from Dundalk, Ireland) and Mortimer Clark (professor of theatre, Westchester Community College, New York). Their decision gave first place honors to *Smoke on the Mountain* produced by the Mobile (AL) Theatre Guild. Coming in second was the Spokane (WA) Civic Theatre’s production of *Mama Drama*. And traveling from

Wisconsin to capture third place was the La Crosse Community Theatre's production of *Cotton Patch Gospel*. Mobile received an invitation to Dundalk, Ireland and La Crosse received an invitation to Quebec, Canada. The Endowment Fund distributed \$100 to each participating company with an additional \$500 to the second and third place productions and an extra \$1,000 to the first place company.

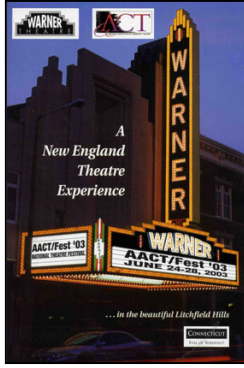
In June of 1998, the endowment fund trustees again examined how they would determine how much money they would distribute. It was decided to calculate the total amount to be distributed at any festival by adding together the endowment's Festival Support Fund value of the two previous fiscal years (audited); the money available would be an amount not to exceed 5% of the total of those two years. The awards would be determined at the winter board meeting preceding the Festival at which the awards would be given.



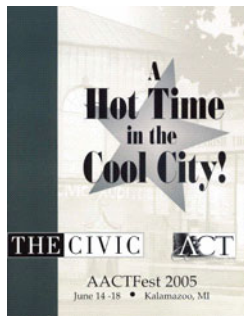
In 1999 AACT/Fest traveled back to Memphis, Tennessee after a twenty year hiatus. "memphis rocks", hosted by Theatre Memphis was co-chaired by Michael Fortner and Bea Miller. Adjudicating in the city that gave birth to the blues were Bennett Wood (actor, teacher, author – Memphis, TN), Jack Wright (Professor of Theatre and Film, University of Kansas) and Kent Brown (freelance director – Fairfield, CT). First place was awarded to Spokane (WA) Civic Theatre's production of Steven Dietz' *Lonely Planet*. Adam Long, Daniel Singer and Jess Winfield's *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* was the basis for Charleston (WV) Stage Company's second place production. The Chameleon Theatre Circle from Apple Valley, Minnesota garnered third place with *Assassins* by Stephen Sondheim and John Weidmen. Spokane Civic, feeling that international travel was beyond the resources of their group, asked not to be considered for any international festivals. Charleston Stage Company received invitations to both Ireland and Aruba. The Chameleon Theatre Circle accepted an invitation to travel to Nova Scotia, Canada. This festival saw a change in how the money from the AACT Endowment Fund was distributed. Equal amounts of \$750 were distributed to each production at the national festival.



AACT/Fest 2001 took place in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania co-hosted by the Whitaker Center and Theatre Harrisburg with Stephen Krempasky and Sam Kuba as co-chairs. Serving as adjudicators for "A Capital Affair" were James Carver (retired Managing Director, Kalamazoo (MI) Civic Theatre, Ted Strickland (Executive Producer, Theatre Memphis (TN) and John Viars (Executive Director, Des Moines (IA) Playhouse. *W;t* by Margaret Edson as performed by the Salina (KS) Community Theatre was selected as the first place production. Following in second were the Burlington County Footlighters from Cinnaminson, New Jersey with their production of Peter Parnell's *Scooter Thomas Makes It To The Top Of The World*. Traveling from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the Carpenter Square Theatre captured third place with Jo DiPietro's *Over the River and Through the Woods*. Ireland issued an invitation to their festival to the Salina Community Theatre, the Burlington County Footlighters received an invitation to Nova Scotia, Canada and Heidelberg, Germany was the destination for the Carpenter Square Theatre. At the 2001 festival, the AACT Endowment reached another milestone when it was able to present each national company with \$1,000.



2003 saw AACT/Fest return to the east coast at the restored Warner Theatre in Torrington, Connecticut with Barry Hughson as chair of “A New England Theatre Experience”. Adjudication duties were handled by Michael Fournier (past Managing Director of the West Virginia Public Theatre), Annette Procnier (director and designer from Ontario, Canada) and Chuck Sheffield (chair of the Theatre and Dance departments, Richland College, Dallas). The alternate adjudicator was Rod McCullough (Managing Director, The Fulton, Lancaster, PA). Top honors went to the Spokane (WA) Theatrical Group for their production of *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* by Celeste Raspanti. Following Spokane was a production of Jeffrey Hatcher’s *Three Viewings* as performed by the Bas Bleu Theatre Company from Fort Collins, Colorado. And bringing up a musical third was *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. This comedy, written by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelber, with music by Stephen Sondheim was produced by the Elkhart (IN) Civic Theatre. An unfortunate byproduct of the 2003 world political climate was the scarcity of international festivals. Because of this, no international invitations were made at the festival.



After almost a quarter century, the national festival returned to Kalamazoo, Michigan in 2005. Kalamazoo Civic hosted “A Hot Time in the Cool City” with Cathy Weir as the festival chair. First place was awarded to the Manatee Players/Riverfront Theatre from Bradenton, Florida for their performance of Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses* (based on David R Slavitt’s translation of The Metamorphoses of Ovid). Following *Metamorphoses* was *Nunsense A-men* by Dan Goggin as performed by the River City Family Theatre from Elkhart, Indiana. Tying for third place was *Suburb* by David Javerbaun and Bob Cohen from the Roadside Theater from Heidelberg, Germany and Accokeek, Maryland’s Hard Bargain Players with *xphiles unrequited* by bob bartlett. Serving as adjudicators were Alex Chrestopoulos (former Managing Artistic Director for the Rocky Mountain Repertory Theatre), Kevin Gardner (faculty member, St. Paul’s School) and Faye M Price (Co-Artistic Producing Director, Pilsbury House Theatre). John Viars (Executive Director, Des Moines Playhouse) served as the alternate adjudicator.