

Theater bears benefactor's name and design

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By Christopher Rawson, Post-Gazette Drama Critic

Byham, O'Reilly, Chosky, Rauh, Heymann -- which of these theatrical namesakes helped design the theater they funded, then knuckled down to do much of the practical work?

Henry Heymann is a theatrical philanthropist of a different stripe.

A few days before last week's opening of the new Pitt theater carrying his name, he was buzzing with last-minute theater construction, set completion, prop buying and a zillion details. Talking to Heymann, 65, you feel the whirlwind of grand and nitty-gritty that routinely fills the life of a theatrical set and costume designer.

"With a new theater, you never know what you'll run into," he said. The new lighting grid was 10 inches lower than designed, but there was also a shopping list -- dozens of clear white light bulbs for the "Ferris Wheel" set, safety pins, pasta, even trees. Supposedly retired since he left Pitt in 1993, Heymann was in his element.

He got the show-biz bug early. When he was a New Orleans teen-ager, his parents took him to New York every Christmas to see the original "Kiss Me, Kate," "South Pacific" and such. He designed his first set at age 16 and kept it up at Washington & Lee University in Virginia. He especially recalls a lavish "Much Ado About Nothing" where he did both sets and costumes, "cutting every costume myself and giving them to faculty wives to build."

One of his professors suggested he go to grad school in theater design at Yale, and he thought, "You mean I can do this for a living?" It didn't take long at Yale to realize this was what he wanted.

He came to Pitt because of director Leland Starnes, a year ahead of him at Yale School of Drama. F. Curtis Canfield, then Pitt's Mellon Professor of Drama, hired Starnes, and a year later Starnes invited Heymann to join him.

"You're kidding," was Heymann's response. "I'm not going to Pittsburgh." He laughs. "So he said, 'Just come for a year.' And I loved it -- the feel of the town, my students. So I stayed."

His first show at Pitt was "Marat/Sade" for Canfield in 1968, with Greg Lehane and Mary Robb Jackson in the cast. Starnes soon departed. "But I've loved the directors I've worked with -- Gil Elvgren, Steven Coleman, David Rinear, Dick Mennen, Kathy George. They're one of the great things about academic theater: bright people who are really dedicated."

As with any theater veteran, the war stories come easily. Heymann arrived just in time to help open Heinz Hall with designs for the ballet's "Romeo & Juliet" and the Symphony's "Aida." His memories are hair-curling: An expensive theater consultant came in and junked the theater's "wonderful old counterweight system" for an impractical electric one, "so another quarter-million had to be spent replacing that." Then the construction company that created Heinz Hall built an orchestra shell six feet too big for the available space. "Patsy Gianella and the other fabulous stagehands saved the opening of Heinz Hall."

The pace quickened with the arrival of the Three Rivers Shakespeare Festival (1980-95), for which Heymann normally designed two shows in addition to his load during the school year. Meanwhile, he designed for many other Pittsburgh theaters, including the ballet, opera, City Theatre, Public, Kuntu and Savoyards.

In the lobby of the new theater is a list of 141 shows, year by year, 1968-'94 -- and 2000 ("Ferris Wheel" and City's "Mystery of Irma Vep"). The names bring back a lot of memories. Heymann designed four or five shows most years, but he hit his peak with a remarkable 11 in both 1981 and 1983. The lobby also displays nine of his set designs.

In 1962, Heymann bought a vacation farm in Bucks County, then, in the early '80s, a dilapidated house in Oakland, which he restored as beautifully as a set designer can. He vividly remembers the initial "empty house party" when 300 people showed up, "drawn from every theater and college group in Pittsburgh. The Savoyards were singing 'Hail Poetry' a cappella on the porch."

But gradually, he wore down. The chief reason he retired young, in 1993, he says, was the nonsupport of Wesley Posvar's administration. "Our budgets kept getting cut. In 1968, I had twice as many dollars to spend as at the end -- and they were 1968 dollars. Pack rat as I am, I kept using set pieces and props again and again and again. But it got very old."

The drama department was stretched thin. "We all had to wear lots of hats. I got tired. On top of everything else, we were teaching kids to build sets, supervising five to eight hours of crew every day -- 14-hour days were normal." Also, his father was sick. So he moved home to New Orleans.

Surprise, surprise -- theaters sought him out, and he's had a small career designing there. Recently, having asked himself "if I wanted to be a caretaker for the rest of my life," he sold the Bucks County farm and bought a house in nearby Doylestown, easily accessible to Washington, the Atlantic shore and Pittsburgh.

And why did he make his six-figure gift to fund the new theater?

"Timing." When theater chairman Buck Favorini approached him, he was "thinking of funding something, here or at Yale or Washington & Lee."

Heymann's heart was already in Stephen Foster. Now his name is there, as well.