

ROYAL POINCIANA PLAYHOUSE -- MERGED HISTORY RESEARCH by Tom Clarie

A Cultural Heritage Crisis Erupts

“Save the Royal Poinciana Playhouse”

By Hap Erstein (blog site). January 17, 2005

“One of the most important issues facing area theatergoers this year is what, if anything, can be done to save the Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

From the first time I stepped inside this gem of a theater in Palm Beach eleven years ago, soon after I arrived at the Palm Beach Post, two things were clear: A) it is a great place to see a show, in distinct contrast to the vast all-purpose performing arts centers built more to maximize ticket revenues than audience sight lines and proximity to the stage, and B) it will be hard for most touring shows to fit in this space or make enough money to justify the stop.

Still, over these years, I saw some terrific shows here, traditional plays like Master Class, Family Secrets and Proof, as well as wildly non-traditional performance pieces such as STOMP, Gumboots and Jonathan Larson's tick, tick. . . BOOM!, which the theatrically conservative Palm Beach crowd learned to embrace.

Nevertheless, the Royal Poinciana's usable life as a commercial road show venue has seemed terminal for a long time. Last year, Clear Channel Entertainment made the inevitable announcement that it would no longer renew its contract to book and manage the place. The building's owner has long had dollar signs in his eyes, envisioning

bulldozing the theater and developing the prime waterfront land into condos. Now there's a novel idea.

But he is currently prevented from doing so by an agreement with the town of Palm Beach that the building and its land will continue as a performing arts venue, unless a zoning change is permitted. That sounds good, but the financially savvy town council will hardly hold him to that pact forever, particularly if the Playhouse remains vacant and gradually becomes a white elephant eyesore.

So what to do with the place? Fortunately, there is island resident Patrick Henry Flynn, a former theater critic and president of Mamalu Partners, which sounds like something Ricky Ricardo used to sing or perhaps the recording label in *Bye Bye Birdie*. Anyway, Flynn has dedicated himself to saving the Royal Poinciana Playhouse, to commissioning a study of its feasibility and exploring all possible arts uses for the space.

There is talk - or maybe it is just wishful thinking on Flynn's part - of the Palm Beach Opera, Ballet Florida or the Palm Beach Symphony making that 800-seat playhouse their joint home. That would be fine if it saves the building from being demolished, but I'm more interested in its being used for theater.

And while the Royal Poinciana is small compared to the Kravis Center, it is larger than any of the county's resident non-profit theaters. Those companies, and even some as far south as the Coconut Grove Playhouse, have long complained that what they need is a place to move a show that becomes an audience hit, so they can keep the show running without disrupting their planned and announced seasons.

The most recent example is Atlantis Playhouse's runaway hit, *The Life*, which opened in June for a four week run, and just closed after many extensions, in early

January. But artistic director Gary Waldman has said that the demand for tickets continued and he could have run the show much longer if he had somewhere to move it.

I suspect the same was true for Palm Beach Dramaworks' Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris, which became a Carbonell Award winner and gained that theater scores of new fans. And certainly it is true for many of Florida Stage's summer musicals. If not a direct transfer, the Manalapan theater could certainly benefit by having a place to remount a summer show in the winter season when their snowbird subscribers return to the area.

Much would have to be worked out to have Flynn's dream become a reality. And - here's a surprise - most of it is dependent on money. He has orchestrated a public forum on the matter, to draw out all possible scenarios for the future use of the theater, on Thursday, January 27, at 2:30 p.m., at the Flagler Museum at One Whitehall Way, just off Coconut Row. I worry that it will be as chaotic and unproductive as my homeowners' association annual meetings, but it is a necessary step towards moving ahead with plans to save the Playhouse.

So I intend to be there and I urge everyone who cares about theater in Palm Beach County to do the same.

“Saving the Royal Poinciana”

By Hap Erstein (blog site). February 18, 2005.

As the New York Yankees’ Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra was said to have said, “It’s déjà vu all over again.” The very real possibility of our losing the Royal Poinciana Playhouse forever feels like a replay of the dilemma that the Jupiter Theatre was in just a few years ago. In the case of the Jupiter, the former Burt Reynolds Theatre, condo developers and a drug store chain were seriously eyeing the prime property at Indiantown Road and A1A, ready to plow under a highly serviceable performance space and a definite piece of Palm Beach County’s cultural history. But thanks to the tireless efforts of producer Todd Alan Price, philanthropist-communications executive Milton Maltz and the taxpayers of the county who voted to spend \$2 million of a \$50 million cultural and recreation bond issue on the Jupiter playhouse, it was renovated into a viable, legitimate theater from a vacant and deteriorating dinner theater.

Out of a crisis situation, the arts in northern Palm Beach County scored a victory. Now the question is can a similar community effort save the endangered Royal Poinciana? Primarily a booking house for touring shows in recent years, with its main tenant being Clear Channel Entertainment, the folks that run the Broadway Series in South Florida, the playhouse has been dark since April 2004. This is largely because Clear Channel has gotten out of the business of mounting non-musicals, which fit the playhouse far better than the much larger Kravis Center. Still, other producers have tried to contact the theater’s current owner and landlord, Sidney Spiegel, about renting it, but have gotten nowhere with him.

The guessing is that Spiegel would rather see the Royal Poinciana be vacant, which would help show that the property is now a financial hardship to him. Thus, the argument goes, he deserves to be let out of a long-standing agreement with the Town of Palm Beach that the building always be used for the performing arts. A few weeks ago, a public forum was held at the Flagler Museum to discuss what concerned citizens could do to help save the Royal Poinciana. There was a mixture of outrage, enthusiasm and energy in the room, but none of it coalesced into a plan. The discussion was unfocused, perhaps in the way it has to be in the early stages of a grassroots groundswell, but frankly, it reminded me why I do not have the patience to attend my homeowners' association's general meetings. Still, even that spirited show of support had an effect, for a developer who was applying to have the playhouse and the adjacent plaza rezoned for, yes, more condos, backed off and withdrew his request, maybe just temporarily. This week, a smaller group of Palm Beachers intent of saving, protecting and reactivating the Royal Poinciana Playhouse met and began strategizing.

They are kicking around the name of Palm Beach Theater Guild for the non-profit company they hope to form and say they have a feasibility study that shows the playhouse is still viable. That could be a crucial point if the deed restriction for performing arts use is challenged in court. But a long-term solution to saving the Royal Poinciana Playhouse needs more than attendance at a few meetings. It needs another Price and another Maltz, someone to spearhead such an effort and someone - or many someones - to bankroll the restoration of the theater back to usable form and to underwrite whatever producing entity goes in there. Surely in a town like Palm Beach there must be people with the financial resources and the desire to have a functioning

theater in their backyard who could write such a check without it putting a dent in their bank accounts. If not, then maybe the playhouse deserves to be a part of history. Let's hope not.

If you have enthusiasm, energy, a pledge of money, ideas or just questions about how the Royal Poinciana Playhouse can be saved, you can call former theater writer Patrick Flynn (561-366-8980) or Brian Reeves (561-533-1033) to join the growing nucleus of concerned theater fans. It worked in Jupiter. It may be harder to achieve this time, but on those rare occasions when the community of Palm Beach agrees to come together and work towards a goal, it usually gets its way.

Past Efforts to Save Playhouse

Palm Beach Post reporter Tim O’Meilia reported in the March 21, 2002 issue, “The town’s landmarks board discarded its own expert’s recommendation to declare the Royal Poinciana Playhouse a historic landmark and might drop the proposal for the near future.

Both moves are part of a strategy by the landmarks preservation commission to prevent the demolition of the 44-year-old theater on the shores of the Lake Worth Lagoon and the construction of three-story luxury condominiums by the owner of the Royal Poinciana Plaza.

“The landmarks board did not accept historic consultant Jane Day’s 19-page report on the theater on the advice of Town Attorney John Randolph after town officials realized Day’s recent appointment to the John L. Volk Foundation might be a conflict of interest. Volk, who died in 1984, designed the playhouse and plaza.

“To avoid further problems, Day said, she resigned Monday from the foundation. She said she had attended only one meeting since she was appointed in December. Day has written scores of studies for the town on buildings being considered for landmark status.

Randolph said her Volk Foundation membership could be used in a legal attack if the town approved designating the theater a landmark based on her recommendation.

“Nevertheless, town officials and board members said they did not doubt Day’s integrity.

‘This was a fair report done in good faith, but it could be argued that she has a conflict,’ said Planning, Building and Zoning Director Bob Moore.

“Instead of seeking another consultant for another report, the commission will wait a month before deciding what to do. Several commissioners feared that the town council would not support a decision to make the theater a landmark because it's less than 50 years old and because owner Sidney Spiegel opposes it. Once the council rejects a landmark proposal, it becomes more difficult to defend in court a later attempt to designate something a landmark.

“Commissioners Sari Wilkey and Ann Vanneck suggested that the town not pursue the landmark designation now but rely on a 1979 agreement signed by the plaza's previous owners that requires a theater remain on the site unless the town changes the zoning on the retail center.”

The *Palm Beach Post's* O'Meilia continued reporting on the Poinciana in the paper's April 18, 2002 issue, stating, “Confident that a 23-year-old agreement protects the Royal Poinciana Playhouse from a bulldozer's blade, the town's landmarks board decided Wednesday not to try to declare it a landmark.

“‘It is one of Palm Beach's treasured jewels and I hope in the future we'll be able to landmark it,’ said Ann Vanneck, a landmarks preservation commission member. ‘But we're stepping ahead of ourselves with the town council not willing to landmark buildings less than 50 years old.’

“The council has refused to designate as landmarks newer buildings or those whose owners object. The exterior of landmark buildings cannot be altered without the landmarks board's approval.

“Sidney Spiegel, owner of the 12-acre Royal Poinciana Plaza, has proposed razing the theater, a vacant dining club building and the former Hibel Gallery building and erecting luxury three-story condominiums on the eastern shore of the Lake Worth Lagoon.

“Spiegel's plan aroused the passions of island residents for the 850-seat theater, some even suggesting that the town consider buying it. Architect John Volk designed the plaza in the Regency style, with the playhouse anchoring the western end. Since its opening in 1958, Helen Hayes, Christopher Plummer, Dame Judith Anderson and scores of other well-known actors have performed there.

“In February, the town's zoning commission refused to recommend a zoning change to allow the residential units. Town officials also uncovered a 1979 agreement between the former plaza owner and the town that guarantees a theater remains on the site unless the town later allowed more development.

“Landmarks commissioners fear the town council would reject the commission's recommendation to declare the theater a landmark. If that happened, later attempts to do so would be difficult to uphold legally, Town Attorney John Randolph has warned. ‘I don't want this in any way to reflect our feeling that this is not a worthy building,’ said Vice Chairwoman Elizabeth Dowdle. ‘This building, of all buildings, meets all four

criteria. It is incredibly important to the history of the town. It would be a shame to lose this building.”

Hallowed Ground – Playhouse on Site of

Historic Royal Poinciana Hotel Gardens

The Royal Poinciana Playhouse is most appropriately named, for it occupies part of the site of the Royal Poinciana Hotel built by Henry Flagler. It was part of his plan to extend Florida's East Coast Railroad to quiet Lake Worth, build the hotel on the lake's east shore, and develop a town that would later become West Palm Beach.

During 1893, Flagler sent his agents to vast acres of land on the island of Palm Beach. Some early colonists of the area became wealthy overnight, as Flagler's representatives had orders to purchase the land at any price. Ground was broken on the project May 1, 1893, and the Royal Poinciana opened its doors on February 11, 1894 to welcome seventeen guests. Construction costs had come in at over a million dollars. At that time, it was considered one of the largest wooden structures in the world. It became the world's largest hotel for some time, with 1,100 rooms accommodating at various times estimates of between 1,600 and 2,000 guests. Its dining room seated 1,600, and it had a very attractive "Grill Room." People came from all over the world to stay at this sprawling, Georgian-style, six-story yellow-and-white hotel surrounded by lavish gardens.

The Royal Poinciana Hotel occupied more than 1,800 feet along scenic Lake Worth. A summary published by The Breakers Hotel says that the Royal Poinciana's

hallways were so extensive at over three miles long “that bellhops delivered messages and packages from the front desk to guest rooms by bicycle.” Henry Flagler donated a building site on Whitehall Way and the Royal Poinciana Hotel was constructed in 1898, moving to its current location in 1973.

A month after the February 1894 opening, the first train pulled out of West Palm Beach’s Loftin Street Station on a bridge across Lake Worth newly built for the hotel. Some vacationers crossed the bridge in their own private railway cars. A second hotel, the Palm Beach Inn, was erected on the Royal Poinciana’s beachfront property. This new hotel burned to the ground in a 1903 fire.

As with much of Palm Beach, the Royal Poinciana was devastated by the September 16, 1928 hurricane. Of all Florida locations struck, Palm Beach had the worst damage. *The Bismarck Tribune* of October 13, 1928 reported, “For the first time in 30 years of colorful existence, the Royal Poinciana Hotel, exclusive pioneer hotel on the shores of Lake Worth here, will not open this season, because of hurricane damage.

“Water-soaked and damaged by the hurricane of Sept. 16, the huge structure, famous the country over as a vacationing place for exclusive society sets, is in such a condition that it would be impossible to repair for the coming season. H. E. Bemis, Hotel operator, said. Whether it will ever reopen, he added, is another matter and one which company officials have not considered.”

Also devastated by the hurricane was the former Oakley Theatre (now the Lake Worth Playhouse), then a movie palace and vaudeville house built for the then exorbitant price of \$150,000 and opened November 3, 1924. Originally built in the Mediterranean

Revival style, it had been later modified to Art Deco. Although the theater was virtually demolished, brothers Lucien and Clarence Oakley, who had come here in the early 1920s from Illinois on the wave of movie fever then sweeping the country, rebuilt it, only to lose it within months due to the Depression's fully hitting Florida.

As for the Poinciana, the *Key West Citizen* of December 15, 1928, stated that even though "crippled and almost blown away by the hurricane," the Royal Poinciana Hotel would reopen January 12, 1929. However, this would be in a very limited way, with only 600 of the 1,600 rooms prepared for guests, "many of whom have spent their winters under its vast roof for two decades. Coconut Grove, the palm-roofed outdoor tea garden, again will offer its charm."

Also, the *Charleston Daily Mail* of West Virginia in its January 2, 1933 issue reported that President Hoover went to the Royal Poinciana Chapel for services on New Year's Day and spent the evening aboard the yacht Sequoia before returning to Washington, D. C. by special train.

A Theater for the 1930s -- Palm Beach Playhouse

Charles Ventura, writing in California's *Oakland Tribune* in March 2, 1958, referred to late millionaire Joseph Ryder, who "startled even his rich neighbors 40 years ago when he built a theater on his estate and sent his private railroad car north once a month to bring down stars of the legitimate theater, the opera and ballet to entertain his guests." This was a precursor to the Palm Beach Playhouse of the early 1930s.

The opening play for the playhouse was announced in the January 14, 1931 *New York Times* with the article, "Palm Beach Group Gives First Play; Capacity Audience Witnesses Milne Drama at Miss Muriel McCormick's Theatre." The play *Mr. Pim Passes By* was presented at the theater on Royal Palm Beach Way to a capacity audience and was considered "one of the gala occasions of the early season. Many later attended the after-theatre supper dance at the Everglades Club."

The *Syracuse Herald* of February 15, 1931 stated, "The play at the Palm Beach Playhouse this week was 'Hay Fever.'" The opening night saw a capacity house." Following the play, most went to the Everglades for a supper dance. "Numerous dinner parties were given prior to the time that the blue velvet curtains parted for the first act of Noel Coward's comedy." At one party in the Everglades Club, with a miniature sunken garden decorating the dinner table, guests included members of the acting company of the Palm Beach Playhouse. The Herald attempted to convey the excitement of that era:

“Palm Beach seems an island of rare delights these bright February days. Ennui has no place under the swaying palm trees or beneath the bright hued beach umbrellas, there is a type of amusement for every taste, and often sophistication and naiveté walk hand in hand.” Palm Beach around Valentine’s Day 1931 was also anticipating the opening of the Flower Show in a few days. It was to feature an exhibit of fruits and vegetables from the Florida Everglades, displayed in an area portrayed as a reproduction of a Spanish market street scene complete with picturesque market carts.

The March 20, 1931 *New York Times* announced that Muriel McCormick would play the role of Mona Lisa in *The Face* at the Palm Beach Playhouse. It was a drama in blank verse about the life of artist Leonardo Da Vinci.

The September 10, 1931 *New York Times* dated out of Bar Harbor, Maine, announced, “Muriel M’Cormick to Be Bride Today; The Granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller Sr. Will Be Wed to Elisa D. Hubbard.” The news came as a surprise to the McCormick family. Her mother said she had not expected the announcement of the engagement, which came to her by mail from Bar Harbor. Muriel’s brother, Fowler, said, “I never heard of Hubbard.” McCormick at that time was a woman in her early thirties. Hubbard, from Middletown, Connecticut, was about 53 years of age at the time and resided on his estate, Lone Tree Farm, just outside of Middletown. He served on the staff of former Connecticut governor John H. Trumbull, which is how he received his title. Hubbard and Muriel McCormick had been prominent in the summer colony at Bar Harbor for some years. In 1922, she had been in a few plays under the name Nawanna Micor. She studied music at Rochester, New York’s Eastman School.

A Wisconsin newspaper published on September 10, 1931 its article on the engagement with a much more dramatic title: “Granddaughter of Rockefeller in News Again; Muriel McCormick Leaves ‘Spiritualistic Bridegroom,’ Whom She ‘Met’ at Séance, to Web Bachelor, 52.” Apparently, she once claimed she had met George McKinlock, Jr., the dead son of Mrs. George A. McKinlock, her chaperone, at a spiritualistic séance, and had proclaimed him as her “spiritualistic bridegroom.” She had never met George Jr., who was killed in World War I, but after the announcement, she wore a wedding ring. She spent years in the company of Mr. and Mrs. McKinlock in Chicago, Palm Beach, and Bar Harbor. In fact, the announcement of her engagement and wedding to Hubbard was made at Deep Cove, the Bar Harbor summer home of the McKinlocks.

The *New York Times* of January 13, 1932 reported, “Attended by a brilliant company, the Palm Beach Playhouse, Inc., initiated its second twelve weeks’ season tonight [January 12th] with Rachel Crothers’s *Let Us Be Gay* at the theatre on Royal Palm Way. Emil Ross and Howard Bailey played leading roles, and every member of the repertory company, the majority of whom are new this year, was included in the cast. Daniel Reed is director with Mrs. Reed in charge of costumes.” Several subscribers gave dinners preceding that performance, including playhouse president and founder Mrs. Elisha Dyer Hubbard and her husband Major Hubbard, who entertained six guests at their villa.

The February 3, 1932 *New York Times* announced the opening of *June Moon* at the Palm Beach Playhouse the previous evening before “a large audience of subscribers.” One of them, Mrs. James H. Kennedy, gave a large dinner at her home and then took her

guests to the play. She then gave them a luncheon the next day at the Bath and Tennis Club.

The *Syracuse Herald* of February 17, 1932, announced that “Palm Beach society last night acclaimed Mrs. Elisha Dyer Hubbard as an actress in her appearance in the title role of *St. Joan*, the historical satire by George Bernard Shaw, which opened at the Palm Beach Playhouse. The most brilliant audience of the season joined in the applause that greeted Mrs. Hubbard, the former Muriel McCormick, a granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. She received baskets and sheaves of flowers and was forced to respond to several curtain calls.”

Palm Beach Playhouse Resurrected in 1950

A *Palm Beach Post* article of May 4, 2000 written by Ron Hayes discussed longtime Palm Beach Playhouse leader Mary Howes: “When she came here in 1949, Mary Stuart Howes looked for live theater, and couldn't find any. Two years later, she had helped establish the Palm Beach Playhouse, which brought professional theater to the area for six winter seasons and paved the way for today's Royal Poinciana Playhouse. Ms. Howe, who died Monday at 92, was perfect for the part.

“‘She had worked in summer stock, so she knew a lot of people,’ recalled Barbara Gault, a longtime friend who attended those early productions. She'd say, ‘Let's take the show we did last July to Palm Beach,’ and they had a resident director and designer, all Actors Equity.

“Born in Boston on July 5, 1907, Ms. Howes was the daughter of Ernest G. Howes, a leather merchant who wintered in Palm Beach. She studied at the Boston Repertory Theater and began performing in summer stock on Cape Cod. She also appeared on Broadway with Tallulah Bankhead and Miriam Hopkins. The Palm Beach Playhouse, which was situated in a former greenhouse for the Royal Poinciana Hotel, featured stars such as Helen Hayes, Eva Le Gallienne and John Barrymore Jr. Later, Ms. Howes sponsored a series of Sunday evening lectures at The Society of the Four Arts featuring Bette Davis, Hal Holbrook, Marcel Marceau and Sir John Gielgud.”

In 1951, Paul added a winter season in Palm Beach, Florida. They now had to change school to do three months in Florida, but that didn't faze them at all. In Florida they began work at the Palm Beach Playhouse, which Mary Crabtree called "a charming theater." At this time, Paul Crabtree and Frank Hale were working together to produce shows at the Palm Beach Playhouse, located in a renovated greenhouse of the old Royal Poinciana Hotel. and later at "the magnificent Royal Poinciana." [photo: interior of Palm Beach Playhouse]. Jim appeared in two plays, in *Life With Mother* with Billy Burke and in *Mrs. McThing* with Helen Hayes. Amanda played small roles in *Annie Get Your Gun* and in *Front Page* with Pat O'Brian.

When their son, Jim Crabtree, appeared with Billy Burke at the Palm Beach Playhouse, he was only eight, and it was therefore a giant role for him. Mary went to a rehearsal one day and saw Billy Burke arrive looking feeble and elderly. She held her coat around her as if freezing. Jim Bob read it well for his mother but she noticed he had "no energy." Palm Beach was really looking forward to the Billy Burke performance because, back when Flo Ziegfeld was alive, they spent lots of time in Palm Beach.

On dress rehearsal night, Mary Crabtree drove Jim to the theater. Both were very quiet. At one point, he said, "I think I'll surprise them tonight." Mary quietly replied, "I certainly hope so." She was still obviously very worried about the performance of both her son and Burke. On opening night, Billy Burke went into her dressing room early. She came out "looking dynamite—just marvelous. And Jim Bob stole the show. The audience went crazy, and Billy Burke adored him."

A December 2, 1956 *New York Times* article by Ward Allan Howe announced the opening later that month of Palm Beach Towers, then a \$3,500,000 apartment building

fronting on Lake Worth with 1,449 rooms divided into 273 apartments ranging from one-room studios to five-bedroom penthouses. It was situated next door to the Palm Beach Playhouse between the Palm Beach Biltmore Hotel on the north and the Whitehall on the south, on the site of the former Royal Poinciana Hotel. That article also mentioned that associated with the Norton Gallery and School of Art was the Norton Gallery Players, Inc., which produced played “at moderate prices” during the winter season.

Paul Crabtree managed the Palm Beach Playhouse for three winter seasons and skipped the fourth season to write a film script for Universal Pictures. His plan was to return to Palm Beach the following season when the brand new Royal Poinciana Playhouse was ready.

To convey a flavor of those exciting times, we quote an article titled “Wish You Were Here” that appeared in *The Post-Standard* of Syracuse on March 11, 1956:

Thursday night we had dinner in what turned out to be one of the best restaurants I've ever been in, and it was almost an accident that we found it. I read in the Palm Beach paper that a formal dinner dance was to be given for the Duke and Duchess of Windsor in Nino's Continental Restaurant that evening, and since we had tickets to see Helen Hayes in "The Circle" at the Palm Beach Playhouse, we determined to have dinner there, and possibly have a glimpse of "the woman I love" and the ex-king of England. The whole restaurant is done in maroon and white with thick maroon carpets on the floor, and reproductions of famous Toulouse Lautrec paintings in white frames on the walls. A small string orchestra was playing French music behind the palms, and there was a general air of continental elegance which was delightful. After ordering dinner, Helen and I went up to the second floor, where was located the Moulin Rouge

room, in which the party was to take place. It was much too early for the guests to arrive, but we asked permission to view the paintings, and were allowed inside. Covers were laid for about 40 guests at small tables of four and six. Each table was centered with a low arrangement of vari-colored gladioli. A champagne glass and two other wine glasses were at each place. At one end of the rather small room was space for a small orchestra, at the other a bar. In the center was a dance floor about as big as a postage stamp. In one corner of the room the head waiter was in a huddle with his staff, instructing them as to the service in a rather tense tone. We heard him say “Her Grace must be always served first.” On a table near the door were envelopes with place cards, each carefully numbered. Also neatly typed was the master list of guests and seating chart. Since no one was there to interfere we took a good look. It was filled with the names of the “international set”—Woolworth Donohue, the Kinston Guests, Lord and Lady Dudley, Princess Djordjadze (formerly Sylvia Ashley, widow of Douglas Fairbanks Sr.), the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, and many others almost as famous. Reluctantly we descended to our table, ate our delicious dinner, and realized that unless we wanted to miss the first act, we would have to miss the Duchess. We flipped a coin and Helen Hayes won out. And she was matchless as Lady Kitty in Somerset Maugham’s “Circle,” supported by Arthur Treacher, whom all movie goers know as “Jeeves.” Her portrayal of the aging beauty in outrageous getups and a brilliantly burnished red wig was done to perfection, as always with every part she plays. You will remember I know, the name of Paul Crabtree, a graduate of Sawyer Falk’s drama department at Syracuse University, and more lately the producing director of the Fayetteville [N.Y.] Summer Theater. He holds a similar post at the Palm Beach Playhouse for the fifth season, and is

considered the greatest single factor in making this theater one of the outstanding of its kind in the country. Mr. Falk and Syracuse may well be proud of Paul Crabtree, whom I had the pleasure of meeting several years ago at the home of his great friends, Dr. and Mrs. William T. Melchior. Mr. Crabtree is married to lovely Mary Evelyn Ducey, who played the ingénue role in "The Circle." The Crabtrees with their four children have a lovely house in Palm Beach, where they enjoy a prominent place in the professional and social life."

The Royal Poinciana Playhouse is Built

The *New York Times* of January 12, 1958 announced in an article written by Wilbert Evans:

“The newest and one of the most elaborate theaters in the United States, the Royal Poinciana Playhouse, will open here on the shore of Lake Worth on Feb. 3, while in West Palm Beach, the Palm Beach Musicarnival will start a twelve-week season of tent shows on Jan. 24. Together they will offer winter visitors a few months of professional theatrical entertainment not to be seen elsewhere this side of Broadway.

“The Royal Poinciana Playhouse adjoins the Royal Poinciana Plaza, the new Palm Beach fashionable shopping center. The theatre is a separate building of classic Regency style decorated in white, gold and red. Its 707-seat air-conditioned interior includes such modern appurtenances as three sliding stages, a new-type electronic lighting system, automatic contour curtains and mechanical counterweight flying apparatus. One of the features of the theatre is the "Celebrity Room," just off the loggia, which has a circular refreshment bar, lounge banquettes and tables, with large windows offering a panoramic view of Lake Worth.

A full dome ceiling mural, done by Robert Bushnell and portraits of a hundred of the greatest stars of the entertainment world add to the decor of the room, which has a Venetian motif. Use of this room between acts or for cocktails

and dinner before the show will be limited to subscribers for season tickets; ticket holders for single performances will be served in the loggia. Ten plays and musicals, each for a week stand, will be presented during the season.

The owner of the \$1,500,000 theatre structure is Bessemer Properties, Inc., which has also built the Royal Poinciana Plaza shopping center. Frank J. Hale, who has been a backer of Broadway productions, is president of the new theatre project. All seats for the series of Monday opening nights are \$56.50. For other nights and Wednesday and Saturday matinees, the charges range from \$11.50 to \$56.50 for the series, but those in the lower brackets have been sold out. Tickets for individual performances may be obtained at the box office after Jan. 20.

As for the “Musicarnival,” this theater-in-the-round tent seating 1,300 would be established on a concrete base at the international polo field on South Military Trail. It was to be brought from Cleveland, where it had successful twenty-week summer seasons since it was started there in 1954. Producers Robert H. Bishop III and John L. Price Jr. planned to invest \$250,000 in the West Palm Beach venture. No one would be more than fourteen rows from the stage. Each production would run for two weeks nightly, Tuesday through Sunday. *Silk Stockings, Call Me Madam, The Pajama Game,* and *Annie Get Your Gun,* and other such hits of recent years were planned.

It was an exciting time for the area. Evans stated in his 1958 *New York Times* article, “Polo has caught on here since it was first introduced a couple of seasons ago. This year the Palm Beach International Polo Club is being managed by Porfirio Rubirosa

and Emilio Tagle, whose experience in this field of sport may assure a good polo season. Stock car racing has been revived here at the Fairgrounds Speedway.

The West Palm Beach City Commission is now considering a proposal from private promoters which, if accepted, would considerably improve this city both for residents and visitors. It would involve the construction of a \$5,000,000 project, a new civic center in the downtown area to include a 7,000-seat auditorium, a multi-level off-street parking facility for 700 cars, a bus terminal, a marina and a municipal office building.

West Palm Beach is enjoying a boom which is partly the result of the arrival in Palm Beach County of the \$50,000,000 Pratt & Whitney Aircraft's jet aircraft laboratory, situated some twenty miles northwest of the city. As of the end of the year, Pratt & Whitney had 900 employees and the schedule calls for 1,900 by next June, 2,500 by January 1959, and 3,500 by January, 1960.

Most of these employees are coming from out of the state, which has put a squeeze on rental housing, which many of them want until they can make a final determination as to just where they want to live permanently. The impact of a large industrial acquisition on communities that have catered predominantly to tourists has created some problems, chiefly in housing for people in the \$4,000 to \$7,000-a-year bracket.

Meanwhile, more and more accommodations for tourists are being provided. The latest addition to resort hotels is the Palm Beach Terrace, opening this month, and which is situated on the rapidly developing ocean strip to the south which is still Palm Beach

though it extends beyond Lake Worth. This new hotel is within a stone's throw of the Lake Worth municipal casino, which also is in Palm Beach.

The Palm Beach visitor notices, among other things, the growing number of eating places of all types including cafeterias and hamburger restaurants. One of Palm Beach's oldest restaurants has a sidewalk cafe. But even though there is more catering to the budget-minded, the air of elegance which has always distinguished this famous island is unmarred by rampant commercialism. The city managers intend to keep it that way. Zoning regulations are very strict and efforts to relax them have failed.”

The *New York Times* of February 15, 1958 continued the good news about the new playhouse and plaza: “A shopping center that is, in a refined way, perhaps the most luxurious in the country opened recently in Palm Beach to coincide with the height of that resort's season. It is called the Royal Poinciana Plaza and was built on the site of Henry Flagler's Royal Poinciana Hotel. The center thus has the advantage of the hotel's lush palm and orange tree landscaping, which was spared when that forty-two-year-old structure was razed in 1936.

The owner of the property is Bessemer Properties, Inc., a real estate investment affiliate of the Henry Phipps estate. Many members of the Phipps family spend their winters in Palm Beach. The buildings enclose a four-section, lawn-covered mall that has a French tea garden at its center. At the edge of Lake Worth a theatre has been built. It will specialize in pre-Broadway play openings and other theatrical events. Tenants at Royal Poinciana will emphasize luxury merchandise ranging from the creations of Hattie Carnegie to the fancy groceries of S. S. Pierce. Abercrombie & Fitch, the sporting goods concern, has taken space. The center is managed by Tankoos & Co. which is negotiating

with jewelry, leather goods, automobile and cosmetic retailers and other types of retail tenants.”

Three of Heaven's Stars Intersect at Poinciana—

Volk, Hale and Crabtree

John Volk

In a December 19, 1999 *Palm Beach Post* special section honoring “The Palm Beach Post 100” of the 20th century, Heather Graulich noted, “John L. Volk belonged to an exclusive club of early Palm Beach architects: Mizner. Fatio. Wyeth. Urban. The men whose vision of grand Mediterranean-style villas and lush tropical gardens became the trademark look for one of America's toniest towns. But Volk was one of the few who churned out designs well into his later years, more than 1,000 by his own estimate.

‘From the inlet, all the way down to the south end of the island, there's hardly a street in Palm Beach that doesn't have something that I've done,” he once remarked. “After all, you've got to have something to show for more than 50 years of work.’ That work includes some of the area's most notable landmarks: Good Samaritan Hospital, the Royal Poinciana Plaza and Playhouse, the 1944 redesigned Bath and Tennis Club and the Parker Playhouse in Fort Lauderdale.

He designed homes for the rich and famous—George Vanderbilt, Nicholas DuPont, Henry Ford II—as well as the not-so-rich. Over the years, his work encompassed Spanish, Italian, Classical, Oriental and British Colonial styles. He championed preservation, despised condominiums, and always looked back fondly on the splendor of the '20s. “Said Volk, ‘It was a happy era back then.’”

Frank J. Hale

Born March 26, 1899 the son of Irish immigrants, Hale danced on the sidewalks of San Francisco at age 9 to raise money for his family, later developing into a song-and-dance man in that city. He appeared with Dixieland Jazz Vaudeville on the Keith-Albee Circuit. Hale reminisced about his youth in an April 22, 1959 Wisconsin newspaper article that discussed Hale's "underwriting the talents of American boys and girls" through supporting young ballerinas: "I know about these kids...I was one of them, a long time ago. I fought my way up, the hard way, and now I'd like to give some of these other kids a hand."

Frank Hale had an exciting career in the 1920s as a justice agent trying to stop liquor bootleggers. A December 14, 1922 article in the *Newark Advocate* [Ohio] reported that Frank J. Hale and James R. Kerrigan, chief intelligence officers for the prohibition enforcement department, were investigating the dumping of part of a cargo of liquor into the ocean off Freeport, Long Island valued at \$1,700,000 at bootleg prices. The whiskey, brought in from the Bahamas, was thrown overboard when members of the rum runner's crew became upset at the failure of the cargo's owners in New York either to get water and food supplies to the ship or to unload the liquor.

A *New York Times* article of April 11, 1926 reported that federal agents and police of the Special Alcohol Squad led by Chief Inspector William J. Lahey and Inspector Frank J. Hale, seized at Woodside, L. I., the most liquor in the history of prohibition enforcement in that area. They seized seven stills together with alcohol and

equipment valued at more than \$400,000. The manufacturing plant they raided housed three stills of 5,000 gallons capacity each, two of 3,000 gallons capacity, and two others of 1,200 gallons capacity. The stills were still running full blast. Arrangements were begun for bringing the liquor to the Army Base in Brooklyn and for the destruction of the stills.

In the July 31, 1926, *Coshocton Tribune* of Ohio, it was reported, “The American and Canadian governments began an attack today against the Niagara border bootleg traffic with its toll of two score deaths from wood alcohol beverages in Buffalo, Toronto and other cities in the border region. Chief Frank J. Hale with a squad of federal agents working under direct orders from Washington raided a ‘wildcat brewery’ here [Buffalo] alleged to have boosted the alcoholic content of the beer by ‘needle treatment.’ The squad wrecked \$10,000 worth of machinery, and seized alcohol from a gun machine which propelled it into the beer vats. The seized alcohol was being tested today to see if it was part of the poisoned cargo responsible for the 44 deaths in western New York and Eventually, Hale’s career came under investigation when he and others began to politically attack President Hoover. The *Frederick Post* of June 14, 1928, reported that Assistant Attorney General Mabel Willebrandt had told senators about the personal finances of former prohibition agent Frank J. Hale, former prohibition agent. He was publisher of an anti-Hoover weekly in Washington at a loss of \$400 or more a week and wouldn't tell the committee the source of his funding. Willebrandt implied that Hale made his money as a prohibition agent and offered that men then associated with him had suddenly attained small fortunes. She claimed that she tried to have Hale fired, but that General Lincoln C. Andrews, then boss of prohibition enforcement, saved him. Many

felt that Willebrandt had clear hatred for Hale's boss and wanted to get something on him.

Hale also came under harsh attack in the late 1940s and early 1950s in famous columnist Westbrook Pegler's columns. One appearing in the *Middletown Times Herald* of New York dated January 31, 1947 and another appearing in the *Dixon Evening Telegraph* [Illinois] of September 18, 1950, questioned President Roosevelt's son Jimmy's connection with the National Grain Yeast Corporation of Belleville, N. J. and with its principal owner, Frank J. Hale. In 1935, Hale appointed 28-year-old Jim president of his corporation at a salary of \$500 a week, even though the young man had no experience. The job was announced on July 12, 1935 and Roosevelt resigned from the position on November 20th. Plans for a picnic at the Roosevelt Hyde Park, N.Y. estate to be attended by Hale and yeast company employees was quickly called off after an investigation by federal treasury agents.

Hale's firm was at the time fighting with another company over patent rights to a German process for yeast manufacture. Hale won the battle, Pegler claimed, largely because "the son of the president of the United States" had interceded with the German officials, claiming that Hale's company was being discriminated against by some Nazis who considered it a Jewish firm. Pegler added, "Considering Hale's record in the treasury files and senate hearings, what was Jimmy doing in such company at all?"

Also, a high Treasury official allegedly stated that Hale, during a golf game with his chief in the prohibition service, had promised to make him rich by investments. Pegler called Hale "an old-time Barbary Coast vaudeville hooper, private detective and prohibition agent. Testimony was given in the senate that Hale left the prohibition

service under a cloud and under pressure. He and certain associates showed evidence of wealth, although his salary was small, and he has since been successful in the yeast business.”

Hale’s National Yeast Corporation merged with Universal Foods Corporation in 1968. In the early 1960s, his homes were at 10 Gracie Square in New York City and also at 147 E. Main Street in Palm Beach, Florida.

Paul Crabtree

Paul Crabtree, a Virginia boy, went to Syracuse University on a scholarship and majored in drama under Sawyer Falk, playing in more than 40 productions before he graduated in 1943. He was so highly viewed at the university that an appearance for him was arranged on the very popular Fred Allen radio show.

Mary Crabtree left college after two years to test her wings in New York City, moving into a hotel with a girlfriend. She modeled for Lord & Taylor but also put her name in with famous director George Abbott, not expecting anything to come of it. office called asking if she could be in the touring company of *Kiss and Tell*. Paul Crabtree was in the show. Mary was very taken with how hard Paul worked. While other young people in entertainment just did one creative thing, Paul was working at everything, including writing radio scripts and organizing young actors to entertain in military hospitals across the northeastern United States.

Mary Crabtree was sent to Chicago to appear for six months in *Kiss and Tell*. She got great reviews. Back in New York City, she learned the ropes for auditioning from Paul, who soon auditioned for *Men to the Sea*. His role was small but they loved him.

He was cast in *The Streets Are Guarded*. He flew to Pittsburgh to wed Mary and then they returned to New York for the *Streets* show. The play received poor reviews but, again, they loved Paul's performance.

The Theater Guild and Rodgers and Hammerstein noticed him. Paul auditioned for the principal comedy role of Will Parker in front of Hammerstein by singing "Kansas City." Hammerstein asked, "Can you dance?" Paul had a foolish comic step he used to do for family members, and he performed a bit of that. Hammerstein started to laugh, and Paul got a bit irritated. Rodgers then came in, Paul sang for him, and he asked Crabtree to dance. Paul did his comic step again, now starting both men laughing. His feelings now really hurt, the young man turned to leave quickly, but Rodgers and Hammerstein raced after him and signed him to a five-year contract, unheard of at that time. This gave the Crabtrees great security with a guaranteed income. In October 1944, *Oklahoma* with Crabtree opened. Paul played the part on Broadway for nine months was given wide latitude that allowed him to direct and work up scripts.

The Theater Guild owned a summer theater in Westport, Connecticut, where new properties were tried. The Crabtrees bought a house in Forest Hills, New York, and spent summers in Connecticut. Mary acted in a few Westport shows. Her first son, Jim (whom they soon called Jim Bob), was now 2. At Westport in the summer of 1947, Paul directed Patricia Neal in her first role and also directed the Johnny Mercer musical, *Texas Little Darlin'*, which eventually went to Broadway.

In 1947, Paul also appeared in *The Iceman Cometh*, having been personally chosen by playwright Eugene O'Neill to play the role of Don Parritt, and received several awards for his acting. [PHOTO of clipping: "Broadway Goes Highbrow"]

By New Years 1948, they were parents of Jim Bob and Amanda. Paul's new play, *Story for a Sunday Evening*, starred Chloris Leachman and played in Westport to great reviews. The advance press in New York heralded it as exciting, noting that not since Noel Coward had a writer directed and produced his own play on Broadway. But on opening night, the play was flat, and Paul blamed it on his own performance. The second night, the second-string critics loved it, but the damage had been done. Robert Montgomery used to do a thirty-minute radio show, and he did one Thanksgiving night on Paul Crabtree. Montgomery even offered to put up his own money to keep the show going. But a big snowstorm hit New York and they closed the show.

In the 50s, Paul established and managed three summer theaters: Syracuse (Fayetteville) with a 1950 opening, E. Rochester outside of Rochester with a 1951 opening, and Watkins Glen with a 1953 opening. Stars included Olivia DeHavilland, Arthur Treacher, and Jerry Stiller in his first job right out of Syracuse.

The summer of 1950 saw Paul direct a pre-Broadway production of *A Story for a Sunday Evening* at the Famous Artists Country Playhouse in Fayetteville. In the cast was Cloris Leachman. Three years later Paul came to Fayetteville for another pre-Broadway show, directing Eva Gabor in *Strike a Match*.

Paul Crabtree and producer Frank Hale brought *Midsummer* to New York in 1952, featuring Geraldine Page in her first Broadway play. Jack Gaver's column, "Up and Down Broadway," appearing in the *Panama City News* of February 11, 1953, began, "The season's biggest excitement has been stirred up by a new actress named Geraldine Page." The article reported that Crabtree and Frank J. Hale were the producers and Gaver added, "Paul Crabtree's direction is perceptive and affectionate."

The article went on: “Miss Page, who is 27, makes her Broadway bow as the heroine of “Mid-Summer” by Vina Delmar. She is an emotional actress of the very highest order who can make an audience hold its breath by a slight gesture of facial movement.

“She achieves her impression without the assistance of a bravura role which is always a help in an actor’s career. Her part is that of a quiet, almost mousy, woman, whose only talent is for homemaking and whose heartbreak is that she sacrifices this to further the career of her husband, who is seeking the rainbow’s gold in a theatrical career.

“There are many good actors and many fine performances to be seen over a span of Broadway seasons. But it is rare that a performer completely conquers your emotions. Miss Page has that ability.”

Crabtree also brought Johnny Mercer’s *Texas Little Darlin’* to Broadway. Tommy, the third baby, was born 1951 in Rochester, and in 1952, they had their fourth, Abby, in New York City.

In the fall of 1958, they made Pound Ridge, New York their home, selling their Forest Hills, New York home. Pound Ridge was in an upper Westchester County area near the Connecticut border. Mary Crabtree called it “God’s country” and considered the area most as pretty and unspoiled as Crossville, Tennessee. The family loved it there, with their Little League, Pony League, Brownies and Cub Scouts. In fact, Jim’s Little League coach was “Buffalo Bob” of “Howdy Doody” fame.

Their fifth child, David, was born in the summer of 1958 in Mount Kisco Hospital. Mary was later to call Pound Ridge her favorite home, but “Florida seemed destined to be their permanent home.” They moved there the first time for an entire

school year when Jim started high school over 1959-1960. Amy, their sixth child, was born in Florida in the summer of 1959. They felt blessed. Said Mary Crabtree, “Palm Beach is an amazing place, at least it was then—so incredibly quaint and gleaming and rich. But “it all had a rather unreal quality.”

In 1958 Paul helped Frank Hale found the Royal Poinciana Playhouse in Palm Beach, Florida. Paul Crabtree doing three-month winter seasons at the Poinciana 1957-1958 and 1958-1959. Said Mary Crabtree, “The Royal Poinciana Playhouse truly had no equal as a theater. It was built by the Bessamer Corporation, and nothing was spared in its construction or décor.” During there time there, they met incredible people. Marjorie Merriweather Post when she entertained for Billie Burke; Bing Crosby just dropped in and got Mary up to sing with him in the nightclub connected to the theater. [photo: Post in lobby of which theater?] [photo: Bing and Mary—2 closeup shots]

Stars at the Poinciana includes Bea Lilly, Charlton Heston, Tallulah Bankhead, Gypsy Rosa Lee, Gloria Swanson, Arthur Treacher, Helen Hayes, Claudette Colbert, Bob Cummings, even Mary’s “old flame” Francis Lederer, who had kissed her hand backstage once when the young college girl visited him backstage. He laughed now when she reminded him of his kindness to her.

Mary reminisced several years ago that, out of season nine months of the year, Paul Beach was “just a small town of 2,000 people.” They settled into “great family times, doing lots of beachcombing and really practically living at the beach. They walked out the front door of their home, walked by two houses, and there was the beach. There were great school in Palm Beach, and they loved the Dominican nuns. That’s were they first did Pinocchio, with Paul directing it [photo: photo of Jim playing the cricket].

Paul didn't read music; he picked out melodies a finger at a time. Sister Thomas Gertrude turned it into music and they shared credits—her music and Paul's script.

Let the Music and the Ballet Begin

On April 12, 1959, the *Tri-City Herald* of Pasco, Washington, featured a story by AP Women's Editor Dorothy Roe concerning the upcoming Poinciana show of a Richard Rodgers' remake:

It's not every composer who can see two generations of stagestruck girls use his songs as a springboard to stardom. "It's a strange feeling," says Richard Rodgers, who has composed more than 1,000 hit tunes, first in collaboration with the late Lorenz Hart, later with his current partner, Oscar Hammerstein II. He is in Palm Beach, Fla., watching the opening of the 1959 version of "Babes in Arms," the musical which first opened April 14, 1937, with music by Rodgers and Hart. The star of the first show was Mitzi Green, then a 16-year-old unknown. A promising youngster in the cast was Alfred Drake, who later made history as the singing star of "Oklahoma!" This time the star is electric Julie Wilson, who belts out a song with all the verve of an Ethel Merman. The rest of the cast is made up of talented youngsters. The scene of this opening is the Royal Poinciana Playhouse in Palm Beach, where the audience dines and dances in an adjoining room before and after the play. Says Rodgers: "I hope I'm around long enough to see some of these kids make good in as big a way as did Mitzi Green and Alfred Drake and some of the others in the first cast. And I hope I can still write their songs for them." Julie Wilson has the audience doing nip-ups with her high-voltage rendition of that durable Rodgers-Hart hit song, "The Lady is a Tramp." Next she gives out with "Johnny One Note." Then the entire company does a

reprise of "Babes in Arms." "Good songs just don't go out of date," says Rodgers, who wrote his first professional score for a Broadway show at 17. "I've been writing them for 40 years, and most of them are still being sung and played."

An April 13, 1959 article in Wisconsin's *Appleton Post Crescent* discussed the new secret weapon in the Poinciana's arsenal—local ballerinas:

"A 10-year-old ballerina from Palm Beach could be an American secret weapon. She is Claudia Cravey, baby prima ballerina of the first American full-length ballet, "The Princess," produced here by philanthropist Frank J. Hale and Paul Crabtree, and scheduled to open on Broadway in the fall. Next in impact could be her 8-year-old sister, Clara Beth. 'If we could present these wonderful American kids in this all-American ballet at the Moscow World's fair, we'd steal all the thunder of the vaunted Russia ballet,' says Hale. He's the founder of the Academy Royale, a nonprofit institution dedicated to giving American boys and girls a chance to develop their talents in the ballet, the theater and music. Critics who have seen the fresh and charming ballet in its initial presentations here seem to agree with him. And so does the girl who wrote the libretto and trained the young form of ballet which the general public can understand, and which gives an opportunity to the wonderful, fresh talent of American youngsters. 'You don't have to starve in a garret and live on borsht for 20 years to be a great ballerina. The proof is in these children who have captivated audiences at the Royal Poinciana playhouse here, after training of only a few months.' Jo Anna taught ballet in Durban and was a top ballet star of South Africa before she came to America, met and married TV producer Ted Kneeland and drifted down to Palm

Beach to open a dancing school. There she met Frank Hale, who had just built the million-dollar Royal Poinciana playhouse, and who also had ideas about opening the doors of opportunity to American kids. The result was 'The Princess,' and a plan for establishing a training center for the talented youth of America. 'We're in on the ground floor of a great new national awakening of art in America,' says Hale. 'Kids all over the country, in small towns and on farms from Maine to Arizona are feeling the urge to express themselves. If they've got what it takes, they'll have a chance to show it here. We screen applicants for the academy, and if they make the grade, they get scholarships. In this one year of operation, we've found that American youngsters do have what it takes.'

The *Palm Beach Post* of September 11, 1959 announced that a theatrical training school called the Academy Royale would be established at the playhouse to develop new talent for all branches of professional theater. The announcement of the move was made at the start of a three-day theatrical symposium at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse that was called to help plan the school's program.

About 25 people attended the symposium, including drama teachers, producers, and union leaders. Speakers included Miss Mary Virginia Heinlein, chairman of the Drama Department at Vassar College; Newell Tarrent, director of the Erie (Pa.) Playhouse, and Prof. Sawyer Falk, director of dramatic activities at Syracuse University. Mr. Falk also is serving as chairman of the meetings.

The school was the idea of Frank J. Hale, a business man, who built and opened the playhouse last year. Its expected opening date was summer 1960 with 100 students, a quarter of whom were to receive scholarships. Candidates were to be 20 to 30 years of

age and study in Palm Beach from November 1st through May. Actors, writers, composers, directors and designers who felt they could qualify for the program were asked to write to the Academy. Paul Crabtree, producer and director of the playhouse, said that besides using the theater's facilities, the academy would develop its own classrooms, studios, and dormitories.

A Wisconsin newspaper of April 22, 1959 announced that Hale was planning “a gala benefit to end all benefits next January in Palm Beach – a Venetian Mardi Gras, with barges to bring the audience across Lake Worth to his playhouse, and tickets selling at \$1,000 each.”

Crabtree Lured Away by Loretta Young and Tennessee

During the Kennedy election period, John Kennedy was often an usher at their church when he came home as a U. S. senator. Paul had some business connections with his father earlier, but didn't know the younger Kennedys personally. After the election, he came to Palm Beach to rest and choose his cabinet. The Crabtrees were invited to a reception for President Kennedy and President Hoover, who had come to dedicate a dam built in the Everglades. [photo of JFK with Paul; another photo of President Hoover with Paul] They asked Paul to help and bring one of his velvet ropes to put in front of the two dignitaries. They were worried about the elderly Hoover having to shake hands. Photographers were in Palm Beach everywhere all the time, so they got great pictures of the event. Mary didn't go. She was pregnant with Billy, their seventh child.

For the Crabtrees, the Florida years were "great and interesting times." Paul and Mary had just completed their second year at Royal Poinciana and Billy was two weeks old. [great closeup photo of Paul Crabtree and Frank Hale]. One day, Paul called from the playhouse and said, "Bring the car over. I just resigned from the theater."

Mary never knew what happened. Paul never shared what caused the final break with Frank Hale, Paul's co-producer. "We were fond of Frank. He was an arresting personality, but a very difficult personality. It wasn't surprising that you would have a problem with Frank. But I don't know what went on."

They bundled the four older kids into the family station wagon and Paul headed to California. Mary called the moving company, closed the house up, and flew with the three little ones to Los Angeles, where they rented a house.

Paul worked on scripts for Loretta Young's new show and thoroughly enjoyed his writing times with Loretta, reading scripts to her while she sat and listened. He also wrote episodes for *My Three Sons*, *Bonanza*, and other popular TV series. In the summer of 1963, the Crabtrees and their five young children went to the small mountain town of Crossville, Tennessee, where Mary had deep roots, to think out whether to move back to New York or buy a home in Los Angeles. They were captivated that summer with the Tennessee Appalachian area and moved there permanently, creating the non-profit Cumberland Country Playhouse and growing it into one of the most famous and successful regional theaters in the nation.

Paul Crabtree's obituary in the March 23, 1979 *Post Standard* of Syracuse stated that he died of a heart attack at age 60 as he was directing one of his shows in rehearsal, *Pennsylvania U.S.A.* at the Hershey Theater in Hershey, Pa. He had once written that he intended to keep working in the theater until the day he died. He had been in rehearsal for "Pennsylvania U.S.A." at the time of his death. He left his wife, actress-director Mary Evelyn Ducey, seven children; five grandchildren, and a brother and sister.

On July 14, 2005, Jim Crabtree, Producing director of the Cumberland County Playhouse in Crossville Tennessee, and oldest son of Paul Crabtree, sent a letter to Palm Beach Theater Guild President Patrick Flynn dated July 14, 2005. Jim had attended Palm Beach Public School, St. Ann's, and Cardinal Newman, eventually attaining his Masters Degree in Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Drama in 1971.

Excerpts of Jim Crabtree's letter follow:

I am the oldest son of Paul Crabtree, the founding Producing Director of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse, and of its predecessor, the Palm Beach

Playhouse, which he opened in 1950, in association with Palm Beach luminaries such as Mary Howes, Messmore Kendall, and Frank J. Hale. I have vivid memories of your town in the 1950's and 60's, when it was home to a leading professional theater.

When this superb theater was built, I recall my father saying it was the first major legitimate theater designed, built from scratch in the United States in about fifty years. He explained that Broadway theaters were all older, and that New York real estate values seemed to discourage theater construction there. This was prior to the renaissance in regional theater, which coincided with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts in the early sixties. Perhaps there were school auditoriums constructed during that time prior to the Royal Poinciana, but Dad believed that the Royal Poinciana was an important step, and a signal of renewal, in the American professional theater. A few years later, as the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Actors Theater of Louisville, and others including our own Cumberland County Playhouse were built, his work in Palm Beach proved prophetic.

In the late 50's and early 60's, the theater Produced a winter stock season, running up to ten productions for one or two weeks—a season which by 1961 was completely sold out in advance by subscription to season ticket holders! Barbara and Bernard Gault ran the remarkable subscription department. James M. Riley, Jr. headed the stage design department, and helped specify the theater plans.

*The Royal Poinciana also served as a community resource, as well as a performance hall for professional theater. My dad wrote several musicals presented there as benefits for nearby Rosarian Academy, staged and hosted televised charity telethons, established apprentice training programs for aspiring professionals, and started an off-season smaller-scale theater series in the Celebrity Room, the theater's restaurant, where *The Fantasticks* was first seen outside New York. The Playhouse staff helped produce my dad's production of *The 27th Star*, an outdoor stadium Florida Centennial pageant he wrote and produced for a local government celebration.*

I also recall the theater hosting the Palm Beach Ballet, gala Opening Nights in the Celebrity Room, and the Playhouse's live radio program. In many ways, the theater was a social focal point for luminaries during "the season," and a hometown cultural center for area residents all year long.

*The Cumberland County Playhouse was founded by Paul Crabtree in 1965, in rural Crossville, Tennessee. A production of *The Perils of Pinocchio*, Paul's musical first produced with the Rosarians at the Royal Poinciana, was produced here in 1963 under Dad's direction, at the junior high. It inspired the community to build this Playhouse, which celebrates its 40th Anniversary this summer. A summer hiatus from New York and Hollywood became a permanent home for our family, and a nonprofit family mission. So the Royal Poinciana is part of the Cumberland County Playhouse's roots.*

*Your organization's name –Palm Beach Theater Guild—recalls my dad's years with *The Theater Guild* in New York and Westport, when he directed on*

Broadway, appeared in the original company of Oklahoma!, and ran the Westport Country Playhouse in the late 1940's. It was his Theater Guild contacts and experience which helped him find and develop success at the Palm Beach Playhouse (in the renovated greenhouse of the old Royal Poinciana Hotel) and the new Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

With the shift of many touring events to the Kravis Center in West Palm, perhaps it is time again for Palm Beach to host its own producing professional theater, and to employ professionals who have an interest in working with young people, seniors and families who find joy and growth in performing arts participation. I hope you are successful in saving the theater. Perhaps one day Palm Beach will again be home to a vibrant community of theater artists and craftspeople, rehearsing, designing, building and performing live professional, school, and community projects year 'round, and bringing in special events to supplement what is produced there. It is a joyful, family-friendly and community-enriching process, as we have discovered here.

Just months after Jim Crabtree wrote this emotionally generous letter to the Palm Beach Theater Guild, Jim's mother and Paul Crabtree's wife Mary died. An obituary posted on the *Tennessean.com* website November 13, 2005, stated that "Mary Crabtree, 83, of Crossville, Tennessee, who with her husband, Paul, started the renowned Cumberland County Playhouse 40 years ago, died Friday at home." Natalia Mielczarek wrote, "One day she would dine with the Kennedys and the next she would introduce scores of poor Appalachian children to the magic of theater. She was an actress, a costume designer, a performance director, a friend and a mother of seven." Stated one of

Mary's sons, David, of Nashville, "My mother planted seeds within people that helped people see who they truly are. She planted seeds of love, encouragement, patience. She embraced people from divergent cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, and she was a very inclusive person."

Glory Days of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse

The *Panama City News-Herald* of January 20, 1963 ran a special feature story on the playhouse: "Another star studded season opens Monday night at Palm Beach's Royal Poinciana Playhouse but, as usual, much of the sparkle will be on the other side of the footlights where will be assembled an amazing collection of wealth and all it represents.

Eva Gabor will be on stage playing the leading role in 'A Shot in the Dark,' but a shot in the dark among the audience might hit some of the nation's leading industrialists, political figures, financiers or their bejeweled wives. In the past five years, Frank J. Hale's Royal Poinciana Playhouse has become a cultural magnet for the wealthy from Palm Beach to New York. Subscription lists are a closely guarded secret, but opening nights often attract such notables as the Benson Fords, the R. J. Reynolds family, Jim Kimberly of Kimberly Clark, the Stephen Sanfords, Countess Maximillian de Pulaski, and scores of others.

Families faithfully renew their subscriptions from year to year because it's de rigueur. This year only about 10 opening night subscriptions passed from the hands of the old-line families and onto the open market, and in these instances it was due to death, foreign travel or moving out of the country. Any tickets available for single performances--and there are scarcely ever more than 10 or 20--draw a queue in front of the box office at 10 a.m. the day of the show. Mrs. Rose Kennedy, mother of the President, has been among those who have waited in line for the precious ducats.

In addition to seeing a play in company of their peers, first nighters can enjoy a 'Dinner de Gala' in the plush Celebrity Room which adjoins the Playhouse or retire there after the performance for a supper of champagne and caviar, a snack of pate de foie gras, or crepes suzette or a plate of plain old scrambled eggs. Coffee is 50 cents, demitasse espresso 75 cents, and cafe diable \$1.50. Last season, when King Saud Al Saud of Saudi Arabia was a guest at the Playhouse, the Celebrity Room prepared a special menu to his liking by sending to Saudi Arabia for some of the delicacies.

The man behind the playhouse, Frank J. Hale, is an interesting combination of industrialist, philanthropist and patron of the arts. At one time, he himself was a dancer, actor, and producer on Broadway, climbing that ladder of success via sidewalk dancing in his native San Francisco at the age of nine to help in the support of his family. Following the stock market crash of 1929, Hale went into business to protect an investment in the National Yeast Corporation, and eventually became president of the firm, which he still is.

In the more than three decades he has lived in Florida, Hale has also shown himself to be an inveterate gambler, though his interests have been inclined toward the theater rather than the horses. One of his investments was production of a Broadway play called 'Mid-Summer,' which brought before the public a relatively unknown actress named Geraldine Page.

While the Playhouse is the most glamorous of Hale's enterprises, because of both the talent it draws and the celebrities in the audience, he has other theatrical sidelines. The Academy Royale Theatre, for example, serves as a

training ground for people interested in all phases of theater, puts on 'little theater' productions, plus spectaculars like a recent Christmas Holiday Ballet, featuring Maria Tallchief and Oleg Tupine. On the Academy's advisory board are Helen Hayes, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Cummings, and other notables.

When construction of the Royal Poinciana Shopping Plaza was under consideration back in the mid-50s, Architect John L. Volk, who had designed the New York City Center, suggested that a new Playhouse be built in conjunction with it because the old Palm Beach Playhouse was becoming too small for the growing resort city. Hale, who had just leased the old Playhouse, and the developers of the Plaza liked the idea and commissioned a \$1.5 million structure. It is one of the very few buildings erected in the past 60 years which was designed and constructed as a theater, and it has more than 800 seats. Volk chose the Regency style of the early 19th century for the Playhouse and Plaza because of its clean, simple lines. For the interior decor, he settled upon rich reds, with white and gold. The ceiling is lighted with Maria Theresa imported crystal chandeliers.

The Celebrity Room, just south of the Playhouse, has a ceiling mural on which have been painted the likenesses of internationally famous personalities. To prevent guests from craning their necks, showman Hale slips the menus into mirrored covers so you can see the mural's reflection. Huge sliding glass doors of the Celebrity Room overlook Lake Worth, as do the actors' dressing rooms backstage. The dressing rooms also lead onto a wide terrace where the stars can relax in deck chairs between scenes.

The Royal Poinciana Playhouse packages most of its shows in New York and selects the entire cast, though local thespians are sometimes used in minor roles. Among the 10 offerings of the current season will be Hugh O'Brian in 'The Tender Trap;' Arlene Francis in 'Janus;' Thornton Wilder's 'The Matchmaker,' with Faye Emerson; and Jean Kerr's successful comedy, 'Mary, Mary,' with Jeffrey Lynn.

The Royal Poinciana advertises itself as 'the most fabulous show place under the sun,' and that claim, when you add up the posh surroundings, the stage productions, and the collectively fabulous wealth gathered under its roof, may not be very far from wrong."

Photos in the 1963 *Panama City News* article featured Walter Slezak as a favorite of Poinciana Playhouse audiences; Patrice Munsel, who starred in *Chrysanthemum* in 1962, shown in the star dressing room; Helen Hayes, Leif Erickson, and June Havoc in *Skin of Our Teeth*; playhouse fans Bing Crosby and wife, Kathy, putting on an impromptu act at the theater's Celebrity Club; and a photo of playhouse owner Frank Hale and playgoers Mrs. Stephen Sanford and Mrs. Winston Guest.

The *Syracuse Post Standard* of June 22, 1963 announced that Frank Hale was to be a special guest at the fourth performance of *Gideon* the previous evening at the New Playhouse of Syracuse University's Regent Theater. "He made a special trip to Syracuse to observe what the New Playhouse is doing and to serve as a consultant on the civic-university concept as it applies to Syracuse and Syracuse University."

A January 20, 1965 *New York Times* article by Charlotte Curtiss described the happenings at the Poinciana the previous evening: "The lights in the Celebrity Room's

Venetian glass chandeliers flashed on and off nearly 50 times last night before Frank J. Hale managed to get three-fourths of the opening-night audience back into his adjoining Royal Poinciana Playhouse for the third and final act of 'Beekman Place.' Only then did the impresario finally sit down to his own four-course dinner.

'We go through this every year,' Mr. Hale said between bites of roast beef. 'It doesn't matter who's the star or what the play's about. I have to beat them over the head and tell the bartenders no more drinks. They are a hard bunch to order around.' 'They,' as every reader of every New York gossip column knows, are the assorted nabobs, tycoons, moguls, magnates and fashion plates who for want of a better definition are usually called 'American Society.' At this time of year, unless they wish to be expelled from the club, they pack up their old and new money and return not just to Palm Beach, but to the combination restaurant and theater that Mr. Hale calls 'the most fabulous showplace under the sun.' The opening show, as might be expected, grew more fabulous the farther it was from the footlights.

By 7 P.M. the Rolls-Royce brigade, which rivals New York's, had begun to deliver 900 persons wearing an estimated total of \$30 million worth of haute couture, furs and economy-size jewels. Mrs. Roy Tuchbreiter, Chicago, wife of the chairman of the Continental-National Group of insurance companies, limited herself to an almost audible cloth-of-gold and sequined gown with a mink-trimmed jacket, a two-and-a-half inch rectangle of diamonds on her shoulder, and a single diamond suspended from a chain around her neck. Some of the others were equally restrained. Mrs. Stephen M. (Laddie) Sanford, den mother of the charity-ball set, had bunches of sapphires and diamonds on

her left wrist and in the front of her hair-do. This left her neck, ears and fingers free for the plain diamonds.

Mrs. Joseph Lauder added a ruby-and-diamond necklace and matching earrings to a pink gown from Balmain in Paris. Earlier in the season the New York cosmetics empress and husband acquired their first Palm Beach house. Mrs. Victor W. Farris, wife of the New Jersey industrialist and inventor, had held herself to a ruby-and-diamond pin ('its two s's shaped like a treble clef in music'), a matching bracelet, and a Jean Louis black dress.' 'I'm sure I'm the most understated of all,' Mrs. Farris said, but that was not the point.

Most of the women were so busy being their same old glamorous selves that the responsibility for making the resort's first fresh fashion statement was left to Mrs. James H. Kimberly (Kimberly-Clark Corporation, paper products). The fragile-looking blonde did her duty by wrapping herself in a Chadou, pronounced shadow. What this garment is, is a four-cornered headdress with sleeves. Mrs. Kimberly's was yellow silk organza sewn with jet-centered white flowers. She wore it over a plain black evening dress by the same designer--Ferro Ettehadieh, an Iranian who graduated from Oxford and migrated to Palm Beach. Mrs. Horace E. Dodge Jr., widow of the heir to an automobile fortune, has a Chadou, too, but she left it at home, preferring a full-length neon-pink suit with sleeves (the temperature was in the 50's and Florida is not known for its central heating) and a corsage of diamonds. She and her fiancé, Daniel D. Moran, were among those who sat through all three acts of the play.

During dinner there was so much table-hopping that waiters served guests wherever they found them. One woman had her fruit cocktail and consommé at one

table, her entree at another, and her coffee at a third. She did not get to dessert until the first intermission. 'That's a system of mine,' Mr. Hale confided later. 'I get them to come back for dessert. If we waited until everyone got around to it, we'd never get them out of here.' Another of Mr. Hale's systems had been abandoned. He used to have the play televised for dinner patrons who did not want to bother with actually going into the theater. 'It didn't work,' he said. 'The husbands turned in their tickets and stayed at the bar. I had empty seats I couldn't get rid of.'

The opening-night curtain, scheduled to go up at 9 P.M., was only 15 minutes late. The lights dimmed at 9, and five minutes later Mr. Hale was shushing everyone politely. Lester Lanin, working his first stint in the supper club, kept his orchestra quiet—'society-like,' according to Mr. Hale—while the actors were on stage. The blare of Dixieland and twist music was reserved for the intermissions.

Before the chauffeurs collected their cargo—there was a champagne supper for Arlene Francis and the rest of the cast—the list of celebrities had included Baron and Baroness George de Grippenbergh (he was Finland's representative to the United Nations), John E. Rovensky, the Newport, R. I., banker, industrialist and economist; Loy Anderson, president of the resort's First Federal Savings and Loan Association, and his wife; John Volk, the architect who designed the Andersons' house and Mr. Hale's theater; Dr. Leon Levy and his wife, the former Blanche Paley, who recently gave Philadelphia's Albert Einstein Medical Center \$1 million, and Denise Darcel, the entertainer.

The Anderson's, who have been to all eight of the Playhouse's opening nights, were among those who gave parties before going to the theater, thus avoiding the Celebrity Room traffic. 'The first year there were six of us,' Mrs. Anderson said. 'Now

we are 24. We have cocktails and supper, and leave the house at exactly 20 minutes of 9. We wouldn't know we were in Palm Beach if we missed an opening.'

The April 21, 1965 *Chronicle Telegram* of Elyria, Ohio, ran this story by famed columnist Jim Bishop, titled "He Can't Stand Ballet, But This Is Different:"

Ballet is art on stilts: toe torture, a musical hot foot, a crinoline cha-cha; an amazon leaping into the arms of a willowy man. Of all the arts, ballet is the most confined. It consists of five basic foot positions, eleven arm positions and two facial expressions--a pout and a smile.

I can't stand it. That is why, when Frank Hale of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse invited me to see a ballet called Coppelia, I went at once. Mr. Hale is a remittance man from an old vaudeville show. He is tall and consciously handsome with black brows and a crayon moustache to match. I am not in the habit of alienating entrepreneurs, even when I can't pronounce it.

The Playhouse was jammed with low necklines, black ties, and jewels. Everyone thought it was worth the price of the ticket to see Jose Ferrer in a ballet. A man who plays Toulouse-Lautrec cannot possibly dance. Still, Mr. Ferrer is known in the trade as a fine actor. He is so good, in fact, that he has been out of work in Hollywood.

Coppelia, I found, is the story of a doctor who creates a mechanical doll so life-like that he falls in love with her. As in all operatic ballets, there is a tavern maid named Brigitta, who loves the august doctor and despises his doll. Got it? You can guess who gets the doctor in the finale. If you figure it was the mechanical doll, remain after school for a little heart-to-heart chat.

It was beautiful. Wonderful. An exciting evening. When the final curtain dropped, I was the only person in the Royal Poinciana who stood and whistled between my teeth. Then I asked myself why other ballets, including Swan Lake, give me the squirms whereas this one had me hoping it would go on for an additional hour.

The answer appears to be Jo Anna Kneeland and her husband, Ted. Mrs. Kneeland is a ballerina who teaches the art. Ted Kneeland is a one-time television producer who knows how to put acting and story-telling into ballet. She is dark and tiny. He is broad and blonde.

They must be good, because they persuaded Jose Ferrer to leave Los Angeles and go to Palm Beach for a one-week stand in a medium he had never tried. There was nothing great about the mounting of Coppelia. The Kneelands didn't even have an orchestra. They used taped music backstage.

Someone put the brocade on the wrong side of the big theatre curtain and Frank Hale, who is a charitable friend of the Rosarian Sisters, phoned the Mother Superior on opening day and said, "I'm in an awful jam. The brocade has to be ripped off the theatre curtain and sewed on the other side. Do you think...?"

By 3 p.m., thirty nuns were sitting on the stage in their habits with the curtain in their laps. Needles were flying, and Mr. Hale kept looking at his watch, beads of perspiration on his forehead, saying, "Sister, Baby, it's five p.m. This curtain has got to go up at 8:30. I'm only asking for one of your small miracles, Sister, Baby..."

The curtain went up on time.

The pirouettes, the arabesques, the mincing steps were the same as one always sees in ballet. But the accent was on telling the story, and the Kneelands permitted no dancing to slow up the action.

On December 21, 1972, the *New York Times* and other papers reported that Frank J. Hale, owner and producer of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse, died in Palm Beach December 20, 1972 at age 72.

Stated the *New York Times*: “Mr. Hale, a native of San Francisco, began his career there as a vaudeville dancer. According to the late Damon Runyon, writing in the *New York American* in 1937, he originated a dance called the Texas Tommy "in the hot spots along the Barbary Coast," brought it East for Martin Beck at the Orpheum here, and quit dancing in 1918.

“In the 1920's he was in the news as a prohibition agent. Subsequently he became president of the National Yeast Company, returning to the theater as a producer. In the 1950's he became associated with Paul Crabtree with whom he operated the Royal Poinciana and for several years the Academy Royale, a theatrical training school. With Mr. Crabtree he produced "Mid-Summer" on Broadway in 1953.

“The 800-seat theater in Palm Beach—which associates said would open its season Jan. 8 [1973]—and its adjoining Celebrity Room restaurant became a center of activity for the fashionable winter set in Palm Beach. It often boasted a complete sell-out for the 10-week season before the curtain went up. Mr. Hale was also founder and president of the Palm Beach Ballet Company and had been president of the American Society of the Aged.

“Surviving are two daughters, Mrs. Dolores Walsh of New York and Jean Anne Hale of Puerto Rico; a son, Frank Jr. of San Francisco, and three grandchildren. A funeral mass will be offered at St. Edward's Roman Catholic Church in Palm Beach tomorrow at 3 P.M.”

Other Poinciana Contributors

The Manitowic Herald Times of Wisconsin announced in its April 17, 1965 issue that James McKenzie and his actress wife, Jeanne Bolan, had recently completed a ten week season at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse in which McKenzie was associate producer and general manager. Producer of the Peninsula Players, McKenzie was at that time also producer and operator of Westport Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut. Tom Connors, general manager of the Players for the past two years, was to return to Wisconsin in the summer after having spent the winter in Palm Beach with the McKenzies as house manager of the Royal Poinciana. McKenzie later ran The American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco from 1962 to 1982, which received a Tony award for regional theater in 1979.

While at the Poinciana, James McKenzie brought in more than 40 shows. Two of those shows, *The Girl in the Freudian Slip* plus *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*, went on to Broadway, with *Miss Reardon's* winning two Tony awards. Two of the shows he produced after leaving the Poinciana also went on to show at Broadway. McKenzie's term at the Poinciana lasted only three years and ended in 1968, but he still kept a home in Palm Beach County.

McKenzie died February 20, 2002 in Connecticut at the age of 75. An obituary written by Sonja Isgar in the March 5, 2002 *Palm Beach Post* stated, "The theater season officially began the first Monday after New Year's and ran for only 2 1/2 months. Every seat in the house was filled. Every opening was a black-tie, televised affair. And the

Royal Poinciana Playhouse's associate producer and general manager, James McKenzie, was driving the engine that kept one show a week in rehearsal while another was on stage. Then he'd pack his bags and head north, to do the whole thing all over again - with such energy that he became a force behind regional theaters and playhouses throughout the country. In his 50-year career, he worked on more than 2,000 productions. He was the executive producer of 11 regional theaters from Westport, Connecticut, to San Francisco.”

“Running a theater in the crush of the Palm Beach season wasn't merely about filling the house - on more than one occasion it was about putting up the actors, said Mr. McKenzie's son, Kevin McKenzie, a teacher at Dreyfoos School of the Arts. The younger McKenzie recalls fondly eating breakfast with many of the production's stars.”

An article written by Jan Tuckwood in the March 6, 2001 *Palm Beach Post* discussed popular Poinciana announcer Tony Glenn, who died February 18, 2001 at age 67. He had also been a well-dressed, handsome, six-foot-two-inch local television personality viewed by millions on WPTV Channel 5. “If you lived in Palm Beach County in the '60s and '70s, you knew Tony Glenn: Jet black hair. Booming deep voice. Suave good looks. Glenn personified local television in West Palm Beach back when television was really local.”

"He was an icon in our business," said Channel 5 sportscaster and friend Kinnaird, as glamorous as the people he interviewed for his Opening Night at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse show. Thirty years ago, a new play opened at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse in Palm Beach every Monday night, and everyone who was anyone showed

up, dressed to the nines, for opening night. Tony Glenn, in his tuxedo, would greet the swells along the red carpet. If they were lucky, they got on TV. Glenn fancied this job more than doing the weather. "He was in his seventh heaven on that red carpet," Kinnaird says. This was such a big deal in those days that the Palm Beach police would have to hold back the crowds of onlookers. It was like a mini-Oscars show every week. And it marked the end of an era in Palm Beach: By the late-'70s, people didn't seem to want to dress up anymore. Times had changed."

Christine Dolen of Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service wrote this obituary on George Abbott on February 1, 1995: "Abbott, master of Broadway for nearly 40 years, died at his home on Sunset Island off Miami Beach after a stroke at 107 years old. Producer, playwright, director, actor and 'play doctor,' Abbott made it to Broadway over 125 times between 1913 and 1994. "Could 'The Abbott Touch' transform an apparent failure? Actor Joe Bova, once married to Abbott's daughter, Judy, recalled the time the master came to Palm Beach's Royal Poinciana Playhouse to direct Bova and others in 'The Well-Dressed Liar.' Someone else had rehearsed the cast, and 'Liar' looked like a very ill-made play. After watching a run-through, Abbott dismissed the cast for a dinner break, then started over. 'Without stopping from 8 to midnight, he deftly cut lines, rewrote lines, reblocked, changed pace, checked phony moments and generally changed a flop into a hit,' Bova recounted. 'But it was also the speed and ease and deft way he went about it. In every instance of change, there was a sigh of relief and praise from the cast as proof to the fact of his accuracy. It was as though he stood there with a magic wand of genius, offering a touch here, a touch there. I was in awe.'"

Another famous name in Poinciana history is John Lane, Ogunquit Playhouse owner from 1951 through 1996, after which time he donated the theater to a foundation that today continues his legacy. Lane's success in Ogunquit led to other ventures, including his partnership in the Royal Poinciana Playhouse in Palm Beach, Florida, where he was executive producer through the late 1970s. He enjoyed a seasonal home in Palm Beach for many years and supported the Society of Four Arts and attended Bethesda by the Sea. Lane loved to travel, particularly to London and Rome, and was an avid reader. He was also a passionate walker. His daily walks covered miles of the Lake Worth Trail and Flagler Drive in Palm Beach, Madison Avenue and Central Park in New York, and Marginal Way, Israel's Head and the beach in Ogunquit. He died October 29, 2000 at his home in Ogunquit after a long illness. He was 85 years old.

High Society Makes the Poinciana Their Own

Charles Ventura's "Manhattan Memo; On the Glitter Gang" column in the *Oakland Tribune* [California] of July 12, 1959 discussed Mrs. Stephen (Laddie) Sanford's staying at Los Incas, her Palm Beach estate, through part of the summer to recuperate from two operations (she was formerly Mary Duncan when in the theater).

The Sanfords were delighted with "Frank Hale, who has been in Palm Beach supervising philanthropic and theatrical activities. Mr. Hale sent colored movies and an operator each night to the Sanford manse to brighten up the convalescent. Which gives us a chance to mention that the yeast magnate and associates will trek to Spain later this summer to make a Technicolor motion picture of Mario Braggiotti's ballet, *The Princess*."

Ventura's "Manhattan Memo; On the Glitter Gang" column appearing in the *Oakland Tribune* of February 7, 1960 stated, "Another dashing bachelor named Jim Kimberly, who races sports cars and pilots his own seagoing yacht (when in the mood for it), is giving local match makers something to light on by confining his dates to a beauty named Sharron Curran. They can be noted nightly, shuttling between the Poinciana Room of the Palm Beach Towers and the neighboring Playhouse. Best impromptu show of the season brightened up the early morning hours at the Celebrity Room when Veronica Kusmin, one of Frank Hale's singing discoveries, warbled excerpts from operettas for Frank and his party. Mario Braggiotti, former member of the Fray-Braggiotti piano duo, is writing a musical around Veronica, to be produced at the Playhouse."

The “Susy Says” column in the *Syracuse Herald Journal* of January 17, 1969, stated, “Frank Hale opened his Royal Poinciana Playhouse in Palm Beach with ‘Your Own Thing.’ The beaded, chiffoned and furred first night audience thought they were doing their own thing, too. Who knows? Maybe they were. Anyhow, Frank dispensed with an intermission so that he could open at 9 o’clock. Everyone was frightfully enthusiastic about the whole idea.

Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney arrived in Oscar de la Renta’s beautiful white ruffled gown, and so did South American beauty Ana Maria Alba, who has turned an old family beauty secret into a thriving cosmetics line. What else do you do with an old family beauty secret?

The Whitneys have installed themselves in the guest cottage of Mr. and Mrs. George Vigouroux for the next three weeks. It should please you to hear that both are looking remarkably fit.

Mrs. Frank MacMahon, wife of the Canadian multimillionaire, wore a pink Elizabeth Arden thing to the opening, the top beaded in a criss-cross motif. She was splendid.

Mrs. George Schrafft was outstanding in a one-shouldered long aqua chiffon and Mrs. Stephen Sanford was poured into a long clinging number beaded all over in silver Exotic. Mrs. Leon Mandel, wife of the department store heir and the world’s greatest woman shot, was in an elaborately draped pink chiffon dress with an embroidered panel in the back. Mrs. Loy Anderson wore white satin right out of the ‘30s with a white satin cape banded in white fur. (Really, all she needed was Harry Richmond on her arm.)

Mrs. Albin Holder wore white bengaline by Stavropoulos and Mrs. Banty Lawrence looked like a Persian lily in a yellow Norell. Anika and George Faraco also made the scene. They're fabulously rich Greeks (where did all the poor Greeks go, daddy?) who live next door to Ethel Kennedy in Virginia. Anika wore a white satin belled skirt with a multisequinned top. Also milling about were Sepha and Arthur Pearson, dear Doc Holden, the Andrew Fraziers (who are building a fantastic house on South Lake Trail) and Mrs. Bernard Gimbel with Mr. and Mrs. John Davis Lodge ...Theater lovers, all."

The "Suzy Says" column of December 30, 1969, in the *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, stated, "Mary (Mrs. Stephen) Sanford gave the kickoff party for the newly formed Ocean Club at the Celebrity Room in Palm Beach. Mary wore a silvery-white dress and all the sapphires she could manage (plenty) and knocked everybody out.

"Young Craig Crossman was so stunned he brought in a sort of music box (it made sounds like an orchestra) with a microphone attached and toasted Mary with a song he wrote called 'Dear Mrs. Sanford, How Are You Today?' Well, everybody got a little teary because they all Love Mary so – and then there was the champagne, of course.

"A rock group called the Visitors blasted away, and guests included Durie and Tommy Shevlin. Durie looked like Pierrette in a black dress with a ruffle around the neck. The Loy Andersons brought their son Loy Jr. and his wife, and their daughter, Dianna de la Valdene, and her husband, Ambassador Stanton Griffis came with his son John, and Lilly and Alvan Fuller came with each other. The Fullers have that fantastic new Chinese house in Palm Beach, the one with the 10-tier pagoda in the patio. On a clear day you can hardly miss it."

The “Suzy Says” column in the *Syracuse Herald-Journal* issue of April 14, 1971, said, “The big deal over the weekend was the Fine Arts Festival at the Poinciana Playhouse featuring dancers from the American Ballet Theater led by the magical Natasha Makarova, the pale blonde ballerina who defected from Russia on gossamer wings and who is presently engaged in winning over the West.

“Makarova and five other visiting dancers admirably performed gems from ‘Don Quixote,’ ‘Giselle,’ ‘La Cygne,’ ‘Swan Lake,’ etc. The playhouse (capacity 800, including Charlie Munn) was packed, and from time to time cries of bravo, bravissimo rent the air. It was really rather surprising as Palm Beach audiences are not famous for unbridled enthusiasm. Ask anyone.

“The Kennedy family, practically indigenous to Palm Beach as we all know, was represented in the audience by Rose and Sen. Ted Kennedy. Rose Kennedy was looking – well, marvelous is the word – all in blue print with a jeweled belt clasping her trim waist. The Kennedys sat at Mrs. Stephen Sanford’s table at the party in the playhouse’s Celebrity Room after the performance.”

The “Suzy Says” column of July 15, 1973 in the *Syracuse Herald-American* reported, “Mrs. Stephen Sanford, the carpet heiress, and Albin Holder, the millionaire, are starting a new Palm Beach club, to be called the Poinciana, you’ll be tickled to hear. The club, a year and a half in the planning, hopes to replace the round table that existed so many years at the old Coral Beach Club.

“The reason behind all this enterprise is that the existing Palm Beach clubs are so big and impersonal, namely the Everglades with about 1,700 members, the Bath and

Tennis with 1,300 members and the Beach Club with almost 1,000. The Poinciana will be cozier, no?

“The new club will be located in the huge celebrity room premises of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse, and John Volk, the eminent Palm Beach architect, is revamping the whole area. When completed, it is hoped that it will resemble White’s, the distinguished men’s club on London’s St. James Street, smacking of gentility, privacy, poshness, the whole bloody lot.

“A superbly paneled governors’ room will face Lake Worth, suitable for small dinner parties, tournaments, etc. Thanks to Albin Holder, who with Mrs. Sanford made the deal with Florida East Coast Properties, the club has a 10-year lease on the premises.”

The "Suzy Says" column appearing in the Syracuse Herald American of March 23, 1975, stated, “Everyone who is anyone in Palm Beach (and there are divergent opinions) will be at the Colony Gala tonight, a combination theater presentation at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse followed by a supper dance in the Poinciana Club. The gala will salute Bob Hope and benefit the American Cancer Society. And good old Bob will be there in the flesh.

“The Poinciana Club will be one big splash of red, white and silver. Tables with red and white striped overskirts to the floor and red handkerchief cloths edged with tassels. Silver candelabras with twinkling tapers as centerpieces. Silver wine coolers filled with red and white tulips. Everyone is excited.

“Lots of people are coming from out of town -- Bill Blass, the Winston Guests Jr., Johnny Galliher and Harry Platt from New York, Freddie and Jacqueline Behrens of

Caracas, Fritz and Carol Ingram from New Orleans, and Betty and Martin Brown and Clare and Hunter Armistead from Nashville.

“Among the locals who will show their pretty faces are Noreen and John Drexel, Anita Young, Rose Kennedy, Lillian and Alfonso Fanjul, Mary and Esmond Rothermere, Dorothy and Charlie Munn, Dawn and George Coleman, Chris Dunphy, CeeZee and Winston Guest, the Marquesa de Cuevas, Raymundo de Larrain, Nicky and Bunny du Pont, Aimee and Roddy de Heeren, Ann and Morton Downey, Jean and Tommy Tailer, Durie Shevlin and Bev Bogert. Normally you only see this group in a private home.

“Mrs. Guilford Dudley is general chairman. Mrs. Stephen Sanford is chairman emeritus. Mrs. Douglas Fairbanks and Mrs. Earl E. T. Smith are co-chairmen and Mr. and Mrs. Pepe Fanjul are heads of the junior committee. Robert Watenhall and David McConnell, owners of Palm Beach's Colony Hotel, are sponsoring the entire evening. They and Bob Hope are the ones who deserve the big, wet kisses.”

Later Shows and Later Years, 1980s and 1990s

An article in the June 21, 1995 *Palm Beach Post* by Thom Smith stated, “These days the only calm place around Royal Poinciana Playhouse is the lobby. All 862 seats have been ripped out of the auditorium. Why not—they've been there since the place opened in 1968 [that sure doesn't sound right?]. Replacements will arrive in the fall, in plenty of time for the new season.

“On the south side of the building, decorator Ann Downey hopes the Poinciana Club also will be ready. It was closed last season. A shell of its former self, even the club's floors have been ripped out to the bare earth. Downey, who has decorated the homes of such chic clients as Frank Sinatra, is known for her impeccable taste. Her plans for Poinciana include Mexican tile, fans, trellises, outdoor dining. ‘We want it to be informal, fun...’ said Downey. ‘This will bring back the old charm of Palm Beach’ Membership will cost \$300. Despite rumors to the contrary, it will not, Downey stressed, be a clone of the infamous—some would say seedy—and dearly departed Au Bar, which sat just across the parking lot.”

Landmark Preservation and Historic Building Designation

As the Poinciana's 50th Anniversary Arrives in 2007

An article by David Rogers in the *Palm Beach Daily News* of July 21, 2005 reported that the Palm Beach Landmarks Preservation Commission in a surprise and welcome move had voted unanimously to start the process leading to the consideration of landmark status for the Royal Poinciana Playhouse and the entire 12-acre Royal Poinciana Plaza property. The owners, Poinciana Management, want to redevelop the parcel, and the landmark designation would prevent the owners from demolishing the Playhouse without the board's consent. Reporter Rogers cautioned, "A move to landmark the plaza and Playhouse might be an uphill battle, as the Town Council in recent years has not been willing to designate buildings less than 50 years old nor to designate buildings when owners object."

Seasons, Shows and Stars Year-by-Year

Sandy Dennis has her 1956?? Stage debut in *Bus Stop* at the Royal Poinciana (did they mean Palm Beach Playhouse?).

In 1958, *Holiday for Lovers*, starring Bob Cummings, was the initial offering. Subsequent shows were: February 17th, Vincent Price in *A Visit to a Small Planet*, March 17, Billie Burke in the tryout of *Lady of the House*, a new comedy by Paul Crabtree, and March 24th, Fernanda Montel in *Roberta*.

The *Odessa American* of Odessa, Texas on March 9, 1958, mentioned that Alexis Smith and Craig Stevens were going to play in *King of Hearts* the next evening at the Royal Poinciana playhouse.

The *Mansfield News Journal* of Mansfield, Ohio, in its March 20, 1958 issue, printed a Walter Winchell “On Broadway” column that thanked to Mr. and Mrs. Laddie Sanford, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor “and all their high falutin' friends” for the large Polo Ball they put on benefiting the Runyon Cancer Fund the previous evening at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

The Post Standard of Syracuse announced in its August 16, 1959 issue that Fay Bainter had played in *The Girls in 509* at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

The Nevada State Journal of Reno announced in its November 4, 1959 issue that Lily Lodge, daughter of our Ambassador to Spain, had been “bitten by the show-biz bug” and was to be one of the cast at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse soon.

Paul and Mary Crabtree presented *The Fantasticks* (date?) at the Poinciana, giving the show its first production outside of New York City.

The *Holland Evening Sentinel* of Holland, Michigan on February 22, 1960, noted that Jim Dyas, who was then operating the Red Barn Theater near Saugatuck, Michigan during summers, and his wife, Dorothy Lee Tompkins, were with the production staff of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse for its yearly grand opening January 23rd with Helen Hayes starring in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Another article noted that except for his three years as a paratrooper in the OSS during World War II, Dyas had devoted his entire life to the theater.

The *Chronicle Telegram* of Elyria, Ohio, in its March 24, 1960 issue reported that stage star Kim Stanley suffered a miscarriage in the early stages of her pregnancy and had to cancel her appearance next week in Royal Poinciana's *Two For the Seesaw*.

Holland Evening Sentinel of March 28, 1960, noted that James Dyas had continued to be busy at Royal Poinciana Playhouse, now directing *Once More With Feeling* starring Chester Morris, Jan Sterling and Fred Clark. Dyas also directed during this winter Palm Beach season *The Golden Fleecing*, a recently released comedy hit. In early 1962, Dyas brought along to Florida with him from the Michigan theater scenic designer Richard Segar.

Gerald F. Reidenbaugh was acting at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse with his wife Shirley in 1961.

The *Nevada State Journal* of Reno, Nevada, on March 15, 1961, announced that Arlene Francis, a regular panelist on the popular television show *What's My Line*, was starring in a revival of *Old Acquaintance* at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

Among the 10 offerings of the 1963 season were Hugh O'Brian in *The Tender Trap*; Arlene Francis in *Janus*; Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker*, with Faye Emerson;

and Jean Kerr's successful comedy, *Mary, Mary*, with Jeffrey Lynn. During this season, James Riley was manager and art director of the Royal Poinciana Playhouse, which one newspaper of the time called “a ‘showcase’ theater featuring new plays and standard classics with professional guest directors and stars.”

Earl Wilson, writing in the March 26, 1964 *Times Recorder* of Zanesville Ohio, wrote that the "new Eddie Fisher" sang at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse at a tribute for deceased President John F. Kennedy. Fisher said that he wanted to become a band singer again, and, indeed, he sang with the dance band for a full hour. “He crooned his love tunes across the mike at Pamela Turnure, Jackie Kennedy's secretary.”

The *Coshocton Tribune* [Ohio] of March 16, 1965 reported that Jennifer Jones was rehearsing in New York for her part at Frank J. Hale's Palm Beach Playhouse and had refused to grant any interviews or permit rehearsal photographs.

In 1966, Richard Chamberlain appeared in *The Philadelphia Story* at the Royal Poinciana with Joan Marshall.

In 1968, Jerry Lester and Edward Everett Horton appeared at what an archive calls the “Frank J. Hale Playhouse” in the show, *Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*.

George M began playing February 16, 1970 at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse. It had opened in Florida January 19th at the Parker Playhouse in Fort Lauderdale and then moved to the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami on February 3rd before coming to Palm Beach.

In 1973, Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach appeared at the Royal Poinciana in *Waltz of the Toreadors*.

The *Syracuse Herald Journal* of October 16, 1974, mentioned that *Noel Coward* in *Two Keys*, a pair of Coward's one act plays popular on Broadway in 1973, would begin a national tour January 6th at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse with the original cast of Anne Baxter, Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy. Eleven cities were to be visited, with the finale being in Los Angeles.

The *Gettysburg Times* of March 10, 1976 announced that now that filming for *All In The Family* had concluded for this season, Bill Putch of *Totem Pole Playhouse in Gettysburg* was busy directing *Jean Stapleton Mornings At Seven* which would open the following week at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse in Palm Beach, Florida. It was to have a two-week run there and then go on to Ontario, Canada, for a four week run.

Patty Duke appeared with Melissa Gilbert March 1979 in *The Miracle Worker*. The production was a rehearsal of sorts for an NBC Theater Presentation.

The *Valley Independent* of Monessen, Pennsylvania of January 18, 1980, mentioned that Anita Gillette, Arlene Francis and Barry Nelson would costar the following week in *Harold J. Kennedy's production of Terence Rattigan's courtroom melodrama The Winslow Boy* at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

The *Valley Independent* of Monessen, Pennsylvania on January 26, 1980 reported that Barbara Rush would star the following week in George Furth's comedy *Twigs* at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse.

The *Syracuse Herald-Journal* of December 21, 1983, announced that *The Show-Off* would travel to Palm Beach, Florida, for a week's engagement at the Royal Poinciana Playhouse starting December 27th, and would then move to Fort Lauderdale's Parker Playhouse from January 10th through the 29th.

The Poinciana production of *Jerry's Girls* showcasing the music of Jerry Herman took place in 1984 with Carol Channing, Leslie Uggams, and Andrea McArdle. A live recording of the show was cut onto a two-CD set of the same title, containing 39 tracks.

In February 1985, Christopher Plummer and Glynis Johns appeared at the Poinciana in *Peccadillo*, with Plumber playing Vito De Angellis. This was the world premiere of a comedy written and directed by Garson Kanin.

On February 16, 1988, *Arsenic and Old Lace* opened at the Poinciana, starring Dody Goodman, James Macarthur, and Edie Adams.

The 1995-1996 season (does that mean starting in 1996??) featured *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* January 9th through January 21st; the Isadora Duncan Dance Company on January 27th; *Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh* January 29th through February 4th; the Greater Palm Beach Symphony on February 12th; Dionne Warwick February 13th through February 18th; *Song of Singapore* with Loretta Swit February 21st through February 25th; *Stomp* February 27th through March 10th; *Raisins and Almonds* March 13th through March 17th; and The Mitzi Gaynor Show March 19th through March 24th.

In the 1990s??, Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach opened at the Poinciana March 28 (year??) in *Down the Garden Paths*. Also appearing in the show were their daughter, Roberta Wallach, and Amy Stiller, daughter of Jerry Stiller and the play's author, Anne Meara.

November 16 through December 5, 1999, Valerie Harper appeared in *All Under Heaven*.

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