

A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Depression by an enterprising young actor named Robert Porterfield. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, "With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh." The price of admission was 35 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading "ham for Hamlet" caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared \$4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

There are many firsts in the history of the Barter Theatre. In 1946, Barter was designed The State Theatre of Virginia, the first theatre to receive a form of recognition that is now in practice nationwide. In 1949, when Barter took a production of *Hamlet* to Denmark, it was funded in part by the federal government through the Department of the Interior, now the National Endowment for the Arts. Barter was a founding member of the League of Resident Theatres, a national association of resident theatres. After celebrating its 73rd birthday in 2006, Barter is now the longest running professional Equity theatre in the nation.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Kevin Spacey. and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of *Cheers*, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney

Robert Porterfield died in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington had been at Barter as an actor in the 1950s as an actor and the 1970s as a stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the producing artistic director in October 1992. In that time attendance has grown from 42,000 annual patrons to more than 140,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements have also been made. Including renovations to both theatres, addition of the Café at Barter Stage II and most recently the dramatic improvements made to Stonewall Square in 2006.

Barter represents three distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre, Barter Theatre Stage II and The Barter Players. Barter Theatre, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Stage II, across the street from the theatre and beyond Stonewall Square, is perfect for more adventurous productions. Stage II offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting. The Barter Players is a talented ensemble of actors, producing plays for young audiences throughout the year.

Throughout the year, Barter presents morning performances for students who are brought in from many states around the region, some up to 200 miles away. Barter also continues a tradition of touring that dates back to 1933, performing throughout Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, Maryland, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, West Virginia and Kentucky.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.