

Bow To Stern

Ed Stern is even more accessible than a life insurance salesman. When you go to The Playhouse - and I hope all of you do - you'll see Ed before the performance, you'll see him at intermission, and you'll see him after the show. He wants to know how you liked what you saw. He needs and wants your opinion, good or bad. This is not just on the odd Tuesday evening; this is at every performance. He is the Cincinnati Playhouse 24/7.

When Ed started in the fall of 1992, we had 14,852 subscribers and a deficit of \$1.2 million. We were doing six plays in the Marx Theatre and five in the Shelterhouse. This year Ed has 21,599 subscribers and, for nine consecutive years, a surplus. Ed does 55 productions a year, including Saturday mornings for kids. Monday evenings for select adults, summer productions, and lots and lots of outreach. The board has never requested that Ed do more shows; he just thinks a dark theatre is wasted. Hence, we are looking forward to "Midnight Madness" - plays that start at 12:00 a.m. and run until 3:30 in the morning. That's the only time we have open.

Who is this guy? He grew up in Queens (Forest Hills, to be exact). His father was first generation

Hungarian, owned his own shirt-making business. He made contract shifts for J.C. Penney and other big department stores, and he worked in the Empire State Building. Ed's mother was a homemaker. *But*, he lived in New York City, and his parents took him to musicals. They saw "My Fair Lady," "South Pacific," and "Music Man". He remembers seeing "Bye, Bye, Birdie" on New Year's Eve. The time was the late 50's and early 60's, and musicals were on the wane. Ed started to go to "straight" plays without his parents. He saw everything on and off Broadway, a play every Friday night. The last two years in high school, he would see 50 plays a year. Of course, he was educating himself. Ed says his parents never got in his way. "They let me follow my bliss."

Ed went to the University of Virginia to major in international affairs. He thought that meant sex with foreign women. But the siren kept calling. He began directing plays for the school. By the time he graduated, he had directed 23 plays. Naturally, he switched his major to theatre arts. Upon graduation his mother asked him, "Ed, what did you major in?" He said, "Theatre. I'm sure I told you. I switched two years ago." She said, "Yes, you did, but I thought you were kidding."

Anne Ward, his present wife, was in charge of scheduling plays. Ed told her that he wanted to direct one play a month. She said, "No, that's impossible. The rules say you can only do one a semester." He replied, "I will do one a month." Anne said, "I'll speak to the chairman of the department about that." Ed said, "Go ahead. Be my guest." The chairman said, "Oh, he's very good. Let's let him do it." Anne said he was the most self-absorbed, arrogant person she'd ever met. "I just couldn't stand him." Naturally, they got married.

When Anne married Ed her family was appalled, his family was appalled, and Anne was appalled. She was a product of Miss Porter's School, Sweetbriar and the

University of Virginia. Anne was going to marry a southern Episcopalian who would become a doctor or, at a very bare minimum, a lawyer. Instead, she married a nice Jewish boy from New York with no prospects. When Ed and Anne decided to elope, she called her mother and said she was getting married and asked, "Mother, who do you think it is?" On the third try her mother guessed right.

On the first day of their honeymoon - they went to New York City, of course - Ed had tickets to see James Earl Jones in "The Great White Hope," one of the great plays of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, Anne had the flu, so she told Ed they must leave at intermission. She gets out of the cab at the hotel, but he stays put. "Aren't you coming?" she pleads. "Why? I can't help you. I'm going back for the second act." The taxi speeds off, leaving this beautiful girl on the first day of her honeymoon wondering what she got herself into. The hours pass, midnight comes and goes, she becomes concerned, then deeply worried. At about two in the morning, Ed breezes in. Anne goes crazy. "Where have you been?" "Like I told you, Anne, I couldn't help you. So, I went to a movie after the play." On the first day of their honeymoon. In spite of Ed, the marriage has lasted 34 years.

His goal in college was to be artistic director at a regional theatre. He achieved that at age 23 when he began the Indiana Rep. When you have a goal in mind, and you make it so young, what do you do with the rest of your life? After 10 years in Indianapolis he left and went to Rutgers to teach acting and do independent directing. He had done good work at the Great Lakes Theatre, and they tapped him to direct "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby." To direct "Nicholas Nickleby" is a Herculean job. It's 8-1/2 hours long, has 96 scenes and 645 lighting cues. The script is larger than the New York City white pages. Rehearsal time for the actors was 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Tech directing was from 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. This went on for three days, and Ed got two hours of sleep each

night. He was never tired, completely alert, as if energy fed on itself. "'Nicholas Nickleby'" was an event. It touched people. It made me so very proud. I came home after it opened, slept a week, and got up only to eat, and then back to bed. Was it worth it? Certainly."

All of the major roles at The Playhouse are played by Equity actors, who are based in New York City. Ed invited me to attend an audition for "Sweeney Todd." The sessions were held in a building that was dingy, on Seventh Avenue, a fifth floor walk-up. The small room was bare, except for a pianist. Ed and I sat behind a large, undecorated table. The scene was desolate, hardscrabble. I was apprehensive. "Who am I, Ed? Won't they know I'm a fraud?" "No, no. Relax. They won't care. I'll introduce you, and they'll never think of you again."

We must have heard 20 people in three hours. They were trying out for singing roles, so they could use a piece from "Sweeney Todd" or anything else they cared to choose. The aspirants told the piano player what they wanted to sing and in what key. They were all wonderful. I remember a young man who made up the lyrics to his own composition. It was about breasts. Big, small, pointed, lumpy, droopy, and so forth. Ed, always a gentleman said, "Thank you very much. We'll call you."

Ed considers his play for children. He chooses them, casts them and directs them, and, as far as he's concerned, they're all 100%, A+. Jackie Demaline is the theatre critic for the Cincinnati Enquirer. She is bright, theatrically knowledgeable and articulate. Sometimes her reviews of Ed's plays are - how does one say it? - tepid. When this happens, Ed goes into a funk. He won't talk with her except to answer her questions with "Yes. No. Goodbye," and is generally difficult. One time he called her many weeks after she had written a less-than-glowing review and allowed as how a truck loaded with fertilizer was at her office

door. Jackie says, "He always comes around - but it takes a while."

Ed tends to take on the persona of the plays he is directing. For instance, when directing Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey Into Night" he started to drink after rehearsals - and Ed doesn't drink. But, the characters in "Long Day's Journey" drink, and drink and drink. And Ed found himself coming home and slugging down sour mash. After the play he didn't drink a drop. God help him when he directs "Oh, Calcutta."

Christmas is one of Ed's favorite holidays, because every year Federated Stores buys the house for a matinee of "A Christmas Carol" for inner-city kids. Very few of the children have ever been in a theatre, much less seen live people on stage. They see the show, and lunch and presents are provided afterward. The kids come up on stage where the cast, in full costume, hands out gifts.

Last year, after everyone else had gone, there was just one small boy hanging back. He timidly approached Joneal Joplin (Scrooge), put his hand out, tentatively touched his cape, and in an amazed whisper said, "You are real." That's the reaction Ed lives for.

Today, success stories like "The Producers" are few. At the same time, not-for-profit regional theatres are experiencing a renaissance, and I'm pleased to say that the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park is at the forefront. To what can we attribute the incredible turnaround of The Playhouse's fortune? Two words: Ed Stern.

Howard L. Tomb
