

Cassius Carter Centre Stage

Darlene Gould Davies

Cassius Carter Centre Stage, that old and trusted friend, is gone. The theatre in the round at The Old Globe complex in Balboa Park had its days, and they were glorious. Who can forget “Charlie’s Aunt” (1970 and 1977), or the hilarious 1986 production of “Beyond the Fringe”? Was there ever a show in the Carter that enchanted audiences more than “Spoon River Anthology” (1969)? A. R. Gurney’s “The Dining Room” (1983) was delightful. Craig Noel’s staging of Alan Ayckbourn’s ultra-comedic trilogy “The Norman Conquests” (1979) still brings chuckles to those who remember. San Diegans will remember the Carter. It was a life well lived.

Cassius Carter Centre Stage, built in 1968 and opened in early 1969, was directly linked to the original Old Globe Theatre of the 1935-36 California-Pacific International Exposition in Balboa Park. It was not a new building but a renovation of Falstaff Tavern that sat next to The Old Globe.¹ In fact, until Armistead Carter



Falstaff Tavern ©SDHS, UT #82:13052, Union-Tribune Collection.

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Falstaff Tavern refreshments. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

expressed his wish to make a donation and name the remodeled Falstaff for his father in December 1968, The Old Globe planned to rename the renewed theatre, Falstaff Playhouse.²

As with most of the buildings erected in Balboa Park for the Exposition, The Old Globe, the Falstaff Tavern and the Old Curiosity Shop were temporary structures that were meant to be torn down at the conclusion of the 1935 fair.³ Falstaff Tavern was the spot where audiences and visitors purchased food and beverages (apple cider, tea, coffee, old English style tarts, meat pies, and other refreshments). It was Tudor in style and an architectural companion to the next-door Old Globe Theatre, a replica of the Elizabethan Globe Theatre in London, with its open ceiling

and hard bench seats. At Falstaff Tavern, delectable edibles were available to theatergoers before and after the forty-five-minute abridged versions of Shakespeare's plays. One author recalled, "For a nominal fee, The Old Globe Theatre produced five abridged performances of Shakespeare's plays daily. Two thousand five hundred eleven performances were given in the 1935 season alone. If you dined at Falstaff Tavern, Queen Elizabeth (Elizabeth Sowersby) might be seated at the next table."⁴

Preservation architect David Marshall wrote, "In 1936, the theater was sold to wreckers for \$400, but a citizen's committee was organized and raised funds to save the building."⁵ Mary Belcher Trapnell (later Farrell) led that group of concerned citizens to save the Globe complex at the conclusion of the Exposition.⁶ This was the same Mary Belcher who stood outside of the California Building with a floral bouquet to greet the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as he arrived for the 1935-36 Exposition. Her brother Frank Belcher was President of the Exposition Board. He was also in the jump seat of the President's convertible during his Exposition visit.⁷

Facing the likelihood of the imminent destruction of Falstaff Tavern, the 1936 "Committee to Save The Old Globe" swiftly went into action. To the dismay of Trapnell, and another committee member trying to prevent the work of the wrecking crew, they "found the much admired fireplace of Falstaff Tavern completely demolished" and could not persuade the crew to halt work.⁸ After dashing to the offices of the wrecking company, however, Mary was quoted a price that would ensure the end of demolition. She wrote a check from the committee funds account and the structure was saved, without its original fireplace.

Falstaff Tavern continued to serve as a mini restaurant until World War II intervened. The Navy occupied many buildings in Balboa Park during the early 1940s, including The Old Globe complex. When the Globe, also known as the San Diego Community Theatre, resumed theatrical work in 1947, things had changed.⁹



Old Globe Plaza. The Cassius Carter Center Stage is to the right of the theatre. Photo courtesy of the Old Globe.

Over time, the Falstaff space evolved into a place for catchall needs, e.g. rehearsal hall, meeting place, and casting calls. By 1961, director Craig Noel was ready to launch a permanent second theatre and, in makeshift manner, created a stage and seating in the round for productions of more experimental and non-mainstream fare. In 1963, Noel di-



"Godspell" 1975. Photo by Bob Redding. Courtesy of The Old Globe.

rected his first show in Falstaff. The floors were bare, and patrons sat on folding chairs arranged in three rows on risers.¹⁰ In this very modest environment, Noel and director William Roesch created their magic.

The first play produced was John Osborn's angry young man British drama "Look Back in Anger," and it was followed in the same season of 1963-64 by a deeply moving staging of Arthur Miller's "The Crucible."¹¹ Both of these successful productions made it clear that this kind of venue was important. Such shows as "Tartuffe" and "The Little Foxes" were artfully staged. Then, there was more choice for San Diego theatergoers, with varied styles and genres of plays.

It was not until 1968 that plans were definite to make the arena arrangement permanent by remodeling Falstaff to meet higher artistic and technical standards.¹² Of course, a new structure was preferred, but money at The Old Globe was a constant worry. So, due to insufficient funds for building anew, the Cassius Carter stage was built from Falstaff Tavern.¹³ The result was that some of the Falstaff



"School for Wives" 1974. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

building was kept and incorporated into the new one. When venerable Artistic Director Noel was asked, "Was only a token piece of Falstaff Tavern kept as part of the Carter?" he answered, "Oh, more than that, I think."¹⁴

In order to transform what had become an all purpose space into an arena theatre, considerable remodeling and expansion were undertaken. According to a 1995 publication, "The original production and administrative wing was constructed in 1965, and in 1969 the Cassius Carter Centre Stage was created from the former Falstaff Tavern."¹⁵ It was in many ways an extension, not a replacement. One gave birth to the other. On July 14, 1968, *San Diego Union* staff writer Welton Jones wrote, "The process of changing The Old Globe Theater's Falstaff Tavern from a general-purpose room to a 250-seat arena theater will involve excavation



Lowell Davies, president of the Old Globe Theatre board, takes notes while Artistic Director Craig Noel, long known as the creative force behind the scenes, plans the next production. Photo (1949) from the author's collection.

sited at the top of rather steeply descending stairs leading down to the stage. Noel and others referred to these as the "four corners."

The sequence of events leading to the Carter name is chronicled in the diaries of longtime Old Globe President Lowell Davies (1895-1983) who served in that capacity from 1947 until 1977, and afterward as board Chairman. Davies was a lawyer by profession who devoted much of his life to the arts. He was a member of the advisory committee of the National Endowment for the Arts during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. He also served for eight years on the California Arts Commission, appointed by then Governor Ronald Reagan.¹⁸



"Tartuffe" 1973-74. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

of a shallow bowl to allow for better sight lines, and removal of existing walls to accommodate an expanded, permanent seating arrangement surrounding 16 x 18-foot stage. The present tavern facade is obscured by refreshment booths."¹⁶ The building interior was extended 14 feet to the rear and an added foyer extended the building toward the greensward. Donna Couchman, long-time Old Globe costumer, remembers that the Falstaff kitchen was saved and the area incorporated into the Carter.¹⁷ There were four entrances into the arena theatre. Those entrances were



"The Little Foxes" 1977. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

The tale unfolded rapidly in 1968, as renovation proceeded. As late as July 1968 the *San Diego Union* reported that no construction contracts had been issued and that the city approval process was still to be undertaken.¹⁹ The entire naming process began and was completed between September 12, 1968, and January 21, 1969. On the former date, Davies wrote in his



"Otherwise Engaged" 1978. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

diary: "By globe this morn & talk with Craig about prof. play in Falstaff Playhouse next summer that could tour community colleges. Coffee house near completion."²⁰ Then, on October 8, 1968, Davies wrote, "Worked in office until 11:30 then to meeting the globe; carnation slender & meeting of Exec. Comm. until almost 3. Looked at starting of work on Falstaff Tavern—now Playhouse."²¹ Less than a week later, on October 21, he wrote of the board meeting, "Our annual report presented by Bernie Lamb, Treasurer. A very good year, even accepting gifts of \$68,000. Now we can safely pay the \$95-\$100,000 for the Falstaff Playhouse, now under construction."²²

There was a quick turn of events on December 4, the same day that Davies logged in his diary: "A summer Day. Must have been 75 degrees. Played tennis only 1 & 1/2 sets because Armistead Carter wanted to talk about gift of his for his family to the Falstaff Playhouse. He also wants to be a member of its directing group."²³ On December 12, he wrote, "Went over to Armie Carter's after dinner to talk about pictures for foyer of Cassius Carter Centre Stage. He is more appreciative of his father after all this attention to his father."²⁴ On Monday, January 20, 1969: "Set-back this morning when we decided to cancel gala performance set for Wed. Insufficient support. House will be at full dial tomorrow night. Adrienne set on having dull green carpet in foyer."²⁵ Then, the big night of Tuesday, January 21: "Home from Cassius Carter Centre Stage opening Ustinov's



"The Unknown Soldier and His Wife" 1968-69. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

"The Unknown Soldier and His Wife'...a gem of a theatre. Enjoyed play fairly well... Armistead, Polly [Carter], his sister & bro & wife & Cassius III there; they should be proud."²⁶

It was fitting to name the new theatre after Cassius Carter. Certainly his son Armistead Carter admired him, but there was more to it. It turns out Cassius Carter was an accomplished man who was notable in his own right. Though his profession was that of a lawyer, he was admired as an expert on the subject of Shakespeare. John White reported that Carter's former law partner in Texas stated that Carter knew most of the lines of Shakespeare's plays by memory. Nevertheless, he concluded, "While the theater memorializes Carter for his Shakespearean scholarship, he deserves to be remembered chiefly



Portrait of Cassius Carter from the original hanging in the theatre lobby. Photo by Iris Engstrand.

as the energetic district attorney of San Diego County from 1903 to 1906."²⁷

For many years, Cassius Carter's portrait hung in the theater with the caption, "Drama is the noblest form of human expression." This was the first line of a longer quote by Carter, which continued, "...A people that has no love for great plays and good players will show itself to be lacking in social development, in humane politics and in intellectual and moral life."²⁸ He wrote those words in 1905. In 1969, his devotion to drama was acknowledged when the Center Stage was named for him. Carter's portrait will hang in the new Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre, which will replace the Cassius Carter Centre Stage.

Eventually, time ran out for the Carter. What had met building codes in 1969 no longer fulfilled legal requirements. Louis G. Spisto, The Old Globe's CEO, pointed out to *San Diego Union-Tribune* reporter Jeannette Steele that the Carter's electrical wiring was "pieced together" and that the theater had



Jenni-Lynn McMillin in *The Old Globe/USD Graduate Theatre Program's 2004 production of "Twelfth Night."* Directed by Patricia Conolly. Photo: Jennifer Watts.



"USA" 1976. Photo by Bill Reid. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

no audience bathrooms.²⁹ There were, however, by the date of the article in 2008, three other sets of patron bathrooms in The Old Globe complex, but not at the Carter. Actors and stagehands could only enter and leave from the set through the audience. In short, everything was out of date—everything but the love of the space by performers, directors, crafts people, and theatergoers. Theatre director Noel has consistently claimed his favorite production space was the Carter.³⁰

From those associated with the Carter, stories flow. Betty Meads, who performed in nine Old Globe shows (only one of which was in the Carter), remembers playing the piano on a specially built balcony for the Bicentennial production of "Rodgers & Hart" in the Carter in 1976. "I had to be up in the balcony throughout the whole show, and it was hotter than the dickens," she recalled. There were six singers in the cast and Meads was the accom-

panist. She describes the Carter as, "intimate, providing experiences like those of pre-television times." She also characterized it as good for small shows, but very restrictive: "With no walls, somebody was looking at the actors at all times from some vantage point. It required a consummate actor, one who was very agile, who could really be appreciated." She added, "It was a forum where the audience was part of the show. It was also a hazardous setting." As Meads pointed out, people were human obstacles, stretching their legs into the aisles, and those aisles consisted of steps that actors frequently walked or ran up and down.³¹

Players on the Carter stage over a forty-year period comprise a roster of the most talented, unique, funny, and unforgettable performers anywhere. Some were equity members; some were not. Among that stellar group were Robert Foxworth, the great Irene Tedrow (a member of the 1935 Globe Players), Don Sparks, Katherine McGrath, Serena Pratt, Daniel J. Travanti, Lillian Garrett, Larry Drake, the much loved C. Wayland Capwell, David Dukes, Mary Louise Wilson, Kandis Chappell, Dakin Matthews, Jonathan McMurtry, and Diane and John Sinor.³²

Richard Seer, Director of The Old Globe MFA program, faculty member at the University of San Diego, and seasoned director in the Carter space, views



"Pericles." The Old Globe/USD Graduate Theatre Program 2007 directed by Richard Seer. Photo: J.T. MacMillan.

the Carter as an actor's theatre, a place where actors could shine. "It's very exciting for audiences to be that close to drama, to view combustion first hand. It was with this in mind that that the 'Classics Up Close' series was designed," he said. Seer took part in some of the discussions regarding ways to recreate the ambience of the Carter in the new White Theatre.³³

Couchman has many fond memories of working in the Carter. "I was an unpaid costumer from 1965 until 1967, then paid from 1967 until 1980," she said. She worked on the Carter opening production of "The Unknown Soldier and His Wife" and she remembers that the Carter opening was delayed because the seats did not arrive in time. A major drawback to the Carter was the absence of dressing rooms. "In the Carter, costume changes were made either in the lobby or outdoors back of the theatre. People who drove down the services road and made U-turns frequently saw actors in their underwear." Couchman remembers the joy associated



Ionesco's "Macbett" 1975. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.



Kate Turnbull and Chip Brookes in The Old Globe/USD Graduate Theatre Program's 2006 production of "Much Ado About Nothing." Directed by Richard Seer Photo: J.T. MacMillan



The Old Globe/USD Graduate Theatre Program's 2006 production of "Much Ado About Nothing." Directed by Richard Seer. Photo: J.T. MacMillan.

with working in the Carter: "During comedies, people sometimes laughed so hard, they literally fell into the aisles. That happened with the first production of 'Charley's Aunt' [Summer 1970]. Looking back, I realize there were many limitations to the Carter, but those very limitations caused everyone to be more creative."³⁴

Old Globe costumer and hat maker Diana Cavagnaro worked on quite a few shows in the Carter, including "Dear Liar" (1981), "The Gin Game" (1982), "Moby Dick Rehearsed" (1982), "Mass Appeal" (1983), "Wings" (1983), and "Macbeth" (1983). "Anthony Zerbe, who I watched on 'Harry O' and 'Mannix' was pleasant and so humble. I also remember making hats for 'Billy Bishop Goes to War' in 1982. The stars were David Ogden Stiers and Harry Groener. Something happened with the hats, either they didn't get done in time for the photo shoot or they decided not to use them in the play, but that wasn't unusual. I also played the flute in 'Poor Murderer' in 1980. I loved working in the Carter because it was very intimate. You felt like you were just talking with someone standing next to you."³⁵

Merle Wahl, long time volunteer and supporter of The Old Globe, recalls several of the Globe Guilders awards nights held in the Carter. The Globe Guilders auxiliary is a volunteer group at The Old Globe that has been in existence for more than five decades.³⁶ One awards night she recalls vividly. It had a Mexican theme and was very festive. Event chair Wahl and co-chair Judy Miller dressed in colorful Mexican attire and Craig Noel served as Master of Ceremonies. She said, "He wore a large Mexican straw hat that had a big red pepper in the center, and he was at his best that evening, funny, charming, and articulate. Why not? He was in the Carter, and he was with his favorite gals, the Guilders." She added, "Craig always had a great love for Mexico, you know. In fact, it was his fondness for Mexico that led to his founding of Teatro Meta, the Hispanic wing of the Globe's educational

program."³⁷ The beautiful bicultural production of "Fanlights" (1983) grew out of Noel's passion for Hispanic culture. "Fanlights" was performed in both Spanish and English.³⁸

New and innovative programs flowered in that arena setting. A fundraising support group for Hispanic theatre at The Old Globe was formed and launched with a graceful and successful formal evening. Years later, "La Pastorela" was staged in the Carter (2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07) and directed by William Virchis, continuing the Hispanic thread of the Carter's theatrical life.³⁹

The Carter played important roles in other aspects of The Old Globe's history. A memorial service for Old Globe iconic costumer and set designer Peggy Kellner drew a large community of Globe family members. Collectively, those in attendance shared voluminous memories of theatrical moments in the Carter's life.

So it went, play after play, until it was no more. In 2008, the wrecking ball began its work.

In 2009, San Diego's long-time and much respected theatre critic Jeff Smith wrote:

WILL NO ONE MOURN THE CARTER? The Cassius Carter Centre Stage is no more. The Old Globe demolished its intimate theater-in-the-round to make way for a state-of-the-art, ADA compliant arena. Named for its generous donors, the Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre will open January 2010. But, in the meantime, San Diego has lost a historic playing space, and no one has mourned its passing.⁴⁰

Asked how he would bid farewell to the Cassius Carter Centre Stage, Noel answered, "With gratitude. I did my best work there."⁴¹

Sometimes people mourn what might have been, but, in the case of the Carter, they may mourn the loss of what truly existed. To have seen and experienced it is cause for celebration. Now, The Old Globe moves to a new period in its history. 2010 marks its 75th anniversary, a fitting time to inaugurate a fresh performance venue. The Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre will be beautiful and up-to-date. In



Carter Stage showing audience. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.

addition to incorporating a sense of theatrical intimacy, a hallmark of the Carter, the White Theatre will provide more space, advanced technical support, and building code compliance. All of this is necessary in a different age. A new building celebrates the future. As Bob Dylan wrote so poignantly in his song, which was also the title of a recent Globe production, "The Times They Are a-Changin'" (2006).⁴²

Change is constant, but memories of the Falstaff Tavern and the Cassius Carter Center Stage will linger.

Endnotes

1. JoAnne Boncher, "History of The Old Globe Theatre," unpublished manuscript written for Zeta Rho (2008), 7; Welton Jones, "Globe Will Enlarge Tavern For Arena-Stage Theater," *San Diego Union*, July 14, 1968, 1, 6, 8.
2. Lowell Davies, *Diary*, 1968. Author's collection.
3. Florence Christman, *The Romance of Balboa Park* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1985), 71.
4. Sam Erwine, "The 1935 Expo," *San Diego Magazine* (June 1965), 71.
5. David Marshall, *San Diego's Balboa Park* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 94.
6. Christman, *The Romance of Balboa Park*, 91.
7. Erwine, "The 1935 Expo," 66-67, 71.
8. Christman, *The Romance of Balboa Park*, 92.
9. Craig Noel, conversations with the author, ca. 1980-2009.
10. Jeff Smith, "All Around You," *San Diego Reader*, February 19, 2009, 112.
11. Production List, Old Globe Theatre.
12. Jones, "Globe Will Enlarge Tavern For Arena-Stage Theater," 1, 6, 8.
13. Lowell Davies, *Diary*, 1968. Author's collection.
14. Noel, conversations with the author, 2008.
15. *Old Globe Theatre for the Next Generation* (San Diego: Old Globe Theatre, 1995), 10.
16. Jones, "Globe Will Enlarge Tavern For Arena-Stage Theater," 1, 6, 8.
17. Donna Couchman, interviewed by author, August 10, 2009.
18. Lowell Davies Papers, 1895-1893, Special Collection, San Diego State University Library, <http://infodome.sdsu.edu/about/depts/spcollections/collections/daviespapers.shtml> (accessed August 15, 2009).
19. Jones, "Globe Will Enlarge Tavern For Arena-Stage Theater," 1, 6, 8.
20. Davies, *Diary*, September 12, 1968.
21. *Ibid.*, October 8, 1968.
22. *Ibid.*, October 21, 1968.
23. *Ibid.*, December 4, 1968.
24. *Ibid.*, December 12, 1968.
25. *Ibid.*, January 20, 1969.
26. *Ibid.*, January 21, 1969. Davies wrote this entry on the January 21 page of his 1969 diary. He was in the habit of writing each day's entries before retiring. The author notes, however, that Beth Mohr states that the Cassius Carter Center Stage opened on January 23, 1969. Beth Mohr, "The Old Globe Theatre: Highlights from Fifty Years," *The Journal of San Diego History* (hereafter *JSDH*) 31, no. 2 (Spring 1985), 100.

27. John White, "Cassius Carter: The Scrapbooks of a District Attorney," *JSDH* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1974), 36-43.
28. *Ibid.*, 36.
29. Jeannette Steele, "Museum's Theatre-in-the-Round Passes Its First Test as a Stand-In," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, August 9, 2008.
30. Noel, conversations with the author, ca. 1980-2009.
31. Betty Meads, interviewed by author, July 2009.
32. Production List, Old Globe Theatre.
33. Richard Seer, interviewed by author, August 8, 2009.
34. Donna Couchman, interviewed by author, August 10, 2009.
35. Diana Cavagnaro, interviewed by author, August 5, 2009.
36. *Backstage at the Globe* (San Diego: Old Globe Theatre, 2000), 25.
37. Merle Wahl, interviewed by author, August 3, 2009.
38. Production List, Old Globe Theatre.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Smith, "All Around You."
41. Noel, conversation with the author, 2008.
42. Production List, Old Globe Theatre. *The Times They Are a-Changin'* was the title of singer-songwriter Bob Dylan's third studio album, released in January 1964 by Columbia Records. It also was the title of a musical, directed and choreographed by Twyla Tharp. After a production at the Globe, the show opened on Broadway in 2006.



Artist's rendering of the Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre situated within the new Conrad Prebys Theatre Center. Photo courtesy of The Old Globe.