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Wit, Substance, and Survival of the Arcade in the Performances
of Fort Myers' Florida Repertory Theater

There is a sense of revival in downtown Fort Myers—not just of buildings and history, but also the substance of another era. In the center of the historic district, interpretative performances of insightful drama are being exposed to public eyes and ears, old and new alike. Some dramas are current productions of new plays while others are adaptations or true-to-the-original-script musicals or adaptations of such earlier works. In this way, the Florida Repertory Theater troupe and their performance center echo the songs and times of past and present generations.

The Arcade Theater in downtown Fort Myers is a prime example of surviving turn-of-the-century commercial style architecture that remains with us as a historic site and a rallying point for active promoters of the dramatic arts in southwest Florida. The theater address today is 2267 First Street, these numbers appearing over an entrance at the center of the block between Jackson Street to the east and Hendry Street to the west.

The immediate area is also the historic site of Fort Harvie. The original fort was established and abandoned twice, first in 1841 and again in 1850 during the Seminole War. The war concluded in 1858 and the fort was not reestablished until the Civil War blockade of southern ports increased demands on available food supplies. So it happened in the early 1860s that Fort Myers was built on the same site in order to supply cattle to

Union naval vessels. Today, the Federal Courthouse in classical revival style stands on First Street across Jackson Street as a memorial to the order first established by the fort in earlier times.

The Ionic columns that front this building, along with entablatures hung over the large windows on First and Jackson Streets, contrast the commercial style architecture that otherwise dominates the entertainment district, as the area of Hendry and First streets is named in Fort Myers' *Downtown Master Plan & Streetscape Design* of 1994. Many of these buildings—especially the theater—in fact predate the Federal Building. The Arcade was built in 1908 and was the first brick building in town. It became a center for vaudeville variety shows that fueled a thirst for entertainment in the townsfolk. A block away on Hendry, the Edison Theater remains much the same as when it opened in 1920, first demonstrating the capabilities of Edison's cinemascope with the local public in showing silent films of the day. Both theaters were opened and originally operated by John Hendry, one of the early mayors of Fort Myers and an historic character in Florida politics.

The theater remains with us thanks in part to later compromises in land and building use as the density of the town's center increased. During the early 1980s, the Arcade subsisted on revenues from moviegoers. Since 1986, the greater area known as the mixed-retail district has been reinvigorated and restored through the hard work and incentives provided for in the first draft of the Downtown Master Plan; as part of this plan, the Arcade was completely restored to its historic function with enhancements in the early nineties. At an earlier time, the Bradford House was built fronting the Arcade itself as a three-story painted brick building; the lot was apparently sectioned some time

after the theater was sited and built. The main Arcade entrance remains on First Street—a set of doors that opens into a tiled hall transecting and connecting both buildings while leading to another entrance on Bay Street.

The Bradford House Apartments, as they currently stand, share many features with the simpler but similar earth-resting design of the Arcade. Functioning as the façade and main entrance to the theater building, this taller structure is adorned with rows of tall large windows indicating the upper floors. Also segmenting the building into floors is a strip of royal blue moulding, the relief of which underlines pairs of windows on the second floor as well as each floor itself. This latter set of horizontal mouldings hugs the entire surface of the building, curving around columnar protrusions that extend from sidewalk to sky. The second-floor moulding is accented with a blue dental design that “bites” into the neutral white of painted brick just below. This decorative detail helps integrate the next element still further below—a five foot sloped overhang covered with glazed blue roof tiles, which shields a few feet of sidewalk beneath from the elements for the entire length of the block.

In the center, this overhang subsides and instead a larger horizontal awning extends out from the entrance across the width of sidewalk there. This substantial structure in itself hangs from iron bars above that triangulate the surfaces of sidewalk and façade. The awning has a pointed shield shape adorned with “ARCADE,” repeating on either side in yellow-glazed aluminum lettering. On show nights, this and a two-sided vertical sign above glow in neon colors amidst the subdued ambient streetlights. The central bar-supported awning mimics those of storefronts across the street, preserving and accenting a feature common to early twentieth century commercial style buildings.

The edifice housing the theater itself is relegated to Bay Street, a block away from the Calusahatchee River. Like the façade, the building is painted white with a simple relief pattern of raised bricks that frame sections of this wall. A modest entrance with a lightweight awning is labeled “Florida Repertory Theater.” The wall left of the Bay Street entrance encloses the theater itself and is adorned with the logos now adopted by the Florida Repertory Theater to promote their current performances: the expanded images of an actor’s mask and a dancing child or muse are painted in green and blue; these lie within the relief brickwork frames, painted in royal blue. Above, a thin blue line accents the upper edge of this wall. The east and west sides of the Arcade building take this height and step up five times to plateau centrally, enclosing an area that might appear to contain space in a pointed vault, though the roof lies flat below this decorative accent.

While the Bradford House frontage and west-facing side are accented with unpainted, natural brickwork arches—some as relief, and others that protrude over the sidewalk like flying buttresses—the theater building uses similar brickwork to cover the space and accent the outside of both entrance doorways that open into either end of the central hall. Meanwhile, one such arch appears to buttress the central awning on First Street. Under this protection, geometric tessellations of tiles adorn the main entrance. Mounted on the supporting arch is a roster of upcoming and current shows, posted behind a glass enclosure.

The inner hallway itself is lined with the same decorative bricks near the floor, while about two-thirds of the way between floor and ten-foot suspended ceiling, decorative outdoor brass wall lamps align along both sides of the hall warmly lighting faintly painted passage walls. Near the First Street entrance, an eatery shares its tables

with the hall and cordons off its own space with wooden latticework from floor to ceiling. The other end of the hall sports the ticket office behind glass panels, and the theater entrance itself—carpeted in bright red. The carpet protrudes from this space, under a row of swinging glass doors and down a short but steep ramp that brightly welcomes patrons—including those in wheelchairs. During performances, the theater is ensconced in darkness, but the original proscenium arch frames the action onstage and urges audience-actor interaction.

The Florida Repertory Company makes its home at the Arcade Theater. Presently the Florida “Rep” is in their third season of bringing quality performances to historic downtown Fort Myers. An important element of the business district rejuvenation, the theater generally offers performances every night except Mondays. I can personally attest to the quality and talent in these productions, as I have attended two performances, and certainly plan to see more. I attended the Tony award winning *Art* this past January and recently attended a performance of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize winning play *W;t* (*Wit*).

The performance of *Wit* allowed me to take an intimate spiritual journey into the mind and heart of a terminally ill cancer patient. Prior to her hospitalization, our main character, Professor Vivian Bearing, was a teacher and scholar specializing in seventeenth Century English literature. With dry humor and sharp “wit,” she repeatedly shares the dehumanizing experience associated with aggressive chemotherapy and its physical and mental effects on her. The playwright effectively shows irony in the healthcare that Vivian undergoes, in essence a demonstration of the word “healthcare” as an oxymoron. Vivian Bearing’s journey begins as one of intellect but finishes as one of the heart.

Wit is a tragicomedy that is multifaceted in its message. Life and death, cancer treatment being harsher than the disease, the inhuman clinical treatment by healthcare professionals in present day hospitals, and the positive effect of human kindness, are all-important messages presented here. The main character, Vivian, recalls literature's perception of life and death as she prepares to overcome her treatment with her intellect, until she comes to face to face with her humanity as her body physically deteriorates. Her favorite subject of study, the sonnets of John Donne, are shared in her asides and serve as a metaphor for her quest; his work illustrates the intellectual paradox of death and salvation. Vivian Bearing's deepest moments of sorrow and introspection are often interrupted by "How are you feeling today?" These moments allow for comic relief or what Aristotle called the proper purgation of emotion.

The audience is introduced to Dr. Bearing during a consultation with her oncologist, Dr. Harvey Kelekian, in which she, Vivian, is informed of her dire medical condition. In this scene we have the two doctors communicating at an intellectual level, clinically describing the physical hell of experimental chemotherapy. They both acknowledge they are teachers and scholars seeking to control their world through their pursuit of knowledge. Later Dr. Bearing is introduced to Dr. Jason Posner, a clinical fellow who is also an ex-student of hers. Jason is horribly inept at bedside manner, his clumsiness demonstrated as he does a clinical history during which he treats Dr. Bearing like a lab rat. He mentions he got an A- from Vivian before he gives her a pelvic exam, which she comments, "was degrading"(tongue in cheek). Finally, a true and kind relationship develops between Dr. Bearing and her primary care nurse, Susie Monahan,

who responds to her patient's suffering and fear with empathy, care, and, most importantly, a human touch.

The somewhat intense subject matter of this play is tempered by the positive messages it offers. Dr. Bearing finds salvation when she realizes it is her heart and not her head that is of ultimate importance. Consequently, her physical death is an ironic reversal of her fortuitous insight into spiritual life through kindness. Dr. Bearing shares her change in perspective with the audience through additional asides, and we the audience accompany her through the journey. As anyone would when confronted with a deathbed realization, she regrets teaching Jason these values, and wishes she could have had more empathy with her other students.

To say *Wit* is about cancer is misleading. It also isn't a lecture on how to die, but rather is about finding a balance between intellectual and spiritual values. Irony abounds in this tragicomedy, often raising more questions than it answers. In the words of Horace, "drama teaches and delights." The play is a lesson on how to live with simplicity and kindness. To this effect, CG Jung in his *Collected Works* says "We should not pretend to understand the world only by intellect. We apprehend it just as much by feeling. Therefore, the judgment of intellect is at best only the half of truth and must, if it be honest, come to an understanding of its own inadequacy." The message conveyed to us in *Wit* coincides with this point while giving us a dramatic pause in which to examine our own values as they relate to life, death, and the human condition. These insightful elements lend form-content and individual character to the performance.

This Repertory Theater drama was underwritten by Southwest Florida Regional Medical Center. In addition to the performance, there were forums organized after

selected shows to discuss issues that this play brought to the surface for members of the audience. This is an exceptional example of the relationship this facility has with the community.

The history of the Florida Repertory Theater is intertwined with that of the Arcade. The Arcade was added to the national register of historic places in 1990 and was completely restored in 1991. Nonetheless, it remained underutilized until the Florida Repertory Theater group relocated there in 1998. The Florida Repertory Theater is the only acting troupe south of Sarasota made up of its own, resident company of actors. It is a nonprofit professional actors' guild whose mission is to bring the quality of "Big City" theater to Southwest Florida at prices everyday people can afford. Now in its third season, the Theater's popularity continues to grow, with the number of subscribers and ticket sales increasing every year. It began with 212 seats and over 100 seats were recently added to accommodate the growing demand. Today, the theater has over 3500 subscribers and patrons. Despite the theater's status as a not-for-profit organization, it makes a 2.6 million dollar impact on Lee County.

The theater is most active during the fall season, which lasts from October through May. During this season, six unique plays are performed and acting classes are offered for adults and children. Children's classes are grouped into sessions, each of which culminates in a performance. During the summer, the theater puts on three additional plays and offers summer camp enrollment for children.

The Florida Repertory Theater offers a variety of plays, including comedies, thrillers, musicals, and classics. The plays are professionally produced and carefully chosen. Many are award winners. Tickets are under thirty dollars. Children's sessions

include the Theater Workshop offered at the Arcade and the Canterbury Summer Theater, affiliated with the Canterbury School. The costs of the respective workshops are \$751 and \$440. Adult acting and tap sessions are offered at the theater, taught by a resident actor. Sessions are about a month long and cost \$100, or \$10 per class. Scholarships are available for aspiring participants in sessions for both adults and children.

Expenses for the Florida Repertory Theater reach 1.2 million dollars annually, including production, administration, maintenance, marketing, development, and outreach costs. Ticket sales cover only 60% of this figure. Fundraising, particularly through sponsorship, membership and grants helps to cover the remaining expenses. Individuals can sponsor the theater with gifts beginning at \$1000 and reaching over \$20,000. Benefits are accrued at each level. Those who donate \$20,000, for example, are known as Grand Season Sponsors and receive dinner with 7 guests and the Producing Artistic Director, along with a special performance of any show for 300 of their guests. Circle Patrons are individual supporters who make annual gifts ranging from \$1000 (Actor's Circle) to over \$10,000 (Executive Producer's Circle). Corporations can donate a minimum of \$500 to receive benefits and the opportunity to be affiliated with the theater.

A major patron, Mrs. J. Howard Wood, set up an endowment fund in honor of her husband in order to specifically secure the Theater's educational activities, such as the Children's Theater and adult classes. The Theater also offers an internship program for aspiring young theater professionals, which the J. Howard Wood Educational Endowment Fund benefits as well. Individuals or groups may also make tax-deductible gifts to the Endowment as they would gifts to the Repertory Theater. Instead of or in

addition to giving money, many people also volunteer their time to work with the Theater.

The relations between the theater, the repertory company, and the community at large are an important example of how vital a grassroots-driven drama community can be. The renovation of the Arcade theater, and subsequent sustained growth of the Florida Repertory Company have tangible and intangible benefits for the people of Fort Myers. The affordable and first-rate performances allow access to many who might not get an opportunity to see live drama. Since its beginnings in the early 1900s, the Arcade Theater has been at the epicenter of historic Fort Myers, in both a literal and figurative sense. Following a period when the downtown area fell into disarray, the Arcade once again approaches its previous glory and usefulness. For someone reflecting on the theater's past, present, and future benefits for the community, it becomes clear that the health of quality local drama is a cultural necessity. It is critical to patronize this facility for its personal benefits, but even more so to recognize and affirm the cultural and economic revitalization it has visited upon the Fort Myers community.