

THE THEATER LOOP

BY CHRIS JONES



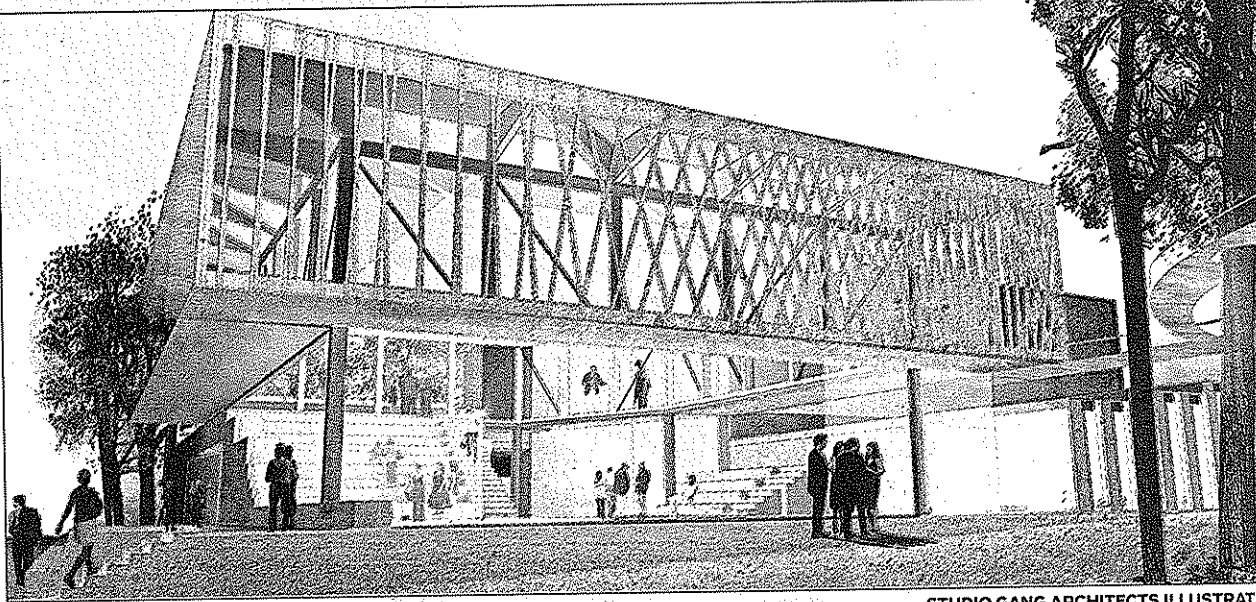
Why did Writers thrive, Apple fall?

In 2002, I wrote a Sunday piece for this newspaper comparing the fortunes of two theaters on Chicago's affluent North Shore: the Apple Tree Theatre of Highland Park and an upstart named Writers Theatre, then known as Writers Theatre Chicago, a reflection of the Glencoe company's desire to be spoken of in the same breath as the Goodman Theatre or Steppenwolf.

Here is what Eileen Boevers, the longtime artistic director of Apple Tree, told me at the time: "I am worried every year that it's all going to go away."

Boevers, who died in 2009, had good reason to worry. At that moment, her theater was 19 years old (twice as old as Writers Theatre, and, throughout most of the previous decade, far larger), and it had become a pillar in the Highland Park community. But she was facing space and money crises. Apple Tree had been forced to scale back to overcome a deficit that had ballooned to as high as \$200,000 a couple of years earlier, following a disastrous season wherein "Shakespeare's R&J," "Via Dolorosa" and "The Dying Gaul" all had lost money.

Apple Tree's space in a strip mall was clearly inadequate and unsustainable. Both Boevers and her managing director at the time, Cecilie Keenan, spoke of the difficulty of attracting board members with ample resources when they felt that such people preferred the big Chicago institutions, or the likes of Ravinia. And then there was the matter of the lack of support from Highland Park itself, a community that spoke of its support for this theater in



STUDIO GANG ARCHITECTS ILLUSTRATION

The \$28 million two-theater complex for Writers Theatre of Glencoe will be designed by Chicago architect Jeanne Gang.

the midst of the upscale retail in its tony downtown, but had, its mayor told me at the time, only \$25,000 in its cultural arts budgets. "We face the phenomenon of not being accepted in our backyard," Boevers said. "It's like when a member of your own family becomes famous. It's not the same."

Highland Park eventually came up with another \$50,000 or so. It didn't do much good. By September 2009, less than nine months after its founder's death, the debt-laden Apple Tree had called it quits. Writing about that, I recalled something Boevers had said to me in 2002: "I'd love to be able to say this is a legacy that I've left for this entire community." As things turned out, that legacy was restricted to memories.

Just down the road in Glencoe, as I reported Wednesday, Writers Theatre soon will be operating in a high-profile, \$28 million facility, designed by Jeanne

Gang and almost entirely paid for with private money. The benefactors were the very kinds of people that Boevers and Apple Tree tried so hard, and yet failed, to attract. Writers Theatre has shrewdly built into its capital campaign an additional \$3 million, helping with the increased costs of working in a new building.

Even in 2002, it was clear that Writers Theatre was thriving while Apple Tree was struggling, even though the latter had the higher profile reputation for its artistic work. But the contrast sure is stark now. One theater is gone; the other has a \$28 million playpen. Bandy around such figures, and a deficit of \$200,000 sounds trivial indeed. What are the lessons?

It's clear that Writers artistic director Michael Halberstam and colleagues were better at figuring out that individual support was what mattered, at courting high-profile donors and

developing a board with the right kinds of pockets and connections. Writers also was much better organized in other ways, not the least institution building, eventually figuring out that its future lay in Glencoe and moving to a prouder embrace of its suburban home and dropping the need for "Chicago." Halberstam also realized there was a strikingly large audience for the kinds of writerly plays that provide the bread and butter at locales like the Stratford Festival: literary classics. The North Shore audience was more willing to come to hear "Hamlet" or Noel Coward, history now shows us, than the small relationship-driven musicals in which Apple Tree specialized.

Why? Snob appeal, certainly, but also a genuine thirst for erudite culture from a highly educated populace, with a high preponderance of people older than 50. Many in this audi-

ence had children or grandchildren studying such plays in school. This is a golden target for live theater, both in terms of audience and the donor base, and Writers figured out what they wanted. And, frankly, Writers just created significantly closer relationships with its audience. It understood that theater is retail business. It held hands. And it paid its artists well and thus attracted to talent.

Perhaps the biggest mistake Apple Tree made was not mounting a high-profile campaign for a building, such projects being far sexier and easier to fund than trying to raise cash to keep going on the second floor of a strip mall. It'll be evident here that I miss Apple Tree and I think the city of Highland Park made a serious mistake. But this is a time to tip one's hat to Writers, going forward.

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