



Take a rustic, woodsy site outfitted with a few little cabins that once served a boys camp along the bay. Add a dream, a barn-like proscenium stagehouse and a hundred or so seats open to the stars above and you have the early days of Peninsula Players.

Richard and Caroline Fisher, a young novice brother-and-sister team, started the troupe in 1935 when they produced Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* at a site behind the former Bonnie Brook Cottage/Motel in Fish Creek, now the Fish Creek Town Park. By 1937 the Fishers along with their parents ("Mama" who designed and made costumes and fed the company and "Papa," the general handyman) realized the ensemble had outgrown the motel site so they purchased the 22-acre Wildwood Boys Camp, the present site of the theater.

Now, in its 75th season, it is no longer just a dream: we are America's oldest professional resident summer theater.

Since the beginning we have been a theater for actors who work in regional companies across the country from San Francisco to New York City, professional actors who tread the boards night after night, responding to and with the audience. They occasionally venture into television and films, but their hearts and souls are in the living, breathing theater.

If you have been with us over recent decades you may be familiar with these working actors: Greg Vinkler, Tom Mula, Carmen Roman, Tim Monsion, Neil Friedman, Kevin McKillip, Maggie Carney, Joe Foust, James Leaming and Sean Fortunato. Or you may fondly remember actors from seasons past: Robert Thompson, Bill Munchow, Jean Sincere, Leo Lucker, Dennis Kennedy, Maggy Magerstadt Rosner, Helen "Casey" Bradon, Amy McKenzie and Jeanne Bolan.

In the 75 years Peninsula Players has performed at the Theatre in a Garden, more than 1,000 actors have crossed our boards. Some had their first professional experiences at the Players. Many continued their careers in the arts, either on- or off-stage, and some have even gone onto stardom.

Sam Wanamaker, who later helped form the organization that funded reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, was a Players apprentice in 1937. "What romantic memories. So many firsts -- first play, first car wreck, first passionate unrequited love affair (Caroline), first star-filled night, first Northern Lights," he recalled. "It was a beautiful time, which I shall always cherish."

Harvey Korman worked with the Players for several seasons in the early 1950s. Even then, he had a hard time keeping a straight face during a funny moment on stage, something he

continued to fight while working with Tim Conway on the “Carol Burnett Show.” Harvey earned his Actor’s Equity union card at the Players and continued his professional career in film and television.

René Auberjonois gained his first experience in musical theater on stage at the Players as Mack the Knife in *Three Penny Opera*, a large singing role for someone who had never performed in a musical before. He said, he was naïve enough to try and the Players were daring enough to let him. René used his experience at the Players and continued working on stages as well as in television. He eventually earned a Tony Award nomination for his musical theater work in *Big River* on Broadway and a Tony Award for his role in *Coco* with Katharine Hepburn. He was a familiar face on television’s “Benson,” “Boston Legal” and “Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,” (although his face was hidden under heavy makeup as character Odo).

Although Peninsula Players began under the stars a canvas top was draped above the audience in 1946. Another 11 years went by before Caroline’s dream of a permanent roof came true. The new pavilion of 1957, even with its open sides, provided protection from inclement weather and fit in well with the natural surroundings.

In 1960, after 25 years of involvement, the Fishers sold the theater at public auction to Kenneth Carroad, a New York City attorney. Jim McKenzie was hired to oversee the Players operations as producer. He and his wife, actress Jeanne Bolan, both associated with the Players since 1947, took on the Fisher legacy. The non-profit organization, Peninsula Players Theatre Foundation, Inc., was formed in 1962, to operate the theater, and in 1978 Carroad sold out. McKenzie became owner of the property in 1978 and continued as the company’s producer.

Anticipating significant renovation and repair to the theater pavilion and surrounding support buildings as well as the need for new production and housing facilities, McKenzie decided to sell the place to the Peninsula Players Theatre Foundation, Inc. in 1993. As a member of the Players Board of Directors, McKenzie continued to help preserve and improve the theater’s facilities and environment until his death in 2002.

More than a decade ago many improvements were made including actor housing and public restroom facilities, expanded and upgraded rehearsal and storage areas and a computerized box office. The close of the 2005 season brought the beginning of the Players largest improvement – a new stage house and audience pavilion.

Through the generous support of many donors, benefactors and volunteers, all intent on continuing the magic of live theater for future generations, the Players built a new facility in the same foot-print of the first theater. Included are up-to-date wiring, more space for actors and scenery and a redesigned space to provide better sightlines for the audience, not to mention new comfy seats. It is all part of the splendid heritage and mission of the Players, “to preserve America’s oldest professional resident summer theatre and to support the most exciting theatre company possible.”

Success has come because of stalwart artists who have delighted audiences from the very beginning. More than 400 plays have been staged and many actors who played here have

become personalities on Broadway, in regional theater and on screen and television.

“Everyone in our theater company lives on property -- actors, interns, directors, designers, technicians, stage managers and administrators,” explained Business Manager Audra Baakari Boyle. “Company members get to know everyone involved in the creative process because they’re not living an independent life off property.”

Audiences sense the rapport the Players share with each other and delight in seeing the same actors portray many different characters throughout the season.

Caroline’s and Richards’ dream of creating a retreat in the woods for actors to master their craft before a live audience is thriving six nights a week from mid-June to mid-October. As each season draws near, excitement among the entire Players community builds. It could be a scene from the Fishers’ scrapbook -- actors rehearsing lines as they stroll the tree-lined paths, scenery built from almost nothing that takes on elegance on stage, costumers using remnants and castoff clothing to transform performers into believable characters.

The passion that Richard and Caroline shared to stretch imaginations, provide reason for laughter and tears and furnish cutting edge theater experiences is still the hallmark at Peninsula Players. Safeguarding that dream and this lovely Theatre in a Garden is paramount to the Players Board of Directors which is committed to –

- Preserve America’s oldest professional resident summer theatre;
- Support the most exciting theatre company possible;
- Provide freedom, tools, and facilities so artists may entertain, uplift and inform audiences; and
- Foster future generations of theater professionals through internships.

We hope you enjoy your visit as you explore the theater where the sun sets, the curtain rises and the stars shine.

Welcome to our theater in the woods.