

## I Was a Mole in the Moral Majority: Or How the Academy Theatre Got Saved

JAMES M. ELSON

Lynchburg got a relatively late start in Virginia history, but by the middle of the nineteenth century had become very wealthy. Just before the War Between the States, it was claimed that our city, thanks to tobacco, had the second highest per capita income in the nation, exceeded only by New Bedford, Massachusetts, grown rich in the whaling industry. Thanks to my favorite Rebel General, Jubal Early, our fair city avoided significant structural damage during the War Between the States. Prompted by the encouragement of such civic boosters as war hero Senator John Warwick Daniel during Lynchburg's Centennial in 1886, the city went on to a boom in the 1890s with the building of the Rivermont Avenue bridge and a streetcar line all the way out to the new Randolph-Macon Woman's College. Sweetbriar College was founded in 1901, and present-day Lynchburg College shortly after. With the founding of the Sphex Club in 1910, The Burg had become a major cultural center. Can there be any doubt why the Academy of Music was built during that time?

I'll note here that The Academy of Music Theatre, first opened in 1905 but *fortunately* caught fire in 1911 and burned extensively. I say "fortunately," because our leading citizens did not hesitate to fund an upgraded renovation. The Academy of 1912 was far more elegant than the original of 1905. As before the fire, there were no talking movies and no radio. Most all of the star performers traveled, coming south by railroad and stopping here to display their talents in our jewel of a theatre.

During "The Roaring Twenties" Lynchburg did not roar very much. And according to a history of Virginia during the Great Depression, the Commonwealth survived the 1930s through "progressive backwardness." During World War II the Hill City, by now a factory center, gave its all to the war effort. But despite an annexation in 1940 and full employment in Lynchburg's industries during the war years, by 1950 the city had grown by only 7,000 inhabitants in the two decades since 1930. So with this brief history in

mind, this paper commences with “The Second Northern Invasion of the 1950s.”

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On March 8, 1955, readers of *The News* were greeted with a large front-page headline “Reactor Plant to Be Built in Area,” and underneath it in slightly smaller type, “New York Firm Options 500 Acres.” The firm in question was the Babcock & Wilcox Company, which would build a “several million dollar” plant about five miles east of Lynchburg at Mount Athos. A little over six months later, lightning struck again. “Lynchburg Chosen for Huge GE Plant,” announced *The Daily Advance* in big black headlines on September 23, 1955. General Electric was coming to town with a \$3 million payroll by the end of 1957. The facility was soon designated for the manufacture of mobile communications equipment. When G. E. announced plans to bring in 600 families to Lynchburg, things really started to look up in the local real estate business.

A less noticed, but equally important economic development, also taking place in 1955, was the establishment by Lynchburger Edwin Bryan Horner of the First Colony Life Insurance Company. First Colony is usually not thought of as being part of the Second Northern Invasion. Nevertheless, many of the professional staff of this major Lynchburg employer have, over the years, been recruited from outside the city and state.

As the decade of the 1950s ran its course, new housing developments began to spring up in Lynchburg. The Hill City’s population rose 7,000 between 1950 and 1960. The B&W and GE employees had a high degree of interest in maintaining the quality of the city’s public schools for their children. Several were elected to the school board, as well as the city council and other positions with civic responsibilities. A new E. C. Glass High School, dedicated in 1953, had undoubtedly been a strong selling point in attracting to town the new industries from the North.

During this time, the Reverend Jerry Falwell and members of his fledgling Thomas Road Baptist Church were meeting in an abandoned building that had last housed the defunct Donald Duck Bottling Company. Thomas Road was named for the Thomas family, original

owners of the property through which it ran. The family's most prominent member was the Honorable A. F. Thomas. Senator Thomas was a highly successful businessman, a socialist, a founder of Lynchburg's Unitarian Church, and an active member of the SpheXClub. Although the Thomas Road Baptist Church has moved from its original location, its name remains the same.

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By July 1956, a month after Rev. Jerry Falwell had organized his church on Thomas Road, he made his first broadcast at station WLVA-TV's studio on Church Street. Eventually, of course, he was seen on television screens around the world. Today, the Thomas Road Baptist Church's ministries, including, of course, Liberty University, may be considered the most successful growth industry in Lynchburg's history.

When the first arrivals from above the Mason-Dixon Line came to Lynchburg in the mid-1950s, they could find temporary shelter at any of *five* downtown hotels. The newcomers discovered that Lynchburgers enjoyed a compact shopping area on Main Street between Fifth and Twelfth streets. If her feet tired from all the walking, a lady shopper could rest them by taking in a first run feature at the Paramount Theater, Lynchburg's 1930s movie palace (where the Holiday Inn is now), or a second-run feature at the dilapidated Academy across the street, with perhaps a short live show of some kind on the weekend. The other two theaters on Main Street, the Warner and Isis, also showed second-run or so-called "B pictures," which did not feature the most popular stars of Hollywood.

As the fifties came to an end and the sixties began, the suburbs continued to grow. More folks drove to work, and downtown parking became an increasing problem. It was time for an enterprising businessman to correct this situation. Sure enough, Dr. R. L. Pittman of Fayetteville, North Carolina, seized the opportunity and in 1956 arrived with plans to build a shopping center on the Miller Home property off Memorial Avenue near the new high school. Weeks later another shopping center was being built on Langhorne Road, out where the new hospital was going up on Tate Springs Road. In 1958 the Academy Theatre on Main Street closed its doors, leaving only the Paramount and the Warner downtown and Harvey's Drive In on U. S.

29 South for Lynchburg moviegoers. Most folks were staying at home watching TV.

As the sixties went on, downtown became only a shadow of its former self. Certainly it was not a place where Lynchburgers went for culture or entertainment. In 1962 a fine arts center was built out by the new hospital, used primarily by residents of 24503. It hosted programs from outside and generated shows produced by locals as well. But the building itself had none of the grandeur of the Academy in its halcyon days. In 1968 Lynchburg almost lost the Academy, when City Council considered demolishing it in order to construct a more convenient access from Main Street to the Lower Basin.

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It is said that the theatre was saved only by a last minute appearance before City Council by the late George Stewart of the First Colony Life Insurance Company. A generous donor to non-profit organizations, New York born Mr. Stewart was a prime mover in the restoration of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest.

The Academy continued to deteriorate throughout the 1970s and early '80s until I was engaged in 1984 to assist a group of Hill City citizens in restoring this jewel. The Academy of Music, Inc., as the group was called, had been organized in 1972. As its first executive director, I was asked to come up with a plan for the theatre's renovation. This would start with a certification of the building's structural soundness, an estimated restoration cost, and an assurance that there was support in the community to complete the restoration. A structural engineer from Richmond was brought in, who certified that there were no major problems, and estimated a renovation cost of \$3 million.

With the help of two consultants based in Richmond, the Academy trustees and I drew up a "Case for Support" statement. I made appointments for consultants Harry Jennings and Paul Hood to interview fifty citizens in the Lynchburg area whose influence would be valuable in accomplishing the theatre's revival. Their report to the Academy's board of trustees, to put it mildly, was not encouraging. This excerpt from the report will illustrate:

The general public is largely either apathetic or uninformed. More serious, however, is the fact that a number of influential citizens whose good will and support

would be very important to this project are openly hostile to it. The principal reason for this hostility is concern about competition between the Academy and the Fine Arts Center for leadership, audience participation, and operating support.

Finally among all of the top Lynchburg civic, corporate, and business leaders we interviewed, not a single person stepped forward and said he or she would be willing to take a leadership role in a campaign for the Academy.

What to do now? When I called to arrange an interview for one of our consultants with Macel Falwell (that is Mrs. Jerry Falwell), she had very kindly expressed an interest in our project and invited me to call back, if she could be of further help. So I called her back and left my home phone number on her

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answering machine. About two weeks later I got a call from a sonorous voice, which boomed something like, "When can you show me the Academy?"

About a week afterwards, Rev. Falwell had his then-financial advisor, George Rogers, with him. As I showed them around the theatre, Mr. Rogers did not seem terribly enthusiastic about acquiring the property, for the Falwell ministries were not nearly as affluent then as they are today. [Comment on Mr. Rogers, today 96, survivor of Bataan death March].

It was at about this time that a key figure in the history of the Academy's survival appeared. Brigadier General George Murrell Snead, Jr., Ph. D. , United States Army, ret. came upon the scene as president of the Academy Board, just when some long-time board members were pulling out. (Gen. Snead was a Sphinx Club member). I don't think we could have gotten a more respected person to represent what little interest the Lynchburg community had in the theatre at that time.

After several sessions of negotiations, it appeared that Rev. Falwell might be willing to take the Academy Theatre off the hands of the citizens of Lynchburg, yet allow the community to use it on occasion after it had been renovated by Liberty University. But I could not help thinking, "If Liberty University takes over the theatre, what

will be my status? If I become a Liberty employee, will I have to join Thomas Road Baptist Church?"

The phone at home rang –again on a Saturday afternoon. “This is Jerry Falwell,” said the voice. “Can you be at the theatre in twenty minutes?” I responded in the affirmative, and headed out the door. “I wonder if I’m going to be unemployed soon,” I thought to myself, as I sped down Rivermont Avenue and over the bridge.

There he was with his new business manager DeWitt Braud, who, like George Rogers previously, did not look very happy about standing in the Academy balcony, listening to his boss’s vision of how beautiful the place was eventually going to look. “And Jim, here, is going to work with us on this project!” Rev. Falwell declared. I braced myself for what might come next, “You are a Christian, aren’t you Jim?” he enquired.

I momentarily thought of giving a clever answer like, “Yes, that is, if being an Episcopalian counts!” But I didn’t. Instead, I said only, “Yes, I am.”

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“Well, that’s fine! As long as you’re a Christian, you can go to church anywhere you want,” was the reply.

Not knowing exactly what I should say in answer to that, I thought I should respond with something as agreeable as possible. So I said, “And I’m also a heterosexual! “

Rev. Falwell did not miss a beat, and his reply was even more enthusiastic than mine, “Well,” he beamed, “I’ll bet your wife is pleased with that!!”

Now, how could you dislike such a fellow? Disagree with him? Perhaps. Dislike him? Highly unlikely. Jerry Falwell was what most men I’ve run across in the South—or at least farther South than Virginia--would call “A Goodoleboy.”

Negotiations between Liberty University and The Academy, Inc., went along smoothly, thanks in great part to George Snead. “Restoration of Theatre still in talking Stages” was the headline of a

story in *The News* of October 22, 1985. An agreement was announced publicly on November 8, 1985, when the Academy, Inc. and Liberty University held a joint press conference in front of the theatre. Chancellor Jerry Falwell and President A. Pierre Guillermin (a SpheX Club member) represented the university. President George Snead, a number of the trustees, and I were present for the Academy, Inc.

Here's how Jerry Falwell put it in his autobiography *Strength for the Journey*, published about that time: [Show book, page 93.]

I get excited about every new open door for Liberty University, its students, and its staff. Every day something new happens that gets us closer to our dream of a world-class university in Lynchburg. Last Monday, for example, we announced that the impressive old Lynchburg Academy of Music—closed and silent for years—will be reopened to house live performances by our students and by guest artists on our campus.

The story on the Academy transfer in *The News* of November 9, 1985 reported—not quite accurately—that the university had paid thirty thousand dollars for the theatre. Actually the funds given by Liberty to the Academy, Inc.

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were not for the building (no one expected payment for the privilege of undertaking a multi-million dollar renovation) but a kindness on the university's part to rescue the Academy, Inc., from a deficit accumulated in the months immediately before the transfer. During its eighty-year life, the Academy had survived three fires, attempts at demolition, and almost thirty years of neglect. Now a rebirth seemed near at hand. But we had yet to reckon with the City of Lynchburg, the Virginia General Assembly, the PTL Club, and the countless financial demands made upon Rev. Falwell by his ministries.

I now became an employee of Liberty University. I was given a desk and chair in a Falwell Ministries Building at Church and Sixth streets. It is now called "The Center" and houses the All Nations Community Church. In the interest of saving time, I'll have to assume you remember what the Moral Majority was. In a 1991 article, columnist Darrel Laurant observed, "Established in late 1979, Moral

Majority blossomed during the presidential election of 1980, hitching its rising star to Ronald Reagan's conservative juggernaut. The marriage proved useful for both."

Admittedly my new workspace was not in nearly as picturesque a location as my former room on the second floor of the Old Courthouse at the top of Monument Terrace (thanks to Tom Ledford). Thus began my days as a Mole inside the Moral Majority, with the supervisor, Charlie Judd, in an enclosed front office observing his subordinates. Charlie knew who I was and what my assignment was, but I'm not sure many of the other guys there did.

I was out of the office much of the time—the Academy was only a block away. But since action on the renovation frequently lagged and there was often nothing for me to do, I decided to devote my time to researching the Academy's history. This translated into the history of stage and screen during the first half of the twentieth century. I began by going to the Lynchburg Public Library, then to the Jones Memorial Library, and later to the Liberty University Library, which to my surprise had quite a good collection of books on theatre. When I eventually got into newspapers on microfilm, I became fascinated by things that were going on in Lynchburg as well as the Academy. I used these Columnar Pads in which I recorded the entire timeline of the Academy's history with much of Lynchburg's [show pad]. This one, listing Academy attractions during the late teens and early twenties is in the best shape of the six I ended up with. But if you look through it, please be gentle with it.

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Thus were sewn the seeds for my twenty-two eventual articles in *Lynch's Ferry* magazine, my editorship of the magazine for five years, the subjects of some of my SPHEX papers, and ultimately my big-fat, 541-page Lynchburg history, which was published in 2004. I am sure all of you have read it from cover to cover. Well, if you buy a copy at many non-profit sites around town--mostly historic, they will receive 100% of the price of the book,. I have given the books to these non-profits, deciding that I would rather be famous than rich. And besides I didn't want to have to move them all when we moved to Westminster Canterbury five years ago.

At the beginning of 1986, shortly after the Liberty University acquisition of the Academy, a new team for the renovation came

together, headed by Wiley & Wilson, architects and engineers of Lynchburg. Among our town-gown advisory committee, besides Gen. George Snead, was architectural historian S. Allen Chambers Jr., at the time living and working in Washington, D.C., but now retired and living one floor up from me at Westminster Canterbury. Al has worked secretly for the past quarter century editing my manuscripts. Where else could I find someone who knows more about Lynchburg history and who majored in English at Princeton University?

In early 1986 the Liberty University Academy [show brochure] began work with Theatre Projects Consultants of London and New York City toward producing a design report for the renovation. Theatre Consultants' principal representative on the project was Iain Mackintosh, a knowledgeable and articulate Englishman. Among the most memorable times in my Moral Majority experience were the trips with Gen. Snead, and on several occasions Mr. Mackintosh, to confer with Jerry Falwell in his office in the former Carter Glass mansion on Liberty Mountain.

The Academy's acquisition by Liberty University brought a feeling of relief—if not appreciation—to Lynchburg preservationists, for the city had shown itself both unable and unwilling to do anything for the theatre. The new owner was rewarded for volunteering to spend \$3.5 million to save the landmark by being presented with a bill from the City of Lynchburg for taxes on it. Liberty University, like other Falwell ministries, was owned by the Old Time Gospel Hour. (Remember that?) The Academy transfer brought the long-simmering question of past and future taxation on certain OTGH properties to a boil. Therefore, by the middle of August 1986, Chancellor Falwell let it be known that he was contemplating not only a return of the Academy by Liberty University to its previous owners, but a move of his university, the OTGH, and all his ministries, except the Thomas Road Baptist Church, to Atlanta.

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This possibility caused immediate consternation in Lynchburg's for-profit sector. "It would have a devastating impact on the community," warned Frank Rock, president of the Greater Lynchburg Chamber of Commerce. It took some time for Lynchburg City Council to clear the way for tax exemptions for the OTGH property. In addition, the Virginia General Assembly had to approve them. Thus, all things concerning the Academy, for all practical purposes, ground to a

halt. Lynchburg's interest in things historical turned toward celebrating its upcoming bi-centennial in October 1986.

Needless to say, Liberty University did not move to Atlanta. The PTL (remember Jim and Tammy Bakker?) and Jimmy Swaggart scandals in which Rev. Falwell got personally involved slowed down the Academy project. Donations to *all* televangelists, whether they had sinned or not, dropped drastically. Toward the end of the 1980s the Moral Majority began to run out of steam. Its reduced staff moved out to Langhorne Road into the shopping center where the Pearson Cancer Center now stands. I did *not* go with them.

Thus ended my career as a mole in the Moral Majority. If you look up the word "mole" in your dictionary, you'll find it has a variety of meanings. I was never a mole in terms of *meaning number four in my dictionary*, which is "a double agent." [I sent no memos out to either the C. I. A. or to Vladimir Putin at the K. G. B.] But certainly I was a mole in terms of *meaning number two in my dictionary*, which is "*one who works in the dark.*"

So, I continued in my problematic but interesting job on the Liberty University campus. A cubicle was found for me in the basement of a building which also housed the offices of the University's maintenance staff. Again, since I really belonged to nobody there, I could wander around as I pleased, satisfying my curiosity concerning the history of the Academy Theatre and Lynchburg.

Finally, in April 1987, Iain Mackintosh and his associates at Theatre Projects completed a design report (a copy of which may be seen here--point). Their estimate of the cost for renovating the Academy with the necessary equipment to function properly was \$5 million. Unfortunately the televangelist scandals and the tax controversy with the City of Lynchburg continued, and the theatre remained in limbo. I had been keeping my eye out for other employment opportunities, when in 1988 I was offered the position of executive vice president of the Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation at Red Hill, Mr. Henry's last home and burial place, I did not hesitate to accept. My eleven

and one-half years I was at Red Hill before I retired were extremely rewarding for me and, I think, for the Henry Foundation as well.

During my time at Red Hill, I continued to live in Lynchburg but, you might say, I was not completely *of* Lynchburg. My interest and concern for Academy developments—or lack of them—continued. I can show you a big, fat file of newspaper clippings and memos to prove it.

Much to my surprise, on July 2, 1988, just after my departure from Liberty University, *The News & Daily Advance* announced, “Academy of Music renovations start soon.”

“We had some hurdles to get behind,” Rev. Falwell was quoted as saying. “We had to get our own ministry stabilized with the fiscal year ending and to wait to determine the negative fallout of the Bakker and Swaggart fiascos. But that’s history now. . .”

The next Academy clipping in my file is dated a year and a half later (February 11, 1990). “Academy renovation stagnant,” it states and notes that, “So far, a new roof has been put on and some structural repairs done to keep the building from deteriorating further.” Nine days later a lengthy editorial (presumably by Spheeris member Bob Wimer, then editorial page editor) proclaimed “Restoration Still Important.” Another year and a half later (October 10, 1991) readers learned that LU was “soliciting contributions to restore the Academy Theatre.”

Fast forward *again yet another* year and one-half to Sunday, May 2, 1993, and there I am in living color on the front page of the paper’s Lifestyle section, standing in front of the theatre, together with pictures of the show biz greats who had once performed there. This marked the publication of my book, *Academy of Music: The Golden Age of Live Performance*, sponsored by the Lynchburg Historical Foundation.

Nature, or perhaps even The Deity, was not going to tolerate still another year and one half of procrastination on the Academy. So, about 6:00 p.m. on Friday, June 4, 1993, thunderstorms with hurricane-force winds hit Central Virginia, depriving 1,400 homes of electricity—some for several days—and causing more than \$10 million dollars of damage.

Three Lynchburg landmark buildings were seriously damaged. The 75-foot steeple of First Baptist Church was ripped off by the wind and crashed through the roof of the sanctuary. The Court Street Baptist Church steeple was so badly damaged that it had to be removed and lay on its side next to the building, though later it was rebuilt. The Academy stage tower was knocked almost completely down. This perhaps turned out to be a blessing, because it probably would not have been strong enough to handle contemporary stage equipment. The auditorium, however, was open to the elements and required protection as quickly as possible.

“Restoration is out of the question right now. First things first,” asserted *The News & Advance* in a July 11, 1993 editorial. “And that can’t wait for long—certainly not the months that Liberty University officials are talking about. An August 11, 1993 article made it clear that some Lynchburg citizens were not satisfied with Liberty’s lack of progress. A group calling themselves the “New Friends of the Academy” believed that Liberty was “violating the deed’s requirement that the theatre be preserved and its structural integrity be maintained.” Despite a \$10,00 grant from the Craddock Terry Foundation and other offers of assistance, the open-air view of the James River and Madison Heights remained uncovered. [show picture]

On February 17, 1994 the paper announced that Liberty University would match the \$10,000 grant from the Craddock Terry Foundation and return the Academy Theatre to the original Academy, Inc. board—or at least what was left of it. Less than a month later, the Academy Inc. announced it had added four new members, including Dr. Clifton W. Potter Jr. “a history professor at Lynchburg College, who has kept a low profile with the academy during Liberty’s reign. . . Potter will replace George Snead as president next week.”

This is probably the best place to note that although Liberty University no longer has an ownership interest in the Academy Theatre, it has remained a good neighbor and made significant financial contributions to its restoration from time to time, despite the fact that it now has a very fine 600-seat theatre of its own on campus

There were a few matters to settle before setting off in a new direction, including unsettled taxes and suits from property owners near the academy whose property had been damaged by the stage tower’s collapse. Four years later, in an article dated August 28, 1998,

Kate Gray, who was heading up development for the Academy board, stated to *The News & Advance* that the

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Academy restoration had already received some \$500,000 in grants and pledges. “A restored Academy of Music Theatre by 2002,” concluded the article. “Doesn’t that sound exciting?”

In December 1999, Vol. 1, No. 1, of *Academy Marquee*, an attractive six-page newsletter in color, appeared. It reported the Academy, Inc.’s accomplishments for 1999 and plans for the year 2000. Among the former were a wide variety of shows at various locations around the city. The Academy also increased its real estate holdings by purchasing the building at 600 Main Street—still in use today—to provide space for its increasing staff. Perhaps most important, was that the Academy had matched a million dollar challenge by Lynchburg native Ida Sherman Cole, then living in Seattle, Washington. Ms. Cole had prospered as a result of her association with Microsoft.

The Academy was on a roll as it entered the twenty-first century. In addition to the acquisition of 600 Main Street during 1999, on September 1, 2000, the directors announced the purchase of the two Commerce Street buildings behind the theatre, which gave the organization control of its entire block. “The Academy has planned a \$14 million restoration, but has yet to kick off an official campaign,” noted *The News and Advance*.

On September 30, 2000, the editorial page gave a “thumbs up” to the Academy Trustees “for hiring Arnold Breman to guide the restoration of the 95-year-old theater to its former glory days ‘That’s quite a challenge,’” the editorial continued, “but Breman has the experience, the enthusiasm, and the vision to pull it off.” The editorial noted that he had restored a 1925 vaudeville theater in Elmira, New York, as well as overseeing the construction and development of new entertainment halls in Clearwater and Palm Beach, Florida. A week later, under the headline “Academy of Music announces bundle of funds,” readers learned that more than half of its \$15 million capital fund-raising campaign had been completed.

A large brochure reached the Hill City public toward the end of 2001. “Academy of Music—The Grand Preview” it proclaimed.

During January through May in 2002, the Academy was sponsoring a series of over twenty programs by professional touring artists—most of them at non-Academy locations. It is likely that Lynchburg had not seen such a concentration of road shows since the Academy closed as a venue for touring companies in 1928.

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On January 8, 2002 a headline in the *N & A* stated, “Academy director departs.” There were concerns on the part of the Academy board that Mr. Breman was spending more money than was likely to come in.

Perhaps the most interesting article in the Academy’s spring newsletter was one headlined “Possible Fine Arts Center and Academy Merger.” The merger of the Academy of Music Theatre and the Fine Arts Center out by the hospital was confirmed in July with a new name, “The Academy of Fine Arts.” By the end of October the new entity was under pressure to raise one million dollars to take advantage of a \$1.2 million appropriation from City Council and

a \$1.8 million offer from Centra Health for the former Fine Arts Center property, which would become a hospital parking lot. “We don’t have time to take a breath here,” commented Michael Gillette, the Academy’s new president.

In February 2004 the Academy received a building permit for \$5,100,000. In March the Academy of Fine Arts was awarded yet another \$1 million for successfully meeting the challenge issued a year earlier, by the F. M. Kirby Foundation. In May the Academy announced that it had hired Richard Kordos as its next executive director. Mr. Kordos came to Lynchburg from California after having served in similar positions in the Midwest and the Los Angeles area. . As the year ended and the new director, staff, and officers of The Academy of Fine Arts settled into their positions, Attorney Robin Wood (a Sphex Club member) was announced as the leader of a \$15 million capital fund drive to complete the arts complex.

February first 2005 was the centennial of the Academy of Music Theatre. The theatre was far from being ready for prime time, but some

of the add-on buildings in the back were. So there *was* cause for celebration, specifically 12,000 square feet of classrooms, dressing rooms, and art studios and a 5,000 square feet “Warehouse Theatre,” mostly from the old Price-Clements machine shop. The 10 January 2005 *News & Advance* displayed two pictures in color of a packed house in the lobby of the Arts & Education center gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony and open house. The 31 January 2005 edition featured a piece by columnist Darrell Laurant titled “The ‘occasion’ at the Academy,” in which the Warehouse Theatre made its debut as a performance venue. The performers, sponsored by the Forte Chamber Music Society of Lynchburg, were pianists Gustavo Romero and Massimo Somenzi playing an all-Mozart program for two pianos.

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Unlike his predecessor’s first season of shows sponsored by the Academy, Executive Director Kordos’ first season of fifteen shows was much more modest and less expensive. They were selected to suit all tastes and scheduled at various times during the week. Some of the performers were pros from outside and some were local artists.

Phase Two of the Academy of Fine Arts building was, of course, the theatre itself. The work was going to cost \$20 million, said capital campaign fund leader Robin Wood. Some \$10 million had already been raised. The Cornerstone Campaign, as the fund raising effort was called, did not achieve its ultimate goal. There was, however, a gift of \$1 million by the estate of Lynch and Joy Christian. To honor the Christians’ donation, Executive Director Kordos announced, the 300-seat Warehouse venue would be named “The Joy and Lynch Christian Warehouse Theatre.” In addition to the Christians’ gift, a Cornerstone Campaign report published in 2008 confirmed contributions or pledges of \$1 million or more {to date} from seven separate sources.

Work on the theatre’s stage house and fly tower began with a ground breaking ceremony on June 26, 2008, with new Academy President David T. Petty, Jr., Mayor Joan Foster, City Manager Kim Payne, and Campaign Chair Robin Wood—all of course, Sphex Club members. City Manager Payne, always a strong advocate for the Academy, was speaker on the occasion. Less than six months later, on December 12, the topping out ceremony for the fly tower took place, with Mayor Foster signing the final beam before it went up. The laying

of cement blocks and brick façade, completing the structure, took place during the following summer of 2009.

An article in *The News & Advance* with colored pictures on September 26, 2009, titled “Waking Sleeping Beauty,” stated, “The continued renovation and restoration of the theater will cost \$29 million--\$13 or \$14 million of which will come from tax credits, leaving Wood and the committee to continue to raise the final \$15 million.” The article made clear that the architectural supervision for the recently restored fly tower and stage had been accomplished under the supervision of the local office of CJMW, a firm offering architectural, engineering and interior design services, with considerable performing arts experience. Plans for the interior of the Academy revealed “a palatial-looking space, with two balconies, six box seats, and an orchestra pit that can be lowered or raised depending on the event.”

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On November 15, 2011, *The News & Advance* let it be known that Executive Director Dick Kordos had been let go on September 30 . “Dick did a fabulous job for the Academy. He really did so much to strengthen our background in the performing arts.” Jean Meeks, a long time board member and sometime employee of the Academy remarked, “Our shows are just doing fabulously, and it was really all due to Dick and his hard work.”

That was my impression too, although my contacts with Dick were much less frequent and from much farther away than Jean’s. But the right guy *had* to be found, and seemingly *was* found when on February 2, 2012 *The News & Advance* announced “ *Academy gets new director*. “ This was David Jenkins, who had been running and restoring theatres in five disparate locations more or less the size of Lynchburg since 1983. I got to know David quite well when he found  
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out I was in possession of materials that very likely made the Academy the most thoroughly documented theatre of its age. I appreciated David’s appreciation of my work, but sadly it didn’t translate into completing the restoration of our theatre. He left Lynchburg in January of this year.

No time was wasted by the new folks, who seemingly all of a sudden appeared to operate the Academy Theatre and finish its restoration. On March 15 of this year the Academy of Fine Arts announced that Geoff Kershner would be the Academy's Executive Director and that George Dawson would serve as Chairman of the Capital Campaign. Geoff was already known favorably in this area for his knowledge and management skills in the arts. George's career as CEO of Centra Health speaks for itself. If you should have any doubt about his ability to raise funds for good causes, go look at the new Lynchburg Humane Society building on Old Graves Mill Road.

"There's no doubt we'll reach our goal, and that the theatre will reopen by 2018," Chairman Dawson told a news conference on June 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Academy of Fine Arts Warehouse Theatre. I have no doubt that George and his star group of colleagues will accomplish their goal. As a result, Lynchburg will get a cultural showcase that will increase property values—particularly downtown, generate tourism and economic activity, and attract new residents and businesses to our region.

THANK YOU