

UPAF Opened Doors for this Aspiring Actor and Playwright

By John Pielmeier

April 1, 1973 turned out to be the luckiest April Fools' Day of my life.

At a mass audition in Chicago, attended by graduate acting students from all over the country, I was hired by Nagle Jackson to work at the Milwaukee Rep. He gave me an Actors' Equity contract and enough of a salary for me to live on, and I arrived in November to begin rehearsals for the Rep's production of "Our Town." Over the next six months I got to work with amazing actors like Judith Light, Jeffrey Tambor, Rick Russo, Penny Reed, Ruth Schudson, G. Wood and Bill McKereghan, to name but a few. On free afternoons I got to sneak into other spaces at the Performing Arts Center and see Rudolph Nureyev dance "Giselle," or hear the Milwaukee Symphony play Tchaikovsky. I sampled May Wine and wolfed down sauerbraten at Mader's. I was in heaven.

I went on to other acting gigs, and eventually made my living as a writer (Renaissance Theaterworks recently mounted a production of my play "Agnes of God"), but the Milwaukee Rep gave me a foot in the door, a modicum of faith in my talent, and hope for a career in the arts. Everyone should be so lucky. And make no mistake about it - I was able to work in Milwaukee because of the generosity of the United Performing Arts Fund.

Not everyone needs to make a career in the arts to reap its rewards. (Sometimes it's wiser *not* to!) Theatre, dance, music, and opera enrich our lives to such a degree that they are *necessary*; as important as exercise and food are for our bodies, so the arts are exercise and food for our souls. I still remember Judith Light's delivery of Emily's "goodbye" speech in "Our Town;" it brought me to tears each time I heard it and has colored my view of every performance of Thornton Wilder's play that I have seen in the last 40 years. That's the amazing thing about the performing arts: they are once-in-a-lifetime experiences that can never be repeated, but the amazing ones live on in memory forever.

The Arts have immediate, concrete effects too: they educate, encouraging creativity in our classrooms; they remunerate, generating local income outside the arts-related community; they heal, in often miraculous

and life-affirming ways — yet they continue to be marginalized in our pocketbooks and budget. Still, with so much pessimism pounding us everywhere we turn, I can honestly say that I have had my faith in humanity renewed time-and-again when attending performances of theatre, music, and dance. For me, they serve as an antidote, a booster-shot of belief in a world that may not be as troubled as we are told. They are a - here's that word again - *necessary* part of our lives.

And best of all, by supporting the performing arts, UPAF and its donors also support the local community. UPAF's fundraising efforts sustain 15 performing arts organizations and dozens of smaller affiliates. It brings arts education into the schools. And it has been ranked as the most cost-effective united arts fund in the country.

I still have ties to the Milwaukee community, however loose: some members of the Pielmeier family moved there at the turn of the last century, and I'm sure I have more than a few Wisconsin cousins I've never met; another cousin, Sister Francis of Assisi, the inspiration who showed me it was possible to write professionally, has retired to Fond-du-Lac; the terrifically-talented Jim Pickering, whom I knew at grad-school, still acts locally. But my strongest tie is to the Rep, and the gratitude I feel for that first job made possible by UPAF.

Later in my acting career I was in a production of "The Matchmaker," another wonderful play by Thornton Wilder. One of my favorite quotations comes from there. The first part is fairly familiar, but it is the last part (which I italicize) that gives the whole quote its grounding. It represents, I believe, exactly what UPAF stands for.

"Money, if you'll pardon the expression," Dolly Levi says, "is like manure. It's not worth a thing unless it's spread around *encouraging young things to grow.*"

I was one of those young things. It works.

John Pielmeier is the award-winning playwright of "Agnes of God" and other major works and he cut his acting chops at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater in 1973 in a production of "Our Town."