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Support the Heart and Soul of Milwaukee: Give to UPAF

By Judith Light

The life of an actor sometimes takes on more plot twists than the work we appear in. When I graduated from Carnegie Mellon University I knew I wanted to pursue an acting career. I also knew I had to pay my dues and seek out acting opportunities throughout the country.

I quickly cut my acting chops in 1970 by spending two seasons at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, which proved to be a priceless experience and growth opportunity for an aspiring actor. Growing up out east and attending college in Pittsburgh, the Rep had already established a reputation as an excellent company far beyond the Midwest. The Rep gave me an opportunity to appear in a variety of roles and in plays, including “You Can’t Take it With You,” “Measure for Measure,” “As You Like It,” “The Liar,” “Cat Among the Pigeons,” “Spoon River Anthology” and “Medea.”



While I went on to perform at other theater companies I returned to The Rep in 1973-74 to appear in “All Together Now,” “Our Town,” and “The Little Foxes.” In Milwaukee, I was privileged to share the stage with many gifted artists, some names you may recognize – Jeffrey Tambor, Charles Kimborough and the gifted actor and playwright of “Agnes of God,” John Pielmeier.

My time in Milwaukee was transformational as I had an opportunity to be a member of the community and appreciate an arts and cultural vibe that far exceeded cities of a much larger size. What I also observed is that the people in the Milwaukee area embraced the arts.

By the time I arrived in Milwaukee, an organization called the United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF) had been launched about three years earlier. What a novel concept: an umbrella fund-raising organization dedicated to supporting some of the key performing arts assets in the community, including the Milwaukee Rep. Now, almost 50 years later UPAF’s annual campaign raises more than \$12 million and supports 15 Member Groups and dozens of smaller affiliate organizations. But those dollars come from the generosity of more than 22,000 donors, companies and foundations that share the belief that the performing arts give a community a heart and a soul. The work of UPAF remains a nationwide model for support of the arts.

As an actor who has been fortunate to cross over to film and television, I’ll always consider the stage my home. It’s impossible to replicate the adrenaline rush that comes with performing before a live audience. I’ve also grown to appreciate the breadth of what we call the performing arts – theater, music and dance – all supported by UPAF.

When it comes to filling the pipeline for performers, I'm concerned about the cutbacks that have come throughout the country in arts education and what that means for new generations of artists. Even if you don't pursue a career in the arts, exposure to it at an early age feeds the curiosity and contributes to the overall civility of our society.

Again, UPAF through its dedicated arts in education funding has helped pick up some of the slack by contributing last year more than \$400,000 and expose young people to the power of the arts. While my time in Milwaukee was decades ago, the experiences and memories are indelible. It's heartening for me to know that my "old" home, the Milwaukee Rep continues to thrive and that the performing arts as practiced by dozens of UPAF-supported groups continues to enchant audiences and make the Milwaukee area a better place to live and work. Please keep supporting UPAF now and in the future.

Judith Light is an Emmy and Tony-award winning actress.