

## WHERE CREATIVITY SITS

Jim Crabtree

*“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he marches to the sound of a different drummer. Let him step to the music that he hears, however measured or far away.”*

—Henry David Thoreau

Theater has always been part of my life. I was raised by parents who succeeded in theater and TV in New York and Los Angeles, parents who decided to raise seven children in Crossville, Tennessee, where they and local visionaries started and ran a theater that changed the lives of a rural community and region, and changed my own life too. I remain at that theater now, having helped build and run it for forty years.

My path has had many turns. From a child of the theater, to seminary, to Yale School of Drama, to building a professional theater organization for forty years. What follows is Part 1 of my story. Theater can be magical wherever it happens. I’ve seen that in Crossville, Tennessee.

### BEFORE

My parents were successful in New York, Palm Beach, and Hol-

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lywood. Then they moved to Crossville, Tennessee.

In August 1963, my family moved from Los Angeles and the TV industry for which my father, Paul Crabtree, had been writing. We settled “temporarily” in the small town of Crossville, TN, pop. 4,500, a mountain crossroads on the rugged Cumberland Plateau, where my grandmother and her mother had grown up. The family roots date back to 1870. Granny had moved to Pittsburgh with her soldier/engineer husband Major Ed Ducey. He had returned from France after World War I. In that postwar era, Crossville and many other Plateau towns were “sundown towns,” where people of color had not been welcome after dark, since black and immigrant railroad laborers had been pushed out by economics and hostility once the trains were rolling, and the Klan grew ascendant after the Great War.

A few weeks earlier, in ‘63, I had graduated from Chaminade Prep, then a boys’ Catholic high school, amid the meadows and horse farms and relentlessly encroaching suburbs of Canoga Park, California. In late August, the family enjoyed a community “welcome” reception for my family that was organized by Crossville folks who knew of my parents, Paul Crabtree and Mary Evelyn Ducey Crabtree, and their theater, radio, film, and TV work.

They met in the early 1940s in New York City, in the National Touring Company of Kiss and Tell, a successful Broadway comedy directed by the great George Abbott. Courtship was followed by marriage, followed rapidly by me, in August ’45, 18 years before our “short-term” relocation to Crossville.

In the mid-‘40s, Dad’s career blossomed, with major radio roles, and a successful audition for Rodgers and Hammerstein that put him in the new production of Oklahoma!

Mom’s career as a successful model and actress was interrupted and deferred by my impending and actual arrival, and then by the six siblings who followed me over the next 16 years. Mary juggled family with occasional roles at theaters where Dad was director or producer.

That same year as the family move, Martin Luther King Jr. was

delivering the “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial, and I headed off to the Roman Catholic seminary of the Paulist Fathers, St. Peter’s College in Baltimore, to study for the priesthood.

I mourned my California girlfriend as we drove Route 66 across Arizona and New Mexico, through Texas and on to Tennessee. I was idealistic, and headed to the seminary perhaps in part for lack of another clear ambition beyond playing baseball—my high school coach was a part-time scout for the L.A. Dodgers—but that seemed unrealistic, and besides, the family was leaving California. I was not ready to be on my own.

I had grown up as a good student and jock primarily in Catholic schools, playing occasional kids’ and teen roles for Dad in Palm Beach with his professional company and in benefit musicals he wrote for Rosarian Academy, the Catholic girls’ school of my sisters. Life there sort of alternated among Little League, then high school sports, and plays for Dad and Mom.

I was successful in the small California pond at Chaminade, prompting “the boys”—surfers, mischief-makers—to push me for student government president instead of a great guy who dated Ricardo Montalban’s beautiful daughter, and was deemed an upper-crust “soc” (“sosh,” as in “social”) by the surfer-world ho-dads and gremmies who made up “the boys.” I wasn’t very good at the office and its modest politics, but I made sports teams as a starter at the tiny school, and excelled in speech contests, getting to the state finals. But I suppose I had lost what roots I had put down in Palm Beach, and didn’t know where to head or what to do for college. My instinct was to stay close to home, and Mom and I considered Loyola College, south of L.A. But with good memories of Dominican nuns at St. Ann’s and Rosarian, and surrounded by Marianist brothers and priests and a great regular-guy pastor at our church in Canoga Park—the seminary seemed a good and idealistic choice. Decisions about the future were made for me. Life was planned.

And then Loretta Young’s TV series, for which my father wrote, directed, and acted—was cancelled mid-season. All the other shows

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had writers and scripts as spring approached. Paul and Mary decided to move us “temporarily” from sunny, lavish California to Granny’s home in rural Tennessee—an inexpensive place to park seven kids until Dad returned to New York or L.A. for the next TV season—and maybe a good place to write a book.

The trip from California became another family journey, like all those from New York to Florida each December, right after Christmas. We reversed the drive from Palm Beach to L.A., which had featured New Orleans, the Grand Canyon and Route 66 and Carlsbad Caverns, through the desert to L.A. and TV-land. The return featured a blowout in the Mojave Desert, engine trouble in Albuquerque, and cooking out at campsites and outside motel rooms in sweltering Oklahoma—to save money, I now realize.

For me, the trip to Tennessee was about “the girl I left behind me,” away from another set of friends in giant L.A. to tiny Crossville—and then a monastic life at St. Peter’s, and beyond. The trip seemed a pilgrimage of sorts. I was Paul on the way to Damascus, or at least to St. Peter’s. The sense of mission heightened on my late August trip north to New York to see relatives, then down to Baltimore, as Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech echoed. Later that fall, with Gregorian chants as background in suburban Baltimore hallways, I honed new handball skills, accepted celibacy, and, grudgingly, got used to touch football and tennis. I registered for Selective Service at suburban Catonsville, Maryland’s, Draft Board, and was deferred as a divinity student. In November, ceremonies, tragedy, and destiny intertwined as John Kennedy was assassinated and Advent began, with its waiting and preparation. And I heard from home about a Crossville production of Dad’s *Pinocchio*, in which I had starred at the center of Rosarian Academy beauties.

Just before Christmas, I came home to see the Crossville *Pinocchio*. My younger brother, Tom, triumphed in my role! Townsfolk thrilled to songs by a hundred kids on the 1930s junior high stage, as Dad worked magic and Mom sketched costume designs and recruited seamstresses.

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I went back to St. Peter's, but the stream of news from Crossville continued. A new theater building was planned! Kids were hoarding pennies to buy a share of stock—at \$10 per share—in “The Cumberland County Playhouse—CCP.” Dad was planning an Actors’ Equity Association professional summer stock company—with stars, like in Westport and Florida!—as the centerpiece of year-round programming. Local schools and the new “Cumberland County Community Theater” would use the facility in fall and spring. A dream was becoming reality, in a small Appalachian county where the Interstate stopped just before climbing up our mountain. The dream featured a professional theater for general audiences, in a state where none existed.

But, that spring, it became clear to Paul and Mary that the sale of stock in the new for-profit theater (after the models of Westport, Palm Beach, and the Theater Guild in New York) would not generate enough money to build a facility. Yes, the remarkable sum of \$100K had been raised, from 700 stockholders. But the building would cost \$200K, leaving no money to post Equity bond—two weeks’ salary for New York-based pros—to guarantee their travel home if the new Playhouse folded mid-season.

I don’t know why Paul and Mary didn’t throw in the towel and head back to NYC or L.A. Perhaps Dad’s small-town roots beckoned. Perhaps they were broke.

Paul went back to his “trunk” of original works, and dusted off 1959’s Florida Rosarian/Royal Poinciana Playhouse show, *Dreamland, USA!*, which had again benefited the school, and had provided me with a good role. Dad needed a tall, good-looking young man who played the guitar to play the young leading man. And I couldn’t play the guitar.

But I did know a talented guy who played the guitar and sang pretty well. During a phone call, I told Paul about Bob Gunton, a fellow seminarian from California. Bob was a handball addict and a powerful folksinger, with a repertoire ranging from The Kingston Trio and Bob Dylan to Joan Baez and The Limelighters. He sang

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lead baritone in Rev. Bob Mize's seminary chorus, which learned the liturgical chants to lead the congregation of St. Peter's High School and college seminarians and the faculty of priests. I sang with the group, never blending quite well enough to suit Father Bob.

Bob became "Johnny Timberlake" in Tennessee USA! When Dad needed a choreographer, I proposed seminarian Vic Luckritz, a trained dancer and Broadway fan who had directed Bob and me in a couple of holiday shows at St. Peter's. Paul took my word that Vic could choreograph the show.

And it was a huge hit, generating summer revenue (at \$1, \$2, and \$3) that would carry the theater through fall and winter, and building the foundation of a theater audience in rural Tennessee—the audience that now has averaged over 100K visits since '65—over five million, in fifty years. Tennessee, USA! ran five summers, through '69, then came back ten more times through 1995. Paul wrote a dozen more shows for the Playhouse stage, developing a tradition for new, original plays and musicals.

Bob, Vic, and I returned to Crossville for TUSA! '66 after our second year at St. Peter's; and I returned home for the Christmas holidays. We dated, grew up a bit. Personally, I had found friends, a community, and an extended family. A hometown that felt more authentic, more traditional, than homes in Queens, summer stock locations, Westchester County, NY, Palm Beach, or West Palm, and eleven different primary, middle, and high schools. Somehow, Crossville felt like home. The hometown where I belonged.

For Paul and Mary, Crossville was a mixed blessing. It was exciting to see the Playhouse succeed and grow, and fun for us seven kids to be in Tennessee, USA! each summer, and involved, like it or not, in whatever was happening onstage. Crossville seemed a good place to raise a family, though New York and Palm Beach had excitement and large salaries. But paying the mortgage took most of the proceeds. The Kennedy Administration had established the National Endowment for the Arts, which generated state arts councils (and funding for nonprofits) across the country. Nonprofit regional the-

aters, based on the Theater Guild model of season schedules and subscriber audiences, were developing across the country. Paul helped start the Tennessee Theater Association, and was asked to serve as an original member of the Tennessee Arts Commission. But his theater, nominally “for profit,” was ineligible for funding.

Paul was an original incorporator of the Playhouse—and would share in the profits. But after the mortgage was paid, no surplus remained. He wrote scripts to keep the theater alive, receiving no royalties as writer, just a very modest salary as CEO. Mary was unpaid, then became a salaried theater teacher at Crossville Elementary after several years, when federal funding was developed to broaden the mission of the Playhouse and continue connecting with local youth. Then Mary was diagnosed with cancer. After five years of TUSA!, volunteers had run out of gas—they had given up summers for half a decade.

Dad drank too much, and must have felt his career was lost but couldn’t figure how to find it again. Still, when a sixth consecutive season of Tennessee, USA! seemed impossible to cast with enough volunteers—and with Bob Gunton in Vietnam—he responded creatively: 1970 featured his new musical *That’s the Spirit*, after its earlier premiere as a musical for Cumberland County High; and summer brought *An Evening with Paul Crabtree*—with new music by Crossville musician Steve Wheaton, and songs and stories drawn from Paul’s youth in “Doby Creek”—his pseudonym for Pulaski, VA—and his careers on Broadway, in Hollywood, and amid the wealth and society of Palm Beach.

*An Evening* was a huge success, with a small supporting cast, including my sisters Abby and Amy and composer Wheaton, and a very modest production budget for scenery and costumes. And Dad was in his element, back onstage as a song-and-dance man, and remarkable storyteller. His tales of youth in small-town Appalachia, and his songs from vaudeville and Broadway and growing up, sold out the theater all summer, and led to his Patchwork Press publication of a crude locally printed but strong-selling volume of auto-

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biographical Stories from Doby Creek which helped to support the theater. And the next year, '71, saw the return of *An Evening* and the summer premiere of *Step to the Music*—a big, splashy semi-autobiographical musical starring Dad himself and now-Vietnam vet Bob Gunton. The show's lyrics connect deeply to our family.

And *Step to the Music* became his career solution. The developers of Opryland, USA!, a large theme park in Nashville, came to see both shows, and hired Paul to create and direct all the live shows for the new "Home of American Music."

Opryland was economic salvation for the family, though Paul wrote "for hire" rather than retaining his copyrights—anathema in the theater business, but not unusual in the Nashville music industry. As Paul was drawn to Opryland, the Playhouse was drawn to convert to nonprofit status as a 501(c)(3) corporation. Most of the stock was donated by founding families who loved the new Playhouse, and the remainder was repurchased, over a period of years, as the law prescribed. But Paul and Mary informally, but quite distinctly, separated, with Paul in an apartment near the under-construction theme park. Though legally intact, the family was broken.

Remarkably, Mary took the reins as Producing Director strongly enough to balance the theater's budget for the first time—and every year for the remainder of her tenure as CEO.

By this time, I had left the seminary, drawn to the theater as a career. Two years at St. Peter's had been followed by summers of Tennessee, USA! The next step in training for the priesthood was a "year of prayer and contemplation" at the Paulist Fathers' rural "novitiate" in northern New Jersey. I had basked in the bright lights and applause and the social life that came with small-town celebrity. I had seen Dad and Mom work magic, involving scores of families and hundreds of volunteers—inspiring and leading a successful sellout theater far from urban centers, before I-40 had cut driving time in half to Crossville from Knoxville or Nashville. Instead of uncertainty about college and future from California, and the "life-as-planned" noble security of the seminary, I now saw a new horizon. Three



months into the “year of prayer and contemplation,” and without the academic anchor and challenge of classes, I decided to leave the Paulist novitiate. I came home, idled awhile, and helped at the Playhouse, until my mother wisely suggested I get a job, and think about the future.

The job was driving a photo-finishing pickup route and developing film for Harry Cravens, whose photography documents the Playhouse’s early years. The future was envisioned, during months of working and dating in Crossville, as beginning at Middle Tennessee State University, to complete my last two years of college. I knew about MTSU because Dad had taken his high school theater class there, to compete in the state one-act play competition. They won, with a one-act he had written and directed, and he had made the acquaintance of Theater Chair Lane Boutwell. I headed for MTSU, a young man in a hurry. And I met a Tennessee girl who had seen me in Tennessee USA; and she would change my life. Annie.

In 18 months, cramming 21 hours of credits into semesters and returning to Crossville for two more summers of TUSA!, I completed the BA degree. But midway through the undergrad curriculum, most satisfying in literature, history, technical theater/design, and other classes where I found my academic competition much less formidable than at St. Peter’s, I grew frustrated about the program. There were a few other guys who shared my feelings, and thankfully, we found encouragement in Clayton Hawes, the theater tech director and tech/design instructor. Clay challenged us to challenge ourselves, by putting on our own show, offering the small arena theater, and suggesting we read *Waiting for Godot*.

We did. And the show, and its challenges, taught me volumes and lessons—one of which was “quit griping and get to work.”

## **WHAT COMES NEXT**

At the drama club, I met Ann Windrow, and her identical twin, Nancy, who mercifully changed her hair color shortly after I met

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them both. Before *Godot*, to take on a project of my own in a realm which I thought I knew—musical theater—I had posted a notice on the theater message board seeking a (free) piano player. Annie responded. And she has “musically” directed and guided my life ever since.

And as we dated, and began to get serious, I thought about the future. More training? I certainly needed it. Grad School? Seemed a comfortable idea.

While at St. Peter’s, I had haunted the library, where we could read *The New York Times*. An article in the Theater section had caught my eye a year or more before. “Painting the Green Room Red” chronicled Robert Brustein’s new-broom/new-spirit arrival as Dean at Yale School of Drama, which had evidently grown somewhat musty and academic. The article spoke of the school’s long and great prestige, but also an exciting new late ‘60s spirit. After all, the “Summer of Love” would hit San Francisco, and for Annie and me, it would hit Murfreesboro, too.

Knowing no other options, since I hadn’t researched theater grad schools, I applied to Yale. My academic transcript was strong. But my experience in the theatre was short-term, and my training had just begun. Could I possibly be accepted? If not, what then? No options.

The Yale application threw me a curve, asking for an essay on “Why I believe I have the background, training, and experience to succeed at the Yale School of Drama.” I realized I might be in over my head, and stewed for several weeks through several drafts of the essay. Finally, in frustration, I decided to simply come clean. “I have realized that I DO NOT have the background, training, and experience” to be successful at such a top competitive school. But, I expressed, I had begun to learn from my father; knocked the top off the grading curve in academics; and I had directed a successful (and independent) student production of *Godot*. I griped about weaknesses in the MTSU program, while lauding the academic strengths of St. Peter’s and several MTSU classes in history and lit. And I admitted that I had much to learn, and promised to work hard to do so.

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And I was accepted. A year later, Associate Dean Howard Stein would tell me that the essay, its frankness and reasonable craftsmanship, had led them to me. And it didn't hurt that Stein had seen Paul on Broadway in *The Iceman Cometh*, and knew his name from New York theater. I had the genes.

But I struggled at Yale. New Haven was then amid year-round summers of love, and I had led a sheltered, even cloistered, life. I was not cool. My clothes were from Sears, not the East Village or the Ivy League. I lived in a rented room with the bath down the hall, cooked bologna in an electric skillet in my room, but was slow to acclimate. Like Dad, I began to drink. And smoke. Gradually, I made friends and grew more comfortable—but still felt quite alone—no family, no seminary pals, no Annie. Our parents had asked us to wait a year before marriage, which my Catholicism and Ann's Southern Protestantism seemed to justify.

Year 1 at Yale finished successfully, and I returned to Tennessee for TUSA! rehearsal, then marriage in Columbia, Tennessee, in Annie's Cumberland Presbyterian Church—a branch which had splintered off for its opposition to slavery. Ours was the first Catholic marriage in Tennessee celebrated by a priest in a Protestant church, with the church's minister assisting. For the rehearsal dinner, Dad made his specialty—meatball pie—and Bob Gunton sang Billy Edd Wheeler's lyrics, "There'll never be another hunk of woman like my Ann—she makes me feel like a great big man." We had a one-day honeymoon, then returned to rehearsal for TUSA! '68, with Annie leading the soprano section of the show's large chorus. We collaborated on musical revue "show dinners" at nearby Holiday Hills Resort, recruiting TUSA! cast members to volunteer. For the summer, I was the resort "entertainment director," Annie the music director and dining room hostess. We rented our first home, an apartment just off Main St, in downtown Crossville.

In the following year at Yale, I made connections through Annie (now a secretary in the School of Music) with conductor C. William "Bill" Harwood, who was to become a key colleague in my early ca-

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reer. With Bill, I became stage director for several theater and opera productions during the coming years.

Bill planned a “staged concert production “of Jesus Christ Superstar, which brought us together. Certainly the work’s biblical roots were not lost on me, given my seminary years, but the rock score is what excited us and the community. While preparing for Superstar, Bill also asked me to help him with some staging for a less commercial opera—Benjamin Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde* (Noah’s Flood), a medieval “mystery play” set to music with a quartet of mature voices and a professional core orchestral ensemble—and with a chorus written for youth choirs, and orchestrations encompassing parts such as “tuned teacups” to evoke raindrops, and a supporting orchestra of young players. Knowing nothing of opera, but eager for Superstar, I agreed.

Ironically, Superstar was canceled during a licensing rights dispute, as a production of the rock opera was planned for Broadway. But Bill and I went forward with *Noye’s Fludde*.

And what a blessing that “medieval mystery play/opera” became for us both. We had little or no budget, but the combined forces were impressive—Yale Collegiate Chorus and the Smith College Glee Club—nearly 200 college singers, and a volunteer youth and university orchestra eager for opportunities to play, thanks to Bill’s enthusiastic recruiting and magnetic musicianship. We were to perform in Battell Chapel, the Yale University Church led by Reverends William Sloane Coffin and Phil Zaeder. I was pleased to have the opportunity but had no idea how to proceed.

For we had no set, no costumes, no lighting, just 200 singers and the orchestra for cavernous Battell, and to create an ark and all the creatures who boarded it to escape the flooding sea of deluge. But auditions produced a strong group of grad student opera singers for the leads, and a 75-ish emeritus faculty member as God—a spoken but rhythmically complex role—and I had to figure out how to stage this opera in a church, adapted from a medieval “mystery play,” sung in a version of medieval English!—and incorporating the Navy

Hymn of Great Britain, no less!

I recalled a comment my father had made once about directing problems—“See if you can turn your biggest problem into your biggest asset”—as he had done with a town full of enthusiastic amateurs in TUSA!, I assumed. So the 200 collegiate singers (mostly music students, not actors) clearly comprised one problem, along with no scenery, costumes, or lights!

So the singers had to become everything. And Britten’s use of the Navy Hymn suggested a spirit of creative license. As Bill rehearsed the singers and his Yale Chorus, I listened, and imagined another 100 voices when joined by the Smith College women (and a few men, for Smith was newly coed, like Yale).

And the Navy Hymn’s rhythm became, to my ears and imagination, the rocking of a vast ship amid a stormy sea, as it was during Britten’s youth in the Second World War, when Britain’s navy youth fought the tide of swastika’s tyranny at sea, in the air, and “on the beaches, in the streets” as Churchill’s stirring oratory promised, should Britain’s island be attacked, The hymn, by British composer and choir director William Whiting, was also adopted as the U.S. Navy Hymn—and incorporated by Britten in three full verses for choirs and orchestra in Noye’s Fludde:

ETERNAL FATHER, STRONG TO SAVE, WHOSE ARM  
HATH BOUND THE RESTLESS WAVE,

WHO BIDDEST THE MIGHTY OCEAN DEEP, ITS OWN  
APPOINTED LIMITS KEEP,

OH, HEAR US WHEN WE CRY TO THEE, FOR THOSE IN  
PERIL ON THE SEA!

With image in mind of a vast ark rocking on vaster seas, as 200 voices burst forth in repeated “Alleluias!,” in my mind (and then in reality), half of our 200 singers became the joyous animals, in brightly colored plumage from personal and dorm-buddies’ closets, prancing two by two down church aisles to be welcomed in celebration by Noah and his family, onto the church steps approaching the altar. First, in a raucous celebration of living creatures, then forming

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into the shape of an ark! A ship with pointed bow and raised stern, with a captain's wheel of the arms of a kneeling, lanky girl at mid-ship, halfway up the steps, and a mast and sail of the tallest giraffe of a guy with the smallest young lamb of a girl on his shoulders, arms waving as a sail. The tribes of colorfully garbed animals celebrated fellowship, danced and sang together, then morphed into Noye's Ark itself on the final "Aaa-le-lu- iaaaaaahh."

And then came a percussive triangle's ting of rain, then tuned teacup raindrops—ping, ping—slowly first, then faster, as a bass rumble emerged from tympani and deep strings, as 100 black-garbed figures flowed and undulated down the aisles, splashing onto spectators, surrounded the ark of animals, flowing up to the altar itself, and nearly engulfing the front pews of spectators.

And the ark rocked. The entire church truly rocked on that Sunday afternoon, as the ark and sea began to sway in a circular pattern, gestures following the path of an imaginary dove circling the ark, bearing an imaginary branch of greenery as ten-year-olds tinkled teacups and triangles, echoing final raindrops. As the dove landed on Mrs. Noah's head (or so it seemed, as all pointed), our majestic white-haired God, in his very own commencement robe with bright collar, our God spoke in resonant rhythms from his organ loft high above, telling us he would send his rainbow to bless all. And miraculously, Prof. Benjamin DeLoach, as God, spoke of his coming rainbow, and the orchestral chimes celebrated salvation of humankind and all living creatures. And a celestial lighting designer brought the sun streaming through the stained-glass windows of Battell Chapel, gleaming on the organ pipes surrounding our warm-voiced God, then spilling onto the entire ark and sea, enveloping Noah, his family, all creatures, and Creation, in brilliant dappling of sunlight and stained glass. The divine light cues were astonishing and impeccable. And as God finished his words of blessing and salvation, animals and sea and Noye's family processed arm in arm up the aisles, as God threw candy kisses from his organ-loft perch. Children with hand bells and

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musicians with chimes, percussion, pipe organ and more, evoked a new beginning for the entire world. A triumph for Bill and me, and our entire cast, their families, and the attending audience.

It was certainly a new beginning for my world; now with Annie in New Haven, and our discovery of an additional world of music and theater beyond the Drama School, and the collaboration with Bill Harwood. I learned much in the directing, design, and literature classes; the interaction on class projects with my peers. All that I learned I brought to Crossville, Tennessee, where our theater has continued all these years. I learned that theater can be anywhere and everywhere. That is the story I will one day tell in a longer piece. This is my beginning.