

**Through the Intersection of Gender, Class, and Career: A Look at the Life and Legacy of  
Lucille Lortel**

by

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# **Through the Intersection of Gender, Class, and Career: A Look at the Life and Legacy of Lucille Lortel**

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This thesis on the career of Lucille Lortel examines how she was a self-funded, female, Off-Broadway producer who favored political shows and how she navigated obstacles to further her work and establish a legacy. Lortel's work as a producer helped establish Off-Broadway, introduced many playwrights to the American stage, and provided opportunities for theatre artists. However, her career has not been the focus of much theatre scholarship. Developed through archival research of Lortel's collection in the New York Public Library, this thesis analyzes how Lortel's time as an actress shaped her producing career, her navigation of the press's sexist characterization of her work, and her unique status as a self-funded producer. As a financially independent producer, Lortel supported political shows and artists who were creating under oppressive circumstances. By using the methods silence, ambiguity, and redirection, Lortel avoided discussing political aspects of the theatre she supported, which is examined in a case study of Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods*. Lortel established her legacy through methods that supported others in the theatre community, preserved and shared information, and used traditional forms of honors and awards. Some of these efforts included funding new drama at Yale University, working with the Theatre on Film and Tape archive of the New York Public Library, and naming her Off-Broadway theatre after herself. This thesis argues Lortel's awareness and agency within the decisions she made that shaped her career and deeply impacted American theatre.

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## 1.0 Introduction

In 1900, Lucille Wadler was born into a family of artists: two uncles were musicians, her brother was a child violin prodigy, and her sister was a painter.<sup>1</sup> After graduating from high school, she attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts to train as an actress, following her family's artistic path. After graduating in 1920 she changed her name to Lucille Lortel, preferring the sound of the alliteration.<sup>2</sup> Ten years passed and Lortel was about to change her name again by marrying Louis Schweitzer. Her fiancé was in France at the time and was so eager to wed that he paid for Lortel's journey on a ship to meet him. But in need of a new passport and missing her birth certificate, Lortel asked her father to confirm her citizenship and take five years off her age. A twenty-five-year-old actress was more easily cast than a thirty-year-old, she believed. He complied and Lortel soon sailed to marry Schweitzer.<sup>3</sup> However, he expected her to retire once married, and for a while she did, going by the name Mrs. Schweitzer. In 1947, she launched her new career as a producer and returned to Lucille Lortel—the name she was known by in the theatre community.<sup>4</sup> Later in her career, instead of giving reporters her actual age, she would give them an estimate.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis Greene, *Lucille Lortel: The Queen of Off-Broadway* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2004), chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> Sam McCready, *Lucille Lortel: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Greene, chapter three.

<sup>4</sup> Greene, chapter four.

<sup>5</sup> "For Lucille Lortel, all the world's her stage" by Irene Backalenick, July 13, 1988, Box 90, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

This awareness of the theatre world, of qualities that helped careers, of the barriers to women was a trait that Lortel used often as a producer. It is my argument that Lucille Lortel was aware of how her position as a female producer who was self-funded and favored political shows would be received by the theatre community and purposefully navigated these obstacles to create a strong legacy that would continue her work after her death.

### **1.1 Literature Review**

The scope of scholarship on Lortel is fairly limited compared to other major figures in American theatre history. The most significant work dedicated to Lortel is a biography published in 2004 by Alexis Greene titled *Lucille Lortel: The Queen of Off-Broadway*. Prior to this, Sam McCready wrote *Lucille Lortel: A Bio-Bibliography* as a resource for scholarship on Lortel's career. Additionally, *Angels in the American Theatre: Patrons, Patronage, and Philanthropy* edited by Robert A. Schanke includes a chapter titled "Queen of Off-Broadway" also written by Greene. Lortel appears in encyclopedic publications and biographical texts. However, her work is less acknowledged in texts dedicated to American theatre history and Off-Broadway, even when productions she supported are recognized as significant.

Greene's *Lucille Lortel: The Queen of Off-Broadway* presents a full, nearly chronological narrative of her subject's life. The research for this biography is compiled from the extensive Lucille Lortel papers collection in the New York Public Library, other theatre archives in which related materials appeared, and interviews with friends and colleagues of Lortel. The biography is divided into eleven chapters with each focusing primarily on one subject of her career while also giving a view of other aspects of Lortel's life at the time. This structure allows for Greene to argue

that Lortel artistically influenced Off-Broadway as a producer and was successful as a woman in theatre during a time when few women were. Additionally, Green argues that Lortel is influenced by two forces: a deep love for theatre and a need for recognition. Green explains that these forces resulted in conflicting actions within Lortel's relationships with money, artists, and self-promotion.<sup>6</sup> The biography provides a thorough account of Lortel's nearly 70-year involvement in theatre and highlights her important relationships with institutions, artists, and artistic styles, like Athol Fugard, Yale Repertory Theatre, and European avant-garde plays.<sup>7</sup> Greene also highlights Lortel's philanthropic efforts and her contributions to theatre organizations, explaining the extent of her financial support of her community. In writing this biography, Greene brought attention to the life and career of a significant figure of theatre history who previously had not been acknowledged in this capacity. Furthermore, she used this book to represent the work of a woman in the role of a producer during a time in theatre history when few women occupied that position. Greene recognizes her considerable position in theatre history, but she does not exclusively honor Lortel. She writes widely of Lortel's character and how her contradictions made her a complicated figure. Although Greene has made a substantial contribution to Lortel's legacy in writing extensively on her career, she psychologically analyzes the decisions she made in her career rather than analyzing decisions in their individual circumstances. Greene's biography leaves room for the analysis of Lortel's career without prescribing personal motivations to her actions. In my work, I place my analysis of the choices Lortel made within the circumstances of her career and the theatre community at the time.

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<sup>6</sup> Greene, chapter one.

<sup>7</sup> Greene, chapters four and five.

Sam McCready's *Lucille Lortel: A Bio-Bibliography* is the only other text concerned entirely with Lortel's career and was the first one published in 1993. However, McCready does not provide a clear, linear narrative of her work and is structured as a guide through Lortel's producing career. By interviewing Lortel and using her collection of papers and materials, McCready compiled extensive information on her career.<sup>8</sup> There is a brief background of Lortel's early life, but the majority of the introduction is dedicated to providing an overview of how she began her career as a producer. A timeline of significant events in her life and work is provided, followed by four sections of Off-Broadway, Broadway, ANTA Matinee Series, and White Barn Theatre productions. These sections each provide information on the run, a production history, a plot summary, excerpts from reviews, and commentary. Following the productions are a bibliography of additional sources and appendices of awards and honors. McCready argues in the biography that Lortel was a significant contributor to theatre in America, but this is only extended occasionally into the commentary sections for productions.<sup>9</sup> The rest of the book is factual information about Lortel's productions. McCready's bio-bibliography was a valuable tool in the creation of my thesis. Through it, I was able to trace Lortel's relationships with different theatre personnel and patterns in who, what, and when she produced. It was especially helpful in how it compiled all the information for a production in one space such as the playwright, synopsis, and reviews, that I could use to then search for additional materials in the archives. Unfortunately, the bio-bibliography was published five years before Lortel's death and does not include information

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<sup>8</sup> "Chronicles of the 'Queen of Off-Broadway'" by William F. Brown, October 29, 1993, box 82, folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>9</sup> McCready, 1.

on several of her final productions. Additionally, the book is strictly focused on Lortel's experiences as a producer, which excluded information of how she contributed to the theatre community in other ways, like through donations to theatre organizations.

There are several texts where Lortel is mentioned but is not the focus of the entire work, like with *Angels in the American Theatre: Patrons, Patronage, and Philanthropy* edited by Robert A. Schanke. The overall text examines the different ways in which “angels” or wealthy individuals and organizations supported theatre at different points in American history. Alexis Greene contributed a chapter titled “Queen of Off-Broadway”, which condensed her writing from the biography, and focused more tightly on Lortel as a producer.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, entries on Lortel's life and prominent productions appear in encyclopedic texts such as *Historical Dictionary of Contemporary American Theater: 1930-2010* by James Fisher, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* by Gerald Bordman and Thomas S. Hischak, the *American National Biography* entry by Deborah Grace Winer, *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia* edited by Anne Commire, and the *Encyclopedia Judaica* edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Schanke, *Theater in the Americas: Angels in the American Theater: Patrons, Patronage, and Philanthropy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), accessed March 19, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>11</sup>James Fisher, *Historical Dictionary of Contemporary American Theater: 1930-2010* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), accessed March 17, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 479.

Gerald Bordman and Thomas S. Hischak, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2004), accessed March 19, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, 399.

Stewart Kampel, “Lucille Lortel,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 195, Vol. 13 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), *Gale eBooks* [https://link-gale-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX2587512765/GVRL?u=upitt\\_main&sid=GVRL&xid=51b1b892](https://link-gale-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX2587512765/GVRL?u=upitt_main&sid=GVRL&xid=51b1b892).

These texts provide summaries of Lortel's life and career as brief as a few sentences up to several paragraphs, only highlighting her career as a producer Off-Broadway and at the White Barn, her beginnings as an actress, her connections to well-known theatre personnel and organizations, and some honors she received. Also situating Lortel in the context of other people that she knew are a few biographies, like *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* by Eric A. Gordon, *Margo: the Life and Theatre of Margo Jones* by Helen Sheehy and *Eva Le Gallienne: A Bio-Bibliography* by Robert A. Schanke.<sup>12</sup> These works mention Lortel entirely in the contexts of how she intersected the careers of their subjects as she produced, worked with, or produced similarly to each of them. Another context in which Lortel is mentioned is in *Off-Broadway: the Prophetic Theater* by Stuart W. Little. This book chronicles the development of Off-Broadway through several phases as influenced by individuals and organizations, such as The Phoenix Theater, Edward Albee, and Joseph Papp. While Lortel is not one of the central figures discussed, she is mentioned in association with her ownership of the Theatre de Lys, the *Threepenny Opera*, and Jean Genet's *The Balcony*.<sup>13</sup> Lortel's background is not given, and she is not mentioned as the artistic director of the ANTA Matinee Series, which Little covers at two points. However, in other Off-Broadway and American theatre history texts, Lortel's name rarely appears, even in association with her productions when they are claimed to be foundational to the development of Off-Broadway.

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<sup>12</sup> Helen Sheehy and Emily Mann, *Margo: the Life and Theatre of Margo Jones* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989), 231.

Robert A. Schanke, *Eva Le Gallienne: a Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 88, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart W. Little, *Off-Broadway: the Prophetic Theater* (New York: Delta, 1974), 82, 98-99, 120.

I began this project with contextual research through several texts discussing topics that were associated with Lortel. However, she did not appear in their pages. The two main texts I used that Lortel was absent from were *New Broadway Theatre Across America: Approaching a New Millennium* by Gerald M. Berkowitz and *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: from Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Chorus Line* by Garff B. Wilson. My expectation is not for Lortel to be mentioned in every text related to American theatre history nor the ones that focus exclusively on Off-Broadway, but these two texts in particular discuss topics closely related to Lortel, and yet her name does not appear in the context. For instance, Berkowitz's book dedicates a significant amount of space to the development of Off-Broadway exclusively and credits the *Threepenny Opera* as contributing to the establishment of this new form of theatre in New York. Berkowitz also explains that *Threepenny* had a short but successful run before closing, only to open with the same cast and in the same theatre later.<sup>14</sup> There is no connection to Lortel's purchase of the theatre and her collaboration with the original producers to continue. Berkowitz largely focused on the individuals behind productions, including those who often acted as producers like Joseph Papp and Margo Jones. He presented the stories of the individuals behind productions, and not only performers or playwrights.<sup>15</sup> My work then places Lortel in the context of this history and considers how she functioned uniquely as an independent producer to develop Off-Broadway.

Lortel's absence in Wilson's text is noticeable in his coverage of the American National Theatre and Academy. For 20 years, Lortel was the Artistic Director for the ANTA Matinee series,

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<sup>14</sup>Gerald M. Berkowitz, *New Broadway: Theatre across America: Approaching a New Millennium* (New York: Applause, 1997), 48-49.

<sup>15</sup> Berkowitz, 31-61.

which held weekly performances of underperformed and new experimental works. Wilson says this organization's beginning signified a new form of theatre in New York, but not Lortel's association with it.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Wilson presents early Off-Broadway as a period of history dedicated to the cultivation of new playwrights, including several that Lortel produced like Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and Lanford Wilson. These artists are mentioned in the contexts of the notable productions and the individuals involved in staging them but exclude Lortel.<sup>17</sup> Her absences indicate that in scholarship, she is not yet closely associated with the development of Off-Broadway, despite the consistent credit of her influence on this community while she was alive. My research narrows this gap by focusing on how she functioned as an Off-Broadway producer, many of the artists and organizations she championed, and other contributions she made to this community.

## 1.2 Methodology

My work in New York Scholar in Residence research award was the first time that I completed archival research. My approach to the project began with spending a few days immersing myself within the New York Public Library's system and how Lortel's collection was arranged by calling boxes from each subsection, comparing how they were organized. I compiled information in a document, taking notes on the content and its location. I examined materials folder

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<sup>16</sup>Wilson B. Garff, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: from Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Chorus Line* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 284.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, 285-316.

by folder, but as I gained more experience within the archives and gathered more information from her career, my approach changed. I formed my research questions, which led me to request materials from these subjects. I spent multiple days poring through *A Walk in the Woods* materials that would later be my sources for the case study, along with examining all of the clippings as I quickly identified newspaper articles as one of the most helpful sources. Not only did they contextualize the events of Lortel's career, but they were the materials through which I was most often able hear her own perspective on her work. I then photographed materials and noted citation information in the document so I could transcribe and organize the images later.

My approach to examining a female-centered history was influenced by *Women, theatre, and performance: new histories and new historiographies* edited by Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner. The introduction proposes considering how the material circumstances of women influenced their lives and careers, which is the approach I chose to take rather than using a specific theoretical or feminist lens.<sup>18</sup> To do this, I considered the material in terms of Lortel through the resources available to her and the structures of theatre that she was operating in at the time along with the material remnants of her career. Primarily, the clippings mentioned above. By close reading the language used by the writers and Lortel herself, I was able to develop my argument of how her gender influenced her career.

Additionally, my approach to this historiography was influenced by a theatre history course taught by Professor Patrick McKelvey. When discussing Aristotle's *Poetics*, Professor McKelvey noted several times that "Aristotle was not inevitable." The method of removing my presumptions

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<sup>18</sup> Maggie B. Gale and Vivien Gardner, *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 2-3.

that historical figures and events were bound to happen has guided my research and remained with me since that class. It led me to closely examine what possible obstacles could have prevented Lortel's career, to locate the inconsistencies in the stories, and to analyze how her navigation of these obstacles shaped her career.

### 1.3 Women in Theatre and Off-Broadway

Lortel was a producer during several significant shifts for the theatre community in New York. One shift was in how women were able to be involved in theatre. There were several prominent female producers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Cheryl Crawford, Eva Le Gallienne, and Jean Dalrymple.<sup>19</sup> Similarly to Lortel, these women began their careers as actresses and shifted to producing later, although many of them maintained creative involvement in theatre. They differed in the kinds of theatre they produced and how they funded their shows, which I discuss in the first section of my thesis.

Another shift that Lortel contributed to was the creation of Off-Broadway. To stage a show on Broadway was costly even in the 1920s when Lortel was an actress. When she returned to theatre over 20 years later, it was even more expensive, but a new movement had begun through theatre companies like the Circle in the Square and the Living Theatre.<sup>20</sup> These companies were

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<sup>19</sup>Milly S. Barranger, *Gambler's Instinct: The Story of Broadway Producer Cheryl Crawford* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), accessed March 17, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Robert A. Schanke, *Eva Le Gallienne: a Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

Jean Dalrymple, *September Child: the Story of Jean Dalrymple* (New York: Dood, Mead & Company, 1963).

<sup>20</sup>Berkowitz, 35.

dedicated to producing experimental shows that were different from the commercial standards of Broadway, which predominantly featured the light-hearted American musical.<sup>21</sup> When Lortel moved to Off-Broadway, she contributed to the work of these early companies that created alternatives to the mainstream theatre. They were produced at lower costs, which made for lower investment risks and a greater chance that a backer would support a new playwright or an experimental show.<sup>22</sup> Slowly, Off-Broadway groups had consistent successful performances that gained the attention of the theatre world, and artists saw new opportunities for creation while audiences saw theatre unlike anything they had before.<sup>23</sup>

Lortel's revival of the *Threepenny Opera* was one production that led to the establishment of Off-Broadway, as it consistently drew audiences throughout its seven-year run.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, her work with the ANTA Matinee Series frequently gave playwrights their New York debut as she tested out shows at the White Barn in Westport before staging them for a limited time within the series.<sup>25</sup> Presenting new material every week meant that artists had plenty of opportunities to become involved in theatre and audiences were always prepared for something new. While Lortel's impact on Off-Broadway was established in her time but is less reflected in the scholarship I have found, I am not arguing only to establish her influence. Instead, I am acknowledging her impact at that time of her career and re-centering her importance in how she navigated obstacles.

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<sup>21</sup> Berkowitz, 185.

<sup>22</sup> Berkowitz, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Berkowitz, 57-59.

<sup>24</sup> Berkowitz, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Greene, chapter five.

## 1.4 Chapter Descriptions

I previously explained how Lucille Lortel changed her name and age several times throughout her career as a way to navigate the expectations for a woman as an actress. However, actions such as these continued into her work as a producer. In my thesis, I argue that as an independent, self-funded, female producer on Off-Broadway in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lortel guided the community's perceptions of her as a way to navigate obstacles and establish a legacy that would continue her work after her death.

In the first section, I examine how Lortel's early career as an actress built for her a foundation of knowledge of theater both within and outside of New York, established her preference to contribute to theatre education, and introduced her to theatre artists and personnel, all shaping her later career as a producer. Then I analyze how Lortel's status as a millionaire following her marriage to Schweitzer deeply impacted how she was able to function as a producer. I consider how Lortel was uniquely situated as an independent, self-funded female producer and how she inverted sexist language to reframe and further her work. I argue that Lortel's career was intricately tied to her time as an actress, her wealth, and her gender, and her navigation of these elements led to the success of her career.

Lortel had a distinct preference for certain kinds of shows throughout her career but hesitated at ever clearly articulating what they were. These shows tended to be experimental in style and content, were created by underrepresented artists who often worked in oppressive systems and had political elements. In section two, I argue that Lortel preferred these shows and navigated discussing the difficult topics associated with them through three methods of silence, ambiguity, and redirection to avoid any consequences while still promoting her work.

In section three, I examine elements of Lortel's career that also established her legacy. I consider how these elements furthered her work in serving the theatre community financially and artistically. I argue that Lortel established her legacy through actions that were in service of others, by creating spaces dedicated to the preservation and sharing of information, and through the traditional, permanent honors and awards that she is still known for today.

## 2.0 Section One

On August 14<sup>th</sup>, I had just returned to Pittsburgh from the New York Scholars in Residence program during which I had researched 20<sup>th</sup> century producer Lucille Lortel, when a New York Times article by Michael Paulson was published with the title, “Who Calls the Shots on Broadway? She Does.” The article discussed the increased presence of women as lead producers for Broadway shows and opened with a photo of the eight women producers whose Broadway shows received Tony awards and nominations that year. Many of these women were quoted celebrating how far the industry had come, while also acknowledging that women playwrights and directors were still in need of support. They also shared the sexism they had faced and subconsciously passed on to other women in their careers. Nevertheless, the article stated that 2019 had felt like “a tipping point.”<sup>26</sup>

This tipping point, as acknowledged by Paulson, had been building for a century, as female producers had worked on Broadway with varying degrees of success for many years. Lortel herself produced seven shows on Broadway from the 1950s to the 1980s and had worked with multiple other female producers including Cheryl Crawford, Eva Le Gallienne, and Jean Dalrymple. However, Lortel only became a producer as her in-laws and husband expected that she would retire from acting, due to the negative cultural associations of women in that profession at the time. Lortel first became involved in theatre through her career as an actress, meeting many people she would work with later as a producer and providing her with knowledge of how the commercial

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Paulson, “Who Calls the Shots on Broadway? She Does.” *New York Times*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/14/theater/broadway-women-producers.html>.

theatre world functioned. Her marriage prevented her from continuing her career as an actress but provided her with an advantage to becoming a producer. Lortel's husband Louis Schweitzer was a millionaire from an industrialist family and his wealth allowed her to own two theatres and pursue the productions that she wanted to without many of the constraints felt by commercial producers.<sup>27</sup>

The way that Lortel and her contemporaries navigated the impact of their gender on their careers was far different from the producers of Paulson's article. The producers of 2019 discussed sexism as openly as they discussed the other difficulties of their careers like maintaining relevancy after a Tony win and securing theatres to host national tours. However, Lortel's navigation of her gender was far less direct. Instead of drawing attention to the sexism in the theatre community at the time, Lortel played into the way it characterized her as a mother figure and used it to further her support of underrepresented voices, new playwrights, and experimental playwrights. She embraced the framing of the press as a "motherly" figure to craft her reputation that she was willing to nurture the work of theatre artists. In this section, I argue that Lortel's previous career as an actress, acquired wealth, and use of the gendered characterization of her career to define her reputation contributed to how she uniquely functioned as a producer in a time when few women were producers.

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<sup>27</sup> Greene, chapter three. The Schweitzer family made their fortune by manufacturing cigarette papers. At this time, the United States imported all the paper for cigarettes from France and the Schweitzers were able to monopolize this industry by opening a factory in New Jersey and providing a product of a higher quality than their competitors.

## 2.1 Acting Career, 1920-1930

Lucille Lortel had been born and raised in New York City and took her first steps toward a professional career in theatre when she auditioned for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1920 at age 19. At the audition, she was observed to be a “good ingenue type” and was accepted into the academy, beginning her career of being labeled with a type of popular stock character.<sup>28</sup> The term ingenue describes a young, innocent, naïve, and sometimes sexualized character, most often played by women.<sup>29</sup> When later asked to speak about her acting career and the kinds of roles she played, Lortel primarily referred to them with the stock character title, rather than name. In some later interviews, Lortel uses “ingenue” which was the same term used in the press when commenting on her roles in the 1920s, but in other interviews, she calls the kinds of roles she was cast in “whores” and “virgins.”<sup>30</sup> Her language reveals the limited options of characters that could be played by female actresses at the time and suggests her frustration at reducing even the stock roles to the way the character’s sexuality is displayed. Lortel spoke of how she struggled for years to get “decent parts” at this time, saying that she was “just one of hundreds of young actresses

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<sup>28</sup> McCready, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Patrice Pavis, Christine Shantz, and Marvin Carlson, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> “Your Birthday” by Stella, December 16, 1926, Box 80, Folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

“We’re Lucky Lucille Lortel has Taste—Theatrewise” by Markland Taylor, July 3, 1983, Box 37, Folder 6, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

looking for work.”<sup>31</sup> She was quickly realizing the difficulty of being a woman in the theatre: there weren’t many options for her or other women, and the decent opportunities took years to achieve. She carried this frustration with her into her producing career, ensuring that there were decent opportunities for all young artists at her White Barn. Before Lortel attempted her professional acting career, she performed in several plays as a part of her curriculum at the academy. She often received positive reviews, even when reviewers harshly critiqued the shows. After she graduated, Lortel pursued acting opportunities and was cast in multiple productions with several summer stock companies, performing whatever ingenue role the play called for in Albany, Maine, and New Jersey.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Lortel found acting opportunities in between summers as a member of the Myrtle-Harder players, which was a group that toured between a few east coast cities and performed a different commercially successful Broadway show each night they were there.<sup>33</sup>

During her months of performing a new role every week at the same theatre, Lortel learned how stock theatres functioned. In the 1950s, the White Barn Theatre in Westport, Ct. functioned similarly in some ways to a stock theatre in that, when the White Barn was operating in the summer months, it would host new productions every week using the same space with many designers, directors, and actors involved in successive shows for that season. This was seen in 1960 when Richard Barr directed three shows and in the early 1950s when both Paul Shyre and Milo O’Shea

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<sup>31</sup> “The Do-It-Yourself Queen” by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>32</sup> Multiple programs, 1924, Box 80, Folder 3, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>33</sup> Greene, chapter two.

performed in multiple shows.<sup>34</sup> In an article from 1971, Lortel discussed the relationship between the White Barn and summer stock companies, saying that they functioned similarly, but that summer stock companies were typically built around recent hits or well-known performers; the White Barn was instead built around entirely new works and artists.<sup>35</sup> The way in which Lortel's White Barn most reflected her experiences at the American Academy of Dramatic Art and early theatre career with stock companies was when Lortel created the White Barn Apprentice School in 1951. Lortel's experience at the American Academy of Dramatic Art inspired the White Barn Apprentice School the short sessions consisted of training in specific courses followed by application in performances in front of critical audiences. Additionally, students were involved in the creation of scenery, acted in select roles for the White Barn's staged readings, and took courses offered on a variety of subjects. Several shows were performed entirely by the apprentices.<sup>36</sup> Especially in the mid-50s after actress and director Eva Le Gallienne joined the White Barn Board and became an Apprentice School teacher, the students performed a collection of scenes from classic plays written by William Shakespeare, Anton Chekov, and Henrik Ibsen.<sup>37</sup>

Lortel's time with the touring Myrtle-Harder Players was also reflected in how she operated her theater. Several of Lortel's first professional acting jobs were within this touring

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<sup>34</sup> McCready, 152-55.

<sup>35</sup> "From Main Street to Broadway: It's been her life" by Sandra Wesley April 5, 1971, Box 90, Folder 2, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>36</sup> "The Do-It-Yourself Queen" by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, Folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>37</sup> McCready, 161.

company and were opportunities for her to be a steadily employed performer for several weeks at a time. Having had her own experiences with a touring company, Lortel likely saw the value in supporting these groups as they provided opportunities for early-career performers. The White Barn was particularly welcoming to touring companies or groups of artists, hosting them for one to two performances usually within the same weekend before they moved onto their next location. Some of the touring groups that Lortel hosted were the Oxford University Player's production of *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson in 1950 and the Dublin Player's production of *The Words Upon the Window Pane* by W.B. Yeats in 1951.<sup>38</sup> Lortel also opened her theatre and grounds to groups that were not specifically theatre companies, including the Geoffrey Holder Steel Band and the Trinidad Dance Group and After Dinner Opera Company for multiple performances annually beginning in 1956 and lasting until 1959.<sup>39</sup>

Lortel's acting experience contributed to her later career not only in the structure of her producing, but also who she worked with and the kinds of shows she produced. The most significant relationship she developed through performing on Broadway was with actress Helen Hayes. Lortel spent the last years of her stage career on tour and Broadway, which introduced Lortel to many respected theatre professionals. In 1925, the Theatre Guild produced George Bernard Shaw's *Cesar and Cleopatra*, in which Lortel made her Broadway debut, introducing her professionally to Helen Hayes, the actress who was cast as the titular female lead. Lortel played several roles including the Harpist, the Whore on the Wharf, and later in the show's run, played

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<sup>38</sup> McCready, 152-3. The Dublin Players performance in 1952 was the company's and the play's premiere in America.

<sup>39</sup> McCready, 158, 160-65.

Iris.<sup>40</sup> Lortel's and Hayes' careers intersected several times after their initial run together on Broadway. Hayes was a prominent actress at this point in her career and worked for many years to come in New York, including through the American National Theatre and Academy productions. When Lortel established the ANTA Matinee Series in 1956, Hayes took part in the second performance, producing a collection of scenes from Shakespeare and performing as the narrator and Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.<sup>41</sup> Outside of a performance setting, the two women were both involved in supporting the Actors' Fund and maintained a correspondence for many years.<sup>42</sup> After Hayes' death, Lortel was involved in honoring her life and career with the Helen Hayes award, of which she was also a recipient in 1996.<sup>43</sup>

In 1931, Lortel's acting career mostly ended after her marriage to Louis Schweitzer. Whether leaving the stage was her new husband's idea or his mother's is unclear, as Lortel said each of them were responsible at different times in multiple interviews. Regardless, she agreed to retire, but took several years to do so, lending her voice to radio shows and acting in short films for Warner Brothers when her husband was at work during the day.<sup>44</sup> But Lucille's marriage to Louis did not mean the end of her theatre career entirely.

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<sup>40</sup> McCready, 3.

<sup>41</sup> McCready, 122.

<sup>42</sup> "For Lucille Lortel, All the World's her Stage" by Irene Backalenick, July 13, 1988, Box 90, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>43</sup> Greene, chapter nine.

<sup>44</sup> "The Do-It-Yourself Queen" by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, Folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

## 2.2 Wealth and Producing

Schweitzer came from an incredibly wealthy family that had begun to accumulate millions of dollars from their business in manufacturing cigarette papers. This meant that Lortel no longer had to work to support herself and her family. In the early years of their marriage, Louis Schweitzer and his brother further built the family business, expanding their production into manufacturing plants in New Jersey. Their manufacturing expansion into the United States kept him out of the city during much of the day. Lortel attempted to keep her acting career, secretly booking her final Broadway show before Schweitzer caught and acting in short films for Warner Brothers in their New York City film lots.<sup>45</sup> Lortel agreed to no longer act, but with Schweitzer occupied far from their apartment, she continued performing off-stage. In 1927, Lortel performed on Broadway in a play called *The Man Who Laughed Last* in the lead female role.<sup>46</sup> Two years later, it was adapted to film and Lortel reprised her role, likely assisting her in booking these later film roles.<sup>47</sup> Lortel already pulled on what she learned as a theatre actress to guide the adaptation of her career into a form suitable for her now married life where working was not a necessity for her, but a passion. Her husband's growing fortune allowed her to continue adapt her career later from a performer into a producer. Wealth such as this would be incredibly beneficial once Lortel found her way into producing and her husband's financial expertise in business would be just as valuable.

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<sup>45</sup> Greene, chapter three.

<sup>46</sup> Program for *The Man Who Laughed Last*, 1927, Box 80, Folder 7, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>47</sup> Greene, chapter two.

From the beginning of their marriage until 1938, Louis Schweitzer and Lucille Lortel moved between apartments in New York City. In 1938, the couple had been searching for a place to spend weekends outside of the city and purchased a property in Westport, CT.<sup>48</sup> In 1947 Lortel hosted her first staged reading in the barn that had come with their home. *The Painted Wagon* by Philip Houston and Elizabeth Goodyear was the first of six productions to happen that year, all of which were without Louis Schweitzer's knowledge as he was in Europe for his family business.<sup>49</sup> When he read about Lortel's successful new theatre venture, he agreed to assist her and acted as a business manager for the White Barn Theatre. Schweitzer helped establish the White Barn as a chartered non-profit foundation in 1951. In 1954, Schweitzer, along with designer Ralph Alswang and actress Eva Le Gallienne, assisted in renovating the barn to expand the seating, enlarge the stage, and update sound and lighting equipment.<sup>50</sup>

The White Barn theatre nearly immediately received positive attention for the successful innovation of a staged reading. One article following the White Barn's first reading said of Lortel, "she is providing playwrights a service...If the White Barn functions as it should, it can very well justify itself by the time and money it will save producers, playwrights, actors, investors, and all those who might be connected with a forthcoming Broadway production. They can all tell whether

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<sup>48</sup> "Q&A: Westport Producer Lucille Lortel" by Lisa Faye Kaplan, September 29, 1982, Box 90, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>49</sup> Greene, chapter four.

<sup>50</sup> McCready, 9-12.

or not the play is sturdy enough or ready for New York.”<sup>51</sup> The tryout process for a script was benefited by the White Barn’s intimate space and minimal technical elements, which placed the script and actors’ performances as the focus of the readings. This method came without many of the distracting elements of backer’s auditions in New York City, which could hurt a script’s chances at receiving financial support. As the theatre community’s attention stayed on the White Barn, the project expanded to include the apprentice school and more forms of artistic entertainment in addition to the readings, including opera, marionette, and dance troupe performances. With Lortel’s skill for producing theatre in Westport, Ct. well established, she began to consider moving towards New York.

Two years after the early success of the White Barn, she had opened an office in the city for Lucille Lortel Productions, bringing her work in Westport closer to the New York Theatre scene. Her work as a producer was quick to follow.<sup>52</sup> In 1951, Lortel made her producing debut in New York City with her role as an associate producer for the Off-Broadway production of *A Sleep of Prisoners* by Christopher Fry, which was not associated with her work at the White Barn. Staged in St. James’ Episcopal Church in October, this production marked the play’s American premiere. Critics received it with moderate reviews that praised the actors’ performances but stated that it did not meet the high standards set by the playwright’s previous work.<sup>53</sup> Lortel’s next venture into producing Off-Broadway would have a more favorable reception.

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<sup>51</sup> “Lucille Lortel Opens a New Kind of Theatre” by Vernon Rice, July 29, 19479, Box 37, Folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>52</sup> McCready, 11.

<sup>53</sup> McCready, 41-3.

In 1954, the Theatre de Lys in the Greenwich Village was lacking an owner after the previous one, William de Lys, turned out to be a con artist from Pittsburgh.<sup>54</sup> De Lys had bought the old movie house and renovated it into a respectable theatre and promised those who joined his club extravagant theatrical performances. Instead, he produced a flop of a show that ran one night in 1952 before shutting down the run and abandoning the theater.<sup>55</sup> The construction company that had done the renovations had outstanding debt from de Lys and took over the theater's lease instead of demanding payment. The company then hired Max Eisen as a manager to rent the theatre out in the wake of de Lys's abandonment. Eisen filled the space with many productions, the last of which was Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera*.<sup>56</sup> In 1954, Louis Schweitzer began the process of purchasing the theater for his wife for \$60,000, at the same time that Eisen began purchasing stock in the company that held the theater's lease, as he now wanted to own it himself.<sup>57</sup> Schweitzer's motivation to purchase a theatre for Lortel in Greenwich Village is uncertain. When Lortel was asked about it in interviews, she gave multiple answers. In some instances, she claims he bought it for her as an anniversary present, while others attribute the purchase to Schweitzer's

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<sup>54</sup> Greene, chapter five.

<sup>55</sup> "Notes on People", November 17, 1982, Box 71, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>56</sup> McCready, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Statement of Closing—Ralph V. Voorhis, seller, to Louis Schweitzer, Purchaser, August 26, 1954, Box 71, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

desire for Lortel to spend more time with him in the city.<sup>58</sup> Lortel even stated that her husband hoped that she would close the White Barn if she had an Off-Broadway theater to produce in, which was not the eventual result.<sup>59</sup> When Schweitzer's purchase went through, Eisen claimed that it was invalid, since he was a majority owner in the company who held the lease and had not been consulted. The dispute went to court the following year and within two weeks, the judge dismissed it on the terms that Eisen's written consent would not have been needed for the sale.<sup>60</sup> In purchasing the de Lys, Schweitzer created the corporation Lortel, Inc. in Lucille's name, giving her complete control over the Off-Broadway theater.<sup>61</sup> With the Theatre de Lys under her control in the spring of 1955, Lortel reinstated the previous run of the *Threepenny Opera*, unknowingly placing a show that would run for seven years in her new theater.<sup>62</sup>

Lortel's ownership of these two theaters greatly impacted her position as a producer. Producers, at the time and now, have functioned in multiple ways as per the needs of the production, but are primarily concerned with the legal, financial, and management aspects. Producers can be members of theatre companies or operate independently, which can change the requirements of the position. Lortel was in some ways an independent producer as she operated the White Barn for the first few years under Lucille Lortel Productions, meaning that she was not

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<sup>58</sup> "The Do-It-Yourself Queen" by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>59</sup> "Theatre: Beyond Broadway" by Jeanine Larmoth, September 1985, Box 90, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>60</sup> Greene, chapter five.

<sup>61</sup> Greene, chapter five.

<sup>62</sup> McCready, 14.

associated with a theatre company or an organized group of producers with unified artistic goals. As an independent producer, Lortel's production company was a method for her to produce the kind of theatre she wanted and to reinvest any financial gains from shows into future productions.

Lortel was an independent producer at the White Barn in several ways. She sought out plays that had not been produced widely in America or she selected new plays from those that had been sent to the White Barn in the hopes that she would stage them.<sup>63</sup> Other than selecting the plays and occasionally finding people to fill positions, Lortel was not involved artistically in the productions. Robert Glenn, a director who worked with Lortel several times and most notably on *Shakespeare in Harlem*, said of Lortel as a producer, "She would drift in occasionally. And she usually sat in on the dress rehearsal. But she didn't say 'Do this' or 'How about this?' None of that."<sup>64</sup> This showed that, while Lortel was dedicated to a specific kind of theatre, she trusted that the artists would maintain that type of theatre. Lortel saw her responsibilities as not to guide the artists into creating what she wanted, but to give them the space and resources they needed to create art that she hadn't seen before, whether or not she comprehended it. When producing *The Owl Answers* by Adrienne Kennedy in 1965, Lortel said, "I'm willing to try it. Understanding isn't always an absolute necessity. To me, the theater is an emotional feeling more often than not."<sup>65</sup> As an independent producer, Lortel was relatively removed from the art she enabled others to create.

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<sup>63</sup> "White Barn's Genius" by Don Rubin, August 8, 1965, Box 90, folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>64</sup> Greene, chapter four.

<sup>65</sup> "White Barn's Genius" by Don Rubin, August 8, 1965, Box 90, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

After the White Barn's transition to a non-profit foundation, Lortel used her production company to operate the de Lys. Her role as an independent producer was benefited by the fact that she owned her own theatres and operated non-commercially. The White Barn, with its transition in 1951 to a non-profit foundation, maintained a board of directors throughout its existence, and the degree to which the board influenced the running of the theatre is difficult to know. However, board members such as Ralph Alswang and Eva Le Gallienne were active participants in the White Barn theatre, with Alswang designing the theater's renovations and several following productions, and Le Gallienne teaching the classical performance master classes, acting, directing, and adapting scripts.

However, Lortel ran the de Lys different from the White Barn for many years, as the Off-Broadway theatre hosted several shows that she was not a producer. Whether or not she produced them, the shows in the de Lys benefited from Lortel's wealth. As she was not reliant on her theatre career as a way to support herself, Lortel could and would ease up on the financial expectations of the productions in her theater if they were financially unstable or going through a period of decreased audience attendance. Lortel's operation of the de Lys was different from the White Barn in that after the purchase was complete and the lawsuit was settled, Lortel hired theatre managers who handled much of the administrative work. Lortel employed theatre managers in this capacity throughout her entire career. As Lortel owned the theatre under the corporation Lortel, Inc., it was not operated by a theatre company that would decide what could be hosted in the theatre.<sup>66</sup> In the bio-bibliography by Sam McCready, it is stated that she:

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<sup>66</sup> Letter from William Hugues Lewis to Louis Schweitzer, August 26, 1954, Box 71, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

decided that her theater would be operated on a flexible policy, booking in both her own and independent productions. Thus, many of the shows mounted at the Theatre de Lys from its acquisition have not been produced by Lucille Lortel, nor has she participated in the profits of these shows. Nevertheless, she has personally approved every production that has appeared there since 1955...Although she has not technically invested in these productions, in practice she has given strong financial support to keep them running until they have built an audience. Sometimes this has meant not taking any rent during difficult weeks or the buying of additional advertising space. Sometimes it has been an outright monetary gift.<sup>67</sup>

In this way, Lortel acted as an artistic director by determining what shows were staged in her Off-Broadway theater, whether or not she was a producer for them. One show that she was not initially a producer on but intervened financially with was *The Lady and the Clarinet* by Michael Cristofer. When the show received negative reviews after opening, Lortel took over as a producer to ensure that it would not close before Christmas.<sup>68</sup>

The arrangement and management of Lortel's estate cycled through multiple versions in the years before her death. In 1980, she established the Lucille Lortel Foundation which would manage her wealth (left to her by her husband after his death in 1971) after her death. The Lortel Foundation also became the source of funds for the White Barn Theater Foundation in 1980 since it had previously been run as a non-profit foundation when was chartered in 1951. Later in Lortel's life when she was in her 90s, she established the non-profit Lucille Lortel Theatre Foundation. This would manage the de Lys—which had been renamed the Lucille Lortel Theater—after her death and would fall under the Lucille Lortel Foundation. The foundation would manage her estate and the Lucille Lortel Theatre Foundation would operate and manage her White Barn and Off-Broadway theaters. There were two groups of people given responsibility for Lortel's theatres and estate for after she would pass. This consisted of a Board of Trustees including Lortel as the

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<sup>67</sup> McCready, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Greene, chapter nine.

president while she was alive, Michael Hect her accountant, James J Ross her attorney, and George F Shaskan her financial advisor. The second group of people consisted of her artistic advisory board, comprised of Arvin Brown, Marshall Manson, Al Pacino, Anna Strasberg, and Lanford Wilson.<sup>69</sup> The Trustees would control the money and the artistic advisory board would suggest how to spend it and which shows to fill the Off-Broadway theater. While these changes occurred frequently over the last two decades or so of Lortel's life, they did not change or impact how she was producing, as their roles were only to take affect once she was no longer alive.

While the arrangement of funds and management of theaters under different corporations and foundations over the course of Lortel's career is rather complicated, it shows a fairly clear distinction between her and other theatre producers. Although one of the primary responsibilities of independent producers and those within theatre companies is to raise the funds needed to put on a show from backers or angels, Lortel rarely had to do this. The majority of producers at this time did not have access to personal wealth that could be consistently used to fund show after show, in succession. Lortel's level of financial investment did depend on where, when, and the other people whom she was producing a show with.

This is seen in how Lortel produced differently at the White Barn from how she produced at the de Lys. The fifty years of shows at the White Barn Theatre were primarily produced entirely by Lortel, with the exceptions being outside groups that brought their performances to Westport, such as the Dublin Players and the After Dinner Opera Company.<sup>70</sup> Although Lortel paid for the

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<sup>69</sup> List of Board members, 1998, Box 71, Folder 2, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>70</sup> McCready, 153, 163.

theatre performed on her property, the nonprofit foundation status of the White Barn could be used for tax purposes.<sup>71</sup> This was the realm of her producing career in which the cost of producing could be under her control, meaning that Lortel could determine how much money to spend on advertising, how many people she wanted to be involved, and how many performances a production could have.

In the first two decades of her producing Off-Broadway, Lortel was credited as the only producer on several shows like *Three Players of a Summer Game* by Tennessee Williams (1955), *Fam and Yam* by Edward Albee (1960), and *I Knock at the Door* by Sean O’Casey (1964), meaning that she was also the only backer. Later in her career, Lortel discussed the increased price of producing Off-Broadway, which began to prevent her from being the sole source of funding. Frequently, she would compare the original cost of only ten to twenty thousand dollars to stage *The Threepenny Opera* Off-Broadway to what she estimated the cost would be at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, never falling below a million dollars. Lortel had strong beliefs as to how producers had to work, stating that “Getting to opening night is just half the battle. Then you have to roll up your sleeves and pull out all the stops to keep the audiences coming. Many fine shows have died on the vine because producers didn’t do their jobs.”<sup>72</sup> For Lortel, her responsibilities as a producer lasted the entire run of a show and were not over after it opened and began making money. She was dedicated not only to getting her shows on a stage, but to continuously pull in audiences so

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<sup>71</sup>Robert A. Schanke, *Theater in the Americas: Angels in the American Theater: Patrons, Patronage, and Philanthropy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007) accessed February 21, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>72</sup>“The Do-It-Yourself Queen” by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, Folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

the show could run as long as possible. Even when it seemed impossible for a show to continue its run, Lortel would push off its closing if she thought the circumstances called for it. She did this for a multitude of reasons. Perhaps she thought enough people hadn't been given a chance to see it, like with *A Walk in the Woods* by Lee Blessing, or because she didn't want to put the people involved out of a job before the holidays.<sup>73</sup>

The rising cost of producing theatre in New York had changed how she had worked, "When I started out I almost never had partners...But with costs as they are, I've been forced to go in with others for the last 10 years or so. If I were beginning now, I suppose I couldn't even think of being as independent as I was."<sup>74</sup> She was aware of how much she benefited from having personal finances as a producer, but over the course of her career, that advantage diminished as costs of producing Off-Broadway steadily increased. To adapt to this, Lortel had to begin partnering with other producers on shows, whether they were on Broadway or even Off-Broadway in her own theater. Even as her ability to produce completely independently lessened and she partnered with other producers, she used her personal wealth to finance her portion of the show, while other producers of the time would typically have to acquire funding from backers.

This was only furthered by her work on multiple productions at the same time and her large charitable contributions to many organizations. Her increased producing on Broadway in the 1980s also worked against her as it was impossible to easily produce a show alone, even for a person of substantial wealth. In the 1980s, Lortel produced five shows on Broadway, all of which except for

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<sup>73</sup> "Off Broadway's Matriach" by F.L., May 1997, Box 37, Folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>74</sup> "The Do-It-Yourself Queen" by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, Folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

one were done with other producers and organizations. For *Sarafina!* in 1988, Lortel produced with the Lincoln Center Theatre and the Shubert Organization, while *Blood Knot* in 1985 was done with James B. Freyberg, Max Weitzenhoffer, Estrin Rose Berman Productions, and F.W.M Producing Group.<sup>75</sup> These productions took the combined resources of multiple people along with well-established organizations to stage, showing the increase of the cost to produce on Broadway.

Nevertheless, she was not entirely disadvantaged in this situation as her more frequent, costlier productions on Broadway happened in the 1980s, when she had decades of building a reputation as a prominent theatre producer and was well-known in the community. Those decades of experience also assisted Lortel when her producing resources were stretched thin. In 1988, Lortel kept the Broadway premiere of *A Walk in the Woods* running for four months after opening to a harsh negative review by Frank Rich of the New York Times.<sup>76</sup> At this point, Lortel knew how to use advertising materials, interviews, the play's two Tony award nominations and other strategies to continuously draw an audience when other production members were convinced that the show would have to close.

Overall, Lortel benefited immensely from being able to financially support all or most of her shows. As a sole or lead producer, it was much easier for Lortel to stage the kinds of shows she wanted to, without concern about commercial viability. Firstly, her financial security would not have been risked with one—or more—of her shows flopping, so she could take chances in her career without concern for how the financial results would impact her personal financial situation.

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<sup>75</sup> McCready, 110-113.

<sup>76</sup> “Stage: *A Walk in the Woods*” by Frank Rich, February 29, 1988, Box 34, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Her ability to produce another show was never reliant on the success of the previous show she supported, which allowed her to produce non-commercial plays without much fear of financial impact on her career. Lortel also benefited from this as she did not have to convince other producers or possible backers of the worth of producing a show, allowing her to produce what matched her artistic vision without relying on others to also see its value. This, in addition to Lortel's access to the two theaters she owned enabled her to produce nearly any play she wanted as she would not have to convince a theater manager or owner to book her show in their space. With her financial status as an independent producer, Lortel was in a position to prioritize her artistic tastes, which was an advantage over many other producers who had to choose the shows they could produce very carefully. For others, the commercial appeal of a play, both in terms of how it fit into the landscape of the current season of theatre and how they saw it possibly drawing in audiences, was a much bigger concern. Not only would their investment be on the line but so would their ability to produce in the future.

### **2.3 Gender and Producing**

Lortel differed from other New York City producers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only because of her gender, but also since she was able to pay for many of her productions out of her own pocket. The majority of producers at this time were male, but Lortel did have female contemporaries such as Cheryl Crawford, Jean Darlymple, and Margo Jones. However, these women did not produce in the same way that Lortel did, as she was independent, and primarily in Westport and Off-Broadway. Lortel worked with, shared the same values as, or had close relationships with many of these women. Cheryl Crawford began her career with the Theatre Guild before helping found

The Group Theatre and later, the American Repertory Theatre, spending the majority of her career within theatre companies. She occupied many roles within these theatre companies including director, but for a period of time was an independent producer. In these years, Crawford was producing on Broadway. To see her shows staged at this expensive level of theatre, Crawford would gather backers to provide the financial support, unlike Lortel whose shows were primarily funded by her personal wealth.<sup>77</sup> Jean Dalrymple, similarly to Crawford, produced on Broadway. Dalrymple produced through the New York City Center of Music and Drama, of which she had been the director. In addition to a director and producer, Dalrymple was a former actress, a press agent, and playwright, working in multiple capacities within the theatre community all at once. Her productions tended to be successful revivals and similar to Crawford, Dalrymple relied on the financial support of backers to see them staged.<sup>78</sup> Another contemporary female producer who was similar to Lortel in her dedication to new playwrights and creating theatre in places other than Broadway was Margo Jones. While Lortel saw Off-Broadway as an effective new place for theatrical development, Jones was dedicated to regional theatres, specifically her own in Dallas, TX.<sup>79</sup> Jones and Lortel were distinctly aligned in the kinds of new theatre that they wanted to

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<sup>77</sup>Milly S. Barranger, *Gambler's Instinct: The Story of Broadway Producer Cheryl Crawford* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), accessed February 27, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>78</sup>Jean Dalrymple, *September Child: the Story of Jean Dalrymple* (New York: Dood, Mead & Company, 1963).

<sup>79</sup>Boone J Hopkins, "The Mind of an Adult, the Heart of a Girl: Constructing Margo Jones in Rehearsal," *Theatre Symposium: A Journal of the Southeastern Theatre Conference*, Vol. 2 (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014), <http://pitt.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/docview/1627869005?accountid=14709>.

cultivate, but their similarities are limited as the former was the head of her own theatre company and a director. Furthermore, Jones, like Crawford and Dalrymple, was not funding her productions through personal wealth.<sup>80</sup> Lortel never was involved artistically in her productions. She remained a producer, theatre owner, and artistic director, but never ventured into playwrighting, directing, or designing herself.

However, among the many other male producers, Lortel was one of the only female producers operating primarily on Off-Broadway and in Westport, with financial independence outside of a theatre company. Due to the unique way that she was able to produce, Lortel's work and methods were highly visible, subjecting her to the sexism of the time. This sexism faced by Lortel throughout her career did not prevent her from becoming a producer. However, it was an obstacle present and visible in the language used by reporters in articles about her career that she had to choose how to navigate. In these instances, Lortel did not call attention to or speak out against the gendered language that characterized her. Instead, she used the idea of being a mother figure to draw attention to her work as a producer who supported new theatre artists and cultivated experimental forms of theatre.

Articles from the White Barn's early years minimized or shifted Lortel's role in the development, as some were titled with phrases like, "Conn. Matron's DeLuce Method of "Casting" Angels for New Plays" and "Angel in the Barnyard." Both of these articles display elements of gendered language, not only in their wording but also in how neither were entirely accurate in their characterization of Lortel's place at the White Barn. The first was a Variety article that used the

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<sup>80</sup> Helen Sheehy and Emily Mann, *Margo: the Life and Theatre of Margo Jones*, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989).

word “matron” to signify Lortel’s age, gender, and marital status as if they were integral to the readers’ understanding of her work. It also relabels Lortel with a gendered title rather than her actual role as a producer and theater owner, which were primarily held by men at the time. The use of “matron” then categorizes Lortel’s work under an “acceptable” female role. The article continues to state that Lortel “is principally interested in getting a break for new playwrights by putting their product before a group of handpicked moneybags.”<sup>81</sup> Although finding possible backers for the shows produced at the White Barn was one of the goals of establishing the theatre, the writer neglected to mention that the actual performance at Lortel’s theater was of considerable significance, whether or not it was later moved to a full scale production elsewhere. Other purposes for the performances at the White Barn include providing an opportunity for playwrights to see their scripts on their feet in as close to actual production conditions as possible without spending all the money and to receive feedback from the audience after the reading. Additionally, Lortel’s focus was not entirely on playwrights, as the White Barn gave professional opportunities to early-career performers, directors, and designers, as can be seen with the White Barn Apprentice School and Lortel’s drive to hire local artists.

The other previously mentioned article had a full title of “Angel in the Barnyard: former actress having a wonderful time tossing away coin on artist productions.” By closely examining the language and content of this article, the minimization of Lortel’s involvement and goals for the process forming at the White Barn becomes evident. This article also misrepresents Lortel’s work

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<sup>81</sup> “Conn. Matron’s DeLuce Method of “Casting” Angels for New Plays”, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1947, Box 89, Folder 16, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

at the White Barn, first by stating that she is an angel. In the context of theatre production, angels, also referred to as backers, were individuals whose only involvement in a production was through financial contribution.<sup>82</sup> In the entirety of Lortel's career, she was an angel to productions at times, but not to any shows at the White Barn since she owned the theater itself. Additionally, Lortel occupied a role comparable to that of Artistic Director of the foundation through which the White Barn functioned. The role was comparable in that she decided the shows that received readings, the plays that premiered, and the existing companies who staged their productions at the White Barn. Furthermore, the use of the phrase "tossing away coin" to explain that Lortel was funding her foundation in Westport trivializes her work, in that it references the idiom of "throwing away money," often used to express frustration at an expense that is considered to be wasteful. This phrasing, coupled with the reference to Lortel's previous career as an actress contextualizes her new work at the White Barn as if she was at the time, a person primarily removed from the theatre world but attempting to stay relevant by frivolously spending money on productions without any serious consideration of her actions. It removed Lortel's own goal for the White Barn of producing new theatre and cultivating new artists that she was consistently working towards. In part, the early point of Lortel's career at which these articles were written could contribute to the authors' misrepresentation to her status and goals at the White Barn, but coupled with the use of gendered language, it is more likely influenced by an attitude of sexism towards a woman entering a predominately male field of the time.

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas Bruce Birkenhead, "Economics of the Broadway Theatre" (PhD diss., New School for Social Research, 1963), 133.

Several years after the White Barn had been founded and was consistently producing innovative seasons, sexist language was still used in newspaper coverage of Lortel and her work. One example of this was in a 1952 article from the New York Herald Tribune titled, “Theater in her Backyard Makes up for Lost Career.” This article did mention Lortel’s important work with inviting audiences of theatre professionals, supporting the work of early-career artists through the apprentice school, and the influence of a staged reading at the White Barn in the process of a play’s development. However, the writer also frames many of Lortel’s responsibilities through the phrasing of, “she has the fun of overseeing the productions and being hostess to the theatre people from New York who come to see the White Barn shows on summer weekends.”<sup>83</sup> The first thing that a reader sees describing her contributions to the process is that she “has the fun” of being a hostess. The use of gendered language minimizes her involvement, reducing her to the role of only a hostess. The use of the word “hostess” in particular removes the association of professionalism with her work and places a connotation of socializing. Although these readings and performances were certainly opportunities for Lortel to spend time with friends and people she knew from the New York theatre community, that was not their primary intent. Any production hosted at the White Barn was done so not with the purpose of providing Lortel with an opportunity to socialize, but as a way to grow her early career as a producer, to support the work of the artists, and to showcase the types of artists she was personally invested in.

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<sup>83</sup> “Theater in her Backyard Makes up for Lost Career” by Don Ross, August 10, 1952, Box 89, Folder 17, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

However, within this article, Lortel uses gendered language, similar to what had been used by writers previously, to frame her dedication to her work. She says, “A lot of people will help orphan kids. Theater people happen to be my children. So, I help them. Having been an actor myself, I know how tough it is for them.”<sup>84</sup> In these sentences, Lortel uses the gendered assumption of women as caretakers to frame her relationship to the artists she works with and agreeing to what has previously said of her as a provider and nurturer for them. However, Lortel does not use gendered language that minimizes or misrepresents her work, as she equates her support of theatre artists to the work done by philanthropists and charities in caring for orphans. Furthermore, Lortel bases her desire to help struggling artists in her own previous career as an actress and the difficulties she encountered while pursuing a career in the theatre world. By placing her impetus to support artists as coming from her own experiences as a struggling actress, she moves away from the gendered assumption that she cares for them only because she is a woman. Instead, she uses the “mother” characterization within her own context of a shared career background, a desire to create important art, and the struggles of being an artist to justify the gendered language, while complicating the narratives that otherwise minimize her work.

Lortel’s use of gendered language can be interpreted as a strategic choice for her career. By not addressing writers about the sexist ways her career was covered in their articles, she would be more likely to continue receiving coverage from the publications. Furthermore, by playing into the characterization of her work as a mother and hostess figure, Lortel presented a welcoming

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<sup>84</sup> “Theater in her Backyard Makes up for Lost Career” by Don Ross, August 10, 1952, Box 89, Folder 17, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

environment at the White Barn. Lortel's presentation as a caregiver to new artists without concern of the financial risks associated with a career in theatre contrasted greatly with the increased risk and decreased likelihood of finding steady work in New York on Broadway. With publications framing how supportive Lortel was as a producer, it would be more likely that new artists would approach Lortel and seek out opportunities at the White Barn. This strategy also had the added benefit of persuading theatre personnel to trust and build a relationship with Lortel who was also in the early years of her producing career.

This characterization of Lortel in the press and her strategy of using it to her advantage continued throughout her career, even when some of her most well-known productions were not at the White Barn but were on Broadway where she had more difficulty controlling the finances. In 1985, an article titled "Lortel Reigns as Theater's Best Den Mother", writer Thomas A. DeLong covers the upcoming season of the White Barn. To introduce Lortel, he riffs off of her reputation in the 1980s as a recipient of many awards by saying, "If an award were given to the care and feeding of summer theater actors and crew, Lucille Lortel would have received many commendations."<sup>85</sup> Instead of introducing her through actual awards she had been given or through any of her recent Broadway plays, DeLong begins the article by positioning her as a caretaker. He explains the extent of what this has meant over her career by stating that Lortel has personally arranged the accommodations for over 2,500 artists and labels it "the formidable task of handling

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<sup>85</sup> "Lortel is Theater's Best Den Mother" by Thomas A DeLong, July 14, 1985, Box 90, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

house-keeping arrangements.”<sup>86</sup> In this article, DeLong places the fact that over 2,500 artists had performed at the White Barn in conversation with Lortel’s need to make arrangements for their stays. This framing removes the significance from her work as a producer and theater owner who was able to organize opportunities for many artists. Instead, it puts emphasis on Lortel’s ability to be a competent hostess on her property. Lortel, after saying how difficult it is to find help with cooking and cleaning the actors’ quarters, is quoted as saying to DeLong, “After 37 years, I’m not too crazy about being den mother. But, when I see the need for dramatists to have an opportunity to present their new, and often unusual, works, I know the White Barn must again open its doors.”<sup>87</sup> Although she acknowledges the difficulty of the work required to make accommodations for artists and expresses her lack of desire to be a “den mother”, Lortel states the importance of her theater as a welcoming space for experimental new works and the artists who create them. She navigates this gendered language by placing her motivation to carry out the difficult task of accommodating many artists on the value of the art they present. By stating, “I know the White Barn must again open its doors” without including the work she must do every time the White Barn’s doors open, Lortel moves the focus from the domestic labor to the significance of her theater’s warm reception of new and innovative artists. Furthermore, by including the phrases “I know” and “must”, Lortel

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<sup>86</sup> “Lortel is Theater’s Best Den Mother” by Thomas A DeLong, July 14, 1985, Box 90, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>87</sup>“Lortel is Theater’s Best Den Mother” by Thomas A DeLong, July 14, 1985, Box 90, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

removes the aspect of a decision from the action. The emphasis is instead placed on her dedication to the creation of this art.

In the decades that Lortel worked within the theatre community, her career was greatly shaped by her experience as a woman and her social class after her marriage to a millionaire. Lortel's time as an actress introduced her to the structures of summer stock theatres and traveling production companies, which she later incorporated into her work at the White Barn Theatre. As an actress, Lortel experienced the very limited high-quality acting opportunities for women at a time when it was one of the only realms of theatre where they were welcome. Once she was married, Lortel's in-laws expected her to retire from acting due to the negative assumptions of women in that career at the time. Her later career as a producer was informed by her knowledge and experiences as an actress in the 1920s. Despite Lortel's aptitude for her new role in theatre, she was characterized in the press as a motherly figure and was subjected to gendered language which minimized and misrepresented the innovative work she was doing at the White Barn. Instead of acting against this characterization, Lortel used it to further her growing reputation as a producer who took risks to support new and experimental artists who would not receive assistance in creating their art elsewhere. However, when she had the opportunities to speak to her work, Lortel subtly reframed it to more fully encompass the scope of her position as a producer with experience in an artistic career, and not just as a woman who was sympathetic to those who were struggling. Lortel's work benefited from her use of gendered language and was supported even further by her husband's wealth. With his financial support, Lortel was able to own two theaters, including an Off-Broadway venue, in which to place the shows she wanted to produce. Furthermore, her personal wealth enabled her to produce the work she wanted without relying on the financial support of backers or other producers. It also provided her the freedom to produce

non-commercial plays to further what was being seen on American stages and to give playwrights more opportunities to experiment without fear of financial loss. Lortel's career then was not greatly impacted by the commercial failure of one or several productions, which allowed her as a producer to take more risks. However, Lortel was still careful about how she navigated the risky choices she made, especially when it came to productions with political content.

### 3.0 Section Two

Lucille Lortel's producing career has been characterized in many ways. In her first few years, she was subjected to newspaper articles titled "Theatre in her Backyard Makes up for Lost Career", "Angel in the Barnyard: former actress having a wonderful time tossing away coin on artist productions", and "Conn. Matron's DeLuce Method of "Casting" Angels for New Plays."<sup>88</sup> Many such articles attribute Lortel's turn to producing as an attempt to overcome a failed acting career or cast her as a rich woman without a genuine interest in or understanding of the art she financed. As the years progressed and her prominence in the New York theater community was established through her relentless producing work, the headlines and articles lost some of their sexist subtext but continued to refer to Lortel in terms such as "Broadway angel" and "The Queen of Off-Broadway." After her death when her biography was published, the author Alexis Greene limits much of the agency that Lortel had within her career, often attributing her successes to her significant financial resources and framing her choices within the contexts of her gender and childhood as a member of a financially unstable immigrant family. Even when referencing the political content of many of the shows that Lortel produced, Greene follows Lortel's lead and does not speak to how the play's politics impacted the producer. Rather, Greene states Lortel's assertion that neither her nor her work was political early in the book, and then does not place Lortel and the political content in relation to each other.

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<sup>88</sup> Multiple clippings, Box 89, Folder 16, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>88</sup> McCready, 44-48.

In this section, I will argue that Lucille Lortel used her position as an Off-Broadway theater producer to advocate for and increase awareness of multiple political and social issues. I will also argue that how Lortel approached being politically engaged through theater changed from her early career of the 1940s-1960s to her later career of the 1970s-1990s. My argument examines Lortel's producing career in two sections. This division comes from how Lortel changed the ways that she was engaged politically in her career, in addition to how the artistic world responded to politically engaged creators changed over time. In her early career, Lortel primarily produced shows with political messages and supported the work of new and experimental playwrights who were not often produced for reasons including financial risk, gender, and race. The first section focuses on the decades when Lortel's primary political engagement was through producing and when there were certain risks associated with being an outspoken politically engaged theater artist, such as government censorship. During these years, her producing career began at the White Barn Theatre before expanding to her Off-Broadway Theater de Lys and continued through her work as the Artistic Director and producer of the ANTA Matinee Series during the decades of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

In her later career, Lortel continued the work of her early career but also expanded her approach to include financial support of different theater institutions and organizations, which were concerned with social and political issues. In her later career from the 1970s to the 90s, Lortel's concerns shift away from government censorship and more toward a show's ability to draw a crowd. I attribute this to Lortel's more frequent productions on Broadway and internationally, which ultimately exerts more pressure on her to draw a crowd. During this time, Lortel also continued producing at the White Barn and Theatre de Lys/Lortel theater, but no longer produced the ANTA Matinee Series after 1975. I will conclude this section with a case study of

Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods*, which was produced several times by Lortel in 1988 and exemplifies many of the aspects of Lortel's career as a political producer, especially in the second half of her career.

Throughout her producing career, Lortel used three methods of silence, ambiguity, and redirection. These methods helped her navigate the topics of her political engagement in the press in a way that avoided direct commentary on the content of her shows, while still providing her an opportunity to promote them and cultivate interest in the audience. These three methods were used by Lortel to navigate the political content in the shows in press materials and in interviews. Her silence, ambiguity, and redirection on this aspect of her productions allowed for the space within these publicity materials for other information that Lortel would rely on to sell the show. The emphasis within these materials would then not be placed on any possibly controversial subject matter which would dissuade potential audience members.

Since I am arguing how Lortel used theater to be a political advocate and since the idea of political theater can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, I will be drawing on the definition from *Politics and Performance: Theory and Practice*: "The politics of representation is the politics of multiple relationships: of the character to the actor, the character to the person being represented, the history to the story, the place to the space of performance."<sup>89</sup> The component of this definition that I will be applying is how political significance arises when contextualized in established relationships. Specifically, I am interested in the relationships of the history to the story and the history or time to the artist. This because I see Lortel's choice to produce certain playwrights and

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<sup>89</sup>Susan C. Haedicke et al, *Political Performances: Theory and Practice* (Amsterdam: BRILL, 2009), accessed February 8, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

kinds of experimental theater as political due to the historical contexts, the representation or lack thereof for those playwrights, and the specific kinds of content they created related to their identities and experiences. This is seen in Lortel's work with many playwrights of color and women playwrights and the time periods in which Lortel produced them. The time periods in which she produced theater about certain issues is significant as it was a way to advocate for a cause, in addition to providing financial support to related organizations.

The first method of silence refers to how Lortel would never directly speak to the political content of her shows as a way to publicize them. In press releases, she would not include the politics as a part of the summary or as what drew her to producing the show, and when interviewed, Lortel would not reference the politics in her responses. Her silence on these topics was a way to advertise the shows as nonpolitical, which meant that audiences would be drawn in for other reasons and once they had seen the show, they would be less likely to assume its primary purpose had been political as it was not advertised as such.

The second method Lortel used was ambiguity. When asked by reporters and in interviews as to why she was drawn to her shows, especially overtly political shows like Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot* and Lee Blessings' *A Walk in the Woods*, she responded by praising their "theatricality", the artistry of their "dramatization", or the quality of their "human stories". As these phrases have multiple definitions, what exactly Lortel intended their meanings to be is up to interpretation. However, in the contexts they appear in during interviews, their use evokes a sense of appreciation for various qualities that align with Lortel's artistic tastes. Due to this, her lack of specificity could come across as alluring rather than dismissive or unthoughtful to prospective audience members. If the reader wanted to understand exactly why Lortel was drawn to produce the show, they would have to be in the audience. The method of ambiguity provides just enough

information for a potential audience member to form their own understanding as to why Lortel thought the show was worth performing, generates expectations as to what the show would be like, and develops a deeper interest in seeing the show. Ambiguity fulfilled the expectation of Lortel to answer questions of political content without addressing it, ultimately allowing the reader to come to conclusions on their own.

The third quality I argue that Lortel uses is that of redirection, which refers to the instances in interviews when Lortel is asked specifically of the politics or message of a show and she acknowledges it briefly before moving on to discuss other aspects of the production. This included issues within the production process or in previous productions of the play, such as a history of censorship in Europe with Genet's *The Balcony*.<sup>90</sup> It also included discussing the individuals involved in the production such as the directors, actors, playwright, composers, and other producers, especially if anyone was well known and respected within the theater community. This method allowed for Lortel to avoid a full discussion of politics while selling the show to audiences based off of the reputations of the individuals involved or a compelling or intriguing anecdote related to the show. Additionally, if audiences were aware of and enjoyed the previous work of those involved, they could develop an understanding of what this new show might be like.

The use of these methods also allowed Lortel the ability to craft and maintain her reputation as a producer of artistically significant shows, which she would then use to justify the kinds of shows she produced. While statements from Lortel declaring her theatre preferences were full of ambiguous terms such as "originality," "theatricality," "experimental," and "dramatization" Lortel was occasionally vocal on what she would not produce, once saying, "Shakespeare's not a new

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<sup>90</sup> Greene, chapter six.

writer, he doesn't need my help," in an interview as to why she focused primarily on new works over revivals, and very rarely on classical pieces.<sup>91</sup> This quote reveals that for Lortel, the artist behind the work influenced her decision on whether or not to produce it. Shakespeare was not having difficulty being produced, nor was he new to the New York theatre community, so Lortel saw fit that she put her money behind the artists who were. However, not all contemporary shows and artists were given that chance by Lortel. When it came to the "New York top hits" or in other words, shows that were guaranteed commercial successes, Lortel was unwilling to produce or even see them, reasoning that, "I'm sure some of them would be amusing. But what about afterward when I leave the theater? Have I gained anything?"<sup>92</sup> While Lortel uses ambiguous language in defining what she will produce, she is more straightforward in stating what she will not: fairly commercial work without a strong message and the work of artists well-established who can find support for their previously premiered work. However, in using precise language to define what she is not drawn to producing, she is using redirection and ambiguity to say what she will.

These tactics are present throughout Lortel's career and allowed her to speak of what she was drawn to producing without explicitly defining a mission statement, which prevented Lortel from too narrowly defining her career. Her silence, ambiguity, and redirection on the topics of politics within the art she produced guarded her from the risk of censorship from the government.

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<sup>91</sup> "The Original Broadway Babe" by Gully Wells, February 1998, Box 90, Folder 23, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>91</sup> McCready, 44-48.

<sup>92</sup> "White Barn's Genius" by Don Rubin, August 8, 1965, Box 90, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>92</sup> McCready, 44-48.

It also helped her work appeal to audience members who would otherwise not see a show that was advertised as political. The use of these three tactics is significant because it allowed for Lortel to talk about her work without saying anything too definitive, allowing the people who read her articles and interviews and the audiences that saw her shows to form their own ideas of what Lortel's message or intention might have been. This result was fitting for Lortel's career, as she did not think the importance of theatre was in its transparency, "Understanding isn't always an absolute necessity. To me, the theater is...like a painting. You don't have to understand a painting to like it. I don't understand Picasso, yet those who do say he's a great artist. I doubt if Albee himself understands everything in his plays. And yet they work and that's the important thing."<sup>93</sup>

### **3.1 Early Producing Career—1940s, 50s, and 60s**

It was during Lortel's first years at the White Barn, Theatre de Lys, and the Matinee Series that she developed the methods silence, ambiguity, and redirection that she used. At the beginning of her producing career, Lortel held staged readings, which she called tryout readings in the barn on her Westport, CT property. The first reading was of a play on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1947, followed by a musical revue, and four more staged readings finished the season.<sup>94</sup> The White Barn season ran in the summer months and was established by Lortel and her board for "the purpose of presenting works of an unusual and experimental nature. This theatre was created to develop the talents of

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<sup>93</sup> "The White Barn Theater" by Don Rubin, July 10, 1966, Box 90, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>94</sup> McCready, 149-150.

new playwrights, composers, actors, directors and designers, and to allow established artists to open themselves up to new directions in their careers by performing in pieces they might not have been able to do in commercial theater.”<sup>95</sup> In 1955, Lortel and her husband Louis Schweitzer completed the purchase of the Off-Broadway Theatre de Lys, which established Lortel’s producing presence firmly in New York, and Lortel opened her new theater with the 1955 production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* which ran for seven years.<sup>96</sup> Lortel was surprised at *Threepenny*’s success, but also wanted to produce other shows at her new theater. This led her to working with the American National Theater and Academy to create the Matinee Series, hosted in the de Lys, beginning in 1956.<sup>97</sup> During this early portion of her career, Lortel produced only one show on Broadway, Sean O’Casey’s *I Knock at the Door* in 1957.<sup>98</sup>

My argument is based on the press materials from the shows Lortel produced at this time, including interviews and articles in newspapers and magazines. In these materials, Lortel was only asked to include minimal information on what the show was about, with the primary emphasis being on who was involved in the show and some aspects of its production history. This led Lortel to stay silent on the political, be ambiguous when it was mentioned, and to redirect the conversation to information that would promote the show.

Lortel developed these methods at this time due to the stakes of being a politically engaged creator in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. During these decades, Lortel produced the work political

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<sup>95</sup> White Barn 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary booklet, 1997, Box 40, Folder 13 Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>96</sup> McCready, 44-48.

<sup>97</sup> McCready, 14-15.

<sup>98</sup> McCready, 99.

playwrights who were known in Europe but not as successful in New York such as Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Sean O'Casey. Their writing frequently included themes of power, class, violence, and religion, in addition to typically having stylistic differences from the mainstream theater in New York. Lortel also produced the work of artists who were facing oppression and in her early career, that included playwrights of color and women playwrights. The playwrights of color she supported included Langston Hughes and Adrienne Kennedy and she placed their work in front of primarily white audiences during the intensifying civil rights movement. She produced the work of women playwrights during a portion of theater history when women were just beginning to be accepted in production roles outside of performing. The work of some of these playwrights spoke to political topics and to produce the work of others could be seen as political when contextualized in the time period and their exclusion from most mainstream theatre.

One of the risks of advertising a show as political was that audiences who went to the theater for escape and entertainment may have been dissuaded from attending that particular show. This was also related to the risk of alienating audiences who had or suspected that they had different political views from those presented in the show. Although Lortel did not produce only shows that she was confident would draw audiences large enough to recoup her investments, she still produced with the desire of drawing an audience.

Another risk of producing political theater in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was censorship from the government. The House Un-American Activities Committee was concerned with investigating instances of possible communist propaganda due to rising fears of a communist presence in the

country. Those who were investigated were often blacklisted and faced difficulty finding work in the following years.<sup>99</sup>

Although Lortel never stated that it was a prominent mission within her career to give opportunities to blacklisted artists, she worked with multiple artists who were censored by the government at this time. Lortel produced shows with several blacklisted actors at the White Barn, de Lys, and in the ANTA Matinee Series. These included Canada Lee who performed in the first staged reading in 1947, Zero Mostel who acted in *Jim Dandy* by William Saroyan the following year, and Kim Hunter who appeared in *Red Roses for Me* by Sean O’Casey in 1948, *Come Slowly*, *Eden* by Norman Rosten in 1966, and *Hello and Goodbye* by Athol Fugard in 1968.<sup>100</sup> Lortel also supported many people who had been investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee including Clarence Derwent and Bertolt Brecht.<sup>101</sup> Whether or not she intended for her work with these individuals to be political, she was giving opportunities to artists who had faced censorship from the House Un-American Activities Committee, which showed that Lortel did not have the same ideas as the government as to what could or should be said politically through theater. As Lortel was an independent producer who did not rely on funding from the government or collaboration with other producers, she was able to work with individuals who had faced investigation and blacklisting without fear that the possible repercussions would be devastating

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<sup>99</sup> Greene, chapter four.

<sup>100</sup> McCready, 141, 149, 150, 171.

<sup>101</sup> Greene, chapter four.

James F. Clarity and Warren Weaver, “‘Sprechen Sie Brecht?’” *The New York Times*, April 26, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/26/us/briefing-sprechen-sie-brecht.html>.

toward her own career. At the time, Lortel did not outwardly speak to the significance of supporting these individuals in interviews or the promotional materials of her shows, and thus used her method of silence. By not publicizing her work with blacklisted or investigated theater personnel, Lortel did not draw possible unwanted attention to her own career and was able to continue producing political shows. From the materials available to me, I cannot see that she was asked about her choice to work with performers or other theater professionals who had been investigated, and thus cannot state if the opportunity to use ambiguity or redirection was ever presented.

However, she did not deny her connection to these artists at that time, or when she was asked about it decades later. In 1954, Lortel purchased a nearby property in Westport to serve as short-term lodging for out-of-town performers and to house students during the summers when the White Barn Theater Apprentice school was active. She named it the Derwent house after Clarence Derwent, who supported Lortel's early endeavors at the White Barn and had been investigated for possible communist ties.<sup>102</sup> In the later years of Lortel's career, she more directly spoke on her involvement with previously blacklisted and investigated theater personnel. In a 1991 interview with Vincent Curcio whom she worked with for many years, Lortel boldly stated:

...besides, using private money means I never have to concern myself with what the government thinks about the politics of my artistic personnel or the controversial nature of the statements they sometimes make in their work...If you are a serious producer, you cannot flinch where artists are concerned. Even in the days of red channels 40 years ago, I gave all the blacklisted actors who couldn't get work elsewhere a chance to perform in my theaters—Zero Mostel, Kim Hunter, Sam Jaffe, Anne Revere, all of them. People said, "Aren't you afraid, Lucille?" but I said, 'No, I'm using my own money to hire them, so nobody has the right to tell me what to do.'<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Greene, chapter four.

<sup>103</sup> "The Do-It-Yourself Queen" by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

She clearly laid out in this quote the connection for her between financial resources, politics, and artistic independence, which was of the utmost importance to Lortel. However, since it took forty years for Lortel to speak on her reasoning behind her choices, it shows an awareness that doing so at the time would have likely had more consequences. By waiting so long and not speaking in the moment, Lortel avoided drawing unwanted attention to her choices of productions and performers.

Lortel's three methods also benefited her in her work with oppressed artists of color who were not consistently receiving opportunities within the mainstream theater of the time. This included supporting black performers and writers during the 1950s and 1960s during the civil rights movement such as *Dark Fire* by Vinie Burrows and *The Owl Answers* by Adrienne Kennedy.<sup>104</sup> At this time, few shows on Broadway and Off-Broadway were created by and focused on the lives of African Americans and much of the drama of playwrights of color was not integrated into the mainstream, predominately white theater community. One production where Lortel prominently supported a black playwright was with *Soul Gone Home* by Langston Hughes and *Shakespeare in Harlem* also by Hughes, adapted by Robert Glenn.<sup>105</sup> Lortel was approached by Glenn, a director who was new to New York City. He suggested to her a project that he had directed in Texas for an all African American theater company. Unable to find scripts with an all-black cast, he had arraigned several pieces of Langston Hughes' poetry along with music and had titled it *Shakespeare in Harlem*. They were performed by different characters in the style of vignettes and were woven together through a narrator. They were also connected through the

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<sup>104</sup> McCready, 137-8.

<sup>105</sup> McCready, 129.

central idea of the “dream deferred”, a phrase from the Hughes’ poem “Harlem”, as the men and women spoke of the challenges faced every day in their lives: the loss of love, the frustration of living under neglectful landlords, and communicating across racial differences in academics.<sup>106</sup> Lortel agreed to produce the show at the White Barn Theater and worked with Glenn to arrange the casting of the all-black cast.<sup>107</sup>

The performance was so successful in August 1959 that Lortel added it to the season of the ANTA Matinee Series for a performance in October of the same year.<sup>108</sup> The New York City premiere also received much praise, even from Langston Hughes himself who said that it was, “It is as if I were looking at something new, as if I didn’t write it, and I have found it indeed most enjoyable and most effective indeed.”<sup>109</sup> In his book chronicling Lortel’s career, Sam McCready states that this performance made Langston Hughes the first black poet to have his poetry dramatized and presented on stage.<sup>110</sup> Although the actual script for *Shakespeare in Harlem* was arranged by Robert Glenn, Lortel had paired the performance with *Soul Gone Home*, a one-act play by Langston Hughes. The choice to stage *Shakespeare in Harlem* as a double bill with a play written by Hughes situated Hughes’ writing as a central focus of the performance.

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<sup>106</sup> “Theater Harlem Bard” by Lewis Funke, October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1959, Box 24, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>107</sup> Greene, chapter six.

<sup>108</sup> McCready, 166.

<sup>109</sup> Transcript of radio interview between Alice Griffin and Langston Hughes, October 27, 1959, Box 24, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>110</sup> McCready, 128.

Lortel's political engagement of supporting oppressed groups of people through theater also extended into supporting female playwrights. Although the work of female playwrights had begun to be more produced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it took decades for them to have opportunities that could be considered equal to those that their male counterparts received regularly. Lortel was one producer who consistently produced female playwrights before it was commonplace. The very first staged reading at the White Barn Theatre was *The Painted Wagon* and had been co-written by a woman, Elizabeth Goodyear.<sup>111</sup> Many more female playwrights followed Goodyear at the White Barn, and later in the ANTA Matinee Series. This included Katherine Anne Porter who wrote *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, which was performed at the matinee series in 1957, followed a year later by Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Aria Da Capo* and Margaret Webster who adapted *The Brontës*, performed in 1963.<sup>112</sup> All of these shows featured women as the central characters with the plots following their experiences. Notably, Webster's adaptation was focused on the lives of the Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anna. It was compiled partially from the three sisters' published writing, including *Agnes Grey*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Villette*, along with additional materials. These productions were not only created by women but also featured the experiences of women—some fictional, some historical—as the primary focus.

Within the early years of her career, Lortel also produced work by Athol Fugard for the first time. Fugard's *The Blood Knot* premiered Off-Broadway in 1964 in the Cricket Theatre, after premiering to mixed reviews in London, having had its world premiere in South Africa. The play

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<sup>111</sup> McCready, 149.

<sup>112</sup> "Twenty Years Lucille Lortel's Matinee Series at the Theatre de Lys" Box 71, Folder 1 Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>112</sup> McCready, 44-48.

is set in Korsten, South Africa and explores the tense relationship between two half-brothers as they attempt to live under the racist apartheid system. Morris supports the two and is white-passing, while Zachariah is black and unable to pass. They unknowingly break the law when Zachariah becomes pen pals with a white woman who wants to visit them and plan for Morris to pretend to be Zachariah to avoid discovery, but the incident tests the brothers' relationship. Lortel became a proponent for Fugard's work as she gave him his American premiere with *Blood Knot* and refused to close the show over a few rough financial patches during its seven-month run.<sup>113</sup> Lortel would go on to produce Fugard's writing several more times, but this premiere of *Blood Knot* in America was significant as it can be seen as an attempt to draw attention to the oppressive and racist system operated by a government at a time when there was not much international awareness. One of the first united, global attempt to act against apartheid through art came four years later in 1968 when the United Nations set a resolution for states and organizations to discontinue any cultural interactions with the country as a protest.<sup>114</sup>

Lortel's support of these playwrights and productions may have not been seen by audiences and the press as overtly political at the time for several reason. Although Lortel's support of playwrights of color and female playwrights can be seen as political, she framed her work as an attempt to include new voices with the artistic purpose of expanding theatre in America. Additionally, the shows written by these individuals may have discussed struggles that the playwrights encountered because of their identities, but they were not often directly connected to

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<sup>113</sup> McCready, 62-66.

<sup>114</sup> Michael C. Beaubien, "The Cultural Boycott of South Africa," *Africa Today* 29, no. 4 (1982): 5-16, accessed February 25, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/4186110](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4186110).

the political events of the time, such as the civil rights movement or second wave feminism. Although Fugard's *Blood Knot* addresses the conditions of life for two brothers under apartheid, it does not as directly address the oppressive system as later productions do. Rather, Fugard's play focuses on the impact of apartheid between individuals. Within the press materials of these productions, especially those within the ANTA Matinee Series, the political content and context of staging these shows was not mentioned. For productions such as the double bill of Langston Hughes' writing, reviews would occasionally state that it was significant that an all-African Americans cast was performing the work of an African American man on Off-Broadway, or that the plots were about the struggles they encountered and the frustration they felt. However, these same reviews did not acknowledge that the shows portrayed such empathetic struggles due to systems of inequality. The reviews acknowledged the personal stories of struggle that the characters experienced but did not mention the oppressive systems of racism and sexism that caused their oppression, and which the plays spoke out against.<sup>115</sup>

Lortel's method of redirection was also present in these articles in the ways that previous performances would be used to promote future ones. The ANTA Matinee series in which many of the previous shows were produced, changed its schedule over the 20 years that it existed, but on

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<sup>115</sup> "A Dream Come True" by Mrs. Walter White, November 24, 1959, Box 24, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Shakespeare in Harlem" by Ruth Karen, November 6, 1959, Box 24, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Theatre Harlem Bard: Works by Langston Hughes at de Lys" by Lewis Funke, October 28, 1959, Box 24, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

average, had one matinee performance a week, with shows occasionally double-billed. Due to this, ANTA, of which Lortel was the artistic director, would use the success of that week's show to promote the next week's show, as an attempt to move from one well-attended and reviewed show to the next. The use of redirection in this method is similar to how Lortel would reference the previous well-known productions of the cast, directors, and playwrights involved in these shows. This would continuously associate the matinee series with successful productions each week, building a reputation of high quality, experimental theater that would become associated with the ANTA Matinee series.<sup>116</sup>

Another way in which Lortel's career was political in this time was how she often brought over plays by European playwrights, whom she cited as having 'theatrically' interesting or 'dramatically' compelling scripts that she was drawn to. Furthermore, Lortel often cites these works as being experimental compared to much of what was seen on the American stages at the time. Although this often means experimental in terms of form as she was producing works of Genet, Ionesco, and Brecht, it also refers to the content of the scripts. These were instances in which she tended to use ambiguity.

One European playwright, Sean O'Casey, was produced frequently by Lortel, who navigated the political content in his work by the method of ambiguity. In the second year of the White Barn, Lortel produced *Red Roses for Me* for the first time in America.<sup>117</sup> She continued to give Sean O'Casey works their American premiers as her own career advanced. His play *I Knock*

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<sup>116</sup> "Theatre Harlem Bard: Works by Langston Hughes at de Lys" by Lewis Funke, October 28, 1959, Box 24, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>117</sup> McCready, 10.

*at the Door* was her first Broadway production in 1957, which was followed the next year by the Off-Broadway and first New York production of *Cock-A-Doodle Dandy*.<sup>118</sup> These O’Casey productions could be seen as experimental at this time in multiple ways. For instance, *I Knock at the Door* was staged as a “concert reading” with only a blue cyclorama, stools, and lecterns on the stage and all of the performers’ physicality was toned down and not fully acted out.<sup>119</sup> This style of performance for a Broadway premiere was unusual for the time and received criticism in reviews, mostly for not fitting the reviewers’ ideas of what theatre should be.<sup>120</sup>

O’Casey’s work was considered experimental for the content he wrote in addition to the style in which it was staged. Several of O’Casey’s plays were adapted by Paul Shyre from his autobiographies and dramatized political events that had occurred during his life, while others written by O’Casey were “anti-realistic dramas”.<sup>121</sup> One such anti-realistic show was *Cock-A-Doodle Dandy*, which received many negative and mixed reviews that cited the incongruity in the tone of the piece, calling it both a “spoof” and “too reverential”.<sup>122</sup> Whether it was due to the content of his autobiographical political plays or the incongruous fantastical dramas, or the combination of both within one playwright’s body of work, many reviewers of the time claimed that O’Casey was too uncommercial for the tastes of New York theatre audiences to be

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<sup>118</sup> McCready, 16.

<sup>119</sup> McCready. 101.

<sup>120</sup> “A Charming Tale-but it’s Not ‘Theatre’” by John McClain, September 30, 1957, Box 32, folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>121</sup> McCready, 53.

<sup>122</sup> McCready. 52.

continuously produced. Lortel, however, thought otherwise and her career ultimately included fourteen productions of Sean O’Casey’s plays on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and at the White Barn and with a strong focus on his works in the beginning of her own producing career.

Even though Lortel was undeniably a supporter of O’Casey, she did not frequently speak to the content of his shows. In the clippings from the Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, Lortel is not quoted and she is only mentioned in relation to her position as a producer and her previous O’Casey productions. Even in the press releases from the agencies Lortel employed, her feelings toward the content of the shows, positive, negative, or otherwise, were not included. The press release from *I Knock at the Door* consisted of production details such as where, when, and how long it is running, along with brief biographies of notable performers and O’Casey himself. Lortel and other producers are mentioned, but the majority of the release is comprised of favorable quotes from reviewers. It is the only section in which information about the production’s contents are referenced, and it is entirely through praise of the performances and compliments of O’Casey’s skill for writing.<sup>123</sup> Lortel frequently used silence and redirection in her early career during the runs of many O’Casey shows. However, in the later years of her career, when she was asked what had drawn her to the work of the Irish playwright, it was common for Lortel to use ambiguous language by praising O’Casey’s “theatricality” or simply his skill for writing, and to then associate him with another playwright whom she produced frequently, like Athol Fugard or Bertolt Brecht.

Another way that Lortel was able to avoid a lot of the politics of these shows is because they dealt with more abstract political ideas (such as power, governing, religious control,

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<sup>123</sup> Press Release for *I Knock at the Door*, September 1957, Box 31, folder 19, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

revolution, etc. rather than the real life political events of the time), and could easily be reframed, like what was seen with *The Balcony*. Jean Genet's play could be considered controversial in the time of this production for the obscene content and language related to the depiction of a brothel and the women who operate it and work there, along with the clientele who frequently visit. Additionally, Genet's highly symbolic script increased the difficulty in successfully producing the play. In press coverage of Lortel production, it is described by the New York Times as:

...a fantasy dealing with the relationship between appearance and reality and the role played in society by sex. It unfolds in brothel "to which men come to indulge in their illusions." Meanwhile, outside, a revolution rages. When the queen and her court are overthrown, the chief of Police sets up the brothel keeper in her place and the "dreams of her customers come true." Our man tells us that this once was too strong even for the Paris police. The change in government evidently has eased the situation. So much so that shortly after the local premiere, Miss Lortel will produce the play in Paris with Marie Bell...<sup>124</sup>

In this example, there is some summary, but the primary focus of the coverage is on the ideas of appearance and reality, along with the play's history with censorship, as mentioned by the Paris police. However, what isn't directly stated is why it was censored, other than that it "was too strong" for authorities in Paris, leaving readers to come to their own conclusion as to what led authorities to the censorship. In this instance, Lortel's methods of redirection and silence were used. This same article from the New York Times includes comments from an interview with Lortel about how she had wanted to produce *The Balcony* earlier and in her own theater, but her desired director Jose Quintero had only just become available. The play was ultimately produced at the Circle in the Square because *The Threepenny Opera* was still in the midst of a successful

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<sup>124</sup> "News and Gossip of the Rialto: Revolution" by Lewis Funke, January 17, 1960, Box 90, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

run at the de Lys.<sup>125</sup> Lortel's silence is present since, when she had the opportunity to provide comments about the play, she did not mention the political content. The redirection is seen in how Lortel did speak to the production, but instead of mentioning what it was about, she discussed the director and the complications that arose in producing it within the circumstances that she desired.

### **3.2 Late Producing Career—1970s, 80s, and 90s**

In the later part of Lortel's producing career, the stakes of producing politically engaging shows were different from the stakes when she first began producing. The concern of alienating audiences remained present but facing censorship from the Housing Un-American Activities Committee was no longer a threat. Lortel's three methods of responding to the political contexts and motivations of her shows had kept her from censorship and blacklisting so far and had allowed her to continue producing these political and experimental shows. She continued to use these methods in the later part of her career because they had been successful for her even though the stakes of being producer of political theater were now different.

As previously stated, Lortel was not dependent like many other producers were on her ability to recoup her investment in a show, but she was still concerned with being able to draw audiences. Being known as a producer of political theater then might alienating audience members who only want entertainment from their theater experience and not to engage with political topics. There was also the possibility of alienating audiences with opposing political views to those expressed in a show.

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<sup>125</sup> McCready, 53-56.

Another concern of Lortel's may have been becoming known as a producer of only political theater. One of Lortel's goals as a producer was to allow established artists the space to experiment with their work without the risk of commercial failure, as I previously mentioned. I argue that Lortel similarly would not have wanted to have one type of theater prescribed to her career, and thus used terms such as "theatricality" and "experimental" which could be interpreted multiple ways to define her work. Furthermore, Lortel stated that theater is her life and she closely aligned her professional life with her personal identity. Because of this, Lortel may avoid discussing the political content of the shows she produces as a way to ensure that they are not too closely associated with her personal views.

In the later section of Lortel's career, she continued the previous ways of being a political producer by supporting European playwrights and artists who faced oppression. The ways and people Lortel supported may not have changed, but the works they created that she supported tended to have a new form of immediacy. In the early part of Lortel's career, the political plays that she produced often dealt with topics that were broadly political, meaning that they dealt with topics like the rights of individuals, class and economic structures, and war and violence, which were frequently fictionalized and broadly articulated in a way that could apply to many eras of human history. Usually playwrights would write fictional stories to grapple with political themes, such as Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, which depicts many complicated topics including religion, power, and revolution. However, these themes in *The Balcony* are not based on or referring to specific historical events. Although Genet's choice to confront these themes in this play may have been inspired by events of that time, the text avoids referencing them directly and approaches them through a fictional lens. Because of this, the audience is confronted with broad topics that, while relevant to their times, have also been and are likely to continue to be relevant in the future.

However, in the later part of Lortel's career, the politics tackled in her shows tend to be harder to separate from the times in which they were written and produced. There is a sense of immediacy to the politics that are explored as they are pulled from the current events of the time, and audiences are confronted with these issues on stage as they are in the news.

One production that exemplified this was Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina!* in 1988. This South African musical was based off of historical events and directly confronted the oppressive system of apartheid. It is set in a high school under military control in Soweto, South Africa and follows the daily lives of the students as they attend classes, share stories of violence experienced by their family members, attend protests and funerals, and prepare for their annual school concert. The music of *Sarafina!* was done in the indigenous style of mbaqana, with the musicians on stage, dressed as soldiers and the cast was comprised of actual school children from South Africa.<sup>126</sup> While its characters are fictional, it is based on the political events and tensions of the 1970s and 80s in South Africa, and even evokes historical figures such as Nelson Mandela, whom the titular character of Sarafina portrays in their concert.<sup>127</sup> This musical also touches on the themes of violence, power, and the rights of individuals so through the systems of oppression that were in use at the time.<sup>128</sup>

Lortel's work with *Sarafina!* also exemplifies her continuation of supporting playwrights working within systems of oppression, specifically apartheid. When Lortel first produced a play by a South African playwright, there had been a few minor attempts by artists and organizations

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<sup>126</sup> McCready, 114-117.

<sup>127</sup> McCready, 115.

<sup>128</sup> McCready, 114.

to advocate awareness and prevent the spread of western cultural products in the country. However, all of these were independently organized, and many western, especially American, performers and artists ignored the boycotts.<sup>129</sup> Lortel's choice to support a South African artist on Off-Broadway when international activism against apartheid was just beginning, was a bold choice. However, her continued support of Fugard and his South African contemporaries was bolstered by a public awareness of and outcry against apartheid, especially through the arts. The activism against apartheid by artists was through cultural boycotts in the late 1970s and 80s, which were attempts to prevent the import of artistic creations to South Africa and agreements to not visit the country for any reason.<sup>130</sup> At this point, South Africa was facing economic pressures through sanctions and divestments from other countries, to which the boycotts contributed. These attempts were much more unified than the previous ones with artists publicly declaring their stances and artists who violated or refused to participate in the boycott were added to a blacklist.<sup>131</sup> Musicians made up most of the participants in these boycotts, but theatre artists were included when the Associated Actors and Artistes of America declared that its members were to participate beginning in 1981.<sup>132</sup>

This followed a growing response in American theatre of the conditions that black people endured under apartheid. This was seen in the protesting of a 1977 performance of the South African musical *Ipi Ntombi*, which was criticized for showing an inaccurate and exploitative

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<sup>129</sup> Kareem Estefan, Carin Kuoni, and Laura Raicovich, eds, *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency and Cultural Production* (La Vergne: OR Books, 2017), accessed February 24, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>130</sup> Kareem Estefan, Carin Kuoni, and Laura Raicovich, 18.

<sup>131</sup> Kareem Estefan, Carin Kuoni, and Laura Raicovich, 19.

<sup>132</sup> Kareem Estefan, Carin Kuoni, and Laura Raicovich, 18.

depiction of life for black people under apartheid.<sup>133</sup> The difference between the South African shows that Lortel produced and *Ipi Ntombi* is that Lortel's shows were decidedly anti-apartheid. However, there was no guarantee that anti-apartheid shows were not at risk, as the public-relations representative for *Ipi Ntombi* explained that the advertisement for the show dropped the word "south" from its description, leaving only "Africa" as, "When you mention South Africa, everybody's back goes up."<sup>134</sup> Despite this, Lortel was even more committed to supporting South African playwrights who were living under the oppressive system of apartheid in the 1980s.

As previously mentioned, Lortel facilitated the transition from Off-Broadway to Broadway for *Sarafina!* by Mbongeni Ngema in 1988. Even earlier, she produced the work of Fatima Dike, another South African playwright. Lortel produced the premiere of *Glasshouse* by Dike on Off-Broadway in March 1981.<sup>135</sup> Both of these productions explore the tension surrounding race in South Africa in the 1980s, with *Glasshouse* following friends Linda, a white woman, and Phulma, her family's servant since childhood, who jointly inherit a home from Linda's father. They believe it is an opportunity for them to finally extend their friendship beyond the servant-employer bond, but when the government steps in to prevent Phulma from owning property in a white area, their arrangement and friendship become at risk.<sup>136</sup> The play premiered to mixed reviews with praise for performances and design, but some find faults in the script. However, it exemplified the

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<sup>133</sup> C. Gerald Fraser, "Black Committee Urges Boycott of 'Ipi Tombi,'" *New York Times*, December 28, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/12/28/archives/black-committee-urges-boycott-of-ipi-tombi-from-south-africa.html>.

<sup>134</sup> Fraser, "Black Committee Urges Boycott of 'Ipi Tombi.'"

<sup>135</sup> McCready, 76.

<sup>136</sup> Frank Rich, "Stage: 'Glasshouse' - About Apartheid," *New York City*, March 24, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/24/theater/stage-glasshouse-about-apartheid.html>.

previously stated point, that even if a South African piece was anti-apartheid, it was still a risk to produce. Lortel only managed to keep *Glasshouse* running for a week.<sup>137</sup> In the latter half of her career, Lortel was still dedicated to producing new voices, especially those of artists of color facing oppression whose work had not reached audiences in America.

Even after the short run of *Glasshouse*, Lortel was willing to take risks on South African productions. In September 1985, Yale Repertory Theatre produced a 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary performance of Fugard's *Blood Knot* and Lortel came on as a producer to transfer it to Broadway in December the same year, providing a third of the money needed for the transfer.<sup>138</sup> This marked the play's Broadway premiere and Fugard and Zakes Mokae's return to the roles they originated.<sup>139</sup> The play was very well-received, praised in some reviews as a "contemporary classic", while others highlighted the depth of characters and relationship between Fugard and Mokae.<sup>140</sup> *Blood Knot* received a Tony nomination for Best Play in 1986, which is a massive contrast to Lortel's experience with *Glasshouse* just four years earlier. In the press materials available from this production, there is a lot of focus on the significance of it having been 25 years since the show

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<sup>137</sup> McCready, 78.

<sup>138</sup> Letter from Ben Sprecher to Jim Freyberg, October 2, 1985, Box 32, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>139</sup> McCready, 111.

<sup>140</sup> "Stage: *Bloodknot* with Fugard and Mokae", Frank Rich, December 11, 1985, Box 32, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

"Stage: *The Blood Knot* by Fugard", by Mel Gussow, September 24, 1985, Box 32, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

premiered in Johannesburg and over 20 since its American premiere. Despite this, Lortel is not present, but the issue of apartheid is. Whether mentioned in a review by one of the critics, or in an interview by a performer, the show's sadly maintained relevance, if not growth in political immediacy, was frequently commented upon. When the show was performed Off-Broadway in 1964, America was in the midst of its own reckoning with a racist governing system, but in 1985, the performance of *Blood Knot* was surrounded by years of growing awareness and international activism against apartheid. With this production, Lortel used the method of silence to let the play's message speak for itself and to avoid what would have been the imminent questions of motivation for producing the show.

At the same time Lortel started supporting shows with more explicit and immediate political content, she continued the work of her early career as well by also producing shows with less immediate concerns. This can be seen in some of her continued work with women playwrights, whose shows engaged with the politically connected themes of societal expectations of women, motherhood, and families. She premiered several of these productions Off-Broadway, including *Marvelous Gray* by Diane Kagan at the White Barn Theatre August 19, 1978 and later at the Lion Theatre on December 2, 1982. Kagan's *Marvelous Gray* depicts a mother in the wake of her baby's death as she endures a grueling investigation via the media, provoking more judgements than answers as the characters question the mother's behavior and whether the death was an accident or murder. The play is centered around the social concerns of infanticide and an individual's right to privacy once they have been brought into the public eye.<sup>141</sup> *The Baby Dance* by Jane Anderson also premiered at the Lortel Theatre in 1991 and follows a well-off couple Richard and Rachel,

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<sup>141</sup> McCready, 80-82.

from Los Angeles who arrange an adoption agreement with a struggling couple, Al and Wanda, who live in a Louisiana trailer park. As *The Baby Dance* progresses, the couples clash over Richard and Rachel's financial assistance, which is exacerbated by their class differences and the binding legality of their arrangement is brought into question.<sup>142</sup>

Lortel's continued support of women playwrights can be seen clearly in the professional relationship that Lortel developed with Paula Vogel later in her career. When Paula Vogel's *And Baby Makes Seven* was produced at the Lortel Theater in 1993, she had already been teaching in Brown University's MFA playwrighting program for nearly ten years and had a previous play produced by the Circle Repertory Theater.<sup>143</sup> Although Vogel's *And Baby Makes Seven* did not premiere at her theater, Lortel took a risk in producing the play since it had received much criticism for its plot of a lesbian couple becoming mothers with the help of their male friend. At this point in her career, Lortel had chosen to produce plays that were written by women and depicted unconventional forms and experiences of motherhood. While motherhood was a central to their plots, the societal concerns of privacy, class, and the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals in a homophobic culture were also integral to the productions but led to the majority of the criticism that these plays received.<sup>144</sup> They maintained friendly correspondence through the 90s when Vogel

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<sup>142</sup> McCready, 93-94.

<sup>143</sup> "Paula Vogel", Lucille Lortel Archives, Internet Off-Broadway Database, accessed December 17, 2019, <http://iobdb.com/CreditableEntity/2738>.

<sup>144</sup>Several years prior to her theater housing Vogel's play, Lortel had begun corresponding with the playwright when she was in the process of establishing a fellowship in playwrighting at Brown University. They maintained friendly correspondence through the 90s when Vogel received several prominent honors from Lortel, including being

received several prominent honors from Lortel, including being one of a few dozen playwrights honored with the Playwright's Sidewalk outside of the Lortel theater and the 1997 Lucille Lortel Award for her play *How I Learned to Drive*.

It is in this time that Lortel begins to be pointedly labeled as a political producer in interviews and newspaper articles. Part of this, I argue, is that during the later period of Lortel's career, mainstream theater is moving to accept and support even more overtly political productions, especially at the level of Broadway. In the 70s, 80s, and 90s, political shows came to the mainstream of theater often through musicals such as *Hair* (1968, 1977 Broadway revival), *Evita* (1978 Broadway premiere), and *Cabaret* (1966, 1987 Broadway revival), dealing with themes such as war, revolution, and power.<sup>145</sup>

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one of a few dozen playwrights honored with the Playwright's Sidewalk outside of the Lortel theater and the 1997 Lucille Lortel Award for her play *How I Learned to Drive*.

Correspondence between Lucille Lortel and members of Brown University, 1990-1995, Box 57, Folder 22, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Correspondence between Lucille Lortel and Paula Vogel, 1996, Box 58, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>145</sup> "Hair," Internet Broadway Database, Broadway League Inc., accessed February 2020, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/hair-4153>.

"Evita," Internet Broadway Database, Broadway League Inc., accessed February 2020, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/evita-3400>.

"Cabaret," Internet Broadway Database, Broadway League Inc., accessed February 2020, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-show/cabaret-2338>.

In the second half of her career, Lortel produces more shows on Broadway with a greater frequency. Prior to the 1970s, Lortel had only produced the Broadway premiere of Sean O'Casey's *I Knock at the Door*. Following that, she produced one play in the 70s and then five in the 80s. In this portion of her career, Lortel was reaching a larger audience and her shows were gaining the status of having been performed on Broadway, which increased the theater community's awareness of her as a producer on multiple levels and not just Off-Broadway. Part of the significance of producing on Broadway is that of scale, since Broadway theaters in general hold larger audiences than those of Off-Broadway. Another significant factor is the kinds of audiences that Broadway attracts, which tends to be different from that of Off-Broadway and regional theaters, in that, not only local residents and dedicated theater fans attend, but so do the tourists and more casual theater consumers.

An effect of producing more shows to bigger audiences at these other levels of theater is the acknowledgment from more forms of theater awards. This not only includes the Off-Broadway awards that Lortel had been nominated for and won in the past like the Obie and the Drama Desk Awards, but also Tony's, the Laurence Olivier Awards, and Pulitzer Prizes. With nominations alone for these awards, Lortel and her productions would receive and seek out more coverage from the press and thus would encounter more opportunities to be questioned about the shows' messages and her motivation to produce them. In these situations, Lortel's goal would be to advertise the show in a positive light with enough detail to create interest to draw further audiences in the weeks leading up to the awards. Due to the pressure to increase audiences in a limited time, Lortel would have used tactics such as ambiguity to praise the show and redirection to include non-political information to avoid the risk of alienating potential audiences. This comes up several times during her Broadway productions in the 1980s, when she produces *Blood Knot*, *As Is*, and *A Walk in the*

*Woods* within three years of each other and even after those shows closed, the association lingered. In an interview about her career, an interviewer asked Lortel what she wanted to see about herself in the press and Lortel responded with, “They’ve been writing so much about ‘what I stand for.’ *I love the theater. The theater is my family.* I’m in my eighties, and I have arthritis, but *I keep going.* But thank god, when I don’t feel good, that I’m not on the stage. I can be backstage, and I can have pains here, and pains there.”<sup>146</sup> Rather than definitively stating what her career in theater “stands” for as politics had been ascribed to her by the press, Lortel ambiguously replied with a statement of her emotional attachment and dedication to the community. Immediately following it, she redirects to her age and the continuous lengthening of her career. This shows that Lortel was unwilling to ascribe any political association to her own career when given the opportunity to and redirected it smoothly as if to show that her career speaks for itself, while she will continue to speak of her dedication. An additional difference between the early and late portions of Lortel’s career is that when Lortel began to use her position as a member of the theater community to be politically engaged in other ways, she did not have to use the three methods of silence, ambiguity, and redirection to avoid the political connections in the press. Often these actions were private donations to organizations that I learned of through Lortel’s archived correspondence and she made no attempts to publicize her private contributions. Other times, financial contributions were made public and were typically when the donations were directly related to the theatre community, such as Lortel’s New Drama Fund at Yale University and her donations to install Infra-red

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<sup>146</sup> “Theater People: Lucille Lortel: The Queen of Off-Broadway” by Larry Meyers, 1987, Box 90, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Listening Systems in several theaters. In the press coverage of these financial contributions, the focus was not on the reasoning behind the donation as it was on the effect that the donation would have on the community. The Yale New Drama Fund used the success of the play *Fences* by August Wilson to publicize the impact that the endowment had already had, while the Infra-red Listening System coverage primarily cited statistics about the populations who would be able to better enjoy performances thanks to Lortel's donation.

Lortel expanded her work around this time from advocating politically through the productions to also donating to and financially supporting organizations related to those causes. Often but not always, these causes were tied to the theater community. Within the 1980s Lortel demonstrated multiple ways of being directly involved with and advocating for the cause of AIDS research, treatments, and awareness. At several points, Lortel donated to the organization Broadway Cares and in the late 1980s, a quilt represented three of her shows *Angels Fall*, *Steel Magnolias*, and *A Walk in the Woods* was signed by everyone involved in the productions and donated for a fundraiser. At one point Lortel directly stated that she also gave \$5,000 to St. Clare's Hospital and Health Center to provide care to AIDS patients in 1988.<sup>147</sup> This was a few years after she produced *As Is* in 1985, the first play depicting a gay man and his community's experience in the wake of an AIDS diagnosis.<sup>148</sup>

Another cause that Lortel supported in multiple ways was that of deafness and hearing loss. In 1967, David Hays expanded his career in theater from working as a designer to creating the

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<sup>147</sup> Letter to Willard Swire from Lucille Lortel, Box 54, folder 7, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>148</sup> Greene, chapter nine.

National Theatre of the Deaf through his involvement with the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center. Touring nationally and internationally, their goal was to present shows with casts of deaf and hearing actors using American Sign Language and English to deliver the lines to enact social change by bringing deaf and hearing people into the same space. Hays also wanted to showcase the sign language used by the deaf actors, which he called, “Sculpture in the air.”<sup>149</sup> While operating at the Eugene O’Neill theater center in Connecticut, Lucille Lortel served on NTD’s artistic Advisory Board.<sup>150</sup> In 1981, citing financial difficulties, a threat to federal funding, and a lack of support from the Eugene O’Neill center, the executive committee announced NTD’s split from the administration of their host institution in favor of seeking to incorporate as an independent theater company.<sup>151</sup> Following their separation, Hays asked Lortel to serve as a trustee and for approximately the first five years as an independent theater company, Lortel was acknowledged as a member of their board of directors with financial support being credited to the Lucille Lortel Foundation.<sup>152</sup> During this period, NTD brought their production of *Parzival—From the Horse’s Mouth* written by Hays and Shanny Mow to the White Barn. In 1987, Lortel returned to the

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<sup>149</sup> “The National Theatre of the Deaf” by Mark Scism, reprinted from Trends Magazine, 1983, Box 49, Folder 6, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>150</sup> Letter from David Hays to Lucille Lortel, August 25, 1981, Box 64, Folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>151</sup> Confidential Memo to the Trustees, August 21, 1981, Box 64, Folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>152</sup><sup>152</sup> Letter from David Hays to Lucille Lortel, June 1, 1983, Box 64, Folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Advisory Board, which she continued to serve on through the 90s in addition to donating annually to NTD in amounts ranging from \$500 to \$10,000.<sup>153</sup>

Their growing popularity as a touring company in America and internationally was concurrent to the disability rights movement beginning in the 1960s. The next few decades saw an increase in awareness and support for individuals with disabilities in society and legislature, with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 making illegal many forms of discrimination commonly experienced by members of the disability community. One of the goals of NTD was to present shows with casts of deaf and hearing actors using American Sign Language and English to deliver the lines to enact social change by bringing deaf and hearing people into the same space. This aligned with the goals of the disability rights movement to bring awareness to the public of the difficulties and discrimination felt by many individuals with disabilities.

Related to her work with NTD, Lortel was approached by Jane M. Gullong in 1984 on behalf of Joseph Papp to request assistance in placing Infra-red Listening Systems in the Public's performances spaces.<sup>154</sup> Within a month Lortel responded with the check to cover the cost of over \$24,000 to permanently install the system which would be free of charge for patrons to use in all six of the Public's spaces. From there, she requested the information on how to have the same system installed in the Lortel.<sup>155</sup> Within the following years, she supplied the funds for the systems

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<sup>153</sup> Letters from David Hays to Lucille Lortel, 1987-1922, Box 64, Folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>154</sup> Letter from Jane M. Gullong to Lucille Lortel, November 29, 1984, Box 66, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>155</sup> Letter from Lucille Lortel to Jane M. Gullong, December 5, 1984, Box 66, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

to be placed also in the Vivian Beaumont and Roundabout theaters at Lincoln Center.<sup>156</sup> In her letter to Lortel, Gullong cited that 400,000 individuals in New York City were members of a hearing-impaired audience and that those with up to 75% hearing loss would benefit from these systems.<sup>157</sup> Lortel was immediately willing to pay the significant costs of installing this system in her theater as well as eight others to directly improve the quality of the experience that audience members could have. In doing so, she made attending Off-Broadway shows at multiple venues more accessible to many individuals with hearing difficulties and expanded the ways in which she engaged politically with the New York theater community.

Moving away from directly political causes, Lortel addressed the need of the theater community for stable and directly funded theater education opportunities through her work with universities., Lortel worked with theater departments at universities such as Yale and Columbia to further their programs for the development of new playwrights. Although not necessarily a political act, Lortel spoke of the importance independent theater creation and viewed university programs as one way to foster that creation. Lortel said in an interview:

Art does not happen in a financial vacuum. The money has to come from somewhere. People who believe in private support for the arts must do more than talk about it. They must spend money on it. Otherwise the most serious art our culture has to offer will be subject to the dictates of the commercial marketplace or government policy, a situation which is at best uncomfortable and at worst dangerous. I lived my life

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<sup>156</sup> Letter from Bernard Gernsten to Lucille Lortel, April 16, 1986, Box 69, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>157</sup> Letter from Gullong to Lortel, November 29, 1984, Box 66, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

independently, believing that art should be independent. Only the active support of other likeminded individuals will make it possible for people like me to exist in the future.<sup>158</sup> In this context, Lortel saw that establishing a fund at a university was one way for her to ensure that there would be support for new playwrights dedicated to creating experimental theater, that would not rely on commercial success or government funding.

An example of Lortel's commitment to a university's new playwright development program that came without a strong form of courtship to her is the Lucille Lortel Fund for New Drama at Yale University. While Lortel had received a certificate celebrating her forty years in theater which coincided with the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the School of Drama of Yale University, it had occurred in 1965, 20 years before the Lortel Fund was established in 1985.<sup>159</sup> In April 1985, Lortel sent a letter to Lloyd Richards the dean and artistic director at Yale, formalizing pervious communications and affirming her commitment to establish an endowment of \$300,000 over three years to the school, the first portion of which would go to support August Wilson's premiere of *Fences* later that month at the university.<sup>160</sup> At the end of the three years, Richards wrote again to Lortel, detailing the impact of this fund. He stated the shows that were the direct recipients of donations with Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* being the second show to benefit, premiering in 1986, followed in 1987 by Athol Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs*.

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<sup>158</sup> "The Do-It-Yourself Queen" by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>159</sup> Certificate from Yale University honoring Lucille Lortel, November 6, 1965, Box 70, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>160</sup> Letter from Lucille Lortel to Lloyd Richards, April 18, 1985, Box 70, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Richards' letter explains in detail how the fund contributed to the success of August Wilson and *Fences*, which was on Broadway at the time and had just won the Pulitzer prize:

The Lortel Fund has enabled Yale Repertory Theatre to gather playwrights, directors and casts in New Haven and given new work production of the highest quality. The Fund has allowed us to take steps to both deepen the work and provide the production and the playwright with national exposure through a process I've termed "production sharing". For example, *FENCES* began as a staged reading at the O'Neill Playwrighting Conference, received a full production under your auspices at Yale, moved onto the Goodman in Chicago, then to San Francisco, and finally to Broadway. At each location, the production went back into full rehearsal, thus allowing August the opportunity to develop his script during an extended rehearsal process. It was heartening to watch August's national exposure increase, and to experience the positive appreciative response of so many diverse communities."<sup>161</sup>

Richards also states that *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* was undergoing a similar development process at the moment. Lortel's relationship with Yale was grown specifically out of a desire to cultivate great playwrights and new drama and her belief in Yale and Richards' ability to do so. They continued to work together in capacities outside of the fund, with Lortel producing the transfers of Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot* and Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods* from Yale Rep to Broadway in the 1980s.<sup>162</sup>

Lortel's desired independence for the development of new artists outside of commercial pressures without reliance on government funding can also be seen in her work with the University of Bridgeport and Columbia University. At the University of Bridgeport, she established the Lucille Lortel Distinguished Lecture Series which brought in various theater professionals.<sup>163</sup> Her work at Columbia University involved a large donation which supported three years of the Lucille

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<sup>161</sup> Letter from Lloyd Richards to Lucille Lortel, May 14, 1987, Box 70, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>162</sup> McCready, 110, 117.

<sup>163</sup> Greene, chapter nine.

Lortel Visiting Professor of Playwriting and the Lucille Lortel Lecturer beginning in 1997. These previous two programs brought playwrights such as Beth Henley, Arthur Miller, and Tina Howe to the university.<sup>164</sup>

The establishment of these programs and endowments at various universities allowed Lortel to further achieve her goal of supporting, cultivating, and providing opportunities for growth and development of new playwrights in a way that could not be done without the collaboration between the institution and the producer. Spreading her financial resources to academic institutions with their own established development processes, connections to the community, and venues in which to produce plays, Lortel greatly increased her ability to reach out to support the work of new voices in theater.

### **3.3 Case Study: *A Walk in the Woods* by Lee Blessing**

Lortel attended the premiere of *A Walk in the Woods* on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1987 at Yale Repertory Theatre and was immediately interested in seeing the show move to New York. This production touched on political topics that were particularly immediate to the time it was written and first produced in. *A Walk* dramatized the real events of the disarmament talks in the 1980s and was based on of a walk taken by negotiators Paul Nitze and Yuli A Kvitsinsky. As the title suggests, the play shows these walks as taken by a Russian diplomat named Andrey Botvinnik and an American negotiator named John Honeyman as they go through the woods of Geneva, Switzerland

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<sup>164</sup> Letter from Kristen Linklater to Lucille Lortel, March 25, 1999, Box 59, Folder 17, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

during their breaks from disarmament talks. The play episodically depicts several of these walks over the course of a year as the men develop from opposing negotiators into friends. Lortel initially attempted to find other producers for the show before approaching Lloyd Richards to become involved herself, saying in an interview, “When Lloyd sent me the script originally, I thought it was so good I must get some major producer to bring it to New York,” Lortel recalls. “Then I said, ‘What am I doing? This is one I would like to do myself. Why give it to someone else? I’m no stranger to Broadway.’ So, I plunged right in.”<sup>165</sup> Lortel often used this anecdote of her immediate desire to see the play go further before deciding to produce it herself within her method of redirection when asked about the production.

After the Yale premiere, *A Walk* moved to the La Jolla Playhouse in California over the summer to give Blessing a chance to further work on the script while the Yale members involved in the development of the production considered its future. The artistic team was initially hesitant to work with Lortel as she showed her preference to staging the show in her Off-Broadway theater, while Richards and Blessing were determined to have it premiere on Broadway.<sup>166</sup> Since Lortel was determined to produce the show, she promised that if Richards were to agree to work with her, the Yale artistic team would maintain all artistic control during the production process, in addition to receiving any and all of the profits to further fund the Lortel Fund for New Drama at

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<sup>165</sup> “‘Queen of Off-Broadway’ puts on her 500<sup>th</sup> show” by William A. Raidy, March 13, 1988, Box 34, folder 7, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>166</sup> Letter from Lloyd Richards to Lucille Lortel, March 2, 1987, Box 32, folder 12 Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Yale.<sup>167</sup> Richards and Blessing agreed to open *A Walk* on Broadway with nearly all its funding coming from her alone and ultimately made the final decisions on the theater, directors, and cast. *A Walk in the Woods* opened on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1988 at the Booth Theatre.<sup>168</sup>

This production drew attention to Lortel as a political producer as it exemplifies many of the aspects of Lortel's later career which I previously identified. It was at this time that Lortel was asked frequently about her status as a political producer in publicity interviews for the shows. When it was directly addressed by the reporters, Lortel would use both ambiguity and redirection, often acknowledging that there was something special about the show in terms of its "message" or "theatricality" but would switch topics before expanding on her intention. When asked about the common link of politics in many of her previous productions and in *A Walk in the Woods*, Lortel responded that, "it is only a coincidence."<sup>169</sup> Examples of the topics she would redirect to would involve the process of seeing the show develop from its premiere at Yale to its brief residency at the La Jolla Playhouse, before finally moving to Broadway, when she would end her response by commenting on how, with each iteration, the message would remain clear and the audience would respond warmly.<sup>170</sup> Another way to use redirection to promote the show involved Lortel mentioning the extreme cost of being the sole producer on Broadway, before stating that *A Walk*

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<sup>167</sup> Letter from Lucille Lortel to Lloyd Richards, April 2, 1987, Box 32, folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>168</sup> McCready, 117.

<sup>169</sup> "When political plays call, influential producer listens," May 21, 1989, Box 90, Folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>170</sup> "Lucille Lortel's Latest" by Jeff Stimpson, April 1988, Box 34, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

meant so much to her that she would make the financial sacrifice just so more people could experience its important messages.<sup>171</sup>

The 1987/88 season on Broadway was one of many politically engaged shows including the previously mentioned musical *Sarafina!* also produced by Lortel and the revival of *Cabaret*, along with shows such as August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and Hugh Whitmore's *Breaking the Code*.<sup>172</sup> Many of these productions confront the politically charged themes of racism, sexual identity, the rise of fascism, and violence and all of them were nominated for Tony awards in several categories, which shows how mainstream theater had begun to celebrate socially relevant productions dealing with challenging and potentially controversial issues. *A Walk in the Woods* was also nominated for several Tony awards, which was an acknowledgement the mainstream theater community that a play with this form of overtly political message could be celebrated at this time.

It was proposed in the biography that Lortel extended the run of the play primarily so it could qualify for and gain attention from the Tony Awards. And while that seems a likely explanation in this independent case study as a motivation for Lortel's financially stressful decision, when viewed through the larger context of her career it is less compelling. At the same time as she was nearly independently supporting the Broadway run and preparing for the international productions, Lortel had also contributed \$100,000 to assist the Lincoln center's

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<sup>171</sup> McCready, 122.

<sup>172</sup> "List of Nominations for 1988 Tony Awards With PM-Tony Nominations," *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, May 9 1988, [apnews.com/6242870ac28374642ce34f0261db8987](https://apnews.com/6242870ac28374642ce34f0261db8987).

production of *Sarafina!*, a musical by Mbongeni Ngema about school kids in South Africa, which was also nominated for several Tony's that year. If Lortel's only goal for producing on Broadway was to be nominated for a Tony, she wouldn't have needed to extend the run of *A Walk*, as she secured a nomination for a Tony with *Sarafina!*.

Lortel's work with *A Walk in the Woods* directed attention from the theater community and the press to the politics of her producing career for its reach to national and international audiences. In addition to the Broadway premiere, Lortel and the original cast traveled to Washington, DC to perform it in the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress for senators and political representatives from multiple countries including Russia. Shortly after the Broadway production, Lortel produced the London premiere in the Comedy Theater in the West End starring Alec Guinness. The original Broadway production was also internationally transferred. They performed several times in Russia working with the American Soviet Theater Initiative to produce it at the Pushkin Drama Theater and the Vakhtangov Theater.<sup>173</sup> All of these productions occurred within the same year.

In addition to the live productions, Lortel arranged for the recording of the Broadway production which was later televised.<sup>174</sup> She also sold the movie rights, and the script was quickly adapted for film.<sup>175</sup> Lortel and the rest of the production team had also considered the possibility of arranging a national tour, but instead opted to release the rights for *A Walk* to be performed in

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<sup>173</sup> McCready, 117-120.

<sup>174</sup> Letter from Betty Corwin to Lucille Lortel, March 1988, Box 32, folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>175</sup> Motion picture rights contract, 1988, Box 35, folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

regional theaters. Multiple regional theaters were eager to produce their own performance of the Tony-nominated play and companies in New Mexico, Connecticut, Florida, North Carolina and New Jersey, were the first to produce it within two years of the Broadway premiere.<sup>176</sup>

The original Broadway production gained much attention in the press, not only for its political content, but for the quality of its performance. The premiere was nominated for two Tony awards including Best Play and Best Actor for Robert Prosky's performance although neither won. However, Prosky won the Outer Circle Critics Award for Best Actor in a play and the script of *A Walk in the Woods* was a 1987 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The London production was nominated for the Evening Standard Award for Best Play and Alec Guinness was nominated for the Laurence Olivier Award for best actor.<sup>177</sup> The awards that *A Walk in the Woods* was nominated for and won show an acknowledgement of the play's quality by the artistic community, in addition to recognizing the large audiences that it was able to draw across multiple regions and several countries.

Not only does the scale and multitude of the productions contribute to the increased focus on the politics present in Lortel's career, but so does the contexts in which several of these productions occurred. When the Broadway cast performed at the Library of Congress, the show was attended by multiple senators and representatives of countries impacted by the arms negotiations, including Paul H. Nitze, who was the American negotiator that the play was based

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<sup>176</sup> Programs from productions, 1988-1990, Box 36, folders 7 and 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>177</sup> McCready, 120.

on.<sup>178</sup> Furthermore, the Russian tour of the production was a result of Lortel's collaboration with the American-Soviet Theater Initiative, which was established with the goal of facilitating exchange between the two theater communities.<sup>179</sup> For the United States and Russia to exchange theater would create a connection between two cultures which had for decades had been alienated from each other due to fear and political differences. This was one of several theater exchanges that ASTI facilitated. Another included a cast of Soviet performers being directed by an American director in a production of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, with a set designed and built by the Soviet theatre company. Exchanges such as these would humanize the artists from different countries by uniting them with the common goal of staging a production with the responsibilities built between the two nations. Not only did it strengthen the growing collaboration between the two countries on the level of the individuals, but the Soviet Union reported the massive growth of their theater, with the establishment of hundreds of small theater companies and a theatre union.<sup>180</sup>

It is through these productions that the immediacy of *A Walk's* political content is particularly evident. As previously stated, Blessing based his play on actual talks taken by

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<sup>178</sup> "Paul Nitze: A Farewell to Arms?" by Peter McKay, Box 33, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>178</sup> McCready, 120.

<sup>179</sup> "U.S.-Soviet Theater Conference Plans Exchanges" by Richard F. Shephard, July 7, 1988, Box 34, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>180</sup> "U.S.-Soviet Theater Conference Plans Exchanges" by Richard F. Shephard, July 7, 1988, Box 34, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

negotiators Paul Nitze and Yuli A Kvitsinsky. Although the playwright invented the events and topics of conversation, the timing of the productions aligned with other actual negotiations. Within the production, this shaped the performances as director Des McAnuff said in an interview, “Very few people give themselves a chance to think about these weapons because it involves unimaginable images. What Lee Blessing has done with his play is to put a human face on arms negotiations and to begin to take some of the responsibility away from the high priests. People come out of the play feeling that they can understand what the real issues are.”<sup>181</sup> McAnuff through the directing process saw this production as a way to generate political engagement between the audience and the looming threat of nuclear weapons. Some members of the press capitalized on the immediacy of the political content to possibly receive such responses from the cast and production team, while others used it to distinguish *A Walk in the Woods* from most other Broadway plays with the effectivity of its immediate political message.<sup>182</sup> On May 23, 1988, the Broadway cast performed the play at the Coolidge Auditorium, while the Senate was in the process of reviewing the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the performance was attended by multiple ambassadors and senators. The treaty was approved by the senate four days later on May 27<sup>th</sup>, before becoming effective on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1988. *A Walk* closed on June 26<sup>th</sup> of the same year.<sup>183</sup>

This play is significant not only for the scope of time and resources that Lortel dedicated to each production of it, but also for how she navigated its political content in the press. The first

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<sup>181</sup> “The Nuclear Age and its Problems Come to the Stage” by Laurie Winer, February 21, 1988, Box 33, Folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

<sup>182</sup> McCready, 119.

<sup>183</sup> McCready, 117.

method of silence would seem to be difficult to use for this particular production for the previously mentioned reasons of being on Broadway, nominated for multiple awards, the immediacy of its political advocacy, and the political contexts of being performed in the Library of Congress before government leaders and in Russia as a part of a theatrical exchange.

However, Lortel did manage to use silence. In many of the archived clippings, Lortel is not mentioned or quoted. Instead, the playwright, director, and performers are interviewed with the emphasis being on their experiences with writing the script, staging the production, and characters rather than the political content. In the few pieces that Lortel is mentioned in, the primary focus of the articles is on Lortel's reputation as the Queen of Off-Broadway. The writers take space to mention Lortel's most well-known Off-Broadway shows like *Threepenny Opera*, *Brecht on Brecht*, and recent productions, as well as stating how Lortel was immediately drawn to producing *A Walk in New York*. There is additional space in the articles dedicated to Lortel's few previous shows on Broadway like the concurrent *Sarafina!*, *As Is*, and *Blood Knot* both of which were in 1985.

In the articles in which Lortel was interviewed and quoted, she heavily relied on ambiguity to speak to the content of the production without mentioning the political content. In one interview, Lortel uses the phrases, "It's very timely. It's very important. But most of all it's very theatrical... This works dramatically, and that is what is important to me."<sup>184</sup> Some of the language such as "timely" and "important" seem to speak vaguely toward the political content, in that Lortel

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<sup>184</sup> "Lucille Lortel's Elixir of Youth: Enthusiasm" by Nan Robertson, February 27, 1988, Box 33, folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

is suggesting an awareness that it is about real current events that will someday be viewed as historically significant, without inserting her opinions of them. The vague references to the play's political content that these phrases suggest can be read as an acknowledgment of the given circumstances of the world of the play and the time period in which the it is being produced. However, how Lortel uses the words "theatrical" and "dramatically" invokes a sense that she was drawn to the script not for its timeliness or importance, but for an artistic quality that she prefers and cannot specifically name. The use of ambiguity in these examples acknowledges that there are themes relevant to the lives of the audience members in the script but does not call them political in the way that they are. This acts as a method of reassurance to audiences who may hesitate to attend a political performance, by stating that there are "timely" themes, but not stating what that means in this context and removing them from the way she is attempting to sell the show insinuates that these themes are not the main focus of the play. Instead, the ambiguity Lortel uses focuses on highly interpretive qualities of the overall performance, which is a way of stating that there is something special artistically about this production, but to know how it is, you will have to see it for yourself.

Lortel similarly uses redirection in multiple ways. One of the most often quoted anecdotes from Lortel in these press materials is how she knew immediately that she wanted to produce the show. Instead of saying why she was drawn to *A Walk*, Lortel highlights the depth and immediacy of her desire to see the play produced in New York. This in no way addresses the political content but infuses her quotes with a sense of the show's importance. Another form of redirection used by Lortel is to mention who was involved from Lee Blessing and Lloyd Richards to the performers Sam Waterston and Robert Prosky. By discussing the other members of the production, Lortel can speak to how they became involved in the play, in addition to using their established reputations

in the theater community to draw audiences who were familiar with their work. Once the London premiere had been announced, Lortel used it as a redirection to discuss the involvement of actor Alec Guinness, whose enthusiasm for the play, she suggests, matched her own. In one particular article, Lortel's only quote was mentioning Guinness's involvement in the future production.<sup>185</sup> In other articles, the redirection from the political content of *A Walk* is shifted to the substantial cost of producing the show nearly independently on Broadway and then internationally on the Russian tour. She even joked at times that she would sell her jewelry to continue the production if she had to.<sup>186</sup> The redirection to the immense cost that Lortel had undertaken to continue this production and to put it before new audiences allows Lortel to reaffirm her dedication to *A Walk in the Woods* and state how deeply an important play she considered it to be. The framing of the cost of the show is presented as a sacrifice that Lortel is making, which builds an aspect of lore that may draw more audiences. Additionally, mentioning the extreme cost of extending the production to be open for the Tony awards and her financing of the Russian tour allows for Lortel in the same breath to advertise that additional contributions toward the show would be greatly supported.

Another form of redirection that Lortel employed was to state how *A Walk In the Woods* was a "human" story. *A Walk* can be seen as the epitome of the "human story" that Lortel frequently proposes as what she is drawn to in theater. One article said, "It was this human quality that first brought the play to co-producer Lucille Lortel... 'Disarmament talks might sound like an unusual subject for a play, but the sharing of human conditions between these two men is certain to make

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<sup>185</sup> "Lucille Lortel Gives Life to 'Walk'" by Titian Butash, October 11, 1987, Box 34, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>186</sup> McCready, 120.

theater-goers both laugh and cry. I've seen it with three different sets of actors and the response is always the same."<sup>187</sup> Rather than presenting the nuclear disarmament talks in the official meetings that they occurred in, Blessing wrote the play about the private discussions of a Soviet and American diplomat who would go on walks together during breaks. Their conversations are filled with the mundane just as they are with the political topics spilling over from their negotiations. This play replaces the international tensions and historic discussions of two countries with the private worries and concerns of two diplomats, both attempting to represent their respective nations to the best of their abilities. As if she were concerned that this redirection did not get far enough away from the show's political advocacy, Lortel brings into consideration the three various iterations of the cast and claims that audiences for all three casts successfully saw the human elements in the story and were not blinded by the politics. This case study shows Lortel's dedication to theater that is politically engaged. Even with the financial difficulties that she faced during this time, her dedication to the show is undeniable. Lortel was determined to ensure that *A Walk* would stay open after an opening of some unfavorable reviews so it could be seen by as many people as possible, keeping it open for weeks longer so that the "human quality" of the story could spread.

Lucille Lortel's work as a political producer was exemplified by the 1988 production of *A Walk in the Woods*. Although she expanded how she supported the theatre community in her later career, she consistently supported artists who were in oppressive and restrictive systems. She

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<sup>187</sup> "'Walk' is Rich in Drama: Disarmament Talks Take Stage" by Winnie Bonelli, February 25, 1988, Box 33, Folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

navigated the repercussions of producing these individuals and plays through the three strategies of silence, ambiguity, and redirection. By not mentioning, vaguely addressing, or diverting the focus from questions of political content and associations in her productions, Lortel was able to continue this work and further shape Off-Broadway's reputation as a place for challenging and experimental theatre.

## **4.0 Section Three**

Having created such an extensive career, the 1980s and 1990s saw Lortel take many steps to ensure that her legacy lasted long after her death. The steps that she took were strategic in many ways and aligned closely only with the values that she maintained as a producer. In this section, I will argue that Lortel actively made choices that established her legacy and served her career while she was still alive. These choices generally fall in four categories: methods that served others, methods intended to preserve and share information, traditional forms of honors and awards, and inconsistencies in Lortel's stories. Each of these methods worked to allow Lortel to control the narrative of her legacy in different ways and to represent different aspects of her work. Additionally, the characterization of how Lortel established her legacy as discussed by authors Greene and McCready will play into my analysis, as I resituate many aspects of Lortel's career as active choices. Although Greene suggests that Lortel was, "Insecure about her standing in the profession, she tried to ensure that she be honored and remembered, at home and in the theatre community." I instead argue that Lortel was deeply aware of how her death would be received in the theatre community and that she attempted to shape it in a way that would make it a continuation of her producing work.

### **4.1 In Service of Others**

Many of the strategies Lortel used to build her legacy were done in the same way that she worked to benefit theatre artists as a producer. While her work with universities, organizations,

and playwrights continued, Lortel also engaged with these individuals and groups in new ways that ensured her work would continue after her death and always be associated with her. These forms of establishing her legacy functioned within her work as a producer while also extending it in new ways.

For several years, Lortel donated to the Actors' Fund as one of her many ways to support theatre artists. This organization worked with not only actors but all professionals within the artistic and entertainment industries to provide support, such as health insurance, affordable housing, early-career development, and senior care.<sup>188</sup> In the late 1980s, the organization sought help from Lortel to contribute to one of their facilities that provided senior care, the Actors' Fund Home, which was under construction. The president Nedda Logan wrote to Lortel that if she could contribute, they would name the small theatre after her. Lortel agreed and gave \$100,000.<sup>189</sup> This contribution was not entirely dissimilar from previous ones that she had given to the fund, but it was different in that it was for the purpose of a specific project that would result in a physical space that would be named after Lortel. Although it was an extension of the previous ways that she had helped the Actors' Fund in the past with financial donations, it was also a step in building her legacy. Their theatre was the first of several physical spaces that would come to be named after Lortel. Additionally, it was an honor for a space such as this to be associated with Lortel's name, since the Actors' Fund Home was a valuable resource in the lives of many members of the theatre community. This was a strategic way in which Lortel continued the work of her career to help

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<sup>188</sup> "Our Services & Programs," Actors Fund, accessed February 4, 2019, <https://actorsfund.org/services-and-programs>.

<sup>189</sup> Greene, chapter nine.

theatre artists while shifting it to a focus of establishing her legacy, as this physical space would be able to support these individuals long after she could no longer donate to the organization.

As mentioned in the previous section, Lortel had significant relationships with multiple university theatre departments. Several of these involved establishing funds for programs related to the study of theatre or the university's ability to produce new works, like with the Lucille Lortel Fund for New Drama at Yale University. However, Lortel's work with universities extended beyond simply gifting money with an intentional purpose. In the last two decades of her life, she visited multiple universities, attended their theatre productions, and presented her biographical film *The Queen of Off-Broadway* to students. Occasionally, this included displaying the archival materials of her career for a period of time. Lortel did not limit herself to only working with Universities of certain sizes or reputations, but most of these schools were relatively close to her homes and theaters in New York City and Westport, CT. This suggests that she may have known members of these communities prior to her involvement with the universities. It also reaffirms that she was actively dedicated to developing theatre artists within her communities during her career and built the foundations for continuing this work through her legacy.

The schools that Lortel contributed substantially to expand educational opportunities include the University of Bridgeport with the Lucille Lortel Distinguished Guest Lecture Series in 1985, Yale University with the Lucille Lortel fund for New Drama in 1985, the City University of New York Tisch School of Drama with the Annual Lucille Lortel Graduate Readings from 1992-1994, Brown University with the Lucille Lortel Fellowship in Playwriting in 1955, and Columbia with the Lucille Lortel Visiting Lecturer in Playwriting from 1997 to 1999. Her involvement in these universities established programs dedicated to expanding educational opportunities related to the creation and discussion of new plays, to varying degrees of

permanence. Programs such as the guest lecture or reading series were funded for as long as Lortel was willing to continue a relationship with the institutions, often with both parties discussing the projected timeline of the program. In the case of the Columbia University Lucille Lortel Visiting Lecturer in Playwriting, Lortel had pledged to give \$75,000 over three years with \$25,000 a year for the university to bring in an established playwright to lecture for the year, culminating in a masterclass session taught by another playwright.<sup>190</sup> Some of the playwrights who participated in these programs included Arthur Miller, Beth Henley, and Tina Howe. Although the initial commitment was for only three years, the university reached out to Lortel in late March 1999 at the completion of the program to ask if she would consider either extending it or dedicating a more significant amount of money to a permanent fund.<sup>191</sup> Unfortunately, Lortel passed away in early April of that same year before any arrangements were made.<sup>192</sup>

Whether or not the programs were permanent, their value on students' educational experiences would have been shaped and informed by the opportunities to learn about playwriting in unique ways. Since Lortel's name was included in the titles of each of these programs, students would have been aware of the impact she made on their education. Several students who benefited from Lortel's university involvement wrote to her, expressing their gratitude. Gina Gionfriddo who was a recipient of the Fellowship for a first-year playwright at Brown University in 1996 was one of these students. Her letter to Lortel explained that not only

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<sup>190</sup> Letter from Robert Fitzpatrick to Lucille Lortel, March 18, 1997, Box 59, Folder 13, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>191</sup> Letter from Kristin Linklater to Lucille Lortel, March 25, 1999, Box 59, Folder 18, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>192</sup> Greene, chapter eleven.

did this program give her the much-needed financial assistance to pursue playwrighting, but that it actually helped increase her confidence in her writing.<sup>193</sup>

Lortel's dedication to providing educational opportunities at universities for students extended further than financial support. She would visit these schools to speak to student audiences and screen her biographical film *Queen of Off-Broadway* with her exhibit of photos and career memorabilia. During these sessions, she would present each audience with the same narrative through the film, which was comprised of interview segments with Lortel, images and voiceovers describing the significant productions of her career, and interviews with multiple successful theatre artists who she had worked with. This would be followed by a question session or a close colleague and friend speaking to the audience on Lortel's behalf.<sup>194</sup> The exhibition of Lortel's life and career would remain on display in the space provided by the university for anywhere between a few days to a few months, depending on the relationship between Lortel and the university.

These campus visits served multiple purposes for Lortel. In some cases, her presentations and exhibition of materials aligned with her receiving honors from the university. For the City University of New York, the display of her materials corresponded with the dedication of the Lucille Lortel Distinguished Professorial Chair in Theatre for the Graduate School and University Center on April 10, 1989, which was the first chair dedicated for a woman in theatre.<sup>195</sup> Her

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<sup>193</sup> Letter from Gina Gionfriddo to Lucille Lortel, March 5, 1996, Box 58, Folder 2, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>194</sup> Greene, Chapter nine.

<sup>195</sup> CUNY Doctoral Commencement Program, May 25, 1993, Box 59, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

exhibition remained on the campus for the following month. In other instances, her visits and exhibit later led to a Lortel receiving an honor from the school. This occurred after Lortel visited Fairfield University in 1986 and the following year, she received an honorary doctorate.<sup>196</sup> Whether her reception of honors from universities were the result of her campus visits or the cause of them, Lortel emphasized her dedication to the theatre students by providing further educational experiences. With her presence on campus, she created an opportunity for them to engage with a person whose career had contributed significantly to theatre history. They not only saw what her career had been like, but frequently had the opportunity to ask questions to a successful member of a field that many of them were likely pursuing. Lortel then was able to establish her legacy on a personal level with many individuals, ensuring that no matter what they had learned in the classroom, they graduated with a familiarity of her work. She was dedicated to providing educational opportunities for theatre students and enthusiasts outside of a classroom, and in some unconventional ways.

Outside of the Lucille Lortel Theatre is a block of sidewalk that is patterned with gold stars inscribed with the names of playwrights like Edward Albee, Paula Vogel, and Athol Fugard and a few blank stars with names yet to be inscribed. The Playwrights' Sidewalk was another way in

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Letter from Marvin Carlson to Lucille Lortel, October 13, 1988, box 59, folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

“Lucille Lortel, Patron who made Innovative Off-Broadway a Star, is Dead at 98” by Enid Nemy, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1999, Box 90, Folder 21, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>196</sup>Commencement program, May 17, 1987, Box 61, Folder 3, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

which Lortel established her legacy with a method that was in the service of others. This monument was installed in front of Lortel's theater in 1998 to honor the playwrights who had contributed to Off-Broadway and since then, has annually had a name added to it.<sup>197</sup> A post of the Playbill website providing information for the dedication ceremony mentioned its striking similarity to the Hollywood Walk of Fame.<sup>198</sup> This comparison immediately generates the magnitude at which this was perceived to be an honor for the individuals who were included. Its placement directly outside of the Lortel Theatre was intentional.

One star among the collection is inscribed with "Lucille Lortel." Lortel had dedicated a large portion of her career to supporting playwrights in her theatres, universities, and theatres across the world. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she created a physical monument to honor them and future playwrights who would come along after her career was over. Although this monument is foremost an honor to the playwrights, it also solidifies within Lortel's legacy her dedication to supporting them as her star is centered in the constellation. This symbolizes how she was a central figure to the careers many of the greatest playwrights to impact American stages, as she gave many their first productions in either America or New York. While the only criteria for a playwright to be included is that they had to have been produced Off-Broadway and a working relationship with

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<sup>197</sup> Press Release for Playwrights' Sidewalk dedication, David Rothenberg Associates, October 5, 1998, Box 71, Folder 18, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>198</sup> "Lucille Lortel to Dedicate "Playwrights' Sidewalk" Oct. 26" by Robert Simonson, October 13, 1998, Box 71, Folder 18, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Lortel was not a necessary factor, this monument only further connects her legacy to the successes of these playwrights.<sup>199</sup>

#### **4.2 Preservation and Sharing of Information**

Lortel was dedicated to education as can be seen in her presentations at universities and the establishment of the White Barn Apprentice School. However, Lortel was also concerned with the preservation and sharing of information outside of academic settings. Artistic communities and theatre in particular honor the people who have contributed significantly to their fields. Lucille Lortel was often both a recipient and a provider of such honors. She frequently used her resources and position as a well-known producer of Off-Broadway to preserve and share information as a way to shape her legacy. Most of her efforts were concerned with information related to her career, the careers of her frequent collaborators, and the larger theatre community. Her work with organizations such as the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape archives and the Museum of the City of New York exemplifies her efforts to preserve and share information, in addition to using her own theatre spaces and financial resources. These efforts were ways to honor members of the theatre community and to educate those who were unfamiliar with their careers in easily accessed settings. Lortel's funding of archives and museum spaces dedicated to theatre and the chronicling of her own work in a biographical film and book was also a method of establishing

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<sup>199</sup> Press Release for Playwrights' Sidewalk dedication, David Rothenberg Associates, October 5, 1998, Box 71, Folder 18, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

narratives of herself and the careers of those she worked with. However, it went further than simply creating these stories as Lortel publicly displayed and toured the curated materials in some instances, along with hosting receptions that invited people in to see the materials and publicize her efforts.

One of the tools that Lortel used to preserve and share information of her own experiences was the biographical film *The Queen of Off-Broadway*. Written by Evangeline Morphos who at the time was the head of the Drama Department at New York University and produced, edited, and directed by Harry Kafka, the film was given to Lortel for her use in 1985.<sup>200</sup> The film told the story of Lortel's life and careers as an actress and producer up until that point. Much of the material used was in interviews with Lortel and her colleagues, still images accompanied by a narrative voice over, and clips from other recorded events were edited in. There was a focus on her Broadway performances, the early years of the White Barn, the successes of the Theatre de Lys, the ANTA Matinee Series, and her ventures on Broadway, discussing the different points at which she supported European or absurdist or experimental theatre works. Milo O'Shea, Athol Fugard, and Lanford Wilson were a few of the playwrights and performers interviewed who spoke of their experiences of working with Lortel with praise.

This biographical film went nearly everywhere with Lortel. As previously mentioned, she would take it to universities as a part of presentations for students to then ask her questions on. Lortel also arranged for screenings of the *Queen of Off-Broadway* during events at which she was honored, including a reception hosted by the League of Professional Theatre Women in 1988 and

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<sup>200</sup> Greene, Chapter nine.

during the gallery opening at the Museum of the City of New York in 1981.<sup>201</sup> When Lortel was a guest lecturer on the Queen Elizabeth Two as it sailed to Europe, the biographical film was a significant portion of her lecture.<sup>202</sup> Her frequent use of the film in settings where she had to talk about her work to audiences suggests that it was her preferred method of introduction. Although it is no longer traveling, *The Queen of Off-Broadway* is available in the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape archives and can even be accessed on the Lucille Lortel Foundation YouTube account. This biographical film provided a consistent narrative of her life and career that was formed through primary sources of recorded events, interviews with Lortel, and comments from colleagues. Lortel's involvement in the process of creating the *Queen of Off-Broadway* by providing recorded materials and through interviews gave her significant control to shape the outcome of the film and one of the strongest narrative sources of her work.

One possible reason that Lortel was in favor of creating and using a film detailing her life is that she was uneasy with speaking to crowds. Lortel often pre-wrote her speeches with help from colleagues and occasionally was able to read her interviews before they were published and could edit her responses. One article stated, "She says she doesn't miss acting because producing 'is the same excitement. I'm always nervous before I appear or when I speak. I've never gotten over

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<sup>201</sup> General Membership Meeting Minutes, January 12, 1988, Box 62, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Press release for "Lucille Lortel: Queen of Off Broadway" at the Museum of the City of New York, Box 63, Folder 13, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>202</sup> Lucille Lortel's European itinerary, August 19-September 15, 1984, Box 85, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

that.”<sup>203</sup> Having a film to rely on would allow Lortel to travel and speak to more people with a greater level of control of the narrative and a framework in which the audience could ask questions. Biographer Greene says, “...for Lucille, who felt uneasy talking to groups of people and making impromptu comments, it was an ingenious tool. After a screening, she could sit on stage with someone like Anna Strasberg or Vincent Curcio by her side, and they would repeat questions if she could not hear, prompt her or even answer questions themselves.”<sup>204</sup> Shaping presentations, lectures, and discussions around the biographic film the *Queen of Off-Broadway* was a strategy that Lortel could use to consistently deliver the same narrative of her life and career as well as overcoming any pressure or difficulty that she felt when interacting in these settings.

The narrative that this biographical film presents is compact and laudatory, with the resounding message that Lortel served an immensely unique position in theatre history. It is compact in that it condenses roughly 60 years of Lortel’s work into just under an hour of film, highlighting the most important events and aspects of her career. The *Queen of Off-Broadway* begins with her early acting career by explaining her Broadway and film roles followed by how her marriage led to her retirement from performing. The producer portion of her career focuses on her tryout readings at the White Barn, the production of *Threepenny Opera*, the ANTA Matinee Series, *The Balcony*, and her first few Broadway productions. Her relationships with playwrights are also emphasized, especially with Sean O’Casey and Athol Fugard. The subjects that are

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<sup>203</sup> “Off-Broadway’s Queen gives new talent a break” by Linda Stowell, August 2, 1987, Box 90, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>204</sup> Greene, Chapter nine.

covered provide an insight to Lortel's career and a brief education into the development of Off-Broadway and what theatre in New York City was like in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>205</sup>

The biographical film then discusses how significant she was through the praise of those who were interviewed. These artists like Athol Fugard and Milo O'Shea highlighted Lortel's generosity, her ability to know what made a show great, and the opportunities she provided for new artists. There is a running comparison between Lortel and mainstream theatre as the film's narration emphasizes that the shows at the White Barn and the ANTA Matinee Series were experimental and could not have been produced anywhere else. Her preference for staging shows while they were still developing and were far from perfect was also oppositional to how other producers worked at the time. Lortel herself ends the biographical film by stating that she will continue working until she is no longer able to.<sup>206</sup>

The narrative that the *Queen of Off-Broadway* presents is direct. It either overlooks difficulties in her career such as the legal issues with purchasing the Theatre de Lys or quickly moves on from more complicated stories, like her retirement from performing. The inconsistencies in these stories and the larger context of her career will be discussed later in this section. This biographical film presents a narrative of Lortel's career that is simplified and focuses on her most significant contributions to the theatre community as a producer. In doing so, it closely aligns Lortel with theatre history and the well-known artists whose success was linked to her work as a producer. When screened alongside exhibitions of her work during visits to institutions such as

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<sup>205</sup> Lucille Lortel Foundation, "Lucille Lortel: *The Queen of Off-Broadway*," YouTube, November 6, 2017, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWnkRsBjdm8>.

<sup>206</sup> Lucille Lortel Foundation, "Lucille Lortel: *The Queen of Off-Broadway*," YouTube, November 6, 2017, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWnkRsBjdm8>.

museums or universities, Lortel was using it as a strategy to preserve and share the positive elements of her career.

Lortel's discomfort with unplanned discussions among large groups of people was not the only difficulty that she encountered in establishing her legacy. In the 1980s, Lortel served on a committee called the Friends of the Museum which was associated with the Museum of the City of New York. This group would provide recommendations and advice on decisions the museum was making and occasionally would contribute or raise funds for different programs and expansions.<sup>207</sup> During this time, Lortel was asked to contribute \$25,000 for the dedication of a space within the museum reserved only for theatre-related exhibits. She was promised that this space would be called the "Lucille Lortel Theatre Gallery" and that it would open with the exhibition of her materials.<sup>208</sup> This was a fantastic opportunity in building Lortel's legacy, as she was closely aligning herself with a well-established institution, was able to put her name to a permanent space, would preserve and share the extensive work of her career, and would provide a space for the same treatment for other theatre artists in the future. When asked the following year, Lortel contributed the same amount of money for the gallery's maintenance. However, within a few years, it became evident that there had been a misunderstanding between Lortel and the museum administration as to the extent of her financial involvement. In a 1985 letter, Lortel explains:

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<sup>207</sup> Friends of the Theatre Collection meeting minutes, December 23, 1985, Box 64, Folder 3, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>208</sup> Press release for "Lucille Lortel: Queen of Off Broadway" at the Museum of the City of New York, Box 63, Folder 13, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

To my knowledge, I have never promised \$25,000 a year to the Theatre Collection...when Arnold Weissberger was alive I gave \$25,000 which was to be used to house my memorabilia, which didn't take place. It was explained to me that they needed the money for other uses and used it. In 1980 I gave another \$25,000, and the following year they did mount the exhibit of my memorabilia.

However, as I wrote to Mr. Noble in my letter of November 15, 1985, I have no recollection of stating when I was in his office on December 16, 1980, with Ray Rebhann, Director of Public Relations...and Mary Henderson that I would be giving this donation annually. Mr. Rebhann confirms that I did not say I would give the \$25,000 every year.

To date I have given \$25,000 in 1979, \$25,000 in 1980, \$25,000 in 1982, \$25,000 in 1983, and \$10,000 in 1984. So far, a total of \$110,000.

I am glad to give to the Museums...what I feel I can give. But, I do not like to be put in the position of being compelled to give a designated amount. Left to my own devices I might, on occasion, give more.<sup>209</sup>

Lortel explains clearly that multiple times she had been approached for money under a presumption of the administrators that she had agreed in the past to annual donations, despite Lortel's protests that she never made such a promise to this institution. In other instances when Lortel had arranged for significant annual donations, there is clear documentation in the archives that she immediately involved her lawyers, financial advisors, and accountants, like as is seen in the correspondence with Yale University for the Fund for New Drama.<sup>210</sup> There is no such documentation in 1979, 1980, or so on within her archives for the Museum of the City of New York. This signifies that Lortel's memory was most likely accurate in this instance. As her letter explained, she felt "compelled" to donate a "designated amount", even after the museum administration had not been forthright in the past about how the money would be spent. As a producer who used her own money to fund productions and her constant expansion within the

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<sup>209</sup> Letter from Lortel to Franklyn Lenthall, January 2, 1985, Box 64, Folder 2, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>210</sup> Letter from Lloyd Richards to Lucille Lortel, June 29, 1987, Box 70, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

theatre community in the 1980s, Lortel may have seen this pressure from the museum as a restriction on how she was able to use her funds.

In the following years, there were new individuals brought into the administration of the museum and the dedication of the gallery to Lortel was removed. Following this, Lortel removed herself from the involvement of the museum.<sup>211</sup> Although this had once been a preferred method for Lortel to use in establishing her legacy, the expectation of her to donate based on a conversation from several years ago without any legal or professional documentation placed Lortel in a difficult position in which she was no longer willing to participate. After the dissolution of this arrangement with the Museum of the City of New York, the next museum that Lortel would be involved with would be her own at the White Barn. However, this was where Lortel's work of creating a space to publicly display information on the lives and careers of theatre artists began. Her later work at the White Barn Theatre Museum was more under her control. Lortel could choose the exact financial support that she wanted to dedicate to this project, the subjects of exhibits, and how she wanted the information on their lives and careers to be presented.

White Barn Theatre Museum opened on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1992 as a portion of the White Barn Theatre that hosted annual exhibits of memorabilia and materials of theatre artists' careers.<sup>212</sup> The subjects of these displays were people who had contributed significantly to both Lortel's career and the theatre community. They were designed and curated by Mary C. Henderson, a theatre historian and once curator at the Museum of the City of New York who worked frequently

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<sup>211</sup> Letter from Mary C. Henderson to Lucille Lortel, April 8, 1997, Box 64, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>212</sup> Greene, Chapter eleven.

with Lortel.<sup>213</sup> The exhibits ran for different lengths of time but always opened with a reception that involved either a performance by the artists or speeches by loved ones and colleagues sharing memories and achievements.

The first to receive this honor was Sean O’Casey in 1992, followed by Marc Blitzstein in 1993, and then Athol Fugard in 1994.<sup>214</sup> The next year saw the exhibit focus on two people for the first time: director, actress, producer Eva Le Gallienne and designer and director Ralph Alswang. Both Le Gallienne and Alswang were key figures in the development of the White Barn in the 1940s and 50s, helping Lortel plan renovations, teach and organize the Apprentice School, and run the White Barn as a not-for-profit theatre.<sup>215</sup> In 1996, the multi-person exhibits continued with a “Gala Celebration of the Lives and Careers of Kurt Weill, Bertolt Brecht, and Lotte Lenya,” who were the creators of the *Threepenny Opera*. Lenya was instrumental in facilitating the Off-Broadway production that she also starred in.<sup>216</sup> The following year, the White Barn itself was celebrated as 1997 was its 50<sup>th</sup> year in existence. This exhibition focused broadly on its history, highlighting major performances, significant artists, and of course, Lortel’s work in contributing

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<sup>213</sup> Letter from Lucille Lortel to Jerry Orbach, July 25, 1996, Box 54, Folder 3, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>214</sup> Greene, Chapter eleven.

<sup>215</sup> Program for A Tribute to Eva Le Gallienne and Ralph Alswang, August 27, 1995, Box 53, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>216</sup> Press release for The Lives and Careers of Kurt Weil, Lotte Leyna, and Bertolt Brecht, August 10, 1996, Box 53, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

to the theatre community.<sup>217</sup> In 1998, the last exhibition was mounted, celebrating the life and career of actress, writer, and director June Havoc.<sup>218</sup> The White Barn Theatre Museum did not continue after Lortel's death in April of 1999.

This method of establishing a legacy for Lortel was through contributing to the legacies of the people that she worked with. Since so many of them were produced by or collaborated with Lortel, her work would be remembered just as theirs was. It was also an opportunity to provide education, as many of these theatre artists worked in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and the White Barn Theatre Museum opened in the last decade of the century. Additionally, it was a way for Lortel to keep alive the personal memories of the people who had meant so much to her, and not only their contributions to theatre.

Another way that Lortel preserved and shared information was through her work in supporting a growing theatre archive. In 1970, Betty Corwin taped a musical titled *Golden Bat*, adding the first film to what would become the New York Public Library's Theater on Film and Tape.<sup>219</sup> Founded by Corwin, TOFT worked to film and archive live theater performances in New York City and the surrounding area. Lortel ensured that many of her productions were archived including the ones she produced on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and in Westport. Additionally, Lortel preserved performances from the theatre benefits she hosted, the Lucille Lortel Award shows, and her biographical film through the archives. Not only did Lortel aim to preserve the

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<sup>217</sup> *White Barn Theatre: A Brief History* display materials, Box 54, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>218</sup> Greene, Chapter 11.

<sup>219</sup> "Making Do in Difficult Times" by Ben Brantley, August 31, 1993, Box 66, Folder 3, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

ephemerality of performances and theatre-related content through taping these events, but she also placed them within an archive of the New York Public Library, where they would be maintained and available for free to the public.<sup>220</sup>

In the 1970s and 80s, the filming of live theater was expensive, as Lortel paid several hundred dollars per production to have the material processed and archived.<sup>221</sup> This in itself was an investment in Lortel's legacy as so many of the shows she produced were preserved through her funding. In 1989 when members of the NYPL began to seek long-term financial support from Lortel, TOFT was required to fundraise nearly all of their annual budget at \$300,000.<sup>222</sup> Despite the high cost, the program's benefits for the community were indisputable. In a letter summarizing the needs of TOFT and a proposal to Lortel to help them, it is stated that TOFT was the only program with permission from the eleven theater guilds and unions to film live Broadway and Off-Broadway performances. Andrew Heiskell, the Chairman of the Board, stated in his letter to Lortel that the program's "...documentation and preservation of theatre performances has changed the face of theater forever."<sup>223</sup> He explains that theater professionals from performers to designers along with students and those who were unable to attend live performance would be able to view the work of professionals, colleagues, and predecessors for free. In order to continue the program, Lortel was asked to establish an endowment that would perpetually support the salaries of four

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<sup>220</sup> Greene, chapter eleven.

<sup>221</sup> Greene, chapter eleven.

<sup>222</sup> Letter from Andrew Heiskell to Lucille Lortel, December 8, 1989, Box 66, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>223</sup> Letter from Andrew Heiskell to Lucille Lortel, December 8, 1989, Box 66, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

TOFT employees and supply the funds to build and furnish a viewing room named after her, totaling \$1,000,000.<sup>224</sup> Lortel had been initially hesitant, perhaps influenced by her experience with the Museum of the City of New York, that resulted in an impermanent dedication and misused funds. After several months of consideration, she committed to the endowment, establishing the needed long-term financial support for the Theater on Film and Tape program within the New York Public Library. With Lortel's endowment, TOFT not only had the funds to employ archivists to continue their preservation work, but they also had their own space dedicated to viewing the preserved productions within the Performing Arts library for the first time named after her.<sup>225</sup> Her name was still displayed near the entrance to this room when I conducted my research in the summer of 2019. In partnering with the reliable institute of the New York Public Library to support TOFT, Lortel gained a permanent theatre space dedicated to her. This room physicalized her support of the TOFT and years of Off-Broadway history that was and continues to be easily accessible to the public. This continued the work of her career as an Off-Broadway producer by creating and sharing innovative theatre to more audiences and extended it to exist long after her death.

Information on Lortel's life and career was compiled into a bio-bibliography over the course of two years by Sam McCready, a then associate professor at the University of Maryland,

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<sup>224</sup> Letter from Timothy S. Healy to Lucille Lortel, March 23, 1990, Box 66, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>225</sup> Letter from Timothy S. Healy to Lucille Lortel, May 29, 1990, Box 65, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

as well as an actor, director, and writer.<sup>226</sup> McCready himself explained the concept of a bio-bibliography as, “essentially a reference book devoted to the life and career of a notable subject...It includes a biography of the subject, a chronology of significant events in the subject’s life, and a detailed listing of the subject’s career achievements.”<sup>227</sup> Through this form of publication, Lortel’s accomplishments and extensive career would be recorded, but a narrative that was not of her own creation would not be applied. This was especially possible as McCready’s research was conducted through Lortel’s meticulously collected materials and interviews with the producer herself.<sup>228</sup> A book such as this arranged the noteworthy events of Lortel’s life in a way that was minimally—if at all—framed through another person’s perspective. This then factually laid out elements of Lortel’s legacy without defining or restricting it too severely.

Lortel took full advantage of having a book published about her life. Released on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1993, the book had two release parties, one hosted in the New York Public Library and the other in the Westport Public Library in Connecticut.<sup>229</sup> Both of these events were attended by many

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<sup>226</sup> “Lortel Biographer to speak at Westport Library” October 8, 1993, Box 66, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>227</sup> “Lortel honored at New York Reception” by William F. Brown, December 17, 1993, Box 82, folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>228</sup> “Chronicles of the ‘Queen of Off-Broadway’” by William F. Brown, October 29, 1993, box 82, folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>229</sup> “Lortel honored at New York Reception” by William F. Brown, December 17, 1993, Box 82, folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

theatre community members and personal friends of Lortel, and copies of the book were available for purchase. Prior to the release, Lortel signed a deal with a publicity firm that would promote the book by sending press releases to publications and arranging interviews for Lortel and McCready.<sup>230</sup> This level of promotion from Lortel displays her approval of and desire to use this as a method to develop her legacy. Furthermore, Lortel and members of this publicity firm ensured that copies of the bio-bibliography were donated to the libraries of multiple universities, only some of which Lortel had established relationships with.<sup>231</sup> Not only was Lortel widely promoting this publication in traditionally commercial ways to spread a story of her career that she had had a hand in crafting, but she also donated the book to institutions where it could be an easily accessed and helpful resource. She was not exclusively concerned with how well the book sold but was also determined to share this form of her story with many people in the more easily accessible spaces as libraries.

Lortel also collected a significant amount of materials and memorabilia from her career that would travel with Lortel to universities and museums and be exhibited alongside her biographical film *The Queen of Off-Broadway*. When not traveling, this collection was maintained at several institutions, including her White Barn Museum, The Westport Public Library, and finally

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Invitation to reception at the Westport Public Library, October 20, 1993, Box 82, folder 12,. Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>230</sup> Letter from Keith Sherman and Associates to Lucille Lortel, November 3, 1993, Box 82, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>231</sup> Letter from Lucille Lortel to Bob Taylor, December 11, 1993, Box 82, Folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

the NYPL Performing Arts library where it remains today. The process of recording her work as a producer began early at the White Barn, where she would photograph and scrapbook the productions, artists, and prominent audience members.<sup>232</sup> These scrapbooks are held in the archives of the NYPL. The primary materials in the traveling exhibition were photographs with captions, written by Mary C Henderson, with editing and final approval given by Lortel. Although the collection of these materials and her personal and professional papers resulted in Lortel leaving behind an extensive archive recording her experiences, while she was alive, this material functioned differently. Primarily, it allowed Lortel to visually depict her work without the need for her presence or for an observer to sit through an entire biographical film. These materials could be arranged to fit the needs of certain spaces and could remain there for months, spreading the experiences of Lortel's career without her actual presence.

### **4.3 Honors and Awards**

Lortel established her legacy in several more permanent and traditional ways as well. This included changing the name of the Theatre de Lys to the Lucille Lortel Theatre, creating the annual Lucille Lortel Awards for Off-Broadway, and accepting if not seeking out other awards within the theatre community. Such large honors of these represent just how impactful Lortel was on the community. In addition to establishing the level of influence her career had, these honors also have a way of perpetually sustaining Lortel's legacy. Having a building—especially a theatre in New York City—named after an individual is a somewhat permanent symbol of their impact and is a

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<sup>232</sup> Greene, Chapter four.

very public memorial. This would extend the public awareness of Lortel even further outside of the theatre community. All of these more traditional and permanent ways of establishing Lortel's career were completed during her lifetime, providing Lortel the opportunity to continue building and actively shaping her legacy with the choices and when she made them.

This can be seen with the timing of renaming the Theatre de Lys. To name a building after a person is a fairly permanent and very visible honor. When Theatre de Lys changed ownership to Lortel in 1954, its name remained the same. After nearly three decades after operating under Lortel's artistic direction, the de Lys was renamed to the Lucille Lortel Theatre on November 16, 1981.<sup>233</sup> The honor, it was reported, came at the insistence of the theatre community, including organizations and individuals like the Actors' Fund and Anna Strasberg.<sup>234</sup> The renaming occurred during the two year run in the theatre of *Cloud 9* by Caryl Churchill and as a celebration, there was a special performance to benefit the Actors' Fund.<sup>235</sup> Lortel it seems was aware of the level of honor and publicity that comes with having one's name displayed on the façade of a performance space. She said in interviews that she had been "shy" and "resisted" having her name attached to

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<sup>233</sup> Program for the renaming benefit, November 16, 1981, Box 71, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>234</sup> "Theatre: Beyond Broadway" by Jeanine Larmoth, September 1985, Box 90, Folder 8, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Letter from Sandy Starr to Patty Onagan, April 3, 1995, Box 71, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>235</sup> McCready, 22.

"Christening" by Ernest Leogrande, November 16, 1981, Box 71, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

anything, but later realized that she had “earned her stripes” and wouldn’t be “the first woman to have her name on a marquee”.<sup>236</sup> She presents her reluctance as an acknowledgement of what she believes is the weight of having a theater named after you: it is something to be earned and ideally, there is precedence for it. Interestingly, this is in stark contrast to the kind of theatre that Lortel produced, which valued artists who were mostly inexperienced and work that had not previously been seen. Additionally, by explaining that she would not be the first woman with her name on a marquee, Lortel was situating herself in relation to other prominent women in theatre history, such as Vivian Beaumont Allen and Mitzi E. Newhouse. Both of these women had theaters named after them by Lincoln Center Theatre.<sup>237</sup> In the previous comments, Lortel qualifies the renaming of the theater through the success of other women in theatre paired with the considerable artistic significance and commercial success of multiple shows that she had produced at this time. The renaming then came at a time when she met those qualifications. She arguably had earned it as *Cloud 9* was entering the fifth month of its run, was receiving positive reviews, and notable members of her community were insisting she make the change.<sup>238</sup> In addition to being an honor

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<sup>236</sup> “A New Name for an Off-Broadway Theater” November 17, 1981, Box 71, Folder 10, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

“Lucille Lortel, Queen of Theatre, in city, in country” by Thomas A DeLong, July 11, 1982, Box 90, folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>237</sup>“Vivian Beaumont Theater,” Lincoln Center Theater, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.lct.org/about/beamont-theater/>.

“Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater,” Lincoln Center Theater, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.lct.org/about/newhouse-theater/>.

<sup>238</sup> McCready, 22.

and a step to ensuring her legacy, Lortel's career at this time was benefited as she gained publicity from this choice. Not only was her name now displayed visibly on the outside of a building in the popular Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, but she would receive acknowledgement in any press coverage of a show staged in the theatre. As mentioned in the first section, Lortel was not always a producer of the shows in her theatre as she would frequently rent it out to performances that she personally approved. However, in all the publicity materials and press coverage of those shows, Lortel's name would be mentioned, associating her more closely with these productions than she had previously been as the owner of a theatre with an unrelated name.

In addition to naming theaters after individuals who contributed substantially to the theatre community, another traditional method of honor is by naming an award after them. For theatre in particular, there are awards such as the Tony Awards for Broadway and the Olivier Awards for London theatre that invoke the influential careers of individuals to honor the work that is currently being done in contemporary theatre. The Tony's use the name of former actress, director, and producer Antoinette Perry who was also a leader within the American Theatre Wing, which is responsible for distributing the awards annually.<sup>239</sup> They carry a significant amount of prestige, apply only to Broadway productions, are presented in multiple categories for performances, design elements, writing, and directing among others. Other honors, such as Lifetime Achievement Awards are given out once a year as well, but usually only have the singular award.

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<sup>239</sup> "Our History," Our History | The American Theatre Wing's Tony Awards®, accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.tonyawards.com/history/our-history/>.

In 1986, the Lucille Lortel Awards for Off-Broadway were established at the recommendation of the League of Off-Broadway Theatres and Producers. Several members of the Board of Directors for the League thought that there was not a suitable award for Off-Broadway productions as the award at the time was the Obie from the *Village Voice*, which they believed favored low-budget, non-profit productions over any show that might have commercial appeal. When approached by members of the Board, Lortel agreed to create the award—and use her name, which they also suggested.<sup>240</sup> It took several years for the series to settle into a format that was similar to the Tony's, as in the first year it was called the Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Achievement for Off-Broadway and only one award was given along with \$10,000. The recipient was “Woza Afrika!” a four-week series by the Lincoln Center Theater which showcased the works of South African playwrights, directors, and performers.<sup>241</sup> The following year, two awards were given, one for an outstanding Off-Broadway production, and the other was for an individual or non-profit organization that created great theatre, each award was accompanied by \$5,000.<sup>242</sup> The committee that decided was Clive Barnes, Andre Bishop, Paul Libin, Lynne Meadow, Edith Oliver, Albert Poland, Ben Sprecher, and Willard Swire.<sup>243</sup> In 1988, the award was titled the

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<sup>240</sup> Letter to Paul Libin from Albert Poland, May 12, 1992, Box 72, Folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>241</sup> “Lortel awards \$10,000 to Lincoln Center Theater” October 15, 1986, Box 72, folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>242</sup> Letter to committee Members from Ben Sprecher, February 5, 1987, Box 72, Folder 6, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>243</sup> “10G Lortel Prize to Lincoln Center” October 8, 1986, Box 72, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Lucille Lortel Award for Lifetime Achievement Off-Broadway and it went to Paul Libin. The evening dedicated to celebrating Libin's work and receiving the award was also a benefit for the Actors' Fund.<sup>244</sup> This aspect of the dinner and reception during which the awards were presented being a benefit for the Actors' Fund was a fairly consistent arrangement, except for in 1989 when the proceeds from the event went to funding the ASTI tour of *A Walk in the Woods* to Russia. As Lortel underwrote these events, all of the money raised through the selling of benefactor tables for the ceremony would be given to the organization. The 1989 Lortel Awards had the same format as the 1987 awards, with two given to an outstanding individual achievement and an outstanding production.<sup>245</sup>

In the early 90s, the format of the awards started to change, with 1991 coming as the first year in which there were recipients in all the categories of outstanding play, musical, director, revival, performer, and body of work.<sup>246</sup> In 1992, the optional consideration for the special award returned, and the next year saw the presentation of two outstanding performance awards, divided by gender.<sup>247</sup> 1995 saw the expansion of many design categories, including costumes, lighting

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<sup>244</sup> Invitation to Lortel Awards, March 28, 1988, Box 72, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>245</sup> Letter from Terry Hodge Taylor to Lucille Lortel, January 9, 1989, Box 72, Folder 13, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>246</sup> Letter from Ben Sprecher to Lucille Lortel February 20, 1991, Box 72, Folder 15, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>247</sup> Lucille Lortel Awards Program, May 11, 1992, Box 72, Folder 22, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

design, and scenic design, as well as the outstanding musical category.<sup>248</sup> The following years saw only slight shifts with an extra performance category added and a differentiation between the outstanding body of work for an institution and the lifetime achievement award for an individual. The fluidity of the categories reflected discussions of the committee every year of the entire scope of Off-Broadway productions. The Lortel Awards were inconsistent in who they honored, in an attempt to best suit the activity of their community at the time. Not only did the winners and nominees of these awards receive increased publicity and celebration of their work by their community, but they were also associated with Lortel's extensive career.

Lortel benefited from these awards as well. When she was alive, her career was annually associated with well-received productions and performances on Off-Broadway and after her death, her legacy continues to be acknowledged in this way. As long as the Lucille Lortel Awards are hosted, her legacy will be continuously represented through the honoring of artistic excellence and exploration in the realm of Off-Broadway.

In addition to benefiting members of her theatre community by annually presenting awards, Lortel was honored by her community in the same way. Once she expanded her producing career to Off-Broadway, the awards slowly began to accumulate. The first awards won by a production that she was associated with in 1956 when *Threepenny Opera* received a Special Tony Award and an Obie from the Village Voice.<sup>249</sup> That was not the last time her producing work was acknowledged by the American Theatre Wing as five of her seven Broadway productions were

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<sup>248</sup> Lucille Lortel Awards Program, April 24, 1995, Box 73, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>249</sup> McCready, 223.

nominated with *Sarafina!*, *A Walk in the Woods*, *As Is*, *Angels Fall*, and *Blood Knot* all receiving Tony nods.<sup>250</sup>

Two years after *Threepenny*'s Obie, Lortel herself won an Obie for her own work in “fostering and furthering the spirit of theatrical experiment.”<sup>251</sup> The acknowledgment of Lortel's work as a producer had begun. In 1959, she received the Greater New York Chapter of ANTA Award for her work with the Matinee Series followed in 1962 by the first Margo Jones Award for her “significant contribution to the dramatic art and hitherto unproduced plays”.<sup>252</sup> A multitude of organizations acknowledged Lortel's work as she was honored by Yale University for her contributions to Connecticut theatre in 1965, by Connecticut Governor Ella T. Grasso on behalf of the United Nations International Women's Year in 1976, and with the Special *Theatre World* Award in 1985.<sup>253</sup> She received Lifetime Achievement Awards named for individuals and organizations such as Lee Strasberg in 1985, the Kennedy Center in 1987, the Hudson Guild in 1990, Sean O'Casey in 1992, Outer Critics Circle in 1994, and the League of Professional Theatre Women in 1997.<sup>254</sup> These awards and honors associated Lortel with multiple organizations and

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<sup>250</sup> McCready, 225-228.

<sup>251</sup> McCready, 223.

<sup>252</sup> “First Margo Jones Award,” February 19, 1962, Box 90, Folder 1, “When political plays call, influential producer listens,” May 21, 1989, Box 90, Folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>253</sup> Invitation from Governor Ella T. Grasso, May 3, 1984, Box 62, Folder 1, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

*Theatre World* Dedication by John Willis, 1981-1982, Box 68, folder 22, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>254</sup> McCready, 226-229.

artists—some that she had worked with before, others that she had not—and acknowledge that her work of establishing a legacy was supported and furthered by the community. The press coverage that came with each reception and ceremony for an award increased the public’s knowledge of her work and the positive reaction of the theatre community. These awards also built or solidified a relationship between Lortel and the organization. She had dedicated twenty years of producing within the American National Theatre and Academy, had been a member of the League of Professional Theatre Women, and had been a champion of O’Casey’s works in America, so the awards that she received from them signified their appreciation of her contributions directly to them. Other awards like the honor from Yale University and the honorary doctorate from the University of Bridgeport led to the developing of relationships in the following years.

#### **4.4 Inconsistencies in Personal Narratives**

Even though much of the material covered in this portion of the section has previously been discussed in the first two sections, it is relevant to how Lortel shaped her legacy as she was acutely aware of an individual’s ability to guide public perception of their life. Lortel told multiple versions of the stories of how her marriage to Louis Schweitzer led to her retiring from acting, how the idea

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“The Queen of Off-Broadway Also Reigns in Westport” by Averil Krafman, July 8, 1981, Box 90, Folder 4, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Program for Lucille Lortel Memorial Service, May 24, 1999, Box 90, folder 21, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

for the first tryout reading at the White Barn was formed, and her purchasing of the de Lys was presented as a far less complicated process than it was. These multiple versions of events changed over the course of her career but not in a consistent way. By telling these stories in the changing ways that she did, Lortel was able to refocus and direct the narrative of her career in a way that would best support her in that moment, even if it later resulted in a conflicting narrative of her life and career. I argue that her strategies to control the lasting public perception of her life that would impact her legacy were to generate vague, reduced, and conflicting narratives so that she could say what would best support her in that moment. Additionally, Lortel was involved in creating and distributing materials like the biographical film *The Queen of Off-Broadway* and the bibliography by Sam McCready, which then presented whole and more reliable narratives that she had more control over.

This awareness—similar to how she navigated the political content of her productions—led Lortel to make strategic choices to shape the perception of her life. Her vague, reduced, and conflicted responses to questions did not always go unnoticed by journalists though. In an article, journalist Irene Backalenick commented, “For Miss Lortel’s “getting on,” she admits to being somewhere in her 80s, but “I haven’t reached 90 yet, darling,” she told one producer recently. No matter.”<sup>255</sup> Lortel’s purposeful hiding of her exact age was also seen in how some articles would refer to her as an “octogenarian”.<sup>256</sup> However, her age discrepancies were never the focus of a

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<sup>255</sup> “For Lucille Lortel, all the world’s her stage” by Irene Backalenick, July 13, 1988, Box 90, Folder 11, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>256</sup> “When political plays call, influential producer listens,” May 21, 1989, Box 90, Folder 12, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

piece of writing and were acknowledged but were ultimately disregarded by journalists to instead focus on her work. At several times, Lortel also commented in interviews that the way older people were treated in America was vastly different and less respectful than how they were treated in European countries.<sup>257</sup> For Lortel, keeping her exact age from the public eye was a way to maintain her reputation as an active, influential producer.

Discrepancies appear within multiple narratives of why she retired from performing. The event most closely associated with this change was Lortel's marriage to Louis Schweitzer in 1930 which then led her to pursue producing. However, Lortel changed the reasoning for her retirement over the course of her life. At some points, Lortel said on Schweitzer's opinion of her career, "My husband, of course, didn't want me to act. At that time, darling, when a man marries you, he wanted you to stay home. Louis used to pick me up after every performance, but he told me, 'You've got to give this up.' And so I did."<sup>258</sup> Schweitzer expected Lortel to somewhat be a homemaker figure, staying home in the evenings and weekends to spend time with him while he was home from work. A career as an actress who would primarily be performing in the evenings and on the weekends would obviously interfere with this.

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<sup>257</sup> "Q&A: Westport producer Lucille Lortel" by Lisa Faye Kaplan, September 29, 1982, Box 90, Folder 5, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>258</sup> "The Original Broadway Babe" by Gully Wells, February 1998, Box 90, Folder 23, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

The other reasoning that Lortel gave for her retirement after her marriage was because, “My husband’s mother disapproved of acting.”<sup>259</sup> She only ever expanded further on this saying, “...the theatre was a dirty word to his family.”<sup>260</sup> Her retirement under this reasoning would then have been to appease her new family, that had a low opinion of women and theatre in general. Both reasonings suggest that Lortel was attempting to move into her new stage of life as a married woman. To a degree, it is possible that both of these were factors in Lortel’s retirement, or that there were other motivations that she never did express. However, the way that Lortel’s reasoning for retirement from acting is explained shapes the perception of her relationship with her husband, and then his relationship to her career in theatre. If Lortel places her retiring from acting on her husband’s desire to have her home when he was, her later work as a producer then seems to be a more acceptable role for her as a woman even if it was less traditional at the time. Producing would most likely not keep her away from home at the same times as acting would. If she places her reasoning on her appeasement of her in-laws, it then seems like Lortel initially sacrificed her career in theatre to only return to it later, as if she could not stay away. Additionally, this places her within more traditional gender roles for the time as there was a different perception of women in the

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<sup>259</sup> “Lucille Lortel, Patron who made Innovative Off-Broadway a Star, is Dead at 98” by Enid Nemy, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1999, Box 90, Folder 21, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>260</sup> “Years don’t Slow Lucille Lortel” by Frederick M. Winship, February 11, 1986, Box 90, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

workforce in the early 1930s as compared to the presence in the 40s and 50s, following World War II.

At several points in her career, Lortel discusses how she began her process of tryout readings at the White Barn. The facts of the event such as its date, location, the first production, and her friendships with the artists involved are consistent across the stories. However, the inconsistencies are in how the idea to do readings in a barn came to her. In some instances, she says she attended a backer's audition in New York City, and when disappointed at the poor conditions for both performers and audiences, she said that she thought she could better approach the practice.<sup>261</sup> Her idea to host readings in her barn would be a better way to represent the script and the actors involved, in addition to making it a more comfortable experience to the audience. The first story emphasizes Lortel's involvement in the process of new play development through how she improved the practice of a backer's audition by creating staged readings. This more firmly credits Lortel with the now commonplace practice of a staged reading.

Another story that Lortel puts forth is that she was approached by her friends Phillip Houston and Elizabeth Goodyear or only Canada Lee with a script that they wanted Lortel to share with people she knew in New York. Instead, Lortel proposed the idea of performing it in the barn on her property.<sup>262</sup> The second story emphasizes Lortel's connections within the theatre community and how important her career as an actress had been on her ability to become a successful producer. If she hadn't previously been involved with Broadway, she would not have

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<sup>261</sup> Greene, Chapter four.

<sup>262</sup> "How the White Barn Theatre and the ANTA Matinee Series Began" by Lucille Lortel as told to Ira Bilowit, December 19, 1986, Box 90, Folder 9, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

had connections within the theatre world to be approached to produce a staged reading. This version of the story heightens both her significant position of a person of influence within her field as well as the element of chance that is involved in anyone's career. If so many details had not aligned in this version of events, then none of what Lortel had spent her life working on would have existed.

A third version of her inspiration said that she had wanted to use the barn that they had bought for horses for theatre since they first moved there, and it was only in 1947 that she was finally able to convince Louis that it was a good idea.<sup>263</sup> This third story frames her choice to become a producer as more deliberate than the others. It suggests that she had been seeking a way to become involved in theatre again since the end of her performance career and their moving to Westport. This version of events puts more emphasis on Lortel's ability to shape her career, giving her a form of agency that the other two stories do not, and establishing a deep, personal connection to theatre that she so often credited for the range of successes within her career.

As discussed in the previous sections, Lortel's ownership of the Off-Broadway Theatre de Lys was one of the factors that most enabled her to have an influential and long career in the theatre. Touched on within this section is how Lortel used it to establish her extensive legacy. However, it is another narrative that is not consistent or told in full. Louis Schweitzer's purchasing of the Theatre de Lys in Greenwich Village was challenged by another man who also wanted to own it and believed that he had a legal claim to the building. The process of their actual purchase

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<sup>263</sup> "Years don't Slow Lucille Lortel" by Frederick M. Winship, February 11, 1986, Box 90, Folder 3, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

of the theater was complicated as the challenger took Schweitzer to court, and the legal proceedings were covered extensively in the press, along with the favorable verdict to Lortel's ownership.<sup>264</sup> From what was present in her archives, Lortel never mentioned the complications when discussing her ownership of the theater, despite the publicity that it had generated in the 1950s. Throughout any coverage of her ownership in the theatre, including several of the booklets and programs celebrating her ownership of the theatre, Lortel did not mention the lawsuit or legal proceedings. Instead, when she was asked a question related to expanding on how she came to own the de Lys, she would offer multiple reasons for why her husband purchased the theater for her. One story was that she had told him that she wanted to produce Off-Broadway and that the theatre would allow her to continue working during the winter when the White Barn did not have a season. This version suggests Schweitzer's full support of his wife's new career and even his promotion of her work, as it then would have been a considerable gesture of encouragement.

A similar motivation that she said Schweitzer had to purchase the theatre was as a wedding anniversary present for her.<sup>265</sup> This statement is usually coupled with his desire to spend more time together in the city. By presenting his motivation in this context, Lortel is again offering a reading of the situation as Schweitzer being considerably encouraging and supportive of her career, in addition to placing it in a romantic light. This also would have shown just how closely Lortel valued theatre and considered it a part of her personal life that her husband would then find a theater to be an appropriate anniversary gift.

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<sup>264</sup> Greene, Chapter five.

<sup>265</sup> Greene, Chapter nine.

The third reasoning that Lortel gave for his purchasing of the de Lys was stated in an interview she gave at the White Barn, saying, “Louis thought that if he bought me a theatre in New York, I could produce my plays there and not use this building.”<sup>266</sup> She further explained that this was out of Schweitzer’s desire to spend more time with Lortel in the city where he worked. They had kept two homes throughout their marriage, one was an apartment in New York City, the other was the farm in Westport, which was primarily for in the summer and when Lortel hosted events at the White Barn. Schweitzer’s desire to then spend more time with Lortel at their residence in the city then could have also had a similar romantic element that the previous two reasonings had, but this one also depicted her husband of being far less supportive of her career as a producer.

Whether Schweitzer purchased the theatre for one or more of these reasons, Lortel’s framing of his action in a romantic situation redirects the focus from the legal issues they encountered to her passion for theatre and Schweitzer’s acceptance and support of her new career.<sup>267</sup> When she framed it as an attempt to spend more time together as she would likely close the White Barn, it was similar to the other previously explained romantic motivations. However, it situated them at the cost of her career. This last reasoning would have portrayed their relationship as sharply contrasting with the previous two reasonings, as Lortel would have been seen as still making sacrifices in her career for the sake of her husband’s happiness and their marriage. No matter the strategy she used, Lortel’s redirection and deflection of the serious legal problems that

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<sup>266</sup> “An Angel in Westport” by E. Kyle Mimor, July 28, 1994, Box 90, Folder 17, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>267</sup> “The Do-It-Yourself Queen” by Vincent Curcio, June 1991, Box 90, folder 14, Lucille Lortel papers 1902-2000, \*T-Mss 2001-006, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

arose from purchasing the theater allows for the focus of her career to be the dramas she that she produced on stage and not the dramas that arose off stage.

Lucille Lortel developed her legacy through a combination of strategies. She extended the focus of her producing career which was to serve the theatre community by creating a memorial dedicated to the artists she most prominently supported and establishing relationships through universities to provide additional educational experiences to theatre students. Another strategy she used was to preserve and share information related to herself and other theatre personnel that she worked with. In creating exhibitions on their lives and supporting an innovative archive, she ensured that the work and impact of the people with contributed greatly would be remembered accurately. Additionally, the traditional methods of honors and awards such as renaming her theatre and creating an award series with her name provided a strategy that was more permanent and visible. Not only did the strategies Lortel used to establish her legacy, but they aimed to guarantee that she would be remembered favorably for her considerable work and not only her wealth.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Throughout her career, Lortel displayed an awareness of her position in the theatre community as a producer. At different points this meant an awareness of how she was characterized due to her gender, of the possible consequences for producing shows with certain messages or people involved, and of the resources she could leave behind to preserve her name and work. Lortel's experiences as a former actress introduced her to how the theatre world functioned both in and outside of New York City. It began her dedication to theatre education and introduced her to people that she would continue to work with in the decades to come. Her retirement from acting and transition to a producer occurred because of her marriage to a millionaire named Louis Schweitzer. Although this marriage initially ended her career, it later allowed her to have more freedom and resources to create the kind of theatre that she desired. This was possible due to her ownership of two theaters, Schweitzer's assistance in establishing the organizations that she ran her theaters through, and the independence to not rely on support from other producers or the return of her investments from each show. Additionally, Lortel was aware of how she was characterized in the media and rather than contradicting this portrayal, she used it to her advantage by cultivating her caretaker figure to be welcoming towards new artists who needed support.

Many of these new artists that Lortel supported were creating within systems that limited their voice and participation in art like Zero Mostel, Athol Fugard, and Adrienne Kennedy. The artists who Lortel supported often faced censorship or discrimination due to their political beliefs, their gender, and their race. As a producer, she gave these individuals the opportunities to practice their crafts in the early part of her career. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lortel continued to

support these artists as a producer, but also expanded her focus to include theatre companies, universities, and organizations that were not related to theatre, like hospitals. One aspect that was consistent through her work in producing and financially supporting organizations was the three methods of silence, ambiguity, and redirection that she used to navigate these topics in the press. These were used prominently when Lortel's work had a political association, like with *A Walk In The Woods* by Lee Blessing.

Lortel continued to support the theatre community as she established her legacy. Several of her methods like establishing lecture series and endowments at universities, contributing funds for a theatre at the Actors' Fund Home, and the dedication of the Playwrights' Sidewalks served others. She used her substantial wealth to provide further educational opportunities for students, to ensure a place for theatre in the lives of artists, and to honor the playwrights who had contributed significantly to the development of Off-Broadway. Additionally, Lortel preserved and shared information through her creation of the White Barn Theatre Museum, her considerable donations to the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape archives, and the creation of a biographical film and a bio-bibliography on her career. The renaming of the Theatre de Lys and founding of an annual awards series in with her name were two more traditional forms of honors that both furthered her career and also indicate her contributions to Off-Broadway after her death.

Lortel developed and applied these strategies throughout her career as a way to contribute to her community and shape the world's reaction to her work. However, the degree of her success in establishing a legacy is debatable as there is still evidence of her career in New York City, but she is less associated with the development of Off-Broadway in scholarship than much of her career suggests. I argue that Lortel's name does remain in the history of theatre, but it is not in association with the narrative of her career that she cultivated.

The traditional methods that Lortel used to establish her legacy are still present today. The Lucille Lortel Theatre in the Greenwich Village is still owned and operated by the Lucille Lortel Foundation. The theater hosts productions every year and offers programs like the General Operating Support Program, which provides funds for New York City-based theatre companies.<sup>268</sup> The Playwrights' Sidewalk has been maintained and a new playwright is added annually. The Lucille Lortel Awards have continued to be hosted every year as well in the same form that they were presented toward the end of her life.<sup>269</sup> Additionally, the foundation created the Lortel Archives or the Internet Off-Broadway Database, which documents every production from Off-Broadway, preserving every theater it was staged in, the run dates, the production team, and the cast lists.<sup>270</sup> Within the past few years, the foundation has also created an Off-Broadway dedicated podcast titled, "Live at the Lortel" and established a fellowship opportunity that partners Bennington College students with Off-Broadway theatre companies.<sup>271</sup> The Lucille Lortel Foundation has remained true to the pursuit of its founder during her career by providing support for theatre companies, preservation of information, maintaining the memorial to playwrights, and educational opportunities for early-career theatre personnel. Not only do these programs continue

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<sup>268</sup> "The Lucille Lortel Foundation," The Lucille Lortel Foundations, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.lortel.org/the-lucille-lortel-foundation>.

<sup>269</sup> "The Lucille Lortel Awards," The Lucille Lortel Awards, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.lortelaward.com/>.

<sup>270</sup> Al Zimmerman, "Lortel Archives," Lortel Archives: Internet Off-Broadway Database, accessed March 19, 2020, <http://www.iobdb.com/>.

<sup>271</sup> "Bennington College," The Lucille Lortel Foundations, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.lortel.org/bennington-college>.

the work that Lortel was dedicated to, but they further develop her legacy by continuously connecting her history to the innovative and experimental Off-Broadway productions of today.

While Lortel's is still present in the world of Off-Broadway today, she is not remembered in the same way through the other methods that she established. I have not been able to find evidence that the programs that Lortel established with universities have continued. Even though some of these were endowments designed to replenish the money spent, like the Lucille Lortel Fund for New Drama at Yale University, I have not been able to locate proof of their existence and continued support. It is possible that the funds are still being used to continue the programs she established during her life, but her name is no longer publicly associated with them or that this information is not easily available to the public.

An additional blow to Lortel's legacy was the demolition of the White Barn Theatre in Westport, CT. The property had been sold and in 2015 there were plans proposed by a housing developer to demolish the barn which required major renovations. The foundation and Lortel's great nephew challenged the demolition and were given two years to raise the funds needed to maintain the site but failed in their efforts. In 2017, the White Barn Theatre was demolished.<sup>272</sup>

Lortel's absence from theatre scholarship, especially that which focuses on Off-Broadway could be explained by several factors. Although there have been considerable efforts to include the experiences of women in the main body of theatre history, it is likely that Lortel's gender may have contributed to her absence. Additionally, there is not a significant focus on the influence of independent producers within theatre history, especially within Off-Broadway scholarship. In part,

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<sup>272</sup> Robert Koch and Kaitlyn Krasselt, "White Barn Theater Demolished," *The Hour*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.thehour.com/news/article/White-Barn-Theater-demolished-11303821.php>.

this may be due to how the role of a producer had developed over the course of this century, resulting in a history that is difficult to untangle as the language used to describe positions and responsibilities were shifting. Along with this, much of the early development of this area is attributed to the collaborative work of multiple companies and the individuals who came together to establish them. These companies often include all aspects of the creation of theatre including the administrative, financial, and artistic work. Lortel's absence from this kind of scholarship compared to the work of other female producers like Cheryl Crawford or Eva Le Gallienne may also be related to her dedication to primarily producing. While she was an artistic director for twenty years, Lortel left the creative decisions to the artists she was employing. Meanwhile, Crawford and Le Gallienne would be involved in the creative concepts of their productions as directors. Le Gallienne continued acting for many years as well and contributed translations to the American dramatic cannon. Due to their creative work, Crawford and Le Gallienne may be more consistently acknowledged as theatre producers as they were more closely involved in the development of their productions.

This signifies to me that there is space within the current theatre scholarship to research and write on the influence of producers on individual shows and the development of theatre in America. It also reveals to me that there remains a substantial number of female figures in theatre history whose stories have not yet been told to their fullest extent. With the immense scope of Lortel's career which spanned seven decades and hundreds of productions, there was a considerable amount of materials and areas that I was unable to analyze. However, what I was able to focus on revealed fascinating and insightful aspects of theatre history that I had not previously been aware of. Lucille Lortel's career remains a complex and abundant narrative through which theatre history can be examined.

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