

A Legacy of Love and Laughter:
Robert Porterfield's Barter
Theatre

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“If you like us, talk about us! If you don’t, just keep your mouth shut.” This line by Robert Porterfield opens every play at the Barter Theatre in Abingdon. I have been going to the Barter since I was little, and that line always intrigued me. I knew there must be a story behind it. So when I was selecting a topic to research for NHD, I remembered the Barter Theatre. I especially liked this topic because it is local and not well known outside of southwest Virginia. I thought a documentary would be a great way to convey my topic, because there are many interesting photos and videos from the time period.

Finding enough sources was like a treasure hunt; I knew there must be newspapers and primary sources, but finding them was difficult. At the Historical Society in Richmond, I found an article about a donation of the Barter Theatre’s archives to the Library of Virginia, also in Richmond. There I found the gold... books about the Barter Theatre and hundreds of newspaper clippings and letters written by Robert Porterfield were hidden in microfilm scrapbooks and on the shelves. I visited many different websites such as the National Archives to find photos, videos, and even audio from the time period. I also researched at Virginia Tech and the College of William and Mary.

I gathered the research I found, and wove the important parts together into a script of the right length. This part was difficult, for there were more fascinating Barter stories than I had time for. I then recorded my script and edited it using Final Cut Pro, which I used in my NHD documentary last year. I went to the Barter Theatre, and their staff gave me many of the Barter Theatre’s historical photographs for me to use in my documentary.

Because there were not many books about the Barter Theatre available, my most valuable sources were interviews. I contacted eight former Barter actors and actresses to see if they were willing to be interviewed. Frances Fisher and Elizabeth Wilson both

responded and gave terrific interviews. I contacted the Theatre Department at Emory and Henry College because I knew they had a partnership with the Barter. They helped me find another interviewee, Kelly Bremner. At the Barter Theatre, I interviewed Ryan Roorda and Katy Brown. I also interviewed Harriet Debose, who has attended the Barter Theatre since the early days.

My topic has to do with this year's NHD theme, Leadership and Legacy, because it took tremendous leadership for Robert Porterfield to create a theater that helped talented, unemployed actors do what they love. It also helped the audience and farmers in Abingdon get a laugh during hard times. Because there was little money to spare, farmers could trade their extra food for tickets to performances. The Barter Theatre continues to help the actors and the community by providing jobs and beautiful performances. Through his leadership, Robert Porterfield left a legacy to be proud of!

Primary Sources

Barter Theatre (Abingdon, VA). Scrapbooks, 1946-1991. Accession 41323. Business Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

This is a microfilm collection that includes hundreds of newspaper clippings and photographs. Although some of the images were not good quality, it was very useful in my research. It was amazing to sift through the different newspaper clippings and letters and piece together what happened. I learned about the Barter's production of Hamlet, and I read many old reviews of the Barter Theatre's performances. I used a letter from president Truman and a newspaper article that I found in this collection in my documentary (cited separately).

Barter Theatre, Abingdon, Virginia. Personal photograph by author. 2015.

I used this photograph to show what the Barter Theatre looks like in the present day.

Barter Theatre Historical Photographs. Barter Theatre. Digital Collection. Abingdon, Virginia.

The Barter Theatre gave me a huge selection of historical photographs, which helped me better understand my topic. There was only one problem: there were more amazing photographs than I had time for! It also made me realize that the Barter Theatre was getting attention from many famous people around the world, like Eleanor Roosevelt. I think these photographs also captured the fun of working at the Barter. I used 42 of these pictures in my documentary, listed below.

4131101-R1-E006. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

4131101-R1-E011. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

4131101-R1-E018. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Barter Bus1. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Barter Theatre. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Barter Theatre Award. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Barter Theatre Workshop. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Barter Theatrepic. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Bartering. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Behind the Camera. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Bob Porterfield Ham. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Borgnine in Costume. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Box1 Folder6. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Elizabeth Wilson. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Empire 2 Ceiling. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Empire 5 House. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Ernest Borgnine. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Front 001. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Front 003. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia

Hamlet. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Hats. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Henley Photo Marquee Edited. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Kitchen. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Milking. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

1949 BT in Review Cover. 1949. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Old Barter. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Opening Night. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Painting. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Peck and PorterfieldCMYK. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Pigs. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Porterfield and Barter. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Porterfield Trading Duck. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Porterfield with Dove. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Posing in Front of Curtain. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

R Porterfield and Frank Lovejoy. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Robert Porterfield. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Sitting With Weapons. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Slow Actor Crossing. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Summer Wednesday. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Threepenny Opera. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Tornado Two. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Under Barter Sign. Barter Theatre Historical Photographs, Abingdon, Virginia.

Bread Line beside the Brooklyn Bridge Approach. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

This is a picture from the Library of Congress of a really long breadline from the Great Depression. I used this picture in my documentary.

Borgnine, Ernest. *Ernie: The Autobiography*. New York: Citadel, 2008. Print.

This is Ernest Borgnine's autobiography. He talked a lot about the Barter Theatre, and I used two of his great quotes in my documentary. It showed me the influence of the Barter Theatre on Borgnine's life. This helped me explain what the Barter Theatre was like from an actor's point of view.

Debose, Harriet. Personal interview. 16 May 2015

Harriet Debose has been attending the Barter Theatre ever since the 1930s. This interview was really helpful because it gave me perspective about how the Barter Theatre impacts its audience. She also knew Robert Porterfield and worked at the Barter in high school. I used a clip from her interview in my documentary.

East, Jim. *Robert Porterfield: A Memorial*. Virginia: Barter Foundation, 1972. Print.

This source was published after Robert Porterfield's death. It described how the Barter Theatre was started. It gave me really great information about who Robert Porterfield was and how he inspired people.

"Farewell, Mr. P." *Bristol Virginia-Tennessean* 1971. Print.

This is a newspaper clipping I found in the Barter Theatre Archives. This is an article about Porterfield's death. I used a section of this article in my documentary.

First Motion Picture Unit Army Air Force. First Motion Picture Unit, 1944. National Archives.

27 Mar. 2013. Web.

This video was produced by the First Motion Picture Unit in the Army Air Force about itself. Bob Porterfield worked there during World War II. I used two sections of it in my documentary to show the audience why working there was important in his career.

Fisher, Frances. Personal Interview. 24 Feb. 2015.

Frances Fisher is an actor who started her work in the Barter Theatre, and has performed in many movies, such as Titanic. She answered my questions over e-mail. She helped me understand what it was like to apprentice at the Barter Theatre.

Groups of Depositors in Front of the Closed American Union Bank. 1932. National Archives, Washington DC.

This photograph shows people in front of a closed bank. I used it in my documentary to show what effect the stock market crash had on the nation.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. "Manhattan: Broadway - 46th Street" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1933.

The New York Public Library had a huge collection of photographs from New York City during the Great Depression, which helped me understand what the city was like. This was a picture that I used in my documentary to show what Broadway looked like in 1933.

Lange, Dorothea. *Migrant Mother*. 1936. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

This is a picture taken in 1936 of a poverty-stricken mother with her children. I used this photograph in my documentary because it pictures perfectly how stressed and scared people were during the Great Depression.

Roosevelt, Eleanor. "My Day." 4 May 1940: Web. May 2015

This is an article Eleanor Roosevelt wrote about the effort to make the Barter Theatre the State Theatre of Virginia. I found it on an online database that keeps all of her "My Day" newspaper columns. I paired it with a photo from the Barter Theatre Historical Photos collection, which showed Eleanor Roosevelt with Robert Porterfield. I used a quote from this article in my documentary.

Roster. 1942. Pencil. Barter Theatre, Abingdon, VA

Every year the Barter lists every actor that has performed in their plays on a decorative roster. This is a roster of the actors from 1942, with a drawing of the Barter Theatre logo. I took a picture of the logo at the Barter Theatre and used the image in my documentary.

"Shall We Arm Merchant Ships?" *Over Our Coffee Cups*. Pan-American Coffee Bureau. Rec. 12

Oct. 1941. Radio.

This radio presentation included Eleanor Roosevelt talking about the Barter Theatre. It made me realize how much Eleanor Roosevelt helped with the Barter Theatre's business.

It was partly because of her that the Barter Theatre became the State Theatre of Virginia. She gave the Barter Theatre publicity, and wrote and talked about the Barter Theatre publicly. This particular audio recording helped me in my research because it showed how the Barter Theatre was getting national attention.

The Addams Family. Dir. Barry Sonnenfeld. By Caroline Thompson and Larry Wilson. Perf.

Anjelica Huston, Raul Julia, and Christopher Lloyd. Paramount Pictures, 1991.

I took a screenshot of Elizabeth Wilson acting in this movie and used it in my documentary.

The Graduate. Dir. Mike Nichols. Prod. Lawrence Turman, Richard Sylbert, George R. Nelson,

Harry Maret, Sherry Wilson, Patricia Zipprodt, and Sydney Guilaroff. By Calder

Willingham, Buck Henry, Robert Surtees, Sam O'Steen, Jack Solomon, Paul Simon, and

Dave Grusin. Perf. Buck Henry, Anne Bancroft, Dustin Hoffman, Katherine Ross,

William Daniels, Murray Hamilton, Brian Avery, Norman Fell, Alice Ghostley, and

Marion Lorne. An Embassy Pictures Release, 1967.

Elizabeth Wilson acted in this movie. I used a picture from it in my documentary.

“The Summer Theatre Reaches its Mid-Season Peak.” *The New York Times* 23 July 1939: Pag.

Print.

This is a New York Times article about the Barter Theatre. It includes a drawing by a famous cartoonist Al Hirschfeld, picturing a hectic scene in the Barter lobby. I used the drawing in my documentary.

Truman, Harry. Letter to The Barter Theatre.

This is a letter that Harry Truman wrote to the Barter Theatre about its performance of Hamlet at Elsinore Castle. I found this letter in the microfilm Barter scrapbooks at the Library of Virginia. I used it my documentary to show how the Barter was getting attention worldwide.

Unemployed Men Queued outside a Depression Soup Kitchen Opened in Chicago by Al Capone.

1931. National Archives, Washington DC.

I used this photograph of a soup kitchen in my documentary. I chose this photograph because it shows how people in the city needed help getting food.

USA 1936. Federal Work Agency. Work Projects Administration,

1936. Archive.org/details/USA1936. Web.

This video was created in 1936 about the Work Projects Administration theatre project. It helped me figure out how the Great Depression affected actors. I used three sections of the video's footage of New York City during the Great Depression.

Wall Street in Panic Due to Heavy Trading. 1929. National Archives, Washington DC.

This is a photograph from the National Archives that shows a picture of Wall Street at the beginning of the Great Depression.

Williams, Anne St. Clair. *Robert Porterfield's Barter Theatre of Abingdon, Virginia: The State Theatre of Virginia*. 1970. Print.

Anne Williams describes the Barter in its early years. This book was very useful for me because it told all of the little details about running the Barter. I consider it a primary source because the author studied the Barter Theatre early on.

Wilson, Elizabeth. Telephone interview.

I contacted Elizabeth Wilson, who was an actor who started working at the Barter Theatre in 1942 and knew Robert Porterfield. She answered many of my questions over the phone. This interview was extremely important in my research, because Elizabeth Wilson gave me a sense of who Robert Porterfield really was. I was surprised about the impact of the Barter on her life. Elizabeth Wilson told me that whenever she couldn't get a job in Broadway, she could always call Mr. Porterfield. She also described what it was like to work at the Barter when they were still bartering food. Sadly, Elizabeth Wilson died a few weeks after my interview with her. It made me realize how important it is to document primary sources while it's still possible. I used a portion of the interview in my documentary.

Secondary Sources

Barter Theatre Time lapse, Abingdon. Personal video by author. 2015.

I took this time lapse at the Barter Theatre. I put it in my documentary to symbolize the amount of people who go to the Barter Theatre each year.

Bremner, Kelly. Personal interview. 20 Feb. 2015.

Kelly Bremner is in the theatre department at Emory and Henry College, and coordinates the partnership between the College and the Barter Theatre. She told me about how the Barter impacts the community. I included part of the interview in my documentary.

Brown, Katy. Personal Interview. 13 Feb. 2015.

Katy Brown told me a lot about what it is like to work at the Barter as an actor and a director. She also explained some of the history of the Barter Theatre. She explained what makes the Barter Theatre different from other theatres. Even though Katy Brown works at the Barter, I consider this to be a secondary source because she was not working at the Barter when Robert Porterfield was alive.

Dawidziak, Mark. *The Barter Theatre Story: Love Made Visible*. Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium, 1982. Print.

This book was one of the only resources that thoroughly covered the early story of the Barter Theatre. It included many short sections of quotes from various Barter actors and Robert Porterfield himself. This furthered my understanding of my subject as a whole.

Fishgall, Gary. *Gregory Peck: A Biography*. New York: Scribner, 2002. Print. Book.

This was a biography about Gregory Peck. It included a chapter on his 8 weeks at the Barter Theatre. It included many funny stories, and explained how hard Porterfield made the actors work.

Fiddler, Henry T. Flop-Eared Mule/Liberty. 1992. Web.

I used this fiddle music in my documentary.

Fiddler, Henry T. Midnight on the Water. 1992. Web.

This is fiddle music that I used in my documentary when I was talking about the Great Depression. I like this particular piece in because it starts out slow and kind of sad, and seems to fit the mood of the Great Depression.

Fiddler, Henry T. Orange Blossom Special. 1992. Web.

This is fiddle music that I used in my documentary.

Fiddler, Henry T. perf. Bile Them Cabbage Down/ Rubber Dolly. 1992. Web.

This is fiddle music that I used in my documentary. I picked this piece because sounds really bright and happy, and describes the Barter Theatre well.

Fiddler, Henry T. perf. Sweet Georgia Brown. 1992. Web.

This is fiddle music that I used in my documentary when I was describing how Porterfield went to Broadway to pursue his dream. I picked this music because it was cheery and hopeful.

Fiddler, Henry T. Red River Valley/ Red Wing/ Turkey In the Straw. 1992. Web.

I put this fiddle music piece in my documentary because it was started out sadly, then moved to brighter, happier parts.

“Hay Fever.” Samuel French. Web.

This is a script cover for a play that the Barter Theatre performed. I used it in my documentary.

"James Hilton." *Home*. Web. 25 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.jameshiltonsociety.co.uk/>>.

James Hilton was a friend of Bob Porterfield's who inspired him to restart the Barter Theatre. I used a photo of James Hilton from this website.

Johnson, Kim. *The Funniest One in the Room: The Lives and Legends of Del Close*.

Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2008. Print.

This is a biography of Del Close, who worked with the Barter touring company. The tour went to many extremely rural places that weren't familiar with dramatic arts. The Barter Theatre impacted his life a lot; that is where Del Close first began improvisation. This was important in my research because it helped me understand the Barter tour, which had been glossed over in some of my other resources.

Justice, Debra. *Avoiding Founder's Syndrome in Arts Organizations: Studies of Successful*

Succession Transitions in Three Established Regional Theatres. Diss. Texas Tech U, 2010. Print.

This dissertation described how Porterfield was able to create something that has lasted for eight decades without any experience running a business. It provided many facts and theories on why Porterfield succeeded. This source made me think about the ways that Porterfield was such a strong leader.

McKinney, Robert L. *If You like Us, Talk about Us: The Life and Times of Robert H. Porterfield, the Founder of Virginia's World-famous Barter Theatre*. Abingdon, VA: Barter Media, 2006. Print.

This source didn't just give me the story of the Barter Theatre, it gave me the story of Robert Porterfield's life.

Roorda, Ryan. Personal Interview. 13 Feb. 2015.

Ryan Roorda works at the Barter Theatre. He explained the impact of the Barter in Abingdon and also explained what it is like to work at the Barter Theatre. I used a section of his interview in my documentary. I consider this source to be secondary, because Mr. Roorda did not work at the Barter when Robert Porterfield was alive.

"Study Finds \$34 Million Annual Economic Impact from Barter Theatre." · *Industries*. Web. 26 Jan. 2015.

This source was useful in my project because of the statistics it provided. I found out the facts about how the Barter Theatre impacts not only the actors but also the community as a whole. I was amazed by what I found: the Barter Theatre has a \$34 million economic impact and supports 485 jobs! I didn't realize that one business could affect so many people.

Spector, Joel. *Elizabeth Wilson Portrait*. 2012. Oil. Barter Theatre, Abingdon, VA

I took a picture of this painting at Richard Rose's office in the Barter Theatre. Elizabeth Wilson gave this to the Barter Theatre on her 91st birthday. It shows her in a Broadway performance of "A Delicate Balance." I used this picture in my documentary.

"The Great Depression." History.com. A&E Television Networks, Web. 04 Apr. 2015.

This website helped me get an overall understanding of the Great Depression. It helped me understand the bigger, nation-wide problems, which put the Barter's story into context. It provided statistics and general information that were crucial in creating my documentary.

US Map. Dir. Mia Lazar. 2015.

This is a short animation I made in iMovie to show the actors' trip from New York to Abingdon.