

Star Turn

BY JENNIFER JACKSON SANNER

A summer project became the role of a lifetime for a Colorado mining town and intrepid young actors from KU. Forty years later, the show goes on.

A simple sheet of paper, headlined “Operation Summer Theatre,” dangled from a bulletin board in Murphy Hall in spring 1966. Its smudgy, indigo-ink message, spun from a mimeograph machine in a tiny church nearly 800 miles from Lawrence, competed with other stray advertisements for roommates, rallies and rides home, the transactions of college life in a simpler time.

“Operation Summer Theatre” caught the eye of Steve Grossman, an ambitious junior theatre major from suburban Chicago. He stopped to read the flier, then slyly removed it from the board and stashed it in his pocket.

“I didn’t want a graduate student to see it,” he now admits.

Grossman, c’67, g’97, showed the flier to his roommate and fellow aspiring actor, Joseph Roach, c’69. Friends since high school who were desperate to produce plays on their own, they decided to take the dare issued by unseen fellow dreamers in a town they’d never heard of. “We were a theatre looking for a place,” Grossman recalls, “and along came a place looking for a theatre.”

So they made a call to Creede, Colo., tucked near spent silver mines, 9,000 feet high in the San Juan Mountains.

Jim Livingston answered the phone.

A member of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the “Jaycees,” and pastor of the Congregational Church, Livingston had suggested that the Jaycees try a new venture to smooth the rough edges of Creede’s nightlife and boost summer tourism, offering families an attraction besides trout fishing.

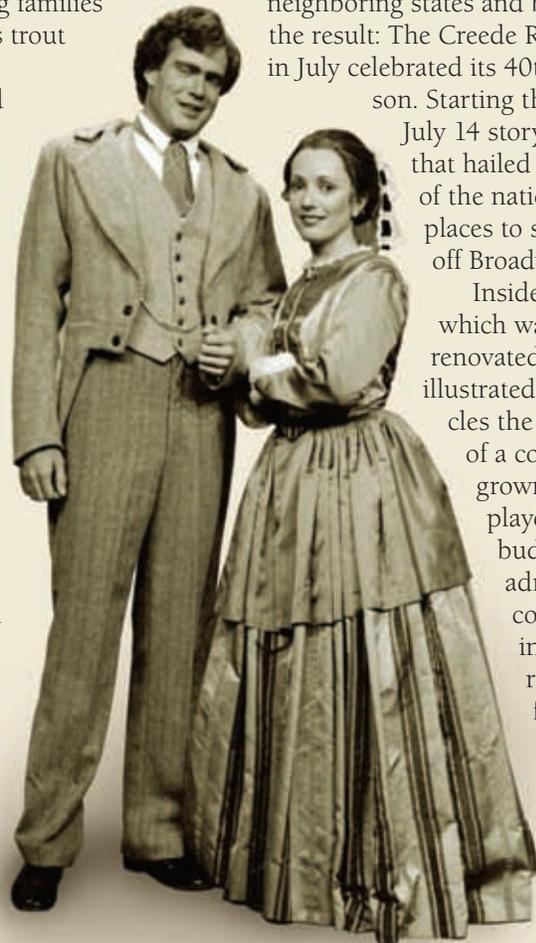
In those days and through its history, Creede “was known as a place to go and get drunk. Some maps already listed it as a ghost town,” says B.J. Myers, c’69, g’71, who led the town as mayor in 2002.

To restore Creede’s rightful place on the map in the 1960s, Livingston, the young minister from the East Coast, proposed that the town convert its aging Creede Opera House, formerly home to occasional movies and campy

melodramas, into a summer theatre. Folks far and wide still wonder why the town’s miners—and a dozen students from the University of Kansas—agreed to the outlandish scheme.

But loyal patrons who travel from neighboring states and beyond applaud the result: The Creede Repertory Theatre in July celebrated its 40th summer season. Starting the revelry was a July 14 story in USA Today that hailed the CRT as one of the nation’s “10 great places to see the lights way off Broadway.”

Inside the theatre, which was completely renovated in 1992, an illustrated timeline chronicles the improbable saga of a company that has grown from a dozen players, a \$200 budget and \$1 admission to a company of 60, including a year-round staff of five; a budget of \$700,000; and ticket prices of \$15-\$24 (still a bargain by



today's performing arts standards).

Through four decades, the theatre has remained true to the classic concept of repertory—staging a different play every night—in a town where the last mine closed in 1985 and the year-round population hovers around 500. During the last three days of July, the town toasted the CRT's success with a reunion that included Livingston and most of the original 12 students, along with other alumni who have performed at CRT.

Those who returned echoed one refrain: A summer in Creede stays with you for life. The grandeur of rocky cliffs, the rush of the Rio Grande, the town's ornery history and its quirky characters—both on-stage and off—make for unforgettable theatre.



Though town lore credits the Jaycees for sending “Operation Summer Theatre” fliers to 100 colleges and universities in 1966, pastor and impresario Livingston says emphatically, “We didn't have that much postage. We sent six.”

The call from Grossman was their only reply. After talking with Livingston on the phone, Grossman and Roach made the 12-hour drive from Lawrence to Creede, in southwestern Colorado, the following weekend in March. The two students met the townspeople, toured the dilapidated opera house, and shook hands with the minister to seal the deal. (“Even if we'd signed a contract, it wouldn't have been enforceable, because neither of us was 21,” Roach now muses.)

They vowed to return in May, after final exams, with KU cast members who somehow would renovate the opera house and open the CRT's first season on June 26, 1966. The first production, at Livingston's request, would be his favorite, “Mister Roberts.”

As the roommates drove out of Creede, Roach recalls, his buddy intuitively pointed their project in the right direction: “Steve said to me, ‘We must run in rep. If we do only one show at a



JOHN GARY BROWN (2)

■ The CRT founders are: (seated) Gary Mitchell, c'66, g'72, Independence, Kan.; Pat Royse-Moynihan, c'67, Canyon Country, Calif.; (first row standing) B.J. Myers, c'69, g'71, Creede, Colo.; Steve Grossman, c'67, g'97, Northbrook, Ill.; Joe Roach, c'69, New Haven, Conn.; Shari Morey Lacey, '69, Chicago; Jim Livingston, former church pastor in Creede; (back row) Steve Reed, c'70, c'70, Santa Fe, N.M.; Kay Habenstein Lancaster, c'66, g'70, Charlottesville, Va.; David Miller, c'69, Chicago Heights, Ill.; Connie Bohannon Roberts, d'66, Olathe. Not pictured: Lance Hewett, '70, New York, N.Y., and Earl Trussell, c'70, Port Chester, N.Y. Left page: Hugh Hastings and Christy Brandt, c'73, starred in “The Heiress” in 1982, early in Brandt's 30-year run at the CRT.

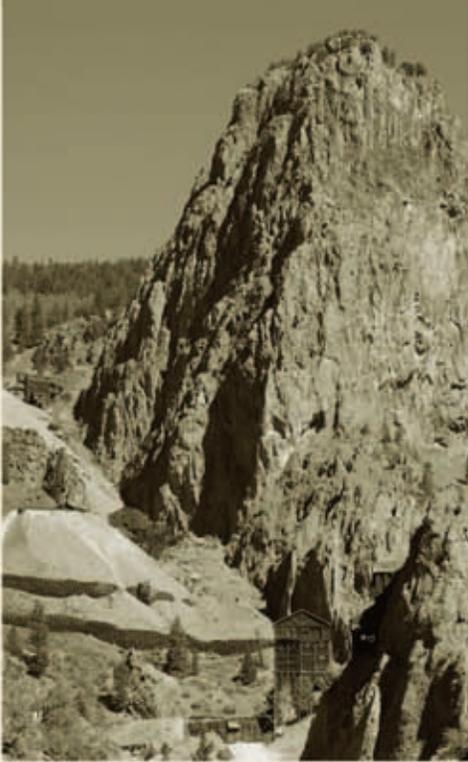
time, we'll die in two weeks.’

“I've noticed that the word ‘naive’ comes up as we tell our stories, and it is justified. But ‘naive’ underestimates just how smart Steve Grossman is.”

The two returned to Lawrence and held auditions, but the rapidly vanishing semester left no time for rehearsals. So they passed out scripts, asked the actors to find their own costumes and get to Creede as soon as they could.

The first wave, four of the 12, arrived

two weeks before opening night. They found the opera house still in disastrous shape. Luckily one of the first four sojourners was B.J. Myers, acclaimed to this day by the others as “the only one who knew how to do anything.” As technical director extraordinaire, she presided over the local high school wood shop, which became headquarters for the theatre's construction. Once the remaining cast members arrived—with only one week to go before opening



■ The steep, 17-mile Bachelor Historic Tour, named for one of several old mines, begins and ends in Creede.

night—rehearsals began in Livingston’s church. Because the roles in “Mister Roberts” were nearly all male, Myers’ crew back at the high school consisted mainly of the five determined but exhausted KU women. The night before the show opened, Myers had been up for four days straight. “I fell asleep standing up at the table saw, cutting a 4-by-8-foot sheet of plywood.” Luckily someone woke her before blood was spilled.

The curtain opened June 26 to a sold-out house. As they took their bows, the dog-tired and terrified troupe—and the equally terrified Jaycees—knew they had pulled off a miracle. “There were whoops and howls and shouts of ‘Bravo!’” recalls Kay Habenstein Lancaster, c’66, g’70. “The Jaycees knew they had done the right thing for their community.”

But the work had just begun. The company staged four more shows that summer and continued to improvise even the necessities. When the theatre’s makeshift lights melted the colored gels used for scene changes, Grossman dreamed up an unlikely solution: Magic Markers. After every show, the schoolchildren in town formed a light brigade. Myers stood on a 12-foot ladder to unlatch the lights and hand them down to the kids, who would furiously scrub off the colors with Brillo pads and scrib-

ble on new colors for the next show before sending them back up the ladder to Myers. For five years, marker madness was standard operating procedure.

Though the memories provoke laughter today, the actors learned to make do because they were absolutely serious about their craft. They were, as Grossman says, “hungry to make art.”

At times that first summer, the 12 Jayhawks, who were lucky to make a few dollars any given week, were just plain hungry. But there were always townspeople ready to feed, clothe and house the “theAYtre kids.” Families took turns hosting the students for dinners on Mondays and Tuesdays, when they weren’t performing. The rest of the week they lived on sandwiches, soup and other donated delicacies from the Creede Hotel. The Tomkins Hardware Store owners extended a lengthy line of credit and the keys to the store, and Postmaster Ed Hargraves opened his boarding house to the seven young men, who took to calling their cramped quarters “The Silver Palace.” The Kipp family gave the five KU women the run of their home for the summer. Nell Wyley loaned them coats to warm the cool

summer evenings.

Many Creede stories describe the generosity of one patron, Chloe Rogers. After Phil Grecian, ’70, broke his eyeglasses, she drove 50 miles to Monte Vista, got them fixed and paid for the repair herself. When cast members needed furniture to complete the set for one production, she appeared at the theatre with everything they needed. Later, Grecian recalls, they passed by her house at night to find her sitting on boxes in her living room.

Myers remembers when Rogers asked whether the theatre kids were going to the rodeo in Monte Vista. When Myers looked puzzled, Rogers hurried off, only to return soon after “with enough money to buy tickets for all of us, plus \$5 each to spend. And she even provided the transportation.”



One are the days when company members had to borrow pocket money. Now they earn actual salaries and live in CRT-owned apartments that are a far cry from the notoriously moldy trailers of the



■ The theatre’s Main Street home carried its old and new names until the building was dramatically renovated in 1992.



1970s. The theatre, rebuilt by Myers and KU students after a fire in 1970, includes all the latest technical and performance features of a modern hall, and its impact extends beyond summer shows (see box).

Myers' pivotal role in the theatre's amazing run, and her loyalty to the town as a former mayor and longtime businesswoman (her parents started the first gift shop in 1972), are part of the Creede story. That summer of 1970, while she and her crew restored what fire had scorched that spring, she also completed her master's project by creating period costumes for two of the summer's shows. Her KU faculty adviser was William Kuhlke, g'59, now an emeritus professor who recently performed in a starring role at the CRT. After three decades, Kuhlke is also Myers' leading man: The two will be married Thanksgiving weekend.

While Myers has been a mainstay behind the scenes, actress Christy Brandt, c'73, has become an on-stage favorite. Through 30 seasons in Creede, Brandt has played 115 roles, from ingénues to matriarchs, including this summer's feisty Kate in Neil Simon's "Broadway Bound." On July 28, Brandt turned in a radiant performance, earning another standing ovation from fans who return to see her year after year. They saw no sign of the inexplicable vertigo that had kept her bedridden most of that day, forcing KU Professor Jack Wright, g'67, PhD'69, who directed the play, to rework Kate's second-act dance scene at the last minute.

"She was incredible," Wright raved. "It was one of her best performances. I'm so proud of the entire cast." This was his third stint as a director since 1968. "The mountains, weather and scenery all make Creede an inviting place to work, but I truly think it is the magic and spirit the original founders had that has somehow managed to sustain the theatre and keep it going all these years," Wright says. "Those who have contributed to Creede over the years somehow caught the spirit of the place and managed to improve upon it each year."



Managing director Tristan Wilson predicts the CRT's 40th season will set an attendance record: 18,000. Another 18,000, including children in Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico, will benefit through the CRT's annual tour of bilingual plays and its camps and workshops for elementary, high-school and college students.

Wilson and Maurice LaMee, executive/artistic director, are optimistic. "We've been bucking the trend in theatre for years," Wilson says. "We've seen increases of 10 percent each season for the past six or seven years. Mo and I attribute it to raising the quality of every aspect of the performances: our acting, our technical support, our marketing and our outreach."

And what's good for the CRT has been good for Creede. According to a recent economic study:

- The CRT's impact on the 100-mile radius around Creede is \$2.8 million.
- The per capita effect on the 831 year-round residents of Mineral County is more than \$2,500 annually.
- The CRT accounts for 26 cents of every dollar spent on tourism and 18 percent of the entire economy.
- The theatre has brought 55 jobs to the county.

—JJS

Talented directors and cohesive casts have made Creede's stage ideal for Brandt. "The atmosphere in a repertory company is so intense and exciting for an actor," she says. "I've done work here I could never had done in New York or Chicago. We have always worked together for a common goal, and we've never had a diva. We know the product is good, and we want to do our best for the people of this community."

Brandt and her husband, photographer and painter John Gary Brown, are so committed to Creede that they own a home, living half the year there and the other half in Lawrence. Brown, '67, who followed his girlfriend Brandt to Creede, is staff photographer for the CRT. He has played his share of on-stage roles, including real-life groom to Brandt's bride in 1981, when they were married on the set of "A Doll's House," Henrik Ibsen's classic tale of marital strife. Brandt was starring as Nora that summer. "Nora leaves her husband at the end of the play, but we decided to live on the edge," Brown jokes.

The two have recruited a number of Lawrence and friends to visit Creede and invest in homes. Charla Jenkins, j'69, communications director for University Theatre, is eager to put down roots in Creede. "When you meet natives

and they learn you're from Lawrence or KU, they treat you like family," she says. "I've never been to a place where I felt so immediately that I belonged."

And when you meet Lonnie and Danny Rogers, sons of Creede and the CRT's legendary patron Chloe Rogers, it's clear that the KU-Creede connection remains true. The two attended the July reunion in their mother's honor, laughing about her devotion to theatre, which prevailed over her own sons' doubts. "I couldn't believe folks would actually pay a dollar to watch a play," Lonnie admits. "I thought, 'Boy, this is really gonna flop.'" But he and his brother never complained when loaves of their mom's homemade bread—or the family's furniture—ended up down the street.

Earlier this summer, the Rogers family shared a barbecue dinner with renowned Broadway and TV actor Mandy Patinkin, '74, a Creede alumnus who, like many others, formed a lifelong bond with the town and bought a home. "Mandy says our mom will always be his sons' grandma," Danny says. "She just adopted those theatre kids. She wouldn't have had it any other way."

Somehow their mom, the minister, the miners and those kids knew this place and this theatre were made for each other. 