

Entertainment

Description

The Front Street Theatre of Memphis was established in 1956. Its roots can be traced back to a group of actors that called themselves “12, Inc.” that formed in the summer of 1954. The defining moment of their establishment came during their efforts to stage “The Lady's Not for Burning,” a play by Christopher Fry. George Touliatos, an alumni of the University of Memphis (then called Memphis State) was the director of the time, and so, when the leading lady, Anne Brown, dropped out of the effort, it fell upon him to find a replacement. He sought the counsel of Edwin Howard, a writer and editor for the Memphis Press-Scimitar. Howard recommended to him an actress he'd met on a few prior occasions, a lady whose talent and charm had stuck with him: Barbara Cason.

Though much of Cason's success came after the establishment of the Front Street Theatre, she was no stranger to the stage. She was a drama major and alumni of the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi. Her first big break came when she won the Main Street to Broadway Talent Hunt, an accomplishment that lead her, of course, to Broadway. She didn't stay long, though, returning to the South to set up shop in New Orleans, where she performed regularly at Le Petit Theatre de Vieux Carre. It was here that George Touliatos found her and asked her to come north to Memphis to star in “The Lady's Not for Burning.” She accepted, unaware of just how much that simple decision would change her life. She performed the part well enough to impress the local critics, and apparently enough to impress George Touliatos quite a bit. They were married by 1956.

“The Lady's Not for Burning” was well-received, and “12, Inc.” gathered a small but dedicated following. They took up residence in basement Theatre of the Hotel King Cotton, calling the venue Theatre Twelve. By 1956, the group had dissolved, but from its ashes rose the Front Street Theatre, a joint effort by Barbara Cason and George Toulianos that established itself in the summer of 1957. It went on to enjoy a long-running series of critical and popular successes. Barbara Cason was, simply put, a star. She was known for her success in comedic roles, and papers of the time commented often on her energy and magnetism on the stage. For five years she maintained the position as leading lady of the Front Street Theatre. All was not quite well, though, despite the Theatre's outward success. Friction between Barbara and her husband eventually spurred her to seek a divorce, and she left Memphis in 1962 to pursue other prospects—and prospects she found!

She traveled throughout the north, picking up roles in Cleveland and New York, and even ventured as far as California to perform in the Sanford Repertory's 1965 production of “The Skin of Our Teeth.” Though she returned to Memphis from time to time, she continued to roam, enjoying success and also eventually enjoying the company of fellow thespian Dennis Patrick. The two married in 1970, and remained together as they both pursued busy careers in television. Barbara Cason passed away in 1990 at the age of 61 after she suffered a heart attack. Her legacy was left in the form of the fond memories of her friends, lovers, and fans, but she had also left the Front Street Theatre behind, and it did not sit idly in her absence.

Another notable star of the Front Street Theatre was Diane Parrish. Parrish was making news at an early age, appearing in the Memphis Press-Scimitar when she was still a teenager. A student of Memphis State, she was active in the college acting community. Not only was she a member of the student acting group Sock and Buskin, she was also lauded by the local chapter of the dramatics fraternity Alpha Psi Omega as the “best supporting actress” of 1955. The praise for her skill and enthusiasm did not go without notice, and it wasn't long before Diane landed herself a career in television. She played the titular role of the The Storybook Princess on WKNO-TV, and also served as a voice actor and puppeteer. On the theater scene, she performed regularly at the Front Street Theatre and the Little Theater in Memphis, starring in such plays as “The Bells Are Ringing” and lauded for multiple other performances in plays like “The Boy Friend” and “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.”

Her ambitions eventually led her to enter the world of Hollywood. Diane kept herself busy, and though she was far from home, Memphis newspapers still covered the doings of their former “Storybook Princess.” Unfortunately, her career came to a halt after a car accident, the lingering effects of which forced Diane to stop performing for a time. She suffered from a condition called acute myositis, which limited her mobility and caused her great pain. Despite this setback, she remained active, pouring her energy into other skills until she found a cause she paid particular attention to: her religion and its relation to her career. The Hollywood Christian Group was an organization dedicated to providing advice and support for struggling actors and actresses of the faith, and Diane Parrish became quite involved, serving on its board of directors for many years. It was there that she met the man who would later be her husband: Al Rush, fellow board member and California radio star. The two married on August 8th, 1963.

Rita Wilson was already something of a star before she graced the Front Street Theatre's stage. She had already landed the 1961 title of Miss Tennessee and 1962's Miss Dixie before she starred in the Front Street Theatre's 1962 production of “Gypsy.” The titular Gypsy Lee Rose, called “the world's most famous stripteaser,” naturally demanded someone beautiful of form, which Wilson most certainly was. There was more than one big musical number in the play, as well, so something of a vocal talent was also required. Wilson had it covered, of course, and wowed Memphis audiences with her skill and enthusiasm. She wasn't just a pretty face, however. Though she primarily pursued acting in her future schooling and career, she also expressed an interest in optometry as an alternative to acting, should those ambitions fall through.

Wilson needn't have worried; her talent and drive carried her forward to many roles in the future. She was cast in Hollywood movies, found work in television, and entertained locals in Hollywood with live singing performances. Today, Rita Wilson has settled into a much quieter profession. She has returned to her native Humboldt, Tennessee, and is the co-owner of the Crown Winery, a picturesque solar-powered vineyard and venue. She also does work with womens' charities and scholarship programs.

Further Reading

Mantel, Sara and Linda J. Snyder, “Women Composers and the American Musical: The Early

Years.” *Journal of Singing* 59, no 5 (2013): 527-534.

Miss Representation, directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. 2011; New York, NY: Virgil Films, 2012. DVD.

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