Peter W. Culman, former Center Stage managing director, dies

By Frederick N. Rasmussen
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eter W. Culman, who during his more than three-decade career as managing director of Center Stage helped the theater survive its early financial woes and a devastating fire and whose leadership resulted in it becoming one of the most prominent regional theaters in the nation, died Aug. 18 of complications from a broken hip and Alzheimer's disease at St. John's Medical Center in Jackson, Wyo.

The longtime Roland Park resident was 77.

"Peter was integral in building all that Center Stage is today. He is as much a part of this institution's legacy as the 230 productions presented during his 33 years here," said Stephen Richard, who is Center Stage's current managing director. "We are very sad to say goodbye to such an important person in Center Stage's history and such a wonderful man."

"Peter was a gentleman first and foremost, and he always treated everyone that way. He was a very kind and sensitive person," said Rhea Feiken, a longtime Baltimore television and radio personality who was a co-founder of Center Stage.

"He had a great impact on Center Stage from its beginning and improved it enormously. He was a very learned person and brought that attitude to the theater," said Ms. Feiken. "He brought enthusiasm and hope and helped fulfill its dream."

When he announced in 1999 that he would retire the next year, Mr. Culman said that the 15-hour days had finally caught up to him.

"I don't think it's fair to Center Stage, the art form of theater or myself to continue when you don't have the reserves you need," Mr. Culman told The Baltimore Sun at the time. "We all grow up with parental bromides. My mother was forever saying, 'Leave at the height of the ball,' and I would concur with her. At this point, it seems to me I want to slow down the rhythm of the walz."

The son of Otto Culman, a Wall Street stockbroker, and Mariel McGuire Culman, who managed Kathleen Inc., a dress shop, Peter William Culman was born and raised in New York City.

His interest in the theater began early. When he was a child, he spent summers with his older sister in St. Paul, Minn., where he entertained family members and friends with heartfelt renditions of "Danny Boy" and staged shows in his sister's barn.

In 1948, at age 10, he was attending his first Broadway show with his grandmother — a performance of the musical "Where's Charley?" — when he suddenly rose from his fourth-row seat and joined Ray Bolger in singing "Once in Love with Amy."

As the story goes, Mr. Bolger continued singing along with his accompanist and then the entire audience.

In the 1960s, Mr. Culman, who had red hair, read a profile of Mr. Bolger, who told the interviewer that at a matinee one day a young redheaded boy stood up and started to sing.

"Bolger stopped the show and the audience joined in," Mr. Culman told The Baltimore Sun in a 1991 article.

After graduating in 1955 from St. Paul's School in Concord, N.H., Mr. Culman enrolled at Williams College in a joint program — two years at Williams and three years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology — which would culminate in a master's degree in chemistry.

After receiving a grade of 17 on an advanced chemistry midterm, a freshman dean summoned Mr. Culman to his office and asked him what else he was interested in. He responded, "I've always wanted to put on musicals."

"It's amazing how a bad grade changed my father's life," said a son, John LaFarge "Sean" Culman, of Cleveland, N.M.

He changed his major and joined the Cap and Bells Society, the college dramatic club, where he acted and directed plays. After earning a bachelor's degree in 1959 in English, he went to England to work as an assistant to producer Steven Mitchell, whose show "Sea Shells," starred Dame Sybil Thorndike and a then-unknown Sean Connery.

In 1961 he enlisted in the Army where he studied Chinese at the Army Language School in Monterey, Calif. He had attained the rank of specialist 5 at the time of his discharge in 1964.

He was hired that year to direct the auxiliary of the Barter Theater in Abingdon, Va., and serve as an assistant to the theater's founder, Bob Porterfield, and later as a main stage director.

Mr. Culman came to Center Stage as a production director after he was recommended for the job by his mentor, T. Edward Hambleton, the Baltimore resident and producer who was a founder of the off-Broadway movement and New York City's Phoenix Theatre.

When he arrived in Baltimore, the 400-seat Center Stage, then located on North Avenue, was struggling in its fifth season. At the end of his first week, the theater's business manager informed Mr. Culman that there was only enough money left for two weeks.

"We put signs on the doors saying, 'Don't let these doors close!'" Mr. Culman told The Sun in 1996. "We passed hats."

The next challenge came in 1975 when the theater's venerable house burned to the ground. The show, "Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf," went on that night at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the company finished its season at what is now Notre Dame of Maryland University.

"In a funny way, the fire made us," said Mr. Culman, who said it called attention to the fledgling theater company that was producing excellent productions despite persistent money worries.

In 1975, Center Stage's new home opened in what had once been the home of Loyola College and High School on North Calvert Street.

In addition to insisting on high artistic standards, Mr. Culman brought an unrelenting drive to increase theater subscriptions, ticket sales and endowment, plan another capital fund drive and balance the budget.

"The only way we're going to ensure our survival is to avoid the perils of red ink," he told The Sun in 1996. "The healthier the institution of Center Stage is, the more able we are to produce excellent art."

Mr. Culman's legacy is an impressive one. During his 33 years at Center Stage, he worked with five artistic directors, built the Head Theater and housing for artists working there.

By the time of his retirement, he also had completed three endowment and capital campaigns that raised a total of $25 million. During his tenure, the theater's annual budget rose from

$250,000 to $5.4 million, and he presided over 22 continuous seasons that ended in black ink.

“We all stand on the shoulders of Peter Culman,” said Kwame Kwei-Armah, Center Stage’s artistic director.

“It is his genius, his generosity of spirit, and his commitment to making Center Stage a reflection of everything he believed in that elevates us above the ranks of an ordinary theater. He will be profoundly and utterly missed,” he said.

“He was loved by all and was one of the most respected arts leaders in the country,” said Sue Hess, who had served on the theater’s board. “His creative and amazing development of Center Stage lit the way for almost every major theater nationally.”

In his retirement, Mr. Culman, a longtime resident of Merryman Court in Roland Park, worked as a theater consultant.

He was an omnivorous reader and liked writing poetry. He was also a Chesapeake Bay sailer and enjoyed vacationing on Nantucket and hiking and snowshoeing in the Tetons of Idaho and Wyoming.

Plans for a memorial service are incomplete.

In addition to his son, Mr. Culman is survived by his wife of 50 years, the former Anne Salisbury “Sista” LaFarge, who had been a vice president of the Abell Foundation; another son, Peter William “Liam” Culman of New York City; a sister, Kathleen Culman Rodler of Lantana, Fla.; and a granddaughter.

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