

William Patton (1927-2011)

By Amy Richard

William Patton, the first general manager and executive director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in Ashland, believed that art is connective—that is, that art begets art. During his tenure at OSF, from 1953 to 1995, the organization became one of the largest repertory theaters in the United States. According to Paul Nicholson, who succeeded Patton as executive director, “the Festival grew from 29 performances and an audience of 15,000 to 752 performances and 359,000 in attendance the year he retired.”

Patton was born in Medford on September 22, 1927. His family moved to Berkeley, California, but soon returned to Medford, where Patton finished junior high and high school. Active in community theater, he worked on lighting for the Medford Little Theatre, where he first met Angus L. Bowmer, founder of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Patton attended Stanford University and served from 1945 to 1947 in the U.S. Army Air Corps. He then returned to Stanford, where he earned a degree in drama. While at the university, he again met Bowmer, who was pursuing a doctorate in theater, and Patton began to spend his summers in Ashland working at the OSF.

Patton joined the Festival as a lighting technician in 1947, and Bowmer hired him in 1953 to be general manager, the organization’s first paid fulltime employee. His title was changed to executive director in 1981. In 1958, Patton married actress Shirley Douglass, who would perform at the OSF for thirty seasons. The couple lived in Ashland and had three children.

Patton cultivated relationships in Ashland and southern Oregon and encouraged the business community to recognize the importance of theater as a regional economic driver. Both he and Bowmer believed that for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to succeed, it needed to attract people who lived outside the region. So they embarked on a marketing campaign, sending actors to promote the Festival in towns and cities along Interstate 5. Patton also attended national conferences sponsored by Theatre Communications Group to gather and share expertise.

Patton’s success in building collaborative relationships within and outside the theater community led to new Festival performing spaces—the Elizabethan Theatre (1959), the Angus Bowmer Theatre (1970), and the Black Swan (1977)—conceived by Richard L. Hay, OSF resident theater and scenic designer. In addition, he oversaw the enhancement of the Elizabethan Stage with the Allen Pavilion (1991).

Three artistic directors served with Patton: Angus Bowmer, Jerry Turner, and Henry Woronicz. Their ability to build a financially sound theater in a small town such as Ashland, which benefitted from tourism, became an example for those who wanted similar success for their communities. Many art practitioners visited Ashland to consult with Patton.

In 1983, Patton and Turner traveled to New York City to accept the Tony Award for regional theater, a recognition of OSF’s excellence. After the ceremony, Patton achieved a measure of notoriety for being identified as a “show biz exec” in the *National Enquirer*, dancing at the celebration with a longtime friend, actress Ginger Rogers.

Patton received the Oregon Governor’s Award for the Arts in 1993 for his achievements and contributions to Oregon culture, and he was an honorary life member of the Ashland Chamber of Commerce. The Shakespeare Theatre Association of America, Institute of Outdoor Drama, American Shakespeare Center, Lewis & Clark College, and Southern Oregon University also honored Patton for his life and work.

During his retirement, Patton continued to be a theater supporter and audience member. He died of cancer in January 2011.

Sources

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Longtime Oregon Shakespeare Festival leader Bill Patton dies at 83. *The Oregonian*, January 14, 2011.

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