

Arts

Dispatch
From the
Culture
War

**IN GINGRICH
COUNTRY,
GOVERNMENT
SPENDS ZILCH
ON THE ARTS.
IS THIS
THE NATION'S
FUTURE?**

By David Richards
Washington Post Staff Writer

MARIETTA, Ga. — Michael Horne is watching the final dress rehearsal of "Red Scare on Sunset" and sweating.

After all, Theatre in the Square, for which he is the producing artistic director, is located in the heart of Cobb County, Newt Gingrich's home turf and a bastion of conservative politics and Southern Baptist morals. And the play onstage, a wild comedy about the Hollywood witch hunts in the 1950s, features a man in the role of glamorous film star Mary Dale. Mary's husband is an alky and a Commie tool, while her best friend is a right-wing loudmouth who barks out things like: "How many times must I tell people ideas are dangerous. Squash 'em."

By the time hysteria and satire have run their course, a gay boyhood has thrown himself out a window, acting careers have been ruined, genders have been bent and—in a gesture worthy of Loretta Young at her

See GEORGIA, G6, Col. 1



Michael Horne and Palmer Wells of the Theatre in the Square, which has lost \$40,000 in funding from Cobb County.

COBB COUNTY CULTURE WAR

GEORGIA, From G1

most righteous—Mary has denounced her very own husband before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

No one batted an eyelash, false or otherwise, when this Charles Busch comedy was performed off-Broadway in 1991. But Theatre in the Square is a long way from off-Broadway geographically, and even further spiritually. "The climate is so uncertain and audiences are so skittish, I have no idea how it will go here," says Horne. "If they see it as something funny and outrageous, we're home free. If it's perceived as a drag show that thumbs its noses at their standards, we're done for."

Perhaps that's why the play is being advertised as being "in the tradition of Uncle Miltie." In Cobb County, running a theater is tricky business these days.

It has been 18 months since the Cobb County commissioners made national headlines by passing a controversial resolution condemning "the gay lifestyle," affirming "the traditional family structure" and pledging "not to fund activities which seek to contravene... community standards." At stake was approximately \$123,000 in grants earmarked for nine local arts groups, including Theatre in the Square. Deciding which groups met community standards and which didn't proved such a thorny enterprise, however, that the five commissioners ultimately took another way out. After weeks of acrimonious public debate, they unanimously passed a second resolution, which simply cut off all funding to the arts. The money went instead to train police dogs and purchase video cameras for patrol cars.

Theatre in the Square suffered the biggest loss, \$40,000, but such groups as the Pandean Players (a woodwind quintet), TellTale Theater (a children's theater), the Marietta/Cobb Museum of Art and the Cobb Symphony Orchestra were also stripped of crucial operating funds and left to ponder their diminished role in the polarized community. The psychological blow, in many cases, was greater than the financial one. Some of them still think about relocating elsewhere.

But where? As a Republican-controlled Congress considers dismantling the National Endowment for the Arts, and religious conservatives flex their new-found political muscle across the country, what happened here 18 months ago no longer seems an isolated phenomenon. Cobb County's past may turn out to be prologue for the rest of America. Gordon Wyson, the commissioner who spearheaded the passage of both resolutions, recently applauded the results, saying, "I think this has cleared the air for everybody. Government getting out of the way allows everybody to do exactly what they want to do, which is what this country is all about."

Horne, whose theater was largely unknown outside Georgia until the county commissioners put it on the map, senses his battles are not unique. "Now everyone's in a quandary about how they're going to survive," he says. "I guess there's a perverse irony in the fact that we're not alone anymore." He doesn't seem to derive much pleasure from it, though.

And he can't help sweating the opening night of "Red Scare on Sunset."

'Gay' Plays?

Some citizens in Cobb County believe that Theatre in the Square got precisely what it deserved. Months earlier, hadn't it produced that gay play by Terrence McNally, "Lips Together, Teeth Apart"? After a complaint came across his desk, Wyson, who is not a theatergoer, investigated and concluded it had. The hitch is that "Lips Together, Teeth Apart" is really about two heterosexual couples sorting out their lives and marriages over a Fourth of July weekend on Fire Island. (It contains only passing references to homosexuality.) Furthermore, the theater's subscribers had voted it their favorite play of the season.

No matter. In the explosion of protests and counter-protests precipitated by the commissioners' actions, a lot of simple facts got muddled and rumors ran rampant. The resolutions were alternately castigated as blatant homophobia, hailed as an expression of decency and fiscal sanity, and decried as right-wing Christian morality on a tear. With time, this much has become blindingly clear: The arts, once a source of uplift and inspiration, are in the minds of many here cause for deep suspicion.

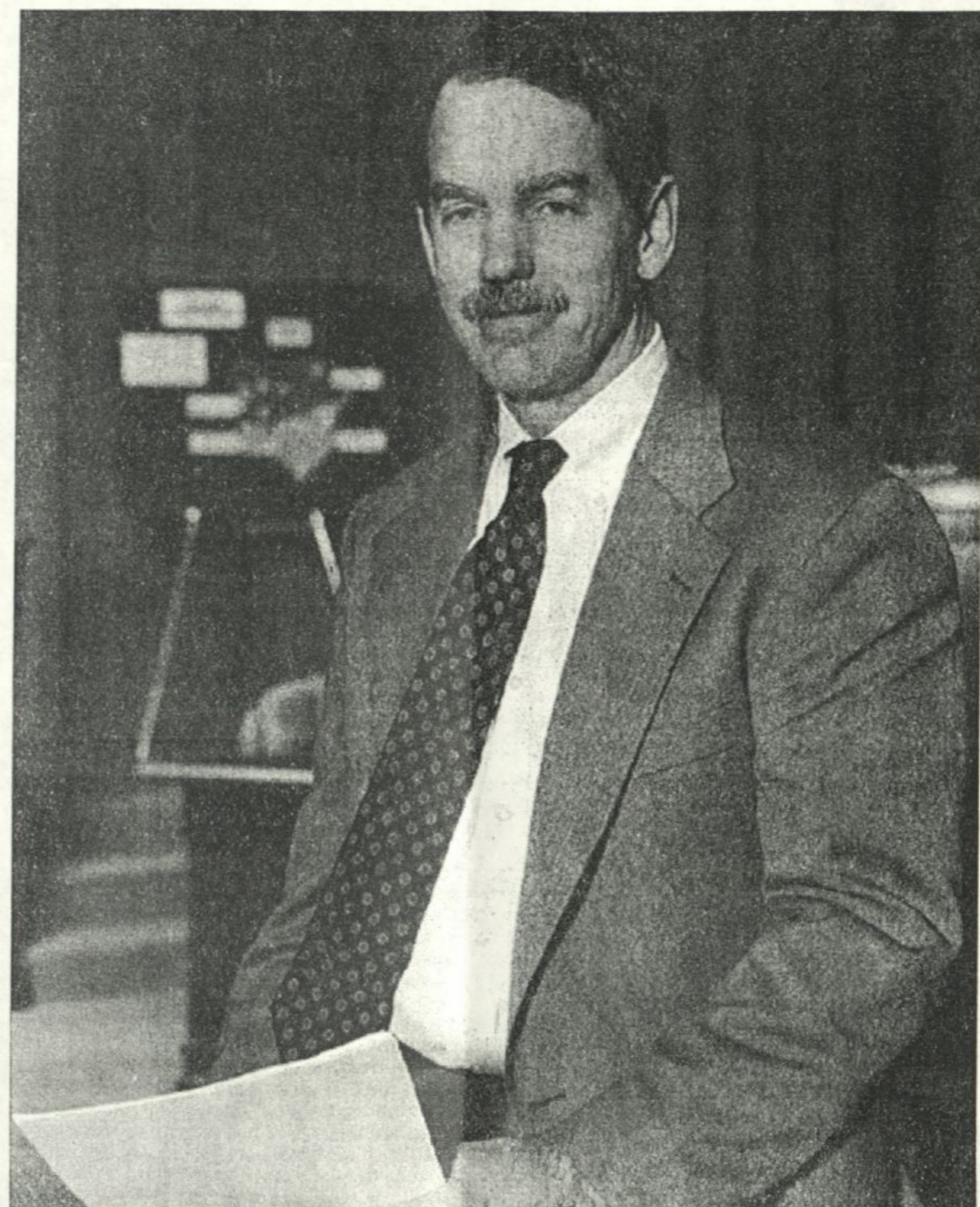
"Overnight we went from being accepted, appreciated members of the community to these hell-raising, trouble-making radicals," says Horne. "It was mind-boggling. We couldn't let people misrepresent our work. But if we defended it, it appeared that we were apologizing. 'Lips Together' is not a gay play, but at the same time we wanted to defend our right to do a gay play if we so chose. We kept switching back and forth. Our board of directors had a nervous breakdown. Some of our staff stabbed us in the back. We didn't know where to turn for advice or counsel."

"It was like being in some kind of surreal grade-B movie where you're convicted of a crime and sent off to the slammer for 50 years. You're not guilty, but it's too late and Ida Lupino is coming at you with a coat hanger."

Theatre in the Square is hardly the sort of place you expect to find at the heart of a brouhaha, which makes the events in Marietta both frightening and slightly absurd. It was founded as a nonprofit institution in 1982 by Horne and Palmer Wells, his companion of 18 years, who were both working as writers for IBM at the time. Pooling their vacation pay and a small grant from IBM, they produced their first show, "On Golden Pond," in the banquet room of a restaurant so close to the Marietta railroad tracks that the scenery shook every time a train roared by. Neither man relinquished his day job immediately. In fact, Wells started drawing a salary (currently \$27,000) as the theater's managing director only four years ago.

By 1985, Horne and Wells felt confident enough to move the theater to bigger quarters, a turn-of-the-century cotton warehouse on Whitlock Avenue less than half a block from the picturesque town square. It seats 225, has a red-brick courtyard where customers sip white wine at intermission, and reeks of the kind of Southern charm normally associated with New Orleans. The budget has risen to \$950,000. "Red Scare on Sunset" is the theater's 107th production.

A quick glance at the list of prior offerings is sufficient to understand why Horne might feel he is "pushing the envelope with this one." Plays like "Born Yesterday," "Look Homeward Angel," "The Glass Menagerie" and "The Nerd" turn up regularly. The first season, Walton Jones's "The 1940s Radio Hour," a nostalgic re-creation of an old-time



PHOTOS BY GUY D'ALEMA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"The NEA can have a 97 percent success rate, but funding the best concert in the country won't get them on the front page of a newspaper. Their public relations is always going to be focused on that other 3 percent. If a private patron had funded the Mapplethorpe, it would never have made a headline."

—COBB COUNTY COMMISSIONER GORDON WYSON

radio variety show, was such a hit that the theater has since remounted it every year at holiday time.

Horne doesn't like to think they've necessarily played it safe and points out that some patrons balked at the flashes of nudity in "M. Butterfly," which was staged in 1992. But the truth is that the company rarely strays too far from the middle of the road. Among the awards displayed in the glass case in the lobby is a certificate of appreciation from the Marietta Girl Scouts, which makes you wonder how the word got started at one point that Theatre in the Square was a movie house showing gay porno flicks.

"I don't want to sound like poor, pitiful us," says Horne. "People have been through worse things. But when people attack this theater, they're attacking us and our vision. It's very personal. You settle back after the furor, but a seed has been planted, a worry. Because you know those attitudes are out there. They haven't gone away. And you're not sure when and where they will rear their ugly head again."

Horne, who is 40, has hair styled like a porcupine's, cornflower-blue eyes and a voice best described as Harvey Fierstein Lite. Energetic and ambitious, he naturally gravitates toward the spotlight. Wells, avuncular at 57, lets him do most of the talking, content to contribute a dry chuckle now and again.

"Michael keeps one foot off the ground," says Alan Kilpatrick, who plays the alcoholic husband in "Red Scare." "Palmer keeps one foot on the ground."

Horne puts it another way. "Palmer has always been the heart and soul of this theater. I'm its flash and trash."

On this, they agree: It was their longtime partnership that allowed them to weather the past 18 months.

"One person bearing the brunt of this would probably have gone insane or climbed a water tower and shot up the town," says Horne. "When I was down, Palmer was usually up. And vice versa. Thank God we weren't both down on the same day."

Few White Knights

In the long run, the canceled funding may be the least of it. On the heels of the commissioners' actions, Theatre in the Square actually received a windfall of contributions from nearby Atlanta and beyond that more than compensated for the lost \$40,000 grant. (Actress Joanne Woodward, a former Marietta resident, sent a check for \$20,000.) They were, however, one-time gifts, sparked by a sense of indignation, and Wells notes that private giving is way down this year. "Corporations were willing to help us get through a crisis," he says, "but eventually, they expect Cobb County to take care of its own. They've told us as much."

For the foreseeable future, Cobb County seems to have

Schmedes jokes that his lost audience "measures its disposable income in quarters."

No one has a lot of sympathy for the artist's plight, so the victims have necessarily become the school kids, the elderly, the physically and mentally challenged, whose lives might have been touched by the aborted programs. To argue here that the arts have some kind of intrinsic value would be pure folly. They must serve a specific constituency. They must improve, educate, enlighten. They cannot just be; they must be purposeful.

Donna Colebeck, the curator of the Marietta/Cobb Museum of Art, harbors no doubts in that respect. Her unequivocal mandate is to give people "a positive experience." Housed in what used to be the Marietta Post Office, a handsome 1909 structure with majestic white columns, the five-year-old museum was set to receive a \$15,000 grant before the commissioners dropped the ax. Its budget has since shrunk from \$200,000 to \$160,000. But there are no hard feelings.

"We were not personally confronted as the theater was," says Colebeck, a soft-spoken woman whose manner falls somewhere between pensive and timid. "Our board decided not to take an adversarial position to the commissioners. You have to look at what's best for the survival of the institution."

Since the museum leases its quarters from the county—the commissioners, Colebeck says, are "our landlords"—treating delicately seems to be advisable. The museum has had only one blockbuster show in its short history, "That's All Folks!," which brought 155 paintings and drawings of Porky Pig and his Warner Bros. cartoon friends to town. Otherwise, 50 to 75 people dropping by on a Saturday is considered an encouraging turnout.

Colebeck took her job months after the controversy erupted, but she reflects the temper of the times in Cobb County perfectly when she says: "Being a young institution in a conservative community, we have to know what parameters are acceptable. Our approach is educational rather than confrontational. We want to provide family guidelines."

The Russians Are Coming

The arts grants represented an infinitesimal percentage of Cobb County's annual budget. But Commissioner Wyson considers the \$123,000 well saved.

"Why," he asks, "is an arts organization entitled to a subsidy, when a carwash isn't, or a restaurant or a car dealership? Do they somehow have a higher moral calling? If so, how did they get it? I don't see that they have any greater claim on government resources than any other private business."

It is a rainy Saturday morning, and Wyson is sipping coffee in a McDonald's on the outskirts of Marietta. Casually dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans, his graying hair and mustache neatly trimmed, he looks younger than his 48 years. His manner is laid-back, but the beeper on his belt lets you know that he is a busy man, accustomed to putting in 70-hour work weeks.

Wyson doesn't pretend to be an "afficionado" of the arts. He has too little time "to participate in the minutiae of self-gratification." But he does recognize a lousy idea when he sees one, and government grants to the arts—whether it's "ours or the NEA or others"—strikes him as a loser.

"The reason is," he explains, "they give people less determination, not more, to get into the arts business. You're not helping them build the strength of character to weather the bad times. So what happens when they do have bad times? They turn immediately to the easiest solution, which is the government. It creates the wrong, vincible, et cetera, other words, survival of the fittest. Good art pays its way. Bad art doesn't."

Wyson can't forgive the NEA for funding exhibitions of such artists as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. "Those exhibitions create a widespread image that that's all art is today," he says. "I can tell you the average man in the street is afraid to buy a ticket and go to an art show. Well, you take the 200 million people I consider to be in that class, who don't buy one \$15 ticket. You've just destroyed \$3 billion of retail market for the arts. And you did it with \$167 million of subsidies. The net loss to the arts community is \$2.8 billion."

And you can forget the worthy projects. "The NEA can have a 97 percent success rate," he says, "but funding the best concert in the country won't get them on the front page of a newspaper. Their public relations is always going to be focused on that other 3 percent. If a private patron had funded the Mapplethorpe, it would never have made a headline."

It's not that Wyson is against art—good clean art that people want to see. On the Formica table, he places a glossy brochure announcing an exhibition of "The Sacred Art of Russia, From Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great," which he has helped broker with Russian authorities. A multi-million-dollar project—privately funded, he insists—it will go on display in May at the Cobb Galleria Center, the county's glittering convention facility. Its purpose seems to be twofold: to show the world that Cobb County is not a backwater and to show the world that Gordon Wyson is not a philistine.

"Maybe half a million people will get into a show like this," he boasts. "That's an enormous impact." Members of the local arts community, however, ask themselves why the commissioner has chosen to champion a display of icons and chivalries from abroad so vigorously, when their efforts are in serious jeopardy. "Oh, they'll be beneficiaries too," Wyson says, although he doesn't spell out how beyond "the spillover effect."

Many demonize the commissioner, but it would be foolhardy to underestimate him. In November he ran for a second term as commissioner and was reelected with 60 percent of the vote. For the arts world here, his victory represented a repudiation of what it stands for all over again. Secrist doesn't imagine the climate changing for the next four years. Morale is low.

"What that tells me," Wyson says of his reelection, "is that I was right in my sense of the mood of the people and their view of the issues. I was vehemently opposed by every newspaper, radio station and TV station in Atlanta. All of them took great pleasure in misrepresenting me and making serious remarks. They spent hours trying to beat up on me. And it didn't work."

He leans back in the booth and smiles. "I was too much in line with the way the people think for the media to convince them otherwise."

Which may be another reason Michael Horne is sweating.

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INSIDE TODAY

America on the verge: Kurt Andersen's exhilarating new historical novel "Heyday" portrays a heady pre-Civil War United States. **K8**



Photos by CALVIN CRUCE / Staff
Theatre in the Square has played a major role in revitalizing the town square in co-founder Palmer Wells' adopted hometown.

Palmer Wells presides with quiet power over Theatre in the Square, now a major Atlanta cultural force

A smash run in Marietta

By WENDELL BROCK
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His father was a Kentucky coal miner who died when he was just 3 weeks old, leaving his mother, a Pentecostal church singer, to eke out a living selling Avon products. As a kid, he held odd jobs as a soda jerk, newspaper delivery boy and movie theater usher — and discovered, early on, that he had printer's ink and "avocational theater" in his blood.

Just as America was getting into Vietnam in the early '60s, he took a degree in journalism and got a gig at his hometown weekly in Cumberland, Ky. He knew the draft was inevitable. But he started a community theater anyway, and though the Lonesome Pine Little Theatre was the first stage company that Palmer Wells built from scratch, it wasn't the last.

In 1982, Wells and his partner, Michael Horne — both IBM communications officers with a love of theater but no professional training in the art — founded Marietta's Theatre in the Square,

► Please see WELLS, K3

Wells: Theater co-founder follows his heart

► Continued from K1

kicking off with a production of "On Golden Pond" in the leaky upstairs banquet room of a restaurant that is now Cool Beans Coffee Roasters. It was, in its way, a valentine to the historic town where they had recently acquired a lovely 19th-century cottage on McDonald Street.

They were in love with theater, with each other and with a town.

"It just seemed like a natural progression," says Wells, relaxing on a Victorian settee in the front parlor of his home, stroking his cat, Boobs (short for Boodude). "We bought the old house near the square, and we both were just charmed, enchanted, with the square and wanted to be more a part of it."

A quarter-century later, Theatre in the Square has become as much a part of the fabric of the bustling and picturesque town center as its roaring trains, Civil War cemetery and Brumby Rocker showroom. But the journey hasn't always run smoothly.

With the death of the charismatic Horne in 1996, Wells was left to become the public face of the institution, make artistic decisions alone and sort through the aftermath of a national controversy over the content of a play.

After a 1993 production of Terrence McNally's "Lips Together, Teeth Apart," the Cobb County Commission ceased all county arts funding and passed a resolution declaring gay lifestyles "incompatible with the standards to which this community subscribes."

"It's sort of a lovely little juxtaposition that two gay men moved into a historical home in historic Cobb County," says Alan Kilpatrick, an artistic associate at the theater. "I don't know if it was naive or if it was courageous. ... But they had to have known about the politics of this county when they moved here, so to some degree I think there was an element of bravery there."

Though the '93 controversy was a hurtful affair, Wells — who had survived the hard-scrabble life of rural Kentucky, put himself through college and served in the Army — was not about to be undone by it.

"He has lived through that," Harry Lembeck, the theater's board chairman, says. "He's gotten the better of it, and he's gone on with his life, as we all have."

If anything, the theater has come back with programming that is as edgy as ever, Richard Greenberg's "Take Me Out" being a case in point. (Featuring full frontal male nudity, the Tony Award-winning play about a professional baseball player who comes out of the closet drew sold-out crowds to the smaller Alley Stage in 2003.)

But while the 125-seat Alley space has become a destination



Photos by CALVIN CRUCE / Staff
Palmer Wells, 70, combines artistic imagination with business savvy. When not at his home or Theatre in the Square, he travels to faraway spots or takes scripts to his Ellijay retreat.

for such hot political dramas as Dael Orlandersmith's "Yellowman" or Stephen Adly Guirgis' "Jesus Hopped the A Train," Wells has also ensured that his company's choices are balanced and diverse.

For the 2006 season opener, he commissioned the premiere of "Turned Funny," about beloved Journal-Constitution columnist Celestine Sibley. The show was such a success that he plans to remount it this summer.

Beginning previews tonight is the burnished Robert Penn Warren classic "All the King's Men." And next month, with the world premiere of "Mount Pleasant Homecoming," the troupe presents yet another installment of the Sanders Family saga.

Financially, the theater has also shown impressive growth for a midsize arts organization. Now the third-largest theater in the Atlanta area (after the Alliance Theatre and the Center for Puppetry Arts), Theatre in the Square has doubled its budget, to \$1.8 million, in the last decade and is carrying no long-term debt.

"It started out as a pop-and-pop organization," says Jessica Phelps West, the artistic associate who handles casting and dramaturgy, "and it has really grown tremendously. ... We produce 12 shows a year" (The Alliance, by comparison, stages 10.)

Wells, whom West calls a "pocketbook-watcher," has put the company on such stable ground that he doesn't feel like he has to be present every time a show goes up.

Ask him his age, and he will tell you proudly that he celebrated his 70th birthday in January with lunch at an outdoor cafe in the Melbourne, Australia, wine country.

Late last year, the Atlanta Coalition of Performing Arts recognized his contributions to the region's landscape by making him the second recipient of the Georgia Arts & Entertainment Legacy Award. At the ceremony, his niece, Julie Foldesi,

a Broadway actress and singer, performed a song she wrote for him:

"You think I don't know him quiet at the table
This man is an artist,
listening to our fable ...
Little tiny moments cradle you somehow."

"There are very few like him," Kilpatrick says. "There are very few of his breed."

Part of Wells' survival strategy has probably been his ability to remain calm and unruffled.

"Michael was the more flamboyant one, the more visually passionate" of the theater's founders, West says. "Palmer is so quiet and reserved. They were complete opposites."

There is a mystique to Wells that he seems to guard. Even his closest family members find him inscrutable. But sometimes, it's the quietest people who have the best stories. They're just waiting for someone to ask.

Growing up in rural Kentucky, Wells says he had little exposure to theater, but he has vivid memories of the Barter Theatre tours that came to his school.

The performers drove a wood-paneled station wagon and told Bible tales using little more than an easel and layers of felt. "I don't think I learned the Bible stories, but I was just fascinated by the process they went through. ... That was theater to me."

As he grew up, he enjoyed acting, but he was hardly the leading-man type. "I wasn't even cast in the high school play," he says. "The popular kids got the parts."

Wells attended Kentucky's Berea College, later took a journalism degree from the University of Kentucky and fondly recalls his post-collegiate career at the Harlan Daily Enterprise, where he wrote stories, took pictures and even ran the press. Though his stint in the military interrupted his journalism ca-

reer, it didn't arrest his interest in theater.

While serving in the Army, Wells had a small role in "The Threepenny Opera" at Washington's Arena Stage, directed by legendary Arena founder Zelda Fichandler. This was the early '60s, around the time of the Cuban missile crisis, and "everybody was convinced that Fidel had rockets aimed at Washington." During one security alert, Wells had to beg his commanding officer to let him report for duty — at the theater.

After leaving the Army in 1963, he worked at United Press International in Louisville, Ky., and the Kingsport Times-News in Tennessee, before moving to IBM in White Plains, N.Y. From there, he was able to indulge his theatergoing passion by making trips to Broadway. "Fiddler on the Roof" and "Funny Girl." "A Chorus Line" and "Hello, Dolly!": "I was just gaga," Wells says. As fate would have it, Horne worked in the Washington office of IBM, and eventually they met and moved to Atlanta together.

"We were just compatible in so many ways," Wells says. Both were Southerners, both had backgrounds in journalism, both were crazy about theater. "We didn't start out as a vanity theater," Wells says. "In fact, it was three or four years before Michael started directing."

Wells directed just a few times and made occasional cameo appearances. But mostly he handled theater administration. Even though neither man had studied the craft, they insisted that their theater be professional, that the actors be paid.

The one thing they never had was a deliberate political agenda. They picked the plays that they believed in, and they never apologized. A few years after Horne's death, Wells produced "The Lynching of Leo Frank," just a couple of miles from where the only known lynching of a Jew in U.S. his-

Palmer Wells

► **Personal:** Age 70. Born in Kentucky; lives in Marietta with his partner of eight years, Andy Ewing. "He doesn't care for theater at all." On second thought, Wells says his partner likes theater, but he's more of a movie buff.

► **Professional:** Has worked as a reporter, an IBM communications officer and a theater artist and administrator and has served in the Army. Founded Theatre in the Square in Marietta with his late partner, Michael Horne, in 1982.

► **On his theater legacy.** "It's sort of been organic. It's sort of just grown and grown, and suddenly it's something pretty significant, I think."

25 years of making theater and history

1982 — First performance ("On Golden Pond") in 85-seat space adjacent to Marietta Train Depot at 31 Mill St. (now Cool Beans Coffee Roasters).

1985 — Opens 169-seat space in converted cotton warehouse at 11 Whitlock Ave. First production: "A Day in Hollywood. A Night in the Ukraine."

1986 — First Actors' Equity contracts issued.

1988 — Receives Georgia Governor's Award in the Arts.

1990 — First Cobb County organization to win a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

1991 — "Zion!" — commissioned by the theater — produced by Woody King's New Federal Theatre at Riverside Church in New York.

1991 — Opens experimental 60-seat black box Alley Stage.

1993 — Cobb County discontinues funding for the arts and passes resolution critical of "the gay lifestyle," actions triggered by the production of "Lips Together, Teeth Apart."

1996 — Co-founder and artistic director Horne dies after long battle with AIDS.

1998 — Alley Stage renovation completed, increasing capacity to 125 seats.

2005 — Wins three of four awards, for outstanding professional theater, at debut of Suzi Bass Awards.

2006 — Foundation's wheat-penny "challenge" earns the theater a record \$250,000 gift.

2006 — Wells wins the Georgia Arts & Entertainment Legacy Award.

Source: Theatre in the Square



Wells stood tall during the uproar over a 1993 production that resulted in an anti-gay resolution in Cobb County. He has continued to put on controversial, along with mainstream, shows.

tory occurred.

For some, the show felt like rubbing salt in a wound. "We stepped on some toes to do that play in Marietta," West says. "That was a scary one to do because some of those people were still around."

But it's exactly that kind of fearlessness that has made Wells such an admired figure in the community. "He never backs down on his choices," West says. "And I think that's one of the reasons the theater is so strong."

As for his future, Wells has no plans for retirement, but he says

he'll eventually "recede into the background." He says it seems like a "logical progression" that West or Kilpatrick might some day run the company. Both associates are naturally circumspect about their ambitions.

Meanwhile, Wells is enjoying his trips to Mexico and New Zealand — and taking scripts to his Ellijay retreat for weekends of reading.

After 25 years, Palmer Wells is still inscrutable, still keeping his own counsel, still producing theater that speaks — for better or worse — to his heart and home.

Furor takes Marietta theater by surprise

By Howard Pousner
STAFF WRITER

When Theatre in the Square remodeled its lobby last summer, the measurements Michael Horne was most curious about were those of a Tony award. The Marietta troupe was adding a trophy case, and the artistic director wanted to make sure it could accommodate the Tony for achievement outside New York.

It's a wide-eyed wish that few regional artistic directors would allow themselves, much less confess. But Mr. Horne — a born hysteric with a healthy dose of chutzpah — didn't turn an operation launched on a shoestring and a prayer 11 years ago into one of Atlanta's biggest arts success stories by dreaming small.

"Well, we didn't want to have to tear that trophy case apart later," the 39-year-old

Mr. Horne explained this week, chuckling at his naked display of ambition.

Right now, however, there are more ominous developments tearing at the heart of the theater. On Tuesday, the Cobb County Commission votes on whether to require that county-funded arts meet "community, family-oriented standards."

This hornet's nest was created by a complaint to the commission about gay references in last season's production of "Lips Together, Teeth Apart." (The theater also received a few complaints and walkouts over its staging of "M. Butterfly," mainly because of a flash of nudity.) The commission already has passed a resolution condemning homosexuality, and commissioner Gordon Wylson is campaigning to kill all Cobb arts funding.



Palmer Wells (left) and Michael Horne on the set of "Lips Together, Teeth Apart" at Theatre in the Square.

JOEY IVANS/Staff

Please see THEATRE, C7 ▶

Theatre: Its success shows it's in touch with the community

▶ Continued from C1

Theatre in the Square — which derives only \$41,000 of its \$800,000 budget from the Cobb arts grant — is certain to survive, regardless of the outcome. Shows of support of all types are pouring in: everyone from Marcia Hair, owner of Frameworks Gallery on the square, who's buying a season subscription, to actress Joanne Woodward, who faxed an eloquent statement and has promised financial help.

The way Mr. Horne and managing director Palmer Wells, 56, befriended Ms. Woodward is illustrative of the enterprise they have employed to fill the theater's seats (it had a record-breaking attendance of 57,000 last season — a remarkable 90 percent capacity).

The duo, spotting the Marietta-raised actress at a restaurant on the square several years ago, dashed back to the theater and whipped together a promotional packet and letter. The maitre d' delivered it, and Ms. Woodward waved them over for a 20-minute talk in which the theater leaders encouraged her to come home to act on their stage — an idea they've continued to pursue.

The former IBM executives raised the curtain in 1982 in the Marietta Depot in a rent-free but leaky banquet room that shook when the train rumbled by.

After three years in the tiny (18-by-54-foot) space, they moved to their cozy playhouse on

Whitlock Avenue. The stage in the converted furniture store is as big as their entire original theater, capacity has grown from 85 to 225, and attendance continues to mushroom, especially the season subscriber base (4,000 last season). And the theater earns 75 percent of its budget from ticket sales — a ratio that Alliance Theatre artistic director Kenny Leon would gladly trade his closetful of Nikes for.

Their crowd-pleasing success in suburban, conservative Cobb — and the role it has played in reviving business on the square — is why they've taken the arts-funding fracas as an insult.

"We're in touch with the community," Mr. Horne says. "You don't have a 94 percent [season subscription] renewal rate by being out of touch with the community. One thing we've never done is condescend to our audience. We didn't go into this saying, 'Oh, we're in Cobb County ...' We went into it thinking about art we believe in."

That art has ranged from the sublime (a lump-in-your-throat "Death of a Salesman" and the world premiere of "Zion," about the founding of Marietta's first black church) to the ridiculous (the current, elbow-in-your-side revival of the gospel-bluegrass musical "Smoke on the Mountain").

"It's been very hard to pigeonhole us," Mr. Horne says. "We have a wide love of all kinds of theater. We like musicals, we

The plays in question

Here are synopses of the two controversial plays cited by the Cobb County commissioners as reasons for their campaign to impose "family values" on arts grants.

▶ **"M. Butterfly"** was the 1988 Tony Award-winner for best Broadway play. David Henry Hwang's fact-based drama tells of a French diplomat in China who falls in love with an opera singer named Song Liling. Embarking on an affair that lasts 20 years, he is seduced into revealing state secrets to his new lover — only to learn that "she" is actually a man.

Starring John Lithgow and B.D. Wong, the show ran for 777 productions in New York, breaking the record held by 1981's "Amadeus" for the longest-running Broadway drama. A touring production was seen in Atlanta's Fox Theatre in 1991, and it was produced by Theatre in the Square last fall. The film version, starring Jeremy Irons, is due in theaters this fall.

▶ **"Lips Together, Teeth Apart"** by Terrence McNally, this year's Tony Award-winning writer of the book for the musical "Kiss of the Spider Woman," concerns two married heterosexual couples in their 40s who vacation at the Fire Island, N.Y., summer home inherited by one of the women from her brother, who has died of AIDS.

During their weekend, the couples reflect on their lives and infidelities, while joking nervously about the gay men who are their temporary neighbors, and who never appear onstage during the play. It won the Lucille Lortel award for best off-Broadway play for 1991. Presented as the final show in Theatre in the Square's 1992-93 season, the production was awarded the theater's in-house "Jennie" award for favorite play of the year. The awards are chosen by the theater's 4,200 subscribers.

— Steve Murray

like dramas, we like comedy and we like controversial plays."

Atlanta Theater Coalition board president Lisa Mount believes the theater — the only full-time professional troupe operating outside the Perimeter — "has grown artistically and its audience has grown with it."

That communion never felt stronger to Mr. Horne than when "Lips Together" was selected

best play in last month's Jennie Awards — the theater's version of the Tonys, in which subscribers vote for their favorites. The Terrence McNally drama is about two straight couples re-examining their marriages and their prejudices toward homosexuals during a getaway at a Fire Island beach house whose previous owner died of AIDS.

"I just fell apart and started

Attendance continues to mushroom, especially the season subscriber base.

crying because ... it meant so much to me that our audience was being progressive and intelligent and caring," says Mr. Horne, who had decided to stage "Lips" after attending a New York production shortly after a friend died of AIDS. "We were so reinforced by this past season, feeling that we'd truly arrived, chosen the right plays and reached our audience."

Three days after the Jennies, the family values debate exploded unexpectedly.

"They don't seem to get it," Mr. Horne says of the Cobb Commission. "They want the theater to be successful and thriving and bringing in 65,000 people per year [the 1993-94 season attendance projection] and having a \$5.5 million impact on the local economy and getting a national reputation. But they don't want to allow us to be able to do it — to do the kind of work that will get us all that. So see, they're in the Catch-22."

Those who have worked at the theater believe it will persevere.

"Michael and Palmer are really blessed with a lot of people who give them a lot of love and support," says Glenn Rainey, one of the "Smoke of the Mountain" stars. "They have a tremendous amount of respect for everyone involved in theater, and that feeling is mutual."

Actors' salaries have increased from \$25 to \$250 a week over the 11 years, but some of the best work gets done by people who never get paid. They are the 80 members of the Premiere Club, a volunteer group that does everything from handling mailings to soliciting season ticket sales to preparing dinner for the cast between Sunday stagings.

"Every one of us is passionate about that theater — our importance to it and its import to us," says club co-chairwoman Jeri Pearson, a supervisor of blind services for the state of Georgia. "That's why I'm mad as hell [about the commission's actions] — they're messing with my family."

In a little more than a month, the 1993-94 season opens with "The Member of the Wedding" and includes a world premiere of

The Theatre in the Square's 1993-94 season

▶ **"Smoke on the Mountain"** (through Sept. 4): The musical revue of old-timey gospel as sung by a family band in a 1930s North Carolina mountain church.

▶ **"The Member of the Wedding"** (Sept. 22-Oct. 30): The world premiere of an original musical version of Carson McCullers's touching tale of coming of age in a small Georgia town.

▶ **"The 1940s Radio Hour"** (Nov. 24-Jan. 1): The ever-popular musical revue set against a Christmas radio broadcast to the troops in 1942.

▶ **"Love Letters"** (Jan. 12-Feb. 26): The poignant comedy-drama by A.R. Gurney Jr. ("The Dining Room") tracing a long friendship (and sometime romance) of an upper-class man and woman through their letters. Starring Mary Nell Santacroce.

▶ **"Rain"** (March 9-April 16): A drama adapted from Somerset Maugham's novel of dark secrets about Britons in the South Seas.

▶ **"The Rights"** (April 27-June 4): A world premiere commissioned from Lee Blessing ("A Walk in the Woods") about the mad power of money in America.

▶ **"Little Joe Monaghan"** (June 15-July 23): Brenda Bynum stars as the real-life woman who prospected for gold — as a man — in the Wild West in this play by Atlanta's Barbara Lebow ("A Shayna Maidel").

Performances 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. Sundays. \$15-\$25. 11 Whitlock Ave., Marietta. 422-8369.

— Dan Hulbert

Theater benefits Marietta in many ways, square's merchants say

By Don O'Briant
STAFF WRITER

Theatre in the Square benefits Marietta economically as well as culturally, according to a 1992 survey by Southern Tech. The survey, conducted during the 11-week run of "Smoke on the Mountain," indicated that 25 percent of the 14,000 patrons were attending the square for the first time because of the theater.

The survey showed theater patrons spent an average of \$29.51 at downtown Marietta restaurants. Translated into dollars spent at the theater and surrounding shops, the total 1992 economic impact was estimated at \$3.6 million.

In recent interviews, merchants on the square talked about the benefits of the theater and what the controversy means:

▶ **Peter Johnson, owner of Kathy's Hallmark Shop:**

"That theater is widely recognized and perceived in greater Atlanta as a pre-emi-

nent theater in this area. It pulls people from all over. ... I think the commission's actions will have a negative impact. It's the wrong kind of publicity."

▶ **John Christian, owner of Little General Theater:**

"Some people don't understand the theater is a tremendous anchor for the square. I've heard people say the square is what Underground Atlanta would like to be. The negative publicity may affect people who don't know about the square, but not the ones who come here."

▶ **David Reardon, owner of Shilling's on the Square restaurant:**

"The theater is real, real important to us and to Marietta. With it, we're not just a destination downtown. It's a great little playhouse. ... As far as the gay issue, in my opinion, live and let live. I didn't see naked people running around in the streets, so why did we need to bring something up?"

▶ **Jim Kumpe, owner of Antiques on the Square:**

"I support the theater and I think it has had an economic impact. Their selection of programs has been very good. They stretch the mind, and that's what education and the arts should be about. They can come down here and use anything they want to for productions, and I don't charge them a thing. ... If someone wants to discuss funding of the arts out of public funds, that's an issue and needs to be debated. There are a lot of issues like that that can be discussed without getting into a condemnation of a person's lifestyle."

▶ **Frank Mulligan, owner of The Celtic Connection:**

"I'm not particularly in favor of my taxes going for the theater, but it's been a positive influence on the whole community. I think the publicity is going to hurt the area. Marietta's gone back 50 years, in my thinking. I don't agree with their [gays'] lifestyle, but it's their choice."

TV HIGHLIGHTS

9:00 PM Spend a night out with THE BOYS!

9:30 PM Join Bonnie Hunt for laughs in The Building