



MILESTONES:

TOM O'DELL

50 YEARS AT THE ALLEY THEATRE

Tom O'Dell, Director of Audience Services.
Photo by Melissa Taylor.

Beginning this season, we are proud to spotlight members of the Alley Theatre family as they reach milestones onstage and behind the scenes. Each program will feature a member of the Alley's staff or company on the occasion of a significant landmark in their career. For our first "Milestones" feature, Literary Assistant Brandy Carie interviewed Director of Audience Services Tom O'Dell, the Alley's most tenured team member who is reaching his fiftieth year in the Box Office this season.

Brandy Carie: You started working at the Alley in 1968, when Nina Vance was still here. Do you remember talking to her?

Thomas O'Dell: It's incredible.

BC: It is! Do you remember your first show that you ever worked on?

TO: I was trying to think about that the other day, what the first season, first show was, and I can't even remember, there's been so many.

BC: Do you have a favorite, early in your time here, that you remember liking?

TO: Oh yeah, one of my favorite shows of all time is *A... My Name is Alice*. It's a musical...the actors were all very good, and the theme was kind of like, I want to say women's rights, but it was topical at that time. And there's this one scene where the girls are walking by a construction worker, and the construction worker is hurling insults at them, or, you know how construction workers are, and the response in song was really incredible, how they handled the situation. And that was on the Neuhaus Stage.

BC: That sounds awesome. So you started working at the Alley in 1968, when Nina Vance was still here.

TO: Yes.

BC: Do you remember meeting her and talking to her at that time?

TO: Oh yeah, she was a wonderful lady. She would come into the box office and sit down, at that time with a cigarette and just smoke and chat.

BC: That's amazing. Did you work with her a lot?

TO: At that point I was box office manager, she would come in and say, "How are sales going." I'd always blow it up a little bit.

BC: (laughing) So she'd feel good.

TO: Yeah.

BC: Your job must have changed a lot with all the different technological advances that we've had.



Alley Theatre Under Construction in 1968



Alley Theatre Under Construction in 1968

TO: Yeah, when you think of back then, everything was manual. You know, you wrote down the charge numbers on the cards, you processed the charge, and you had a ticket rack where each row went in a separate little cubby, a cubicle. You could see like one week at a time. We kind of had a hard time getting used to having to look in the computer to see the show, what availability was for the next week, because we were so used to getting a visual look.

BC: Do you remember when that change happened?

TO: It was probably in the mid 80's.

BC: Then you would write the ticket numbers down by hand?

TO: Mhmm.

BC: There's a poster in (Managing Director) Dean Gladden's office that has some of the old ticketing with the prices printed, but then somebody had just crossed it out and written new prices.

TO: Oh yeah, I probably did that.

BC: Was that something y'all did a lot?

TO: When you look back at some of the reports and see three dollars and six cents for a ticket or something like that, or a subscription for seventeen dollars.

BC: Seventeen dollars, for the whole season? And that was in the 60's?

TO: Yeah.

BC: I'd be so interested if you have any other memories from that time?

TO: Well, one of my memories of the early days is... I've never had the acting bug, thank goodness, because I realized you have to rehearse. So I was in the opera chorus when Jones

Hall opened in 1965 with Plácido Domingo before he was an international star. I was in the last production of Theatre Inc., that's the old theatre that Tommy Tune came out of, and the last production was *110 In The Shade* with K.T. Oslin.

BC: What did you do in that show?

TO: Just in the chorus.

BC: So you're a singer?

TO: Yeah.

BC: Do you dance also?

TO: I tried. (laughs) I was in a dance class with Patrick Swayze. His mother, Patsy Swayze, had a dance studio here at the time so it was a class in her studio. I also studied with Houston Ballet and we did, when Nureyev came to town, who choreographed *Raymonda*, I was a Super in that, that was an interesting experience. That would've been in the 70's.

BC: While you were already box office manager?

TO: Yeah.

BC: So you were busy.

TO: Yeah, and then I was in the first two productions of Theatre Under the Stars at Miller Theatre, *The Boy Friend* and *Carnival*. That would've been before '65.

BC: So when did you stop acting?

TO: After I went to a few rehearsals. (laughs)

BC: Well it sounds like you did a few shows before you decided to stop.

TO: Yeah well it was kind of like, "Oh, do I really want to do this?" and then I decided, "No, I don't." I'd rather be behind the scenes.

BC: Keeping the train running. Do you remember how you got your job here at the Alley?

TO: I do, it's kind of funny, my whole professional career I've been here on Texas Avenue. I was working for Missouri Pacific Railroad in Union Station at that time. The building that had my office in it is still there, it's a part of Minute Maid Park now. I can still see the windows of the office that I used to look out on the street. I was a rate analyst with the railroad. I used to come down here on my lunch break and watch them build the Alley. I'd sit across the street on the Plaza and watch it come out of the ground. And it just so happened that when they were opening that theatre, that year, the mailroom person apparently had dumped, instead of taking the invitations to the post office, he had dumped them in the garbage can, and so there was an opening here at the Alley. I had a friend who worked here, so I applied, and that was the start of my Alley career.

BC: So this building was built in the mid 1960's, but the Alley has been around for longer than that.

TO: Yeah, at what I call "The Old Alley", over on Berry Avenue, I was a volunteer.

BC: So you already knew Nina?

TO: And Beth Sanford, and Bettye Fitzpatrick.

BC: And they were in shows for years here.

TO: Years and years and years, yes.

BC: So obviously your job has changed, you said you started in the mail room, then you were box office manager, and now you're the Audience Services Director?

TO: Made that title up. (laughs)

BC: Well it sounds really fancy, it is really fancy. Were there any interim steps between those positions?

TO: No, it's always been kind of an evolution. We've had a Box Office Manager and a Subscription Manager, then we had that consolidated, then it kind of became a specialized position. If they were going to hire someone to replace me, it would be a totally different job description, I'm sure, than what mine is, just because I've been here so long. I know what needs to be done.

BC: What does need to be done? What do you do day-to-day?

TO: Oh, mostly dealing with customers. I call myself a "subscriber whisperer."

BC: (laughs) okay, what does that mean?

TO: Customer service, dealing with subscribers. (By) phone, e-mail. Some in person, not as much as I would like, because I love people and I love the personal contact.

BC: Awesome. Do you have any other favorite memories of the Alley?

TO: Well, remembering some of the famous people that have come through. Maggie Smith, Margaret Hamilton, Lynn Redgrave, Helen Hayes, Robert Stevens, Tennessee Williams.

BC: Did you ever meet Edward Albee?

TO: Oh yeah, he was a cat person, and I'm a cat person, so.

BC: Did you share tips about cat care?

TO: We talked about cats a little bit, yeah.

BC: (laughs) That's awesome. Is there any advice you would want to give to young people coming into the box office world today? Or the theatre in general?

TO: Well, in our case, the box office seems to be the jumping off point for almost any other thing in the theatre. We've had people go into development, group sales, education, into stage management, so it's an entry level position that gives you opportunities to explore what you would really like to do.

BC: That's great. Lastly, is there anything you want to say to the many Alley patrons who will be reading this interview?

TO: I love you!