This Is YOUR Theater

This fall marks the centennial of the birth of Nina Vance, founder of the Alley Theatre.

Recognized as a pioneer of the American regional theater movement, Nina was born in Yoakum, Texas, on October 22, 1914. She graduated from Texas Christian University and then trained at the University of Southern California, Columbia University and the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. She moved to Houston in 1939 to teach drama and speech at Jefferson Davis and San Jacinto High Schools, explaining, “There’s always been a strong force of the teacher in me.”

In the early 1940s, Nina volunteered at Houston’s Little Theater where she helped with props, worked in the box office, performed walk-on parts and did “a lot of sweeping.” Taking a leave in 1946 from her teaching job, Nina began to direct plays for the Jewish Community Center. She directed more than a dozen productions for the Players Guild between 1945 and 1947 and, following the innovative lead of Margo Jones of Dallas, her troupe performed in the round in places like the Rice and Lamar hotels.

One day a small group of her theater colleagues met and said, “You know,
why don’t we start a theater? (Meaning, why don’t YOU?).” Intrigued and excited, Nina realized she had to let people know, and so she reached into her purse, found $2.14 and purchased the now legendary 214 postcards inviting folks to a meeting at a dance studio at 3617 Main to discuss a new theater for Houston. More than 100 theater enthusiasts attended that first meeting on October 7, 1947 – a turnout that exceeded her expectation. Nina recalled, “It was all very democratic. You paid a dime and became a voting member.” When the question on what to call the theater was raised, one actress looked at their surroundings and the narrow path leading to the dance studio and suggested, “The Alley.” The name was accepted unanimously.

Her triumphant 1949 production of *The Children’s Hour*, which inaugurated the Alley’s second home in an old fan factory on Berry Street, reaffirmed her belief that Houston theater audiences wanted and appreciated more mature, thought-provoking theater. When the show ended and the cast took their bows, the applause was overwhelming. When the applause finally died down, Nina stepped forward on stage and said “This is your theater.”

By the Alley’s 11th season, Nina declared that the Alley was probably the only theater outside of New York to operate year-round – a tradition the Alley has upheld to this day. When, in 1959, the Ford Foundation awarded the Alley a grant to assist in developing a resident acting company, Nina’s tenacity was finally rewarded. The Alley today is one of a small handful of regional theater companies that maintains a professional resident company.

To realize her dream of developing a world-renowned theater company, Nina knew that she had to have a first-class theater building. In 1962, with a gift of land from the Houston Endowment and a challenge grant from the Ford Foundation, her dream of a permanent home in downtown Houston was attainable. However, there was still one major hurdle to overcome – the Ford Foundation grant required the Alley to raise $900,000 from the Houston community by a deadline date. During the hot summer of 1963, a city-wide effort was undertaken to meet the challenge. With support from thousands of Houstonians, including a crusade of children who donated pennies from their lemonade stands, Nina’s vision became a reality with the dedication of the Alley Theatre building on October 13, 1968.

For all her gregarious ways, Nina Vance was a private person. In 1979, she kept the seriousness of
The Meaning of Family

Virtually everyone knows the first names of their parents, and in many cases, their four grandparents. But unless they are interested in genealogy, very few people know the first names of all eight great-grandparents. For most of us, it’s uncertain whether our own lives will have influence beyond a few generations.

There is a way, however, for your life and values to be a force for good far into the future. You can make a gift to the Alley Theatre that continues giving for decades to come. A thoughtful bequest in your estate plan is one way to perpetuate your concern for the theatre’s future. When realized, legacy gifts are invested within the Alley Theatre Endowment and a portion of the earnings will be used to support the Alley’s general operations.

It’s possible to leave assets to benefit both loved ones and the organizations that have been important in your life. For example, you can create a trust that pays income first to family members before assets are distributed to the Alley (a charitable remainder trust). You might fund the trust with the balance in your IRA or qualified retirement plan and avoid income tax that would otherwise be due when distributions are made. Or you might consider a trust that pays income first to the Alley for a period of time and then passes assets down to family members (a charitable lead trust).

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her health condition a secret from everyone, including her staff and supporters. Then, on February 18, 1980, she passed away, separating the theater from the woman who had birthed and shepherded it through its formative years.

Now, as we benefit from her vision, it is with a great sense of pride and gratitude that we echo Nina Vance’s words: “This is your theater.”

As you think about your future and the legacy you want to leave, please take a moment to consider the role the Alley Theatre has played in your life. A gift from your estate plan for the Alley Theatre, no matter the size, is a meaningful expression of support to help safeguard the future of your theater.
On Your Mark, Get Set . . . Wait

If you’re waiting for Congress to act before making a distribution from your IRA to the Alley Theatre this year, you may have to hold off a little longer. The provision that allows IRA owners ages 70½ and older to make direct gifts to charity expired at the end of 2013. Renewal of the provision is included in the extenders package that is awaiting action in Congress.

Each year since 2006, eligible IRA owners have been able to direct the custodians of their accounts to send checks up to $100,000 to charity. Although no income tax charitable deduction is available, the distribution is not subject to tax, as it would be if the IRA owner made a withdrawal and then gave the funds to charity. Qualified charitable distributions also satisfy required minimum distributions, providing tax savings.

If you normally itemize your income tax deductions, consider having your gift to the Alley made from your IRA, at least up to the amount of your required minimum distribution. If the law is extended, the gift will be considered a qualified distribution and you’ll avoid the tax you would otherwise owe on a withdrawal. If the law is not extended, you’ll be subject to tax, but receive an offsetting income tax charitable deduction. Call us if you have questions about making gifts from your IRA or the status of the renewal.

Free Booklet

In today’s economy, it is important that you plan your financial program carefully to take advantage of all of the income tax saving measures to which you are entitled. The Alley is offering a FREE publication on Minimizing Your Income Taxes. The publication can be mailed or e-mailed to you. There is, of course, no obligation. Simply return the enclosed card in the envelope provided.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nina Vance’s choice for the Alley’s inaugural production in 1947 was A Sound of Hunting, a wartime drama. Her theater friends argued that she should open with a comedy because she knew nothing about war. She felt she had an advantage because, “the casting was all men and many of those who were coming back from the war could tell me how to do this play.” Plus, the men could move the piano back for the next day’s dance classes.

If you would like to make a bequest for the future of the Alley Theatre, our legal name is Alley Theatre and our Tax ID number is 74-1143076.