

Nina Vance

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Nina Vance, founder and artistic director of the Alley Theatre in Houston

VANCE, NINA ELOISE WHITTINGTON (1914-1980).

Nina Vance, founder and artistic director of the Alley Theatre in Houston, the only child of Calvin Perry and Minerva (DeWitt) Whittington, was born on October 22, 1914, in Yoakum, Texas. She was descended directly from Green DeWitt and Benjamin Beeson. She began her theater training at Texas Christian University and earned the B.A. in 1935. She continued postgraduate work in theater at the American Academy of Dramatic Art, Columbia University, and the University of Southern California. In 1939 Nina Whittington moved to Houston, where she taught drama and speech at Jefferson Davis High School and later at San Jacinto High School. She also taught private acting classes and by 1941 was acting herself with the Houston Little Theatre and the Houston Community Players, an amateur group headed by **Margo (Margaret Virginia) Jones**.

She married an attorney, Milton Vance, but the childless marriage eventually ended in divorce. After Jones left Houston, Nina Vance was asked to teach adult acting classes for the Jewish Community Center, but instead she offered her services as a director of plays. She was raised a Presbyterian, but she stipulated that the participants in her Players Guild could be of any religious denomination. Vance directed over a dozen productions for the Players Guild between 1945 and 1947, and following the innovative lead of Margo Jones, her troupe performed in the round in such places as the Rice and Lamar hotels. When the Players Guild disbanded for financial reasons, Vance and her group of theater enthusiasts were without a home. In the summer of 1947 her friends Vivien and Bob Altfeld had the idea to produce plays in Vivien's dance studio. Vance agreed to direct, and at the group's first meeting in October over 100 people interested in a new amateur theater for Houston attended. The group voted on a name, and the Alley Theatre was born.

Under the leadership of Nina Vance, from its modest beginnings in an eighty-five-seat theater that had to be converted and struck for every performance, the Alley Theatre grew to be one of the most prestigious nonprofit resident theaters in the United States. When the fire marshall forced the group to close its doors in 1948, the theater reopened in a converted fan factory that remained its home until 1968. In 1960 the Alley was one of the first recipients of a Ford Foundation grant to support a resident acting company. In 1962 the foundation awarded \$2.1 million more to the Alley to construct a new theater in downtown Houston and provide operating expenses for its first decade. The opening of the new Alley Theatre in November 1968 was a nationally chronicled event. Since then the Alley Theatre has continued to uphold its position as one of the nation's pioneering and leading nonprofit resident theaters.

Nina Vance was responsible for the Alley Theatre's success. She fought for its early advancement to professionalism and in 1954 made the irreversible decision to "go equity"-to turn her theater into a unionized group of professionals *rather than to remain in amateur status*.

Starting with *Season with Ginger* in 1950, she championed the cause of new plays and produced

many world premieres, including *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* in 1965. She was also an advocate of a repertoire of American and European classics. Moreover, Vance herself directed more than 100 plays during her tenure at the Alley.

Her participation was also instrumental in the development of the resident theater as a national movement. She was one of the founding members of the Theatre Communications Group, a networking organization for professional regional theaters, in 1961. The same year, President John F. Kennedy invited her to serve on the advisory committee of the proposed National Culture Center, and in 1963 Secretary of State Dean Rusk appointed her to the advisory committee on the arts of the United States Advisory Commission on International Education and Cultural Affairs. As early as 1958 Vance received her first personal grant from the Houston branch of the English Speaking Union to observe and report on theater conditions in England. The Ford Foundation awarded her a director's grant for travel and study in 1959, and in 1974 she was the recipient of a special "artistic director's discretionary fund" prize from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In 1969 the University of St. Thomas in Houston awarded Vance an honorary doctor of letters degree.

In 1977 she was one of eight American directors invited by the United States Department of State, the Russian Ministry of Culture, and the Soviet copyright agency, VAAP, to observe Russian theatrical productions in Moscow and Leningrad. As a result she invited Galina Volchek, artistic director of the Sovremennik Theater in Moscow, to restage her production of the Russian play *Echelon* in Houston with Alley actors. The American premiere of *Echelon* in 1978 was the first instance of such a project and a highlight of Vance's career. After a long struggle with cancer, Nina Vance died on February 18, 1980, in Houston. She was buried at Masonic Cemetery in Gonzales, Texas. At a memorial tribute in March of that year, her theater was renamed the Nina Vance Alley Theatre.

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