

## **Margo Jones - who was she?**

**Category : Who's Who:In American Theatre**

**Published by [Dobey](#) on 2007/3/8**

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### **MARGO JONES**

#### **Who she was**

Margo was "the Texas Tornado" who dreamed the resident theater into existence in the 1940s and '50s. She was born in Livingston, Texas in 1911 and died in 1955 in Dallas at the age of 43.

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Margaret Virginia Jones was born on December 12, 1913, to Richard H. Jones and Martha Pearl Collins of Livingston, Texas. She received the nickname Margo while a student at Texas State College for Women and was known as Margo Jones in her professional life. She began study at TSCW at the age of 14, graduating from that institution with a master's degree in psychology in 1932. She immediately went to work at Louis Veda Quince's Southwestern School of Theater in Dallas in a position she described as "glorified office girl." After a year in Dallas, Margo Jones attended the Pasadena Playhouse for the summer of 1933 and then assumed her first full directorship with the Ojai Community Players of Ojai, California. After a year at Ojai she had the opportunity for international travel as the companion of a wealthy woman, attending theaters all over the world.

Upon her return to the United States in 1936, Margo Jones became an assistant director of the Federal Theater in Houston. The project folded after a few months, at which point Jones traveled to the Moscow Arts Festival, financing her trip by covering the event for the Houston Chronicle. Jones returned to Houston in the fall to begin work with the Recreation Department of the city; as part of her program she organized the Houston Community Players. In the summer of 1939 the Community Players leased the air-conditioned ballroom of the Lamar Hotel in which to perform. Out of necessity, since the ballroom lacked a stage or proscenium, Margo Jones staged her theater in the round. Under Jones' direction, the Players gave the world premiere of Edwin Justin Mayer's *Sunrise in My Pocket* and attracted some national recognition through its review by Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times*.

In 1942 Margo Jones left Houston to direct summer theater in East Hampton, New York. She joined the Drama Department of the University of Texas in September of that year with the conviction that the University was a place where theater could continue to operate at professional standards during wartime. She remained in Austin from 1942 to 1944, but took several leaves of absence to direct other theaters. In 1943 she staged *You Touched Me* by Tennessee Williams and Donald Windham at

the Cleveland Playhouse. She took the play to the Pasadena Playhouse and while there also directed Theodore Apstein's *Sporting Pink* and the premiere of Apstein's *Velvet Touch*. In 1944 she returned to Pasadena to direct *The Purification* by Tennessee Williams.

In that same year she was granted a fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation to study the possibilities for a permanent professional theater in Dallas. However, after only three months of study Jones received an invitation to co-direct another Tennessee Williams play with Eddie Dowling. She discontinued the fellowship in order to work on *The Glass Menagerie*, which opened in Chicago in December 1944 and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1945. In spring 1945 Jones returned to Dallas to follow through on her plan to organize a local professional theater. The project was launched almost immediately with a generous check from Ms. and Mrs. Eugene McDermott, but due to difficulties such as finding a suitable building for theater in post-war conditions, the theater was not officially opened until November 1947, with the premiere of William Inge's *Farther Off From Heaven*. In the meantime, Jones directed two other Broadway productions: *On Whitman Avenue*, by Maxine Wood which opened in May 1946, and *Joan of Lorraine*, by Maxwell Anderson which opened in November 1946.

Margo Jones' permanent professional repertory theater dedicated to the staging of new plays and classics was a pioneering effort of professional regional theater. Due to limitations in building and budget, Jones used arena staging or "theater-in-the-round," for her productions. Jones' work in Dallas theater attracted critical acclaim and box office success, and earned her an international reputation. Margo Jones wrote a book on the history and methods of arena staging titled, *Theatre-in-the-Round*. Eight of the plays she produced in Dallas eventually reached Broadway. Two of them she directed herself in New York: *Summer and Smoke* in 1948 and *Southern Exposure* in 1950. Another, *Inherit the Wind*, was a hit on Broadway at the time of Jones' untimely death from uremic poisoning on July 24, 1955.

Margo Jones and the theater she founded in Dallas were pioneers, which earned national and international recognition with a policy of performing only classic or previously unproduced plays using a professional repertory company of the highest caliber and innovative theater-in-the-round staging. The Margo Jones Theatre in Dallas was a milestone in the growth of regional theater.

The theater, which she founded, continued after her death, but its success declined, and after a brief transformation to traditional proscenium staging the Margo Jones Theatre closed in December 1959.

The Margo Jones Theatre was originally incorporated under the name Dallas Civic Theater, Inc. It was also called Dallas Theater, Inc., in early materials soliciting pledges. Moreover, from the very beginning, Jones envisioned the name of the theater changing each year in accordance with the current calendar. Each year at midnight on New Year's Eve, the sign on the theater's marquee changed to the new date, so that Theater '50 became Theater '51 and so on. After her death, Jones' name was added to the title, and the theater proclaimed itself Margo Jones Theatre '55. At the beginning of the 1959-60 season, when the theater merged with the Maple Theater and abandoned arena staging, the name became Margo Jones Theatre. Bank accounts were held concurrently under both the Dallas Civic Theater and Theatre '50 names; the former for holding funds and the latter for current operating expenses.

The Theatre faced continuous difficulties in finding and maintaining suitable housing. Ultimately, problems of finances and management outweighed its critical successes, and the theatre closed in 1960.

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### **Her theater philosophy**

Margo was influenced by the European art theater, which she encountered in the 1930s, and combined this with a belief in "decentralization" - the movement to expand theater beyond Broadway's commercial domination. Through her work for the Depression-era Federal Theater Project in Houston, she also absorbed the idea of an American national theater. In the early 1940s, Margo put all these concepts together in a plan to start a national network of nonprofit, professional theaters that would serve new audiences and nurture the artists soon to emerge from World War II. At the time, professional theater was virtually non-existent outside New York.

### **Her importance**

Margo was one of the major innovators and visionaries in American theater history. She founded Theatre '47 in Dallas, a non-profit professional theater that was the first of its kind in the country, and ran it until her death in 1955. (The name changed with every year.) It provided the model for the resident theater movement of the 1960s and '70s which transformed the American stage. She was a crucial figure in the early career of Tennessee Williams and discovered playwright William Inge. Her 1955 world premiere in Dallas of Lawrence and Lee's *Inherit the Wind* - initially rejected by eight Broadway producers - saved a major American play.

### **Her innovations**

Margo utilized and fine-tuned many producing strategies, which she detailed in her book *Theatre-in-the-Round* (called the "bible" of the resident theater movement). Among them: low-cost arena staging, use of a resident company of professional actors, subscription sales, board development and community involvement. In addition, she excelled at marketing, publicity and fund-raising - bringing to all tasks a legendary personal fire and energy, and a commitment to theater as art.

### **Margo as a woman in theater**

Margo was preceded by such figures as actor Eva Le Gallienne, who also sought to start a national theater, and Hallie Flanagan who ran the Federal Theater Project. She inspired followers Nina Vance and Zelda Fichandler, founders respectively of the Alley Theater in Houston (1949) and Washington's Arena Stage (1950), and others, both men and women.(1)

### **The Margo Jones Award:**

The Margo Jones Medal commemorates one of the pioneers of the American professional regional theatre movement. Margo Jones (1912-1955) supported and nurtured new plays at the theatre she founded in Dallas in 1947, including Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's *Inherit the Wind*, William Inge's first produced play, *Farther Off From Heaven*, and Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke*. The pattern she created for developing new plays is now a standard method for producing new plays in the living American theatre.

The award was established by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, and is given to "that citizen-of-the-theatre who has demonstrated a significant impact, understanding and affirmation of the craft of playwriting, with a lifetime commitment to the encouragement of the living theatre

everywhere."

The Margo Jones Medal Committee includes Janet Waldo Lee, representing the family of Robert E. Lee; Deborah Robison, for the family of Jerome Lawrence; Emilie S. Kilgore, Christopher Durang and Marsha Norman, the most recent recipients of the Medal; and Alan Woods and Nena Couch, the Director and Curator of the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute at the Ohio State University, which administers the Medal.

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Information compiled from these great sources:

1-Sweet Tornado-- <http://www.margojones.org/>

2-Margo Jones Award- <http://library.osu.edu/sites/tri/jones/jones.html>

3 <http://dallaslibrary.org/ctx/archives/MA62-1.html>