

WHAT SHE WAS THINKING:

Nina Vance's Role in the Creation of the Alley Theatre on Texas Avenue

By Catherine Essinger



The Alley Theatre's second home was a converted fan factory on Berry Avenue, with an arena stage that seated 310. The space was so tight that a man sitting in the front row once reached out and lit an actor's cigarette in the middle of a scene when the prop lighter broke.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-1955-0751-001.

The Alley Theatre Company's concrete fortress on Texas Avenue reopened in September 2015 following its first major renovation. Studio RED Architects' overhaul of the facility sparked accusation, argument, and eventual acceptance in print and online (the three stages of grief in building renovations). Many of the improvements are unquestionably positive, such as better sight lines for the Hubbard Stage, more stalls in the women's restroom, increased wheelchair-accessible seating, and a new second floor bar. The meatier changes, however, were aimed at improving the dressing rooms and backstage areas over, under, and around the Hubbard Stage. Naturally, the alterations aimed at employee accommodation were more controversial than those aimed at audience comfort.

The project's lightning rod was a tall fly loft, clad in eye-catching zinc, which glared down from the Smith Avenue edge in early renderings. The fly loft, which is used to hoist

scenery, lights, and other theatrical matter above the stage, inspired the anger of preservationists when archpaper.com published a feature on the renovation in December 2014. Ben Koush published a disparaging article titled "The grain silo plopped atop the Alley" in the *Houston Chronicle* on December 17, 2014. In response, the Alley's managing director, Dean Gladden, and others defended the changes they considered necessary and overdue. Alley representatives had long been frustrated with the space's inherent limitations and argued that the original design was short-sighted and underestimated the technical needs of postmodern productions. In a *Houston Chronicle* article on December 18, Gladden teasingly laid the blame before the feet of the person most responsible for the building's original sins – not architect Ulrich Franzen or

Hugo Neuhaus, the committee chair who selected Franzen, but the Alley's first artistic director, Nina Vance: "There's a rumor – I don't know if it's true – that Nina Vance never wanted to have touring shows to play in her theater. So she made sure that touring shows *couldn't* come through."¹

Much of the negative criticism directed at the squat concrete castle has been aimed at Nina Vance since its completion in 1968, especially when the criticism dips into vague condescension. Take, for example, George Izenour's description of the "nonarchitectural black-box" Neuhaus Stage in his book *Theater Design*: "...virtually a carbon copy of Director Nina Vance's earlier successful theater improvisation in an abandoned factory, and like its prototype it works – that is, if you like intimate theater in the round." Izenour, who designed the theater's lighting grid, gives credit for the Hubbard Stage to Vance and stage designer Paul Owen, with architectural design by Ulrich Franzen. "I therefore only conjecture as to design intentions and the forces operating upon Miss Vance," he writes before belittling the building's materials, style, and inflexibility.²

This tendency to lay responsibility at the feet of the artistic director and not the architect is not as perverse as it might appear. Nina Vance was no mere board of trustees hire. She was a co-founder and, when the building opened in 1968, she had been the controlling force at the theater for twenty-two years. Although the original idea to estab-



Nina Eloise Whittington left her hometown of Yoakum, Texas, to study theater at Texas Christian University, where this photo was taken. As a postgraduate she studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Art, Columbia University, and University of Southern California, before moving to Houston to teach drama and speech at Jefferson Davis and San Jacinto High Schools.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

lish the Alley Theatre was not hers, she was responsible for nearly every artistic and financial decision that guided the theater's development.

The Alley began as a diversion for theatrical hobbyists with more than one hundred voting members. (Membership was famously open to anyone for the cost of ten cents.) From the beginning, Nina Vance constantly fought to create a theater company based on her own vision, despite limited or no funding. She negotiated with fire marshals, manipulated volunteers, and battled with members who disagreed with her about plays, staffing, and Equity status. In 1952, she was able to force a vote that gave her full artistic and managing control of the theater. That ushered in the era of Nina Vance's benevolent dictatorship, a period of extraordinary growth and risk-taking. Under her exclusive command the Alley joined the Actors' Equity Association and developed a national reputation, attracting numerous leading actors and directors from Broadway. Vance aggressively cultivated a relationship with the Ford Foundation, which was then focused on developing regional theater. It was Ford Foundation money that allowed her to first hire a company of professional actors and eventually build two stages on Texas Avenue.³

In 1962 she decided that her company had outgrown its location, a 310-seat converted fan factory on Berry Street. A determined Nina Vance acquired land from Houston Endowment and funds from the Ford Foundation. Her hand-picked board appointed a fundraising campaign committee and a committee to select an architect.⁴

The latter was chaired by Miesian architect Hugo V. Neuhaus, Jr., whose service to the Alley Theatre is evidenced by the arena theater being named in his honor. Houston-born Neuhaus was educated at Harvard Graduate School of Design (HGSD). His successful practice is best-known for the elegant houses he produced in the fifties and sixties, a period which found him at the height of his architectural and social powers. He served on the Board of Trustees at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where he

eventually became a life trustee. One of his services to that institution was to chair the Building Committee that selected Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to design the 1954 addition. In 1962 he was asked to perform the same service for the new Alley Theatre building. It is possible that Nina Vance and the Board of Trustees anticipated another Mies van der Rohe commission, or, at the least, another internationally known architect. With Neuhaus overseeing the committee, they would certainly have anticipated another cool modernist. Neuhaus's committee, however, championed an unexpected contender for the Alley's commission, giving another HGSD graduate his first major commission.⁵



Ulrich Franzen, seen here in the late 1970s, won the 1972 Bartlett Award from the American Institute of Architects for his Alley Theatre design. The award honors designs that overcome architectural barriers.

Photo courtesy of Josephine Franzen.

Ulrich Franzen, the man selected to design the new Alley Theatre, was born in Germany and worked in I. M. Pei's office before establishing his own firm in 1955. Much of his early work was residential. He had never designed a theater before the Alley. His career was clearly on the rise in 1962, however, and the Ford Foundation backed his selection. The foundation provided another grant of \$1.4 million which was issued specifically to support innovative theater architecture.⁶

Nina Vance, who had maintained control over the Alley creatively and financially for so long, could not have felt comfortable at this time. Her character was audacious, but a multi-million dollar public project was beyond her ability to control and, sometimes, understand. Her

concerns and hopes for the building are on record in the Nina Vance Alley Theatre papers, archived in the University of Houston Libraries' Special Collections. In November 1963 and January 1964, she sent Ulrich Franzen a series of

WE ALL MUST ACT FOR THE ALLEY!

Chip in a chair! Business firms and individuals who subscribe at least \$1,000 will endow one of the 850 seats in the new Alley Theatre. In recognition of their pledge, a handsome bronze plaque bearing the donor's name, a memorial name, or a company or firm name will be permanently affixed to one of the seats. A \$1,000 pledge may be paid for on the basis of \$200 per year, beginning in 1963 and continuing over a period of five years.

Chip in your share! Even though The Ford Foundation has kicked off our campaign by pledging a fantastic portion of our total goal, \$900,000 remains quite a lot of money! All Houston must dig down deep to have our dreams for the Alley become a reality. Give \$5, \$10, \$25, \$50, \$100 — whatever you can!

"NO RESIDENT THEATRE IN EXISTENCE HAS SUCH ARTISTIC POTENTIALITIES AS THE ALLEY" . . . W. McNeil Lowry, Director of the Program of Humanities and the Arts, Ford Foundation

"THE FORD FOUNDATION HAS GIVEN US A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY. WE MUST MEET THE CHALLENGE!" . . . Lewis Cutrer, Mayor, City of Houston

"IT IS AN IRREFUTABLE FACT: A CITY WITH A WELL DEVELOPED CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT TENDS TO ATTRACT IMPORTANT INDUSTRY AND PEOPLE. A CITY THAT CONTINUES TO FLOURISH MUST SUPPORT THE ARTS." . . . Marvin Hurley, Executive Vice President, Houston Chamber of Commerce

"OUR OPPORTUNITY . . . ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT DRAMA CENTERS" . . . Houston Chronicle Editorial

"HOUSTON NEEDS A THRIVING REPERTORY THEATRE. THERE IS EVERY REASON TO BELIEVE THAT HOUSTONIANS WILL RESPOND" . . . Houston Post Editorial

"NOW IS THE TIME TO GIVE THE ALLEY THE SUPPORT IT NEEDS" . . . Houston Press Editorial

In 1962 Vance acquired a gift of land from the Houston Endowment and a \$2.1 million grant from the Ford Foundation to build a large modern theater. To secure the grant, however, the Alley had to raise an additional \$900,000 locally. The citywide campaign raised \$903,000 from more than 25,000 individual donors. Photo courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, used with permission from the Alley Theatre.



By the 1960s Vance, seen here directing a 1962 production of Becket, had developed a national reputation. She was invited by President John F. Kennedy to serve on the National Culture Center's advisory committee and appointed by Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the U.S. Advisory Commission on International Education and Cultural Affairs.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0157-0665.

letters detailing her design needs and philosophy, which are organized into practical and thematic sections. Those notes provide much insight into the design project and the culture of Vance's Alley Theatre.

Vance did not lightly enter into her interactions with Franzen. Before she began communicating with him she toured facilities, read on the subject of theater design, corresponded with George C. Izenour, and personally facilitated discussions with each staff member about their space needs, even sending Franzen notes from her conversations with interns and volunteers. She wrote disapprovingly of the experience of her peers at the Arena Stage Theatre in Washington, D.C. who "...wanted no collaborators or consultants."⁷

Vance did not attempt to bluff her way through the design process in these notes. She acknowledged gaps in her own knowledge and entreated her architect to "...teach me about materials, textures...I want to know and understand." She insisted on knowing more about Izenour's findings on acoustics, even after being put off by Franzen. "I know that you told me that acoustics was an inexact science," she wrote him before insisting on a consultation with Izenour.⁸

Intelligently, Vance also attempted to communicate with her architect in the language of existing buildings. Her two touchstones were the Mummies Theatre in Oklahoma City (later the Stage Center) and the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. – two other regional theater companies nurtured by the Ford Foundation. Mummies, which was under construction at the same time, guided technical decisions. Arena served as a cautionary tale. She toured both buildings, knew their artistic directors, and used those structures to convey to Franzen what she hoped to achieve and wished to avoid.

Included among the documents she sent to Franzen are the Mummies Theatre program, her notes from touring that site, and the text of a speech made by Arena stage director Zelda Fichandler, titled "The Collaboration of Architect & Client in the Planning of Arena Stage." She also investigated the technical systems of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and decided she wanted their telephone system in the Alley.⁹

The Arena Stage Theatre in Washington, D.C. opened its theater-in-the-round stage in 1961. Sharing many qualities with the Alley, the Arena Stage was a fast-growing regional company co-founded by a long-time artistic director, which outgrew a repurposed building (an abandoned brewery) with Ford Foundation money. Like Franzen, Arena Stage architect Harry Weese was a highly pedigreed but still emerging architect. The architect/client relationship between Weese and artistic director Zelda Fichandler, therefore, may have mirrored that of Franzen and Vance. "The architect, who had never designed a theater before, leaned heavily on the experience built up by the client," reported *Progressive Architecture* in 1962. Nina Vance consulted with both Weese and Fichandler, though she disapproved of the starkness of their building and many design elements. As she was unable to communicate what she did like to her architect, she could use the Arena to explain what she did not like. She negatively described low ceilings, a dim and severe lobby, and drab building materials. She longed for a more "joyful" building: "Would it look different...if it had trees or some frivolity to counterbalance the clean, firm look?" She recognized, however, that her objectives and conditions differ from Fichandler's. "It's a winter building," she wrote Franzen, "Well after all it's only used in the winter. I am going to play spring and summer and skip the fall." (Then, as now, the Alley operated year-round.)¹⁰



The Alley Theatre grew at a whirlwind pace, becoming an Equity company only seven years after it was founded. As the producer, director, and business manager, Nina Vance, shown here in the 1950s, rapidly became a local celebrity.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Mummies Theater, on the other hand, was a huge influence. The exterior of John M. Johansen's now demolished fortress of decks and turrets was reminiscent of those used at the Alley. Both theaters house two stages surrounded by function-determined silos. Vance also wanted to learn from the Mummies's interiors and technical spaces. She was keen to follow the Mummies's model and have two lobbies in

order to minimize noise. This would allow her to run two plays simultaneously. More importantly, she hoped to avoid the cost of a fly loft by using the alternative system installed in *Mummers*, “The manner in which [managing director Mack] Scism intends to fly scenery is a very simple one that David Hayes designed and seems economical, easy and good. I would have to first find out precisely what it is and check it out carefully with my own technicians. It is doubtless not more than chains but I think it would work. This system does not require a tall fly gallery and without this height, a small amount of cubic footage is saved.” (She may have been referring to David Hays, who was also associated with Scism at the National Theater of the Deaf at the time of his death, according to Scism’s *New York Times* obituary.) It is clear, therefore, that Vance was not trying to prevent the presence of touring companies. She was, instead, hoping to install a cost-saving compromise. This alternative would still limit lighting options and prevent some special effects, however.¹¹

It appears that Nina Vance was willing to compromise in matters of taste, as well. Her personal style was well-established and easy to identify. Her personal papers are brimming with its evidence in portraits, wedding artifacts, and other mementos. Her clothes were modern, formal, sculptural, and feminine in a straightforward, elegant way. Her theater on Berry Street, which was altered to suit her, bore the same qualities. She and her volunteers created an understated lobby, a sophisticated, eye-catching façade, and an unexpected touch of class with the installation of old elevator doors, which served as a gate at the entrance alleyway. Her notes show that she and Franzen engaged in a polite tug of war over the style of the new building. She had a complicated appreciation of brutalism, the architectural style Franzen had then recently embraced and with which he is now most associated. Brutalism, which is characterized by exposed rough concrete and large modernist block forms,



Despite differences in their personal styles and experiences, Franzen and Vance worked closely together throughout the theater’s five-year design and construction.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0157-0664.

flourished in the sixties and seventies. Vance praised the work of exemplars like John Johansen and Paul Rudolph and endorsed brutalist design elements, like concrete arches. She repeatedly expressed longing for something bright and romantic, however, qualities that were anathema to brutalists like Franzen. “How can the building be warm?? and elegant??” she insisted. “This building must not look like a bank or a store or a post office – it is a house – a house of dreams.” This was reiterated when she asked Franzen, “But are humble materials good in a building of oblivion and dreams...?” She, again, uses the Arena Theatre to convey her fears to Franzen, “If the gymnasium were changed...and the lobby less severe – I miss a joyful thing. It’s such a serious building. I have said I don’t believe theatre is a circus but it is a delight.” This was at odds with Franzen’s own preferences. Like other Harvard graduates of his era (Rudolph, Johansen, Victor Lundy), he swerved to embrace the unadorned, straight-forward brutalism in the mid-sixties. The Alley’s final design makes clear that Franzen won the battle of style.¹²

On matters of substance, however, Franzen was able to meet Vance’s long list of reasonable demands outlined in her letters. She preferred that the audience descend into a theater, which she considered “...common to all good theatres...” She repeatedly expressed concern about the flow of human traffic through and around the theater, so Franzen filled the facility with a series of alleys (through the restrooms, past the box office, etc.). She saw the benefit of a green room, but showed no enthusiasm for a VIP room. She dutifully reported that they “...want a bar for members...” but her tone suggested that she did not care to have the members hanging about. She was, after all, plagued by the mob-rule of the Alley Theatre’s membership in earlier years and the board of directors was then making important decisions about the new building’s architect, site, and budget, which discomfited her.¹³

Her creativity was often evident in her notes. For example, she wrote, “I am intrigued with the idea of diverting the eye away from the stage until performance... Are there rooms where great pieces of sculpture are lighted to give the eye an adventure before show time?” (Notably she does not expect the interior architecture to provide this service, more evidence that she was unable to engage with building details.) Franzen also accommodated her only true flight of fancy: the mind-blowing suggestion that, “A drive-in ticket window has never been done at a theatre. Texans might like it.” The Alley’s drive-through will not actually take patrons up to the ticket window, but it comes close.¹⁴



The new theater brought a triumphant Nina Vance, seated on the Hubbard Stage, and the Alley Theatre much attention when it opened in 1968. The completed design won an additional Ford Foundation grant of \$1.4 million to support innovative architecture for the theater.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0157-0663.

Her desire to give her audience of Texans whatever they might like is evidenced throughout her letters to Franzen. She wanted the money to serve the public spaces, not technical spaces or offices: “All I’m saying, is priority. The non-public spaces just can’t be gold leaf – or spacious maybe.” She was fixated on the audience’s experience of the theater. (Can the lights be hidden until the beginning of the plays for pleasant effect? How should the ladies be expeditiously routed through the restroom?) Her only guidance concerning the concessions counter was, “...I am hopeful that this matter not be totally settled on a point of economics, but settled considering the audiences’ pleasure as much as possible.”¹⁵

Economy was the main factor in her planning and prioritizing, however. By the time Vance wrote to Franzen, she knew that the Ford Foundation and the local fundraising committee had secured more than three million dollars for the building project, but she was convinced that this sum was not enough. She feared the site was too large and the program too ambitious: “Will it be an island on the site which I think will be much larger than we need?” Her financial worries informed key decision-making about technical and employee spaces, as well as the building’s dimensions. She decided that her theater could do without some staff conveniences and artistic options to focus the budget on public spaces. She gave Franzen few notes on administrative needs, a third of which refer only to the mail room staff. An outer office is just needed for: “Dictation, actors’ files, budget study, hiring and firing actors, gossip.” She spends even less time on backstage facilities. She, again, delegates to the expert (in this case stage manager Bettye Fitzpatrick, who worked at the Alley for fifty-four years and became best known as a member of the acting company). Funding concerns also motivated her decision to veto a fly loft.

Had Franzen had previous experience in or deeper knowledge of theater design, he may have persuaded her to better develop the functional spaces. George Izenour implies in *Theater Design* that Vance’s inexperience with a large thrust stage prevented her from developing a fully functional theater. For her part, she claimed Izenour’s one blind spot was in “...the matter of worshipping a functioning space to the disregard of architectural artistry.” Vance acknowledged her own limitations in her notes to Franzen on “Auditorium, Stages,” saying, “I keep skirting mentally the problem of the main room as though it were something that I was afraid of. Perhaps I am since I have always worked in this small arena. I know I’m not afraid to work on any stage anywhere but I seem unable to go through the problem of a stage for the future.” Notably she only offered Franzen lightning notes for the arena stage.¹⁶



The Alley Theatre underwent a major renovation by Studio RED Architects in 2015, which added a fly loft above the Hubbard Stage and altered the seating. Photo courtesy of author.

The building was dedicated on October 13, 1968, after two years of construction. Vance planned a memorable and highly publicized opening night. Guests included Robert Stephens and Maggie Smith, from the National Theatre in Great Britain, as well as NASA’s entire astronaut corps and their wives. Guests paid up to one thousand dollars for a ticket to the first night performance of Bertolt Brecht’s *Galileo*. The building was featured in *Architectural Forum*, *A+U* and other architectural periodicals. The theater earned Ulrich Franzen & Associates the Bartlett Award from the American Institute of Architects in 1972. The award jury declared: “Inside and out, a brilliant theatrical event and a striking work of architecture. Faced with intimidating surroundings, the architect has responded with a bold and confident plastic expression that gives this building a memorable presence on the urban scene. The interior spaces have been skillfully designed to enhance the excitement and ceremony of theatergoing.” Accolades were not Franzen’s alone. “The design of the building was left entirely to Nina Vance and the architect she chose,” proclaimed *Architectural Forum* in its March 1969 issue. “[Franzen] had the one qualification that Miss Vance valued most: he was willing to analyze the theater’s needs without imposing any preconceptions. Franzen proved to be ‘a good student,’ she recalls...” Vance may have been justified in taking some credit for the building’s initial success, but she also bears some responsibility for its technical limitations.

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