

Paul Barrosse

From Paul Barrosse - Mee-Ow Castmember 1977-1980
and writer on SNL:

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In the chilly spring of 1979, four friends gathered over patty melts at Northwestern University's Norris Center student union to launch our own theatre company. Brad Hall, Robert Mendel, Angela Murphy and I called our new group Attack Theatre, dedicated to the production of new and seldom-produced plays and the art of improvisation. We also boldly proposed to have a profound effect on popular culture and scientific method. We were only half kidding.

We incorporated as a non-profit company and, true to our founding documents, we would rarely turn a profit. But what we managed to accomplish over the next decade would both exceed our highest expectations and ultimately frustrate our fondest hopes. Our innovative and idiosyncratic theatrical experiment didn't last, but it was a Little Big Bang – and the vibrations still emanate from that

explosion of passion, creativity, and controlled insanity. We were friends, classmates, artists, clowns, and concerned citizens bound together in one wacky, wild and inspired tribe. Our motto was “Art is Good” — not Art is Profitable or Easy or Painless.



Paul and Brad in “Clowns” (1979)

But I’m getting way ahead of the story...

Our first production opened on April 11, 1979 on the NU campus in a drafty shack known as Shanley Hall. Forty people attended the two performances of Clowns, a play about two improvisational comedians that Brad and I wrote and performed. Later that school year, Attack Theatre’s second offering, Subnormal by Barrosse & Hall, was staged at Northwestern’s Music Hall with Rush Pearson in the role of Max, a mild-mannered insurance salesman driven to steal a nuclear submarine.



“On the Fritz” with Laura Innes

Soon after Subnormal, our board of directors expanded when playwright [Grace McKeaney](#) (who had been an NU undergrad and Yale grad student) and her then husband, director Mark Milliken, joined forces with us. That September, we closed Attack Theatre’s inaugural season with a pair of one-act plays staged at the National College of Education: Playgrounds by [Brad Hall](#), and On the Fritz by Grace McKeaney and Lewis Black. (Yes, that [Lewis Black](#). Though none of us, including Lewis Black, knew it at the time.) On the Fritz starred [Laura Innes](#) (long before she was hobbling around as Dr. Kerry Weaver on ER). 120 people attended the two-week run. It

was a good start, but bigger things were in store.



You can click on each image to enlarge and read all the articles, posters, tickets, etc. in this article.



Sound business practice was never the hallmark of our offbeat theatrical enterprise, but one thing was obvious by October of '79. It wasn't going to be easy to raise charitable donations for something called Attack Theatre: too many violent, bomb-throwing connotations. And, remember, the Vietnam War had officially ended just four years earlier and two decades of roiling social unrest had finally cooled to a simmer. We fancied ourselves revolutionaries – but not that kind of revolutionary. So we made the practical decision to change our name to – what else? – The Practical Theatre Co.



Noyes Cultural Arts Center

With the help of a modest grant from the Evanston Arts Council, we staged our second season of new plays and improvisational comedy at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center in the summer of 1980. Over the course of six weeks, from July 25th to August 31st, we offered three vastly different productions to a total audience of 671 discriminating, sometimes sweltering theatergoers. (Alas, the air conditioning in this historic old school building wasn't the best.)



“Bag O’ Fun! Yes, it’s just tremendous. Bag O’ Fun! All those who attend us — will agree, you will see, that we are gonna be a great big Bag O’ Fun!”

The opening show of the summer, Bag O’ Fun, was the

first improvisational comedy revue written and performed by the PTC. Most of the cast were veterans of Northwestern's student-written [Mee-Ow Show](#), including me, Rush Pearson, John Goodrich, Jane Muller and Fat Dave Silberger, who became immortalized in one particularly bizarre sketch as The Clown of Crime. The show's irreverent, high-energy mix of slapstick, satire, absurdism, agitprop, and a dash of unlikely literary sophistication tied together with music and punctuated by wacky yet surprisingly polished song and dance numbers established a unique style and format that the PTC would refine in more than a dozen comedy revues over the next seven years.




NU buddy Christopher Michael Moore (left) in "Nightfall"
Two new plays filled the rest of the summer's theatrical bill. Nightfall by Lewis Black was a dark apocalyptic drama, and as incongruous a follow-up to the zany Bag O' Fun as could possibly be imagined. (Imagine a double bill of Monty Python & The Holy Grail and The Road.) Getting back to funny business, the season closed with another Barrosse & Hall comedy, Citizen Stumpick, a farcical ghost story featuring the Chandleresque film noir hero-in-his-own-mind, Detective Rex Cleveland. We'd hear from Rex again. But our gypsy period of moving from one performance space to another was over.



703 Howard Street

That same summer, our search for a permanent home led us to a small vacant storefront space at the corner of Custer and Howard Streets, on the border between Evanston and Chicago. The rental price was just about

right, but 703 Howard Street was hardly an ideal location for a cutting-edge theatre: it was a frontier outpost in a cultural dead zone. The only places within a mile where entertainment could be found were the Tally Ho Pub, just a block south on Howard, and The PM Club, a working class watering hole just a hundred staggered steps to the north. But at the time, the truly legendary Cottage diner was just up the street. The Cottage looked and felt as though it had not changed one iota since VJ Day, and when old Bob was serving us chezzies and a shooker, we knew we'd landed on our own little corner of heaven. There was magic on that corner. And those who were there know that's no exaggeration. 

The storefront at 703 Howard Street was leased and dedicated in July of 1980 and plans were made to build a theatre in the space — but before construction began, the show must, and did, go on.



“Reed O’Branson on the Campaign Trail” (1980)

The fateful Presidential election that put Ronnie Raygun in the White House was underway, and the PTC responded with a street theatre project in which we ran a fictional candidate named Reed O’ Branson for President. Starring as the glad-handing political everyman Reed O’ Branson was Reid Branson, a good-natured, sharp-witted, red headed pal from Northwestern, who also helped out on the theatre’s business side. We campaigned with Reed O’ on the streets of Chicago and at colleges, comedy clubs, and community centers. The project finally morphed into a holiday show in our storefront space entitled, Sant O’Claus on the Christmas Beat. We were having lots of fun, but we were operating largely under the cultural radar. Soon, we

would become far more than a blip on the Chicago theatre screen.

We christened our new storefront theatre space The John Lennon Auditorium and placed a photo of our hero in the front window. Our friend, fellow actor and designer Louis DiCrescenzo (whom Brad had met when they were both in the cast of the original production of *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?*) drew up plans for a 42-seat theatre that fit neatly into our little rectangular shoebox and construction was set to begin in the New Year.



Jamie Baron, Angela Murphy, Brad Hall and me admire Louis D's model of the soon-to-be-built John Lennon Auditorium. (Photo shot through the front window of 703 Howard Street.)

Before the year was out, the space would hold one more unscheduled event in early December: an Irish wake for John Lennon. It must be noted that our theatre space was never called The John Lennon Memorial Auditorium: it was named before the great man died – and afterward, we did not want Lennon's senseless murder to define him, or our continuing devotion to his life and art.



Dave Bell as "Ted" holds onto Rush (Max) as Gary (the Cop) tries to exercise some control in a press photo for "Subnormal" (1979)

Incredibly, December would soon shock us all with another tragic handgun killing. Tall, good looking and athletic, Dave Bell was a beloved fellow NU alum from Florida who had been Brad's and my roommate, a *Subnormal* cast member, and one of the first of our theatrical band to seek

his fortune as an actor in Los Angeles. On December 20, 1980, Dave was gunned down by a crazy, frightened old woman in Hollywood. His murder was second body blow to our collective, youthful sense of joy and optimism – the third if you count Reagan's election. The New Year would bring better, brighter days.