

## AMERICAN THEATRE WING BACKGROUND

Established in January 1940, the Wing got its name when prominent playwright Rachel Crothers called six friends—all notable women of the New York Theatre—and formed the American Wing of the British War Relief Society. By the end of the year, more than 3,000 volunteers—mostly women of the theatre—were knitting, sewing, collecting donations, organizing benefits, and raising many thousands of dollars to help British war victims.

On December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Rachel Crothers called a meeting. With the U.S. officially at war, the group renamed itself “The American Theatre Wing War Service.”

In March of 1941, the Wing opened the Stage Door Canteen. Located in the basement of the 44th Street Theatre, the former speakeasy was refurbished with volunteer labor and donated materials. Among those making donations were Lee Shubert who donated the premises and Irving Berlin who donated a piano.

The Wing’s wartime efforts included more than 50 different programs for entertainment, education and recreation including The Lunch Hour Follies, produced by Moss Hart and starring Broadway performers who were bussed as far away as Baltimore to entertain workers in factories and shipyards. In 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt declared the Wing to have made “the fines of all contributions toward war morale.”

As part of its post-wartime efforts, the Wing opened the Professional Training School in 1946 for GIs anxious to return to their jobs in professional theatre. Classes were taught by such stars as Oscar Hammerstein, Maureen Stapleton, Alfred Lunt, Tennessee Williams, Jerome Robbins and Martha Graham to students including Charlton Heston, Tony Randall, Lee Marvin, James Whitmore and Eli Wallach. In 1951, The Program was opened to civilians and the following year classes were opened to “experienced non-professionals.” The school closed in 1965.

In 1946, The Wing established its Community Plays Program, which offered a series of half-hour sketches on a range of social themes. Amateur theatres could choose scripts about poverty, cancer, safety, race relations, mental health and many other social and civic topics. In 1958, the program was re-christened "Plays for Living," a name familiar to anyone who has worked with civic-minded community theatres across the U.S. In 1960, "Saturday Theatre for Children" was developed to provide professional theatre for New York's school children. The tradition continues with the "Introduction to Broadway" program, which offers \$2.50 tickets to students and offers seminars allowing the youth to speak with casts and crews after performances.

The Tony Award, the most recognized symbol of the American Theatre Wing, was created in memory of Antoinette Perry, one of the Wing's founders, in 1947. Born into a wealthy family, Perry gave up her fortune to become an actress. She married, left the business to raise two daughters, and when her husband died, returned to the stage. She switched to directing in her 30's and was on the Wing's original executive board, serving as its chairman until her death in 1946. The American Theatre Wing created the Antoinette Perry award to commemorate Ms. Perry's example of excellence as a director.

On the Wing's directorate since the 1950's, Isabelle Stevenson became its president in 1966. She served for 33 years until Roy A. Somlyo took the position in 1999. Determined to keep the idea of theatre learning alive, in 1973 Ms. Stevenson developed the "Working in the Theatre" seminars. These seminars, as well as its many other ongoing programs, perpetuate the American Theatre Wing's passionate commitment to service in art.