



THE  
**CURTAIN RISES**

*By Virginia Butterfield*

(L-R) Mel Ferrer, Gregory Peck and Dorothy McGuire

## THEY WERE A TRIO OF HOLLYWOOD ACTORS

at the height of their film careers, for the most part under contract to David Selznick. But they longed for the legitimate stage and found it strangely absent in Los Angeles. So Gregory Peck, Mel Ferrer and Dorothy McGuire dreamed of opening a playhouse.

Despite megabucks and the adoration of millions, they missed theatre. Where, during repetitive takes on a film set, was the immediacy of a live performance? Where was the sense of cast and ensemble? And where, in particular, was the audience?

At first the three tried for a site in Los Angeles, at the corner of Wilshire and Doheny. But that plan fell through. Santa Barbara, maybe? Then Peck thought of his hometown.

Peck had grown up in La Jolla when it was a very small town. His father was a druggist at the corner of Fifth and Market in downtown San Diego. Gregory attended grammar school (at the Little Red Schoolhouse) and high school in San Diego. He went to UC Berkeley as a pre-med student, but in his senior year, a stage director needed “a tall man.” Greg was 6 foot 3 and qualified. But a reviewer was critical of his acting, causing this perfectionist to head for the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City to polish his skills. Summer stock followed, then various major roles, even several tours with Katharine Cornell.

By 1945, Peck was hard at work on two films — *The Macomber Affair* and *Gentleman's Agreement* — when nostalgia struck. And he remembered the La Jolla High School auditorium with its arched proscenium featuring a dramatic mural of Katharine Cornell and Brian Aherne in *Romeo and Juliet*. The auditorium might be available, he was told, if old friend Frank Harmon — who ran the Buick agency on Herschel and was president of the Kiwanis Club — would pressure the school board. The floor was flat; risers would have to be built so people in the back could see. And the seats were hard — just folding chairs, really. But here was a charming beach community not far from L.A. that might — just might — be ready for legitimate theatre.

What would bring San Diegans to a high-school theatre to see plays? Stars, the trio decided. Stars like Vincent Price, Lee Marvin,

Eartha Kitt, Richard Basehart, Louis Jourdan, Ginger Rogers, Dennis Hopper, David Niven, José Ferrer (no relation to Mel), Olivia de Havilland, Eve Arden, Groucho Marx, Jane Cowl, Tallulah Bankhead, Joseph Cotton, Miriam Hopkins ... all of whom, and many more, appeared at the La Jolla Playhouse during the next 18 years.

“We felt the people in La Jolla and San Diego would be intrigued to see these famous actors on stage,” explains Peck. “We always started with who’d play the leads. And once you got Richard Basehart or José Ferrer, it was fairly easy to cast the supporting roles. We were reading plays endlessly, all three of us, Mel and Dorothy and I, because we wanted well-balanced seasons.” Meanwhile, David Selznick had loaned them \$15,000 “to see what the kids could do,” says Peck. They were joined by Joseph Cotton and Jennifer Jones and in the beginning called themselves The Actors Company.

“Greg was the *deus ex machina*,” says Mel Ferrer. “The La Jolla Playhouse never would have existed without Greg. He was a tremendous success at the time . . . and when Selznick brought me out here [from New York], at first I had nothing to do. ‘While you’re looking for something for me to do,’ I said, ‘I’d like to work in the theatre.’”

“We have no idea what plays we’ll present or who’s going to be in them, but we guarantee you 10 plays a year and our word that they will be good.”

– Gregory Peck

“I want you to meet Greg Peck,” Selznick said, ‘He keeps talking about the same thing! He took me to the set where Alfred Hitchcock was directing Greg in *Spellbound*.’ And that’s how their friendship began.

Dorothy McGuire joined them, and they drove to La Jolla to meet the Kiwanis. “We were audacious. We were so full of beans — and ideals,” says Peck. Ferrer remembers Peck’s pitch to the La Jolla Women’s Committee, who were entrusted with ticket sales plus acquiring props and costumes.



8th Week, August 26 thru 31

LARAINÉ DAY  
GREGORY PECK

in

"ANGEL STREET"

"Fancy Meeting You Again"

HOUSE \* La Jolla, Calif.

LA JOLLA PLAY

LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE



TALLULAH BANKHEAD  
"HERE TODAY"

ESTELLE WINWOOD  
RICHARD KENDRICK  
PETER HUBBS

DOROTHY McGUIRE  
DON T

"I Am A Co

Lee Patrick  
Edif Angold

JOHNSON

"Greg made the most remarkable speech. 'We have no idea what plays we'll present or who's going to be in them,' he said, 'but we guarantee you 10 plays a year and our word that they will be good.' And he sat down. Within the next few weeks, the women had sold 60 percent of the subscription tickets, without our announcing a single play."

Such was the power of the presence Gregory Peck, even in those days, before *Moby Dick* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

They selected a star of international repute for opening night: Dame May Whitty, that elegant British lady noted for her London-then-Hollywood triumph in *Night Must Fall*. "We wanted the theatre to open with a good play that would get us off to a fine start," says Peck.

He and Ferrer called Whitty's apartment in Los Angeles for an appointment. They explained their dream — to create a theatre like the Chichester outside London, where they'd seen Laurence Olivier, Michael Redgrave and all the English greats. What was her response?

"When Selznick brought me out here [from New York], at first I had nothing to do. While you're looking for something for me to do, I'd like to work in the theatre."

— Mel Ferrer

"She was amused," says Peck. "I don't think of theatre in California," she said. But those British people — with them, it's no big deal to walk out on a stage and do a play. The location seemed strange to her ... but she said yes."

*Night Must Fall* was a great success. "After that opening," says Peck, "all doubts — if there were any — were assuaged. We got started right away with quality, thanks to that great old lady."

Others followed. "These were great, great people, real theatre people, busy with film commitments, both they were willing to go down and help us get this thing started," he says. The great Jane Cowl was one — one of the first ladies of the American theatre, along with Katharine Cornell and Helen Hayes — "depending on who you're listening to," Peck adds wryly.

"To see Jane Cowl in La Jolla — a woman who had conquered Broadway and the West End in London and played a great Juliet in her day in the '20s, to see her walk out on the stage in La Jolla was a treat. When Jane Cowl said, 'I'll come down and do *Art and Mrs. Bottle* for you — I've done it before in London' ... well, naturally we wouldn't put up an argument." (She also appeared in *The First Mrs. Fraser*).

Peck acted in three plays during the next few years, Ferrer three and McGuire six — plus Ferrer did a great deal of directing. McGuire chose her plays well, among them, Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*, Noël Coward's *Tonight at 8:30, I Am a Camera* (which became *Cabaret*) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (in which she and Jane Wyatt played two young women being courted by Mel Ferrer and Hurd Hatfield). A new production of the latter opens the 1997 season, and Peck and Ferrer have confirmed they'll be in the May 17 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary audience.

"It was a lot of fun — and a lot of work," says Peck, now 81 and, after 55 movies, still active with his one-man show. Sitting in the living room at his Los Angeles estate, he remembers the excitement of 50 years ago. "We had only one week to rehearse, so we had to schedule every hour into 20-minute scenes, 40-minute scenes. It was like a railroad schedule. We demanded — no, we couldn't really demand, because they were working for practically nothing — but we fervently requested that everybody

learn their lines before they got there. We didn't have time for people to walk around with a book in their hand."

The actors were paid \$55 a week plus hotel accommodations (usually at La Valencia) and three meals a day. The tone changed somewhat when Jennifer Jones, a recent Oscar winner for *Song of Bernadette* and engaged at that time to Selznick, came to do *Serena Blandish*. She arrived with luxury trailer and butler, chauffeur and maid, plus a wardrobe designer and an acting coach — the famous Constance Collier, who also played a major role.

Collier was once described by Mrs. Patrick Campbell, a contemporary of George Bernard Shaw, as "having a mouth like a galosh, and she comes at you like a chest of drawers." The story goes that one night during a La Jolla rehearsal, someone in the darkened auditorium complained, "I can't hear you, Constance."

The magnificent Collier stalked downstage, and the chest of drawers intoned grandly, "Who in this theatre cannot hear Constance Collier?"

"It's David Selznick, Constance."

"Oh! Yes, David. I'll start projecting."

And no one dared to laugh.



(L-R) Sue Carson, Benay Venuta and Gene Nelson in front of La Jolla Playhouse, then located at La Jolla High School.

(RIGHT): Mel Ferrer and Diana Lynn

## WHILE SELZNICK HAD PROVIDED SEED MONEY

for the little troupe, he was still very careful not to let his stars get far out of his sight. Telegrams flowed. "He was given to verbosity in memos," Peck remembers. A chiding Western Union message to Peck illustrates the point:

"I of course agree with all your arguments about the value of stage work ... Granted that the worldwide reputation of a motion picture star would not seem on the surface to be subject to damage with a week in La Jolla, but the fact remains that there can be enormous damage. I have had a great deal more experience in managing careers than you have ... more experience in the many subtle things that go into the launching and development of a great star ... It is folly to disregard them, in my opinion, in relationship to players who have been stars a few years only, such as Jennifer and yourself."

The crux of the matter was Selznick's reluctance to trust ones with only one week's rehearsal. As a result, *Serena Blandish* rehearsed for three weeks ahead of time in Los Angeles.

One of Ferrer's fondest memories is of Groucho Marx, whom they had lured with the promise of a play he hoped to develop. "We knew Norman Krasna had written a play with the Grouch in mind," says Ferrer. "We said, 'If we do the play, and Norm does a

rewrite with you, will you come down?'

"Oh, I don't know, that's a very straight-laced community down there," said Groucho. " But he acquiesced, and *Time for Elizabeth* was the third play of the 1952 season. At first Ferrer made lunch reservations each day for himself and Marx at the La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club. By the end of Marx's two-week stay, there would be 20 or 30 people at lunch with them, listening to Groucho's stories.

Peck developed a great admiration for Marx. "A brilliant personality," he calls him, "with a quicksilver mind. An ironic view of everything in life, to put it mildly. He conducted a long-term correspondence with T.S. Eliot, did you know that? There was a side of Groucho that appealed to the literati and the intellectuals. They saw in his manic comedy style a reflection of the uncertainty, the ludicrousness of life. The chaos. The Marx brothers created chaos."

The brilliant mind did not stop its owner from leering around pillars in the lobby at visitors at La Valencia, however, and teasing onlookers. His stay in La Jolla provided entertainment for all.

Was La Jolla too conservative for the dreams of Peck and company — dreams modeled on Chichester, where the great



(Above): **Groucho Marx** on break from 1952's *Time for Elizabeth* with Peggie Castle; photo by Schneider & Peltcher.

(Clockwise from Left): Unidentified man, **Patricia Neal** and **Vincent Price**; **Patricia Neal** and **Mel Ferrer**; **Gregory Peck** photographed in 1998; Photo of perspective architectural plans for La Jolla Playhouse Theatre Complex.

Olivier and Redgrave brought challenging drama to the English countryside? There is no doubt some La Jollans found some of these plays too strong for their taste. Bill Kellogg Sr., owner of the La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club, where the actors frequently gathered, and normally a strong supporter of the Playhouse, walked out on a play in which two husbands exchanged wives — and San Diego columnist Neil Morgan applauded his action.

Another time, a patron complained about being seated next to a black person. According to Ferrer, “Greg and I were in the box office at the time, and we both — as in a single moment — reached for the cash box and gave him his money back. ‘Do us a great favor,’ we said, ‘and don’t come back.’”

But instances of bigotry seem to have been rare. (“An aberration,” says Peck. “One nut.”) And La Jollans, for the most part, enjoyed their new theatre — and in particular, enjoyed monitoring the comings and goings of the stars.

**“IT BECAME THE THING TO DO,”** remembers Peck, “to come to the opening and mix in the patio between acts on a beautiful summer’s evening. After each opening night we’d have a blast at the Whaling Bar [at La Valencia]. Sometimes I — and I suspect at times Mel and Dorothy — would have to drive back at 1 in the morning and be on a film set at 6. But we were young, and we were resilient. We were busy young people, and we were having the time of our lives.”

It was in a 1951 production of *The Voice of the Turtle* that Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz first saw Vivian Vance — and decided they’d found the ideal Ethel for TV’s *I Love Lucy*. The same year saw Joan Bennett in *Susan and God* and Charlton Heston in *The Petrified Forest*. David Niven led off the 1952 season with *The Moon Is Blue*, followed shortly by Groucho Marx in *Time for Elizabeth*.

Peck led the group as artistic director for the first critical years, then in 1950 went to London to do *Captain Horatio Hornblower* and in 1952 to Europe to do *Moby Dick* in Ireland and *Roman Holiday* in Rome. At that time he became less active in the Playhouse. “Mel and Dorothy continued it,” he says, and Dorothy’s husband, John Swope, took over the management.

In 1953 Mel married Audrey Hepburn and for the next few years lived in Europe, so that was the end of his direct association with the summer theatre.

In 1954 the Kiwanis Club withdrew its support, and Swope cut the schedule from 10 plays with one week runs to five with two-week runs. But the Playhouse remained hale and healthy until

the late ‘50s, even attempting a musical in 1956, *Pal Joey*. One of the chorus for that rollicking extravaganza was La Jollan Raquel Tejada, later Raquel Welch.

Then began a down hill slide. Whether it was the choice of plays or the quality of acting, no one could determine. Writer Roberta Ridgely, in her comprehensive study of the La Jolla Playhouse for a 1987 issue of *San Diego Magazine*, suggests that “television was breaking up the major film studios, causing a decline in the number of contract players. Eventually, few could afford to play gratis Hollywood hooky at La Jolla.”

Reviews were frequently critical (“Ginger Rogers was in better shape than the script”), and the final blow came with a 1964 performance by Zsa Zsa Gabor in which an observer commented that she “sometimes forgot where to stand or when to begin talking.” This in a performance for which it was said she was paid \$4,000 a week!

Perhaps economics had caught up with the Playhouse. It closed after Gabor’s last performance in *Blithe Spirit* and would not open again for 19 years.

As early as 1954, the tireless Marion Longstreth, president of the La Jolla Women’s Committee, had begun raising funds for the construction of a new theatre. Her efforts were frustrated by false starts, legalities and every-imaginable obstacle; she forfeited both her marriage and her health. “She made great sacrifices,” says Peck, “in trying to expand it beyond a summer theatre and build a proper playhouse.”

Ten years later, when the Playhouse closed, the project still fell short of its financial goal, but Longstreth had piqued the interest of UCSD’s Dr. Roger Revelle. Eventually the new venue would be built on the UCSD campus. Longstreth had taken the full burden of building a new La Jolla Playhouse on her shoulders. In the end, her faith was vindicated.

When Peck returned for the opening show of that new Playhouse in 1983, he felt that if his theatre had been allowed to evolve gradually, it would have been doing similar work. In a letter to [then] Artistic Director Des McAnuff, he wrote: “I always hoped that our little summer-stock theatre would evolve into something very much like what you and your associates are doing now.”

*Reprinted courtesy of San Diego Magazine, from the May, 1997 issue, Volume 49, No. 7*