

Production Brings Joy to Ghostlight Patron

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Ghostlight Theatre can thank World War II, at least in part, for the patronage of Dr. Walter E. Neiswanger. The theatre company's upcoming production of *Das Barbecü* will happen largely because of Neiswanger. He provided the impetus for the production, and he's putting up more than \$15,000 for it to happen.

When Neiswanger graduated from Davenport Central High School in 1941, he had been involved in a few plays but hadn't yet caught the "bug." Then in 1943, he was selected in the draft for military service and was stationed as a medic in New York City. "*Oklahoma!* had opened on Broadway shortly before I went into the service," he said. And the Rodgers & Hammerstein production re-wrote the rules for musical theatre. From that point on, Neiswanger said, musicals were "a virus that got into my human genome. I had a mania for musicals."

So in the mid-1990s, the four founders of Ghostlight Theatre approached Neiswanger and asked him to help finance their productions. He recalls that he gave them between \$15,000 and \$17,000 for four shows: *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Moliere's *The Miser*, *Once on This Island* ("kind of a flop," Neiswanger said), and Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*.

It was the last that Neiswanger remembers most fondly. "It was perfect," he said. "I was really enthralled."

But shortly after that, Ghostlight changed direction, and the company and its patron parted ways. Ghostlight in recent years returned to doing less-mainstream productions, and Neiswanger enjoyed them, although he wasn't involved. Then, a year ago, he gave Ghostlight's Tom Brooke a CD of a musical called *Das Barbecü*. It was a country-and-western version of Wagner's *Ring* opera, and it had been one of Neiswanger's favorites since it was given to him in the mid-1990s. "Don't ever lose that," Neiswanger told Brooke. "It's part of my blood."

This past spring, Ghostlight approached Neiswanger about putting on *Das Barbecü*. "Give me

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a budget,” he said, and they did. And with that, they renewed their relationship. “I am just thrilled with it,” Neiswanger said of the production. “I said to the people in the cast, ‘You made me happy.’”

But Neiswanger’s money doesn’t come without a price. He asks that his name be listed on all marketing for the show, and that he be allowed on-stage to give bouquets to the leading actresses after the play.

These are admittedly small demands, but the retired pathologist – who also funds medical scholarships, had the Neiswanger Institute for Bioethics & Health Policy at Loyola University Chicago named after him because of his generosity, and played a key role in developing the Davenport Museum of Art’s collection of Haitian art – wants the community to know his passion for musical theatre. “This will show people that there is another side to my very complex makeup,” he said.

Ghostlight has asked Neiswanger to take a more active role in the organization, such as serving on the board, but he’s declined. “They think they have found an angel in me,” he said. “I don’t feel like I want to be in control, on the board. I’d rather do just what I’m doing.”