Theatre X

Curtis L. Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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Theatre X, as one of the longest living experimental theatre projects in modern times, began in Milwaukee in 1969 and extended its life of some thirty-five years of active theatre to American cities including New York, San Francisco, Baltimore, and other venues across the nation and throughout Europe. A highlight in Theatre X's career was a ten-year collaboration with Ritsaert ten Cate at the Mickery Theatre, Amsterdam, from 1975 to 1985. The approach to exploring the career of Theatre X here will examine the activities performed in the processes of creating Theatre X's contributions to experimental theatre. The focus will be on the activities that constitute the life of Theatre X as a living form of theatre evolving during the second half of the twentieth century.

Theatre X was officially formed under the leadership of Conrad and Linda Bishop (now Elizabeth Fuller) in 1969 by a group of faculty and students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Their inaugural production of X Communication by faculty and students of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's theatre program took place at the Village Church located in downtown Milwaukee. My own first encounter with Theatre X occurred shortly after arriving in Milwaukee from Boston this same year of 1969. Having enjoyed experimental theatre in Boston and New York, I was curious to find the announcement of Theatre X's X Communication taking place in Milwaukee. The performance consisted of individual segments based on the actors' concerns with contemporary societal issues. Soon after, a 1970 production of Bertolt Brecht's The Measures Taken held at the first International Brecht Symposium in Milwaukee received acclaim from critics and scholars. Subsequently, the name Theatre X began to appear in various European theatre journals.

The X in the company's name refers to the mathematical symbol "x," which alludes to the unknown or an element of change. Initially, according to the original bylaws, Theatre X operated under a collective consisting of some twenty-two member-directors, each with equal voice. Three of the collective participants were designated as co-managers responsible
informally for artistic and administrative management. The initial co-
managers were Conrad Bishop, Ron Gural, and Dan Desmond, all of whom 
eventually moved on elsewhere to successful careers in the theatre. Initially, 
Theatre X functioned as a democratic collective with each company member 
etitled to one vote on artistic decisions affecting the choice of productions 
and their development. The decision-making structure was modified later, 
depending on the understanding of the company leadership and a board of 
directors that was added later and which included both Theatre X company 
members and community leaders.

Among the early artistic contributors to Theatre X was Willem Dafoe 
(1975), who began his acting career with the company prior to moving 
to the Wooster Group in New York, followed by his rise to top billing in 
film and Off-Broadway theatre. Victor De Lorenzo (1976), later a founding 
member of the band the Violent Femmes, was also a member of Theatre X. 
Flora Coker (1970), John Schneider (1971), John Kishline (1972), and later 
Deborah Clifton (1976) became the core members who remained with the 
company until shortly before its ending in 2004. In 1973, Theatre X became 
a company of seven people replacing the original home company of twenty­ 
two in order to focus on its national and international touring while also 
maintaining its base in Milwaukee. Paring down the company size reflected 
in part a focus on the ensemble's developing national and international 
opportunities.

The mission of Theatre X from its beginnings was both to create and 
to present original theatre works that emerged out of the experiences of 
the artists as they researched and reflected on the nature of theatre and its 
experimental possibilities for examining contemporary personal and social 
issues. Its productions aimed at creating a "total theatre," which employed 
multimedia as well as verbal and physical performance. The range of Theatre 
X's activities encompassed seasonal productions in Milwaukee, a national 
touring program touching down in American cities and towns to present 
"on the road" performances, and performances in the theaters of major 
American cities. In 1973–4, for instance, the company performed some 250 
performances with bookings at colleges and universities and small theaters 
across the country. The company's international touring program began 
in 1975 and included productions in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, 
Great Britain, and Japan.

The audiences for Theatre X productions consisted of artists and members 
of the public with a taste for reaching beyond the repertories of traditional 
theatre productions. In the words of artistic director John Schneider, speaking
of Theatre X's Milwaukee audiences in 1989, "the audience includes a wide variety of people, including the Mayor of our town and most of its other artists ... feminists, gays and lesbians, and young people looking for ideas and experiences they won't find in any other theatre in town frequented the performances" (Schneider 1989).

Theatre X and Experimental Theatre

As this is the first case study in the volume, some background on the origins of Theatre X and companies like it may be helpful. Experimental theatre as presented here is a continuation of the avant-garde arts as they continued to unfold and develop throughout the twentieth century. Experimental theatre, broadly speaking, evolved through and beyond the various forms of modern representational and expressive theatre. The basic theatre experiences in Theatre X performances, as in all theatre, were formed by the encounters between performers who initiated a relationship among themselves and their audiences, aiming to engage with the audience in exploring feelings, ideas, and the means to critique contemporary social and historical issues. But like many ensembles emerging out of the 1960s, Theatre X was experimenting with these encounters.

By 1969 when Theatre X was born in Milwaukee, experimental theatre had already appeared in many forms. To cite only a few precursors, Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) had tested the boundaries of representational theatre in his "Theatre of Cruelty" with its preference for kinetic images, rituals, and magic over realism and narration. The Living Theatre, a creation of Judith Malina (1925–2015) and Julian Beck (1925–85), championed social cooperation in lieu of competition in their productions. In their search for cooperative methods for creating dance theatre, artists at the Judson Dance Theatre (1962–4) such as Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown sought to alter traditional forms of theatre through innovative dance performances (Banes 1993a). Similar developments abroad could be seen, for instance, in the Belgian experimental theatre artist and founder of the Troubleyn theatre company, Jan Fabre (1958–), who would interact significantly with Theatre X and challenged virtually all theatre conventions in his individual and group performances (Carter 1993).

The contributors to experimental theatre each chose a different path for examining the art of making theatre. Each aimed at reflecting on new possibilities for theatre experiences with a fresh view on altering its means.
What is common to these endeavors? Perhaps it was the desire to introduce new ways of understanding theatre itself and to have an impact on a changing culture. Were there still possibilities for a fresh approach to theatre at the point when the founders of Theatre X began their venture in 1969? Relying on their own desires and creative abilities, a talented core of Theatre X writers, directors, and actors committed themselves to the task. They shared with other experimental theatre artists a commitment to innovative and socially relevant theatre. Extending the perceptual capabilities of audiences, as well as those of the company members, beyond the offerings available in traditional theatre was central to their goals. What took place in a Theatre X performance is separate from the worlds of low and high culture that reside beyond its presentational spaces. It existed on the fringes of a culture, which it often sought to critique or subvert.

Theatre X, then, founded in the same decade as La MaMa in New York, belongs among developing forms of twentieth-century experimental theatre. Like other instances of the form, however, Theatre X abandoned, or used selectively and in different ways, the existing conventions of theatre. Experimental theatre reconstructs both the world of theatre and in varying degrees recasts the relation of performers and audiences. As in other examples of experimental theatre, Theatre X exposed what is capable of being representable within otherwise hidden or enclosed spaces of culture. It created theatre spaces where the underside of culture is exposed and experienced. Its significance depended on disclosures of personal and societal reality that may otherwise evade discovery.

Methodology of Theatre X for Creating Plays

Like the artist John Cage, who once said, “I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones” (Kostelanetz 1986), Theatre X held no fear of new ideas. But the projects of Theatre X also showed no fear of older ideas. Rather, their repertory engaged past artistic themes while giving them fresh interpretations, as well as striking out in their own directions. From its beginnings, Theatre X's aims centered on the use of theatrical artistry (scripting, directing, performing, stage design) as a means of communication, first among the company members themselves and then with diverse audiences found in their respective local, national, and international platforms. The company did not endorse a particular creed with respect to theatrical practices.
Rather, it employed a variety of theatrical means including ensemble scripting, storytelling, physical-based performance forms, light, media, and film design, music and dance, experimental uses of technology, the space and architecture of the staging space as inspiration for new ideas, unexpected casting choices, and deep research and long development periods to articulate and implement ideas generated collectively through interactions among company members, with other artists, and with other theatre companies. Trial and error in the development of the art and a place where artists can fail was built into the operations of Theatre X (Schneider 1989, 5). Underlying the process of making theatre at Theatre X was to regard "x" as the unknown and to foster artistic research and critical thinking.

Succinctly expressing the mission of Theatre X, John Schneider offers this statement:

We aim to create multiplicities of anti-realities. In other words, we mean to resist the manipulated and manipulating descriptions of the real offered by the social environment and the mass media. We embrace the idea that reality is constructed largely by the language and symbols that saturate our culture, the interplay between them, and the positions of power they affirm, conceal, or make possible. (1989, 2)

Schneider explains the company's approach to creating a new work thus: the seed of the idea that the play develops is discovered in the collective unconscious of the company members and is then further identified and agreed upon by the entire group. Research in conjunction with improvisation, and ongoing discussion among the company members, follows in an effort to identify more fully a theme for the play and its potential audience interest. Then follows the company's experiments in the search for form, style, design, and theatrical means suitable for presenting the topic. In a workshop mode, the company develops the acting model and identifies the skills and training necessary to implement the production. At this point in the process, a company resident playwright (in this case John Schneider) writes the script reflecting, but not copying the body of work done in the previous improvisational stages of creation. Then follow the customary design and construction of sets and costumes, and decisions concerning music and other elements of the production. Of course, the process does not end here, as rehearsals and performances invite continuous rethinking of the text and production aspects (1989, 6-7):
The plays are personal. They represent individuals in the company, but our concerns are philosophical, aesthetic, social. We write for the actors in the group. We choose subjects about which we feel deeply. We try to make our lives (also our working lives) and the times we live in more vivid and understandable to ourselves and our audience.

We champion no style; the plays are “total theatre” experiments ... We consider the form of a play, the process through which it is created, and all aspects of its presentation to the public to be at least as meaningful as its subject matter. (Schneider 1989, 5)

The subjects of Theatre X plays were grounded in the present experience of America and included, among others, gender roles and sexuality, civil rights, the impact of consumerism and the commodification of art, the role of the automobile, television, and the daily news, group dynamics and dysfunction, and violence in contemporary life.

Following a revamping in 1975, the company reaffirmed its commitment to the creation of original plays, which reflected the artistic and personal concerns of company members.

Its first original play under the new structure, The Unnamed (1974–5 season), featured experimentation with light and darkness, aiming to evoke an experience of “dread and cataclysm” informed by stories of H. P. Lovecraft (1989, 5). The Unnamed was followed by Razor Blades, both of which played by invitation at the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam in 1975–6 and in Baltimore at the 1976 New Theatre Festival. The 1977–8 season resulted in a New York production of A Fierce Longing based on the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. Theatre X’s production of A Fierce Longing received an OBIE Award for its multimedia production design (still to this day the only such award garnered by a Wisconsin theatre company).

A secondary aspect of the company’s mission was to explore both new and old theatrical forms in order to advance the shape of innovative theatre. Their efforts in this respect included revisiting and bringing fresh insight into existing texts that would not otherwise be available to its audiences, while defining and perfecting a unique style that could be identified with Theatre X. Examples would include Bertolt Brecht’s The Measures Taken, 1969–70; Dylan Thomas’s Under Milkwood, 1981–9; Samuel Beckett’s Happy Days, 1987–8; and Truman Capote’s A Christmas Memory (featuring Flora Coker, which became a seasonal favorite in Milwaukee).
Cultural Diversity and Theatre X

Throughout its history, Theatre X consistently aimed to address cultural diversity both with respect to its audiences and its productions. One aim of its audience development was to address "a variety of somethings" in their work: these included the experiences of diverse young adults that varied in race, gender identities, cultural preferences, and social and political views. During its thirty-five years of performance history, Theatre X explored a wide range of culturally challenging issues. These issues include among others Native American tribal and African-American issues, women in the theatre, and the 9/11 bombing of the Twin Towers in New York.

Native American-Themed Productions

While social justice, cultural diversity, gender, and sexuality issues are present throughout the repertory of Theatre X, its productions also addressed these issues in particular works. In 1994, the company collaborated with the Potawatomi Indian Nation to produce Bode-Wad-Mi: Keepers of the Fire, an original theatre work written with the performers, which for this piece included five American Indians who worked with Theatre X to devise the show. The performance portrayed storytelling around an intimate campfire setting, with actors reciting tribal documents pertaining to land transfers between the Potawatomi tribal communities and the United States government. Bode-Wad-Mi was performed both in Milwaukee at the Theatre X Black Box and also in Canada at a gathering of seven tribal divisions of the Potawatomi Nation, which had been dispersed.

African American-Themed Productions

As it evolved, Theatre X incorporated into its program projects to address societal issues and works by African-American and Latino writers, directors, and performers, including the African-American playwright Reggie Finlayson. The company's production of Jazz in 1999 focused on the lively African-American jazz culture that had existed in the Brownsville neighborhood of North Milwaukee during the 1920s. This production carried a social edge as it recalled an era of success for the African-American
culture of Milwaukee located in a section of the city which was literally wiped out in the 1960s by an expansion of freeway construction that cut through and effectively demolished this thriving community.

Women in the Theatre

The position of women in US theatre was a theme that carried throughout the work of Theatre X. Flora Coker and Deborah Clifton each held central roles in the company as leading performers. They were also key contributors to Theatre X’s ongoing creative and administrative processes and co-authors of its production, Desire of the Moth for the Star (1989). Others, including Elizabeth Fuller, who was active in the early stages of Theatre X, and longtime company member Marcie Hoffman held important roles in the ongoing operations.

A number of Theatre X productions focused on issues relating to or representing women’s role in the theatre and in society. For example, the company’s 1994 “Blue Stockings” series focused on the Women’s Suffrage Movement. The company’s annual “Theatre Women” series featured original performance art by diverse national women artists and was an important part of Theatre X’s projects, especially during 1994-6. The Women’s Series also included a production of Garcia Lorca’s The Shoemaker’s Prodigious Wife. Imagining Brad, another of the plays in the Women’s Series, took place inside the Wisconsin Taycheedah Women’s Correctional Facility, April 29, 1996, before the facility’s inmates and staff. A 2001 production of Arabian Nights, John Schneider’s adaptation of the classic, focused on issues of gender in the writings of feminist author Judith Butler.

Theatre X’s National Outreach

Plans for Theatre X soon expanded beyond the productions introduced to Milwaukee audiences to include performances in cities and towns across the United States. Beginning in the 1970s, Theatre X established an impressive national presence through its performances in US cities including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, St. Louis, and Washington, DC. As a traveling company, Theatre X found it necessary to adapt its performances to many different kinds of theatre spaces—from its changing home bases
in Milwaukee to a variety of theatre spaces in cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Baltimore. In the beginning, the opportunities for road shows meant adapting to university settings and whatever local spaces might emerge as the players endured rigorous road schedules. Company director John Schneider recalled that Theatre X had 250 performances across the country in 1973–4. These performances included bookings in colleges and universities, small experimental theatres, and churches in states across the nation. Among these national sites of Theatre X performances were residencies at Chicago's The Body Politic Theatre, 1974–5; the Baltimore Theatre Project, 1975, 1976, and 1986; New York at the Performing Garage, 1978; Seattle's New Theatre 1987; and Chicago's Goodman Theatre, 1987. During this period, Theatre X traveled to numerous other sites across Indiana, Ohio, Iowa, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma. Revenue from touring provided the main source of income for the company during this era.

Of their national touring projects, two are especially noteworthy. As mentioned above, the 1979 *A Fierce Longing* with script by John Schneider and directed by Sharon Ott played in New York and received an OBIE for its stage design featuring projected scenery. The other involved *A History of Sexuality*, a three-year collaborative project created with the New City Theatre of Seattle (1987–8) with John Kishline, Julia Romanski, John Schneider, and David Schweizer contributing to the project. The production was based in part on ideas found in the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault as expressed in *The History of Sexuality*. The San Francisco Bay area's Critics Association viewed this theatre piece as an outstanding achievement of the American stage. After premiering in Seattle, *A History of Sexuality* played in Milwaukee, Stockholm, Sweden, and Munster, Germany.

**Theatre X and Its International Productions**

Concurrent with the development of its national touring projects between 1969 and 1975, Theatre X began to explore select international engagements. Central to the international dimension of Theatre X's development was its eleven-year collaboration (1975–85) with Ritsaert ten Cate, director of the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam. After experiencing Theatre X's productions of *The Unnamed* during a visit to Denver, and a subsequent performance of *Razor Blades*, ten Cate invited the company to perform with him there. Ten Cate was a major catalyst for advancing experimental theatre worldwide.
Although their initial collaboration at the Mickery with Folter Follies turned into what ten Cate termed a theatrical failure, the discussions between ten Cate and Theatre X members resulted in a continued collaboration between the Mickery and Theatre X (Austria 1987, xv). The outcome of this collaboration resulted in a stream of Theatre X performances including Sweet Dreams, Beauty and the Beast (a John Schneider collaboration with the Mickery), Half My Father's Age, and Scenarios for the Living/for the Dead. All of these productions included experiments with video and live music. The work at the Mickery also included noteworthy collaboration on other in-house projects including Rembrandt, Hitler, Or Me (later made into one of Mike Figgis's early films) and numerous others. This collaboration brought the company into contact with the best of experimental theatre from around the world and challenged Theatre X to achieve accordingly.

The collaboration with ten Cate and the Mickery undoubtedly proved to be a high point in Theatre X's thirty-five-year history. It brought untold opportunities to develop their work among the leading experimental theatre companies from across the world who brought their performances to the Mickery. The collaboration between Theatre X and the Mickery ended in 1985 (ten Cate 1989, 11-12). Intermittent international productions of Theatre X continued alongside its Mickery performances in the Netherlands, Sweden, West Germany, Wales, and England. The company also performed at the Toga Mura International Theatre Festival at the invitation of Tadashi Suzuki at his company's home in Japan.

Theatre X in Milwaukee: Finding Space

While developing its national and international profiles, Theatre X also retained its base in its home city of Milwaukee. After performing in sporadic spaces throughout the city, including the Village Church, a coffee house, a jazz club, and the Haggerty Museum, Theatre X acquired a ninety-nine-seat space for its performances in a former toy factory in 1972 at 1247 North Water Street. It opened with its own version of Alice in Wonderland featuring some forty puppets designed by company members. Following this opening, the company launched their staging of Samuel Beckett's Endgame and one of the first American productions of Peter Handke's Offending the Audience. These productions followed Beckett's and Handke's scripts closely, distinguishing this practice from the collaborative creation featured in X Communication and continuing throughout the company's history.
When the Water Street building was sold in 1980, Theatre X's Milwaukee productions moved to a gymnasium space in the basement of Lincoln High School, billed as Lincoln Center for the Arts, and began again with a black box construction. Soon this arrangement proved unsatisfactory for the work being undertaken by an experimental theatre. The company's tenure at Lincoln Center ended with the production of *My Werewolf* in the 1984–85 season. Departure from Lincoln Center was followed by a lengthy period of touring, which included performances in Baltimore and Great Britain, except for occasional performances around the city at such places as the Haggerty Museum, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, and other local spaces.

Despite the nomadic existence, Theatre X continued to represent the cutting edge in Milwaukee theatre. Among the notable theatre events of this era was a controversial performance in 1981, *Theatre Written with a "K" Is a Tomcat* by Belgian visual artist and theatre artist Jan Fabre and his experimental theatre group, Troubleyn, from Antwerp, Belgium. The group's performance included a portrayal of simulated sex that drew the attention of the Milwaukee police and generated a media blitz in the Milwaukee news media. Objections from the theatre community and members of the public over the response of the Milwaukee police and the media on this occasion generated productive discussion over the content future of theatre performances.

Fabre also presented in Milwaukee two years later the eight-hour theatre piece *This Is Theatre Like It Was To Be Expected and Foreseen* (1982) together with Theatre X in Milwaukee's Skylight Theatre. These two works together with a third piece by Fabre, *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984), each performed in Milwaukee in conjunctions with Theatre X, formed a trilogy, which became legendary in twentieth-century theatre history.

Although much of Theatre X's work took place in national and international venues, the company continued to the end with its full seasons in Milwaukee and with ongoing efforts to attract local audiences and support. In 1985, the company began performing in another ninety-nine-seat black box theatre at 158 North Broadway. This site also became the home of the Skylight Theatre and Milwaukee Chamber Theatre and was named the Broadway Theatre Center. Theatre X performed its regular season in this space until its closure in 2004.

Indeed, several of its most memorable productions focused on Milwaukee- or Wisconsin-related events. Among these is *Sketches from a Life* (1991), based on the life of Milwaukee-born power diplomat and author/scholar George Keenan, and selected for performance by Theatre X at the request of Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist. *Success*, scripted by
John Kishline and presented in the company's 1990 Milwaukee season, continued the company's interest in portraying individual personas of note in contemporary Milwaukee life. This work was based on a series of interviews with influential Milwaukee leaders including Mayor Norquist, investment banker Sheldon Lubar, CEO Max Samson, attorney Brendan Comer, and advertising executive Dennis Frankenberry.

Also reflecting its substantial engagement with Milwaukee area social issues is Theatre X's 1996 production, *The Line*. The show featured a failed strike by union workers after a two-year labor dispute between the Cudahay Packing Company and its meat-packing union workers. The performance of *The Line* was based on interviews with company representatives and union workers conducted by University of Wisconsin Milwaukee professor Michael Gordon and John Schneider (who prepared the script).

Extending its efforts in Milwaukee in 2002 by attending to current social and political issues, Theatre X explored the philosopher-anarchist Noam Chomsky's libertarian views in *Chomsky 9/11*, examining his perspectives on the Vietnam War, global economic power structures, and problems relating to pending terrorist attacks.

**Conclusion**

The question of endings for a vibrant experimental theatre project must be met with mixed feelings. Feelings of lament are common as the ending impacts the lives of those who have invested significantly with their commitment of ideas, emotions, and years of dedicated interaction with a community. It is interesting to note that the question of endings appears in the reflections of Ritsaert ten Cate as he pondered this question at the end of Theatre X's ten-year collaboration with the Mickery in 1989.

So, there was a beginning with Theatre X. Is there an end? It is a fascinating aspect of mutually inspiring and beneficial relationships to not only see how they start, but also how they separate again, how at a certain point in the road, participants take different turnings. (ten Cate 1989, 11)

Perhaps a similar reflection might also serve to bring closure, though under more painful circumstances and with deeper personal and institutional investments at stake, when the time to close off the future to any further realizations of Theatre X came in 2004.
There seems little doubt that the ideas driving the accomplishments of Theatre X have more than brought to fruition a positive outcome far beyond the time frame allotted to most experimental theatre projects. Theatre X did not hesitate to explore both the new and the old alike in its creation of theatre works. It freely produced new works while also adapting existing scripts and giving them new meaning. Civil rights, the place of women in the arts, gender roles and sexuality, social violence, labor unions and worker's rights, and testing the boundaries of theatre in the same pursuit are among the issues addressed in the productions of Theatre X. African-American jazz culture, Native American tribal issues, and the influences of media (television, computers, internet, and news media) in a changing twentieth-century culture are all present among the issues represented in the company's thirty-five-year endeavor, which produced scores of original scripts and some four thousand performances.

The recognition given the work of Theatre X is noteworthy. Invitations to perform in the major experimental theatres across the nation and the world such as the ten-year residency with the Mickery, one of the leading experimental theatres, itself accords high professional recognition to the contributions of Theatre X. The OBIE and other awards received throughout its history attest to its stature as one of the important chapters in the history of twentieth-century experimental theatre. Recognition accorded to company members also includes John Schneider's nomination for the Pulitzer Prize for the writing of Sweet Dreams and a NEA Playwright Fellowship Award in 1983. Company members John Kishline and Wesley Savick received nominations for Best New Play of 1988 from the American Theatre Critics Association for their play, I Can't Stop Loving You. The Desire of the Moth for the Star by Deborah Kishline, Flora Coker, and Wesley Savick also received a nomination for best play in 1990. Each of these awards serves as a measure of the success of Theatre X.

Evidence of the interest in Theatre X's contributions to the life of experimental theatre is also apparent in the noteworthy list of its major financial supporters. Among these were the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Dutch Ministry of Culture, the Japan-United States Friendship Commission, and major private foundations including the Rockefeller Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, and Philip Morris Incorporated. Additional support for Theatre X was provided by the Wisconsin Art Board, the United Performing Arts Fund of Milwaukee, the Milwaukee Foundation, and various other corporate foundations including the Kohler Foundation, as well as private individuals.

In short, the accomplishments of Theatre X speak clearly to the truth that its aims as a noteworthy contributor to experimental theatre have
been realized in good measure and often under difficult conditions with respect to funding and site facilities. As the poet Henry David Thoreau once reminded, "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts." And this indeed Theatre X has accomplished, if not in every attempt, still on many a day. Still, when the activity of a live theatre company comes to an end, the question remains: how then must we regard its existence? The activities that comprise the artistic identity of Theatre X are for the most part memories, memories in the minds of the former company members and the audiences that enjoyed the performances over time. Or perhaps the company's identity resides in the newspaper reviews, scripts, and any visual documentation that might remain. Surely archives exist that would preserve important documents, but without organization and placement within an institutional setting the likelihood of their survival remains uncertain. In lieu of a formal archive, I have gathered below the following comments from company members, their collaborators, and supporters.

REFLECTIONS ON THEATRE X

Editor's Note

The material archives and historical traces of ensemble theatre in the United States, apart from the better-known collectives based on the East and West Coast (such as the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre, the Performance Group, San Francisco Mime Troupe, and El Teatro Campesino), are rapidly disappearing. Most companies as well as many participating artists, while they lacked the means to establish their own archive, retained a good deal of company memoranda, marketing materials, scripts, and photographs (and sometimes film) related to rehearsals, productions, and tours. Theatre X is paradigmatic in this regard, and so to close this initial case study several important contributors to the company's long and successful tenure were asked to share their reflections on the ensemble to provide a sample of the rich materials available for further research. (Comments have been lightly edited for clarity.)

Conrad Bishop (Founding Co-manager)

Theatre X grew out of a workshop exploring diverse modes of improvisation at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. The first show, X Communication, was a collection of short sketches in many styles: whatever we could toss
together in five weeks. Accidental in a way, the collective couldn't decide on a single story or play but it gave us a structure we could change, expand, condense, for the next five years. Eventually, since it was our one money-maker on tour, it wore out. But for us it did several things: Though a lot was developed through improvisation, stuff was eventually scripted. I did most of the scripting, and eventually started to think of myself as a playwright. Others did writing as well, and when we left, John Schneider found his voice. That necessity was extremely productive. It offered a huge range of styles and structures, which I think benefited us all in creating longer works—a fluidity in finding the right style for a story.

Among the strong motives driving us to push Theatre X as a performing ensemble, rather than simply a workshop, were (a) seeing the world and playing for audiences outside the academic setting; (b) finding a way we could work as artistic peers, not as students/faculty; (c) being part of a theatre with a soul, as opposed to simply directing one show in a four-show season; (d) our first experience with puppetry in The People as the People and Alice in Wonderland; (e) keeping at least some work in long-term touring repertory, finding how it can grow. Secondly, I suppose, was being engaged in immediate response to the political climate of the time, including the anti-war protests—but always, I think, with stories and images you couldn't immediately pigeon-hole. All those elements were the gateway to what we've done in the past forty-five years.

Our formal connection with Theatre X ended in 1974 when we hived off to form The Independent Eye, though we returned several times to stage Hedda Gabler and our play Full Hookup, to see their staging of our play Dreamily, and to do guest performances of Action News and Mating Cries. But we saw a lot of the work of Theatre X and feel enormously gratified in having a hand in planting the seed.

Flora Coker (Founding Member, 1970–2004)

I have a lot of memories and my mind reels. "x", the algebraic unknown ... I took that literally as something to be defined by me and others in the group and I was hooked. I arrived in Milwaukee from Virginia in a stylish long black Carnaby Street cloth coat and patent leather boots. It was February 2, and I had never felt such cold.

A production of Bertolt Brecht's The Measures Taken at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the student strike against the US invasion into Cambodia and following the Kent State massacre. I was a member of the chorus and the glorious music was by Hans Eisler. Long drives across
Wisconsin in a van, sleeping on a built-in platform with props and costumes and baggage stored underneath, touring colleges with plays and workshops. We were in Ashland at the top of Wisconsin on Lake Superior in January, as cold and beautiful a place as I have ever been.

Spending a boiling hot August in Denver, living off the small box office proceeds from our best touring production The Unnamed, a play based on a story by H.P. Lovecraft that required only four actors, three shrouds, one simple wooden frame, chalk, a flashlight, matches and total darkness. I answered an early morning telephone call and heard a melodious foreign voice ask if Theatre X would consider performing in Amsterdam. “Oh, um, um, gosh, gosh,” say I, “how could we possibly do that?” “Well,” says he, “I saw your play last night and I would like to bring you all to my theatre in Amsterdam as guests of the Dutch government.” The beautiful voice belonged to the late, great Ritsaert ten Cate of the famous Mickery Theatre, home for experimental theatre from around the world. He was Santa Claus.

I understood, FINALLY, like a lightning flash, that what I was about to say in the scene I was performing on stage was really, really funny ... the writing ... so I should just say it out loud and clearly, which I did and I brought down the house. You should know that till then I had presented myself as a dramatic actress. To try for a laugh scared me too badly.

Everybody wants to know about Willem [Dafoe]. I have many happy memories of him. Among them: as we huddled backstage before going on for a play he’d say, “I’ll be scared for you if you’ll be scared for me.” With such pleasure. Also, in the dark and dingy basement of our warehouse theatre, Willem and I, for days, boiled the flesh and hair off a cow’s skull and some other bones to be used for props in a play.

It felt awful to thrust small boxes of glass from shattered car windshields into the hands of audience members in a play about torture at the Mickery. On the other hand, never was there more fun than the comedy about a difficult and fracturing family on the Mickery stage, with live ducks, and live carp and live trees lining a large pool. It was very funny and called “smartass” by the Village Voice.

I could of course go on and on: we used different processes over the years to create many original plays ... from simple ideas (i.e., fear of the unknown), books (Kubler-Ross’s On Death and Dying), scenarios developed around a theme or presented by our resident playwright, John Schneider, and developed by us the actors. I think I could say that I was often more interested in the process of making the play than I was in performing it. That was not always true.
I could list play after play: *I Used to Like This Place Before They Started Making All Those Renovations*, *Happy Days* (I love Samuel Beckett to death), the Milwaukee history plays, *CHOMSKY 9/11* (which nearly killed me), *TOBACCO ROAD* (played on a mound of dirt—huge fun), three plays by Ibsen, one more wonderful than the next. And, really, on and on.

Many came and went in Theatre X. We had a long-lived strong core of actors and we had a company playwright almost the entire time. If I think back to what kept me going ... Year after year, we planned something I did not want to miss.

*Victor de Lorenzo* (Founding Member)

My experience with Theatre X began in the Summer of 1976 after I had successfully secured a position with the company after auditioning to fill a spot left vacant by the soon to be departing Willem Dafoe. I had been studying theatre, music and literature at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee when I saw a notice posted on the Theatre Department bulletin board that Theatre X would be holding auditions for two acting positions with the company.

I decided to try out. I had never done an audition before, so I was more than amazed and excited to find out that I had passed the audition and would soon be employed as a full-time actor in the world of experimental theatre! Little did I know at the time how much this job would go on to influence and shape my future creative life. Theatre X not only taught me how to think in a dramatic context, but it gave me the thirst and drive to find the truth in everything I’ve done on and off the stage ever since. I particularly loved the development and live performances of the play, *A Fierce Longing* (a study of the life and work of Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima) that won the company an OBIE award in 1978! Theatre X was an incredible way of life and I’m proud to have been a part of its glorious history.

*Deborah Clifton* (Core Ensemble Member, 1976–2004)

Theatre X was my first professional audition and then my first professional job after graduating from Carroll University. I had it in my mind to seek out a company just like Theatre X but in NYC. Imagine my surprise when I found it in my backyard.

The first two shows I worked on with Theatre X were stepping into *The Unnamed* and then the development of *A Fierce Longing*. Remarkably, I had read the entirety of both authors’ works before joining Theatre X: H. P.
Lovecraft in high school, and all of Mishima's work after I left a failed marriage to a Japanese man. So it seemed the universe was in sync with my new career.

Being in Theatre X was profound. I loved the creation of new work, the extensive research, playing with styles and, of course, audience responses. We were so lucky to have had long development periods. And living in Milwaukee at that time was affordable. I rarely had to pick up other jobs. But we held to a grueling schedule and attacked at every project with ambition. Our association with Ritsaert ten Cate was the apex of this approach to theatre. Daunting projects, artistry, ambition, and Dutch funding made for a great and fertile time.

While we were in Seattle, performing The Unnamed, I ran across a book at a bookstore, Memoirs of a Medieval Woman, the story of Margery Kempe. I brought it back to Wes Savick and Flora Coker, and we made a play, Desire of the Moth for the Star. We each took a chapter of her life. Mine was the first act. It was the comedic version of Margery Kemp's visions done in a vaudevillian style. We had the good fortune of a visiting Dutch guy, who was young, beautiful and had great comedic timing, to play Jesus. The numerous curtains for this production were designed and painted by visual artist Robert Kushner, paid for by the Milwaukee Art Museum's Fine Arts Society. It was a luscious mise-en-scene.

The touring was great fun and a way to connect with other artists of our ilk. Our association with Phillip Arnault and the Baltimore Theatre Project was a big part of our lives. Phillip remains a true friend and when he heard our board was trying to dismantle us, he sent in a ringer, asking Sommerset Waters to join the board. That held the board at bay for a while.

**John Kishline** (Core Ensemble Member, 1972–2004)

Our conception of Theatre X as an ensemble of six artists seeking their own way for the last thirty years, as opposed to an institutional corporation, is the conception that most of Milwaukee holds true. The ending was too sad. The board did not know what they had in us and thought they could create a better company. Their insistence that we needed hierarchy in structure was a death knell. We had operated as a collective, with all its blemishes but it worked.

What I cannot forget:

*Offending the Audience*

*The Unnamed*
Razor Blades
A Fierce Longing
Renovations
My Werewolf
Sweet Dreams
Rembrandt and Hitler or Me
The History of Sexuality
I Can't Stop Loving You
Success
Pilgrims of the Night
The Desire of the Moth for the Star
Good
Chomsky 9/11

Jan Fabre (Theatre X Guest Visual and Theatre Artist, Director of the Troubleyn Company)

Milwaukee, May 10, 1981
Arrived, haven't even opened my suitcase.
  Worked for the rest of the day at Theatre X.
  Setting up—technical things—lighting.
  At 11 pm started the dress rehearsal for the American premiere of Theater geschreven met een "K" is een Kater.
    I took part in it myself.
    The other actors didn't spare me.
    I'm hurting all over; I'll be covered in bruises tomorrow.
    Will Beckers, director of the Nieuw Vlaams Teater, played his part as the writer with just the right phlegmatism.

Milwaukee, May 11, 1981
We all went for it in the extreme.
  There was the right concentration and a sharp action-reaction impulse in the performance.
  There was intensity in the physical transfer of energy.
  Which is why we immediately received energetic applause at the end.
  So I can't complain.
  The American premiere was OK.
Milwaukee, May 12, 1981
Spent the whole day under negative tension.
First the rumour went round that the performance would be banned.
Then that there would be a protest against it.
Then came the message that we could perform if we left out certain scenes and actions. (Censorship; you can guess I wouldn't allow that!)
We went ahead with the performance.
But it was not alive. It died before we even started.
The performance was a corpse that tried to seize hold of life.
At the end of the performance, even before the applause had died down, we were rounded up and arrested.
We already have to appear in court tomorrow.
We shan’t go.
A lawyer arranged by Curtis L. Carter will appear in court for us.

Milwaukee, May 13, 1981
Curtis L. Carter is sticking his neck out, defending me in public in interviews for newspapers and on TV.
In an article in The Milwaukee Journal (the biggest paper in Wisconsin State) Curtis ended with: “I’m amazed that this incident could happen in America. It’s not too late for Milwaukee to offer our apologies.”

Milwaukee, May 15, 1981
To avoid the symptoms of fatigue one could sleep or rest.
I write or draw.
(To get all the press fuss about Theater geschreven met een “K” is een Kater out of my mind.)

Milwaukee, June 17, 1983
Learned a lot about turtles today.
How stupid can people be? At the last moment I had accepted turtles instead of tortoises because tortoises were apparently impossible to find and on top of that more expensive than gold.
The performance had been going on for four hours.
The action began, the gambling contest with the tortoises with burning candles on their backs.
Normally this scene lasts 15 to 20 minutes.
This time it was over after 2 minutes.
Those stupid turtles started squeaking and crying because their shell was too thin for the burning candles.
And apparently turtles do not suffer from vertigo (logically, as I realised later). So they didn’t stop at the edge of the stage but fell two metres to the floor with a cracking blow.
The audience went very quiet.
I tensed up and didn’t know where to hide.
And after 20 seconds another cracking blow and 10 seconds later again, crash.
There was complete tumult; the audience started shouting and screaming.
I thought they would stop the show.
The audience became the personification of the hypocritical, devastating conflict between man and animal.
Marc, The Moon, saw a brilliant solution: he metamorphosed and himself became a turtle.
He too splattered to the edge of the stage and fell to the floor with the same sort of blow, picked up the three turtles, blew out the candles, started kissing them all over and went backstage with them.
Calm returned to the audience and their gaze was once again focused on the poetry of the performance.
A triumph of improvisation and living proof of how well I have trained my actors.
My actors are an embodiment of animal chaos and tamed intelligent energy.
The evening was back on the right course.
And now I’m ready to demolish the night.

Ritsaert ten Cate (Director of the Mickery Theatre, Amsterdam)⁶

Could Theatre X come to perform in the Mickery (Amsterdam)? They could and did (1975–85). They dealt with forbidden emotions and terrors with things many people never seem to face. ... Discussions developed between me and Theatre X company members: long and excruciating, fruitful and inspiring. And work followed: a trilogy performed in Amsterdam as well as in Milwaukee. Personal, close to the skin, vulnerable, searching .... Mickery and Theatre X were still moving in a mutually shared direction. John Schneider wrote the scripts, the company developed material and performed. But we wanted still more, Mickery and Theatre X were moving in a mutually shared direction.
American Theatre Ensembles Volume 1: Post-1970

John Schneider (Core Ensemble Member and Company Playwright, 1971–2004, and Author of “The Theatre X Book”)

I’m proud of everything we did. We showed that original experimental personal and engaged theatre could succeed in Milwaukee, could make work that mattered to people, that was of high quality and that could provide a living for artists. We planted many seeds here in terms of careers, spaces and the kinds of matters theatre could address and the many ways they could be addressed. We brought national and international attention to Milwaukee as a city that supported artistic experiment. It’s the work we did that was and that remains important. Somehow that work meant something important to so very many people. So very many people played a role in it, were indispensable to its realization in so many ways—so very many more than are referred to in this piece.