



TONY BROWN



Marry Me a Little

Idaho SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL CAME to wive it wealthily in Cleveland, Ohio. What it found, 1,766 miles east of Boise, was no damsel, although she was in some distress: Great Lakes Theater Festival, a dowager princess who was a little down on her luck but who still held title to a proud theatrical legacy.

It was pretty much love at first sight.

No Shakespeare comedy is complete without a wedding or three. But seven years into the romance between these far-flung, unlikely partners—Idaho Shakes, an esteemed 33-year-old summer-season venue, and the flagship GLTF, founded some 16 years earlier—the two classical companies still haven't officially tied the knot. Their affair, however—a long-distance cooperative agreement that both parties believe to be unique among professional regional theatres—has reaped financial and artistic dividends for both. Now Great Lakes and Idaho Shakes together look well positioned not only to survive but to thrive in the new economic paradigm.

The wise Shakespearean duke behind it all is Charles Fee, who spends a lot of time on airplanes as producing artistic director for both companies. But unlike the behind-the-scenes manipulator in many a Shakespeare happy-ending comedy, Fee did not put his charges into headlock-wedlock. Instead, he's fostered a business and artistic partnership that leaves each company independent but very interested in each other's welfare.

Here's how it works.

Each spring, Great Lakes produces two shows in repertory. This past spring they were Fee's Rio de Janeiro-flavored update of *The Comedy of Errors* and New York-based guest director Drew Barr's funny and poignant new adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. As soon as the shows closed in Cleveland in May, the sets, costumes and props began

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the long truck-trek west, followed soon by the actors and directors, and both shows were playing in rep in Boise by mid-June.

A few days after *Seagull* opened in Boise, rehearsals began there for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, directed by Cleveland's Victoria Busbert, and for Fee's *Twelfth Night*. After *Seagull* closed in July, *Drood* went up and played a few weeks in rep with *Comedy of Errors*. When *Comedy* closed in late July, *Twelfth* joined *Drood* in rep and both ran through the end of August.

By the time you read this, *Drood* and *Twelfth* will already have begun the trip from Boise to Cleveland, where they constitute Great Lakes's fall rep, scheduled to begin later this month.

Fee, like everyone else who works for the two theatres, is employed by each theatre separately (although two or three of the back-shop types, paid by one or the other of the theatres, are in effect "loaned out" by their respective employers). Each theatre has its own front-office staff and maintains a separate board, technical shops and annual operating budgets (\$3.4 million at Great Lakes, \$2.6 million at Idaho Shakes). Each presents its own innovative theatre-education programs and functions as an independent 501(c)3. The two theatres even operate under different Actors' Equity Association contracts—Great Lakes is LORT; Idaho Shakes is LOA—though the pay is the same at both venues. And the companies produce their own shows that are not shared; Fee does a pocket musical or comedy every autumn in Boise (this year, *A Tuna Christmas*), while at Great Lakes he mounts one of

From left, Idaho Shakespeare Festival's Shakespeare Café at intermission; Charles Fee; Hanna Theatre at the Great Lakes Theater Festival.



ROBERT MULLER



KEVIN REEVES

Double-duty artistic director Charles Fee has brokered a rewarding long-distance relationship between 2 classic companies

Cleveland's longest-lived holiday traditions, *A Christmas Carol*, which marks its 21st year in November.

The marriage thing all started one day in 2001 when Fee—a relaxed, cucumber-cool West Coast outlier in an industry fueled by East Coast *agita*—boarded a flight out of Boise, where he had been artistic director since 1991, to interview for a job as producing artistic director at Great Lakes.

He had no intention of permanently leaving Boise, a small, young, growing town of many possibilities, for Cleveland, a declining Rust Belt city that still has an enviable cultural infrastructure, including one of the world's great orchestras, the largest U.S. performing arts center outside New York, and an art museum with an endowment bigger than Boise's entire annual city government operating budget. Fee's idea was to work both jobs, and eventually to get the two companies together to the benefit of both. The idea was not just to save money by sharing rehearsal and building costs, but to build “a single repertory company” of artists and artisans who work in “two venues that just happen to be about 2,000 miles apart,” as Fee has put it.

“I create a *Hamlet*, perform it 14 times and then throw it in the garbage can,” Fee explained in 2002 as he set out to create his new producing model. “That's just not smart. Classical theatre is hard to produce in any of our cities. I'm thinking about a different financial and artistic model—build a production of a Shakespeare play, and then rebuild it and recast it with the same director and creative team and make it better the next time.”

The “parents” of Fee's intended partners, the boards of the two theatres, were intrigued by the possibilities. For Idaho Shakes—a solid, solvent but under-the-national-radar outdoor summer company where

Fee had managed to attract high-caliber talent like Bartlett Sher (before he became *the* Bartlett Sher)—the partnership could mean higher visibility and better actors lured by 40 weeks of union pay and benefits. For Great Lakes—whose 47-year tradition started with founding artistic director Arthur Lithgow and continued under the leadership of Irish rascal Vincent Dowling, Broadway-connected Gerald Freedman and, prior to Fee, James Bundy, now at Yale Repertory Theatre—it was an opportunity to erase a mountain of debt and breathe new life into an artistically brilliant but financially shaky operation.

But at a meeting of executives from both boards in Cleveland in 2002, there was hesitation. No one wanted to get caught up in a merger with a partner that might go south and drag the other down with it.

Up stood Carolyn Ticknor, then a board member at Idaho Shakes. Drawing on her experience as president of Hewlett-Packard's Boise-based imaging and printing systems group (which has a longstanding long-distance relationship with Japan-based competitor Canon), she calmed the group down by suggesting that the two companies could hop in bed together without the till-death-do-us-part bit.

“I remember being at that meeting, which was full of hope and tension,” Ticknor recalls. “I said: ‘This isn't a marriage. We aren't getting married. This is a business and artistic relationship, and when it no longer makes sense, we end it, and there's no big divorce, no custody battles, no hurt feelings.’ And I remember the chill suddenly went out of the room, and we settled down to discuss why this made sense.”

It didn't take long, thanks to the circumstances of Bundy's departure from Cleveland, to test Fee's ambitions. Bundy had scheduled the 2002–03 Great Lakes season for Fee, but hadn't cast any of the

shows. “Charlie started in Cleveland knowing he had to put up a play in late September ’02, and, fortunately, James had picked *Much Ado About Nothing*,” says Great Lakes board member David Porter, a retired lawyer from the international law firm Jones Day, headquartered in Cleveland. “Charlie happened to have a *Much Ado* on stage in Boise. That was a lot of luck. It was quickly decided to throw out James’s second fall play, *Master Harold...and the Boys*, and replace it with another Idaho play, *Arms and the Man*. Charlie was able to adapt immediately, bringing in two plays from Idaho, and to try out our idea.”

The idea evolved over the next few years—with a short detour during which Fee tried switching Great Lakes to a summer schedule coinciding with Idaho Shakes’s—into the semi-formal trading of shows back and forth that exists today. According to Porter, the arrangement would never have come about without the “boundless energy and enthusiasm, the can-do attitude you see in a successful businessman.”

WHEN FEE, NOW 51, ARRIVED IN BOISE FROM SIERRA Repertory Theatre in Sonora, Calif., in 1991, Idaho Shakes was “a ficus tree in the corner with the last leaf on it,” says Dana Oland, arts and culture writer for the *Idaho Statesman*, Boise’s daily newspaper. Founded in the summer of 1976 by a bunch of scruffy-looking longhairs who set out to produce *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the shadow of downtown Boise’s only skyscraper at the time, Idaho Shakes remained young and energetic and in search of a new and permanent home. By 1998, Fee and his managing director Mark Hofflund had built enough of an audience for his colorful and sometimes outlandish Shakespeare productions, gathered enough community support, and raised enough money (\$3 million) to open a new 770-capacity, thrust-stage amphitheatre, fashioned after Shakespeare’s Globe but with terraced lawn seating and cabaret tables and chairs, all nestled on parkland surrounded by the Boise River and the Rocky Mountain foothills. The fundraising and building continued, and Idaho Shakes’s 12-acre complex now includes a café, an interpretive center, nature trails and picnic spots. Total cost: \$11 million. And Fee managed to do it all while keeping the Idaho Shakes annual operating budget in the black year after year.

In Cleveland, Great Lakes was more than \$1 million in debt when Fee arrived, the result of a long streak of financial instability. Founded in the suburb of Lakewood in 1962 by a civic-minded school-board president who recruited Lithgow as artistic leader, Great Lakes had been in arrears since 1982. That’s when Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival (as it was then known) moved to downtown Cleveland to the newly renovated Ohio Theatre to be the first resident company in what would become one of the world’s largest theatre restoration projects, PlayhouseSquare, which now has five renovated 1920s venues



The Comedy of Errors at Idaho Shakespeare Festival in Boise in June 2009.

TONY BROWN/THE PLAIN DEALER

and several newer ones. Even in debt, Great Lakes had a noble standing as a classical theatre, generating productions starring the likes of Jean Stapleton, Hal Holbrook and Delroy Lindo, some of which went on to New York. (Most famously, Tom Hanks got his start at Great Lakes as an intern in 1977, and still likes to mention how grateful he is for that first job.) Fee charged into this mixed situation with gusto, slashing the Great Lakes staff, paying off debt and ending dangerous practices such as “borrowing” from a coming season’s advance subscription sales to pay off current-season costs. The company is now debt-free and even has a \$600,000 contingency fund.

Soon Fee, along with Great Lakes executive director Bob Taylor, set about doing something that had been talked about for years: renovating PlayhouseSquare’s 1921 Hanna Theatre into a 550-seat, audience- and classics-friendly thrust-stage venue to replace Great Lakes’s old PlayhouseSquare home in the Ohio, a traditional proscenium configuration that at 1,000 seats was too big for a small LORT company. The Hanna has its own celebrated history as the site of performances by everybody who was anybody in the American theatre, from Humphrey Bogart and Hume Cronyn to Helen Hayes and Katharine Hepburn. It hosted numerous world premieres over the decades, including the 1933 pre-Broadway tryout of Noël Coward’s racy *Design for Living*, starring Coward, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, whose complicated three-way relationship formed the basis of the play’s storyline.

After a \$15.7-million makeover that took less than a year, the

Rather than charging into headlock-wedlock, Fee has fostered a business and artistic partnership that leaves each company independent but very interested in each other’s welfare.



The Comedy of Errors at Great Lakes's Hanna Theatre in May 2009.

has to compete with the setting sun, particularly in Act 1. At the Hanna, staging is often altered from Boise to take advantage of the three hydraulic lifts that together compose the thrust stage.

The two venues also offer completely different experiences for the actors and audience. Wind-rustled trees and a shortage of acoustically tuned walls and ceiling in Boise's outdoor venue force the actors to project more emphatically. But the actors say they love being able to make eye contact with members of the audience in Boise, who are sprawled out drinking wine and eating from picnic baskets before and during the performance.

Fee and the Hanna architects

Hanna reopened last fall. The architects—Cleveland-based Westlake Reed Leskosky—preserved the historical interior but added high-tech goodies like a hydraulically operated stage to raise and lower actors and scenery, and an electronic fly system that is structurally independent of the stage house. If the company completes its fundraising—as of late July, it was still \$600,000 from its goal of \$19.2 million, but has a commitment from Hanks to perform a benefit to push the campaign over the top—Great Lakes will have an endowment for the first time in its history.

The opening of the Hanna helped add stability to Great Lakes during the economic downturn last fall as curious Cleveland theatregoers packed the house in record numbers for *Macbeth* and *Into the Woods*. Despite that positive bump, the repertory shows shared by Great Lakes and Idaho Shakes are still seen by two to three times more people in Boise—where there is little competition for audience—than in Cleveland, where Great Lakes competes with the larger and older LORT Cleveland Play House and with one of the strongest Broadway touring houses in the country, PlayhouseSquare.

School matinees and the big crowds drawn by Great Lakes's *Christmas Carol* help even out the numbers between the two operations, but Idaho Shakes still does a better job of “penetration,” or getting a higher percentage of the local population through its gates. (The Cleveland-Akron population of nearly 3 million is almost double that of the entire state of Idaho, 1.5 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.) On the other hand, Great Lakes does a better job at fundraising, thanks to a tradition of old-money giving that stretches back to the days of industrial giants such as John D. Rockefeller, and remains alive today thanks to the Cleveland Foundation, one of the country's largest community foundations, and other major donors.

The Hanna reopening has also eased some of the technical challenges posed by performing the same shows in two venues. The Hanna and the Idaho Shakes amphitheatre share approximately the same stage dimensions and aisle-entrance configurations, for example. But there are still significant hurdles for the design and technical teams. The Idaho Shakes amphitheatre has no fly system, so most set pieces have to roll in and out from the wings, and the stage lighting

worked to bring that kind of atmosphere to the Hanna—the bar is located inside the auditorium, for instance, and seating ranges from regular theatre chairs to cozy banquettes. But it's still an indoor theatre where the house lights go down.

The differences in the venues reflect the differences in the expectations of the two cities' audiences, says actress Sara Bruner, a veteran Idaho Shakes company member who started doing the east-west shuffle when Fee took the Cleveland job.

“In Boise, we're innocent until proven guilty—the crowds love us to begin with, and we get recognized at the drugstore and grocery,” Bruner says. But in Cleveland, where many audience members also attend the Stratford and Shaw festivals in nearby Ontario, Bruner says, “We're guilty until we prove otherwise.” That's also true of the press, Fee says. “In Idaho we might—*might*—get three reviews, in print and online,” Fee says. “In Cleveland, we get 14, and they're all over the map.”

Where does the innovative, cross-country partnership between Great Lakes and Idaho Shakes go now? Fee and board members of both theatres say they're not ready to stop looking for ways to continue expanding. In Cleveland, that might mean adding a sixth show to the season to fill one of the vacancies in the Hanna calendar, either at the end of October or the beginning of March. Fee is weighing the possibility of an indoor *Christmas Carol* at a performing arts center in Boise. And in both locales, there is talk that adding a third city to the mix might be a good idea.

“Maybe we could go elsewhere, find a city, another classical theatre company, that would benefit—and would benefit us—by being a partner with Boise and Cleveland,” Great Lakes board member Porter says.

If that happens, it might make for a *ménage à trois* that would rival that of Coward, Lunt and Fontanne in *Design for Living*. No marriage certificate required. ☒

Tony Brown celebrates his 10th anniversary as theatre critic at the *Plain Dealer*, the daily newspaper in Cleveland, on Nov. 1. Read his blog at www.cleveland.com/onstage.