

Eric Krebs



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Eric Krebs, a graduate of Morris Hills Regional High School in Rockaway, New Jersey, matriculated at Rutgers University. There he studied English and worked in theater. Though he did not “particularly think about theater as a career,” the community appealed to him, and he wrote plays. [2] After graduation, during a brief stint teaching preparatory school, he directed his first shows and “got hooked on the theater.” [2] In 1967 he started “part-time graduate school here in the Ph.D. English program at Rutgers, which I was oddly interested in and oddly able to get into.” [3]

At that time, he launched a 75-seat theater in a storefront on 47 Easton Avenue in New Brunswick; he named it Brecht West. [4] It lasted at that location for one season and “then moved down to 61 Albany Street, exactly where the entrance to the Johnson & Johnson headquarters is now. It lasted there about two or three years.” [4] He described the theater as “the consummate, wonderful, welcoming experience for the arts in New Brunswick.” [5] At the time, Rutgers had only a “modest undergraduate program” in theater, and there was no connection linking it with Brecht West. [6] As a graduate student, Krebs taught a basic writing course and later taught an introductory theater course. [7] This set the foundation for lifelong careers—“parallel careers in academia and in professional theater.” [7] He dropped out of graduate school; because Rutgers could not retain him as a teaching assistant, he was offered a position as assistant lecturer at Livingston College. [7] “Then over the years, I became a lecturer, an assistant, and eventually got tenure as associate,” Krebs said. [7]

Krebs vividly recounted his experiences at Brecht West. In one story, a group of policemen asked for a certificate of occupancy, and the theater presented a cultural center permit. The police disagreed with what fell under the purview of a cultural center: “You can’t do theater. It’s not a certificate of occupancy for theater. It’s only for a cultural center,” Krebs recalled one saying. [8] In another, Al Pacino directed the play *Rats* and was paid \$75 plus his bus fare. [9]

He described the experimental and edgy productions and how the greatest patrons were—surprisingly—“the East Brunswick professionals commuting to New York,” not the Rutgers academic community. [11] He also mentioned Jacqueline (Jackie) Rubel, who

was “instrumental in everything that happened in the arts early on in New Brunswick.” [12] There were “pockets of support” at Rutgers, including the director of Public Safety, Robert Ochs. When Krebs faced the dilemma of having to provide parking to receive a theater license, Ochs permitted theatergoers to park in Rutgers lots, allowing the theater to receive the license. [12] Despite this, “there was absolutely no engagement whatsoever from the Rutgers undergraduate theater department,” Krebs said. [13] “J&J was completely uninvolved with Brecht West in any way; it was so counter to their image,” he added. [14]

Krebs described downtown New Brunswick in the early 1970s as a “little working part of a little working town that had kind of gone to seed.” [15] He said that the city was “very conservative and very counter to our [the theater’s] culture,” which he described as “an oddball kind of radical-seeming sort of counter culture–oriented group of folks.” [16, 13] His next endeavor was renting a carpet warehouse—a former Acme supermarket—and converting it to a theater in 1974. [16] The theater—the George Street Playhouse—opened its first season with *Arms and the Man*, charging \$4 (\$2 for students). [17] The Playhouse started with six plays and 110 subscribers and grew to the more recent number of roughly 4,500 subscribers. [18] He said that Ralph and Barbara Voorhees were charter supporters, and that Johnson & Johnson donated \$4,500 to renovate the bathroom plumbing, although the City of New Brunswick and Rutgers provided “almost no engagement at all.” [19] He added that New Brunswick Tomorrow was not involved and that Mayor John A. Lynch, Jr., never attended the theater. [19] Krebs noted that Governor Thomas Kean came to a benefit event, which, incidentally, was during a “horrible rainstorm.” [20] A leak opened up right behind the governor, so during the performance Krebs was “in a tuxedo up on the roof in a rainstorm pushing a broom to brush the water away from over the spot where the governor was sitting. My life in art.” [20]

In 1979 Jackie Rubel and Krebs presented a vision of a New Brunswick Cultural Center to John Heldrich, Paul Abdalla of Devco (the New Brunswick Development Corporation), and Hugh Boyd of the *Home News* at the apartment of Rae and Morris Landis. [22] “The cultural center she envisioned was the State Theater, the YMCA, the Elks building, new construction, a closed Livingston Avenue,” Krebs explained. [22] After this meeting, a study was conducted. One suggestion was to build the new cultural center across the street from the train station. Krebs thought that this was “totally misconceived when the cultural center actually sort of existed in place.” [23]

Part of the formation of this cultural center began when “Johnson & Johnson wanted to build its headquarters and wanted to buy everything around,” including the George Street Playhouse. [24] Johnson & Johnson agreed to find the theater a new location if they moved. The first option was Davidson’s Food Market on George Street, farther away from downtown than the previous location. [24] This was rejected. Eventually the YMCA on Livingston Avenue was selected and converted to a theater. [25] The renovation “was a

great choice, it was a great design, and it worked very well as a theater; it was one of the linchpin moments when the cultural center really happened.” [29]

The George Street Playhouse opened in the fall of 1985 in the new space on Livingston Avenue with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. [26] Krebs explained that the Playhouse got off to a rocky start: “We almost went into bankruptcy because we fell into the edifice complex—a small organization gets built a big building and can’t support it, doesn’t know how to support it, doesn’t know how to find support.” [26] “I didn’t want to run a theater company that was about a building,” Krebs said, and left after three seasons. [26] He elaborated that as a smaller organization, the theater could put on more “provocative” plays for a smaller audience. [30] “We didn’t have to get all the good wishes all the time of all the power brokers,” Krebs added. When the theater grew, more mainstream productions became expected. [30]

Another part of the cultural center is the Crossroads Theater. “Rick Kahn and Lee Richardson came into my office and said, ‘Would you help us start a black theater company?’ And I said ‘Yes’ in about two seconds,” Krebs said of the founders. “Crossroads became a project of the George Street Playhouse, under the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program,” Krebs said. [27] He helped rent the first space, a “walk-up industrial loft down on Ward Parkway.” He said that they were “most successful there because, again, they were not supporting a huge building with all of the staff positions. They had a vision—and it was a great vision.” [28] Krebs served as the first executive director of Crossroads.

Krebs spoke about the third leg of the cultural center, the State Theater. Krebs said that he “always viewed the State Theater as a monumental resource, but nobody else could really see it or understand how to raise the money for it.” [29]

He said that New Brunswick and its neighbor across the Raritan River, Highland Park, “were always one community,” through the 1950s. However, “things changed with the influx of the Hungarian immigrant population, the Latino population, with the loss of business to the malls, and the core of New Brunswick went kind of dead.” [33] Krebs explained that the two “evolved into two very different worlds” as New Brunswick fell ill to drug- and crime-related problems.

Krebs said that “There really wasn’t a New Brunswick community” involved with the arts. Supporters were from the surrounding region—Highland Park, East Brunswick, Somerset, Franklin, Princeton—and some from the redevelopment community. [35] Rutgers “stayed at the fringes for decades,” which perhaps explains why Rutgers did not heed Krebs’s pleas to build the Nicholas Music Center in downtown New Brunswick. [36] Still, Krebs gave Rutgers credit for expanding the downtown in other ways. [39]

One of the direct results of the theater movement, Krebs said, was the proliferation of “lovely restaurants within five blocks” of the arts district. [37] When speaking about the

evolution of theaters, Krebs said that “The ones that seem to stick, like the model in New Brunswick, become very sort of mainstream, acceptable, safe organizations.” [38]

Krebs thought that the City could improve its ways of addressing issues related to “the poor, the immigrant, the fringe people, the housekeepers, and burger-servers who live here.” [39]

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

Downtown New Brunswick

There was a wonderful meat store called the Pork Store up on George Street—that was when we started the George Street Playhouse, in the early 1970s. It was just community stores, clothing stores, nothing that would presage anything that was to come there. It was just a little working part of a little working town that had kind of gone to seed, which is why we could rent the Brecht West at lower Albany Street for \$150 a month.

Gentrification

I think that real estate has driven New Brunswick.—I think that’s a natural extension of where the money is in New Brunswick.—The power of New Brunswick has to do with buildings, so Johnson & Johnson and Rutgers, which have enormous power bases of both money and personnel, and so on, obviously become the parts of what happens here.—And to Rutgers’ credit, it has now come downtown in a big way.—Twenty years ago, twenty-five years ago, there was no presence of Rutgers between Somerset Street and Commercial Avenue, but now there is.—So Rutgers had to grow.—It has done it reasonably well and continues to get even better.—But real estate and the power needs of those two institutions have obviously driven New Brunswick.

I don’t think the needs of the poor, the immigrant, the fringe people, the housekeepers and burger-servers who live here have ever been addressed nor can they be addressed in the current structure of how America functions.—We need those people to flip our hamburgers, and they’ve got to live somewhere.—The problems are so great that I’m not sure any city can address them, but I don’t think New Brunswick has particularly made much progress in addressing those kinds of core issues of what it means to be poor and pretty much disenfranchised in a world of real estate, money, and powerful organizations. [38-39]

George Street Playhouse

*I remember a particularly poignant moment when the AIDS crisis was just coming on us. The first major AIDS play was called **As Is**—a play about discovering what AIDS was. I said, “Okay, we’ve got to put this as the first show in our season because that’s the show that gets the most attention and sets the tone for the season.” Several of the board members said, “Well, why do you have to put it there when we have financial issues? Can’t you put it in the middle of the*

season?" And I said, "Exactly for the reason you are suggesting—that a different show would get more attention at the top of the year, and that's why we have to do it first." And I still remember when we did **As Is**; we were in the new building at the bottom of the staircase as you face the staircase on the left-hand side, leaning on the polished railing, and a gentleman came up and said, "Mr. Krebs, why don't you just do pedestrian plays that audiences can enjoy?" I think it was from that moment on that I started my alienation from George Street and the process. [31]

Historic Preservation

Half of me understands totally why people would get upset about demolition of old buildings and half of me knows that you've got to demolish old buildings to make new ones. [41]

New Brunswick/Highland Park

Highland Park and New Brunswick were always one community.—Through the 1950s, they were really one community.—In the 1950s, things changed with the influx of the Hungarian immigrant population, the Latino population, with the loss of business to the malls—and the core of New Brunswick went kind of dead.—With the crime and the drugs that came to New Brunswick but not Highland Park, it just sort of evolved into two very different worlds.—But for many decades, they were really one world. [33]

Role of the Local Community

I can't answer where the community was in all of this.—It really wasn't a New Brunswick community.—It was Highland Park, East Brunswick, Somerset, Franklin, even the Princeton community that supported what was evolving in the arts here.—There was the redevelopment community of people with money and real estate power, and Johnson and Johnson power. There was the Rutgers community, which stayed at the fringes for decades.—Nicholas Music Center over at Douglass—I pleaded with them to not build it over there but to build it in downtown New Brunswick.

What a great facility that would have been to sit next door to the Mason Gross School of the Arts office, next to the Cultural Center.—That building—800 beautiful seats—would have been a perfect concert hall size and space to add to the cultural center.—But Jack Bettenbender, even though he did marvelous things for the arts within Rutgers, never got involved in the greater New Brunswick community—never.—So while his legacy is sacred within Rutgers and Mason Gross, his legacy in terms of the redevelopment—there was never any participation.—I don't think he ever came to the George Street Playhouse.

I tried, by the way, to establish the George Street Playhouse as a part of Rutgers, because I was teaching full-time at Rutgers at that time.—I tried to make it a professional company, and I'm afraid that infringed on what was seen as "the turf" of the theater program. [35-36]

State Theater

The State Theater used to be owned by a guy named Jeff Gersten.— He bought it for \$55,000 or something when it went out of business as a porno house, and he sat on it for a while.— I always viewed the State Theater as a monumental resource, but nobody else could really see it or understand how to raise the money for it.

Theater and the Proliferation of Restaurants

One of the achievements of the cultural movement in New Brunswick is that there are fifteen or twenty lovely restaurants within five blocks of here. That's a direct result. But the people going to those restaurants want a certain kind of entertainment and a certain kind of non-demanding sort of material. So it's a mixed blessing when it grows bigger and more accepted in the community. [37]

YMCA Conversion to a Theater

So they found the alternative of the Y, which had a gym—a track on the second floor I used to run around.— And they figured out a whole program for about \$2 million—knock out the back wall of the gym, build a whole stage house (which is currently still in use), and they redid the whole first two floors of the building into a theater. It was a great choice, it was a great design, and it worked very well as a theater.— It was one of the linchpin moments when the cultural center really happened. Once they saw what George Street could do in terms of bringing people downtown, restaurants started to happen around a bit. They then took interest in the State Theater.