
Larry Kornfeld

Larry Kornfeld was involved in the theater at Judson for many years.

During some of these, he lived at Judson House. _____

Toward the end of 1960 I decided to leave the Living Theater, where I had been working as general manager and assistant director. A close friend of mine, Joel Oppenheimer, told me over dinner one night that Judson Church was starting a theater, and they wanted to do his play, *The Great American Desert*. Joel wanted to know if I was interested in directing it because he loved my work. Would I do this at the church? My initial response was, "No way. They won't let you do this. The play is filthy." And Joel said, "The Judson Board said they would do it, and I have their support." I said, "I can't believe it's a church, Joel. It has the word 'fuck' in it many, many times, and other words, too." We had gone through this with the Living Theater just a few years before with the premiere of a play by Paul Goodman, which was the first time the word "fuck" had been used in a theater openly. We had been expecting to be arrested but nothing happened.

Anyway, Joel reassured me that the board of the church had said they would support the arts program with no censorship, and he said he believed them. So I said I would do it, and that was the first real production that Al Carmines set up. The theater had been started earlier by Al and by Bob Nichols, or it may have been Bob Nichols and Howard Moody. They may have done a production of *Faust*. But the first theater *season* started with *The Great American Desert* and a translation of Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias*. This was around December 1961/January 1962. Well, I came to do that play, and it turned out very well. Howard told me the story that he or someone on his staff was hanging out in the hall at the end of opening night when some high Baptist official and his wife came down the stairs, and this person overheard the wife say to the husband, "George, that's the best fucking play I have seen in years." The story may be apocryphal but it is wonderful.

That's how I came to Judson. I did another play and then another. Very quickly I became the resident director, whatever that meant. There was no way of becoming artistic director, with Al's position as the arts minister. I did about half the plays.

I MOVE INTO JUDSON HOUSE

I lived in Hoboken at the time. My upstairs neighbor there was George Dennis, the poet, playwright, novelist, and social critic, now dead. Both he and Joel Oppenheimer died of lung cancer, both ferocious smokers. George was a good friend of mine. We lived in this old building. George always wanted to open his apartment up, so he kept knocking walls down over the couple of years that I lived there. One night the whole ceiling came down while I was asleep. The stuff buried everything. I had become more and more tired of living in Hoboken, and the day after the ceiling fell on me, I gave my cats away to friends, I gathered some books and things that I had, and moved into Judson House. Before I came to live at the house I had already spent a lot of time there, playing bridge and going to a lot of parties. Howard offered me a place there.

I had a room on the third floor, directly across from the stairs. I don't remember who my neighbors were. Al had the big apartment downstairs. I brought in a bookcase and a painting of Julian Beck's called *King Lear*, and I had a rug. It was very pleasant. I may have had two rooms. I took my meals in the kitchen. That was the arrangement because now I was staff. The church paid me a small stipend of about \$50 a month, but I spent all my time in the theater, so I was allowed to have free meals. The arrangement allowed me to leave teaching. My time at the Living Theater had been a high-level apprenticeship. When I came out of that monastery and went out into the world—I am speaking in medieval terms—it was Judson and the Student House that allowed me to develop my skills over ten years. I lived at the house for two years until 1965 when Margaret Zipse and I got married, and then we moved to Brooklyn to a house that Lee Guillatt found for us.

Willie Mae Wallace was the cook for the house. I don't know where Willie Mae lived. I know she came in and she cooked wonderful meals, twice a day, lunch and dinner. She was more than a cook, she was the housemother. She was raucously funny, a strong woman.

I was very fond of her. We took things for granted. We were all staff, paid and unpaid, it was not so much staff as it was community. It was the sixties, and I did not explore who paid whom. Beverly and Ralph Waite ran the place. In hindsight, the Judson Board obviously put up money for it and supported it.

I GIVE UP BRIDGE FOR MARGARET

There were always lots of interesting people in the house, in addition to the people who lived there. There was Julie Kurnitz. She was the light of the world. I remember Paul Goodman coming to visit often, sitting in the kitchen. At that time Paul was one of the great figures in American radical politics. He loved the young people at the house and engaged with them.

There were bridge parties. Al Carmines was my partner. Al, Julie, Jack Matlaga, and I used to play bridge. Margaret and I played bridge, too, when we were first married, but I found myself getting very nasty, and I decided that if this marriage was going to last, I had better not play bridge anymore, so I gave it up.

After I moved out I kept my position as resident director of the Judson Theater, but, of course, I did not spend that much time at the Student House any more. I would occasionally drop in, certainly at rehearsal time. But I had my own home now, and then I had a child.

THE CAGE AT THE GALLERY

One of my favorite events at the Judson House took place at the Judson Gallery. Kate Millett had organized a happening that involved waiting outside in line before you could go into the gallery. Margaret and I went inside where there was a big wooden cage, beautifully sculptured, and they squeezed a lot of people into it and then they were able to close it. There were maybe fifteen or twenty people in it. Lights started flashing, there were incredibly loud noises, and of course you did not know what was going to happen. It was like a torture box. I hated it, so I broke the box and got out of it. I thought, "The artist is going to hate me for this." Already she came running over and said, "You are the first person who has resisted." I occasionally tell this story because for me it was a sign of how passive the avant-garde had become. This was 1967. The artist

was waiting for people to respond, to tear it apart, but they went in and did nothing.

There was a flow in and out of people at Judson House. You did not ask what people did, why they were there. Some were related to the theater, some to the church, some of them were just there. There were hayseed types who would move in for the summer.

The garden was wonderful. When the weather was nice, we would sit outside late at night. I have a drawing that Jon Hendricks did of me when we sat there one night. He picked up a piece of cardboard and a stone and he made scratches with the stone on the cardboard. Then he picked up some dirt and rubbed it into the scratches and did the portrait.

Jon Hendricks and I were good friends. Actually, Margaret and I were able to get married because of Jon's parents. I had never met Jon's parents, and Jon and I drove to Vermont to visit them, wonderful Quaker people. We spent a weekend with them. They were elderly people, or what seemed elderly to me then, and it was wonderful to see two people who had been married many, many years, with a lively intellectual life. It was an example to me of how a married couple could still maintain a friendship after all those years, which I had not seen much—just wobbly marriages, divorcing marriages. Jon's parents inspired me to get married myself.

That was part of the community at the Student House. It was not just what we did at the house, but how it gave us a base for growing up. It was a safe haven. For me, it was also very important that I met so many people who were not New Yorkers. There were people from Ohio and Iowa! I barely used to think those people existed. I am an old New Yorker, born and raised here. My parents grew up in New York. The contact really broadened my outlook. And for those people it was the first time they lived with a real New Yorker. It was a reciprocating community.

LARRY AND MARGARET KORNFIELD

live in Brooklyn, New York.