

# A fringe theater titan sets down roots in Kansas City

NOW BASED IN MIDTOWN, PLAYWRIGHT, ACTOR AND DIRECTOR JOHN CLANCY WILL EXERT HIS TALENTS AS CENTRAL STANDARD THEATRE'S NEW RESIDENT PLAYWRIGHT

BY ROBERT TRUSSELL

You may not have noticed, but Kansas City is a lot fringier than it used to be.

“Fringe theater” wasn’t a thing here before KC Fringe was established in 2005. It remains a major player in the performing arts scene, and Central Standard Theatre, an offshoot of Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre, got started in 2010.

But Kansas City’s prestige in the international fringe festival scene recently got a major boost.

John Clancy — a playwright, actor and director who helped found the New York International Fringe Festival — has moved here to begin a new chapter in his artistic life.

Clancy’s reputation as a fringe-dweller, as it were, comes from decades of creating alternative theater with his wife and artistic partner, the late Nancy Walsh. Walsh was a stage actor who for a time supported the couple, performing on soap operas in New York. Walsh died in 2024 after a long, defiant struggle with brain cancer.



METROPOLITAN ENSEMBLE THEATRE

John Clancy as Larry Slade in Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre’s 2023 production of “The Iceman Cometh”

Clancy’s decision to make Kansas City his home base for the present came in response to an offer from Bob Paisley, co-founder of the Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre and founding artistic director of his own nonprofit company, Central Standard Theatre. It was under the Central Standard banner that Kansas City audiences first saw performers and writers from England, Canada and Australia, most of them doing one-actor shows.

Clancy, for this year at least, is Central Standard’s resident playwright.

Paisley introduced Kansas City theatergoers to Clancy’s work in 2010, when he performed “The Event,” a one-man show in which an unidentified actor prepares to perform a one-man show. Clancy’s piece questions the nature of theater and raises cosmic and philosophical questions about the meaning of art — and the meaning of existence.



PHOTO BY JIM BARCUS

Playwright John Clancy (left) and Bob Paisley, co-founder of Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre and founding artistic director of Central Standard Theatre, in the Warwick Theatre lobby

Paisley was not the only actor to perform the piece, but he said it captured his imagination.

"It was a piece of work I admired a lot," said Paisley, who went on to perform the play in Canada, England and Australia. "He touched on so many facets of theater."

Before making the formal move to Kansas City, Clancy had performed in the MET's productions of "Judgment at Nuremberg" and "The Iceman Cometh."

Clancy, 61, said he met Nancy Walsh in graduate school at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. She was from Massachusetts and Clancy hailed from St. Louis.

Clancy, who had studied acting at Oberlin College, said they became friends without considering what that might lead to.

"We didn't know we were falling in love," Clancy said. "We were both engaged to other people at the time."

Walsh went on to earn her graduate degree, but Clancy said he was kicked out of SMU in his first year.

"I was a terrible student," he said. "I had really good training at Oberlin. I realized I was just tired of it. I was always a bad student, disrespectful of the professors. I came to the conviction that grad school is just not the right path for acting or directing. You're just stalling three years when you should be out there doing it."

After Walsh graduated, they took a deep breath and headed to New York. They both got agents. Nancy became a working actor while Clancy concentrated on writing.

"I went to auditions but got very little work," he said. "Nancy made all the money. She was on soap operas and commercials; I was bartending for a while

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Actress Nancy Walsh in 2002

COURTESY OF JOHN CLANCY

and doing a day shift and so we turned on the TV above the bar and you're watching, and your wife walks out."

#### **EVOLUTION OF NEW YORK FRINGE**

Eventually they formed their own "illegal" theater company in Hell's Kitchen in Midtown Manhattan. The space included a small performance space and an office. He knew about the annual fringe festival in Edinburgh and watched a lot of his friends travel there to perform.

"I realized I had a notebook of all these names of New York theater artists going to Edinburgh," he said. "There were so many, I thought why not do this here?"

They published "a tiny little announcement that we were going to start the first New York Fringe Festival."

To their surprise, 350 people showed up.

"It was just like wham-bam," he said.

"We were sitting up onstage like we knew what we were doing . . . It was the right idea at the right time. I've seen it a hundred times where you might have a good idea but if it's not the right time, it won't happen."

Clancy officially became one of the founders of the New York International Fringe Festival.

John and Nancy stayed in Hell's Kitchen for three years. But it was a subway ride to downtown where the experimental theater was happening. So, in 1998, they moved.

"We found this huge garage," he said. "It was enormous — four thousand square feet and 15-foot ceilings. . . It was a chop shop and there was an illegal bar in back. 'Theatertorium' I called it."

One advantage of being in the old garage: There were no support columns performers would have to "act around."

Clancy said Nancy's tumor announced its presence in 2002 when she suffered a seizure. He remembers the date: July 3.

The doctors gave her three to five years to live.

"Twenty-two years later she finally gave up the ghost," Clancy said. "She had a solid 10 years before she began to decline physically. She was incredible. She was 47 years old. She was in excellent shape. We stayed in touch with her surgeon, and he said, 'You are a medical miracle.'"

Walsh continued touring and performing at fringe festivals, but Clancy said her condition affected her abilities as an actor in certain ways. She had no problem memorizing lines. But she could no longer improvise.

"Think of the terror of that: Zero ability to improvise," Clancy said.

#### **A NEW BEGINNING**

The couple ultimately moved to Mount Carmel, a small town in eastern Illinois about a 2-hour drive from St. Louis. There they bought an old bank building with a bar next door and called it the Little Egypt Art Center, which they ran for five years.

In 2014 Clancy and Walsh came to town to perform his "The Piano Store Plays" for the Kansas City Fringe. Clancy described the one-acts as "three short weird little plays."

Other than that, Clancy had not spent much time in Kansas City.

"It feels like a welcoming town," Clancy said. "And there's a strong tradition of theater."

Clancy is now on the board of the Kansas City Fringe Festival, invited to join by an old friend, Audrey Crabtree, the festival's artistic director. Crabtree, who grew up in the Kansas City area,

had a long and varied theater career before moving back. She said she was glad she made the move.

"I love it," Crabtree said. "My friends from New York would say, 'Aren't you dying out there?' But I'm thrilled to be part of the community. There's so much good art and good theater here."

She said she met Clancy in New York in 1998. It was there that she founded the New York Clown Theater Festival. But after years of performing in the city and on the road, Crabtree said she was glad to be back.

"I am very excited about him being here," she said. "He was really a mentor to me in New York . . . He was someone I would look up to and he would advise me about certain things and projects."

She said one reason she left New York was the preponderance of alternative theater performers and venues. In Kansas City, the fringe festival happens once a year. In New York, it never ends.

"The challenge in New York is basically people are doing fringe theater all year round," she said. "There is so much experimental work and there are tons of little theaters."

Clancy has settled into a midtown apartment and continues to write every day except Sunday.

"Sometimes it's nothing, it's no good," he said. "I have a screenplay I need to finish. And I'm working on a one-actor play. I'm writing a novel, a memoir and short stories (he began writing in Mount Carmel). I started writing poetry three years ago and some of it is pretty good. If I don't write I go kind of insane." □

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