

‘WHERE WE WENT’

Written by Angela Minor



HAM FOR HAMLET : BARTER THEATER : ABINGDON, VA



The year was 1933. In rural southwest Virginia, cash was scarce and there was often a surplus of farm goods. Into this landscape returned local native Robert Porterfield, young actor and visionary, with an outlandish proposition: “With food you can’t sell, you can buy a good laugh.” His creativity to barter for the price of admission to a live performance gave birth to the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia. “All you needed was 35 cents or the equivalent in produce, and you could see the best of theatre in America,” says Katy Brown, the fourth producing artist director and first female chief executive in the theatre’s 87-year history. “Porterfield was at the vanguard of a movement taking theatre into all parts of America. He was saying in essence, ‘Theatre is for everyone; not just people in cities; not just people with power or money.’” Today, Barter is the country’s longest running professional theatre. “Regional theatres celebrate the best of stories, people, and art. It’s an art form that only exists in the space between the performance and the audience. Every person deserves this connection,” Brown states. Well-known and award-winning stage and screen stars have performed here: Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ned Beatty, Hume Cronyn, Larry Linville, Gary Collins, and others. In addition to a full production slate, Barter offers a youth academy and playwrights festivals to encourage creativity and foster community bonds. “I think of Barter as a tree – growing its limbs larger over the years,” shares Brown. “We’re developing initiatives for those with hearing and sight impairments, as well as sensory shows. We want to open the doors wider so everyone can enjoy a show at Barter,” she concludes. That first performance in June of 1933, where some 80% of the audience paid with either dairy products, vegetables or livestock, was sold out! That first season they cleared \$4.35, two barrels of jelly, and gained a collective 300 pounds amongst the cast and crew. In the spirit of the founder, check the schedule for shows where your admission price can be a donation for the local food bank. For more information visit bartertheatre.com