



A Look Back

From War to Peace to STAGE & SCREEN

They aren't necessarily household names—Norman Hall '48, Sam Denoff '50, Phil Hymes '49, Lee Philips (formerly Leon Friedman), Jo Wilder (nee Joanne Brower), Roswell Bigelow '48, and Fanchon Scheier (nee Miller) '74—but the television, film, and theatre productions these Adelphi alumni contributed to are well known.

Longtime television and theatre director **Norman Hall '48** won an Emmy for direction on *One Life to Live*. **Samuel Denoff '50**, who passed away earlier this year, won four Emmys—two of which were for his writing on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. **Phil Hymes '49** is still the lighting director for *Saturday Night Live*. **Lee Philips**, who passed away in 1999, became famous for his lead role, alongside Lana Turner, in the 1957 film, *Peyton Place*. He went on to direct scores of television shows, including episodes of *M*A*S*H*. **Jo Wilder**, a former actor, was married to actor Joel Grey and is the mother of actor Jennifer Grey, of *Dirty Dancing* fame. **Roswell Bigelow '48**, who also passed away earlier this year along with his wife of 64 years, alumna **Blanche Bigelow '44**, was a lighting director at NBC and ABC. **Fanchon Scheier '74** continues to teach theatre at Sarah Lawrence College.

They all came to Adelphi just after World War II. Many, such as Mr. Hall, Mr. Hymes, and Mr. Bigelow, were veterans who took advantage of the G.I. Bill. The veterans were older and had gained experiences and skills that served them well in the theatre—both on stage and behind the scenes. *SNL* lighting director Phil Hymes, who worked with Norman Hall to design Adelphi's Little Theatre in 1947, says, "I was a master sergeant in the signal corps in maintenance...I knew a little something about a screwdriver and a hammer." Adelphi's Speech and Drama Department, as it was then known, was intimate and allowed for camaraderie and autonomy. In an essay, "My Time at Adelphi," Mr. Hall writes, "In choosing Adelphi, I felt that I had found a perfect place where I could learn, explore, and initiate creative ideas." With the support of Adelphi President Paul Dawson Eddy, Mr. Hall and Mr. Hymes helped the College acquire and reconfigure a World War II Quonset hut that became Adelphi's Little Theatre—the predecessor to Olmsted Theatre. Even after his graduation in 1948, Mr. Hall continued to direct Adelphi plays.



- 1 A 1950 production of *The Aim of the Game—An Original Musical Revue*, written by Norman Hall '48 and Fred McMorrow '49, with (from left) Fanchon Scheier (nee Miller) '74, Mr. Hall, Gordon Rigby, Jim McDonald, and Mr. McMorrow
- 2 A 1947 production of *Waiting for Leftie*, directed by Norman Hall '48, with (from left) John Shapiro, Fred McMorrow '49, Ira Lapoff, and Roland Gomez '51
- 3 Adelphi alumnus Lee Philips starred in the 1957 film, *Peyton Place*.
- 4 Creators and cast of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* at Emmy night in May 1966: (from left) writer Bill Persky; the show's creator Carl Reiner; its stars Mary Tyler Moore and Dick Van Dyke; and writer Sam Denoff '50

Fanchon Scheier, who has devoted her career to acting and teaching acting, recalls being in the plays Mr. Hall directed. "Norman was so dynamic," she says. According to Ms. Scheier, "It was a very exciting time [at Adelphi] because of the veterans." She came to Adelphi to study with Jack Thompson, a faculty member who had studied out in Hollywood at the Actors' Laboratory. "He had absolutely revolutionary, exciting training, and I was just thrilled with his classes and his belief in me," says Ms. Scheier.

Following graduation, Mr. Hall and Ms. Scheier, along with others, including Lee Philips, formed the Circle Theater—one of the first arena theatres in New York City—where they produced plays. "We got nice reviews," says Ms. Scheier. "But it never made a profit."

Ms. Scheier fondly recalls seeing her friend, Mr. Philips, starring in *Peyton Place*.

"I remember my friend...and I ran down to...the theatre downtown, and we were just thrilled," she says. "He was a terrific, terrific guy."

Ms. Scheier also remembers performing with Jo Wilder, whom she describes as "a terrific singer." **Lois Kester Jason '53**, who continues to act, says she used to pick Ms. Wilder up in Brooklyn and drive her out to school.

Ms. Jason, who describes her Adelphi days as "exciting times," says she performed a scene from *Born Yesterday* with Sam Denoff. "I was Billie Dawn, and he was, I think, Harry Brock."

Mr. Denoff passed away in July 2011 from complications of Alzheimer's disease. In his obituary in the *New York Times*, Margalit Fox writes, "It was for the acerbic wit that he brought to *The Dick Van Dyke Show* that Mr. Denoff probably remained most celebrated."

What made Adelphi a starting ground for theatre talents such as Mr. Denoff and his fellow alumni is hard to pinpoint. The College's proximity to New York, its appeal to World War II veterans eager to move on with their lives, and its collegial and respected drama department all likely played a role.

Regardless, it was a fruitful time for the performing arts and for those who would make their careers on or near stage. "During those years, I found so many talented and creative actors, stage managers, and technicians, many of whom became lifelong friends," writes Norman Hall. "I have spent my entire professional life in the theatre and television, and I will always be grateful for the unbelievable opportunities afforded me at Adelphi." 

By Bonnie Eissner