



## Harold G. “Hal” O’Leary - *Music and Fine Arts*

The most consistently valuable community theater experience in the Wheeling area for four decades has been found at Oglebay Institute’s Towngate Theatre. The name most often associated with Towngate Theatre is Harold G. “Hal” O’Leary, its founder and recently retired artistic director. Whether a member of the audience, onstage or behind the scenes, those persons participating in a Towngate production knew Hal’s influence over the proceedings was deeply palpable.

In fact, O’Leary is the unquestioned leader in community theater in the Upper Ohio Valley. But his varied career also has given him a regional and national forum because he has acted in several movies and in industrial promotions and commercial spots for television and performed on stages in Washington and Pittsburgh, Pa. His fine, vibrant voice has been used in the recording of anthologies of children’s literature and early in his career he appeared on programs for CBS and ABC radio. His expertise as a scenic designer has been called upon for numerous Towngate productions as well as those in Clarksburg, W.Va., New York City, and on board the SS Rotterdam World Cruise. He was instructor of communications at Bethany College from 1970-79.

O’Leary was born on April 26, 1925, in Wheeling, graduated from Warwood High School, and attended West Liberty State College. He served in the U.S. Army and, with the exception of those years of service and a few years in the late ‘40s when he lived in New York City, Hal has resided in Wheeling. As a theater volunteer in Wheeling in the early 1960s and as soon as he joined Oglebay Institute in 1965, O’Leary developed a keen sense of his role as mentor to young people with an interest in the theater. Early in his career he took great pains to begin programs aimed at the emerging artist. For example, one of his first initiatives was to bring the theater experience to every elementary school classroom in

the Wheeling area. He founded the Junior Theater Program for young actors which became the Parcel Players summer program geared to high school- and college-age students.

O’Leary oversaw in 1969 the renovations to an historic church purchased by Oglebay Institute and turned into a 166-seat theatre now in its 39th season. Towngate Theatre has produced 250 shows with 1,592 performances for a combined attendance of more than 158,000 people. Along with the Parcel Players, Towngate shows have included summer musical productions in the outdoor amphitheatre in Oglebay Park and a variety of touring productions in area schools, colleges, churches, community centers and even the state penitentiary.

Hal has overseen all this activity in his decades of service to Oglebay Institute and the community. But what of his life beyond the Towngate? Along with his brainchild, the National Playwriting Contest, which has brought much distinction and gravitas to the program, O’Leary has acted in five films which have received national attention, most notably the movie “Bob Roberts”, one of the first to take a satiric look at those seeking political office. He is a member of the Screen Actors Guild, Southeastern Theatre Conference, the American Association of Community Theatres, and the Pittsburgh Film Workers Association.

If you are a theater-goer in this region, chances are you’ve seen the work of Harold G. O’Leary in one or more of its forms. After all, he has directed and/or acted in more than 300 productions. In Wheeling, his name is synonymous with live community theater.