

ESTHER'S FOLLIES COMEDY THEATRE: A TEXAS LEGACY OF LAUGHTER

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Jamie Renee Suire, B.F.A.

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**Jamie Renee Suire**

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# **ESTHER'S FOLLIES COMEDY THEATRE: A TEXAS LEGACY OF LAUGHTER**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Amid the loud music and hordes of people, on a street laden with cigarette butts and taco stands, and alongside a stretch of loud bars and nightclubs, sits a little comedy theatre known as Esther's Follies. Located in "the heart of Sixth Street," the theatre posts on the corner of Red River and Sixth Street in Austin, Texas's Downtown Sixth Street District. Inside and out the theatre is painted as an aquatic mural of undersea creatures and is adorned with paintings, posters and pictures of their namesake: Esther Williams. The theatre, though modest, attracts audiences nationwide and is a staple tourism spot in Austin. The shows are an hour and a half in length and involve a combination of magic, music, sketch comedy, and political satire. It is *Saturday Night Live* meets Vaudeville. While the majority of comedy groups that have formed over the years have not found sustainability, Esther's Follies has thrived. Using newspaper articles, autobiographical novels of former cast members, and face-to-face interviews, this thesis details the history, people, and philosophy of Esther's Follies in an attempt to understand how and why they were able to succeed in an ever-changing economic and ever-unpredictable entertainment landscape.

“In the beginning, there was nobody here but us turkeys” boasts the Esther’s Follies website and is the basis of the first chapter, “The Formative Years: 1968-1979” (History). It reveals the story of how this group of artists, determined to do experimental theatre, came together to create this comedy phenomenon. Before they were officially the Follies, the shows this group of artists were doing, caught the attention of reputable people and even toured nationally and in Europe. The idea for the show began in 1976 when Michael Shelton and Shannon Sedwick headed Liberty Lunch, a popular musical venue in Austin that closed in 1999. Liberty Lunch often had dances through the lawn sprinklers. These dances were a campy tribute to Esther Williams, an actress and swimmer from the 1940s and 1950s who performed in movies where she would swim underwater to choreographed movement. This tribute is still the finale of the show today. In 1977 Michael Shelton leased a bar on Sixth Street and threw an April Fool’s Day party. One week later groups of singers, poets, dancers, mimes, musicians and comics arrived to join in on a night where anything could go and it did. This became the routine of Friday nights in a little bar next to the JJJ Tavern. After the show the floor was cleared and both performers and audience would dance to a band for hours. They hired Doug Jaques to paint a sixty-by-twenty-foot undersea mural along the entire east wall and the venue got its nickname: Esther’s Pool.

At that time the show brought in all walks of life who wanted to *dive* in, and was similar to what Chicago’s Second City group had done in the 1950s with their outlandish character skits and a lot of improvisation. Michael Shelton built a small stage with its back to a window looking out on Sixth Street, and the gatherings became a phenomenon

for performers, audiences, and the average pedestrian passing down the street. Each week there was something new on the mural and someone new jumping on stage. Along with Michael Shelton and Shannon Sedwick, the core group included Doug Dyer, their leader and director; Lyova Rosanoff creating challenging and humorous musical numbers; comedians and writers Terry Galloway, Joel McKeen, Steve Saugey, and Amos Ewing; and singers Linda Weatherby and William Dente, whose invention of Dame Della Diva became legendary. Once again they were approached by respected national talent as executives of *Saturday Night Live* offered to move the show to New York City, but this time the Follies refused the offer.

The years when Esther's got their sea legs and began to grow into a tourist attraction is the focus of Chapter 2, "Becoming a Local Legend 1980-1996." Due to internal and external reasons the company moved to different locations before settling into their current home. A touring group began as well, led by David Perkoff, but it stopped soon after it started: some believe that the touring group appeared to be too threatening to Shelton and Sedwick who seemed to fear the success of the show slipping out of their hands. Throughout the eighties other main players arrived, notably the comedic works of Kerry Awn, Margaret Wiley, Ingo Neuhaus, Colom Keating, Keith Kelly, Cindy Wood and Ray Anderson as a guest magician.

In 1990 Shelton bought and renovated the JJJ Tavern, which is still today Esther's current home. Keeping with the theme from their first home they again had the mural painted in aquatic wildlife, only this time it extended to the outside of the building as well, and they again backed the stage up to the windows. Just as in the 1970s and 1980s,



they were again approached to expand the show in 1990 as networks in Los Angeles began filming the Follies in order to turn the show into a made-for-TV comedy hour, and even though it seemed to all involved that this was indeed happening, the show never made it on screen. Could it be the novelty that contributed so greatly to their fame on the stage, the giant windows behind the stage looking out on Sixth Street, was the same thing that kept them from finding success on television? Or was there a deeper reason, linked possibly to the cancellation of their “Esther’s To-Go” touring troupe, lurking beneath the surface? Since the show seemed to be on the rise, the reasons and ramifications of this choice is explored herein. What kept them from expanding? How far could they have gone? Certainly what they were doing on the stage at the time, though edgier and more bawdy, could easily rival *Saturday Night Live* due to the immense talent of the cast. And unlike the other successful comedy shows, such as *The Second City* and *Saturday Night Live*, Esther’s had something even more unique than giant windows: Vaudeville. Their fast-paced show, made up of unrelated acts on one bill, songs heavy on character and comedy, magic, juggling, and their novelty of giant armadillo costumes and cowboys on stilts nods a hat to the theatre style so popular during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

It is possible that there was a feeling of not needing to expand. Once the new venue opened up, being twice the size of the cafe, and once Ray Anderson came on full time with an impressive magic show, the celebrity of the theatre and the financial picture grew immensely. At this time the show began to change from guerilla-style theatre to a set format. Like *Saturday Night Live*, Esther’s uses political jabs in their skits. Their use

of cast members portraying political figures became one of the great contributors to their success. Keith Kelly's flawless portrayal of Bill Clinton kept him employed and audiences laughing throughout the nineties, especially during Clinton's second term when all it took to get audiences roaring was Kelly walking on stage in speedo underwear playing a saxophone and winking at female audience members. Shannon Sedwick joined him onstage as Hillary Clinton paired with another party-loving politician, George W. Bush, played by Kerry Awn. Their blend of music, magic, and political satire in the style of Vaudeville set them apart from other comedy troupes around town and nationwide. In fact, local shows like Monks Night Out and Catfight, two groups mostly rooted in improvisation but growing in sketch comedy, who found their home at the Bad Dog Comedy Theatre in the late nineties and early two thousands, fizzled out after a few years, even as members of Esther's joined the teams. What gave Esther's the sort of stamina that surpassed that of other groups and venues? The founding members of Esther's Follies never expected the show to become so popular and were happily shocked by their own success. Both the local audiences and national networks were interested in the show's expansion. The opportunity for nation-wide success was available, yet never attained. The inability of the Follies to gain national recognition and fame is curious and is a subject to be explored.

I was a cast member at Esther's Follies from 2001-2004. Chapter 3, "My Dip in the Pool: 1996-2006," details the years immediately before and after my time there. It includes interviews with Jerome Schooler, Sean Wainwright Branigan, Tamara Beland and others. This chapter also includes the entire spectrum of my experience, giving an

actor's perspective of the writing and performance process of the show, unveiling the challenges of being a very young *female* artist in a realm dominated by men and already established women, and provoking thought into how devastating events like September 11, 2001 can shake, but apparently not break this theatre group.

Chapter Four, "Now at the Pool: 2007-Present," will focus on their current production styles. Most of the early members of the group have left the Pool, but there are new faces bursting on stage and making it look new and fresh, which is key for comedy to unfold. The dynamic of the show is extremely different than it was for the first twenty years, yet on a recent visit it was still breathing with excitement. I must admit, though, even in the short time since I have been gone, something seems to be missing from the show. It could be that I am nostalgic for the comedy of Kerry Awn or the live music of Lyova Rosanoff. It could be that I am just unwilling to *completely* change and grow with the show. This sentiment is shared by other performers who used to call Esther's home, but do so no longer. To audiences it seems the show, though different, is still a great hit and the "something missing" is more often than not just an occupational hazard of being a former cast member.

The conclusion of this thesis peers into the future plans Shelton and Sedwick foresee with the Follies. Inevitably one day they will have to pass the hat. To whom would they pass it? Or would it all just end? In short, this thesis is a narrative on the comedy theatre Esther's Follies, detailing the history, spotlighting the people, and grasping the philosophy and purpose behind this incredibly unique venue. Using candid interviews, reviews, and a personal cast member's reflection from its author, this thesis

critically assesses the success of Esther's Follies while simultaneously uncovering the reasons it has not extended past Austin, Texas, even though the opportunity has been numerous presented over the years.

## CHAPTER I

### THE FORMATIVE YEARS: 1968-1979

The story of Esther's Follies begins at the University of Texas at Austin in the spring of 1968, the year Michael Shelton, Shannon Sedwick, Lyova Rosanoff and Doug Dyer all met one another. Auditions were being held for the musical *Guys and Dolls* to be performed in the Student Union by the theatre group, the Curtain Club, a well-known dramatic club in Austin. In operation since 1908, the Curtain Club was once attached to the Drama Department but became its own separate entity by the end of World War II. In 1968 all of its shows were still being performed on campus, headed by the President and Director, Doug Dyer<sup>1</sup>.

Rosanoff had moved to Austin from New York City that year to pursue her Doctorate at the University of Texas. She noticed on the posting for *Guys and Dolls* that the Curtain Club was looking for a pianist. Michael Shelton also saw the posting and decided to audition. At the time he was a Freshman at the university and had been intrigued by the Curtain Club ever since he was a school boy in the 1950s. Fascinated by his uncle's tales of *Hipsy-Boo* a musical revue put on by the club using popular music of

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<sup>1</sup> Though the University of Texas claims on their website that the Curtain Club was no longer in existence after 1963, Shelton, Sedwick, and Rosanoff all insist that in 1968 it was certainly in operation.

the time, and officially hooked when he learned that Rip Torn and Jayne Mansfield had been members, he dreamed of one day attending the University of Texas and being a part of the Curtain Club. For his audition he chose “Dear Heart” as his song. Shelton describes the results of this audition for the newly hired pianist Lyova Rosanoff: “I had this card and Lyova was supposed to write ‘Soprano’ or ‘Baritone’ on the card when you’re done. Well on mine she wrote ‘Loud Monotone,’ and I thought ‘Oh I’m never getting cast now’” (Personal Interview). To his surprise Doug Dyer did cast him in the show. He played the role of Harry the Horse and it was his first experience with live theatre.

After *Guys and Dolls*, Dyer craved a new art form for the group and so began creating an original follies for the Curtain Club called *Now the Revolution*. This *Hair*-like musical was wildly successful during this time of so much political unrest on campus. Its beginnings are comical and fascinating and by 1969 it would become infamous on campus. On the show’s opening night a female cast member randomly took off her shirt and bra, without alerting anyone else in the cast. According to Shelton someone complained. Then the very next show she did it again, only this time the house lights came up and the campus police, who had been alerted since the first night and were standing by, forced the audience to leave. The Dean of Students was called and the group was instructed to cease the nudity. The very next day an article in *The Daily Texan* titled “Campus Busted for Student Nudity” brought local fame to *Now the Revolution*. The show would continue, now with an audience of thousands, as a musical protest for freedom of speech, in which the cast performed in their underwear for every show. The

show would start in the Student Union which housed eighty people and would move outdoors to the West Mall of campus where an audience of thousands would be waiting to join the musical protest and see the cast nearly naked. One of the audience members fascinated by the show was Shannon Sedwick, a freshman theatre student at the University of Texas. At that time freshmen were not allowed to be involved in the productions through the Drama department, unless they were working backstage, so Sedwick jumped on the opportunity to perform with the Curtain Club and joined *Now The Revolution*.

According to Shelton, by 1971 Frank Irwin, Head of the Board of Regents at the University, canceled the whole operation and the Curtain Club never opened another show. Shelton claims that this was because there were many parodies of the Board of Regents in the show over the decisions they were making in firing tenured professors. He admits now that he does not remember why they were so passionate at the time of the, in his opinion, awful firing of John Silver, but marks that for some reason it “torched off a firestorm on campus” (Personal Interview). Silver eventually found great success in politics, but Shelton, now remarking on Silver’s right-wing status, can not imagine why *Now the Revolution* cared so much. But in the 1970s, it did.

The *Now the Revolution* show changed its name to *Stomp* in 1970, and even though the Curtain Club was halted, *Stomp* had enough of a following to continue successfully. This production of *Stomp* is unrelated to the present-day drumming group, but they did bang their drums outside the venues to which they toured, such as the Vulcan Gas Company, a musical venue in Austin in the 1970s which always included psychedelic

light shows, and the old Alley Theatre in Houston. It was at this time that Michael Shelton and Shannon Sedwick became romantically involved. Shelton humorously relives his first interaction with Sedwick: "Towards the end of the show we would do this number and Shannon was the girl that they put on my shoulders. So every night we would perform this show with Shannon on my shoulders, which was like 'Wow!' 'cause that was the closest I'd ever been to a girl and here she was on my shoulders" (Personal Interview).

*Stomp's* popularity and cast were growing and in the same year Joe Papp saw the show while on tour in Atlanta, Georgia, and took most of the group to the New York City Shakespeare Festival. The festival was held at the old New York City Library in Martinson Hall. Shelton became more interested in carpentry and built bleachers in the room for the audience; since they were paid five dollars a day, the cast also lived under the bleachers. The musical *Hair* had just vacated the space and was now playing on Broadway, and *Stomp* seemed to attract the same type of audience. Since the cast was living in the performance space, recalls Shelton, the audience and cast would interact for hours after the show. Eventually *The New York Times* wrote on this affair and the cast was forced to move out due to health code regulations. Sedwick, involved in a show in Austin at the time, was not in the New York productions, but Shelton played a large role in designing the set as well as the bleachers. *Stomp* then went on a six-month European tour in 1971, but neither Shelton or Sedwick were involved in the show at this time. According to Shelton it was important for him to stay in school so that he would not get drafted for the Vietnam War, so he went back home to Austin after only a couple of weeks



in New York. He states his dilemma: “Only way to get out [of being drafted] was to convince the psychiatrist you were gay and most of the guys in the cast did that, but I just...I didn’t have the nerve” (Personal Interview). Lyova Rosanoff was also not involved at this time as she was focusing on her Doctorate and home life. She would realign with the cast many years later as a founding member of Esther’s Follies.

Once *Stomp* returned from their European tour it resided for a spell in an abandoned church in Atlanta, Georgia. At this time Shelton and Sedwick rejoined the show. The entire group at this time lived in the halls that attached to the church. Shelton and Sedwick eventually moved into the church because they were the only non smokers and were having a hard time dealing with the lack of fresh air. Both Shelton and Sedwick describe this time as difficult but necessary for the creation of Esther’s Follies. Sedwick recalls: “We lived on this commune and I worked at Steak and Ale to make money for the whole group. There were babies born in that house. That was our first experience with a theatrical group, a show, and that was a harbinger for Esther’s. You know, a big cast of people creating stuff” (Personal Interview).

Just a few days after the group returned to Austin near the end of the year they found out the church was firebombed. Shelton never said whether the investigation was closed or not, but did say that there was evidence that pointed to a right-winged conservative group and that the group claimed credit for it in the Atlanta paper. He admits that he at first was under suspicion, not by Atlanta authorities, but that it was common talk in local conversations back home in Austin. To his amazement, some people even

went so far as to ask him if he was responsible for the bombing, to which he assured them that he was not involved in any way (Personal Interview).

Shelton also states that upon return from Atlanta, the group collectively fired Doug Dyer because of “too much acid and drugs” (Personal Interview). Dyer moved to Florida at that time and would return a few years later. Shelton and Sedwick then decided to go into business for themselves. Their first venture into entrepreneurship as a couple was showing on campus the independent films that were being made in the art building at the University of Texas. Michael Prochoroff would join the team at this time and work the projector. He would follow the group from here on out and work lights and sound for the shows. He would quit Esther’s in 2006 when Rosanoff was asked to leave. The University eventually shut down the entire film showing operation, because, claims Sedwick, it brought in so much money for the group and not the University (Personal Interview).

In 1974, with the war over and their first business a financial success, Shelton and Sedwick decided to drop out of school and continue on the road of Entrepreneurship. They opened up a jazz club they called Buffalo Grille and a sandwich shop called Phillie’s Diner. Sedwick delivered sandwiches from the diner on her bicycle to the downtown area. Shelton and Sedwick soon found they were missing the performance atmosphere, however, and began contacting everyone they knew to put a *Now the Revolution* type show together. This time they would market it with full nudity, but the off-campus audience of 1974 was not as responsive as the on-campus one of previous years, and besides, they no longer had a place to perform.

They decided then that what they needed to do was open their own space, where they could serve food and where theatrical and music acts could perform. So in 1975 they found a building that sat in an old lumber yard at the corner of Second Street and Guadalupe Street in downtown Austin. The building was used as a flea market and housed a restaurant which served fast food. Shelton recalls acquiring the space: "We had a real estate guy who said, 'You'll like this' and showed us the space. It was a big spot...the owner was a drunk and sold it to us for next to nothing" (Personal Interview). Chuckling with embarrassed pride, Shelton continues, "We saw him years later and he regretted it" (Personal Interview). Sedwick recalls their first experience with the space: "Nobody went there. [It] was a funky place. We cleaned off part of the building and it said 'Liberty Lunch' so we called it that" (Personal Interview). At first, Shelton used the lumber yard to make props for local performers at the Armadillo Headquarters, a large space downtown which housed performers in lofts and provided space for rehearsals and shows. In 1976, according to Shelton, the Headquarters were in a down swing and so the group of performers began performing in between bands at Liberty Lunch (Personal Interview). The bands they booked were experimental, which allowed for a sketch or two of the same nature.

Shelton recalls the atmosphere being of comedic surprise, of guerrilla-type theatre, where the audience would not know if something was part of the performance or happening in the moment. For instance, at some point sprinklers would just go off on the audience and the cast would act as if it were an accident just to soak their audience in jest. This eventually led to the cast dancing through the lawn sprinklers to cool down in

the Texas heat and then formed into a campy tribute to Esther Williams, an actress and swimmer from the 1940s and 1950s who performed in movies where she would swim underwater to choreographed movement. They called this the “Hard Corp du Water Ballet.” This performance would eventually become known as “Cry me a River” and is still the finale of the show today. During the shows at Liberty Lunch the cast would also appear on the roof at some point with light fixtures on their heads. When probed for a reason Shelton labels this as another example of the “comedic surprise” that was prevalent in the show (Personal Interview). Shelton himself began doing stand-up comedy at this time. He recalls the eccentricity of the shows at Liberty Lunch:

They were weird times. You know, it was all water oriented. There was a bathtub on stage and one girl would literally bathe during the show. I had this hose. I thought it would be funny to wet my pants during the show. So I had the hose up my leg and she [Sedwick] turned it up full blast instead of a trickle and all of a sudden these guys were tackling me. The water was out of control and in front of several hundred people they were tackling me. I thought it was amusing, but they were pissed. (Personal Interview)

The funny play on words aside, the situation was no laughing matter. Apparently water was pouring onto the sound board belonging to the group of men whose band was playing that day at Liberty Lunch. Shelton admits that he realized then that Liberty Lunch was not the ideal place for these kinds of spectacles. He continues: “[The band] had their sound board right on stage. So it was a few moments like that that made us think ‘maybe we should do theatrics somewhere else’” (Personal Interview).

At that time Dyer, who had returned from Florida, joined the cast of Liberty Lunch. Described by Shelton as a “Motley Collection,” the group was comprised of Dyer, Shelton and Sedwick, James Wagner, Gene Menger, Dee McCandless, a group of local dancers called The Blister Sisters, and Steve Saugey. Saugey and his comedy group The Microwaves (named so because at that time microwaves were thought to be dangerous) found a home at Liberty Lunch for their Bicentennial Show, in which they would sell hamburgers with the tongue-twisting tag line “Buy ten ten-cent bicentennial burgers.” They had recently received a write up and landed the cover of *Show World* a popular performer’s magazine at the time, but Saugey recalls having to read the article in the dark because they could not afford electricity. Living in Liberty Hill because he could not afford to live in town, he came back in town to do a show at the local Creek Theatre with Michael Nesline, who would later urge him to join Esther’s Follies.

While in town Saugey ran into Dyer, whom he had known since 1970 when Saugey lived on the part of University of Texas’s West campus, which Saugey claims was nicknamed “the Questionable Periphery,” due to its theatrical and homosexual residents. Dyer knew Saugey was a piano player and exposed to the theatrics often put on by his roommates, and so assumed that Saugey would be a good fit for the theatre. Saugey reflects on those days “of crazy things” like painting rooms in unusual colors, dressing in drag, and installing track lighting (then a common fashion for homosexuals in home decorating), as preparing him for the eccentric world of theatre. Dyer told Saugey in 1976 about Liberty Lunch and of Michael Shelton who had rented a house for all of the cast to

live in. So Saugey and his group joined right away and he worked as a dishwasher to pay the rent.

Lyova Rosanoff was not involved in the performances at Liberty Lunch but would often go to see the shows. According to Rosanoff, Dyer had mended his strained relationship with Shelton and Sedwick and maintained good footing with them because of their business sense. The couple by that time had a lot of experience in real estate and had owned a number of businesses, so Liberty Lunch would have been successful, in her opinion, no matter what (Personal Interview, 14 Nov 2011). Knowing that, she believes, is why Dyer sought to attach himself and whomever he wanted to work with to Shelton and Sedwick. She affirms that even at Liberty Lunch it was Dyer who was directing the shows and it was Dyer who would create Esther's Follies. She states: "He [Dyer] was very much the director. In those days Shannon and Michael, you know, they were the landlords and he would stay in touch with them because they ran Liberty Lunch and he knew they were landlord types" (Personal Interview, 5 Oct. 2011). On one of her visits she recalls Dyer announcing the plans that would eventually lead to Esther's: "One day I was there and he [Dyer] hopped up on the stage and announced that he wanted to start a theatre group and I remember being very interested. I was doing a lot of graphic art and I was involved in classic music but this seemed like more fun" (Personal Interview, 5 Oct. 2011). Shelton and Sedwick would continue to run Liberty Lunch, turning it solely into a music venue after Esther's Follies began taking off, and finally left it in 1983 because according to Sedwick, it was becoming too hard financially to maintain. She states: "With the open air and [with] bands that even if it would rain out, we would have to pay them

anyway. It became too hard to keep up financially” (Personal Interview). Even though they passed the ownership over, Sedwick reflects on the success of Liberty Lunch with excited pride: “But it was the beginning of bands like ‘The Lotions’ and ‘Beto y Los Fairlanes’” (Personal Interview). Liberty Lunch continued to be a popular musical venue in Austin before finally closing in 1999.

Once Dyer suggested the idea for a new show, Shelton began looking for a place to house the project. He soon rented a space at 515 East Sixth Street in 1977 and began making it ready for performance. Though Sedwick states that Doug Dyer had the idea of putting a stage against the window that looks on to the street, Shelton claims that in fact it was his own idea. He asserts: “Well it [the stage against the windows] was mine. I needed to replace the front [of the building] so one day I pulled off the whole front area and I didn’t know what I was going to do, but it was ugly and needed to go.” While ripping up the front of the building, Sedwick, doing a photo shoot for Sam Shepherd’s *Tooth of Crime*, raced by Shelton on the back of a motorcycle, turned around, and came roaring into the building by way of the hole Shelton had just generated. This created a lightbulb sensation for Shelton. He recalls: “All of a sudden it was like ‘Wow, that’s what it should be! Let’s open it up to the street.’ So right away it was like, ‘let’s do it right here. Do it right on the street. In fact let’s get that guy on the motorcycle to come all the time’” (Personal Interview). Now Shelton knew the stage had to back up to the street and it has remained there ever since.

With the location established, Shelton, Sedwick, and Dyer began putting together the show, but there was not enough of a group of talented writers and performers to make

it happen. "The problem was the talent," Saugey affirms, "Shannon was pretty good. William was pretty good. The little girls, the Blister sisters, they weren't very good" (Personal Interview). So the performers would rehearse in the new building but no real show was coming together. According to Saugey, Dyer was frustrated and stated that he needed to get away and go to Florida for two weeks. So the show would have to be placed on hold until he got back. Once Dyer was gone, however, Sedwick and her friend Michael Nesline came to the rental house and said "Let's do a show anyway." Saugey recalls that they immediately started rehearsing, and with Dyer out of town, people started coming out of the woodwork: "[There were] like twenty people, and by the time Doug came back we had a full house," suggesting that by this time Dyer had become somewhat tyrannical (Personal Interview). In the two weeks that Dyer was gone, the Microwaves, Noel Alford, Lyova Rosanoff, Sedwick and Michael Nesline began creating musical numbers and sketches. Some of the acts from *Stomp* were implemented in this newly formed group and the Microwaves were able to have a few more runs with their "BiCentennial show" even though the year had changed. Once Dyer returned the show was ready to go but was still somewhat lacking in stage talent. Before the show even opened, however, Dyer would find its first star, William Dente.

William Dente was just in town from Rhode Island visiting friends, but Dyer talked him into staying. Dente moved here, became a local celebrity, and stayed with the show until his death in 1986 from liver cancer. Shelton recalls their meeting the day before opening night: "One afternoon Doug Dyer come in with this guy he met next door at the dirty bookstore. Doug...always had sexual things. And he brings in this guy and



says, 'I just met him next door. He does Ethel Merman.' So William stood up on the stage and did this song he called 'Blow Gabriel Blow.' I was like 'Wow, that was it. Let's do it tomorrow night' (Personal Interview). The following night they opened the doors, which were through the back of the building in a long dark alley, to a number of people claiming they were having a party. William Dente sang and Shannon performed a comedic parody called the "Dorothy's Laundromat Lament." The show did not yet have a name but the cast and crew told people to come back for an official opening one week later and on April 1, 1977, the building opened their doors to audiences and the groups of singers, poets, dancers, mimes, musicians and comics who had arrived to join in the show.

The show became extremely popular almost immediately. Every Friday night at eleven p.m. crowds of about two hundred people came to watch the show, play pool, drink and do drugs. The show at that time was free and the philosophy was "anything goes." Keeping with the theme from Liberty Lunch, they named the show "Esther's Follies" and a local artist, Doug Jaques, painted a sixty-by-twenty-foot aquatic mural along the inside wall, and soon the building was nicknamed "Esther's Pool," with the pool tables offering a double meaning. Rosanoff reflects on the first location: "You had to know where to go to get in. And everyone did. It was very Austin weird, really...it was an experience to go there. There was a little fountain in the back yard. This mysterious entrance and then seeing the street on the other side of the stage" (Personal Interview, 5 Oct. 2011).

According to the Esther's Follies website, performances at the Pool were an unscripted free for all (History). Rosanoff recalls that one woman would get on stage and

simply roll her eyes while she sang (Personal Interview, 5 Oct. 2011). The show consistently had singing and mimes, which made it very unique. Huge operatic numbers were being written by Saugey and Rosanoff, which proved to be ambitious and creative projects. Interested in creating an official cast, Sedwick started contacting several circles of friends to join in the show. She knew that a group of actors would often perform Shakespeare in a nearby town called Winedale. At that time an English Professor at the University of Texas, Dr. James Ayers would take a group of students to Winedale, Texas for six weeks. The students would spend their time living on the land, and studying and performing Shakespeare. Many of that group joined the show in Austin, including Robert Faires, now an editor for the *Austin Chronicle*, and Terry Galloway, who would become a major star in the show alongside Dente.

Galloway writes in her book *Mean Little deaf Queer: A Memoir* of how she became involved in the Follies. While she was at the University of Texas she met Shannon Sedwick in a television scripting and performance course that seemed to attract “the wilder more off-beat rejects of the theater program” (Galloway 114). In 1977, after graduating from the University, she ran into Sedwick again at Liberty Lunch and Sedwick asked her to bring her some of her old skits to this new venue they were opening on Sixth Street. She describes the atmosphere of Esther’s Follies upon her arrival, with scripts in hand, at midnight that very day:

The place had no stage. It did have that scattering of pool tables. And it had a microphone smack-dab in front of the huge, wide window. . . . People were sitting on the floor, lounging at the bar. . . . Outside, passersby plastered their mugs

against the window...sticking out their tongues or shooting the finger or just staring through the glass like snakes mesmerized by a mongoose. I felt perfectly at home. (115)

She writes of the excitement of that first group of Follies members, sitting on the curb of the neglected Sixth Street, giggling because they knew the area would soon emerge to greatness. And it did. She writes: "Within a year, that dark street came alight with restaurants, cafes, bars, bookstores, and shops. . . . Soon the Pool was so crowded we had to start charging admission. Weekend after weekend our popularity grew, and as it did so did the street it was on" (116).

Galloway's experience with Esther's Follies made her a local star. She writes in her book that she could only mouth the words in musical numbers, due to her deafness, but as a comedienne she was able to speak as if she were not deaf at all. Galloway became a bonafied Follies comedienne. She describes the character that made her famous: "Jake Ratchet, Short Detective...a tough guy in miniature" (118). Galloway would stand on a chair at the end of the sketch, to take Sedwick (as Rose Simpler, the "cheap broad with a record") into Ratchet's arms and have a "comic smooch more like two animals worrying a bone" (119). She continues: "To the audience and, I have to admit, to myself, I was not a woman in drag; I was the short, trash-talking gumshoe himself" (119). The audiences loved her and she loved them. She writes of her relationship with the audience: "They stamped their feet, whistled, and cheered when the Ratchet theme music played, and mouthed certain lines along with us. Offstage they'd buy me drinks, offer me tiny spoonfuls of snort-able drugs, grab me in bear hugs, and ask

for my scrawled signature on programs or their bared backs” (119). She describes that dressing in drag, her private fantasy, is what made her “one of the stars of her small city” (119). After this success she helped lead the Winedale group to break off and create their own show, just down the street of the Pool. This new adventure did not succeed and Galloway returned to Esther’s for a period of time before ultimately leaving.

Another contact Sedwick made was to a friend she knew in high school, Linda Wetherby. Wetherby, a statuesque blonde, paired with Sedwick to play one of the Andrews sisters, alongside Dee Lewellyn, calling themselves “The Blandscrew Sisters.” She played viola and along with Bill Dick who played violin, and an unnamed tuba player, she could perform in the huge classical numbers being written by Rosanoff. Wetherby became a sensation on the Esther’s stage. One night she rode bareback and nearly naked, save a pasty barely covering each breast, on a horse down Sixth Street to adoring fans. Galloway, who had a short-stinted sexual relationship with Wetherby, describes her in her memoir: “She knew a little something about every kind of drug known to mankind. She played viola. She wore black and fur. She seemed to always be in a state of half-dress. I didn’t know what to make of her, even the gay boys seemed smothered in her aroma” (122). Galloway would come off stage and into the roofless hallway that led to the dressing rooms, and, dressed in drag, would pass Wetherby in a steamy moment as Wetherby would move onto stage. Galloway recalls that Wetherby was not a lesbian but that their passionate looks were not to be ignored. This led to an infatuation with Wetherby. She writes: “I could tell from the way the corners of her mouth drew down as she spoke that she had a drawl, and her way of moving seemed

stunned by all those drugs or recent orgasms and just didn't seem 'smart'" (121-122).

Wetherby remained in the cast until the mid-1980s, left to pursue her musical career, and returned for a short time, until finally leaving the Pool in 1993.

In 1978, much to the cast's amazement, Esther's Follies rented out the Paramount Theater in Austin, Texas and celebrated their first birthday. Rosanoff describes this as a huge thrill. She reflects:

Here we were in this magnificent theatre with intriguing underground dressing rooms that we knew nothing about and the audience was very good. I believe we filled the hall. It was very professional; [it] started with a band and some music and then the pink velvet curtain rose and everything was elaborate with big scenery and big props and we were never able to do that in a tiny cramped theatre.

(Personal Interview, 14 Nov 2011)

The horse that they rented and used on Sixth Street also made it to the stage of the Paramount. Esther's Follies would celebrate their birthdays on the stage of the Paramount for years. By 1990 the show's success was no longer a shock and birthdays seemed unnecessary to celebrate.

The sensation the show created was unlike anything the audiences in Austin had seen before. The smoke-filled room was attracting hundreds of people every week and was growing more alive at every performance. Danny Jacobus of the *San Marcos Rumors*, wrote about this new comedy phenomenon in a 1977 article. He writes: "I must say that Esther's Follies are alive and different each week, and bring to Austin the most exciting and creative theater imaginable" (Jacobus). Saugey reflects on the audiences of

this time: “They were a sensation! A mob! It was free...and since it was free it didn’t have to be good” (Personal Interview).

Eventually so many people started coming to see the show that the Follies began doing a Saturday show as well. This added a new wrinkle: if the show was going to be a recurring thing, with two shows every weekend, they better start charging, and if they better start charging, it better be worth seeing. The cast began tightening up their performances, and slightly shortening their musical numbers. Soon the cast was being approached to capitalize on their talents, but by all accounts this was frowned upon by the members. In an article for *The Daily Texan*, Mark Ivey covers this in a 1978 article titled “A Year of Esther’s.” The article hones in on the mindset of the cast at this time, detailing a deal offered by KLRN, a local television station: “Just when it looked like the deal might bloom, The Follies, sensing the conditions were not right, abruptly killed it and, as one member put it ‘threw the network creeps out’” (Ivey). The article continues, gaining reaction from cast members, such as William Dente: ““Sure we’d like to make more money. . . . But not if we have to market ourselves”” (Ivey). This sentiment was felt strongly by the group, even when executives from *Saturday Night Live* conducted a meeting with Dyer and Shelton, offering them a spot in New York City. Disagreements and resistance to “selling out” sent the executives packing with a bad taste in their mouths. Rosanoff reflects on these purposefully avoided opportunities: “There were so many close encounters with big stuff really early on and they seemed frightened by it” (Personal Interview, 14 Nov, 2011). Sedwick recalls this time with the same sentiment: “*SNL* said ‘We gotta get you up to New York,’ but you know, about half the cast were

anarchistic and didn't want to. They thought they would take over the show" (Personal Interview). She continues that this was not a hinderance to the success of Esther's Follies but that it was things like this that kept the show alive, "It was better because it would have been a distraction. And what we were doing, we all felt, was true art" (Personal Interview). In *The Daily Texan* article, William Dente summed up the sentiment: "Most important is that we preserve our self-direction, that we control our self-destiny. When that goes, the Follies might go" (Ivey).

By the end of 1978 the show began to change. The huge musical numbers became less important to the show and the official cast had grown to around twenty-six members. This created tensions for the show that needed resolving if it were to last. The huge cast of people began to reduce in size as groups of performers decided to leave.

Rosanoff recalls:

Trouble with the early days is there was so many people, but it all felt very creative. When you have that many people, you find out the hard way, that people tend to break up into factions. There was a lot of competition. We discovered after a long time the best way was to tear it down to about twelve people. Also, you can't pay twenty-six people very much and we had by that time decided to charge a dollar admission. Some of the cast felt we were prostituting ourselves to charge a dollar, so people were leaving anyway. (Personal Interview, 14 Nov. 2011)

Due to exhaustion with Shelton and Dyer, Steve Saugey also left at this time and assisted the Winedale faction in their new show, which he claimed was terrible (Personal Interview). He notes though that this pairing down to twelve members really helped in

the success of Esther's Follies and that that has been in their rule books ever since (Personal Interview). Also helpful and a rule of the show, he says, was that by now the show was always changing, which creates fans. He states: "When you keep changing the show you get quite a following....even when we started changing, people kept coming" (Personal Interview).

In 1979 Saugey rejoined the show alongside Dyer, Rosanoff, Sedwick, Dente, Wetherby, and Shelton. He wrote and introduced "Westward Hos," one of the Follies last big musical numbers, lasting about twenty minutes long, a characteristic that Shelton and Sedwick feel would never work for the fast-paced show of today. When prompted by that idea, however, both Saugey and Rosanoff disagree. Saugey states: "It would [work] if they believed it. I really think Esther's could do anything they believe they could do. I mean, Lyova got all sorts of classical stuff in, I got classical stuff in, we did classical stuff together, but I don't really think, at the base of it, there wasn't a lot of support for that" (Personal Interview). Both Saugey and Rosanoff contend that there were cast members, musically inclined, and itching to do classical numbers, but eventually the show would be whittled down in such a way that there was no room for them.

Although Saugey would stay with the Follies for many more years, he, like most of the founders, reminisce on this time with a "glory days" nostalgia, suggesting that the type of theatre they were doing then could never have been matched, and could never be done again. He recalls one of his favorite moments during a show they played on the University of Texas' campus, when Michael Shelton was still performing for the Follies: "We were doing Swine Lake with pig noses in Hogg Auditorium! Shelton came out as



Allister Cooper and fried bacon on stage! I was going, ‘Yes! Yes! This is what it’s about!’ There was this sense of comradery and togetherness. We felt we had arrived” (Personal Interview).

The togetherness was short lived, however, when the Follies was asked to play a show for five thousand people at Zilker Park in Austin. According to Saugey the first act of the show was agreed between the City Council and Shelton to be family friendly, and then later on in the night, the second act would emerge for the adult crowds. The agreement, Saugey suggests, was intentionally ignored by Shelton and was not passed on to the cast, and the Follies were never asked back again. Saugey recalls that this event in Zilker Park, the same year as the Hogg auditorium show, proved that the togetherness felt previously was all but gone:

After Act One the families were supposed to go and we could do the raunchy stuff, but Shelton didn’t tell me that. Michael, playing Ruth Carter Stapleton comes on stage [in Act One] and says “Fuck em” while smoking a cigarette. After the show we were never asked back. And Shelton knew! Got almost five thousand people in the park! He also played Anita Bryant and would say “I am not sick” over and over until it sounded like “I’m Nazi.” (Personal Interview)

Saugey’s finger covers his upper lip to indicate a Hitler mustache as he acts out the Anita Bryant skit that Shelton performed in the park. Those not let in on the agreement performed Act One just as uncensored as Act Two. Rosanoff, who knew the scoop, was horrified as the show began (Personal Interview). Saugey reflects on the ramifications of

that night: “Most of the people loved it” he proclaims, “but there was plenty of press about the people that didn’t” (Personal Interview).

Shelton himself describes his early days with the Follies as “all wrong,” but necessary: “My days of performing I got thrown up there at the beginning. Just was all wrong. I did it for the first couple of years until I couldn’t do it anymore, but someone had to get up there and gather the attention or whatever” (Personal Interview). He recalls playing a football coach, using his dad who accidentally rhymed when he swore, as his character. He mostly played women though. He explains: “Heterosexual guys usually portray ugly women. So I played Madeline Murray O’Hare as “Madeline Murray Oh Her?” and Evangelists Ruth Stapleton Carter and Amy McPherson. I couldn’t believe I was up there channeling God like Amy McPherson!” (Personal Interview). Because he realized he could not perform without being intoxicated, Shelton would have to sober up and move backstage in the following decade.

By 1980 Esther’s Follies was a popular place for Austin audiences and performers of all walks of life; everything was considered and no one was off limits. As Steve Saugey remarks, “We had a healthy disrespect. Anything that is big enough, then people can make fun of it” (Personal Interview). To be a Follies member required a certain eccentricity spot-able by critics. In a 1978 article titled “A Year of Esther’s” in the *Images* section of *The Daily Texan*, writer Mark Ivey notes the meaning behind the Follies title: “a title that not only represents a unique brand of Austin vaudevillians, but denotes a different breed of character—zany, fertile and imaginative” (Ivey). The darkly lit pool hall turned comedy venue proved a reckless, fun party at every show. The audiences would

cram into the small “beat up cabaret” as one critic, Carla Hagen put it, for a few more years until a devastating fire in 1983 destroyed the Pool and threatened to destroy the show.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **BECOMING A LOCAL LEGEND: 1980-1996**

The next two decades at Esther's Follies would prove to be extremely creative and lucrative. By 1980 the group had a following, who gladly sat on pool tables or crammed themselves into the small area next to the stage to watch the envelope-pushing, gender-bending, and off-the-wall eccentricities that made the Follies so unique. The main cast of 1980 was Doug Dyer, William Dente, Shannon Sedwick, Michael Shelton, Lyova Rosanoff, Steve Saugey, Amos Ewing, Jeanie Baxter, and Linda Wetherby. The next sixteen years would skyrocket the popularity of the Follies to a level not yet seen before, and prove that national fame and fortune could be possible. It would become evident that the success of Esther's Follies was due to individual talent and the comedic magic they created on stage. At the same time the individual egos and personalities of the performers played a huge role in the hindrance of seeing that possibility of national fame and fortune come to fruition.

The atmosphere at Esther's Follies in the 1980s was as wild as the decade itself. Fondly referred to by ex-cast members as "The Cocaine Years," Esther's Follies was offering three shows a night over the weekend. At this time Michael Shelton was still

paying the actors in cash. According to an anonymous source, Shelton, highly intoxicated, would stumble up to the actor after the show, look them up and down, apparently forming a conclusion on how well he felt the actor did, and then pay them. Some sources even re-enact him by throwing their heads back and growling in a condescending voice, “What did *you* do in the show?” After the actor told Shelton what they performed in the show he would flick their cash at them.

It was also at this time that Doug Dyer learned he had contracted AIDS. Wetherby details the night Sedwick brought her the news: “I remember being in the dressing room and Shannon came up to me and she said ‘Have you heard of something called AIDS?’ I said ‘No what’s that?’ She said, ‘Some kind of gay cancer. I think Doug has it.’ And he did. He had a bad strain” (Personal Interview). Dyer’s disease would cause him to leave the cast soon after.

Arriving on the scene in 1980 was Margaret Wiley, quite likely Esther’s Follies most memorable star. Described by nearly everyone who knew her as a force of nature, Wiley would start off building costumes for the troupe and within a few years, would push her way onto the stage. Lyova Rosanoff recalls Wiley’s persuasive personality: “She was very anxious to get in the show and she would stay up all night making costumes and then say ‘I’ve been up all night making costumes’ and force Shannon [Sedwick] to put the number up, and we all could see disaster looming” (Personal Interview, 14 Nov. 2011). Sedwick seems to agree. Robert Faires quotes Sedwick’s reflection of Wiley in an article for *The Austin Chronicle*: “She was my peer, my bane (as director, trying to keep her happy)...” (Faires, n.p.). In the same article Linda Wetherby notes that Wiley began

her life on the stage as an exotic dancer at the age of sixteen. Wiley's forte was the funny stripper, using wigs, joke costumes and gimmicks (Faires). By the mid 1980s Wiley was the sought-after, demanding, reckless diva of the Esther's stage. Kerry Awn, who would join the show in 1981 and also become a major comedic star at the Pool, recalls his first few years with Wiley: "When I first joined the Follies she wasn't around. She came in as a costume person and kind of worked her way up to being in the show. To being the star. She saw it all and did it all. There was nothing like her. Just this force of nature" (Personal Interview).

Wiley became extremely well known on the Esther's stage as a singer, comedian, and larger-than-life personality. Her most notable role was Chi Chi LaBamba and she would open the show every night as Chi Chi with the line, "Hello. I am Chi Chi LaBamba, and these are my breasts." Throughout her years at the Follies the audiences adored her and the cast was intimidated by her. When asked if Wiley was ever mean to them, most of the cast produce a story in no time flat. Perhaps Kerry Awn put it best when describing her: "Hell yes she was rude to me. All the time. She was mad at the world" (Personal Interview). Her tough woman personality seems to merely have been a cover for her damaged soul. Prone to reckless drug taking, overeating, and drinking, Wiley was known to leave stage and immediately begin groaning and limping in agony and anger. She spent many years on the stage at Esther's Follies and died suddenly in her apartment in 1999 at the age of fifty.

In 1981 Michael Shelton began pleading with Kerry Awn to join the cast. Awn, a local musician, often played with the Uranium Savages at Liberty Lunch. Shelton was at

this time, struggling with an alcohol addiction. According to Shelton he could not perform without being intoxicated, and as a result his lifespan was being shortened by the stage. Needing a change, he went scouting for a replacement and began his life as a sober man. Shelton describes Kerry Awn as “macho” and claims that Awn had no interest in joining the Follies because he “thought it was just a troupe of gay people” (Personal Interview). When asked about this Awn laughs and explains : “No I didn’t think that at all. I knew that! I thought here’s all these girls dressing in their underwear, and all these gay guys. It’s just going to waste and I better come down here. I better cash in on this. My odds are pretty good!” (Personal Interview). Once asked by Shelton to play in the Follies, Awn arrived for his first experience in theatre. Even though Awn is now a local legend in Austin, his gentle innocence is apparent. He reflects on what made him like the theatre: “I was always with bands lugging equipment. So when I went down there I thought the cool thing was you could leave your costumes!” (Personal Interview). Awn began playing in at the Follies when he was not on tour and would join the cast permanently after Wiley’s death. Throughout his time at the Pool he would perfect his knack for comedy (winning the title of “Funniest Person in Austin” multiple times), reject fame and fortune, and discover his true love of painting. He left the Follies in 2011.

David Perkoff, the saxophone player for the Uranium Savages, also came over to the Follies around the same time as Kerry Awn. Unlike Awn, though, Perkoff rarely got on stage and stuck mostly to playing music for the show. When he did perform on the Follies stage he was the only one in the band willing to put on a costume (Personal Interview). By 1983 he was a member of the opening band for the show with Rosanoff

writing the arrangements. By that time the Follies was performing three shows a night over the weekend: three on Friday and three on Saturday at eight p.m., ten p.m., and twelve a.m. Perkoff helped developed "Esther's Traveling Follies," which became immensely profitable. He continued as a member of the house band until the mid 1990s.

Another part-time member, turned full-time member, turned star of Esther's Follies, Ray Anderson, currently Esther's biggest star, had his first encounter at the Pool in 1983. Anderson came to Austin to study at the University of Texas in 1980. At this time he had only been practicing magic for a few years. On a suggestion from his friend Mario Lorenz, a juggler at Esther's, he decided he would check out the show and if it suited him, he would put a magic routine together. His experience upon his first visit changed his life forever. He describes his experience that first night: "Mario [had] said, 'You've got to see this. It's right up your alley.' He knew I liked this kind of humor. I always leaned toward the bawdy. So I came to a show to see him perform. I had no idea." Young, new to theatre, and unsure he was even in the right place, he followed the alleyway of people to get a glimpse of what Lorenz was talking about. He continues:

I entered through the alleyway, which back then you would have to enter through a grotto. And at that time all the dressing rooms were in a two-story shack that faced alley way. There was a long line. It was a happening place. Back in the day it was the 'in place to be.' It was still an undiscovered treasure. So I am standing in line waiting and wondering what this is all about, and Sixth Street was still not exactly safe. The next thing I knew I looked up and on the balcony off this shack [dressing room] was this guy in operatic drag. And he had hiked up his



skirt and he was pissing off the balcony into the alley! I thought “Where am I?

What is this place?!” (Personal Interview)

Once inside he was blown away by the show: “I sat down and then when the show started, I just loved the show. It just had me from the word go” (Personal Interview). He remembers Jeanie Baxter performing the famous “Patsy Cline,” now performed by Sedwick, in which Patsy sings “She’s Got You,” while pulling giant objects such as crutches and golf clubs out of her dress until her dress is empty and she accidentally pulls out a bra. She finishes by singing “I’ve got these little things. She’s got you!” while holding her breasts. “I just thought that was hilarious,” says Anderson (Personal Interview). Most intriguing, felt Anderson, was how the audience seamlessly switched gears when the humor changed from bawdy to the clean with Lorenz’s slapstick juggling routine, enjoying it just as much as the crass jokes at which they were previously laughing. He explains: “Hilarious things were happening. It was a very loose show. Lots of drug humor. Then Mario came out and his act wasn’t bawdy. It was a silent act with interaction with the audience, and the audience accepted him immediately. I thought that was amazing” (Personal Interview).

Anderson found influence in Bette Midler’s one-woman show *Divine Madness*, where she would often switch from bawdy crass jokes to a tender love ballad, and always play interesting characters. Anderson aimed to do a similar schtick with his magic. Upon seeing Esther’s he realized he had found the perfect opportunity to do that. That night, Lorenz introduced him to Michael in the little roofless hallway leading from the light and

sound booth to the stage. Shelton asked Anderson to put an audition together and come back the following week. Anderson describes his audition:

Well I was living in Jester dorm [University of Texas]. Back then my act was a standard magic routine with sponge balls and linking rings. Stuff that every magician uses. I came back and did my act, and they were very nice but I could tell it was a, 'Don't call us we'll call you' kind of situation. So I went back to dorm, and was totally depressed over it. I thought, "Great. I blew it." (Personal Interview)

Determined to be in the show, Anderson challenged himself to put together a routine that would work for the Pool. He created an act in which he would dance like a robot, which was extremely popular in the 1980s, and he would interact with the audience. "Robot" is still in the show today. It starts with Anderson using his robot moves to walk over to a male audience member. In time with the music he stares at the man, bends down to the man's eye level, then ejects back up, only to fall back down even closer to the man, without blinking or moving his face in any way. Then he moves to a woman and does the same thing, only with the woman his face ends up all the way down to the cleavage area of her chest. After the audience has died down from laughter, he taps his cheek to the woman asking for a kiss, but by the time she goes to kiss him, he has turned his face around so that her kiss lands right on his lips. He then jerks back up and moves towards the guy with puckered lips, then turns to the woman and walks mechanically to her with his tongue out. This bit, Anderson feels, is why the audience likes him right away.

Because of the silly interaction, he comes off warmer and not like a stuffy "Mr.

Magician” (Personal Interview). He also notes that structuring the Follies by always having a comedy routine following his magic tricks keeps it light, and thereby, more enjoyable (Personal Interview).

One thing that inspired Anderson’s magic and helped him get hired was the window that sat behind the stage:

I developed this routine where I would put a cigarette out in a woman’s dress from the audience. I had to put my hands up her dress to do it and all the lines that go along with that. And I loved the window idea, and even though they used it during sketches, no one was referring to it or to the people outside. So I saw a guy watching me with my hand up this woman’s dress and it was getting huge laughs and so I kept building on that and they [audience] loved it. Finally they [Shelton and Dyer] liked me. I was then asked to come back every once in a while when Mario was not in town. (Personal Interview)

Anderson also attached a roller blind to the window, so that while on stage he could roll it down over an onlooker’s face. After a minute or two, the person on the street would realize that they could just step to the side to see in again, and once they did, the audience would explode with laughter. When on break from touring and back in Austin, Anderson would return to the Pool over the years with new innovations, and become a permanent cast member in 1990. By 1983, though, the Pool held so much talent the show seemed it could go no where but up.

In 1983 Ether’s Pool was destroyed by a fire. The roof collapsed and Esther’s experienced a total loss. According to Mike Cox of the *Austin American-Statesman*, this

three-alarm fire also damaged three adjacent buildings (Cox). Although no one was injured in the blaze, police officers rescued James Carter, a man who had been sleeping inside the theater as a night watchman (according to Carter), before it was engulfed in flames (Cox). It is not clear what could have caused the fire. Some suggest Carter may have left a burning cigarette unattended, while some suggest faulty wiring done by Shelton. The fire destroyed the playing space for the Follies and all the equipment housed there. Rosanoff lost a \$50,000 Steinway grand piano. Anderson lost magic tricks. Neither of them ever received monetary retribution for their loss. Hundreds of costumes and props all burned to the ground. Doug Jaques's original undersea mural melted down the walls. Linda Wetherby lived two blocks down the road at the time and recalls seeing the flames from her home. She immediately took off running, in the cold night air, barefoot, and in only her nightgown (Personal Interview). Anderson recalls the night of the blaze: "Mario called me...and he came over and got me and we sat and watched the tail end of the fire" (Personal Interview). As devastating as the fire was, Anderson knew that this tragedy would not stop the Follies: "It was such an interesting group. Even though they were sad there was almost this *toasting* mentality. There was never any question that it wouldn't go on (Personal Interview). It seemed even a lack of performance space was not going to slow down this group of performers.

Kerry Awn claims that that fire was "the best thing that ever happened to them [Shelton and Sedwick]." He continues: "Suddenly they were famous in Austin. They were front page news. If you hadn't heard of them before, now you have. Everyone was like 'Awww, let's help them, give them money'" (Personal Interview).

The fire benefits gave them enough clout and money to move their show to the Ritz Theatre, which was already owned by Shelton, but booking only well known musical groups. With the determination of Shelton and his cast and the local support from the people of Austin, Esther's Follies gained the stamina they would need, for over the next three years, the Follies would have to entertain their audiences in a very different way.

The giant Ritz Theater lacked the things that made the old Pool so unique. The space was much larger, there were no pool tables, no cramped crowds lounging at the bar, and the main ingredient of their success, the window behind the stage, was missing. Sedwick describes the three years at the Ritz as "hard times." Likewise, Rosanoff says, "It was a hard time. It's disparaging to play in a place that never fills up. It was just dark and gloomy and was falling apart" (Personal Interview, 5 Oct. 2011). Anderson describes it similarly: "It was this huge black hole. Cavernous. I thought 'Oh the magic is gone'" (Personal Interview). Both Awn and Anderson were coming and going during this time and both of them recall the depressing feeling that the show would soon be just a memory. Anderson explains: "I went one Christmas. I don't know how long they'd been at the Ritz, but I remember there were more people on stage than in the audience. I thought, 'This will be the end of it.' That spark wasn't there" (Personal Interview). Awn reflects the same sentiment that the large Ritz theatre just was not right for Esther's, especially without the window (Personal Interview).

The three years spent at the Ritz Theater were certainly challenging for the Follies, but also proved beneficial. Though the cast refers to a limited audience, they were

gaining national success as comedic stars like Lily Tomlin were playing in the show frequently. Austin was still a relatively small town at this time and so the notoriety that Esther's Follies was receiving was impressive. Linda Wetherby remembers this as a time of growth as performers: "Before the Ritz, we never even wore wigs. Margaret brought in wigs and started making the biggest props and costumes. We had the largest most flashy things that we could, with giant hoop skirts and giant costumes. Big dance numbers and large stuff" (Personal Interview). Nevertheless, she feels it was still a challenge, "It was dark and lofty and hard to project. It was a very scary feeling that it might all end. And the cast was splitting" (Personal Interview). Though the show was not ideal at the Ritz theatre, it did not hinder the success of Esther's Follies. As Rosanoff puts it, "Other shows would have folded there, and we didn't. So we must have been pretty good" (Personal Interview, 14 Nov. 2011).

Another adventurous production that Esther's Follies put on while housed at the Ritz Theater was their Halloween spook shows. The cast would dress up in scary, yet funny costumes, such as Joel McKean's impersonation of a half man/half chicken, and would station themselves around a maze of black garbage bags to spook onlookers. In the lobby was a cage where the comics would insult the people as they went by. Austin Jernigan, bartender at Esther's who has been with Shelton and Sedwick since their film showing days at the University of Texas, writes of these Halloween events in his online article for the Velveeta Room:

The Esther's haunted houses at the Ritz were in '85 and '86. The great thing was that in '85 the cast was extremely enthusiastic about the project and came up with

all kinds of creative ideas. It was a change from doing the usual shows. One of the first exhibits was a Lucille Ball room that Margaret Wiley set up. She made a Lucy model and a tape of Lucy saying outrageous things. Funnier than it sounds here. Further down was an operating table - Chris Bonno was either the doctor or the patient - with a ham serving as the patient's leg which was being carved and the dialogue was hilarious. (Jernigan)

He continues that the scariest part of the haunted spook nights was the breaking of fire codes and the questionable wiring of Shelton's set up. He writes:

The one at the Ritz was not scary but very dangerous. During construction the doors were always locked to avoid the fire inspectors. It consisted mainly of tunnels made of 2x4s covered with black plastic, with electricity from cheap extension cords spliced together running along the floor. (Jernigan)

The Haunted Houses put on by the Esther's cast at the Ritz were a welcomed break from the normal show routine, and though dangerously rigged, no one in the cast was ever hurt and everyone enjoyed the large amounts of money it brought in.

In 1986 the cast of Esther's would undergo major changes. First, Dyer's role as director was changing as his sickness grew but also because the cast often had very different ideas than he did and his reaction to that pushed people away. Wetherby expands on this: "Doug had opinions. There was beginning to be this whole contingent of people who didn't want to do it the way Doug did" (Personal Interview). He left the Follies around this time. This separation allowed Michael Shelton and Shannon Sedwick to move from the role of landlords, producers, and cast members, to a more front and center,

Director/Owner role. This shift in leadership would be what would propel Esther's Follies into a true local success, but would also be what would keep it from becoming anything more.

The cast by now was used to playing private parties facilitated by David Perkoff, but there was no specific cast, separate from the main cast, available to do such performances. A second major change of this time occurred when Perkoff suggested a second cast with the idea that it would be beneficial for the theatre as a soft marketing technique and also serve as a training ground for potential full-time cast members. Shelton and Sedwick liked the idea and "Esther's Traveling Follies," commonly referred to as "Esther's To-Go" or "Esther's Cast B" was established. Perkoff expands on the group:

In the second cast we had a four to five man band and a five to six person cast. It was a full show. We rehearsed every Monday or Tuesday. My thought was that the casts could intermingle, when people got burned out, they could move out to the Traveling Follies and other cast members could move up into the main show. Maybe even a school could grow out of that. The idea was that by marketing, more audiences would come to the theatre. As long as we represented the show in an honest high level. Which we did. It was a great show. Eventually we were up to seventy shows a year. We did things like Continental Airline's, "Airline of the Year" party and flew all over country. We performed for the American Association of Bankers, the International Travel Agency in LA at the Biltmore Hotel. We were everywhere, except Esther's Follies. (Personal Interview)



Another major change in the cast was the forming of “Rotel and the Hot Tomatoes,” an extremely successful singing group that consisted of Wetherby, Baxter, and Sedwick. The success of the band began pulling the girls in many directions at this time, which allowed Margaret Wiley more room to grow in the show.

At the same time that Margaret Wiley was becoming a bigger name in the show, William Dente, Esther’s first star, lost his battle with liver cancer. Throughout the late seventies and early eighties the operatic comedian was a hit. Audiences loved his flamboyant absurdities and his acts were perfect for the style of the show at that time. Dente had been suffering for years with cancer. Then, according to Rosanoff, after a trip to an holistic clinic in California, his cancer was in remission. Once the cancer returned, however, Dente knew he was not going to live much longer. Rosanoff reflects on Dente’s last years: “He had several healthy years and I guess it came back rapidly and he handled it very well. He had people come to see him and say goodbye and he knew he was going to die and he handled it very well” (Personal Interview). Dente is memorialized at the current Esther’s Follies location. His Dame Della Diva costumes are framed and there are photos and paintings of him on the wall. His outrageous arias proved his knack for comedy as well as his immense talent as an opera singer. Though he could be difficult offstage, his talent onstage was remarkable. Kerry Awn remarks: “He was even more flamboyant than Doug [Dyer]. He was very sweet, but a grouchy and demanding prima donna. But William was a fabulous actor. Fabulous on stage. In real life he could be difficult, but on stage he was great” (Personal Interview). William Dente died in 1986.

In January of 1987 the cast moved further down the street to the Balboa Cafe at Sixth Street and Nueces. Shelton and Sedwick purchased a liquor license and were serving food and drinks at the show. The Balboa was intimate, and had large windows that the stage could back up to. It proved to be an almost perfect space for the Follies. The new faces of Amos Ewing, Joel McKean, Colom Keating and Ingo Neuhaus, would find their funny bones on the stage of the Balboa at this time. The cast uniformly reflects on the days at the Balboa Cafe as creative, innovative, and flourishing. Kerry Awn speaks on the years the Follies were at the Balboa Cafe:

The Balboa was the coolest one of them all. The atmosphere was really creative. Windows were back. Colom was in the show. Ingo was there. And Margaret was a sensation. Just a real golden era for me personally. The most fun. And suddenly everyone was making money. It was trickling down to us a little more. That was a big creative time! (Personal Interview)

At the Balboa the Follies stopped the three-show a night lineup. Their Thursday night shows were experimental. An audience was still invited to attend and the cast would judge what was working and what was not. From there they would determine their weekend lineup and perform two shows on Friday night and two shows on Saturday night.

In 1988 Baxter and Wetherby would leave the Follies to focus solely on "Rotel and the Hot Tomatoes," but Sedwick decided to stay. "It was hard to do both," recalls Wetherby (Personal Interview). Around that time, Anderson recalls that he was tired of

traveling and returned to Austin permanently, finding now that the cast had completely changed:

I moved back and sure enough Esther's Follies had moved to the Balboa with a fresh new cast. There now were a lot of people I didn't know. No Jeanie Baxter, no Linda Wetherby. Margaret was around when I first started but wasn't a huge part of show. I remember her in the back, in the corner, making costumes, but by time I came back Margaret was the star of show. (Personal Interview)

He continues on his experience at the Balboa:

I moved back and the Balboa was going strong but they had another magician 'Peter the Adequate,' who was doing cheesy magic tricks with Margaret, and so I didn't feel like I could come back in straight away, but then somehow Peter wasn't working out and Margaret and he didn't get along very well, and about at the same time I won a magic contest in San Antonio. So Margaret fired Peter and talked to Michael, so I came back in. (Personal Interview)

While away from Esther's Anderson had really grown as a performer. His knack for comedy combined with magic and illusions, such as sawing a girl in half while she sang "Mean to Me," was a hit with the audience. Anderson, himself, though, was not a hit with the cast: "Just like it is today when you first come in, no one in the cast knew me or took me into their arms" (Personal Interview). Anderson was also using animals in the show, which he claims, added to the cast's rejection of him: "I used a giant walk-in freezer as a dressing room with Colom [Keating]. He was hideous to me and didn't want to share a room with doves and dogs" (Personal Interview).

Also arriving in 1988 was a young teenage juggler named Red Ryder. Shy and skilled, he would play at the Follies from time to time in between traveling on tours. His quiet demeanor kept him somewhat isolated from the other cast members, though some feel that Shelton treated him as if he were his own son. Eventually he would perform regularly at the Follies, opening the night up with his amazing and innocent-like juggling skills. As discussed in chapter three, he lived a short, troubled life, as much under Shelton's wing as he could be, but was murdered in 2006.

One of the last members to join the show during its run at the Balboa Cafe, was Cindy Wood. Cindy Wood joined the show on May 24, 1989. She describes her first encounter with the Follies as "vibrant" and "electric." At the time, they were performing one of their anniversary shows at the Paramount. Wood walked in for the audition and got thrown into helping out backstage. She describes her first experience with the group:

They used to make a big deal of the birthday and the whole town would attend. I remember going to the Paramount Theater with them and helped haul big props and costumes, and the scurry of rehearsing for the regular show followed by rehearsing for the birthday show. And then, as everybody was getting ready, they forgot a big prop, and Ingo said, "You gotta go back to the theatre and get such-and-such prop." So I hauled butt and felt like a champ going to retrieve this very important kooky prop and rushing back to get it there in time! And I hung with them for that special performance and it was just a gala; they were so well loved and there was so much exciting energy at the time...upon my initiation.

(Personal Interview)

Wood revels in the fun she had preparing her audition:

I was very happy to bring to fruition some writing I had done on my own. I discovered that I enjoyed writing comedically and pulling from real stories but creating original characters. So I was very excited about piecing this audition together. I took five characters and in five minutes I did my characters, sang a diddy, and used several different dialects. I just loved it. (Personal Interview)

Her first experience and creative audition preparation had her excited to be a part of the show. She reflects with a tongue-in-cheek humor, however, that from the beginning of her audition to being in the show, the warm welcome turned into being treated as if she was in the way: “I had a blast doing [the audition] but it was very unnerving backstage. You know, it was very warm when they wanted you to get there, and then once you’re there it’s like ‘Come on, hurry up (claps hands), We got a rehearsal and a show. You gotta hurry up!’ The energy had switched” (Personal Interview).

After being rushed backstage to prepare, she ran into the most intimidating moment of her audition process, meeting Margaret Wiley. Wood explains:

So I quickly went back stage and was getting my stuff together and I was squatting on the floor. And all of a sudden a huge shadow was crowding over me and it was Margaret. I said “Oh hello” and she said, “Move.” So I moved and she grunted, “Whatta you plannin on doing?” I already had been filled in on Margaret and nothing was going to penetrate me so bad because I knew the opportunity. I had been working at a Psych hospital and wanted to go back to making people laugh. So I said, “Well I plan on auditioning,” And she said “Humpf,” and walked

away. I thought okay that's gotta be the worst of it. I thought 'she will learn to love me' and many many many years later she did! By the time she confessed that she decided she liked me (after I called the ambulance for her when she was sick one day at work), though, it was one year before she died and I thought, "Oh. I thought she liked me way before that!" (Personal Interview)

Though Wood has been a major figure in the show for years, her first experiences as an employee prove that she was not treated as congenially as she was hoping. Wood was the first woman since Wiley to join the show and she was much younger than any other female. Her reflections of her first few years at the Follies seem to show a less than welcoming treatment of incoming girls. In the following chapters this sentiment is shown in other female cast members as well. Men that came into the show from this time on recall having a voice from the beginning, though the women do not. In the same rushed fashion Wood found at auditions, she was also hired. She details:

I went home to Houston. I was working a regular job. I got this phone call from Shannon to join the cast as soon as possible. I had earned two weeks vacation, and I wanted to attend my sister's graduation. So after my two weeks of work and vacation and graduation I would be available. Well she basically said, "The sooner the better or it's not gonna work." So I put in my two weeks, trained another person, and put some writings together. I drove down there, under the guise that I would drop off this writing and go back to Houston, go to my sister's graduation, have a couple of weeks and then come back. Well I dropped off the writing and she said, "Tomorrow you need to have this and this memorized. We'll

give you a try and see how it works.” And I thought, “What the hell?! I quit my job! You told me you had a position here, and not only that, I am not prepared to perform. I have time off.” I could tell right away that was not an option. I thought, “They’re testing me. I will do one show and then be on my way.” So I memorized this huge solo overnight and sold it. (Personal Interview)

Wood soon found out that going back to Houston was not happening during this weekend. She continues: “Then they wanted me for the next show. I didn’t have anything. Had to go to thrift stores to get clothes. I slept in my car that weekend. And I missed my sister’s graduation” (Personal Interview).

Wood found herself thrown into a new town and a new job of which before she could have only dreamt: “I was thrilled to have a theatre job and the cast was great. I loved the creativity” (Personal Interview). Once in the show, she began to learn that if she were going to make her way in the Follies, she would have to establish herself and not be intimidated:

From that point on I was working. I went back home, got my stuff in one day, and came back and stayed with Lyova until I found a place. Everyone was getting their envelopes [paychecks] at Tuesday’s rehearsal. I thought, “Where’s mine?” Ingo said to ask Michael and so I chased him down and asked him what I was gonna be paid and he gave me an envelope with \$25 cash in it. I didn’t allow those things to keep me from doing the job. I was very much a cheerleader and have since learned how to create boundaries. (Personal Interview)

By 1990 the Follies were a huge event to see at the Balboa Cafe. It soon became clear that they needed a bigger space and to be back in a theatre. Every cast member at that time reminisce on the Balboa as a remarkable time of creation and pleasure, of up-and-coming comic routines, and of a local following, without a large amount of pressure. Anderson sums up the lively times at the Balboa: “It was an incredibly creative environment. We were becoming a tourist attraction” (Personal Interview). He continues that the lack of pressure to be good, aided in the creativity, and that it would all change permanently in the coming years: “[At the Balboa] we didn’t have pressure; tickets weren’t expensive. We just weren’t expected to be as good as now. I think you lose creativity because you have to put on good show. There was not as much pressure or stress. Within five years that would change” (Personal Interview).

In 1990 Shelton bought the JJJ Tavern (Esther’s current location) and moved the show there. He also bought the room next door, with plans to turn it into a stand-up comedy club, and under Michael Prochoroff’s suggestion, named it The Velveeta Room, after Kerry Awn’s infamous womanizing, boozier character, Ronny Velveeta. Linda Wetherby quit Rotel and the Hot Tomatoes and came back to the Follies at this time. Esther’s was becoming so well known and the stakes were growing higher. Wood remarks that she soon realized she would have to write herself into the show (Personal Interview). The cast was experimenting with political figures, such as Joel McKean’s George H.W. Bush impression and creating comedic skits with shorter musical numbers. The days of ten-to-twenty minute musical performances were long gone and the show was beginning to move at a much faster pace in which the jokes had to be quickly set up



and quickly delivered. Colom Keating expands on the brilliance of the show at this time: “I clearly remember that the best the cast ever got was during the first Gulf War. I mean for two or three months it was a solid, solid show. The kind where I couldn't wait to get back to the theater” (Personal Interview).

The show was getting a lot of recognition and once again was creating a buzz. In 1990 Shelton was approached by Comedy Central to record a pilot for their network. Some of the cast were in a small amount of the pilot, such as Wood, Kelly and Wetherby, and some were major features of the show, like Awn, Neuhaus, and Keating. The excitement in the cast grew and many were preparing for national success that seemed inevitable. Keating recalls: “The Comedy Central project was a huge deal for all of us. We were all going to be TV stars” (Personal Interview). Awn elaborates on the thrill of the pilot filming:

Everybody thought it was really cool because suddenly these people from LA were coming in here. They liked us. We were funny. We were getting praise which we were not used to [from Shelton and Sedwick]. These people were really in the business and not just saying they were in the business because they are landlords and own a theatre. They were reaffirming things you always believed about yourself. That was really wonderful. (Personal Interview)

The crew from Comedy Central highly praised the group and assured them that the show's success was inevitable and that their talent was unbeatable. Esther's Follies, however, never aired on Comedy Central. A few people suggest that perhaps the show just was not right for television. Without the windows and intimate audience setting, the

interactive comedy fell flat. Most, however, disagree with that theory and point to Shelton and Sedwick as the reason for the project's failings. Awn explains:

The truth of the matter is when they [Comedy Central] came into town, Michael and Shannon were pushed aside. They weren't running things. These people from Hollywood and New York and all the people that were suddenly interested in Esther's- they came in and started calling the shots. Those two were put in the background. Shannon got to do Patsy Cline but that was about it. She wasn't the Queen Bee anymore. I don't think they liked that too much. Suddenly they weren't in charge. (Personal Interview)

Like the New York City executives from the late seventies, the Comedy Central network was never able to sign a deal with Shelton and Sedwick, now the owners of the show. This caused a lot of resentment in the cast towards Shelton and Sedwick. Wetherby explains:

It was a good show and the thing is that we could have at that point, gone to New York, we could have been involved with *SNL*, Comedy Central, but there are those who believe that Michael and Shannon wanted to keep it local. We were definitely thrilled out of our gourds. We were gonna be famous and really go all the way. Some people felt robbed of potential. (Personal Interview)

What followed was a huge shift in control of the Follies. Awn explains: "That whole thing was a turning point of Esther's. That's when they [Shelton and Sedwick] suddenly went 'This is our business. Shannon's our star. No one can ever get big here'" (Personal Interview). According to Awn, Shelton was simultaneously aiding in the rift that was

about to occur. He details: "I remember doing the Comedy Central thing and suddenly I got all this money. I thought, 'this is not fair!' Keith and Saugey got a fifth of what I got. I went to Michael and said 'Why are you doing this?' Michael was just trying to divide people" (Personal Interview). Perkoff, however, defends Shelton and Sedwick's tight grip on the Pool: "It was not their goal to make movies. It was not their goal to be global. Their goal is to work really hard and make high level comedy on a property on Sixth Street in Austin, Texas" (Personal Interview).

At the same time Shelton and Sedwick pulled the plug on Esther's Traveling Follies. Shelton and Sedwick approached Perkoff and explained to him that they wanted to steer traffic to the theatre and have all the custom shows happen within the Pool (Personal Interview). Though Perkoff recalls the ending of the traveling group as "No muss. No fuss," others feel this decision deeply hurt Perkoff and the cast. Anderson, who spent time in the traveling cast as well, explains: "They [Shelton and Sedwick] didn't want it to expand. I don't think they wanted someone else cashing in. I can understand but it was hard on David [Perkoff]" (Personal Interview). Kerry Awn, still bewildered by this decision, reflects: "The Follies To-Go was almost more popular than the real cast. This threatened them. Somehow their own cast threatened them" (Personal Interview).

Justifiable or not, the anger within the company caused members of the cast to leave. By 1992 Steve Saugey left the company to focus on music in Austin and still works closely with Rosanoff. Ingo Neuhaus and Colom Keating headed for Los Angeles and both worked with the people from the Comedy Central network. Ray Anderson expands on this divide as well as the shift in control: "After the Comedy Central pilot,

two things occurred: We lost a core group of people that took off to find fame and fortune. Moved to L.A. Then fewer people were deciding what goes up. The formula changed for how things are produced, put up, and what they are about. In that respect we lost something there” (Personal Interview).

Though approached many times to leave, one of the cast members that chose to stay, was Kerry Awn. He explains that he never wanted to be famous and really thought the Comedy Central show would be happening in Austin instead of Los Angeles (Personal Interview). He expands:

They wanted me to go do a sitcom based off of Buck Huskey [a crass, angry man that ended every joke with “And Dammit I’m Mad”]. They already had a whole thing put together. I was like “I don’t wanna move to L.A.” I was stupid I guess. I just always liked living in Austin. I thought we were gonna do it here! (Personal Interview)

Keating explains that Austin was no longer where he wanted to be after all of the changes. The people with Comedy Central were already running one of his bits on their program “Short Attention Span Theatre” and stressed to him that he could be more successful in Los Angeles. He was growing angrier as Shelton and Sedwick were tightening their grip on the show and Margaret Wiley was becoming a larger personality with Chi Chi LaBamba. He was ready for a change and explains his departure:

It was in 1992 that I decided that it was time to go. I also reached Margaret Wiley fatigue. Margaret had an enormous amount of control over Michael and Shannon. To be fair to Margaret, the public couldn't get enough of her humor so I

understand why they put up with it. I can tell you that it didn't sit well with the rest of the cast at all. I had a piece called "Geeks Gallery" that started off the show after the Medley and it set the audience up to watch for things at the window. It was a huge, huge hit, and the audience would howl at it. One day I came to work and it had been pulled from the schedule. I asked why and Margaret said she couldn't follow it with her Chi Chi LaBamba bit. So I said, "Let me get this straight. We're pulling a bit because it gets TOO MANY laughs?!" She just said, "Well, I can't follow it." That was the final straw. I gave my two weeks notice shortly after that. (Personal Interview)

In the midst of relocating to their current location and the huge shift of the cast, Esther's Follies lost one of their founding members. In April of 1991 Doug Dyer died of AIDS. Wetherby mourns the horrors of seeing him in the hospital: "I've never seen anything so horrific in my life, than the last day of him in the hospital. He ended up dying with his parents not having a clue what to do" (Personal Interview). She remembers other cast members dying in the same way around this time: "Joe Hollis was in "Westward Hos" with me. He was Stale Evans. He was sophisticated, handsome, and gay. He died of AIDS and his parents would not talk to him because they found out he was gay. They all died. Fucking rocked everybody so hard" (Personal Interview). Dyer is remembered by Kerry Awn as having a creative spark. Rosanoff refers to him as a "Gay Icon." He is remembered for his eccentricities, creativity and power. He was always on the lookout for good talent and was the reason for the successful careers of many of the people of the Follies.

Because fewer people were now deciding what would be put in the show, and with Shelton and Sedwick's full ownership of it, Esther's Follies became even tighter and more enjoyable to the local audience, with the formula for comedy already established and proven. To the egos of the actors that either left for Los Angeles or stayed but were not included in the decision making, this shift seemed to prohibit them from growing as performers and certainly packed away any ideas of national renown.

Throughout the next few years things would stabilize at the Pool. In 1993 Linda Wetherby finally left to pursue a different career. Margaret Wiley, Shannon Sedwick, and Ray Anderson were soon the stars of the show. The Follies would begin exploring more and more with politics and with President Clinton's second term, they had enough material to take the show in a new direction: to the world of highly topical and political farce. This would become the backbone of the show's success in the years that followed, and remains so today.

## CHAPTER III

### MY DIP IN THE POOL: 1996-2006

Comedy, particularly stand-up and sketch comedy, was arguably at an all-time high in the 1990s. Andrew Dice Clay was shocking audiences with his in-your-face style of non-politically correct humor. Bill Hicks, George Carlin, and Rodney Dangerfield were celebrated for their anger. Jerry Seinfeld and Mitch Hedberg were famous for their unique delivery and *Saturday Night Live* was experimenting more with impersonations, in particular, within the realm of politics. Just before my stint from mid-2001 to late-2003, Esther's Follies left the idea of national fame behind them and like *Saturday Night Live*, also turned their eyes to a new direction: finding new ground and stamina in political humor. The political characters and scandals in the mid-to-late 1990s would offer much fodder for the cast. Though there was already a small amount of political humor in the show, that small amount would change into a main ingredient in the late 1990s. By the time I arrived on the stage in 2001, and after I left in 2003, political and topical humor reigned. The aspect of current events and political satire would explode in the mid 1990s and remain arguably the strongest element of the show today.

Keith Kelly, who actually arrived in 1987, began gaining attention at the Follies for his spot on impersonation of Bill Clinton during Clinton's first presidential run. His

smooth talking, saxophone playing, and youthful demeanor gave Kelly a character that kept the audiences laughing. In 1996 Clinton was elected for his second four-year term in office. By then Clinton had a number of women claiming he made sexual advances toward them, and so Kelly played up the ladies man and possible womanizer persona, and the audiences loved it. As explained later, once the 1998 adultery scandal between Monica Lewinsky and Clinton broke, it proved the audiences were not ready to stop laughing at Kelly's impersonation of the President.

Though admittedly not extremely funny and without a political impersonation under his belt, the Follies gained an important new member in late 1997 named Jerome Schooler. Schooler fancies himself less of a comedian and more of a singer, and is at times baffled at how long he was able to get away with being "mildly funny" (Personal Interview). Schooler recalls seeing the show at the Balboa Cafe in 1986. He describes the show as "casual" and "more like stand-up," but also "edgy and different" (Personal Interview). He explains that he bought into the window when someone on the street was arguing with an actor on stage (Personal Interview). Before returning to Austin to live, Schooler spent many years as a musician in Los Angeles. His band was the house band at the Whiskey A-Go-Go for years. His voice would be his hiring factor. Schooler's audition has been dubbed "the best audition ever" at the Follies. He describes his audition:

I brought in a TV and told Shannon, "Sorry I am really nervous so I videotaped my audition." Then I turned on the TV and it was me onscreen ragging on myself for not auditioning. So then I started fighting with the me in the TV. We got in this fight and then a song and dance erupted. I sang "I say potato, you say potato" and



me and myself in the TV sang for the audition. We actually used it in Esther's the next week. (Personal Interview)

Upon arriving at the Pool, Schooler felt immediately out of place. He describes the atmosphere as "clique-y" with Ewing, McKean, and Rosanoff against Shelton and Sedwick. Because of this Schooler did not know to which group he belonged, and immediately developed a relationship with Sedwick. To Schooler, Esther's Follies seemed like something that was on the brink of skyrocketing into something even bigger. Not knowing why there was an obvious division between cast and Shelton-Sedwick, and not knowing where he would fit into all of that, he enveloped himself in conversations with them over Esther's possible expansion. He explains:

I came in not really knowing which team I was supposed to be on. And Shannon and I hit it off immediately. So before rehearsals I would go to lunch with them [Sedwick and Shelton] to talk about a future. They were thinking about expanding onto Sixth and Lamar. They wanted to take advantage of their status. Maybe open up a whole area with a magic thing with Ray. They were interested in my opinion. Together we thought about what else we could do, and they asked me what role I would like to have. I thought, "Oh, man! I'm on a ship about to explode!"

(Personal Interview)

Unfortunately for Schooler, there was no expansion. Eventually the lunches began to fade away as well. When asked why, in his opinion, nothing ever expanded he remarks:

I think different things happened. I think they realized they actually were doing really well. They always had packed houses. I think they really wanted to have

kids too. When they decided to adopt that slowed down the business end of it and they were content with “this is what it is. Let’s just stay here and just maintain this business.” (Personal Interview)

It seems possible that the refusal to expand the the show this time had less to do with losing control of the business and more to do with Shelton and Sedwick placing their focus on the idea of becoming parents. They began adoptions in 1996 and now have two children, Suz and Noah.

Schooler noticed more and more the tensions in the workplace. He details: “They [the cast] all rallied different points just to butt heads over nothing” (Personal Interview). He soon learned that he was becoming one of the points being rallied. Kerry Awn had recently left to focus on stand-up comedy, and Schooler was getting a lot of Awn’s roles in the show. Also, because he was a great singer he was onstage immediately singing solos in the musical numbers. These factors made those who had already put in ten years or so of time at the Pool jealous. Even though he was not a comedian, he found he was getting more stage time than the others. He explains:

I came in a young, fresh gun. Everyone else was probably ten years older. When I came in I didn’t know what to do. Shannon liked me singing so I got vocal roles and that pissed off Amos and Joel. One of them said, “We’ve been here ten years and he’s getting all the parts!” And I was no where near as funny as them. That’s my dirty little secret. Comedy was my weakest strength. (Personal Interview)

Being loaded with Kerry Awn’s roles while Awn was on a hiatus was extremely hard on Schooler because he did not know how to make the roles funny in the same way

that Awn did. Occasionally Awn would be in town, performing stand-up comedy next door at the Velveeta Room and would catch a glimpse of Schooler performing his acts on stage. Schooler describes one instance:

Kerry had left for a while and they gave me some of his stuff. It was really awkward. One song, *Fire*, by Bruce Springsteen, Kerry would sing “I’ll set your house on fiya.” He could make it funny by being this gruff, off-key, genius-at-comedic-timing, singer. Kerry made it funny by selling it. And I’m a singer and sang it nice, not funny. I could see Kerry peeking into the window from the Velveeta Room watching me do it. He was probably shaking his head and thinking, “Who is this kid?” (Personal Interview)

Eventually the tense atmosphere let up and the cast began taking Schooler under their wings. He specifically remarks on Wiley’s gentle attention to him: “Margaret was nothing but motherly to me” (Personal Interview). He recalls a sketch he was performing on OJ Simpson. It was a golf joke, wrapped up with the tag line “And OJ’s home safe washing his balls,” suggesting he got away with murder and is now just living an easy, golf-playing life. Schooler found himself being schooled by Wiley on how to make this bit work: “I remember Margaret taught me how to grab my crotch to sell the joke better. I thought ‘Okay this is the fine tuning of comedy.’ She showed me how to be funny. Of course, then she’d go off and be vicious to someone else” (Personal Interview). Schooler spent his time at the Follies as a singer and honed his skill for comedy. He climbed the Esther’s ladder quickly and easier than others, it seems, and was making a significant paycheck very early on. He left in 2006 to pursue a new career.

The world-wide political scandal of President Bill Clinton's extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky exploded in the news in 1998. Keith Kelly's nearly naked Clinton, paired with Cindy Wood's blue dress-wearing Lewinsky and Shannon Sedwick's over-the-shoulder-looking Hillary Clinton kept the audiences rolling with laughter. Soon Shaun Wainwright-Branigan's George H.W. Bush, Sr entered the scene to wag fingers with Margaret Wiley's Linda Tripp. Rosanoff's quick-witted writing, combined with the spot-on impersonations by the actors, gave these political farces life. Kerry Awn began asking why Governor George W. Bush was not being spotlighted. He describes:

I did Bush as governor but not much. They ignored him as an idea. I thought, "He's getting ready to run for president, someone should do him!" I had just seen him on TV doing all these silly gestures while he talked. All these funny things. Just being Bush. I said, "He's acting so goofy we gotta do something!" Everyone said, "He doesn't have a chance [at President], he's an idiot." I suggested Keith or someone do him, because I don't do impressions, I just do characters. They thought it was stupid and said, "You do him then, Kerry!" I said, Ok "I'll do him then." I guarantee he is going to go national!" And nobody would believe me! Well the rest is history. I had a job for the next ten years! (Personal Interview)

In 1998 Shaun Wainwright-Branigan hit the Esther's stage. At the time he was performing at the Velveeta Room for an improvisational troupe called Code Blue. Everyone in the troupe was invited to audition for Esther's Follies and Wainwright-Branigan was the only one to make the cast. To him, the show seemed "corny" (Personal Interview). Quite a different description in 1998 from the "edgy" one described by

Schooler in 1986. Wainwright-Branigan describes the atmosphere as feeling like he was experiencing a “period of great change” (Personal Interview). With a lot of the heavy weights gone and just two stars of the show commanding more stage time, coming in new was less welcoming than before and there was less room to shine. He explains: “Amos had just left, Ingo left, Joel McKean just left. I didn’t know anyone and there’s not a lot of work for newbies, so I felt like there wasn’t much for me to do. The audition process for Esther’s Follies is really the first six months of employment” (Personal Interview). By the time Wainwright-Branigan got to the show, the line-up was tight with not much room for additional sketches and the stakes for an actor to remain employed had risen to a higher level. His nervous encounter with one of the show’s major stars, Margaret Wiew, further influenced his uneasy feeling of being new to the show and not knowing how to find your place. He describes an incident with Wiley:

Well she was a very big personality. I was already convinced she didn’t like me.

One time we had just finished a big musical number and so I hit my pose at the end not realizing that my hand was blocking her face. She jerked my hand away and left stage saying, “These fucking newbies don’t know...!” (Personal

Interview)

Though not associated with a specific character in the show, save the Cat from The Cat in the Hat sketch, Wainwright-Branigan is now one of the best paid actors at the Follies, and no doubt a heavyweight as far as stage time and input. He sees no reason to leave the show any time soon.

Also arriving on the scene in 1998 was Tamara Beland, a three year cast member and my mentor. At the time she was a New York City transplant who was not finding any theatre to do in Austin and had planned her move back to the Big Apple. Just before, she noticed an audition posting, and driven by her need to perform again, got the job. She recalls her first night at her new venue: "I remember first getting ready to go on with all the props and smells and people and I knew it was exactly where I was supposed to be" (Personal Interview). Known for her singing, Beland was always in musical numbers though she was not on stage much as a comedienne. Like Wood, Beland found it hard to come in and establish herself right away. During her time there she developed an impersonation of Martha Stewart (explained in detail later) that got her recognition and she developed herself more as a singer and performer. Like most of the females coming in to the show, there was no more room for big stars as long as Sedwick and Wiley were performing.

Wiley had been a huge star on the Follies stage for years. She was also heavily using prescription drugs and alcohol and as she became more and more popular on stage, she became more and more unhappy offstage. She had been the star of the Follies, along with Ray Anderson for a while. She was prone to bossiness, and instability, but it seems that around this time she became more and more enveloped in her own misery and the turmoil brewing within. She became withdrawn and fell into a deep depression in the late 1990s.

On November 2, 1999, Margaret Wiley was found dead in her home. She was fifty years old. According to Wetherby, Wiley's boyfriend found her that morning, sitting

at her typewriter, slumped over her script (Personal Interview). Her death seems to have been a combination of alcohol and prescription drugs, and though she often talked about committing suicide, and although an anonymous source claims she said that she did not want to live past fifty years old, nearly everyone that knew her contends that her death was accidental. Her Chi Chi LaBamba was a massive hit in the show, and sits as if in a tomb, untouchable by any other player. Aunt Edith, however, still lives on. Aunt Edith (now called Maxi Crafts) is a sketch in which a woman gives advice on how to make good use with maxi pads, such as an Easter basket, a napkin holder, or even a donkey or elephant made to celebrate elections. Robert Faires quotes Linda Wetherby in an article for *The Austin Chronicle*: “[I]t was a great day when Margaret invented ‘Aunt Edith,’ the drunk housewife whose crafts made with feminine hygiene products are now Follies history. During Desert Storm, Aunt Edith wore camouflage while griping about ‘riding that cotton camel.’ I believe it was at that point she devised an entire hunting jacket padded with Kotex. . . . every woman in the audience would laugh until she cried” (Faires).

Wiley is remembered by those who knew her with mixed feelings. Almost everyone contends that she was difficult, but had a loving streak that was golden. Lyova Rosanoff on Wiley: “She was very talented but very difficult. Not with everybody, but I think I represented something and I don’t think she liked me very much. Strangely enough though, she gave me gifts once in a while that were exactly the kind of things I like. I don’t know how she figured that out. She could be very funny, but also very temperamental” (Personal Interview). Ray Anderson on Wiley: “Margaret and I actually

always got along really well. I understood her in a way that other people didn't and she, me. She was always very very kind to me" (Personal Interview). Shaun Wainwright-Branigan on Wiley: "She was amazing on stage but had multiple neuroses. She was really insecure in real life. She was a prolific writer. Always had good ideas" (Personal Interview). Colom Keating on Wiley: "Margaret Wiley was a piece of work to put it mildly and we all watched her slowly commit suicide. I mean she didn't do it in one day but we all watched her put that gun to her head and slowly pull the trigger. It was very sad" (Personal Interview). There are many more who remark on her anger, insecurities, and talent. Perhaps Kerry Awn put it best in his assertion of her: "She once told me, 'No matter how I'm feeling when I get onstage and do Chi Chi I feel like the most beautiful person in the world.' People [audiences] always say how they miss Chi Chi. I think that's what killed her. She let Chi Chi take over her life. That became her bigger-than-life personality, you know? No one ever said 'I miss Margaret'" (Personal Interview).

The death of Margaret Wiley was crushing for the cast and audiences. There was anxiety on whether or not anyone would be able to fill the massive hole left by her death, to which Schooler remarks, is the amazing this about Esther's Follies, "It goes on. It could all still work" (Personal Interview). Shelton, Sedwick, and others feared the show might not be able to survive without Chi Chi LaBamba (Personal Interview). In fact it did. Though no one has tried to recreate LaBamba, after Wiley's death, room opened up in the show for more people to showcase their talent. Wiley's Aunt Edith was changed to Maxi Crafts and was given to Tamara Beland, who played it as Martha Stewart. Maxi Crafts is still in the show today, played by Shannon Sedwick. Also after Wiley's death,



Shelton asked Awn to come back on full time. That month, George W. Bush was elected into office as President of the United States. Awn perfected his role and had more stage time than before. The star of the show was now only Ray Anderson, and according to Kerry Awn, was the only one to have an actual dressing room (Personal Interview). With Wiley gone, Anderson needed an assistant for his magic tricks. Enter Cindy Wood. Wood's chemistry with Anderson and her lovable, goofy, small-framed assistant was a stark contrast to Wiley's brash, angry and heavy-set assistant, but it worked. The audiences loved Cindy Wood more than before, and even though she reveals that she never wanted to be Anderson's assistant, she can not deny it has kept her hired and given her more stage time than the sketches alone (Personal Interview). There was room for new musical numbers, new political sketches as well. There was room for Sedwick to command star status again. Also, Cat in the Hat was born and Shaun Wainwright-Branigan paired with Cindy Wood to make Dr. Seuss dirty and hilarious. The opening "I am Sam, Sam i am. Would you like to Slam and Bam?" unravels in a quick paced, rhymed, and relentless back and forth between the two, using body language to describe the argument, finally culminating in Wood's character giving in:

Yes I can see you're very hard. Perhaps we could go to the yard. Or maybe do it in a house, or maybe do it with a mouse. Or even do it in a boat or even do it with a goat. Or on the floor or in the store or in your car if it's not far. Yes I would love to do it on the table, God I hope that you are able. I'll even to do it in a tree.

Please oh please make love to me..I need to do it here and now, let me help you

with those trou [trousers]! I do so want to Slam and Ba-ya-yam. Take me, take me, Sam I am!”

The two are still performing Cat in the Hat to this day.

Rex Rotsko joined the cast in July of 2000. He moved from Los Angeles to join the show. Because he was a member of a barbershop quartet, a writer on *Hollywood Squares*, and vouched by his old friend, Jerome Schooler, Rotsko did not have to audition for the show. He recalls learning about Esther’s Follies from a friend at *Hollywood Squares*: “I was visiting Mark Herrington, a coworker at *Hollywood Squares*. He said, ‘Jerome’s in this show in Austin. You should be on that stage instead of making Whoopie [Goldberg] look funny” (Personal Interview). According to Rotsko, all Shelton and Sedwick had to hear was “Hollywood writer” and the job was his (Personal Interview). For the time he worked at Esther’s Follies he lived at the farm that Shelton and Sedwick owned. As a writer he was lazy, by his own admission, and seldom ever wrote sketches. He did, however, consistently have two or three numbers in the opening Medley of short and topical parodies, which pleased Shelton and Sedwick well enough. Ever the comedian, he describes his first impression of the show: “It’s like Branson, Missouri but not so cutting edge!” (Personal Interview). To Rotsko, Esther’s Follies is one of the most interesting things he has ever done and that living on Shelton and Sedwick’s farm was a very nostalgic and special situation (Personal Interview). He feels the show’s success is also what makes the actors so frustrated: “They distill the bits down to only the punchline” (Personal Interview). He left in 2002 to write the “Great American Novel.”

Though the show was less experimental and tamer than in the early days,

occasionally shocking things would happen on stage, mostly by accident. Cindy Wood recalls popping out of the magician's box during one performance only to realize her entire top was missing. Backstage craziness was still occurring as well. One night in the early 2000s, while the men were outside setting up for Cry Me a River, the last number of the night, Jerome Schooler recalls a man trying to steal a prop:

Some drunk guy on the street grabs a prop leg or something. Crazy Carl, the man who posts outside the show twirling flowers and flashing the audience through the window, starts squirting him with water. All of a sudden the guy pulled a knife on Carl and where did Carl run? Right in the backstage door. Me, Ray and Shaun were all standing there. One of us said, "Crap what happened?" Then we looked at each other and realized, "Oh, shit we gotta go in there." There were only girls in there. We knew we had to run in there. So we gotta man up. So we, begrudgingly go running for the door when suddenly it flies open and Carl runs back out flailing his arms and screaming. The guy runs back out and down the street with props. So we chase after him. All of a sudden he turns around in horror and drops the prop legs and runs off. I thought, "What, just happened. Why is he so scared of us?" Then we all realized about the same time that I was dressed as George Washington, Ray as Frank [padded body and genitalia area], and Shaun was dressed in a pink gorilla costume! We terrified the guy so much he ran away!

(Personal Interview)

In 2001 Tamara Beland decided to leave the show. Beland's time at the Follies was bittersweet. She loved performing five shows a week in the two-hundred and fifty

house theatre, with every seat filled, for three years and she reflects now that she has, “never had that again” (Personal Interview). She has mixed feelings about leaving. On one hand she states, “I wanted to be treated better,” while on the other she reveals: “When you’re young, you’re idealistic and you don’t realize when you have a good thing. When you’re older you’re less selfish and less of a jackass” (Personal Interview). At the time she was leaving she was my co-director of the improv troupe Catfight. I remember Beland crying one day at a Catfight rehearsal because she had spent so much time at the Follies trying to make them happy and they never once told her that she was doing a good job. A sentiment expressed by nearly all of the women of the show, mid-1990s and beyond. It is possible that once Sedwick became more of an authority, and without Wiley there to appease, her role switched in a way that left some wanting in gentleness. For at this time, it is most certain that Esther’s Follies was no longer a group of collaborators, and any female coming into the show would now be younger than Sedwick, and possibly a threat on one level or another. Beland has left the door to the Follies open and keeps her close friendships, which has enabled her to do things such as appear as a guest artist when she happens to be in town.

I joined the group on July 3, 2001. I was a member of Catfight, the show Tamara Beland co-directed. One night the group of us went to see the Esther’s Follies. I do not remember thinking that I wanted to audition, only thinking how cool it would be to actually be able to be in the show. I had seen nothing like it before, and I did not think I had the chops, or even if I did, that they would give someone like me a chance. Beland had just left the show. Her replacement was performing fine, but the other role—the

young, cutesy, cheerleader type, was about to get canned. Beland instantly thought of me as the girl's replacement and requested an audition from Shelton and Sedwick. She helped prepare me for my audition and became a mentor to me throughout the whole process. At age twenty-one I was the youngest cast member to ever join the Follies. Being that July Fourth was a holiday, I had only one rehearsal on July third before my first performance on July fifth. There are no words to explain my first night on that stage: the nerves, the excitement, being extremely new to the entire experience, is not something I can formulate in any poetic way. I can say, though, that after the show I felt more alive than I ever had before and more alive than I have since.

I was warned by Beland that as a young female I would not be starring in the show any time soon, but little by little I was able to get more stage time and was singing solos regularly before I left. My first year I played cheerleaders, ditzy young girls, and little roles here and there. I wore a big armadillo costume and danced around stage. I recall one rehearsal for a performance that would be in black light. For the show we would wear full body costumes with skeletons pasted on our blacks to make it look like dancing skeletons on the stage. Needless to say, for the show, I would be completely covered up. Ray Anderson, after the rehearsal pulled me aside and said, "You do realize that no one is going to see your face during the show, right? You don't have to smile." I replied, "I know, I just enjoy smiling when I dance." He laughed, patted me on the back and said, "Ah, you're so young and un-jaded." Soon enough I would understand what he meant, but in those early days there was nothing in the world I wanted to do more than be on the stage at Esther's Follies.

Experiencing September 11, 2001 was a devastation to every American. I had only been employed for two months at that point and seriously was questioning if I still had a job. How were we, a comedy show that poked fun of our own country, going to alter the show in two days? Would it no longer be able to survive, period? Would we lose an audience? I walked into the theatre and the ceiling felt like it was on my head. Everyone seemed to have been wondering the same thing. Sure we could still do magic tricks, but our entire show otherwise had to change. Immediately. Luckily the girl that arm pit farted the National Anthem had just finished her last show the weekend before. I noticed Rex Rotsko standing by the window. Being a former New York citizen, I am sure he felt something entirely different than any one else in the room. I approached him and asked if he was okay. Without looking at me he replied, "I don't think anyone gets what this actually means." A quote I would reflect on as the next few years followed and America found itself at war. Rotsko claims that Sedwick grew angry at the cast for being in such a depressive state, and in her heightened state of fear of the show's future and the confusion surrounding those first few hours of that morning, she canceled rehearsal and threw our paychecks at us and yelled "Fine! Why don't you all go sit morose in front of your TVs!" (Personal Interview). Shaun Wainwright-Branigan confirms Rotsko's claim, but defends Sedwick's outburst due to the the magnitude of the situation (Personal Interview). Wainwright-Branigan states that there never was a feeling that show would end after 9-11: "We realized that people were hungry to laugh. A lot of times people are shocked or terrified, and their response is to laugh" (Personal Interview). After a few weeks of having to cancel the second show on Friday nights, the crowds returned in full

force, ready to laugh; with some minor adjustments, and with a “We’re gonna get the bad guys” slant on political sketches and songs, the show was as strong as ever.

In February 2002 Catherine Gonzaga joined the show. She was also a member of Catfight and Esther’s was looking to replace Cindy Wood, who had just found out that she was expecting a child. I met with Gonzaga for a few afternoons, as Beland once did with me, and we prepared her an audition. Sedwick met with Gonzaga for lunch and agreed to “try her out” (Personal Interview). She began rehearsals that week. Along with playing small roles in sketches in musical numbers, Gonzaga interned under Wood until Wood was too far along in her pregnancy to work. She took over Cat in the Hat and played Anderson’s magician’s assistant. She describes the atmosphere as “high pressure” because she had to learn a lot of magic tricks quickly, with little room for mistakes (Personal Interview). She states that even though the cast was supportive and the audience made it worth it, that things could get very competitive between the younger girls in the cast for roles and attention (Personal Interview). She describes her most and least favorite roles:

My favorite role was playing "Chunk" and/or "Precious" for Ray's card trick and compression trick. I got to interact directly with the audience a lot for it and I really loved working with Ray. My least favorite role was playing Sharon Osbourne for the 2004 New Year's Show. I couldn't get the look or the accent right so I was completely not believable and the audience knew it. I got no laughs on my entrance. It was depressing. (Personal Interview)

She left in 2005 to focus on a new career, returned after a short time until 2007, when she would leave for a final time to pursue law school.

Rex Rotsko left the show in 2002. His replacement, the outspoken Aaron Johnson, seems to say what other previous cast members only hint at in regards to Shelton and Sedwick's business practices. As an actor, he appreciates his sixth-month stint at the Follies, but he is also the only cast member to have worked in the office and has a less than affectionate attitude towards the duo and their associates. He met Shelton and Sedwick while working at the Velveeta Room. According to Johnson, a man named Robert Burke, wanted to buy the Velveeta Room and call it "Funnies" (Personal Interview). Momentarily, the Velveeta Room was rearranged and Johnson became the general manager. Johnson explains how the transition was set to unfold:

The deal was something to the effect that Michael and Shannon would own the liquor, and Robert would rent or lease the liquor. He would sell it out of Funnies and then pay Michael and Shannon. We hired bartenders, cocktail waitresses, and door staff. The guy that booked everything was Bruce Baum. He sent us all the talent from L.A. He called me one day and told me that Robert Burke was a crook. The comics paychecks were bouncing. It seems Michael and Shannon weren't getting their fair cut in the liquor sales as well. (Personal Interview)

Shelton covered the expenses of the Funnies, according to Johnson, and restored the Velveeta Room name. Also according to Johnson, Shelton did not cover any pay that Johnson was supposed to receive, and needing a job, Johnson auditioned for the show (Personal Interview). He was required to rehearse for two weeks before being allowed to



get on stage. Also he was paid two-hundred dollars a week, cash, and “under the table,” an unusually low amount of pay for the actors in 2002 and a practice that was no longer common in the now professional Esther’s Follies. He explains his experience as an actor at Esther’s Follies:

I really liked the cast. They were very supportive. Particularly Ray, which was nice. I really did not like Michael or Shannon at all. Michael is a bully and Shannon is not the world’s most competent actress, yet she attempts to make up for it by taking everybody else’s roles. Michael could be a jerk and you’re trying to say, “You know I’m in the middle of the show right now, can you please wait until the show is over to be a jerk?” I remember the fact that there had to be these old hack numbers in the show that weren’t good anymore but because Shannon could sing them [they were in the show]. Shaun and I had a sketch axed, something about conjoined twins going out on a blind date together, hysterical, but because it wasn’t going like this (snaps fingers), it was out. (Personal Interview)

Johnson left that same year, but ironically enough, returned in 2009 to work in the Esther’s Follies business office.

At the end of 2003 I left Esther’s Follies. During my run I moved up to solos, singing Medley songs, and portraying celebrities like Jenna Bush and Brittany Spears. I participated in to-go gigs, where I got to play Patsy Cline and Maxi Crafts, things I would never have been allowed to do on the main stage, and also got a time or two with Sam I Am. By the end of 2003 I was itching to move to Los Angeles and very tired of the show.

There is a certain unspoken rule at the Follies that young girls are not allowed to be funnier than Sedwick. I learned that even if my big roles got great laughs, she would find a way to need to be in the sketch with me. I know my talent was valued at the Follies, but it certainly was not a place where you were ever told that, except by the audience. It is possible that Sedwick and Shelton feel that is enough. Though I was able to support myself working at Esther's Follies alone, I received only one raise during my two and a half years there, another sentiment that seems only felt by the female cast members. My last show was December 14, 2003. My cast mates played tricks on me during my final show and Jerome Schooler surprised me by planting a big kiss on me on stage at the end. It is a night I will never forget.

Like September 11, Hurricane Katrina devastated the hearts of Americans in 2005 with its destruction. Esther's Follies faced another anxious moment of panic in the show's sustainability, especially with many refugees housed nearby at the Austin Convention Center. The Follies, though, like the audiences after September 11, found the audiences of Hurricane Katrina were ready to laugh. Shaun Wainwright-Branigan explains: "It was like a big catharsis. We ended the show with, 'When the Saints Go Marching In.' The audiences went wild" (Personal Interview).

In 2005 Keith Kelly left the show. Kelly claims that by 2005, most of his characters had been "term limited, defeated, or died" (Personal Interview). He would not state whether he left on his own accord or was asked to leave, though it is probably safe to say he was *guided* out of the show by the hands of the people that no longer felt he was needed, namely Michael Shelton. This type of *letting go* of an employee, either by giving

them less money, less stage time, or both, seems to have been common practice by Shelton. Kelly is remembered as a gentle and funny man, who will most likely never be outshone in his impressions of Bill Clinton, and who had a spot-on announcers voice. Currently he teaches Comedy Defensive Driving in Austin.

Also in 2005 Esther's hired a new electric piano player named Doug Ewart. For a while, he and Rosanoff collaborated on their musical creations for the show. Shelton and Sedwick began to integrate Ewart's electric sounds more and use Rosanoff's classical piano accompaniment less. Soon, it seems Rosanoff was being edged out of the show and Ewart's "canned" creations were taking over. Awn explains this transition: "Ewart had lots of recordings and sounds. It was really good. Lyova was old school. Michael wanted to snazz it up. It was time for a change and so it was time for her to go. Doug was already there and they'd switch around and do stuff and you could tell that was the way it was going" (Personal Interview). Awn continues to explain that Shelton and Sedwick did not want to fire Rosanoff, but convince her to quit (Personal Interview). Rosanoff decided that at the end of the year, she would resign.

The decision by Rosanoff to leave Esther's Follies was shocking to anyone who had ever played in the show. Many agree that this founding member did not seem to want to leave anytime soon, and that her departure seemed unfair and unnecessary. Esther's Follies, however, must have felt it necessary for the show's advancement to bring in a different way of doing music. Michael Prochoroff, who worked the lights for the show, quit along with Rosanoff and Kerry Awn offered to as well. Awn felt if Shelton wanted to make cut backs, he was ideal for the cut. To his surprise, Shelton was not interested in

letting go of Awn. Rosanoff played her final show in late 2005. Shaun Wainwright-Branigan remembers Rosanoff: “It was sad to see her go. I’ve never met anyone quite like her. Utterly dynamic. Inventive, funny, and warm. One of the people I feel truly privileged to have met” (Personal Interview). At the end of the show, previous cast members, myself included, snuck into the building and joined the current cast onstage. Cast members poured out the edges of the stage and into the audience to serenade Rosanoff with an a cappella version of The Beatles “In My Life.” Rosanoff, ever unstoppable, still tutors privately, writes and plays concerts regularly.

Just as 2005 brought the end of live piano being the only musical element in the show, 2006 brought the end of a juggling act as the show’s opening. Not long into 2006, the iconic juggler Red Ryder was murdered outside of an apartment complex in South Austin. According to Wainwright-Branigan, Ryder was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, had witnessed a robbery, possibly went to stop it, and was stabbed to death. Ryder struggled for years with substance abuse. His onstage/offstage persona was similar to that of Wiley’s, captivating the audience with his impressive act onstage, and barely able to function offstage. Jerome Schooler reflects on Ryder: “He was the craziest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. He was like Margaret. He’d come strolling in with scabs and bruises, and obviously way hung over or still stoned and reeking. And yet once he hit the stage he was this crazy monkey boy. Juggling like I’ve never seen in my life” (Personal Interview).

Ryder often seemed unable to make it to the stage, but somehow always did. It has been rumored that at times Shelton would provide Ryder with whatever drug he

needed to function on stage. Whether or not that is true, what does seem to be true is Shelton's fatherlike attention to Ryder. Schooler expands on this:

I would be stage left waiting and on the other side of the stage Michael would be watching Red Ryder perform, encouraging him like a parent: "Come on. Come on." I think Red Ryder lived as long as he did because of Michael. There was a time where he [Ryder] had a case of the dropsies for a couple months. Michael didn't can his ass. He just kept giving him the gig. I think Michael tried to keep him out of trouble as best he could. If he [Ryder] was not working, it would have been worse. (Personal Interview)

Ryder's death came at a time when he seemed to be getting his life together. Though going through a divorce and most likely still using drugs, most contend that he seemed cleaner and on a better track. His sudden death was a shock to the cast of Esther's Follies. Other than the occasional guitar player, Ryder's opening act to the show has not been replaced.

Jerome Schooler left the show for the second and final time in 2006. He had recently began developing an act with Allen Robertson that they called the Biscuit Brothers. One summer, Allen Robertson was hired on at Esther's and the two found they worked well together as they put together this act. At first, for the Follies stage, the Biscuit Brothers represented, according to Schooler, "this red-neck Ozark-mountain barefoot-singing duo, singing things such as: 'I married my sister and my cousin is my wife'" (Personal Interview). On a request from the Zach Scott Theatre, the two changed their act to one suitable for children and took their act there. Soon, its popularity grew so

much that they began to gain funding and landed a spot on PBS. They filmed the pilot for a television show at Shelton and Sedwick's farm. The show's popularity grew and soon Schooler found himself torn between his two jobs. He explains:

I had this come-to-Jesus moment. I thought, "I can't be a role model for kids and fine arts and music in the mornings, and at night have the parents come to Esther's and see me as Matthew McConaughey, naked playing bongos. I was always the naked guy or Cher with ass-less pants. I could care less. Then once the Biscuit Brothers started showing regularly, people started recognizing me. I never wanted to hear "Aren't you the guy my child watches in the mornings?" (Personal Interview)

Schooler still has moments when he wants to return to the Follies stage but knows he can not. He appreciates his new life with the Biscuit Brothers show, and comments on why he thinks Esther's Follies works : "They didn't sugar coat anything. Pissed off a lot of people, but with a weekly show there's no time to waste" (Personal Interview).

From the mid-1990s to the late-2000s Esther's Follies again experienced changes, not only in the cast, but the show changed quite a bit as well. The racy material from the 1980s and early 1990s was cleaned up just enough to make the show family friendly in the late 1990s. The long musical numbers were replaced by short comedic medleys. The political scandals of the 1990s helped the comedy move to focus more on politics. The deaths of Margaret Wiley, Red Ryder, and the resignation of Lyova Rosanoff would shake, but not break the Follies. In the next years, the show would become even faster

paced, with even more political humor, and Shelton and Sedwick hired their first non-performing, permanent comedy writer.

## CHAPTER IV

### NOW AT THE POOL: 2007-PRESENT

By 2007 Esther's Follies was certainly a Texas Landmark. The devastation of September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina, as well as the loss of such greats as Margaret Wiley, Lyova Rosanoff, and others, did not stop audiences from pouring in every weekend to see the show. The Follies had found their niche in political humor and Texas-bred farces such as the "Dixie Chicks" singing: "Mama don't let your babies grow up to be Yankees." The show of today is very different from the show of 1977: less drug and sex humor, except in innuendoes, and less experimental pieces. Also, the line-up is tighter, with one skit racing in after the one before it, and the jokes are delivered faster. Even the intermission is only five minutes long. To first time audience members, Esther's is probably unlike anything they have ever seen before. But the Follies is not just a place for first-timers, and never has been. Audiences continue to return to see new jokes and magic, and also bring friends to see older skits that they know will be in the show, such as Patsy Cline. With certainty they can lean into their friend's ear and say, "You're gonna love this!"



With a new electric piano playing sound effects, the show was able to expand in another unique way. In 2007 Shelton and Sedwick were also in the midst of opening another restaurant in Austin, aptly named Patsy's. The cast of Esther's Follies in 2007 included Shannon Sedwick, Cindy Wood (who had returned after her maternity leave), Ray Anderson, Shaun Wainwright-Branigan, Kerry Awn, and Catherine Gonzaga. Gonzaga, though, soon moved to Seattle to pursue Law School. Lyova Rosanoff, though no longer employed full time at the Follies, began submitting writings to them and still does from time to time, and in 2007 they decided to hire their first non-performing comedy writer.

Steven Baranowski came on as Head Writer for Esther's Follies in 2007. Although he briefly dreamed of being in the show, he never auditioned and is the only steady writer who has never been a performer in the show (Personal Interview). He found a posting on Craigslist.org, a national classifieds website, for a full-time writer, and decided to check out the show. At first he brought in seven songs that he wrote to the new musical director, Doug Ewart. He remarks that the first or second week he got lucky with the success of his first two parodies, "I Will Survive," and "School Musical." "I Will Survive" was a parody of Osama Bin Laden. The song ran weekly until Bin Laden's death in 2011 (Personal Interview). "School Musical," based on the songs of *Grease*, pokes fun of teenagers and is still used in the show today. He notes: "Because of those two parodies, I was put on a stipend, which is a point that most people that write for the show don't get to. At that point I was *the* writer for the show" (Personal Interview).

For the first three years Baranowski was paid cash in an envelope, a system of pay that seemed an archaic practice from the 1970s and '80s. Upon Baranowski's arrival, Sedwick was opening their new restaurant, Patsy's, and was not always available. This made his job very challenging. He elaborates: "It was a difficult time to join the show. Shannon was chin deep in opening Patsy's Restaurant and just wasn't around, so I wasn't getting a ton of direction. Even another writer, Phil Bentley, came on and quit because we could not figure out what they wanted in the show. I was skating the edge" (Personal Interview).

Once Patsy's opened and Sedwick returned, she started giving Baranowski detailed plans of what she wanted for the show. Soon he learned the formula she wanted. He describes: "Joke heavy and topical, but not wonky or geeky. You must know some issues, but not be [Jon] Stewart or [Stephen] Colbert deep. The show must be very physical and very broad, but not terribly sophisticated in certain ways. If [you have a] sophisticated [joke], you have to bring it to an unsophisticated level. You can't just make smart people and liberals laugh" (Personal Interview). For instance, he recently wrote a Medley song about Rick Santorum making fun of his sweater vest. In the song he parodies that all evangelicals are lining up behind Santorum. As this is sung, actors line up behind him and point at his sweater vest. On the second stanza the actor playing Santorum sings "Every Evangelical has some kinks" and rips off his clothes, exposing leather gear under his sweater vest. He remarks:

The song I used was "The Letter." You know, "my baby wrote me a letter." So I wrote, "My Sweater." With the chorus, "My underwear's made out of leather."

Even if you weren't paying attention or you have no idea who Rick Santorum is, it's going to get a big laugh when a guy rips off all of his clothes and is wearing leather underwear. People who don't speak English would laugh at it. Then you make some political points along the way so that the song has a reason to get to the point. Same thing with Mitt Romney. I am writing a song right now and the line is "Women gonna love my manly jog, Grecian formula in my hair, and Lord Above, when it's time to love, I put on my magic underwear." He rips his pants off and has glittery underwear on which parodies the Mormon magic underwear that we have heard so much about. (Personal Interview)

The "magic underwear" Baranowski is referring to is a facet of the Mormon faith and has become fodder for columnists and comedians nationwide. This certain under-garment that Mormons wear once they have completed their Endowment Ceremony, which is part of the journey of their faith, serves as a reminder to its wearer of a life dedicated to Christ.

Baranowski finally felt he was doing they wanted and needed. To study he watches a lot of politics, but he remarks that overeducating in politics would be pointless (Personal Interview). When writing for a character he feels for the emotional gist. He explains further what makes a character funny on stage: "Cheating on wives is funny. Lobbying is funny. You have to make it bodily. It's about people's bodies. That's what gets people to laugh. A lot of humor is proximity of bodies. If someone does a funny move fifteen feet from you, you laugh. I've learned to work with that. It's a strange thing" (Personal Interview).

In his description on what makes the show funny, Baranowski makes an intriguing remark about how the comedy of Esther's Follies would not work on television, a sentiment that was certainly not the consensus in previous years, and had nothing to do with the use of the giant window behind the stage:

This show wouldn't work on TV. A certain category of jokes which gets laughs here, a lot of big physical grabs, would come off as silly and crass on TV, but live they work like gangbusters. It would have to be a lot more like Jon Stewart or *SNL*, but wouldn't be what it is though. You would need very nuanced political figures, for one thing. Maybe if we did more character-based stuff, but the jokes would feel like the late night shows of Letterman or Leno. (Personal Interview)

Baranowski claims his jokes are always the ones that end up on the stage. He explains that he arrives at writer's meetings with a page of jokes and because of the sheer quantity alone, he believes, he always gets the joke that works and gets put in the show (Personal Interview). He also explains that he has no interest in comedy! He just happens to be funny and understands the comedic world: "I get my jokes because I am funny. I have no interest in comedy. To me, comedy is a way of understanding, of undercutting the world" (Personal Interview). Baranowski learned to make it work because he needed a job. He elaborates:

You know that something will come because something has to. You write because you have to. You don't have an option because your back is against the wall. You have to go in with the faith that there is an answer. There is a joke. And you realize that if you're fighting a good fight that you're doing better than

ninety- nine percent of what people could do. Even my bad writing is still either inventive, or at least dumb but in the right way. My missed attempts almost look like a final product, but it's like I built Hoover Dam, not painted the Mona Lisa.

(Personal Interview)

He describes it as “fairly painstaking work” and explains, “If Esther’s Follies folded tomorrow, I wouldn’t seek another comedy job” (Personal Interview). In his opinion, the actors at Disney World are more suitable for the show than regular comedians (Personal Interview). It seems that within only a few years the performance style of the show had changed immensely. Although Baranowski has no plans to leave the show as of yet, he feels he will probably stop before Sedwick and Shelton do. In his opinion the show will go on until Sedwick can no longer perform (Personal Interview). He markets himself as the “Most performed comedy writer in Austin.” Anyone working harder or more than him, he confirms, is living in Los Angeles (Personal Interview). He suggests, though, that he has learned exactly what they want and is now the model of an Esther’s Follies writer: “I think that if something happened to me, I am the one who invented what the Esther’s Follies writer should probably look like” (Personal Interview).

The year 2007 also brought Ted Meredith to the Follies stage. He was already an actor by trade and was performing Shakespeare’s *Richard III* with Austin Shakespeare. Another cast member, whose girlfriend had ties to the show, suggested he audition and contacted Sedwick for him. He auditioned for Sedwick, Anderson, and Ewart. For his audition he expanded on a blog post he had previously written in college at Southwestern University in Georgetown about *American Idol*, which he had tied to the rising global

problems: oil prices, Iran, etc. In his blog and audition, all of the anger surrounding those problems stemmed from people's outrage about Taylor Hicks winning *American Idol* (Personal Interview). He was frustrated during his audition when he read a four-person scene; the other people reading from the audience. So when he was asked on his next cold reading if he wanted to play John Edwards or Dick Cheney, he said "both." He expounds: "I felt it raised my game. I had never impersonated either of them, but I did! That pretty much sold them" (Personal Interview). Once done with the audition, as is common, he was not officially told he was hired, that he would need his own costumes, and salary was never discussed (Personal Interview). Under the impression he was cast he went to see Thursday's show. Within fifteen minutes he thought: "What am I getting myself into?" (Personal Interview). Although still not quite certain he was in the show, he showed up at Monday's writers meeting. According to Meredith, Sedwick handed him a stack of scripts and a tape of the show, and by Thursday he was on stage at the Pool (Personal Interview). He performed his first show with a one-hundred-and-two degree fever, and only made one mistake: coming on late for a song [which he blames on the show itself]. He explains: "Everything's too fast. Oh, and that five minute intermission, is actually about two and a half!" (Personal Interview).

Like Baranowski, Meredith noted that Sedwick was gone a lot when he first arrived. Unlike Baranowski, Meredith reveals that it actually made it easier for him to maneuver his way into the show. He explains that opening Patsy's gave Sedwick work that pulled her away from the overworking she was doing at the Follies. He expands on this: "She [Sedwick] works a lot. That is part of why Esther's Follies is successful. She

suffers from that a lot of times, though. She puts more work into Esther's Follies than she needs to and so opening Patsy's helped her spend less time at the office and thereby put the right amount of time in it [Esther's Follies]" (Personal Interview). Not only was it easier for Meredith to learn and grow in the beginning without Sedwick around as much, but he also comments on the cast's longevity from that point on, and insinuates that with Sedwick absent from rehearsals, more opportunities for stage time arose.

When Meredith first arrived at the Follies the stars of the show were Sedwick, Anderson, and Awn. In 2007, as in recent years previous, the show was divided into stars and everyone else. Though Shaun Wainwright-Branigan was not one of the main stars of the show, Meredith felt that as long as he modeled himself after him, he would keep his job. He admits that at first he thought the secret was to include Wainwright-Branigan in the sketches that he wrote, and so he always brought something to the table with a character written in for Wainwright-Branigan. As a writer he feels he shines most in *improving* a joke, instead of bringing in a fully fleshed-out sketch, and remarks that he really hits his stride in politics (Personal Interview). Political humor is by far the "joke" of the show today and Meredith explains how that is proven by the audience: "Cycle is we sell out every show during the run-up to a big election and then it [audience] tapers off after the election" (Personal Interview).

Meredith did not get a chance to sing a Medley song until he had been there for a year. His first year there he learned another secret: making himself useful, such as setting up magic props. This sink-or-swim technique kept him employed while not on stage. Now he feels as if he is only off stage long enough to change and go back onstage

(Personal Interview). Meredith also noticed upon joining the team, the difference in the treatment of male and female cast mates. He explains: “There are definite distinctions between a man and a woman in the show. It’s not that men benefit but women get the short end of stick. I am under less scrutiny because I am a guy” (Personal Interview).

Within the next few years Meredith watched the show become more of an ensemble piece of work: “Maybe it took about three years. I felt the show improved because there wasn’t any weak spots. Now the show is more of an ensemble. They started trusting people further down the cast list, and our sketch work and ensemble work is much better now” (Personal Interview). At the same time that he felt the group became more congealed, he noticed a part of him was suffering:

I began to struggle with the fact that my sense of humor and what works at Esther’s Follies do not line up one hundred percent of the time. It stressed me a little. I came from theatrical shows and working with different casts, and “Writer-Comedy Ted” was thriving, but “Actor Ted” was bummed about it. This spoon-fed comedy. Then, Tom Booker came into town. He runs the Institution Theatre and started teaching improv out of the Velveeta Room and he invited the Esther’s Follies cast to take classes. Now I teach for him. Doing improv helps me because I get to do what *I* think is funny. Makes Esther’s not feel like I am selling out! I am so spoiled. In Austin, if you can get forty people to a show you’re doing good. So, in the end, selling out is pretty good. (Personal Interview)

Meredith goes on to explain that working as an actor at Esther’s Follies is both a blessing and a curse. On one hand you are a working actor, but on the other, you are unable to do



other theatre because you must remain committed to the schedule at the Follies. Also, he, like others, remarks on the fear that seems to be surrounding Sedwick and Shelton over the success: “Nowadays I think they are afraid of their own success. That’s why every sketch is two minutes long and the intermission is three minutes long. They are worried that if one two-minute sketch is not funny enough, then people won’t come” (Personal Interview). This is just another example of how the pace of the show has changed over the years.

For Meredith, he rests in the belief that as long as there is a topic in the political realm, he will remain employed. He now feels respected and paid enough to consider himself an asset. He continues: “I am now making what I was at Sony. I feel respected there. I feel too that you can almost judge how much new stuff is in the show based on how much I am in the show! And that feels good” (Personal Interview).

On New Years Eve, 2010-2011, Kerry Awn finally left the show. He examines his final months there: “I was making less and less money. After a couple of pay cuts I thought, ‘I’m not gonna do this much more. I’ve served my time.’ I’ve never regretted that. I could finally breathe. I was almost getting physically ill the last couple of years going down there. I just couldn’t even drag my body down there, and it wasn’t anybody’s fault but my own” (Personal Interview). He confesses that he now realizes that he stayed in the show for so long out of fear that he would not be able to make a living doing anything else (Personal Interview). He told himself that when his father passed away, he would quit the show because of the financial support the life insurance would provide him. He kept his word to himself and after his father’s passing, gave Shelton and

Sedwick a month's notice (Personal Interview). Once out of the show, though, he rediscovered painting and found that he was able to survive on that and stand-up comedy alone. Awn says now he has found a new zest for life and "can't wait to wake up in the morning" (Personal Interview). Though undoubtably one of Esther's biggest stars, who easily shifted as the show did over the years, he remarks that he never wanted to be an actor in the first place (Personal Interview). As it turned out, he was a genius at comic timing and has the Follies to thank for his popularity. He is proof in the ability of Esther's Follies to create a local legend. Wainwright-Branigan comments on Kerry Awn: "One of the most effortlessly funny people I've ever met. Impossible to look at onstage [or would break character laughing]. He is an icon. This old hippy that rides the line between Good Ol' Texas Boy, and a comic" (Personal Interview).

One of its old comedic heavyweights, Colom Keating, made a recent visit to the show. To Keating, the show is now the opposite of what they were doing in the early 1990s, yet it is still important to him. He describes:

When I saw the show during a visit about three years ago I could barely recognize it. It was all family "G" rated material sandwiched between Ray Anderson bits. Ray and I are great friends and I love him dearly but I feel they all became too comfortable with their paychecks. The biting political commentary and adult humor is all but gone. But you know what's weird? Here it is, going on 19 years since I left and I STILL have dreams that I'm on stage and cannot remember my lines. I'm standing there with Shannon glaring at me and there is only silence from

the audience. Everyone on stage is looking at me to deliver and I can't. (Personal Interview)

In September 2011, Tamara Beland also returned to the Follies. Beland came not to see the show, but to perform with the group again. At the start of the second act (more than likely strategically placed by Shelton at a time when the audience members were still thinking they were at intermission), she performed her Big Mama Red character. She winces in thinking back at Sedwick's frustration during a recent rehearsal and she remarks that the way Sedwick deals with people has not changed; it would bother her if she were in the show nowadays, as an older and more established performer (Personal Interview). Big Mama Red is a lot like Chi Chi LaBamba in that she is bawdy, sexual, oversized, and is an older woman joking about her breasts, her age and her sex life. She opens with: "Hi Y'all. I'm Big Mama Red. I'm red-headed, left-handed, an only child, and a Pisces, which means none of y'all are going to date me!" For as similar as the two characters are, and as much attention both acts draw to the female body, the just-warmer-than-lukewarm reaction from Beland's portrayal seems more of a reflection of how the audience has changed in the last years. That is not to say that perhaps LaBamba was not funnier, because Wiley very well may have been, but perhaps this is a glimpse of how much more conservative the audience has grown in the last ten to fifteen years.

Cindy Wood comments that the show is almost all political humor now (Personal Interview). In a recent article for the *Austin American-Statesman*, titled "Political Folly, Funny Fodder," Nancy Flores confirms the sentiment made by Wood. Flores writes: "Elections provide [a] 'constant stream of material' to keep Esther's Follies' writers,

actors busy” (Flores E1). She interviews the cast on the use of topical humor: “‘The trick is to make it funny,’ said cast member Billy Brooks. . . . Brooks plays Obama as both the Old Spice guy and a transvestite, among other characters. ‘You’d rather see someone who doesn’t sound anything like Bush at all rather than a bad impression for 15 minutes’” (E4). She continues: “The Esther’s writing crew expects weeks of writing and constant rewriting in preparation for a debate parody between the two presidential candidates...” (E4).

Austin Jernigan also notes on how the show has changed over the years. Though he is nostalgic for the 1990s when he feels the show was at its funniest, he remarks that the tightness and speed of today’s show is better than when the show was in its infancy:

I went to one of the earliest shows around 1978 and didn't like it much. The production values were low and the humor was cheap. We left at intermission. I'm probably partially to blame for the short intermission, because it goes back to trying to keep the audience. When Esther's started, it was much more experimental and risque. Over the years, it became more professional and more mainstream. One aspect they really worked on at the previous venue was keeping it snappy from bit to bit. Some people think the show was best in 1981. It was arguably best before Margaret Wiley died in 1999. Ray Anderson is the major attraction in the show today. The window continues to make the show magical. I think the best show is the one that you see next time you go. (Personal Interview)

Musically, the show is also very different. Although the piano is still its main instrument, the show’s use of computerized sounds and recordings present a different

atmosphere. Doug Ewart, Esther's musical director since 2005, explains how today's show differs musically:

Shelton and Sedwick want the show's music to be as powerful as the music that plays during the magic shows, pop songs that I play from my laptop. So just a classical piano won't do. I use two digital pianos and two computers. Someone brings in a song [lyrics] and we sit down at the piano and figure out what key it needs to go into and so on. We record background harmonies to back up certain pieces. So we make an arrangement and also record vocals to help everyone out on stage because they are so rushed sometimes getting from piece to piece. I mix it all and add percussions too. Then I play the piano live while the track is playing. (Personal Interview)

Certainly the use of background harmonies and recorded vocals is much different. It seems to give the actors a little break on stage in case, for instance, one forgets his lines. This may be an example of the softness of the show nowadays. This may be an example of progression. Nevertheless it must be a different feeling to know as you transition from one quick song to the next, forgetting the lines to your song can be the last thing on your mind.

Before moving to Texas, Ewart worked as the Musical Director for The Second City's touring group. According to Ewart the reasons for the success of The Second City is very different than that of Esther's Follies (Personal Interview). Ewart explains that the fact that The Second City has had an immensely successful school for years, never keeps a sketch in longer than six months, and that very early on in the beginning a number of

people moved on to big things has made this staple comedy show legitimately successful. He remarks that Esther's success lies in its longevity but mostly the fact that old sketches are always in the show. Without a school and famous practitioners it is certainly not as strongly recognized as *The Second City*. It is curious, then, given the passed-over opportunities, if it ever could have been. Ewart goes on to explain that *Esther's Follies* is jokey; a true Vaudevillian act with costumes and wigs, whereas *The Second City* is relationship based comedy without costumes, set, or choreography (Personal Interview). Ewart states boldly that *Esther's Follies* is a more difficult show because writers simply do not write this style of comedy, once so prevalent in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, anymore (Personal Interview). He details: "Here [*Esther's Follies*] it's about costumes and stuff. I love that it's a traditional style of theatre that isn't done anymore. Hard to find writers for. Writers have to alter their style. So early Twentieth century. Writers don't write like that anymore. It is so stylized but with updated material. Feels like 1900s kind of show, which is cool. Big, loud, fast, funny. That is so missing in live productions nowadays" (Personal Interview). Another reason Ewart gives for the *Follies* being more difficult than *The Second City* is that while both shows have about three-second scene changes, *Esther's Follies* adds on costumes, wigs, and extensive props (Personal Interview).

In April 2012, the show will celebrate its thirty-fifth year in production. The show of today is almost unrecognizable to the show thirty-five years ago. The material is less edgy and more suitable for popular culture and a wide age range. The cast that was once twenty-six members is now no more than twelve and the "anything goes" attitude

has been replaced with “This is exactly what goes...in or out.” While old staples such as Patsy Cline, Robot, and Maxi Crafts are still being played, new sketches and songs that seem to lean more towards current events and politics fill the Pool nowadays. With a new style of music, the show is allowed to move at an even faster pace with pre-recorded vocals as back-up to the songs. Also adding to the excitement of the show, musically, is the ability to bring percussions and spot-on harmonies. The show that was never supposed to make it a year (according to most of the founding members) is still incredibly strong thirty-five years later and shows no sign of stopping. Inevitably, though, it will have to end, begging the questions: when, how, and why?

## CONCLUSION

For thirty-five years Esther's Follies has made people laugh with their unique blend of comedy, music, and magic mixed in with a local flair. The Follies that began as a weekly experimental extravaganza of theatre, free of restrictions and charge, is now a tightly knit show, with jokes specifically timed and perfectly placed, that charges twenty dollars a ticket, five shows a week. While the founding members did not expect the show to survive for even a year, it consistently sells out almost every weekend. Though the show has undergone many changes over the years, Shannon Sedwick explains one element that is continually constant: "Our philosophy has always been the same: to create, make people laugh, and be happy" (Personal Interview). The Follies rejected national attention to remain an Austin staple. For some, this move was more about Shelton and Sedwick not wanting to release control. Nevertheless the show has remained successful. Sedwick speculates on the reasons for their success:

We never talk down to an audience. They are always allowed in on the joke. And comedy is therapy. Also, Michael is a hard task master. He won't just put anything up. We evolve with our audience too. As the audience has gotten older and more mainstream, we have had to take out the bad words. We know kids and tourists are in the audience. We also maintain a show that the audience expects to see, so



it's gotten harder and harder to write for. In the beginning anything made them laugh. [Being] cutting edge and mainstream is difficult. We have a good business sense too and that just comes from doing it. We [Shelton and Sedwick] are a good blend of practicality and creativity. We work off each other pretty well. (Personal Interview)

A few other cast members have weighed in on what makes the show so successful. Tamara Beland cites its topical material, location, word of mouth, and most of all, Ray Anderson. She elaborates on Anderson: "Ray is brilliant because he has been doing the same jokes for twenty years and it's never stale, but fresh every time. Many people have seen it but it is still so fresh. He's the whole package" (Personal Interview).

According to Anderson, it is Sedwick's dedication and Shelton's eye for talent that makes the show so successful. He explains:

A large part of the success of the show is Michael and Shannon. Any business needs someone willing to be here twenty-four-seven and making it their priority in life. That's their life. It's most important to them. Not saying other people's contributions have not made it successful. In the end, though, they are the ones that keep the play house going. You gotta have someone willing to do that. It's very difficult. I know I don't want to do that or think about a place twenty-four-seven and worries and headaches and drama. It has been thirty-five years of constant stress and getting the door open. Shannon is here by nine a.m. or will call me late at night with an idea. Always thinking about it. Also Esther's is full of talented people and always has been, due to Michael. He is

good at finding talented people. It's very rare that we get a bad apple that causes havoc. We all pretty much get along in the cast and stay here for years and years.

Shelton has good sense of seeing talent in people. (Personal Interview)

The sentiment that Shelton has a great eye for spotting talent is shared by nearly all of those who have crossed the Follies stage. It seems it is Shelton who decides who and what goes in the show, though no one remarks at his being around for their audition, myself included. It is during the show that Shelton makes his decisions on who and what is working, but also, it is Shelton who has always spotted talent outside of the theatre. Also, it is Shelton who has always attracted the right people, not just the performers for the show, but investors, networks, and all people who assist in growing his multiple business ventures. Lyova Rosanoff remarks that, "Michael is always in the right spot at the right time" (Personal Interview). Kerry Awn agrees: "Shelton always attracts the right people," then gives a tongue-in-cheek, remark that is laden with sarcasm: "I mean, aside from him being a great manager" (Personal Interview).

Some cast members feel the success of the Follies lies in the show itself. Jerome Schooler remarks:

It's the longevity of the show. They're an institution now. People know exactly what to expect. You know like McDonald's. It's a good, quick night of entertainment. The five-minute intermission is genius. As an audience member I know that the show is going to be great. I know I can bring family members or friends and I know they are going to laugh and I know I will be looked at as, "Wow what a fun night!" By not changing, it keeps people wanting more. It

shouldn't make sense, but it does. And that was created from years and years of doing it. (Personal Interview)

Austin Jernigan shares that sentiment:

Esther's Follies is a miracle. A live comedy show is not supposed to survive for a year. For nearly thirty-five years people have gone to the show, laughed their troubles away, and left the theater a little bit happier. Esther's makes the world just that much better. The window is what made Esther's Follies successful from the beginning. It was the backdrop in which anything could happen from the audience's perspective. People on the street saw crazy stuff happening and they wanted to see that show. The window was a stroke of genius. We'll probably never know whose idea that was. (Personal Interview)

Shaun Wainwright-Branigan was recently interviewed for the *Austin American-Statesman*. In his interview he explains what makes the show work and he also remarks on how the show is part of the experience of living in Austin: "I think the Esther's experience is really part of Austin's core; it's old Austin. It's not highbrow, but not dumb. We all share this; it's part of our heritage. I'm trying to think of something comparable in another city, and I really can't. I can't think of another theater group that is so ingrained in that city's personality" (Flores E4).

The fact that the show has been so successful for so long leaves one wondering how long all this success will last. What would be the deciding factor to the show's end? What would happen if Anderson decided to move on to other ventures? Is it possible someone would take over the reins if Shelton and Sedwick were to retire? What would

make them retire? Most past and present cast members feel that if Shelton and Sedwick were to retire, the show would end completely (Personal Interviews). Meredith suggests that they would not trust anyone else to have control of something that has been in their name for so long (Personal Interview). Shelton himself seemed to give no suggestion as to who would run the show if he, Sedwick, or Anderson were to retire. He details: “It feels like as soon as Shannon or Ray stops doing it, it would all end. We would like to do it longer, forever, but on the other hand we would like to have freedom. Weekends. Travel. I guess we will do it until it’s no longer practical” (Personal Interview).

Esther’s Follies began in 1977 and became the little show that could. Though it has undergone changes in management, style, theme, and personnel, it continues to be a beloved part of the Austin personality, and has grown to be a show so successful, that it would only end if the owners themselves decided to walk away. Even under the circumstances of the deaths of extremely successful cast members, devastating disasters such as a theatre fire, September Eleventh and Hurricane Katrina, and the rejection of national comedy networks to expand, the show has lost none of its appeal. Its unique blend of music, magic, and comedy, produces a nostalgic style of theatre and keeps an audience of three hundred people, laughing five times a week, every single week. The show at Esther’s Pool that seemed it would sink within a year has kept its talent swimming in success, and provides a place where audiences can dive in, float along, and drown themselves in laughter.

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## **VITA**

Jamie Renee Suire was born in Beaumont, Texas on March 9, 1980, the daughter of James and Carmaleen Suire. As a young child she learned her mother was dying of cancer and found that theatre was a way she could express herself and also envelope herself in another world at the same time. She spent many years as an actress, five years as a professional actress, and then returned to school to fulfill a new dream: teaching. She completed her undergraduate study at Texas State University-San Marcos in San Marcos, Texas, receiving her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Theatre in May, 2010. Ms. Suire began graduate studies in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Texas State in August, 2010 and with this, completed her Master of Arts degree with an emphasis in Theatre History and Dramatic Criticism and a cognate in Directing.

Permanent Address: 9235 Shepherd  
Beaumont, Texas 77707

This thesis was typed by Jamie Renee Suire.

