



Francis "Frank" Hilgenberg

February 3, 1949 - August 10, 2020

Frank Hilgenberg gave one of the most robust — and attention-getting — pre-show speeches in Central Florida when he was running Theatre Downtown with his wife, Francine.

“How many of you are here for the first time?” he would bellow. And then to those who raised their hands: “Well, where the hell have you been?”

For decades, Hilgenberg was at the forefront of the Central Florida theater scene — acting, directing, producing, mentoring young performers and keeping the scrappy Theatre Downtown afloat. He was half of “the original power couple of Orlando theater, who paved the way for everyone who is doing work in this town,” said producer Paul Castañeda.

Frank Hilgenberg died Monday [August 10, 2020] after a long illness. He was 71. Though many called him “Uncle Frank,” “he was the father of Orlando theater,” said longtime friend Peg O’Keef.

“This city can never thank you enough for all you gave to the community,” said Rob Del Medico, who acted at Theatre Downtown during its 25-year run at the corner of Princeton Street and Orange Avenue.

Like Castañeda, Del Medico was speaking as part of a video made for the

Hilgenbergs this summer by Jamie Cline, another performer who cut his teeth at the storied community theater, which shut in 2015 when it lost its lease.

Frank and Fran Hilgenberg, pictured onstage at Theatre Downtown, on Wednesday, Aug 1, 2007.

“I don’t know that I would be fighting my way through L.A. if it hadn’t been for the opportunities to work with him that Theatre Downtown afforded me,” said Cline, citing the “freedom to play” and “sense of family and safety” created by Hilgenberg. In his growth as an actor, Cline said, “my journey with Theatre Downtown was vital.”

If in his later years, Hilgenberg served as a mentor and patriarch to the Orlando theater community, his Central Florida beginnings were a bit edgier.

“Back then, we all smoked cigarettes and were drinkers and would sit up late at night talking about elevated topics,” remembered O’Keef, a veteran actor and director. “It was very, very experimental, and a lot of the ‘raise hell and make art’ energy swirled through all of us, especially Frank.”

O’Keef met the Hilgenbergs in 1985 when they all were involved with Tropical Theatre, located in the basement of a downtown warehouse.

Frank Hilgenberg arrived in Central Florida in 1982 with plenty of experimental-theater street cred. Born in Kaukauna, Wisc., he became involved with a University of Wisconsin theater group making statements against the Vietnam War. He also starred in an infamous university production of “Peter Pan,” involving nudity, that was shut down by the mayor.

Frank Hilgenberg, right, stands outside Theatre Downtown with board president Aaron Babcock in 2007.

After that, Hilgenberg left school and helped start Broom Street Theatre in Madison before joining the Organic Theater in Chicago — described by a critic as “essentially a hippie group.”

He later practiced yoga in Boulder, Colo., moved to Fort Lauderdale to live on a boat and served as stage manager for a Chicago mime theater. Eventually he returned to Madison and met Fran; they married Aug. 29, 1981, after “living in sin for seven years,” as she puts it.

By 1982 he was burnt out on auditioning and came to Orlando for a sales job. But within a couple of years, he was acting again at the Tropical.

Frank and Fran Hilgenberg, the couple who run Theatre Downtown, pictured in 2002.

“We had a blast ... until the roof caved in,” O’Keef recalled. A literal roof collapse led to the end of the theater, but the Hilgenbergs, O’Keef and others regrouped and created Theatre Downtown, which opened in 1989.

The building needed work: Friend Margaret Nolan remembered Hilgenberg knocking out walls, cleaning toilets, arguing with lawyers about onstage nudity and rigging up very basic air conditioning — a fan blowing over ice cubes.

But even if the building wasn’t first-rate, the art set its sights high. Hilgenberg staged hundreds of shows at the theater, with an affinity for playwright Tennessee Williams and romantic writer Edgar Allan Poe.

“His direction was always direct, thoughtful, sometimes met with disagreement but always included love,” said Rick Sotis, a friend and collaborator for nearly

30 years.

Over time, musicals and more mainstream fare joined the theater's edgier material — and a unique communal vibe developed.

"It was still a theater about art, but also about a family of caring, collaborative artists," O'Keef said. "That was because of Frank and Fran."

A production of "A Christmas Carol" became a holiday ritual for generations of Central Floridians. O'Keef would laugh as Hilgenberg would go into curmudgeon mode with the young cast of carolers.

"You'd see Frank corralling these adorable children to sing these sweet songs: 'All right, stand here! Sing loud!'" she said, mimicking his gruff shout. But the bluster was mostly an act. "He was never as bad a man as he wanted other people to think he was," she said.

Indeed, he was just as prone to offering support to young performers, often over drinks at the theater bar.

"All the connections I made in theater in Orlando started with you guys," said actor Valensky Sylvain in the tribute video.

But Hilgenberg never truly lost his edge.

"We would have knock-down, drag-out fights and still love each other," said longtime collaborator John DiDonna. "We'd hug it out and drink Jameson's at the bar." One particularly memorable moment: Hilgenberg surprised DiDonna with an unwanted birthday party. When DiDonna walked out, "he chased me down the street and carried me back in."

And Hilgenberg remained direct: Another standard part of his preshow speeches was a strongly worded warning to turn off cell phones and not text during the show. "That's just rude," he would snap with a scowl.

"He was textured. He had a great appreciation for fine things, but he could also be deliciously profane yet exquisitely kind," O'Keef said. "The one thing he was always was truthful."

Frank (holding microphone) and Fran Hilgenberg (to his left), who ran Theatre Downtown, joined cast and crew for a curtain call at "Encore," the theater's final public show, in December 2014. (Matthew J. Palm)

The eighth of 10 children, Hilgenberg is survived by two sisters and three brothers, as well as Fran.

"It was a package deal," O'Keef said of the couple. "That relationship was built in concrete."

After Theatre Downtown lost its space, Hilgenberg staged shows at the Orlando Fringe Festival and revived his classic "Christmas Carol" at the Central Florida Community Arts theater.

But his heart always remained in the quirky venue on the corner of Orange and Princeton.

"I'm trying to keep from crying when people walk in because they're coming in with tears streaming down their face," he told the Sentinel for a 2015 article on the theater's closing. "That place was a special, magical place."

Arrangements are pending at this time. The family of Frank Hilgenberg invites you to leave a message of condolence on the Tribute Wall created in his

memory.

To view the full article and video as published in the Orlando Sentinel please visit:

https://www.orlandosentinel.com/entertainment/arts-and-theater/os-et-frank-hilgenberg-theatre-downtown-obituary-20200812-6an66byhInd3vlbjpizwgzhqoe-story.html?fbclid=IwAR212ws97_i2c5jjhqkqyrIL-iVBDY79IAeL-Msz_5wRDGSuQ_fomUfDeal

Tribute Wall

PW

“ I offer my condolences. Frank was a great showman and brought joy to me and thousands of others through his work. I was privileged to know him and he will truly be missed.
Patrick Westerfield

Patrick Westerfield - August 15, 2020 at 01:53 PM



“ 4 files added to the album *Frank Hilgenberg*



DeGusipe Funeral Home & Crematory - August 13, 2020 at 01:47 PM