

SATURDAY, May 28, 1994

The Post and Courier

*High Profile*

# STYLE





Movie Time Clock	7-E
Comics	8,9-E
Television	10-E

# Milton Rhodes

## Spoletto boss knows about fresh starts

■ **BACK HOME:** Plight of homeless man on streets of New York stirred a sense of gratitude within him.

By **DOTTIE ASHLEY**

Of The Post and Courier staff

For three years, a man lived in a box at Fifth Avenue and East 53rd Street, just outside Milton Rhodes' office at the American Council for the Arts in New York City.

As he passed the man each day, Rhodes felt compelled to do something about his plight.

"His name was Robert Green and both his arms had been broken when he was a teen-ager, so that he found it hard to use his hands in order to hold a job, and on top of that he had a drug and alcohol problem," recalls Rhodes. "I couldn't stand the thought of him sleeping outside during freezing weather.

"So I got to know him, and learned so much from Robert and why people are on the street. I found out that he was from Augusta, Ga., and had some family there, and so I tried to get him to go back there, but he wouldn't."

Last December, Rhodes moved to Charleston as he assumed the position of general manager of Spoletto Festival USA, a job he was eager to fill not only because of his passion for the arts, but also because it was a way to come home.

And, although the arts take top priority in Rhodes' life, he counts as his proudest personal achievement his adoption of this homeless man.

"I seriously thought about bringing Robert with us when we came here," says Rhodes. "But my wife didn't think it would be a great idea, and of course, she was right about that.

"However, Robert Green taught quite a lesson to a guy with a middle-class upbringing. Many of us have so much to be thankful for.

"And for me, it's great to be back home and to get back to my roots," adds the North Charleston native, who left behind the nationally visible American Council for the Arts position, which included such sought-after perks as dinner at the White House.

Recalling such an occasion last fall honoring the National Medal of Arts winners, Rhodes says, "It was really interesting to see how President Clinton truly related to the performers there, as he talked about meeting Ray Charles for the first time in 1967, and how this affected his life."

Rhodes assumed the super-Herculean task of saving the 17-year-old Spoletto Festival during a year when it seemed near the brink of extinction, partly caused by the downturn in the economy and the closing of the Naval Base, combined with the resignation last October of festival founder and artistic director Gian Carlo Menotti,

See RHODES, Page 3-E

Milton Rhodes moved to Charleston last December when he became general manager of Spoletto Festival USA.



# RHODES

from Page 1-E

leaving the festival \$1 million in debt.

Rhodes makes it clear that he has no aspirations to fill the shoes of the brilliant, enigmatic Menotti.

"I'm a behind-the-scenes guy who pushes the artists to the forefront, and I don't like to promote myself."

## Starting over

The Rhodes family traces a memorable South Carolina history, having come to this country in the early 1700s, landing in the Beaufort area. Rhodes' great-great-grandfather George Rhodes signed the Ordinance of Secession in 1860, which stated the withdrawal of 11 Southern states from the federal Union, thus precipitating the Civil War.

"Because my great-great-grandfather's name was on the order of secession, when Gen. Sherman came through, he found his house and destroyed it, took the silver and absolutely everything," says Rhodes. "The family was virtually wiped out and had to start over."

And, Rhodes, himself, is learning about starting over at the age of 49.

After leaving the Lowcountry to go Upstate to college in 1963, he went on to North Carolina, ultimately winding up in the Big Apple. During the course of almost nine years at the American Council of the Arts, he garnered the respect of such hard-hitting businessmen as Gene Dorsey, the former chairman of the Gannett Foundation and chairman of the ACA for a decade.

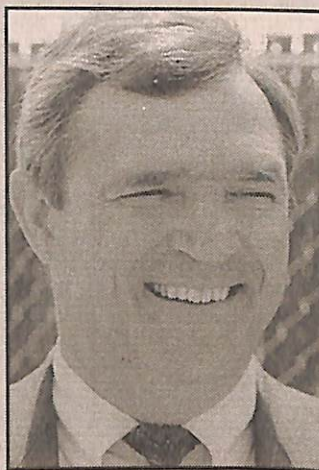
"I got to know Milton quite well at the ACA, and worked with him on a variety of other projects," says Dorsey in a telephone conversation from his retirement home in Long Boat Key, Fla. "I found he's a person who is compassionate, but at the same time pragmatic. He sets goals, is well-organized and can make the hard decisions. "I have done a great deal of work with nonprofit groups all over the nation, and I would rate Milton as one of the outstanding nonprofit organization leaders in the country today."

As a teen-ager, Rhodes showed he could be tough and resilient in sports, a characteristic he has used in other arenas of his life. After winning 11 letters in three sports — football, basketball and track — at North Charleston High School, he won a football scholarship to Wofford College.

He carries this determination with him as he spends his days, and many of his nights, convincing individuals and corporations to contribute money to support music, dance, theater and the visual arts.

"I believe the arts, more than

# HIGH PROFILE



## Milton Rhodes

■ **Born:** April 7, 1945, Great Falls, Mont. (his father was in the Army Air Corps); grew up in North Charleston.

■ **Occupation:** General manager of Spoleto Festival USA.

■ **Education:** Graduate of North Charleston High School, 1963; Wofford College, B.A. in English, 1967; New York University, MFA in theater management, 1969; Harvard University Summer Institute in Arts Administration.

■ **Favorite saying:** Turn the other cheek.

■ **Family:** Parents, Dr. and Mrs. T.M. Rhodes of North Charleston; wife, Mattie; three sons, Milt, 23, Ben, 18, and Addrian, 13.

■ **Mentors:** Felder Cook, my football and basketball coach in high school; Dorothy White, my student council adviser and English teacher.

■ **Pet Peeve:** Racism.

■ **Favorite book:** "The Prince of Tides," by Pat Conroy.

■ **Favorite people:** My family.

second grade, he insisted that I start taking piano lessons.

"At the time, I didn't want to, but then I got interested in music and began to play the trumpet in the junior high school band and to sing tenor in the school glee club."

In high school, Rhodes was president of the Charleston County Student Council Association. Eleanor Kline, one of the advisers of that group, remembers Rhodes as an extremely responsible student leader.

Mrs. Kline recalls with a chuckle one day when she and her husband were picking up their pet boxer at the animal hospital, which had upgraded its facility to include piped-in music in the recovery room.

"My husband mentioned that the place should be called The Bow-Wow Hilton," she says. "And, the next thing we knew, there was Milton out front painting a sign that said 'The Bow-Wow Hilton!'"

Rhodes says the sign is still there, even though his father has sold the business.

"I point it out as an example of my early artwork," he jokes.

Rhodes' being able to laugh at himself is one of the qualities that Columbia attorney Jeter Rhodes remembers about the youth he

manager of the New York Philharmonic, recalls in a telephone conversation from his Spartanburg home that Rhodes was such an outstanding student leader at Wofford that Dr. Charles Marsh, then president of the college, called to ask Moseley to give Rhodes some kind of job in 1967.

"We created a job for Milton and he didn't disappoint us," says Moseley. "He was wonderful. He did everything we asked, and he learned all about the workings of a large music organization."

During his two years in New York, Rhodes served as chauffeur for conductors, wore a tuxedo while he worked in the box office and attended Philharmonic board meetings. As part of his degree requirement at NYU, he also assisted in various capacities backstage at off-Broadway and Broadway shows.

"As graduate students, we were farmed out to learn firsthand the ropes of running a theatrical production," says Rhodes. "I saw 90 Broadway shows in two years, and my most memorable time was seeing the opening, in 1968, of 'Hair.' Seeing this changed my life. I couldn't believe a Broadway show was speaking to my generation and

meant to train me for what I'm going through now.

"Certainly it was hard, because I was in foreign territory and, as a Southerner, I spoke a different language. Mattie was supportive, even though she had a tough time and wanted to go back to North Carolina at one point.

"However, we became very active in the little town where we lived, Maplewood, N.J., an hour and 15 minutes from New York," he says, adding that he served as soccer coach for a winning team that traveled the state.

Rhodes counts as his greatest challenge at the ACA getting the diverse groups within the arts to cooperate to achieve a common goal.

"Through sheer patience and determination, I tracked down all 117 national arts organizations in the country, from Actors Equity to the American Museum Association, to convince them to make arts in education a top priority for all."

## Right at home

Rhodes has kept the positive aspects of what he has accomplished in the forefront of his mind through the past hectic five months of his and Mattie's move here with their



anything else, are the best means for caring about each other and appreciating other cultures, because the arts enhance the quality of life for both those who are artists and for those who are entertained by art," he says.

Indeed, during the 1993 convention of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies last November, Rhodes made his case, along with National Endowment for the Arts chairwoman Jane Alexander, about the need for arts education in the schools and how government money is much better spent deterring crime by establishing one arts center in an inner-city community, rather than by hiring 10 new policemen for the same area.

## Arts and sports

The son of Dr. and Mrs. T.M. Rhodes of North Charleston, Rhodes and his brother, Tally, and two sisters, Betsy and Frankie, lived for several years next door to the animal hospital owned by his father, who was a veterinarian.

"I decided I didn't want to be a veterinarian on the day a lady brought a skunk to the animal hospital and the smell from the skunk got over into our house," recalls Rhodes. "It took weeks for that awful odor to get out. Also, I didn't like holding the puppies while their tails were cut off," he says with a grimace.

He came by his love of the arts and sports from his father, who recently served as chairman of the advisory committee to construct the North Charleston Coliseum. He was also instrumental in organizing the North Charleston Arts Council, of which he is chairman. The Rhodes Arts Center, which opened this month in North Charleston, was named for his father.

"My dad is an example of someone who combined the love of sports with the love of the arts, because when he was a student at Clemson he excelled in sports, as well as played in the band," says Rhodes. "And so, when I was in the

youngest son, Addrian, age 13.

"Milton and I were more like brothers than cousins," he says. "I spent lots of time at his house because my father had died when I was 9 and Milton's dad became like my second father."

Although Milton Rhodes was constantly in the spotlight, whether from his student council work, his sports or his singing, he never suffered from a swelled head, his cousin says.

"Milton always kept his feet on the ground."

While at Wofford, Rhodes found he loved to be in musicals staged by nearby Converse College, which he frequently visited.

"ROTC at Wofford meant Run Over To Converse," he says, smiling at the memory.

"After changing majors five times, I settled on English because it was all Wofford had at the time that was remotely related to the arts."

During college, Rhodes used his trained, tenor voice to sing in a Methodist church choir in Spartanburg and was paid \$10 per Sunday. At one point during his college career he held five jobs.

"After my junior year, John Richards McCree, my voice teacher, invited me to go to the Brevard Music Center, where I sang in operas and musicals and even danced on stage."

His experiences in the theater at Converse and during summers at Brevard Music Center had a positive effect, and Rhodes realized he had a passion for arts management. Also, it was at Brevard that he met his wife, Mattie Menefee, a flutist and a graduate of the North Carolina School of the Arts.

They were married in 1967 and moved to New York so that Rhodes could pursue a master's degree in arts management at New York University. To help pay his way, he worked for two years at the New York Philharmonic, while she worked as a church secretary.

Carlos Moseley, retired general

our concerns."

## South and North

The Rhodes moved in 1969 to North Carolina, where he was business manager for the Winston-Salem Symphony for a year, before entering the Army, where he worked as a finance officer.

In 1971, after his release from the Army, Rhodes returned to Winston-Salem to be executive director of the Winston-Salem Arts Council for 14 years, bringing the arts to the forefront of the business community.

He was credited for his leadership in the successful \$8 million New Dimensions Campaign for building a new downtown arts center and a renovated little theater.

"Milton definitely placed his imprint permanently on Winston-Salem in a way that went even beyond his work with the arts council, which got fully under way when he came here," says L.M. Baker, CEO of Wachovia Bank, in a telephone conversation from his Winston-Salem office.

Residing among the leafy lawns of Winston-Salem seemed ideal for a family with three sons. However, in 1985, Rhodes rose to a challenge to change jobs and head north to become president and CEO of the American Council for the Arts.

"When I took over, it was exactly like Spoleto," says Rhodes, who had served as a consultant for the organization for several years previously.

"I took the job in New York for several reasons," he says. "I had five corporate leaders in NYC, including ones with AT&T and Exxon, who said to me: 'You have got to come to New York full time, because we don't have the data or the arguments to keep this afloat.'"

"The arts were part of the cutting in \$31 billion worth of domestic programs under the Reagan administration. The ACA was mainly financially busted when I got there, and so I had quite a challenge facing me. I think that experience was

Their oldest son, Milton, 23, a graduate of the College of Charleston, is married and lives in upstate New York; the middle child, Ben, 18, is a freshmen at Clemson University.

"Mattie did all the work of selling our house in New Jersey, and she has had to shoulder a lot of the responsibility of our moving," Rhodes says.

Taking some time from unpacking, Mattie Rhodes speaks with enthusiasm about becoming a permanent resident of the Lowcountry.

"I really have always enjoyed visiting Milton's parents here through the years, and now I'm working to feel really at home," says Mrs. Rhodes, who taught flute at a private girls school in New Jersey before their move here.

"Believe me, I've been too busy to practice my flute much, but I would like to play for some events later on."

Rhodes has little doubt that he made the right decision to return to South Carolina.

"When I took this job, I knew financially what shape the Spoleto Festival was in, but I didn't know how the foot bone was connected to ankle bone and the ankle bone was connected to the leg bone. I didn't know how everything was intertwined with politics, and the intricate way that people are connected. Winston-Salem was a fairly young city and so you didn't have the complex social and personal entanglements you have here, and of course New York was a different ballgame."

When asked to look to the future, Rhodes says: "We, as management of the festival, need to find permanent assistance with big pockets of money in this state, whether it is the hotel-motel tax contributions or concession income — whatever. We have to look at an ongoing base of support that won't cause the festival such financial chaos. That's my next plan of survival."