6. Escaping No-Man’s-Land

The city of Cleveland’s history is filled with infamies that have tarnished the city’s reputation on a national scale, from unimaginable accidents like the burning of the Cuyahoga River in 1969 to the horrific explosion of the East Ohio Gas Company in 1944 that left over 130 people dead. One moment that captured the national spotlight occurred in such close proximity to the Play House that Superintendent Elijah Ford was forced to defend the theatre by standing with his shotgun alongside the National Guard on the rooftops of the theatre, protecting the building from “the pimps, the prostitutes, and the thieves.” The Hough Riots, documented in newspapers around the country as an event marked by burning houses and violent clashes between police and residents of the neighborhood, resulted from a culmination of political and social decisions that widened the disconnect between the urban ghetto and the other residents of Cleveland now situated in the suburbs. While the Play House was in no way directly involved with the Hough Riots or could ever be blamed for the outbreak of violence that erupted, it continued to reflect its community not only through artistic endeavors, but also by mirroring the attitudes and actions of the city with its attempts to follow trends occurring in the regional theatre movement. For example, the theatre ignored a portion of the Cleveland community as part of a financial strategy utilized by theatres around the country; similarly, the city’s efforts to improve itself at the expense of the urban population, however, provoked the shameful violence and inexcusable deaths. An exploration of the administrative and economic decisions of the Play House in the 1960s compared with the policies and actions of city leaders and government officials reveals both a theatre and a city struggling mightily to redefine themselves while hoping to remain relevant on a national level.

THE HOUGH RIOTS AND THE ITS EFFECTS

A single glass of water. It is hard to conceive of six nights of violence, four deaths, over 300 arrests, and 531 reported arsons resulting from a dispute
over a single glass of water. Of course, the complete history of what sparked the riots is far more complex, replete with racism, oppression, economic disenfranchisement, and government incompetence.

Following the automation of farming in the 1940s, jobless African Americans moved north seeking work, many settling in the urban neighborhoods of Cleveland. The construction of the Willow Freeway (now Interstate 77) forced the destruction of numerous properties in the Central neighborhood, causing the African American residents to move further north to find cheap and affordable housing in Hough.2 The effect of this migration resulted in a drastic demographic shift. In 1950, blacks were only 4 percent of the Hough population, but that figure quickly rose through the decade. By 1960, the population of Hough was 73 percent black, and this percentage rose to nearly 90 percent by 1965 as white residents fled the area.3

Living conditions in Hough deteriorated rapidly as the neighborhood became the city’s most populated area. “The neighborhood would become overcrowded,” one scholar noted, “eventually, it would not be able to support itself, and it would break. The economic, political, and social, and geographic [sic] factors responsible for Hough’s decline, irritated by a lapsing post-war economy give rise to a cyclical dynamic taking the neighborhood on a downward spiral. The combination of deterioration and division in the community would irritate each other until Hough could take no more.”4 In his study of the 1966 riots, Marc E. Lackritz noted that the Hough area housed approximately 45 people per acre compared to other Cleveland neighborhoods that hosted anywhere from ten to 35 people per acre.5 According to one estimate, Hough contained 30 thousand people per square mile, comparable to modern-day Brooklyn and Queens, New York, but without the high-rise buildings. Hough was primarily two-story homes crammed with people and interspersed with small business establishments.6 One of these small businesses that catered to local clientele was the Seventy-Niners Club located at 79th Street and Hough Avenue, which was owned by two brothers, Abe and Dave Feigenbaum, who assumed ownership of the bar when their father was killed while sitting in his car not far from the club.7 The club had a history of tense and inflammatory relations with the residents, including an attempt to set fire to the brothers’ car a few months before the riot.8

While the Feigenbaums denied provoking members of the Hough community to riot, most accounts tell a story of minor events snowballing into a massive violent reaction. On Monday, July 18, Dave Feigenbaum was working at his bar when a local prostitute named Louise entered the premises, seeking donations for a fund-raiser to benefit Margaret Sullivan, a