



*the*  
**Foreigner**

2024  
SEASON

PLAY

PRODUCTION NUMBER 251

Jan. 06 — THROUGH — Feb. 17

# ◇ INTERESTING FACTS ◇

There's no doubt *The Foreigner* is a Utah favorite, with at least 10 productions in the last 12 years (including here at HCTO in 2011). *The Nerd*, by the same playwright, isn't far behind with at least 4 productions in the space of seven years (last seen here in 2016).

Utah's not alone, as both these plays have been in front of audiences across the world almost constantly in the four decades since they were written.

Unfortunately, the brilliant comic mind behind these two classic comedies barely got to see any of that success.

Larry Shue was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and grew up in Kansas and Illinois. From childhood, he was interested in the theatre: "I put on shows in the garage when I was 10 years old and charged a penny admission." He graduated cum laude from Illinois Wesleyan University, where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre, and then served in the United States Army from 1968 to 1972.

Shortly after his Army service, he started his career as a professional actor. While he had written two plays in college, his focus in the beginning of his career was as an actor. He appeared in repertory theater and on the New York stage, and on the soap opera *One Life to Live*.

His playwrighting career really began in earnest when he became a company member at Milwaukee Rep, appearing in early works by David Mamet, among others. Although Shue had joined the company as an actor, Artistic Director John Dillon knew Shue had playwrighting experience and convinced him to write for the company, later naming him playwright-in-residence in 1977. The company premiered *The Nerd* in 1981 and *The Foreigner* in 1984 before each went on to greater success. While Dillon had convinced him to write, Shue never found it easy: "The thing that gets these plays written is stomach churning fear. They are selling the tickets for the play, so I know I must finish it. I worry about it all the time."

Milwaukee Rep had a strong relationship with the internationally famous Tadashi Suzuki's theater company near Kyoto, Japan. When Suzuki invited the Wisconsin theater to send an actor to join them for a short stay, the normally shy and introverted Shue immediately volunteered—much to everyone's surprise. A friend went to the airport to see Shue off, and found him dressed in cowboy boots and hat, nothing like his usual appearance. When the friend asked why he was dressed like that, Shue replied "I think in Japan, they probably don't know much about Americans. But I'm sure that they know about cowboys. So if I'm a cowboy, maybe they'll like me better."

When he came back, that cowboy hat was covered with the signatures of all his new Japanese friends.

It was that experience which inspired *The Foreigner*: "I found that I could be excused for the most extraordinary behavior because I was a foreigner and didn't know any better. My Japanese friends would smile and say, 'Ah, well, that is his way where he comes from. Isn't he cute and adorable and charming?'"

Following its premiere at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, the play opened off-Broadway on November 1, 1984 at New York City's Astor Place Theatre where it ran for 686 performances and won multiple awards. Shue himself performed in the show, first as 'Froggy' LeSueur and later taking over as Charlie.



Larry Shue performing in the premiere of *The Nerd* at Milwaukee Rep in 1981.



*The 1983 premiere of The Foreigner at Milwaukee Rep.*

After the wild successes for both *The Nerd* and *The Foreigner*, Shue's career was about to hit new highs. He was going to make his Broadway debut as an actor in the premiere of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. He was also writing a screenplay of *The Foreigner*, which Disney planned to turn into a major motion picture, working on a new comedy series for CBS, and writing the book for a new Broadway musical based on *The Honeymooners*.

On September 23, 1985, as he flew home from New York rehearsals of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Shue was among fourteen people who died in a commuter plane crash near Weyer's Cave, Virginia. The plane crashed into Hall Mountain, killing everyone aboard, as the flight approached the Shenandoah Valley airport between Staunton and Harrisonburg.

He left a legacy that still affects American comedy, and knew his plays meant more than just laughs. In an interview shortly before his death, Shue said the characters in *The Nerd* and *The Foreigner* contained "my dream that the wishy-washy nice guy will emerge triumphant."

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