

Crossing Theatrical Boundaries:

The Craft of Directing Comes of Age

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The last 40 years have seen the maturing of the American director as a creator, placed beside or even above the playwright and actor. No longer the transparent partner in the creative process, today's director is most often a catalyst, visibly channeling theatrical elements and placing a recognizable stamp on the practice.

The most significant transformation of the role of director took place in the 1960s as regional theatres were exploding into existence, fueling a need for new directing talent, while a diminishing commercial Broadway marketplace relied ever more heavily on the skill of directors to attract and gratify consumers. The theatre industry divided itself into three distinct communities, each wary of the other, each with its own aesthetic, venue, and pool of directors. The entrepreneurs of Broadway, with their dedication to traditional 19th century ways of producing theatre, were attempting to hang on to their audiences by moving away from serious drama and largely producing boulevard comedies and musicals. Regional theatres were attempting to become centers for theatrical community service, to build new local audiences for

plays held unprofitable by commercial theatre. And there were new experimental theatres, largely located in New York, but with counterparts in other areas of the country, intent upon creating a new theatrical language and audience for their plays.

Forty years later, Broadway—the most visible and intransigent of these three disparate theatrical arenas—has begun to profit from the efforts of the other two. Regional theatres have become the training ground for directors. Experimental directors have contributed techniques adopted by dramatic and musical directors, and the experimenters have occasionally ventured productions into commercial theatres. Directors have crossed theatrical boundaries, carrying their values with them, cross-pollinating as they work.

Broadway: Style Over Substance

Broadway in the '60s represented the national benchmark for theatrical production values, but continued its drift begun in the 1950s toward valuing style over substance. Broadway directors became experts at functioning within an inefficient and expensive entrepreneurial system that created each show from scratch, contained in an unequipped and empty 19th century stage shell. Today, Broadway is a national showplace for work that is largely developed elsewhere. Broadway reaps more than it sows.

While it was still possible to find an ample audience for drama on Broadway in the 1960s, in this entertainment-focused atmosphere, musicals increasingly became coin of the realm. And even this theatrical form underwent a transformation directionally, moving from the hands of dramatic directors like George Abbott and Joshua Logan to a new generation of regisseurs such as Gower Champion, Michael

Kidd, Joe Layton, Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, Tommy Tune, and Michael Bennett. Directors Susan Stroman and Graciela Daniele represent today's choreographic dominance of musical theatre.

George Abbott's protégé and heir apparent, Harold (Hal) Prince, in collaboration with Stephen Sondheim, created musicals of sophistication and wit considered to be the pinnacle of this American art form. Like Abbott, Prince initially produced in order to further his own directorial projects. But once established as a major director, he began to function solely in that capacity under the aegis of other producers, with a series of new musical collaborators. Speaking about the last decade of his work, Prince says, "I suppose the change in my working methods hasn't been especially dramatic. However, over decades there's no question that I am somewhat more cautious before I go into rehearsal.

There are more rehearsed readings with actors, and even workshops—all of this imposed by escalating costs. In the case of musicals, this additional preparation cuts down on replacing costumes, orchestrations, even scenery. But occasionally, it takes some of the fire out of what used to be spirited improvisation."

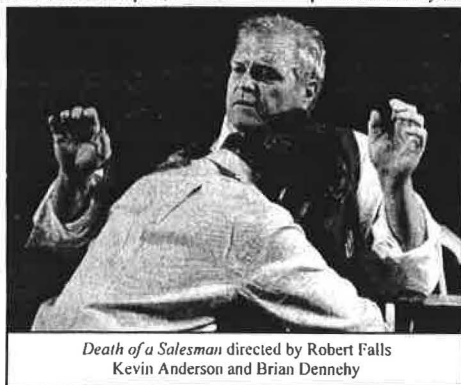
By the '60s, Broadway's greatest dramatic director, Elia Kazan, had shifted his focus to the newly formed Lincoln Center Repertory Company. Robert Lewis and Harold Clurman, who emerged along with Kazan from America's most impressive repertory company of the 1930s, the Group Theatre, had only a few Broadway productions left ahead of them. But they influenced a whole generation of Eastern establishment directors, largely through the Actors Studio led by Kazan, Lewis, and Lee Strasberg. They included Joseph Anthony, Peter Kass, Gene Frankel, Arthur Penn, and Ulu Grosbard. These directors emphasized a psychological, interior subtext that worked well for the dramas being written at the time.

In contrast, Mike Nichols emerged as the prodigy of the 1960s, at his most impressive with comedic directing. Nichols' exterior approach developed from the rough and tumble Chicago school of acting as exemplified by the Second City. He harkened back to a time when directors had direct experience in the technical timing skills required by vaudeville. Today, the director with the closest relationship to these skills is the "new vaudevillian" actor/director Bill Irwin.

In 1962, Alan Schneider directed Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" garnering the playwright instantaneous international reputation. It would take over 30 years for another Broadway play to gain its writer that distinction, the 1993 production of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America,"

directed by George C. Wolfe. Schneider had begun his directing career at Catholic University and matured his talent as resident director at Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage. In addition to Schneider, by the 1970s more and more directors trained in the regions were directing or transferring work to New York. Most congenial to Broadway were revivals such as Michael Kahn's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" (American Shakespeare Festival), Arvin Brown's "Long Day's Journey into Night" and "Watch on the Rhine" (Long Wharf Theatre), or

Vivian Matalon's "Mornings at Seven" (Academy Festival Theatre). Recently, it is the Tony Award-winning success of Robert Falls' revival of "Death of a Salesman" (The Goodman Theatre) that received accolades. Falls subsequently directed Disney Productions' musical "Aida." It was the second time in as many musicals that Disney had called upon a regionally trained director, the former musical being "The



Death of a Salesman directed by Robert Falls
Kevin Anderson and Brian Dennehy

Lion King," with the unique American director and artist, Julie Taymor.

Of his experience on Broadway and as artistic director of Chicago's Goodman Theatre, Falls says, "Twenty years ago the dividing lines between the not-for-profit regional theatre, experimental theatre, and commercial theatre were all there. More and more, all the boundaries have broken down. Indicative is the fact that I'm directing musicals for Disney. Julie Taymor is directing musicals for Disney. In both cases, we were two people who had not directed a Broadway musical, but they gave us full support. Disney gave me license to put together the team I wanted, so it didn't feel particularly different from the way I work at the Goodman. It never felt like what it is, a corporate entity. It felt like a strong producing organization committed to doing the best possible work on Broadway. I'm in the business of running a not-for-profit theatre. We are opening a new \$65 million complex in downtown Chicago, presenting both classical material and new work. But I've always been interested in reaching the largest possible audience. At the Goodman, I'm directing the premiere of two plays by Alan Ayckbourn. In New York, I'm casting the national tour of "Aida." I think it's possible to have artistic achievement and popular appeal."

Despite infrequent exceptions, such as the current play "Copenhagen," tested first in London by England's Michael Blakemore, for the past 40 years Broadway production has taken on a continuously glossier appearance. At a time when it has the resources to present work on the highest level, Broadway's vitality as a creative initiator has diminished. In the face of astronomical increases in production costs due to the inefficiencies of the entrepreneurial system and entrenched interests, individual producers have given way to consortiums of moneyed backers. On one hand, this has given the Broadway director almost absolute power, since there is no single producer in a position to act as a creative counselor as did the great producers of the past—including Kermit Bloomgarden, George Abbott, Joe Papp, Robert Whitehead, and, yes, even the controversial David Merrick. Despite this freedom, Broadway directors have become experts at and slaves to the craft of pulling the audiences' chain...as often as possible. The audience rising to its feet at the final curtain of a Broadway show has more to do with a director pushing the right buttons than sincere appreciation, and has become as common as standing for the National Anthem.

Regional Theatre: Cultivating New Scripts

Until the 1960s, directors largely developed their craft from within the commercial Broadway, Off-Broadway, or stock theatrical system. The assistant director or the production stage manager, who kept the Broadway show in shape and rehearsed understudies and replacements, would be assigned to direct the road company or the summer stock version, developing his own reputation in the process. And it was usually a "his," not a "her" whose reputation was made.

As resident theatres became established across the nation, new directors tested themselves in a broad range of work under professional conditions. Women who saw no future for themselves in the commercial theatre of New York founded three of the early resident theatres: Nina Vance at the Alley Theatre in Houston (1947), Margo Jones at Theatre 47 in Dallas (1947), and Zelda Fichandler at Arena Stage (1950) were the courageous mothers of invention who wanted to establish theatrical roots in their own home territory and create a place where they could themselves direct. During the hard process of managing, they discovered as much satisfaction in cultivating an institution as in directing.

The trickle of resident theatres founded in the 1940s and '50s became a torrent in the 1960s. Schools such as Yale, Carnegie Mellon, and New York University formed professional departments to train directors for what they saw as a burgeoning regional market. This route took the place of the old Broadway apprentice system for new directors.



Hal Prince



Mike Nichols



Robert Falls



Julie Taymor



Anne Bogart

Despite the visionary leadership shown by the first women artistic directors, male directors headed most of the new generation of theatres. Outside of New York, the Minnesota Theatre Company (The Guthrie Theater) became a flagship for community-supported theatre under the influence of Sir Tyrone Guthrie. William Ball, a directing genius, and potentially America's greatest world-class director, founded San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre; Luis Valdez founded El Teatro Campesino in San Juan Bautista, California; Robert Brustein established the Yale Repertory Theatre; Adrian Hall and a group of theatre artists founded Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence, R.I.; and Gordon Davidson was appointed artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. As directors and artistic leaders, their example inspired others, and by the 1980s there were over 300 well-established not-for-profit professional theatres situated around the nation.

As Broadway's hit or miss mentality became increasingly treacherous for playwrights, an interesting reversal took place. Agents who never considered sending new plays to the regions suddenly became aware that theatres away from the spotlight of New York critics were a good place to develop new scripts. Regional directors became adept at cultivating them.

The strength of these institutions was in the visionary leadership of the directors who founded them. A regional theatre is most apt to falter when it is created by or led by a board of trustees, because the governing impulse is not in itself artistic. One of the greatest examples of this type of failure was the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, founded in 1960. The Center's board wanted a permanent theatrical company, a National Theatre, to complement its other constituents, the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Ballet, and the New York Philharmonic, all institutions with long and honorable records of artistic achievement. The Center appointed Elia Kazan and Robert Whitehead as co-directors. Both were notably successful on Broadway, but with no experience in guiding a classical repertory company. Kazan had been a part of the great Group Theatre of the 1930s, but that company had never shown an aptitude for the classics. After two years of critical failure, Lincoln Center's board fired the cream of Broadway and brought in Jules Irving and Herbert Blau, who had founded San Francisco's Actor's Workshop, an esoteric and anti-Broadway company noted for its stagings of Brecht, Pinter, and Beckett. Their work at first appeared naïve and amateurish. Blau resigned. Irving continued, and just as he appeared to be mastering the challenge, resigned in the face of financial cutbacks. After decades of troubled organization, an entirely different management concept emerged as the Lincoln Center Theater. Today, it operates with financial success under the leadership of Andre Bishop and Bernard Gersten. Neither is a director.

The Experimenters and Off-Off Broadway

Concurrent with the political and social upheaval of the 1960s came young directors experimenting with new forms, deconstructing the traditional ways of approaching plays, reorganizing the priorities of conventional dramaturgy. Not since Eugene O'Neill and the other experimenters of the Provincetown Players created their new

Directing

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works in the 1920s had there been such a flurry of creativity in American theatre. Joe Cino opened his hole-in-the-wall coffee house on Cornelia Street in the late 1950s, and by the '60s he became the Dolly Levi of the underground theatre world, pairing budding playwrights with new directors. Cino introduced playwright Lanford Wilson to director Marshall Mason. They collaborated for the first time on "Balm in Gilead," which was produced by Ellen Stewart at her Cafe La MaMa, created in imitation of Caffe Cino. What Cino and Stewart created were hothouses where young directors and writers could create without artistic compromise or union restrictions. Much of the work was amateurish, but it was rich in ideas and experimentation and, occasionally, reached the level of world-class theatre.

A number of these experimentalists became internationally influential: Mabou Mines and its collaborative actor/directors, including JoAnne Akalaitis, Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczek, David Warrilow, and Philip Glass; Richard Foreman who formed the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre; Andre Gregory and The Manhattan Project; Robert Wilson and the Byrd Hoffman Foundation; Richard Schechner and the Performance Group; Elizabeth LeCompte and members of The Wooster Group, Spalding Gray, Willem Dafoe, and the late Ron Vawter; Martha Clarke and Julie Taymor developed by Lyn Austin's Music-Theatre Group; from La MaMa came Tom O'Horgan, Andrei Serban, John Braswell, and Wilford Leach; Charles Ludlam and his Theatre of the Ridiculous; and the Bread and Puppet Theatre founded by Peter Schumann. They followed the anarchistic footsteps of The Living Theatre directors, Judith Malina and Julian Beck. Founded in 1946, The Living Theatre advocated independence from all restraints and, in doing so, attempted to free theatre from its ossified traditions. By 1964, the Living Theatre company fled an inhospitable America to Europe, later journeyed to an even less hospitable South America, and then back to a welcoming Europe. They would return permanently to America in 1984, with work that seemed dated and amateurish. But some of those inspired by their spirit of theatrical invention became world-class artists working with rigor and intellectual conviction.

Theoreticians Mary Overlie and Wendell Beavers explain how some of these experimental directors work by deconstructing theatrical language into six "viewpoints," vertical levels of traditional hierarchy. These viewpoints begin with "story" on top, followed in descending order by "emotion, time, movement, design, and space." Traditional directors tend to create their work in this order. Viewed simultaneously, together in this descending order of importance, traditional theatre appears to have a unified language. But when these six levels are laid side by side with no one viewpoint taking hierarchical precedence over another, this horizontal setting allows freer, if more random, access to theatrical language. Therefore, time may take precedence over story, space over emotion, design over movement, etc. All or only one or two of these viewpoints may be incorporated. The experimental directors began playing with these elements to provide various angles on the disordered universe they saw around them. They did not invent a new theatrical language; they simply used this technique as a tool to reorder the priorities of traditional theatre, giving it a fresh approach.

Director Anne Bogart has embraced the viewpoints, creating additional categories, sometimes making them the production itself rather than just a tool for investigation. She says of her investigations, "The way I have solved the problems of the world is by forming my own company, the SITI Company. I looked at the regional theatre movement and decided to make up a new ideal that can function in the way I want to work and for whom I want to make the work—audiences who have an appetite for edgy

work. I want my company to become the Kronos Quartet of the theatre world."

Off-Broadway: Two Arenas

Today, there are two Off-Broadway arenas, one replicating uptown theatre on a smaller scale, and the other modeled after regional not-for-profit, institutional theatre. In the 1960s, Off-Broadway's revivals often upstaged the original productions, especially when produced by Circle-in-the-Square and the Phoenix Theatre, both founded in the 1950s. Circle-in-the-Square began as Jose Quintero's Loft Players, and the Phoenix Theatre maintained a company of actors directed by Stuart Vaughan in a diverse program of ancient and modern classic plays. Quintero turned Broadway failures into success through a sense of company, actors working together repeatedly to create a theatrical vocabulary that enabled them to build on previous work. Quintero subsequently severed his ties with Circle-in-the-Square, and the producing entity, under the direction of Ted Mann, moved into a new theatre in the Broadway district in 1972, finally ending production in the 1990s. The Phoenix seemed to be constantly seeking new inspiration and, like its namesake, rose again and again over the succeeding decades in new incarnations and with new directors until it disbanded in 1982.

The flagship of New York producing theatres was created by Joe Papp as the New York Shakespeare Festival. By 1957, Papp became legendary by winning a battle with parks czar Robert Moses to permit Free Shakespeare in Central Park, and in 1961, the Delacorte Theater was constructed. He and associate producer Bernard Gersten created an empire of four theatre spaces in the Astor Library on Lafayette Street, which was dubbed the Public Theater. The Public became the base for an endless stream of new multicultural plays and musicals, the training ground for directors, and the shelter for the Shaliko Company, Eliot Feld Ballet, Mabou Mines, The Family, and the Manhattan Project. Papp's subversive mission was to outdo Broadway under the umbrella of a not-for-profit institution. Upon Papp's death in 1991, the baton was passed to his anointed director, the experimenter JoAnne Akalaitis. Undermined by a critical campaign by *The New York Times*, which took exception to her downtown approach to theatre, Akalaitis was discharged and replaced by director George C. Wolfe, with several Broadway successes under his belt.

While the Public Theater did much to support the careers of minority directors, two institutions stand out as having had the greatest historical impact on the careers of African-American actors and directors. The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), founded in 1967 by Douglas Turner Ward, Robert Hooks and Gerald S. Krone, and New Federal Theatre, founded in 1970 by Woodie King, Jr. After almost 20 years of extraordinary work, NEC faded away and, today, remains in name only. This year, New Federal Theatre is marking its 30th anniversary and practically stands alone with its mission of presenting multiethnic plays.

Durable 1970s institutions, crucibles for new playwrights and directors that became mainstream Off-Broadway producing theatres, are the Manhattan Theatre Club, led by Lynne Meadow; Playwrights Horizons, founded by one of Off-Broadway's most durable entrepreneurs, Robert Moss; and Circle Repertory Company, founded by Marshall Mason, Lanford Wilson, Tanya Berezin, and Robert Thirkield. Of the three, MTC and Playwrights survive to the present and are among the most prolific producers in New York.

Where will directors of the future develop? What will form their visions? It should be noted that Anne Bogart heads Columbia University's directing program, JoAnne Akalaitis chairs the Bard College drama program, Lee Breuer has been teaching at Arizona State, and Mary Overlie and Wendell Beavers' viewpoint curriculum is taught at New York University and by myriad disciples throughout the nation. ■

40 YEARS
BACK STAGE



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