

# U.S. THEATER IN THE NINETIES: A HEARTLAND PERSPECTIVE

*By Dan Sullivan*

---

Minneapolis, Minnesota -- Nearly a half-century ago, in September, 1951, *Theatre Arts* magazine noted that "the American theater" was, of course, the New York theater. "It is an unfortunate fact that very little of genuine worth or national interest originates outside Manhattan Island," the article observed.

It wasn't quite true, even then. An intrepid impresario named Margo Jones had been launching new plays in her little theater in Dallas, Texas, since 1947, notably Tennessee Williams' *Summer* and *Smoke*. Playwright Eugene O'Neill had unveiled *Lazarus Laughed* at the Pasadena Playhouse in southern California as far back as 1928.

But there was some lingering truth to the magazine's point of view. In effect, what existed was Broadway and off-Broadway. Everywhere else -- Boston, Cleveland, Denver, Los Angeles, Chicago -- was "out of town." And "out-of-town" agreed with this perspective. When a touring production of a Broadway-launched play or musical came to the Orpheum Theater in Minneapolis in the postwar era, prospective playgoers needed reassurance that it was "direct from New York." In other words, the real thing.

Even then the audience might be slim. The Orpheum had grown scruffy; road show standards were slipping; television was keeping people at home. Indeed, someone might have wondered, would there be any professional theater at all in Minneapolis fifty or sixty years from then?

- - - - -

Now it is April, 1998. Driving down Hennepin Avenue, in the heart of Minneapolis, I pass the Orpheum Theater, restored to its former glory. *The Lion King*, an adaptation of the Walt Disney animated film, now the talk of Broadway -- had its pre-New York engagement here in mid-1997. *Bring In 'Da Noise, Bring In 'Da Funk*, a history of African-Americans told through the medium of percussive dance, spent the winter holidays in Minneapolis. One of Broadway's most acclaimed revivals, *Chicago*, toured here in the spring. The national touring company of the new musical *Ragtime*, a colorful evocation of early 20th-century America, is enroute to this city. There is no stinting. "The road," the touring circuit is back.





*Two scenes from Ragtime, the new Broadway musical, based on E. L. Doctorow's novel.*

**--Photos by Catherine Ashmore (top)  
and Michael Cooper (bottom).**

But another road -- in fact, a whole network of roads, of developments -- is now in place and visible through the lens of the heartland, of middle America. Other aspects are reflected here as well. The decentralization of U.S. theater -- a process that has taken a generation -- is a fact today, evident in Minneapolis, and in cities dotting the landscape, from Seattle, Washington, to Hartford, Connecticut.

A few blocks from the Orpheum, for example, another type of playhouse comes into view. The Tyrone Guthrie Theater opened 35 years ago, with legendary director Guthrie's staging of *Hamlet*. The Guthrie wasn't the first regional -- or resident professional -- theater to be built in this country, nor would it be the last. In the course of the past generation, the theater world's pendulum largely has swung from Broadway to the regions, with New York theater frequently beholden to the rest of the country for an infusion of activity. These days, if new companies aren't springing up all over, the ones that were established largely between 1950 and 1975 are constructing new homes, and second stages, to expand their activities.

In the 1940s, Margo Jones dreamed of driving cross-country and finding a resident professional theater offering "good plays, well done" at every stop. In the 1990s, it's a reality. One glance at a list of offerings at more than 200 resident theaters from Hawaii to Maine, printed in the current issue of *American Theatre*, successor to *Theatre Arts*, proves the point.

---

## EAST WEST PLAYERS: CROSS-POLLINATING AUDIENCES

When the curtain went up several months ago on a production of Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* at the new home of East West Players in downtown Los Angeles, it marked another new chapter in the annals of this troupe, and, in a broader sense, the history of multicultural theater in the United States.

East West Players is the oldest, and one of the most influential, Asian-American theater companies in the nation, with a three-decade-plus track record of affording Pacific Rim actors a place to practice their craft, hone their skills and gain insights into the business of acting.

The troupe's success is "preceded by that of its alumni," Jan Breslauer wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* recently about this "invaluable nurturing ground." Actors Pat Morita, John Lone and Sab Shimono -- all of whom are well known in the U.S. film and television industry -- are among those who have passed through the company's doors, along with playwrights David Henry Hwang (who has had four of his plays staged there) and Philip Kan Gotanda.

East West Players is now in residence in the 220-seat David Henry Hwang Theater in a former church, known today as the Union Center for the Arts, which also houses an art exhibitor and an independent film organization. Lead donors included Henry and Dorothy Hwang, parents of the playwright for whom the theater was named. Hwang, author of such Broadway dramas as *M. Butterfly* and *Golden Child*, is the most successful Asian-American playwright on the contemporary scene.

The company's first artistic director was Mako, a familiar face as a character actor in a skein of Hollywood films who later starred in the original Broadway production of *Pacific Overtures*, Sondheim's 1976 musical depiction of the opening of Japan by the West in the 1850s. Mako recalls that he and his colleagues weren't "consciously working to establish a model" when they began to stage plays. "What we were trying to do, consciously, was to be honest with ourselves, learning to cope with elements that were surrounding us, such as racism and discrimination."

Beulah Quo, another gifted Asian-American actress and an original East West player, recalls that in the beginning, "we were really the first group of Asian Americans working together in Los Angeles. That's common now. But in those

days, people never thought of it."

With the passage of three decades, *East West Players* reflects the themes of U.S. society from the identity politics of the Sixties and Seventies to more mainstream issues of life and love. The company, which inspired the creation of other Asian-American companies in the Seventies in the aftermath of its own success, also typifies the multicultural theater scene in the United States. It represents its constituency in the same manner as Hispanic-American theater in Los Angeles, New York City and elsewhere, and African-American theater in all parts of the country. And as with these other forms, Asian-American theater is flourishing.

"The audiences are larger," Hwang said recently in *The Washington Post*. "It's more accessible. It's more visible than we would have thought 20 years ago. It's exciting, the way you'd be excited about seeing any child grow up."

Tim Dang, the current artistic director, told *The Daily Bruin*, the University of California at Los Angeles newspaper, that he hopes the new site will evolve into an arts center rather than simply a theater. "I think that's one of our goals -- to have a cross-pollination of audiences, where hopefully the audiences that come to see the theater will come to the art exhibits as well, and if we have any film screenings, we will invite [patrons] to come see theater."

-- Charlotte Astor

---

Driving east from California in April, one could catch Brecht in Los Angeles, comedic playwright David Ives' *All in the Timing* in San Diego; Emily Mann's *Having Our Say* and August Wilson's *Jitney*-- two plays about the African-American experience -- in Phoenix and Denver respectively; an Oscar Wilde revival in Chicago; new works by contemporary playwrights A.R. Gurney and Richard Greenberg in Cleveland and in Princeton (New Jersey); and an Edward Albee anthology in Boston.

All this activity takes place in what is known, familiarly, as the "nonprofit sector." Today, nonprofit theater happens to be more non-profitable than ever. Support still comes from foundations, state arts councils, corporations, and individual patrons, but less so than before from the National Endowment for the Arts -- whose budget has been drastically cut.

So the vocabulary has had to be changed. One seldom hears the phrase "repertory theaters" nowadays. Changing the bill every night turned out to be a lot more expensive than producing one's season a show at a time, as the old stock companies used to do, perhaps leaving a few

weeks vacant at the end of the season in case the last show, often a comedy, is a hit. Given today's cash-flow problems, theaters need hits.

The term "acting company" is still heard, but it usually means tonight's acting company rather than its original meaning: an ensemble meant to serve a number of roles over an entire season. Tyrone Guthrie would frown; the Guthrie's new artistic director, Joe Dowling, is philosophical. A veteran of Ireland's Abbey Theatre, Dowling knows that an acting company can become too permanent. Besides, today's actors are reluctant to commit to a full season. And more often than not, theaters cannot afford to keep a large group of actors on staff.

Dowling's first two seasons have been more audience-friendly than those of his predecessor, Garland Wright, and subscriptions are up. "A fellow called me a crowd-pleaser the other day," Dowling says. "I suppose I am. I've got 1,300 seats to fill every night. I like crowds; I want to please them."

How far to stoop, though? That is the dilemma most nonprofit theaters face. They often want to be experimental, daring -- to discover the bright new playwright or to tinker artistically with traditional venues of classics and the eras in which they are set, or to create an imaginative stage setting. But to demand too much of audiences is to risk angry letters, cancelled subscriptions and decreased corporate support. If these companies were invented to shake up the social order, they certainly aren't doing so at the moment.

Another challenge is the very regularity of the resident-theater schedule. Broadway shows are a temporary alliance of zealots obsessed with making their present work the most stupendous production in the history of the theater. The pressure is ruthless, the emotional cost great, and the results, on occasion, sensational.

By contrast, take the recent opening of A.R. Gurney's *Sylvia* at the Cleveland Play House, a literate and amusing play about a man who (figuratively) falls in love with his dog. It was a charming script, well-acted and thoroughly enjoyed by the audience. But a sense of danger, of experimentation, was certainly not in the air.

Yet given all that, our resident theaters still retain their commitment to what Peter Hackett, artistic director at the Cleveland Play House, still calls "art theater," a phrase so old (shades of O'Neill and the Provincetown Playhouse) that it's new again. Hard as it is to define "art theater," it doesn't mean the plunging chandeliers of *Phantom of the Opera* and *Miss Saigon's* helicopters buzzing the stage. Resident theaters are supposed to offer meaningful entertainment, and in the main they do so.

As a result, the serious theatergoer anywhere in the United States no longer feels cheated if a well-received play closes in New York City before he or she can see it. Very likely, it will turn up one or two seasons later on the schedule of the local resident theater, in a production that quite

often will equal and sometimes surpass the original. I still regret spending \$60 to watch a young movie actress -- cast for name value -- struggle with Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *How I Learned To Drive*, off-Broadway, when I knew that a smart Minneapolis director, Casey Stangl, was about to stage the play at her home theater, Eye of the Storm. Stangl's leading lady might not boast Hollywood credits, but I felt certain she would know something about shaping a monologue. The same, no doubt, would be true of the actress performing the role this season in Providence, Rhode Island, or Baltimore, Maryland, and next season in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

And they might be stars at that -- in their home venues. One of the happiest developments in theater today is that a good actor can put together a career in one or more regional theaters without moving to New York City or Los Angeles. Fame and fortune may not come, but you might be warmly approached in the supermarket by someone who saw your performance last night here in the Twin Cities, at the Guthrie or the Theatre de la Jeune Lune.

Fame and fortune aren't excluded, to be sure. John Mahoney, who only began his acting career in his late 30s, is a product of the Chicago theater scene. Today, he can afford to buy a comfortable Hollywood mansion following his success in numerous films and, more recently, in the successful television situation comedy, *Frasier*. But he chooses to live back in Chicago, and to perform there as frequently as possible -- in the spring of 1998, for instance, in a revival of Kaufman and Hart's Thirties comedy, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, which he then was taking to London.

Similarly, Robert Prosky, a product of Washington's Arena Stage, has followed his longtime residency with a role on television in *Hill Street Blues*, and many movie portrayals as well. Actor Jeff Daniels, who costarred with Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber*, is so committed to the stage that he opened his own theater, The Purple Rose, in his home town, Chelsea, Michigan. In mid-1998, the troupe was boasting a world premiere, *Book of Days*, by Lanford Wilson, one of the more honored U.S. playwrights of the contemporary scene. Kevin Kling performs solo shows like *21A* and *The Education of Walter Kaufman* all over the world, but similarly remains a Minnesota artist, whether performing *Diary of a Scoundrel* at the Jungle Theatre, adapting Goldoni's *Venetian Twins* for the Guthrie or doing a voice-over to pay the rent.

Compare that with the experience of a Midwestern playwright of an earlier era. William Inge was discovered by Margo Jones in the 1940s. Determined to get to New York City, he finally did so with *Come Back, Little Sheba* in 1950. Following four straight hits (including *Bus Stop* and *Picnic*), however, Broadway declared his talent obsolete. Feeling too disconnected to return to Kansas, he fled to Hollywood, where he languished until committing suicide in 1973.

Still, this sad tale has a happy ending. The William Inge Festival was founded in his memory 17 years ago by a determined secondary school teacher named Margaret Goheen. It takes place every spring in Inge's birthplace, Independence, Kansas, as typical a small town as you'll find in

the United States. The most unexpected people turn up in this prairie setting to be honored during the festival -- Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, August Wilson, Neil Simon, Wendy Wasserstein and, this year, Stephen Sondheim.

Partly they come to honor Inge, whose career remains emblematic of the displaced American artist. Partly they come to be honored: Broadway composer-lyricist Sondheim's tribute, featuring songs by Bernadette Peters -- his leading lady in his Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Sunday in the Park With George*, as well as *Into the Woods* -- drew 1,000 people to Memorial Hall. And partly they come to talk theater with the students of Independence Community College.

"You're known as an uncompromising artist, but you made changes in *Passion* when it was trying out--isn't that compromising?" a young woman asked.

"No," Sondheim replied. "It's making changes. I don't do it to please the audience. I do it to make my intention clear to the audience. Once they know that, they can either accept it or reject it. In *Passion* they rejected it."

In Independence, we also heard a new script by David Ives, once an emerging playwright, now a successful one. His comedy, *All in the Timing*, was resident theater's most-frequently performed play in the 1995-1996 season. How had he become a playwright? "Theater is such a fluke. I sent a play to some guy in Minneapolis, who told me about a theater in L.A...."

Flukes aside, there are established channels these days for new- play development -- even for musical theater. There are so many, in fact, that critics have condemned some regional theaters for "developing scripts to death" -- giving them so many trial readings and audience discussions that in the end not even the playwright can say what the play is about. One also hears the opposite complaint: that a theater will retain a script for a year and then return it without comment.

In general, though, a young U.S. playwright finds it easier to get a hearing today than ever before. And often, a premiere will follow -- sometimes a double premiere.

Christopher Sergel's *Black Elk Speaks* went from its debut at the Denver Theater Center Company to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1995, in return for the Taper's production of Leslie Ayvazian's *Nine Armenians*. Syl Jones' *Black No More* was co-commissioned by the Guthrie Theater and Washington's Arena Stage. Actors Theatre of Louisville's annual Humana Festival has introduced more than a dozen new dramatists of note to the U.S. stage. The Denver Center Theater sponsors two new-play festivals -- one devoted to the works of women playwrights.

While women dramatists have yet to achieve parity with their male counterparts in the United States, there are encouraging signs. Tina Howe, Marsha Norman, Wendy Wasserstein and Emily Mann continue to make their mark -- Mann as artistic director of the McCarter Theater in

Princeton, New Jersey, as well. Indeed, some of the most acclaimed works premiered in New York City this season were by Howe (*Pride's Crossing*), Jane Anderson (*Defying Gravity*) and Amy Freed (*Freedomland*).

African-American women dramatists are especially visible these days. In addition to Naomi Wallace, Suzan-Lori Parks and Cheryl West, Pearl Cleage saw her *Blues for an Alabama Sky* unveiled at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, with subsequent stagings around the United States. And Kia Corthron is a prolific newcomer who has had works performed in cities from Baltimore, Maryland, to Seattle, Washington.

To bring this discussion of theater in the United States full circle, I have to cast my eyes far from Minneapolis -- to the East Coast, and a suburban Connecticut setting. There, in Waterford, on an old farm, is the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, named to commemorate the great U.S. playwright of the first half of this century. It houses a playwrights conference, a musical theater workshop, and a critics' seminar. The playwrights conference stages readings of a dozen new scripts every summer. Its alumni include John Guare, Israel Horovitz and August Wilson, the United States' most celebrated contemporary African-American dramatist.

Wilson has drawn criticism recently for taking what some regard as a separatist position on African-American theater. He maintains that black writers and artists need to resist the mainstream white theater establishment, found their own stages, and act in them. The irony is that Wilson himself continues to unveil his own plays in mainstream theaters across the United States.

This doesn't obscure his basic argument that the United States could use more black theaters, more Asian-American theaters, more Hispanic theaters, to meet the enthusiasm of expanding multicultural audiences. This might lead in turn to the presence of more multicultural critics on the scene, to join two prominent African Americans, *The Denver Post's* Sandra Brooks-Dillard and Rohan Preston of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*.

So theater in the United States has its work cut out for it. But at least it is, now, a genuine American theater.

-----

**Dan Sullivan has been a theater critic for the then-*Minneapolis Tribune*, *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. He teaches at the University of Minnesota.**

---