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# the Journal

FOR STAGE DIRECTORS AND CHOREOGRAPHERS

*Following*

# Directions



*Perspectives on the art from*

**Richard Eyre • Jack O'Brien • Libby Appel • Mary Overlie**

**Carey Perloff, Tony Taccone, Timothy Near and Robert Kelley**

**7** Biz Buzz

**18** A Breath Of Fresh Eyre

In between rehearsals for the Broadway revival of *The Crucible*, renowned director Richard Eyre talks with SDCF in an eloquent and insightful *One-on-One Conversation*.

**28** I Left My Art In San Francisco

San Francisco-based director Margaret Booker interviews artistic directors Carey Perloff, Tony Taccone, Timothy Near and Robert Kelley about their personal vision and their diverse theaters that ring the bay.

**37** All Work And All Play Makes Jack A Fun Boy

Award-winning director, Jack O'Brien, offers candid insights into his life, his craft and his successful approach to collaboration.

**42** A Viewpoint On Viewpoints

Susan Einhorn, director and theatre professor, tells what it was like meeting Mary Overlie, and how the creator of *Viewpoints* profoundly changed Susan's process of directing and training actors.

**48** Question and Appel

Oregon Shakespeare Festival Artistic Director Libby Appel answers questions on how to approach Shakespeare in today's theatre, focus on a play's text and overcome creative self-doubts.

**54** The Future Is Now!

Two founders of the Lincoln Center Theatre Directors Lab West discuss the genesis of the Los Angeles group and their efforts to influence theatre-making in the City of Angels.

**58** Scene And Be Seen

Left: Richard Eyre. (Photo by BBC)

Cover: A scene from *The Oresteia*, directed by Tony Taccone at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. (Photo by Ken Friedman)



By Ernest Figueroa and Nick D'Abruzzo

## **“You are the future of the American theatre!”**

So announces Anne Cattaneo, dramaturg and director of the Lincoln Center Theater (LCT) Director's Lab. Part challenge, part statement of fact, every year Cattaneo and LCT Artistic Director André Bishop give directors of varying backgrounds this charge as a springboard to three weeks of artistic exchange. Since its inception eight years ago, the Lincoln Center Theater Director's Lab has inspired a generation of artists who almost immediately began to inspire each other.

Just under 3000 miles west of New York City, attention is being paid to the Los Angeles theatre scene where, with an approving nod from the Lincoln Center Theater, a band of young stage directors has been referring to themselves as LCT Director's Lab West. Similar in purpose and intent, although smaller in scope (one week instead of three), the West Coast Lab has grown exponentially over the past three years driven by a group of L.A. based Lab alumni directors galvanized to reorient actor-driven theatre in Los Angeles. Little did Cattaneo know her cry to arms would become so prophetic.

Upon arriving at Lincoln Center Theater, Bishop and Cattaneo brainstormed about how to break the play development cycle which, over the past decade, had become stalled in a reading-development-reading process that rarely culminated in a fully-mounted production. Where was the genesis for new work? What had happened to the great regional theatre movement? Where was the cutting-edge of the theatre? Where were those young theatre voices now speaking out? Uptown? Downtown? They concluded the answers could be found in the visions of individual directors. But how do you unite these now disparate individual visions? It was through this discussion that the LCT Director's Lab was born. By the end of its fifth year, close to 300 early and mid-career directors had found common ground at the Lab and now alumni were spread nationally and internationally. Projects were born, and partnerships and friendships developed between unlikely artists: uptown and downtown, musical and avant-garde, masters and neophytes.

The Lab not only inspired the directors but also planted desires in members to find a way of continuing the experience after the Lab sessions ended. Yet, without Cattaneo or the resources of Lincoln Center Theater, what was needed most was a critical mass of directing talent dedicated to furthering the work and mission of the Lab. What surprised many is the fact that this critical mass was to be found on the West Coast. Knowing that theatre in Los Angeles is often driven by actors' showcases, the West Coast alumni directors saw an opportunity to change that focus by inspiring directors to become a seminal force behind creating theatre in the city. What better way to inspire those directors than to “clone” the Lab?

Since many LCT Lab alumni are seasoned artists—many of whom have run their own companies, served as associate artistic directors, literary managers, managing directors at regional theatres, and assistants on Broadway shows and at prestigious theatre festivals—it was clear that this was the group to create a West Coast Lab. A self-dubbed steering committee, comprised of Nick D'Abruzzo ('99), Ernest Figueroa ('98,'99), Olivia Honegger ('99), Kappy Kilburn ('00,'01) and Andrew Sachs ('98), understood that, if they wanted something to happen, they had to be the ones to make it happen. The newly formed steering committee knocked on doors, pooled resources, called artists they knew (and those they never met) and worked tirelessly to produce the inaugural session of the LCT Director's Lab West. The end result was a week in the

The future is now



Members of the Lincoln Center Theatre Directors Lab West 2001.

spring of 2000 of incredible theatre artists donating their time and talent to West Coast directors who were new to the entire Lab experience. Like the New York Lab, the members arrived not knowing what to expect but left ready to change the world of theatre.

The inaugural session focused on "Producing and Production" and was hosted by the then newly-opened Greenway Court Theatre in Hollywood. Excitement was high all week as Academy Award-winning songwriter, Randy Newman, kicked off events with his keynote speech. The week of sessions featured a panel of L.A. theatre critics, John Holly of Actors Equity, South Coast Repertory Artistic Director Martin Benson speaking on "creating your own theatre," Mark Taper Forum Associate Artistic Director Robert Egan and playwright Robert Glaudini examining the "Director as Dramaturg," famed dramaturg Leon Katz highlighting his many years working and creating new work, and a group of attendee directors demonstrating their rehearsal styles by working on a scene from *The Maids*. The Lab concluded with a lively discussion on multiculturalism and non-traditional casting after a presentation by four ethnically diverse companies performing scenes from *All My Sons*. In all, 35 directors spent one week in artistic exchange free from the pressures of pounding the pavement or producing their own work. Some of the knowledge imparted was historical, some practical, some artistic, but all was inspiring. By the time Anne Cattaneo moderated her session, the magic that had started in New York City six years before was beginning again in Los Angeles.

Year Two saw a broadening in the Director's Lab West participants with a great number arriving from the Bay area and even places east of the Rocky Mountains. This new group of directors focused on "Plays and Playwrights" led by keynote speaker, Tony Award-winning playwright Mark Medoff who, with invited guest Phyliss Frelich, spoke about *Road to a Revolution*, their new work being developed at Deaf West Theatre. Writers from *Wordsmiths*, the resident playwrighting collective of the Los Angeles Theatre Center, participated in sessions on creating text. *King Lear* served as a springboard for workshops and discussions on playwrighting, dramaturgy and text exploration. Directors became playwrights; playwrights became directors. The week began with an emphasis on the "sacred text" and evolved as discussions began to focus on the director and his/her creative impact. Each evening culminated with a workshop featuring one of five newly commissioned works from

members of *Wordsmiths*, each based on one or more themes from *King Lear*. Appropriately, the week ended with Sheldon Epps, artistic director of the Pasadena Playhouse and creator of the Tony Award-nominated musical *Play On*, leading a spirited question-and-answer session that encouraged directors to follow their own inspiration.

When entering into its third year, the Lab West steering committee realized that the ever-increasing size and scope of the Lab meant finding a host who could accommodate its growth. Sheldon Epps, SSDC executive board member and artistic director of the Pasadena Playhouse stepped up to the plate. For the first time, the LCT Director's Lab West will be hosted by a major regional theatre. Epps shares Cattaneo's belief in the great importance of passing on theatrical knowledge and expertise to future generations. Epps and Cattaneo speak the same artistic language and recognize that the Lab can help further directorial vision and collaboration in a way that will benefit American theatre across the country.

So where does the Director's Lab West go from here? At press time, the steering committee—assisted by Lab West alumni—is feverishly on the May 2002 program. With the resources of the Pasadena Playhouse, the Lab will host a series of noteworthy sessions beginning with a day of symposium sessions open to members of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, as well as to the theatre community at large. Notable actors and directors will explore the theme of "Actors and Process." Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* will be springboard material for the week. Martin Benson and Sheldon Epps will again speak and be joined by regional artistic directors Andrew Barnicle of Laguna Playhouse, Des McAnuff of La Jolla and others. Director/choreographer, Kay Cole, will be offering a practical workshop on "movement with actors." New sessions are being added daily.

Yet, even as the planning continues, the vision for the Lab expands. There is the hope that other area theatres will host the Lab in the future, thereby making it a true West Coast Lab rather than one limited to Los Angeles.

Programs like the LCT Director's Lab, east and west, continue to infuse new lifeblood into our art. Alumni of the West Coast Lab have now attended the New York Lab and visa versa, as members of each continue to motivate one another. From its humble beginnings three years ago, Lab West has grown to become a significant force in the development of theatrical directors. Clearly, the future of the Lincoln Center Theatre Director's Lab West is now! **SCENE**

If you want to know more about Lab-West, visit their website at [www.lctdirectorslabwest.com](http://www.lctdirectorslabwest.com) or call the Lab line at (323) 281-0344.