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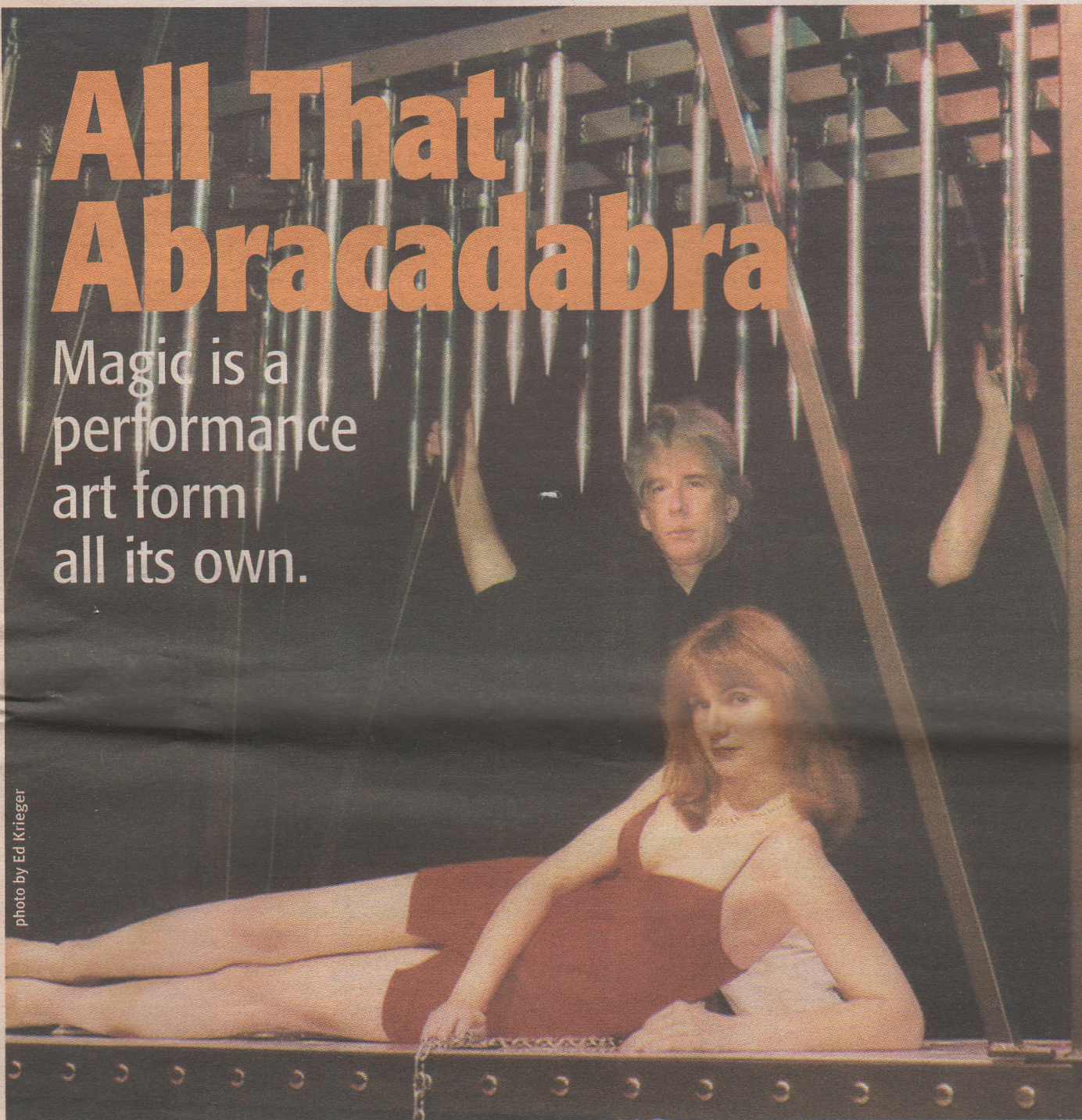
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THE ACTORS
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All That Abracadabra

Magic is a
performance
art form
all its own.

photo by Ed Krieger



Directors Play Well With Others

Attendees at Directors Lab West considered collaboration in all its forms.

by Leigh Kennicott

“Weddings are perfectly awful things.” In the courtyard of the Pasadena Playhouse in the twilight of a warm May night, the audience clustered around the outside staircase spied a mysterious veiled presence hovering at the top and three performers arranged at regular intervals below her. The arrangement was punctuated by camping lanterns, one of which illuminated a woman in white at her feet.

One after another, the three described perfectly awful, even ghastly, experiences at weddings. The wraith-like presence, instead of holding forth as well, suddenly screamed, “I don’t want to get married!” and plunged down the steps and through the surprised crowd with the other participants chasing after.

Scene.

Armed with those few lines from Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* on the opening weekend of the 2003 Directors Lab West, the four artists had scurried to create and produce this short theatrical piece in just hours. Called “fast and furious,” the exercise threw together strangers who then emerged from the process as collaborators and friends. Thus, 50 lab participants from all parts of the U.S. spent the remaining week in the process of ever deepening camaraderie.

During the opening weekend, Lab steering committee members Kappy Kilburn, Andrew Sachs, Nick D’Abruzzo, and Ernest Figueroa recounted how the lab is drawn from their experiences at the Lincoln Center Directors Lab in New York. They saw a need, in a city as spread-out and diverse as Los Angeles, to strengthen the community of theatre artists. The idea has caught on: This year’s lab was sponsored in part by the Pasadena Playhouse, the Laguna Playhouse, and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation.

This year the theme was “Collaborations,” which animated 20 presentations covering the director’s relationship with actors, playwrights, designers, the disabled, children at risk, and communities. Pasadena Playhouse artistic director Sheldon Epps kicked off the series with his description of the evolution of *Blue* in collaboration with playwright Charles Randolph Wright. For him, collaborating is “like getting into bed with each other in every sense of that term.” It is important to “talk for a long time to make sure you both want to do the same play—in other

words, make sure you’ve dated them.”

Epps’ views on the role of an artistic director ranged from high-flown—“The artistic director should function as a third eye to the director”—to the quotidian: More often than not, a season is chosen by the marketing, subscription, and development departments. “You have to sneak in your choices,” he confided. Looking around the room, Epps initiated a theme that would echo through the eight-day lab: “Despite what they say [that] there’s no theatre in L.A., it’s overwhelming.”

Monday afternoon Anne Cattaneo, founder of the Lincoln Center lab, shared the story of its genesis. “For 2,000 years theatre was passed down through apprenticeships,” she explained. That process has broken down in the United States, with “too many things in the hands of too few people.” She observed, as had Epps, that “theatres over the years have shifted to run in terms of the way they are funded.... Artists are now serving the institution instead of the other way around.” For Cattaneo, the Lab is a response to that lack of wide-spread apprenticeship programs. In the Q&A after her remarks, several impassioned directors expressed their views on the ills of the theatre in such variety that Cattaneo ended her session with the satisfaction that attendees would “have plenty to discuss in the next few days.”

Although the controversies tended to ebb and flow with each presenter, some recurring themes centered on letting go of the idea of the “auteur” director in favor of the director as a sort of fixed center for an evolving constellation of collaborations. A constant refrain was the challenge of remaining “in charge” while maintaining room to include the ideas of others involved in the process. Shirley Jo Finney, who has developed several of Velina Hasu Houston’s plays, said she always wonders, “How do you get inside a piece without interfering with it?”

Larry Moss has the advantage of being almost worshipfully respected by his students, Pamela Gien and Bo Eason, with whom he helped develop *The Syringa Tree* and *Runt of the Litter*, respectively. His role, he maintained, is to bring out the best in his actors. He has earned their trust by his commitment to them.

“The whole world is filled with ‘I’ve got to get someplace,’ ” said Moss. “But there’s no place to get. There are only stories to tell.” As his talk went on, the direc-

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Lab Confab

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tors in attendance became every bit as worshipful as his actors. He left them with an invaluable piece of advice: "Find your autobiography in [every] piece that you direct."

Contrasting two unconventional ways of creating theatre, Luis Alfaro of the Mark Taper Forum and Bill Rauch of Cornerstone Theater spoke of their processes. Alfaro's method follows his apprenticeship with Maria Irene Fornes: The ending is not what's important but rather the catharsis. "For me," he said, "the notion of collaboration is a kind of laying yourself open."

Rauch described the evolution of a community-based means of creating theatre. Cornerstone enters into partnerships with groups to help tell their stories. "Our

projects are always as good as the community we're serving," he related.

A particular lab highlight was the hilarious storytelling of George Furth, who shared his personal history creating such cultural landmarks as *Company* with Stephen Sondheim. His generosity and sense of humor endeared him to everyone.

Throughout the week, each presenter added to the one before, piling on innovative techniques, advice, reassurances, and alternatives to the "way things are done." Dakin Matthews, founder of Antaeus Theatre Company, emphasized specificity. L.A. Women's Shakespeare director Lisa Wolpe concentrated on physicality in language and action: "Physicalize phrases, and the scene will stage itself," she declared.

Later in the week a panel of artistic directors peppered their observation with often hilarious bon mots. Said Odyssey Theatre founder Ron Sossi, "Directing is

the art of correcting the mistakes you made in casting." Said the seemingly beleaguered head of Zoo District, Jon Kellam, "Building a common language is really important. Not all of our company understands that." John Sylvain of Sacred Fools responded, "We are in agreement on the work, but we can't seem to agree about the color of posters."

Last Friday, 50 weary participants summed up their experiences. Randy Dixon, who had led an experiential workshop on improv, said, "It's an honor to be here because I love stories so much.... It makes me want to go home, roll up my sleeves, and get back to work." Said Andrew Sachs, "My dream is to see a play come out of Texas and then go on to Seattle... just because you all met in this lab."

But perhaps the best quote from an attendee was this: "This week has been like falling in love again." They can't help it.