

Your FRIENDS and NEIGHBORS

SIX WORLD-THEATRE PRACTITIONERS

remind us why we should look beyond our own front yards

Few of us think twice about seeing foreign films, especially if they're well made, provocative and subtitled. But the American theatre, film's distant and much older cousin, has only intermittently demonstrated the willingness to seek out and appreciate the work of foreign artists. Our theatre, it seems, has inherited a tradition (from whom? our government?) of lopsided sharing—even in times when we've amply exported our work around the world, we've been stingy with our invitations and imposed restrictions on our international colleagues. The producers and artists featured in this survey—Joseph V. Melillo, Christopher Martin, Robert Graham Small, Daniel Banks, Philip Arnoult and Roberta Uno—take issue with this American mindset. Some of them charge our community to get to know the major artists living beyond our borders; others encourage us to reflect upon our progress, while acknowledging the long journey that remains. —*Lenora Inez Brown*



JOSEPH V. MELILLO is the executive producer of the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

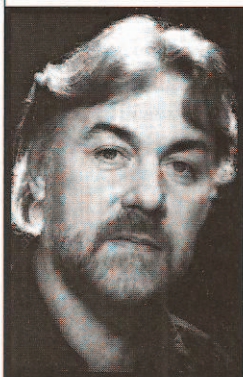
As I write this statement in February 2002, the United States is at war against terrorism; Israel and the Palestinians are on a dangerous daily diet of deadly retaliations; the Colombian, South American and Philippine governments continue to battle insurgent or revolutionary movements; and I am being asked to put a positive spin on internationalism in the theatre. Hmm.

I live globalism here at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in all of its artistic forms, including the hybrids of music-theatre and dance-theatre. Instrumental music was the pioneer for international integration; dance soon followed, and opera has

always been intrinsically international, given its singers, stage directors and designers. The American theatre, however, has been sluggish.

I am consistently informed that language has been the issue. To that, I would like to remind my colleagues that subtitles are a possibility, as well as tried-and-true simultaneous translation. I believe that the global theatre artists of today—Ratan Thiyam, Ariane Mnouchkine, Luca Ronconi, Calixto Bieto, Thomas Ostermeir, Ivo van Hove, Jan Lauwers, Antunes Filho, Ong Keng Seng, Rina Yerushalmi and Yukio Ninagawa—all have ideas, storytelling techniques and conventions that make theatre a vital and dynamic part of their communities; and, if we are lucky, part of our own.

If you do not know who these artists are, then you should make every effort to discover your artistic colleagues. It does mean that you need to make traveling a professional and personal priority (and perhaps that you manipulate the system in order to get your plane ticket paid for by one government agency or another). Ultimately, this aesthetic adventure requires a commitment. If you make it, you will embark on a provocative, insightful journey of new discoveries into the human spirit.



CHRISTOPHER MARTIN frequently works abroad as a director/designer and composer/arranger for national and state theatres in many countries. He was the founding artistic director of Classic Stage Company in New York City.

There I was in Ankara, Turkey. My back was turned to the TV as I prepared for another rehearsal of my upcoming Turkish-language production of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Rehearsals had hit a snag—nothing sounded right. As I worried, part of my mind occasionally tuned in to the two voices on TV: It was Ned Beatty and Dennis Quaid in *The Big Easy*. Wait! How could I know that without looking? After all, they were speaking Turkish!

Suddenly it became clear to me: The problem with our translation of Steinbeck was a matter of syntax. It had been approached as a literary endeavor. After all, in many cultures theatrical texts are considered literature. What we needed to do was overhaul the language by making it more colloquial—and once we did that, rehearsals took on a new dimension. I was no longer directing actors speaking Turkish, but Turkish with an Oakie dialect. By tweaking the language, a fabulous production and cultural exchange evolved. The production played three years, in every major city in Turkey—even the ancient amphitheatre at Pergamon.

It was after 18 seasons and nearly 100 productions at CSC Repertory in New York that I moved into the foreign arena, thanks to my long association with ITI. I began with the two languages I knew, but it was when I ventured forth with the Serbo-Croatian, Finnish, Swedish, Polish, Spanish, Russian, Korean and Turkish languages that I found experiences that would forever change my theatrical vision.

The challenge of a foreign culture is finding common ground, that tacit musical and rhythmic understanding of one another. All plays, all people, are basically the same, no matter what our language. We all go to the theatre to laugh, to be thrilled, to be moved.

I choose to memorize the text in English before I set out to direct it in a foreign language. Within two days I know exactly where the actors are in the script at any given moment. Amazingly, one begins to hear the play as audiences will. This has remained true, whether mounting Albee in Russian, Strindberg in his native tongue or the gospel according to Lloyd Webber in Seoul. My reward comes not of spreading cultural imperialism, but in giving the international experience a local habitation and a name.



ROBERTA UNO is the artistic director of New World Theater in Amherst, Mass., and a former adviser to *American Theatre* magazine.

I've just returned from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and a discussion focusing on the creation of new performance still rings in my ears. Nuth Samony, a master teacher of the Cambodian circus, Cirque Kmei, described his troupe as follows: "We are different from, say, Cirque de Soleil: They create new work that looks to the future. Our circus school needs to look back to the past to create the new. We are trying to create a Khmer aesthetic." Considering that his school at the Royal University of Fine Arts was reestablished in 1980 fol-

lowing the Khmer Rouge genocide, the urgency to create the new by connecting a broken past becomes particularly vivid.

What's remained with me from this conversation are conflicting thoughts regarding the role of the American and European artist abroad. Before returning to Amherst, I was asked if I would like to return to Cambodia on a fellowship to do a project or lead workshops. I thought to myself, "Am I, or any American director, what these artists really need?" As a director, the desire to engage with and experience the unknown is appealing, but I have grown weary of the Western practice of harvesting the exotic for our vision and audience consumption. I ask and encourage others to consider the following questions when looking at international collaboration: Does this project exist only because of a U.S. or European collaborator/leader? Who will see the work created? Who would this artist work with or what work would they create if they had the resources to lead?

Compelling work exists because of an organic connection, beyond a fascination with the foreign other. Some exemplary recent examples of international collaboration include Cambodian-American choreographer Sophilene Cheam Shapiro's *Othello*, Indian director Rustom Bharucha and the Philippine PETA's collaboration on *The Maids*, the Chilean production of the Yugoslavian play *Historia de Familia*. Perhaps a way can be found for India's Ratan Thiyam, a director steeped in traditional culture who pushes contemporary form and shares a heritage of war, to collaborate with these Cambodian artists. It may be contrary to our Western instincts, but sometimes, the best move for an American or European director is to use the privilege of our mobility and access to step aside.



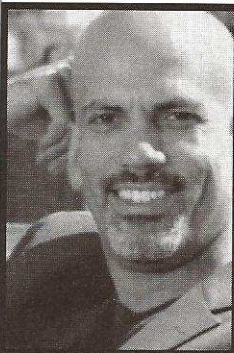
ROBERT GRAHAM SMALL is the artistic director of ShenanArts in Staunton, Va. Shenandoah International Playwrights is the oldest of the three programs ShenanArts produces.

When we at Shenandoah International Playwrights travel to work and play abroad, or provide a home

for artists from other lands to do the same, we have a special opportunity to see our lives and our work anew. We become actively engaged in America's grand experiment of life, liberty and pursuit by celebrating that which makes us different, only to discover how much we really hold in common.

The words of astronauts sailing to the moon give eloquent testimony to the change in perspective that comes from leaving the known behind. As they see the earth grow smaller, their expressions of wonder inspire us, making us feel somehow taller. In like manner, theatre exchanges connect us to our world, rather than leaving us isolated in a capsule of our own making. We become citizens of planet Earth. This kind of perspective serves to humble us in the face of a creative universe so much larger than we can ever be. It also serves to heighten our sense of reverence and responsibility for the gifts of time, place and purpose that are uniquely ours.

What we have discovered seems obvious now—in the current parlance, it is "to think outside of the box." Our work with theatre artists from 30 countries has taught us to see, hear and feel outside of it as well. Culture is essentially myopic—a mere (mirror) reflection of the life we live. We long for journeys through our own looking glass to see beyond our cultural blindness, opening ourselves to a greater spectrum of creative imagination.



DANIEL BANKS recently directed the opera *Beautiful Warrior* for New York's Vineyard Theatre and is currently working on Countee Cullen's adaptation of *Medea* for Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. He is a 2001–03

NEA-TCG Career Development Program recipient.

What is always tremendously educational and exciting for me about working internationally is the sense of community and culture that still exists in European theatre. We have strong theatre communities here, but most of the time we seem

to be united in adversity. Working in France, Germany, England, Italy and parts of Eastern Europe, I have found an almost Siddhartha-like naïveté, a kind of sheltered existence—artists sit in cafés and discuss “art” and “aesthetics” without negotiating the contingencies of economics or politics. For North American artists this can be a deeply romantic and nostalgic experience, focusing on creativity, with no apparent concern for fundraising, budgets, audience development and boards. It is the ultimate fantasy—deeply freeing and, I think, crucial for the development of the artist’s spirit. And while it may be no more than our fantasy, or a misapprehension of the status quo, it is a wonderful moment to languish in.

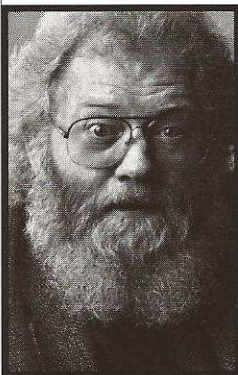
This atmosphere has fostered amazing ensemble work, which is both deeply physical and stylistically challenging. And although the notion of style is constantly reinventing itself, whether it be the post-Lecoq revolution of companies like Theatre de Complicite, Moving Picture Mime and Philippe Genty, or the proliferation of Grotowski-based and Kantor-influenced collectives, there is a deep focus on the quality of the work, and the process of creation. Also present, of course, is the intense aestheticism of some current German, French and Belgian directors which almost all but obliterates the actor’s individuality. But, for every auteur, like Luc Bondy, there is a wordsmith and physical genius, like Belgium’s Yves Hunstad. And, once again, the remarkable thing is that the work itself, the creation itself, is so intense. It is a theatre of extremes, total theatre, nothing unsure or apologetic about it, either in its warmth or its coldness.

The irony, of course, is that friends and colleagues have articulated similar longings and observations about our work. They envy the

“I thought to myself, ‘Am I, or any American director, what these artists really need?’”

—Roberta Uno

versatility of musical theatre, the political engagement of hip-hop theatre, the comparative diversity of voices (and audiences) found in our theatres. Through this ongoing exchange we expand our vocabularies, our ability to see, our critical and creative faculties. And we learn to think and work harder. The grass may indeed seem greener “over there,” but only because of cross-fertilization.



PHILIP ARNOULT is the director of the Center for International Theatre Development. He founded and was for many years artistic director of Baltimore’s Theatre Project Company.

BACK THEN...Arena Stage, the New York Shakespeare Festival, American Repertory Theatre, Yale Repertory Theatre, the Guthrie Theater and La Mama ETC brought Romanian directors Liviu Ciulei, Andrei Serban and Lucian Pintilie; Russia’s Yuri Lyubimov; Bulgaria’s Mladen Kiselov; Poland’s Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor; and Denmark’s Eugenio Barba to American audiences and theatre communities. Their arrivals made a deep impact that began a transformation of the American theatre.

Those brave initiatives grew out of a specific set of cultural, political and social realities in Eastern Europe and the U.S.—the Iron Curtain, a cold war and the residue of McCarthyism—and tightly controlled access to travel and communication on both sides.

THE RECENT PAST...Some quick snapshots of March 2002 in Eastern Europe:

- In Budapest, the Burger King has 10 flat-panel, high-speed Internet-accessible computers available to customers for about \$1.10 an hour;
 - Radu Apostol, a 25-year-old Romanian director, asks me if I want the copies of his performances on tape or DVD;
 - In Moscow, I speak to my Kenyan partner cell-phone-to-cell-phone for an update on the developments of an exchange between Moscow’s Golden Mask Festival and East African dancers;
 - Vista Travel in Budapest offers a round-trip Budapest/New York/Budapest fare of 89,000 HUF (\$323);
 - Nikolay Dmitriev, the founder/director of DOM Cultural Center in Moscow, tells me how life-changing the work of Thomas Richards and the WorkCenter of Jerzy Grotowski has been for Russian composer Vladimir Martynov. Martynov had seen the company at the Olympic Festival last spring but didn’t meet Thomas. Two e-mails and a DHL package of CDs later, they have been introduced;
 - I sit in on a meeting with Jim Nicola, artistic director of New York Theatre Workshop, and Hungarian director Robert Alfoldi as they outline a directing contract for Alfoldi’s production of *Merchant of Venice* (including a Hungarian design team) in New York in the spring of 2003. In less than an hour the deal is done;
 - When I interview nine young Romanian directors, all are comfortable speaking and working in English. On the train from Transylvania to Bucharest, Jim Nicola sees a truck sitting in a field with a sign hand-painted in English reading “FOR SALE.”
- The cultural, political and social changes in Eastern Europe have been massive in the past dozen years—all of which increase the ease with which we can travel to meet face to face or see each other’s work. And the impact of the changes in the way we talk—not just the rise of English as the “lingua franca” of our world but the technologies that are available and widely used on both sides of the East/West equation—has only just begun to be felt. These advances are unprecedented.

All we need is that same curiosity and will that led Zelda and Alan, Joe, Ellen, Lloyd, Bob and Rob to reach out 30-plus years ago. **AT**