



# How to make it in the competitive world of live theatre

# Success on the Boards

**BY LAURA HITCHCOCK** *One thing is absolutely essential to the success of any stage production: an audience. Although the writer or actor may derive inner satisfaction from expressing himself, a play's success involves an act of communication between the people onstage and the people in the house. Unlike film or television, live theatre is not performed for a camera. As a result, theatre can pack a one-two punch that the recorded performing arts can't. First, it can use a nonlinear form which is not a story, but which can touch viewers in intuitive places below the logical level of the mind, but above the level of ordinary emotions. Second, it can use heightened or poetic language which isn't evocative in film. Theatre carries with it the exciting possibility of change. Performances change subtly every night. Sometimes audiences participate in a production.*

And the actors themselves can feel the audience. "They're with us," actors say on those nights when nobody seems to breathe, and players and spectators are carried along together on the same

vibrating wavelength. Or, "we're losing them," when the house is full of shuffles and coughs. Actors are acutely conscious of whether "it's a great house," or "they're sitting on their hands tonight."

Theatre is live, it is spontaneous, and it is a direct communication between cast and audience. What makes this communication work? We've asked

experts on both coasts for their answers.

**BERNIE JACOBS** (President, the Shubert Organization): What are the ingredients for theatrical success? Good product, produced efficiently and effectively. Fine actors. Sound economic structure, set up by people who know what they're doing.

Sometimes perceptions differ from reality. Some cities are more responsive to cerebral productions; some cities go for the common denominator. In some productions you find both.

Theatre is on its way back.

**BILL BUSHNELL** (Producing Director, Los Angeles Actors' Theatre): Success is a combination of high quality art with high quality marketing. First it's the *play* that's successful. Second, you need a *production* of that play which leaves the audience emotionally moved or intellectually stimulated. —>

ILLUSTRATION BY BARBARA McADAMS





time, place or human knowledge that is highly theatrical and very different from what we experience in TV, movies or daily life. Though the emotions are identifiable, the worlds are not. Theatre today is a magic carpet experience. We've gone back to the

ing. What I did 10, five, two years ago is not what I would do today.

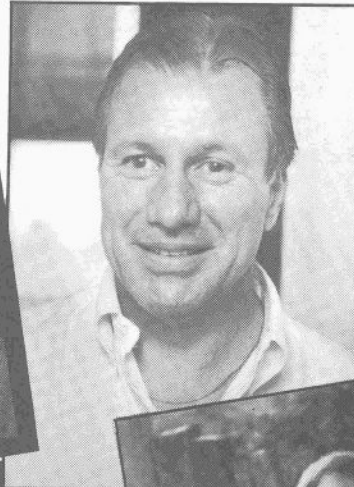
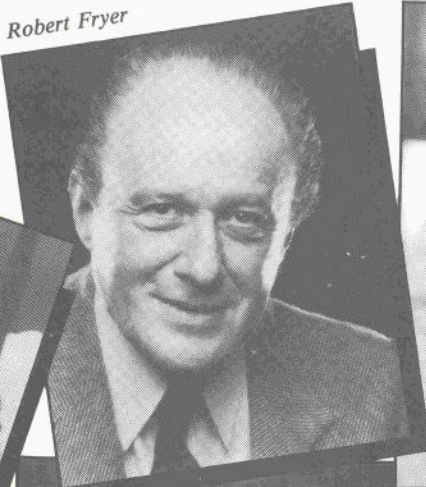
Components that seem to make a musical successful with Broadway audiences: very traditional structure, something with a little bit of courage, songs like "The Impossible Dream," patriotic or

*George C. White*

ous programs; in fact, I am part of a committee developing a program to write plays for a consortium of five or six Broadway theatres. A large real estate developer in that area will contribute to a fund, hopefully \$50-60 million. There'll be low-price tickets and a guarantee for the playwright. We'll ask important actors to work six to eight weeks for the cause. We must restimulate an audience to get back into the theatre-going habit, and attract people who have never been to the theatre before.

**SUSAN DIETZ** (Producing Director, L.A. Stage Co.): Success takes equal parts love, guts and willingness to take a chance. You need

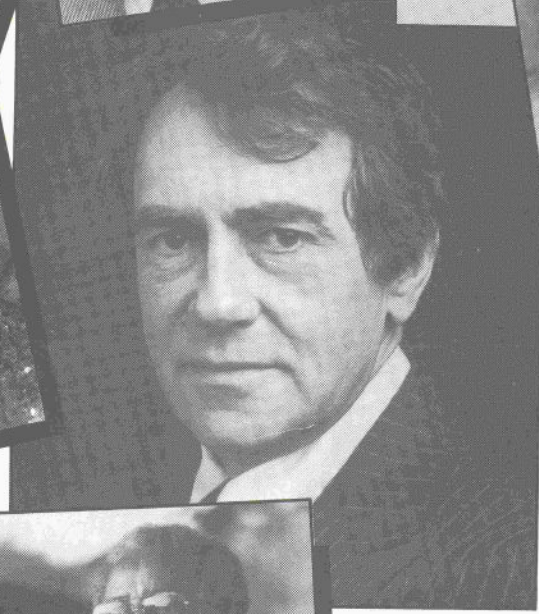
*Robert Fryer*



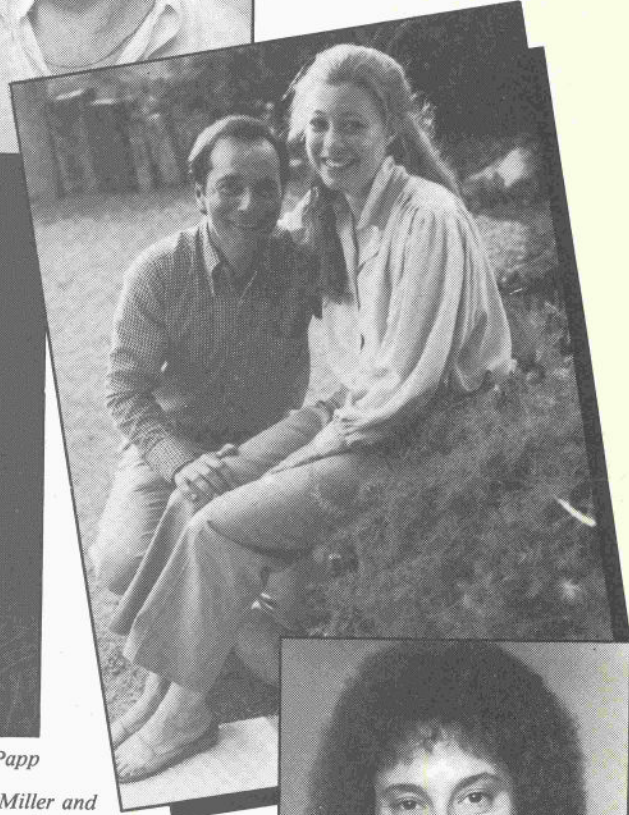
*Joel Siegel*



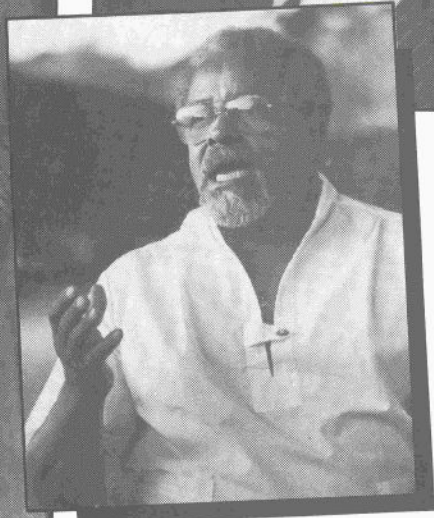
*Geraldine Fitzgerald*



*Joseph Papp*



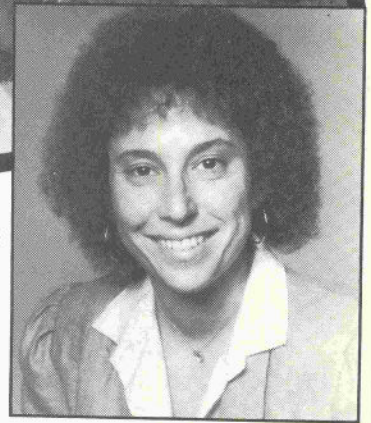
*Allan Miller and Laura Zucker*



*Bill Bushnell*

*Lloyd Richards*

*Susan Dietz*



**PHILIP ANGLIM** (Producer and star of "The Elephant Man"); Plays like "The Elephant Man," "Cats" and "Amadeus" are not the "slice of life" theatre of the '30s and '40s. They're plays that transport audiences into another historical

highly stylized art of European expressionism, as opposed to the school of naturalism. Audiences are willing to make that journey, to suspend their disbelief.

**JOSEPH PAPP** (Artistic Director, New York Public Theatre): Mv

sentimental elements, something that lifts the soul or touches the heart. Sometimes even wit, but I have seen witless things succeed.

A musical should be rich and original, have substance, not be a rehash. It should reflect some of the musical structures now crisscrossing our society, particularly Latino.

There's almost no audience left (and very little financial support) for serious plays. Most writers don't write for Broadway, because fine plays have no audience and are hard to get produced. "Plenty" made its money back, but after 3 months it had to close.

This situation has to be altered

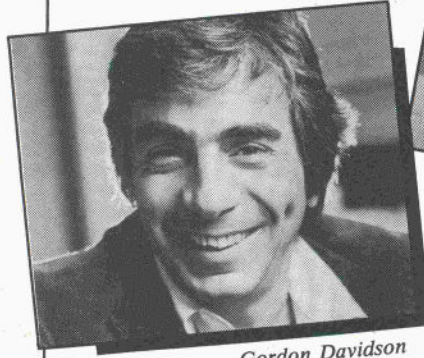
foolhardiness, a support group of theatre artists and managers who all share an artistic vision, and commitment to that vision and to seeing it through.

I can't say which play will be successful. I'm aiming toward a subscription season, because with a built-in audience you can make choices which are not dependent on commercial success.

**GORDON DAVIDSON** (Artistic Director, Center Theatre Group, Mank



← How do you succeed in the theatre? Get up early in the morning and stay late; be true to whatever vision you have, in terms of your theatre and community; don't try to pander or please everybody; start from yourself, collect around you a group to work with, and then share it with an audience. If you do it the other way, if you try to figure out what

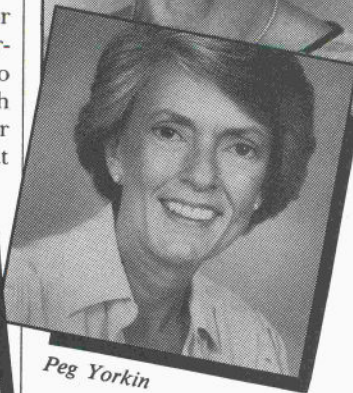


Gordon Davidson

they want, they'll double cross you every time.

You need the ability to roll with the punches, because you are going to get punched a lot, critically, financially, and in every other way. You have to be a Taurus. And I am. The community has responded to what we're doing.

Big question: what do you do for an encore? And that ain't easy.



Peg Yorkin

**SUSAN ALBERT LOEWENBERG** (Producing Director, L.A. Theatre Works): The key to being a successful producer is having a nose for what's stimulating to people, what's exciting.

The only reason for getting up out of your easy chair to go to a play is to have an experience you couldn't have with TV or movies. I really believe people want to see highly theatrical works that reach them in the way they are reached in live theatre. So I'm not interested in doing realism. In "Greek," we found a playwright, Steven Berkoff, who could use language, and had a highly physi-

Susan Albert Loewenberg

cal, very unusual style. Fortunately, it was one of those times when something eminently worth doing got a response. It's most exciting when "noncommercial" theatre gets a "commercial" response.

**GEORGE C. WHITE** (Founder and president of the Eugene O'Neill National Theatre Center; Chairman of the Sundance Institute: Success requires true teamwork. You need people working together in an atmosphere of cooperation. Of the 1,700 plays we receive annually for the National Playwrights Conference, we must choose 14. We look for an authentic "voice," a writer with something to say and a unique way of saying it. Sometimes we only hear it briefly in the third act—but the purpose of the Conference is to give the playwright a chance to develop.

**ROBERT FRYER** (Artistic Director, Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre): Success is giving people what they want. We're a nonfunded theatre with no subsidy. We live on the box office. We're "dependent on the kindness of strangers," as Blanche du Bois said in Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire." If we do things people want to see, we have an audience. In selecting a season, we have to figure out what they want.

L.A. theatre has grown so fast in such a short time! We're more adventurous here. The Ahmanson's name is on "Brighton Beach Memoirs" in New York and "A Patriot for Me" in London. We've spread over three cities and two countries. The city's growing up. **JOEL SIEGEL** (Critic, "Good Morning, America," ABC-TV): We are in the tushy business, as a producer friend of mine said. You've got to put tushies in the seats. If you don't, you're not in the theatre anymore. If people want it, they'll wait in line. Theatre in this country is one of the last areas of pure capitalism. There are no hard-and-fast rules.

The first performance I ever saw, when I was a first grader at Harrison Street School in East Los Angeles, was a magician. I thought he was wonderful. I've never forgotten it. I still expect to see magic in the theatre. I want to see magic.

**ERNEST SCHIER** (Director, National Critics Institute; cofounder, American Theatre Critics Association): What makes a theatrical success? Talented people under the leadership of a gifted person

sightful basis. Fresh, performable ideas. What often happens in American theatre is the production of a flash idea which has not been intellectually or artistically tested.

**GERALDINE FITZGERALD** (Actress, director): For a play to succeed, the audience must be touched in the heart or experience a revelation. Performing arts are all about people. They're the least abstract of all the arts. The successful play or movie is the one which has the most humanity. "Peter Pan" and "E.T." are basically very human, even though the locales are fantastic. Going to other planets is interesting, but who are the people who live there? The closer a play gets to people, the more successful the venture will be.

**FRANK RICH** (Drama Critic, the New York Times): There are no set rules that lead to theatrical success. Often, what's successful in theatre are ideas that no one has ever tried before. Theatre ventures often fail because people fall into past formulas and bore the audience.

**PEG YORKIN** (Producer, L.A. Public Theatre): I believe a successful theatre venture rests on a large subscription base of people who will support not only one well-reviewed play but a season of plays. I look for plays that speak to something about the human condition in our lives today, plays that I would want to see myself. I have a fine, dedicated staff that's open to ideas. Stimulating theatre will always be around. It appeals to a certain curiosity.

**LLOYD RICHARDS** (Dean, Yale School of Drama; Artistic Director, O'Neill Center's National Playwrights Conference): What does a theatrical venture need to succeed? The right people at the right time doing the right thing, independently or in combination. A time in life when people are ready to come together and ferment. People who stimulate one another to achieve beyond their capability to achieve independently. Then maybe you have a chance. There are so many unknowns; that's what's marvelous about theatre. Provocative ideas can appear. It's a dangerous place in so many ways. ★

Laura Hitchcock has a varied background in theatre, playwriting and psychology, including residencies in Japan and Paris. She is a theatre reviewer for *The Hollywood Reporter*, and was a 1983 critic-fellow at the O'Neill Theatre Center's National

MICHAEL B. DRUXMAN, Public Relations

8831 Sunset Blvd., Suite 406  
Los Angeles, Calif. 90069  
(213) 652-5592

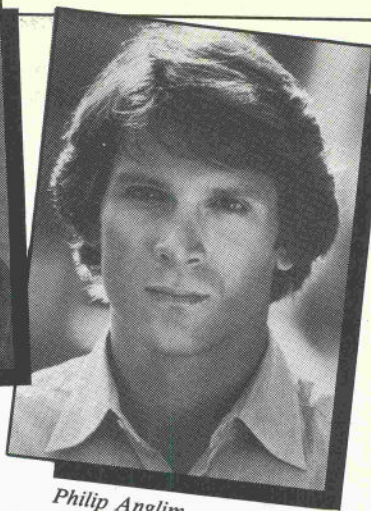
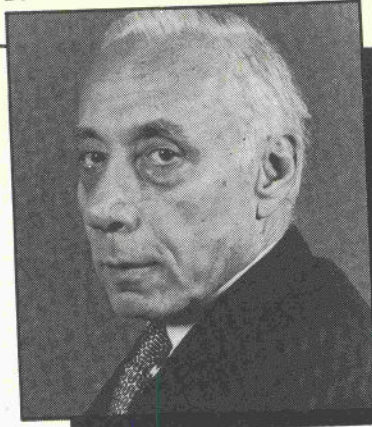
An Experienced Professional Who Cares



People are easily pleased. It's difficult to take them past the simple kind of opiate that pleasure provides to a space where the emotions are charged and the mind is electrified to do something with this information that's received in dramatic form. I don't mean "do something" in the sense of an overt act, but rather an internal effect that changes the way people look at the world.

I'm never upset when the audience is upset—if their minds are working. Most of the time, audiences want to be what they call "entertained." We must find, develop and educate that audience to the fact that they can be *more* than merely entertained. Theatre is not a private but a public process, of which the audience is an essential part.

Aristotle called high tragedy



*Philip Anglim*



*Ernie Schier with Karl Malden*

cathartic. Well-done melodrama and comedy also allow audiences to purge themselves of one set of ideas, and to perceive things in a different way. You can't get that in TV or films, which address an average mentality. Theatre plays to the highest mentality, and brings the lowest up with it.

Art and commerce don't neces-

sarily go together in theatre. Sometimes they do, but it's not endemic.

**LAURA ZUCKER** (Producing Director, Back Alley Theatre): Succeeding in the theatre means doing

something that's never been done and pulling it off. A number of your projects will fail. If you do really innovative or original works, you will only succeed a small percentage of the time, and you have to accept that up front. The unexpected can be traditional, like "The Fox," which was done in an innovative way, as was "Greek."

We're concerned not just with the production, but with publishing plays, as we've done with "The Fox" and "24 Hours," and marketing plays in a long-term way to extend the life of the play. We must develop a long-range plan, because a play's real income doesn't come from big New York productions, but from stock and regional deals. That means really

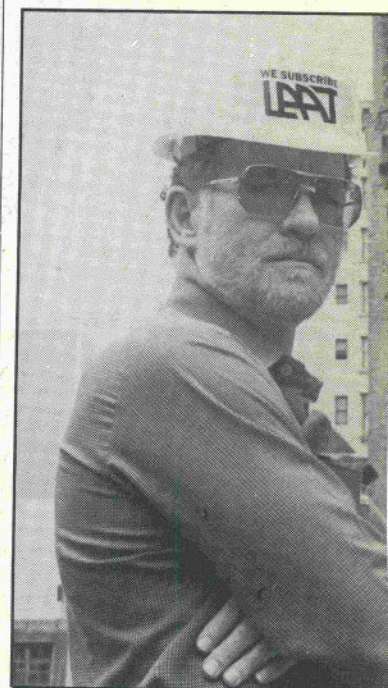
## ■ **Film Laboratory**

## ■ **Videotape Post-Production**

## ■ **Titles & Opticals**

## ■ **Audio-Visual**

# CFI



thinking about that play's marketability. It takes a lot of persistence and staying on top of it and making sure it reaches the proper audience. Where will a play be five-ten years from now?