

WHY ARTISTIC DIRECTORS LEAVE

August, 2001

Over the past ten years I've been in shouting matches with Mexican street performers over the chance of rain, run the lights and sound for three consecutive shows off a gasoline-powered generator parked outside the theater, sent my own sweet mother to work a box office on Orchard Street and sweet-talked fire chiefs, angry clowns from Chicago and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. That's right, for the past decade I've served as the Artistic Director of The Present Company and The New York International Fringe Festival, two institutions where the above-mentioned events usually don't rate a mention. It's been a ball, but baby, its goodbye.

Why? Simple answer: great job, wrong guy. I came to New York to write, direct, act and generally cause trouble. But in the past few years, I've found myself mostly producing, presenting, fundraising and administrating. This is the price of success. In the world of critically under-funded New York non-profit theater, when a company becomes successful in the traditionally understood sense (larger audience, operating budget of over a quarter of million dollars, regular coverage in the papers), the Artistic Director's job rapidly becomes a combination of front man, mouthpiece and chief fundraiser. If the company buys or leases a theater, the Artistic Director adds custodian, box office manager and backstage technician to his job description. And there is tremendous creativity in all of these aspects of the theatre. There is also, I'm told, tremendous creativity in podiatry. I could simply no longer balance the scales of artist and administrator, holy fool and landlord.

And then there is the unspoken plague of downtown theatre, Crisis Addiction. About two years ago I started to feel the early symptoms of this silent killer of serious, thoughtful work. It's a mild, attenuated strain of the Emergency Room Syndrome, the condition of adjusting to and then thriving in a chaotic, challenging environment. With no real resources, very little sleep and a large enough ego, you find you can do just about anything if you *just keep doing it*. Producing and creating theater in America, let alone New York, let alone downtown New York is an impossible task. Every show is a tremendous triumph and a minor miracle. Merely producing and continuing to produce becomes a victory. The only constant rewards, since there is no money and little fame, are the adrenaline rush and the subsequent wonder of simply having pulled it off. You find yourself beginning to thrive in the desperation and chaos. You confuse the crisis with your Muse. You no longer can see or plan towards a life beyond the current emergency. And so, subtly at first, flagrantly in the later, terminal stages of the disease, you begin to perpetuate and then create the crisis. You become an emergency room director, a mercenary actor; you even begin to think that the crushing conditions are actually helping your art. Let me tell you, my brothers and sisters downtown and anywhere where the struggle is fierce, if you are a committed and intelligent artist, if you are really in this for the long haul, your work will only improve with financial stability, a good night's sleep and a clean and well-ventilated space in which to work. You must think past the Crisis or live in it forever.

There is a political party in Mexico with a name that always makes me laugh. They call themselves, with a straight face I assume, the Institutional Revolutionary Party. That name contains all of the frustration and the confusion of the job of Artistic Director in today's non-profit theater. For your work to mean anything, you must be thinking as a revolutionary. For your work to continue, you must be planning as an institution. Any artist, but particularly a theater artist, and most particularly a contemporary American theater artist, has to work from a place of risk. But when you become part of an institution, or god forbid partly responsible *for* an institution, it's no longer only your time, money and reputation on the table. You're risking people's jobs, people's plans and futures. So you stop and think for a second and in that one second the artist retreats and the administrator steps in. Soothingly, calmly, responsibly, the administrator glides in and the artist lays down his pen, climbs off the ledge and thinks in terms of safety. It's one thing to jump from rooftop to rooftop. It's another thing entirely when you've got a baby in your arms.

But the real reason I had to step down is a matter of wardrobe. I got tired of being the Suit. Even in my jeans and black T-shirt, grimy from a day hauling sheetrock, I was the Suit. Young artist pokes his head in the office, grizzled Artistic Director says "Yes?" and the instantaneous mental costume change is complete. I may look like the guy who sweeps up the lobby, but suddenly I'm also the guy who can get your show onstage. I'm the guy that can get you into the festival. I'm the guy on the letterhead. I am the Suit. I began to long to be on the other side of the desk. I began to envy that writer's freedom, that director's time. All this time I had imagined myself to be a swash-buckling pirate sailing the high seas of culture, looking for new lands, only to realize that I had become a downtown Captain Steubing, amiably pretending to steer an ocean-liner while trading quips with the guest stars. (*This week, Richard Maxwell and Greg Kotis have their luggage switched resulting in a hilarious and light-hearted cruise!*)

I'll miss it all, of course. For the past ten years I have pretty much been able to do whatever I liked. I green-lighted a comedy about a modern-day concentration camp museum/theme park run by children of Holocaust survivors. I personally burnt money onstage, a federal offense, I'm told. When a young writer pitched a project improbably called *Urinetown*, I laughed and said, "Yes. Beautiful. How can I help?" I got up every morning and went to work in the theater, which is a rough definition of Paradise for me.

Now what? A few hours after I announced my resignation a friend asked me that question. Without thinking, I broke into the smile you smile when you have a simple answer to one of life's Big Questions. I raised my glass and vowed, "I'm going to behave irresponsibly." She nodded gravely and said, "Well, good. It's about time."