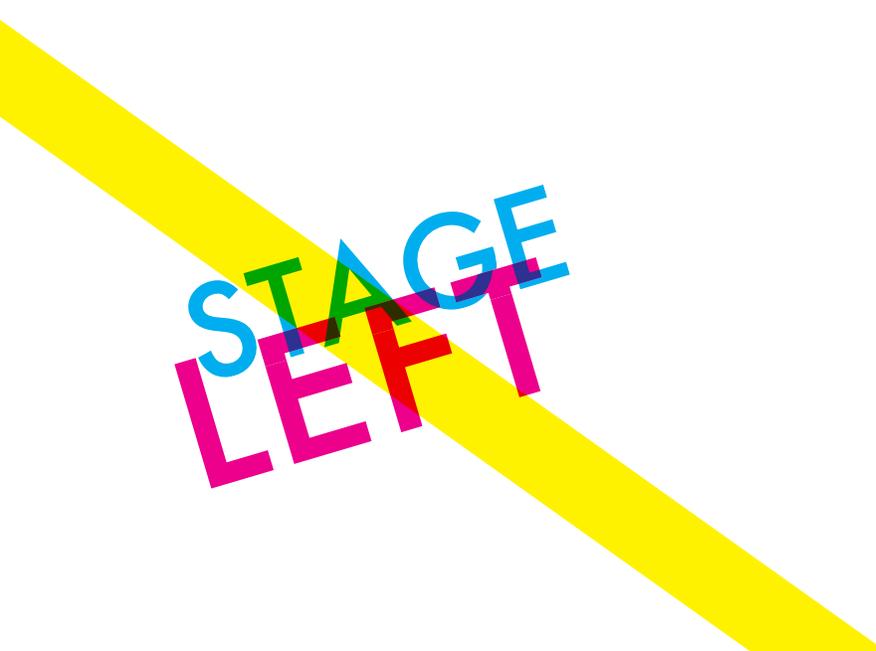


THEATER IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

by ROBERT HURWITT, THEATER CRITIC at THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE



STAGE
LEFT

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THEATER helped shape the culture and identity of San Francisco from its earliest days, and theater plays a similar role for the entire Bay Area in the early 21st century, however much the times and popular entertainment climate have changed in the interim.

THE GOLD RUSH ROOTS OF BAY AREA THEATER

No sooner did the city spring into existence almost overnight with the 1849 Gold Rush than—despite its remote, in many ways isolated location—it became one of the nation’s leading theater centers, at a time when very few American cities could make such a claim. Now no longer isolated or remote, as the cultural and social hub of a metropolitan Bay Area intricately interconnected with the rest of the world, it’s experiencing a theatrical renaissance at least a half century old, and counting.

It’s no wonder San Francisco became an instant magnet for the traveling, mostly actor-manager-run theater troupes of the mid-19th century. A decent run in the city by the bay not only paid off well but paved the way for a quick tour of the mining towns and camps in the Sierra foothills, where theater-hungry miners (Shakespeare was a particular favorite) would applaud by stomping, hollering, firing pistols in the air and tossing nuggets or bags of gold dust onstage.

AN INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL CENTER

Within a very short time, San Francisco had its own theaters and growing companies of actors and other performers, creating their own seasons and standing ready to fill out the casts for the era’s greatest stars — who traveled solo or with a small core company that played the lead roles in their repertoires. The local offerings reflected the diversity of a city born in an international gold rush, covering the whole range of high- and low-brow genres, from melodrama, early vaudeville and blackface minstrel shows to Shakespeare, opera and a thriving Chinese opera scene.

As the primary form of mass entertainment, theater also helped create a sense of civic identity. It brought people together, for entertainment, discussion and to build cultural organizations, helping define the city’s personality and sometimes reach across the class, ethnic, religious and other divisions within it. At the same time, the artists it developed helped cement San Francisco’s international reputation as a cultural center, from Edwin Booth’s emergence as a leading Shakespearean actor to playwright-entrepreneur David Belasco’s impact on early 20th century Broadway, Isadora Duncan’s influence on modern dance and the great comic Bert Williams’ breaking of the vaudeville color barrier. By the time one early San Francisco theater critic, Samuel Clemens, left town, he was already becoming better known by his pen name, Mark Twain.

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A NEW MOVEMENT

The first half of the 20th century was less conducive to the growth of theater throughout the country. The transcontinental railway system and development of national highways revolutionized how cities and people interconnected. Radio waves and movies became the new forms of mass media and New York producers took control of the national theater and vaudeville touring circuits to supply the nation's appetite for live performance. It wasn't until after World War II when television became the dominant mass medium that a new regional theater movement sparked what's become a national theater renaissance.

Though few would have foreseen it, San Francisco was well-poised to join the vanguard of this new movement. The city emerged from the war as the center of a Bay Area that had experienced tremendous population, racial diversity, academic and business growth during the war, with a burgeoning jazz, counterculture and Beat poetry scene that kept its transgressive Barbary Coast traditional allure alive. With the founding of the Actor's Workshop by Herbert Blau and Jules Irving from San Francisco State University, in 1952, the city had what would become one of the nation's leading new professional regional theaters for the next decade. More than that, the Workshop quickly

developed a national reputation for cutting-edge, risk-taking work with its early productions of Brecht, Beckett, Genet and Pinter and nurturing of interdisciplinary work. R.G. Davis founded the artistically and politically radical San Francisco Mime Troupe under its aegis in 1959.

THE THEATER EXPLOSION

The Workshop sowed the seeds for the great flowering of Bay Area theater that followed but didn't survive to see it. It closed in 1965, not long after Irving and Blau left to head the new Lincoln Center theater company in New York. With its demise, the Mime Troupe was left to almost single-handedly carry on the region's reputation for adventurous new work. By the end of the decade, though, the Bay Area was awash in dozens, then more than 100 new companies, a growth that continued through the 1970s and '80s and keeps replenishing itself to this day. Though many have flourished and then died, new groups keep arising to replace them.

The reason for this sudden explosion in theatrical activity and experimentation in one region lies in a unique confluence of social trends. Some were economic. The post-war prosperity of the '50s fostered a generation of college students and graduates many of whom believed that jobs would always be plentiful, allowing time for travel, social causes or artistic exploration



Photo by Ganslen Studios; courtesy San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

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before settling into a career. Meanwhile, the Ford Foundation spearheaded a national wave of foundation investment in the creation and nurturing of new arts companies—a movement that coincided with the rapid growth of the National Endowment for the Arts, which, in turn, encouraged the growth of funding from state arts councils, fostering county and city arts programs in turn. San Francisco's Grants for the Arts Fund became one of the most active in the nation.

THE SIXTIES AND THE RISE OF NEW ART FORMS

Other influences can be summed up simply in the cultural upheaval known as The Sixties. Anti-HUAC, Free Speech Movement and anti-Vietnam War protests made Berkeley a magnet for Civil Rights and other activists from around the country, who arrived dedicated to working for change. By the middle of the decade, an emerging drug culture had combined with the new San Francisco psychedelic rock sound, resulting in the region's second gold rush, the Acapulco Gold rush or Summer of Love. Many in that summer's mass influx of hippies, not finding the earthly nirvana they'd expected, left. But a significant number stuck around and began creating the new art forms they'd hoped to find.

Serendipitously, in 1967 William Ball's American Conservatory Theater—key beneficiary of Ford Foundation seed money—moved in to take the

place of the Workshop as the Bay Area's flagship professional theater company. At the same time it began energizing Bay Area audiences with an adventurous rotating repertory of productions, local university theater departments—most notably S.F. State and UC Berkeley—were producing graduates and dropouts eager to stage specific plays, even if they had to start their own company to do it. This led to the founding of Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Magic Theatre and TheatreWorks, among many others.

THE SEVENTIES TO THE PRESENT - COLLABORATION

The theater explosion of the late '60s resulted in a remarkable growth of new companies for the next two decades, a period when the Bay Area achieved national prominence for originating landmark new plays such as Sam Shepard's *True West*, *Fool for Love* and *Buried Child* (from the Magic) and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (the Eureka Theatre). The energy devoted to new work continues unabated, though its focus has changed. Where the region acquired an international reputation for experimental and multidisciplinary work in the '70s and '80s—from such groups as Soon 3, Marin County's Snake, Antenna and Nightfire companies or Berkeley's seminal Blake Street Hawkeyes and George Coates' Performance Works—much of that inventive experimentation has become incorporated in the past two decades in the



Hibiscus, founding member of the Angels of Light. Photo by Robert Altman.

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production methods of the major companies and in a dedication to developing new work that produces more than 100 world premieres every season.

The general profile of the theater scene has changed as well, from a community with one flagship company to two—A.C.T. and Berkeley Rep—surrounded by a constellation of smaller, important regional theaters, from TheatreWorks and San Jose Rep in the south to California Shakespeare Theater, the Aurora and Center Rep in the east, Marin Theatre Company in the north and the Magic in San Francisco, with other companies growing in the wings. But one constant is that all of these companies work together to one degree or another, sharing and sustaining the same pool of actors, playwrights, designers and directors, mentoring smaller groups and cooperating on specific projects in a manner that seems unique even in the inherently collaborative art form of theater. It's no accident that the region boasts the largest and most active theater support group in the nation, Theatre Bay Area, which in turn continues to nurture and broaden the collaborative impetus that gave it birth.

Some companies actively fostered others. The Chicano teatro movement began when Luis Valdez left the Mime Troupe to found El Teatro Campesino, just as the new circus movement began when Larry Pisoni and Peggy Snider left the Troupe to found the Pickle Family Circus, which, in turn, begat the nouvelle vaudeville movement as well. Ed Hastings at A.C.T. was instrumental in midwifing the Asian American Theater Company. Since then, the impetus to found ethnic- or identity-specific companies that flowered in the '70s has largely subsided—though many of those companies continue to broaden their work—as the mainstream companies have diversified their offerings, thereby better fulfilling their mission of holding the mirror up to the world in which we live.

That, too, is one of the ways in which Bay Area theater continues to help shape and define its community. Ever since the ancient Greeks, theater has always been the most political of the arts—and not because it depicts or explores specific issues or presents a political point of view, though it can do that very well.

The history of theater in the Bay Area, as outlined by *STAGE LEFT* and beyond, is one that exemplifies the best of what theater can and should do. Theater should offer the chance to experience the world through others' lives, to empathize with people who may be very different or very much like us and to question not only what we've just seen or been told but the nature of the experience itself and our own perceptions. As *STAGE LEFT* makes so clear, that is exactly what the vibrant theater community of the Bay Area has done. We have tackled challenges, met those not like us, celebrated success and commiserated in sadness, all in the company of others, as part of a community. The collaborative nature of the art form has inspired the collaborative spirit of its audience as well.
