

THE NON-PROFIT AND COMMERCIAL THEATER: A COMPARISON

A CONVERSATION WITH ROCCO LANDESMAN AND ROBERT BRUSTEIN AT YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA

May 2007—This conversation took place in a classroom setting amongst theater management, directing, and acting students and faculty. Rocco Landesman, who was then President of Jujamcyn Amusement Corporation and is now Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, facilitated this conversation with Robert Brustein, founding Artistic Director of both the Yale Repertory Theatre and the American Repertory Theatre. Despite their differences in opinion on the role of nonprofit and commercial theater, Brustein has been a mentor, colleague, and longtime personal friend of Landesman. In this discussion, they address the evolution of the nonprofit theater movement, the state of repertory companies, enhancement deals, the role of the Artistic Director within an institution, and the function of dramatic criticism in both nonprofit and commercial theater.

Background of the Non-Profit Theater

ROCCO LANDESMAN: I would like to broach the topic of the relationship between the institutional theater and the commercial theater, which I now represent. Although Bob and I both have pretty strong roots here at Yale Drama School, you may get some different perspectives between us on this relationship.

ROBERT BRUSTEIN: The opposition between the commercial and the nonprofit theater is a

subject I've been poring over now for many years. It certainly outlives me because there's always been a red state, blue state opposition regarding theater in this country, as there's been a red state, blue state spiritual opposition in the electorate. In the 1930's for example there was a nonprofit theater. It wasn't the Group Theater, which you would expect to be a nonprofit theater. The Group Theater, which lasted only nine years, was really forced into a box office arrangement where it had to go play by play and had to depend on critics and

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audiences in the same way that the commercial theater did. As a result, as Harold Clurman says in his brilliant book, *The Fervent Years*, there was always disappointment. There was always a sense that they weren't achieving their goals; that they were being forced into a system that they politically had set out to oppose.

The alternative during that period was the Federal Theater. The Federal Theater was the first experiment on the part of the government to create a nonprofit situation in which the function of the theater, as well as other arts, would be to develop artists and give artists employment. That was the thought behind it by Harry Hopkins and the New Deal administration. Hallie Flanagan was the brilliant head of it and one of the great theater people of the 20th century. In her mind, it was an attempt really to create a whole different complex of thinking about the theater. She was first to decentralize the theater. She set up theaters not just in New York City, where previously, outside of touring companies, that's where they had been, but in virtually every major city in the country. She not only decentralized the theater, but she got subsidies through Harry Hopkins and Franklin Roosevelt to support these theaters. She was very much in advance of her time by having multicultural theaters. She had a Jewish theater, Black theater, Latino theater. She was really a prophetess of this movement. The movement lasted four years. What happened to the movement is what's happened to the nonprofit theater in relation to the government ever since, which is it collided with Congress. Congress in this case decided that the Federal Theater was full of Reds, Communists, Pinkos and what have you and even accused Hallie, who was virtually non political, of the same failing. It was wiped out because there's always a smell of socialism about nonprofit theater.

There is to this day the notion that if you're dealing with a collective group of people and you are not concerned primarily with profits, but the development and evolution of artists, technicians, administrators, that's essentially a socialist idea, a collective idea, even though it may be led by one person who makes the decisions as often happens with the Artistic Director. That's what happened in Soviet Russia with Stalin and it happens in socialist countries as well; someone makes the decisions on behalf of the collective. That idea frightens people. The idea of not pursuing profits is directly contrary to the basis on which this country was based, which is capitalism. The Broadway theater is essentially an expression of capitalism. In my time, the same thing that happened in the 1930's has happened in the 1970's, the 1980's and the 1990's, which was the inexorable destruction of the nonprofit movement by the forces of capitalism. I'm not a communist; I'm not a socialist; I essentially believe in art. I also believe in creating the proper conditions for art and I don't think capitalism provides those conditions very often.

In the 1960's, as in the 1930's, through some fluke there was an effort to find money to subsidize the arts in this country and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was created as a result. Because of the NEA, there was a proliferation of nonprofit theaters around this country, something like 260 of them, very similar to the Federal Theater movement. Before too long of course, there was worry about these theaters, about where the money was going. In a democratic country or in a country that represents itself as democratic, the question was whether you should spread this money geographically or whether you should spread it towards the best theaters or the biggest theaters. All those questions were being debated. Then there was the further question, which essentially began to "do-in" the NEA, which was the multicultural

question. Do you distribute this money according to theaters that are set up for specific purposes to represent minority groups who are unrepresented?

All of those questions were essentially obliterated by the famous Mapplethorpe and Serrano controversies. As a result of this, Congress got ready to get rid of the NEA, certainly to curtail it. Whereas during the 1960's and 1970's, oddly enough under Richard Millhouse Nixon, the NEA was increasing in the amount of money that it was being allotted, soon under Carter and other presidents, it was being severely reduced until now I think it's around \$100 million, which is what it was in 1974. The money is now essentially going to restoration and historical projects. So once again Congress, a political arm of the country, destroyed subsidy that was going to the theater. Now this long winded preface is simply to tell you why the resident theater behaves in the way it does. It can't get money from the government and it can no longer get money from private foundations, which, being fickle and fashionable as they are, have really turned their attention to other things; they never stay with anything very long. There was a time when the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and other foundations were putting a lot of money into the theater. No longer. Only the Mellon Foundation and the Shubert Foundation continue to fund the theater in any significant way.

Corporations were getting a little clout by putting their imprimatur on the resident theater through contributions. I remember CBS was giving money under a man named Arthur Thurlow, who was a Benjamin Franklin scholar. He was giving money to the best theaters for doing the best work. That soon stopped. CBS decided they would only give money where the largest viewership was. So you can see how the corporate mentality reduces everything

down to what is good for them in terms of income. Corporations stopped giving money of any significant kind. Although now as Rocco points out, they endow theaters and name theaters after them such as the American Airlines Theater. God knows what's coming next, the Campbell's Soup Theater? The Heinz Ketchup Theater? Private individuals are the last best hope of the theater through being on boards or outreach, but they're not very dependable. So the theater naturally begins to look to the box office for support and that means they begin behaving just like the profit theater. You never tire of quoting Jerry Schoenfeld, nor do I, when he said, "there's no profit like nonprofit."

Nonprofit theater began to systematically look for products that could be moved to Broadway. They didn't do this 100%, but they did it enough and with enough frequency really to look as though they were spoiling their original birthright and undermining and compromising their original position as an alternative to the Broadway system, rather than an extension of it. That opposition, that red state, blue state opposition between profit and non profit, while each respected the other, were meant to follow parallel paths, not converging paths.

Resident Companies

LANDESMAN: As I reread Bob's book about his time here, infused throughout it on almost every page is this ideal and mission of having a resident company and doing works in repertory. He was swimming against the overwhelming tide on this. Is it possible to do this? When you ask Artistic Directors why they don't have a repertory company, they will say they can't get the best actors for the individual production and that it's too costly to present plays in rep. What do you think has happened?

BRUSTEIN: It isn't too costly. I think it's very economical to run a repertory company. The changing of the sets is expensive, but the maintaining of the actors is really inexpensive. Instead of having to bring up actors from New York and house them, the actors raise families in your towns and house themselves. The same time they are performing one play, they are rehearsing another, so you are saving on rehearsal costs. So there are a number of savings. I've never been convinced that repertory is more expensive than a sequential system.

I also disagree with those who say you can't get the best actors. I'd say that repertory actors are trained to be the best actors. They're trained not just to play themselves, but to transform themselves in a way that will make them available. Of course not everybody can play every role, but they can play a great variety of roles other than the ones designed for themselves. Whereas in the Broadway theater as in Hollywood, and this is reinforced and encouraged by Strasberg's Method system, you essentially look into your own personality, your own character, your own biography in order to play yourself. Stars are expected to play themselves, are expected to be recognizable to the audience, whereas resident theater actors are meant to be in disguise. They are meant to be absolutely transformed so that you don't recognize them.

The other thing about the repertory trained actor is he or she is part of a moral system. The system is that you are devoted to the collective, to making the work as good as possible. Not simply shining by yourself, although you want to do that too. If a theater is doing work in repertory, it's very hard to pick that very successful work out of the repertory and put it into the commercial venue. It keeps the theater honest in a way that pulling out of repertory doesn't. I remember the time when I first noticed this. It was at the Long Wharf in

the early 1970's. Arvin Brown was the Artistic Director. They had had a repertory company and a production of a *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which was successful. It was moved to Broadway with four of its major repertory actors and the company was decimated. It didn't exist anymore while the play had a long run on Broadway. It never really recovered itself and never became a company again. It began doing sequential work in the hope they might be able to move it again. That's always the danger.

LANDESMAN: Something I've always had a problem with is your assumption that if the actor wants to take a job that is much higher paying or has much more visibility or might advance his career, that there is an implied moral judgment.

BRUSTEIN: Let me deny that. Everything I say is qualified by the word frequency. It's a question of frequency. How often do you do it? If you do it all the time it's one thing. If you do it once in a while, it's another.

LANDESMAN: Isn't it perfectly legitimate for someone who is an aspiring actor and has a family and wants to make a living, to feel that imperative to go to New York and work in Broadway or to Hollywood and work in movies? It's a perfectly natural human choice and does that deserve the moral approbation of Bob Brustein?

BRUSTEIN: I think if you have a family and you want to support them, you're more likely to find that support in the resident theater, with a regular season. If you go to Broadway or Hollywood you're taking a big chance and you and your family may starve. If you're looking for a kind of regular supportive environment, that environment used to be the resident theater. And no, I don't make a moral judgment on actors that want to go to Hollywood. I want to go to Hollywood too.

Everyone wants to go to Hollywood. We're imbued with Hollywood. I want to go to Broadway. It's a natural impulse in everybody.

But the fact is that they are well known and they become stars of their own environment. Our company could not walk down the street without being accosted by very happy theatergoers or very angry theatergoers and they were a part of an environment, part of a neighborhood, part of a circumstance that really gave them a lot of endorsement. The kind of endorsement you don't get when you're a Hollywood star because there's a buffer between you and your audience. You're not allowed to go into the audience because they'll tear you apart and rip your clothes. So I have to take this puristic position. You have to do that in the monastery; you have to observe the rules.

LANDESMAN: Right, but we don't live in a monastery.

BRUSTEIN: But in a way the resident theater became a kind of monastic hairshirt. It became a hairshirt for all of us because it caused a lot of trouble for everybody. Technicians don't like it because they have to change sets every other day. Designers don't like it because they're limited by budgets and by the fact that sets have to be changed. Playwrights don't like it because they don't get that perfect actor in the role that they imagined. The audiences sometimes don't like it because they're tired of seeing the same actor over and over again. Still there's something very appealing about it in spite of all of this. Something that really satisfies in the way that other things don't satisfy and those very limitations are often things that prove to be advantages. The fact that you have a limitation makes you design better and more imaginatively than if you don't. If you got all the money in the world, you're going to create a monstrous design.

LANDESMAN: I think a lot of designers would disagree with that pretty strenuously.

BRUSTEIN: I don't know if they would. And I don't know if a lot of directors would. I want to tell you a story about Paul Sills who was teaching here. Paul Sills was the person who created the Second City Theater Company and for awhile we had a lot of Second City actors here. I had a dream of having a classical company made up of Second City actors. Sills is a brilliant director and we had lost a play, for a reason that I won't go into now. Sills came in to my office and said, "I've got an idea for you." I said "What is it?" He said, "We get on the stage. We tell stories." I said, "What do you mean tell stories?" He said, "Grimm's' Fairy Tales. You go in and you tell a fairy story on the stage and it starts with the actor saying 'Once upon a time, there was a very old man' and he turns into an old man before your eyes and then transforms into any number of other characters as the story's being told." I said "Well, sounds interesting, but the trouble is it sounds like a small idea and we have the Main Stage University Theater, which is a big idea, what are you going to do about that?" He said, "It's a limitation. I prefer the limitation." He made out of this limitation a brilliant series of plays called Story Theater. I don't know if you ever heard of those but they became really a pattern of storytelling on the stage, which allowed us to use novels, short stories by Chekhov, Tolstoy, Conrad and make them into stage vehicles in a way that had never been done before. I think limitation, for any artist, is an inspiration.

LANDESMAN: Is this gargantuan effort to keep a company together, functioning as a unit and working from year to year, worth it in terms of that kind of ephemeral sense that an audience gets over time about the evolution of the company and its community? I assume that part of it in your view is artistic. Another part has to do with the establishment of the

community, with idealism in having a group of people together working from year to year and protected from the exigencies of the market place.

BRUSTEIN: I first learned of that when I was an actor with a group called Group Twenty, later known as Theater on the Green. We played outdoors in Wellesley. It was the first post-war classical company in America. It was a summer camp. We rehearsed two weeks, regardless whether it was Shakespeare, Sheridan, Arthur Miller. Whoever it was, it was two weeks. It was summer stock. We had a marvelous group of actors. I never will forget the feeling. I'm sure some of you have experienced it at some time when you're working towards a common goal with a group of people who you love. There's no better feeling in the world than that and I wanted to recapitulate that when I came to Yale and started the Yale Repertory Theater and when I came to Harvard to start the American Repertory Theater. The fact is that the audiences pick up on that too. The thing I'm getting now after five years of a different system when we only had four actors from the repertory company and they weren't in every show, the audience misses those actors. The plays that were most successful audience-wise at the American Repertory Theater were the plays that used those actors.

LANDESMAN: To get back to the central question, why do you think that there's virtually no repertory theater now in the United States in spite of your best efforts?

BRUSTEIN: For the very reasons we've been discussing, namely the box office effort to create a success that can run longer than repertory. It makes absolute sense. If you have something that's income-producing, why can't you get money for it since you're so desperately in need of money? But your thinking changes at that point. I remember the historical moment when Joe Papp's thinking

changed. It was the year of *Chorus Line*, when he did this workshop with Michael Bennett that turned into an enormous bonanza that moved to Broadway and funded the Public Theater for 25 years. I think it's still funding it. Then he moved *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to Broadway. A whole series of things began to go to Broadway and his thinking changed. Whereas he was looking for the "hunchback play," as he called it, the thing that nobody else would do, he suddenly started looking for the play that would appeal to the larger audiences and the Public Theater was never the same as a result.

Enhancements

LANDESMAN: The next stage, which ironically Bob aided and abetted unwittingly, was for commercial producers specifically to go to the resident theaters with their project, develop it, presumably with the encouragement of the resident theater and then to use that as essentially a Broadway tryout and to bring it to Broadway. The first production of that nature to my knowledge was *Big River* and that begat what is now a very common practice in the commercial and resident theater of using the resident theaters as commercial tryouts.

BRUSTEIN: *Big River*. That story is interesting. Rocco sent me a script by a Yale Drama School graduate and a good friend of ours named William Hauptman, which was an adaptation of Huckleberry Finn. I thought it was a terrific adaptation and thanked him for sending it to me. I said, "We'll do it." He said "I want music" and I said, "Who you got in mind?" He says Roger Miller. He was great country musician and it was a stroke of genius to think of him for this because he was the perfect composer for it. Rocco was a little worried about getting him because he was high on drugs at this time and couldn't even finish a score. He hadn't written a song in about ten years. Rocco decided he would go out and spend a weekend with

Roger Miller, sober him up and see if he can get a score out of him. He got about four or five songs. Des McAnuff was the director and we had a lot of fun with that production with the resident company of the American Repertory Theater. That play went on to Broadway with an entirely different cast; it didn't touch our company at all in that way. Our company remained our company. They didn't move, but the play moved and that was perfectly fine. Why shouldn't a play be distributed any number of places and why shouldn't the playwright have exposure in any number of cities, including New York? A perfectly good idea. I saw nothing wrong with that at all. You gave us a little piece of that, a small piece but it was nevertheless a good piece, and that helped to keep us afloat for awhile. If I then said "what's the next piece that's going to keep us afloat for awhile?" I would be in the brothel.

LANDESMAN: The funding now is pretty significant. A typical, so-called enhancement (one of the great euphemisms) for a production, a musical, is nearly two million dollars now. In some cases notably more and that's very important money to a not for profit theater.

BRUSTEIN: We refused your offer of enhancement then. It may be silly not to accept the enhancement money, but once you do, then Rocco's my boss. Rocco tells me how to do the play. He becomes the producer and not me.

LANDESMAN: That is in fact what the dynamic is as these productions get on. The resident theater very much wants to make it their production with their artistic staff, their dramaturgy, their point of view and the commercial producers may have an entirely different idea in mind. The question is who's talking to the director, to the authors? What is that dynamic? It can be quite difficult. It

certainly does go to the heart of what an institutional theater is supposed to do and be about.

BRUSTEIN: I first experienced it at Yale as a matter of fact. I'd been in London on a leave in 1972, 73 and I ran into an old Yale graduate who was also a Broadway playwright named Burt Shevelov who was one of the co-authors with Larry Gelbart on *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. We got along very well and he told me that when he had been at Yale as an undergraduate, he had done a production of *The Frogs* in the Yale swimming pool. That such an insane idea that we had to do it. I thought we would bring Burt in to direct this with our company and with some of the students who were there at the time. Meryl was then matriculating. We proceeded to do this and have a two-week run. What happened was the following: first, Burt thought that it should have music. This is always the first step. So I said, "Who do you want?" He said Steven Sondheim. I said "Ok, who can refuse Steven Sondheim?" So Steven Sondheim was going to do the lyrics and the music. Then he decided he should have a star. "Who do you want?" "Larry Blyden." "Alright." Well, as long as our company all have good roles, that's acceptable. Larry Blyden wasn't that big a star so he wasn't going to take that much focus off the company. Little by little there are more and more demands. The whole Broadway system was so different from the non-profit system. For example, they had a rehearsal system that would have blown us out of the water because our people are supposed to have eight hours a day with a day off and rest in the middle of the day. It's not allowed in the commercial system. In fact there's a twenty-four hour rehearsal period that was right before the opening of the play and they wanted to impose this on us and I was refusing. The budget was increasing and increasing and it was getting out of hand. Finally, it went on, under a lot of acrimony. We had more critics at that one production than

we'd ever had in our entire history. It was raved about, although I thought it was really inferior. It cost us and we did make a little money out of it. We all felt a little used by the end of the run. You couldn't hear anything at the pool because of the horrible acoustics, but every sweetheart from Broadway came up to kiss the cast and so did all the critics as a result. It was a very strange place at the Yale Drama School at that particular moment. I felt as though I'd done something corrupted to the atmosphere. That taught me a lesson too.

LANDESMAN: You don't have any mixed feelings about taking one of your productions and moving it into a commercial venue to enable it to reach a wider audience?

BRUSTEIN: Things would move on from us and occasionally with one of our actors, but wouldn't go with our company. We were going on to our next production. The key for was keeping the company to do the next project so that we were not simply functioning on a show by show, a hit and flop basis, but rather that our identity had to do with the plays in the season. Not only in the season, but in all the succeeding seasons. That was our identity. Not one play, but a whole series of plays and their relationship to each other.

LANDESMAN: The point being that they are chosen together for a reason and they reflect on each other and comment on each other.

BRUSTEIN: Sometimes unconsciously, sometimes consciously, yes.

LANDESMAN: Although sometimes they may be picked because you have a great actor and there's two different good roles for them.

BRUSTEIN: Or a great play. I mean if a great play comes along and my spine tingles from reading it, I have to do it despite of any kind of objections I may have personally. For example

'Night Mother. Marsha Norman sent us a play called *'Night Mother.* Have you ever heard of that? Forty five theaters had turned that play down because it was a play about suicide. Who wants to come and see a play about suicide? That's a downer. For me, I had other objections to it. It was a domestic play that took place in the kitchen. We never do that kind of play. It's a two character play. None of our actors were really appropriate for it, so why would we do it? Except that it was a marvelous play. So I decided to do it. We got Kathy Bates who was unknown at that time and Anne Pitoniak and they both were in repertory. They became members of the company. Kathy Bates was in *Three Sisters*, the play that was in repertory with it and so was Anne Pitoniak, playing the nurse. This thing went on and instead of being the flop we expected it to be, it left audiences unwilling to leave the theater. They were absolutely mesmerized by it. Then it went on to Broadway and they actually got a Pulitzer Prize for the production at the American Repertory Theater, which was the first time in history that a play out of town got a Pulitzer Prize. I hoped that was the beginning of something, but it wasn't. Anyway then it went to New York and it did fairly well there and then it became a movie, but without Kathy Bates and Anne Pitoniak.

The Role of Artistic Directors within an Institution

LANDESMAN: When you look at the founders of the resident theater movement Tyrone Guthrie, Bob Brustein, Joe Papp, Zelda Fichandler, Gordon Davidson, they're all different and have different artistic missions, but they were all very idiosyncratic, forceful people who, come hell or high water, forced their vision onto their communities and made people listen to what they felt needed to be heard. It seems to me that the role of the leaders of these theaters have become much more, for lack of a better word, practical, with

the need to keep the company going, to keep the subscription base up, to keep the Board of Directors happy, to keep funding. More and more the balance of power in all these theaters has shifted to the Managing Directors from the Artistic Directors. You see it at Manhattan Theater Club. You're seeing it in so many places where the person who is in charge of keeping the trains running on time is more important to the theater's survival. To me that's an unmistakable trend and I wondered whether you see the same thing and if you can address it.

BRUSTEIN: I think you're absolutely right. It does inevitably happen. Adrian Hall, who was another founding director of the great theater Trinity Rep before Oscar Eustis, was assailed by his board for doing work that was not bringing in enough income. He fired the Board. He didn't get fired. He fired the Board and reconstituted a whole new board. That would be unheard of today. The fact is the Boards have been getting stronger and stronger and the Managing Director has been getting stronger and stronger. Whenever money's short, that's what happens. It's an inevitable result of shortage of funds. When the theater is fiscally sound, the Artistic Director has a great deal of leeway and a great deal of freedom in choosing what she or he wants to do. When it's not sound, that's when the money people come in and start putting constraints on the theater.

Things have changed and every Artistic Director that is chosen really has to have a stake in the survival of the institution, and not in his or her own artistic expression. That's the major problem that's come down after the founding directors. The founding directors, of course, would have a stake in the institution. They've founded it; it's their child. But their successors, their children don't have that kind of stake. Who is interested in the institution as

a whole and in other people in the institution? That's first and foremost.

How do you measure it? I'll tell you how I did it and I failed actually. Robert (Woodruff) didn't have it. Robert had it for other directors, but not for the institution. We auditioned a lot of directors for my job. I was reaching seventy and I knew I was going to retire and I wanted someone who would continue the legacy of the ART. One of those legacies was the devotion to the idea of a resident company and to pushing the boundaries of the theater forward. Not just doing the latest resident theater hit. We auditioned a lot of people and I saw each of them who were so preoccupied with themselves and their own particular work that they would not respond to other directors. The way you found that out is the way they evaluated other productions that were being done that year. You could tell instantly what they were going to be like in relationship to other people who worked there. It's very hard to find a director who isn't. You've got a real gem if you find that director.

LANDESMAN: Maybe the answer's not having a director. Joe Papp wasn't a director.

BRUSTEIN: That's true. Woodruff, on the other hand, was extremely generous towards other directors. He really enjoyed good productions by people other than himself. I thought that's a sign. He was not interested in playwrights, oddly enough. This man who was Sam Shepherd's leading director got a play by Shepherd which I thought was one of the best plays he ever wrote and decided he didn't want to do it. We didn't do a single new American play in the five years that Robert Woodruff was the artistic director, except for two operas by Rinde Eckhart, which were fine, but no new American plays. He brought in a lot of directors from all over the world, which he endorsed and supported. He was very generous in that regard. You've got to find

someone who is interested in the institution and not just in himself or clones of himself. That means you have to find an Artistic Director who's willing to raise money, who's willing to put his hand out, who's willing to rob banks if necessary. You also have to find a director who loves his audience enough to talk to them, to extend himself or herself out to the audience. I began by being very disdainful of audiences. I thought that they were way behind me. I realized that they weren't behind me at all. I just hadn't described what I was up to well enough. The first two years we were in Cambridge we got a real barrage of criticism for the way we were doing the classics. Everyone has an idea of the way they're meant to be done. I was arguing that it is our mission to treat a classic as if it had just come across the transcend to our dramaturge, who's read this terrific play by someone named William Shakespeare and we have to find a way to do it. Not the way it's always been done, but as if it's a brand new play. The English Department didn't like that at all. They had seen a production with Maurice Evans in 1935 and that's the way it should be done. Instead of being disdainful of them, I began to realize that I should be communicating with them. We began to have debates and panels. We got money from the National Endowment for the Humanities in order to do symposia after each of our classical plays. We brought in members of the English Department as well as the other experts from all over. They love being educated in Cambridge. They really are fascinated with knowing and learning something. When this became a learning experience, they began to respond. The best thing I did was pre-shows, where I would go before the show and talk to this audience about what they were going to see and why it was designed in this particular way. We'd talk about anything. We'd talk about politics, Bush. We'd talk about the future of the theater. They really got to feel part of the institution in a way they never had before. They became very loyal

to the institution as a result. I bring that up because I think Artistic Directors have to have that kind of connection with their audiences. They really have to recognize the audience is another member of the company. The actors then realize what the other actor does for them. An Artistic Director also needs to have a clear artistic vision, what this play's supposed to be, where it's supposed to be going, and why it's making exceptions from that vision. I don't know who that person is. It's hard to find all of that in one person.

Making a Living

LANDESMAN: To me, Broadway is tremendously important because it's the one place where theater practitioners can make a living. If you have a play on Broadway, if you were a designer or a director or an actor, you can actually make some money and put a little money away for your retirement or send your kids to school. The salary structure in the nonprofit sector is, I don't want to use the word "obscene," but I will say it's appalling what actors and designers makes. I was married to a designer for eighteen years and she would work very hard on her productions. Because she worked so hard on them, she might be able to do a couple in a year by the time she did all the development work and put it all together. If you got a few thousand dollars for each one of those productions, you don't make a living. If you're a director trying to piece together a living from doing a couple of resident theater productions, you don't make a living on the money that you get. On Broadway, you can. That to me is tremendously important for the survival of people working in the theater. If we don't want them to go entirely off to working in television and movies, it's at least one arena where if everything goes well and you get there, you can make a decent living. That to me is tremendously important and keeps people working in our business. The fact that theater

practitioners can work there, to me, is of tremendous value.

BRUSTEIN: When you say “you can make a living,” who do you mean by “you”?

LANDESMAN: I mean a director, a designer or playwright.

BRUSTEIN: A limited number of directors though. You’re talking about a handful of directors. I think the resident theater can offer more jobs, if at less money, to more people.

LANDESMAN: Less money is putting it mildly.

BRUSTEIN: It’s not that mild. I mean an actor makes a fairly decent living in the resident theater now. An actor makes between sixty and seventy thousand dollars in the resident theater. That’s not beans.

I used to go out to Hollywood to try and talk Harvey Weinstein or some of those people into giving money to the theater, which they would get back at some point maybe if the play was made into a film. We couldn’t get a penny out of those people. They have no farsightedness. They have no vision when it comes to the process of how talent is eventually developed. They just see a talent and they grab it, but they don’t know how that talent is developed. They have no sense of process, and they won’t reward process. That’s a problem with America in general.

LANDESMAN: We’re different people here. Bob’s a moralist. I’m a Libertine. I like sensation. I like having a big score and a financial payoff. Bob is in the moral aspects of his work.

BRUSTEIN: But I’m a sensualist. I used the wrong metaphor when I said “hairshirt” because I was trying to suggest denial, but the denial is of something juicy and generally

unattainable in favor of something which is attainable and satisfying. I don’t mean that you’re going to be unhappy in the resident theater world. I think you’re going to be very happy in it, but what you have to give up is the thought of stardom. You give up stardom. That’s what the hairshirt is, giving up the thought of stardom. What’s missing in this country in the present time that was not missing in the thirties or even in the forties or even in the fifties is some alternative political idea. It used to be Marxism and that flopped dreadfully but at least it provided people with a notion that there was an alternative to this selfish, self-aggrandizing system by which we live. People could embrace that and try to develop an aesthetic out of it at the same time. You don’t have anything like Marxism anymore. Liberalism is ridicule all over. You don’t even have liberalism anymore. What you have that is the blue state alternative that you can develop an aesthetic version of in this country. I don’t know what it is.

I think there are a lot of good playwrights around, but I don’t think their plays are being done very often. I find there’s an awful lot of hesitation and timidity on the part of theaters in doing new plays. They really want to do just what’s been done or what Charles Isherwood had just told them was wonderful and repeat that. We haven’t talked about the really dreadful condition of criticism on the *New York Times* but I don’t want to get into that. I don’t know when it’s ever been worse. You mentioned the New Deal when out of this political system we got Social Security and later we got Medicare. We got the notion that there was an obligation to care for the citizenry and not just their bodies, but their minds and their souls through the love of art. That’s gone now and I don’t know what’s helped to kill it. Maybe it’s just popular culture. Although there’s so much that’s really worthwhile in popular culture. I mean I think of something like *The Wire*. I think *The Wire* is as good as

anything written by any playwright today. I also think *The Sopranos* is extraordinary. It's extraordinary talent and it's primarily through HBO. But something is missing in this country that was once there. I think part of the problem lies with the university. I think the universities are not doing their jobs anymore. For one thing, the university used to be a place where people made a sacrifice in order to be there. People did not go to the university to get rich. When those stars in the university that were continually being sought after and grabbed by someone and offered a car and a parking place and trips to Europe, that also changed. The worst thing that's happening in the university is this goddamned political correctness, which is really the enemy of art. It's the absolute enemy of art. I don't know how the arts can survive political correctness and the use of the word "elitism." When you use this word as an expletive instead of meaning leadership, excellence, you've destroyed the arts. We can't survive under these conditions. This kind of fake democracy that we've developed in place of real democracy. Democracy was never supposed to subvert the individual or say that you couldn't express yourself in any way that you wanted. Democracy never meant to hold down excellence because it was not egalitarian. Now we're saying that we must. I don't know how that's going to change. I think it's so endemic in the people who are teaching in the university and the people who are being now taught by them that it'll take generations to change. Just like it'll take fifty years to get out from under the Bush Administration and what it's done to us.

It seems to me that what we're lacking in our plays is a response to the world we're living in, which is a pretty anxious and desperate world. I'm not just talking about Al Qaeda, I'm talking about our own president, our own axis of evil, Bush, Rumsfeld and Cheney. They're the axis of evil. Why don't we have plays about this? Why aren't we responding to it? We did in the days

of Vietnam but we don't have them now. The only one I have seen is Mike Daisy. He's at the ART now and he astonished me by giving me a really heartfelt emotional response as an everyday citizen to the world he's living in. The emotion just filled the room when he did that. I thought where is that? Why aren't the playwrights giving us that?

The Influence of Criticism

LANDESMAN: Bob created the DFA program in Dramatic Literature and Criticism that I entered. The purpose was to train repertory critics who would be educated about dramatic literature and therefore qualified to deal with the repertory theaters' work and evolution. There was a time when at the major journalistic organs, there were these very middlebrow philistine critics and then there were a group of critics, Bob, chief among them, but Richard Gilman, Stanley Kauffman, Eric Bentley. We used to call them adversary critics, counterculture critics who are railing at the established philistine way of doing things, the mercantile orientation of Broadway. What started to happen is that these critics started to get jobs in the mainstream press. Dick Gilman moved to *NewsWeek*, John Simon went to *New York Magazine*. Stanley Kauffman was hired in the *New York Times* after you turned the job down. For a while there were within the mainstream media a group of very serious, well educated, dedicated critics. Even in the more intellectual publications you had Elizabeth Hardwick at the *New York Review of Books*; Susan Sontag was running *Partisan Review*.

An extraordinary move into the mainstream of serious minds in criticism. It didn't last long and in your book you attribute that decline to the decline of Broadway itself as an interesting arena. Want to elaborate on that?

BRUSTEIN: We all were having a lot of fun smashing away Broadway and we got some

very funny reviews out of it too. We were also having a lot of fun supporting the Off-Broadway movement. My first review as a reviewer for the *New Republic*, was of Jack Gilbert's *The Connection* with the Living Theater. Every major media critic had panned that show. Harold Clurman was reviewing for the *Nation* and myself, and Kenneth Tynan was reviewing for the *New Yorker*, but he couldn't review off Broadway so he had Donald Malcolm go and review it, and between us we managed to save that show. Not only save it, but turn it into some sort of pinnacle of the Off-Broadway movement. The Living Theater was now on the map as a result of the movement of these adversary Off-Broadway critics. We suddenly began to feel we had a little power not to do anything with Broadway but at least to bring Off-Broadway and some of its achievements to the attention of the public. As often happens with adversary movements, they enter the mainstream and as you pointed out some of these critics enter the mainstream as well. When some of us ended up in the resident theater movement, which was an alternative to the mainstream theater, these critics didn't come. They didn't come and watch it and criticize it, support it, endorse it, challenge it. They didn't do this sort of thing that could have helped us, not just as a publicity thing but in terms of our evolution and development. The Yale Repertory Theater in a way was an extension of what Eric Bentley had called for in *The Playwright as Thinker*. He thought the university was the only place where theater could have some sort of ideal identity. The university is now just as corrupt as any other institution in this country, but nevertheless that was an idea that inspired a lot of us and inspired me really to start a theater at Yale. But they stopped coming. They didn't cover it. Eric Bentley never reviewed anything up here, nor did Susan Sontag, nor did Richard Gilman. Gilman couldn't because he was a member of the faculty, but none of

the major adversary critics ever ended up reviewing us.

LANDESMAN: But think of what you're saying here and what you're not mentioning is that a very important event occurred in the interim. What happened was that you founded a theater institution. At one point, your view of a critic was, hurl your stones, call them as you see them and suddenly now because you're in a different place, you'd like to have it in a completely different attitude and serve a completely different role.

BRUSTEIN: I said the critic can't just be that, he also should be this. I've always believed that. I just gave you an example of *The Connection*. You identify and find the things that give you hope and give you a sense of the theater at its best. If you don't name and identify those, you are just a shrill voice screaming in the wilderness and enjoying your negativity.

This is a communal art and people who review books, for example, want to share their enjoyment of the book with other people. People who enjoy exciting productions and plays want to share their enjoyment of that with other people. It's not a public relations thing. It's simply an endorsement of something that you want to share and that you think should be encouraged. It should be allowed to survive and exist.

I do believe you need conflict. The very essence of drama is conflict and the essence of how we grow is conflict. Not violent conflict, but disagreement and working out. Screaming if necessary. Finding out where you agree and where you disagree and advancing beyond that. Toughening our skins. I think we're all much too sensitive all of us, minority groups of all kinds, Jews, Blacks, Latinos, Gays. We're all too bloody sensitive. Nietzsche once said, "Life is hard to bear but do not affect to be so delicate." We have to be tougher. We have to

be able to withstand slings and arrows a little better and give back as much as we get without feeling that we're going to shrink into non-existence if someone insults us publicly. Insult back. Give as good as you get. If we're going to start suppressing speech then we're not going to have any art either. So that's another worry.

Just have the guts to do things that are going to confront audiences and upset them if necessary and inspire debate and then create seminars about them. Work off the steam through the seminars if necessary, but don't give up the confrontation. If you believe passionately in what you're doing, that you have a truth that people have not absorbed yet, you have to present that truth regardless of how dangerous it may be or how controversial it may be. I think that's what we're losing. We're losing the ability to hold on to our truths. We want to be liked. We want to be part of one great group. We're never going to be part of one great group, not in this country. This is a very diverse country and we have to maintain and embrace this diversity and not turn into a melting pot of political correctness.