

THEATER

Will Theater in Los Angeles Fade to White?

By Margo Jefferson

Aug. 7, 2005

HOW does a majority theater support minority playwrights?

You probably stumbled over the phrase "majority theater." It is awkward, but no more awkward than "minority playwrights"; it's just unfamiliar. Majority groups don't need such ID tags. They're considered the norm.

In traditional mainstream theater, that "majority" consists of playwrights, producers and directors who are largely white, male, middle class and free of physical disabilities. So let's rephrase the question: how do mainstream theaters make space for all those minorities, those "others" whose lives are rarely shown on their stages?

Recently, this familiar question has aggressively reared its head in Los Angeles. Michael Ritchie, the new artistic director of the powerful Center Theater Group, announced that starting in July, four programs devoted to minority play development would be eliminated: Other Voices (for the disabled), the Latino Theater Initiative, the Asian Theater Workshop and the Blacksmys Theater Lab. These labs were founded in the 1980's and 90's by Mr. Ritchie's predecessor, Gordon Davidson, and their goal was to commission and develop new works.

The Center Theater Group is made up of the 750-seat Mark Taper Forum, the 2,000-seat Ahmanson Theater and the Kirk Douglas, a new 300-seat theater devoted to new plays in Culver City. In explaining his decision, Mr. Ritchie said the programs were not effective in getting plays onstage, generating only dead-end readings and workshops. Those are "a luxury we can no longer afford," he said. "We have to focus on production and focus less on play development."

Of course no one claims there is only one blueprint for nurturing talent, and Mr. Ritchie insists that he is committed to developing works by minorities. Still, the announcement had a grim symbolic resonance, especially coming shortly after Los Angeles elected its first Latino mayor in more than a century. For the moment, something tangible was being replaced by something hypothetical.

The issue has resonance far beyond the West Coast. What is the role of powerful theaters like the Center Theater Group, or Lincoln Center and the Public Theater in New York, or the Arena Stage in Washington, in developing other voices?

The Cuban-American playwright Eduardo Machado, who got his first big break at the Mark Taper in the early 1990's, says the big nonprofits are not doing enough. Mr. Machado now heads Intar in New York, the only company in the United States devoted to works in English by Latino writers. Like all small companies, Intar must fight for every arts council dollar it gets. "If none of the minority theaters get city money, isn't it the responsibility of the bigger companies to represent the entire population?" Mr. Machado asked. "They're public institutions, not private enterprises."

After all, if minorities are still marginal in the theater, it's a different story outside the stage door. The majority of Angelenos are not white. And though the majority of Angelenos are women (as are the majority of Americans), inside the theater, women are just one more underrepresented group.

When Ellen Stewart founded the La MaMa Experimental Theater in New York City more than 40 years ago, she wanted to create a truly international center for artists. She calls it a theatrical pot in which no culture melts down. "You put work in and you take work out," she said. "You give others your choices; you get their choices. You infuse each other."

This vision is rarely found in the United States. Chay Yew, the playwright and director who ran the Taper's Asian Theater Workshop and is now out of his job, is right to ask: "Is the theater still doing an effective job of reflecting and representing the world we live in, or is it merely reflecting a select few? If so, we deserve the dwindling, aging audiences."

COOKING: *Daily inspiration, delicious recipes and other updates from Sam Sifton and NYT Cooking.*

[Sign Up](#)

In Mr. Davidson's time, the Taper mounted six productions a year and the Ahmanson was mainly devoted to touring shows. The theater has grown and its policies have changed. This time, the board wanted an artistic director who could mount 20 or so productions a year. For the 2005-2006 season, six are planned for the Taper, seven for the Ahmanson, and nine for the Kirk Douglas.

The Williamstown Theater Festival in Massachusetts, where Mr. Ritchie was stage manager for years and then artistic director from 1996 through 2004, has long been famous for elegant, crowd-pleasing productions that feature celebrated playwrights (Chekhov, Shaw, Coward, Miller), and star well-known-to-famous actors (Blythe Danner, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sam Waterston, Jesse L. Martin and Kate Burton, Mr. Ritchie's wife). His tenure there has been described as profitable and successful.

The Center Theater Group's offerings this season make Mr. Ritchie's commercial focus very clear. The lineup is tasteful, respectable and very conventional. The Taper season includes works by David Mamet, Alfred Uhry and Chekhov (a "Cherry Orchard" that will star Annette Bening).

The Ahmanson will import brand-name hitmakers like Robert Wilson, Matthew Bourne and Dame Edna. The Web site tells potential ticket buyers that "We are in final negotiations with major British talent" for a production of "The Importance of Being Earnest."

Mr. Ritchie proudly cites two new musicals that he hopes the organization will send to Broadway. One, still in development, involves the music of Kander and Ebb; the other, "The Drowsy Chaperone," is an homage to 1920's Broadway musicals. Clearly this is the "everything old is new again" principle.

The Mark Taper Forum's two world premieres will explore the range of the history play. Robert Schenkkan, best known for the sprawling, romantic "Kentucky Cycle," will be represented by "Lewis and Clark Reach the Euphrates." And Culture Clash, a dynamic trio of Latino writer-actors, will present "Power and Water," a tough-minded look at Los Angeles history. This work, Mr. Ritchie said, represents part of his streamlined new model for play development: "I came to them and told them: you have a slot. I will guarantee you a production. Now let's develop a piece."

The other minority voices will be heard in the small Kirk Douglas. Nilo Cruz, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Cuban-American playwright, is adapting "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings," a story by Gabriel García Márquez, for young audiences. Another program will be devoted to a group of solo artists. Given the disproportionate number of women and minorities in solo performance, variety should be no problem.

Still, so far, no female playwrights appear on the roster of 22 plays this season, although "The Drowsy Chaperone" does have a female lyricist. Otherwise, as the former head of the Blacksmiths lab, Brian Freeman, observed: "It's jaw-dropping, the sheer number of plays by white men."

Mr. Ritchie insists the doors are still wide open to minority writers. "The difference is, it's one door," he said.

In an ideal world there should be just one door. In the real world, though, that door usually isn't wide enough for minorities or women to pass through until labs and workshops devoted to their work become part of an institution.

The Center Theater Group's minority labs had problems; work too rarely made it to the main stage. And Mr. Ritchie's view of what he called the "slow, meandering process" of play development was shared by some lab veterans. Readings and workshops that lead nowhere can feel like slow torture if the theater's artistic director ignores them.

But Mr. Ritchie didn't have to ignore them. The labs used to hold a yearly festival of readings called "New Plays for Now"; it was supposed to provide the Taper and other interested Los Angeles theaters with plays they could develop.

"Last spring we flagged the plays we thought were most likely for production," Mr. Freeman said. "Michael did not attend a single one. When questioned about it, he said he doesn't believe in readings."

On that point Mr. Ritchie agreed, saying: "I generally don't attend readings. My strength is getting plays from the page to the stage." To which Mr. Freeman responded: "What does that say to actors, directors, audiences? It's about not being in the conversation."

So who is Mr. Ritchie including in the conversation about what gets produced? I find it distressing that Luis Alfaro, who had run the Latino Playwrights Initiative before being made director of new play development, lost his job. And I find it

distressing that there is only one minority woman on Mr. Ritchie's artistic staff. No one should have to bear that burden, artistically or practically.

When I asked Mr. Ritchie who else on his staff would be on the lookout for interesting new work by nontraditional writers, he assured me, "Oh, virtually everybody."

More specifically, he promises joint productions with small Los Angeles companies that cultivate new writers, directors and actors. This season, for example, he will join forces with the Robey Theater, a black company, and the Greenway Arts Alliance to produce Thomas Gibbons's "Permanent Collection" at the Kirk Douglas. Mr. Ritchie proudly said: "The idea for us is not to take ownership of the production, but to give those companies greater exposure. The intent is that it's more to their benefit than to ours to do those productions."

Hopefully, such money and exposure will benefit the playwrights and the companies. But this plan is hardly daring. The Robey produced "Permanent Collection," which has had more than 20 productions around the country, last year. And Mr. Gibbons is white.

At this point, I'm sure, some readers are thinking, "Talent is not an equal opportunity employer." It certainly isn't. Most of the plays produced by traditional mainstream theaters are written by white men; many of these plays are terrible. Quality isn't the barrier. Access is. Experience is. Exposure is.

Loy Arcenas is a Filipino-American set designer who has worked for some of the best theaters in the country. He is directing now, at the Ma-Yi theater in New York, which presents plays by Asian-American writers. "You don't just become a good writer or terrific writer," he said. "You need to be helped. Nurtured. You have to have the ability to fail. The only way you can do that is to be put in the same league as everybody else."

Directors, producers, even audiences need to be nurtured too. Our cultural realities are changing rapidly. How does art map those changes? How do we learn to see the world differently and stretch our imaginations in unexpected ways?

Asked about his theater's place in the city of Los Angeles, where whites now make up only about 30 percent of the population, Mr. Ritchie answered: "Los Angeles is probably the most diverse and vibrant city in America right now. It's to our well-being to be as diverse and vibrant as possible."

Let us hope he lives up to the far more eloquent words of Joseph Papp. Papp's Public Theater helped create a long, still singular tradition of artistic excellence through diversity. Thirty years ago, he wrote: "What fills me with everlasting hope is the diversity of the people who make up this impossible cosmopolis. New York's energy has always come from the bottom of the heap, the minorities the Irish after the potato famine, Italians, Jews, Puerto Ricans. And long before any of them, the blacks. As Shakespeare wisely said, 'the city is the people.' I say amen to that."