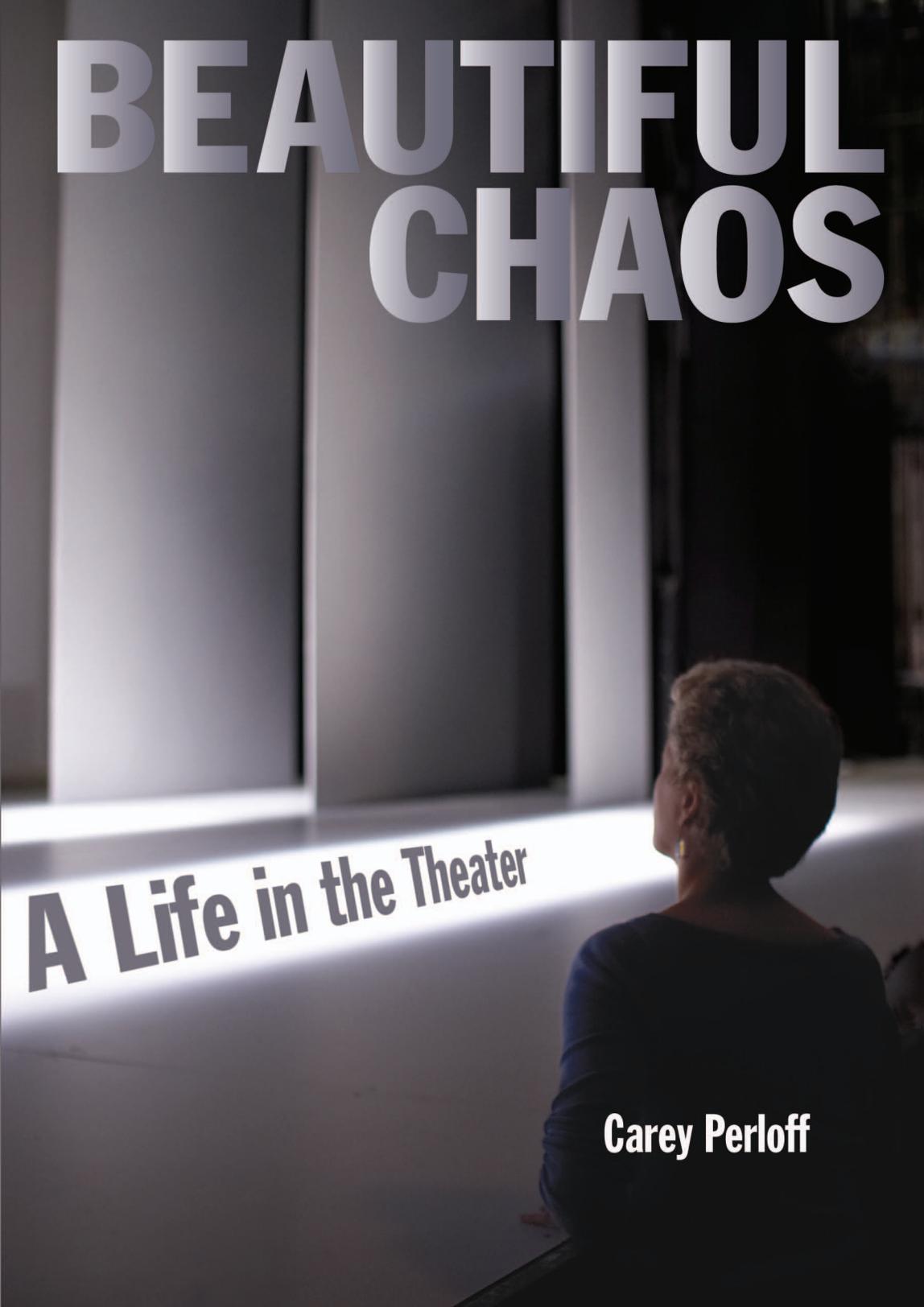
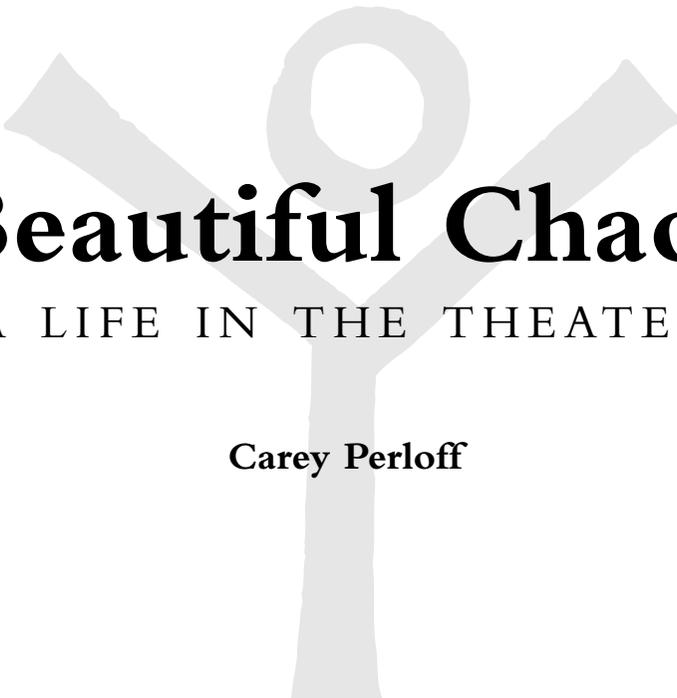


BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

A woman with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark blue long-sleeved dress and a gold earring, is seen from the back, sitting in a theater. She is looking towards a brightly lit stage area. The stage is illuminated by a strong light source, creating a bright glow on the floor and highlighting several vertical columns or pillars. The background is dark, suggesting a theater setting.

A Life in the Theater

Carey Perloff



Beautiful Chaos

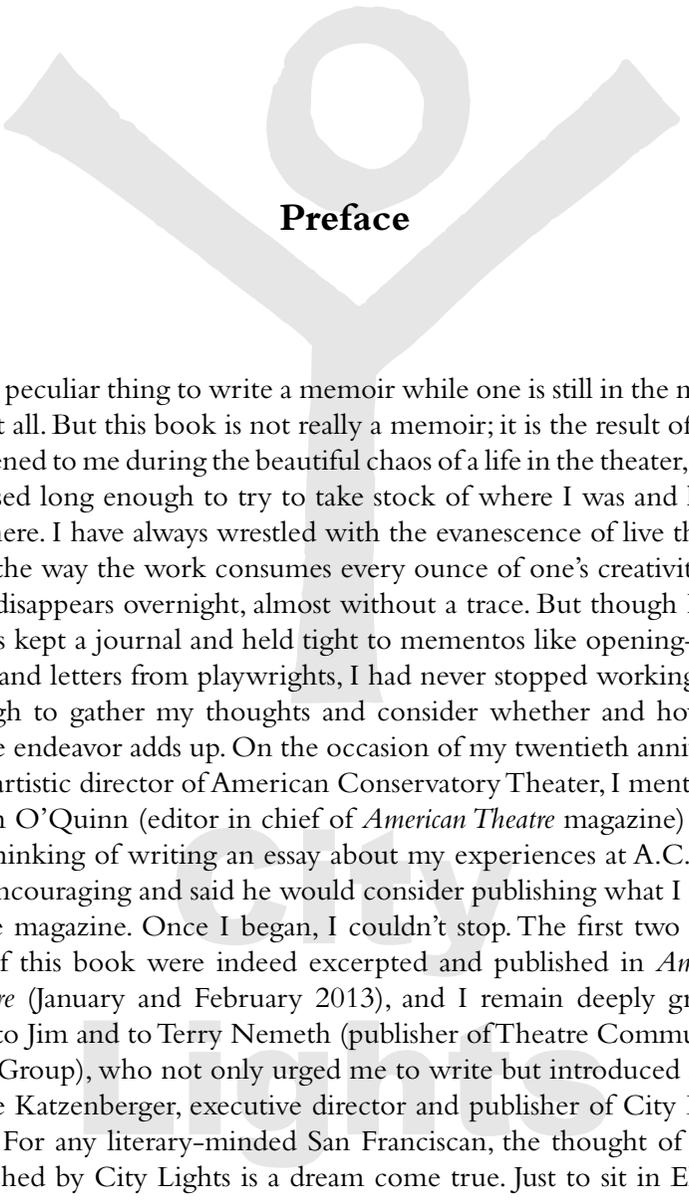
A LIFE IN THE THEATER

Carey Perloff

City
Lights



City Lights Foundation
San Francisco



Preface

It's a peculiar thing to write a memoir while one is still in the middle of it all. But this book is not really a memoir; it is the result of what happened to me during the beautiful chaos of a life in the theater, when I paused long enough to try to take stock of where I was and how I got there. I have always wrestled with the evanescence of live theater, with the way the work consumes every ounce of one's creativity and then disappears overnight, almost without a trace. But though I have always kept a journal and held tight to mementos like opening-night cards and letters from playwrights, I had never stopped working long enough to gather my thoughts and consider whether and how the whole endeavor adds up. On the occasion of my twentieth anniversary as artistic director of American Conservatory Theater, I mentioned to Jim O'Quinn (editor in chief of *American Theatre* magazine) that I was thinking of writing an essay about my experiences at A.C.T.; he was encouraging and said he would consider publishing what I wrote in the magazine. Once I began, I couldn't stop. The first two chapters of this book were indeed excerpted and published in *American Theatre* (January and February 2013), and I remain deeply grateful both to Jim and to Terry Nemeth (publisher of Theatre Communications Group), who not only urged me to write but introduced me to Elaine Katzenberger, executive director and publisher of City Lights press. For any literary-minded San Franciscan, the thought of being published by City Lights is a dream come true. Just to sit in Elaine's

office, where the anniversary edition of Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* was being prepared and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's old wooden desk still holds pride of place, was worth the entire process of writing the book. I am honored to be among their authors, and to throw my lot in with the intrepid publishers of Ginsberg's "Howl."

Beautiful Chaos is an attempt to articulate not only why I chose a life in the theater, but how being in the theater has given shape to the rest of my life. It is also something of a polemic about the state of the American theater today and the urgency with which I feel certain aspects of it must be addressed if the field is to flourish. It doesn't pretend to be an objective account, although my treasured colleague, A.C.T.'s education director (and former publications editor), Elizabeth Brodersen, has tried to bring the chronology and details in line with the actual facts. But if it is true that the particular yields to the universal, then it is my hope that this very subjective and particular story about a particular artist in a particular city at a particular time will yield some broader truths about the state of culture and the world we live in today. I hope it will make people long for the beauty of live performance, as it offers a glimpse into the often byzantine inner workings of making theater.

I also hope the book will encourage women in this field, particularly women with children, to stick with it in spite of the punishing hours and relative paucity of female voices rising to the top of our profession. The logistics of the life of a working mother in the theater are ridiculously complex, but to my mind the effort is utterly worth it. I vividly remember a T-shirt that circulated around our household when my children were young; the lettering on the front declared, **I CAN'T, I HAVE REHEARSAL!** in bold capitals. Indeed, rehearsal is the great maw that devours Fourth of July picnics and Christmas Eve celebrations, family visits and school performances. I spent over twenty years wishing that I could clone myself and be at home and at work simultaneously, worrying that my bereft family would disown me if I rehearsed one more play or cultivated one more donor. The beauty of hindsight is the realization that much more is possible than one thinks, and that it's never worth torturing

oneself for failing to subscribe to some artificial norm of marriage and parenthood.

Much of this book is concerned with the artistic collaborators that have meant the most to me in my creative life, and I hope that those artists will forgive me if I have pulled the curtain back on conversations and rehearsals that were essentially private and occasionally difficult. At the same time, the book makes no attempt to cover the entire time period comprehensively, so I make apologies to many treasured colleagues who didn't end up being mentioned. In trying to stitch a narrative out of many disparate threads, some have inevitably ended up being more visible than others.

The next few years are filled with new adventures: At A.C.T. we are opening our long-awaited second stage (The Strand Theater); we are starting an initiative called Stage Coach to bring theater on a mobile unit to neighborhoods across San Francisco; we are developing an unprecedented number of major new theatrical projects; and we are launching the San Francisco Semester to introduce undergraduates from across the country to A.C.T.'s unique form of actor training. Several of my plays are having productions around the country and in Europe that I look forward to enormously. Perhaps this book will help to frame and catalyze many of these initiatives; I know I will learn a great deal in the process.

In researching stories for this book, I reread hundreds of letters from A.C.T. subscribers and notebooks full of press clippings, and I am eternally grateful both to Bay Area theater audiences and to the *San Francisco Chronicle* and Bay Area theater critics for their ongoing dialogue with our work. For reading sections of the manuscript in process, I want to thank James Haire (who patiently guided me through much of A.C.T.'s complicated history and explained the earthquake and many other touchstone moments with his incredible memory and wit), Alan Stein (who reminded me of many things I had forgotten about our early years of working together and continues to be my gold standard of arts patronage), and Sue Yung Li (whose taste and wisdom have guided me from the day I arrived at A.C.T.). Olympia Dukakis read the book cover to cover and responded with

her characteristic passion about the artistic journey it represents, and Robert Brustein encouraged me to tackle the big issues of acting companies and classical repertoire that he has championed so brilliantly in his own career. Graham Beckel dared me to be provocative, and Liz Perle's well-honed narrative instincts helped me lift my personal observations toward something more universally applicable. Michael Paller applied his razor dramaturgical eye to the proceedings; Craig Slight urged me to think rigorously about my dreams for the future; and Ellen Richard made sure my frequent hyperbole was grounded in the truth. Nancy Livingston gave me the invaluable perspective of a longtime Bay Area arts lover and trustee, and Caresa Capaz held the rest of my life together while I tried to remember what happened when. My parents, Marjorie and Joseph Perloff, and my sister, Nancy Perloff, all three among the most incisive critics I know, were happily patient and incredibly perceptive as I attempted to become the last person in the family to finally write a book.

For being my companions in this long theatrical journey, I thank the tenacious and talented staffs of Classic Stage Company and A.C.T., as well as so many remarkable board members whose faith and generosity have sustained the work. For helping me shape and conceptualize the whole project, for talking me through every argument and interrogating every assumption, and for mitigating my sense of the dramatic with doses of reality, I thank my editor, Elaine Katzenberger, and my right hand, Elizabeth Brodersen, for their wisdom, tenacity, and wit.

Most of all, this book is for my husband, Anthony, and my children, Lexie and Nicholas, the three people in the world whom I always long to come home to, and who always make me laugh, no matter how bad the review or how difficult the actor. They are the luckiest things that ever happened to me.

Lights

The Beginning

The voice on the other end of the phone is modulated with the faux calm unique to consultants and headhunters. “The theater does indeed lie in ruins, but the potential is enormous. The rebuilding campaign is a thrilling opportunity to reintroduce A.C.T. to the community. The cost is estimated to be upwards of \$30 million.”

Behind me on the floor, my two-year-old daughter, Lexie, is drinking soy sauce directly out of the bottle, gurgling happily. It is 7:00 PM in New York and she hasn’t been fed yet. I cradle the phone with one cheek and deftly swipe the soy sauce from her hands, substituting an animal cracker to buy five more minutes of transcontinental conversation.

“The search was well under way when we got your letter, but the board is definitely intrigued. We think you should come out immediately and meet the search committee.”

It was August 1991. I had a babbling two-year-old, a job I loved at a beautiful but indigent small theater in New York, and a husband whose career in Soviet foreign policy had been prematurely cut short by the fall of the Iron Curtain. (END OF THE COLD WAR: THERE GOES MY CAREER read the T-shirt I gave him at the time.) I also had a lovely teaching position at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University,

which meant there was a pool and a superb library at my disposal. I lived two blocks from my theater, and my life seemed about as full as it could get. Yet something in me had instinctively sent a brief letter of introduction to the search committee of a famed but troubled institution in San Francisco to suggest that I might be an appropriate candidate to helm American Conservatory Theater.

I was not a stranger to destitute nonprofits. The day I took over Classic Stage Company in 1987, I discovered to my horror that no payroll taxes had been paid for several years and Con Ed was about to turn off the power due to outstanding bills. My first task as artistic director was to hire the heaviest actor I knew (no names named) to sit on the sidewalk grate outside the building to prevent eager meter readers from descending to the basement to quantify our negligence. I attempted a crash course on tax law at night while directing Tony Harrison's *Phaedra Britannica* by day, and bit by bit we wiggled out from under our disastrous tax burden. Over time, CSC had come back to life through blind chutzpah, a great deal of cajoling, and a Harold Pinter premiere. I figured A.C.T. would just be worse on a magnitude of five. . . .

Thus, two days later, I found myself on a plane to California with my loquacious two-year-old in tow. I told my beloved CSC colleagues that I was going to see my mother, a Stanford professor, for the weekend. The chances of anything materializing at A.C.T. were so slim it seemed unnecessary to tell them the truth.

On the plane, Lexie played Pat the Bunny and I conjured up everything I knew about A.C.T. A few years before, while visiting San Francisco on a Theater Communications Group (TCG) observership, I had attended A.C.T.'s production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. I remembered sitting in the last row of the second balcony of The Geary Theater, while those booming, well-trained voices carried all the way back to the deeply uncomfortable wooden benches that constituted the cheap seats in that otherwise spectacular playhouse. (I still remember that there was no sound barrier between The Geary and the commercial theater next door, and when their musical finished that evening at the quietest moment of Chekhov, right before

Kostya shot himself, the crowds tramped loudly down the fire escape stairs outside, and the moment was lost. That was one of the first things I wanted to fix when we renovated The Geary Theater years later.) Because my Stanford drama professor Martin Esslin (author of *The Theatre of the Absurd*) was also a resident dramaturg at the Magic Theatre in the 1970s, I spent more time during my undergraduate years going into the city to see experimental theater at Fort Mason than attending A.C.T. productions. But a few years after graduation, when I found myself interning in the casting office at The Public Theater, I auditioned recent A.C.T. alumni and learned more about the theater's famed graduate-level training program for actors (then known as the Advanced Training Program, the antecedent of today's Master of Fine Arts Program). It was around that time that rumors began to circulate that Bill Ball, founding genius of A.C.T., had died of a drug overdose in Los Angeles—he had departed A.C.T. a few years earlier, leaving it in the hands of his capable second-in-command, Ed Hastings. Of course I also knew that on October 17, 1989, the company's gorgeous 1910 Beaux-Arts theater had collapsed in the Loma Prieta earthquake. Clearly, A.C.T. was in a financial crisis and on shaky ground in more ways than one. But I knew, too, that in the mid sixties something legendary had happened with the founding of A.C.T., something idealistic and pure and brave that focused on great actors, great literature, and lifelong learning.

I got off the plane on that late summer day in 1991, deposited my daughter with her soul-mate grandmother, Marjorie, in Palo Alto, and drove up Interstate 280 to interview with the A.C.T. search committee in an office at the Bank of San Francisco. As I drove, my mind flashed back to September 1976 and the first time I had driven that particular route, but in the opposite direction, heading south from the San Francisco airport on my way to Stanford as an incoming freshman from Philadelphia. As soon as I landed in California that day, having never lived anywhere but the East Coast, I felt I had discovered a little piece of heaven. It was the year of the Big Drought, which meant perpetual sunshine and water-saving communal showers, students typing under palm trees and riding bicycles into the hills,

watching the nascent Pickle Family Circus cavort around White Plaza (never imagining that years later Pickle members Bill Irwin, Geoff Hoyle, and Lorenzo Pisoni would become beloved collaborators), declaiming Greek tragedy in the back garden of Helene Foley's house, and watching Professor Jack Winkler climb out of the chimney as the *deus ex machina* Athena at the end of my first-year Greek class. It was bliss. I was an East Coast girl; I had never encountered the "other" that is California before leaving the protective confines of Germantown Friends School and Philadelphia (a city that at the time seemed inordinately filled with Biddles and Cadwaladers whose claim to fame was the number of generations since the Mayflower that they had parked themselves on Wissahickon Drive) and arriving at San Francisco International Airport, two suitcases in hand, to board a bus to the campus. My college counselor had desperately tried to dissuade me from my California ambitions by informing me that the last GFS graduate to go west had joined the Moonies at Berkeley and never returned, but this had only made the whole venture even more tempting. As we drove south, I saw signs for Half Moon Bay above a glistening blue reservoir and wondered where I had been all my life. This was my coast.

So here I was in reverse, fifteen years later, driving north in a rental car and an ill-fitting borrowed suit, trying to look vaguely professional and rehearsing a few key declarations of principle in my head as I navigated my way downtown. It's a tiny city, San Francisco. I was an inveterate New Yorker by then, accustomed to colliding with a million people as I shoved my way through turnstiles to jump on the subway in a desperate attempt to get home in time to relieve the babysitter and make dinner before blood sugar levels plummeted and tears ensued. San Francisco seemed like a toy city that day, intimate and charming and somewhat inscrutable. The original Bank of San Francisco is now defunct, but at the time its headquarters sat in a grand pile on a distinguished street corner across from the Transamerica Pyramid, a reminder of the robber baron days when Leland Stanford and Collis P. Huntington ruled the city. In a big, sunny boardroom, six trustees were waiting for me. The head of the

board was a smiling man named Patrick Flannery, who was as honest and disarming that first day as he continued to be throughout the many disasters and tribulations that followed over the next five years. Next to him was the imperturbable Ellen Newman, daughter of the legendary Cyril Magnin, who, along with Mortimer Fleishhacker Sr. and Melvin Swig, had selected A.C.T. to be San Francisco's resident flagship theater back in 1966 when the company first arrived from Pittsburgh. Beside Ellen and her giant glasses was a small, wry man wearing a cowboy belt and a quick grin who introduced himself as Shep Pollack, and the lively and frank Joan Sadler, whose devotion to A.C.T.'s conservatory was legendary. I was captivated by the woman across the table from me, a striking woman with bright eyes and extraordinary chunks of jewelry around her neck and wrists. This was Sue Yung Li, a landscape architect who worked with the legendary Lawrence Halprin and who would become one of my saviors throughout my A.C.T. career. Finally there was Mary Metz, brilliant and businesslike, the former president of Mills College, with just a hint of a Louisiana accent and a seemingly endless supply of pointed questions. I began to reply.

A confession must be made right up front, one that will come as no surprise to those with whom I have even a passing acquaintance: I enjoy talking. Bruce Weber, in an interview with me in the *New York Times* some years later, labeled me a "world-class talker," and indeed talking is probably the only activity in the world at which I am world class. There are so many things in life I have no talent for: I cannot intuit anything on a computer, back the car into our garage, build a fire, remember the passwords for my internet accounts, read music, analyze data, follow sports, or read Brecht in the original. What I can do is set a trail of words in motion and watch them quickly find their way into complete sentences, paragraphs, speeches. I have never had a fear of speaking in public, because there is something about standing before a group that feels liberating to me. I love to extemporize, in front of an audience, about any number of things I care about, and theater and culture most particularly. So the talking part of my first A.C.T. interview was easy. I believe in the transformative power of

theater, I have a great love of dramatic literature, I revere great actors and I am willing to fight for them, and I know what it is to run a cash-strapped theater and to fundraise as if my life depended on it. I also knew even then that, unlike many theater people for whom the freelance gypsy life is most congenial, being part of an institution suits my particular temperament. From my first day at CSC, the institution had functioned like an envelope into which I could place my appetites, my questions, my interests; it was the village well around which I could contextualize what I saw happening in the field and contribute to the larger art form. I shared this with the A.C.T. board. They asked questions. I replied. We laughed. We shook hands, and it was over. Two hours later I was back on the highway heading south toward my mother and my two-year-old. The two of them were so delighted with each other (as they have continued to be ever since), that the entire trip seemed worth it just for their pleasure, and I never expected things would go any further than that conversation in the boardroom of the Bank of San Francisco. I was in every possible way unlike the standard profile of a LORT (League of Resident Theatres) artistic director: I was young, female, classical in bent, noncommercial, and way too opinionated.

Two months and several visits later, the phone rang. It was Alan Stein, the gentle and heroic chair of the A.C.T. board. He wanted to see me at his apartment in New York; could I come up tomorrow? Within two minutes of my arrival at East 77th Street, he offered me the job. He was extremely sober about the current condition of the organization, and extremely passionate about its future. He said that if I'd commit to helping resurrect A.C.T., he'd be with me every step of the way. It had all happened so fast that I had no time for self-doubt, self-reflection, or even self-congratulation. I said yes. And so the adventure began.

Lights

What Do You Have for Free?

British director Emma Rice, who has created work with the experimental Kneehigh theater company in Cornwall for two decades, uses an expression about theatrical investigation that struck me as invaluable as soon as I heard it. Whether she is talking about a particular actor or about a piece of theater, she begins her investigation by asking, “What do you have for free?” Not “What is your type?” per se, but “What qualities exist innately in your being that others can instantly ascribe to you?” I teach a class to A.C.T.’s first-year master of fine arts students titled “Why Theater?” in which we borrow from Emma and begin by exploring what each of those young artists has “for free” before we move on to discuss what might stretch them beyond their natural givens. We then do an exercise about our hometowns, in which we try to imagine what a given community has for free, to try to determine what kind of theater might thrive there.

When I took the job at A.C.T. I thought I understood what San Francisco had, as it were, for free. This is critical when you are thinking about running a major arts institution. Despite the fact that the American theater is often in danger of becoming, in the words of Steppenwolf Artistic Director Martha Lavey, a kind of “McTheater” in which institutions across the country often produce the same five

plays in the same packaging, I have always believed that great theater grows out of a very specific time and place, with specific artists in service to a specific audience. Repertoire is most interesting when it is determined by the unique geography, demographics, mood, and history of the given community.

After all, it was not a coincidence that A.C.T. ended up in San Francisco to begin with. When Bill Ball first conceived of the notion of a permanent company of classically trained actors committed to staging a diverse repertoire of plays to be produced on a large scale for a literate audience, he traveled across the country looking for the perfect home. Pittsburgh proved difficult because of power struggles with the Pittsburgh Playhouse; Chicago extended a hand, but the deal was never closed. It was San Francisco in 1967 that became Bill Ball's natural partner in crime. In his book *The Creation of an Ensemble*, John Wilk quotes the *Minneapolis Tribune's* Mike Steele about why San Francisco proved to be the perfect match for A.C.T.: "It's a city of theatricality. Every street corner is a stage and every fourth person seems to be either a manic actor out of Genet or a street musician out of work. It's the obvious city for the American Conservatory Theater, America's most flamboyant regional theatre and one of its best. It reflects San Francisco exactly, erratically brilliant, vain, diverse, perverse, and very exciting." The Actor's Workshop founder Herbert Blau, in *The Impossible Theater*, described San Francisco in the fifties and sixties (with the arrogance and slightly patronizing tone of a transplanted New Yorker) as "a gilded boom town grown urban on a fissure . . . two great universities nearby, and a trolley college of high caliber; a great park of eclectic fauna; a Chinese ghetto which feels affluent and no conspicuous slums; sick comics in the bistros and a Bohemian Club of unregenerate squares . . . withal, a city reposeful and august . . . the old Pacific Union Club on Nob Hill, home of the railroad kings, lording it over the new arrivals: the students, the dockworkers, the doctors of the Kaiser Plan, the Hadassah ladies, the vagrants from the valleys, the junior executives of the new Playboy set, the Beats from Tangiers and North Platte, all the questing intellectuals . . . a city with a nervous graciousness, upholding a worldwide reputation for a culture it

doesn't quite have . . . a city that is a myth, with the golden opportunity to live up to it." The audacity and elegance of the new American Conservatory Theater in the late sixties and early seventies matched both the appetites and nascent sophistication of San Franciscans, and elicited the kind of financial generosity necessary for a nonprofit venture of that scale to survive. During those initial years, San Franciscans fell in love with Bill Ball and he with them; Ball won their hearts with an unparalleled sixteen-play rotating repertory in the initial twenty-two weeks. As Ball told Wilk: "The idea was to have so much, such a splashy repertory that it was an undeniable experience. We had to dazzle our audience and overwhelm them."

Alas, despite its glorious beginnings, A.C.T. failed to create an infrastructure to match its ambitions, with the result that by the time Ball departed in the eighties, there was precious little to hold together the brilliant idea he had created. The man who adored casts of thousands and staged legendary curtain calls (called "walk-downs") at the end of each season (in which actors bowed in the costumes of one show and then madly changed into costumes for the next until the entire season's repertoire had been represented in one fabulous and continuously swirling bow) had been reduced to producing *The Gin Game* and other small-cast plays for an increasingly disaffected audience. The story of Ball's downfall is complex: He rarely engaged with his San Francisco fundraising group (originally called the California Theatre Foundation and later the California Association for the American Conservatory Theatre, or C.A.A.C.T.) in any substantive discussion about the direction the company was taking, because he viewed A.C.T. as a national theater and resisted outside input of any kind. Meanwhile he became more and more fanatic about his own power and need for control. This situation proved unsupportable, particularly when major foundation funding began to dry up, and according to all accounts, Ball became increasingly volatile, unpredictable, and isolated. Rumor had it that he locked Cyril Magnin, his largest and most passionate benefactor, out of the theater for alleged disloyalty, and that, nervous about the future, he had taken a large portion of an A.C.T. Ford Foundation grant and invested it in gold

to create retirement accounts for himself and his trusted lieutenants. In 1986, the California Attorney General stepped in and forced his resignation. Critic Sylvie Drake described the end in her *Los Angeles Times* obituary for Ball in 1991: “Well-known bouts with booze and pills exacerbated [Ball’s] intemperate personality and growing reclusiveness. By the early 1980s, the work at A.C.T. began to slip. So did the finances. And Ball had lost perspective on it all. He seemed no longer to differentiate between himself as an individual and the institution he had created, dismaying associates with infuriating behavior and alienating the very people who had invited him to San Francisco in the first place. In typically flamboyant (and prophetic) style, he abruptly announced his . . . resignation while staging a crucifixion scene.” This final story may be apocryphal, but it was the beginning of a heartbreaking demise. In 1991, at the age of sixty, Ball died of an overdose in Los Angeles, “an apparent suicide.”

Ball’s successor, Edward Hastings, was a compassionate leader and an able director who mounted a major effort to move A.C.T. forward, diversifying the acting company, stimulating A.C.T.’s commitment to new work through the creation of Plays in Progress, building bridges with small local ensembles, stabilizing the finances, and staging major productions of American classics. But for many reasons, it was difficult to keep the ambitious dreams of A.C.T.’s beginnings alive.

By the time I arrived in the early nineties, A.C.T. was so complicated, so troubled, and so dysfunctional that I failed initially to grasp the depths of its paralysis. Ignoring its fraught past (and earthquake-destroyed building) for the moment, I focused instead upon the present day, and tried to envisage what A.C.T. still had for free by being housed in the very specific arts ecology that was the Bay Area in the late twentieth century. This exercise led to some disastrous assumptions that plagued my first year of programming, but it was not done without real thought. Outside of the hermetic bubble of A.C.T., here’s what I assumed 1992 San Francisco had “for free,” in no particular order:

- A tradition of physical comedy, clowning, and vaudeville dating from the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s

beginnings in 1959 to the inception of the Pickle Family Circus in the mid seventies and the ongoing presence of such amazing clowns as Bill Irwin, Geoff Hoyle, Joan Mankin, Sharon Lockwood, and Jeff Raz.

- A love for the radical, aggressively acted work of such directors as Robert Woodruff at the Magic Theatre.
- A cultural pluralism that has permitted a wide range of ethnic and cultural traditions to be represented equally around town, from African drumming to klezmer music to Russian Orthodox liturgy to Filipino parades to Japanese tea ceremonies.
- Gay culture—I assumed the presence of a politically powerful gay culture that made its presence felt would be a major plus in programming a season.
- A European feel—I’ve always believed that it’s easiest to make theater in a place where people can walk in off the street and find it. San Francisco’s origins as a European-style city can still be felt in its urban planning and in the intimacy of its streets and sidewalks, to say nothing of its population of Russians, Irish, and Italians. It is a city where many people get around on foot or by bicycle. This seemed to me a helpful thing when building a theater community.
- A highly literate book-reading population.
- A love for the experimental and the multidisciplinary in performance, evidenced by the presence of such visionaries as George Coates (whose new take on the *Alice in Wonderland* story, *Right Mind*, had just opened at The Geary Theater before the earthquake brought the building to the ground), Chris Hardman, Lou Harrison, David Harrington, Anna Halprin, and more.
- A sense of pride in being three hours behind New York but always with an eye to the future, a city of endless technological and social revolution, looking to the East instead of the West.

Some of these assumptions proved in the long run to be true and valuable as guiding principles. Others turned out to be misleading. What didn't occur to me was that, although it had arrived in San Francisco as the brash, brilliant, and exciting new kid on the block, by the early nineties A.C.T. had become a bastion of culture, a somewhat intimidating monolith housed in a gilded structure out of another century. Its relationship to the city as a whole was oblique; from the beginning, Bill Ball wanted to create a national rather than a regional theater (hence the name "American Conservatory Theater" rather than "San Francisco Conservatory Theater"). Ball was grateful for local philanthropy, but his biggest support came from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, and under his leadership A.C.T. became a self-contained entity within the cultural landscape of San Francisco. Ball brought his acting company with him from Pittsburgh, trained them in the confines of his own very private institution, and produced a repertoire heavy on classical literature without requiring much collaboration from the community at large. Despite the fact that Ed Hastings was an intensely generous community builder who helped spawn many smaller companies (including Turtle Island Ensemble, Asian American Theater Company, and Encore Theatre Company), it was startling to me when I arrived at A.C.T. to discover just how isolated the organization had become.

Trauma leaves its marks on a theater just as it does on a human being, and A.C.T.'s history was one of repeated glory followed by repeated trauma. By the time I arrived, the organization was twisted around its own pathologies like a strange family that has learned to live with its brilliant but transgressive father, its competitive angry siblings, and its wary jealous neighbors. It also seemed to be a very male institution. Few women had held positions of leadership at A.C.T. over the years; in addition to Ball, the power had been housed in the hands of such men as James McKenzie, Robert Goldsby, Allen Fletcher, and Ed Hastings. Some talented women directors had left their mark, including Elizabeth Huddle and Joy Carlin, but they were the exception rather than the rule. When I arrived, the atmosphere was grim. It was as if Daddy had killed himself, Uncle Ed had left town, and now the

potentially evil stepmother had arrived. No one had any idea what to make of me. I remember my first A.C.T. company meeting with horror: I walked into an immense studio in which the entire company, from actors to stagehands to stitchers to faculty members, had lined up to hear from the new artistic director. They greeted my words with complete silence and would barely meet my gaze as I looked around the room. It was clear that survival at A.C.T. had come to mean keeping one's head down so as not to make waves; everything was done by code, there were no policies on anything from maternity leave to sick days to parking, nor any clarity about how decisions were to be reached about play choices, casting, or academic admission. If the buzzword of the new millennium is transparency, the buzzword of A.C.T. in the nineties was secrecy. The very geography of the office space, a rabbit warren of small rooms inaccessible to each other and impossible to navigate, epitomized the culture in which I found myself when I first arrived, and the anxiety in the air was palpable.

It should be said at the outset that the recruitment process that led to my hire was anything but transparent. The board handled the search internally with great care, but very few people outside the small circle of the board had any say in my appointment or any knowledge of me or my work. When Producing Director James Haire, who had been with the company almost since its inception, was asked to give me a tour of the theater while I was in town for one of my interviews, he had no idea who I was or that I was a candidate for the artistic directorship of his own theater until Joan Sadler called him later and inquired, "What did you think of our girl?" To which Jim replied, "What girl?" The person most opposed to my appointment was supposed to be my closest colleague, Managing Director John Sullivan. I discovered halfway into my negotiations that during the search process John had proposed a new organizational scheme whereby he would be named general director and supervise two stage directors (Anne Bogart and Robert Woodruff), who would report to him. The board had considered but ultimately rejected his proposal. John had chosen to stay on as managing director regardless, a disastrous decision from my point of view, and probably from his.

He was, perhaps without quite knowing it, deeply invested in my failure, and my year's "collaboration" with him was among the hardest of my professional life.

Without giving me any real guidelines, Sullivan announced at our first meeting, in November 1991, that I would have to have the following season announced and budgeted by January. If I had been less naïve and compliant I would have refused; it takes at least six months to understand an organization and its culture well enough to begin to make remotely informed decisions about the work ahead. But I said yes, and made every mistake I could possibly have made.

It all went back to what I thought we had "for free."

In celebration of an artist whose work had had a dramatic impact on Bay Area theater during his distinguished career at the Magic Theatre (and to please Sullivan), I asked director Robert Woodruff whether he would like to be part of my first season at A.C.T. This seemed like an obvious way to bring younger, edgier audiences into the A.C.T. fold, to salute the city's cultural history, and to give us license to do more adventurous work. Woodruff eagerly accepted and chose a classic I loved that had strong meaning for him at the time: Webster's Jacobean masterpiece *The Duchess of Malfi*.

To honor the company of actors who had meant so much to A.C.T. over the past decades, I found roles for many of them in a 1930s American comedy I had always admired, *Dinner at Eight*, and in a new translation of Molière's *The Learned Ladies* that Richard Seyd had directed very successfully for me in New York. These two plays would give me a chance to see how I related to a whole raft of A.C.T. talent (including Peter Donat, Sydney Walker, Richard Butterfield, and Frances Lee McCain) and to do a few comedies on the grand scale that Bill Ball had espoused and adored.

To share my own personal aesthetic and theatrical training with my new audience, I chose to commission a new Timberlake Wertenbaker translation of Euripides' *Hecuba*, which was to star Olympia Dukakis in the title role. And to appease those who felt my tastes were not popular or American enough, I agreed to produce Ken Ludwig's Broadway farce *Lend Me a Tenor*, which was not a play that particularly

spoke to me but which I thought might appeal to the opera lovers in San Francisco and balance out my Jacobean drama.

And finally, because it never occurred to me that Strindberg's dark psychological landscape might be a bizarre way to usher in a new theatrical era, I chose to begin my tenure at A.C.T. with Paul Walsh's new version of *Creditors*, which we had done so successfully at CSC the season before.

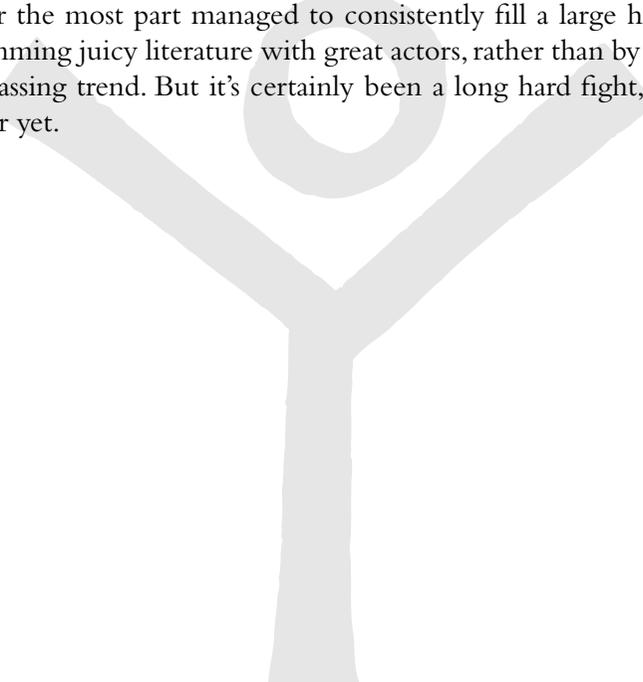
All this was thought through and decided on planes and phone calls between November 1991, when I was hired, and March 1992, when the season was announced. I was still living in New York, still running CSC, and still raising a two-year-old. It was hardly the calmest and most propitious way to plan an inaugural season. Not realizing until I had accepted the job how disastrous A.C.T.'s cash flow was and how complex the union contracts and administrative budgets were, I allowed myself to be railroaded into decisions that had far-reaching consequences. Many of these decisions were shepherded by a shadow marketing consultant whose salary was nowhere to be found on A.C.T.'s official payroll but whose Denver-based office seemed to be generating whatever thinking was going on about how to introduce new artistic leadership to A.C.T. and how to communicate with the audience. "If your theater were a vegetable, what kind might it be?" was one of her first questions to me. I think it was this encounter that led to my ongoing antipathy for consultants and my resistance to the kind of marketing speak so ubiquitous in the field today.

If I was surprised by what I discovered, so was the theater community when they learned that a thirty-two-year-old neophyte from New York had been hired to run one of the five largest companies in America, a once great institution with a theater full of earthquake rubble, a troubled school, a negative cash flow, a dwindling audience, and a traumatic history. Why did A.C.T. choose to gamble on me? Trustee Joan Sadler recently shared with me the letter she wrote to the full board that fall, in which she articulated her unqualified support for their candidate (me), not just "because she was capable, talented, experienced, committed to excellence—they all were. But because for A.C.T., with the special characteristics of its history and

its special needs of the moment, she seemed uniquely suited, offering unusual strengths, skills, and understanding. First, because she communicated immediately the kind of passion, the ‘fire in the belly’ that will be a critical factor for us in our daunting task of capturing the public’s imagination and rallying its support. . . . Furthermore, because she recognizes A.C.T.’s unique role . . . with its dedication to training and ensemble, and she is committed to furthering and enhancing both. . . . Thirdly, because she recognized immediately the particular challenge and opportunities offered by the enormous diversity of the Bay Area.” It was a brave and unpredictable choice that this committed but beleaguered board was making. And San Francisco had little idea what it was getting.

Not that I have ever been secretive about my tastes and desires. I am passionate about complex dramatic literature, heightened text, big ideas, deeply invested acting, beautiful visuals, and international collaborations. I am woefully ignorant of pop culture, have little appetite for television, and have kept the remotest track of popular music only in recent years because my son is a musician. I realize this is a terrible admission, one that today would most likely disqualify me for the very job I have been doing for over twenty years. But I came of age at a time when live theater was meant to do something different from pop culture, and when success was measured in ways other than simply the number of people served. The current punishing fiscal climate and the challenge of attracting new audiences has led to a hunger for theater to aim more and more closely for the commercial center, in terms of subject matter, casting, and methods of outreach. The arts have come to rely on metrics that measure success according to the cost per person of producing a given play or mounting a given art exhibition. Obviously, broadening audiences in an era of niche marketing and the ability to self-curate any artistic experience is hard. But as Ezra Pound famously said, “Literature is news that stays news,” and the converse can also be the case: those pop-culture phenomena that may seem on the cutting edge of cool one year may be obsolete the next. If part of the mandate of the nonprofit theater is to nurture and cultivate that which may have lasting value, I believe it’s worth being cautious about

the endlessly seductive pull of the trendy and the transient. Looking back on my years at A.C.T., the thing I am proudest of is that we have for the most part managed to consistently fill a large house by programming juicy literature with great actors, rather than by chasing every passing trend. But it's certainly been a long hard fight, and it's not over yet.



City Lights

The Postfounder Era

My generation of artistic directors sits somewhere between the visionary founders of the regional theater movement and the often refreshingly anti-institutional independent artists who have found homes either in the commercial or experimental theater worlds in recent years. We were idealistic enough to believe in a commitment to acting ensembles, classical repertoire, large-scale new work whose goal was not Broadway, subscription audiences with a love of variety, and federal funding for the arts. We were not disillusioned enough yet to despair of institutions and to hold the nonprofit movement accountable for the lack of access and adventure in the field, a charge one hears repeatedly (and often fairly) today. After all, the founding notion of the National Endowment for the Arts was that the future of a democracy is interlaced with the future of its art forms, and that to nurture the arts there must be a subsidy that protects risk and keeps artists' vision focused on the long-term growth of the art form rather than the short-term profitability of any given piece of work. Bill Ball articulated this beautifully in the souvenir program printed for A.C.T.'s inaugural season in Pittsburgh in 1965:

The American Conservatory Theater has been founded as a non-profit, educational institution to bring together the

finest directors, authors, playwrights, and educators in the theatre arts. Its immediate goal is to awaken in these theatre artists a maximum versatility and expressiveness. And as they approach these goals, we hope that their audiences will be provided with a banquet rather than merely another dessert. . . .

The American Conservatory Theater exists not only for the benefit of the artist—but also for the benefit of the audience. In recent years, the metropolitan theatre audience has become more and more an audience of hit-followers. The thoughtful theatre lover is offered little in the way of a sustained, meaningful repertoire. The thirteen plays which comprise the first season of The American Conservatory Theater encompass every major dramatic epoch in the history of the theatre.

Ball understood that resident theaters were given nonprofit status because they were held in the community trust, and at the beginning, he took that charge very seriously.

I recently reread Arena Stage co-founder and longtime producing director Zelda Fichandler's words, written in a letter to the U.S. Department of the Treasury in the fifties (and later read into the Congressional Record), arguing that theaters should be accorded 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status: "Once we made the choice to produce our plays not to recoup an investment but to recoup some corner of the universe for our understanding and enlargement, we entered into the same world as the university, the library, the museum, and the church, and became, like them, an instrument of civilization." So beautifully put. The fact that many large-scale institutional theaters today have become roadhouses to incubate commercial productions headed for Broadway is a sad diminution of the original notion of the nonprofit theater, but in the face of declining contributions and audiences, some argue that this is the only means of survival.

I will never be entirely sure why the board of A.C.T. decided to risk everything on me, but I suspect it was that, on some deep level,

I shared DNA with Bill Ball: I believed in the uniqueness of A.C.T.'s mission, and I knew it was worth fighting for. Most important of all, A.C.T. was about lifelong learning. That's the piece of it I loved. The founding definition of A.C.T. stated:

The American Conservatory Theater combines the concept of resident repertory theater with the classic concept of continuous training, study, and practice as an integral and inseparable part of the performer's life. . . .

Our goal is to awaken in the theater artist his maximum versatility and expressiveness.

I hoped *her* versatility and expressiveness would be awakened as well.

Ball's company of forty-plus actors was engaged in constant artistic growth, taking and teaching classes while performing a repertoire of up to twenty-three plays in the first full San Francisco season. Modeled on the Comédie Française, A.C.T. was built around a large rotating repertoire, a permanent acting company, and a conservatory in which actors studied and students acted. The conservatory quickly became a major training program in which young actors apprenticed at the feet of master actors while performing alongside them on-stage. As the critic Martin Gottfried explained it, "[Bill Ball] is training them to discipline flamboyance and then apply it to productions that he stages with all the devices of grand opera, ballet, mime, and magical full-throated theater. Combining these primary theater colors with an unrelenting demand for such basics as voice control, diction, movement, and facial expression, and pumping them up with the inspirational effect of his own genius, he blends directorial creativity with respect for a playwright's purposes."

The idea of a theater that sustained not only a permanent acting company but a multi-year actor training program was thrilling to me. This was how the ancient art of theater had always been carried forward. Educated actors and an educated audience meant the opportunity to do challenging work in a sophisticated way. San

Francisco's proud separation from the entertainment industry in Los Angeles freed A.C.T. from the oft-bemoaned requirement of hiring television and film stars to populate its stage: Bay Area audiences pride themselves on knowing good theater acting when they see it, and Ball had trained his audience to recognize talent. So although I was sad to leave the vast talent pool that was New York, there seemed to be the potential in San Francisco for a sustained and serious theatrical exploration.

As actor Ray Reinhardt, a member of the original A.C.T. acting company, explained, "No repertory company has been able to make it in New York over a length of time. APA [Association of Production Artists] did have some wonderful seasons, but the pressure becomes too much. It's more and louder and faster and funnier and—I don't know. The temptation is always there for other things. . . . I'll tell you why not Los Angeles. Obviously, in Los Angeles every actor would be going to Bill and every director saying, 'Oh, just one day out, just one day's shooting on a film, one day on a television program.' It would be impossible. Up in San Francisco, it is a very good choice because you are away from the commercial pressure. You're in a cosmopolitan city. It's still, as far as . . . social living is concerned . . . perhaps the best city in the United States to be."

In addition, the fact that San Francisco is an extremely small town compared to New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles makes cross-disciplinary collaboration far easier and quite natural: over the years at A.C.T. we have collaborated with such composers and musicians as Kronos Quartet, Chanticleer, Rova Saxophone Quartet, Nathaniel Stookey, Bonfire Madigan Shive, and Tracy Chapman; such dancers as Pascal Molat and Muriel Maffre of San Francisco Ballet, and Nol Simonse and Joe Goode; and local visual artists and video makers—all because we share the same town and, to some extent, the same philosophy of making art. We also share the frontier spirit that has historically characterized Northern California; after all, this is where the Gold Rush began, where Levi's were born, where many social movements, from black power to feminism to ecology to gay pride

to ethnic studies to social media first found fertile ground in which to grow.

One of my happy discoveries when I took the job at A.C.T. was that San Francisco was the least corporate place I had ever been, and the kind of hierarchy originally envisioned by the NEA as good business practice for the arts, with organization charts for theaters and museums that looked like those of banks and corporations, seemed somehow less applicable in Northern California. A.C.T.'s precarious history as a one-man band with very little in the way of corporate structure or governance was also its saving grace: it had never become an institution in search of a mission; it was, rather, a mission in desperate search of a sustaining financial structure. In many ways, twenty years later, I feel as if we are still searching for that elusive formula whereby a thousand-seat theater company can produce serious and exciting work while at the same time developing new plays and sustaining a highly regarded training program in the most expensive real estate market in the world. I discovered early on that survival is never something one can or should count on; each play, each season, each young actor in training has to be its own event, its own journey, as if it might well be the last. This was the lesson of the earthquake.

City Lights