

5 WAYS TO MAKE LA THEATER GREAT(ER)

I'M WRITING THIS ARTICLE under the safety and smugness of "practicing what I preach" [my play *Some Girl(s)* opens at the Geffen Playhouse on Feb. 6] so I hope this entire document doesn't come off as disingenuous. If so, it'll fit in nicely with most of my fictional work.

That said, I'm attempting to write something of worth and note here, a treatise of sorts that helps push Los Angeles Theater toward a place of prominence and stature rather than skepticism and outright derision. Mind you, I'm not one of those who scoff when they hear those words—"Los Angeles" and "Theater"—in the same sentence but there are those (some of our East Coast colleagues and others) who have been known to do so, to in fact see the phrase "Los Angeles Theater" as a bit of an oxymoron. Rightly or wrongly, Theater in the City of Angels has often taken a backseat to its glitzier, wealthy cousins Film and Television.

But why should that be the case? To be sure, there are companies and individuals who have given their creative lives to producing viable theater in this community, theater that isn't a means to an ends but rather worthy art in its own right. There are a number of theaters—I'm working at one of them right now—that use all of their resources to develop new plays and present strong, individualized work from top-notch artists. So why the pall that continues to hang over the work we do here?

I suppose part of it has to do with seeing this town as an 'entertainment industry' and the idea that nothing of artistic value can come from that sort of environment—I'm guessing the notion of Warhol's Factory escapes them. Theater people here are seen as the ones who couldn't make it in LA, doing plays when paying gigs aren't coming in or our agents stop taking our calls. My own agents glance politely at each other when I say I'm working on a play—the new pool will have to wait.

By Neil LaBute



LISA CARPENTER

Playwright Neil LaBute

It's strange that at the turning point in college—deciding where to go to follow your vocation—many are seen as heroes for turning their back on LA and heading to New York to pursue their theatrical craft; the boys and girls moving out to California are seen as the sellouts and pursuers of vanity and glory.

If someone, however, says they plan on furthering their theater career by moving to Los Angeles they are immediately seen as hopeless fools and written off as the future managers of any number of retail stores in the Beverly Center.

What can we do as artists to waylay this sentiment? It's not enough to simply punch the next guy in the mouth who makes a crack about LA Theater—mind you, I'm not against this idea and it probably wouldn't hurt anything—we must do more if we are to turn the tide of popular opinion that is against us. Below are five suggestions I've made to get us started. Agree or disagree, that is your privilege. But do something.

TALENT - More seasoned actors need to be willing to participate at a local level. We need to see ourselves as the isolated artistic community that we are—not unlike the many talented artists living in London who regularly work in film and TV and theater, as well as radio. Work is work to the English artist and one can regularly see or hear their favorite actors giving voice to characters in all of the mediums because the opportunity is

afforded them in an industry that is overall much smaller than our own but has somehow manifested itself into a viable force by creating opportunity where little seemed to exist. It needs to be far less of an “event” when a star treads the boards at the Kirk Douglas Theater because folks are doing it all the time. So many of our leading directors, actors and writers started out in the theater and they should return with regularity to the medium that first spawned them. This is their home now and they shouldn’t save themselves up for a run at a Tony or an Olivier; they should be working at any of the many venues that inhabit this city.

LOCATION - I’ll go one step further with this idea; our artists should go beyond the Geffens and the Ahmansons and begin to work with new and emerging artists in the many smaller, storefront theaters in the city and valley. I would love to see Morgan Freeman or Nicholas Cage or Renee Zellweger working with the companies that make up the Open Fist or 3KO or the Actors’ Gang. Years ago it was a regular pilgrimage for known actors to make their way over to the Pasadena Playhouse. What happened? And why shouldn’t we enjoy broadcasts of high quality Radio Theater on KCRW? Because no one would listen, you say? Well, if it comes down to “Chocolate City” or Shakespeare, I’ll take my chances.

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MATERIAL - Playwrights—hell, everybody has at least one good play inside them, I firmly believe that—need to be premiering works in theaters in LA. Again, not all of them can be in the biggest and best venues; don’t forget that it’s theater so you’re not going to be making any real money anyway! Do it because you love it and as Chekhov (whom I’m about to grossly paraphrase) once rather famously said to Gorki, “Write, write, write! Any success, even a slight one, may be of great importance to the theater.” Don’t always turn your ideas into pitches and screenplays, my friends—once in a while churn out a decent one-act play

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that we can all enjoy some night over in Burbank. You might surprise yourself with how pleasurable the experience is.

AUDIENCE - We must get out and beat the bushes for a real LA theater audience, one that understands how vital this art form is and the full benefit of regularly attending live shows. Let’s be honest, folks, the one thing we’ve got going for us here—since Euripides was running around worrying about the hem on his actors’ togas—is that nobody else is selling what we’ve got. There is nothing like a live performance and that is why theater is never going to die and the Catholic Church, the Communist Party and the NEA had better get used to it. We must be out there doing the educating, though, giving that audience something tangible and real to hold on to in this age of instantly disposable entertain-ment. No matter how much is spent on digitizing cinemas and high-deffing televisions, we must also get our asses out in the community every so often and say, “Hey kids, come on in and see a real show! This is entertainment!” I don’t want to sound like the uncle that no one really wants to invite to Thanksgiving but if we don’t spread the good word, nobody will. Now is the time. Tomorrow may be too late.

RESPECT - We must earn the respect we crave. We cannot use the theater as a kind of stepping stone to another career, as a showcase for what we can do, or as a means to an end (as noted previously). The amazing sensation we get by really connecting with a live audience, with using the medium as a way of distilling and imparting truth, as both a classroom and an entertainment, must be the only reason we do it. Those who go back to the stage will repeatedly tell you its not for the money or the awards or the applause—I’m someone who seems to rarely get any of those things. No, you do it because you have to. Because there’s nothing else like it (in either fantasy or reality). Because it starts out as a passion and becomes a religion. You do it because, like Everest, it is there. ■

This article is posted at lastageblog.com. We invite your comments.

SOME GIRL(S)

Previews Jan. 29-Feb. 5
Opens Feb., 6; plays Tues.-
Thurs., 8 pm; Fri., 7:30;
Sat., 3:30 & 8pm;
Sun., 2:30 & 7:30 pm;
through March 9
No performances
Feb. 3 & Feb. 13;
Makeup performance
Mon., Feb. 4, 8 pm
Tickets: \$69-\$74
Audrey Skirball Kenis Theater
Geffen Playhouse
10886 LeConte Ave., Westwood
310.208.5454
or www.geffenplayhouse.com