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## Culture report: gatekeepers Causing a scene Can anyone save us from the aging subscribers and rank commercialism that has paralyzed our city's stages?



By David Cote

After years of private bitching and public grumbling about our nonprofit theaters' toothless seasons, homogeneous production designs and timid, old-man marketing, I've finally found a person with the taste and courage to be the ideal artistic director of the 21st century: me.

You heard right; I've sat through enough shit (and genius) and I want some power. Give me an annual budget of \$5 million, all my downtown contacts and see if I don't make a splash. I'd program a season of Anne Washburn, Young Jean Lee, Annie Baker and Will Eno. Plus—eventually—younger, unproduced playwrights who landed on my desk. (The more violent and obscene, the better.) Foreign writers, too, in fresh translations. Every first Monday I'd throw a free play reading with an open bar. In the summer, I'd open the doors for a two-month workshop by a favored company—Radiohole, the Debate Society or Nature Theater of Oklahoma—ending in a massive celebration. The advertising would be slick and bold, the tickets cheap, the parties raucous and the shows calculated to enrage, excite and astound. For the first five years, I would not accept any subscriber over the age of 35. I'd have blogs, press conferences, preshow talks and fat souvenir programs. I'd constantly bombard the media with video and op-ed pieces tied to our shows—when I wasn't hosting a kick-ass party.

The next morning, hungover and broke, I realize that it was all a drunken dream.

Running a daring, high-quality theater in this town is nearly impossible. Whether you head the tiny Vineyard Theatre on East 15th Street (120 seats and an annual budget of \$2 million) or the elephantine Roundabout Theatre Company (two Broadway spaces, an Off Broadway house, an Off-Off studio, 44,000 subscribers and \$43 million to burn), you've got divided loyalties. Are the artists happy? Are the funders happy? Is the board happy? Natalie Portman is interested in Director A? Great, um, let's find a project. What? Will Smith really wants you to read his friend's play; it stinks, but the friend writes for HBO. Can you put Jada's brother in the show? He'll donate! The subscribers are pissed! The critics hate your guts!

I'm sure our artistic directors would like to do the right thing. I'm sure that the Roundabout's Todd Haimes would love to hire Jack Cummings III to direct an American classic. Or that Lynne Meadow of Manhattan Theatre Club knows that Qui Nguyen needs her support. Or that Carole Rothman would be thrilled to turn Second Stage Theatre over to the Civilians, a downtown docu-theatrical troupe that could use a high-profile platform.

Actually, Oskar Eustis is already on that—he's hosting the Civilians' Paris Commune later this month. Eustis, who took over the Public Theater in 2004, has been rebuilding its downtown and political credibility. Only the third person to walk in Joe Papp's shoes (after George C. Wolfe's solid but commercial-minded rule of 1993 to 2004 and JoAnne Akalaitis's aborted 20-month tenure), Eustis has made good moves: inviting the Wooster Group, hosting the Under the Radar Festival and spearheading an Off-Off series, the Public Lab. But can he truly revitalize the Public, get younger butts in seats, and make plays seem exciting and dangerous the way Papp (1921–1991) did?

Can there even be another Joe Papp? The legendary showman who started Shakespeare in the

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Park and recolonized the Astor Library was an impossible, controlling figure. He baited the critics, strong-armed the city and did all he could to make himself irreplaceable at the theater he created. His democratizing mission: Bring the classics to the people and foster a spirit of aesthetic adventure. But today, do "the people" want classics? It's hard enough getting seasoned playgoers to embrace garden-variety postmodernism.

Robert Brustein, who founded and ran the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from 1980 to 2002, sees a bleak picture. "Critics, the subscription audience, the high cost of tickets, the collapse of the NEA as a predictable funding source...all of these things contribute to a general atmosphere of blandness and timidity," he says via e-mail. "I think Jim Nicola at New York Theatre Workshop is maintaining high standards.... But never say never in the theater. Someone will come along with a burst of energy that will explode the general torpor."

Gregory Mosher also has hopes for an artistic-director messiah. Mosher led Lincoln Center Theater from 1985 to 1991, and isn't afraid to suggest radical solutions—like dumping pesky old subscribers. "The 'next Papp' is right here, wherever here is—could be Newark, for all we know," Mosher says. "Joe's successor is a young person, very likely a woman and a first- or second-generation American, with a startling idea and the determination to bring it to life. Joe had many wonderful qualities, but above all he had a compelling idea. His idea, however, was deeply strange at the time, and threatening to the status quo. And the next great idea will seem equally strange to us. We have to be alert for it and embrace it. And we have to remember that it probably won't lead to something that looks like the Public, or LCT or any other 50-year-old company, but will be a new form."

Well, whoever this revolutionary art leader is, I hope to be around to complain about their seasons. And to covet their job.

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