Oskar Eustis: "Engaging with Artists, Community and Risk Taking"

Saturday, November 11, 2006

The following is an abridged transcript that appears in the January 2007 issue of American Theatre.

I want to start with a story that is the founding myth of the institution I now lead, New York City's Public Theater. It's the story of Joseph Papp's struggle with Robert Moses. Moses was the most powerful man in New York City—one of the most powerful men in the country, in fact, during the 1950s, when the New York Shakespeare Festival was founded. He was commissioner of parks and chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority. Nothing got built, nothing public happened in this city in the way of capital projects, without going through Moses. He's more responsible for the look and shape of New York City than any other individual.

Joe Papp, at that time, was a stage manager for CBS-TV and had as his hobby—his nighttime job, his passion, his vocation—the New York Shakespeare Festival. He started it in 1954 in a church on the Lower East Side, then moved to an amphitheatre on the Lower East Side, which is still there, though it's not used now as much as it should be. Then he started moving his productions around in the back of trucks to various parks, including Central Park. Moses decided that all of those people flocking to free theatre at Shakespeare in the Park were destroying the grass and were bad for the ecology of the parks. But he didn't try to stop Joe. What he tried to do was get Joe to charge admission. He thought Joe should charge money and that that money should be split with the parks department and the parks department would then use that money to replace the grass. Joe refused.

That refusal turned into a six-month struggle. Joe had a genius for publicity, and this ended up continually on the front page of the New York Times. Moses released to the press the fact that Joe had been a member of the Communist Party. Joe was fired from his job at CBS. Now Joe was fighting for his livelihood as well as for his principles—and, eventually, he won.

The courts ruled that Moses had used his power capriciously and therefore Joe was entitled to continue to perform Shakespeare in the Park for free. He also, with the help of his union, went to court and forced CBS to give him his job back. The day he got it he quit and never worked for anybody else ever again. His vocation had become the full-time job that he would pursue for the rest of this life.

The founding myth, the Ur-story of the New York Shakespeare Festival, was born.

Joe was defending the principle that art belonged to everybody. It was a simple idea. The greatest artist of the Western canon, Shakespeare, was not the property of people who had money or of people who had education or of people who were born here. Shakespeare was the property of everybody, and it was the job of those who were going to make theatre to make sure that that cultural artifact, the plays of William
Shakespeare, went out and became the property of all the people. It's an extraordinarily simple idea.

His model was the New York Public Library. (This story is a little bit apocryphal, but this is a storytelling business.) Joe would say that he taught himself English by going to the Brooklyn Public Library and taking out Shakespeare. He came from a Yiddish-speaking home and his parents were immigrants. That model of the public library was an essential idea for Joe and, indeed, in 1967 when the theatre's current home on Astor Place opened, that model was immortalized in its title—the Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival. That building, the home of the old Astor Library, was also where the New York Public Library started. When the library moved uptown, the building became the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, so it went from being the Public Library to being a place where tens of thousands of immigrants found shelter, help, education, a place to sleep, a soup kitchen.

So the building has a history that dovetails with what Joe decided to do with it.

After 13 years of providing Shakespeare for the people, Papp realized that there was another side to his mission: He had to take the voices of the people and make them part of the canon. It was not only about giving culture to the people. It was about listening to the people, learning from the people and taking their voices and putting them on stage and making them part of the culture.

The first show that the theatre opened with in 1967 was *Hair*. You have to think, "How did this guy who had done nothing but Shakespeare for 13 years produce *Hair*?" But there you go. That set the theatre off and running on what it's been doing ever since, under JoAnne Akalaitis and George C. Wolfe, and what I've been attempting to continue to do.

Alfred Kazin, the great critic, has a passage about seeing the original production of *Awake and Sing!* on Broadway in the '30s. He describes sitting in the back of the balcony and watching the Group Theatre and, he says, watching his brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles up on stage, inhabiting it by right as much as if they were Hamlet or Lear. It completely changed his vision of what was possible in the culture. It's a simple idea—but a potent one.

It casts me back to *Angels in America*. It's a great play. It's about a great and important subject. But one of the things you could also feel in the late '80s and early '90s, as we were working on it, was that this play was a major American cultural artifact. Gay Americans—who were gay in a complicated, contradictory, adverse way—made the claim that they could not only speak for themselves, but that they could speak for America. Miller did it in *Death of a Salesman*. There's no mention of ethnicity in the Loman family, but I grew up in a WASP household and "attention must be paid" is not WASP syntax. The Loman family was Jewish. Miller was making a similar claim to that of Odets: "Yes, we speak for everybody. We speak for all America." The stage is a fantastic place for accepting people into the story of civilization. It's not a coincidence that it does that. It's actually built into the nature of the art form itself. We know that democracy and theatre were invented in the same city, in the same decade, within a few years of each other. Unless you're a much more arbitrary person than I am, you can't believe that's a coincidence. We know in the ancient festivals of Dionysius there was
always storytelling. At some point, legend has it, right at the time when they were first inventing that idea of democracy, somebody named Thespis got the idea that instead of just talking to his audience, he, being on stage, could turn and talk to somebody else on stage. That changed everything, just as the Greek idea of democracy changed everything.

Now, we know that Greek democracy was incredibly flawed and partial. It was a slave-owning society. You had to own property to vote. But that fundamental idea that power flowed from the people upwards—that power flowed from the consent of the governed—was an idea that changed everything. Power didn't come from above; power came from below.

As soon as Thespis turned and spoke to someone else, as soon as he invented dialogue, everything changed. The storyteller—who has had this authorial, god-like, unified perspective—isn't right anymore. His point of view is not the authorial point of view. He is one of two points of view that are on stage. At that juncture we realize that truth resides not in the storyteller—truth resides somehow in the dialogue, in the space between two people. You're imagining that you're in my shoes: You empathize with me, and then empathize with whoever I'm talking to. That act—that empathic leap of imagination—is the democratic act. In order for a democracy to work you have to believe that nobody has a monopoly on truth. That there is no such thing as absolute truth—otherwise the whole idea of democracy is nonsensical. All it would be is a compromise. In order to really believe in democracy, you have to believe that truth resides in the dialogue between different points of view.

This is a pretty thought. Since I'm really a dramaturg, I'll note that we have textual evidence for this pretty thought. It's in the first extant play that we have, Aeschylus's *The Persians*. It is one of the few Greek tragedies not based on mythological material. It's a docudrama set during the second Persian invasion of Greece, chronicling the defeat of Darius's army at the Battle of Salamis. Aeschylus fought in that battle. It was so important to him that it was the only thing he wrote on his tombstone—never mind that he invented Western drama. For the Greeks it was their Civil War, Revolutionary War, World War II all rolled into one. It was the war that proved that Greeks were better than Persians. It was the war that proved that democracy was better than tyranny. It was the war that proved that free men could fight better than slaves. Not a single person in that audience would have been unaffected by that war, because Aeschylus wrote it eight years after that war. In 472 B.C. he wrote this account of the triumph of the Greeks from the Persian point of view.

There's no question that part of what goes on in that text is schadenfreude.

It's a chance for the Greeks to relive the pleasure of having defeated the Persians. But you also can't read the text without knowing absolutely that Aeschylus was asking his audience to identify with the Persians—eight years after this war. He was asking them to imagine what it felt like to lose this war, what it felt like from the other person's point of view. And he was also doing something even a little bit more subversive than that, I think.

He was saying, "We've triumphed. We're the most powerful. We sit on top of the world. But look who, eight years ago, was sure that their empire would last forever. Look who
was positive that God was on their side. Look who was sure that their armies could never be defeated. And think of what happened." We know only two certain things about the reception of *The Persians*. The first is that it didn't win any prizes that year. But the other is that enough people were affected by it that they wrote down copies of it and preserved them. It is one of the 30-odd plays that survived the burning of the library of Alexandria and all of the other huge losses in the transition of the classical world through the Dark Ages. It survived. It survived because it had an impact, and people cared enough about it to keep it alive.

So we know that the theatre is about democracy and that the theatre is about imagining what it looks like from somebody else's point of view—which means that the theatre has to be, from its very nature, controversial. It doesn't always have to be politically controversial. It doesn't always have to be offensive. But the whole idea of the theatre is the idea of imagining things that you haven't imagined before—of imagining perspectives that are not yours. The theatre is not there to validate our own experiences. The theatre is there to push our own experiences, to expand our notion of what we are.

There's a beautiful example of this in Shakespeare. In the Henriad cycle of history plays (*Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*) you can feel that what Shakespeare is doing is inventing the idea of what it means to be English. He's exploring very specifically the idea of right rule. What is the appropriate way to rule? What is the appropriate way to rule?

One of the reasons that he feels the demand to do this is that, for the first time since the Greeks, you have a genuinely democratic audience. The Tudor compromise allows for an audience that is more diverse in class, in education and in every other way. All of those people, from the aristocracy to the illiterate groundlings throwing apples, are demanding to be entertained. They're insisting that a writer show up who can speak to all of them at once. This is a concrete demand on a theatre company. They've got to have plays that speak to all those different audiences simultaneously or they go out of business. So, in a way, that democratic audience calls Shakespeare into being. Like any great artist, having been called into service by this audience, he has to figure out, "What is it that I can actually make happen with this audience?"

One of the things he's doing in the Henriad is trying to figure out how all of these people go together: What makes them all English? Shakespeare is trying to work out stories that will make sense of their experiences so that they can come in as disparate and diverse as they are, but they can leave one audience. They can be one nation. He does this in the most literal way in *Henry V*. There's the Welshman, the Irishman and the Scotsman, and they all fight with each other and they all come together. What you see there is the exciting artistic result of democracy in action—but in order for that to happen you have to have the audience all sitting together.

Twenty-six years ago Ronald Reagan was elected and a sea change started to happen in American culture. It was embodied in the attack on the National Endowment for the Arts; the gradual decline in governmental support for the arts, particularly for the risk-taking arts; and the gradual change in priorities in many foundations and corporations. The arts started to seem like a luxury. We in the nonprofit theatre got better at our jobs. We became more entrepreneurial. We got smarter about surviving. We figured out how we can work better within this climate.
But there’s always a cost, and I think it’s an appropriate historical moment to look at some of that cost. We got better about earned income. We started making more money. We started to be more dependent on the box office. The math became trying to get more dollars out of each seat. We tried to extract more revenue from each seat in order to continue to serve our mission. Our relationship with the commercial theatre changed. At the Public, *A Chorus Line* moving to Broadway in 1975 had an immense economic effect for the next generation—it put well over $50 million into the Public Theater’s coffers. A lot of people, including us, have tried to replicate it.

In the course of doing that, we’ve blurred some of the lines that distinguish the nonprofit theatre from the commercial theatre. I’m proud of us for having survived, but we have to be very careful about what the consequences of that are. We are a nonprofit theatre for a reason—think of the New York Public Library. The idea behind the nonprofit theatre—certainly the idea behind the Public—is that culture is actually part of the birthright of the nation. The voices that need to be reflected on our stages are not the voices of the few, but the voices of the many. The great democratizing power of the theatre needs to be unleashed by the nonprofit theatre, not constrained. That means that the nonprofit theatre is, of course, different than the commercial theatre. Not opposed, but different.