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CENTERPIECE FOCUS ON: GOVERNANCE

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WHO NEEDS TO KNOW?

BY BARBARA SCHAFFER BACON

Of all the statistics presented in the 1998 TCG study *In Whom We Trust: An Exploration of Theatre Governing Boards*, the one that seemed to surprise and alarm the most people was this — that **92% of theatre managers believe that their board is barely or not at all knowledgeable of theatre**. Surely every theatre can count some devoted trustees who pursue every opportunity to see theatre and others who steep themselves in theatre history and critical review. But, it seems, theatre knowledge is neither a prerequisite for nor guarantee of theatre board service. Two key questions immediately present themselves. First, is this a problem? And, if yes, what can or should be done about it? I would like to respond to both briefly.

Is this a problem? Some may not see it as such. After all, the job of trustees is to raise the money, not choose the plays, right? Some artistic directors and managers may even resist the notion that trustees should be better educated in theatre for fear they will demand a greater voice in programming. However, as a consultant who works frequently with arts boards, I believe it is a problem. My reasons are both practical and philosophical. From a practical point of view, trustees who “know the work” — who are comfortable with and knowledgeable about their theatre’s program choices — will be better at performing their public relations and fundraising roles on behalf of the organization than those who are not. Philosophically speaking, trustees who associate their board service only with opportunities to plan fundraising events, solicit friends, monitor finances and attend gala opening night events will soon lose sight of theatre’s real purpose and potential. Trustees who are regularly inspired by the aesthetic, intellectual and emotional stimulation of theatre reap the benefits of board service and will rededicate themselves to the cause of theatre over and over again.

What can or should be done? Theatre companies and trustees around the country need to rethink their trustee education programs. Perhaps on the advice of consultants like me, trustee education has become too focused on fundraising skills, planning approaches and marketing strategies. Little thought or attention is given to this more basic need for continuing theatre education. This needs to change and artistic leaders, managers and trustees must all must play a role. Artistic leaders and managers must plan creative opportunities for trustees to see plays, new and old, in progress and fully staged. Trustees too must commit to their continuing education in theatre. The following articles from Barbara Pearce, board chair of the Long Wharf Theatre, and C. A. (Al) Irvine, a trustee with the San Diego Repertory Theatre, offer some personal reflections of board members who have accepted this challenge. By accepting the invitation to expand theatre knowledge, I believe that trustees will derive great personal rewards. Ultimately, the theatres will reap the benefits through the renewed interest and dedication of their trustees.

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Governance Centerpiece Curator: Jaan Whitehead, Trustee, Theatre for a New Audience.

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HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

BY BARBARA PEARCE

Why did I decide to participate in the 1998 National Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwrights Conference? In the end, it's pretty simple — for the same reason climbers trek up Mount Everest — because it's there. Forty miles down the Connecticut coast from my home is one of the world's great laboratories for new plays. People come from all over the world to participate, many of them annually, and I could attend without even having to sleep in a dormitory.

For the past two years, I have spent more time at Long Wharf Theatre than I care to recollect. I chaired two searches: one for our new artistic director, and one for our new managing director. After they were hired, I took over as board chair. That was the first year. Over the next year, we paid off the accumulated debt that we had been carrying for the past nine years, increased our subscriptions for the first time in a decade, reopened our second stage, and improved our lobby, our sound and light systems, and our box-office software. Then, in 1998, I had the luxury to think about theatre in a more reflective manner.

A discreet ad in *American Theatre* magazine caught my eye one cold winter weekend. I read about the National Critics Institute, for a nanosecond contemplated applying, and dismissed the possibility. Or so I thought. Over the succeeding weeks, the idea kept cropping up at odd moments. I realized that I hadn't wanted to do anything academic in almost twenty years. Eight consecutive years at Harvard and three degrees had seriously diminished my interest in formal education. This

was the first opportunity that had appealed to me since. I thought about my family, and whether my children could survive a month of my being unavailable as a driver, a disciplinarian and a housekeeper. I pondered the wisdom of leaving my company for others to run during one of the busiest months of the real estate season. Then I went for it. First I called Dan Sullivan, who runs the NCI program, and asked whether a non-critic could even apply. I said that I hadn't written a review since college. He seemed intrigued with the idea of a board chair wanting to know more about theatre, and encouraged me first to apply, and later to come.

As the opening of the Conference approached, my tension level rose. When friends asked me what I would be doing, I explained that it was like going to fantasy baseball camp. I would be eating, breathing and living theatre virtually twenty-four hours a day. But what if I couldn't hack it? What if my knowledge base and skills were so rudimentary that I embarrassed myself? What if I was too old, at 43, to keep up the pace that was demanded?

I confronted the homework assignment given ahead of time: an essay on a movie that had changed my life. I was baffled. I speculated that everyone else would be writing about obscure foreign films. I thought that I might as well lay my cards—or my ignorance—on the table up front, so I wrote about *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and how it helped to cement my relationship with my then boyfriend, now husband. In the back of my mind I kept thinking that a better idea would present itself to me, but, when the deadline

arrived, I turned the essay in unchanged.

The big day arrived at last. I nervously timed the trip from Guilford to Waterford, and arrived with time to spare. I wanted to make a good impression, but I quickly realized that my dress and my jewelry belonged in another life. As time went on, I fell into wearing my son's cast-off jeans and old T-shirts, but I was stuck that first afternoon. At the dinner following the opening convocation (notable for the announcement of artistic director Lloyd Richards's retirement the following summer), I sat with some of the other critic fellows. The one on my left had a brother the age of my son; the one on my right wasn't as old as most of my clothing. At least they were friendly, though, and I drove home in the Sunday beach traffic feeling a little better.

If I had imagined a leisurely routine, I was rapidly disabused of that notion. The days that followed more closely resembled Beast Barracks at West Point than they did the halls of Oxford. The typical morning began with an all-Conference meeting to critique the play of the night before. Then it was on to class, where we each read aloud the review we had written in the middle of the previous night. Visiting faculty either tore it to shreds or gently suggested changes. After a lunch of sorts (chicken was ubiquitous and chocolate invisible), which usually lasted for me no more than five minutes, I would check my voice mail on the run. It was amazing to me how regularly callers ignored my recording, which stated that I would be gone until the end of July; each check yielded eight to twelve messages. I would triage

those calls, then race to the afternoon class. That session would end in time for me to think about how nice it would be to have a nap, but without the luxury of actually taking one. Almost every evening we saw a different play, after which I would drive the forty miles home and then write a review. The following morning, I would jolt awake after five or so hours of sleep, run for an hour, drive back to Waterford, and begin again.

After ten days of this, I was exhausted but unbowed. I now could dash off a “standard” review. I was no longer prefacing each statement I made with the phrase, “I’m not really a critic.” My writing was tighter and clearer. Of course, my house was a mess, my running was slow, and my Sundays were spent trying to atone for my absence all week, but nothing’s perfect. I was infused with the zeal that comes from acquiring hard-won competence in a new discipline, and I knew that I was enriching the quality of my theatregoing forever.

The classes themselves did not all consist of ritual public humiliation. We also met with a set designer, a production manager, an acting teacher, a director and a fight director. We spent one whole day acting out scenes from *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, where I acted for the first time by playing Mary Tyrone. It was a big relief to know that I didn’t have to do that again, but it did give me a glimpse of the director’s role, as well as the difficulty of acting. I finally learned the names of theatre equipment or techniques that I had seen before. Our meals were often spent with playwrights, who were unfailingly receptive to input from lowly critic fellows.

The capstone of the program at NCI is the chance to follow one show from start to finish as an observer. I was assigned to *The Kitchen*, by Charlie Schulman. The

production meeting was fascinating, as I listened to Charlie talk about his preconceived ideas about set and staging (very few), and heard the heads of the various departments describe the way they imagined the production. My favorite exchange concerned the time period for the set. The play covers eighty years in a family’s life, and is all set in one kitchen. Obviously, appliances evolve during that span, and it seemed impossible to use the same ones from 1920 through the present. Charlie simply wanted a generic refrigerator; others pointed out that iceboxes were the standard at the time of the play’s early scenes. He didn’t want an intermission, which would have allowed for a refrigerator updating. Finally someone asked him: “Do you really need an icebox, or do you just want something with a general feeling of ‘icebox-ness’?” I knew at that instant that I wasn’t in Kansas anymore.

Plays at the O’Neill are only given four days of rehearsal and one day of tech. Sets are modular and gray. The actors carry scripts on stage, wear their own clothes, and employ minimal props. They don’t even take a curtain call, because the process is not about their work. The language is paramount, and the playwright has ultimate authority. He or she can make changes right up until the curtain; Charlie added and subtracted between six p.m. and eight-thirty p.m. on opening night.

From the earliest rehearsal through the last performance, I saw it all. For the first time, I got to see how the magic is made. The hardest part for me was keeping silent. At the initial reading, questions arose about factual events in history: When did wood-burning stoves disappear? When was busing an issue? When was the March on Washington? I wanted so badly to answer, but I confined myself to

tentative comments to the dramaturg on rest breaks. At one point, Charlie’s dates made the mother ninety, while her daughter was twenty-five. I bit my lip, and someone else eventually caught it.

The only show a critic fellow is exempted from reviewing is the one he or she follows. It soon became apparent to me that the objectivity necessary to write about the show would be unattainable once I had tracked it every step of the way. Casey Childs, the director, went out of his way to make me feel like a valued team member. I would definitely see this piece through rose-colored glasses. When a late-day thunderstorm caused a move indoors, from the thrust stage (newly named for Edith Oliver) to the barn, I fretted about the impact on the staging, along with everyone else.

At the opening performance, I sat behind the playwright, hoping with him that the audience would respond to all the material. I worried when some sequence that had worked beautifully in rehearsal didn’t get a laugh. I marveled when another scene produced more dramatic tension than I had expected. I eagerly awaited the verdict by my fellow critics, and was gratified to learn what they had been able to glean from their viewing. I couldn’t wait to hear what Casey would say at the notes session, or what additions and deletions Charlie would propose before the second and final evening.

By the end of the Conference, I felt right at home. My car automatically headed that way in the morning, and I had adjusted to late nights and little sleep. I knew, at least by sight, most of the participants, and felt comfortable approaching anyone. I complained ritually about the food. Except for the driving, I guess it *was* a lot like summer camp.

As a critic, I had grown bolder and surer of my judgments. Early on in the course, more than one person told me that I wasn't opinionated enough. Later on, I developed increased confidence in my own ideas about theatre. I think I waited too long to ask for letters to bring back to my friends and coworkers proclaiming my lack of aggressiveness and excessive timidity about my opinions. By the end of the Conference, I no longer qualified.

I'm back at work now, and July seems a distant dream. I can't imagine writing theatre criticism in the near future (although one of my initial attractions to the National Critics Institute was that its title did not limit it to theatre—I saw myself as a general and free-ranging critic of everything and anything). Loyalty and the nature of my position require me to wax enthusiastic about everything appearing on the Long Wharf stage, and professional courtesy demands

that I extend that to all our sister theatres. But every now and then, as I debate with myself over the phrasing in a business memo, I'll look back fondly and remember when, for one brief and shining moment, I was a theatre critic.

Barbara Pearce is the board chair of Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut.

YOU'LL NEED A LOT MORE THAN A BARN IF YOU'RE GOING TO PUT ON A REAL SHOW

BY C.A. ("AL") IRVINE

I have been a fan of live theatre for many years and a subscriber to the San Diego Repertory Theatre for about 18 years. I've also been a member of the Rep's board of trustees for almost six years now. Several months ago, I asked Sam Woodhouse, one of the two founders and the artistic director of the Rep, if I could just hang out during the development of an entire production, *Avenue X*, which was set to begin rehearsals in a couple of weeks.

Although I love live theatre, and had seen hundreds of shows, I knew very little about how a show was produced. I was pretty sure that increasing my understanding would increase my appreciation of theatre; in my experience, the more we know about how an art form is produced, the greater is our appreciation for it. For example, I can enjoy watching American collegiate wrestling matches, one of the world's most boring spectator sports, because I have some technical knowledge of wrestling. Even when it looks as if the two wrestlers are frozen together, I can see their subtle movements, and I know how fiercely they are jockeying for advantage. I'm not sure I can extend this principle to synchronized swimming, but I now know for sure that it applies to theatre.

I'm writing this article primarily for people who know as little about the production of live theatre as I did a few months ago. I hope that I can convey my newly gained appreciation for the quantity of work, the attention to detail, the artistic teamwork, the concern for safety, and, in general, for the hidden 95 percent (what I call the "theatrical iceberg") of the effort needed to produce a show.

One of the first steps, of course, is casting — a tricky task in the case of *Avenue X*. The show requires eight actor/singer/dancers, six men and two women, four of whom are black and four white, all with great voices. Moreover, the specific voices have to blend in complex doo wop, with close harmonies. As if that weren't enough, the music includes hymns, rap, gospel, ballads and operatic material, all a cappella! And, of course, Sam has to take into account the show's budget while casting, too.

During the company meeting that kicks off rehearsals, Sam and Nakissa Eternad (Sam's assistant and the resident dramaturg) discuss the work, Sam's intentions, and some of the research Nakissa has already done. Before the rehearsal period, Sam and Nakissa had gone to New York, visited author/lyricist John Jiler and composer Ray Leslee and toured *Avenue X*, a real street in Brooklyn. I am amazed at how much effort has gone into understanding the time period in which the play takes place. Sam and Nakissa have studied the politics, current events, music (of course), fashions, fads, dialects and architecture and developed a timeline for the cast to study. Until now, I have had no idea how much research is done to prepare for a play.

After the company meeting, the cast begins "table work," which starts with a lot of discussion to help them get to know each other and the work. I've managed engineering projects for many years and throughout the preparation for this production I constantly see analogies to what we do in my field. The "table work" corresponds to what engineers call a project "kick off" meeting. But

whereas an engineering project will deal with facts, numbers, hardware, *stuff*; this project deals with people, emotions, relationships and feelings. Engineers work hard to keep their personality, history, emotions and feelings out of a project — they try to remain objective. Actors have to bring emotions in, expose them and work with them. In one sense, emotions and feelings are some of the substances, the materials of which the production will be constructed.

I am overwhelmed by how open the actors are during this discussion. *Avenue X* deals with the interaction of blacks and whites in Brooklyn in the early 1960s. The actor who plays Julia tells us about her real-life experience in interracial dating when she was a young girl in New York. She dated an Italian boy and was, fortunately, largely unaware of the problems inherent in that relationship in that time. Then she met her boyfriend's uncle, who wasted no time and minced no words as he expressed his feelings about his nephew dating a black! All these years later, the pain is so intense that "Julia" begins to cry as she tells us about it. Over and over again during this project I see the same kind of openness from them. It can't be easy, but I can see how it helps them fashion powerful and moving performances.

The company meeting is held at "the Island," as the building housing the Rep's rehearsal space, costume shop and scenery shop is called. The main rehearsal area consists of a large empty room, about the size of the stage in the Rep's big theatre in Horton Plaza.

The floor in the rehearsal room is covered with a complex pattern of colored tape, measurements and other notes written on the floor. This represents various important features of the set on which the play will be performed. Everyone is going to work for the first couple of weeks — half of their rehearsal time — in this space with tape on the floor representing the set. The set contains five different levels. Tape on the floor will tell the actors where staircases and tunnels are, advise them on the overhead clearance when they are under a platform, and locate the edge of a seven-foot-high platform on which they will be dancing, without benefit of guard rail.

Many hours have gone into carefully taping the floor to correspond to the design of the set, which at this point is embodied only in a small 3-D scale model about eighteen inches wide. And that little model, along with its corresponding taping on the floor, represents many more hours of work prior to this meeting by Sam, set designer Robin Roberts, stage manager Alexis Randolph, lighting designer Trevor Norton, sound designer Randy Cohen and many other people. In fact, I learned later that the set designer read the script and had a conversation with Sam about the set *eight months* prior to the company meeting.

As you can already tell, the depth and breadth of detail that is involved in mounting a production is stunning! Let me supply a few more anecdotes to drive this point home.

- In the rehearsal room, actors have to constantly visualize the set. It takes more time to cover a horizontal distance of six feet if you have to climb eight steps than if you're just walking six feet. The tape on the floor is their only clue that they will be climbing steps.
- The set design includes a downstage-center open grating, present in all the scenes, that allows steam to rise and catches dripping water in scenes that take place in a sewer. The grate is carefully represented by tape on the floor at the Island. It is an important part of the set that has to be taken into account in several ways. The fight choreography has to be done so that an actor will not have to fall on the grate and risk catching a finger in it. This raises another issue that impressed me greatly: an immense amount of energy and attention goes into safety on the part of the cast and everyone on the staff. I have, in my career, worked in or visited some very dangerous job sites, in large factories, oil refineries and aluminum smelters for example, and I don't think I've ever seen a work environment in which everyone is so aware of and sensitive to safety issues.
- But back to the grate, or, more precisely, the tape on the floor representing the grate. Sometime during the first or second day of rehearsal, Sam asks for someone to check and make sure that the feet on the legs of a chair that will be used in a kitchen scene are large enough that they won't fall through the openings in the grate. In my world of computer programming, there are some people who create programs slowly (anticipating problems as they go) and debug them quickly and others who develop them quickly and debug them slowly. I think that Sam's incredible ability to deal with detail and to carry in his head a vision of the whole production would qualify him for the quick debugging camp. Of course, in my world there are also the "stars" — programmers who are 10 times as productive as their peers. Sam would probably be a star programmer.
- Sam has to keep the lighting design in his head. At one point, as he is directing the blocking (that's the design of where the performers are on the stage during the show) he explains how the simple action of moving in and out of the light can be used in many ways; for example, to say "I'm out of here," or "I'm not listening to you" or "I'm with you."
- During a musical rehearsal, the actor cast as Ubazz asks how they should be enunciating the consonants

in that particular song! And later Sam directs them to “use consonants as *knives*” during the Rap scene.

- During a rehearsal, Nakissa, the dramaturg, notices that the actors playing Pascuale and Milton are singing two bars incorrectly. She tells them that they are singing those two bars as they are written for that song in the finale but not as they are written for the same song in this (earlier) scene. Nakissa clearly is a well-trained musician, as well as a dramatist and skillful researcher.
- They have to work out exactly how Barbara will throw down her coat so that it looks good, looks natural, will be in the right place, and can be picked up easily by the collar later in the scene. (This is only one detail out of hundreds about where props are, when and how they get onstage, when and how they get offstage, who does it, etc., that must be worked out during what is called the “tech rehearsal.”)
- At one point, the actress playing Barbara asked the choreographer (Javier Velasco) what old movie she could watch to see how people danced in 1963.
- Chuck gives Barbara a ring that she is supposed to throw away in anger. The ring box needs to end up in a specific area of the stage so that Chuck can pick it up as he exits the scene. Whenever she has a free moment, the actress playing Barbara practices the ring throw. She does it over and over again, even though she has to go down a flight of steps, all the way across the stage and back and up those steps again for another practice throw.
- At one point, Sam has to teach one of the actors how to take a breath during the preceding speaker’s line so that he can correctly jump on his cue without an unnatural pause.
- Sam must manage the order of scene rehearsals based on the emotional as well as the physical energy the actors are using. Doing three scenes in a row that require high emotional energy from the same actor may be just fine in a performance, but in rehearsal where each scene might have to be run three or four times, rehearsing those scenes in order would be emotionally exhausting. Of course physical exhaustion (dancing and fighting) also has to be taken into consideration and complicates the scene rehearsal scheduling problem.

I have, in my notes, perhaps another 50 anecdotes relating to the attention to detail that is so fundamental to good theatre. I probably missed or forgot to make a note about a couple of hundred more potential anecdotes. This is a part of that hidden 95 percent, the theatrical iceberg that I mentioned before.

And, now, to another one of the things that made a great impression on me during this adventure. Theatre is produced and presented through the collaboration of a *team of artists*. I’ve seen lots of different kinds of teams — in sports, science, engineering and industry — and I’ve never seen a team of creative and talented people work so well together to produce a single work (of art in this case). They are all artists, including the people who build the set, run the sound system, and so forth. This is just one example of what I call the theatrical iceberg, where the audience is only aware of a small fraction of what’s involved in producing a piece of theatre. This show had eight performing artists on stage, but another 25 or so other creative artists worked together with them to develop the production. In fact, during a performance there are just as many people working backstage as those appearing onstage. One of the actors said, “If there was just one thing that I wish that the audience understood, it would be that there is one hour of preparation for each second of performance.” That would be a factor of 3,600 to one. In my business, we used a rule of thumb of one hour of preparation for each minute of presentation for a seminar or class. That says sixty times as much preparation is required for a show as for a class. My calculations for what went on with *Avenue X* say that the one-hour-for-one-second estimate is conservative. I think it was more like an hour and a half per second or a factor of 5,400 to one! And the performers work *so* hard for so little pay. This cast consisted of world class talent who worked six days a week, averaging probably more than 10 hours a day. Some days it’s like being in a seven-hour aerobics class and on others like a nightclub performer doing seven sets in a single night! On some days it’s like doing both!

During this project, I sat through all but a couple of hours of the rehearsals, the invited dress rehearsal, all of the previews, the opening night and the first three or four shows following the opening, as well as several other performances during the run of the show. One of the things I came to appreciate was how dynamic a performance is.

First there is the evolution of the work through rehearsals and each preview performance. Then there are the dynamic differences from night to night. I had assumed, without really thinking about it, that during all of the rehearsals and previews a sort of live recording is being developed, and that most of the time that recording is just played back by the actors during the show. That’s a long way from the truth. No two shows are the same. A performance is much more like a baseball game, in which everything is dynamic, constantly adjusting to the reality of what’s happening. It takes incredible teamwork to present a show, as well as to develop the production. For example, I couldn’t understand how the wireless microphones worked without getting feedback (the

fingernail-on-blackboard screech we've all heard from time to time). When I asked the sound designer about that, he explained that during the show he is 'playing' the sound board, constantly adjusting the gain on each microphone. When two actors are standing very close together, perhaps during a duet, he shuts one of the microphones down entirely and uses just one mike to pick up both singers or speakers. As the performers move, he adjusts appropriately.

The stage manager (Alexis Randolph) is coaching this game — calling plays (300 light cues and 120 sound cues) not from the sidelines but through a system of mikes and headphones. She also had to know the musical score, not just the lyrics, because many of the cues were based on the music. But, unlike a basketball game, no one ever sees the stage manager. Although I had seen hundreds of live stage performances previously, I had no idea of how important the stage manager's role is, how hard the job is, or how many skills are required to do it well.

Of course, I have also developed an awestruck respect for what a director does. The director has to carry an integrated vision of the whole production, and how all the details fit together into a consistent, integrated whole. This is what, in my business, we call a systems view. In a *system* the smallest error can cause large problems. For example, an error in one constant in a computer program carried over from our first Apollo satellite launches caused the astronauts' capsules to splash down *miles* away from their pickup point. This integrated, consistent complex of details is another aspect of the theatrical iceberg. In *Avenue X*, I would guess that there were a few thousand things that had to fit together in ways that might be invisible to the audience, but that would diminish the production if flawed.

Watching such a show is sort of like the "What's wrong with this picture?" game, in which, even when you can't put your finger on it, you feel that something's wrong. For example, the interpretation of each line has to be realistic and believable, while fitting with the lines that precede and follow it, and maybe with something that happens half an hour later. I now know that there are these wonderful subliminal effects that affect the audience, though perhaps no one in the audience, not even an

experienced theatre critic, would be able to identify them. Just one example, part of Sam's staging concept is that in the prologue all of the actors enter from various parts of the theatre wearing black trenchcoats. The trenchcoats make them anonymous, but Sam's view is that the prologue "is creating a fountain of sound from which the whole play emerges," and that the actors' message should be, "Listen to us! Don't we sound great? And, there's no band!" He tells the actors that at the end of the prologue they "should feel wonderful, own the stage and the theatre and be ready to get going!" and he points out that the opening line of the play is "Let's go!" The cast is excited by this concept because they can really enjoy singing together. It's magic! Suddenly the prologue sounds much better than it ever has before!

That one example can't convey the complexity and subtlety that make good theatre. Think about it. This production, a musical, tells a powerful story about how blacks and whites can't even rise above their prejudices to satisfy their personal ambitions, desires and dreams. It's historically sound. It's an opera comprised of rich, complex, beautiful, moving music and poetry. It includes choreography, which in my view is living, moving sculpture.

The costumes are the work of a fashion designer that has to fit invisibly but beautifully into the entire work, including dance scenes and fights, with historical accuracy. The set is a piece of skillfully designed and fabricated engineering that pleases the eyes, and is itself a piece of sculpture on a monumental scale. It is filled with items of graphic art. It is also the work of a skillful interior designer. There are fight scenes in which the fight choreography (yes, sculpture again) has to be believable and exciting — real martial arts! And all of this is organized into and presented as an integrated whole that touches us, moves us, makes us laugh and makes us cry. Now that I know so much more about how theatre is made, about how much art is in theatre, I know that theatre like this is a great and wonderful gift, and I can't thank the artists enough for giving us such performances.

C.A. Irvine is a trustee of the San Diego Repertory Theatre.