



CiNE

RE-PUBLIC

The CiNE Collective's Portfolio for New York's Joseph Papp Public Theater

For the purposes of this published portfolio, CiNE is:

Wayne Chambliss, Co-founder, Nomea, LLC

Judy Chang, Dramaturg

Gordon Dahlquist, Playwright

Jim Findlay, Founder, Collapsible Giraffe

Prem Krishnamurthy, Principal, Project Projects

David Levine, Author and Project Lead

Doris Mirescu, Director

Gus Powell, Gus Powell Photography

Writer and Project Lead: David Levine.

Supplemental research provided by Jamee Freedus

The following portfolio expands on an August 2004 letter of application for the position of artistic director at New York's Joseph Papp Public Theater. The position became available when George C. Wolfe, the Public's third artistic director, announced that he was stepping down after eleven years at the theater's helm.¹

Unbeknownst to CiNE at the time, the Public's executive search committee had already retained the services of Albert Hall and Associates, LLC, to conduct their search for a new artistic director. While the engagement of for-profit consultants was neither surprising nor objectionable, the explanation, provided by board chairman Kenneth B. Lerer, managed to be both: "It doesn't make any sense," Lerer told the *Village Voice*, "to do this search in public."²

Now, think about that for a second.

It's called "the Public Theater."

The building is leased from the city for one dollar a year.

So what's in a name?

Facing page: "Public Theater" shifts from being a proper name to being a caption, a caption that describes an unlimited range of daily activities. Photo: Gus Powell Design: Prem Krishnamurthy

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Joseph Papp, possessed of the unshakeable belief that seventeenth-century plays are vital to the life of a twentieth-century city, inaugurated the New York Shakespeare Festival in the band shell of New York's abandoned East River Park. When Papp lost that site and could no longer bring the people to free Shakespeare, he opted to take free Shakespeare to the people, on the back of a flatbed truck that brought productions of Shakespeare to all five boroughs. When the truck broke down in the middle of Central Park, free Shakespeare found its new home.

The New York Shakespeare Festival was "public theater" to the extent that it was (a) free and (b) delivered to the five boroughs as a public service.³ But it was also "public theater" in the sense that there was a public demand for it. In Papp's epic battles with the New York City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, it was "public opinion" that proved decisive. After Papp had given them a taste, the public clamored for their free Shakespeare, and the public, with some savvy media goosing from Papp, made sure they got it. That is to say, more than simply a matter of ticket prices or locale, Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival was "public" in the sense that the public seemed to have a genuine stake in the outcome.

Even so, it would have struck many observers as unusual, in 1967, to read the following announcement: "In January, 1966, the New York Shakespeare Festival purchased the old Astor Library Building, a designated City Landmark located at 425 Lafayette Street.⁴ The historic structure is being transformed into a PUBLIC THEATER [their emphasis]. . . . The New York Shakespeare Festival PUBLIC THEATER [their emphasis, again] will present a year-round program of contemporary plays at popular prices. A low-cost ticket policy will continue to attract the vital audiences created and developed by the Festival at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, the Mobile Theater touring the boroughs, and the productions in the New York City schools."

The block caps emphasize that *public* is used here adjectivally, to describe a theater that *is* public, rather than a theater called "The Public." Furthermore, the announcement depicts 425 Lafayette as simply the indoor, new-plays branch of a larger entity known as the New York Shakespeare Festival. This larger entity aims to infiltrate and address every region of civic life—every borough, every park, every school—and every conflict of civic life, from the draft to racism to poverty, as much as it aims to incorporate everything that could possibly be called "theater": old plays, new plays, musicals, dance theater, political debates, and rock concerts. That is to say, as far as the New York Shakespeare Festival was concerned, the "Public Theater" in question was New York City, not the building at 425 Lafayette.⁵

And thus did the New York Shakespeare Festival become unique among the world's nonprofit stages: neither an imperial theater, like England's National Theater, which exists to sanctify a cultural tradition; nor a state theater, like Berlin's Volks-

bühne, which exists to question a cultural tradition at the culture's own expense; nor even an independent theater like Lincoln Center, which exists mainly to administer high-cultural morphine to an ailing upper crust. In mixing private and public funding to create a theater by, for, and of the people, the New York Shakespeare Festival pioneered the American brand of nonprofit theater: a theater both inclusive of and aggressive toward the culture at large. Without it, nonprofit theater as we know it—from the Perseverance to the Taper to the Goodman to New York Theatre Workshop—would not exist.

Or rather, we should, say, without 425 Lafayette. Because it can hardly be said that the remainder of Papp's program—infiltrating the city, broadening the definition of theater, forcing Shakespeare to prove his relevance by bringing him before the people—was adopted as enthusiastically as Papp's diversity-based approach to New Play Development. However, it *can* be suggested that the reason 425's model proved most congenial to theaters around the country was precisely that 425 was the most conventional of Papp's operations, in its reliance both on box office and on traditional indoor auditoria; the very qualities that made it the *least* “public” arm of the New York Shakespeare Festival.

Thus it is that the Public transformed the nonprofit theatrical landscape, and thus it is that there is currently nothing “public” about American nonprofit theater. Ticket prices are prohibitive; public funding has evaporated; all programming is strictly localized; and the nonprofit theaters themselves have come to confuse *representing* topics of public interest with actually playing a vital role in the civic discourse. All of which has resulted in the general public no longer giving a damn.

CiNE is not bemoaning this state of events. Far from it. We believe that if the general public has been willing to tolerate a decline in public funding for theater, it is because theater has failed to make itself essential to the public. To name a venue the “Public Theater” is to pose a perpetual challenge both to the public and to the theater. And if American theater is to thrive in this century, the challenge must be answered in the place where it was first issued.

So let's ask ourselves: what does it mean to be a public theater, in New York, in the twenty-first century?

OUTREACH INITIATIVES: PREMISES

A public art form expresses the desires, tensions, and aggravations of a culture in its very *structure*, and does so with such a reckless, thoroughgoing voracity that audiences can no longer tell where they end and the medium begins. We are referring to *Sex and the City*; we are referring to *Resident Evil*.

Being public is not merely a question of content or admission prices; it's a question of reach, and no great mystery: film and TV are central to the civic discourse

because they are marketed *to the public*; their advertising is everywhere. A product that is advertised only through mailings, on the other hand, or through the occasional print ad in the newspaper's arts section, is essentially a boutique commodity, produced by people who are interested in targeting only a coterie audience. Why else do they ignore the promotional possibilities offered by theater's very form? Unlike TV and film, theater can easily expand its civic presence without the expense of conventional advertising, because, unlike TV and film, the public no longer has any interest in defining theater's limits.⁶ Furthermore, unlike TV and film, theater can potentially happen *everywhere* (see photo, page 156).

On the strength of its brand—its name and its location are recognizable to all New Yorkers—and on the strength of its mission—make theater *public*—the Public is in a unique position to redefine what theater *is*, and thus to expand theater's activity—and public visibility—beyond 425 Lafayette, beyond the theater listings, beyond *theater* itself and into the very fabric of the city. Following are three such outreach initiatives.

OUTREACH INITIATIVE (1): PARTNER COMPANIES

We are radicals, but we are not idiots: the Public relies on subscribers for at least 20 percent of its income and, for the moment at least, these subscribers skew conservative. Like CINE, the Public's artistic administration would like to broaden its subscribers' tastes, and in an effort to do so incrementally, without alienating a crucial source of income, they have periodically invited younger, more radical companies (Pig Iron, the Civilians, Division 13) into their black boxes and rehearsal rooms to develop new work. Quite rightly, such workshops do not have the status of full productions, nor do they profit from the full scope of the Public's promotional apparatus. But the result of these well-intentioned efforts is a whirlpool dynamic in which the all-consuming "daddy" theater swallows up more work than it produces.

We wonder if it would not be more productive—and rather less paternalistic—for the Public to formally recognize and sponsor younger, edgier companies who *already have their own theaters* (e.g., Radiohole, Pregones). A \$15,000 contribution to each of their annual budgets—roughly the size of a small show—would earn the Public the right to place its logo on all of the smaller theater's publicity materials, as well as the right to offer discounted seats to the Public's subscribers. In exchange, the Public would feature the partner theaters' work prominently on all its promotional materials and offer the latter's fan base discounted seats for Public theater productions.

By thus promoting theatrical activity across the city, the Public would effectively position itself as the city's theatrical curator, and in the process gain exposure to entirely new neighborhoods and audiences who would, in turn, check out the offerings at 425 Lafayette. This was the model that worked so well for New York's P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), who entered into a fiscal and programming partnership in 2000. The relationship with P.S.1 revived MoMA's credibility as an institution dedicated to contemporary art, even as it offered P.S.1 both

financial stability and exposure to new audiences who had hitherto only been exposed to MoMA's relatively stolid holdings.

The same reciprocity ensues here: the partner companies benefit not only from the Public's investment, but from the Public's audiences, the Public's imprimatur, and the Public's considerable marketing resources. For its part, the Public profits demographically by reinventing its profile with younger, less genteel, more adventurous audiences, and materially by expanding its brand presence across the five boroughs. The Public's subscribers profit by being able to broaden their artistic horizons at their own pace. And finally, the public at large benefits; for by formally recognizing off-off Broadway theaters as *peers*, rather than condescending to them as wannabes, the Public makes real that theatrical chimera of "a diverse community."

OUTREACH INITIATIVE (2): PUBLIC ART

The chasm between contemporary art and theater is a topic of perpetual amazement to CiNE. Theater does not have much appeal to visual art audiences, who are put off materially by theater's admission prices and aesthetically by theater's insistence on the suspension of disbelief. But today's theater audiences don't think much of contemporary art, either; they are put off by its obscurantism, its resistance to narrative, and by what they consider its amateurish approach to performance.

CiNE, however, considers this a simple question of context: if Janet Cardiff, in a video walk commissioned by the Public Art Fund, asks you to wander through Central Park regarding yourself and innocent passersby as participants in some sort of noirish plot, how is that project materially different from director Deborah Warner's instructions that you wander through New York City regarding yourself as a seeker of hidden angels? If the Lincoln Center Festival brings in a troupe of fifty men and fifty women for an outdoor re-creation of the wedding banquet of the Danaides, how is that project substantively different from a project like Allison Smith's "The Muster" (also sponsored by the Public Art Fund), in which fifty artists perform a Civil War reenactment on Governor's Island? (The major difference—and this is, unfortunately, telling—is that a ticket to the Lincoln Center *Angel Project* costs \$90, while admission to "The Muster" is completely free. Indeed, to the extent that a great many of their projects are performative, and to the extent that they are *all* presented free of charge, the Public Art Fund is in fact doing more to advance the cause of public theater than is the Public Theater itself. This is especially ironic—and once again, telling—in light of the fact that the profit margin in contemporary art is considerably higher than in theater.)

The Public Theater has an obligation to expand the public *for* theater by expanding the definition *of* theater, and this means collaborating with such nonprofit public arts presenters as Creative Time and the Public Art Fund to co-sponsor at least three off-site public works each year, works that, like Cardiff's, bridge the distance between theater and art.

OUTREACH INITIATIVE (3): THE PUBLIC REP COMPANY

Switching to a repertory company is perhaps the most conservative strategy the Public can adopt to broaden its profile. In a city like New York, whose addiction to celebrity is matched only by its commitment to hype, a company of celebrities is far more noteworthy than a season of stimulating plays. For the general public, as we know, does not care about plays and playwrights; it cares about what movie stars look like naked. And this fact is acknowledged whenever a nonprofit theater manages to get its hands on a television or film star, at which point all references to a show's content or artistic staff suddenly vanish from the promotional materials. Now, while CiNE sees nothing inherently wrong with putting people who can't act onstage, this practice does perpetuate the dispiriting image of theater as the poor old relative who only survives on the generosity of his offspring.⁷

But the real problem with this kind of cynicism is that, like so much else in theater, it does not go far enough. Stars are made, not born; and they are made with tremendous ease in a city like New York, in which the mere fact that someone, somewhere, thought you were worth exploiting is enough to earn you front-page coverage in *Paper*, *New York* magazine, *Time Out*, and any number of boutique publications that will have folded by the time this portfolio goes to print. Because talent—at least until you get into the theater—is completely beside the point.

That said, it's just as easy to make stars of gifted actors (Liev Schreiber) as of their more limited brethren (Heather Graham). So rather than bringing movie stars to the Public, the Public will make movie stars of its enormously talented rep company. Each season, the Public will select twelve performers from among New York's deep pool of trained actors to form its core company and devote its marketing budget to promoting their images (see photo, right).⁸ To shift the emphasis thus is not to denigrate the value of plays or of playwrights, but simply to acknowledge that popular culture is primarily visual, and if theater wishes to be a popular form—that is to say, if theater really wishes to matter—it must be willing to compete in a visual arena.

But we must also acknowledge that as long as actors earn no more at the Public than they would on unemployment, they will of necessity view theater as a stepping-stone to film and TV jobs. More than acknowledge this fact, we must take advantage of it: via marketing and coordinated work with managers and casting agents, the Public would do everything in its power to launch the company's film and television careers, thereby establishing the Public as the most desirable, high-profile, career-boosting acting gig in New York City, and thereby providing actors with the incentive to accept year-long, exclusive Equity contracts.⁹ This would ensure a steady flow of talent into 425 Lafayette, and this talent, coupled with heavy promotion, would ensure that the Public Theater became known as the place to see stars—and, yes, possibly their breasts—before they got famous because there is nothing a New Yorker loves more than being ahead of the curve.¹⁰

BRIDGE: CIVICS AND LOBBIES

These proposals have appealed variously to the spirit of promotion, to civic duty, and to sheer artistic imperialism. We have tried to demonstrate that for a theater called the Public there is no difference between the three. For theater to do anything worthwhile in this century it must stop thinking of itself as a retreat *from* the culture and become a player *in* the culture.

For theater to be *for* the people, rather than merely *about* them, it must be willing to expand its civic presence. 425 Lafayette is surrounded on three sides by such civic-minded institutions as Cooper Hewitt, NYU, and the Village Voice. There is no reason why it should not be working with them to cosponsor a vigorous intersite program of

Unbranded posters promote the rep company as both civilians and individuals. Photo: Gus Powell Design: Prem Krishnamurthy



lectures, panel discussions, and debates on matters that have nothing to do with drama. For whatever involves public rhetoric properly belongs to the theater, and a theater sitting on public land can hardly justify recusing itself from the public discourse. The wider the Public throws its doors to different *kinds* of theater (i.e., debates, lectures, panel discussions), the broader will its exposure be to new audiences.

It has often been noted that American cities thrive when they possess a high percentage of mixed-use neighborhoods, in which different kinds of commerce and different kinds of people intermingle. The same could be said of theaters, and, indeed, all of CiNE's initiatives have been directed toward making a mixed-use neighborhood of theater itself. Such a transformation finds its most vital expression in a theater's lobby, which, although it ought to serve as a bridge between the life of the theater and the life of the city, more often functions as a moat, protecting the theater and its staff from life on the street. There is no reason why a lobby as magnificent as the Public's, in a neighborhood as diverse and vibrant as the East Village, should not be the automatic downtown destination for every idler, every appointment, every date. Because in terms of cultural relevance and vitality, the Public's competition isn't New York Theatre Workshop and it's not the movies; it's the Starbucks on Astor Place. (Joe's Pub, founded in 1998, was just such an attempt to broaden the Public's constituency, traffic, and offerings. But by incorporating the door policies and prohibitive prices of the city's best clubs, and by failing to integrate the pub architecturally with the rest of the building, the Public managed only to establish a more modish alternative to the snobbery going on next door. The club drew a crowd that could actually ask, with a straight face, "You mean there's a theater attached to Joe's Pub?"¹¹)

ON-SITE INITIATIVES: PREMISES

In the broadest sense, CiNE's objection to current theatrical practice is that it has become insufficiently *public*. And, ultimately, by *public*, we really don't mean accessible, relevant, hip, or even high-exposure. Ultimately, we mean "engaged with the world at large." Speaking of the high-minded tone of most "indie" films, the director Olivier Assayas commented, "These movies are aimed at audiences who are scared of their children, scared of their values and their technology. They feel threatened by how the world is changing, so for two hours, they live in this simple dream world with no aggressive threat of modernity."

Every initiative that CiNE has proposed we have advanced in the name of creating an interaction with modernity that is muscular, forthright, confident, and egalitarian. It's the interaction of strangers pressed close together in a crowded subway, an interaction that is based on and welcomes *friction*, which is the characteristic sensation of public life in a healthy democracy (as opposed to the much-touted *collaboration*, which otherwise describes public life in an occupied country). But for a theater claiming

to be Public, outward engagement in civic life isn't enough; a public theater must itself be shaped by the dynamics upon which civic life depends. To this end, CiNE offers the following on-site initiatives.

ON-SITE INITIATIVE (1): DIRECTORATE

Friction is a sensation notably absent from the administration of not-for-profit theaters, in which all artistic responsibility ultimately rests with a single Artistic Director. While this model is certainly functional, CiNE wonders if theater can truly claim to be championing plurality when it embraces an administrative structure that is inherently hierarchical. We will go a step further and say that a monologic decision-making process at the top encourages a monologic relationship with the audience, who are presented over and over again with product they feel powerless to alter.

A friction-based, or dialogic, decision-making process would split artistic control between the dramaturg and the artistic director. In contemporary American theater, the dramaturg is trained not to have any opinions, and is employed—should any employment be found for her—as a background researcher, or as the liaison between the playwright and the powers that be, “nurturing the playwright” in much the way Guildenstern tries to nurture Hamlet. In CiNE's Public Theater, the dramaturg—now a European-style intendant—has found her voice, and is responsible for programming the entire season, as well as for cultivating and contracting with playwrights. The artistic director, on the other hand, is choosing directors, casting the rep company, overseeing the Public's off-site initiatives, and generally acting as the theater's public face.

This lack of unity will result in unseemly combinations, in fissures and artistic seams that will be fully visible to the public. And this friction alone would justify the division of labor, even if the expanded operations of CiNE's Public Theater did not make it necessary. For in this overlapping of tastes and visions, in this lack of *finish*, the public hears a plurality of voices, a plurality that *potentially* includes them. Because there's a vast difference between being talked *at* and feeling like you, too, could step in and intervene.¹²

ON-SITE INITIATIVE (2): NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT

If culture has passed theater by, the anemic quality of most productions is partly (but only partly) to blame. Theater, in an attempt to position itself against television and film, is constantly touting the fact that it's the only place where you can encounter live bodies—but if that's all there is to it, CiNE would, to be honest, derive a greater rush from watching the Stooges or seeing someone urinate in a gutter. The entertainment theater offers needs to be about more than just bodies speaking lines.

But under current circumstances it cannot be, because any attempt to write plays



Rep company actors as street scene participants. “[*public theater*]” becomes a stage direction, an open injunction to *make* public theater. Photo: Gus Powell Design: Prem Krishnamurthy

for the actual capacities of actual theaters is derailed by the nonprofit development process itself, in which playwrights are shuttled from workshop to workshop, refining scripts in the absence of any clear idea where they’ll be produced, who will direct them, or what technical means might be available to ease the play’s expository burden. The results are either plays that lack any personality or plays whose stage directions are so fantastical as to preclude realization. In either case, the playwright has invested too much time and too much labor to consider revisions from directors and producers who are, essentially, strangers to his entire process. Thus, rather than creating works in which every aspect of the auditorium generates meaning, the directors are stuck trying to negotiate between the demands of the text and the demands of the space. And all the audience comes to expect is clever solutions to impossible problems.

In this, as in so many other areas, the Public Theater has an opportunity to lead theater out of the doldrums. CiNE would shun the traditional nonprofit commission-

ing arrangements—in which theaters offer small commissions to playwrights they are unable to produce—in favor of commissions that guarantee production in spaces that are specified in the playwright’s contract. In exchange for this guarantee of a premiere at the Public, however, the playwright must accede to a much more unusual, and invasive, development process than that to which he has grown accustomed; a development process geared around *friction*.

In this arrangement, playwrights, directors, and spaces are matched before the playwright has penned a single word. Sometimes the subject is of the playwright’s choosing, sometimes the director’s (this is up to the intendant; see the “Programming” section below). From the start, the play is being conceived for a particular space, and the director and playwright share in determining both the content of the piece and how that content will be communicated. The evolving script is subject to frequent scrutiny by the intendant or her staff, and a lead time of a year-and-a-half is allowed for at least two developmental workshops *in the space the play would premiere in*. While it would be difficult for both director and playwright to cede control of their accustomed turfs, . . . that’s what it means to be Public. And that’s the price you pay for a guaranteed production at 425 Lafayette. And this is the way you create a fully realized, fully theatrical production.¹³

ON-SITE INITIATIVE (3): PROGRAMMING

In programming the Public’s season, CiNE holds certain principles inviolable:

There will be two free Shakespeare productions each summer at the Delacorte.

Wherever possible, 425 Lafayette will run multiple productions simultaneously. It is in the nature of a public institution to offer the public a *choice*, and to create situations (i.e., a crowded lobby) in which different constituencies must confront each other’s choices.

425 Lafayette will produce two revivals per year. In selecting these plays, the dramaturg will apply the term *classic* in the broadest sense, designating plays that provoke or intervene in the civic discourse.

425 Lafayette will produce nine new plays a year, along a central theme to be determined by the intendant. All new plays will be commissioned by and developed at the Public. The Public will not produce work commissioned by, or developed at, other theaters.

The tenth new play, known as *Commission X*, is commissioned *from* the Public *by* a major corporation. It is written to that corporation’s specifications and is expected, in return for a hefty sponsorship fee, to advocate for and advance the corporation’s interests (see note 17). *Commission X* will receive the same run and budget allotted to the other new plays, and, like them, it will be staged by a working playwright and director. In returning thus to the tradition of court theater and patronage, *Commission X* merely



Mixed-use development: CiNE's Public Theater.



makes explicit relationships that have always been there to begin with.¹⁴ And in so doing, *Commission X* opens these relationships up for public consideration and debate. Corporate control of culture is a key facet of public life in the twenty-first century, and it is the duty of a public institution to reflect the *full* diversity of public life—not just the diversity we like.

July through August at 425 Lafayette will be devoted to a themed summer play competition (a competition, mind you; not a festival), in which tickets will, following the only salutary trend in contemporary theater, be priced at \$10 apiece.¹⁵ Ten itinerant off Broadway companies in whom the Public takes an artistic interest will be given a \$10,000 budget and four weeks of rehearsal to mount a weeklong run in one of the Public's theaters. The best production will win a \$10,000 prize, to be distributed as the winning company sees fit. In all likelihood, given the season and location, the Summer Play Competition and Prize would (and should) be sponsored and branded by a liquor company. Just as the monetary prize would establish theater as something worth competing over, so would the liquor sponsorship establish it as something worth endorsing.

Sample 2007–2008 Season

Free Shakespeare at the Delacorte:

The Taming of the Shrew, directed by Des McAnuff

Macbeth, directed by Doris Mirescu

Revivals:

The Country Wife, by William Wycherly, directed by Tina Landau

The Hyacinth Macaw, by Mac Wellman, directed by Mike Nichols

New Play Commissions:

[theme for the 2007–2008 season: Fear]

1 by Joseph Goodrich, directed by Jay Scheib

2 by Karen Hartman, directed by Bart DiLorenzo

3 by Lisa D'Amour, directed by Richard Maxwell

4 by Kelly Stewart, directed by Stephen Soderbergh

5 by Kia Corthron, directed by Peter Sellars

6 by Charles Mee, directed by Melissa Kievman

7 by David Greenspan, directed by Philip Seymour Hoffman

8 by Octavio Solis, directed by David Leveaux

9 by Paula Vogel, directed by Robert Woodruff

10 *Commission X*, commissioned by Daimler Chrysler, written by Gordon Dahlquist, directed by David Levine

Summer Play Competition:

Theme: *High School Theater: Civics on Parade*

Plays: *The Diary of Anne Frank; The Dining Room; The Miracle Worker; Balm in Gilead; The Rainmaker; The Royal Family; Ten Little Indians; Watch on the Rhine; You Can't Take It with You.*

CONCLUSION: MONEY

To implement the above proposals would cost between \$1 and \$2 million, added to the Public's annual operating budget of \$12 million. It seems clear that the money isn't going to come from the NEA, nor from the state, nor from the city, nor from the dwindling number of foundations supporting nonprofit arts. This has been clear for the past twenty years. Clear enough that even such obvious remedies as CiNE's initiatives are no longer even envisioned; theaters are too busy just trying to keep their heads above water.

But again, we see a sinister reciprocity at work; if funders are redirecting money from theater to "more important" goals, is that the *cause* of theater's marginality or the effect? If American nonprofit theater had made itself more *necessary* in the first place, would it be forced, again and again, into the humiliating position of having to justify its own existence? Theater, the grantmaking cycle implies, is not valuable in and of itself; its *real* value is that it's educational; its *real* value is that it raises property values; its *real* value is that it builds communities, and a million other developmental sleights of hand we've evolved to game foundations and government agencies into keeping the money trickling in for just one more year. Nonprofit theater is forced to regard its own programming as the means to a financial end; and thus a for-profit mentality is re-created in the not-for-profit zone. Nonprofits are just for-profits operating under a severe investment handicap.

But it's important to realize that this handicap is to a large degree self-imposed. Nonprofit status was extended to the American arts in order to liberate them from the need to, say, plug Gran Centenario Tequila in the middle of a Broadway revival of *Sweet Charity*.¹⁶ Even though it's perfectly legal to do so, nonprofit theaters cannot nowadays resort to such exigencies without seeming to have violated both their independence and their mission. But in a climate where nonprofit funding is scarce, and where such moneys as do exist come with strings attached, the difference between bending over for a tequila and bending over for the Sloan Foundation is practically nil; the only difference is that Gran Centenario pays a lot more, and asks for a lot less.¹⁷ For CiNE's part, we would gladly hawk Reeboks in *Death of a Salesman*, if it meant not having to spend the next five years producing "plays about science."

And ultimately, nonprofit theater's refusal to engage with modernity is best expressed—or perhaps even *caused*—by this "tasteful" relationship to modern com-

merce. CiNE believes that the impulse to isolate culture from market forces, in a country where market forces *are* the culture, is not only self-destructive, but dishonest and unethical. You cannot—and we can't believe you still have to say this—you cannot change the culture unless you're willing to dirty your hands, and if you're *not* willing to dirty your hands, all your commitment to “diversity” is just a way to keep the grant money coming in. Theater will never inspire us to overcome the degradation of public life by remaining pristine; theater should inspire us to overcome *ourselves*, by clarifying public life's true contours. That's why it's so important to represent the interests of Lockheed Martin in a new play commission. That's why it's so important that the Summer Play Competition be sponsored by a high-profile liquor company. That's why it's so important that nonprofit theater give up its reliance on *staged* dissent and become *structurally* radical. At this point, the most thought-provoking, revealing and controversial thing the theater could do is stop at nothing to turn a profit.

This is why CiNE applauds the Roundabout Theatre's decision to accept American Airlines's gift of a theater building. This is why we're glad to read that “Continental is the Official Airline of the Public Theater” though we're dismayed to see how thoroughly hidden the information, and thus the relationship, is. Perhaps if nonprofit theater didn't feel obligated to keep such relationships on the margins, the endorsements themselves wouldn't be so marginal.¹⁸

Or perhaps not. Like opera and ballet, theater's corporate funding generally comes from banking and transportation—two industries that have a vested interest in maintaining culturally anonymous public personae. Visual arts and athletics, on the other hand, are generally sponsored by the luxury goods sector, which is interested in creating as specific, provocative, and high-profile a presence as it possibly can. If the Public were sponsored by Prada, you can be damn sure you'd be seeing more handbags around 425 Lafayette. But you'd also be seeing more *people* at 425 Lafayette because in America we take our cultural cues from *products*: luxury goods depend on celebrity endorsements, but so too do celebrities depend on the endorsement of luxury goods: you're no one unless Absolut gives you a billboard, and you're no one until Nike anoints you a spokesmodel. And speaking institutionally, your cultural currency is zero if the luxury goods sector doesn't consider you *worth endorsing*.

The mutual indifference of theater and consumerism has cost nonprofit theater a wide public. But even worse, theater's snifty choice of patrons has actually *compromised* its artistic independence. Altoids and Philip Morris *want* you to associate their product with unique, innovative, and controversial works. JP Morgan Chase wants you to forget it's even there (while you internalize the knowledge that it is everywhere). And thus the awful paradox: the industries that cater to elite, affluent, and exclusionary groups are the ones offering carte blanche to aggressive, innovative, and controversial work—i.e., work best suited to serve the public good—whereas the industries that cater to the general *populace*—i.e., airlines and banks—must of necessity invest in work that is inoffensive, conservative, and above all nonconfrontational.

As far as we can tell, they're getting their money's worth.

In the end, to ask why theater is being sponsored by the same organizations that sponsor opera and ballet is to ask, once again, how theater became so utterly disconnected from the practices of public life. It's also to ask what a theater that was actually *part* of the culture would look like. In the case of the Public Theater at 425 Lafayette, the solution is indivisible from the financing, which is indivisible from the marketing, which is indivisible from the mission, which is indivisible from the branding, the programming, the development, the administrative structure, the compromise, crass commercialism, intemperance, friction, diversity, indulgence, vaulting ambition, gross inequity, saturnine contempt, appetite, and sheer *engagement* of the city itself.

We're not in Europe, after all.

NOTES

1. Wolfe succeeded JoAnne Akalaitis, who ran the Public from late 1991 to early 1993. Akalaitis succeeded Joe Papp, who founded the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1954.
2. *Village Voice*, September 8, 2004.
3. The New York Shakespeare Festival was, in fact, originally incorporated as an educational institution.
4. The New York Shakespeare Festival sold the building to the city in 1971. The city, in turn, gave the NYSF a ninety-nine-year lease at the aforementioned rate of \$1 dollar per year.
5. 425 Lafayette had an impressive record of public service. Home of New York City's first Public Library, it was purchased in 1921 by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to serve as a shelter and job-training center.
6. Compare, for example, the general indifference to Nicole Kidman's Broadway vagina with the national *furor* over Janet Jackson's Super Bowl breast. Clearly the difference is that the latter was displayed *publicly*—but isn't that, precisely, Theater's problem?
7. In this very fruitful metaphor, theater is King Lear, film is Goneril, television is Regan, and Cordelia is played by CiNE.
8. The selection of the rep company ought to be a media event in itself. For an example of how such a campaign might function, see the media blitz surrounding P.S.'s 2005 Greater New York survey of local artists. The first such survey, in 2000, launched so many high-profile careers that in 2005 general-readership weeklies were saturated with such tie-in features as "the 10 Artists Most Likely to Succeed from Greater New York" (*New York*, March 7, 2005).
9. As if a year's worth of health insurance weren't enough. These contracts would be modified versions of the standard Equity Off-Broadway Agreement, which at the Public currently mandates \$493–\$665 per week (depending on the auditorium), for a period that usually runs eight or nine weeks. The Public's rep agreement would boost this wage to a standard \$750 per week for forty-four weeks, or ten months, per year. All other actors would be jobbed in on a per-show basis, on the standard off Broadway agreement.

10. We should also note that, in a market such as New York, the rep company solves the perennial problem of having to create a nonsubscription audience anew for every show. Assuming terrific actors and marketing, the Public can begin to count on a fan base, as people follow their favorite actors from production to production.
11. Question posed to a member of CiNE, February 25, 2005.
12. The key to making this arrangement function is, of course, the mutual respect of the dramaturg and artistic director. To ensure the perpetuation of such a relationship, as well as the constant but unpredictable evolution of the Public's aesthetic, a mechanism would be established whereby, upon the departure of the one, a replacement is appointed by the other.
13. Contractually, of course, all authorship rights belong to the playwright. After the Public premiere, it is assumed that the play will begin the more conventional process of getting itself wedged uncomfortably into regional theaters.
14. This is why the *name* of the American Airlines Theater has much more cultural value than anything the Roundabout is apt to produce in it.
15. See Arielle Tepper Productions' SPF festival in New York and Nicholas Hytner's £10 ticket initiative at London's National Theater.
16. See "On Broadway, Ads Now Get to Play Cameo Roles," *New York Times*, April 22, 2005.
17. The going rate for such endorsements is between \$500,000 and \$1 million. Three such endorsements, or two plus the fee for *Commission X*, would meet the costs of CiNE's expanded programming. Any depreciation in endorsement value caused by 425's tiny auditoria and limited runs would be amply offset by leveraging nonprofit theater's reputation for incorruptibility—and its coterie audience.
18. The Delacorte Investor's program is a similar example of misconstrued patronage. Under this controversial program, a law firm can, say, purchase 100 seats at "Free" Shakespeare in the Park, along with a pre-performance dinner, for \$10,000. While the Public has defended this program as a legitimate and historical source of income, CiNE's problem is with how theater sets its worth at such an utterly impoverished rate. The idea of selling \$100, tax-deductible tickets—an utterly standard Broadway rate—in *addition* to dinner, to people who wouldn't blink at paying three times that much, is the equivalent of turning tricks when you could be "marrying up."