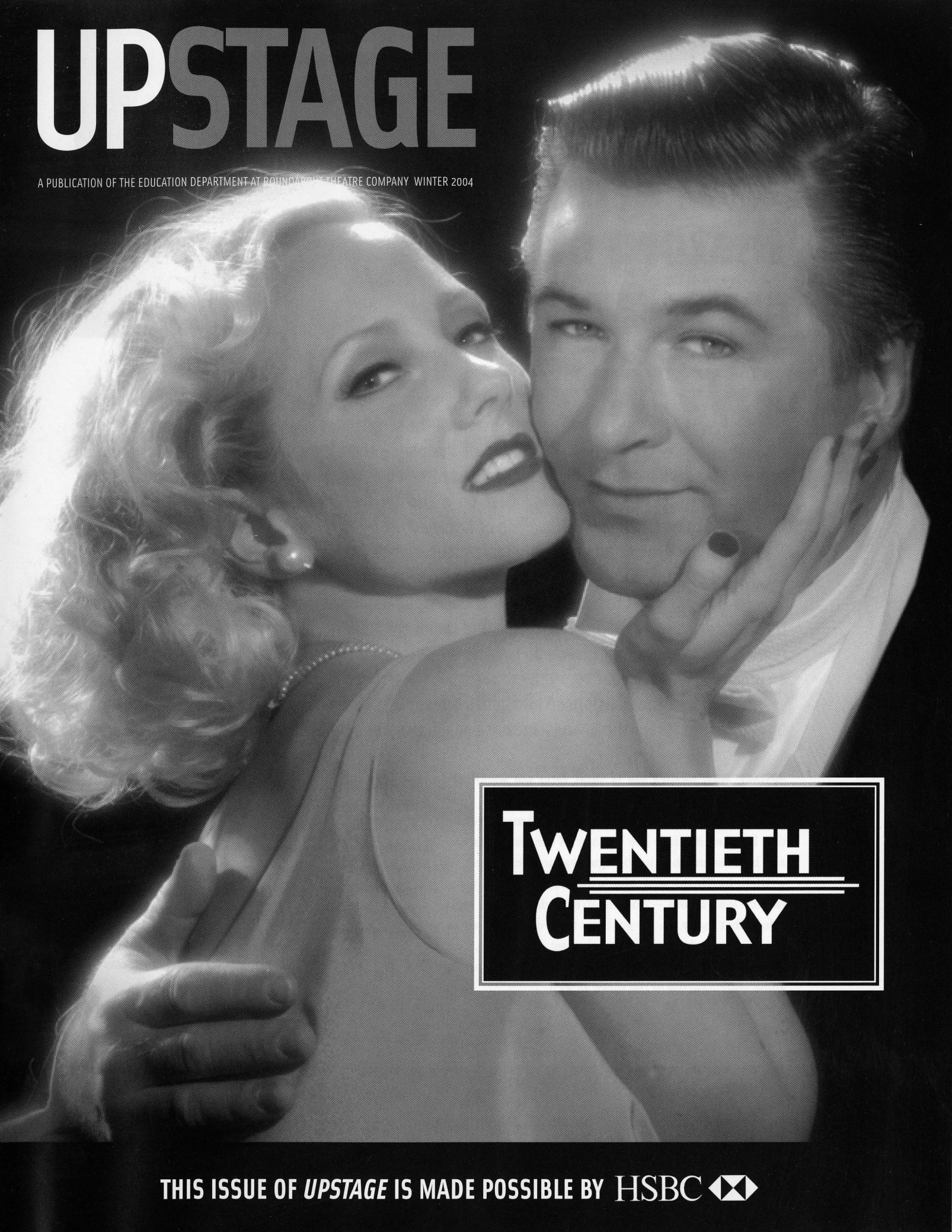


# UPSTAGE

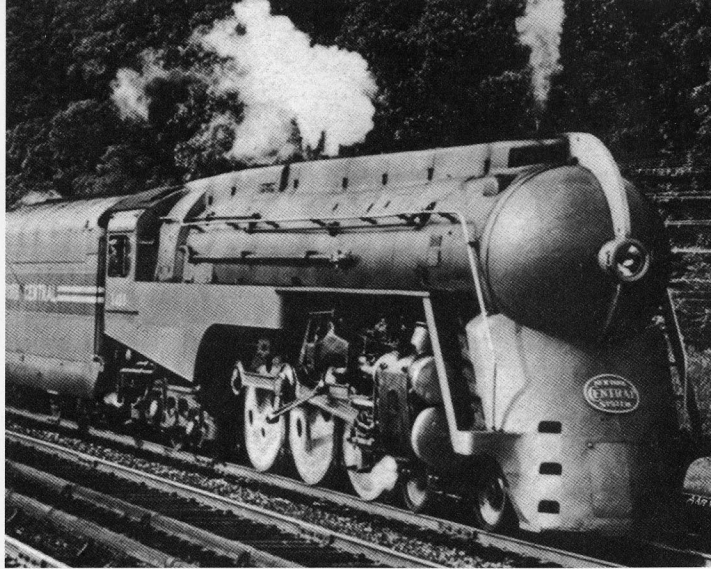
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**TWENTIETH  
CENTURY**

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# A Brief History of *TWENTIETH CENTURY*



1938. The Twentieth Century

Photo: New York Public Library Picture Collection

Ken Ludwig is not the only author of *Twentieth Century*. In fact, the history of the script dates all the way back to the actual time period of the play – the 1930s. The original idea for the play began with a man named Bruce Millholland, who served as a publicist for Morris Gest, a major producer during the 1930s. Observing Gest on a trip on the 20th Century Limited train inspired Millholland to create the play, *Napoleon of Broadway*.

After Millholland sent the script to four producers, one producer said yes. Broadway producer Jed Harris agreed to produce this script under the stipulation that the accomplished writing team of Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht rework it. MacArthur and Hecht had already collaborated to create the Broadway success of *The Front Page* and would continue to collaborate in years to come. The reworking of *Napoleon of Broadway* became the successful play, *Twentieth Century*, which opened on Broadway on December 29, 1932.

It has since been transformed into both a screenplay and a musical, and today has been adapted by Ken Ludwig for the Broadway stage once again. *Upstage* spoke to Ludwig regarding this process.

**UPSTAGE:** What inspired you to adapt Hecht and MacArthur's play, *Twentieth Century*?

**KEN LUDWIG:** *Twentieth Century* is a great American play that had lost its stage life because of the size of its cast and because much of its dialogue was severely dated. As written by Hecht and MacArthur, the play required twenty-four actors – and theatres today simply can't afford that many. So my goal was to give the play a new life by cutting down the size of the cast. Eventually, I cut the cast size down to ten, and this ended up requiring some restructuring of the piece as well.

**UPSTAGE:** What are the challenges in adapting a work from the 1930s?

**LUDWIG:** Because it was written over 70 years ago, many of the lines were simply obscure and out of date. The comic premise and the characters still worked like crazy – but many of the individual lines didn't work any more because we don't laugh at the same references now that audiences did in 1933. So I ended up keeping the plot and many of the characters – and rewriting some of the dialogue.

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LINDSAY ERB *Education Program Associate*; TIM McCANNA *Design*; ADRIANA DOMINGUEZ *Education Intern*; COVER: Anne Heche and Alec Baldwin. Photo by Douglas Kirkland

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**UPSTAGE: Why this particular play?**

**LUDWIG:** I think a great stage comedy needs to have a great comic premise. It has to be simple and bold and plausible – with possibilities for great abandon and development. *Twentieth Century* is about a maniacal director, Oscar Jaffe, who desperately needs to get his former pupil, lover, and star, Lily Garland, to sign a contract by a certain time. (Deadlines are always enormously helpful in comedies in order to keep the engine going.) It's that simple. Oscar will go to any lengths to get Lily to sign, and Lily needs a lot of persuading. It's brilliant.

**UPSTAGE: What accounts for your affinity with material set in the 1920s or 30s?**

**LUDWIG:** I do believe that the mid-1930s were simpler, happier times for our country as a whole. At the same time, while the country was in a relatively happy state, it was poised at a delicate moment between the Great Depression on one side and World War II on the other. So there's an innate tension to the times which allows me to go deeper – to find and examine the bones beneath the skin – to say things about the world that I care deeply about.

**UPSTAGE: Is comedy more difficult to write than drama? What do you think makes a play funny?**

**LUDWIG:** When you ask if comedy is more difficult to write than drama, I think the answer is probably no. For someone who thinks in terms of comedy, I think drama is probably harder – and vice versa. No one has ever written in both forms with equal success except Shakespeare.

The trouble is that many people dismiss comedies as somehow frivolous and consider only dramas to be "serious" plays. But of course comedies are equally serious – and equally important. They can and do have enormous significance. *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are the greatest comedies ever written. (And I'd argue that *Henry IV*, part I is the third.) They're not merely comic, even in the broad sense. They're profoundly comic. And profoundly moving. They tell us about who we are.

Yet comedy in the theatre can do other things as well and doesn't have to be of Shakespearean proportions to be significant. A stage comedy is beautiful because of its proportions. A great one has an architectural rightness that you can feel instinctively when you sit in the theatre and watch it. It starts out with a bal-

anced exposition that isn't tedious; it presents its comic premise; it builds on that premise and gets more complex; it has a climax, and then it resolves itself, all of the pieces falling into place.

**UPSTAGE: I read somewhere that you like to describe what you write as "muscular comedy." Can you elaborate on what that means? Does *Twentieth Century* fall into that niche?**

**LUDWIG:** By "muscular comedy" I mean comedy that isn't merely quips set in a drawing room, or the modern equivalent, sitcoms. I mean comedy that lives and breathes in a larger sense, where dialogue is ineluctably intertwined with story and plot, where there is a big canvas, where the characters are somehow large in spirit. All the truly great comedies – from *Twelfth Night* to *Some Like It Hot* – contain romance, confusion, mistaken identities, multiple plots, colorful characters, improbable situations, high language and low puns. They're cauldrons of bubbling life and that's what makes them great.

**UPSTAGE: How much research do you do before you adapt and/or write an original script?**

**LUDWIG:** Usually, I do very little research. I know the 30s pretty well through the movies – and I write about what we think those times were about, not necessarily what they really were about.

**UPSTAGE: What kind of actors are necessary to make your work come alive?**

**LUDWIG:** As for actors, my plays tend to require actors who know how to do "high style" acting. They need great technique coupled with the courage to be somehow extravagant. That doesn't mean playing "big" all the time; it can often mean playing "small" in some way. But real technique is the most important thing.

**UPSTAGE: What are you working on now besides *Twentieth Century*?**

**LUDWIG:** I have several new plays in various stages of development. One of my new plays, *Shakespeare in Hollywood*, which was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, recently had its world premiere and now I'm hoping to get it to Broadway. Within the next couple of days though I expect to finish preparing the rehearsal draft of *Twentieth Century* for the Roundabout production. Then it's back into my office, on the sofa with the lights dim and the phones off, to try to think up the next play. ●

# Have Costumes. Will Travel.

*Upstage* sat down with costume designer William Ivey Long to discuss his process as a designer.

**UPSTAGE:** Do you have to do research in order to design a show like *Twentieth Century*? If so, what, how much, and what kind?

**WILLIAM IVEY LONG:** I do research for every show I design. For *Twentieth Century*, I researched 1930s glamour for the two leads, pulling from movie stills from the period. The supporting players came from period still photographs, as well as period magazines. I also found photographs from the original Broadway production, the musical version titled *On the Twentieth Century*, and the movie starring John Barrymore and Carole Lombard.

**UPSTAGE:** Are there any factors you have to consider before designing costumes for a musical vs. a play? What about a comedy vs. a drama? Do you have to choose different colors or textures for each?



Costume design for the character of Lily Garland by William Ivey Long.

a costume. For example, I cannot put a long train on a dress in which an actress will be required to do acrobatic movement. Comedies also tend to have more movement than dramas, and as a general rule, the colors in comedy do tend to be a bit more intense than in dramas, but color palette is determined individually based on what the project requires.

**LONG:** If I am designing a musical, especially one in which there are many dance numbers, I have to make sure that every garment is made so that it will take the wear and tear of lots of rigorous movement. Shoes in particular take a beating in musicals. For a play, there tends to be less dancing, so there can be a bit more flexibility. However, the costumes still have to be durable enough to last eight shows a week. Also, I have to consider every movement the actor will make while they are onstage. Stage movements dictate certain things about

**UPSTAGE:** How do you collaborate with the director? The other designers?

**LONG:** After I read the script and do some preliminary research, I meet first with the director. We talk about the characters in the play, and how it relates to what they will wear. I like to bring some research to the first meeting so that the director has something to respond to other than words. I then take my cue from what they are most attracted to visually.

I then meet with the other designers, often with the director, to talk more specifically about color and texture. We often have fabric swatches at this point, so by the end of this process, we are all as clear as we can be about what will end up on the stage.

**UPSTAGE:** New York theatre seems to be having a love affair with the 1930's. You designed *Never Gonna Dance*, and there is *Wonderful Town*; *42nd Street*, and now *Twentieth Century*. Why do you think so many shows are currently set in the 1930s? Is it a more romantic period than our own? Is it because of the Depression? Were the clothes more elegant then?

**LONG:** I cannot think of any other period that defines romance and elegance better than the 1930s, especially with regards to clothing. I always love working in this period, and I suspect a large reason why others do as well is that romance and elegance triumphing against the odds over the Depression will be an audience favorite for some time to come. The quality of clothing back then was certainly higher than it is today. Much more was hand sewn and trimmed, and the fabrics were thicker and richer than most modern off the rack clothing. Also, clothing of this period tended to have more intricate, Art Deco inspired geometric patterns, which also added to the detail level in the garments.

**UPSTAGE:** Any advice for a young person who is considering costuming as a profession?

**LONG:** I would say get the broadest education possible before making any decisions. Costume design is part historian, part craftsman, and part psychologist. I use all areas of my education on a regular basis, and continue to learn things all of the time. There is no short cut to the top. You need hard work, determination, and a little bit of theatre magic to get you there. ●

# Chug-chug? Woo-woo?

*Upstage* met with Tom Clark and Nevin Steinberg of ACME Sound Partners to investigate the use of sound in *Twentieth Century*.

**UPSTAGE:** Can you tell me a little bit about how you work together? How do you create sound designs together?

**NEVIN STEINBERG:** Well, there are actually three of us: Tom Clark, myself, and Mark Menard. We often approach projects with all of our brains working on the challenges at the same time and have lively discussion about the best approach to it.

**UPSTAGE:** Would you agree that this train is somewhat like another character in the play?

**STEINBERG:** I think that discussion is actually continuing. I think that the train is clearly an important part of the production. How the train itself will participate in the drama is something I think we are going to discover more clearly as we go through the piece.

**UPSTAGE:** How do you find the authentic sound of a 1930s train?

**TOM CLARK:** There are a lot of train fanatics in this country and Europe. There are actually some very good, high quality recordings of quite a number of the older trains.

**STEINBERG:** It's also interesting I think, that when we actually do listen to the historical trains, we will often also introduce sounds that are not actually authentic into a project to satisfy certain dramatic components or textural goals that the director might have. In fact, sometimes the historic sound, either because of its quality or because of its character, may not actually fit the moment that we are trying to support.

**UPSTAGE:** What kind of technology goes into creating sound for a Broadway show? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**CLARK:** There are many parallels between the kind of equipment we use, and the kind of equipment that is used for popular music. The professional audio business shares technology between a bunch of different groups and professional theatre is one. When it comes to doing a play that has a significant amount of prerecorded information in it, computers have become very important. It is much easier to make high quality recordings and then edit them in a very detailed way on a standard home computer than it used to be, when you were using reel-to-reel tape or other kinds of earlier recording technology.

**UPSTAGE:** So will you be responsible how for how the actors are heard as well as what is heard?

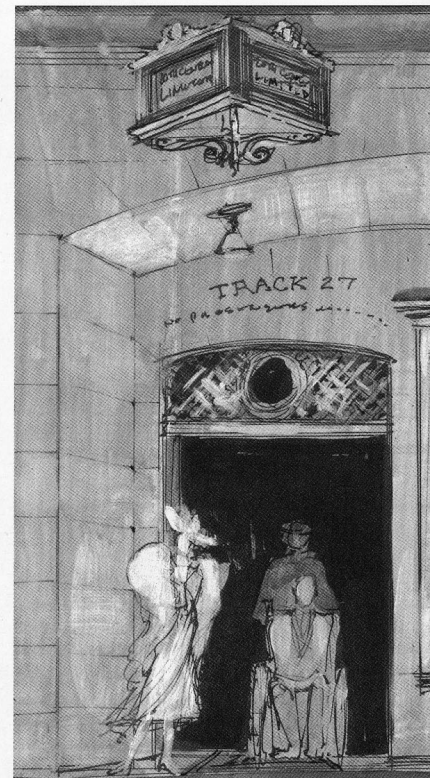
**STEINBERG:** There are really three components of this project that the sound designer is responsible for. One is the sound effects or the sound environment that is created. There is also often a musical component with the play. We help the director and the rest of the creative team choose appropriate musical components that might be used for transitions or underscoring. These may or may not be prerecorded. Finally, there's the element of making the show loud enough so that people can hear it in a way that is comfortable for them throughout the theatre.

**UPSTAGE:** One thing I was fascinated by is that the sound operator sits in the theatre, outside of the booth. Why is that?

**CLARK:** If the operator is behind glass and listening on loud-speakers themselves, then they have no idea what the audience's experience is like in the hall. The reason that in virtually every musical in town the operator is in the auditorium with the audience is because they are trying to hear the show the same way the audience does so that they can make adjustments based on that information.

**UPSTAGE:** What is your favorite part about being a sound designer?

**CLARK:** The process of rehearsing, performing and getting ready for a performance, of what in some ways is a new work, means that we don't have any preconceptions by which we have to operate. We have a script that gives us some hints, but virtually everything that we do is allowed to be new. It is most interesting for us in that we get to go through this process with the director, actors and the other designers to try to create a new piece of work even though it happens to be based on an old piece of literature. That's the most fun about what we do; that process of discovery and refining. ●



Set design for *Twentieth Century*  
by John Lee Beatty.

# Transporting a Classic to the 21st Century

*Upstage* met with Director Walter Bobbie early in the process of his putting together *Twentieth Century*.

**UPSTAGE:** So, what made you want to direct *Twentieth Century*?

**WALTER BOBBIE:** Well, I liked the play and I was always a fan of the movie. I thought it was a very, very smart compression of the play. It seemed to refocus the principal characters. So I thought nothing was lost; in fact, I thought a great deal was gained. It is just a little crisper because the play, which is quite charming, is a regional dialogue with a regional rhythm.

Also, because the play seemed so refreshed, we wanted to do that in terms of the casting too. By casting Alec Baldwin and Anne Heche, we've brought two very contemporary, modern actors to this material so it seems re-awakened -- not dusty in any way. I think they bring great passion and high stakes to it emotionally.

**UPSTAGE:** I loved your take on putting modern actors in these roles. Is it just the fact that they are more contemporary and they'll bring a new spin to it, or do you need a certain type of person?

**BOBBIE:** I think you need an actor who has a very full emotional side and is not afraid to raise the stakes and have great passion; Alec has that. You need someone who is not afraid of this time period. These people are characters who are pursued by the press; they are like contemporary people who are followed by the Paparazzi.

**UPSTAGE:** Kind of like a 1930s J-Lo and Ben?

**BOBBIE:** [laughs] They are like J-Lo and Ben but those people lack the wit of the lead characters, Jaffe and Garland. Forgive me, J-Lo and Ben, but Oscar Jaffe has better one-liners than you'd ever dream about! These



A photographer of the 1930s.

characters are stars. Anne and Alec are stars and they know what that means and they have a wonderful comic take on it.

**UPSTAGE:** How would you describe the genre of the play?

**BOBBIE:** Screwball Comedy is an interesting period word. I think it has the energy of a farce. But what I think really drives the play and what makes the play breathe and continue to work is that it is a romance, a great romantic comedy. These people are made for each other. They're going to fight and scream, but they bicker with more wit and zest than you can imagine; they're fated to be mated. In the end they are irresistible to each other and we, as an audience, can't wait for them to get back together again.

**UPSTAGE:** How do you go about collaborating with your design team?

**BOBBIE:** I almost don't know. We've worked together so much that we kind of have a short hand and we talk about what the play is about before we get technical. My overall approach to this is that I want everyone to completely do their research on their scenes, so that the play looks like we think it should. We want to be historically accurate, but we still need to make them look good. These people have to look like stars. This train must look like the finest thing that was on the rails. The designers and I have done a considerable amount of research, and have also been able to incorporate the creative active imagination.

**UPSTAGE:** Will the audience see what the train is passing through the windows?

**BOBBIE:** We're working on that right now. We have to deal with all those issues: What's the time of day? What's going on outside? How much of that can we technically do without it being a distraction? I don't want to see a movie screen with trees going by for two hours.

**UPSTAGE:** One of the other things I wanted to talk about is the sound. Sound seems like an important aspect of the play.

**BOBBIE:** There is a lot of sound design in the show. We want to have the ability to have the train come and go. It will have to be subliminal so it doesn't become a drone and take away the rhythm of the language of the play. The best part and most fun is the research.

**UPSTAGE:** There is also a musical version of this play. Did you ever think about doing the musical instead?

**BOBBIE:** The play sings on its own. The language of the play and the heightened sensibility of these characters have their own music and that is appealing to me.

**UPSTAGE:** Can you talk about how you made the progression from acting to directing?

**BOBBIE:** I always wanted to direct. I remember being in college and I was in a show and I was sort of advising a little too much and the director said to me, "You have director-itis." I always wanted to do it. When I first came to New York I directed as I was performing. Little jobs would come along and I would do them. I don't know how it happened. But since I wasn't making any money, I didn't do anything that I didn't believe in. There were some things that came my way that were quite visible and public that I did not do, because I thought I can't win with that show; it's not good enough and if I want to announce myself as a director, I better do something that I was willing to rise or fall upon. I've always just followed my heart. I choose what I do based on what I feel like I have to learn next. I've also had great fortune, and I've had wildly gifted friends who have been there to encourage me along.

**UPSTAGE:** One last thing I'd like to talk about is the comedy in this piece. Isn't it glorious when you feel an audience laugh? Do you think that is one of the goals, to have a good laugh? It certainly was when it was done during the Depression.

**BOBBIE:** I don't want to predict anything, but if it's any indication from the readings we've had so far, I think it can be a joyous ride for the audience. I think it can be very funny, but beyond that, what will really make it satisfying is if it is romantic and if it is emotionally rich. ●

## Activities

### BEFORE YOU GO

Think about Hollywood today.

- ◆ What images come to mind?
- ◆ What colors, attitudes, structures, and people create the glamorous world of Hollywood?
- ◆ Is it a fantasy world?
- ◆ How does it relate to the reality of the world in which you live?

Create a collage of pictures, words, and images that you can find in magazines, newspapers, or even your own drawings that represents the "glam" world of Hollywood as we know it in 2004.

### AT THE THEATRE

Watch and Listen for various design elements of the show.

- ◆ How do the lighting, set, and costume design create the world of the play that you see on stage? How do they convey the style of 1930s Hollywood?
- ◆ What do you now know about that world?
- ◆ How do the actors' behaviors convey the style of 1930s Hollywood?
- ◆ Do you see a difference between reality and fantasy? Where?

### AFTER THE SHOW

Think about your own world.

- ◆ How does the reality of your world conflict with the Hollywood image of glamour today?
- ◆ What is the difference in style, in behavior, and in lifestyle choices?
- ◆ What is different about the way they look?

Create a picture, or even a set design, of your world and how it might contrast with today's Hollywood.

Write a monologue from the viewpoint of someone in Hollywood explaining the difference between the fantasy and reality of that world.

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created *Twentieth Century*.

Mail it to: Education Department  
Roundabout Theatre Company, 231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200,  
New York, NY 10018

Or email to: [lindsaye@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:lindsaye@roundabouttheatre.org)

# When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

## TICKET POLICY

As a student participant in *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

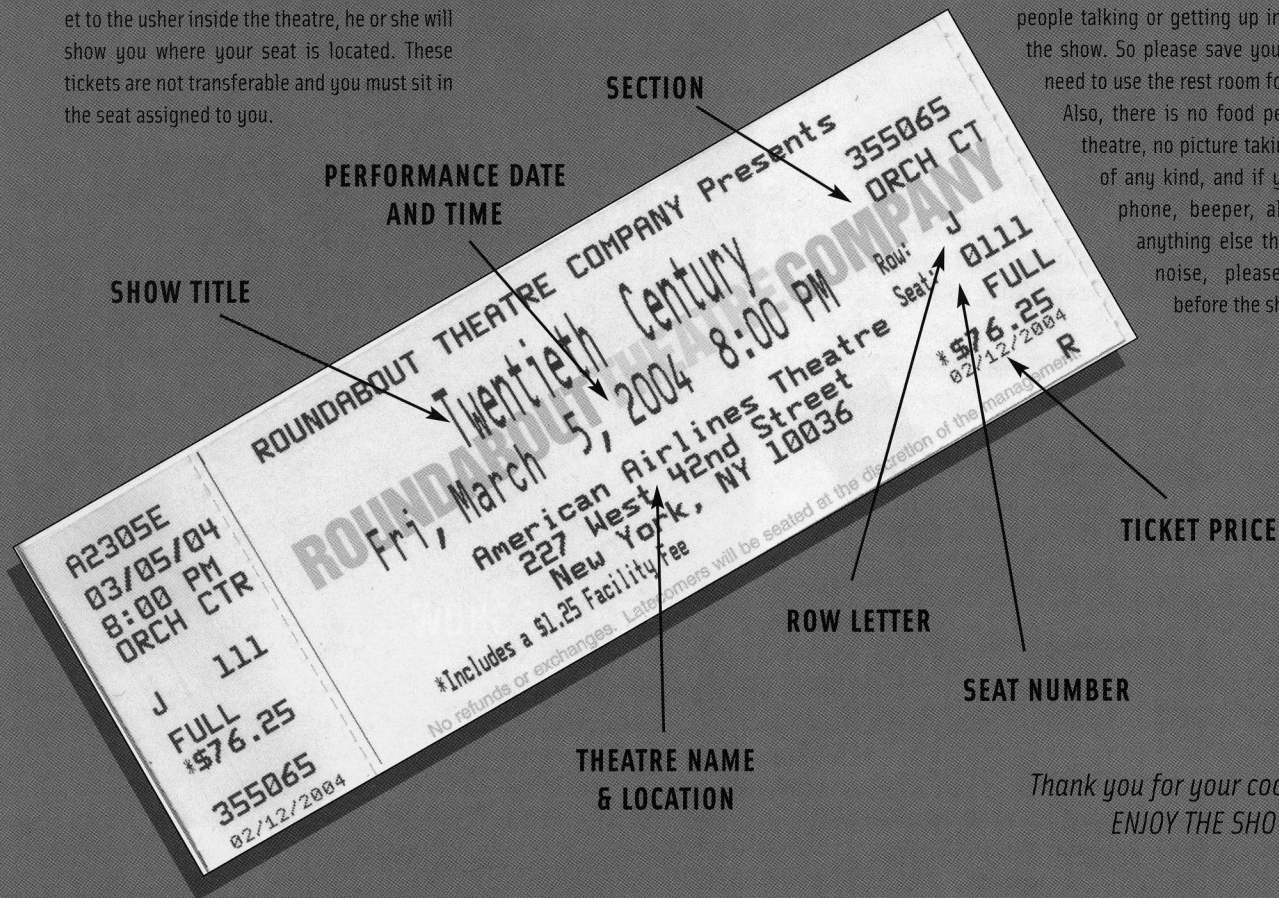
## PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission.

Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



Thank you for your cooperation.  
ENJOY THE SHOW!

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