

UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY SPRING 2005

McREELE





ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL



UPSTAGE DISCUSSES McREELE WITH DIRECTOR, DOUG HUGHES

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COVER: Artwork for the Roundabout Theatre Company production of *McReele*

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Doug Hughes

Why did you want to direct this play?

DOUG HUGHES: I was thrilled to do it mostly because I find it to be such a unique work. There was something about this play in particular that seemed to address so many things that trouble the nation, and it is written in a way that is highly entertaining and elegantly structured. I believe we are all concerned about whether or not our political mechanism is working. Belber is working from the perspective of a citizen worried about the health of his country. That drew me in, along with the fact that the characters are all wonderfully clear. I found the writing to be distinguished.

Will the audience have a connection to this story now because of the recent election?

We discussed the timing of this production at some length. At one point we thought that we should do it in the fall prior to the election; but, somewhere along the line, we decided against it. Regardless of what one thinks about the outcome of that election, *McReele* remains wonderfully relevant. In fact, I think the play will be seen and heard even more clearly with the perspective gained in the months since November.

What is it about Darius' character that intrigues you?

There are so many things that are of great interest to me. These days a version of the truth is taken to market so quickly. Everything that's said, often on very crucial matters, is instantly perishable. The next minute's blog or cable broadcast can instantly distract us from the very important thing that was said in the previous minute. The market is flooded with sound bites of opinionated senators, congressman, and cabinet members who are shoved in front of cameras. Things that are of vital interest to the country are served up to people as entertainment and, as a consequence, we are offered very superficial analysis of problems. Belber takes all this on and I believe he's created a remarkable character in Darius McReele.

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Here's this guy sitting in a prison who gains a perspective on our society that can refresh the listener and make them feel sane. It's almost as though one needed to do very hard time under the sentence of death in order to have the mind concentrated adequately to cut through all the noise. Darius can see and hear things we cannot. He can see possibilities for connection that we cannot. He also has an exceptional ability to make his enthusiasm for new ideas contagious. He is, therefore, despite his death row pedigree, an extremely credible candidate for leadership.

Would you vote for Darius if he were really running for Senate?

I would. I disagree with him about the death penalty and about abortion but his approach on other issues—economic policy, foreign policy—seem sound to me idealistically and practically. What most appeals to me about him as a candidate is his willingness to live dangerously—to depart from the script and say things that are not crafted for bland acceptability. This trait wins my trust and therefore would win my vote. ●

***I know one thing:
in order to play a good liar you
have to have your overall truth.***

CANDIDATE



Why did you want to play this character?

ANTHONY MACKIE: I wanted to play Darius because of the complexity of the character. Also, I truly share a lot of the same views as Darius, such as his view on affirmative action. A lot of the views that he has on black issues are really interesting.

Lets talk a little bit about Darius, in terms of his use of language, what he learned in prison, and the fact that he's reinventing himself.

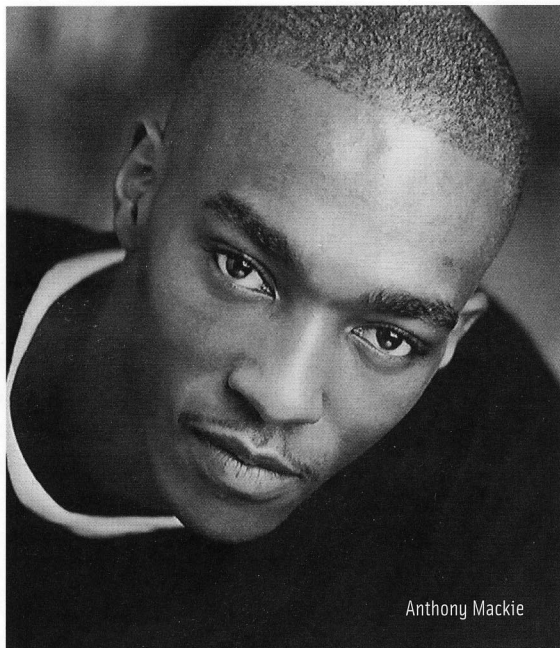
I really rediscovered the intensity of language in preparing for this role. The way that Stephen uses language and the way he forms his scenes and conflict between the characters is very classical. The overall conflict for Darius seems to be, what is the line between being real to yourself and your people and being commercial enough to the point where you are sellable?

What do you think about him not telling the exact truth all the time? Do you think you have to lie in order to be successful?

With Darius, he tells the reality that is suited for that moment. I think his reality depends on the person he's dealing with. He will tell you what he thinks you want to hear, instead of what's really the truth. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad trait, but it's interesting to play that. I know one thing: in order to play a good liar you have to have your overall truth. Somebody once told me, and I think it pertains to Darius, "You can lie as much as you want, as long as you don't start lying to yourself." Once you start lying to yourself, the whole idea of reality is skewed. So Darius knows his truth, he just chooses to tell it differently to different people.

Can you tell me what connects Darius to Rick and Katya?

Rick sparks everything that happens in Darius' life. When he got out of prison, he got out of prison through Rick. When his work was published, it was published through Rick. All of the work he was getting done—the



Anthony Mackie

**UPSTAGE DISCUSSES McREELE
WITH ACTOR, ANTHONY MACKIE**

HOPEFUL



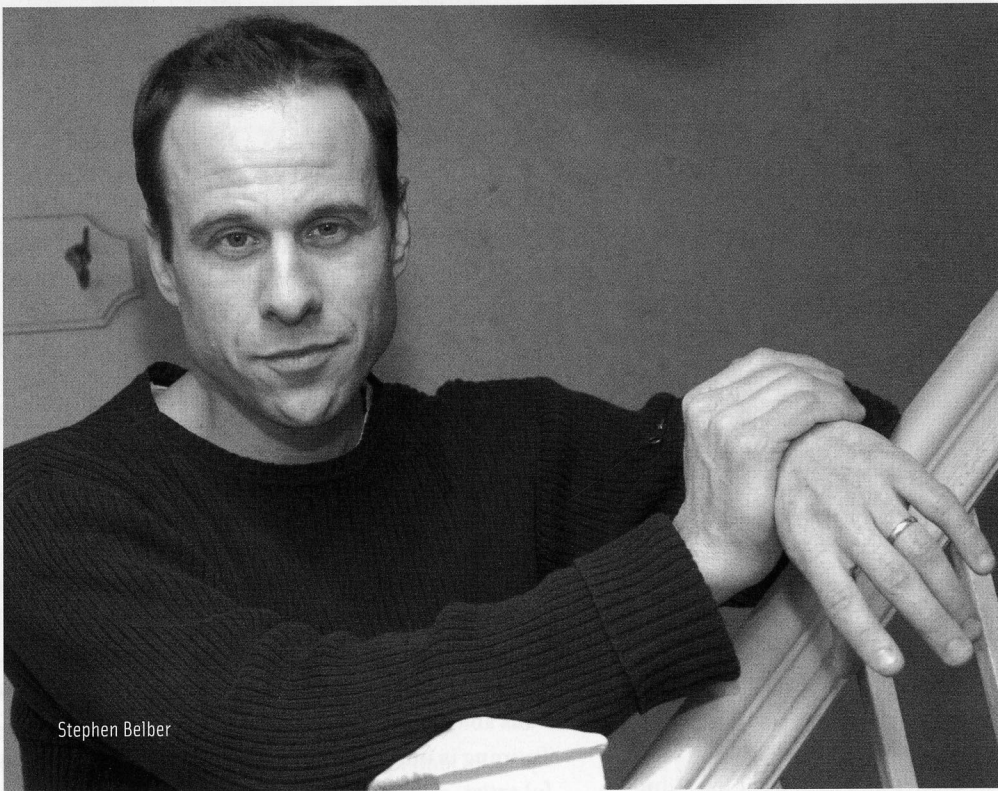
debates, the lecture tour, all of the stuff—happened through Rick. Rick is like his manager. I think Katya is just another aspect of Rick. Katya is basically like everybody else in the world because she is the ultimate skeptic. When we meet someone who is an ex-convict or someone who has been let out of prison, for something as serious as murder, our instant thought is that there is no way he can be innocent; he's a convict. But Darius' charm sways Katya, showing how he can win anybody over.

What did you do to become an actor? What advice could you give to young people who might want to be actors?

I was studying to become an engineer. I was always a huge fan of Don Cheadle, Morgan Freeman, James Earle Jones and Denzel Washington. These phenomenal actors started in theatre and then leapt into film. So I realized there were certain things they all had in common: they all had a theatre background, and they all had training, be it focused intense conservatory training, or the regional circuit training. Back then it

was about working. It wasn't about the instant gratification of doing a play and trying to get that play to springboard you into movies. So I decided to study very intensively. I went to North Carolina School of the Arts for high school and then I came to Julliard for college. And once I got out of Julliard I never would have expected that I would have gained such a full head of steam at such a quick pace. The way it happened for me is a blessing. I think for me, training is very important. I've learned more working than I did in school, but I wouldn't have been able to work the way I did if I hadn't had those four years of learning how to work at school. So it's a "catch 22." I developed my process of how to work when I was in school, so that once I got on the set, I was able to learn a lot in a short amount of time. Training is imperative if you are going to be a successful artist, not a wealthy actor—that's different. I think a lot of people are looking for jobs, not careers; and it's easy to be a working actor, to find a job, but it's very hard to have a career in acting. ●

SPEECH WRITER



Stephen Belber

UPSTAGE DISCUSSES *McREELE* WITH PLAYWRIGHT, STEPHEN BELBER

What inspired you to write this play?

STEPHEN BELBER: I've always been interested in politics and the political process. I've been following the huge rash of DNA exonerations that have taken place over the last seven or eight years. I found that to be an inherently dramatic thing. I was so interested in how these guys reemerged into society and the choices that lay before someone who was really intelligent and wasn't, quote, "An uneducated criminal." And I just wanted to give a journey to one of these guys in a stylized, epic sort of fashion. And because of my love for politics, I wanted to see what would happen if someone took the path from death row to the precipice of a senatorial seat.

It's easy for us to jump on bandwagons; it's easy for us to dismiss people whose politics we inherently disagree with—but finding someone to truly believe in is a complicated process.

What do you want the audience to walk away with when they leave?

I guess in a very simple way I'd want them to walk away with a higher scrutiny of the way we approach voting, the way we approach that one significant piece of power that we have access to, because there are a lot of obstacles in the way to our seeking out a candidate that we can believe in. There are a lot of obstacles that society puts in our way, that the candidate puts in our way, and that we carry with us that are burdensome. It's easy for us to jump on bandwagons; it's easy for us to dismiss people whose politics we inherently disagree with—but finding someone to truly believe in is a complicated process. It's a personal process. As much as we think we know or want to know our candidates, there's a leap of faith involved in the political process. We need to approach that leap, that edge, and find out as much as we can before we make the leap. Inevitably with any human relationship there's an unknown with your partner—which is scary, but a fact of life.

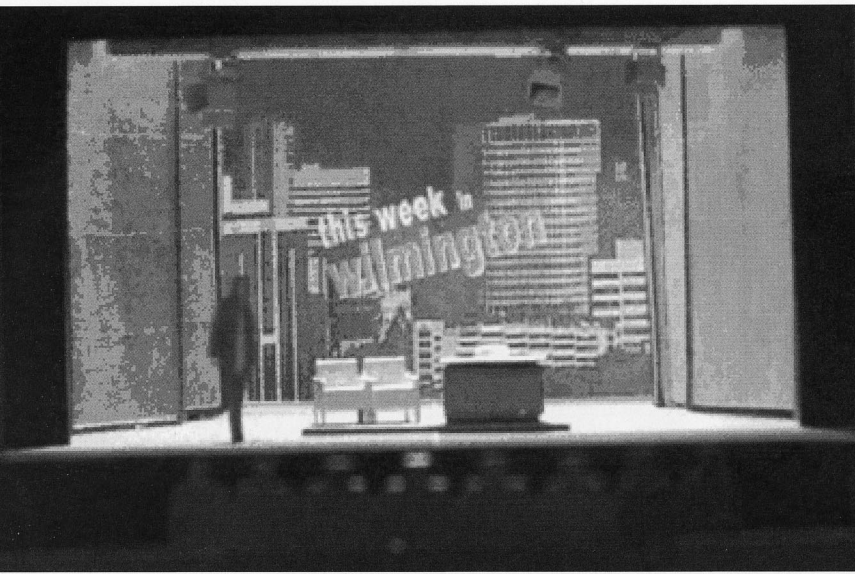
I wanted to talk about Darius' use of language. The way he speaks, his ability to be really smart about a lot of different issues. How important is that to the development of the character?

Simply, I wanted to create as dynamic a speaker as possible. That's such a fundamental part of universal appeal. So I wanted to give him a street credibility and political polish. I wanted him to be someone who can walk the walk and talk the talk. So I wanted his politics to be sophisticated but make it appealing to a lay person who's not a political junkie. I get very excited when I see people who carry certain ideals and are able to relate them to people who wouldn't necessarily hold those ideals or ideas. The question is, "Is he full of it or

not?" He speaks his heart every time out and he believes this stuff. He's done his research and his homework, but is there calculation there, is there compromise? I'm sure, but at the end of the day he believes what he's saying and I wanted that to really come across. The beauty of human beings is that they can mean what they're saying and use it for a particular reason at a particular time.

I want to talk about Darius Rick and Katya. Is Rick the architect of Darius' campaign?

He falls for Darius before Katya does and she gives him flack for that, but eventually she falls for him too and then feels utterly betrayed and reverts back to her journalistic shell. That's kind of her journey. Rick's journey is a little more complicated. He thinks about it, thinks about it hard, falls for it, and gets burned and has to make a decision based on whether they believe that was just a burn or just a necessary survival technique. I also wanted to write about journalistic neutrality. Everything we know of the candidate is through



Set designer, Neil Patel's early model of "This Week in Wilmington" (later called "This Week in Delaware"), a fictional TV show in *McRee*.

the media. That's a lot of what we're basing our choices on, and the media is obviously not as unbiased as it should be. So, I wanted Katya to represent the job the media does. The media is the device by which the candidates ride. Rick comes from an older school. Rick probably represents an old school sort of, "I'm going to try to be neutral." But, he's tired of that neutrality. My dad's a journalist. I used to be a journalist. I have issues with journalistic neutrality, because I want to be a part of it. I want to be interested in the stuff. I want to express that interest and express those opinions. And now journalism is heading towards people just watching the channel they agree with. The New York Times is struggling with this daily it seems. It's Rick who hopefully embodies part of that struggle. He's going to take a leap of faith. The beauty of politics is that we all have a huge stake in it.

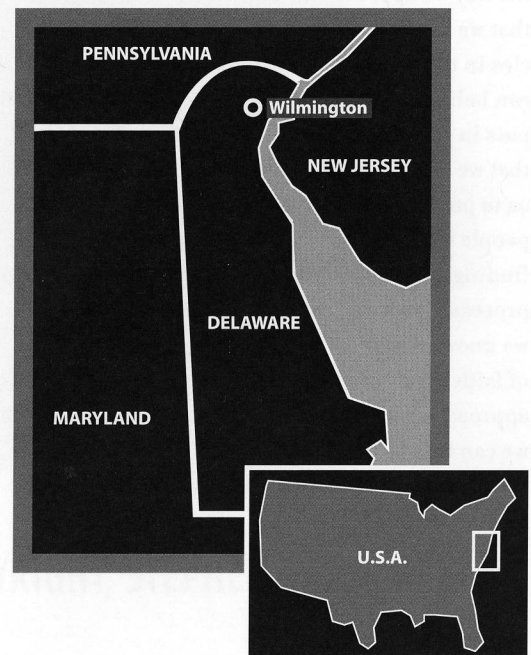
When I read this play, I thought, "Wow, this guy could have committed murder." He's just so good at reinventing himself or presenting himself.

It's reinvention. It's very possible that he did it. So, I say it's either lying or reinvention. Reinvention has a positive note to it in American Lore, and lying doesn't. It depends on how we as personal voters are going to view something like that. Should we forgive him? Is he

worth being our senator, even if he did do it? It's reinvention—he's no longer a bad boy. The use of language is what the play is about.

What exactly happens between the victim's father and Darius in the last scene? It seems like a crucial moment. And we were just curious. Is it something you want to talk about?

Yeah. There's a part of me as a playwright that feels it's a cop out to not show that conversation, but I've thought a lot about it and I think it's ultimately more interesting to leave that unknown. In the end, Rick has to settle. If Darius is good enough to placate the man in that room—no matter what he says, he's telling him the truth; "I killed your son and I'm sorry," or he's saying, "I didn't kill your son." Whatever it is, that man comes out and he hugs Darius. And I wanted that truth telling/political skill—whatever happens in there—to be enough. If he can placate that man, it's enough for me, because as a voter Rick is our stand-in and as I said, we don't get to know what our politicians ultimately and truly think about when they fall asleep at night. All we get to know is their actions and the way they vote on the floor. So, I wanted to leave that scene silent, because I wanted the audience member to have to think: not being able to hear that conversation, would I vote for this guy? And I wanted that to be the real choice at the end of the play. ●



POLITICAL NAME-CALLING



THE CANDIDATE

The person running for office. The one who is known by face and name in the eyes of the public.

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

The Volunteer Coordinator manages the recruitment of volunteers, then maintains the volunteer staff by assigning them to various positions within the campaign.

CHIEF OF STAFF

The person who oversees the entire operation. The COS recruits other senior campaign staff members and dictates the overall strategy and day-to-day operations of the candidate.

FINANCE DIRECTOR/TREASURER

The money person. The FD oversees the campaign's budget and serves as the accountant. This person makes sure the candidate doesn't go bankrupt.

CHIEF POLICY ADVISOR

The person who helps to shape and mold a candidate's position by researching the issues and strengthening ties with various political groups and organizations that are supportive of such a decision.

SPEECH WRITER

The Speech writer researches topics and writes the speeches, ensuring that they connect with the audience and convey the message as best as possible. If none is present, the Communications Director assumes the role of the SW.

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

The Communications Director is responsible for the candidate's message having to do with media and press relations. He establishes ties with reporters, supporters and volunteers. The CD approves press releases and quotes.

EXONERATE:

TO RELIEVE, ESPECIALLY OF CHARGE, HARDSHIP OR OBLIGATION; TO CLEAR FROM ACCUSATION OR BLAME.



Since 1973, 117 people in 25 states have been released from death row with evidence of their innocence. Here are two of their stories:

ERNEST WILLIS

Willis is sentenced to death for the 1986 deaths of two women who died in a house fire where he was staying for a brief time. Wilson escaped from the fire and officers at the scene arrested Willis because he was acting strangely. The fire was ruled arson because investigators believed that they had found an "accelerant" in the carpet.



Seventeen years later, a federal judge overturns Willis' conviction, and the case is revisited.



The district attorney hires a new fire expert who concludes, "There is not a single item of physical evidence in this case which supports a finding of arson." The alleged "accelerant" found in the carpet was in fact "flashover burning", consistent with electrical fault fires.



U.S. District Judge Royal Ferguson holds that the state had administered medically inappropriate antipsychotic drugs without Willis' consent during the trial; that the state suppressed evidence favorable to Willis; and that Willis received ineffective representation at both the guilt and sentencing phases of his trial.



The state attorney general's office declines to appeal, and prosecutors drop all charges against Willis.



Willis, who had no prior record, is released on October 6, 2004 with \$100, ten days of medication, and the clothes on his back. He becomes the 117th person to be released from death row.

RYAN MATTHEWS

Shortly after his 17th birthday in 1999, Matthews is arrested for the murder of a local convenience store owner. His court appointed trial attorney is unprepared, and unable to handle the DNA evidence. The judge orders closing arguments on the third day of the trial and sends the jury to deliberate. When they cannot reach a verdict after several hours, the judge orders the jury to resume deliberations until a verdict is reached. Less than an hour later, the jury returns with a guilty verdict and two days later, Matthews is sentenced to death.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

In March 2003, Matthews' attorneys have the physical evidence (including a ski mask) retested. The DNA results exclude Matthews and point directly to another individual—one serving time for a murder that happened a few months after the convenience store murder and only blocks away.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A new trial is ordered in April 2004 based upon the new DNA results and findings that the prosecution withheld evidence.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Matthews is exonerated on August 9, 2004 after five years on death row, making him the nation's 116th exonerate and the 14th death row inmate freed with the DNA testing. ●

www.deathpenaltyinfo.org

Activities

BEFORE YOU GO TO THE THEATRE:

- ★ Think about how the term 'reinvention' applies to a person.
- ★ Think about people who have reinvented themselves.
- ★ How many politicians, celebrities or sports figures can you name who have reinvented themselves?
- ★ Have any of your friends reinvented themselves?
- ★ How did they accomplish the reinvention? Was it for the better? Why? Why not?
- ★ Have you ever reinvented yourself? Why?

AS YOU WATCH THE SHOW:

- ★ Notice Darius' behavior.
- ★ Why do you think he is doing the things he does?
- ★ How does his behavior affect his relationships?
- ★ How does his behavior affect your impression of him?

AFTER THE SHOW:

- ★ Reflect on whether or not you would vote for Darius. Why? What happened in the play to affect your opinion?
- ★ How did his reinvention affect your opinion of him?
- ★ Write Darius a letter telling him why you would or wouldn't vote for him.

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

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

Or email to: cassidj@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.

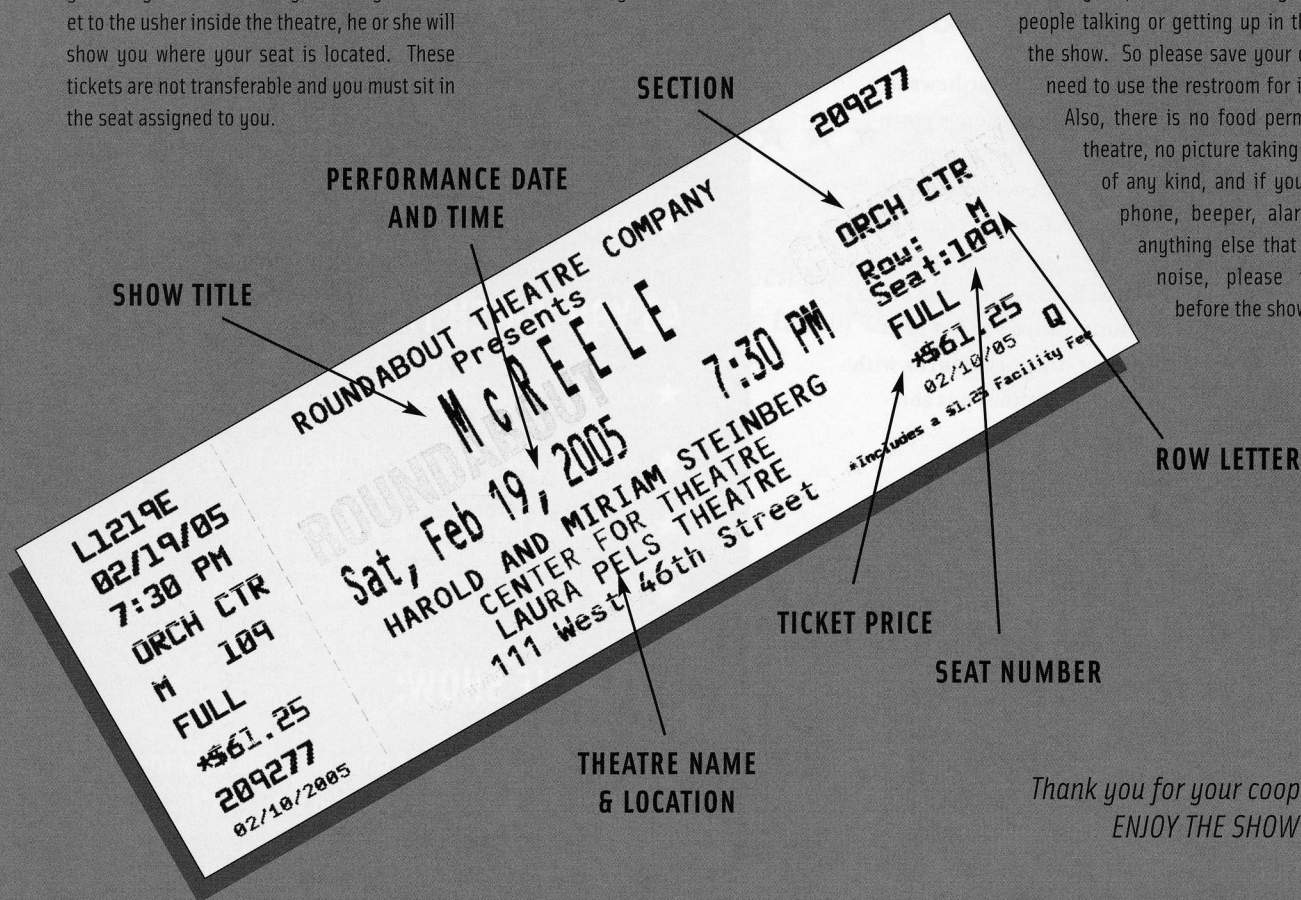
PROGRAMS

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 restroom 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!

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM:

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