

# UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY SPRING 2006



## The THREE PENNY OPERA

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"A man who sees  
another man on the street  
corner with only a stump for an  
arm will be so shocked the first time  
he'll give him sixpence. But the second  
time it'll only be a three penny bit. And  
if he sees him a third time, he'll have  
him cold-bloodedly handed over to  
the police."

—BERTOLT BRECHT

"The play basically is asking  
people to have some  
understanding for these people who  
have been driven by poverty to take  
revenge and commit crimes and I think  
the appropriate response is to walk  
out thinking the world should  
be changed."

—WALLACE SHAWN

"Life is a jest, and all  
things show it.  
I thought it once and now  
I know it."

—JOHN GAY  
(self-written epitaph)

Towards happiness you run  
Through rain and snow and sleet,  
But happiness will always run  
Behind you in the street.  
Yes, for human living,  
Humans aren't smart enough.  
So they don't know their striving  
Will never be enough.

—QUOTE FROM ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY'S  
PRODUCTION OF THE THREEPENNY OPERA

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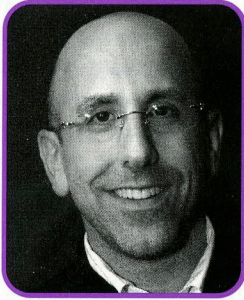
COVER: Artwork for the Roundabout Theatre Company production of *The Threepenny Opera*

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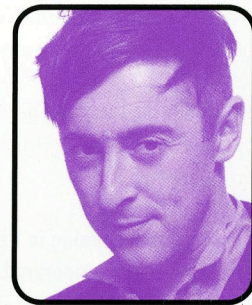
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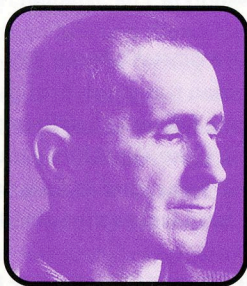
# The THREE PENNY OPERA



2 The Director:  
Scott Elliott



The Actor:  
Alan Cumming 4



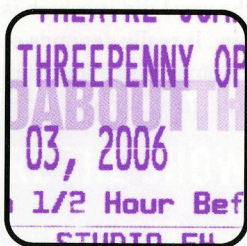
6 The Play:  
Adaptations

The Set Designer:  
Derek McLane 8



10 The Adaptor:  
Wallace Shawn

The Choreographer:  
Aszure Barton 12



BC The Audience:  
Your Role





# The Director

## UPSTAGE DISCUSSES *THE THREEPENNY OPERA* WITH DIRECTOR SCOTT ELLIOTT

### Why did you choose to direct *The Threepenny Opera* now?

Well, it's a long, complicated question because I decided to do it a couple of years ago. To me it's a piece that has aged really well. It feels relevant, or at least, Wally's translation makes it feel really relevant. The messages of the piece and the politics of the piece haven't really changed. I've always found it challenging and interesting, but always found it very elusive.

### Tell me a little about the period, if you will.

The way we're doing it is that it takes place when you're watching it.

### Is it actually happening in New York, or would you say it's happening in contemporary London?

No, it's happening at Studio 54.

### So the references to London in the script are just references, it could be anywhere, right?

He (Brecht) set it in London because he's skewering the class system and the class system was, and in a way remains, part of British culture. He also uses the setting to skewer the operatic art form. They were speaking German onstage and the characters were English. The fact that it is set in London is just a storytelling element. I think that what we're trying to do is make the play reflect the world as it is today. Or the cross section of what the world is today, because there are a lot of contemporary archetypes (in this play). We're hoping that a modern audience will feel that it is modern and that they're not seeing a piece that was written all those years ago, but they're seeing something that feels like today. So hopefully they will be shocked in the same way that the audience was shocked back then.

### How do you approach each piece?

I only have my own personal way of trying to tell a story. I don't really approach things differently; obviously this has a different sort of style to it. It might have a different feeling and style, but I only know what I

know. It's like being a painter, in that way. I might be known for painting seascapes but why can't I paint a still life? Or why can't I try painting a nude? I liken it to something like that and try to think of it as being no different than a sculptor or an artist or a writer or anything. It's using your imagination and your poetry and your life experiences. And so every time I take on a piece, no matter what, hopefully, underneath it are my own personal emotions and my life experiences and my feelings. That's what I use to do my work. I'm a director and I'm an artist. I'm not a facilitator. And so I try to bring my own emotions to it and I think that's why people get it, you know?

### Do you find that doing a musical is harder than doing a play?

Well this is harder than a musical, I think, in a weird way because it's like a full-length difficult play with songs in between. It's like a spoof on a musical, a spoof on an opera in a weird way. And so I am using a lot of different muscles, but I feel excited about it.

### Could you talk a little bit about why you chose to have Lucy played by a man?

I'm looking at the piece, in the modern world, and my interpretation of the gang is sort of like a modern gang. Alan Cumming is playing Mack the Knife and, he's such a sexy guy that he appeals to men and women, and I like to work with what I have. I thought it would be interesting if Mack the Knife has a little bit of a wild side. There are a lot of people in the cast, who live alternative life styles, and very different sorts of performers and poets and downtown sort of performance people and people who are drag artists. I think that's what I was trying to do, to show a cross section of humanity.

### What would you say to a student who wants to be a director?

Well, I only know the way I did it, which is I started my own theatre company. It really depends on what type of director the person wants to be. There are a lot of directors who just like to be hired, but then I was more



interested in projecting my own work. I started my own theatre company because I felt a passion to direct and I wanted to do it my own way. I wanted a chance to sort of explore myself as an artist, so I spent my life savings starting this little theatre company which has now, luckily, grown. But it was there that I was able to figure out what I was doing. Were my feelings of wanting to be a director valid to myself? I wasn't really looking at anybody else at the moment but myself because I wasn't thinking about becoming successful. I had kind of a checkered past because I was an actor, and I left acting because I didn't really like it. Then I was going to become a psychologist, so I went back to college and did all that for a while and then I was unsatisfied. And I knew that I had a kind of feeling when I was acting that I really wanted to direct, but it seemed like an impossible task to run around and try to get directing jobs. That's when I did some research and found out that you could actually have a not-for-profit company where you could create your own work. And that's what I did. And the fact that it caught on was purely luck. **UP**

Scott Elliott's Directing Credits include: *Barefoot in the Park*, *The Women*, *Three Sisters*, *Present Laughter*.



## WITH YOUR VOICE

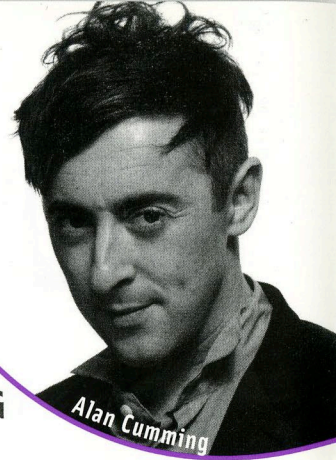
### BEFORE THE SHOW:

- Satire—irony, sarcasm, or caustic wit used to attack or expose folly, vice, or stupidity.
- Where in theatre, television, and film have you seen satire used regularly?



Solo:

# The Actor



UPSTAGE DISCUSSES *THE THREEPENNY OPERA* WITH ACTOR ALAN CUMMING

**So why did you want to take on this role?**

I really wanted to do something in the theatre again, and I realized that I was turning down a lot of things because I didn't really like them. It's such a big commitment too, emotionally, to do a play, and I really want to do more theatre now. I just realized that it would have to be something really amazing that would attract me. This came along, just out of the blue, and I have always loved it. It was a very challenging role for me—it's a lot of singing, and the character is very complex. It's kind of the antithesis of a Broadway musical in a way. It's more like a cabaret of different scenes of political life, of people in economics and social groups. I've always liked Brecht. We did a workshop of *The Threepenny Opera* about a year and a half ago, and I came away from it being much more excited about the character than I had been before because it's much more human than you'd imagine in terms of his foibles.

**Do you have a particular process that you subscribe to as a performer?**

I suppose I'm trained in the Stanislavski method, but I also come from a country where there is a tradition of what you'd call "front of cloth performance," which is where the curtain comes in and scene changes keep happening and happening behind the curtain and people have to go out and do a little scene and talk to the audience or do something to kind of cover it. It's a much more presentational kind of style of acting, so I think you'd call it Vaudeville, I suppose, or pantomime. All of those things were very popular in Scotland and very much part of my upbringing. I think I'm trained in the way where I can understand a character's life and backstory and all the things that might make them feel. I don't have a technique, I don't have anything more than that that I adhere to, I don't have a process. I think it changes for each role. What I normally do is I read the script a lot, think over it in my head. What has been really interesting is that he's the "man."

**Do you feel like there's going to be one specific challenge in doing this role?**

I think it will be partly hard because it's the Brecht

work, the way he writes...the characters don't sort of meld. As I say, it's like a series of different sketches. Right now, the thing is trying to link all the different facets that are found in each scene into one cohesive whole. That's quite hard. And also I think what's going to be hard is trying to make someone attractive who does such horrible things. In a way, the audience has to sort of be attracted to Mack the Knife because Brecht's intention is to get you involved with this person so that then you can stand by this person who's a villain. So it makes you kind of reassess how you feel about the poor and about people who do crime. But of course you don't want to be too horrible or they won't like you, and you don't want them to like you too much and forget that you do all these horrible things.

**Will you tell us a little bit about the difference between movies, theatre and television, and I know you've done all three.**

It's not really an issue in terms of what it's really about. For me, you're relating with a different audience every night so that's like a different performance every night. And when you're doing a movie, you have to do the same thing again and again because they're covering it from different angles. But when you're in a big theatre you've got to make sure that the story you want to be telling is being caught by people further back, and in a movie when the camera is right in your face, an eyebrow or a little twitch is all you need. But at the core, you're just pretending to be someone else and meaning it. In theatre, you can use more parts of your body—this is a musical, of course—so there's other ways that you can tell the story: by singing, by using your body through movement. Often in television, it's mostly just your face they use. Like this last film I did, *Suffering Man's Charity*, I was able to be a bit more physical. Another skill about being a good film actor is that you have to be able to turn it on. Because it could be five in the morning, you could be asleep for three hours, and you have to be able to get up, get out of your trailer, and do it, do it right there and then. You just have to. And I think that's the best way, that's what acting should be like. You shouldn't have to crank yourself up for ages to do it.



**Do you miss home? You're such a phenomenon here in this country, do you miss Scotland?**

I still feel connected to it in a very strong way. I mean, I really love it here. I've done things, like have a place in the Catskills that is so like Scotland, the terrain I mean. What's interesting, when you move away, is that you understand what makes you Scottish, what makes you whatever you're from. It's having openness to going out into the world and also of receiving things, kind of an understanding that you have to let go and relax and have a laugh. Laughing and talking is important, and thinking. People do those sorts of things for a reason, but I think sometimes that people don't understand the value of those things.

**What advice would you give to a student who wanted to be an actor?**

The crux of the matter is that I believe the most interesting thing about anyone who wants to be an artist is themselves and their life, their experience, and how they think. You have to be open enough so that your self comes out, because really that's the most interesting thing about you. When you see someone being an actor and performing, the people who are watching them aren't thinking, "Ooh, gosh what tremendous technical flair he has," they're actually going, "I'm interested in this person, I'm attracted to this person," and it's because they're giving a bit of themselves. I used to think acting was all about putting layers on top of yourself, like the character, and the accent, and the mannerisms. Sometimes you use things like that, but actually I feel it's more about letting yourself come through, and not about so that you sound all the same or that all your performances would be similar. It's an essence of yourself that comes through. Obviously we all have our "types," but you have to maintain your identity and not lose that, and be proud of that. Be really proud of who you are—there's a lot of shame about a lot of things in America, and I think

that's not very healthy. It all starts with being ashamed of where you're from, or your desires, or your accent, or your class, your sexuality, everything. It's really scary. Some people in America believe that it is a classless place and it is so not.

**And it's kind of fascinating that we're sort of coming full circle to talking about class, because I think Mr. Brecht is dealing with that, wouldn't you say?**

Yeah, absolutely. I think what's really interesting—because I actually studied Brecht quite a lot at drama school—is that he was kind of unusual in his time. A lot of the other people who were doing theatre were doing it for the workers and trying to get the poor to rise up and make change. What he realized was actually that you had to get the educated middle classes; the educated, well-to-do people who are open to new ideas are actually the ones who can make change. So he did these parables, most of his plays are parables of things that are about stuff that needs to be changed in society, and this one's about how we need to all look again about how we feel about the poor and about criminals and undesirables, because really we are buying into them having to stay in that position. I did love the way in the play that he says, "You know, in real life, this is what happens, you'd get hung. But, guess what, it's a play, so we're going to go with a happy ending."

**Did you want to say anything else about the play?**

What I think is really interesting about this play is that it's a big production, but it's not a Broadway show. Broadway musicals are something different from this, smoother with round edges, and this is very spiky, oddly constructed, weird music. All the characters are nasty, there's not really anyone who is particularly the nice character. **UP**

Alan Cumming's Acting Credits include: *Cabaret*, *Design for Living*, *GoldenEye*, *X2*, and *Son of the Mask*.

## WITH YOUR VOICE

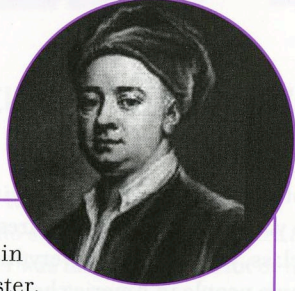
### BEFORE THE SHOW:

- Think about how you define power. What does the word 'unjust' mean to you?
- How do you see status demonstrated in contemporary society?
- Observe the various ways that people demonstrate their sense of power.



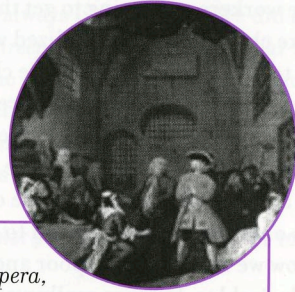
# ADAPTATION

ADAPTATION—  
A composition that has been recast into a new form.



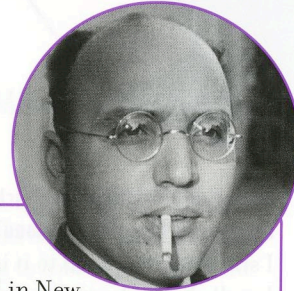
## JOHN GAY

- John Gay was born in 1685 and died in 1732; his body is buried in Westminster.
- Before achieving success as a writer, John Gay was an apprentice to a silk merchant and a secretary.
- Early works by Gay include *The Mohocks* (which was never staged due to politics), *The Wife of Bath*, *The Shepherd's Week*, and *Fables*, a book of poetry. He then achieved fame through the writing of *The Beggar's Opera*.
- Within his works, John Gay took popular songs of the era and added his own lyrics.



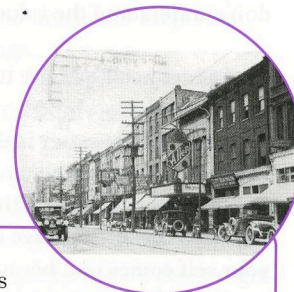
## THE BEGGAR'S OPERA

- John Gay's fourth play, *The Beggar's Opera*, debuted in London in 1728 and was performed more than any other play during the 18th century.
- The play focused on the class system of London society and poked fun at Robert Walpole, the British Prime Minister of the time.
- The play was also intended to be a satire on the Italian opera tradition—the characters of Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit were based on two London opera prima donna, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni.
- Gay later wrote a sequel to *The Beggar's Opera* entitled *Polly*, but Prime Minister Robert Walpole banned the production from any performance because of the satirical comments it made against him.



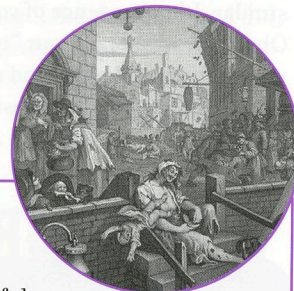
## KURT WEILL

- Kurt Julian Weill was born March 2, 1900, in Dessau, Germany and died in New York on April 3, 1950.
- Weill's earlier works included pieces for symphony and orchestra, but he then began collaborating with Bertolt Brecht as a composer for the theatre; they worked together until 1930 when they split because of political differences.
- Weill's wife, Lotte Lenya, played the role of *Jenny* in the original production of *The Threepenny Opera*.



## THE THREEPENNY OPERA

- The original German production was performed more than 10,000 times and translated into 18 languages.
- Several English adaptations have been produced, including four film versions.
- The setting of the play was London's SoHo during the 1920's.
- Though set in London, Brecht made the production a satire based on German capitalism, which encourages private business rather than a government-controlled economy.
- In 1933, offended by the political messages that the show presented, the Nazi Party banned all performances and demanded that all existing copies of the score be destroyed.



## REAL WORLD—1720'S LONDON

- Britain was a world power in both finance and trade.
- Crime rates skyrocketed because of the financial gap between classes.
- Gin, called 'Madam Geneva' at the time, was seen as a primary cause of the increasing crime level. In the late 1720's, the government began putting restrictions on the selling and consumption of gin in an attempt to bring order back into their city.



## 1920S GERMANY—REAL WORLD

- This period was known as "The Golden Twenties" because of Germany's worldwide cultural impact.
- Berlin was the capital of culture and intellect, introducing many innovations in the fields of architecture and design, literature, film, art, music, philosophy, psychology, and fashion.
- Due to Germany's defeat in World War I, the early 1920s were also a time of economic crisis. A state of financial normality soon returned with a newly elected government and the assistance of United States loans.



## BERTOLT BRECHT

- Born: February 10, 1898 Died: August 14, 1956
- A playwright, director, and poet, Brecht was born in Germany and began his career there.
- After Adolf Hitler came to power, Brecht fled Germany and traveled through many countries until settling for a time in the United States. It was during this period that Brecht penned his most successful plays, all of which were reactions to his resistance to the Nazi regime.

## ELIZABETH HAUPTMANN

Though Brecht is cited as the author of *The Threepenny Opera*, the play was actually a German translation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, written by Brecht's secretary Elizabeth Hauptmann!



## WALLACE SHAWN

- Though known as an actor of film and television, Shawn made his debut onstage in his own translation of Machiavelli's *The Mandrake* in 1977.
- Shawn has won 3 OBIE awards in his playwriting career for the plays *Our Late Night*, *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, and *The Fever*.
- Wallace and his musician brother Allen also collaborate on operas, including *The Music Teacher*, which opened in February at the Minetta Lane Theatre.

## 2006 AMERICA—REAL WORLD

"*Threepenny Opera* reminds me of the struggle and pain that I have observed growing up. The play is similar to today's society because the styles of the characters express how we feel and what's going on today. *Threepenny Opera* just switches up then with now and sends a message to let us know right from wrong, how we can change, what path we have to choose and what life is right for us as people of this society."

—Brandon Thorpe  
Student at Manhattan Theatre Lab  
High School



Solo:

# The Set Designer

## UPSTAGE DISCUSSES *THE THREEPENNY OPERA* WITH SET DESIGNER DEREK MCLANE

### Is this adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* actually taking place in contemporary London?

In theory it takes place in contemporary London, but we're really not concerned about the city.

### How did you find your way into the world of this play?

I experimented with a world that confronted the theatricality of the piece head on. So in one of the sketches I made early on I just took the names of the places in the script and made them into signs and put those signs on stage. For example, when the script says that a scene takes place on a street I simply made a large neon sign that said "A Street." So rather than actually trying to show a street or make any kind of scenic description of a street; it was rendered with a giant sign. But the sign itself was quite beautiful. It had its own kind of flash and excitement to it.

### What's the first thing you do as a designer?

I always start with the script. Beyond that, I have no set way into a piece. It really varies, depending on the piece. I mean for me, it always involves some experimentation. Some things involve a lot more experimentation than others. I had a couple of other ideas for this that Scott Elliot rejected when I showed him. But, among the ideas that I showed him was this idea of the signs and he immediately took to that. So the first time I ever showed anything to Scott I probably showed him about four different ideas. And I was doing that partly because neither of us knew what we wanted to do with the piece yet and I was really just experimenting. I wanted to see where it would go. And when I showed him this version of the neon signs he immediately took to it and said "Yes, let's do that; let's explore that."

### Will there be levels on the stage?

Well there aren't exactly levels, per se, but the floor is raked. Which means that the further away you get from the audience the higher the stage is. It's lower down front and higher up at the back.

### How steep of a rake is it?

It's a half-inch to the foot, which means for every foot you go upstage, the floor rises up a half an inch. It's a fairly modest rake.

### Could you discuss your understanding of the word "Brechtian"?

In its simplest form, what it means to me is that there are no illusions on stage. The performance that is taking place on stage is a performance and that is made absolutely clear to the audience at every moment. They don't pretend that things are anything other than what they really are. You acknowledge the fact that the stage is an artificial place, that a performance is an artificial event. And that the actions that take place on stage are not real, they are a performance. And there's no allusion to reality on stage.

### What was the most challenging component of this design?

The biggest challenge in this piece is the royal messenger who is supposed to arrive on horseback at the end of the show.

### How did you solve that?

Well, we've talked about various solutions: How necessary is it that he actually arrives on a horse? Does he arrive on a real horse? Does he arrive on a puppet horse or a rolling horse? And finally what I decided on is a horse that flies in. No one will think for a minute that this is anything other than artificial. It has its own kind of flash. It feels almost like a horse sign.

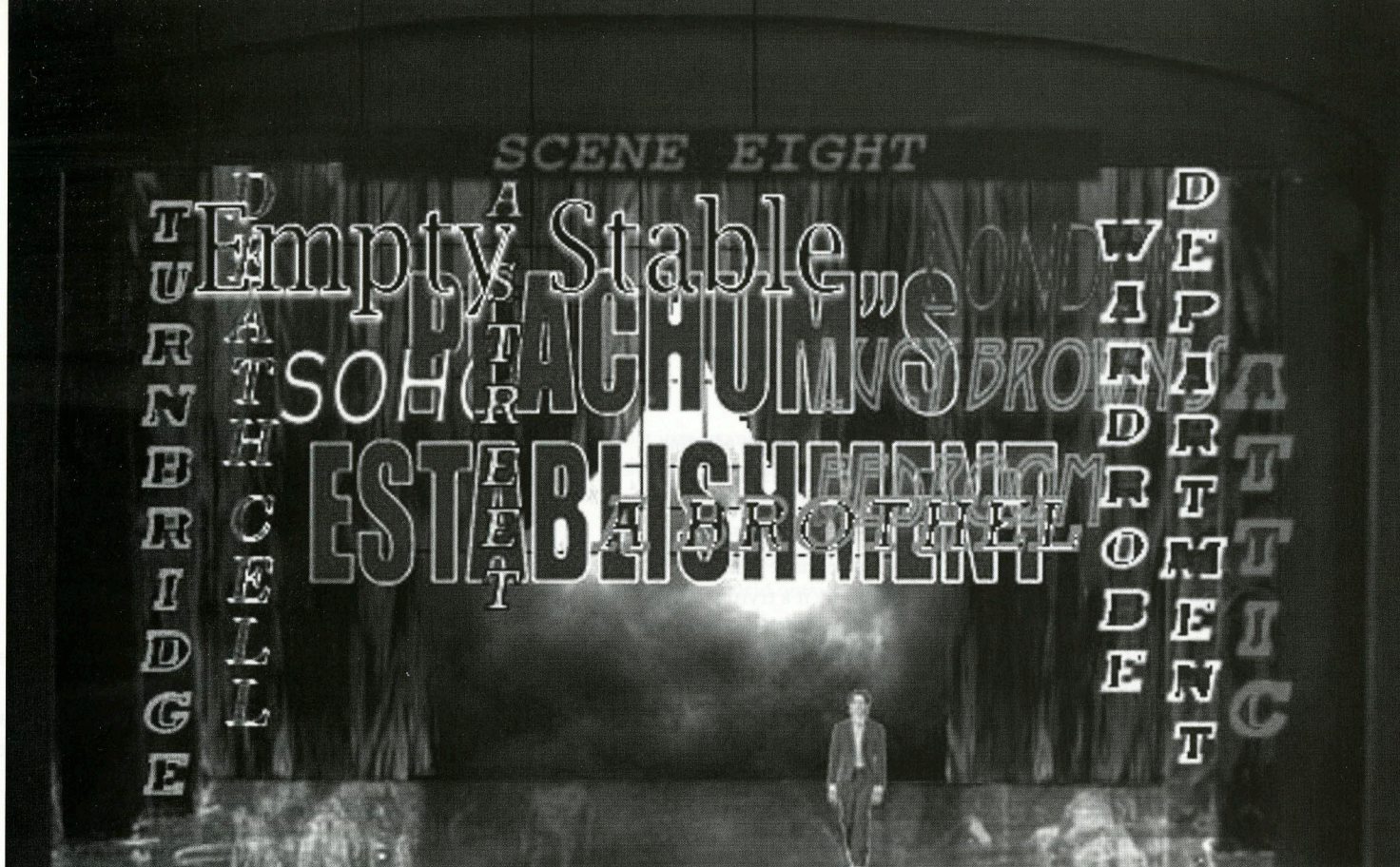
### What is your favorite part of this design?

It is the neon. I mean, there's nothing like neon, it's such a great thing. I think it looks beautiful, it has its own flash, but it also there's something so fantastically suggestive and tawdry about neon. You know, neon is almost pure commerce.

### What has influenced you as an artist?

Well, lots of things have influenced me over the years. Certainly I've had teachers who taught me about set design who were a big influence. But more recently, I go to a lot of museums and art exhibits. I look at a lot of





design and architecture magazines. But, I also look at a lot of historical references and rummage through books looking for ideas. I'll take ideas from wherever I can find them. Sometimes they come from a museum exhibit, sometimes they come from an art gallery, sometimes they come from an ad in a magazine and sometimes they just come from the script itself. You read it and you see it. That's the most exciting thing, when you read a script or hear a story and you say, "Oh, I know what this should look like." That's always a thrilling moment.

**What would you say to encourage a person who wanted to be a set designer?**

I would encourage them to draw and to study drawings. I would encourage them to draw their own versions of sets for shows that they have seen. They might come up with what they feel are better ideas for sets than what was in the production they saw. And the more they can get in touch with that response, trying to decide what a thing should look like, the better off they're going to be. They can also do that with stories, it doesn't have to

be a play. You can read any story and you can do a drawing about what you think it looks like.

**Where did you go to school?**

I went to Harvard as an undergraduate and studied English. Then I went to Yale Drama School and studied set design.

**Is there anything else you want to say about the process or your work on the show?**

I'm just so excited to see how it turns out. I'm a huge fan of Wally Shawn. One of the first things I saw when I first came to New York was the original production of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*. Then I was lucky enough to be able to design the revival of it last year with Scott Elliott. And I'm such a fan of Wally's writing. This is kind of a dream come true to be able to do his version of *The Threepenny Opera*. **UP**

Derek McLane's Set Designs can be seen in: *The Pajama Game*, *Barefoot in the Park* and *Lestat*.

**WITH YOUR VOICE**

Derek McLane talks about how he used neon to create a specific atmosphere for the play.

- While you are watching the show, notice how the world of the play is created through the various design elements (lights, set, sound, costume.)



Solo:

# A Translation

## UPSTAGE CAUGHT UP WITH WALLACE SHAWN WHO ADAPTED THIS VERSION OF *THE THREEPENNY OPERA*

**Could you talk a little bit about how you begin adapting somebody else's work when you are an artist and a writer yourself?**

Well, it's really a translation initially; obviously for the purposes of production we have made a lot of cuts and shaped it somewhat. But initially it's trying to write what the original writer wrote in your own language. But obviously his writing was quite lively and funny and sort of exciting. So the only way I know how to be lively and funny and even vaguely exciting, is in my own style. I don't just put down the dictionary definition of each word that he used. That's not automatically going to become exciting or funny. As a matter of fact that could make it rather boring, and his original was not boring; his original was electrifying, really. Shocking, amazing, and so you take it as your responsibility to translate the amazingness as well and try to make it actually something that the viewer would find interesting. If your only goal is to learn the language, then you, in a way, would translate each sentence using the dictionary definition of each word without any interest in whether the final sentence in English is an exciting sentence or a boring sentence. And of course, a lot of what is in a play or any work of literature is suggestive, it's meant to suggest something. For example, in German somebody might say, "Well, this isn't worth any more than a big pile of glue," which is a German expression. But that's not an English expression; it doesn't have any interest for us because it just is not an expression that for us means anything. Whereas for them, the phrase "a big pile of glue" has taken on kind of a bigger meaning. So you have to think of interesting ways to make the point that you think the original author was making. And of course, with lyrics that are rhymed as in *The Threepenny Opera* you couldn't possibly come up with exactly the same meaning as the original writer because you have to use the same music, and it has to rhyme.

**So in working on the lyrics of the songs you distilled the meaning of the German for yourself and then brought your own self to the new version, yes?**

I think that's fair enough, yes. I studied the German text and I wrote a version of my own that I hoped Brecht would have enjoyed had he been alive. I would hope that he would say, "Yes, that's what I was trying to say," but it can't really be exactly what he said.

**Could you talk to me a little bit about the themes?**

Well, the true attitudes that Brecht is expressing in the play may be too shocking to be admitted. In other words, what he's really saying is something that no teacher could say to a student. I mean, Brecht was reasonably young when he wrote this. I suppose the question that it still poses, is how should people respond to injustice and to the unjust world that we live in? Brecht eventually became a communist and believed that we should try to build a better world and a better society and try to change the world. But of course he begins by being very angry at the injustice of the world, and the main character in *The Threepenny Opera* basically feels that the world is unjust and so you should take any revenge that you want on the ruling class, or the rich. Brecht eventually thought, well that's not the right way to make a better world, just arbitrarily hurting anybody who happens to come across your path; we can actually have change in society so society would not be so unjust and there wouldn't be the rich and the poor, but there would be an equal and just world. So that's why he became a communist. In other words, crime is one way to rebel against an unjust world, but a better way is to actually change the world. Political action is better than crime. I think that there is absolutely no question that Brecht would have been horrified by contemporary America. He would have been horrified by the brutality of the American invasion of Iraq. He would have been horrified by the abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo. He would have been horrified by Abu Ghraib. So obviously some of that anger has to come into the piece, and, of course what he's showing in the piece is that in a corrupt and unjust society everyone becomes corrupted, everyone. So you have even the poor behaving in a corrupt way.

**I don't know that anybody is really a nice person in the play.**

I think Brecht and certainly most communists would believe that in a decent society there can be decent people, but it's hard to be decent in an unjust society because people are stepping on you. So if you want to survive you may have to step on the next guy. Of course we all can use this as an excuse to be horrible to one another, which I personally don't approve of.

**In your mind, do you have a sense of what you would like the audience to be thinking about when they leave?**




I suppose I would say that the play basically is asking people to have some understanding for these people who have been driven by poverty to take revenge and commit crimes. I think the appropriate response is to walk out thinking the world should be changed.

**It sounds like he wants people to have some compassion.**

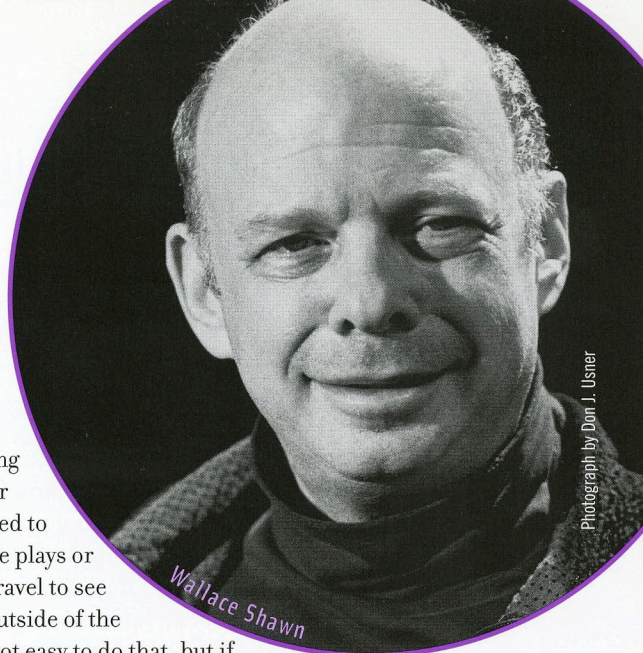
I think ultimately he would want a more compassionate society. And it does end with a plea for sympathy for those who have been driven to be criminals and to rebel violently against society.

**If a young person says, I want to be a writer, what would you say to them?**

I had so much good luck and so much help, it's hard for me to be the one to give advice. I think it's not easy to do, but I suppose that my true answer would be that I would try to figure out how I could travel. I suppose I think the

most important thing that you could do for yourself if you wanted to write fiction or write plays or films, would be to travel to see parts of the world outside of the United States. It's not easy to do that, but if you can figure out how to do that, you'll learn a great deal. In other words, we live in a kind of fantasy world. I think it would be valuable to travel to Europe, to England to see what that's like. But I think it's even more important to travel to poor countries. 

Wallace Shawn's Playwriting Credits include: *Marie and Bruce*, *The Fever* and *The Music Teacher*. As an actor he has been featured in: *The Incredibles*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Clueless*, and *The Princess Bride*.



Photograph by Don J. Usner

## BERTOLT BRECHT

Bertolt Brecht was born in Augsburg, Germany in 1898. Brecht, who was foremost a poet, began his career by studying medicine. In 1918, Brecht wrote his first play entitled *Baal*, but he found success as a playwright with *Trommeln in der Nacht* (Drums in the Night). After World War I, he began to develop a negative attitude in regards to the bourgeois or middleclass, and in 1919 he joined the Independent Social Democratic party. Later, in 1928, he wrote *The Threepenny Opera* with the composer Kurt Weill. During this time Brecht began to explore what he called "Epic Theatre," in which his goal was to provoke and shock the audience. During the 1930's Brecht's work and citizenship were banned in Germany. In 1933, he fled to Denmark and later moved to the United States where he wrote some of his most well renowned plays including *Mother Courage*, *The Life of Galileo* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. When Brecht's radical opinions brought him under the suspicion of the House Un-American Activities Committee, he returned to Germany. In 1949, he staged *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* at the Deutsches Theater where he began his own theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble. In 1955, Brecht received a Stalin Peace Prize, and a year later he died of a heart attack in Berlin.

Brecht believed that if the audience became too enraptured with a play their emotions would cloud their true reactions. He contended that the audience should not identify with the characters onstage, but rather view their actions and stories with a critical objectivity. Brecht's "Epic Theatre" was meant to alienate the audience and cause the observer to remember that they are sitting in a theatre watching a play. This device was actually called "alienation" and was an integral part of Brecht's approach to theatre.

## WITH YOUR VOICE

In his interview Wallace Shawn talks about how the outside world can influence a play.

While you are watching the show, think about:

- How the playwright is using satire to explore the conflicts between the classes.
- When the status or power shifts from one group to another? Why?
- If the actions of the characters are 'unjust' based upon your definition of the word.



Solo:

# The Choreographer

**DURING REHEARSALS UPSTAGE CAUGHT UP WITH CHOREOGRAPHER, ASZURE BARTON.**

**What attracted you to this piece?**

It's *The Threepenny Opera*!

I am so lucky to have met Scott! I am an artist in residence at the Baryshnikov Arts Center and I was creating a piece in June of last year and *Hurly Burly* was playing in the Theatre downstairs.

I invited the cast of *Hurly Burly* to a showing of my choreography. Scott said he immediately felt connected to my work (he said he fell in love!) and asked me if I would like to be involved in his production. I have always wanted to work in theatre... I am so thrilled to be working on this amazing production! And with these fantastic people!

**Can you talk to me about your background; did you start as a dancer?**

I started taking dance classes when I was four. I took everything from ballet to tap to jazz to modern to highland to synchronized swimming to musical theatre. And I've always loved making crazy little dances, that's what I did in my spare time growing up with my sisters! I am very bossy. When I was fourteen I moved away from home to attend the National Ballet School in Toronto. And, at fifteen, I helped start the Stephen Godfrey Choreographic workshop at the National. I have always wanted to create new work.

**Can you talk about your process?**

I am very interested in unleashing the quirks and idiosyncrasies in people. I love observing peoples differences. I am interested in human nature. I like real emotion. I love making people smile or experience something when making the work and performing it. I hope to challenge the dancers, myself too. My work is not merely about the form, about the steps... it's about trust, trusting your body, feeling open, allowing yourself to feel strange and odd, and to take risks. Also, about feeling sensual, and sensitive. I hope to physicalize the actors' emotions.

**So you could actually work with non-dancers?**

Of course... although, everyone is a dancer!

**Can we talk a little bit about how you are making the movement, or the dance in *The Threepenny Opera* happen?**

I have been working very closely with Scott. He is very clear, open, trusting and collaborative. When I found out I would be choreographing *Threepenny*, I read Wallace's amazing script numerous times. And, of course, I listened to the music A LOT. I am very affected and motivated by music. I love Kurt Weill. And, I've been working closely with all of the actors to develop a new vocabulary...they have all shared a lot with me! They really are amazing.

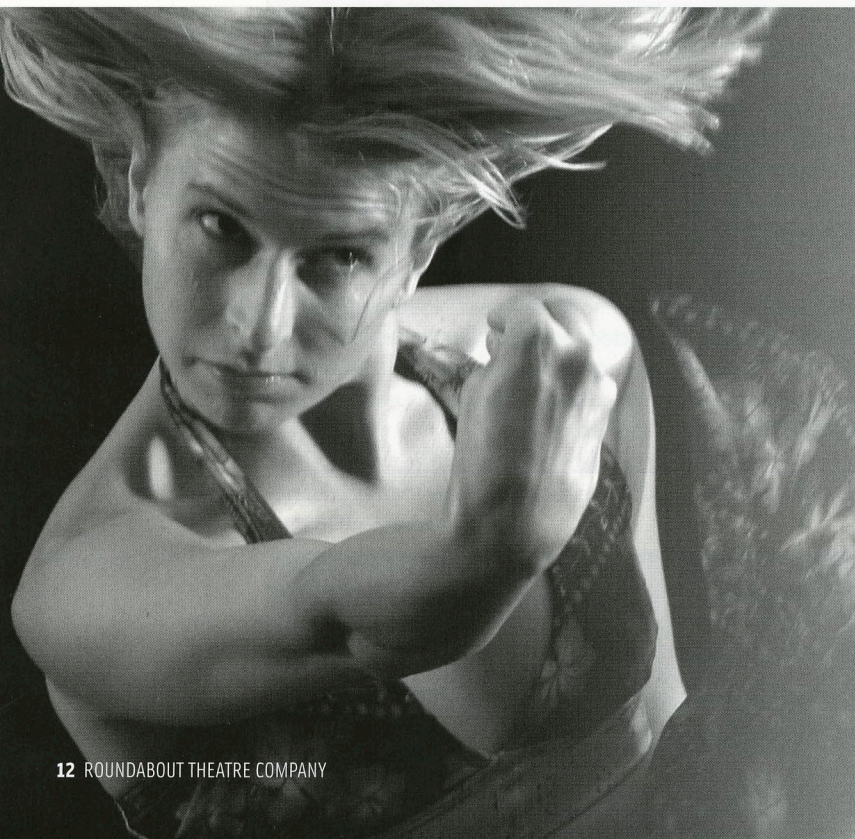
**Do you have a signature approach?**

To experience pleasure and to not take one's self too seriously!!!

**What would you say to somebody who says I want to be a choreographer, what advice would you give them?**

Go for it! Go crazy! Do what you love to do. Be true to it. Bust your ass for what you love. Generate it...you can always edit later...just get it out and learn from it. I am so lucky to be doing what I want to be doing. I have met so many incredible people.

I moved to New York from Canada not knowing to many people here. I took on numerous jobs (dance and non-dance), and tried to figure out what the heck I wanted to do. I danced with several companies and presented my own work in countless venues throughout the City when I could. That was/is the whole point for me, making choreography, challenging myself and hopefully always learning from it, always. New York is the best place to be. It can be overwhelming, but, there is endless opportunity here. And tons of nutty people to be inspired by!





## AFTER THE SHOW

- Think about the issues and reasons for conflicts in *The Threepenny Opera*.
- How are these issues present in contemporary society?
- What are some of the other concerns you have as an individual about what is 'unjust' in contemporary society?
- Write a short scene, song lyrics or create a visual image using satire that expresses your point of view about one of the concerns identified above.

### SEND YOUR WORK TO ROUNABOUT, AND WE'LL SHARE IT WITH THE ARTISTS WHO CREATED *THE THREEPENNY OPERA*.

Mail to: Education Department  
 Roundabout Theatre Company  
 231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200  
 New York, NY 10018

Or e-mail to: [education@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:education@roundabouttheatre.org)

## TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE WORLD OF THIS PLAY, CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

Brecht, Bertolt. [Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic](#). Hill and Wang; Reissue edition, January 1, 1964.

Brecht, Bertolt. [The Threepenny Opera](#). Arcade Publishing, August 1, 1994.

Gay, John. [The Beggar's Opera](#). Penguin Classics; Rep edition, January 6, 1987.

#### **John Gay and the Beggar's Opera (Links, History and Music Files):**

<http://www.contemplator.com/history/johngay.html>

#### **Saturday Night Live Weekend Update:**

<http://www.saturday-night-live.com/snl/weekendupdate.html>

#### **The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (Modern Politic Satire):**

[http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the\\_daily\\_show/index.jhtml](http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_daily_show/index.jhtml)

#### **The PBS History of Political Theatre:**

<http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/politicaltheater.html>

#### **The Threepenny Opera:**

<http://www.threepennyopera.org>



# When you get to the theatre...

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

## TICKET POLICY

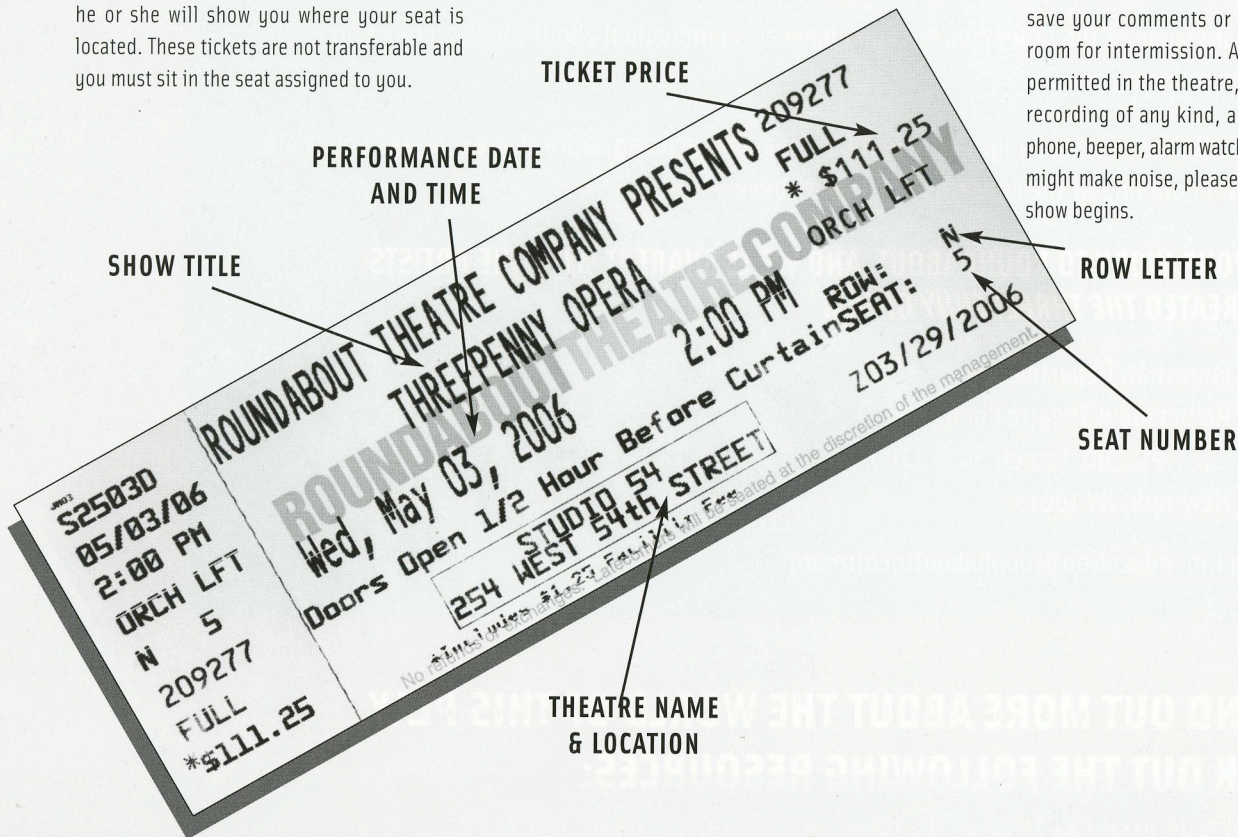
As a student participant in *Producing Partners*, *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket 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.



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