

The New York Times

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Tuesday, January 6, 2015

THEATRE

An Ambitious Plan to Boost American Playwrights

Second Stage Hopes \$58 Million Will Help It Find a Place on Broadway

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Brother, or sister, can you spare \$58 million?

If you're a theater lover with a little change leftover from the ever more expensively festive holiday season, you might consider tossing a few coins in the direction of Second Stage Theater, which is amassing a big pile — that \$58 million, to be precise — to embark on its ambitious plan to join the small ranks of nonprofit theaters with a Broadway berth.

This would be money well spent. Broadway has become a rather straitened marketplace, artistically speaking. Money for new musicals based on popular movies or pop songbooks will always be available, as commercial producers search for the next show with legs as long as “Mamma Mia!” Similarly, producers will always line up to import the latest prestige hit from London, or a revival with an A-list star.

What is in danger of disappearing from Broadway, sadly, is the serious new American play without starry names, or even the unserious new American play.

This season there have been but two new American plays: Ayad Akhtar's “Disgraced” (which just announced a March 1 closing) and Donald Margulies's “The Country House.” The spring season promises three more: Larry David's “Fish in the Dark,” Robert Askins's “Hand to God” and Lisa D'Amour's “Airline Highway.”

Meanwhile the season will see an equal number of new British plays, with “Constellations,” “The Audience” and “Wolf Hall” (two parts of it) joining the fall's “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” and “The River.”

This is not a fresh problem, unfortunately, and not one that the arrival on Broadway of Second Stage, an Off Broadway house with a strong recent record of producing new work, can single-handedly solve. But with just 40 theaters on Broadway, and a good chunk of them taken up with long-running shows, the odds keep narrowing for the emergence — and more important, the nurturing — of American playwrights.

Why is it important that a play be produced on Broadway rather than off? Aesthetically speaking it isn't, of course. A fine play is no better for being seen in a theater seating more than 500, at a cost of more than \$100. But in part because of those numbers, Broadway brings financial rewards to the artists working there that Off Broadway cannot match. Also significant is the publicity that attends a Broadway show: Because there are roughly only 30 to 35 presented in a season, each becomes an event attracting more media attention, potentially much larger audiences and the possible glory (and career and publicity boost) of a Tony Award or two.

While most of the truly stimulating new writing continues to be presented Off Broadway at nonprofit theaters like Second Stage (“Disgraced” and “Hand to God,” incidentally, were first seen in New York at such spaces), these theaters are hamstrung by their subscriber-based system into short runs. Even if a play wins acclaim and sells out, it can usually extend for only a week or two, and with luck move on to regional productions.

In New York, however, there is nowhere to go but up to Broadway. The Off Broadway commercial transfer has become an event as rare as a total solar eclipse. Plays like Lynn Nottage's “Ruined” and Annie Baker's “The Flick” (both Pulitzer Prize winners) and Gina Gionfriddo's “Becky Shaw” and Ms. D'Amour's “Detroit” (both finalists) all deserved healthier New York runs than they achieved, squeezed as they were into subscription seasons at nonprofit theaters.

Second Stage's plan to buy and program the Helen Hayes Theater on Broadway is significant for another reason, too. The company's longtime artistic director is Carole Rothman, and as in many other industries, women in positions of power remain dispiritingly rare in the theater.

In her engaging memoir, “Beautiful Chaos,” to be published in March by City Lights Books, Carey Perloff, the artistic director of the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, notes a grim statistic from a 2012 study by the League of Regional Theaters: The percentage of women running such theaters had not increased in 25 years.

I'm not fond of bringing matters of gender to bear on discussions of artistic merit — or professional merit — but that remains a striking statistic. And, sad to say, New York is not the exception that proves the rule. Among the city's top tier of nonprofit theaters, only two, Second Stage and Manhattan Theater Club, are run by women.

Manhattan Theater Club, under the direction of Lynne Meadow, paved the way for Second Stage's move some years ago, with its renovation of what is now the Samuel J. Friedman Theater, giving the company its own Broadway space. So far, Manhattan Theater Club has used its Broadway house to produce new plays more aggressively than the other two nonprofits with Broadway houses, Lincoln Center Theater and the Roundabout Theater Company. The Roundabout's primary Broadway houses, Studio 54 and the American Airlines Theater, are almost always filled with revivals. Lincoln Center has done more new work on Broadway, with recent plays like Jon Robin Baitz's “Other Desert Cities,” Douglas Carter Beane's “The Nance” and James Lapine's “Act One.” But those are all well-established writers — well-established male writers.

Second Stage has an impressive track record of presenting work by less established artists, and new plays by women.

The company has presented Quiara Alegria Hudes's Pulitzer Prize-winning “Water by the Spoonful” and “The Happiest Song Plays Last,” Laura Eason's “Sex with Strangers” and Ms. Nottage's “By the Way, Meet Vera Stark,” to name a few. Ms. Rothman has underscored that in moving to Broadway she hopes to bring more work by women and minorities to the fore.

Of course there's potentially a small downside to the company's plan to step up and play with the big boys on Broadway. Second Stage's leaders have said they expect a significant portion of the funding needed to come from the sale of naming rights to the theater.

So goodbye to the marquee celebrating Helen Hayes, once known as “the first lady of the American theater.”