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REDISCOVERING THE STRUGGLE OF ROCKY BALBOA: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR

ALEX TIMBERS

+ CHOREOGRAPHERS

KELLY DEVINE + STEVEN HOGGETT

MARK LAMOS

VIBRATIONS OF TRUTH

BETTING ON POTENTIAL

A CONVERSATION ON GENDER PARITY

WHY I CAST *THAT* ACTOR

MARCIA MILGROM DODGE

AND MORE

SDC
STAGE DIRECTORS AND CHOREOGRAPHERS SOCIETY

Mark Lamos

VIBRATIONS OF TRUTH

INTERVIEW BY GERARD RAYMOND

When it comes to stage direction, **Mark Lamos** has done it all. Or nearly so. This "poet of the theater," as the *New York Times* has called him, is a director of plays, musicals, and opera who has led two prominent theatre companies. Now 67, Lamos began his stage career as an actor, first in his native Chicago and then on Broadway and in regional theatre, most notably at the Guthrie in Minneapolis, as well as at San Diego's Old Globe. He spent 17 seasons as Artistic Director of Connecticut's Hartford Stage (1980–1998); there he staged acclaimed productions of many classics, including 14 Shakespeare plays as well as a cycle of Ibsen dramas, including *Peer Gynt*, starring Richard Thomas. During his tenure, the theatre premiered new work by Tony Kushner, Simon Gray, Tom Stoppard, **Richard Foreman**, **Anne Bogart**, and many others. He has been the Artistic Director of the Westport Country Playhouse since 2009.

In addition to working extensively on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and in regional theatres across North America, Lamos has staged operas for more than a dozen companies in the U.S. and Europe, including the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Santa Fe, Los Angeles, and San Francisco Operas, and Glimmerglass. Many of these productions have been televised on PBS's *Great Performances*.

Theatre journalist Gerard Raymond joined Lamos at the SDC offices in late November for a conversation about directing. The following interview is an edited transcript of their chat.

PHOTO Kathleen O'Rourke

ANNE BOGART since 1990 | RICHARD FOREMAN since 1976 | MARK LAMOS since 1986

I want to begin by asking what interests you most about directing as a craft.

It's so slippery to talk about the craft of directing. Acting is an art, but directing is craftsmanship—and it always changes. The way you build the ship is different time and again. Very often you study a text and you think, "I know exactly how this should work." And then you get in the rehearsal room and the energy takes you in a new direction. You have to abandon many of the assumptions you've made. The minute you think, "Oh, I know what this is," or, "I know what this actress is capable of," or, "Let's cast this gentleman because he's going to deliver that a certain way," your expectations are sometimes upended. Often for the better, but sometimes not. But this is the essence of the act of creation. Mistakes. Reversals. Revelations. You have to watch for them and embrace them.

At Hartford Stage you were known especially for staging large-scale productions of the classics.

I had the chance to work at Hartford on its large stage at a moment in time when the board was interested in having a director who wanted to explore classical theatre. There was an audience that wanted Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Molière, which is unusual. It was the 1980s, and foundations supported large-scale work. It was a good synergy, a good connection of a community that was into theatre in that way and a person who could explore it with them.

At the time I became hooked by the Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, and Andrei Serban's work at ART. **Peter Sellars** was just starting to do his stuff. That all was fomenting at the same time that I was doing these enormous, large-scale, highly visual productions of classic plays. I was very much influenced by an incomparable designer with whom I worked for many years, John Conklin. He led me to thinking about the theatre in new ways. Another designer, Michael Yeargan, was also a huge influence. They always surprised me. The dramaturgy began with them.

You once said that you almost always approach a classic play via conversations with the designer, which helps generate how you're thinking about the play. Is that still the case?

To a lesser extent now. I try to keep my mind a blank canvas as long as possible. Sometimes the whole picture of what the production will look like just springs out of the negotiation between your subconscious and the text and you can communicate it to a designer. Sometimes the designer says, "I have this amazing idea, here's a photo," and you think, "My God, that's it!"

Any specific examples?

I did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a few years ago at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. I'd had "Athens, Georgia" in the back of my head, but it wasn't coalescing. The fairies African American, the Athenians white, but it seemed unwieldy and arch to me. At the first design meeting, Constance Hoffman, a longtime collaborator of mine, showed us a book of photographs by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, and that was the production. Everything from there on out had its blueprint in those magically bizarre, very "arranged" photos. At once artificial and real – like Shakespeare.

In those instances, at least, it sounds like your conception of the production coalesced around your conversation with the designers.

It's rare that I can begin auditioning actors before a design deadline, but when I begin to hear the play, I almost always immediately move toward a decision about the look. I might see an actor for a role who seems like an unlikely match, and suddenly realize that something she's doing has unlocked an idea in the text for me. The production can shift dramatically if you offer her that role. I wait for as many influences as possible before I have to lose my freedom and stick with my choices. Joseph Brodsky said, "Every choice is a flight from freedom."

> "Acting is an art, but directing is craftsmanship – and it always changes."

I've just been asked to direct *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which is new to me. Reading the play, my first realization was, "Oh, Shakespeare did this better in *Twelfth Night* and that better in *Much Ado About Nothing*." But the play began to grip me. I thought, "Wait, stop thinking of this as a comedy. Just think of it as people being people, and having needs, sexual and otherwise." And then something opened up to me. I have to remember that Shakespeare was always experimenting. It's an early experiment, yes, but it must be allowed to breathe. It's so fresh. I'm thinking of setting it in the period in which he wrote it. I'll discover more about it than if I set it in, say, the Wild West or Paramus.

That's one of the most important decisions you make about Shakespeare: what era to set the play in.

In the early '80s, I used to feel very strongly that it was important to do Shakespeare in contemporary dress, and to explore the collision of Elizabethan thought and language with the sensibility of the modern mind, with a modern-looking man and woman, a desk and a chair and a telephone.

Now I find that period clothing really feeds me. It's beautiful to look at. It's intriguing for the actors to get into. If they let it work on them, they move through to a new way of thinking about every aspect of their characters. I don't feel it makes the language pretty and distant, and I don't feel audiences think of it that way, either. It's important for me to see Hedda Gabler in a bustle and a corset. How we fabricate ourselves through clothing! That intrigues me no end.

For *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, [Old Globe Artistic Director] **Barry Edelstein** asked what I am thinking about for design. I said, "It seems such an Elizabethan play, with such youthful Elizabethan energy." And he said, "If you set this play in Elizabethan costumes, my audience would go down on its knees and offer you the keys to the city." [*laughs*] So we'll see. It's true that modern dress has become *de rigueur*, and more common feeling that Shakespeare's comedies need conceptual assistance.

That's an interesting change in perspective. How else would you say you have grown as a director over the years?

One of the happiest things about getting older is that you feel more assured, and people look to you for that assurance in the rehearsal process. It's not the energy of a young director who has to work hard to control a lot of different temperaments, to interact with mature actors, and try to make a stamp—all things I felt myself. I feel more collaborative with actors now. It's interesting being older and being able to take a long view in working on a play now. I never was more terrified than I was of *Room Service* [the 1937 farce by John Murray and Allen Boretz], which we programmed in Westport to close last season. And which I'm sure is why I chose to do it.

I thought, "Gosh, should another director do this?" And then it was too late to get another director. I was inching toward it all season long, utterly terrified. Studying it felt as if I was reading Sanskrit. "God, this isn't funny. I don't know what I'm doing." Then, the first day of auditions with the brilliant Tara Rubin, the play bloomed, like a dormant seed into an enormous flower. After seeing five actors, I knew exactly what the play needed from me, and how I needed to cast it. And I raced toward it like a lover. Hearing the actors validate all the

BARRY EDELSTEIN since 1995 | PETER SELLARS since 1997

design work John Arnone and I had already done.

Once we were in the rehearsal hall, it was that maturity of having so many productions behind me that kept me calm in the face of my own doubts, though there were never doubts about the company of absolutely stunning comedic actors. So I opened it up to them, giving them a lot of permission. They brought so much of themselves into the comedy. I became an editor, a collaborator, a delighted audience. It was great fun, so fulfilling.

Farce can invite being dictatorial. Instead, I decided that *together* we would make the production.

Speaking of actors, one of the most interesting collaborations in your career has been with Richard Thomas.

Working with Richard was an unusual situation that occurred very happily three or four times. The *Peer Gynt* was our biggest undertaking together. It was a situation similar, oddly enough, to *Room Service*, where, as we were getting closer to the production, we would call each other up and say, "What are we doing? I don't know what this is about. I don't know what I can bring to it. I'm worried I can't help you." And yet, as soon as we began to work on it, the play began to make its own sense, driven very much by Richard's extraordinary intellectual capacities, his understanding of what is happening in each scene, and by his awareness of the whole play, not just his role. So we relaxed and we *played* until each scene started to *tell us* what it was about, instead of us trying to mold it into something.

You're very good at making sure that the classic texts, even difficult ones, speak to a current audience.

Yes, with these great plays you've got to get actors who understand that if they are not clear, and if they don't know how to speak the language, we're pretty much lost. It sounds Draconian, but there are rules that, if you follow them, will provide clarity. If you don't, they make for muddleheaded speaking. As a musician, I learned that you can't play Chopin by the rules of Bach. You can't play Bach by the rules of Tchaikovsky. If the score is marked *rubato* or *pianissimo*, you've got to try to achieve that.

I work very hard to get everybody on the same page about how to speak the verse and how to listen to it. How to be still. Let the language move instead of your body. Everything that's spoken in Shakespeare is a very simple idea expressed not in flowery language, but in the most economic way possible. Nuggets of thought.

I don't always succeed. I did a production a few years ago in New York where there was huge resistance from three of the actors about how to speak verse. One of them kept saying to me, "People don't talk like this. People can't speak this quickly." They had all these reasons for not following these simple, simple, simple rules. It hurt them in the notices. They were singled out for being incomprehensible. It was awful, but I had to agree.

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Does what you just said about speaking the text apply to modern writers as well?

Absolutely, yes. To **[Edward] Albee** and Kushner and O'Neill and Williams and Beckett. It's not in iambic pentameter, but it's definitely music.

A couple of seasons ago I was directing a revival of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* in Westport, and Terrence McNally said, "You're letting the actors speak too empathetically at times. This is in 'McNally-speak' – it just sort of ambles along."

You once told me that classics really energize you, more so than contemporary plays. Has that changed over time?

One of the reasons I was attracted to the Westport offer had to do with the desire to work on new writing, with living writers. I thought that Westport's proximity to New York would aid and abet that. Also, it's the perfect proscenium house—it couldn't be more different than Hartford Stage. Since I had done so much classical work and even revisited some of those big plays, I no longer felt a burning need to concentrate on doing them so often. Yes, they are utterly energizing, but also exhausting. As I was freelancing, doing both big and little plays and operas, I began to enjoy working more with writers, and understanding the dynamics of having the writer in the room and what needs to be done to serve him or her.

How much of the director's job is to help shape the text of a new play?

It's a very interesting question that we deal with at SDC all the time. I don't want to be too influential. I want to be able to offer my opinions, but that can get the play into trouble if your ideas are so seductive or interesting that the playwright's vision veers off track. If I can help bring the best out of the actors and search for psychological depth, the writer will be validated or inspired. I always have to think of myself as taking second place to the writer and being very careful about "shaping."

I must say that I have never read a draft of a play that has changed perceptively by the time it got in front of an audience. Little things, sure. I noticed in Hartford, where I produced two or three new plays a year, that an absolutely marvelous script when I first read it was still a marvelous script when it landed on the stage. *Marvin's Room* and *Other People's Money* were two cases in point. And a script that needed work when I first read it still needed work on opening night, still needed work when another theatre picked it up or it moved to New York. That's one of the reasons I'm wary of workshops. Things pretty much either work, or they don't.

Let's talk a bit about opera. How much is working on a play similar to staging an opera?

Not much. The more different and separate those disciplines remain, the more successful I am working in them. Visually it's the same, though opera requires concept and I design sometimes years in advance of rehearsals. However, actors and opera singers are different animals who need different things. The size of the energy coming out of an opera singer's body is enormous, even in a small opera house. Actors don't experience that except for moments in *Lear* or *Hamlet*. Now imagine those moments lasting hours. However, if the singer has stage presence as well as musicality, and if he or she can really act, the result is

overwhelming. I sometimes think, when I'm working with singers, this is what the ancient Greeks experienced in the theatre – this size, this passion, this overpowering beauty.

The great thing about opera, and I've said this *ad nauseam*, is that the singers come totally prepared. The first day in the rehearsal room, you can finish an act of a Verdi opera because they're already singing the score, they're *inside* it. Sometimes they have performed the role in the past, which can be uniquely exciting. You can help them build on what they've already achieved. You're working right away toward a much more complete gestalt. Because of their preparation, you can go so deep. Whereas an actor's almost always coming to it fresh, carrying his script around as long as possible.

How do you collaborate with the conductor?

You and the conductor have to work in tandem. Sometimes an interesting power struggle goes on, but when the energy is collegial, wonderful things can happen. The conductor will, however, be performing with them in front of an audience. That's the big difference.

It can be very challenging for both the conductor and the stage director, but they have to find a way together, and of course compromise is involved. But I learn a lot from the really fine conductors. Hogwood was great, also Levine, and a number of others. It helps that I was a trained musician. That also helped my recent work at ABT.

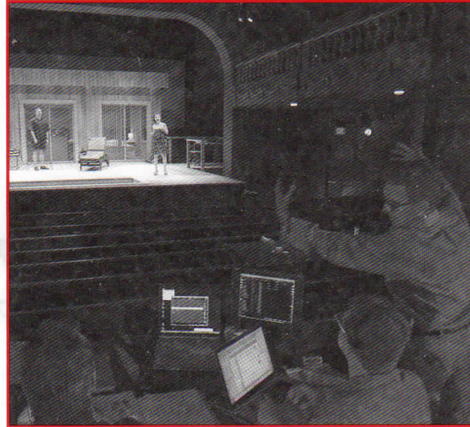
You're referring to the American Ballet Theatre, where you worked on Alexei Ratmansky's ballet of *The Tempest* this past fall, right?

Yes. My contribution was helping tell the story and helping Alexei to clarify what he needed to say through dance. What was a danceable idea and what was not. It was a very collegial experience for everybody. And for me, to be in a room with those extraordinary dancers—that was one of the greatest thrills of my entire life. They had no idea of the plot. They lived completely kinetically. And yet they expressed what needed to be expressed, what Shakespeare had written. I don't know how it happened. But God, I was amazed. I felt like...I don't know what. I could have sat there for 24 hours without eating, I loved it so much. I wanted to go up to [ABT Executive Director] Kevin McKenzie and say, "I can help with *Swan Lake*! I can help with *Sleeping Beauty*! [*laughs*] Like Miranda says, "Let me live here forever! Oh brave new world, that has such people in it."

I've always loved dance. Seeing it as a child really brought me to the theatre in the first place. Another great moment for me was when I was working in Moscow, going to the Bolshoi and being taken backstage during the bows. Oh my God, I was like a child. Dancers are just amazing. Classical ballet is an extraordinary art form. I don't know quite why it's so exciting to me, but I love to watch it.

With all your work in opera and now ballet, is the theatre still where you live the fullest?

Yes, because I was an actor. I have that in my DNA. When I'm in a room with actors I feel we're all pretty much starting from the same primordial ooze. It may be hubristic, but I think I can help them best because I don't have a lot of issues about egos. I can move through a lot of stuff relatively easily and get to the thing that will help them unlock something. If I can't do that, maybe another actor can. I'm an equal opportunity director.



Mark Lamos directing *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* in 2011 at Westport Country Playhouse
PHOTO T. Charles Erickson

> "I don't want to be too influential. I want to be able to offer my opinions, but that can get the play into trouble if your ideas are so seductive or interesting that the playwright's vision veers off track."

To be honest, I'm happy to work on a smaller scale, too. I really love the intimacy of the playhouse in Westport. Some of the most challenging staging I've ever had to do is with four-character scenes in the plays of A.R. Gurney, where the substance of the play is so delicate that if you delve too deeply, you destroy what the playwright's trying to do. There's very little conflict in a Gurney play. The characters live in another plane entirely, and you have to be able to keep that alive and afloat moment to moment to moment for an audience to stay invested in them. In a way it's far more challenging than something from Shakespeare, like, say, "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania." You know right where you are if you get those lines right. You have conflict. You have sex. You have issues.

At the 50th birthday celebration of Hartford Stage, you mentioned that directing is like sending "a letter to the world" that you write with the actors and your collaborators. Could you elaborate?

There are two things that I love most about directing. One is sending that letter, something that you can communicate through a text with a group of actors, designers, and others that expresses your singular vision to a greater or lesser extent, an essence of the play that you want to unlock for the audience. This changes from piece to piece. With Shakespeare or a great classic, I want the audience to go out differently than they came in. I want them to feel the vibrations of truth from the past resonating in their bodies. If I'm doing a play by A. R. Gurney, a certain feeling has to accrue throughout the evening, a very delicate cobweb of meaning and cultural back-history. With a play like *Room Service*, it's about believing that there are really some insane people who are doing a certain kind of insane thing in front of you and that they're human beings just like you. They're just bigger than you could ever be. More dangerous.

What's the second thing you love about directing?

The actual making of the production—working with the actors, collaborating with designers, being in the room where the piece is being made. I love watching actors when they first have the lines under their belts and can get through a scene without needing to stop, or when somebody gets a great idea and just lets it happen. I am excited by the chemistry, the continuous negotiations, first between you and the text, then between you and the actors, then all of you together with the audience. The more I do it, the more I feel endorphins kicking in.