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Scott Elliott: Director in Demand

By
Gerard Raymond

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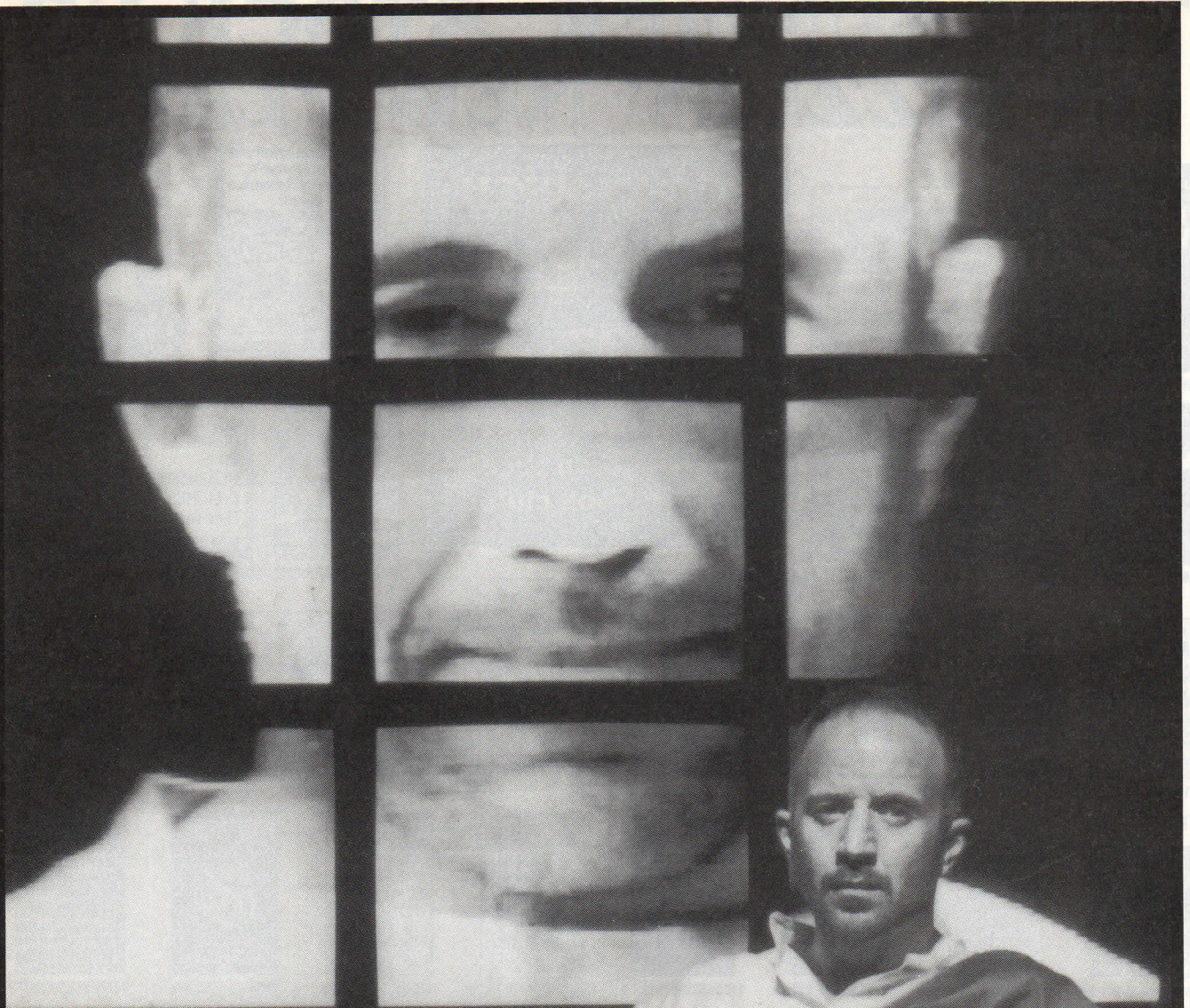
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INSIDE





Director in Demand: Scott Elliott

by Gerard Raymond

I'm doing an article on him too; he's the flavor of the month," said a colleague when I told her I was going to interview director Scott Elliott. Then simultaneously, we both remarked, "But isn't it great when a flavor of the

month is someone who is really good!"

Indeed, judging from two much acclaimed productions, the 33-year-old director of the current off-Broadway success *Curtains* is clearly more than a passing fad. Already one of the most

sought after young talents in the business, Elliott is building up a remarkable career in the theater, and will soon move into film as well. And he's setting about it with admirable good sense and timing.

Up until last year, Elliott was virtually unknown. His status changed overnight with his production of Mike Leigh's *Ecstasy*, which he directed off-Broadway for The New Group, the acting company he founded five years ago. As he likes to describe it: "I went to bed after the opening night of *Ecstasy* and when I woke up I literally had a different life." He adds with genuine modesty, "I never dreamed that I would be seeing my name in newspapers and have people really like my work."

In fact, if Elliott did entertain grand dreams, he might have expected the spotlight to fall on him for achievements in film, not the theater. At age 25, he was pursuing a career as a musical theater actor not, incidentally, unlike former actor Scott Ellis (director of the recent *Company*), with whose name Elliott's sometimes gets confused. After a lucrative stint in the chorus of *Les Misérables*, Elliott quit the acting business and put himself through film school at New York University. "I really enjoyed working on the show and saved a fortune of money, but you can revolve on that turntable only so many times." Once he finished film school, however, he realized he didn't want to make "the kind of movies young people make." So instead of rushing headlong into the jaws of Hollywood or making one of those flashy debuts at Sundance, Elliott put all his savings into starting his own theater company, The New Group.

If there is a manifesto for his company, Elliott says it's simply "I want to evolve. I hope that the Group, whatever commercial career I might have outside of it, will always continue to be a place that doesn't have limitations." Keeping a low profile in the early years, Elliott began directing for the first time at the company, developing new work (particularly the plays of New Group member Diane Bank) and staging revivals.

Then came the Mike Leigh play, a bleak, yet poignantly funny portrait of four working-class friends living in shabby conditions in Northwest London. The production received a Village Voice OBIE Award in 1995 for its "subtle direction, skillful design, extraordinary acting" which "all came seamlessly together."

After this year's highly acclaimed production of *The Monogomist*, Elliott directed *Curtains*, a black comedy by



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Stephen Bill about a family in Birmingham, England, coping with its wheelchair-ridden 86 year-old mother. The New Group has just received another OBIE award for its current offering, along with yet another slew of critical raves.

Since *Curtains*, Elliott has directed a revised version of Jon Robin Baitz's *End of the Day* at Williamstown, and he also directs F. Murray Abraham there in the American premiere of Arthur Miller's *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*. Early next year he makes his Broadway debut with a production of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* for the Roundabout Theater Company, and he will direct *Baby Anger*, a new play by Peter Hedges, at Playwrights Horizons. And now he says he's ready for the movies.

At the John Houseman theater, where *Curtains* is currently running, Elliott talked about his work.

TheaterWeek: The New Group has established its name with two British plays—*Ecstasy* and *Curtains*—both somewhat bleak, but also funny. What drew you to these plays?

Scott Elliott: You know the thing that I like about these two plays? They're not plot-driven. They're about people. I'm so into how people behave and what's really under the words as a subtext; about how people can say things in different ways to mean different things.

I've been a great fan of Mike Leigh's films, and I didn't even know that he was a playwright. I was talking to his agent about another of her clients when

tion up more to the press; it seemed like the right time for us.

Do you know how *Curtains* came to me? [The English actress] Sheila Kelly, who played the lead in *Ecstasy* in London, is married to Stephen Bill, the man who wrote *Curtains*. They came to a preview of *Ecstasy* in New York and the next thing I knew they sent me *Curtains*. I didn't even read it for awhile because I thought, "Oh, it's just a friend's play." When I read it, I felt we had have to give it a shot. It seemed like karma. It's a really important play.

How does someone like you, who grew up in Long Island, seem so completely at home in the obviously foreign worlds of both *Ecstasy* and *Curtains*?

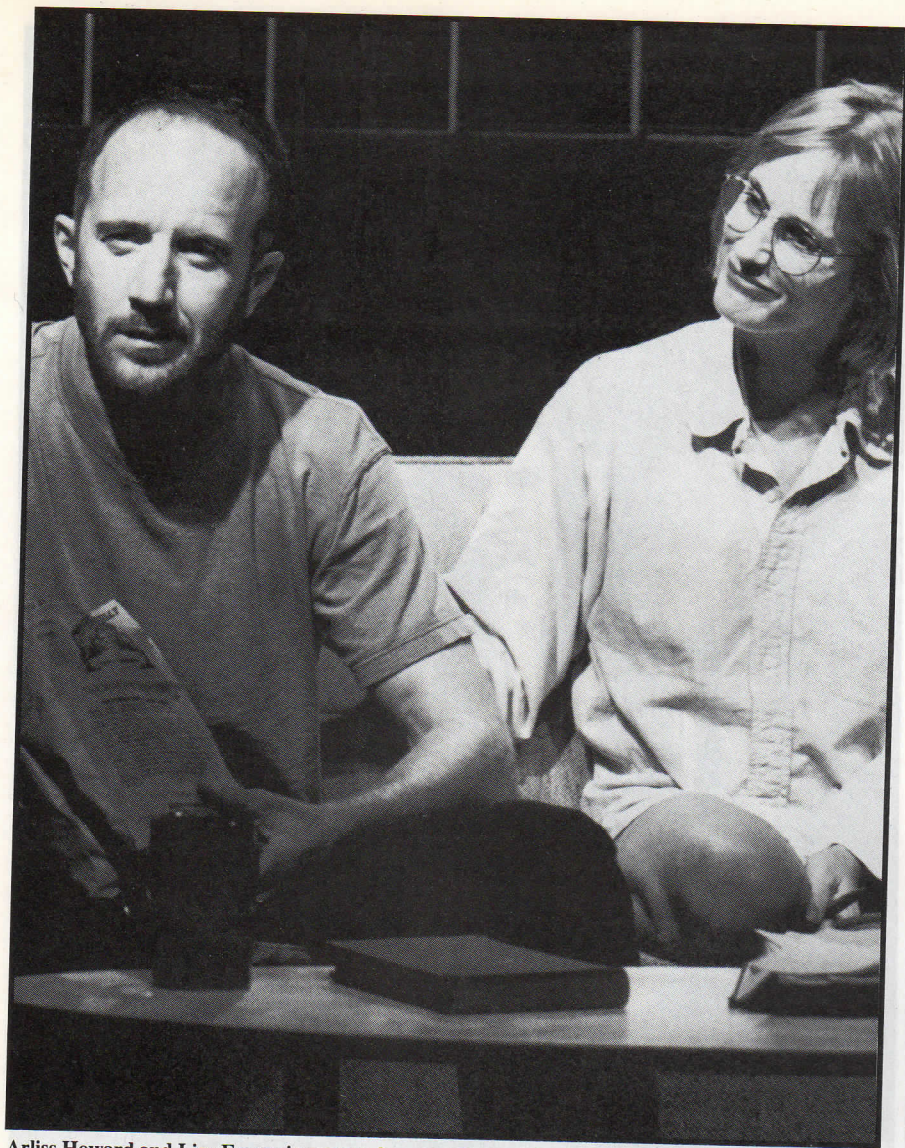
I do a lot of research. But I think that people are people, and they behave the same way wherever they are. The dynamics of people doesn't change. The only thing that changes is the veneer. Every American who has seen *Curtains* says, "Oh, it's my family." It translates.

Ecstasy was about the lower-class, *Curtains* is about the middle-class. It's subtle. There was a *joie de vivre* in *Ecstasy* that this play doesn't have. In most of the people in *Ecstasy*, even the violent characters, there's a sense of biting into and living their lives. The people in *Curtains* have a



Scott Elliott

she told me about *Ecstasy*; it's Mike's favorite play. Mike and I talked on the phone and we hit it off right away. It was like a collaboration; the play is very spare on the page—Mike doesn't write stage directions. Because of his high profile we decided to open this produc-



Arliss Howard and Lisa Emery in a scene from the Playwrights Horizons production of Christopher Kyle's *The Monogamist*. Photo Joan Marcus.

vener. The wonderful thing about working on this play was helping to coax the actors to understand how to cover [their behavior] and still transmit what was going on.

You weren't daunted by the subject matter of the plays—the drab lives of the people in *Ecstasy* and the mercy killing of the old lady in *Curtains*...

...I'm kind of fearless that way.

Was it draining to work on these plays?

Ecstasy dealt with a universal theme—loneliness. I mean life is really bleak—who hasn't experienced that? *Curtains* is not about euthanasia, it's about family dynamics and responsibilities. The competition between the sisters, the positioning of who's where and why. [It's also about] how to deal with an aging parent—it puts a stress on the family and the relationships. One of my favorite

moments in *Curtains* actually is after the mother is dead. They've all argued with each other and after going through all that, they're all able to sit in the same room together because they're a family. That to me is what *Curtains* is about.

A common factor in both productions is the exceptional ensemble work. How do you meld your actors together?

I encourage a sense of community, honesty, and openness. I talk about me so that they'll talk about them. I try not to set up a stressful environment to work. I think it's very important that actors express themselves. I know from when I was an actor, there were some working environments that I felt stifled in, [where I felt] a little bit too controlled by a director and unable to relax. I play. I really think it is important to have fun when you are working on something, even if it's



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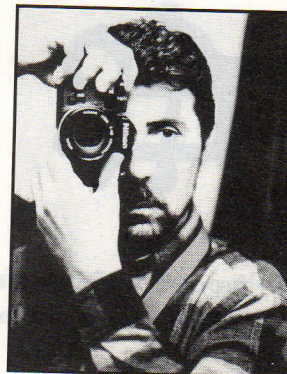
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Caroline Seymour as Jean in a scene from The New Group's production of Mike Leigh's *Ecstasy*
Photo Ron Reeves.

bleak. (Am I talking to too much? Tell me to shut up if I'm talking too much.)

I try to encourage actors to explore their own ideas, even if I think they are wrong, because to me that's what gets the best results. They're smart people, actors, like you and I are smart, and if they try an idea of their own that stinks, they know it. I push people to their limits. I make them do weird things, and be bold, sexy, and loud. I encourage them to trust in the fact that they should go there and act like a schmuck in front of everybody, and by doing that it frees inhibitions. I work a lot improvisatorily. I come in and go with the

flow of the day. I don't pre-block my shows, I paint as I go along.

Casting a play, that's half the battle. I think it's one of the things that I do well. You know if it was a different cast it might have been a very different play. Everybody's instrument is really different and I work really hard to get know what my actors' instruments are like.

When I audition I read people, but I don't always base casting on the reading because some people don't audition well. I talk to them and I can get a sense of whether or not they are right for the piece. There are some actors who are very

bright, but they come in and I don't feel chemically connected to them for some reason, even if they are brilliant.

You also get many laughs in your production, particularly in scenes one might not consider comic. In fact, most of the laughs are not on lines but actions.

Behavior! The laughs that *Curtains* gets are because of the behavior of the people. I never direct a play for laughs. People fake laughter at laugh lines, but they laugh at what people do to each other. They laugh when Margaret [the elder sister] is describing to her middle sister and her mother how she used topping on the trifle—that's one of my favorite moments. It's a very complicated moment because it's about pauses and silences and letting things happen.

I work a lot with actors on the history of the characters. I feel they have to understand the histories so that they have something to think about, to draw on. Because when you're doing a play eight times a week, it's not easy. When they look at another actor on the stage, they know specifically what the history with that person is and their feeling about that person. That's what makes the play funny, at least for me. I think the reason why there is scattered laughter all the way through is because no matter who you look at or who you happen to track in this play—there are eight people on stage the whole time—the characters are always involved.

This is why we are all looking forward to your Broadway production of *The Three Sisters*. Despite the pathos of the lives in the play, Chekhov himself described his play as a comedy. And isn't *Curtains* also a play which deals with the dynamics of three sisters?

That's what I keep saying to myself—that it's great training! I'm so excited about doing the play, I can't even talk about it yet.

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