

WILL THE CRITICS KILL *KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN*?

TheaterWeek

June 11, 1990

\$2.00/\$3.00 Outside NYC

The World According to Jerry Zaks



Behind the Scenes at *Six Degrees of Separation*

Jerry Zaks Directs John Guare's New Play

by Gerard Raymond



James McDaniel and Stockard Channing in *Six Degrees of Separation*.

Brigitte Lacombe

There are very few directors in this country whose name on a project, alone, can raise a theatergoer's expectations. Jerry Zaks is one of them. Particularly skillful in releasing the unique energies of the plays he directs, Zaks has enjoyed fruitful partnerships with playwrights like Christopher Durang (*Sister Mary Ignatius Explains it All for You*, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*) and the late Larry Shue (*The Foreigner*, *Wenceslas Square*). His productions are further marked by pace, style, wit, and superb ensemble acting.

Since 1986, Zaks has worked mostly at the Lincoln Center Theater where he is resident director. He directed a revival of John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* which won him a Tony and essentially launched the first season under the current regime at Lincoln Center. Zaks followed that auspicious beginning with highly acclaimed productions of *The Front Page* and *Anything Goes*. The 43-year-old director's latest project at Lincoln Center is Guare's new play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, opening June 14 at the Mitzi Newhouse.

Zaks gave *TheaterWeek* an unusual opportunity to discuss his production while it was in rehearsal during two interviews in his small office at Lincoln Center.

Tuesday, April 24, 5:30 p.m.

Today the cast got "on their feet" for the first time. Prior to this, they had been reading the script around a table. There was a week's hiatus in the rehearsals caused by Blythe Danner's resignation from the company. Stockard Channing has just replaced her.

Zaks is eating pistachios which are stored in his pocket. He punctuates his words with expressive hand gestures. Occasionally he will excitedly bang his desk or jump out of his chair to underscore a point.

Gerard Raymond: *What is it like at this stage of the production?*

Jerry Zaks: I don't think I have ever talked to anybody about a project at this point in the process. It is interesting as a life experience, but it is absolutely inappropriate! I am distracted, and I feel like a total novice, but it is a great feeling. One forgets that there is an inevitable process, and that you can't rush,

ever. We are very far away from the physicalization of the text. It began to have a life of its own when we were around the table, and now it's just this strange unknown thing.

And it is not because my preparation has been any different. Although, I think in the past, with plays like *The Foreigner* and even *The House of Blue Leaves*, I would block out scenes in pretty extensive detail before the first day of rehearsal on our feet. I had a clear battle plan in my mind, but I would pretend that I hadn't prepared. But with recent projects like *Lend me a Tenor*, *Square One*, and now this one, I don't feel quite as compelled to plot out everything as long as I understand the basic vocabulary of how I am going to tell the story. Somehow I am not as threatened as I once was by letting the actors wander a little bit in an attempt to find the life of the scene.

What was your reaction to the script when you first read it last fall?

Simply, "My God, what a great story!" When the play begins you know that something very extreme has happened to the characters. You

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN
 A MUSICAL CELEBRATION
 BY CAROL HALL
 JUNE 1, 2, 3
 JUNE 8, 9, 10
 ALL CURTAINS 8:00 PM
 ST. PAUL'S CHAPEL
 BROADWAY & FULTON
 FOR TICKETS CALL
 602-0800

THEATER AT TRINITY

OPENING OFF-BROADWAY?
 Advertise your production in
THEATERWEEK.
 Call Mark Stromberg at
 212-627-2120.

"NEW YORK'S LONGEST RUNNING COMEDY!"

"HILARIOUS DEMOLITION BY LAUGHTER!"
 - NY TIMES

"GIDDY, OUTRAGEOUS, FUN!"
 - NY POST

"DELIGHTFULLY FUNNY!"
 - NY MAGAZINE

Vampire LESBIANS of SODOM

PROVINCETOWN PLAYHOUSE
 133 MACDOUGAL TicketMaster 307-7171
 TICKETS BY PHONE: (212) 477-5048
 TUES-FRI at 8 PM SAT at 7 & 10 PM SUN at 3 & 7 PM

don't know what it is but you know by their behavior that they have had a brush with something that has gotten their pulse going, and that their immediate concern is to share their story with us. John [Guare] is a wonderful story teller. He sets you up by planting things that will pique your curiosity.

I thought the text was funny and serious and not easily pigeon-holeable. I also felt that, for the most part, it was startlingly complete and that always gets me very excited. If anything, it was going to be a matter of shaping and perhaps cutting redundancies and lines that are a bit authorly or self-conscious. (He laughs.) I can just see John going "Oh, really?"

Have you already seen the final version in your head?

Moments of it, absolutely. And the feel of it. But it is an incomplete enough picture that at any point what happens amongst the actors can hopefully improve it.

I started with an image of the entire company and a bare stage. Tony Walton [set designer] was very excited about that notion. He encouraged me to articulate that image more clearly and the idea for presenting the play was born, and it feels bold. So we decided on the vocabulary ahead of time.

It is not a realistic set. We are using an all-purpose playing disk on the thrust stage. The play begins in one specific location—an apartment on the Upper East Side with a view of the park—but then thirty pages in, the story gets blown apart and we go to Central Park, a doctor's office, then back to the apartment and then there are long distance phone calls...and we need a space in which we can do all of this.

The scenes are prefaced by characters telling the audience where we are going so that takes the burden off us having to depict it realistically. It's going to be very simple, very straightforward. The energy of the story will be provided by the actors and the text. The story is told with a very definite rhythm and pulse, and hopefully it will work like this. (He gets up to demonstrate.)

You, as the audience, are sitting in this room and I rush in and say to you "I have this incredible story to tell you but I need some help." Then I call in seventeen people who come and encircle you. They say, "You are not going to believe this story," and ask each other "Who wants to start?" One of them begins, "Well I was going here, and I did this and I did that...but wait a minute, let me act out the scene as it took place." And they act the scene out. Then even in the middle of the scene I will stop and turn to you and say, "And then he said this to me..."

So you, the audience, are in a sense, the object of this story. You are included right from the beginning as opposed to being safely tucked away behind the fourth wall.

Once I felt committed to the way this was going to be presented my eagerness to get to work grew. I have confidence that it is the best way for the actors to execute the rhythm of this story. But in order to get to the point where we really know if the convention works, the story has to be told with urgency. And there is no way now, at this point in rehearsal, that anyone is going to do anything with urgency until we get these little pieces together.

So now I am at this awful, slightly terrifying, stage where we are dealing with the play in such detail that there is no way of knowing how it is going to work! I suppose it will be about two weeks before I have this sense of "yes we are on to something" or "something is not right..."

What do you ask the actors to keep in mind in terms of the style of playing?

The style will evolve when the actors become more audacious and confident about telling the story to the audience and then acting it out for their benefit, commuting between the two without missing a beat.

Specifically, there are many asides in the course of the play. The actors must communicate the facts of these asides so that the story tumbles as the various characters pick up the thread of the story from each other.

“Never ever talk an actor into doing a play, it’s too much work. Unless the enthusiasm comes from within, there will be a crisis.”

When everyone is operating on the same level of urgency all of a sudden you will say, “My God, what wonderful ensemble work!” (He leans forward delighted at the prospect.) *That’s really it.*

All seventeen actors must get to the point where their need to communicate information to you is equally great and you never get the sense that they are concerned with how they are coming off in any way—cosmetically—but that they are totally involved with the story. The ironic and wonderful thing is—and I think the best actors understand this—that when this happens they look great.

I usually talk to the acting company about the things I frown upon—those things which can unwittingly impede the formation of the ensemble spirit. I don’t like actors helping each other. If I am telling someone about something in the scene, I don’t want another actor giving advice to that actor as to how it should be done. I suggest quite strongly that when the actors go off to lunch they don’t discuss the scene that they just acted in because, invariably, someone unconsciously takes the role of director.

What kind of actors did you look for when casting?

Believable ones.

This sounds obvious, but I promise you, if you were to sit in auditions with me, by the first three lines that any actor said you would know whether you believed them or not. Then I deal with type and so called physical rightness for the part.

I have not worked with most of the people in this company before. That involves certain risk-taking. I may know their previous work, certainly, and I may know the way they have worked with other directors if I have researched that, but this is that getting-to-know-you time. You can guess through auditions how much a craftsman a person is but you never really know.

Blythe Danner resigning must have been a drawback similar to the situation with Mandy Patinkin leaving Square One (Steve Teisch play produced at Second Stage) early this year.

You want to look for parallels? The fact is that in both cases we are talking about an actor who resigned before the first day of rehearsal. With Blythe it was a week before rehearsal. Mandy expressed tremendous anxiety at the prospect of doing the play a month before rehearsal. In both instances I contributed—against my gut reaction—towards talking the actors into changing their minds.

If there is something I hope I have learned from this, it is never ever to talk an actor into doing a play. The process of putting a play on is just too much work. Unless the enthusiasm for being there comes from within the actor there *will* be a crisis. There were different circumstances obviously; Blythe had a lot of personal problems that made it impossible for her to focus. With Mandy it was something else—artistic differences, whatever. Next question!

Do you make changes in the script in rehearsal? Do you consult with the author before making these changes?

I ask John to stay away until I can present a stumble-through so that he can really look at it with some objectivity. It is good at that point to hear what he has to say. But we talk as things come up. He’ll listen to anything. And I am frankly getting much better about re-writing a little word or two in rehearsal if a character says something that I feel is self-conscious or unclear or not to a particular effect. Often it is something as obvious as a tense or a misplaced pronoun but sometimes it is a little more substantial like one person getting the last word in an argument rather than the other person. I make sure John’s assistant is

given a very thorough list of every little word change so he has access to them. But if John never notices a change when he comes in and watches the scene, the change will probably stay in. It is not so much that I am tampering with the fabric but smoothing something out.

Thursday May 10, 9:00 a.m.

Due to the one week’s delay in rehearsals, the first public preview has been rescheduled from Wednesday May 16 to Saturday May 19. However, the official opening, Thursday June 14, remains unchanged.

Zaks is an early riser. He says he thinks best at the beginning of the day. We talk over a bagel and coffee. He is scheduled to audition understudies as soon as we are done.

Where are you now?

We were on stage for the first time yesterday and it was wonderful! For one thing, the reality of the set is even more exhilarating than the model promised it would be. The space and the way it is going to serve the play, I feel is going to work. Also, being in the space allowed me to begin to refine some of the staging ideas.

On the last day in the rehearsal room [Tuesday, May 8] we discovered a problem in the first scene that follows the play’s startling prologue. Interestingly enough, two actors and I experienced it as a problem from three different perspectives, which made me quite certain that indeed it was a problem. I brainstormed a bit with the company after the run-through. The moment involved a character getting too comfortable too soon in a particular situation and it just wasn’t credible.

John and I talked about it and he came in yesterday with a re-written page which we actually put on its feet in the course of the technical rehearsal. (He grins happily.) It was just *perfect*, and let me tell you it was thrilling. You see, in telling the story

I must feel that their work has a truthful ring. This makes actors terribly self-conscious, but that's too bad.

of the play we fast-forward many times, but we didn't establish that convention until what had been this opening realistic scene gets played out. Well, now with John's rewritten page, the realistic scene has gotten fragmented with a leap in time. So not only did the re-write deal with the immediate problem of credibility, it also helped make that particular scene consistent with the rest of the play.

Your technical collaborators, Paul Gallo (lights), Tony Walton (set) and William Ivey Long (costumes) have worked with you before on numerous productions. . . .

(He leans back with an expansive gesture.) Oh just being back in techs again with them is bliss! I have worked with Paul on just about everything, even *Tintypes*, which I acted in. This is my fifth or sixth production with Tony, and William Ivey did costumes for *Sister Mary*, *The Marriage of Better and Boo*, *Lend me a Tenor* and *Wenceslas Square*. All of a sudden the team is here, and it feels strong. It actually gets a bit heady.

How far have you progressed in the play?

Yesterday we teched the first 24 pages but considering that we put a new scene in, that feels just perfect. I am not very good at going on to page three when pages one and two don't have some sort of simple recognizable truth to them. As a result, obviously, the end of the play tends to get rehearsed last for me.

Do you have any qualms about not working on the ending at this point?

Oh no, I have a good sense of what the tone of the very end is going to be, and knowing that gives me a bit of security. I know where we are in process. For example, we will tech now, concentrating on getting a good first draft of light and sound cues, and deal with the props. We began yesterday and will go on through Saturday [May 12]. Maybe we will be done by Friday night.

We'll see. We won't have to deal with costumes until Monday, which is wonderful. So we can really concentrate on just the traffic of the show. I can almost present the first two-thirds of the play to an audience now and not feel much differently than at a first preview.

On this kind of a schedule where we can rough-in a good first draft in these three or four days, I go step by step with Paul [Gallo]. I'll stop if there is a light cue I am not happy with. We'll really try to nail down the timings of certain cues so we can make it better later. The evenings next week will be tech run-throughs, but I will get back to the acting of the scenes Monday through Thursday next week.

We will have a full four hour rehearsal every day which the actors are going to need for the lines—to get rid of the last vestiges of reading them from the back of their head. That probably won't happen till the end of the first week of previews. I will continue to rehearse during previews. But a week from Saturday [May 19] we will have a good, hopefully reasonably confident, draft of the show to present to the first paying audience.

And how are the actors doing right now?

The company is intact and in good spirits and everyone is doing good work. It is always one of the nightmares that someone will just not do what you had hoped that they would do. But happily this is not the case.

Are they an ensemble now?

They are beginning to feel a team. I think they will feel more of a team when they get a little bit more secure in what they are each individually doing, and that is on the verge of happening. They understand that this is going to be presented in a special way, but an individual doesn't have to take the burden of that on himself. They must trust themselves and the text.

Has the fact that a number of the cast is new to you and unfamiliar with your working methods made it difficult?

I think the younger people have been used to being let go more—to find their way, so to speak. It is hard for me to sit back sometimes and let them work it out if I don't see that they are taking active steps towards increasing the stakes. I am afraid I get impatient, but that's part of the way I work. I must feel that their work has a truthful ring. This makes actors terribly self-conscious, but that's too bad, you know, because it is something that has to be worked through. The actors I love are craftsmen. They know what tools they have and then they do it. And it has got total credibility.

I gather you are not fond of "The Method"?

Absolutely not. Occasionally you will see a great actor like Brando and you say if this is what happens when you study the so-called Method, well then of course it is the way to go. But I think that is the exception and not the rule. Perhaps an actor needs to look into himself first, and I appreciate that. But I give a short experimentation time-span, because it usually doesn't have anything to do with anybody else on stage. I don't care how an actor prepares. I would just as soon not know, frankly. As long as when the lights come up it has got the ring of truth—if I really believe that what they are saying to someone is said with the need to communicate and not with a need to display their emotions.

I have cast talented young actors. I define talent as: when they speak I believe them. What really gets my goat is when young actors, who have this gift of credibility, muddy that gift by trying two or three things at the same time. Because when what they are doing starts to lose resemblance to reality; it's on its own agenda. And an audience will

accept it, unfortunately. They won't be moved, they won't care, but they'll just accept it and blame something else. But I just can't tolerate it. Unfortunately, it feels good for the actor. I've been there myself. It feels good to get angry. You feel like you are acting and you hear the sound of your voice. But unless you are hurt first the anger is truly a secondary emotion; it is just petulance and you lose sight of what is really going on.

Can you shed any light on the title of the play?

Six Degrees of Separation. It refers to the idea that every person on this planet is separated from any other person by only six other people. The hitch is you've got to find the right six people.

That sounds like one of your favorite themes: E. M. Forster's "only connect..."

In retrospect, I find that the plays that I am most drawn to, regardless of their tone, one way or another, deal with "only connect"—the search for connection and the unlikely places that we find it. I fall in love immediately with the person who finally drops all the reasons not to connect—all those reasons we have against intimacy—and attempts to connect and then is not able to. I can relate to that.

What was the genesis of the play?

I know that John read about a certain incident. He stored it away and all of a sudden a combination of things happened, in his life and in his work, which culminated in this sort of explosion and the play was born. That suggests the energy and the urgency of it. If you read it, you hear voices; it's in the language. And that's the way we have to tell it.

And you want the audience to experience the story the way you did when you first read it?

Yes exactly! (He bangs his desk with excitement.) So you will have that sense of seventeen people rushing in on you and telling you something that you didn't expect to hear. □

Jerry Zaks's next project is directing Stephen Sondheim's Assassins, at Playwrights Horizons.



London Theatre News

*Your ticket to the best of
London theatre*

This lively literate newsletter is an insider's guide to the London theatre scene. Each monthly issue brings you:

- Complete West End theatre listings
- Timely recommendations
- Convenient ticket booking service
- Opening night reviews
- Exclusive interviews
- Dining tips, and more



London Theatre News...

"a must for theatre lovers."

- *Travel & Leisure*

\$49 for 1 year, \$24.95 for 6 months

Please send your check to:

London Theatre News, Suite 620
12 East 86th St., New York, NY 10028
Or Call 1-800-779-0077

OPENING OFF-BROADWAY?

Advertise your production in
THEATERWEEK.
Call Mark Stromberg at
212-627-2120.

TICKET TOWN

Ticket Agency

PO Box 1974, Fort Lee, NJ 07024

**Theater • Concerts
• Sports •**

- *Phantom of the Opera*
- *Les Miserables*

**Ticket Town
(201) 585-0876**

THEATREBOOKS

1600 BROADWAY, room 1009
(between 48th & 49th Streets)
New York, New York 10019

212-757-2834

Monday to Friday
10:30 to 6:00
Saturday 12:00 to 5:00

NEW USED OUT-OF-PRINT
Visa/MC/Amex

Mention this ad and get 20%
off on all acting editions
ordered before 7/31/90
Ask for catalog when ordering.

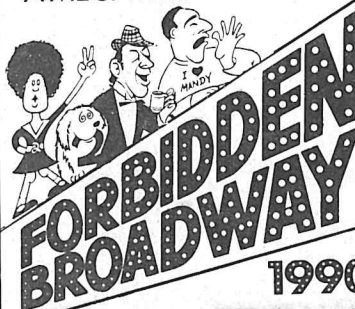
PHOTOGRAPHY

JIM
MOORE

HEAD
SHOTS
FREE
Consultation
1 800 244
0 1 5 2

DON'T MISS OUR
PHONY AWARDS SHOW!
NOW PLAYING

"GLEEFUL MALICE!"
"A MEGA HIT!" —NY Post



1990

THEATRE EAST
211 East 60th Street
Call (212) 838-9090

Tues.-Fri. 8:30,
Sat. 7:30 & 10:30,
Sun. 3:30 & 7:30