

BUSINESS MAN AS ARTIST

Jerry Sterner whose long running New York comedy *Other People's Money* opens in London this month, talks to Gerard Raymond

Jerry Sterner is one happy playwright. And, if Londoners respond to his play *Other People's Money* with even half the enthusiasm that New Yorkers are showing, he will be happier still.

'I think I am the luckiest person I know,' the 51-year-old playwright announces beaming. 'There are so many people who have money but don't have a dream to pursue. Then there are many more people who do have the dream but who don't have the resources to follow that dream. To have both is a blessing. To have this happen on top of it . . .'

Sterner is referring to the fact that *Other People's Money* is still a sell-out in New York, one-and-a-half years after opening off-Broadway. The play won awards for Best Off-Broadway Play 1989 and is soon to be a major movie directed by Norman Jewisson. It opens this month in London at the Lyric with Martin Shaw, Maria Aitken and Paul Rogers, directed by Alan Strachan.

Other People's Money is Sterner's second produced play. His first closed in a single night in 1986 but Sterner wasn't discouraged. He had always wanted to be a playwright. The Broadway production of *Inherit the Wind* with Paul Muni and Ed Begley that he saw 35 years ago inspired him to write for the theatre. As a young man just out of school he worked for the New York City Subway (underground) system. He wrote plays while sitting in a booth selling tokens in the small hours of the morning. Although he wrote seven plays in the intervening six years, none of them was produced.

Sterner says he stopped writing when he met his wife, Jean. After getting married and having two children, he says, 'I knew I had to be a good Jewish boy and go out and get a real job.' Going into real estate he worked steadily in the business world until just four years ago. Instead of writing plays during this period, he wrote leases. 'Have you ever read a New York lease? It is more creative than any play you could write,' he observes.

Being a businessman actually gave Sterner, what he considers is a 'tremendous advantage'. Noting that there are very few good plays or movies

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Jerry Sterner, New York businessman turned playwright whose off-Broadway hit *Other People's Money* opens this month in the West End. Photo: Peter Cunningham

about business, he confidently states, 'I have an insight into the business world that, I would say, all, writers don't have. Writers in general are left wing with a clearly liberal bias. Businessmen are always perceived to be greedy, soulless individuals who would sell their mothers down the river for a quarter — and it's not true. Business is really an exciting creative force.'

Sterner is an avid player on the stock market. A few years ago he made an investment in a small mid-western company whose stock value then dropped considerably shortly afterwards. Then a 'corporate raider' appeared on the scene and offered to buy up the devalued stocks at a greatly enhanced figure. Sterner says he didn't think twice, he promptly sold his stocks, took the money and ran. 'I opened a window and looked up to heaven and said thank you God for making me so smart.'

Several months later, Sterner happened to be passing through that part of the country and decided to look up the company whose shares he had so recently owned. He was quite shocked to find that the company no longer

existed, the plant had been closed and hundreds of jobs were lost. 'What I saw there made me want to write *Other People's Money*. I wondered if I had done the right thing. I thought if I explored the situation by writing about it in a play, I would better understand it myself.' In the play, a raider named Lawrence Garfinkle creates havoc in a small, ailing but stable company when he tries to buy out their stock at a highly inflated price. Sterner feels that the audience can identify with each of the characters in his play, having given all of them their day in court, so to speak. 'You know that everybody is right and that makes for drama.' But Garfinkle, although he is in a sense the villain of the piece, clearly fascinates Sterner. Garfinkle is an outrageous character whose vulgarity and aggressive business instincts are set off against his brutal honesty and infectious sense of humour. 'When the play is over the audience respects him and recognizes that he has a legitimate point of view. They don't think of him as crude villain.'

Ironically enough when Sterner completed the play, he had the biggest

trouble convincing the businessmen in the theatre — the producers — of the viability of *Other People's Money*. 'They said, 'Green Mail, poison pill, restructuring — if audiences want a lesson in economics they'll read the *Wall Street Journal*'. But Sterner says he knew his business friends were going to love the play 'because it was about deals that these guys have made.'

He notes that men love the play. 'My businessmen friends fall asleep at most of the plays on Broadway. But this is about power, about money, it is about getting the girl, it's about stuff they care about.' Judging by the box-office, it appears that people who don't ordinarily go to the theatre are sustaining the long run of *Other People's Money* in New York. Sterner has observed that men who normally have to be dragged to the theatre by their wives, are attending in groups of their own.

Is the enthusiasm for *Other People's Money* because business is seductive? 'Absolutely', Sterner affirms 'It used to be sex. Now sex is dangerous and business is sexy. When Donald Trump walks down the street there is more excitement than any movie-star. In my opinion these the stars of the business world are the folk heroes of the day.'

Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* got the same response in London that *Other People's Money* is currently receiving in New York. Still, when *Serious Money* transferred to Broadway, it flopped instantly. Sterner's play is very different in approach from Churchill's and it remains to be seen how it will fare in the West End. But Sterner is hopeful, noting that 'what happens in the English corporate world is very similar to what happens in America.' He points out also that 'Jimmy Goldsmith is clearly the English equivalent of Garfinkle.' Whatever its fate Sterner considers the British production of his play the highlight of his year.

Sterner still retains some business interests and still loves to play the stock market, but he does not involve himself in business on a daily basis anymore. He regards his career in the financial world as the means to his blossoming career as a playwright. 'Money bought me freedom,' he claims. 'I worked hard and I enjoyed it but I always knew that I would rather be Neil Simon than be Donald Trump. And as it turns out that was probably the right decision. I think, at this point, even Donald Trump would rather be Neil Simon!'

Reference

Other People's Money previews from October 19 at the Lyric, Shaftesbury Avenue (071 437 3686).

FRIEL AT THE NATIONAL

Patrick Mason whose Abbey Theatre production of Brian Friel's new play *Dancing at Lughnasa* comes to the Lyttelton this month, talks to Gerry Colgan

It is for theatre's Grim Reaper to nominate, in his own good time, the outstanding Irish playwrights of the last quarter century or so; but a betting man may safely put a few bob on the inclusion of Brian Friel in the top three. Born in 1929, he first got the attention of his contemporaries with some brilliantly penetrating and evocative short stories, collected under the title of *A Saucer of Larks*. Then, while we were still celebrating the arrival of a significant writer of fiction, he exploded on the 1964 Dublin Theatre Festival with *Philadelphia Here I Come*, and the playwright was amongst us — to stay.

Broadway was an early conquest, and London succumbed just a little later, confirming the judgement of Friel's native observers who believed that his themes and treatments were manna for audiences beyond the insular boundaries that contained many — most — of his dramatist peers. *The Loves of Cass McGuire*, handmade for the late Siobhan McKenna, travelled far and wide; so did *Lovers*, *Aristocrats*, *Faith Healer* and *Translations* with conspicuous success, and other less prominent works with their own appreciative reception. As one might expect from so prolific an author, some of his 14 original plays and several adaptations elicited mixed critical opinions, but none was dismissed as unworthy of the debate.

The strengths of Friel's plays have invariably included an array of credible and colourful characters, dialogue springing from a mastery of the spoken word and superior technical skills in stage-carpentry. His themes have been more controversial, particularly when they veered towards the overtly political, in past or present times — and this seemed in a recent work like *Making History* to have become a set direction. Then, in April of this year, came the Abbey Theatre production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and all wagers were off. Hailed by populace and pundits alike, it was a return to simplicity, to people rather than the grand design.

The work is set in rural Donegal in 1936, and is centred on a family of five unmarried sisters, one of whom has an illegitimate son. He steps out of time to be our narrator, recreating in memory a



Brian Friel whose latest play *Dancing at Lughnasa*, comes to the National this month in the Abbey Theatre production directed by Patrick Mason

past idyll containing seeds of future grief. The sisters have one brother, a priest returned from Africa, where he learned and was disoriented by new and strange truths. And still, in nearby hills of home, ritual from a pagan past survives and touches all their lives. The title's Lughnasa literally means August, in Ireland named for Lugh, pagan god of the crops, whose cult survived up to recent times in harvest festivals.

The simplicity, as had to be the case, proved to be deceptive, the sort that is reached only by a journey to and beyond the boundaries of sophistication. Whatever the individual view of the play, it was apparent to all that it was the work of a master playwright. Nobody less could have wrought such a total revelation of the characters, made them to be known so completely. This sense of their time and place is history of the truest kind; and their lives take up space in our consciousness. In shifting from the experience of the play to a view of its creator, it is easy to believe that he has moved on to a new plateau, with an infinity of open ground ahead.

In seeking a director for this significant play, so critical to its own bid to regain ground lost in recent times, the Abbey Theatre needed to look no further than Patrick Mason, whose work has included some of the most notable and exciting productions Dublin has seen for the last decade or more. Apparently at ease with any form of work destined for the stage, he has given new and sometimes controversial life to a wide range of classics, from Shakespeare to Shaw to opera and, more to this particular point, has been midwife at the birth of many vital new