

# An Interview with Lynne Meadow

The Manhattan Theater Club's artistic director on Ayckbourn, Broadway, and the power-shift to non-profit theaters.

by Gerard Raymond

**T**HEATER WITHOUT WALLS" IS HOW MANHATTAN Theater Club describes itself. This month, MTC productions are indeed everywhere: Richard Greenberg's *The Extra Man* and Elizabeth Swados's *Groundhog* are playing on the two stages of MTC's

home at City Center; Terrence McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* and Donald Margulies's *Sight Unseen* have transferred to commercial theaters off Broadway; and Alan Ayckbourn's *A Small Family Busi-*

*ness* recently opened at the Music Box Theater, the first MTC play to be directly produced for Broadway. Next year, MTC hopes to launch the national tour of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*. Plans are also underway for exchanges between MTC and theaters in London, and, together with

Playwrights Horizons and Lincoln Center Theater, MTC has embarked on a venture designed to commission and develop new musicals.

The brainchild of public relations consultant A.E. Jeffcoat, Manhattan Theater Club was established in 1970 by a group of businessmen who were looking for an alternative to Broadway. Jeffcoat, who had worked in London as a correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, was inspired by London fringe theaters like the Arts Theater Club and the Hampstead Theater Club, hence the name, Manhattan Theater Club. The new theater initially confined its work to informal readings in the homes of its subscribers, then later moved to a building in East 73rd Street. But MTC really took off in 1972 when the board appointed Lynne Meadow, then 25 years old, as artistic director.

After graduating from Bryn Mawr, Meadow had applied to Yale Drama School but was rejected. She didn't accept that defeat lying down. Convinced that she had encountered a prejudice against women as directors, she wrote a strong letter to the school and eventually persuaded

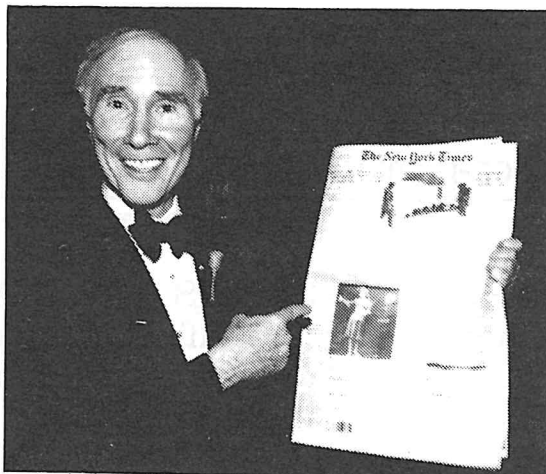
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Steven Speliotis





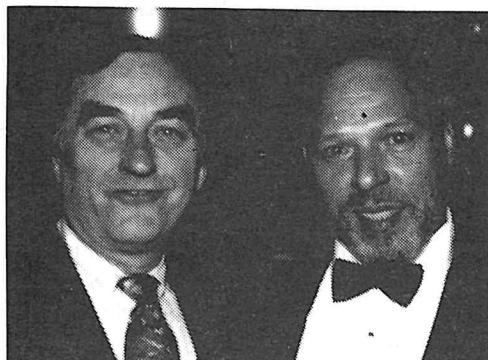
Producer Gladys Nederlander and her husband, Yanks owner Robert, at Tavern on the Green.



Producer Roger Berlind triumphantly displays the Times review at the opening night party for *Guys and Dolls*.



Kitty Carlisle Hart with Eliza Clark at the opening of *Opal*, Broadway's newest orphan.



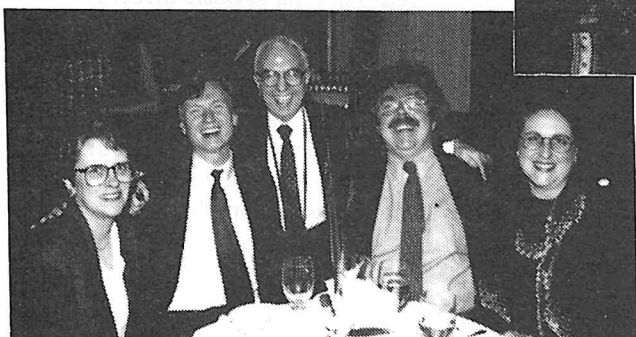
The two Mr. Wilsons, Lanford and August, converging at the party for *Two Trains*.



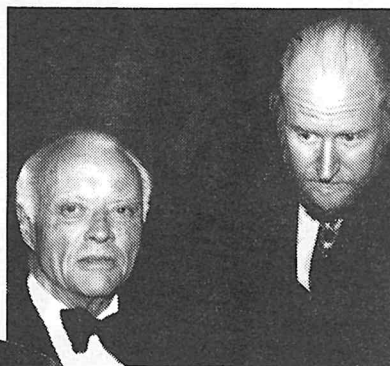
Faith Prince and Nathan Lane



Dina Merrill at the Metro party.

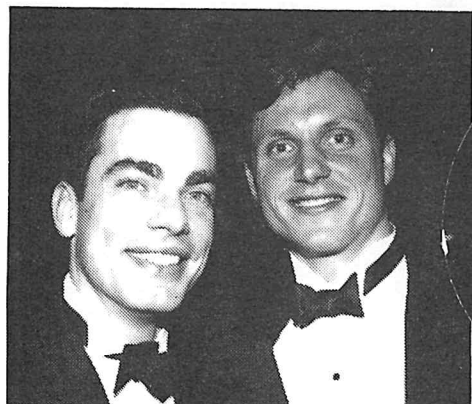


*New York Times* scribes Glenn Collins and Mervyn Rothstein with their wives, Sarah and Ruth, share a smile with photographer Aubrey Ruben.



The Crasher at *Guys and Dolls*, *Metro*, *Two Trains Running*—he goes everywhere.

James H. Binger, Chairman of the Jujamcyn Theaters, and a thoughtful Rocco Landesman, President of the JT, at the opening night party for *Two Trains*.



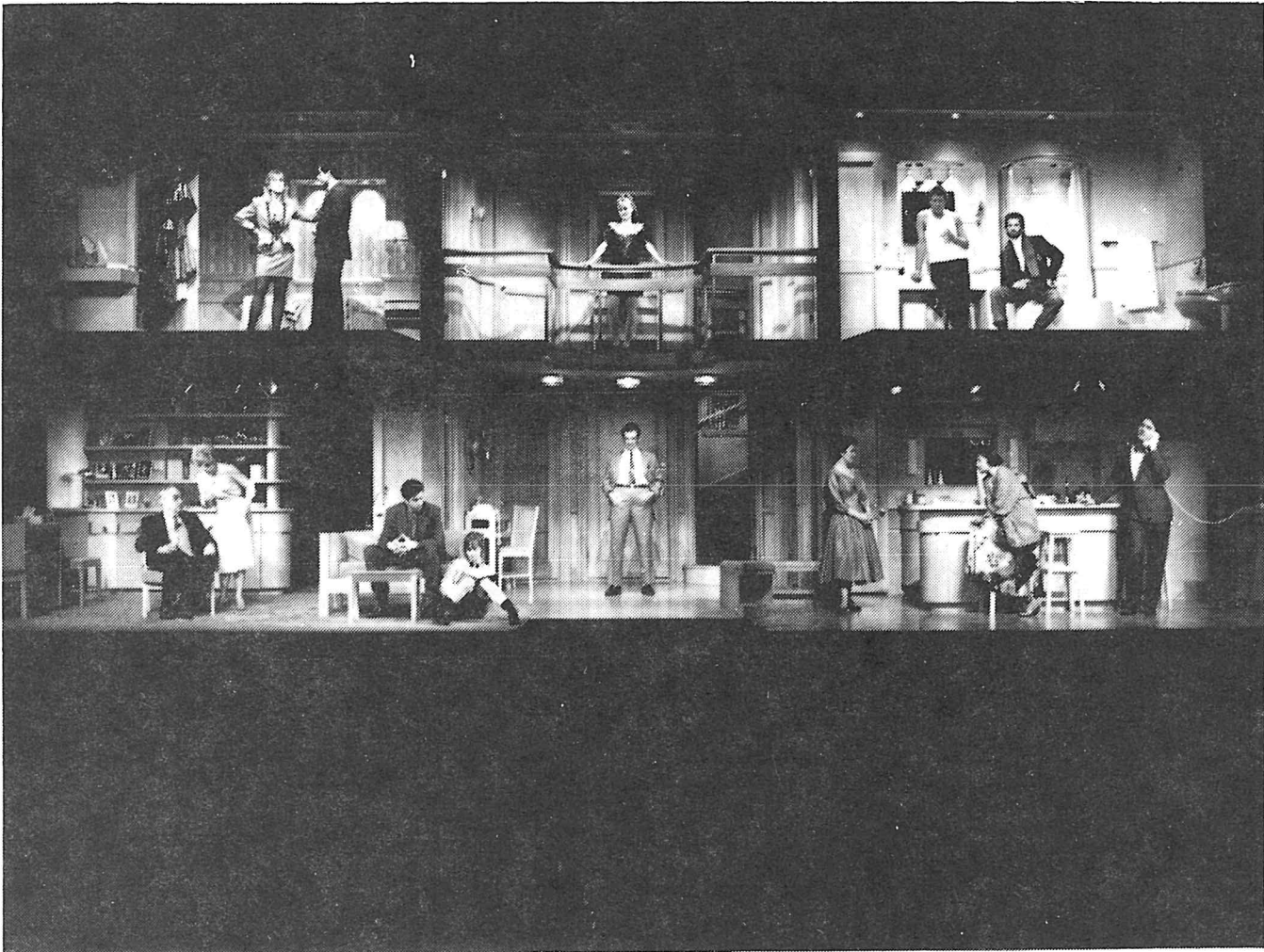
Peter "Lips" Gallagher and Tony Goldwyn.



Film director Robert Altman and his wife "playing around" at *Guys and Dolls*.

"Heavens" to Josie de Guzman.





John Lee Beatty's set for *A Small Family Business*.

and eventually persuaded it to reverse the decision. She would later describe the experience as being a practical exam for running the Manhattan Theater Club: "Don't take no for an answer. If you want a yes, then you should get a yes."

*TheaterWeek* talked to Meadow in her office at West 16th Street, where the MTC administration occupies a large converted warehouse that also includes three rehearsal studios. Tall, confident, and brightly dressed, Meadow exudes the assurance of a well-seasoned professional and the enthusiasm of a novice, a combination which, no doubt, comes in handy when she is cajoling her board to commit to MTC's rapidly expanding operations in New York as well as across the country and overseas.

**TheaterWeek:** You became an artistic director straight out of drama school. Wasn't that a bit unusual?

**Lynne Meadow:** Well it wasn't ex-

actly a plum job when I got it. It was not like being named artistic director of the Guthrie! There was a tremendous amount of activity going on in the early '70s and people were opening theaters in every storefront and church. I directed a play by a colleague of mine from the Yale Drama School at Manhattan Theater Club and then the board asked me to take over the executive and artistic directorship of the theater. We actually couldn't even afford to use the theater at East 73rd Street. We used to rent out the theater and put on plays in other rooms of the building. I was just a kid trying to make my way in the theater. I came in as a director and didn't even know what a producer was. Because I didn't understand what a parenthesis around a number meant, I didn't realize we had a \$75,000 deficit!

**When you started was there anybody you wanted to emulate?**

I was very, very influenced by Joseph Papp and The Public Theater.

Joe was a great mentor for me. I had a great love for him, and I aspired to the kind of theater that he had created. I saw a kind of activity where people influenced each other. From the earliest days at Manhattan Theater Club, I had more than one thing going on at a time—poetry series, cabaret—because I always thought that in some way, even through osmosis, good people working in one room will influence other people in another. Quality will beget quality.

I hired Barry Grove [Managing Director of MTC] three years after I had been there, and I remember the day we had our big breakthrough. We had lunch at Finnegan's Wake, which was our corner hangout, and over a hamburger I said, "I think it is time to use the stage for our own work." This was a landmark artistic meeting!

**Is there a similarity between the work you did then and what you are doing now?**

Absolutely. The seed of who we are

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—New York Times

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PHOTOS: MARTHA SWOFF

was very obvious then. In many ways we are the same organization that we were 18 years ago. My aesthetic has certainly grown and evolved, but it hasn't shifted course. I am just more interested now in the things I was interested in then.

**Who came to your shows in the beginning?**

We went after everybody. In the early days I used to go out into the streets and get people to come to sit on the seats. We started with cabaret because I didn't want the place to look empty. I thought tables and chairs would make it look as if it were full! Given our size, we always had a large percentage of subscription audience. From the earliest days, I believed in having an audience that would be there on a regular basis. I wanted the right to fail. I didn't want to always have to say what we were going to do, and I didn't want to have to open and close a play and not have an audience. That is very much a view of what this theater ought to be—a subsidized, subscription house.

**Let's talk about your current project, directing Alan Ayckbourn's *A Small Family Business*. It's part of your ongoing commitment to the English playwright. How did that come about?**

I think Alan is one of the great writers alive today. His work is filled with insight and humor, compassion and accuracy. A couple of years ago we made a major commitment to Alan because he has written many plays which American audiences are not familiar with. I think you can tell from the past few years that we feel strongly about this writer, along with a number of other writers to whom we have made the same kind of commitments: Beth Henley, Richard Greenberg, Terrence McNally, Keith Reddin, Don Margulies.

Also, MTC has a very long tradition of producing English playwrights. We have presented the American premieres of a score of English writers including David Rudkin, Harold Pinter, Simon Gray, David Edgar, Stephen Poliakoff, Howard Brenton, Nick Dear, and Pam Gems. Alan Ayckbourn joined MTC's roster when we produced *Woman in Mind*.

**Why English writers?**

I was always interested in them, from my early days as artistic director. In the '70s there was a kind of po-

litical writing in the English theater that wasn't as prevalent in the American theater. Some of the works we produced by English writers like Poliakov and Barker were very political. I always had a fairly eclectic aesthetic as the artistic director of this theater, and I turned to those English playwrights to provide a different view of society and the stage. We also have had a wonderful exchange with English actors and English directors so it has been part of MTC's artistic profile for a very long time.

**Are you concerned that some people may sniff at this, deriding your interest as anglophilia?**

I think it is hard to sniff at what MTC is doing since we have had such a strong balance of American writers and English writers. I think the theatergoing public wants to see a variety of interesting and innovative work.

**To get back to *A Small Family Business*, why do you like the play?**

I think it speaks to a lot of people. It's about who we are and how we function—how we make decisions.

**What do you tell the cast when you begin rehearsing *Ayckbourn*?**

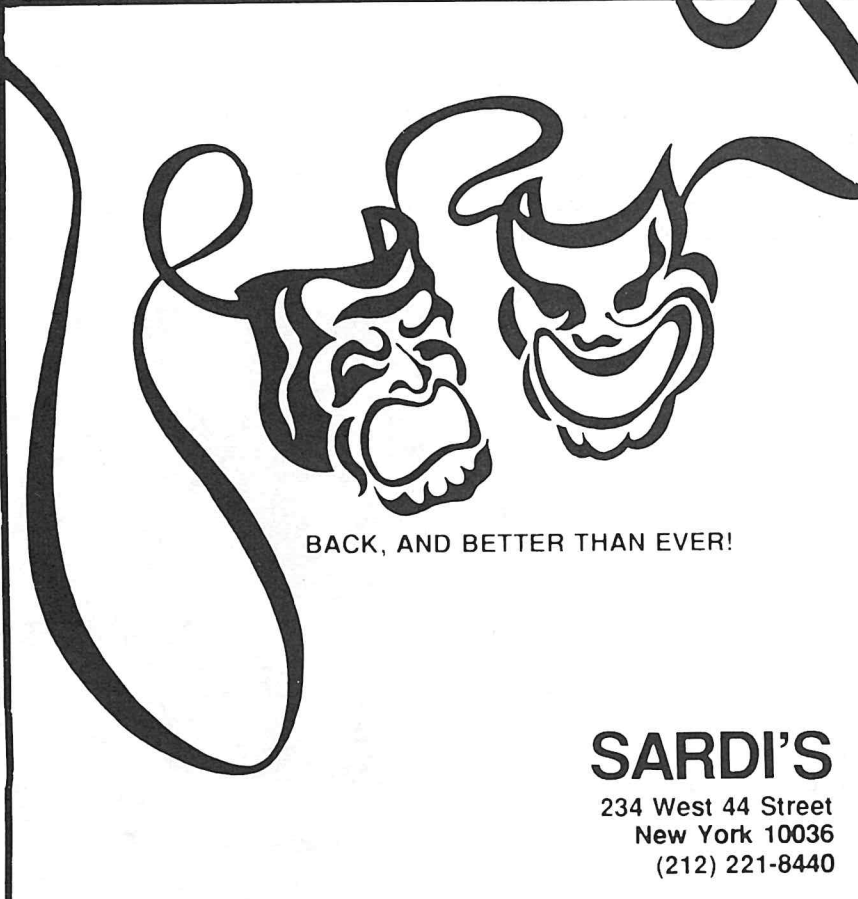
I tell them to trust Alan Ayckbourn. They are in the hands of a master, a really skilled craftsman. If they really trust him, he won't fail them.

**What about his English sense of humor? Do you think this poses a problem for American audiences?**

Alan has an uncanny ability to observe us in all of our humanity—our foibles, yearnings, disappointments, and our humor. He is observing English people, but his work so transcends anything English that I think an American audience will be very comfortable watching this play. You will see many people that you know on that stage.

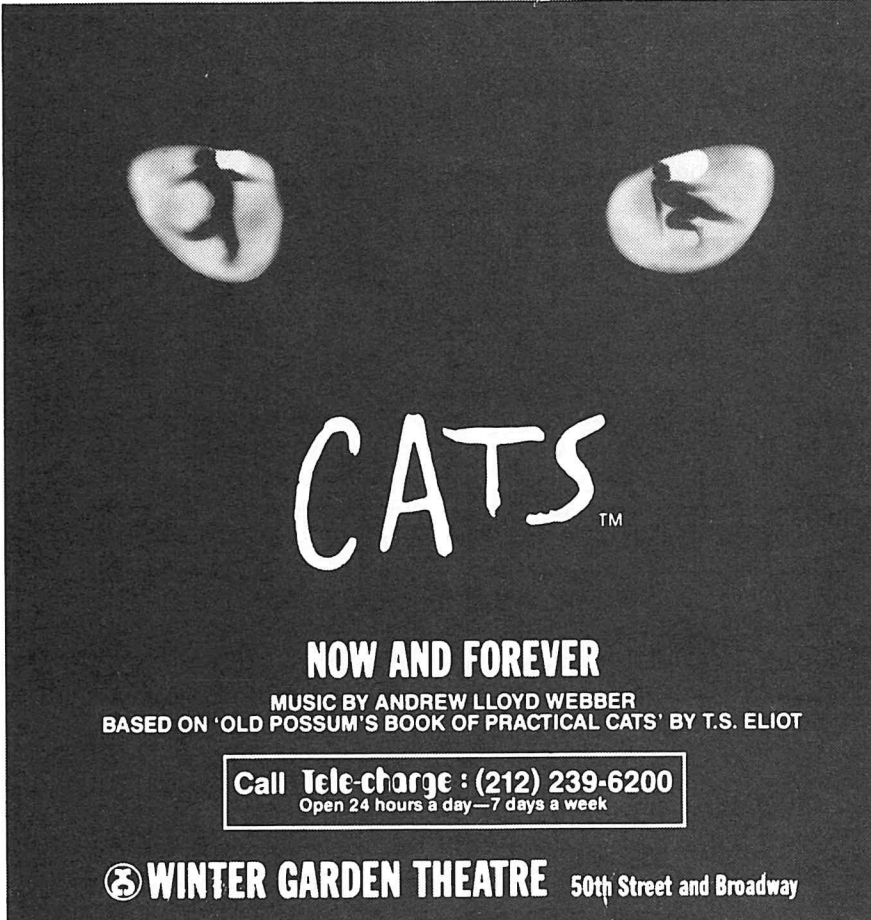
***A Small Family Business* marks the first time MTC is producing on directly on Broadway. What does that signify?**

That is really a very practical matter—the play has a two-storied set. We first considered doing it at our home on 55th Street (City Center). John Lee Beatty, the set designer, worked on it, and he is a genius who can come up with anything for anywhere. But we realized that we were going to be hampered by how tall that set would be. So we are not taking a



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**Does this represent a new direction for MTC?**

We are seeing a completely new trend now, and we are moving into a very new phase, a very exciting phase. I think what you are seeing at MTC is an expansion of our activities in many different ways. All of us have grown up here. This was Barry's and my playpen, our back yard and our front yard. It is the place that we grew up as producers. So there is our own personal professional development, but there is also what has happened to the industry.

In the late '70s and early '80s, there were people to move MTC's shows from our theaters to other venues. Now we have to do it ourselves. We produced *Aristocrats* at Theater Four when we had to move it to accommodate the run of *What the Butler Saw*. We moved *The Lisbon Traviata*, producing it ourselves at the Promenade and then produced in California as well. And we moved *Lips Together*, *Teeth Apart* and *Sight Unseen*.

We are in a phase in which we are taking our own work and trying to get it to a larger audience, beyond the MTC subscribers. Doing *A Small Family Business* in a larger house on Broadway is part of that activity, though technically it is presented by MTC Productions, Inc.

Now, more than ever, we are a theater company that produces wherever we feel they will do their best.

**How much does your subscription audience's taste dictate what you do? There is a perception that they are wealthy, older, upper-middle-class, well heeled. . . .**

The audience doesn't choose the plays that are done here, I do. So maybe I am well-heeled! [she laughs].

**But they are the ones who have to come back for the next season. If they don't like the plays. . . .**

Then they don't come back. I have been doing this for so long that it would be dishonest not to say that anybody who has an entrepreneurial

inclination, as I do, wants to appeal to an audience. We want to keep our subscription audience and we feel strongly about having a group that will support our work through thick and thin, but we won't pay the price of trying to second guess what they want to see. That is the most dangerous thing. Everyone who works with

I have a young child and there is only so much tech you can put a kid through.

**Playwrights whose careers were launched or fostered by MTC are now very much in the mainstream—Richard Greenberg, Terrence McNally, etc. Do you have a commitment to the next**



Gerry Goodstein

**Christine Baranski and Anthony Heald in *Lips Together*, *Teeth Apart*.**

me has always urged me to do the things that I am interested in doing.

**Would you prefer to direct without having the bother of running an organization like MTC?**

I wish I had an opportunity to direct more and I feel swamped by the administrative aspects of my job. But I also love what is called "artistic directing." I enjoy all the facets of my work—it is one of the things that makes me tick. I don't handle everything that has to do with the theater any more. There are all these wonderful people on the staff who have so outdistanced me in terms of their expertise and I relish that. But I haven't lost interest in all of it. I love to direct plays, and I love working with other directors, I love working with writers on plays that I am directing as well as plays that I am not directing.

**Your limit is directing one or two plays a year?**

**generation of writers?**

We are trying to respond to them by keeping our Stage II as a place where new writers can come in, to bring new blood into the theater.

**Are you concerned that Manhattan Theater Club, which started off as an alternative to mainstream theater, is now part of the establishment?**

You never see the hump on your own back! With all of this activity, all of us going and producing elsewhere, I think that more theaters are going to spring up again. Once there is more work and there is more employment and more people who are working in the theater, someone will say, "Oh yeah, Manhattan Theater Club is so establishment, we need to have an alternative to MTC, Playwrights Horizons, and Lincoln Center. We really know where it is at." That's life, isn't it? □

## Manhattan Theater Club Highlights

1970

MTC founded, East 73rd Street

1972

Lynne Meadow begins as  
Artistic Director

1975

Barry Grove begins as  
Managing Director

1976-77

*Ashes* by David Rudkin  
**Obie Award** Playwright

1976

**National Council of Women  
Award** Lynne Meadow

1977

**Special Outer Critics Circle Award**  
Lynne Meadow for her  
Supportive Contributions  
to American Theater

1977

**Drama Desk Award** for  
Outstanding Contribution to the  
Theater

1977

*Ain't Misbehavin'* by  
Richard Maltby, Jr. (moved to  
Broadway)  
**Tony Award** Best Musical,  
Director—Richard Maltby, Jr.  
**Drama Desk Award** Performers—  
Nell Carter, Ken Page  
**NY Drama Critics Circle Award**  
Best Musical

1980

*Mass Appeal* by Bill C. Davis  
(moved to Broadway)  
**NY Drama Critics Circle Award**  
Director—Geraldine Fitzgerald

1980-81

*Crimes of the Heart* by  
Beth Henley (moved to Broadway)  
**Pulitzer Prize** Beth Henley  
**Obie Award** Director—  
Melvin Bernhardt, Performer—  
Mary Beth Hurt

1982

**Theater World Award** for  
Outstanding Achievement



Martha Swope

Ken Page in *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

1984

MTC moves to its present home at  
City Center on West 55th St.

1984

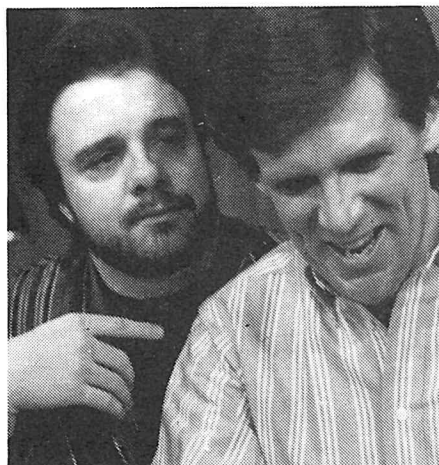
*Mensch Meier* by Franz Kroetz  
**Obie Award** Playwright,  
Performer—Stephen McHattie

1985

*It's Only a Play* by  
Terrence McNally  
**Drama Desk Award** Performer—  
Joanna Gleason

1986

*Loot* by Joe Orton (moved to  
Broadway)  
**Drama Desk Award** Performer—  
Joseph Maher  
**Outer Critics Circle Award**  
Outstanding Revival of a Play on  
or off-Broadway, Director—  
John Tillinger



Gerry Goodstein

Nathan Lane and Anthony Heald in  
*The Lisbon Traviata*.

1987

**Lucille Lortel Award** for  
Outstanding Achievement

1987

*Frankie and Johnny in the Clair  
de Lune* by Terrence McNally  
(moved to the West End Theater)  
**Obie Award** Performer—  
Kathy Bates

1988

*Women in Mind* by  
Alan Ayckbourn, directed by  
Lynne Meadow  
**Drama Desk Award** Performer—  
Stockard Channing

1988

*Eastern Standard* by  
Richard Greenberg (moved to  
Broadway)  
**Drama Desk Award** Performer—  
Peter Frechette

1989

*The Lisbon Traviata* by  
Terrence McNally (moved to  
Promenade Theater)  
**Drama Desk Award** Performer—  
Nathan Lane

1989

**Drama Desk Award** for setting  
high standards, encouraging new  
playwrights and importing  
unusual plays from abroad

1991

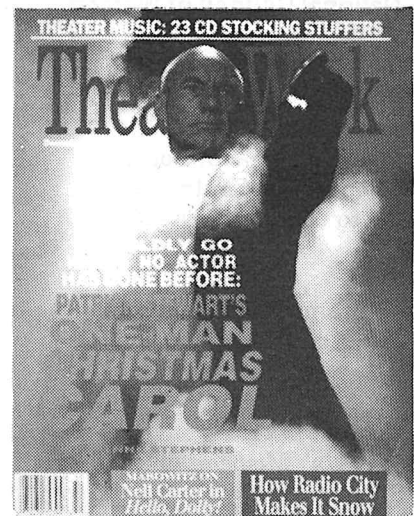
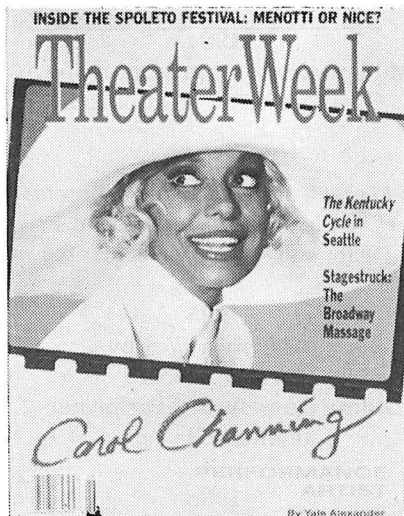
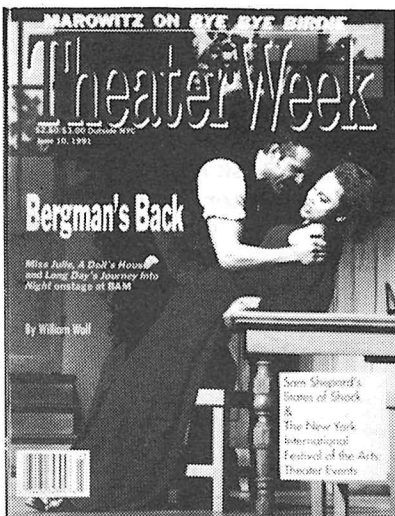
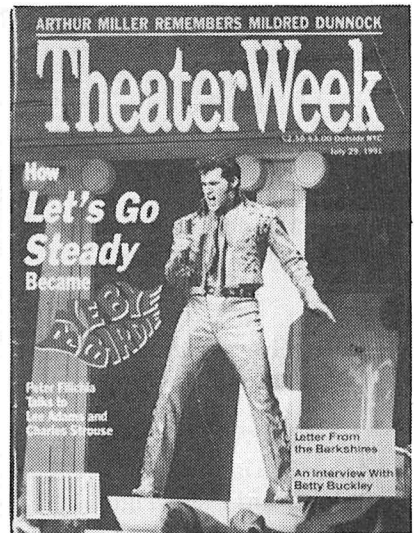
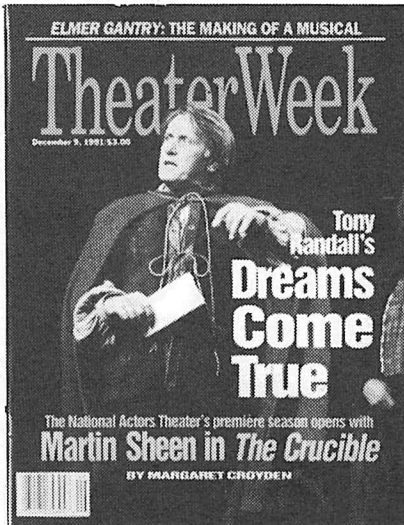
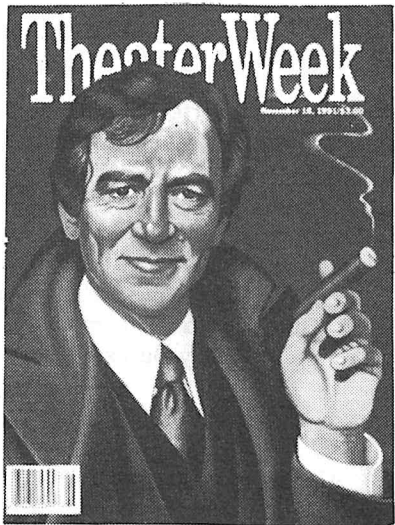
*Lips Together, Teeth Apart* by  
Terrence McNally (moved to  
Lucille Lortel Theater)

1992

*Sight Unseen* by Donald Margulies  
(moved to Orpheum Theater)

1992

MTC has five shows running at  
once: *A Small Family Business* by  
Alan Ayckbourn (Music Box  
Theater), *Groundhog* by  
Elizabeth Swados, *The Extra Man*  
by Richard Greenberg (City  
Center), *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*  
by Terrence McNally (Lucille  
Lortel Theater) and *Sight Unseen*  
by Donald Margulies  
(Orpheum Theater)



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