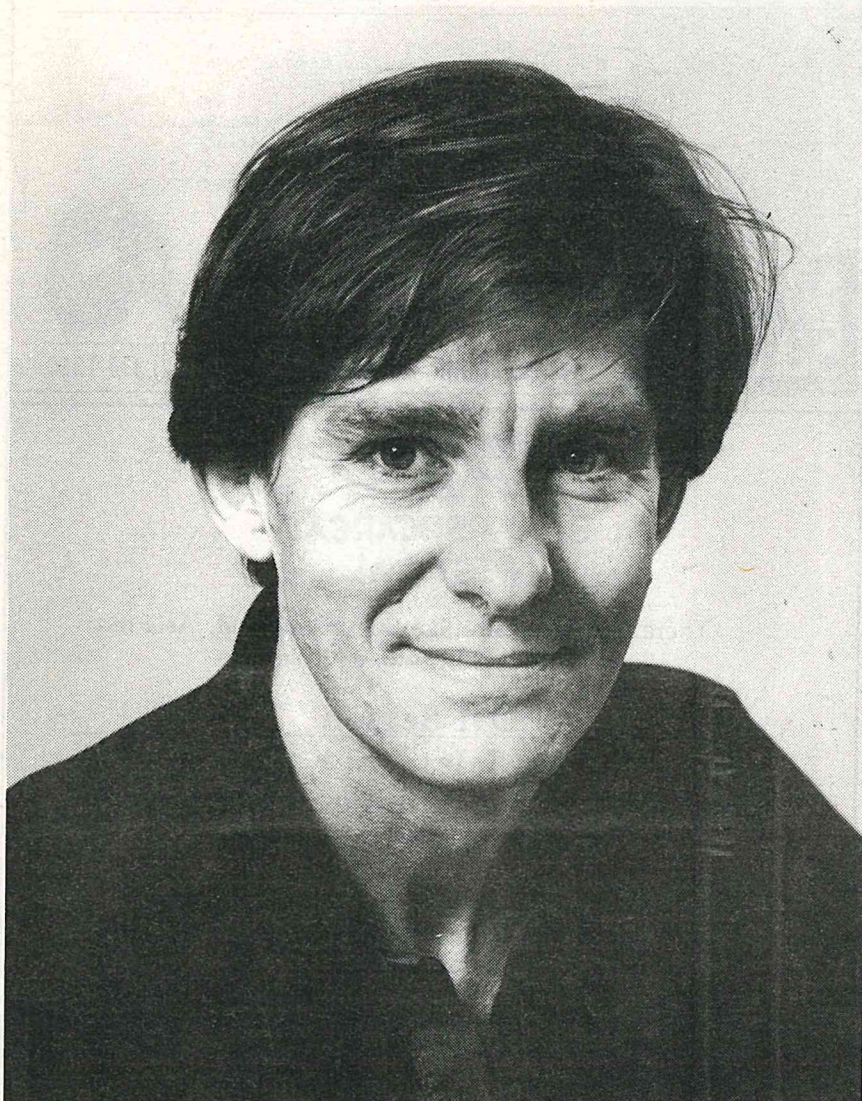


# Mark Lamos Conquers The Classics

In the last ten years, he's made HartfordStage a top regional theater.

by Gerard Raymond



T. Charles Erickson

Mark Lamos, Artistic Director of HartfordStage.

**“I**N THE CURRENT AMERICAN THEATRICAL culture I think the only way you can build up any body of work whatsoever is to stay aligned with an institution,” says Mark Lamos. He recently commenced his eleventh year as artistic director of HartfordStage Company in Connecticut.

In the past decade Lamos has emerged as one of this country's preëminent directors of the classics. He has created for himself at Hartford an environment where he can do the work which excites him and stretches his talents without being

subject to the vagaries of the commercial market. Two years ago he mounted a five-hour version of *Peer Gynt* with Richard Thomas in the lead. Illuminating Ibsen's unwieldy epic, Lamos demonstrated his particular talent for injecting a contem-

porary consciousness into classical plays while remaining faithful to the text.

Lamos's ties to institutional theaters date back to 1972 when he began his professional career, not as a director but as an actor, at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Even today, at 43, he retains something of the clean-cut matinee idol look that garnered him romantic leads in the classics. On Broadway he played the dashing young lover, Christian, in the musical *Cyrano*. Although he still acts occasionally, his ambitions now lie in tackling difficult plays.

In a season of six plays, Lamos generally directs three productions a year at Hartford. Last year he directed Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (in which he played Jack), a visually breathtaking production of Tony Kushner's adaptation of Corneille's *The Illusion*, and a delightfully anachronistic production of Molière's *The Miser*. Given Lamos's flair for the classics, it is easy to overlook the fact that HartfordStage is also committed to presenting two new plays every season. *A Shayna Maidel*, *Other People's Money* and *Stand Up Tragedy* played at Hartford before their New York premieres. This season Scott McPherson's *Marvin's Room* and A.R. Gurney's *The Snow Ball* will be given their east coast premiere's at Hartford.

Lamos opened the current 1990-91 season at Hartford with his own production of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*. Modern in tone and style, Wertenbaker's play is, nevertheless, set in 18th-century Australia and centers round the first convict production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* in that country. Lamos was drawn to the play because it presents the idea that “art can transform human possibility.” A group of prisoners struggle to put on



His favorite role, thus far, has been "Anatoly in *Chess*. I was so wrapped up in that show; I'm sorry more people didn't get to see it. I loved the people I was working with—Judy Kuhn and Phil Casnoff—and I loved Trevor Nunn, who directed. I'm sorry that I couldn't have stayed at the Imperial a little longer." Though the musical closed quickly on Broadway, Carroll did receive a Tony nomination.

**P**reparatory to returning to *Grand Hotel*, he saw a run-through of the national company. "Sitting out front, I got a whole new perspective." This time out, Carroll will be sans moustache, "a younger-looking Baron. I'm trying to approach the role a little differently. He's supposed to be young and foolishly in love. I think people missed that, the first time around. They compared me to John Barrymore, who played the part in the Oscar-winning 1932 film. Hadn't anyone read the novel? Of course, they hadn't. I'm going to try to make the Baron more relaxed and fun-loving. The first Baron was created under a lot of stress—out-of-town tryouts, learning new lines. I think I got my big song 11 days before we opened in New York. I was constantly working. This time, it's going to be fun.

"I'll be seeing new faces. Everyone in the leading roles—except for Tim Jerome [Preysing] and John Wylie [the doctor]—will be a new face. Of course, I'll miss Liliame Montevecchi and Karen Akers—and, especially, Michael Jeter and Jane Krakowski.

"I did play it before with Chip Zien, the new Kringlein, when Michael injured his leg. It must be tough to step-in for somebody. I've understudied—and hated it. Rex Smith, who has been playing the Baron, wrote me a very nice note when I was in the hospital, saying something like he steps into my shoes 'with trepidation.'"

Just in time for the holidays, there's an especially bright light on Broadway; if things seem particularly cheerful on West 45th Street, it's just David Carroll-ing, "It's nice to be back!" □



**MISS SAIGON**

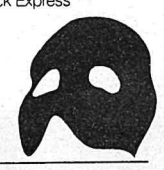
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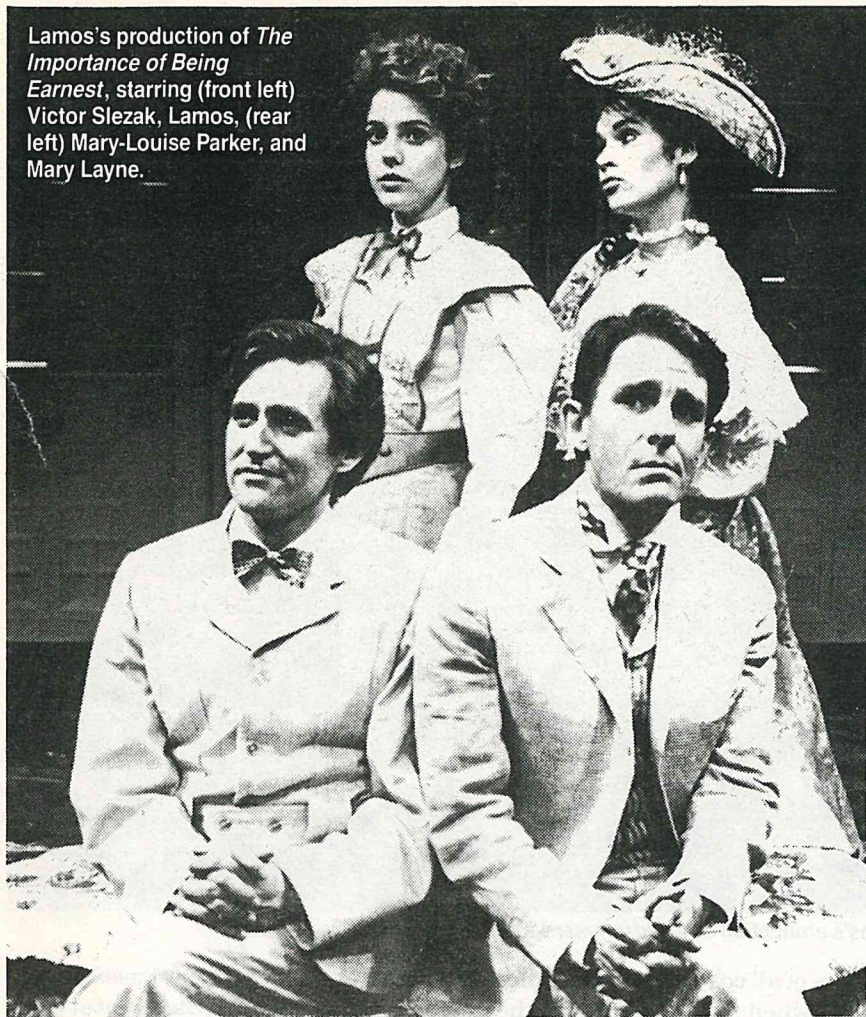
Robert LuPone, Bernard Telsey, Jimmy Bohr, Dolores Sutton, Ellen Nickles, Laura Fine, Susan Greenhill, Martin LaPlatney, Robert Goodwin, Paul Minx and Scott Frank teach a variety of classes in acting, acting as business, playwriting and screenwriting at a school that's also producing theatre on Theatre Row.



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Lamos's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, starring (front left) Victor Slezak, Lamos, (rear left) Mary-Louise Parker, and Mary Layne.



T. Charles Erickson

Farquhar's play despite the prejudice of their officers and even with the threat of death hanging over one of the actresses. "It is as if this seemingly inconsequential play that they are doing brings out their innate humanity."

For Lamos, directing *Our Country's Good* was complicated by the fact that the play evolved at the Royal Court in London through a series of workshops with the author, original cast, and the director, Max Stafford Clark. Much of the original actors' improvisations found their way into the final text as did Stafford Clark's directorial touches. "Some of the rhythms of the script are not mine and it was a question of locating myself in another director's music," explains Lamos who says it initially felt like a strait jacket.

"When you have a living writer, and especially a play with a background that this one has, you

have much input assisting you. A lot of roads that you might take in rehearsal, you don't take simply because you are told they are not going to work. That is tremendously helpful and you get there quicker. But I never feel as *exercised* by a new play, as I do by a classic. I don't know why, but I don't feel quite so spiritually agonized. I am *ecstasized*, if that is a word, by the classics."

He will return to classics for his next two productions in the Hartford season. In December he directs Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (starring Sam Waterston) and in March, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. *The Master Builder* is for him the logical step from *Peer Gynt* ("it's like *Peer Gynt* grew up") and he says *Julius Caesar* came into the season "minutes after Ceaucescu's assassination in Romania." Lamos finds a contemporary parallel with the democratic movements sweeping Eastern Eu-



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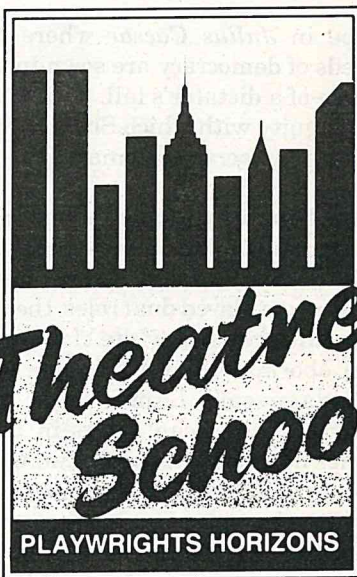
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Shakespeare meets the Little Mermaid: Lamos's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

rope in *Julius Caesar* where the seeds of democracy are sown in the wake of a dictator's fall. "I find the ambiguity with which Shakespeare treats democracy fascinating."

**W**henever possible Lamos casts his productions multi-ethnically. In *Our Country's Good*, where most of the actors played dual roles, the text specifies two non-white characters, an aborigine and a prisoner from Madagascar. Lamos cast two African American actors in these roles but gave the actors two white parts as well. Those two particular white characters both represented positions of power, (one was the priest) and both were especially bigoted and racist. I asked Lamos if this was a coincidence.

"It is a balancing act. You need to have some aesthetic control, especially in a play where there is talk about racial differences. I go into the casting process attempting to be colorblind, but then I notice a certain edge that begins to appear. Ac-

tors of all colors read for all the roles but when a black actor read the line where the [white] officer says, 'aborigines are innately bad, they can't even build a proper canoe,' I thought it would be wonderful to see a black actor play that part."

In addition to directing three productions, part of Lamos's job is to select and oversee the other three plays in the season. A free-lance director in the commercial world does not generally work this hard in a single year. After ten years on the job, has Lamos experienced artistic director burn out? "I guess I have begun to learn how to pace myself better. I can delegate work to others and I don't have to breathe down the back of every guest director who works here. From my own work as guest director elsewhere, I know I feel much happier when I feel a great amount of support but not a lot of watching."

I wondered if Lamos ever felt limited, having to stage all his favorite plays in the same space. Hart

ford has a thrust stage, based on Sir Tyronne Guthrie's prototype. "About five years ago I thought I was sick of this stage but then all of a sudden, when I was working as a guest director in a proscenium stage, I realized how *unfree* I felt, how distant and separate and *anti-sculptural* the proscenium was. I thought 'Gee, I can't wait to get back and re-invent that space!'" "It is more challenging, in a funny way now, than it was about five years ago," Lamos explains with an almost schoolboy enthusiasm.

This past summer Lamos directed *La Bohème* for the Glimmerglass Opera and made his film debut as a person with AIDS in *Longtime Companion*. When you include his outside jobs, he ends up doing a production almost every two months. That's when he worries that he might be shortchanging himself. "But I tend to work better quickly. In the long run, as a theater crafts person, I think it is better to have a great deal of activity going on in



"I don't have a great interest in working in New York. I don't believe it is the theater center. I think it is the show biz center."—Mark Lamos

your life, than to wander through a year with one project, going from one venue to the next."

**A**fter ten years of successfully directing plays of his choice at Hartford is there anything else he would like to achieve there? "I have been very fortunate. Now it is not so much projects that I want to do but having goals like raising actors' salaries further. We now have a capital campaign in place to redo and install all the technical aspects of the theater. I'd also like to have a laboratory situation where I could work on non-text, performer oriented projects that will need a two to three month gestation time—projects that I don't want to put on a subscription series."

To the outsider Hartford seems to be a bleak city occupied solely by insurance companies and banks over which hang the clouds of recession. But Hartford Stage Company is "pretty secure," says Lamos. Subscriptions have gone up in the last four years although they did experience a slight drop this year, which their telemarketers attribute to some people moving out of the area. But Lamos claims that, "the core audience that we've maintained and nurtured is coming back."

One might conclude that this "core" group is a captive audience because HartfordStage is the only theater in town. But Lamos says their research indicates that this audience also regularly attends productions elsewhere in the state, at Yale Rep, Long Wharf, and Goodspeed Opera House. They also travel to Trinity Rep and American Repertory Theater in Massachusetts and even to New York for their theater fare. By contrast, New York audiences don't often travel out of state in search of good theater.

Unfortunately, most New Yorkers will not get an opportunity of seeing

Lamos's work. Apart from one, not entirely successful, production of *Measure for Measure* at Lincoln Center in 1989, Lamos has not directed in New York. And he is unlikely to do so in the future.

"I don't have a great interest in working in New York. I don't believe it is the theater center. I think it is the show-biz center, and I don't mean that disparagingly." Lamos speculates that New Yorkers need to go to events that are "approved" beforehand "perhaps because they have a hard enough time in their lives, they like less risk in their lifestyles. In other parts of the country the audience is more investigative."

It does take a certain commitment of time and money to make the trek to Hartford, but there is hardly any "risk" at all. Having attended the past two seasons at Hartford, I have yet to see a Mark Lamos production that wasn't stimulating and entertaining. □

**Hartford Stage Company  
1990-1991 Season**

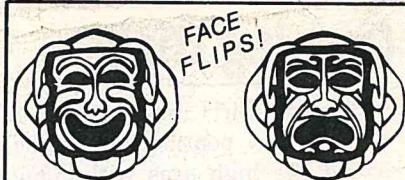
*Marvin's Room*  
by Scott McPherson  
Directed by David Petrarca  
November 10 - December 15

*The Master Builder*  
by Henrik Ibsen  
Directed by Mark Lamos  
December 29 - February 4

*The Snow Ball*  
by A.R. Gurney  
Directed by Jack O'Brien  
February 9 - March 16

*Julius Casesar*  
by William Shakespeare  
Directed by Mark Lamos  
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