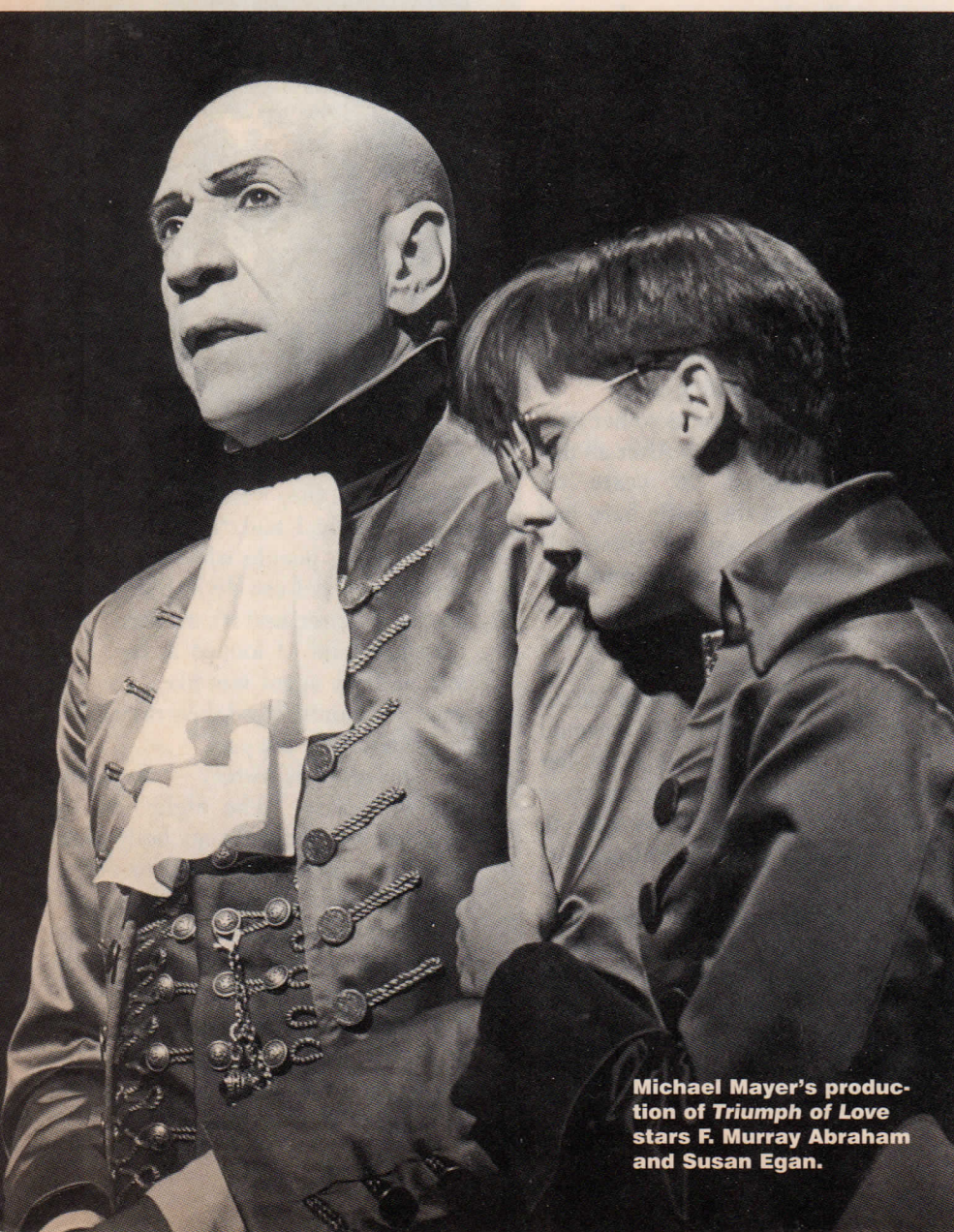


What They REALLY Want to Do Is Direct

Three of the Theater's Hottest Directors Speak Out

By Gerard Raymond



Michael Mayer's production of *Triumph of Love* stars F. Murray Abraham and Susan Egan.

JOAN MARCUS

It takes about 10 years to become an overnight sensation. Michael Mayer, Nicholas Martin, and Mark Brokaw are three directors who worked steadily in the '80s but are currently registering "hot" on the industry thermometer. Mayer is making his Broadway debut directing two productions back to back — the new musical *Triumph of Love* and the Roundabout Theater revival of Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge*. Martin, acclaimed for last summer's revival of Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End* at Williamstown, is rehearsing the U.S. premiere of Martin Sherman's *A Madhouse in Goa* at Second Stage, and redirecting his off-Broadway hit *Full Gallop* for a forthcoming national tour. Two of Brokaw's off-Broadway productions are enjoying successful commercial transfers — Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* and Douglas Carter Beane's *As Bees in Honey Drown* — and a third, the much lauded production of Kenneth Lonergan's *This Is Our Youth*, is set to open off-Broadway as soon as a theater becomes available.

MICHAEL MAYER

These are heady times indeed for 37-year-old Michael Mayer, as he prepares to rehearse a modern tragedy by America's greatest living playwright by day and shepherds a frothy Broadway musical through its final previews by

night. Right now, shifting gears to work on Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge* comes as a relief from the "brutal" logistics of giving the right élan to *Triumph of Love*. The Broadway musical confection boasts "three seductions, four disguises and 15 original musical numbers," (not to mention Betty Buckley, Susan Egan, and F. Murray Abraham). "I had no idea it was going to be hard labor getting this thing to have lightness," admits the director.

Three years ago, Mayer directed a darker, non-musical version of *Triumph*, an 18th-century French comedy by Pierre Marivaux translated and adapted by James Magruder. But that was in the much less stressful not-for-profit environment of the off-Broadway Classic Stage Company. "If I were less in control of the style and tone of the whole production, it would be very easy to get completely confused," says Mayer of his Broadway debut.

"With \$3.5 million of other people's money riding on the show, there are all these voices inundating me with bright ideas. Sometimes I feel like my head is going to blow up."

But the basics of theater-making are the same anywhere, Mayer believes. When he's actually rehearsing a particular scene, "trying to figure out how to

make certain moments land better," he can easily imagine he's back at the WPA Theater, where he directed the musical revue *Hundreds of Hats*, or at Baltimore's Center Stage, where *Triumph* was developed.

Mayer graduated from NYU in 1983 dreaming of being an actor, but discovered his true calling after a directing stint at Ithaca's Hangar Theater, made possible by the Drama League of New York, a program to help emerging directors (see sidebar). "I suddenly saw that I could have a life in the theater

that was a rewarding and enriching experience without all of the *mesbugas* [insanity] that goes with being an actor." After doing several zero-budget, zero-salary workshops around the city, he landed his first New York professional job directing one of the plays in the 1990 Young Playwrights Festival (a breeding ground for new writers and directors, now sadly defunct). The turning point in Mayer's career was his 1993 NYU student production of *Perestroika*, the second part of *Angels in America*; Mayer and playwright Tony Kushner had become close pals during their own student days at NYU a decade earlier. Impressed at how brilliantly Mayer realized the play's immense theatricality on a minuscule budget, the Broadway producers of *Angels* hired him to direct the play's national tour. "I was honored and humbled," Mayer says.

While it was Mayer who suggested

open imagination; he's incredibly funny and tells great stories," the director continues. "I was intimidated at first, but we always had the same ideas on casting the play, so I'm confident we're on the same page. I hope he's around a lot during rehearsals." Mayer stops and laughs nervously. "Talk to me when he's about to see the first run-through.... I'll be a wreck!"

NICHOLAS MARTIN

"Every once in a while I think I'm too old to be this hot, to old to be 'discovered,'" chuckles 59-year-old Nicholas Martin. But then directing is actually a second career for the Brooklyn-born former actor and teacher. "I was a repertory baby," says Martin, who joined Ellis Rabb's Association of Producing Artists company as an actor straight after college and went on to appear in productions ranging from

You Can't Take It With You to *The Wild Duck*. "I had an active career in the classics playing a lot of offbeat characters. I always say I could present a one-man show of servants through the ages," Martin jokes.

While continuing as an actor, he started directing about 17 years ago at San

Diego's Old Globe and at Bennington College, where he is still a member of the teaching faculty. However, it was at Playwrights Horizons with his 1992 production of *Sophistry*, a black comedy by one of his Bennington acting students, Jonathan Marc Sherman, that Martin established his career as a director. "Jonathan's particular sensibility — a mordant kind of urban Jewish poetry — is one that I respond to," says Martin. He went on to direct the Roundabout revival of Anouilh's *The Rehearsal*, *Macbeth*



Hot trio (from left): Mark Brokaw, Nicholas Martin, and Michael Mayer.

reviving Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge* at the Roundabout, he was totally unknown to the playwright, who had director approval on the project. The prospect of meeting Miller was daunting, of course — "he was a God in my house when I was growing up" — but the two hit it off. "He's open to a very bold approach. I told him about how I was fascinated by the tension in this play between the modern kitchen sink drama and the Greek tragedy inside it," Mayer reports. "He has this great vitality and a youthful,



Nicholas Martin directed Mary Louise Wilson in *Full Gallop*.

starring Victor Garber at the Old Globe, and most successfully, Mary Louise Wilson as fashion maven Diana Vreeland in *Full Gallop*.

"I like plays that are funny and wildly theatrical and are brilliant vehicles for actors," says Martin. He could be describing his current production, *A Madhouse in Goa*, which opens mid-November at Second Stage. The new work by Martin Sherman, a London-based American playwright best known here for *Bent*, is actually a pair of linked plays set in the Greek Islands. Refraining from describing the work because he says it will spoil the experience, Martin enthuses about the playwright instead. "I think his work deserves a retrospective — you can find in it most of the serious problems of our day, treated with such profundity and always with humor."

A sure sign of Martin's ascendancy as a director is his frenetic schedule, which has him booked well into the 1998-99 season. "I feel a bit like an opera director," he quips. *Madhouse* marks Martin's third new production in a row following his ambitious

mounting of *Dead End*, Sidney Kingsley's gritty 1935 drama about the slums of New York's Lower East Side, at Williamstown. He directed the premiere of Albert Innaurato's *Dreading Thekkla*, also at Williamstown, and just last month directed at the Old Globe *The Mask of Moriarty*, a Sherlock Holmes spoof which he'll direct again in January at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse, and maybe later in New York as well. Next year, he hopes to direct Jon Robin Baitz's *A Fair Country* in San Diego ("There's a writer who for me has everything — a social consciousness that is actual and not implied, brilliant wit, and characters you've never seen before") and a revival of Christopher Durang's *Baby With the Bathwater* for Second Stage in its new Times Square space.

"The thrill of the theater is about collaboration," says Martin. His great regret is that his production of *Dead End* is not likely to have a future life. "I wish more people could have seen it," he says, proud that he pulled off the near impossible task of creating a 45-member ensemble of adults and kids out of a group of professional and non-professional actors, students, and

Williamstown locals. "Everybody was working under the most difficult circumstances on something we all believed in. That for me is the most moving part of the work."

MARK BROKAW

"I was so lucky to bump against three really terrific plays back to back," says off-Broadway director-of-the-moment Mark Brokaw modestly. "I've been working here for 10 years, so I have a better sense of proportion about it. I can be glad about it but not take my press too seriously."

The 39-year-old Illinois native says he "always knew" he wanted to direct, and upon graduating from Yale he came to New York to do just that. Armed with a Drama League fellowship, similar to the one that helped propel Michael Mayer toward his directing career, he landed a job at Second Stage. There he assisted artistic director Carole Rothman in transferring her production of Tina Howe's *Coastal Disturbances* (starring Annette Bening) to Broadway. Two years later, in 1989, he was directing a cast of 18 in the Second Stage revival of Lanford Wilson's *The Rimers*

Mark Brokaw's streak of hits includes *As Bees in Honey Drown*, starring J. Smith-Cameron and Bo Foxworth.



JOAN MARCUS

of *Eldritch*. He scored his first huge success at the same company directing Lynda Barry's *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, which enjoyed an extended commercial run in 1991. Now he's returned to Second Stage for a three-month residency and will be instrumental in effecting the company's transition to its new space next year.

"I like plays that are all about the gray areas; that don't have a point of view that says 'this is what's right or what's wrong,'" says Brokaw. Half-way through the script of Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, he recognized its special qualities. "Paula tells such an explosive, potentially victim-of-the-week story totally devoid of sentimentality," he explains. The play chronicles an unconventional and damaging love affair between a girl and her uncle, which begins when the young woman is 11 and the man 38. "One of the triumphs of the play is that you abhor and love him at the same time," says Brokaw. There is a similar ambivalence, he says, about *This Is Our Youth* (last season's hit at the New Group, now waiting in the wings for an off-Broadway house). The play is a "finely observed, clear-eyed and harsh look" at three Upper West Side Generation X-ers which Brokaw calls "both funny and heartbreaking."

With the recent *As Bees in Honey Drown*, which followed fast on the heels of the multiple-award winning *How I Learned to Drive*, Brokaw proved that he's equally at home with a fluffy comedy about wannabe celebrities as he is with a tale of pedophilia in 1950s Maryland.

Soon after his two off-Broadway triumphs he directed *Racing Demon*, David Hare's masterly drama about the politics of the Church of England, at Minneapolis' Guthrie Theater. Now, overseeing his current hits (Molly Ringwald follows Jayne Atkinson and Mary Louise Parker, and Bruce Davison follows David Morse in *Drive*) and gearing up for *This Is Our Youth*, he is preparing for *The Dying Gaul*, a "deeply disturbing and very moving" new play by Craig Lucas, slated for

the Vineyard Theater this spring.

"Style for me is simply the result of the creation of a world," offers Brokaw. "The most interesting thing about working in the theater is taking a group of disparate people, bringing them to a piece of material, and creating one world and knowing the rules of that world." Entering each new world is like becoming a detective, he says. "The fun about working on *Racing Demon* was that it truly was research into a foreign world." But the southern world of Vogel's play or the late 1980s Manhattan milieu of *This is Our Youth* are no less foreign, he adds. "Each time it's like entering an alien culture and making it your own." ■

Training Directors

For the past 14 years, the non-profit Drama League in New York has selected promising young directors (including Mark Brokaw and Michael Mayer) for its much-sought-after professional training program. Up to 200 young, untried drama school grads vie for eight slots (four in summer, four in fall) that allow them not only to observe and assist working directors but to direct an Equity production of a one-act play themselves.

A panel of pros such as Ming Cho Lee, Scott Ellis, Carole Rothman, and Donna Murphy sifts through the applications and recommendations, then personally quizzes 20 finalists on, say, how they would make a particular moment in *The Winter's Tale* work onstage or why they prefer a given theatrical style. "Our goal is to find the most talented emerging directors and propel them into professional careers in the theater," says Drama League President Julia Hansen. "What's wonderful is that our directors actually direct."

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