Cultural Daily

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Hollywood's Fountain Theatre: The Tiny Theatre That Could

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 7th, 2014

When Stephen Sachs was a student at Agoura High, he won a national high school writing award and was offered several writing scholarships. He turned them all down. Why? "I wanted to be an actor," he answered a bit sheepishly.

He became one in the 1980s, but it's the old story. As reality set in, he began to direct, write plays and help run theatre companies. He was a manager at Ensemble Studio Theatre, worked behind the scenes at Stages in Hollywood, and with Joan Stein and Suzie Dietz at the Canon Theatre in Beverly Hills. Until he got a phone call "out of the blue" from Deborah Lawlor, another independent theatre producer.

Lawlor had met Sachs at Stages when she rented space there, and was impressed by him. While recuperating from a serious auto accident in New York, she decided that, if she survived, she would do what she'd always wanted: have her own theatre. She called Sachs and asked him to run it with her. That was 1990. You might say that the rest is history, but not so fast…

"I was just starting to develop as a playwright and director," Sachs said. "Deborah had a dance background. She was part of the avant-garde dance scene in New York in the 1960s and 70s. The Judson Dance Theater, Café Cino, the whole thing. Her idea was to create an artistic home for theatre and dance artists."

As a wise friend once told me, we tend to enter our lives through the back door. Looking around for a suitable space, Lawlor and Sachs were shown a funky building at 5060 Fountain Avenue in Hollywood and fell in love with it. They named it the Fountain for the street it sat on, but also, Lawlor said, "I liked the idea of a fountain of work…"

"We opened our doors on April Fool's Day 1990—the perfect day to start a theatre company," said Sachs, "and we've been there ever since. Los Angeles being such a diverse city, we wanted to do work that would give voice to a variety of communities."

Which is how the theatre's association with Flamenco dance began.

"Through Deborah," specified Sachs. "Shortly after we opened she asked, 'Have you ever seen a Flamenco concert?' I said no and she said, 'Come with me.' We got in the car, drove up to Santa Barbara and she introduced me to Roberto Amaral, a well respected Flamenco teacher and choreographer. I saw my first Flamenco concert and was blown away. 'We're going to do that at The Fountain,' Deborah said. And now we're the foremost regular presenters of Flamenco in Los

Angeles.

“When we started it was just Deborah, me and the building. We plugged in a couple of phones, drove down Western Avenue and bought a couple of desks. We had to assemble them ourselves. We made our own programs on a manual typewriter. It was all very small, very modest.”

In many ways, it still is. “But from the beginning,” added Sachs, “we felt we were on to something. We did *The Golden Gate*, a play I had adapted from a charming novel by Vikram Seth about yuppies, gays and straights living in San Francisco—romantic and fun, beautifully written, and entirely *in verse*. It was like 30-somethings meet Shakespeare. We did it up in San Francisco, so right out of the gate, our work was being noticed. It’s just been a slow kind of gentle growth ever since.”

Key words: Slow. Gentle. Growth. Add: Challenging.

While next year will mark their 25th year in business at the same address in a virtually unchanged environment, and they have a lot to show artistically for the past quarter century, big profit is not one of them. Lawlor has delivered financial support when needed, while Sachs has delivered a stream of noteworthy plays, becoming that unusual creature: a playwright and director with his own sandbox. Together, they’ve built a loyal audience and done work that has brought them recognition and has traveled pretty far afield.

Sachs has had 11 of his plays produced during that time, many of them at the Fountain, quite a few elsewhere—from The Pasadena Playhouse to Toronto, from Chicago’s Victory Gardens to Vancouver. A quick Google search offers an impressive list of directing and playwriting credits.

(l to r) Tamlyn Tomita, Pamela Dunlap, Elissa Kyriacou, Andre Dantas, Maria Bermudez, Mindy Krasner. Photo by Ed Krieger

Currently, his play *Heart Song*, which recently premiered at the Fountain and is about the transformation of a middle-aged Jewish woman “separated from her tribe and very much alone,” is filling up houses at Florida Rep. His 2012 two-hander, *Bakersfield Mist*, about the encounter of a celebrated art dealer with a woman in a Bakersfield trailer convinced she owns a major work of art, opens in June at The Duchess Theatre in London’s West End. It features Kathleen Turner and Ian McDiarmid.

“There’s been something special about this play from the start,” said Sachs. “I directed the world premiere at the Fountain and was on the 101 freeway driving to my first production meeting, when I had a call from my agent telling me the script had been optioned for New York. I had to pull over!”

Bakersfield Mist received three other productions around the country as part of the National New Play Network (NNPN), an organization of theaters of which The Fountain is a member. It was founded in 1998 with the intent of giving new plays more than one production.

“They do this thing called ‘rolling world premieres,’ ” Sachs explained, “guaranteeing at least three productions of a new play. *Sweet Nothing In My Ear*, another play of mine that premiered at the Fountain, went around the country through NNPN and then was made into a Hallmark movie with Marlee Matlin and Jeff Daniels. A new version of Strinberg’s *Miss Julie* that I wrote was

produced that way as well. We want to continue doing more of that."

Bakersfield Mist had productions at Wellfleet Harbor Theatre in Cape Cod, New Rep in Boston, the New Jersey Rep and was optioned by Sonia Friedman, a major New York and London producer. "They'd never seen a production of it," said Sachs. "They read that script sent by my agent and optioned it for London and New York. Now they control the U.S. rights."

In 2004, the Fountain drew the attention of no less a playwright than South Africa's Athol Fugard, who chose the tiny Fountain for the world premiere of an exquisite and very personal two-character play: *Exits and Entrances*. It was followed by the U.S. premiere of Fugard's *The Blue Iris, The Train Driver*, *Victory* and the West coast premiere of *Coming Home.*

Timothy Taylor and Deidrie Henry in the West Coast premiere of Anthol Fugard's newest play, 'Coming Home,' directed by Stephen Sachs. Photo by Ed Krieger

When asked how many productions the Fountain puts on per year, Sachs answered: "Trick question. We'll announce four, but actually do two or three. Our productions tend to extend and run for a while which is a nice problem to have. So we announce four and see how it goes."

Productions are no longer pegged to specific dates, but to seasons — Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter — allowing for greater flexibility. Sachs and Lawlor threw out the old model of rigid slots when they found themselves closing hits because they had committed to a new show on a given date. With just 80 seats to sell, they had to think more creatively. "We changed everyone to a flexible pass and we've never looked back. This allows us to keep a hit going. It also allows our subscribers the flexibility to come at their convenience—a good thing when decisions today tend to be so last-minute."

So is the small physical plant a plus or a minus?

"It's a question we've been wrestling with for years," Sachs acknowledged, "a tug between ambition and what is right for the company. We even explored Hollywood quite a bit, looking to find maybe a second space or larger building, thinking, boy, how much bigger we could be. Yet talking with Fugard about this, he said, 'Don't. Don't do it.' Maybe he's right…"

So here's the dilemma: Awards and recognition are certainly not lacking, but breaking even—let alone making money—is a perennial struggle. The staff has ballooned to six people: Lawlor and Sachs, producing director Simon Levy, tech director Scott Tuomey, associate producer Yvonne Bennett and head of subscriptions Diana Gibson. The budget has "a little more than doubled" since they opened their doors, and sits between $550,000 to $600,000. It does not easily enable profit.

Stephen Sachs

"There are times when I wish we had more seats, a bigger stage," said Sachs, "but there are plenty of examples out there of smaller theatres that have gone on to larger buildings and have regretted it or have lost something in the move; suddenly the focus becomes the real estate and maintaining the overhead.

"I don't ever want to lose the magic of this intimate space. It makes for such a visceral experience.

But after almost 25 years, there's also a question of growth. We can't become stagnant or complacent and we do want to continue building forward. You don't want to sell your soul and you don't want to lose what makes this theatre special."

Lawlor concurred. She's writing a play for which she's received a grant and acknowledged that "our losses have decreased; we may even show a tiny profit this year."

The future?

"Expanding fund-raising; exploring the possibility of adding 19 seats to our existing space. Not easy," said Sachs, "but we *can* do that under the 99-seat Equity Waiver and 19 seats could make a difference. Other than that, we're looking to expand our exposure across the country and having more of our work done at other theatres."

So the funky Fountain remains the-little-theatre-that-could, on its funky street with its broken sidewalk, its postage-stamp parking lot, and widely enjoyed by many people who apparently have found out that they really, really like what it has to offer.

Case in point: The current production of *My Name is Asher Lev*, a moving piece about a young man's difficult choice between religion and art, written by Aaron Posner and staged by Stephen Sachs, has been extended to May 18. That's the good news. But the glowing reviews have caused the run, extension included, to sell out completely. They do have a waiting list.

WHAT: *My Name Is Asher Lev,* The Fountain Theatre

WHERE: 5060 Fountain Avenue, Hollywood, CA 90029

WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, extended through May 18. SOLD OUT.

HOW: 323-663-1525. Tickets $34

You may join the waitlist at www.fountaintheatre.com.

Top image: Jenny O'Hara and Nick Ullett in 'Bakersfield Mist' at the Fountain Theatre. Photo by Ed Krieger.

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