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Once Again, Theatre-Maker John Steppling Exits America

Adam Leipzig · Friday, December 2nd, 2011

John Steppling, iconoclastic LA theatre-maker, has exited America again. He left for Europe yesterday morning.

If you don't know John Steppling, that's because he's always been at the fringes of theatre and he lived in Europe for most of the past decade. While never part of America's well-established institutions, Steppling taught hundreds of playwrights and crafts his own pieces that are as uncompromising as they have been influential. Steppling's a playwright who believes in the text, and his plays come at you in bursts of scenes punctuated by staccato blackouts; his characters, whose motives are clear although their situations may be ambiguous, live on the margins, as Steppling does.

Last week playwright and screenwriter Marlane Meyer started a Facebook thread that began, "John Steppling is leaving town because he can't find work. This is appalling. He is one of the best, if not the best, playwriting teachers in the United States can't find a job, plus, he is also a gifted and provocative lecturer on theater, culture and politics. Everybody's brain gets bigger when he's around."

John told me he was flattered by the respect, although he cringed a bit at the attention. He wrote to me as he was packing his bags:

"I was in Europe for ten years, a bit more actually. In France, England, Poland and Norway. In many respects I prefer Europe. That said…..it's not easy to do theatre in countries where the language isn't your own. I like working in theatre in the US — even though you can't make money doing it. The institutional theatres are there to destroy radical ideas – but even with the penury attached to working in theatre, I still always did it. I also enjoy teaching — certainly my workshop became the one thing that kept me sane these last two years. It's a wonderful very smart group and we will continue to develop the radio serial. I may return for a few weeks next year to see to the recording. However……..yes I found it impossible to get hired at the University level.

"Also….part of me thinks it's healthy psychically to leave. The émigré-leaving trope is something that has real structural, psychological and almost ideological implications. Artists who don't leave, and I see this often, tend to wear down. You pay a price for trying to have integrity. Those who work second jobs and do whatever they can to survive, in order to make art….they get beaten down. You can see it in their bodies and in their eyes. — on the other hand….I know people in fiction and art who simply do NOTHING except write about themselves, or their careers more accurately. The desperation to survive….to get some kind of income of out your work, tends to just

suffocate people, and we all feel this. The sort of indignity of having to plead with people to come to your play. To hound them and bug them and bribe them……it just becomes really depressing.

“So leaving is good in many ways. If not most ways. Would I have liked to stay longer? Yes. Yes, because I love my workshop and I enjoy and value the work we have done. But I don’t want to flip burgers during the week so I can get a show up for a few weeks a year.”

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