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The great not-so-white-hot way

A Portland theater director reviews the current Broadway season

BY JON KRETZU

Summertime, and the New York theater season is exciting and exhilaratingly sultry. For more than 20 years, one of the highlights of my year has always been my annual trip to London and New York, soaking up as much theater, dance and music as humanly possible. These trips are very special and invaluable to me as a source of artistic inspiration and renewal. While some seasons are better than others, it never ceases to amaze me how varied and stimulating the arts scene is in these two culturally rich cities.

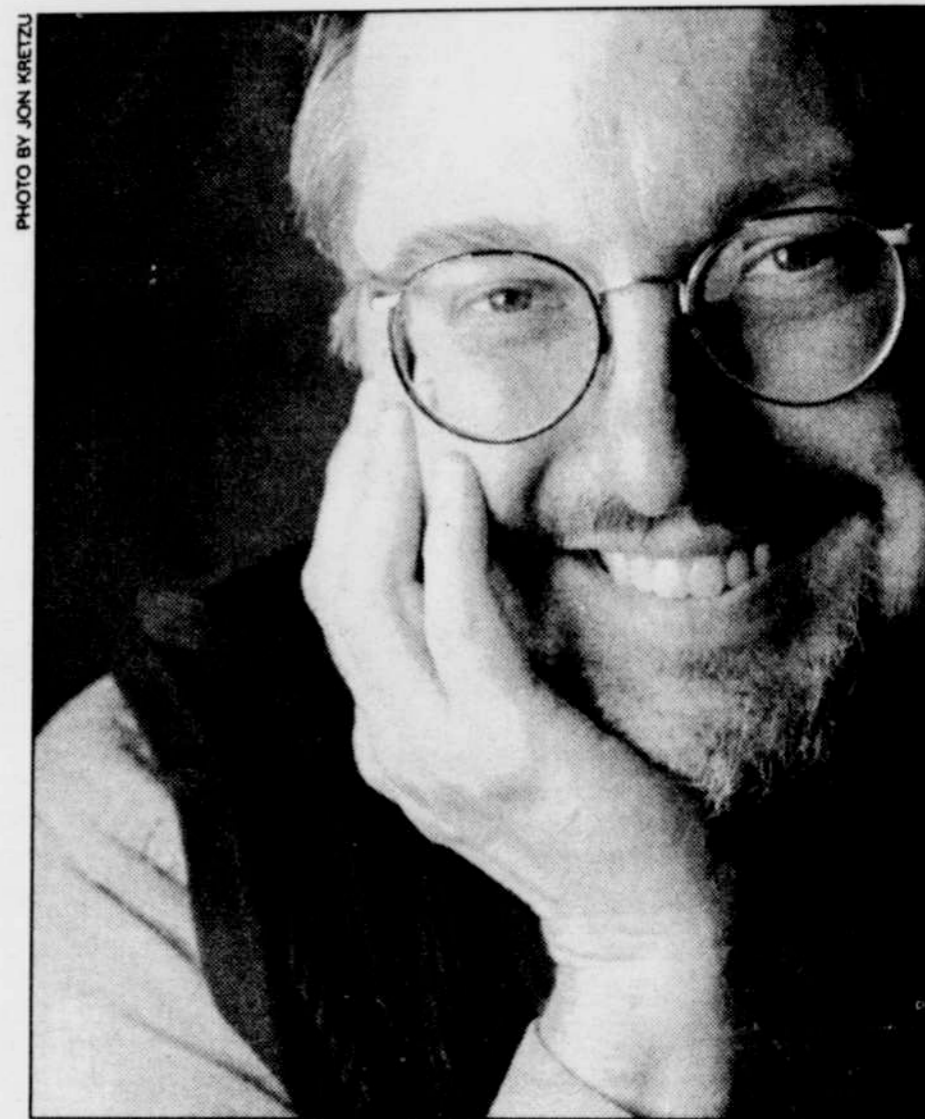
The current New York theater scene is a bit low-key and disappointing, but then the glorious highs of last season are hard acts to follow. Last year's return of drama to Broadway generated a powerful current that electrified the entire community. Any season offering the multiple thrills of Warren Leight's splendid family drama *Side Man*, Connor MacPherson's haunting play *The Weir*, Brian Dennehey and Elizabeth Franz in *Death of a Salesman*, Kevin Spacey and company in *The Iceman Cometh* and Dame Judi Dench in *Amy's View*—plus the sheer adrenaline rush provided by the original casts of the revivals *Fosse*, *Cabaret* and *Chicago*—is a unique theatrical event.

This year's Broadway drama season is dismal indeed, with the highlights few and far between. Claudia Shear's salute to Mae West, *Dirty Blonde*, is a tough ticket (I couldn't manage it), as is Michael Frayn's Tony-winning *Copenhagen*, a play whose esoteric charms eluded me when I saw it in London last year. There also were well-received revivals of O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten* and Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*, which I also saw in London and found to be chilly and emotionally distant.

The off-Broadway drama season is sparked by Donald Margulies' clever and undeniably engrossing Pulitzer Prize-winner *Dinner with Friends*, which is so well-written that it almost disguises the fact that it's just a really good episode of *Thirty-something* onstage.

Another highlight of the current off-Broadway season is *The Laramie Project*, a powerful new play by Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project, who created the highly successful *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials Of Oscar Wilde*.

Rather than simply being a docudrama re-enactment of the events, *The Laramie Project* is



Jon Kretzu takes a busman's holiday

a moving study of the town and citizens of Laramie, Wyo., and how their lives were touched and altered by the Matthew Shepard tragedy. Kaufman and his fine acting ensemble spent nearly two years interviewing the people of the town, getting to know them in such intimate detail that what emerges is a work of universal relevance. The work's quiet impact comes from its exploration of how a single, horrific act of violence can both tear a town apart while also bringing a community together in both shared strength and pride.

As we get to know the citizens of this little town and watch their prismatic reactions to this unthinkable crime and its aftermath, we get caught up in the play's powerful exploration of basic human truths such as hate and humanity, death and renewal, chaos and community. Lovingly performed by the multitalented ensemble who created it, *The Laramie Project* is an *Our Town* for our time.

As has often been the case in recent years, things are somewhat brighter on the Broadway musical front, even if there is no end in sight to the past decade's dearth of exciting new musicals. This season brought us the chamber-sized delicacy of James Joyce's *The Dead*, two competing versions of the mordant 1920s epic poem *The Wild Party*, and *Marie Christine*, a New Orleans voodoo

version of *Medea*. None of these new works lasted out the season, and, based on their original cast recordings and critical reports, few deserved to.

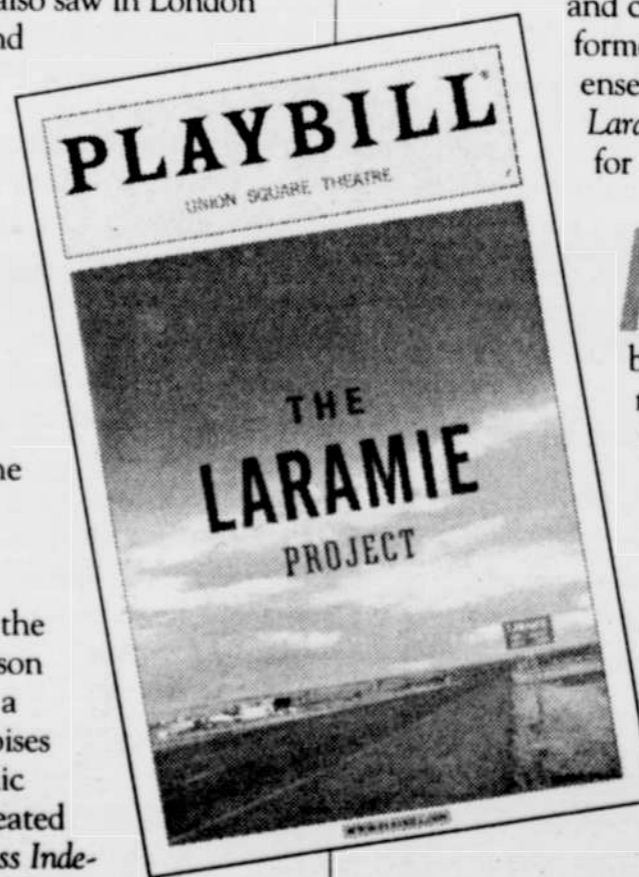


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