

Curtain Call

After nearly 40 successful years as the Center Theatre Group's founding director, the eminent and much-beloved Gordon Davidson is taking his final curtain call. But his legacy shines brightly, even as changes at CTG in Davidson's wake seem to signal uncertain transformations in the future.

BY KATHERINE TURMAN

There's a silver-wrapped gift in Gordon Davidson's office, dropped off at the Center Theatre Group's front desk. It's a "thank you" from a complete stranger, an apt metaphor for what Gordon has given to the city - a visible-to-some, but behind-the-scenes-to-most gift of quality theater. The package is also a parting gift, because, after 38 years as artistic director of the CTG - the Mark Taper Forum and the Ahmanson and the newly minted Kirk Douglas Theatre - Davidson is leaving the stage - in stages. His office in the CTG's Temple Street building is a decent size, packed with scripts, awards, childhood drawings from his grown kids, a life-size "Zoot Suit" cardboard cutout of actor Edward James Olmos with Davidson's face in place - but it's a downgrade from his former digs, now occupied by his successor, Michael Ritchie.

Genial, generous and universally liked, for nearly 40 years, Davidson has had the enviable - or unenviable - task of imposing his artistic sensibilities, curtailed by self-imposed commercial considerations, on Los Angeles' theater-going public. His final directorial work, "Stuff Happens," about "the historical march to a preemptive war against Iraq," by playwright David Hare, was an easy choice as a parting salvo for Davidson's Taper career.

"Mostly, my thoughts were about taking chances. I did not want to go quietly into the good night," he laughs, chatting in his office before a "Stuff Happens" rehearsal. "I think that the play is interesting and challenging enough and speaks to the lives we're living now and the political situation and the war in Iraq and the war on terror, that I think this must be heard and that pleases me a lot."

Davidson, 72, built a career that has given both critics and audiences much to talk about, with very few artistic gaffes along the way. From "Zoot Suit" to the debut of "Angels in America" to "Children of a Lesser God," the director notes, in a phrase that might sound cliché coming from someone else, that, "in the long run, the real joy and excitement has been the audience."

He puts much consideration into who comprises L.A., and as a Brooklyn native who moved to L.A. in the early '60s, capturing the city's sensibility was at first elusive.

"When I did my first play at UCLA, 'The Deputy,' the night we opened was when Watts went up in flames and I didn't know where Watts was. My journey did not take me there," confesses the son of a speech and drama professor. "I thought, as a New Yorker, if Harlem had gone up in flames, I would know exactly [where it was.] Here you have to work harder [to include] downtown, Baldwin Hills, Boyle Heights. Instinctively, I wanted to put my arms around the city, and it was very hard, but I thought I could do it through the theater."

He didn't waste much time. While many know the 1981 "Zoot Suit" film starring Edward James Olmos in a career-defining role as "El Pachuco," Davidson first staged the play - with "Eddie," as he calls Olmos, in 1978.

"I had heard a story about the Zoot Suit riots and it interested me, and I was having a meeting with Luis Valdez of the El Teatro Campesino," recalls Davidson. "He said he'd been thinking about a play about the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, and we took the two ideas and put them together and the rest is history. It was amazing to have [Anglo audiences], sit side by side with Latino audiences."

Davidson, 72, who looks at home in a suit and tie, and whose handsome demeanor and easy affability make him well suited for the Hollywood milieu he often operates in, is aware of the Taper's reputation.

"I think that it's important that an institution like ours, that appears to be based in the Anglo world, is really concerned with and part of the larger picture, and nothing makes me happier when I look into the house and I see a mixture... it's not easy to get. The African Americans come out for African American plays, the Asians come out to see Asian plays, Latinos come for Latino plays, because it's their story. What you hope they discover, is that in a play, it may not be based about specific history, but about human relationships, and that they get the same [feelings]."

Even when Davidson segues out of his post as founding director, he vows, "I'm still going to tell the L.A. story." How he'll do that remains to be seen - he may let his fingers do the talking. "I write, but I don't know if I'm a writer," he muses. "I think I oughta tell the story of this whole period; not just me, but the decentralization of the American theatre and the changes in dynamics and relationships to the society; that interests me a lot. When I move out of here, I'll organize my files and see if the story is in my files."

As to the question of how odd it must be to "replace" yourself, Davidson doesn't have a simple answer, though he's happy to ruminate on the topic. "I let the Board do the search. Had I had a single candidate that I'd been nurturing, and there were a few I put forward... they wanted to make a wider search, and I think it was right. There's only one time you change from a founding director to the next, and traditionally, the worst thing is to inherit a job from somebody who has put a strong stamp on something. And there are examples of blood on the pavement, not the least of which is Joe Papp's Public Theater [in New York]."

"I saw some of the finalists," furthers Davidson, "and I am happy with their choice. Michael is a terrific human being, and he's a producer, not a director. But he will put all his efforts into making the three theater hum in his way, acknowledging that there's a history."

Some of that history is already fading, however, in what must be a painful blow for the departing Davidson. The L.A. Times reported May 24 that new artistic director Ritchie is "eliminating the Other Voices program for disabled artists - a Taper fixture since 1982 - plus, he's also cutting the Latino, Asian American and African American labs established from 1993 to 1995," under Davidson's thoughtful tutelage.

Theater in Los Angeles is a unique animal, and while many of Davidson's productions have gone on to Broadway, cable and films, he never fully made the leap into those mediums, merely dabbled briefly. "There were always people sniffing around [to recruit him into the film or TV business]. I chose to do this because I believe in it and I thought that's what I'm here to do."

Defining theater in L.A. can be an uphill battle, however. Davidson offers an example of the worldview of the City of Angels. "I once gave a speech in Stockholm, and the audience asked questions after a performance of 'Terra Nova.' It soon became apparent they were not asking questions about Los Angeles, it was about Hollywood; 'what stars have you had?' I stopped and said, 'wait, I know that's what you know because that's the most visible export, but Los Angeles is a city full of all kinds of interesting people - doctors and lawyers and scientists - that's what makes the city happen.'

"For the most part, I think my work here has not been about Hollywood, but the biggest factor is the availability of actors who are also working in TV," says Davidson, whose son is a filmmaker who has "done a whole bunch of television... good shows," he qualifies. "One of the biggest pluses about working in Los Angeles is that they're all here, and the worst thing is that they're here to do film," furthers Davidson. "One agent said, 'what if my client got a job?' and I said, 'what do you think I just offered him?'"

Actor Tyrees Allen, who plays Colin Powell in "Stuff Happens," and is also a successful Broadway and TV actor, with roles on "Jag," and "The Practice," was thrilled to get his initial call from the Taper. He concurs with Davidson on the problem of stage actors opting out of plays for more lucrative in-front-of-the-camera gigs. "As I get older, the less theater I can afford to do. But this came about at the perfect time," he says.

Allen says Davidson "challenges me to go deeper, he doesn't micromanage my work," calling his directorial approach and personality "very reasoned, even keel. I sense he has a lot of plays in him."

Indeed, Davidson, who also has a daughter and one granddaughter, is both vital and amenable, seemingly as excited working on "Stuff Happens" as he was his first Taper production, the controversial 1967 offering "The Devils," which was denounced as obscene by the city's then-archbishop.

Davidson cast a couple of "players" in "Stuff Happens," but he says he didn't choose Keith Carradine, who portrays President Bush, because he's a "name. It's a bonus," he concedes. "I did feel that someone playing the president of the United States ought to have some recognizability."

Normally, it's the Ahmanson that would attract marquee stars, as Davidson explains: "The way I distinguished the two theatres, at least in the past - and I have to be careful because I am now talking about the past - I would describe them if someone came to the box office for the Taper, they would say, 'what's playing?' and if someone came for the Ahmanson, they would say, 'who's in it?'" He notes that Taper staples, including John Lithgow and Tyne Daly, were theater successes were here before they were "stars," and will always come back to the theatre.

But what about the public? Will they come - and come back? It's a challenge. Downtown L.A. has always been somewhat of a joke among major urban cities, deserted at night, many Angelenos never even venture downtown more than several times during their lives.

"When I came here in 1964, there was a feeling of great excitement, the Music Center was just opening," he recalls. "Little did I think that three years later, I would be running one of the theaters! There was a sense that downtown, with big buildings going up, I think the genius of downtown and Mrs. Chandler's (the civic leader who gave the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, the Music Center's first venue, its name) dream of downtown, was the way these freeways converged. We felt that excitement; people didn't complain about traveling, it was 15, 20 minutes from the Westside. I used to go home after a days' work here, in the beginning days, leave at 6, have dinner with my kids, read them a story and come back in time for an 8 o'clock curtain. Now I'm lucky if I go one way. I know it's deterring people," he says. "The city has to solve it. They've not been forward-thinking. I know the subway, there's an attempt, and buses, but it's deeper than that."

Despite the obstacles, he says, "in general, we've been doing OK, but there is some resistance now that I think has to be addressed." During his reign, Davidson has kept the \$42-million-a year enterprise in the black, adding the Ahmanson to his Taper duties in 1989, then taking on the inception what seems to be his current "favorite child," Culver City's Kirk Douglas Theatre.

"One thing I'm happiest about for myself is that I was able to be here for the opening of the Douglas Theatre and start it on its journey. I'm very, very proud of that. Both the theatre itself, which is inviting, and the shows that we've done, this all-premiere season." He beams like the proud grandparent he is, checking his watch, tardy for "Stuff Happens" rehearsal.

"If there's an empty space, just say a line, even if it's from another show, that's what I like to do."
- Fred Willard to Eugene Levy in "Waiting For Guffman."

Davidson's productions are a far cry from the campy local theater Christopher Guest directs in the mockumentary "Waiting For Guffman," but it's clearly not just lip service when Davidson says he's concerned with regional flavor and topics.

It's a proverbial curtain that rises on the preview of Davidson's final production on May 25th, which, while written by British playwright David Hare, is relevant to all Americans. Inside the round, 750-seat Mark Taper Forum building, the set for "Stuff Happens" is stark as the audience files in. Davidson stands in an aisle, looking alternatively pensive and effusive. In a bright blue shirt and colorful tie, he remains anonymous to most of the passing patrons despite his role as the architect of what goes on in this famous room.

His genius has not gone unnoticed, as Davidson has garnered a Tony Award (theatrical excellence), LADCC Award (distinguished achievement), the 1993 Casting Society of America Lifetime Achievement Award, among many others, and was appointed to the National Council on the Arts by Bill Clinton, who appears in his "Stuff Happens" in name only as "the prior administration."

As the older ladies next to me discuss hearing aides, the green-jacketed ushers guide octogenarians and a fair selection of 40- and 50-somethings to their seats. A few people of color, a young man in a Rock the Vote T-shirt and a dreadlocked couple break up the sea of older white faces.

Davidson glances at his watch, when, at 8:05 p.m., actors begin to stride onto the stage, house lights still up. Davidson takes a seat in the center of the audience, which quiets down as the room dims. Ten seconds into the play, there's laughter, warranted and hearty. Keith Carradine as Bush has a stellar Texas twang and presence, saying "God wants me to do it," as justification for his presidency to a giggling audience. Tyrees Allen is a particularly powerful and likable Colin Powell, garnering spontaneous applause for a heated speech.

This night marks the beginning of the end for Davidson, and it's going well. The journey from founding artistic director to outgoing artistic director has been a long, fruitful one, though five month's into his replacement's tenure, some of Davidson's pet programs and people are getting their walking papers.

But at this point, the torch has been passed, Davidson has chosen not to comment on successor Ritchie's actions, and he's happy artistically with his final choice of plays.

"There are different ways you can take chances - subject matter, style, a classic revival and what you want to say with them. I went through all of that, but when this play crossed my view I knew it was what I had to do."

As for his approach to portraying living public figures, he's done a handful of plays with that obstacle, namely "The Catonville Nine" and "In The Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer."

"I'm not doing look-alikes and I'm not doing Madame Tussauds' waxworks or a comedy sketch on 'Saturday Night Live' (though Davidson does bear a resemblance to 'SNL' genius Lorne Michaels); we want to capture the essence of the character. It's a fun way to do it," he says of "Stuff Happens," which premiered first in England.

"I didn't choose my first play to make controversy," he furthers, referring to "The Devils." "I did it naively; I thought, 'this is a really good play about a historical event that actually happened,' and was about society, more than the libertine priest and nun with sexual fantasies, it was about mass hysteria and what it can do to a community. 'Stuff Happens' has a contemporary idea and a kind of classic form; it more resembles the plays of Shakespeare. So maybe that's the bookend."

And for Davidson, it marks both a happy ending and a new beginning.

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