

Theater Conversation with Arnold Mittelman
Conducted by David Ellenstein
Circa 2020

David:

David Ellenstein here, Artistic Director of North Coast Repertory Theatre. It's my pleasure today to be joined by my dear friend Arnold Mittelman. So, by way of introduction, I have known Arnold for all about 20 years. Arnold was the Producing Artistic Director of the famed Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, Florida for 21 years. And I was lucky enough to have Arnold invite me to come down there to direct several plays in my career, which were great experiences. And we're going to talk a little bit about that. Before that, Arnold was the co-founder of a theatre called The Whole Theatre Company in New Jersey, co-founder with Olympia Dukakis, and ran that for a number of years. And Arnold has produced on Broadway and directed all over the place. And we were actually lucky enough to do the workshop of the revised musical Rothschild and Sons, which was based on The Rothschilds by Bach and Harnick. And we did the workshop of it at North Coast Rep, which Arnold produced. And then he went on to produce it off-Broadway and went on to produce it on the West End in London. I want to ask you about the Coconut Grove Playhouse, where not only every theater star in the country, but almost every movie star in the country at one time or another worked at the famed Coconut Grove Playhouse. And it was really renowned for bringing in the very top actors in the country. So I want to ask you, when you think about your 21 years there, what are a couple of really unusual or fun stories that just pop in your mind about that tenure or your training and career with different people that we might all know?

Arnold:

You know, actors at times become very involved with their roles.

I remember when I went to the High School of Performing Arts, Zero Mostel came to talk to us, and he talked about how he pretended anyway that he was a very method actor and that the other actors in the company who he hated, he waited for outside to harass and torment them as they left the theater. I mean, it was all the kind of humor that Zero was very good at. But as a kid at the High School of Performing Arts, I thought this was amazing. And then, of course, I was lucky enough to be able to produce the world premiere of Fame the Musical at Coconut Grove Playhouse. And last year when my wife and I were in London, I happened to go by a marquee and saw the name of my theater and my name there. And now it's 30th anniversary production.

David:

That's amazing. So you went to High School of Performing Arts. You grew up in New York City. And then how did it come about that you formed a theater with Olympia Dukakis?

Arnold:

Well, after I graduated the High School of Performing Arts, I was lucky enough to also wind up at NYU School of the Arts. And from there, I formed the New York Free Theater, which is the first interracial street theater using students that I was classmates with at NYU and Yale and Columbia. All of us who wanted to make a difference with our lives rather than just become, you

know, people who would pursue interests only in Hollywood or on Broadway. And in the course of that relationship, we began to attend workshops that were being run for people in the business. And Olympia and her husband, Louis Zorich, were running one of them. And my wife then at the time, Judith Delgado and I, we went to the work-shop and we just started to become, you know, friends with all of these people. And eventually they formed a consortium of people who were essentially 10 married couples. And at one point, Louis got a part in the film *Fiddler on the Roof*, where he was going to play the constable. And we decided as a collective group in what had to be a moment of absolute youthful insanity, that we would go with him to Zagreb, Yugoslavia, so that we could continue the work we were doing on developing the company. So all of us went to Yugoslavia under the belief that we would all be in the movie, none of whom which came true. But we were able to work together and form the whole theatre company. And the name came from everybody when we got together saying it's the whole company here, it's the whole company here. And just decided, let's call it the whole theatre company. And I had the good fortune of working with them for over a decade.

David:

Wow. So, and where was it located?

Arnold:

We were going to be in New York, but then a few people, including Olympia Louis, moved to a community called Montclair, New Jersey, which would be 25 minutes from the middle of Manhattan. It's just one of these great places to live. And I was going to soon have a child, so we bought out there. And then the community literally heard about the fact that we were rehearsing in a local church. And they came to us and they said, would you like to have a theatre company here? We want that. We'd love it for our community. So they donated a bank building to us and we renovated it. And we opened a theatre company in Montclair, New Jersey, that drew upon all of the work we were doing together collectively and a lot of the talent from New York City. And that's actually how I got to get to Coconut Grove, because one of the people who came to work with us was a gentleman named Jose Ferrer, one of the great actors in the history of the theatre. And he and I became very good friends. And at that point, he was the artistic advisor to the Coconut Grove Playhouse and realized he couldn't juggle his career with that responsibility. So, at some point toward the end of my tenure at Coconut Grove, when I was going to produce and direct a play called *Alone Together*, on Broadway. That was with Janice Page and Kevin McCarthy. Joe said to me, why don't you come down and talk to the people at Coconut Grove? I'd never been to Miami before in my life. I said, for you, Joe, I'll come down. I did. And the search, the National Search Committee said, would you consider becoming our producing artistic director? And I so fell in love with the history to that point of the Coconut Grove that I decided to accept the responsibility and move.

David:

So when you think about your 21 years there, and I know you've been lucky enough to work with so many of the great people in the theatre, who stands out as like, I am so glad that I got to brush with this person and collaborate with this person?

David:

Is there one or two that just kind of jumped to the top? I mean, aside from me, that jumped to the top of your list?

Arnold:

I was going to say you, but now that you've taken yourself off the list. I'm off the list. Edward Albee. He had a home in Coconut Grove. We became good friends. He directed for me. I directed for him in a play he previously directed, in which I thought there should be parts cut in the play. I thought I was actually going to be thrown out of my own theatre by suggesting to Edward that he might make this cut. And he was very open and willing to do that, which was shocking to me. So, the opportunity to be with him was amazing. And because it was Miami, remarkable things happened. For instance, when Joe Ferrer was still living in the community, I got to know a man named Mario Vargas Llosa, a great, great author. And he had a play he wanted read that he'd written, and Joe did a reading of it. But at the same time, I was able to sit at lunch with Jose Ferrer, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Edward Albee and just listen. That's all you could do with that crowd.

David:

It was pretty formidable stuff. I remember when I was at Coconut Grove directing Halpern and Johnson, which I actually subsequently did at North Coast Rep, and it was Brian Murray and Hal Linden. So Edward Albee came to the play and I asked Brian, did he like it? And he said it was one of the highest compliments Edward Albee ever paid him of a play. He had come to see him, and he said, well, I wasn't completely bored. That's the highest compliment he's ever gotten from Edward Albee

Arnold:

Edward could be very... He could be very acid. A director who shall remain nameless was directing *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* for me with Elizabeth Ashley. And Edward, after the first read-through came, we went out for a drink, the three of us, and he turned to the director and said, now, did you read this play before you went into rehearsal at all? Yeah. So he could let you... He could hurt you if he needed to in ways that you would never forget.

David:

Right. Well, I had such a great time in my experiences down there, You know, I was actually directing the final production in the 50th anniversary season with Lucy Arnaz. Melinda Lopez's play, *Sonia Flew*, which is a lovely But we got most of the run in before the theater actually closed, which was heartbreaking, because so many artists love to come down there, not only to come to Miami and to work in the famed Coconut Grove playoffs, but also that the work had an ethic to it and a sensibility that you brought to the company, which was so appreciated by everybody that came down there.

Arnold:

A lot of dedicated people. A lot of them. Surprising commitments they made, including my great friendship that I had with Tony Randall and Jack Klugman. Right. Who were... I know you did

Sunshine Boys recently. Right. We rehearsed that before it moved to Broadway. We premiered it at Coconut Grove, and I spent time with them, and they became such good friends that it was the kind of relationship, where if I had something I thought they might want to do, I could call up either or both of them, and they'd commit to coming back, which was remarkable.

David:

So you've moved on since leaving Coconut Grove Playhouse, and you founded the National Jewish Theater, and you founded the National Holocaust Theater International Initiative . You want to talk a little bit about that work?

Arnold:

Sure. Well, the National Jewish Theater is actually a producing name for the National Jewish Theater Foundation, and when Coconut Grove closed, literally within six months from its closing, I decided what did I want to do next, and so I thought that was something I would like to try to do, which is to somehow commemorate, honor, and recognize the cultural commitment in theater, and the talent and excellence of Jewish authors, playwrights, and theater artists. Edward Albee said to me, why do you need to do that? There's already Broadway. But I thought it was going to be something very important to me, and we did several shows, including one that you directed about Ira Gershwin, that proved to be incredibly successful wherever they were done. And as part of that journey, I was approached by people who said to me, you know, there's something that's been missing about the Holocaust, and it's 70 odd years after the end of the war. And I said, what is that? They said the commemoration and understanding of the role theater has played, both during and in recognition of it since that date. And so I decided I would see where that investigation took me, and it wound up becoming the Holocaust Theater International Initiative, which is now tied to the University of Miami. And as part of that, we do research on every play that's ever been written about the Holocaust from 1933 to the present, and we found close to 1,000 plays, musicals, cabarets. We do readings of those plays, which North Coast Rep and a lot of your other colleagues there helped launch from the La Jolla Playhouse and also from the Old Globe. And now it is spread internationally in honor of commemorating the Holocaust through the use of theater. And we also have education in which we've developed college courses, and now a new book that I'm part author of called Enacting History, a practical guide to teaching the Holocaust through theater, which is aimed at teachers of the Holocaust who are not necessarily connected to the theater in any way, but it pretty much stems from the notion that something I have witnessed in my own lifetime, and that is the impact of playing roles in parts at any age level seems to move people into both a recognition of the person they're playing and an awareness of something that they remember for the rest of their lives. So, building on that model, we've developed a way to use scenes and monologues and testimony and artifacts to create theater classroom-related activities that can be used to teach the Holocaust.

David:

Well, I salute you. It's great work, and it's so important, and thank you for doing it. Thinking about your whole lifetime, having been committed to making theater happen, what still rings true

for you about why it's important and what is magical and different about it and why it's still needed in our world?

Arnold:

Well, I was able to do the national tour's launch of *Death of a Salesman* with Hal Holbrook. I later worked with Hal and his wife Dixie Carter in another play. But when we were doing that, I had the chance to meet Arthur Miller. And Mr. Miller handed me something that he thought I might enjoy reading, and it was entitled *The Blood Brotherhood of Perfect Strangers*. And it dealt with what happens when an audience is assembled who virtually never met each other or normally have never met each other before except maybe for whom they're with. And they assemble and they take in the experience in a united way of a live theater event occurring. And the way that is dynamically experienced, not only between them and the audience and between the actor and the audience, but collectively with each other. And those form bonds to the memories. I mean, David, let's face it. We are the makers of live memories, and that's all we really do. And people remember a moment or a play or a thought or what they felt when they saw something..

David:

Arnold, I'm so grateful to you for doing this today and sharing your wisdom and some glimpse into your lifetime spent pursuing this noble effort. I miss sitting and chatting with you like today.

Arnold:

I really enjoyed it, my friend. Thank you.