

**Radmila Nastić***Filološko-umetnički fakultet, Kragujevac***JOSEPH PAPP'S MULTIMEDIA CULTURAL PROJECT**

The paper is an overview of the work of the American theater producer Joseph Papp (1921-1991) who dominated the theatrical and intellectual scene of New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. He began with the Shakespeare Festival in Central Park, but in time he extended his activity to modern American drama produced in his Public Theater. Most of his productions were multimedia projects involving artist from other fields, which made Papp a significant cultural figure of contemporary America.

**Key Words:** Theater, Drama, Joseph Papp, Media, American Culture

In June 2005 the exhibition opened in The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts entitled 'A Community of Artists: 50 Years of the Public Theater' presenting archival documents, photographs, films, interviews, theater programs, designs, and original production elements of the Public Theater's landmark productions, recalling the work of the major American cultural icon Joseph Papp, the company's founder. The exhibition was drawn in large part from the personal papers of Papp, now part of NYPL's Billy Rose Theater Collection.<sup>1</sup> Public Library thus continued Public Theater's mission of providing democratic access to rich cultural resources, being, in the words of its president Paul LeClerc, 'an inspiration to creative minds for generations to come.'<sup>2</sup> The exhibition highlighted one of the most important aspects of the Public Theater's legacy – provision of a home for thousands of America's artists whose names (6,700 of them) were projected across a twenty-five-foot wall in the Library's gallery.

From 1954 until his death in 1991 theater producer Joseph Papp channeled and created the theatrical and intellectual life in New York City. His first major project was the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park started in 1957 with free productions of Shakespeare. In 1967 Papp obtained from the city the Astor Library Building to produce

1 'Exhibition Documents 50 Years of Theatrical Innovation', by Jim Young, The Epoch Times, Jun 25, 2005.

2 Ibid.

plays, movies and experimental works by new artists. It will become The Public Theater, and from 1992, The Joseph Papp Public Theater. Papp was an important promoter of off-Broadway theater and such new playwrights as David Mamet, Sam Shepard and David Rabe, as well as the custodian of the best American theater tradition embodied in Eugene O'Neill, 'the consciousness of America' as he called him. Papp produced the famous musicals *Hair* (1967) and *A Chorus Line* (1975). He was an initiator of multimedia projects, such as the opera version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Papp's favorite play, and Pierre Boulez's notorious 'Rug Concerts' of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He successfully fought against conservatism and censorship, while struggling to restore government funding to the arts without any form of censorship.

Joseph Papp was also a promoter of interdisciplinary arts. Among the collaborators of Papp and the Public Theater were artists from other fields, architects and designers. The notable example was the designer Ming Cho Lee whose remarkable set models for the productions staged in the park from 1964 to 1971 were also exhibited in the Public Library's 2005 exhibition. Public Theater productions have won a total of 138 Obie Awards, 40 Tony Awards, 39 Drama Desk Awards, 19 Lucille Lortel Awards, and 4 Pulitzer Prizes. The Public has brought 49 of its shows to Broadway. The success must have been partly due to Papp's excellent cooperation with leading critics and media, in the first place CBS Television where he was employed full time when he was starting his theater project, and such influential critics as Robert Brustein and Brooks Atkinson, who were recruited among the chief supporters of Public Theater. 'We'll be setting up a whole cultural movement', exclaimed Papp proudly.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Papp was called a cultural populist and indeed he introduced and promoted the so-called multiculturalism only later to become fashionable: Charles Gordone's 'No Place to Be Somebody' was the first African American and off-Broadway show to win the Pulitzer Prize; today prominent black actors James Earl Jones and Morgan Freeman were given chance to play in Shakespeare's and other plays in The Public Theater and Shakespeare Festival (outstanding examples are Jones as Oberon in 1961 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', Morgan Freeman as Petruchio in a 1990 production of 'The Taming of the Shrew', among others); Ntozake Change's 1976 play 'for colored girls who have considered suicide/when rainbow is enuf' was produced in The Public; David Hwang's work was also produced in The Public; the Theater was home to the Festival Latino in 1988 with productions in Spanish .

3 'The Theater', 'Joseph Papp: Populist and Imperialist', July 3, 1972.

However, Joseph Papp was not only a populist: in 1988 he was the first recipient of the Folger Library's annual William Shakespeare Award for Classical Theater, introduced to honor individuals who have made major contributions to classical theater in the United States. In the same year Joseph Papp and some other members of his company were in the committee for the celebration of Eugene O'Neill's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Public Theater staged a repertory season of O'Neill's plays directed by Hose Quintero, and a free marathon screenings of five films based on O'Neill's plays.<sup>4</sup>

Papp's prime achievement has been the Shakespeare Festival originating from the Shakespeare Workshop in a Presbyterian Church on East Sixth Street in 1953. Papp managed to stage free Shakespeare in the park and even to have the city pay part of the cost of production. In 1960 the city gave him \$60,000 – revenue from subway chewing gum machines. In 1971 he persuaded the city to buy the former Astor Library (to be later converted into theater), and lease it to him for \$1 a year. Papp took part of the profit from his successful Broadway productions to finance unprofitable modern plays, like Rabe's 'Sticks and Bones'.

For Papp Shakespeare stood for life energy which he endeavoured to match with theater energy. 'You can more easily reach a working-class audience with Shakespeare than you can with contemporary plays,' said Papp.<sup>5</sup> 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona' started as a free production in the park in 1971, but ended as 'the biggest money earner' in Broadway in the following year. Papp 'embodied the ideal of live theater,' as was underlined by Gregory Mosher at a public discussion sponsored by Columbia University Arts Initiative to celebrate the legacy of Joseph Papp in 2004. Mosher, an actor himself, called Papp 'a persistent presence,' an 'energising force,' a man who revered Shakespeare and quoted from him frequently. The actor Kevin Kline, among the many now famous movie stars including Meryl Streep and Al Pacino, who began their career at Public Theater, remembered Papp encouraging his crew by citing Shakespeare's 'Henry V': 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.'<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Papp's contribution included authorship and sponsorship of publications accompanying productions of plays: 'Shakespeare Alive' (1988) together with Elizabeth Kirkland, presented Shakespeare against the cultural background of his time; 'Theater in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players and...' (1986), with an introduction by Papp, summarized the history of American theater; 'A Portrait of a Theater' (1979), also

4 'News, Notes and Queries', The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter, Vol.III, No.3, January, 1988.

5 'The Theater', July 3, 1972.

6 Gary Shapiro, 'Papp's Pride', 'The New York Sun', October 25, 2004.

introduced by Papp, that was ordered by Papp from the photographer Frederic Ohringer, today represents a valuable document of an artistic project with a series of black and white photographs of the artists attached to the Public Theater in its prime time; a series of editions of Shakespeare's plays produced in the Park were published with Papp's introductions.

The paper is an introduction into the study of the indirect influence of Joseph Papp's work on drama scholarship in New York and The United States, especially Shakespearean scholarship and studies of modern dramatic theory: it cannot be a coincidence that from the 1960s on United States has produced so many important books on the theory of drama, especially tragedy after the 'death of tragedy' had been proclaimed in the early 60s (Michel and Sewall, Elder Olson, Murray Krieger, Robert Corrigan, Francis Ferguson, Normand Berlin etc.)

The fact is that Papp's Public Theater was considered to be in the first place a writer's company. In 1972, when the American playwright seemed to be 'an endangered species', Papp discovered that America in fact had 'more new plays worthy of production than can be produced in the U.S.' Donald Schoenbaum, managing director of the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, was quoted saying that 'The work he's doing – nurturing of playwrights – is enormous.'<sup>7</sup>

Papp himself considered his discovery and promotion of David Rabe to be his highest achievement, calling Rabe 'the most important writer we've ever had'. Rabe's reputation was established at the Public's in early 1970s as the major playwright's of the Vietnam-War era. Papp was responsible for the first professional production of Rabe's first significant play 'The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel' in 1971. Papp further produced 'Sticks and Bones' and 'Streamers' – together they formed the 'Vietnam Trilogy'. Rabe was himself a Vietnam veteran who wrote not only about the war experience, but also about the post-war drama of a man returning to his family and to a society incapable to comprehend full implications of war which Rabe described as 'a surreal carnival of death.'<sup>8</sup> 'It wasn't just that I couldn't reach my family, I couldn't reach anybody', said Rabe.<sup>9</sup> This kind of experience was something new even to Papp: as a radical he had been thinking and acting mostly in terms of the condemnation of war and the U.S. military involvement, without much regard to the feelings of soldiers.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Theater'.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Basic Training of Pavlo Humme', Enotes, Jan. 7, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Sam Shepard's reputation of a significant new playwright commenced when he was commissioned by Joe Papp to write a play for his theater – it was to be 'The Curse of the Starving Class'. Shepard later recalled the occasion: in a telephone conversation Papp expressed his desire to do one of Shepard's plays (Shepard had already written and produced a number of plays, but none with wider critical acclaim or popularity). He asked Papp for advice and Papp recommended the subject-matter; '...a family, two sons, one stays home, one goes off to Vietnam or anyway to war and gets fucked up.'<sup>10</sup> Shepard immediately noticed that it was the same story as in Rabe's 'Sticks and Bones' but did not mind much, seeing this as an opportunity to write about his own painful family experience at last. Indeed, the topic was common to all three significant American playwrights that Papp valued so much: O'Neill, Rabe and Shepard. Dealing with their own personal concerns and with their family conflicts, they simultaneously dealt with the fundamental American themes: disintegration of American family and the value system in a money-oriented consumer society, the inability to communicate, the search for the sense of the self. It was said of both Rabe and Shepard that they became successful only when they adopted O'Neill's American realism, and it had been said of O'Neill that he 'achieved greatness only when he adopted an unadorned Ibsenian realism' (Robert Brustein).<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Papp and his favourite playwrights, in the tradition of Eugene O'Neill, were suspicious towards Hollywood and superficial entertainment, called by one of Papp's early protégés David Mamet, 'reversion to entertainment as pure titillation'<sup>12</sup>, (though Mamet and Shepard would become famous Hollywood stars and develop a kind of love-hate relationship with it); they have been equally suspicious towards mass-media's tendency to distort truth. Pursuit of truth behind the surface of appearances was William Shakespeare's obvious passion, and Eugene O'Neill's enduring quest which, according to him, could be fully realized only in the transfiguring nobility of tragedy focused not on achievement but on struggle itself.

Not all the playwrights repaid the debt they owed to Joseph Papp (some have called him cultural imperialist). While in his recent collection of essays 'Make-Believe Town' Mamet pays a full tribute to him, David Rabe and Sam Shepard quarreled with their former mentor over insignificant matters: Rabe sold rights for one of his plays to his friend,

10 Quoted in Don Shewey, 'Sam Shepard', Da Capo Press, New York, 1997 (updated edition), 107.

11 Introduction to David Rabe, Enotes, Jan.7, 2007.

12 David Mamet, *Make Believe Town*, Essays and Remembrances, New York and Boston, Little, Brown, 1996, quoted in Deborah R.Geiss, Review, www.mamet.eserver.org, 1997.

while Shepard was dissatisfied with the cast of his 1980 'True West' production by Papp and sabotaged it in the press.

Public Theater is still an important institution though not of the same stature as in Joe Papp's time. The reason is probably in the changed cultural climate: lack of a major theatrical personality to give it direction, but also absence of city and state support. The Public has five theaters in its complex in Lafayette Street in the East Village and the Delacourte Theater in Central Park, but can put on production plays in only one or two of its theaters, plus one free production in the park.<sup>13</sup> After Joseph Papp's death George C. Wolfe took over the direction of New York Shakespeare Festival and the now Joseph Papp Public Theater with mixed success. (Interestingly, Sam Shepard, after promising he would never again have his play produced in New York and in the Public, allowed his 'True West' to be staged by Wolfe, again not with the success of its productions elsewhere.). Wolfe resigned a couple of years ago; The Public has a new management and lives on.

### Literature

Helen Epstein, *Joe Papp, An American Life*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, New York, Toronto, London, 1994.

Mary C. Henderson, *Theater in America, 200 Years of Plays, Players, and Productions*, Foreword by Joseph Papp, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1986.

Stuart W. Little, *Enter Joseph Papp, In Search of a New American Theater*, Coward, McCann & Geoghegan., Inc., New York, 1974.

Frederic Ohringer, *A Portrait of the Theater*, with Introduction by Joseph Papp, Merritt Publishing Company Limited, Toronto, 1979.

Joseph Papp and Elizabeth Kirkland, *Shakespeare Alive*, Bantam Books, Toronto, New York, London, Sydney, Auckland, 1988.

Don Shewey, *Sam Shepard*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1997.

### Internet Sources

'Exhibition Documents 50 Years of Theatrical Innovation', by Jim Young, The Epoch Times Jun 25, 2005 , <http://en.epochtimes.com/news/5-6-25/29790.html>

'Joseph Papp: Populist and Imperialist', Time Magazine, The Theater, Vol. 100, No. 1, July 3, 1972., <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601720703,00.html>

<sup>13</sup> 'Public Theater has a decision to make' 'The Record', February 22, 2004.

David Mamet, *Make Believe Town*, Essays and Remembrances, New York and Boston, Little, Brown, 1996, quoted in Deborah R. Geiss, Review, [www.mamet.eserver.org](http://www.mamet.eserver.org), 1997.

'News, Notes and Queries', The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter, Vol. III, No. 3, January 1988, <http://www.googlesyndicatedsearch.com>

Gary Shapiro, 'Papp's Pride', 'The New York Sun', October 25, 2004, <http://www.nysun.com/article/3708>

Rabe, David (Vol. 200) | INTRODUCTION, 'The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel', Enotes, Jan. 7, 2007, <http://www.enotes.com/contemporary-literary-criticism/rabe-david-vol-200>.

'The Record', February 22, 2004., Copyright © 2007 North Jersey Media Group Inc.

## Радмила Настић

### МУЛТИМЕДИЈАЛНИ КУЛТУРНИ ПРОЈЕКАТ ЏОЗЕФА ПАПА

Резиме

Џозеф Пап, амерички позоришни продуцент (1921-1991), усмеравао је и креирао позоришни и културни живот Њујорка од 1954. године до своје смрти 1991. Његов први велики пројекат био је њујоршки Шекспиров фестивал у Централном парку који је отпочео 1957. године бесплатним представама Шекспирових драма. Пап је 1957. од града добио зграду некадашње библиотеке Астор за извођење драма, приказивање филмова и експерименталних представа нових уметника. Она ће постати чувено *Јавно позориште* (Public Theater), а од 1992. зваће се *Јавно позориште Џозеф Пап*. Пап је подстицао алтернативно позориште и нове драмске писце попут Дејвида Мемета, Сема Шепарда и Дејвида Рејба, као и класичну традицију Јуџина О'Нила. Био је заслужан за извођење чувених мјузикала *Коса* (1967) и *A Chorus Line* (1975) који ће се изводити годинама па и филмовати. Џозеф Пап је подржавао мултимедијалне пројекте као што су мултимедијална опера Карсона Кивмана *Хамлет*, и популарни концерти Пјера Булеа са њујоршком Филхармонијом. Међу његовим сарадницима у *Јавном позоришту* били су уметници из других медија, пре свега дизајнери и архитекте. Имао је релативно добре односе са медијима, био је претходно запослен у телевизијској кући CBS, а многи чувени новинари и драмски критичари били су међу највећим следбеницима његових културних подухвата. Резултат његовог деловања био је да је Њујорк у деценијама Папове активности био, више него икад, културна престоница света.