ROBERT COHEN

WORKING TOGETHER IN THEATRE

COLLABORATION & LEADERSHIP

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Collaboration and Leadership

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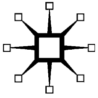

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To the thousands of theatre artists in
all areas with whom I have worked with
over the past fifty years

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PREFACE

There are many books on the subject of the various theatre arts: acting, directing, scenic design, playwriting, and so forth. I've written six (five on acting, one on directing). But there are few books on how all these people work *together,* and that's what I've set out to do in this one.

My goal is to examine how creating great theatre requires not only great work by many individuals but also a great 'working together' of specialists in many different fields. People come to this work for many different reasons, and usually from a broad variety of backgrounds, but for their work to truly bear fruit it must be consolidated into a collective and seamless whole. And this, I find, takes two things often seen as opposites but which are equally essential: collaboration and leadership.

I've included in this book the work experiences of literally hundreds of people, many that you have heard of and many that you haven't, but all whom have devoted the bulk of their lives to the producing of what they hope and expect will be theatre performances that will live in the minds of those who see them for the rest of their lives. The performances I cite are almost all from professional venues, mainly in the live theatre but sometimes film and television, since it is anticipated that the majority of this book's readers will either already be working professionals in these arts, or will be persons hoping and/or training to become so.

The book is divided into three parts.

- Part One is introductory. Its two chapters include a general overview of the relationship of **collaboration and leadership** in creating theatre, and a study of the two basic forms of theatrical organization in which they are commonly represented: the **ensemble** and the **hierarchy,** respectively**.**
- Part Two divides the process of theatrical collaborations into four stages, which, while often overlapping, have a loose chronological structure. First is the **preparation stage**, where a producer and director, and often a playwright, translator or dramaturg, originate the basic ideas of a production. Second is the **planning stage**, where designers enter the project and join with the director to collectively create the production "on paper," (actually, these days, mostly on electronic files): sharing ideas, images, sounds, and written descriptions that indicate how the play will look and sound, who will be in it, and how, where and when it will be put together. Third is the **production stage,** where actors and stage managers join the team in the rehearsal hall, business and publicity staff members get to work in their appropriate offices, production staffs move into shops and studios to create the scenery, costume, props, wigs, sound cues and other production aspects, and technicians move into the theatre, hanging and wiring the sound speakers, focusing the lights, and installing the scenery and machinery created in the shops. Fourth comes the **presenting stage,** where stage managers take over many of the controls and everything is put together on the stage and played before an audience.
- Part Three is a concluding chapter that discusses the modes of communication that may be employed at every level of this complex but highly integrated process which, apart from scale, is pretty much the same in professional theatres around the world. An appendix that details some of the methods discussed in parts one and two follow.

Exercises appear at the end of Chapters 3, 4 and 5, which can be used by individuals or groups to experience, hands-on, some of the methods and techniques that can lead to successful collaborations and leadership in actual practice.

And to the reader: all citations are identified in endnotes, arranged by page number, at the back of the book.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

Family Theatres/ Theatre Families

"No one ... not even geniuses ... ever makes it alone," says Malcolm Gladwell in his best-selling *Outliers*. This truth permeates this book, which has only one goal: to help theatre artists learn to create great art *together*.

The chapters that follow are not about aesthetic or intellectual goals, but rather about the process of working as a unit. Every theatre production, though sometimes headlined by a world-renowned director or one or two famous actors, is put together by a great many people, numbering from the dozens to the hundreds. And when these people work together they can, as a collective, attain artistic heights that none could attain independently. "If the theatre is not about the interaction of people, it's about nothing," says Joe Dowling, former head of Ireland's Abbey Theatre and now of Minneapolis's Guthrie Theatre. "Theatre," Dowling continues, "can never be solely about concept, ideas, intellectual pursuits – it has to be about the way in which the people relate to one another."

People in a theatre or film company, therefore, must work closely together. In doing so, they often call themselves a "family." Indeed, one of the most common comments theatre artists make when accepting Tony or Academy Awards is praising their fellow artists in the project by saying, "We were a family!"

There would rarely be a need to say this in previous centuries, however, because until the seventeenth century, *real* families created

most theatre. The troubadours, *jongleurs,* mimes, and *commedia dell'arte* troupes that toured Europe from the Dark Ages through the Renaissance were almost entirely blood-related artistic collectives, with elders handing down their duties and roles to their descendents from one generation to the next. Even the celibate monks who created liturgical dramas at the start of the second millennium were members of lifelong "brotherhoods,"* as were the craft guilds that created the mystery plays of the European High Middle Ages. In the late sixteenth century, it was two real brothers, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, together with their father, James, and their fellow Warwickshire countryman Will Shakespeare, who came together to create the greatest theatre and dramatic repertoire known to the English-speaking world. A century later, the young Jean-Baptiste Poquelin assumed the stage name of Molière and, together with four members of the Béjart family (one his mistress and another afterwards his wife), founded the *Théâtre Illustre* in Paris, which became the greatest theatre company in that country's history. Meanwhile, half a world away, eleven Japanese families were developing a unique and popular dance-drama style into the *kabuki,* which for the past four centuries has been Japan's leading theatrical art.

And in the nineteenth century, a Russian teenager named Konstantin Alekseiev gathered his relatives together and, with them, created the Alekseiev Circle, a family company whose amateur productions entertained Muscovites in the Alekseiev home and country house, leading Konstantin to take the name "Stanislavsky" and co-found, with Vladimir Nemirovich-Dantchenko, the Moscow Art Theatre, which went on to revolutionize acting throughout Europe and, eventually, the United States.

These were all, at least initially, *family* theatres. Some continue to reflect their family heritage: In Japan, the same eleven families that ruled the *kabuki* in the seventeenth century continue to dominate it today. In France, Molière's *Illustre,* which was consolidated with others into the *Comédie Française* not long after his death, is still known as the "House of Molière," and its permanent company members call themselves not artistic partners but *sociétaires,* implying a social and not just a professional linkage.

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* "Brotherhood" remains a term that designates certain unions, such as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

But blood-linked family theatres are extremely rare today. In America, the tradition is upheld mainly in the circus – as exemplified by the Zoppé Family Circus, founded in 1842 and now run by its founder's great-great grandson, Giovanni Zoppé, who grew up performing with his father, mother, wife, two siblings and their spouses. We're "just like the circus was 100 years ago," said Giovanni in 2005, as he took the reins from his father.

Members of such real family theatres did not acquire their theatrical skills by training at drama schools or university theatre departments, as most theatre artists do today. Rather, they learned their skills in apprenticeships with their family-led troupes. Tradition has it that William Shakespeare's first theatre job was looking after the horses of wealthy patrons when they attended his company's performances. Before he was invited to play before King Louis' court and become France's most famous actor-playwright, Molière had honed his craft touring his company through rural villages in Southern France for some thirteen years. What training such artists received came not through courses of formal instruction but through continuous performing – often passing the hat for their supper when not being chased out of town. This called for an extraordinary commitment and group loyalty, for which family ties are the surest component.

Non-family theatres created in subsequent centuries in many ways followed the family model, forming large companies of actors who lived in the same city and performed at the same theatres, working with many of the same colleagues year after year. Many in such companies married and performed together, including Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, and Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy, while others created family acting dynasties, such as the Booths, the Barrymores, and the Redgraves.

But there has been a sea change in theatre production since the mid-twentieth century. As a person who has been directing plays since 1957, I have watched these changes evolve with fascination.

First, theatre has diversified geographically, particularly in America. In the 1940s and 50s, the American professional theatre simply meant the New York professional theatre. To be sure, there were the seeds of a regional American theatre movement being planted – Nina Vance's Alley Theatre in Houston, Margo Jones's Theatre 47 in Dallas, Zelda Fichandler's Arena Stage in Washington, Herb Blau and Jules Irving's Actors' Workshop in San Francisco – but that was about it. Apart from those venues, anyone wishing to create

professional theatre and be paid for it had to move to New York. Now, however, there are nearly *2000* professional theatres in the United States, about 150 of them operating on budgets of anywhere from one to thirty-some million dollars. And these theatres are broadly scattered throughout every state and large city in the nation. Such diversification is good in many ways, but – since the vast majority of theatres outside of New York present only limited runs of, typically, three to seven weeks – it has also led to actors, designers and directors working mainly on short-term, single-production assignments rather than on yearly (much less lifetime) contracts as was commonly the case in earlier generations. And while single-show ensembles may bond into what participants may *call* a family at Tony Awards time, such pseudo-families are, in most cases, decidedly short-lived.

European theatres companies, maintained through most of the twentieth century on a permanent or semipermanent basis, often with ample government funding, have also moved toward single-production contracts in the third millennium. Prominent European actors and designers worldwide now receive attractive offers from other theatre, television and film companies from around their continent – and even around the world. In our now-global economy, permanent companies are rapidly giving way to independent theatres where relative strangers come together for short work periods to produce single projects.

Second, as the theatres are diversified, so are the artists they engage. Today's professional theatre practitioner has probably received his or her basic training in a university graduate program (particularly in America) or a theatre conservatory (particularly in Europe) or a commercial school in New York, London or Los Angeles or other large city, rather than a long-term professional apprenticeship or internship – which, today, is almost always very brief (measured in months rather than years), usually unpaid (even lacking a housing allowance), and can thus normally only be a brief midway step between the classroom and the profession. So the "family of strangers" that gathers today to mount a twenty-first-century production is also educationally diversified: its constituents comprise a varied assortment of independent artists who have been trained in different schools, in different cities, in different ways, and by different teachers. Moreover, they have usually received intensely *specialized* training in just a single theatrical discipline: as an actor, perhaps, or sound designer or stage

manager or a projection designer. If they are trained in a university, they will sport MFA degrees in their specific discipline: an MFA not in "Theatre" but in "Costume Design." And when they then become professionals, they will join specialized professional unions,* which oversee the rights pertaining to their particular discipline and protect their members from real or imagined subjugation from artists in other professional unions.

Specialization existed in the past, of course, but not so rigidly. Thespis, whom Aristotle considered the world's first actor, was also the playwright and director of his early Greek tragedies. Aeschylus and Sophocles wrote, directed and often acted in their plays, and designed them – and perhaps their stage machinery – as well. Shakespeare and Molière acted in their own works as well as the works of other writers; probably both also directed their plays – Molière definitely did. Indeed, until the twentieth century what is now called directing was in fact normally executed by the production's playwright or leading actor.

So in contrast to their predecessors over the past two millennia, theatre artists today are also diversified *professionally* into separate artistic disciplines. This can lead to isolation of the various artists – what in France was ridiculed as the "arthritis of specialization" when it threatened to throttle the more free-form avant-garde theatre of the early years of the twentieth century, when distinguished easel painters, including Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, and Pablo Picasso were routinely designing scenery for theatre and dance.

Finally, artists who hope to make a living in today's highly mobile and geographically diversified theatre must become individually *competitive* if they hope to make a living. No longer able to rely on a family connection to begin or sustain their careers, today's artists must compete avidly for a foot in the door, an audition or portfolio review,

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*The unions, basically, are Actors Equity Association (AEA) for Actors and Stage Managers, SDC (the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, as recently renamed) for Directors, and the United Scenic Artists (USA) for Designers – with USA members segregated into more than a dozen specific branches, including those for Scenic Designers, Costume Designers, Lighting Designers, Sound Designers, Projection Designers, Scene Painters, Art Directors (for films), Storyboard Artists, Computer Artists, and Art Department Coordinators, among others. While Stage Managers are currently represented by AEA, they have different (and higher) salary scales than do the actors in that union.

a production assignment, a union membership, and then continuing (and hopefully growing) recognition – in the press, in the media, and by word of mouth – on a larger and larger scale for the rest of their careers. Since today's theatre is broad-based, they must embrace its diversity of locales, styles, and performative media. Which means that unless they snare a permanent position at a regional theatre, or national attention in film, television, or star assignment on Broadway, they must "go on the move," competing to establish reputations in multiple media and separate locales. They must compete broadly for their livelihood, and they must do so throughout their careers. And they must make friends – without making rivals or enemies.

But all of this requires the most serious attention to "working together."

For today, families don't make theatre; theatre makes families.

1

Collaboration and Leadership

Collaboration and Leadership: the key words of this book's subtitle. Are they allies or opposites? Does one contradict the other, or does one *require* the other? Let's look at them separately first.

Collaboration

"Theatre is a collaborative art." How many times have you heard that? Hundreds probably. Maybe thousands.

Well, it's true. And even though obvious, it bears repeating. If a sales clerk daydreams at her post at Macy's one afternoon, the store won't close down forever, but if the actor playing Mercade – who is suppose to arrive with the news that the king is dead – fails to make his entrance in the final scene of *Love's Labor's Lost*, the play simply cannot continue, for his unexpected announcement instantly reverses everything that's been happening up to this point.*

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*This is not a random example. Fifty years ago I was in a production where exactly this happened. The actor, absorbed in a book in the dressing room, simply forgot to enter. While the actors ad-libbed in panic, I ran offstage as if hearing someone call me, then, not finding him, ran back onstage to explain to my fellow-actors that I had "just seen Mercade" who had told me that the king was dead. The play went on, but the actor's career, to my knowledge, did not.

Yet the actor playing Mercade is not the only person who could create this theatrical catastrophe. If the stage manager has failed to call him up from his dressing room in time, or failed to flash the off-stage cue light that signals his entrance from behind a see-proof and soundproof door he is to enter through, the play may likewise come to a dead halt. Or if the wardrobe assistant had mistakenly taken Mercade's costume back to the costume shop for repairs ten minutes beforehand, or if the scene shifting crew had failed to unlatch the door after moving it into place during the previous scene change, the entire performance could be ruined, and no one would talk about anything else after the curtain call. In the theatre, *everybody* must pull his or her own weight, and pull it *all the time* or disaster may follow.

So full collaboration among all members of the theatre company is essential and essential all the time. No job in theatre is too small to engage everyone's attention. Actor Willem Dafoe has won two Oscar nominations for his work in films, but his career is centered on his stage work at the experimental Wooster Group theatre company in New York, which calls itself an "ensemble of artists." How did he join the group? "I just wanted to be with those people … I literally walked in there and said: 'I wanna work with you guys.' And they said: 'Okay, well you go and sweep in the corner,'" Dafoe explains. Film and Broadway star Denzel Washington describes his attitude in similar fashion: "What I learned working with directors like Jonathan Demme, and what I now try to create, is community feeling. We're all in it together. I can grab the bucket and pail just like the next guy. Nobody can get to work earlier than me. And I like that."

For there's nothing like sweeping and scrubbing the dressing room floors – and doing it *well* – to remind you of how much effort and affection (and often humility) goes into collaborating with others in the creation of great theatre art. Indeed, most of the persons who work in theatre love doing so. Not every minute of every day, of course, but almost always *they come back for more* – whenever they can. Few theatre artists retire voluntarily. Many, when they are between well-paying assignments (Broadway shows or films, say), work for free. As this book was being readied for press, Broadway stars Bernadette Peters and James Naughton were spending a full week rehearsing a staged reading of composer John Kander's new adaptation of *The Skin of Our Teeth* in New York, for which they received only the bare

minimum (and union-required) scale salary. "People in the theater are just very generous," Kander reported afterwards in the *New York Times*. "They do readings all the time, usually just as favors. Then they get their $300 and they go home." Their fee for doing this commercially would surely be in the five figures.

What theatre has retained from those centuries when it was largely a family business is that its best artistic work almost always comes out of well-tuned *working relationships*. These need not be social relationships, but they are personal, and they are equally or even more intense than social relationships because they are fiercely dedicated to achieving specific artistic goals, maintaining clear and honest communications, and aimed at a wholly integrated collaboration.

Such collaborations (the word is a compound of "co" and "labor" – thus indicating "shared work") may make the work process more comfortable than non-collaboration would, but that is not the reason why I wrote this book, nor is it the reason you should be reading it.

Dynamic and free-flowing collaborations make theatre art *successful* – not just for the artists involved, but for their audiences as well. So while this book deals with what in many quarters might be called theatre ethics, it does not presume to preach morality. It is, at heart, a *practical* book. Its principles are not designed just to make the theatre pleasant, but to make the theatre *great*.

There's an immensely practical, even economic reason for you to learn the art of successful theatrical collaboration, too. Your career will absolutely depend on it! Why? Because at the end of a production, the overseeing producer and/or artistic director will almost certainly hold formal or informal "exit interviews" with most or all members of the artistic team. These interviews will not be held to assess the talent, skills, or reliability of those who worked on the show, since the interviewers will have already made such judgments themselves; what they really want to know is *how well you worked with others* on the team. So they will ask you about the others – and they will ask the others about you. And make no mistake about it: your professional future may well depend on what the responses of your collaborators will be. A director, designer, actor, or other member of the team who is described by other colleagues as, for example, argumentative, sullen, unhelpful, distant, selfish-minded, crude, impolite, unappreciative, pouty, arrogant, or overly self-absorbed will, you may be sure, have trouble getting rehired for the next show or following season.

Such persons may even fail to receive good reports when other theatre companies call to check their references.

Of course, having a key role or a design assignment in a show that gets thrilling reviews, sold-out houses, and nightly standing ovations can compensate for a good deal of flack from your exit interviews (theatre being, at least in part, a commercial business), but even if you are lauded to the skies for your talents you may be a toss-up in a future employer's mind if your lack of collaborative skills are reported to have made your colleagues miserable. For despite what you might read in the gossip columns, the theatre artists who succeed over a lifetime career are inevitably *the ones that draw the best work out of their artistic partners, and who have their own best work drawn from them by the same people.*

It's a reciprocal process, a win-win situation for all involved, and it pays off in the seamlessness of the final product. Your ability to collaborate will prove essential for your creation of collective theatrical art, as well as for the furthering of your individual artistic career.

No one understands the importance of this better than those who initiate theatrical productions and engage theatrical artists: producers, artistic directors, play directors, and casting directors. Should you, as an applicant for a part in – or a position on the artistic staff of – a production, come off brilliantly in your audition or resume/portfolio review, the producers' and/or directors' next steps will be to consult with your previous colleagues. And their first (and sometimes only) question will be, ninety-nine times out of a hundred: "How was he/she to work with?" Your talent and skills will have caught their attention, but they already know about those things from the reviews and photos and videos: what they really want to know at this point is *how well you work with other people*. And whether you can easily integrate yourself with the company they are assembling.

Absolutely no one is hired into a professional theatre or film company without this sort of one-on-one background check of their collaborative and cooperative abilities. And a negative assessment of these attributes – or even a tepid "well, I guess he's OK..." – will probably send them back to their long list of other applicants.

And the worst thing about failing to be rehired for this reason is that you will never know *why* the axe fell on you. Nobody will ever tell you that they didn't ask you back, or recommend you to a colleague, simply because they thought you were difficult to work with. You may

spend the rest of your life wondering why, after all the good reviews and standing ovations you received, they never called you up for their next season or forwarded your name to another theatre. The reasons for such silence are both personal (no one wants to be considered a tight-ass) and legal (no one wants to be sued for "attitude discrimination"). You'll be left in the dark, wondering why your audition or portfolio didn't meet their standards and without ever realizing that *they* weren't the problem: *you* were.

In sum, your ability to collaborate effectively, willingly, enthusiastically, and unreservedly is nothing less than a career *requirement*. It is also the definition of what it means to be a "professional" in the performing arts.

But, you may say, "I don't have a collaborative instinct." Don't worry, no one does. As the Tony award-winning director/choreographer Twyla Tharp explains, "Collaborators aren't born, they're made … a day at a time, through practice, through attention, through discipline, through passion and commitment – and, most of all, through habit." That's one of the primary goals of this book, not only to provide you with collaborative skills, but also with the collaborative habit.

Does this mean, however, that great theatre art evolves solely from people who are always sweet-tempered, gracious, gentle, undemanding, and soft-spoken? Lord, no! Almost all great theatre artists are, at least at times, opinionated, strong-willed, and individualistic, sometimes aggressively so. Disagreements, criticisms, demands, disputes, challenges, arguments, and rebukes – all intensified with the inevitable stress of approaching deadlines and mounting fiscal pressures – are endemic to artistic work everywhere in the world.

And for this reason, the free collaborative spirit requires at least a general set of boundaries – and a focus toward collaborative *goals* as well as skills. And this can come only through some sort of leadership.

Leadership

Leadership is not contrary to collaboration. It is in fact crucial to it.

Leadership is what organizes the collaboration. It gives it focus, discipline, boundaries, and orientation. It combines ideas with goals, visions with imaginations. Leadership helps collaborators find common ground between varying ingredients of imagery, dramaturgy,

intellectuality, philosophy, and social viewpoints. It also involves practical matters: setting targets, timetables, and budgets; cultivating good relationships and healthy attitudes; inspiring imagination, creativity, commitment and "going the extra mile."

Leadership does not reside solely in the top ranks of an organizational chart; it permeates collaborations at every level. It includes mentoring: the passing down of experience from a senior to a junior – and sometimes from a junior to a senior. It includes sharing, as with those personal experiences of individual members that may contribute to the deeper fabric and texture of a production. And it includes discipline, insuring that work is executed as well and as quickly as possible – and negotiating the proper balance between these two, often contradictory, goals.

Where does such leadership come from? You read in the introduction about the theatre company as "family," but notice you did not read that it is always a "happy family." Families are rarely if ever wholly harmonious. Rivalries, quarrels, and even violent separations are relatively commonplace, and so are the battles within a theatre: One can only imagine the turmoil in Molière's company when he spurned his wife to marry her younger sister at a time when all three were acting in the same productions!

Family theatres had family leadership, generally from a patriarch – father or father figure – who assumed the role of producer/director. In the Zoppé Family Circus, fathers handed down the leadership through seven generations. In the all-male *kabuki*, fathers introduce their fully costumed sons to kabuki audiences in a public ceremony when they are children; when they grow up, the sons assume their father's roles and eventually their stage names – yet they must still ask their father's permission to make even minor changes in the actions or gestures that their characters perform in their inherited roles.

And while there are no longer actual family theatres companies of note in Western theatre, there are "virtual family" companies of the current era that are based on similar principles. Members of the Living Theatre, which was founded in New York by husband and wife team Julian Beck and Judith Malina in 1947, continue to live together, eat together, perform together, and share their political agenda with audiences around the world today, with Malina continuing at the company's helm at time of writing. Another virtual "mama" is off-off-Broadway's doyenne, Ellen Stewart, whose "Café La Mama"