

the irresistible rise of ETHAN McSWEENY

The director credits luck and timing
for his eclectic career

BY JAIME KLEIMAN

ETHAN McSWEENY SEEMS TO HAVE A MIDAS TOUCH.

It's not that the plays he directs turn into gold. But they do sail across the footlights with a vibrant, magnetic sheen. At 35, McSweeney, the wunderkind director who made his Broadway debut before some directors finish graduate school, is earning plaudits for a flurry of new productions—including *A Body of Water* at Minneapolis's Guthrie Theater and San Diego's Old Globe, and *The Persians* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C.—and planning his second season as co-artistic director of the Chautauqua Theater Company in upstate New York.

His remount this past April of *The Persians*, in particular, represents a triumphant and meaningful return—not just because he started his directing career as an apprentice to the Shakespeare Theatre Company's artistic director, Michael Kahn, but also because he has strong familial roots in the nation's capital, where he made his professional directorial debut. The son of political journalists (although his father now heads the international division of a small oil corporation), McSweeney grew up across the street from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. As a teenager, he attended St. Albans, a prestigious college prep school located near the Washington National Cathedral.

"D.C. is a weird city," McSweeney says. "There's this political class of Washington, and there's 'landed gentry' of Washington. One is transient and mixed with people from all over the country. The other is settled and largely southern. Growing up in the continuum of these two groups as they overlap—which is what they

have to do to have a social arts life in the city—you've got to bring the politicians to your banquet dinner. I think it taught me a lot about theatre, because there's a lot of theatre at work in politics, and there's a lot of theatre at work in social situations. I was brought up to believe that I would go into foreign service or become a foreign correspondent, or perhaps do what my sister is doing now, which is work on political campaigns."

What McSweeney became, of course, was a fledgling theatre director. The Shakespeare Theatre Company was, in essence, his graduate school. As the first alumnus of Columbia's new undergraduate theatre department, he returned to his hometown in 1993, where he quickly became Michael Kahn's right-hand man, assisting on dozens of productions and conducting understudy rehearsals. At 22, he found himself in the awkward position of giving notes to the company's member actors, who had been performing years—sometimes decades—longer than he'd been on earth. For almost four years, he assisted established directors like Kahn, Laird Williamson, Garland Wright and Barry Kyle.

In 1997, just as he was about to leave the Shakespeare Theatre Company and strike out on his own, Eric Schaeffer, the founding artistic director of Signature

Theatre in nearby Arlington, Va., asked his younger colleague to stage a play called *Never the Sinner* by then unknown playwright John Logan. A drama about the infamous 1924 murder case that sentenced two Nietzsche-spouting psychopaths, Leopold and Loeb, to life in prison and sparked American debate on capital punishment, *Never the Sinner* was an unexpected hit. It would ultimately propel



Ethan McSweeney

MICHAEL DANIEL



CAROL ROSEGG

Foreground, from left, Erin Gann and Helen Carey in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's *The Persians*, directed by Ethan McSweeney.

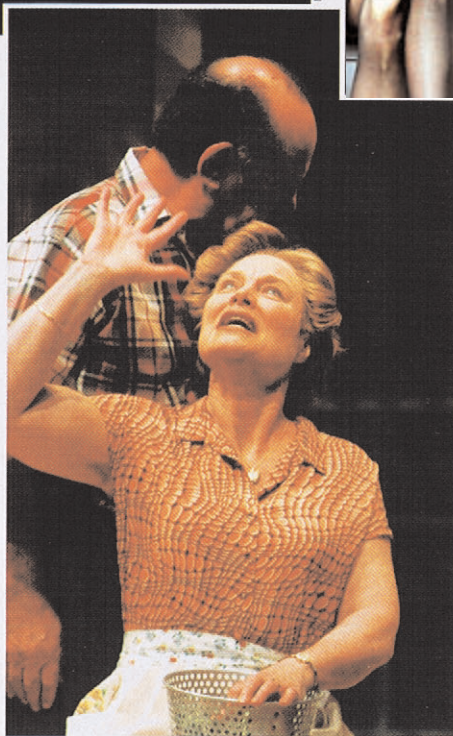


From left, William Whitehead, Bard Goodrich, Alex Podulke and Richard Ooms in Lee Blessing's *Thief River* at the Guthrie Lab.

McSweeney into the limelight. His flashy, sold-out production transferred to New York's American Jewish Theatre and eventually landed a commercial Off-Broadway run at the John Houseman Theatre. It won the Outer Critics Circle award for outstanding Off-Broadway play. McSweeney was only 27 years old. (Logan later went on to pen the screenplays for Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* and the upcoming film version of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*.)

Two seasons later, at the ripe old age of 29, McSweeney once again found himself at the helm of a high-profile show, the Broadway revival of Gore Vidal's *The Best Man*. McSweeney was both blessed and cursed with an all-star cast (and all-star egos) that included Spalding Gray, Michael Learned, Chris Noth, Elizabeth Ashley, Christine Ebersole and Charles Durning. The play's satirical take on national politics rang true with audiences, and McSweeney's production received a Tony nomination for best revival and Outer Critics Circle and Drama Desk awards. Vidal, by the way, had also attended St. Albans, a coincidence that may have helped the very green McSweeney secure the gig. "Some directors who have worked on this play have known nothing about politics," Vidal said in an interview with *USA Today* in 2000. "This kid knows everything, even more than I do now."

A self-confessed "Ethan groupie," Guthrie Theater artistic director Joe Dowling saw *Never the Sinner* in New York and was blown away. "He has a remarkable capacity for shaping a theatrical production in its emotional power," Dowling avers. "I knew then that he was going to be a major director." He has since hired McSweeney to direct



Stuart Margolin and Lisa Harrow in Chautauqua Theater Company's *All My Sons*.

fortunate. I'm not poor—I can live on what I make. I do feel like there's a lot of sacrifices demanded for the cause of the art form. Investing? For me, that means paying off my credit card debts."

McSweeney's image as a prodigy has not always worked in his favor. One of *Best Man*'s cast members, the actress Michael Learned, remembers getting into a bit of a spat with the director about what was ultimately just a miscommunication. "When I realized he was not even 30 years old and steering this huge ship, I got for the first time the immense amount of pressure he must have been under," she says. Five years later, Learned again worked with McSweeney, this time on *A Body of Water* at the Guthrie. She noticed a major difference in his approach. "I think what comes with maturity is that one becomes



Amy Van Nostrand and Stephen Pelinski in the Guthrie Theater's *Six Degrees of Separation*.

several plays at the Guthrie, including the premiere of Lee Blessing's *A Body of Water* (subsequently revised and re-staged at San Diego's Old Globe this past winter); a gorgeously designed production of *Romeo and Juliet*; the regional premiere of Blessing's *Thief River* and John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*.

When prompted, McSweeney will admit that he's a product of class (and Caucasian) privilege. "If you're someone like me, you're ignorant of poverty and therefore not afraid of it—because if you really *knew* what it was like to be poor, you would go into business and try to make as much money as you could before you died. You know what I mean?" He pauses, then plunges on emphatically, "I do not make as much money as I would in other professions, but I've been very

willing to show one's vulnerability," she muses. "When you're young, you don't have the guts to say, 'I don't know'—and he does now."

McSweeney may have felt at the time that he had a lot to prove, but today his process is more relaxed. He walks into rehearsals with an open ear and often invites designers, assistants and anyone else in the room to contribute ideas. "This comes back to authority and confidence in directing," he explains. "No one, at the end of the day, knows who had which idea. If you loved a certain acting moment, there could have been 8 to 10 collaborators making that moment work for you—the playwright, the director, the actors."

Throughout his career, McSweeney has moved from classics to contemporary dramas to premieres with ease. Defying categorization is a mixed bag, he notes, because without a definitive style, producers don't automatically think of him for specific kinds of plays. However, there are elements that help set him apart. McSweeney is a big believer in table and text work, a skill he no doubt picked up from his days with Kahn, and he jokingly calls blocking one of the most boring parts of his job. His scrupulous attention to the melding of design, pacing and performance, and the facility with which he presents them, feels crisp, vibrant and cinematic.

Lighting designer Jane Cox asserts, "He does transitions better than any other director I've worked with. It's fulfilling for a lighting designer, because lighting is all about transitions. It's also challenging to work with him because he's extremely demanding." McSweeney and Cox once worked the opening and closing moments of a show for more than 16 hours apiece. It's this kind of precision that can drive actors and designers crazy, but, adds Cox, "When the piece is finished, I've done my best work."

In a McSweeney show, you always know where to look, and there are no wasted moments. The art of directing is a "timing thing," he suggests. "How long an interval of stillness should there be? Should the move come with the thought? Should it come after the thought or the reaction? I think that manipulating time is the medium of directing—the experience of the audience from the time they come to the theatre to the time that they leave. If you're doing it right, you're sculpting time."

In 2003, the late Tony Randall, who founded and headed the National Actors Theatre in New York, asked McSweeney to create and direct a new version of Aeschylus's *The Persians*. McSweeney told Randall he hated Greek theatre, but Randall hired him anyway. McSweeney asked actor-playwright Ellen McLaughlin to write a new adaptation. She agreed, despite the project's killer six-week timetable, and then typed furiously while McSweeney held auditions. Their *Persians* opened on time, to critical acclaim. Margo Jefferson, writing for the *New York Times*, called the production "more than 'relevant' and 'timely.' It is heart-wrenching and terrifying."

McLaughlin had never worked with McSweeney before. She

was impressed with what she calls his "passionate intellect" and "extraordinary eye." Says McLaughlin, "He works extremely well with designers and cares deeply about the beauty of the stage picture, but not in a stupid way. He has an unusual ability to find the simplest and therefore the most beautiful solution." The director's vision for *The Persians* involved 25 tons of red sand, live drumming and a newly penned prologue that set the stage for the modernized parable of political action and policy-making in times of war.

Three years into the Iraq War and billions of taxpayers' dollars later, it's pretty safe to assume *The Persians* will resonate differently in the nation's capital than it did in New York City. "I tried very hard in *The Persians* to not do a political treatise," says McSweeney, a proud liberal. "People often don't understand how personality differences in [government leaders can] reverberate in enormous policy decisions that affect the lives of millions of people." He chuckles a bit. "We're not stupid. We know we're not going to change Bush's policy."

"Manipulating time is the medium of directing—the experience of the audience from the time they come to the theatre to the time that they leave."



COURTESY OF CHAUTAUQUA THEATER COMPANY

McSweeney and Vivienne Benesch, co-artistic directors of the Chautauqua Theater Company.

The most recent significant step in McSweeney's life has been assuming leadership of the Chautauqua Theater Company. Last year, he and his partner (in life and in business), Vivienne Benesch, became the co-artistic directors of the 23-year-old company, founded by McSweeney's old mentor, Michael Kahn. Charged with running not only a theatre company but also a nationally recognized conservatory, the pair impressed community members, actors and critics with the caliber of their productions and the professionalism of the training program.

Last summer, Benesch and McSweeney programmed more than 50 events, including 30 mainstage performances. The theatre saw a 45-percent increase in revenue and audience attendance, with most shows playing near full capacity. Guest artists Lisa Harrow and Stuart Margolin each took a superb turn starring in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, and they'll be returning this year in *The Cherry Orchard*, also directed by McSweeney.

After having raised the bar and others' expectations so significantly, Benesch and McSweeney (who celebrated their ninth anniversary as a couple this past June) face new challenges as Chautauqua continues to grow. The conservatory alone is made up of 16 emerging

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professionals from around the country; they do three fully mounted productions over an eight-week time period. The coming mainstage season includes, in addition to the Chekhov, an adaptation of *The Art of Coarse Acting*, directed by Dylan Baker, and *Twelfth Night*, directed by Andrew Borba.

"We complement each other very well," says Benesch, best known as a stage and television actress. "Where Ethan is driven by a very singular and unique vision, I tend to be driven by a wide-angle lens of wanting to please as many people as possible at one time. He is a highly cerebral person who utterly trusts his gut, and his gut is incredibly creative. For someone who has so little patience with himself, he has incredible patience for and insight into how to help actors."

Next up for McSweeney is, he hopes, more directing work, and possibly branching out into film and television. Last fall, he used an unexpected period of unemployment to his advantage, trailing directors in Los Angeles on the sets of "The West Wing" and "Will and Grace." Working in different

media and genres, he believes, will make him a better director. And it's those qualities—a relentless drive to improve, a quick intellect and a remarkable yet simple visual elegance—that will keep him in the game for years to come.

Perhaps the most prescient predictor of McSweeney's future is his mentor, Kahn. "I expect to see some pretty important things come out of Ethan in the coming years," states Kahn. "I haven't been surprised by his career or the shape of it at all."

I interviewed McSweeney twice, first in New York City during a break at a rehearsal of Willy Holtzman's *Sabina* at Primary Stages, then in San Diego this past January the day after he turned 35, while he was working on the Old Globe's production of *A Body of Water*, featuring Sandy Duncan. What follows are excerpts from both interviews.

JAIME KLEIMAN: How did starting out so young factor into your career?

ETHAN MCSWEENEY: I was 22 when I began

at the Shakespeare Theatre Company as the directing intern. Three months later, I became the associate director of the theatre. I was very conscious in the beginning of being young. Between passing on Michael's notes to the company and the articulation of those notes (there is some editorial distance), I was having to make immediate decisions about how to engage in conversation with the company members. Knowing that a director needs to approach an actor's experience with respect, I also wanted very much to earn their respect.

One's point of view changes as a director. Certainly experience helps, but the age of a director does not seem to present a liability in the United Kingdom as it is does in the United States. More often, in England, you'll see that a young, new voice in directing is celebrated, and you'll see senior actors working with that director. This situation is, I think, rare here, because a younger, less established director is perceived as a risk. It's very hard to get commercial or not-for-profit producers to take a risk on young directors. What I learned

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as a young assistant director is that you have to *earn* the right to be trusted.

How do you, as a director, go about earning that trust?

By offering respect, you create the circumstances where it might be returned to you. If you offer trust and encouragement, you receive it back. If you give a note, be sure you're right (that helps a lot), and if you're not sure, acknowledge that you may not be right. My process is a democracy until I've made up my mind, at which point it becomes essentially a dictatorship. But that doesn't mean that the people living in the dictatorship can't imagine that they're living in a democracy, much as we do here.

The time I spend around the table is probably the most important time of the entire rehearsal. There's a lot of going off the subject, and a lot of storytelling. Two things are happening: One, we're trying to get the entire group comfortable with one another, so we are socializing. Two, I spend that time listening, because I'm learning about how different people's processes are. I'm learning about them, intuitively and subconsciously, because the truth is, right after the first read-through, I probably, inside, know all the notes I'm ever going to give on a project. It's just a question of figuring out how to phrase them and when to give them.

Timing is *everything*. In building a production from first rehearsal to opening, *when* you do something is as important, if not more important, than *what* you do. For example, I would never do a speed-through of a play—in which the actors talk faster and lump their thoughts together—until after everybody was so well honed in their patterns of thinking that they could comprehend things faster. I would never do a specific line-reading note in the first week of rehearsal, because it's too early to say, "You know, I think you should really say this line like this." In fact, I often will check in with designers—I'll solicit their thoughts about where they think we are. You gotta figure—four, five, six plays a year is the maximum that I can do as a director. Getting six jobs is hard enough! A lighting designer can do 12 or 15 plays a year, which means they've seen a lot more plays than a director has, so if they have an idea for you—listen to it.

How do you work with writers on a new play? Getting too close to where the writer is,

too far into trying to help the writer write, doesn't end up helping. I would never tell Lee Blessing, "Wouldn't it be great if this character said, 'Blah blah blah blah.'" I could maybe suggest to Lee that this moment is not working, or that we've experimented with it and we're hitting a roadblock here, or that we can't make this transition work, or that this line of inquiry is going nowhere, or that I feel left out of this experience as a surrogate audience member. A director's job isn't really to try to find problems with the play.

Can you describe Michael Kahn's influence on you?

Michael is a remarkable director. He is, I think, an expert editor, and I learned that aspect of directing from him. He is also exceptionally good—and this is very rare—at watching plays he's directed *as if he has no idea what's going to happen*. Being able to watch the play through the audience's eyes is *very* difficult. It's taken me a long time to get better at it.

Does Vivienne offer another set of eyes?

In fact, Vivienne often sees my work in previews, and there's no one else on earth that I would allow to be as intimately involved in giving me notes. I really trust her, because she's got a great eye, and also, because she's not involved in the production, she has no agenda other than what's she seen.

Do you feel *The Persians* would play differently in D.C. than in New York?

Yes, on account of the fact that the Shakespeare Theatre production takes place two-and-a-half years later than when it was first staged in New York. Times have changed.

The experience of doing *The Persians* the first time was *so thrilling*. We were literally making it up as we went out the door. There was no prep time. I started rehearsal thinking I was just going to do a kind of a concert reading. Nobody thought we were going to change the tide of human history, but because of the Iraq war starting and because of Tony Randall's passion for the project, there was a sense of being able to use our creative gifts to speak up. It felt *good* to be working on it.

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This feeling has happened many, many times after 9/11—you know, the feeling of “What are we doing here? What’s the purpose of this weird, old handmade art form that we’re still practicing?”

At the same time, we were doing it on a wing and a prayer. Ellen wrote it in five days while I was casting it. The show was up six weeks later. There’s a certain virtue in that, but it was like sky-diving. I felt, I think, more free as a director than I’d felt in a long time, which was delicious. Now, the choice to stage *The Persians* again in D.C. is about, “If I’d known what I learned by doing it, what would I do differently?”

I thought going into *The Persians* that I hated Greek drama. What I eventually realized is that I hated many often well-received productions of Greek plays, which I just found very histrionic and dull. I was just always bored by the substitution of affect and effect for action. So, what I tried to do in *The Persians* was to find a way to bring moment-to-moment narrative acting into a story, in spite of the fact that the majority of what’s

going on is relating things that happen off stage. And what we found, of course, is that you *can* do moment-to-moment stuff. You just have to work doubly hard, because you’ve got to be serving your narrative storytelling and serving your results at the same time.

The other thing that I did that I was really proud of was to write a prologue. Every time I tried to explain *The Persians* to people, I had to explain about half a dozen things: that Aeschylus was a veteran of the Persian wars, that he was at the battle of Salamis, that this is the oldest surviving play in the Western canon—by pure chance, it’s the one that didn’t get burned in Alexandria. It’s not the oldest play ever written; it’s just one that we still have a copy of. And, of course, when you think about Aeschylus as a veteran of these wars—that he lost his own brother in them—the extraordinary thing is that he did not write a sort of Athenian victory march. Instead he set the play in the camp of his enemies as they awaited news of their defeat. The leap of dramatic imagination required to do that is extraordinary.

I took that information and created a little prologue, where the actors came out in their street clothes with a big, Persian *sbmatte* in their hands, and told us these facts about the play. I believe that my work as a director needs to stand free of any program notes—I *never* write director’s notes. With the prologue, I wanted to put the program notes into the dramatic action of the story.

Do you have a style as a director, a signature?

I don’t choose to cultivate a signature style as a director. It’s probably up to someone else to identify that. What I say to myself is: “What’s this play doing, and how can I match the dramatic rhythms of this play? How can I amplify the storytelling of this play? How can I theatricalize the play itself in support of what is already being done?” That’s the litmus test.

Are there kinds of plays that you’d like to do that you’re not getting offered?

Anyone who gets to do what I do and does not acknowledge the role that luck and timing have played is taking way too much credit for themselves. I think I’ve been ready every time luck gave me a break to seize it, but I know too many people who are as smart and talented as me who didn’t get the same break. I’ve been fortunate and privileged to do a wide range of work.

It’s a great vexation to me that the good work I have done regionally has very little impact on furthering my career options in New York. Justifiable or not, New York is where your influence and success are measured in the theatre, and if you want to continue to work at a high level regionally, you have to also prove you’re bona fide in New York. I also know I need to go out to Los Angeles and learn more about television or film—not just because of the lure of lucre but, in fact, because you learn to hone your directing skills further as you cross media. I’d love to direct opera. I’d love to think on that pageant-level scale, and opera is one of the few places where you’re able to do that. ☑

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