

STRUGGLING TO MAKE OLD WORDS NEW:  
JOSEPH PAPP'S *THE NAKED HAMLET* AND THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

Allison Bailey

*Why is my verse so barren of new pride,  
So far from variation for quick change?  
Why, with the time, do I not glance aside  
To new-found methods and to compounds strange?  
Why write I still all one, ever the same,  
And keep invention in a notèd weed,  
That every word doth almost tell my name,  
Showing their birth and where they did proceed?  
O know, sweet love, I always write of you,  
And you and love are still my argument;  
So all my best is dressing old words new,  
Spending again what is already spent;  
For as the sun is daily new and old,  
So is my love, still telling what is told.*

(Shakespeare, Sonnet LXXVI)

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE PLAY AND THE PAPER

*You shall know I am set naked on your kingdom.*

—Hamlet's letter to Claudius (IV.vii.43)

In 1967, Joseph Papp brought to life his own, revised version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as part of the Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival's (NYSF) first official season in its newly acquired, newly renovated home, the landmarked Astor Library. Papp titled his production *William Shakespeare's Naked Hamlet* with the goal of breathing a contemporary, raw energy and vibrancy into Shakespeare's words, channeling the Bard's messages across the United States. During preview performances, audiences responded animatedly, and theater house managers reported rounds of raucous laughter, unprecedented audience participation, and fervent standing ovations. After several weeks of previews, with much anticipation, Papp

opened the production to the critics. In an abrupt twist, the critics Papp most relied upon for the institution's livelihood were silent in the theater. But certainly raucous enough in their reviews.

The *New York Times*, the only paper syndicated across the U.S. and by far the most widely read by theatergoers and arts enthusiasts, published a review of the *Naked Hamlet* by Clive Barnes, who saw less “shadowgraphing” and more “jejune nonsense.” He expounded his point further through splashy lamentations and exclamations in one of the most scathing reviews he ever wrote (“Slings and Arrows” 53). Then, for those *Times* readers not satisfied with Barnes's criticism, Walter Kerr covered the production again, with equally cunning critical wit, in his Sunday theater column:

Take a handful of examples from Joseph Papp's vaudeville rearrangement of 'Hamlet,' an enterprise so exactly like the shows idiot children used to put on in their basements (admission 2 cents, if you had 2 cents) that it would be a simple kindness to pretend the Public Theater had never given it house-room if it hadn't just happened to bring up the point. (“Hamlet Takes a Pratfall” D1)

Unlike Barnes, however, Kerr offered no disclaimers as to his knowledge and tastes, speaking freely throughout his review about “these kinds of plays.”

The two reviews were by far the most negative the production received; the remainder of reviews could be described at worst as lukewarm, praising the play's intent but finding faults within the production itself, and at best as glowing, announcing a revolution in American theater. The gap between the *Times* responses and those of other critics draws attention to the role of theater criticism in the U.S.—by far the freest arena of journalism, since even letters to the editor are chosen carefully by the publisher and not necessarily read as expert opinion. The critic, in essence, has the power to make or break a production, and with the weight of the paper behind him—which means even more when that paper is the *New York Times*. “The other effect,” Papp said of negative *Times* theater reviews, “which is even worse than the attack on [the plays and

the playwrights], is that the public loses as a result. . . . The public is deprived of certain writers and the theater then is poorer for that fact” (Booth 38). In refusing to back down—and with extraordinary media access at his disposal—Papp initiated a cat and mouse game, talking back to the paper and, in the process, improving both the theater and the theater criticism process.

## THE PLAY

In the program’s director’s notes, Papp expressed his intentions: “This production aims radioactive ididium 192 at the nineteenth century **HAMLET** statue, and by gamma ray shadowgraphing seeks to discover the veins of the living original, buried under accumulated layers of reverential varnish.” By literally breaking the play into fragments and pasting them back together, Papp created a new world for *Hamlet*—one in which vaudeville, burlesque, sight gags, and traces of the circus are infused into the text—in which Ophelia, clad in sexy stockings and coat-tails, sings her mad songs into a microphone cabaret-style. (There is, despite the title, no nudity in the production save the seductive Ophelia’s fishnetted legs and Gertrude’s various states of sheet-covered undress). The pastiche nature of the production attempted to echo the essence of the decade—which Papp saw as shattered, ambiguous, contradictory. Papp further reproduced the sounds of the 1960s by commissioning a rock music score from Galt McDermot, who had just composed the successful, innovative rock musical *Hair* for the same theater.

The fragmented form filters through every element of the play, from the script to the scenery. Even costumes become characters unto themselves as metamorphoses occur from scene to scene: Hamlet transforms into Ramon the Janitor several times, as when Claudius says, “Something you have heard of Hamlet’s transformation”; Horatio dons prison garb, calling attention to the metal catwalk maze of a set, a literal representation of Hamlet’s psychological

“Denmark’s a prison.” Props enter the game as well—the most famous of which were the bags of peanuts that appeared periodically throughout the play, as Hamlet passed them out in the audience or shelled and threw them at Claudius. In *Talking Back to Shakespeare*, Martha Tuck Rozett meditated: “All of this stage madness, and the way it affects and infects the other characters, comes across with a certain bizarre clarity as the peanuts, at once missiles, fun food, and tokens of exchange, are thrown around the stage” (118). In the final scene, the audience must accept an integral role as well: a game of Russian roulette replaces the swordfights, and Hamlet selects an audience member to venture on-stage, point the gun at his heart, and decide whether or not to pull the trigger.

Ted Cornell, who had been a student of Papp’s when he taught at the Yale Drama School, assisted in rewriting the play. Cornell’s goal in Papp’s class had been to create a *Hamlet* that broke through its solemn and hallowed masterpiece stereotypes and opened up to contemporary audiences, focusing specifically on the lines and scenes that had been less frequently examined in the literary tradition. In the *Naked Hamlet* production handbook, for example, Papp calls attention to what he sees as one of Hamlet’s key lines: “Remember thee? Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe.” “This is an antic line,” writes Papp, “a joke which must have set the Globe Theater audience on a roar. ‘A seat in this distracted globe’—a laugh line given to the tragic figure of Hamlet?” (12). Papp theorized that the character of Hamlet would have appeared lighter and wittier to the audiences of Shakespeare’s time, and thus even more complex and multi-layered. He believed contemporary audiences were poorer for not appreciating the humor inherent in Shakespeare’s words. In his script, Papp finds ways to provide for the same kinds of moments for the audience of his day. He did not view the vaudeville frolics and pranks of the play as stooping to slapstick or cheap jokes, but as ways of

formulating an experience truer to the play's original intent, allowing the audience to be distracted from the unbearable truths of the story with brief moments of comic relief.

## THE PAPER

It is fairly widely accepted that negative reviews in the *Times* hold an influence over theater audiences powerful enough to close a show. "The *Times*' reputation as the most influential outlet for theater coverage is borne out by statistics. The audiences for Broadway plays include more readers of *The New York Times* than the combined totals of the *Daily News*, *USA Today*, the *New York Post*, the *Newark Star-Ledger* and the *Village Voice*" (Hawthorne and Simon 74). Often in theater, producers rely on the *Times* review as their best indicator for predicting a production's box office sales and length of run. Bernard Gersten of Lincoln Center (and at one time colleague of Papp's as Associate Producer of the Public Theater) has said that if the *Times* chooses not to cover a production, "it doesn't really happen." When probed to acknowledge whether or not there were *any* benefits to positive reviews in other New York papers, Gersten said, "Yes. We can reprint the review [in an advertisement] in the *Times*" (Hawthorne and Simon 72).

The dramatic and tumultuous chain of events stemming from the two *New York Times* reviews of the *Naked Hamlet*, however, was not limited to the usual harmful fallout of a shortened theatrical run and wounded artistic pride. Beyond these expected unfortunate drawbacks, the criticism sparked a sudden call for the NYSF to defend its appointment by the New York City Board of Education to present Shakespeare to the schools. Without the Board of Education contract, the institution's public funding was threatened. Further, the *Times* reviews generated heated debates over such varied topics as cross-cultural casting, free theater and

outreach to communities not usually exposed to the Bard, the creation of an American Shakespeare and an American theater, and the democratization of the theater criticism process, especially in regard to the *New York Times*.

Near the midpoint of his reign over the NYSF, the *New York Times* referred to Papp as “the producer-director who eats critics for breakfast and politicians for lunch” (Bongartz SM12). The reputation sprang both from Papp’s infamous, seemingly epic fights with the government (over presenting free Shakespeare in the Park, saving the landmarked Astor Library, and taking the fifth before HUAC to name a few) and from a unique kind of reciprocal, if histrionic, relationship between the producer and the paper. The producer took on a larger-than-life persona in the public eye, and was not afraid to use that to his advantage. Papp would not—ever—sit still upon receipt of a bad review. He would reply directly to his critics, even calling them in the middle of the night and asking, as he relished relating in a *Times* interview, “What the hell kind of review is that?” He continued:

They are not used to that. But a public theater has a duty to criticize critics. The commercial theater is afraid of them. We are not. Critics ought to be made to take responsibility for what they say. I would like to have them all stand up right there in the theater after a performance and say what they think, defend themselves in open debate, and then have the papers publish an account of the whole thing. (Bongartz SM12)

In place of that, Papp did the next best thing. He used every connection possible to ensure that the *Times* would cover his responses to the reviews, through letters to the editor and full-fledged articles written by and/or about him. While both producer and paper won and lost individual battles, the two also motivated one another to do their best work.

The debates sparked by the *Times* reviews of the *Naked Hamlet* provide an interesting case study of just how much the *New York Times* can influence not only an individual production’s success, but beyond that, and more importantly, the cultural atmosphere of New

York and the United States as a whole. Conversely, it provides a model for a way in which the *Times* can serve as a forum for important, democratic cultural debates in this country, debates that might otherwise remain unvoiced and unexplored. Instead of viewing the negative reviews of the *Naked Hamlet* as threatening to the American theater, in this essay I attempt to place the ensuing events and battles in a broader context. If one considers that the goal of art is to inspire response, and that the goal of criticism is to arouse debate, perhaps instead of considering a review a final judgment, an alternative might be possible in which it becomes, instead, a jumping-off point.

## II. THE FOUNDATIONS

Curious pretenders  
 Gaze with wonder  
 Affected nonchalance  
 Superficial ponder  
 Nodding assent  
 In false comprehension  
 To works of art.

—poem written by Joseph Papp in the seventh grade

Papp's views on the theater arose partly from his early childhood experiences and partly from his involvement with the Actors' Lab in Los Angeles. As a child of Jewish immigrant parents from Poland struggling to make a living in Brooklyn, Papp grew up "in a row of multifamily houses that were home to a mix of poor ethnic groups—Jewish, Italian, Ukrainian Polish, Irish, Negro, and some Arab families whom the children called 'Mohammedans'" (Epstein 72). Papp recalled his most significant encounter with language as a moment when he was twelve years old and a teacher gave him a verse of *Julius Caesar* to memorize. The

language mesmerized Papp, and he would recite that speech (the ‘Wherefore rejoice?’ soliloquy) at will for the rest of his life. He became obsessed with Shakespeare, in whom he found enough “violent, graphic detail” to “bridge the gap between Elizabethan English and Brooklynese, school and street, and to excite a teenager who carried a knife and ran with a gang” (Epstein 33).<sup>1</sup>

As Papp grew up, his love of Shakespeare and theater in general continued to flourish in unlikely places that would eventually influence his theatrical goals with the NYSF. He joined the Navy in 1942 (mainly to avoid being drafted and escape a failing marriage), and it was on his base in Bainbridge, Maryland that he re-discovered his passion for plays. He began to put on skits for his fellow shipmates, at first simply to amuse himself. The skits grew into an organized entertainment unit for which Papp produced variety shows and vaudeville rip-offs, and he continued doing so “for the duration of the war, in aircraft carriers, on open stages, inside officers’ clubs. . . . His last show, starring Bob Fosse, played the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1946” (Epstein 57).

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<sup>1</sup> The parallels between Papp’s childhood and that of Arthur Gelb, who would become a reviewer for the *Times* drama department, and Abe Rosenthal, who would become a writer/editor and later run the entire paper, are striking. Both men shared Papp’s Eastern European Jewish background, and both grew up in ethnically diverse lower middle-class New York City neighborhoods and later engaged in the same zealous advocacy for cultural pluralism. In these and other ways, all three men were a part of the American entertainment industry’s post-war story of second-generation Jewish-American artists whose ideas were formed during Hollywood’s wartime push of “the American way of life,” the melting pot, and art as a means of social reform. The shared histories would eventually work in Papp’s favor while forging a relationship with the *New York Times*. Papp’s widow, Gail Merrifield Papp, muses that the three men were all “coming out of the social movements and Jewish backgrounds of New York, coming out of those times of Depression and war.” Another reason they immediately had a kind of unspoken bond, she said, was their shared achievement of “being able to make it to their positions from where they began.” Indeed, Gelb eventually wrote the review of Papp’s *The Taming of the Shrew* at the East River Amphitheater (Papp’s first outdoor Shakespeare venture), which Gelb would later claim was the catalyst for the NYSF’s fame, both in terms of the productions themselves and Papp’s philosophy of free Shakespeare. “[Gelb] came in at the moment he was needed and did something very significant,” Gail Papp said. “You don’t usually get that attention with the *Times*. You know, you’re invisible. And if you’re trying to raise money for an organization you can’t stay invisible. So that was very important for Joe.”



The most important step in forming the foundations of Papp's philosophies of theater was at that point just on the horizon. Papp left the Navy and headed out to Los Angeles, where a shipmate put him in touch with the Actors' Lab, a new theater school that was accepting veterans free of charge per the G.I. Bill. It was the moment in which Papp landed squarely within the theater tradition spurred by the Works Project Administration's (WPA) Federal Theater Project. Members of the Group Theatre had founded the Actors' Lab several years earlier, carrying with them the Group's core values of creating an American theater that would both mirror and change their times. The Group Theatre had broken up under financial strain, and many of its defectors had migrated to Hollywood. Harold Clurman, one of the primary founders of the Group Theatre, published an obituary for the organization in the *New York Times* in 1941 entitled "Note on the Future," ironically placing all hope for the revitalization of the theater on the return of the G.I.s to the United States: "What President Truman has said in regard to the whole situation—namely, that the world of tomorrow belongs to the G.I.—applies equally to the theater. I doubt that the returning G.I. is going to be satisfied with the timid and tepid pleasures of our unadventurous stage" (Clurman 41).

Meanwhile, across the country, Papp was immersing himself in Clurman's philosophies at the Lab, which had become "the only theater group in Hollywood who consistently presented the classics" (Epstein 58). The group's mission statement expounded: "The Actors' Lab is an organization with the primary purpose of developing for actors a real understanding of and participation in the life of our times—based on an intelligent appraisal of the social forces at work in this particular period." Within that, the cornerstones of the philosophy behind the NYSF were taking shape, somewhere in the spaces created by the conflict between classical and avant-garde theater that the Lab relished exposing—with the ultimate goal of making the two relevant

to one another. As Papp would later insist at his Festival, the Lab accepted actors of all types, and a single production would cast both Hollywood stars and starving artists.

It was also at the Lab that Papp would cultivate his socialist ideology. His first foray in the press, the start of a long career of publicity dramas, came in the form of a response to a critic for the *Los Angeles Times* who mocked the Lab's integrated open-air barbecue. "The group's corny idea of being liberal will eventually lead them into trouble," she wrote. "Everyone in the world is as good as he is in his heart regardless of race, creed or color. But that doesn't mean they have to intermix. . . . That's the sort of thing that leads to race riots." Papp responded:

Mothers, fathers, kids and old folks, Catholics, Protestants, Jews joined together this day and had a good time. Certainly there were Negro people present. . . . There were no back doors or separate entrances for Negroes. In the best tradition of theater and democracy, there was no discrimination against fellow human beings. We, as a theater, are part of the tremendous struggles being waged by Equity and the Dramatists' Guild against segregation in theaters. (Epstein 68-9)

Papp's experiences at the Lab precipitated his ardent quest for the acceptance of multiracial casting in the United States, a quest that would eventually become an integral part of the mission statement of the NYSF.

Disastrously, in 1949, after shutting down the WPA Theater Project (claiming it was "infested" with communists) the House of Un-American Activities indirectly destroyed the Actors' Lab. Since the majority of the "Hollywood Ten" were associated with the Lab, audiences feared that attendance at the group's performances would lead to their association with communism. Papp eventually moved to New York City, where, while working as a stage manager at CBS and struggling to get his first productions of free Shakespeare in the Park off the ground, he himself had occasion to invoke the fifth amendment when called before HUAC. Both his hearing and his infamous fights with larger-than-life Parks Commissioner Robert Moses over free Shakespeare in the Park were covered extensively in the *New York Times*. Papp seemed to

be living by the adage that all publicity is good publicity, and indeed his aggressive encounters with political drama in the public eye caused a great deal of interest in his first artistic projects that might otherwise have been somewhat less keen and intense. Since its inception, the NYSF has faced the battles and glories of public criticism, arguably more than any other theatrical institution in the United States, and nowhere more notably than in the *New York Times*.

Papp knew from the start that the *Times* was the key not only to ticket sales and recognition, but to forging his dreams of a new theatrical community through to the public. When he began producing theater in a church basement in the early 1950s, seven daily newspapers operated in New York City. By the late 1960s, there were only three. Of the three, the *New York Times* is the only paper syndicated across the U.S., and by far the most widely read by theatergoers and arts enthusiasts (Epstein 282). Other elements of a *New York Times* critic's power stem from the distinctively vast span of the paper's arts coverage and the "widespread consumer dependence on critics" (Booth 17). In addition to its direct influence, a *Times* review is often the only one quoted on the radio and on television, even when the opinions in its reviews differ wildly from the majority of other papers. Recognizing all of this, Papp paid little or no attention to other newspapers in his public relations endeavors, theatrical and otherwise. When he spoke about critical influence over his plays, he frequently added a parenthetical "and we're talking about the *New York Times*" (Booth 36).

When Papp set out on his mission to get his plays reviewed in the *Times*, he did so with a fresh and idealistic zest, beginning his journey by showering his audiences with photo-copied letters criticizing the paper's lack of off-Broadway theater coverage.<sup>2</sup> His grass-roots tactics

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<sup>2</sup> One such hand-out read: "Dear Audience Member: It is automatic that any play opening on Broadway, though it be the worst piece of junk, ineptly produced and cast, having no other purpose but to satisfy the egos of a number of people with money enough to pay for the expensive adventure—this play will be covered without any question... (continued on next page)"

worked with Abe Rosenthal and Arthur Gelb, and for a time the NYSF maintained what former employee Julius Novick referred to as a “sacred cow status” (Epstein 281). Not many were willing to challenge the institution founded on a fight for equality in the arts world, let alone the man at its helm, whose strength and power had been elevated to an almost mythical status by his rare willingness to fight (and win) against Robert Moses. Other arts institutions became intimidated by the NYSF and exasperated by their lack of coverage in the arts section of the *Times* that seemed weekly (and at times even daily) to feature Joseph Papp and his new Shakespeare.

Papp would later regret (and curse, literally and notoriously) his massive amount of coverage in the paper. When *The Naked Hamlet* opened in 1967, Papp’s bonds with Gelb and Rosenthal did nothing to dilute his aggressive reactions to the critics that wrote for them. He rejected Clive Barnes’s pointed witticisms and Walter Kerr’s perpetual traditionalist bashing of more avant-garde productions. When the two directed their printed wrath in his direction, the action-oriented, fiery-tempered Joseph Papp was not one to sit idly by.

### III. THE GOALS

There *were* significant similarities between the audiences of Shakespeare’s own day and those he drew in America. One of Shakespeare’s contemporaries commented that the theater was “frequented by all sorts of people old and young, rich and poore, masters and servants, papist and puritans, wise men etc., churchmen and statesmen.” The nineteenth-century American audience was equally heterogeneous (Levine 24).

Joseph Papp was a firm believer in what has come to be referred to as the “Americanization” of Shakespeare. Of the *Naked Hamlet* Papp said, “You do Shakespeare a disservice if you worship him. You have to see him as you would see a contemporary writer, someone who’s speaking to you. . . . The artistic impulse, not the accent, is what matters” (Epstein 93). He intended his productions to cast the Bard’s words in an American light, believing one of Shakespeare’s greatest goals was to touch every audience member with his plays.

The disparity between Papp’s view of the Americanization of Shakespeare versus that of Clive Barnes and Walter Kerr mirrored a classic, perpetual debate. On one side, there are those, like Papp and Peter Brook (who imagined that the excitement felt at the Globe was akin to the enthusiasm created by the opening of Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* in the U.S.), who feel that “each line in Shakespeare is an atom. The energy that can be released is infinite—if we can split it open” (Brook 25). On the other side are the Shakespearean purists, who believe that attempts to modernize Shakespeare’s art are simply disrespectful or dishonest appropriations of art. In his groundbreaking study of “high” versus “low” culture focusing on Shakespeare in America, even Lawrence Levine admits to a wavering nervousness as he approached his initial research:

Could I, a non-specialist, possibly possess the credentials necessary to do research involving a figure my culture had taught me to revere as one of the barely accessible Classic Writers who could be approached only with great humility and even greater erudition? (5)

Levine realized, however, that much of this feeling stemmed from false impressions about European art versus American art. As San Francisco columnist Gerald Nachman said about the seeming automatic distaste for American opera, “I realized it must be the American reverence for all things European and our tendency to take for granted all things quintessentially American. I

thought we were over that but it's too ingrained; we're patriotic about everything but our art" (qtd. in Levine 1-2).

Papp would write much about the process of Americanizing Shakespeare, including a full-length book titled *Shakespeare Alive!* and countless articles in the *New York Times*. In one such article, protesting against the BBC Shakespeare Marathon scheduled to be broadcast in the U.S. without any American actors, he argued that Americans do not respond to Shakespeare as they should because they are used to hearing his work in a distancing British accent, giving them the impression that access to his messages is unattainable for working class Americans. "British-spoken Shakespeare merely reinforces the mistaken attitude that the Bard's Elizabethan workingmen actors acted his plays in some highfalutin manner," Papp wrote. "The fact is that our less lyrical and tougher accents of American speech, in all its varied intonations, are far closer to the original Elizabethan" ("The Shakespeare Project" D39). Papp then went on to chide the newspaper itself for its writers' apathetic acceptance of the BBC series. "The *Times* suggests we should take advantage of the bargain we have been offered, since 'the series costs a fraction of what an American production would cost,'" he wrote in a letter to the editor. Pushing the newspaper to take a stand, he continued:

I would expect the distinguished *New York Times* to offer a more dignified and thoughtful argument along these lines: the sharing in the production of the Shakespeare canon by Americans and Englishmen subsidized by private and governmental funds; a move that would be in the interest of both countries and open up the doors to new exchanges and do away with the "cultural chauvinism" which the editor deplores but actually encourages.

Papp's plea for consideration of American participation in a project half-funded with American dollars seemed to work—for a time. After reading Papp's published statements, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting withdrew its portion of the funds. Left with \$1.2 million unaccounted for, WNET/Channel 13 (which had partnered with the BBC for the event) pursued private

funding, and after several weeks secured the amount from the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. The marathon went on as planned, with entirely British casts, crews, and directors. Papp accepted the defeat begrudgingly, acknowledging that at least American taxpayers were no longer footing the bill, but was “struck dumb” when the BBC asked him to be a special consultant on a series of mini-introductions to the plays for the American TV audiences. “I simply cannot believe that you people are serious,” he wrote to John Jay Iselin, president of WNET:

How can you in good conscience dare to suggest that outstanding American performers you name, such talents as George C. Scott, Colleen Dewhurst, Julie Harris, Meryl Streep, James Earl Jones, Estelle Parsons . . . , all of whom have played major Shakespearean roles with our own and other fine companies in the United States, relegate their function to that of ‘storyteller’ of Shakespeare and not performer of Shakespeare? (qtd. in Epstein 355)

Papp would eventually produce his own all-American Shakespeare marathon, staging all 36 plays for free in Central Park between 1987 and 1993. The *Hamlet* of the marathon would be his fifth.

The *Naked Hamlet* was his first. In it, Papp’s goal, first and foremost, was to create a Shakespearean production that simmered with life and vitality and exploded with a distinctively American energy. The producer was not alone in his venture, as the climate of the 1960s had produced several reimagined Shakespeare productions including Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Peter Brook’s highly controversial *King Lear*. Papp passionately believed that he was unveiling *Hamlet* in order to provide entertainment that crossed culture and class lines, just as Shakespeare’s plays had done in his time. Nothing thrilled Papp more than imagining his audiences as those at the Globe, spanning all classes and “gentles all.”

The premise behind Papp’s revisions rested on two main pillars: the reality that there is no definitive version of *Hamlet*, and his belief that many aspects of the tragedy were intended

more humorously than had become widely accepted. In his adaptation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern became Rossencraft and Gilderstone, since Papp did not want anything taken for granted, including the text. As he explains in his production handbook, “These names are from the 1603 *Quarto*, often called ‘the corrupt quarto,’ but remember that any text you read is an amalgam of folios, quartos, and scholarly speculations. There is no extant, crystalline, ‘original’ *Hamlet*” (40). As Oscar Wilde wrote, “There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies.” Wilde’s words might easily have been applied to Papp’s production as he continues “[Hamlet] will always be showing us the work of art in some new relation to our age. He will always be reminding us that great works of art are living things—are, in fact, the only things that live” (109).

Literary scholar Harold Bloom believes that Shakespeare never stopped revising *Hamlet* to the day he died. Papp seemed to follow Shakespeare’s lead in this sense, both by continually rethinking and reproducing *Hamlet* throughout his career, and in reference to this production; in his production handbook, he stresses to directors who pick up the script that this play would always be a work in progress. The printing and publishing of the script was simply “an arbitrary interruption of the continuing process which should be renewed in your production” (30).

Bloom further questions whether or not the play was intended to be a tragedy in its first incarnation (415). “Hamlet himself is a great comedian,” he points out, “and there are elements of tragic farce in *Hamlet*” (417). Along these lines, Papp offers his audience vaudevillian antics amidst the overwhelming tragedy—Hamlet offers Claudius an exploding cigar and Claudius extends his hand to Hamlet with a joke buzzer hidden in his palm. In perhaps the most stunning application of the idea, Papp gives his Hamlet a “To be or not to be” that begins in a thick Puerto Rican accent, overdone to the point of purposeful disrespect. As Papp relates in his production



handbook, audiences typically laughed to hear the familiar soliloquy treated lightly, but as Hamlet gradually lost the accent as the speech progressed, an astonishing change would descend and stun the audience silent. As Sheen's Hamlet became quieter and more intense, removing his wig and speaking more carefully, the audience realized along with him that there was a petrifying truth behind his words. He was trapped in this prison of Denmark, and seemed only to sink deeper into its complexities with each attempt at escape, agonized into the heartwrenching question of whether or not the better answer was simply not to be. Within this most famous monologue of Shakespeare's, Papp attempted to make old words new by portraying a powerful twist of farce into tragedy.

Lawrence Levine spotlights Papp's efforts as extraordinary within the struggle over how to present Shakespeare. In his view, the process of reimagining Shakespeare exhibited by "such young producers and directors as Joseph Papp in the late 1950s and 1960s" served to

liberate Shakespeare from the genteel prison in which he had been confined, to restore his plays to their original vitality, and to disseminate them among what Papp called 'a great dispossessed audience,' is a testament to what had happened to Shakespearean drama since the mid-nineteenth century. (32)

Papp did not cast any British actors in his production. Martin Sheen (half Puerto-Rican, born Ramon Estevez) played Hamlet, and the bawdy April Shawhan played Ophelia. When the NYSF opened the production for previews in December of 1967, the *Naked Hamlet* was only the second production to be presented in the new Public Theater venue on Lafayette Street, following upon the bright success of the rock-musical *Hair*. The audiences that swarmed to the previews of the *Naked Hamlet* were as diverse in class as those who attended free Shakespeare in Central Park, and as ethnically diverse as the cast performing the play. Papp was elated with his audiences. He had expressed his hopes for a new federal arts commission in the United States nine years earlier in the *Times*, writing, "For a number of years I have been harboring the

suspicion that the great mass of Americans were not as allergic to ‘culture’ or ‘highbrow’ fare as is suspected in some quarters, but that they were simply suffering from underexposure” (“Joseph Papp Proposes New Arts Commission” X3). Now he believed the success of the *Naked Hamlet* could forge a new excitement for Shakespeare among all Americans.

#### IV. THE REVIEWS

Papp was entirely unprepared for the barrage of negative criticism he received for the *Naked Hamlet* from the *New York Times* after the weeks of standing ovations during previews. The majority of reviews were high-spirited affirmations, and even the few who had not enjoyed the production itself expressed fascination with and support of the intentions behind it. Michael Smith of the *Village Voice* wrote:

[Papp has] shaken the daylights out of Shakespeare and turned “Hamlet” upside down, cut, scrambled, pared it down, and pasted it back together all out of kilter (as it is generally thought to be in the first place). It’s a hallucinatory “Hamlet,” with the clashing styles, jagged emotional tone, and image overload of specifically the 1960s. It’s not a “modern-dress” “Hamlet” but a now “Hamlet,” with access to the full range of attitudes that clutter the modern mind.

Of the method itself, Smith deliberated, “The production’s justification is not to be found in theories but in its life on the stage. You’d have to be sadly up-tight about Shakespeare not to get great fun out of it” (29). Robert Brustein of the *New Republic* “found the whole undertaking to be pretty courageous, and while it has drawn a predictable response from those who prefer their Kulchur pre-packaged, standardized, and wholly digestible like a TV dinner, I think it is bound to have an effect on the theatrical consciousness for some time to come” (23). Though Harold Clurman had some reservations about the production, namely that audience members who did not know the original play might have trouble following the story, he confessed in his review in *The Nation* that “[he] could submit himself much more easily to this *Hamlet* than some of the

star-studded productions [he had seen]” and drew attention to its aims “to be funny and to elucidate the play in all its ambiguities for a mod audience” (92).<sup>3</sup>

The plethora of positive reviews cast the *New York Times* responses in an utterly incoherent light—yet they are the two reviews that most effectually influenced both public and private response to the production. Clive Barnes seemed to sense that he would himself be criticized for taking issue with a production that had so obviously attempted to bridge the gap, making Shakespeare accessible to audiences that might not normally feel comfortable with *Hamlet*. He begins his review by stressing to readers that he had indeed read Jan Kott’s new book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, a literary plea to relate Shakespeare to our own times. After a jab at Kott, claiming his work was well-written but unoriginal, Barnes seems almost comically on the defensive, perhaps sensing the slings and arrows he would endure from aggressive Papp’s direction when the review came out in print. Barnes skirts around his opinions for a bit, warning his readers: “I am about to say some very nasty things about this ‘Hamlet,’ but I must stress that Mr. Papp has no reason to feel a martyr in the cause of progressive art.” He then settles in for one of his most scathing reviews, sprinkled with ironic, snide asides such as

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<sup>3</sup> Some other responses:

- “A serious attempt to demonstrate the viability of Shakespeare’s insights into men’s weaknesses in terms of modern theater. This *Hamlet* is a gathering of fantasies envisaged by the leading players . . . emotions are inner, private and unshared, until they clash in a series of brutal, shattering collisions. . . . Papp’s imaginative scissoring and repasting has sculptured a *Hamlet* of crystalline tensility.” —Alan Rich, *Time Magazine*
- “Joseph Papp’s new *Hamlet* is a brilliant example of a play not added to but turned inside out. . . . His technical devices have to do with pop art, with bringing on images bigger and more absurd than they are in life itself. . . . It sends shafts of intense light on over-familiar passages.”—Emily Genauer, *Newsday*
- “. . . raucous, annoying ,explosive and exciting. . . . It is both Cubist and Pop. Cubist in that it tries to break the characters down into planes and angles we have never seen before. . . . Pop because it tries to force the art of Shakespeare to co-exist with modern trappings—and thereby to shake Shakespeare up and to jangle the audience a bit too.”—Leonard Harris, CBS-TV
- “This *Hamlet* is one of the most fascinating departures from the traditional I have seen. Once you get used to the strange costumes, this *Hamlet* not only ceases to annoy, it begins to intrigue.”—Allen Jeffreys, ABC-TV

“This is not it,” “No, no, no,” and “Poor Mr. Papp!” He provides the following disclaimer to his woeful lamentations:

I am not attacking this “Hamlet” for “tampering with a holy cow,” but for its incompetence, and I would say fundamental misunderstanding of Mr. Kott’s muddled, but prophetic message. For this is not a “Hamlet” for our times; it is fundamentally an aimless “Hamlet” for Philistines who wish to be confirmed in their opinion that the Bard is for the birds. (53)

At the end of the review, “in fairness,” Barnes adds, “at times . . . Mr. Papp showed a conventional director’s skill and flair. Indeed, his idea of having Claudius conned while drunk into playing the play scene himself was brilliant. But normally, his directing was too concentrated on cheap laughs.” Other than his enjoyment of the switch of character names to Rossencraft and Gilderstone (which Barnes interpreted as a nod to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern truly being dead), finding it “difficult to discuss performances in a production that [he regards] as so clearly misconceived,” he concludes, “The Ophelia was the largest-bosomed Ophelia I have ever seen, but seemed otherwise less remarkable.”<sup>4</sup>

For some reason the *Times* editors decided not to stop there, possibly because they had read the other papers’ positive reviews and thought they might receive a different response from a different critic—a practice which the *Village Voice* often employs when its staff members disagree with the reviews published in its pages. Strangely, though, the critic sent to cover the production for the Saturday issue was Walter Kerr, quite possibly the most traditionalist theater critic in New York. Papp always felt threatened by Kerr and what he perceived as an agenda against his philosophies of art, as he wrote in the draft of a letter to the *New York Times* :

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<sup>4</sup> Following publication of the review, Papp added another antic bit into the play, as he writes in his production handbook. When Polonius asks, “What do you read, my lord?” Hamlet answers, “The program.” Papp’s director’s note on the line reads: “There are many alternatives you might want to use here. . . . After our scathing review in the *New York Times*, Hamlet was reading that newspaper for a while.” (73)

During the formative years of the New York Shakespeare Festival, Mr. Kerr wrote a piece for the now defunct *Herald-Tribune* where he honestly expressed his views about not charging for Shakespeare. He said: “I am sure that my own first instinctive rebellion against the notion of wholesale free-loading” (he omitted libraries and schools) “is a Puritanical one. A man must pay for what he gets; if he doesn’t, there’s something wrong with him or something wrong with it.”

“Puritanical” indeed; a euphemism for “commercial” and a deep distrust of motives. . . . The man who doesn’t do it for a buck is not to be trusted.

As it turned out, Papp’s fears were not unfounded. In his review, Kerr summarized his views of Papp’s NYSF productions: “What [they] really resemble are the Theater of the Absurd trying to crawl back into the warm womb of Expressionism, the fifties aspiring again to the redcheeked youth of the twenties. . . . Sometimes, when I have nothing else to do, I count the number of people asleep.” “Alas,” he goes on, mourning the *Naked Hamlet*, “we are signaled to laugh and cannot,” calling the play “a shadow of a director’s thought.” His very long review continues in the same manner, sighing that “the emptiness isn’t new, especially among productions priding themselves on being very ‘far out’” (“Hamlet Takes a Pratfall” D1). And thus the *Naked Hamlet* received its second crushing blow from the *New York Times*.<sup>5</sup>

Attempting to explain the phenomenon of *Times* reviews differing from audience perception of the production, Gail Papp recalled how unwilling Kerr was simply to travel to the physical site of the downtown theater. “He was used to a more comfortable setting on Broadway. That was his territory. [Off-Broadway, experimental theater] was not the kind of

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<sup>5</sup> Immediately, several audience members wrote editorials responding to the two reviews, mocking the bemoaning tone of the two reviews and citing strengths of the production that matched Papp’s goals when producing the play, with comments such as:

- “Hamlet” is . . . so much a part of our tradition that our reverence for it puts it clear out of consciousness. . . . Mr. Papp’s “Hamlet” went beyond interpretation toward confrontation.
- Alas, Messrs. Barnes and Kerr! . . . The brilliance of this production is that it does combine the low farce of “Hellzapoppin” -- and my audience laughed -- with a “To be or not to be” that saw the audience start to snicker but end in pin-dropping absorption.
- There is something a little wild and out of kilter in this production, just fitting for the out-of-jointness of the time -- Hamlet’s, Shakespeare’s, and, “would it were not so,” ours.

coverage he was expecting to pursue.” She feels that his predisposition to attack Public Theater productions stemmed entirely from Kerr’s being “of a different era”:

He did not respond to the kind of work that Joe was interested in doing. He was hooked to a time and a viewpoint that was not suitable or proper to review this kind of work. He couldn’t bridge out of his generation. Some people can do that. But the way he paid attention to [the NYSF] was often derisive, condescending, and kind of dismissive, with humor and huge dismissals of the entire thing.

Papp felt deeply that the *Times* was doing a disservice not only to the NYSF but to theater in the United States by keeping Kerr on as a first-string critic, and frequently wrote letters to Brooks Atkinson calling for his removal. Papp himself did not attempt subtlety in his responses to Kerr’s explicit reviews, at one time writing him:

The game playing is over. This is to notify you that you are not welcome at the Public Theater for any of our new presentations. My conscience does not permit me to allow you to annihilate young writers who are the mainstay of the theater. . . . So please stay away. Don’t come. Keep out. I don’t want you here. You are incapable of judging and evaluating new works. (Epstein 295)<sup>6</sup>

As strongly as Papp felt about Kerr, though, it was Barnes who would receive the brunt of Papp’s furor in a full-force drama spurred by the results of the *Times* reviews.

## V. THE FALLOUT

Listen, when I hear criticism of one of my shows, I know more than most critics what’s wrong with it. For every criticism they give, I can give two. But I try to

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<sup>6</sup> The letter was reminiscent of a famous early twentieth century *New York Times* theater debacle, in which the Shubert organization barred one of its critics from viewing further plays after he had published an unfavorable review. The newspaper eventually challenged the Shuberts in court, but the court ruled in favor of the *Times*. In another example of the power wielded by the newspaper, however, Epstein writes of how the *Times* then refused to place any advertisements for the Shuberts, and further meticulously edited and removed any trace of the organization from its pages, including any businesses, productions, and actors associated with it. “Moreover,” she writes, “the *Times* featured the story on its front pages, creating a climate of opinion that shamed the Shuberts, lost them business and eventually forced the producers to invite [the reviewer] back. The Shuberts never challenged the *Times* again” (284). Epstein later notes, “Because of Papp’s favored-theater status with Abe Rosenthal and Arthur Gelb, [Papp’s furious complaint letters asking the critics not to review his productions] became the stuff of *Times* folklore rather than provoking retribution of the kind the newspaper had exacted from the Shubert brothers in 1915” (295).

judge the entire work and say: “Isn’t it an interesting evening in the theater?” That’s the important thing. (Joseph Papp, qtd. in Epstein 293)

The repercussions of the *Times* reviews of *The Naked Hamlet* could well have been disastrous to the survival of the NYSF. The institution had entered into a contract with the New York City Board of Education for an annual tour of its Shakespeare productions in the City’s public high schools, and in this, the contract’s last year before possible renewal, Papp had been planning on presenting his *Hamlet*. The City of New York provided a significant portion of the Festival’s yearly public funding based on the school performances.

When Superintendent Bernard E. Donovan read the reviews in the *Times*, he objected to the choice of this play for the school performances and immediately asked Papp to present something else. Donovan had not seen the play, and his objection struck the theater community hard at a time when the arts were coming under increasing attack for exercising first amendment rights in debates over public funding, with the newly formed National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) still struggling on shaky ground. Donovan’s challenge accented the far-reaching influence of the *Times* over all other criticism, with its reviews directly affecting public funding. Papp had long known that “foundations are impressed in a general way by good notices. Even today, maybe an individual notice may not be one thing or another, but if you keep getting bad notices you won’t get any funding if you apply” (Booth 37). Now he learned that even already-promised public funding could be withdrawn due entirely to opinions printed in the *Times*.

Even had Papp wanted to comply with Donovan’s wish, he had nothing else prepared and no time in which to embark on a wholly new production—not to mention no funds with which to fuel such an endeavor. These considerations, however, were not the basis of Papp’s response to the superintendent. Papp defended *The Naked Hamlet* as an ideal avenue through which

schoolchildren could approach Shakespeare—free from the corseted European conventions that so often distance children from the Bard, making them feel as though his works are inaccessible and too far removed from their own experience to understand. The argument continued back and forth for weeks.

In the meantime, instead of adding his voice to the *Times* with an editorial responding to the critics as he often did, Papp chose a different route in an attempt to reverse the negative *Times* publicity in his favor. Using his connections at CBS, where he had stage-managed for many years (and where Leonard Harris had given his *Naked Hamlet* a favorable review), Papp challenged Clive Barnes to a live debate on a weekend discussion program at the station. Barnes agreed begrudgingly. Scenes from Papp's production were splashed against screens in the background throughout the debate, giving the *Naked Hamlet* a great deal of added publicity before the arguing had even begun. Papp's strategy was simply to humiliate Barnes into conceding that his review had been mistaken. Papp was indeed a self-assured and intimidating presence, and was prepared to debate with aggression; Barnes had pinched his most sensitive artistic nerve. Throughout the program, Papp involved a bit of stage business straight out of the *Naked Hamlet*, making a grand show of shelling and eating peanuts as Barnes spoke; and whenever Barnes appeared to gain composure or eloquence, Papp tossed a few shells in his direction (Little 168). While Barnes had no problem with succinctness and lucidity in print, he was entirely out of his element in the spotlight before the cameras. He found himself stammering half-hearted responses to Papp's challenges, failing to defend his own printed words. Unarguably to anyone who witnessed the spectacle, Papp emerged as the victor. The debate gave the production the added publicity (and humor and authenticity) necessary to keep it running.



On the other hand, relates Gail Papp, “After that debate, [Barnes] stopped printing Joe’s name in the *Times*. For every play he reviewed he would list all of the credits under ‘The Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival,’ but he would just leave Joe’s out. Just not include the producer. Of course, this infuriated Joe.” The omission provides an unambiguous example of the free reign given to *Times* critics; the editors did not even fact-check the lists of credits, presumably the one section of a review absolutely free from opinion. “Years later,” Gail Papp continued, “[Barnes] admitted to it and sort of apologized, but it was too late then, of course.”<sup>7</sup>

Papp tried several avenues to convince the Board of Education to accept his production for the school tours. The first was an appearance before the Board with an author of a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in support of the production—Roger Goodman, Chairman of the English Department at New York City’s Stuyvesant High School. The two made an impassioned plea, but to no avail. Donovan would not budge.

The superintendent’s persistent efforts to cancel the school tours finally spurred Papp to approach the *Times* directly. In an article about the controversy, “School Aides Object to Papp’s Modern ‘Hamlet’,” Donovan claimed that his objection was simply over the question of “whether or not this version of Shakespeare’s play is suitable for the maturity of high school students” (Zolotow 33). Papp rebutted:

There is nothing in the contract between the festival and the Board of Education that gives them the right to censor our production.

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<sup>7</sup> In 1974, Papp attempted to fend off further criticism from Barnes by sending a letter to Arthur Gelb before the season began. “Dear Arthur,” he wrote, “We are coming up with a number of new plays, all of which I believe fall into Clive Barnes’ category of ‘filth,’ chic or otherwise. . . . May I ask, therefore, that Clive not be assigned to cover our new plays. It is absolutely ridiculous for us to invite the annihilating criticism emanating from a man who is totally out of touch with contemporary writing. You must grasp what I’m saying in the proper way, for the implications are not limited to me and the Shakespeare Festival. The effects of constant degradation of new works by the *New York Times* is and will be felt in the entire American theater.” In a postscript, he noted, “I am sending a similar letter to the Sunday Arts and Leisure editor in regards to Walter Kerr. The problem here is essentially the same.”

My position is that [the students] have the customary text of “Hamlet” as accepted by scholars and we are offering an interpretation of that text. Since the “straight” play is ambiguous, there is no conceivable way to produce it on the stage without some special point of view.

I also hold the view that this production will challenge both teacher and student to tackle the written text in an imaginative and joyful way rather than through the old, tired, stale and dull methods generally taught in the city school system.

The *Times* further reported that the Board of Education would decide the issue by a panel vote after a special viewing of the *Naked Hamlet* the next week at the Public Theater. Members of the Board of Education would serve as judges, and would be advised by ten panelists, five chosen by Papp and five by the Board of Education’s Audio-Visual department, which supervised the school tours. “Regardless of their decision,” though, “Superintendent of Schools Bernard E. Donovan has reserved the right to make his own decision.”

Papp withheld a key piece of information about this special viewing when interviewed for the *Times* article—information of which even the Board of Education remained unaware. Papp had been working quietly in the wings, secretly inviting a large audience of high school students and teachers to the test performance. More significantly, he had used his pull at CBS once again, arranging for the television station to cover the event with cameras on all sides of the theater, specifically directed to focus on audience reaction. Both teachers and students responded enthusiastically, and “the performance went as well as it had in those uninhibited previews”—and now Papp had caught it on tape (Little 170). During the discussion period that followed, as reported in the *Times*, Papp resorted to the peanut bit again, munching them casually on-stage and declaring his advice to the Board of Education: “Don’t tell me how to direct and I won’t tell you how to teach” (Severo 43). Papp later elaborated on the youth reaction in the prologue to his production handbook for the play:

They have expressed their exhilaration in the experience and have made such extraordinary comments as groovy, wild, sends me—the vernacular of our time; they have, I was going to say, enjoyed it, but they have experienced the insides of a work of art that has grown stale, respectable, and therefore coated with the varnish that prevents the viewer from coming to grips with the real life force within the play.

To Papp, the special performance had achieved exactly what he had hoped it would; it made it clear, once and for all and in the public eye, that he had created a production of Shakespeare to which students would respond energetically. Whether the superintendent enjoyed the performance or not, it sparked reaction from the students—and more importantly, promised to precipitate animated discussions in the classroom.

The following Monday, Donovan agreed to compromise. His terms were even better than Papp had anticipated. Donovan did not want the production traveling around to the schools, but he would allow individual schools to choose whether or not to attend special performances at the Public Theater. The financial terms of the contract, however, would remain intact. Not only would his production maintain its connection with school audiences, but now that the tour travel expenses would be saved, Papp would be left with a cash surplus. When the school run was over, Papp used the extra money to create “The Other Stage” (now the LuEsther Theater) in the Public Theater building, a 100-seat experimental theater.

The rollicking publicity for the production did not end there. Because of other acting commitments, Martin Sheen had to leave the cast of the production for the school run. In his place Papp cast African-American Cleavon Little in the title role. The move gained publicity for the color-blind casting cause Papp had taken up zealously years before at the Actors’ Lab—and even more media hype for the production in the *Times*, with an article titled “Negro Will Play Hamlet for Papp” (Zolotow 49). When Sam Zolotow interviewed Frederick O’Neal, president of Actors Equity, for the article, O’Neal made sure the article would not portray the casting choice

as a bid for publicity: “Mr. Papp has followed the principle of equal opportunity in casting for a number of years,” he said.

Papp so enjoyed producing his *Naked Hamlet* that he decided to run it for the summer, with Little staying on as Hamlet, as one of his free productions in the mobile theater that traveled throughout the boroughs of New York City. Papp shrewdly persuaded the editors at the *Times* to send neither Barnes nor Kerr, securing John Lahr to review the production for the paper instead. Though some elements of the Barnes and Kerr reviews were present in his assessment, Lahr avoided their stinging tone and applauded the revisions that fit well into the impromptu nature of street theater. “Whatever the audience’s response to Hamlet’s story or his final death,” Lahr wrote, “in Papp’s version, riddled by the machine guns of the State—they come away with a range of emotional experience” (Lahr D1).

Perhaps more importantly, Lahr dwelled on the vital necessity of the mobile theater itself. He knew that the Festival had not received enough funding to make it through more than that current summer of productions, which was beginning to look like its last:

A public theater is, in a very real sense, a social force: and actors who perform in it are more than players in the wooden, middle class sense of the term. No longer protected by the proscenium, they touch the audience and learn to manipulate often untutored energies. It is a position of responsibility and trust. . . . The audience is bound to talk to the performers, get excited with them, and (at the performances I saw) even yell “Sock it to ‘em” when Hamlet dispatches Laertes. This is when mobile theater becomes thrilling and important. . . . Next year, the park will be empty after dark. . . . The city will be deprived of a great asset if the mobile theater flounders; and the theater, trying to divorce itself from the myopia of the past, will lose its most exciting audience of the future. (Lahr D1)

These kinds of moments are when the mobile theater becomes closest to the Globe of Shakespeare’s time. Although not very critical of the production itself, Lahr chastised the NYSF’s management for instituting rules for the audience and for hiring grave and strict ushers to enforce them: “Ushers plunge like hawks out of the darkness on individuals. And, by caveat,

no one under 16 is allowed into the theater unless accompanied by an adult, which means either you are lucky or, like one under-age youth, you talk fast. ‘I’m Hamlet’s brother,’ he said.”

Perhaps this kind of criticism seems idealistic, but Lahr has a point; there were never audience monitors at the Globe.

Lahr’s positive review and plea for funding worked, and within weeks the NYSF received enough money for another summer of free productions. The reality of the *Times* working both ways hit Papp yet again. In a country where arts institutions are forced to re-identify (and re-assert, with passion) their importance over and over in order to receive enough funding just to stay afloat, it was becoming palpably clear just how big a role the paper could play in the fate of Papp’s American Shakespeare.

## VI. THE ARTIST AND THE CRITIC

The critic will certainly be an interpreter, but he will not treat Art as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed and revealed by one whose feet are wounded and who knows not his name. Rather, he will look upon Art as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify, and whose majesty his privilege to make more marvelous in the eyes of men. (Wilde 111)

Oscar Wilde wrote prolifically of the necessary nature of the artist as critic and the critic as artist. In those terms, the questions that arise from the *Naked Hamlet* controversy are many. First, the role of the artist as critic. Joseph Papp was certainly not afraid to appropriate Shakespeare’s work, smashing it open and smattering it with his own ideas of how to elicit reactions from his own audiences. “Our purpose was not deliberately to alienate an audience,” Papp said of the Kerr and Barnes reviews. His goal, conversely, was to arouse a comparable experience and excitement to what Shakespeare’s original audiences would have felt at the

Globe. In order to do so, Papp argued, sometimes the playwright's original intentions would have to be reworked and revised as if he were writing in the present. "I might go so far as to say that one could change the viewpoint of the playwright himself, because if the playwright is a great playwright, as Shakespeare was, he makes this possible" (Bongartz SM12).

Then, the critic as artist. Walter Kerr challenged the very foundations underlying these innovative cultural philosophies of Papp's, raising an important question: what happens when a critic attributes solidly set values to "good" art that have little or nothing to do with those principles motivating the productions under review? In an article for the *Times* entitled "Musicals that were Playful, Irresponsible, and Blissfully Irrelevant: A Plea for More No, No Nanettes," Kerr called for more "wise and foolish musicals," exalting the traditional American musical comedy. "'No No Nanette' just wants to be happy and to make you happy, too" (SM14). The article outraged Papp. To him, it represented concrete evidence that Kerr had no right to be reviewing avant-garde theater. Kerr's position was obviously traditionalist, clearly anti-avant-garde—and to Papp, stuck in the era in which he first been exposed to theater when he graduated from Northwestern University in 1937. Papp could not see how the *Times* could hire a man who had chosen one art form to represent the whole of "good" and "right" theater, and was furious that Kerr would be allowed to remain on the paper as a judge of all theatrical forms. Papp, like Oscar Wilde, believed that:

A true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of Beauty, but he will seek for Beauty in every age and in every school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realize himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. (Wilde 149)

Papp responded to Kerr's article with another of his own, which the *Times* published under the title: "Papp's Plea for No More Nanettes." In it, Papp specifically attacked Kerr, claiming that

“during the past number of years things [had] been happening in the theater that Mr. Kerr [had] just failed to understand.” More to the point, Papp outright accused Kerr of attempting to destroy off-Broadway, fortunately failing because “new forms continued to emerge and insist on recognition.” He stressed that he took offense at Kerr’s article on the part of the whole of emerging off-Broadway theater, and warned of stultifying consequences for all American theater—including the American musicals Kerr claimed to value, which were, he pointed out, at one time just as innovative and groundbreaking as the new trends developing off-Broadway.

For a major theater critic on an influential newspaper to point to this work of the past and suggest it as the present standard for musical theater is patently absurd. What is basically disturbing is that new movements in musical theater have to be subjected to a mind that cannot tolerate the new currents in the theater. That mind in a private citizen is a private right. But that mind with the power of the *New York Times* behind it is a menace to progress.

Papp would continue to challenge the *Times* and its support of Kerr as a theater critic throughout his career. In a letter to old friend Arthur Gelb after Kerr’s patronizing review of the NYSF’s production of Wallace Shawn’s “Marie and Bruce,” he complained:

[Kerr is] a relic and hasn’t the vaguest idea where he is or where the theater has been in the last 15 years. He missed Becket by a mile and Pinter too (now he’s trying to make up for it). He absolutely missed Wally Shawn’s play. Where is the *Times*’ culture? Where is the alert eye and mind in your Drama Department that is capable of recognizing real writing talent? Kerr’s eye is dim and his mind is made up of old hairy roots of some other time.” (Archives Box 1-159-16)

However much he despised Kerr, Papp was willing to support those *Times* critics whom he thought open to new theater, even when they happened to be the same ones who frequently slammed Papp’s own plays. Richard Eder was one such case, as evident in another of Papp’s letters to Gelb:

Arthur,

This is all off the top of my head, but I want to say a few words about Richard Eder. Some of the Broadway wise guys were taking some potshots at him

yesterday and I found myself defending him. He has a valuable stubborn streak and his hard-edged opinions are a relief from all that creaming of the past. His limited experience in the theater has its drawbacks, but there's virtue in it: no obligations to stars, directors or even to the avant-garde. He doesn't suck up and I admire that. The most important thing that I see emerging from his kind of criticism is the introduction of standards. And what can be more important than that? I am making these impulsive comments with the full knowledge that I may be the next victim of the very thing I am now praising. But I must say it now before I have a reason to get angry at him for a bad notice which will blur my present lucidity.

Best to all,

JP. (Archives Box 1-159-18)

The extraordinary scope of Papp's productions at the NYSF—which ranged from straight classical plays to new experimental to musical theater, and from free park productions to commercial Broadway—called for a reviewer open to all theatrical forms and the change and progress of culture in the United States as a whole.

Papp had a unique advantage over other artists and heads of cultural institutions; not every producer was granted rights to publish full-fledged, full-length feature articles on the front pages of the arts section in the *Times*, let alone in the editorial section. When Harris Green criticized a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in an article entitled “All's Well That Kills Will?”, Papp's response, “More Ado About ‘Much Ado’” received markedly *better* placement and photo coverage than Green's original piece.

Papp was even given the space to publish the NYSF's mission statement as a feature article in the *Times*'s culture section. In “To Break Down the Wall” (which again received prime placement) Papp wrote:

If there is a single driving force which characterizes the New York Shakespeare Festival, it is its continual confrontation with the wall that separates vast numbers of people from the arts. This wall—spawned by poverty, ignorance, historical conditions—is our principal opponent, and as we house and engage with this ‘enemy,’ we distill and shape the nature and style of our theater.



Through this highly extraordinary opportunity of publishing his cultural institution's goals in the *New York Times*, Papp realized the kind of publicity for his plays and the hope of a new American theater for which he'd always yearned.

After the *Naked Hamlet* reviews, and after the *Times* refused to remove Walter Kerr as first-string critic despite countless written complaints from Papp, the paper did concede to publishing an article by Papp outlining how criticism in the United States (and particularly in the *New York Times*) needed to change. In "How Shall a Critic Judge," Papp stated straight out, "A critic's attitude toward the theater does not originate in a vacuum, nor do his values operate in a void. They are shaped in a specific milieu and, in the case of Walter Kerr, that milieu happens to be the commercial theater, Broadway." The article revolved around the thesis that an artist is an interpreter of life—and that duty needs subsidy, freedom, and accomodation. Papp also focused on a reevaluation of criticism of those productions that take place within a cultural institution as opposed to those on Broadway, most of which originate as singular events not attached to any sort of institutional season or mission.

Though the critical and popular success of a particular play is certainly desirable for the American Place Theater, the Negro Ensemble Company, Café La Mama, the NYSF's Public Theater and others, these companies are equally concerned with viewpoint, growth, the development of a style, and a continuous artistic life.

Papp also took issue with glitzy, blockbuster-spectacular tourist hits, pleading that these kinds of productions not overshadow the metamorphosis of theater that was taking place in out-of-the-way theaters. Behind a Broadway production, there exists no institutional mission statement. Surrounding it, there is no season of complementary plays, which creates yet another kind of mission statement. At an institution such as the Public Theater, each production is a piece of the

whole, yet rarely has a production ever been considered as such in reviews. Instead, Papp reproached, the critics take each play individually, as if it were a consumer product possible to label thumbs up or thumbs down.

Critic Robert Brustein of *The New Republic* agreed with Papp's criticism of criticism. In article he entitled "Himalaya Criticism" ("after Danny Kaye, who, when asked how he liked the Himalayas, replied, 'Loved him, hated her'") he wrote of the Group Theatre:

Where the Group differed from the commercial theater, and where the nonprofit theater differs from Broadway, is that it was meant to be a permanent institution for developing works of art, not a show-stop for producing hits. A critic's function in regard to such institutions has to be different from a critic's function as a consumer's guide. . . . [Critics] are only accustomed to check out the Himalayas, and that, as Odets angrily observed, is not the function of a critic but the act of an assassin. (79)

At the same time, Brustein acknowledged the difficulty of treating plays as part of an evolution in theater and the development of an institution, when few critics are trained in such an endeavor. He also recognized "the value of destructive criticism," noting that Bernard Shaw defended negative reviews on the premise that "construction encumbers the grounds with busybodies, while destruction clears the air and encourages freedom." Brustein has certainly written some negative reviews and been involved in some major controversies in the theatrical world during his tenure as a critic.<sup>8</sup> He notes, though, that neither he nor Shaw held the kind of power that

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<sup>8</sup> Most notoriously, his debates with August Wilson after Wilson's speech at the Theatre Communications Group, "The Ground on Which I Stand," calling for separate Black theatres. Wilson argued against the trend of multiculturalism within "white theatres," specifically (and most controversially) attacking "colorblind casting" as a tool of "cultural imperialists." Early in the speech, Wilson explicitly targeted Brustein, seizing upon his wishes for theatre funding to be awarded on aesthetic and not sociological bases: "Brustein's surprisingly sophomoric assumptions...[show] him to be a victim of 19<sup>th</sup>-century thinking and the linguistic environment that posits blacks as unqualified." Brustein himself was not present at the TCG conference, but of course learned of the remarks by word of mouth and later read them in *American Theatre*, prompting him to publish his own reply to Wilson (titled "Subsidized Separatism") in the next issue. The debate continued back and forth in print for several months, with many leading figures of the American theatre world chiming in, until eventually the two agreed to a live debate moderated by actress Anna Deavere Smith—an evening in Times Square entitled "On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion." The debate highlighted several questions central to American culture today. The primary one, of course, was whether the establishment of black theatres (and abolishment of color-blind  
(continued on next page)

critics of the *New York Times* yield, often carelessly. Brustein claimed he was at liberty to give negative reviews “without killing the hopes of the playwright, without affecting the employment of actors, without reducing the royalties of directors” since, as far as he could tell, *New Republic* readers were not avid theatergoers. When the *Times* offered Brustein a drama critic position, he turned it down “with little difficulty,” in order to protect his privilege of passing judgment without holding his tongue. Brustein has always been uncomfortable with the effects of theater criticism in the *New York Times*, calling it the “supreme example of corruption of power. . . . To wield that kind of power over works of art is unnatural in the extreme” (77).

To be sure, the possession of such power does not sit easily with every *Times* critic. Frank Rich, who would later be nicknamed the “Butcher of Broadway,” took eight hours to write his first review for the paper, “so heavily did the august responsibilities of my new job with its preposterously official-sounding title weigh on [him]” (*Hot Seat* 969). He was later able to feel more open and comfortable with voicing his opinions by seizing onto Arthur Gelb’s advice: “Serve the paper’s readers, not the theater’s public relations needs” (970). Despite his reputation for harsh reviews, Rich admits feelings of guilt when he turned them in to be published:

While it can be fun to write a joke-strewn pan of a venal or lunatic theatrical catastrophes, whether *Moose Matters* or *Carrie*, there is no pleasure in writing about a failure in which artists commit no crime other than fallibility in pursuit of high theatrical ambitions. But neither was there any point in pulling punches for *Times* readers who knew better. It was a no-win situation. (*Hot Seat* 974)

Papp’s “How Shall a Critic Judge” went further than a condemnation of the newspaper’s criticism process itself, once again attacking Kerr specifically for his ignorance of the rise of

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casting) signifies progress or segregation—universalism or separatism. Beyond that, it publicized grander questions: what is the role of art in America? What is the role of the artist? What do the terms and acts of “multicultural” and “colorblind casting” mean to the American theatre? Though Wilson and Brustein never reached a common ground, the intricacies of their arguments often overlapped in interesting ways, and it is perhaps within those overlaps that the most important answers lay.

postmodernism in the U.S., mocking him for claiming he could find no “meaning” in the play *Invitation to a Beheading*. “Nabokov’s ideas in the novel from which ‘Invitation to a Beheading’ was made are not spelled out for grammar school children,” Papp rebuked. “And if I recall correctly, Mr. Kerr some time ago took Harold Pinter to task for his refusal to spell out that which he preferred not to explain.” Movement toward a national theater that echoed the times was naturally headed toward the postmodern, Papp claimed. He sighed that “to imply that the Public Theater, as a matter of policy, sets out to baffle the audience with obscure wares is chicanery and totally insupportable.” The article’s thrust is uncannily similar to Susan Sontag’s famous 1969 essay “Against Interpretation,” in which she suggested that the goal of interpretation should be to create a new kind: more an expression of the work’s place in an evolution of ideas, less analysis of specific content (Sontag 5). She seemed to predict the rise of postmodernism, which can in a way be seen as a dare to the critical urge—since, as Papp writes in his article,

The doing of these plays therefore constitutes a *search for meaning*, and we invite audiences to join with us in the exploration. The search can be more or less fruitful, depending on what one is seeking. And because there are no final answers, the theater experience might prove uncomfortable for those, like Mr. Kerr, seeking clear-cut solutions.

A fundamental question behind all criticism is whether or not it is all right to presume to know anything beyond what is presented in the work of art being reviewed. Postmodernism counters that one can presume whatever one would like, but presuming will seldom be easy, and will almost never be supportable. Within its dare to interpretation comes a luring note from postmodernism inviting the critics out to play. Criticism sparks the kind of endless action-reaction dialogue that lies at the heart of postmodern fiction, the *mise-en-abîme* nature of questioning and explaining and questioning again that never ends.

## VII. THE POSSIBILITIES

*What is past is prologue.*

—*The Tempest* II.i

While Papp referred specifically to Kerr and his reviews throughout “How Shall a Critic Judge,” his greater goal was clearly to communicate his vision of the way criticism and art could, ideally, work together in defining the course of American theater. He had experienced a taste of this kind of criticism in John Lahr’s review of the *Naked Hamlet*, which had at least drawn attention to the larger goals behind the production and its place within the development of a public theater in the United States.

Papp never underestimated or took for granted the power of the *Times* and the role the paper had played in the creation of his Festival. “As for my relationship with the media,” he wrote in a response to an article labeling him a media hound past his prime, “despite great shortcomings, they have been one of the single constructive forces in the development of the New York Shakespeare Festival. They have provided me with outlets for my views from the very beginning” (Papp, “Letters” 1974).

The year before Papp’s death, he would see the publishing of an article that highlighted the unique relationship between the producer and the paper, written by none other than Frank Rich, the “Butcher of Broadway” himself and one of Papp’s harshest critics. In an article entitled “Such Stuff as Dreams,” Rich wrote of sitting in Central Park and watching Patrick Stewart in *The Tempest*:

Theater doesn’t get more timeless; for a moment, you would think there had always been Shakespeare in the park. But in fact it dates only as far back as government funding. “There was art in America before 1965,” goes the rallying cry of those who would kill the National Endowment for the Arts, which was founded in that year. Yes—but not for everyone.

Shakespeare had once been popular culture in America. . . . such plays were the rock concerts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In our century, though, Shakespeare has become high culture, seen and read mainly by an intellectual and economic elite. Papp rather madly thought he could reverse the tide. . . .

No, not every park production is great, and no, Papp alone could not prevent pop culture from becoming that nightmare of depravity politicians now deride. But the best publicly funded theater, like “The Tempest,” towers over most of what passes for serious drama in the commercial marketplace, at \$60 a ticket. (Have you seen “Indiscretions”?) And better still, every child attending the New York Shakespeare Festival or the countless others created in its image with NEA support is one less child consuming Rupert Murdoch TV trash and gangsta rap. Or such is the case this summer. Enjoy Papp’s dream, like Prospero’s enchanted island, while it lasts.

Rich’s plea, like Lahr’s many years before, again spurred an outpouring of support, and of course the NYSF still survives today. Papp summed it up early in his career in a letter to Howard Taubman at the *New York Times*: despite the hardships of enduring scathing reviews, “without [the newspaper’s] assistance, it would undoubtedly have been adieu” (Box 1-160-17).

Rarely will one find an artist who has escaped the frustration caused by a lack of courses of redress when it comes to unjust criticism. There is no point and counterpoint in this realm, no appeals court. Yet criticism’s necessity is undisputed in the case of new plays and new playwrights. While the dangers involved in that necessity can be grave, criticism can also spark the kinds of cultural debates that will keep the American theater moving forward, as was the case with the *Naked Hamlet*.

“Papp says he never thinks of the critics when he puts on a play; if he did he’d have no idea at all what to put on. ‘The only thing critics can influence is whether or not people will or will not go to see a show, and we’re talking about the *New York Times*, and that’s called commerce’” (Booth 36). Papp was not interested in producing the right play to make it to Broadway, or the right play to fit the needs of the cultural section of the *New York Times*. He fought for an American theater, a theater founded on pluralism and democracy where no one

would be barred because of ticket prices, where he could redefine Shakespeare with an American style and discover new, as yet unheard voices that he believed would contribute to the creation of a vibrant, original, and much needed American theatrical canon. And he fought for that theater to get recognized nationally. Apart from the dramas taking place on his many stages, the *Times* served as Papp's podium throughout—sometimes to his elation, sometimes to his chagrin—but without it, millions of readers across the country would never have been privy to his goals and efforts.

The relationship between the paper and the producer was not parasitic in any sense; rather, a mutually beneficial relationship gradually evolved—one in which Papp received the publicity he desired for his theater and philosophies, and the *Times* gained a cultural icon providing arts news never lacking for excitement, animation, and controversy, exuding always (both in his groundbreaking theater and in his passionate temperament) an air of utter newsworthiness. Beyond that, the American public received front row seats to an important national cultural debate arising almost subconsciously out of the sometimes very personal dramas taking place within the pages of the *New York Times*, a debate that transformed into a kind of art of its own. Very often, almost laughably ironic dialogues emerged between the producer and the paper, and the reliance of one upon the other became clear with a crystalline lucidity in drawn-out threads such as the one begun by Clive Barnes's criticism of Papp's *Naked Hamlet*. In an age in which the *Times* is being called upon to do something to make the power of its theater criticism more democratic (to hire more than one critic, place two reviews side by side, or include excerpts of reviews from other papers, to name a few suggestions) Papp used his position to do what most cannot: he caused dialogue, conversation that could not be ignored. He criticized the critics right back. What emerged from that, without anyone realizing it was

happening, was a crucial heightening of national theatrical consciousness—and a critical form of cultural democracy.

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