

IRISH THEATRE INSTITUTE
ANNUAL NETWORKING CONFERENCE
Keynote Address
Oskar Eustis
Director, Public Theatre, New York
PROJECT ARTS CENTRE OCTOBER 5TH 2006

Jane Daly, Producer Irish Theatre Institute: Welcome one and all to the 13th annual Conference. It is my pleasure to have Oskar Eustis as our keynote speaker. Oskar will be introduced by Vincent Woods, playwright, who is somebody I've worked with a number of times over the last number of years. He's written plays for the Abbey and for Druid, and, most recently, the Galway Arts Festival. *A Cry from Heaven* and *At The Black Pig's Dyke* are the pieces that you're probably familiar with.

Vincent Woods: Oskar Eustis is a passionate and committed maker of theatre. For some 25 years he has worked in the US as director, dramaturg, artistic director, teacher and mentor. He's worked with some of the finest independent theatres: Artistic Director with the Trinity Rep in Providence, Rhode Island for ten years; before that in charge of the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, and Associate Artistic Director of the **Mark Taber Forum** in Los Angeles. The writer **Emily Mann** has credited him with shepherding some of the most important new plays into the national repertoire in his own country, the most obvious being Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which Eustis commissioned at the Eureka, also directing its world premiere.

He's been described as the best script advisor in the US – what we wouldn't give to have him here for a while – and as one of the best dramaturgical minds in his country. He says that theatre should be “messy, thrilling, inclusive, radical, alive. More concerned with making something meaningful than something pretty”.

When he was made Artistic Director of the famous Public Theater in New York two years ago an article in *The Village Voice* said his appointment had given rise to something seldom seen in the fractious theatre community: immense goodwill.

In laying down his vision for the future of the Public Theater – many of you will know its great role in presenting Shakespeare In The Park – he's talked of radical accessibility, new ways of supporting writers and other theatre artists, and defending of the non-commercial nature of theatre with muscle and vigour.

His other appointment as Professor of Dramatic Writing and Arts and Public Policy at New York University may provide an opportunity to forge links between the Public Theater and the College. A necessary synergy, as he has described it.

But whatever else, it would seem that Oskar Eustis is committed to the nurturing of new plays. As he said himself, theatre as an event, not an object.

I'm very pleased to welcome Oskar Eustis to this morning's Irish Theatre Institute conference here at the Project Arts Centre.

Oskar Eustis: Thank you Vincent. Thank you for having me here; it's an honour to be here.

What I thought I'd do this morning is begin talking about the thing I know best, which is the Public Theater and what are the specific issues and problems facing the Public Theater, because I think that's the way that I'm most likely to not get lost in a lot of hot air talking

about practice, which is the thing that matters most to all of us I'm sure. I'm also going to end the one long run-on sentence that I'm going to do as quickly as I can so there's a chance to have a dialogue with you. There are a lot of different issues here, and not that much time, and it will probably be more interesting if I'm guided to a certain extent by your interests.

There's a foundational myth about the Public Theater. It was a real political event and I think it's an important thing to remember for anybody who's running it. **Joe Papp**, who was an extraordinary man, had a vision that was incredibly simple. He taught himself English, as he liked to say, by reading Shakespeare at the Brooklyn branch of the New York Public Library. The idea that Shakespeare was the property of the people, that Shakespeare was a force that actually brought people into the fabric of American society – Joe was an immigrant who came from a Yiddish speaking household – and that it happened in Joe's case through the medium of the public library. An institution that's formed on a very simple principle: that the cultural wealth of the nation and the planet belongs to the people for free, and should be available to them. He transferred that into a very simple idea. You put on Shakespeare for free in the park. You do it for free and give it to the people.

That started in 1954, and it really had its formative crucible in 1958 when he took on the New York Commissioner of Parks, **Robert Moses**. It may not be self-evident, but the problem was that the New York Parks Commissioner was by far the most powerful official in New York; in many ways the most powerful official in America. Nothing was built anywhere in New York without their permission. Suffice to say that for two generations he absolutely dominated New York City politics. Nothing could happen without Bob Moses. Later he humiliated **John Linsey**, the Mayor, who tried to rein in his power, and Moses swept him aside like a bug.

In 1958 Moses, who was Commissioner of Parks, decided that putting on free Shakespeare in the Park was eroding the grass, bringing the wrong kind of people into Central Park, and generally disruptive to his particular vision of what the park system should be. So rather than trying to stop Joe from doing it, because he was four years in, and there was already tremendous popularity, he tried something very simple. He tried to make Joe charge for it. He said, you can do Shakespeare in the Park, but you need to charge admission and split it with us so we can use it to reseed the grass. Actually Moses' idea had nothing to do with reseeding the grass, it had to do with bringing an admission charge in.

Joe at that time was doing the New York Shakespeare festival as a hobby. His job was as a stage manager at CBS Television. He wasn't being paid for the Shakespeare festival; he was doing it on the side. He took Moses on, and this battle ended up raging in the front pages of the New York Times for six months. The battle wasn't about doing Shakespeare in the Park, the battle was about keeping it free. Joe was insisting that the core idea of what he was doing was that it was free. You couldn't even charge 50 cents and maintain that core idea.

It raged back and forth, and a few months into it Moses quite consciously and publicly red-baited Joe. He got all of the material and he released to the press that Joe had been a member of the Communist Party. This was during the McCarthy era; this was a serious issue. The idea of free Shakespeare in the Park was part of the Communist plot and Joe was fired from his job at CBS Television because of it. They made no bones about it; they fired him because he was a Communist. Joe with the help of his union took CBS to court, and by the time all of this was resolved, Joe had beaten Robert Moses, and Moses had to retreat and allow him to do free Shakespeare in the Park. Joe had forced CBS Television into giving his job back, which was a crucial moment in history, in breaking the back of the McCarthy policy in the United States. CBS gave him his job back, whereby he promptly quit and never worked for anybody else ever again. That image of what it was, David and

Goliath, of taking on the powers that be on behalf of the people is a formative image of the Public Theater. And we've been doing it for fifty-odd years since, giving Shakespeare free in the park to the people.

The other corollary idea that came and really transformed the Public into a theatre of true brilliance, was in 1967 when he took over the old Astor Place Public Library, which was the foundation stone of the New York Public Library system. He decided that really there needed to be two strands to the Public Theater: one was taking Shakespeare, the iconic greatest writer of all time, the man who sits on top of our cultural canon, and offering him up to everybody as their property. But the other thing that he needed to do was to take the voices of the people and make them part of the canon. To take what was the confusing, weltering diversity of America and put it on the stage and say those voices also are iconic voices, and it's a two-way street. So he also opened the Public as a venue for new American writing, and the first production in 1967 was *Hair*. It's kind of remarkable when you look back at this guy who had done nothing in the theatre except produce Shakespeare since 1954, the first time he puts on a new work he produces *Hair*.

That idea of Shakespeare and new work sitting side by side has been the fundamental idea of the Public Theater ever since. It's the only great American public institution that was founded by a communist. It's the only one of the great American public institutions that is dedicated at its core to the idea that culture is of the people. That radical inclusion is the heart of what culture is, and that culture not only needs to be given to the people but that culture needs to be informed by the people and taken from the people, and in that churn and mix is where greatness lies.

Of course this is always been true of the theatre. If you look back you could make a contention that Shakespeare's genius is explainable by his audience. That Shakespeare was called into being by the audience that allowed to have him at the Globe Theatre, because you have the most democratic audience that you had in Western theatre history sitting in the Globe. You had the aristocracy and the groundlings side-by-side. What you had therefore was a demand for a writing that could speak to all of them at once. A writing that had a stretch and a scope that would appeal to everybody, and not only appeal to everybody, but told them and brought them into consciousness of why they were one people, why they weren't separate people.

It is a great citizen-making machine, the theatre when it works. You all know exactly what I'm talking about. When you go to the movies – I don't know if they have this phenomenon here. In the United States over the last ten years the movie theatre architecture has created something called stadium seating, where there are incredibly steep-raked seats, with the intention to make sure that you experience the film as not interfered with by the noise and sight of any other audience member. You know you like it when the seat next to you is empty and the seat in front of you, it great because you can eat your popcorn and be alone with the screen. In the theatre it's the exact opposite. You're disappointed if you go to the theatre and it's half full. You're disappointed that it's not crowded, because what you want when you go to the theatre is the experience of being part of an audience. That's a communal experience. That's an experience where we are part of something larger than ourselves. We show up as consumers, but if the theatre does its work we're not consumers by the end, we're actually members of a community and feel that tribal sense. I'm about out to go off on a tangent I shouldn't be on.

That's the tradition of the Public Theater that I inherit and is a tradition that is as great and democratic a tradition that a theatre can have. It's a tradition that is also very clear: its mandate is inclusion. Democracy is at the heart of what the Public is about, not only in terms of the audience but in terms of the voices on stage. That's what we're in there to do; we're in there to expand the breadth of who get to speak for America, of who gets to be

Everyman. And if we do our job right, we are expanding American citizenship. It's a little grandiose, but I'll risk it.

because I've no intention of changing that mission such a palpable feeling of dealing with the loss of Catholic faith, what it means to not have a faith in God and not being able to trust in and I being a lapsed Marxist have exactly the same thing. What it means w

So then the question is what are the specific challenges that we face at this moment to that mandate. When you can no longer quite believe in Socialism, that God has failed. But there are certain principles underneath it that you can stick to. One of them is the idea that human worth can't be measured by the market, can't be measured by dollars. There is something fundamentally pernicious and inadequate about the market as a measure of human value. We're living in a time where across the globe the market seems hegemonic, dominant. We can't conceive of how you measure value separate from the market, separate from dollars. We in the theatre have got to be smarter than that. If we have any job at all, it is to resist that notion that we can change human experience into commodity, that we can put a dollar value on it, that we can measure by commercial popularity what the value of something is.

How do you do that? In New York one of the very real realities is that with the decline in Government funding, with the rise in the market as the sole arbiter of value, which really dates quite specifically to the second Tuesday in November 1980. The election of Ronald Reagan was an absolutely crucial historic turning point. The theatres have done what theatres always do, which is figure out how to survive, and a huge amount of that has come in the form of compromise and entrepreneurial efforts in the relationship with the commercial theatre system, to try and blur the lines between what a non-profit theatre is and what a commercial theatre is. My theatre indeed pioneered this in 1975 with *The Chorus Line*, and much American theatre has been pursuing that [unclear] ever since, because *The Chorus Line* produced buckets of money for the Public for 25 years.

What we see is that a lot of our colleagues in New York have very specifically taken on Broadway houses, tried to get Broadway theatres operating on [unclear] which allows them have certain advantages that commercial theatres don't have. You have a blurring of the distinction of what is commercial and what is not commercial. Which is fine. It's very smart in a lot of ways. It's a survival strategy. But it's also really pernicious if it's the only survival strategy, so one of the things that the Public has to do is draw a thick dark line and say, we stand very strongly on the non-commercial side.

The most powerful manifestation of that is that we give away our seats in the Park. We have the most beautiful theatre in New York City, 1800 seats in it, and we give them away for free every day. If you haven't been to the Delacourt in Central Park I urge you to do it. It is one of the great theatre experiences, even when the shows suck, and they don't ever any more. It's an amazing thing to be part of an audience that is that diverse, that eager, that young, that outdoors in the middle of New York, watching some extraordinary work onstage.

Part of what the question that we're asking is, if we can do that in the largest of our theatres for Shakespeare, why can't we do that in all our theatres? We have what is often perceived as a structural disadvantage at the Public, where we have five theatres downtown plus a cabaret, Joe's Pub, and each of those theatres is very small. 300 seats is the largest, down to 100 seats. We earn a smaller percent of our money than almost any non-profit theatre I've ever heard of; about 25% of our income comes in at the box office because at our big theatre we give them all away, and at our tiny theatres we can't make any money. Huge frustration, except it's also a huge advantage, because in means if we were to decide to give away all those seats the amount of our income that we would have to replace is actually relatively small. It's not that much money. And think of the power of

that statement if we could do that. Think if we could actually say in the simplest way, we're showing it's not about the market. We're showing it's not about commodity value because we're giving it away, because it's free.

It's so interesting. Raise this with my very own board of directors and you get a predictable set of responses – I bet some of you have had the same responses – which is you can't do it because people won't value it. If you don't charge for it people don't think it's worth anything, so they won't come, they won't show, they won't be interested. This is from a board of directors of an organisation that has run free Shakespeare in the Park for fifty years, and if you see those audiences, they are the most passionate, eager, diverse, young audiences that you've ever seen in the theatre. Extraordinarily alive. And one of the characteristics of Shakespeare in the Park: nobody ever walks out. Three hour shows at night in Central Park and nobody ever leaves because they've paid with their bodies by waiting in line to be there. It's extraordinary. And yet you'll find people immediately saying they won't value it if they don't pay for it. What that shows me is the power of ideology over experience. The ideology of the market is so powerful that it will actually persuade people that their own experience is meaningless. What they've actually experienced for fifty years doesn't count.

Another problem we face – I'm going to switch subjects to a question about artists – is exactly the same issue with writers. When I started in this business the standard model that you could count on was that a young writer would come out of school, would write a couple of plays, would have readings, workshops, a production off-off-Broadway, then an off-Broadway production, then a very successful off-Broadway production. Round about the time of their second or third successful New York production happened the TV folks would start hovering around them and they'd start getting offers and we'd be into a different conversation about how you're going to live the rest of your life.

That conversation now happens in the second year of graduate school. Mostly because the television folks are just smarter. Most of them are my ex-students at this point. Really, there is the uncannyest thing where you train the best and the brightest people in the country who go out and make television for twelve year olds. It's just spooky. They're smart people and they know if they get the talent earlier it's cheaper and they can run it for a longer run before their quote goes up. And of course there's a lot more television with the cable explosion. So what you have suddenly is a situation where writers are being ushered into that television and film world without any intermediate stop where they establish a presence in the theatre. This is a really dangerous and pernicious place, because you can't compete financially and you'll never be able to compete financially with what television and film has to offer. And we have no need to create monks; we have no need to tell writers that they can't write for electronic media, they're not allowed to earn money. But what you do need is that you need to make sure that those people who are interested in and passionate about dramatic writing can have a home in the theatre that gets them rooted enough and involved enough and feel enough part of something in American theatre, bigger than themselves, that when they go away they have a place to come back to. They have a community.

If the Public Theater should be about anything it should be about how we make that community happen. How we make that community strong enough so that we hold on to the idea that a life in the theatre is something other than a life of impoverishment, failure and embarrassment in front of your parents. What can we do to strengthen the sinews of that? I think there's a number of different ways. You have to approach it on a number of different levels. First thing you have to do is with those younger writers. Clearly, we can't produce everybody, yet we have to find a way to have a home for writers even before we produce them. Trying to create a place where we can pay writers to be residents, where we have a community of writers, where we give writers access to actors and young directors, where we give writers a place in the theatre which is crucial to establishing a sense of community.

We're establishing a writers' group of about fifteen writers a year who are on-site, paid by the theatre, have access to our resources and integrate into the life of the theatre. Even if it's only temporary, I think it's terribly important.

But you also have a problem – I don't know if you have the same problem in Ireland, but as the pressures mount financially you have an increasing cutback in production, an increase in readings and workshops as substitutes for production. Essentially readings and workshops become hoops that writers have to get through in order to get to production. Whereas there's lots of value in this kind of developmental process, there is also something irreplaceable for a young writer in actually having their work produced in front of a young audience, so they can sit in an audience and watch their work done and have that response to it. So what we are trying to establish is quite simply removing some of the barriers to production.

We're trying to establish in our smallest theatre a basic platform for production, where we would do one play a month all year round, so we'd do twelve shows a year. Three week runs, one week of turnaround. It obviously makes us incredibly limited technically what you can do. But trying to be quick and put theatre up so that you have a place where twelve times a year a young writer is getting a full production, minimally designed, but a full production. I think for the Public what that means is that it lowers the standard of perfection that a play has to be before we fully produce it. It makes it easier to say, sure, go ahead and do it. Of course it doesn't quite work. Go ahead and do it, what's the problem? Particularly what's the problem since we're giving those tickets away. Since the tickets are free then if it doesn't work, it doesn't show up as a hit on our ability to function as an institution. What it also does, is that it says to an audience that it can count on the fact that the first three weeks of any month there is something exciting and new happening at the Public. You can just show up and go see it, you don't even need to know what it is. What you're doing of course is creating what is the absolute basis for any theatre community which is production activity. You're actually making things happen. We all know in theatre that making things happen is what we have to do. Eliminating the barriers to production, and eliminating the distance between the writer and the audience feels crucial to me.

At the whole other end of the spectrum, there is an idea that I feel I need to steal from the university system, which is really, when you look at, it is another alternative model. You have the commercial system as one model and you can try to blur the distinction between the non-profit and the commercial, but you can also try to blur the distinction between what the non-profit theatre is doing and what the values of the university are. Certain values of universities are very problematic. Certain are extremely valuable. For example one of the things is establishing Chairs of Playwriting at the Public Theater, and what that should look like is very much like a Chair of Philosophy looks like at NYU or Colombia, which is – ignoring tenure, because that doesn't quite work – that five years for a senior playwright. Playwrights connected to the Public would be Tony Kushner, John Guare and Craig Lucas. Five years in which the playwright receives a salary, receives pension, benefits, health care, all the things that somehow America has forgotten to provide to people who don't have regular jobs. And a place to do their work.

This is not an ongoing series of commissions where the Public Theater will own the work of the writer, though we'll probably have some kind of deal where we get first look at the work for a non-profit context or something. But the basic idea has to be exactly the same as a chair at university. The idea is that at a certain point of achievement what you want to do is give a playwright a place to pursue their work because it is of value to the culture. The universities are the places that our western culture has decided that we should house our philosophers and feed them and pay them. Well, theatres are the places we should house our playwrights and feed them and pay them. What John Guare does is of value to American theatre, and it is the responsibility of the major theatres to make sure that they have a way to keep doing their work, not to make sure that they get paid for doing

something other than their work. Not to pay them for teaching and letting them do their playwriting on the side, nor to say that the only way to support yourself is by writing for film and television. Nobody is going to get rich off this, just as very few people get rich off university jobs, at least not in the arts. But it is a way, I think, of actually turning round and saying that the theatre is the place that's actually going to take responsibility for supporting the senior folks. That's important not only to those senior writers. It may seem odd to somebody that John Guare has to worry about where his money is coming from. Craig Lucas has to worry about paying his mortgage. It's not automatic that because you're a very successful and well-known playwright that you've got your expenses covered.

There's a real cost to doing film and television work. Tony Kushner is a very close friend and we have been involved in a very serious debate over the last year and a half about his film work, which is at the moment I think terribly important politically. I think what he's doing in film really matters and is a worthy project. And yet at the same time it is absolutely interfering with his ability to add to the corpus of what should be one of the great American canons, and it may not be if he continues to do film work.

Having some place where it's possible to make a dignified living as a senior accomplished American playwright I think is terribly important. Also terribly important as an example, as a way of saying to the young writer, look, the American theatre is not a place where you can get rich. It's not a place where you will have celebrity beyond the dreams of avarice. But it is a place where you can imagine growing old with dignity. It's a place where you can look at and see that it is possible to construct a life.

As you can probably tell by now, I can go on. So I would be happy to continue on for a while, but can I just say I'm going to talk about one more topic for two or three minutes and then I'd be happy to take questions and we can have a discussion – and that's about the relationship of writers to theatre, because it's something that I care about a lot, and I've spent a lot of time on in the last quarter of a century. The thing I want to say about it is that it's a very tortured and problematic relationship. And it should be. It's very rare that a writer has a long-standing, healthy relationship with a theatre and a director and the same bunch of collaborators over a generation. I've tried to cast my mind quickly over the American scene and Michael Frayne and Michael Blakemore are almost the only team that I can think of that have stayed together over the course of their entire careers. It's difficult and problematic exactly because of the nature of the theatre business. For playwrights in theatres most specifically. What we love about the theatre is that when it works right, it manages to communicate to an audience almost the full range of human experience that is created ranging from a writer alone, in conflict with their own soul, facing that blank page, trying to deal with the most private things that only a writer can deal with, through the relationship with the director, producer, dramaturg, when the writer starts having dialogue about the play, through the relationship with designers and actors, where other people and their opinions get involved and finally it becomes that most public of events, a production, when the audience walks in and the audience is part of it. Theatre covers the full gamut. That is inherently the tearing, dialectical, conflicting thing, and the issue of individual voice and individual ownership of a playwright's work all the way through the collective appropriation that happens in the course of a production, is always fraught. Should be fraught. If it's not fraught, either the playwright isn't connected enough to the privacy of their work, or the theatre isn't taking seriously enough how they have to open it up for the public. Every relationship that I've watched happen over the years between playwright and theatre, the successful relationships involve a great deal of tension, and the really successful relationships are also ultimately completely idiosyncratic. They happen exactly that way because it can only happen that way with that group of artists and that piece of work. And it's why, blessedly, we're in the business of making art, not in the business of stamping things out. You can't use any old form for something new.

I'm going to talk about *Angels in America* because it's a play that you'll know what I mean when I'm talking about it as an example, and also because it is one of the great examples. I've said many times, *Angels in America* wouldn't exist, and certainly wouldn't exist in a way that I could talk about it and assume you'd know what play I'm talking about, without the existence of the Eureka Theatre Company. *Angels* was commissioned by Eureka Theatre and it was commissioned with a very strict set of mandates including the fact that Tony had to write parts for all the actors who were members of Eureka Theatre Company. There were three women, and I can't tell you how often in that first two years Tony would say to me, what the fuck am I going to do with these women? It's a play about gay men. Do I have to write the women into this? You do. Why? Because you have to write a part for Abigail and Laurie, they're part of the company, it's part of the deal. I also like these memories because this is the last moment in American theatre history where I could talk to Tony Kushner like that. But you can see it when you look at the play. Hannah ends up playing the doctor and the rabbi, not for any conceptual reason but because it took about two years to get Hannah into the play, Abigail had to have something to do along the way, same with the Angel doubling as the Mayor. All of this was because we had the actors and we hadn't gotten their parts yet and so it was necessary for them to have something to do.

The consequence of that is that Tony's vision was forced to expand onto a canvas that was broad enough that that play, which would have been a wonderful play no matter what, became a play that shockingly spoke to a variety of people that none of us had ever anticipated. It had a reach and impact that none of us had ever anticipated, first at the Eureka and when it moved to the Taber in Los Angeles, the theatre stayed behind that project, provided resources for it; human resources in terms of dialogue and continuity and company; financial resources in terms of workshops and readings. Everything that was necessary for the six years it took to bring that play into being. So what you had at the end was a play that could not have existed had Tony sat alone in his room and written. That's when you know that the theatre has done their job, they've created something that wouldn't have been created otherwise.

That's the good part of the story, and that's the story that I like to tell. The part that I should also tell is that by the time that play reached Broadway, every single person who had been involved in the creation along the way, except for Tony, had been fired or eliminated. It was a six-year process, and I was the last one to go. I didn't direct it on Broadway. That was a manifestation of the other side of the equation, which is that this process was never simply collaborative, communal and sweet. It was always torn by a dialectical tension between what about this was exclusively Tony's, and what about this could be created, supported, claimed by anybody else. That story which obviously was a very big event in my life, and which my mother cares a lot about but as an exemplar it really, really matters because I think it shows something that is fundamentally true, which is the tension between what it is that has to remain a playwrights' vision is not a simple and easy road, nor should anyone expect it to be. I think that the sign that we're doing it right is that we're making an extraordinary piece, not that we're all getting along.

Is this a pertinent moment to stop and see what you guys want to talk about?

Vincent Woods: Before I ask all of you to ask questions, I might just ask a question or two myself. Can I ask how the Public Theater is funded, given that only 25% of the funding comes from the box office?

Oskar Eustis: We have various sources of funding. The first is endowment. We have, thanks to *A Chorus Line*, about \$20 million remaining in our endowment, which yields about \$400,000 a year. We get a real amount of money, unlike most American companies, from the City of New York, both in-kind – the city owns the Delacourt in Central Park and owns the Public Theatre downtown, those two sites, and gives them to us for a dollar a year. That's a huge contribution. Other than that, our Government funding is negligible, as it is

true now for most American theatres. We are a \$17 million theatre, and I believe we got \$40,000 from the United Federal Government last year. It's a joke.

The vast majority of the money other than what we earn from our income comes from foundations, individuals and corporations. The foundation resources have been stressed and stretched in the last 25 years, primarily because – again I think this is a different model than you have here – but one of the corollary results of the Regan administration was the very conscious dismantling of the social safety net over the last 25 years in America. From healthcare to services for the arts. Many of the foundations have been forced to shift their priorities to supporting things that the government used to do rather than supporting the arts. It's been a great stress on the contribution we get from the foundations, and that percentage has gone down from what now look like the glory days of the 60s and 70s. I have a friend who was Managing Director for the Guthrie in the late 1960s and he has a little story that the way they used to budget in the late 1960s was they figured out how much their year was going to cost, they figured how much income they were going to get from the box office, they subtracted the income from the cost, and they called Mac Lowery at the Ford Foundation and they told him what the number was and he wrote the cheque. We are a far cry from that now.

Foundations are a tremendously important source of our funding, but what has happened is that the real activity is in the realm of corporations and individuals. With corporations we actually have been able to do fairly well over the years, but what has happened I'm sure all over the Western world, is it used to be when I started 25 years ago, that you had separate departments in corporations. There was a marketing department, and there was a community service department, and you dealt with the community service department about their funding to the community, and you dealt with the marketing folks about marketing. In the vast majority of American companies the community service department has been absorbed into the marketing department, so what you are now dealing with when you are dealing with corporate contributions is literally trying to figure out how they are going to get marketing value for the dollars they give to you. That's pernicious, but men make history but they do not make it as they wish, they must create it in the circumstances in which they find themselves. That's the circumstances in which we find ourselves. You'd be amazed at how much this leftie can talk to Coca Cola about the value that Shakespeare in the Park in terms of branding.

The final area is individuals. Again I'm going to stress that we don't approve of this at all because I think it's not the way that a society should work. However, we are intensely dependent on the philanthropic interests of a relatively few individuals who we at the Shakespeare festival are pretty successful at getting to direct their resources our way. To the extent that out of our \$17 million budget, we probably get \$6 million from individual people, contributors. On a human level it can be great. There's some of the people who are contributors are some of the best and most wonderful people I know, and I value my relationship to them. The fact that they give to the theatre, and by giving to the theatre, give to the people of New York, is extraordinary and wonderful. None of this is criticism of the individuals. It's just really problematic as a system. What it means of course is that, like university presidents, artistic directors start to have a skill set that is not artistic. One of the things that I can do is I can talk to people, and I'm able to move relatively easily in different levels of society. I'm very comfortable talking with the wealthy. I've an incredibly charming wife. I'm straight. There's a whole bunch of things that made me successful as an artistic director that are not good in the long run for the health of American theatre. I think I'm great, but it's not good for the health of American theatre that that has become a necessary skill set for any artistic director, not simply a conditional one. Just as it's ultimately not good for American universities that the university presidents have to primarily be fundraisers, and then secondarily have all the wonderful intellectual qualities. However it is the reality of how we're living right now.

Vincent Woods: Would you scrutinise at all the sources of income? Who you take money from. Individuals or corporations.

Oskar Eustis: If by scrutinising you mean do I look at the number of zeros after the number, yes I look very carefully. Do I examine the source? I have never found money so dirty that going through the Public Theater didn't make it clean as driven snow, because our job is the redistribution of wealth. Our job is trying to be a place that take resources from wherever they have been inappropriately privately appropriated and give them back to the community. Now, the place where we could have this problem, and I've never had to face it, is when you find yourself being used to launder the image of a corporation whose image shouldn't be laundered. I haven't been in that position yet. There was a boycott of Coke for a while, but it got called off and our discussions with Coke have now reengaged with renewed vigour.

Vincent Woods: On that note I think I'll ask for questions.

Mike Bradwell (Artistic Director of the Bush Theatre, London): Tony Kushner was the first person who ever said to me that Margaret Thatcher was a Nazi.

Do you find that you are compromised in any way in the choice of play that you do by, say, subscription audience? We work with a lot of American writers who are done first in England before they are done in America like Beth Henley and Naomi Wallace. Do you find that the subscription thing compromises your choice?

Oskar Eustis: Not me, because at the Public we don't really have any subscribers. We have a few. I do not have to worry like when I was Artistic Director at the Rep in Providence about what the audience is going to think. I actually don't feel compromised by that at all. I do feel, or I did feel when I was a trainee, that most American theatre has to worry about their audience in terms of their income, and of course that creates some concerns. The great thing in the Public is that the Public's political and social mandate was clear from the beginning, and I have received absolutely zero criticism from anybody that has the ability to put any pressure on me for anything political, with the sole exception of issues pertaining to the State of Israel. That is a conundrum that is very, very difficult for the American left and for America in general to deal with right now. That is the one truly controversial, truly dangerous, truly thorny issue for American cultural workers. I am, however, in that way in an absolutely exceptional position in the United States. There are very, very few theatres that can say as brazenly as I'm just saying that I don't have to deal with that. It's a real problem. Again, part of the difficulty is that most American theatres are in the range of 60-70% of their income coming from the box office – the non-profit theatres. That is too much to be completely bold about artistic programming. It shouldn't be that way.

Neil Murray (Director, National Theatre of Scotland): I'd really love to hear a bit about the journey that *Angels in America* took over that six years, because it's probably – since Arthur Miller – the best known American play in the UK. It's been done in London, and it was done here in Dublin, and I work for a company that did it in Glasgow, where it's going to happen again. It's going to become this massive seminal piece of theatre, so I wonder when you started that piece with Tony Kushner and with Eureka what your ambition was for the piece, and how that scale changed. And how you all ended up all being shafted by Broadway as well.

Oskar Eustis: Well, I have to say I wasn't shafted by Broadway. I was delighted it happened when it happened. The reason I didn't direct it in New York really had to do with Tony and I coming to the end of a six-year period where it was really necessary for us to stop working together for a period of time. We had reached an irreconcilable place, which was certainly connected to the fact that the play was becoming so stunningly successful. But what it was

really about was issues of boundaries and ownership of the work. Again, that relationship has been fantastic from about eighteen months after that point to the present day.

Tony and I share, I think, a completely grandiose and outsized ambition for everything that we do so on a certain level of course the ambition was that the show would grow to be successful as it did. Neither of us, I can say absolute confidence, had any idea that it would have the success and impact that it had. One of my favourite conversations was just before we did the premiere at the Taber in fall 1992. We were tearing our hair out because we didn't have a second stage at the Taber in Los Angeles; we only had the main stage which is 850 seats. We were absolutely certain this was a disaster for *Angels in America*. It belonged in a 300-seat house. We were going to be exposing it to a level of criticism it couldn't possibly take. So what we finally agreed to compromise on was that rather than have a subscription slot we created a special 4-week add-on slot that certain subscribers could choose, and maybe we'd have enough interest to sustain a 4-week run. Shows you how stupid we were. I've now received royalty cheques from over 70 countries where *Angels* has been on.

So, no, I don't think there was any idea that it would have that external effect, and indeed – I'm sure all of you guys have had similar experiences – what I think was so successful about the process of developing *Angels* is that Tony and I had become such close friends, and Eureka was such a tight group, that the kind of conversation and the kind of interaction that we had, both good and bad, both the lovey, positive conversations and the knock-down, drag-out fights, were so intense that they kept our focus on the process itself for six years. For six years, what was actually happening in working on that play was way more interesting to me than what anybody else would think of it when we were done. That's hard to do in this culture. It's hard to get your focus so resolutely on what you're doing, and not on what the impact what you're doing is. I think one of the reasons we were successful was being able to create a status screen between us and the culture. By doing that, creating a protected zone where for six years we were able to meditate on issues of justice and responsibility and freedom, and how they manifest in these characters, without having to overly worry about what anybody else was going to think of it. Certainly the opposite paradigm from throw it up right away and run it for a couple of weeks.

That particular project needed a kind of protection that rarely happens in America. I'll give you an example on how that plays out artistically. I don't know if you guys remember the when the Angel is first confronting Prior. She says "You've had dreams revealing to you the location of the sacred prophetic instruments" and he says "No I haven't. I haven't had a dream in months. Dreams? Are you sure?" It's a laugh line. It, however, is sitting on top of six years of material that has now been cut from the play, which was one whole through-line of the play, which was how as we grew closer to the millennium everybody, particularly those who were most sensitive, were ceasing to dream. Dreams were dying out. The dream life was vanishing, and this was potentially a precursor to the end of the world. In the entire play of *Angels in America* what is left of that is that joke between the Angel and Prior, and one line in the Angel's speech in which he's describing the end of the world. Everything else has vanished. And yet what is left is the tip of the iceberg, it's sitting on that substructure of material that is so much denser than we normally get to have in plays. Plays tend to get to live on the surface so much more than novels. The fact that that happened is absolutely the result of six years of work. It couldn't have happened otherwise. It gives it a kind of thickness.

I'm going to send my kid through college by auctioning off on ebay the original commission for *Angels in America* which calls for a one-set, hour and a half, intermissionless comedy. It didn't work out that way. And it didn't work out that way for the best of reasons. As we started work on it, as we started to develop the characters, the themes, as the discussions went on, Tony began to write, about a year into it – I'll put this in context. This was Tony's second play. I had done his first professional production and it is one of those absolutely

wonderful plays that just doesn't work. It's beautiful, brilliant, smart, has all the great characteristics of Tony's writing in it. And I'm sorry if anyone's done it, but the play doesn't work because Tony didn't understand dramatic action. He didn't understand when he was writing it, reversals and change. It's actually pretty simple. One of the things you can learn as a writer as opposed to all the things you can't learn. So we'd spent time reading the Poetics and what he was absolutely sure of is that, goddamn it, in *Angels in America* these characters were going to change. Whereas his first play was full of really interesting characters who walk on stage and express incredibly smart and beautiful things about their condition and then the lights go out. Nothing has changed.

About a year after this process began he comes to me and says, I can't get these people to change fast enough. We'd set up their dilemmas, they were moving forward, but he wasn't able, judging by his own sense of truth, to get the characters to change. And that was when he proposed to me that maybe this should be a two-evening event. I laughed, in that irritating, patronising tone that all you playwrights will recognise, and explained to him that it was absolutely impossible for there to be a two evening play about AIDS by a completely unknown American writer. The last historical moment when I laughed such laughter.

Two weeks later I agreed. The reason being that he had convinced me that the difficulty in the characters changing was not a result of artistic laziness or a failure to have a breakthrough or self indulgence, but it was the result of the fact that he was taking seriously the mandate that characters needed to change, and he was not going to force them to change in a way that didn't feel real to him. He was going to actually going to put them through the process. So, as a result, and this was not a part of our original dialogue, he took the technical difficulty of how hard it was to get the characters to change, and he made it the content of the play. Ultimately that's what *Angels in America* is about. It's about the incredible difficulty, almost impossibility, almost like death it's so hard, but absolute necessity to change. I think one of the reasons we can sit here and talk about it is that by the time you get to the end of *Angels in America*, audiences – and I've seen this in a lot of different countries at this point – actually have the experience that they have experienced the embodiment of the characters changing in a way that feels realer than theatre. It feels truer than most of what we get to see. And that experience is exhilarating.

Henrietta Duckworth (West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds): I'm interested in the programme of work you were talking about, with developing writers and taking down barriers to production. I think a lot of the theatres represented here and in the UK do a lot work developing writers, and we work out the different ways of similar models, how the models going to work depending on the nature of the work sitting in our in-tray. But the other thing we have, is that we have a 750-seat theatre. it's phenomenal, it's a great space. It's enormous. A big, big stage. We need big plays to fill that. Is one of your ambitions in developing those writers to get them to move on from making a piece of theatre for a black box with 70 seats in, to being able to write a piece of theatre that works and that fills the scale of those theatres? And do you have examples?

Oskar Eustis: Absolutely. There's no question it's one of the big problems, and it's one of the big implications of running a theatre that puts Shakespeare next to new writing, because in a certain sense you're saying that Shakespeare is the model for exactly how social or political a playwright needs to be, or how broad a brush and how broad a social brush they can paint with, and still write about the most personal things. We have a very specific problem in the United States in the 70s, 80s and 90s of raising a generation of playwrights who only wrote for 99 to 199-seat houses. It has an absolute impact on the art, and anybody who says it doesn't is wrong.

I've just been through discussions about this in the United States because we just produced David Hare's *Stuff Happens* in the Public very successfully. We had a wonderful run downtown and David did a lot of work on the script and made it dramatically better. Had

a real impact on the audience, was very successful, and it was so successful that we moved it to the Delacourt and gave it away for free. So the last thing we did was these performances in Central Park which was euphoric, the first modern play done at the Delacourt. Watching Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld in front of 1800 people was fantastic.

But the debate we got into is why are we producing the most specifically political play about America's war in Iraq by a Brit? The answer is very simple, which is that David Hare is able to do it in a way that no American writer is. I've said this to American audiences and got a bad reaction but the fact is that – anyone who's got an opinion about David Hare, check it at the door for just a second – he spent 30 years writing big social plays and having them produced, every damn one of them at the National Theatre, and by doing that, has got a degree of control over the practice of writing big public plays, that he could actually be commissioned to write this kind of play and he was scared to death, but it wasn't insane for it to go up six months later. We don't have that degree of facility, because we don't have that degree of demand. We have to change that; we have to challenge those brilliant, brilliant writers that we have to continue to write for the theatre, to write for the theatre on a broader scale, to write for our bigger stages. Sitting at the Delacourt and watching *Stuff Happens* and thinking now what we've got to be aiming for is new work at the Delacourt. That is something that's going to be really thrilling, but of course it throws up a challenge of work that can fill the stage. So you've got to figure out how to do both. Nothing that I know, nothing that I've worked on that has been of any value whatsoever hasn't broken practical boundaries that I thought was unbreakable. 37 actors for the Eureka Theatre Company, two evenings long, six years. Anything really worthwhile has to break the bounds.

Vincent Woods: That challenge of new plays at the Delacourt is something we can all really look forward to. I'm very sorry but we can't go on for longer. If you're in New York do check out the Public Theatre. If you haven't already, do check out Shakespeare in the Park. It's one of the joys of theatre. Check out Joe's Pub.

Oskar Eustis: And Mark Russell's Under The Radar Festival, which we're lucky enough to have.

Can I just say one other thing? It's about international work. This is something that I think we are still trying to figure out what we're doing at the Public. The theatre is often seen as an incredibly nationalistic force, for very good reason because it's so local. The audience is local, the writing is local, so there's a strong sense of national tradition in all our theatre cultures. But what's very interesting looking at it from the standpoint of the American theatre culture, and most of you are probably too young to remember Chariot of the Gods, which was Eric von Danike's theory that all human life was actually seeded here by aliens that came down and planted humans on the earth a million years ago. In a way the American theatre is like that. That you can trace the existence of what we consider to be most American about American theatre to the visit of the Moscow Art Theatre to New York from 1922 to 1923. They were in residence in New York for 18 months. Just that idea – they played Broadway in Russian for 18 months in New York, and they could do that. And when they left they left behind Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Auspenskaya who founded the American Laboratory Theatre and trained Lee Strasbourg, and all the people who went to make up the Group Theater. The Group Theater of course produced *Men in White*. Also a legacy of the Group Theater was the Actors' Studio which produced the American Method Acting which is considered the most quintessentially American. All this directly from the Russians. You could do the same thing with the experimental tradition from the visits that Grotowzski made to the Washington Street Church in 1968 and 1969 that were absolutely essential in the seeding of what became the downtown experimental theatre scene. That idea somehow that we have these national traditions that are actually seeded and created by this international cross-fertilisation. The Berliner Ensemble went to London in 1933. Absolutely crucial to what happened at the Royal Court. It just feels to me a reality that Mark and I talk about and we at the Public don't yet know what the right programmatic response to it is, but I'm pretty sure there is one.

Vincent Woods: One very quick last question.

Mike Bradwell: How did the Moscow Arts Theatre play 18 months on Broadway with American Equity?

Oskar Eustis: It was before Equity. It's easy for us to union-bash, but actually we can be smart, and Equity has got huge progressive forces in it, and if we're smart about how we talk to them and make them partners in what we're doing, we can make international things happen that right now on the surface seem impossible. It's a Regan era trap to think that union intransigence is the thing that's our problem. We really can work with Equity.

Vincent Woods: My thanks to Oskar Eustis and to all of you for being here this morning, and I hope the rest of the conference goes very well indeed.