

HAIR, ROCKY, MARKET, REX

The arrival of those celebrated English extravaganzas Les Misérables and Starlight Express is hardly the only theatrical excitement in town. A flurry of new productions reminds us of the unique pleasures of undiluted American star power.

By Don Shewey

Producers bank on it. Playwrights accept it as inevitable. Audiences crave it. There's no question that having stars on stage is one of the thrills that keep theater alive—and this month will see an extraordinary influx of celebrated American performers hitting the stage.

Broadway will play host to last year's Oscar winner Geraldine Page, Richard Chamberlain and *Brighton Beach Memoirs*' costars Blythe Danner and Judith Ivey in a stellar revival of Noël Coward's delirious *Blithe Spirit*. James Earl Jones returns to the Great White Way in August Wilson's play *Fences*.

Off-Broadway, Mandy Patinkin will undergo a sex-change operation between acts of David Hare's musical *The Knife* at the Public Theater, and Dianne Wiest and Ron Silver will portray bewildered Polish emigrés new to New York in *Hunting Cockroaches* at The Manhattan Theater Club. The Circle Repertory Company will premiere the Lanford Wilson comedy *Burn This*, starring John Malkovich, while Karen Allen takes the title role in a revival of *The Miracle Worker* by the Roundabout Theater Company.

Out-of-town, Richard Thomas goes directly from the hit revival of *The Front Page* to the lead in Howard Fast's *Citizen Tom Paine* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, and Spalding Gray moves his autobiographical monologues to the

Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. With such an impressive array of familiar faces performing live, you'd never know the American theatrical star is a thing of the past. But it's true. Whereas in England the prestige of a stage career can make an actor like Ian McKellen internationally renowned, it has been a generation or more since an American actor could accomplish the same feat. Probably the last performers in this country to become famous primarily on the basis of their theater work were Ethel Merman and Zero Mostel, whose larger-than-life energies never quite translated successfully to other media. The qualities that make a performer electrifying in the theater go somewhat undervalued today—or perhaps just overshadowed. Our public is much more familiar with Linda Evans and Don Johnson than with Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn. And most people under 30 haven't the vaguest idea who the Lunts were.

This state of affairs saddens some devotees of the theater, who reason that developing an audience familiar with great stage performers is healthy for both sides of the footlights. "It should be sufficient to say 'Patti LuPone in...' or 'Lindsay Crouse in...' or 'directed by Andre Gregory' or 'a play by Michael Weller.' But it's not sufficient now," says playwright David Mamet. "The producers have done themselves in by advertising on television, by electronic amplification, by putting non-actor television people onstage."

He mentions a movie-star bombshell who replaced the lead in a recent Broadway musical. "I don't know if she can act," says Mamet. "You, Mr. Producer, have selected your audience. You're pitching to people who just got off the bus. That's fine, but you just lost me. They're gonna go see Miss So-and-So, but I'm not. You've taken the risk out of going to the theater by giving them a known quantity, but you've put the risk into my going to the theater, because I'm a knowledgeable theatergoer, and I don't want to be taken advantage of."

It's true that most of the stars currently appearing in the theater achieved notoriety some other way. All of them have been captured on film at one point or another. Fortunately, most have extensive backgrounds in the theater as well. Decades before carving her own particular niche as the

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ON A ROLE! STARS ON THE STAGE

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ON A ROLE: STARS ON THE STAGE

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31) soulfully derelict matron in movies like *The Trip to Bountiful* and *The Pope of Greenwich Village*, Geraldine Page helped launch the Off-Broadway movement in the '50s with her legendary performances in Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* and other plays. And although we know him now as Mr. Will in Robert Benton's *Places in the Heart* and Mr. Right in Susan Seidelman's new movie, John Malkovich had toiled unknown for nearly 10 years within Chicago's hard-hitting Steppenwolf Theater. Still, in today's formula for stardom, theater is not enough. Some mass-media exposure—the X factor—is required, even if it's as marginal as playing the voice of Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, through which James Earl Jones has become immortalized.

Titanic To Tiny

It's always great to watch stage stars make the leap to the screen. They don't always make the transition at the same level of stardom. While Barbra Streisand hit Hollywood a full-blown star in *Funny Girl* and never looked back at Broadway, and William Hurt held out for years until his first starring role, they are exceptions. Most accomplished stage actors must go through a period of playing tiny walk-on parts in movies; even Meryl Streep began this way.

Sometimes it's a great pity to watch titanic stage actors playing human scenery for flavor-of-the-moment movie stars. Until Woody Allen gave her a big break in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, you would never have known from her mousy roles in *Footloose* and *It's My Turn* that Dianne Wiest possesses such comic turbulence that she brought down the house in Lanford Wilson's play *Serenading Louie* with her delivery of a single line: "She must be agog in Hawaii."

On the other hand, veteran theatergoers get an extra kick spotting hardworking stage actors in the casts of major motion pictures. This is actually becoming a more common occurrence.

The influence of savvy casting directors cannot be underestimated. Long associated with Woody Allen, Juliet Taylor has been instrumental in filling films like *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* with New York's finest stage actors. After working on *Desperately Seeking Susan*, newcomers Risa

Bramon and Billy Hopkins are now the hottest casting directors in the business. Their taste in talented young actors and offbeat performers led to roles for performance artist Ann Magnuson, who stars with John Malkovich in *Making Mr. Right*, and punk rocker Su Tissue, who played a zonked-out suburban wife in Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild*. And Michael Mann's casting director Bonnie Timmerman has hit pay dirt by plundering the fringes of New York's avant-garde theater, enlivening the supporting cast of *Miami Vice* with the likes of Charles Ludlam, Ron Vawter and the late Julian Beck, at the same time giving these superior performers at least a taste of the national exposure they deserve.

Once you've seen an actor onstage, though, he or she almost always seems diminished on the screen, whether in film or in television. It was in an effort to make up for this "shriveling of the aura" of the actor, suggested the late German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, that the publicity departments of Hollywood studios spent so much energy creating artificial personalities for performers. "The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of a commodity," Benjamin wrote in his classic 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

If that's true, nothing reveals "the phony spell of a commodity" more quickly than putting a star from some other realm onstage. It was painful to watch the Karate Kid, Ralph Macchio, go up against Robert DeNiro in *Cuba* and *The Teddy Bear* last year. Macchio basically had two expressions: looking at you, and looking away. Trying her acting wings in *The Pirates of Penzance* and *La Bohème*, pop star Linda Ronstadt was equally awkward—she didn't know how to stand or what to do with her hands. Even Dustin Hoffman, returning after 20 years to Broadway in *Death of a Salesman*, seemed like a bundle of self-conscious mannerisms; his Willy Loman was more of a stunt than a performance.

Realism And Magic

But almost any good actor is more satisfying to watch live than on film or TV. We all know that films are shot out of se-

quence in very small bits and pieces, and the mistakes are edited out. In the theater, you never know what's going to happen. Stage acting takes real stamina and concentration. The art of acting is made both more real and more magical when it takes place, unedited, before your eyes. You get to see everything, not just what the camera selects.

Amanda Plummer, currently in London starring with Peter O'Toole in *Pygmalion*, is a brilliant actress less for what she does and says than for the way she listens and reacts—she has vitality that her screen performances have not yet conveyed. The formal distance and the what-if structure of theater allow actors to stretch in a way that film's microscopic realism doesn't permit. Cast against type as a sad-sack daddy in *Precious Sons* on Broadway, hunky devil Ed Harris gave real dimension to what could have been a deadly dull role. And only when donning a wig and whiteface during the final act of *The Marriage of Figaro* at Circle in the Square last season was Christopher Reeve able to detach himself from his identification as Superman.

In addition, theater gives an actor the opportunity to relish language that other media don't; teen star Molly Ringwald, who made her stage debut recently in the Off-Broadway *Lily Dale*, surprised many by speaking Horton Foote's dialogue with the speed and clarity of a Shakespearean master—a skill she's not often asked to exercise in the movies.

There will always be those who argue that the only true stars are the stars of the silver screen. And some will always be more comfortable with movies than with live theater, preferring actors to be idealized human beings: distant, perfect, un-touchable. I feel that way, too, at times. It's almost scary the way we're inundated with the two-dimensional images of people in the movies and on TV. I think sometimes we walk through our lives as if they were movies, as if we were on TV, treating others as if they were unapproachable two-dimensional objects as well. That's when I start to feel it's refreshing and healthy to go to the theater, to be jolted back into the third dimension.

Editor's Note: Don Shewey writes frequently on theater for *The New York Times*. His latest book is *Caught in the Act: New York Actors Face to Face* (NAL).