



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **Playbill for In Real Life**

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"The thing that you realize over and over again in the theatre is that imagination is extremely powerful."

summer at Poughkeepsie. "We put it up together at Vassar, along with the actors, and, in developing the script with them, we were able to put into a little 90-minute scenario the experiences in the book," Esbjornson says. "In fact, we took it a little bit beyond that. It's a rather simple, beautiful meditation on the process of dying."

He has been juggling all three of these projects for several months. A fourth iron in the fire is *Resurrection Blues*, Arthur Miller's latest, which he launched Aug. 9-Sept. 8 at the Guthrie in Minneapolis with Jeff Weiss, John Bedford Lloyd, Laila Robins and David Chandler. Its future is up in the air right now, but, given Miller's track record for produced works, look for it to come down on the side of the angels. It tells of a man taken for the Messiah in a small Latin American country; the dictator in residence becomes obsessed with him and decides to crucify him as a lesson to insurgents.

Esbjornson was tapped for this task because Miller liked the way he had negotiated *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*—first in its New York bow at The Public, then in its Tony-nominated turn on Broadway. "In both those situations, we were working on the play," says the director. "We didn't treat it as a finished play. We did a lot of dramaturgical work on it at The Public, then a little more development of the script."

Between these Rides, Esbjornson made a detour into deep, dense Albee country with the Off-Broadway premiere of *The Play About the Baby*, followed by a Guthrie revival of Albee's evergreen, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* At the latter's first preview, Albee presented the director with his new play, *The Goat*, and pointed him toward Broadway.

Getting Albee's goat right for the public consumption required a lot of flop sweat and tears. Blind panic, Esbjornson confesses, "wasn't an option because I thought the play was just too important. I felt we had captured the imagination of the audience right from the beginning. Even in those early previews, I did not question the audience's reaction. For me, the exciting part of

[[image – photograph, by Aubrey Reuben]]  
[[caption]] l.-r.: Mercedes Ruehl, Esbjornson, Edward Albee and Bill Pullman on opening night of Albee's *The Goat* [[/caption]]

it was in the beginning when you had people storming out standing up applauding with their hands over their heads.

"If anything, it galvanized us. It put us together in a great way and made it possible for us to continue the vision. We never changed the original intention of the play. We altered and shaved and we cut and we played with the image at the end of the play. The thing that you realize over and over again in the theatre is that imagination is extremely powerful and when you can rely on the audience to use their imagination it resonated to a greater degree than anything you can show them—so, to some extent, just hiding the animal a little bit was an important step in terms of getting the desired reaction. I think it was one of the most challenging places to do a new play because there are so many forces



that affect the project, which you both have to listen to and ignore simultaneously. Really, it's just about trying to keep the rudder in the water when the storm comes up."

The only comparable storm in his theatrical repertoire was the world-premiere of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which he directed in San Francisco prior to productions in London and L.A. In addition to mastering the *Old Masters*, Esbjornson is a translator of Young Turks—Kushner included, along with Suzan-Lori Parks and Neal Bell. "I haven't abandoned the young and upcoming writers. For me, the excitement is to be able to have both these generational experiences. I realize they all have the same passion and needs. It's encouraging to think, as you get older, that doesn't change."

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#### HAPPY DAYS IS HERE AGAIN

The legendary Joseph Chaikin directs the 41st anniversary revival of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*

". . . what is the word—see—glimpse—seem to glimpse— need to seem to glimpse — folly for to need to seem to glimpse—what—what is the word . . ."

- from a Samuel Beckett poem for Joe Chaikin

Winnie is trapped, buried, embedded up to her waist in a mound of dirt and scorched grass; in Act II, up to her neck.

Joseph Chaikin is trapped in an aphasia, a word/memory blockage, that since his stroke in 1984 has, through immense struggle over the years, lifted bit by bit, word by word, to where he can now converse—searching, straining, reaching, shaping—in sentences, or considerable parts of sentences, that are only vestigially garbled.

What better man to direct *Happy Days*, generally conceded to be one of the most difficult-to-stage of all the plays of Samuel Beckett; also one so essentially depressing (in spite of—and because of—garrulous Winnie's chatterbox resistance to terminal fact) that the author of *Waiting for Godot* wryly referred to *Happy Days* as "another misery"?

Joe Chaikin, in directing the *Happy Days* that's at the Cherry Lane Theatre to October 27 and possibly into November, has thought and unearthed a vein of humor in it that, he feels, goes deeper than all Winnie's shenanigans with her purse, her toothbrush, her toothpaste, her mirror, her spectacles, her handkerchief, her parasol, her memories, and oh yes, the revolver she digs out of the depths of the bag—the pistol her wormlike, inarticulate husband Willie is grasping for (or is he?) at the end of the play.

It was after Chaikin had acted in Beckett's *Endgame* in 1969 and, a decade later, had directed it at the Manhattan Theatre Club that Sam Beckett wrote Joe

[[image - photograph by Carol Rosegg]]

[[caption]] Joseph Chaikin with Happy Days star Joyce Aaron [[/caption]]

Chaikin a letter—"and then I went and met him, two times, in Paris." At 20, the future founder of the Open Theatre had seen and forever after been haunted by the Bert Lahr/E.G. Marshall/Kur Kaznar/Alvin Epstein Waiting for Godot of 1956. He has since directed Godot twice himself. "I love Beckett," says the now 67-year-old Chaikin. "I adore him. He was very kind. But a really unhappy person. Major unhappiness."

For all that, Chaikin and actress Joyce Aaron and dramaturg Bill Coco have worked hard the past two and a half years on the Happy Days that now, complete with a tinge of happiness, comes to the same historic Cherry Lane that housed the drama's world premiere under Alan Schneider's direction in 1961. Ruth White and John C. Betcher were the Winnie and Willie of that one. Joyce Aaron and Ron Faber are the she and he of this one.

It is Bill Coco who has intervened—served as transmission belt, and much more—for director Chaikin over the years since 1984. "Joe has a storehouse of relationships with artists he worked with before the stroke," says Coco, "so there's a whole vocabulary of relationships. He has insights which he will concentrate into a few words, and I will try to expand on that. Then Joe comments on my expansion, and it becomes a conversation." Imagination untrapped. Happy day.

by Jerry Tallmer

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