



Photographer: Eric Schwabel

# Roundtable

## Five theatres that collectively have 210 years of experience

Terence McFarland, Executive Director, LA Stage Alliance: For the *LA Stage Roundtable* series we have been bringing in leaders from the theatre community to talk about what's been going on, where they fit in, what are their challenges and successes? We decided it would be great to bring together organizations with an illustrious history. What does it take to stick around and be a company of longevity? How did each of your theatres start and when did you personally become involved?

▲ **Armando Molina, Artistic Director of Company of Angels:** Apparently, we are the oldest theatre company in the city, founded in 1959. Leonard Nimoy, Richard Chamberlain and the late Vic Morrow were among the original members. It was a neighborhood organization so the fact it has lasted as long as it has without city, state or federal funding is a minor miracle. It is amazing to have the level of audience support we have had without any sort of founding director to take it through a number of years. That is staggering to me. I was with Cornerstone for nine years. Two years ago I did a play at Company of Angels, then was on the Board of Directors and now I'm Artistic Director.

▲ **Evelyn Rudie, Co-Artistic Director with her husband and partner Chris DeCarlo of Santa Monica Playhouse:** The Playhouse was founded in 1960 by Ted Roter along with James Arness and Hans Gudegast who is now known as Eric Braeden. They were the founding actors and directors. It was also an actor's theatre, basically a showcase with a workshop attached. I came to the Playhouse in 1966, the same day I started at UCLA. Chris came there in 1964 for a couple of years and then he went to Vietnam. When he came back to the Playhouse, I was in the workshop. We met, fell in love and got together in 1970. We took over artistic leadership of the playhouse in '73 when Ted retired. We've been there ever since.

▲ **John Gallogly, Executive Director of Theatre West:** We were started in 1962 by a small group of actors who wanted a workshop because they were quite successful in their field but were very tired of doing three lines on a *Mannix*, making a lot of money and calling it a career. So they went back to their roots artistically. It wasn't a class so much as a moderated workshop.

As time went on they realized without the audience they were lost so they began to do projects that interested each of them. Probably the most successful project at the time was *Spoon River Anthology* which went to New York and was nominated for a few awards. Some of our original members, such as Betty Garrett and Connie Sawyer, are still with us. I started as an artist in 1990 and became Executive Director in 1995.

▲ **David Hunt Stafford, Artistic Director and Managing Director of Theatre 40:** It was founded in 1964 by Susan French and the name Theatre 40 was created because they used to get together at her home and read Shakespeare and the classics. Her address was 40 Halteman Road. And shortly after that they were given a space on Santa Monica Blvd. in Hollywood and they did a couple of productions there. In the early 1970s, Ruben Cordova, who was Deputy Superintendent of the Beverly Hills High School District, became familiar with the group and gave us this empty room on the campus of Beverly Hills High School in exchange for services we would provide the District teaching an adult education theatre appreciation class and to this day we're still teaching that class. I joined Theatre 40 in 1989 as an actor and I've done 46 shows there and I'm producing almost all the plays.

▲ **Marilyn Fox, Artistic Director of Pacific Resident Theatre:** This is our 23rd year. We started as a pretty small company, mostly people from American Conservatory Theatre when it was run by Bill Ball and Alan Fletcher and some people from Denver, PCPA, Yale, a bunch of people who were kind of the *crème de la crème* of those schools who came here to have film and television careers and wanted to start a theatre. I joined the company in '86 or '87 and became Artistic Director in 1995. We do a season of four or five shows for subscribers. We also have an unusually high renewal rate. We have now approximately 2000 subscribers at the theatre. We are in Venice; it's a great community.

McFarland: What hasn't changed with producing theatre in Los Angeles? What remains consistent for your organization?

▲ **Rudie:** In terms of Los Angeles itself one thing that hasn't changed very much is the fact it is very difficult to get people to recognize or realize theatre exists and that Los Angeles actually

produces more theatre than any other city in the world. I think what hasn't changed is that once people come to see a quality show their lives are changed forever and they become very, very strong advocates for the theatre process. And I think something that hasn't changed is that in Los Angeles perhaps more so than any other city in the world most theatres are actor driven. I think at Santa Monica Playhouse what hasn't changed is the need to develop new audiences; also, to give audiences as well as artists ownership in the process so it isn't just for the actor. We involve everybody to help them find their artistic voice and to use it for the betterment of the community.

▲ **Gallogly:** Well I'm middle aged, that's changed, but the audience and the actor haven't changed, that's the thing that is always there. People come back for a communal experience in a place where you react with living human beings; that may be stronger now than it was before people started texting all day long and in their own heads in their own cubicles, but the experience itself has not changed and I don't think that making theatre has changed except in the sense that it's still about asking questions and dancing with questions and singing with it and seducing it and sleeping with it and fighting with it and all those things. I'm not trying to give an answer so much as to live the question with the audience and let them come to their own answer to what they just saw.

▲ **Molina:** Theatre is not quite the thing to do here, the movies certainly. You know you go to a film and there's 500 people and you say, "My god, I'll take a third of this for my house and be really happy." We don't have anything here like the "I Love New York" campaign, for example. Going to the theatre in New York is part of the culture. That has stayed the same here.

▲ **Stafford:** I think one thing that hasn't changed at all is the collaboration it takes to put these shows together. The desire of the actor, the director, the playwright, these entities come together to create this experience and the audience sits there and watches and I think that collaboration, that courage in creating theatre is something that is very constant in this business and the fact that it's happening live right in front of you.

▲ **Fox:** I agree with everything that's been said. Also what hasn't changed is the perception this city is that different from New York. Actually theatre at the small or midsize level where we operate is the same here as in New York. The difference is in New York the business of Broadway is like the movie business is out here; it's as difficult to be a part of Broadway there for actors and theatre people as it is to be starring in a major motion picture. It is a very closed shop. People do slip in and things are developed but it really is the little blade of grass that goes through the cement that gets through it. So in a way that hasn't changed either. The amount of theatre here has grown and grown, but that situation of Los Angeles not having theatre as a business except in very rarified situations continues.

**McFarland:** So what has changed? What's different?

▲ **Gallogly:** I think theatre has begun to see itself as a community rather than as competitors. It's been doing that through advocacy; also through the County Arts Commission and public entities that recognize some of the problems we've been talking about and have said, "Well there is a synergy here." For example, the Hollywood Arts Retention Program, which now includes North Hollywood and some other areas, has development grants with Arts for LA and in some way California's Advocates for the Arts. Very powerful ties are being made between organizations

and LA Stage Alliance as well where people recognize, "Yes you're different than I am but we work within a sphere where there's much more that we have in common than there is that separates us." The Internet has changed everything, in terms of the way we market. The Internet allows us to create. We're beginning a monthly newsletter and if people click on it they can see how our set designers build sets and paint them, so for a guy who likes to build things, he can find out how to do that. We can do backstage interviews with people who are in the shows or the person who composed the music so there is a give and take. Then we're going to start interviewing audiences and let them post their stuff through our website or on YouTube and they can get it up to their friends. So instead of trying to stuff all this down their throats, turn that thing into the public bullhorn and let them shout it out for us.

▲ **Molina:** Theatre can be like a town hall. Look at the arts or the theatre as the grease that keeps the society healthy. I think participatory theatre, participatory involvement in the community is what's changing.

▲ **Rudie:** I think audiences are more savvy than they used to be in terms of theatre. I think they're more willing to participate and we've noticed with the younger students their understanding of psychology, of different concepts that a play is trying to share with them is way bigger than it was years ago because they have been exposed to more.

▲ **Gallogly:** One thing that hasn't changed is there's not enough money. No matter what theatre I talk to or what level of organization in the non-profit world burnout happens on a regular basis and it's very, very difficult for people to sustain a life in the theatre.

**McFarland:** We have organizations here who have sustained for a very long time. What elements have contributed to that sustainability?

▲ **Stafford:** I guess the main way Theatre 40 has survived is with extremely low overhead. Our arrangement with the School District is such that it's just allowing us to continue without a big nut to meet at all times. The artists that have been involved with Theatre 40 over the years have a tremendous belief in the organization and they want to see it sustain itself and grow. They're volunteering their time, they're giving their own money to make sure the organization has what it needs to sustain itself.

▲ **Rudie:** Well to put it into three words: balance, diversity and flexibility. We have a small company, we've always had a small core group of artists right from the beginning. We learned early that we didn't want to have to rely on one big hit and if we didn't have that hit we were going to go under. Listen to the audience, listen to your actors; because we're actor driven we can literally turn on a dime. When the climate changes, when society changes, when a company wants to come in from Europe and says, "We can come in three weeks and we have a wonderful play and we'd like to present it for you," we can do that.

▲ **Fox:** I would say flexibility also in terms of our season, our dates, the way our audience supports us. I do a very unusual kind of flexible subscription, not just flexible like you can come at any time on any day, but like we might not do one of these 15 shows but we're going to get four or five great shows this year. Not working in marble, working in clay so that when we give the audience something it isn't because we promised we would deliver this exact thing but promised we would deliver something beautiful. The trust the audience has in that attention

to excellence as far as we can possibly give it under the given circumstances has created a faithful audience for our theatre because we look at it as little works of art.

▲ **Molina:** I guess being with the same company is the initial impulse that allows creative freedom. A company that doesn't have ongoing leadership is constantly morphing which gives power to the actors.

▲ **Stafford:** Some people stay for a long, long time but even the ones who stay for a shorter period have a commitment and a love to this art form and that commitment has helped sustain theatre.

▲ **Gallogly:** One thing that really sustains us is need. If there's a need the artists have that's being fulfilled by the organization they will stay. If there isn't then the reason for the organization goes away. The need can be in the audience in terms of what we're doing, but a company has to be about what the artist needs and if it isn't we'll just drag them all away.

▲ **Fox:** Yes, it's the artist, the gift you know of being able to put that out. I totally believe that's totally true. That's what makes it happen. Everything else is the style or the way to do it, but without that original impulse to create something beautiful, we wouldn't be doing any of this.

**McFarland:** How does a season come together? How is the art itself generated?

▲ **Gallogly:** Well we have had seasons but choose to do what we want to do when we want to do it. And that's difficult in terms of sustaining an audience because if you only do one play one year and the next year you do seven, you've got a different sort of audience who will come. We do the children's shows consistently. And we assign a group of people to work on that in terms of creation of the shows and it sort of has a brand to it. It's Storybook Theatre. The adult stuff we have comes out of workshops so we don't know what's going to make it to main stage and it's very interesting. I think the best stuff we do has been driven from the workshops. So that's the way we are right now, we may change.

▲ **Molina:** I have final choice along with the executive producer and director. We have a distinction between the main stage productions and the totally original work we do collaboratively with an organization called East LA Community Corporation, so that work starts in the community and then fights its way down to our space or vice versa. That's part of Company of Angels; we call them wing projects which are not reviewed but seen by the membership. We still have the membership; that's still a part of the structure of the company

▲ **Fox:** At our theatre the artistic director chooses all the main stage plays. The workshop develops plays for the just pure impulsive actor and/or writer. I've often opened our workshop productions on the main stage because so many of the things that come out of it are so wonderful.

▲ **Rudie:** More and more of our theatre satellite things are starting to happen like the writers group and then workshops are developed just for readings or a Monday night reading series or a new playwright's reading series or shipping in a playwright to work on a play and have an audience watch it so they're like little satellite things but they're extra programming that comes out of the company. We do have a mandate to never be dark. We have had seasons in the past. We don't have a season at the moment, but we haven't been dark since Chris and I took over in 1973.

▲ **Stafford:** We have an executive board that's not involved in any artistic decisions. We do have an artistic committee; they're

actors from the company elected to a three-year term. Actors in the company can put together a presentation of a project they want to do and present it to the artistic director and the artistic committee to try to get a slot in the season.

**McFarland:** What's coming up in the next year or two for your organization?

▲ **Molina:** Mostly new work. I mean like 99.9% world premieres either coming out of the community or out of the playwrights group which is restricted to the Los Angeles area.

▲ **Rudie:** A lot of new works, we are in the process of a capitol campaign trying to purchase our space. We are in the process of creating a new international piece, a three country festival with our sister companies Playbox Theatre in England and A Model Language Studio in Japan that are all going to be performed in America, England and Japan and we're also doing a cultural exchange community oriented production at a playhouse in Ireland. Other than that we're trying to stay small, keep in touch with our humanity, but create new satellites of good word, new sound byte projects. We're in the process of creating a young playwrights company and a young actors company, young meaning 18-40 to work out of the playhouse.

▲ **Fox:** We're trying to find a way to purchase our buildings; we're getting much more involved in the community of Venice doing some children's programming and some Shakespeare. We're in partnership with a larger theatre developing a production with our actors and at a local Equity house. We have a hope of developing a new musical. And as I said all this activity and our writer's workshop has been going on for about five or six years, but now seems to be coming into fruition in that some real talents have emerged so I'm hoping to find some new work that way.

▲ **Gallogly:** We've been on a forced march if you will by the Community Redevelopment Agency, for the last two years through HARP. So that process I think will take another year before we've actually defined the boxes well enough and the goals that go with them and make them something we can actually achieve or not, that we can have as a benchmark so we can understand how we are moving forward, where we're stalled, what works for us, what doesn't and create the fertile ground that will allow us to have the strategic campaign to move to the next level. We're not trying to grow because of a desire to be bigger, but we find the needs of our artists and the communities we are serving demand we do certain things. If we do not grow ourselves the people who are currently sustained and running the organization will burn out and disappear and the organization will cease to be effective. So if we have clearly articulated our goals and vision based on the needs of the community we are involved with, if that's true, then these steps are dictated by that understanding of the need based on our mission. So that's where we're going, and it's been very interesting, but it is very much a directional change for us and one that's taken a lot of thought and been slowly maturing.

▲ **Stafford:** I think for the next couple of years our focus should be growth of our audience. I admire Marilyn's 2000 subscribers, I have about 700 subscribers and I don't have a full house every night. We want to focus on maintaining high quality production, interesting choice of materials that will intellectually challenge yet entertain our audience, satisfying membership needs and growing the audience and of course grow our financial resources. That's my goal as it is all of ours.

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