



It's All True

Interview of Louis Contey and Jason Sherman

TimeLine's Artistic Director PJ Powers [PP] recently chatted with director Louis Contey [LC] and playwright Jason Sherman [JS] about TimeLine's production of IT'S ALL TRUE.

[PP] Lou, you return to TimeLine after your acclaimed production of Clifford Odets' AWAKE AND SING! last year, and now you've chosen yet another play that takes place in New York in the 1930s. What is your fascination with that time period?

[LC] It's an incredibly fertile time in terms of its social and political climate. It was a time in American history when the public was crying out for some kind of change, some relief from The Depression. They were seeing despair everywhere they looked, and they were looking to places they hadn't looked before for new answers, socialism being one of them. So there is a lot of great writing about and from that time period, and that's why I tend to gravitate towards that era.

[PP] Even outside of your work at TimeLine, it seems like you are often drawn to directing historical stories with your productions of JUDGEMENT AT NUREMBERG and WARHAWKS AND LINDBERGH'S at Shattered Globe, among others. Have you always been a history buff?

[LC] Yeah, I grew up that way. My father was a history teacher so I grew up around stacks of history books. A lot of them were about this time period – World War I and World War II and American politics. I supposed I've cut my teeth on the American historical panorama.

[PP] Do you ever want to get away from working on history plays or do you miss that historical context when you're working on a play that doesn't really have one?

[LC] I always try to find some historical basis in everything I do. If I'm doing it, it's going to have a historical or social context. As I mentioned, there are times I'd like to get out of the 1930s.

[PP] Jason, this is the first time your work has been done at TimeLine, yet so much of your work is a great fit for us since so many of your plays explore historical themes & stories. Has history always been of interest to you?

[JS] It's rather unavoidable.

[PP] This isn't only your TimeLine debut. IT'S ALL TRUE also marks your Chicago debut as well, yet you've been produced so widely in your native Canada and other parts of the U.S. What are the challenges of getting your work produced outside of your Canada?

[JS] In the absence of a meritocracy, it all comes down to luck and timing, to which you can contribute, but cannot control. Just today I received an email from an artistic director who has expressed great interest in my work, and was very enthusiastic about my most recent play, REMNANTS [A Fable], which sets the story of Joseph and his brothers during the second World War. Unfortunately, he explained, his theatre had just experienced a bit of a flop with a play about another biblical patriarch, and a subsequent marketing survey revealed that his audience wasn't interested in plays based on biblical characters. Therefore, and in conclusion, and with all due respect, he passed. That's just one more hurdle.

[PP] As a Canadian, do you feel that you bring a different perspective to IT'S ALL TRUE – a story that deals so much with American politics in the 1930s?

[JS] No doubt, in the same way that European writers bring a different perspective to stories set in America. Hollywood and the airlines may consider Canada to be part of their "domestic" business, but we tend to see ourselves as having a set of national characteristics that are very different than yours. It may be that our varying degrees of power [yours, vast; ours, negligible] is the source of what sets us apart, and that at base we are very much the same sort of people. But I doubt it.

[PP] Lou, let's talk specifically about the show. Would you say that IT'S ALL TRUE is a political play?

[LC] I don't think it's Jason's intent. I think there are things that are political and it deals with politics. But I think it's more a social play about people trying to change their situation and improve it. That doesn't have to mean that it's a political play, but it may have the same results.

[PP] Jason, the play addresses many issues related to government funding of the arts. There is a perception in the U.S. that there is better government support for the arts in Canada. Is this an appropriate perception in your opinion?

[JS] The short answer is no. The long answer is somewhat more depressing. One need only examine the public record. Support for the arts in Canada is certainly higher in Canada than it is in the United States, on a per capita basis. And I'd say we have done a much better job of supporting indigenous work over the last forty years than the U.S., but this is due to a rise in nationalist sentiment that started around the centennial year [1967], reached its fever peak during the Trudeau years, and began to wane under the rule of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, who served as de facto governor to Reagan, overseeing the beginning of the end of the social welfare state as part of the hated Free Trade Agreement. "Culture" was never supposed to be part of that bargain, but in the years since, we have seen a massive drop in real dollars for the arts, with a concomitant switch from government assistance to corporate handouts. The problem with the latter is that corporations are not interested in dissenting voices [however few they may be], nor in small companies whose audience base can't be counted upon to bolster the sponsoring corporation's bottom line. Under these circumstances, artists find themselves under subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, pressure, to create conformist art. My point is that funding levels rise and decrease due to a number of factors, but the more important question is this: what sort of

work is being funded? Here's another sobering thought: A recent survey by the Toronto Star, the largest paper by circulation in the country, asked its readers to rank in order of preference which areas of public endeavour the city should give priority to. Health and education featured highly, as one would hope and expect; the arts finished dead last, as one would fear and only be surprised by if one wasn't paying attention. Artists did themselves a lot of harm by trying to rationalize their usefulness according to the "economic impact" of their work. Large amounts of money and time went into conducting surveys and producing glossy reports that proved beyond a shadow that the performing arts "sector" brought in millions upon millions of dollars to the local economy, surely a sign of their importance. Strangely, this argument failed to impress the Puritans at the Chamber of Commerce. The arts are important not because they make people go to restaurants, take taxis and buy a piece of cake after the show, but because they are an irreplaceable part of the human experience, the import of which cannot be measured by bean counters. I can hear the cries of "elitist" even now; but that's an argument for another day.

[PP] Jason, as a follow-up to that question, IT'S ALL TRUE shows some of the negative ramifications of government arts funding when those funders shut down THE CRADLE WILL ROCK due to the play's message. Do you think there is an opportunity today for the government to subsidize the arts without wielding authority over the work that is being created?

[JS] The government has abrogated that responsibility, and we're not likely to see anything approaching the level of government funding depicted in IT'S ALL TRUE, which, by the way, doesn't argue against government funding, but government intervention in what it's funding. Private donations are apparently up, and there are a mind-boggling number of foundations, their treasuries stoked by the fires of investment, but not a lot of private or foundation money is making its way to non-conformist art. These are very conservative times in the arts. The high priests of our artistic institutions, who have tended to play it safe, are now playing it fearful. Which is why my plays tend to be produced by companies such as TimeLine, who, in the words of Edward Albee, "haven't learned to be afraid."

[PP] Lou, why do you think that this is a relevant story to be telling today?

[LC] There's the fact that we have no federal funding for the arts to speak of. As a director working primarily in non-equity theatre in Chicago and living on a shoestring, I feel that the play is relevant to me. I'm working against all odds to get the work done. And even though I'm no Welles or Blitzstein I can relate to their struggle.

[PP] Lou, TimeLine audiences might be interested to learn that you first started talking about IT'S ALL TRUE with TimeLine a couple years ago, at the same time we were discussing doing AWAKE AND SING! It turns out that we ended up producing both shows, just in different years. What was it that first drew you to Jason's writing?

[LC] It was the writing in the very first scene of the play that first attracted me to the play. He managed to capture the language of the time. I love that the play begins with catching the characters of Welles, Houseman and Blitzstein right in the middle of a moment. Plus, I have always had a personal interest in Orson Welles and the 1930s as we discussed.

[PP] Let's talk a bit about some of the characters in the play. It includes some very bold and famous personalities in it as you just mentioned, including Orson Welles, John Houseman, Marc Blizstein etc. Jason, what was your approach towards writing dialogue for such notable characters?

[JS] To ignore the fact that I was writing such notable characters. I did my research, got a sense of who these people were, and started writing...and rewriting. But historical accuracy has to go out the window when it comes to telling your story. There's probably some sort of unwritten code of conduct when it comes to using historical figures, something like, the farther away in history, the less allegiance is owed to getting the "true" character of that person. It takes a certain amount of arrogance and presumption on the part of writers to put words into the mouths of real people; but if you've done your work, and set out to depict that person in a sympathetic, or let's say empathic, way, then you have nothing to apologize for. After the final performance of the premiere production in Toronto, the stage manager informed me that "Howard Da Silva's son is downstairs -- and he wants to talk to you." You could have heard a tort drop. Though I love the character of Howard, I invented his affair with Olive in the play. Mind you, he's shown to be a pretty noble fella, and it didn't take much of a leap of imagination to think that the leading man might have bedded the leading lady. But I wasn't thinking any of this as I made my way downstairs; I was wondering how hard Da Silva's son was going to punch me for taking liberties with his dad. He was waiting in the box office with his daughter; they'd read about the play on the internet and driven up from Pennsylvania to catch the last matinee. He was a great bear of a man, as I recall, and he extended a great bear of a hand and offered his congratulations on the play. Without any prompting, he added, "Yeah, you really got him. He was a hell of a ladies man."

[PP] Lou, how do you work with your actors when they're playing people that the audience already knows?

[LC] I've done my job in casting to find actors who I think can appear enough like the historical figures both in appearance and manner, but the bottom line is that they have to be good actors that are skilled and capable. In rehearsals it came up frequently, especially with Welles, how to do it without rendering a caricature. I told Brian McCaskill, the actor who plays Welles that he has to be who he is as an actor. If there are similarities to Welles, that will be sufficient. But Brian is Brian and I cast him to be who he is. He has a wealth of information about the time period, not to mention extraordinary talent. He's not giving an impression. He's bringing out parts of Orson that are close to who Brian is. But I think the audience will certainly understand the characterization.

[PP] This is quite a theatrical show with live music, very fast-paced scenes and actors who quickly switch back-and-forth between different characters. Lou, how has this challenged you as a director?

[LC] Well I knew I had to find ways to serve the play and to also have fun. The audience is going to become aware that we're taking them in and giving them a bit of a wink and a nudge. If they can have as much fun as we are, then we've succeeded. I've tried to be cautious with music

and sound. I don't want it to become too cinematic and lose the theatricality of it. It's not supposed to be real, but I don't want it to be hokey.

[PP] Lou, has there been anything surprising to you while working on this show?

[LC] Once I cast it I felt confident with the results I'd get. I knew that these actors would be good. The rehearsal process for this show was slightly shorter due to some scheduling issues. But despite that I think I'm most impressed by how quickly we've come across finding the play and how quickly it's coalesced. That's really a testament to the quality and skill of the actors, their work ethic and TimeLine's ability to make things happen quickly and expeditiously. And, of course, the playwriting is pretty damn good too. But no other surprises in the process. I always enjoy working with TimeLine. I love to play here.

[PP] Lou, you've built a strong reputation for staging American classics and working on plays by Albee, Odets, Williams, Miller, etc. But I know you have a very strong passion for working on new plays as well and working with emerging playwrights like Jason. Ultimately, how do you choose the plays that you work on?

[LC] You try to predict the future and you want to be relevant in what you're working on. Especially with historical things you want to find things that resonate today. I look in the places that seem to be the most fertile. There was something that sounded relevant and fertile about this play and I hunted down the script and read it. It's a never-ending battle to find the right project, and it's always uphill. Once you find the right thing, it can get pulled out from under you or you find that you can't get the rights to it. So I find myself stockpiling ideas, and I come back to them and hope they'll still be relevant when there is the opportunity to get them produced.

[PP] And how do you differentiate from wanting to direct a new play or working on a classic?

[LC] If I get to a point where I feel that I need solid writing that doesn't need any "fixing", I'll go back to classics. Then I make sure that there is resonance that can work for the time and place that we're doing it. What makes them classics are their ability to be universal and speak to people across time.

[PP] Jason, what's up next for you?

[JS] By accident or design, I'm working on a number of adaptations, including THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV for the Stratford Festival; Brecht's LIFE OF GALILEO for Theatre Calgary and the Shaw Festival; and THE CHERRY ORCHARD for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. One or all of them will be produced during the 2005-06 season, assuming Ontario isn't hit by an other series of Old Testament shocks [SARS, mad cow, blackouts...]. Meantime, in order to put food on the table, and to ensure that there's a table on which to put food, I write for television. I'm also trying to complete a screenplay version of my play THREE IN THE BACK, TWO IN THE HEAD and writing a radio drama about the world o' newspapers.