

# 29 GOING ON 90

Native son and STC Associate Director Alan Paul on growing up in D.C., his theatrical apprenticeship and his love for doing it all

by Drew Lichtenberg



“I’ve always felt as though I were 90 years old,” Alan Paul groans, as we sip coffee near the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s offices on Barracks Row. “I’ve just always felt so old. I’ve always wanted to feel that connection to an older world.” As he prepared to go into rehearsals directing *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, the latest and most ambitious of STC’s forays into Broadway style, musical theatre programming, Paul reflected on his career. He has learned from elder statesmen of the American theatre, traveled around the world, and worked on

classics, operas and musicals—all at the tender age of 29.

Paul grew up in the nearby enclave of Potomac, Maryland. His passion for the theatre started at a young age. He started taking voice and piano lessons at the age of 9. “My mom used to take me to every Broadway musical,” he says. “I still have all the tickets, all the programs, all the cast recordings. And by all I mean *all*.” He has a book sitting at home on his coffee table, filled with letters from actors and stage managers. “I always wanted to know how it worked,” he says, in a half-apologetic shrug that belies the intensity of his ardor for all things theatre.

Like many theatre lovers of a certain age, the 1996 revival of *Forum* is a pivotal memory. “Nathan Lane said he would not be coming out after the matinee, but he agreed to sign my poster. It’s still hanging on my old bedroom wall.”

Paul traces his interest in the classics to high school. “I took a class in Shakespeare at the Musical Theatre Center in Rockville, Maryland. I won an award from the Folger for playing the piano on ‘Brush Up Your Shakespeare,’ and for playing Benedick from *Much Ado About Nothing*. I got a *Complete Works* for that,” he says, beaming with pride. He still has the book at home. “And then I saw *Hamlet* at the Lansburgh in 2001.” When I mention his love of both Shakespeare and musical theatre, he shrugs. “I should have been a Gemini. I have a very serious classical side, and a side that wants to sing and have fun.”

Paul enrolled at Northwestern University, where he was in the musical theatre program. “Right around the time of *Six Degrees of Separation*”—his senior-year directing project—“I had an interview with Molly Smith at Arena Stage, and she asked me to be her assistant

for *Cabaret*.” Work at Arena led to an internship after graduation at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and assistant directing gigs with Rebecca Taichman and Moisés Kaufman. At the same time, he was launching a directing career back in Chicago. “I decided to produce a season of classical plays with a friend of mine. We raised \$30,000. I directed *Richard II* and produced his production of *La Mandragola* by Machiavelli. We did them in repertory, with a six-week run.” He takes a breath. “When that was happening, I met Michael Kahn, and he offered me a fellowship here at STC. I came on in 2007, the year they opened Sidney Harman Hall. I thought I’d be here for a year.”

What changed? “Michael has a way of being very casual about momentous moments in your life. We were having a drink at the Playbill Café, and he asked if I’d like to come on staff as an assistant director. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. For me it meant everything: I was joining the staff of this huge theatre, getting a salary, having security ... At the end of the next season, my predecessor and friend David Muse left to become Artistic Director of The Studio Theatre. Michael decided that he wanted me to move into that job. So here I am, 25 years old and the Associate Director, handed this huge amount of responsibility.” He sighs, thinking about all of the work. He laughs. “I still haven’t taken a break.”

“In retrospect, all of it has been a trial by fire. I’ve been through everything good and everything bad that can happen at a theatre. You know, hiring, firing, casting, budgeting, solving every crisis. Sometimes I’ve made those messes, but I’ve always cleaned them up. It was all building to this,” he gestures, indicating *Forum* in midair, “and now it’s finally happening. It’s the most exciting opportunity I’ve had.”

When discussing *Forum*, Paul shows the powerful producer’s mind he has acquired after years spent as Michael Kahn’s right-hand man. The germ for the project originated, he says, with the successful mounting of the Harman’s first musical, Mary Zimmerman’s production of *Candide* in the 2010-11 Season. *Candide* led indirectly to “Bard’s Broadway,” two-week mountings of classic-inspired musicals during STC’s 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season. On *Forum*, Paul is working with many of the Bard’s Broadway designers, as well as the same casting director. “It was an exciting time for the theatre,” he says. “We discovered that not only could we produce these musicals at a high level, but we could attract big talent.”



Alan Paul, 1996



Alan Paul and the cast of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Photo by Elayna Speight.

When asked what he has learned from years of apprenticeship under Michael Kahn's leadership, Paul pauses and thinks hard. "I have a huge amount of admiration for Michael, and gratitude for all the opportunities he's given me. Most importantly, I learned how to orchestrate big plays and musicals from him. It's an amazing feeling, when you get a large group of people together to create a piece of theatre. The other thing I've learned from Michael is how to jump fearlessly between styles and genres. I've tried to emulate him in my career, working on everything from musical comedies to minimalist opera to Thornton Wilder ... all in the last year." He smiles again. "When you tackle such varied material, you develop muscles. I feel like I've been at the gym for seven years."

From listening to Paul talk, it is obvious why he feels so old at heart. He dreams of being the kind of director who is increasingly rare in our contemporary theatre world. "My biggest hero is Michael," he says, "but I also look up to people like Jack O'Brien and Bartlett Sher because they do it all, from classical plays to musical theatre to opera." Paul is still as in love with the theatre as he was when he was 9 years old. He still writes letters to his heroes, which he saves in a book on his coffee table. In fact, the first thing he did for *Forum* was to meet with Jerry Zaks, the director of the Broadway revival in 1996. Zaks had acted with Zero Mostel, the original Pseudolus, in *Fiddler on the Roof*.

He stares at his coffee, thinking.

"I've always felt a connection to the generations of people that have worked in the theatre." I ask him why. "I enjoy their stories. Theatre is ephemeral. It only exists in the moment. There's no record of it, except for those stories." He sighs, again, old beyond his years. "I'm only 29 but I feel like I've seen it all. I've always just wanted to be part of that tradition." He smiles. Curtain.

**Drew Lichtenberg** is the Literary Associate at STC and production dramaturg for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. He holds an MFA in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from Yale School of Drama.