

# Profile's director finds a fit with Albee

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Special to the Oregonian

In 1997, new artistic director Jane Unger had a problem. Acting on an idea that she says "grabbed hold" of her, she was starting a theater company that would perform one playwright's works each season. Her plans included outreach to schools and bringing the playwright to Portland. She had a board of directors, a space and modest funding.

The problem? No playwright.

"My first thought was Chekhov," she says. But Chekhov's plays are difficult, and, well, it's tough to bring a man dead 93 years to town. When Unger asked friends in theater for advice, one Seattle director said to go with "something sexy."

That tip led to Arthur Kopit and one of the most impressive beginnings in Portland theater history.

And it led, eventually, to a double bill of Edward Albee's one-acts "Zoo Story" and "The American Dream," one of the best shows on any Portland stage right now, with a defining performance by Michele M. Mariana as the take-charge Grandma in "Dream."

Originally from Long Island, Unger had seen Kopit's plays and thought his stark, emotional approach was just what she needed. He agreed to come; in January 1998, Unger's Profile Theater Project debuted at the Main Street Theater with "Wings."

The response was overwhelming. The past two years, Unger has seen

theater fans will be talking about for years," The Oregonian's Barry Johnson wrote that Profile had "burst onto the Portland theater scene in a blaze of glory." Before the year was out, Portland drama critics had named Sterchi the year's best actress and Unger its best director.

What did it all mean?

"It meant we could keep going," Unger says.

A petite woman with feathered black hair, Unger has learned to be practical when assessing her success. Having spent 10 years as an actor and director in New York and weathered her share of setbacks in Portland's fragile theater climate, she knows the hardest thing sometimes is staying alive.

Only months after the success of "Wings," Profile lost its lease, forcing Unger to slash her upcoming season of Tennessee Williams plays to a staging of "The Glass Menagerie" and two readings.

"We were in three different venues our first two years," she says. It became clear that identifying an organization with a home was key to attracting audiences.

Despite the lack of a home space, Unger staged a season of Constance Congdon plays in Profile's third year. Then, in 2000, while preparing for a year of Arthur Miller's works, she signed a five-year lease with Theater! Theatre! Profile had a home at last.

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The first allowed her to pay her staff, the second to hire a development director.

This past year, Unger expanded Profile's education program from workshops and school-group matinees to student versions of her playwrights' plays. And, after choosing playwrights for their audience appeal, she's made a personal choice.

"I've been interested in profiling the plays of Edward Albee for many years," she writes in the playbill for Profile's current staging of "The American Dream" and "Zoo Story." In conversation, she adds, "I can't imagine a better play to see right now than 'The American Dream.' As Albee has said, it is his attempt to look at the American culture's substitution of artificial for real values. 'Zoo Story' is the flip side . . ."

Unger has always been most interested in what a writer has to say. She has already talked with Albee about his ideas on directing his works; he comes to town in February.

"I see playwrights as our guides," she says. "I would love to talk to him in an order I can understand."