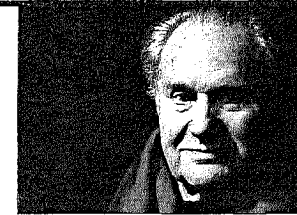


ArtsWeek

ANUARY 18, 2004

EDITOR: BARRY JOHNSON • 503-221-856

Romulus Linney, celebrated this year by Profile Theatre Project, may be the best American playwright nobody knows



Romulus Linney: "Writing a play is not an intellectual exercise. It has to come out of the subconscious somewhere."

Playwright behind the scenes

BY MICHAEL MCGREGOR
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Romulus Linney stood by an open black curtain watching the Profile Theatre audience mingle. It was Nov. 9, the 65th anniversary of Kristallnacht, and the people around him had just seen "2," his play that portrayed Hitler's second-in-command, Hermann Goering, as disturbingly human. In a few minutes they would listen to him discuss it with a panel of experts. But no one approached him. No one seemed to know who he was.

Undisturbed, Linney kept his hands in his pockets and waited. After more than 50 years in the theaters as an actor, a director and perhaps the most respected living American playwright that few have heard of, he has learned to be patient. The play's the thing, Shakespeare wrote, and Linney has come to trust his plays to speak for themselves.

As he sat on the stage that November day, Linney listened quietly to the gathered experts — among them a rabbi, a professor and a Holocaust survivor — until someone suggested Goering was less a human than a monster.

Then he stuck.

"We try to clear our conscience by making someone like Goering a demon," he countered, displaying both the deep thought and feeling behind his work and what he calls his "disputatious" side. "We try to explain him away. But there are no explanations for the evil that lives within us."

What had been a careful conversation among polite panelists shifted swiftly, surprisingly, into something more: the essence of drama, what he calls "a flesh-and-

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Ted Roisum (left) and Michael Mendelson rehearse Romulus Linney's new play, "Klonsky and Schwartz," which Linney co-directed.

Photos by FAITH CATHCART THE OREGONIAN



Linney: Playwright looks clear-eyed at life

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blood encounter with flesh and blood."

To those gathered that day, at least, Linney was unknown no more.

Linney, who has written close to 40 plays, was in Portland that day — and again this weekend — because Profile Theatre Project, which features the work of a single playwright each year, has dedicated its 2003-2004 season to him.

"I'd been aware of him and his importance as a playwright for years," said Profile's artistic director, Jane Unger, "but '2' was the play that pushed him to the head of the line. When I read it, I found it to be the most timely, politically resonant play I'd read in years."

In Linney himself, she found even more availability and energy. Not only did he participate in the panel discussion about "2," but he also has helped direct his newest play, "Klonsky and Schwartz," which opened at Profile on Friday.

Linney exhibits the soft-spoken courtesy of many raised in the South, yet he can be intimidating. The first thing you notice is how closely he listens, then how candidly he speaks. You soon realize this man who has invested most of his 73 years in the artifice of theater believes, above all, in looking clear-eyed at life.

His plays have an elegant simplicity influenced by his brief stay in Japan during an Army stint in the 1960s. Any actor who reads his plays will tell you he does something too few playwrights do: He trusts performers. He concentrates on writing dialogue with the power to animate a stage.

"He will start with what looks like a simple tale, drawing you into the center of it," says Mary McDonald-Lewis, who has performed Linney's plays at Readers Repertory Theatre. "Then, just as you have surrendered yourself to its simplicity, he will slip in truth that applies not only to you but to the human condition. Many writers today are very skilled craftspeople but are empty inside. Linney writes out of a fullness, a wealth."

McDonald-Lewis goes on to call Linney "a true Southern storyteller, comfortable with leaping into magic, able to be rural without being condescending, and an absolute master of dialect."

Linney believes he is not better known, in part, because so many of his plays have a rural rather than an urban setting. This is not accidental. "You need an emotional reason to write a play," he says, and his deepest emotional connections come from his childhood in the rural South, in Boone, N.C., and a small town outside Nashville, Tenn. He still thinks of Appalachia as his spiritual home.

"In the Appalachian plays the dialogue is a little bit sharper, a little bit fresher," he says, "because those are the voices I heard around me as a child."

He traces his awareness of the power of theater to watching his mother, an amateur actress, play Mrs. Gibbs in "Our Town."

"I took along two cupcakes," he says, "because I thought I'd be bored. At first, when I saw Mrs. Gibbs' son, I thought, wait a minute, that's not your mother up

there. Then they got to the end of the play and there was my mother dead in a cemetery. As a little kid, I was shattered. I cried all over my cupcakes. I realized then how theater can disturb you, even if it was on a mistaken level."

Linney's father's death when he was 13 had an even greater impact on him and his future plays. "Writing a play is not an intellectual exercise," he says. "You have to care about it. It has to come out of the subconscious somewhere. My father's death, or something like it, is in every play I write."

Linney's first play, "The Sorrows of Frederick," which debuted at the then-new Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1967, came directly out of his father's death.

By then Linney had acted at Oberlin College, earned a Master of Fine Arts in directing from the Yale School of Drama and worked as a stage manager at the Actor's Studio in New York ("I would sit right next to Lee Strasberg in the middle of everything," he says, "because I had to turn on his tape recorder"), but he was no longer in the theater. He had come to think of himself as a novelist.

While working at the Actor's Studio after Yale, he took evening writing classes with editor Hiram Hayden, but instead of writing plays he wrote a novel, "Heathen Valley," which Hayden published. Linney began to see himself as a novelist — until the memory of his father's bird dogs brought him back to theater.

"I read something about Frederick the Great and his dogs," he says, "which



JAMIE BOSWORTH

Playwright and co-director Romulus Linney knew immediately that Ted Roisum (bottom) and Michael Mendelson were right for his new play, "Klonsky and Schwartz."

involved me not because of the history but because my father owned bird dogs and we used to go to the field trials together. So I read and I read and I read about Frederick's relationship with these dogs when he was old. Then a writer friend said, 'Why don't you stop reading all those books and write the play?' So I did."

After its successful run in Los Angeles in the late '60s, "The Sorrows of Frederick" moved to other theaters around the Unit-

ed States and overseas.

Slowly, Linney acquired a following, especially among those involved with regional theaters. After seeing a National Critics Award-winning production of "2" in 1989 at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, New York Times critic Mel Gussow wrote, "There is every likelihood that play will finally bring Mr. Linney the major success he so clearly deserves."

The following year, after working with Linney on "Heathen Valley," an adaptation of Linney's first novel, James Houghton founded New York's now-storied Signature Theatre Company to give Linney's work more exposure. But though his plays continued to be popular among theater insiders, Linney never became widely known.

"You have to have a Broadway hit that runs for a year or win a Pulitzer Prize to enter the consciousness of this country," Linney says now. "Of course, I would have liked that. But all of my plays have been produced and my novels are published. Many people who have had great success have been unable to keep things going. That's never been a problem of mine."

Linney may never enter what he calls "the consciousness of the country," but in recent years he has come quite close to fame. One of his two daughters is actress Laura Linney.

"She's done marvelous work, and everybody goes to the movies," he says, his usually impassive face breaking into smile. "I have a whole new identity now. People come up to me and say, 'Oh, you're Laura's father!'"