



BILL CASTELLINO

AN ECLECTIC CAREER

From Las Vegas show rooms and New York cabarets to cruise lines and corporate events, legit director **BILL CASTELLINO** reflects on using his directorial skills for unconventional projects. The mythological popular view of a modern stage director usually paints the practitioner as dwelling in just one place, seemingly instantly created from day one as a master crafter of only plays and musicals in no other realm but the high-profile commercial world. SDC Members know that the world is wider than that. A lifelong career more often than not is a cobbling-together of eclectic gigs that draw on the director's skills. The range of work is vast: galas, industrials, academic productions, concerts, revues, cruise ship entertainment, Vegas, indie theatre, resident theatre, Off-Broadway, and beyond.

Director/choreographer **Bill Castellino** has walked this nomadic path. His 40-year résumé is spiced with readings, starry cabaret shows (with Amanda McBroom, Ann Hampton Callaway, and others), galas, and tributes (including SDC's 50th Anniversary celebration and 2013 tribute to outgoing President **Karen Azenberg**), concert and Las Vegas acts (the Supremes' Mary Wilson, the Four Tops, and the Australian vocal group Human Nature), Off-Broadway productions (the acclaimed *Storyville*, *Ionescopade*, and, most recently, *Cagney* – all for York Theatre Company), cruise ship revues (like the upcoming *Soul Mates: A Journey to Hitsville*), and many regional plays and musicals, including work at Cherry County Playhouse in Michigan, where he was producing director for four seasons.

SDC Journal talked with Bill, an SDC Member since the mid-'80s, about his small-town roots, his circuitous path to directing (via journalism and acting), and his experience working in unconventional arenas while continuing his career in the legitimate theatre.

Looking at your bio, it's clear you've been a bit of a nomad, working in various live platforms beyond traditional theatrical spaces. Do you think you are atypical?

For most of us, necessity is the mother of invention. As our work in the theatre continues, we use the skills that we've developed and apply them to as many opportunities as possible. As a result, I found myself working in cabaret and using my understanding of format and structure to help cabaret artists. That moved into the revue format and to cruise ships and galas and special events. All of that was using the skills that I developed and used as a theatre director. There are those of us who make their living exclusively in the theatre and that's wonderful. But I think, for most of us, [a career] becomes a kind of creative patchwork.

Is it easy to calculate what percentage of your career income has been from "non-theatre" gigs, such as corporate galas, cruise shows, and concerts?

It changes year to year. The overarching truth for me is that the commercial world pays more than the not-for-profit world. I think most people would corroborate that. Not to say that you enjoy or give more or less energy to one thing or the other, but I think that, when you are doing commercial work—be that commercial theatre or for-profit work for an event or a cruise or another entity—typically the payday is in your favor.

No matter what the platform, do you feel you're using the same muscles?

It's the same muscles, although the situational structure is different. If you're doing, let's say, a one-off event, there is no dress rehearsal. [You have to] be prepared in a particular way - you have one shot to make it work, as compared to theatre where we have structured time and mechanisms to address things that we theatre people think merit attention.

Before we go on, I'm curious about your roots. Was your family sensitive to the arts, and how did you experience the arts as a kid?

I didn't experience it. I grew up in a very rural community—Burgettstown—in Western Pennsylvania. Coal miners, 600 people. There was a movie theatre there for a while and a drive-in movie [theatre]. So we did see movies. But when I think about what interested me in



OPPOSITE TOP *Soul Mates* at Florida Studio Theatre; will perform on cruise ships beginning Dec. 2015 PHOTO Matthew Holler | LEFT TO RIGHT 1 *Nightclub Cantata* by Elizabeth Swados + directed by Bill Castellino (second from the right) at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble in LA 1978 PHOTO Ron Sossi | 2 David Edwards, Nancy Anderson, Tina Stafford, Leo Ash Evens + Paul Binotto in 30th Anniversary Production of *Ionescopade* at the York Theatre in NYC 2013 PHOTO Carol Rosegg 3 Cristina Gerla + Tom Lowe in *Ionescopade* by Eugene Ionesco + Mildred Kayden at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble in LA 2014 PHOTO Ron Sossi 4 10th Anniversary production of *Nightclub Cantata* at The Odyssey Theatre Ensemble in LA 1988 PHOTO Ron Sossi | 5 Nancy Lenehan + John Rourke as Nancy + Ronald Reagan in *Rap Master Ronnie* by Garry Trudeau + Elizabeth Swados at the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble in LA 1985 PHOTO Ron Sossi

this whole idea [of a life in the theatre], I have to go back to television—TV specials or variety shows.

This is the age of Ed Sullivan.

Exactly. That would be my first lesson in entertainment. Television, and we're talking about the '60s, so it's a much tighter focus than it is now—only a few channels. That's where imagination took flight. Walt Disney and Ed Sullivan on Sunday night. *The Untouchables*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, or *The Twilight Zone*...

And when you watched television, did some inner part of you say, "That's a world I want to be involved in"—show business?

I think it's connected to the fact that I was kept out of another world. I was infirm as a

Boston University. I was accepted at those schools and chose Boston University, in part to be somewhere else, to be in the Northeast and to be in a city. [At Boston University] I was in journalism for two years, and I had my eye on the theatre school. I auditioned as an actor and was accepted.

You ended up getting a BFA in acting in 1975. What attracted you to acting?

I don't think that making a living was part of the logic here. It was really about expressing. Remember, we're talking about hippies. We're talking about an era of finding expression and alternate expressions, and [being] from a small town, raised a Catholic boy, I was looking for a way to express. Language became the first means to do that. Ironically, I got interested in dancing at that time, too. There were dance classes *outside* of school. The Boston

avant-garde—with Swados as the director. This piece had an enormous impact on me. Simultaneously, I got cast in a movie [*See How She Runs*] in Boston with Joanne Woodward. When I did the movie, Joanne was very encouraging of me to work in the movies. I went to L.A. and did a couple of films, but as most people can tell you, even when you're busy in L.A., you have plenty of time.

So I had this idea to [direct] *Nightclub Cantata* in Los Angeles, where it had never been done before, to showcase myself [as a director] and an actor. Swados approved. I did it at the Odyssey Theatre. When she came to see it, she said she thought that the pictures that I had made were more sophisticated than the ones that she had made as the director. She gave me a lot of encouragement in that regard. I realized, working on that piece as a director,

Robert Creighton in *Cagney* by Peter Coley, Robert Creighton + Christopher McGovern at the York Theatre in New York 2015
PHOTO Carol Rosegg



child and physically challenged. So the world of "play day" and sports and all of that was kept away from me for health reasons. So my imagination took flight via television. That was my outlet—that and school. I went to a Catholic high school in West Virginia, about 40 minutes away from where I grew up. It was a sports- and athletic-oriented part of the world. I was a bookworm, and there were school plays in high school. I was Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma!*, of course, as the most ethnic-looking person in that school.

What was your path to theatre?

I had good grades, and my parents thought highly of us getting further education. I was interested in English and writing. I applied to a number of journalism schools: Northwestern,

University conservatory was very connected to modern drama. Musicals were not part of the department's thinking.

Share a little bit about the switch to directing—your trajectory as a working director.

As an actor, who came at this as a journalist, I was guilty of seeing a bigger picture all the time, and that made it problematic or challenging for me to fit into it as a *piece* of a bigger picture. So, even as an actor, I was stepping outside the frame in my head, which challenged me as an actor.

Out of college, I was cast in *Nightclub Cantata*, Elizabeth Swados's breakthrough piece in the '70s—all about language and innovative,

that's what I wanted. The community rallied around me in that way, and I was awarded and praised for that work. I was drawn to offbeat stuff. I found myself directing, leaving acting behind. I picked up occasional acting jobs here and there, but the directing thing took hold as a way to make a living. The Odyssey Theatre Ensemble became my home theatre where I directed nine productions over the years.

Your connection to Liz Swados would continue.

I've done more than a dozen productions of Liz's shows over the years. I'm one of the few directors who she trusted to do that, and I'm very grateful for that...

How did you, as an avant-garde leaning director, transition into more commercial forms like cabaret and cruise shows?

Amanda McBroom, a composer and a cabaret singer, came to me, having seen some of the work that I did. Amanda had a trunk of songs; “The Rose” is the most famous. We crafted a revue called *Heartbeats* to feature her, and it premiered at the Matrix Theatre in Los Angeles, to some considerable appreciation. From that production, **Jack O’Brien** saw it. His affection for Amanda and her work led us to developing it further at the Old Globe in San Diego in 1983.

Meanwhile, since Amanda had such a lively and successful life in the cabaret world in the ‘80s, I found myself associating with a lot of cabaret artists. I worked on Amanda’s cabaret act, writing her act with her and writing other people’s acts—like Ann Hampton Callaway. I found a real freedom in [cabaret]. My definition of cabaret comes from a Brechtian, no-rule world. Plus, working with singer/songwriters enabled me to work with many exciting and original songs.

But you still had a responsibility to structure and story...

Yeah, a good cabaret, in order to be satisfying, needs to have a beginning, middle, and an end. What you learn about structure and language and format in the theatre applies here—you know where to put the ballads, where to put the upbeat, where to put “funny,” and all of that.

How do you move to the world of cruise ships from there?

Elizabeth Swados comes back into the picture. I was involved in a project called *Rap Master Ronnie* by Garry Trudeau and Swados. I originally co-directed it in Los Angeles, and then I went on to direct seven productions of my own, and I choreographed it for [HBO]. The casting director for *Rap Master Ronnie* for HBO just got a job producing shows for a cruise ship, and he asked me if I wanted to go into business with him, creating cruise ship shows.

It’s the classic story of luck and circumstance. What cruise line?

Holland America. I wrote, directed, and choreographed all the revue entertainment aboard Holland America for four years, 1988 to 1992.

This is before Broadway shows were licensed for high seas presentation, right?

Yes. This is when the cruise ships were looking to get away from their usual formula of dancers and feathers, and were looking to do more theatrical, character-driven shows in the

same format—meaning the same amount of time, the same amount of limitations, the same amount of assets.

Can you give me an example of a show you created?

The client wanted shows with themes. So the first show I wrote was *No Oscar, Not Tonight*. My concept was famous songs that lost the Oscar; I created it as an Oscar ceremony. It was a variety show, like *Ed Sullivan*, and it had a theme, like a good cabaret act or a revue, but it had ongoing characters in it.

And an ensemble?

Twelve! What was great about Holland America is that they had an 11-piece orchestra. And, not unlike cabaret, you can pick any song you want because it’s an ASCAP-BMI situation, so the room pays a licensing fee so there was no limit [to access to content]. It’s an amazing opportunity, inventing something brand-new using your skills and imagination. By the time I finished my tenure with them, I had written something like 10 or 12 revues.

It might seem that working on Vegas revues might be a natural result of the cruise ship work.

Not yet. The next big unconventional chapter was [directing, writing, and producing] corporate events. One of the early jobs that I got was because I worked on two engagements of *Heartbeats* at Goodspeed Musicals in Connecticut. Hartford Public Schools contacted me. They do an annual celebration of the arts in Hartford for the public schools and asked would I be interested in putting together their annual event? What they had done up until this time was basically feature a Broadway singer—a dinner and then the act. But this year they wanted to do something else. Did I have any ideas? My idea was: if you’re trying to raise money for students of the arts, let’s put the kids on stage.

So I started a three-month project of trolling the public schools for great things that the students were doing that I could make a show out of. I ended up putting together this show that celebrated the students. They raised hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars. From that, I was asked to be the creative consultant for all the entertainment in the Hartford School District. I did that for a couple of years while still working around the country in the legitimate theatre.

What was the major challenge of that, and is that challenge echoed in other formats that you’ve worked in?

One of the main skills that I’ve been able to use through all of this stuff is organizational skills. A director needs to be able to look at

the chaos of a script in a circumstance—the theatre and the casting and the staffing and all of that, which is a lot of moving parts—and be able to bring order to it. Being able to look at something and organize it has been common in all of this.

The second thing is to be able to organize it on a *timeline* and a *budget*. As somebody who’s been a producer, I understand money, and I understand how money is spent, and I don’t like waste. It’s anathema to me. Figuring out a way to not be wasteful is important—to not pursue an idea for so long that it costs more money at the expense of another idea, which might be the idea you want to bring to the finish line. And we all know that time is money. So scheduling is really a critical part of being efficient with the budget.

Then there is the aesthetic we all develop for all of the reasons that are unique to any one of us. Taste—what do we like? What do we like to talk about it and how do we like to talk about it? And a director as storyteller is key. I mean, the writer writes the story, but the director tells the story, and that is an incredibly symbiotic relationship, but it is a function of the director to tell the story.

Did the bulk of your muscle building in terms of organizational and budget planning come from being a producer-creator of cruise shows?

The skills evolved simultaneously. Because I was involved often with the creation of a budget, which is not common for a director, I was able to learn more directly how to manage a budget. Sometimes the director doesn’t know [he’s] spent too much money until somebody says, “You’re spending too much money on costumes.” That knowledge has been powerful. I can be very proud of how much I can get out of a certain amount of money because I’ve been charged with how to spend it for years.

How did you land jobs directing other corporate events over the years?

I’ve been associated with different production companies over the years, and I obviously have forged alliances with other entities, like event planners and different corporations that have these needs. It’s always been concurrent with working in a legitimate theatre.

Are there examples of corporate events for which you found a creative way to get SDC involved?

Our union is very supportive of our efforts to educate these entities about the advantages of working with a Member that has the experience that a professional director brings to a project. The challenge is convincing the

producer in a situation where it does not require an SDC contract what the advantages to having an SDC contract would be. Well, the first advantage is you're getting an SDC Member and everything that Member brings to the situation.

For the Member, the advantages are that your pension and health is being contributed to, and that's enormously important, as well as securing basic protections through a union contract.

What can a Member do to encourage a producer to consider SDC guidelines in this special event area?

What's on the Member to do is begin the process of educating a producer that this need not be costly to them and there is no real threat to their power or any jeopardy to them by entering into a contract with us. It's to the Member's advantage, and there's no peril to the employer.

What's one of the major challenges of directing a corporate event?

Another way to look at these corporate events, from a theatre perspective, is that they're one-nighters, typically. I mean, you have *one chance* to get it right, and the more organized you are, the more paperwork you have, the more likely you are to succeed. You cannot afford to get it wrong because you will not get return business. So it requires an enormous amount of vision because often it's not rehearsed until that night, because you can't get all the moving parts in the same room at the same time.

It's all prep.

It's all in the prep. And organizing the different parts and making sure you have enough people to get the right people on the stage doing the right thing at the right time. The staffing is incredibly important in the corporate events. You just need more help.

It's also important to manage your own expectations of what clients know; it's not fair to ask somebody who has not spent their life in the theatre to know when we need to break and what "half hour" means. People just don't know why at "half hour" you shouldn't be backstage or you shouldn't be rehearsing 12 hours on the day of a show. There's a lot of things that we, in the theatre, have worked out because we know usually it's the best way to get the best result.

How can a young director today get experience in the areas you've worked in?

[With] anybody who is making a living as a director, I think it is our responsibility to hire those who are starting out as assistants. First of all, for them to gain the experience of our wisdom. Also for us to get the advantage of their energy, time, and talent, but also to give them entrée to situations that have taken us decades to get into. The Union's Foundation has been very clever with the Observership Program and other grant-giving situations to get emerging directors in the room. But I know, for me, I did not have that opportunity and, certainly in the corporate world and nonconventional venues, there's no formula for that.

Directors need to involve other people, and sometimes that costs a little bit of money, but, in the long run, it's really worth it, especially since we're trying to expand our jurisdiction, which makes our pension and our health funds healthy for all Members.

What was the genesis of your directing in Las Vegas?

Through these various legitimate and unconventional situations, I became the Creative Director of Aruba Productions in New York, [run by] Ken Denison, a producer I met when directing *Heartbeats* at the Old Globe in San Diego. Ken was invited to look at a project called "Human Nature" in Las Vegas; it's four white Australian men who have a Motown show. As the Creative Director part of Aruba Productions, I helped them re-craft their show and physical production. I worked with them to move from the Imperial Palace to the Venetian, where *Human Nature: The Motown Show* is now in residence for the fourth year.

During my time with Human Nature, I also got involved with Mary Wilson of the Supremes, and directed and choreographed a show for her, which was a thrill. The Four Tops approached her about a double bill, and I put that whole show together with them in Chicago. We tried to place it in Vegas, but, so far we haven't found a venue.

Can you point to the major challenge of Vegas and star concerts versus other venues?

With Human Nature, with Mary Wilson, with the Four Tops, or any time you're crafting a story that's about the artist, what they want to say is what this needs to be about. Now, *how* they say it or how they lay it out is something you help them with. With Mary Wilson, there are parts of her story that she wants to tell and

parts of her story she's not interested in telling. So it was up to me to spend the time with her to figure out what that was, to ask the right questions of her and then put together what ended up being her act, her comeback tour.

There are equivalents in the legitimate theatre to all of these things. There are people, no matter what kind of work you're doing on a stage, no matter where it is, that have opinions and have the right to approvals. Whether that is in the commercial theatre, an investor that's invested a lot of money who has notes that you have to listen to, or the cruise director on a cruise line who's trying to keep their fingers on the pulse of what their guests want. They have opinions. Or a celebrity who says, "I don't want to say that."

For your latest project, you've taken elements of the Human Nature origin story and turned it into a cabaret musical with an American setting, with four actor-singers playing the boy-band characters.

The Vegas work led me to create and direct *Soul Mates*, which is a concert spinoff, inspired by the Human Nature story. That's playing at Florida Studio Theatre as a cabaret through February 2016. I then reformatted the show for cruise ships. Currently, there are two *Soul Mates* companies, one originating in New York, the other in Sydney. Each company is booked through 2016.

Are you mindful of the web of connections in your career and how everything touches back on your history?

I am now. **SDC**

*Kenneth Jones is a dramatist and theatre journalist who writes at ByKennethJones.com. His play *Alabama Story* had its world premiere at Utah's Pioneer Theatre Company in 2015 under the direction of former SDC President **Karen Azenberg**.*