

The Beginning of Syracuse Stage: 1974 - 1976

Arthur Storch was a well-known New York actor and director with a resumé that included six Broadway plays, four films, and more than 100 television shows. His appointment was announced at a press conference at Lubin House in New York City. In what may have been seen as an indication of things to come, the announcement was attended by Actors Studio artistic director Lee Strasberg, and actors Eli Wallach, Pat Hingle, Joseph Bologna, and Rene Taylor. In an interview in 1997 to mark Stage's 25th anniversary, Storch recalled some of the process that brought him to Syracuse.

There were so many combined things going on. I was directing on Broadway, and part of the whole showbiz/New York scene. At the same time, I had been very active in the Actors Studio and part of the philosophic discussions about what theatre should be. By sheer coincidence, and oddly enough, it all started here, where I am speaking from, which is Stockbridge. The Syracuse University Drama Department had an apprentice program right here with the Berkshire Theatre Festival, and I was invited in to direct something on the main stage. And Leonard Dryansky was the faculty person in charge of the apprentice program. And he said to me, would I be interested in talking to the apprentice group under a tree one morning here on the grounds, about life in the big, bad city as a theatre person, an actor/director or what have you, and I said of course I would. I spoke to this group of probably 16 to 18 students, and after that he invited me to breakfast at Alice's Restaurant, that famous Alice's Restaurant which no longer exists. And at that breakfast he told me there had been a theatre in Syracuse, working in the same area as the [Syracuse] University Department of Drama, and the University at that time was interested in putting together a professional component with a teaching component, and someone up there came up with the idea of possibly having one person head up both units. Dryansky asked me if I was interested in being that person. Could he submit my name?

Of course, there was an enormous thought process: at that time, I was married, had a new baby who was a year, a year and a half old; my entire life was centered around New York City, where I was directing, or in London, or in Italy. Suddenly to think of leaving, of pulling up my roots and going to Syracuse—and it was a moment of truth for me, because I had been thinking, philosophizing about what a theatre should be; I had a lot of big ideas about what that should be. I then faced a moment of saying, well, you've expressed yourself vehemently on all of these subjects for years; here's your opportunity to—the saying didn't exist then—to walk the walk and talk the talk. And I decided to take a shot at it, thinking, well, let's see if I can do it, let's try it for a year or two, and see what happens. It ended up to be 18 years that I was there. And that's how it started. I actually arrived in Syracuse on January 1, 1974, and decided to get the season up and running by March 1.

Something exciting was happening: 1974 – 1975

"You're so wrong I ain't laughing. Any guy with eyes to read knows it" –Waiting for Lefty by Clifford Odets

On March 1, 1974, the actor John Carpenter playing Harry Fatt in *Waiting for Lefty* delivered the line quoted above, and so began Syracuse Stage. Storch paired Clifford Odets' well-known one-act with *Noon* by Terrance McNally as the company's first offering. He thought it a risky way to begin. He feared one-acts might not be popular with audiences, but "as a child of the 30s" he wanted to do political theatre and intended to signal that interest from the outset. Arthur Miller's adaptation of *Ibsen's Enemy of the People* followed, and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* completed the short season. "It created quite a

stir," Storch recalled of the initial season. Subscriptions jumped from 300 to 1800 by the start of the next. Syracuse Stage was on the ascent artistically and its popularity grew accordingly.

This same year Syracuse Stage became a member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT). The largest association of non-profit professional theatres in the country, LORT establishes collective bargaining agreements with various professional unions including Actors' Equity Association (AEA), the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC), and United Scenic Artists (USA). In practical terms, membership in LORT streamlines contractual arrangements with performers, directors, and designers by establishing uniform pay scales and benefits. In 1974, there were just 28 LORT theatres. Today, LORT is the largest employer of Equity actors with 75 affiliate theatres in 29 states.

Syracuse Stage's second season, or first full season as Storch referred to it, again opened with risky fare. To start the 1974/75 season, Storch adapted and directed Arthur Schnitzler's sexual romp *La Ronde*, which featured full male and female nudity. If the highly politicized first season hadn't sent a message, this play certainly did: theatre in Syracuse was headed in a new and more daring direction. New York-based actor Mitchell McGuire played the role of the playwright in *La Ronde*. He told The Daily Orange at the time about one patron's reaction to the play: "One woman said, 'I had the feeling Syracuse finally grew up.'" Gerard Moses, who was on the Drama faculty at the time and had performed in many SRT productions, recalled of *La Ronde*, "some people liked it, some people didn't, but everyone knew something exciting was happening."

Shortly thereafter Storch scored a coup d' theatre when he presented the world premiere of a play that would become long associated with Syracuse Stage, William Gibson's *The Butterfingers Angel, Mary & Joseph, Herod the Nut, and the Slaughter of 12 Hit Carols in a Pear Tree*. Storch knew Gibson from the Berkshire Theatre Festival. *The Butterfingers Angel* was one of two scripts the playwright offered for consideration to Storch, who had to rearrange the announced season in order to accommodate the new play. Gibson came to Syracuse to attend some rehearsals, generating excitement and interest in Syracuse Stage. Writing about the world premiere in The New Times, David Feldman noted: "And for Syracuse, the concept of regional theatre comes alive with this production." Storch, he noted further, "has turned the old Regent into an exciting place for theatre of all sorts to happen." An article in CNY Magazine summarized the change as follows: "Syracuse Stage has not only undertaken a change in name, but a whole new image in its transformation from the Syracuse Repertory Theatre. At the pinnacle of that change is Arthur Storch."

An Enterprising Company: 1976 – 1980

Storch's daring leadership invigorated theatre in Syracuse and Stage's audiences grew rapidly. Karl Gevecker became the company's first general manager as 1800 subscribers turned into 3000 for season three. Storch rewarded their patronage with challenging plays by Luigi Pirandello, Paul Osborne, Noel Coward, Anton Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, and Georges Feydeau. In addition, Storch's impressive contacts in the industry meant familiar names and faces from Broadway, television, and film would appear at Syracuse Stage in seasons that mixed classic and contemporary work, comedy and drama. George Bernard Shaw, Sean O'Casey and Tennessee Williams were among Storch's favorites. In 1976, Joseph Regalbutto (later of *Murphy Brown* fame) played Orsino in the company's first Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*. Noted New York actor Trish Hawkins played Nina in Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*. Two decades later she would return to appear in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*. David Canary of TV's *Bonanza* and later a star of daytime soaps took on Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* opposite Storch's wife Virginia Kiser,

who balanced a TV and film career with appearances at Syracuse Stage. In 1977, Emmy Award-winner Myra Carter appeared in two one-acts, *Love Letters on Blue Paper* and *The End of the Beginning*. The former drew attention from The New York Times' Mel Gussow who called the production "a definite coup for an enterprising company." Carter would appear numerous times at Stage over the years.

Dina Merrill closed out the 1978/79 season with Olwen Wymark's *Loved*, which garnered a review not only from Gussow in the Times but from Newsweek's Jack Kroll as well. While performing at Stage, Merrill, wife of actor Cliff Robertson and daughter of financier E. F. Hutton, stayed at the residence of Chancellor Melvin Eggars and his wife Mildred. Earlier in that same season, Storch revived *The Butterfingers Angel* with the well-known character actor Mike Kellin as Joseph and a young actor named Tazewell Thompson as Third King and Third Lout. Thompson would eventually succeed Storch and become Stage's second artistic director.

During the 1979/80 season, New York-based director Terry Schreiber staged an acclaimed production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with Meg Myles and Alan Mixon. The onstage sparks that flew between George and Martha were matched by an offstage firestorm that surrounded another play, *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra* by Quebecois playwright Michel Tremblay. "It created the greatest stir of anything I had ever done. It was blasphemous," Storch recalled. "There is anti-Catholicism that runs through the play, and that infuriated people." Stage survived the controversy unscathed enough for Storch to try his luck again with Tremblay a few seasons later when he produced *The Impromptu of Outremont*, with similar results. "That was something I could have moved away from," he later admitted.

Three offstage developments in the mid-70s would have long range impact on the stability and continued success of Syracuse Stage. In the 1976/77 season, James A. Clark replaced Karl Gevecker as general manager, and the Board of Trustees welcomed its first non-University, community members, Charles Schoeneck and Sandy Dietz. Clark's tenure with Stage would span 30 years, during which he would partner with four artistic directors and eventually be named Stage's producing director and chair of the Department of Drama (1992 - 2006). The addition of community members to the Board of Trustees redefined the Board's function while introducing a wealth of resources and talent to work on Stage's behalf. The move also helped Stage establish ongoing relationships with important corporate and private partners in the community. The value of this would become immediately apparent when the third major offstage development took shape in 1978.

Storch's continuing success attracted more patrons to the theatre. By 1977, the number of subscribers had jumped to 5000 and single ticket sales were brisk for most shows. Good news for any theatre, of course, except that the demand for tickets frequently surpassed the capacity of the 200-seat Experimental Theatre. Patrons were routinely turned away, much to Storch's dismay. The Regent held 800, but Storch thought it unsuitable for Syracuse Stage productions. "I detest the big theatre," he told The Daily Orange. What he wanted was greater seating capacity without losing the performance intimacy of the Experimental Theatre. His goal was a new theatre in which no seat would be more than 30 feet from the stage. By contrast, in the old Regent, the *closest* seat to the stage was 35 feet away.