

The Roots of Steppenwolf

It was 1941, and 12-year-old Barbara June Fluhrer made a telephone call that in many ways would represent the philosophy that shaped the lives of many of her high-school students at Highland Park High School in suburban Chicago, the birthplace of Steppenwolf Theatre Company. She recalled,

I called the acting studio where my mother worked and said, ‘Momma, Sally set fire to the house and there’s water everywhere.’ Said my mother, ‘Well, then, get the mop.’ And she hung up.

The self-empowering “do-it-yourself” principle implied in this simple story would become the backbone for the entrepreneurial approach applied by two of her students, Gary Sinise and Jeff Perry, who with Terry Kinney would be the founders of Steppenwolf Theatre Company. The three would set in motion an approach that would reimagine the American theatre. Perry said of his mentor:

With her giant industrial flamethrower of life-loving, theatre loving knowledge and practice Barbara June revealed what became the seeds of our passion.

High-school theatre for Sinise and Perry was a religion. There were directing class projects, as well as a regular four-show school season; it was as though they were in a stock company during high school, often rehearsing multiple plays at one time, while simultaneously performing in other shows in the evenings.

In 1973, Sinise and Perry put their classroom experiences to work in a collaborative final directing class project, Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come*. Their cast and various friends transformed a seldom-used portion of the school cafeteria into a black box theatre for their production. Sinise fondly remembered his first foray into directing:

Everybody had to find a place to do their final project, so we did productions in hallways, in the parking lot, everywhere. I went to the principal and asked if we could turn the cafeteria into a theatre on the weekend. We put floodlights in coffee cans and some guy's dad had a wire store and we got all the wires and cables, and somebody else's dad had a conduit or hardware store, so we got all this conduit. We used the school's risers and cafeteria chairs and made a theatre-in-the-round.

Simultaneously, other future members of the ensemble, including Terry Kinney, John Malkovich, Al Wilder, Laurie Metcalf, Moira Harris, Joan Allen, Rondi Reed, Randy Arney, Francis Guinan, Nancy Evans, Tom Irwin, H.E. Baccus, many from small Midwestern towns, were learning from a variety of influential mentors at Illinois State (ISU) and Eastern Illinois University. One young professor at ISU, Gail Cronauer, was an inspirational force:

I was young and passionate with boundless energy. I did dinner theatre in the area, because I was so hungry to act. The place (ISU) was very established at the time and I think my coming in began to signal a bit of a shake up.

Cronauer's energy clearly meshed well with the company members she encountered who were not looking for "established". They wanted energy. They wanted passion to match their own. In 1974, Perry joined the others at Illinois State University to study theatre, but he continued to support Sinise's goal of starting a theatre back home in Highland Park.

Three plays under the name Steppenwolf Theatre occurred in 1974: *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*, *Grease*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*; all played to enthusiastic audiences. Perry's classmate from ISU, Terry Kinney, gave his first Steppenwolf acting performance in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. After *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the idea for starting a permanent theatre was put on hold when Perry and Kinney returned to the ISU program. With the idea of forming an

ensemble-based theatre in mind, Perry and a group of ISU actors launched discussions at the beginning of the spring semester in 1976. Classmate Nancy Evans, an original ensemble member, remembered,

Terry and Jeff invited John (Malkovich) and me to a meeting. A friend of theirs, Gary Sinise, was going to be there, and wanted to talk with us, so I said “sure.” Literally everybody in the theatre department that I had respect for was there. There were maybe fifteen of us altogether and Gary was sitting in the corner off to the side. They started to talk to us about how Steppenwolf was a germ in their minds when they were in high school and they wanted to put this company together and be the best theatre in the world.

Attrition of participants over the course of the ISU meetings left a company of nine: Sinise, and the ISU classmates Laurie Metcalf, John Malkovich, Al Wilder, Moira Harris, H.E. Baccus, Perry, Kinney and Evans. They decided to start a theatre in Highland Park, and plans for Steppenwolf’s summer season were set in motion. Although the company had produced plays since 1974, this expanded ensemble and fresh moment marked the “official” beginning of Steppenwolf Theatre.

The members of the company found jobs to sustain themselves while they developed their theatre in a small Catholic school basement, but the sustaining energy of everyone’s life was the company. Speaking of this period, Laurie Metcalf reflected,

It was definitely like “Peyton Place.” We were very cloistered. We’d do our temp jobs during the day and then we’d do plays at night, and then party with each other after the shows - not really socializing with anybody else. We never went into Chicago. We were stuck in the suburbs and saw only each other for three years.

This period of isolation known fondly as “the incubator period,” bred the style that would come to characterize Steppenwolf. In the next few years, the ensemble continued to hone their talents and build their reputation in performances including *Fifth*

of July, The Glass Menagerie, Waiting for Lefty, Say Goodnight, Gracie, and Death of a Salesman. They performed in Highland Park and different spaces in and around Chicago. During this time, they garnered exceptional critical support. Richard Christiansen, a powerful critic with the *Chicago Daily News* and later with the *Chicago Tribune*, recalls an early performance.

One of my favorite stories about the early days of Steppenwolf is when I went to see *The Indian Wants the Bronx*. There's this scene where the two street punks attack the Indian who's lost in the Bronx and Terry and Gary were the two punks. They were so intense, so convincing in their portrayals, that for the first time I lost the suspension of disbelief. I really thought they were going to come after people in the audience once they got through with the Indian. I just got caught up in the illusion of danger and menace and fear that they created.

The foundation for Steppenwolf's reputation was built with this type of intensity during their first four years and laid the groundwork for something special to occur -- something that would catapult the ensemble to levels of success they had never imagined.

By the summer of 1980, just prior to the opening of their landmark production of *Balm in Gilead*, the reputation of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago was at a high point. Ensemble members were among the most sought after actors in town, and when they were not involved with a Steppenwolf production, they eagerly accepted outside offers.

The original production of Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead*, produced by Ellen Stewart at New York's Café La Mama and directed by Marshall Mason, created a minor sensation when it premiered in 1965. In the intervening period since the initial run of *Balm in Gilead*, only five other professional productions of Wilson's play had been attempted. But for Steppenwolf's purposes, the large cast, securing the proper location,

and the sizeable budget it would take to produce, had kept production of the play on the back burner. Now, the successes and increased visibility of Steppenwolf, along with their move to their first Chicago home at the Hull House, encouraged them to take the risk. The play had been under consideration for a long time by the ensemble, as Sinise explains:

Terry was the Lanford Wilson guy. Malkovich was the Pinter guy. I ended up being the Shepard guy. *Balm and Gilead* had been in Terry's view even before we started the company. Once we moved to the Hull House we began to consider it for production. Nobody knew what it was going to be like, because we were flying by the seat of our pants.

Terry Kinney adds:

When it came time to do the play everyone said, 'So, who's going to direct it?' I was sort of the logical choice, but John really threw his hat into it. He said, "Oh, I love this play.' So I just said, 'Fuck it, you do it, but only if I can play Fick.' It's providence that we did it that way because John had a very clear notion of what he wanted to do with it with the music and everything else.

In putting on the show there were a number of elements that came together: creating an environmental piece of theatre with lots of simultaneous action, designing a set in a small space that could accommodate the large cast, delivering a 25-minute monologue by Metcalf's character in the midst of the chaos, and most importantly, rendering Dopey as a sort of onstage stage manager. As Malkovich recalls:

Although I've never directed it, *Our Town*, was one of my favorite plays. With that in mind, somehow we hit upon the idea of Gary's character being the kind of master of ceremonies, narrator, observer, participant, or all of the above, so that he gave the sound and light cues and moved the action forward and backward or had moments where he controlled repeat action. He became kind of director on the floor.

Sinise gives further insight:

The ringmaster aspect of my character was discovered along the way. It wasn't like we went into it saying, 'We're going to have Dopey be the ringmaster and have him cue the lights on and off and start the sound cues.' We just started futzing around with different things and then at the end, we did it once and then we did it again for another moment and then again for another moment and then it took on a world of its own. I became this guy - the junkie king.

Laurie Metcalf also talks about the "happy accident" that brought that discovery to light:

At the Hull House, the booth was up in the corner and whoever was calling the show couldn't see the stage too well, so Gary, who was like slumped in character on the side, said 'I'll cue it myself.' Then it just morphed into, 'Well, just let him call the show.' It was just an accident. It was theatrical, but also gritty and super theatrical.

Balm in Gilead appeared to be a questionable choice, as ensemble member Francis

Guinan suggests:

I remember opening night of *Balm in Gilead*. I was standing alone onstage and Malkovich came out. He and I were the only ones in the theatre standing on the stage before the show and I asked him, 'How do you feel John, do you think this is going to work?' He said, 'Gosh buddy, I don't know if this is going to work or not.' He was really in doubt, he didn't know. Of course, the reviews came out and it was practically a civic holiday. But we didn't know.

The opening of *Balm in Gilead* on September 18, 1980 was a red-letter day in Steppenwolf history. The locale for the play is a seedy, all-night, New York City diner, inhabited by hookers, junkies, hustlers, dealers and drunks. The play's story moves these characters helplessly forward in a metaphoric dance of death. Newcomers to the diner, Joe and Darlene, played by Francis Guinan and Laurie Metcalf, are the lovers at the play's heart, and victims trapped in this world beyond their control. In Malkovich's production, the play began with the passionate strains of Bruce Springsteen's Thunder Road ("We've got one last chance to make it real!"), as Dopey, played by Gary Sinise, lit

a match that let loose the cacophony of the inhabitants of the all-night diner; it ended with the final ear-ripping, cranked-up guttural screams of Springsteen's *Jungleland* ("They reach for their moment and try to make an honest stand."), which framed the show's finale. Along with Springsteen's music, songs from Tom Waits and Rickie Lee Jones provided an evocative and memorable soundtrack for the show. *Balm in Gilead* remains etched in the collective consciousness of not only the Steppenwolf ensemble, but also the Chicago theatre community, as a flashpoint that propelled the beginning of a period of historic growth and attention for both. John Mahoney summed the up synchronicity of *Balm in Gilead*:

Balm in Gilead was just one of those incredibly magical things where the exact right cast finds the exact right play and the exact right director and it's performed in the exact right place at the exact right moment in history.

The production was a hit and Richard Christiansen's *Chicago Tribune* review eloquently captured the immense enthusiasm of the critics:

Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead* is not so much a drama, but it is a play filled with marvelous theater, and in the miraculous ensemble production that Steppenwolf Theater opened Thursday night, it already has given the young Chicago theater season one of those brilliant electric evenings for which the living theatre was made ... It is a night to remember, a production to cherish.

Steppenwolf's Midwest premiere of *Balm in Gilead* at the Hull House Theatre proved the company's ability to create extraordinary theatre, but it seemed also to pigeonhole the audience's expectations of the work of Steppenwolf in the short term. Beginning with the production of *Balm in Gilead*, people associated the company with a "rock and roll" style, minimizing their more sensitive performances of plays such as John Murrell's *Waiting for the Parade*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, C.P. Taylor's *And*

a Nightingale Sang, or the comic styling of a play such as Alan Ayckbourn's *Absent Friends*.

WTTW, Chicago's public broadcasting network, televised the 13th annual Joseph Jefferson Awards ceremony in 1981. The awards, modeled after New York's Tony Awards, honor the best work in Chicago area theatre, were held at the Shubert Theatre. *Balm in Gilead*, nominated for nine awards, was the big winner of the evening. The company garnered seven "Jeffs," an unbridled achievement that catapulted their name fully into the consciousness of Chicago's theatre-going public. Jeff Perry speaks of the impact of *Balm in Gilead*:

It was absolutely the most defining, challenging, vibrant and fun example of what we had set out to do. It had a structure that has exactly the kind of fertile ground that we had been practicing. This extended tribal community of urban people, whom Lanford Wilson called 'losers who refuse to lose,' fit in with our emotional and political bent toward the underdog. We felt a great affinity with all of the people represented in the play.

Perry's comments suggest the nexus of an underlying purpose that Steppenwolf continues to carry on, which is telling meaningful stories that represent the under-represented and disenfranchised. Francis Guinan speaks metaphorically of the ensemble's collaborative approach:

It is almost like music - like playing jazz. When you get the bunch of us onstage, anybody can do a riff and people make room. There is a great deal of freedom with that in the individual performances, because other people would give the space away - they give other people the scene. When they were finished, there was a sense that you didn't want to be a pig about it, you know, but when the other person was done, there wouldn't be a beat dropped.

Joan Allen added:

Balm in Gilead was exciting when it worked, because it was difficult, because of all of the overlapping dialogue, but I remember a few times when it was perfect, and it was probably the most exciting time I've ever had onstage. When it all worked, it was like being on a rollercoaster - so exhilarating.

And William Petersen:

We ad-libbed stuff and we tricked each other. It was just so free. None of us had any intention of what it became. We just found it really fun to hang out with each other. We just hung out and sometimes the lights would go up and we'd still be hanging out and then the lights would go down and we'd still hang out. The lines were blurred between the stage and reality. We were all in our 20's and just playing.

John Mahoney shared his view of the company's ensemble approach:

I think what we do is take a work that we admire and attack it ferociously and it doesn't mean that we do it by punching each other in the face or playing Bruce Springsteen, but by attacking it ferociously. It could be by Noel Coward as well as Sam Shepard. It means attacking it with an intensity and honesty that pushes all personal considerations aside and concentrates on the work itself.

This sounds corny but one very important thing is that each of us respects the other's method. I would never in a million years question Al Wilder's approach and Al would never ridicule my, what might seem to him, lack of preparation.

Jeff Perry adds:

Another common thread that we grew up with as actors, along with, 'If you're not working together, you're working alone,' was, 'If you're not in the moment, where the hell are you? You're in some plan and that plan can't be as good as what could happen spontaneously.'

The ensemble members believe that one way to accomplish that objective was not only to perform a character intensely, but also to understand the role of actor as the chief source for audience involvement. If the audience sees a performer fully involved emotionally in a character, then they are more apt to involve themselves to the same degree.

Glenn Headly described the company members' total involvement in "the moment":

When I say go for broke, I mean they might try anything even if it hurts physically and mentally. Some might be more wild than others, but it was, 'if you're going to go that far, then let's go further.' It would just sort of escalate. People would also say to one another, 'That was good, but it wasn't good enough.' That forced us to be better.

Headly's observation highlights the self-deprecating sense of humor that was a main attribute of the company's demeanor, and which manifested itself often with pranks during performances. This helped to keep the notion of play present in the company's work. To paraphrase noted theatre director Peter Brook from *The Empty Space*, "A play is called play for a very important reason, because a play is play." Ensemble member Tom Irwin called Steppenwolf's humor, "A healthy irreverence for both the business and the profession of acting."

The chain of events that led to *Balm in Gilead*'s most defining moment, a 25-minute monologue delivered by Laurie Metcalf as the innocent Darlene, began with a chance meeting between John Malkovich and playwright Lanford Wilson as Malkovich recalls:

We happened to meet Lanford Wilson in the late spring or summer before we went into rehearsal for the original production of *Balm in Gilead* in the fall of '80. We met him in Lake Forest because they were doing a production of his play *Serenading Louie*. We briefly said hello to him and I told him we were doing *Balm in Gilead*, and the only thing he said was, 'You're a braver man than I am. . . Oh, and cut that monologue. It can't be done. It's unnecessary.'

Malkovich continues about his first experience seeing Metcalf's rendition of this difficult "unnecessary" piece:

The centerpiece of that play is Darlene's lengthy monologue recounting the story of the day she almost got married. Laurie never wanted to rehearse the piece because she wanted to get it right. Before the first preview when we would have our first audience, I told her I really needed to go through the entire thing, so I could set the light and sound cues, because I still had not seen it. She started the monologue, and at that point in the play it's only John Mahoney's and Deb Engle's characters and Glenne Headly who played Ann, the character that Laurie's character is talking to, on stage. Little by little, all the other actors came in to watch and listen to Laurie's monologue. Even on the very first attempt, it was utterly spellbinding. It was very, very lean. It was very, very funny. I think everyone got, even then, in that moment, that what we were witnessing was something out of the ordinary in Chicago theatre and in Steppenwolf Theatre.

Metcalf shares a look inside her process for this piece:

Even out of an early reading of *Balm* when I just learned that I was going to play Darlene, there was something about her line where she describes finding her marriage license. She and her boyfriend never got married, but she found the license and it had a big bend across it. For some reason, that just broke my heart. I was just aware that it affected me and so I let it. It was crucial that I played the scene with Glenne even though I did all the talking, because she listened to the whole thing every night and kept it active – kept it a scene and not just a monologue.

Original ensemble member Al Wilder, who played the character of Rake in *Balm in*

Gilead, relates his impressions of Metcalf's work:

We were almost in the audience's lap in the small Hull House space, and there's Laurie doing a monologue that to someone in theatre would be considered way too long to hold anybody's attention, but I never got tired listening to it offstage. The monologue was a cornucopia - a continuum from terrible and disappointing to marvelous and magical.

Malkovich finishes the story of the monologue, bringing it full circle:

Lanford had never seen us and had certainly never seen Laurie, but he eventually saw Laurie's work in *Balm in Gilead* at an event where I was trying to raise money for the New York production at the house of a wealthy theatre investor. Lanford came to see it, and seeing Laurie doing the monologue, he couldn't watch. He found it too upsetting and had to walk out of the room and wait until it was over. When he finally did see it in New York, he loved being around the

jazziness of it and the collaboration between Circle Rep and Steppenwolf. That, and Gary's production of *True West* inspired Lanford to write *Burn This*, which I was in with Joan Allen.

The monologue ended with underscoring of Tom Waits' classic ballad *Waltzing Matilda*, which was meticulously planned to end with the last lines of Metcalf's emotional speech.

The company members worked in every aspect of the theatre both on stage and off, developing the tightly knit bonds that strengthened their ensemble. Joan Allen compares working with Steppenwolf to working with other companies:

Steppenwolf is like a family, because there is such profound history. There's a lot of trust and deep feeling that is just sort of given. You're in for life and it's a shared experience. That's not always the experience when you go outside of the company. There are people who you act with that want the attention on them and they think their character is more important than yours, and they don't care about the story and how it's told.

John Mahoney echoes Allen's family metaphor:

We are virtually selfless with each other when it comes to making sure that the other person has what he or she needs at any particular time to get where he or she needs to go, and I just don't think we find that anywhere else.

These traits developed over years in which the company worked together, in many cases lived together, and socialized with one another almost all the time helped to manifest an ensemble connection that could not otherwise be manufactured.

Along with the company's dark sense of humor came an accompanying trait that can only be described as arrogance, or in John Malkovich's words, "confidence."

Growing from a belief that the work that they were doing was really special, this arrogance gave them the strong commitment needed to extend to new heights. They never ceased to believe that they could be better than anybody else. Terry Kinney

expressed these feelings in an article by Christine Dolen in the *Miami Herald* entitled *Born to be Wild*:

We had a little chip on our shoulders. We went to see a lot of Chicago theatre, but didn't see anything we liked. We wanted the kind of intensity that we saw in the films of Cassavettes; he was our hero.

Kate Erbe tells a related story about working with Randy Arney on the Steppenwolf production of Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*:

We would have a huddle before going on stage. Randy was around during previews and opening night and he would gather us all into a circle. We'd put our hands in and he would say, 'Find the asshole. Tear it open. And stick your head in it.' Those were his fighting words for us before we went on stage. That's it in a nutshell. It's that visceral. It just makes sense.

Kate Arrington simply summed up this freedom of letting it all go:

The moment of, 'Who gives a fuck?' is the most amazing moment. That's the most meaningful thing you're ever going to learn as an actor.

This brashness on the part of many of the Steppenwolf actors added another layer of self-imposed pressure to succeed that forced them to push that much harder to accomplish their ambitious goals and to always work to 'tear it open.' When discussing their approach, ensemble members often used music and sports analogies; through these metaphors, each individual member expressed the need for understanding one's role not only in terms of a specific production, but also in terms of the individual responsibility to supplant one's own ego for the greater good of the whole and, in a broader sense, to the future of the company.

There is no question that *Balm in Gilead* was a watershed moment for Steppenwolf Theatre Company. The ripple effects of that production continue to

reverberate; the success, both in Chicago and in the subsequent collaboration with Circle Rep in New York in 1984, significantly impacted the growth of the “storefront” theatre movement in Chicago and also positioned Chicago and Steppenwolf at the vanguard of the American theatre.