

TIME

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THE WORLD'S
A STAGE: This
outdoor
Elizabethan
theater is one
of three venues
in Ashland, Ore.

DAVID COOPER—CAST OF TITUS ANDRONICUS

Bigger Than Broadway!

T H E A T E R

The boldest theater in the U.S. may be in your own town. Our picks for **America's Best Regional Theaters**

By RICHARD ZOGLIN

BY THE TIME THE ECO-TERRORISTS show up—a band of tree sitters, with names like Lynx and Aquarius and Smokebomb, who drop from the skies, rappelling down the trunks of a redwood grove onstage—your head is already spin-

ning. *Daughters of the Revolution*, one-half of David Edgar's two-play cycle about an American political campaign called *Continental Divide*, has mostly been talk up to this point. But what talk! The play has nearly 50 characters, rapid-fire dialogue and an impossibly complicated plot involv-

ing leftover '60s radicals, skeletons in the closet, the clash between ideals and pragmatism in politics, and a hot-button ballot initiative that would mandate loyalty oaths for all voters. And that's only half the story. *Daughters of the Revolution* centers on the Democratic side of a gubernatorial race in an unnamed Western state; its companion play, *Mothers Against*, focuses on the Republican side. In all, it's six hours of dense, unruly, sometimes maddening, always engrossing drama.

THE TOP FIVE REGIONAL THEATERS

Some focus on new work; others have a commitment to the classics. Bringing new plays and artists to the national stage is important, but so is serving your local audience. *TIME* traveled the country to find the five theaters that do both best—and know how to put on a great show

1 Goodman Theater, Chicago With the groundbreaking Steppenwolf troupe and such ambitious smaller companies as the Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago's theater scene is lively. But the Goodman continues to make the biggest national mark. Artistic director Robert Falls has supplied Broadway with acclaimed adaptations of American classics (including this season's *Long Day's Journey into Night*) and has nurtured such important new voices as Rebecca Gilman (*Boy Gets Girl*) and—along with Chicago's Lookingglass Theater—Mary Zimmerman (*Metamorphoses*). The Goodman is currently introducing *Gem of the Ocean*, above, the latest in August Wilson's 20th century chronicle of the African-American experience, in a vibrant production with a strong cast of Wilson regulars. And Stephen Sondheim's long-awaited new musical, *Bounce*, will open here in June. "New York is a place to celebrate new work rather than to originate or nurture it," says Falls. "That's our responsibility."

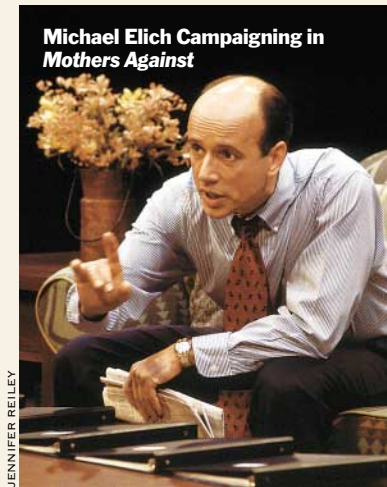
3 American Repertory Theater, Cambridge, Mass.

Robert Brustein, the longtime artistic director of this adventurous company, turned over the reins this season to Robert Woodruff, a veteran avant-garde director from New York City. Woodruff responded by bringing in a *Who's Who* of theater innovators, including Peter Sellars and Andrei Serban, whose quirky take on Shakespeare's *Pericles*, right, is currently onstage.

Another highlight of the season: Woodruff's staging of *Highway Ulysses*, an update of the Ulysses myth, with text and music by Rinde Eckert, about a man on a freaky cross-country trek in search of his son. Even when the journey wandered, Woodruff's teeming, haunted stage kept you enthralled.

2 Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Ore.

The name is misleading. Although the company began as an all-Shakespeare troupe back in 1935, the Bard's works now constitute less than half of its increasingly eclectic season. OSF is one of the few U.S. companies left that hew to the classic repertory format. Its 70 to 75 actors take various roles in 11 works that play in rotation from February to November. And since visitors generally travel to this Oregon resort town to see several shows at a time, the *Romeo and Juliets* and *Hedda Gablers* can be supplemented with more unconventional fare such as the two parts of David Edgar's *Continental Divide* (one of them, *Mothers Against*, below) and, in July, Nilo Cruz's *Lorca in a Green Dress*. "We're willing to take a chance on plays that other theaters aren't interested in," says artistic director Libby Appel, "because we have the audience for it."



Michael Elich Campaigning in *Mothers Against*

JENNIFER REILEY

And you have to go to Oregon to see it. *Continental Divide*, currently being given its world premiere at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland (in a co-production with California's Berkeley Repertory Theater, which will mount it later this year), is just the latest sign that challenging American theater is alive and well and nowhere near Broadway.

It's hardly news, of course, that theaters beyond the Hudson River are doing good work. Or that many of the plays that wind up on Broadway and off Broadway get their start at regional theaters. Nor should it be a surprise (though it was) that

this year's Pulitzer Prize for drama went to a play most of New York City's tastemakers had never even heard of: Cuban-born playwright Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics*, which had been produced only at the 104-seat New Theater in Coral Gables, Fla.

What isn't so apparent—until you spend some time, as I did over the past few months, surveying regional theaters across the country—is that these companies are pursuing whole chunks of the repertory that New York, with its commercial pressures and unforgiving critics, largely ignores. And local audiences

are getting a better taste of the possibilities of theater than most New Yorkers get in an entire season. The plays that succeed on and off Broadway these days are, as a rule, small things: two- and three-character relationship dramas (those big casts cost money!); minimalist exercises in craftsmanship; tidy little plays that convert big subjects into manageable private dramas (*Proof*, *Copenhagen*, *How I Learned to Drive*, to name just a few recent award winners). Plays of epic size and scope, works that examine American history and the American experience, plays that attempt to engage the audi-

ence in social and political issues—for those, mostly, you've got to look in the hinterlands.

A couple of years ago, for example, a San Francisco playwright named Joan Holden had the somewhat unpromising notion of turning *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich's best-selling book about her experiences as a minimum-wage worker, into a stage play. The result is an episodic but incisive series of vignettes about the impossibility of making ends meet while waiting tables in Florida, scrubbing toilets in Maine and stocking discount-store shelves in

4 Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis One of the legendary American regional companies has been quietly tending its garden for years, with 32,000 subscribers (among the highest in the nation) who brave the frigid Minnesota winters to see high-quality productions of the classics. But the Guthrie has also launched a program for developing new work, and last summer staged the world premiere of Arthur Miller's latest play, *Resurrection Blues*, above. Artistic director Joe Dowling, who once ran Dublin's Abbey Theater and directed a Broadway revival of *Tartuffe* this season, says that the audience in Minneapolis is "one of the most sophisticated I've ever worked with."

5 South Coast Repertory, Costa Mesa, Calif.

In Southern California, enterprising regional theaters are nearly as plentiful as orange groves—among them, San Diego's Globe and the La Jolla Playhouse—but the little engine that could in Orange County gets the nod. Run by two former San Francisco college buddies—Martin Benson and David Emmes, who founded the company as a traveling troupe in 1964—the South Coast Rep has helped nurture such playwrights as Richard Greenberg and David Henry Hwang (*Golden Child*). This spring the theater, along with Baltimore's Center Stage, staged the premiere of Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*, right, about a black seamstress in turn-of-the-century New York City who makes corsets for rich ladies—and a mail-order match for herself with a laborer on the Panama Canal. It's a lovingly rendered slice of the American story that seems to glow especially bright in the heart of Reagan country.

CAROL ROSEGG

Minnesota. *Nickel & Dimed* has its deficiencies as drama, but it's a rare example of theater that tries to open people's eyes to the way life is lived in the real world—and maybe even rouse them to action. Midway through the second act, the actors step out of character, stop the play and conduct a 10-minute discussion with the audience on how much a cleaning woman deserves to be paid. Producers in New York haven't given it much attention, but *Nickel & Dimed* is making a successful march through the regionals, from Seattle to the Trinity Rep in Providence, R.I.

In Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Repertory Theater last fall presented writer-director Eric Simonson's big, imaginatively staged adaptation of *Moby Dick*; there was no whale, but a surprising amount of Herman Melville's imposing novel made it onstage. (Adaptations of epic novels, like John Irving's *Cider House Rules*, have a habit of flopping in New York.) Houston's enterprising Alley Theater last fall staged a fine production of *The General from America*, Richard Nelson's brooding, against-the-grain, surprisingly convincing historical drama about Benedict Arnold. (The play later

“We’re willing to take a chance on plays that other theaters aren’t interested in because we have the audience for it.” —LIBBY APPEL, OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

opened off-Broadway, where the critics, predictably, dissed it.)

“Our responsibility is to do big stuff—not the next one-set, three-character play,” says Gregory Boyd, artistic director of the Alley, which has commissioned, among other new works, a play from Keith Reddin about the Luddite rebellion in 19th century England. Regional theaters are one place where *educational* is not a dirty word. Performances are often followed by discussion sessions; the programs (so pathetically inadequate in New York) are filled with background articles on the play’s issues or real-life subject matter. People leave the theater with something more than stagecraft to talk about.

Even with more commercial works that play the regionals with one eye on the ultimate prize—Broadway—the audience participates in a more direct way. Last winter Ellen Burstyn played the title role in *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, a one-woman stage adaptation of Allan Gurganus’ best-selling novel, which had its world premiere at San Diego’s Old Globe Theater. She was still stumbling a bit (engagingly, catching herself with a casual “I mean ...”) as she tried to master the demanding part, but audiences had the frisson of being present at the development of what may (when the show comes to Broadway this fall) turn out to be one of the great stage roles.

By most measures, the regional theaters are booming. There were just 23 in 1961, when the first national organization of nonprofit theaters was formed; today there are 1,800. Many have gleaming new theaters, with two or even three stages, and state-of-the-art production facilities that put to shame the cramped old boxes on Broadway. “Frankly, it’s something of a step

down for me when I go to New York,” says Jack O’Brien, artistic director of San Diego’s Globe Theaters—who has lately been going to New York often to direct hit shows like *Hairspray*.

For playwrights, the chance to see their new work given a sumptuous first staging is matched only by the ability to keep tinkering with it while shielded from the harsh lights of Broadway. “One

how or if your play is communicating.”

Today’s tough economic times have brought their share of pain, of course. Subscriptions and ticket sales have held their own at most of the major theaters (though advance bookings have dropped, as they have on Broadway since Sept. 11), but it has been a struggle to keep corporate and private donations coming. Seattle’s ACT company, one of the city’s three major theater groups, announced last winter that financial woes would force it to close down at the end of the season—before \$1.5 million was raised at the last minute to keep it going for at least another season. The Seattle Rep, across town, is in less dire straits, but will still have to reduce staff and cut its roster of plays from nine to six next season. These pressures could increase the danger that regionals will shy away from risky fare, in favor of tried-and-true revivals, or new works that might have the prospect of a commercial run in New York. That is a criticism that some have long made of the regionals; off-Broadway is still a more receptive place for certain kinds of stylistically experimental plays. “I find that sometimes theaters are a little tame when it comes to choosing their seasons. They want to cater to their audiences,” says playwright Cruz. “A lot of regional theaters won’t take chances with work that deals more with experimentation.”

A successful regional theater, of course, has to strike the right balance, to know its audience and serve its tastes while pushing it, at least on occasion, into new territory. What’s gratifying is how well many of them are doing it—and proving in the process that all the country’s a stage.

—With reporting by Amy Lennard Goehner



INTRIGUE: Eco-terrorists nab a former '60s radical (Mark Murphey) in Ashland's *Daughters of the Revolution*

DAVID COOPER

of the things you find is that there’s a low level of audience pretension,” says Richard Greenberg, who has developed plays like *Three Days of Rain* and *The Violet Hour* at South Coast Repertory in California’s Orange County. “There’s a receptiveness about the audience. Their responses are pure. And that’s especially good early on, when you’re not so sure