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## Getting Ahead...On The L.A. Stage?

Yep. In a scene once thought to be limited, it's now possible to build an acting career that includes Hollywood--or not.

By REED JOHNSON

It's been a long, strange trip from Griswold's Candlelight Pavilion Dinner Theatre in Montclair to the Great White Way in Manhattan. But after 12 years of singing and hoofing his heart out on suburban stages across Southern California, Eric Gunhus has landed a spot on Broadway's hottest ticket.

Eight times a week, the Cal State Fullerton grad slips backstage at the St. James Theatre, dons a black Nazi storm trooper's uniform and belts out the opening solo in "Springtime for Hitler," the loony signature tune from Mel Brooks' show-biz satire, "The Producers."

After sweeping this year's Tony Awards, "The Producers" looks set for a long, lucrative New York run followed by a long, even more lucrative national road tour. That's good news for Gunhus, a well-spoken, Malibu-blond 31-year-old who's living proof that it's possible for an actor to hitch his or her star to L.A. theater and ride it to bigger and, perhaps, better things.

"I think for pretty much everybody who is working in the L.A. theater scene, if you do put in the commitment, the rewards are there," says Gunhus, who once earned his keep as a singing-dancing cowboy in Disneyland's Golden Horseshoe revue.

In the hall-of-mirrors world that sometimes is Los Angeles theater, success for an actor can be an elusive commodity. Pay is low, if there's any pay at all. Competition can be surprisingly fierce. And the city's sprawling, polyglot theater scene, while arguably the nation's most diverse and prolific, hasn't attained the same recognition as New York's or Chicago's.

Then there's the siren song of Hollywood, whispering of multiyear sitcom contracts and ocean-view mansions.

No wonder many L.A. actors view local theater from dueling perspectives. Some see it purely as a means to an end, others as an end in itself. Some regard it as a showcase for shopping a resume to studio talent scouts. Others insist that L.A. theater must strive to maintain an identity separate from the all-powerful industry monolith.

But despite L.A. theater's ambiguous stature, a number of successful L.A. actors credit local stage work with helping to shape--and reshape--their careers. Some, such as Gunhus, have ended up on Broadway. Others, such as Bradley Whitford ("The West Wing"), have broken through into TV and film. A few, such as Julia Sweeney of "Saturday Night Live," have used L.A. theater as a training ground. Still others return to it now and then to maintain a connection with their roots.

"There's something very sound about theater as a way of

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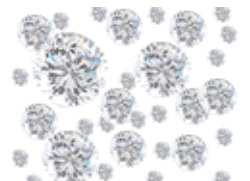
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getting experience and getting some time on the clock," says French Stewart, who already was well-known to L.A. theater audiences from his over-the-top antics in Justin Tanner plays at the Cast Theatre before his breakout role in NBC's "3rd Rock From the Sun."

"Working in television, you really, to a certain degree, have your hands tied," Stewart says. "You're on a schedule and every episode is costing several million dollars to produce. At the Cast, you were able to get a month of rehearsal, and however an evening was going to happen, it was going to happen. I think that's still the thing I enjoy most. My feeling is, if you can do a Tanner play, you can do anything."

For Whitford, who has appeared in productions at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa and at the Tiffany Theater in West Hollywood, the training and experience from performing on the stage have been invaluable. "I know that if I had not spent years doing theater as an actor, I would feel I had no skeleton," he says. "When I meet young actors, I tell them I think it's the only way to learn how to act."

Amy Brenneman, star of CBS' single-mom drama "Judging Amy," says that many of that show's principal cast members, including Tyne Daly and Dan Futterman, share a theater background that lets them gel as an ensemble. Their theatrical instincts, Brenneman says, are evident in "the work ethic, the lack of diva energy, the gratitude for the opportunity to say good words."

"It's a very simpatico group in that way. There's a real sense of the collaborative art form," says Brenneman, a founding member of the grass-roots-oriented, L.A.-based Cornerstone Theater Company.

Stewart says that the same held true for the "3rd Rock" cast, some of whose members have performed on Broadway. Besides the technical experience he got from doing shows like "Zombie Attack," Stewart says, working at the Cast helped him gain notice in Hollywood. The theater is close to Paramount Pictures, and several industry players and "slumming actors" regularly show up.

L.A. theater also allowed him to profit from early mistakes with minimal pain, Stewart says, whereas TV and film catch every flub for eternity. "There's plenty of plays I went out and [was terrible] in, but it doesn't matter. So years later I can go out and tell people I was fabulous! It's a matter of going out there and hitting the boards and doing the part."

Of course, getting onstage in L.A. is a whole lot easier if you're already a Hollywood brand name. In a town where money and power don't so much talk as bellow, "vanity" shows have long been part of the landscape. Typically, these one-person, glorified monologues are designed to help stars land TV and film roles or jump-start sputtering careers.

Such productions are still going strong. But so is legitimate stage work by theater-trained actors who happen to be Hollywood names. The recent spate of performances by Alan Alda, Annette Bening, Donald Sutherland, Al Pacino, Kelsey Grammer and David Hyde Pierce (currently co-starring with Uta Hagen in the Geffen's twice-extended "Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks") shows that in Los Angeles, celebrity-hood and serious acting chops are by no means mutually exclusive.

Meanwhile, dozens of lesser Hollywood luminaries, along with scores of relatively anonymous journeymen TV and film actors, perform regularly at the region's mid-size theaters. They also can be seen at L.A.'s more than 100 storefront venues with 99 seats or fewer, which present some of the most aesthetically risky and provocative work in town.

In recent years, Brenneman, a Harvard graduate, has moved from Shakespeare to high-profile TV roles ("NYPD Blue") to movies ("Your Friends and Neighbors"). But if many

L.A. actors are increasingly open to working in different media, that's not necessarily true of the people hiring them. "I can't say [for me] there's been cross-pollination in terms of theater and film," Brenneman says. "The people who knew me from theater tend to cast me in theater, and the people who know me from TV and film tend to cast me in TV and film."

Other L.A.-trained actors tell similar stories about Hollywood's ignorance of the bustling theater activity in its own backyard. Mark Ruffalo ("You Can Count on Me") has said that after he returned from New York to Los Angeles, where he'd done theater for 10 years, casting directors and producers would ask him, "Where have you been all these years?" Frustrated, he told them, "I've been right under your noses! Why don't you do your jobs?"

Even seasoned, multi-tasking actors agree that it's tricky being a switch-hitter in Los Angeles. Dakin Matthews, a classically trained actor and director seen last winter in Peter Hall's production of "Romeo and Juliet" at the Ahmanson, describes the L.A. theater actor's dilemma in Catch-22 terms. Theater producers and directors at major playhouses often like to cast TV and film stars in big roles. So that, "if you stay and develop your craft long enough [in theater], you will ace yourself out of the roles you want to play because you won't have television and film credits," says Matthews, founder and artistic director of the classically oriented Antaeus Company.

Michael G. Hawkins, one of Southern California's most frequently employed musical-theater performers, says most theater credits have little carry-over value in Hollywood. "If you have a Tony nomination, certainly that's going to open the door," says Hawkins, who recently played Harold Hill in "The Music Man" at the San Gabriel Civic Auditorium. But most Hollywood casting directors would "rather see two TV credits than 100 stage credits," he adds.

Casting director Sally Stiner likes seeing stage credits on a resume "because I believe they are truly studying and learning their craft." Often, she says, that's not the case with other actors.

"I see so many [TV and film actors] trying to wing it" at auditions, Stiner says. "I see so many actors come in unprepared and say, 'I don't have my pictures or resume,' or they don't have their sides [script pages]. The theater, I think, teaches you to be prepared."

However, several actors say that when they began doing theater, they had no intention of going into TV or film. Some, like Whitford and his wife, Jane Kaczmarek ("Malcolm in the Middle"), would have been content with stage careers if Hollywood hadn't come knocking.

"Plays are exhausting and time-consuming. But for Jane and I, all we ever wanted to do was be theater actors. And we were happy doing theater," Whitford says. "All this commercial success is wonderful and great and just gravy."

In sheer numbers of productions--roughly 100 larger or mid-size and 1,200 smaller professional shows a year--"there's more theater in L.A. than any other place in the history of humankind," says Lee Wochner, president of Theatre LA, which promotes playgoing on behalf of its 190 member organizations.

Yet even L.A.'s most ardent theater aficionados admit it's difficult for a stage actor to make a career in L.A.--as it is most anyplace else on the planet. "You may make a career, but you might not make a living," says Gordon Davidson, artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Theatre, the city's flagship not-for-profit playhouses.

But for many workaday L.A. actors, theater, film, television and commercial work aren't rival genres anymore. They're different sides of a common profession that no longer has a clear-cut hierarchy. These days, for L.A. actors, it's less likely

to be a question of either/or than of a little of this and a little of that.

"There's no Maginot line" between theater and TV and film, says Wochner, who's also a playwright and producer. "People cross back and forth. I don't know if they're sister industries: They're Siamese twin industries. We used to have this story of 'large versus small theater.' That's not a story anymore. Then we had this story of 'theater versus TV and film.' Now that's not a story anymore."

The real story may be that in the contemporary 24/7 global entertainment universe, artistic disciplines have blurred, and the once-impregnable barrier between high and pop culture has turned to tapioca. Consequently, many L.A. actors say, it's essential to know your way around several types of acting, whether that means brushing up on your Shakespeare or firing one-liners over a laugh track. It's all acting, and so long as the checks clear it's all pretty much welcome.

Theater, TV and film are "so interconnected that to kind of have knowledge of one helps the other," says "Saturday Night Live" cast member Will Ferrell, who honed his performance skills at the Groundlings, the 27-year-old L.A. comedy-improv troupe, and has appeared in such movies as "Dick" and the Austin Powers series.

An Irvine native and USC graduate, Ferrell spent a summer studying scene construction, dialects, movement and writing at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, where his mother used to drag him as a kid to see Chekhov plays.

Ferrell's fellow Groundlings alum Lisa Kudrow, who shot to fame as Phoebe on the long-running hit NBC comedy "Friends," thinks Los Angeles could use more actor-driven theater training programs like the Groundlings, which emphasizes ensemble work, hands-on experience and a quick transition from page to stage.

"Think about it," Kudrow says. "In three minutes, you have to get out a beginning, middle and end and laugh every seven seconds. That's really phenomenal training, especially for sitcom. And even movies now are so fast-paced."

Such training also helps toughen your skin, Kudrow says.

"I remember getting ready for a show," she recalls, "and an older Groundling saying, 'Are you doing that character again? I remember when I saw it a year ago.' That was great training, just to hear that and not take it personally and let it go out the other side of your head."

Another Groundling trainee, comedian Sweeney, describes her alma mater, favorably, as "kind of like a trade school." Sweeney, the author-performer of the solo stage show "God Said, 'Ha!,'" still appears regularly as a guest in all-improv shows at the Groundlings. "Honestly," she says, "the thing that keeps me in L.A. is getting on stage."

Hollywood's cultural and economic power guarantee it will keep enticing L.A. stage actors. However, as is true of acting itself, only the individual performer fully knows his or her own motivation.

"I've found that there's a lower percentage of people who are doing theater to do theater," Whitford says. "They're doing theater to do television."

In actuality, Hollywood actors and L.A. theater have been locked in a strange, symbiotic relationship since the dawn of the sound era. That's when histrionic silent-film actors began flocking en masse to the theater to learn how to sing, do line readings and emote convincingly.

Among their principal destinations was the Pasadena Playhouse. Between its founding in 1928 and its demise in 1969, the Pasadena Playhouse College of Theatre Arts, a.k.a. "the Star Factory," trained or gave jobs to dozens of future Hollywood heavyweights, such as Eve Arden, William Holden, Gene Hackman and Dustin Hoffman.

Courses in the fully accredited program covered everything from the Greek classics and fencing to set design, comic improv, and radio and television performance. Instructors were recruited from the professional theater world and Hollywood, as well as academia.

Most significantly, young actors were able to perform onstage with seasoned Hollywood pros, many at the peak of their careers. Several students repaid the favor by appearing in playhouse productions after they became stars.

Today, such opportunities are rare. Serious theater instruction tends to be more of a specialized academic field, and many college programs struggle to strike a balance between formal training and how-to advice on landing a job.

Young stage actors often are groomed at colleges such as Yale, Northwestern and the University of Indiana, and at conservatory programs attached to prestigious regional theaters such as the American Repertory Theatre in Boston and American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

Among the many local colleges and universities that teach acting or have full-fledged theater programs are UCLA, USC, Cal State L.A., Cal State Fullerton, CalArts, UC Irvine and UC San Diego. But their individual strengths and emphases vary widely, from musical theater to avant-garde theater and post-modern performance art.

Pasadena Playhouse artistic director Sheldon Epps says he'd like to restore some type of in-house training institute, probably a conservatory similar to ACT's. A "huge part" of this training, he says, would come "not from what you learn in classes, but from the experience of working with other great actors."

"It would allow us to do some productions of greater scale and scope just in terms of the number of people involved," Epps continues. The Taper's Davidson says he considered developing an actor-training program, probably joined to a repertory company, when the theater was founded in the 1960s.

"My first instinct was, 'Of course we're going to create a company,' because that's what was being done at the Guthrie and elsewhere," Davidson says, referring to the acclaimed Minneapolis theater. "I found I didn't have the wherewithal, the budget, to sustain it. And especially it was going to be hard to get senior actors."

Davidson recalls having a conversation with actor Jason Robards many years ago. "I said, 'What would it take, Jay, to have you come and do a couple of seasons [with us]?' And he said, '\$500 a week.' In other words, \$25,000 a year. So, 10 actors--that's \$250,000." Such a cost, at the time, would've been prohibitive, Davidson says.

The shortage of institutional training programs may help explain why Los Angeles theater has had trouble attracting and retaining dedicated stage actors over the years. A handful of well-regarded actor-driven theater companies, including the Matrix, Actors' Gang, A Noise Within and Antaeus Company, have partly filled the gap.

Antaeus' Matthews says one of his aims has been "to keep a first-class company together and yet not punish them for a career in TV and film."

"You can't want to have people who have film and television credits in your stage productions, and then penalize stage people who want to go do film and television," he says.

Besides the industry's historic indifference to L.A. stage credentials, some say there's also a theater-world bias in favor of actors from east of the Hudson River versus those from south of the San Gabriels. "I think they'd rather you were a New York actor," Hawkins says.

But Gunhus, Broadway's singing Nazi, challenges that notion. He estimates, for instance, that at some point in their careers at least half "The Producers" cast have worked in

Los Angeles, including Tony winner Gary Beach, who played Lumiere in Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" at the Schubert in 1995.

When Gunhus started out in L.A. theater, he says, he often was told that "there isn't enough work in L.A. to sustain a career, that it's a nice hobby but it isn't something you can do full time."

But by the time he was cast in the national tour of "Ragtime," Gunhus was working 42 of 52 weeks a year. Many New York and Chicago actors would think themselves lucky to work half that much.

The Taper's Davidson says the majority of actors he casts are L.A.-based. "People may have other perceptions of that," he says "but it's true."

Many of these actors, he says, are stage-trained performers "who've somehow managed to juggle their lives such that they keep a hand in the theater, and they make a living in film and television."

That pretty well describes Whitford, who's well aware of the added cachet his name has in New York now that he's on a hit TV series. "I'm the same actor I was five years ago," he says, "but now if I wanted to do a play in New York, I'm sure I could do it. I'm sure if Jane said she wanted to do a play in New York, she could do it. And that's true to a certain extent here."

Mariette Hartley says she "really recommitted" to doing theater about seven years ago and has been working there steadily ever since. She was last seen locally in a staged reading of A.R. Gurney's "Ancestral Voices" at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank.

This summer, she starred in the Williamstown (Mass.) Theater Festival production of Gurney's "Buffalo Gal," about an actress of a certain age who's debating doing "The Cherry Orchard" in Buffalo or accepting a role in a cheesy new sitcom. In the fall, she'll play opposite Len Cariou in the L.A. premiere of Michael Frayn's "Copenhagen" at the Wilshire Theatre.

"This is about really learning my craft. This is about not faking it. This separates the men from the boys, at some level," the 61-year-old Hartley says of stage acting. "Who would've thought I'd be doing regional theater at my age and loving it?"

But whether you're an understudy in a 99-seat production or a Hollywood star, theater often conflicts with better-paying jobs, with kids' soccer practices and spouses' work schedules, with having an actual life.

"I love doing theater, but I detest doing eight shows a week, and with a family it is just not something I would choose to do now," says Laraine Newman, a former cast member of "SNL," who has also had stints on "Laverne & Shirley" and "St. Elsewhere."

A recent exception was Newman's appearance last fall, playing opposite Glenna Headly, in a well-received production of Colleen Dodson-Baker's "Detachments" at the Tiffany Theater in West Hollywood.

"It was a role where I got to play about six characters, so it was right up my alley," Newman says. "I loved working with Glenna; it was a great experience and it was four days a week--a short run."

But even the inconvenience, low pay and industry disinterest doesn't seem to stop L.A. stage performers from wanting to return.

Veteran character actor John Diehl spent a good chunk of this spring and summer logging three-hour round-trips between his Ojai home and the 2100 Square Feet Theater on San Vicente Boulevard.

The gig? An under-seen but critically lauded turn as a charming blue-collar rogue in Murray Mednick's dysfunctional family drama "Joe and Betty."

"If it wasn't for the theater, I don't know what I'd be doing," says Diehl, 50, whose career has encompassed feature films ("Stripes," "Nixon"), teleplays, New York and Los Angeles theater (including "A Lie of the Mind" with Holly Hunter at the Taper) and a brief but lucrative part as Detective Larry Zito in "Miami Vice."

He doesn't waste any words summing up his unique artistic contributions to "Jurassic Park III," the \$92-million summer blockbuster in which he had a bit part--literally.

"They paid me a lot of money. I worked five weeks. And I get eaten on Page 28."

The difference between playing a character like Joe and getting eaten on Page 28 is the reason Diehl got into theater in the first place, about two decades ago. And it's the reason he's not about to quit now.

Chatting over coffee one recent afternoon, Diehl said while most of his acting these days is done "for Starbucks and love," he thinks that could change as L.A. theater slowly continues to come of age.

"L.A. [theater] is not there yet," Diehl says. "But L.A.'s kind of waking up, I think in a kind of human way. In a big-city, human way."

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