



LOOKING BACK WITH JAMES BLACK

INTERIM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Alley's Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for more than 30 years as a member of the Resident Acting Company and a frequent director. During the season he curated as Interim Artistic Director, we are delighted to present a series of essays from him about his career and his memories of the Alley.

Keeping Company

Writing these program articles this past season has reminded me again and again how fortunate I was to make my hometown my artistic home. Looking back, the smartest move I made was to stay. The Alley is one of the few theaters in the country that still supports a Resident Acting Company. That means it employs, at a livable wage, a group of actors who, because of that employment, can put down roots in Houston, buy homes and raise families. These actors have chosen to share their considerable talent exclusively with Houston audiences. They have made a commitment to the Theatre, and the Theatre, at substantial expense, has made a commitment to them. The Alley Theatre experience is enriched when those involved are a part of the Houston community. It promotes a sense of pride and proprietorship for audiences as they watch their actors grow and transform (and yes, on occasion, fail) from show to show, year to year.

Although many theatres in recent years have abandoned the Resident Company model for financial reasons, there is no denying its value in several vital areas. It allows for more challenging and adventurous theatre programming - an audience is more likely to venture into unknown territory with familiar faces leading the way. The resident actors find themselves constantly challenged as well because "typecasting" becomes an impossibility in the company model. Plays aren't chosen to fit the company; the

company is made to fit the play and such casting "against type" can reinvent the familiar, making it fresh and vital. It forces the actor's skillset to be constantly pushed and expanded beyond their comfort zone. Many of my favorite roles here have been in shows that I would never have considered myself right for - Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*, Oscar Wilde in *The Invention of Love*, or George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Those plays pushed me beyond what I thought was my limit and that challenge, without doubt, made me a better and more confident actor.

The Resident Acting Company inevitably develops a familial shorthand when working together for a length of time that makes the rehearsal process more efficient. When out of town actors (usually strangers to one another) come together to do a play, a big portion of rehearsal time is devoted to quickly developing relationships and learning each other's work process. When I direct the company in a production, I immediately know which actors need extra support and encouragement during rehearsal and which ones prefer to be left alone.

Performance is more confident as well when company is involved. There's undeniable comfort and trust when sharing the stage with someone you have worked with for years - someone you know will pick you up if you stumble, and knows you'll do the same. That chemistry between company actors, that history between those who have played together

for so many years, is palpable to the audience and both informs and deepens everything about the work.

But even more important than those production advantages, being part of an acting company gives a stage actor a foundation, a sense of stability and support that is rare in this transient and often self-involved business. It's a family in its truest sense and like any family it is built on unconditional love with a pinch of occasional dysfunction.

Yes, we are guilty of taking each other for granted on rare instances. We know what buttons to push, we know faults and foibles, where bodies are buried and dirty laundry is piled. We're quick to criticize behind each other's back, but we are quicker to leap to each other's defense should that criticism come from the outside. Together we have been through birth, death, glorious success, and soul-crushing failure. Never have I known a group of actors who are more supportive and protective of one another than this current company. There are endless hugs, selfless praise, and unlimited encouragement. Family doesn't need to be perfect, just united.

Our production of Nick Payne's cosmically haunting love story *Constellations* continues this theme of family and connection. The actors, Elizabeth Bunch and Chris Hutchison, have been fellow Alley company members for 13 years and more importantly, husband and wife for nearly 14. Before they were married, I directed them in *Proof*, their first show together at the Alley. Several years later I directed them again as they played Mr. and Mrs. Cratchit in *A Christmas Carol* with their first born son, Mack, playing Tiny Tim. This time the couple are under the expert guidance of Leslie Swackhamer, a brilliant director and the wife of recently retired Alley General Manager Ten Eyck Swackhamer. Years ago, I directed their daughter, Sarah, in *A Christmas Carol* as well.



Top Photo: Chris Hutchison and Elizabeth Bunch in *Proof*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson. Bottom Photo: Elizabeth Bunch, Chris Hutchison, and Mack Hutchison in *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by John Everett.

And so the Neuhaus portion of my Interim Artistic Director season comes to a close. It's been a journey that I never imagined I would find myself on but arriving at this destination, with the theatre intact and headed towards an exciting new era, has made it all worthwhile.

Navigating the challenges of these past sixteen months would have been impossible without my family - Todd, Chris, David, Elizabeth, Melissa, Jay, Paul, Charles, Shawn, and Dylan. Let me add the extended family to this as well and include everyone who works at this remarkable institution. Everyone who has an Alley badge. I can't thank them enough for the unwavering support and love they've given me while I was cast in this, my most unexpected role yet.