



LOOKING BACK WITH JAMES BLACK

INTERIM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Alley's Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for over thirty 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.

"Dying is easy.....comedy is hard."

Truer words have never been spoken. We're just not sure who actually said them. The quote has been attributed to Edmund Gwenn, Edmund Kean, Groucho Marx and Stan Laurel, along with many others. Regardless of who really uttered those final words, there's no one in the theater biz who would deny the veracity of the sentiment.

Drama is one thing. You don't walk out on the stage as Willie Loman in *Death of a Salesman* expecting a lot of laughs. You don't really know how well you did during the course of the evening until the house lights come up and you take your bow. There's little feedback during performance, just a final lab result at the end. It's both disconcerting and comforting. That's drama.

Comedy is another beast altogether. The verdict on your work comes in real time. You are constantly aware, adjusting and adapting to that living, breathing barometer that gives you an instant reading of success or failure: the audience and their laughter. Sometimes what is laugh out loud funny on Tuesday night is more of a chuckle on Wednesday.

But that's ok. There's always Thursday.

There are few things more intoxicating and euphoric than standing in front of a full house

and getting a laugh. The social chorus that rolls through to the back of the theater like a wave is a natural opiate for all involved. And as high a "high" as that is, nothing can bring you crashing down quicker than not getting a laugh. Or worse yet, losing it. A funny line or a piece of physical business gets a great response on Tuesday night and on Wednesday night, it falls flat. Crickets. The line was spoken with the same emphasis, the same physicality. But this time? Nothing. Was I too fast? Was I too slow? Did I turn my head upstage before I finished the line? Such onstage autopsies are usually started and abandoned within hundredths of a second. Spend too much time analyzing, questioning, and other moments begin to tumble like dominoes. Rhythms falter, self-doubt leaps in and before you know it, another laugh is lost. You've heard the term "flop sweat"? It's real.

An actor quickly and painfully learns that playing comedy is a balancing act of equal parts precision and abandon.

In the 1940's during a pre-Broadway run of a show in Boston, the great actor Alfred Lunt was surprised he got a laugh after a line in which he asked for a cup of tea. During the play's New York run, the laugh got weaker and weaker until it disappeared entirely. Lunt asked his on- and off-stage partner, the equally great Lynn Fontanne, why the laugh was gone. "Because you're asking for it," she said. "You used to ask for a cup of tea."

Sometimes the loss is obviously your fault - a bobbled line, a swallowed word, a distracting gesture - but other times we forget about the one important element that does change nightly...the barometer itself. A different mix of 700 people all coming in with a different day's history, different weather, different energy, all variable ingredients that are mixed together in that nightly gumbo with unpredictable results.

And sometimes, it's in the hands of the theater gods.

One of my favorite theater experiences here at the Alley was performing in George Feydeau's farce *A Flea in Her Ear* in 1991. On opening night as the characters' lives onstage began to crumble, so did our set. It started early in the evening with doorknobs coming off and as the show progressed, chairs broke, zippers got stuck, revolves didn't revolve and by the time we got to the fifth act, entire sections of the set's back wall began to collapse. Many in the audience thought it was all part of a genius production design. Who was I to argue? Regardless, it was genius. And funny.

We currently have the bravest of actors playing comedy on both of our stages. Rob Askins' *The Carpenter* on the Hubbard and Eliza Clark's *Quack* in the Neuhaus.



Top Photo: James Black and Noble Shropshire in *A Flea in Her Ear*. Photo by Jim Caldwell.

Bottom Photo: Melissa Pritchett and James Black in *You Can't Take It With You*. Photo by Jann Whaley.



Jay Sullivan and James Black in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Photo by Lynn Lane.

One a Texas-sized farce about status and mistaken identity, the other a character-driven look at hubris and celebrity, both filled with guaranteed laughs. But where will they land tonight? And how? It all depends on this evening's barometer. Who is out there in the audience with you? What will you respond to and why?

The dance between audience and actor begins shortly.

Enjoy the ride!