



## ***BROADWAY***

**By George Abbott and Philip Dunning  
Directed by Ted Pappas**



**STUDY GUIDE**

# A study guide to Pittsburgh Public Theater’s production of

## ***BROADWAY***

By George Abbott and Philip Dunning  
**September 23 – October 24, 2004**

### ***CONTENTS***

The Beginnings of <i>BROADWAY</i> .....	3
They Called Him Mr. Abbott.....	4
The Decade that Roared.....	6
The Twenties at a Glance.....	8
Gangstas.....	10
<i>BROADWAY</i> Glossary.....	12
An Interview with Costume Designer David Zyla.....	14
Costuming Professions.....	18
Resources and Suggested Reading.....	19

Prepared by Angela Vincent. Additional support and materials provided by Kyle Brenton and Rob Zellers.

## The Beginnings of *BROADWAY*

There had been rumors all through the summer of 1926 that the play called "*Broadway*" was a success. Or would be as soon as it reached town. And although many plays are similarly heralded as probable hits long before they appear on Broadway, in this particular instance the rumors were wise ones, being largely circulated and vouched for by the wise folk of the theatre.

In Atlantic City in the early summer "*Broadway*" had been called "*The Roaring Forties*," but the title was discarded because many of the visitors in Atlantic City missed the significance of the street reference and thought it referred to the California gold rush.

The night of its Broadway premiere the crowd took the play to its palpitating heart. There were cheers for both the players and the authors, but no speeches. Mr. Abbott was buried some place back stage and Mr. Dunning, then acting as stage manager at the New Amsterdam Theatre, had run over to the Broadhurst for a minute and was furtively dodging among the standees at the back of the theater, wondering a little whether the fuss the folks were making was really inspired by their liking for the play or was due to the fact that they had been away from the theater for a long summer and were just happy to be back.

The play was, however, a very genuine success and for many months thereafter its popularity dominated the entire list of plays to be seen in New York. The reviewers were enthusiastic, accepting "*Broadway*" as the truest and most entertaining of those dramas whose authors recently had taken so heartily to reflecting native life in the rough.

As Alexander Woollcott put it, "Of all the score of plays that shuffled in endless procession along this season, the one which most perfectly caught the accent of the city's voice was this play named after the great Midway itself."

*An excerpt from The Best Plays of 1926-27, editor Burns Mantle.*



A scene from Act II of the original production of *Broadway* in 1926.

## They Called Him Mr. Abbott

By Kyle Brenton

Gilbert Millstein of the *New York Times* wrote that “on the basis of sheer frightening volume alone, an easily defensible argument can be made that no living individual, or possibly even dead, has contributed more to the Broadway theater in the capacities of actor, director, producer, co-producer, author, co-author and play doctor, than George Abbott.” When Millstein wrote that—1954—Abbott still had almost four decades of work ahead of him. By the time the great man passed away in Miami Beach on January 31, 1995 at the age of 107, the “easily defensible” argument had become incontrovertible. George Abbott—known by the anti-nickname “Mr. Abbott,”—virtually created Broadway theater as we know it, launched not only a generation, but entire lineages of performers and creators, and made some of the most popular and lasting theater seen in America.

He was an unlikely impresario. Born in June of 1887 in upstate New York, he was by his own admission a troublemaker and liar, and not particularly interested in anything in particular. When he was 11 his family moved to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and he spent several years living the life of a young cowboy—working on local ranches and delivering beer to saloons and brothels. After attending the University of Rochester, he decided he wanted to write plays. At that time (1912) there was only one place for an aspiring dramatist to train: Harvard University, with George Pierce Baker in the nation’s first university-level course in dramatic writing. After Harvard, Abbott considered himself ready for New York.

When producers offered encouragement but no author contracts, Abbott settled for a career as an actor. Landing a role as a drunken college boy in *The Misleading Lady* and suddenly flush, Abbott married his sweetheart Ednah, but he quickly discovered how fickle the theater business could be. After the show closed, it was two years before he was cast again, two years in which Ednah supported him with a job in a law office and Abbott spent most of his time auditioning and writing. In 1915, he got a job as an office boy and “associate playwright” with producer John Golden, and he began to polish up the scripts of the writers Golden worked with. His big break as an actor came in 1923, as Tex the cowboy in *Zander the Great*—the *Times* called it one of the 10 best performances of the year.

In 1926, a producer friend of Abbott’s passed him a script called *Bright Lights* by an assistant stage manager named Philip Dunning. The play—a melodrama about chorus girls and bootleggers—had been read and rejected by nearly every producer in New York, but Abbott saw potential. “The main plot was exciting and topical... The problem was to give the play order, and to me that did not seem difficult,” he wrote in his autobiography.

The two rewrote the play together, retitled it *Broadway*, and Abbott directed. On opening night Abbott skulked in the balcony, and Dunning wasn’t even in the theater—he was across the street stage managing another show. Their trepidation proved unwarranted, however, as *Broadway* became the biggest hit of the decade and one of the most successful plays in the history of New York theater. Needless to say, after that Mr. Abbott never lacked for work.

In fact, he was a workaholic. Never did a day pass when he wasn’t working on at least one play, and more often four or five at once. Most seasons at least two or three of his projects bowed on Broadway. He could write, rewrite, produce, direct—whatever a particular project needed.

## **They Called Him Mr. Abbott** *continued*

He became known as one of the all-time great “play doctors,” and was frequently brought in to fix a show that was faltering out of town. His involvement more often than not spelled a hit. His shows were fast, clever, and meticulously timed. “Walk here, count one-two-three-four, say the line and count seven, kiss the girl and count eight, walk off the stage,” is a fair approximation of his instructions to actors. He had an unerring instinct for finding talent. He helped launch the careers of (to name but a few) Liza Minnelli, Bob Fosse, Harold Prince, Jerome Robbins, Stephen Sondheim, Shirley MacLaine, Carol Burnett, Tom Bosley, Jean Stapleton, José Ferrer, Gene Kelly... The list of plays and musicals (he became known as the king of musical comedy—no one has ever directed it better) to which he contributed reads like an anthology of the most popular works of the twentieth century: *Broadway*, *Three Men on a Horse*, *Pal Joey*, *The Pajama Game*, *The Boys from Syracuse*, *On Your Toes*, *Fiorello!*, *Wonderful Town*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Damn Yankees*... He shared a Pulitzer Prize, won five Tonys (plus a sixth for lifetime achievement) and the Handel Medal from New York City, was given honorary doctorates from the University of Rochester and the University of Miami, and in 1982 was awarded the Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement Award.

Through it all, one accolade meant more to him than all the others: the applause of the audience. For Mr. Abbott, theater was not primarily a vehicle for artistic self-expression. First and foremost, it was about pleasing the audience, about entertaining people. His was the world of hits and flops, and there was no room in between for “noble failures.” If a joke didn’t get a laugh, it was cut unceremoniously. If a show flopped, it was quickly forgotten. Once an actor had landed a line the right way, he was never allowed to change his delivery—and there was always a right way.

In his personal life, he was fastidious to the point of puritanism. He never smoked and rarely drank. He was always at rehearsal on time and impeccably dressed in a suit and tie. When dealing with tardy starlets, he would simply put the understudy on—the star’s fear of being replaced would generally goad her into appearing on time. For Mr. Abbott, the play always came first.

Until the day he died, Mr. Abbott never stopped working. While he was brushing up the book of *Damn Yankees* in 1993, he was asked what the new script was like. “Hard to say,” he replied, “but it’s better than what most 106-year-old writers are doing.” An American original and a Broadway immortal, George Abbott was the definitive man of the theater.

***This article also appears in Pittsburgh Public Theater’s newsletter, PUBLIC•ATION.***

## The Decade that ROARED

**By Kyle Brenton**

When the First World War ended on November 11, 1918, mankind awoke to a world that had been irrevocably changed. The spirit of optimism and hope that had accompanied the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions was confronted with the horrors of absolute, inhuman slaughter. In the aftermath of the war—the bloodiest and most brutal in human history to date—all of the assumptions and theories upon which the prewar world had been based had to be reevaluated. None of the old belief systems seemed adequate to the task of facing this new reality, and humanity sought a way to confront its now-uncertain future.

As is often the case in such situations, two divergent approaches developed. On the one hand many rejoiced in throwing off the strictures of the past and embraced the new wholeheartedly. Flappers, Flaming Youth, modernist writers and many others reveled in the new hedonism and pushed at the boundaries of what was acceptable in this new world. On the other hand, there was a strong faction that advocated a return to more traditional values and increased restraint. Creationists, Victorian temperance matrons, and others preached caution and discipline. In constant conflict with one another, the tension between these two philosophies engendered a decade that literally changed the world, and will always be remembered as “roaring.”

The clearest point of contention between the Victorians and the Moderns was America’s policy towards alcohol. Distilled spirits had been a part of the fabric of America from its beginnings, but by the mid-nineteenth century, the perceived precipitous rise in drunkenness was regarded as the number one problem facing the nation. Escalating crime, poverty, and violence was blamed on the influence of alcohol, and in 1851 Maine became the first state to ban the manufacture or sale of distilled spirits for any other than medicinal purposes. After the Civil War the so-called “temperance movement” gained momentum, and by the early twentieth century the Anti-Saloon League—formed mostly of conservative society matrons—had become a powerful political lobby. Finally, in 1917 Congress passed the Volstead Act, which, when ratified by the states in January of 1920, became the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, banning the manufacture, sale or import of alcohol in the United States.

But no sooner did the forces of Victorianism ban alcohol than the Moderns embraced it. Now that saloons could no longer operate openly, they went underground, becoming “speakeasies”—so-called because of the need for their patrons to speak softly to avoid undue attention. These clandestine bars and clubs quickly became the nucleus of the entire Flaming Youth movement. The young men and women seeking rebellion gravitated towards the forbidden—with their bobbed hair, knee-length skirts (or shorter!), and raccoon coats, they defiantly created a new kind of society.

In stars like Louise Brooks, Clara Bow and a young Joan Crawford the flappers and Flaming Youth found their idols, but it was F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald who were the movement’s royalty. After the publication in 1920 of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald became a celebrity of the new sophisticates, and he and his beautiful, witty, and emotionally unstable wife Zelda began throwing lavish parties in the style of his characters. Fitzgerald’s masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, is considered the epitome of Roaring Twenties literature, and perfectly encapsulates both the glory and the dissipation of the Flaming Youth life-style.

## **The Decade that ROARED** *continued*

And it was not only young white Americans who were creating a new society. Fueled by the postwar economic surge, African Americans who had migrated northward after the Civil War gathered in cities and began creating their own distinctive culture in a movement known as the Harlem Renaissance and remembered primarily for its most famous by-product, jazz. Both jazz and the artistic and literary style of the renaissance were consciously created by the blending of elements of African arts, gospel music and plantation life, and modern European innovations. The goal of this diverse movement was to give artistic expression to the African American experience, and for the first time the rest of America took notice. The poetry of Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the novels of Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, and the music of Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton and countless others became incredibly influential in America and in Europe, and for the first time the work of African Americans was seen by many as culturally significant.

Ironically, Victorianism's greatest victory—Prohibition—led to one of the greatest increases in crime ever. Before the Volstead Act, organized crime was limited to extortion, protection, and petty theft. When alcohol became illegal, however, what was to become known as “the mob” suddenly had an entirely new revenue stream. Almost as soon as Prohibition began, gangs stepped in to fill the booze needs of the burgeoning speakeasy industry. Liquor was a windfall for the mob—by 1926 more than \$3.6 billion was going through the gangs' pockets. It is little wonder, then, that the most powerful gangsters became tremendously influential in society at large.

The biggest mobster of them all was Al “Scarface” Capone. Born in Brooklyn, Capone moved to Chicago in the early 20s, and by 1925 had become the head of Johnny Torrio's organization. Capone had interests in booze, gambling, prostitution—name a vice, and Capone sold it. He was a ruthless enemy, and in the 1929 St. Valentine's Day Massacre his men brutally murdered seven members of a rival gang while dressed as policemen. However, despite his violent tendencies, Capone was something of a hero to the counterculture of the day. He carefully managed his public image—the press usually gave him positive coverage, and he made large and conspicuous donations to charities. In the eyes of the rebellious youth, Scarface was all that stood between their fun and the tyranny of Bible-thumping matrons. After Capone was finally arrested for tax evasion in 1931 and spent eight years in jail, he died in Miami in 1947, his brain destroyed by syphilis.

The exuberance engendered by the conflict between liberation and repression, between Victorianism and Modernism, brought forth one of the most culturally fertile and fascinating periods in American history, but as with many things, it quickly came to an end. As more and more middle-class Americans had more money to spend, they began investing it in the stock market. Such a tremendous influx of money created a bubble effect, and in October 1929 that bubble burst. In just over a week, the New York Stock Exchange lost more than \$30 billion, and America's booming postwar economy crashed into what would later be called the Great Depression. The conflict between the dignity of the past and the excitement of the future would have to wait to be resolved until another day, but its by-product, the Roaring Twenties, would always be remembered.

***This article also appears in the playbill of Pittsburgh Public Theater's production of BROADWAY.***

## The Twenties at a Glance

*November 11, 1918* – World War I ends.

*January 16, 1920* – The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution goes into effect at midnight, forbidding the manufacture, sale, import or export of alcohol in the United States. Prohibition begins.

*August 1, 1920* – Mohandas (later Mahatma) Gandhi begins his program of nonviolent confrontation with the imperial English power in India.

*August 18, 1920* – The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution is ratified, granting women the right to vote.

*September, 1920* – The “Black Sox” scandal, in which eight members of the Chicago White Sox are indicted for fixing the World Series.

*November 2, 1920* – Radio station KDKA begins broadcasting in Pittsburgh, becoming the first broadcast radio station in America.

*March, 1921* – The first Thompson submachine guns come off the assembly line. The gun quickly becomes a favorite weapon of bootleggers and gangsters.

*May 15, 1921* – The New York state legislature grants the state commissioner the right to censor scandalous dances.

*August 22, 1921* – The State Barber’s Commission of Connecticut rules that any woman “bobbing” another woman’s hair must have a barber’s license.

*February 2, 1922* – James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is published in Paris. 500 copies mailed to the U.S. are seized by the Postal Service as obscene material and are burned.

*March 25, 1922* – Pope Pius XI urges an international campaign to reign in revealing clothes for women.

*October, 1922* – Mussolini’s Fascists seize power in Italy.

*August 2, 1923* – President Warren Harding dies of an embolism while in office. Vice President Calvin Coolidge is sworn in to replace him.

*January 21, 1924* – Vladimir Lenin dies and is succeeded by Josef Stalin as the leader of the Soviet Union.

*November 7, 1924* – The stock market hits a five-year high.

*February 17, 1925* – Harold Ross publishes the first issue of *The New Yorker*.



**A 1920's "Flapper"**

## The Twenties at a Glance *continued*

*July 10, 1925* – The so-called “Scopes Monkey Trial” begins in Tennessee.

*April 10, 1925* – F. Scott Fitzgerald publishes his masterwork, *The Great Gatsby*.

*June 13, 1925* – First International Feminist Conference begins in Geneva.

*April 7, 1926* – Value of alcohol bootlegging in the US estimated at \$3.6 billion.

*May 9, 1926* – Richard E. Byrd and Floyd Bennett become the first men to fly over the North Pole – in a zeppelin.

*September 16, 1926* – Abbott and Dunning’s *Broadway* opens at the Broadhurst Theatre.

*September 23, 1926* – Gene Tunney stuns the world by beating Jack Dempsey in a 10-round match for the world heavyweight title.

*May 20-21, 1927* – Charles Lindbergh flies *The Spirit of St. Louis* from New York to Paris, traveling 3600 miles in 33 and one half hours.

*September 30, 1927* – Babe Ruth hits a record-breaking 60 home runs in a season.

*October 6, 1927* – *The Jazz Singer*, starring Broadway legend Al Jolson, debuts as the first “talkie” motion picture, and its success spells the end of the silent era in film.

*July 3, 1928* – The first television sets go on sale.

*September 15, 1928* – Alexander Fleming discovers penicillin.

*November 6, 1928* – Herbert Hoover wins the presidency.

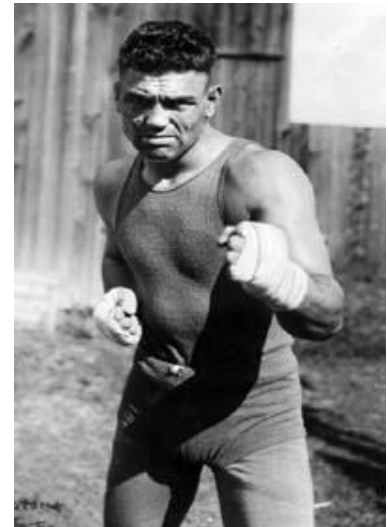
*February 14, 1929* – In the “St. Valentine’s Day Massacre,” six gangsters from the “Bugs” Moran mob and another man are gunned down in a Chicago garage.

*October 24-29, 1929* – In the greatest market crash in history, the American stock market loses over \$30 billion in the space of a few days. On the worst day of the crash, October 29 (“Black Tuesday”), more than 16 million shares are unloaded by panicked investors. The crash begins the economic spiral that will culminate in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

*This time-line also appears in the playbill of Pittsburgh Public Theater’s production of BROADWAY.*



**F. Scott Fitzgerald**



**Jack Dempsey**



**Babe Ruth**



**Al Capone**

## Gangstas

### By Rob Zellers

Of all the 1920s and 30s stage and film heroes defined by their occupations, none was more present and popular than the gangster. Curiosity about those living outside the law seems a natural human interest by no means confined to the gallant Robin Hood tradition. Think Tony Soprano. Think Gangsta Rap. Gangsters by definition operate in packs – hence such phrases as “the mob,” the “syndicate” and “organized crime.” This sort of enterprise has been around forever, but it got a big boost during the era of Prohibition (during which the consumption, distribution and sale of alcohol was illegal). Prohibition turned organized crime into a multimillion-dollar enterprise.

There is something oddly perverse about our fascination with gangsters. The cold-blooded gang vendettas, ambushes and massacres, purely to eliminate rivals, seize power and increase profits, seemed in effect the extension of big business and even the American Dream to their logical extremes – cutthroat capitalism without hypocritical pretense.

Some of the best examples of the gangster genre at least subliminally invite the audience to identify with a figure who has, however outrageously, beaten the system and made it pay off in possessions. And these possessions are often the kinds of things that many can only envy, such as fine clothes and big cars coupled with beautiful women and plenty of minions to do their bidding. Many real life gangsters like Al Capone, Legs Diamond, Arnold Rothstein, and Pretty Boy Floyd became folk heroes so it was no surprise that their fictional counterparts were at the center of many popular plays and movies.

In the late twenties and early thirties, the advent of talkies - films accompanied by speech and sound - enhanced the gangster film genre by capturing the gritty realities of urban America. Audiences could now hear the sob of night club saxophones, the chatter of a Tommy gun, the roaring motor and squealing tires of a getaway car, the wail of police sirens, and the harsh rasp of underworld slang.

Three of the best all-time gangster films came right on the heels of the huge stage success of George Abbott and Philip Dunning's *Broadway*. 1931 was the greatest of all years for gangster films, not only in volume (more than thirty), but in the number that remained of enduring interest. *Little Caesar* opened and starred Edward G. Robinson. His gangster was a complex figure (often compared to Shakespeare's Macbeth or Richard III) but ultimately his demise was brought on by his insatiable lust for power.

*Little Caesar* was indeed a hard act to follow. But then came *The Public Enemy*, starring James Cagney, Jean Harlow and Mae Clarke – recipient of the most famous grapefruit in movie history. This film attempted to delve into the characters' pasts to explain their criminal behavior. It also was the first film to link the war, Prohibition and the rise of the beer and liquor racket. The third of this classic trio was *Scarface* released in 1932 starring Paul Muni. It was based on the flagrant criminal career of Al Capone who from behind bars actually asked to see the script in advance.

One more film of note when considering the effects of this era, which began with the play *Broadway*, is *The Roaring Twenties*. It was Hollywood's first critical look back at the jazz decade. Even aside from its quasi-documentary value as a vibrant recapture of the pulse

**Gangstas** *continued*

and pace of New York nightlife in this incredible decade, it featured a first-rate performance by James Cagney as a basically decent bootlegger, Priscilla Lane as the innocent singer, and Humphrey Bogart as a gangster who won't let anything stand in his way.

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, and the repeal of Prohibition, speakeasies and bootlegging disappeared. But the gangster life and the Roaring Twenties have proven to be very durable. Stereotypes, even archetypes, are firmly set in our national consciousness. New interpretations, sometimes serious, sometimes satirical, from, *The Godfather* to Tony Soprano, will continue to be explored in this popular American genre.

## **BROADWAY Glossary**

**Bloomer** – A blunder.

**Butter and egg man** – A big spender who runs up large bills. Coined by Texas Guinan to describe a big spending Midwestern dairy magnate who dropped enormous amounts of money at her club.

**Campbell's** – Upper East Side funeral home (East 81<sup>st</sup> and Madison).

**Coupons** – United Cigar Store (or Schulte Cigar Store) coupons, which accompanied cigars and could be redeemed for promotional merchandise a la Marlboro Miles/Camel Cash.

**Cross-patch** – Unpleasant person.

**Darb** – Slang, something or someone very handsome, valuable, attractive, or otherwise excellent.

**Donahue, Jack** – Dancer, Vaudeville performer. Danced and choreographed for Flo Ziegfeld in the early 20s. Mentor to Marilyn Miller (whose story was dramatized in *Look for the Silver Lining* in 1949- Ray Bolger played Donahue). His memoir is called *Letters of a Hooper to his Ma*.

**Four-flusher** – One who makes outrageous poker bets without the hand to back them up (four of five cards necessary for a flush, for instance).

**Gat** – Gun (from "Gatling Gun").

**Guinan, Texas** – Mary Louise Cecilia "Texas" Guinan (1884-1933) was a Vaudeville performer who, with the advent of Prohibition, became the most famous speakeasy proprietress in the nation. She ran the 300 Club, which was famous for its 40 scantily clad fan dancers.

**Gus Sun Time** – Vaudeville circuit, included Bob Hope and Eddie Cantor early in their careers.

**Mammy song** – Genre of popular song now remembered in conjunction with Al Jolson, mammy songs were sung in blackface and expressed a yearning for simpler times and "traditional values."

**Morris chair** – Deep wooden chair with removable padding that can be set to recline at different angles. Named for William Morris, socialist reformer and founder of the Arts and Crafts movement.

**Pershing, General John** – Commander of American forces in Europe during World War I, fantastically successful, instrumental in the Allies winning the war.

**Poli** – New England Vaudeville circuit.

**Prisoner's song** – Written by Guy Massey in 1924 and recorded in Vernon Dalhart, the Prisoner's Song was fabulously popular. The pertinent lines are: "Meet me tonight in the moonlight, meet me tonight all alone. For I have a sad story to tell you—it's a story that's never been told. I'll be carried to a new jail tomorrow, leaving my poor darling alone. With the cold prison bars all around me, and my head on a pillow of stone."

**Pullman Service** – Refers to the service on Pullman sleeper cars on the railroad.

**Rod** – Gun.

**Second-story men** – Burglars adept at entering through second-story windows.

**Squab** – Pigeon, colloquialism for girl.

**BROADWAY Glossary** *continued*

**Sullivan Act** – Controversial 1911 New York City legislation which prohibited citizens from owning a gun small enough to conceal without a license from the local police precinct. Granting of such licenses was at the discretion of the local precinct, and licenses were rarely granted except to retired police officers. The Act is still in effect today.

**Tomasso, Jim** – Owner of Chicago nightclub.

**Westcott Express** – New York City/Brooklyn parcel delivery service.  
Headquarters: 215 Eleventh Ave.

**White chip** – something practically worthless - white chips are the lowest-value chips in poker.

**White Horse** – a brand of Scotch.

## **An Interview with Costume Designer David Zyla**

**By Angela Vincent**

*In the midst of the Public's fourth floor costume shop, I found BROADWAY's Costume Designer, David Zyla, hunched over a desk coloring sequined butterflies with a fabric marker. David, along with the rest of the costume shop staff, was busy finishing up any last minute costume notes for first preview. But as promised, David gave me about twenty minutes of his time for an interview, which was conducted in the fitting area of the costume shop.*



**Costume Designer David Zyla**

**David, you've been working with the Ted Pappas (Pittsburgh Public's Artistic & Executive Director) at the Pittsburgh Public Theater for how long?**

I've designed six shows over seven years. I worked on *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Dirty Blonde*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *You Can't Take It With You*.

**When did you first meet Ted and how did your relationship begin?** I worked with Ted first at Sacramento at the California Musical Theatre and we did a production of *Brigadoon*. We did *Carousel* the next summer. And when we were working on *Carousel*, he said, "Will you come to Pittsburgh and work on *Pirates of Penzance* with me?" I was thrilled to be asked.

**What other regional theaters do you currently work with?** I work with the Ford's Theatre in D.C., Repertory Theatre of St. Louis and Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park.

**You design for television and film in addition to the theater, is that correct?**

Yes, I have designed for both film and television. I've designed for the ABC show *Port Charles* for two seasons, *General Hospital* for a year and I just joined *All My Children* five months ago.

**How does designing for the theater differ from designing for television and film?** The scale of the design. The most important elements in television and film are usually from the waist up. (Shoes are the least important.) When you're designing for the theater it's more of a head to toe look. On top of that, you have to take into consideration the size of the theater and where the stage is in proximity to the audience. But, what I love about working in the theater is that there is an art of collaboration. You work with a director very closely. You bounce ideas back and forth. A director may come to you with a picture, an artist or a swatch of fabric and say this is the feel for the show, and then you'll play with it. You'll come back with an initial idea or design concept, and then you and the director will both throw out an idea and a new idea emerges. Working in television, it's a little bit more of a producer's medium than a director's medium. The departments interact a little differently. Each department will work with the producer separately, whereas in the theater, everybody collaborates and speaks together.

## **An Interview with Costume Designer David Zyla** *continued*

***What keeps you coming back to theater, when you're so busy working on daytime television drama?*** I love the theater. I love the theatrics of it – the height of it. It's a little bit bigger than life. Daytime drama is based more on current fashion, even though it's the height of fashion. But, in the theater you can make the choice to do a production all in blue, if it speaks to the play. You have the option to be more conceptual.

***How did you become involved in fashion design when you have spent most of your career designing for theater and television?*** I fell into fashion. I had an acquaintance that worked in a store on Madison Avenue. I had just gotten out of college and this person knew that I studied costume design. A client of theirs needed a gown designed and built in a week for a Victorian ball. So I did it. The people in the store said, "Wow you have a great sense. If you did a line, we would carry it." I thought okay and put together some pieces. So, I went into Henry Bendel's during the open day and they bought the collection. And it was just a matter of probably one and a half to two years before I was selling to stores like Bergdorf Goodman's, Macy's and specialty stores throughout the country. I dressed Hilary Clinton. I also showed my collection at 7<sup>th</sup> on 6<sup>th</sup> as part of Fashion Week, a well-known fashion event in New York City. After six years, I got to a point where I had achieved a lot of my goals for fashion design, and I was yearning to go back to the theater. Fashion is the opposite of costume design. Costume design is designing for one particular individual in a particular role; in fashion you're designing something that is of the moment, but somehow speaks to a lot of people, on the hanger even, not even on the body. I eventually called all my stores and said I'm taking a year off...and that was years ago. I'm very interested in fashion and if there were a way to juggle that with what I'm doing now, I'd entertain it.

***Tell me about your design process and how it differs from other designers.*** For any project, the first thing I do is read the play. I will immediately get ideas, and they will manifest themselves in a color palette. I'll usually go to my color box and just start putting a collage together based on what the world of the play is in terms of color. That's what roots it, for me. For example, you may read a play and say it's a pastel play because it's delicate or it's an oil painting play because it's rich and royal. My fabric choices and design choices all stem from my color palette. I know that there are some designers who work from the line first, and I have one designer friend who will feverishly sketch and then feverishly try to find a fabric to fit that design. I'm quite the opposite. I'll come up with the colors and do some swatching; I'll have a color for each design, but then I'll tweak it according to what I feel is in the market.

***What has been your best overall design experience?*** I have been very lucky to have had several. I thoroughly enjoy working here at the Public. The staff's collaboration, attention to detail and work ethic is amazing. Everyone here works as hard as I do. That's really been a plus. We've done shows here like *Romeo and Juliet* that are just enormous, and, to have people that are all so supportive and that are all working together as a team to make it happen is incredible to me. Two and half years ago I began a project, a musical called *Big River*, where half of the cast is hearing impaired and that challenged me in new ways. It wasn't just the communication with the cast and crew, but it was designing for deaf theater - the hands became very important. Patterns and sleeve treatments all became very important, in order to highlight the hands. Each section of the show is different, everyone signs at some point throughout the show whether they are a hearing or non-hearing actor.

## **An Interview with Costume Designer David Zyla *continued***

I did *Big River* with the Deaf West Theatre in California and I was able to revisit it again when it went to Broadway at the Roundabout Theatre last summer, and once again when it started its international and national tour. It'll actually be in Pittsburgh the week of March 8 for one week.

***What genre or type of productions do you prefer to design and why?*** I enjoy it all. Even with a contemporary show, there are still choices to be made. Where does a character work, where does that character shop, where does he or she come from? You can work all of these traits into the clothes, no matter what the period is. I personally love doing period and conceptual work and that's usually Shakespeare and musicals.

***What qualities do you think a costume designer should possess in order to be successful?*** You have to have a background in the theater. If you want to work as a designer, you need to have seen shows. I'm always encouraging people to see theater, whenever possible. If you can get a discount ticket or a free ticket to a show, go. If a friend has an extra ticket to something, get it. If you want to design for period films, you should see period films. You should familiarize yourself with the world. I also think that communication is key and talking about your ideas is key. In my training at NYU we had to come up with a reason for every choice that we made. Why did you choose blue for that dress? It can't be, "Well, I like blue." That's not helping the process. You need to start by challenging yourself with why I came up with that choice – why is this the right shoe and not that one. In order to work with other people, you need to be able to talk about what it is you do and why. You need to listen and understand the director in order to gather the proper information so that you are all on the same page. A director could say, "I want her dress to be blue," and your vision of blue is different from his or hers. Being flexible is also important. You need to come into a project completely prepared, but then when you actually meet the actress in person and learn that she's actually much more demure than her picture, you should adjust from it. You should say, "Wow that color's really too big." You can't be married to it because you are dressing a human being and a character at the same time. You may look at the skirt and say, "I know it's period, but that's too much skirt for her." You can't be stuck in your ideas; the collaboration needs to keep going from the first fitting until previews. Overall you need to pay attention and be objective.

***What advice would you give to a student who is interested in pursuing a career in costume design?*** See as much as you can and develop a vocabulary. Say you go to a show with a friend and neither of you cared for it, you need to be able to say why. Why didn't you believe that her Act II dress worked? This is how you learn, by seeing and talking about it in a constructive way. I also would encourage anyone who is interested in this field to take classes in color theory and art history. In art history we learn about the silhouette and the color palette of each period. And, to be successful there has to be a yearning to learn. I'm constantly learning. Just last week I spoke to a group of high school students and they were asking questions and I was challenged because after a while your process is a part of you and you're not breaking it down anymore. When a young person asks, "How do you come up with the ideas?" You have to go back and think about it yourself. Being personable is very important; if you're working with a new director and a new actor, you need to be able to carry on a conversation. Being a part of a team is also very important

## **An Interview with Costume Designer David Zyla** *continued*

because no one works in the theater on his or her own. There are wonderful design programs in the country - whether one goes to grad school or not is really a personal choice. I did not go to grad school, I did undergrad and took additional classes. I strongly suggest taking a class, if say your figure drawing isn't where you want it to be, take a class in it. Before going the next step to graduate school, there should be some breathing space between undergraduate and graduate in order to see what the world is like as an adult. Get your feet wet a little bit and see. Then say to yourself, these are the things that I think I still need to know and decide what your next step is.

### ***Are there particular undergraduate design programs that you would recommend?***

NYU undergraduate is excellent. Carnegie Mellon has a very good program and is very well respected. Northwestern is very well respected. And, I actually know some people who have come out of some other smaller schools, such as Ithaca College, which has a great program. Otterbein College in Ohio has a great theater program. Some of the smaller programs translate to more hands-on experience.

### ***You are always impeccably dressed. As a costume designer is there added pressure to dress in a certain way, or do you think it gives you the freedom to be a little more eccentric?***

All of us, when we go to work for that important meeting, go on a first date, or whatever the situation is, we use costume in our day-to-day lives. As a costume designer, you need to instill confidence in people that you know - what you look good in. So that whether your style is classic European or cutting edge runway fashion, you should still have a look going on. If I were to walk into a room and my hair was a mess, my t-shirt was ripped and I had mismatched socks on, what is that going to say about me? It's really not going to convey the message that I'm a detailed oriented person that is capable of dressing 35 people in 112 costumes. I encourage everyone to have their own look and really develop it, but at the same time, the more together it is and the more developed the look is, the better.

## Costuming Professions

**Costume Designer** – is an artist who creates the look or style of the clothes worn by the actors for a production, in collaboration with the director.

**Assistant Costume Designer** – is a personal assistant to the Costume Designer on a specific production.

**Costume Shop Manager** – is an individual who oversees the daily operations of the costume shop, including personnel and supplies management.

**Draper** – is also known as the *Cutter* or *Patternmaker*. The theater artist who creates the patterns and supervises the construction of specific costumes as designed by the Costume Designer.

**First Hand** – is also known as the *Assistant Cutter*. He or she is the theater artist who assists the Draper in pattern making. This person also manages and instructs the stitchers.

**Stitcher** – is also known as a *Seamstress* or *Seamster*. An artisan who sews either by machine or hand the costumes assigned by the Draper or First Hand.

**Shopper** – is a person who purchases clothing and accessories as delegated by the Costume Shop Manager or Costume Designer.

**Tailor** – is an artisan who creates menswear costumes for a specific production as designed by the Costume Designer.

**Dyer/Painter** – is a theatrical assistant responsible for dyeing and painting fabric as designed by the Costume Designer.

**Craftsperson** – is a theater artist who creates all accessory items or special costume projects such as masks as designed by the Costume Designer.

**Milliner** – is a theater artist who creates hats and headwear as designed by the Costume Designer.

**Wardrobe Master** – is also known as the *Wardrobe Mistress* or *Wardrobe Supervisor*. He or she is a run (backstage) crew-member

**Dresser** – The run (backstage) crew-member that implements the care and use of the finished costumes in dress rehearsals and performances.

**Wig Designer** – is also known as the *Wig Stylist* or *Wig Master*. He or she is part of the run (backstage) crew who implements the care and use of hair and makeup in dress rehearsal and performances.

***For the Public's production of BROADWAY about eight persons worked an average of 40 hours a week over span of four weeks. Toward the end of the build these same eight persons worked an average of 50 - 60 hours a week in order to construct a total of 60 costumes for 16 actors.***

## Resources and Suggested Reading

### TEXTS

- Abbott, George and Holm, John Cecil. *Three Men On A Horse*. Dramatist's Play Service, 1998.
- Abbott, George and Bridgers, Ann Preston. *Coquette: A Play in Three Acts*. Longmans, Green and Co., 1928.
- Botto, Louis (Editor) and Viagas, Robert. *At This Theatre: 100 Years of Broadway Shows, Stories, and Stars*. Applause Theatre & Cinema Book Publisher, 2002.
- Charyn, Jerome. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers: Old New York, the Jazz Age, and the Birth of Broadway*. Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003.
- Downey, Patrick. *Gangster City: The History of the New York Underworld 1900-1935*. Barricade Books, 2004.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner; Reprint edition, 1995.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *This Side of Paradise*. Scribner, 1998.
- Mantle, Burns (Editor). *The Best Plays of 1926-27*. Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927.
- Morrison, William F. *Broadway Theatres: History and Architecture*. Dover Publications, 1999.
- Waggoner, Susan. *Nightclub Nights: Art, Legend, and Style 1920-1960*. Rizzoli Publications, 2001.
- Walker, Stanley. *The Night Club Era*. John Hopkins University Press, John Hopkins Paperbacks ed edition, 1999.
- Whitehead, Colson. *The Colossus of New York: A City in 13 Parts*. Doubleday, 2003.

### ON-LINE

- American Cultural History of 1920-1929 "<http://kclibrary.nhmccd.edu/decade20.html>" Prohibition and The Music, Art and Culture of the 1920s "<http://alephnull.net/20s/>"
- Prohibition and The Volstead Act "[www.searchtuna.com/ftlive/816.html](http://www.searchtuna.com/ftlive/816.html)"
- US History and Roaring 20s "[www.besthistorysites.net/USHistory\\_Roaring20s.shtml](http://www.besthistorysites.net/USHistory_Roaring20s.shtml)"

**All of these sites have links to other web sites with information of or relating to the subject matter.**

### FILMS

- Coppola, Francis Ford. *The Godfather*. Paramount Home Videos, 1972.
- Chase, David. *The Sopranos*. Warner Home Video, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003.
- Hawks, Howard and Rosson, Richard. *Scarface*. Universal Studios, 1932.
- LeRoy, Mervyn. *Little Caesar*. Warner Studios, 1930.
- Walsh, Raoul. *The Roaring Twenties*. Warner Studios, 1939.
- Wellman, William A. *The Public Enemy*. Warner Studios, 1931.