

Theater Monsters

As different as they are, they all have two traits in common: iron wills and the ability to keep their foot in the door. That's what makes producers theater's sacred monsters.

In a city dominated by Broadway behemoths, it's the reason tiny theaters continue to survive and thrive.

by Henry Edwards ■ Photography by Brad Wilson

The 35 people currently living on the second floor of the imposing townhouse at 138 East 27th Street include Satan, St. Peter, Jesus, Death, a slew of gossiping angels, lewd devils, cured cripples, wily bishops, and jobless gravediggers. A group of souls also float through the air.

Another resident, Peralta, a gambler with a Robin Hood streak who gives all his winnings to the poor, has just challenged Satan to a card game. To the accompaniment of throbbing salsa rock, the game proceeds. Its outcome will determine nothing less than the fate of 33 billion souls who have misguidedly been condemned to hell. And it will offer definitive proof that divine justice is just as crooked as the human variety.

Adapted by Colombian director Jorge Ali Triana from a popular Colombian play and folk tale, this phantasmal morality play is called "And the Carnival Erupted!" It is one of 12 productions currently being presented at Repertorio Español.

Repertorio Español, along with its companions Ubu Repertory and American Jewish Theatre (AJT), are the three principal specialized nonprofit theater companies in the Flatiron District. As different as their productions may be, they have one thing in common: all are headed by uncontainable, passionate producers who are willing to do virtually anything in order to make their companies succeed.

Dedicated and driven, Repertorio Español's René Buch, Robert Federico, and Gilberto Zaldivar, AJT's Stanley Brechner, and Ubu Rep's Françoise Kourilsky are survivors who share a lifelong commitment to the art of playwriting, and a desire to use maximum theatricality to enhance that art. They are three prime examples of theater's sacred monsters.

Sacred Monsters Are Made, Not Born

Sacred monsters are not born. Usually they find themselves infected with the theatrical virus at an exceptionally young age. In the early 1940s, in his native Cuba, Buch was studying law at Havana University, when legendary French actor Louis Jouvert and his company turned up to perform. The young student did not speak a word of French, but he attended every performance. Fifty years later, the recollection of Jouvert's performance of Arnolphe in Molière's "The School For Wives" still overwhelms him.

After earning his law degree, and a MFA from Yale University, Buch went to work as an editor. But the theatrical virus had taken over his soul. And in 1968 he joined forces with fellow Cuban Zaldivar. Although a Diner's Club executive, Zaldivar had previously worked in Havana's theaters, and he too lost the battle with the theatrical bug.

Together, they raised \$10,000, and put on their debut Spanish-language production at the Greenwich Mews Theatre. The decision to devote themselves to theater full-time came easy. But Zaldivar's resignation to Diner's Club was more difficult, and he said that he was moving to Miami to open a beachwear factory.

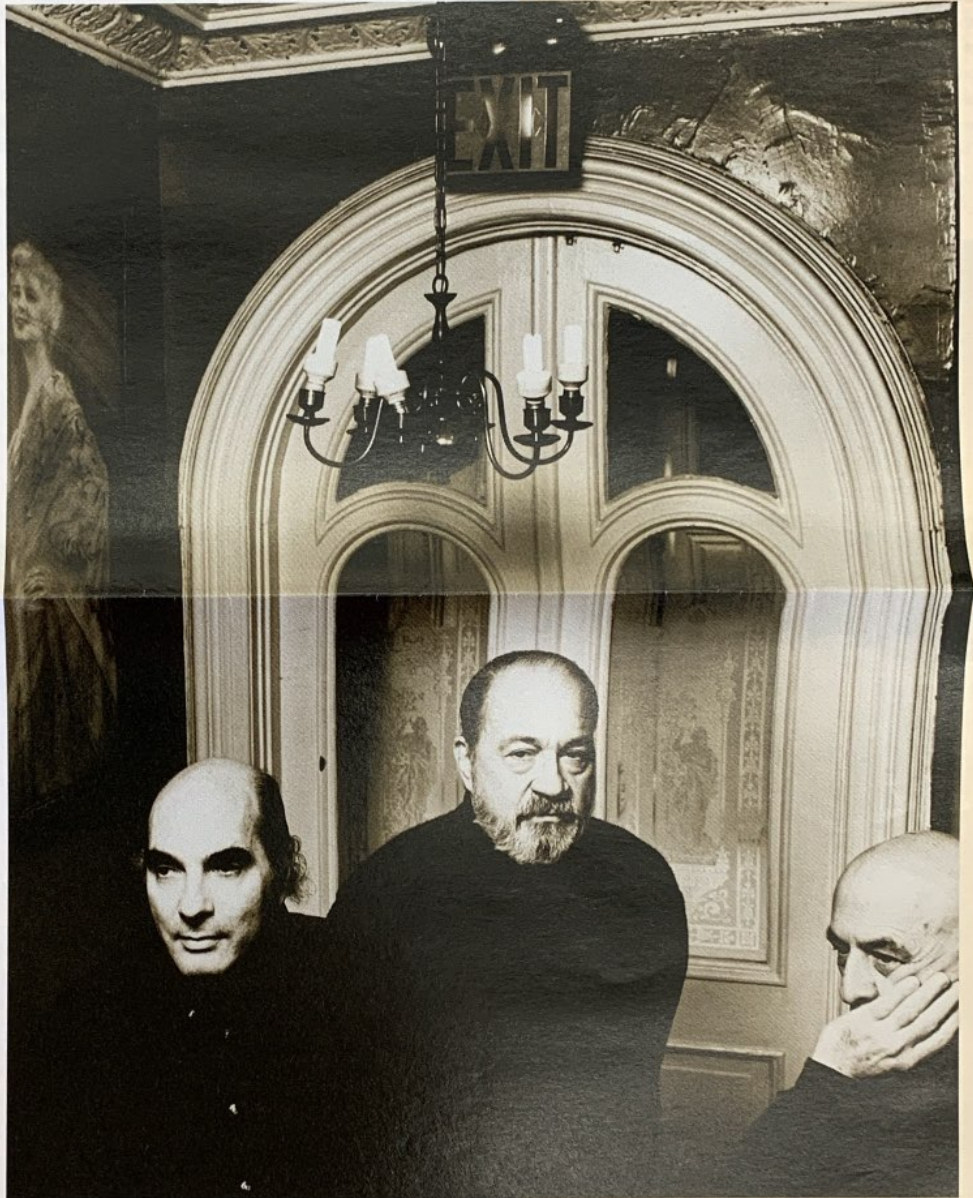


Photo from left: Repertorio Español's Robert Federico, Gilberto Zaldivar, and René Buch.

"I was too embarrassed to admit that I was quitting a good business career for the theater," he says sheepishly.

Soon a third partner, associate producer Federico, a New Yorker who spoke no Spanish, signed on as resident designer in 1971. Federico proved an ideal collaborator, and his artistic vision fit well with Buch and Zaldivar, who equate realism with bad television.

In that same year, the troika moved to their current space, a brownstone containing the 140-seat Gramercy Arts Theatre. Prior occupants included an Armenian church and 19-year-old Barbra Streisand, who made her professional debut there in the catastrophic 1961 flop, "Another Evening With Harry Stoones."

Twenty-four years later, the trio is spending \$1.8 million to present a hectic 350-performance season that includes classics like Calderón's "Life Is A Dream" and Lorca's "Blood Wedding," plus new works like "Dominican Serenade," a 30-song revue celebrating the music of the Dominican Republic, and two plays that document the experiences of Puerto Ricans raised in New York.

Enter Second Banana

A few blocks away in a tiny basement at 307 West 26th Street, a second carnival is underway. Sixty-five-year-old comedian Sammy Shore is busy pretending to be his father, Hymie. Shore, a rooming house owner and operator, ex-husband of Mitzi Shore—the doyenne of the Los Angeles comedy club circuit—and father of comedian Pauly Shore, is comedy's best known number two, an almost never out-of-work second banana with a trunkful of vaudeville and Borscht Belt shtick. Over the years, he has been a preferred opening act for Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Ann-Margret, Julio Iglesias, Dionne Warwick, and Diana Ross.

Shore has temporarily abandoned Las Vegas to come to the 120-seat AJT to star in Greg Lewis's and Rudy DeLuca's adaptation of his memoir, "The Warm Up." His bulbous nose glistens with rage. And his humor blisters as he snaps insults at everybody in sight.

As the comic paints a startling portrait of his tight-fisted crank of a father, every move and inflection are being scrutinized by director Martin Landau, best known for appearing in the television show "Mission: Impossible" and for his recent Academy Award-winning performance as Bela Lugosi in "Ed Wood." Other luminaries who have worked at AJT include Kevin Bacon, Matthew Broderick, Malcolm McDowell, Marian Seldes, John Turturro, and Eli Wallach.

According to Brechner, AJT's producer, stars like these have come to AJT because they share its sense of identity and purpose.

"Anti-Semitism is as old as man, or at least as old as Christianity," he explains. "My theater investigates and pursues the mechanism of this age-old

hatred of Jews. Jewishness is a highly dramatic frame of reference. Nothing about it is cliché."

Nor is there anything clichéd about AJT's lobby decorations, a collection of newspaper clippings about anti-Semitism labeled "The AJT Hall Of Fame." Headlines scream "Pogrom in Brooklyn," "Sununu Blames The Jews," "Rioter Describes 'Kill The Jew Attack,'" "Anti-Semites At Columbia," and "Waldheim Given Welcome By Kohl."

As a showcase for Jewish theater, AJT has presented major new works by Howard Fast, Ronald Ribman, Eric Bentley, Wolf Mankowitz, Grace Paley and Isaac Bashevis Singer, along with new translations of various Yiddish classics, including plays by Sholem Aleichem and Sholem Asch.

Brechner's esthetic has proved disturbing to some. In 1992, young blacks upset over racial taunts in "The Day The Bronx Died" smashed his theater's front window. A year later, patrons threw their ticket stubs at the producer's face after viewing "Have You Spoken To Any Jews Lately?," which depicted murder as a young Jew's response to anti-Semitism. Others were dismayed by "Shabbatai." Not only was a Torah trod upon, but the late Lubavitch leader Rabbi Menachem Schneerson was mentioned with David Koresh, Jimmy Swaggert, and Sun Myung Moon. "Shabbatai" even depicted

"Everyone Thought She Was Jewish"
But Brechner's greatest successes have been a series of chamber revivals of Broadway hits with Jewish themes and characters. His most acclaimed production of "The Rothschilds" was so successful it moved to Circle in the Square Downtown, and ran almost a year. Another hit, the runaway hit, "Call Me Ethel," the life of musical comedy legend Ethel Merman was a lifelong practical joke. It didn't faze Brechner because, as he explained, "she thought she was Jewish."

Despite these successes, Brechner's theater is convinced that his theater will never get the respect it deserves. "Jewish sophisticates are not by anything they consider too ethnic and not part of their assimilated culture. Orthodox Jews don't understand theater and how it contributes to forging Jewish identity. The conservative right view theater as things and curiosities. And as far as the mainstream is concerned, if you're part of a Jewish theater, what you do it won't be good enough."

Being Ubu

Not far from Brechner's basement theater, the brightens considerably with Ubu Rex. Rehearsed by Kourilsky, who holds court a few doors down, is an elegant 99-seat playhouse. A former school teacher, sophisticated and stylish, Kourilsky holds a doctorate in Theater Arts from Sorbonne, radiates the ageless grace of French cinema star Danielle Darrieux.

