

SERVICING THE ART A CONVERSATION WITH JOE MELLILO

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As Executive Producer of the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in Brooklyn, NY, Joseph V. Melillo has upheld BAM's position as the leading institution for contemporary performance. BAM is firmly rooted in its local environ while being international in its scope of programming. Melillo is responsible for all of BAM's artistic programming. In this interview, he discusses his role in relation to the artists and institution that he services.

JANE KYUNGWON JUNG: During the course of your career, you have been the Marketing Director for the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, PA and also have worked in a service organization for theater management professionals. From there, you transitioned into producing the New World Festival in Miami and then to Brooklyn Academy of Music. What was behind the transition from theater management to producing?

JOE MELLILO: It specifically started with getting my MFA in theater at Catholic University and then going to the Guthrie Theater immediately following my degree. I had a job working at the resident theater doing very basic work of assisting the production manager and the administrative

director. I did everything I could and I learned a great deal in that post-graduate academic world because I found myself being able to watch Michael Langham, who was the artistic director of the Guthrie Theater at that time actually direct. I watched a certain kind of professional process that I did not have training in because he was a Brit and had worked in Canada. But more importantly, I knew that I didn't have that skill bent but I recognized that he did. This taught me that I had the aesthetic vision and the passionate need to create opportunities for men and women who are of that world, of that talent. So it started with a very clear understanding of my place in relationship to the art of theater.

What I wanted ultimately was to become a producer. Migrating from Minneapolis to New

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York City, I took every job I could possibly get to start accumulating practical experiences. I worked at the City Center for Music and Drama in educational and young people's theater and after that in touring lecture demonstration groups for the New York City Ballet and New York City Opera. I was involved in a lot of creative endeavors but it was all focused upon assembling practical experiences that would position me to make a very clear commitment to being a producer. That's why I left New York City to become the Marketing Director of the Walnut Street Theatre during the Bicentennial season because I knew that I wanted to commit to learning how to attract audiences. That was another skill that I could gain by being a practitioner.

When I came back to New York City, I was hired by a man named Fred Vogel to become the theater program director for the Foundation of Extension and Development of the American Professional Theater (FEDAPT), which helped young artistic directors and managing directors create the not-for-profit institutional support for their artistic vision in their geographic region. It was great fun because I was able to help them and I got to see all of the problems and challenges in constructing an artistic season and how to deliver that season.

I knew then that I needed to get into actually doing it and that's when I became the General Manager of the New World Festival of the Arts in Miami. The festival of Miami was in June of 1982 and I did 22 world premieres in three weeks. It required a different kind of professional methodology both as a producer and as a manager. No one had any experience in doing world premieres of opera, theater, and modern dance within the immediate administrative staff. It was on the job training while also delivering a service. I was elucidating and enlightening, while actually doing. When I went down, it had been three

years in the planning but I was there to produce it eight months before opening night. It was huge. I'm a very logical practical human being and applying calm practical action controls the chaos, eliminates it and puts it on a continuum. That's what I did. I can deal with change. I can deal with improvisation and I can deal with the unknown.

Making that choice to go to Miami to produce that festival was in retrospect the critical decision because it positioned me when I came back to New York to be hired by Harvey Lichtenstein. He had the idea to create a contemporary performing arts festival at BAM and he needed someone who knew how to produce a festival and I had the credentials.

When you transitioned into being the Next Wave Festival director, what was your relationship to the artists?

When Harvey Lichtenstein hired me in 1983, he had a single piece of paper with names of individual artists and productions. My first management act was to create a file folder with each one of those names. The endeavor of producing the festival was to clarify what was achievable. At that time the festival was going to be three years in duration. I could produce two of the opening productions and present the balance of the others.

I moved one of the productions that was on his list from the Inaugural Festival to the following year. It became very clear that we were not going to recreate, restage, reproduce Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* in 1983, but we could do it in 1984. That was a management act that came out of research. The sets and costumes didn't exist. They needed new choreography commissioned and there was not enough time.

There was also not enough money to make it happen yet. So the opening production of the

Next Wave Festival was *THE PHOTOGRAPHER/Far From the Truth* composed by Philip Glass, performed by Philip Glass Ensemble, directed by Joanne Akalaitas. I produced that while simultaneously producing the full production of *The Gospel at Colonus* with Lee Breuer and Bob Telson.

Those were the two big productions of the inaugural Next Wave Festival. Everything else was presented. With Bob Telson and Lee Breuer, I negotiated a relationship with Robert Stearns of the Performing Arts Program at the Walker Arts Center and we gave Lee and Bob a workshop in Minneapolis. From the workshop, Lee then found more ways to elucidate and amplify what he and Telson wanted to do in the re-imagining and the re-conceptualization of that classic Greek text set in an African American Pentecostal Baptist church. It was essential to have that workshop and then to have the rehearsal period here in Brooklyn.

My role was to assemble the production budget, negotiate contracts, set up a production schedule, work with the directors on casting, and oversee all of the logistic issues making it possible to get through opening night. It was an opportunity to give New York City the experience of seeing what was then called performance art or inter-art, a multiplicity of media and mediums in this work, on a large scale for the first time.

Was the Next Wave Festival the first time you worked with the types of artists that exemplified that aesthetic?

At Catholic University, they prided themselves on teaching you how to direct classical literature, Greek drama, Shakespeare, Molière, while I was interested in a different kind of literature, contemporary American and global playwriting. This comes from being a part of the sixties, in the generation of reacting to a kind of conservatism. That was the nature of

my upbringing and experiences of that time, knowing there was another world to approach and to have access to. The fact that I ended up producing the Next Wave Festival and have a career in contemporary performing arts is organic to my interests.

At the time you were trying to gain the skills necessary to make that a reality, what motivated you during that period?

It's about how you service the project with your intelligence, hard work, personality, and it's how you devote yourself to that endeavor. There's a certain selflessness that operates in doing that, which allows you to completely focus on the endeavor and provide to the creative endeavor all that it needs to be successful.

Did you have a clear sense of this vision all along?

I knew I had a destiny. I was clear about that. It was something that comes out of life that propels you emotionally and psychologically forward. I was seeking something and I didn't know it was going to be BAM, but I knew that I was on some kind of trajectory. This calling is a belief in your own aesthetic need. It's a kind of identity. It's organic of your want, desire, needs that you hear and listen to and follow. It is the creative imagination put to some productive good.

Can you talk about your process when reviewing works and deciding what to program?

In seeing final work fully produced, I determine whether or not, in my best tabula rasa or subjective-objective opinion, whether the art will work within the context of the physical venues that I am the steward of. Will my audience perceive this as beautifully as I do? If I'm feeling good about it; if I feel that shock of

the newest; if I think that this is original story telling, intelligently articulated, extraordinarily produced, and it's not like anything else I've ever seen, then I know the audiences that we have here at BAM, who are much younger than other audiences throughout the country, will register the same awe as I do. I've been servicing them for twenty five years and I think New Yorkers are profoundly open to innovative and progressive in ideas about the theater.

As of January 1st, I have been to Egypt, Jordan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Senegal. Here we are at March 1st and on Thursday, I go to Reykjavik, Iceland. I travel. I walk the walk and talk the talk. I'm in those theaters. I'm seeing what's going on around the world. I was at Manhattan Theatre Club on Saturday night. I've seen more performances than probably any other colleague in the city because that's the nature of BAM. It's both a local and a global cultural center. I'm constantly meeting with artists, producers, managers and my entire world is about artists and art. So over time, you build up a kind of muscle that tells you what is good. This is beautiful story telling. This is amazing art. These actors are terrific. Even though they are from an Arab country and they're speaking in Arabic, I understand them. This dance company from Taiwan, look at that movement, composition and structure! Here I am in Morocco at a Sufi music concert and this sound is so haunting and mysterious.

Is this sensibility an acquired skill or something innate?

It's an acquired skill. I think that you have an innate, native quality that makes it possible, but I think that I have been trained to be an adjudicator of art. When I was at Catholic University, principles of aesthetics and issues of quality were hammered into me. Not all people are created equal. There is something called virtuosity versus proficiency and

efficiency. It's just how the hierarchy works and it has to do with Mother Nature. It's the way the world works. I don't have to battle it. I don't have to question it because I'm not an academic. When you see someone like a Yo-Yo Ma take the cello, this is one of arguably three or four artists of the world who are to be called virtuosic in the mastery of the cello. It could be in the poorest neighborhood in Dakar, Senegal. You watch this child who is learning American modern dance for the first time. You watch this child's body respond to a vocabulary that she's never seen before and you are taken aback by her instinctive response. There are many other students going through these master classes, but this child gets it. "The body doesn't lie," as Martha Graham said.

With the Next Wave Festival, you were eventually in a position where you made the choices of what works would go up. How did this happen?

That's evolutionary. You go from being a producer to being a curator and that's where you build a trust between people and you bring ideas, projects and opportunities into a cauldron. I was working with Harvey Lichtenstein and we were traveling together to these locations and he was the gatekeeper. He opened my perceptions up but it was certainly limited to the European community and my interest was more international and global. I got the opportunity to work and meet with a whole range of different artists who were giving me the opportunity to understand what was possible. I was seeing a lot of international art in the festival formats and I was able to report back to Harvey. Harvey would say, "You need to go to South Africa this weekend to see this play at the Market Theatre." Those kinds of experiences happened with Harvey and so I've conditioned myself. I always have my passport in my briefcase. I'm always ready to depart.

Currently as you're traveling the world, what are some of the trends you see in the performing arts?

The trends really have to do with technology all over the world. It is abundantly available to everyone because the hardware has become so affordable. So you give artists the opportunity and it becomes a new tool. It's readily available everywhere and that's the big change. Technology is extending the narrative of the content of the work. It's not décor. It's about storytelling and how the visual mediums of technology and multiple technologies are being used. The digital universe has arrived in the performing arts.

Coming from a theater background, how do you approach the other disciplines in terms of programming?

I see it as theater. If you keep theater as a mother art form in front of you then you're able to look at all art even visual arts from a perspective of theater. Spectacle, performance, artistic creation, audience member, spectator-take the frame and look at it objectively and subjectively.

BAM's programming is expansive, ranging from the Next Wave Festival to films to music concerts all over Brooklyn. BAM is more than just a presenting organization but a cultural hub for this neighborhood and for this borough.

BAM is an urban contemporary art center. We want to be a vibrant epicenter for art and culture in our community. The fact is that today in 2010, Brooklyn is the largest borough in the five borough system. It's exceptionally culturally diverse and it has the youngest community of creative professionals. Anyone who graduates from colleges and universities all over the country who think that they want to come to New York City to work in a creative

profession does not think about finding an apartment in Manhattan. They live in Brooklyn or Queens. Brooklyn has not only the largest demographic but it's the largest geographic area. There are plenty of places for individuals to afford economically.

We also have the third largest and efficient transportation hub. First one being Times Square; second, Grand Central; the third is Atlantic Pacific Stop. There has been a Brooklyn renaissance. The quality of living in Brooklyn today is exceptional. It rivals Manhattan and that's a big change. We're all part of the global community and finding a way in which BAM can be a player on a daily basis in someone's life is essential. We want to be their art and cultural and entertainment outlet in the borough Brooklyn.

We touch many different artistic communities here in Brooklyn. The BAMcafé is primarily Brooklyn musicians and singer-songwriters. The BAMcinématek also is responsive to the Brooklyn film making community. The Education and Humanities Department does spoken-word concerts with Brooklyn-based writers. For our literary series, which is done with the National Book Awards organization, we make sure that we have Brooklyn authors represented along with national authors from all around the country. Forty-five percent of our audience comes from Brooklyn, forty-five percent from Manhattan, and that remaining ten percent comes from the other boroughs and the places like Westchester County, Holbrook, and New Jersey.

In terms of the overall trajectory of the organization, where do you see BAM now?

The vision that was essential to articulate to the Board and Karen five years ago was that this institution needs a more intimate theater. When you have the opportunity to work in the 2000 seat Opera House and the Harvey

Theater, an 874-seat proscenium, what's missing is a less than 300 seat, completely flexible theater.

In the autumn of 2012, I will be opening that Next Wave Festival in the new Fisher Building, which will be a 250 seat completely flexible theater. There's art that I have seen both locally and globally that is intimate in nature and my colleagues throughout greater New York City are not interested in that work. I said we can play a role in facilitating that and making it possible to introduce New York City to new ideas. In the 21st century there are artists who don't believe that the proscenium arch is the right physical environment for their art and we need to be able to respond to them and nurture their growth. We can grandfather them from the 250 seat completely flexible theater to an 874 seat Harvey Theater to a 2000-seat Opera House. Structuring that path for the future would probably be the job of someone who will replace me, but it's very much needed in order to complete BAM's artistic profile of how to service art.

With the transition from Harvey, Karen had a need to get the institution invested in the local community. I had a need to go from internationalism under Harvey, which was Euro-centric art, to a more global palette. I was a person who was of the globe, not just of Europe. It's very important to me to have Latino, South American, African, and Asian art represented in all of our programming. Karen and I have fulfilled our vision of this local and global reality. We are now maintaining it and growing it and trying to bring it to another level of understanding within the city.

In the end, it's all about the artist. Not about us. The word artisanal represents our work. It is a commitment to each individual artist to structure for them individually with our hands their voyage through BAM, from the invitation to the opening night to the run to the close

out. I just said to a younger administrator manager who is starting his own company here in Brooklyn that what you'll learn is that being transparent is the most perfect state of being. I don't own anything here at BAM. I service BAM, I service New York City. Ultimately at the end of the day, what it is to be a professional in the performing arts is to make a contribution. When you objectively look at your career, do you feel as though you've made a contribution and is it perceived as significant? Then you can retire.