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Epstein's Joe Papp: A Manic and Fearless Shakespearean Hero

By Tony Kushner

Joe Papp: An American Life, by Helen Epstein. Little, Brown, \$24.95, 554 pages.

People stay away from the theater in America, in the hundreds of millions they stay away, because so much of it is just narcissism on the hoof, desperate, dumb and disengaged. Tune in some night to David Letterman crooning his *Cats* ballad, "Meednight, and the keetties are sleeping," and the goose flesh on your arms will tell you all you need to know. War, plague and the G.O.P. aside, there is nothing much on this earth that is more terrible than terrible theater. Irrelevance is boring. Joe Papp understood that.

I met Joe Papp a few brief times and that was near the end in 1990 when the Public was producing my play *Bright Room Called Day*. He talked nonstop in a kind of free-associative ramble Helen Epstein's nourishing and juicy biography showed me was characteristic. "This is a good play," he told me, "it's not a great play but it's a good play it's got problems a number of problems especially in the second act but I like this play we can do this." I was so thrilled to be meeting him, and to be produced at the Public, that I didn't really care that he thought my play was only "good" (and besides, I agreed with him). My most important early theatergoing experiences had been at his theaters: Sam Waterston's *Hamlet*, Richard Foreman's *Threepenny Opera*, JoAnne Akalaitis' *Dead End Kids*. When *Bright Room* was trashed by virtually every critic in New York, Papp was supportive, extending the show a week even though the houses were small. He called me on the grim morning after opening night. I'd left a spiteful, pissy message on my answering machine and fled my apartment. Papp laughed at the message and said, "I'm glad to hear that you'll be all right you'll make it in this business if you can laugh you'll be fine." And he offered to produce my next play, sight unseen (which, I also learned from *Joe Papp: An American Life*, was standard practice).

Bright Room turned out to be part of the last Papp season. His long, painful dying and his death, interrupted by the death of a son from AIDS, are movingly (and even, surprisingly, intimately) elaborated by Ms. Epstein. His final years have frequently been compared to Lear's, with his kingdom in disarray and many heirs apparent, but I am more reminded of Lenin's final illness. No one could sufficiently prepare for his death because no one could really believe he was going to die, including, one suspects, the man himself.

Joe Papp grew up, he once told a reporter, "at a time when everything you did had a certain importance." He never learned that art is trivial, marginal, a luxury. He believed art mattered; he believed it entirely, and his belief convinced nearly everyone else—at least as long as he was around to grab them by the lapels and remind them. Papp was marked and made by poverty, his parents' immigrant

experience, his multiracial community's belief in social transformation, the international victory over fascism, and by the tragedies of the Holocaust and American racism and McCarthyism. He was a communist, a radical democrat, unapologetically but not doctrinally or nostalgically of the Left. He was brave and ferocious. He fought great battles and he won a number of them. Problematic, disappointing or even appalling at times, whether a hero of the Life or of the Art, or of both, Papp was one of the very few heroes this tawdry, timid business, the American theater, has produced.

Shakespeare-Schakespeare

Papp obviously loved Shakespeare but for all of his repeatedly avowed intentions to do so he never created an "American Shakespearean" style, whatever that might be. He was no scholar—I remember being amused and outraged when reading his boast that he had written the prefaces for a new edition of the entire 37 plays in some preposterously short period of time, like over one weekend. Ms. Epstein quotes a young Papp (or rather, Papirofsky) in a 1939 letter to a friend, prophetically articulating the credo at the heart of the mature Papp approach to the canon: "I am consuming all [Shakespeare's] masterpieces rapidly." It's easy to sneer at such naïve, arriviste enthusiasm, and critics sneered for years. But this appetite for and toward literature is ultimately political, even in its gleeful, unselfconscious vulgarity. Shakespeare-Schakespeare, or to borrow from Jon Lovitz, "acting-schmacting": Shakespeare is ours! said Papp, ours/Jewish, ours/black, ours/American. What's wrong with the way we do Shakespeare is what's wrong with the way we do theater in general—not enough thinking, not enough feeling, not enough politics. The best and rightest thing about this biography is the centrality Ms. Epstein has given to the political, rather than the esthetic, aspect of Papp's life and prodigious achievement.

If there is anything like a New York Shakespeare Festival style, it can be found in an anarchic multiculturalism, which, occasionally, electrifies (as when, for example, a couple of seasons ago in the Park, soft, subtle, dry Christopher Walken and robust, operatic, radiant Raul Julia clashed to great visceral and theatrical effect as Iago and Othello). Papp cared more about what he was saying on his stages than how he was saying it. This passionate recklessness made for a lot of bad work—a lot of bad Shakespeare, in my opinion—but Papp understood, as few have, that the stage is a public forum, and he willed into existence on his stages dramatic art that had an active presence in the life of his city and his world.

Papp led a life full of incident, public and private, and hundred of productions, and only a volume three times the length of *Joe Papp* could have given full consideration to all of it. Most modern biographers would have gone for that kind of length, drowned their subject in obscuring clouds of detail, and been unforgivably boring in the process. Ms. Epstein

has lingered over very little, which is a respectable and smart choice. As the subtitle, *An American Life*, suggests, her intention, successfully achieved, was not to render a highly individuated portrait, but rather the passage of an exemplar of a certain sort of consciousness through a particular time.

That approach has its shortcomings. Readers looking for great heaps of dirt will be frustrated. There was plenty of mud to be flung—four marriages, affairs, several estranged children, periods where the young Papp hid his Jewish origin, a weird although apparently salutary relationship with a shrink—but the author, who worked closely and respectfully with Papp's friends and family, abstains. The wives are all underdone, which is surprising given Ms. Epstein's appreciation of Papp's relatively enlightened sexual politics (at least on the job). Only Gail Merrifield, his fourth wife and close collaborator at work, makes a more vivid impression by virtue of her sharp observations. (One of the book's surprises is learning that Merri-



Sheldon Ramsdell

Joe Papp on the Capitol steps during a 1972 antiwar demonstration.

field is the great-great-granddaughter of John Wilkes Booth.) Papp was opulently narcissistic, manic and fearless. And so also, of course, to a far lesser degree, self-hating, insecure, saturnine and consumed by anxieties, justified and not. Abruptly severed relationships with the producer abound in Ms. Epstein's account. Personally, I always found him intelligent, sensitive, perceptive and honest, but many of his best artists felt they had to break off, at least temporarily, to preserve themselves and their work.

What one gets in quantity instead is a number of useful and pointed anecdotes about Papp himself, such as Papp's beating at the hands of an Irish neighborhood terror named Whitey. The incident is formative: Echoing a similar episode and conclusion in Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Papp says that he learned from his boyhood tormentor all he needed to know about fascists, and what sort of force is needed to respond to them. It's heartbreaking to read that Papp's father stood by watching his son being beaten and felt in-

capable of helping, a fact that may offer clues to Papp's aggression and courage. Mercifully, Ms. Epstein allows you to make such speculations at your own risk.

'Shout a Little'

The grand fights with Robert Moses, with the House Committee on Un-American Activities, against McCarthyism at CBS, against segregation in the theater—he had plans, in 1963, to send a mixed-race *Romeo and Juliet* on tour down South—and for sufficient money to produce, are briskly, lucidly recounted, and wonderfully spiced with the brilliantly splenic letters Papp pounded out hourly. It's thoroughly invigorating, inspiring even, to be shown a person negotiating for governmental and private support who demands such support as his civic due, and better yet, who hollers when his due is not forthcoming. When New York City was in a deep recession, he demanded that it buy the Astor Library for him and pay for its restoration. When the president of CBS seemed cowed by Vice President Spiro Agnew's attacks after the airing of *The Selling of the Pentagon*, Papp wrote him a letter:

"When do liberals ever learn that the only way to handle a bully is ... to hit and hit hard ... Of course, be reasonable, but God, man, shout a little." The best passages in Ms. Epstein's book come in the numerous quotes from Papp and his associates. Remembered Meryl Streep: "Joe saw actors as drayhorses, muscular and fierce." Or Bernard Gersten, who gives us Papp's "doctrine": "When you're in trouble, get into deeper trouble."

One wishes Papp were around to give that advice to President Clinton, just as one wishes that Mr. Clinton's (and Mayor Giuliani's) approach to governance was more like Papp's. He maintained an absolute certainty that art was one of the services a civilized government provided, through subsidy, to its populace. Certainly one of the most admirable facts of his life, and Ms. Epstein has scrupulously preserved this, was his persisting volubly in that certainty even in the face of deepening economic gloom and Ed Koch-Ronald Reagan-George Bush budget slashers, and on through the *mishegas* of the Jesse Helms-Rev. Donald Wildmon N.E.A. battles, to the end of his days.

I went to Joe Papp's funeral. His coffin was on stage at the Newman Theater, in the Public. One of his relatives read from *Cymbeline*:

"Fear no more the heat o' th' sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages ..."

When the service was concluded the casket, on its gurney, was pushed offstage. Exit, stage left. I was immensely moved. There was a man of the theater whose death was nationally noted and mourned, there was a life in the American theater that had had purpose, meaning, dignity, honor, adventure, a great romance of a life that now had come to a flawlessly theatrical moment of closure. Ms. Epstein's book gives us the shape and the sweep of this life in a biography that is passionately true to the man who lived it.

And renowned be his grave.