

Book Review

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The Man Who Loved Shakespeare

A life of the street-fighting producer who created the Public Theater.

JOE PAPP

An American Life.

By Helen Epstein.

Illustrated. 354 pp. Boston:

Little, Brown & Company. \$24.95.

By Benedict Nightingale

JOE PAPP was smaller than average and larger than life. When I first met him in his Public Theater in 1983, surrounded by trophies and posters commemorating the glory days of the 1960's and 70's, it seemed to me that he combined the looks of a sleek vole with the charisma of the tragic hero so marvelously described by the Renaissance critic Lodovico Castelvetro: he was dynamic and proud, he "intensely wanted what he wanted," he did not endure injury patiently, he was naturally immoderate, he followed his instincts without apology, he was temperamentally more inclined to go to war than to law, and he was most likely capable of "killing both strangers and relatives," in Castelvetro's language. It is no surprise to learn from "Joe Papp: An American Life," Helen Epstein's fascinating biography, that early on he concluded that any theater needed "a strong monarch," and that in his later years some of his associates thought of him as an erratic, arbitrary but still formidable King Lear.

But you could hardly say, with Goneril, that the best of his time was but rash. Has there been a more energetic, effective figure in the modern American theater? It was not merely the well-known accomplishments: the Homeric battle to provide free Shakespeare to New Yorkers and build the Delacorte Theater in Central Park; the conversion of the Astor Library into that vast creative caldron, the Public Theater; the discovery of David Rabe and many another striking playwright, and of Meryl Streep and scores of other fine actors; the pioneering dedication to colorblind casting and minority-group theater; and much more. It was also that fierce missionary zeal, the example it gave and the idealism it kept alive. If it is still possible in America to think of theater in its original Greek way — a vital experience that the polis should be offering as a right to all its citizens, not just to the educated or moneyed few — Joe Papp is more to be thanked than anybody else.

As Ms. Epstein evokes it, Papp's Brooklyn childhood

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JOE PAPP

AN AMERICAN LIFE

HELEN EPSTEIN

"fascinating"

— NYTBR

chutzpah, resourcefulness and aggression.

Two things turned Joseph Papirofsky, as he was called until his mid-30's, into Joe Papp. One was a love of literature, and especially of Shakespeare, great slabs of which he could quote from high school onward. The other was the wartime Navy, where for no very good or clear reason he found himself entrusted with organizing variety shows for bored sailors. At all events, the later 1940's saw him first at the Actors' Laboratory in California, next presenting Shakespeare to tiny audiences in a church hall in New York City. And bit by bit the cultural islet expanded into an empire that at one time stretched beyond Broadway, where "A Chorus Line" and "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf" and many other plays that Papp had originally opened downtown were regularly to be found, to Lincoln Center, which he tried and failed to transform into an offbeat American National Theater.

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Ms. Epstein, a freelance journalist, relates Papp's professional achievements interestingly and lucidly, though there are odd gaps. Why, for instance, did Sam Shepard storm out of the Public after the production of his "True West" and why did he never return? That not-insignificant contretemps is barely mentioned, let alone explained. But if there is an overall criticism to be made of the book, it is about its handling of Papp's private life. I sometimes felt Ms. Epstein could have dug deeper, asked harder questions, and maybe speculated more about the workings of that odd, elusive psyche. There were even moments when I wondered if she wasn't the victim of her friendship with Papp and his family. The book was, after all, once conceived as a quasi-official biography, written in cooperation with the producer.

Not that Ms. Epstein is obviously evasive or willfully busy with the airbrush. She tells us that
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He Loved Shakespeare

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explains why he became the sort of producer he did, yet makes it hard to understand why he became a producer at all. His father was a trunk maker who spent long periods unemployed, and his mother did not learn to read or write English until she was in her 60's. Though he played Scrooge in a school "Christmas Carol" at age 8, his family was far too poor to afford trips to any theaters, let alone those on Broadway. He ran wild, plucked chickens and shined shoes for pocket money, and did not continue his education after high school. Somehow he managed to land a respectable job with a company of jewelry manufacturers, and would probably have made a career in that trade, had he not been fired for organizing a strike and telling his boss off in very colorful language.

AS that suggests, he was radicalized as well as toughened by late Depression Brooklyn. He became a Communist and remained one deep into the 1950's. Ms. Epstein also tells us that he never forgot the beating he received at age 14 from an anti-Semitic 17-year-old called Whitey. What he learned from this thug — "if you want to make an impact, you hit first, hard and without any kind of feeling" — he would one day teach others. In 1958, CBS thought it could quietly fire Papp from his then job as a stage manager after he pleaded the Fifth Amendment at a House Committee on Un-American Activities hearing, and it was wrong. In 1959, the Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, the political powerhouse who commanded the very shape and appearance of New York City, believed he could stop the presentation of free Shakespeare in Central Park, and he was wronger still. To take on Papp was often to end up on your back in the ring, stunned by the man's

Biographers Aren't Burglars

Helen Epstein is on a high. She's just back from a two-week publicity tour in Prague where her first book, "Children of the Holocaust," has finally been published in Czech — 15 years after its appearance in English. "This was very important to me," the author, who was born in Prague, explained. The book, which broke new ground in 1979, has been published in several languages, but "none as significant as this one," Ms. Epstein said.

In a telephone interview from her vacation home in the Berkshires, the author, now 46, spoke about her new book, "Joe Papp: An American Life," and about her collaboration with Gail Merrifield Papp, his widow, who asked her to write this biography shortly after his death. Ms. Epstein has written that Papp's widow "respected the integrity of the writing process. . . . She never imposed her convictions on me."

But "almost everyone," she continued, "expressed fear of a whitewash. People believe that if you are given access to private papers, you essentially have to trade your independence for that access. I think that kind of investigative journalism mentality is driving attitudes toward authorized biographies, which is basically that they're suspect. Many, many professional and personal friends actually came right out and said, 'How are you going to do this?' They didn't believe I could pull it off. But biographers who do it know that if you respect the process, the process takes care of itself."

Nevertheless, she said, "It was very, very difficult. I got really angry at some of the recent accusations about biographers being



SUSAN EPONY
Helen Epstein.

burglars and immoral people. All the biographers I know are incredibly respectful of people's privacy.

"This biography involved extraordinary tightrope walking between private and public, between what to divulge and what not to divulge. It wasn't only Gail. There were five Papp children in-

involved here and two ex-wives about whom I was extremely sensitive because they're lovely people.

"There was an enormous number of people whose feelings, whose sexuality, whose alcoholism, had to be hidden or respected. Some people wanted to be identified as homosexuals; some didn't. The hardest thing about writing this book was dealing with everybody's psychological problems."

The author characterized her relationship with Joseph Papp as that of a portrait painter to her canvas. "It was hard to react to the whole person because there are so many different parts of him and I feel so differently toward each one of them. Some I admired and some I didn't."

"As for the collaboration," she said, "it was harder on me than my marriage. My husband is in business and I don't see him all day."

LYNN KARPEN