

## THE VOYAGE OUT

By Peter Zeisler

I'm really *not* the spider inviting the fly into my parlor—but this welcome is indeed intended to lure you deep into the pages of this inaugural issue of *American Theatre*. Sitting next to me as I write are two artifacts: an earlier *American Theatre*, published nearly two generations ago, which Alan Schneider gleefully brought into my office when he found out the name we had chosen for this magazine; and TCG's first attempt at information-sharing, a four-page mimeographed newsletter, which later came to be known as *TheatreCommunications*.

The first *American Theatre* had a very short life. Its initial issue was published in March 1940, and the changes in the American theatre in the 44 years and one month since that date are simply extraordinary. The issue listed the shows playing on Broadway (there being virtually no other professional theatre activity in New York at the time): *Life with Father*, *The Male Animal*, *Du Barry Was a Lady*, *Pins and Needles*. "Touring companies" were playing in eight different cities during the month: Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, St. Louis, San Francisco and Detroit. And Katherine Cornell was doing one-night stands in "Pa. and N.J." in *No Time for Comedy*. Judging from *American Theatre*, that comprised the totality of professional theatre available throughout the country—the only other references to theatrical activity were notes on a goodly number of amateur productions taking place in various cities (Des Moines, Houston, Buffalo) as well as a substantial section reporting on college and university theatre work. But clearly, professional meant New York; all else served recreational and educational purposes.

Most significantly, the total amount of theatre activity reported fell far short of the 65 active theatres included in our January 1973 inaugural issue of *TheatreCommunications*. And in the ensuing decade, the American theatre has burgeoned into a vast and multi-faceted arts discipline, a far more complicated art form than we could have imagined in March 1940. To further underscore the point, I'll cite a comment by critic Ward Morehouse in the August 1961 issue of another magazine, *Theatre Arts*: In his account of an extended trip across the country, "Ten Thousand Miles of American Theatre," Morehouse declares, "The country still

cares about flesh-and-blood drama, but professionals are not as numerous as they used to be. . . ." That was written just 23 years ago!

In this issue, Arthur Ballet writes perceptively about British director Peter Hall's controversial diaries, and recounts the telling section in which Hall discusses with Trevor Nunn (his protégé and successor as artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company) the problems of trying to cope with large organizations. The fact that the theatre has grown so extraordinarily doesn't mean we assume that big is better—but surely there have been remarkable gains made in both the amount of professional activity and its decentralization over the past 40 years. The theatre—its growth and development—is now a national phenomenon; and New York, still its most visible "market," is now a large but simply *another* production center. This fact is the most striking difference between our national theatre today and that which existed in 1940 when the earlier *American Theatre* assayed the situation.

The best play production shares a common methodology with archaeology: one digs to find the answer through discovering the essence, and in the process sifts through an enormous amount of material. We hope that this magazine will illuminate that sifting and digging process as it puts the trends and concerns of the theatre in a context. *Communication* and *context*, in fact, are the charges given us by our contributing editors, and I think those imperatives address a pressing need. Alan Schneider, in this issue, insists that "the system is us" and suggests that there may be more to the theatre than what we refer to as "show business." I hope we explore—and exploit—our new initiatives through communication and context in the months ahead.

That exploration has been made possible, in no small part, by the support—both moral and economic—that TCG has received from its funders in the preparation of this new venture, and by the invaluable involvement of the contributing editors. Finally, I can't sign off from this inaugural note without thanking TCG's associate director Lindy Zesch for the vision, care and persistence that have made the development of the magazine a reality.

