

WOOLLY MAMMOTH: A BRIEF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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BIG IDEAS

I can't recall precisely when Roger Brady and I first broached the idea of forming a theatre company together. But sometime during the summer of 1976, when we were acting interns at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, the idea became a source of consuming intellectual passion that took hold of our friendship and conversations for many months. We met regularly in cheap New York cafés to discuss books and theories about theatre, to talk about shows we were seeing and performing in, to speculate how our new company would be organized and to clarify its precise mission. These discussions lasted for two years before we took any concrete steps. From the beginning — and this is the most important thing to know about Woolly Mammoth — we were obsessed with our mission, with developing it, articulating it, and refining it. With a clear mission, we believed, anything could be accomplished.

Influenced by Peter Brooks' radical essay, *THE EMPTY SPACE*, we looked around at the theatre we knew and pronounced it lacking. The commercial and regional theatres were too easy, too homogenized, not relevant. Hit plays emerged on Broadway and were produced all across the country in predictable ways. A small collection of well-known classics were produced over and over, while hundreds of equally interesting but lesser-known works were ignored. Provocative experimental works were hastily created in New York warehouses for a brief time, never to be seen again.

In 1978, after drunkenly selecting a name for our new Theatre, we wrote a high-minded manifesto called, "A Statement of Artistic Intent." We imagined new plays that were uniquely "theatrical" unlike the realism of film and television. We sought a style of acting that was bold and expressive unlike the "mumble and wheeze" approach common in New York. We pictured a company of actors who would work and train together over many years to develop new approaches. We posited that theatre must be treated as a genuine art form progressing according to its own history and logic, not by the dictates of the marketplace.

And yet — the second most important thing to know about Woolly Mammoth — we believed it was possible to both advance the art of theatre *and* build a new, more adventurous audience.

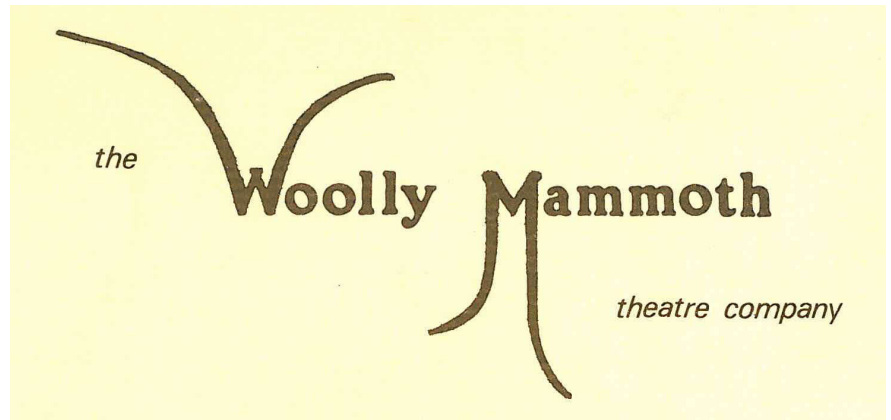


Woolly Mammoth Company members in the early 80's

TESTING THE WATERS

Our first tentative step toward launching the new Woolly Mammoth was producing two plays in New York, about as far *off* Broadway as it was possible to get. The first was in the community room of a housing cooperative on the Lower East Side where, for our somewhat elderly audience, we selected Arthur Schnitzler's classic, *LA RONDE* — a series of frank seduction scenes about the capriciousness of sexual relationships. Our second show came months later at a Jewish Community Center near the northern tip of Manhattan. On a shoestring budget we tackled the neglected Yiddish classic, *THE GOLEM*, an expressionistic tragedy about a Frankenstein-like savior who flies violently out of control.

Already much was clear about our new company: Like the Woolly Mammoths of old we would traipse the earth seeking not food but a place to perform. We would treat our audiences to something provocative and different that lay just at the edge of their comfort zone. We would challenge *ourselves* to take big artistic and producing risks, often on material we didn't totally understand — trusting that working on each play would reveal what we needed to learn.



Buoyed by the positive response to these fledgling efforts, Roger and I decided to start our company in earnest. Rejecting the idea of staying in New York (where all theatre was poisoned by the lure of commercial success!), we embarked on a search for a location, researching and visiting Buffalo (my home town), Tacoma (Roger's home town), Niagara Falls, Albany, Seattle, Chicago, and Washington, DC. The nation's capital was a draw because of our political interests, and it had a combination of appealing factors: a major regional theatre (Arena Stage) proving there was a ready audience, several small companies just getting started (New Playwrights, Source, Studio, Gala, Horizons), a growing pool of local actors, a smart and diverse population, and encouraging funders. In the summer of 1979 we moved Washington, DC.

PLUNGING IN

The Woolly story during our first several years in Washington was one of dogged determination and quick development — artistically, financially, building a staff and audience. At a party shortly after our arrival we met Linda Reinisch who signed on as a third co-founder and Managing Director. Before we had a place to perform, we held our first auditions outdoors in Glover Park and began workshops and rehearsals in an auditorium at the Health and Human Services Department. We traipsed the streets looking for a performance venue, and eventually found a home at the Church of the Epiphany by the new Metro Center — in those days a somewhat forbidding location. There we produced plays in the Parish Hall for six seasons, removing our seating risers every Saturday night to make way for a Church reception the following morning.

This was a period of intense experimentation to find our core artistic identity. Our early workshops with actors (which lasted for several months before we picked any plays) involved extreme physical and vocal improvisations to see if we could develop new language about acting and find a more

liberated sense of style. Our earliest productions included an improvised one-act created by the company (a disaster); absurdist works from Chile, Poland, France, England, and Czechoslovakia; and American plays by radical young writers like Mark Medoff and Jean-Claude van Itallie. Most had a strong political or social message couched in an intellectual comic style derived from Beckett and Ionesco.



The Kramer (1981)

Roger and I traded off acting and directing duties. To open our second season, I directed Roger in Mark Medoff's *THE KRAMER*, our first big hit. The play is a macabre portrait of a malevolent young man named Bart Kramer who worms his way into a Washington temp agency and systematically destroys the life of a good-hearted co-worker. I had the idea to cast Kramer with three actors who would sometimes take turns playing the role and sometimes play it simultaneously. This heightened the play's surreal qualities, lent variety to the scenes, and injected a great deal of physical humor (imagine three actors scratching their noses at the same time). The success of *THE KRAMER* emboldened us to not only seek out unusual plays, but to take unusual approaches in staging them.

HITTING OUR STRIDE

Roger left Woolly Mammoth in 1983, largely for personal reasons, yet partly due to our diverging taste in plays. After his departure, Linda and I shifted focus toward American works, and we hit our stride with two very fresh plays that had the hallmarks of many Woolly plays to come.

MARIE AND BRUCE by Wallace Shawn (1984) depicts a day in the life of a seemingly hip New York couple, complete with their bizarre sexual fantasies. Marie appears to despise her milquetoast husband, tries to leave him, but ultimately cannot pry herself loose because of his passive-aggressive neediness. *CHRISTMAS ON MARS* by Harry Kondoleon (1986) depicts the comically fraught reunion of a young pregnant woman with her mother-who-abandoned-her-as-a-child, while her desperate boyfriend and his flamboyantly gay ex-roommate lay claim to her baby as a savior.

Neither of these plays had been very successful in New York, but both were big hits in Washington. They focused on lovably neurotic characters in dysfunctional romantic or family relationships. They demanded high-stakes acting choices and stylized, non-realistic staging. They were caustic in their language and unorthodox in their narrative structure but still told a reasonably clear story. They fused extreme comedy with great sadness.

By 1986, Linda and I had done some serious soul-searching about the purpose and values of our company, prompted by the predictable ups and downs of critical response, the intense hours, and the continuous scramble for funds. Running Woolly Mammoth, we concluded, was more like running a church than a restaurant; we weren't creating a *product* to be marketed and sold, instead we were converting people to a new way of seeing and feeling. Two corollary mantras we repeated often: (1) Stay one step ahead of the audience, not two — i.e., avoid esoteric work or "theatre for its own sake." (2) The further out on a limb you go, the better your work must be — i.e., challenging plays done *badly* will appeal to no one.

CHRISTMAS ON MARS was part of a hugely successful three-play rep that concluded our tenure at Epiphany. It introduced our first permanent company of actors, two of whom, Nancy Robinette and Michael Willis, still perform with us today. The energy of this new company — which also included actor/director Grover Gardner, actor/playwright T.J. Edwards, and actress Grainne Cassidy, propelled Woolly Mammoth through its swift growth in the late 1980s, and distinguished us as a theatre with a fearless, even reckless sense of style. The critic, David Richards, said that watching a Woolly actor was “like going over Niagara Falls in a barrel.”



Christmas on Mars (1986)

TO CHURCH STREET

Following our six years at Epiphany, we spent a nomadic year performing at New Playwrights (now the Church Street Theatre) and the Washington Project for the Arts (now Jaleo Restaurant). We were on the verge of moving to a space in Takoma Park; it fell through at the last minute when asbestos was found. For the 1987-88 season, we landed in a rented warehouse on Church Street along the historic 14th Street corridor — a strip that was burned down in 1968 on the day Martin Luther King was shot. We thought we would stay for 5 years before finding a more permanent home. We stayed for 13 years. The theatre had 132 cramped seats arranged around two columns and a tiny thrust stage. The ceiling was 13 feet above the stage. In this womblike setting, you could see the actors sweat.

Several of our productions in the late 1980s and early 1990s were directed by Grover Gardner. He injected our work with a sharper focus on character detail (Grover was a fan of the quirky character-based films of Preston Sturges). Our language about acting became more psychological, aiming for an intense inner life that allowed the actors to not only *make* bold choices, but to *support* them truthfully. We referred to it as Woolly’s “keyed-up psychology.” We modified the usual Stanislavsky language about “character objectives” and referred instead to “objectives that you fail at.” In other words, each character is trying desperately to achieve something, but it’s constantly slipping away. This approach proved ideal for neurotically charged playwrights like Harry Kondoleon, Nicky Silver, Amy Freed, and David Lindsay-Abaire.

Our long stay at Church Street was marked by a greater diversity of plays and programming: works by women and writers of color; politically charged solo performances; off-stage activities including theatre classes and community outreach programs. Our company expanded with more actors who are still active today, including Jennifer Mendenhall, Rob Leo Roy, Sarah Marshall, Naomi Jacobson, Mitchell Hebert, Doug Brown, and Daniel Escobar.

NEW PLAYS

The most important artistic development on Church Street was our increasing emphasis on new plays. Beginning with Nicky Silver’s *FAT MEN IN SKIRTS* in 1990, we began to think of new plays as the very heart of Woolly’s mission. We found it stimulating to work directly with writers. We liked the element of risk involved, plus the reward of contributing to scripts in a formative way. It distinguished Woolly from our local competitors. And it opened up a much larger world of plays to choose from, despite the daunting task of reading hundreds of un-produced manuscripts.

FAT MEN IN SKIRTS carried on the tradition of plays like *CHRISTMAS ON MARS* but pushed



Fat Men in Skirts (1991)

farther into neurotic, even psychotic, territory. The Oedipal plot focuses on a mother and son marooned on a desert island after a plane crash. They eat the dead passengers and become lovers. Once rescued, they attempt a normal life with their husband/father, but the son finally kills both parents. All this is portrayed in a campy style, hilariously funny at first but ultimately spooky. The play has since been seen in dozens of productions across the country and around the world. Other premieres by Nicky Silver followed: *FREE WILL & WANTON LUST* and *THE FOOD CHAIN*, which subsequently ran for a year Off-Broadway. The success of these plays proved that Woolly's audience was willing to stretch far, and would reward us for producing outrageous, even shocking works — so long as the writing and acting were dazzling.

Other notable premieres on Church Street included Amy Freed's *THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF SAVAGES*, a sardonic riff on the lives of four famous American poets; Christi Stewart-Brown's *THE GENE POOL*, a sitcom-like depiction of a lesbian couple and their son; Robert Alexander's *THE LAST ORBIT OF BILLY MARS*, a shocking tragedy about incest in a black family; and David Lindsay-Abaire's *WONDER OF THE WORLD*, a hilarious travelogue about a woman on the run from her husband's weird sexual fetish.

Other notable works on Church Street included Wallace Shawn's *AUNT DAN AND LEMON*, a provocative examination of American political morality; and Don DeLillo's *THE DAY ROOM*, a Beckettian exercise in madhouse linguistic comedy. A number of English and Canadian works also received their first or second American productions at Woolly. These included Steve Berkoff's *KVETCH*, a riotous send-up of repressed thoughts; Nick Darke's *THE DEAD MONKEY*, a tragicomedy about the collapse of an aging surfer following the death of his pet monkey; Ann-Marie MacDonald's *GOODNIGHT DESDEMONA*, a lovable riff on Shakespeare; Philip Ridley's *THE PITCHFORK DISNEY*, a post-apocalyptic nightmare; and George Walker's *HEAVEN*, a violent examination of the clash between liberal values and the reality of life on the streets.



Kvetch (1992)

NEW FRIENDS

In 1990, Woolly Mammoth went through a financial crisis as the Gulf War kept people glued to their televisions and away from theatre. At the same time, we were looking for a new Managing Director following Linda's departure a couple years earlier. I lured our former Development Director, Molly White, to take the job. As part of this courtship, Molly and I had a series of intense conversations about how Woolly could operate from its deepest values. Influenced by the writings of art critic Suzie Gablik, we felt that the arts should play a direct role in improving society. In college, Molly had been involved with the Cornerstone Theatre, a company formed by Harvard graduates who adapted classic plays to address the concerns of community residents. We decided that, with Woolly's emphasis on plays of social and political relevance, we too should find ways to impact our community directly.

Repeating a time-honored Woolly strategy, Molly walked up and down 14th Street and knocked on the doors of neighboring businesses and social services agencies. We learned about their work and asked how we might use our theatre skills to help. This led to Woolly's curating a series of large

neighborhood murals as a means of creating pride in the run-down corridor. Then we began a series of arts workshops tailored for the clients of nearby agencies like the Boys & Girls Club, Martha's Table, and Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind. Dubbed "Outside Woolly," the new program played an important role in building bridges within the Shaw and Cardoza neighborhoods.

When Molly left in the mid-1990s, our new Associate Artistic Director, Tom Prewitt, led Woolly's community programming. Collaborating with Young Playwrights Theatre, he developed two programs which became the core of our outreach work for many years, affecting the lives of hundreds of inner-city kids. The first was "The Art of Playmaking" — kids wrote their own short plays and saw them performed in public readings with professional actors. The second was "Community Playbuilding" — with the guidance of professional playwrights, kids and adults from many organizations created plays based on interviews with their neighbors. *INVISIBLE CITY*, performed at the True Reformers Hall in 2000, focused on the gentrification of the 14th Street corridor. *THE OTHER RIVER*, performed at TheARC in 2005, focused on overcoming violence in Anacostia.



Invisible City
Community Play (2001)

HEADING DOWNTOWN

After 13 years on Church Street, I was sick of the tiny space. Our resourceful designers and actors had plumbed its depths many times over. Throughout the late 1990s we searched for a new space with no success. But under the far-sighted leadership of Managing Director Imani Drayton-Hill, we clarified our long-range goals, conducted a feasibility study, and strengthened our fundraising capacity.

Miraculously, just as our lease was about to expire (a victim of neighborhood gentrification and re-development), we won a year-long competition giving us the right to build a theatre in a mixed-use development downtown. The decision to move to DC's trendy new 7th Street corridor was not an easy one. It would test our conviction that, by sticking to Woolly's unique mission, we could build an even larger audience looking for theatrical adventure. But the can-do attitude of our new Managing Director, Kevin Moore, along with the increasing sophistication of our Board of Directors, gave us confidence we could pull it off.



In the Blood (2001)

Unfortunately, it would be four years before our new space was ready, so we scrambled to find an interim home. The Kennedy Center came to our rescue and offered to house us for a few shows each season in the former AFI Film Theater. The DC Jewish Community Center, along with their resident company Theater J, offered to supplement our schedule. We set up temporary offices in a warehouse at 9th and M Streets, and embarked on a series of eclectic seasons with works that ranged from a 1930s classic (Clifford Odets' *ROCKET TO THE MOON*) to a harrowing urban tragedy (Suzan-Lori Parks' *IN THE BLOOD*) to a smutty English fantasy (Lee Hall's *COOKING WITH ELVIS*) to an international epic (Tony Kushner's *HOMEBOY/KABUL*). Over the four-year period we performed in four different venues.

If anyone had asked, "How would you like to move from stage to stage at the same time that you need to raise \$9 million and build a new theatre?", I would have said no thanks. But the experience

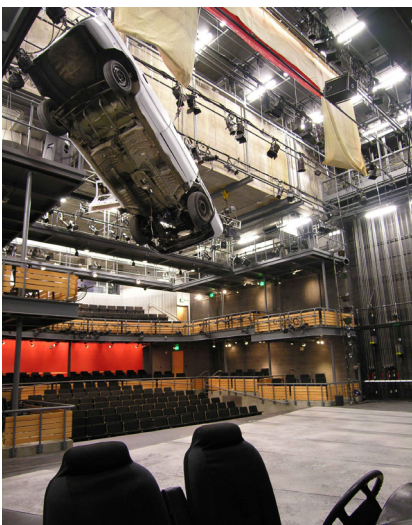
performing on other stages paid off. The Kennedy Center helped expand our audience. And we gained valuable experience working on stages larger than Church Street, which prepared us for the move to an even larger stage downtown.

The most significant artistic development of those nomadic years was our increasing confidence working with playwrights. We committed to producing two wildly creative new works — David Bucci’s sci-fi fantasy, *ANDROMEDA SHACK*, and Craig Wright’s 9/11 meditation, *RECENT TRAGIC EVENTS* — before a first draft was even completed. Through a series of workshops, each script moved steadily forward. *RECENT TRAGIC EVENTS* was a major success with subsequent productions in New York and around the country. Then, with support from the A.S.K. Foundation, we commissioned three new plays from scratch *with a commitment to produce them no matter what*. This is rare in the American theatre, and set us apart as a company willing to say “yes” to playwrights. Two of the three plays (Neena Beber’s *JUMP/CUT*, about a gifted young man with manic depression, and Craig Wright’s *GRACE*, about a religious zealot who commits a grizzly murder) were sellout hits.



Recent Tragic Events (2002)

Meanwhile, we immersed ourselves in the challenge of designing a new theatre. Naturally, the project would require its own mini vision statement — “transparent theatrical laboratory” — and a set of characteristically hyperbolic goals: 1) to build one of the great small theatres in the world; 2) to reflect Woolly’s risk-taking mission and aesthetic; and 3) to make the theatre affordable for our community. We conducted a national search for the perfect architect, which led to a small local firm, McInturff Architects, paired with one of the biggest theatre design consulting firms in the world, Theatre Projects Consultants. Four years later — with intense dedication from our staff and great passion and generosity from our Board and donors — we achieved an award-winning result, a “courtyard-style” theatre inspired by the Cottesloe and Tricycle in London, but with its own unique American character.



Woolly’s New Theatre (2005)

As breathless as we were when we opened our doors in May 2005, our new theatre immediately felt like home. Though four times the square footage and nearly ten times the volume of our previous home on Church Street, it had that unmistakable Woolly feeling: edgy, but welcoming.

Has the new theatre changed our work? Absolutely! It has raised expectations, pushing us toward higher levels of artistry, technical support, and management skill. It has forced us to build our staff to produce effectively in the larger space — including the arrival of Managing Director Jeffrey Herrmann in September 2007. It has allowed us to expand our programming with the addition of guest companies like the Rude Mechanicals, Neo-Futurists, Mike Daisey, and Second City. And it has attracted new and different audiences.

Yet our core mission remains unchanged. We have continued to build our resident acting company – with the addition of Kimberly Gilbert, Dawn Ursula, Kate Eastwood Norris, and Jessica Frances Dukes. We have strengthened our impact on the new play field. Provocative plays launched at Woolly — including Sarah Ruhl’s DEAD MAN’S CELL PHONE, David Adjmi’s STUNNING, and Danai Gurira’s ECLIPSED — have gone on to multiple productions in New York and around the country. We have vastly increased the visual sophistication of our work, leading to many more Helen Hayes Awards for set, lighting, and costume design — while sustaining our long-standing recognition for acting and new plays.



Dead Man's Cell Phone (2007)

A new Woolly mantra hangs on the bulletin board over my desk: “from Woolly to the world.” Our goal today is not merely to give new plays a leg up, but to launch them at a level of excellence which sets a standard for every subsequent production. Supporting this goal are five simple phrases, articulated at the time of our move, which raise the bar for every area of our operation: *path-breaking new plays, world class artistry, vital audiences, deep community engagement, and lasting support*. These lie at the heart of a new campaign entitled “Free the Beast” — intended to lay the foundation for Woolly’s development over the next ten years.

I like to refer to Woolly Mammoth today as one of the great “experiments” in the American theatre. We take provocative, risk-taking new plays — of a kind most often associated with younger companies working in warehouses and churches — and launch them at the highest level of artistry in a world-class theatre. The experiment is whether we can sustain our risk-taking artistic profile and, at the same time, build the audience and financial support needed to operate at our new mid-sized scale. This, in essence, is the latest version of the thesis we set out to prove in 1980.

THE “WOOLLY” IN WOOLLY

What does all this say about the plays we actually produce? Well, a “Woolly” play is no single thing, but it generally includes one or more of the following:

- Above all, *originality of voice* — i.e., a certain heightened energy or razzle dazzle in the language so it doesn’t sound flat or “realistic” like movies or TV.
- *Heightened theatricality* achieved through unusual narrative structure, such as multiple layers of reality, experimenting with time or memory, or drawing attention to the artifice of theatre itself;
- *Challenging or provocative subject matter*, often dealing with political or social issues, surprising a liberal audience with a different point of view, or featuring characters from the margins of the culture rather than the center;
- *A preference for comedy or irony*, and a low tolerance for plays that are too earnest;
- *A special interest in young or emerging writers*; we take special pride in helping to launch a playwright’s career.

One critic in the late 1990s, Lloyd Rose, said that Woolly Mammoth dealt with the underside of the American dream, and I think that’s true of many of our plays. But I’m usually drawn to *how a play sounds* before I focus on *what it’s trying to say*. Ultimately, the *content* and the *style* of Woolly’s plays are inseparable. This should come as no surprise. Throughout history, playwrights have found new

ways of *writing* when they have wanted to say new *things*.

Above all, I believe the audience has its own *job* to do in the theatre: to sort something out, to think about something in a new way, to struggle with their own feelings or values. If you spoon feed the audience, if you put them in a passive role, what's left for them to do? We used to say, "if you don't offend *somebody*, you're probably not doing anything very important." The point, obviously, is not to give offense, but to startle people enough so they participate, both during the performance and as they think about it afterwards. Contrary to P.T. Barnum's advice, we want to never *underestimate* the intelligence of our audience or their readiness to engage.



Stunning (2008)

Visiting playwrights like Bruce Norris, Sarah Ruhl, and David Adjmi have expressed amazement at the intelligence of Woolly's audience. They sense a rare level of curiosity and engagement, and it emboldens them to be daring and ambitious in their writing. Likewise, playwrights and directors respond to the depth of experience that our actors bring to working on new plays. Some of them have Woolly company members in mind as they create new works.

The chemistry between Woolly's artists and audiences is perhaps the greatest asset we have built over 30 years. As we begin our thirtieth season, we are challenging ourselves to deepen this connection by thinking about a new question: the relationship between theatre and democracy. Our new theatre is located just a stone's throw from the great symbols of American democracy on the National Mall. How can the provocative material presented on the Woolly stage be part of the wider civic dialogue that happens every day in the nation's capital? What new challenges does this pose with respect to the plays we select, the composition of our audiences, our pricing and marketing strategies, and the way we engage with other organizations and individuals in our city?

Woolly Mammoth began in 1980 by asking fundamental questions about the role and relevance of theatre in our lives. After thirty years, we're still asking.



Audience lining up for *Eclipsed* Pay-What-You-Can Performance (2009)

Special thanks to Peter Culman for providing both inspiration and editing for this article.