

ALAN MACVEY ON THE ART OF MAKING ART

by Luke Daniel White, Dramaturg

Around the centennial anniversary of the debut of Georges Seurat's masterpiece *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte*, or *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884/86), legendary composer Stephen Sondheim set to work with playwright and director James Lapine on a musical that would use Seurat's park, painting, and life as inspiration. Perhaps Sondheim's most autobiographical work, the musical has become a masterpiece in its own right, drawing in audiences since its 1984 Broadway debut with its moving meditation on the role, the process, the challenges and triumphs, and, ultimately, the legacy of an artist. For University of Iowa Department of Theatre Arts chair Alan MacVey, who helmed this production of *Sunday* as director, the musical offers a kind of meditation on his own career.

On any typical day you can find him in his office just off the Theatre Building lobby handling the day-to-day operation of the department through an endless stream of emails and meetings. It is there that MacVey fulfills what he feels is his primary identity as an educator. When asked if he identifies as an artist, he replies, "I don't think you can be an artist and be a department chair," clarifying, "For me personally, I don't consider myself an artist and haven't for a long time. But I still consider the individual works that I do works of art, because I commit myself completely to them. I spend a lot of time thinking about them, I research them, I do the very best work I can." What is it to be an artist, then? MacVey says, "A person who's really an artist: that's what they do, that's how they identify themselves, that's their perspective on the world, and it's what matters most, all the time." Though he may not think of himself as an artist in his current role, his stories from more than fifty years of directing say differently.

As an undergraduate at Stanford University, he acted in several productions, began directing, and even composed an original musical. Yet, he felt himself called to teach. He graduated, got an MA in Education from Stanford, and taught high school and junior high for three years before realizing it was not for him. With enough saved money, he took a year off and wrote a novel, composed a record, and directed his first "meaningful" play: a production of *Marat/Sade*. It was then that he woke up one day and thought, "Oh, I can be a director!" He was accepted at the Yale School

of Drama in 1974 where he and his classmates were told by their legendary mentor Robert Lewis, "You have to now start thinking of yourselves as artists."

It was there that he first faced one of the great challenges of being an artist: criticism. Curious to try his hand at Shakespeare, he directed a production of *King Lear* that was not received well by the dean. He likens it to the criticism we see George receive in *Sunday*: "People aren't really telling him straight up 'I don't like this' but you know that people don't know what to do with it." After *King Lear*, he says, "It made me think maybe I really don't know anything, maybe I'm just not any good at all. But in looking back on that experience, which I did for years, I did learn a lot. I learned how much I didn't know and I really set out to learn it." It seems he did, for he left Yale on a path that would lead him to some of the finest professional and university theatres in the country.

When asked about one of his favorite productions, he mentions a 1992 production of Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All*, which he directed first at Bread Loaf School of English, his summertime artistic home for nearly four decades, and then in the fall, here, at the University of Iowa. He recalls, "I have an image of myself sitting on a sofa struggling to figure out the text and then saying how do we do that, now that I've figured it out, so that the audience will get it and yet remain true to Gertrude Stein. That, for me, was real artistry at work. My imagination was rich and I was in practice, so it wasn't about the audience. I loved the way the production looked when we got it on stage, and we had a really good cast." In that way, he says, his experience parallels that of George: "It wasn't about anything else but that focus, and both the struggle and the enjoyment that came from that focus."

However, Alan insists that the through-line of his career, if anything, has been about creating learning environments. His best example of this is a professional acting company he started in 1977 at Princeton, where he was on the faculty, and then re-founded at Bread Loaf in 1986. "The Acting Ensemble takes actors into to the classroom," he says, "and they explore texts of all kinds." Here, MacVey's legacy as artist and educator harmonize beautifully: "That really mixed both of them together, and I'm very pleased



MacVey observing Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, on permanent display at The Art Institute of Chicago.

that it continues today and will, I think, continue for years to come because it's a very special thing." He feels similarly about the Big 10 New Plays commission, a program he initiated in 2014 that promotes the writing and production of new works about women, written by female playwrights.

One of the greatest challenges for George in *Sunday* is something we must all, artist or not, learn to do: how to "move on." Here MacVey finds one more parallel with our protagonist, for he, too, is moving on. After 28 years of serving as department chair, he will step down at the end of this academic year. "People told me you sort of know when you're ready. And I'm now ready." He adds, "I'll miss the job and I'll miss the identity. I'm responsible for everything that goes on in this building and that's a burden, but it's also a great identity. I know who I am. And who will I be when I'm not that? We'll see." Here one can almost hear the echo of George: "White. A blank page or canvas. His favorite. So many possibilities..."

A note from the author:

I wish to personally thank Alan MacVey for agreeing to be interviewed for this article after my suggestion that bringing his personal history together with Seurat and Sondheim might create a more personal connection for you, our audience members. I hope that is the case.

For more on Seurat and Sondheim

We recommend the following sources which were instrumental in the shaping of this production:

- *Georges Seurat (1859-1891)* by Robert L. Herbert. Press: Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1991.
- *Seurat and the Making of La Grande Jatte* by Robert L. Herbert. Press: University of California. 2004.
- *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011)* by Stephen Sondheim. Press: Knopf. 2011.
- *Six by Sondheim*. Directed by James Lapine. Studio: HBO. 2013.