



# The Show Must Go On

PETER ROTHSTEIN TALKS ABOUT LOVE, VALOR, COMPASSION—AND WHY, IN THE YEAR AHEAD, WE’RE GOING TO NEED MUSICAL THEATER. LIKE, REALLY NEED IT.

BY STEVE MARSH

On a Thursday night in early March, I watched the second-to-last performance of *La Bohème* at the Ritz Theater, in Northeast Minneapolis. If you haven’t seen it—and I hadn’t in years—Giacomo Puccini’s 19th-century opera chronicles a group of Parisian artists attempting to live and love while falling ill with an unnamed affliction. The company set the show in Vichy France: a corrupt puppet state under Nazi rule. The crowd for this intimate Theater Latté Da production felt palpably tight: unwilling to bite on jokes, sitting on their hands after the big arias.

Latté Da’s founder and artistic director, Peter Rothstein, remembers the performance well, and not just because his theater closed for the season the very next night. “It was unbelievable, the difference,” he says. “Wednesday night was wild—laughter out of the gate. And Thursday night, the second Mimi comes out and coughs into her handkerchief, it was, *Oh, this is a tragedy.*”

This month, Latté Da’s 22nd season was supposed to culminate in a premiere musical production of *Twelve Angry Men*. But 12 angry men sequestered in a little room? Out of the question. When

Latté Da opens, either this month, or next month, or in six months, or in 2021, it will re-open with *La Bohème*.

“We’re just on hold until the world tells us we can regather,” Rothstein, 53, says. “So I don’t know.”

Over its long and critically celebrated history, Theater Latté Da has mounted 78 shows (all musicals or plays with music), including 12 world premieres and 13 area premieres. In the theater business, the biggest investment is spent getting to opening night. Two thirds of any theater budget goes to the set and costume designers, set builders, lighting

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technicians, electricians, and actors. When opening night arrives, payroll narrows to basically the cast, the pit band, and a skeleton crew. "So we just don't have money in the bank to tear *Bohème* down and build a whole new show before selling tickets," he says.

Two weeks after putting the show in mothballs, Rothstein furloughed all nine of Latté Da's permanent employees and ended 65 artist contracts (including the casts for the rest of the season). "During the last recession, artists were the first to suffer," he says.

It must be different this time, Rothstein says. He's pushing termination dates out as far as possible, paying for health insurance for as long as he is able, and trying to treat contract employees as fairly as his permanent staff. He believes that we need artists right now. "Great art," he says, "responds to the world that it lives in, right?"

He notes with pride that our regional theaters aren't forced to import actors from New York and put them up in temporary housing. The Twin Cities, he adds, is one of the few communities with full-time theater artists who actually live here and send their kids to school here and go to church here. "There's great power where artists are citizens," he says, "part of the fabric of your society."

Latté Da has been producing *La Bohème* every couple of years since the company debuted as a two-person operation in the Loring Playhouse. Rothstein loves the production because "in one fell swoop," he says, we encounter "the painter, the musician, the poet, the philosopher, and the waiter."

The majority of Rothstein's friends still fall into one of those categories. "I love artists," he says, "because no matter how bleak, they believe they can ease some other people's pain."

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I'd planned to meet Peter Rothstein at the Ritz, the company's home for the past five years. Even with the shutdown looming, we could sit 6 rows—or 12 rows—apart. But by the time our appointment arrived, we both conceded we'd be talking over the

## Dear Ms. B

These difficult times have me dreaming of a lush landscape like never before. I'm raring to finally get outside and beautify my surroundings, but how can I make sure my appetite for bright doesn't get the best of me? —Craving Color



### Dear Craving,

I'm with you. I, too, have been plotting the day my living space officially expands, when I can sit in my oasis or camouflage myself among the ferns. Cultivating a garden can bring us joy and peace. It can even be a memorable team effort when willing hands participate. Here's what you need to get growing:

✻ **Know your zone.** Here in the Twin Cities, we're in zone 4 (and north of Duluth is zone 3). I know you're psyched to sow, but remember most plants don't do well until after our frosty evenings have fatigued. Average last frost is around Mother's Day.

✻ **Evaluate your exposure.** Watch the sun pass over your yard and map what gets full sun, partial shade, and all shade so you can pick the right plants. Petunias, calibrachoa, geraniums, and rudbeckia thrive in the sun, while impatiens, coleus, hostas, and begonias prefer a parasol.

✻ **Make amends.** Prepping the soil is a wonderful way to get out in the yard, even if you can't plant yet. When you amend your soil with compost, you set up a veritable buffet for your petaled pals. Think: looser, moister soil; tastier, more nutritious veggies; stronger root growth; healthier plants. Then treat your gardening toolkit to a sprucing up so it can help you do the hard work.

✻ **Vet your variety.** How much space do you have to fill? A creeping plant can cover large areas. Edges can take a tinier plant up front, but be sure to add height behind. (If you can't see it, what's the point?) Beautiful blooms aren't the only thing to consider: Even if you don't want a full-blown vegetable garden, you can choose veggies that flower and provide greenery or fragrant herbs you can snip and toss in a cocktail.

✻ **Brighten up.** OK, OK, part of the fun of gardening is color. Pick a few favorites—spring, summer, and fall bloomers. Remember some are ever-blooming (like my favorite Night Sky petunia), some last a few short weeks (peonies, *sigh*) but leave lovely greenery behind, and some bloom later. Remember, as color-starved as we are, gorgeous spring flowers fade under intense heat, and you'll want to have color into fall. If you need some extra pop, aim high with hanging baskets.

You can do this! Make a plan, then bloom into the gardener I know you are. We're in this together.

Ms. B

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phone. Rothstein has been holed up in his condo in the Lake Harriet neighborhood with his husband, Omar Guevara-Soto, who has been performing urgent work during the shutdown. Guevara-Soto serves as assistant director of culinary and wellness services for the nutrition center of Minneapolis Public Schools. And school is where kids in Minneapolis get most of their meals.

In his 22 years as artistic director of Latté Da, Rothstein has tried to connect musicals to what's happening in the community. "I think it's important that we're not deaf and blind to the outside world," he says. As his mentor, Garland Wright, a visionary artistic director at the Guthrie Theater in the 1980s and '90s, used to say, "One thing I love about gay men and theater people—he clumped those groups together—is that you could be talking about the leg of a table, but you're really talking about the history of civilization."

In Latté Da's earliest years, Rothstein and his producing partner, Denise Prosek, would switch off selling tickets, painting scenery, and cleaning the bathroom. Now, it's a mid-major company, casting mostly Equity actors, with an annual budget of more than \$3 million. But projecting expenses and leading capital campaigns was never the goal.

After graduating from UW–Madison with a master's degree in theater arts and directing, Rothstein became Wright's assistant director at the Guthrie. He notes

PHOTO BY DAN NORMAN

A show about impoverished artists and a fatal illness? Who'd ever believe it? Katherine Henly as Musetta in *La Bohème*



that Wright mounted just three or four musicals in his long tenure. Back then, Park Square had never staged a musical. Neither had the Jungle. “Chanhassen”—the indomitable dinner theater—“was kind of it,” he says.

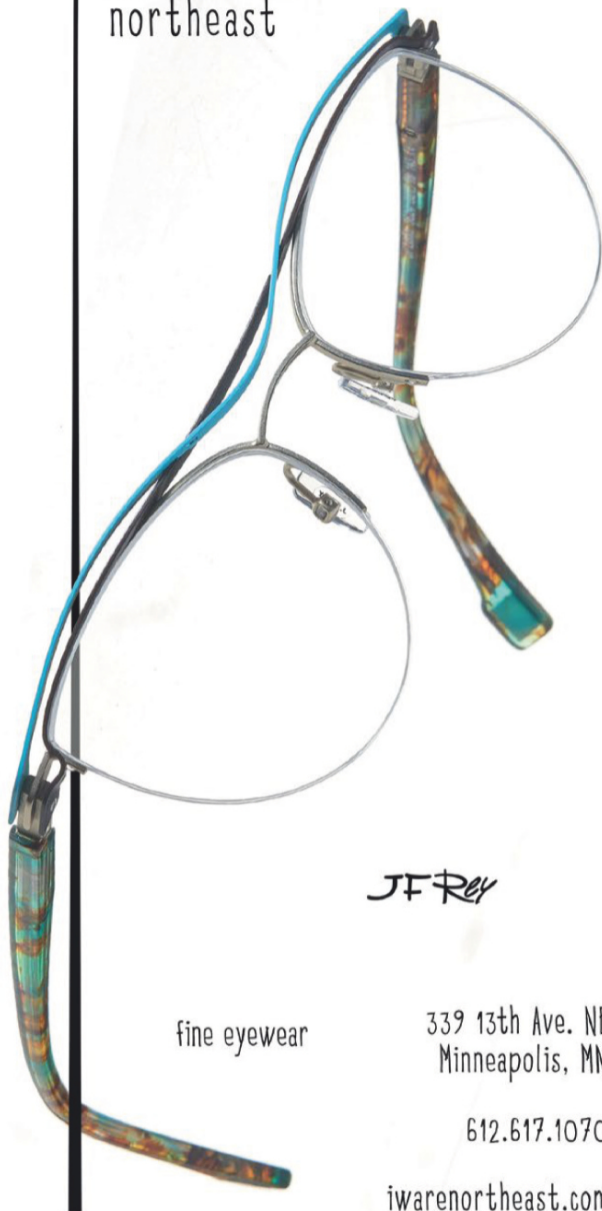
Rothstein discovered musical theater as a kid growing up in Grand Rapids. All his brothers played for the town’s legendary hockey team, but he joined the drama club and fell in love with the Royal Shakespeare Company’s recording of *Les Misérables*.

“Theater was my salvation,” he says. “I didn’t end up in the drama club because I had extraordinary talent; I ended up in the drama club because I wasn’t very good at hockey.”

Rothstein attended Saint John’s as an undergrad. And while the school wasn’t known for its drama program, Sister Nancy Hynes, a Benedictine nun in the English department, took his hand and walked him across campus to the chair of the theater department. “This is Peter,” she said, “and he will become an English and theater major.” She didn’t even ask for Rothstein’s agreement, he says.

Later on, the stage gave him the courage to figure out the parts of his identity a Benedictine nun couldn’t help him with. Rothstein remembers starring in Terrence McNally’s 1995 classic *Love! Valour! Compassion!* at Park Square, in the role Nathan Lane made famous. “Everything that I either despised about myself or I tried to hide about myself, I

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just got incredible affirmation for,” he says. “The more flaming the character was, the more the audience loved him and cried for him.”

Rothstein describes that role as a gift, and he actually wrote McNally a fan letter to thank him. The letter was returned unopened—a happy fact that Rothstein appreciated 20 years later, when he directed McNally’s *Ragtime* at Latté Da. Afterward, the legendary playwright reached out to collaborate. “And I was able to tell him I’m so glad the fan letter never got to him,” Rothstein says. “Because it wouldn’t have been able to say everything I feel about him now.”

If you pay attention to theater (or just the headlines), you know where this story ends. Less than a week after closing down *La Bohème*, and a day after our interview, Terrence McNally died in Sarasota, Florida, from complications of the coronavirus. Rothstein seemed heartbroken by the loss—one of the first prominent artists to appear in the ever-lengthening roll of obituaries, though, tragically, far from the last. (When I texted Rothstein my condolences, he thanked me and responded, “I share my sadness with so many.”)

Rothstein’s company has survived economic downturns before—though may be nothing as extraordinary as this one. He’s staged *La Bohème* three times now, once at the Loring and once at The Southern, and he fully intends to present it again at the Ritz.

The theater is his life’s work, and whether or not it’s defined as such by the state’s distancing recommendations, he believes the work is essential. “We are actually more vital now than we were two weeks ago,” Rothstein says. Long live the theater; *viva la vie bohème!* ■