



Joe Papp: An American Life

Helen Epstein

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This eBook edition of Joe Papp: An American Life includes 116 photographs and theater posters by Paul Davis (www.okdavis.com).

Joseph Papp (1921-1991) theater producer, champion of human rights and of the First Amendment, founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival and Public Theater, changed the American cultural landscape. Born Yussel Papirofsky in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, he discovered Shakespeare in public school and first produced a show on an aircraft carrier during World War II. After a stint at the Actors' Lab in Hollywood, he moved to New York, where he worked as a CBS stage manager during the golden age of television. He fought Parks Commissioner Robert Moses (as well as Mayors Wagner, Lindsay, Beame and Koch) winning first the right to stage free Shakespeare in New York's Central Park, then municipal funding to keep it going. He built the Delacorte Theater and later rebuilt the former Astor Library on Lafayette Street, transforming it into the Public Theater.

In addition to helping create an "American" style of Shakespeare, Papp pioneered colorblind casting and theater as a not-for-profit institution. He showcased playwrights David Rabe, Elizabeth Swados, Ntozake Shange, David Hare, Wallace Shawn, John Guare, and Vaclav Havel; directors Michael Bennett, Wilford Leach and James Lapine; actors Al Pacino, Colleen Dewhurst, George C. Scott, James Earl Jones, Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, Sam Waterston, and Denzel Washington; and produced Hair, Sticks and Bones, for colored girls, The Normal Heart, and A Chorus Line, the longest running musical in Broadway history.

"This first biography of the late Joseph Papp will be a hard act to follow," wrote Booklist. The front-page New York Times Sunday Book Review noted, "The portrait that emerges might have been jointly painted by Goya, Whistler and Francis Bacon." Playwright Tony Kushner called Papp "one of the very few heroes this tawdry, timid business has produced" and the book, a "nourishing and juicy biography."

Oklahoma-born Paul Davis created 51 iconic posters for Joseph Papp, starting in 1975 with the New York Shakespeare Festival production of "Hamlet" starring Sam Waterston. "It was inspiring to work with Joe," says Davis. "We would discuss what he wanted to achieve in a production, and he trusted me to find a way to express it. And he respected the poster as its own dramatic form." The artist's work has been exhibited in the U.S., Europe and Japan. He is a recipient of a special Drama Desk award created for his theater art. Davis was elected to the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame and the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame, and is a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome.

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