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## A City With a Rep

Still Playing in New Haven: Boffo Theater

By SUZANNE SATALINE  
Special to The Washington Post

Sarah Bernhardt swooned here. Al Jolson "mammied" and Eddie Cantor crooned. W.C. Fields groused before shuffling off to Philadelphia and the Barrymore empire lent the place some class. Then there were the shows. "The Caine Mutiny," "My Fair Lady" and something called "Away We Go" that was reborn in New York as "Oklahoma!" All opened first in New Haven, Conn., Broadway's maternity ward.

Richard Rodgers launched a raft of his repertoire before a New Haven crowd, including "Carousel" and "The Sound of Music." The city practically invented August Wilson, welcoming four of his plays, three of which would garner Tony Awards. And the lucky audiences in 1947 scrapped with New Yorkers for tickets to see a new Tennessee Williams drama, "A Streetcar Named Desire," introducing a mumbling hotshot named Marlon Brando (in a production that also cast Jessica Tandy, Karl Malden and Kim Hunter).

Venture up the Atlantic seaboard north of New York and you will witness, if not artistic history, then a front row on American theatrical pageant. New Haven has long been known as the seat of the thinking person's theater, a lofty cultural bearing that survived the city's long period of neglect and is thriving anew as the city rebounds.

The shine has been a long time coming. New Haven is a melange of Puritan roots and Gothic towers, Irish bread and Romano cheese, and the whiff of blue bloods in navy blazers. The whole place collapsed into a coma in the 1960s, wounded by riots and scarred by ill-conceived urban renewal schemes. Only the presence of Yale University and some vocal preservationists kept the downtown breathing while the city amputated smaller neighborhoods. That and the knowledge that the nearby cities of Hartford and Bridgeport were much worse off.

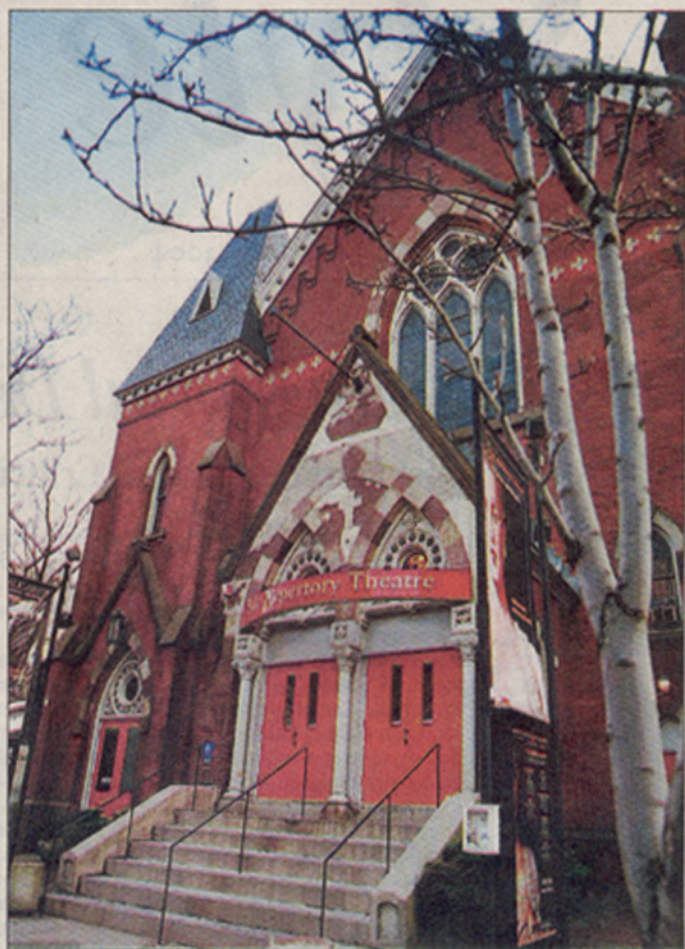
Fifteen years ago New Haven was studded with sullen, desolate blocks

that, in a bigger city, would have seethed menace. In New Haven, it just meant waste. Department store windows wore plywood curtains. Gunshots—in the home town of the Winchester rifle—began crackling day and night. To turn it around, developers, city officials and Yale partnered to renovate landmark buildings. They created a business improvement district that collected private dollars for street cleaning and other neglected basics. That, in turn, lured more developers, biotech engineers, facade improvements and then more businesses. In recent years, office buildings and factories from the 1920s and '30s have become luxury apartments.

Today New Haven is a quaint retreat from busier cities, with 10 times the culture. Its Victorian and revivalist downtown is primly laid out in eight squares that ring a town green. Yale's spired campus interlaces it all. The sparkling Chapel Street Business District bisects the downtown, filled with pricey clothing and jewelry stores, old Yale watering holes, coffeehouses and adventurous restaurants serving fusion Asian and Latin American cuisine. One of downtown's more striking features is the relative absence of chain stores. The ubiquitous Starbucks is an exception.

Creating theater buzz has been key to the revival, and theaters are tucked in everywhere. The Shubert Performing Arts Center presides over College Street in a modern, glass-walled complex. Along the green's southern border, Chapel Street, an old brick church houses Yale Repertory Theatre, down the street from its managing partner, the Yale University Theatre, where the drama school stages professional-caliber student productions. The intimate regional theater, Long Wharf, is just off I-95, and from the outside still looks very much like the meat warehouses that surround it.

In other places, at other times, New Haven offers the symphony, summer cabaret, galleries, the grand exhibits of the Yale Center for British Art, and smaller spaces with concerts and solo performers. In June the city hosts a New Festival of Arts



BY T. OWLES EROKSON

Much of New Haven's reputation as an incubator of dramatic arts can be traced to the venerable Yale Repertory Theatre.

and Ideas, luring dance, music and theater talent from around the world. Shakespeare productions and concerts are performed on the green. About the only thing missing is a resident dance company and a revival movie house, but plans are afoot to convert the former United Illuminating Co. into an art house cinema.

The theater scene has garnered the most recognition and acclaim, including numerous Tony Awards. That may be because of the theaters' bent toward taking chances. It's not just pride in being cutting-edge, but the fact that it's economically vital for local directors to think originally, says James Bundy, Yale Rep's youthful artistic director.

"We have a metro audience, all the theater-goers who read the New York Times. There's no point in us producing 'Proof,'" he says.

Bundy feels similarly about the classics. Since its founding in 1966, Yale Rep has offered ticket-holders

startling ways to think about Shakespeare. Bundy argues that playwrights yearn for immediacy. "It should feel new. How do you interpret a play so people feel the experience of the story for the first time? If the play confirms your prejudices, what's the point of spending \$45?"

That philosophy has led to productions of "The Taming of the Shrew" with an all-Latino male cast. This season Chekhov's short story "Rothschild's Fiddle" will be performed in January by a Russian cast in Russian with English surtitles. Later in the season, the Rep will present Avery Brooks as King Lear. Director Harold Scott will set the Shakespearean tragedy in Mexico's ancient Olmec civilization.

New Haven theater is a chance to watch established actors stretch in new directions. Meryl Streep, Frances McDormand, the late Jason Robards and many more have performed at the Rep. Al Pacino starred in "American Buffalo" at Long

## ESCAPE KEYS

**GETTING THERE:** New Haven is about 300 miles north of Washington on I-95. US Airways flies several times daily from Reagan National to Tweed New Haven Regional Airport for \$273 (800-245-4882, [www.usairways.com](http://www.usairways.com)). Amtrak (800-872-7245, [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)) runs several trains daily; a one-way weekend ticket starts at \$95.

**STAYING THERE:** The **Omni New Haven** (155 Temple St., 800-843-6664) offers rooms for two starting at \$170. **Three Chimneys Inn at Yale** (1201 Chapel St., 800-443-1554, [www.threechimneysinnct.com](http://www.threechimneysinnct.com)) is an 1870s Victorian "painted lady" with 11 rooms, four-poster beds and a chef's breakfast. Rooms start at \$215.

**THEATER:** Between now and May, **Yale Repertory Theatre** (1120 Chapel St., 203-432-1234, [www.yalerep.org](http://www.yalerep.org)) will mount "Rothschild's Fiddle," "King Lear," "The King Stag" and "The Mystery Plays." Tickets are \$45. Students at the **Yale School of Drama** will perform in two more productions, "The Lonesome West" and "Uncle Vanya" (University Theatre, 222 York St., 203-432-1234, [www.yale.edu/drama/shows/index.html](http://www.yale.edu/drama/shows/index.html)). **Yale Cabaret** (217 Park St., 203-432-1566, [www.yale.edu/cabaret](http://www.yale.edu/cabaret)) has not yet announced its spring season; tickets will sell for \$12. Upcoming **Long Wharf Theatre** productions (222 Sargent Dr., 203-782-8497, [www.longwharf.org](http://www.longwharf.org)) include a war satire, a Bulgarian's take on Hamlet, and a Public Theatre co-production about a dysfunctional newspaper. Tickets are \$38 to \$55 for its Mainstage productions and \$48 to \$55 for smaller Stage II shows. **Shubert Theater** (247 College St., 888-736-2663, [www.shubert.com](http://www.shubert.com)) will offer in upcoming months "Rent,"

"42nd Street," "The Graduate" and "The Exonerated," featuring Brian Dennehy.

**EATING THERE:** With its rich history of immigration, New Haven is a city that loves food and new tastes. A spate of imaginative restaurants has opened on or near Chapel Street in recent years. **Ibiza Restaurant** (39 High St.), around the corner from the Rep, is hailed for its Nuevo Latino food created by Luis Bollo. Consider house-cured tuna and grilled veal sweetbreads. Around \$45 per person. **Roomba** (1044 Chapel St. at Sherman's Alley) is more Caribbean, a little earthier. Also \$45 per person. For Franco-opulence, try the **Union Square Cafe** (1032 Chapel St., 562-



BY JOAN MARCUS

**New Haven's recent offerings included a 2002 Yale Rep production of "Medea/Macbeth/Cinderella."**

4299). Duck or roast rack of lamb can run the tab to nearly \$50 per person. My favorite is **Zinc** (964 Chapel St.), a zippy place that borrows from Vietnam, France, Thailand and nearly everywhere else. A \$48 full-course dinner might include Thai bouillabaisse or mesquite-smoked duck breast. **Louis' Lunch**, reported birthplace of the hamburger, is primarily a midday stop but is open late on weekend nights. (261-263 Crown St., 562-5507). A juicy one costs \$4.25, and don't you dare ask for ketchup.

**INFO: Greater New Haven Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-332-7829, [www.newhavencvb.org](http://www.newhavencvb.org).**

Wharf. This season Mia Farrow's performance in the premiere of "Fran's Bed" was widely acclaimed.

Often New Haven plays, especially those at Long Wharf, are trying out for Broadway runs. Since its founding in 1965, more than 20 productions on Long Wharf's stark and barren proscenium have moved on to New York, including "Wit," which won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize.

That is the other advantage of New Haven arts: near New York, but nowhere near New York prices.

Not to say that there's never a bomb. Sometimes the work is just too turgid, too boring or just plain weird. It is then that you can pace the walkways of Yale, huddle over a coffee, or indulge in a four-course meal and ponder: Whatever were the critics thinking?