MAKING A NEW WORLD
AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH HAJ

INTERVIEW BY TED SOD
I WANT TO RUN A THEATRE THAT [CAN] BE A CULTURAL WATERING HOLE WHERE WE CAN ENGAGE IN DYNAMIC CONVERSATIONS WITH OUR COMMUNITY... CONVERSATIONS ABOUT POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND AESTHETIC ISSUES, CONCERNS, AND THOUGHTS.”
From performer to director to Producing Artistic Director at PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, N.C., JOSEPH HAJ has proven a fast-rising talent. As one of the few Arab-American artistic directors in the country, Haj has worked to transform the stage from a seeming ivory tower into a place of diversity and inclusion. He recently spoke with TED SOD, theatre artist and dramaturge at The Roundabout Theatre Company, about his career and mission to create theatre that engages a community.

TS | You started your career as an actor, correct?

JH | Yes. I didn’t come to acting until very late. Growing up in Miami, it was far more interesting for me to be at the beach than to be at school. My senior year, I signed up for drama and I had that one really great teacher. It didn’t take me long to know that this was something that I really wanted to do. I went to Florida International University for my undergraduate degree and I studied acting, but I felt I didn’t know nearly enough in order to be an actor. So I went to the University of North Carolina (UNC) and got my MFA in the professional actor training program. In grad school, I felt that my classmates were all well ahead of me. The first day of school they showed us the stage and they said, “These are the voms,” and I asked, “What’s a vom?”

Coming out of grad school, I was doing summer stock in Maine for $200 a week when JoAnne Akalaitis cast me in Genet’s The Screens at the Guthrie and that changed everything. It legitimized me. After staying for two years at the Guthrie and doing several plays there, I no longer had to go into an audition room trying to persuade anybody I was an actor. It was a different level of conversation.

TS | You’ve described yourself in articles I’ve read as a “person of color.” How did being a person of color affect how you were cast?

JH | In all of my years as an actor, I never once had an audition for a Shaw play or a Moliere play. So, even though the doors had been kicked open with Shakespeare, it wasn’t being applied across the rest of the Western European canon, all of which I was eager to play in, but I was never invited to the table.

And, in Hollywood, I played roles ranging from Ali to Samir, all of them terrorists. I anglicized my name professionally from Haj to Hodge and all of a sudden I was auditioning for the lawyer named Sam.

TS | Were you born in this country?

JH | I was born in Paterson, New Jersey. My parents emigrated in ’59 from Palestine. We lived in the public housing projects while my father studied in New York City. He took a job in Miami after receiving his Ph.D. from NYU.

TS | Are you bilingual?

JH | Because my parents were recent immigrants, Arabic was spoken at home. By the time my younger brother came around, my parents had been in the country for some years, so we spoke a mixture of English and Arabic. It wasn’t in their interest for us to cling to our cultural identity as Palestinians at the expense of being fully assimilated as Americans. My father was blind from a very young age, and both he and my mother were forever grateful for all this country had to offer. They found it miraculous. My father passed away in 2007 and I almost never heard him speak a sour word about America. We were participating in what to them was the greatest country in the world.

TS | Tell us about your tenure at the Guthrie Theater.

JH | I was at the Guthrie during what can only be described as a very rich time in its history. I worked with the director Garland Wright when he was at the height of his gifts as an artist and

scanned image of a page from the Fall 2013 issue of SDC Journal
an artistic director. The level of influence he has had on my work is entirely disproportionate to the amount of time I actually spent with him. In the two years I spent at the Guthrie, we did four plays together, but there’s hardly a day that goes by that I don’t think of him in one way or another. And it’s there that I met JoAnne Akalaitis and Robert Woodruff, both of whom have become lifelong colleagues, mentors, and friends.

**TS** | What would you say you learned from working with Wright, Akalaitis, and Woodruff?

**JH** | Taken as a group, they all have sensational craft, understand bodies in space, are fearless and spectacular rehearsal room leaders. They create powerful ensembles. When you make work as an actor for any of those directors, you are keenly aware that you belong to something special. They have all had a profound influence on my work, not because I make plays that look like theirs, but because they live rent-free in my head while I’m working on a show, urging me to be braver, smarter, more collaborative, etc. It was Garland who once said to me that there is only one reason to be a theatre artist, and that’s because it makes you a bigger person. So I try to choose projects and collaborators who I think will make me bigger and I try to lead a process so others can be made bigger by the work.

**TS** | Can you remember the moment you decided you wanted to direct?

**JH** | For many years, I felt that everything I wanted to understand in the art form I could explore by being an actor. And then, almost overnight, I started feeling like a punter on a football team, very specialized and narrowly focused. I found myself becoming interested in having a larger influence on the take of the play. There was a part of me that felt if I were to start to direct I would know how to communicate with actors. I understood the language of actors, I understood the concerns. The part of it that surprised me is that I have a strong visual sense. I love design; I have a very strong compositional sense. I have a sense of how things are placed in a room; how actors work in relationship to their own bodies, to one another, and to the things on stage. I was talking to a colleague about being surprised by that and he said, “Well, look, you spent thousands of hours in rehearsal rooms with these fantastic visual directors.” I think it’s connected to what Malcolm Gladwell posits in Outliers. Whatever your level of native talent, you need 10,000 hours to be really good at anything. And I think it’s really hard for directors to get 10,000 hours in.

**TS** | What was the first full-length play you directed?

**JH** | *Henry V* with maximum security inmates in the corner of the Mojave Desert.

**TS** | What did you learn from working with inmates on Shakespeare?

**JH** | Those of us who spend a great deal of time around the plays of Shakespeare go around saying repeatedly that Shakespeare is for everybody, although we have the nagging suspicion that it may not be true. Going into a maximum security prison was for me an attempt to test the theory. I worked from the center of the art form—from the place that I understand it best—and I asked the inmates to rise to that high bar. The work they made was astonishing. It was huge because it reminded me of the awesome power of the work that we do. It’s become important for me, periodically, to stop whatever I’m doing and find a way to make work with non-practitioners. I spent time in the West Bank in Gaza with a group of theatre artists including JoAnne Akalaitis, Robert Woodruff, Anne Bogart, and Michael Greif during the second intifada. I spent four months in residence in rural South Carolina making a piece that looked at race and the generational gap between teenagers and the oldest residents in that community, etc.

I had such a great time directing and conceiving work for non-practitioners that it gave me an appetite for wanting to do more on a professional level.

**TS** | How did you navigate the transition into directing professional theatre?

**JH** | I started putting feelers out. I called some folks I knew who were running theatres. I called Blake Robison, who was at the Clarence Brown Theatre, and I said, “Look, I know that you don’t know my work. If there’s anything on some introductory level that I could come and do to help you get to know me, I’d be happy to do that.”

And Blake said, “Well, what if you come out and co-teach this Shakespeare class with me with the grad students and you can direct a Shakespeare project. You can choose what you want. There are six actors who are members of that class who I want you to use and you can do anything you want. It’ll give me a chance to know you and your work.”

I directed a graduate production of *Pericles*. Blake then invited me back to direct Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses* and *As You Like It*. In the meantime, I was hired here at PlayMakers. I assisted Mark Wing-Davey on a production of *King Lear*, and then got hired to direct a play here, which then led to another play.

**TS** | When you are directing Shakespeare, how much research do you do? How important is having a concept? How much table work is necessary?

**JH** | I read everything I can get my hands on. There’s so much scholarship around all of those plays. I spend a lot of time with the text itself, of course. And while I don’t search for a “concept” per se, they are plays that are so deep and vast that they benefit from finding a powerful organizing principle for approaching them. We stay at the table until...
we all feel we understand the play. Typically two to four days. And then, once we’re up from the table, I almost never look at the written text again. There is a danger for both directors and actors with Shakespeare in thinking that solving the play is about not playing an iamb as a trochee. The plays are so much better and bigger than that. And after all that text-based work is done, you better be in the room working on these plays based on their performance requirements. I return to the same Shakespeare plays repeatedly, which I love. I think it is very hard for a young director to get meaningful exposure to those texts, and I am terrifyingly grateful for an acting career that asked me to spend a lot of time in those plays. I had acted in well over half the canon by the time I began directing, having sometimes spent months inside those works, some of them multiple times. I don’t know how a young director who has not been an actor gets time with those plays—not as texts, but as plays in production. I have been in or directed five Henry V's, three Pericles, four Romeo and Julies, etc. And I know a bit more about them each time. I am a different person when I come back to them. They are plays that can be looked at and interpreted from multiple points of view. It started me thinking: I want to run a theatre that could be a cultural watering hole where we can engage in some dynamic conversations with our community through the work that we’re making—conversations about important political, social, and aesthetic issues, concerns, and thoughts.

It was my intention that if anyone was foolish enough to give me the keys to one of these LORT organizations that I was going to make the walls of the building as porous as possible and give the theatre to the community that it is charged to serve. I intended to do that by creating rigorous work and connecting that work deeply to our community. And that has proven to be a successful approach for us.

TS | What about ensemble-building exercises and improvisation?

JH | I don’t do a lot of exercises or games and such. I find it hard enough to make a play by actually working on it. As an actor it was always completely clear to me when a director was buying time by asking the company to play a game or perform an exercise. Actors always know when a director isn’t ready. I try not to be that director.

TS | What do you look for when casting actors or hiring a design team?

JH | At PlayMakers we have a very deep thrust stage and it is a room that is unfriendly to the small reactive performance, so partly for our room and partly because it’s the kind of actor I enjoy, I like actors with compression and muscularity in their playing. Actors who have a powerful engine and know how to get on their front foot and get after it. In designers I look for a dramaturgical intelligence to go with a strong aesthetic. I also have an enormous preference for actors and designers who are mature and not crazy. Some directors thrive on chaos and insanity. I find it totally debilitating. The work is hard enough, and I can’t make myself “thin-skinned” to come to work each day when what the job demands is to make myself “thin-skinned” and available to the rehearsal room. Nothing is more valuable to an actor than knowing that a director is listening deeply and attentively to their work and reflecting that work accurately back to them. I find that to be very hard to do when there is a lot of crazy in the room.

TS | When did you decide you wanted to run a theatre company?

JH | I started getting really interested in the question of what theatre can mean to a community and what a community can mean to a theatre. It was always clear to me that I didn’t want to start a theatre from scratch. That just wasn’t where my interest was. The idea of a LORT theatre is really where I wanted to find myself. Because that’s where I grew up. I love the idea that when we do our best work as LORT organizations, we’re providing resources and moving obstacles out of the way so that artists can be maximally successful, which is all any of us want as artists, finally.

I grew up in LORT theatre and I watched as the funding landscape changed. I watched what happened from 1989 forward. LORT theatres began to shift the mandate of how they thought about themselves. I think the arrangement for some LORT theatres for a long time was: our job is to make the art, your job is to come in the building, admire it, and get the hell out so we can move onto the next thing. The structure of those organizations allowed for an ivory tower kind of thinking. And that way, people end up in a meaningful relationship to the work that we’re doing. I have a magnificent Associate Artistic Director, Jeff Meana, who leads our outreach efforts. We have what I think are very sophisticated education and outreach initiatives. PlayMakers is associated with UNC and building university-wide conversations, building community-wide conversations around the work that we do is very valuable.

TS | Can you give us a sense of what the community is like there? How do you invite people into the building?
We're the only LORT theatre in the Carolinas and we're conscious of the fact that we need to be a lot of things to a lot of people. So, we question if we are being rigorous enough in our programming. Are we being diverse enough? And when we talk diversity, I'm not just talking about cultural diversity. Is there aesthetic diversity? How Dominique Serrand might approach a particular play will be very different than if I were to hire a different director for it. Are there women (playwrights, designers, actors) in the season? Are there people of color in the season? Are there enough plays that are thematically resonant to our particular communities? If you look at the nine-play season we have coming forward, four of the nine are written by women; four of the nine are being directed by women. Four of the nine are being directed by people of color. We're intentional about this. We know that if we aren't, the outcome will always be disproportionately white and male.

TS | I’m wondering if there is a big difference between diversity and variety, then?

JH | That’s a good question. I think there’s variety that’s not diverse. You can have a season of aesthetic variety that includes plays that are all written and directed by white men. I always feel inept talking about diversity because it is the most complicated issue and there are many LORT theatres that are wrestling with the issue meaningfully in their own communities. I don’t expect that I can speak comprehensively and clearly in some holistic way about it because it defeats me, finally.

TS | But I would like to talk to you a little more about it. You’ve referenced that in LORT today there are only six people of color running theatres in a country that is immensely diverse in its demographics and population. Why do you think that’s happening?

JH | This is an important question right now and a place where SDC could be involved in moving the needle on the LORT leadership question. If one is to pull back the camera, as it were, and look at this from 10,000 feet, let’s just forget the reasoning for a minute, just look at the picture. Roughly 150 LORT leaders; you have six of them as leaders of color. Six. Fortune 500 companies, privately held, no obligation towards the public good, have better outcomes than we have. No obligation to reflect their communities, the diversity of the communities in any way, they have better outcomes than we have.

So, I think we have to look at it and say this isn’t just accidental. In my personal view, we have to be able to look at this and say, there have to be some aggravating circumstances here. There are systemic failures that are not allowing the emergence of people of color in these roles. When you look for women in executive or artistic leadership in LORT, it’s at 22 percent and the needle hasn’t budged in a quarter century. And women make up over 50 percent of the administrative workforce in our LORT theatres. That is a picture of a glass ceiling. And I think our field needs to recognize it. It ought to realize that we’re late to the conversation. And it’s time for us to do something meaningful about it.

TS | Certainly boards will need to play a role in addressing this issue. How diverse is your board?

JH | I don’t have one since PlayMakers is a part of UNC. We have an advisory council, which is not yet as diverse as I’d like it to be. And we’re working on that. TS | Are you involved in the selection of the grad students? I imagine that gives you another opportunity to diversify, correct?

JH | Yes. We see 500 to 600 students annually to accept a class of 6 to 8. And the diversity of that group is important to us. My commitment is to cast them in our work at PlayMakers, giving them meaningful opportunities for growth over their three years with us. As soon as a student shows readiness, sometimes the moment before, they’re cast and put through the demands of making work at a professional level. When our students leave after three years, they leave with strong résumés, having worked with some of the finest directors in the country.

TS | It sounds to me like what you are doing, on a number of different levels, is opening the door to everybody to tell these stories and not just a select group.

JH | We’re trying. I wish I could say that we’ve been wholly successful at it, but that’s the intent.

TS | Is your intention to make sure that when the community comes into the building that they can see themselves on stage?

JH | I have to say I struggle with that question a little bit. Because as a Palestinian male, I never see myself in stories unless somebody is blowing up something. I go and watch Fences and I don’t have to be black to appreciate the father/son issues that are in that play. The struggle for wanting more for oneself and one’s family, the desire to get out and to make a new world. I don’t have to be African American to know that. Audiences are able to understand themselves relative to that world.

What’s important to me is that we’re getting a plurality of stories and voices on stage, and a plurality of voices in terms of who is directing and designing those plays.