

Interview with Ellen Stewart of LaMama Experimental Theatre Club, December 9, 1989

Bev Ostroska

Ellen Stewart is the founder and artistic director of LaMama Experimental Theatre Club in lower Manhattan's East Village. The theatre is nationally recognized as one of the prime centers of off-off-Broadway's emergence in the 1960s, and has grown from a one-room basement café to include three stages, an art gallery, rehearsal and workshop studios and its own archival space.

Such talents as Lanford Wilson, Tom O'Horgan, Sam Shepard, Harvey Fierstein, Liz Swados, Andrei Serban and Tom Eyer all had early beginnings at LaMama. LaMama has also been the American host to such notable international experimentalists as Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadashi Suzuki and Peter Brook.

To speak of LaMama is to speak synonymously of Ellen Stewart, who continues to guide almost every aspect of the theatre, even today, some twenty-nine years after the theatre's opening. During the past fifteen years, Stewart has followed an artistic credo which many, if not most, productions at LaMama exemplify.

Committed to a theatre that goes beyond the limits of national culture towards a universally communicative exchange, Stewart has sought to produce theatre at LaMama whose meaning is conveyed viscerally through images, gestures, music, sound and emotional content.

In December, 1989, I met with Ellen Stewart and she discussed LaMama's early beginnings and long-standing commitment to internationalism. She also talked about the theatre's move from "playwright's theatre" to "playmaker's theatre," and of her interest in supporting a visually-centered, rather than verbally-centered, theatre. This concept is intimately connected to Ellen Stewart's vision of LaMama as a theatre with an international mission.

In 1985, Stewart received a five-year MacArthur Fellowship awarded to "exceptionally talented and creative people." She is using funds from this grant to establish LaMama Umbria, an arts center outside of Spoleto, Italy.

Interview

Q: You have indicated a preference for theatre pieces which are primarily visual, not verbal, and you say you are more interested in "playmaking" than "playwriting." You also frequently use the terms, "LaMama style" and "cross-pollination theatre." Could you talk a little about some of these things?

ES: Well, cross-pollination is something I've believed in strongly for a long time. It relates to internationalism, and LaMama has been international from its very beginnings. Because by 1964, we had established an artistic collaboration with Bogota, Colombia. In fact, the first LaMama play to be published was published in Bogota: Paul Foster's *Hurrah for the Bridge*, which Edgar Negret, a Colombian sculptor, had shown to a group of Colombian students. They liked it and decided to perform it as their entry in an international theatre festival in Erlangen, Germany. It was there that Jens Okking, a Dane, saw the play. He then contacted me and asked if I had any more plays like that. It just so happened that at that time I was very frustrated about there being no critical awareness or reviews of LaMama's work in the U.S. Critics wouldn't come downtown to see our work, and our playwrights were not taken seriously--and we were doing plays by Sam Shepard, Jean Claude Van Itallie, Lanford Wilson! I asked Jens if he could get us reviewed if we performed in Europe. He said that we would be reviewed in Denmark.

That is what made me decide to send LaMama troupes to Europe: it was basically to get our playwrights published, because none of the publishing companies would publish us with no critiques backing up the plays. So, in 1965, we sent out our first LaMama troupes to Europe: Tom O'Horgan's troupe went to Denmark, and Ross Alexander's troupe went to Paris. The Danes loved us, though we had a more difficult time in Paris . . . but from this tour, which was made traveling in a Volkswagon bus and for no salaries, just room and board they received from locals who would put them up as they traveled from town to town, everything came.

Our "LaMama style," which Tom O'Horgan was in large part responsible for developing was in this way shown to the Europeans. In turn, they started making theatre that was influenced by us and also by the Living Theatre which had been over a bit before LaMama. Then the Europeans began to send things over here and we produced them at LaMama in New York, and that is very much how this whole cross-pollination effect began happening. Of course, don't forget that even before we sent out the troupes to Europe, we had already produced at LaMama the work of theatre artists from Colombia,

Korea, France, Japan, India, Peru, Finland and Poland, so we had a kind of organic cross-breeding going on at LaMama, from our very first beginnings.

For instance, we did the first American production of Harold Pinter's *The Room* in 1962. And later, in 1967, we co-sponsored, with N.Y.U., the first Grotowski workshop in America. Peter Brook became a friend in 1966, and when he founded his international troupe in Paris, all of the Americans in that company were LaMama people. In 1969, I brought Andrei Serban to this country and of course his production of *Fragments of a Trilogy* began world tours in the mid-1970s and it is still touring. Right now there is another production of it being put together for a 1990 tour.

In that next year, 1970, were the beginnings of the great Japanese: Terayama, who introduced Butoh (although most Americans just recently learned about Butoh), and Higashi's big influence with his troupe, the Toyko Kid Brothers, and their production of *Golden Bat*. This show was all visuals, music, lighting, scenic devices that had not been seen anywhere in America.

So you see, LaMama has gone out into the world, and the world has come back to LaMama. And we did all this in a period of time in the U.S. when the country was really not much interested in the rest of the world. The U.S. was very obtuse and ill-informed as to what was going on in the rest of world theatre. It is only in the last five years or so that the light bulbs have been going on; but LaMama has been living it for the past 25 years: this has been our life!

But when I speak of cross-pollination, I mean more than just the production and presentation of plays. I have always had at LaMama, a place for residents: a place for people who came to work at LaMama from other countries where they could sleep and live. When the Tokyo Kid Brothers came, all 18 of them stayed with me in this building--for six months! And they were not the only ones.

I believe very much in creating the organic circumstances that surround the art being created . . . and you know, this comes truly when you can just be totally involved with what you're doing and with the other people involved. I think this contributes to the art and also by having the artists live and work with us in America, there is inter-cultural exchange-cross-breeding, cross-pollination that's happening as well.

Q: As I understand "LaMama style," it refers to a physicalized, gestural, stylized kind of performing which is accompanied by, or integrated with, a lot of evocative sound, music and scenic visuals. You've talked about preferring "playmaking" to "playwriting." Does "LaMama style" relate more directly to playmaking than playwriting?

ES: Because LaMama is so internationally focused, we really want to find ways to communicate, and to communicate to all people. So that is a large part of our experimentation. The LaMama style does not mean that we have

deserted the word, or that the word is meaningless. It's just that LaMama people try to find ways to use text so that one can *see* what is happening rather than having to just listen to what's happening.

I believe that all of the performing arts are absolutely essential to theatre. For me, I don't think theatre is theatre when it has only the word: no dance, no music. I harken back to the Greeks, who used the word "theatron," (seeing place) to define their theatre. And they also used "drama," (meaning action) when they referred to the theatre: and for me, theatre is still best when it is a seeing place with action. Now, "forum" (another Greek word) is a talking place, which is largely what our contemporary and commercial theatre has become: it's an intellectual approach, it strangulates and constricts action with a lot of talk and no action--and that *is* serious contemporary theatre today.

Q: How was the LaMama style developed?

ES: Well, in LaMama's beginnings, we had people like Joel Zwick (he's now a Hollywood film director) and Stanley Rosenberg, who directed LaMama Plexus, one of our resident companies. We called them "the body builders," because they were responsible for the beginning body training LaMama actors received, which is so important to the LaMama style of performance. The training was a mixture of ethnic influences from countries such as India, Japan and Korea where actor-training is very physically oriented. And of course the Grotowski workshops were very influential upon us.

Another person who must be mentioned in speaking of developing a LaMama style is Tom O'Horgan. Tom's works always had music, all composed by him, and in the early days, all performed by him. He was a one-man band! He used to hang instruments around his neck, play the piano, snap his fingers or drums that were on his knees--but we'd have music in all of Tom's plays! And Tom used space inventively; he'd start performances in the streets sometimes and move audiences into the theatre as the action progressed. Of course, Tom's work at LaMama stopped when he was invited to direct *Hair* on Broadway in 1968. I personally believe that *Hair* revolutionized theatre around the world, not just in New York. I'd say by far what has shaped theatre most in the world today is O'Horgan's *Hair*.

Other directors who've been influential in developing the LaMama style were John Braswell and Wilfred Leach. They co-directed the ETC Co., and their production of *Carmilla* in 1970 was a landmark piece. This was a company composed of musicians, everyone in the company was a singer/dancer. This included musicians, actors, everybody--the only one who couldn't sing was Wilfred! [Wilfred Leach went on to become artistic director at the Public Theatre.] And they used film, slide projections, had the actors using microphones on stage, techniques that are now commonplace and used all over the world, in all kinds of theatre pieces. But Wilfred Leach and John Braswell were the first ones, to my knowledge, to introduce all these things.

Other experimentalists who had a close link with LaMama were Robert Wilson, his giant puppets were used in our first European tour of Van Itallie's *Motel*, Mabou Mines, Philip Glass and the Creation Company. These artists we now associate closely with "performance art" and "post-modernism." They are the ones who've gone out into the world lately--Europe, everywhere and influenced things. There's a great deal of "Americanism" in the world today, which really can be traced back to LaMama no matter what the genre: music, dance, performance art.

But let's backtrack for a moment, because we must not forget to mention Andrei Serban and Liz Swados. Their work, particularly *Fragments of a Trilogy*, has certainly been, I think, an influence on the world. And Liz Swados, who defined and created the language and music of this play, made a huge contribution, because music is at least 50% of the work.

I like very much the kind of work that Andrei and Elizabeth started and I try to keep it going. I think it's very important to do this, because with our own LaMama company [the Great Jones Repertory Co., for whom Ellen Stewart has directed *Mythos Oedipus*, *Orfei*, *Dionysus Filius Dei*, and *Another Phaedra*] we are given a particular identity.

Q: When we read about LaMama, we also see the term "in the LaMama spirit" used. Is this different from the LaMama style?

ES: The number one thing about the LaMama spirit is that it means you love what you're doing, and you really want to find ways to communicate it to all persons.

Q: You speak often about LaMama being your "pushcart," a pushcart being the idea of pushing a cart along to help other people, but which, in the process, takes you where you want to be. Is having a pushcart also part of the LaMama spirit, and how has having LaMama as your pushcart affected the theatre's development?

ES: Well, it is everything. Because there I was, sitting on the other side of the world in Morocco in 1960 when my brother, a playwright, had a disastrous experience with Broadway producers--people he had trusted and gave his work to--but they financially and ethically betrayed him. It was a terrible thing for him which really ended his career as a playwright. He got a writer's block. But I didn't know that at the time.

Up until this point in my life I had been working in fashion design. I was then in Morocco recuperating from an illness, and somehow, when I heard about my brother's experience, I felt very much the spirit of my Papa Diamond. [Papa Diamond, a Rumanian shopkeeper, was Ellen Stewart's adopted father.] He had always advised me to get a pushcart and push it for other people. So this idea (it was like a vision really) came to me when I was

in Tangiers to go back to New York and make my pushcart a theatre where the plays my brother and his friends wrote could be performed. Other friends would act in them and be the audiences, this was my idea of it then. I knew nothing about theatre at that time. And that's how it started.

I rented a basement on East 9th St. which came to be known as Cafe LaMama, but my brother never joined us. He was really destroyed as a playwright after that Broadway experience. But nevertheless, in a strange kind of way, it was because of him that LaMama happened. It's like a phoenix, you know, out of his ashes, if you can call it that, all of these other people and events have come. You see, I really believe that whatever is put into my hands is supposed to be there. That's what I think.

[At this point, Ozzie Rodriguez, a LaMama director, made the following point about another aspect of the "LaMama spirit."]

OR: You asked about LaMama's "spirit". . . Well, when the Great Jones Repertory Company was on tour in Greece, we were booked to play at Delphi: an outdoor festival event. Now, we were expecting around 2500 people to see our performance, there were places for 2500 people--but 4500 showed up! And there were thousands of people barred from coming in through the gates to see our show. So, halfway through the performance, I'm looking for Ellen, and where do I find her? In the middle of the crowd at the gates, sneaking people in!

Q: [To Ellen Stewart] Could this story be sort of a metaphor for how you have brought in artists to New York from countries whose borders are ordinarily difficult to cross, from countries such as Poland, for instance, to perform and work?

ES: But I tell, you, it's not ME, it's LaMama! LaMama does its own thing. I just go along with it.

But it is true that, to our audiences, especially in countries other than the U.S., LaMama is kind of mythic. Our audiences will come to see the same work again and again: it's kind of like a pilgrimage. They'll sit on rocks, and on dirt and in the rain. We've done tours to Europe, South America, the Middle East, Asia--LaMama has covered a lot of territory. The only country we're not received in is our own country. But it doesn't bother me in the least. It used to, but then I said, "Who needs this?" And now, critics better know our work or they are not taken seriously!

Q: What is theatre?

ES: Theatre itself is magic, if you will allow it to be, theatre is magic.

Q: What about Broadway? Is it magic too?

ES: Yes, all theatre is magic! Look, you have to understand that there are all different mentalities in this world. And we mustn't narrow ourselves to only what we like. We have to understand that if some people like what they see on Broadway, that these tastes are very meaningful and relevant to them. They like what they see on Broadway, they don't feel uncomfortable, they don't have to try to understand what they see. If we didn't have Broadway, a large part of the populace would have nowhere to go, no place to see theatre. For myself, I could never feel comfortable there, but it doesn't mean I don't respect the other's feelings. I don't want to tax myself trying to enjoy something like Broadway, which I'm never going to enjoy. I much prefer a gut connection in theatre: my gut to your gut, rather than my head to your head. But the truth is, the key to art in the theatre is universality. There may be opposite styles of working, but each has the possibility of universality: how you express and explore is your individual art form.

But you see, American culture is really closed--stultified in many ways--we have a kind of complacency. We don't even know what we're missing and so we don't care. You know, if you take North America (and even include South America!)--well, that is the smallest part of the world! When you travel, and you begin to see and think about what is happening in all of this world, not just this small part of it, what you see so often, in countries like Japan, for instance, is that there is an almost inherent ability in these countries to love, respect and create. That is what we still lack in America. It is not inherent here yet. So when you speak of Broadway, you're addressing a part of American culture that is sufficient to our needs now. As to whether or not we will become more mature in that respect, I don't know.

But maybe Nature is going to fix us up. I think this is our only hope. Because unless Nature creates some kind of innate receptivity within us--almost a kind of geneticism that can be passed generationally--then it can't happen. The only element that will make this happen is Nature. And Nature does incredible things, I don't realize how, but I do have hopes. Because I see now, and for the past 10 years or so, that there is more openness in America, more of a seeking in the American spirit that wasn't there before. People are no longer satisfied with the status quo. People in the United States are trying, as best they can, to reach out: they may not know where they're reaching, but they are reaching out. And I'm not speaking just about theatre: I'm speaking of the culture itself. I mean cooking/cuisine is culture. And look at how much more adventurous we are in that respect, we eat Vietnamese food now!

But you see, Nature has its own way and we follow. It is not a path that we are making, it is a path that She puts out and we follow. Nature has a way of taking us, inspiring certain people to do things, and then those people in turn inspire others, illuminate, show, teach. And I do have hopes. I do have hopes.



Gisela May. *Mutter Courage Und Ihre Kinder* von Bertolt Brecht, Musik Paul Dessau. Photo by Vera Tenschert