

Paradise Revisited: The Current State of The Living Theatre

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Throughout its long history, The Living Theatre has revealed a seemingly endless capacity to reinvent itself. Founded by Judith Malina and Julian Beck in 1947, the company has undergone several radically different phases. The work of The Living Theatre has seemingly ended several times, beginning with the closure of their Fourteenth Street Theatre by the IRS in 1963. During a self-imposed exile abroad, the troupe produced four collectively-created pieces, most notably *Paradise Now*. In 1968, they returned to America to present these works in a controversial and highly publicized tour across the nation. Shortly thereafter, the company renounced performing in traditional theatre spaces and splintered into four cells. The one headed by the Becks performed underground in various countries, ultimately working from a base in Rome and then Paris until the early 1980s. The Living Theatre then decided to return to America to present their eagerly anticipated repertory of four new productions at the Joyce Theatre in New York City in 1984. Although they had triumphed as the most politically radical and theatrically innovative company of the 1960s era, they received an overwhelmingly negative critical response upon their return. This unexpected reaction essentially suggested that their work was still linked to the 1960s and therefore dated.

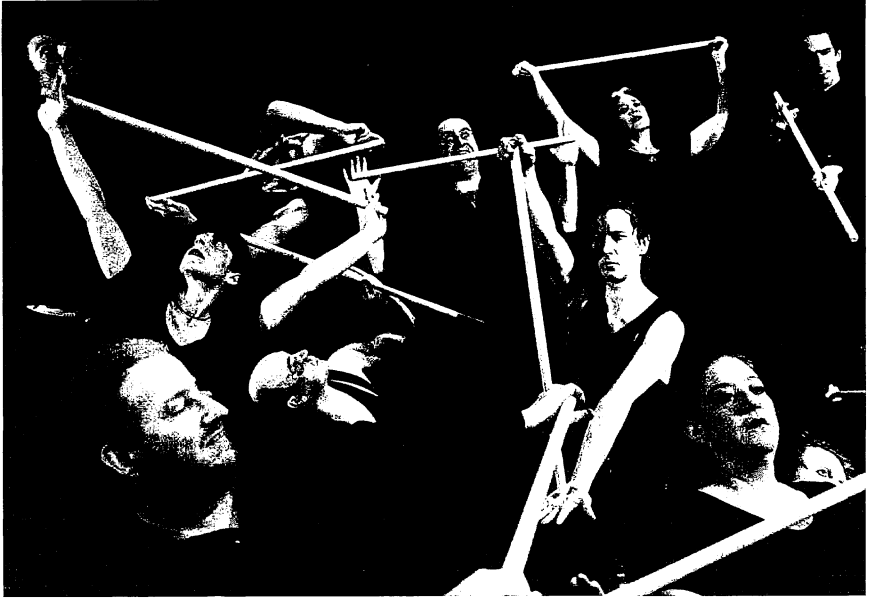
Shortly thereafter in 1985, Beck, sadly, died from cancer. Since then, The Living Theatre has managed to maintain a low profile and financially precarious existence based in New York under the leadership of Malina and her current husband Hanon Reznikov, who joined the company as an actor in 1973. Despite their unceasing commitment to continue their mission after Beck's passing, I have continuously encountered a number of theatre professionals who are startled to discover that The Living Theatre still exists and actively produces new work. Indeed, after working with the company briefly in 1991 as the Assistant Director on their premiere of *The Rules of Civility*, I have received mostly incredulous reactions to any mention of this experience.

On one level, such responses probably indicate an acknowledgment of Beck's death in the 1980s, which was a major blow for the troupe. Apart from his artistic contributions to and spiritual leadership of The Living Theatre, Beck was also the all-important spokesman and administrative head of the company. Despite the anarchic nature of the group's structure, he handled all bookings and was responsible for housing, clothing, and feeding the communal Living Theatre family for years—no easy task (Gelber 6-29). Thus, his death created a

significant leadership vacuum for The Living Theatre in many ways. As a result, for many people, both admirers and detractors, the company simply ceased to exist after Beck's death. While they are still producing new work in America, the company now suffers from a low visibility problem in the wider theatrical community, exacerbated by their need to tour in Europe for a good part of each year. The theatre has received a great deal of acclaim and financial support in Europe from the 1960s to the present day, and their endless touring abroad is in part necessitated by monetary concerns (Eaker 36). Yet The Living Theatre is now one of the few notable avant-garde troupes from the 1960s which is still intact, and continues to work towards promoting its anarchist-pacifist vision of world peace.

In other ways, however, this lack of awareness about the company also reflects contemporary perceptions in America about the alternative lifestyles, political activism, and altruistic mythos which dominated the era of the 1960s. Although Malina and Beck's theatre was a major part of the off-Broadway movement in the 1950s, they are today perhaps best known for their highly experimental, controversial, and influential work in the 1960s. Their adoption and pursuit of a communal and alternative lifestyle during that period and beyond also firmly identifies them as icons of the hippie era in the minds of many viewers in the 1990s. Any examination of their current state must consider the implications of this cultural baggage *vis-à-vis* the response of a contemporary, post-modern audience to their work, which still reflects the zeitgeist of the 1960s in both style and content.

How much in fact has The Living Theatre changed during the last fourteen years? In the early 1980s, they marked their return to America by renouncing their confrontational tactics of the 1960s in favor of a gentler means of promoting anarchy and non-violence. In a later response to the critical assault on their work at that time, Judith Malina herself admitted that what was once "breakthrough" and avant-garde in their productions (and that of others) had become mere "novelty" by the 1980s. Recognizing the need for The Living Theatre to grow, she expressed her concerns about the general nature of the avant-garde movement: "We can't breakthrough unless we find something really new. I don't think any of us have done that. I don't think the Wooster Group has done that, nor The Living Theatre for many years, not since we got off the stage and all embraced each other. We are in a static state" (Trousdel 37). Thus, while the overall mission of The Living Theatre has not changed significantly since the late 1950s and 1960s, such comments indicate an awareness, at least, of the need to adapt their methods to changing times and cultural climates. Whether or not such growth has actually occurred, however, is an important issue in considering their recent work.



The Living Theatre's production of Hanon Reznikov's *Utopia*, directed by Judith Malina. (Photo courtesy of Paula Court).

Indeed, the company has endured a series of negative reviews since their return to New York in 1984, especially during the 1980s. While their productions in the 1960s certainly garnered a wide range of critical response, the reaction to their work at the Joyce Theatre was almost uniformly harsh. Their once cutting-edge avant-garde techniques such as audience interaction and highly physicalized staging were dismissed as dated and "shop worn," having been absorbed by the mainstream Broadway theatre in such offerings as *Hair* and *Cats* (Le Sourd 1). The troupe's unpolished acting technique, which evoked some negative criticism even in the 1960s, was labeled as "unnecessarily crude" in comparison to the highly crafted work of avant-garde artists like Richard Foreman and The Mabou Mines (Wynne 1). Frank Rich of the *New York Times* was particularly offended by Julian Beck's act of placing his hand on the critic's crotch (Beck denied this), and published an especially abusive review which mocked the company's hippie image: "The Living Theater is now a straggly collection of indistinguishable riffraff; the troupe could be a defrocked Moonie ashram, or maybe a seedy bus-and-truck company of 'Godspell' at the end of a 15-year tour" (Rich 1). Consequently, in relation to the polished and technically innovative work of such

artists as Foreman, The Wooster Group, The Mabou Mines, and Robert Wilson, more visceral and politically oriented ensembles such as The Living Theatre were seen as crude and behind the times.

Similar viewpoints were expressed throughout the 1980s and early 1990s as the company struggled to produce new productions. A good example of the rather personally oriented reaction which their work seemed to illicit was evident in Sy Syna's review of their 1991 production of *Rules of Civility* in *Back Stage*: "It is an often enigmatic, amateurish, pretentious and somewhat smelly assault upon the audience's sensibilities and sentiments . . . from their collective aroma, it's clear that the frequent use of soap and water is not currently part of The Living Theater aesthetic" (Syna 44). Perhaps the overall critical reaction of the period was best expressed by the title of a 1989 article by Howard Kissel in which he scathingly attacked the remaining vestiges of the 1960s theatre "esthetic": "Isn't the Living Theatre Dead Yet?" (Kissel 1). Even *Village Voice* critic Mark Robinson's generally positive review of the 1994 revival of their seminal 1964 production of *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* began with a discussion of his preconceptions of the group based on their wild image from the 1960s involving "coarsely articulated politics, coerced audience participation, embarrassing sexual rituals . . ." (Robinson 93).

In short, negative perceptions about the radical politics of the 1960s continues to work against The Living Theatre to this day. In the period of the 1980s, at least, the critical response reflected changes in both the American theatre (especially the nature of the avant-garde) and the larger socio-political climate of the conservative Reagan/Bush years. In terms of societal changes, the 1980s was a decade best known for the pursuit of material comfort and financial profit, which in many ways reflected a reactionary backlash in some circles against the alleged hedonism and non-materialism of the 1960s. Thus, the social activism and lifestyle excesses of the "age of Aquarius" were perceived by many people as passé, dangerous, and somewhat embarrassing in the years following the 1960s. A group like The Living Theatre, which continued to espouse flower power-like maxims about peace, love and collective harmony throughout the 1980s, was certainly working against the dominant cultural current of the period. In such a self-obsessed era, The Living Theatre was, in critic Mark Gevisser's words, "often characterized as an incense-burning, mantra-chanting dinosaur, a hangover from the Winter of Discontent and the Summer of Love" (Gevisser 1).

The irony of The Living Theatre's image as a symbol of the 1960s was not lost on Malina, who remarked in a 1989 lecture that industry people were reluctant to hire her after Beck's death because "they don't know of the Living Theatre." For many people in the entertainment field, The Living Theatre was, for all intents and purposes, an historical artifact by the 1980s. She also admitted

to being a "little bitter" about the lack of financial support offered to the company by government agencies, while also acknowledging that their radical politics had "frightened away" a good deal of potential backing over the years (Malina 17-18). This paradox, of course, has plagued The Living Theatre for years in that even a theatre devoted to anarchist principles requires money to support its work. She has also noted that the theatre had been active for years before achieving international fame in the 1960s. For them, no phase of their work has been successful in that they have yet to achieve their so-called "beautiful non-violent anarchist revolution" (Goldfarb 17). Both Malina and Beck were frustrated by the end of the 1960s because increasingly militant audiences were unwilling to hear their message of non-violence. Thus, they perceived their work as incomplete, even during the heyday of the 1960s (Gelber 24-25).

Regardless of any conflicting views over the "reality" of their situation, however, the company is still widely identified with a 1960s persona and performance style. Such factors invariably contributed to the fact that even avid former supporters like *Performing Arts Journal* editor Gerald Rabkin reacted to their work as out of touch with the current climate upon their return to America in the 1980s. Rabkin felt that the "disaster" at the Joyce resulted from their years of wandering exile, which had removed them from the new, "cool" experimental theatre of the 1970s. Ultimately, he perceived them as victims of history whose ideals had failed to change with the times (Rabkin 20). Rabkin's criticism underscored the notion that the public response to their work was also affected by marked changes in the American theatre by the 1980s. Concerning the nature of the changing avant-garde "aesthetic" of the period, Richard Schechner's 1982 essay, "The Decline and Fall of the American Avant-Garde" claimed, and I agree, that in contrast to the work of the 1960s, the post-1960s avant-garde theatre generally championed experimentation with form over political content. As Schechner himself put it, "almost without notice subject matter—content—disappeared from experimental theatre" (Schechner 11-76 and 27). In a review of director Reza Abdoh's 1993 production of *Tight, Right, White*, Marvin Carlson concurred that in relation to the highly "exhilarating theatre" of the 1960s, much of the recent experimental theatre in America has seemed "more intellectually abstract, more technological (if not technocratic)" (Carlson 187). Such specific changes in theatrical practice were influenced by the larger issue of changing attitudes and values among the post-modern audience and artists of the 1980s and 1990s as well. In an essay on postmodern psychology, Steiner Kvale described the post-1960s climate as follows:

The ideas of progress and development, be it the progress of mankind or the individual pilgrim's progress toward salvation

of his or her soul, is out. An attitude of tolerant indifference has replaced the involvement and engagement in the social movements and the inner journeys of the 1960s and 1970s. What is left is a liberating nihilism, a living with the here and now, a weariness and playful irony. Fascination may take the place of reflection; seduction may replace argumentation. There is an oscillation of an intense sensuous fascination by the media and a cool, ironical distance to what appears (Kvale 24-25).

Thus, this tendency towards "nihilism" and "tolerant indifference" in the contemporary culture as described by Kvale has certainly created yet another major obstacle for the politically oriented activism of The Living Theatre.

With this in mind, and recalling Malina's earlier remarks about the "static" nature of their work in the 1980s, I will evaluate some of The Living Theatre's recent productions to determine if the company has achieved the new forms Malina was advocating at that time. The honesty of her self-examination was perhaps most apparent in their 1993-94 production of *Anarchia*, which was presented at Theater for the New City in New York. In this production, the company used Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta's nineteenth-century essay of the same name as a springboard to examine its own history and commitment to anarchist-pacifist principles. Unlike their more notorious productions of the 1960s, *Anarchia* revealed a distinct, almost tongue-in-cheek sense of humor which has been an integral part of all of the company's productions I have seen in New York since 1989. For example, one actor in *Anarchia* made a joke about Malina being a "household saint," which referred to her film, *Household Saints*, in release at that time. In the opening of *The Rules of Civility*, another performer announced that the play was being presented by "The Living Theatre, a registered corporation in the state of New York." Given the company's political history, this line always elicited a large laugh from the audience, and more importantly revealed a previously unseen willingness to poke fun at itself. After years of pursuing strident didacticism as a means of political persuasion, the company now seems more interested in developing a warm and almost cuddly relationship with its audience. In a more recent outing, the 1996 *Utopia* at the Vineyard Theatre in New York, the group actually shared wine and grapes with the audience as part of its exploration of the value and meaning of utopia in contemporary society. Another scene involved the company enveloping audience volunteers in a feel-good body pile. Most recent Living Theatre productions, in fact, have contained significant moments in which the actors interacted with the audience members in a respectful and friendly manner. Thus, while the company's current work is still

very much reliant on a physical engagement of the audience, the tone of that engagement has definitely changed since the 1960s and early 1970s.

Despite this change, however, I feel that The Living Theatre has not moved forward on any larger formal and stylistic levels. Thus, the welcome humor of the productions discussed above does not minimize the problematic nature of their work at many times. Despite much public rhetoric from Malina et al. about continuing experimentation to explore new forms, the company seems stuck in the use of their now overly-familiar techniques from the 1960s, and none of their recent productions have indicated any attempt to discover the promised new methods. Even the 1991 "work in progress" production of *Rules of Civility* was revived virtually intact a year later at Theater for the New City, with no effort made to revise unclear staging, clumsy writing, etc. What was most exciting about the 1993-94 production of *Anarchia* in my mind was the honesty of its self-appraisal—warts and all. Even then, a series of 1960s style, Open Theatre influenced sound and movement exercises seemed irrelevant to the larger issues of the production. Furthermore, the inevitable attempt to drag the audience on stage at the play's end was extremely awkward. All too often the company's actors seem to break the fourth wall simply because they feel that is what The Living Theatre is expected to do, rather than out of any vital purpose or necessity. While historically interesting, perhaps, such work as their literal recreation of *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* seems repetitious in the 1990s. Watching actors grab their crotches, use profanity, and engage in stylized "tableaux vivants" in that production was probably provocative theatre in 1964, but now seems rather tame to a more sophisticated and cynical post-modernist audience in the 1990s. I would agree with the theatre's critics that they have become somewhat static in this sense, and need to shed their historical shackles and find the promised new forms of expression if their work is to continue successfully into the next century.

In addition, the stylized, highly kinetic brand of theatre which the company still practices is undeniably difficult and requires the presence of a group of skilled, highly flexible actors. The Living Theatre has rarely utilized formally trained performers or auditioned actors for their productions as is commonly practiced in the conventional theatre. Rather, interested actors are expected to seek them out and find a way to become involved with the company. Not surprisingly, this practice has produced uneven casts comprised of performers ranging from Living Theatre veterans of the early 1970s to total newcomers, many of whom are not up to the high vocal and physical demands of the various productions. Indeed, the company has always been criticized for its use of raw, unpolished actors, but at least the former members of the company had the advantage of working together for years as a tight-knit ensemble. During the operation of its theatre on the Lower East Side of New York from 1987-1992,

financial pressures required that the company run two productions simultaneously at times, as was done with *The Rules of Civility*. While a more experienced cast of Living Theatre veterans toured that play in Europe, a younger, less-seasoned group—many of them working with the company for the first time—ran another production of the piece at the home base in New York. Another negative result of this practice was that New York critics were at times reviewing a second-string company of sorts, many of whom were totally unfamiliar with The Living Theatre acting style. This problem only served to exacerbate the negative image of the troupe among the larger New York press. Happily, *Utopia* featured most of the best Living Theatre actors I have seen in past performances, supplemented by a few carefully chosen talented newcomers. The result was a refreshing production, with the company employing many of its standard techniques to produce an enjoyable and well-executed evening of theatre. Overall, however, their track record has been quite inconsistent in this regard and a continual reliance on such practices is increasingly reductive for The Living Theatre.

It is certainly true that in some productions their penchant for audience involvement has been handled skillfully and with great verve. At other times, unfortunately, the audience has merely humored them out of a polite desire to be "good sports," in contrast to the Artaudian-like fervor of the audience participation in their work during the 1960s. Once again, this speaks to the all important change in the dynamic of the company's audience in recent years, reflecting the potentially hostile nature of their interactive aesthetic to the contemporary, socially-fragmented theatergoing public. Allan Wallach's review in *Newsday* of their work at the Joyce Theatre noted this difference when he commented on how unresponsive "today's audience" was to The Living Theatre's interactive approach, observing that only "half the audience" responded to a company appeal to stand up and sway with the "chanting performers" (Wallach 1). Although weathered, The Living Theatre of the 1990s remains undeterred by their critics, feeling that their work is even more valid and urgent during the "down" periods (Walsh 6). In a letter to supporters dated August 25, 1994, for example, Malina and Reznikov reiterated the importance of pursuing their work "at home" despite the current antagonistic climate in America: "The two of us have just returned from Europe where, as in years past, there continue to be possibilities for us to further the work of 'the Living,' as it's known there. But we have always wanted to work, not necessarily where we are most popular, but rather where we are most needed" (Malina and Reznikov 1). Thus, despite the changing pendulum of time and numerous setbacks, The Living Theatre is still committed to its historical quest for anarchy, pacifism, and a better world. Despite this commitment, the divisive nature of the contemporary Zeitgeist offers huge obstacles to the company's ongoing mission. They have struggled mightily

with the problem of maintaining a viable contemporary identity amidst the changes in American society since the 1960s and, as noted, still command much greater respect and attention in Europe than in their native country. To drive this point home, perhaps, the New York program of *Utopia* was sprinkled with glowing notices from the European press.

Surely The Living Theatre's historical goal of enacting social change has often led them to pursue choices which would be untenable for a more commercially oriented group. The choice of location for their former theatre on East Third Street in Manhattan is a good example of this emphasis on idealism over pragmatism. At that time, Malina stressed the importance of working specifically in this poor neighborhood, which was one not typically frequented by city theater goers (Malina 10). Such noble goals, however, ignored the practical realities of drawing a consistent audience to a locale generally considered dangerous and difficult to reach. These outside perceptions eventually created a situation in which most people attending their productions were those already familiar with the company's work. Since the closure of that theatre in 1991 due to fire code violations, their work has been performed in somewhat more accessible downtown New York locations. Despite this shift in performance venue, they still have played primarily to a rather limited audience of avant-garde



The Living Theatre's production of Hanon Reznikov's *Utopia*, directed by Judith Malina. (Photo courtesy of Paula Court).

theatre artists, aging kindred 1960s spirits, and younger students. Like myself, the students have typically studied the company in theatre history classes, and are now interested in experiencing their work first-hand (with varying degrees of ideological support). For a company whose *raison d'être* is to change the consciousness of an entire society, however, playing to small houses, regardless of the degree of positive reception, is problematic. This geographical isolation has undoubtedly contributed to the ongoing problem of poor visibility amidst the larger New York and national theatrical communities which has plagued them since their return to America in the 1980s.

Their failure to resonate in the contemporary culture on a larger level also reflects an ongoing lack of connection to the spirit of the 1960s in America. Undeniably, the post Reagan/Bush years of the 1990s have revealed a softening in cultural attitudes towards the values of the 1960s counter-culture. Although popular films like the 1994 *Forrest Gump*, as well as certain arch-conservative factions of the Republican Party, continue to take a reactionary stance towards the "vices" of the period, a distinct interest in the cultural markers of the 1960s has definitely emerged in the last few years. As critic Margo Jefferson noted in a *New York Times* article, "the politics of the 1960's are taking a beating right now, but 60's clothes and songs are all the rage" (Jefferson 1). Unfortunately, recent events like the stale nostalgia of Woodstock II have further evoked the sensibilities of the 1960s in superficial ways, underscoring the shallow nature of the current trendy interest in the external trappings of the era. While at least the ongoing mission of The Living Theatre continues to reflect a more authentic representation of the deeper values of that period, the company must inevitably confront the notion that a good portion of their small audience regards them—and the watershed events of the 1960s—as a historical phenomenon. The younger members of their audience might sport long hair, wear tie-dyed clothing, and listen to 1960s-influenced contemporary music, but the ethos and spirit of the 1960s are still very much forgotten for the larger American public. Ed Morales's review of *Utopia* in the *Village Voice* reflects the rather benign bemusement with the 1960s which I think characterizes the response of much of The Living Theatre's current audience:

. . . I've been piqued by that wild and crazy '60s gimmick of breaking the boundary between actor and audience. . . . The point, I guess, was the jolt one gets from actors' continual engagement of the audience, challenging our idea of sitting comfortably and being entertained. But this is a revelation that must be as old as this company's 45-year old history. I was hoping to be challenged by the text . . . but instead there were

touchy-feely exercises about feeling the limits of one's aura. If this is anarchy, I've suddenly become a big fan of Order. As much as I sympathized with the troupe . . . *Utopia*, or anything like it, seemed extremely anachronistic to me, and after a while I felt like I was humoring the actors (Morales 69).

In terms of concluding remarks regarding my analysis of the current state of The Living Theatre, I think it is clear that they face an undeniably strong challenge in reaching a new generation of theatergoers over a long-term period. On the positive side, regardless of any and all flaws, I almost always emerge from a Living Theatre production with a palpable sense of community. Their recent productions in small, low-profile theatres have been well-attended and at times even positively reviewed by the mainstream New York press. For example, John Bell's review of *Anarchia* in *TheaterWeek* declared that the performance had "a certain strength and integrity that other theater companies can barely attain on a good night" (Bell 13), while D.J.R. Bruckner of the *New York Times* praised their 1991 production of *Humanity* as follows: "this is the kind of play the members of the company are good at—very good . . . spectacular staging . . . this performance is a gift . . ." (Bruckner 1). Nonetheless, despite any recent successes or my own positive reactions to individual productions, I would conclude that the company is still most valued and best known in theatrical circles for its past work—especially during the 1960s. Furthermore, it has become stagnant in its reliance on a performance style which was fresh and highly influential in the period of the 1960s, but which has hampered the growth of their subsequent work. Their use of techniques such as audience interaction have also been co-opted by the larger mainstream theatre, with highly commercial offerings such as *Tony and Tina's Wedding* now utilizing these once avant-garde practices. Granted, while The Living Theatre uses them for more serious purposes, they are still no-longer avant-garde in nature but rather commonplace theatrical conventions. In tandem with the company's unshakable association with the "wild and crazy '60s," this emphasis on recycling old strategies more often than not serves to create a museum-piece aura about their work. While paying lip-service to the need for change, they have failed to adopt their work to both changing cultural times and theatrical currents. This has inevitably helped relegate them to the dusty mantle of historical fame for both the small audience which attends their productions, as well as the larger public which is totally unaware of their current existence.

Perhaps significant change is impossible for a group as far removed from the goals of the mainstream theatrical community as Malina and her colleagues. Nonetheless, given their desire to affect the masses as opposed to carving out a

small, specific audience as with other avant-garde companies, the future success of their mission seems highly doubtful. Considering the ongoing, deep-rooted nature of the negative perceptions towards the 1960s in America and The Living Theatre's strong identification with that period, it seems particularly unlikely that any of them will live to see their beloved anarchist-pacifist revolution come to fruition in their own lifetimes. And while Hanon Reznikov is a gifted writer and director, the company seems to have never fully recovered from the death of Julian Beck. Finally, I think that the review of *Anarchia* in the mainstream theatre publication *Back Stage* aptly summarizes the current state of The Living Theatre: "But, alas, gone are the '60s, the glory days of The Living Theatre, when it broke new ground and changed the face of American theatre forever" (Backalenick 60).

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