

# Brian Kite Directs Williams' Menagerie

BY: JULIO MARTINEZ

A quick perusal of stage director Brian Kite's resume reveals impressive credentials. He is the Associate Director of La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts where this year he directed Alfred Uhry's acclaimed *Driving Miss Daisy* starring Michael Learned. He is a founding member and continuing Artistic Director of the award-winning Buffalo Nights Theatre Company. He is a member of the directing faculty of UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television. And, in his free time, Kite is a sought-after director for hire, having staged productions in regional theatres across the nation including over 20 productions at French Woods Festival in New York where he was the Director of Theater Programs for seven years. Kite recently helmed a production of *Cabaret* in Bermuda under the patronage of the Queen's Governor.

For all this prolific creative energy, there has been one surprising blank spot within Brian Kite's directorial output. "I have never staged a Tennessee Williams play," he admits. "Of course, I have seen productions of his plays over the years. I have taught from them at UCLA and I've thought about them a lot; but I've never directed one."

Kite is now in rehearsals for the Actors Co-op production of Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, which will conclude the Hollywood-based stage company's 2007-2008 season, opening May 2. "This is also my first time directing at Actors Co-op. I was going to do a show there last year but I had some scheduling conflicts. *Glass Menagerie* was set for this season. They called me back and, thankfully, it has worked out for me. I am so happy to finally get an opportunity to be involved in a Tennessee Williams play. For me, *The Glass Menagerie* is one of the great American stage works of the 20th century."

Founded in 1987, Actors Co-op is a member-based ensemble, the first professional theatre company in the U.S. to be in residence on a church campus (1st Presbyterian Church of Hollywood). Having garnered many awards over the years, the company is a recipient of the L. A. Drama Critics Circle Margaret Harford Award for "Sustained Excellence in Theatre."

"The Co-op has a set procedure for casting," says Kite. "First of all, a director must audition from within the company. Then, if a role can't be filled, the director can

look elsewhere. I was fortunate to be able to cast quite easily from within the company. They have a wonderful ensemble. This is so much a play about people: who they are, their dreams, their delusions, who they remember themselves to be and who they hope to be."

*The Glass Menagerie* premiered on Broadway in 1945, subsequently garnering the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the season. The Actors Co-op production, which ushers in the company's American Classic Series, features Lori Berg (Amanda Wingfield), Toby Meuli (Tom Wingfield), Tawny Mertes (Laura Wingfield) and Stephen Van Dorn (The Gentleman Caller).

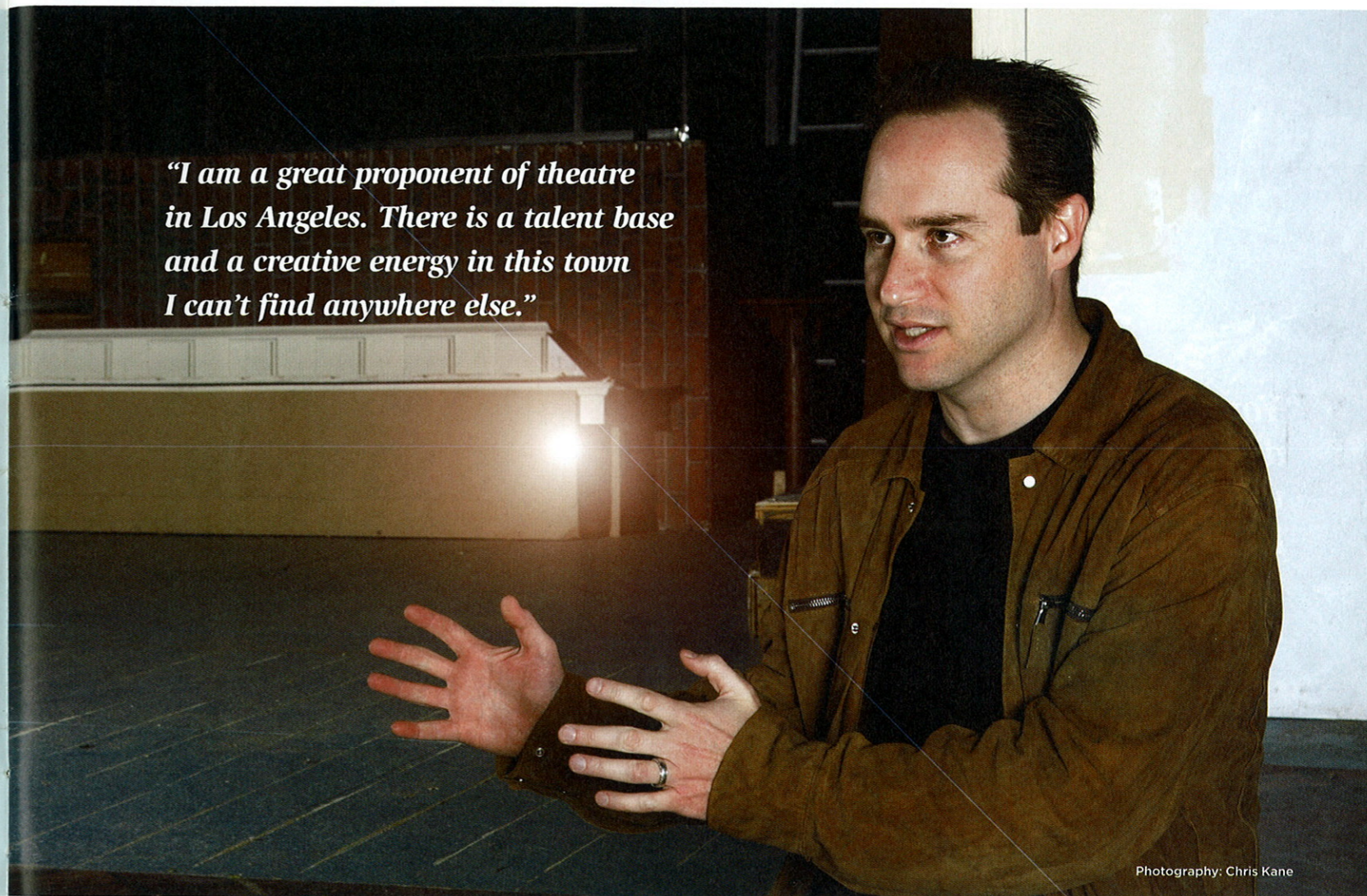
"This is a perfect play for me to do," Kite admits. "In preparing to direct, I do a lot of research. Whenever I'm working on an established piece, I want to absorb what has happened before. This play has been done so many different ways, with so many different ideas. I'm not afraid to read a lot of criticism. I like to go back to the original Broadway reviews. There is a lot to be learned from commentaries of the past."

"I delve into everything, exploring the world of the play as best I can. Williams has a lot to say about the work. There are a lot of stage directions. Digesting what he has to say—the way he describes the world that he sees—is all part of the research."

Kite is also cognizant that an abundance of pre-ordained stage directions by the playwright can be an inhibiting factor for the actor. "True," says Kite. "Sometimes too much information from the playwright intimidates the cast. They are afraid to let it go once they've seen it in the script. I tell them it is just part of the information that can be used on the actor's journey to discover his or her character. I believe it is better than having to deal with a playwright who is so enigmatic, the actors struggle to find their way through the playwright's intent. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams tells us, 'This is what I mean. This is what I want. Now do what you want'."

The rehearsal schedule for most 99-Seat Plan theatres is different from Kite's usual full Equity schedule at a large house like La Mirada, where he enjoys full day

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Photography: Chris Kane

rehearsals with the actors' undivided attention. At Actors Co-op, he has five and a half weeks, mostly working evenings, with the possibility of falling prey to the actors' needs to interrupt the schedule to take a paying job. Kite is comfortable with the schedule and the amount of time the actors will have to live with the work. He adores the process of constructing a production for an audience.

"When we get into the rehearsal room, it's no longer about the research. It's about what happens there with the words, the actors and me. I do like to be really collaborative in my relationship with the cast members, working moment to moment, exploring it together."

"My rehearsal procedure is fairly standard. I start with a table read to let people get to know one another. I want the actors to ask questions, talk about the play, what it's about, what we want it to be about. Then, after the first rehearsal, I leave that behind."

"By day two, I start getting the play on its feet. We begin blocking and working and figuring out what's going to be happening in the moments right away. From then on, I don't spend a lot of time discussing what the play means. The actors can't 'act' the play's meaning. As the

work continues, the play takes on its own life."

Brian Kite chuckles when informed that the diversity of his directorial projects has him going in many different creative directions. "My days are spent at La Mirada, which is a large house with a conservative subscription base, where I quite often work with established stars like Michael Learned. Two days a week I am at UCLA, dealing with student actors who require and seek a lot of guidance."

"I have been with the same group of actors at Buffalo Nights since 1991 and we have established a kind of shorthand that allows us to interact fairly seamlessly. Buffalo Nights works in a highly theatrical style with a mandate to perform original works or seldom performed works by established playwrights."

Although *The Glass Menagerie* is Kite's first sojourn at Actors Co-op, it helps fulfill one of his principle mandates. "I am a great proponent of theatre in Los Angeles. I am originally from Chicago and have worked in New York. They are both great theatre towns; but there is a talent base and a creative energy in this town I can't find anywhere else. I am ecstatic to be able to work in Los Angeles as much as I do." ■

*The Glass Menagerie*  
Opens May 2  
Plays Fri-Sat 8  
Sun 2:30  
Sat matinees  
May 10 & 17, 2:30;  
Through June 8  
Tickets: \$20-\$30  
Actors Co-op  
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