

## Hot-Button Politics in Missouri

**ST. LOUIS, MO.:** **New Line Theatre** is at it again, rounding up a dozen area companies for the second **St. Louis Political Theatre Festival**, already underway. New Line artistic director **Scott Miller** revisits *Hair*, through Oct. 18. Having staged it twice before and and written the 2003 tome *Let the Sun Shine In: The Genius of 'Hair'*, Miller says: "I'm more confident now with the more experimental devices it uses—some that still feel experimental 40 years later!"

Over the next eight weeks, **St. Louis Actors Studio** investigates the individual's struggle against an all-powerful state in **Jean Anouilh's** *Antigone*, then opens **Heather Raffo's** *9 Parts of*

*Desire; That Uppity Theatre Company* and **Playback Workshop Theatre** celebrate National Coming Out Day, Oct. 11, by inviting audiences to tell their own coming out stories; and **Upstream Theater** performs **Athol Fugard's** *Blood Knot*.

The benefits of getting a range of city theatres working in concert are undeniable. But is the word "political" an albatross or a marketing boon? "Ratings for the TV [presidential] debates have been great, and the number of people donating to the campaigns is breaking all records," Miller suggests. "Americans are serious about this choice they're going to make, and I think the festival allows us to benefit from their engagement." Visit [www.geocities.com/newlinetheatre/stlptf.html](http://www.geocities.com/newlinetheatre/stlptf.html).



ANDY BRINING

Tom Ball in **Playbox Theatre Company's** *Monkey—Journey to the West*.

## Beijing in L.A. (Way of the U.K.)

**SANTA MONICA, CALIF.:** Can't shake Olympics fever? Not to worry: Starting Oct. 24, a company of 20 young actors from Warwickshire, England, kick up acrobatics, physical storytelling, dance and movement in *Monkey—Journey to the West*, billed as a fast and furious "live-

action anime" take on the Chinese literary classic *The Monkey King*. Every year, these U.K. performers, who call themselves collectively **Playbox Theatre Company**, visit **Santa Monica Playhouse** in California. So frequent are these visits that both troupes affectionately call each other "sister companies." Visit [www.playboxtheatre.com](http://www.playboxtheatre.com).

## U.S. HISTORY PLAYS

When Rauch, Sneed and Packer all found out at a Nashville conference that they were independently thinking along the same lines, their next thought was, "Let's collaborate." OSF, though, was much further along. As soon as Rauch was appointed **Libby Appel's** successor, he had hired **Alison Carey**, co-founder with Rauch of **Cornerstone Theater Company** of Los Angeles, as the director of the history cycle, named *American Revolutions: the United States History Cycle*. By January '08, OSF secured a \$400,000 grant from the Collins Foundation, to be awarded over three years from 2008 through 2010. The plan, according to a prepared statement, is "to commission 37 new plays over 10 years, each inspired by a moment of transformation, inspiration or conflict in the nation's history." In June, Carey announced the first roster of new OSF commissions: **Culture Clash**, **David Henry Hwang**, **Lynn Nottage**, **Suzan-Lori Parks**, **Robert Schenkkan**, **Naomi Wallace** and the team of **Jonathan Moscone** and **Tony Taccone**.

Meanwhile, Sneed and Packer went back to the drawing boards and shifted gears. Both are actively seeking funding; this past August, they identified four playwrights (**Constance Congdon** and **Gary Wright** at CSF; **J.T. Rogers** and **Emily DeVoti** at S&C) for a first round of commissions. More important, Sneed and Packer have decided to throw out a wider net. "Let's build a national network of Shakespeare festivals and theatres to guarantee multiple productions, a network

to get these plays to larger audiences and into more communities than our own. Tina and I are interested in direct collaboration. We want to co-commission everything, share productions, everything done in tandem. We can give playwrights the ability to write on a big scale and with a large cast."

Of course, the seed of the idea of asking contemporary writers to grapple with and give voice to the concept of American democracy can be traced back to **Joseph Papp**. The establishment in 1967 of his **Public Theater** made it possible for Papp to move the focus away from the free-Shakespeare-in-the-park ethos and produce social and political plays by the likes of **Charles Gordone**, **David Rabe**, **Jason Miller** and **Larry Kramer**. The twist here is that Rauch, Sneed and Packer are making decisive, concerted efforts that are national in scope and scale, with history serving as a lightning rod.

Although it can be a thorny puzzle to position and frame two history-based play cycles, OSF has expressed public support for Sneed and Packer. Says Carey: "Is there such a thing as too much? No. How could there be a surfeit of great art? How could there be a surfeit of impassioned and informed conversations about the state of the nation?"

Rauch agrees: "We may be a step ahead in our program, but others can learn from our mistakes. We are incredibly happy to be part of this national movement to use theatre to examine our national past." —*Randy Gener*