

The Business

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Must the Show Go On?

What happened when members of the cast of *The Eight* questioned whether eight audience members was enough.

By Deanna Isaacs

Actor Shannon O'Neill and Journeymen Theater Company artistic director Frank Pullen met in 1995, just after he founded the company. Since then, O'Neill's done a dozen Journeymen shows, including repeat performances in the annual holiday satire *The Eight: Reindeer Monologues*. In the play Donner, Blitzen, and crew take turns at the microphone, going public with Santa's sins. This year the monologues turned nearly as ugly backstage.

O'Neill: This was my third time in the role of Vixen. We opened November 25 and were supposed to run through December 23 at the Theatre Building. We got through the first weekend, but the next Friday, December 2, at the five-minute call, the stage manager said we've got maybe eight people [in the audience]. The cast looked around at each other. We said maybe we should talk to Frank about canceling.

I asked the stage manager to get Frank, and when he came to the dressing room I talked for everyone. Frank gave me a death stare. Another cast member said she felt uncomfortable; there were only about six people in this big auditorium. Frank said, "OK, fine. You make the speech and you give the money back, and you can do whatever you want."

The box office refunded the tickets. I stayed to help Frank clean up and saw that he was really pissed at me. I kept saying, "Frank, this was a unanimous decision." I went home thinking it was just one bad night; I was prepared to do the rest of the run. But the next night Frank had taped up an announcement backstage that the new closing date of the show would be December 4 and that after what happened, even doing theater anymore would be questionable for him. It said, "Fill out your W-2s and I'll send you a check."

We felt horrible. If we'd known he was going to take it this way we'd have done the show. I tried to talk to Frank; he was barely speaking. I said, "I am here for you; you can keep my stipend if that will help." The actors hugged each other and said our good-byes. Then on Monday I got a call from a



The original cast, front row: Anthony Casale, Shannon O'Neill, Mac Brandt. Back: Charles Glenn, Zach Welsheimer, Kristin Williams, Ricardo Gamboa, Jeannette Blackwell.

friend asking what was happening. I said, "Journeymen's done." He said, "No, it isn't. He's reopening the show with a new cast." I found out he had asked some of the newer cast members to come back. When they found out we hadn't been asked, they quit.

Frank is basically easy to work with. No one expected that type of reaction. Mac Brandt, Tony Casale, and I had a lot invested in the company. We're worried about Frank, but it was so seedy. Why would he burn those bridges? We were all left in the dark.

Pullen: I'm up in the booth and our production manager comes up and says the cast isn't going to do the show. I count the tickets—eight people paid full price and there's two comps, ushers, and an understudy who needed to see it. Thirteen total. And these are eight-minute monologues. I could be a bitch and demand they go onstage, but

I don't want to make anyone do what they don't want to do. They said [the audience] will come back and I said no they won't. At that point I was ready to throw in the towel. The next day I put a notice on the board, because I can't promise a full house every night.

That Saturday night we had understudies for two cast members and we had a great show, and I said, "Why should I let the actions of a small group of people determine what happens to a show I've invested a lot of money in when there are people who'd love to do it?" Actors don't call the show. It's the director or stage manager's job. It was audacious.

Sunday morning I got on the phone and asked the newer members of the cast to come back. I didn't have understudies for them, and I knew they weren't behind the mutiny. The old rule is if the audience doesn't outweigh the cast, you don't do it. But that wasn't the case, and it's a monologue show. We

had another show running that same week, *The Amazing Adventures of Scott & Ernest*, which didn't do well. The Sunday before there were six people in the house and the actors went out on that stage and performed like it was sold out. It's the integrity, desire, and passion to do it. The [refunded] tickets could have paid the rent that night.

Three of those people were very good friends [of mine], but when I'm doing a Journeymen show I'm acting as a producer. Eight minutes of stage time. They could have pretended they were doing it as an audition or rehearsal. I still can't get over the fact that the actors decided to call the show. That's just appalling. It's very similar to what's going on in the story—walkouts, Vixen taking it to the press, scandal, and me as the big bad Santa Claus.

Reindeer Monologues closed Sunday, one performance shy of its full run.

Pullen expected to break even on it and is moving on to his next idea: a CAN TV series featuring Chicago performance artists. He expects to begin taping in the spring.

Katrina: A Windfall for the Arts?

You couldn't miss the shiny red-and-black flyer tacked into a year-end solicitation letter from the Lyric Opera. It flashed a carmine headline reading "Tax Relief" and followed up with some amazing propositions: thanks to Hurricane Katrina and Congress, tax relief will be coming to folks 1,000 miles from Bourbon Street and wealthy enough to give the Lyric (or any other charity) as much cash as they made this year. If they do it by the end of 2005 they'll be able to deduct their entire adjusted gross income, instead of just half of it. As a result, says Jonathan Siner, Lyric's director of planned giving, even IRA withdrawals for large-cash gifts (usually not a good idea) can make sense for some people this year.

For the future, Congress is considering legislation that would allow gifts from IRAs, including stocks, to roll directly over to charities, skipping income taxes. It's also looking at a floor of \$210 per person on charitable contributions, an idea that could pop up and smack most of us in the pledge drive: the first \$210 an individual gives (or \$420 per couple) would no longer be deductible. It's been paired with a provision that will let people who don't itemize deductions on their taxes take off anything they give over \$210, as if that'll balance things out. Andrew Finch of Americans for the Arts says the floor breaches the long-standing principle that every dollar you give is deductible. "And once you have it, there's nothing to stop it from rising," he adds. "A floor of \$210 may not be much of a disincentive to giving. A floor of \$1,000 would be."

Also pending: a provision that would allow artists to deduct more than the cost of materials when they donate a piece of their work to a nonprofit. Don't get your hopes up—at press time Congress was heading home. ■