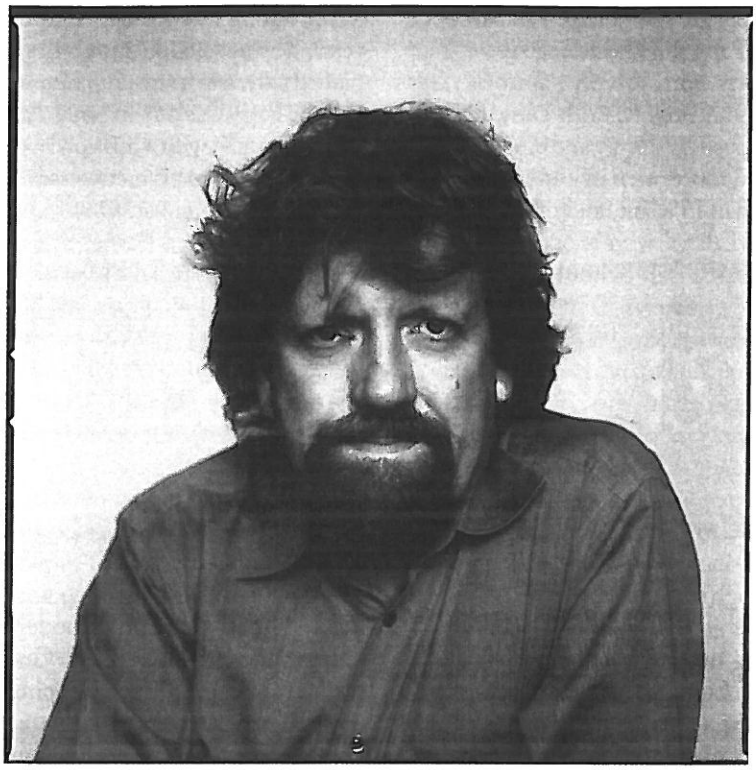
THE NEW YORKER
MARCH 22, 2010

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

STAGE LEFT

Oskar Eustis, the Public Theatre's latest radical.

BY REBECCA MEAD



Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theatre/New York Shakespeare Festival, is a man whose emotions run close to the surface, and given his imposing physical stature—he is six feet two, with a burly chest, broad shoulders, and a mane of golden hair—there is a lot of surface for those emotions to run close to. At a performance of "The Brothers Size," a drama of fraternal love and conflict by Tarell Alvin McCraney, Eustis snuffled loudly in the orchestra. At the opening night of "County of Kings"—a one-man show by Lemon Andersen, who tells of losing his youth to crime and his mother to AIDS—Eustis sat hulked over in a tuxedo, his eyes moist and his goatee aquiver. He mists over at the merest mention of "The Winter's Tale," which the Public will present at the Delacorte Theatre, in Central Park, this summer. "It's a father who behaves really, really badly, and gets the ultimate punishment for behaving badly, and gets the ultimate forgiveness," he told me, the rims of his eyes reddening behind reading glasses perched halfway down his nose. To Hannah Cabell, a young actress auditioning for a role in "Compulsion"—a play by Rinne Groff that Eustis recently directed, at the Yale Rep—Eustis said, "I'm sorry, that was far too emotionally affecting. We're not allowed to do that in the theatre anymore."

In the United States, which lacks the kind of federally funded theatrical institution that can be found in many European nations, where work that is politely referred to as "challenging" is supported, the Public is the country's de-facto national theatre. Eustis, who is fifty-one, has been its head for six years. It takes a large personality to fill the role first occupied by Joseph Papp, the Public's notoriously tenacious founder. Papp cajoled and shamed mayors and philanthropists in order to establish and sustain his institution, which began as the Shakespeare Workshop, in 1954, and which became better known as the Public Theatre in 1967, when it moved into its labyrinthine headquarters, in the former Astor Library, on Lafayette Street. After Papp's death, from cancer, in 1991, the job was held by two of his former acolytes—JoAnne Akalaitis and George C. Wolfe.

Eustis met Papp only once, in 1976, when he auditioned for a spear-carrying role in a production of "Henry V." At the time, Eustis was enrolled in New York University's experimental-theatre program, and, at eighteen, was already the co-director of his own experimental-theatre company, called Red Wing, which produced impenetrable performance pieces based on the works of Peter Handke and Heiner Müller. "Papp asked me to do some Shakespeare, and I said I didn't know any," Eustis told me. "I said I had this piece I'd been working on, based on a poem by Kenneth Koch, called 'Sleeping with Women.' He said, 'Well, why don't you show me a bit of it?' I did this twenty-minute performance piece, and by the end I had flop sweat—when you know it's a disaster—running down my face. When I had finished, he said, 'What was that?,' and I said, 'It was a poem called "Sleeping with Women,"' and he said, 'I suggest you keep doing *that*.'"

The lack of a personal relationship with Papp, however, has permitted Eustis to develop a relationship with Papp's legend. "He constantly pays tribute to the legacy," Gail Merrifield Papp, Papp's widow, says. "I know Oskar is inspired by some of the principles by which Joe operated. He is passionately devoted to free Shakespeare, and the democratic nature of the audience." Papp's rallying cry was "Shakespeare for All"—evidence of his genius for combining populism with public relations. (The neighborhood groundlings who watched Papp's actors rehearsing in East River Park in 1956 could hardly have been persuaded to pay for a ticket.) Upon arriving at the Public, Eustis displayed a Pappian touch when he declared that all of the theatre's tickets, not just those for shows at the Delacorte, should be free. This proposal has not yet made the transition from mani-

Eustis runs the country's de-facto national theatre. Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe.

festo to policy, to the palpable relief of those of Eustis's colleagues for whom logistics must loom larger than symbolism. "We have to figure out what 'free' means," Andrew Hamingson, the Public's executive director, told me, cautiously.

Like Papp, who belonged to the Communist Party in his youth, Eustis is a congenital leftist. His father, Warren Eustis, was a district attorney and an official of the Democratic Party in Minnesota, where Eustis grew up; Walter Mondale, Eugene McCarthy, and Hubert Humphrey were friends of the family. His stepmother, Nancy Eustis, is a sociologist at the University of Minnesota. His mother, Doris Marquit, a retired professor of literature and women's studies, is an ardent activist and a member of the Communist Party; Eustis's stepfather, Erwin Marquit, is a professor emeritus of physics at the University of Minnesota who, in 1974, ran for governor on the Communist Party ticket. Eustis's politics are less doctrinaire—he supported Michael Bloomberg for reëlection last year, in acknowledgment of the New York mayor's enthusiastic support for the arts—but he remains ostentatiously anti-establishment. Posters of the Berliner Ensemble hang on the walls of his office, and a carved statuette of Lenin stands on a shelf, juxtaposed with the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical that the Public won, last year, for its Broadway production of "Hair." He does not mind it being thought that he adopted the name Oskar—his given name is Paul—in honor of Oskar Matzerath, the anti-hero of "The Tin Drum," by Günter Grass, though in fact the name was bestowed on him by two disparaging classmates in seventh grade.

There are few surface similarities between Papp and his latest successor. Papp, who was born Joseph Papirofsky, was scrappy and kinetic, with a taste for smart suits; Eustis is shaggy and embracing and earnest, more often in jeans and a sweatshirt than in a suit, and of a professorial bent. (Eustis, who is on the faculty of N.Y.U.'s Tisch School of the Arts, is dauntingly well read, although he dropped out of college before graduating.) "There's a kind of Midwesternness, a heartiness, to Oskar," Akalaitis says. "He rides his bike through Central Park, smoking a cigar, when there is fifteen inches of rain. Only someone from Minneapolis would think it's O.K. to do that." Akalaitis has known Eustis since 1974, when he spent the year after high school following experimental-theatre groups around the country, including the one she co-founded, Mabou Mines. Eustis has particularly vivid memories of a performance piece, in Ann Arbor, by the Living Theatre Company: the actors stopped outside a bank and burned Monopoly money. Moved to tears, Eustis took the cash out of his wallet and burned it in costly solidarity.

Papp invented an institution in his own image; Eustis has devoted most of his professional life to improving institutions created by others. (Before being hired by the Public, he was the head of Trinity Rep, in Providence, for eleven years; he was so popular that the city renamed a stretch of street for him when he left.) If Papp was a man with a mission, Eustis is a man with a mission statement. He is indebted to his predecessor but untroubled by his ghost. One recent evening, he went to a Barnes & Noble to participate in a panel discussion about the book "Free for All," an oral history of Papp and the Public, by Kenneth Turan. Another panelist was Bernard Gersten, the executive producer of Lincoln Center Theatre, who went to work at the Public in 1960 and was Papp's closest collaborator until he fell sharply out of favor, in the late seventies; the rift occurred after Gersten organized a lavish surprise party for Papp at which Gail Papp was lightly made fun of. When the moderator of the bookstore discussion, Bill Goldstein, spoke glowingly of Papp's inspired decision to bring free Shakespeare to the masses, Gersten challenged the premise: Papp's motivation in starting a theatre company was to create a job for himself, and Papp chose Shakespeare because it meant that he wouldn't have to pay royalties. "He didn't care about Shakespeare for the people," Gersten said. "He cared about Shakespeare for *him*."

Eustis was quick to respond. "I didn't know Joe, so everything I say is completely made up," he said, with a confident grin. "And that is a good thing, because we are in the theatre, and we are in the business of telling stories." Eustis went on to argue that Papp belonged to a long-standing tradition that had its most violent expression in the Astor Place Riot of 1849, when, during a performance by an English Shakespearean actor at the Astor Place Theatre, partisans of an American Shakespearean actor battled with the police in the streets outside, leaving more than twenty people dead. "It was a struggle over the idea that Shakespeare got to belong to all of us, that his plays are ours, they are part of

"It's a major fixer-upper. How's your marriage?"

the great legacy of Western civilization, and that Americans got to make them American," Eustis said. "And, from my perspective, Joe was, by leagues, the most important and influential and successful legatee of that tradition." He pushed a tumble of hair back from his forehead. "The best thing about America is that there is a penumbra of democracy around our institutions that keeps insisting we are not yet democratic enough, we are not yet inclusive enough—that we need, in the case of culture, to make this country *more* diverse, make the ownership of our past *more* spread out. To me, Joe is unparalleled in his setting of that example." When Eustis eventually subsided, Gersten muttered a good-natured rejoinder, but exactly what he said was drowned out by the audience's applause.

One day last fall, Eustis attended a reading, in a rehearsal space downtown, of a musical that the Public is developing. Inspired by the book "February House," by Sherill Tippins, the show recounts the history of 7 Middagh Street—a brownstone in Brooklyn that, before America's entry into the Second World War, was briefly home to W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Carson McCullers, Paul Bowles, Gypsy Rose Lee, and George Davis, a former editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, who founded the highbrow domestic coöperative. (Eustis himself lives in brownstone Brooklyn, in Cobble Hill, with his wife, Laurie, who works on development and events for *The Paris Review*; they have two children.) Among Eustis's innovations since arriving at the Public is the establishment of a Musical Theatre Initiative to commission new works, and for the previous ninety minutes he had listened intently as, with the help of half a dozen actors, Gabriel Kahane, the composer and lyricist, and Seth Bockley, who is writing the book, showcased their efforts thus far. The score included a duet between Britten and Pears about the house being infested with bedbugs (Eustis's shoulders shook with laughter), and a plaintive McCullers visiting Coney Island and feeling at one with the freaks on display (Eustis sighed). Throughout, he wrote tidy notes in a small book.

After the rehearsal, Kahane and Bockley, who are both in their late twenties, met with Eustis in his office, along with Davis McCallum, their director, and Ted Sperling, who heads the Musical Theatre Initiative. Eustis invited each to describe the ways in which he felt the piece was working or failing. Should George Davis function as the narrator? Did Britten and Pears feel parachuted in? Then Eustis spoke deliberately. "What strikes me is this sense of this house perched in Brooklyn Heights on the verge of war," he said. "For Auden and Pears and Britten, their being in Brooklyn is about not being in England, and about *not* participating in the war. They are trying to remove themselves from that. They are trying to create something beautiful, but they are also trying to not be part of something else." Eustis said he wasn't sure that Davis should be the show's protagonist. "George is the guy who takes us into the place, like Stingo, in 'Sophie's Choice,' but I think he can't bear too much weight," he said. "I can feel you guys pushing on that, and I am saying, release yourselves, and let him be like Nick Carraway, in 'Gatsby.'" Gypsy Rose Lee, he proposed, offered greater room for comedy than had hitherto been exploited. "She is perfectly situated to do what Shakespeare does with his subplots, which is to repeat, in a kind of abbreviated form, what everybody else is doing," he said. "You have a stripper who desperately wants to be part of this rarefied atmosphere, and that's funny."

Perhaps, he gently suggested, the team had become so caught up with dramatizing the gossipy comings and goings of the residents—who was moving out, who was in love with whom—that they had paid insufficient attention to the mounting crisis outside the house's walls. "This is probably way too intellectualized," Eustis said, offhandedly. "But you have Wystan Auden leaving England, and Carson McCullers throwing off her Southern background to move to Brooklyn with Auden, and Gypsy Rose Lee throwing off the stripper life, and all of them thinking they can leave it all behind. And they can't. And—if you can do this, you will win the Pulitzer—that little house on Middagh Street, in 1940, is also Fortress America. It's the last year America can pretend to itself that it's not completely entwined with the rest of the world." By the time Kahane and Bockley left, Eustis had described their musical to them in a more ambitious form than actually existed—telling them not what he had seen but what he had seen in what he had seen.

Dramaturgy—which involves the editorial shaping of a theatrical work—is widely regarded by Eustis's professional peers as his greatest strength. David Henry Hwang, whose play "Yellow Face" Eustis staged at the Public in 2007, calls Eustis the best dramaturge in America. "We were close to opening night, and Oskar said, 'Ultimately, this is a play about your relationship with your father,'" Hwang told me. (Hwang's father, a character in the play, had died a few years earlier.) "I hadn't seen that—I had all sorts of political ideas about what it was about, and all sorts of structural notions of what it was about. It was very insightful of him, but also very compassionate."

Eustis's brand of dramaturgy is both personal and political. Diane Paulus, the director of "Hair," says, "Because Oskar is such a political thinker, he was looking at how the story could resonate for our audience." Eustis recommended treating the counterculture "seriously, not treating it as the fun, hippie-dippy show with actors in tie-dyed shirts." Paulus says that the scene in which members of the young tribe burn their draft cards was particularly important to Eustis, and that for the Broadway production he suggested adding to the book an explanatory line about the legal implications of burning one's draft card—"Yeah, go to prison, five years hard labor"—for the benefit of the audience members who were too young to understand its significance.

Eustis first saw "Hair" in London, at the age of fourteen, and considers the experience the dawning of his theatrical vocation. "I remember dancing up onstage with the cast at the end and it being a huge moment for me," he says. "The theatre is the only place I have ever felt completely at home. Growing up in Minnesota, I just felt everything too much. I laughed way too loudly, and cried way too easily. I was too big for everything, and I felt like a freak all the time. In the theatre, that's normal." As Eustis sees it, "Hair" is not merely a period piece about LSD and Vietnam but an expression of a broader desire for cultural and political change. "This production is analyzing something tragic about that time period, but also about our own sense of ourselves—that we have these ideals which are extraordinarily powerful, and extraordinarily high, and our inability to execute them is tragic,"

he told me. "That feels to me like a very American story, and a very contemporary story. This is being a little hyperbolic, but if the health-care bill fails I think 'Hair' will close in three months, because at that point it's not a warning, it's the truth, and I don't think anyone is going to want to see it anymore." (Adding to the risk for the play, an entirely new Broadway cast began performances on March 9th, after the original cast left for London, to perform the show in the West End.)

Eustis has tied the programming of the Public to political currents: in 2006, he dedicated the summer season at the Delacorte to a three-part theatrical commentary on foreign affairs. ("Heck, let's call it the imperialist venture in Iraq," he told the *Times*.) The series included a staged reading of "Stuff Happens," David Hare's conjuring of the debates in Washington in the lead-up to the war; a militaristic production of "Macbeth," directed by Moisés Kaufman and set in the early twentieth century; and a spectacular "Mother Courage," directed by George Wolfe, and starring Meryl Streep. (Eustis had commissioned a new translation by Tony Kushner that, if it did not explicitly invoke George W. Bush and Iraq, was certainly perceived as suggesting them, with applause-winning references to tax exemptions for the rich, and lines such as "It's expensive, liberty, especially when you start exporting it to other countries.") Eustis may devote a portion of this fall's Public season to a series of works exploring the war in Afghanistan, including a British twelve-play cycle called "The Great Game," and a piece by a group of Afghan actors which grew out of workshops held in Kabul by Ariane Mnouchkine, of the French avant-garde company Théâtre du Soleil.

Eustis was first exposed to the art of dramaturgy in the late seventies, when he and Stephan Müller—a young Swiss director who co-founded Red Wing, Eustis's college troupe—were hired to create an experimental theatre within the Schauspielhaus Zurich, where several of Brecht's plays had premièred. "The idea was that you would have a resident intellectual—somebody who would take ideological and philosophical responsibility for what the theatre was trying to do," Eustis says. "That was very exciting to me." Zurich, in turn, was very excited by the dynamic young Eustis, and his importation of unfamiliar techniques learned from Lee Breuer and Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman; a newspaper ran a story about him with the headline "JUST NINETEEN, AND ALREADY A STAR." Eustis and Müller's masterwork in Zurich was the Project on Nothing—a nonlinear, narrative-free performance piece that was presented in an eight-hour marathon to audiences of thirty at a time. While living in Zurich, Eustis sometimes travelled to East Berlin, where his mother and stepfather were living while they taught at Humboldt University. "I got very friendly with the border guards at Checkpoint Charlie," he said.

After two years in Switzerland, Eustis and Müller took their company to San

Francisco, with a production that sought to combine elements of Heiner Müller's play "The Horatian" with case studies of schizophrenia. The show was a disaster, and Red Wing disbanded. Eustis says that he had become disillusioned with the abstruse practices of experimental theatre, such as doing without a story or a playwright. "The contradiction between the work I was doing and my politics had just become unbearable for me," Eustis says. "I was doing work that could only be appreciated by an art élite." In San Francisco, he was hired for the humbling position of second assistant director at the Eureka Theatre Company. He eventually became the artistic director and the resident dramaturge.

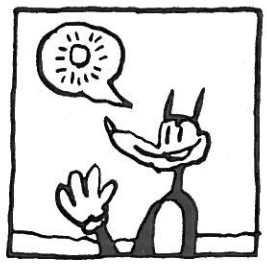
While at the Eureka, Eustis met Kushner, forming the most important relationship of his theatrical life. Eustis saw Kushner's first play, "A Bright Room Called Day," on a visit to New York in 1985. "There is a scene where three of the characters onstage sing the 'Internationale,' and to my great surprise someone in the audience started singing along, in this warbling tenor voice," Kushner says. It was Eustis, who called Kushner and invited him to bring the play to San Francisco. Kushner had never been to the city, and Eustis, a baseball fan, took him directly from the airport to a Giants game. "It was a bonding ritual—or some sort of nasty straight-guy joke," Kushner recalls. Although "Bright Room" received mixed reviews, Eustis was eager for Kushner to write more. "He said, 'Do you have anything you would like to work on?' I had been brooding over this obituary of Roy Cohn that had appeared in *The Nation*, with the old-left idea that there is some mysterious connection between fascism and homosexuality," Kushner says. "So I said I didn't know exactly what I was working on, but it was a play that involved three or four gay men and Roy Cohn and an angel. I said, 'I think I have a title for the play: I am going to call it "Angels in America."' And Oskar said, 'Right the fuck on!'"

The play, which ended up being about Reaganism, Mormonism, the AIDS crisis, and God, among other things, was six years in the making. Throughout the process, Kushner and Eustis talked frequently. "One of the things that makes a dramaturge valuable to you is when you can really tell whether they are genuinely excited or fake excited," Kushner told me. "When he's genuinely excited, Oskar gets very serious. It's not giddy—it's adrenalized and aggressive and sexy." They had free-floating conversations about politics. "We were both very interested in Marx and socialist traditions from England and Europe, but we also have a real interest in American history and a real love of this country," Kushner says. "It was a great relief to have someone who shared all the skepticism that was appropriate to bring to bear on any reading of American history, but who hadn't lost sight of the fact, as many people on the left had, of the really remarkable things that had been achieved in the name of progress in American history, and the radical potential of American de-

mocracy. I think that was partly where the play came from."

In 1989, Eustis left the Eureka, which was struggling after the death of one of its founders, to join the more established Mark Taper Forum, in Los Angeles. "I thought, Institutionalizing the counterculture is not going to work, so the thing we need to do now is to take the agenda we have developed in these small theatres and take over the theatres that have fountains in front of them," he says. (The move did not please fountainless colleagues he left behind in San Francisco.) Eustis took "Angels" with him to Los Angeles, and directed a workshop production of the first half, "Millennium Approaches," in 1990. The Eureka claimed the work back for its world première, in 1991; a year later, a third production, directed by Declan Donellan, opened to acclaim at the National Theatre in London. Great excitement was building around the play, which Kushner had not yet completed; at the 1992 Tonys, Ian McKellen announced that he had just seen a play in London that would sweep the awards when it finally arrived on Broadway.

By late 1992, when it fell to Eustis to direct the world première of both parts of "Angels"—"Millennium Approaches" and "Perestroika," which was still being written—his relationship with Kushner had become fraught. "I wanted desperately to have more control than I could comfortably get with Oskar," Kushner says. "I think we would both handle it very differently now. I would be less inclined to hysterics, and Oskar would perhaps be less controlling." One of the points of contention, as Kushner recalls it, was the structure of "Perestroika," which Eustis thought should have three acts, like "Millennium," but which Kushner had written as a five-act play. (The Los Angeles production had three acts; Kushner reverted to five for the Broadway production.) Tony Taccone, who had been the artistic director of the Eureka when "Angels" was commissioned, and who had been brought in to co-direct the two plays with Eustis, says, "The actors were starting to freak out, too. They were picking up that Mom and Dad were not having a good time." Before the Los Angeles production opened, Kushner had told Eustis that he needed to break from him as a director when the play went to Broadway. Some reviews of the Los Angeles production were not entirely kind: Frank Rich, writing in the *Times*, called the production "stodgy" and "plodding."



"I am not happy at all with the way I behaved," Kushner told me. "I loved Oskar very much at that point. He was one of my closest personal friends, and someone I owed everything to. But I also felt the play needed to be directed by someone with a different sensibility. I even at one point considered, Should I put the play away and forget about it? I thought, If I take this away from Oskar, it is going to be devastating. And it was." For about a year and a half—the period during which the play opened on Broadway, in a production directed by George Wolfe, and won multiple Tonys and the Pulitzer Prize—there was a rift between the men, which was repaired only with much effort. "Oskar engages with his relationships as he engages with everything—as struggle and labor and negotiation—and he has an openness to people who are willing to engage with him," Kushner says. "I can't imagine writing anything and not immediately thinking, I have to show this to Oskar, and see if it is any good or not, and to see how to make it better. But I think a measure of how terrible that time was is that we are now fifteen or sixteen years away from it and we have still not quite had the nerve to get back together in the rehearsal room as playwright and director."

Eustis says of the "Angels" crisis, "Tony handled the most difficult circumstances with such grace and generosity, and such integrity, that he really carried us through that very difficult time, and we have ended up with a relationship that I cherish." He added, "What Tony is a genius at, among other things, is figuring out how best to use the people around him, and I think he has figured out how best to use me." Eustis calls it "the joy of my professional life sometimes to carry Tony Kushner's bags."

When George Wolfe stepped down as the head of the Public, in 2004, Eustis was an obvious candidate to replace him. By then, he had spent more than a decade at Trinity Rep, where he had directed a controversial production of "Julius Caesar" that transposed the action to nineteen-sixties Washington, D.C. (The reviewer for the Boston *Globe* called it "an evening of rabid excitement," but added, "While 'Julius Caesar' is hardly a subtle play, the way Eustis works it over raises an inescapable question: 'Does it have to be this blatant?'") He also staged a Shakespeare history-play marathon—the so-called "Henriad," which he plans to bring to the Delacorte a few summers from now—and continued a holiday tradition of presenting a new version of "A Christmas Carol" each year. In addition, he developed a widely admired M.F.A. curriculum at Brown. He has considered undertaking similar institutional projects at the Public, including a holiday spectacular. Eustis recently received an estimate for tenting and heating the Delacorte in winter: six million dollars initially, with installation costs of perhaps a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a season. "The Public should have a holiday show for the city of New York for free in the middle of Central Park!" he says. Warren Spector, the chairman of the Public's board of directors, says of Eustis's appointment, "We wanted to hire someone who would be focussed as a producer. The scope of the Public had been enormous under Joe Papp—probably never to be repeated—and we felt that it was important to emphasize rebuilding that scope, with more productions, more development, more artistic activity."

Eustis has occasionally directed plays since coming to the Public: he did "Hamlet," his favorite Shakespeare work, at the Delacorte, in 2008. (Critics were startled when, at the play's conclusion, Fortinbras's lieutenant responded to the command "Go, bid the soldiers shoot" by taking out a pistol and executing Horatio. Eustis argues, "On a literal story level, how can Fortinbras allow Horatio to tell the story of how noble Hamlet was? Just on a certain Realpolitik level, it is true.") But Eustis believes that his more important function lies elsewhere. "I am the first artistic director of the Public who is a professional artistic director," he says. "George is a brilliant director who had never run anything. JoAnne was a brilliant director who had never run anything. Joe built the thing out of spit and determination and genius. Some people

ECCLESIASTES 11:1

We must *cast our bread*
Upon the waters, as the
Ancient preacher said,

Trusting that it may
Amply be restored to us
After many a day.

That old metaphor,
Drawn from rice farming on the
River's flooded shore,

Helps us to believe
That it's no great sin to give,
Hoping to receive.

Therefore I shall throw
Broken bread, this sullen day,
Out across the snow,

Betting crust and crumb
That birds will gather, and that
One more spring will come.

—Richard Wilbur

think that I am boring compared to the other leaders of the Public—I am too institutional. I think that is what I have been hired to do."

True to his word, Eustis has introduced a raft of new structures and departments with mind-numbing names but useful functions: in addition to the Musical Theatre Initiative, there is the Shakespeare Initiative, which brings together all the Public's Shakespeare-related activities under a single umbrella. (One goal is to begin staging Delacorte productions in parks in Queens or the Bronx for a week, in an effort to recapture the original spirit of what has become an élite event.) He has instituted the Emerging Writers Group, a yearlong program for about a dozen young writers that will not only generate new plays for its own stages but will also brand scores of talented writers as Public protégés. He has also incorporated the Under the Radar Festival, headed by Mark Russell, formerly the director of Performance Space 122, which presents work in January, traditionally a dead month for theatre. Under the Radar has already discovered Tarell Alvin McCraney, whose play "The Brothers Size" moved Eustis to tears. A trilogy of McCraney plays was staged last fall at the Public, and the *Times* critic Ben Brantley compared the experience of watching them to "what people must have felt during productions of the early works of Eugene O'Neill in the 1920s or of Sam Shepard in the 1960s."

As well as cultivating new artists, Eustis has rounded up some old ones: in September, 2009, he brought Peter Sellars—once his housemate in Los Angeles—to the Public for the first time, to direct "Othello," in a production in which Othello (played by John Ortiz) was not black and Iago (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman) was not evil. The production was widely panned, which dismays Eustis, though he admits that the interpretation was provocative. "For me, the brilliant stroke in the entire thing is saying that Iago is a man with a conscience who is desperately pained by what he does," Eustis says. "But it's a really puritanical thing to do with the play, because what you are removing is the time-honored theatrical motor of Iago's villainy, and that is a huge part of what an audience derives pleasure and enjoyment from." (Producing crowd-displeasers is part of the job description: Rocco Landesman, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, who is a friend of Eustis's, says of the Public's programming, "It is always a mix of the compelling, the interesting, and the dreadful. And you have to be willing to do the dreadful.") Eustis has also brought back into the Public fold Richard Foreman, whose Ontological-Hysteric Theatre Eustis admired greatly in his youth, with "Idiot Savant," a strangely enchanting piece starring Willem Dafoe. For a leftist, Eustis has an unusually astute sense of the value of a brand identity, and his tenure at the Public has been marked by an effort to embrace the history of progressive theatre in New York and to tie it to the Public. "I want to put what I am doing within an intellectual tradition, a cultural tradition, as opposed to show business," Eustis says.

Show business does have its place, of course. In its early years, the Public was repeatedly on the edge of bankruptcy. Then its production of "A Chorus Line" opened on Broadway, in 1975: the show ran for fifteen years, and earned the organization more than thirty-eight million dollars. George Wolfe was drafted to run the Public immediately after the début of "Angels" and the critical and commercial success of "Jelly's Last Jam"—which he wrote as well as directed. "Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk," Savion Glover's tap musical, ran for four lucrative years at the Ambassador Theatre, but two other Broadway excursions, "On the Town" and "The Wild Party," lost ten million dollars between them. This balance-sheet debacle has threatened to overshadow Wolfe's larger accomplishments, including the opening of Joe's Pub, the Public's popular night-club space, which has launched the career of, among others, Stew, the singer-songwriter whose autobiographical show, "Passing Strange," ran on Broadway.

Although Eustis is currently cashing checks from "Hair," which started turning a profit last August and is otherwise

capitalizing on the commercial popularity of the counterculture ("We got your shirts, we got your tunes, we got your goods. We got your merch, brother!" the show's Web site reads), he is determined not to be dependent upon Broadway. "The 'Chorus Line' model is a lousy business model," Eustis says. Instead, he favors launching an endowment campaign, with a goal of raising a hundred million dollars—an amount that would generate enough interest, he calculates, to realize his aspiration of free tickets for all. (The endowment currently stands at just under eighteen million; at its height, in the late nineties, it reached thirty-five.) "The example I use is this building—which was the first free lending library in the city of New York," he says. "That idea that the intellectual and cultural wealth of our human history should be available free to anybody who wants to walk in and check out a book was at one time a really radical idea, but we take it for granted now, and I think we can get to the same place with the theatre." Others are less convinced. Warren Spector, the board chairman, says, "I don't know whether Oskar's idea will be the one that is implemented." And Bernard Gersten says, "It is remotely doable, subject only to miracles."

In January of 2009, a capital campaign, the first in the Public's history, began to contribute to a thirty-five-million-dollar renovation of the lobby and other public areas; the Public aims to contribute nine million dollars toward that total, of which $7.1 million has been raised so far. (City and state funds will pay for much of the rest.) Elsewhere in the institution, though, finding enough money for projects has been problematic, particularly in the wake of the current financial crisis. In November, 2008, Eustis cancelled "A Free Man of Color," a new play by John Guare, two and a half weeks before rehearsals were to begin. It was to be directed by George Wolfe, had a cast of more than twenty actors, and was projected to cost $1.8 million. "That was the worst thing that has happened to me since I have been here," Eustis told me. "I said I was going to do something, and I wasn't able to do it. In the spring, I thought I had the money, and by the fall I didn't have the money."

Wolfe, who was furious at the time, says he now regards the experience as part of a necessary process of separation from the Public. "Hopefully, the best part of us allows something to live without us, even if the worst part of us wants it not to live without us," Wolfe told me. "The least evolved aspect of us wants to go back and have everybody saying 'Hello, Dolly!' as you come down the stairs in your red dress—'It's so nice to have you back where you belong!' " He and Guare took "A Free Man of Color" to Lincoln Center, where it will be staged this fall. "That makes George and John very happy, and me sad," Eustis said. "But it's O.K. It's going to get done, and in a big way."

One Sunday morning last October, Eustis, wearing bluejeans and a T-shirt that read "Theater Starts Here," and with a pass saying "Stage" hanging around his neck, emerged from the McPherson Square Metro station in Washington, D.C., into brilliant sunshine and a surging crowd. The previous evening, he and the thirty-strong cast of "Hair" had boarded a bus to Washington after the curtain fell at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre. Eustis and the show's commercial producers had cancelled a Sunday-matinée performance so that the cast could perform at the National Equality March for gay rights. Eustis, who was twice the age of most of the marchers, tilted an ear to determine the words of a chant—"Hey hey! Ho ho! Homophobia has got to go!"—and joined in with full-throated verve.

Although Eustis had slept little on the bus, which rolled into Washington at three-thirty in the morning, he was nonetheless brimming with collectivist zeal. Outside the White House ("Hey, Obama! Let mama marry mama!"), he posed for a photograph, making a double peace sign with his fingers. He ran into a Broadway beat reporter, and gave her a quote: "We can be leading troops for this movement." He was exhilarated by the fact that his mother and stepfather, who only a few days earlier had returned to the United States from Damascus, where they had been attending the Extraordinary International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties, had flown in for the march. "When I look at my mom and stepfather, there's a revolutionary legacy," Eustis said, as he approached Capitol Hill. "But what I believe in is there is incremental change you have to fight for continually. The victories are not huge, but they matter. What I know is that gay people should be able to marry, and there are things we can know regardless of our belief in dialectical materialism or the dictatorship of the proletariat." As he neared the Capitol, where the march ended, Eustis flashed his pass to a police officer, who permitted him entrance past a barricade. "What would an equality march be without a V.I.P. area?" he said, as he walked up the Capitol steps.

While Eustis listened to a series of speeches, he put a protective arm around a little boy who was wearing a T-shirt that read "My Daddy's Name Is Donor"; the child nestled against him and gazed in wonder at mounted policemen before being led away by his mother, who explained to him, "Mommy wants to listen to Cynthia Nixon." When Julian Bond, the civil-rights activist, went to the lectern, Eustis moved closer for a better view, and was shocked to realize that the young crowd, which had just finished screaming for Lady Gaga, had no idea who Bond was. He laid a hand on his heart, and snapped a shot of Bond on his iPhone.

By the time the performers from "Hair" got onstage, the crowds were dispersing, Lady Gaga and her entourage having already departed. But there were still thousands of marchers remaining to sing along with "The Flesh Failures/Let the Sun Shine In," the musical's culminating number, and it struck a far more optimistic note than it does in the show, where it functions as a lamentation for Claude, the hero, who has been killed in Vietnam despite the best efforts of his friends to save him from the draft. During the song, Eustis hopped from one foot to another, in a jerky dance step; his face was reddened from the sun and from the spirit of the moment. When it was over, he stood by the steps of the stage, enfolding in a bear hug any member of the cast who came his way.

"You'll remember that for a long time," he whispered to one actress.

"I'll remember it forever," she whispered back, and descended the hill to get back on the bus, while Eustis looked around for somebody else to embrace. ♦