

FACEBOOK TRIBUTES

MELVIN BERNHARDT, DIRECTOR

[Frank Gagliano](#)

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It took a day or two to begin, finally, to come to terms with director Melvin Bernhardt's death (<http://www.nytimes.com/.../melvin-bernhardt-tony-winning-dire...>).

At first, I simply enjoyed recalling the joy of the incredible energy of the 1964 Barr-Wilder-Albee Playwrights Unit, where Melvin and I were paired, workshopping my play, "*Conerico Was Here to Stay*." Soon after, Melvin and I stayed a team on the well-received Off-Broadway "Conerico" production at the Cherry Lane Theatre.

At that time I assumed that Melvin would be my Elia Kazan, and that Melvin and I would stay teamed together, Siamese-like, on a trajectory of hits over the course of my playwriting life. It didn't work out that way. It rarely does. (It NEVER does?) And soon, the obstacles that Gagliano/Bernhardt confronted along the road (and pulled them apart), and that sprouted up through the career pot holes, seemed as dangerous to back up over as those wicked looking tire-slashing blades at car rentals. In short, in mourning for Melvin, I have found myself mourning for my own professional life as well, and for the perplexing journey of the five decades from a very special 1960's creative energy — to whatever it is that American Theatre has become today. And THAT is too large a subject for this final post on Melvin's death.

Meanwhile, FOR this post — a last remembrance of one of Melvin's unique qualities as a director: "*Conerico Was Here To Stay*" was a compressed series of urban violent events that take place on an isolated subway platform, but that, in language and tone, demands a certain elegant and comic touch (what has become a trademark of my work). Melvin immediately saw that and cast actors who could release the absurd comedy, as well as navigate internally through — and

reveal — a “center of pain” for each character. And he found that mix — with a soupçon of elegant and stylized choreography — in the staging.

In one sequence, for example, a very belligerent, demanding, blind man, demanding help, almost decapitates with his cane (and with elegant moves) my anti hero YAM, whose objective throughout is to avoid human contact. YAM stays on the move in the scene — often with awkward and absurd moves, but stays silent throughout the Blind Man’s violent monologue rant. At one point the Blind Man makes bodily contact with YAM and Mel develops that into a kind of Lindy Hop dance between the two (twirl and dip included). Very funny. I recall Melvin asking if I thought that bit was over the top. “Are you kidding? Terrific,” I said. “Go further.” And he did. Right through to the Blind man’s exhausted, before-blackout, painful curse hurled at YAM: “If there’s ever a God again, he’ll punish you.”

In another scene, after the Girl-With-The-Cello is raped offstage (as originally played by Melinda Dillon, at the Albee workshop), Mel has her reenter YAM’s space, hugging her cello and dragging, slowly across the stage, the soft canvas cello case that now resembles a used condom. The moment is somehow musical in its silence and pathos and shaming of the cowardly YAM (and —yes— in its elegance). Which, of course, makes it more horrifying and upsetting.

The last time I saw Melvin was at the O’Neill Theatre Center in 2004. I was one of the dramaturges there that year and Mel was directing a staged reading of a magic realism play by a new playwright and, once again, Mel had found the elegant essence and voice of the piece — delighting that playwright. Melvin seemed very happy, too, because his then partner, Jeff Woodward, was in the O’Neill acting company and, according to the obituary, they had finally married.

From the absurd qualities in my plays, to the plays of “poetic realism” (for which he won many awards, including a Tony), to plays of “magic realism” — Melvin Bernhardt could do it all. We did not stay in touch. But our careers, I think, stayed formed and were buoyed by the 1960’s energy of that first collaboration — a ’60’s energy, the likes of

which we may never experience again. Alas: You, Melvin, won't. And I? . . .Well. . . .Requiescat In Pace, Melvin. FG



Melvin and Frank (1965)