

The Designer in Charge

By: David Barbour



The hectic and fruitful career of James Morgan

It's a typically busy day at The York Theatre Company. People are darting about everywhere; the noise level is high and getting higher. The day's agenda includes the reading of a new show, and invited audience members are assembling in the lobby. So frenetic is that action that even James Morgan, who runs the place, has trouble finding a place to talk quietly with a visitor. Then again, a certain level of madness is probably native to Morgan's daily life, as he is one of the very few working designers who is also artistic director of a theatre company. Most people find one career in the theatre exhausting enough; to do two well is certainly remarkable.

As we go to press, Morgan is having a summer where everything goes right. The York's production of the revue *Closer Than Ever*, by Richard Maltby, Jr. and David Shire, is riding a wave of terrific notices; it has extended several times, and is now scheduled to run at least through the end of September. In addition, Morgan has designed scenery for the Irish Repertory Theatre's well-received revival of *New Girl in Town*, a rarely seen musical based on Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*. He also managed to squeeze in time to design a new production of Douglas Carter Beane's comedy *As Bees in Honey Drown* at the Cape Playhouse in Dennis, Massachusetts.

It's all in a day's work for a man who takes on a surprising number of design projects while also running a company that, by any standard, must be considered a hive of activity. In addition to producing several main stage shows each season, York—which is billed as “where musicals come to life”—offers its wildly popular Musicals in Mufti series, staged readings of lost or forgotten musicals; it also plays host to an extensive development program of new works.

Indeed, you could call York the Janus Theatre Company, for it is a two-headed enterprise, looking forward into musical theatre's future while lovingly examining its extensive past. Its influence cannot be underestimated. The company's 1994 revival of *Merrily We Roll Along* offered a critical second look at a show that, on its 1981 debut, was dismissed out of hand; it has since received many major revivals. Another flop, *So Long, 174th Street*, was reworked at York as *Enter Laughing, The Musical*, where it enjoyed

two lengthy runs. New shows, such as *Yank! A WWII Love Story*, the uproarious spoof *The Musical of Musicals (The Musical!)*, and *Thrill Me*, about the killers Leopold and Loeb, have been staged around the country. *Souvenir*, about the notorious would-be diva Florence Foster Jenkins, transferred to Broadway, nabbing a Tony nomination for its star, Judy Kaye. Soon after *Memphis* took home the Tony Award for Best Musical, its librettist, Joe DiPietro, was at the York, presenting his new show, *Falling for Eve*, based on the first few books of Genesis. A number of these productions benefited from Morgan's design expertise.

In addition, thanks to attention-getting Musicals in Mufti presentations, a number of forgotten, but historically important, musicals received their first full recordings. These include *Billion Dollar Baby*, an early Betty Comden and Adolph Green effort with a distinctive score by Morton Gould; *Mata Hari*, originally produced by David Merrick and written by Edward Thomas, Martin Charnin, and Jerome Coopersmith; and *The Body Beautiful*, the first collaboration of *Fiddler on the Roof*'s Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick. Among the shows that have passed through the company's developmental reading series is a little thing called *Avenue Q*.

Morgan's presence is felt everywhere at York, from his graphic designs for each show's poster, to his cheery presence in the lobby before the show, to his distinctive pre-show speeches, which often ramble hilariously through a variety of seemingly unrelated topics and generally include a paean to the company's concession stand offerings. And, more often than not, he has designed the production's scenery.

“I never set out to be an artistic director,” says Morgan, and indeed his career path was an unusual one, based on the concept of learning by doing. York was founded in 1969 by Janet Hayes Walker, a working actress who had appeared in many golden-age Broadway musicals, including *Damn Yankees* and *The Music Man* (where she understudied leading lady Barbara Cook). Establishing a home base at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, on New York's Upper East Side, York presented such rarely revived works as Arthur Laurents' *The Time of the Cuckoo* and Joshua Logan's *The Wisteria Trees*. Eventually, musicals were added to the mix, and, thanks to Walker's cordial relationship with Stephen



New Girl in Town at Irish Repertory Theatre. Morgan's design, made up of modular parts, allowed for rapid scenic transitions, a helpful strategy for a large musical staged in a tiny space.



Morgan's design for *As Bees in Honey Drown*, at Cape Playhouse, featured a colorful expressionist collage of New York City skyscrapers.

Sondheim, York began staging major revivals of Sondheim's hits (*Company*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*) and misses, including a production of *Pacific Overtures* that some reviewers felt was more coherent and effective than the Broadway original. It transferred to a commercial Off Broadway production. The first Broadway revival of *Sweeney Todd*, staged at Circle in the Square Theatre, was also a transfer from York.

York's productions from this era were definitely "Off Broadway" in their production values—the company performed in a gym, and shows had to be struck each night, to allow classes to take place during the day at the private school where, for many years, Morgan directed shows. But, at a time when revivals of Broadway musicals were much rarer than they are now and before the Encores! At City Center series, they were unmissable events for musical theatre fans.

Morgan arrived in New York City in 1974, just out of college. His aunt and uncle, who attended services at the Church of the Heavenly Rest, set up a meeting for him with Walker. "She asked me to design the poster for her next play, which I did," he recalls. "After that, I helped out on a couple of shows, and then I designed *Night Must Fall* in

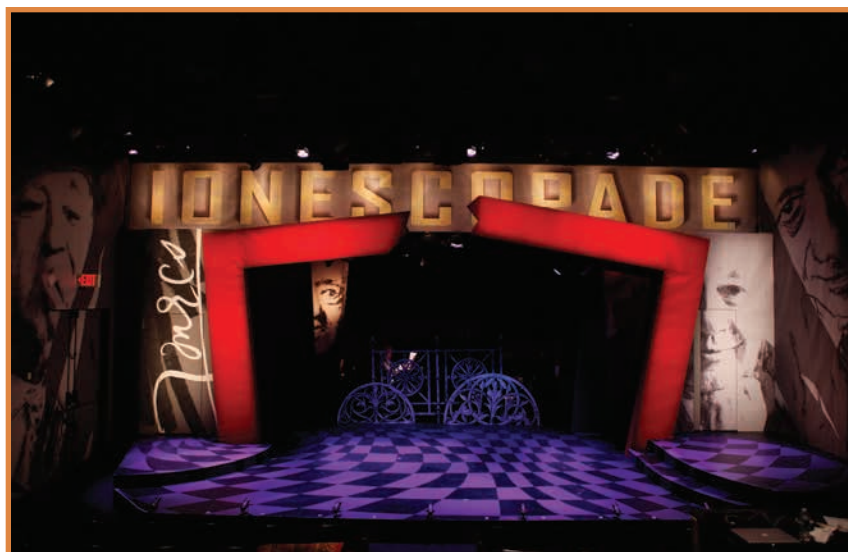
1975." He became the company's in-house set designer and, he adds, "after a while, Janet's right-hand person." He learned on the job, designing show after show and observing Walker's artistic and management style firsthand. "My experiences here were my graduate school," he says.

Morgan took a major forward step in 1983 when, with several years of design experience behind him, he applied to join United Scenic Artists. "I found out that you could get in based on your body of work and the quality of your recommendations," rather than taking the famous entrance exam. Thanks to his work at York, he came armed with letters from Sondheim, Comden and Green, Joshua Logan, and Cy Coleman, among others. Unsurprisingly, he was admitted.

For years, York-Walker-Morgan seemed like a winning combination—with Morgan taking the time to design for other companies and also doing summer stock—until Walker fell ill with cancer, and he began to take on more and more responsibility. "I had been there 20 years, and people didn't really know anyone but Janet," he says. "I started doing the pre-show speeches, just to put another face on the company." Walker died in 1997, and the theatre's board of directors asked him to take over.



The design of *Closer Than Ever*, currently running at York Theatre Company, combines motifs of doorways and partly cloudy skies.



Ionescopade, also staged at York, featured a witty and slightly sinister design that employed multiple images of Eugene Ionesco.

By this point, York had evolved considerably, having left the Church of the Heavenly Rest for a permanent berth in the basement of St. Peter's, a Lutheran church in the Citicorp Building in Manhattan's East 50s; also, over time, the theatre began producing more musicals. As Morgan officially took over, he pushed York to convert to an all-musicals policy. He had a clear vision for the theatre's mission. "I had designed a lot at Goodspeed Opera House, which only does musicals—but the emphasis was on revivals," he

says. "I wanted us to do new shows on the main stage, saving revivals for the Musicals in Mufti series. That's also when we began to focus more on developmental work."

Also by now, Morgan had a fully formed design style, defined by a puckish wit, a strong graphic eye (he admits to being "fascinated by print and type"), the ruthless elimination of unnecessary details, and the ability to work small miracles with a limited budget. One of the first York productions under his management, *No Way*

to *Treat a Lady*, featured an artfully drawn New York skyline that burst the boundaries of the proscenium, placing the audience in Central Park, surrounded by 1970s Manhattan. This summer, his design for *As Bees in Honey Drown* presented the city as a wildly tilting Expressionist collage of skyscrapers; the buildings were defined by bright pastels, as if someone had thrown a silkscreen over most of Manhattan.

Morgan can do a naturalistic set as well as anyone—"I love simplicity, but I also love detail," he notes—but his most distinctive work plays games with spatial perception and audience expectations. For *Ionescopade*, a revue taken from the writings of Eugene Ionesco, he placed the show's title above a broken proscenium and scattered images of the author everywhere, including a half-face that peered mysteriously from the wings. The effect was amusing and a little macabre. For *Closer than Ever*, a song cycle about young adults making the transition to middle age, he created a space with several doors (an allusion to the show's opening number) and images of partly cloudy skies; it subtly communicates the show's theme of major life changes.

Morgan has done particularly interesting work at New York's Irish Repertory Theatre, where the audience is divided into two sections that form a 90° angle. (The bulk of the audience faces the stage in a standard configuration, but there is another audience area located where, in another theatre, the stage right wings would be.) In his designs there, he frequently paints the stage left and upstage walls; these surrounds make such a strong impression that only minimal additional scenery is needed. For *New Girl in Town*, he painted a view of the Atlantic Ocean with the horizon in the distance, a smart choice given the characters' obsession with the sea. For Brian Friel's *Aristocrats*, set on the grounds of a decaying Irish manor, he says he "did a photo montage; it was the same photo of an estate chopped up in various ways." Interestingly, he

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describes the opportunity outside of York as “a paid vacation,” giving him the opportunity to see how other theatres are run.

Morgan seems especially proud of the Musicals in Mufti series, which has covered everything from rarely staged vintage hits like *Fanny* and *Wish You Were Here* to flat-out disasters like *Onward Victoria* and *Kelly*. “Some of the saddest stories involved shows that lasted only one night,” he says. “We want to give the authors another chance after those horrible experiences.” Indeed, he says, a Mufti reading of *Carmelina*, a late Alan Jay Lerner effort (music by Burton Lane), led to a new version that can be staged with a small cast. The transformation of *So Long*, 174th Street to *Enter Laughing* came out of the Mufti series. (Both shows had librettos by the late Joseph Stein, of *Fiddler on the Roof* fame, one of many Broadway notables who, over the years, have become close friends to York. Morgan has also been especially supportive of Tom Jones and Harvey Schimdt, authors of *The Fantasticks*.) Morgan’s policy is much the same with new productions: to seek out the unusual works that need special attention. “We pride ourselves on doing shows that aren’t being seen elsewhere,” he adds. “I love working with younger writers, and helping older ones to be heard, as well.” (York presents between 30-40 developmental readings a year.)


Looking to the future, Morgan says he is trying to choose his design projects more carefully. “I overdid it last summer,” he admits, having done a new production of *Enter Laughing* at Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor, Long Island; *The Graduate* at the Cape Playhouse, and Brian Friel’s *Molly Sweeney*, a remount of his Irish Rep design, at Long Wharf in New Haven. He is also helping to create a strategic plan for York, which imagines a new space with street level visibility, a lobby, and signage; an expanded board of directors, a production fund (eliminating much of the company’s reliance on co-producers); a fully funded developmental reading series; and



For *Aristocrats*, seen at Irish Rep, Morgan created a photo montage showing fragments of a country estate.

broader awareness of York and its mission. Finally, he says, he wants to “discover, and rediscover, many more wonderful pieces of musical theatre.

“We’re a specialized organization, offering specialized services to people writing musicals,” he says. “And it is amazing, but we’re still here.”



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