

Welcome to NYC's Hidden Golden Age of Theater

In New York theater today, what's not imported is what's underrated

By [Michael Feingold](#) Tuesday, May 18 2010

Some colleagues were chatting lately, yet again, about a Golden Age of American theater. This time, they meant the years just after World War II. People seem to enjoy believing in a magical time, usually just before they came along, when everything was splendid. Such talk makes me uneasy, because I have the terrible habit of accumulating theatrical facts. I know the aureous wonders of the late 1940s, but I also know its turkeys. No Golden Age arrives unalloyed.

Hence my unease. Talk of Golden Ages always makes me hear, echoing in my brain, the voice of [Barbara Cook](#), who embodies the phrase in two senses, being both an icon of the Broadway musical's great past and, though over 80, still displaying her expertise on Broadway today. Not many years ago, during her solo show at the [Vivian Beaumont Theater](#), she warbled a succession of memorable songs from that gilded past, and then reflected, "They tell me now I was living in a Golden Age. I didn't know I was living in a Golden Age." And then she cocked her head quizzically at the audience and asked, "Do you think we're living in one now?"

Do you think we're living in one now? That's what echoes in my brain when I hear people picturing the past as a Golden Age. You see, Cook's rhetorical question had stuck with me. Like everyone else who spends endless hours seeing theater, I often get the glooms from what seems to be the unremittingly gray

cloud of our current theatrical era. To notice that the gray cloud is displaying a lustrous gilt edge requires more effort. That's the trick time plays on us: Decades from now, the gray clouds will have dissipated from collective memory, leaving behind only the golden glory that they currently seem to overwhelm.

I love the past; I never understand artists who feel they can live in ignorance of it. But loving it also means never overrating it. If you cherish the past to the exclusion of the present, you trade in your chance of spotting something good today. Golden Ages can be close-mouthed creatures; they don't post signs telling you, "This is the Golden Age." And if they did, such signs would be an excellent reason to distrust them. The art that achieves its effect simply by doing what it set out to do tends to be quiet. In our time, it has all too often been jostled out of the way by the noisier, more specious kind that fails of effect while busily proclaiming its own importance. No wonder people find reaching backward for art certified by the past to be easier than sorting today's nourishing wheat from the noisy chaff around it.

The past isn't the only locale that distracts us from the devoted artists who make our present glow. One peculiarity of New York theater, in recent years, has been its increasing habit of looking away from its own best assets, instead relying for guidance on taste made elsewhere, mainly in [London](#) or Hollywood. This is fundamentally unhealthy, not because either London and Hollywood are such evil places, but because they aren't New York. A city with our long tradition, our vast community of artists, and our burgeoning ability to spawn new creative impulses can only be itself. London's taste is fine—for London. Hollywood's taste is fine, too, for those who think Hollywood the be-all and end-all. But New York must inevitably always be New York.

Not that artists from London or Hollywood should be unwelcome here. Who would resent the arrival of an actress as good as [Scarlett Johansson](#), whatever her movie credits? Who could fail to admire London design work as gorgeous as the sets and lighting for *Red*? But specific artists or productions are never the issue: The issue is the habit of assuming that taste must come from somewhere else, that one has no right to evolve one's own taste.

Broadway, which lives by the profit motive, understandably needs to cast its glance elsewhere: Its affluent patrons hunger for the snobby security of pre-approved London hits; its tourist market thrives on Hollywood-branded star names and titles. While giving our local economy a wonderful boost, this situation has the unfortunate side effect of making Broadway irrelevant to the city's cultural life. "It's a business," hit-hungry Broadwayites say.

But for a business, the theater has some eccentric qualities. Mass-marketing it internationally to maximize profit tends to dry up its organic sources locally. That, in due course, dries up the profitability. The magic of the musical was once Broadway's specialty. Today, its cupboard of new musicals is bare; only Off-Broadway, where money exerts less pressure, lets our artists take the risks that might turn to gold, artistically or monetarily.

The tricky part is knowing the gold when we see it. Taste gets progressively deadened through the habit of responding only to works that arrive with fanfares from elsewhere. (Both Hollywood and London have better fanfare factories than we do.) Fanfares, too, make me uneasy. To welcome work that's already celebrated elsewhere can be a joy, but the joy of discovering unheralded wonders is greater. One of New York's longtime quirks is to keep some of its most lustrous

jewels secret; the habit may be one that, in the noisy era of globalized media, we should learn to break.

I felt I had stumbled on one of those secret jewels, some months back, when I sat spellbound, in the tiny upstairs theater at [Playwrights Horizons](#), by the quiet magic of *Circle Mirror Transformation*. It had not been overlooked: There were favorable reviews, and a bit of buzz on the chat sites; the show's run was already in the first of what proved to be multiple extensions. Even so, it felt secret. Here was a wonderful new work by a gifted young playwright, [Annie Baker](#), and director, [Sam Gold](#), and there had been no ecstatic media celebration, no bouquets of feature articles and interviews. Roughly twice as many people see [Promises, Promises](#), every night, as saw *Circle Mirror Transformation* in any week of its run. Not only London, but Paris, Berlin, or [Stockholm](#), would have found ways of compensating for that inevitable disparity.

The problem seems especially urgent where our actors are concerned. *Circle Mirror Transformation*'s immaculate ensemble, two members of which had already won [Obie Awards](#) for "sustained excellence," could not be called unknown. None of them, though, could exactly be called a media star, either. Cook's bothersome question came back into my head. I started asking people, colleagues and theatergoing friends, "Do you think [Deirdre O'Connell](#) and [Reed Birney](#) are the two best actors in New York?"

I expected, and got, some agreement, but I wasn't prepared for the number of people who said, "Who?" These two artists did not begin their careers this season; they have been around Broadway houses and cramped downtown lofts. It's hard for me to imagine regular theatergoers who've never seen them. But we don't

always notice what's not explicitly pointed out to us; some people only listen when the fanfare machines are at work.

I kept adding names to the list. "We are living," I began to tell myself, "in a Golden Age of acting, and nobody knows it." The playbill for every Off- or Off-Off-Broadway show I saw gave me a few more names for it; so did the press release for every one I missed. I nearly wept when I had to skip a concert that featured [Judy Blazer](#), [Chuck Cooper](#), [Jeff McCarthy](#), and [Debra Monk](#), a cast, not currently visible on Broadway, that could grace any musical. Actors I knew I could trust, like [Eisa Davis](#) and [Darren Pettie](#) in *This*, turned in spectacularly good work; actors totally new to me, like [Mary Bacon](#) and [Quentin Maré](#) in *Happy Now?*, brought the joy of discovery. I started compiling, in my head, the accumulated achievements of [Francis Jue](#), [Jayne Houdyshell](#), [Sean Dugan](#), [Jeremy Shamos](#), [Sharon Washington](#), [Rocco Sisto](#), [Richard Topol](#), [Tom Nelis](#), [Ty Jones](#), [Leslie Kritzer](#), [Stephen McKinley Henderson](#), [Jennifer Ikeda](#), Maggie Lacey, [T. Ryder Smith](#). Golden? Our age was pure platinum.

In the mass-market mind, these artists are not stars; few have been billed above the title of a Broadway show. A fair number have won Obies, or other awards; you will find one or two listed among this year's winners. Their names will probably never sell as many theater tickets as the latest escapee from a cancelled sitcom. But they, with the many others for whom my memory and this column have no space, embody our theater's hope for greatness. Their names on a playbill mean that something will be done well, perhaps unforgettably, that evening.

Will anybody notice, apart from the few, like me, whose duty it is to do so? I don't know. I wish I could see New York learning to value and cherish its own. The era

of mega-profits, now apparently over, and of digitized communication, now degenerating into Tweeted triviality, have given us bad cultural habits. We've grown used to mistaking monetary success for value and logo recognition for meaning. Unlike England, which cherishes its artistic tradition, we've always tended to toss aside a previous generation's favorites in pursuit of the next big thing. This carelessness with our own goods creates an aesthetic vacuum, which Art, like Nature, abhors. London and Hollywood only step in to fill the gap our inattentiveness has left.

These two bad habits—preoccupation with profit and apathy toward our own valuable artists—merge to create a third. Unlike London or the great continental cities, New York has no major theatrical institution. Lurching nervously from hit to hit, our better-funded nonprofits strive more often to placate current taste than to offer it either the backbone of tradition or the adventure of the new. They, like the commercial producers with whom they feel compelled to compete, look elsewhere for their grounding, not to the incredible artistic potential waiting for them here at home.

And whatever comes next for us will assuredly not be easy. As I was working on this article, the news of the "mothership" *Law & Order's* cancellation, after two decades of silently subsidizing our acting community, made the gray cloud hanging over our theater that much grayer. Our distress—economic, political, ecological—may give us some unexpected advantages. While the maximizing-profit model and the international-shopping habit may be coming to their end as ways of sustaining New York's theatrical life, the genuine gold that glitters, quietly, just below their noisy flashing signboards may become visible. The Golden Age we think we lack, and yearn for, the one granted public recognition,

may be just around the corner. The ore is there, waiting to be mined. I hope it happens soon: Like the rest of the planet, we are in no position to waste our precious resources.