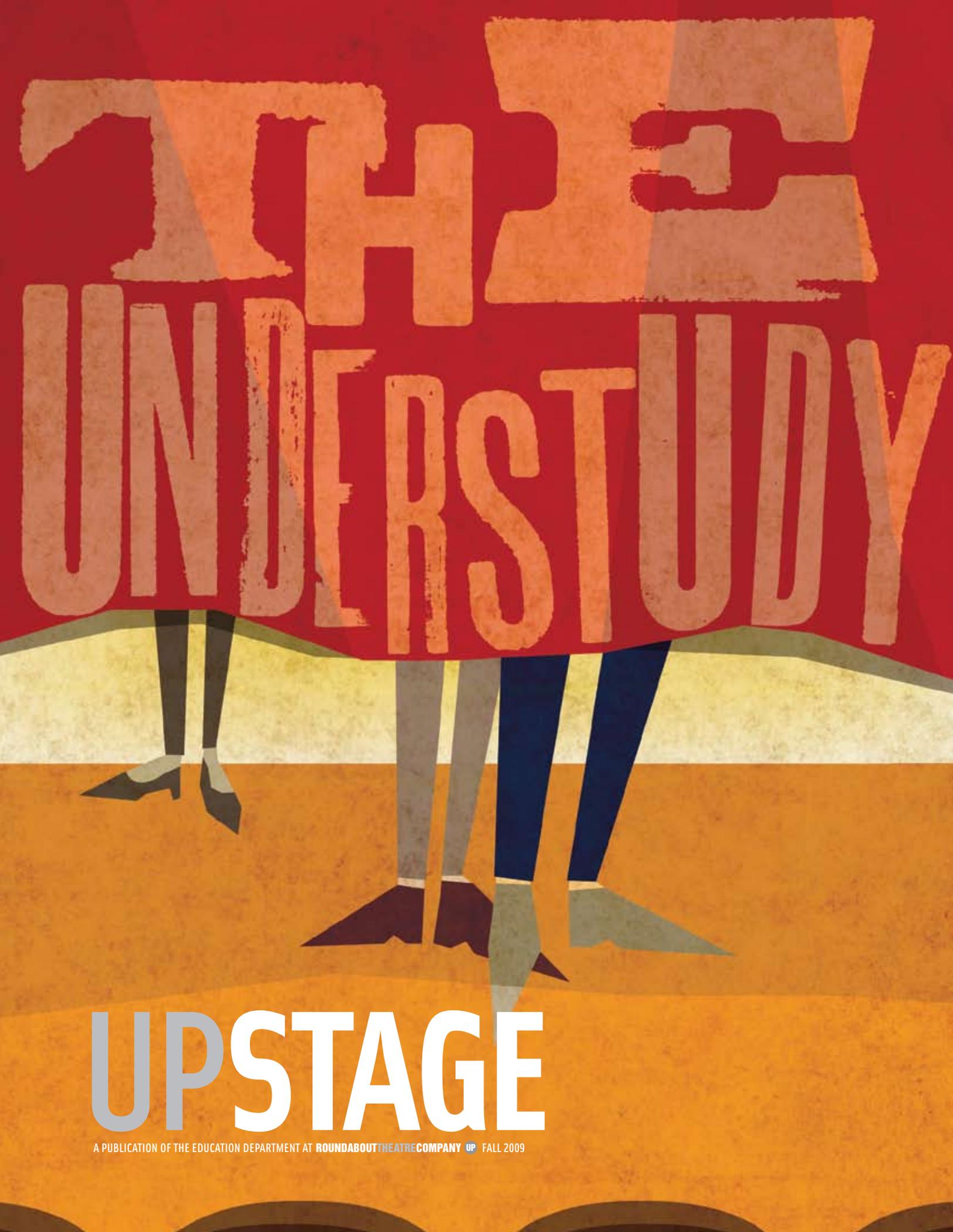


THE UNDERSTUDY



UPSTAGE

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How do the roles we play
DEFINE us?

"You have no rights!
You are an actor!
You're not even an actor;
you're an understudy!"

—ROXANNE, *THE UNDERSTUDY*

THE UNDERSTUDY



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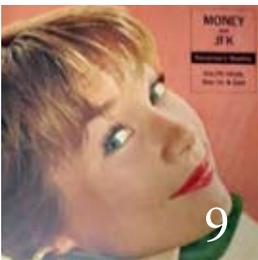
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INTERVIEW WITH

the DIRECTOR: Scott Ellis

UPSTAGE SAT DOWN WITH *THE UNDERSTUDY* DIRECTOR SCOTT ELLIS, WHO ALSO SERVES AS ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY'S ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR.

Why did you want to direct *The Understudy*?

I got the script from Williamstown. Nicky Martin, the artistic director there, said, "You should look at this." So he sent it and I really liked it. And I said, "Ok." I had never read one of Theresa Rebeck's plays before. It was as simple as that.

Did you direct readings of the play at Roundabout first?

Yes. I said to Theresa, who had heard it once, that I'd like to hear it, so we did a small reading just for her and the three actors. She worked on it, and then I said, "Let's do it at the Roundabout in the subscriber program in front of a larger audience," and that went well. Then we brought it to Williamstown. My intent was always to bring it back to the Roundabout.

You've been working in both worlds, theatre and television, and there seems to be something in the play about the hierarchy of actors in different mediums. Did that appeal to you?

I am going to have to say no. The only appeal was that it was a good play and I liked it. It made me laugh, and it made me care about the people. To me that was it.

Tell me about casting. You had a whole other cast at Williamstown.

It's unusual that I'll be doing a play with a whole different cast—I've never done that before. Julie White did the reading originally. She was cast in it and then couldn't do it in Williamstown. But I always knew that if I did it in New York, I would go back to her to do it. So I always had her in mind anyway. The other two roles were cast up in Williamstown, and they've been recast here. Bradley Cooper had a film, and Reg Rogers chose to do another play. But I am beyond thrilled with the cast that we have.

Justin Kirk, who is playing Harry, is a TV star now; he is a very interesting choice and I think he's just got that right dry quality.

And Mark-Paul Gosselaar was Zack on *Saved By the Bell*, but he's never done theater. He auditioned for me and he was great. He had a great audition, and I figured, let's try this.

What this play made me realize when I read it is that we are asked to play certain roles in life. Not just in our business lives, but all the time. And I'm really fascinated by the aborted romance between

Harry and Roxanne. Do you find that an interesting part of the script?

People try to put other people in certain categories. You walk in and you are cast, you are typed. I'm typed, you're typed, it doesn't matter. We are all typed the minute we walk in a room. That can change once they get to know you or they see something else, but we are attracted to people because they are a type. We hire people because they are a type. That's just how human nature works. Harry comes in and thinks Jake is just this stupid action star. Jake thinks Harry is a non-talented actor who is an understudy. Harry now sees his ex, Roxanne, as a stage manager who was an actress. There are these constantly shifting feelings as far as what you are expecting from each individual.

Do you have any idea what the Kafka play within the play is about?

I had Theresa write a little bit of what it was about so the actors could follow the play and know what was going on. But the audience is not there to care about the Kafka play; you don't need to follow that through.

Roxanne and Harry were together as a couple, then he left her and now they are together again as if by fate. That relationship could be seen as sort of Kafkaesque—would you agree?

Yes, there's a way that Kafka dealt with women, and that's how Harry deals with women. There was a commitment, and then he left. Kafka basically did the same thing.

When *Front & Center*, our subscriber magazine, talked to Theresa Rebeck, the author, she said that she felt that this was one of her most tender-hearted plays. Do you see that?

Yeah, totally. It's about love, it's about the love of theater, it's what people do for the art, how much passion they have for it, why we all do it. In fact, at the end, they continue to rehearse, and that speaks volumes. We don't do it for the money. The one person who does do it for the money is Bruce, who gives it all up to go do a big action movie for a lot of money, and the other characters aren't like that. They are passionate about the work.

Tell me something about the sets. They feel like another character to me.

Actually, the character who represents the sets is Laura. She is a character we never see. The way we see that

character behave is through the movement of the sets. The sets are important because there is something going on constantly with lighting, sound and the settings that make the off stage character of Laura important.

How did you collaborate with Alexander Dodge, the set designer? Had you ever worked with him before?

No, I had not worked with him before. Nicky Martin had suggested him. It was a good collaboration—it was a great collaboration. It took us a little bit to get it. In Williamstown we had the challenge of doing it on a smaller stage and how to make that work. And, in fact, it helped us here because we're on a small stage in New York too. The challenge was finding how to get to these constantly changing sets to work. You couldn't see anyone on stage moving them of course. They had to be magically moving because it's all supposed to be happening immediately.

Tell me about the designers for lighting and costumes.

Kenny Posner, who I've worked with before and Tom Broecker, who also did costumes for *Streamers*, is designing the clothes—he's great. I met him through *30 Rock*. He does costume design for *30 Rock*.

You've directed for *30 Rock*, *Weeds*, and *Nurse Jackie*. Do you still love the theater as much as you used to?

Oh, absolutely. I love it. My thing is—I don't do television unless I know I'm doing theater. I've never said yes to a TV show unless I knew I had a theater job coming up.

But don't you feel there are similarities? Do you feel like you are rehearsing a one act when you are doing a TV show?

Yes, there are similarities. Listen, you are telling a story. You tell it in a different way, and you have to tell it in a very fast way in television. That's hugely different. Then you are telling the audience where to look through the use of a camera lens whereas in theater you are doing it in a lot of different ways. I think the biggest thing is that it's just very fast in television. You still have to ask the same questions.

You don't see a difference in the actors, do you? Harry has a prejudice against Jake and Bruce, but that's more out of professional jealousy than reality, right?

I'm fortunate that most of the actors I've worked with



on television shows—*Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds*—come from theater. I think people who don't come from theater can get wrapped up in this Hollywood stuff, and it's not about the work—it's about something else. I've definitely run into that, but for the most part I've been lucky that the actors I've worked with on TV have been good actors, and they've been theater-based.

I wanted to end with talking a little bit about how you are going to prepare for this. You've done it before. Do you have to do anymore work after that?

First of all, it's three new actors, so my challenge is to wipe the other production out of my head. That's really what I've got to do. The design is the same. We up scaled it a little bit and made it better, but the structure of the piece we kept because it worked. Blocking, actors, relationships -- that's all going to be different because we have three new actors. So that for me really is the challenge -- to let it be what it's going to be with these three people and not bring my preconceived ideas from the other production to the table. It's a different ball game. ^{UP}

INTERVIEW WITH the **ACTOR**: Julie White

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH TONY AWARD-WINNING ACTRESS JULIE WHITE ABOUT HER ROLE IN *THE UNDERSTUDY*, ROXANNE, THE STAGE MANAGER.

What made you decide to become an actress?

I've told this story before. I was late for my English class so many times that I had built up like three hours of detention, and I came after school to do my three hours with the English teacher. He was also the head of the drama department, and he was having auditions for *Guys & Dolls*. So I sat there and watched all these other kids audition—specifically for Miss Adelaide—and I was like, "Wait a minute. I could do that. I could do that way better than any of them." So I asked him if I could audition, if he would cut my three hours down to two if I agreed to potentially humiliate myself. He said yes. So I auditioned and I got it.

Have you been singing since?

I sang a little in my first show. The show that actually brought me here was *The Baker's Wife* by Stephen Schwartz and Joseph Stein. My first show when I came to New York was the musical *Lucky Stiff*.

You strike me as someone who can see the humor in the roles you play, who has real gifts as a comedienne. Is that something you were born with?

I can't tell if it is nature versus nurture or something. But definitely my response to hardship is generally to see the funniness in it. To see what's amusing. And I love to laugh.

Was the part of Roxanne, the stage manager, written for you?

I couldn't say for sure, but I know that is what was written with me in mind.

I think it's an ideal role for you.

I like doing Theresa Rebeck's stuff. I think I just get the humor in it and the resilience of the characters that she writes for me to play.

You were in her play *Bad Dates*, right?

Yes.

And you were in *Spike Heels* too?

I was.

So, you've done quite a bit of Rebeck?

Yes. I also did a play called *The Family of Mann*.

Tell me a little bit about what it's like to do a play by a female writer, and Rebeck in particular.

What's it like to act in a play by a woman? I've done a lot of that. Mainly, of course, because what I'm drawn to doing in a play is a great character. Of course, a woman

could write a play about anything, but very often in a play written by a woman there are female protagonists or the central story is also about a woman. So those are the good parts to play. I certainly don't confine myself to it.

Do you find that a woman's perspective is different from a man's? Or is that too reductive?

Each individual playwright's perspective is different, whether it be that of a man or a woman. They are coming from their own individual set of what their belief systems are, what is important to them. For example, Liz Flahive, she's a wonderful young writer whose play, *From Up Here*, I just did last year at Manhattan Theater Club. She was writing about young people, and I played the parent of a troubled teen. She was writing about her recent past. She was only like 24 or 25 when she started working on the play. On the other hand, sometimes you do a play by someone later in their life, like when I did Donald Margulies' play *Dinner with Friends*; he was sort of at a mid-life place and sort of wrote about that perspective—about people who were in their late 30s and 40s. It is where you catch them in their development. Playwrights are people too, so they write about what's happening in their lives or what interests them in their lives.

Tell me a little bit about the part of Roxanne. I know you haven't started rehearsals, but do you have any impressions of who she is at this point?

Well, not more than is actually indicated in the writing. What Theresa mainly does is give me these great obstacles. Roxanne has a huge obstacle from the very get-go of the play, from the minute she sees Harry. I'm under such duress in this play. It'll be really interesting to work on it, to see how we work through it, because I feel like there's a change in Roxanne by the end of the piece.

Do you think that change is precipitated by interacting with the character of Harry?

A little bit. Yes, by getting to see him after all these years, never seeing him or having spoken to him after he did that dreadful thing.

What is the first thing you did when you got the script? Read it and then...?

This play I've had for a couple of years. I've been reading drafts of this play for a while now. I've been sort of living with it and thinking about it. I'm about four weeks out from rehearsal now, and what I will probably



do is just take it with me—I'm going out of town for a little bit—and try and read it in the morning and read it before I go to bed. I'll actually start learning it. I started doing that with *Bad Dates*, because how can you start rehearsing a play if you are holding a script in your hand? I don't know how to work on a play until I know it. So I'll learn a lot of it before we start. Or I'll have it down pretty well in my head. Not letter perfect. I find that it's the old Spencer Tracy thing—"Learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture." Step one is definitely to learn the lines because how can you work it until you know what you are saying? Then you can really deeply learn what you are saying as you rehearse it.

Tell me a little bit about research. Will you talk to a lot of stage managers?

No. I know so many stage managers so well. They are just great people in general. I mean Roxanne was an actress at one point who gave that up because it was just too insane. I think she wasn't willing to deal with the craziness of waiting for the call every day and would rather have a more hands-on job behind the scenes.

What do you think the play is about?

I think a key to the show has always been Laura, the unseen character in the booth.

You mean the stoner technician, right?

Yes. And no matter what I ask for she doesn't give me what I ask for. Like I'll ask for the bar scene, and she'll bring in the interrogation room. So we just end up doing that instead. In some ways I think she is representative of God. I think that you ask God for what you think you need, and you don't get it. And I think there's something like that with Laura. Is God just a big stoner and everything is random? Or is there method to that madness? Is there an intelligence to that order, or is it just random? I think that's the great question of the play—how does one deal with that crazy stoner, God? Maybe at the end of the day you just got to do a dance.

What about the play within the play—the whole Kafka thing. Do you have any idea what the play within the play is about?

You mean the actual story of that play?

Yes. The play *Harry, Roxanne and Jake* are rehearsing is a "lost" play of Kafka's. It feels like sometimes the play we are watching is mirroring some Kafkaesque world. Do you agree?

Completely. It's incredibly clever how Theresa's weaving that in and out. And by making the undiscovered piece be by Kafka, she's giving you themes through the play. She is telling you what we're dealing with; it's kind of absurd existentialism. What they always identify with Kafka is whether he believed there was a God or not.

This play also deals with the hierarchy of actors. I know you probably know a lot about this because you've done television, movies and plays. Do you think there is a kind of snobbery about theater actors versus film actors?

Well, sure. The world of show business is a very complicated hierarchical lunch room. Who gets to sit at the fancy table; and who gets to be student body president; and who are the drama nerds at the drama table. I think the theater actors are probably still perceived as the drama nerds. The ridiculousness, the absurdity of the hierarchy, is what Theresa is dealing with in the play, along with the hierarchy in Kafka. He's always looking at office politics. And in some ways it's about Harry and where he fits in. You know how in *Metamorphosis* Kafka famously had that guy wake up as a giant cockroach.

What do you look for in a director?

I've worked with Scott Ellis on *Little Dog Laughed*. He directed it off-Broadway, on Broadway and then again in Los Angeles. I love working with him because I know Scott so well. I really trust him. You are letting the director be your eyes and ears, telling you how to tell the story the way you want to tell it. So you really have to trust him. I trust Scott a lot—I trust him to have good taste; I trust him to have a sense of humor. I look for directors whose judgment I trust. ([click here to see a clip of Julie White's performance in *Little Dog Laughed*](#))

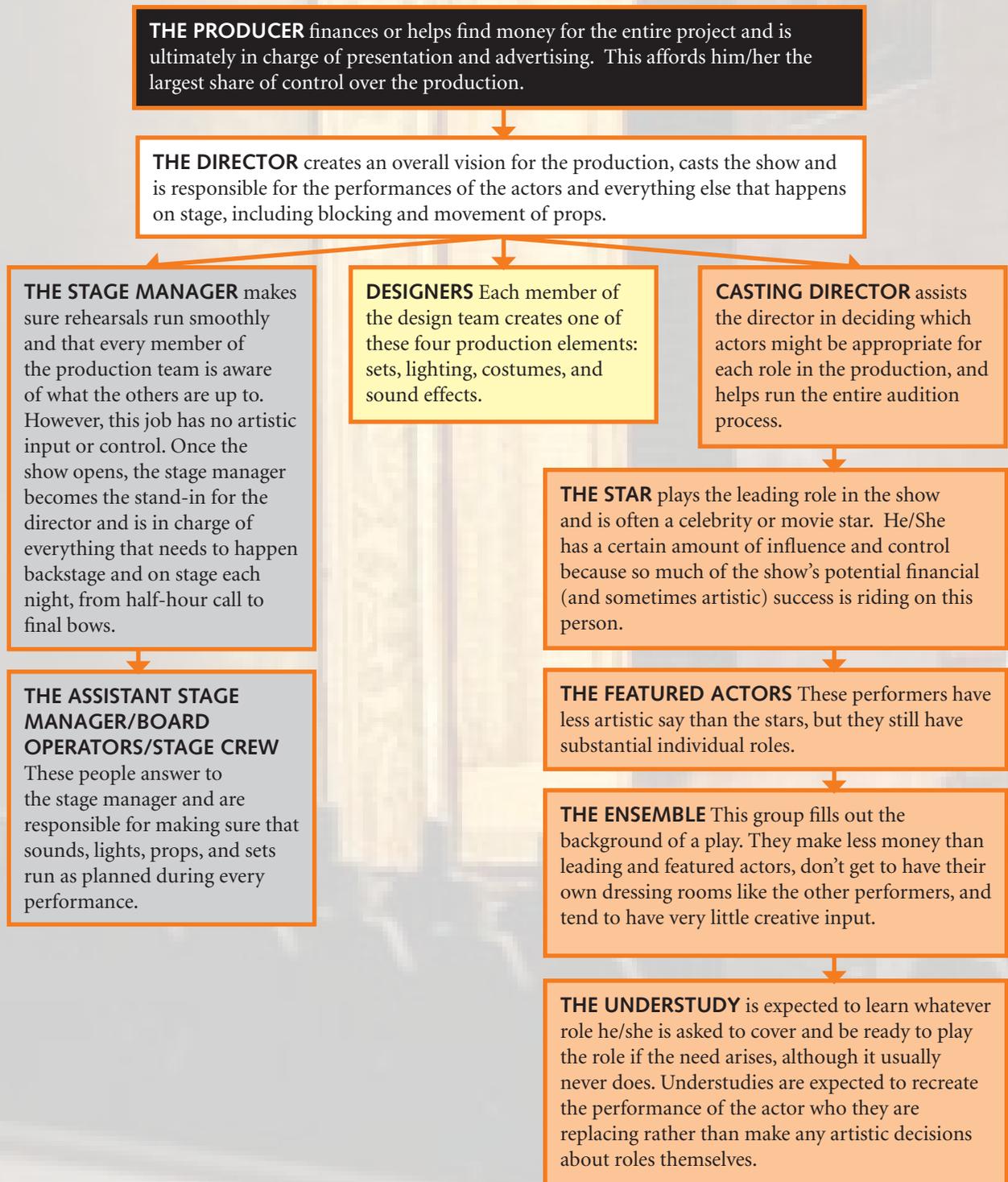
Can we talk a little bit about what advice you might give to a young person who says they want to be an actor?

Don't do it! You have to be very brave because most of the time you are going to hear something that is a variation on the word "no." "No, you didn't get it. No, you're not right for it. No, you can't get an audition for it." So you have to really, really, really want to do it. And really believe in yourself. 🍷

World of the

THE HIERARCHY OF THEATRE

THE THEATRE FAMILY TREE: BREAKING DOWN THE HIERARCHY



PLAY

FAMOUS UNDERSTUDIES

Although *The Understudy's* Harry never gets his shot at the spotlight, many Broadway understudies have gotten the opportunity to make it to the top. Some have gone on when the star couldn't and became hits in their new roles. Others have gone on to become successful leading actors in their own right years later. And while today all these actors can call themselves movie stars or Broadway leads, they all started as understudies.



In 1954's *The Pajama Game*, star Carol Haney was injured during the run of the show, and at a moment's notice, her vivacious, redheaded understudy had to take her place. That young understudy, an actress named Shirley MacLaine, stepped in and not only became a sensation in the role, but more significantly, also attracted the notice of a Hollywood producer, who just happened to be in the crowd that night. This led to movie stardom and later to an Academy Award for her performance in *Terms of Endearment*.



At the 2001 Tony Awards, an actor who started off the season as an understudy ended it as a Tony nominee. That actor was Brad Oscar, who had begun as the understudy for the role of Franz Liebkind in *The Producers* and who had been called in (and eventually taken over the part) when the original actor, Ron Orbach, was injured. A year later, at the 2002 Tonys, it was Sutton Foster's turn. She had gone on as *Thoroughly Modern Millie's* title character at the last second at an out of town performance and was later given the role full time on Broadway. Foster not only went from understudy to Tony nominee—she actually made it onto the stage of Radio City Music Hall, winning the best actress statuette.



And although she is of course fictional, *42nd Street's* plucky Peggy Sawyer is perhaps the archetypal understudy—the one who takes over the lead at the last possible minute and becomes an unbridled success. Somewhere, in the back of their minds, every understudy remembers the famous quote: “Sawyer, you’re going out a youngster, but you’ve got to come back a star!”



“WHEN GREGOR SAMSA AWOKE ONE MORNING FROM TROUBLED DREAMS, HE FOUND HIMSELF CHANGED INTO A MONSTROUS COCKROACH...”

—Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*

FRANZ KAFKA

Understudy playwright Theresa Rebeck uses the stories and novels of German writer Franz Kafka as inspiration for her play and the fictional play-within-a-play. Kafka, whose family was of German heritage, was born in Prague in 1883 and went on to write a series of classic novels and short stories including *The Trial*, the tale of an innocent man accused of an unknown crime; *The Castle*, a dreamlike work about a man trying to gain access to a mysterious organization; and *Metamorphosis*, the story of a man suddenly turned into a giant cockroach.

Kafka and his three sisters grew up with an intensely overbearing father who, it is widely agreed, was responsible for many of the feelings of intense guilt and self-loathing that play so big a part in Kafka’s work. As one critic wrote, for Kafka and his sisters, life with their father was “a trial in which they were inescapably guilty.” Very few of Kafka’s works were published during his lifetime and, when Kafka knew he was dying of tuberculosis, he asked his best friend, Max Brod, to burn all of his writing once he died. However, when Kafka passed away in 1924, Brod didn’t destroy the manuscripts and instead readied them for publication, feeling that deep down that was what Kafka actually wanted.

Kafka’s unique works of fiction take place in worlds that are irrational, nightmarishly bureaucratic, and darkly ludicrous, in many ways similar to the bizarre, uncontrollable situation Harry, Jake and Roxanne find themselves in during *The Understudy*. Perhaps the most succinct summary of Kafka’s worldview came from the author himself when he said, “In the fight between you and the world – back the world.”

[\(Click here to watch a clip of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*\)](#)

INTERVIEW WITH

the **PLAYWRIGHT:** Theresa Rebeck

UPSTAGE DISCUSSED *THE UNDERSTUDY* WITH PLAYWRIGHT THERESA REBECK

You've had plays produced all over New York City, but this is your first at Roundabout. How did that happen?

I've always admired Todd Haimes and what he does with Roundabout and I was very fortunate that Nicky Martin asked me to bring *The Understudy* to Williamstown, where he is artistic director. He'd already sent it to director Scott Ellis at Roundabout, who liked it very much and was interested in working on it. Then there's this Monday night play reading series for Roundabout subscribers, and Scott asked if I'd like to do that. I thought it was a terrific opportunity to see it in front of an audience and hear what we had. That gave me a chance to work on the script for a month before we began rehearsals in Massachusetts. Todd came up to Williamstown and loved it. Then it was really easy for us to commit to each other in a very protected way. Actually, it's never easy. But it felt easy.

Do you feel *The Understudy* is very different from your previous work?

It feels different to me in that it's a tenderhearted play and I don't achieve that always. I do feel that the play is about disappointment and joy—and there is a lot of love in it that made me feel safe enough to float around in some of those issues. This play is very much about love—love of art, about people whose lives are defined by their passion for storytelling. The character of Jake, the movie actor, has so much love for Kafka. There's a real delight and passion for this odd German expressionist and the play starts to partake of that joy and revels in the oddness of art. The play is very affectionate toward all three characters.

You seem to do a lot research after you choose a subject. Kafka plays a part in the plot of *The Understudy*. How did you get into Kafka?

I re-read a lot of his work. In college I just loved his stuff, the eccentricity of it. Then there was a point about four or five years ago when my husband and I were going to Prague, which is like "Kafka Central," so I read a big biography and fell in love with his story all over again. *The Understudy* is about someone's affection for that crazy guy more than it is about that crazy guy. There's a kind of terror and weariness in Kafka that the play partakes of but in a much more affectionate tone.

A common theme in much of your work is a concern about the rights and respect artists deserve but rarely attain in our society.

I worry about the place of the artist in our culture. If you were to ask me, I'd say capitalism and art don't always mix; the interface of business and art is problematic. I'm a very passionate supporter of the theatre. I'm actually one of those people who say, "The world would be a better place if people went to the theatre more often." It's an absurd thing to say, but theatre can be a moving experience to people on the best levels: it brings a community together; people are called into empathy; and they're asked to have some kind of spiritual or psychological response to this communal event. I'm yearning for the theatre to bring more people in. I feel my stuff gets too categorized as commercial in a way that's sort of dismissive. In fact you've got to invite audiences in. If they're not coming we're all in trouble. I do not think there's a very coherent discussion about art and class in America. Theatre's a populist form at its core but there's a notion that it's an elitist form. I don't think it is.

What inspired this play?

It kind of spun out of Harry's, who is the understudy, character. I was writing a monologue for a friend, an actor who was in a bitter rage about his own inability to have a coherent life. So I was kind of writing this monologue and it started going in these crazy directions. I am interested in actors. I find them funny and frightening and heartbreaking because show business—theatre, film, television—is very hard on the spirit. I've spent a lot of time talking to people about how you survive this business and be healthy. Not everybody does. So I'm well acquainted with the bitterness of certain members of our community and the buoyancy of others. No one has it as bad as actors do. They have to audition all the time and take direct rejection. Then we still expect them to embody the human spirit in all its different dimensions—and on a dime. It's very hard on the heart. Also, actors can begin to feel like life is far too defined—and this is where I've worked to keep the play on its Kafka track—by enormous, mysterious forces that are way beyond their control. Certainly it feels like that being a theatre artist.



There's that Kafka level of absurdity in your day-to-day living.

Is that why you keep "Bruce," the unseen megastar who Jake understudies, offstage?

Yes, it heightens the sense that there are unseen forces offstage whose actions will affect these actors' lives very directly. You just don't know what they're doing out there.

So you always loved Kafka and you wrote a monologue about a bitter understudy and then what happened?

There are a lot of things crawling around my brain and I let them all crawl around and when one of them reaches a point where it becomes very insistent, then I write it. Edward Albee says he thinks about something for years, and then he writes it. I'm more in that school. I had been thinking about this play for a long time. I had written this little monologue and I thought there is something there. It also revolved around that joke Harry tells, "Get in the truck." Sometimes, I don't think jokes are trivial events. I see jokes as very serious statements. There are, in fact, screenwriters out there

being paid millions of dollars to write "Get in the truck." That is something that irks me on a deep psychological level. So I had written this rambling monologue about that and at the end I suddenly realized this guy was understudying. Once I had that nugget, I thought, "You should write a play." Then I was walking down the street with a neighbor and I started saying I think I'm going to write this play about an understudy and he's going to be working on a Kafka play and it all just sort of erupted from me.

There's also the issue of film acting vs. stage acting in the play. Harry, who's supposed to be the experienced, classically trained stage actor, can't always do things Jake, the Hollywood hunk, can.

It's just that Harry doesn't know how to handle a gun well. With some actors, they'll come into an audition and you can just see they wear their body in a different way. Harry, though he's a wonderful actor, is someone who wears his body like failure in a way that Jake doesn't. I found this working in Los Angeles with all those actors. Most of those guys are really buff. They work out at the gym a lot and I'm sure they practice with guns. They go to shooting ranges and learn how to use guns, pocket them right. That kind of confidence is something that Harry doesn't have.

Now that *The Understudy* has been produced once at Williamstown, do you feel it's finished? Or like Tennessee Williams, do you never stop tinkering with your plays?

I do a lot of rewriting. Edward Albee says "I never rewrite," and he's so proud of it. I could never do that. I rewrite all the time.

The writer who introduces the volume of your published plays says they always ask big questions. What's the big question of *The Understudy*?

Can art survive culture? Pretty good, right? 

INTERVIEW WITH

the set **DESIGNER:** Alexander Dodge

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED SET DESIGNER ALEXANDER DODGE ABOUT CREATING THE WORLD OF *THE UNDERSTUDY*.

What made you want to design settings for the theatre as your profession?

I was born in the Swiss Alps to an American father and a German mother. When I was 6, we moved back to the states and I was up at Taliesin West in Arizona. My father is an architect who studied with Frank Lloyd Wright and still teaches at Taliesin. I wanted to be an architect myself throughout my childhood. However, at some point I became interested in theatre and figured set design was a good combination of architecture and drama. I was able to have my cake and eat it too, so to speak.

Who are you influenced or inspired by as a designer?

I am influenced by anyone and everyone. I get very excited by some contemporary architects, especially the work of Zaha Hadid, Santiago Calatrava, and Frank Gehry. I am always interested in how volume and the experience of spaces affect one's perception and emotions. What do you feel when you walk into a certain, room, space, city street, public square? Good set design can do that as well and bring a performance to another level. I am fascinated by the body within a three dimensional volume.

What kind of research did you have to do to design *The Understudy*?

I started with looking at early 20th century photographs of Prague. The black and white images all had the dark brooding quality of the Kafka's play-within-the-play. I also looked at many of M.C. Escher's optical illusions. His work was very influential in the final stage picture of the play.

What was most challenging about designing this show?

The scenery is essentially the fourth character in the play. Not to mention a character with a distinct personality. I knew identifying the right combination of "Broadway" and "Kafkaesque" would reveal what the design would ultimately need to look like. The scenery required some gritty reality but also needed some sense of surrealism. Therefore the mechanics of the transformations from scene to scene took on particular significance.

What do you think *The Understudy* is about?

I think it looks at the irony and often bittersweet humor that life, especially a life in show business, can throw at you. However, the play is often so funny that it can just feel incredibly amusing and entertaining.

What do you think the play within the play is about?

For me the interesting thing about the piece is that both plays parallel each other. It feels like the line between reality and fantasy is frequently blurred and sometimes their positions are swapped entirely.

What do you look for from a director when you begin your design process?

The design process is the most rewarding and satisfying when it is a collaborative endeavor. I enjoy the experience the most when the director is involved in how the design evolves. I think my most interesting work has come out of good collaborations with directors.

What advice would you give a young person who wants to design settings for the theatre?

See as much theatre as you can, including opera, modern dance, ballet, etc. Look at installations, sculpture and art exhibits at museums and galleries. Travel as much as you can and see the world. Do everything you can to continually broaden your perspective. 



Vocabulary

Theatrical Terminology

BLOCKING: All the onstage movement done by the actors in the course of the play.

BOOTH: A small space where the stage manager usually spends each performance (although other techies, like board operators, use it as well) and communicates to the rest of the stage management crew by headset.

CALL A SHOW: To notify, usually via head set, board operators and stage hands of each cue in advance and as it arises during each performance.

IATSE: International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, or IATSE, is the union covering stage hands and other theatre technicians.

MARKING: Going through a scene to run through the actors' movements and the corresponding lighting, sound and set cues.

ON BOOK: A member of the crew is said to "be on book" if they are holding a copy of the script and are in charge of helping the actors if they forget a line or blocking.

PUT-IN REHEARSAL: A rehearsal held for the purpose of having the understudy put into the role for a run through of the play with the rest of the cast.

STANDBY: Unlike an understudy who usually is given advance notice when called upon to perform, a standby is ready to step into the role at a moment's notice if an actor becomes injured or sick during a given performance.

Vocabulary from *The Understudy*:

KAFKAESQUE: The quality of a world that is nightmarish, beyond one's control, and yet somehow also darkly humorous.

SATIRE: Criticism of some element of human nature through wit or humor.

STATUS: The position of an individual in relation to another or others, esp. in regard to social or professional standing.

ANNIHILATED: Destroyed completely

DOCKET: List or calendar of cases to be heard by a court or judge

EXISTENTIAL: Relating to the nature of existence

MAGISTRATE: An official who administers the laws

PARIAH: One who is a complete outcast

WHELP: A young child or young animal



Activities

Pre Show Activities:

- 1.) In *The Understudy*, humor is often used in bleak circumstances. What is humor? What makes something funny? ([click here for activity 1](#))
- 2.) The dialogue in *The Understudy* gives us very specific information regarding where this play takes place. How can we learn about setting and character through text analysis? ([click here for activity 2](#))
- 3.) In *The Understudy*, the actors are in the process of rehearsing a play by Franz Kafka. Based on dialogue from *The Understudy*, can you make connections between Franz Kafka and Theresa Rebeck? ([click here for activity 3](#))

Post Show Activities:

- 4.) Prior to seeing *The Understudy* you used clues in the dialogue from the play to describe who stole the prop gun. Having seen the play, how would you compare your prediction of Harry to the character you met in this production? ([click here for activity 4](#))
- 5.) Having seen *The Understudy*, you know more about the various jobs of the theatre and got an introduction to the status (level of power) of each job. Rank in order the power structure of your school and compare that to the power structure of the theatre. ([click here for activity 5](#))
- 6.) Just like the characters in *The Understudy*, we also play various roles within our everyday lives. Let's examine how we behave in different circumstances. ([click here for activity 6](#))

Resources

<http://www.theresarebeck.com>

<http://www.alexanderdodgedesign.com>

<http://www.wtfestival.org/>

Janouch, Gustav, *Conversations with Kafka*. New York: New Directions, 1971.

Kantor, Michael and Malson Laurence, *Broadway the American Musical*. New York: Bullfinch Press, 2004.

Kuper, Peter, *Metamorphosis*. New York: Crown, 2005.

Strathern, Paul, *Kafka in 90 Minutes*. Chicago: I.R. Dee, 2004.

[Official website for *The Understudy*](#)



When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

TICKET POLICY

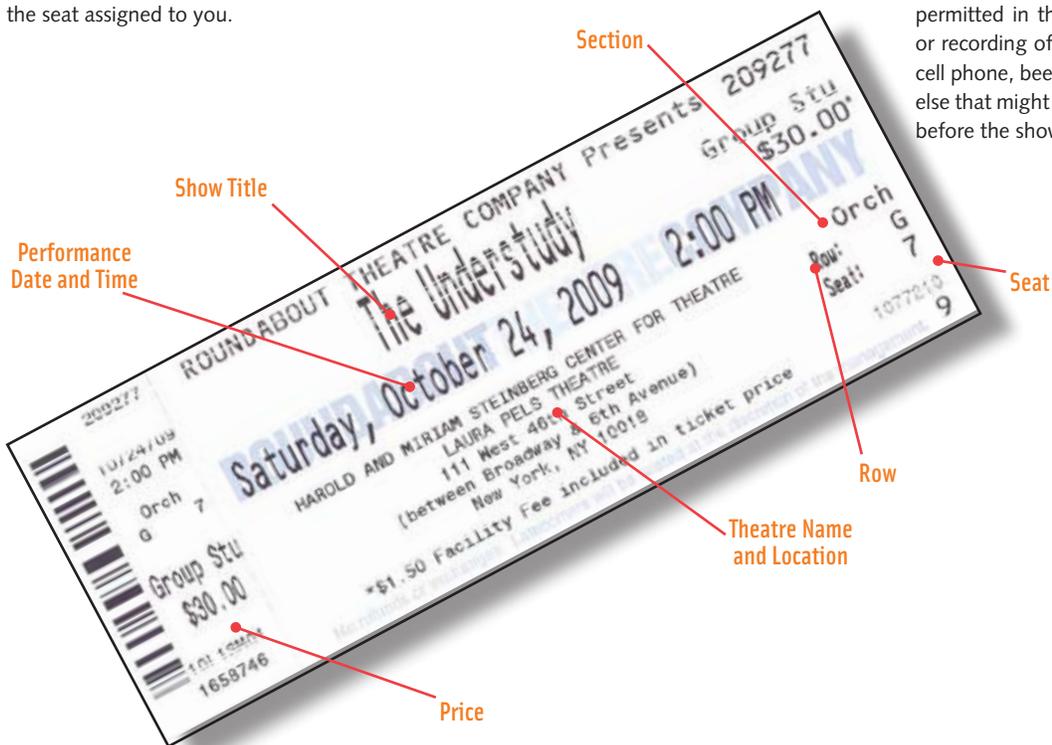
As a student participant in Producing Partners, Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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