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Gordon Goodman and Other Good People Bring Back *Barrymore*

by Steven Sabel | November 13, 2013



Gordon Goodman in "Barrymore." Photo by Steve Anderson.

[John Barrymore](#) was a superstar of the American stage, and he became even more famous as he appeared in more than 60 films during his illustrious career. Now actor [Gordon Goodman](#) tackles the challenge of bringing this iconic figure to life in [Good People Theater Company's](#) production of *Barrymore* at the Greenway Court Theatre.

Written by [William Luce](#), the play first opened at the [Stratford Festival of Canada](#) in 1996. A successful run on Broadway in 1997 featured [Christopher Plummer](#) in the title role, and earned him a Tony Award for best performance by a leading actor in a play. A subsequent multi-city national tour stopped at the Ahmanson Theatre for performances in September 1998.

"I saw Chris Plummer in the role, and I fell in love with the piece," says Goodman.

Director [Janet Miller](#) had a similar response when she saw the Plummer performance. She purchased a copy of the script and placed it on her shelf, where it remained on her bucket list of projects.

"I loved the piece at first sight," Miller says.



Gordon Goodman and Janet Miller

Miller is the founding artistic director of Good People Theater Company. The company's debut production of the musical *A Man Of No Importance* experienced a successful run last June. When it was time to select a follow-up production, Miller went to her shelf. Selecting the piece was one element. Selecting the actor for the piece was another thing entirely, she says.

"It was really important that it be an actor I know," says Miller. "I had to think about who the actor is for this, and then it hit me — there could be no one else but Gordon for this role."

Goodman and Miller have known each other for "20 some odd years," Goodman says.

"It's the odd years that are important," says Miller.

Researching an icon

Miller serves as her own dramaturge for her productions. She and Goodman conducted "tons of research," she says.

The most prominent member of the "first family of the American stage," John Barrymore was born into the "family business" of acting as the son of actor Maurice Barrymore. A would-be illustrator and hopeful reporter, John Barrymore was a reluctant actor who tried to escape the world of the stage and family influences. He once described his eventual choice to begin acting as "the easiest place to earn a decent living."

His ambivalent relationship with his craft is one of the essential keys to the story of the play.

"He came at a time when the industrial revolution made multi-millionaires who invested in things such as theaters," says Goodman. The sudden creation of larger stages with larger houses "gave the actors space and safety, and a place to truly transcend the audience and go into the world of the character," he says.

Barrymore took the opportunity to its greatest heights, and changed the craft of acting, Goodman says. "He was a great impetus in changing the style of theater."



Gordon Goodman

Laurence Olivier, describing Barrymore's performance on the stage, was once quoted as saying: "Everything about him was exciting."

Goodman set out to find and view Barrymore's films and the few recorded interviews to study the man, discovering that "he had amazing eyes. You see that mostly when you see *Svengali*."

"He has this bad hair, and bad beard, and he's still mesmerizing," Miller agrees.

In building the physical character for the stage, Goodman says he seeks to capture the "spirit of the man."

"It's not an imitation," says Miller. "It's interpretation, not impersonation."

Still, taking on a role depicting an actual icon presents particular challenges, Goodman admits. "It puts more responsibility on you to create somebody who is living. No human is two-dimensional."

"The fragility of Barrymore is also a challenge," says Goodman. "Yet he has these bursts of energy of a younger man. You can't get caught up in either one." Performing the role is about "finding the balance between the character's vulnerability and vitality."

The family curse

Some of the research conducted by actor and director included reading *Good Night, Sweet Prince: The Life and Times of John Barrymore*, by Gene Fowler, says Goodman. A major source for Luce's play, Fowler's book depicts a Barrymore who reluctantly benefited from the family business, while suffering from the family curse of alcoholism.

"It hounded him all his life that he turned out to be exactly what his father was, and it's exactly what he set out not to do," says Miller. "In his heart of hearts, he knows that he's never really going to transcend that."

Despite his reluctance to follow in his father's footsteps as an actor and a heavy drinker, Barrymore excelled in both endeavors. Luce's play touches heavily on this theme beneath Barrymore's histrionic stories and brash bravado.

"There are these brief little moments where you see the crack in the facade or the sadness of the character. Those are the moments we're looking for, between all of the hoopla that Barrymore uses to cover them up," says Miller. "All of the small little details are going to add up to something."

For Goodman, it's about capturing Barrymore's many levels, he says. "The only thrill that I get from acting is making a character three-dimensional — to make him come alive with as many perspectives and facets as possible."



Gordon Goodman

"The goal is for the audience to love him in spite of him," he says. "What he's hiding is his sadness. His mistakes he doesn't hide."

"It's important to understand the pathos of the story," says Miller.

One-man play

Though Luce's script includes a "stage manager" character, *Barrymore* is essentially a one-man play. Goodman is called upon to maintain the character on the stage throughout two full acts. Maintaining energy levels can be difficult during

the rehearsal process, he says.

Miller agrees, and she notes that both actor and director can have "those days" of struggling, especially when it's just the two of them working. "I'm really excessive [taking notes] all the time, even when I have a cast of 15, but I'm just staring at him every second, so there's lots to discuss."

Goodman says at times he could hear Miller "furiously writing" during rehearsals. It's an actor's nature to wonder what's being written when you're the only actor on the stage, he says. "I always felt overly responsible to my performance."

Ultimately, "as you go on, you get in a rhythm," Miller offers.

"You do your job, and you trust the other person to do their job, because you know each other," says Goodman.

The time crunch of a short rehearsal schedule also adds to the challenge, he says. "The thing we're not given in this town [Los Angeles] a lot of times, is 6 to 12 weeks of rehearsal. In this town we don't feel that comfort that comes from a longer rehearsal process. There's so much pressure to get the show up in a hurry."

Unsung hero

The unsung hero of the production is the second character, says Miller.



Gordon Goodman

In the original version of Luce's play, Barrymore's "stage manager," Frank, appeared on stage with the title character to serve as a type of foil to the lead. Plummer asked that the character be converted to an unseen voice from the darkness that Barrymore never actually sees.

"That second actor is a crucial part of this 'one-man' show," says Miller, adding that actor [Matt Franta](#) has "stepped up to fulfill the role" in many ways, also helping out behind the scenes.

Unlike most monodramas, Luce's script provides the audience with some insight into an actual relationship between the title character and another character.

"Barrymore's on a tightrope. At the other end of the rope is this 'prompter.' You've got this other element to it," says Goodman.

This element is also extremely important in demonstrating Barrymore's relationship with his craft, says Miller. Various moments in the script call for the character to perform pieces of Shakespeare as he

prepares for a fictional revival of *Richard III*.

"He can do it for us. He can do it for Frank. He can do it all for others, but he can't do it for himself," Miller says.

She attempts to further illustrate that theme through the staging of the play and Goodman's use of the space around him. The reluctant star shies away from center stage when he is vulnerable, she notes. "It's important for the audience to take away from it that yes, he's likable, but he's also 'waylaid by regret,'" she adds, quoting from the script.

"I saw I could have it all. And then I let it pass me by," adds Goodman in character.

Barrymore, Greenway Court Theatre, 544 N. Fairfax Ave., LA 90036. Fri 8 pm, Sat 2 pm and 8 pm, Sun 7 pm. Through Dec. 1. Tickets: \$25. <http://goodpeopletheaterco.org/>. 323-655-7679, ext. 100.

****All Barrymore production photos by Steve Anderson.**