

# The one and only

Devoting each season to a single writer, little Signature Theatre wields big clout.

By **ROB KENDT**  
Special to The Times

**P**LAYWRIGHTS who dedicate themselves to working in the American theater can look forward to lives of lonely scribbling, mystified condescension and relative penury — and those are the successful ones. For real money, even the best-known dramatists typically rely on grants, teaching gigs or scripts for TV and film; for recognition, the tops in the field can aspire to a Tony, a Pulitzer, a published collection, the occasional rave from fickle critics.

As their careers lengthen, they can expect our culture's congenital amnesia to enshroud them, either in the mantle of the one play that made their name or in the outer realms of utter obscurity.

And then James Houghton might give them a call.

"I think every single playwright in this city, maybe the country, is wondering when and if it's gonna happen," said Tony Kushner of the fateful moment when Houghton, the founding artistic director of New York's Signature Theatre, approached him about doing a season of his work to cap the company's 20th anniversary in 2010-11. Kushner, duly flattered, said yes — a commitment that will require of him a brand-new play and possibly a revival of his seminal two-part "Angels in America."

Why would Kushner, arguably America's preeminent living writer for the stage (and lately a busy screenwriter), give up a year to work at a modest, 160-seat off-Broadway house where every seat sells for \$20?

The answer begins with a simple idea, hatched by Houghton in 1991: Why not turn over a theater to a living American playwright for an entire season? It's a gamble that has gathered remarkable steam: In its 16 years, the Signature has worked with its share of household names (Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Sam Shepard, August Wilson). It has taken a fresh look at successful playwrights whose bodies of work aren't widely known or revived: Horton Foote, John Guare, Lanford Wilson, Romulus Linney, Lee Blessing. And it's kept one foot outside the theatrical mainstream with seasons dedicated to Adrienne Kennedy, Paula Vogel, Maria Irene Fornes and Bill Irwin.

The Signature, once a seat-of-the-pants experiment whose first season cost \$35,000, may have since grown into an establishment arts organization with a \$3-million annual budget and lavish corporate sponsorship, but the programming remains as eclectic as ever. The Kushner season is the most commercial of the company's next four: This week, a season of three new plays

by the mercurial Charles Mee kicks off with a production of "Iphigenia 2.0"; next year, the Signature will revive three plays from the 1970s heyday of New York's now-extinct Negro Ensemble Company; and Suzan-Lori Parks ("Topdog/Underdog") is in the house in 2009-10.

It's a commitment that has "filled a niche we didn't know existed," said Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater, where the Signature staged some early seasons before it found a home on West 42nd Street. "Signature consistently allows us to view living playwrights as part of a historical continuum of their own work and hence of the American theater."

Houghton, for his part, is quick to dispel the notion that the Signature's main mission is retrospective.

"We're not a museum," said Houghton, a compact man who still looks a bit like the young actor he once was, with swept-back salt-and-pepper hair and a determinedly upbeat air. "While we may do a play that's a revival, we're doing it because it's about moving that play forward. In some ways, the revivals might be the misfits of a writer's body of work — plays that for whatever reason didn't have a fair shot the first time out."

Indeed, the Signature doesn't have the resources to survey a writer's entire oeuvre, as the Kennedy Center will do next spring by producing all 10 of August Wilson's plays (albeit in staged-reading form). Instead, its seasons are carefully curated, along with the playwright, not to dissect entire bodies of work but to take significant tissue samples. If there's an appropriate comparison from another medium, Houghton prefers the gallery to the museum.

"In the art world, you often get to go and look at a body of work in a gallery," said Houghton from an office with a

Hudson River view and walls filled with a striking collection of original photographs by the likes of Mike Kelley, Cindy Sherman and Anna Gaskell. "Having passed through that, both the artist and the public at large learn something."

For Guare, whose season in 1998-99 included revivals of "Marco Polo Sings a Solo" and "Bosoms and Neglect" alongside a premiere, "Lake Hollywood," the view was as jarring as it was eye-opening. "You get thrown back in time to who you were when you were writing that play," said Guare, whose "Landscape of the Body" was revived at the Signature in a special engagement last year. "It's very troubling, as a matter of fact. You're living in that world for a few months, and it can become more real than the present you're living in."

The upside, though, is that "you're still writing. All the Signature writers are still in the middle of producing, are still in a career. What it shows to young writers is that it is possible to have a life in the theater — that the life of a writer can nourish and sustain you."

## All about Mee

**C**HUCK MEE — as he's known everywhere except on the Playbill — is a special case by any standard. A former popular historian and political activist, Mee began playwrighting in earnest at the ripe age of 48 and since the late 1980s has built a reputation in theater circles as a nervy postmodern collagist as likely to adapt forbidding Greek dramas as to sample popular culture with the gleeful abandon of a hip-hop record producer.

As well-known for productions by edgy young theater companies as for his associations with regional theaters

— his "The Berlin Circle" premiere at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre but bowed in L.A. at the Evidence Room — Mee has had only a handful of major New York productions, some with Anne Bogart's vaunted SITI Company. When approached to do a season, Mee didn't even consider looking back.

"Whether you want to or not, a season at the Signature puts you in a position where you're thinking about your life's work and 'Where do I go from here?'" Mee said. "For me, it's a fresh start. That's more fun for me than to go back."

After "Iphigenia 2.0" — Mee's "entirely faithless adaptation" of Euripides, which features Kate Mulgrew, Rocco Sisto and Tom Nelis and is directed by longtime collaborator Tina Landau — the Signature will mount Mee's new musical "Queens Boulevard" and the canny collage "Paradise Park." Other New York theaters may finally be catching Mee fever: In October, the SITI Company will stage Mee's "Hotel Cassiopeia" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Eustis said the Public would mount his "Cardenio" the season after next.

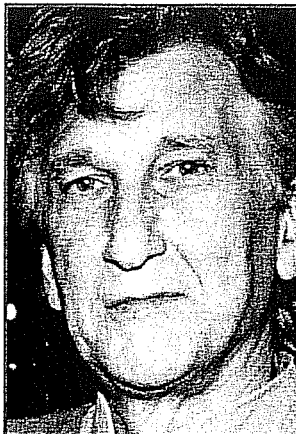
This cluster effect may not be coincidental. "What always happens is that when we do a season of somebody, suddenly their plays are popping up everywhere," Houghton says.

Last year's Wilson season, which had initially been planned to feature all new works while the playwright was still alive, became the theater's first posthumous retrospective. It didn't win new adherents so much as revive works that had been undervalued.

"The August Wilson season was probably the best of the nonprofit seasons in the city this past year," said Charles Isherwood, a theater critic at the New York Times. "King Hedley II,"



**PAUL HAWTHORNE** Associated Press  
20TH SEASON: Tony Kushner will make time for Signature in 2010-11.



**BRAD BARETT** Getty Images  
UP NEXT: The theater is producing three new Charles Mee plays.



**RICHARD HARZOG** Los Angeles Times  
COMING SOON: 'Suzan-Lori Parks holds the spotlight in 2009-10.

best productions are the dead playwrights; maybe it's because they're not there to put their inhibiting fist down on top of things."

Every playwright works differently, of course, and Houghton said the Signature was accordingly "chameleon-like" in its structure to support that diversity.

"Over the years, the company morphs and shapes itself to the needs of the individual artist," he said. "It changes dramatically year to year."

For the physical theater of Irwin, pieces were created and honed on their feet. Most playwrights have required a more traditional rehearsal process but varied in their degrees of involvement: Foote attended every rehearsal and performance, whereas Kennedy mostly stayed away. Albee entered rehearsals "in a very deliberate way," after the cast and director had a handle on his play.

### Better angels

**I**F the involvement of Signature playwrights ranges as widely as the work, so does the significance of their respective seasons — not only what their plays say, but what a group of their plays says together and what they say in the context of the growing roster of "Signature writers," as Houghton has savvily branded them (Albee's "Occupant" will go up at the Signature next spring as part of the theater's "Legacy" series).

"In some cases, I'm trying to shoot down the status of somebody by getting them down to earth, so that people begin to see somebody who might be considered an icon within the field on human terms," Houghton said. "In some cases, I'm trying to take someone who I think is completely underappreciated and shine a bright light on them."

Kushner said he was not sure where he fit in that continuum but admitted that in his case, since he was "not as prolific" as some of his peers, he was content to revisit what might be called his signature works.

"There's a tendency to want to say to people, 'Well, I have written other things,'" he said, still mulling over the prospect of bringing "Angels" back on an intimate scale. "I don't think that's the point of the season for me."

The point, he said, is in the bigger picture of what Signature represents.

"It takes contemporary American playwrights seriously and treats their body of work as something that is worthy of and might benefit from extensive, concentrated consideration," Kushner said.

Even well into its second decade, it's still a fresh, even radical idea.

"To say that contemporary playwrights are producing work that can stand up to that kind of scrutiny, and produce something of value for audiences and critics — that's new."

for instance, was given a much better production than it had on Broadway. It seems that without the commercial imperative of Broadway, you can really make choices that are in the service of the play."

That may be so. At the first rehearsal of "Iphigenia 2.0," Houghton began with a brief pep talk on the theater's mission.

"We involve the writer in every step of the process, to the point of exhaustion," Houghton told the assembled cast and crew. "We try to put the story at the middle of the event. To me that's the core of it — to get away from the hit-or-miss ethic and look at the whole body of work."

That can be a liberating proposition.

"Sometimes in the theater you're only as good as your last play, and there's no connection with the play you did before that," said Guare. "Jim gives you the thing that most theaters don't give you,

which is trust. He trusts in the writer rather than in the text."

In Mee's case, the text functions as "a blueprint, a beginning," said director Landau. "I'm the only playwright I know who says, 'Here's the play, see you on opening,'" Mee said. "I stay away on purpose, so I'm not inhibiting the actors — so they're as free to do what they do as I am to do what I do. It occurred to me years ago that when I went to the theater, the playwrights who get the best productions are the dead playwrights; maybe it's because they're not there to put their inhibiting fist down on top of things."



JENNIFER S. ALTMAN For The Times

**WRITERS' MAN:**  
*James Houghton came  
up with the idea of  
turning the theater  
over to the  
playwrights.*