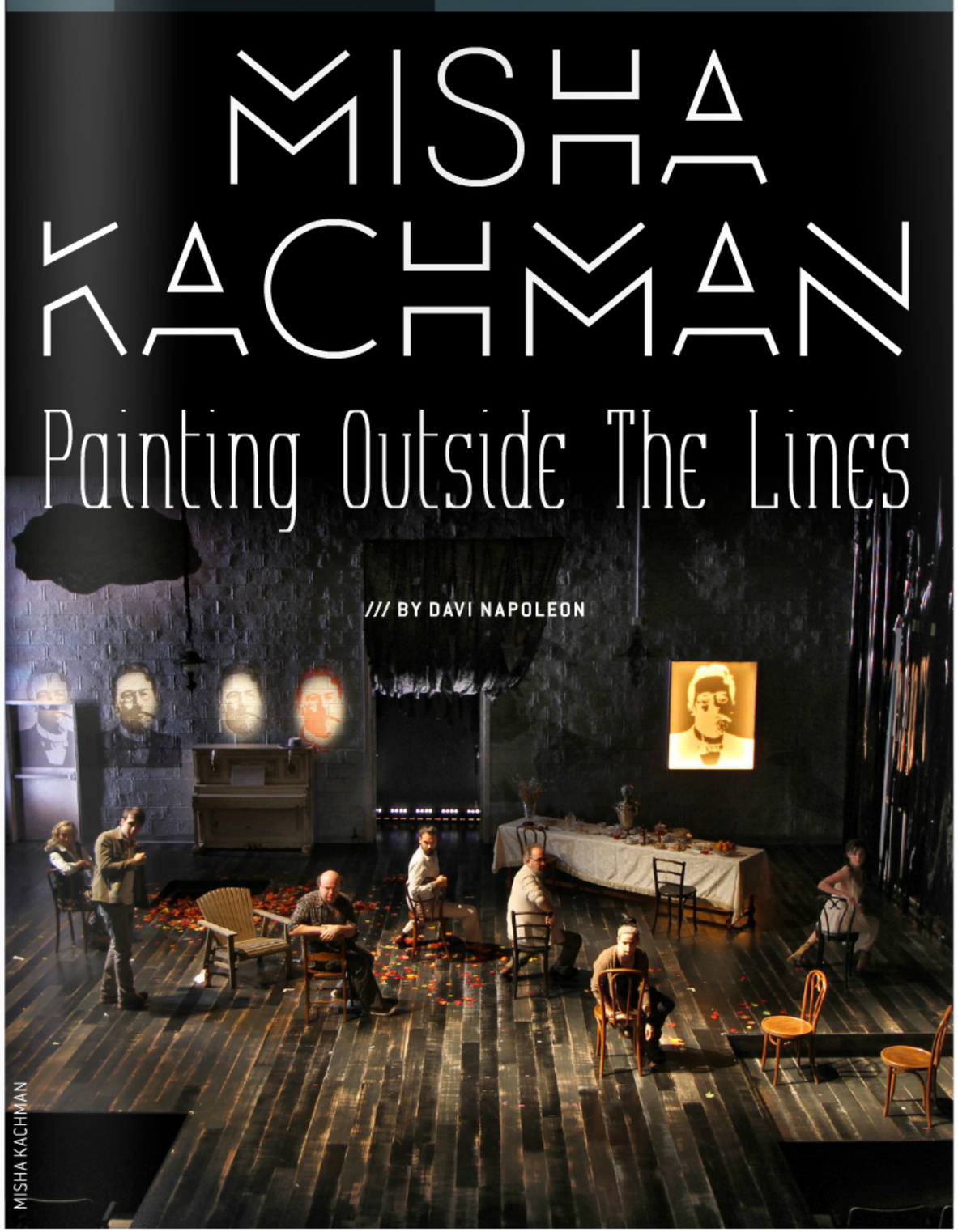
MISHA KACHMAN

Painting Outside The Lines

/// BY DAVI NAPOLEON



When Misha Kachman met with director KJ Sanchez for initial talks about the set and costumes he would design for her production of *Venus In Fur* at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, he carried something surprising with him. "Misha said very sheepishly, 'I'm not married to this, but I brought a model,'" she recalls. "It was a perfectly executed full design, but I wasn't prepared to look at it and say, 'Yeah, that's perfect.'"

She suggested they think about other ideas, and he drew a few. It wasn't long before she realized the model Kachman had brought to that first meeting was just what the play needed. "He has such a knack for understanding how to build a landscape to play on," says Sanchez. "I've never worked with a designer who is so thoroughly prepared before we have our first conversation."

That's not an unusual experience for directors who work with Kachman. "He's always underselling it, but his first idea is ultimately the foundation of the design," says Howard Shalwitz, artistic director of the Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in DC, which Kachman calls his artistic home.

A model at an early meeting is the least of it. Kachman has been known to imagine designs before plays are finished. He helped give shape to Aaron Posner's *Stupid F*king Bird*, an original take on *The Seagull* that is, in part, a send up of Chekhovian design clichés. "Misha is the kind of designer who can make or break a production. *Stupid F*king Bird* had lots of challenges and puzzles in it, especially when we were first working on it, and Misha's design gave the whole thing both a physical and dramaturgical shape. He's the kind of artist who can bring big, powerful ideas to the table," says Shalwitz, who directed the world premiere at the Woolly.

RUSSIAN ROOTS

Misha Kachman grew up in St. Petersburg and studied at the St. Petersburg State Theatre Arts Academy before moving to the United States in 1999 when he was 28. But he doesn't think of himself as a Russian designer. "I'm an American designer of Russian origin," he says. Still, he acknowledges he came to design differently than American designers.

Most people who train in the United States, including the graduate students he teaches at the University of Maryland, come from the world of theatre, not fine art. Like many from his country, Kachman developed as a studio artist before discovering theatre. When he was seven or eight, his parents decided his talents warranted special training, and he began his studies. "If you want to become a professional ballet dancer or tennis player, you won't make it unless you start early," he notes, explaining that the same is true for painting.

"I was very interested in graphic arts and illustration in my teens," he recalls. History interested him, too, and he dreamed of illustrating history books. As he was finishing high school at a special school for the arts that offered the usual academic studies plus 20 hours of painting and drawing each week, family friends turned him in a different direction. "They were art directors for film and television," he says of his early mentors. "They convinced me that I shouldn't go to an academy of fine arts to become a studio artist but consider applying to the theatre academy."

Kachman continues to do studio work; he's had solo shows in Russia, France, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US, and his skills serve him well in the theatre. Shalwitz says Kachman can "sit down and draw you a sketch backward."

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Kachman came prepared with a set model to the initial meeting with Sanchez for *Venus In Fur*.

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Kachman stayed on for post-graduate study at the theatre academy, then took a day job as a staff museum designer at the State Hermitage Museum while he designed shows in Russia. That wasn't easy. "The 1990s in St. Petersburg and most of Russia were hard for arts in general and theatre in particular. There was not a lot going on, especially compared to Russia in the 2000s," he recalls.

Soon, he was on his way to the United States with his wife, Ksenya, an educator and puppet artist, and their daughter, then five-and-a-half. Their second daughter was born after they settled in Washington, DC.

When Kachman visits Russia now, artists he likes sometimes suggest doing a play together. Kachman declines, even when the project is interesting. "We're talking in February, and the show goes up in May. I'm very American in this regard," says the designer, who has started thinking about productions he's slated to do in 2017.

Kachman helped give physical and dramaturgical shape to *Stupid F*king Bird.*

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*Stupid F*king Bird*

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company production of *Stupid F*king Bird* presented by Syracuse Stage

Check out an earlier story on *Stupid F*king Bird*

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THE DESIGNER AS CO-DIRECTOR AND DRAMATURG

In his first conversations with directors, Kachman wants to know why they are doing this play at this time. He says he learned this from his daughters. "You know how you criticize your child for something you see in the rear-view mirror, and she asks, 'Why is this important?' and you better have a compelling answer. You can't bullshit your child, or she will tune out."

Sometimes the answer is elaborate and philosophical, sometimes whimsical. "You have to have something to latch onto. You can't be condescending toward the material whether you're doing Neil Simon or *Xanadu* or Shakespeare. You can't wink at the audience. You have to commit to the silliness, the kitsch. If you have an idea, you have to run with it. You can only stop when you've reached the logical limits of that idea," says Kachman.

Director Yury Urnov, also from Russia, says Kachman becomes a co-director when they work together, something Urnov believes comes out of the Eastern European culture. "He's not an executor of the director's will. He is somebody who together with the director is creating the production, the time, space, and environment for the characters," says Urnov. "We start with what kind of world we want to build and about what kind of creatures inhabit this world. The actual stage design is the last step in this dialogue."

Our Class

MISHA KACHMAN

Marie Antoinette at Woolly Mammoth Theatre

Marie Antoinette

MISHA KACHMAN

For the 2014 Woolly production of David Adjmi's *Marie Antoinette*, for instance, revolution happens over time. "Marie's world is changing from the first to last scene a lot. How do we move her from her early happy days to later? Do we begin in a big, bright set and finish in a small prison? At one point, Misha said it has to be exactly the opposite," Urnov recalls. "Everything is flat and narrow and shifts to the open space of tragedy." Jennifer Schriever, who designed lights for *Marie Antoinette*, says that Kachman is a really good dramaturg, too, "able to boil down the play to its essence." Whenever she works with him, "I know it's going to be something exciting and unique and outside of what I would expect and always right for the storytelling."

Schriever says the Woolly production expressed who Marie is, "like a Kardashian, beloved for being famous, not for helping anybody or for a skill. Misha translated that into the set [which] could have been a fashion runway, with ultra-green grass. All of the masking was hot pink. Marie hung out in a hot tub. As Marie falls, the set dissolves. That physical transformation is essential to telling the story."

Kachman faced the challenge of hiding the guillotine in the early scenes. "The theatre has no wing space and very little fly space," he says, so he hid it full view. "The audience doesn't know they were staring at the blade all along."

Marie Antoinette

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On another occasion, he hid a wrestling ring above the thrust. Shalwitz recalls that when doing *The Elaborate Entrance Of Chad Deity*, about the professional wrestling world, director John Vreeke and Kachman wanted to hide the ring until the second act. There is not much height over the thrust at Woolly, but that didn't stop Kachman from disguising the ring above it. "The reveal at the top of the second act was a dazzling five-minute show-stopping event as they brought the ring in," says Shalwitz.

Kachman designed *Gruesome Playground Injuries* for Vreeke at Woolly in 2010. The two-hander, with eight or nine scenes in the life of a couple, moves back and forth in time and takes place in many locations. "Misha and John were trying to find a container to give the whole thing shape and were inclined to do it in the round. They finally set the whole thing in the location of the final scene, a hockey ring. [They organized the play] that jumped around in space and time around one scene. Throughout the show, various furniture came out, but when everything was cleared away for the final scene, you understood the space you'd been in all along. It was an insightful, dramaturgical idea that didn't come from the script, but gave it greater impact," says Shalwitz.

"It's a dialogue from beginning to end," says director Derek Goldman. "His role isn't merely 'set designer' but total collaborator. I share with him all the questions about the script, casting, and other design elements."

The Originalist

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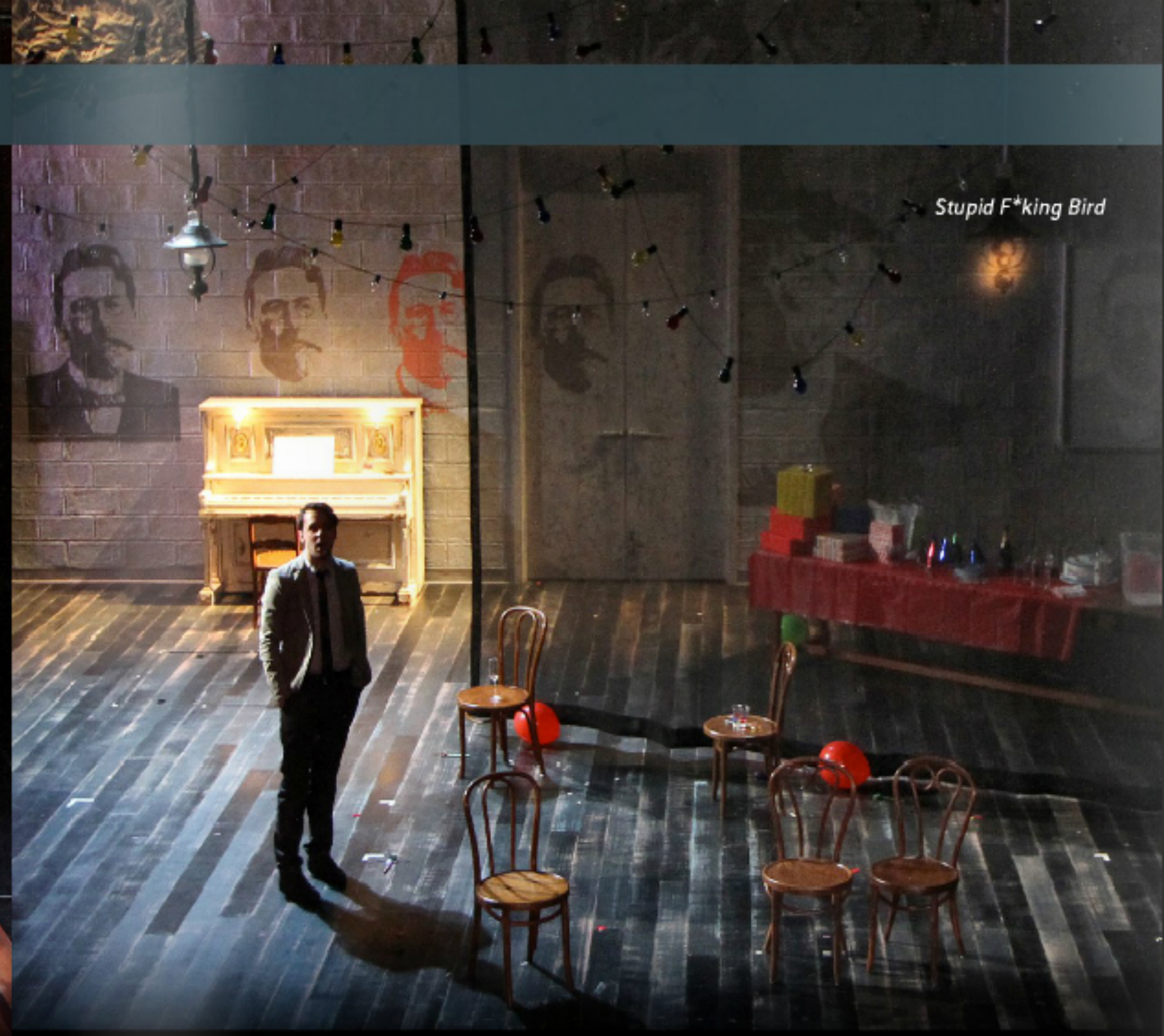
Kachman designed a very simple set—a curtain and a deck—for *The Originalist*.



*Stupid F*king Bird*

Goldman says this approach, natural for Kachman, is rare among American designers "because of the pragmatics of how the industry works. You might only get a couple of meetings with the full production team so it gets carved up into boilerplate roles. Misha as an artist defies those easy categories."

Lighting designer Colin K. Bills, who often designs lights at the Woolly, finds Kachman "incredibly diplomatic, but he has never lied to somebody or been a 'yes' man. He lets collaborators know he really likes something, and when he doesn't, he doesn't beat around the bush."

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Goldman concurs. "I can always count on Misha for a true opinion, with no couching or apology, whether it's about scenery or something else we are struggling with as a team," says Goldman. "If he doesn't know, he'll just say that."

LET THEM EAT SCENERY

Misha Kachman hates scenery. When he says something feels like scenery, that means he finds it superfluous—decoration instead of design. "That is something I absolutely don't do," says the designer who always asks: "Do you really need this?"

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"He gets to the essential core of a piece," says Goldman. "He has little interest in things that are only there because someone said they're supposed to be there." Shalwitz says Kachman can create a literal location when required. "I've seen him do that and very well, but it's not his go-to place."

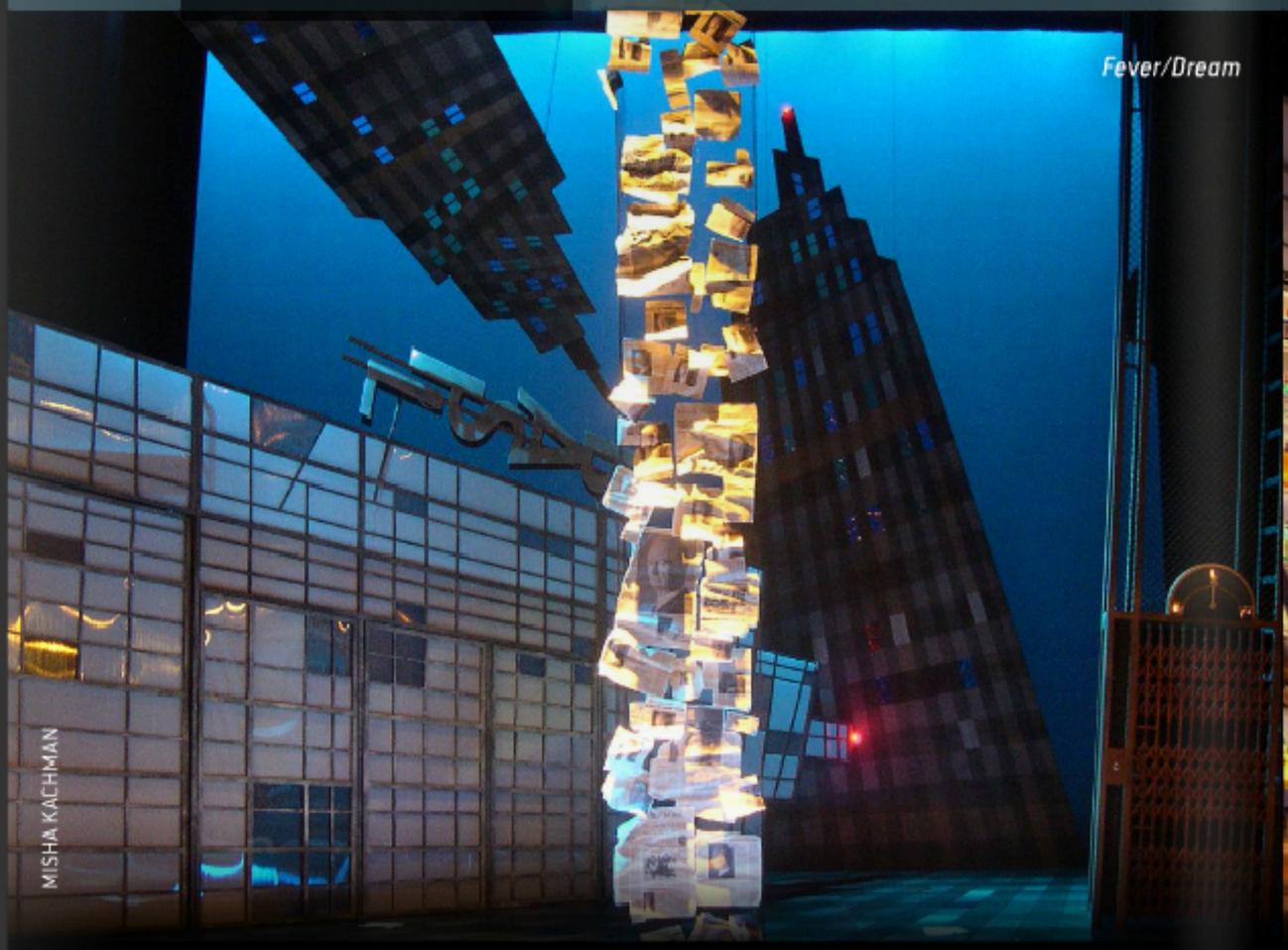
Yet, Kachman doesn't think of himself as a minimalist. "Sometimes you need to fill the entire stage from side to side so it bursts at the seams," he says. "You can't stop halfway." In fact, Kachman says he is not an anything. He doesn't have an aesthetic; he doesn't want to be boxed in by a preference but to draw from a large toolbox as needed. He prefers designers who are unpredictable to one who might have a penchant for portals, another for boxes, a third for wooden planking. "I feel very strongly you have to be able to apply any tools that are out there to tell the story," he says.

"Our art requires absolute complete freedom and fluency and in choosing any visual language that applies," Kachman adds, recalling Ivo van Hove's Lincoln Center production of *A View From The Bridge*. "What he does is take a classic kitchen sink play, and he strips everything off it and makes it relevant and compelling. There is not a single front light until the curtain call. It's not a gimmick, not a shtick. The director, who is also a designer, chose the right tools to tell the story."

"I'm not saying hide behind the text," adds Kachman, who also eschews designs that tell the audience what to think about a play. "You look at the set, and you know what the play is about, not just where it takes place or what the mood is." Instead, he wants audiences to experience the beauty of unpredictability, something he achieves by playing with expectations. "The audience thinks they know what they are looking at but don't [really] know."

Goldman says working with Kachman involves a process of finding a core idea and cutting away, even in some cases cutting things the playwright seems to call for and most people have in a production. A simple, spare world is arrived at with great care. "He gets to less by considering more."

A wall is a metaphor in *Falling Out Of Time*, a production Goldman adapted and directed at Theatre J, a theatre housed in a small auditorium in a Jewish Community Center in DC. "We considered and tried on for size all kinds of ways of approaching the story scenically, at one point looking at having a huge wall." Because they wanted to create a communal event, they emptied rows of the audience so actors could move between spectators, an idea they wouldn't have reached if they hadn't come up against a wall first. For the Center Stage production of *Stones In His Pocket*, which takes place on a movie set in rural Ireland, "we went through



Fever/Dream

Fever/Dream

ideas of cameras and trucks and porta-potties to reach a set that highlights the imposition of a film crew on natural beauty without featuring any of these as primary elements."

Kachman designed *The Originalist*, a one-man show about Antonin Scalia, at the Arena Stage's small second stage. The set was simple—a curtain and a deck—"but it turned out to be a very important project for me. What made it remarkable was how the design worked with the [idiosyncratic and interesting] space."

Fever/Dream, a modern adaptation of Calderón's *Life Is A Dream*, was his first show at Woolly, his introduction to the 248-seat theatre. "It was the first show where I had the resources to do exactly what I wanted to do." Instead of setting the action in a dungeon, playwright Sheila Callaghan set it in the basement of a skyscraper, where government service calls are answered. "This was an exercise in playing with scale and perspective," he recalls, noting that people thought the set was huge, even though it wasn't.

Bills says Kachman put the audience right on top of the violence in *Oedipus El Ray*, which is set in Los Angeles. "It gets into prison culture and racism and life in the barrio. Sometimes a set has to be ugly because the world of the play is ugly," Bills says. "Misha is incredibly good at showing something ugly that is also compositionally pleasing. He never puts beauty over what is emotionally resonant."

Kachman says his simple design for Goldman's Theatre J production of *Our Class*, a three-hour holocaust epic set in a shtetl in Poland in 1941, is one of his favorites. The first four-fifths of the play are direct-address, a compelling narration of a massacre after the Germans invaded, but it wasn't the Germans who murdered, burning some people alive, throwing others down wells. It was local Catholics who exterminated their Jewish neighbors. For this, Kachman created a deck made of boards, weathered siding of different colors,

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with touches of cobblestone between them. "Jews were made to clean the cobblestone with toothbrushes before being killed," he explains. "I'm absolutely convinced that I nailed it."

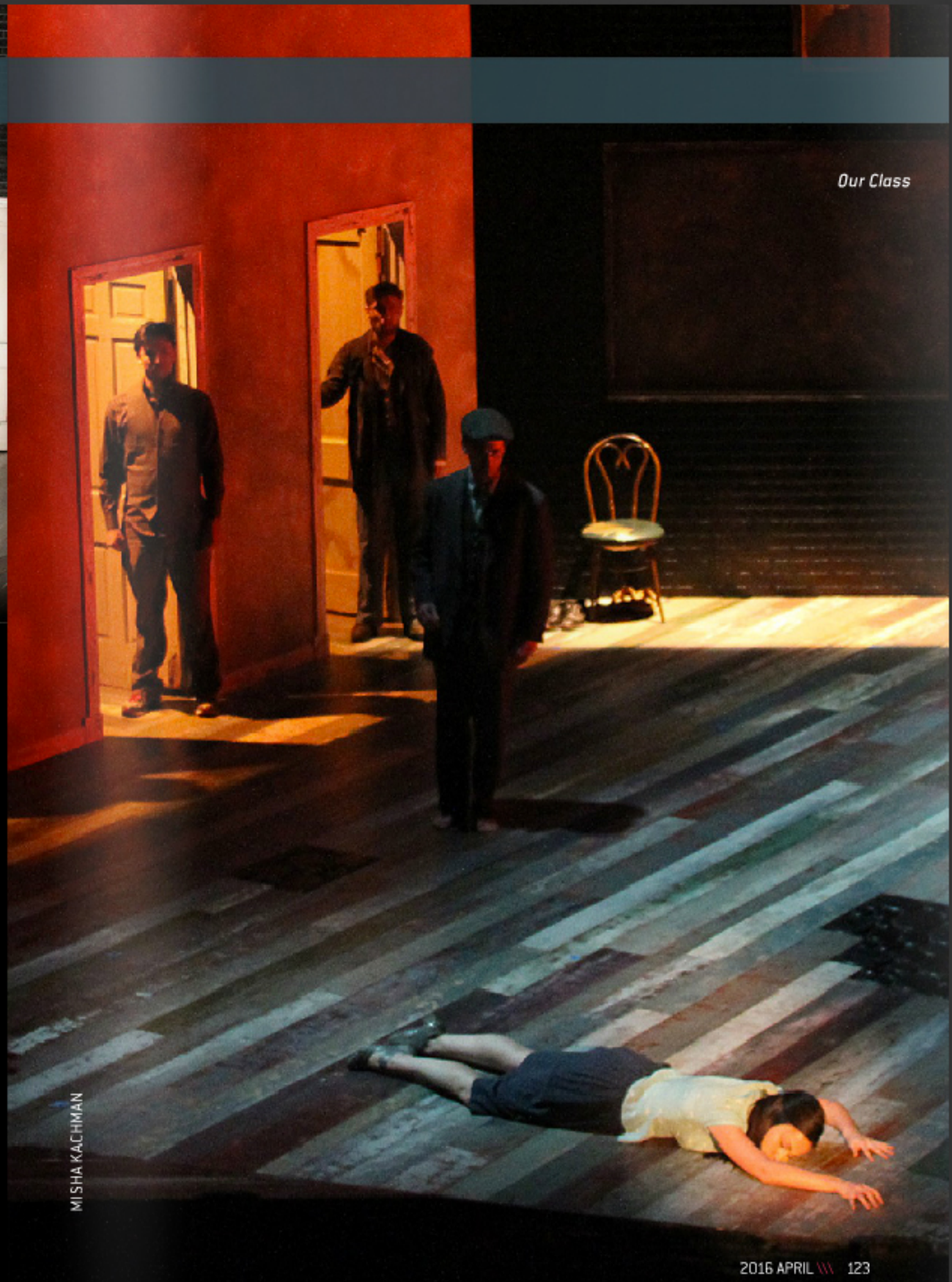
Shalwitz says Kachman looks at the event of the play and the relationship between the audience and actors and has reconfigured the Woolly space for different designs. He's had audiences walk into the space from different doors—once from backstage—whatever supports the theatrical event. He is driven, says Shalwitz by "a guiding idea," something he attributes in part to his background in Russian theatre.

SERIOUS, WITH A SENSE OF HUMOR

"Misha is a serious artist who doesn't take himself seriously," says Goldman, explaining that the designer "takes what we do really seriously but also with a healthy impatience for pretentiousness and compromise and short cuts. We're so accustomed to certain degrees of compromise, we don't even notice it, but Misha always reminds me of the power of working where the art comes first. Nothing is precious. He doesn't cling to an idea that isn't serving anybody."

Bills concurs, "Misha has pushed against the traditional American processes in theatre and approaches a design with humor and without reverence."

Adds Goldman, "We laugh a lot, even though we work on plays that engage the darker parts of life."



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