

FROM THE
FOUNDATION DIRECTOR

Here at the Foundation we are fond of saying that we offer opportunities and insights into a field where the career path is not well lit—and, given the nature of directing and choreographing, is often isolating.

One of the best ways we have found to demystify the career path is through our signature Observership program. In this issue, I've invited 2016–17 Observer Class member Ann Noling to share her reflections on her Observership with director and mentor **Daniel Sullivan** on the production of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* on Broadway. In the article, we get an insider's view of an early-career director honing her skills, articulating her personal vision, and testing her artistic ideas under the tutelage of a master director in his element—the rehearsal hall. It is not only a great read for those of you who might wonder how this whole Observership thing works, but also a powerful testament to the “journeyman” nature of our field, and the important impact of mentors.

In “From the Archives,” we revisit a 1962 lecture by Sir Tyrone Guthrie at New York City's West Side YMCA titled, “The Job of the Director: To Chair the Proceedings,” reprinted from the Winter 1991 issue of *The Journal*. Guthrie is famous, of course, for launching the Stratford Festival of Canada and founding the Guthrie Theater on this side of the globe. The colloquialisms have changed, as have many of the differences between British and American theatre that Guthrie describes (even as the terms “director,” “producer,” and “manager” have persisted in their power to confuse), but many of the artistic challenges facing directors then, they also face now: engaging with playwrights, analyzing scripts, collaborating with actors and designers, setting the tone and making the perfect environment in the rehearsal hall conducive to the creative process—and yes, even (re-)interpreting Shakespeare in the face of heavy criticism. There are some gems of wisdom in this “mini-masterclass” from one of the giants of the 20th-century American theatre movement.

David Roberts
Foundation Director

My Observership with **Dan Sullivan**
on *The Little Foxes*: A Reflection

BY ANN NOLING

“There was an important lesson for me as a young director in Dan's approach and in how people responded to it: always ask for what you want, and when you can't have it, be reasonable and make it work. But always ask, and don't make it any easier for people to say no.”

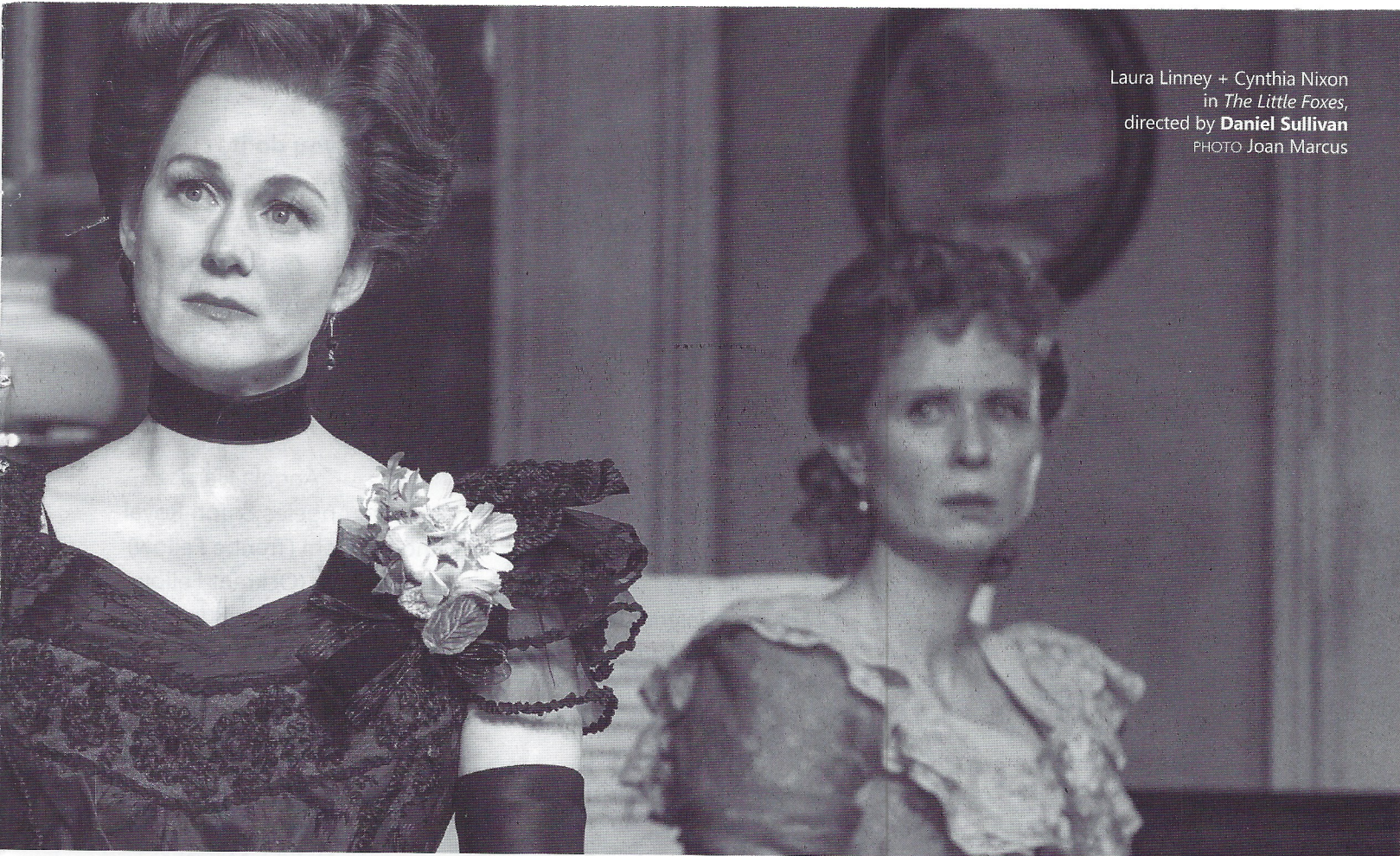
My Observership with **Dan Sullivan** has been a game changer for me in ways I think it may take me months and years to fully understand and articulate. I know without question that this process has made me a much stronger director and assistant. It showed me just how much I still had to learn when I stepped outside my limited experience of working on new plays Off-Broadway. This was the first Broadway show I worked on and the first revival I had worked on in many years. I faced a steep learning curve, and the lessons and confidence I gained from rising to that challenge have been invaluable.

My hope with this Observership was that working with Dan—a director who has a reputation for being an actor's director—on a revival, with the dual casting of Cynthia Nixon and Laura Linney, would allow me to focus on how to work with actors and designers after several years spent focusing on how to work with playwrights on new works. This proved to be completely true.

Dan is an incredible collaborator. He listens to his actors and designers, allows them the room they need to do their craft, but is still firm when he needs to stand up for a particular choice or decision. There was an important lesson for me as a young director in Dan's approach and in how people responded to it: always ask for what you want, and when you can't have it, be reasonable and make it work. But always ask, and don't make it any easier for people to say no.

As I had hoped, the dual casting of Cynthia and Laura as Birdie and Regina gave me a great opportunity to see how Dan approached the same character with two different actors. From the beginning, Dan gave them permission to craft their own individual performances. He didn't make a big deal about it, and he didn't adjust his process too much (at least, not that I could see). We worked through big chunks of the play at a time, which meant that Laura and Cynthia were always there watching while the other was rehearsing. However, Dan allowed them each to do different blocking that made sense to the character choices they were making, and he made it clear that if design and technical aspects of the show had to change to accommodate their different performances, then that is what we would do. By the end, it was an impressive lesson in the collaborative nature of theatre. There was not a single part of the production that was completely the same between the two casts—the lighting, set, props, costumes, blocking, performances of the actors, backstage prep, and audience response all changed to varying degrees between the two casts.

Something I noticed about Dan's approach to actor coaching that has really stuck with me is that he rarely gave general acting notes. Instead, he would give notes about specific lines



that would help get at the larger note—for example, instead of saying, “I think you need to be meaner in this scene,” he would give the note that a specific line needed to have more teeth. I’m still mulling over exactly how or why actors seem to hear Dan’s kind of note differently, but they do. It’s an approach I want to incorporate into my own work and continue exploring.

It was also a great lesson to watch Dan in previews. Because it wasn’t a new play, I could focus on how he fine-tuned the show instead of focusing on rewrites. Dan was not scared of making changes all the way through the preview process. Even in the last rehearsal before we froze the show, we changed the blocking for a significant moment and cut a line and sound cue. I know other directors who would hesitate to make major changes like this on the last day because they wouldn’t have the opportunity to try them out in performance and then adjust them further. Dan did, however, and the show was unquestionably stronger.

I have also learned a great deal about directing revivals, gaining a new understanding of the importance of considering a revival through both the lens of the period in which the playwright wrote the play and also the contemporary lens your audience will bring to it. Before beginning work on this production, I had been thinking about what *The Little Foxes* says about the period in which it is set and what it says about today to a contemporary audience, but I had not been thinking about it in the context of when it was written. Our conversations in the rehearsal room throughout the process helped me understand the importance of considering the perspective from which Lillian Hellman wrote the play in 1939.

As a result of this Observership, I would no longer categorically define myself solely as a new play director. I still have a deep passion and affinity for new play development and love the excitement of finding the play through readings, rehearsals, and rewrites. However, I have always envied my director friends who do devised work because of the opportunity they have to make director-driven work, even though devised work has never appealed to me—script work and textual

analysis are too intrinsic to my approach as a director. This Observership reminded me that with a revival, you still work from a script and start with a playwright, but the director is the primary storyteller of your production—he or she is responsible for finding the narrative through-line that is the driving force for the piece. New work has always appealed to me because the social-political ramifications of my work are very important to me as an artist, and I like the opportunity to tell new stories in new ways. Working on a show like *The Little Foxes* with timely political themes, however, reminded me that there is also a lot of opportunity for socio-political commentary with a well-chosen revival.

Dan talked through ideas and notes with me, listened to my opinions, and trusted me to give notes to the actors when he wasn’t at press performances. This trust and openness not only allowed me to learn more from him and his process but also helped me learn just how much I was capable of. I sincerely hope I am able to work with him again.

In addition to the lessons I learned from watching Dan’s approach, my Observership reminded me how much I can learn from working with seasoned professionals, as long as I am rigorous about searching out new experiences and challenges. It renewed in me a commitment to search out specific new opportunities that address gaps in my training.

I’ve been struggling to put into words how all the little things I learned from working with Dan added up. But I finally realized that this struggle is sort of the point. I don’t know all the ways this Observership will help and shape me moving forward. It has opened up so much to me—new techniques, new ideas, new collaborators, and new ways of identifying and understanding my own work. I don’t know yet what all these new things will lead to. But I know that this experience has given me these new opportunities as well as the confidence to pursue them and make the most of them. Working on this production was new and hard and challenging and stressful and stimulating and exciting, and I did it, and I did it well—and that experience is invaluable.