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## TYPESETTING, LAYOUT & PRINTING

*Clinton Press, Greensboro, NC*

## NOTE ON SUBMISSIONS:

*Southern Theatre* welcomes submissions of articles pertaining to all aspects of theatre. Preference will be given to subject matter closely linked to theatre activity in the Southeastern United States.

All articles will be evaluated by the editor and sitting members of the Editorial Board. Criteria for evaluation will be: suitability, clarity, significance, depth of treatment, and accuracy.

Articles should be double-spaced and should not exceed 15 pages. Authors are strongly encouraged to submit articles on floppy disk. Both DOS and Mac programs can be used. Black-and-white photos, and a brief identification of the author, should accompany all articles. Photos and other materials to be returned must be clearly indicated.

Submissions should be sent to:

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*Southern Theatre*  
P.O. Box 9868  
Greensboro, NC 27429-0868

*Southern Theatre* (ISSNL: 0584-4738) is published quarterly (Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer) by the Southeastern Theatre Conference, Inc., a non-profit organization, for its membership and those interested in theatre in the Southeast.

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Subscription rates: \$10 per year, \$3 per copy.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Southeastern Theatre Conference,  
P. O. Box 9868, Greensboro, NC 27429-0868.

## John Corker: Balancing Art and Business in *Rent*

by COLLEEN KELLY

In his keynote address at the SETC Convention, John Corker, general manager of *Rent*, described the multi-award winning Broadway musical as "the story of a community of passionate young artists struggling to survive: struggling with their artistic integrity, struggling to be artists, struggling with the establishment, struggling with trying to find the artist in themselves."

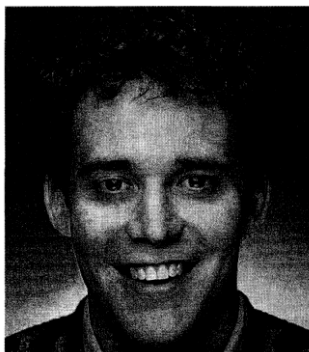
The story told in *Rent* is also the story of *Rent*, observes Corker — an example of life imitating art imitating life. It is the journey of characters choosing between artistic integrity and the establishment; the journey of *Rent* going to Broadway; the journey of playwrights, musicians, actors, designers; the journey of artists in general.

Corker understands this journey. He, too, struggled to find balance between art and survival. With a BFA in musical theatre from Illinois Wesleyan, Corker carved a solid career for himself as an actor in regional theatre, off-Broadway, New York showcases, as a company member with theatres such as Nebraska Rep and Highlands Playhouse, and during 11 seasons of summer stock. He played roles ranging from Jamie in *Robber Bridegroom* to Baby John in *West Side Story*, and, of course, he was forced to take the obligatory "temp" job that identifies a New York actor as a New York actor.

It was Corker's temp experience with companies such as New York City Opera, Bristol Records and Channel Thirteen's Great Performances that allowed him to build an impressive resume in arts administration and to make the transition from performance to business.

His first full-time position was associate director of operations for PACE Theatrical Group, Inc., arranging Broadway tours to 24 cities. For a

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John Corker

time, he served as assistant company manager with *Bye Bye Birdie* which starred Tommy Tune and Ann Reinking. "I was lucky," he confessed. "I gave my best audition ever and got the job."

When asked about his decision to change careers, Corker talked about his need to feel more in control of his life.

"It's the randomness of theatre — the same randomness that contributed to the success of *Rent*," explained Corker. "This randomness can be difficult. You can work very, very hard and success may come to you or it may not come to you. Most jobs, in life, if you show up every day there's a natural progression. In theatre... getting the gold ring doesn't necessarily follow."

Corker's New York agent also contributed sage advice that influenced the change: "...if there's anything else that you want to be doing, do it. If there's nothing else in the world that you want to do, then continue to study and continue to work... and in four or five years... you should be working fairly consistently."

Admitting that randomness was not a healthy life choice, Corker examined what he did need in life. He had a practical side — a business sensibility that he had not thought to nurture. In his attempt to find per-

sonal and professional peace, Corker "shut off" the actor in himself and gave all his energy to PACE Theatrical Group, Inc. Switching careers, however, did not resolve the struggle between art and integrity.

It was not long until the silenced artist demanded attention. Corker missed performing, missed the feeling of community, missed being an artist. He turned the actor loose one more time and learned that the actor didn't need to be his life, but certainly needed to be part of it.

For Corker, balancing art and survival did not have to mean compromise. Rather, it meant integrating his artistic heart and his business mind; it meant beginning a journey that would nurture the whole human being; it meant, in his words, "making the right choice for the right reasons."

He celebrated his choice as a person of musical theatre would: by sharing it in song with fellow cast members of *Bye Bye Birdie*. He sang *I Chose Right* from the musical *Baby*:

*"...life's a very long road  
and the crossroads come up right away.  
And it's sure hard to know  
which way to go  
when you've barely begun.  
And oh, the roads you leave behind  
can shine so bright.  
Then I look at you,  
and I know I chose right."*

As the song proclaimed, crossroads certainly did "come up right away." Corker moved from associate director of operations for PACE, to vice president of The Booking Office (a company owned by *Rent* producers Kevin McCollum and Jeffery Seller), to general manager of *Rent*. This fall, Corker will also serve as general manager of two new Broadway productions: the musical *Side Show* with music by Henry Krieger and lyrics by Bill Russell; and Neil Simon's play *Proposals*. In addition, he is associated in other producing and business ventures with The Producing Company (also owned by McCollum and Sellers). No wonder he's singing, "I chose right."

As general manager, Corker, answers to the producers. It is his re-

sponsibility to make sure that all financial and artistic decisions are executed. All operational responsibilities fall to him.

"Once the producers make a decision, I make sure everything happens that's supposed to happen," he said.

To be the general manager of any Broadway musical would be comparable to operating a small city. Being the general manager of *Rent* is managing an empire.

"... We thought when we were going to do *Rent*, it was going to be a small off-Broadway show," explains Corker. "We had no idea that it would grow and be the phenomena that it has become."

The author of *Rent*, Jonathan Larson, wanted to change the sound of musical theatre. He wanted to give a contemporary voice to the musical. He was an artist who wrote music reflecting the present, rather than imitating the past. Laced in the lyrics of *One Song Glory* is the hope to find "one song to leave behind. . . a song that rings true, truth like a blazing fire, an eternal flame."

Such hope was realized on opening night — Jonathan Larson had given the world *Rent*.

*Rent*, or "the phenomena," has also been christened "the breakthrough musical of the '90s" and "the beginning of a new era in theatre." Its many awards include an Obie, a Tony and a Pulitzer. Productions have been mounted for Boston, Los Angeles, Toronto and London. Future productions are targeted for Japan, Australia, Germany and Austria.

This outbreak of *Rent* has meant an overwhelming amount of paperwork for John Corker. On Broadway alone, he deals with 23 unions. He negotiates, hires, and writes contracts for everyone: "... the people who tear your tickets, who seat you, who turn on the lights and turn on the air conditioning, the actors in the show, the musicians in the show, the stage managers running the show and the crews running the show."

Although the work may be overwhelming, the spirit of community that lives in and through *Rent* reminds Corker that he made the right choice. "We're all here to do theatre because theatre is important to us."

When asked what impact his association with *Rent* has had on his life,

Corker cites moments — moments that have made the past year of his life one of the most exciting years of his life: "rare moments," as he recalls them, "moments of such clarity and profundity that you can categorize them as moments of your life."

Treasuring the moments of life and living life to the fullest is a philosophy reflected in *Rent*, a reflection of the life that writer/composer Jonathan Larson embraced till his unexpected death on the day of the opening of *Rent* in 1996. This philosophy, given to Larson by a professor, has in turn become a gift that Larson continues to give through music and lyrics.

When Corker needs a gentle reminder of this philosophy, he leaves the pile of contracts that have collected on his desk and stands in the back of the house to listen to the message of *Rent*:

"... There's only this,  
forget regret or life is yours to miss,  
no other road no other way,  
no day but today..." ■