Recently, actor John Lithgow ’67, Ar.D. ’05, was offered the chance (“for buckets of money”) to take over the lead role in an established television drama series. “But it came at the very moment that I’d been asked to do David Auburn’s new play,” he says. “To me there was no question what I’d rather do. My original calling, the impulse that made me become an actor, is satisfied onstage much more than it is in movies and television.”

To be sure, these are creators at the top of their professions. Lithgow’s long and varied acting career, recounted in his new autobiography, Drama: An Actor’s Education, has
earned him Oscar nominations and Emmy, Tony, and Golden Globe awards, as well as a Harvard honorary degree. Auburn wrote the Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning drama Proof (2000), among other plays and screenplays; his production with Lithgow will open this spring. “Only a tiny fraction of actors have the luxury” of choosing stage over lucrative work on screens, Lithgow notes, adding, “In a way, it seems unfortunate that people feel you have to have a movie star in the cast of a Broadway show. On the other hand, it might help theater by strengthening its reputation as the ‘high bar,’ the best thing you can do.”

If so, the stars’ boost may be timely. Theater, an institution at the heart of world cultures for millennia, now confronts unprecedented challenges in a rapidly evolving society. Electronic and digital technologies have spawned an array of media, from 3-D movies to crowd-sourced video like YouTube to smartphones, that compete with the stage (and with other traditional media like books, and each other) for the audience’s finite attention. A youthful generation raised amid a digital culture may prove harder to lure to a live theatrical performance; in the 2009-10 season, the average Broadway theatergoer was 48 years old.

“We’re in such a crazy flux now,” says Lithgow. “The whole notion of entertainment is confused and diffused. It’s not just all these technologies and the ADD phenomenon of jumping around—the video-game mindset; we’re not sure what entertainment is anymore. Half of television now is ‘reality television,’ where you have regular people forcing themselves into the limelight and everybody watching happy amateurs failing before their very eyes. Being voted off an island or being fired by Donald Trump is the new drama: that’s where dramatic tension is being generated, rather than from the minds of writers, actors, and filmmakers.”

Entertainment delivered cheaply to a laptop or handheld device beats theater on price and convenience. When playwright Christopher Durang ’71 (see “A Yodel for Help in the Modern World,” March-April 2009, page 28) arrived in New York City in 1975, he paid $10 for standing-room or obstructed-view tickets. A few years later, it cost only about $30 to see his hit play Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You, which ran off-Broadway from 1981 to 1984. By 2008, the average ticket on Broadway was $86, and premium orchestra seats can now fetch $400 to $600. “These seats must be for people in the financial industry,” Durang marvels. “I don’t feel there is any play I personally want to pay $400 to see.”

Those developments threaten live theater. In 2008, five playwrights helped inaugurate Harvard’s New College Theater (now Farkas Hall) with a panel titled “Does Playwriting Have a Future?” The consensus was that there are plenty of fine playwrights, but the daunting question is, “Does producing have a future?” because it is so difficult to get new plays mounted. Durang says, “The people willing to invest in the smaller return of off-Broadway are disappearing.”

Furthermore, the lucrative world of television, which has produced some excellent drama and comedy in recent years, has been siphoning off some of the best young playwrights—or potential playwrights—from the stage. “It’s very, very important that nonprofit theaters continue to generate new writing,” says Lithgow. “It’s extremely difficult to write a play.” He recalls gathering the comedy writers behind his hit television series, Third Rock from the Sun, a few years ago. “I told them, ‘Look, you guys write one-act farces—one a week! You’re brilliant at this! During your four- or five-month hiatus from Third Rock, why don’t you write some plays? The field is wide open. Comedy writers used to write for Broadway, but comedy writers today are all writing for television. Write an evening of three one-acts; I’ll produce it for you. And the playwright is in control in the theater; writers for film and TV are subject to rewriting—they’re employees.’ They were all very excited by the idea—and none of them wrote plays. They worked on pilots, played golf, and waited for the season to start again.”

Drama in the Marketplace

Nonprofit theater faces particular problems. “People who think everything needs to be determined by the marketplace have no understanding of art,” says Tina Packer, RI ’95, founder of Shakespeare & Company, the theatrical company in Lenox, Massachusetts, that has been a staple of cultural life in the Berkshires since 1978. “The great cathedrals of Europe would never have been built, Van Gogh would never have painted, Michelangelo would never have sculpted if it were just about marketplace forces.”

“In order to maintain its ideal form, theater needs to be subsidized,” says Robert Brustein, senior research fellow and founding director of the American Repertory Theater (ART). In the 1930s, a tiny sliver of the New Deal Works Progress Administration bud-

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Lithgow says. “We’re not sure what entertainment is anymore.”

get supported the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), which funded a flourishing American stage culture from 1935 until 1939, when Congress canceled funding in reaction to the left-wing character of many FTP productions. Arthur Miller, Orson Welles, Elia Kazan, and John Houseman were among those who launched their careers under the FTP.

Nonprofit theater enjoyed a second golden age from the 1960s through the 1990s, with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) giving millions of dollars in grants that, along with a surge of awards from the Ford, Rockefeller, Mellon, and Shubert foundations, energized about 400 regional theaters—places like the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. Brustein himself started the Yale Repertory Theatre with $50,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1966.

These regional theaters, many with permanent companies of actors, directors, and designers, “worked together like sports teams,” Brustein explains. “They allowed for shortcuts. You didn’t have to start from scratch, with actors getting to know each other for the first time, or competing with each other on the stage—they were there to provide mutual support.”

“It was a collective idea in a rabidly individualistic society, so its life was destined to be short,” he continues. “It lasted long enough to create some very distinguished work and to influence the quality of Broadway and off-Broadway.” But the curtain came
Brustein warns against “a theater indistinguishable from Wal-Mart—just products to be bought.”

down on this golden age, too. The economic recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s, and congressional reaction to the funding of controversial exhibitions by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, triggered cuts to the NEA’s budget, decimating funding; meanwhile, some of the larger foundations moved away from theater projects. (Today, though, Brustein is guardedly optimistic about the NEA under its current director, Rocco Landesman, one of his Yale doctoral students and a successful Broadway producer, who, “I think, is going to try to re-stimulate the old ideals of the resident theater.”)

Theater can never completely ignore the marketplace and the critics, who influence ticket-buyers. On one hand, when opening an off-Broadway show in New York, “if the critics, who influence ticket-buyers. On one hand, when opening an off-Broadway show in New York, “if the critics, or even stay ahead of its critics,” he declares.

Brustein tells of bringing the ART to Harvard in the 1979-80 season and signing up 13,000 subscribers its first year—they had never enrolled more than 6,000 in New Haven. The ART began with A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and drew 14,000 subscribers its second year. But the following season, the company lost half its audience. “Boston had never been exposed very much to the avant-garde,” Brustein explains, adding that many of the subscribers who left moved to the new Huntington Theater Company, which draws “an audience attracted to less provocative works.”

Nonprofits matter, Brustein asserts, because when companies become completely dependent on the marketplace, “We have a theater that’s indistinguishable from Wal-Mart—just products to be bought. There is no organic quality to it—just something to consume and throw away, with no ending.”

Similarly, the director, actor, and playwright André Gregory ’56 (best known for his title role in the 1981 film My Dinner with André), who’s worked in avant-garde, radical, and experimental theater, declares that “Broadway isn’t theater. That’s show business.” He distinguishes “passive theater”—that “doesn’t force you or seduce you or charm you into asking questions, that tells you what to look at onstage, and when you come out, you say, ‘Gee, that was good!’ or ‘Harry Sterns sang that song well!’”—from active theater that “demands that you ask serious, challenging questions of your own life, the culture, and the society we live in. The live actor performing something like King Lear, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, or Death of a Salesman is extremely disturbing. The question is: Is there an audience for that?”

One large nonprofit theater, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), founded in 1955, seems to have struck a healthy balance between art and the marketplace. The OSF is a “destination theater”—it draws 85 percent of its audience from more than 200 miles away from its base in Ashland, Oregon. With annual attendance of more than 400,000, an operating budget of $50 million, and 100 actors on the payroll, it is the largest acting company in the United States. The OSF’s artistic director, Bill Rauch ’84, praises the “adventurous nature of our audiences.” For example, last year OSF commissioned the Chicano theater troupe Culture Clash to write and perform (along with six OSF actors) an original show, American Night: The Ballad of Juan José. “Shakespeare has been considered a safe box-office bet, and new work considered risky,” Rauch says. “But Henry IV, Part 1 did not do as well at the box office as American Night. Things have shifted: the audience is interested in new stories, and the new work is so exciting.”

American Night is the first of 37 new plays that the theater plans to commission for a series, “American Revolutions,” that will look at moments of change in the country’s past. “We’re inspired by Shakespeare’s cycle of histories,” Rauch says. “We’re doing this in partnership with other theaters,” he adds. “Cooperation among theaters is part of the future. In the past, theaters have been very proprietary, holding onto world-premiere rights. Now many places are sharing; there is a lot of co-producing.”

Theme Park with Footlights

“BROADWAY IS SO STRANGE NOW,” says Lithgow. “It has become a kind of theater theme park.” If so, it’s a long-running Midtown success. Shows appearing on “Broadway”—technically, a list of specific theaters, all in or near Times Square—have prospered steadily. The total box office is about $1 billion annually, with an additional $1 billion reaped from road productions, according to the Broadway League, the national trade association. “In the media business, it’s not large,” says Tom McGrath ’76, M.B.A. ’80, chairman of Key Brand Entertainment, a leading producer and distributor of live theater, including both Broadway shows and touring productions. (Motion-picture box-office receipts in the United States and Canada were $10.6 billion in 2010.) “But in the midst of the recent recession, Broadway has had a record year.”

Nearly half of Broadway’s shows are straight plays, but musicals dominate in attendance and revenue. Its theaters attract an audience heavy on tourists (62 percent), nearly two-thirds of it with annual incomes above $75,000 and 66 percent of it female (up from 55 percent in 1980). The sector remains profitable even though only
one of eight new productions succeeds. Though it’s a risky investment, a smash hit can return 80 percent per year, and the backers of a revival of one well-known show have earned a return of nearly 20-to-1 on their money—with the show still running.

“Broadway is an expensive business,” McGrath says. “It is mainstream theater—it’s not designed to be experimental, just as movie studios don’t produce the same material as independent filmmakers.” A major difference from movies, though, is that “you can open a movie on 1,000 screens or 5,000 screens, but a Broadway show is limited by the capacity of the theater”—and even though runs can be open-ended, “the buildings aren’t growing any new seats.”

Despite the risks, for someone with disposable money who loves theater, becoming an “angel” can be exhilarating. Buy a share of a prospective musical, say, for as little as $25,000, and you can have a theater life. That means being invited to all the backers’ auditions, workshops, tryouts, opening nights, and investors’ parties for all the shows on the Great White Way. “You can have the composer come to your house and play the score on your piano,” McGrath notes. “It can be a lot of fun compared to, say, joining a golf club.”

**Adventures with Audiences**

“**There’s a syndrome in our profession—to blame the audience, especially young people,”** says Diane Paulus ’88, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater. “They don’t want to go to the theater anymore—why? They don’t have attention spans. They’d rather be in control, with their personal handheld devices. There are too many entertainment choices. We’re a depraved cul-

Photograph by Stu Rosner

Photograph by Stu Rosner
“There is nothing like the stigma that was attached to being a theater type 30 or 40 years ago.”

ture.’ I’ve always found this deadening, because it doesn’t give you any room to change. We have to flip that analysis and say, ‘Maybe it’s us—maybe it’s the arts producers. Not just the writers and actors but the whole machine—perhaps we have to do a better job of inviting this audience back to the theater. Have they left? Yes. Have they not developed the habit of coming? Yes. Is it their fault? No!”

Since her first season of programming at ART in 2009 (see “Theater As If It Matters,” November-December 2009, page 17), Paulus has updated the theatrical invitation. She made a splash with The Donkey Show, a reimagining of A Midsummer Night’s Dream (with not a word of Shakespeare) that unfolds around the audience, with participatory dancing and musical numbers sung by the characters. The Donkey Show was a long-running success in New York, where Paulus and her husband, producer Randy Weiner ’87, first mounted it, and in Cambridge it continues to draw throngs to the ART’s Zero Arrow Street Theater, now renamed OBERON (after the character in the play) and reinvented as a nightclub theater.

“We’ve got to open up the definition of what theater is,” she declares. “If the show happens at midnight on Friday night, instead of starting at 8 P.M., that means what? What if the show is 10 minutes long? Or an hour long? What if you dance for 45 minutes before the show begins? Create a space that turns the rules on its head. OBERON is accessing a new demographic: a younger, under-30 audience. This audience isn’t one that ‘goes to the theater’—they go out at night. They want to be in the presence of others, to socialize; they need that release—which theater can provide, like the mosh pit of Shakespeare’s Globe Theater, or the festivals of fifth-century Athens. The theater needs to be something where you feel: ‘I have to experience it.’ Not just read or see it. People are craving experience—they are desperate for experience.”

The theater of the future will be one that actively engages its audiences and probably breaks not only the “fourth wall” (the imaginary “window” of the proscenium) but the other three as well. Audiences at a recent New York production of Our Town, for example, found themselves literally part of the cast. In Boston, the Actors’ Shakespeare Project, founded by Benjamin Evett ’86, an ART Institute graduate, performs Shakespeare in unusual settings like storefronts and churches, literally taking the Bard to the streets. And Bill Rauch, in a previous life, co-founded the Cornerstone Theater (see “To Work and Be Proud of It,” May-June 1990, page 30), which develops community-based and -produced versions of classic plays in small cities and towns.

“In the final analysis, it may be more interesting to work in smaller environments, where you don’t have to earn back millions of dollars but can cover your expenses with $40,000 or $50,000,” says Jack Megan, director of the Office for the Arts at Harvard. “The bigger the dollar investment, the more the producer has to think of the audience, and the more the producer calls the shots over the creative people.”

A Stage Theory of Learning

“If children aren’t exposed to music and art, you won’t develop either artists or audiences,” says Robert Brustein. As the educational system is a prime engine for nurturing accomplished playwrights, actors, directors, and other theater types, he laments the unavailability of art and culture courses in elementary school, due to budget cutbacks where the first move is to fire the music teacher.”

Shakespeare & Company in Lenox has deeply embedded itself in its surrounding communities by bringing theater to local schools. Their program, which involves nearly all the high schools in Berkshire County, as well as several middle and grade schools, reaches more than 40,000 students and teachers annually with performances, workshops, and residencies. It has engaged close to a million participants since it began, along with the ensemble itself, in 1978.

“Our work in the schools,” Tina Packer says, “is as important to us as our own productions. When we go into a high school, we usually get 30 to 50 kids to be part of each Shakespeare play. They do the plays in their schools, then they come together at our fall festival—four days of nonstop high-school Shakespeare—and perform for each other. Everyone who auditions participates in some capacity, and most kids do the Shakespeare program for three years. They get very passionate about this because it’s the place they can speak freely—they can have their emotions. We know that this builds community: we see the kids who do this get deeply attached to each other.”

Meanwhile, in recent decades, the explosion of entertainment in
popular culture has shifted the norms of youth culture, raising the status of performers. “There is nothing like the stigma that was attached to being a theater type 30 or 40 years ago,” says Tom McGrath. “Now, there’s prestige attached to being able to sing or dance or act at a very high level, and this encourages people to do it.” (Witness the hit television show Glee.) Along with an upsurge in the quality of theater-training programs at the secondary-school and university levels, the result is productions where “quality is at an all-time high point,” he says. Despite the economic challenges that professional theater faces, he says, “This is a golden age of theater, in terms of the number and range of productions, and the quality of actors, directors, and designers at all levels.”

At Harvard, undergraduates put on 40 to 60 productions per year, each one running four to eight nights, says Jack Megan. Brustein notes that curricular opportunities in theater have increased significantly since he arrived in 1979, when “There was not a single theater course for credit, except [English professor and playwright] William Alfred’s playwriting class. The ART introduced 12 courses on theater studies that the Committee on Dramatics approved, but there were rumblings. Some members started demanding that our acting and directing teachers should have scholarly publications and advanced degrees. Academicism can be death to the creative instinct. But imaginative scholars know that you can’t apply the same strictures to creative people as to academics.”

Harvard is one of the few major colleges without a drama concentration. Speaking at a recent panel discussion at the ART on the opera Nixon in China, Peter Sellars ’80, its inaugural director, went so far as to declare, “I came to Harvard because they had no theater department; there were not many universities that had that advantage. Theater is something that doesn’t belong in a department at all. I love that artists have to find their own path here.” Nonetheless, today’s Committee on Dramatic Arts, chaired by Wien professor of drama, English, and comparative literature Martin Puchner, is developing a concentration in drama (a recommendation of the Task Force on the Arts that President Drew Faust commissioned in 2007) to complement, not supplant, the lively extracurricular scene.

That will be welcome news to Bill Rauch. “I’ve taught in some very structured theater programs and been horrified by how little they [the students] worked, and how few were the opportunities to act and direct, to practice your craft,” he says. “At Harvard, I directed 26 shows in every corner of the campus, from the basements of dorms to the steps of Widener.”

Stories Acted Out

“Human beings creating and experiencing a story together in a room—that’s not going away,” says Rauch. “In some ways there is even more hunger for it now.” Tina Packer agrees. “It’s only through people gathering together—which is what theaters do—that you can actually feel the humanity. It’s a palpable, visceral feeling—a collective feeling,” she says. “You can’t feel it on Facebook, you can’t feel it on television, and you don’t get the truth in any of these places, either.

“The Greeks and the Elizabethans had everyone in the same place, with the actors talking to an audience that was listening, not watching,” she continues. “The advent of the proscenium arch separated the audience from the actors, creating a kind of frame or window through which to ‘view’ the play. Now, we’ve gotten to a stage where the audience and the actors are not even in the same room. But asking the questions together—that is the thing that builds community. As an actor, when you’re being successful, you can feel it in your body, you can feel you’re getting there. You have an inner picture of who you’re playing; it makes a coherent whole. You can feel through the audience response that they understand it, too.”

That experience cannot be replaced by anything viewed on a screen, in 3-D, or interactively. The theater will surely stay alive in the future—the only question is, in what forms? The hunger for live storytelling, for the shared experience of actor and audience, may even increase, if and when people tire of the edited, buffed, packaged perfection of television and film products. “There’s a kind of tremulous fragility to the theater, because anything could happen,” says Lithgow. “There’s a kind of breathlessness.”

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