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A suggestion for the Cleveland Play House: Become a resident company that nurtures local talent

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By [Christine McBurney](#)
on June 12, 2011 at 6:00 AM

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With the Cleveland Play House's upcoming move to Playhouse Square, many theater fans are wondering what will happen to the Philip Johnson-designed complex at



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8500 Euclid Ave., and most especially, the older, intimate, and storied Brooks and Drury theaters. This move is painful for many -- theater artists and audiences alike.



CHRISTINE MCBURNEY

It is also ironic. For years, the Play House (two words) has been confused with Playhouse (one word) Square. And do you remember the Play House's clever and now eerie marketing campaign a few years back which tried to curtail the confusion. "CPH: We're not Square."

Well, it's now hip to be square. The Brooks, Drury, and Bolton theaters will belong to the Cleveland Clinic; that much is certain. What the clinic will do with these spaces is uncertain. But a bigger question remains: Will the Play House become absorbed into the fabulous behemoth that is Playhouse Square or will it use this window of opportunity to forge a cogent identity?

Now that the Play House will be more directly competing with national Broadway tours, concerts, classical theater and college theater, certainly it will have to re-brand itself to create a new and distinct identity that will draw its uptown

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patrons downtown and new patrons from the greater Cleveland area.

But the move is also an opportunity to redefine the Play House's mission. The country's oldest continuously running regional theater, the only professional regional theater with the name of our fair city in its title, should look to make an even bolder move.

Theater is ultimately about people, not buildings and branding. It's about actors, playwrights, directors, producers, designers, technicians, custodians, security guards, bartenders, students, volunteers and audiences. Times change. The Play House has moved several times in its history. It was once home to a resident company that was a national model for excellence and attracted actors from all over the country, some who have continued to make their home here, paying taxes, joining PTAs , shopping locally and cobbling together a life in the theatre even after the resident company was disbanded in the late 1980s, when many "resident" theater became "regional" theaters.

If the Play House is looking for a niche market, why doesn't it revive the resident company system? But instead of

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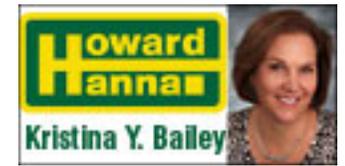
outsourcing, why not invest locally by creating a regional theater that is dedicated to supporting and growing local theater artists?

Cleveland's other regional theater company, Great Lakes Theater Festival (yes, Cleveland has two, count them, two professional regional theaters) employs a handful of local talent on a consistent basis. But only a handful of the hundreds of professionally trained local actors.

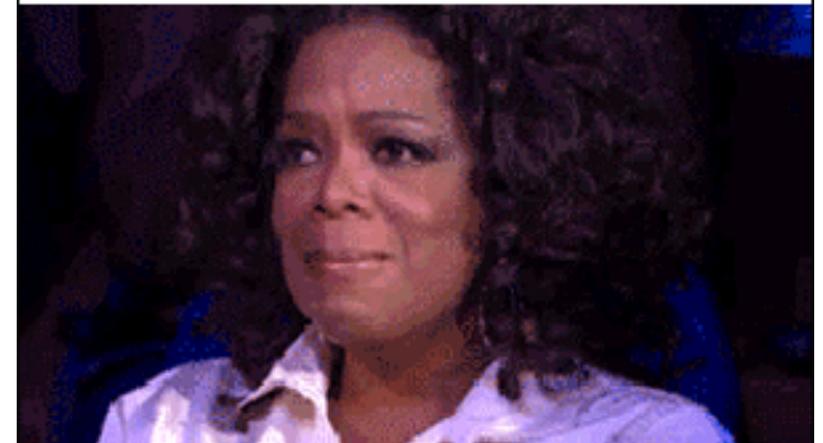
The familiar lament heard from artistic directors who prefer to cast out-of-towners is that Cleveland actors just aren't as talented as the imports. Well, honestly there is a continuum; some are learning the ropes at the beginnings of their careers and some are on par with or surpass the talent of the out-of-towners.

If local actors were given the opportunity to hone their professional skills in a regional/resident theater, this "perception" would surely disappear. Many Cleveland actors who have no artistic home work a day job and go on auditions, if the production rehearsals don't conflict with their day job.

Some of us have been lucky to have been cast in supporting roles (2 in 11 years for me) at the Play House, but that is no



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way to make a living. If an actor is a member of Equity, the professional actors' union, there are only a few contracts scattered amongst the smaller professional community theater.

It's a catch-22 for local actors. It actually pays (in terms of getting work) not to be a professional actor in Cleveland. If you are non-union, there is more work, and less pay which requires that you work that day job. So you have professional actors who can't work because of their zip codes and up and coming talent who works for little or no pay. It's a bad business model, and theater is business: show business.

Your typical actor puts in on average a 10-hour day, inside a windowless room. She doesn't mind redoing the same repetitive task over and over again. In fact, that is her job. She's a bit of a perfectionist as is her boss, the director, and their collaboration along with the cast's feeds the work to create the best product possible. An actor always takes his work home with him. He'll work both the day and night shifts. So why can't this worker make a decent wage, live and work in the community, contribute to his neighborhood, and make a living and a life? You know how cool it is to run into a performer whom you just saw playing Hamlet last night,

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buying cat food at the grocery store.

Cleveland actors need to work. Cleveland needs to cure its brain drain. Cleveland needs to instill more community spirit and pride. Cleveland needs more civic engagement. Cleveland needs more sophisticated artistry from its actors. And let's be honest here. With two college theater programs soon to be in residence at Play House Square, The Cleveland State University Department of Theatre and Dance and the Case Western Reserve University MFA Program, and no real sustainable local work for at least the students studying acting, (CSU is instituting a technical training program), shouldn't this model of growing talent and then sending them away from the north coast to the east and west coasts be reexamined?

All of these pressing issues could be addressed with one decision. Produce globally. Act locally!

We Clevelanders have enough imported entertainment. We can see a Broadway show one night and see the Yankees play the next. A mentality shift has occurred in our consciousness about consumption. We want to buy local. We go to farmers' markets and try to patronize the mom and pop stores over

the big boxes. We support our local teams like nobody else, no matter how much they disappoint us season after season. That's passion. That's commitment . Why don't we passionately commit to supporting our troupes of professional actors by offering consistent employment so they and our theaters can grow. Any company, business or theatrical, knows that it gets more productivity out of its workers when there is a continuity of relationship with common goals and ritualized ways of working.

Imagine Michael Symon working a day job in retail and then rushing to Lola's to cook? Or Grady Sizemore pushing paper in a cubicle before suiting up to play center field. Or President Snyder waiting tables at night so she can lead CWRU during the day. Why do we support a system that requires actors to work day jobs, contributing to their community in this more "tangible" way, before we give them permission to practice what they are trained to do?

Audiences get the art they deserve. Well, if we as consumers want to buy local produce, support local merchants, then why don't we want to see more of our own local talent on our stages?

Compelling, relevant, exciting theater is about risk-taking and bold choices. How bold and visionary will the Cleveland Play House's move to Playhouse Square be? We can only hope and paraphrase from a song from *Cabaret*, (which starred the Cleveland Play House's own Joel Gray), "maybe this time, we'll be lucky. Maybe this time we'll win."

Christine McBurney is a theatre artist/educator from Cleveland Heights.

The image shows two real estate listings from Cleveland.com. The left listing is for a house in Lorain, OH, titled 'The Vineyards at Martin's Run', featuring a white house with a garage. The right listing is for a townhome complex in Cleveland, OH, titled 'The Vineyards at Martin's Run', showing a row of colorful townhomes. Both listings include a 'FOR SALE' badge and a small photo of a man in a cap.

A row of social sharing buttons: a 'Tweet' button with a count of 7, a Facebook share button with a count of 0, a 'Share' button with a count of 0, a 'Pin it' button, and a 'Reddit' button.

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