



Free for All: Joe Papp, the Public, and the Greatest Theater Story Ever Told

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Los Angeles Times film critic **Kenneth Turan** takes you behind the scenes at the Public Theater and tells the amazing story of how Joe Papp made American theatrical and cultural history.

Free for All is the irresistible oral history of the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Public Theater—two institutions that under the inspired leadership of Joseph Papp have been a premier source of revolutionary and enduring American theater. To tell this fascinating story, Kenneth Turan interviewed some 160 luminaries—including George C. Scott, Meryl Streep, Mike Nichols, Kevin Kline, James Earl Jones, David Rabe, Jerry Stiller, Tommy Lee Jones, and Wallace Shawn—and masterfully weaves their voices into a dizzyingly rich tale of creativity, conflict, and achievement. And at the center of this incredibly engrossing account of artistic daring and excellence the larger-than-life figure of Joseph Papp reigns supreme.

Free for All: Joe Papp, the Public, and the Greatest Theater Story Ever Told Details

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Author : Kenneth Turan , Joseph Papp

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From Reader Review Free for All: Joe Papp, the Public, and the Greatest Theater Story Ever Told for online ebook

Kristin says

Definitely a MUST READ for anybody interested in the NY theater scene's recent history (which of course has influenced it's current state). Joe Papp & the Public... I have no words, this book was a great lesson but also an affirmation of all the things I believe theater can and should be and what I want my place in it to be. In closing, WHY is this not required reading for my BA in Theater?! I firmly believe my education would have been incomplete without it.

Lois says

For anyone who loves the theater, this is such a treat. An oral history was the perfect vehicle - all of these actors, directors, playwrights, etc. are so articulate and marvelous storytellers. Joe Papp was larger than life, and his passion for theater that would be available for everyone changed that world. In the 1980s he contracted with Kenneth Turan to write the history of the NY Shakespeare Festival and Public Theater, but cancelled after reading the first draft. Twenty years later Turan contacted Papp's widow to see if the project could be resurrected. She agreed and he compiled the interviews of over 160 people (40 of them since deceased) to bring us this treasure. I have been living this for the past week and now miss them all.

Hank Lin says

I'm not sure if it's the quality of the book or the subject itself, but as the development of Shakespeare in the Park and the Public continue, the individual productions seem smaller, less impacting, and of less anecdotal merit. Talks of backstage intrigue, love affairs, and people striking the kindling of their love for the theater become increasingly remote, leaving way for backstabbing, fiscal reports, and a general smallness - not of the stage, but of the scope - of the theater that remains.

Dara says

Everything about this book is perfection.

Timothy Childs says

The Greatest (Theater) Story Ever Told

Joe [Papp:] has been the entrepreneur par excellence, the voodoo man, the magic man, the medicine man who went and found all the people, who played the drum and brought all the folks in from the wilderness and gave them a fire to gather around.....LINDA HUNT (actress, Aunt Dan and Lemon).

If a man can love a man as a brother, I love Joe. But he has complications on top of complications in him; he has the same dark sides we all have....[and:] he's experimenting all the time. Just when you think he's going in one direction, he's ready to change horses. And that can hurt people....CHARLES DURNING (actor, *That Championship Season*).

"Free for ALL, Joe Papp, the Public, and the Greatest Theater Story Ever Told," by Kenneth Turan & Joseph Papp, is my favorite of the hundred or so theater books I've read over the past twenty years. This book is the best primer I've seen on how theater truly is created, and how it truly works, both backstage and in the producer's office.

The theatrical process doesn't always work smoothly or happily, as many of us know, but somehow Papp held his productions together, and the stories of how he did that are wonderful indeed.

In fact, my biggest problem in writing this blog was that every time I'd pick up the book again to find a quote or check a fact, I'd start rereading the stories I'd read a couple of days before.

"Free For All" has a curious history: 23 years ago, Turan and Papp contracted to make an oral biography from interviews with Papp and nearly 200 of the people who had been important in his theatrical life.

But when Papp read the first draft, he refused to allow the book to be published. By then his son had been diagnosed with AIDS, and he, himself, with prostate cancer. Turan felt Papp was also upset over some of the comments about him that had come out of the interviews. Turan was stuck with a long manuscript in a box, until years later he was finally able to strike a deal with Papp's widow.

I'm not sure I've ever read a book that was entirely composed of quotes, but the format really works, giving immediacy to each event. Often the reader has a Rashomon experience, as two or more people recount the same meeting or moment in entirely different ways. And the deeply personal feelings expressed by those interviewed make for wonderful insights into them, and into Joe Papp.

My ancestral roots are in Eastern Europe, and I'm very conscious of that, conscious that I'm in the tradition of the Holocaust....I came from a certain kind of poverty level, which was really below that of most of New York's Jews. I always felt that distinction. I've always felt slightly removed from, for instance, the world of Broadway and the Shuberts. I can talk to them, I'll walk with them, but, as Shylock would say, I won't eat with them....JOSEPH PAPP

Briefly stated: Joseph Papp was born in 1921 in Brooklyn, had no money, started producing plays in the Navy, then in basements, toured minimal Shakespearian productions throughout the five boroughs of Manhattan, established Shakespeare in the Park, established the Public Theater, took over and failed at running Lincoln Center Theater, and died in 1991, at the age of 70.

At one point, he was producing for a total of ten New York stages.

Papp sent many productions to Broadway, including *Hair*, *That Championship Season*, *A Chorus Line*, and *The Pirates of Penzance*. He gave first big breaks to many actors – Colleen Dewhurst, George C. Scott, James Earl Jones, and Meryl Streep included; and to many playwrights – David Rabe, Jason Miller, and Wallace Shawn included; and though Papp didn't give William Shakespeare his first big break, he sure did give him one hell of a boost.

Joseph Papp produced some huge hits that were fun to watch, and many more plays that were difficult to

watch.

He wanted his audiences to see and experience parts of American life they might otherwise avoid: the heartlessness of the Vietnam War (Pavlo Hummel; *Sticks and Bones*); child molesters in prison (*Short Eyes*); mastectomies (Mert & Phil); street kids (*Runaways*); the outbreak of AIDS (*The Normal Heart*); and the basic hypocrisy and blindness of society (*Aunt Dan and Lemon*).

I told the cast, “Once in every ten years or so, a play comes along that fulfills my original idea of what role theater must play in society,”JOSEPH PAPP [on *The Normal Heart*].

I was enjoying myself watching “*Aunt Dan and Lemon*” and at some point somebody got up and stalked out, hitting his heels, and afterwards I asked Joe “God, what was that about?” And he said, “I always like it better if it gets them mad....LINDA RONSTADT (singer/actress, *The Pirates of Penzance*).

He was passionate, infuriating, shrewd, relentless, soft-hearted (at times), ruthless (at times), mercurial, unstoppable, idealistic, pragmatic, often impossible, brilliant.

“*Free For All*” contains too many great stories from which to choose, so I’ll close with only two, perhaps my favorites:

In 1956, a totally broke Papp was producing *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*, for no money, at the East River Park Amphitheater. His Company was so broke that if he didn’t get the Chief Drama Critic for the Times, Brooks Atkinson, to come to this unlikely theater and review the show, he’d have to close down his operation.

So he went to the Times’ offices, plopped himself down in the lobby, and waited hours for Atkinson to turn up. Determination. Perseverance. Finally, Atkinson arrived, and Papp insisted on their having a meeting. Cojones.

Somehow he convinced Atkinson – Persuasiveness – to come to the show that night, but Atkinson insisted Papp had to drive him there. So Papp picked up the immaculately-dressed critic at the Harvard Club in the only vehicle he had, an old, dirty two-ton truck, and took his chosen reviewer to his Off-Off-Off-Broadway play in its flea-bitten Lower East Side theater.

Atkinson gave the show a rave, and Joe Papp could go on producing.

And, three years later, the immensely powerful Robert Moses, who counted Parks Commissioner among his four City positions, decided the audiences for Papp’s Shakespeare in the Park should have to pay admissions, some of which would go to the City. This was against everything Papp stood for, so he took the immensely powerful Robert Moses to court, and – against all odds – won the battle.

There was a moment when I picked up the New York Times and saw that Joe had literally beat the government. He had no name, no political push, nothing. I know a lot of people who have power, but he’s probably the only person I know who has real power, because he had it before he had the trimmings....COLLEEN DEWHURST (actress, *The Taming of the Shrew*).

If you’ve read this far, you must love the theater, and if you love the theater, you must read “*Free For All*”.

I guarantee you won’t regret it.

Rebecca says

It was painful to leave this book at home when I returned to school after winter break having read only about half of it, but I'm so happy I did--had I read even a page of it during the semester, I doubt I would have put it down to do anything else! Free for All is an incredible chronicle of a theatrical organization with a social and artistic mission, and a fascinating portrait of the charismatic, complex, principled man at the center of it all. This sweeping narrative will energize anyone who is or hopes to be involved in the arts to pursue excellence and new voices and to make a difference in the wider world.

Dyan says

A sometimes fascinating read about Joe Papp, founder of the free NY Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater and one-time Theater Director of the Beaumont Theater in Lincoln Center. An amazing person, whose energy and vision created memorable dramatic experiences, he championed new playwrights and theater content that related to the social milieu.

Turan interviewed over 160 people who had worked with Papp, so the book is a somewhat disjointed chronological read of the highlights from Papp's theatrical life. The title, "Free for All," perfectly captures the spirit Papp embodied -- supporting free theater and experimental break-down-the-barriers theater content.

Brian Willis says

Quite simply one of the very best books I have read on the production of theater. Endlessly fascinating, it tells the story of what it takes to create and maintain theater as a vital and compelling interest in public. Joe Papp created a FREE theater experience for New Yorkers, making it accessible for those who never believed themselves to be interested in the theatrical experience, let alone Shakespeare played in Central Park. In doing so, he launched the careers of several actors, not least of which were names like George C. Scott and Meryl Streep. Constantly fighting with politicians over funding and the proper role of municipal sponsorship of theater, he helped create such legendary productions as Hair, That Championship Season, A Chorus Line, True West, The Normal Heart, and the Mystery of Edwin Drood. Vital and necessary reading for all theatrical practitioners and enthusiasts.

Theo Chen says

An excellent review of The Public Theater's major productions, providing the most interesting format for a biographical book. History is given new life through the many stories told in the book. The book is told through first hand accounts by people involved in the history, and because of this the book is an illuminating tale of theatre.

Susan says

Growing up in NYC, going to Shakespeare in the Park - as conceived and produced by Joe Papp - was a highlight of every summer for my dad and me. We saw all the great American actors there and it was free! When Joe Papp also produced the cutting edge plays at the Public Theater, I saw *For Colored Girls* and the original *Chorus Line*. Joe Papp was an amazing force of nature, and he was New York theater. Papp was always looking for ways to make theater more accessible to non-traditional audiences - young people, people of color, poor people, etc. and was always a champion of new ways to approach anything in the theater. Kenneth Turan captures all the excitement of the man and his visionary work. It would make a wonderful play for The Public...

Neil says

A good book about Joe Papp and the work he did in creating and maintaining the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater. It's a long book, consisting of oral history interviews with Papp and dozens of other recognizable playwrights, directors, and actors, for the most part grouped by the events surrounding particular productions. I thought the book had the most momentum when it was addressing the origins of the Shakespeare Festival, because the efforts to get that institution in place give the narrative a direction. Later, as the book just kind of meanders from play to play, it loses shape a little and becomes less interesting.

Papp was an interesting character, brilliant, but also mercurial, and often difficult to work with. Perhaps it's true for most of us ultimately, but almost all of Papp's relationships ultimately seemed to end badly, with one party or the other doing something unforgivable.

Ultimately you'll read this to get insight into the inner workings of a theater that at first focused on bringing Shakespeare to the masses, later on producing controversial, often highly political material by contemporary American playwrights. It's a long book, but could have been even longer. The information about the early Shakespeare plays, *Hair*, *A Chorus Line*, the early David Rabe plays, *That Championship Season*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Normal Heart*, *True West*, and so on was fascinating, but I wish Turan would have given us some interstitial bits: the season by season story of the Public Theater outside the scope of its best-known productions. If nothing else, an appendix listing these other shows would have been nice. Also, the story of Papp's death needed to be told to give this book closure. So one star off of an excellent book for some things that are not here.

Kelly Nolan says

This book was given to me for Christmas a few years ago. I was just starting my interest and discovery with theatre past the general theatre goer. I think they gave this to me to help broaden my horizon past just musicals. It did help. But more than just my love of theatre, this book opened my eyes to a whole new genre/world of books; the biography. I used to think they'd be boring facts for chapters on end. This was the book that changed that perspective for me and I've since gone onto read not just biographies, but numerous books on history and other non-fiction items. Whenever I hear someone say they don't like Biographies now, I just say, "You haven't found the right one yet".

Daniel says

I'm biased because of my time working there, but this book is a thrilling journey through the founding and development of one of the most important theatrical institutions ever made. Insightful, exciting, with some fun gossip and intriguing works I was introduced to. Highly recommend for those interested in professional theater.

Pete Smith says

No book on theater or the world of entertainment has so inspired me as *Free For All*. Joe Papp began with nothing but proletariat grit and an inexplicable love of Shakespeare to create a theater renaissance in New York unequalled in any era before or since. This book provided true inspiration in my nascent forays into the role of entertainment producer, and I envision myself returning to it in years to come when a 'booster shot' of inspiration is called for.

Chas says

It's always exciting to stumble onto a book at just the right time. I've had this on my shelf for about a year, and finally got around to it, and I'm glad I did. While it drags a bit towards the end, with very detailed summations of some of the work produced by Papp at the Public in the late '70s and '80s, the early days and the Shakespeare Festival's evolution from scrappy D.I.Y. oddity to full-fledged cultural institution is fascinating. The choice to do this as an "oral history" makes for gripping, if occasionally Roshomon-esque, storytelling, too.
