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Born to Direct

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In the new Broadway musical “Tootsie,” unemployed actor Michael Dorsey disguises himself as a woman to get back on stage, a choice that leads to both comedy and complications. Dorsey’s willingness to do whatever it takes to pursue his dream is what persuaded Scott Ellis (THE ’78) to direct the theatrical adaptation of the 1982 movie.

“As artists, we go into this profession with no guarantees, with no 9-to-5 job, with no retirement fund, with nothing—only the sense that we don’t want to do anything else,” says Ellis from a seat in a rear row of Chicago’s Cadillac Palace Theatre, where “Tootsie” debuted last fall before going to its Broadway opening in April 2019. He believes people in any profession can relate to Dorsey’s situation. “What would you do if you were told you could no longer do what you were born to do?”

Ellis was born to direct. He’s been nominated for a Tony Award for Best Director eight times. He won the Olivier Award for Best Director/Musical for “She Loves Me.” He was nominated for an Emmy for directing an episode of “30 Rock” and frequently directs episodes of hit television shows such as “Modern Family,” “Frasier” and “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.”

“He has an impressive record of successful shows. Consistency is one of his hallmarks,” says John Culbert, dean of The Theatre School (TTS). He notes that Ellis’ steadily advancing career contrasts with many other directors who have big hits followed by big busts.
At first, Ellis’ finely tuned instinct for what audiences want caused him to turn down the invitation to direct “Tootsie,” since the script was set in the 1980s and involved a soap opera. Even though he adores the movie, “I felt very strongly that you can’t just put a movie on stage. You have to find a different way into that story,” he says. Ellis finally agreed to direct when the revised script set the action on Broadway in today’s #MeToo environment, with Dorsey awakening to what it means to be a woman in a ruthless industry. “I knew that we had a story that today’s audiences would relate to.”

**From Actor to Director**

Ellis originally set out to be an actor, earning admission to Chicago’s famed Goodman School of Drama and becoming one of its final graduates. Struggling financially, the Goodman was acquired by DePaul in 1978 and merged with the university’s existing theatre program, creating TTS. Ellis credits the Goodman/TTS faculty, especially Joe Slowik (THE MA ’53) and Bella Itkin (THE MFA ’43), with his on-stage success, first in Chicago and then in New York City: “Those two people really changed my life.”

Ellis shared the Broadway stage with luminaries such as Liza Minnelli and Chita Rivera for more than a decade. Throughout that period, he had an itch to direct. In 1987, he scratched it, directing an off-Broadway musical called “Flora the Red Menace.”

“Directing shifted where my passion was. All of a sudden I was on the other side of the table, and I liked it,” Ellis recalls with relish. He spent the next several years directing off-Broadway plays and musicals, including a revue called “And the World Goes Round” that won him a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Director of a Musical.

“That is the best revue I’ve ever seen in my life, then and now,” says Todd Haimes, artistic director and CEO of Roundabout Theatre Company, Manhattan’s largest nonprofit theatre company. When Haimes saw the show, he knew he had found the director for Roundabout’s first musical.

Ellis persuaded Haimes not only to hire him, but also to produce “She Loves Me,” a show that Haimes had never heard of.

“I was in way over my head because I didn’t know how to produce a musical, but Scott knew what he was doing and assembled the best team,” Haimes says. “It was the most expensive play we had ever done. I was terrified that if it wasn’t a hit, we would never do another one. Luckily, Scott’s production was perfection.”

“To me, Chicago is the perfect city. It’s a little smaller [than New York City], but it’s got everything you want.”
Roundabout Theatre is now renowned for its musicals, due in no small part to Ellis, who has been the company’s associate artistic director since 2003. “Just the administrative aspects of doing a musical are staggering, and you have to bring it together. Lights, sounds, costumes, orchestrations, music direction, choreography—all of them are separate rehearsals, and it’s huge! It’s an art form that transcends just being a director,” says Haimes. “It’s a big deal doing a musical on Broadway in New York.”

It’s a big deal in Chicago, too. In rehearsals for “Tootsie” last fall, the Cadillac Palace lobby was strewn with musical instruments, electrical equipment and stacks of boxes, barely leaving enough room for patrons to reach the box office. Costume racks lined the second-floor hallway. Big sheets of plywood were laid across rows of seats to serve as temporary desks for set designers, stage managers, musical directors and others. Ellis was in charge of it all.

“The director in any theatre piece has said yes or no to everything you see on stage,” says Ellis. “It’s my job to make every decision. You’re like the captain of a ship.”

Good directors know that collaboration is essential, he adds. “You surround yourself with great people who bring out the best in you, just as you help them. If you’re secure enough, you give them space and allow everybody to do what they do and do it well.”

Culbert says that Ellis excels at this tricky task, disarming people with his thoughtful consideration of their ideas and his approachable style, which includes his ubiquitous baseball cap. “Directors have to lead without appearing to lead,” Culbert explains. “They are artists working with peer artists. It’s a balancing act, being decisive and, at the same time, giving actors the freedom to try things and become their characters.”

And that’s what makes a great show, says Haimes. “Scott finds the humanity in situations. For example, all the characters in ‘Tootsie,’ as crazy as they are, aren’t cartoons. They are real people, and that’s what makes them funny.”

Ellis hosted The Theatre School’s Annual Awards for Excellence in the Arts in 2015, at which actor Nathan Lane, actor/director Ted Wass (THE ’75) and businessman and politician Christopher G. Kennedy were honored.
That’s why he wanted to debut “Tootsie” in Chicago, even though the show was bound for Broadway. “Chicago theatregoers are savvy. They’re a smart audience,” he says. “If it works in Chicago, it works.”

After observing audience reactions, directors tinker with the show until opening night nears. Then they turn the production over to the stage manager—and leave the show.

“On Broadway, you freeze a show five or six days before critics come in [to review it],” Ellis says. “Once you freeze a show, there are no more changes. Your job is done.”

These days, he is accustomed to leaving one show for the next, but the first time was rough. “I had never felt that type of sadness before in my life. You create a family and then, all of a sudden, they don’t need you anymore.”

“It’s like being a dad,” continues Ellis, who has 9-year-old twins with his husband, Broadway actor Scott Drummond. “You are there when they are born, and you raise them. And then, if you do it well, they don’t need you anymore. You’ve got to let go. That was a very, very hard thing for me to learn.”

Luckily, there’s always something waiting in the wings. “Three seasons ago, I had three shows running at the same time on Broadway. That was a lovely year,” says Ellis, whose boundless energy boggles everyone.

“Scott has 100 percent drive and determination to make a project be the best it can be, and relentless, endless energy to make that happen,” Culbert says.

**Stage to Screen and Back**

Ellis is one of the rare directors who maintains a successful career in both theatre and television. In 2000, he began directing for television, beginning with “Frasier” and progressing to popular programs such as “30 Rock,” “Desperate Housewives” and “Modern Family.” By 2009, he was executive producer as well as a director for shows such as “Weeds” and the hit Amazon original series “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.”

Haimes is thankful that Ellis still directs for the stage. “A whole generation of great directors in theatre went to the West Coast to do television. They said they’d be back, and none of them came back,” Haimes says wistfully. “It’s really great that Scott and some others have found a way to make it work.”

It’s all part of the plan, Ellis says. “I made a deal with myself that I would never, ever say yes to a television show or program unless I know what my next theatre show is going to be.”

As a television director, Ellis often has to adapt to established characters, sets and visual styles. “In a show...
that’s been running a while, the actors know more about the characters than you do, and that’s just the opposite of theatre,” he says. Like most directors, he enjoys directing pilots of new shows, “where you have much more say because you’re helping set things up. You’re creating.”

Ultimately, he believes his success directing television stems from his passion for the stage. “I have an ego with theatre, but I don’t have an ego with television,” says Ellis, who accommodates the preferences of executive producers and studios. “I get all my artistic stuff out in theatre, and that’s what I love. I don’t need to in television, because I have it in the theatre world.”

**TTS Love**

“I love this school [TTS]. I’m obsessed with it,” enthuses Ellis. For years he has helped recruit celebrity guests for the school’s annual gala and emceed the event several times. He has served on the TTS Advisory Board. He created the Joseph Slowik Endowed Scholarship in memory of the school’s late directing instructor. He’s a frequent visitor and guest lecturer; just last fall he talked for more than two hours with students in the directing program.

He thinks TTS is even better now than when he attended. “The backbone of DePaul theatre has been there for a long time,” Ellis explains. “The new theatre building allows it to be recognized as one of the top schools in the country.”

In fact, Ellis always finds a way to work DePaul and TTS into every media interview he gives, even if the reporter doesn’t ask, Culbert says. “We could not ask for a better spokesperson.”

The reason is obvious, Ellis says. “I owe so much to these teachers. I owe so much to this school. … I love what I’m doing. I’m doing what I wanted to, and my career never has to end. I still get to play.”