



Guthrie Theater on the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. Photo: Amanda Orland

A River Runs Through It

One Irishman's Dream Becomes Another's Reality. By Turlough McConnell



Guthrie Theater construction. Photo: Michal Daniel



1100 seat Wurtele Thrust Stage Photo: Gallop Studios



The Guthrie's "Endless Bridge" Photo: Roland Halbe

Joe Dowling stands in the amber glass ninth-floor lobby of the Dowling Studio in the gleaming new Guthrie Theater in downtown Minneapolis. Outside the mighty Mississippi runs alongside the cobalt building designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel. This architectural marvel, which cost \$125 million, is instantly impressive, its deep-blue exterior constructed of steel and glass and adorned with giant sized etched portraits of Irish and American theater giants, the theater's namesake Sir Tyrone Guthrie, Eugene O'Neill, George Bernard Shaw, Tennessee Williams and Langston Hughes. The view encompasses the Mississippi River, the old Minneapolis milling district and the city skyline to the east. The striking lobby that flows upwards on several levels is equally compelling with images from the theater's 43-year history.

"Since its founding in 1963," says Dowling, artistic director since 1995, "the Guthrie has been embraced as a vital cultural and social resource by the people of Minnesota. The founders recognized that the Midwest had an appetite for great drama professionally produced and the will to support it through good times and bad."

Forty-three years later, the Guthrie remains the heart of Minnesota's cultural life and a beacon of the best there is in American theater. The Guthrie is one of the nation's oldest and most respected centers for theatrical performance, production, education and professional training, and presents both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures. "Sir Tyrone Guthrie's vision significantly influenced the development of American theater in the second half of the 20th century," says Dowling. "The new Guthrie Theater has the opportunity to play a major role in American theater in the 21st century."

Dublin-born Dowling, 58, would be a noteworthy theatrical figure anywhere but he is at home in Minneapolis. "The Guthrie gave birth to the American resident theater movement, which now stretches from sea to shining sea in theaters all around the country," says Dowling. "But until now it lacked a center. With the new Guthrie we now have a national center of theater art and theater education."

The Guthrie is a 285,000-square-foot facility that houses three theaters: The Wurtele Thrust Stage, seating 1,100; the McGuire Proscenium Stage, a 700-seat



The Guthrie's Wurtele Thrust Stage. Photo: Roland Halbe

theater; and the black-box Dowling Studio, with flexible seating. A tour of the Guthrie's nine stories reveals both the grand scale and meticulous attention to detail in Nouvel's design, which was inspired in part by the mills surrounding the location. Nouvel believed that, in order to be fully appreciated, the main public gathering spaces must be high above ground level to fully capture the views.

The design of the building is noteworthy by any standard. One acclaimed feature is an "endless bridge": a cantilever that extends outward over the Mississippi. This makes a stunning sight especially at twilight when the blue metal exterior blends into the night sky. Inside, screen-printed images of past productions and actors of the old Guthrie line the public spaces. These faint images of old Guthrie productions are both ghosts

of the old and guardians of the new. Here, under Dowling's inspired leadership, is theater as theme park.

The original Guthrie Theater sprang from Tyrone Guthrie's desire for a new kind of theater that would encourage the production of great works of literature and attract actors seeking a break from the commercialism of Broadway. The Guthrie Theater opened its doors on May 7, 1963, with a production of *Hamlet* directed by Tyrone Guthrie himself. It is fitting that the Guthrie Theater moved to its new complex after a 2006 production of *Hamlet*. The first production at the new location, *The Great Gatsby*, opened on July 15, 2006, a nod to native St. Paul son F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Tyrone Guthrie was born in Annaghmakerrig in County Monaghan, where there is also a long-time cultural

“I believe that the American resident theater movement, which was founded here in the Twin Cities with the birth of the Guthrie, now stretches from sea to shining sea in theaters all around the country,” says Dowling. “But until now it lacked a center, it lacked a place that can call itself a national center of theater art and theater education. And that is what we now have.”

center (see sidebar.) He was director of the Scottish National Players during the 1920s and directed the Festival Theatre in Cambridge, England. During the mid 1950s, Guthrie was the artistic director and co-founder of the Shakespearean Festival in Stratford, Ontario. In 1959 Guthrie published a small invitation in the drama page of *The New York Times* soliciting community interest and involvement in a resident theater. Of the seven cities that responded, the Twin Cities showed the most enthusiasm for the project. Guthrie wrote that it was the Mississippi River that led him to choose Minneapolis over six other locations. “‘Eventually, the Twin Cities will realize that their river is a wonderful and life-giving amenity,’” Dowling quotes Guthrie. “‘It has taken 2000 years even to begin to appreciate this about the Thames. Perhaps it is not unreasonable to expect that the Twin

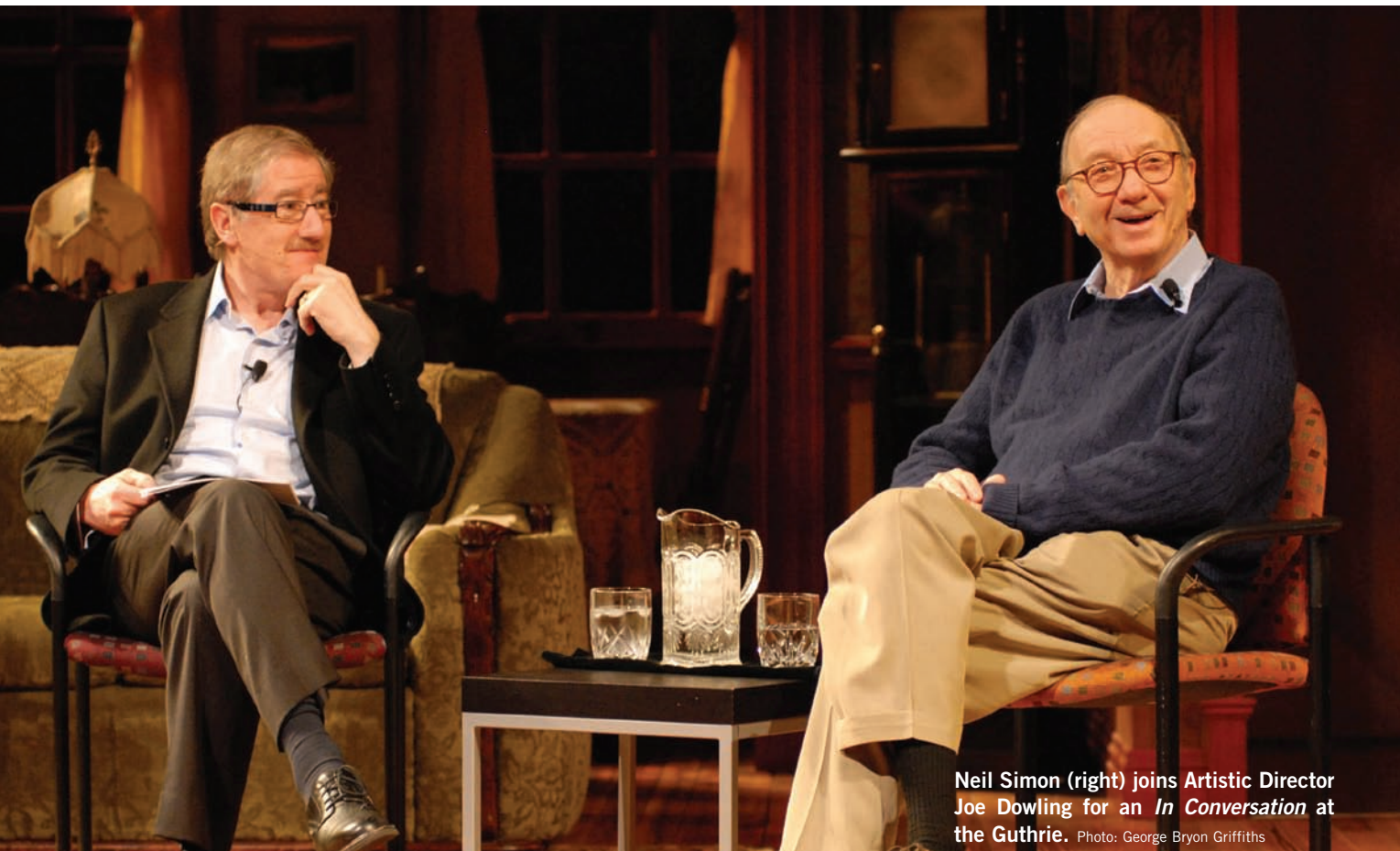
Cities will take a mere hundred.’”

During its first season, the Guthrie Theater featured the well-known stage actors Jessica Tandy and Zoe Caldwell. Tyrone Guthrie served as artistic director until 1966 and continued to direct at the theater until 1969, two years before his death. In 1994, after an international search, Joe Dowling was named the Guthrie’s seventh artistic director. Dowling came to the Guthrie from Ireland’s Abbey Theatre, where he was the youngest artistic director in the theater’s long history. Dowling continued the Guthrie’s commitment to repertory theater and presided over a return to national touring. Under Dowling, the number of subscribers reached a new high of 32,000, and his 2006 production of *Hamlet* set record attendance.

“Overall, we’re still feeling like we’re settling in,” says Joe Dowling. “But it’s

time for the hard work to begin.” He also acknowledges the suddenly grander scale on which his already big-budget regional theater is operating. “Our challenges extend from moving from one and a half theaters to a three-theater organization,” Dowling says. “The shift requires us to think more long-term, in our relationships with writers and designers, as well as considering how to diversify and expand our audience.”

The local reaction to the Guthrie’s 2006-07 season was at first one of skepticism. In addition to *Gatsby*, programming included *The Merchant of Venice* and Neil Simon’s *Lost in Yonkers*. Plays on the McGuire proscenium stage included works by Tom Stoppard, Alfred Uhry, Tennessee Williams and George Bernard Shaw. The proscenium stage opened in June with the North American premiere of Ireland’s Druid Theater Company’s



Neil Simon (right) joins Artistic Director Joe Dowling for an *In Conversation* at the Guthrie. Photo: George Bryon Griffiths

DruidSynge, prior to its Lincoln Center Festival run.

Dowling defends his selections on the grounds of artistic vitality and their contribution to the American cultural dialogue. "I think there's inevitability in the argument that in a new theater people ought to do fancy new things," Dowling says. "But our mission is unchanged. We moved in order to have better facilities. It would be foolish to ask an audience to move location and to also develop a taste for different theater."

Nicolai Ouroussoff, writing in *The New York Times*, comments that, "the true heart of the new building is its connective tissue, such as the two-tier public foyer where theatergoers mingle during the intermission." Dowling is a master of connecting art and community. The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul are undergoing an economic and social transformation. Ouroussoff notes, "The city too is a theater, a vast unstable laboratory that is constantly being reshaped by economic, political and imaginative forces." Dowling knows well that his theater, like the Mississippi River, must challenge and connect people by promoting a national cultural awareness. That is the mission of this great new American theater as the curtain rises for a much anticipated second act. [IA](#)



The Guthrie Centre in Ireland

In the 1970s a committee was formed of nominees from the Arts Councils of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to set up, according to the terms of the will of Sir Tyrone Guthrie, a center for creative artists at Annaghmakerrig, Co. Monaghan. The trustees, over a period of time, also purchased the gardens, the original parkland and lake, the farmyard with its buildings, and leasehold of woodlands which are managed

by Coillte, the state forestry company. The re-integrated Annaghmakerrig estate was handed over to the nation in 2004 and its maintenance is now the responsibility of the Office of Public Works.

The board and staff of that Tyrone Guthrie Centre invited the public to a celebration at the Abbey Theatre in November 2006 that marked the center's 25th anniversary.

Rosaleen Linehan (Grandma Kurnitz) and Finnerty Steeves (Bella) in Neil Simon's *LOST IN YONKERS* at the Guthrie Theater. Photo: Michal Daniel

