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Lombardo Street: On theatre, music and the future of San Jose Rep

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Rick Lombardo is always moving, always working and always finding new ways to engage audiences at San Jose Repertory Theatre.

Photo: David John Chavez

Rick Lombardo is an amazing multi-tasker. In today's world of leading a major regional theatre, there isn't really a choice. Fundraising. Directing. Grants. Auditions. Workshops. Talkbacks. The list of tasks that are required for artistic and commercial success is vast indeed.

But Lombardo is a theatre guy through-and-through. Having spent his formidable years working in various summer stock companies, as well as many years as a freelance director in New York City, Lombardo has found a home at San Jose Repertory Theatre.

What has made Lombardo's tenure such a thrilling one is the number of accolades that he and his company have been able to achieve in his short time. Unrelenting critical acclaim has made its home in downtown San Jose's centerpiece theatre, beginning with Lombardo's first association with the company, the Rep's world premiere of the epic Khaled Hosseini novel *The Kite Runner*, as well as his interpretation of Shakespeare's *"As You Like It,"* his Rep directorial debut. Since that time, the 51-year-old Lombardo's stewardship has led to a sustained commitment to the highest theatrical artistry, one that has continued well into Lombardo's second full season of his Rep tenure. Already this season, both *Black Pearl Sings*, which Lombardo directed, and the medical drama *The Secret Order* have received critical acclaim throughout the Bay Area.

Lombardo was able to sit down and share his thoughts about a variety of topics: his first foray into the world of theatre, the challenges that he faces with the Rep, and what the game of golf means to him.

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David John Chavez: What was the first play you ever acted in?

Rick Lombardo: *I was 16-years-old and I played Pappy Yokum in Lil Abner at Xaverian High School in Brooklyn. I got in the play to meet girls, and we were in an all-boys high school. I remember getting on stage, and I said some line which got this uproarious laugh. At that moment, I had this feeling that I was in the exact place I'm supposed to be.*

DJC: How about the first play you ever directed?

RL: *When I went to college, I was studying pre-med at Georgetown University. I had avoided anything artistic, didn't play in a band, didn't go out for plays and I got really bored. But later I got into the student drama society. Every year, the society would do a play for incoming freshmen, and one year I was asked to direct. Somebody must have thought I looked like a sucker. I had never directed a play, but I thought I would give that a try. It was a one-act by George Bernard Shaw. I directed this play, and it was an experience where my brain sort of did a 360. I felt like it was using every part of me. A director has to be a communicator. I was always in bands, and directing was like playing new music. I would feel the rhythm of a play and see the stage pictures. All these things I dabbled in came together in directing for the stage. I kind of never looked back after that.*

DJC: How did this experience manifest itself into the rest of your undergraduate education?

RL: *Right after I directed that play, the new semester just started. I had just bought 200 dollars of organic chemistry books for a second year make-or-break class. It was being taught by a fairly well-known researcher who held a patent. His point-of-view was that all of us would be researchers. And then he said, I just want you all to know the only viable career is in the natural sciences. Its the only way you can really know the world. I wrote that down and thought about what he said. Soon after, I walked out of the lecture hall and changed my major. What he said made me think about what I felt about the value of art. Art is the most viable way that we choose as humans to examine our world and examine the way we live in this world.*

DJC: What was the most appealing piece of taking the job as San Jose Reps Artistic Director?

RL: *Just the entire move from the east to the west. My wife and I were ready for a new adventure. We were in Boston for 13 years, really well-established, and we had a very well-respected mid-size theatre (Lombardo was the artistic director of the New Repertory Theatre in Watertown, MA). I was starting to feel everything I could offer that company I had done. It was time for somebody else to take the company, and time for me to do what I did somewhere else. For every natural leader, theres a moment when its time to move on. I felt like the last thing I want to be is the person stifling the creativity of the company. I was looking for a new opportunity, and San Jose Rep in many ways was broken. For me, I loved the institutional challenges - what is the right art and how do you do that art so you can engage a community? Art drives everything philanthropy, tickets sales, conversations around the company. The Rep needed the kind of thing I do, and it seemed like it would be a good fit for both of us.*

DJC: You took over for Timothy Near, who had a long tenure at the helm (22 years, leaving at the end of the 2008-2009 season). What were some areas that you felt were important to sustain based on the previous regime, and where did you feel the company would be able to grow with your artistic vision?

RL: *One of the things the Rep has always tried to do which sits right where I live is a commitment to do newer work, whether it is a west coast or world premiere. Tim had done that at the Rep, and to continue that was pretty much a no-brainer. She, through the plays she picked, would find ways to tell stories which reflect the diversity of San Jose. We are well known for doing world premieres which is a direct line from what Timmy set out to do. Im very interested in finding ways to engage new audiences. In some ways I feel the Rep had grown a little insular. We were serving a wonderful community, but we were serving the same community. We need to be attracting the younger people and embrace all the community. We try to do a lot of work with high tech. My inaugural production of As You Like It, we had multiple projectors and multiple computers, using all of the new media we have at our disposal. Its where I live and where I want to go.*

DJC: Not long before you came, the Rep was hit pretty hard with a precarious financial situation, yet the productions still maintained a strong hold artistically. Where are we now with the Reps financial situation and what still needs to be done for long term sustainability?

RL: In 2006, The Rep had real severe problems. When I arrived, the Rep just went through the process of the budget, getting to a scale where we needed to start paying the city back (The city provided a line of credit to the Rep, with more money being contributed by a few donors). Then the recession hit. We had the best laid plans, but those plans werent able to keep up with the impact that we had from the recession. Weve had to since go back and scale down even further. Were hoping by the end of this season, for the first time in many years, to post a significant surplus. What we need to start doing is to show the city, the community and our key supporters that we can maintain artistic quality, maintain shows we want to do and live within our means. What the audience doesnt see is that staff members are now wearing three or four hats, versus one or two. We have to make sure every dollar we spend has to look like five dollars on stage. Its something weve become very used to doing. But where you cant skimp, where I draw the line, is the quality of actors, the quality of plays and the quality of directing. The power of live theatre is about the power of the actor - when you give an actor a great story, everything is icing on the cake. We cant throw money at problems the way we used to, but we have to throw effort and desire.

DJC: What are some projects that you want to continue to nurture in order to maintain the Reps success?

RL: Right now were working really hard in wanting everybody to feel they own (the Rep). Weve started pay-what-you-can night. I want every person to access the shows we are doing, and we want people to know that anyone can come to the Rep. We would also love to create a deeper relationship with San Jose State University and the students there. We have created a deeper affiliation with the department.

DJC: How does the Rep continue its evolution into finding a new and exciting theatre for the next generation of theatre goers?

RL: Your generation, Generation Y, sees the world in an entirely different way. These large institutions, we need to change. We need to figure out ways to break the mold. We want to get young people excited about theatre again. Its the question that every theatre in the country faces. In 2035, traditional theatre audiences will be gone. Its not business as usual. We have to figure out what theatre the audience of 2035 will want to see. And thats ok. Our theatre today doesnt look like Shakespeares theatre.

DJC: Were there any parts of your job you never expected to do?

RL: There is no job that I have not done at some point, which includes dealing with clogs in toilets just before curtain. I came up doing internships and summer stock. I just love everything about theatre. In my current job, fundraising is such a significant part of what artistic directors do these days. People want to know who theyre investing in, not just what there investing in.

DJC: When you direct a piece, do you feel there are added expectations because you are the face of the company?

RL: Yes, and I love it. I always believed that as an artistic director, you have to lead by example. When you are putting yourself out there, you have to put your own work out there too. My work has always

been passionate, clear and compelling. The question is, can you do that every time out, speak directly to an audience? Im excited by that challenge. You have to lead by example.

DJC: When you are not working, what are some things you do in town to decompress and recharge?

RL: *One thing I like to do is get out and play golf. I get to turn off my brain from whatever play Im directing. Other than that, Im kind of a homebody. I enjoy cocooning with my wife and daughter. My wife and I love to cook, we love good food, good wine, and we love to just sit at home and watch movies. Im also still a musician. I love to pick up a guitar. Thatll turn my mind off, but thats if Im in a contemplative mood. If Im in an angrier mood, Ill go in the garage, get on the drum set and bang away for an hour.*

DJC: What have you learned in previous jobs that have helped you sustain success as the Reps artistic director?

RL: *The importance of listening is what Ive learned. Im sure my job is to lead, to pick plays. Im supposed to lead the conversation in some way, but Ive learned that its much more important to listen. I learned to be in the lobby and to talk to people in the lobby, do audience surveys. I have always tried to do audience discussions, because I know audiences come to our shows to learn, and I know that I learn from them.*

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