

SCENE

THE WEEK OF MAY 29 - JUNE 5, 2015

BOB RECHNITZ
MAN OF LETTERS AND SO MUCH MORE

IT IS ALTOGETHER fitting that this interview was conducted in a library within the Two River Theater.

No one deserves to be labeled “Man of Letters” and “of Theatre” more than Robert Rechnitz, holder of multiple degrees in literature and founding producer of one of the most significant professional theater companies in the country.

In the spirit of “getting there is half the fun,” Rechnitz, along with his wife Joan, spoke of their shared history of personal, academic, and theatrical pursuits that culminated in the founding of Two River Theater in Red Bank. (They refreshed one another’s memories along the way, as long-devoted couples do.)

Born and raised in Pueblo, Colorado, Bob earned his bachelor and master’s degrees at Northwestern and Columbia universities, respectively. While at Columbia, he held down an English-teaching job at a small New Jersey institution: Monmouth College. After two years, Bob “decided I should get a Ph.D.,” and enrolled at the University of Colorado, a fortuitous return to the Centennial state, where he met Joan, then a U of CO undergrad.

Soon after marrying in 1961, the couple relocated back east. Colorado felt “alien” to confirmed easterner Joan, whose family lived in Scarsdale, New York, and Monmouth College was only too glad to welcome newly minted Dr. Rechnitz back, where he served as professor of American literature for more than 30 years, retiring in 1999.

Between his stints at Northwestern and Columbia, Bob had pursued an acting career, studying with Lee Strasberg at the famed Actors Studio (where, he recalls memorably, he once was in class with Marilyn Monroe). “I was hell-bent on becoming an actor,” he said, “until I saw Marlon Brando in ‘The Men.’ That did it for me,” he said, “although I did appear as the father in ‘Life with Father’ at a Pennsylvania summer theater in 1980.” (Joan dyed his hair red for the role). Some years later, Bob and his daughter Emily, then 15, played father Otto and daughter Anne in “The Diary of Anne Frank” at Brookdale Community College. By then, however, he had realized that his passion for the theater would be better served in teaching about plays and directing them rather than acting in them.

Prof. Rechnitz recalled his earliest directing gigs: “I wasn’t allowed the use of Monmouth’s theater facility because I wasn’t in the Theatre Department, so I directed a one-act called ‘The Gloaming Oh My Darling’ in a classroom.” His second directorial effort was “The Physicists,” by Friedrich Durrenmatt, a full-length play that is rarely staged. “That’s why I picked it,” Bob said. “Good or bad, no one would know the difference.”

Also widely admired for contributing their time and resources to philanthropic endeavors, the Rechnitzes have given generously to several organizations including Riverview Medical Center and Brookdale Community College. Last year they gave an unprecedented \$1 million donation to a Brookdale Community College program that provides a cost-free head start for Neptune High School students who are the first in their family to go to college. It also allows them the opportunity to earn an associate degree by the time they finish high school.

The Two River Theater Company is the Rechnitzes’ shining achievement. As with many such endeavors, its origins were modest. Sole investors at the start, Bob and Joan exercised caution. “We wanted to keep it sensible,” Bob said, “considering the personal investment.” Being granted charge-free use of Monmouth College’s theater – “finally,” he said with a chuckle – furthered their cause, and Two River Theater premiered there in 1995, the same year Monmouth became a university.

An expense Rechnitz chose not to minimize was salaries, paying actors \$500 a week, a very generous figure for a then non-Equity (the

actors union) company. “It didn’t make us popular with other companies, but I wanted our artists paid,” he said.

The first season was planned to entice a cross-section of Monmouth County audiences: A. R. Gurney’s “The Cocktail Hour,” about upper-class family issues (a “Rumson-y” play, according to Bob) led off, followed by the feminist-slanted “The Heidi Chronicles,” with appeal to young theatergoers, and by Shaw’s “Misalliance,” (“on the weighty side, but an out-and-out comedy.”)

Having agreed to relinquish the space when Monmouth’s fledgling Theatre Arts department grew to require full-time use of the facility, Rechnitz moved his by-then popular company to the Algonquin Theatre in Manasquan after two years, all the while contemplating the establishment of a permanent home. “Red Bank would be

nice,” he and Joan mused. “It’s only a few miles from home,” a seemingly casual reason for what became the perfect location. Learning that his friend Bruce Blaisdell was selling his Bridge Avenue property, Bob opened negotiations, and the state-of-the-art Two River Theater rose on that property. The opening, 10 years ago this week, was a unanimously praised production of the 1936 Pulitzer Prize-winning comedy “You Can’t Take It With You,” directed, fittingly, by Robert M. Rechnitz.

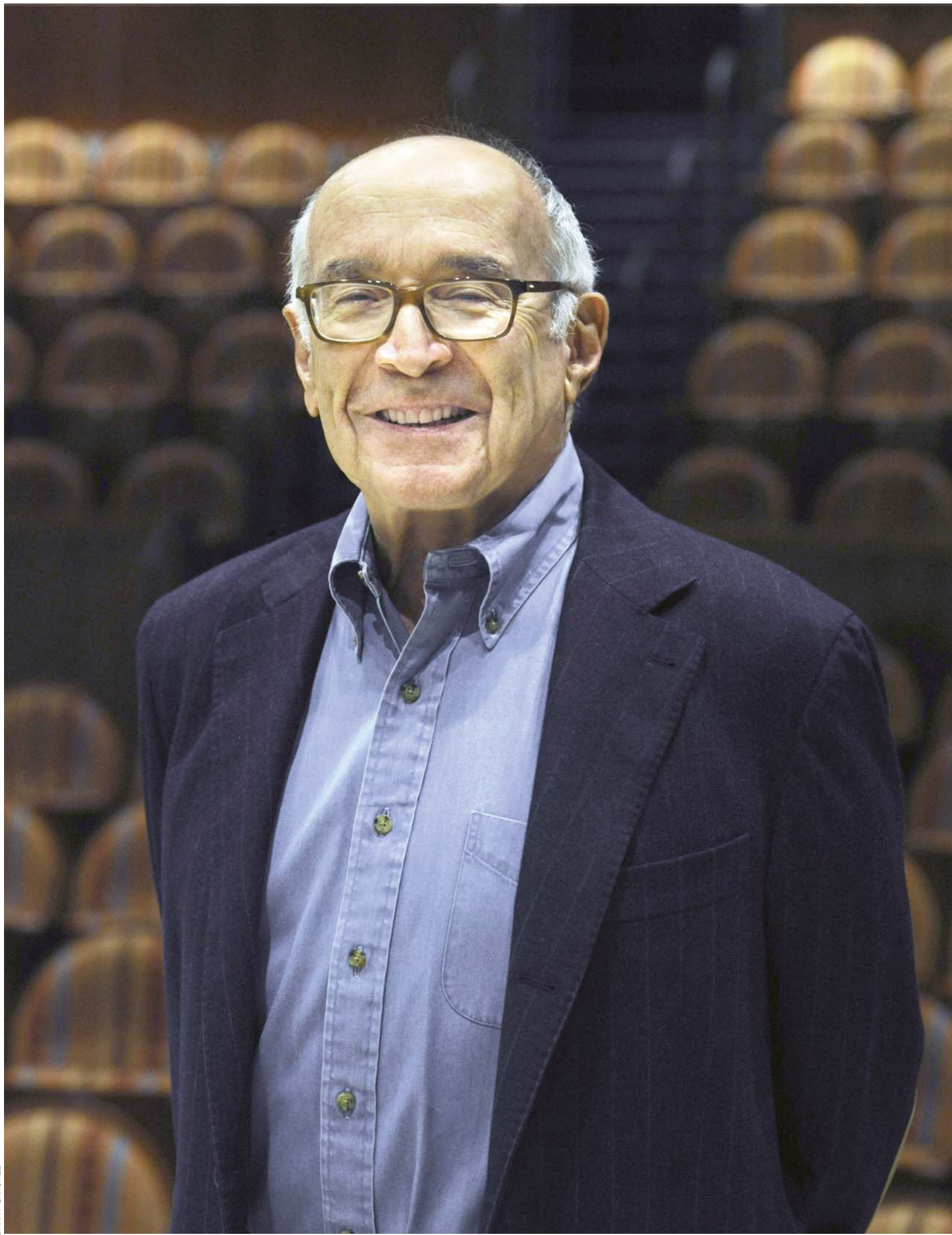
The rest is history: After 20 years, Two River Theater Company, widely esteemed for the variety and quality of its productions, has little left to prove. In the words of five-year artistic director John Dias, the Rechnitzes’ original “brave and improbable plan,” is a lasting tribute to “their faith in the human spirit.” One might assume that no new vistas loom for the 83-year-old

founder; but one would be mistaken. We can now add “Playwright” to Bob Rechnitz’s resume. “Lives of Reason,” written by Bob and former Monmouth University History Professor Ken Stunkel, premieres at Two River next January.

“Lives of Reason” is set at an English Department faculty party. Asked if it was in part autobiographical, Bob replied “Absolutely not!” – an emphatic assertion that whets the theater-going appetite. When pressed about prospects for the play to eventually be widely produced, Bob refused to speculate, saying only “I am pessimistic beyond all imagining.” Really, Dr. Rechnitz? If so, you sure had a lot of folks fooled.

BY PHIL DORIAN

Phil Dorian writes the Scene on Stage theater reviews for The Two River Times.



DANNY SANCHEZ