

# The Compelling Storyteller

Director **Scott Elliott**  
Scores A Trifecta  
In NYC Theater

By Iris Wiener



Photo by Bruce Glikas

**A**s the founding artistic director of one of New York's top theater companies, Scott Elliott enjoys telling compelling stories. Few have directed and produced the astonishing number of works that mark his lengthy resume, and with two plays and a musical running or about to debut, Elliott's own story may be the most interesting of all.

These days, his name almost invariably pops up in any discussion about New York theater. His

credits include such works as David Rabe's *Hulburyly* (for which he won a Lucille Lortel award and four nominations, as well as four Drama Desk nominations), Wallace Shawn's *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, Mike

Leigh's *Goose-Pimples* (three Drama Desk nominations), and *Ecstasy* (OBIE and SSDC's Calloway Award).

"They are diverse," he says of the pieces he has chosen to direct and produce. "But for

some reason they all resonate with me. I would never do anything unless I really love it. I won't do it. I don't do anything just for money, and I would never do anything unless I absolutely loved it and felt passionate about it."

His current pieces showcase both the diversity and passion that he always strives for in his productions. *Abigail's Party* is a classic, Off Broadway satire about British suburbia in the 1970's. The characters are understandable and well-defined, yet kooky



In *Abigail's Party*, Jennifer Jason Leigh (Left) and Elizabeth Jasicki are part of Elliott's comical look at the darker side of humanity.

Photo by Carol Rosegg

on an almost morbid level. Centering around Beverly (originally played by Jennifer Jason Leigh), a socialite putting up with a stressed, workaholic estate agent who quivers in his wife's presence, the play cleverly questions

marriage and the consequences of entering into a bad one. Elliott's comical look at the crazed attendees of Beverly's get-together would make anyone question their own logic when choosing a soulmate.

"*Abigail's Party* is a piece that I really loved since I started working with [playwright] Mike Leigh, which was ten years ago. I guess I felt like it was a challenging piece. Even though I have found all work with Leigh challenging, this one kind of has this sort of indie film world feel," he says. "And I just love stories about humans; I love when plays offer actors a lot of human behavior and humanity. *Abigail's Party* is sort of the darker side of humanity. There's a lot of passive-aggressiveness. But I wanted to do something that was a love story — just not a typical love story."

Elliott took the atypical love story to a new level with his current Broadway revival of *Barefoot in the Park*. "It is all new," he says. "I looked at the script and tried to keep it in the time period, but make it modern so that young people would understand it."

The Neil Simon play, which hasn't seen the bright lights of Broadway since it premiered in 1963, centers on a young newlywed couple, Corine (Amanda Peet) and Paul Bratter (Patrick Wilson), who are trying to start a life together in New York. Joining them in this adventure is Corine's mother (Jill

Clayburgh) and neighbor (Tony Roberts).

Both pairs nicely parallel one another in their fluid, light-hearted traits, all of which Elliott sees in himself. "I relate to aspects of all of my plays — well, at least my interpretation in all of them. I put a little bit of me in everything. That's how I work; I can only base my notions of life on my own crazy experiences.

"I would say I'm in a little bit of all of the characters in *Barefoot*. You're given a character by the playwright, and I try to support them in a way that would create a world, or my own personal world that I want to create around the play," he explains.

Any quirks and crazy flaws found in the characters of *Abigail's Party* and *Barefoot in the Park* will surely be matched by the upcoming *The Threepenny Opera*, one of the greatest hits to ever shake up the world of musical theater. Taking place in the underworld of a foggy London town, the cops are corrupt, pickpockets and prostitutes rule, and Mack the Knife presides as the dapper prince of thieves. The mesmerizing homage to the seedy side of life returns to Broadway with a cast including theater sensation Alan Cumming, "Saturday Night Live's" Ana Gasteyer, and '80s pop star Cyndi Lauper.

One might wonder what made Elliott decide to go from intense, comedic romance to a dark opera? "Well, *The Threepenny Opera* is funny, a dark kind of funny. It's not light, the message isn't light, but hopefully people will be entertained by it. And the message will creep in, and they'll be entertained and think, 'Wow, that had a message and I didn't realize it.'"

Elliott is really excited about the dynamics of the cast in his latest venture. "It's just one of those things where I wanted to make up a cast that was like a cross section of humanity, and so there's a lot of different people in the play with different backgrounds and different places in their lives," he says. "I think that that's one of the beauties of working on something like *The Threepenny Opera*. You can do that and get away with a lot."

Cumming returns to Studio 54 for *Threepenny* after bringing down the house as the Emcee in *Cabaret*. "Cumming didn't need auditions, and I thought that he would be a really interesting modern Mack the Knife. I wanted to give the show a modern feel," says Elliott.

A Bellmore, Long Island native, Elliott is especially excited about his current work because he knows it appeals to New York and Long Island audiences. "*Abigail's Party* and *Barefoot in the Park* are about interesting

suburban people, so I know they'll all enjoy both shows. Plus, Long Islanders are just the coolest people in the world!" Elliott laughs.



Patrick Wilson and Amanda Peet shown here in Elliott's atypical love story, *Barefoot in the Park*.



Photo by Carol Rosegg

Broadway has also been graced with his talent in such prestigious fare as Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*, Clare Booth Luce's *The Women*, and Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. He also recently directed the feature film based on Jane

Hamilton's novel, *A Map of the World*, starring Sigourney Weaver and Julianne Moore.

*The Threepenny Opera* begins previews on March 24<sup>th</sup>. Elliott is also very proud of The New Group's latest play *The Music Teacher*, by Wallace Shawn and Allen Shawn. Upcoming shows include *Spalding Gray Matter*, and *Everything's Turning into Beautiful* starring Annabella Sciorra and Bobby Cannivale.

To learn more about Scott Elliott and The New Group, or to purchase tickets to *Abigail's Party*, visit [www.thenewgroup.org](http://www.thenewgroup.org). To purchase tickets to *Barefoot in the Park*, visit [www.telecharge.com](http://www.telecharge.com) or Cort Theatre on 138 West 48<sup>th</sup> Street.

### Abigail's Party: A Hysterical Treat

Five adults try, somehow, to survive *Abigail's Party*, a drink-fest of a play filled with deception, embarrassment and, well, booze. The plot doesn't seem to move very quickly, but the action quickly degenerates into a social disaster, as all five characters take a drastic turn.

Abigail isn't actually hosting the party, it's Beverly (currently Gayton Scott), a know-it-all, bombastic housewife who thinks that keeping her guests' hands and mouths full at all times is the same as keeping them happy. Any divorced couple can surely relate to her relationship with her husband (Darren Goldstein) — one filled with simple needs and frustrations, as well as a consuming anger.

Other guests at Beverly's party include Angela (Elizabeth Jasicki), her new neighbor, a mousy ditz with an unworldly laugh, Angela's stone-faced husband, Tony, (Max Baker), and another neighbor, Susan (Lisa Emery). She's Abigail's single mother and the only attendee with a head on her shoulders. Not surprisingly, she's banished from the wild party to Beverly's apartment. Set in British-suburbia, circa the 1970s, the play is a hysterical treat.

### 'Barefoot:' Simon's Romp Revisited

From Broadway's most popular playwright comes a classic romantic comedy revival, starring Amanda Peet (films "Something's

Gotta Give," "The Whole Nine Yards"), Patrick Wilson (film "The Phantom of the Opera"), Jill Clayburgh (*An Unmarried Woman, Starting Over*), and Tony Roberts (*How Now, Dow Jones, Play it Again*).

The Neil Simon story follows young New Yorkers Corie and Paul Bratter, fresh off a whirlwind honeymoon and starting their married life together in a tiny fifth floor walk-up. He is a conservative lawyer; she is a free-spirited romantic. Throw in her meddling mother, their eccentric upstairs neighbor, and a hilarious sequence of misunderstandings that test the boundaries of their love, and you've got the perfect mix for laughter.

Peet and Wilson step into the roles played by Jane Fonda and Robert Redford in the well-loved film version of the comedy. Both act with an ease that takes years to perfect on stage, and it's invigorating to see their charm and comedic skill unfold. Roberts returns to *Barefoot* after having taken on the role of the young newlywed in the original 1963 production. Now starring as Victor Velasco, he may look older but his youth shines through. Clayburgh is a natural in front of an audience, and her matronly annoyances come across as charmingly funny. *Barefoot in the Park* has all the energy and fun of an actual stroll barefoot in the park.

— Iris Wiener