

Arts & culture

Thomas Riccio

Organic's artistic director talks about growing up Italian, Chicago theater

Thomas Riccio is the artistic director of the Organic Theater, one of Chicago's cultural traditions as well as an influential theater. Riccio is young, confident and outspoken. Like all good professionals in the theater, he is totally committed to the theater and its role in our lives. Experimental in his approach, he is perhaps the most daring of the working artistic directors. He has a strong sense of the value of his Italian roots but will insist that all Italian Americans reside not in the past but in the future if we are to continually define the meaning of Italian American.

Fra Noi: Are you a Chicago native?
Riccio: Nope...Cleveland. Born and raised there.

FN: Where did you go to school?
R: I went to Case Western for awhile and then to Boston University.

FN: So, what did you study?
R: I studied English for a B.A. and Drama for an M.F.A.

FN: Did you stay on the East Coast?
R: Well...I sailed the Great Lakes. That's why I actually started traveling. That was for about a year and a half. That was the first time I came Chicago. Then from there...well, I actually went back to school and graduated from Cleveland State University. It took me about six years...you know how it is. And then...six months in Italy.

FN: Really? Were you from a heavily flavored Italian American family? Were they into the culture?

R: Oh, very much so. My father's family had 12 children and my mother's family had five. Our family get-togethers are very big. Too big, actually. Both my parents were born here. My grandfather came over here because they were poor...impoverished. My grandmother was an orphan and was brought over here by relatives when she was about 16. She was brought over here to become a bride.

FN: No kidding! That sounds like it came right out of a script.

R: But...They lived in a very traditional Italian community which has since broken up because of people moving to the suburbs...things like that. It was the west side community centered around Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church.

FN: Do you have brothers and sisters?
R: I have two brothers, an older one and a younger one...Anthony and Jim.

FN: Now, did your family speak Italian...did you learn any?

R: Oh yes, they spoke it and I learned enough. You see, I directed shows in Italy. I directed a show at the Teatro di Roma...and just recently in the Fall we did "La Trota" here. Hopefully it will be the beginning of some international exchange here at the Organic. So, like I said, I've been to Italy and I knew a lot more Italian than I thought I knew. You know...all



Artistic director Thomas Riccio has brought innovation and an international outlook to the Organic Theater stage.

those sounds were in my head as a child. But, the funny thing is I learned a dialect. For instance, I have friends here at the Italian Cultural Institute. And when I talk to them, they laugh. I'll use a word that I think means dishtowel but to them in the Neapolitan dialect, it's closer to a kind of basket that the women carry on their head. So, it's very different...very Salerno-Naples...gypsy-inspired. When I went to Italy, I had relatives, cousins.

Now, I was in luck because my grandfather's sister, my great aunt, was there. I saw my grandfather's face in hers. I also met a great uncle from my father's side. So, I go there to this little town of 3,000. This old man is there, hugging me. He takes me to this little room, very sparse and peasant and shows me this drawer full of letters and photos, all from my father and uncles. He had saved everything that was sent from Cleveland for the last 40 and 50 years. He just wanted to show me that he had saved everything...that he had kept alive the family in his heart. It was a very striking moment.

FN: So, when you went over there for the first time, did you have any...what...great feeling of connection?

R: Well, to be honest, I felt it was very easy. You know, the Italians aren't like the Germans or the French. If you don't know the language well, they don't jump on your case.

FN: So, what did you feel you brought back from there that was important?

R: My heritage...a sense of who I was. It was important for me to see my roots.

FN: Were your people affected by the war?

R: Oh, yes, very much so. When we

were walking around, through the fields, we'd be stepping in craters made during the war. The house we stayed in had a cabinet, and it was a German footlocker from the war...things like that. And there are a lot of stories. One of my aunts who came to the States after the war, she'd speak of her experiences over there as a young girl. Actually, she said that the American soldiers were worse than the Germans...raping...whatever. This is the Naples area. I had one relative who was a soldier taken captive in Ethiopia. He was captured by the British and became a POW in England. He said the British were very rough on them.

FN: Now, to move on...how did you become interested in the theater?

R: Well, the big turning point for me in terms of my real interest in theater came when I was working on the ore boats on the Great Lakes. I met a fellow there, a former professor who was a great reader. Up to that point at the age of 19, I had seen maybe six plays. This fellow's cabin was filled with books. When you're out in the middle of the lake, you can only play so many card games. And I read but mostly junk novels...things like that. So this guy turned me on to some heavies, some of them were playwrights. When I got off the lake, I took some courses in theater at a community college. Then these courses led to college and then to Cleveland State and then to graduation and graduate school in Boston.

FN: Why Boston University?

R: I wanted an East Coast school. I had been to Boston and I liked it there.

FN: Was there much theater going on in Boston?

R: Well, I was lucky because I had ap-

plied to the Yale School of Drama. Part of the reason I wanted to go there was Robert Brustein who at the same time was moving to Boston and to Harvard.

FN: You were already familiar with Brustein?

R: Oh, yes. I know his work. I was familiar with his writings... "The Third Theater," "The Theater of Revolution"...his articles in the *New Republic*. So I knew his work and just about the time I get there, Brustein brings his A.R.T. Theater from Yale to Harvard. Harvard had no real theater school. Not that many professionals around. When the opportunity came for a work-study position...well, I was in the right place at the right time.

FN: So, what did you do there?

R: Oh...everything. I assisted in direction, I was a dramaturge, I was an understudy. I developed also a sense of producing plays there.

FN: What was the most important thing you learned there?

R: I learned a great deal there. I like the quality of people, the intellectual exchange...the international atmosphere. I mean the people were very interesting.

FN: Did you come into contact with any Italian work there?

R: Well, for instance, Brustein was very big on Pirandello. He directed the Pirandello at the Goodman last year, "Six Characters in Search of an Author." Now he is involved back East with another Pirandello play, "Tonight We Improvise." In June he'll be doing one of Dario Fo's plays.

FN: So, what happened after Boston?

R: Well, I graduated on a Wednesday and the following Monday I was at a teaching job at a college outside of Cleveland. I went back also because my father had died and I wanted to help my mother straighten out her life somewhat. This was the summer of '82.

FN: After the East Coast, did you feel like you were going back to the sticks?

R: Not really. I knew a lot of people there...Cleveland Playhouse. I got my first Equity work there. I directed five plays there that year. Plus, my wife and I were to be married in the spring of '83 after her graduation from Boston University. No, I was confident. No, the time I spent there was good for my resume and to take care of family problems.

FN: So, where next?

R: My wife and I got married and the next day we went to New York. My wife was an actress and had an agent before she graduated college. I was accepted to New York University's Ph.D. program in Performance Studies. Eventually, I wound up at La Mama, which is also where I met Dario D'Ambrosi, who was here in the fall with "La Trota." He had a big falling out with

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his director and hired me to take his place. It was, once again, a very international scene. Dario had no script. He had me come by and he proceeded to act out the play, portraying all the characters as he went. The play, in fact, was his dream, his nightmare.

FN: Do you feel we lack an international dimension to theater in Chicago?

R: Well, it's unfortunate that not enough international theater comes here. I mean I get calls all the time from groups who are touring here. They'll stop in New York, L.A. and Frisco but not here.

They just fly over Chicago. I don't know exactly why. I think, in part, because no one bothers to ask them. The International Theater Festival is a great start. Sahlins is doing a wonderful job, but that's only four weeks every two years. It should happen all the time. This city is the what...third largest in the United States, but you'd never know it in an international sense.

FN: Yes. It's as if the...say, the Italian-Americans, have forgotten where they and their theater come from.

R: This is the problem with Italian Americans here. When I approached members of the Italian American community to sponsor Dario D'Ambrosi this fall, I found that they have this image of Italy that they had either as a child or that perhaps their parents had. That's with the baccala, the salami, the wine...all of that. Italy is a super modern country. It is a leader in world design. It is no longer the old country. A lot of Italian Americans don't understand this. It's as if you or I were to leave the United States in 1938. Well, the picture we'd have of the States today would still be that of 1938, regardless of what we read in the papers. Italy's theater is also modern and experimental. So these people were reluctant about funding Dario. They didn't feel he was representative of what they thought Italy was. You know, it's a trap! Dario, by Italy's terms is not as experimental as...as other groups. There's a group out of Rome I'd like to bring in... Krypton. They use lasers, holograms, they're very high-tech. They'd blow your mind. Much more high-tech than us. Groups like this are doing up-to-the-minute experimental work. They receive some subsidy from the government, but they're not national treasures. You don't see these groups as often. These people are our counterparts. It's very important for us to see them.

FN: I would add here that even before you lock horns over what might be called Italian American Theater, you still must contend with the concept of theater itself. If Italian Americans think theater is essentially "All in the Family", and a lot of them do, how are you ever going to expose them to the performance-oriented work of Dario D'Ambrosi?

R: It's change. Nobody likes change. Italian American neighborhoods, when they first came to be, were fine. I mean there was the common language, the values... those neighborhoods were like support groups. Unfortunately, a lot of those peo-

ple stayed when they should have moved on. They should have been absorbed into the larger culture. What happened was a regression, a pacification, a lot of these people did not grow to their full potential.

FN: A very interesting point.

R: They did not move on, socially or economically, because they were coddled by the neighborhood. In a sense, these neighborhoods which hold back the possibilities or potential of their residents, I think these neighborhoods have outlived their usefulness. You and I do not have to live next door to one another. We can call, say hi, let's have dinner...all of it. We can still be of help to one another but on a different level. We don't need the Mafia anymore. I don't need that anymore. If anything, I need a community of artists. That's my support group.

FN: Do you think something like the *Fra Noi* is regressive?

R: I think it's good. There is a commonality of culture there. It should become more international. Otherwise, eventually the paper will be about and read only by old people. That's all who are left in old neighborhoods, old people. I mean I'm not going to sit around and play bocci ball and cards and I don't think you are either. You, me and Lionel...we can help one another. We are second-generation Italians. That's what the *Fra Noi* could be...a paper for people like ourselves as well as the old people.

FN: So, how did you wind up at the Organic Theater?

R: I had a viable free lance career going in New York. I think at one point I directed nine plays over the course of the year. I saw an ad for the Organic, so I threw my resume into the mail.

FN: Who did you talk to?

R: Well, actually I wound up coming to Chicago several times. I'd come on Monday from Cleveland on my Equity day off...I was directing a show there. After the board interviewed me, I was offered the position. The same week the Cleveland Playhouse offered me a position as dramaturge. So I took both. This was when? May of '85.

FN: So, you drove back and forth for a year. When you took over, were you given a profile you had to maintain, a tradition to uphold, so to speak?

R: I was basically allowed to do my own thing. I mean the profile here was "E.R.". I think the profile was pretty damaged...at least in terms of doing new works. I was hired basically because my own tendency was larger scale work and less realistic.

FN: Were you tied to Organic's past? I mean, the board didn't say that you had to do things a certain way?

R: No.

FN: What did you find Organic's relationship to the other theaters in Chicago to be?

R: Well, we're not a subscription-based audience. Our tendency is to lead audiences, take more risks. That's what I would like to fashion here.

FN: What do you think of Chicago as a theater town?

R: I think it has a great potential. However, if it doesn't produce new work, as a leader it will definitely fall. I mean genera-

ting new writers, new artists from Chicago. If you look at the *Reader*, how many new works do you see? I mean you are not going to sustain a leadership role by producing Inge or Odets. People don't like me sometimes because I tend to be outspoken but...Chicago's rising reputation is as much due...and there has been good work here...is due to the fall of the New York Theater.

FN: Is there a Chicago "style" theater?

R: Yes. I think it is based on American Realism and comedy improv. They're the two big influences. Sometimes they mix. Now the Organic has a history of uniqueness, risk taking of sorts. I take risks. What bothers me lately is what I would call the Steppenwolf. A lot of actors are trying to follow Steppenwolf's model and become TV actors. The prime environment for nurturing that kind of acting is American Realism. That means that the acting out of this genre translates best to TV. Some agent comes and sees me as the nuclear space hero and you as some far-out mutant...well, he's not going to be interested because we don't translate to TV.

FN: What then do you offer an actor... especially since he or she must make a living somewhere down the line?

R: Well, to the detriment of the Chicago theater scene, all the actors and actresses educated here locally, they all more or less have the same method. What we offer here are new tools or other tools besides the ones they already have. You can expand your vocabulary. A lot of kids in "Beta-wolf," when they first worked with me, I'd ask them to be...say a turnip and they would flip out. Now, if I ask them the same question, they would ask me what

color. I see actors as creators, not functionaries. It doesn't exclude other work in other media, certainly.

FN: What can you and the Organic offer to the Italian American audience?

R: I'm offering it now. We are of the same cloth. I am their peer...they should come and see. All of the other plays I've directed...Cuban, Black, Italian...well, there is a little Italian American in all of them. I mean, I understand that a lot of Italians... my family, as well...came here for a better life. They left a bad one in Italy. So they didn't leave any great artistic or intellectual life over there. I understand. There is not a tradition of culture for most peasants and immigrants. This is true of my own family. It is up to us to create for our sons and daughters our own culture. It's okay to come to the theater or to the opera. Italian American Theater is being made by me which also happens to be mainstream American Theater.

FN: There isn't a place in this country called Italian America.

R: Nope.

FN: Okay...what are your goals in theater and what do you think of the role of theater in society?

R: To bring new insights to who we are...our culture, our society, our economics...politics...an insight that you can't find elsewhere...that person onstage who embodies an idea that is current with us now. For me, it is to present new ideas and new insights as to who we are as a people. That's my goal. These days they are trying to take the uniqueness away from theater. We must try to be unique, not just a seed ground for TV. What you find in the theater you find nowhere else.