

# The New York Times

## Gene Feist, Founder of the Roundabout Theater Company, Is Dead at 91



By BRUCE WEBER: MARCH 22, 2014

Gene Feist, who brought regular productions of classic theater to New York when he founded what is now the Roundabout Theater Company, a multistage Goliath that is one of the nation's most important nonprofit companies, died on Monday in Englewood, N.J. He was 91.

The cause was complications of pneumonia, his daughter Gena said. Mr. Feist lived at the Lillian Booth Actors Home in Englewood and died at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center.

Mr. Feist, a playwright and director who had worked in the burgeoning Off Off Broadway scene in the 1950s, was earning a living as a public school teacher when, with the help of his wife, an actress who performed as Elizabeth Owens, he started the Roundabout, one of the city's early nonprofit theater companies, in 1965.

Carving out a 150-seat performance space in a basement under a supermarket in Chelsea (now home to the comedy troupe Upright Citizens Brigade) and drawing an audience with an inexpensive subscription offer (three plays for \$5 — the first season had 400 subscribers), Mr. Feist assembled a schedule made up largely of revivals of classic plays from various eras.

Strindberg's "The Father" was the inaugural production, in 1966, and the next few years included works by Shakespeare, Shaw, Wilde, Molière, Odets, Brecht and Chekhov, among others. Nearly all were directed by Mr. Feist, whose work was almost always received by critics with gratitude for his enterprise, and usually with respect for his craft.

"The Roundabout is that admirable institution, a neighborhood theater in New York City," Clive Barnes wrote in The New York Times in 1971, reviewing "Uncle Vanya." "It stages major classics (and, certainly, we are starved for these in New York) as well as a few new plays, and it deserves well of us all."

"This 'Uncle Vanya' is perhaps the best production I have seen from the Roundabout Theater," Mr. Barnes wrote. "It is not a production of international class. The last 'Vanya' I saw had Michael Redgrave as Vanya and Laurence Olivier as Astrov, and the production before that paired Olivier's Astrov with Ralph Richardson's Vanya — and this represents the level of classic theater I one day want to see in New York. But for the time being we must do the best we can. And this 'Uncle Vanya' is good, and has a style and authority of its own."

Proving that there was an audience for the classics in the city, the Roundabout grew by leaps and bounds in the 1970s. By 1983, when Todd Haimes, a 26-year-old Yale business school graduate, took over as the theater's executive director in charge of finances, marketing and fund-raising the theater had more than 15,000 subscribers and a \$2 million budget

That did not mean there were no financial problems; having made a disastrous move to a larger space, the Roundabout filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 1978.

"Gene was a force of nature," Mr. Haimes said in an interview, adding, "Gene truly was an artistic person, not a managerial one." The financial situation of the Roundabout when Mr. Haimes joined the company "was a catastrophe," he said.

Mr. Haimes helped right the ship; the company emerged from bankruptcy protection in the mid-1980s. He replaced Mr. Feist as artistic director in 1990. Since then the Roundabout has become a powerhouse in the American theater, operating three Broadway houses, an Off Broadway theater and a black-box theater for experimental work, with 28,000 subscribers and an annual budget of \$60 million. It has won 29 Tony Awards.

"Gene was always very gracious and very supportive," Mr. Haimes said. "When I took over, he said, 'Just do whatever you have to to get us out of this.' "

Eugene Feist was born on Jan. 16, 1923, in Brooklyn and grew up in the rugged Coney Island neighborhood, where his father, Henry, who was called Hennie, owned a bar known as the Bucket of Blood and where young Gene was something of an outcast for his interest in books.

He was sent to a high school to learn the printing trade and joined the Army Air Forces afterward. Stationed in the Pacific during World War II and trained as an aircraft mechanic, he was assigned instead to newspaper and library work. After the war he attended the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh, where he befriended a classmate who was studying commercial art: Andy Warhol.

Before founding the Roundabout, Mr. Feist wrote plays that were performed in small theaters and helped build theater spaces and produce shows in New York. For a time he lived in Montana; he also ran a small

theater company in Tennessee. In the early years of the Roundabout, his day job was teaching drama in New Rochelle, N.Y.

Mr. Feist married Ms. Owens, who was born Irma Schneider and was also known as Kathe Snyder, in 1957. She died in 2005. His twin brother, Harold, died in 1997. In addition to his two daughters, Gena and Nicole Feist, he is survived by two grandchildren.

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