

# BAIN BOEHLKE

2009 DISTINGUISHED  
ARTIST

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

REALLY  
GROOVY





## INTRODUCTION

Robert J. Struyk | Board Chair, The McKnight Foundation

# Bain Boehlke has a gift for seeing.

When he was still in his teens, he looked at a ramshackle old barn outside Farmington and saw a summer playhouse supported by neighboring businesses and residents. As a young man in the early 1960s, he looked at a beat-up old pickup truck and saw a way to take productions of classic plays to outstate Minnesota towns. Nearly 30 years later, he looked at a pair of grimy storefronts occupying a crime-ridden Minneapolis intersection and saw a gem of a theater that would become the hub of a revitalized neighborhood. And year after year, he looks at plays that some have dismissed as irrelevant old warhorses and sees their enduring truth.

“Visionary” is a term you often hear when people are talking about artists, but it’s rare to find an artist who lives the meaning of the word in such a pure sense. In fact, Bain says that the idea for the Jungle Theater came to him in a vision of a fully realized theater poster (though he says he couldn’t quite make out the phone number).

Time and again, Bain has brought his visions to exhilarating life. And all of his visions have one thing in common: an ability to bring people together; a quality that’s based in Bain’s respect for our common humanity and his belief that theater is a catalyst for connection.

The best example, of course, is the beloved Jungle. Bain founded the theater in 1991, spurring the rebirth of the Lyn-Lake neighborhood in Minneapolis. “The audiences for each performance include plenty of people who also hold tickets for the Guthrie and the Minnesota Opera,” the *Southwest Journal* editorialized a decade ago when the Jungle moved across the street from its birthplace, “but they also include people who might not normally go to the theater. They go to the Jungle because it’s ‘theirs.’ It’s part of the neighborhood.”

Bain could have made his life in the theater in practically any neighborhood he chose—after all, he’s worked everywhere from Berlin to Tucson to Honolulu. But it has been our incredibly good fortune that he chose to make his life and his work in his home state of Minnesota. [Bain, we thank you for inviting the rest of us in to see what you see.](#)

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There's a real energy that comes from participating in the day-to-day economy of an intersection. And, of course, being a theater, we also play a role in the cultural life of the community. People come in from all over the city, but it's a neighborhood theater. That's how it began, and what it remains, and what it will continue to be. —Bain Boehlke, 2004





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# JUNGLE THEATER: THE VISION

The Jungle Theater believes that a stage for the performing arts is and should be, first and foremost, a sanctuary of free artistic expression; a stage whose mission is the presentation of works of art which mirror the tragic-comic nature of the human condition, a platform upon which we celebrate the joys, sorrows, hopes, and dreams of the human endeavor, seeking only to reveal and acknowledge our common humanity through the various mediums of the performing arts: plays, music, storytelling, film, performance art, and dance.





**BAIN**  
**BOEHLKE**

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

# HAIL, FELLOW TRAVELERS

July 23, 2009, I turned 70. Looking back on my childhood, on my young manhood—in those days I simply could not believe that 70 would ever occur. Not only did life itself seem too monumental to survive past 30, but the idea of actually aging seemed a cruel myth, an impossible fate. And now here I am. Seventy! As Walt Whitman wrote, “The ship has weathered every wrack, the prize we sought is won.” O captain, my captain, does NOT lie dead upon the deck but rather smiles back at me from the morning mirror, healthy, wealthy (in spirit), and (perhaps a little bit) wiser.

What a journey thus far, a journey across many waters, stopping at many ports of call and so many metaphors: porpoising through life (one of my favorites), or how many big ol’ honkin’ waves has my surfboard caught? Or how many rainbows have I arced? Or how many moonbeams have I straddled, hat in hand, with a whoop and a holler? Whatever metaphor comes up “out of the blue” (as Winnie in Beckett’s *Happy Days* so aptly puts it), **the journey has been real and the ride “she continues”—but truly not alone. So many fellow travelers—which, for me, is what the fun has really been all about!**

First and foremost, my oldest art-collaborator and faithful companion, that witness of our magically shared destiny, John Clark Donahue. A genius guy, a courageous and holy fellow-rider of the purple art sage, he has over the years selflessly and faithfully shared with me the enormous riches of his visionary imagination in revelatory productions not only on the Children’s Theatre stage (plays that he wrote especially for me to perform in—wonderful plays like *Hang on to Your Head*, *Old Kieg of Malfi*, and *How Could You Tell?*) but also at the Jungle.

Now an amazing 71, John continues to ride the turbulent, peaceful waves of the dark waters of his poetic imagination, a living example of that art-journeyer who only/always seeks a personal/suprapersonal ever-evolving relationship with Truth and Beauty; a living example of “Suffering-All” seeking only to remain painfully/joyfully/mysteriously connected to those invisible forces that shape our private/collective destinies and gently guide our unending journeys home.

And then, Wendy Lehr: Is she not the most beautiful, kind, witty, faithful, generous spirit I know? Oh yes she is, oh yes she is, oh yes, you know she is! Together we traveled the earthquake of social revolution in the '60s, finding each other, miraculously, on the stage! Over the years, we have, without seeking to, effected a collaboration of creative energies and artistic gifts knit together by a deep trust in each other's integrity and vision that has exceeded any dreams I ever had or ever will have of Art-Union! With what hilarity, with what deep compassion did we fight each other, hate each other, murder each other, love each other, die for each other on that greatest, most public, and most horrifyingly vulnerable avenue of shared experience, the Highway of the Living Theater!

And there is the inimitable Claudia Wilkens (her unforgettable Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* . . . this alone was worth it all) and then George Sutton (founding managing director of the Jungle, the Sweetest of Hearts) and then Terry Hempleman (the actor who proved to me, time after time, that the truth we sought in acting indeed translates into craft) and then Jodee (I Walk the Line) Thelen, and then Barbara Kingsley (my talisman of lyricism, spirit, the fierce willingness to take it all the way home) and then John Novak (faithful Jungle stage manager, Theater Angel of God) and Mary Winchell ("through all kinds of weather, what if the sky should fall . . .") and Sally Wingert (was her undeniably radiant genius ever more evident than in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane?*) and Allen Hamilton (the poet's hero) and Steven Rydberg (the Artist Eternal) and THEN . . . can I ever forget?! . . . the wild and woolly friends of my early apprenticeship in Berlin, my Theatre On-the-Road companions-in-courage . . . the actors, the writers, the directors, the designers, the tech crews . . . at the Children's Theatre, the Palace Theatre, the Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre . . . my God! . . . Theatre Perspectives . . . and last but not least the stalwarts of the lovely little Jungle! For the riches you have shared, for the amazing things you have taught, for your friendship, for your courage, for your invincible spirits . . . I thank you, I love you . . . and on we go! **On we go . . . and . . . HERE . . . WE . . . GO!**

My Love to You, Bain



BAIN BOEHLKE, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR  
AND FOUNDER OF THE JUNGLE THEATER,  
IS A PERPETUAL STUDENT OF THEATER—AND LIFE

BY TAD SIMONS

# KING OF THE JUNGLE

I first met Bain Boehlke in 1991, a few weeks before the original Jungle Theater opened on Lake Street in south Minneapolis. At the time, I covered theater for the (now dearly departed) *Twin Cities Reader*, a local weekly, and had been avoiding Bain's phone calls. I had no idea who he was—I didn't live in the Twin Cities during his storied years at the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis, and was unaware of his artistic pedigree as an actor or a director—but the man had left me several messages indicating that he was building a "fantastic" new theater, a unique venue that would inevitably become a "jewel" of the Twin Cities theater scene. He was persistent, to the point of being annoying. In one message he even admitted that he had considered calling it the Jewel Box Theater, but had elected to call it the Jungle Theater instead. In any event, the theater he was building was going to be spectacular, he said, and I really should write something about it.

Yeah, yeah, I remember thinking—another self-aggrandizing director pumped up on visions of artistic grandeur, proclaiming his own genius. Jewel Box? Please. No modesty there. And the Jungle Theater? An even worse name. If anything, Minnesota is the anti-jungle, a place where nothing stays green for long and creatures softened by life in a temperate climate are doomed. It sounded like a venture that, like most start-up theaters, would struggle to bloom but eventually die, having given its all to produce a few flowers that no one would ever see. In that sense, the Jungle Theater was a perfect name, I thought.

Then one day I answered my phone, and on the other end of the line, a man with a sonorous, musical sort of voice was asking what the hell was wrong with me? Hadn't I received his messages? Didn't I understand that he was creating something significant at the forlorn intersection of Lake Street and Lyndale Avenue? Didn't I get it? Something important was happening, he promised, and if I'd just come take a look at what he was building, I'd understand.

So I went. And looked. But I did not understand.

The place was a disaster. Chunks of water-stained plasterboard lay everywhere in piles, and miles of wiring hung from the ceiling above what was supposed to be the stage. Workers were hammering nails into planks of plywood where the “seats” would supposedly go, and a stack of two-by-fours in the “lobby” made it difficult to maneuver. It was far worse than I had imagined. Opening night was only three weeks away, and these idiots hadn't even built the stage yet!

But something odd happened while Bain was showing me the space that would soon become the Jungle Theater—something I now understand is a fundamental part of his artistic character, if not the essential key to his success. As he described each element of the theater to come—the stage, the bar, the elaborate palm-tree mural along the wall—his arms moved like paintbrushes and his eyes were wide with an almost frightening intensity. It soon became apparent to me that Bain Boehlke did not see the wreckage and debris around us; he was looking through it, beyond it, into the space it would become, a space that existed until then only in his imagination. Soon, the elaborate vision in his mind was going to take physical form, and this, it was clear, excited him tremendously. But he wasn't excited for himself; he was excited for me, for what he knew I was

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going to experience sitting in those seats over the years to come. Three weeks later, on opening night of *Only You*, the first production ever at the Jungle Theater, I understood: Bain Boehlke was not the delusional artistic windbag I had supposed—he was a genius.

That genius has manifested itself on the Jungle Theater stage countless times over the past two decades, in productions lauded by critics and audiences alike. Indeed, the Jungle Theater has established a gold standard for playmaking in the Twin Cities. Regular patrons have come to expect a level of professionalism and polish in Jungle plays that is actually quite rare, in the Twin Cities or anywhere else. But it's not just the quality of the plays Bain produces that's impressive. What amazes is that he's been able to maintain this consistently high standard of excellence for so many years. His 18-year run at the Jungle is remarkable enough, but it's worth remembering that Bain Boehlke was producing extraordinary theater—as an actor, a set designer, and a director—for 30 years before the idea for the Jungle materialized in his head one day on a beach in Mexico.

As a boy growing up in Warroad, Minnesota, Bain used to amuse himself by staging magic acts, writing musicals, and escaping the boredom and isolation of the long northern winters by creating elaborate cardboard dioramas, often of warm tropical environments with palm trees, where people could go outside in January without risking their lives. “My childhood was full of great efforts, but I didn't have the vocabulary or skills to fully manifest my ideas to my own satisfaction,” Bain says—but that didn't stop him from trying. He started his first theater, the Horseshoe Lake Summer Theater, in an abandoned barn in 1955, where he first staged Frederick Knott's *Dial M for Murder*, the play that kicked off the Jungle Theater's second season in 1992 and became its first breakout hit.

In 1959, after a brief stint in the theater department of the University of Minnesota, Bain joined the Army. He was trained as a code-breaker and was subsequently stationed in Berlin, where, as luck would have it, the Army had a fully functioning theater and never-ending demand for entertainment. “In Berlin I did a lot of plays,” Bain recalls. “Unbelievable as it may sound, the Army had its own theater, complete with prop and scene shop, the whole deal. And one of the most unreal aspects of making

theater in Berlin at the time was that the city was full of costume and prop shops with an amazing array of antique furniture and clothing dating back as far as the 16th century. They were like museums.” Everybody in Berlin took theater seriously: In preparation for directing Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, Bain went to one of those incredible prop shops in search of a stuffed seagull with its wings raised as if for flight. The shop didn’t have what he wanted, so (to Bain’s continuing horror 40 years later) the owner took an impromptu hunting trip, shot a seagull, and had it stuffed for him.

In his latest book, *The Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell posits the 10,000-hour theory—that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice (three hours a day for 10 years) to become an expert at something—and if you look at young musical prodigies, say, or extraordinary achievers like Bill Gates, you usually find that these people accumulated their first 10,000 hours of practice at a relatively early age, giving them a distinct advantage over others in their field. Part of what made Bain Boehlke such an extraordinary artist, I suspect, comes from those endless winters in Warroad and that invaluable experience in the Army, during which he spent countless hours transforming the ephemera of his imagination into concrete, entertaining reality.

Bain had put in a good many of his 10,000 hours by the time he returned to the Twin Cities in 1961 and joined the traveling company Theatre On-the-Road. Inspired by Beat writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg, the troupe (which included longtime collaborator Wendy Lehr) drove around the Midwest in a battered pickup and a VW Beetle, performing everything from Sophocles to Eugene O’Neill to religious dramas. The company disbanded in 1963, and Bain then began his extraordinary run as a founding company member of the Children’s Theatre Company, which became a national phenomenon in the 1970s and spawned countless imitators around the country. When Bain joined the Children’s Theatre, he was 24 years old but already had more than 15 years of active theater-making under his belt.

His artistic consciousness crystallized during the Children’s Theatre days, in the late 1960s, a period ripe with possibilities for a young artist trying to figure out his place in the world. Joel Sass, the Jungle Theater’s associate artistic director, once said an interesting thing to me about Bain:

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“He embodies the spirit and energy of the 1960s more thoroughly than anyone I’ve ever met. He is truly a hippie, and I mean that in the most generous possible sense.” When I asked Bain how he experienced and processed the 1960s, he did not talk of acid trips or following the Grateful Dead. His immediate response was political and spiritual: “In the 1960s, I became a new person,” he said. “This remarkable revolution in the American psyche—with gay rights, women’s rights, civil rights—was, I felt, guided by a spiritual energy that I had never felt before. All sorts of ideas were flying around at the time. It was like a storm, like an earthquake. We felt that the dominant culture was a prison, but we also realized that culture is a choice—it is something we create—and a major part of our problem at that time was that we weren’t free on the inside, within ourselves.” Theater, for Bain, was the ultimate expression of freedom—a way in which he could contribute to American culture as a gay man and artist, while also staying true to his inner voice and vivid artistic nature.

The same can be said for an entire generation of artists, of course—and practically everyone who’s drawn to theater is the sort of person who thinks putting a coat and tie on every day and heading to the office is a kind of slow death. Where Bain truly distinguishes himself is in his work, in the exquisite final product that makes it to the stage and greets the public with a splendid, almost giddy sense of expectation and delight. Opening night at the Jungle is always a festive affair. Before the show, Bain greets people at the door, welcoming them in a way that makes everyone feel as if they have arrived at a special occasion. After the show, he uncorks the champagne, lays out a tantalizing assortment of desserts, and floats through the room on a cloud of collective admiration, feeding off the joyful buzz of a show well done. What most people don’t know is that shortly after one of his plays opens, Bain usually hops a plane to Puerto Vallarta to rest and decompress. He puts everything he has into each production, and the result is often total exhaustion of the sort that can only be treated by a couple of weeks on a deserted beach in a country that encourages naps.

Inevitably, the qualities remarked upon about a Bain Boehlke play (i.e., the aspects of Bain's genius that people notice most often) are his meticulous attention to detail; his ability to pull extraordinary and sometimes transcendent performances out of actors, even unheralded ones; and his uncanny ability to blow the dust off such theatrical warhorses as *The Miracle Worker*, *Bus Stop*, *Dial M for Murder*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *The Gin Game*, and reveal within them a fresh, vital new spirit—as if he's somehow privy to secret directions on how these plays are supposed to be done.

Precisely how Bain performs these frequent acts of stage magic is a bit of a mystery. All theater artists try their best to bring a playwright's characters and ideas to life as compellingly as possible. All directors try to find the heart of a script and make it beat on stage with the pulses and rhythms of greatness. Some just do it better than others, and therein lie several secrets of Bain's craft that aren't easy to explain or duplicate. One summer, Bain and crew took over the Minneapolis Theatre Garage, an unwieldy black box of a space, to mount an extended run of *Gertrude Stein and a Companion*, one of the Jungle's early hits. When the lights went down, however, it felt eerily as if the audience were sitting in the Jungle Theater itself. A raised stage with a proscenium arch had been built, replicating the seating, sight angles, and ambient feel of the original theater a mile away.

At the time, I remarked to Bain that other theater companies were going to be jealous of what he had been able to accomplish in the Theatre Garage, a space that has vexed many a seasoned pro. "People can do whatever they want in here," he replied, incredulous. "They can make it look like their theater. They don't have to be jealous—they can do it, too. Isn't that the name of the game?"

Indeed it is. And one of the reasons Bain is so good at the game of theater is that he plays it differently from other people, according to an idiosyncratic set of rules and aesthetic principles bound by a quirkily personal philosophy of plays and playwriting that's been forged by decades of ingenious trial and error. As I mentioned before, people often marvel at how Bain can breathe new life and meaning into a script that at first glance seems outdated, boring, or cloyingly sentimental. He does it by ignoring the accumulation of cultural and intellectual baggage with which these plays are so often freighted, approaching the text with a fresh mind, unjudged by popular opinion. In this respect, Bain's mind operates like a Zen master's, inverting the entire artistic process in such a way that he is able to see the work through a different array of creative prisms.

Bain doesn't talk to actors about "doing" a play—he talks about "surrendering" to it, so that it may live through them. Likewise, Bain Boehlke doesn't "read" scripts; rather, he allows the play to "speak" to him, which can happen only after he has earned its "trust." Bain's almost religious faith in a playwright's text is legendary, but it's also not an entirely accurate characterization. Bain doesn't simply put his faith in a playwright's words. He simply has faith that if he treats the script with respect and intelligence, and makes himself available to receive its unique energies, eventually what he calls the "central energy key to the play's manifestation"—a very different thing from the playwright's "intent"—will reveal itself to him. Bain learned this lesson early, he says, when, at the age of 10, he tried to write a version of *Romeo and Juliet* that his friends could understand. "I destroyed it," Bain recalls.



“Somehow, the poetic life-force of the play disappeared.” And, in trying to understand where the play had gone, Bain came to see that plays weren’t just words on a page—they were a kind of vortex through which it was possible to channel the playwright’s own connection to the consciousness that created the play. Not to the playwright’s consciousness, mind you, but to the larger suprapersonal consciousness the playwright tapped into when he or she was writing it. For example, William Inge’s *Bus Stop*, about a busload of passengers trapped in a diner in a snowstorm, was first produced in 1955 and has since been bruised and battered by everybody from Broadway pros to high-school drama teachers in search of one-set ensemble pieces that don’t require an English accent. The play was delivered into Bain’s hands in 1996, all but dead from abuse and in desperate need of resuscitation. Bain put the play on the Jungle’s schedule only because he felt that his board of directors wanted a comedy; he hadn’t actually read it. When he did, he cringed. “It seemed so dated—all this talk that was so passé and attitudes that made it seem like the women’s movement had never happened,” he remembers. “I thought, ‘I can’t do this. I just can’t do this.’”

But, Bain says, in life’s mysterious way, he was drawn to *Bus Stop* anyway, probably because he didn’t understand it. He was stumped by Inge’s dialogue, which seemed trite and inconsequential. Then, serendipity. “One day I walked into a bar in northern Minnesota, and suddenly I got it. I realized that Inge is a Midwestern Chekhov, and that the play is an orchestration of humanity’s broken music.” After the play “spoke” to him in this way, revealing its secret, “everything fell into place,” Bain explains, with a characteristically maddening degree of understatement.

My favorite moments as a theater critic are when I don’t feel like seeing a play, or have reservations bordering on contempt about the play I am about to see—then have all the neurons in my brain rearranged by a production so good it upends all my biases and prejudices. Bain’s *Bus Stop* provided one of those moments. Most people who saw that production remember Bain’s exquisite set, a meticulous re-creation of that northern Minnesota bar, with orange walls and faded green linoleum, a counter surrounded by chrome-ribbed stools anchored to the floor, shelves full of vintage bric-a-brac—every detail perfectly rendered, right down to the thick ceramic dishware clanking in the bus tray. What I remember, however, is how each movement and gesture of the characters illuminated layers of complex subtext—relationships, motives, feelings, and intimations that did not strictly exist in the script, but were revealed by Bain’s brilliant direction, giving the play a thrilling emotional buoyancy.

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Thanks to Bain, my experience of *Bus Stop* was as transcendent as it was unexpected. And ever since, I have been unable to eat at a diner or café full of regular folk without trying to hear the music of humanity—broken or not—inside the chatter and clatter.

Such experiences are common at the Jungle, because Bain makes it so difficult not to enjoy the artistic journey he has so carefully charted. His love for the work is contagious, and this, I think, is what makes it so special: He has an amazing willingness to absorb plays into his heart, even plays he doesn't initially like, and find a way to love them. And I do mean LOVE, as in the deep guiding impulse of life, the ineffable breath of creation. To summon genuine love for a play or character requires an enormous generosity of spirit and a daredevil's courage to go emotionally where few people dare to tread. The fear involved in skydiving or bungee-jumping is nothing compared with the fear most people have of being genuinely honest with themselves or allowing their hearts to be emotionally vulnerable.

Indeed, if openness of heart were considered bravery in the classic sense, Bain Boehlke would be one of the toughest, most heroic bastards in the world. If the strength necessary to faithfully follow one's inner compass were measured in muscle tissue, Bain would be the Arnold Schwarzenegger of integrity, the Charles Atlas of bliss.

Bain also fuses a childlike curiosity about the world with the omnivorous intellectual appetite of a lifelong autodidact. I once asked Bain why he wanted to direct a production of *Waiting for Godot*. He replied that he'd never liked the play (which he now says is because he'd never understood it, just as he'd never understood Inge). "But like it or not," he said at the time, "everyone agrees that it's one of the most important plays of the 20th century, so there's got to be something there. I just want to find it, whatever 'it' is."

Indeed, Bain Boehlke's long and distinguished career can probably be summed up as a perpetual quest to find the elusive "it"—in theater and in life. As a director, he is a man standing on a mountaintop who guides actors to the summit so that they can see the entire world of a play. As an actor, he has a sensitivity to the nuances of character and a control over the instrument of his body that make every role he plays a complex fugue of humanity. And as a human being, he is a curious, compassionate adventurer on the journey of life, always seeking wisdom and often laughing when he cannot find it, which is the telltale mark of true intelligence. At 70, Bain insists he still has plenty of work he wants to do—a *Hamlet* "that really comes alive on stage," something from the great American musical-theater canon, more plays with his "acting buddy" Wendy Lehr are all high on his to-do list—but he says he could also be happy just walking on a beach, listening to the rumble-music of the waves, watching the evening sun sink below the horizon.

"I don't have to do theater," he says. "I just happen to like vital living. I like to be fully alive, and theater is the most living, dancing connection to life that I have found. If I find it in something else, I'll do that instead."

Thankfully for us, Bain Boehlke hasn't been able to find "it" in many places other than the theater—at least not for long. No matter how far his travels take him, he always returns to the corner of Lake Street and Lyndale Avenue, where the marquee patiently waits to announce the opening of yet another play. If you go on opening night, Bain will welcome you at the door, and when the lights go down and the curtain goes up, he will be in his element, alive with purpose—king of the Jungle.

*Tad Simons, arts and entertainment editor of Mpls.St.Paul Magazine, has written about the arts for 25 years in publications that include Twin Cities Reader, City Pages, St. Paul Pioneer Press, American Theatre, Back Stage, Variety and The Washington Post. His more than 30 local and national journalism awards include a 2008 Midwest Regional Emmy Award for online writing.*

BY CRAIG WRIGHT

# WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM BAIN BOEHLKE SO FAR

Let Life in.

Never lose your capacity for unbridled enthusiasm.

There are such things as “classics,” and it pays, in every way, to consult them.

The most powerful convictions are the ones that are rarely stated but relentlessly lived.

There's no such thing as “merely beautiful.”

Looking through is more enlivening than looking at.

No one ever convinced anyone of anything by talking: only by *keeping* talking.

Everything is going to grow its own way, to some degree, no matter what we do.

An ethic of “do no harm” is a very fertile medium in which to create great art.

Sometimes just keeping your distance can be deeply transformative for all concerned.

Moving the accentuation to another location always teaches you something.

Effecting a genuine lasting change in yourself and the world is possible.

Never stop listening for new voices.

Never stop listening for old voices.

Loving the place you're from makes you funnier.

People are not objects; people are events.

There are some lessons that are only accessible through trusting submission.  
The gifts of Modernism have by no means been exhausted.  
There's nothing wrong with appearing to be conventional.  
**Everyone, no matter how proud or powerful,  
is desperate to be invited.**

You never get everything wrong the first time; you always get something right.

“Where” matters just as much as “who,” “what,” and “why.”

There are unique pleasures in life to be derived from being neighborly.

The live theater functions as an effigy because life itself feels like one.

There are real, organic hierarchies, and to flout them is a form of respect.

The act of creation is always the act of making a space where something can occur.

Approach everything, a little bit, as if it were an extremely audacious escape plan.

Pretending with one's whole heart is a way of being even more deeply genuine.

**Being completely yourself makes everyone  
else more completely themselves.**

The most traditional works are the most persistently revolutionary works.

We are all manifestations of a cosmic intrepidity.

Don't forget: it's a play!

**It's so brutal and so totally awesome to be alive.**

Let Life in.

*Craig Wright is a Los Angeles-based writer whose plays include The Pavilion (nominated for a Pulitzer Prize), Recent Tragic Events, and Orange Flower Water, and whose writing and production work for television includes Six Feet Under, Lost, and Dirty Sexy Money.*



BY JULIE BOLTON

# TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

When I first met Bain we were young—he 23 and I 21. It was summer and I was full of romantic dreams, but Bain seemed quietly disillusioned and somewhat detached. To me he was handsome, blond, slender, and very sophisticated. He had just returned from living in Germany for two years, working in Army Intelligence.

We played opposite each other in the 1963 Minnesota Centennial Showboat production of *Under the Gaslight*, a 19th-century melodrama, in which I played the belle of society and he played my heroic fiancé. Bain approached this role with a Hamlet-like

intensity, graceful gestures, and a voice that sought every nuance of meaning. His inner truth required me to respond with unexpected authenticity. This was also the premier season of the Guthrie Theatre; Dr. Frank Whiting, the director of the Showboat, was instrumental in bringing Tyrone Guthrie to Minneapolis, so the Guthrie company attended our productions, and we attended their opening nights of *Hamlet* and *The Three Sisters* with the original company (including Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy, Zoë Caldwell, Rita Gam, and George Grizzard). It was reported that someone from that illustrious group of actors thought Bain played the hero as though he were Hamlet: distracted, troubled, sensitive, poetic, and ultimately victorious over his character flaws.

One evening a few summers ago, while sitting on my screened porch in the dark, Bain and I listened to a murmuring fountain. After a while, Bain quietly began reciting Hamlet's monologues with exquisite understanding and sensitivity. I wept. We sat in the darkness letting the words wash around us. Bain's qualities of wisdom, compassion, and spirituality moved me again recently when I saw his heartbreaking portrayal of the Old Actor as he moves from arrogance to humility in *A Life in the Theatre*. Not only is Bain an artist of enormous versatility—a committed actor, director, and designer—but he is also a community-builder and an educator who is generous with his time. Despite his demanding schedule, he is willing to mentor and engage students in talking about theater, art, acting, and their meaning in the larger world. He has attended several of my Augsburg College Theatre productions and often worked with my acting students, eventually taking on a few as interns. He has a relentless but gentle manner as he explores characters and situations with young actors, asking endless questions that push the students to think and feel deeply about their roles.

I once watched Bain with two students playing Emily and George in *Our Town*. Before they rehearsed the drugstore scene, he asked them to take a walk together, relating to all the objects in the theater space, creating natural conversation. He repeatedly stopped them, questioning them and pushing them on and on toward greater insight. Finally, when they were frustrated and tired, thinking they couldn't do anything to please this director—only then did he ask them to begin playing the drugstore scene. Emily almost in tears of frustration and George embarrassed and uncomfortable, they were bonded in mutual awkwardness. Of course, they were perfect! The scene had a tenderness and authenticity I've rarely seen on stage. The class cheered, and the young actors were astonished and thrilled at their artistic achievement.

*Julie Bolton is a professor of theater arts at Augsburg College in Minneapolis.*



BY JIM STOWELL

# I DO REMEMBER

Bain and I have never been close personal friends even though we have known each other and worked together for around 35 years. Of course we are friends, but I can't remember a single time we went out after a rehearsal, just the two of us, and had a lot of drinks and talked about it. Don't get me wrong, that's just the way both of us wanted it—and it might be one of the reasons Bain and I can still work together after all these years.

Instead, we have had an intimate working friendship. Bain got very far into my head when we worked together. He went deep into my heart as well. I'm not sure Bain sees it this way, but I see him as my mentor.

When I was a young actor, a friend took me to the Children's Theatre Company. I met Bain and was, quite frankly, in awe of his talent. But I was even more awed by his knowledge of theater. I would sit in a room with Bain and other people from the

Children's Theatre and listen. I had to pay attention to this guy: He knew what real acting was. He knew what real theater was. I was drawn to his love of what theater could be when live theater was actually living. When he was on stage I studied Bain with an intensity that would have amazed every schoolteacher who had ever had the misfortune of teaching me.

I used to say to anyone who would listen, "Bain's got guts!" Bain has courage as an actor, as a teacher, as a director, and as the artistic director of a theater company. Opening the new theater with *Macbeth* took courage. Bain has been standing up to all kinds of pressures for, what, around 40 or 50 years now? Speaking as a fellow longtimer I can testify to the incredible difficulty of staying true to your vision for so many years. This courage has always given Bain's work a unique integrity that can only come from a truly great artist. When I was asked to write this I tried to remember specifics about working with Bain the director. I have had trouble doing that. I mean, how much might a sponge remember? That's what I was when Bain was directing: a sponge. I soaked it up.

I remember Bain worked very hard to conduct every rehearsal in a way that nurtured the actors. With Bain I never had to rehearse in a bare room with bright overhead lights and the set drawn out in chalk marks on the floor. No, I remember there were always costumes, real food and drink, real chairs (not folding chairs), couches, and small tables with lamps that gave us mood lighting to work with. I remember that over the years we had many spirited discussions during rehearsals. I remember him pushing me without ever trying to bully me. I remember being excited about every rehearsal. I remember being more intensely focused on the next rehearsal than I had ever been on anything in my life. I was determined that Bain would not outwork me.

Being at one of Bain's rehearsals, working like crazy with all the other actors and tech people to make Bain's vision of the play come alive, having that magic suddenly bloom into life followed by the feeling of the play taking off and beginning to fly. That's what I remember about working with Bain.

*Jim Stowell is an actor, a storyteller, and a playwright whose works include Talking Pictures, Rio Bravo! Rio Grande!, and Church Basement Ladies. He played Macbeth in the opening production of the new Jungle Theater in 1999.*

Donahue said to Boehlke, “Pretend you’ve got a jar of jam in your mouth. Talk to the jam jar and see if it is smiling. If so, you can eat some.” That was all, but Boehlke nodded and went into an entirely different facet of the characterization, accurately, quickly, like magic! —Minneapolis *Star* theater critic Mike Steele, watching a rehearsal as Bein created the character of Ichabod Crane at the Children’s Theatre Company, October 1969



BY JOHN CLARK DONAHUE

# THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The Bain I know is a hungry student of life, always growing, discovering, and becoming. In 1966, a 27-year-old Bain told critic Mike Steele that being an actor was what he'd wanted his entire life. "When classmates said they were going to be doctors or truck drivers, I was going to be an actor," he said. "I don't know why, I just accept it. I have no desire for fame, but I do have a desire to work at acting. It's an exciting craft, like a huge puzzle." And work he has, trying to solve the puzzle through the making of the living theater. Never romantic about the seeking, Bain ruthlessly searches the text of a play for all it holds and labors to reveal its poetic life with fidelity to the playwright's intention. He seeks to have every detail correct and in balance toward a natural unfolding of the piece that speaks clearly and movingly, touching the heart of the matter until we in the audience are also moved. As producer, director, designer, or actor (and often all of these at once), Bain never stops striving for an impossible perfection: the perfect connection between the production and the audience. When he succeeds, the result is difficult to forget.

The Bain I remember from our early years in the University of Minnesota theater department was a young man with an intense engagement in life and an uncanny grasp of the details of human behavior, which allowed him to play a very believable old man in *Camille* by Alexandre Dumas fils, complete with the walk, voice, tics, and peculiar habits of someone of 75 years. This, at age 18.

Eight years later, as a core company member in the early years of the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis, he was a kind of living clay for me to work with. From my perspective as playwright, director, and designer, Bain was an inspirational and responsive artist who gave me the courage to do new work with characters written especially for him to play, or to select and create adaptations of classics by Dickens, Washington Irving, Hans Christian Andersen, and the Brothers Grimm.

We determined to build an acting company that could tackle plays by Molière, Chekhov, Gorky, Sheridan, and Pirandello, in which Bain played numerous roles to critical and audience acclaim. His potent energy, his movement and vocal skills, his ability to command the stage and move an audience to wild laughter or stunned silence were all much celebrated and were also great magnets that drew talented fellow artists to join us as the company grew. (The combination of Wendy Lehr and Bain Boehlke was money in the bank, and is legendary today.) Bain also taught classes and was a brilliant inspiration to the students, who could measure his words in class against his performances almost every day and night on stage—portrayals ranging from a rag doll to Scrooge to Johnny Appleseed to Cinderella's stepmother to Merlin the magician. Bain spent 13 years as the company's associate artistic director and was truly a founding figure of the now world-renowned Children's Theatre Company. In the company's early days, a critic from the *Minnesota Daily* wrote that "Bain Boehlke can dominate a stage without moving a muscle." He still can.

*Director, set designer, and playwright John Clark Donahue founded the Children's Theatre Company in 1965 and was its artistic director until 1984.*

BY DAVID NASBY

# THE URBAN JUNGLE

I don't think anyone understood in 1991 why a theater on a declining inner-city thoroughfare would be named the Jungle. The name is a clue to how Bain perceives the work of theater: like the jungle itself, the theater and its neighborhood represent an ecosystem where all the parts are interdependent, and the success of each part depends on how well the others thrive.



Bain had all kinds of options when he was thinking about starting a theater. He could have gone anywhere, but he knew Lake Street and felt a responsibility to try to make a difference there—not by creating some kind of theater-as-outreach program, but by committing to that place as the home for his art. Bain believes that the stage is an agent for the best kind of personal and community change, able to provide new insight into who we are and who we might become, and in the neighborhood's decline he saw the chance to be a catalyst.

The Jungle is connected to its neighborhood in an organic way, because that's how Bain is connected. If you've ever spent any time walking around Lake and Lyndale with him, you know what I mean: he has an unofficial "office" in every restaurant and is greeted enthusiastically by just about everybody he sees. That's no accident. From the start, because of his conviction that theater is something to be created within the context of a community, he has been intentional about making personal connections with his neighbors.

He has been determined, too. Ten years ago, when Bain proposed moving the Jungle to its current wonderful and whimsical space on Lyndale, within sight of the Lake Street location, some of us in the foundation community thought his plan was too ambitious and counseled that it should be scaled back. In fact, we were very clear about saying that there was no way Bain could do what he was proposing, and that he should focus on the existing little storefront theater. But that advice wasn't compatible with Bain's vision, and he moved aggressively ahead. You know the rest of the story. Now, of course, I see that Bain's definition of theater was simply much larger than many of us were able to grasp. The success of the effort to build the new Jungle has been a valuable lesson: our community needs its creative spirits, needs to trust them and to give them the space to do their thing. Funders who are always asking, "Okay, but what's realistic?" miss what it means to be an artist.

In both its old space and its new one, the Jungle has been part of a human community that informs the theater and makes its work organic and authentic. It's true that the arts can be a great economic development tool for neighborhoods, but it's not just about making a place that has good restaurants for theater patrons to visit before and after performances. It's about interdependence: the community needs the Jungle's commitment to creating a gathering place, and the Jungle needs the community's engagement to enliven its artistic expression.

*David Nasby retired in 2004 as the vice president of the General Mills Foundation.*

Theater is an authentic experience that reflects our own humanity, and authentic things have a way of finding the light. —Bain Boehlke, 1998

BY BUFFY SEDLACHEK

# PERFECT PITCH

My friend Barbara Kingsley encouraged me to put together a reading of my play *Helen of Athens* for Bain in early 2000. I dragged my feet, thinking that sitting in the literary manager's seat at the Jungle and setting up a reading of my own play must be breaking some unwritten code. Barbara's logic eventually prevailed. We read the play away from the theater, in my living room, no pressure. The audience was Bain.

After the reading of the play, Bain told me that it had stirred him. But it was too brutal, and he would not be able to direct it. Life went on; we produced another festival of new play readings. They were excellent. He liked most of them. And, once in a while, he would tell me, “I’ve been thinking about your play.” Or he would say, “Your play is on my mind; I’m sorry, I just cannot direct it.” I would always assure him that I understood. It was “cool” (one of his favorite words).

This went on for nearly a year. Then, one day, Bain said, “I’ve decided to put your play on the next season.” I asked him who would direct it. He told me that he had decided to take it on himself. He had a single recommendation: that I change the title to *Tamarack*. The play finally had a title that matched its eerie, tense, rural murder mystery. It no longer sounded like an academic undertaking. Bain has an instinct for making the right choice at the right time.

Bain never detailed his reasons for originally hesitating to direct *Tamarack*, but he directed the hell out of it. It was a disturbing story, and he and Steve Yoakam, Barbara Kingsley, and Terry Hempleman told it brilliantly. Sitting in on those rehearsals was amazing.

The play had its first preview audience on September 12, 2001. Yes, one day after 9/11. It was terrifying to watch this play about a senseless massacre and its aftermath in view of the previous day’s events. On Friday, September 14, our opening night, the country was lighting candles outdoors to remember the victims. In preparation for opening nights, Bain always fills the lobby with votive lights and tables for the after-party. This night, he took a little stepstool out to the sidewalk in front of the theater. Together, we lit candles, placing them on the stool.

At the end of the play, when we came out into the lobby, we looked outside and saw that our memorial had grown with candles added by anonymous passing strangers.

As I said, Bain has an instinct for making the right choice at the right time.

*Buffy Sedlachek is an actor, a playwright, and the literary manager of the Jungle Theater. Her other plays include Restoration Rag, Under Yelena, The Warrior Within, and Swede Hollow.*



## BOEHLKE: Notes from Friends and Colleagues

The earliest days of the Jungle Theater hung by the proverbial thread from moment to moment. Nonetheless, its beginnings were infused with an energy that, while chaotic at times, seemed boundless. When Lloyd from Thurston Jewelers on Lake Street gave Bain the key to the space next door, the place was a far cry from the jewel-box theater into which it would be transformed in a matter of months. Actually, 709 West Lake Street was an abandoned rat-trap pair of storefronts. We quickly tore down the wall between them, operating on the premise that forgiveness would be far easier to seek than permission.

With the proceeds from hawking season passes hand-to-hand, timely starter gifts from a few key donor “godparents,” and a small-business loan from the city, a remarkable space emerged—and with the opening of the first show, Timothy Mason’s *Only You*, audiences streamed in the door. And they kept coming.

To me, the incredible thing about those days at the Jungle was the potency of the artistic experience for artists and audiences alike. Bain’s attention to every detail of production was accompanied by a white-glove approach to keeping the envelope that the play came in as pristine as we could on such a gritty streetscape. When the Jungle opened in 1991, the Lake and Lyndale intersection was better known for crack cocaine than for the arts. Across the street from the theater was Knickers Bar, one of the roughest establishments in the area, rivaling Moby Dick’s on Hennepin for 911 calls about fighting, shooting, and drug dealing.

Looking back, it all seems quite amazing—the survival of the enterprise and the emergence of such a remarkable aesthetic under Bain’s artistic leadership. The Jungle story is a testament to the enduring capacity of a visionary artist with the moxie and tenacity to live his dream of making a real difference in a community.

GEORGE SUTTON | CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY PLANNING CONSULTANT; FOUNDING MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE JUNGLE THEATER, MINNEAPOLIS

## Where to begin on Bain stories. My gosh.

I went with Bain to the State Fair once. The man can eat.

He's very proud of where he's from. Very proud to be a Minnesotan. Also a brilliant artist. The best eye for detail. He could talk about a sentence of text and it felt like you were Alice going down the rabbit hole. "It's the thing of the trip you see" was a sentence I'll never forget.

I was in *Waiting for Godot* with Michael Sommers, Allen Hamilton, and Charles Schuminski. We rehearsed the first sentence for a week. Bain said if we got that, the rest of the play would fall into place. Mike and I were playing the leads, Vladimir and Estragon. We'd rehearsed for about a month, it was two weeks before we opened, when Bain said, "No, I have you miscast" and proceeded to switch our roles. This meant relearning the whole thing just as we were going into tech week. I fell onto the floor in the fetal position. I remember hearing Bain laugh. I thought, "Oh, he was kidding." Then I thought, "No, he's laughing because he isn't kidding."

We spent the next week on that first line again. But he was right.

KEVIN KLING | ACTOR, MINNEAPOLIS



I met Bain in 1984 when I lived in the Whittier neighborhood of Minneapolis, which at the time had the reputation of being old, run-down, and not very safe. He wanted to launch a storefront theater on Lake Street. Whittier needed a project that could coalesce the many artists and arts lovers in the area and breathe new life into a tired community.

Bain brought high standards, generosity, sensitivity, humor, huge talent, and depth of experience to the enterprise. Through many small meetings in the homes of local arts supporters he and his colleague, George Sutton, were able to assemble a strong board and initial funding to get started. The Jungle Theater was born.

There is a philosophical purpose and a theme in Bain's artistic leadership. **His goal is to expose, explore, and explain the “human condition”** (his favorite term). In the 18 years that he has led the Jungle Theater, this theme has been constantly revealed in the plays produced and even in the smallest details of his exquisite sets. His devotion to his art has involved dedication to his community as well. Schoolchildren all over the city have been sensitized to the human condition by the Jungle's touring programs and classroom teaching. The community is a much better place than it was before he arrived.



**PATRICIA BRATNOBER SAUNDERS | FORMER JUNGLE THEATER BOARD CHAIR, MINNEAPOLIS**

**A McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist award—how wonderfully fitting and appropriate. Bain has never played a character as remarkable as he is in person. He's built the Jungle Theater through sheer force of will. His generosity of spirit, extraordinary passion for life, and tireless vision have been gifts to his art and our community. Bravo, Bain.**

**MICHAEL FRANCIS | EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, MARKETING, TARGET CORPORATION, MINNEAPOLIS**

Bain Boehlke is the real thing: an artist in every sense of the word and in every aspect of his life. His mind and heart are in a constant search for beauty and connection, and he can find meaning in anything from an elegant turn of phrase to a Christmas wreath he bought on sale at Costco.

I was an admirer of Bain's work for many years before I got to know him. I'm not sure how it started, but we began having the occasional breakfast or coffee together, and those outings quickly became precious to me. Mostly Bain talked and I listened. I had to listen hard to keep up. **He would go from topic to topic, idea to observation, dry critique to joyous glee. His words spun like plates in the air, and he didn't care if they soared or crashed.**

My favorite of these outings was the time we talked about a production of *The Seagull* that we had both seen. Bain didn't agree with the interpretation of the Nina character. She'd been portrayed in the traditional way, as a lost innocent. Bain saw her as a gutsy woman obsessed by her art, not above manipulation. As he spoke more and more about Nina and her situation, he suddenly grabbed both my hands and began saying some of Nina's lines. He became her. It was entrancing. We stayed like that for a couple of minutes, me looking into his eyes and not breathing as he totally transformed into one of the best Ninas I've ever seen.

CASEY STANGL | DIRECTOR, LOS ANGELES



I owe Bain thanks not only for all his wonderful gifts to the theater community but also for one that he gave to me in particular: the chance to create so many people for his unerringly perceptive eyes and ears. I remember sitting in Bain's empty apartment on Lake Street when we began rehearsing *Happy Days* (the first time, in 1991), and he said, "Try it in your own voice." No one had ever suggested that tactic to me, and it changed everything. Acting became a joy, not just a job. **Eighteen years of joy: that's a gift.**

CLAUDIA WILKENS | ACTOR, MINNEAPOLIS



I walk into the Jungle Theater lobby to find Bain watering the vigorous “mother-in-law tongues” on the windowsill. “If I don’t water them, they’ll languish from neglect,” he says. To walk into that lobby is like meeting Bain. It is unique, full of art, beautiful, comfortable, extravagant, elegant, generous, theatrical. All the elements create a world that reflects Bain’s imagination and artistry.

Bain creates complete worlds on stage, which he brings to life with exacting care. John Donahue informed me one Sunday morning that he was on his way to meet Bain at the Jungle to place dead moths in the cobwebs on the *GIN GAME* set. This is neither frivolous nor eccentric. **Bain’s attention to detail speaks to the gestalt and to the keen understanding of the human condition that makes his work so breathtaking.** (He is equally at home with a bare stage, a rope, and a hammock, which he used to brilliant effect in *Orson Welles Rehearses Moby Dick*.)

At the Jungle, **Bain has made manifest his vision in a vivid and unselfconscious way.** He instinctively hews to Stanislavski’s admonition, “Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art.” **And he has never lost his passion for his art. His mind and spirit take on the universe, and from that we have been the happy recipients of his brilliantly created worlds.** Sharing the stage with him at the Jungle, after 46 years and 80-some plays together, feels like a homecoming to me.

**WENDY LEHR | ACTOR, MINNEAPOLIS**

**Year after year, Bain has been a key part of making Minneapolis one of the best theater cities in the world. His talented work and the way that he inspires others have been a model of artistic and community leadership.**

**R.T. RYBAK | MAYOR OF MINNEAPOLIS**

I first encountered Bain Boehlke when I was a kid, amazed that the cranky old stepmother I was watching in *Cinderella* was really a man. Recalling that memory, my first reaction is that it is completely unremarkable. After all, thousands of other middle-aged Minnesotans could tell the same story. But upon reflection, I guess that's the point. **Bain has become part of the collective unconscious for so many people that he transcends any impression he made on one little towheaded boy. He is one of the rare artists whose imprint has been magnified through the years through reinvention and an honest pursuit of theater.** I may say, "I remember him from the Children's Theatre," and another person might say, "I remember him from the original *Jungle*," and another . . . you get the picture. Bain has become part of the Twin Cities iconography, a touchstone of theatrical life for 50 years. There must have been something in the woods and lakes around Warroad that touched his Minnesota soul. Thank goodness for that.

GRAYDON ROYCE | THEATER CRITIC, MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE



I knew about **Bain's theatrical genius** as I was coming of age in the Twin Cities theater world; I'd heard whispers about his performances in *He Who Gets Slapped* and *Cinderella*, and I knew his transcendent directorial abilities firsthand from shows like *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Old Times*. I wanted to work with him; everyone wanted to work with him. My first opportunity came in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* when Bain played my father. Sitting downstage on the couch, I turned to Bain, but he was gone. In his place was a myopic old man, lonely, needy, still gimlet-eyed, dressed in urine-stained pants, cradling his cane. We were down the rabbit hole, as they say, and that complete, meticulous, wholly submerged actor was my father. Those times are golden on stage. Bain has the mind to make them happen more often than anyone I know.

SALLY WINGERT | ACTOR, ST. PAUL

The second thing you notice about Bain Boehlke (after registering his uncanny resemblance to singer-composer Randy Newman) is his voice. **It is mellifluous and expressive and wrapped in a Minnesota accent so thick and distinctive he makes your Uncle Sven in Moorhead sound like Al Pacino.** The Coen brothers recognized the comedic value of his *sui generis* vocal delivery and rewarded Bain with a brilliant movie-stealing cameo in *Fargo*. Bain's voice has spawned almost as many impersonations as Christopher Walken's or Jack Nicholson's. Every actor in the Twin Cities does a Bain impression with varying degrees of success.

**But in truth, Bain, like his voice, is singular and inimitable. There is no one quite like him.** He is a theater visionary with the mind of an architect, the eye of a painter, and the soul of a poet.

His process is not my process, and we have had some spectacular artistic differences—but we share the same mantras: “Thou shalt not bore” and “Less is more.” Bain manages to bring out the best in just about every actor with whom he has worked.

What I like about Bain is his essentially sweet and playful nature. I have always known him to be without malice or guile. I would happily be his friend even if he never hired me again (which might be the case once he reads what I have written about his accent!).

**ALLEN HAMILTON | ACTOR, MINNEAPOLIS**



Camille D'Ambrose and Allen Hamilton  
© Michal Daniel



Nick O'Donnell, Ann Kellogg and  
Bradley Greenwald © Michal Daniel

I have had the pleasure (or, rather, the gift) of being directed by Bain in numerous shows. **I was lucky to snag a part in the Jungle's inaugural show, *Only You*.** I was fresh off the truck and Bain's support, encouragement, and oft-mentioned “fantastical” direction got my self-doubting bum out on stage! There is no translator available when working with Bain: you either get it or you don't. **Bain is like a big kid who to this day possesses both the wonderment and the odd, soulful maturity that make for a kid I would like to hang out with.** I am forever grateful that he asked me to play.

**ANN KELLOGG | ACTOR, ROCHESTER, MINNESOTA**

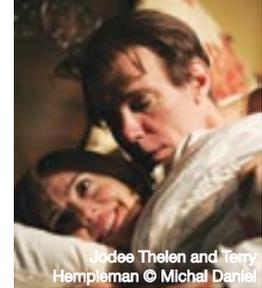
As an artist you must live by your process of discovery. You must be willing to look at your material and pull it apart. To those of us in theater the script becomes large, surrounds you. The words are life-size. You disassemble the whole. You find yourself standing in a place in shambles, words, phrases, scenes tossed willy-nilly, strewn all about you while you search for that **glowing heart, the pure truth** of what this piece is saying. You dig through the piles, reassembling, reconstructing, rebuilding on that kernel, that essence of truth. Then you come to an impasse: Somewhere, you've missed something. You must have the courage to tear it all down again, ignoring fear of failure, and start all over from that single point, working from the inside out. This is the process that I've learned from many great and fearless artists in my life. One of them is Bain Boehlke.

Bain understands and lives by this fearlessness, whether he is directing a play or redecorating a lobby. You can't know that it's right until you do. It's unethical to stamp onto your work a safe, reliable, palatable formula. **Each piece is new. Each piece, each day, deserves the respect and attention of the full force of our intellect, our intuition, our heart.** Anything less is a failure. He demands this of himself and of everyone working with him.

Whether that means the second or third conceptual reconstruction of the day during rehearsals or a complete overhaul of the entire visual concept of a show, Bain requires his collaborators to follow this moral imperative, this responsibility to find that truth. It is difficult, strenuous work, often maddening, but completely clear of purpose (if not destination). He is always at the forefront of that struggle.

It wasn't unusual that a day at the Jungle would begin in the lobby over coffee with "I was thinking about this last night and realized I'm going at this all wrong. . . ."

**BILL HEALEY | FORMER JUNGLE THEATER PRODUCTION MANAGER AND RESIDENT LIGHTING DESIGNER, ST. PAUL**



If you wrote a book about how to direct a play, Bain would get everything wrong. He talks too much and doesn't let the actors "try it." He will call you for rehearsal and then make you wait for hours while he is working on the first three lines of the scene before yours, and then there is the falling-asleep thing. The first thing he does in rehearsal is commit what many actors consider an unforgivable offense: He gives "line readings." He tells the actors how to read not just any given line, but every single line sometimes. I have been in rehearsal several times with actors who were working with Bain for the first time, and have seen them silently or not-so-silently freak out when he did it.

Why do they want to work with Bain if he is going to go against everything they believe about how to put on a play? I think it is because in the dozen or more productions I have worked on with Bain since I met him in 1991, he has never once simply put on a play. **Every production becomes an examination of life, politics, male and female sexuality, Western civilization, our work as artists, and ourselves.** During rehearsal for *Dial M for Murder* the discussion found its way to the decimation of the rainforest, and *Fool for Love* was very involved with Jungian dualities. Yet, at the same time, **I have never done a play with Bain that is about anything except humanity.** He understands the need to see and hear real humanity in the precision of the way an actor picks up a teacup and the way a line is inflected.

Of course Bain is famous for saying strange, brilliant, hilarious things in rehearsal. When actors who have worked with him get together, we try to outdo each other with quotes: "I can't hear anything you're saying; that wall is too yellow." or "The ducks of insecurity are gnawing at your liver."

I have worked with directors who would get everything right in the "how to direct" book, and the results they achieve are often dull and predictable. Bain is my favorite director because although some productions we do together are more successful (whatever that means) than others, I always feel like we are searching for something worthwhile.

In the mid-'80s when Bain and I were working at the Arizona Theatre Company, Bain asked to talk to me about a project he envisioned. In our conversation he expressed how wonderful it would be to start a small theater where the focus could be on the art and not on the institution, and where he could do the kind of work that meant the most to him with artists and associates he admired. Little did I realize that Bain was describing what would become the Jungle Theater.

I have known and worked with Bain for nearly 40 years. There is no artist or person for whom I have more respect. **I know him as an artist and as a man of great passion, integrity, and vision.** I also know him as a man who has struggled with his demons, overcome them, and accomplished what only a few dare even dream of. He is such a complete person of the theater—an excellent actor, provocative director, artful designer, and sensitive producer. Bain's work and that of the Children's Theatre Company in the 1970s were one of the two or three very strong influences on what we did at Chanhassen. And his consequent work has continued to be an inspiration not only to me, but also to the generations who have succeeded us.

He, along with his staff, created a theater that has re-energized a neighborhood, influenced theater art in the Twin Cities, and gained a national reputation. The Jungle is my favorite space in which to view productions; its intimacy preserves the contact between performance and audience that is at the core of the theater experience. And it completely encapsulates Bain's aesthetic.

I wish him a happy 70th birthday and a good semi-retirement. And I thank him for his friendship and his artistry over the past many years.

**GARY GISSELMAN | DIRECTOR, ST. OLAF THEATRE; FOUNDING DIRECTOR, CHANHASSEN DINNER THEATRES, MINNEAPOLIS**



As early and very long-term members of the Jungle board, we have had the privilege of watching the theater grow from a spirited storefront operation into a vibrant part of the Twin Cities cultural scene. Thanks go, of course, to Bain. His insights into what makes characters tick, how the world around them shapes them and they it, and how all this can develop and change during a play's short hours on the stage make going to the Jungle a thrill.

Working with Bain is always an adventure. He has inspired those who have collaborated with him, on stage and behind the scenes. **He has helped us all see anew.** The McKnight award couldn't be more perfect, and we couldn't be happier to have been a part of the magic—a place created by Bain in 1991 in a tiny corner of the city that for so many of us has become a world.

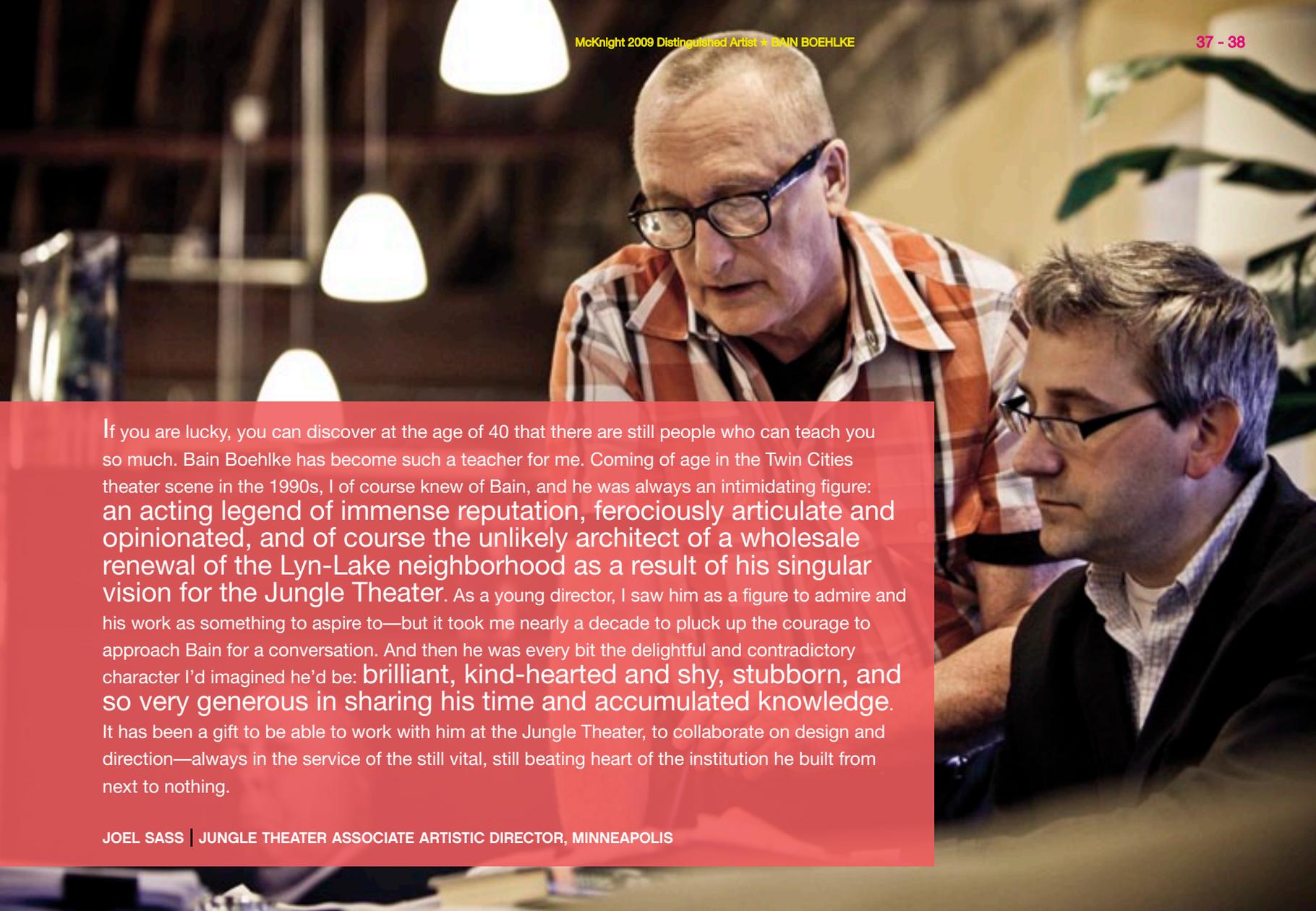
MIRIAM KELEN AND MARCIA STOUT | MEMBERS, JUNGLE THEATER BOARD OF DIRECTORS, MINNEAPOLIS

Long before I ever met Bain, I heard stories about him in rehearsal philosophizing, resting his eyes, and giving line readings: giving an actor the musicality, tone inflection, punctuation, accents in a line. Basically, telling them exactly how to say what the playwright wrote.

I started working with Bain several years back on Buffy Sedlachek's one-woman show *Jump at the Sun: The Life and Times of Zora Neale Hurston*. We were quite a ways into the process before I experienced Bain's historic line readings. Whatever the line was, I think I did tell him, "That's not how they'd say it in my neighborhood." We laughed, but of course I tried it his way . . . and guess what? Yes, he was right. He has a holistic approach to working, a keen ear for the sound of a thing as well as for the look of a thing. So when he closes his eyes and listens to the entire rehearsal of my one-hour show, gives me line notes pointing out specifics, and then says to me, **"That was beautiful, Regina. Really groovy,"** I believe him.

REGINA M. WILLIAMS | ACTOR, MINNEAPOLIS





If you are lucky, you can discover at the age of 40 that there are still people who can teach you so much. Bain Boehlke has become such a teacher for me. Coming of age in the Twin Cities theater scene in the 1990s, I of course knew of Bain, and he was always an intimidating figure: an acting legend of immense reputation, ferociously articulate and opinionated, and of course the unlikely architect of a wholesale renewal of the Lyn-Lake neighborhood as a result of his singular vision for the Jungle Theater. As a young director, I saw him as a figure to admire and his work as something to aspire to—but it took me nearly a decade to pluck up the courage to approach Bain for a conversation. And then he was every bit the delightful and contradictory character I'd imagined he'd be: brilliant, kind-hearted and shy, stubborn, and so very generous in sharing his time and accumulated knowledge. It has been a gift to be able to work with him at the Jungle Theater, to collaborate on design and direction—always in the service of the still vital, still beating heart of the institution he built from next to nothing.

JOEL SASS | JUNGLE THEATER ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, MINNEAPOLIS

**BAIN**  
**BOEHLKE**

# A LIFE IN THE THEATER





1939 Born on July 23 in Warroad, Minnesota



1952 Writes, directs, and stars in *The Sixth-Grade Jamboree* at Warroad Elementary School; 10-cent tickets net \$50 in receipts.



1954 Attends summer theater workshop for high-school students at the University of Minnesota. (Front row, far left)



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Theatre On-the-Road -

Thank you



**1955 - 1957** Moves with family to Farmington, Minnesota. Finds the Horseshoe Lake Summer Theater at age 16; directs, designs, and stars in plays (including *Dial M for Murder*) at the theater for two summers. Graduates from Farmington High School in 1957.

**1959** Leaves the University of Minnesota's theater program after two years to join the U.S. Army; assigned to Army Intelligence in Berlin. (With sister Cathy)

**1961 - 1964** After finishing Army tour of duty, returns to Minnesota and joins Theatre On-the-Road with director Karin Osborne, actor Wendy Lehr, composer Roberta Carlson, and others. Travels the Upper Midwest with productions that include religious dramas like *The Cup of Trembling* and classics like *Ajax*. Returns to Berlin and studies dance at the Studio Manja Chmiel, Gruppe Neuer Tanz; studies voice with Barbara Godfrey in London. (With Judy MacDonald in *The Prodigal*, 1964)

**1965 - 1977** Co-founds (with Wendy Lehr, Roberta Carlson, actor Gerald Drake, and others) the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis under the artistic leadership of John Clark Donahue. Acts in and directs numerous productions including *Cinderella*, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Lower Depths* and *The Sitwells at Sea*. (Second row, fourth from left)

Cordially,  
*John M. Schaeffer*  
John M. Schaeffer



**1978** Starts film production company, Trinity Films, with Gerald Drake. Produces *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories and Perspectives*, a documentary on the life of Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, part of the German resistance during World War II. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906–1945)

**1979 - 1985** Serves as artist in residence at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, directing a production of *The Trojan Women*. Produces and directs shows at the Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre and Palace Theatre, including *Macbeth*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *Happy Days*. With Theatre Perspectives, a theater adjunct to Trinity Films, produces *Journey's End* and *The Lower Depths*. (With Karlis Ozois, Kristen Froebel, and Todd Knaeble, *The Lower Depths*, 1984. Photo © 2009 STAR TRIBUNE/Minneapolis–St. Paul)

**1986 - 1989** Directs and acts in productions at theaters nationwide, including the Arizona Theatre Company in Tucson, the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, and the Louisville Children's Theatre. Spends significant time on the Pacific coast of Mexico, where the idea for the Jungle Theater is born.

**1990** Returns to Minneapolis and works as dessert chef for the Loring Café. Spots an empty storefront near his south Minneapolis apartment, which, with the help of a low-interest loan from the Minneapolis Community Development Agency, becomes the first incarnation of the Jungle Theater.



**1991 - 1995** First Jungle production, Timothy Mason's *Only You*, sells out its run. Other productions in the Jungle's first season include *A Life in the Theatre* and *Happy Days*. Subsequent seasons include productions like *Dial M for Murder*, *The House of Blue Leaves*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Fool for Love*, and *Old Times*. The Jungle receives the Sally Ordway Irvine Award for Initiative (1992).

(Photo © Michal Daniel)



**1996 - 1998** Plays Mr. Mohra in Joel and Ethan Coen's film *Fargo* (1996). The Jungle's board of directors, supported by Boehlke and managing director George Sutton, undertakes a capital campaign to build a new, 140-seat Jungle on the site of the former Knickers Bar at Lake Street and Lyndale Avenue, raising more than \$2.6 million in one year. Ground is broken for the new theater on May 12, 1998.

(*Fargo*, © PolyGram Film Productions)



**1999** Directs and designs the new Jungle's opening season, leading off with a production of *Macbeth*.

**2001** Celebrates the Jungle's 10th anniversary season with five productions, including *Gertrude Stein and a Companion* and *Torch Song Trilogy*. Receives McKnight Fellowship for Theater Artists. (Claudia Wilkens and Barbara Kingsley, *Gertrude Stein and a Companion*, 1992/1995/2001. Photo © Michal Daniel)



**2002 - 2008** Continues to direct, design, and perform in Jungle productions, including *The Blue Room*, *A Delicate Balance*, *Sylvia*, *Betrayal*, and *The Gin Game*. (Kirsten Frantzich, *Sylvia*, 2001/2004. Photo © Michal Daniel)

**2009** Spends the year on sabbatical, with time in Minneapolis, Hawaii, and the Pacific Northwest.

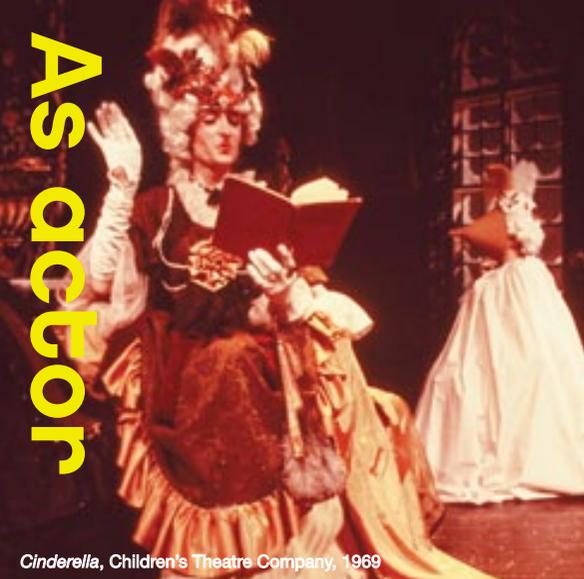
SELECTED PRODUCTIONS

*Cinderella* (restaging), Children's Theatre Company  
*Robin Hood*, Children's Theatre Company  
*Happy Days*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*Macbeth*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*The Glass Menagerie*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*The Seagull*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*Uncle Vanya*, Palace Theatre  
*Macbeth*, Palace Theatre  
*Journey's End*, Theatre Perspectives  
*The Lower Depths*, Theatre Perspectives  
*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Honolulu Theatre for Youth;  
restaged at Children's Theatre Company  
*Only You*, Jungle Theater  
*The Diary of Anne Frank*, Jungle Theater  
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Jungle Theater  
*Gertrude Stein and a Companion*, Jungle Theater  
*The House of Blue Leaves*, Jungle Theater  
*The Pavilion*, Jungle Theater  
*Sylvia*, Jungle Theater

As director



# As actor



*Cinderella*, Children's Theatre Company, 1969



*The Gin Game*, Jungle Theater, 2008. Photo © Michal Daniel



*The Netting of Troupial*, Crawford Livingston Theater, 1973



*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Children's Theatre Company, 1969

## SELECTED PRODUCTIONS

- The Cup of Trembling* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), Theatre On-the-Road
- Ajax* (Ajax), Theatre On-the-Road
- The Prodigal* (The Prodigal), Theatre On-the-Road
- The Killers* (various roles), Theatre On-the-Road
- Cinderella* (The Ugly Stepmother), Children's Theatre Company
- The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (Ichabod Crane), Children's Theatre Company
- The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain), Children's Theatre Company
- The Sitwells at Sea* (Edith Sitwell), Children's Theatre Company
- The Boy Friend* (Lord Brockhurst), Children's Theatre Company
- Journey's End* (Captain Osborne), Theatre Perspectives
- The Lower Depths* (Luka), Theatre Perspectives
- Oh! What a Lovely War* (various roles), Chanhassen Dinner Theatres
- Under Milk Wood* (various roles), Chanhassen Dinner Theatres
- The Government Inspector* (Klestakov), Arizona Theatre Company
- The Death and Life of Sherlock Holmes* (Sherlock Holmes), Louisville Children's Theatre
- The House of Blue Leaves* (Artie Shaughnessy), Jungle Theater
- Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (Kemp), Jungle Theater
- A Life in the Theatre* (The Old Actor), Jungle Theater
- The Gin Game* (Martin Weller), Jungle Theater

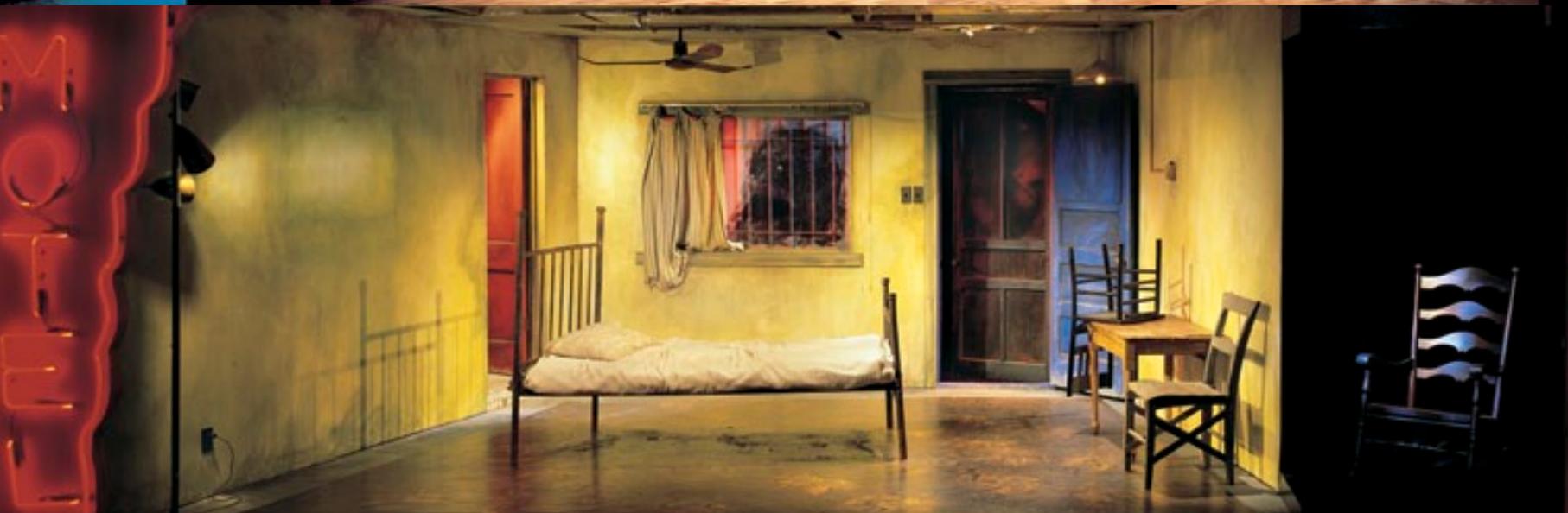
# As scenic designer

*Happy Days*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*Macbeth*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*The Glass Menagerie*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*The Seagull*, Minneapolis Ensemble Theatre  
*Journey's End*, Theatre Perspectives  
*Only You*, Jungle Theater

*Gertrude Stein and a Companion*, Jungle Theater  
*The Diary of Anne Frank*, Jungle Theater  
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Jungle Theater  
*Fool for Love*, Jungle Theater  
*The Dazzle*, Jungle Theater  
*The Gin Game*, Jungle Theater



Top: *The Gin Game*, Jungle Theater, 2008 Bottom: *Honour*, Jungle Theater, 2005



Top: *Lobby Hero*, Jungle Theater, 2003 Bottom: *Fool for Love*, Jungle Theater, 1996

# Honors/Awards



## SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS

Sally Ordway Irvine Award for Initiative  
(awarded to the Jungle Theater), 1992

Best Theater Company, *City Pages*, 1994, 1999

Favorite Mid-sized Theater Venue,  
*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 2000

Best Theater Company, Citysearch, 2000

McKnight Fellowship for Theater Artists, 2001

Theater Artist of the Year, *Lavender* magazine, 2003

Best Play of the Year (*Honour*), *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 2005

Best Actor (with Wendy Lehr), *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 2006

Best Theater for Drama, *City Pages*, 2006

**ABOUT THE AWARD**

Vickie Benson | Arts Program Director, The McKnight Foundation

The Distinguished Artist Award recognizes artists who, like Bain Boehlke, have chosen to make their lives and careers in Minnesota, thereby making our state a more culturally vibrant place. Although they had the talent and the opportunity to pursue their work elsewhere, these artists chose to stay—and by staying, they have made a difference. They have founded and strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, attracted audiences and patrons. Best of all, they have made wonderful, thought-provoking art.

The award, which includes a \$50,000 stipend, goes to one Minnesota artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. The panel that selects the recipient is made up of five people who have longtime familiarity with the Minnesota arts community.

Our thanks go to panelists Philip Bither, Walker Art Center's senior curator of performing arts; Graydon Royce, theater critic at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*; Stewart Turnquist, former coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; 2001 McKnight Distinguished Artist Dale Warland, founder of the Dale Warland Singers; and 2002 McKnight Distinguished Artist Emilie Buchwald, founder of Milkweed Editions. Their high standards and thoughtful consideration make this award a truly meaningful tribute to Minnesota's most influential artists.



McKnight **DISTINGUISHED ARTISTS**

1998 **DOMINICK ARGENTO**

1999 **WARREN MACKENZIE**

2000 **ROBERT BLY**

2001 **DALE WARLAND**

2002 **EMILIE BUCHWALD**

2003 **MIKE LYNCH**

2004 **STANISLAW SKROWACZEWSKI**

2005 **JUDY ONOFRIO**

2006 **LOU BELLAMY**

2007 **KINJI AKAGAWA**

2008 **BILL HOLM**

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## ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based Family Foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, coalition-building, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, the Foundation uses its resources to attend, unite, and empower those it serves. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Foundation had assets of approximately \$1.6 billion and granted about \$99 million in 2008, of which about 11% was directed to improve the quality of and access to the arts. In Minnesota, the Foundation also makes grants to support children and youth, our region and communities, and the environment.

The McKnight Foundation is committed to the protection of our environment, a philosophy that underlies our practice of using paper with postconsumer waste content and, wherever possible, environmentally friendly inks. Additionally, we partner with printers who participate in the PIM Great Printer Environmental Initiative. This book was printed with soy-based inks on recycled paper containing 30% postconsumer waste.



**BAIN**  
**BOEHLKE**

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