

Joe Papp: An American Life - A Journey of Theater, Passion, and Creativity

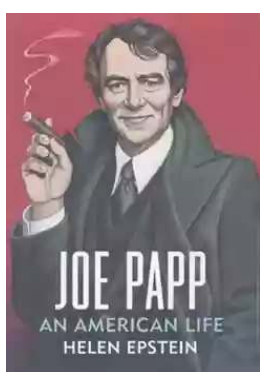


Joe Papp, an iconic figure in the world of American theater, left an indelible mark that shaped both Broadway and Off-Broadway. Born Joseph Papirofsky in Brooklyn, New York on June 22, 1921, Papp's story is one of resilience, passion,

and a lifelong commitment to transform the theatrical landscape in the United States.

Early Life and Education

Life wasn't easy for Joe Papp. Growing up in a working-class Jewish family during the Great Depression, he faced numerous challenges. However, his love for the arts, particularly theater, inspired him to pursue his dreams against all odds.



Joe Papp: An American Life

by Helen Epstein (Kindle Edition)

★★★★☆ 4.7 out of 5

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Papp's love affair with theater began at a young age when he stumbled upon a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Mesmerized by the magic of the stage, he knew that he had found his calling. His dedication led him to study at the School of Dramatic Arts at Carnegie Mellon University, where he honed his craft and cultivated a deep understanding of theater as a powerful medium for social change.

Rise to Prominence

Papp's journey into the world of theater wasn't an easy one. While he faced many obstacles and financial difficulties along the way, his relentless determination ultimately paid off. In 1954, he founded the New York Shakespeare Festival (now known as The Public Theater) with the intent of making theater accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic status.

Papp's innovative approach challenged the traditional theater model, as he believed that theater should be an integral part of society, representing diverse voices and stories. He introduced the concept of "Free Shakespeare in the Park," offering free performances of Shakespearean plays to the general public. This initiative not only democratized theater but also paved the way for the birth of Off-Broadway.

The Impact of The Public Theater

The founding of The Public Theater marked a turning point in American theater history. Papp's dedication to fostering emerging talent, supporting playwrights, and providing a platform for socially relevant productions elevated theatrical experiences for both artists and audiences.

Under Papp's leadership, The Public Theater produced several groundbreaking works that challenged societal norms and highlighted important issues of the time. One notable success was the musical *Hair*, which tackled subjects like war, race, and sexuality, ultimately paving the way for future experimental productions.

Legacy and Recognition

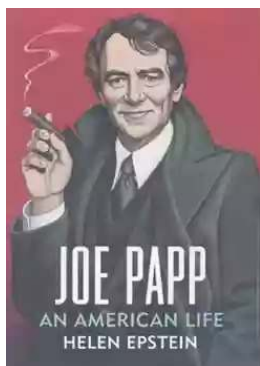
Papp's immense impact on American theater didn't go unnoticed. Throughout his illustrious career, he received numerous accolades and honors for his contributions. He was awarded Tony Awards, Drama Desk Awards, and even a special Tony for Lifetime Achievement in 1987.

Despite his untimely death in 1991 at the age of 70, Papp's legacy lives on through the continued success of The Public Theater. What started as a dream to democratize theater has become an enduring institution dedicated to nurturing artists, promoting inclusivity, and engaging audiences in meaningful dialogue.

A Lasting Inspiration

Joe Papp's American life was a testament to the transformative power of theater. His dedication and passion continue to inspire countless artists, playwrights, and theater enthusiasts around the world. Through his tireless efforts, Joe Papp reshaped the theatrical landscape, leaving behind a rich legacy that serves as a beacon of creativity, social consciousness, and accessibility.

[Wikipedia](#)



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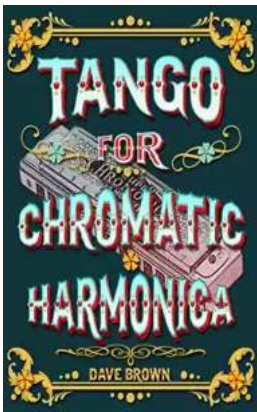
This eBook edition of Joe Papp: An American Life includes 116 photographs and theater posters by Paul Davis (www.okdavis.com).

Joseph Papp (1921-1991) theater producer, champion of human rights and of the First Amendment, founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival and Public Theater, changed the American cultural landscape. Born Yussel Papirofsky in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, he discovered Shakespeare in public school and first produced a show on an aircraft carrier during World War II. After a stint at the Actors' Lab in Hollywood, he moved to New York, where he worked as a CBS stage manager during the golden age of television. He fought Parks Commissioner Robert Moses (as well as Mayors Wagner, Lindsay, Beame and Koch) winning first the right to stage free Shakespeare in New York's Central Park, then municipal funding to keep it going. He built the Delacorte Theater and later rebuilt the former Astor Library on Lafayette Street, transforming it into the Public Theater.

In addition to helping create an "American" style of Shakespeare, Papp pioneered colorblind casting and theater as a not-for-profit institution. He showcased playwrights David Rabe, Elizabeth Swados, Ntozake Shange, David Hare, Wallace Shawn, John Guare, and Vaclav Havel; directors Michael Bennett, Wilford Leach and James Lapine; actors Al Pacino, Colleen Dewhurst, George C. Scott, James Earl Jones, Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, Sam Waterston, and Denzel Washington; and produced *Hair*, *Sticks and Bones*, *for colored girls*, *The Normal Heart*, and *A Chorus Line*, the longest running musical in Broadway history.

"This first biography of the late Joseph Papp will be a hard act to follow," wrote Booklist. The front-page New York Times Sunday Book Review noted, "The portrait that emerges might have been jointly painted by Goya, Whistler and Francis Bacon." Playwright Tony Kushner called Papp "one of the very few heroes this tawdry, timid business has produced" and the book, a "nourishing and juicy biography."

Oklahoma-born Paul Davis created 51 iconic posters for Joseph Papp, starting in 1975 with the New York Shakespeare Festival production of “Hamlet” starring Sam Waterston. “It was inspiring to work with Joe,” says Davis. “We would discuss what he wanted to achieve in a production, and he trusted me to find a way to express it. And he respected the poster as its own dramatic form.” The artist’s work has been exhibited in the U.S., Europe and Japan. He is a recipient of a special Drama Desk award created for his theater art. Davis was elected to the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame and the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame, and is a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome.



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