



Barr, Richard (1917-1989)

by David Crespy

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Richard Barr was a visionary, openly gay, American theatrical producer most famous for producing the works of Edward Albee, including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), *Tiny Alice* (1964), *Malcolm* (1966), *Delicate Balance* (1966), *Everything in the Garden* (1968), *All Over* (1971), *Seascape* (1975), and *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980), and also for bringing the European Absurdist to Broadway, as well as for producing the seminal gay drama, *The Boys in the Band* (1968) by Mart Crowley.

Barr's own background included serving as the guy Friday to film visionary, Orson Welles. Indeed, throughout his career, Barr shared Welles's passion for producing experimental work, as well as a brilliant talent for bringing that new work to the commercial stage. He was also similar to Welles in his somewhat quixotic approach to producing that led to some legendary disasters, including a famous one-night run of Mary Mercier's *Johnny No Trump* (1967).

Barr was the president of the prestigious American League of Theaters, the organization of Broadway and Regional Theater producers, for 21 years, from 1968 to 1989. He was responsible for several innovations in Broadway producing, including the preview that he initiated with his production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which allowed productions to build an audience before critics could respond to shows. He was also instrumental in the establishment of a later curtain time, moving it from 7:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Most important, as president of the American League of Theaters, he founded and promoted the Theater Development Fund, which supports new work on Broadway.

Other of Barr's signature productions include Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), Lanford Wilson's *The Rimers of Eldritch* (1967), Claire Richardson and Kenward Elmsie's *The Grass Harp*--based on a novel by Truman Capote (1971), James Kirkwood's *P.S. Your Cat Is Dead!* (1975), Robert Wilson's *I Was Sitting on My Patio This Guy Appeared I Thought I Was Hallucinating* (1977), and Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* (1979). As these titles indicate, Barr produced works that were experimental, controversial, and seminal in their post-modernist approaches.

As the gay producer of the work of Albee and the European Absurdist, Barr operated both as an outsider--producing at the Billy Rose Theater, just on the edge of the Broadway theater district, and in Greenwich Village at the Cherry Lane Theater--and as the consummate Broadway insider, bringing the avant-garde to the American commercial theater.

Barr founded, along with Albee and Clinton Wilder, also gay, an extraordinary production agency, Albarwild, Inc. The agency worked on, off (at the Cherry Lane Theater), and off-off-Broadway (at the Playwrights Unit in Greenwich Village), often with simultaneous productions in the 1960s, anticipating the similar efforts by Joseph Papp at his New York Shakespeare Festival. Albarwild's Playwrights Unit fostered such new talent as John Guare, A.R. Gurney, Leroi Jones, Lee Kalcheim, Terrence McNally, Jack Richardson, Sam Shepard, Megan Terry, Jean Claude van Itallie, Doric Wilson, Lanford Wilson, and Ursule Molinaro, among many others.

Albarwild, Inc. was one of the few producing organizations operating on Broadway in the 1960s with gay men as the principal partners, and the organization was staffed primarily by gay theater professionals, including Joseph Cali, Michael Kasdan, Robert Moss, Charles (Chuck) Gyns, Edward Parone, and others. In many ways, Albarwild was a "safe house" that provided employment for talented gay theater professionals in an American theater that, despite the stereotypes, was decidedly heterosexual.

Indeed, it is important to note that even Barr's partners Albee and Wilder declined to collaborate on the production of *The Boys in the Band*, which Barr produced with Charles Woodward, Jr. Barr's decision to produce *The Boys in the Band* was deeply felt, and driven by his desire to present a play that he felt dealt honestly and openly with gay issues. Happily, the decision to offer the play to off-Broadway audiences at extremely low prices proved to be financially wise.

Barr was born in Washington, D. C. on September 6, 1917 to Ruth and David Baer. His father was a Washington-based contractor, who built hotels and office buildings. Barr attended Princeton, where he performed in the Triangle Club shows.

John Houseman, co-director with Orson Welles of the Mercury Theater, saw Barr at Princeton in the role of Falstaff, and hired him at no salary. Barr began his professional acting career in New York with the Mercury Theater as a "convention attendant" in Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*.

Barr became Welles's right-hand man, carrying his lunch "from Longchamps up the theater," and even took part in Welles's radio broadcast, *The War of the Worlds* (1938). He accompanied Welles to Hollywood, where he was executive assistant on the filming of *Citizen Kane* (1941). Barr actually appeared in *Citizen Kane* and caused a continuity problem; in the film he played a reporter but was caught in separate frames with and without his hat, perhaps ending an important career in film.

After his work with Welles, and a stint in the military, Barr produced a series of vanity productions for stars such as Ruth Draper and Ethel Waters. Disappointed with his initial forays into producing on Broadway, Barr left the Broadway theatrical firm of Bowden, Barr, and Bullock in 1959 to found Theater 1960 off-Broadway with H. B. Lutz and Harry Joe Brown, Jr.

In founding Theater 1960, Barr and his partners were intent of giving playwrights (rather than actors) priority in the productions. They wanted to get away from the trend toward star-driven shows.

Theater 1960's first production was two one-act plays, Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and Edward Albee's first play, *The Zoo Story*, at the Provincetown Playhouse on January 14, 1960. The decision to premiere Albee's first play was Barr's most profound. The production inspired a generation of new writers, including playwrights Sam Shepard, John Guare, and Lanford Wilson. Guare later recounted that his telling of the plot of *Zoo Story* to his parents in Queens was so emotionally involved that his parents thought he had killed someone on a park bench in Central Park.

Barr's desire to further mainstream theater experimentalism, along the lines of abstract-expressionist and post-modern visual art, was realized in his production of most of the European and American absurdist of the mid and late twentieth century. These included Eugene Ionesco's *The Killer* (1960); Beckett's *Nekros* (1960), *Embers* (1960), *Happy Days* (1961), *Endgame* (1962), and *Play* (1964); Jack Richardson's *Gallows Humor* (1961); Harold Pinter's *The Lover* (1964); Jean Genet's *Deathwatch* (1962); and Fernando Arrabal's *Picnic on the Battlefield* (1962). Barr's promotion of the European Absurdist, along with the work of Edward Albee, helped give young playwrights and other theater artists hope that the American theater could rise above commercialism and strive toward the new and experimental.

In the fall of 1963, Barr, Wilder, and Albee decided to lease the Cherry Lane Theater, under a contract that

lasted until June of 1967. Simultaneously, Barr and Wilder founded the Playwrights Unit at the Vandam Street [Village South] Theater. From 1963 to 1967, the Albarwild operation produced on, off, and off-off Broadway, and its work influenced many other important new play development programs, including the new plays projects at the Mark Taper Forum, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and, later, Playwrights Horizons, which was founded by Robert Moss, the final manager of the Albarwild Playwrights Unit.

Barr lived in Greenwich Village and was very much part of the Village culture of painters, musicians, and poets. He was known for the extravagant, star-studded parties at his home on Eighth Street, and was a great frequenter of theater cafes such as Caffe Cino and Cafe La Mama. He, therefore, had a great familiarity with the playwrights who produced their work there, many of whom, such as Lanford Wilson, Doric Wilson, and Robert Patrick, were also gay.

Barr was known for his generosity toward new writers, and strove to bring them from the obscurity of their off-off-Broadway lofts and church-based theaters into the American theatrical mainstream. There were few Broadway producers who actively sought out this new generation of writers, who were often considered too unprofessional and unruly for mainstream audiences.

Throughout his busy career as a producer, Barr struggled with alcohol. And after the early 1970s, his drinking contributed markedly to the dissipation of his career, as he became notably less productive. Despite his struggle, Barr continued to promote new work and new playwrights up to his death.

In 1961, Barr and Wilder received the Vernon Rice Award "for excellence in their productions and for devotion to new American playwrights and new ideas." Barr's productions won countless awards, including Tony Awards, the Pulitzer Prize, and Drama Desk Awards. He was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame by the American Theater Critics Association in 1994.

Richard Barr died on January 9, 1989 of complications relating to AIDS.

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