



## Mantello, Joe (b. 1962)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Joe Mantello in an interview broadcast on YouTube.

With his strong visual sense and commitment to collaboration, the actor-turned-director Joe Mantello has emerged as one of the most accomplished artists working in the American theater. He has staged a variety of well-received and award-winning productions, from experimental solo shows to mainstream Broadway musicals, from comedies to dramas to opera.

His productions include Terrence McNally's play *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, about eight gay men sharing a series of summer holidays in an upstate New York house; Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out*, which focuses on the issue of gay athletes in the straight-male-dominated world of professional sports; as well as Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked*, the long-running musical deconstruction of *The Wizard of Oz*, and a revival of Stephen Sondheim's controversial musical *Assassins*.

As a profile of the director in the *New York Times* noted, "[Mantello] has come to be identified as one of the few go-to guys who can reliably make the best case for a show."

Before he was a director, Mantello was an actor, first drawing wide attention for his performance in the original New York production of Tony Kushner's politically-charged two-play cycle *Angels in America* (1993), for which he was nominated for a Tony Award.

Since his appearance in *Angels in America*, however, he has concentrated on his directing career. Nevertheless, in early 2011 Mantello returned to acting in a limited-run Broadway production of *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer's 1985 landmark play about the AIDS crisis.

Mantello also drew attention for his widely-chronicled romantic partnership from 1990 to 2002 with the playwright Jon Robin Baitz. In 1994, the *New York Times* dubbed the two men "the New York theater's couple of the moment."

They were linked professionally as well, with Mantello directing several of Baitz's plays. As the *New York Times*' Bruce Weber noted, their personalities and talents are "complementary," with Mantello's "warmth and humor burnishing" Baitz's "intellectual rigor and undercutting his earnestness."

When the two men separated after 12 years together, Mantello felt "completely isolated and heartbroken," but he never ascribed blame for the breakup to Baitz. "Neither of us felt wronged," Mantello later explained. "There wasn't another person. It was just a very painful, mutual acknowledgement that we had evolved from being a couple who lived together into best friends."

Indeed, Mantello and Baitz have remained friends, and in 2011 the two men reunited professionally, when Mantello directed, to critical acclaim, Baitz's new play *Other Desert Cities*.

### Early Life and Career

Joe Mantello was born on December 27, 1962 the oldest son of an Italian-American family in the suburban community of Rockford, Illinois, a city some 90 miles outside of Chicago. With his parents' encouragement, he spent much of his childhood acting in community theater.

After graduating from high school, he enrolled in the School of Drama at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, in Winston-Salem. Soon after his arrival at the school, however, Mantello dropped out and moved to the Virgin Islands with his boyfriend at the time to live in a tent on the beach. He quickly realized that such a way of life was not for him and he returned to the school a week later.

"I feel my life is divided by that event," Mantello later admitted in an interview. "Before, I was having fun. Now, I was serious about becoming an actor."

In 1984, he graduated from the North Carolina School of the Arts with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in acting. That same year he moved to New York to pursue a career in theater.

He teamed up with former classmates actress Mary-Louise Parker and playwright Peter Hedges to create the innovative, but short-lived, theater company Edge Theater. In 1989, he joined the prestigious New York theater group Circle Repertory Company as both an actor and a director; and in 1991 he became associated with the Naked Angels theater troupe.

As an actor, Mantello appeared in several Off Broadway productions, including Keith Curran's *Walking the Dead* (1991) and Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), the latter about a woman who contracts a fatal disease that generally afflicts a marginalized group and is taken on an imaginary trip to Europe by her brother to try to save her life.

He also had a small role in Susan Seidelman's film *Cookie* (1989), and appeared in such television series as *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd* (1990), *Law & Order* (1991), and *Sisters* (1993).

## **Angels in America**

Mantello's acting career culminated in the original Broadway production of Tony Kushner's groundbreaking seven-hour, two-play cycle *Angels in America* (1993). In both of the play's two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, Mantello portrayed Louis Ironson, a liberal, self-centered Jewish New Yorker who leaves his lover Prior Walter, a gay man struggling with AIDS, and becomes involved with Joe Pitt, a Mormon Republican lawyer struggling with his sexuality.

Frank Rich, in his *New York Times* review of the play, called Mantello's portrayal of Louis, "a combustible amalgam of puppyish Jewish guilt and self-serving piety."

Mantello won the 1993 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play and the Clarence Derwent Award for Most Promising Male Actor, and was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Featured Actor in a Play for his performance in *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*.

When the play closed on Broadway in December 1994, Mantello all but stopped acting and instead concentrated on his stage directing career.

In contrast to the dependency on others in acting, Mantello said that directing legitimized his desire to exert control. "I like being the person who says, 'We're going north,' if I believe that north is the best way to go," he explained.

Mantello had directed several productions while still concentrating on his acting career. Early directorial

efforts included Peter Hedges' *Imagining Brad* (1989) and Timothy Mason's *Babylon Gardens* (1991), with Mary Louis Parker, for Circle Repertory, as well as Keith Reddin's *Nebraska* (1991) and Jon Robin Baitz's *Coq au Vin* (1991) for Naked Angels.

It was, however, with the highly praised Off Broadway production of Baitz's triple-monologue drama *Three Hotels* (1993) that Mantello's directing skills were first widely recognized.

Despite the rigor of the play's three-monologue structure, Mantello's direction, "alleviated a frustration that audiences would have had," according to Baitz, and "breathed life into something that might otherwise have been clinical or 20 degrees cooler."

The following year Mantello made his Broadway directing debut with the comedy *What's Wrong With This Picture?* (1994) by Donald Margulies. The play, unfortunately, was not well received and closed after only 12 performances.

### ***Love! Valour! Compassion!***

However, Mantello's next production, of Terrence McNally's 1994 comedy-drama *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (the title comes from an entry in the writer John Cheever's journals), was enthusiastically received and a sweeping success. The play opened Off Broadway to strong reviews and was transferred four months later to Broadway.

The play concerns a group of eight gay men who form an alternative to the traditional nuclear family and takes place over three major holiday weekends over one summer at an upstate New York summer vacation house.

The *New York Times*' Vincent Canby noted that the play was "written, directed and acted with such theatrical skill and emotional range that it's as broadly entertaining as it is moving," and that under Mantello's direction "the play sweeps effortlessly along as the characters fall in and out of love, argue, swim, dine, sleep, flirt and talk, which they do especially well."

Mantello was nominated for a 1995 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Director of a Play and a Tony Award for Best Direction of a Play.

In 1996, Mantello was notified by a friend about certain similarities between the staging of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* by a theater company in Boca Raton, Florida and the original New York production of the show. Mantello promptly flew to Florida, bought a ticket to the play, and began taking notes on any resemblances between the two productions. "I was writing almost continuously," Mantello remarked. "Scene after scene, moment after moment, the staging was identical."

He then initiated legal proceedings against the regional theater company to protect the copyright of "original artistic contributions by directors to a production."

Mantello's lawyer asked the theater company, and their show's director, to acknowledge Mantello's original work and to pay him a nominal fee. They refused, claiming nothing had been copied. When an actual lawsuit was then filed, the defendants decided to settle out of court. Mantello was paid \$7,500, which he donated to his union, the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers.

As a result of Mantello's suit, publishers like Dramatists Play Service no longer include detailed stage directions and other helpful annotations in the scripts they provide to licensees.

Mantello went on to direct the 1997 film adaptation of *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, with most of the original Broadway cast reprising their roles. To date, this is his only venture into feature filmmaking.

Mantello and McNally teamed up on several more productions, including the 1998 Off Broadway premiere of *Corpus Christi*, a highly contentious drama featuring a Christ-like figure who is gay. Due to the play's perceived anti-Christian content, the show's creative team received a barrage of anonymous threats of violence and members of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights organized protests outside the theater during the entire run of the show.

The two men also collaborated on productions of *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (2002); the musical *A Man of No Importance* (2002), with music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, about an amateur theater group in Dublin who are determined to stage a version of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in a church, despite objections from church authorities; and the 2007 revival of *The Ritz*, a farce set within a gay men's bathhouse.

Mantello was scheduled to direct the 2010 revival of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, McNally's play about homophobia. The production was postponed indefinitely, however, when the actress Megan Mullally, one of the play's four stars, abruptly quit, complaining about the alleged incompetence of one of the other actors.

Mantello also directed McNally and Jake Heggie's opera *Dead Man Walking*, based on Sister Helen Prejean's memoir of the same name about working with Louisiana death-row inmates, which premiered in 2000 at the San Francisco Opera.

### ***Take Me Out***

In 2003, Mantello won his first Tony Award, for Best Direction of a Play, for his work on Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out*, a comedy-drama about gay men in professional team sports.

The play, which first opened Off Broadway and was quickly transferred to a Broadway venue, focuses on the discomfort that arises when a star player on a major-league baseball team casually announces his homosexuality in a press conference.

The confusion and self-consciousness felt by the gay ballplayer's fellow teammates is demonstrated in several locker room and shower scenes with protracted displays of male nudity. For example, in one scene, a ballplayer emerges from a shower complaining vigorously that having a gay teammate will now make him uncomfortable being naked in the locker room, but throughout the scene he never covers up.

Mantello added further instances of male nudity to what was already indicated in Greenberg's script, as Bruce Weber noted in the *New York Times*, "as a way of underscoring that the 'problem' posed by a gay man among straight men is, for the straight men, merely in their heads&mdash;not so much a problem in and of itself but a representation of other insecurities."

In addition to Mantello's Tony Award for Best Direction, *Take Me Out* won the 2003 Tony Award for Best Play. The production also won the 2003 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, with Mantello receiving a nomination for a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Director of a Play. Mantello also won the 2003 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Director, for the original, Off Broadway production of *Take Me Out*.

Mantello also directed the 2006 Broadway revival of Greenberg's drama *Three Days of Rain*, starring the movie star Julia Roberts in her Broadway debut, and the 2008 revival of the Richard Rogers-Lorenz Hart musical *Pal Joey*, with a new libretto by Greenberg, based on the original by John O'Hara.

### ***Wicked and Assassins***

In late 2003, Mantello directed his first Broadway musical, *Wicked*, with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and libretto by Winnie Holzman. It went on to become one of the most successful musicals ever to run on Broadway.

*Wicked* is a musical deconstruction of the L. Frank Baum *Oz* tales, as well as the 1939 Judy Garland film *The Wizard of Oz*, and loosely based on Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995).

The musical starred Idina Menzel in an award-winning performance as Elphaba, the future "Wicked Witch of the West," and Kristin Chenoweth as Elphaba's rival, Glinda, the "Good Witch of the North," with Joel Grey as the Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

Mantello won the 2004 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Director of a Musical and the Outer Critics Circle Award, given by critics working for non-New York City media outlets, for Outstanding Director of a Musical. He was also nominated for a Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical.

Mantello's next production was also a musical, the 2004 revival of Stephen Sondheim's audacious and powerful *Assassins* (libretto by John Weidman), which is based on the real life stories of nine successful or would-be murderers of American presidents, such as John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, John Hinckley, and Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme.

The musical, of course, does not celebrate its subjects, but instead, as Ben Brantley noted in his review for the *New York Times*, allows "the frightening title characters" to restate "their demand to be noticed." And under Mantello's direction, Brantley continued, "they [do] so with an eloquence and an intensity that makes a compelling case for a misunderstood show."

Mantello's production of *Assassins* was originally scheduled for the fall of 2001, but was postponed by the creative team until April 2004 due to the sensitivity of the content in light of the events of September 11, 2001. As an article in the *New York Times* explained, "It was hard to imagine asking the audience to accept the show's black humor and intermittently satirical tone, let alone sit through the monologue in which the would-be assassin Samuel Byck reveals his plan to 'drop a 747 on the White House and incinerate Dick Nixon.'"

The production received the 2004 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical, and Mantello himself won his second Tony Award, this time for Best Direction of a Musical. He was also nominated for the 2004 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Director of a Musical.

### ***The Normal Heart***

In October 2010, Mantello returned to acting in an acclaimed one-night staged reading of *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer's 1985 landmark play about the AIDS crisis. Mantello, who had not appeared onstage since his work in *Angels in America* in 1994, played the central character Ned Weeks, an AIDS activist. Mantello said it was a role he had always wanted to play.

The reading was organized as a charity event and raised \$150,000 for two caregiver groups, the Actors Fund and Friends in Deed.

The production, which was also a critical success, was remounted in early 2011 for a limited Broadway engagement, again with Mantello in the lead role of Ned Weeks. The production marked the Broadway debut of Kramer's play, which had distinguished productions Off Broadway in 1985 and 2004.

## Other Productions

Mantello has had a very prolific directing career.

His Broadway productions also include Neil Simon's *Proposals* (1997) and the 2005 revival of Simon's *The Odd Couple*, starring Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick; the 2001 revival of Noël Coward's *Design for Living*; the solo stand-up comedy *An Evening with Mario Cantone* (2002) and the gay comedian's second solo show *Laugh Whore* (2004), which Mantello also directed for the cable TV network Showtime; the 2005 revival of David Mamet's drama *Glengarry Glen Ross* and the premiere of Mamet's political comedy *November* (2008); and the musical *9 to 5* (2009), with music and lyrics by Dolly Parton, based on the 1980 film of the same name.

His Off Broadway productions also include *Blue Window* (1996) and *God's Heart* (1997), both written by Craig Lucas; *The Santaland Diaries* (1996), a one-man, one-act play, which Mantello adapted from the essay by David Sedaris; Jon Robin Baitz's *Mizlansky/Zilinsky or "Schmucks"* (1998); *Lillian* (1998), by the British performance artist David Cale; Neil LaBute's *Bash: Latter-Day Plays* (1999); *The Mineola Twins* (1999), by Paula Vogel; Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1999); *Another American: Asking and Telling* (1999), by Marc Wolf, which explores sexual politics and the American military, and is based on a series of interviews Wolf conducted with gay, lesbian, and straight military personnel, as well as civil rights lawyers, federal judges, academics, and politicians; Adam Bock's comedy *The Receptionist* (2007); *Blackbird* (2007), by David Harrower; and Alexi Kaye Campbell's *The Pride* (2010), which explores themes of homosexuality in 1958 and 2008.

Mantello currently lives in New York City.

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## About the Author

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.