



Public/Private

My Life with Joe Papp at The Public Theater

By Gail Merrifield Papp

(Applause: October 17, 2023)

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Blending the ultimate insider's account of the creation and first decades of New York City's Public Theater with the star-studded story of life working alongside her husband, The Public's founder Joe Papp, ***Public/Private: My Life with Joe Papp at the Public Theater*** is theater director of new works Gail Merrifield Papp's enthralling memoir of their rich partnership and of the legendary theatrical institution. Opening in the early Sixties, Merrifield Papp's narrative spans the twenty-six years she and Joe worked, then lived together until Joe's death in 1991. During most of that time, Gail was Developer of New Plays and Musicals at The Public while it staged hundreds of productions, ranging from free Shakespeare in Central Park to new plays, such as Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, and musicals like *Hair* and *A Chorus Line*. Gail and Joe's production genius was responsible for an extraordinary body of work that launched the careers of dozens of actors, including James Earl Jones, Colleen Dewhurst, Gloria Foster, Morgan Freeman, Raúl Juliá, Kevin Kline, George C. Scott, Martin Sheen, Meryl Streep, and Diane Venora, all of whom make an appearance in the book.

Gail Papp paints a comprehensive picture of the ways that The Public was driven by Joe's ambition to create a democratic theater whose artists and audiences would reflect the city's population. Also highlighted are unfamiliar aspects of his many battles with the establishment, from tilts with Robert Moses to theater critics. She remembers the scourge of AIDS, its impact on the many friends, family and colleagues close to Joe and Gail, and the toll it exacted on Joe's son, Tony. In recounting setbacks and frustrations alongside moments of passionate artistry and theatrical innovation, Gail's personal remembrances lend the narrative a keen, emotional edge which will captivate readers. At a time when America remains divided over issues of equality, identity, and freedom of expression, *Public/Private* is an important chronicle of how The Public Theater became a transformative beacon for social change and of the couple who created it.

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About the Author:

GAIL MERRIFIELD PAPP was born in San Francisco into a family with a deep theater lineage. After joining Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival in 1965, she became Director of New Works Development for The Public Theater and was responsible for identifying up and coming playwrights and composers. Gail's work curated some of its best-remembered productions in Public Theater history. These include *The Normal Heart*, Larry Kramer's Tony Award-winning play about the AIDS crisis, for which she received the Human Rights Campaign Arts and Communication Award, and Rupert Holmes's Tony Award-winning Best Musical *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Gail Merrifield and Joseph Papp were married in 1976.

Producer-Director **JOSEPH PAPP** (1921–1991) is the founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival, which since 1956 has produced free Shakespeare in New York City. In 1965 he steered the New York City's acquisition of the Astor Library landmark building where he created The Public Theater dedicated to new American work, opening in 1967 with the original production of *Hair*. Papp produced over six hundred plays and musicals which, by 1991, had won more than 200 stage, film, and television awards. Called "the most important force in the English-speaking theater" in the twentieth century, he was also an outspoken champion of human rights and the First Amendment who, in the words of the *Congressional Record*, "struggled to make New York City and our country a more livable place, to uplift our spirits, to challenge our minds, and see us through to another day."

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