



Freelance director Timothy Near and artistic director Michael Butler.

Couples in Theatre: Busy, Busy *by / Dale Albright*

Published 2013-02-14

Timothy Near and Michael Butler

“Someone said we were the only married couple who were artistic directors of different theatres at the same time.” Amazingly, for two years Timothy Near and her husband Michael Butler could claim that distinctive mantle (Butler has just completed his seventh year as artistic director of Center Repertory Company in Walnut Creek,

and Near was the artistic director of San Jose Repertory Theatre for 22 years; she is now a busy freelance director).

It sounds like they almost didn't get to know each other, considering their first meeting. Near admits that when Butler auditioned for the role of a ballroom-dancing nerd in a play she was directing, he didn't come off as "quite nerdy enough." However, after the choreographer told Near that he thought Butler would be "the best at taking direction," Near gave him the part—and they both eventually got a much larger prize.

With such busy schedules, it isn't surprising that these two often find themselves on opposite sides of the country. Near says, "This fall I was in St. Louis directing "Clybourne Park" and Michael was directing "The Underpants" at Center Rep. When I am out of town, we talk every night." Also, in a recurring theme for all of our couples in this article, Butler had to miss Near's recent out-of-town production. But both confirm the big plus of having a partner in the field: they get it. She says, "I know what it means to run a theatre. Sometimes you absolutely cannot leave the nest."

Being apart geographically, though, is how it started. According to Butler, "We met under long-distance circumstances. I lived in New York and Timi lived in San Jose. I thought I'd never leave, but I moved to be with Timothy." Their courting was conducted through hand-written letters, which they seem to have used to great advantage. Near says, "We learned a great deal about each other's art and imaginations, senses of humor, vision, history, childhood, longings and just who we were, all through the creative act of writing."

Discovering those artistic sensibilities early on seem to have served them well. They collaborate in many different ways, and often. Not only was Butler in the literary department at San Jose Rep, Near has directed him ten times (he says, "She is far and away my

favorite director!”). Near has produced seven shows that Butler has directed, and he has produced four plays that she has directed. In addition, Butler has written music for several productions for Near, and they even acted together in “Communicating Doors.” He says, “We had a bit of a hard time keeping a straight face in that. We kept getting such a kick out of each other.” However extensively they have collaborated, they have one more bridge to cross in that regard: surprisingly, Butler has not yet directed Near. “I’m dying to do that,” he says.

Could that collaboration be far off? This is a couple who loves to work together. When asked what it’s like to work together, they not only use words like “fun” and “inspiring” but also “life changing.” Butler elaborates, “We have different strengths and we so admire each other’s work. Timothy can really bring out a lot of psychological complexity in a play, and from that, a lot of humor and heart. Her “Uncle Vanya” at Cal Shakes was a great example of that. And the way she includes music and dance in her shows is so surprising and wonderfully revealing.” And Near describes Butler’s directing style as “extreme, hilarious, a little dangerous and ever so playful.”

But that collaboration will have to wait, for a little while at least. Near spills the beans, confessing, “This June we are going to Greece!” where they plan on having no cell phones nor email access. Butler finishes: “What are we most excited about? Seeing the theatre at Epidaurus!”

Of course.