

Left Coast Ideas, Floating East

By JOY GOODWIN

BERKELEY, Calif.

IN a photo of Berkeley Repertory Theater in its founding year, 1968, members of what appears to be the cast of "Hair" dot the facade of a converted storefront. On the roof two hippies perch next to a giant peace symbol; below them a hand-painted slogan implores theatergoers, "Please don't remain silent."

Forty years later, in a bustling downtown with more than its share of students, homeless people and gelaterias, Berkeley Rep occupies two sleek, custom-built theaters. Gone are the days when actors had to dash outside and down an alley to enter on the stage's far side. Yet under Tony Taccone, who is just its third artistic director in four decades, the company continues to pride itself on producing provocative, often overtly political theater, the kind that generates loud and clamorous debate.

In his 19 years with the company (10 of them as artistic director) Mr. Taccone has come to believe that geography is destiny. On a recent afternoon in Berkeley, demonstrators protested the recruiting by the Marines two blocks from his office. "Look, this is a town that has its own foreign policy," he said cheerfully. "We have the proud reputation of being more left than other parts of the country. We're also castigated as a bunch of nutcakes. And we celebrate both. Welcome to Berkeley."

Increasingly, Berkeley Rep's galvanizing productions have been traveling to New York. The rock musical "Passing Strange," which opened on Broadway on Thursday, is the fourth show in two years with Berkeley lineage to transfer to a major New York stage.

Sarah Jones and Mr. Taccone refined her Off Broadway hit "Bridge & Tunnel" in Berkeley before taking it to Broadway in 2006. Mr. Taccone's production of Tony Kushner's "Brundibar" had its debut in Berkeley before a May 2006 run at the New Victory. Les Waters, the Rep's associate artistic director, staged Sarah Ruhl's "Eurydice" in Berkeley before bringing it to



SARA KRULWICH/THE NEW YORK TIMES



Berkeley Repertory Theater in its first year, 1968. Several recent New York productions (like "Passing Strange," above left) have connections to it.

Second Stage in June. And "Passing Strange," originally a co-production of the Rep and the Public Theater, had its world premiere in Berkeley.

It is a striking body of work, a reminder of the importance of regional theaters as feeders to New York. Mr. Waters's production of "Eurydice," described in a review by Charles Isherwood of The New York Times as "rhapsodically beautiful," took place at what appears to be the bottom of a swimming pool. "Passing Strange," the first theater work by the singer-songwriter Stew and the rocker Heidi Rodewald and directed by Annie Dorsen, is an unlikely Broadway musical; its postmodern lyrics chart a young African-American's course through bohemian Amsterdam and Berlin.

Mr. Taccone, an ex-New Yorker whose restless energy, Yankees sweatshirt and shaggy hair suggest the Al Pacino of 1979, shrugged off any simple explanation for this recent string. "Some of it's our eye," he said. "Some of it's luck."

There is also his relationship with Oskar Eustis, the Public's artistic director since 2005. The two men spent seven years in the 1980s at the Eureka Theater Company, based in a church basement in the Castro district of San Francisco. During that time they saw their theater burned down by an arsonist, rebuilt it from scratch and first read the work of Mr. Kushner, then a little-known playwright; his "Angels in America" was a Eureka commission.

Mr. Kushner, whose work has appeared frequently at Berkeley Rep, attributes much of the company's success to Mr. Taccone, a free spirit who once mounted Beckett's "Endgame" at Christmastime. "He's incredibly gutsy, and the Rep is run that way," Mr. Kushner said. "He doesn't lose sight of the fact that part of what makes theater work is being able to take really insane levels of risk."

Berkeley Rep has a tradition of playing host to formidable talents before their big

breaks, like Anna Deavere Smith, Mary Zimmerman and Mary-Louise Parker. And it has long been a leader in producing writers of color. In recent years Mr. Taccone has put his weight behind producing another underserved group: emerging writers, including Stew, Ms. Ruhl (a recent recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant) and Jordan Harrison. Mr. Taccone's approach — to offer emerging writers the same resources as established ones and to hold them to the same standards — has helped yield a string of hits.

He is also able to offer new plays a very educated, broad-minded audience. "Berkeley was a comfort zone for us," Stew said. "I mean, we throw a lot of references at people — art history, literature, politics, language jokes. And we're thinking, 'If anybody's going to get all this, it's these people.' Do you realize that there's a homeless book club in Berkeley? If you're going to throw a bag of cultural references at people, this is the place to do it."

And artists also appreciate Berkeley Rep's intimate 600- and 400-seat theaters, in which no seat is more than 49 feet from the stage.

Like the company's founder, Michael Leibert, who staged Shakespeare in an era of be-ins, and its second artistic director, Sharon Ott, who led the company to a 1997 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theater, Mr. Taccone steers away from the nonnarrative avant-garde. He is making theater for the many.

If Berkeley theatergoers don't like a show, they don't remain silent. Mr. Taccone has drawers full of letters from his shows' detractors — and defenders. Sometimes debating patrons have to be ushered out of the theater by the cleanup crew. Mr. Taccone welcomes the dissenters. "Hey, thinking is an endangered event in this culture," he said.