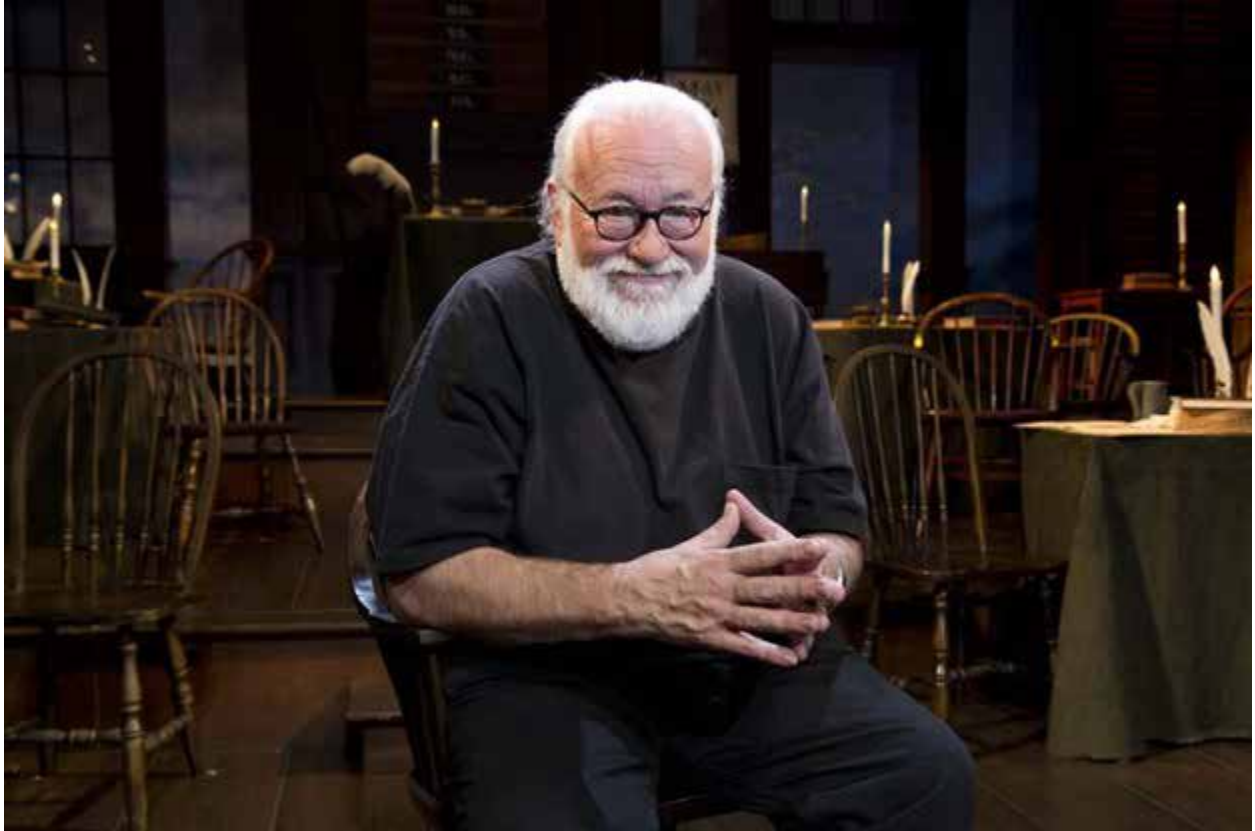


SHERIDAN ROAD

Mutual History

By Brian Justice



Frank Galati and the Steppenwolf Theatre were both born in Highland Park—Galati in the hospital in 1943, the company in a church basement in 1974—and his professional and personal lives have been intertwined with both the wider Chicago theater scene and what is readily recognized as one of the leading theatrical companies in the country ever since.

Galati grew up in Northbrook. He attended Northwestern University in Evanston, earning an undergraduate degree, a PhD, and then became a Professor of Performance Studies there. His high school drama teacher, Ralph Lang, had earned a PhD at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois and taught there, and invited Galati to watch and critique some of his students.

“I first heard about Rondi Reed, Randy Arney, Tom Irwin, and Joan Allen—all of those original Steppenwolf members, because they were my former teacher’s students. I watched a scene with John Malkovich and Laurie Metcalf, who were undergraduates at the time and, needless to say, fantastic. We became friends and have been ever since.”

He joined Steppenwolf in 1985. Before that “I was always kind of, you know, like an uncle figure on the side. Sometimes I would have dinner with Jeff Perry or Gary Sinise and talk about the plans for the theater,” Galati says.

Over the years, those plans and dinners and talks led to a groundbreaking production of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1986, adapted from John Steinbeck's novel by Galati and directed by him, as well. It moved from Steppenwolf to Broadway, and has since been translated into more than 25 languages and performed in Japan, China, Israel, Scandinavia, and Iceland.

In addition to winning Galati two Tony awards, the play quickly became recognized as a theatrical milestone. "I've seen enough theatre for five people's lifetimes at this point," says Patrick Hoffman, Director of the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, "and *The Grapes of Wrath* was superb in every way. I was so knocked out by it that I went back the very same week to see it again." The production is one of several of Galati's that the Archive has video recorded and preserved.

Now Galati, Steppenwolf, and Steinbeck are together again. Galati has returned to collaborate with Steppenwolf on his adaptation of *East of Eden*. Directed by Terry Kinney, it kicks off the company's 40th anniversary season.

Galati is aware that, for many, *East of Eden* is the 1955 James Dean movie, and, for some, a turgid, eight hour mini-series with Jane Seymour in 1981. "I think that the movie is seriously flawed," says Galati. "It starts on page 489 of the book, so it's less than a third of the story. People think that it is a gigantic epic, and it's true that while it covers three generations of the Trask family, it only takes place over a period of almost twenty years, from 1900 to 1918." The film also eliminated a central character, Lee, the Chinese house man who cares for the Trask sons. "They gave all of his profound, philosophical observations to Julie Harris, who is playing this sixteen year old girl! It in no way corresponds to the complexity and density of Steinbeck's original story."

Galati's North Shore roots, Steppenwolf, and *East of Eden* are not the only impetus for him to return to Chicago. He still has family here and remains involved in Chicago theater, including the Goodman, where he was an associate director for 25 years. Additionally, the founders and some members of Looking Glass Theatre are former students.

Eric Rosen, founder of About Face Theatre and Artistic Director of the Kansas City Repertory Theatre, recalls "When I was nineteen, I saw *The Grapes of Wrath* on Broadway. It was as if I had discovered the language of theater and Frank spoke it beautifully. I did everything I could to study with him at Northwestern as a graduate student. Frank casts an enormous spell as a director, as a writer, as a teacher, and as a profound theorist of what theater could do."

The success of *The Grapes of Wrath* made the Steinbeck estate and publishers eager for Galati to adapt another book, and Steinbeck's widow, Elaine, was an enthusiastic supporter. "I got to know her very well," says Galati. "She was a great booster of Steppenwolf and she came to all of our openings in London, California, Chicago, and Broadway."

"I've always loved Steinbeck," says Galati. "I've read all of his books, and *East of Eden* was always something that I had thought about doing for years, but I didn't know how, so I just kept postponing it." Then, another Steppenwolf member, actress/director Amy Morton urged Galati on and convinced him to adapt Steinbeck, again. "It's been an interesting mutual history that I've shared with my brothers and sisters of the Steppenwolf," says Galati, "and that's led us to where we are now."