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Ike Schambelan, Director Who Brought Disabled Artists to the Stage, Dies at 75

By BRUCE WEBER FEB. 5, 2015



Ike Schambelan, seated center, with actors from Theater Breaking Through Barriers.
Credit Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

Ike Schambelan, a theater director who for more than three decades was the guiding force behind a professional Off Broadway company that featured blind and otherwise disabled actors in prominent roles, died on Tuesday in the Bronx. He was 75.

The cause was cancer, said Nicholas Viselli, associate director of the company, now known as Theater Breaking Through Barriers, that Mr. Schambelan founded and where he was artistic director until his death.

Mr. Schambelan (pronounced SHAM-buh-lin) had directed regional and Off Broadway theater productions when he began directing readings of plays on radio for the vision-impaired in 1979. The job evolved into his working with blind and low-vision performers in workshops and presentations at libraries and other community centers.

His company — known as Theater by the Blind until 2008, when it expanded its mission to include artists with other disabilities — was officially formed in 1980, and began performing short programs and revues, with sighted and nonsighted actors, often featuring skits on the theme of sight and sightlessness.

Mr. Schambelan was not blind or otherwise disabled but grew up close to a grandmother who was blind, and he often cited her as an inspiration. “Every Monday night, we’d listen to ‘Lux Radio Theater’ and I’d brush her hair,” he said, referring to a long-running series of hourlong radio programs in a 2012 interview with Washington Blade, a newspaper covering gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues. “I came to associate blindness, affection and theater.”

He was also inspired, he said, by the Broadway production of “Children of a Lesser God,” the Tony Award-winning play by Mark Medoff about the romance and marriage of a deaf woman and a man who can hear. It starred a deaf actress (Phyllis Frelich) and a hearing actor (John Rubinstein).

Theater by the Blind began mounting full productions in 1985, providing a working environment for theater artists who happened to be visually impaired (and others who were not). Under Mr. Schambelan, the company came to view disabilities not as hindrances to creativity but as opportunities for it.

In 30 years the company has produced an original Sherlock Holmes mystery by Judd Woldin, "Murder in Baker Street," as well as Shakespeare plays and works by Brecht, Shaw, Gorky, Agatha Christie, Lanford Wilson, Arthur Miller and A. R. Gurney. Reviewers often described the sensation of letting go of their awareness that the performers were blind or disabled and seeing through to the art of the play. Indeed, the company's mission statement makes it clear that one of its purposes is to have audiences do just that. "We don't do feel-good work or art therapy," Mr. Schambelan said in 2012. "We do art." In 2005 the company addressed the issue of sightlessness in an especially forthright and dramatic manner with a production of Seneca's "Oedipus," directed by Mr. Schambelan. As was his habit and inclination, he cast a small number of actors who played two or three roles.

"The evening's culminating moment turns on another kind of doubling," Honor Moore [wrote in a review](#) in The Times. "At the end of the play, Oedipus, played by George Ashiotis, who is blind, announces that the curse of famine and plague brought on by his crime has been lifted. Poignantly alone on the stage, he is blind not only as himself but also as Oedipus, the moment all the more powerful because a blind man's dark glasses obscure his eyes, which we have seen throughout the play."

Isaac Hillel Schambelan was born in Philadelphia on Jan. 20, 1940. His father, Benson, was involved in several businesses, including photo engraving. His mother, the former Beatrice Rubin, worked for a time as the principal of a school inside a state hospital. Ike Schambelan graduated from Swarthmore and received a doctor of fine arts degree from the Yale School of Drama. He worked in advertising and later at the Austen Riggs Center, a Massachusetts psychiatric treatment facility, using theater as a therapeutic tool. For a time he ran a children's theater program at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven. Mr. Schambelan, who was openly bisexual for much of his life, is survived by his wife, Joan Duddy, a former dancer and arts administrator; a twin brother, Howard, known as Bo; and another brother, Morrie. "My wife and I have now been living together 40 years and married for 31," Mr. Schambelan wrote in New York magazine in 2012. "She knows I'm bi and says it makes me more interesting."

When Theater by the Blind changed its name to Theater Breaking Through Barriers in 2008, opening its productions to theater artists with a variety of disabilities, it was with the idea of making the disabled more visible in the culture at large.

"Only 2 percent of characters on TV exhibit a disability and only 0.5 percent are allowed to speak," the company declares on its website. "Hollywood is required to track casting based on age, gender and race, but categorically refuses to track disability. In 'Glee' the black actor is black and the Asian, Asian, but the wheelchair user isn't. We must change this and gain for actors and writers with disabilities the same acceptance that has been achieved by artists of color."

Its next production, "The Unexpected Guest," an Agatha Christie mystery, opens Off Broadway in April with a cast of nine, including two legally blind actors, two amputees, one actor who uses a wheelchair because of multiple sclerosis, one who has a spine injury that has affected his gait, and one who has cerebral palsy.

"Whenever we say disability, automatically people think it's more of a public service thing," said Mr. Viselli, who is not disabled and who joined the company in 1997 and is Mr. Schambelan's likely successor. "You know, 'Oh, bless them.' But we're a professional company. All our performers are professional actors."