

Director John Hirsch has accepted appointment as Visiting Quinn Martin Endowed Chair in Department of Drama

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San Diego's changing theatrical climate has attracted a major international directing talent to the University of California, San Diego for the spring quarter.

John Hirsch, the volatile Hungarian-born director who has been a tour de force in Canadian and U.S. theatre for more than three decades, accepted an appointment as the Visiting Quinn Martin Endowed Chair in the UCSD Department of Drama because he felt he had something to contribute to both drama students and theatre in San Diego.

"When you are a professional, there comes a time to share what you've learned and accumulated with young people--in theatre, in any profession," Hirsch said recently.

Co-founder of the Manitoba Theatre Center, the first indigenous professional theatre in Western Canada, Hirsch was consulting artistic director of the resurgent Seattle Repertory Company from 1979 to 1981 and artistic director of the widely acclaimed Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada from 1981 to 1985.

He arrived at UCSD in March, after kicking off his teaching sabbatical with a quarter at Yale University. According to Hirsch, he was drawn to San Diego by the positive, bold spirit displayed by its theatrical community and the opportunity to help strengthen the community's ties with the nationally recognized drama department at UCSD, headed by Richard Riddell.

"It is always exciting to be in the midst of an environment that is undergoing change--here the change is a cultural change, a change towards greater enrichments of both the mind and the spirit. To have the privilege to contribute to that is very stimulating," he said.

If there is a constant theme in Hirsch's life, it is change. He recently returned from Israel and his premiere as a film actor.

The lanky, bearded Hirsch played the role of a retired terrorist in a film called Vengeance, "a rip roaring action movie. Never in my life did I think I'd be in such a film."

The film featured Colleen Dewhurst, Michael York, Rod Steiger and Steven Bauer. "And here I was, a total newcomer."

Just as Hirsch embraces change, he welcomes challenges. That's why he said, "Yes," to the Stratford Festival when it offered him the position of artistic director in 1981--a time when it was suffering from a series of artistic and managerial setbacks.

Despite the turmoil and dissent that continued to plague the festival, Hirsch managed to put together five exciting and innovative seasons. He also staged several of the festival's Shakespearean productions.

While at Stratford, he won widespread admiration for establishing programs to train promising young actors to perform the classics and help middlelevel actors develop so they could take on major roles.

Hirsch was a young man, recently graduated from the Israelite Gymnasium in Budapest, when he arrived in Canada in 1947. After earning his B.A. at the University of Manitoba and completing a year at the Centreal School of Speech and Drama in London, he and colleague Tom Hendry established the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg.

The Centre, which incorporated a theatre school and a studio theatre workshop, was the first regional theatre in Canada and has served as a model for regional theatre throughout North America.

Canada had become home for Hirsch. He became a citizen in 1951. "I love Canada; it's a beautiful country, a country of great decency and civic virtues, but I have to get out periodically to escape a love of failure, a kind of negativism, I find there." As a rule, he "escapes" to the United States.

"In spite of the problems this country is experiencing, there is-a tremendous sense of energy--an ongoing belief in potential and a strong sense that things can and must happen. I feel very much at home here."

During the decades that followed his work with the Manitoba Theatre Centre, Hirsch left his distinguished mark throughout both countries. He was resident director with New York's Lincoln Center Repertory Company for four years and has staged productions for the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, the New York City Opera, the National Theatre for the Deaf, and numerous theatres throughout Canada.

He won the Outer Circle Critic's Award for St. Joan at the Lincoln Center; an Obie Award for AC-DC at the Chelsea Theatre Centre, and the Los Angeles Drama Critic's Award for The Dybbuk at the Mark Taper Forum.

During the mid-1970s, Hirsch turned his attention from the stage to television drama. As head of TV drama for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, he developed and supervised the system's entire output of drama, including several long-running series.

What's next on the program for John Hirsch? After leaving San Diego, he plans to continue directing in the theatre, teaching, and working in film--behind, not in front of, the camera. "I'm reading a fascinating script. The novel it is based on is exceptional. It deals with very real, human problems."

He sums up his life's formula in simple terms: "To constantly change your work, your life, is the most stimulating way to grow. To work in many places with many people gives one the opportunity to stretch oneself."

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