

Gisselman (at left) says he's best when directing an ensemble production like *A Christmas Carol*. "I like working with an ensemble, trying to have all of us working on the same play and telling the same story."

PHOTO BY BILL KELLEY

AS HE UNDERTAKES HIS SIXTH SEASON OF DIRECTING *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* AT THE GUTHRIE THEATER IN MINNEAPOLIS, ST. OLAF ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE GARY GISSELMAN STILL FINDS PLENTY TO LOVE ABOUT THE PLAY, THE THEATER AND THE DRAMATIC TURN OF HIS LIFE.

# It's A Wonderful Life

BY PATRICIA GROTT'S KELLY '77

ON THIS RAINY DAY IN NOVEMBER 2005, CHRISTMAS IS IN FULL swing in Rehearsal Room A at the original Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Director Gary Gisselman calls out occasional directives as he sits on a plastic chair, legs stretched out, his left arm resting on a music stand: "Let's all make a bigger deal about Martha's arrival!" § "Tim, the harder you struggle, the better." § "Fan, don't drop off the last syllable: Eb-en-ee-ZER." § Gisselman strokes his beard and laughs aloud at the funny moments. When the cast of the holiday classic sings the opening number, he softly sings along. The scene ends and the actors gather around. This is the final rehearsal before they move onstage. § "This is the last, nit-picky detail work," he says to the actors, "but it helps. You need to tighten it up. Move it along. You don't say your lines faster, but you have more anticipation. Your brain works faster, your heart beats faster. You people who come out during the scene — we don't want all big mouths out there." He demonstrates, opening his mouth wide and pointing his chin to the ceiling. "It looks a little Disney."

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Later, he concedes to “indulging” the big scenes. “But I love the big scenes,” he says. “Well ... I love *all* the scenes.”

After five seasons of directing a perennial holiday favorite — Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* — at the Guthrie, Gisselman, a respected, well-known figure in the Twin Cities artistic community, still finds plenty to love about it.

“If there’s anything that I regret about actor training in this country, it’s that not enough of it includes a liberal arts background.” — GARY GISSELMAN

“When Gary took over *Christmas Carol* in 2000, that particular production had been 30 years in the making. And a lot of things had come into it — bits and pieces of comedy or things that were extraneous to the story that Dickens had written,” says Guthrie Artistic Director Joe Dowling. “Gary decided, I think very wisely, to go back to that original and to refine the production in a way that made Dickens’s story resonate more. He didn’t lose the joy of the piece or the strong theatricality

of the piece. It didn’t become a kind of literary exercise. It remained a strong, vibrant production, as it is to this day.”

Directors set the tone in a theatrical production. “If a director is nervous or jittery or freaking out, it affects everybody in the room,” says Martha Kulig, the Guthrie’s stage manager. “What has made *A Christmas Carol* magical these past few

years is the tone that Gary sets: stress-free and very warm and open. And that carries throughout the whole run of the show, even after he leaves.”

Although Gisselman maintains a full teaching load at St. Olaf, where he joined the faculty in 1999, he credits the college with making it possible for him to handle the considerable *Christmas Carol* tasks as well as his classroom work. “I love doing it,” he says, “and I love the fact that the college makes it possible to do both.” As the St. Olaf Theatre Department’s artist-in-residence and artistic director, Gisselman finds plenty to love there, too: “Great students. Wonderful faculty. What more beautiful place could you go to work every day?”

Gisselman currently is directing the Guthrie fall production, *Lost in Yonkers*, and he’s about to commence work on the 2006 production of *A Christmas Carol*, both staged in the new Guthrie Theater, an architectural wonder that opened this summer on the banks of the Mississippi River downtown. No doubt he will continue to engage a few St. Olaf students as his assistants during the upcoming *Christmas Carol* production. “Not just because they are St. Olaf students,” he explains, “but because they’re good enough to be there. It’s great for them, and for me, to work with the Guthrie’s company of actors.”

### Homegrown hero

GISSELMAN’S PROFESSIONAL DIRECTING career began in the mid-1960s at the Bloomington (Minnesota) Civic Theatre, and it has continued non-stop ever since. The founding artistic director of the Chanhassen Dinner Theatre and a longtime member of the artistic staff of the Children’s Theatre Company of Minneapolis, Gisselman has directed nearly 200 plays, musicals and operas at the Cricket, Illusion and Park Square theaters in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Pioneer Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, the Arizona Theatre Company in Tucson and A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle.

“I always feel that my best work is ahead of me,” says Gisselman, a member of the St. Olaf faculty since 1999.



Gisselman (right) sharing backstage banter with veteran film and television actor Raye Birk, who played Ebenezer Scrooge in the Guthrie Theater’s 2005 production of *A Christmas Carol*.

He grew up in Bloomington in the 1940s and ’50s, living with his parents and three younger brothers on a fox and mink farm on Lyndale Avenue South, just across the cemetery from his grandparents’ strawberry farm — and in close proximity to another 30 or so aunts, uncles and cousins. Young Gary picked strawberries in the morning and sold them on the road in the afternoon: “35 cents a quart; three for a dollar!” He created plays with his cousins, using a chenille bedspread for a curtain. “I had an older girl cousin who was sort of in charge, so I wasn’t the director,” he says, smiling.

He comes from a family of storytellers. On hot summer days, his grandmother would read aloud to her grandchildren, classics like *Peter Pan*, delivered with her heavy Danish accent. She told her own stories, too, tales of her early days in Minnesota. “For me, it was sort of an idyllic growing-up,” says Gisselman. “I know my parents and grandparents were just scraping by, but my childhood was never anything but a good time and a lot of stories.”

In high school, Gisselman considered becoming a Lutheran minister. But when he attended Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, he fell in love with acting. He never thought of the two careers as mutually exclusive until a visiting seminarian asked him: “What’s it going to be, Gary? Jesus or Shakespeare?”

“That turned me away a little bit,” he says. “Now, I may have *wanted* to be turned away. I think I was enamored with the idea of performing once a week in the ministry, but in the theater you could perform *six* days a week!” Gisselman contin-

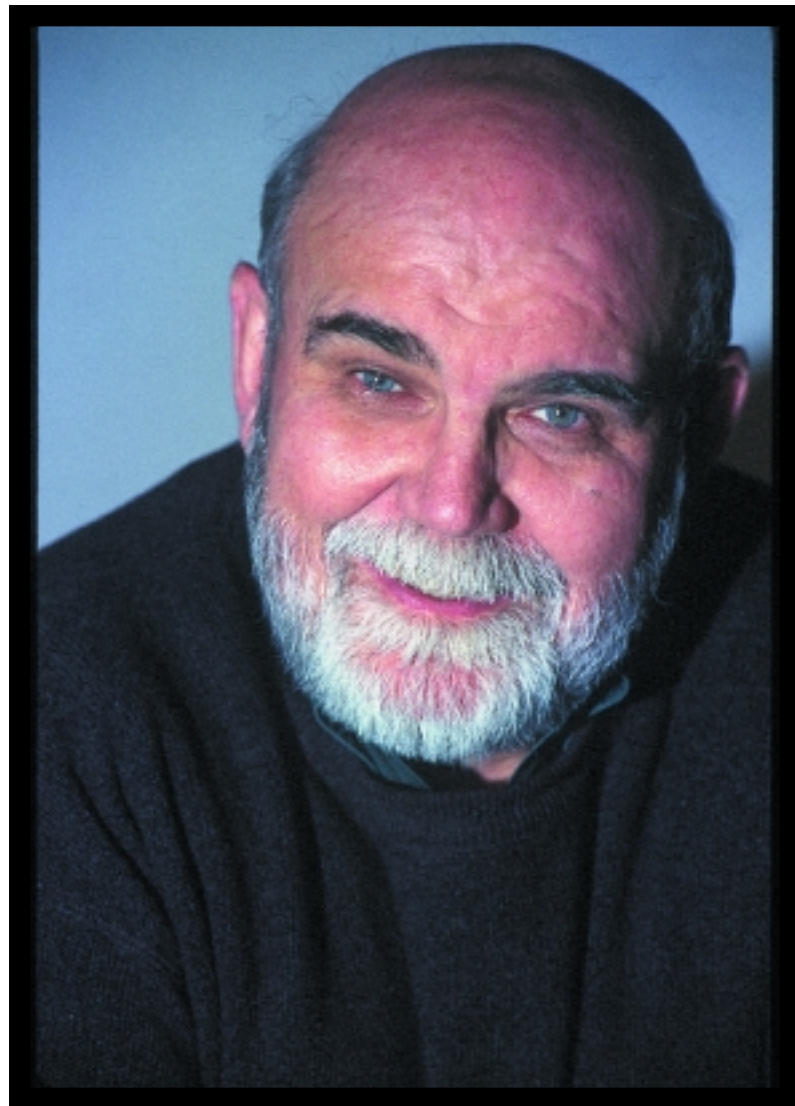
ued his study of acting at the University of Virginia, but when he won a McKnight Fellowship to study at the University of Minnesota, he happily came home to finish his master’s degree and perform at the world-renowned Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963 by the great British director Sir Tyrone Guthrie.

Still, something wasn’t quite right. He began to realize that he would never be the actor he wanted to be. “There was some part of me that I wasn’t willing to let go,” he says. And there was more. When he overheard his fellow graduate students criticizing plays they had never seen because they just *knew* they had to be bad, Gisselman cringed. “I didn’t want to end up like that — cynical. I really was *in love* with the theater.”

Gisselman graduated from the University of Minnesota and became artistic director of the Bloomington Civic Theatre. In 1968, he was teaching in the speech and theater department at Macalester College in St. Paul when he learned that Herb and Carol Bloomberg were building a 90,000-square-foot dinner theater in a cornfield in Chanhassen, 30 minutes southwest of Minneapolis.

Negotiations ensued and within six months Gisselman became the founding artistic director of the Chanhassen

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DAVID GONNERMAN '90

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Dinner Theatre. He was 28 years old. "I tell people I've been really lucky," he says, "and they say: 'Oh, come on.' But it's true. It was just a terrific opportunity. Herb Bloomberg died recently, and it was like losing another father."

Gisselman laughs when he recalls his first opening night at Chanhassen. It was October 11, 1968, and the musical was *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

"We were in the middle of the first number," he says, "and one of the waitresses, who used to work at the American Legion, came right down to the front of the stage and shouted: 'OK, who's got the fish?' We thought, 'Is this what it's going to be like?' One of the great things we had going for us was that we really didn't know what we were doing. We did a lot of things that were right, just because they *felt* right. We tried to model ourselves after the Guthrie. We did a lot of adventurous theater that people said couldn't be done in a dinner theater." Audiences flocked to the Chanhassen, coming from all over the Upper Midwest and from Canada. By the time Gisselman moved on to other work in 1980, the Chanhassen had expanded into four theaters, performing 21 shows a week.

Gisselman enjoys directing musicals and says he considers them a significant art form. "They're fun to do," he says. "Theater is already collaborative, but with musicals, you add the music director, choreographer, dance captains, actors and singers. All the time I was at Chanhassen, people always said to me, 'When are you going to stop directing those musicals, Gisselman, and start doing some real work?'"

Even the esteemed Tyrone Guthrie challenged Gisselman to push his work to a different level. "Guthrie said to me, 'If you want to know what kind of director you are, eventually you have to test yourself against the classics,'" says Gisselman. He tested himself in the desert, as artistic director at the Arizona Theater Company, for 11 years. But by 1991, Gary and his wife, Margo, and their two sons, Sam and Ben, were ready to come home to Minnesota.

Gisselman was working as the associate artistic director at the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis when his old pal Vern Sutton called. The two men met while working on a couple of songs from *Fiddler on the Roof* for the Minnesota Orchestra Summer Pops, which Gisselman directed

for three years. "Gary was the first director who didn't let me get away with anything," says Sutton, who was director of the School of Music at the University of Minnesota at that time. He invited Gary to run the University Opera Theatre. Gisselman laughs. "I asked Vern, 'Doesn't it bother you that I've never directed an opera?'"

According to Gisselman, good directors need to have patience, to love actors and the theater, and to be willing to be leaders who don't always get their way. They need to *point* the way, but not necessarily insist that everyone follow it. "If your ego is such that you can't tolerate that, then it's going to be hard," he says. "Now, if I know exactly how I want something, and occasionally I do, then I try to get the actors to do it, but I try to make them think it was their idea. You have to be somewhat diplomatic. And good actors know that's exactly what you are doing." He laughs. "You're not fooling them. But if you are persuasive, good actors will go along with that."

In 2004, actor Charles Keating took on the role of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Some predicted that sparks would fly between actor and director. A veteran of screen and stage, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, Keating was known to voice strong directorial opinions. But the two men hit it off and enjoyed working together. "Charles was terrific," says Gisselman. "He's demanding because he's smart. I love working with smart actors. You can't be the only one in the room who knows anything."

#### BACK ON THE HILL

At Sebastian Joe's in South Minneapolis, Gary Gisselman cradles a cup of coffee. He's a bit jet lagged, having recently returned from a Theater in London Interim, where he and 28 St. Olaf students saw 21 productions in 25 days. "It was theater boot camp," he says.

Gisselman always wanted to teach, but kept putting it off. "I didn't want to teach until I thought I had something *to* teach. I'd seen so many of my colleagues go through school, get a doctorate and then start teaching what they'd just learned," he says. Gisselman is a popular figure on the St. Olaf campus. In addition to his regular classroom work, he also directs at least one St. Olaf theater production each year, including Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, *Three Penny Opera*, *The Man Who, Sweeney Todd*, *Our Town* and *Herculinia* — all of them

personal favorites. On the heels of the two Guthrie productions, he'll be directing the St. Olaf Interim theater production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. "I think of the productions as laboratories for the class-work we do in the Theatre Department and also for classes across the campus," he says.

Theatre Department Chair Karen Wilson Peterson '77 calls Gisselman a true liberal artist. He likes the description. "If there's anything that I regret about actor training in this country, it's that not enough of it includes a liberal arts background," he says. "I never had trouble with actors learning how to audition, but boy, I hate sitting around the table and, when I mention the First World War, nobody knows what I'm talking about."

He loves the Theatre Department at St. Olaf because it is part of a rigorous, nationally ranked liberal arts program; it's not a conservatory or a training program. "Theater is not about theater, it's about everything else, and the everything else is what students are studying at St. Olaf," he says. The kinds of students Gisselman works with on campus are like the kinds of actors he prefers to work with professionally. "They are often very talented, and they are also smart and curious about a lot of things outside of theater. I like that."

Fueled by strong coffee and a crisp February day, Gisselman dons his puffy orange jacket for the ride to Northfield. He's got a rehearsal to watch and a meeting to attend.

"You know, when the call came from St. Olaf, out of the blue — and then, a year later, the call from Joe Dowling about *A Christmas Carol* — suddenly, things I didn't think were going to happen for me started happening. And now I've got my relationship with St. Olaf and with the Guthrie, and it's really a good life."

At 65, Gisselman says retirement could not be further from his mind. "My knees feel old, but I don't feel old," he says. "I'm just learning how to teach. I feel like in five years, I'll be a really good teacher. I always feel that my best work is still ahead of me." 🍷

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Learn more about the St. Olaf Theatre Department and upcoming productions at [www.stolaf.edu/depts/theatre](http://www.stolaf.edu/depts/theatre).