
St. Louis Character: Scott Miller

Everything seemed to be going well for the New Line Theatre Co., founded by Artistic Director Scott Miller in 1991. After moving five times, the company had landed at the newly built Ivory Theatre in 2007, the former St. Boniface Catholic Church. Then disaster struck. On the day the company was supposed to move in, the theatre wasn't finished and didn't have electricity. Miller and his staff delayed the move by a week. However, when it came time to open the show, there was still no electricity. But the show must go on, so an Ameren truck sat out back hooked up to the building. The company did two shows. Today, New Line is ensconced in a permanent and intimate black box space at the Marcelle Theater, 3310 Samuel Shepard Dr.



DILIP VISHWANAT
Scott Miller

Where you can find Scott Miller

Home working, fundraising and concepting
Attending local theatre at The Rep, The Black Rep, St. Louis Actors' Studio,
Stray Dog Theatre, Act Inc.

Lunching at the St. Louis Bread Co., Wendy's or Penn Station

Having dinner at Houlihan's or Tucker's Place.

From the time he was 4 years old, Miller, 52, was hooked on musical theatre. The youngest of three boys, he grew up in Affton listening to Rodgers and Hammerstein show tunes, the musical preference of his parents — the late Don Miller, a plant manager of a vending machine firm, and his mother the former Joan Hildebrand. When given piano lessons, Scott would bang out show tunes and sing along. His earliest memory of seeing a live musical was at age 10 when his middle brother played trumpet in the pit at Affton High School for “Of Thee I Sing,” a sharp satirical political operetta written by the Gershwins. By 7th grade, Affton High was doing “Godspell.” Musicals could be like pop rock. Then the movie “Grease” came out with dirty words and sex. During his freshman year of high school, he saw “Rocky Horror Picture Show.” It was transgressive. The show stuck to him like the spirit gum liquid actors use to glue things onto their bodies.

By senior year, Miller wrote his first musical, “Adam’s Apple,” produced by the school. It was pivotal; he knew then that he wanted to write and direct. A great student, Miller was named valedictorian, and in 1982, he headed to Harvard. Back to visit St. Louis after his sophomore year, Miller’s high school drama teacher suggested that he stage a summer show. After finding a group of Affton alumni to perform in “Godspell,” it spurred formation of a summer theatre company, CenterStage. When Miller graduated from Harvard in 1986 with a B.A. in music, he came back to St. Louis to launch CenterStage year round but wanted to produce musicals that were more adventurous. New Line was born.

“Scott’s focus and determination have caused New Line to thrive for 25 years and still remain the bad boy of musical theatre,” board member Keith Thompson, a financial adviser, said.

Mike Dowdy, associate artistic director of New Line, admires Miller for his smarts and for the copious research he does for each show. He met Miller in 2009 when cast in “Return to the Forbidden Planet.”

“Scott is amazing at creating a ‘world’ that his actors live in and he is very high concept,” Dowdy said. “He allows me to dig deeper, be more character-driven and help the ‘world’ make sense to the actors.”

Thompson agrees. “The strongest attribute Scott possesses is his determination to stick to his mission and vision for New Line to produce

daring, provocative, thought-provoking theatre that will stir audiences to really look deep inside themselves and discover how the show is challenging their attitudes and core beliefs.”

Miller lives in South St. Louis with Pal Joey, his cat.

What was it like, from day one, to launch New Line? It was the 90s and the birth of the golden age of musical theatre. People were writing very personal musicals with no thought as to whether they would have commercial appeal to play in New York. I wanted to expose St. Louis audiences to the new art of musical theatre.

Where did you get the money? The Regional Arts Commission gave us a \$1,000 grant and our budget that first season was \$1,100. Today, our budget is \$120,000. We get money from ticket sales, Regional Arts Commission, Missouri Arts Council and individual donors — there’s one lady who gives us \$10,000 anonymously.

What musicals are you presenting this season? We did “Heathers,” Next is “American Idiot,” clearly a response to George W. Bush that’s so accidentally relevant to everything going on politically right now. “Atomic: A New Rock Musical” opens June 3, and “Tell Me on A Sunday” opens August 12.

How do you find actors, musicians and designers? We hold open auditions advertised on Facebook and on our website, newlinetheatre.com. We’re non-union and at least half of the cast of each musical is new actors.

Most exciting moment? Several times writers of shows have come to see us such as Amanda Green who wrote the lyrics for “High Fidelity” and “Hands on a Hardbody.” Her father is the late Adolph Green, one of the great lyricists who wrote with Betty Comden, “Singin’ in the Rain” and others.

Where you in all the plays in high school? Affton had an amazing theatre department. John Goodman was in my oldest brother’s class and he came back when I was there to see our teacher. Many mornings when I wanted to pretend to be sick to stay home, I didn’t because I had to be at rehearsal.

Why did you choose Harvard, which didn’t have a theatre department? Everyone expected me to go to an Ivy League college because my brothers had done so. Harvard proved to be a theatre wild west. Anyone who wanted

to put on a play could put up a curtain and do so. My freshman year I went to the dean's office for an arts project grant and got the money for a show I wrote and produced. I also met all these theatre people.

Did any class at Harvard influence your writing today? A philosophy of law class. At the beginning of each class, the professor set up a scenario; he'd change one detail and would ask the class to decide what we would do. It taught me that the chaos of the world has so many factors that affect all of us in so many ways. This has served me well in dissecting a story and getting inside a character's head.

Why did you come back to St. Louis after college? I was already making theatre here and we had a company. I got a telemarketer job at Dance St. Louis. After two years, I was moved into the office and eventually became development director. I learned fundraising.

What gets you up in the morning raring to go? I wake up with songs from whatever show we're working on in my head. "Heathers" had so many ear worms — music that sticks in your head.

Define success for you. When the audience gets what I want them to get from a show and it tells the story as clearly as possible, even if they didn't like the experience.

How do you relax? I spend a lot of time on Facebook. At night when I come home from rehearsal, I watch old episodes of "Law and Order." It's pure plot and story and almost no characterization — clean, lean, well-written stories.

Biggest risks with New Line? We're working on "American Idiot" now. In the middle of a guitar solo, half the cast is head banging and the other half is running around. It doesn't seem like choreography; it's organic and will convey to the audience pure aggression, energy and intensity. It can be dangerous if done badly.

Writing right now? I've written nine musicals, six non-fiction books and one novel. The last musical I wrote was this strange satire, "Johnny Appleweed." We produced it with New Line. I've always wanted to write a sequel. I've also written the first draft of a children's musical.

What would you like your legacy to be? I changed the conversation about the

American musical theatre with our productions at New Line, and with what I've written — musicals, books, a theatre blog, newlinetheatre.blogspot.com, and a theatre podcast, Stage Grok (a sci-fi word that means a deep and profound instinctual understanding).