

The Sachs-Morgan Partnership



Ann Sachs had a busy career as an actress, with credits that included the smash hit Broadway revival of *Dracula* (1977) and Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1980). Roger Morgan lit more than 30 Broadway shows and many more Off Broadway, including early works by the likes of Harold Pinter, Sam Shepard, and Terrence McNally. Both of them worked extensively at Trinity Rep in Providence, Rhode Island, which is where their relationship began. Married since 1970, they're now business partners as well. She's the president and CEO of the theatre consultancy, Sachs Morgan Studio; he's the founder and director of design. The firm has a long list of credits that includes several major Broadway theatres. They recently recalled their careers in a conversation with Sonny Sonnenfeld.

Sonny Sonnenfeld: When, where, how did you meet?

Roger Morgan: At Trinity Square Repertory Company in 1969. Ann was

A marriage, a business, two lives in the theatre.

A conversation with Sonny Sonnenfeld.

an actress and I designed the lighting.

Ann Sachs: Actually, that's not quite correct: We met for the first time in 1967 at the Pittsburgh Playhouse. Word Baker was directing *The Fantasticks* [as he did Off-Broadway] and I was playing Luisa while a student at Carnegie Tech. Roger and his brother came by a rehearsal, and I must say I was smitten.

Morgan: Yeah, by my brother!

Sachs: By both of them, actually. Roger was working at Trinity at the time, and he spoke so respectfully and with such admiration about the actresses in the company. I thought, who is this man? Then we met three years later at Trinity and I remembered that moment in Pittsburgh. We fell in love and got married very quickly; the actors in the company thought it might last a year or two, but here we are. It was obviously meant to be.

Sonnenfeld: How long have you been in the theatre consulting business?

Morgan: I started the studio in 1974.

Sonnenfeld: Weren't you originally a scenic designer?

Morgan: I studied scenic design and lighting at Carnegie Tech. And I did both at Milwaukee Rep with [the director] Bill Ball. I was an excellent lighting designer and I loved it, and there were some outstanding scenic designers I felt I would never match, so

I decided to stick to lighting design.

Sonnenfeld: Roger, how did you start out in the theatre?

Morgan: As a kid in Pittsburgh I worked in the construction industry as a carpenter's helper and then as a carpenter. I worked as a stage carpenter before going to Carnegie.

Sonnenfeld: Then what?

Morgan: I came to New York and worked on my own, and as an assistant to other lighting designers, including Jules Fisher, who had been a class ahead of me at Carnegie. Jo Mielziner hired me in 1963 to work on the Bell System exhibit at the New York World's Fair. I worked in Jo's studio for a three years. I also did Off Broadway shows. You would have a day job, work all night on a show, go home to shower and sleep a little, then go back to the studio. I lit [Ann Jellicoe's hit comedy] *The Knack*, directed by Mike Nichols. I looked up my notes recently. My royalties were \$10 a week; the total for the year came to \$695. For *Othello*, with James Earl Jones, my royalty was \$15 per week and my lighting fee was \$100. Of course, my rent was \$40.75 per month. A hefty cab fare was \$1.45. I was never out of work. In 1969, I was out of New York for 150 days.

Sonnenfeld: You worked at Trinity a great deal. What was different about Trinity as opposed to Broadway?

Morgan: Adrian Hall, Trinity's artistic

director, encouraged me to do whatever I wanted as a lighting designer. We did crazy, high-risk stuff we believed was essential to the play. Regional theatres did not have the commercial pressures of Broadway.

Sonnenfeld: Ann, when did you decide to become an actress?

Sachs: I was born to be an actress. I was one of six kids and, when I was six, I played the Witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. I scared the daylights out of the girl playing Gretel, and she ran off the stage!

Sonnenfeld: After your witching days, what did you do?

Sachs: I went to Carnegie. For the first two years, it was Carnegie Tech; for the second two, it was Carnegie Mellon. After graduation, I worked at Trinity Rep and was lucky enough to

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work almost all the time. I took time off with each of my children, but mostly kept working: I did *Dracula* in 1977, and Wendy Wasserstein's first two plays at Playwrights Horizons. Eventually, in the 1980s, I wanted to get out of the center of the play, to have an impact on the whole thing. I wanted more control—like when I played the Witch!

Sonnenfeld: Is that when you did *Mama Drama*?

Sachs: Yes. I collaborated with four women to write and perform *Mama Drama*, which is published by Samuel French. I had some spooky conversations with myself during that time: As a performer, I'd say, "Who wrote these unspeakable lines?" Then,

as the author, I'd say, "Who is that actress butchering my words?"

Sonnenfeld: Then what?

Sachs: When I decided to get out of the acting racket, I didn't know whether to go to law or business school. Then Roger begged me to help him; he hated the business end of the business. So I said I'd try, even though I had no experience—and, as it turned out, it was exactly what I was looking for.

Sonnenfeld: What is your company's philosophy?

Sachs: We believe in collaboration—the theatre is a collaborative work model. I often think that corporate America could learn a lot from the theatre model. I've even made organizational charts to demonstrate it. In the theatre, every person knows

what everyone else is responsible for. Changes in the script? Ask the manager. Problem with an actor? See the director. The decision-making mechanism is structured for quick action within a collaborative format. It is an inspired model.

We have made our studio a workplace, not a showplace. Also, it is our mission to design theatres that work for their owners, their patrons, and the professionals that work in them. It may sound corny, but we really believe that theatre changes peoples' lives.

Morgan: We make theatres look better and work better. We do a lot of work on Broadway, where theatres were once beautiful. With time and insensitive "improvements," they have

become less beautiful. For example, [we have worked on] the Walter Kerr, the Brooks Atkinson, the Palace, and the Hilton [formerly the Ford Center]. We're experts at adding more seats to theatres without compromising comfort, and we are committed to accessibility for the disabled. We also find ways to increase the number of "seats" in ladies' rooms. Anywhere you sit? That's my job!

Sonnenfeld: Roger, how do you and Ann work together?

Morgan: In the studio, I design. Ann runs the business. We go to work every day with a group of exceptional employees. We work hard at getting the right people, and are fortunate to have them. We believe that our, and their, multiple talents serve our clients well.

Sonnenfeld: Is there a special moment that stands out in your work?

Morgan: I am never fully satisfied.

Sachs: One moment I will never forget is at the end of the second act of *Dracula*, in the seduction scene. I have never heard silence like that. The entire audience stopped breathing. More recently, I did a presentation for 30 of my business colleagues, and they gave me a standing ovation. That was pretty neat—my two worlds, coming together.

Morgan: Once an actress, always an actress!

Sonnenfeld: What do you do when you're not working?

Sachs: We work! People give us a hard time about this, but wherever we go, we work because we love it. And because we are personal and professional partners, we are able to share little moments of inspiration or work out a solution to a problem. We love hiking in the Adirondack

Mountains; some of our best ideas have come while dangling our feet in a mountain stream. We're a good team.

Sonnenfeld: What about your children?

Sachs: Abigail is a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, and Sam is a photographer. They are not in the theatre, but they are of the theatre. As a matter of fact, many years ago, we established that when we travel together, if we get separated, we meet at the nearest theatre. Theatres are "safe havens" to our family.

Sonnenfeld: What advice would you give to young people in the theatre?

Sachs: Do what you love and don't let anyone talk you out of it. And when you fall on your face, figure out why. Also, be your own reality check: If you're not learning anything new, if you're not growing, do something else.

Morgan: "I worked in Jo Mielziner's studio and did Off Broadway shows. You would have a day job, work all night on a show, go home to shower and sleep a little, then go back to the studio."

Sonnenfeld: Roger, are you doing any theatrical lighting design these days?

Morgan: Once every year or so I light a dance piece for Ballet Hispanico. The timeline is so fast, it's the only lighting I can fit into my schedule. It is very gratifying, and the pieces run in repertory so I can go back to see how they look.

Sonnenfeld: Ann, if you got a job offer tomorrow to do a Broadway show, what would you do?

Sachs: That would be a cold day in hell—the system doesn't work that way any more! But seriously? I guess I would say yes until I had to say no. It might be fun! And it is my quest to

have the courage to step into the unknown.

Sonnenfeld: To me, the indication of an exceptional design firm is that their clients keep coming back again and again. Hasn't that been your experience?

Sachs: We believe that you only do great work with great clients. And that comes with trust, over time.

Morgan: We are now beginning to renovate venues we designed as new construction 30 years ago. What an opportunity! Every designer longs go back and do it again. It's like a dream come true. 🏡