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## LA WEEKLY

FEATURES

### MARK SELDIS AND THE WOMAN WHO RESCUED HIM

*Life after Tim Robbins*

**BY STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS**

Wednesday, April 4, 2007 - 3:00 pm

It was back in 2001, after a period of extended distraction with sundry film projects, that the artistic director of the Actors' Gang theater, Tim Robbins, rolled into town from his New York digs, saw what was happening at his theater on Santa Monica Boulevard and was not pleased. He was not pleased with the physical condition of his theater, not pleased with the way it was being managed. He was particularly not pleased with Mark Seldis, the managing director, and he said so, in scathing e-mails to the company.

Seldis, who admits his life was mired in chaos at the time, was on a self-imposed leave from the theater.

"Technically, I was on sabbatical," the mild-mannered, soft-spoken Seldis explains. "I didn't put up a fight to keep the job. I figured, he doesn't want me to come back, I won't come back."

It was a grueling time for Seldis, to be publicly discredited by such a powerful film star when he believed his biggest fault was taking on more responsibilities than he could handle. At this time, he resolved to stop doing theater, a promise to himself that he kept throughout 2001. But now he's back in the field as a producer, running a highly regarded ensemble, Ghost Road Company, with his fiancée, Katharine Noon. For Seldis, the transition from foundering to swimming didn't come from a single event or epiphany, but evolved over time through a combination of introspection, his resolve to finally stop producing theater for other people, and the dumb luck of favorable circumstances.

Seldis says that his desire for a sabbatical came from physical exhaustion, emotional burnout and artistic frustration at Actors' Gang. "I was just tired and stressed. It had been going on too long. There was a little bit of support, but not much. There was a point when it just didn't make sense for me to spend night and day worrying about this theater that wasn't mine anyway. For me, it was like going from prolonged adolescence as an artist and human being to growing up."



Classical gas: Noon and Seldis on the set of *Orestes Remembered* (Photo by Joaquin Lazo)

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Much of the problem stemmed from how Seldis' ambitions as a stage director became stifled by his administrative responsibilities. In the fall of 2000, when he was directing Cintra Wilson's *XXX Love Act*, Seldis was already harboring a desire for change.

"Nothing was progressing for me," he says. "I'd worked really hard to direct a show. I'd wanted to be a director, and then after the show closed, I went back to doing the same thing — which was keeping the company afloat. I'd already said then that I wanted to take a sabbatical. My family offered to support me. We were planning for my departure from Actors' Gang, what the board was going to do, and during that time, the whole thing went down with Tim, who really wanted to change the direction of the company and run things differently."

Seldis wanted to run things differently too, certainly his own life. "I wanted to direct more, to have some financial stability, work stability, emotional stability. I was entering what would become a long-term relationship [with Noon]. Was I going to stay in theater or go back to film?" (Before his involvement with the Gang, Seldis had done production work on low-budget films, music videos, commercials, etc.)

"The big push for my sabbatical was to stop doing any theater and spend three months figuring out what I want to do with the rest of my life," he says. "I hadn't had any time to think about that for 10 years."

**Being an L.A. native**, Mark Seldis is a local-history buff and son of the late *L.A. Times* art critic Henry J. Seldis, who died when Mark was a teenager.

Henry was from Germany. Mark tells the story of their escape. "His father was Jewish, his mother wasn't, but they had to escape. My father's father had the biggest umbrella factory in Berlin before the war. When they started taking property from Jews, for some reason

my grandfather wound up in a work camp. The only way out was to sign over his half of the umbrella factory to a non-Jewish partner — enough to book passage to America. So my dad came to New York at age 13, went to Columbia, studied journalism. Came out here, wrote for the *Santa Barbara News-Press* for a while, and then the *Times*.”

Mark applied to UCLA and was accepted with the caveat that he needed to make up one course. “So I enrolled at L.A. Valley College.”

After a huge falling out with his family, Seldis found himself with no money and unable to afford the tuition at UCLA. He stayed on at Valley College, took film courses at LACC and started working. At Valley College, he met director Tracy Young and her friend Mike Schlitt, who introduced both of them to the UCLA-spawned theater company Actors’ Gang, jointly created by former UCLA undergrads, including Robbins and Sir Laurence Olivier’s son Richard. Schlitt brought in Seldis to produce *The Big Show* in 1988, which went to San Francisco. Later, in 1991, Robbins asked Seldis to produce *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, after which he was named the company’s managing director.

Between 1992 and 1993, Robbins formed his own film company, Havoc, with Bob White, and Seldis was invited to join because of his production work on *Bob Roberts* (1992).

“We were keeping Tim’s production deals floating. During that period, he did *Dead Man Walking* [1995], the Sam Fuller documentary *The Typewriter, the Rifle and the Movie Camera* [1996] and *The Cradle Will Rock* [1999],” Seldis says. “Through each of these projects, we had less and less to do with them, but we were on the payroll and doing day-to-day management of the deals, but they were being more and more run from New York, where Tim was living. So, as part of my contract, I found myself running the theater full time. When that contract ended, I was totally wrung out.”

In 2001, Seldis resolved not to do any theater. Meanwhile, Noon, his girlfriend then, was working to revive a dormant theater company she’d founded earlier, Ghost Road Company.

“We talked a lot about ensemble theater, working with a company of artists to create something. I wanted it to be a true ensemble experience, not so much about space and seasons and production, but about building a piece of theater that means something to us,” Seldis says.

At the start of 2002, after an exhausting job search, Seldis was hired as project coordinator for the Music Center Education Program — sending artists into schools, coordinating music and dance events, and pre-events at Disney Hall. Seldis also started teaching at Loyola Marymount University.

“It’s nice to have your opinion valued,” he says wryly.

What Seldis found particularly appealing in Noon’s approach was the development of new work in a way that defied the conventional wisdom of starting with a script, setting a rehearsal schedule, booking a theater, and then hiring actors and designers — the process that had worn Seldis down through repetition. Instead, Noon guided her ensemble through the exploration of a scenario with a series of exercises. Often through improvisation, the actors came up with the lines and actions, which Noon and her designers then edited and shaped into a script and a stage concept. The process was exhaustive and time-consuming, with a typical rehearsal period of a year rather than the usual four to six weeks. But the work sprung directly from the company, from its members’ passions and thoughts.



(Illustration by Max Kornell)

It was the theatrical equivalent of what political organizers would call “grass roots.” Since Noon and Seldis have been running Ghost Road, they’ve put on a series of workshops, such as *The Four Dervishes*, based on war and anthropological excavation in the Middle East, and *Duck[t] Tape Soup* — “a dark farce about governments that lie.” The company’s centerpiece, however, is a trilogy spun from the House of Atreus that’s taken 12 years to compile: *Elektra-La-La*, (1995), *Clyt at Home: The Clytemnestra Project* (2001) and *Orestes Remembered: The Fury Project*, a production laced in irony that premiered last month at Santa Monica’s Powerhouse Theatre.

“We had to do a walk-through of the facility and it dawned on me, I recognize this box office,” Seldis says. “I’d forgotten the very first show I ever produced was there, for the Gang — *The Big Show*, 20 years earlier.”

Being there made Seldis realize the subtle differences between the Gang’s approach — with the actors in the service of a director and the playwright — and that of Ghost Road, where the actors have actually generated the material. That distinction may be subtle, since Noon claims the authority to shape the work, but for Seldis, who’s found a higher purpose in the process of creating theater rather than its products, it’s all the difference in the world.

As for the dumb luck of circumstance, Seldis believes it’s quite possible that had he not been in a relationship with Noon, and not had such admiration for her work, he probably wouldn’t have gone back to working with a regular group of people in a regular way, though he did direct a play at Moving Arts — Ken Urban’s *Absence of Weather* — as well as L.A. Stage Alliance’s Ovation Awards two years in succession.

But Seldis’ evolving philosophy is a product of time, of having seen so many plays cranked out like pancakes over the years. After having invested so many years in such efforts, Seldis has finally learned to say “no” to projects that don’t fulfill him when there’s so little time to do what matters.

“I think the only way serious work can be done is outside a normal performance space, with the attitude of ‘This is the last thing I’m ever going to do,’ ” he says.

**For more information, visit [www.ghostroad.org](http://www.ghostroad.org).**

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