

Panel of experienced actors and directors share insights, stories

By Alissa Greenberg

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This past Tuesday in the Woodhead Lounge, in the midst of a story about his career, Gilbert Parker '48 told a story about one of America's most famous sexual icons.

"I would have to call the playwrights I represented to see what they wanted to do with this or that option," Parker said, "so I would call Arthur Miller and say, 'Is Arthur there?' and the person on the other end would say, 'I'm sorry, he's working behind a closed door. Can he call you back?'" And that, of course, was Marilyn Monroe."

The anecdote was one of many Parker shared with the audience of about 40 students attending a panel on developing a career in theater, composing, film, or acting at the Career Resource Center. Also there to share stories on life in the business were Tom Kail '99 and Lin-Manuel Miranda '02, who are currently working together to put up a new Off-Broadway musical called "In the Heights."

Parker, Wesleyan's first ever Theatre major, recently retired from the position of Senior Vice President at the William Morris Agency. Collectively, his clients have won three Pulitzer Prizes, 12 Tony Awards, and many Emmys. During his presentation, Parker recounted his climb up the theater ladder, from switchboard operator to producer of "Once Upon a Mattress," "The Grapes of Wrath," "Ragtime," and "The Full Monty." He offered advice to those who might want to follow in his footsteps.

"The most important thing is to get your foot in the door," Parker said. "Don't be afraid to explore—you might just find a talent you don't know you have until you're asked."

Kail echoed Parker's sentiment, relating his own journey from jack-of-all-trades stagehand to producer and director of Back House Productions, the resident theater company of New York City's Drama Book Shop. In telling his story, Kail stressed the importance of learning from more experienced peers.

"I was lucky enough to be around people who knew a lot more than me," Kail said. "If you ask people a couple questions, they're generally happy to tell you about what they've made their life around."

Miranda agreed. He told the story of "In the Heights," which he first wrote and directed as a sophomore at Wesleyan.

"I wanted to write a musical with Latino people in it who weren't having knife fights," Kail said. "But [Kail] and
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Gregory Silver
Parker regaled students with
his stories.

his friends, and then [Parker], have helped me to learn so much. I think maybe five notes in "In The Heights" now are the same as they were originally."

Miranda also stressed the importance of collaboration in theater.

"You find people who are on the same page as you ," Kail said. "It's all about giving up the reins and trusting."

Jess Chayes '07, a Theater major whose thesis will be performed in the spring, found the panel both helpful and encouraging.

"What I learned from this panel is that with drive and moxy, many Wesleyan students have made impressive and fulfilling lives in the arts," Chayes said. "Wesleyan kids seem to often have what it takes and have a great network of alumni to guide them. I only hope I can find my own way, maybe with alumni help, to make a life driven by this kind of passion."

Carol Crosby, who is in charge of CRC programs in arts and communications, was happy with the way the panel turned out. According to Crosby, alumni are often sought out when the CRC wants to put a panel together, but Parker's case was different.

"He told us that he would love to meet and talk to students and he had several friends he wanted to bring with him," Crosby said. "So, at his request, I arranged the program."

Panel programs occur several times a semester and based up on CRC perception of what students need.

"We are thrilled that students are interested in attending these, mainly because it is an opportunity to not only learn about careers first hand but to also network with alums who have advanced in their fields and are there because they want to help students enter the field," Crosby said. "I love it when students come up to me afterwards and say, 'I learned so much from this. Thank you!'"