

VINCENT ASTOR GALLERY March 30 - June 11, 2011



McMullan  
Posters:  
Gesture  
as Design

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DOROTHY AND LEWIS B. CULLMAN CENTER

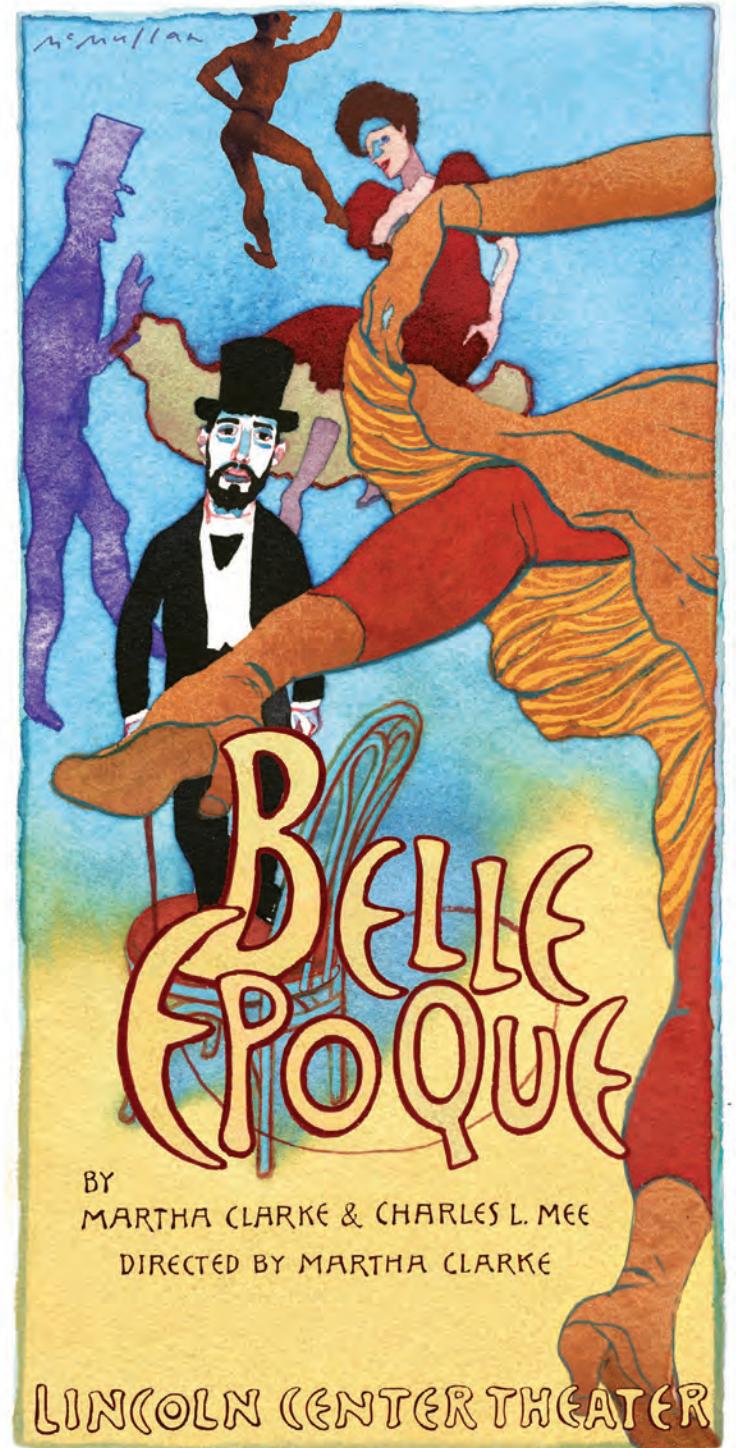
# Could he be a circus Ringmaster ala Fellini's 8½



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1. Notes from my phone conversation with Martha Clarke.
2. Sketches using the basic idea of the Toulouse Lautrec character as a ringmaster with the other characters swirling around him. Something about the play reminded me of the last scene in the Fellini movie "8 ½" where the main character stands in the center of a circus ring while all the people in his life circle around him. Nothing like this happened in the play, but Martha Clarke indulged me.

3. Two sketches.
4. The final art for the poster.

Like many visitors to Lincoln Center Theater, I had long admired the art that Jim McMullan made to commemorate the work the organization produced. I admired the fact that his poster designs weren't necessarily made to "sell" the production to ticket buyers. Rather, they struck me as highly aesthetic and strikingly beautiful works of art that announced the inner meaning of a play or musical, often a very personal meaning. The extremely 'artistic' brush strokes, the shimmer and swirl of color and the composition of each would arrest my attention. And make me think. And enhance the spirit of the production itself, once I saw it. They were made to intrigue and to make a statement in paint and line about a moment in time, a moment made in a performance space called Lincoln Center Theater.

We first met to discuss what I was hoping to communicate in an upcoming production of Shakespeare's dark comedy *Measure for Measure*. In answer to Jim's questions, I talked about the play's gritty urban setting, its ambiguous and

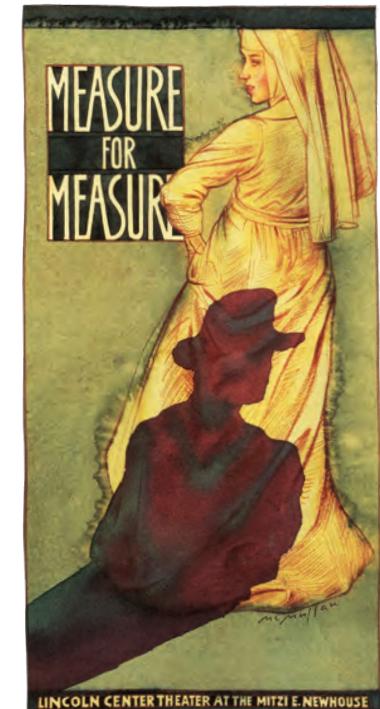
skeptical take on the passions of people both carnal and religious; I wanted our image to project a feeling of early 'noir', in which ethical compromises challenged spiritual hopes. For his part, Jim was at that time intrigued and enthralled by the drawings of Degas, particularly his delineation of drapery and shadow. Together we began to imagine someone who looked like our leading lady, a young Kate Burton, in a novice's white outfit and head wrap looking over her shoulder at the shadow of a man. Very pulp 'noir' but executed with the ravishing delicacy of a Degas. It caught perfectly the feel of the production and the performances.

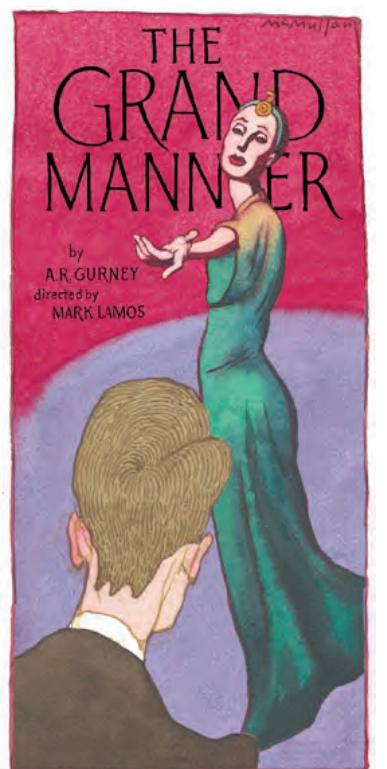
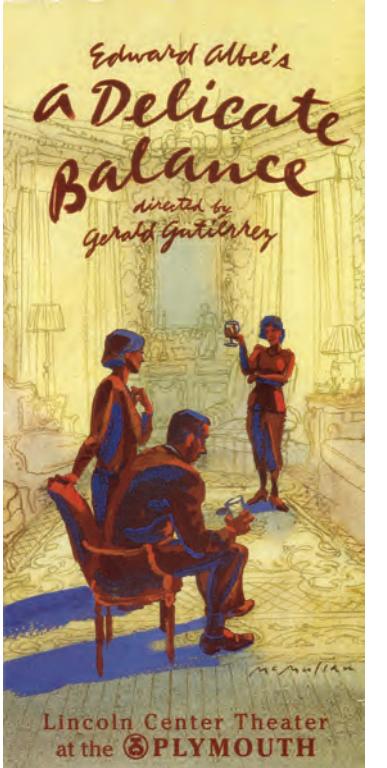
Since then, I've been moved, intrigued, and excited by Jim's 'takes'—for they are indeed highly personal and not company-driven—on other shows of mine, as well as those of colleagues—his spectacularly rich evocation of (again, surprisingly) Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec in the poster for Martha Clarke's *Bel Epoque*; the Cezanne-inspired tapestry of tropical hothouse animation for Bart Sher's *South Pacific*; the strikingly simple watercolor for my production of Albee's *Seascape*—just two people staring out at something perhaps just behind the viewer, a sense of wonder and elation and fear on their faces that the play itself spends nearly 2 hours to

understand, caught by Jim in posture, facial expression, shadow, and light.

His fluidity of line and color is in thrall to script and performance. He's an artist of real magnitude and challenge, making contact with performance art—surprise and beauty—and enticement (it does always make me want to see the production after all). These qualities only begin to describe the unusual and special and always surprising work of Jim McMullan.

**Mark Lamos**  
DIRECTOR





## McMullan Posters: Gesture as Design

### MY APPROACH TO DESIGNING THEATER POSTERS

I use the gesture of the whole body as the principal subject of my posters. I'm interested in how people physically communicate their feelings, not only through the expression on their faces but also in the way they move their bodies.

The smallest gestural change in how the hand is held or whether the fingers open out or close in - can indicate very different states of mind in portraying a character in a poster. The angle of the head relative to the shoulders can evoke so much about how the figure confronts the world: confidence or arrogance in a head held high, as in my poster for *The Grand Manner*, thoughtfulness verging on depression as in the downward facing head on the male figure in *A Delicate Balance*. The combination of these physical details adds up to a particular psychological mood in the character being portrayed. In painting the head of the young man in my poster for *Ah, Wilderness*, for instance, I tried to evoke his adolescent dreaminess, but it is the slightly awkward angularity of his torso and his arms and particularly the inward turned right foot that completes the feeling of tense, self-consciousness in this portrait of this play's central character.

This "whole-figure" esthetic, vital to the way I communicate visual metaphors, runs somewhat counter to the cropping commonly used in figurative posters, where a large head fills the space or the body is shown from the waist up. In fact, one of the most distinctive visual elements of the images in this exhibit is that so many of them include the figure's feet.

This choice of designing posters around the gesture of the whole body is, at base, simply the approach that feels most natural and interesting to me, but certainly the example of Toulouse Lautrec's art has encouraged me in pursuing this way of seeing the body, and has shown me how beautiful the eccentric shapes of the body can look against the formality of the rectangle.

5. Sketches from 10 Unknowns.



I think I share with Lautrec a fascination with the idiosyncratic details that an artist finds in observing a real figure moving or gesticulating – the odd angle of the arm as a figure holds a book against the torso, the unexpected silhouette the whole body takes as a figure kneels. I always look forward to seeing an actor respond to a general idea that I have suggested because the way the actor interprets the gesture will always produce nuances of shape and psychology that I could never have imagined. For *The Ten Unknowns* poster Donald Sutherland took my idea of "hang on the top of the easel with both hands" and gave me a deeply personal physical expression of world-weary yet powerful confrontation.

1 and 2. Sketches imagining different poses and characterizations for Richard, the poetry spouting adolescent at the center of the play. There is an important scene where Richard sits on an old rowboat on the beach, waiting for a girl to arrive.

3. A photograph of Eugene O'Neill on the beach with his wife and son. Something about the slight awkwardness of his hands and knees evoked for me a person that lives more in his head than his body and suggested an adolescence that might have been also a little ungainly. I projected this physical quality in O'Neill onto the autobiographically inspired character in his play.

4. Three photographs of the actor, Sam Trammell, responding to my suggestion to move like a "poetic geek."

5. A sketch working out another possibility.

6. The finished art for the poster.



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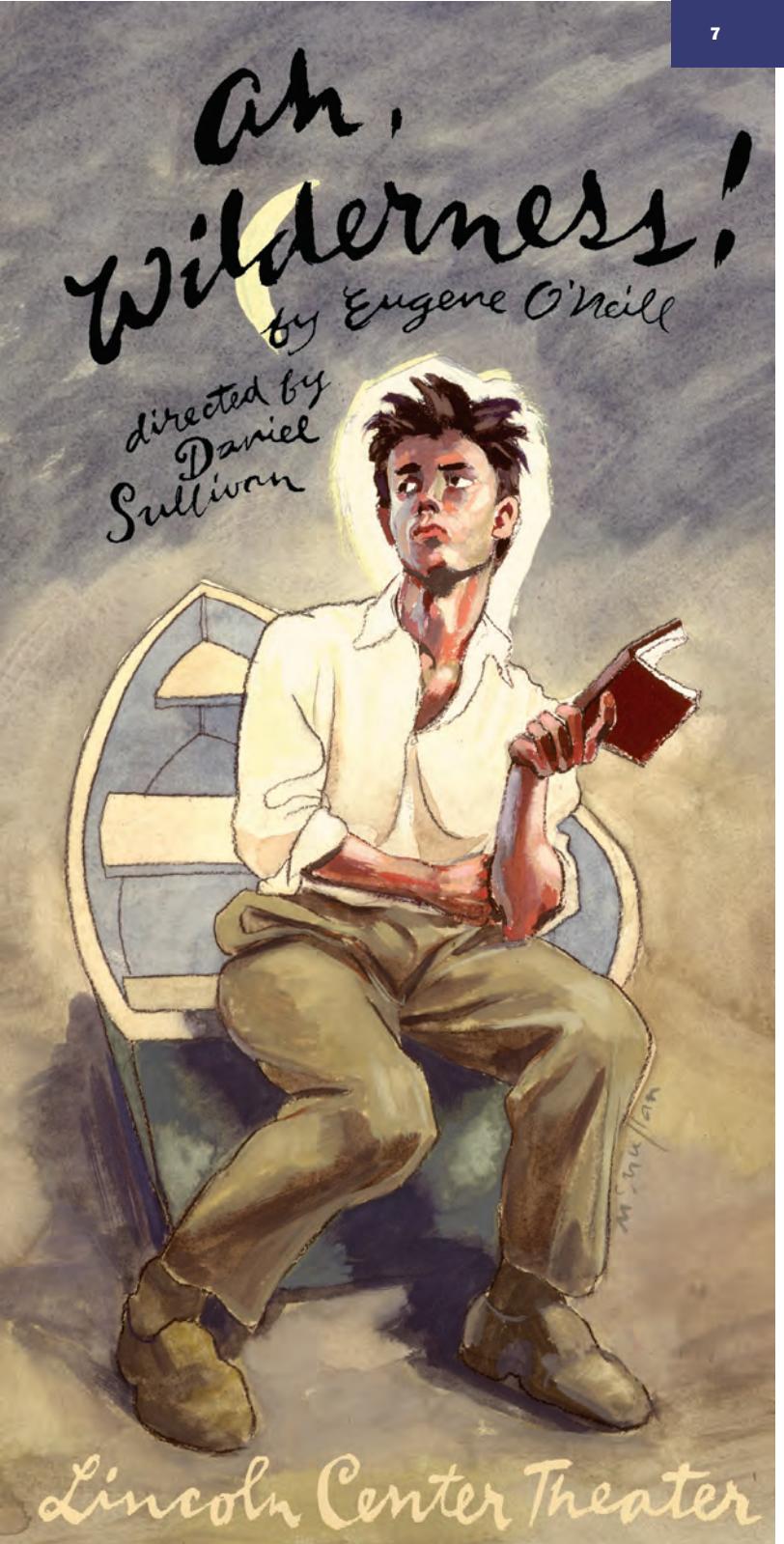
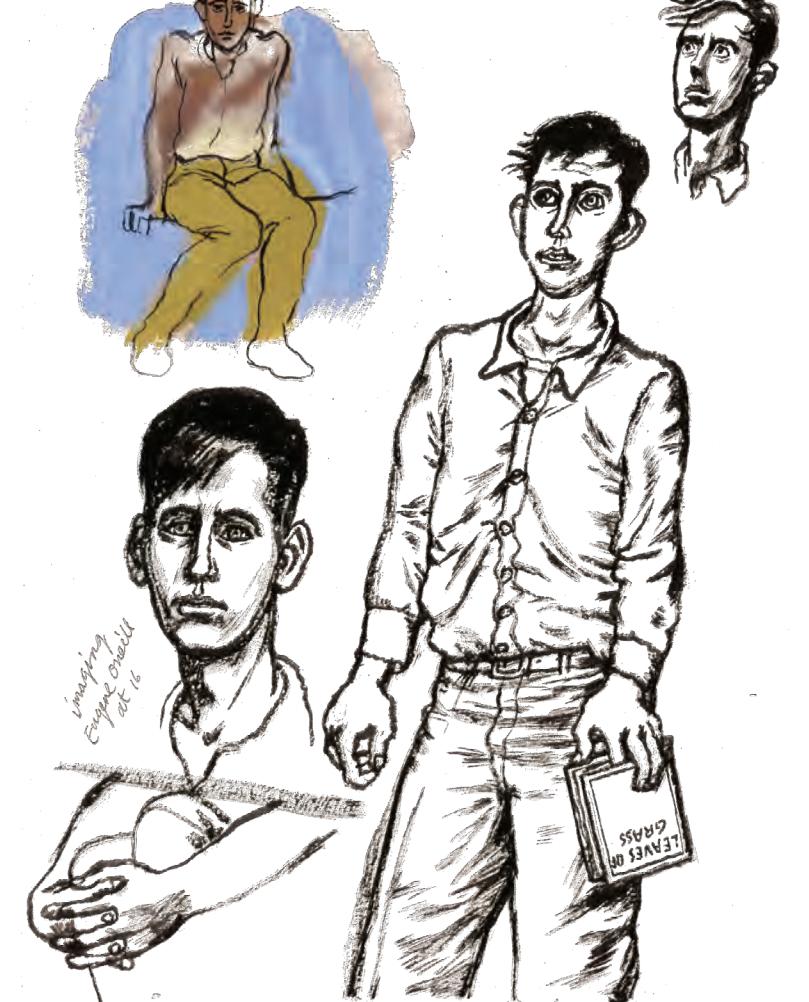
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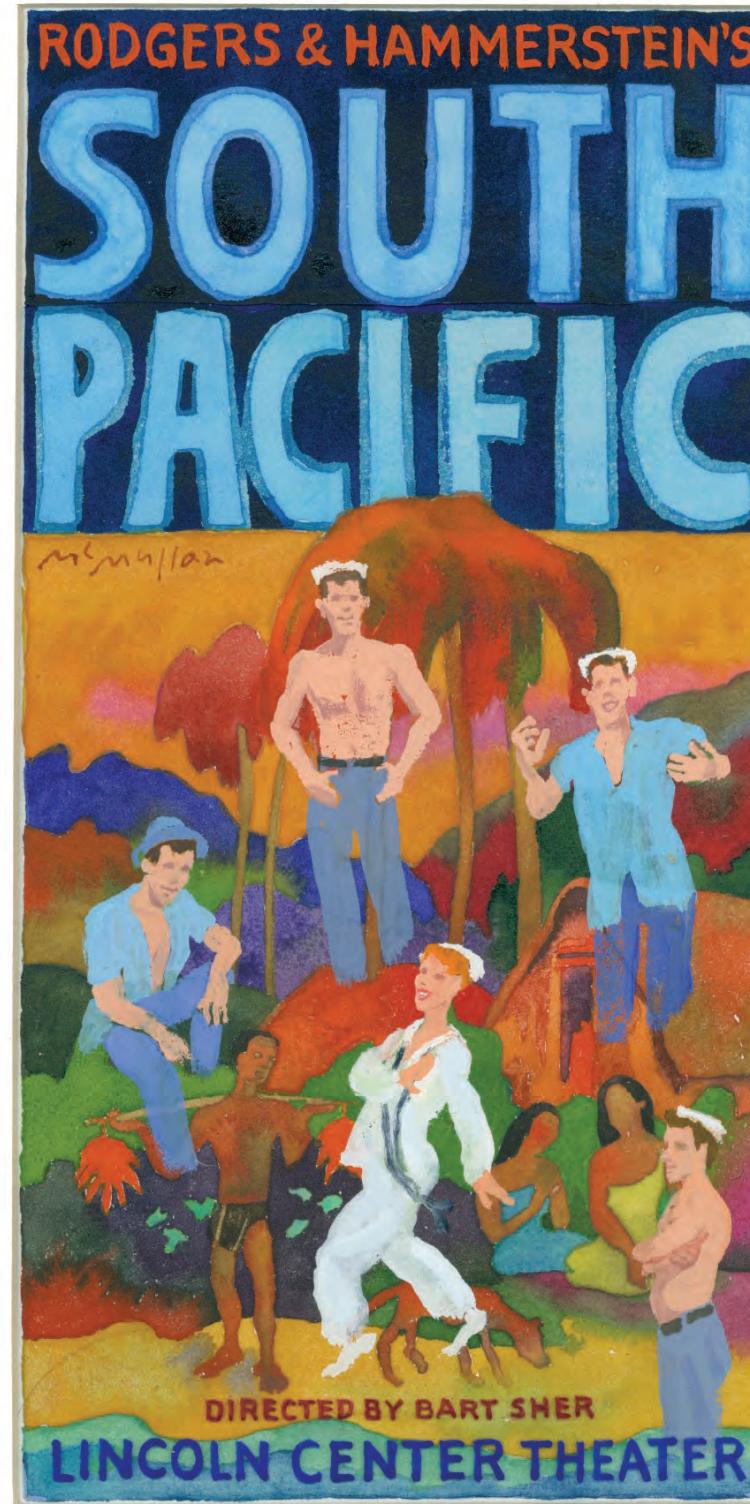
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## THE WAY THE PROCESS ADVANCES

The first step for me is reading the playscript two or three times. (I have finished the poster well before the rehearsals start, so I don't get to see the play before I begin.) I talk to the director to get a sense of how he articulates the play's meaning and what will be emphasized in the production. Sometimes the director will discuss how the play relates to larger external issues. Bart Sher, the director of *South Pacific*, for instance, talked to me about the importance of the racial issues in the musical not only between the two romantic couples, but also the American sailors' relationship to the islanders.

After thinking about the play and my conversations with the director, I come up with a metaphor expressed through a gesture of figure or the relationship between two or three figures. I also think about the style of the painting – its degree of realism, and the color that might be appropriate to the idea. Often, as in *A Delicate Balance* or in *South Pacific*, I will decide to use two slightly disparate layers to suggest dramatic tension in the play. Frequently, when I have worked out these general concepts in a series of pencil sketches, I ask friends to pose for me so I can take the physical information to a more realistic level. At this point, I do a series of color sketches one of which I deem satisfactory enough to send to Bernard Gersten, the executive producer of Lincoln Center Theater. He shows it to the other people involved in the producing team.

If the team likes the sketch, I try to arrange to photograph the actual actors cast in the play and, using those photographs as reference, proceed to paint the image that will be printed as the poster. If my first sketch does not get this approval, I start again – new concept, different poses, and so on.

Two things are worth pointing out. First, that my method is intuitive and spontaneous; each painting, whether sketch or finish, starts out on white paper with no guiding lines. The paintings evolve, not by changing one element at a time but, in each version, by reconsidering several aspects of the drawing, color and composition at once. As you look at the process of the paintings, you will see that although I am circling one idea, each sketch can look fairly different.

The second noteworthy aspect of my posters is that hand lettering the titles and other information is a big part of how I resolve the designs. I think of the title lettering as part of the image, both in the way it supports the mood of the figures and also how it can be a central issue in the composition. In the *South Pacific* poster, for example, the complexity of the Gauguinesque landscape overlaid with the images of the sailors and Nellie Forbush works only because the large title block lettering anchors and contrasts with the intricacy of the painting below.

JAMES McMULLAN



## ARTIST DEDICATION

This work and this exhibit would not have come into being without the championship of my posters by Bernard Gersten, the Executive Director of Lincoln Center Theater. Beginning in 1986 when he commissioned me to do the posters for John Guare's *House of Blue Leaves* it has been Bernie's enthusiasm and his taste that has seen my design through the complex process of approval. I consider this exhibit as much a recognition of his singular leadership in defining the image of the theater as it is a recognition of my art.

I would also like to thank Jim Russek for his collaboration with me since the beginning and his creative and supportive use of my art to help publicize the plays. He has been a wise friend in navigating my not always easy images through the circuitous path to publication.

Linda Leroy Janklow has been a spirited supporter of my work in her role as Chairman of the Board of Lincoln Center Theater and was instrumental in the Library deciding to mount this exhibit. I thank her heartily.

I would also like to thank Linda Mason Ross and Adam Siegel at Lincoln Center Theater for their generous help in all aspects of creating the posters and assembling this exhibit.

*Left and Right: Sketches from The Glorious Ones.*



## CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### Interview video

Tracy Mitchell  
Plum TV, Bridgehampton, N.Y.

### Animated film

*December 25, 1914*  
by James McMullan  
Producer: R.O. Blechman

### Permission to re-run the drawing videos

George Kalogerakis  
Deputy Op-Ed Editor,  
The New York Times Company  
Videographer: Drew Beebe

*McMullan Posters: Gesture as Design* was developed by the artist and The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts: Jacqueline Z. Davis, Barbara G. and Lawrence A. Fleischman Executive Director; Barbara Cohen-Stratyner, Judy R. and Alfred A. Rosenberg Curator of Exhibitions; and Performing Arts Museum staff: Caitlin Mack, Designer and René Ronda and Herbert Ruiz, Installers.

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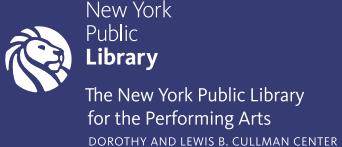
# PUBLIC PROGRAM

Monday, April 4, 2011 at 6:00pm

## BEHIND THE POSTER: A DISCUSSION WITH FAMED GRAPHICS DESIGNERS FRAVER AND JAMES McMULLAN

Graphics artists Fraver and James McMullan will show examples of their work and walk us through the process of design for theater posters.

Programs take place in the Bruno Walter Auditorium. Admission is free and on a first come, first served basis. For further information about programs, call 212.642.0142.



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