



Ilana Becker

**IT'S 10:30 ON A WET OCTOBER MORNING IN** New York City, and the south rehearsal room at Playwrights Horizons is starting to hum. Trickling into the windowless hall are actors, designers and administrators who shake off the rain, graze at the festive snack table—it's almost Halloween—and exchange familiar “hellos.” Today is the first rehearsal of Jordan Harrison's *Maple and Vine*, initially seen at last year's Humana Festival and now making its New York premiere under the direction of the prolific Anne Kauffman (*Stunning, This Wide Night, God's Ear*).

By the time Ilana Becker rolls in, the room's almost full. Goofy, quick to laugh, alternately focused and irreverent, Becker is Kauffman's petite, brown-haired assistant. Becker has already attended some prep meetings for *Maple and Vine*, but as she notes her spot at the rehearsal table—close to Kauffman, naturally—it's impossible not to sense her first-day excitement.

As an assistant, 28-year-old Becker belongs to a breed of unknown

South Florida preschoolers. “I was such a little dictator,” she chuckles. Becker graduated with a theatre studies degree from Emerson College in Boston, and worked as an actor and a stage manager when she subsequently moved to New York. She eventually became an assistant agent at Bret Adams, Ltd., but left after a few years. (Becker enjoyed much of the work but wanted something more creative.)

Soon thereafter, a friend at MCC Theatre recommended Becker for an assistant director position on Neil LaBute's *reasons to be pretty*, a new play to be helmed by Steppenwolf founding member Terry Kinney. Becker booked the job, *reasons* was a downtown hit, and the play transferred to Broadway the following year. How did Becker, then 26, feel when Kinney asked her to move with the show? “I plotzed,” she laughs. (Joking about the word choice, she says, “I'm also 80 years old—I'm sorry!”)

Becker moons over Kinney as “the reason I'm a director.” There were lunch runs, to be sure, but Becker also became a valuable sounding

# I GET A SIDEKICK OUT OF YOU

For one young director,  
assisting is a tricky balancing act  
with a great view

BY HARRISON HILL

yet well-connected young directors, adjuncts to some of the theatre's most important figures. An assistant director's work can be mundane (buying salads) or creatively significant (suggesting cuts), but it always involves some interpersonal sixth sense, a faculty for knowing what directors need or don't need, preferably before they do. Ideally, assisting is a chance to observe and help a master at work. Practically, it's the clearest way for a young director to get her foot in the door.

Playwrights Horizons houses one of a handful of New York's formalized assistantships. Its Theatrical Residency Program is a season-long apprenticeship for young professionals in various disciplines, and every year, two “directing residents” are chosen to assist alternating productions on the theatre's pair of Off-Broadway stages. (For their efforts, they take home a daily \$35 stipend.) *Maple and Vine* is the second of Becker's assignments in the program, which began with Itamar Moses's *Completeness* in August and will conclude this spring with Dan LeFranc's *The Big Meal*.

Back in the rehearsal room, Becker scampers to Kauffman's side as stage management quiets the bubbly crowd. Becker joins the big circle rounding the room, and listens as artistic director Tim Sanford, Kauffman and the designers talk about the play, a social fantasy about a modern-day couple that moves to a town of 1950s reenactors. Attentive and smiling, she looks right at home.

**EVEN AS A CHILD BECKER WAS EVER THE DIRECTOR,** costuming the weekly Shabbat services conducted by her fellow

board. “Terry would ask me to give him arguments for why we should keep a section. He would ask me to dramaturgically work something out for him.” Smiling, she adds, “Some of my favorite moments were when Terry would take me off into a corner and just talk. He would riff about the play or the moment, and I would write down his notes and throw in a thought here and there. He always referred to the dialogue as playing jazz, so I felt like we were playing jazz, too.”

“Of course,” Becker adds, “it was bumpy and I made mistakes. I'd barely assisted before. But Terry was very generous about that fact.”

Becker's access meant she got to witness a funny moment in the *reasons* process. After *New York Post* reporter Michael Riedel mocked the progress of the production in his Broadway gossip column, the enraged Kinney left Riedel an angry voice mail. Riedel retaliated by printing the message in his column, setting up Kinney's expletive-ridden tirade with a sarcastic “note to young actors who might want to use this monologue as an audition piece.” With a laugh, Becker recalls how the *reasons* cast took Riedel's prompt literally and collectively read the text from stage of the Lyceum Theatre to an increasingly red-faced Kinney.

Newspaper theatrics aside, the experience was a profound one, and it taught Becker the essential skill of knowing when to help and when to back off. That ever-changing game of temperature-taking is, to Becker's mind, the fundamental charge of assisting, and leads to a flexibility handy when working for a string of directors, as assistants do. *Maple and Vine* director Kauffman agrees. A good assistant, she



Marin Ireland, Jeanine Serralles, Trent Dawson and Peter Kim in *Maple and Vine* at Playwrights Horizons, directed by Anne Kauffman with Ilana Becker's assistance.

JOAN MARCUS

arises, Becker leans to Kauffman and whispers a possible solution. Kauffman again stands and reenters the action. Their dance continues through the rehearsal, Becker the quiet, agreeable complement to Kauffman's energetic and good-natured leadership.

**BECKER'S NASCENT CAREER ISN'T ALL** swanky assistantships. Her own work, like that of her peers, is usually found in New York City's small black box theatres. These productions have included *Waiting for Lefty* (Portmanteau Theatre Company), *Pigeons, Knishes and Rockettes* (Fringe NYC) and *Ugly Couples in Los Angeles* (Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Festival). She's also in a group of young directors working at the eclectic Flea Theater on *#serials*, a late-night series of episodic short plays. (Full disclosure: I performed in *#serials* last year.)

says, is "proactive" and is "someone who is really sensitive to what I'm looking for." (Becker, Kauffman adds, fits that bill, and has "a really keen understanding of her function.")

Becker's credits aren't limited to working with Kauffman and Kinney. She has assisted Jonathan Silverstein (at the Keen Company), Nick Corley (the New York Musical Theatre Festival) and Randy White (SoHo Playhouse), among others. At Playwrights, in addition to Kauffman, Becker assisted Pam MacKinnon on *Completeness*; MacKinnon, Becker says, taught her "the power of your words, to be able to ask a question and wait for the answer, to let the actors work it out." She'll conclude the Playwrights Horizons residency in a few months assisting Sam Gold on *The Big Meal*. (Beyond Playwrights, Becker was also slated to assist Austin Pendleton on *Detroit* this spring, but that Broadway production has been postponed.) "I got really lucky—I don't know how the heck I did it," Becker laughs when faced with her résumé. "It's all Terry."

**BACK AT PLAYWRIGHTS, MAPLE AND VINE IS KICKING** into high gear. Two weeks have passed since the first rehearsal, and in a work-through of the second act the actors move confidently and playfully through the text. In the afternoon's first scene, two contemporary New York transplants to a 1950s-inspired "Society of Dynamic Obsolescence" are clumsily hosting another couple for a cocktail party. Becker sits to the left of Kauffman at a table scattered with Tootsie Rolls, cough drops, hand sanitizer, a set model and two fat scripts. Becker is quietly poised with a notepad in hand. For the next hour and a half her only interactions will be with Kauffman, who announces that the afternoon's focus is "controlled chaos."

Real food is in play for the first time, so some shenanigans are expected. As actors Peter Kim and Marin Ireland work through the scene (Him: "You cooked?" Her: "I cook every night, remember?"), Kauffman and Becker are alert and occasionally confer, Kauffman dictating notes to her quickly scrawling assistant.

The scene soon hits its first rough spot—that food—and Kauffman bounds up to work on her feet, leaving Becker alone at the table. When Kauffman sits back down, Becker quietly tilts her notepad to Kauffman, who relays her remaining notes to the actors. Kauffman states that note-taking is the primary job of her assistants, a seemingly mundane task that's actually hugely important. "I lose my train of thought pretty easily," she says, "and Ilana is able to pick it up again and move forward with it."

The scene continues. When a question about a prop magazine

Rowdy audiences vote for their favorite 10-minute pieces, and the winners return the following weekend with new episodes. Puzzled? Think "Saturday Night Live" meets "American Idol," only on a musty downtown stage with free beer.

This week of *#serials*, Becker is represented by episode two of Christopher Sullivan's kooky *Air New Smyrna*, a kind of David Lynchian, Beckett-meets-Bogosian fantasia where several oddballs phone in to a smoky-voiced DJ/air traffic controller who soothes or aggravates their strange spirits. Around 1 a.m., when the winners are dramatically announced in the Flea's chatty lobby, it seems the weirdness paid off: *Air New Smyrna* has placed third, so a new episode will premiere the following week.

It's interesting to note that while the low-stakes, seat-of-your-pants style of *#serials* is something of a welcome counterpoint to her work uptown, Becker doesn't usually direct this esoteric kind of work. *Air New Smyrna* aside, she might usually avoid a play she finds especially outside her aesthetic, "but that doesn't mean I shouldn't assist it." It's a noteworthy distinction. "I would learn from that how to serve a play I wouldn't necessarily choose off the bookshelf."

**LATE AFTERNOON AT MAPLE AND VINE, IT'S TIME FOR A** break, so Becker and Kauffman retreat for some roof air and a check-in. It's moments like these when Becker can voice her thoughts, thoughts that might stay muted while rehearsal is in full swing. "I'll have ideas and know it's not the time," she says. "It's not about me or my ego or my point of view." Becker admits that this can be the hard part of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 132



Kauffman, left, with Becker on the set of *Maple and Vine*.

White Pines Productions

2012



## Summer Residencies at the Elkins Estate

Philadelphia's first subsidized  
residency program for the  
support and development  
of performance ensembles

Three week-long  
residencies in June,  
July and August



Applications due by March 1, 2012  
For an application and more information visit us online  
[www.whitepinesproductions.org](http://www.whitepinesproductions.org)

### I GET A SIDEKICK OUT OF YOU

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 57

assisting. "It's a fine line to tread because you don't want to lose your own sense of self, even when you're working on a process."

Herself a former assistant, Kauffman understands the job's difficulties. "It's a really elusive thing," she acknowledges. Still, Kauffman had some great experiences assisting, and recalls a thrilling moment when director David Esbjornson turned a tech rehearsal at New York City's Classic Stage Company over to her fledgling hands. The move, she says, was indicative of their entire process—Esbjornson was "very inclusive and turned to me often."

Her own assistant now in tow, Kauffman heads to the roof. Tech for *Maple and Vine* is starting in two days, and—who knows?—maybe Becker will get a similar, reins-grabbing moment. (Thus far, she's been able to make suggestions about everything from sightlines and transitions to set placement and storytelling details.) Even if she doesn't, though, Becker plans to seek out more assistantships, one show—or several—at a time. After all, she remarks, "Even if I was just getting coffee, I'd be a fly on a great wall." 📧

**Harrison Hill is the editorial intern at *American Theatre* and a New York-based actor. He blogs at [theater-words.com](http://theater-words.com).**