

# The New York Times

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Lindsay Law, the man who presides over "American Playhouse," the public television dramatic series, inhales from yet another cigarette and rubs his sore hands together. A 43-year-old frenetically competent doer of things, Mr. Law is the kind of person who isn't overly happy unless he's overly busy, and maybe not even then. He is restlessly taking a rare day off, during which he has been putting together garden furniture in his yard in Roxbury, Conn.

It hasn't been a relaxing day, however; there have been persistent interruptions by phone and fax, mostly irksome news about "Golden Gate," a feature film written by the playwright David Henry Hwang ("M. Butterfly"), which, budgeted at \$4.5 million, is the most expensive project "American Playhouse" has ever attempted. Recently, the project, for which the Samuel Goldwyn Company has put up \$3.5 million of the cost, lost its star, Matt Dillon, because of scheduling conflicts.

"They obviously have a large say," Mr. Law says, referring to the Goldwyn company, which has frequently helped finance "American Playhouse" projects. "But it's a matter of reminding them what their better instincts are. We're trying to recast the lead, and they're going, 'So and so is valuable overseas.' And I'm going, 'Could we not do this by what your overseas guy thinks? Let's go back to the script and decide who should be in this movie.' "

There, in a nutshell, is Lindsay Law's task: trying to make serious, ambitious movies with almost no money.

"American Playhouse" provides PBS with 12 programs a year, which makes it the nation's most prolific independent film outlet, not to mention a sort of cultural watchdog in the hellish world of commercial film making—Cerberus at the gates of Hollywood. The series has annual operating costs of about \$21 million, only part of which comes from stipends: PBS gives \$7.8 million, the National Endowment for the Arts between \$500,000 and \$800,000, and the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies about \$1.4 million.

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For the rest, Mr. Law depends on partners on particular films, private investors and "American Playhouse's" own film profits, which, because it is nonprofit, must be plowed back into movie making. Some productions are released in theaters before being broadcast on PBS.

Last week "Simple Men," a film by Hal Hartley, became the first "American Playhouse" production to show at the Cannes Film Festival, where Mr. Law was busily trying to sell European distribution rights to six "American Playhouse" films. Mr. Law has been executive producer of "American Playhouse" since its second year, 1982 (during the first season, there was rule by committee). He is in charge of selecting scripts, finding the money to produce them and overseeing their production. It's a mother-hen of a job -- a lot of details, hand-holding and wheedling.

The next offering, for instance, on Wednesday night at 9, is an adaptation of a two-character play, "Mrs. Cage," by Nancy Barr. It stars Anne Bancroft as a housewife who commits a spur-of-the-moment murder in a supermarket parking lot, and Hector Elizondo as the policeman to whom she confesses. To accommodate Ms. Bancroft's schedule, filming was pushed back from last fall and completed just three months ago. Then there was a crisis because PBS was worried about several lines of dialogue containing a familiar expletive.

"It's being bleeped," Mr. Law says. "So the audience will at least know it's there. Most of the artists we work with think of public television as an infinitely freer place than network television, which it is. But even though the language is not there gratuitously, this is what happens when you depend on the public for your financing."

Mr. Law visits the set of each "American Playhouse" film, a prodigious task for which he travels —and talks on the phone—prodigiously. One day this winter, he returned from the Berlin Film Festival, where he helped peddle European distribution rights to the four "American Playhouse" projects screened there; then, after a nine-hour flight to New York, he got in his car and drove seven hours to Peacham, Vt., where an adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel "Ethan Frome" was being shot.

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Arriving around midnight, he spent most of the near-zero night in the world of Wharton's grandiose melodrama.

A compact, light-haired man who chain smokes and happily disdains not only sleep but a healthy diet, Mr. Law is a quick-witted jabberer, easily excited. He enjoys his own humor, which is generally self-deprecating.

"There's a woman in our Berlin office who's exactly my age," he says. "We were negotiating her salary, and she said, 'You know, our 40's are supposed to be our peak earning years. I said"— and here his voice takes on a high-pitched enthusiasm reminiscent of the exercise guru Richard Simmons—" 'Really? You're kidding!' "

Mr. Law, who says he loves his job as though that disappointed him, earns \$120,000 annually, "about as much as you can earn in public television without causing a scandal," he says. "So I can't even complain about that."

A native of Westport, Conn.—recently, to raise money, he says, "I went there to see all the people I went to high school with who became millionaires"—Mr. Law attended New York University with the intention of studying set design, though he never graduated, dropping out to work backstage on Broadway and in regional theater. He eventually ended up producing dramas at WNET, the public television station in New York.

In 1977, tired of poverty and, perhaps, obscurity, he moved to California, where he got a job at Warner Brothers, producing television specials. It drove him crazy. "All you do is develop," he says. "You never get to produce anything."

It also drove him back to New York, where he had an offer to develop a new series of American dramas for WNET. That never quite materialized, but "American Playhouse" did.

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In the first three seasons, "American Playhouse" produced works by Ntozake Shange, Arthur Kopit and Sam Shepard, among others, and in subsequent years, the list of contributors has only grown in distinction. Even more impressive, perhaps, are the acclaimed dramas, unpropelled by famous names, that were made only because "American Playhouse" backed them. That list includes "Sidewalk Stories," the Chaplinesque silent film by Charles Lane; Julie Taymor's macabre "Fool's Fire," an adaptation of an Edgar Allan Poe story performed by outlandish and beautiful puppets; "Straight Out of Brooklyn," the harrowing portrayal of a black family in a Brooklyn housing project written and directed by Matty Rich, who was 19 years old when the film was made, and "Longtime Companion," the 1990 film about a crowd of a homosexual friends devastated by the AIDS plague.

"I met with a lot of the studios," says Craig Lucas, who wrote "Longtime Companion." "None of them were even remotely interested. What Lindsay did was sort of gulp and say, 'Let me get back to you.' He called back and said, 'Let's do it.' He really is a hero."

Not everything "American Playhouse" does is well received, of course, and even Lindsay Law admits that he has picked his share of dogs. (He won't single them out for fear of offending those who worked on them.) He does say that the blame, aside from his own occasionally faulty judgment, lies in the very enterprise of producing ambitious dramas on a low budget.

"Some people think that low budget production just means everybody works for less money," he says. "But it's a whole other way of making movies. To pay a big-name cinematographer or the most famous prop man half the money they usually get never works. They're accustomed to having their own trailer or having nine assistants or spending six hours to light a set.

"It's a matter of having to find people no one knows about yet."

He offers as an example John Madden, an Englishman known mostly for his stage work ("Grown Ups," "Cinders") who is making his American debut as the director of "Ethan Frome" and who will also direct "Golden Gate."

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"He's one of the most interesting directors I've worked with," Mr. Law says. "But after these two, he'll be paid lots of money and I'll lose him."

Mr. Law spent his birthday on the set of "Ethan Frome," in Peacham, a picturesque little town that looked like a movie set even before it became one. There, in the middle of a frigid February night, Mr. Madden was moving dozens of actors, crew members and costumed extras around the churchyard. It was a notably youthful crowd and they were performing nobly in a snowstorm that grew rather furious.

"I don't understand why you would go through all this if the product wasn't going to last," Mr. Law said, swathed in a scarf, stamping his feet and happy as a clam. "I mean, why put up with this if you're just going to make 'Curly Sue?' "

Later, during a break for a meal inside the church, others more or less agreed with him, even the film's biggest name, Liam Neeson, who plays the title role.

" 'American Playhouse' is the opposite of mainstream Hollywood," said Mr. Neeson. "They make serious dramas for adults. There's a sense of commitment to this project. That's why everyone does it. It certainly isn't the money."

When the meal was over, someone doused the lights, and a cake, dotted with flaming candles, was placed in front of Mr. Law. There was a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday," and the lights came up to reveal the cake, huge, chocolate-covered and, alas, a little lopsided.

From somewhere nearby piped a voice: "Looks like a low-budget cake to me."

Bruce Weber

The New York Times, Reporter