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BACK FOR ANOTHER CURTAIN CALL

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Bill Bushnell does not look like a man whose professional life collapsed and died, spectacularly and publicly, a few months ago. A smile travels over the lived-in face as he recalls the evening of Oct. 13, the night the final curtain fell on the bankrupt Los Angeles Theater Center.

"I began to fill with rage," he recalls. "It took me 30 minutes to dump the feeling. There was a time I would have wallowed in it. But I've learned to release negative energy. Nothing lasts forever. Personally, I feel like a 7-million-ton elephant just got off my ear."

Next month, Bushnell will begin a new job as teacher and talent scout, director and fund-raiser at the California Repertory Theater on the California State University/Long Beach campus. A year ago if he'd told anybody he was about to take a job as someone else's employee at a relatively obscure 98-seat theater on a college campus, no one would have believed him.

To hear the theatrical titan tell it, the job combines everything he believes in and is good at. With a dwindling university budget, however, Bushnell could easily be dumped back onto the unemployment heap. It's a daring move. Bill Bushnell likes that.

"I'm not afraid to fail," he says with a broad smile. "I am a tenacious Taurus. I have contacts. I conceptualize things very well. I can see the big picture and break it down and make it work."

Wearing jeans and a denim shirt with a single strand of beads, the loquacious director projects the image of a man on permanent vacation. Sipping coffee, he observes that he is in no rush whatsoever. Having spent the holidays in New York with friends, he's en route to Sedona, Ariz., for a few days of physical and spiritual rejuvenation.

That's where he goes to work on what he calls the Unicorn Method for stress and trauma release. He insists the technique has transformed him from a guy who used to hold on to negative thoughts into a man who has learned to shed bad energy.

He is a highly animated, intelligent man who describes himself as ruthlessly honest. He admits he has a temper. But it's not a hair-trigger temper, he says, and he does not hold grudges. He likes to work with people who are good at what they do.

He says he's convinced the future of professional theater in America lies in combining forces with higher education. He was hired by CalRep's artistic director, Howard Burman, to raise money from the private sector to expand the company and help develop it into a major participant and cultural leader in the community.

"We are going to create a world-class company," he says. "I am here to attract artists of real distinction and to work with Howard on that. There is not an identifiable theater in Long Beach the way there is an opera and a ballet and a civic light opera."

"I have a national reputation for multicultural work," he adds. "Multiculturalism is an issue you have to force or you'll be on the platform and the ethical train will leave without you. I'm not interested in elitist theater." At the time of the collapse of the Los Angeles Theater Center, he accepted part of the blame. But he says the real culprits were the recession, the real estate decline and a city that didn't provide fixed operating costs.

"LATC found itself isolated on an increasingly dark Spring Street in a neighborhood that resembled Beirut," Bushnell says.

He met Burman a few years ago on a government-sponsored tour of German theaters and has served on CalRep's advisory board since the company was founded in 1989.

Recalling his job interview with Burman a couple of months ago, he says the chemistry was right. "He's a playwright. I'm a director. We have different ego identities," Bushnell says. "I like a guy who has the map of the world for wallpaper."

Indeed, Burman's interests literally are glued to the wall of his Cal State office in a decorating statement that can only be called global.

Burman says he's thrilled to have Bushnell at his side. "Theater should be socially responsible," Burman says. "And in this country everyone looks at theater differently because of Bill Bushnell's work at LATC."

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