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After a Career Onstage, Hunter Foster Turns to Directing Full-Time
With productions across the country, including *Million Dollar Quartet* at Paper Mill Playhouse,
Foster looks ahead to his new vocation.



David Gordon

Hunter Foster's résumé is loaded with iconic shows: *Grease*, *Footloose*, *The Producers*, *Urinetown*, and *Little Shop of Horrors* among them. But a few years ago, the Tony-nominated Broadway regular found himself on the other side of the footlights. When Bucks County Playhouse lost the director for its production of Foster's musical *Summer of '42*, he stepped in — and a new career was born.

Since then, Foster has become a regular director at some of the country's best-known regional theaters: Bucks County Playhouse, Ogunquit Playhouse, Casa Mañana, and St. Louis Rep among them. Now, he's working at [Paper Mill Playhouse](#), staging a show with which he's very familiar: [Million Dollar Quartet](#). On Broadway, Foster took on the role of Sam Phillips, an iconic music producer who discovered the likes of Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley. It's his first time at Paper Mill, but his sixth time directing this show. And it's only the beginning of his newly discovered vocational path.

This is your sixth production of *Million Dollar Quartet*. How did you come to direct the show in the first place?

I've mostly been directing for the past three years. It's a show that I pushed for the Ogunquit Playhouse to do. I think we were the first regional production. Then other theaters started calling me to direct it. That's how it all started.

Having been in *Million Dollar Quartet* on Broadway, do your memories of the show heavily affect the productions you direct?

You never want to re-create someone else's work. I don't want to put up Eric Schaeffer's production. You look for ways to make it as different as possible. And then you get to be in the room with the actors, some who've done the show before. We allow ourselves to be very creative. It's good sometimes to look at something you did three or four years ago and say, "Let's examine this again with fresher eyes."

Tell me about the Paper Mill cast.

They're really spectacular. I've sat through auditions, and you see these musicians who come in, and they can act and sing and play guitar and play drums. That blows my mind. A bunch of the group did the Ogunquit production. I have a production currently running at St. Louis Rep that I started right before I came here. There are people in that who have worked with some of these people. We mix and match whoever's available whenever I do it.

Are you just directing now, or are you going back and forth between that and acting?

I pretty much have decided I'm going to start pursuing the directing side full-time.

When did the directing bug bite?

It's interesting. Lonny Price was supposed to direct a production of *Summer of '42*, which is a musical that I wrote, at Bucks County Playhouse. Lonny had to drop out to work on his documentary on *Merrily We Roll Along*, and he called me and said, "Maybe you should do it." I wasn't sure it that was something I wanted to do. And then Jed Bernstein, who was the producer, said, "I think you should try it." So I did and I really enjoyed it. I did another show for Bucks County, and I started pitching other shows to people, and it started snowballing. I've been doing it ever since.

Is it more fulfilling to you than acting?

I didn't realize that was what I wanted to do, but the more I started doing it, I realized I really enjoy the creative process, being in the room, and figuring shows out. My favorite thing is the design of shows. That's the biggest thrill.

You've also got a stage version of the film *Clue* coming up this summer at Bucks County. What can you reveal about that?

It's an old-fashioned farce. The challenge is going to be bringing the iconic lines to the stage and making the play its own unique experience as opposed to being a reread of the film. Anna Louizos is doing the scenic design, and we've been working together to figure out how to create the nine rooms onstage. There are a lot of things that you can't do onstage that are in the film, so it was trying to adapt to that and expand the movie a little bit, open it up, for theater. We have a great cast, a lot of funny people. It reminds me a little bit of *Urinetown*, the wackiness of the material and the ensemble.

Would you ever direct *Urinetown*?

I want them do to it at Encores. I pitched it to them. It would be great to do it at Off-Center, because it was an off-Broadway show first. Maybe next year.