

The New York Times

THEATER | THEATER REVIEW

Ophelia and Friends, Dominated but in Control

Richard Schechner's 'Imagining O' at Montclair State

NYT Critics' Pick

By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES

SEPT. 12, 2014



Credit Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — Tall and imposing in a long, strapless dress, a young man in a feathered mask towered behind the avant-garde director Richard Schechner, who was threatening his audience on Wednesday night. His **exhilarating and erotic new production**, “Imagining O,” was about to start.

Standing in the lobby of the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University, Mr. Schechner, 80, promised to destroy any cellphones used during the performance, which abounds with naked female flesh. Then he would throw the users out. “I come from a family of lawyers, so you’re welcome to sue me,” he said.

It was an apt display of pugnacious dominance and, from the audience, an implied submission to the rules of “Imagining O,” which meshes Shakespeare with “Story of O,” Pauline Réage’s 1954 novel of willing sexual slavery. As for the masked man, the only male actor in the cast of 14, he was the Owl (Parker Denton), and Mr. Schechner instructed us to obey him at all times.

We needed the guidance.

This provocative, confident, sometimes cacophonous production is a sprawling, ambulatory affair — an exploration of power dynamics in both sex and theater. Presented by Peak Performances and constructed largely from borrowed texts, it takes spectators onto the stage and into its wings, through stairwells and tucked-away spaces, outdoors and back inside again. We watch, and sometimes take part in, a succession of intimate vignettes.

When sitting is an option, it may well be on the floor. But there will be no ogling from a distance in the dark. This is immersive theater with a purpose, knocking the audience off balance to create a safe zone for the actors. What’s strange, and surely deliberate, is how safe it comes to feel for us, too.

Twinning Réage’s character O with Shakespeare’s Ophelia, each of whom is played by multiple actors, this East Coast Artists production was conceived by Mr. Schechner and is directed by him and Benjamin Mosse. But what makes it thrilling is how thoroughly in control the women are. Even performing scenes of degradation, these actors are not themselves degraded.

Strength and defiance are defining elements.

There is humor, too. In a space called the Balthus Room, decadently draped with women in various stages of dress and undress, a very young-looking, pajama-clad blond woman (Calista Small) reads delightedly from Réage’s novel in an adolescent cadence that clashes hilariously with the words.

On a pair of video screens suspended backstage, Ophelia (Gabriela Moreno) chats with the author of the “Story of O” (Melissa Krodman), one talking head on each oversize screen. “They say the owl was a baker’s daughter,” Ophelia informs her. “Pardon?” the novelist replies.

There’s something else Ophelia tells her, and it’s at the heart of “Imagining O.” We hear it again later, spoken by a chorus of Ophelias at the evening’s bleak and glorious crescendo, and it urges us to consider who created certain notions we hold about women — about agency, desire and surrender. “I was not born,” she says. “I was written.”

“Imagining O” is a rewrite, and it is powerful.

“Imagining O” continues through Saturday at the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, N.J.; 973-655-5112, peakperfs.org.

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The New York Times

Stage Memories From 2014

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

DEC. 18, 2014

Here, then gone: That's the bittersweet joy of live theater. Sure there are revivals, but will ["Revolution in the Elbow of Ragnar Agnarsson Furniture Maker,"](#) the Icelandic rock musical that played a few hardy months Off Broadway, come back? Unlikely.

Here (and mostly gone) are other stage moments that have stayed with writers and editors for The New York Times:

REVEALING ENTRANCE Nick Offerman, wearing an apron in front and nothing in back, when the lights went up on Sharr White's ["Annapurna."](#) His [co-star and wife,](#) Megan Mullally, may have seen it all before, but audiences hadn't. **SCOTT HELLER**

HEARTY PARTY A chicken, a mermaid, a sad clown and a Navajo chief crowd a motel room in New Mexico, boozing and dancing and bobbing for apples. Riotous and melancholy, this Halloween bacchanal at the close of the Mad Ones' ["The Essential Straight and Narrow"](#) lets the good times roll and then, as evening collapses into morning, the bad ones, too. **ALEXIS SOLOSKI**

SCENE STEALER WITHOUT AN AGENT Fistfights spilled out into the audience of the Winter Garden Theater eight times a week during the run of ["Rocky"](#) as Christopher Barreca's boxing-ring set glided out over the first eight rows of the orchestra. (About 110 displaced audience members got new seats on the stage itself.) It allowed the climactic bout, choreographed down to the last grunt by the wizardly Steven Hoggett, to be viewed from all sides. **ERIC GRODE**

MOST O.C.D. Compulsively picking lint off the carpet, manically washing his hands, tensing up at the slightest suggestion of emotion: [Tony Shalhoub](#) delivered a master class in precision acting as the tightly wound playwright George S. Kaufman in ["Act One,"](#) earning a Tony Award nomination for his efforts. **PATRICK HEALY**

SOUND OF SADNESS Who needs a Steinway when you have a kalimba? The singer-songwriter Jonatha Brooke held in her hands a tiny African thumb piano and sang "Time," a haunting number about her mother's impending death, in her compelling autobiographical show ["My Mother Has 4 Noses."](#) The result was as devastating as it was heavenly. **ERIK PIEPENBURG**

NERD EXTRAORDINAIRE No one acts awkward adolescence like Michael Cera, who reaches a new height of poignant hilarity with his spaghetti-armed dancing in ["This Is Our Youth."](#) Left alone with his crush Jessica, Mr. Cera's Warren busts some spectacularly geeked-out moves to a Frank Zappa tune. **LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES**

BE CAREFUL OUT THERE Hugh Jackman learned how to gut and fillet a trout for a scene in his new play ["The River,"](#) but he cut himself a couple of times while at

it, once even continuing [to perform while bleeding](#). Who knew the drama's tension would include his bodily safety? **PATRICK HEALY**

TEARJERKER OF THE YEAR (BROADWAY) In a year that saw Daniel Radcliffe and Bradley Cooper deform themselves on stage, Gabriel Ebert executed a no less impressive transformation as a fledgling cross-dresser in Harvey Fierstein's "[Casa Valentina](#)." Mr. Ebert's delighted, almost awe-struck look into a hand mirror after his character received a proper wig and makeup interrupted the evening's belly laughs and elicited more than a few snuffles. **ERIC GRODE**

TEARJERKER OF THE YEAR (OFF BROADWAY) People are fired all the time, but in Samuel Hunter's play "[The Few](#)," pain seemed to course through [Gideon Glick](#) as his character, Matthew — lonely and often unappreciated — despaired over losing a job at a newsletter he cherished. "I feel *safe* here," he said, his body frozen in counterpoint to earlier scenes of his bounding around the office. **PATRICK HEALY**

GLORIOUS SWIM There were many Ophelias in Richard Schechner's "[Imagining Q.](#)" at Montclair State University, and the whole pack of them jumped into an onstage pond for the finale. In a stone amphitheater under the summer sky, they splashed and kicked. Then one by one they disappeared. **LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES**

DRAWING HEROES Not only was Crystal Skillman and Fred Van Lente's "[King Kirby](#)" a supple, knowing account of the life of the influential comic artist Jack Kirby, but it was also a fine showcase for Steven Rattazzi, poignant in the leading role. **ANDY WEBSTER**

POWER PLAY Sometimes a kiss is just as kiss. In Simon Stephens's "[Punk Rock](#)," it's much, much more. The lipstick-smeared clinch that the bully Bennett (Will Pullen) orchestrates between two fellow students is freighted with all the excitement, cruelty, degradation and desire of adolescence. **ALEXIS SOLOSKI**

UPSTAGING THE UPSTAGERS It's got to be hard to share a stage with Cate Blanchett and Isabelle Huppert. But the 6-foot-3 Australian Elizabeth Debicki owned every one of her moments as the haughty Mistress in Benedict Andrews's high-style rendering of Jean Genet's "[The Maids](#)." Not only did she tower over Ms. Huppert, as one of the sisters who served her, but she also somehow made even the gorgeous Ms. Blanchett look plain by comparison. **SCOTT HELLER**

SIGN OF APPROVAL The Broadway revival of "[On the Town](#)" produces infectious joy. Proof positive: Filing out at intermission, a distinguished older gentleman passed by, whistling an upbeat number from the show. It was Stephen Sondheim, that whistle a melodic reminder of a link in Broadway's great apostolic succession, from Bernstein to Sondheim to us. **RACHEL SALTZ**

ONE SONG GLORY A transcendent number midway through the first act of "The Fortress of Solitude" at the Public Theater fused the many disparate strands of Jonathan Lethem's novel (comic books, pop music, race, sex, pot) into a rich tapestry rippling in the Brooklyn breeze like Superman's cape. The adapters flew so high with this song that their name for it somehow intuited one of Mr. Lethem's working titles for the book itself: "Take Me to the Bridge." **ROB WEINERT-KENDT**

TOUGHEST ACTING SCHOOL Joe Assadourian, recently released from prison after serving 12 years for attempted murder, put together his wildly funny one-man

show “The Bullpen” using skills he learned in a theater program for inmates. **KEN JAWOROWSKI**

ORDINARY MAGIC In 600 Highwaymen’s mesmerizing dance-theater hybrid [“The Record,”](#) 45 people of all ages — dressed in everyday casual — sprinted, jumped and posed to music and choreography that seemed dictated by an unseen giddy god playing with his toys. The piece filled the stage with joyful human tableaux and, surprisingly, my eyes with tears. **ERIK PIEPENBURG**

UNUSUAL REUNION In [“You Got Older,”](#) the playwright [Clare Barron](#) turned a hospital bedside vigil into a hilarious frenzy of disharmony, with four adult siblings arguing over whether they shared a “family smell,” among other things, as their father lay unaware of the weird brood he’d brought into the world. **SCOTT HELLER**

CHANGES OF SCENERY Sure, Caryl Churchill’s [“Love and Information”](#) asked questions about technology and emotion. But the bigger mystery was [how the props got on stage](#). Each time the lights came up on one of the show’s 57 short plays, invisible hands had provided new set décor, much of it huge, like a Christmas tree and a swing set. Backstage must have looked like an Escher puzzle. **ERIK PIEPENBURG**

LAUGHING THROUGH PAIN “I know we slaves and everything,” one woman says to another in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s [“An Octoroon,”](#) “but you are not your job.” Anachronistic moments like these brought down the house in the playwright’s inventive reimagining of a 19th-century melodrama. **PATRICK HEALY**

IMMERSIVE THEATER (FRIENDLY) The director Ed Sylvanus Iskandar believes in a [“socially immersive party aesthetic”](#) rooted in hospitality. At [“The Mysteries,”](#) his marathon-length retelling of the Bible at the Flea Theater, the vibe was sunny and utterly nonaggressive — welcoming handshakes, hummus and wine. **LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES**

IMMERSIVE THEATER (REALLY REALLY REALLY FRIENDLY) If audience participation panics you, don’t sit up front at a Bridget Everett cabaret show. Or in the back. Or anywhere in a two-block radius. In [“Rock Bottom”](#) at Joe’s Pub, Ms. Everett took a no-man-left-standing approach to crowd work, squatting on gentlemen’s faces, smothering ladies in her cleavage, ordering a table of delighted older patrons to lick her inner thighs. **ALEXIS SOLOSKI**

IT ALL FADES AWAY The title of this full-throated [Steven Pasquale](#) number in [“The Bridges of Madison County”](#) was hard to accept for the musical’s fans, who wouldn’t let the cast leave the stage at the conclusion of an unusually emotional final performance after an abbreviated Broadway run. **SCOTT HELLER**

EERIE EXIT At the close of Dave Malloy’s [“Ghost Quartet,”](#) the four performers left the theater one by one after distributing instruments to be tapped, plucked, pounded. What was left? Audience members keeping a ritual-sounding beat — and the show’s ghosts, including the actors who had slipped away and the stories they had just made so vivid. **RACHEL SALTZ**

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Montclair Times review:

'Imagining O'

SEPTEMBER 13, 2014 LAST UPDATED: SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2014, 7:33 PM

BY GWEN OREL

STAFF WRITER |
THE MONTCLAIR TIMES

Anonymous "O" in Pauline Réage's erotic novella "The Story of O" and Ophelia, from Shakespeare's "Hamlet," are sisters under the skin. At least, they are in Richard Schechner's "Imagining O."



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARINA LEVITSKAYA
(top to bottom) Kim Snauwaert, Calista Small, and Julia Blauvelt in "The Balthus Room," a scene from "Imagining O."

Virginal, innocent Ophelia and submissive, sex slave "O" have a few things in common: they love unwisely and too well, and they have no agency of their own.

With its sometimes shouted lines of Shakespeare, its acrobatic, often nude, actresses, its surreal imagery, the show feels like a bad dream.

In a good way.

"Imagining O" is an immersive, multi-set theater piece, which takes audiences on a tour of the lobbies, green room and halls of the Alexander Kasser Theater, had its world premiere on Wednesday, Sept. 10, presented by Peak Performances.

The piece is a fascinating, haunting, at times trying experience, a cross between performance art, museum installation and normal, if deconstructed, theater. It's weird, and, for anyone

who loves theater, unmissable. Its run here is too short.

Bring walking shoes. It's not clear whether it can be made handicapped accessible - there are stairs to go up and down. Several.

Schechner, who conceived the show, and **co-directed with Benjamin Mosse**, is the godfather of environmental theater. He wrote a book titled "Environmental Theater" that came out in 1973, staged "Dionysus in '69," and is one of the founders of the performance studies program at NYU. At 80, his work remains disturbing and fresh. It's also not for the prudish, as there's nudity and eroticism throughout.

"Imagining O" was previously work-shopped at the University of Kent in the UK and in the International Theatre Festival of Kerala, India.

Ophelia, recall, is the innocent young sister of Laertes, and seeming girlfriend of Prince Hamlet. Her father Polonius puts her up to talking with Hamlet while he and Claudius listen in, to suss out whether Hamlet is mad. When Hamlet catches on, he yells at her and tells her to go to a nunnery. She eventually goes mad and drowns.

She drowns - hence the buckets (literally) of water throughout the night.

O, in Réage's 1954 novella, is a young woman sent to be a sex slave to "the masters" in Roissy by her lover René. Her submissiveness includes being stripped, blindfolded, pierced and plugged. She is given to René's stepbrother Sir Stephen, and falls in love with him. At the high-point (or low-point) of her travails, she is presented in nothing but an owl mask, on a leash.

It does not end well for either woman.

It helps to know that much going in to the dream-like tour of submissive sexuality and the "dispersals," or short, installation-like vignettes, that you get taken to see along the way. Other Shakespearean women, or at least their lines, appear as well

A carnival atmosphere floats through the entire show, and cuts the heaviness. As you enter, you're handed a number. After the first two scenes, you follow an actor with your number, and see your first dispersal. When that one ends, another actor picks up the number and leads you to the next. Chris Muller's environments, which he also lit, are astonishing. There's a grave by the green room. There is a padded peep-house (inside of which, a nude woman. The show is not for children)..

The gorgeous costumes, mostly white and black, and often changed in seeming moments, are by Oana Botez. Roanna Mitchell did the fluid choreography.

This playfulness thankfully strips the show of pretentiousness. Halfway through, you're given games to play. If you don't, you are exiled to "dramaturgy," a corner of the lobby showing displays about eroticism, Réage, Ophelia, and more. The show's dramaturg, Carrie O'Dell, is on hand in costume to answer questions. Everyone wants to play, especially to have pictures taken with a nude woman that might be found on the internet. But the dramaturgy was fascinating, and during the "free play" period when the audience was encouraged to wander on their own, after winning a little map for playing, several audience members chose to linger there and talk to her.

It was also a chance to take a bathroom break and rest. There is no intermission.

Early on, the cast - who include 14 talented women, one silent man in an owl mask and dress - twist in suggestive postures in front of a set built to resemble the jarring paintings of Balthus, the Polish-French modern artist whose images are erotic and a little surreal. A blonde reads from "The Story of O" in a valley-girl cadence, while a woman in fishnet stockings murmurs the words in French.

Then you are taken to the center of the stage to look at an empty table, and screens on either side in which Ophelia, in this instance Agape, an actress with long dark braids, and Réage, here played by Melissa Krodnor, tell each other their stories, then simultaneously drink from teacups.

This scene is crucial. We see how the women themselves feel spiritually connected. "I wasn't born, I was written," Ophelia says to Réage regretfully. In turn, Réage talks about the ecstasy of writing "The Story of O" to keep her lover Jean focused on her.

However, the scene goes on too long.

Much of the show is like that. At nearly 2.5 hours, the variations of the motif begin to seem repetitive, even when the imagery is new. In vignette after vignette, whether it's a woman in a nightgown in a dressing room distractedly handing out dried herbs a woman in a cap throwing buckets of water at another woman reciting Shakespeare, or a cheerful actress giving "instructions" on being a proper sex slave, the show explores the motif of freedom in submission, of exploitation vs. fulfillment.

The show does not so much build as meander.

But "Imagining O" is skillful and impressive. When an actress becomes Ophelia, or Cordelia, or Réage, her lines are compelling, terrifying, convincing. A scene juxtaposing Ophelia's mad scene with lines from "O", in which Ophelia runs through the audience standing in a circle, feels like a bad dream.

The actors look you in the eye, talk to you, entice and command. The final scene, played outside, captures the playful poignancy. It's hard to look away, hard to grasp, hard to forget.

This imagining effectively goes right to the gut, even when it eludes the mind.

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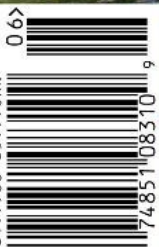
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CONNECT

Nomad /// Theater Director

BY SALLY McGRANE
PHOTO BY BRAD PARIS

NAME: Benjamin Mosse **AGE:** 33 **BIRTHPLACE:** "Aurora, Colorado, but I was an Air Force brat, so we moved around a lot when I was younger."
MONTHS PER YEAR ON THE ROAD: Up to 12 **BENJAMIN'S NEXT DESTINATION:** Shanghai, Madrid, or Dublin



In 2007, **New York City-based theater director** Benjamin Mosse went to Bucharest to stage his production of *Waxing West*, the story of a Romanian immigrant in New York. Smoking a cigarette outside the packed theater, he had a flash of insight: This kind of intense cultural exchange was how he wanted to define his daily life. Shortly thereafter, Mosse got out of his Times Square apartment lease, sold everything he owned, and crashed with a friend for two months. Then he hit the road, crisscrossing the globe and directing plays from Shanghai to Stockholm. In Wrocław, Poland, he met Sally McGrane, a journalist based in Berlin, and discussed the nomadic life late one night in a pub. Recently, they caught up again by phone, after Mosse's most recent play, *Pitch*, finished a run in New York.

SALLY McGRANE: So how did the play go?

BENJAMIN MOSSE: Great. Postpartum is always hard. Our composer is from Munich, our set designer was working from Tokyo, and everyone came together in New York for the production. Now they are spread all over. I'm missing them, of course.

SM: You said that you and your friends refer to yourselves not as nomads but as voyagers. Did all the moving you did as a kid inspire your current voyager existence?

BM: In some ways, absolutely. But I'm also influenced by having a Thai mother, a Cuban stepmother, and a German stepfather. My mother, for example, left Thailand at 21 and has rarely gone back. She's in this liminal space between two cultures—in Thailand, she's not quite Thai, and in America, she's not exactly what some people perceive as American. That feeds into the work I do and the excitement I feel about encountering different cultures.

SM: How does traveling affect your work?

BM: I'm interested in how personal and cultural histories inform the way people experience the world. I'm also very concerned about globalization. Between, say, Germany and Poland, there's a clear distinction. As borders become fluid, what is the line between being influenced by another culture and having another culture completely take over?

SM: When we met, you had just spent three months working on *Hamlet* in Shanghai, using a cast from all over China, with most of the dialogue performed in Mandarin. How was that experience?

BM: The Chinese actors were incredibly generous in showing me their world and inviting me into their homes, which gave me a feeling for the culture in a palpable way. There was also the element of not being able to speak the language, which reduces things to very, very human encounters, because you still need to be able to do the basics.

SM: So not sharing a language brings out what we have in common. Maybe it's better!

BM: (Laughs.) Sometimes, maybe. If theater is about articulations of humanity, then exposure to so many different people has informed my broader sense of humanity. What I like in my own work or perspective is that there's a lot more relativity now. There are so many more experiences informing how I look at everything—from very mundane things to the notion of home.

SM: Living in other places makes you consider things you don't notice otherwise, like how to wash the dishes. But there's a lot that goes into those small things, including history and cultural priorities.

BM: Yes. How food is preserved, the rituals of eating. I also notice how my body is affected, the way I stand or breathe. I respond to being in different places. Then there's the joy of sitting at a café and people-watching. The little details are so interesting or funny or enlightening. Some of my German friends and I joke about black socks—they're the clearest indicator of nationality. Americans usually wear white

socks. Particularly in Asia, you can look and say, "Oh, you must be Swiss or German." In a split second, you take someone in, in different ways. It gives you a new appreciation of how people are taking you in—what makes you *you*?

SM: Have you found any drawbacks to this way of life?

BM: Of course. You start missing out on the daily lives of people you love. In Shanghai, I have a lot of friends, and when I'm there for a month there's this intense quotidian interaction. Then I get on a plane and we're reduced to Skype. All the threads you've been working on, the details of the day-to-day, are cut, so you shift to talking about bigger ideas. Your relationships change when you get on the plane.

SM: If you have close friends all over the world, you have to be OK with the fact that you can be near only some of them at any given time.

BM: Yeah. Then when you do come back, you've got so much to catch up on. You don't take time for granted.

The New York Times

Go West, Young Woman (Ceausescu Ghosts Too)

By [Wilborn Hampton](#)
Published: April 17, 2007

It's been more than 17 years since Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, were executed, freeing Romania from one of Communism's most brutal dictatorships. But evil casts a long shadow, and the terror is not simply eliminated by a firing squad. "Waxing West," Saviana Stanescu's **intriguing and entertaining** new play at La MaMa E.T.C., is an attempt at exorcism, and it is perhaps a hopeful sign that the Ceausescus are ridiculed here as bloodthirsty clowns.

Romania's search for a national identity after the overthrow of the Ceausescus is mirrored in the story of Daniela, who a decade later is trying to decide her own future. A benefactor has invited Daniela to the United States to marry her son, Charlie, a computer technician with few social skills. Although reluctant to follow the advice of her mother, Daniela finally accepts the offer. "Maybe in America," she says with hope, "it is just a little bit like the movies."

The rest of "Waxing West" moves back and forth between Bucharest and New York over a 17-month period, from April 11, 2000, to Sept. 11, 2001. Surprises, of course, are in store. If Charlie turns out to be rather kinky, his sister, Gloria, may be even kinkier, and Daniela ends up cooking and cleaning for Charlie, who keeps postponing the marriage.

But these disappointments are nothing compared with the nightmares that haunt Daniela. The ghosts of the Ceausescus, dressed as vampires in whiteface, keep popping up, singing and dancing and commenting on Daniela's American odyssey while threatening her with a variety of tortures. And the date of the play's final scene is not coincidental.

Daniela is a free spirit. Certainly she, a sort of Holly Golightly of Bucharest, has foibles of her own, including a tendency toward kleptomania. She reads every self-help book she can find at Barnes & Noble, most of which she steals, and she befriends a Muslim Bosnian war refugee named Uros who was once a college professor and now begs from a wheelchair in Times Square, trying to save enough money to follow in the footsteps of Gilgamesh.

Marnye Young is captivating as Daniela, a resilient and resourceful young woman with a twinkle in her eye and a touch of larceny in her heart that are irresistible. Grant Neale and Alexis McGuinness are delightfully malevolent as the Ceausescus. The rest of the eight-member cast, under Benjamin Mosse's brisk direction, are all good, especially Kathryn Kates as Daniela's mother and Dan Shaked as her brother, Elvis.

"Waxing West" continues through Sunday at La MaMa E.T.C., 74A East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 475-7710, lamama.org.



Waxing West

nytheatre.com review by Martin Denton

April 12, 2007

My ancestors emigrated to the United States from Europe between 1863 and 1900; their experiences of leaving behind whatever it was they were escaping in their homelands and navigating/adapting/assimilating in their newly chosen country are remote and, as family members disperse and die, irretrievably lost. For so many of my generation, what it means to be an immigrant—perhaps the single most common thread among the citizens of this Melting Pot in which we live—is something we'll never fully fathom.

Which is why a play like Saviana Stanescu's *Waxing West* is so important. Stanescu has gone through something like what my great-grandparents went through, only it happened to her within the past few years: she lived through the Ceaucescu regime in Romania and its chaotic aftermath, then came to the New York in early September 2001. In *Waxing West*, she tells her own and many of her compadres' stories, tracing a couple of years in the life of the fictional Daniela, a young woman who journeys from Romania to America seeking marriage and comfort and stability and finding, well, pretty much the opposite.

Daniela's tale is fascinating in its own right: she's over 30 when her mother, Marcela, hatches a plan to marry her off to the son of a wealthy New York matron who loves Romanian culture and Romanian people. Charlie, the son in question, is willing to go through with this match to please his mother even though his heart is not in it. Stanescu cannily never gives us a single reason why Daniela agrees to the scheme; instead she feeds us enough information about what Daniela's life in Romania is like so that we fully comprehend a desire to leave it behind forever.

Unfortunately, shortly after Daniela arrives in New York, Charlie's mother dies suddenly: the expected wedding is replaced by a funeral, and then by months of limbo as Charlie appropriates Daniela as maid/cook (the very last thing she wanted to be; Daniela is a cosmetologist by profession) without ever setting a date for their marriage. Charlie's sister Gloria makes occasional appearances in Daniela's life as well, and tries to seduce her into a sexual relationship. Here again, Stanescu is careful not to give away too much, leaving motivations and effects for us to decide for ourselves. A kind of rapprochement seems to be in the offing for Daniela and Charlie...and then suddenly 9/11 happens, and Daniela's life is once again thrown akimbo by events beyond her control.

The untethering discombobulation of trying to create an entirely new life after having lived one for many years is at the compelling center of Stanescu's play; so, too, is the near-impossibility of actually achieving understanding (let alone true synchronicity) when alien cultures collide and coexist. Daniela's one friend in America, a Yugoslav immigrant named Uros who longs to visit Iraq because he wants to retrace the path of the legendary hero Gilgamesh, offers a contrasting yet similar example of the fundamental difficulties of relocation.

Benjamin Mosse has staged *Waxing West* commendably, with a spare but very effective design and extremely sharp casting. Mosse keeps his actors on stage throughout the play, seated on chairs observing the action when they're not directly involved in it. For once, this device proves valuable rather than distracting, helping to reinforce the ties back home that constantly tug on Daniela as she tries to make her way in America—and, similarly, the temptations that pull her away from Romania in the first place. Among the former, by the way, are the ghosts of dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu and his wife Elena, who continue to haunt Daniela's nightmares even after she arrives in New York.

The ensemble is excellent, with particularly memorable work coming from Grant Neale as Ceaucescu, Marnye Young as Daniela, and Dan Shaked and Kathryn Kates as her brother and mother. Stanescu's writing is remarkable, shifting non-linearly back and forth through the parts of Daniela's story in a way that resembles the random patterns of memory, and constantly rooted in a laughter-through-tears absurdism that reminds us that Ionesco was also a Romanian emigre. (Note: Stanescu's play *Aurolac Blues* is published in NYTE's anthology *Plays and Playwrights 2006*).

backstage★

New York Theater

Harvest

By Gwen Orel | Posted Jan. 30, 2006, midnight

In answer to the comment that "no one goes abroad these days," Jaya (Diksha Basu) mutters, "Not whole people, anyway." It's true. In Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest*, bits of impoverished Indians go to America through voluntary organ donation sponsored by the company InterPlanta. InterPlanta's mordant commercials (the video director is Matt Bockelman) punctuate the scenes and are one of the best elements in **a solid show**; the happy actors' sincerity, and InterPlanta's little jingle, "We make life worth living," are uncomfortably close to the euphoric promises of Viagra commercials.

Jaya, the wife of organ donor Om (Debargo Sanyal), is the play's moral center, although the action is driven by Om and by Jaya's brother-in-law and lover, Jeetu (Rupak Ginn), a street hustler who says, "I don't mind being bought, but I won't be owned." After Om signs with InterPlanta, guards (who farcically finish each other's sentences) come to the house and take all the family's possessions. They install a hanging white rosette called a "contact module," through which their sponsor, a blond Southern woman named Ginny (hilariously bossy Christianna Nelson), beams her image. She treats them like prospective livestock, and in return sends them a toilet, shower, couch, and television. Ma (Naheed Khan) purchases "video paradiso," which breathes and eats for her as she watches television inside her mind. Act II provides more exposition; though the material is dramatically successful, the play is less powerful when the circumstances are pinned down.

Thanks to Padmanabhan's lyrical language, director Benjamin Mosse's pacing and humor, and a solid cast, *Harvest* is a fascinating, funny, and frightening glimpse of what happens when we commodify human beings. Although it addresses globalization, the play's issues are universal. As Bruce Springsteen sings, "Everybody has a hungry heart." Keeping body and soul together in the face of images of plenty is a human challenge not limited to the Third World.

Presented by La MaMa E.T.C. in association with East Coast Artists at La MaMa E.T.C., 74A E. Fourth St., NYC. Jan. 19-Feb. 5. Thu.-Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sun., 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. (212) 352-3101.



Harvest

nytheatre.com review by Martin Denton

January 20, 2006

In *Harvest*, Manjula Padmanabhan's fine play that is currently receiving its NYC premiere at La MaMa, a young man in India takes a job as a professional organ donor. The time is the near future, and a company called Interplanta is recruiting healthy Third World humans to become, essentially, health repositories for wealthy Westerners. Om's client is a woman named Ginni, who pays him and his family top dollar—at least in terms of India's per capita income—to stay fit and ready for the possible day when she will need something from him, say, a kidney, or his skin, or his eyes.

Om's wife, Jaya, is understandably distressed by this new job, not least because of the strain it puts on an already very dysfunctional relationship. For Jaya is in love with, and having an on-again / off-again affair with, Om's younger brother, Jeetu, who supports himself by working as a prostitute. The other member of the household is Ma, Om and Jeetu's mother, a meddlesome lady who thinks that her elder boy (Om) can do no wrong and that the others can do no right (Jaya, for example, is repeatedly referred to as a "slut").

As for the work itself—such as it is—well, that's a round-the-clock regimen controlled 100% by Interplanta, who deliver boxes of food and other necessities as dictated by Ginni (she orders, for example, that a working toilet and shower be installed in Om's one-room, fourth-floor apartment, because she doesn't want her employee mixing with the "disgusting" others who dwell in his building). Om and his family do get to enjoy the spoils of his new high-paying position—in one of the play's most effective scenes, their rise to consumerist luxury is depicted wittily in a series of sight gags—but their lack of freedom eventually gnaws away at them, as does Om's fear that the day is drawing near when some part of his body will be needed by his faraway benefactress—quite possibly a part that he can't do without.

I won't reveal the rest of Padmanabhan's intricately plotted tale, but I will say that *Harvest* compels from beginning to end, creating a not-so-fanciful futuristic world that's pretty darned scary. Om's occupation starts off as a stark and brilliant symbol of the most invasive kind of First World Colonialism, but the play shifts gears along the way and turns its attention to an even more insidious form of colonization, that of our very humanity by a cultural ethos besotted with technology and comfort. While Om's family's crisis spirals horrifyingly out of control, commercials for Interplanta's latest and greatest products and services are projected on a screen that coincides with the rear wall of their

apartment, lulling us (and them, perhaps) into a sense of security that's as malignant as it is false. (These exceedingly well-crafted videos are directed by Matt Bockelman.) Padmanabhan essentially picks up where Orwell left off, crafting a 21st century cautionary tale of enormous resonance.

Benjamin Mosse's production at La MaMa's First Floor Theater is mostly terrific, anchored by a quartet of splendid performances (Debargo Sanyal as Om, Naheed Khan as Ma, Christianna Nelson as Ginni, and Rupak Ginn as Jeetu) and smartly paced and designed (the endlessly escalating "conveniences" delivered to the family by Interplanta take the form here of cardboard boxes of all shapes and sizes, and as they stack up toward the ceiling they provide a visual allusion to Ionesco's *The Chairs*, a neat and relevant absurdist reference point). Diksha Basu is less effective as Jaya, unfortunately, failing to hold our attention or sympathy in Act One, which proves problematic as the play's focus shifts toward her in its second half.

But *Harvest* is by any measure a significant success, and La MaMa and East Coast Artists are to be congratulated for bringing it to the New York stage. Audiences in search of lively and challenging theatre that looks deeply and candidly at the relations between the world's "haves" and "have-nots" will be well stimulated by this thought-provoking, valuable work.



PITCH

nytheatre.com review by Martin Denton

September 19, 2009

Pitch, a new theatre piece at La MaMa by Kolekt::f, seems to me to be about the shift in society's attitude toward communication—from something communal and worthy of attention to something ultra-personal and easy to tune out. The piece itself illustrates this dichotomy, resulting in most of the most thrilling moments packed near its beginning while the finale is tougher to get through. But the show overall is elegant and smart and performed with real commitment by its ensemble of seven; it's an intriguing and generally engaging performance work that provides plenty of food for thought.

Kolekt::f is: poet Gracie Leavitt, who wrote the text, which is a dozen monologues, some in a recognizable meter, others in free verse that more than once put me in mind of the cadences of Samuel Beckett; Nick Murphy, the choreographer, who provides some remarkable movement segments that fuel the show with vivid energy and stage pictures; Wolfgang Zah, a young composer from Germany whose music for *Pitch* is its most emotionally affecting element, perhaps in part because Zah himself is on stage as part of the ensemble, playing his compositions on piano; and Benjamin Mosse, the director, whose individual contributions are (appropriately) not so easily sussed out, but who has overseen the creation of a cohesive and pertinent piece of theatre art.

In addition to Zah, the performers on stage are: Jennifer Lim, Erin Layton, Tuomas Hiltunen, Joe Tuttle, Caleb Bark, and Elka Rodriguez. Hiltunen plays "C"; he has invited his friends A, B, D, E, F, and W to dinner. The program informs us that it is a time when stories are forbidden. An ingenious silent prologue sets up the premise: the six guests knock at C's door and then parade into his living space with military precision; they place themselves at the table (a wondrously mysterious dining table, hanging from the ceiling, is provided by set designer Kanae Heike); they eat and drink in silence and then depart. This happens several times, making us understand that this is a way of life for these sort of automaton-like people.

And then one day, after the meal, C lets out what can only be described as a yawp—long, loud, and alarming. The guests are disturbed, but something has happened to their world after this unexpected and unlooked-for occurrence, and now more surprising things happen. One of the guests announces that he is reminded of something, and then he tells a story. Everyone is jolted by this event, but the experience causes everyone to change. They join in, helping to tell the story by acting out parts of it. And they begin to find, and to tell, stories of their own. W, the composer, communicates his from the

piano. Most of the stories are told in words, but some are danced—segments danced by Tuttle, Bark, and Hiltunen are, for me, the high points of the show.

At the beginning, the story-telling seems to be for the sheer joy of expression and of sharing, and the collaborative spirit makes the piece feel exultant. Then the stories start tumbling from the assemblage, overlapping; and as the novelty wears off, the tellers become more engrossed in their own private world of discourse and less concerned with the tellings of others. Rather like, I thought, the way that people live-blog or text or tweet while they're watching a movie or in lieu of conversation while they're surrounded by live human beings.

This, at least, is what I got out of *Pitch*; I suspect that the richness and depth of the work will bear many other interpretations, perhaps not so narratively-bound as my own. I was excited by the show because of its moments of beauty and profundity; I was also impressed by its craft, which is owed to its creators and to its designers (in addition to Heike, they are lighting designer Gina Scherr and costume designer Michael Huang). After it was over, my companion and I talked about it for a long time and discovered that we'd each gotten much from the experience, and that's the highest praise, I think, that can accrue to any work of theatre.



WEEKEND

Cabaret's talented Mosse

BY EVA HEINZEN

Friday, October 3, 2003

Benjamin Mosse speaks in superlatives, calls things “superlative,” and, by all accounts, is superlative. The extremely accomplished Mosse is a third-year candidate for a Master of Fine Arts in directing at the Yale School of Drama, artistic director of the Yale Cabaret and the director of a much-anticipated Drama School production of Tennessee Williams’ “Orpheus Descending” to open in November. And as I sit down at Starbucks to discuss his accomplishments and passions, it is hard to imagine anything he says going unaccompanied by a gleam in his eye and a gracefully effusive gesture of not one, but both hands. And though Mosse happens to be at a particularly fine time in his professional life, the enthusiasm he radiates seems to spring from his love of theater rather than the praise his work is receiving lately.

Mosse considers himself lucky to have grown up in Sarasota, Fla., a place he describes as “strangely” in possession of such cultural and artistic accoutrements as an opera house, regional theater and art museums, as well as everything nearby Tampa had to offer. But then that archetypal eighth-grade social studies teacher ambled onto Mosse’s stage, leading him — by way of a field trip to see “Faust” — to a world in which he could “construct reality.” Mosse took constructing reality rather literally, starting a drama program at his high school, where, with “unmitigated temerity” — a favorite line of his from Atticus Finch, one of the characters he played in his days as an actor — he began his journey down the path he has followed ever since.

Barreling northward, Mosse headed for a theater degree at Northwestern University, choosing the school for its excellent theater studies major and (in his words) “superlative faculty.” He made the transition during his junior year there from actor to director once he realized that the fullness of the theatrical experience lay — to him — in the omniscience of the directorial position. Besides, he said, “directing is performance anyway.”

After years out in the theater world as the founding artistic director for the IF Theater Collective in Cincinnati, Ohio, and assistant director at theaters throughout New England, Mosse applied to Yale. During his final interviews, he was taken to the Yale Cabaret’s production of “Cats Talk Back.”

“That night, I was sold by the notion of independent theater run by Yale Drama School students,” Mosse said. It’s no wonder, then, that once he enrolled at the drama school he became intimately involved with the Cabaret, starting as a waiter, actor, and now artistic director. The Cabaret is just one example of Mosse’s willingness to insert himself into the thick of anything that excites him — as artistic director, he must select

and organize 20 shows for a 30-week season, each production with its own agenda, and all out to prove that “we can’t be complacent, we can’t be indolent.” His work with the Cabaret gives Mosse a chance to incite his audiences to critical thought and as well as giving him the opportunity to “witness the artistry of other imaginations,” Mosse said.

The active and the passive roles are both at play in the Cabaret’s first production of the season, the musical “Wild Party,” in which Mosse can entertain his propensity for romantic thought as well as his belief that “superlative theater has social, political, ethical and moral questions.” The story of one night of decadence in 1929, the action tracks the crumbling of sparkling Jazz Age facades, leaving only “dark and menacing ideologies,” Mosse said. With confidence that musical theater is perfectly capable of being “non-fluffy,” Mosse explained that the music itself is often “an excellent way to convey meaning”; even as it seems innocuous, it can be highly manipulative and persuasive.

For an intense week, Mosse will overlap rehearsals and performances of “Wild Party” (with performances Oct. 2 to 4) with rehearsals for “Orpheus Descending,” a School of Drama production that’s been getting national attention.

The story of “Lady Torrance, a forgotten woman in rural Mississippi longing for rebirth,” and “Val Xavier, a handsome drifter with a guitar” (according to the production’s press release), “Orpheus” is a reworking of Tennessee Williams’ first major production, “Battle of Angels.” In its first incarnation, the show ran for only two weeks, but Williams continued to work on it for more than 35 years afterward.

The loyalty “Orpheus Descending” inspired in its playwright may well provide insight into how it has maintained the interest of its current director.

“Why have I stuck so stubbornly to this play? Well nothing is more precious to anybody than the emotional record of his youth, and you will find the trail of my sleeve-worn heart in this completed play that I now call ‘Orpheus Descending,’” Williams wrote in 1958. Hauntingly similar is the way Mosse grew up with his “Orpheus.” Mosse’s high school drama program performed the play, his favorite of Williams’ (whom he endearingly calls by his first name or sometimes initials) soon after Mosse first read it and fell in love with it. A few years after that, he worked on it at Northwestern. A mere 10 years later, Mosse’s confessed “unconscious yearning” for the play has resurfaced on the list of fall Drama School productions.

All this is of interest to Mosse and perhaps to Williams fans, but what makes this production notable? With the exception at Yale of a Dramat Ex production in the spring of 2002, “Orpheus” is very rarely produced, and when it is, it follows the text of a play filled with unanswered questions and disconnected plot points. Aware of the problem and struggling to find solutions, Mosse and his dramaturg never expected to find any answers when, on a whim, they rented the 1960 film adaptation, “The Fugitive Kind,” starring Marlon Brando and Joanne Woodward. Screening the film in Mosse’s apartment, the two began to notice tiny but significant elements introduced to this story. These elements “completely altered the way [he’d] been thinking about the text,” and one in particular, he said, “invests you so much more in what happens to them.” This scene takes place on Palm Sunday. Lady gives Val a palm leaf, “and they’re happy. For a few minutes, time is still in the store. You kind of see what the potential beauty of their relationship could be –” Starry-eyed, Mosse can only breathlessly recall that seeing this for the first time was “unbelievable.”

Tennessee Williams, who wrote the screenplay to the film, added all of these adjustments to the plot himself, so it’s hardly theatrical blasphemy to include them on a stage version. If anything, the newfound clarity made possible by the inclusion of these “very subtle but very catching” points does his work and his

characters justice. But they never have — it took Mosse to discover them, and then ask for and receive permission by both MGM and the Williams estate to use them in the Drama School production. Most of all, however, it took Mosse and his own lifelong devotion to the play and its playwright to want to do all of this in the name of characters whose pizzazz and poignancy have touched him so closely for so long. Loving “moments of each of them,” Mosse admitted that “even the malignant characters have moments.” By righting the wrongs done to “Orpheus” by time and circumstance, Mosse is “trying to accomplish a clarifying of the action of his play,” motivated by what can only be eager devotion to a little-admired orphan of Williams’ oeuvre.

With a cast that is “unbelievable — truly superlative,” and “all aspects falling perfectly into place,” Mosse’s “Orpheus” will be the first Drama School production to grace the stage of the New Theater, which opened last year. As intimate a look into what Tennessee intended as one can hope to get, Mosse’s soon-to-be-realized vision may well be one response to his own lament that “there are social stigmas about the capital ‘R’ Romantic visions.”

Mosse’s focus and devotion may well enable him to at last realize the romance of theatrical beauty and the truth of his favorite playwright’s words.

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Wednesday, May 30, 2001

IF troupe nails Wilson's 'Burn'

By Jackie Demaline
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Playwright Lanford Wilson has two superlative chamber romances. The first is *Talley's Folly*, and its production at Playhouse in the Park inspired an impromptu Wilson festival on stages around town.

The last show is also the best. *Burn This*, by IF Theatre Collective (continuing Thursday through Saturday at the University YMCA) is the anti-*Talley*.

Set in hip downtown New York, it's about aspiring choreographer Anna (Corinne Mohlenhoff) dealing with grief and creative block and not dealing with her inability to make herself emotionally vulnerable in love.

Then Jimmy, a.k.a. Pale (Matthew Pyle), brother of her gay artistic soul mate, the one who died in a freak accident, erupts into her busy, well-ordered life, a life that includes a gay housemate (Brian Anderson) and a born-to-money screenwriter (Adam Ziemkiewicz), who wants to marry her but politely bides his time.

***Burn This* is a gorgeous play and hasn't been produced here in a decade. It deserves to be seen, but more than that it deserves to be seen in this production.**

It especially needs to be seen by the artistic directors of the other small theaters around town for a reminder about using space, using actors and paying attention to production details.

Director Benjamin Mosse (with production designer Rachel Fenner) transforms the University YMCA's expansive ballroom, our town's most wonderfully funky performing space, into a loft in a grungy warehouse district, perfect for dancers to live and rehearse.

Mr. Mosse uses the entire space with assurance. There's never a wrong step, and the long opening scene, played in quarter light, is a revelation. How better to visualize grief than with darkness?

Mr. Mosse's real gift, though, is to draw performances out of actors. All season long I've been marvelling at what he's been able to find that other directors haven't.

I've always thought that Ms. Mohlenhoff has been underestimated, and I'm delighted to be proven right by her textured performance of Anna. She pulls us in, makes us root for Anna to overcome her fears and let herself blossom into the woman and artist that's hiding deep inside.

All of Pale's big emotions — he has no small emotions — from rage to passion to pain are on the outside, and so much life and light is terrifying indeed in a world where people seek shelter from emotional storms. This is a charged, best-ever performance from Matthew Pyle.

Brian Anderson gives an admirably nuanced performance, finding the tenderness under the smarty-pants gay sidekick. Mr. Ziemkiewicz doesn't quite have the abilities to nail the silver-spoon boyfriend, but he comes up with a reasonable facsimile.

All the elements are there. All *Burn This* needs is a responsive audience.

Burn This, 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, IF Theatre Collective, University YMCA, 270 Calhoun St. 961-7434.

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Sunday, August 26, 2001

Season's shining stars deserve standing ovation



Jackie
Demaline

Next month will be bursting with a new theater season.

Before we look forward, let's look back at what was, for me, the best about last season.

A few caveats:

This annual round of applause is for locally produced shows and doesn't include the Fifth Third Bank Broadway Series (which had a name change over the summer to Fifth Third Broadway in Cincinnati).

My list of best productions is a collection of different breeds of theater. They're not in competition; they couldn't be because their budgets range from \$500 to \$100,000. For me, every one of them had that rare quality — vision — and carried it through. They also packed an emotional wallop that's the mark of a terrific theater experience.

This isn't about picking winners, it's about celebrating the season's finest. My applause goes to all the outstanding talents who make going to theater in Cincinnati a joy. In 2000-01, that included more than 100 productions by more than a dozen companies.

Outstanding production/directing (can't have one without the other): *Bluebeard's Castle/Ewartung*, Robert LePage, Cincinnati Opera; *Burn This, Benjamin Mosse*, IF Theatre Collective; *Closer*, Charles Towers, Playhouse; *Inherit the Wind*, Ed Stern, Playhouse; *Lovers and Executioners*, Jasson Minadakis, Cincinnati Shakespeare; *Marisol*, Jeff Griffin, CCM; *The Merchant of Venice*, Jasson Minadakis, Cincinnati Shakespeare

Honorable mention: *Grand Hotel*, Paul Daigneault, CCM.

Outstanding ensemble: Playhouse. This is what separates the Playhouse from everybody else. No weak links. Best of the best: epic-sized *Inherit the Wind*. Best of the rest: (in alphabetical order because there's no other way): *Avenue X*; *Closer*; *Everything's Ducky*; *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*

Honorable mention: *Lovers and Executioners*, Cincinnati Shakespeare

Outstanding efforts: The Lanford Wilson mini-festival that turned April and May into a celebration of a terrific American playwright. (Although the lack of marketing was a lost opportunity.);

University of Cincinnati's Norma Jenckes brought world theater standouts Athol Fugard and Wole Soyinka to Cincinnati last fall to celebrate the 10th anniversary of U.C.'s Helen Weinberger Center for the Study of Drama and Playwriting. She made us feel like we were on the international theater map.

Outstanding local script: No pick this year.

Most welcome regional premieres: *Closer*, Playhouse; *Lovers and Executioners*, Cincinnati Shakespeare; *Marisol*, CCM; *One Flew Spare*, Women's Theatre Initiative; *Saturday Night*, CCM; *Albertine in Five Times*, Theatre of the Mind (play-reading series), Ensemble; *it is no desert* by Loveland's Dan Stroeh, Cincinnati Arts Association

(The haunting *Three Days of Rain* isn't on the list because it played at Human Race in Dayton last year.)

Best New Ventures: alter-active, Playhouse's swell answer to winter Monday nights; the debut of the Women's Theatre Initiative this summer. I hope more of the region's female artists take a supportive role in the future. Congratulations to Kristin Dietsche and Rebecca Bowman and a big thank you to Cincinnati Shakespeare for taking the project on.

Outstanding performance, guest actor: David Cale, alter-active, Playhouse; Rocky Carroll, *The Piano Lesson*, Children's Theater; Jeffrey Hutchinson, *Three Days of Rain*, Ensemble; Joneal Joplin, *Inherit the Wind*, Playhouse; Philip Pleasants, *Inherit the Wind*, Playhouse.

Outstanding performance, guest actress: Kelly McAndrew, *Talley's Folly*, Playhouse; Marni Penning, *Lovers and Executioners*, Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival; Natalie Toro, *Everything's Ducky*, Playhouse.

Outstanding guest performer in a featured role: Caitlin Muelder, *Closer*, Playhouse; Liam Christopher O'Brien, *Shakespeare's R&J*, Playhouse; Jeffery Thompson, *Avenue X*, Playhouse.

Outstanding performance, local actor: Jay Apking, *Hamlet*, Stage First; Jeremy Dubin, *Merchant of Venice*, Cincinnati Shakespeare; Giles Davies, *Lovers and Executioners*, Cincinnati Shakespeare; Robert Rais, *Dinner with Friends*, ETC; Brian Isaac Phillips, *Henry IV: Heart of a Man*; Matthew Pyle, *Burn This*, IF Theatre Collective; Nick Rose, *Henry IV: Heart of a Man*, CSF.

Outstanding performance, local actress: Sherman Fracher, *Three Days of Rain*, Ensemble; Maria Kelly, *Marisol*, CCM; Deborah Ludwig, *An Evening with Lanford Wilson*, Ovation; Judy Malone, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Ovation; Corinne Mohlenhoff, *Burn This*, IF; Jessica Morgan, *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*, IF.

Outstanding featured performance, local actor: Brian Anderson, *Burn This*, IF Theatre Collective; Michael Frieman, *Our Country's Good*, CCM; Tyler Maynard, *Grand Hotel*, CCM; Deondra Means, *The Piano Lesson*, Children's Theater; Brian Isaac Phillips, *Lovers and Executioners*, CSF; Nathan Roderick, *Marisol*, CCM

Best of the best: Nick Rose, *The Weir*, CSF.

Outstanding featured performance, local actress: Christine Brunner, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Ovation; Annie Fitzpatrick, *The Countess*, Ensemble; Angela Gaylor, *Grand Hotel*, CCM; Dale Hodges, *Merchant of Venice*, CSF; Lindsay Marlin, *Our Country's Good*, CCM; Anne E. Schilling, *Lovers and Executioners*, Cincinnati Shakespeare.

My favorite musical performance of the year: Shy and cowering embezzling accountant Tyler Maynard, *Grand Hotel*, CCM.

Bravest non-musical performance in a musical: Danny Davies as a gay Hispanic florist, *Little Shop of Horrors*, Downtown Theatre Classics.

Best Rock Band: *Hedwig's Angry Inch*, Ensemble.

Best Cabaret: *Forbidden Broadway*, Downtown Theatre Classics.

Best fight choreography: Matthew Pyle, *Hamlet*, Stage First. Pilates instructor Jay Apking and CCM-trained David Zelina, Hamlet and Laertes, performed a sword fight worthy of *Captain Blood*.

Outstanding achievement in coaching dialect: Rocco Dal Vera, *Our Country's Good*, CCM.

Favorite twosomes: Gregory Lofts and Tyler Maynard, true show-stoppers in a Broadway-here-we-come tap routine to the title tune of *My One and Only*, CCM; passionate pros Philip Pleasants and Joneal Joplin, as courtroom titans in a trial of the century in *Inherit the Wind* at the Playhouse; electrifying Sarah Mann and Jessica Morgan as a lesbian couple in *Blue Window*, IF Theatre Collective; James Horan and Gary Sloan as gunslingers Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, *Dark Paradise*, Playhouse; Diane Danzi and Sarah Mann, a haunted woman and child in *One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest*, Women's Theatre Initiative; Michael Frieman and Katie Stuckey as unlikely lovers in an Australian penal colony in *Our Country's Good*, CCM.

Favorite threesomes: Jeremy Dubin, Brian Isaac Phillips and Anne E. Schilling, *Betrayal*, Cincinnati Shakespeare; Alicia Irving, Angela Pupello and J.B. Wing as the Mallard gals, *Everything's Ducky*, Playhouse.

Favorite foursomes: heartbreakers Judith Lightfoot Clarke, Kyle Fabel, Caitlin Muelder and T. Ryder Smith, *Closer*, Playhouse; the perfectly delightful Heather Ayers, Brad Little, Ginette Rhodes and Jamison Stern, *I Love You, You're Perfect... Now, Please Die*, Playhouse; the Cincinnati Shakespeare guys making memorable moments — comic and tragic — in *Henry IV*.

Favorite Fivesome: Jeremy Dubin as a one-man motley crew in *Henry IV*, Cincinnati Shakespeare.

Most Valuable Players: You'll recognize the names from last year: ETC's versatile actor-director-intern director Bob Rais. He's a utility player who provided an anchor to several shows; and Cincinnati Shakespeare's all-stars Brian Isaac Phillips, Giles Davies, Jeremy Dubin and Nick Rose.

Thanks for being consistent, guys.

Design awards: These aren't broken down by set/costume/lighting/sound. They're for the whole package. One weak element knocks it off the list.

Outstanding design, big budget: *Everything's Ducky*, Robert Bissinger, Beaver Bauer, Jeff Croiter, David B. Smith; *Grand Hotel*, Paul Shortt, Dean Mogle, and student James Milkey, CCM; *Inherit the Wind*, Karen TenEyck, Kristine Kearney, Peter Sargent, Playhouse; *Six Degrees of Separation*, Paul Shortt, Amethyst Tynoch, Jim Gage, Chuck Hatcher, CCM; *Talley's Folly*, John Lee Beatty, Laura Crow, Dennis Parichy, Chuck London.

Too good to leave out even though the sound didn't work: dazzling *Dark Paradise*, David Gallo, Ann Would-Ward, Thomas Hase.

A Big Wow for a pair of student-designed shows at CCM: *Marisol*: Cameron Anderson, Tracey Dunne, Brian Barnett, Matt Kraus and Kate Mittendorf; *Our Country's Good*: Geoffrey Ahlers, Brian Bjorgum, Robert Hahn, Alexis Rodriguez-Carlson.

Outstanding design, medium budget: *Sleeping Beauty*, Brian Mehring, Reba Senske, Shannon Rae Lutz, Ensemble; *The Weir*, Todd Edwards, Heidi Schiemer, David Levy, Cincinnati Shakespeare; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Cindy Brauer and Eric Bardes, Ovation.

Outstanding design, barely a budget: *Redwood Curtain*, Terry Brueneman, set/lighting designer, Know Theatre Tribe; *Songs for a New World*, Rachel Fenner, production design, IF.

Honorable mention: *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Rachel Fenner, production designer, who did amazing things with a ball of string.

Special mention: It was a great season for headgear. Hats off to David Warda for his wigs in *Sleeping Beauty*, Ensemble. Evil fairy Wisteria's headdress was to die for (and her nails weren't bad, either). And to Reba Senske and her fishy chorines in *My One and Only*, CCM.

Most breathtaking opening segment: A puppet Everyman at sea in an ocean of pin-points of light, *Account Me Puppet*, Mark Fox and Tony Luensman, Saw Theater.

I Wish It Had Worked: Downtown Theatre Classics, which closed early in the season; *Dark Paradise: Legend of the Five-Pointed Star*, Playhouse in the Park

And finally, fond farewells to:

Charles Towers, who resigned as associate artistic director of Playhouse in the Park early last season to become artistic director of Merrimack Rep in Lowell, Mass. Among his memorable work for the better part of a decade: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Homecoming*, *Valley Song*, *Nixon's Nixon*, *The Woman in Black*, *Closer*.

Benjamin Mosse, founding artistic director of IF Theatre Collective which has spent the last year demonstrating just how good a tiny, low-budget company can be when it has an unerring sense of theatricality. Happily, IF will live on.

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THE
HUFFINGTON
POST

Edinburgh Festival's 'Leaving Planet Earth' And 'Long Distance Affair' (REVIEWS): Skype Liasons And Galactic Migration

Posted: 02/09/2013 11:20 BST Updated: 03/09/2013 12:17 BST

Long Distance Affair (make possible an impossible trip), PopUp Theatrics,
Edinburgh Fringe Festival



Many of us love Skyping our friends and relatives – a free online video call to a special person brings us all closer together. But what if your Skype date was a stranger - one who take you on a theatrical narrative with limitless possibilities?

Romanian theatre and television director [Ana Margineanu](#) brought her production *Long Distance Affair* (*make possible an impossible trip*) to this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival, combining art and technology with over 30 artists from five continents in a virtual adventure. Sitting in a darkened basement at Edinburgh's creative hub Summerhall, surrounded by a handful of laptops and desks, *Long Distance Affair* looks more like a seedy call centre or shady underground Internet Café - a perfect venue for a secretive online rendezvous. A production assistant checks you're seated comfortably and mic'd up. They call your first affair.

Think 'affair' and 'online' and Internet cheating websites come to mind, where users don virtual masks (although as headlines tell us, online anonymity is merely a wishful fantasy). But Margineanu's affairs are not all of a sensual nature, some are mysterious, secretive and cryptic.

The first of my three online rendezvous is a man on Edinburgh's home turf. He says he remembers me, that we worked together a long time ago. He can't speak clearly because his wife may hear, but he tells me of an undercover mission. So this is what James Bond feels like? He recalls the drink I used to drink with him, instead of a Vodka Martini, shaken, not stirred, it's a specific type of brandy.

I go along with the story, but as details emerge through, it is apparent a device needs to be assembled. A bomb? Even in roleplay, the discussion is unnerving.

My next Skype call is with a pretty young woman in the bedroom of her New York apartment. Marina thinks I might be her Persian lover from a previous life. Speaking in riddles she tells me of our desert camel rides. I remind her of the sweet mint tea we would share in the hot sun.

Do I like her red dress, she asks. Disrobing her gown, she puts it on for me. *Long Distance Affair* is certainly intimate, the production could make some people uncomfortable (the rating is age 16+). An audience member in the same room as me is faced with a supposed inmate of a psychiatric hospital in Russia, rolling around naked on the floor.

My final Skype meeting is with another young woman, Kim from Belgium. She laments and cries over a disastrous relationship we once had, she wonders whether it's possible to rekindle it, and if I still have that dashing blue suit?

There is an envelope in the window frame next to the computer, just for me, to be opened when I have left the performance. I couldn't possible reveal what was in the envelope – that's between me and Kim.

Theatre is often comfortable voyeurism - *Long Distance Affair* rejects this traditional role. You become as much a part of the narrative as the actor, making the experience surprisingly raw and unsettling, as your past life spills into the story, sharing it with a perfect stranger. Margineanu's production is dangerous, thrilling and a fascinating piece of psychological theatre. Go into *Long Distance Affair* willingly enough and the payoff is a satisfying artistic workout.



Long Distance Affair (make possible an impossible trip)

nytheatre.com review by Julie Congress
February 5, 2013

Imagine having an actor perform for you one-on-one. Now imagine that this actor is halfway across the world and, via a skype video chat, you are magically together, just the two of you. And for 10 to 15 minutes, nothing and no one else exists – just you and this performer. He or she will ask you questions, will try to facilitate dialogue, try to make you laugh, look for your approval and maybe unsettle you. Each performance is carefully scripted, but designed as a conversation.

Long Distance Affair is a carefully crafted piece of experiential theatre. The audience is limited to six people at a time. Each person is seated at a laptop and given a headset. You have a series of three phone calls, each with a different performer. I spoke first with Oksana in Moscow, Russia. An exceedingly nice middle-aged woman, she is currently under house arrest for performing in a punk rock group (she even performed one of her songs for me). She had managed to get her son out of Russia and to Brighton Beach – was that near Times Square? Could I contact him for her? Next up, I met Toma, in Bucharest, Romania. Young and energetic, Toma is trying to get his cooking show on television – will I be his test audience? He promises to cook whatever dish I like! Finally I met Miguel, in Querétaro, Mexico, a troubled young man who spoke in disjointed, poetical phrases, walking the line between clarity and insanity as he rolled naked on the floor. I found his call to be the most profound – I genuinely wanted to help him and found myself consoling this lost soul.

I had anticipated that the three calls would in some way interrelate, but that was not the case. *Long Distance Affair*, it turns out, is not about plot but about experience. I must say that I have never paid as much whole-hearted attention before in the theatre. Oksana had me memorizing a phone number while Toma had me visualizing moments from my childhood. It is a fascinating experiment in awareness and presence and I know that I do not give as much undivided attention to my friends or loved ones when I am on the phone with them. The performers, or at least the three (of eleven total) that I met, instantly created a safe and trusting environment. As the audience member, I decide how far I want to push the experience, how much information I want to offer up and if/how I will follow up afterwards. Pop Up Theatrics has created a fascinating socio-theatrical experiment and vividly shown that the key to understanding anyone different from oneself is by listening.



YOUR GUIDE TO THE EDINBURGH FESTIVAL

TW EDINBURGH

Saturday 17 August 2013 | By [Sarah Richardson](#)
tw rating 4/5 | [Sarah Richardson]

ED2013 Theatre Review: Long Distance Affair (Make Possible An Impossible Trip) (PopUp Theatrics)

[ED2013 4/5 Reviews](#) [ED2013 Theatre Reviews](#)

Distance is no barrier to intimacy in this intense, immersive experience. Thirty actors from five continents have collaborated to create an innovative production in which each audience member is individually given three live performances to watch – and should they choose, participate in – over Skype. The resulting unique encounters strikingly illustrate how quickly connections can be felt with strangers, while the possibility of participation also movingly highlights how quickly one person can have an impact on another's actions. However, alongside this, you are made acutely aware of the powerlessness that can sometimes result from physical separation. Occasionally, the distracting capacity for overhearing others' conversations broke the performances' intensity, but this should not detract from an ambitious and deeply thought-provoking project.

Summerhall, until 25 Aug, 1.00pm, 1.40pm, 2.20pm, 3.00pm, 3.40pm.



WEEKEND

‘Orpheus’ plunges audience into state of pure bliss

BY [EVA HEINZEN](#)

Friday, November 7, 2003

Even before “Orpheus Descending” begins, you are won over. Director Benjamin Mosse paints his production on a fantastical canvas — a cabinet of curiosities filled with gleaming silver pails, white vases, birdcages and baskets, and sad, slumped stuffed animals. Walking the line of abstraction and realism, scenic designer Lee Savage has dressed his stage in real trappings arranged so carefully, they seem to symbolize rather than duplicate a real dry goods store. This abstract reality fittingly contains some very typically Tennessee (Williams, that is) characters.

Sad, dreamy and haunted by what-ifs, these men and woman are just as abstract as the world they inhabit. The town strumpet, the neglected wife, the betrayed husband, the drifter musician, the uppity wives and the brutish sheriff are the usual suspects of small-town drama. But although these strumpets, wives, husbands, lovers and cops are skewed versions of those caricatures, they are never entirely beatified or entirely demonized. The play succeeds because it never tells its audience how to feel. “Orpheus Descending” has flawed heroes, but trusts the audience to know that they are heroes all the same.

Among William’s heroes here are guitar-toting, snakeskin-wearing Val Xavier (Jedediah Schultz), vengeful but breakable Lady Torrance (Stefani Katarina Romanov), and floppily sexual Carol Cutrere (Mozhan Navabi). Cutrere represents the suffocation ready to overwhelm any free soul entering Two Rivers County. She is generously smeared with blue eyeshadow and decorated in black sequins, her hair wild and eyes wilder. Navabi, as Cutrere, flawlessly ushers the audience into this dirty little town, and is so riotous and gauntly beautiful that we immediately understand why the town hates her. And so it is that we immediately understand a lot about the town.

Val Xavier, stony and handsome, arrives in Lady’s store as one of the “boys who play the guitar and talk about how warm they are” — clearly unemployable. And yet he is employed there, and proceeds to enchant her with the star-scrawled names on his guitar and tales of little blue sky-colored birds who sleep on the wind and never land until they die. Like his character, Schultz is better at strange intensity and piercing stares than he is at swaggering masculinity. His wounded ferocity cruelly repels the desperate advances of Carol Cutrere, unconditionally accepts the religious visions of the sheriff’s wife, (primly and spectacularly played by Keiko Yamamoto), and finds love for an even more wounded Lady Torrance.

As the three acts move from Christmas to Valentine’s Day and finally to Easter, Lady is first gifted with Val’s arrival, then his love and finally resurrection to be followed by death. And all the while, the demanding thuds from her convalescing husband upstairs penetrate the hopeful world inside the dry goods store. In a perfect example of the play’s willingness to experiment with humor, a sweet-voiced song with the lyrics “The gods were angry with me for loving you” is played in response to a kiss interrupted by that same rapping. The end result is humor that makes the tragedy more tragic. The audience, having grown to care for Lady, cannot help but wince at these sharp interruptions. The frail fury of her vile husband, who twice staggers

downstairs with violence in mind, is chillingly acted by Kevin Rich. Romanov's Lady is nothing short of delicious — fuming and fussing and growing bolder all the while, so that her final defeat is almost permissible, because by that time she has just then become what she was meant to be. The passion of her rage and love are outshone only by her ease onstage. Never once can her audience question that she is the proprietor — she owns the set so completely that one can imagine her there now, dusting and rearranging, preparing for the next holiday.

The keenly felt criticisms of race and ethnicity add a deep sense of urgency to the play, but they are also the only point at which the play's spell is broken. While Lady is resurrected as a self-celebratory, fruit-bearing dynamo right before she is shot down, she grew to that out of a place of utter victimization. Seeing Lady Impregnated and abandoned by a social-climbing lover who could not accept her Italian heritage, married to an abusive man, and sprinkled with racist epithets at every turn, we get the point that it has been tough to be Italian in a small Southern town. But her last words, referring to the death of an organ-grinder's monkey her father had bought when they emigrated to the U.S., "The show is over; the monkey is dead" are much too much. Jordan Mahome is mesmerizingly blank as the Choctaw Man, summoned by Carol Cutrere to cry out with a discomfiting rawness. But he arrives suddenly and intensely to do the same thing twice, and seems more an interruption than an enhancement to the plot. The fetishizing of Mahome's character is fascinating because it is perpetrated by one of the few on his side, but it seems that that is something to tackle another day and in another play.

A play that asks one to live the moment

K. SANTHOSH



Uninhibited to the core: A scene from 'Imagining O' staged at the Fourth International Theatre Festival of Kerala in Thrissur.

A tall, muscular man strolls around wearing a woman's gown and an eerie owl mask. Drenched to the skin, women whisper strange incantations. Through the knot-holes of a peep-show room, you see a woman in her knickers uttering dialogue in a staccato rhythm.

'Imagining O,' a play authored by Richard Schechner, directed by Benjamin Mosse, and performed by the University of Kent School of Arts, has no clear beginning and end. It is called a 'dispersed performance-in-progress.' It was staged at the Fourth International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFoK) on Sunday and Monday nights.

The play, uninhibited to the core, peeps into the complex relationship between eroticism, death, and literature — from the perspective of women. The performers speak the words of Shakespeare's women characters who die and O, the heroine of Pauline Reage's French novel, 'Histoire d'O (The Story of O).

Ophelia meets O. Both choose death. Ophelia's heart is broken as her man, Hamlet, has mistakenly killed her father and abandoned her.

O finds meaning in her life when she allows herself to be treated as an object. The play is fundamentally heterosexual. Ophelia offers the tragedy and O the eroticism. A line by Ophelia runs as a motif, “we know what we are, but not what we may be.”

Environmental or site-specific theatre, which shuns the synthetic, artificial elements of traditional drama and embraces a real-world setting, reveals itself in its raw charm in ‘Imagining O.’

The performers make their way around the spectators and interact with them. The viewers are now a part of the cast. A heavy mist rolling over its sprawling campus, the School of Drama and Fine Arts at Aranattukara, served as the venue. As you walk into the large space, on condition of not carrying along your mobile phone and camera, a series of well-lit installations greet you. A bevy of women sit bolt upright, wearing sad expressions. They have their knickers around their ankles.

To move from one part of the show to the next and be guided by the pretty women, you should get a ‘map of fantasies’ from them, either by helping them brush their hair or wear make-up, or picking out bits of papers pasted to their bodies. Armed with the map they affectionately give you, you may work your way to different zones, each of which stages a different scene. You may choose the scene you want. The gap between the performer and the spectator vanishes. As you rack your brain to catch the drift of the happenings, a woman performer catches up with you and touches your hand softly.

“Forget me not,” she says, with her eyes wet. She hands over torn scraps of a love letter she has written. You tell yourself, ‘to hell with understanding. Live the moment.’

'Kocho': A 'Butterfly' by Any Other Name

Sunday, September 25, 2011 - 08:54 AM

By [Olivia Giovetti](#)



*The Garrett Fisher Ensemble's 'Kocho,'
produced by Beth Morrison Projects*

Kocho, the titular butterfly of composer Garrett Fisher's new installation opera, is a character tormented by the fact that she was born too late, an affliction many opera fans bemoan today.

However, given the timeless poetry that pervades Fisher's *Kocho*, there's reason for the modern operagoer to be optimistic. Produced by Beth Morrison, whom the *Wall Street Journal* recently christened "a 21st-century Diaghilev," *Kocho* epitomizes the *raison d'être* of both the Fisher Ensemble and Beth Morrison Projects.

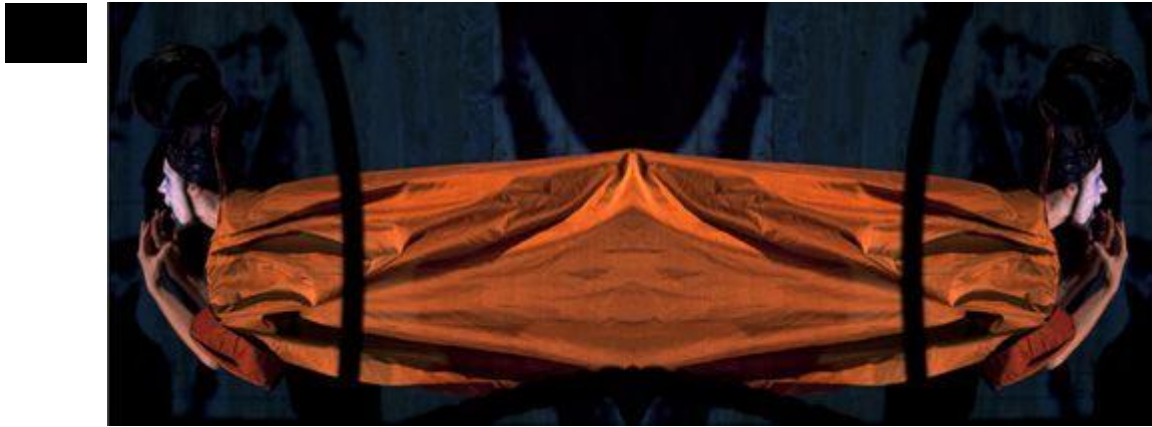
While the inspiration for the work comes from Japanese Noh theater, particularly a play of the same name by Nobumitsu, there are variations on the theatrical standards of a tree and specific wood used on the stage. Replacing the latter is Galapagos's signature steel walkway and black-box boards; the former is grittily and industrially represented by a series of hanging pipes and airy, cloud-like pillows courtesy of Louise McCagg. Zane Pilhström's costumes were reminiscent of Anthony Minghella's *Madame Butterfly* and Doug Fitch's New York Philharmonic staging of *Le Grand Macabre*.

But just as Fisher considers himself "drawn to the power of old forms," Morrison is drawn to new interpretations and *Kocho* is symptomatic of her artistic sensibilities in that department. More to the point, the action is not merely contained onstage but, under director Benjamin Mosse, embraces the space with projections by Ryan K. Adams on all walls, entries and exits through the audience, and an ensemble of five vocalists going so far as to pick up tea lights off of neighboring tables.

The simple story is of a monk who comes upon a butterfly, hears of her born-too-late plight and liberates it by letting it dance under the plum blossom. It is a multi-sensory experience, thanks especially to a score that ranges from understatedly atmospheric to sensory overload. Singers—including five making up the monk—spin pure silky tones that range in influence from Indian ragas to John Sheppard plainchant to Gershwinian trombone riffs. Doubled by choreographer and dancer Christy Fisher, Finnish-American soprano Maria Mannisto soared as Kocho, matched with the virtuosic Margaret Lancaster playing several varieties of the flute

with a three-member ensemble and trombonist and vocalist Jennifer Hinkle (playing an unlikely duet at the end).

Emerging from the hour-long work was like coming out of a dream, aided by the misty weather outside and DUMBO Arts Festival Light installations outside. It's unfair to credit these last two elements to Fisher and Company, but they couldn't have been better-placed.



Gabriel Thompson: Maria Mannisto as Kocho

Check out the slideshow from *Kocho* below and offer up your thoughts in the comments below.



CINCINNATI

by Scott Cain

Songs for a New World

It is always refreshing to hear when a local theater company decides to produce a newer, modern musical theater piece, rather than safe, traditional shows such as *Oklahoma* or *Hello Dolly*. IF Theatre Collective is one of Cincinnati's newer theater companies and is currently presenting the regional premiere of one such show, *Songs For A New World*.

Songs For A New World is a modern musical revue that chronicles the wonder, excitement, and sometimes despair associated with discovery. Whether the discovery is that of monumental worldwide significance, such as Columbus's journey to the Americas, or of a personal understanding of one's self, it is an awareness of a new world filled with opportunities and limitations. Composer/Lyricist Jason Robert Brown, a recent Tony Award Winner for his Broadway musical *Parade*, has provided a wide array of tuneful songs that capture both the power and vulnerability of newly found knowledge. The lyrics are intricate and emotional, and the music is challenging and uplifting. The show is Mr. Brown's expression of his own exploration for understanding and was completed when he was only 26 years old. He has captured the true sense of the journey for meaning that so many members of his generation have taken and the result is a captivating piece of musical theater.

The four-member ensemble consisting of Eric Bricking, Shannon Mullane Kramer, Melissa Manni, and Isaac B. Turner is up to the task of this challenging score with very few problems. The show is sung through and provides chances for each cast member to shine individually, and in tandem with others. In addition to being strong singers, each performer also demonstrates fine acting ability with depth and emotion. The moments that call for humor and a comedic touch are delivered effectively also.

Benjamin Mosse has made some risky choices as Director, and most of them pay off quite well. He has done a fine job of capturing the exuberance and fear of discovery as Mr. Brown intended. The production design, by Rachel Fenner, is appropriately simple with only a few props and chairs serving as the set. High praise is also given for the subtle and creative lighting design by Joe Lovell. Jonathan Kelly serves as musical director and effectively leads a wonderful band consisting of Cincinnati Conservatory of Music musicians.

IF Theatre Collective has produced a worthy presentation of this challenging modern musical revue. *Songs For A New World* is presented through January 20, 2001, at the University YMCA Gothic Ballroom. For reservations, please call (513) 961-7434. *Songs For A New World* premiered at the WPA in New York City in 1995 and the cast recording of this show is available at record stores.

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Wednesday, September 06, 2000



Jackie
Demaline

Theater review

Company shows off in 'Window'

By Jackie Demaline
The Cincinnati Enquirer

You might wonder why a play about a dinner party filled with artfully inclined twentysomethings carries the obscure title *Blue Window*. It's because playwright Craig Lucas explores many kinds of blue and many kinds of windows in the before, during and after of that dinner party.

One blue window is sky divers' code for standing at the threshold of the sky and persuading your mind to do something that is entirely against human nature — free falling into nothingness and putting your faith in a ripcord and your ability to pull it.

Mr. Lucas' point is that relationships are about free-falling, too. No matter how much you think you know about someone, chances are there is much more you don't know. Which is scary when you're handing someone, if not your ripcord, your heart.

IF Theatre Collective continues its run of *Blue Window* through the weekend at the University YMCA. IF is one of the fledgling theater companies with serious intentions, which have been popping up across town.

The work by these companies is invariably a mixed bag, but the price — \$10 — is right, and there can be delightful discoveries for the adventurous theatergoer.

What's best about *Blue Window* is the continuing promise demonstrated by director and IF founder Benjamin Mosse.

Blue Window is an intricate, chamber piece with no intermission. Four different households share the playing space simultaneously. That means overlapping dialogue and criss-crossing actors. Mr. Mosse's staging is confident.

Jessica Morgan and Sarah Mann are the ensemble's stand-outs as lesbian lovers. They both give urgent, engaging performances.

The women are significantly better than the men. Lisa Penning plays the evening's hostess Libby, whose floundering ineptitude masks internal scars. Ms. Penning comes into her own as she as removes her social mask. Stephanie Skaff, as a secretary with hidden depths, also comes through with attention-grabbing work when it counts the most.

While the YMCA's y ballroom is a great *looking* site for theater, its high ceiling swallows dialogue if the actors aren't careful. Production designer Rachel Fenner makes a good effort on what is clearly a low budget, but the lighting is bare bones and the sight lines leave a lot to be desired.

Blue Window, 8 p.m. Thurs day-Saturday, IF Theatre Collective, University YMCA, 270 Calhoun St., 961-7434.

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Sunday, March 25, 2001

Theater review: IF Theatre Collective

IF Theatre acting strong in one-acts

By Joseph McDonough
Enquirer contributor

"It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight."

Spoken by a deeply troubled woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, these words sum up the inner turmoil expressed in two challenging and effective one-acts being produced by the If Theatre Collective at the University YMCA in Corryville.

The opener, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, is a monologue adapted by director Benjamin Mosse and actor Lisa Penning from the story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. A wife is being held prisoner in a solitary room until she is cured of her "nervous troubles."

Is she the sane but hopefully naive victim of her cruel husband, John? Or has she been insane all along? Or has mysterious John pushed her over the edge? All the while she stares, day after day, at the faded peeling wallpaper in the old nursery that serves as her cell. She begins to hallucinate, and the wallpaper takes on a life of its own through her misery.

As this lonely child-woman, Ms. Penning gives a measured and committed performance that creates a riveting experience for the audience, particularly in the YMCA's intimate ballroom with its high ceilings and many windows that create a from-the-inside-looking-out ambience.

The second half of the twin bill is the frank adult drama *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* by John Patrick Shanley (*Italian-American Reconciliation*, the movies *Moonstruck* and *Joe Versus the Volcano*).

Danny and Roberta are two tough and bitter societal losers from the Bronx who meet in a bar and later return to her bedroom. There they fight through their mutual self-loathing, personal demons and violent fear of intimacy.

That these two hardened misfits are able to claw their way to some tenderness and human connection is testimony to Mr. Shanley's provocative yet poetic writing. That we root for Danny "the beast" and Roberta the hidden romantic so completely is testimony to the believable and compassionate performances delivered by Matthew Pyle and Jessica D. Morgan.

In both shows, but particularly in *Danny*, Mr. Mosse finds the rhythms of the dialogue and does a fine job with his actors building the anger, fears and release of each scene.

The Yellow Wallpaper and *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* are two difficult shows that have combined into an impressive evening by the emerging If Theatre Collective.

The Yellow Wallpaper and Danny and the Deep Blue Sea, 8 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, If Theatre Collective, University YMCA, 270 Calhoun St., 961-7434.