

# Time Out

## New York

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## Hand to mouth



**RULE OF THUMB**  
MacCary, left, and Striar, search for new plays.

Downtown's premier play maker, Clubbed Thumb, returns for summer loving.

By Alexis Soloski

At a recent benefit for the company Clubbed Thumb, philanthropists gladly set down their punch glasses and silenced their repartee while friends read from mash notes that playwrights, directors and fellow producers had sent. "Clubbed Thumb is an enthusiastic supporter and promoter of truly new work," playwright Anne Washburn testified in her letter. "They want to create theater that is in love with its audience...that loves giving the audience a great experience," stated her colleague Karl Gajdusek. Crowds cheered each epistle. The punch was spiked, but booze alone couldn't account for such passion.

Even the most jaded theatergoer might develop a crush on this corps. Formed 12 years ago by a group of grad-school friends, the company is now run by Meg MacCary and Maria Striar, both 38. Over late-afternoon drinks, the ladies appear clever, playful and easy on the eyes. They're eager to extol the plays in their annual Summerworks Festival—Gajdusek's *Greedily*, Jordan Harrison's *Amazons and Their Men* and Amy Fox's *One Thing I Like to Say Is*—and to announce the publication of seven plays they've produced. Titled *Funny, Strange, Provocative*, the collection includes works by Adam Bock, Lisa D'Amour, Sheila Callaghan and other regulars.

Clubbed Thumb began in the mid-'90s during an all-night bridge game, when MacCary, Striar, and friends Jay Worthington and Arnie

Jokola discussed putting on a show. They chose Wallace Shawn's *Marie and Bruce*—with MacCary acting, Striar directing—and rented the House of Candles on Ludlow Street for a three-week run. Realizing how little time their 70-minute show would fill, "we called up all of our friends," recalls MacCary, "and said, 'Does anyone have something they want to do?'" They did. On most nights three shows ran, with more on weekends. Clubbed Thumb has been producing ever since. It now claims more than 60 productions—the majority world premieres by living American writers, many of whom have subsequently won Obies, Tonys and even MacArthur fellowships.

Of course, a lot changes in 12 years. The House of Candles is now a hip restaurant, and occasionally MacCary and Striar regret not purchasing the space when they could have, for \$300,000, in 1996. "It would have been a wise investment," MacCary admits, "but we would have become landlords. That didn't appeal so much. That's just all organization." But with their continued growth and the \$15,000 biennial playwriting commission they administer, they've had to become more organized anyway. Last year, they hired an executive coach to help them, in the words of Striar, do "a lot of the grown-uppy infrastructural work. Some things you just don't wing anymore." That grown-uppy stuff, not to mention dogs, kids and mortgages, leaves little time for 4am bridge games. "It seems absolutely insane to me," MacCary admits. "We were staying up all night long, smoking and drinking. Now if I don't go to bed early, I can't think straight."

*Summerworks is at the Ohio Theatre. See Off-Off Broadway.*

PHOTOGRAPH: CARL SKUTSCH