



Photo by: Carl Skutsch

Pointing Fingers

With Summerworks, Clubbed Thumb stamps actors as equals

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By Anna Bengel

Meg MacCary and [Maria Striar](#) met as Brown University undergraduates studying acting and history and continued their friendship in grad school at the University of California, San Diego. After moving to New York in the mid-1990s, they found themselves doing lots of auditioning and not enough acting. So, like many frustrated but determined actors, they founded a theatre company in order to produce their own work. But first they needed a name, so they brainstormed by pointing to random objects — lamps, vases — in Striar's apartment. When MacCary found a funny drawing while thumbing through an old book on Victorian palmistry, Clubbed Thumb was born.

"We didn't want anything overly pretentious," says Striar. "It seemed kind of suggestive and opaque." Yet the image has come to symbolize the principle of Clubbed Thumb, which presents Summerworks, its annual festival of new plays, June 8-28 at Manhattan's Ohio

Theatre.

According to its website, the company "commissions, develops, and produces funny, strange, and provocative new plays," but MacCary and Striar feel that Clubbed Thumb's reputation comes less from a taste for the weird than from their background as actors — from a desire, says MacCary, to develop plays that emphasize character over plot or theme. The formula has proved successful: In 2001 the company received an Obie grant for its body of work, and in 2006 its production of Rinne Groff's science fiction play *What Then* won two Obies — for Groff and for MacCary, who played a woman who quits her accounting job to construct a bizarre dream house, complete with a conveyor belt and a movie theatre.

Clubbed Thumb is especially interested in plays with at least three characters, a balance of roles for men and women, a running time of 90 minutes with no intermission, and some form of humor. "We produce plays that are formally innovative in some way, that are playing with narrative in some way, and that have some form of heightened language, some sort of playful form of storytelling," says Striar. "We look for plays that have a certain kind of vibrancy of character. We look for plays we think will make an interesting collaborative opportunity." Summerworks always presents several such plays; this year's lineup features Ann Marie Healy's *Gentleman Caller*, directed by Brooke O'Hara; Sally Oswald's *Vendetta Chrome*, directed by Alexis Poledouris; and Sigrid Gilmer's *Slavey*, directed by Robert O'Hara.

MacCary and Striar also look for scripts that don't follow neat paths or come to clean conclusions. "There's so much great television out there, why should we be trying to compete with it?" says Striar. "Let's make theatre where you have to do some filling in the gaps and engage in your imagination. We're not doing kitchen-sink dramas; we're not doing witty banter. We understand where we are in the theatrical food chain: We're kind of a gateway. We look for a lot of different ways to give different people a chance." MacCary and Striar have held many jobs with the company — acting, directing, casting, hiring and overseeing production staff — and they try to produce in each festival one writer they've never worked with before.

When Clubbed Thumb was founded in 1996, MacCary was doing a lot of regional theatre and missed the collaboration and camaraderie of the work she had done in school. "When everyone was working together in a very nonhierarchical setup, it seemed more artistically satisfying," she explains. "The jobs I was getting seemed like, 'All right, little lady, put on your costume and go stand over there.' I missed the involvement you have when you're working with peers. Obviously, we weren't making money then, so it wasn't about a job." In the professional world, she adds, "I was a little surprised that my ideas about the script and the play weren't heard. No one really wanted to listen to me."

This is why Clubbed Thumb's actors get the chance to voice their opinions during the development process. "Why would you want to cast somebody whose ideas you don't want to hear?" asks MacCary. "Democratic? I don't know. But fair. No one's getting paid a lot of money, so everyone had better be treated respectfully."