

RULE OF THUMB

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI



SUMMER STALK: CLUBBED THUMB EMERGES FROM THE DIGITAL UNDERGROUND.

Five years ago, grasping at a name for their theater company, Meg MacCary and Maria Striar happened upon a book of palmistry. In it, they unearthed an illustration of a truncated digit and decided to dub their organization Clubbed Thumb. Had they read the description, they might have hesitated: The clubbed thumb, also known as the "murderer's thumb," signifies "a nasty, brutish nature." The sinister appendage is found on the hands of those who "shun the limelight and prefer working behind the scenes" and are "short on willpower and follow-through."

How fortunate that MacCary and Striar prove little like their namesake. Their natures tend toward the lively and charming (if ever sardonic) and they adore the limelight. Furthermore, as a recent Obie grant and Summerworks (their lauded festival of plays, now in its sixth incarnation) prove, they do not lack for follow-through. On a recent weekday afternoon, while enjoying a hurried pre-

hearsal manicure (they have lovely, unclubbed thumbs, all four of them), they discoursed on stalkers, twins, and their hopes for the upcoming summer season.

As the manicurists prodded, pummeled, and polished (Well Red for MacCary and the equally scarlet Macks for Striar), MacCary discussed the company's incarnation. In 1996, frustrated by the women's roles available to them, the recent UCSD Drama graduates decided to take matters into their own hands. They chose to stage Wallace Shawn's *Marie and Bruce*, with MacCary starring and Striar directing. They rented NADA's old House of Candles space ("House of firetraps, we called it," says Striar) and, having leased it, decided they might as well put on a series of plays and incorporate.

Of course, it wasn't that simple, especially when Wallace Shawn decided, shortly before the opening, that he did not want his plays produced in New York. So the women inaugurated a daring campaign to convince him. "We stalked him," says MacCary. "I would get calls saying, 'He's on Eighth Avenue!' We slipped letters under his door." Shawn eventually gave in, but not before leaving an anguished "No more messages!" on Striar's answering machine. Shawn even came to the play and liked it so much he joined the Thumb's executive board. "Of course," says MacCary, "we don't want to en-

courage people to stalk." "Especially Wallace Shawn," adds Striar.

With their stalking days behind them, and a festival under their belts, MacCary and Striar set about making Summerworks an annual event, selecting and commissioning scripts with one characteristic in common: strong roles for women. Explains Striar, "It's not that radical an agenda to think the women in plays should be human beings." But, in the pre-Thumb days, the actresses had trouble locating enough plays and parts with three-dimensional female characters. The emphasis was rather on physical attributes or, as MacCary drawls, "being likable." So they set about locating scripts where likability, beauty, and desirability were not the foremost features of the women characters. Striar says an ideal female character is "multifaceted, filled with contradictions and uglinesses and absurdities." "Flaws are fun," points out MacCary. "Flaws are true," adds Striar. "Maybe that's why they're fun," MacCary rejoins.

And the women characters in this year's Summerworks—which is, incidentally, the first Summerworks with an all-female playwright roster—are flawed indeed. In *U.S. Drag*, the showpiece of this year's Summerworks—which also includes shorter runs of Rinne Groff's *Jimmy Carter Was a Democrat* and Lisa D'Amour's *16 Spells to Charm the Beast*—MacCary and Striar play a pair of gold-digging and possibly sociopathic pseudo-twins. Cursed with a great distaste for an honest day's work, they "are looking for any way to be kept in the style to which they aspire." "I'm the flaky one," says MacCary, "and Maria's the one with the plan." "Not such a strong plan, actually," admits Striar.

In real life, however, there is no room for flakiness. Friends for 16 years, since their undergrad days at Brown University, the women share producing duties equally. MacCary oversees much of the press relations and detail work, while Striar looks after the grant writing and much of the dramaturgical labor. These Thumb-tacks have paid off. For the last three and a half years, increased ticket sales, foundation grants, and private support have enabled the company to pay its actors, directors, and playwrights. Yet this summer marks Clubbed Thumb's arrival. Sure, the \$2500 Obie grant is great, as is the three-week run at HERE, but the real mark of success? Says Striar, "We have interns." ▣

THEATER

All hail Clubbed Thumb Alexis Soloski