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Starting a Theater Company...An Interview with Meg MacCary of Clubbed Thumb

By [Lisa](#) | Posted October 15, 2004 | Topic: [Feature](#) , [Interviews](#) | [TrackBack link: copy me!](#)



Every year, hordes of dewy-eyed college grads, with newly minted diplomas, descend on the city with dreams of a theater utopia. For many, starting a theater company in New York is a way to turn that dream into a reality. And yet, to the uninitiated and inexperienced, the practical realities of running a successful theater company seem murky at best. Even for an old war horse, running a theater company that lasts more than a few seasons can be extremely challenging.

In a new Culturebot feature, I'll be talking to the artistic directors of several respected downtown companies about the nitty gritty of what they do and the lessons they've learned. Whether you're just starting out, or, you've been around the block too many times to count, you'll hopefully glean some new insights and sage advice from our interviewees.

In my first interview, I talked with actress [Meg MacCary](#), producer and co-founder of Clubbed Thumb. Called "one of the most inventive - and inventively named - downtown troupes" by [Jesse McKinley](#) in the *New York Times*, Clubbed Thumb is rapidly approaching its tenth anniversary. Since 1996, Clubbed Thumb has produced over 50 shows, many of them in their popular Summerworks festival. They are known for developing new plays by young living American playwrights and for the humor and quirkiness of their shows.

STARTING OUT

Why did you want to start a company?

Probably for the same reason that everybody wants to start a company; we wanted to create an environment where we could work with the people we wanted to, in the way we wanted to, on the work we wanted to work on.

[Maria Striar](#) [the other co-founder] and I started out as actors primarily. We both went to Brown together as undergraduates and took the same class with [Paula Vogel](#). But then we moved on with the rest of our lives and we coincidentally ended up at the same graduate program at UCSD. And then, two years later, we were back in New York and we really missed getting into a room and working together on something fresh in a mutually respectful environment.

Did you start with a mission statement?

Most companies are smart; they start with a mission statement and they set up a board and we didn't do any of that. We just started. And then as the years went on and as we did project after project, we sort of looked back and asked, "What are we doing exactly?" We realized that we were trying to help

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people develop new American plays and that we wanted to do it in an environment that we thought was very lively and creatively exciting. So three of four years into working, we wrote that down as a mission statement

WORKING

What do you think is the most unique thing about Clubbed Thumb?

Meg: I think probably the most unique thing is that we're actors. We read plays as actors. A lot of companies are spearheaded by directors. When they read plays they're probably picturing themselves directing that play. That's not how we pick plays. We pick plays the way we read plays in Paula Vogel's class. We ask: "What makes this an exciting play?" "Are the characters great?" "Is there action?" "Is it funny?" It can be dark and strange and that's fantastic but there has got to be some sort of sense of humor there because otherwise, frankly, we're not going to keep flipping the pages. So I think we just read plays differently.

Also, we're very prolific. We probably produce way too much. We don't just want to give people readings. Readings are important and useful to the development of plays, but honestly, once you get it on its feet, it's just a whole different beast. So we produce and produce and produce, and it's very expensive and we wish we could pay people more and if we were smarter about it we'd probably produce less and get to pay people more, but we don't. We'll get around to that someday.

Could you talk a little about your process?

Our process has a lot to do with our yearly schedule. Again, over the years, we've sort of honed it into this model. This is the perfect model. Now of course, none of our plays really fit this perfect model, but this is our goal. We have something in the fall we call "Boot Camp." During "Boot Camp" a playwright will come to us with a play that's either partially done or in a first draft. We ask them to radically change the script during "Boot Camp" to the point where they might not even recognize it at the end of the four days. During those four days we give them a theater, a computer, a printer, actors and a director. We also ask the playwrights to come in with a list of 3-5 things they want to change about their play in the course of those four days. It ends with a reading. In the perfect set up, everyone is working like mad and practically twenty four hours a day. It's really exciting. Great things happen. So we do this with three or four plays.

Then we have Summerworks. In the summer, we have four or five night runs of shows that are fully produced. It's assumed that the plays aren't completely polished, but they're certainly ready to get up in front of an audience. We do three or four plays during the summer festival and then we also have readings. We have readings of plays we're interested in, but we're not totally sure about. If the summer production goes well, it gets a winter production of four or five weeks and we put in all our resources.

FUNDRAISING

How do you guys fundraise?

We started by sending a letter out to all of our friends and family and that was ten years ago. We still have a fundraising letter that goes out twice a year to those special people. As far as benefits go, we've really honed what works best for us. We do these small cocktail parties with around 50 people in the beautiful home of someone we know. The host underwrites it and pays for everything and we put on a little presentation and it's just a little cocktail party. People pay \$50-100 per ticket to come. We hold these twice a year. It's worked out really well because we've actually made money. In the past, we've had these big events and we end up breaking even and we got really sick of that. And then, the main thing is applying for grants. That's worked out very well.

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What kinds of presentations do you do at your cocktail fundraisers?

It's varied, but at the Spring benefit, we've already chosen the plays for the Summerworks festival so we do a sock puppet rendition of little scenes from the plays. It's super low key. This year it was on Cinco de Mayo, so we had margaritas and Mexican food. Most of the people who come are supporters or friends of the host. I wish we were better at knowing rich people. We went to Brown and I think a lot of people are very successful who went to Brown, but we don't know any of them. But we do know people who know some. And our friends are very generous, as much as they can be. Most of the people at these events are our age or our parents age - they think it's fun to hang out with people our age and they certainly have more money than we do.

Do you have any suggestions on applying for grants?

Well Maria does the brunt of that. I think she's very honest and I think she does great research. She makes sure that she knows about the foundation that she's applying to so she's not just sending out some blind thing. It really is tailored to their interests. She's a wonderful writer, so that doesn't hurt. And also, she calls and follows up and talks to the people and gets feedback. So when she doesn't get something, she asks them what she can do better.

MAKING MONEY

When you started off ten years ago, did you also have a day job? Do you have a day job now? Are you able to support yourself with Clubbed Thumb?

We're certainly not able to support ourselves through doing Clubbed Thumb. Actually, we didn't used to pay ourselves at all, except as artists. If we were in the show, we got paid the same as the other actors. But we didn't pay ourselves as producers until two years ago, which was just sort of emotionally debilitating. I think it hit Maria sooner than it hit me. I thought that since we're the leaders, we should pay ourselves last. Maria felt the opposite. Even if you get paid a piddly amount, even if it's not going to make a major difference in your lifestyle, it provides a necessary sense of affirmation that what you do is important. You can't be that much of a martyr otherwise you'll get really resentful and bitter. I wish we'd figured that out earlier. I don't know how we would have done it. But honestly, we would've cut back on the budgets for the shows. But that would never have occurred to me at that time. It never occurred to me that it was more important to pay ourselves than to have really nice sets.

When I first started out, I worked at the Drama League and that was great. I worked for a woman named Jen Rockwood. I was her assistant, her Girl Friday. Clubbed Thumb is run out of that little closet right there and she taught me all that stuff, about databases and writing fundraising letters and throwing benefits and writing thank you notes and all that. That was invaluable. I also teach from time to time.

Do the people who are involved with your shows have day jobs or do they support themselves through theater?

I'd say probably about 50% of the people we work with now are artists full time. Not because they're working with people like us - we don't pay them enough. They're able to do the work they do with Clubbed Thumb because they have more lucrative acting jobs elsewhere.

How did you figure out what was appropriate to pay people?

At first, we just paid people what we could. Then we kept raising it as much as we could. We definitely keep it as high as we can. We'd rather cut the set budget than people's salary. That said, you can never pay people enough. Right now, what we pay people, to us, seems astronomical. During the festival, we had close to 100 people working on the festival, so that's a lot of heads. That's a lot of money. It's so much money. And yet, what people complain about the most is "Well I'm practically working for free for you" and it's true, but to us it's not. I know this isn't going to change their lives or their

lifestyle, but to us it's like cutting open a vein.

A BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Maybe you could talk about having a board of directors and an advisory board and why you would have them?

I'm not sure anybody knows the answer to that. We didn't have anything for years and then we started with an advisory board. They're great and we frequently call on them for favors and we do feel their support, but we don't meet with them often. But for example, Paula Vogel is on our advisory board and she's writing our fundraising letter. Really, the advisory board is made up of people we know, who respect us but aren't involved in the organization in a hands on way. But the executive board is much more hands on. We just got an executive board a couple of years ago. I think most other companies start out with an executive board, but we just didn't know what one was. Our board is very small. It's me, Maria and three other people. The board helps us with our budgeting. They all have backgrounds in business so they're really good at helping us evaluate our expenses. But they're not involved artistically. They do help immeasurably with those fundraising events I was talking about. They're the hosts. And they're always trying to help us brainstorm different ways to go about things.

What kind of people do you choose for your executive board? How do you find them?

We went to Brown with two of them. They were very involved with theater at Brown, but they went on to have careers as lawyers and one went on to start his own business. But they have a love for theater. But they're involvement in theater is only their involvement with us. The chairperson of our board is older and she's just a New York person who knows a lot of cultured people and loves theater. Maria and I have talked about increasing the board and I think that we need to. We definitely wanted to start out with a small, trustworthy, manageable board. But now it's time to get a little bit bigger. For me, an ideal board member is someone who is successful in their own right in a different field and can bring their expertise in that field to help me in this field. They're also super interested and love going to theater. They're opinionated and tell me whether they like the shows or not. Who go, "Why don't you try doing mugs this year!" Who'll be excited, but who aren't also on the board of another theater. For some reason, that just seems like a conflict.

MARKETING

How do you promote your shows and your company?

For the most part, we've just sent out postcards. We haven't really done a lot of email stuff. We do sort of the bare minimum when it comes to email, partly because I personally hate receiving stuff I haven't requested. But I realize that we have to do more of it. I've been told many times by marketing advisors that I'm wrong and that we should be email blasting the world. So we mainly send things out by mail and recently we've gotten into advertising, which is incredibly expensive. I sometimes wonder if advertising is worthwhile. I just got a tip from Susan Bernfield, who runs *New Georges*, who said that she's doing a lot of her marketing through *Theatermania* and that sounds kind of exciting. I wouldn't have any problem paying them to email their list.

We do have a publicist. I used to do that myself, but not anymore. If you can afford it, you should really have a publicist. But that said, we've worked with practically every downtown publicist there is and if at all possible you have to know whether they're going to give you the time of day, or not. Because you can pay them 1500 or 2000 dollars and they just send out your press release in a mailing. And that's not going to get you anything. Not even listings anymore, for the most part. Plus, you could do that yourself. That's not worth \$2000. Certainly not in small budget shows. But you just don't know. You're trusting somebody and we've trusted the wrong people. But now we have a very good relationship with our publicist. The difference is night and day between somebody who will make the phone calls for you and really push your shows and reads the scripts and someone who just

sends out a press release. There's no reason in the world why we shouldn't have had more publicity except that we had lazy publicists. And suddenly we get this new guy and we're getting reviewed all over town. I'm not sure what it is that he does that makes such a big difference but I have a feeling he actually works for us, instead of just sending things out in the mail.

What does a good publicist do?

I'm not really sure. You have to ask them. But I think he does a lot of follow up and he calls and talks to the reviewers and says "You have got to see this show and not just because the show is great but because Clubbed Thumb is great and you know that and you know their track record." When I first met with him, he didn't understand why we were getting so little press. Since we've been with him, we haven't had any problems. It wasn't just him. The guy we had before him also worked his tail off and we got reviewed all over the place. Once you get a New York Times review, everyone else will review you, if it's good. We would've stayed with the first guy forever, but he moved to Tibet.

REHEARSAL SPACES

Where do you guys rehearse and how do you go about finding places to rehearse?

When we first started, we rehearsed in a place that's closed down now, the El Boheo cultural center on the other side of Tompkins Square Park. It was an old school and that was great. We did a lot of that in the first years, small spaces, dance studios. Now, we're fortunate that we have relationships with The Ohio and Robert Lyons. We've worked with him over the years and he trusts us, so now if we need a space and he has one available, he'll let us use it, which is wonderful. So we mainly rehearse at the Ohio's rehearsal space, Soho Think Tank. We also use the rehearsal space at New Georges. Now if neither of those spaces are available, we do what everybody else does and pay \$20 an hour for something that isn't half as good. We've been rehearsing at ART/NY when we have to, to fill in the gaps.

STAFF

Do you have a company manager or do you have any other people hired?

Maria and I are the only two full time staff people and we pretty much handle all the day to day stuff. Arne Jokela, who's also a producer, does all the website stuff and a lot of the marketing overflow. He's invaluable. Those are the three people who are on a yearly salary. Other than that, people are paid either by project or hourly. I have people come in and help me with data entry, with mailings, stuff like that. We have a whole group of people who'll come in and just work by the hour.

ROLE MODELS

Are there any older more established companies or individuals that you see as role models?

Sure. When we first started out, David Herskovits at Target Margin was really helpful. Kristin Marting from HERE, who's on our board, is amazing. As far as structurally, Susan Bernfield has been a great help. She and I went out for drinks the other night because we both needed to debrief each other on how our summers had been because we both had had sort of frustrating times in different ways, being producers and also artists. I said to her, "You make it look so easy." And of course she's like, "Are you kidding me? I thought I was going to jump off the top of a building." And I think, "Thank God, so I'm not crazy." It really is as hard as it feels. Same things with Dave Travis at Synapse. I can't say there's a company who's structure we've modeled ourselves after because as I said earlier we were a little ad hoc about how we structured things and we sort of just grew organically. But as far as advice and role models, absolutely. I mean Synapse is incredible at putting on events. Things look so slick and

beautiful. I'm so impressed by that. I assumed that their budget was so much more than it was. And it is difficult. The first thing Dave said when he sat down was "Why are we doing this again?" And I responded, "But you look like you really love doing this. I thought you were going to tell me." Robert Lyons is amazing. He's amazing at Soho Think Tank. There are also a bunch of artistic directors who get together to play poker every month or so. I'm in that poker group and it's fantastic. It's great to hear the scoop and also get advice about contracts and lawyers and rehearsal rooms and lawyers and all that stuff. It's also sort of like therapy.

LOOKING BACK

What have been some of the exciting moments in the growth and development of Clubbed Thumb?

I think the most exciting things have come out of crises. A few years ago during the summer festival, it became clear to us that our main show, the show we'd put all our eggs into, was just not going to happen. This was two weeks before opening night. We were young producers and the idea of canceling the show was completely against everything we believed in, but we didn't know what to do. All the money had been spent, so we had to do something. So we canceled the show and we called up some talented friends of ours from college on a whim, Michael Showalter, Joe Lotruglio, and David Wain, guys who are stand up comedians and sketch comedy guys who don't do the kind of theater we do. But they were active in New York and we knew they were funny and great guys and good on their feet. So we asked them if they had any ideas. These guys wrote a play in a weekend. It was called, *Sex, aka Wieners and Boobs*; not something we would normally have chosen. But the show was hysterical. It was a wonderful thing that we could never have planned in a million years. It was fun and funny and it certainly got us off the hook. It also made us realize that we can get out of the toughest of situations if it comes down to it.

Frankly, "Boot Camp" came out of a crisis too. We had booked a space in order to do a co-production with another group, but their financial backing didn't come through, so suddenly we were without a show. But we didn't want to back away from the commitment that we had made to the theater. So we thought about it and found that there's a middle stage of development between readings and our Summerworks productions, so we figured we'd just fill in that gap. It worked out so well that now it's something we try to do as much as we can and at least once year.

If you could go back and do anything differently, either artistically or administratively, what would it be?

It took us a really long time to finally just say look, we're running this company. Maria and I are running this company. We're the ones who do most of the work. Not to say that other people's contributions are not important, but it's a fact that we make the largest contributions. For years we wanted to call everyone a producer. We wanted it to be a collective and for everyone to have an equal voice. And that created a lot of frustrations. I wish that I had sort of just fessed up to that myself and that Maria and I had had the courage to say, "We're the directors." There's something sort of girly about it really. She might be appalled by my saying that. But I think it was a little like, "I don't wanna be the head, I don't wanna boss you guys around." But then again, I do want everyone to work. So if I could go back, I would definitely call it what it is.

THE FUTURE

How would you like to see the company expand and grow in the future?

We ask ourselves that all the time. I think my answer is we just need to do what we do better. We want to get better at what we do because we really enjoy what we do. We just want to be able to pay people more. And have higher contracts.

ADVICE

Is there any other advice you'd have for someone interested in starting a company in New York?

I really think that what's worked best for us is not talking about it as much as just doing it. That said, I think that a lot of the lessons we learned, we learned probably harder than we had to because we weren't as methodical about things. But at least in the meantime we were doing things. And I'd have to wonder if we'd still be doing things if we'd spent a lot of time figuring other stuff out. I don't think any group of people is going to agree on everything. No group of people is going to have one agenda. So if you're going to sit there trying to decide on one, you'll just hit a wall. I would just suggest doing it and then you'll learn so much about what you want to do.

COMMENTS (2)

From ModFab (Oct 16, 2004 10:39 AM)

Wow, their publicist sounds great! Any way to get a recommendation for them? Downtown publicists that are good are really rare beasts, and we'd love to know about them.

From editor (Oct 17, 2004 2:38 PM)

we should probably do a full feature on downtown publicists, because it is a tricky subject. there are many of them - and different ones will do different things for different people. I think the most important thing is to find a publicist who has a similar aesthetic or cultural sensibility to your work - who will "get it" and publicize you the way you want to be perceived. Read the programs for the shows you like and admire, see who their publicist is, and go from there. People can have very different experiences with the same publicist - depending on how they get along and so forth. ALSO - and this is the hardest thing - publicists can't guarantee press and they also can't guarantee the quality of the work. Sometimes it can be very difficult when a show seems like it'll be good, the artist deserves press, but then when it final hits the stage it just isn't quite there. The artist still wants press, but they probably shouldn't get it, because its not their best work. so you need, as much as possible, to find a publicist you trust and who will advise you as objectively as possible about what is realistic and how to manage your press once your show is up.

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