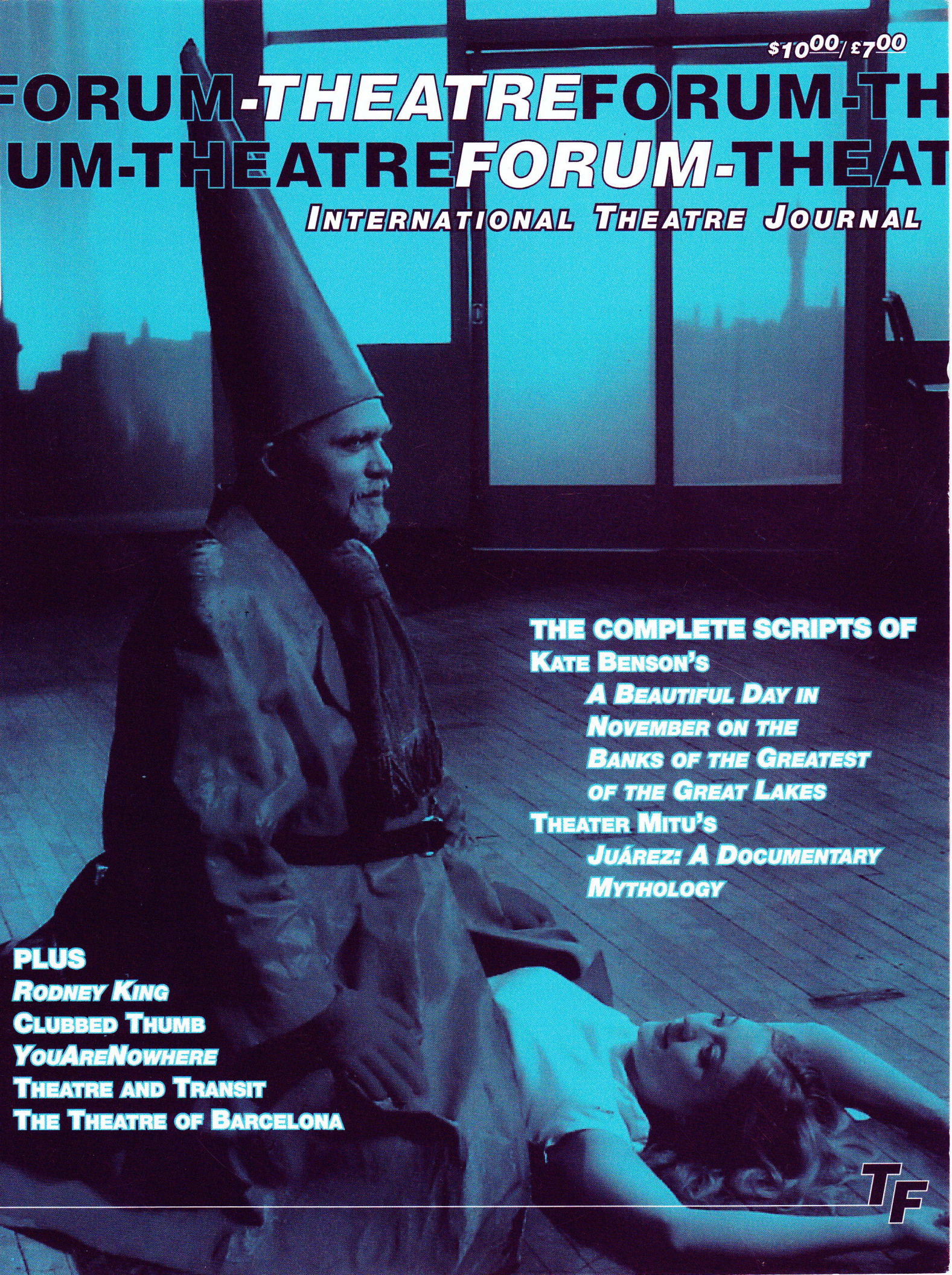
$10.00/£7.00

FORUM-THEATREFORUM-TH
UM-THEATREFORUM-THEAT

INTERNATIONAL THEATRE JOURNAL



THE COMPLETE SCRIPTS OF
KATE BENSON'S
A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN NOVEMBER ON THE BANKS OF THE GREATEST OF THE GREAT LAKES
THEATER MITU'S
JUÁREZ: A DOCUMENTARY MYTHOLOGY

PLUS
RODNEY KING
CLUBBED THUMB
YOUARENOWHERE
THEATRE AND TRANSIT
THE THEATRE OF BARCELONA

TF

Photo 1: Heidi Schreck and Glenn Fleshler in *Demon Baby* by Erin Courtney, directed by Ken Rus Schmoll; 2004.
Photo: Carl Skutsch

CLUBBED THUMB

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA STRIAR

Introduction by Naomi Iizuka

Clubbed Thumb has been on the forefront of developing and producing new American plays for almost 20 years. Since its founding in 1996, it has won 5 OBIE Awards and produced over 90 productions. Clubbed Thumb does some of the most daring, provocative, groundbreaking work in American theatre today. The writers that Clubbed Thumb discovered and cultivated at the inception of their careers are now some of the major voices in American theatre, writers like Anne Washburn, Jordan Harrison, and Sarah Ruhl. The phenomenon of Clubbed Thumb's success may help to provide a template for how to produce inventive, new work for the American theatre. Clubbed Thumb has always taken artistic risks in a theatrical landscape that is, for the most part, risk-averse, and it has not only survived doing so, but it has flourished. How has this small theatre with a modest operating budget and a boldly experimental aesthetic become one of the most influential institutions in the world of contemporary American theatre.

Forty artists who regularly work with Clubbed Thumb—mostly playwrights, but a few directors—asked Artistic Director and founder Maria Striar a series of questions aimed at understanding the phenomenon of Clubbed Thumb. The interlocutors were: Jenny Schwartz, Anne Washburn, Melissa Gibson, Adam Bock, Ethan Lipton, Jordan Harrison, Erin Courtney, Julia Jarcho, Gordon Dahlquist, Heidi Schreck, Peggy Stafford, Sylvan Oswald, Gregory Moss, Rinne Groff, Sheila Callaghan, Sarah Ruhl, Tasha M Gordon-Solmon, Lashea Delaney, Ariel Stess, Ken Greller, Daniel Regelski, Adam Blodgett, Kate Benson, Clare Barron, MJ Kaufman, Jaclyn Backhaus, Ryan King, Amina Henry, Sarah DeLappe, Cory Finley, Stephanie Delrosso, Jen Silverman, Kip Fagan, Hal Brooks, Anne Kauffman, Emma Griffin, Pamela MacKinnon, Portia Krieger, Ken Rus Schmoll, and Adam Greenfield. What follows are the answers to their questions. Each page is grouped around a theme and includes the questions that prompted Maria Striar's answers.

SOME HISTORY

ADAM GREENFIELD: Why the 90-minute rule?
ERIN COURTNEY: Clubbed Thumb has a strict no intermission rule, and so the plays you produce are generally 90 minutes and under. Why?
KATE BENSON: How did the idea for Summerworks come about?
SARAH DELAPPE: Why "Clubbed Thumb"?
PAM MACKINNON: Why do you only produce intermissionless plays? I know it once came from the logistical needs producing, but what do you like about the form?

When we put on our first play we wanted a company name, mostly to provide the illusion of institutionalism. Flipping through a reprint of a Victorian book of palmistry, we were amused by the Clubbed Thumb, which looked like a toe. We had only short-term plans for the name, and didn't give it too much thought (or read the description of what it represented) but our selection of it indicates our sensibilities, and at the time, our rigor.

•

The annual new play festival at college—undergraduates staffing Paula Vogel's grad students' plays—was a transformative experience for me. I'd been acting for some time, but this was a whole new world, both in terms of the peer creative community and the wild universes we inhabited. It's clearly a precursor.

•

Thus: Summerworks, which came out of having paid for a theatre for a month and having a 70-minute play that we could only perform 16 times. And being 27. We asked everyone we knew if they had something they wanted to work on—and they did! We had 8:00 o'clock, 10:00 o'clock, and often midnight shows. It's now (more) curated, supported, and the model has been honed, but in many ways the values are the same. At the time, the plays couldn't be longer than 90 minutes because we had to change over the sets. But we're attracted to work with alternative structures, and the act break is rarely a part of that—we're not doing "reel the story out, pop out a big gesture, break, carefully rebuild and reel it back in again" plays. And as our work is generally formally adventurous, most people are negotiating distance and engagement repeatedly within the play, so the gesture of a big separation in the middle is not as impactful. I've never had a great attention span, and sadly technology has reduced many people to my level—so a focused, uninterrupted piece of storytelling has become a popular, perhaps necessary idea.

Photo 2: *Amazons and Their Men* by Jordan Harrison, directed by Ken Rus Schmoll; 2008. Pictured (L to R): Rebecca Wisocky and Heidi Schreck. Photo: Carl Skutsch

•

Our initial audiences were friends and family, lovingly supporting us. They are still in our audience, but now they have expectations: that we will present something challenging, formally engaging (both in script and in production) and something—and above all, someone—new.

Sometimes instead of funny, strange and provocative I say unusual stories, unusually told.

•

When I read a play that I neither fully understand nor am sure actually works, but I want to figure it out, it's likely a CT play. It's already made me laugh a little and maybe moved me in a way I couldn't place; it surprised me, maybe wowed me with its craft and innovation. This play yearns to be a production, it needs actors and designers and directors—there are big gaps for them to fill. Its annoying cousin is a grab-bag of wacky, but a CT play has a beginning, middle, and end, and characters, and all that good play-play stuff.

•

I read as an actor—or more precisely, as an actress, and, form has always guided me at least as much as content: I understood my job from these words, these rhythms, this pattern on the page. I am drawn to plays in which language is the motor—human, American, character-driven language. Clubbed Thumb plays are determined by their humans and the way they speak. They are weird—but no weirder than we are. They are often very specific slices of people's lives, or through particular lenses: little Chekhov plays.

•

One of the things that I am reminded of when I go out to hear music is how transporting virtuosity is, how it both pulls you deeply in and pushes you outside to admire the skills that are causing your enchantment. I like a theatre that shows off the unique skills of its performers. Heightened language demands that, but so does comedy. You can fake drama. No faking funny.

•

I feel that our critical faculties are honed by engaging with challenging work (but only if we're willing to engage!) and that a sense of possibility, a crucial idealism, is fostered by new forms. I get depressed by predictable story-telling; we all know the ending, the ending is inevitable, things will always be thus. Being stirred into feeling AND thinking makes you more present. A play need not be a call to arms on a particular issue; the exercise of engagement is what's important, it is a way of meeting the world, and it is transferable.

ANNE KAUFFMAN: In planning a season, or what to develop, how much is based on taste, loyalty to writers, devotion to your mission, thinking about forwarding our field?
ARIEL STESS: What do you say to yourself before you pick up a script to motivate yourself to start it?
HEIDI SCHRECK: You are known for having fantastic, adventurous taste in new work. How do you find your funny, strange, and provocative new plays? How do know whether a play is a "Clubbed Thumb" play?
SYLVAN OSWALD: What are the worlds?

•

Summerworks, whatever its shortcomings, communicates a strong curatorial idea, perhaps more than a longer season does. People follow the programming of the Humana Festival and the explosion of downtown performance festivals in January without even seeing the work. Our season has a similar impact, albeit with a smaller reach. Our seasons don't look like anyone else's. We introduce at least one new voice to a larger community, and feature more work by and about women and young people than the average new play season. I hope it sends a message: a season can look like this, too. With our shortish runs in small spaces, we don't have to hedge our bets because someone doesn't have much experience or something might not quite work or be especially polished. We just give it our best shot, and that results in much of our best work.

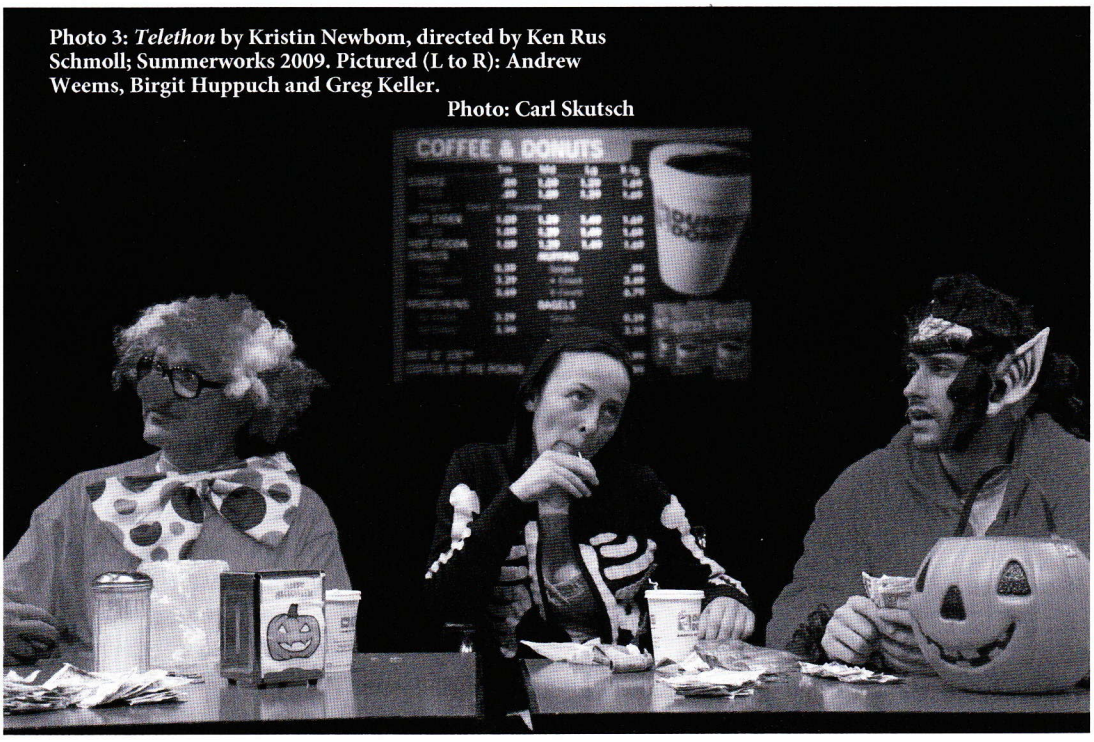


Photo 3: *Telethon* by Kristin Newbom, directed by Ken Rus Schmoll; Summerworks 2009. Pictured (L to R): Andrew Weems, Birgit Huppuch and Greg Keller.
Photo: Carl Skutsch

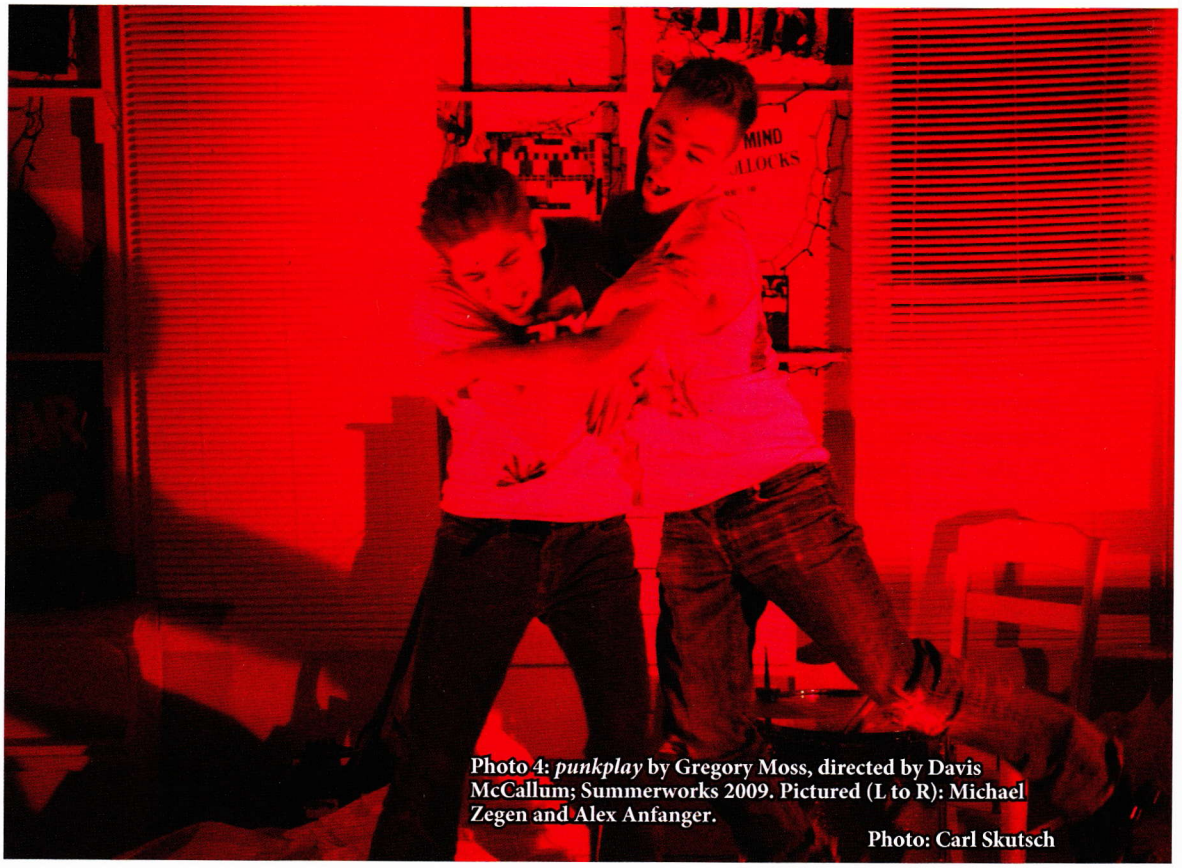


Photo 4: *punkplay* by Gregory Moss, directed by Davis McCallum; Summerworks 2009. Pictured (L to R): Michael Zegen and Alex Anfanger.
Photo: Carl Skutsch

In picking material to develop and produce, it's no effort to hew to our mission, but I do try to curate a range of work and careers, and to push forward the field, in my way. I'm not preoccupied with loyalty—I try to deal fairly, communicate politely and not make promises. I can only work on plays that seize me, and I do everyone a disservice when I don't.

•

When I read a play I can feel it in my mouth. I am usually the reader for auditions—I hope it is helpful to others; I know it helps me understand the play better (and it's totally fun). I'm a pretty good reader of plays, but goodness, I can miss things. So can the writer! I don't need a staged reading—it can be around a table, even just a couple of people reading all the parts. Listening to the writers in our groups read each others' work is a beautiful revelation.

•

There's this ridiculous notion about directors "getting out of the way of the play" as if being an artistic collaborator is an imposition. A new play director, to use a Ken Schmoll phrase, is in charge of infecting everyone with the disease of the play. The best are intensely responsive, constantly adjusting to, embracing and building with the specifics of their actors, spaces, scripts. They aren't afraid to have a vision, and equally, they aren't afraid to amend it, even throw it out, if that's what's called for.

•

THE PROCESS

CORY FINLEY: To what degree do you need to hear a play aloud to develop a feeling about it? What is evident on the page and what's not?
ETHAN LIPTON: What does a good new-play director do?
ANNE WASHBURN: Could you talk about how plays do or don't develop over the course of rehearsals?
EMMA GRIFFIN: What's your favorite moment in the process? From when you first read a play, to opening nigh—what's the best part?

The revision of a play that happens during a rehearsal process is so dependent on the particulars of that room. General discoveries occur as a consequence of getting a play on its feet for the first time—you shed over-determining language, for example—but it can be hard to sort out truths about the script and from the dynamics of the production-in-process. If a play has a major structural issue, it is unlikely to be solved in the rehearsal process. We try to workshop the script, and also design and staging, in advance of the rehearsal process, and let that be about finding the production, rather than fishing for script epiphanies.

•

My favorite moment in the process is the first run-through during tech and the conversations afterward. The first integration of all the collaborators, and the adrenal, visceral responding and adjusting—all toward this inchoate communal goal that we are determining as we go—I love it, It's heady, it's idealistic, it's (usually) everyone at their very best. It's unbelievably charismatic.

MJ Kaufman: I really enjoyed the panel after Jenny Schwartz's Summerworks show this year on civic engagement. How has Clubbed Thumb participated in the Lower East Side over the last 19 years? How has the theater community changed?
Gregory Moss: What changed for Clubbed Thumb after you lost your home at The Ohio?
Sarah Ruhl: Can you talk about the recent writers retreats and writers group you've set up and how they're structured and the impact they've had?
Kip Fagan: Would you ever want to have a permanent Clubbed Thumb performance space? Why or why not? How much or how little do you miss The Ohio Theatre?
Peggy Stafford: Hospitality is at the heart of Clubbed Thumb's approach to making new theatre. I wonder if you can speak to all the great snacks you provide, your sweet slobbering dog, the ample couch space available in your living room—basically the way in which you've opened your home to us—and how it has informed the work we make, the development of our plays, and how it has fostered and nurtured a special community of theatre artists who call Clubbed Thumb their artistic home.

HOME

Of course when I was in college I thought running a theatre meant having a fixed space. And for many years, we produced at the Ohio Theatre, an old sewing machine factory in Soho, and oh how I loved it. It was gigantic, which made all kinds of things possible, its architecture did half your designing work for you, its decaying grandeur was just the right envelope for our formally alternative work, edges deliberately not sanded down. And its giant loading dock doors, thrown open, were inviting, but a few feet off the ground—you had to commit and go in to truly see the mysteries it contained. It was our producing home for a decade, but it wasn't ever all ours.

•

Anne Washburn proposed a writers group comprised of Clubbed Thumb alumni about a year after the Ohio was closed, at a time when I felt especially displaced, and I/Clubbed Thumb was struggling in a number of ways. Eight writers and a handful of directors, designers, an actor would meet every two or three weeks over the course of a season in order to help give some structure for finishing commissions and other projects. It came to fill a great need in me, one that I had scarcely identified. I needed a connection to our artistic past—my peers, after all. I wanted to feel engaged with their work and their lives, and wanted to support them, even though my funds were as limited as ever. The group has similar meaning, filling an emotional as well as practical needs for the people who come to it, and it has spawned offshoots: we have a retreat in the summer, and we have an early career group whose members are chosen and mentored by the mid-career writers. In fact we have two now. We've produced work that has come out of both, and there's a cohesion to our programming and community that feels right.

•

What I've learned is that home isn't a place, it's a value. Not ever having one place of our own has meant that we've created an ethic of hominess—wherever we are, whether its virtual or actual, we treat like we are hosts—we invite, we feed, we libate, we share. That's in everything that we do, it's incredibly important to me. We've always been resourceful, but the creation of that group at a meager time taught me to redefine what those resources are.

•

When we started in 1996 there were a ton more theatres, including many places where you could put up your work for a box office split; most have disappeared. The downtown theatre community is largely strapped for cash, but those of us who have been at it for a while and see how much harder it is for young artists now are building some sort of support system for the next generation.

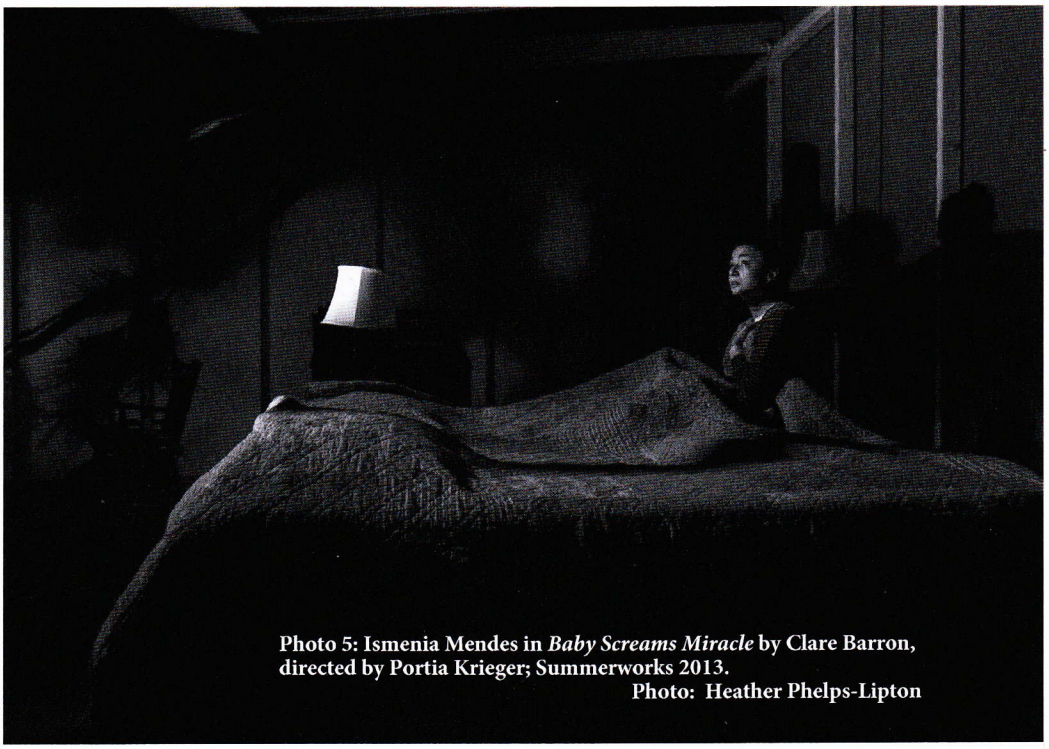


Photo 5: Ismenia Mendes in *Baby Screams Miracle* by Clare Barron, directed by Portia Krieger; Summerworks 2013.
Photo: Heather Phelps-Lipton

WHOSE STORY GETS TOLD

JEN SILVERMAN: What are your thoughts on the relationship between live theatre and acts of violence? And—what do you think about representations of women engaging in violence (vs men)?

JACKLYN BACKHAUS: As someone whose company probably leads the pack in championing theatrical careers for female writers/artistic directors/ administrators/ directors/actors, i'm very interested in your opinions on the parity issue.

SYLVAN OSWALD: And what of roles for women? Long a central part of what CT requests of a script. How have these roles changed over the years?

SYLVAN OSWALD: Who are the humans in Clubbed Thumb plays?

SARAH DELAPPE: How consciously do you look for diversity, of all shapes and sizes, when eyeballing a play?

My experience, especially as a young actress, was of a paucity of female roles, and of those few were anything I relished inhabiting. This is a primary motivator for me. The ladies are never going to advance unless they are in the stories, unless they are players in the stories, beings-in-themselves instead of just beings-for-others. And I want the ladies to advance! But also the ladies' stories are less known, and therefore, interesting to me. There are fewer expectations of what that story is, and therefore how it should be told, which also makes it so interesting. Work in which female characters are merely currency, conduits toward the stories of men, is bad art, lazy writing, a disappointing failure of imagination—these are tedious and creaky old tropes. Repeating them is perpetuating a pernicious lie: that some people matter more, are more interesting, and the others should carry their water, in life as well as in narrative structure. Boo!

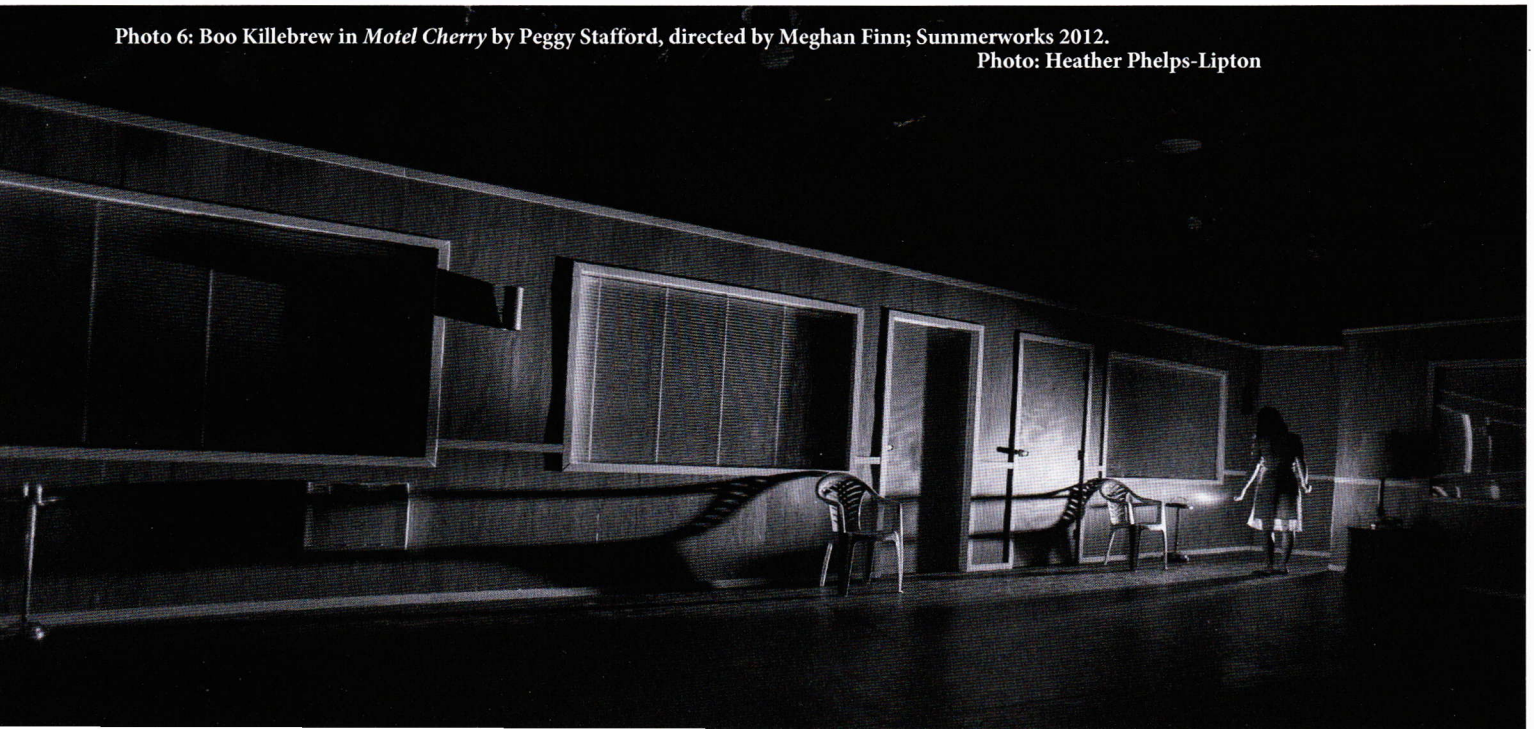
•

I've had friends who work at (certain) institutions at which the principal curators are men who tell me that work by/about women doesn't get programmed because it fails to capture the curatorial imagination—with no recognition that their sex is filtering that imagination. So yeah, we need more women in leadership, and where the money is—on the executive boards. The recent wave of trans artists is complicating this landscape in an interesting way—when we throw the binarism of gender up in the air, and can't reduce ourselves to two sides—we may all to have to – get to – just be people.

•

We may be golden on the gender front, and we do a good job of having people of all backgrounds in our plays, but our track record of producing work principally about people of color is inadequate. In one attempt to address this, last year we asked that, in addition to more direct prompts, an aspect of our commission be to write for a heterogeneous cast with no dominant group and within which the majority of the main characters were not from the same cultural background as the writer. The results were interesting, and this will be a feature of the next commissioning cycle for sure. I'm more concerned with who is in the play than the identity of the playwright. But—people will generally write more towards people like themselves, and people's friends and followers are also usually somewhat like themselves. If you want a diverse audience, you have to make diverse work with diverse artists. You can't force non-theatre goers of any background to go to your play, but you can make your theatre a place where artists and audiences of different backgrounds feel—and are—invited.

Photo 6: Boo Killebrew in *Motel Cherry* by Peggy Stafford, directed by Meghan Finn; Summerworks 2012.
Photo: Heather Phelps-Lipton



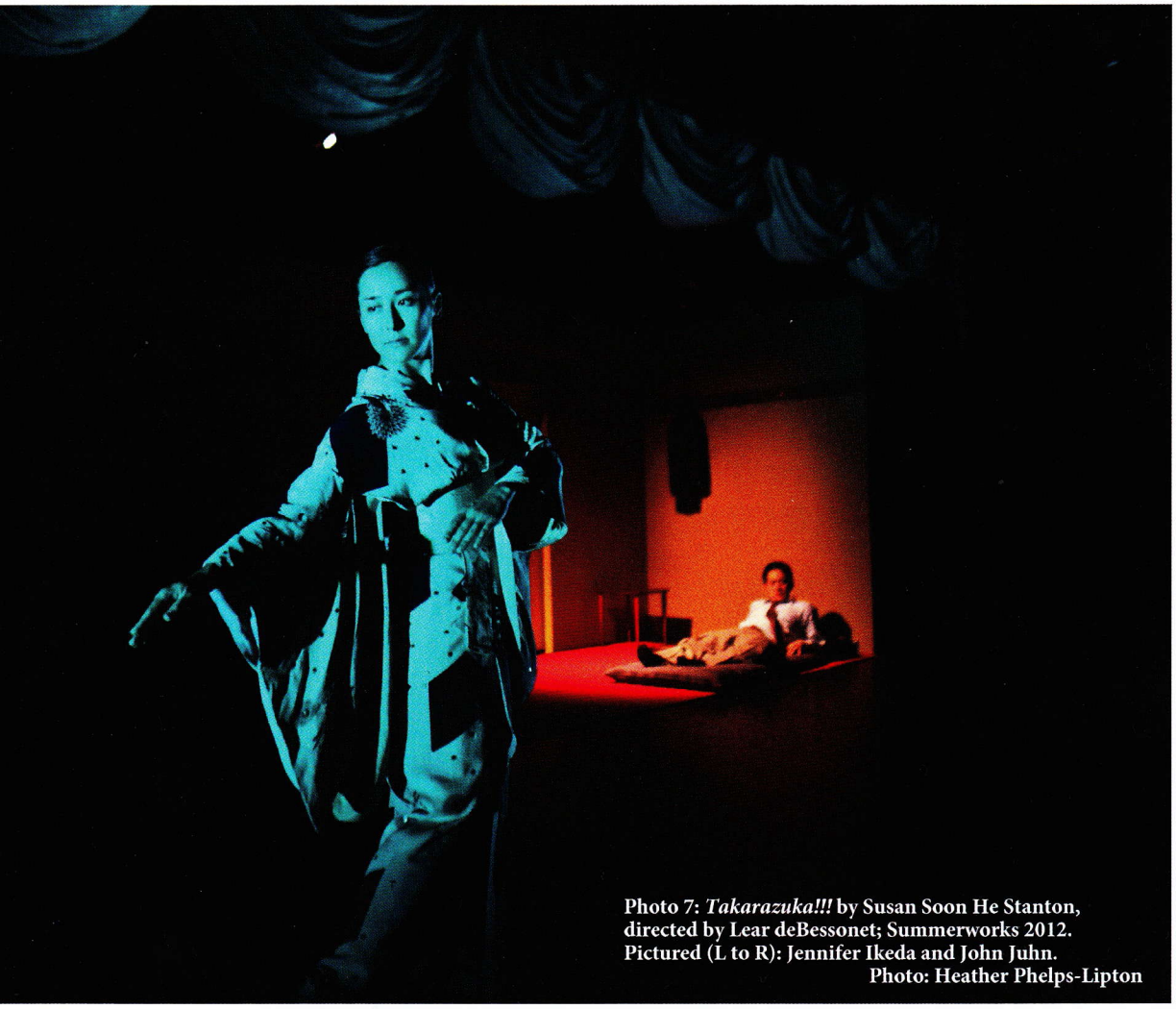


Photo 7: *Takarazuka!!!* by Susan Soon He Stanton, directed by Lear deBessonet; Summerworks 2012. Pictured (L to R): Jennifer Ikeda and John Juhn. Photo: Heather Phelps-Lipton

I am always delighted to see continuing relationships that I put together, or whose nascent collaboration I helped incubate. Sometimes people were just in a festival together, or saw someone's work for the first time under our aegis. We don't pay too much, so building creative relationships that will endure is important.

•

Listen, notwithstanding my feminist agenda, my nightmare is that Clubbed Thumb will be my funhouse mirror, and that all our plays will address the banalities of my now middle-aged life. Writers 20 years my junior live in a different world, and use different tools to describe it, which is exciting to me. I take special delight in giving someone that first shot. I am a different artistic director/producer for every project. I am a different, probably deeper resource for playwrights and directors who are early in their careers than for those who have been working for as long as I have. It's quite precious to preside over someone's first professional production—you give them the best support, advice and collaborators possible, but you have to let them—and sometimes make them—own the process.

•

I am proud of our book of plays, which has brought us artists from all over the country. The year after it came out we had a couple of interns from North Dakota who found us because of it. When playwrights tell me they've gotten a bunch of productions because if it, or that it was a source of inspiration to them I'm all the more thrilled. We are trying to get another anthology together, but it gets lost in the cracks. We're coming up on our 20th, let's say we'll do it by then.

PRIDE

LaShea Delaney: The Clubbed Thumb anthology of 7 plays was so inspiring to me as a developing writer, I'm wondering if you have plans to put together another one?
Sheila Callaghan: Why do you continue to support young theatre artists? I realize this is broad but I'm genuinely interested.
Rinne Becker: Now that you are such a busy theatre-producing maven, do you think you'll ever find the time, energy, mental space, and whatever other nouns would be necessary in order for you to tread the boards again as an actor? What is the connection between your wonderful skills as an actor and your work as a producer? Is it a similar skill set or completely distinct?

Fundraising is a killer. Worrying about money, thinking up ways to get it, who to get it from, enacting those schemes—it consumes so much, actually and psychically. And it's not just the anxiety, and the pariah-like behavior spurred by end-of-year goals—it's that you don't always make them. And then you live with the consequences—debt on your books, which will impact future fundraising, cutting back when you are already close to the bone, not giving raises to people who are already underpaid. Blah. Blah. Blah. There are times when I have thought, when I think, I can't bear this anymore. And there are times when I've struggled with other things—internal relationships in the organization, shows that went horribly wrong—when it has not felt worth it. But I want to leave on top! So I put my nose to that grindstone again...and besides the money stuff, my job is the best and I am privileged to have it.

•

I regret being a hothead. For the most part I keep my cool now, or I blow it in someplace where the impact is contained, but in earlier days I let frustrating circumstances get to me. I'd like to take that back. Never helped anyone or anything to have a tizzy. There were times when we were kind of wacko about minor budget overruns. Basically, I regret any time I lost perspective—or didn't have any to begin with—and was small-minded. There are shows that were painful. Sometimes there was nothing to be done. But in some cases, yeah—I should have put my foot down, or made decisions earlier, or made someone else make decisions earlier. Or I should have intervened, or not intervened, or monitored a situation more closely. There were difficult conversations I should have insisted on having. I regret all of these instances and have learned mightily from them. The mistake I know I'll make again? The leap of faith that in hindsight was a bad call. But in hindsight! It's my job – it's any artistic director's job, but CT's in particular—to just... jump. I mean, if we won't who will?

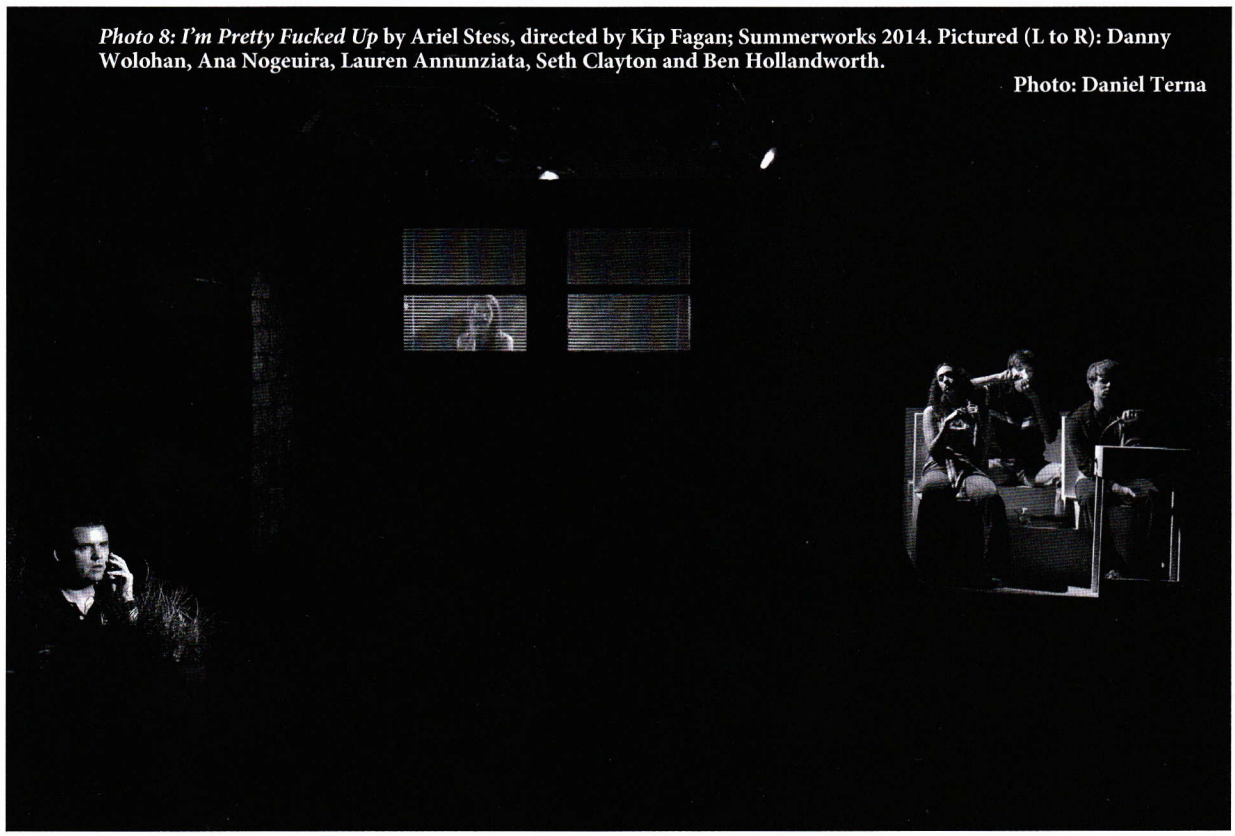


Photo 8: I'm Pretty Fucked Up by Ariel Stess, directed by Kip Fagan; Summerworks 2014. Pictured (L to R): Danny Wolohan, Ana Nogeuira, Lauren Annunziata, Seth Clayton and Ben Hollandworth.

Photo: Daniel Terna

KEN GRELLER: What's a mistake you've made more than once?
HAL BROOKS: What singular achievement are you most proud of, that most exemplifies what you are aspiring to do with clubbed thumb? Any regrets?
KEN GRELLER: What was your greatest failure and how did you learn from it?
TASHA GORDON-SOLOMON: What is one thing you wish you'd learned/understood earlier in your career?
KEN GRELLER: What's a mistake you think you'll make in the future?
JENNY SCHWARTZ: Have you ever almost thrown in the towel? If yes, why? And why didn't you?

THE HARD STUFF

ADVICE

Cory Finley: What role if any does a new play's formatting on the page play in your feelings reading it?
Ryan King: If someone were starting a small company devoted to new and adventurous work, what piece of advice would you give them?
Stephanie Del Rosso: What's a bad habit that you think a lot of young/emerging writers have?
Ethan Lipton: Elipsis or Dash?

Learn from your mistakes, and your triumphs. Talk about them. Cop to them. Think about what you could do differently, even if it went well. Think about what your goals and resources are, and if there is some other way you can shuffle things to get you more efficiently to what you really want. Don't be afraid to throw things out the window. Address conflict, no matter how excruciating. Practice saying: I am sorry, I made a mistake, You did great, and How are things going (not as one sentence, although...). Thank people for their contributions, whether that means a check or a script, coming to your work, auditioning for you, and even if its their job, you are paying them and everyone else is telling them they are great. Respect the calendar: even the richest company in the world can't manufacture time. Plan well, and make timely decisions or there will be consequences.

•

Playwrights: Formatting is an opportunity! Names—of characters, scenes, the play itself—help define your world. Font, the ratio of white space to black space, alignment, using the shape of the words on the page to indicate beats, pauses and silence—help your readers get the flow, rhythm, tone of a text, and most importantly, to borrow Jordan Harrison's phrase, to signify authorial control. If your work is structurally unusual, if your characters are inarticulate or their voices are off-kilter, guide your reader to assume intent. Poor spelling, on the other hand, can undermine trust in a writer—first impressions matter.

•

But don't throw your plays to the far-corners and wait for the letter telling you that your play is loved and will be produced. Take the time to figure out who YOU want to work with, and to find out who they are, what they do, if they are a good match, then send them your work and cultivate a relationship. And while that is developing—and it will take a little while—put up your plays with your friends. You become an artist with your peers. Oh, and proofread.

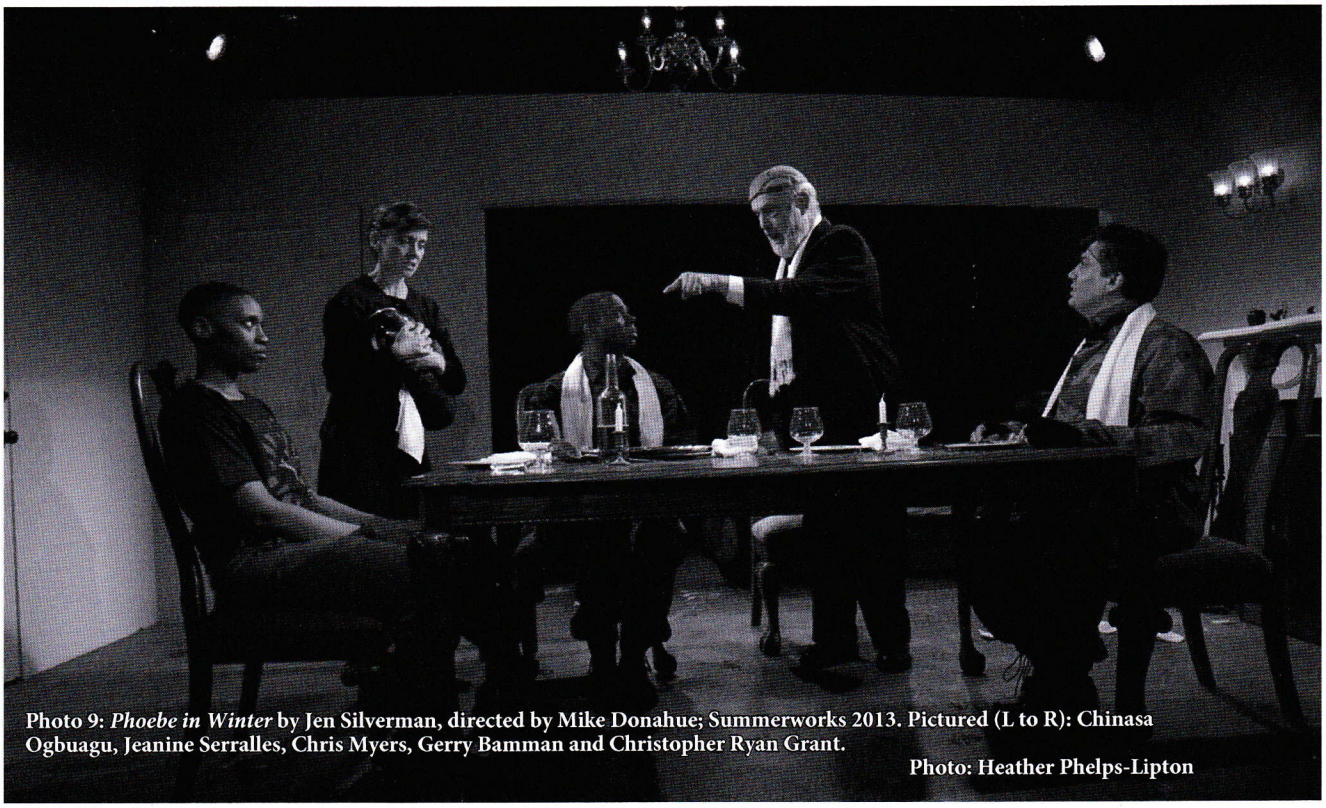


Photo 9: *Phoebe in Winter* by Jen Silverman, directed by Mike Donahue; Summerworks 2013. Pictured (L to R): Chinasa Ogbuagu, Jeanine Serralles, Chris Myers, Gerry Bamman and Christopher Ryan Grant.
Photo: Heather Phelps-Lipton

Photo 10: *Dot* by Kate E. Ryan, directed by Anne Kauffman; Summerworks 2010. Pictured (L to R): Mike Iveson, Kate Hopkins, Lynne McCollough and Mary Shultz.

Photo: Carl Skutsch

Even as a child playing make-believe, I couldn't imagine past college, and that was very approximate. I have never been good at imagining far into the future, and it's a great failure. To compensate for my short-sightedness I respond intensely to what's actually around me, which has made me a good producer of new work and certainly resourceful.

•

Had I a bottomless budget, I would put the whole Clubbed Thumb community on a good salary, with benefits, locked in for ten years. If we—including CT—could be liberated from a basic level of financial anxiety, get back that time and energy—the resulting creativity would astound. Barring that, I would host year-round Summerworks in theatres all over town, with $20 tickets (unless you don't show up, then the price doubles—each time! We'll keep track!) The runs would be open-ended, and there'd be eating and drinking and chatter and young people in lobbies across the city, before and after every show. Big Rock Candy Mountain!

•

Clubbed Thumb was a bit of an accident. But now that we've been around this long, and the landscape is that much more difficult—I have a deep need to ensure that Clubbed Thumb will be a home for all theatre artists, not just playwrights, well into the future. And that it is a transferable institution, which will flourish when I leave to pursue my passion for artisanal butter making.

THE FUTURE

Tasha Gordon-Solomon: You get unlimited funds for one season of programming (or month, summer, year...) what do you do?

Ken Russ Schmoll: When you imagine Clubbed Thumb ten years from now, what do you see? Twenty years from now?

Ariel Stess: When you've had a theatre overload, what do you do to cure yourself?

Melissa Gibson: In 1996, what was the dream you dreamed for Clubbed Thumb and how has it changed, if it's changed?