

## Writers' bloc

A fearless new generation of Off-Broadway playwrights establishes downtown beachheads **By Mac Wellman**

**Y**es theater is a game, and yes that game is rigged, and yes everyone knows it. While we're speaking in threes, the three (unacknowledged) rules of the American theater: Aim low, shit floats, and the squeaky wheel gets the grease. All this, as I've said, everyone knows, yet none knows to shun the heaven that leads us to this hell. ♦ However. ♦ American theater always manages to reinvent itself at the worst of all possible times. The best of our new theater practitioners

have already begun to imagine a set of goals and procedures in which perception requires no other justification than the beauty that entitles it. In this dramatic universe, theatrical high jinks are their own reward; and so it is with the new plays one is beginning to encounter these days in New York.

Like I say, how this is, I do not know. But it may well be that just as the conventional realism of the second half of the 20th century has devolved into meretricious self-parody, remarkable new kinds of theater writing have begun to appear in these States. Quizzical, skeptical even of the idea (if not the fact) of reality itself. This is neither the arch and histrionic skepticism of the absurdists nor the equally histrionic cynicism of what passes for postmodernism. For the best of this new work is more intellectually and emotionally grounded than these earlier movements. Grounded in a paradoxical lack of groundedness. I am talking about plays that are based on meticulous realist craft, but that do not rest with conventional and tired realist homilies. Plays that do not attempt to reassure us that what is taken for granted (by the previous realists) is all there is. Still, given the prevalence of corporate rigidity and staleness in the boardrooms of American theater, the questions remains: Why the optimism?

**ITEM** Consider the excellence of this year's plays at the Humana Festival: new work by Naomi Iizuka, Kirsten Greenidge, Rinne Groff, Melanie Marnich, and Jordan Harrison, not to mention the surprise hit, *After Ashley*, by Gina Gionfriddo. Now, Marnich and Groff are both highly talented veterans. Greenidge and Harrison are younger writers of obvious and unusual talent, and Gionfriddo is a dark horse whose play seems likely to move on. Harrison and Gionfriddo are graduates of Paula Vogel's estimable Brown playwriting program, as are Sarah Ruhl, this year's Susan Smith Blackburn Award winner, and Adam Bock, whose *Five Flights* appeared at the Rattlestick this year after a two-year run in San Francisco. Interestingly, Bock attributes the success of the Brown program to Paula Vogel's emphasis on formal rigor, a concern that animates much of the exciting new playwriting one finds downtown.

## OBIES

**ITEM** Clubbed Thumb, the creation of Meg McCary and Maria Striar (both Brown and later UCSD grads), has a splendid summer series, which has presented the work of Lisa D'Amour (Obie winner for *Nita and Zita*), Scott Adkins, Ann Marie Healy, Gordon Dahlquist, and Gionfriddo, and has produced Erin Courtney's *Demon Baby* this season. Courtney also studied at Brown, and recently received her M.F.A. from the

Brooklyn College program started by the legendary Jack Gelber (where I currently labor). Clubbed Thumb also produced Groff's play, *Inky*. Groff is also a performer with Elevator Repair Service, and was a member of a remarkable class of NYU playwrights that includes Madeleine George, a founder with Rob Handel of 13P (see below), as well as Madelyn Kent, Eduardo Andino, Maja Mikhailovich, Gary Winter, and Anne Washburn. Len Jenkin, Martin Epstein, and Janet Nepris are among the notable playwriting teachers at NYU.



Triskaidekaphilia:  
13P assembles for its big close-up.

**ITEM** The Pataphysics Workshops, started up by Washburn and Winter at the Flea a few years ago, have been sparking useful collaborations. These intensive two-week sessions tend to attract a slightly older and more committed type of writer, generally New York based. Jeffrey M. Jones, Erik Ehn, Karen Finley, Charles L. Mee, and the remarkable Maria Irene Fornes have regularly conducted these workshops.

**ITEM** 13P (short for 13 Playwrights, Inc.) has just begun operations with a fine production of Washburn's *The Internationalist* at the Culture Project, directed by Ken Rus Schmoll (who also directed Courtney's *Demon Baby*). 13P is of particular note because it has been created by playwrights for playwrights on behalf of plays—playwrights who see no point in the whining endemic to the Theater of the Unproduced. Thus, each of the 13 will receive a full production before 2010, and each is expected to contribute manfully to the others' shows. A fine and intelligent idea in this day of institutional blandness. 13P is made up of Sheila Callaghan, Erin Courtney, Madeleine George, Rob Handel, Ann Marie Healy, Julia Jarcho, Young Jean Lee, Winter Miller, Sarah Ruhl, Kate E. Ryan, Lucy Thurber, Anne Washburn, and Gary Winter. These playwrights remain unawed by the difficulty of pursuing an aggressively non-corporate, non-careerist path.

**ITEM** Emily DeVoti, another NYU playwright, and her husband, Theodore Hamm, have started *The Brooklyn Rail*, an excellent new monthly arts and politics magazine that contains serious and comprehensive articles by and about many of the writers mentioned, as well as excerpts from their current work.

**ITEM** The Flea Theater, under Jim Simpson and Carol Ostrow, pursues both mainstream work (A.R. Gurney's hit play *Mrs. Farnsworth*) and a daring new play festival (with work by Kate Ryan, Gary Winter, Sheila Callaghan, Kevin Oakes, Charlotte Meehan, and Will Eno). Similarly, Daniel Aukin's Soho Rep has an impressive Writer/Director lab, which has developed work by many of these writers; Soho Rep has also given strong productions to Melissa James Gibson's *[sic]* and *Suitcase*, and Young Jean Lee's *The Appeal*.

**ITEM** Over the last few years the Little Theater at Tonic, started by Judy Elkan and Kristen Kosmas, and currently run by Jeffrey M. Jones and Kate Ryan, has featured a monthly series of works in progress.

What is striking about all this activity, even rendered in a cursory and incomplete fashion, is how much overlap there is between groups, whether it's workshops (as in Pataphysics) or productions (as in 13P and Clubbed Thumb). Even a collective like the Civilians, which was created by some extraordinarily talented actors (like Jenny Morris and Colleen Werthman) and equally talented directors (Steve Cosson and Anne Kauffman), provides new venues for this fresh writing. Cross-fertilization is everywhere. Indeed, the complex layering of association, what Edward Said calls "affiliation," is typical of the current scene—if scene it can be properly called. Rather, there seems to be a dozen or so scenes, related but not replicates, permeable and fluid for the most part. Individuals move in and about this loose cosmology as interest, talent, energy, and artistic impulse dictate. This type of theater community doesn't seem likely to morph into a Performance Group, Open Theater, or Wooster Group. The real estate situation—and the weird financial paradox

of a super-rich New York with a young theater movement whose poverty seems to be its sole inheritance—have made such fixed structures virtually impossible. Curiously, the writing programs in the area have replaced bohemia as places where the young and adventurous can mix and share ideas for a truer, more vital theater.

What impresses this observer is that these groups seem on the verge of making a truly creative community in which the right kind of competitiveness and conversation stimulate individuals to reach deeper into themselves, work harder, and go further. My generation of theater writers, by contrast, despite some attempts by a Happy Few, has remained pretty much a collection of suspicious, envious isolatoes—unwilling even to contemplate, much less formulate, common goals that involve any aesthetic discussion beyond the purely professional. Thus we remain at odds, loners and careerists of varying talent and success, and of an unclear profile, artistically speaking. The generation now hitting its stride may be able to do more. We will all be better off if it is able to pull it off. The rigidity will perhaps always be there, but the sham will be far more obvious if there is some kind of real alternative, several miles downtown of the land of the yellow playbill.

Mac Wellman was the recipient of the 200 Obie Award for Lifetime Achievement.