

## WRITERS' EQUITY

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI

In 1840s Manhattan, a notorious female abortionist throws a housewarming party, which features drinking, dancing, and a pair of female pugilists dressed in corsets and velveteen knickers. Meanwhile, in medieval Japan, a distraught noblewoman seizes a lute and croons a Carolina blues lament. And on a frozen lake in the wilds of Michigan, a spinster, a blind man, and a duplicitous coed narrate an epistolary romance. The locales may seem exotic and the stories bizarre, but for Clubbed Thumb it's simply the roster for Summerworks 2005, the company's 10th annual new-play festival, which opens May 4 at the Ohio Theater with works by Ethan Lipton, Honour Kane, and Ann Marie Healy.

It's unusual for a downtown producing organization—particularly one without a permanent theatrical home—to have lasted so long or offered such excellent work. Clubbed Thumb materialized in 1996 when actors, best friends, and newly minted MFAs Meg MacCary and Maria Striar arrived in New York and, frustrated with the roles available to them, decided to produce Wallace Shawn's *Marie and Bruce*. They rented the Ludlow Street space the House of Candles (a/k/a the fire marshal's bane). Equity rules prevented them from putting on the play every night, and as it was quite a short work, late nights were unused as well. "There were so many people in the same position," recalls MacCary, "active, eager people who had moved to New York right after grad school, who were really itching to do something." So MacCary and Striar put out a call to trusted friends and soon had two or three shows running every night. The festival model stuck.

The name Clubbed Thumb stems from a Victorian book of palmistry owned by Striar. According to the tenets of chirosophy, those possessed of the stumpy digit are often quarrelsome, but also superb craftspeople. Both qualities—the slight obstreperousness and the meticulous artistry—seem to be ingredients in Clubbed Thumb's success. As frequent collaborator director Pam MacKinnon

says, "They are two very strong-willed creative women, and they're both very good readers of plays. They're certainly not always in agreement, but they're able to yell and scream and kick and yet continue conversations and negotiate which plays they want to produce." The result: An impressive rota of plays by downtown notables such as Rinne Groff, Adam Bock, Lisa D'Amour, and Gina Gionfriddo. But MacCary and Striar not only determine the plays, they also assign directors and designers. They've a talent for choosing collaborators who make shoestring budgets look like endless endowments.



Photograph by Cary Conover

Summer sisters: Striar and MacCary

Actually, a recent bequest has made those shoestrings thicker—an anonymous donor has provided funds for a \$15,000 biennial commission grant. The grant asks that applicants adhere to the usual Clubbed Thumb parameters (less than 90 minutes long, "funny, strange, provocative," a parity of male and female roles) while also considering "the relationships between truth, power, history, and personal responsibility." Erin Courtney, perhaps the company's most frequently produced playwright, says, "They put the playwright in a very primary creative role and this grant really shows that." MacKinnon agrees. "They recognize that plays aren't born overnight and that they're not born in a café sitting in front of a laptop, that they require many months of attention from an artistic community."

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While Clubbed Thumb's commitment to playwrights and the writing process has remained constant over the years, the decade has seen a few changes. "We have a little bit more money every year," explains MacCary. "We can pay everybody a little bit more and we can also hire more support staff, a production manager, people to build stuff—thank God because they're better at it than we were—but it's still all hands on deck. We'll still be covered in paint midnight before the show opens." "Actually we do go home by midnight now," says Striar. "Yes," admits MacCary, "we have a rule. We go home by midnight now."

For more information about Summerworks 2005 call 212-802-8007 or visit [clubbedthumb.org](http://clubbedthumb.org).

