

Maria Striar Summerworks 2009

A nytheatre voices cyber-interview

Maria Striar is Producing Artistic Director of Clubbed Thumb, the company presenting *Summerworks 2009*. She is also a founder of the company. In addition, Maria is also a director and an actor having appeared or directed in several of the company's plays. She has, also, worked regionally and in various local venues. This interview was conducted by playwright/performer Chris Harcum. [Photo by Carl Skutsch] Learn more about [punkplay](#).



Please give us the origin myth of Clubbed Thumb.

Clubbed Thumb started when classmates from acting grad school, tired of waiting for others to provide opportunity, decided to do a play. But who would put it on? At the time Meg MacCary (who until recently was my co-director), her boyfriend, Joe (who did some sound design) and our friend Jay (who, when not finishing law school, designed lights) and I played bridge together, fairly frequently and fairly drunkenly. We thought we could produce that play: why not?

We needed a name for some paperwork. We didn't like naming things, and feared the Scylla and Charybdis of The Whimsical Pantaloon Players and The Schroedinger's Cat Ensemble. We were in what I liked to call my library, speculatively announcing all the nouns: "The Chair Theater Company? Mouseturd Theater?" Meg flipped through a re-print of a Victorian book of palmistry, stopped at a drawing under which it read "clubbed thumb". We both emitted Beavis and Butthead-esque laughs. And that was that.

"Funny, strange, and provocative" are used on your website to describe plays you are interested in producing. How do you know that's what you have in your hands when you get a new submission?

A Clubbed Thumb play has a motor in it. It takes you along, even when you don't understand it. A Clubbed Thumb play presents problems that have to be resolved in production, good juicy problems. It makes you laugh, and then wonder if that was an appropriate response. Its characters are communicated through well-observed and original, crackling dialogue—you can feel it in your mouth, and you really want to hear it.

What are some good trends you are seeing in playwriting these days? What are some trends you find inexplicable?

If I see it often enough to think it's a trend, I'm probably not going to think it's a good thing, to be honest. But there's a lot of really adventurous writing out there, covering a large range of subjects, and telling different kinds of stories.

People seized (understandably) on 9/11, Katrina, and more recently, torture as subjects that we as a society needed to grapple with, and I've read a lot of plays on these issues. It brought out a number of people who had something to say, but weren't really interested in the craft of playwriting. I think these are profoundly important topics, which can and should yield compelling, and more importantly, nuanced plays.

What is Summerworks?

The first Summerworks was a result of renting a theater for a month. Our play was short, so we asked our friends if they had projects in the works, and lo and behold: three different shows a night, most nights, for a month. Afterward we thought "well, that was kind of cool" and so we just kept doing it. With the progression of time and the accrual of resources, the festival is now far more curated and supported. I think of it as a truncated season. In a nutshell: it opens with a messy, fun theater event/party, and features three new plays, fully rehearsed, fully mounted and running for a week each. Nothing is shopped in, the playwrights are involved in the process and everything is a NYC if not world premiere. Our first year it was held in July (hence the name) but most of the time it has been in June. One year it was in April, and we felt compelled to call it Springworks. It snowed on load-in. Boo.

Tell us about the plays you will have running in Summerworks this year and what people will be missing at your theater if they spend the summer watching the Star Trek movie over and over?

We cannot offer CGI or climate control. But you can drink during our shows. And... you sit feet away from people who not only are performing live, but are still figuring things out, and you are part of that. It's not performance number 3,017 of a ten-year run. The people working on these plays are fantastic—some right out of college, some Off-Broadway legends, and a bunch of newly minted Obie winners. The plays themselves: *Telethon* and *punkplay* are already cult classics—they've never been professionally performed, but they have rabid fans. Madeleine George's play is so new it doesn't yet have that following, but she herself does. There's a lot of excitement and anticipation around these plays. The play descriptions on our site give a good idea of the individual character of each piece.

Do you feel there are things in common with the three plays you are producing or do they all stand alone?

It's a new play pupu platter!

What does a Producing Artistic Director do?

A Producing Artistic Director gets the pleasure of making the major artistic decisions and the burden of bringing them to fruition. This involves everything from raising all the money to taking out the trash. In between, you get to choose the plays, and the artists, design programming and all that good stuff.

A lot of plays developed under your organization have gone on to be published, win prizes, or be produced at some other great theaters. What's the secret?

I advocate as best I can for plays and playwrights with publishers, prize-givers, other theaters, etc. I was kind of obsessed with putting out a book of our plays, and approached Playscripts about it, which resulted in our anthology and a number of acting editions being printed. I'm pleased to say that many productions have occurred since the book was released.

But really the secret is: they are good plays. You can tell when you read them. That's why we put them on, that's why they get printed, that's why they get prizes.

Is there a moment that sticks out to you from the plays you've produced as the most startling, possibly a moment that you didn't initially see in the script?

We try to pick scripts that invite a rich theatrical collaboration. So I'm constantly surprised by what happens in production. A recent example is last summer's production of *Gentleman Caller*, in which all the sound—from underscoring, incidental effects and major events—was created live on stage by two exceptional percussionists. The script contained several scenes in which the protagonists' home was rattled by vicious bombing campaigns, and the drummers just went to town. The effect was both extremely visceral and aesthetically pleasing. I certainly didn't imagine that solution, and I can't imagine a better one.

Clubbed Thumb has been kicking since 1996. What would you like to have happen between now and Summerworks 2022?

I would like Summerworks to keep on going but with greater financial resources. "Necessity is the mother of invention" might as well be tattooed on the back of my neck. Economy and efficiency are an aesthetic and kind of a moral value to me, and Clubbed Thumb is really good at wrestling with the challenges posed by limited means. That being said, there are certain challenges that, at this point, are just realities of poverty and contending with them squanders human resources best spent on something more elevated. But most importantly—I want to pay people a living wage. I HATE not being able to do that.

I hope that Summerworks will continue to be a showcase for artists who are young and unestablished, which means it will depend more and more on younger people taking the lead within the organization.

The floor is yours. Give the readers practical wisdom about being in the arts right now.

The current financial situation makes this a difficult time for large organizations and small—and for everyone else. Which means we are all scrutinizing everything we do and the way we do it, and looking for better solutions. Necessity is the mother of invention, right? Ultimately, I think we will look back and realize that this was a great time, when all kinds of exciting changes happened. But right now, we're all a little too nervous about the day-to-day to see it that way.

Having no money can free you up to dream beyond pragmatics, and to think about what you really want to do. And sometimes you see that goal is actually within reach.