

# THEATERSPEAK

WHAT THEATER ARTISTS ARE THINKING, CREATING AND TALKING ABOUT.

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## Clubbed Thumb's Maria Striar Talks About The Development of Sheila Callaghan's Interesting New Play, Roadkill Confidential



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### **How did Clubbed Thumb get to know Sheila Callaghan's work?**

I saw a play called Kate Crackernuts that was at The Flea many years ago. I think Emily Morse from New Dramatists suggested that we go together to see the play, and, shortly thereafter, I got in

touch with Sheila and asked her if she had anything she was working on that might be right for us. We have a program called New Play Boot Camp which is a four day script revision workshop/intensive and Sheila brought in a play. I think it was the fall of 2003 that we worked on it and then we went on to produce it the subsequent summer. Our cornerstone programming is a summer festival called Summerworks and we did that play in that.

She is a pretty insane re-writer. I've never seen someone so unsentimental about their own language and be able to create new language right there on the spot. She would x out passages and come up with new ones. She would rename characters and even renamed the play right before we made the postcard. She's a fun person to work with because she has such a strong voice. She takes in so many stimuli that if you're near or around her, working with her, you're really part of the brain-pool that she is tapping into. That's a lot of fun, obviously. So we worked together on that play which is called Crumble (Lay me down, Justin Timberlake) That play is actually in an anthology of our plays and is done a lot.

One of the really interesting things about Sheila is that she is produced a great deal by both schools and independent companies across the country. When I was writing some grants for this particular production, I did some research, and I was startled by just how many productions there were of all of her shows, but especially that one. So somewhere in the beginning of 2006, we started talking about commissioning a play. That was another crazy brainstorming session. I have a really good friend who runs the Center for the Humanities at the CUNY Grad Center, and I think I went with her to a symposium on (artist) Steven Kurtz, so somehow stuff like that came up in our conversation (with Sheila).

**You knew at that point you were going to commission her?**

We knew that we were going to apply for a commission through NYSCA, and she was rattling around ideas of things that she was interested in. We just built from there and applied for the commission - which we got - and over the course of the next year or two, bits of the play would emerge. We would have many, many readings of the play here, in this living room, as it started to take shape, until we finally started to have more developed workshops. We did one at the Playwrights Center with Polly Karl in Minneapolis, Playwrights Horizons, and we did a few of our own as we started to set aside more funds to support our own commissions, then, in January of this year, we did a long workshop.

Initially, we were talking about doing this in a raw space - kind of the opposite of 3LD in many ways- so we did it in an empty retail space through the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership in Flatbush, which, although had been promised, had neither a working bathroom or heat. That's why we decided that really the opposite is what we needed - a really outfitted space. This was before the Ohio was completely over and done with, which was our producing home for the last ten years. The idea of where we were going to do this play was an exciting question, too. Where should this play be done, given that we can't do things the way we normally do things? So it was an opportunity. We decided to go with 3LD, which happened to have a slot that was available. In the past, they have not programmed the way most theaters do. They usually have these long residences.

We kept on developing the play with various different collaborators. I think there have been three or four directors who, at different stages, helped shape the play, and it wasn't unnatural that we would work with Kip Fagan because we had worked with Kip in 2006, and Sheila's worked with Kip many times, so that's how that partnership came to bare.

### **Is the developmental process different for every playwright?**

Absolutely, depending on what their needs are and what their process is. Some people give birth to complete projects. Some people really want to hear it, and the way that something comes out of them is much more in fits and starts. It really depends. Sometimes, when we've commissioned people, they've had a thought about something they've wanted to do, and we've been like, 'that sounds great', or they've had a few ideas, and we're like, 'we're more drawn to that', but with Sheila, it was more of a brainstorming back and forth, and in terms of all of the development process, that also depends on the writer - whether they want to hear the play at various stages or not. Then, as more of the text is in place, it starts to be about rehearsing it a little bit and exploring different parts of it, like exploring the physical parts of it, etc. A couple of the workshops were about trying to figure out, without fully doing the tech of it, what parts of the stories would be able to be manifest without having to be textually explained.

I had a lot of concerns that the part of Trevor was sort of under-developed, so we spent a lot of time making sure that she was there enough, and that there was a balance between the characters. For a while, we didn't think it was there, and it was sort of a great discovery when all of the video stuff came in. I mean, there was a dramaturgical discovery of how to get more of her voice in, and the development of her voice, but then there was the discovery, once we had the full tech, that her voice was quite present and balanced with the FBI Guy, even though he obviously talks a great deal more. Certainly Rebecca's performances help enormously, because she's really done a great job balancing what's sort of charismatic and warm and complicated and really loathsome about that character. It's sort of one of those things where you're like, 'I don't know if I like it, but I can't stop looking'. I think that some people think that the writing is cold that way, but in some ways, the characters are a little like road kill. You don't want to watch them, but you can't help it.

## Was FBI Guy a part of the play from the beginning?

He was always a part of it. It's hard for me to remember, but some of the first bits of the writing that I recall are



from the family scene, and his first 'allow me to introduce myself' monologue. I think he kept growing and growing and growing. I think she had a great deal of fun writing the character, and she stumbled a little bit with the other characters, but with him, she was like, 'that was fun!' I think all of the characters were there from the beginning, but a lot of stuff was in a different order. A lot of stuff needed to have more explanation or more back-story or more balance. I remember the very big discover when Melanie became part of the piece of art.

**I thought that was a very interesting moment. Obviously, she is damaged in some ways, and it seemed at that moment, for her character, there was a grounding. She had found what she had been looking for – the best of what she could envision for herself – to be a part of something, even if the result is questionable.**

Obviously it's sort of an investigation into fame, because I think she's tackling the numbness of the brutality that's especially the result of taking in so much over-mediated information, and obviously fame and the cult of celebrity is a big part of that - the strange, privileged position some people seem to get, and we seem willing to concede. Obviously, all of the characters in the play are very engaged with her (Trevor's) celebrity. They all suck off of it.

**Do you think they would be as interested in her if she wasn't famous because it does seem as though part of her appeal is her drive and artistic passion.**

That's hard to say. I don't think that's the story that Sheila is telling in this case. I think it's often very hard to tell with people like that. People who achieve fame are usually people who are very driven, whether or not they are totally good at what they do, they're good at part of what they do. They're goal oriented. There's a focus that I think is appealing on an unconscious, if not conscious, level.

### **How did the other design elements come about?**

We always knew that surveillance was part of the story, and she did say in the script that the scene titles would be projected. Once you get into the issues of surveillance, the play expands. In what way do we as an audience watch this? Are we going to see us the image that is seen by the FBI Guy? Do we get to see him watching it? Do we get to see it live? I know that we've all seen unsuccessful or overwhelmingly successful or sometimes superfluous use of video in theater and because it's part of a story line, we wanted to make sure that it struck the balance, that we didn't have the video competing with the actual dramatic, that the points of focus were working fairly well hand in hand, which is interesting, because you have to look a lot of different places when you watch this play - especially the way the space is laid out. In the surveillance moments, you're watching the person's who is being filmed. You're watching their film image. You're watching the person's who's watching their filmed image, and sometimes it's not only on that bank of monitors. Also, the bank of monitors has two different levels of focus, so even if you just chose to watch the monitors, you have two different options.

There was a lot of playing around with it and a lot of ideas were formed relatively late into the game once the set idea was put into place. I mean, that was Kip and Peter and the video designers. Some of the ideas, like what kind of surface, what kind of rear projection screen we would use, what color, what dimensions - some of this stuff was just downtown scrounging. I mean, those were the monitors that we got for free, and I think they're perfect and fantastic and the design was adapted around accommodating them. Originally, we were looking for something smaller, more flat-screened, but then we got these and they're so much more surveillancy. They turned out to be perfect, but they weren't what we originally wanted. That's one of the ways in which doing theater on a tight budget is like a creative opportunity. Sometimes it's just a pain, but necessity being the mother of invention can be a benefit.

**Did working with 3LD influence or inform the design elements of the production?**



That has been part of their mandate until now. I don't know if they're shaking that up a little, but maybe that's less of an exotic demand now that it's much more often a design component of theater in general. In this particular case, we decided to work at that theater because we knew that this show would have some measure of video in it and we liked the space

so much - it's bigness, it's strange gallery-like blankness, but that can bite us as well because people are less use to going there and people don't necessarily know where it is, but it seemed like very much the right space for this particular project. It allowed us the opportunity to expand the video from what's just prescribed in the play to a more creative and dramaturgical take on what's seen here and what's seen there. It has the whole idea of how you watch and where you watch, which is built into the viewing room-like portals through which you watch most of the action of the play, to then the narrator who is sometimes outside of it as well as inside. Then there's a certain detention room feeling to it, which is a sort of nod to the noir, where the G-man falls and ends up in the police room, but also points to some of the war aspects of a weird creepy prison.

**Was the stylistic influence of the noir always a part of the play?**

There's been a lot of back and forth about that, but the FBI Guy's voice came out so clearly in it and using it so that the story-telling structure would be helpful and not a hindrance. It's been a good check in. 'Is there a real cat and mouse chase going on here?' For a while, before Trevor had those video confessionals, she didn't use to talk back to the camera so there was a problem of the balance of the cat and the mouse. It was just the cat chasing the mouse and the mouse seemed pretty oblivious to the cat, so that was a really great development and that came out of the idea of the noir. It's more present in some characters than others and in some design elements than others.

### **What's coming up next for Clubbed Thumb?**

We're about to launch a collaboration with Playwrights Horizons. We're co-curating and fiendishly reading plays. We're trying to cross-pollinate our esthetics and audiences and talent pools. There has been, especially over the last few years, an overlap, as people work with both companies, and we're interested in expanding that and also, pulling in perhaps a couple more of the extremes from either end, like what if Clubbed Thumb considered doing this more established writer's new work or what if Playwrights Horizons considered doing this much lesser known quantity? Also, what if all of these artists were in a room together and felt at home?

### **Any advice for emerging producers, actors or playwrights?**

For producers, it's always plan ahead. Trouble shoot the problems now and they won't come back to bite you three months down the line. Find your peers. Work with your peers. That's where you're going to feel most like an artist. That's where you're going to develop most as an artist. Also, figure out which community best fits you. Clubbed Thumb is open to blind submissions and we got a lot of new material sent to us by people that clearly have no idea what kind of esthetic we're after and it's a waste of both people's times. It's a waste of their paper and postage and a waste of ours. We'll read them, or a portion of them, but I think you can get a lot more traction if you do a little research and go and see somebody's work. Find where you're esthetic home is. If you don't make it yourself, make room for yourself in somebody else's, and that's a little hard to do if you're not doing a little bit of legwork. Don't get too easily disappointed. Things take time. You need to think positively that you're developing a relationship even if somebody says no to you. It's just the beginning.

Photo of Maria Striar: Heather Phelps-Lipton  
Production photos: Carl Skutsch