

August 4, 2014

To Whom It May Concern:

I first came into contact with Clubbed Thumb when I attended *The Small*, by Anne Washburn, at the Ohio Theatre in Soho during Summerworks 2010. I remember thinking during the play, no one is making theater that celebrates the peculiarities and highlights and protects the unique vision of playwrights like Clubbed Thumb. My first goal became to get my scripts to Maria Striar.

This year, Clubbed Thumb supported and developed my writing in a number of ways. September 2013 through May 2014, I was a part of Clubbed Thumb's Early Career Writer's Group, the Falcons. While with the Falcons I developed three new plays and got to hear those plays read aloud by a mix of smart writers, actors, and other theater makers. At the Falcon meetings, Striar brought in guest artists like sound designers, directors, devising companies, agents, literary managers, mid-career playwrights, and more. By inviting these guests to join our early-career writer's workshops, Striar was expanding our community exponentially. The guests were able to hear snippets of our young scripts, but in the context of helping us to unlock various keys to our writing processes and stories, rather than for the purpose of evaluating our work. So, Striar sort of disrupted the usual process that characterizes "making connections" or "forming new relationships" with professionals in the industry --- the process usually entails submitting a script and then being evaluated based on the script and then that's it. This process can feel limiting, sometimes paralyzing, especially because oftentimes submitting a script can feel like our only pathway to beginning a relationship with an institution or a director or a company. Instead through Clubbed Thumb's writer's group, we *all* --- well-established theater makers and us young writers --- joined together to read young plays aloud and thus celebrate a story in its early stages and have fun inhabiting that world, for a little while. Most importantly, we got to know our visitors through working creatively on art with them, albeit briefly, rather than through a cut and dry evaluation process. Part of the meeting also entailed a casual Q & A wherein us young writers were able to pick the brains of these more experienced theater makers. I feel exponentially empowered as a writer because of this group. And I know the other Falcons feel the same way. In fact, some of us will be forming the "Falcons Cont'd" group to perpetuate the benefits of this group utilizing Striar's structure.

One day a fellow Falcon and I were chatting. We agreed that it was incredibly rare to find an artistic director like Maria Striar because she puts her money where her mouth is, even when there isn't much money to allocate. Even more rare is that she puts her energy where she says it will go. When we became part of the Falcons, we assumed that Striar might drop into our workshop once or twice through the year because we know how small her team is and how much Clubbed Thumb does for supporting and developing living playwrights' voices. But she came to almost every meeting and gave our scripts her full attention. We

don't know how she had that much energy to give, but she does, consistently, give it.

Not only was I a part of the Falcons, but Clubbed Thumb also developed and produced my play *I'm Pretty Fucked Up* in Summerworks 2014. The development and support started with a SUPERLAB, co-produced by Clubbed Thumb and Playwrights Horizons. For the week, SUPERLAB assembled an incredibly sharp team from literary managers to stage managers and actors. Striar paired me up with director Kip Fagan, who ended up directing the play in June. Working with Fagan was a total epiphany. I had never worked with such an experienced director, someone who could bring delicacy and invention to the collaborative process. This was also the first time I had ever experienced developmental support of this caliber. My script grew and changed because of the team, because of Striar's and Fagan's dramaturgical feedback, and because I had time and space at Playwright's Horizons. Then came the developmental support for the production itself.

Striar gave us a design workshop which allowed Fagan, the set designer, and I to come up with a set concept. After that, Clubbed Thumb organized as many readings as I required to shape the script. If I requested a reading, Striar responded immediately with a yes and options for getting the ball rolling. Sometimes I wrote to Striar with very specific dramaturgical questions about the script. She would, as far as I could tell, drop everything and re-read the script in order to offer immediate feedback. Sometimes I would send her tiny questions like, "Is it okay to re-print the script, because it will help me, even though it will waste a lot of paper?" Striar's responses were prompt but also full of invaluable tidbits of guidance, guidance that empowers. Guidance that allowed me to feel like my process deserved support and resources.

Striar's guidance was crucial to my development as a writer. She consistently reminded me of my voice, my value, and my power as an artist. She is a champion of new writing and writers in every sense of the word; her positive influence feels limitless. Working with Striar is an all encompassing experience, a cohesive education in the art of writing, owning ideas, questioning choices, being rigorous with structure and format and collaborative invention, communicating, considering and re-considering and then at long last tech-ing and watching the run of the show. (During the run she sat with me whenever I felt that I needed someone beside me.)

During the last week of rehearsal right before tech, Striar pointed out that the last fifth of the script seemed to have some structural issues. She reminded me that this was the perfect moment to jump on solving those problems. So the next day, I brought the last fifth of the play to rehearsal. I had cut it up into puzzle pieces. I gave the puzzle over to Kip to move around as he pleased. We found the structure finally, after multiple experiments in rehearsal and tech. Striar both identified the issue but more importantly she demonstrated confidence that we

would find the solution. This is an invaluable thing for an artistic director to be able to do, to demonstrate unflinching confidence in the play while introducing questions about it.

During tech, for about two days straight, Striar sat in front of me scrolling through my script looking for typos, messy formatting accidents, and questionable margins. No one has ever given that much attention to my script.

I guess what I am trying to say is, through the entire process, Striar acted not only as an artistic director and producer, but also as an incredibly smart Dramaturg and mentor --- someone who both protected my best interests and also pushed me to be stronger, more confident, and more bold about claiming my space as an artist in the collaborative process. Really, words cannot describe the experience of developing a script and then moving into a production with Striar at the helm.

Sincerely,

Ariel Stess
(Playwright)