

July 11, 2011

There's a line in my play *Civilization (all you can eat)* (commissioned, developed, and produced by Clubbed Thumb from 2008-11), in which one character describes the emergence of intelligent life on earth:

"...we actually are a kind of miracle. One second some molecules stick together in a chemical reaction and in the next second here we are. In the dark. In a house. Food getting cold. The odds against any of it are astronomical. It's humbling."

That passage would only require slight rewording to describe the existence of Clubbed Thumb, and to describe my own experience with them. Every step in this extensive and unique three-year process has been a rare example of how plays should be made (but rarely are).

In 2008, when Maria Striar approached me about a commission, I had become convinced that the commissioning process was a dead end for me; I'd had a number of commissions, but I was never quite happy with the resulting plays. No one else seemed to be either; these were invariably the plays of mine that languished, either in a drawer or (if I was lucky) in the workshop circuit, never to be produced. I can't say with any certainty why this has been, but I instructed Maria that, for the sake of the project, I could only accept the commission under very particular conditions. I was hoping to create the play using an approximation of the Joint Stock method, an approach I had experimented with in the Lincoln Center Directors' Lab in 2006. Clubbed Thumb was extraordinarily generous and patient with me, working with me to obtain a grant via the New York State Council on the Arts to pay for the commission, then booking spaces via the LMCC's Swing Space program and at Playwrights' Horizons, and hiring actors, designers, and a director, all before a single word had been written. Maria then worked closely with me over the course of the next year as the first draft of the script was developed, offering advice, feedback, deadlines, and hiring actors for readings at her home. Once the first draft was completed in late 2009, Clubbed Thumb was instrumental in further developing the piece, both on its own and in collaboration with The Denver Center's Colorado New Play Summit and The Sundance Institute. This finally culminated last month in a six-day workshop production in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks at HERE Arts Center, in an amazing production directed by Seth Bockley. For the first time in my career, I can say that every single aspect of the production, from the choreographer, cast and design team to the publicity and the production itself, not only met but exceeded my expectations. Maria Striar is an exceptionally gifted producer and the play would not have been anywhere near as successful if not for her trust, skill, intelligence and hard work. There is no other organization in New York that does so much so well to help create new plays.

Post-Summerworks, I am already working on a longer run of the show at Washington, DC's Woolly Mammoth, directed by Howard Shalwitz, and at Austin, TX' Salvage Vanguard, directed by Jenny Larson. There is also talk of a Chicago version to be directed by Seth. It appears that this play will have the longest and most fruitful life of any of my plays since 1001, and I owe that to Clubbed Thumb. It is no exaggeration to say that this play would not exist without them.

Jason Grote