The New York Times

Review: In ‘Lunch Bunch,’ You Are What Eats You

The New York Times Critic’s Pick

By By Alexis Soloski | May 22, 2019

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Sarah Einspanier’s play centers on beleaguered public defenders finding ways to nourish themselves and maybe one another.

Keilly McQuail and Jon Norman Schneider as lawyers who work, and eat, together in “Lunch Bunch.” Photo Credit Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

In Sarah Einspanier’s “Lunch Bunch,” the trim, compassionate comedy that opens Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks festival at the Wild Project, a group of public defenders tries to do good, feel good and eat well. Five of them have formed Lunch Bunch, a club in which members take turns cooking and packing “veggie/ healthy, friendly/ forward” meals for one another.

No peppers. Jacob (Ugo Chukwu) is allergic. And don’t even think of serving pretzels as a side dish.

“It’s the 21st century,” Hannah (Irene Sofia Lucio) explains. “With a few clicks on the internet and a trip to Trader Joe’s, you can replicate the feasts of past emperors in under 30 minutes.”

Between the towering caseloads, the obstructionist judges and the vulnerable clients, these lawyers, who sit in ergonomic chairs facing a persimmon wall (Jean Kim did the set design), don’t have it easy. (Neither do we: Ms. Einspanier’s clipped lines include a lot of legal jargon — ACS, DV, 1028s. Keep

up!) The job doesn't allocate for a personal life; weekends are spent mostly alone, with Netflix and maybe a cat.

The curried quinoa salads and barbecue jackfruit sandwiches are a kind of compensation. At least until Tal (Eliza Bent) leaves for a trip to Paris, and Tuttle (Keilly McQuail) decides to adopt the restrictive Whole30 diet, throwing the Lunch Bunch into chaos. Two new attorneys are recruited, Mitra (Nana Mensah) who is a lunch bunch natural, and Nicole (Julia Sirna-Frest), who is not. Her first attempt: mixed nut butter and jelly on leftover pita bread.

If you know Clubbed Thumb — and you should, because the company has more than 20 years of gutsy new play development under its belt — you'll recognize this as a very Clubbed Thumb show: idiosyncratic, nonrealistic, gently experimental with a Downtown's greatest hits compilation of a cast. (Ms. McQuail is a particular standout, but then again she always is.) Directed by Tara Ahmadinejad and running just about an hour, the length of a slightly luxurious lunch break, it's a slim show, yes, but also charming and smart and kindly.

Ugo Chukwu, foreground, and other members of the "Lunch Bunch" ensemble. Photo Credit Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

For most of these characters, the focus on food is a coping mechanism, a welcome distraction. Take Tuttle. Why would a person voluntarily renounce sugar, dairy, grains, legumes, alcohol and fun? She is hoping to find "whatever's been giving me occasional gas and near constant feelings of worthlessness," she says.

In other words, you are what eats you. And as "Lunch Bunch" ultimately suggests, lemon tahini goddess noodles with garlic broccolini are probably — *probably* — less important than what we owe to one another and how we live in fumbling, sustaining, necessary fellowship.

Watching the play, I remembered what I'd eaten earlier that day — a lukewarm egg and cheese sandwich, which I'd split with my 2-year-old, plus whatever blueberries the kid discarded — and how this was probably evidence that I am not living my best life.

Or maybe I am. Because what mattered is that we'd shared it and enjoyed sharing it and fed the bread to the birds after. Food for thought.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

The Universe Doesn't Cast Leading Roles: Zhu Yi's *You Never Touched the Dirt*

by Billy McEntee | June 2019

To visit publisher's website, click here!

(L to R) Holly Chou, Kenneth Lee, and John D. Haggerty rehearsing for Clubbed Thumb's production of You Never Touched the Dirt. Photo: Zhu Yi.

Awareness of a changing environment is piercing our consciousness like a bobcat clawing into the earth, but Zhu Yi wants us to dig even deeper.

In her surreal new comedy *You Never Touched the Dirt*, the wealthy Lis have lived detached from the land that nurtures them while also paying exorbitant prices to enjoy its unspoiled splendor in a private lakeside community somewhere outside Shanghai. Zhu Yi's play is a bonkers, tilted, and utterly delightful eclogue; naturally, experimental mainstay Ken Rus Schmoll directs this New York premiere that bows at Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks starting June 3. As gods and gardeners fight over land, Zhu Yi, a Chinese-American playwright attuned to the global cost of gentrification and capitalism, reminds us of our humanity—shared and comedic—and the cyclical natures of the earth and greed.

Billy McEntee (Rail): Before we dive in, can you discuss how you first got into playwriting?

Zhu Yi: I was an only child often left alone at home to practice piano while my parents went to the movies or malls, so I developed this hobby of making up stories to entertain myself. Not any kind of stories, but the dramatic ones with a lot of characters whose voices came out through my mouth in turns, and their vibrant imaginary presences filled up the empty room. Later when I applied for college, I learned that people have a serious name for that thing I was doing. It's called playwriting.

Rail: I hear your play is having a near-simultaneous production in China. Is this true? If so, can you discuss how that came to be and what it's been like working on the same play in two different languages?

Zhu: Yes. The company in China created two productions of the play, which premiered in January and March, one in a traditional theater space for touring shows, the other in an outdoor courtyard space. There were actual trees, flowers, vegetable plots, and a goldfish pond in the courtyard. Actors emerged from the pond as lake-drowned ghosts and stood on the rooftop of a building as a 120-year-old tree. The "tree" had a green skirt the length of a whole building. When each "branch" was cut off, a piece of her skirt was pulled down by actors on the ground. The tree should have a magnificent death in the play, and it was a truly magnificent death.

I wrote the play in English, later translated it to Chinese, edited in Chinese, translated it back to English, edited in English, translated it to Chinese… The content of the two language versions sync, but the titles are different. In English it's *You Never Touched the Dirt*, while in Chinese it becomes *Outside of the World*, which is a phrase borrowed from an ancient Chinese poem.

Rail: On top of all that, the play has already been in Scotland during the 2017 Edinburgh International Festival. It must be very rewarding to see your work staged in multiple countries. How has that been?

Zhu: The play was created and developed at the Royal Court Theater's International Playwrights Program from 2016 to 2018. The program encouraged and supported us to tell stories about contemporary China. The staged reading of the play was presented by the Royal Court at Edinburgh International Festival as part of "Spirit of '47," in celebration of international cultural collaboration in today's fast-changing world.

It was adorable that the British director Sam Pritchard helped me adjust the English slightly for the British audience; for example, "popsicle" becomes "ice lolly," and "asshole" becomes "arsehole." And now since we are doing a production in NYC, all the "assholes" are welcome back.

Rail: I'm curious about the new play development process in China, where you were born. In America, it's both slow and hurried: you write your play, wait for someone to program it, develop it over various retreats and writer's groups, and then, wham, you have a production lined up but only a few weeks of rehearsal. How do plays evolve in China?

Zhu: "Both slow and hurried"—that's so accurate!

In China, I would describe it as "fast and furious": You write a play, submit to a theater, if someone likes it, they will produce it immediately, and you will get paid well. Things happen so fast. The market is booming. Theatergoers are all young people. It's totally possible to make a decent living as a theater professional in China. But the downside is, because there isn't a proper development process, the director and actors often run into obstacles in rehearsals. They realize that they need more time to digest the play or work with the playwright. But the clock is ticking, the theater is booked, the tickets are sold… They just start to rewrite the play in the rehearsal room without the playwright's consent. And gradually that becomes an industry tradition. It's easier to erase an obstacle than to face it. And that makes playwrights *furious* watching their own shows.

Rail: Your play has been seen by audiences of different cultures. Did the reactions vary at all, country to country?

Zhu: I was born and raised in Shanghai, later moved to Nanjing, Oslo, and New York. I traveled a lot to maintain a "bicoastal" (Shanghai and New York) life and career in the past 11 years. This made me interested in themes that are global, but the way I approach them are personal.

Sometimes the reactions from audiences surprise me. The Taiwanese audience recognizes the immigration history of Taiwan in *Holy Crab!*, which is a play about the American immigration history [told] through the journey of Chinese mitten crabs. A Russian father brought his second-generation immigrant daughter to see *A Deal*, because he was moved by the conversation between a Chinese Communist father and his America-educated liberal daughter in the play.

Rail: The issues of gentrification in your play seem parallel to a lot of the problems New York has long faced; neighborhoods change as quickly as skyscrapers ascend. China, too, is a very populated nation. Has gentrification long been an issue there, even out of the major cities where your play takes place?

Zhu: When major cities expand into the country, the process usually doesn't happen evenly. So you would often see hundreds of luxury villas erected in the middle of a rural area like a tiny enclave. The city people who own the villas and the local residents are two disconnected communities, but there is one group traveling between the two worlds every day—the locals who work in those villas. The play looks into that specific arrangement.

In order to gain a solid understanding of the hidden economic forces and conflicts of interests in the story, I spent two years researching land laws, household registration laws, and national endowment insurance policies in China. But the play won't bore you with analyses.

Rail: I'm wondering what it's been like to work with Ken Rus Schmoll; he seems like such a congruous fit for your show given its tone and his own historical style.

Zhu: I saw *Catch as Catch Can* at Page 73 and *The Invisible Hand* at New York Theatre Workshop before I knew Ken. I was amazed by how sharp, subtle, precise, clean, and explosive those pieces were. So when Clubbed Thumb suggested Ken as the director for this play, I was extremely excited. I pictured the play as a series of snapshots of domestic life, almost like a film, but those brief moments hit heavily. Each scene should feel like a quiet explosion. And I can't think of anyone who can capture that better than Ken. My favorite thing is listening to Ken explain scenes to the actors. It's also very calming working with him, because besides his naturally calming personality, he solves problems in a very organized way.

Rail: Your play has made me reflect on my own relationship to the earth. Would you be willing to discuss your connection to our changing planet and how that informed this play?

Zhu: The play reflects my anxiety from listening to my mom complaining about her endless battle with our gardener. My family owns a lake-view villa outside of Shanghai, just like in the play. I listened to her talking about the missing duck, suspicious boats, her fear of the dark at night, my father's absence… I decided to dive deep into the subject and write a play before I went crazy with her.

I don't know what my relationship to the earth is. On one hand, I'm another heartless consumer of things coming out or into the earth; on the other, I don't believe a human's joy and pain weigh higher than a tree's or a cow's. The universe doesn't cast leading roles. Therefore I see the cruelty and absurdity in how humans center the world around ourselves. It feels both horrible and wonderful.

exeunt

Review: You Never Touched the Dirt at the Wild Project

A witty, smart production brings out the absurdity, the poignancy, and the cruelty in Zhu Yi's rich script . . . and also, there are sheep.

By Loren Noveck | June 7, 2019

Kenneth Lee, Daniel K. Isaac, Jennifer Lim, Julyana Soelistyo, Holly Chou, dog, and goose

(Photo: Elke Young)

In an interview with *The Brooklyn Rail,* playwright Zhu Yi says she sees "the cruelty and absurdity in how humans center the world around ourselves." Her play *You Never Touched the Dirt,* receiving its New York premiere at Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks (while almost simultaneously premiering in China), uses one family, in one upscale gated lakeside community in the countryside outside Shanghai, as a microcosm of that absurdity and that cruelty: in the way humans relate to the physical world and the way we treat one another; in the complex relationships within families and across internal rifts in class and culture; and also in the way the physical world persists beyond and without us. (The details of how gentrification warps rural societies are specific to China, but the issues are familiar to any resident of a capitalist society.) And the strikingly clever production, excellently directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, finds a perfect visual idiom to capture the play's complicated tone, using manipulations of scale to create both deadpan humor and a weird poignancy, and representing the natural elements of the world with a defiant pop-art artificiality. (The house and tree next to it, in Andrew Moerdyk's set, are literal microcosms– perfectly realistic scale models that make the villa about the height of a barstool.)

Yuan Dong Lake, formerly the center of a farming and fishing community, is now Moonlight Lake: the center of a luxury development, designed to appeal to wealthy Shanghai residents purchasing lakefront villas, expanding at a rapid rate and swallowing up the land of local village after local village. The villagers, most of whom originally received their land a generation or two back when Chairman Mao redistributed property in the area, no longer own their former farms, but don't for the most part have anywhere else to go, either. While they were paid (as part of a process that sounds roughly analogous to eminent domain), the money supported improvements to their local homes and lives, but wasn't really enough to allow a family to move to the city and start over–even if they wanted to. So most of the former-farmer residents remain, trapped between one world and another, working as housekeepers and gardeners and handymen for the rich people who bought out their birthright.

The Li family owns the villa known as Spain (the domestic staff identifies the homes by their architectural styles). Mr. Li (Kenneth Lee) is a successful businessman in the city who commutes back and forth to the villa at weekends; his wife (Jennifer Lim) lives there full-time, mostly alone, as their daughter is in college in America. Their relationship with the land is ornamental, transactional: they import a fancy tree from another region to plant in their garden and then later chop it down when they want to build a shed. They have a small decorative vegetable patch and later chickens, but the main virtue of the chickens is to show off "organic" meat to their city friends.

The people Mrs. Li sees the most are their gardener, Zhou (John D. Haggerty), the farmer who formerly owned the property and still feels a deep attachment to it, and the next-door neighbors' maid (Julyana Soelistyo), who like Mrs. Li is generally alone in the villa all week. At first, Mrs. Li is nothing but suspicious: she tries to fire Zhou because she suspects him of stealing the duck and the sheep (it couldn't possibly be one of the "wealthy decent people" in the gated community) she was fattening up to feed her daughter. But she starts to recognize the rhythms of the community–as difficult as that is when she and her husband, in "Spain," really might as well live in a different country than her neighbors do.

For a short play, it's full of complex relationships: The Lis' marriage, without their daughter at the center, reveals its hollowness, but they come back together to share hopes for the future. Mrs. Li builds a tentative friendship with the woman next door, based on loneliness and also local gossip, which includes a good bit of dirt about Zhou's deadbeat son. Zhou and Mr. Li realize they're peers–the same age–but that connection only goes so far, and when Zhou wants a favor, he realizes how transactional their relationship is. Zhou fetishizes his "ancestral" connection to the land, but the Local Earth God (see

below) is at pains to remind him how brief that connection is in the sweep of time. Zhou may feel his relationship to nature is more authentic than the Lis', but ultimately it, too, is centered around himself.

And the human world, as layered as it is, isn't the only realm in the play; Zhu Yi also creates a set of "characters" in the animal kingdom and in the spiritual dimensions. The animals, all played by toys or props and voiced by ensemble members Holly Chou and Daniel K. Isaac (in matching costumes that combine flower-print shirts that evoke a stylized nature with the kind of pants chefs or restaurant workers wear), play key plot roles: the sheep that disappears and returns pregnant (stuffed, and stuffed with an also-stuffed tiny lamb); the Lis' dog, Jojo, and their neighbor's (inflatable), who have a "friends with benefits" sort of relationship; a goose that attacks Jojo, and a flock of chickens (made, I think, from handbags; I don't know whether Schmoll, set designer Andrew Moerdyk, or prop designer Raphael Mishler should be credited with them, but they're one of the cleverest pieces of low-tech stagecraft I've seen in ages). And then there's the spirits, all ambivalent and with ambiguous relationships to humanity: a Local Earth God (Isaac), at pains to remind the humans both that they are mortal and that they can leave this place; the spirit of the tree the Lis cut down (Chou); the ghost of a child who drowned in the lake.

Director Ken Rus Schmoll finds the perfect rhythm for the piece, using the scene breaks as a kind of structural punctuation that ties the disparate realms together. All the design elements are spot on: Moerdyk's set, which so perfectly encapsulates the play's themes and tone, gets special kudos, but Brendan Aanes's sound design, with little touches like the noise of a swiveling security camera, also adds a great deal. And Schmoll gets wonderful performances out of the cast, both in the more realist human characters (especially Lee and Haggerty, whose different kinds of masculinity are on full display in their performances) and the fantastical and absurd elements (Isaac as the Local Earth God/real estate agent is particularly hilarious, channeling a kind of world-weary majesty that chastises and chuckles at the foibles of humanity simultaneously; but then the ghost child is genuinely chilling and unsettling).

And then there's the bits of slapstick physical comedy: The fight between a toy goose and a toy dog. The scene where four full-size human actors work to cut down a scale model tree using a scale model chainsaw. Mr. Li trying to mow his own lawn and being unable to control the mower (a Fisher-Price-style toy).

There's a lot going on for a 90-minute play–perhaps too much at times. And there are a few key emotional pivots that might not entirely hold water (especially Mrs. Li's turn from having Zhou beaten up to counting on him to come to her rescue). But these are tiny quibbles given the richness of character and the economical way in which this world is drawn–and especially given how wonderful the production is: witty, smart, absurdist, but also poignant. And while Zhu Yi draws a sharp portrait of a particular time and place in modern China, she also points to the ways in which the growth of capitalism warps relationships of community, family, and society–a lesson we see played out, certainly, in America as well.

The New York Times

The New York Times Critic's Pick

Review: Decapitating American History in ‘King Philip’s Head’

Daniel Glenn’s astutely goofy portrait of legislative gridlock in the Plymouth Colony casts women as some seriously conflicted founding fathers.

By Ben Brantley | June 23, 2019

To visit publisher's website, click here!

From left, as some lawmakers of the Plymouth Colony, Elizabeth Kenny, Jennifer Ikeda and Kristin Villanueva in “King Philip’s Head Is Still on That Pike Just Down the Road.”
Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Watching a legislative body maul, maim and paralyze itself through grotesquely irrational infighting probably doesn’t sound like your idea of summer escapism. Or if it does, you could argue that there’s always C-Span, which comes with the convenient comfort of your couch.

Might I still put in a word, though, for the sheer, idiotic delight of watching the fatally quarrelsome lawmakers now in session at the Wild Project in the East Village? As might be expected, they are all old white men — centuries old, in fact — who are as ineffectual as they are talky.

They also happen to be our own American founding fathers, and not those Johnnies-come-lately who barnstormed Broadway in “Hamilton.” These guys, dressed in costumes that recall grade-school Thanksgiving pageants, hail from the Plymouth Colony of the late 17th century.

Not incidentally, the self-serious men here are all portrayed by women, who manage to maintain lugubriously straight faces while tickling their audiences into stupefied giddiness.

The querulous councilmen of Plymouth have been brought together by the playwright Daniel Glenn under the appropriately cumbersome title of “King Philip’s Head Is Still on That Pike Just Down the

Road.” That also happens to be both the first line and the enduring focus of debate in this, uh, head-spinning production from Clubbed Thumb’s invaluable Summerworks series of new plays.

The titular head belongs — or belonged — to a fearsome Indian chieftain (real name: Metacom), which has been mounted as a warning to Native Americans who would wage war upon the Puritans of Massachusetts. When the play begins in 1677, said head has been on display for more than a year. And the good Goodman Good (Crystal Finn, a flustery vision of conscience at war with insecurity) proposes that it is perhaps time to remove it from view.

Nay, says the council leader, Goodman Brown (a hilariously severe Jennifer Ikeda), whose family was slaughtered by Metacom’s warriors. But Good is a tenacious soul, who continues to plow through the legislative rules and regulations (sometimes invented on the spot) with which Brown tries to keep him from returning to his idée fixe.

Ms. Ikeda, left, and Crystal Finn, whose character proposes that it is time to remove the play’s titular head from the pike. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

And there you have, more or less, the entire plot of “King Philip’s Head,” which runs only through Saturday under the astutely restrained direction of Caitlin Ryan O’Connell. And if you think that such a standoff might not be enough to sustain a political feud that stretches over years — and years, and years — then I guess you haven’t been watching C-Span, after all.

This is not, for the record, the first time that a Clubbed Thumb production has explored a chapter of American history via gender-reversed casting. The company scored a hit four years ago with the similarly conceived “Men on Boats,” Jaclyn Backhaus’s reimagining of John Wesley Powell’s 1869 geological expedition in the American West.

That show, which used non-male performers to portray its manly male characters, subsequently transferred to Playwrights Horizons for a longer run. Like “Men on Boats” — and like Phyllida Lloyd’s wonderful series of all-female Shakespeare from London’s Donmar Warehouse — “King Philip’s Head” reminds us of the gleeful illumination that can come from women embodying men.

For one thing, the discrepancy between macho posture and physical reality underscores how so much of perceived masculinity is a matter of posing. And without dropping their voices or flexing their muscles, the actresses of “King Philip’s Head” provide a transparent window on the contortions and confusions of ego-driven men in power — and of the absurdity of the official rules and regulation used to justify highly irregular behavior.

But while the gender-swapping casting works beautifully here, this is not a play about the subjugation and erasure of women in public life. Or not only that. Broader notions of what constitutes equality are parsed, in deliciously convoluted language. (Mr. Glenn, who is also a high school English teacher, has a keen ear for the emptiness of political bloviation.)

So is the concept of free will according to Puritan theology, a subject of particular concern to Goodman Giddens (Zuzanna Szadkowski), who suffers from some mighty unholy lusts. Then there is the suspiciously close friendship between Peters (Rachel Christopher), whose wife is said to consort with the devil, and Fuller (Kristin Villanueva), whose own spouse poses some knotty problems in the bedchamber.

The ensemble also includes Mary Lou Rosato (as council members of several successive generations from one family), Elizabeth Kenny and, as the variously pliant women in these men's lives, an admirably understated Sam Breslin Wright. Even (or especially) when their characters are at their most obnoxious and obstructive, they're all delightful company.

As is usually true of Clubbed Thumb, the production has been expertly and attractively mounted, with a wittily anachronistic set (Carolyn Mraz) and costumes to match (by Melissa Ng). "King Philip's Head" is probably too much of a cleverly extended sketch to have the afterlife of other examinations of American institutions that were incubated at Clubbed Thumb, including Heidi Schrek's Tony-nominated "What the Constitution Means to Me," a current hit on Broadway.

But for the fast, goofy duration of its 80 minutes, "King Philip's Head" qualifies as one of this season's tastier diversions. As a distant mirror to contemporary stasis, it may be too familiar for comfort. Still, in this prickly summer of American discontent, there's sweet relief in being allowed to giggle contentedly at a shrewd, silly evocation of the kind of legislative gridlock that usually has us biting our nails and fearing for our future.

An Interview with Maria Striar

By Victoria Myers | May 30, 2019

Photography by Tess Mayer

[To visit publisher's website, click here!]

It's embarrassing to admit, but up until a few years ago, I had not heard of Clubbed Thumb, the downtown theatre company that has produced an impressive amount of playwrights and directors that you have definitely heard of—or will soon hear of—often giving them their first New York City production. I first encountered Clubbed Thumb in 2016 when I profiled Leigh Silverman as she directed Ethan Lipton's *Tumacho* as part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks. It was one of the most delightful experiences I've had—and, at times, one of the most delightfully deranged (I mean, there were singing cacti). The following summer, Clubbed Thumb produced their most successful, high-profile show to date: Heidi Schreck's Pulitzer Prize finalist, the Tony-nominated *What the Constitution Means to Me*.

The woman behind all of this is Maria Striar, founder and Producing Artistic Director of Clubbed Thumb. Maria started the company in 1996, with the mission of doing "funny, strange, and provocative new plays by living American writers," and has been with it ever since as it has continued to grow and evolve. I recently spoke with Maria about the history of Clubbed Thumb, producing *What the Constitution Means to Me,* the company's development programs, and more.

What led you to founding Clubbed Thumb?

It was a number of things, although it was not an intentional founding. I had really loved doing new plays at Brown University. It was a time when there was a graduate playwriting program in the creative writing program, but there was virtually no graduate school [for theatre]. It was before this Brown/Trinity Rep program. They had a couple of PhD students, and when those playwrights wanted their plays mounted, they had the undergraduates, which meant we had their plays. So there was this fantastic new play festival. They were really wild and fun and funny and very strange, and really different from the kinds of plays that department put on and very different from the kinds of theatre that I, for the most part, encountered. I really fell for that whole experience.

[It was] a bunch of actors and friends from graduate school, newly arrived in New York, who were doing some work but also had lots of quiet time. We were just sort of like, "Let's throw something up there." We rented a theatre and found ourselves with a lot of time, only some of which was possibly going to be eaten up by our pretty short equity showcase production. We had a month for a 24/7 rental, so we invited friends from graduate school and from college and people we'd run into [to put on a shows]. It was only loosely curated, but we had 8 o'clock shows, 10 o'clock shows, midnight shows. It was such a confirmation that it is a lot more fun to make things happen than to wait around and to be given opportunities selected by other people, and it kind of stuck.

That was the first Summerworks, and that model has been honed and honed and honed every single year, and is much more supported and much more heavily curated and thoughtfully put together now. But it really did start in what is still a very core Clubbed Thumb value, which is leveraging your resources to maximum effect, and also having a community of work. It's always been action first, then infrastructure followed what we seemed to be doing and trying to do it better and more thoughtfully.

What were the challenges the first few years and what do you consider to be the biggest turning points for the company?

That first year we were at a theatre that doesn't exist anymore called the House of Candles, which is now Stanton Social, although I wonder if that didn't close recently too. We didn't know what we were doing and that was great, because we could be doing anything. And then, you do a little bit more and you should know a little bit more about what you're doing. We had very, very limited resources, so we did the next few seasons at HERE and we worked off a lot of our rent by hanging drywall and grouting and tiling the bathroom floors—work that we were probably quite unqualified to do (just in case anybody's panicking, it's since been redone by professionals). I think the challenges were mostly not having any money and also not knowing what we were doing, but that's also part of the fun. I think it was a few years before we could pay anybody. But you stick around. I look around sometimes with great delight at what people are doing and what they were doing then.

I think one of our first big breaks was when we got one of those first Obie grants. That felt like an invitation to the club, in a way. That was in 2000. I also feel like when we settled into the old Ohio theatre where we produced for more or less a decade, that was also a sort of staple residency of sorts.

Certainly the last decade has also been really, really strong, but Clubbed Thumb has always kind of had incremental growth, and we've been pretty smart about reflecting on what resources we have that we didn't have and what interests we have that we didn't have and what's not working anymore, and really trying to calibrate within that. Sometimes that's meant pulling back on certain kinds of programming.

About nine or so years ago, we started adding a lot of incubation programs. We started doing much more development. We started working with Playwrights Horizons, running a development program, and that led to us getting a space residency with them, which we've had now for five years. Free office space and free development space is a complete game changer for us. Not just in the money that it saved us, but being able to do administrative work and artistic work in the same place is a real luxury that is not afforded small companies very much. Companies like mine, we raise most of our budget from scratch every single year. From the same sources, but very little of the resources we have are continued resources. You want to think big, but you have to be cautious.

A few years ago, after pulling back for a lot of years, we remounted a show of ours with Playwrights Horizons, and that went really, really well, much better than either of us expected. That meant that we had a lot of extra money that year. Then last year, we had a gala for the first time. We had extra money, so now we have this little cash reserve that we call an opportunity fund. We're not using it like, "Oh, this is rainy day." We're like, "This can stake us while we find other money so that we can do more things and think bigger and make bigger gestures like increasing remuneration or return to producing outside of Summerworks more regularly." That feels like one of the most recent big jumps, and a big deal.

When it switched over from being something you were just doing to being something very professional, did that feel like a different ball game? Was there a learning curve with that?

Most of our growth has been pretty incremental, and every now and then something will come in and generally kick it up and sometimes kick it down a little bit. There was a period of time just before the last nice wave of growth started where we were overextended. We were doing a second show on a Broadway contract. We couldn't really afford it. We thought we could afford it, but then various things happened that were recession-related mostly, but we had a little perfect storm of a crunch. That led to a lot of recalibrating that was ultimately for the good, but it was pretty painful at the time. When you do have a setback, you have to look very, very hard at what you're doing and what you're doing just because you've been doing it, and what you're doing that's working, and what you're doing really well, and what you're not doing that you should be doing. Those are always good questions, but especially when something's got to go because you're overextended, those questions are really strong.

For the most part, we were super conservative in terms of not getting ourselves into a situation where we were carrying debt. I think it's one of the reasons we have some longevity, because we never put ourselves at a point of financial crisis, but also sometimes I think that was a retardant. That maybe we could have accelerated more quickly if we had been a little more like, "Fuck it. Let's go for it and see how it goes." But I don't know. I think because Clubbed Thumb was started by actors, who are very often on the lowest part of totem pole power-wise, we've always tried [to pay people] even when the fee was 50 bucks total, or 100. We're not talking big money when we first started paying people. Nor are we really talking big money now, frankly.

We're always going, "Given what we have and given what we think we could have next year, what's one more thing we could do better?" I'm always wary of the term professional because I feel like that's sort of loaded and doesn't mean the same thing to people. I feel like respectful, nurturing, thoughtful [are the better terms]. How can we make people best able to do their work? That can mean things that are outside of the norm of professional. That can mean acknowledging that people's lives are complicated, and they have children, so trying to make rehearsal schedules where they can pick up their kids. It can mean a lot of different things.

For Summerworks, it's a wide range of people who are involved. You have some people who are very emerging, and you also have Tony winners and Tony nominees. How do you curate that?

There are a few things. One, Summerworks is a time-limited proposition, and that works in its favor. There's four weeks of rehearsal, and then there's two weeks of tech/previews/performances. So it's a six week commitment. For the first chunk of time, people are in rehearsal during the day, so they have their nights. For the last week of performance, they have an hour and a half play, so they're free all the time except for that little bit of time. There's basically one week where they kind of can't do other things, and even with that, we maneuver. It is a really condensed experience, which means that even though it's not financially maybe the most lucrative gig to pick, you can contain its impact. It's a really high impact. It's pretty pure. It's a really pure art-making experience. You're not doing it for any reason other than the piece speaks to you and you want to collaborate with these people. A huge amount of relationships are born out of it. I would say that we tend toward early career people, but we always have a place for pieces that need a very particular environment. For artists who want to make something and they don't want to throw it into a huge theatre setting initially, or they have something that's a weird little beast that they're not sure belongs in a big theatre setting.

So Leigh and Anne [Kauffman] and Ken [Schmoll] come back and do things in that context. And Heidi's play, that was the perfect place for that play to be born, because it needed something small and flexible, and we don't know how many people will be in this play, because we don't know what the end of this play is. We don't know whether it will be open to the press. "No, it won't be." We don't know all these things, and that's a harder thing for a larger theatre to pivot around. You can't be like, "We're not going to tell the audience about what this is." We have a lot of flexibility.

It's really important for us that it's ambitious, but low stakes. There's a calibration of shoot for the moon, don't be lazy, don't be unambitious, but also don't be scared, don't hedge your bets. You can try something out and if it doesn't quite work, we're all going to be okay. I think that makes it a really special place for a wide range of artists. I think it's fun. I do think that we are good at making people feel seen and taken care of. We do as best as we can with the money, but I think we do better than most in terms of the other stuff. And there are a lot of snacks. People feel loved when they're fed.

When I was writing about Leigh, I was in the rehearsal room for *Tumacho* for most of that process. I think I wouldn't necessarily have known that the budget was what it was. I probably would have thought it was more.

We were once told, years ago, by our program officer at the Mellon Foundation, that we punch above our weight. We are very good at doing a lot with a little. We have an insane amount of programming for a company with three full-time employees. It's creative leveraging. You know what you can beg, borrow and steal. You can take somebody else's leftover set parts, and you repurpose your own set parts, and you do all kinds of clever, thrifty things that require a little bit more scheming and engagement. That is not standard operating procedure in a larger theatre, probably because that would be an exhausting thing to have to do seven times, and harder to do when you're doing a run that's eight weeks long. I don't know that the production managers of a big theatre would want to be like, "Whose show is being struck? Let me see. I saw that. They had really cool wood walls." But that's sort of how we do it. I sort of like that. There is part of me that is so deeply downtown-y and scroungy and really hates waste. So I like that back and forth of using resources, as long as within the parameters of not wasting people's time and not clipping people's wings. The set budgets for Clubbed Thumb can't cost more than the artistic. People first, stuff second or third, down the line. I think we're pretty clever about that. I think we think it's a little tiny bit fun. I mean, it's stressful but it's a little bit fun.

I wanted to talk a little about the emerging programs that Clubbed Thumb has.

They all kind of happened one by one. We've had a mid-career writer's group for a long time, which was basically a lovely opportunity for me to hang out with people who are my age who aren't being produced by Clubbed Thumb so much anymore. They read their plays and work on them in my living room. Like most writers' groups, there's some structure. It helps when you're no longer a new dramatist to have some deadlines, have some structure, but also some communion. A few years after doing that, it felt a little like, "Gosh, given that what we mostly produce are early career writers, we should probably have some group for that." But there are so many [early career writer groups], so we were like, "How do we do this with authenticity?" We don't want to do it if we can't do it authentically.

There are two things that make that writer's group a little peculiar. One is that it's mostly made up of people who have been suggested by other writers—mostly people who are in our mid-career group or our mid-career adjacent community—and sometimes the people get into it for really random reasons. For example, Will Arbery. Aaron Carter, who at the time was the literary manager at Steppenwolf and a professor at Northwestern said, "Hey, I've got this student who's graduating, he's moving to the city, he doesn't know that many people. Will you have coffee with him?" I was like, "What if we put him in a writers' group?" We hadn't read anything by him. I was like, "I don't care," because the new-to-town energy is so fantastic for those things. It's a really great dynamic to have in a group, somebody who doesn't know all the rules and all the places. It's generally people who are nominated by other writers. We like the idea of giving people who are already a part of our community a little bit of a seat at the table, because most people have people under their wing, and they'll also vet them a little bit. We try really hard to not have people in the group who are already in other groups. There is a little bit of notching of the belt that can happen, and we like the weirdos and we want to spread the wealth, and we do not know who's going to turn out to be a person that we really want to work with. You can hedge your bets and you can curate and be like, "I like this play, I'm going to pick all these people." You do some of that. But sometimes you vet people and you're like, "I think this person might really benefit from this thing." It's worked out really well to have it not come from straight-up curation. We have a lot of programs that come from that straight-up, I've read that play or I've met that person and yes, this seems like the right profile, but it's great to shake that up sometimes. I think it's very okay if there are lots of people in that group who are never really going to write something that's especially Clubbed Thumb. That's not what the name of that game is. The name of that particular game is for them to form a community together and for us to try and support them. We bring in guests. We pair them with mentors who are not the same people who suggested them, because they want another perspective, so

they have somebody else to ask questions. You should have somebody who knows what it's like to be in your position, I think.

When we moved into the space at 440 [Lafayette], we sort of noticed the presence of the students, and also when it was really quiet. We were like, "Hmm, there seems to be some opportunity in here." At the same time, I'd have these conversation with Anne and Ken bemoaning the lack of opportunities for career development for directors. So many early career programs were observerships or assistantships, that there were very few practica around. Because that evil loop of you don't want to hire somebody until you've seen their work, how does somebody see your work unless somebody's hired you? So we came up with a program in which young directors work with students developing a new play for a semester and then there's a short, very truncated period with professional actors in the same room, using the bones of blocking and the use of space, and a very bare bones production where they transfer some of that exploration onto people who are more appropriately cast. Then there are two weeks of rehearsal and then this professional showing. All throughout that, Anne and Ken and Michael and I are interacting, giving people feedback, giving them support, giving them ideas. Anne and Ken meet with them regularly and impart directorial wisdoms. So they get some craft and honing and hands-on experience, and they also get a showcase at the end, and it's worked out really well. We've also ended up producing a couple of those plays and hiring some of those directors much more quickly than I thought.

Our producing fellowship is the same way. We have two a year. Sometimes one person will continue for a second year, if there is sort of more to be gained. That's always at least one, sometimes two people of color. That also allows us a flexible staff relationship, too. Depending on who they are, they might be more interested in casting or directing and observing, assisting artistic processes, or management or grant writing. Creative producing can hold a lot of things. But they've been helpful to us and sometimes people come back, and we hire in limited capacities and we give back to them.

All of the programs now interact with each other really well. Now, the early career writer's group, those writers can submit proposals for the scripts that are worked on in the directing fellowship. With all of these programs, they started infecting our main programming, which is really great. And one of the things we did very deliberately with all of them is very strong diversity benchmarks. As an organization, we're way too white. If we make sure there's really a much bigger range of people who are coming in young, some of that's going to come back to us, and it has, and it's been great.

Let's talk a little about Heidi's show because that's your first production to go to Broadway.

And I'm going to guess the last, but who knows? Who knows? Maybe the world is changing.

How has that been for the company to have?

I don't know yet. The most palpable effect, other than going to a lot of really weird events that we never went to before, is really frankly the pride of our community. The Clubbed Thumb community is a big one, and some of them are uptown and some of them are downtown, but I think there's a real feeling of like, "Hey, look at that!" We're all up there a little bit and really proud of us, and that's a piece of all of us, and that's a really lovely thing to behold. It's intense. I read the press summaries. I can barely keep up with them every day. It's really humbling how many people this play is rolling over and how much they're chewing on it.

I can't say there are lots of Broadway producers knocking down our doors saying, "What else have you got?" That's not happening in any way. There haven't been any of those types of effects. I don't know that people came to see *Plano* or will come to see Summerworks because of *Constitution*. I hope so. I hope the story is, "Hey, this thing started in this little run. Wouldn't you love to have seen it for 25 bucks, in a room of very few people? Wouldn't you have loved to be there at the beginning?" But if it doesn't, that's okay, too.

I'm really proud of Heidi. She was quite scared, and I was quite sure for a lot of that process that it was maybe not going to happen. I had a lot of crazy back-up plans, and was just crossing my fingers. It's very understandable that it was scary, not just because it wasn't finished, but because it was coming out of her bones, and she had been working on it for a really long time. She could've perhaps continued that way, but there was something about in the weeks after that election feeling like, "What the fuck do we talk about now? What conversation can we responsibly invite people to take part in? And authentically go, yeah, let's all gather." So that definitely was a big aspect of the curation of that particular season and that particular play. For the most part, I don't think it's a great idea to book a lot of plays that aren't in any way finished, because people are going to be stressed out. They're going to be nervous. It puts a lot of stress on everybody to hold off. Hold off on those design deadlines, hold off on that budgeting, hold off on casting. It's exciting, but it's also scary, and it's scary for the person who's in the biggest position of responsibility, which is arguably the playwright. But doing it every now and then is good.

I was going to ask you about that, because, obviously, I've talked to Heidi a lot about the show, and we just did an interview with Rachel Hauck, where she was saying that she tried to wait as long as possible with the set so Heidi would have as much time as possible to figure out what the show was.

Everybody was on those instructions. We hired a composer. At one point, there was a song, because there was maybe going to be a song. We hired a choreographer, but there ended up not being a dance. That was before he started working on it, so that was great. But the song had been written. We looked at a bunch of different types of young actresses, and we found Rosdely because of Susan Bernfield, who runs New Georges. I've read Heidi say a few times that the play became [itself] with the things. It's like you go toward the light. There was a lot of development time built in. We sent them to the O'Neill at one point, and because of our relationship with 440 [rehearsal studios], we also booked a lot of rooms to sit and talk and write. [Sometimes she was like] "What if everyone decides what's here sucks?" [And I'd say] "Then we'll do that part." I sound very calm. I wasn't always. I was like, "*Then we'll do that part, I guess*!" But that was given a lot of space. Sometimes it's like that. And sometimes there's wild maneuvering and changing happening, really aggressively, because for the most part, they're very new plays that are not so set. But sometimes, just small changes are happening. You never quite know. Or sometimes you know. Sometimes you know you're in for a little bit of a ride.

Over the last 25 years there have been a lot of changes in the industry and a lot of economic changes in New York. Going forward, what do you see as being the biggest challenges to maintain what you want the company to be?

I think the most important thing is striving to pay people. It is so expensive. The city is so expensive to live in. Everything you can do to put money in the hands of young artists or other types of theatre practitioners is allowing the presence of this form in this city to continue. I feel like that is my highest priority.

I also feel like it's really, really important to keep ticket prices low. I can't tell you how many people showed up for the 25 dollar rush tickets. And how many people tell you they don't have money for a 20 dollar ticket. If that's the case with our low, low ticket prices that are not much above the price of a movie, you can imagine how completely inaccessible most Off-Broadway theatres are, that even their low 30 under 30 ticket is probably too much money for most, especially when you add the fees and what the ticket really ends up being.

Those things are really, really important. I think whatever other forces can do to protect spaces [is also important]. Rehearsal space is out of reach for so many young artists. It's crazy. [For us] it's all in-kind from 440. If we were actually giving people cash for those rooms, I don't know what would happen. We couldn't do that. It's bonkers. We try to spread the wealth but stick to our agreement with Playwrights Horizons. We were pretty profligate in the first few years, we just gave everybody space, and now we have to rein that in a little bit. It's money and space, which is money, and time, which is money.

Theatre is insanely inefficient. It involves a bazillion people to make something. They all have to be there more or less at the same time, and then everybody has to show up at the same time to see it. It's nuts. I keep thinking Netflix and all the streaming platforms are such a sign that there is a much wider, passionate audience for the kind of material we do. It's very often our artists participating in it, and thank God for it all because it's propping up the American theatre. We're limited by physics in a way, of bodies having to be in the same place at the same time. I keep thinking, "How can we Netflix-ize? How can we find the people that we know now are out there, and get at them?" I sometimes think the way is to really take a look at how theatre is marketed and framed and understood and walk far away from it. I think it's really unappealing to a lot of people who would actually like things that are actually theatre, but what they think that is, is so old-fashioned and staid and boring and stilted, that they don't want any part of it.

What are your goals for the company over the next five years?

I would like to be able to continue to be producing outside of Summerworks, and in a way that doesn't feel panic-inducing. I really want to grow. I want to grow a really solid core of audiences who will take

on faith what we're offering, and be like, "I don't know what that is, but I'm going to go." So that we don't have to hustle so much in such a micro, micro way, because we hustle too in like a put-our-ass-in-the-seat way sometimes. It's one of the things we're willing to do, but it's exhausting. I would like to really build a robust, young audience for weird work, and I would like to put on more of it, and I would like to keep on striving to make it possible to be somebody who makes that kind of work and live in New York City.

exeunt

Review: King Philip's Head Is Still On That Pike Just Down the Road at The Wild Project

Clubbed Thumb wraps up its annual Summerworks with Daniel Glenn's raucous play about governmental deadlock and the removal of a severed head. Lane Williamson reviews.

By Lane Williamson | June 26, 2019

To visit publisher's website, click here!

"King Philip's Head Is Still On That Pike Just Down the Road" at The Wild Project (Photo: Elke Young)

The Plymouth pilgrims have shucked off their Thanksgiving peacefulness and are going for the jugular. Just ask King Philip, the titular character of Daniel Glenn's new play, *King Philip's Head Is Still On That Pike Just Down the Road*. Or, actually, you can't ask him because, as you might guess from the title, King Philip has been decapitated by the time the play begins. The Colony's town council is meeting to discuss any business other than the head ceremoniously placed on the pike, but one member, Goodman Good, feels a calling to show respect to the deceased and get the head down. The year is 1677, but Glenn's portrait of governmental deadlock is not a far cry from 2019.

Though most of the characters are middle-aged or elderly white men, Glenn has them portrayed by female-identifying actors in a range of age and ethnicity. Like Clubbed Thumb's previous work, *Men on*

Boats, telling a story that centers on machismo with non-male bodies serves to highlight and lampoon the foibles of masculinity. At the center of Glenn's play is the showdown between Goodman Good and Goodman Brown (whom Glenn describes as "the honcho of the council") over the topic of King Philip's head. It becomes a test of will that extends through their entire lives: the last section of the play speeds through their future as Brown and Good attempt to outlive each other under King Philip's severed skull. Tonally, the back and forth between the two recalls not so much *The Odd Couple* as another Jack Lemmon-Walter Matthau vehicle, *Grumpy Old Men*, only more vicious. And with higher stakes.

King Philip, it must be noted, is not actually a king, or named Philip. That is a mocking moniker bestowed on the leader of the Pokanoket forces. His actual name is Metacom, and he is based on the real chief of the Wampanoag people who was beheaded in 1676 as an act of retaliation after the Wampanoag lost the war to stop the Puritans from expanding across their land. In the play, Brown is proud of King Philip's head on the pike because it is a symbol of his dominance over the people who killed his family. Good does not see himself as superior to the other race; he sees the barbarism in displaying a man's severed head as a trophy.

The play uses these opposing viewpoints to look at how a government treats people who are considered "other": the minorities who live outside a society that is primarily white, male, and Protestant. In this case, it is the white settlers who have usurped the land belonging to the Wampanoag and, in displacing them, have othered and dominated them. In a potent exchange late in the play, Brown responds to Good's defense of Metacom's people by asking him, "Do you want to be an Indian?" Good concedes that he would accept being an Indian if that is how he was born, but he is "more accustomed" to his privilege as a white man. Good's dedication to his cause is further depleted when his wife suggests that their lack of children is metaphysically tied to his unending advocacy for the removal of Metacom's head. She urges him not to bring up the topic and, for a while, his silence pays off: his wife bears two children. With his personal goals achieved, he sacrifices his goal for Metacom, again putting his privilege first.

Taking Good to stand in for we contemporary liberals who decry the government for the infinite list of objectionable deeds that define this administration and the Republican party, Glenn is calling out our hypocrisy. Good's hand-raising is our posting on social media about concentration camps on our Southern border, but not actually doing something about it because we have the privilege not to. The silence of the other town council members who agree with Good, but choose not to make waves are the hundreds of congresspeople who allow the president's rhetoric to go unchallenged, even though they know it's wrong. There is racism ingrained in Brown and Good's debate just as America elected a racist tyrant to its highest office.

The miraculous thing about Glenn's play, though, is that he tackles all of this in what is, for all intents and purposes, a raucous comedy. Directed with period-blurring winks by Caitlyn Ryan O'Connell, the play is filled with outlandish physical and verbal humor. The sparring between Brown and Good is comedic on the surface, but what simmers under it is fear and heartbreak and bloodthirstiness. With the stakes so high for these characters, but the dialogue so frivolous, it sets up a juxtaposition that underscores every word. We're laughing because Brown's arguments are presented as absurd, but to him, they're gospel.

Jennifer Ikeda plays Brown like a son in his father's clothes. There's a lot of pomposity, there's a lot of smug righteousness, there's a lot of trying to prove himself. Ikeda leans into the more fearsome aspects of Brown's personality, snarling her way through the arguments, using the loudness and the authority of

Brown's voice to override any opposition. Crystal Finn plays Good with an eye-popping, stressed-face-twisting neuroticism. Finn has an innate ability to externalize a character's interior anguish. As an actor, she *thinks* better than anyone; you can see the cogs turn and turn and snag and turn.

The final section of the play allows these two to strip away the zaniness and focus on the core of their characters. All the way downstage, they sit on a bench and go at each other until there's nothing left. They are both zapped of their anger, of their need to fight, but they're still pushing at it. Something happens to Good, though, and to see Finn drain herself of all that has filled her up for the preceding seventy minutes is bone-chilling. She sits on the bench like a shadow of herself, hollow and aching. *King Philip's Head Is Still On That Pike Just Down the Road* gives you the laughs and then grabs them all back and leaves you to think about what was so funny in the first place.

VULTURE

Theater Review: The Dizzying Whirl of a Messy Texas Family in *Plano*

By Sara Holdren | April 13, 2019

To visit publisher's website, click here!

From *Plano,* at the Connelly Theater. Photo: Elke Young

Will Arbery's wonderfully unsettling *Plano* is a kind of inside-out play: it goes so far into the uncanny, protean mind's eye that it comes out the other side, revealing all sorts of disturbing social truths. Directed in a focused rush of fight-or-flight energy by Taylor Reynolds, *Plano* appeared in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks Festival last year. Now it returns for a run at the Connelly, where its thrilling oddities have a bit more elbow room and the scruffy Astroturf lawn of Daniel Zimmerman's set spills over the lip of the theater's fantastic old proscenium stage. Arbery grew up in Texas as "the only boy with seven sisters," and in the taut, wily *Plano,* he turns a fun-house mirror onto certain aspects of that autobiography.

The play's three sisters — related to those of Chekhov inasmuch as they're stuck as hell — inhabit a couple of bleak suburban houses outside Dallas as well as a shared, haunted mindscape. Anne (Crystal Finn) is the oldest, a professor with a husband named John (Cesar J. Rosado) — actually it's Juan, but he's "always wanted to be John" — who may or may not be gay and may or may not have married her for a green card. Isabel (Susannah Flood) is the youngest: devout, self-sacrificing, possibly anorexic, and never as "fine" as she claims. Genevieve (Miriam Silverman) is in the middle. A sculptor with a straying husband called Steve (Ryan King), she's the kind of driven, skeptical caregiver whose concern comes off as bullying. "Don't fuck up your life," she snaps at both of her sisters, a warning that's more personal than she lets on.

So far, so domestic — but Reynolds and her actors immediately bring the play's rapid, trippy rhythms and its Tilt-A-Whirl sense of reality to the fore. "Talk as though your life depended on it. *Now*," Genevieve demands as she and her sisters huddle on her porch together, and indeed, Arbery's characters behave as if they're always following similar orders. At least, the women do. If Genevieve, Anne, and Isabel stop talking, they might blink out like tiny lights, but John, Steve, and a frightening male figure known only as the Faceless Ghost (Brendan Dalton) can come or go, speak or not speak, as they please. But whatever their literal physical wanderings, the sisters — and, as the play's harrowing climax reveals, their mother, Mary (Mary Shultz) — are trapped, clinging desperately to each other in a world where the edges of sanity, possibility, and agency are steadily crumbling.

If you live in this world, time flies when you're having the opposite of fun, and though we laugh as Anne rattles breathlessly through a sequence like, "We're going down to Juarez for New Year's … See you later. It's later. Juarez was wonderful" — the hairs on the backs of our necks stand up. Something's out of joint. The world hurtles forward yet nothing moves. People split and shift and disappear to Plano ("Stop saying Plano, I hate Plano," Genevieve snaps) as if it's some kind of psychological wormhole, not a town but, as the stoners say, a state of mind. The mundane slips ever closer to the nightmarish — indeed, the sisters hardly know the difference between their memories and their nightmares. Soon enough, there are two Steves, one who's left Genevieve for an intern (and whose "new thing is now intersectional feminism") and one who's still lurking — lumpish, sulky, and terrifying — around her house. There's John, slippery and unknowable as a deep-sea creature, who unblinkingly assures Anne that, though there are many more of him ("All the mes … All around. Everywhere"), he "keeps them invisible" and she'll "never need to know where they go." And there's that ghost, faceless, needy, and menacing — and hellbent on keeping Isabel in the theater. He wrestles her back onto the stage when she panics and tries to make a metatheatrical break for it. As Isabel discovers, say "Plano" enough times and it starts to warp into "Play — No."

The chronology of events in Arbery's play is less significant than the feeling of cyclical vertigo it induces. Yes, there are marriages, pregnancies, divorces, moves away and moves back, but *Plano* isn't a line but a loop. The zealous, well-meaning Mary has bequeathed to her daughters certain diseases of the soul — from Genevieve's repressed rage and Isabel's physical and spiritual dysmorphia to Anne's self-erasing ability, when someone asks her about herself, to "smile and deftly make it about them" — and in adulthood the girls are caught up playing out patterns that have become prisons. "I feel made up, and I feel like I had no hand in that making up," says Anne. "I don't know why I'm suddenly a mother, and a wife. And I don't know why I'm suddenly 35. I love and hate everyone, I scream in my car, I scream at my kid, I'm afraid of saying anything to John that will make him hate me. I want everything to be okay." Genevieve puts her finger on the injustice of the sisters' plight: Somehow, they seem to recede in their suffering, while the men expand in theirs — literally proliferating because one body isn't enough for all their feelings. "Why can't *I* be the one who has two bodies?" Genevieve growls. "Me and the other me? One body gives a fuck, the other body doesn't give a fuck." Her ambition thwarted, her identity blurring, she laments in one of the play's most piercing moments, "I wish when I looked to the future I saw me, standing alone with the things I've made."

Silverman, Finn, and Flood feed each other, and feed *off* each other, with electric energy and precision. They create a pulsing, spinning three-atom molecule at the center of the play, which is as funny as it is powerfully disturbing. "I wish there had never been a Steve!," Genevieve howls in frustration to her sisters. "And I wish there'd never been that fucking Norwegian book. What's it called? The one that enabled him? About the white guy struggling?" And if you think that's good, just wait till one of Knausgård's actual 900-page coffee-table bricks shows up as a hilariously deadly prop. Reynolds and her choreographer Kelly Bartnik, backed by Tyler Kieffer's shifting, eerie soundtrack, put together a

series of sinister dream ballets, and even when the sisters meet in full daylight, that nighttime sense of running — running without stopping from some monster, toward some cliff — is still there.

As we left, the friend who saw *Plano* with me compared it to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. She's right. Both have a way of presenting as "quirky" before you really get to know them, and both, if you had to give them a genre, are actually much closer to horror. The horror of the internal landscape and the way the world has somehow surreptitiously cultivated it without our consent. With its mysterious plagues and its slug infestations, its multiplying men and its cornered, fighting women, its sense that the drab, weird, grossly unfair universe is always on the edge of an apocalypse that never comes, *Plano* is a fiercely smart contemporary dream play — to paraphrase Ursula Le Guin, a "realism of a larger reality."

Time Out NEW YORK

Plano

Recommended ★★★★☆

By Helen Shaw | April 13, 2019

Photograph: Courtesy Elke Young

To visit publisher's website, click here!

The first 15 minutes of Will Arbery's *Plano* are experimental-theater perfection. They move like lightning. They're hilarious. They look like one thing (three sisters chatting on a porch) but they are another (a reality-bending boot camp for the mind). If other parts of this high-weird comedy don't have the same precision and surprise, it may be because the first moments have worked too well: Our thoughts have been accelerated to fruit-fly speeds, so the later sequences strike our newly superperceptive brains as a little slow.

On a seemingly normal wooden porch in Texas, Anne (Crystal Finn) rattles through a conversation with bossy Genevieve (Miriam Silverman) and fragile Isabel (Susannah Flood). Anne is pregnant, and she's telling her slightly shocked sisters about her new lover John. "Okay I'll introduce him later. It's later, here he is." John (the superb Cesar J. Rosado) melts around the proscenium edge and is suddenly there.

In *Plano,* time whips past us, like film on a reel that's been cranked into high gear. John keeps slipping off—he has things to do in Plano, he says—and other men, even other Johns, multiply and buzz around the women. The three have their own eerie capacities, which emerge in a few witchy moments, but male menace challenges their power of three. Genevieve's husband Steve (Ryan King) leaves her for

someone younger, but versions of him are always still around, demanding attention and praise. A faceless boy tackles Isabel as she starts to have ecstatic visions; she complains her God has turned against her, but it's just the devil next door.

What the hell is going on? Arbery is playing with a sunny-Texas-weekend version of Lovecraftian horror—with men providing the terror instead of squid-aliens—while also writing a tightly observed portrait of sisters. Director Taylor Reynolds presides over a production that does Arbery proud: Daniel Zimmerman's set looks normal, but the more you look at the simple wooden house in Isabella Byrd's slanting light, the more you mistrust its geometries. And in a stellar cast, Finn, Silverman and Flood prove to be masters. It's delicious to see a playwright binding genres so confidently (body-double horror and rueful family comedy), but the real pleasure is in how much *Plano* manages to bend how you perceive reality beyond the proscenium. Heading out of the theater, I thought, "It's later, I'm home," expecting time to warp to my needs. And you know? It kind of worked.

The New York Times

Review: Can a Play Make the Constitution Great Again?

By Jesse Green | March 31, 2019

The New York Times Critic's Pick

[To visit publisher's website, click here!]

Heidi Schreck in her play "What the Constitution Means to Me" on Broadway at the Helen Hayes Theater. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

As you enter the theater, there are 163 men onstage.

Not in person, but in battalions of framed photographs staring down from the walls of an American Legion hall circa 1987.

Soon a 15-year-old girl named Heidi arrives, with a compulsively ingratiating smile and a buttercup yellow blazer. She is there, in essence, to debate them.

Hardly seems like a fair fight, does it? It's not meant to be. Heidi Schreck's "What the Constitution Means to Me," which opened on Broadway at the Helen Hayes Theater on Sunday, is nothing less than a chronicle of the legal subjugation of women by men, as experienced in the day-to-day injustices of living while female and in the foundational American document that offers paltry recourse.

But if "What the Constitution Means to Me" is nothing less than that, it is also very much more. It is a tragedy told as a comedy, a work of inspired protest, a slyly crafted piece of persuasion and a tangible contribution to the change it seeks. It is not just the best play to open on Broadway so far this season, but also the most important.

Unlike typical "important" plays, it doesn't announce itself as such. Rachel Hauck's diorama set, already minimal during an Off Broadway run at New York Theater Workshop last year, is a bit smaller at the Hayes. (There were 205 men Off Broadway.) The cast remains tiny. Oliver Butler's rivetingly intelligent production includes no special effects except the kind achieved by words.

But watch out: In a play that parses the meaning of a 230-year-old legal document, words are tricky.

Ms. Schreck, left, with Mike Iveson on the set inspired by an American Legion hall. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

“What the Constitution Means to Me” even begins in deception. Addressing the audience directly, Ms. Schreck, now 47, tells and sometimes enacts the impossibly sunny story of how, as a teenager, she earned the money that would put her through college by preaching about the Constitution at competitions around the country. In these competitions, sponsored by the American Legion, she and other entrants were asked to give seven-minute orations that drew a “personal connection between your own life and the document” before extemporizing on an amendment selected onstage at random.

Young Heidi’s stock speech compared the Constitution, hilariously, to a witch’s caldron. (Her chief competitor went with a patchwork quilt metaphor.) But unpacking the Ninth Amendment in her oration, and responding to the 14th in her extemporaneous challenge, Heidi often avoided making those valuable personal connections.

We feel the suppression. From the start, something violent and presumptively male has been threatening the complacent skin of the story. (A legionnaire played by Mike Iveson sits at the sidelines, occasionally explaining the rules but mostly just watching.) Ms. Schreck’s jokes, left unrefrigerated a second too long, keep curdling after the laugh. She zooms past certain details — such as growing up in an “abortion-free zone” — as if they were haunted houses.

They are. And in the next part of the play, removing her jacket and reintroducing herself as a grown woman less eager to please, she lets the ghosts out. We learn about her great-great-grandmother, a melancholic mail-order bride; the history of domestic abuse in her family; and her brush with certain rights the Supreme Court eventually located in the “penumbra” of the Ninth Amendment and in the right to privacy of the 14th.

Though neither of these concepts is explicit in the document, the teenage Ms. Schreck merrily interprets them as prime examples of the framers' brilliant modesty. "The Constitution doesn't tell you all the rights that you have," she says, "because it doesn't *know*."

But seen now from the other side of the great achievements of the civil rights, women's rights and gay rights movements — all of which are threatened by the same shadowy vagueness that nurtured them in the first place — the penumbra is not a field of freedoms but a wasteland of neglect. If you are not a white, male landowner as envisioned by the founding fathers, the Constitution has little to offer you.

"Our bodies had been left out of the document from the beginning," Ms. Schreck says.

Statements like that, out of context, may make "What the Constitution Means to Me" seem merely polemical, possibly misandrist and surely grim. It's none of those things. Though it is angrier and more pointed now than it was downtown, its wording clearer and its jokes finer tuned, it is also more accessible. Ms. Schreck, known as an actor before she was known as a playwright, gives a real and wrenching performance, not a speech. And Mr. Butler has shaped the play's representation of maleness — largely through Ms. Schreck's interactions with the inventive Mr. Iveson — with loving complexity.

Rosdely Ciprian, left, is one of two teenagers who participate in a live debate with Ms. Schreck as part of the show. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Least of all is the play grim. Although it takes us through the classic sequence of tragedy, from hubris to recognition to horror, it doesn't bring down the curtain there. After forcing you to consider for 80 minutes whether your civics class enthusiasm for the Constitution is still defensible, Ms. Schreck then introduces a 20-minute coda that includes a live debate on the subject. (Topic: Should We Abolish the U.S. Constitution?) After a coin toss, a guest debater from a local high school takes one side and Ms. Schreck the other. An audience member judges.

At the performance I saw, Rosdely Ciprian, a preternaturally composed 14-year-old New Yorker, spoke for abolishment. (At alternate performances, the guest debater is Thursday Williams.) Ms. Ciprian's arguments, honed during a year of the play's development, are sophisticated and cutting, and often hilarious. But so are Ms. Schreck's. Of course, at other performances, they might wind up arguing the opposite positions.

That they are debating at all is an antidote to grimness. It's also an instance of theatrical activism at its purest, modeling the world the play hopes to achieve: one in which even first principles are open to

vigorous, orderly debate, and in which all stakeholders, not just powerful ones, are invited to the podium.

After all, Ms. Schreck points out, it would have been impossible for two women to argue policy on a public stage when the Constitution was written. They couldn't have voted until 1920. Even then, the barriers faced by Ms. Ciprian, who is Dominican-American, and Ms. Williams, who is Jamaican-American, might well have been insuperable.

Being underage, they can't vote now, either; some of the unexpected joy of "What the Constitution Means to Me" comes from the hope that people so smart and passionate and ready for change will soon be part of the electorate.

Joy comes too from watching an imaginative new kind of theater emerge. It doesn't come from nowhere, of course: In some ways, "What the Constitution Means to Me" recalls Lisa Kron's memoir play "Well," in which a prepared speech about urban decline is hijacked by a mother who begs to differ. In other ways, Ms. Schreck's play seems to be part of the wave of formal experimentation being led by young black playwrights today.

Linking these works is a sense of backlash and betrayal. But in the wake of tragedy, Ms. Schreck offers something more than catharsis. "What the Constitution Means to Me" is one of the things we always say we want theater to be: an act of civic engagement. It restarts an argument many of us forgot we even needed to have.

Summerworks 2019

Recommended ★★★★☆

By Helen Shaw | May 23, 2019

To visit publisher's website, click here!

Photograph: Courtesy Elke Young Lunch Bunch

Clubbed Thumb mounts its 24th annual new-works festival, one of the best ways to see which

local playwrights have their fingers on the pulse. The first show is Sarah Einspanier's portrait of harried public defenders, *Lunch Bunch* (May 17–28), directed by Tara Ahmadinejad. Next up is Zhu Yi's *You Never Touched the Dirt* (June 3–13), a depiction of economic transformation and its costs, directed by downtown mainstay Ken Rus Schmoll. The final show is Daniel Glenn's look at life on the Plymouth Plantation, *King Philip's Head Is Still on That Pike Just Down the Road* (June 19–29), directed by Caitlin Ryan O'Connell.

Hey, here's a dare! Try seeing *Lunch Bunch,* Sarah Einspanier's excellent workplace comedy, when you're hungry. Its characters are overtaxed public defenders (the script suggests they might be in the Bronx), and their lone joy is a co-op lunch agreement shared by five proud members. In rattling, lickety-split dialogue, the lawyers tell us about the sustainable homemade delicacies—like sesame-encrusted kale chips and jackfruit barbecue—that they bring in to share with fellow Bunchers. (My notes here read: "Buy jackfruit.")

Membership in the Lunch Bunch is jealously guarded, so when rookie cook Nicole (Julia Sirna-Frest) subs in for a vacationing Tal (Eliza Bent), we have the whisper of plot. But there's little room for a story, because Einspanier has crammed every second with marvelous character studies and syncopated conversations that reveal the topsy-turvy stakes of a life lived in service. Everybody in the office is tightly wound: Jacob (Ugo Chukwu) is one bad salad away from a breakdown, and Tuttle (comic superwoman Keilly McQuail) keeps wondering if her misery means she's making a difference. Behind its giddy surrealism (someone goes on a vision trip to the Stone Age), *Lunch Bunch* is a heartfelt paean to people who work desperately to help others.

Einspanier and director Tara Ahmadinejad operate hand in glove; the amount of dynamic indication in the text (font changes, ellipses, etc.) makes the script seem almost like a piece of music. The downtown stars that Clubbed Thumb has assembled for its first Summerworks offering are so at ease with the play's relentless pace and rhythms that at times they almost seem to be singing. Einspanier is playing a little game with the audience's ability to focus—can you think about the real world when someone's talking about French cheese?—while also being frank about the brutality of the legal system. *Lunch Bunch* is at once a cry for help and a joyful, fizzy comedy of manners; it celebrates both getting a father limited visitation rights and the value of a good sandwich. The fact that some victories aren't very big—say, the size of a little brown lunch bag, or an hour-long play—doesn't negate them. If anything, we are all the more grateful when one of them turns out to be so delicious.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

In Pursuit of the Urgently Inexplicable

Will Arbery and His Plays

By Billy McEntee | April 2019

To visit publisher's website, click here!

Playwright Will Arbery on the set of Clubbed Thumb's production of *Plano*. Photo: Peter Bellamy.

"I don't think my plays have protagonists," Will Arbery shared.

It's true. His plays are devoid of a central figure; that'd be too much pressure on one person. Arbery—tender, clement, and an exposed nerve who shines with a quiet charisma—does not intend to be the center of attention, even as his career is exploding, and so it seems fair that he wouldn't force a principal role on anyone else, even a fictional character. Appropriately enough, after our interview, he suggested I perhaps lead with the first person in this profile; it was the first time an interviewee offered that idea.

His suggestion may have been because we discussed, at length, our Catholic upbringings and the role it now plays in my life and his works. But more simply, his offer may have been one of immense humility, one of the less vexing gifts of inherited Catholicism and something Arbery has in spades.

Warm as he is, Arbery's plays deftly excavate bleak truths out of even bleaker circumstances: *Evanston Salt Costs Climbing* confronts climate change and capitalism, *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* erupts the ire and fears of red-state conservatives fighting to be heard, and *Plano*—which Clubbed Thumb

premiered in last year's Summerworks and is now reviving for a limited Off-Broadway run—follows Texan sisters and the shadows of masculinity that haunt them. In these unnerving and harrowing plays, even the darkest moments seem to flicker with a unified, shimmering brilliance: truth without answers, finality without resolve.

Arbery's isolated characters, each scaling their own Everest, seek community as hungrily as they pursue solutions to their dire circumstances. As a result, his pieces are often ensemble-driven, and even his more disagreeable characters, on the fringe of the communities to which they're so desperate to belong, are treated empathetically. In *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, Teresa, a young Bannonite, worries that her political convictions are costing her more than her friends.

EMILY

What are you scared of?

TERESA *(cold)*

That my wedding won't be beautiful. That it just won't be beautiful. That people won't know how to celebrate me, or my love. That people won't trust my love with Patrick, they'll walk away saying: "I wonder how long that will last."

Pause. She gets quieter.

Or just that people don't know me, that I don't let them know me
That I'm too private with my love
Or that I don't really know how to love at all

The search for belonging is not an uncommon impulse for a writer to chase. "I often imagined scenarios in which I was the other," Arbery said. "Growing up the only brother among seven sisters in a conservative Catholic environment, there was a fear I would be gay, and I was aware of that from a very young age."

Before studying at Kenyon College—and then Northwestern for his masters—Arbery went to a grammar and high school run by Hungarian monks in Dallas, where he was "growing up with the expectation that I might be gay," he said. Arbery is straight, but he remembers "feeling like whatever it is that people are talking about, I feel a kinship with because of how much it was projected onto me. It's a really. . . I don't know if I've ever tried to articulate this. The sheer fact that I was being viewed through that lens was like I was identifying with something. I didn't even know what sex was, but I was already identifying with the other."

Queerness and Catholicism—or many religions, for that matter—are often incongruous, and so Arbery's plays frequently examine identity through faith. The desire to explore religion started early as his parents are celebrated Catholic professors at the tops of their field.

"I grew up with two extremely articulate, brilliant, poetic thinkers for parents; from a very young age it was very clear they were very Catholic, very conservative," Arbery said. "But it was always poetic—I don't know how else to describe it. It was thoughtful, it had gravitas, it was formidable."

Arbery's parents greatly influence his plays, as do his sisters who became the inspiration for *Plano* (performances begin again April 8 at the Connelly Theatre). *Plano* follows three sisters—no, not those sisters, though Arbery's characters share a similar distress to Chekhov's infamous trio—who are stricken with a series of strange plagues. "I can't think of a play I've written where my sisters don't factor in just a little bit," Arbery said. "I feel really grateful—it's terrifying to imagine where I would be, who I would be if I didn't have each and every one of them. I just love them all so much."

Nuanced female characters permeate Arbery's plays, as does faith. If Christopher Durang wrote for wound-licking and satire-seeking Catholics in *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, Arbery writes for the steadfast ones clinging to beliefs in the face of cataclysmic cultural shifts in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* and *Plano*.

Both of those plays—along with *Evanston Salt Costs Climbing*—feature eerie, supernatural omens that are never quite explained. In *Heroes,* the roar from a screeching generator ever on the fritz spookily, terrifyingly disrupts the debates of Catholic college alumni trying to understand their place in a nation they once ruled. In *Plano,* a masked man lurks in the shadows and haunts the play's lone unmarried sister who is desperate for purpose and a companion. And in *Evanston,* a lady in a purple hat curses a street salter as heated pavers threaten to make him and his job obsolete.

Left to right: Miriam Silverman, Susannah Flood and Crystal Finn in Clubbed Thumb's production of Will Arbery's *Plano*.

"I never mean to, but I always have something in my plays that becomes a real question mark that never has a satisfying answer because if it did it wouldn't be a question mark," Arbery said. "I can't help it. These devices feel so much more realistic to me than having a satisfying dramaturgical answer for everything in the play. I guess I believe in mystery, I believe in the unanswerable."

Are we discussing faith again?

"We might be," Arbery laughed. These unanswered questions—and the splintered, ominous worlds of Arbery's plays—can leave audiences itchy. "When I was at Cape Cod Theatre Project last summer, developing *Heroes,* an audience member asked me pretty pointedly, 'What is the generator, what is that sound, why don't you tell us what that is?'" Arbery recalled. A moment later, there was a startling, crazed sound in the theater. "I said, these things happen!"

"I guess I'm always wondering," he continued, "Can I still have faith without having faith, can I believe in this thing while not believing in this thing?"

It's both a dazzling and simple question. Through a generator, a mask, and a purple hat—and the humming possibility of our belief in them—our existential doubts are often hiding in plain sight. Some of us can ignore them better than others.

For Arbery, anxiety and identity have always been inextricably linked. "A lot of my fears have to do with being a straight white male, and I think the feeling of being watched and the feeling of not knowing whether your desires or secrets or thoughts are okay affects everything I write," he confessed.

"But," he said, "my exhilaration and excitement and sense of belonging has also increased. I really really like the way the conversation has shifted, and I really like being assigned an identity. And I like being evaluated on the grounds of my identity. Now that the cultural discussion has called to task a lot of white writers and male writers, everything that I am, I feel excited. I guess I feel like there's an invitation and a hunger for writers who wanted to tell the truth about the hyper-specific details of what it's like to grow up in the ways that I grew up. The things that I was taught as being 'right' informed so much of the thinking behind where we are right now."

Introspection has, selfishly, not always been characteristic of white people, whose privilege has made us assume our identities are superior and unnecessary to dissect. But identity has long been on Arbery's mind, and its exploration has allowed him to craft stirringly contemplative and profoundly human works.

"I think in terms of thought crimes and the idea that God is watching us all the time and what that breeds socially. Do people know what I'm thinking about? Is it obvious that I'm a horrible person?" he said, laughing. "That kind of stuff."

On my way home after our interview, I felt like I was narrowing in on some kind of conclusion. This slippery thought process reminded me of my own relationship to faith, where belief is fortified by richer questions, not by quicker answers. I tried to define what these breathing omens—the generator and the purple hat and the masked man—mean, but the more definition I tried to ascribe them the less significant they became.

I then thought of the terrified alumni in *Heroes* and the war they feel is coming. I thought of the sister in *Plano* who is battling multiple versions of her husband in her head—and in real life.

And then I thought of something else, and it made me shudder: Is paranoia Arbery's protagonist?

Inescapable and omnipresent, it is the dread his characters dance with in each scene, one that seems to go on its own journey. Toward the end of *Evanston Salt Costs Climbing,* Basil, one of the salters, is

stopped mid-thought, frozen by his own existence and plight. "I just found a little sadness for a second," he says. "But I moved through it."

Arbery's characters are constantly reminded of their small sadnesses, ones that reflect larger, seemingly insurmountable issues—climate change, political divide, oppressive masculinity. In the liminal space between despair and possibility, Arbery activates his characters. "I'm passionate about work that serves as both a response to the visible world and an expedition into the invisible world," he said. "I'm passionate about the urgently unexplainable."