

Performing Community 3

Short Essays on Community, Diversity,
Inclusion, and the Performing Arts

By Blair Ruble



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Center



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Artistic Visionaries and Community Creators

The power of the performing arts to nurture inclusive communities has been praised widely in recent years; so much so that “creative placemaking” is now seen as a powerful tool in community development. The supportive role of community in fostering artistic innovation is less acknowledged. This series highlights the work of visionaries for whom creating communities of students, protégés, audiences and donors has become a strategic element in transforming their arts.



CONTENTS

Chapter 1- Profiles of Artistic Visionaries and Community Creators: / 1

- Dmitry Bertman and Opera / 2
- Paul Carr and Jazz / 6
- Zeljko and Natasha Djukic and Dramatic Theater / 8
- Lawrence Edelson and Opera / 10
- Vanessa German and Spoken Word Opera / 13
- Hernán Jacinto and Argentine Jazz / 16
- Andrew Kingsley, Andrew Vaught and Social Impact Theater / 19
- Nikolai Kolayda and Playwriting / 23
- Larissa Koniuk and Bicycle Opera / 26
- Brent Lindsay and Amy Pinto and Community-Specific Theater / 29
- Hugo and Rebecca Medrano and Hispanic Theater / 33
- David Alan Miller and Contemporary Classical Music / 37
- Mansai Nomura and *Kyōgen* Theater / 41
- Mark and Susan Marie Rhea and Irish Theater / 44
- Ari Roth and Transformational Theater / 47
- Albert Schultz and Civic Theatre / 51
- Daniel Soulières and Performance Dance / 54
- Grace Srinivasan and Paula Maust and Baroque Music / 57
- Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili and Physical Theater / 59
- C. Brian Williams and Stepping / 63

Chapter 2-Conclusion to Performing Communities 1, 2 & 3 / 66

- Making Cities Work as Holistic Communities of Promise / 67
- Contents to Performing Community 1 and 2 / 71

INTRODUCTION

The Woodrow Wilson Center's Urban Sustainability Laboratory began posting short essays in 2012 concerning the importance of the performing arts for inclusion in an era of urban diversity. The first collection of essays was published in late 2015 and the second a year later. These brief compilations feature essays by Urban Laboratory Director Blair A. Ruble, with particular attention being paid to the role of diversity, inclusion and the performing arts in nurturing a sense of community. Information about the previous volumes are to be found at the end of this report.

This collection seeks to reverse the causal arrows in the relationship between community and the arts by focusing on artistic visionaries who are also community creators. The power of the performing arts to nurture inclusive communities has been praised widely in recent years; so much so that "creative placemaking" is

now seen as a powerful tool in community development. The supportive role of community in fostering artistic innovation is less acknowledged. This series highlights the work of visionaries for whom creating communities of students, protégés, audiences and donors has become a strategic element in transforming their arts.

The artistic visionaries profiled here are community creators. In nearly every case they came from somewhere else--as migrants within their own countries, as immigrants, as students from elsewhere--seeking the opportunity to innovate artistically. They have created new communities of performers, audiences and supporters sharing a fresh artistic sensibility. These communities are open, inviting, dynamic and fluid. They constitute an alternative vision to notions of community conceived as closed circles, excluding all who are not among the embraced. Their artistic visions include an

innovative sense of community suitable for our times.

Now more than a quarter-century old, the Wilson Center's Urban Sustainability Laboratory--which began as the Comparative Urban Studies Program--has long promoted holistic views of cities as places of promise. Whether sponsoring discussions about the expanding peri-urban communities in Africa, innovative housing in Latin America, or new smart transit systems in Asia, the Center's urban programming has sought to embed the discussion of specific urban challenges in larger conversations about community, governance and transparency. Our approach to the urban condition very much aligns with the intention of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 advocating for cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. As the essays in this collection reveal, the performing arts are an essential



component of the quest for such urban values.

As in the first two collections, the essays presented here are by Blair Ruble. They have benefited tremendously from the support and contributions of Urban Sustainability colleagues Allison Garland, Kathy Butterfield, and Savannah Boylan.

Profiles



Dmitry Bertman and Opera

July 26, 2017

Moscow in 1990 was on a collision course with history. Within a year or so, the country of which it was capital would no longer exist, taking entrenched elites, institutions and living standards with it. This future was already present. The city's streets appeared empty both because there were few places to go and because folks from elsewhere had stopped coming to Moscow to shop. Rather, Muscovites headed off to other cities where nourishment was less expensive and more plentiful. Food disappeared from displays in most Moscow stores; though it was still possible to obtain minimum daily sustenance at work, private markets and from rationed goods still available at state stores. Prices were high, variety nonexistent and any task took extraordinary time and effort.

The city literally was falling apart. People were exhausted, frustrated and had lost hope for improvement. Everyone seemed to have a horrid tale or two about two- to three-hour lines for such staples as butter or salt even though lines had shrunk with

rationing. Many Muscovites viewed the era's reformers as inept and everyone detested those still in power. Yet, for those with resources, the Moscow real estate market offered munificent spaces at a pittance. Musicians were cheap too. Among all the nightmares, dreams could be born.

Dmitry Bertman was a dreamer, and a fortunate one at that. As he writes on his personal web site: "I am a lucky guy, as so many of my dreams when a child, came true." Those dreams were operatic.

From childhood, Bertman wanted to be part of opera. As the beloved director of the Odessa Operetta Theater Matvei Osherovskii once exclaimed, "Bertman came to the planet of Earth to devote himself to Opera.... He knows opera, music, and languages since his childhood. He is a great pianist and knows everything about singing.... In him musical and theatrical talents focus like rays of light in a lens."

Bertman graduated from the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts, where he now

is a faculty member. At the age of twenty-three, he established his own opera company--the Helikon Opera--in far off Syktyvkar, forestry center and capital of the Komi Republic eight hundred miles northeast of Moscow. Bertman named his new company "Helikon" after the Ancient Greek mountain that was home to the Muses and site of the pond in which Narcissus became transfixed by his own beauty.

Months later he brought his show to Moscow. He became music theater director of the Elizabet Buhne Theatre in Salzburg, Austria that same year, 1990, and has been presenting opera at major theaters across Europe ever since. The Helikon, which became a state company in 1993, remains his paramount passion.

Bertman has sought to bring psychological realism and outstanding acting to the opera stage without diminishing the musical quality of a performance; and to do so while presenting new interpretations of nineteenth century classics together with lesser-known works from the Russian and European repertoire. His emphasis on acting necessitated a strong connection between performer and audience.

Accordingly, he favors performances on smaller stages and at non-traditional venues. There is nothing "grand" about Bertman's opera even when the operas being performed and the actors who are performing them might appear with regularity at the world's grandest opera houses. In 2015, for example, Helikon joined with the Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra

***Boris Godunov, an opera by Modest Mussorgsky.
Photo: Quincena Musical (Flickr) <https://flic.kr/p/18wEAGz>***



to stage Anton Rubinstein's 1871 opera "Demon" with international stars Dmitry Khvorostovsky, Asmik Grigorian, Alexander Tsymbalyuk and Evgeny Svetlanov.

To realize his dream Bertman required a venue, performers and audiences. The collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated his quest.

Taking advantage of Moscow's disintegrating economy, he secured control of a lovely eighteenth century nobleman's house up the hill from the Moscow Conservatory in the very heart of Moscow. Dating from the 1730s, the Shakhovskoy-Glebov-Streshnev mansion on Bolshaya Nikitskaya is among the few aristocratic homes remaining in Moscow. Once the mansion was in his hands, he was able to carve out two auditoria, one seating just 250 and the other 70.

Eventually, the Helikon Opera rescued a neoclassical columned auditorium added in the nineteenth century, redeeming it from a Soviet-era tattered-yet-stately condition following decades of use by the USSR Union of Cultural Workers. Helikon created just the right room to host intimate opera performances.

The building would undergo major renovations between 2007 and 2015 during which time the opera was housed in one of the tawdry Khrushchev-era office buildings along Novyi Arbat once thought to have symbolized Soviet modernity.

As before, the now renovated elegant state-of-the art mansion facility retains both a larger 250 seat hall and a smaller auditorium for chamber productions.

Bertman's company benefited from the depressed wages of the post-Soviet collapse. He was able to build a company of world-class performers desperate for any paying job. Beginning with seven colleagues, Bertman has grown the company to over 350 artists, musicians and administrators today; including some of Russia's premier opera singers. Many of these performers have come from Bertman's studios and training programs and share his dedication to acting excellence on the opera stage. To sustain these efforts, Helikon performs frequently--over 200 times a year--and tours abroad regularly where the company has won high praise and recognition.

Central to Bertman's vision has been an audience that embraces his view of opera as combining psychological depth, high-quality acting and superb singing. Realizing that his company could fill the seats with opera aficionados for only a performance or two at a time, Bertman set out to expand the company's audience to include many who never considered themselves to be fans of opera. He did so through innovative performances and enhanced accessibility, both within his own theater and in public spaces around the city.

Bertman brought new energy to old standards. His staging of Bizet's "Carmen" is filled with sex and drugs as the action is set in a burned-out carcass of an automobile; the costumed cast of Johan Strauss's "Die Fledermaus" greets the audience in the theater's grand staircase entrance as if welcoming everyone to an enchanting masquerade-ball; Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin" is performed in high 1920s costumes.

In other instances, Bertman focuses on little-known and rarely performed works by famous composers, always doing so with a special dollop of the unexpected. In the mid-1730s, as coffee was becoming all the rage in Germany, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote a cantata about the beverage evidently as a way of paying lighthearted homage to the habitués of Zimmermann's Coffee-House. In the hands of Helikon, Bach's "Coffee Cantata" becomes a one-act opera set in an appropriately delightful café as the cast compares life's various pleasures unfavorably to that of a good cup of coffee--all while preparing demitasse and espresso and serving the members of the audience. Bertman reaches into popular culture for inspiration working with the company to produce completely new works. In some instances--such as a celebration of George Gershwin--the performance draws on the more serious side of twentieth century popular culture. In others, such as "Cartoons-Opera," the company presents a concert program featuring

beloved songs from children's films; while their production "Back in the USSR!" another concert program featuring popular Soviet-era mass song, draws on the pull of nostalgia to attract new audiences who otherwise probably never would have considered attending an opera performance.

Bertman has fulfilled his dream of a life in opera and much more. He has elevated acting standards and expanded the psychological depth of opera performances without devaluing their musical quality. He has done so by leveraging the harsh realities of social collapse at the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, converting them into assets for extending the reach of his beloved opera. He has emboldened opera as an art by creatively engaging a wider public rarely seen at its performances. In accomplishing all of these achievements, he has unambiguously reinvigorated the art of opera.

Paul Carr and Jazz

September 19, 2017

Saxophonist Paul Carr tells the story of waiting with his saxophone at the baggage claim belt in St. Petersburg, Russia, when another passenger came up and said: “Paul Carr, Westminster Church in Washington.” Paul recounts this incident as a way of testifying to the global reach of Friday Night Jazz at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Southwest Washington, D.C. Home to a hugely successful concert series now nearly two decades old, Westminster has become a touchstone of the D.C. jazz scene.

Telling the story in this way downplays Carr’s own international fame. Not only does Carr regularly tour the world and the country, he was a regular performer at the White House during the Clinton administration; sharing then President Clinton’s love of the Saxophone.

Carr is more than a performer. He has emerged as a tireless promoter of jazz, a teacher as well as a performer, and the moving spirit of a re-vivified Mid-Atlantic Jazz Festival that extends the music’s reach beyond well-trod territory. For Carr, sustaining innovative improvisational music requires sustaining the current and future players who will take the art form to new levels; and sustaining the audiences who appreciate the sound. His holistic vision of jazz emerges from his own experience growing up in Houston.

Carr grew up in inner-city Houston where legendary teacher Conrad Johnson at Kashmere High School took an interest in the young Carr. By the time he had graduated, Carr was a member of the Kashmere High School Stage Band and had inculcated the large Texas style of playing the tenor sax embraced by his early mentors Arnett Cobb and Don Wilkerson. In 1985, Carr packed up his big Texas tenor sound and headed off to Howard University where he gained the training that has enabled him to establish his global presence on the saxophone scene.

The Washington jazz scene doesn’t always receive the attention it deserves. The region’s strong musical institutions-



*Paul Carr in The Jazz Academy of Music Fall Concert.
Photo: woodleywonderworks*

-ranging from the Duke Ellington School for the Performing Arts, through venerable music programs at such local universities as Howard, Maryland, and UDC, to the military bands and a plethora of non-profit venues such as Westminster-- have enabled dozens of talented young musicians to move into the mainstream. These organized supports join with a score of musical village elders such as Carr who share a passion for cultivating rising musicians. Among recent D.C. products performing around the world are rising bassists Ben Williams and Baltimore-born Kris Funn, sax players Lyle Link and Elijah Jamal Balbed and drummer Kush Abadey.

Carr was once such a rising star himself, sitting in at Lawrence Wheatley's legendary 1980s jam sessions at One Step Down, and landing performance opportunities alongside trumpeter Terell Stafford at Takoma Station. Having experienced the power of mentorship in his own development, Carr remains passionate about jazz education even as he has moved among stages on several continents.

In 2002, Carr founded the Jazz Academy of Music which sponsors summer camps and school-year ensembles for young players from around the region. The Academy's reach, which has sent a half-dozen graduates on to the Julliard School of Music in New York, brings together inner-city musicians with suburban students from some of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the country. While many go on to careers in music, many more of Carr's students have their lives

permanently enriched by music as they move into various worlds far beyond the world of music.

In 2010, Carr assumed leadership of the East Coast Jazz Festival, founded in 1992 by beloved vocalist and educator Ronnie Wells. Following Wells' passing, Carr joined with others within the DC community to relaunch the festival as the Mid-Atlantic Jazz Festival held every Presidents' Day weekend in February at a non-descript suburban Holiday Inn. Regularly attracting as many as 4,000 jazz aficionados, the Festival showcases national talents together with student groups, with every level of musical professionalism in between. The Festival creates new audiences for the music which adds new support to the local scene.

As important as his educational and organizational activities are, Carr's musical vision remains foremost in his accomplishments. Inculcated from youth with the Texas tenor tradition of playing large, Carr amplifies the influence of the music's Southern roots on contemporary jazz. Whether playing in the United States, South America, Russia or Asia--performing before presidents, kings or students--Carr carries on the venerable tradition of jazz as an art form brought from the pastoral South to the metropolitan city.

As he takes this creative journey he makes sure that others will follow. As he discovered in the baggage reclaim area in St. Petersburg, his reach has no bounds.

Zeljko and Natasha Djukic and Dramatic Theater

April 18, 2017

Zeljko and Natasha Djukic have shaped one of the most inventive theater companies in one of the most creative theater communities in the country: TUTA Theatre in Chicago. Named after the Serbian word for bedpan, TUTA promotes European-style psychological theater through the dramatic restaging of modern and classical works with startling design and passionate acting. Their productions routinely receive rave reviews from the city's toughest critics in a highly competitive theatrical environment. Critics from the Chicago Tribune meant as a compliment the observation that TUTA productions were unlike anything else in the city. This is high praise in a city of committed audiences who value honest presentation of dramatic work over celebrity and gimmick.

Zeljko and Natasha arrived in Washington, D.C. in 1990 from Serbia to pursue further training at the University of Maryland, College Park. A graduate of Belgrade's Drama Arts School, Zeljko added additional degrees to his resume and subsequently taught at several institutions including the University of Maryland and James Madison University. Designer Natasha similarly advanced her skills and taught full-time at James Madison. Together in 1995 they established the TUTA to bring challenging theater with unique and exceptional ideas to American audiences.

They moved the company to Chicago in 2002 where they quickly caught the attention of local theater devotees. For Zeljko and Natasha, Chicago offered a gritty urban energy and authenticity they found missing in other American cities. A storied theater town, Chicago already was home to audiences and actors well-prepared to tackle their brand of theater. Beyond her work for TUTA, Natasha crafted costumes and sets for several other Chicago theaters including the legendary Steppenwolf Company and the Light Opera. In moving from Washington to Chicago, Zeljko and Natasha found a creative environment which embraced the contradictions of life that elude confident certainties and proclamations.

As they settled into their Chicago life, Zeljko and Natasha sought to energize American theater both by presenting new



Gentle, an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's story by Zeljko Djukic.

Photo: Kurtis Boetcher. Courtesy of TUTA Theatre Chicago.

works and by training a cohort of theater professionals inculcated with southeastern European dramatic traditions. Their company has nurtured rising talent through studios and various productions insuring a steady stream of actors capable of performing the kind of theater they valued from their years in Belgrade.

Following several early successes--including a well-received adaptation of "Alice in Wonderland"--Zeljko and Natasha secured their positions within the Chicago community with a stunning staging of Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." Critics called their production of the Russian classic the best work in Chicago theater for 2008. Indeed, reviewers ran out of superlatives for the production, calling it compelling, extraordinary, lingeringly lovely infused with tenderness and humanity. They deemed Zeljko's direction to be a masterpiece of subtlety and simultaneously admired Natasha's costumes. One critic, Venus Zarris, writing for the "Steadstyle Chicago" website concluded that the production proved to be "nothing short of the quintessential 'Uncle Vanya,' sure to delight the Chekhov devotee and novice alike." Russian-language theater critic Sergei Elkin considers this and other TUTA's productions to be landmarks of Chicago theatrical life.

TUTA has brought contemporary European theater to the American Midwest, having presented a half-dozen world premier productions as well as nearly as many American premiers. Almost all their plays were new to Chicago. These

include important productions of Guy de Maupassant's "The Jewels," featuring noted Chicago actor Kirk Anderson; Berlin-based Blue Man Group veteran Martin Marion's whimsical "The Anyway Cabaret (an animal cabaret)" satirizing the events of the day; plus classics by Brecht, Chekov, and Dostoevsky. Known for presenting the works of Serbian playwrights--including the world premieres of Ugljesa Sajtinac's "Huddersfeld" and Milena Markovic's "Tracks"--TUTA similarly has presented major works from the contemporary Russian repertoire including the American premier of notable Yekaterinburg playwright Oleg Bogaev's "Maria's Fields."

The Djukics have experimented with a variety of formats to engage new audiences. TUTA has performed cabaret-style, presented works responding to contemporary events and has run dramatic laboratories in such popular venues as the Pritzker Pavilion stage in Millennium Park. These settings cultivate new audiences for the company far beyond Chicagoans embracing the avant-garde.

Among the several components of TUTA's success have been Zeljko and Natasha's dedication to developing new talent and an appreciative audience; as well as their belief in the importance of European dramatic theater--both classic and contemporary--for American viewers. In bringing southeastern European theatrical traditions to the New World, they have reinvigorated the Chicago stage in return.

Lawrence Edelson and Opera

May 18, 2017

Opera producer Lawrence Edelson and composer/librettist Mark Adamo had been enjoying a pleasant enough summer in 2002 as they worked away on a production of Adamo's 1998 opera "Little Women" at Cooperstown, New York's Glimmerglass Opera. The production was going well and the weather in New York's Finger Lakes district had remained comfortable, if a bit wet at times. Still, breaks now and then were welcomed so, in need of an interlude in the mission of bringing an opera to the stage, they set off for drinks. Sometime later in this century, that particular cocktail hour may be remembered as recharting the course of American opera.

As Edelson and Adamo settled in, they began to chat about how so many programs existed to help the sorts of younger singers performing at Glimmerglass. Nevertheless, very little systematic support existed for mentoring those who wanted to write operas as Adamo had been doing to critical and audience acclaim.

Neither Edelson nor Adamo were newcomers to the world of American opera. A native of Ottawa, Edelson had studied voice and musicology at the University of Ottawa before heading to New York to study dance at The Joffrey Ballet School. He performed with

Boston ballet, Ballet West and BalletMet Columbus before moving to choreography for both opera and ballet companies. At the same time, he sang in opera, oratorio and musical theater.

Adamo grew up in suburban Philadelphia before attending New York University, where he gained recognition for undergraduate achievement in playwriting. He graduated from The Catholic University in Washington with honors in music composition and was hired by New York City Opera to curate a contemporary opera workshop. Subsequently, he became the company's composer-in-residence.

Adamo's first opera--"Little Women"--enjoyed instant success. Within a few years of its premier by Houston Grand Opera, the opera based on Louisa May Alcott's novel had been broadcast on National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System; had been performed by opera companies across the United States; and, had appeared on opera stages around the world. The opera quickly became a staple of American summer festivals, which is how Adamo found himself at Glimmerglass with Edelson.

Having learned their way around the backstages of opera houses, they understood that hiring young singers was

an asset for many companies as they cost less than established singers. Taking a risk on a new opera, on the other hand, carried very real costs; especially as few companies had the resources necessary to nurture writing talent. Edelson decided to do something about this particular lacuna in the American opera enterprise.

Both Edelson and Adamo were concerned about the seeming decline in American audiences for their beloved performing art. Edelson's master's thesis for the performing arts administration program at New York University was titled: "Opera: The Irrelevant Art: Uniting Marketing and Organizational Strategy to Combat the Depopularization of Opera in the United States." He was concerned about the art's ability to attract and sustain new audiences with works that were removed from contemporary life. American opera faced numerous trials, including the need

to develop new works which spoke to the present day. He established the American Lyric Theater (ALT) based in New York to collaborate with other companies to produce new operas.

The challenges of producing new opera were numerous and complex. Many American companies already were doing so; yet they often achieved less than hoped. Edelson realized that great operas do not just happen; they begin with great music and great librettos. Recognizing the need to nurture new composers and librettists, he mobilized ALT's resources to launch the "Composer Librettist Development Program" (CLDP) in 2007.

CLDP has become the country's first and only complete mentorship program for operatic writers. The program is designed to attract and nurture accomplished playwrights, poets, symphonic composers,

Lawrence Edelson mentoring Jeremy Howard Beck and Stephanie Fleischmann. Photo courtesy of American Lyric Theater.



lyricists and musical theater as well as opera professionals to become opera composers and lyricists. Predicated on opera being a storytelling form, CLDP favors narrative works setting writing for classically trained singers into pieces for the contemporary stage.

Working with prominent opera authorities, program participants are given the opportunity to learn opera dramaturgy, to hone their creative craft, to collaborate with others in developing new works and to learn how to move their ideas through the creative process to production. The program's first year favors collaborative partnerships among entering class members. Faculty commission works from the most promising contributors during the program's second year.

CLDP alumni are presenting their works to growing acclaim across the country's opera stages, including the Chicago Lyric Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Fort Worth Opera, and Opera Saratoga, where Edelson has been Artistic and General Director since 2014. As important, opera companies around the country increasingly are investing in supporting librettists and composers through various initiatives including commissions, residencies and more limited mentorship programs. In just a decade, the U.S. opera enterprise has created a variety of initiatives supporting and promoting American-created opera.

A little more than two centuries have passed since Lorenzo Da Ponte--the librettist for Mozart's most famous Italian operas "The Marriage of Figaro," "Don Giovanni," and "Così fan tutte"--fled a swarm of European creditors for America along with his common law wife Nancy Grahl and their four children. Moving among several failed businesses--including grocery and book stores in New York and Pennsylvania--Da Ponte eventually gained an appointment as Columbia College's (later University's) first professor of Italian Literature. Seemingly settled in the New World, Da Ponte produced the first full performance of "Don Giovanni" in the United States in 1825, thus introducing New York and North America to opera. In 1833, when he was 84, Da Ponte founded the short-lived New York Opera Company which eventually became the precursor to the New York Academy of Music and the New York Metropolitan Opera.

Opera took hold in America and, by the time the bicentennial of Da Ponte's initial production arrives in 2025, the country will have dozens of opera companies and festivals. In no small measure because of the efforts of Edelson and his colleagues, the anniversary will be met as well with a robust repertoire of new American works speaking to the experiences of new American opera fans.

Vanessa German and Spoken Word Opera

March 1, 2017

One afternoon in December 2016, well over one-hundred denizens of official Washington crowded into an auditorium in the Woodrow Wilson Center to celebrate “creative placemaking.” With NEA Chair Jane Chu, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, and Kresge Foundation President Rip Rapson looking on, a young African-American artist stepped to the stage and transported the entire room into another dimension with her moving poem about the children of the Homewood neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. German transformed the afternoon into a spiritual awakening with what many were calling the most inspiring performance they had ever seen anywhere.

German is an accomplished self-taught artist whose works have been incorporated into some of the country’s leading museums. She has shared the stage with luminaries such as former President Bill Clinton. Closer to home, the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts named her as its 2012 Emerging Artist of the Year. German’s deep exploration of indigenous urban art forms melds painting, sculpture, textiles, poetry and music into what Pittsburgh Magazine has called “a collage of community activism and soul-searching artistry” unlike anything that has come before. As personal as her art may be, she is about more than individual expression. German seeks to use art to give voice and

comfort to those who live lives of “ordinary fear,” beginning in her adopted home of Homewood.

Once the home to various Carnegies, then Irish, Italian, German and black residents, Homewood, in eastern Pittsburgh, was at one time a place of middle-class life and easy diversity. City plans in the 1950s for a sports arena and other public facilities displaced 8,000 residents, touching off a spiral of decline that accelerated following disturbances after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968. By the turn of the twenty-first century, some 2,400 residents, of whom 98.3% were African American, claimed Homewood as their home; and nearly all were poor. Criminal violence accentuated the neighborhood’s reputation as a place to avoid. This was where Vanessa German came for inspiration, and to redefine the meaning of art for communities often bypassed by the creative class.

German, the daughter of a well-known fiber artist, was born in Wisconsin, raised in Los Angeles as well as in suburban Cincinnati before settling on Pittsburgh as her home. She established her reputation as a sculptor producing what she came to call “contemporary power figures.” In the words of the curators at Baltimore’s American Visionary Art Museum, her art transforms everyday objects “into an iconography of astonishing metaphors.”

Vanessa German.
Photo: Wilson Center



Moving beyond the visual, German writes and performs poetry that elevates the everyday to the mystical, as she did that December afternoon in Washington. Drawing on any number of street traditions from hip hop to meringue, she crafts what she has called “Spoken Word Opera”—a mixing of spoken word poetry, storytelling, music and movement. In 2014, Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto called on German to perform at his inauguration, which led her to produce the dramatic poem “The City is Ours Today.”

German finds sustenance in Homewood, where she sees life, motion, and music even as others see only blight. She draws on that energy to create and then returns it to her neighbors. Embracing community as a force that advances her art, German

has devoted her life to nurturing a cohort of children who add their own sparks, moving Spoken Word Opera ahead.

Her inspiration for the concept of moving spoken word performance in new directions arose while growing up in Los Angeles. She recalls attending a performance of the Alvin Ailey Company that included a piece set to the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The more she listened to King’s speeches the more she heard a gathering up of creative understanding in which, she has said, love unfurls its petals. The insights she drew from King’s rhetoric convinced her of a need to move beyond the limits of language. The result has been a theatrical and passionate style of storytelling that combines various art forms into

performance that does not fit in any single genre.

From the outset of her time in Homewood, German noticed how interested neighborhood children were in her work after painting and sculpting on her front porch. When asked by local children, “what is you doin’ in this neighborhood?” she responds, because “you live in this neighborhood.... Because you are good and strong and you fly.”

She subsequently opened her front porch to all who wanted to join her in artistic creation. Her porch--now known as Love’s Front Porch, an ARTHouse--became a refuge for children in a violent neighborhood as well as an incubator for talent that otherwise might go unnoticed. The children paint, sculpt, write music and poetry, and perform. They constantly engage their community, as happened when she printed signs reading, “Stop shooting...Live Love Respect” and placed them with the help of the children all around the neighborhood.

German is as artistically ambitious as she is socially determined. Her commitment

to a contemporary fusion of artistic forms marks a qualitatively new artistic genre, Spoken Word Opera. She merges various historic and contemporary strands of African American culture into a unified production, expanding spoken word poetry by infusing it with the theatricality of opera, African American storytelling, and enhanced theatricality.

At the close of her performance in Washington that December afternoon German declared that “freedom is the sound of the loud man drunk on the sun.” She exhorted those in that official Washington, D.C. auditorium to “rise as if the sun, get up from whence you was” and “tell your story and then restore us with the story/ and rise.” In doing so she unlocked the door on the room of infinite possibilities that she believes is energized by the power of love. In her new spoken opera, everyone can go to places they never could imagine. The magic and mystery of that journey is, for her, the transformative and redemptive power of art; a power she enhances by linking art and community.

Hernán Jacinto and Argentine Jazz

October 11, 2017



Hernán Jacinto.

Photo courtesy of Hernán Jacinto.

Tucked away a couple of blocks off the prominent commercial avenue Santa Fe in a distinctly middle class section of the well-groomed Buenos Aires neighborhood of Palermo hides a small doorway with the tiniest of possible signs invisible to all who do not bother to look for it. Up a treacherous winding marble staircase hides the Buenos Aires' venerable Thelonious Jazz Club. Stretched out over the Toledo Bakery and Pastry Shop, the club's main two-story room shifts mood from a sofa living-room style seating area past a congenially cluttered and well-stocked bar area on to the more traditional tables and stage arrangement known to

jazz fans worldwide. Large enough to be comfortable and close enough to be convivial, the Thelonious is a perfect room for attentive listening.

Musicians Lucas and Ezequiel Cutaia opened the club in 2000 to provide just the sort of friendly venue their fellow musicians needed as a shared home base in a teeming and chaotic metropolis of seventeen million souls. They craved to have a place that recalled the famous musician hangouts of New York and Chicago; and they have succeeded in nurturing and realizing their vision. They were doubly fortunate in founding their

club just as a master jazz musician--pianist Hernán Jacinto--was coming of age.

Born in 1981 in Buenos Aires, Jacinto was a child prodigy who began as a self-taught pianist at the age of seven. He quickly demonstrated genuine talent and studied classical piano with Claudio Espector of the National Conservatory and jazz piano and harmony with Diego Schissi, Guillermo Romero and Ernesto Jodos. These mentors prepared him well enough to win a scholarship to study at the renowned Berklee College of Music in Boston. Berklee brought him into contact with leading musicians from around the world, hence he set off touring Europe with Austrian saxophonist Karlheinz Miklin and Latin America with compatriot bassist Javier Malosetti. Jacinto's reputation quickly grew so that by 2009 he received the prestigious Clarín Prize as the Jazz Revelation of the Year.

Jacinto began to appear regularly at leading jazz haunts in Buenos Aires, including the Thelonious Club and the Bebop Club, with the city's leading musicians such as internationally acclaimed Andres Boiarsky. He also appeared playing both classical and jazz repertoires in television broadcasts across Latin America. His monstrous technique and unique harmonic sense allows him to move effortlessly from the sadly sweet delicacy of his city's tango sound to the fiercely abstract improvisations that dominate post-Bop modern jazz. He also moves seamlessly among classical,

jazz and, increasingly, electronic musical modalities.

Jacinto's terrific talents make him a noteworthy addition to global jazz. Yet, he is more. As his success has grown, Jacinto has become a focal point for the impressive yet disparate Buenos Aires jazz scene. Appearing at Thelonious and other venues, he attracts the city's best musicians. His favored trio includes prodigious bassist Jerónimo Carmona and drummer Daniel Pipi Piazzolla (yes, he is Astor's grandson). His performances are punctuated by guest appearances by local musicians of varying ages and skills who sit in on one number or another. By sharing his own presence with others, he has created an increasingly vibrant jazz scene that demands growing recognition abroad. He also nurtures new audiences who become introduced to jazz as they seek Jacinto out; and cultivates musicians who, like he himself, emerge from surprising corners of the great metropolis.

Few cities are more musical than Buenos Aires, and fewer still have given the world as distinctive sound as tango. Now ubiquitous, tango has evolved from a pariah brothel sound to an instantly recognizable global musical powerhouse. The city always offers opportunities for its musicians to find a gig playing what every tourist wants to hear. Classical and jazz musicians--and, to some extent, traditional Argentine folk artists--have to struggle to make their way through the thicket of tangomania.

Jazz musicians in particular need safe places to improvise and play off of one another; and they need listeners who appreciate what they achieve when they do. Clubs such as the Thelonious provide pleasing venues to attract audiences to the sound of jazz. Places alone are not enough to keep the music alive. Dedicated musicians who draw on their own popularity to redirect the gaze of appreciative audiences to other talents must fill those venues. Buenos Aires at this particular moment in its musical history is fortunate to have a native promoter of jazz living in it. Hernán Jacinto brings new verve to his music, and new ears to his performances.

Andrew Kingsley, Andrew Vaught and Social Impact Theater

October 18, 2017

New Orleans in the Spring 2006 was a wounded city. Just months after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the city hardly functioned. Less than half the pre-storm population had returned, and much of the city's infrastructure still lay in ruin. As Gary Rivlin noted in his book, *Katrina: After the Flood*:

Broken stoplights still dangled in parts of the central business district. Stores even in the center of town remained shuttered a year after Katrina. To reach the city's economic-development office one entered through a side door, as the revolving doors out front were still boarded up. Shell was back, but Chevron announced it was moving its offices to higher ground in the suburbs. Traffic at the port was almost back to normal, but the city's manufacturing base post-Katrina was almost non-existent. One survey found that twelve months after the storm, two in every three businesses were still closed. Shops catering to tourists complained that they were doing maybe half their pre-storm business. One local economist predicted that 40 percent of the city's businesses would end up a casualty of Katrina.¹

At the same time, something phenomenal was happening. New Orleans and the Gulf Coast had become the location of perhaps the largest private, voluntary charitable project in American history. Hundreds if not thousands of volunteers came to town to try to put what was broken back together again. Students, church groups, medical professionals, educators, musicians and artists came to town intent on saving the city and its unique culture. There never had been a civic charitable response of such magnitude to a disaster on United States soil.

While many of the volunteers and organizations came for specific purposes and limited periods, some decided to stay and commit to the city's uncertain future. This was especially true of many young artists, musicians, dancers and chefs for whom New Orleans was too precious to lose.

New Orleans long has nurtured a distinctive culture rooted in the improvisational blending of its various human and natural ingredients. Tulane University historian Lawrence Powell captures its distinctive heritage in his city history, *The Accidental City*:

The kitchens may have been French, but the cooks were slaves,

tossing in the same kettle culinary ingredients plucked from three continents. They received direction from the mistress of the house, but they were the ones who occupied the nexus of town and country. Not only did they cook the food but they purchased the groceries from petty tradesmen and footloose trappers, themselves slaves, and in the process, they skimmed off something extra--'lagniappe', as later generations would describe it--in the form of income and victuals.... In other words, African slaves not only stirred the pot; they filled it too.²

What was true of the pots and pans that hung over the stoves of this swamp metropolis proved equally true when New Orleanians put down their spoons and knives and picked up musical instruments, writing pens and paint brushes. Even Edgar Degas reinvented himself as a painter while visiting relatives in the city. The result has been a distinctive blend that has remained resistant to the forces shaping a broader American mass culture.

Two of New Orleans' earliest suburbs--the nineteenth century neighborhoods of Faubourg Marigny and Bywater just downriver from the foundational French Quarter--that had been spared Katrina's rising waters, quickly became favored stomping grounds for idealistic and creative new arrivals. Two theater majors from Ohio's Kenyon College--Andrew

Kingsley and Andrew Vaught--were among them.

Kingsley and Vaught came with a belief that the theatrical arts should engage with society and with the issues of the day. Post-Katrina New Orleans cried out for discussions of the city's endless challenges which could transcend existing social, racial, economic and political divisions. They saw theater as a means for framing the most difficult problems facing the city while engaging its numerous contentious communities. Their Cripple Creek Theatre Company was born out of an engagement with a traumatized city that seemingly was overwhelmed by insolvable problems.

Founded in 2006, the Cripple Creek Theatre Company has grown from two company members to more than ten currently with Co-Artistic Director Emilie Whelan, reflecting the animated diversity that has always marked New Orleans and its culture. The company has enjoyed artistic success and acclaim while producing nearly three dozen theatrical works of social importance. From their first production, Tennessee Williams' *The Kingdom of Earth*, to their most recent--such as a lively production of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*--Kingsley and Vaught consciously used theater to explore the most difficult issues confronting their city in order to provoke social action.

Kingsley and Vaught held open auditions from the very beginning. At the outset,

they needed flexibility to find the artistic talent required for their ambitious productions in a city slowly recovering from catastrophe. Their productions, including such works as Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead*, Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*, Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, August Strindberg's *Erik the XIV* and Jules Feiffer's *Little Murders*, presented artistically challenging plays revolving around the most pressing social and political issues of the moment from the perspective of other times and places. Open auditions showcased new talent and reinforced connections between universally acclaimed works and their local community.

Kingsley and Vaught extended their outreach beyond the stage, bringing their work directly into communities rarely served by theater. They did so to discover talent, nurture audiences and sponsors, and more. Building on their goal of

promoting civic and social engagement, they have positioned their productions to include workshops, creative collaborations and post-show conversations which serve to enhance audiences' understanding of the social issues addressed in the pieces they present. More strikingly, they tour to underserved audiences throughout the city and region. Their 2017 presentation of *Taming of the Shew*, for example, opened at the Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson, Louisiana before being performed on the New Orleans Shakespeare Festival's mainstage season. Previously, the company offered, a three-course maritime-inspired dinner by Chef Jessie Wightkin served between acts and produced works at the Saturn Bar before heading to the Bayou Playhouse in Lockport, Louisiana.

Not surprisingly given its origins in a hurt city and its mission of social engagement, the company has moved around quite

a bit. In addition to temporary stages--including a residency at the Shadowbox Theatre housed in a former pharmacy along Marigny's Saint Claude Avenue--the company most recently has found a home in the heart



Saint Claude Arts District in New Orleans, Louisiana.
Photo: SL Snyder (Flickr) <https://flic.kr/p/4x832B>

of the Saint Claude Arts District at the AllWays Theatre.

Settled into AllWays' two-story nondescript New Orleans roadhouse brightly painted in pastels, the company shares the stage with bayou blues burlesque shows, cabaret and dance nights, perfect partners for the social impact theater Kingsley and Vaught seek to cultivate. Saint Claude at this point is a bit too wide--and the buildings a bit too modest--to ever claim the moniker "charming." The area is too industrial, the trees on the street's neutral ground (median) too spindly and the sidewalks too cracked to ever be called "grand." More importantly, the atmosphere bristles with creative energy, the sort of vitality produced by exciting artistic visionaries doing all they can to create a community constantly responding to the deepest and most painful challenges of the moment. Be it bayou blues burlesque or Shakespeare, dedicated artists such as Kingsley and Vaught are working in all variety of genres to insure that post-Katrina New Orleans remains a global creative hot spot.

Vaught challenges the company and himself to remain mindful of whom they serve in a world full of distraction. His goal has been to stimulate communication and engagement across the city's numerous

and complex disunions. In doing so, the community expands the company's creative impulse, encouraging it to take on fresh artistic challenges. Beyond audience cultivation, the company's Louisiana Stage Writers' Workshop promotes inventive expression among imaginative people who, like Kingsley and Vaught, came to find their muse in the ever provocative city of New Orleans.

In 2013, the company presented Vaught's original work *Possum Kingdom*, which told the story of an economic dystopia in which forest dwellers who scrape trees to sell their covering are in constant competition with killer possums who aggressively scavenge from the forest dwellers in a Darwinian competition for resources. The audience arrived at a backyard on St. Claude Avenue decked out in colored lights. When conversations stopped at the surprise of the lights having gone out, ushers with flashlights emerged to escort the audience members down a winding path covered with roots and leaves to a cluster of seats facing some trees. There, in the dark interior of an otherworldly city block, the play began. At that moment everyone knew they could be no place other than New Orleans--a city where the phantasmagorically improvisational rules a world beset by constant struggle.

Endnotes

- 1 Gary Rivlin, *Katrina: After the Flood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), p. 292.
- 2 Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City. Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 97-98.

Nikolai Kolyada and Playwriting

May 3, 2017

The master dramatist Nikolai Kolyada has made himself the center of gravity around which much of the new drama world revolves in Yekaterinburg, Russia, a city of 1.4 million residents just beyond the Urals tucked inside the edge of Asia. Born in 1957 in the bleak and remote provincial settlement of Presnogor'kovka in the Kustanay Region, Kolyada trundled off to the theater school in Sverdlovsk--as Yekaterinburg was known for much of the Soviet period--at a young age. Graduating at twenty, he began a career on stage with the Sverdlovsk Academic Theatre of Drama. As an aspiring actor, he played the sorts of wide-ranging, ever-more-prominent roles that are typical of the Russian repertoire. But Kolyada was drawn to writing, so he enrolled in the prestigious Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow. This move brought him to the Soviet capital at the height of the excitement and ferment prompted by Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost' (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) policies.

The Soviet-era Sverdlovsk he left behind earned a reputation as one of the most criminally violent in the entire Soviet Union. Indeed, the same factors that enriched its economic and cultural life made it a natural center for vice. The city was sufficiently far from Moscow to be beyond its direct control yet close enough to remain within

reach, and close enough to the Siberian prisons to become a magnet for newly released prisoners. It stood astride major transportation routes connecting narcotics-growing fields to the south and east and drug markets to the west, with a vast population of factory workers and their families who were beginning to feel the first indications of a national economic collapse that would shut down their factories. Everything about the city promoted the emergence of vast, disciplined, aggressive, and malevolent bands of armed criminals, hangers-on, and wannabes.

As the Soviet industrial economy collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, criminal cartels--known in Russia as "mafias"--moved in to lay claim to the region's vast mineral wealth; to seize and dismantle the enormous factories that could only be used as scrap; to sell off light and heavy weaponry from military bases that were no longer under any form of discernible control; to traffic in desperate human beings trying to find some way to survive; to push drugs and launder their profits; and to extort whenever possible.

These gangs entered into turf battles following the collapse of the Soviet Union, unleashing a brutal and massive gang war. Explosions, shootings, and murders became a daily occurrence from 1992

until 1994, with Yekaterinburg earning a reputation as the most criminal-plagued city in Russia. With turf divided up by late 1994, criminal cartels allegedly expanded their horizons, reputedly laying claim to various local, regional, and national political positions.

Post-Soviet Russia's criminal gangs in Yekaterinburg and elsewhere thrived by drawing new recruits from those who felt they had lost out during the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the late 1990s, Russia had no shortage of those who had been slapped in the face, pushed into the gutter, and abandoned during the post-Soviet collapse--and no shortage of writers and artists trying to give form and meaning to their travails. Which brings us back to Kolyada.

Once in Moscow, Kolyada became a cause célèbre after penning *Slingshot* (1986), a play that offered a sympathetic view of a gay relationship. While shocking Moscow, Kolyada found an enthusiastic reception in California where the play was performed at the San Diego Repertory Theater. He became an international sensation for the first time. After graduating from the Gorky Institute in 1989, he returned to Sverdlovsk and, since 1994, has taught at the Yekaterinburg Theatrical Institute, offering one of the few playwriting and dramaturge curricula in Russia.

Once back in the Urals, Kolyada began to write plays (more than one hundred, of which more than half have been performed in Russia and abroad), to teach others to write and act (his students include some of Russia's most exciting young playwrights),

to direct and produce plays, to organize theater festivals (e.g., the Eurasian Drama Competition Festival, which began in 2003, as well as the Kolyada-Plays Festival, which began in 2006), and to serve as an intellectual leader in the Urals region (as confirmed by his decade-long editorship of the intellectual journal *Ural*). These activities nurtured and sustained a thriving theater community in this Soviet rust-belt leviathan.

In December 2001, Kolyada founded his own company, the Kolyada Theatre, which initially performed at Pushkin House in a historic Yekaterinburg neighborhood. Though operating with almost no state funding, Kolyada kept his company together at times by asking its members to bring in any items that they no longer needed at home, and by drawing on the considerable international interest in his work to secure support for his actors and protégés.

Kolyada attracted controversy yet again. Unlike many among the Russian intelligentsia, he publicly and enthusiastically embraced the 2012 candidacy of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for a return term as Russian president. The move brought Kolyada a wave of outrage and approbation from many former supporters, combined with charges that he had sold out to those in power in order to secure a new theater.

While Kolyada thrived, many observers were arguing that Russian theater was just one more victim of the post-Soviet transition. But just as some were sounding the death knell for the Russian stage, a New Russian Drama Movement coalesced

around talented writers and directors who were liberated by the end of censorship that accompanied the collapse of communism; actors who were increasingly exposed to a rich tapestry of competing styles now unencumbered by the legacy of the Soviet stage's ossified psychological realism; and audience members who were trying to find their own lives amid the wreckage of post-Soviet culture being overrun by the most degraded and least creative artifacts of increasingly globalized pop culture.

As important as Kolyada has been for the theatrical and cultural scene in Yekaterinburg, his ambitions extend far beyond its boundaries. He has sought to free Russian theater from its traditional fixation on director-producers (*rezhissery*) so that it can find a new focus on writers. This commitment to writing becomes especially evident in the city's Eurasian Drama Competition, which has become a showcase for Russian-language

playwrights living in Russia as well as abroad. The Kolyada-Plays Festival concentrates more directly on his own work together with that of his students.

Yekaterinburg theater seasons during the 2000s have included new directors, new plays, new writers, and new stars, as the local opera company, ballet company, academic dramatic theater, children's theater, and smaller chamber theaters have attracted fresh talent. Local productions--whether they are tragedies or dark comedies, multi-act or single-act productions, allegories or high realism--share a concern with the joys and pains of everyday life in a turbulent society. They emerge from the individual keyboards of writers who are embedded in the wider community of writers and theatrical institutions--writers who are engaged in a common search for meaning in a city, society, and country where every marker of stability and identity has vanished. Writers nurtured in large measure by Nikolai Kolyada and the community he has helped create.

Nikolai Kolyada's ensemble. Photo courtesy of the Kolyada Theatre.



Larissa Koniuk and Bicycle Opera

October 4, 2017

Few places on the planet are more hip than Brooklyn's National Sawdust, which, according to its website, as "an unparalleled, artist-led, non-profit venue, is a place for exploration and discovery. A place where emerging and established artists can share their music with serious music fans and casual listeners alike."

Housed in the shell of a former sawdust factory in the "Hipster Central" Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, there is little that is traditional about the place. Thanks to the teamwork of leading architects with Bureau V and acoustic engineers at Arup Acoustics, National Sawdust has emerged as one of New York's premier venues for contemporary music. The stately *New Yorker* magazine covers its season openings together with those of the august Metropolitan Opera a few miles and cultural lightyears away on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Despite all the trappings of planned spontaneity and crafted informality, National Sawdust is a most serious place for performers and inventors of contemporary music to launch a new work. Critics notice when a small, Toronto-based contemporary opera company that gets to its performances by bicycle premieres a new work at the Sawdust.

The Village Voice did in October 2016, for example, when it declared the immediacy

of the National Sawdust's 200 seat space combined with the proximity of the singers' live voices to forge an empathetic connection among the audience, performers and the nameless sweatshop workers around whom the story swirls in The Bicycle Opera Company's a cappella chamber opera *Sweat*. Just as important for company founder and artistic director Larissa Koniuk would be the show's subsequent 600 kilometer, two-week bicycle tour through the un-hip towns of Southern Ontario.

Contemporary Canadian opera has prospered in recent years as companies large and small--such as Toronto's Tapestry Opera and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's New Creations program--have promoted contemporary opera and choral works. Toronto-based soprano Koniuk has built a successful singing and acting career gaining particular notice for her interpretations of new vocal compositions. She has become a "go-to" performer for works ranging from *The Bells of Baddleck*--a music-drama about Alexander Graham and Mabel Bell performed at the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site in Baddeck, Nova Scotia--to engagements in Toronto, Montreal and Los Angeles.

The company's mission has been to bring the vibrant music being written in Canada to audiences for whom it is

unknown. An enthusiastic environmentalist and cyclist, Koniuk joined with singer/ethnomusicologist Nadia Channa in 2012 to launch summertime operatic bicycle expeditions across Ontario. As the Bicycle Opera Company grew, the circuits extended to Nova Scotia; as the newly commissioned works became more ambitious, the company began extended stays in Toronto and, in 2016, in Brooklyn.

The company of a dozen or so performers and support staff typically arrive in town before sunset, perform the next day, and move on. Some productions require that costumes, props and larger instruments such as cellos are transported in carriages attached to cycles. Their cycle caravan catches the attention of audiences and resident media alike. Minor on-the-road mishaps (such as busted tubes and broken spokes) frequently lead to chance encounters with locals along the road who invariably become fans.

This exoticism captures attention of many who have never given much thought to contemporary music. The company's high quality performances and promotion of important innovative new work lures in serious aficionados, as their performances of the new opera *Sweat* demonstrated.

Librettist Anna Chatterton and composer Juliet Palmer set their opera in a generic contemporary sweatshop of indeterminate location to lure the audience into considering the workers themselves. Why were they doing such underpaid and difficult labor? What were their dreams?

Had the move from the countryside improved their lives?

Prompted by the ethical dilemmas poised by their own shopping expeditions in search of discount clothing, Chatterton and Palmer recreate the sonic world of the factory floor with an a cappella chorus and no instrumentation. They set out the lives of the workers toiling under dingy conditions as they battle with one another and the larger world over forming a union. The factory owner and overseer want to lock the factory doors in response until all the orders for dresses have been fulfilled.

To reflect the global reach of the sweatshop economy, Chatterton wrote the words sung by the four leading characters in English, Cantonese, Tamil and Hungarian. In doing so, the creative team underscored the work's immediate social commentary as they used the languages spoken in contemporary international media reports of worker abuse.

Sweat is but one of Bicycle Opera's works which seeks to break down barriers between audiences and performers by highlighting the power of storytelling through the expressiveness of the human voice in intimate spaces. Cycling into town is another part of the package. The bike grease breaks down any lingering notions that opera must be an elitist enterprise.

Toronto in recent years has emerged as a global hotspot for contemporary music with many companies--such as Esprit Orchestra, New Music Concerts, Continuum, Contact and Music Gallery-

-focusing on a 21st century repertoire. The city is home to more than a half-dozen opera companies offering a variety of opera ranging from the large-scale classical productions of the Canadian Opera Company to small studio companies. Two opera companies--Tapestry and Bicycle--focus on contemporary work.

This ecosystem supports composers, musicians, singers, librettists and backstage workers alike, nurturing a steady flow of new works and the

audience that appreciates them. Since its founding in 1979, for example, Tapestry Opera has premiered 160 opera shorts, twenty chamber operas or experimental operatic works and seventeen full length Canadian works.

Conventional wisdom suggests that Brooklyn is about as hip as hip can get at the moment. Yet, even Brooklyn did not nurture serious opera brought to new audiences on the wheels of cycles.

Bicycle Opera. Photo: Gary Lloyd-Rees (Flickr) <https://flic.kr/p/opb6Fs>



Brent Lindsay and Amy Pinto and Community-Specific Theater

April 10, 2017

A garage door dominates the cinderblock industrial storefront tucked onto Santa Rosa, California's Sebastopol Avenue next door to the Criminal Baking Company and uncomfortably close to a major highway cloverleaf. Only a splash of purple paint and a seemingly handmade red sign suggest what lurks inside--an exciting scrappy theater company--The Imaginists, dedicated to art, activism and community, bringing theater to the disenfranchised and the disenfranchised to contemporary American theater. The word "scrappy" has been applied so often to the company by reviewers that the label amplifies how far contemporary theater has moved from daily life. For founders Brent Lindsay and Amy Pinto and their ensemble-driven company, using theater to reach out to day laborers, undocumented youth, immigrant rights groups, and English-Spanish bilingual audiences is not so much "scrappy" as "normal."

Santa Rosa, the county seat for the famed Sonoma Valley wine district, is itself at the "scrappy" intersection of upscale and hardscrabble. Long an agricultural center, Sonoma remained just far enough away to be outside of the stresses and strains of big city life in San Francisco, an hour or so away. Presently home to approximately 175,000 residents, Santa Rosa has become ever more diverse in recent years with over half of the population

consisting of non-Hispanic whites; more than a quarter being Hispanic or Latino of any race, with the balance drawn from African Americans, Native Americans and a dozen or more immigrant communities. "Scrappy" rings true for the city and its internationally renowned theater company as much as the local Chamber of Commerce's claim that their city is "California's Cornucopia."

Lindsay and Pinto launched the company with the goal of creating unintimidating theater, completely re-thinking theater *who* participates, *where* it happens and *what* it is. They create works that reflect the variety of voices all around them and to do so in a way that break down existing hierarchies within the theater and within the community. Ensemble, audiences and community blend together as The Imaginists regularly collaborate with local partners traditionally excluded from the stage. In doing so, they make no sacrifice in theatrical excellence.

Not only do their superbly innovative productions prompt Bay Area residents from San Francisco and Berkeley to travel an hour or more out of their comfort zones; they also take their shows on the road. Their productions regularly tour nationally and internationally, earning kudos as far away as Moscow. As important, their productions travel to local

middle and high schools in low-income districts. Such works focus on real-life challenges for their audiences, such as the tale of a young undocumented person navigating the system to become a “real” boy. Beyond touring, Lindsay, Pinto and their associates participate in international exchanges with such leading companies as Hungarian Árpád Schilling’s cutting edge Kretakor. Such connections reach out within the United States and California as well, including an exchange with the Los Angeles-based Teatro Jornalero sin Fronteras.

The Imaginists were preceded by the Knights of Indulgence Theatre United States (KITUS), founded in 1993 by Pinto, Lindsay, and five other artist colleagues with the goal of moving theater beyond established bounds, conceived as a space in which individual voices would contribute to a shared understanding of community. By 2001, KITUS had grown into The Imaginists under the leadership of Pinto and Lindsay.

In keeping with their non-traditional inclusionary mission, Pinto and Lindsay encourage members to draw on their own stories and imaginations to write and produce performances that are unique. This goal has become embedded into the very production of plays, which begin by gathering the ensemble for each new work to contribute ideas, stories, images, writing, movement choreography and/or research as part of their unique collaborative process.

As the company notes in its website:

Often the lives of the collected ensemble bleed into the fabric of the made-up world of the performances we are making. We play with the layers of who we are and who we are pretending to be. We make theater of place and we include people from that place in our productions. Our process has grown out of many years of making theater with varied groups, from our actor-driven beginnings to young people, community members, emerging artists, artists across discipline, and hybrids of all of these—always impelled to include those who had never thought themselves performers.

In trying to describe how the company works, a member told an interviewer for *The Oak Leaf News*, “If other theaters are like farmers using the rich soil left by volcanic lava, this theater is a volcano.”

Under the hand of director Lindsay, a recent adaptation of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* reimagined the surviving women of war-torn Troy as a tired band of veteran circus performers. Moving from shabby dressing room to worn-out circus ring, the women reenacted their tragic life stories and continuing battles to become the twenty-first century *WarCircus*. As Helen emerges from a giant steaming egg, Euripides becomes as contemporary as the iPhones carried by audience members.

In *SitCalm!*, the Company deconstructs the American television sitcom with Pinto and Lindsay playing mom and dad. Described by KQED's Senior Arts Editor Chloe Veltman as "a totally warped take on sitcom tropes," the play draws on stereotypical teenagers from all the ethnicities, backgrounds and personalities found in Santa Rosa to deliver a sprawling dystopia about American family life and television culture.

Every summer, Company members take their show on the road with a "free, bilingual, bicycle-powered" tour on Santa Rosa's public parks, day laborer centers and community centers. Beginning in 2001, they put their props, costumes and sets on their bikes and peddle off at sunset to nearby public settings.

There, they set up an ever-evolving *The Art is Medicine Show/El show el arte es medicina*.

Moving easily between English and Spanish, the performers might draw from a classical text--such as Federico Garcia Lorca's poetic drama *The Butterfly's Evil Spell/El Maleficio de la Mariposa*--or from some new inspiration drawn from the actors' imaginations, such as a recent take on *Prometheus Bound: Calderon's Life is a Dream*. They invite audience members on stage, or ask them to create an end to the story. Some performances include community potluck meals, while others are a brief interruption in a summer evening's merriment.

While "scrappy" is often employed by critics to describe the production,



The Imaginists.
Photo courtesy of the Imaginists.

audience members writing on Facebook may have gotten closer to the truth by describing the company as: “Inventive;” “Creative, Angry, Itchy, Under-the-skin irritating;” and, as “Brave. Fearless, Inclusive. Honest. Uplifting.” These characteristics led KQED Theater Critic John Wilkins to note that “Santa Rosa’s The Imaginists is the type of theater company you wish every city had, deeply committed to community where they reside, yet full of a cosmopolitan dash and daring.”

Such comments underscore the company’s success at bringing together

art, activism and community and taking it to the disenfranchised. By doing so Lindsay and Pinto are creating new audiences for contemporary theater and transforming contemporary theater in the process.

Once a visit to a park or a community center is over, the actors load up the assorted tools of their trade, climb back on their bicycles and peddle away. As they do so, they leave behind new connections between community and theater that are transforming both everyday life and art.

Hugo and Rebecca Medrano and Hispanic Theater

October 25, 2017

In some ways Argentine actor and director Hugo Medrano began a career in theater at a most unpropitious time. He graduated from university with a degree in theater studies just as his homeland was about to descend into a dark political era now known as the “Dirty War.” He set off for Spain to hone his craft, spending five years working in theater there at the end of the Franco dictatorship. As with many South American intellectuals of the period, he found refuge in the United States, settling into Washington, D.C. He initially worked in the city’s only Spanish-language theater at the time, a bilingual children’s theater company Teatro Doble.

Washington has rarely been considered a major outpost of Spanish-language culture; though perhaps it should be. The city’s long-established Latin diplomatic community draws heavily on well-educated intellectuals steeped in traditional Spanish language letters. As the political, ideological and philosophical conflicts unleashed by the geopolitics of the Cold War ebbed and flowed, cultural creators--including several future giants from across South America--came and left Washington, depending on the ascendancy of left or right political regimes back home.

Less visible, though no less significant for the development of Spanish-language

culture in the city, the Washington metropolitan region was about to become an immigrant gateway. At first, large-scale immigration came from countries torn by civil strife, followed soon thereafter by economic migration. If less than five percent of Washington’s population was foreign born when Medrano arrived in the city in the early 1970s, almost fifteen percent would be in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Large immigrant communities spread across the Washington metropolitan region. During the 1990s alone, a quarter-million immigrants from 193 countries and territories settled in the Washington metropolitan area as the region became the fifth most common destination for legal immigrants in the country, behind New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami. Unlike the patterns in more customary receiving cities, no single immigrant group dominated; though a third travelled from Latin America and the Caribbean, and Salvadorans constituted the region’s largest single immigrant group.

This was a moment when English translations of Latin American literature were moving to the top of best sellers lists. Growing interest in Latin American magical realism lured more than a few non-Spanish-reading intellectuals further

and further into Spanish literary traditions. This was especially true in Washington, a city that was home to a well-educated and worldly professional middle class.

By the 1970s, demand in Washington was exploding for both high and low brow Spanish language based culture. Medrano arrived just at this seminal moment. Making his way around the city's Spanish-speaking communities Medrano encountered Rebecca Read, a former dancer who was working at the Organization of American States. Medrano and Read settled into the as-yet-

ungentrified multicultural bohemian Adams Morgan neighborhood.

In 1976, operating out of a typical Victorian-era brick D.C. townhouse, Medrano and Read--who married one another--joined with their friends to establish the Grupo de Artistas LatinoAmericanos (GALA). The consortium embraced visual artists, writers, dancers, singers, musicians and actors who wanted to nurture Latino culture in Washington. GALA's productions presented Latin American works performed in Spanish as well as in English. From the very

GALA Hispanic Theatre.

Photo courtesy of Shalev 'Stan' Weinstein.



beginning, the Medranos and their colleagues sought to integrate their Latin American artistic traditions and sensibilities into the larger Washington cultural community.

Early GALA productions often showcased the political themes of the era. Many immigrants in Washington at the time had fled their homelands for political reasons, including intellectuals who were escaping dictatorships. Joined by large numbers of Central American migrants escaping civil war, politics naturally were at the top of everyone's mind. GALA quickly developed an additional educational mission, presenting children's plays and working with community leaders to transfer Latino cultures to the next generation. Such outreach and children's theater efforts have remained central to GALA's operations ever since.

By the turn of the twenty-first century GALA had become a widely-respected and much-praised presence on the D.C. cultural scene. During its first three decades, the company produced nearly 150 plays in Spanish and English while supporting poetry, music and dance programming. The company established a network of actors who came from across the Americas to perform in Washington, and became a leading institutional touchstone for the city's growing Hispanic community. Nonetheless, they still did not have a permanent home.

As the century came to an end, the D.C. government requested proposals for redevelopment of the historic Tivoli Theater in the increasingly multicultural Columbia Heights community to support the area's revitalization. Designed by noteworthy theater architect Thomas W. Lamb, the Tivoli was a city landmark when it opened in 1924. A few years later ownership passed to Warner as part of a consolidation of the company's Washington operations.

The Tivoli survived as a cinema until the April 1968 civil disturbances following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when the neighborhood suffered severe damage and was slow to recover. The building was boarded up in 1976 and sat vacant for the next quarter century.

The Medranos had long been interested in the building and joined in a proposal submitted by the Horning Brothers developers to convert the building into a mix of offices and retail with a theater. City officials were taken with the idea of returning the Tivoli to its original theatrical purpose as well as recognizing GALA's contributions to the neighborhood over the previous decades. In 2005 the Medranos moved their company into its now permanent home.

Over the course of the two decades of the company's residence at the Tivoli, GALA has consolidated its presence in an ever-growing Washington theater

scene. Recognition has followed with the company winning several Helen Hayes awards and the Medranos being named 2010 Washingtonians of the Year by *Washingtonian Magazine*. The company's outreach programs have become a mainstay of child-oriented cultural programming in the city; its highly professional and innovative productions regularly attract wide and diverse audiences, all just two miles uphill from the White House.

In 2017, the GALA premiered the first Spanish-language production of Lin-Manuel Miranda's "In the Heights" to rave reviews. The show was a triumph for the values expressed by the founders of the Grupo de Artistas LatinoAmericanos four decades previously; all the more so as it appeared in one of the nation's most vibrant multicultural urban neighborhoods, Columbia Heights, in a treasure of a theater originally designed by one of this country's most distinguished theater architects.

The at times difficult-to-please Washington Post critic Peter Marks could hardly contain his enthusiasm. "So there is a sense of linguistic homecoming for this kaleidoscopic story of contemporary life among the Americans of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, and Mexican descent in Manhattan's Washington Heights to be sung," he wrote in April 2017, "in the language of its rollicking, struggling characters. And how grand for GALA Hispanic Theatre, the tenacious company tacking Spanish and Latin American plays in Columbia Heights, to be the one to produce it."

Hugo and Rebecca Medrano are leaving an indelible mark on Washington, D.C. and on American theater by embedding Latin American drama in the heart of the Washington theater community. GALA Theater demonstrates the power of multiculturalism with each new performance.

David Alan Miller and Contemporary Classical Music

September 11, 2017

High water, thunderstorms, flash floods and tornadoes were forecast in upstate New York throughout the week leading up to July 4, 2017; perhaps perfect weather for the imagination of a Romantic Era composer, but hardly ideal for contemporary musicians planning on playing on a barge. The always entrepreneurial David Alan Miller, music director of the Albany Symphony, plans for celebrating the bicentennial of the Erie Canal seemed as if they might become unraveled even before they could begin.

The barge, musicians and enthusiastic audience all arrived at a riverside park in Amsterdam, New York as the distressed skies cleared. Miller once again had achieved something remarkable. Over the preceding months, he had commissioned new works from young composers who had been sent into the seven canal towns that were to host celebratory concerts stretching 360 miles or so from Albany to Lockport. The Grammy award-winning Miller reconfirmed his reputation as a leading champion for new American classical music.

Of even greater importance, Miller was bringing new sounds and new composers to new audiences once again. *New York Times* critic Michael Cooper noted in the lead article of the July 8, 2017 Arts

Section, “As the Albany musicians tuned up Amsterdam’s mayor, Michael Villa, surveyed the audience members who had opened lawn chairs on every available patch of grass and were lined up at trucks offering ice cream, fried Twinkies, barbecue and wraps.”

The scene would be repeated that week at Albany, Schenectady, Little Falls, Baldwinsville, Brockport and Lockport; all towns that boomed with the canal in the early nineteenth century and languished approaching despair at the end of the twentieth as New York’s industrial economy entered an agonizing death spiral. Each of these once proud small industrial cities seemed a more than appropriate setting for Miller’s quarter-century of programming as the Albany Symphony’s music director in which he has shaped innovative programs blending the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. Miller’s musical accomplishment stands as a successful example of what each of these communities is trying to achieve by retooling their economies.

The Erie Canal secured New York’s position as the continent’s leading harbor for at least half a century, until the railroads came to dominate continental shipping (which New York also would dominate). On November 4, 1825-- a short eight



*Albany Symphony Orchestra at the Hudson River's Amphitheatre in Albany, New York.
Photo: Judy Baxter (Flickr) <https://flic.kr/p/gBptd>*

years after the first shovel had been put to earth--New York governor DeWitt Clinton poured two casks of Lake Erie water into New York Harbor from the first flat barge to make the trip from Buffalo east through the canal and south on the Hudson, touching off a wild celebration. Within a year, shipping costs plummeted from \$100 a ton to under \$9. No other city could compete with New York; not even New Orleans, where the entire Midwestern river system emptied into the sea. As the canal's eastern terminus where barges moved into the Hudson River, Albany was the lynchpin for the entire system.

Albany is one of the continent's oldest European settlements north of Mexico. Founded by Dutch settlers as Fort Orange in 1614, the town continued to grow throughout the Dutch and British colonial eras. The city became New York State capital in 1797, a status it has retained since. Albany hit its economic stride in the nineteenth century when it was one of the first cities in the world to install public water mains, sewer lines, natural gas lines and electricity.

Like many Northeastern industrial cities, Albany began to fall on hard times during the second half of the twentieth century

when its traditional urban cityscape was mangled by megalomaniacal New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Tearing out the city's historic heart for ultra-modern megastructures tied to highways luring residents into sprawling suburbs, Albany lost population from an historic high of 134,995 in 1950 to a low of 97,856 in 2000. The city has fared better in the twenty-first century becoming home to a technology boom and gentrification. Situated at the center of the Capital District, Albany joins with several nearby communities to form a metropolitan region of some one million residents. The city nonetheless continues to suffer from above average poverty and violence for a community of its size.

As this topsy-turvy history implies, Albany is home to a combination of impressive legacy institutions and innovative start-ups. The Albany Symphony Orchestra, established as the People's Orchestra of Albany in 1930, stands among the city's most prominent cultural establishments. Much more than a modest regional orchestra, the Albany Symphony embraces a singular mission of performing new works by modern composers thereby expanding its own audience while advancing American classical music. David Alan Miller's tenure as Music Director--which began in 1992--has secured the ensemble's reputation as one of the country's major supporters of young composers and artists.

Miller grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from the University of California,

Berkeley before heading East. Earning a Master's from The Julliard School, Miller began his conducting career with the New York Youth Symphony before heading back West to hold various conducting positions with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Miller's eclectic musical tastes stretching from Classical to Funk and numerous other genres of contemporary music has made him a champion of American modern classical music.

The Albany Symphony has provided an ideal platform to seek out and promote young composers and new music. Over his tenure at Albany he has helped the company support numerous young composers who have gained national and international reputations. Miller also has served as guest conductor with nearly all of the country's major orchestras. In 1994, Miller invited eighteen members of the Albany Symphony to form the contemporary rock-classical music ensemble Dogs of Desire, which has commissioned over 100 new works and has toured widely promoting contemporary classical music.

Miller has returned frequently to Los Angeles, and has performed widely in Europe, Australia and the Far East offering plentiful opportunity to promote a new American classical sound. These accomplishments have earned Miller a bookcase full of awards, including a 2014 Grammy Award for his Naxos recording with the Albany Symphony of John Corigliano's "Conjurer." His 2017 Erie

Canal tour is but a small component of an enormously ambitious strategy to energize American music.

For Miller, his engagement with living composers and their music is an opportunity to continue learning. Once known as a rising young talent himself, he has used his platform in Albany to constantly refresh his own creative spark; often challenging his musicians and his audiences in the process. His programs purposefully combine the familiar with the unfamiliar to provoke new ways of listening and playing. This style has earned him such monikers as “Space Captain Dave” and “Cowboy Dave” even as his long tenure has made him a well-respected community icon.

Miller’s constant reinvention of orchestral music and style is a creative response to many forces which have swept over the American classical music community in recent decades. By keeping the music fresh, he has continued to attract new, often younger, audiences. He reminds his musicians, composers, audiences and critics that orchestras and the music they play are organic, constantly changing in response to new environments.

The Albany Symphony--which has become a thriving, vital community institution under Miller’s leadership--nonetheless confronts all of the challenges faced by regional classical ensembles across the country. Despite Miller’s efforts, classical music attracts a shrinking audience base even as fixed costs rise. By

implementing a variety of ticket packages and playing in an expanding array of venues, the orchestra has managed to secure its subscription base in a virtuous circle which reinforces its recording and touring opportunities while encouraging new sponsorships and donors. This business success rests on the exciting creative verve that Miller has sustained for over a quarter-century. Miller has been able to expand the horizons of classical music by bringing new resources to the table: creative; financial; and, social. This new capital in all of its forms has energized the Albany Symphony and American classical music.

In June 2017, Geraldine Freedman, the music critic for the Schenectady *Daily Gazette*, reviewed the Albany Symphony Orchestra’s concert at the American Music Festival in neighboring Troy. The festival extended over two days, attracting large audiences to hear the world premiere of five works by newly arising composers. The music ranged from miniature musical comedy and clarinet concerto to a percussion quartet featuring tuned water glasses and compressed air containers besides snare drums, cymbals and xylophones. Through every piece, Freedman reported, “the ASO performed brilliantly with a real sensibility for what these composers, most of them under 35, were trying to say. It was a comfortable reminder that the future of classical music is in capable, inventive hands.” She might have added, that those are the hands of visionary conductor David Alan Miller.

Mansai Nomura and *Kyōgen* Theater

June 26, 2017

No role can possibly be larger than Godzilla, even if the actor portrays the world's most famous lizard through motion capture. *Kyōgen* idol Mansai Nomura must have experienced special pride in playing the rampaging giant in the 2016 film *Godzilla: Resurgence*, the 29th installment of perhaps the world's longest cinematic series. Then again, Nomura had already done it all since first appearing on stage in *Quiver of the Monkey* at the age of three. For nearly a half-century, Nomura has garnered every conceivable Japanese award for stage and screen following his masterful appearance at the age of 17 in a supporting role for Akira Kurosawa's epic *Ran* (1985). Furthermore, he has collected kudos worldwide for his adaptations of Shakespeare to Japanese stage traditions. His *kyōgen* production of *Macbeth* has enjoyed rave reviews in nearly every major theater city on the planet; and his transformation of *Richard III* into *A Country Thief* won munificent praise at home.

Mansai Nomura is but the latest noteworthy in a family line of prominent actors reaching back more than two centuries. His father Mansaku--a Living National Treasure of Japan--has been praised for proselytizing Japanese theatrical traditions around the world ever since his rousing initial appearance at the Paris International Theater Festival in 1957.

Mansaku's father Manzo, in turn, was also declared to be a Living National Treasure as he came to personify the traditions of the distinctive Izumi School of *kyōgen* (in contrast to those of the Sagi and Ōkura traditions).

Despite his prestigious dramaturgical pedigree, Mansai Nomura did not decide to become an actor until he was in his late teens. His talents simply could not be contained by any single tradition. In addition to his impeccable *kyōgen* credentials, he studied at the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, has lectured in aesthetics at the prestigious Tokyo University, and has won the hearts of tens of thousands of television and film fans. Yet, it is to *kyōgen* that he always returns.

Often compared to Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, *kyōgen* is among one of the oldest of all theatrical traditions. Originating as a comedic counterpart to Noh drama at the dawn of the 14th century, *kyōgen* began as an improvisational art drawing humor from the everyday. Centuries later, *kyōgen* still is known for its straightforward storytelling and expressive, clear speech. These characteristics made its repertoire of around two-hundred or so plays readily adaptable to television and film so that *kyōgen* remains hugely popular in contemporary Japan.

Despite its age, *kyōgen* remains very much a living art form. Older performers pass the drama's spirit as well as its technique to younger performers while its improvisational origins encourage contemporary performers to hold up their classical mirror to modern life. By doing so, they sustain tradition through distinct costumes, delivery and especially language which ties a performance's slapstick and satire back to century-old traditions. The result is a fusion that constantly reinvigorates the classical with the modern.

Nomura's time in London expanded his vision for this dramatic practice of *kyōgen*. More specifically, he has acknowledged, he found that British actors trained in Shakespearean conventions learned how to use their body and physicality to express emotions relating to the contemporary world, thereby opening the door to radical reinterpretations of old works. Understanding *kyōgen* as the most emotionally accessible of all historic Japanese art forms, Nomura imagined a pathway to align a centuries-old art form with modern life. Similarly, he fixed on the centrality of gender relations to the *kyōgen* storytelling as an entry point into emphasizing universality across time and space.

Nomura was not alone in his desire to connect *kyōgen* to contemporary theater. Kazuhiro Morisaka, for example, has encouraged young performers to embrace a variety of performance styles while simultaneously striving to expand

the existing repertoire with new works. Nomura similarly has trained and mentored young performers; and, he has expanded audiences using his own star power to multiply the community of *kyōgen* fans.

Nomura's celebrated father and grandfather are unlikely to have played Godzilla (and probably never would have been invited to do so). Mansai, however, has cultivated an enthusiastic fan base in contemporary theater, as well as in film and on television. His popularity reaches across generations as he has used appearances on the popular children's television show *Let's Play in Japanese* to introduce ever younger viewers to *kyōgen*. He has staged the centuries-old *kyōgen* play *Sanbaso* to the backdrop of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*, emphasizing similarities in the underlying structures of both works. At the same time, he has argued that greater accessibility should not be allowed to deplete aesthetic standards. Rather, he seeks to reinvigorate Japanese culture by bringing traditions into the present.



Sanbaso, an ancient divine dance, performed by Mansai Nomura. Photo: Ars Electronica

Most recently these various efforts have converged at the Setagaya Public Theatre where Nomura has been artistic director since 2002. The theater opened its doors in 1997 in a non-descript commercial complex in one of Tokyo's outer boroughs. Setagaya is one among two-dozen administrative wards that make up the city and would not seem very "suburban" to most Americans. Home to around 900,000 residents, it is the largest among Tokyo's wards in population and second largest in the amount of territory it occupies. Setagaya's population density is about twice that of New York City.

Founded at the initiative of the ward administration, Setagaya Public Theatre's mission has been to keep a living culture central to local life. The theatre has provided a welcomed home to large numbers of visual artists and writers; the ward in turn created an autonomous literary museum to celebrate its own cultural successes. The theater's artistic team promotes jazz, modern dance and contemporary theater to local audiences. Outreach programs extend to the disabled and infirmed, to children and the elderly, and the merely interested. Each year, the

staff and producers create a play based on the stories told by local residents.

Nomura has insured that, at some point during their school career, each of the ward's 6,000 schoolchildren attends one of the theater's *kyōgen* performances. Somewhere around a third of ward residents have attended a performance of some kind at the theater, while the theater estimates that between 80 and 90 percent of its audience arrives from outside the ward, including from abroad.

Mansai Nomura is custodian of a centuries-old theatrical tradition that has been associated with his own family for too many generations to recall. He has dedicated his career to reinvigorating that tradition, linking it to the contemporary world without weakening its own distinctiveness. To do so, he has enlisted thousands of fans in a community of shared intention, including Japan's most well-known radioactive lizard behemoth. Indeed, he has made the path from medieval Zen monk to Godzilla, from television idol to Macbeth, appear remarkably effortless.

Mark and Susan Marie Rhea and Irish Theater

November 1, 2017

Nearly two decades have passed since two young actors appeared opposite one another in a small founding theater company's second production of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as Brick and Maggie. Texan Mark Rhea had just combined his love for Irish and American theater within a newly formed Keegan Theatre in Washington, D.C., and New York-trained Susan Marie (now) Rhea won the play's lead. Both had worked together in an earlier production of *The Taming of the Shrew* yet the emotional demands of Williams's sparring characters deepened their connection with one another and with the fledgling company. Much to the delight of Washington theater audiences, the Rheas and their Keegan Theatre have thrived ever since.

Mark founded Keegan to share his passion for the Irish theater that had developed as he explored his own heritage. His unique vision was to bridge two theatrical traditions by forming a company that would take American classics to Ireland and perform Irish masterpieces in the United States. The company garnered enthusiastic audiences and enjoyed immediate critical success on its first tour to Galway in 1999 and has returned to Ireland on tour almost every year since. The company similarly has won praise and a passionate following in Washington presenting a blend of Irish and

American classics as well as lively musical productions.

Mark and Susan Marie similarly were ambitious in their artistic goals. They have shaped their company around a belief that theater succeeds only in so far as it presents an honest, pure exploration of the human condition. Moreover, they have been committed to allowing actors to draw on their own experiences to explore their characters and the play's text. They have sought out directors equally committed to open, participatory artistic leadership.

Throughout the company's history Keegan has sought to create opportunities for young talent to enjoy theatrical excellence in their work. Their intern program has encouraged dozens of young theater professionals to pursue their passions while their work with young artists similarly has nurtured budding talent.

Beyond what happens on stage, the Rheas are on a mission to bring classic and modern plays and musicals to the community at affordable, neighborhood prices. They have consistently promoted an artistic vision which links sophisticated drama to the experiences of real people and have done so by bringing real people into their productions.

The results of their efforts have been stunning. Their Irish productions of

American classics continue to reap enthusiastic kudos from audiences and critics alike; their Washington shows earn critical acclaim as evident in enthusiastic reviews, fervent audiences, dedicated supporters and armfuls of the Washington Helen Hayes theatrical awards.

Throughout the company's first decade, they performed wherever that could find a stage. They wandered around the Washington area performing in Arlington and elsewhere in Northern Virginia, in churches and schools. Despite this drifter existence, they retained a growing audience which managed to find their productions no matter how inconvenient the venue may have been. In 2009 they took advantage of Synetic Theatre's move to Arlington to find a permanent home

at the historic Church Street Theatre in Dupont Circle.

The Church Street Theatre was a diminutive century-plus old gymnasium that had once been attached to a long dispatched private school. Independent companies had found its intimate dimensions and low overhead congenial with various productions passing through over the years. Synetic and its earlier incarnation, the Stanislavsky Theatre Company, settled in at the end of the twentieth century and, in 2009, Keegan moved in to take its place.

Charming deterioration threatened to decline into degrading decay by the time Keegan arrived. The Rheas and their supporters secured a generous gift from

*Mark and Susan Marie Rhea.
Photo courtesy of Keegan Theatre.*



an anonymous donor who purchased the building and underwrote a \$2 million renovation. When it opened in 2015 with a fitting production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the company enjoyed a theatrical gem. The addition of a glass enclosed entranceway, a more spacious lobby, functioning restrooms and improved stage and backstage facilities left the theater's intimate performance space largely untouched. Rechristened The Andrew Keegan Theatre, there are few stages in Washington better suited for transporting audiences into the world playing out on stage.

The connection between theater and community could not be stronger. Nestled on a bucolic one block-long stretch of Church Street between Seventeenth and Eighteenth Streets just off of Dupont Circle, the theater and its neighbors have largely avoided the intrusion of the area's hyper-gentrification.

Trendy is to be found nearby, and development is transforming into overbuilding in the surrounding area. Indeed, a park nestled in the ruins of the burned out church that gave the street its name is being replaced by an overscaled condo development just a few hundred feet away. A row of popular taverns and restaurants can be found a couple of hundred feet in the opposite direction on Seventeenth Street.

Keegan is very much embedded in one of the city's most dynamic and energetic corners. Nonetheless, a sense of serene

charm washes over audiences as they step out of the theater after a performance onto historic sidewalks surrounded by three-story Victorian townhouses exuding a quiet domesticity that remains compatible with the company's artistic values.

The Rheas have dedicated their professional lives to promoting bold, honest classical theater that brings life's serious conundrums to life on stage. Blending lively musicals and children-oriented productions with works by some of Ireland's and America's most thoughtful dramatists, they have forged a deep bond between two communities, and between the theater and community.

Long time African American Washingtonians speak of the souls of their city's earlier residents who manifest themselves to all who embrace their ideals. Many of this country's leading writers have lived within a five minute walk of the Church Street Theater during some of their most productive years. Langston Hughes, for example, as well as Duke Ellington, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, and Frances Parkinson Keyes. They all undoubtedly walked past the old gymnasium many times over; probably not paying it much mind. The Rheas--with their dedication to forceful, honest and sophisticated artistic expression--honor such spirits by insuring that they continue to enrich the city even as redevelopment runs at fast pace.

Ari Roth and Transformational Theater

July 12, 2017

Playwright, producer, director, educator and provocateur, Ari Roth has added fresh verve to an already lively Washington, D.C. theater scene by heading outside its well-worn flightpaths. In launching his latest project--Mosaic Theater Company of DC--Roth has set the goal of producing theater that is simultaneously entertaining and engaged in issues of social justice. As important, Roth has made expansion of the Mosaic content and audience a primary artistic goal. His emphasis on post-performance programming--including panel discussions, Peace Cafes, race and identity workshops and open microphone artistic response forums--regularly incorporates the diversity of his audiences into what transpires on stage. A show at Roth's theater pulls back a corner of the curtain on what the U.S. Census Bureau already tells us about our country: more than ever, we are and will always be a colorful medley.

The company's fall 2015 inaugural show--the world premiere of Jay O. Sanders' "Unexplored Interior"--captured these foundational qualities. Sanders' play forces the audience and actors to bear witness to Rwanda's genocidal civil war pitting neighbor against neighbor in a violent spiral of death and destruction. Beautifully staged by Derek Goldman and powerfully performed by a stellar fourteen-member cast, Roth's new company told the horrific

story of genocide with complexity, depth and texture while weaving together several compelling layered plots into a vividly horrifying appraisal of violence. "Unexplored Interior" proved to be an ambitious yet risky launch for a new company trying to attract new audiences. As DCTheatreScene website reviewer Jessica Pearson recorded at the time, the Mosaic production was "a beautiful and moving piece of theatre and, most of all, it is important because it confronts issues that American theatre audiences would rather ignore and 'Unexplored Interior' cannot be ignored."

Mosaic's second season began with a poignant, moving and humorous production of Terry Teachout's one actor play "Satchmo at the Waldorf" featuring a bravura performance by veteran Washington actor Craig Wallace. Set in the jazz master Louis Armstrong's Waldorf Astoria dressing room at the end of his career, Armstrong's monologue takes the audience through the racism, tawdriness and criminal thuggery that constantly reigned in the career and life of one of the twentieth century's seminal musicians. Reminiscences of towering conflicts between an African-American musician and a Jewish manager define the ever-present limits for an American career of genius constrained by racism, criminality and endless greed.



Ari Roth.

Photo courtesy of Mosaic Theater Company of DC.

The second season recently closed with an exploration of social justice through voices directly from the Middle East. Palestinian-American actor-writer Hanna Eady and U.S. writer Edward Mast's two-character play "The Return" takes the audience on a voyage of discovery as an Israeli woman returns from the U.S. to find an Arab-Palestinian auto mechanic who has paid a terrible price for a brief rooftop dalliance with her thirteen years earlier. Powerfully performed, "The Return" confronts audiences for their own assumed sense of privilege which asserts itself in relationships among society's betters and those who serve them. For an audience comprised of Middle Easterners, Americans Jews and Muslims, African American and white Americans, the agonizing interplay on stage

simultaneously tells a story of Israelis and Palestinians and of insider and outsider lovers at home.

Roth and Mosaic have found an ideal home for the company's signature commitment to "transformational, socially-relevant art" in the Atlas Performing Arts Center, a renovated former cinema in the increasingly trendy H Street NE Corridor just beyond the shadow of the United States Capitol Building. Once a major shopping street for the city's African Americans, H Street fell on bad times following the civil unrest in response to the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Lying fallow for more than three decades, H Street began to revive as a Hipster haven anchored since 2006 by a renovated Atlas movie theater that has

come to serve as a pioneering performing arts center. As Roth understands more than most, the recent wave of gentrification has added but a patina of Hipsterdom to the already rich and textured community that predated it.

When moving to the Atlas, Roth purposefully set out to diversify his board by inviting long-time Washingtonians and African Americans to join in. From Mosaic's first season, plays focusing on the Middle East alternated with those about American race relations. Interestingly, before its premier season's end, Roth discerned not only an overall growth in the company's audiences, but its diversification as well. African Americans began appearing for Middle East-oriented productions; while previous supporters of his work as director of the D.C. Jewish Community Center's Theater J started buying tickets to plays about the Black experience. Similarly, he has brought the neighborhood's young vibe into the house with productions of new plays focusing on what it means to come of age in today's America such as "Milk Like Sugar" and the enormously popular "Hooded: or Being Black for Dummies."

Mosaic's success builds on Roth's earlier accomplishments which have long garnered a multitude of admirers within the Washington theater community and beyond. The son of Holocaust refugees, Roth grew up in Chicago before attending the University of Michigan, where he discovered the power of theater.

Previously, his theatrical experience had been limited to playing in the band of a high school production of "Godspell."

Subsequently teaching at Michigan, Brandeis and New York Universities as well as at Carnegie Mellon and George Washington University, Roth not only wrote about theater, he wrote theater. While still at Michigan, he won two Avery Hopwood Awards for Drama given by Arthur Miller.

In 1989, Washington's Arena Stage commissioned Roth to write "Born Guilty," a work based on Peter Sichrovsky's interviews with the children and grandchildren of Nazis "Schuldig Gleboren." The play moved from Washington to Off-Broadway in New York in 1993, earning rave reviews--The New York Times labeled the play "searing drama"--before it continued on to Chicago and beyond. That work's 2002 sequel "The Wolf in Peter" enjoyed critical success while a somewhat autobiographical 2013 prequel--"Andy and The Shadows"--further extended Roth's creative reach.

Ari and his wife, NGO executive Kate Schechter, moved to Washington at the end of the 1990s when Kate landed a job at the World Bank; and Ari secured an appointment as Artistic Director of Theater J. Over 18 seasons at Theater J beginning in 1997, Roth produced 129 productions including 44 world premieres and new productions from the Middle East.

Roth's term at Theater J came to an end in 2014 as some vociferous stakeholders in the Greater Washington Jewish Community (including a group self-identified as Citizens Opposed to Propaganda Masquerading as Art, or COPMA) expressed their concerns over what they saw as an anti-Israeli bent in the company's repertoire. As COPMA exerted pressure on both the boards of trustees of the DCJCC along with the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, Roth's departure became a public spectacle, capturing the attention of the Washington and national press and theater communities. At one point, over 100 artistic directors of U.S. theater companies published an open letter in Roth's support.

Roth quickly moved on to his new venture, Mosaic, which has established itself as an important fixture on the Washington scene. The company's engagement with various local communities over painful issues swirling around race and class in contemporary America provide an

indispensable platform for discussions which must--but too often do not--take place about the nature of Washington as an urban community. Roth and Mosaic, however, present more than a listening post. The company presents high quality dramatic art.

In reviewing "The Return" for *The Washington Post*, critic Nelson Pressley began: "It took Mosaic Theater Company no time to forge a social justice identity beyond the Jewish lens of Theater J where Mosaic Artistic Director Ari Roth had worked for nearly two decades until his firing at the end of 2014. But the Voices from a Changing Middle East Festival, begun in 2000 under Roth at Theater J, continues at the impressive young Mosaic as one of the most valuable streams in Washington theater."

That stream, in turn, contains company members, supporters, audiences and communities who collectively carry Roth's artistic vision to new levels.

Albert Schultz and Civic Theatre

June 1, 2017



Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto, Canada.
Photo: jofo2005 (Flickr) <https://flic.kr/p/KRb4u3>

Albert Schultz came of age with Canadian theater. Born in 1963 in Port Hope, Ontario, Schultz grew up in Okotoks, Alberta before heading to Toronto and London to study at York University and the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. His career has moved among stage, television and film; from acting to directing; from performance to fundraising. Schultz connected with leading innovators in late twentieth-century theater ranging from Robin Phillips at the Stratford Festival to a long creative interaction with distinguished Hungarian theatrical professionals. Always ambitious, Schultz is on a mission to

create civic theater, give the classics a Canadian accent, and take the voice of Canadian theater to the world. Toronto's two-decade-old Soulpepper theatre company has proven to be a powerful collaborator in bringing his dream to reality.

Schultz arrived on the Canadian stage just as French and English Canadian theater were coming into their own after a long history. Various chroniclers date the arrival of European theater in today's Canada to 1583; others to 1606, and 1640. Whatever the precise date, English and French language classics by such authors as Molière, Corneille, Racine

and Shakespeare enjoyed wide following among Canada's early French and English colonists. Given Canada's sparse population--plus the hostility of Protestant and Catholic clerics--theater primarily remained an amateur entertainment well into the nineteenth century. Even then, Canadian performing arts largely remained connected to distant metropolitan capitals in Europe (and later in New York and eventually California).

The state of Canadian theater changed following World War II. Regional theaters came into being across the country while nascent English and French television networks encouraged writers, actors, directors and producers as they scrambled to fill the airways with distinctive Canadian content. By the 1960s, smaller experimental theaters emerged across English Canada while a distinctive French theater took shape in Quebec at times drawing on the Quebec idiom *joual*.

Grants supporting Canadian playwriting in anticipation of Canada's Centennial in 1967 spurred further development. One major project, Toronto's St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, emerged as an important focal point for English Canadian theater which encouraged the continuing development of Toronto's vibrant theater community. Many associated with the Centre anticipated that it would secure a solid foundation for a new form of Canadian civic theater. Toronto grew into a theatrical powerhouse by the century's

end, just as Schultz became a theater professional.

Schultz joined with a dozen other rising Toronto artists in 1998 to form Soulpepper as a company that would present classical works by such noted playwrights as Harold Pinter, Thornton Wilder, Tom Stoppard, Samuel Becket and Anton Chekhov, all from a distinctively Canadian perspective. Seven seasons later the company moved into the Distillery District, an artfully renovated industrial site next to the Gardiner Expressway east of downtown, where whiskey was once produced.

Within a decade, Soulpepper had become Toronto's most popular theater attracting as many as 100,000 viewers each season. The company expanded its repertoire to newer works including a widely acclaimed production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Not everyone was pleased by this turn of events. In 2013, University of Toronto Professor Holger Syme complained in an email to Toronto's major newspaper *The Globe and Mail* that, "If the company started out 15 years ago hungry for a challenge and committed to making old texts newly exciting and engaging, they have now transformed themselves into a commercial enterprise offering an utterly conventional, very safe repertory of not-very-old plays staged with slick production values in polished and largely unchallenging performances."

Schultz, the company's Artistic Director, indeed set his sights on a different agenda as he returned to the Centenary-era goal

of creating a “National Civic Theatre.” The company actively seeks engagement with communities across the city and nation running ambitious training programs; commissioning new works by Canadian authors; regularly touring throughout Ontario, Canada and internationally; expanding its reach through social media and other digital platforms; engaging new Canadians as they discover their country through theater; all while maintaining active seasons at its home base in the Distillery District. To celebrate Canada’s Sesquicentennial and its own twentieth anniversary, Soulpepper presented a well-received repertoire of six Canadian plays in June 2017 at New York’s Pershing Square Signature Centre on 42nd Street, just west of Times Square.

Soulpepper’s artistic and popular success undergirds its activist civic mission of becoming “a place of belonging for artists and audiences of all ages and backgrounds.” The company realizes its mission through six sets of activities which look to the community through civic engagement of various forms including programming in schools; to the future through The Soulpepper Academy training up-and-coming generations of theatre artists; to the “pipeline” through the

development of new works; to the stage, including plays, presentations and other events; to the road with touring; and, to the air through digital and broadcast media. Their charge is clear: everyone belongs at Soulpepper.

In his message to the audiences of his 2015 season, Schultz observed:

Our profoundly gifted company of artists are, like you, citizens of this community and represent the cultural, generational, and artistic diversity of your city. The work on our stages looks out to the world while simultaneously focusing on our national voices. Our offerings are multi-disciplinary and expansive in their scope; they acknowledge the gifts of our collective cultural past while imagining our creative future as a nation.

Schultz has led Soulpepper through a transition from a stage dedicated to the classics to a civic powerhouse. In doing so, the company has not so much abandoned its original mission as expanded it. The transformation to a community asset has created a support system that sustains and replenishes the company’s original vision.

Daniel Soulières and Performance Dance

August 25, 2017

Montreal and Quebec had come out of World War II stuck in a time warp that placed La Belle Province at odds with much of North America. For more than a century, the province languished under a brokered allocation of power which stymied entrance into the contemporary world. An Anglophone Protestant elite controlled the commanding heights of commerce from their granite citadels in Montreal. French-speaking Catholic clergy controlled the rest of the province, keeping their flock tied to the countryside for farming or, in many instances, the messier task of resource extraction. A nationalistic right-wing populist government under Premier Maurice Duplessis and his thuggish Union Nationale Party--together with corrupt police and officialdom--used its gerrymandered majority in the Assemblée nationale to insure that nothing would change.

Transformation came as the rest of the continent increasingly became incorporated into what would grow in a few years into the most dynamically mobile continental economy in world history. Eventually, following Duplessis's death, the previous system snapped during the "Quiet Revolution" begun in 1960 by a new Liberal Government under Jean Lesage. Modernity arrived in Quebec with a vengeance, unleashing intense socio-political and socio-cultural adjustments

accompanied by secularization, the creation of a welfare state, and incompatible federalist and sovereigntist factions. Identities and values radically loosened as Quebec went, according to numerous surveys, from being the most religious to the most secularized society in North America.

Nothing escaped this makeover including performance dance. Beginning almost immediately following the World War II, those Montrealers connected to continental trends in the arts began to push back against repressive policies of Duplessis and the Roman Catholic Church. New Montrealers debarking from war-torn Europe brought their cultural tastes and expectations with them. Before 1945, the only serious dance reaching Montreal stages was performed by visiting companies made up of Americans, Europeans and displaced Russians (including Ruth St. Denis, Isadora



*Par le chas de l'aiguille (Through the eye of the needle),
a choreography by Audrey Bergeron.
Photo courtesy of Danse-Cité.*

Duncan, Anna Pavlova and various legacy companies from Les Ballets Russe). By the 1960s Montreal had its own classical company--Les Grands Ballets Canadiens--and the first of what would become a panoply of modern dance troupes.

The theater community constituted a radicalizing vanguard pushing forward exciting fresh voices who were striving to decipher the meaning of everyday experiences on stage. Les Grands Ballets Canadiens established dance at the forefront of the city's cultural life during the late 1950s through its performances, its school and studios and its community outreach programs. Contemporary dance companies appeared as an increasingly vibrant community formed with more and more performers arriving, audiences growing and donors opening their coffers.

Danse-Cité was the inspiration of Daniel Soulières who founded the company in 1983 before turning it over to choreographer Jean-Pierre Perreault. He remained a major player within the company in numerous capacities ever since, serving as Artistic Director in recent years.

Soulières embraced dance after having completed his degree in psychology at l'Université de Montréal. Initially studying classical ballet, he turned to contemporary dance working with leading teachers such as Peggy Baker, Peter Boneham Linda Rabin and Tassy Teekman. Soulières quickly became one of the most popular

dancers in Montreal, performing an average of thirty-seven shows each year between 1977 and 1996. These productions included roles created for him by choreographers James Kudelka, Françoise Sullivan, Jeanne Renaud and Paul-André Fortier among many. He himself choreographed and co-choreographed dozens of works.

Soulières established Danse-Cité to promote contemporary dance. He began by presenting new works over a two week period--his *Treize chorégraphes pour deux danseurs* ran a month--and actively sought out young performers and choreographers to bring their work to the stage. His reliance on new talent made for an easy transition to new troupe leadership in 1986.

Beyond Danse-Cité, Soulières worked as artistic advisor to the legendary Montreal dance company Le Groupe de la Place Royale and founded several production groups including Qui Danse, Les Événements de la Plieune Lune and Most Modern. These efforts supported the development of emerging artists throughout the 1980s and 1990s into the current century. Such programs expanded over time to embrace exchanges with European companies.

Soulières insisted from the very beginning that Danse-Cité have no single choreographer or artistic team, featuring instead a variety of ground-breaking works by numerous innovative artists. At least three generations of youthful dancers and

choreographers got their start through various Soulières-organized programs including, among many: Irèni Stamou, Isabelle Van Grimde, Jane Mappin, Roger Sinha, Holy Body Tadoo, Estelle Clareton and Laurence Lemieus.

Soulières similarly sought to cultivate new audiences for contemporary dance. He took his artists into the community, often appearing at nearly a dozen cultural centers scattered around the city. He attracted new audiences with multidisciplinary approaches to performance dance combining dance, theatre and poetry. He expanded the relationship between artist and public in every way that he could imagine. Most recently, Danse-Cité has promoted the use of dance to mediate across the cultures of Montreal's varied local communities.

Thirty-five years after its founding, Danse-Cité bills itself as a "Montreal-based research, creation, production and distribution company dedicated to the advancement of contemporary dance" by being at the "forefront of Montreal's cutting-edge dance scene." The company produces four works and presents three dozen shows during the course of most years as it seeks to meld works by younger new artists with works drawing on their collaboration with more established practitioners.

The twentieth-first century began with Montreal well established as a significant international center for performance dance, and a global leader in the two dance-related genres of physical theater and circus arts. One might have thought this always was so. However, just a half-century before, clerical arbiters of public taste throughout Quebec frowned on physical artistic expression in almost any form.

The emergence of first classical, then modern and contemporary dance in Montreal is inexorably linked to broader, profound changes in society that drove political conflict and deep cultural wars. The Quebec transformation to modernity is no less dramatic for being swift and largely peaceful. Accompanying dislocations drove the preeminence of the arts--including literature, theatre, cinema, television, circus, music or dance--as a form of bringing together high culture with street performance.

Dance became embedded in Montreal life--a space in which it had largely been absent--because the dance community constructed a broad base of supporting institutions ranging from studios to schools. Dance has thrived in Montreal because it became rooted in local society by interacting with it. Artistic visionary Daniel Soulières helped make this happen while creating community.

Grace Srinivasan and Paula Maust and Baroque Music

March 29, 2017

On almost any given Sunday nine blocks west of the White House on Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue, the parishioners of Saint Stephen Martyr Catholic Church are transported to thoughts of Heaven by the golden soprano voice of Cantor Grace Srinivasan. Srinivasan, who grew up in the Washington area, graduated with degrees in music from nearby George Washington University, and studied ballet, the cello, and, later, voice at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory.

Saint Stephen Martyr has a long and distinguished history. Founded in 1867, the parish's sturdy brick sanctuary and school stood proudly over the city's tumbledown Foggy Bottom neighborhood for nearly a century. Prominent local architect Adolf Cluss--who had been the Best Man at Frederick Engels' wedding prior to leaving Germany--designed the church in a signature carnivalesque red-brick style that came to define much of Washington's cityscape (among his surviving buildings are The Smithsonian's Arts & Industry Building, Eastern Market, and the Franklin School). When structural damage proved too severe, the old church was replaced in 1959 by an elegantly Modernist sanctuary defined by a progression of liquefied parabolic vaults. The new Saint Stephen Matyr became the home church for President John F. Kennedy, whose

favorite pew at the back of the sanctuary is memorialized by a bronze plaque.

Srinivasan has retained her connection with Saint Stephen Martyr from her college days even as her career has taken flight. In addition to recitals and stage appearances around the world, she played the lead role in the 2014 PBS docudrama *Enemy of the Reich* recounting the heroic story of Noor Inayat Khan, who aided the French Resistance during World War II and was killed in Dachau.

Srinivasan met Paula Maust while studying at Peabody Conservatory. An accomplished harpsichordist and organist, Maust has earned a multitude of degrees in early music and organ performance from Peabody, the Cleveland Institute of Music, and Valparaiso University. She has earned praise for her performances and has served as music director and organist at several churches around the country.

Srinivasan and Maust's shared passion for early and Baroque music drew them together. They perform regularly around Baltimore and Washington and beyond with numerous groups and colleagues, and they promote their music through teaching and by encouraging new audiences to discover the music. Maust, for example, teaches at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and Towson

University as well as taking on private students. Yet, they wanted to do more.

Last year, Srinivasan and Maust joined together to form *Musica Spira* (*Music Breathes*) dedicated to promoting Baroque music that captures “the essence of life’s stories” thereby making the music relevant to contemporary society. Together, they curate and perform programs touching on the trials of life in the twenty-first century through the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

One such program featuring the music of women composers is entitled “Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Women Who Defied the Odds.” Another, entitled “In Pursuit of Fidelity,” explores the meaning of trust through the music of Henry Purcell, Peter Philips, Thomas-Louis Bourgeois, Joseph-Nicolas-Pancrace Royer and Domenico Scarlatti. Concluding with Scarlatti’s rage aria, “*Fille, gia piu non parlo,*” their performances humanize a music that might otherwise seem distant from contemporary society and life.

When collaborating as *Musica Spira*, Srinivasan and Maust draw musical traditions of the past and present into renewed conversations about the importance of life and values. Working in partnership to develop uncommon programs, they highlight shared themes which reach across centuries of seeming difference.

Together and with other musicians in a variety of venues and events ranging from pop up concerts in public spaces to formal recitals at esteemed institutions, Srinivasan and Maust enjoy diverse and elevating careers as performers and teachers. Their successes extend beyond promoting their own considerable talents to redefining the masterful music of the European Enlightenment for new audiences. In doing so, they are building new communities of followers who, in turn, revivify the legacy of the past.



*Grace Srinivasan and Paula Maust.
Photo courtesy of Musica Spira.*

Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili and Physical Theater

February 3, 2017

Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili arrived in the United States with their own immigrant dream: to integrate their distinctive brand of physical theater into American theatrical life. As *The New York Times* has noted, their vision produces an “elegant fusion of dance and experimental theater.” Their approach draws on the long-standing theatrical traditions of their homeland, the country of Georgia, which merges physicality and mime into an exceptional brand of performance. Now widely known for their striking productions of Shakespeare plays without dialogue, the Tsikurishvilis and their Synetic Theater in Arlington, Virginia, create an aural and visual indulgence resembling dance and theater while being not quiet either.

Paata and Irina are products of a distinctive late-Soviet theater culture which merged Soviet (and Russian) theatrical practices with earlier Georgian traditions celebrating distinctive national polyphonic a cappella singing, regionally specific dance from both the mountains and lowlands, and pantomime theater. They grew up as artists surrounded by masters of visual storytelling through acting, movement, and music. Georgian theatricality came with them, packed away in their suitcases, as they travelled to their new homeland in the United States.

The Tsikurishvilis were already highly-trained professionals when they left home in search of fresh opportunities following the collapse of the Soviet Union and an on-going vicious civil war close to home in Georgia. During her final courses at Georgia’s national ballet school, Irina discovered the power of pantomime to tell stories through gesture, music, and movement. She was won over, tossing off a promised place in Georgia’s celebrated national folk-dance company upon graduation to pursue pantomime theater.

Paata, meanwhile, came to physical theater from a different direction. A promising film student, Paata had completed a bachelor’s degree in acting and a master’s in film directing at local universities. He was performing in a home-grown pantomime company waiting for a film project to come along when a group of aspiring ballerinas visited to learn more about incorporating gestures into their performances. Irina was among the group.

Tbilisi at the time was no place to launch acting careers. Confronting a collapsing economy brought on by a punishing war among competing political factions, Paata and Irina decided to take their theatrical dreams and growing family (including their newborn son Vato) on the road. They made their way to Germany, where they established the Mimodrama Theater.

Immigrant and theatrical life in Europe proved to have its own challenges and before long the Tsikurishvilis were looking further afield.

Meanwhile, Irina's father, an Olympic gymnastics coach, had made his way with Irina's mother to the United States, where he eventually would join the Ohio State coaching crew. Her parents helped Irina, Paata and Vato to follow their path across the Atlantic. After a rough patch of performing before school assemblies and the diners at a Russian restaurant in Baltimore, the Tsikurishvilis sought entrance into the American theater scene.

In 2001--now joined by newly born daughter Anna--Irina and Paata united with other actors trained in Soviet

theater to form a company housed in Washington's diminutive Church Street Theater near Dupont Circle. Dedicated to performing European classics, the company relied heavily on physicality to overcome at times suspect English language skills. Irina and Paata established their presence in Washington theater with stunning performances as Ophelia and Hamlet in the wordless "Hamlet... the Rest is Silence."

Members of the original Church Street company soon set off in different directions. Irina, Paata, and fellow Georgian, film star Irakli Kavsadze, took their Synetic Theatre (from SYNthesis for "the coming together of distinct elements to form a whole;" and KenETIC, for "pertaining to or imparting motion,

*Master and Margarita, a Roland Reed's adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel.
Photo: Graeme B. Shaw, courtesy of Synetic Theater.*



active, dynamic,” to produce “a dynamic synthesis of the arts”) across the Potomac to Arlington, Virginia. From there, they set about to redefine American theatre “by blending innovative techniques and movement, investing in artists’ growth, and creating unforgettable visceral experiences for every audience.”

Thinking about how to infuse their visionary approach of physical performance into American theater, Paata looked to the career of an earlier Georgian artistic immigrant, George Balanchine. Noting how Balanchine took on all opportunities--including working with fellow immigrant Igor Stravinski on a “pachyderm ballet” for circus elephants--Paata came to appreciate that every performance offered insight into American audiences. To move forward, Paata, like Balanchine, needed audiences and donors. Synetic’s fresh artistic vision needed performers trained in a new way.

In short, personalistic artistic visions require their own idiosyncratic communities to sustain their creativity. The vision would thrive as students headed out into the world, as audiences spread the word and as checkbooks were dispatched in patronage. Balanchine, Paata realized, created his own like-minded community which eventually transformed American dance. Irina and Paata, through Synetic, would do the same; building a company which not only performed, but trained and cultivated as well. Synetic would be more than a mainstage; it would become the

focal point for a growing community of artists and their admirers who continuously expanded the reach of a new concept of theatrical art.

With the support and encouragement of Arlington County’s vibrant arts programs, Synetic secured increasingly capable facilities for both performance and a robust educational program in Rosslyn, then Springfield, and now Crystal City as well as at the Kennedy Center and Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington. These mainstage productions have been supported by the creation of a band of performers and other artists embracing Synetic’s vivid staging, striking costume design, haunting music, and other-earthly movement set free from the laws of gravity.

As their company grew, Irina and Paata expanded educational outreach to include studio training for all ages from seven through adult, summer camp, children’s theater, and teenage performance. In recent years, they have taken their company on the road, performing on numerous U.S. college campuses as well as in Mexico and in their native Georgia. These activities have extended the company’s reach to over 40,000 patrons annually. More important, a small company of formerly Soviet performers matured into a self-replenishing network of young American players who bring fresh vitality to the mainstage productions and are moving out onto stages across Washington and the nation.

Synetic protégé Ben Cunis has moved on to Los Angeles where he is performing on stage and screen (including *The House of Cards*); John Milosich appeared in the first U.S. National Tour of *War Horse*. Joseph Carlson similarly has been in numerous roles beyond the Synetic stage (including appearing in the film *Lincoln*); Rebecca Hausman may be seen in *The Coming Storm*; and Courtney Pauroso appeared in *If Women Ruled the World*. Brittany O’Grady has enjoyed perhaps the most visible success in the role of Simone Davis in Fox Television’s series *Star*. Actor by actor, designer by designer, Irina and Paata are bringing their distinctive artistic vision to American audiences; and they have done so by nurturing a community of appreciating artists, audiences, and supporters.

At any given Synetic performance in Crystal City, Arlington the audience includes hopeful young performers who have benefitted from the company’s various studio workshops, Russian and Georgian emigres who grew up watching one of the world’s great theater traditions unfold on stage, suburbanites out for a

night on the town, Washingtonians pulled across the Potomac by the promise of a memorable night at the theater, members of the international diplomatic corps looking for a more “European” experience, and many more drawn from a rich tapestry of local groups. The Synetic audience is among the youngest of all theater audiences in Washington, and one of the most devoted.

Irina and Paata have enjoyed recognition and honors of various kinds, including a collection of Washington theater community’s Helen Hayes Awards and a grant for innovating emerging theatre from the New York theater wing, the founders of the TONY awards. They were recognized by *Washingtonian Magazine* in 2013 as among a handful of Washingtonians of the Year. Most important, they have created a theater unlike any other in the nation’s capital; and they have done so by investing in nurturing a community around their effort. They are living their dream of bringing a new style of physical theater to America. And American theater is beginning to change in response.

C. Brian Williams and Stepping

October 2, 2017

Having just completed business training at Howard University as South Africa was moving towards electing Nelson Mandela as its first post-apartheid President, C. Brian Williams set out to teach small-business skills in Lesotho and to encounter the emerging South Africa surrounding it. A member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Beta Chapter at Howard, Williams had learned the complex rhythmic stomping and chanting art form popular among African American college students known as Stepping. He was caught off guard by Southern African Gumbboot Dancing, which immediately reminded him of the dances he had performed with his fraternity brothers back at Howard. This unexpected moment changed his life.

Gumbboot dancing emerged in the early twentieth century in the migrant worker clubs around Durban and other South African cities where rural migrants were segregated into barracks as they worked in South Africa's gold, coal, platinum and diamond mines. Dancing in the Wellington boots often used in the mines, performers sometimes added bells to the boots which rang as they stomped the ground.

The dances are drawn from a variety of sources including indigenous steps brought by the migrants from their home communities; steps from various missionaries; the dances of sailors who visited the port city of Durban including Russian folk dance; the popular social dances of the 1930s and 1940s such as

C. Brian Williams.

Photo: The Napoleon Complex Project, courtesy of Step Afrika!



the jitterbug; and American tap dance brought by visiting minstrel groups of the nineteenth century and popularized through the Hollywood extravaganzas of the mid-twentieth century. Oft' times the pattern of the steps and rhythms communicate messages of protest to those in the know.

Like the African American Stepping tradition, Gumboot dancing is highly competitive with performance judged by precision. Individual dance groups mesh together a variety of styles--such as the stamping of feet in traditional Zulu dance, the enthusiasm of minstrel show performers, and the intricacies of Hollywood routines--to make personal and collective statements. Dancers mimic their workplace relationship to an authoritarian "boss boy," who determines what each dancer does.

Gumboot dancing thus emerged as a cherished expression by migrants desperately trying to claim a corner of an alien environment as their own. The association with African American cultural forms felt by Williams was immediate and obvious.

Williams began reaching out to South African partners, eager to demonstrate the traditions he had shared back at Howard. He eventually met with the Soweto Dance Theater and they formed an alliance. By 1994, Williams and his Soweto partners had organized the first Step Afrika! International Cultural Festival in Johannesburg. Williams brought the

concept back to the United States two years later, establishing Step Afrika! as a Washington based dance company dedicated to promoting Stepping which the company describes on its website as blending "percussive dance styles practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities, African traditional dance and influences from a variety of other dance and art forms" so as to "integrate songs, storytelling, humor, and audience participation."

Williams performed, lectured and taught around the United States as well as in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. The company established itself as a significant force on the Washington cultural scene with deep ties into area schools and universities as well as residency programs for elementary, middle- and high school students. In addition, they developed Summer Steps with Step Afrika!, a popular one-week program that teaches stepping and concepts of teamwork, discipline and commitment to students from across the country.

Step Afrika! became ever more ambitious artistically, performing longer works and taking stages in some at the country's leading universities and art centers, and eventually at the White House for the Obamas. Williams and his company developed a performance style which lures their audiences into the spirit of their show. They encourage audience members to break traditional theatre rules, luring

everyone to a shared cultural experience similar to the communal spirit Williams enjoyed watching South African Gumboot dancers. Their shows frequently begin with the cast singing the song “Calling All Brothers and Calling All Sisters,” thereby letting everyone present understand that there are no boundaries between performance and audience.

Williams’ most ambitious work unambiguously brought the Stepping tradition into mainstream American performance dance. In 2011 in close cooperation with The Phillips Collection, the company mounted a full-length piece responding to Jacob Lawrence’s iconic *Migration Series* (1940-41). Their work became a cornerstone of celebrating the 2016 centenary of Lawrence’s monumental series of 60 images tracing the experience of the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south to the industrial north. That year, the Washington Performing Arts, the Meany Center for the Arts and several other major performing arts center helped to remount the work and launch a national tour that continued this season with Step Afrika!’s New York debut at the New

Victory Theater. These performances were greeted by wildly enthusiastic audiences as they captured the spirit of Lawrence’s work.

In 1937 or 1938, future Nobel Peace Prize winner and Howard University political science professor Ralph Bunche visited the Witwatersrand Native Labor Association’s workers’ club where, according to his field notes, he witnessed competing choirs singing Zulu songs accompanied by dancing with “weird and shuffling steps.” Like Williams more than a half-century later, Bunche was fascinated by music and dance traditions which were strangely familiar and alien at the same time. Embracing a physical statement of presence, Zulu migrant workers used dance and song to claim their humanity in the most inhumane of circumstances. Bunche and Williams were nurtured by this spirit, bringing it back to the United States in different ways. For Williams, it has animated a life dedicated to establishing the Stepping tradition of his college years as a significant American art form. In doing so, he has incorporated those who feel alienated from many aspects of American culture onto its main stage.

Conclusion



Making Cities Work as Holistic Communities of Promise

May 16, 2017

Shortly after the completion of the Empire State Building, the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald was shattered by a visit to its observation deck. “Full of vaunting pride,” he wrote, “the New Yorker had climbed here, and seen with dismay what he had never suspected. That the city was not the endless succession of canyons that he had supposed, but that it had limits, fading out into the country on all sides into an expanse of green and blue. That alone was limitless. And with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his mind came crashing down.”

The present is a moment when we view cities from even further away than the top of the Empire State Building. The central image of our age has become the bright necklace of electrical lights revealed in nighttime photographs of the earth taken from the cosmos. This new reality transforms every aspect of life, replacing the city as Fitzgerald knew it by a flowing global urban system. Cities have become limitless once again; and they have become our collective home. The world is now urban.

Present-day recognition of the importance of cities in the global agenda for inclusive and sustainable development is unprecedented. In September 2015, U.N. member states agreed on 17 global goals to end poverty, fight inequality and tackle

climate change by 2030. Among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is an “urban” goal, “SDG Number 11” calling on the international community to make cities “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” A few months later, in October 2016, the United Nations’ HABITAT III conference--an international gathering convened every twenty years--adopted the “New Urban Agenda” which would further align domestic policies and international cooperation across the globe with the objectives of SDG11.

These United Nations declarations emerged from the concerted efforts of urban thinkers and practitioners around the world to place cities on the international agenda. Their hard work gained traction following recognition of an historic demographic shift sometime during the last decade when, for the first time in history, a majority of humans live in urban settlements. Further, it is expected that by the year 2050, 70 percent of the world population will be urban. Humankind is now an urban species; cities themselves have changed as traditional urban settlements have grown into sprawling, urbanized regions. These unprecedented circumstances require a reorientation of how we collectively think about the world.

Proclamation is laudable; action is essential (and considerably more elusive).

Cities are the largest and arguably most complex product of human enterprise. As cities are made by humans, they necessarily are imperfect. As cities are complex, humans invariably struggle to bring the totality of urban reality into a single vision. We tend to isolate those aspects of urban life which give us pause, approaching with singular solutions and agendas intended to “fix” a particular urban condition. This piecemeal approach tends to distract us from the larger objective of nurturing cities as holistic places of promise.

Unlike a decade or so ago, the challenge is no longer that cities are being ignored. Notions of creative classes, triumphant cities, and winner-take-all urbanism abound. Political opponents of current national policies are looking to cities to right the ship of state with sanctuary cities, green cities and charitable cities. Urbanites and suburbanites struggle to define and redefine political institutions in an era when both have become co-dependently metropolitan. Some ask what the world would be like if it were ruled by mayors instead of by presidents; others are convinced that our salvation is to be found in making cities smart.

Each perspective has value intellectually and operationally; all somehow come up short when engaging our new urban condition. In thinking about the goal of promoting inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities, perhaps we must ponder more meaningful criteria. The simplest test

for delineating a helpful view might be to consider whether or not mothers would want their children to grow up in a given community. Meeting that standard depends on gaining grounds for opportunity and security. Recalibrating our ultimate goal--shifting from a view of cities as centers of efficient economic growth or as home to especially creative innovators to holistic places of promise--empowers us to reconsider the city as our primary habitat.

Unidimensional approaches to urban life drive us towards conventional hierarchies of smart technologies and innovations in governance, which, while laudable, are insufficient. As almost 180,000 people are added to the urban population each day, we need to plan for cities which do not yet exist. As ubiquitous proponents of new urban lifestyles fall into the fallacies of winner-take-all mentalities, we need to expand policy goals beyond favoring any particular group no matter how creative it may be.

As we gather more and more information about cities we must remember that they are homes to millions and not merely data laboratories. As poverty spreads to the urban periphery, we need to embrace a vision of the city that extends well beyond fixed boundaries. As urban complexity abounds, we need to accept that no particular policy offers a cookie-cutter approach that will prove successful everywhere.

Philosophical reflection and debate on the nature of public purpose and public

virtue is as pressing today as it has been across centuries. Today's cities remain as rooted in time, place and culture as cities always have been. Even so, today's urban challenge is universal. In trying to blend the universal and the particular, we need more humility. We must begin by recognizing that success in terms of making the city desirable requires dexterity, flexibility and pragmatism.

Now that we have become urban, humans must embrace a more fulsome vision of the city. Not so long ago, we came to think of cities as places with limits--if not natural at least political and administrative--which faded into the green and blue of the countryside. Once we bound the city within ever tight definitions, urban life came to be viewed as somehow abnormal. The now ubiquitous view from outer space at night erases all such boundaries. Today, our concepts and policies must follow.

Performing Community 1:

Short Essays on Community, Diversity,
Inclusion, and the Performing Arts



By **Blair Ruble**



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CONTENTS

Chapter 1- Performing Community Engagement

The Sound of Music Is The Sound of Community Resilience
Making Community Work: the Importance of the Performing Arts
The View from the Bus: Rethinking Cities through Performance
Dancing towards Revolution in Kyiv
Theater and the Heart of a City: Moscow's Teatr.doc's Confrontation with Authority
Porgy & Bess at 80: Rethinking Russian Influence on American Culture
Performance and Power from Kabuki to Go Go
Acting Out Gentrification: Theater as Community Engagement
"Beauty and the Beast:" A Tale of Entrepreneurship and Community
Misty Copeland to Dance Swan Lake at DC's Kennedy Center

Chapter 2- Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Building

The Devil is a Local Call Away: Cities, the Arts, and Misunderstanding "Decay"
As Urbanization Accelerates, Policymakers Face Integration Hurdles
After Baltimore, we must see community as a process
Fight not Flight: Lessons from Detroit
Odessa: Ukrainian port that inspired big dreams
How Cities Can Foster Tolerance and Acceptance

Chapter 3- Planning for Inclusion and Creating Community

Rethinking Engagement in Cities: Ending the Professional vs. Citizen Divide
Innovation through Inclusion: Lessons from Medellín and Barcelona
Detroit: Planning for a City of the Future
Diversity by Design
Discovering the Power of Community in Unexpected Places

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Inclusion, and the Performing Arts

By Blair Ruble



CONTENTS

Chapter 1- Communities and Change

Living Diversity: Documenting Arlington, Virginia's Inclusive, Safe, Resilient, and Sustainable Communities

Washington's Rose Park and the Lessons of Welcoming Public Space

Feasts for Eyes Too Blind to See: Destroying Communities in the Name of Ideology

Washington's Changing Neighborhoods: Looking East

From Collards to Kale: Redefining Washington's West End

Small is Beautiful: A Washington Tale of Little Red Rockers and Ducks

Washington, D.C. The Anxious City

10 Steps to a More Genuine D.C. Experience

Chapter 2- Mobility, Community, and Equality

A Public Management Train Wreck: The Lessons of Unaccountability and the Washington Metro

CARPETing the City with Transit: Essential Elements for Promoting Mobility and Equity with Sustainable Development

Returning to Plato's Cave: How the Light of Smart Technology Brings Us Back to Old Debates

Summer of Washington's Capital Discontent: Lessons from the Past

Chapter 3- The Arts and Community Making

Feel that Funky Beat. The Sound of Converting Dreams of Community into Reality

Hometown D.C.: America's Secret Music City

Down By the Riverside: Jazz Over the Volga

How Naples Became Europe's Great Musical Machine

Building Community Through Theater; Lessons from the Setagaya Theater

The Cirque Comes to Town. Learning about Culture and Cities from Montreal

Bringing New York to the Broadway Stage

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Dr. Ruble's *The Muse of Urban Delirium* appeared in early 2017. This work examines how new forms of performing arts emerge at moments of uncertain social identity in cities undergoing rapid transformation. Dr. Ruble's most recent previous book, *Washington's U Street: A Biography* (2010), explored the tentative mixing of classes and in one of the Nation Capital's most important neighborhoods. This volume was reissued in paperback (2012) and in a Russian language edition (2012).

His other book-length works include a trilogy examining the fate of Russian provincial cities during the twentieth

century: *Leningrad. Shaping a Soviet City* (1990); *Money Sings! The Changing Politics of Urban Space in Post-Soviet Yaroslavl* (1995); and, *Second Metropolis: Pragmatic Pluralism in Gilded Age Chicago, Silver Age Moscow, and Meiji Osaka* (2001). *Second Metropolis* has been published in Russian (2004) and Ukrainian (2010) translation. In addition Dr. Ruble authored *Creating Diversity Capital* (2005) examining the changes in such cities as Montreal, Washington, D.C., and Kyiv brought about by the arrival of transnational communities. This work has appeared in Ukrainian translation (2007).

Dr. Ruble's more than twenty edited works with several partners include: *Jazz in Washington* (2014), *Urban Diversity* (2010); *Cities after the Fall of Communism* (2009); *Composing Urban History and the Constitution of Civic Identities* (2003); *Urban Governance around the World* (2001); *Preparing for the Urban Future* (1996), and *Russian Housing in the Modern Age* (1993).

Dr. Ruble received his MA and PhD degrees in Political Science from the University of Toronto (1973, 1977), and an AB degree with Highest Honors in Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1971).



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