

## Experimentation With Forms

By LUCIA MAURO

In a year that celebrated the redemptive power of the classic well-made play (Writers' Theatre's *The Price* and Goodman's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, for example), I found myself equally transported by a bold series of non-linear theatrical experiments (many of them presented at the worn and malleable National Pastime Theater).

While multidisciplinary merging is not a radical new concept, the number of Chicago theatre companies—from avant-garde downs to commedia revivalists—dared to test less rigidly structured dramatic waters. The results may not have boasted high-profile success, but the efforts to plumb the depths of the human soul through alternative forms proved quite extraordinary in 2002.

I've often returned to the unpretentious swirl of life of T.U.T.A. Theatre Company—under the direction of Zeljko and Natasha Djulic—injecting into Peter Handke's semi-improvisational *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other*. A generic town square setting provoked the unpredictable action as actors morphed into people of all ages, dispositions and motivations over the course of 80 minutes—and several lifetimes.

The experience was as spontaneous and illogical as a day spent people watching in any public place. But under Djulic's exactly invisible direction, the eight cast members of T.U.T.A. (formerly based in Washington, D.C.) achieved something indescribably potent. What began as an exercise in silent spatial relationships, invasions and collisions, crescendoed into an operatic burst of civilization's simplest desires scattered across a complex landscape.

A similar metaphorically expansive spirit took hold of the International Theater of Chicago's less fluid yet admirable attempt at turning Alessandro Baricco's stirring novel-fable, *Ocean Sea*, into a stylized merging of sound and movement. Also at National Pastime, it wove vintage aspects of the space into its pondering on those simple yet volcanic moments of life (from first love to remorse). The Italian novel speaks concisely and eloquently about the

vagaries of science, faith, love, vengeance, forgiveness and becoming whole again after the onset of a soul-erasing malaise as a group of individuals gathers at an imaginary seaside inn.

And, although this production required more focused shaping, the suggestion of the contradictory power of a body of water had a delicate way of seeping into my pores.

National Pastime was the setting for Local Infinities' fearless plunge into the creative process in *Wax & Wayne*—a visual art/physical theatre reinvention of the "Pygmalion and Galatea" myth. Creators Meghan Strell, Larry Underwood and Charlie Levin placed themselves at the mercy of their materials, even as they tried to harness that elusive artistic spark.

Levin was detached from the central action. But, as she painted on a large glass canvas the Picasso-like fragments of a woman's figure in multicolored wax brushstrokes, she forged an elusive connection to the two main figures engaged in deconstructing immortality before our eyes.

Underwood, an absent-minded comic figure, took on the persona of Wayne (a.k.a. Pygmalion). But, in an intriguing move away from the familiar myth, Wayne did not long for his statue (Strell in a performance of awe-inspiring endurance and flexibility) to become flesh and blood. Instead the statue asserted her will and slowly shed small shards of her wax covering or, in figurative terms, her emotional stasis. Wayne's wish was to merge with his art—nor by uniting with his dream-statue-turned-real woman, but by marrying the very process that defined him.

In a precarious series of hoisting and dunking, Underwood later emerged from a tub of molten wax. The liquid coating then became a simultaneous life-ending and life-preserving force. *Wax & Wayne* posed the question: How does our quest for immortality manifest itself in the desire to leave a legacy?

Confronting our mortality in these fragile and confusing times dominated the more experimental works I experienced this year. The tour de force of masterfully

suggestive provocation was Goat Island Performance Group's latest piece, *It's an Earthquake in My Heart*, with audiences seated on the Athenaeum Theatre's stage.

In it, Bryan Saner hunched over a microphone as Mark Jeffery held a plastic hand (suspended from an incrementally longer pole) over his head. The image provoked notions of soothing and reprimanding; and one could not escape the glowering sense of Saner's smallness. In the meditative-repetitive style that is the troupe's trademark, Saner reiterated, "Now let's talk about something that's easy to understand."

But the thrill of a Goat Island experience is that it doesn't discuss issues in a tidy way. In fact, the ensemble sort of takes this looming, tenuous jigsaw puzzle of the human condition and breaks it apart—then spends approximately 95 intermission-less minutes of NOT putting it back together. Instead the four artists, directed by Lin Hixson, flash fragments of the puzzle pieces and encourage us to form our own arresting pictures in our minds.

Performers Saner, Jeffery, Matthew Goulish and Karen Christopher require patience—a virtue that will pay off over the course of a lifetime for Goat Island devotees.

I can't help but revisit the image of Christopher wearing wooden blocks on her feet as she leans forward and "walks" with two sticks sporting bird feet on the end. As the bird feet scamper ahead, her bulky shoes follow dangerously behind almost trampling the tiny carefree creature. Does one need a better illustration of humans' callous infringement on the natural environment?

Who would imagine that Jeffery's wounded soldier figure listening to Saner's poetic catalog of tree names could move one to tears by the sheer force of its quiet simplicity? And whenever the eagle-eyed Goulish announced the cryptic passing of time, one could not help but feel an urgency to hold onto every precious minute of life.

Profound issues—from fear of adulthood (The House's *The Terrible Tragedy of Peter Pan* and Running With Scissors' *Pan & Boone*) to aging (TriArts' *Hfobbie*), to teen



Goat Island's *It's an Earthquake in My Heart*

contemplation of suicide (MadJoy Theatrics' *Skeptics*), to the grotesque collapse of civilization (Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Giulio Cesare*) and the hope buried beneath absurd destination (Sang Froid's *Cooking with Elvis*)—engaged audiences in our surreal political landscape in a dangerously astute way.

Following are my top choices for the most inventive and empowering productions of 2002: Sean Farrell's *Life Separates Us*; Shattered Globe's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *High Life*; Writers' Theatre's *The Price*; European Repertory Company's *Go-Away, Go-Away*; Roadworks' *Phyo-Giant*; Peter Brook's *Le Costume* at Chicago Shakespeare Theater; Famous Door's *The Lonesome West*; The Hypocrites' *Blood Wedding*; The Neo-Futurists' *City Girl*; Steppenwolf's *The Dazzle* and *The Time of Your Life*; Stage Left's *Empty*; Orson's *Shadow* at Chicago Center for the Performing Arts; Rivendell's *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*; Naked Eye's *Nocturne*; Andy Eninger's *One Man Seen* at WNEP Theater; Visions & Voices' *Vintage Red and Dust of the Road* and Chicago Opera Theater's *Così fan tutte*.

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