

L.A. CHAT

LOS ANGELES IS THE HOME OF MANY TALENTED ARTISTS, producers and directors, and in our new feature, we hope to give you a glimpse of them and what they're up to. This month we're checking in with Wren T. Brown of Ebony Repertory Theatre and director Michael Arabian.

► **You've both worked in television and film but continue to consistently work in or helm a theatre company why in a film town are you still drawn to the theatre?**

Wren: As a fourth-generation Angeleno, I have always made it my business to experience as much of the art and culture as my home city had to offer. Specific to the theatre, I find the immediacy, urgency, and danger of this medium, performed without safety nets, at its best, to be absolutely thrilling.

Michael: To be an LA-based artist in the theatre one has the opportunity to combine working in TV and film, which artists do in New York and London. I do theatre because it is a substantial creative art form where bold ideas and philosophy can be expressed to a live audience. Also, the rehearsal and prep process is a magical time for collaboration that does not quite happen in film and most TV.

► **Wren, what was the impetus for founding Ebony Rep and why now?**

W: Ebony Repertory Theatre was born out of necessity. Throughout my life in Los Angeles, there has never been a mid-sized to large African-American professional theatre company (Equity contract) producing the work of the African-American theatrical canon, with its primary intent being to present work that would allow the black community to see itself as whole. In addition, there is a large group of African-American artists who find themselves artistically starved and in need of theatrical sustenance. It was the goal of the late, brilliant Israel Hicks (Founding Artistic Director) and me, to work toward filling this void, by creating a working laboratory to address the artists and members of the African-American community and beyond, by producing meaningful and purposeful evenings in the theatre.

M: Isn't it rewarding to be at the helm of a company where you can pursue your vision and serve a community?

W: Indeed.

► **Both of you deeply understand the notion of collaboration but why is a specific CTG collaboration important?**

M: I think CTG moving a production such as this introduces and raises awareness to the wider public there is quality theatre being done in other parts of the city that reflect this huge multi-cultural community that CTG is a part of.

It is also exciting for a local artist such as myself to do a play for the CTG audience where my work can

have a greater impact on the city just because of the large presence CTG has locally and nationally. It is also important to see CTG forming collaborations in Los Angeles to produce great work out of its own culture. This can also be cost effective, as it is expensive to bring people and shows in from out of town. Also, I feel a sense of responsibility to the LA theatre community, in essence representing them

W: Having our production of *A Raisin in the Sun* presented by CTG represents an important collaboration on many levels. First, anytime a company has the opportunity to have its work exposed to a larger and demographically different audience, there is the real possibility of adding that new audience to one's base, as we hope to do for our work at the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center, and that is huge. In addition, giving our production life beyond its initial design provides a wonderful benefit to the many artists who made the production possible, keeping them employed at a living wage at a time when work is, unfortunately, not that plentiful. Finally, when I was a small child growing up in 1970's Mid-City Los Angeles, ostensibly at La Brea and Washington, the Culver City bus line used to travel into my neighborhood and make its turn one light to the east of where the Holden now sits, coming to collect the children and adults of my community to take them to one of the many Culver City attractions: Helms Bakery, the Maralta Theatre, and the Culver Theatre, to name a few. During those years, accessing the arts districts of Downtown Los Angeles, Mid-City, and Culver City was made very easy through public transportation. Perhaps this collaboration will go a long way toward fulfilling a part of ERT's mission, which is to engender business development by reconnecting the long neglected Washington Boulevard Corridor.

► **Would either of you like to add anything?**

W: As serendipity would have it, I had the good fortune of working with the wonderful director, Michael Arabian, as an actor on a staged reading of a re-imagined take on Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* for Mr. Gordon Davidson and his entire artistic staff at CTG. From receiving my Equity card from CTG in the 80's, and working with Michael there in 1990, to now having Ebony Repertory Theatre's production of *A Raisin in the Sun* being presented by CTG, I think we can safely say that this confluence of CTG, Michael and me, represents the importance, for all artists, of staying in the race.

M: Yes, we are still following our bliss and the fire in our bellies! ●

Michael Arabian is a director of television, film and stage who is currently preparing to direct the CTG production of Waiting for Godot starring Alan Mandell and Barry McGovern.

Wren T. Brown is an actor and producer who is the co-founder of Ebony Repertory Theatre, Los Angeles' first African-American Equity company.



L To R: Israel Hicks and Wren T. Brown.



Michael Arabian.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

CTG Welcomes Joy Meads CTG's New Literary Associate



JOY MEADS IS THRILLED to be returning to California after four rewarding but chilly years in Chicago. Before joining CTG, Joy was the Literary Manager at Steppenwolf Theatre Company,

where, most recently, she served as production dramaturg for Jason Wells' *The North Plan*. Prior to Steppenwolf, Joy served as the Associate Artistic Director of California Shakespeare Theater, where, as director of the theatre's New Works/New Communities program, she oversaw multi-year community-based processes of new play creation with such writers as Naomi Iizuka, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa and Octavio Solis. Joy has developed plays at theatres including Steppenwolf, Portland Center Stage, the O'Neill, Cal Shakes, Campo Santo + Intersection for the Arts, and Chicago's Dog and Pony Theatre Co. and Pavement Group. Joy received a B.A. in Dramatic Literature and Theatre History from New York University.

Pass It Back!



Charlayne Woodard PHOTO BY CHRIS BENNION

THIS PAST SUMMER the New Play Production team gathered two of our favorite artists, Danai Gurira and Charlayne Woodard, to talk about their fascinating and inspiring journeys. Both women have work featured in our upcoming Douglas season.

Using your PDA, scan the QR code above or log on to CenterTheatreGroup.org/NPP to watch an exclusive interview with two gems of the American Theatre!

Danai Gurira is an Obie Award-winning actress and playwright. Her plays include In the Continuum, Eclipsed and the CTG commissioned The Convert. The Convert will receive its world premiere production in the spring of 2012 at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Charlayne Woodard is an award-winning solo artist and playwright whose work includes Pretty Fire, Neat, In Real Life and Flight. Woodard's latest work, The Night Watcher, will be presented at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in the fall of 2011.

"As artists we cannot stay in our bubble, we cannot stay in that comfort zone. We have to move out and take that chance, be a part of the whole world." —Charlayne Woodard

"Where are the stories of African Women? I can't find them, I guess I'll tell them!"

—Danai Gurira



Danai Gurira PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ



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FALL 2011

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ARTISTIC STAFF

Michael Ritchie
Artistic Director
artisticdirector@CenterTheatreGroup.org

Neel Keller
Associate Artistic Director
nkeller@CenterTheatreGroup.org

Kelley Kirkpatrick
Associate Artistic Director
kkirkpatrick@CenterTheatreGroup.org

Diane Rodriguez
Associate Producer
Director of New Play Production
drodriguez@CenterTheatreGroup.org

Pier Carlo Talenti
Resident Dramaturg/Literary Manager
ptalenti@CenterTheatreGroup.org

Lindsay Allbaugh
Producing Associate
lallbaugh@centertheatregruop.org

Malcolm K. Darrell
New Play Production Associate
mdarrell@CenterTheatreGroup.org

Joy Meads
Literary Associate
jmeads@CenterTheatreGroup.org

CTG is a non-profit arts organization.

Douglas' \$1 million Gift Keeps New Work Thriving!



Kirk and Anne Douglas
PHOTO BY STEVE COHN PHOTOGRAPHY

"Theatre was always my first love," says Kirk Douglas.

"In fact, when I came to Hollywood to make my first picture, I thought it was just a temporary detour. I would earn enough money to tide my family over only until my first long-run hit on Broadway. That never happened, and I soon resigned myself – believe me, it wasn't hard! – to being a movie star. My second-choice career gave my wife and me an opportunity to give a lot of money to the Center Theatre Group (CTG) over the years, a joyous commitment of which we continue to be extremely proud."

In fact, the Douglases have given generously to many brilliant causes both in Los Angeles and nationally, and gave the leading gift to assure that the Kirk Douglas Theatre became a reality. Since the theatre opened, they have given multiple six and seven figure gifts to CTG productions and specifically new work at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. Their most recent gift – a \$1,000,000 matching

grant combined with a previous \$1,000,000 gift – has successfully inspired new donors to support emerging work and artists at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. The matching grant, CTG's most successful challenge ever, has been hugely motivating to donors and will be active for the next 10 years.

"When Gordon Davidson told us about the opportunity to shape a defunct movie house in Culver City into CTG's first Westside outpost," Douglas continued, "Anne and I jumped on board. (After all, it was one way for this old thespian to get his name up in lights at last.) Michael Ritchie took over the reins from Gordon and shepherded the dream into a splendid small theatre which has enriched the environment of its host community as well as premiering extraordinary works, two of which made it to Broadway last season (*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* and *Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson*). Even an oldtimer like me was able take to the boards with my autobiographical show, *Before I Forget*."

Supporting CTG has become a Douglas family tradition. Anne Douglas served on CTG's Board of Director's for many years, Michael Douglas gave a \$1,000,000 gift in honor of his father to help build the Kirk Douglas Theatre, and Peter Douglas is President of The Douglas Foundation which directs funding to CTG.

(Continues on Page 2)

We Don't Do Plays, We Do Theatre

By Steve Epp



Cast of the CTG workshop *Massoud The Lion of Panjshir*.

Steve Epp is co-founder of The Moving Company with Dominique Serrand and is a longtime member of the former Tony Award-winning theatre company Theatre de la Jeune Lune in Minneapolis. Epp is the co-author of Massoud The Lion Panjshir, one of CTG's production commissions made possible through a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

"AND SO HERE I AM, LUCKY TO HAVE FOLLOWED MY IMAGINATION."

That's a line we wrote for Aramis in our production of *The Three Musketeers*. Plunged into the sea, Aramis barely escapes drowning only to find himself in the bowels of a theatre encountering all the ghosts of past productions. He becomes snagged in a rope that lofts him up to the catwalk from where he spies a critic, fifth row, on the aisle, pen in hand. Aramis challenges the critic to a duel. Caught in a sudden tempest, he grasps the stern of a boat and is re-united with his cohorts crossing the English Channel. "And so here I am," he explains, "lucky to have followed my imagination."

Dominique Serrand and I have had the good fortune to work together as actors and creators for 25 years at Theatre de la Jeune Lune. We collaborated with many, many fellow artists in the making of more than 50 productions. Our work has ranged from original comedies and adaptations of novels to signature productions of Molière, and re-inventions of Mozart operas. At times the work has been epic, vast and extravagant, at other moments spare, intimate and economical. But it is always theatre. We've always insisted that "we don't do plays, we do theatre." For us there is an inherent distinction. Each piece is its own exploration, the material revealing what is wanted, the process a comprehensive marriage of subject matter, performance technique, space, the individuals in the room, and the world at hand. And we follow our imagination.

{ Space has always been an integral element, if not the key element, in the conception of the work. }

(Continues on Page 3)

From Our Corner of the World to Yours

News in Brief

3 CTG Commissions Receive World Premiere Productions this Season!

I'VE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY
Book and Lyrics by Kirk Lynn
Music and Lyrics by Peter Stopschinski
Directed by Thomas Graves and Lana Lesley
Created by Rude Mechs
Kirk Douglas Theatre
October 6–23, 2011

THE CONVERT
By Danaï Gurira
Directed by Emily Mann
Kirk Douglas Theatre
April 17 – May 13, 2012

LOS OTROS
Book and Lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh
Music by Michael John LaChiusa
Directed by Graciela Daniele
Mark Taper Forum
May 23 – July 1, 2012

For more information about these productions and others in our season, log on to CenterTheatreGroup.org/us

NEW PLAY PRODUCTION NEWSLETTER

Editor
Diane Rodriguez

Managing Editor
Malcolm K. Darrell

Copy Editor
Nancy Hereford

Graphic Designer
Nishita Doshi

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Special Thanks
Ana Rose O'Halloran, Jean Kling, Bruce Rise



MUCH HAS DEVELOPED SINCE OUR LAST COMMUNICATION WITH YOU. We had 1,100 theatre professionals descend upon downtown Los Angeles for the ultimate TCG conference, the 50th anniversary celebration. We met at three different sites along Grand Avenue, and our local theatre community was proud to welcome all to the City of Angels to share

L.A.'s *vida loca*. In tandem with the conference CTG collaborated with REDCAT, New York's Public Theater and the Department of Cultural Affairs for the City of Los Angeles to produce the inaugural RADAR L.A. Festival, a contemporary theatre festival that focused on work from the Western United States, Latin America, the Pacific Rim and Los Angeles. Due to much hard work, RADAR L.A. was a huge success and a historical first for the TCG conference in that a theatre festival was an integral part of the meeting. We plan to do the festival again during the fall of 2013 and CTG will again focus on curating the festival with a healthy mix of Los Angeles-based companies.

CTG welcomes Ed Rada back to the staff as our new Managing Director. He was our CFO from 1996-2008. Ed's energy, expertise and big picture view can already be felt throughout the building. We look forward to his influence and ideas on how we can continue to deepen our relationship with Los Angeles artists and communities.

CTG has launched our new season and its aesthetic range is expansive and includes Rude Mechs' newest musical piece, *I've Never Been So Happy*, local company Ebony Repertory Theatre's production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the National Theatre of Great Britain's production of *War Horse*, Danaï Gurira's new play, *The Convert*, and Michael John LaChiusa's world premiere musical, *Los Otros*. Of the works mentioned, three are CTG commissions, *I've Never Been So Happy*, *The Convert* and *Los Otros*. Aesthetic range has been a goal we have been pursuing for the last few years, particularly with the addition of DouglasPlus and our company-based commissions. It is always gratifying to see our work pay off, particularly when we can continue to support playwrights as well as the work of national and international artists who are challenging themselves to work in new forms and aesthetics. Onward. ●

—DIANE RODRIGUEZ PHOTO BY KEVIN MCINTYRE

A NOTE FROM THE RESIDENT DRAMATURG/LITERARY MANAGER

This Just In



WHETHER THE OLD SAW "AS CALIFORNIA GOES, SO GOES THE NATION" has any basis in fact, we at CTG imagine that our three newest commissions, all on California themes, will have repercussions far beyond our home state's borders. As part of an initiative we've titled "On the Brink: Three Plays Explore 21st Century California," we recently commissioned three Los Angeles-based playwrights

to write plays on themes specifically assigned to them. **Laural Meade** will write a play about the precipitous decline of California's public-school system in the space of one generation; **Dan O'Brien** will explore how a state with such an astonishing GDP perpetually teeters on the brink of financial collapse; and **Evangeline Ordaz** will examine the demographic shifts that continually redefine and question the very meaning of the term minority in the state.

We've enhanced the commissions with a research stipend that will allow each playwright to conduct her inquiry as she wishes—e.g., honoraria to experts, travel to Sacramento, audio-recording equipment for interviews, etc. We have no idea what form each play will take, nor do we know precisely what each will be about. We do expect, however, to be surprised and informed by how each playwright broaches, investigates and dramatizes the assigned theme.

We are embracing this initiative not only as an opportunity to indulge our own fascination with the sociopolitical vagaries of our home state but also as a chance to engage our audiences

in new theatre that dramatizes and speaks to issues in their own backyard. And it may be that these new plays will speak to the nation at large because last time I checked, I had trouble identifying a state that was content with its public school system, secure about its financial health and completely at ease with major shifts in its population.

In other news, we've assembled our 2011-12 Writers' Workshop, which this year will include playwrights **Padraic Duffy, Larissa FastHorse, Sigrid Gilmer, Steven Yockey, Matt Sax, Prince Gomolvilas and Jennifer Haley**.

We also recently concluded a two-week workshop of *The Behavior of Broadus*, our commission with Los Angeles comedy troupe **The Burglars of Hamm** and co-composer **Brendan Milburn**. What started out as play with music about the father of behavioral science ended up a full-blown musical, replete with high tragedy, low humor, sex, science and singing lab rats. If the enthusiasm with which our packed KDT audience greeted the workshop presentations is any indication, the Burglars are well on their way to a hit. I hope to have more news about this project in a future newsletter.

Finally we're delighted to welcome **Joy Meads**, the former literary heart of Steppenwolf Theatre Company, as the new literary associate at CTG. Chicago's loss is L.A.'s gain, but when all is said and done, she'll continue to be a passionate advocate for new American theatre no matter where she is. ●

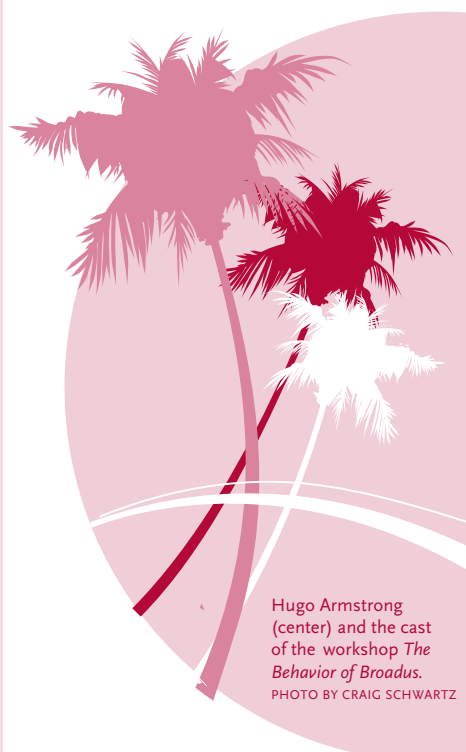
—PIER CARLO TALENTI PHOTO BY CHARITY CAPILI

Douglas Gift

(Continued from Page 1)

Joel Douglas and his wife Jo Ann were recent dinner guests of Michael Ritchie and Kate Burton at the opening of *Les Misérables*. Though they do not live locally, they enjoy making the trip to L.A. to support the theatre and are especially excited about the upcoming new work at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

"Kirk and Anne were instrumental in making a dream come true that my predecessor had of the creation of a mid-sized theatre," said CTG Artistic Director Michael Ritchie. "They have continued to be nothing but supportive of our work, especially with the development and production of new plays. I have become a great admirer of Kirk and Anne Douglas." ●



Hugo Armstrong (center) and the cast of the workshop *The Behavior of Broadus*. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ



A Universe of Possibilities

By Mildred Ruiz

Mildred Ruiz is a founding member of Universes, a national/international Bronx based ensemble theatre company that fuses Poetry/Theatre/Dance/Jazz/Hip-Hop/Politics/Blues/Boleros to create moving and challenging works of theatre. In the last 15+ years, UNIVERSES has worked to bring American voices to the stage at home and abroad. For more information about Universes log onto to www.universesonstage.com. Universes received a Completion Commission from CTG which is made possible through a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

WHEN UNIVERSES BEGAN CREATING AND PERFORMING we did not know that we were at the vanguard of a shift in the American theatre identity, one that bounces from “Ensemble Theatre” to “Hip-Hop Theatre” and now “Devised Work.” Understanding, simply, that we had stories to tell and communities to represent, we began to study poetry, jazz, and theatre masters who had laid the groundwork from which Universes would continue to evolve. Because we are a company of playwrights, poets and musicians, diplomacy goes a long way when creating works that negotiate the democratic needs of the playwrights, their communities and their audiences.

In our earlier years, we were local, all born and raised in New York City. As we’ve evolved and expanded, Universes has company members in New York, New Orleans and Puerto Rico; production team members in New York, New Orleans and New Mexico; and an amazing collection of designer and director collaborators who blanket the nation. As amazing as this sounds, it has become a juggling act. As a touring theatre company, we coordinate travel schedules for each member to every venue and while planning this can be consuming, even more challenging is bringing the core members together to write and research. Theatres are always in “the market” to bring in new plays, but where do they think these plays come from? How do they think they are informed and created?

As most American playwrights know, it is difficult and nearly impossible in this economy to get multiple commissions, let alone one commission, to create a new work. Universes is not a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation, so it does not have access to the funding that many arts organizations or artists do. Even as public funds evaporate, Universes moves forward because we were never exclusively beholden to those funding streams in the first place. The majority of Universes’ operating budget comes from earned income and though this gives us financial flexibility, it has limited out activities and growth potential.

Universes’ members come from an urban reality where collective bargaining is key, and we utilize that reality in our creative aesthetic as well as the relationships we foster between local folks and the theatres that support us. In the past year, however, with the commissioning and development of our latest work, *Party People*, a piece that reflects on the traumatic past and unclear future of the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the Black Panthers all of whom are now in their 60s. The company has benefited from a new play commission from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF); a grant from the New England Foundation for The Arts (NEFA); a completion commission from Center Theatre Group (CTG); and fiscal sponsorship through Fractured Atlas and The Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF). In addition, we have received travel and housing support from Berkeley Rep (CA), Playmakers Rep (NC); Arena Stage (D.C.); and office/rehearsal space from the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics (NYC).

As touring artists, identifying funds is an arduous and most often non-traditional task. Usually, the producing or presenting venues apply for funding on the company’s behalf and although this gives the venue the support it needs to present or produce a Universes work, it does not provide infrastructure support for the company and rarely funds to support the artistic team. In the case of Universes’ *Party People*, the company was commissioned by OSF, given a research/development/touring grant from NEFA and given completion funds by CTG, a first for the company. This allows us flexibility for our research and script development that the company has longed for. Additionally, it gives the company touring funds that it can bring to the table when planning the future of *Party People*.



Party People cast member Christopher Livingston PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM COURTESY OF OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL



We Don’t Do Plays, We Do Theatre

(Continued from Page 1)

L TO R: George Ketsios, Jeanne Syquia and Asaaf Cohen in workshop *Massoud The Lion of Panjshir*

After years of being itinerant, Jeune Lune opened its own theatre in 1992, a dynamic, fluid performance space carved out of an old warehouse in Minneapolis. The nature of the space influenced the many choices we made in conceiving and producing our work there. The physical scope demanded a muscular performance style; it embraced work of ambition and import. For the opening of the building we created a four-hour epic telling of the making of Marcel Carne’s classic film *Children of Paradise*. Over the years we created works based on Zola, Hugo, Dashiell Hammett, Kafka, we mixed Molière with Mozart, we turned the space into a beer hall for a millennial reinvention of *The Magic Flute*, and stripped it down to a patch of dirt for *Carmen*. We produced Shakespeare, Marivaux, Gozzi, Euripides, a fairytale circus, a tango opera, and numerous creations solely of our own invention. But no matter what the source we always approached each production as if it were a new creation — a thing to be discovered and deciphered; a living, breathing, always evolving entity. And each piece was always subjected to the collective scrutiny of — “Why this one now? Why in terms of the individuals in the room? Why in terms of the world at hand?”

We were first and foremost a collection of actors. Jeune Lune grew out of the pedagogy of the Jacques LeCoq School in Paris. The central discipline of the school being a physical approach to actor training, but more importantly perhaps, a philosophy that puts the actor front and center in the process.

{ The actor is given great responsibility as a creative partner in the making of the work, }

what we call the actor/author, challenged to build upon the root techniques of the past to create theatre that speaks to the world today.

Each production at Jeune Lune defined to some degree its own process. Some shows were invented entirely on their feet through improvisation and play. Others were structured and storyboarded along the lines of a screenplay — the story, scenography, text, and action being mapped out simultaneously, each element being equally important in their potential to communicate. Other more traditional pieces were a process of text adaptation, followed by lengthy, rigorous, and collaborative development through rehearsal, but the actors input was always paramount in the evolution toward performance.

And then there’s the audience. The ultimate editor, the true partner in the conversation.

{ Nothing really means anything until it meets the audience. }

Jeune Lune closed in the summer of 2008. Since then Dominique and I have continued creating new work for the theatre. And this past spring we launched a new base of operation — The Moving Company. Several projects have already been produced and others are in various stages of development, each one defining its own terms.

We have created and produced a one (wo)man show, *The House Can’t Stand*, the story of a mother, a lifelong Republican, her children grown, her husband dead, who through a chance phone call embarks on a journey that takes her to the last battlefield of the Civil War where she encounters and falls in love with Abraham Lincoln.

We created and produced a new American oratorio of sorts based on William Faulkner’s novella *Old Man*, about the great Mississippi flood of 1927.

We just completed a workshop at CTG of *Massoud*, the powerful story of Amad Shah Massoud, the brilliant military genius of Afghanistan, who defeated the Soviet Army, tried to establish a democratic government in Afghanistan, and held the Taliban at bay until his assassination by al Qaeda forces on September 9, 2001. We are currently developing a new piece with students of the University of Minnesota theatre department on the theme of *The War Within or All’s Fair*. We have a commission for a new piece based on Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s writing of *The Little Prince*, while living in exile in New York City during the Second World War. We have dismantled Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, and rebuilt it incorporating material from many of his plays, into a celebration of the infinite conjugations of love.

We are developing a concert rendering of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* for one actor and one singer. And we are beginning the conception process for a new adaptation of Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Having moved beyond Jeune Lune we find ourselves itinerant once again. Our process hasn’t really changed, but it was never a fixed system to begin with. It has always evolved, adapting to best confront and embrace the material we choose to engage with. What is new for us are the ways and means of producing the work and getting it in front of an audience. Though Minneapolis remains our home base, we are now more than ever, operating on a national scale and the work is far more project driven. The essential questions and the essential pursuit, however, remain the same — to create theatre that speaks to the world today, to follow our imagination. ●