



new plays, new work, new ways



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CENTER THEATRE GROUP NEW PLAY PRODUCTION PROGRAM SUMMER 2009

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NEWSLETTER
SUMMER 2009

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New Works News



By Eric Rosen
Co-writer, with Matt Sax, of *Venice*, a new musical
LEFT: ERIC ROSEN RIGHT: MATT SAX

THREE WEEKS. That's how long our workshop for *Venice*, a new musical I am writing with Matt Sax (*Clay*), lasted in Los Angeles. It's also how long it's taken me to resume a normal sleep schedule, though I still can't get the songs out of my head. And I don't want to.

Here's the story of how we made it: Matt and I were commissioned by Center Theatre Group (CTG) in November 2007 to write a new musical, a follow up to our critically acclaimed solo show *Clay* which premiered in Los Angeles that fall. Since Matt is a much younger man — thirteen years separate us — he bounded in, fearless and full of enthusiasm. I guess since I'm safely in the early part of my middle career or the latter part of my early career, I was more cautious. The commission was to write a full length musical, using the genres of hip hop music as our guide. Unlike *Clay*, this musical would star other people — lots of other people, it turns out. Matt leapt; I followed.

Had we not come up with what I think is an extraordinarily good place to start — a new musical, set in the not-too-distant future, inspired both by Shakespeare's *Othello* and, in less direct ways, the election of Barack Obama and transition of federal government in the new political era — I'm not sure we would have gotten off the ground. And had CTG not been willing to tailor a developmental process to our schedules and artistic needs, we never would have written a note.

Three months after the commission, CTG brought us to LA to give us a week to write. Two months later they brought us back for a week to work on a nascent first act with a handful of actors. What we made in those early experiments was cool, if I do say so myself. Inspired by what we were creating, and the unusual method we were using to create, CTG hosted a two-week workshop to finish the first act last July. It was great, but still just the beginning of a show.
[Continue to the back page ►](#)

A NOTE FROM THE RESIDENT DRAMATURG/LITERARY MANAGER

This Just In AN UPDATE ON NEW PLAYS AT CTG



BETWEEN OUR LAST NEWSLETTER AND THIS ONE, we held workshops and/or readings of five plays, three musicals and one piece with magic, all of which I have listed below. For the inside scoop on each project, please be sure to visit www.CenterTheatreGroup.org/NPP. I hope that all of these projects, whether they're CTG commissions or not, will have many future lives so I hope you won't hesitate to contact me should any sound particularly right for your own programming needs.

- *Please Continue* by Frank Basloe, directed by Chris Fields. A CTG commission.
- *Palestine, New Mexico* by Richard Montoya for Culture Clash, directed by Lisa Peterson. A CTG commission.
- *The Murphy Game* by Alexander Woo, directed by Will Frears.
- *Next Stop: Amazingland* by Trey Lyford, Geoff Sobelle and Steve Cuiffo. A CTG commission.
- *Just War* by Jessica Goldberg, with Darrell Griffin, Sr. A CTG commission.
- *The Last Cargo Cult* by Mike Daisey, directed by Jean-Michele Gregory.
- *Post Office*, book and lyrics by Melissa James Gibson and music by Michael Friedman, directed by Mark Brokaw. A CTG commission.

- *Venice* by Matt Sax and Eric Rosen, directed by Eric Rosen. A CTG commission.
- *Sam Bendrix at the Bon Soir* by Keith Bunin. A CTG commission.

I'm also proud to announce our latest round of commissions. For more information on the projects these artists will be creating, please visit www.CenterTheatreGroup.org/NPP.

- Annie Baker
- John Ballinger
- Tanya Barfield
- The Civilians
- Kristoffer Diaz
- Danai Gurira
- Rajiv Joseph
- Ken Roht ●

—PIER CARLO TALENTI

LEFT: Rajiv Joseph and Moisés Kaufman. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.
RIGHT (L TO R): TOP Glenn Davis, Nekar Zadegan and Hrach Titizian;
BOTTOM Sheila Vand, Kevin Tighe, Brad Fleischer and Arian Moayed.
The cast of *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.



A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF NEW PLAY PRODUCTION

From Our Corner of the World to Yours

NO ONE WANTS TO CURB CREATIVITY during these exceptional times so we have to find ways of continuing to let the ideas flow, percolate, ignite and then execute them strategically. Like most theatres across the country production has taken the biggest hit. But our workshops and commissions thrive. Most likely we'll see the fruits of our labor next season with a commissioned work or two that we will produce. This season, we also embarked on this crazy idea called DouglasPlus. The initial impulse was to have the freedom to pick and choose projects that came to the surface and which we could program with very little turnaround time. This programming was not part of our subscription offerings but was work that we felt spoke to us and to demographics we did not see in our theatres. We brought out Mike Daisey, Eric Rosen and Matt Sax and produced a play by local maverick playwright Michael Sargent. It was insane to walk the line without the subscriber net when the economy was tanking. But we did. It became clear that the biggest risk we took was relying on single ticket sales. The struggle to fill the houses anchored and energized us.

At the Taper we produced Octavio Solis' *Lydia*. It was a muscular and beautifully wrought production, a tough and epic play that in some cases was not for everyone. We were so proud of the work. The delicate and complicated relationship between audience and player was palpable, "almost physical" in Mike Ritchie's words. The staff wholeheartedly agreed. *Lydia* was a hit with them. And then, a few weeks later, we opened Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. It is a staggering, sobering play about war and its players, currently running at the Douglas. Both of these pieces and the work we did in DouglasPlus remind us all of why we wrestle with this crazy, hard, impossible thing we call theatre. In good times or in bad, we find our soul. ●

—DIANE RODRIGUEZ



Mike Daisey in *How Theater Failed America*. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

Mike Daisey Questions the Los Angeles Theatre Community

By Douglas Clayton

MIKE DAISEY MODERATED a roundtable between eight leaders in the LA theatre community held after a performance of his famed monologue, *How Theater Failed America*.

The panelists included CTG Artistic Director Michael Ritchie, LA Stage Alliance Executive Director Terence McFarland, Artistic Director of Critical Mass Performance Group Nancy Keystone, Actress/Playwright Adriana Sevan, Artistic Director of Furious Theatre Company and Associate Artistic Director of Pasadena Playhouse Dámaso Rodriguez, Artistic Director of Odyssey Theatre Ensemble Ron Sossi, Critic-At-Large from LA Weekly Steven Leigh Morris, and Cornerstone Theater Company member Bahni Turpin.

The hour long roundtable touched on many topics. The most prominent of these addressed the 'culture' of Los Angeles, as it related to the attitude of the everyday Angeleno to attending, supporting, or even being aware at all of theatre in Southern California.

Ron Sossi in particular discussed how because of the pervasiveness of the film/TV entertainment industry, theatre doesn't have the appeal it can have in other major cities. "If you're a successful meat-packer in Chicago," Sossi suggested, "it's really sexy to give money to the theatre. But if you work everyday in entertainment, your money tends to go to hospitals, or something else that's different from what you do every day."

This led to a discussion of the profusion of theatre in LA (at last count there are more than 300 theatre companies in the Greater LA Area, producing over 1,000 full productions annually, and many more one-time or alternate style events), and the 'ongoing contradiction' that theatre artists face.

"We have two contradictory needs — to be true to our art, and to be popular," asserted Michael Ritchie. "Center Theatre Group has 3,000 seats to fill every night, so making choices to be popular is very important, but that's not our mission or what we're fundamentally about."

Sossi agreed. "You always have to be aware of how much of your energy is going into the art that you really want to do, and how much you're willing to twist your art to attract more audiences... We've built our audience over many years, so now they trust us and will come see whatever we do. It's much harder to do that, of course, with one show."

Dámaso Rodriguez laid out his biggest concern about the many theatres in the city: "The ease of ability to produce shows (due to the 99 seat plan) has generated many companies and many theatres in town, without requiring any skill in artistic direction or producing. So when someone goes to one of these poorly produced shows, they're less likely to give my theatre a try." Michael Ritchie pointed out that one of the great strengths of the current theatre ecosystem was the very powerful communities that have arisen within the small theatres, where artists are socially and artistically sustained by their companies in times when they are without recognition or paid work.

Further conversation raised a fundamental question: Do the theatres in LA exist to serve the artists, or to serve audiences and local communities? Bahni Turpin and Adriana Sevan made impassioned statements about the number of Los Angeles residents who are not represented on LA stages, and whose voices are not being heard in the plays being written and produced on any of the stages in town. To draw more audiences, they argued, it is key to speak to the people who live in this city and who would benefit most from attending the theatre, instead of only creating theatre that appeals directly to the artists. Steven Leigh Morris pointed out several musicals and plays in 99 seat theatres in the last year that ran with full houses for months — clearly reaching a wider audience and serving the residents of LA.

On the topic of artistic quality, panelists repeated several times the idea that "Everyone comes to LA to get into TV and film, and then does theatre to sustain themselves in the meantime." Left unresolved was the question of how the theatre community could raise its own status, prestige and national profile if the artists continue to have the attitude of 'in the meantime.'

As a final question, Mike Daisey asked the panelists what they would tell someone who had just decided to dedicate their lives and career to the theatre. The eight panelists' answers mostly could be summed up as "Be sure that you have a burning desire to do this is greater than any other options you could pursue. Then go for it and don't let anything stop you." ●

—Douglas Clayton is the Programs Manager for Los Angeles Stage Alliance

News In Brief

▶ *9 to 5: The Musical* is currently running on Broadway and has received four Tony nominations.

▶ *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* opened to rave reviews at The Public.

▶ *This Beautiful City* by the Civilians wrapped up a successful run in NYC. CTG has commissioned The Civilians to write a musical on the porn industry in Southern California.

▶ New Works News continued from the front page

And then came the big call. In November, probably convinced that we needed a really terrifying deadline to finish this script, our producer Kelley Kirkpatrick called with an offer we could not refuse: to be a part of the inauguration of DouglasPlus, CTG would give us three weeks — THREE WEEKS! — with a full cast, with a goal of not only finishing the play by April, but staging and presenting a workshop version of the play for three nights of performances. In front of people. Lots of them.

Matt and I showed up in Los Angeles with one act, three songs, eight sketches of songs, twelve scenes, ten brilliant actors, our music producer Josh Horvath, our dramaturg Mike Sablone and a whole lot of terror. Suddenly, about five or six days into the project, the second act emerged and made some kind of sense. Matt and I were in a groove — the music was the best he had written, the plot was moving forward with great intensity, the lyrical ideas had real energy and poetry — and our beautiful cast was singing the hell out of our nascent score. I'm sure it was one of the greatest experiences of my creative life, but I don't remember much — I was too sleep-deprived.

With a week to go, we began staging the material even as we were writing it, adding lights and rough choreography, trying to learn as much as possible about this thing we were creating. Inspired, we tore the show apart and re-wrote it, so that by the third performance we had not only finished a draft of the show, we had previewed it twice, cut and re-written songs, re-structured the first forty minutes, and with the help of close to 1,000 audience members, learned more about our show than we ever could have learned locked in a room together writing alone.

There's still so much to do — new musicals are not written, they are re-written — but I know that *VENICE* will have a life. In 2010, we'll premiere the show as a co-production between Kansas City Repertory Theatre and CTG. The work you'll see will owe every debt to the inspiration CTG provided by commissioning us to write another musical, the creativity the institution showed in supporting two very unconventional artists, and the determination our artistic staff demonstrated in creating a forum for us to give birth to what is already one of my favorite shows I've ever developed.

I can't wait to share the show with you next year. ●



The cast in *Venice*. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.