

In the Works: Dystopian Cabaret

The collaborating artists of Synaesthetic are currently researching source material and laying a conceptual foundation for next year's show, using the small-group structure of the seed project program to develop different elements that will inform the rehearsal/writing process.

"There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There's something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It's like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with."
 - The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood

Picture a world where dissent is illegal. Where all performance is either federally commissioned to promote a homogenous nationalistic vision, or has gone underground. Sex and violence are fair game for family entertainment as long as they remain apolitical. Social commentary is permitted only on a "this is how we're superior" level. Consumption and Illusion have become synonymous with progress. The appropri-

Big Brother says:
 "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH."
 - 1984, George Orwell

ate target for antagonism is Public Enemy #1, featured nightly on what passes for news so that right-minded citizens can hiss and boo and feel unsafe. Or change the channel and watch celebrity wife-swapping. In the not-very-distant future where our next piece is set, the only way to share subversive views or ask penetrating questions is to bury them in parody, burlesque and Punch & Judy bits. You enter a club for an

evening of entertainment. Outside there's a war on, but what's new about that? Inside you're welcomed by a Master of Ceremonies with a sharp tongue and sharper wit, who invites you to shed your cares, fears and inhibitions, and indulge in some harmless fantasy. Exotic acts, sultry solos and slapstick humor, maybe a classical allusion or two - it's all State-Approved and guaranteed to support the status quo. No disturbing revelations or reflections here, just pure Entertainment. We promise.

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Recharging the Creative Batteries

From July through September 2005, nine Synaesthetic company members met roughly bi-weekly for a series of performer-oriented training sessions, reconnecting to and deepening our understanding of the Viewpoints and various improvisational structures.



For the past several seasons, Synaesthetic has offered training and educational opportunities to professional theatre artists. This year we chose to begin by reconnecting ourselves to the underlying questions of our craft as physical performers & creators. The bi-weekly training sessions have served to sharpen and broaden key rehearsal tools: improvisation and composition. It has been invigorating and deeply satisfying to "play"

together in this way, experimenting with the element of chance, setting choreography, improvising with text and working with sound. In such an intimate and innovative environment, the members are freed to suggest ideas for games and express opinions and reactions, crossing the boundaries of actor, director, choreographer and designer that tend to define our roles in a rehearsal process.

Without the demands of a production, we have been free to push our experiments to the breaking point, risking structures and ideas that might not "work" in the sense of immediately producing dynamic performance material. This freedom to change directions on a dime and pause at any point to process what was exciting, confusing, challenging or overwhelming, has produced a healthy synergy that will feed the next season's rehearsals and workshops. 



Update from Board Chair Jessica Baker

As the weather turns cooler and 2005 moves into its last few months, Synaesthetic is continuing to grow into a stronger organization. We are very happy to welcome a new board member, the talented and wonderful Paula Marchiel. Paula has worked with Synaesthetic Theatre for 4 years and also works as a Marketing Associate for TheatreworksUSA. We are so pleased that Paula has agreed to accept a position of responsibility and governance within our Board as we re-examine and define our company's long-range plan for the future. The company also continues to experience growth with the addition of two new members to our ranks, Arwen Lowbridge and Michael Makowski (See related article below).



Artistically, the company is assembling in the rehearsal studio this fall with another round of in-house training sessions and CAC (Creating Art Collaboratively), our invitation-only workshop series exploring special performance topics. The overall goal of both programs is to keep our company's internal artistic dialogue alive outside of production time periods, and CAC also provides a stimulating exchange with an extended family of artists. Led by Joy Leonard and Chris Nichols, this year's series focuses on the relationship between dance and theatre, and participants are encouraged to experiment with and test their assumptions about these two mediums to find areas of interplay, tension, and illumination.

Administratively, we continue to refine and shape our organizational structure to

better support the needs of the company and larger community of artists. We have appointed Arwen Lowbridge to focus and invigorate Synaesthetic Theatre's development efforts, and the producing members are utilizing this time of relative quiet (i.e. not rehearsing four nights a week) to revisit and prioritize company goals and plan the next season of workshops for the public. We have also begun conception work for our next original piece, which will be work-shopped before a select audience in the spring, followed by a fully-staged production in the late fall of 2006.

Last but certainly not least, Synaesthetic Theatre is very excited to announce that our very own Executive Producers Chris Nichols and Joy Leonard are getting married! This amazing couple has led Synaesthetic as its core artistic directors since the company's inception. They will be married on November 5, 2005 in New York City. Cheers to Joy & Chris... we wish you every happiness! ☺

Greetings

This summer Synaesthetic grew by two new members. Arwen Lowbridge joined us as a Producing Member, after serving as Assistant Stage Manager for both *The Trial of K* and *Arcana: Cycle of the Fool*. Over the past year Arwen also worked closely with our development team to strategize new potential sources of support, and we're pleased to deepen the collaboration and continue to benefit from her substantial experience and skills.

Michael Makowski, featured as a performer in both *The Trial of K* and *Arcana: Cycle of the Fool*, has now joined our extended family of Associate Members. Michael participated in several Synaesthetic workshops over the past two years and has proven to be a very positive addition to Synaesthetic's ensemble of creator/performers.

Welcome Arwen & Michael! ☺



Support Synaesthetic



Want to help us continue to offer affordable workshops and original productions that are challenging and spectacular? You can!

Synaesthetic Theatre is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating new multimedia theatre with a social conscience, and supporting artists in their efforts to collaborate across the perceived boundaries of media and methodology. Any contribution that you choose to make, whether financial or "in-kind," will be tax-deductible. In-kind donations include goods and services such as theatrical, film or sound equipment; raffle prizes for our benefits; printing; fabric; legal assistance ... you name it, and we can probably use it.

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inquire about what we need, please don't hesitate to contact us at: (212) 696-6721. ☺

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Peeling Onions with Raina Von Waldenburg



Synaesthetic concluded our '04-'05 workshop season with a new Master class in character work led by Raina Von Waldenburg, held on June 25th and 26th. Ziedah Giovanni -- last seen as Billie Holiday, Ingrid Bergman, Jimmy Stewart and sundry other stars in Synaesthetic's *Icon* - reflects on her experience as a workshop participant.

From the moment we began to work and play in Raina's workshop, I knew I was in for a treat. We discussed our preconceptions, paradigms and ideologies about character-and then we got on our feet and busted them wide open. Her exercises took us out of our heads by teaching us to give voice to the characters living there. The improvisation exercises forced us to explore our inner monologues while taking in external stimuli/energy, emotion and impulses from the environment around us. These exercises helped us to develop ways to embrace the insecurities, judgments, and running commentaries inside each of



us. We learned to accept each voice give it a face, a body, a speed, a shape ... a life.

One of my favorite exercises involved listening to music and creating characters inspired by and motivated by the sound. We explored the voice, the gait, the face, the shapes and the emotions that music gives to characters. When the music changed, our impulses and choices changed, and because there wasn't enough time to get too cerebral, the characters developed spontaneously and organically.

On the second day of the workshop we explored playing with character containers by wearing different costumes. We experienced how a charac-

ter morphs and develops when it lives in different skin. We played with the connections between costumes and the choices we make about both personality and physical character traits. We also began to apply to scene work some of what we learned in the exercises. After making initial choices, we explored developing the character containers by making very small, incremental changes. It was a very challenging exercise that really focused our attention on the details in our characters.

Raina taught us to approach character in a variety of nontraditional ways. Although two full days of high energy training left me both mentally and physically exhausted, somehow I still wanted more! 

Upcoming Workshops

December 17-18, 2005 Movement Workshop with Wendell Beavers	Spring, 2006 Acting Workshop with Raina Von Waldenburg
February, 2006 Vocal Workshop with Jonathan Hart Makwaia	Summer, 2006 Viewpoints Workshop with Synaesthetic Theatre

For more information on upcoming & past Synaesthetic Workshops visit: www.theviewpoints.com

Seed Projects 2004/5, part 2

Included here are two short blurbs about new concepts for future productions. These two groups presented their concepts and images to the rest of the company at a Spring meeting, and lively discussions followed all of the presentations. Once again, the process of brainstorming, researching and developing these ideas has provided company members with opportunities to collaborate in new configurations, and has produced exciting results.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Aubrey Hardwick, Clinton Powell

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* creates a religious regime that enforces an anti-feminist dystopia. Offred is a woman trapped not only in the system but also in her memories of the past. The interplay between her memories and the world she now finds herself in suggests a series of overlapping interludes with the style of a still-life by Vermeer. Hooded pairs of handmaids move in constant and constrained duets throughout the space. Household members gather in the sitting room to await the monthly breeding Ceremony in a charged tableau, which is interrupted by visions from Offred's past, where we glimpse the little betrayals and sacrifices that lead to Atwood's terrifying future.

THE FAIRY TALE PROJECT

E. James Ford, Margaret O'Sullivan, Seth Trucks

A modern fairy tale about the 'typical' suburban family, following the story of Mother and Father Johnson and their two-and-a-half children: Jack, Goldie, and Les (a baby who is, literally, only the lower half of a child). As the tale progresses, the family unit begins to fall apart and fall prey to the monsters of the evil forest. Mother Johnson sacrifices everything to enchanted antiseptics that promise her a clean lifestyle, Goldie gives in to her darkest desires, and Jack drowns himself in a bathtub of his own tears. A grim fable about modern life, the Fairy Tale Project would combine expressionistic stage scenes with documentary-style footage to create a world that is both magical and eerily familiar.

The content and style of each Synaesthetic show is always related to the last - often we'll choose to further develop aspects of the previous piece that were stimulating but peripheral. In **The Trial of K** Cabaret served its purpose very effectively as a semi-hidden layer or genre, adding an edgy, confrontational performance style for the ensemble to work within. In the next production, Cabaret will be the uppermost layer - a format that allows for a series of performance vignettes and interludes, from solo torch songs to raucous group dance numbers, from clowning and satire to magic and marvels.

On the flip side, we also look to build into each new piece elements that the previous production lacked. While

The Trial of K had plenty of resonance within the larger cultural moment, it was in the end more of a personal than political journey. With the 2006 production relying less on plot-driven scenes, we intend to leave ourselves free to create very timely material and alter it as surrounding events dictate. We've zeroed in on what feel like relevant texts and images as a point of departure: essentially the canon of dystopian literature. The state of endless warfare and revisionist history in 1984, the mass media culture of distraction without depth in Fahrenheit 451 and Brave New World, are just a few of the scenarios

"Monday burn Millay, Wednesday Whitman, Friday Faulkner, burn 'em to ashes, then burn the ashes. That's our official slogan."
- Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury

World State's Motto:
"COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY."
- Brave New World, Aldous Huxley

we'll be riffing on in our Dystopian Cabaret. The company agreed to embark once again on a longer creative journey, with workshop performances mid-process (think late April/early May '06) offered to a small invited audience. Feedback solicited in post-performance artist/audience dialogues will contribute to the restructuring, refinements and additions that the collaborating artists make after experiencing the work in performance. The final, fully-realized production will premiere for a longer run in the fall of 2006. We hope you will join us for both! For more information about the show as it develops, please visit: www.synaesthetic-theatre.com/cabaret 

Synaesthetic/Synaesthesia: What's in a Name?

In 1997 Chris Nichols, David Crittenden, Joy Leonard, Kristi Leigh Herman and Theresa Gonzalez were searching for a name for their fledgling theatre company. Attempting to define their common "aesthetic," these founding theatre artists kept returning to an overlapping of media, where each design and performance element relates to and affects each of the others, both in the process of creation and in the product. When the word SYNAESTHETIC was introduced, it seemed to fit this ideal: a state of being where one kind of sensory input (or idea) suggests others, where differing impulses generate an experience of completeness.

Famous Synaesthetes:

Vladimir Nabokov (author, 1899-1977) saw each letter of the alphabet as a different color.

Franz Liszt (composer, 1811-1886) saw colors when listening to music.

Vasily Kandinsky (painter, 1866-1944) saw the colors for his paintings when listening to music.

Richard Phillips Feynman (physicist, 1918-1988) saw colors in his physics equations.

"What would be truly surprising would be to find that sound could not suggest colour, that colours could not evoke the idea of a melody, and that sound and colour were unsuitable for the translation of ideas, seeing that things have always found their expression through a system of reciprocal analogy."
-- Charles Baudelaire (poet and synaesthete, 1821-1867)

For more information on Synaesthesia visit:
www.synaesthetic-theatre.com/syn

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syn-aes-thet-ic, *adj.* characterizes a work of art which produces harmony out of different or opposing impulses.