Theatre Arts Alumni Collaborating to Create New Works for New York and Beyond

BY KRISTIN STERLING

During her audition for the School of the Arts Theatre Arts program, Diane Paulus, SOA’97, recalls Professor Anne Bogart asking each prospective student where they hoped to be in five years. For Paulus, the answer was easy. She wanted to have her own theatre company and tour internationally. Today, not only has she reached that goal, but her company, Project 400, created the off-Broadway hit The Donkey Show, which celebrated its 1,000th performance in November.

Her story is becoming the norm for many theatre arts alumni. Bridgid Antoinette Evans, SOA ’99, Cynthia Croct, SOA ’99, and Sophia Skiles, SOA ’98, are part of The Kazbah Project, which enjouhs social activism with theatre. Ivan Talijancic, SOA ’98, Erika Latta, SOA ’97, and Doris Mirescu, SOA ’97, are members of WaxFactory, which tends to adapt texts not necessarily written for the stage.

All of the alumni attribute their innovative success to the collaborative nature of their companies, a spirit they say they learned from Theatre Arts professors.

“The principle of collaboration is the golden jewel of the Columbia acting program because it prepares students to make theatre, not just show up for rehearsal and play their given role,” says Evans.

Evans, Talijancic and their collaborators were interested in the Columbia program because it embraced an unconventional approach to theatre. They were trained to “invent the theatre that will exist tomorrow,” as Professor Andrei Serban would say. Through different approaches, all three collaborations are creating new theatre and introducing it to the world.

Project 400’s The Donkey Show is a Generation X version of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, set to 1970s disco music. It takes the idea of interaction a step further and puts the audience in the middle of the choreographed disco action.

“Our shows have one foot in the classics and the other in pop culture,” says Paulus. “Everything we do is driven by music—how it relates to our memories and how to structurally tap into elements of our lives outside the theatre.”

Her co-collaborators and actors, three of whom were her classmates at Columbia—Jordin Sams, Anna Wilson and Rachel Benbow—play both the female and male roles. In addition to long-running performances in New York, currently at the El Flamingo Club, The Donkey Show has been performed in London, France and Edinburgh.

Jordin, Anna, Rachel and I discovered that we truly share a vision, work ethic and belief in a common goal, all of which stems from common experiences at Columbia,” says Paulus. “As a group you build on what you have made together. It is a different dynamic because everyone is in on it from the start, and even before that, from the last show. We are truly committed to one another and the company.”

The Donkey Show took root shortly after the group graduated. Talijancic admits that in the early days the company would return to the Dodge Hall lobby after hours to rehearse, because they didn’t have the money to rent other space. While Paulus and Project 400 get their material from their history, often focusing on Shakespeare, WaxFactory, which was established at Columbia, is creating new theatre by focusing on adaptations of text that weren’t necessarily written for the stage.

Their current project, Quartet V2.0, is an adaptation of Heiner Mueller’s Quartet, itself derived from Choderlos de Laclos’ novel Les Liaisons Dangereuses (Dangerous Liaisons). Talijancic describes Quartet as a decapitated requiem for the end of the millennium. Set after World War III, the two protagonists are the last survivors of a deadly plague. The pair are quarantined to rehearse, because they didn’t have the money to rent other space. In “Quartet V 2.0,” the two protagonists are the last survivors of a deadly plague.

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The Kazbah Project takes yet another approach to creating the new theatre. They bring historical events to the stage, creating projects that explore and challenge freedom and address humanitarian crises.

The Kazbah Project’s most recent production is based on Suzanne-Lori Poot’s Obie Award-winning Venus, dramatizes the true epic journey that took Saartjie Baartman, known as the “Venus Project,” founded in 2000, uses Baartman’s story to promote social change through women’s health, self-determination and liberation from violence. Their civic projects are drawn from methods utilized in Columbia’s theatre arts program, particularly the work of Professors Kristin Linklater and Anne Bogart.

“The Venus Project is unique because it marries social activism with theatre,” says Venus director Cynthia Croct. “From the inception emphasis was placed on both humanitarian and artistic goals. We feel something is missing if the work doesn’t go beyond the first row.”

Evans and co-producer Rana Karkaz also facilitated civic dialogues in South Africa with young African artists, working to transform anger and pain into a plan of action. During their residency next summer, Evans and Karkaz will offer a four-week intensive training program for returning students.

The groups still recall advice the Columbia faculty, particularly Andrei Serban, Anne Bogart and Kristin Linklater offered.

“We went through so much together in the program and still quote Serban and Bogart in rehearsals,” says Paulus. “They set the bar so high as a young artist you are constantly striving to reach it and won’t settle for less.” Likewise Evans often reflects on the advice Serban offered at her audition.

“One thing I do now is with Andrei Serban’s goal of inventing the theatre of tomorrow in mind—forging a new path. In one evaluation session Andrei told me that he proves very important to always choose the path of most resistance in my artistic choices. Otherwise, he said, you get lazy.”

Six months after graduating, Evans had two agents, a featured role in a major film, an off-Broadway show, a guest spot on Law & Order and a national commercial that paid her rent for a year. A great start for an actor. But she wasn’t happy. Six months later she forged ahead with Venus.

“Since then I’ve been terrified of failure, humbled beyond words, exhilarated, among many other things,” she says. “Still, look what energy has wrought. I live by this rule (path of most resistance) now.”