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Women Leading U.S. Theatres in the 21st Century

women on the cutting edge

Judith Malina, Artistic Director, The Living Theatre//**Kamilah Forbes**, Artistic Director, The Hip-Hop Theater Festival//**Maria Striar**, Producing Artistic Director, Clubbed Thumb



BY ANNE HAMILTON

Last May, WOMEN IN THEATRE Magazine arranged a meeting among three leaders of experimental theatres to discuss the risks, challenges, and rewards of running companies. The group, which included Kamilah Forbes, artistic director of The Hip-Hop Theater Festival, and Maria Striar, producing artistic director of Clubbed Thumb in New York City, met in the New York apartment of Judith Malina, who co-founded The Living Theatre with Julian Beck in 1948.

ANNE HAMILTON: Do you have a definition of experimental theatre?

JUDITH MALINA: No, I don't. I guess it means asking what's important to you and working on that.

KAMILAH FORBES: You're right, there. I think, in essence, art is experimental. Art is a response to a period in time, or a feeling or emotion or event. Its core essence is experimental in and of itself.

AH: Maria, do you have a definition?

MARIA STRIAR: Not at all. I think that when artists like Judith were starting out in theatre, they were responding to a type of theatre so different from what we have now. In subsequent generations, there has been layer upon layer of response to work like hers. There are those of us now who are making work that's termed "formally innovative"—and then people pry at that in turn, and it tumbles down.

AH: Judith, can you tell us about the new play you're writing?

JM: Not too much, really. But all our work is always based on what's the most important thing we want to say next. Every workshop I do, every performance I do, begins with that question. And it's not a question of experimenting.

First, we have to decide as a group, "What are we trying to convey?" Then we have to invent a way of saying it that's going to have the greatest impact on the audience. Now, what do I mean by impact? I mean what's going to lead them to have a hope for the beautiful, non-violent, anarchist revolution. Because that's our goal.

KF: Has your goal as a company changed over the years?

JM: Yes and no. In a way, it changes every day, and it changes from the beginning of my sentence to the end of my sentence all the time. Yet there are certain fundamental principles that remain the same. The fundamental principles can be roughly defined as anarchism and pacifism.

MS: If one were to come up with a definition of experimental, yours is a good one. I would like people to leave Clubbed Thumb with the sense that their minds have been in a very alive place. That we've gotten them two-thirds of the way to action, but that the rest is their own to work out.

JM: But we have to make that very clear: "You should leave the theatre and make the revolution now, tonight!"

AH: Kamilah, does HHTF have any wish for its audience when it does a show?

KF: Our wish is to challenge. We came together as producers because we felt we were filling a need. I was not seeing any theatre that was representative of my generation, nor did I see people



Judith Malina as Antigone (1980). Photo Bernd Uhlig

onstage that had the same thoughts, socio-political ideology, and race/culture/class. We came together to fulfill that as a community.

What's inherent in our company is this idea of generational voices speaking. The hip-hop generation can be defined at this point as ages thirteen to forty-five, and it's consistently growing. But I wonder how our company will define itself in the next ten, fifteen, or twenty years, because we are so embedded in a culture that is ever-moving and ever-changing, morphing and redefining itself. Our work spans class, it spans culture, it also spans race. And that's really a big cornerstone for us, especially when you look at any sort of paradigm within hip-hop culture and see how the culture organizes itself.

JM: As for institutions, I'm an anarchist. I want to destroy institutions.

KF: I hear that.

JM: Including my own.

AH: Judith, why did you start the Living Theatre?

JM: I was destined to be in the theatre. My mother was an actress. When she was a young girl, she was hoping to work with a great young director, Erwin Piscator, but she fell in love with a rabbi. At that time, it was unthinkable that one could be an actress and a rabbi's wife. Today you can be an actress and a rabbi!

So my mother gave up her career, and my father and mother decided they would have a child, a daughter, who would be a surrogate for my mother. And so I am. When I graduated high school, Erwin Piscator was starting the Dramatic Workshop here in New York, and I went and studied with him. He was a very influential person, although he isn't as

well-known today as he should be.

But I've just written a book about him that will make him more popular, I hope. It's a notebook on Erwin Piscator's work—two hundred pages of my school notes and my thoughts. It begins with a little epigraph by Bertolt Brecht, because Brecht and Piscator worked together. Brecht was the writer, Piscator the director.

Brecht said, "Piscator is probably the most important theatre man of his time and possibly even the most important theatre man of all time." Now wait a minute: all time? I wrote this book in answer to the question, "What did Bertolt Brecht mean when he said that Piscator was the most important theatre man of all time?" And I think he meant that Piscator turned the theatre on its head, he taught us to have responsibility to our commitment. And I have done political theatre ever since.

AH: Maria, why did you start Clubbed Thumb?

MS: Well, I can't say that I meant to start Clubbed Thumb. It happened. I met with some friends to put on a play, and it took up only some of the time for which we had rented the space. So we simply filled almost every slot that was available. We have been around for sixteen years. I'm the only remaining founder who has been consistently there, but affiliated artists come in and out. Once somebody has been involved in three productions or substantial workshops, they're an affiliated artist. We have refined our mission, but we did not start out with a manifesto. We discovered along the way that we had an agenda.



Kamilah Forbes. Photo Xanthe Elbrick

AH: What is your mission?

MS: Our mission is that we commission, develop, and produce funny, strange, and provocative new plays by living American writers. We do plays that are ninety minutes and under—intermission-less, have at least three people in them, and offer complex and challenging opportunities for both men and women.

We hope the plays have a sense of humor. They can't have a substantial New York production history, because we really are doing new work, and we like to have a very hands-on relationship with the writer of the text. Also, my main concern is theatre which expresses the American vernacular.



Maria Striar. Photo courtesy Clubbed Thumb

AH: Kamilah, you spoke a little bit about your mission with the Hip-Hop Theater Festival. Do you have anything to add?

KF: As a Festival, we produce, commission, and present work. Our work is multidisciplinary. It's work that is representative of the hip-hop cultural arts movement, be it straight plays, solo plays, or dance-theatre. So it's ever-changing. As you mentioned, Maria, over the past sixteen years the Festival has also been about evolving our relationships. So even though we're presenters, we feel as though we have been building up a company with affiliated artists.

AH: When did your Festival start?

KF: In 2000, we had started it as a summer project at PS 122. We were going to produce Sarah Jones. Mark Russell, who was then PS 122's artistic director, gave us two spaces. Soon it became two weeks of inviting friends and hanging out after the theatre, engaging



Bmuthi (Hip-Hop Theater Festival, 2008). From left: **Delina Patrice, Amara Tabor-Smith, and Adia Whittaker.** Photo courtesy Hip-Hop Theater Festival

in conversations. We decided to do it again the following year and realized that Hip-Hop was a culture and a community that we were ultimately supporting. We now create full productions and co-productions throughout the year as well. We also produce curated conversations that relate to socio-political topics.

AH: Judith, what are the risks, challenges, and rewards of doing your work?

JM: Economic problems: how to sustain a theatre without receiving any real funding. We've managed to do that for sixty-five years. We get no funding, only individual donations. Maria, how do you support your work?

MS: The lion's share of our support comes from foundations and, to a dwindling extent, various government sources.

JM: I don't know why we don't get that. We make all the applications. We try very hard. Maybe it's because we are anarchists.

MS: They might know how you feel about institutions.

JM: Maybe that's true.

MS: We get some individual support as well. Our ticket prices are quite low, because we're interested in an audience that doesn't have to make a choice about whether or not they can afford to go to our shows.

JM: How about you, Kamilah?

KF: Private foundations, primarily.

JM: Private funding. We have to do that.

AH: Judith, how did you raise the money to build your new theatre space?

JM: I sold my home. I sold all of Julian's paintings. And I sold a big archive to Yale—400 boxes of archives to Yale University—and that helped. I sold my apartment and moved into this small but nice space. And we're in continual struggle. We have no problems with art. We have no problems with our magnificent company. All our problems are economic problems.

MS: Yes, it's always the money.

AH: Do you find that your subscribers come back?

JM: We have a membership, and it does come back to us. For fifty or sixty years now.

AH: They bring their children and grandchildren?

JM: Children and grandchildren.

MS: We do not have a subscription, but we do have a loyal audience. Our June programming has been a set part of the calendar for long enough that people know about it. We're more of a think-tank, in a way, for the theatre community. Operating at a level that includes commercial production is completely uninteresting to me.

JM: Do you pay your actors?

MS: We certainly do. But we do not pay them anywhere near what they should be paid. We have to make a great effort to make sure that everybody involved in all of our work feels that this is a special experience, where their contribution is valued. That is the thing which is incredibly important to me. Not just because it's a human value, but because, literally, that is our currency.

AH: And Kamilah, what about your audiences?

KF: We have definitely developed them. Very similar to your theatre company, Maria, in that our ticket prices remain low. Ten dollars; never over. And when we can, we subsidize. We never set up blocks for anyone who wants to take part in the conversation of the theatre, and especially the conversation that we're interested in engaging. Keeping our ticket prices low is an issue not only for us philosophically but also a part of how we build our



Telethon (Clubbed Thumb, 2009). From left: **Andrew Weems, Birgit Huppuch, and Greg Keller.** Photo Carl Skutsch

community and audience.

JM: We try to do that, too. But all our actors have to do other work. They have to do part-time office work or wait tables. It breaks my heart. We split the box office with the actors, but that's not enough for them to live on.

AH: If you had enough money to pay your actors well, would that make them better artists? Or make your theatre company better?

JM: Oh, sure. Because instead of working part-time [in the theatre], after you're tired from a day's work, you could work all day with the company. You could develop better.

MS: I will say one tiny exception I find to that: the high quality of work you sometimes get when it is not about the paycheck. There's something self-selecting about those people.

But it is a fact that part of why you choose to do certain things at certain times in your

as company members, so even our part-time staff receives health benefits. We have to take care of ourselves, so that we can do the work. If we had a million dollars, would the work be any better? I don't think so. The work would be different. It would be shiny. A lot of light. But would it be better?

JM: My work would be better if I didn't have to think about money all the time. I have to give 80 percent of my time to fundraising and I really want to give 90 percent of my time to the artistic work.

AH: Kamilah, what is your biggest challenge?

KF: It's money. It's perception, too. In this country, hip-hop is seen as a culture by/for brown people, period, from the ghettos. Then you add "theatre" right behind that, which has the perception of privilege. So, when you put those two things together, you have an



Frankenstein (1968). Photo courtesy The Living Theatre Archives

life is because you need to pay the bills.

AH: What do you think, Kamilah, about the compensation for artists?

KF: It's a huge issue among artists across the board. As an artist of color, originally there were very few roles for me as an actress. I would wait for that one August Wilson play. I would get jobs that did pay well, but they were not the jobs that really fed my spirit and/or my soul.

We're a small company, but our philosophy is that we have to take care of ourselves

interesting conversation.

JM: I always believe that the people that belong to us come to us. We have a company of pacifist anarchists and feminists, and I never have asked them if they're anarchists or feminists, or audition them. I don't do that. If they belong to us, they know it. And they come to us and work with us.

AH: It seems like it's a spiritual tribe.

JM: Oh, very much so.

AH: What do you do when you're not working, Judith?

JM: When I'm not working? I work some more. I don't know that I'm ever not working. I'm a 24-hour-seven-day-a-week worker.

MS: Do you feel that the timer is on, and you've got a lot to get out?

JM: Right. I'm eighty-five and I have at least fifty more years of plays that I want to do. And I won't be able to do them all, so I want to go as fast as I can.

AH: Can you describe the play that your theatre performed recently?

JM: *Seven Meditations On Political Sado-Masochism.* It was in response to when we had done some time in jail in Brazil, in some very tough prisons under the military government. I've been arrested in twelve different countries, never for anything I'm ashamed of. I got busted only for things that I'm proud of: civil disobedience at different times, and protests all over the world.

AH: Kamilah and Maria, as theatre-makers, can you imagine yourselves practicing civil disobedience?

MS: As an individual, yes. But I'm not the originator of the work that we do. However, were that the shape a given play was to take? Absolutely. I certainly wouldn't not pick a play because I thought, "Oh, this could be troublesome to put on."

AH: How about you, Kamilah. Would you consider sit-ins or protests connected to your work?

KF: In direct connection with our presentations, no. But our work does ask questions, and it has the same inspiration and response as the things Judith and Maria are talking about.

MS: Judith, tell us about some of the things you think of when you look at your blank pages. Maybe some of us can take up the mantle.

JM: I want to inspire the individual audience member to feel empowered, to make important changes in life, in the world. Get rid of poverty. Get rid of money. Get rid of national boundaries. Get rid of jails. Get rid of police. I want to inspire the feeling that these are not Utopian dreams but real possibilities. That's what I think about. How can I inspire that feeling?

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