Rebecca Holderness

I am a director, teacher of acting and movement and an entrepreneur whose research, teaching and service are centered on New Work.

"New Work" is a phrase that includes premier works, radical reinterpretation of classic work and performance that falls outside the traditional definitions of a discipline. In the professional theater community new work, may simply mean a premiere. New Work as defined by my practice is broader, containing four specific areas of focus: *creation* of original or premier theater works; *reinvention* of classic works of the theater; *training* of artists prepared to perform New Work; *developing* audiences or venues that support New Work.

New Work is the research and development arm of the theater industry, and its purpose is parallel to that of any new product development. In creating New Work it is not my intention that the central audience or greater part of the industry would move into that way of making or presenting, but rather to expand and reinvigorate the center. Just as the iPhone spawned innovations in the more general market of phones, so New Work produces a fundamental shift in mainstream work. In many cases New Work simply becomes mainstream work over time. Concepts from New Work, included in productions designed for the major market, energize Broadway or Regional Theater alike, from Angels in America to Spring Awakening and American Idiot.

Performers for this New Work need a theatrical practice and mode of creation that must remain flexible and responsive in the moment. I maintain that classical theater skills are the core tools for an actor in New Work when combined with tools that increase responsiveness to change and greater imaginative possibility. These are a prime concern in my development of training for actors. In this training the same tools used to decode and embody Shakespeare are used to embody and decode the most complex of cutting edge plays. This technique of analysis and performance I call *Radical Classical*. In my training methodology, tools of making theater from the Avant-Garde – such as Viewpoints and Grotowski Theater training – are combined with clown, Body Mind Centering and improvisation to develop an imaginative and bold actor. The creation of New Work requires the highest standards of rehearsal and performance skill, devotion to presentation, informed patience with the unknown, intellectual rigor and courage. It is this bracing combination of elements that informs my rehearsal, curricular development and teaching.

New Work is entrepreneurial. Since it is not yet reflected at the center it must generate its own locales and methods of presentation and grab its audience where they live. Creating New Work, analogous to the improvisational techniques of all art, operates from a "you conceive it you make it" core energy, creating artists with a strong ownership of their own work, fearless creators of their own theaters that empower audiences to demand work that reflects and challenges them.

Theater is vital only when it speaks directly to its audience. The pressing issues of the day must be presented in ways which speak to the audience that needs to hear it. I see New Work as product development in service of a community – proactive, challenging, unknown and catalytic.

Creation

In 1998, along with the Princess Grace award-winning writer Kip Erente Cheng, I created Einstein's Dreams, an adaptation of the Alan Lightman novel. It has been produced 6 times under my direction on four different stages in three states, becoming a definitive version of the work – moving from New Work to a part of the canon. Larger or smaller – New Work is in tension with the center in performance, production and creation, thus invigorating and sustaining the field.

I was commissioned by Burning Coal Theater to create Einstein's Dreams as a theatrical adaptation of Alan Lightman's popular book. The book presents dreamscapes as illustrations of Einstein's interrogation of and theories about time. Burning Coal's artistic director, Jerome Davis, knew of the visual and physical nature of my work through his observation of my Masters Thesis production, The Tempest. Lightman's book, while presenting moving and beautiful imagery to stage, provided no direct narrative to adapt or dramatic events to extract. This posed an initial problem, since in my experience visual imagery alone, presented on stage without the compression and necessity of dramatic action, quickly becomes extraneous and thin; at best it creates a performance in another genre, closer to dance or circus. When presented in the context or service of a dramatic action, however, visual imagery can become the key to exposing the psychological truth of such action with great impact, speed and specificity.

The problem with Einstein's Dreams as text for theatrical adaptation is its lack of action. My collaborator, Kipp Erente Cheng, and I created a framing play which shows Einstein searching for the daughter that he may or may not have had by another woman, while at the same time his friends, son, and wife search for the truth of their relationship to Einstein buried in his work. These three threads, – lost daughter, dreaming genius, and abandoned family – move towards each other over time. Time is represented as happening in multiple lines as Einstein's children and Einstein are represented at the same age, his age at the discovery of E=mc (2), 26 years old. The passage of time is an emotional concern of all families, where guilt, need, and desire combat. In this adaptation of a novel, now in truth a dramatic play, the dreams become exploration of heightened inner states.

Acting, movement and design are integrated in each production of the play through the use of iconic objects – a black board, a desk, a sheaf of papers and chairs. Chairs are seen as expressive of each character in the chorus, which is cast as widely as possible to represent the community of humankind. Chairs are a low order of stage object, homely and worn. In this case each chair is different as each human is different. This alignment of chair to characterization, which I often develop through an exercise of choice in rehearsal, helps the actor ground himself in the minimal world of the play. Since the ideas expressed in the dreams and play are abstract or emotional; the objects the actors connect to should be familiar and unique to them. Otherwise the actor has no anchor for the effort to live truthfully in an imaginative environment. These objects are combined into different relationships during the play, providing fluid locations for the dream action to take place.

Some productions have included home-made, fantastical machines that at once function as children's playthings and serve to represent the passage of time. Others have featured paper boats, toys or a dreamlike image of Lake Geneva. In one case the sand of an hourglass is poured onto the stage floor, becoming in turn the snow through which the wife walks barefoot in leaving her husband; thus presenting a sharp image of pain and loss. Such transformational imagery and objects invite a more reflective, poetic response in the audience, even as it is anchored in concrete things. The dreams of the characters become real for them.

Cheng and I left the play with open frames, or places for adaptation to each production. So each production of the play is similar in its visual and dreamlike style yet grounded by the story itself. The production can expand and contract to fit each theater or community and lends itself to a minimal but concentrated visual landscape. This openness and adaptability has helped give the production its longevity and national exposure. Produced six times in five different theaters the production under my direction and development has become a standard. This is an example, again, of how a new work can become central work, when audience and actors are able to connect to an unexpected vision with a familiar tool – in this case the drama and narrative of a family.

Reinvention

My radical reinvention of a classical or canonical play involves repositioning the play so it can be viewed as if new. Frequently produced scripts carry the weight of performance traditions that can blunt the impact that led them to become canonical works to begin with. My aim is rarely to perform what has been called a "deconstruction" – using an old play to express content of a different sort, often politically inflected. Rather, I am looking for a renewal, a reconnection.

For me, the process starts with a series of questions: What does the original text say and do? (Here I bring in all the scholarship I can, without necessarily aiming to produce an archaeological reproduction of the original). What does the current cast and the audience community need from this new production of the play? At what points are the play's original sense and my new concerns aligned, or else at odds? Throughout this process I always ground my new thoughts in the specifics of the original text, exactly as if it was written yesterday, even if I take them in fresh directions. By ignoring the traditions of a canonical work, I decode it anew just as I would with a New Work.

My initial work on the classical text is based especially in the unraveling of language, image and dramatic action. Dramatic action is a constant in most plays and provides the base for actors to enter into the process. But it is the language of a play that contains its individuality. I often use language and image as the direct source for the visual/musical or movement elements of a production. In Twelfth Night the text leads me to focus on music in all its forms, even the music of a storm. Or, in Much Ado About Nothing, a reiteration of jokes and images about fencing led me to use small sword work (as a physical language of the play), fencing, military uniforms and to set the play in an abstracted Sal Des Armes.

Twelfth Night is a Shakespeare text I have encountered three times, once playing Olivia and twice as a director. The production by Holderness Theater Company in 2002 at the Rose Theater/Lincoln Center is reviewed by Kenneth Gross for Theater Journal 54.4 (12/2002):

> At the opening of Rebecca Holderness's production of *Twelfth Night*, one saw on the stage floor an elongated pile of crumpled sheets of paper. Over the course of the show these were variously kicked at, danced over, scattered, rearranged, and blown away. Given the plot of *Twelfth Night*, the papers suggested the detritus of sea-storm and shipwreck, seaweed and shells also rejected and lost letters, even discarded scripts and newspapers. Mere litter at one moment, at the next they could be carefully arranged into a circle to create the sad, enclosed garden of Olivia. (Other props were scarce: a stool, a fishbowl, and some umbrellas). Without calling too much attention to the idea,

> they might have made the New York audience think of the chaos of paper that filled lower Manhattan in the weeks after the World Trade Center disaster — the snow of pages from destroyed offices as well as the innumerable messages, memorials, and photographs affixed to walls in the surrounding neighborhood, fading and tearing over time. This was a *Twelfth Night* after the Eleventh, alive to the sense of mourning and disaster, the feeling for the fragility of things that sifts through Shakespeare's comedy.

The intention in producing this play at this time was to provide an audience a space to grieve and to be redeemed. The play's themes of storm and loss, love and music could be brought to light by radically reducing the set to a pile of paper and a red floor. Twelfth Night is also a play obsessed with gender and masks. The 2002 production featured extensive use of social dance as the image and embodiment of love, solitude and social-gender roles. In my view the play's action, while comic in a traditional sense, puts the characters at grave risk in a fragile and dangerous world. The post-modern production was multi-disciplined, featuring dance and vocal, instrumental and recorded music. All these choices of presentation were intended to clarify and put the risk of the play in front of the audience in an effective way.

Gross comments again,

> One felt quick, ferociously direct confrontation between speakers, which was by turns comic, seductive, mocking, and aggressive. The disguises so many of the characters assumed heightened rather than blocked this directness, as if their own masks betrayed them, making them speak their minds more clearly and dangerously. This suggested the Director's stark reading of the play: that in a world so endangered, the only community worth having is one in which people are ready to challenge each other, to risk offense, if it compels others to reveal their hearts.

I do think that as fragile a world we still find ourselves in, a community must challenge and risk offense if truth is to be revealed. Much of my reading of Twelfth Night remained the same when I re-encountered it six years later, directing it for Burning Coal Theater in North Carolina. My arrangement with Jerome Davis, artistic director of the theater, is that he casts the productions. I find this stimulating because my concept must embrace a given set of performers as well as support my reading of the play. In the case of the 2008 production the cast was extremely diverse, featuring black and white performers of very different ages and physical types. The cast featured a very beautiful white Olivia, a handsome black Orsino, a very tiny Viola, a tall Sebastian, a very large Toby Belch and a stellar, grandmotherly black actress as Maria. Other cast members were just as diverse as these. What reading of the play might encompass them all?

I decided to focus on the tension between themes of death and loss in the play and sensual desire as the procreative force of nature. This was a film noir Illyria, with a jazz heart and a dream of hot colors. It is a series of moments of the self – emerging from confusion and misapprehension. With such a diverse cast we could see love and desire reach across boundaries and traditions. And we could hear the loneliness of the Jazz horn in the alley that is the heart of a passionate and clandestine encounter.

Once again I reduced the setting to the bare bones. But this stage space was intimate, with fully half of the audience sitting on rugs and pillows on the floor, invited to recline and drink it all in. The set consisted of 5 black metal door-frames, representing the traditional doors of comedy or farce, sitting on a triangular painted playing floor. These doors provided for the comic entrances and exits, as well as places for

eavesdropping, but in a skeletal way that revealed the space behind. Upstage of them was a visible "off-stage" decorated with large paintings, in super saturated color, on a black wall, each individually lit. This series of paintings, by South African Painter Morag Charlton, featuring twins coming in and out of swirls of patterns, were warm, but with a strong autumnal feel. The back stage space with its high contrast of dark and color was peopled throughout the play with the cast held in still image. This was the interior space of desire made visible; the private thoughts of characters who are lost and seeking, revealed.

Music is integral to Twelfth Night. In this production we used the world of Jazz standards as well as instrumental works of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. Feste was played here as a "trousers role" by a wonderful black singer, allowing me to reset all the songs in the play to the tunes of jazz standards. This use of standards gave the songs more impact, giving this contemporary audience an association with which to decode the unfamiliar imagery. This was especially useful when Feste sings to Malvolio in prison. By this point in the play the clowns have tired of revenging themselves upon the steward. Feste in particular seems aware that they have overstepped themselves. Setting Feste's song, which invokes the devil, to the tune of *Someone To Watch Over Me*, ironically helps expose both Feste's ambivalence and Malvolio's suffering.

Elements common to both productions arise in general from a close reading of the text and a desire for strong and immediate impact and meaning. Once again I staged the imprisonment of Malvolio in bright light, with Malvolio's eyes wide open – letting the blindness and darkness be of the heart and mind, not literal things. In the later production this scene was played in a square of light that echoed the framed upstage spaces, making both the spaces of the mind and heart. And there were umbrellas because in a Holderness Illyria it rains.

The Burning Coal production was designed to overcome the sense of otherness or stuffiness that audiences sometimes expect in stagings of Shakespeare. Sexy, jazzy and close to them in performance space and musical era, the precise intention of the words could still be heard.

Every canonical play I direct is subjected to this same process of questioning: How do I renew and reconnect this play to its audience? Hence the use of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and iconic depression era photos but contemporary Austin, Texas music to frame Of Mice and Men, or intermission "knee plays" in Hay Fever, choreographed with the inner life of the characters. These choices, and many like them, are ways to make the "old work" reveal itself as New Work.

Training

Milwaukee is often called a "Hyper-Segregated" city, a condition exacerbated by the facts of urban geography. Not unlike New York City, whose Cross Bronx Expressway subdivided poor from middle class, destroying vibrant African American and Eastern European neighborhoods, the building of I-43, combined with unfair housing practices, devastated the Walnut Street Neighborhood and essentially walled off the inner city from the rest of Milwaukee. This division within the city has been strongly represented in my classroom where white and black students routinely sat apart.

Theater spaces often carry their histories with them, in the traditions and customs associated with the space itself. The space at Studio 508, Kenilworth had no such tradition in place. As a "non-theater," it offered

opportunity for the development of New Work and to become a place bringing divided communities together. Under my direction Studio 508 itself debuted with the premier of Ghost, a new play that spoke directly and provocatively to the plight of young inner city black men in Milwaukee in their own language.

At my request the Theater Department commissioned a new work written for these students by Zakiyyah Alexander, a nationally known award-winning playwright who often writes in a hip-hop inspired African-American vernacular (her awards include, Helen Merrill Award, ACT New Play Award/Lorraine Hansberry Award, Stellar Network Award, the Theodore Ward Prize, Jackson Phelan Award). To reinforce my idea of working across disciplinary lines, I asked Brazilian choreographer Simone Ferro, of the UWM Dance Program, to create a movement language for the production based on the forms of street dance

The process of developing this play included Ms. Alexander speaking with students and community members during a research visit to Milwaukee. She returned with a play written in urban vernacular about a young African-American man's effort to throw off his past and start a new life: It dealt with pressures from a community both to change and to stay the same, to stay in the familiar. It dealt directly with issues of drugs, money and family. At the core of the play was a pair of young African-American men debating life style. As it proceeds, the play reveals they are in fact two aspects of the same man – one the spectre of a violent, alienated self, the other a stand-in for a more hopeful, human future. In this struggle for primacy, only one self can prevail.

A new play in a verbal and social style requires research as part of the process. The depth of the research into these questions will help the play to develop through the rehearsal process. In the case of Ghost, the process would be twofold – at once endowing the play and characters with an informed truth, and developing a practice of empowerment and ownership in the performers. Research included cast meetings with Dr. David Pate and investigation of his seminal research on African American men and the role of the social roots of Hip-Hop (prior to appointment at UWM, noted author Pate was founder and director of the Center for Family Policy and Practice and held a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP), University of Wisconsin-Madison.) This research unified the cast by giving primacy to the facts rather than simply relying upon the actor/students' personal experience.

Our research project also included the study of graffiti, partly through working with Joe Austin's study Taking the Train. Graffiti became, indeed, a visual element of the set, an example of the reaction to segregation and exclusion. Even more important was the concept that graffiti, like vernacular poetry or playwriting, can possess a conceptual complexity, which can be decoded with the same tools as any elevated text or art. And for a young cast it was an active and concrete way to make that connection.

With 13 mixed-discipline performers and a set made of graffiti covered wallboard pulled from the garbage, staged in a barely outfitted 508 – the performance was as complex as the issues it dealt with, and as raw. What was the purpose in this? In the rehearsal room black student actors worked along side a top cutting-edge black playwright. In performance a racially diverse audience that crossed generational lines was inspired to debate. Most striking, though not surprising, was the response of the young black men in the audience. The same UWM students I had observed walking out on their friend's work in Equus, stayed for Ghost and cried. Met in a theater by their own story in a language they employ every day, changed theater from an antique medium to a vital experience for them.

Ghost, as the first play in 508 at Kenilworth, set a standard for challenging work done in a new way. It modeled for the audience, students and artists a theater made without expensive sets and costumes; it inspired in them an entrepreneurial spirit for developing New Work. In this way the production of Ghost touched on a number of the roles played by New Work in my research: it presented a new play connected to its community; it gave new training for performers, who found poetry and pathos in street speech; it got actors dancing and dancers acting; it gathered a new audience in a new venue.

Development

Movements of New Work occur when key elements converge with luck and timing. Such movements, artists know, depend on communities; they are forged in school or workshop and fostered in a neighborhood. New Work is conceived in hallway conversations, studio visits and chance encounters over burgers at the local pub. Interestingly an economic downturn can support the early stages of New Work movement. Space and time for working opens up. Artists are forced to use raw spaces and new materials through scarcity of support. While inspiration can't be manufactured, I believe you can jump start the process through training, modeling and advocacy. It is my intention, long-term, to energize Milwaukee's national reputation as an incubator for New Work through just this sort of process.

My targeted, top-level training of new actors, my creation of New Work and my fostering of empowered entrepreneurship on stage, in rehearsal and in classroom studios, has in five years already changed the Milwaukee theater scene. My adaptation of Accidental Death of an Anarchist, presented in Studio 508, was deemed "most surprising show of the year," and critics have favorably compared my main stage work with APT and the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. The production of new plays such as 1001, or Mr. Melancholy, have challenged and inspired a new audience. And from this foundation have grown two new Milwaukee theater companies – Youngblood and Uprooted – both founded by my students. As students they read and staged new plays, acted in them, decoded them and used classical ideas to model them. As artists they form companies whose work garners this response:

> Until three months ago, I'd never heard of Mickle Maher or his 2003 play, "Spirits to Enforce." For much of the past three weeks, I've been able to think of little else.
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> That sea change comes courtesy of Youngblood Theatre Company's recent production of "Spirits," which is easily the most exciting and also one of the best plays I've seen in Milwaukee during the 2009-'10 theater season.
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> I loved it so much that I went back for seconds, two weeks after having caught the opening night performance. It was even better than I'd remembered, and the enthusiastic reception from the audience - which included a number of Milwaukee's theater professionals - made clear I wasn't the only one who felt this way. Even on its final weekend, "Spirits" remained a huge hit; the last Saturday night performance sold out.
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> ...
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> That Milwaukee responded as it did - and that its theater community is still buzzing so excitedly

> about what it saw - sends a loud message to the artistic director of every theater company in town: We want more of the same. Don't make us wait seven years to see any play this good. Take us back to Prospero's island. Take us home.
> [*Mike Fischer - The Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel - May 15, 2010*]

Universities continue to be fertile and important laboratories for New Work, forging entrepreneurial relationships with the professional world. Where do we stand in this? Milwaukee has space and community ready for development. My panel at ATHE 2009 NYC concerned how the professional community seeks mutually beneficial involvement with universities in this process, thus providing rich opportunities for students to enter into the professional field with a project, or empowering them to change the market themselves. When students can work side by side in the creation of New Work they learn the skills required to foster that work – from making their own programs to hanging lights made from hardware store supplies. When any artist has forged a work with sweat equity from nothing, they have a deeply vested interest in it being seen. They want an audience and they know who their audience is. They bring the market for their work with them – broadening the audience for work at large. They are in fact the leaders in audience development.

Students from my classrooms have entered into roles and intern programs at all the major theaters in Milwaukee, the APT, Utah Shakespeare, and Shakespeare and Company, in Lenox MA, or have joined the writing community in Chicago. At UWM my colleagues across disciplines look for my research and creative work to continue to generate opportunities to make New Work that supports and deepens their own creativity and student curriculum.

My own research and observation on this topic led me to refocus my non-profit – Holderness Theater Company – as The Battery Factory. The Battery Factory (TBF) is an incubator that brings together arts professionals and business professionals. Artists, performers, directors and producers mingle with real estate developers, urban planners, entrepreneurs, business leaders and community stakeholders to power the growth of Greater Milwaukee as a lifestyle destination. Through production and presentation, advocacy, fiscal sponsorship, audience and venue development, The Battery Factory will spark new arts opportunities and strive to better integrate the performing arts into all communities.

The Battery Factory has a developmental core of 4 people: Nic Bernstein a businessman; County Supervisor Gerry Broderick, Third District; Leroy Stoner of UWM and myself. We are working at this time to assemble both a Board of Directors and a Board of Artistic Advisors. We believe the arts play an important role in the life and development of any community, and that it is in the best interests of leaders from business, government and civic life to be involved in the development of the artistic enterprises within their city and region.

More and more, people want to live with the arts among them, not in separate districts. Developers around the country see this and recognize the benefits that spring from having arts activities and events as part of the mix – alongside retail, dining, residential and other mixed-use purposes – in their developments. Political leaders recognize that the arts are an important and vibrant part of our local, regional and state economies. Money invested in the arts has a higher return on investment than just about any other stimulative investment. By creating an environment in which artists can live and work within the

communities they are entertaining with their art that simulative energy stays within that community as well.

TBF believes strongly that since arts do not exist in a vacuum, neither should artists be separate or apart from the business people, political leaders, developers and other stakeholders in the community. We will be bringing these different people and their viewpoints together, whether in panel discussions or other forum, as mentors and in promotional partnerships. We take as our models such organizations as ART/New York (Alliance of Resident Theatres), Fractured Atlas, and others like them, and we'll strive to bring leaders of these groups to Milwaukee to talk with our membership and community partners about how to use the arts to build up our community.

Overview

Since my arrival at UWM in the fall of 2005 I have created two works original to Milwaukee, in a new performance space (which was in turn defined by them) – Studio 508 – both creating cross-generational and multi-racial audiences. I have directed 6 premiers (regional, national and/or international) produced on various stages during my tenure at UWM, most with nationally known writers in residence. I have directed two canonical plays reinvented for the UWM stage. As a result of my efforts contacts have been made between students, community artists and audiences with over a dozen award winning new writers from Carson Kreitzer (current McKnight Advancement Grant winner in Minneapolis) to Zakiyyah Alexander, (Lorraine Hansberry Award winner) as well as directors and leading trainers around the United States from Tina Packer, founder of the internationally known Shakespeare and Company, to Walton Wilson, Associate Director of the Yale School of Drama; from Andrew Volkoff, Associate director of Barrington Stage Company (developers of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee), to Jerome Davis, founder of Burning Coal (major presenter of new plays in North Carolina.)

My own creative research includes directing the premier of The Revolver Lover, the Valentine's day play of 365 Days / 365 Plays by Suzan-Lori Parks, at the Public Theater for the Drama League Directors Program in New York City; and a Performance, Film, and Installation, Rough Cut, and Miss Julie, supported by UWM (with a Graduate School Research Grant), Vassar College, and Burning Coal Theater, exploring performance and production styles and their impact on received meaning. This latter project took place in various areas of the USA, combining artists from Wisconsin, North Carolina, New York, and Los Angeles (including noted actors and producers, Katie Selverstone, Tony Adler and Bill Block). Additionally, I have directed four professional productions mounted at Burning Coal, in North Carolina, and a New Work at the Boulder Fringe Festival. On my immediate horizon are professional productions of Einstein's Dreams in Washington DC, King Lear, at Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, MA and the launch of The Battery Factory in Milwaukee.