

And God Created Great Theatre

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By Kirk Wood Bromley

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Melanie Joseph, the intense and animated artistic director of the Foundry Theatre Company (3 Obie awards and 2 Drama Desk nominations), leans across her desk and shouts, “The microcosm is so huge!” And that, I think, is the Foundry in a phrase. With acclaimed philosopher and activist Cornel West on its board, genocide discussion groups on its agenda, and a new musical theater piece, <I>And God Created Great Whales</I>, by the multi-talented Rinde Eckert opening next week, the Foundry’s microcosm is huge and getting huger.

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Due to this hugeness, it’s difficult to pin the company down. All of its programming is generated through the impetus of Joseph, yet she gets her leads from the artists she knows: “If I’m interested in your art, then I’m interested also in your curatorial eye.” Thus, the Foundry’s growth has been organic, artist-driven, emanating outward from a core of conceptual community.

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This type of growth has brought about a distinct, yet diverse, style. I mean, look at this production list:

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- Numerous performance texts on the difficulty of object relations by W. David Hancock

- “Never Again: A Town Meeting,” featuring a panel of world-renowned journalists covering war crimes

- <I>Gertrude and Alice: A Likeness to Loving</I> by Lola Pashalinski and Linda Chapman, directed by Anne Bogart, a relatively straight play on the relationship of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas

- <I>The Roaring Girl</I>, a 17th century Jacobean play, adapted by Alice Tuan (upcoming)

- <I>Talk</I>, a new theatre piece by poet/playwright/rap recording artist Carl Hancock Rux (upcoming)

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And now, the Foundry has taken on Rinde Eckert, writer of music and words, singer, and dancer, whose piece <I>And God Created Great Whales</I> is about a gifted composer on a quest to finish his opus: an opera based on Moby Dick. As Joseph describes, Eckert plays a musician named Nathan, who “has a tape recorder hung around his neck and every morning he wakes up and pushes play and it gives him his instructions, all of which he recorded in his more compos mentis moments.” Desperately fighting against a disease eating away at his mind, Nathan utilizes a vast array of musical techniques, physical motions, and textual metaphors to nail the whale of his musical mind.

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One of Eckert’s trademarks is that he pays “fastidious attention to his character and the miniatures of his world,” thus investigating the difficulties and opportunities of the autistic/artistic dichotomy. His performances present “multitextual layers of consideration so that his character is somehow fractalized by the nature of the work itself.” Through this process Eckert synthesizes seemingly unconnected concepts into a wonderful, troubling whole.

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The synthesis of Eckert and the Foundry makes complete sense if one understands how the Foundry functions. If there's anything consistent in the company's objectives, it's an obsession with discovery. Foundry plays plunge deeply into their subject, thrash about within it, and emit unabashedly whatever they discover. They realize on stage one of Joseph's expressed beliefs: "there's no primary way of looking at this moment. It exists simultaneous with so many things, many of which are connected in ways we would never even conceive of." Foundry plays conceive of these connections.

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Such a pathos for discovery finds its place in the Foundry's political events as well. These community get-togethers are designed to provide a forum for the hashing out of ideas. The concept originated in Joseph's feeling that "people are hungry for intelligent investigation of things that are effecting them." While these forums may form "the etymologies of a theatrical piece," Joseph is adamant about the fact that the political Foundry and the theatrical Foundry do not necessarily coincide. Rather, they form opposite sides of the single coin that is Joseph's fascination with "things which engage people's thought."

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And that's what's so great about the Foundry. It engages and entertains; it presents theatrical political discussions and political theatrical productions; it goes for the intellectual in order to frolic more richly in the emotional. After attending any Foundry function, one feels challenged and inspired by the complexity of the world.

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<I>And God Created Great Whales</I> is appearing at Dance Theatre Workshop's Bessie Schonberg Theatre, and stars writer/composer Rinde Eckert. The piece also features Nora Cole as Nathan's Opera-singing muse, and is directed by David Schweizer, who has worked with Sam Shepard, Austin Pendelton, and Ann Magnuson, among others. This evening of song, text, dance, and whales promises to be an extraordinary and haunting musical adventure into the multi-faceted psyche of a single-minded artist.