



Raymond Bobgan: Avant-garde plays in historic buildings

Published: Saturday, July 23, 2011, 11:08 AM Updated: Saturday, July 23, 2011, 9:52 PM



By **Grant Segall**

Raymond Bobgan has helped to revive a traditional neighborhood with very untraditional plays.

The award-winning Bobgan, 44, leads Cleveland Public Theatre. He shared last year's Cleveland Arts Prize not just for directing admired shows but restoring landmark buildings and helping to turn around Detroit-Shoreway.

He also helps urban youths and homeless people turn around their lives.



Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer

Tell us about your background.

I'm from Santa Barbara. My dad's Armenian. My mom's Swedish. She directed plays in our church. I created my first play in sixth grade.

How'd you end up in Cleveland?

Came to Akron in 1991 to do what I thought was a one- or two-year director's apprenticeship. I drove by the beautiful Carnegie library on Fulton. I went to Pilgrim Church in Tremont and saw "Marat/Sade." I couldn't believe someone was doing "Marat/Sade" in Cleveland.

So have you learned to cope with Cleveland weather?

I love the snow. When I grew up, I'd see snow in picture books. To me, it's magical.

You miss anything about California?

I miss the ocean, and I miss the mountains. But I feel so much more at home in Cleveland. Cleveland's an awesome community.

Californians have a vibe of falseness. There's such an emphasis on material and physical things. Not a real sense of community.

In Cleveland, people's cousins live in town. I like being in a community where people have to be accountable because somebody knows somebody who knows their brother.

How else is the North Coast different from the West Coast?

Cleveland's a great place for traveling to other cities. It's central. You can get to New York in a seven-, eight-hour drive, depending how fast. You can get to Chicago or Toronto.

Low cost of living, too. We could afford a house. We were able to bring artists here, and they could live with us. We moved again, right by Don's on Lake.

It's incredible to have a kid in Cleveland. We're members of the Natural History Museum, the Science Center and the Zoo. Edgewater's across the street. I can go on a bike ride there with my son, Raziel, who's 10.

I went to the downtown library a lot with my son in the winter. I'm very fond of the sculpture garden there, with the little guys.

I also love the guy I call the basketball player on Mall A.

You mean the war memorial?

Is that a war memorial? I think he looks like a basketball player going for the rebound.

So what brought your wife, Holly Holsinger, to town?

We were just friends at UC Irvine. Then she came here and played romantic leads with me at CPT.

Favorite local band?

I'm a big fan of Lost State of Franklin, which is this hybrid country rock band.

Local heroes?

Matt Zone, my councilman, is going to kill me, but Joe Cimperman is one of my heroes. He's done so much

for the arts. He's one of those pols who does it for the right reason. For the partner registry, he had to go to bat time and time again and find a way to reach. Rather than create divisions, he furthered discussions.

Is Cleveland's theater cooler than California's?

The theater in Santa Barbara was incredibly conservative. The CPT style of theater is really wide. Most of the work I do personally, it's devised theater. That's like being in a band that doesn't do covers. We collaborate. We're working it out together.

Do Clevelanders go for it?

I love Cleveland audiences. The broader culture has no idea what's going on at CPT and no idea of our national reputation. But audiences who come here get it.

Artists from other communities are blown away by the support here. I had two friends come from New York and Philadelphia. As usual, they were going on and on about why I should be making art in those cities. I asked, "In either of those cities, is there a county fund that gives artists \$20,000 fellowships?"

Do people expect cutting-edge work on the supposedly humdrum West Side?

I continue not to understand the East Side-West Side thing. It's one city.

Tell us about your programs with homeless people and urban youths.

Theater gives them a space. They can be themselves and feel safe here and have their stories championed.

Tell us a success story.

Years ago, a 16-, 17-year-old disappeared and showed up halfway through the third or fourth day. He looks horrible. Police had arrested him on a warrant for his dad, an addict, who had the same name. The next day, they realize the mistake. He goes home. His wallet and clothes are all gone. He'd been robbed by his own father.

I got an email from him the other day. "I'm 32 years old, I'm married and have a job and I'm doing good, all because of CPT."

Tell us about CPT's digs.

The Gordon Square Theater's 100 years old. We also own the old West Side Irish American Club building and the 1907 home of the first Romanian orthodox church in the U.S.

Where do you go for food?

I never have to leave my neighborhood. I've got XYZ now and Latitude. I like the pizza at Luxe. They have a European-style pizza, with less sauce.

I get the falafel sandwich at Nate's and the jambalaya at The Souper Market on West 25th. At the Liquid Planet on Clifton: a blues factor smoothie.

One of my favorite restaurants is Jaipur Junction out in North Royalton. It's the best Indian food in Cleveland.

Where do you shop?

There's amazing antique stores on the West Side: Sweet Lorain and the others. Flower Child is a cool antique store on Clifton.

Tell us more about Gordon Square's boom.

Forty-seven new businesses in the district since 2006. The data proves again and again: The arts make a huge difference to the economy. Young, creative professionals are buying homes in Battery Park and other parts of the neighborhood because they want to be connected to the arts.

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