



Cleveland Public Theatre's slate of premieres illustrates its mission

Published: Sunday, October 30, 2011, 12:05 AM



By **Special to The Plain Dealer**

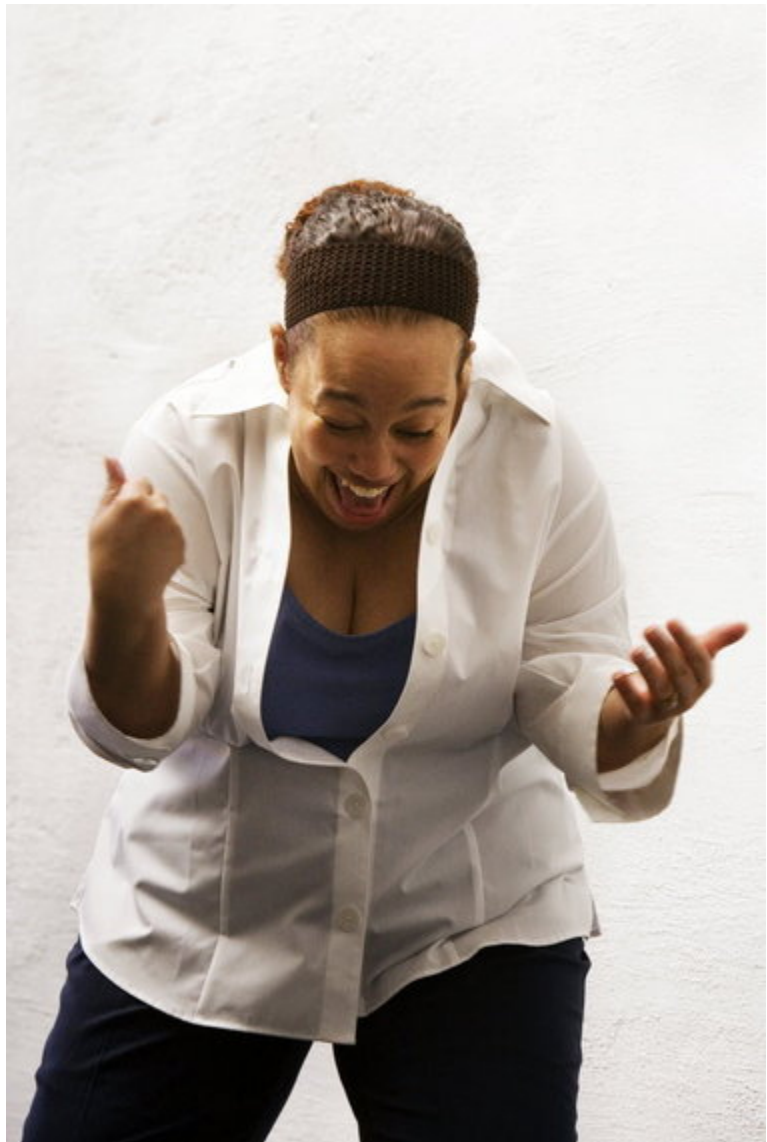
"What 'cha got?"

That's the first question Raymond Bobgan, artistic director of Cleveland Public Theatre, asks the playwrights and directors he works with when he's assembling a new season.

Instead of scanning lists of published scripts and hoping he can claim a show before another local theater, Bobgan and his staff often go directly to their sources in seeking out new, unseen material.

The result is a 2011-12 season in which CPT is mounting seven full productions of world premieres (out of a total of 11 shows). This is remarkable because, for most theaters in this region and around the nation, one or two premieres per season would be considered ambitious.

"We prefer to select directors and playwrights, instead of picking shows," says Bobgan. "Then, they tell us what they're working on that really excites them. That's the stuff we're interested in presenting at CPT."



Steve Wagner

Nina Domingue will open her solo show "Ya Mama!" this week as part of Cleveland Public Theatre's ambitious, premiere-packed 2011-12

season.

There's also a payoff for Cleveland audiences.

As Bobgan explains, "Our new plays receive a great response here for one important reason: Invention and manufacturing are part of the Cleveland mythos, part of the city's collective unconscious. So our audiences have an eager, natural curiosity. And that's a perfect match for these shows."

The string of CPT premieres, which features many local creators, began with the just-closed "Monster Play." Like many of the premieres, it was a devised production (one that is not pre-scripted but put together by the director and his cast).

Next up in the premiere procession is "Ya Mama!," a solo work created and performed by Cleveland actor Nina Domingue, which opens a two-week run Friday.

"This play deals with my changing perceptions of motherhood," says Domingue, "about how I decided to be present for my children." Her play was first staged in January in CPT's Big Box workshop series.

Big Box is just one part of the multilayered development structure that CPT offers to playwrights, directors and performers. The latest edition of this series, Big Box '12, opens Thursday, Jan. 5, and is a multiweek showing of 11 works-in-progress.

Other CPT steppingstones include Springboard, staged readings of plays in their infancy (which just concluded), and Leap/Conceive (Thursday through Saturday), a series that helps creators polish work at a midpoint in their process.

Another premiere production that is going through CPT development is "13 Most American Dreams," which will open in May. It is conceived and directed by local theatrical innovator Pandora Robertson.

As she describes it, "My show looks at the Internet as a worldwide dream catcher, so we want to incorporate social media. We'll probably invite the audience to keep their mobile phones on during the show as we develop interactive portraits of people and our culture."

Three other locals -- Jill, Frank and Meredith Levin -- will launch the premiere of "Not The Flying Stupendas"

Coming Up

Ya Mama!

What: Cleveland Public Theatre presents the one-woman show written and performed by Nina Domingue.

When: Previews at 7 p.m. Thursday; opens at 7 p.m. Friday. Through Saturday, Nov. 12.

Where: 6415 Detroit Ave., Cleveland.

Tickets: \$10-\$25. Go to cptonline.org or call 216-631-2727.

in April. This show is for families (something of a rarity at CPT) and involves a circus where the headlining acrobats are out of commission. So staff members are forced to perform in the acrobats' place, as clown acts and songs mesh with various personal dramas.

Director Matthew Earnest, whose "Wanderlust: A History of Walking" ignited the CPT stage last season, is returning in March with his new "Lulu Project." It is based on two plays by Frank Wedekind, who wrote the controversial "Spring Awakening." That 1892 play was recently turned into an award-winning Broadway musical.

As Earnest says, "This show will include graphic sexuality, as we follow a young woman making her way in a violent and debauched world."

Thinking about that subject matter, Earnest, who is based in West Virginia, adds, "I consider myself very lucky to make some of my work here in Cleveland, where audiences embrace edgy and challenging material."

CPT kicks off the new calendar year in January with "At-TEN-tion Span," which offers a collection of fully produced, 10-minute devised plays by local artists.

And CPT's season of firsts ends in May-June with "Akarui" by Iowan Jen Silverman. It's a fantastical journey involving a transgender boy, a rave cave and forces that can transform dead bodies.

While new shows are not always great shows, innovation is critical to assuring theater remains viable by attracting young, adventurous and diverse audiences. In that effort, the energetic and daring Cleveland Public Theatre is an acknowledged leader -- here and around the country.

-- *Christine Howey*

Freelance critic Howey's blog is raveandpan.blogspot.com.

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