



Southeast Michigan may be reeling from the recession, but you'd never guess it from the region's thriving theatre scene

BY DAVI NAPOLEON

From left, the cast of Planet Ant's *Detroit Be Dammed: A Beaver's Tale*: Sharon L. Brooks, Chris Korte, Dez Walker, Dawn Bartley, Mikey Brown.

EXIT THE FREEWAY FOUR MILES FROM THE heart of downtown Detroit, and you'll pass boarded-up buildings—uninhabited apartment and office complexes, fire-damaged churches and banks, shut-down stores. But as you make your way through the neighborhoods, the tableau brightens. On the shabbier blocks and in the built-up area that hosts large arts institutions, little theatres taking big risks have come on the scene.

Theatres have been staking their claims in outlying areas, too, in the suburbs and small cities in Southeast and Central Michigan. Visit for a week and you won't have enough time to see all the exciting theatre in the region. "I feel we're on the verge of something great," says Molly McMahon, artistic director of BoxFest Detroit, a summer festival for women directors and new plays.

The scene in and around Detroit evokes Greenwich Village and SoHo in the mid-20th century—it has become an active arts community that includes visual artists and poets. Theatre runs the gamut from traditional to wildly adventurous. Venues include living rooms, lofts, vacant buildings, a converted martial arts studio and a garden store.

According to Donald V. Calamia, editorial director of EncoreMichigan.com, 12 theatres have opened in the past 5 years. Two more are set to open this spring, all this in the midst of a recession that continues to hit Michigan harder than most of the country. The U.S. Department of Labor

reports that employment in Detroit and surrounding areas declined 2.1 percent between September 2009 and September 2010, while the national average rose 0.2 percent during the same period.

A few of the 60-some theatres within honking distance of the motor city, including Plowshares Theatre Company and Meadow Brook Theatre, have faced difficulties but pulled through. Only one of the area's nine Equity theatres, the BoarsHead Theater, folded; seven of the others formed the Michigan Equity Theatre Alliance to work together on marketing and audience development. "The theatre is always dying, always struggling, but many of us are still here," says Jeff Daniels, founder and executive director of the 20-year-old Purple Rose Theatre Company in Chelsea.

"People laughed when Jeff talked about starting a theatre in a one-stoplight town," adds PRTC's managing director, Alan Ribant. "But art galleries, restaurants and hotels sprang up because of it."

Area theatres new and old are surviving, and some are thriving. Last year, PRTC set a record with 291 performances, entertaining more than 40,000 people, up about 6,000 from the year before. Attendance at the 10-year-old Water Works Theatre Company in Royal Oak went up 10 percent last season. PRTC renovated its theatre and lobby, and Ann Arbor's Performance Network Theatre, founded in 1981, also spruced up its digs. The Blackbird Theatre in Ann

Arbor, on the scene since 1998, moved from the outskirts of the city to a central location and is starting an extra outdoor season this summer. BoxFest Detroit, which began three years ago as an annual weekend festival, now runs three weekends. The Detroit Repertory Theatre celebrated its 54th season without a hitch.

There are summer Shakespeare festivals in Jackson, Royal Oak and Ann Arbor. Several universities boast active theatre-producing wings. University Musical Society in Ann Arbor brings top companies in from abroad. There are theatres for children and youth. And new plays are workshopped and produced almost everywhere.

Why here? Why now?

Some say the theatre explosion in Southeast Michigan didn't occur in spite of economic hardship but, at least partly, because of it. Playwright David MacGregor believes one reason theatres are opening is because in trying times people need "a feeling of community and connection to other human beings. All of the new theatres are small, intimate spaces, and the audience can literally feel that they are part of the play."

More prosaic factors are at work, too. Says David Wolber, PNT's artistic director, "Detroit has so much empty space that if you've got the moxie and the ability to function on four hours of sleep, you don't need money as much." Take the Abrecht Performance Space, which doesn't charge admission and is subsidized by its four directors, one of whom uses his loft as a venue for its mostly modern-drama fare. Art4artillery Theatre uses a 2,400-square-foot space with high ceilings in the Russell Industrial Center, once abandoned; its productions have included a two-hour version of both parts of *Angels in America* in interwoven narratives and *The Marriage Plays*, an amalgam of three plays by Edward Albee.

Wolber observes that while theatre artists who trained here once left for the coasts and bigger regional theatres, fewer can afford to leave in today's economy. And the more who stay put, the more abundant the talent pool. "Every time I go to cast a show, it comes down to difficult decisions," says actor/director Lynch Travis.

PNT executive director Carla Milarch notes that fine university theatre programs have helped sustain Michigan theatres. Schools not only train top artists who work in Michigan's theatres, but teaching jobs

provide a steady income for them. Schools also provide inexpensive labor. Williamston Theatre, for instance, offers Equity points to Michigan State University students who work on crews.

Movies are also helping local theatre flourish. Since 2008, tax incentives have brought more than 50 film shoots to Michigan. With corporations suffering, fewer industrials are being shot in the state, but local actors are getting cast in feature films, and some feel this is the place to be discovered. Film opportunities have encouraged other theatre artists to stay here, too. Scenic/projection/lighting designer Justin Lang, for instance, planned to move to the West Coast when he graduated from the University of Michigan two years ago, but film crew work kept him here, leaving him available to design at PNT and other area theatres.

Instead of skipping town, some talented college graduates have chosen to apprentice at established Michigan companies in recent years; they learn the ropes, then found companies guided by their own visions. Frannie Shepherd-Bates, artistic director of the three-year-old Magenta Giraffe Theatre, was an

intern at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre in West Bloomfield but resigned to direct plays elsewhere; her short stint gave her insight into how an organization runs. In 2010, after apprenticing at PNT, Keith Paul Medelis founded the New Theatre Project and Russ Schwartz co-founded Penny Seats Theatre Company.

Purple Rose has been a breeding ground for a new generation of Michigan theatre leadership. PRTC alumna Christina Johnson started Tipping Point in 2007; James Kuhl, another former apprentice, became Tipping Point's artistic director two years later. Four PRTC vets started the Williamston. Another runs Go Comedy! in Ferndale. Williamston artistic director Tony Caselli, who stayed past his PRTC apprenticeship to act and direct, says his 12 years there taught and inspired him, and the affiliation served the Williamston well. "People knew if we were coming from the Rose, we knew what we were doing," he says.

In this rapidly expanding theatre scene, neighborly cooperation trumps competition. "Having many theatres doesn't mean less patronage but that theatre has more of a

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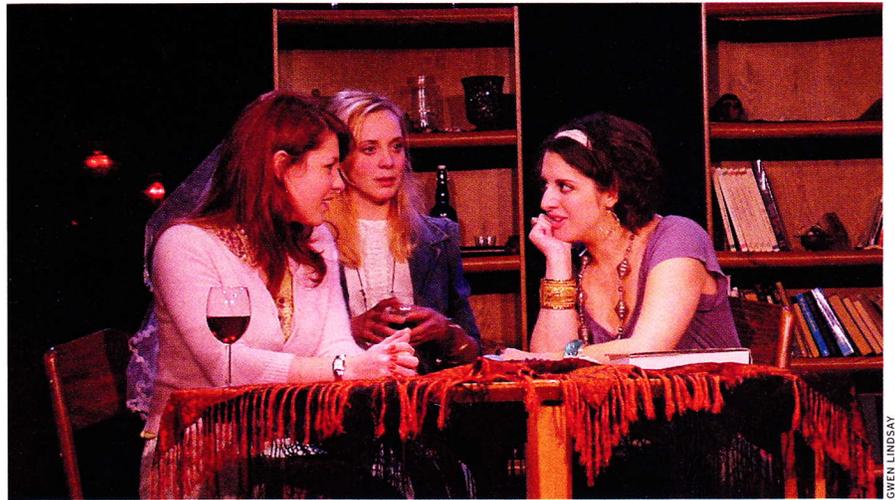
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presence,” says Inga Wilson, artistic director of a 13-year-old theatre, Planet Ant. It also means there is more inventory—flats, lights, whatever one theatre may need to borrow from another. “We trade program ads, we hold joint auditions and we share materials,” says Shepherd-Bates of the informal cooperation that goes on between area theatres. Theatres also share productions. “We can do a six-week run and pack it off to Tipping Point an hour and 15 minutes away,” notes Caselli.

In 2004, Detroit-based Courtney Burkett drove over the nearby Canadian border for dinner and chatted with the waiter, Demetri Vaccratsis, who happened to be producing a show in Windsor. Before dessert, the Breathe Art Theatre Project, which takes each of its productions to Detroit and Windsor, was co-created, spurred by the duo’s awareness that locals don’t tend to travel from one country to another for theatre. Though the theatres are less than 10 miles apart, “the audiences are very different,” Burkett says. “Some jokes land better in one place than another.”

Audiences may stay in their backyards, but the region’s artistic directors frequently work at each other’s theatres. Shepherd-



From left, Jaye Stellini, Jaclyn Strez and Frannie Shepherd-Bates in the 2010 premiere of *The Current*, by Magenta Giraffe resident playwright Sean Paraventi.

Bates will direct at TNTPT this season. Guy Sanville, artistic director of PRTC, along with Tipping Point’s Kuhl, recently joined Barton Bund for a staged reading at his Blackbird Theatre, under the direction of Water Works artistic director Jeff Thomakos. And Bund has acted, directed and designed at several theatres, including PNT,

Planet Ant, Water Works and Williamston.

Local artists also regularly see their colleagues’ productions. Sanville went to TNTPT’s production of José Rivera’s *Cloud Tectonics*, which Ben Stange staged in a 20-seat room. “I’ve paid 10 times as much to see plays in New York and haven’t been nearly as satisfied,” Sanville avows.

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Betting on New Work

"I see something I didn't expect," says playwright Joseph Zettelmaier. "With the economic crunch, instead of playing it safe, I see more theatres taking chances, and the risk is paying off." Magenta Giraffe's Shepherd-Bates suggests that because most of the new theatres start with nothing, the area has become a laboratory where ideas can be tested. "We have a blank canvas," she says, "and we have nothing to lose."

That may be part of the reason why almost every theatre in the region, new or not, reads and workshops new plays.

TNTP does mostly original work, sometimes created out of classic and modern texts. When TNTP approached Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, for example, Medelis asked actors to respond to journal prompts relating to the play's themes of adolescent sexuality and emerging adulthood. Then he asked playwright Jason Sebacher to incorporate journal material into the original play. The result, *The Spring Awakening Project*, was a highly original re-imagining of the play, with some scenes removed and others, including a gay rape scene, added.

The Williamston has done five world premieres in its five seasons. A three-part series, *Voices from the Midwest*, was developed through an interactive process with Midwesterners by playwrights/creators Caselli, Zettelmaier, Annie Martin, Suzi Regan and Dennis E. North. Next on the boards is Caselli and Martin's adaptation of *Oedipus* for five characters.

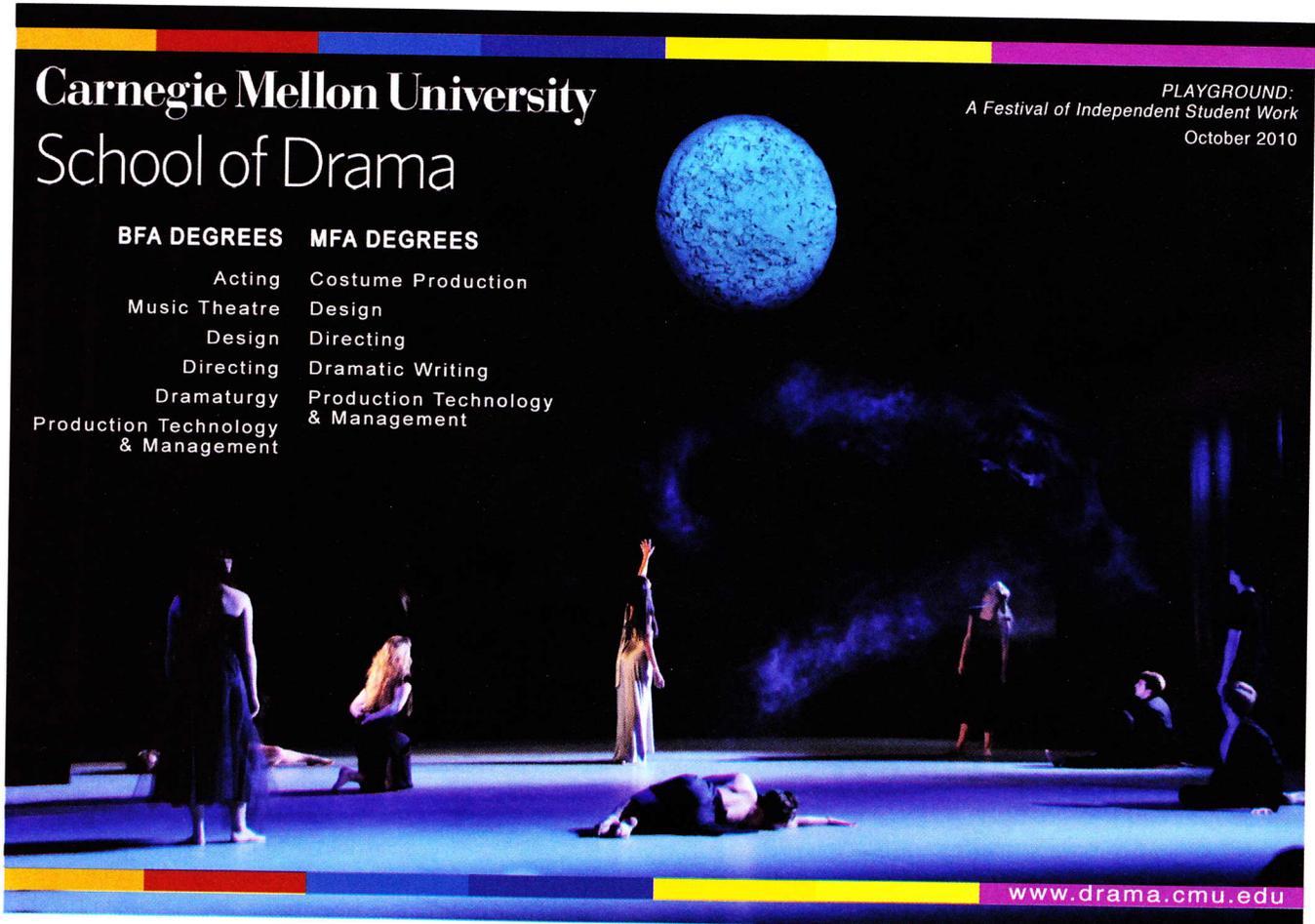
Planet Ant, which does about one published play for every three originals, balances comedy, fantastical work and drama in its space in Hamtramck, where 26 languages are spoken. "We're the most international city in Michigan," says Wilson. "We are small, and we are grassroots. It's important that we keep things relevant." Recently on the boards, *Detroit Be Dammed: A Beaver's Tale* spans 300 years in the life of a fictitious Detroit family and takes audiences through Detroit's history in satiric songs, dance and video.

At Detroit's Matrix Theatre Company, too, local issues are the inspiration for new work. Each year, staff and community members collaborate to create plays around a theme of local importance—this season, it's water justice. "Over 45,000 people here

have had their water cut off, and that story needs to be told," says executive director Shaun Nethercott. Meanwhile, a group of middle-school students are developing a piece on water pollution. Other Matrix seasons have focused on immigration, children who are abandoned when parents are deported, substance abuse and gangs.

Joanna McClelland Glass's *Palmer Park*, about a white couple in an African-American neighborhood after the Detroit race riots of 1967, was a hit at JET and Detroit's Hilberry Theatre, which co-produced the U.S. premiere. "People who lived in Palmer Park came, and children of people who moved out came too," says David Magidson, artistic director of JET.

PNT, which often does new plays with commercial potential by Kim Carney and Zettelmaier, and Magenta Giraffe, which is committed to Michigan-born resident playwright Sean Paraventi, are also among those that regularly do full productions of new work. PRTC is producing four new plays this season. The Stormfield, a new theatre in Lansing created by former BoarsHead artistic director Kristine Thatcher, does new plays



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that “tell the stories of their times.” Even the University of Michigan’s musical theatre department develops new work.

Bund has written and directed significant work at Blackbird, a theatre that does bold new works and revitalizes classics in a space the size of a living room; recent examples include a vivid musical that immersed audiences in the world of kidnap victim Patty Hearst and a thought-provoking adaptation of D.H. Lawrence’s novel *Women in Love*. “The theatres here are not just developing plays, they’re developing playwrights,” Bund says. “For instance, if you follow Joe Zettella, starting at PNT when he was much younger, his work has really grown.” This growth has taken Zettella places, sometimes out of the state. His plays have been staged in San Francisco and Florida as well as throughout Michigan. At least four of his plays are slated for production in 2011, including one at Hubris Productions in Chicago.

Playwrights often write for particular actors. Wayne David Parker has appeared in many new plays, including in roles Jeff Daniels wrote for him. He also appeared in Lanford Wilson’s *Book of Days* when it premiered at



Jamie Weeder and Samer Ajluni in José Rivera’s *Cloud Tectonics* at the New Theatre Project.

PRTC. “We have the luxury of working with fledgling playwrights and Pulitzer Prize winners,” Parker says, “and of creating the show as well as the character.”

Many playwrights set stories in Michigan, but the stories are larger than their location. After Kim Carney’s *The Home Team*, a play set in Lansing on the day of a Michigan vs. Michigan State football game, was workshopped at PNT, the play was produced in

Indianapolis; a few lines were changed so that Indiana played Purdue. Michelle Mountain says Michael Brian Ogden’s *Corktown*, about two Detroit hit men, “is about love and finding yourself” in the same way that Carey Crim’s new play about infertility, *Some Couples May...*, speaks to “anyone wanting something badly that isn’t working.”

Both of those plays will premiere this year at PRTC, whose executive director, Daniels, says his plays “are for the guy in row G seat 8...I want to take him on a trip he recognizes and connects with.” Although Daniels sets his plays in the state, he is quick to add that “When David MacGregor writes a play about Isaac Newton, that’s for the people in the seats here, too.”

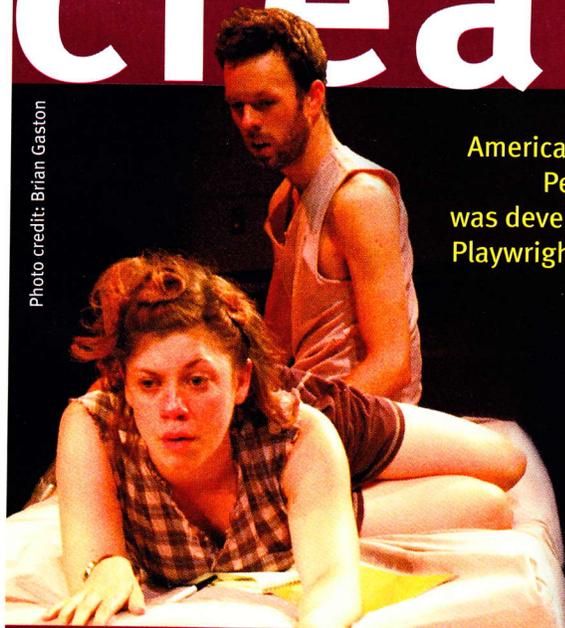
Audra Lord, who invited friends to her home for impromptu readings to test her plays and whose work is now getting read in theatres in Detroit, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and Hamtramck; Sebacher, resident playwright at TNT, who uses the theatre to contribute to discussions in the queer community; Margaret Edwartowski, who comes out of Second City; Bund, who writes about “what keeps me up at night”; and Martin, who says if she wrote a play that wasn’t linear “my head would explode”—they are among the many scribes who have found or founded Michigan theatres that are in turn helping them develop their work.

As Edwartowski puts it: “If I lived in any other city, it would have taken me years to get this far.” ☒

Davi Napoleon is a theatre columnist for *The Faster Times* and a regular contributor to *Live Design*. She is the author of the book *Chelsea on the Edge: The Adventures of an American Theater*.

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America’s #1 play last season, Peter Nachtrieb’s *boom*, was developed at Brown/Trinity Playwrights Rep, Summer 2007

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