

JAY SCHEIB

Riding a Different Circuit

The experimental director is making a name for himself outside the traditional resident theatre network



BY AARON MACK SCHLOFF

Important things to know about director Jay Scheib: Born: 1969, Shenandoah, Iowa. Occupation: associate professor in music and theatre arts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Number of productions slated for 2008: five, three of them world premieres, taking place in three countries. (“Last season, I had seven premieres in five different countries,” Scheib says evenly. He says everything evenly.) Number of resident theatre gigs this year and every year heretofore: zero.

How can such a director as Scheib—who, not so incidentally, has also written or adapted scripts for about a dozen of his own productions—earn degrees and awards from impeccably conventional bodies (B.A., University of Minnesota; MFA, Columbia University; NEA/TCG Career Development Program grant) and then go on to fashion his career entirely outside of the institutions they were intended to serve—ostensibly the center of the American theatre? The circuit he is now riding—stretching from New York City’s P.S. 122 to Minnesota’s Walker Art Center to theatres and festivals in Hungary, Austria and Germany—suggests that another center exists and that another kind of theatrical life is possible, even if it’s not quite, or not yet, a living.

“One of my goals is to pay my actors as much as they would make temping,” he says. Still, his regular actors, a group of six to eight that one might call the Jay Scheib Players, moan like addicts when they think of working with him again. “Whenever I get a call from Jay, I just stop the presses,” says New York-based performer Eric Dean Scott. He and

the rest of Team Scheib are gambling big as they develop Scheib’s exuberantly physical, heavily technologized but emotionally open style of theatremaking. Audiences and critics may love it or hate it, but they are rarely indifferent. Scheib himself cites Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, William Forsythe, Rem Koolhaas and Anne Bogart among his various inspirations



April Sweeney and Thomas Keating in Scheib’s *This Place Is a Desert* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

and mentors—famous names that would mean nothing if Scheib couldn’t refine those influences to give every work (whether it be a song cycle or straight play, with his own text or not, high-tech or low) a genuine sense of excitement and risk.

Let’s look at the projects. In January *This Place Is a Desert* appears at Mark Russell’s Under the Radar Festival at New York City’s Public Theater, the equivalent, for Scheib’s circuit,

of the resident theatre's Humana Festival of New American Plays. *Desert* is a smashup of relationships inspired by the works of filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni and Three Mile Island transcripts. Disintegrating couples video and re-video each other with multiple live feeds designed by Scheib's frequent collaborator Leah Gelpe.

In March, his as-yet-untitled Mars project premieres at P.S. 122, combining scientific fact and fiction to imagine genuine space colonization. In July, Scheib's staging of the biographical song cycle by the gypsy cabaret punk band World Inferno Friendship Society, titled *Addicted to Bad Ideas: Peter Lorre's Twentieth Century*, has its European premiere at the Salzburg Sommerszene (it played this past September at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival). This coming September, not far away in Budapest, he will adapt Philip K. Dick's science fiction in a piece called *Time Again and Again*, for Pont Mühely theatre (whose actors also plan to take part in the Mars project, if funding permits). An engagement tentatively scheduled for December will bring him to Minneapolis to direct the premiere of Anthony Gatto's opera



World Inferno Friendship Society in *Addicted to Bad Ideas* at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival.

of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* at the Walker Art Center. Scheib is writing the libretto.

And that's the year. Add to that at least one student production, various readings, teaching. "For the past three years, I've been booked a year and half in advance," he says, again, evenly. "This year it's almost two."

Scheib is tall and lanky, with thick brown curly hair going gray and a square, friendly face with a point of a chin. He moves and speaks casually—at a roundtable discussion, he'd rather sprawl than sit. A former high school track-and-fielder, he can live in his body as well as his mind. (The result, perhaps, of his Midwestern farm-boy



Malaika Ledig in *Kommander Kobayashi* at Germany's Saarländisches Staatstheater.

upbringing. Actor Aimée Phelan-Deconinck remembers, “In Germany, we were outside a rehearsal space. A shirt was in a tree, very high, and he lassoed it.”)

This casualness is also deceptive—or no longer the whole story. The sprawling productions of Heiner Müller and of Scheib’s own works (produced by his own theatres, the Arcade Theatre and the American Theatre Institute) that gave him outlaw cred in Minneapolis in the ’90s have been replaced, 10 years later, by shows that display a more focused mind and structured development.

WHAT REMAINS IS HIS BREADTH OF

taste. “He likes high culture, but he also likes trash,” declares German opera director Berthold Schneider of the Saarländisches Staatstheater in Saarbrücken, who imported Scheib to direct episodes of the space opera *Kommander Kobayashi* after seeing his work in Berlin. “This is rare—there are few people who can contain such various visual and other impressions.” When asked why so many of his adapted works have “after” in the credits—“after Tolstoy,” or Euripides—Scheib speaks of searching for ways to make the works as surprising as they were when they were born. With Tolstoy’s play *The Power of Darkness*, which he developed with his MIT students before directing the show for Pont Mühely, he dropped characters, restored censored scenes and rewrote based on actor improvisations. The play’s rural violence resonated for Scheib. “I grew up in Iowa in the ’80s when every third farmer went bankrupt. Rather than doing the play as a museum piece, I did research to see to what extent it paid homage to its time and engaged social

issues—and then I found a way to reassess them.”

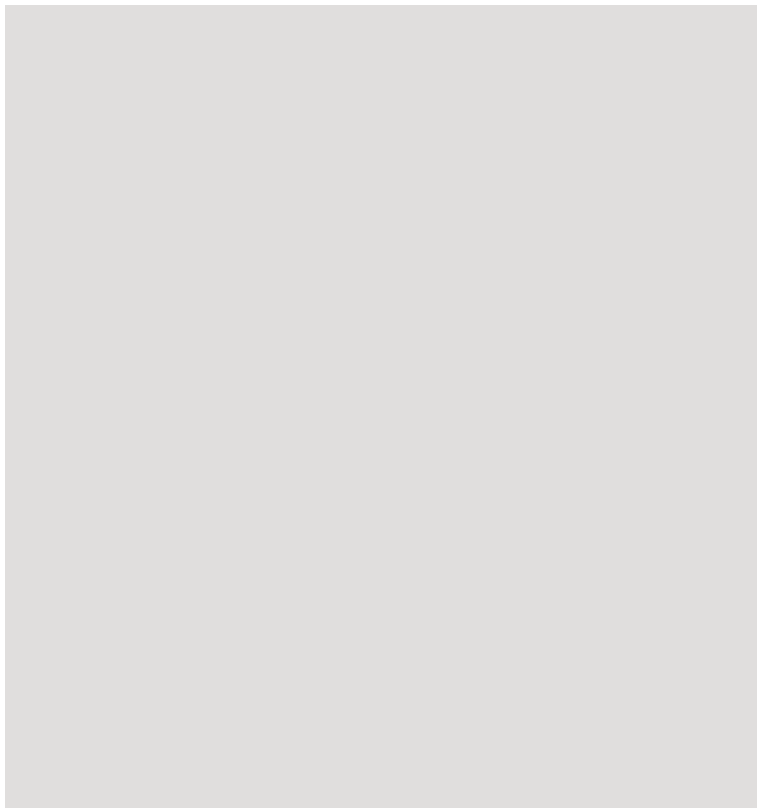
I witnessed a sample of Scheib’s approach last year, when he directed Daniel Veronese’s *Women Dreamt Horses* at the Buenos Aires in Translation festival at P.S. 122. I’d seen Veronese’s own production of his play in Argentina—a semi-realistic dinner party in cramped quarters, brimming with suppressed violence. Under Scheib’s direction, the playing space was vast and the violence was drawn to the surface, enacted with boxing, slap fights, compulsive

vomiting and semi-gymnastic stunts. Was this acting or contact improv? It played like both—and, at the first show, also a bit like porn (when they’re talking, you just want the action). But when I returned for the final show of the run, all was knit together: sensible, Argentine at the source, but American in tone and, most important, continuously

interesting. Scheib had gambled and won.

Scheib is perfectly comfortable being textually faithful to other writers’ new plays, but one thing about *Women* was atypical—its low-tech style. At the finish of *Women*, the gun-toting actor just yelled “Bang.” (By comparison, *This Place Is a Desert* has four screens with live video feed. The role of video mediation in live performance has obsessed Scheib for more than a decade.)

Listening to his players talk about how they developed *Women* reveals a lot about Scheib’s method. First of all, like his teacher Anne Bogart, Scheib treats his actors as collaborators rather than instruments. “He’s interested in people—who you are, what you bring to the process and how you and only you can bring that thing,” says another frequent actor-collaborator April Sweeney. When their extensive table work on *Women* finally ended, Scheib brought the cast to its feet with small exercises and wild-card requests—recipes for moments the actors would go off and create. “We composed a list of things to have,” says Scott, “like 30 seconds of a repetition or one moment of the smallest possible violent event.” One actor knew how to box.



They used it. Dance-trained Phelan-Deconinck can stretch her ankle above her head, casually. So they used that too.

Like the late Polish experimentalist Kantor, Scheib gives titles to different periods of his work. The past seven years, ending with *Desert*, were “The Flight out of Naturalism.” A new era, “Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems,” is being born with the Mars project.

Scheib’s research bent is supported by his current berth at MIT, which, he says, forces him to organize his thinking. “MIT is a research institution.

If my research has to do with the integration of media and live performance, or development of tech for use in live performance, or exploring other theatrical idioms, I have to theorize them and describe them in concrete ways.” He can also use student productions to begin explorations—he had his first crack at the Mars project at MIT in October, for instance. “So long as I can continue to main-



This Place Is a Desert at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art.

tain a studio environment that I connect to teaching, then I'll continue to be happy,” he says. “When it becomes routine, it’s time to leave—but as yet it’s never routine.”

The practical challenge for Scheib is turning his theatre life into a living. In the past year, Shoshana Polanco, who produced the Buenos Aires in Translation festival, has joined him as creative producer (a title that

suggests a formal economic relationship that they do not yet have). Her role is flexible, she says, but the management responsibilities are now hers. Financial stability is still a goal. “We fantasize about taking over one of the regional theatres,” she says, even as she admits she has no contact with them.

How long this alternative circuit can sustain them is a hanging question. “I put the work out; I write letters. Most theatres are not interested,” shrugs Scheib. Still, with the Under the Radar showcase, the array of other projects on tap and Polanco on board—not to mention the continuing loyalty of his players—2008 (or 2009 or 2010, when his schedule opens up) could be the year love meets money. **Z**

Playwright and journalist Aaron Mack Schloff writes frequently for this magazine.