An Interview with Rachel Chavkin

Carol Martin

Margaret Mitchell probably never dreamed that her novel Gone With the Wind would be adapted for the stage and turned into a tale of what went wrong with the country. Nor could she have anticipated linking her epic story of the Civil War with a devastating hurricane that drowned New Orleans, the Chartres Cathedral, or the corporate creation of “traditional” neighborhoods. This is exactly what the TEAM (Theatre of the Emerging American Moment) has done in their ambitious work, Architecting (2008).

Based in New York City, the TEAM stages devised work that has everything to do with who we are and the way we process information now. Fully researched devised texts, physical theatre,
set and sound design created in the flux of a collaborative process, and an original approach to staging give the TEAM’s productions a theatrical and political authority that we have not seen in American theatre for a long time. The cultural frame of this authority is the rejection of apolitical postmodernism and the ethical ambiguities of late-20th-century experimental theatre in favor of a newfound legitimacy in rewriting the national consciousness. Exploring the disappearance of ideals that have shaped and sustained this country coalesced as the mission statement of the company in light of the unambiguous reelection of George W. Bush. Of their seven works to date (see the chronology of works), Architecting best exemplifies the rapid intellectual, theatrical, and textual growth of the company.

Architecting was initially informed by both Gone With the Wind and The Education of Henry Adams, the autobiography of a Boston intellectual struggling to come to terms with the arrival of the 20th century. While the TEAM was working on these texts, Hurricane Katrina struck the US Gulf Coast. As the company followed the reportage on the devastation wrought by Katrina, they began to link the destruction caused by the hurricane with the frayed spiritual fibers of the country. During one rehearsal break, actor Libby King told the company about Carrie Campbell, a friend of hers who had just sold a plot of land in Nebraska to a corporation that was planning a “traditional neighborhood development.” The TEAM became intrigued with the contradiction of the Disney-like idea that a “traditional” American neighborhood needed to be created by a corporation and Carrie became a character in Architecting.

The TEAM was founded in December 2004 by Rachel Chavkin (director), Jessica Almasy (performer), Jill Frutkin (performer), B.C. Hastert (performer), Stephanie Douglass (dramaturg), and Kristen Claire Sieh (performer, costume designer). They had recently graduated from the Department of Drama at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, when they decided to try to bring two productions to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Give Up! Start Over! (2005) won the Fringe First award and A Thousand Natural Shocks (2005) was nominated for a writing award. As none of them had ever toured before, their venture was born much more from theatrical savvy than producing know-how. Chavkin went on to study directing at...
Columbia University in New York, during which time she and the rest of the TEAM began work on *Particularly in the Heartland* (2006) and *Architecting*.

The TEAM’s rehearsals are a collective collaboration that Chavkin describes as an “intellectual board game”: part roundtable discussion and part improvisation. This method is at least partly attributable to the training of a dual consciousness of theoretical inquiry and aesthetic application that, as with the best professional training whether in science or in the arts, is part of the Department of Drama’s extensive academic and practical curriculum. A reading list is part of the creation of every production. In the case of *Architecting*, the result of this process is a pastiche of history and the present that moves back and forth in time between the US Civil War, Reconstruction, post–Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, a 1990s couple headed toward New Orleans for a Scarlett O’Hara pageant, and a meeting in contemporary Hollywood—all of which are portrayed onstage or on television monitors. The country rises, staggers, and seeks to right itself in a blur of time, fact, and fiction.

The company of six actors plays eighteen characters. The cast created back stories taken from whatever sources suited them for individual characters. Many of *Architecting*’s principal characters were born out of an intensive week of improvisation in Glasgow with Davey Anderson, at the time resident director of the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), which with the TEAM coproduced *Architecting*. Anderson has also come to the US to work with the TEAM on several occasions since that first session. But the most crucial support the NTS gave the TEAM was the time and space to devise and rehearse *Architecting* for eight weeks during April and May of 2008.

The TEAM is among a number of young companies changing the American theatre scene—including Witness Relocation, the Civilians, Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, the National Theater of the United States of America, Pig Iron, and Les Freres Corbusier, among others. They are heirs of the work of companies that have been around a bit longer—companies like Elevator Repair Service, International WOW, Rude Mechanicals, Theatre Mitu, and the Builders Association—all of whom continue to make challenging first-rate theatre. The TEAM is also a beneficiary of the globalization of theatre, of the efforts of producers, such as NTS, who have moved well beyond their roles as presenters to create and fund new circumstances and occasions for artistic collaboration at annual theatre and performance festivals around the world.

The following interview with the artistic director of the TEAM, Rachel Chavkin, was conducted on 21 June 2009 in New York City.1

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1. [Ed. note: For more on the TEAM see “The Labor of Architecting” by Maurya Wickstrom and “Art in the Age of Political Correctness: Race in the TEAM’s Architecting” by Rachel Jessica Daniel, both in this issue of *TDR*.]
CAROL MARTIN: I would like to know about the two productions you brought to Edinburgh.

RACHEL CHAVKIN: In Edinburgh 2005 we premiered two works that were both collaboratively written. One was a solo show that Jessica Almasy and I created together called *Give Up! Start Over! (In the darkest of times I look to Richard Nixon for hope)*. I was inspired by the George Trow essay, “Within the Context of No Context” that I'm now working with again. It was published in the *New Yorker*, in 1980 or 1981. It's one of the most prescient essays I've ever read.

*Give Up! Start Over!* was about reality television, and the search for authenticity in America. It featured Jess playing a kind of demonic Richard Nixon as the granddaddy of reality TV.

The other show was *A Thousand Natural Shocks*. It was a quartet piece cowritten by Kristen Claire Sieh, Jess, B.C. Hastert, Jill Frutkin, and me as well as Stephanie Douglass, our dramaturg. *Give Up!* won the Fringe First award and *A Thousand Natural Shocks* received tremendous accolades and was nominated for a writing award. The success of those two works in Edinburgh really ended up catapulting the TEAM. I'm not sure that we would still exist if that hadn’t happened. After our success, the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh came to us and asked, “What are you going to bring next year?” So we continued and things have snowballed from there. *Give Up!* did tours to London and Glasgow [2005]. *A Thousand Natural Shocks* went to the Bath Shakespeare Festival [2006]—and that was the beginning.

Then we came back to Edinburgh with *Particularly in the Heartland*, and when the National Theatre of Scotland saw that production, we began talks with them about making a new work and a year later they came on board to coproduce *Architecting*.

MARTIN: From the beginning, you were doing devised work instead of producing plays. But as you work, are you also writing a text?

CHAVKIN: Yes, that is true.

MARTIN: Your texts are developed in rehearsal?

CHAVKIN: Yes, rehearsals often consist of all of us sitting around a table with our computers. I just got back last night from the Orchard Project, which is a fabulous residency in its third year of life. It was originally designed for companies using new methods of creating work collaboratively. Because of where we were with our new work, we were at computers most of
Figure 3. Jessica Almasy epitomizes the cultural draw to Reality Television and the ubiquitous pursuit of 15 minutes of fame as a person who swallows her television in Give Up! Start Over! (In the darkest of times, I look to Richard Nixon for hope). The TEAM, 59E59 Theaters, 2006. Directed by Rachel Chavkin. (Photo by Rachel Chavkin)
the time. Other than a few physical improvisations to get our blood going, we were writing the entire time.

MARTIN: Can you describe your method of creating a new work?

CHAVKIN: Very often, for example, I will say something like, “OK, everyone write a Cassie/Joan scene.” Cassie and Joan are two of our characters in The American Capitalism Project (a working title [now, Mission Drift]). We know a little bit about them, and before we write we talk a little bit about what would give Cassie, if she were a real estate person, her stakes. Perhaps she has money in a development, etc. Then maybe I’ll end the conversation by saying something like, “Okay, there’s a lot of possibilities, let’s see what people write, and then maybe we’ll go with what emerges as a consensus in the writing.”

MARTIN: Then you combine various aspects of what people have written?

CHAVKIN: It depends. Sometimes the little vignettes that everyone writes are so good that we combine them. The version of the character Tiger John interacting with a waitress, for example, was so hilarious that we said, “Let’s take this line, this line, this line, and the substance of this particular scene.” Sometimes a scene gets written in just one version, and it’s just IT. In Architecting, Jake Margolin wrote a scene for Mammy and Margaret [Mitchell], in which they’re bantering and Mammy slowly begins to undercut Margaret, and then lashes out at her and says, “You see Ms. Mitchell, in addition to our many disagreements; I don’t like you very much.” All of us were floored by that scene the very first time that we read it so we agreed that it would be included in the play in its entirety.

MARTIN: Are you making the decisions?

CHAVKIN: I am the final decision-maker, yes. I would say 9 times out of 10 the decision is very clear. There definitely have been times when I shut doors, saying, “Let’s go here, not here. I think that this is more compelling.” Most of the time, through discussion, we actually do arrive at a similar point of view in the room, so rarely have I stepped in with a unilateral decision. I can only think of one time when I had to make a big decision more or less alone. It was right before we premiered Architecting in Edinburgh. There was one character who we had never quite figured out how to make work. It was a great idea and the actress was doing beautiful work on the character but it just was not functioning in the play as a whole. So between our previews in Glasgow and our premiere in Edinburgh with encouragement from our associate director, I decided to cut the character. It was terribly painful, but the company, including that actress, ultimately supported the decision.

MARTIN: Decisions like these can be difficult and can create unrest in both the creative process and the spirit of the company, especially in collectively created work. Yet finally one person necessarily needs to make decisions. This could have a negative effect on the trust and freedom of company members in creating the collective composition.

CHAVKIN: It’s a hugely delicate process, and one to which the entire group is sensitive. If there’s one person whose writings we have not been glomming onto or celebrating, people make efforts to take, and forge, and twist, what someone is doing to pull it into the project. If for some reason that person is on a different track with a character, the company will rise to pull in that person’s work in some way.

MARTIN: What kind of company dynamics enable such generosity?

CHAVKIN: Uh, love?

Each of us has said exactly the right thing at some point during our lives together. At some point during each working process, each of us has contributed exactly the right idea or the most brilliant line. There is no one in the company who consistently doesn’t show up to the intel-
lectual board game that we play to make a TEAM show. Fundamentally I think we trust and respect each other as artists, we have interest in each other in that professional capacity. We are close personally because we live together so much of the year between touring and rehearsing. It’s very much a professional relationship and that’s what I think enables the closeness and trust.

MARTIN: What is the Orchard Project?

CHAVKIN: The Orchard Project, it’s awesome, and definitely worth talking about and worth looking at in and of itself. The Exchange is the name of the company that created a residency called the Orchard Project located at Hunter Mountain. They work with the Catskill Mountain Foundation. This year there were several ensembles at the Project. We were up there with Rude Mechanicals from Austin and Tectonic.² There were also individual playwrights, and playwright-director or director-designer duos. You get housed and fed and it’s glorious. Rehearsals are open, and then there is an official open rehearsal sometime near the end of your stay. It’s a mountain retreat, and it’s one of the only ones of its kind for companies. There is a lot of goodwill.

MARTIN: From my perspective, you are working in the realm of what I call “theatre of the real.” Your work is neither documentary theatre nor verbatim theatre. It doesn’t have the trappings of documentary theatre, but it is focused on actual events in American culture. The assemblage of ideas that the TEAM uses are inventions, but the events that serve as the basis for many of your works have actually occurred. So I want to ask you, why the real? It’s interesting that your second work, Give Up! Start Over! was about reality television. Your work has a preoccupation with the real in a way that is part of a shift in how we understand both theatre and the real, onstage and off.

In Particularly in the Heartland you cite that well-known ur-text, The Wizard of Oz by having the Springer kids in the play dealing with the aftermath of a tornado striking their isolated farm in Kansas. Kansas turns out to be anything but a normal place. In your work, Kansas is deserving of the appellation, “There’s no place like home,” because its residents are fanatically idealist and crazy-confused. Particularly in the Heartland recasts the mythology of the film by coupling the film’s assumptions with the ghost of Robert F. Kennedy, the Rapture, and the Bible. Kansas becomes an eternally-going-crazy landscape.

This unlikely mix of fantasy and reality created a critical and passionate critique of America.

CHAVKIN: This is something that I’m only recently codifying. I just sent the company a very impassioned email a couple weeks ago with a sort of a revelation about how I was thinking about our work.

I think of each of our plays as a history thesis—a chance to get another master’s degree in some specific aspect of American history. Rather than writing a paper, we’re producing a production. The goal is for the work to have the same intellectual rigor that would be applied to an academic study, as well as the passion and emotion that I think is necessary in theatre. I am fascinated by American history and American mythology and love reading about how myth is created. We’re going to talk to Richard Slotkin, who just retired from Wesleyan, and who wrote Regeneration through Violence, Gunfighter Nation, and The Fatal Environment—all of which are about how the mythology of the American West shaped national identity. It’s this interest in American history and culture combined with a political impulse that the company shares. We try to both question and to understand what is shaping our nation’s actions. In so doing, the current mixes with our research on the past. We are part of the process of constantly reinvestigating and rewriting our national identity. Does that make sense?

MARTIN: It makes perfect sense. Why this fascination with America, with the United States?

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². Rude Mechanicals from Austin, Texas, was founded in 1995. Tectonic Theatre Project, from New York, was founded in 1991 by Moisés Kaufman and Jeffrey LaHoste.
CHAVKIN: It’s home. I believe in this country. I was raised by very political parents, both civil rights lawyers. I find the politics of America consistently amazing—the ideals and the separation between ideals and reality. Since our founding fathers, there’s always been something in the way people write about America.

With our new piece, The Capitalism Project, we are going back to the founding of the colonies—both the British Puritan colonies and the Dutch New Amsterdam, right where you and I are sitting. [In Greenwich Village one block south of the Washington Square arch.] From the very beginning people talked about this land as a New Jerusalem, as well as, of course, a place to make money... Our new work looks at how inextricable those aspects—religion and money—of our founding are. America, even long before it was America, has always been understood in epic terms, and I really like the epic. As a director I’m drawn to intimate human stories from the larger perspective of sweeping narratives.

MARTIN: While working on Particularly in the Heartland you were all reading the Bible?

CHAVKIN: Yes.

MARTIN: I ask, because there’s a famous work, The Serpent [1967], by the Open Theatre, which I may have mentioned to you, that begins with the Bible and includes the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. So I was wondering how reading the Bible informed Particularly in the Heartland.

CHAVKIN: The three main characters in Heartland are fundamentalist Christians so the Bible was essential research. In particular, the Book of Revelations became an important source, as did the best-selling fictional version of Revelations, the Left Behind series. Half the company got
very into reading the *Left Behind* series which is shocking to people who are not in the evangelical Christian community. I think that at one time they were the largest selling fiction series in the United States.

One of the first things we knew about the play was that one of the characters would be the ghost of presidential hopeful Senator Robert F. Kennedy. Why did we know that? Well, I have always been obsessed with RFK—a hero of my father’s that I inherited. He was also a character model for Jessica Almasy when she played Hamlet in *A Thousand Natural Shocks*, our *Hamlet* deconstruction, which is all about inheritance. Her research got us looking at him again. And Jake Margolin, who plays Robert, and I, and the company are terribly moved by the mythology of RFK and the last great moment of liberal hope, before Obama, that was snatched away by an ill kid...

A big thing that led us to him was the famous tour he took to look at poverty in the American south. Before the tour he was known as a pretty hard-nosed and somewhat nasty guy. Then he makes this trip and comes back *changed*, almost reborn as a politician—and rebirth is a central theme in *Heartland*. So we use Robert F. Kennedy as a symbol of both the possibility of personal regeneration, and the promise of progressive America.

MARTIN: So you’re using the book of Revelations, as a corollary text?

CHAVKIN: It ended up being the key structural choice: the play opens and closes with potential versions of the Rapture. The three children, who are the protagonists of the play, lose their parents in a storm that they decide is the Rapture, and they are heartbroken that they haven’t been taken up to heaven as well. A mass vanishing of the righteous up to Heaven is how the *Left Behind* series begins. The Earth is then plunged into war with the Anti-Christ. I think in the novels he’s Romanian? He’s a very sexy Eastern European guy, whose name sounds like Nicolae Ceaucescu. In particular Libby King, Brian Hastert, Frank Boyd, and Kristen Claire Sieh looked at the Bible, because that’s what their characters would have known.

Our whole process is about creating a communal subconscious and consciousness from which we can then write and improvise. Anything that people are taking in is going to come through in the text and the performance.

MARTIN: *Particularly in the Heartland* is about idealism, politics, critique of idealism? Loss of idealism? A sense of nostalgia?
Five Years and Change with the TEAM
Moving Fast Past the Apocalypse

Rachel Chavkin

apot-a-lypse Function: noun
1a: one of the Jewish and Christian writings of 200 b.c. to a.d. 150 marked by pseudonymity, symbolic imagery, and the expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm [...] 
2: a revelation made concerning the future 
3: a great disaster <an environmental apocalypse> (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

Following a recent London workshop of our new show Mission Drift (formerly The American Capitalism Project formerly To the Boys and Girls in America I am taking a sick day formerly Bowling for Dollars: A Western) a British audience member asked how Americans are dealing with the waning of our role as a superpower and moral center in the world...she wanted to know if we were concerned. I paused for a moment and answered that I couldn’t speak for anyone else, but that my brain was simply not formatted to deal with that idea. It’s a paradigm shift to which I have not and may never adjust.

The question left me amazed that—in a profession in which we regularly imagine the unknown—I constantly encounter universes for which I do not possess the genetic code. I think characters in the TEAM’s plays are always confronting this problem in large and small ways—dealing with worlds they do not recognize, levels of change they cannot fathom. I imagine this is in part because we began creating work as an ensemble in a time when we were profoundly confused by what had happened to our country. Most of us were in college when President George W. Bush was elected, and most of us were at New York University during the September 11th attacks. We knew we were living in crazy times, but the degree of change was hard to wrap our minds around because we did not truly have a “before” to which to compare the moment, at least not as fully conscious political adults. We came of age with the internet, mobile communication devices, and cable television. I think the interdisciplinary nature of our work is in part the result of the education we received, both in school—many of us studied the Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, and Elevator Repair Service on equal footing with Grotowski and Stanislavsky and the Group Theatre—and from the productions we witnessed. But it is also connected to growing up in an age in which multitasking and quick edits are the norm. Our work is dense because our minds are most focused when engaged on multiple levels simultaneously.

Now five years and six plays into the life of our company, we are trying to move past the apocalypse. This event featured quite literally in Particularly in the Heartland in the form of the Rapture affecting one Kansas family, more obliquely in A Thousand Natural Shocks in the form of the assassination of King Hamlet, and took poetic shape in the near-total annihilation of the character “the Experiment” in Give Up! Start Over! (In the darkest of times I look to Richard Nixon for hope). Our most recent work, Architecting, felt like a step forward because it focused on the moment post-apocalypse. Rather than focusing on the breathless gathering moments immediately following a disaster, that work dealt with the profound difficulties of recovery and grieving, and was set in the post–Civil War Reconstruction South, and post-Katrina New Orleans.

I think the reason American history and mythology, and particularly dead figures like Robert F. Kennedy, Margaret Mitchell, and Richard Nixon feature so strongly in our work is because we are always trying to determine what we have lost, whether it is for better or worse, and who we are even as we march onward. We are always telling a ghost story. Born after the sea change of the 1960s and 1970s, we have a profound sense that things have been gained and lost, but only really know the aftermath. We find ourselves constantly looking back at figures and events perceived only on historic and mythic levels. The real is always coming up against the imagined in both our narratives and
performance style. (Perhaps if we had lived through the Nixon presidency we would not have treated him as affectionately as we do in *Give Up! Start Over!*)

Now, as we move into our company’s next five years, it feels as if we are beginning to process not just the world we inherited, but the world we are making. Inheritance was a major theme in some of our early pieces: *A Thousand Natural Shocks* focuses on a Hamlet (played by Jessica Almasy) panicked at the prospect of inheriting his father’s country; and *Particularly in the Heartland*’s young protagonists are forced to process their cultural and religious inheritances in the face of their parents’ disappearance and the arrival of three outsiders.

*Mission Drift*, our new work-in-progress in part deals with people confronting the frontier, and draws a triangle between the colonies of New Amsterdam and New England, and modern Las Vegas. These characters are inheriting nothing, but are instead grappling with unknown territory—the place where civilization drops off (for the European settlers), and a city or civilization can be built anew, a constant lighting out for the territories, in the words of Mark Twain. The work is taking the form of a myth that unfolds like a bullet of narration and song, while examining American frontier mythology to determine whether the idea of freedom in this country is extricable from the freedom to make as much money as possible.

We also did a large portion of our research for the work during a month-long residency in Las Vegas during June 2010. This inaugurated a new period in the TEAM’s life, an initiative we are calling American Geographic and for which we will commit to spending a month or more developing work in a new location each year. It is part of our effort to help generate dialogue about the state of our country with different audiences, and stems from our desire to better know our subject matter. It is also linked to our feeling that this country is constantly re-inventing itself from the inside out, and this is our attempt to witness and track that process in intimate or local ways.

Our plays happen in very real time, a quality learned in part from the experimental companies we grew up watching, whose work seems to value the real above the imagined, and the performer above the character. While making *Particularly in the Heartland* we were obsessed with this idea, and crafted moments of action that pushed our fictions to the breaking point: the audience gleefully threw eggs at 9-year-old Anna Springer (played by 20-something Kristen Claire Sieh who didn’t wish to be hit), and later asked questions of 16-year-old Sarah Springer (played by 30-something Libby King, answering in the voice of the evangelical teenager who is coming out of the closet). Characters and performers nearly always share the stage in our work. And it is partially this balance that situates our plays somewhere between traditional and experimental performance. We are drawn to narrative, even if sometimes it is a difficult thread to follow. I think this balance is also what defines a TEAM performer: someone who is as at home in a representational play as they are in a postmodern deconstruction. We build productions that beg massive leaps of faith on the part of audiences and performers alike, while simultaneously demanding an utterly realistic sensibility and a high level of emotional commitment in the crafting of moment-to-moment action. And these moments constantly refuse to be one thing, opting instead for layers with fiction on top of history on top of the intimacy of the shared moment between actor and audience.

As a playwriting ensemble we have never deliberately aimed for chaos or convolution, but I do believe our messy stage is a product of our times. We are drawn to the panting of a sweaty performer, dialogue that simultaneously invokes pop culture and poetic cracks (an audience member once described our work as Gertrude Stein meets MTV), and action that consistently teeters on the brink of total disaster. I cannot (and have no desire to) define the work we will make in the next five years. But in our first five years we returned pathologically to moments of catastrophic change, again and again putting our characters’ hearts alongside our own, vulnerable in the face of a vanishing world and hoping for the best in the one to come.
CHAVKIN: All of those things. Members of the TEAM are all quite idealistic people. In our work and in our peers’ work—artists in our generation—there’s a lot of genuine belief that connection is possible between human beings. I’m thinking about the Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s work, which is radically different from our company’s work, but is also in part about people attempting to communicate, and sometimes really succeeding, though often outside of language—through dance. I think their work is profoundly emotional, in a very smart and wonderful way.¹

MARTIN: I saw their Rambo Solo, Zachary Oberzan’s solo retelling of First Blood. His use of three images of himself in his tiny apartment on a large video screen behind the stage to act out the same story as the one onstage is exactly the kind of critical inquiry into the blurring of the live with the virtual, reality with myth, and replication with simulation that makes some of the most interesting contemporary theatre.

CHAVKIN: It’s a strange, strange, magnetic work.

MARTIN: I loved it.

CHAVKIN: I’m a huge fan.

MARTIN: When you say communication is possible, are you assuming there was a time when it was not possible?

CHAVKIN: The work that I was seeing while I was an undergraduate was often aesthetically and politically miraculous but also very often steeped in irony. I don’t mean off-the-cuff ironic. There was a profound sense that change was not possible in human beings. The politics of the country at that time reflected this sensibility. It was where the country was, and voter turnout reflected that. My generation is the product of a new youth movement that I think—I hope—has been reinvigorated. It seems like political change is possible again and that the country believes in this possibility again.

MARTIN: Are you talking about a new youth movement?

CHAVKIN: For the first time after a long time youth is involved in politics again. The idealism of the TEAM is tied to a shift in the country. You can be politically attuned, informed, and it can be demoralizing, or it can be helpful. Our first works came out of the confusion of the Bush presidency.

MARTIN: How would you describe that confusion?

CHAVKIN: Not understanding how our country could elect someone who was so aggressively out of sync with anything that we as individuals believed.

MARTIN: For example?

CHAVKIN: That the right of corporations to make money trumps social justice and a commitment from the government to maintain a safety net for its citizens, that there should be national health care, etc. In A Thousand Natural Shocks we used a great quote of a senior Bush advisor, originally from an article by Ron Suskind that I have since heard in a number of works: “We’re history’s actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do” [2004]. In terms of the confusion of the Bush presidency, we felt like we had been left. We were literally coming of age when Bush was elected for the first time. The confusion was about the disconnect between what you’re taught America’s supposed to be and how it is actually perceived around the world, as well as how you understand it at home.

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¹ See “The Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s Aesthetics of Fun” by Rachel Anderson-Rabern in this issue of TDR.
MARTIN: The statistics about the small percentage of the population that controls the majority of the wealth and the trickle-down theory, which in fact is not trickling down, were affecting you? Components of the infrastructure of a great society — education, roads, public transportation, health care, and protection of the environment were either diminished or abandoned. A sense of social justice guiding the spirit of being American seemed to vanish.

CHAVKIN: Even as we’re pulling back to a place where equity may be an American value again, the scales went so grossly out of balance that it is difficult to have a full discussion about the presence of the federal government in our daily lives. Private wealth and conservative economics have taken over to the degree that we can’t even consider the possibility that some people might want to have the option of health insurance from the government.

MARTIN: In the 1960s and 1970s there were many theatre companies — the Living Theatre was formed in the 1950s, but the Open Theatre, and the Performance Group, and Bread and Puppet, and At the Foot of the Mountain, a feminist company, and the Free Southern Theatre — that were driven, in part, by the idea of participatory democracy. Participatory democracy formed the way they worked and their ideas about collectively devised work and egalitarian rehearsal process. Even as there were many problems and failures with collectivity, some great American theatre was created. Is there any analogous idea that informs the formation of the TEAM and the way you work? This is a remarkable moment in American theatre where suddenly we’re seeing the formation of theatre companies again. In the 1980s and 1990s with the radical reductions in funding for the arts we never thought we would see the emergence of new company work in the US. Do you think there’s an overarching pattern of thought that is generating your company and all these other companies?

CHAVKIN: An overarching pattern is that most of us were seeing the work of the Wooster Group, Elevator Repair Service, Robert Wilson, Robert LePage, Richard Foreman, and Pina Bausch — all of whom were experimental voices that were as much a part of the theatrical canon I encountered at college as Arthur Miller. We learned about Route 1 & 9 alongside Our Town. That’s a generational thing. I remember saying to a friend in Elevator Repair Service that I read about the company in school and she was totally blown away. A hugely formative moment was reading Breaking the Rules [1986], David Savran’s book about the Wooster Group and learning that you could collaborate on writing a work.

We certainly saw Dionysus in 69 [The Performance Group, 1968] on film. I saw House/Lights [The Wooster Group, 1997] my freshman year. I can’t remember any of it, because I didn’t understand what was happening. In particular in looking at House/Lights, at Dionysus in 69, and at Elevator Repair Service’s work at P.S. 122, there was messiness and jaggedness in the work that I loved and that I wasn’t often seeing in work by single playwrights. This work spoke in a more layered and thus generally more complex way, and was more aesthetically exciting. All of it made me think, “I want, I want that.”

MARTIN: More complex? Could you explain that a little bit?

CHAVKIN: Most of the work that I just described used a layering of images with dialogue and songs, myths and historical texts, including video. I’m thinking of Andy Horwitz who has a lecture entitled “What is Jewish Theatre?” because I’m beginning to work on a number of Yiddish plays; I’ve been very excited by his thinking. He holds up the Wooster Group’s Hamlet as a model of Jewish Theatre. He uses as his inspiration for the lecture’s thesis a page of Talmud text, where a central text is surrounded by commentary from scholars from different centuries all engaged in one visual space — i.e., the page — in arguments with and interpretations of the original text. Andy argues that there is Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Richard Burton’s Hamlet, and the Wooster Group’s Hamlet. Then there is what the Wooster Group means in postmodern theatre history, what Richard Burton meant, and what the RSC meant in theatre history. All of these different layers happen at one time in the Wooster’s Group’s production.
MARTIN: Meanings are multiplied and situated in history rather than reduced to a single idea.

CHAVKIN: Exactly.

MARTIN: One can also look at the Talmud as a progenitor of the internet.

CHAVKIN: Yeah, yeah totally. Hyperlinks.

MARTIN: Hyperlinks, absolutely. Alright, can we talk about Architecting?

CHAVKIN: Yes we can.

MARTIN: What are the informing texts that helped to create a collective subconscious for the work?

CHAVKIN: First, our research focused on the American Civil War and the Reconstruction period that followed it, up to its demise. Then we looked at Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone With the Wind*, which has a very Southern, romantic perspective on that period in history. Then there were current events, primarily the failure of reconstruction immediately following the Iraq War (the lack of exit strategy, the plundering of the country’s education system by neocons, the chaos that led to the thefts from the Baghdad Museum), and the horrendous mistakes made in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina. Reconstruction of many of the devastated houses and neighborhoods has still not happened four years now after the storm. Spike Lee’s documentary was amazing for us, as well as our trips to New Orleans.

MARTIN: What did you do on your trips to New Orleans?
CHAVKIN: Frank Boyd was the first to go down there in relation to Archit ecting. A bunch of us had spent a lot of time there before Hurricane Katrina and Libby King went to graduate school in Louisiana. Frank went and volunteered for an organization called lower nine.org that provides housing and food for volunteers who can get down there on their own. Once there, you build, paint, remove lead, and generally do anything you can in the Lower Ninth Ward. When we went down there the last time it was college spring break. We were going to be working with Acorn on a lead removal project, but they were so glutted with volunteers, just for that week, that we ended up working on a friend’s home. It was a home that had been significantly damaged by the storm, and probably not in very good shape before the storm, so we helped with anything that didn’t require much skill. We were filling ditches and helping to remove pigeon feces, and one of us managed to nail gun his hand immediately after I had stepped square on a rusty nail.

MARTIN: How do you connect Katrina with Gone With the Wind with the failure of reconstruction, and with the history of slavery?

CHAVKIN: The primary connection that we were interested in making was the disparity between white and black residents who were displaced, whose homes were destroyed, who have not been able to rebuild or have not had rebuilding in their neighborhood. There was no centralized effort to reconstruct the city and those suffering were overwhelmingly African American. Our work, Archit ecting, attempts to draw a line between the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War and the gross disparities of today, most graphically visible with Hurricane Katrina. When we began working on Archit ecting, New Orleans was not our focus. We were looking at the failed Reconstruction after the Civil War to look at the failed reconstruction in Iraq. I believe this link actually is what took us to Gone With the Wind: in Iraq you have the story—particularly as told in terrifying books like Imperial Life in the Emerald City [2006, by Rajiv Chandrasekaran] and even more polemically in The Shock Doctrine [2007, by Naomi Klein]—of a victor imposing its own sense of justice and law and values onto a society. That really is the story of Gone With the Wind, at least of the second half of that novel, which is entirely about the Reconstruction period and the North imposing its values on the South. The only full section of text that we use from the novel is an incredible scene in which Scarlett and a former slave, Uncle Peter, are confronted by two Yankee women.

MARTIN: It’s an incredible scene.

CHAVKIN: It’s an incredible scene, and you go through this wild journey of radically shifting empathies as a modern reader/listener. Scarlett and Uncle Peter are subjected to this very casual and thoughtless racism from the two Yankee women who, it seems Mitchell is arguing,
just don’t understand anything about Southern society, including the familial and loving relationship between former slaves and their former masters. In *Gone With the Wind* the North and the South are presented as two wholly different countries that happened to be joined by geography. It’s not the Civil War but the war of Northern aggression, right? What the Yankee women do in that scene is quite horrifying, and has absolute historical justification, considering the first apartheid laws in this nation were in the North. But then the second half of the scene has an inner monologue in which Scarlett thinks, and I’m quoting, “The Yankee women didn’t realize that negroes have to be treated gently, as though they were children.” As a reader you think, “Oh God, how could I have been sympathizing with this woman for the first half of the scene?”

MARTIN: That moment contains a clash of narratives.

CHAVKIN: Totally, totally, and that’s really important.

MARTIN: In terms of complexity of historical ideas, how do you approach structuring them in time and space?

CHAVKIN: With *Architecting* it took two and a half years. What we presented in Edinburgh was quite different from what we presented in New York. New York was wildly more coherent in structure, and in how the different narrative strands worked with each other. As late as May 2008, almost two years into our process, we were presenting *Architecting* as four totally separate chapters that, in theory, spoke to each other because they were performed in the same eve-
ning. But they were not really in dialogue with each other. And then for Edinburgh we decided to combine the chapters and began to figure out how to make it all one story. Who does the historian character Henry Adams become? How does he know Margaret Mitchell? Are they just in a bar together, in New Orleans? What is this bar? Does this bar have racially mixed customers, white customers, is it a Southern rights bar, or is it a great diverse bar in the Lower Ninth Ward? This was a huge discussion that happened very, very late in the game. With other shows, the process went much faster — and actually with our new show, the structuring of the ideas is happening much more at the outset. With Architecting we had many separate pools of ideas that we tried to build separately and then pour together. With our new show we are interested in seeing if we can create one body of ideas and then go deep into it.

MARTIN: What is the title of the new show?

CHAVKIN: The working title, which is definitely going to change, is The American Capitalism Project. It is taking form even as we speak. It feels like we’re ahead of the curve on this one, at least in comparison to Architecting. I’ll probably regret saying that.

MARTIN: I saw Architecting twice. The first time I saw it at the Public Theater I didn’t perceive the structure. When I saw it at P.S. 122 a couple weeks later it was crystal clear. I don’t think the show had changed, but the structure was suddenly clear to me.

CHAVKIN: Thank you, it may have also helped to see it in proscenium. When a show is that all over the place, it helps to have just one frame through which to watch it.

MARTIN: I also saw an early showing at Three-Legged Dog [3LD]. There was the basic wooden set structure that first appears as a background and then is a gas station and then is a restaurant. How was the set developed so early on?

CHAVKIN: Well it’s interesting, we’re actually in kind of a soul battle about this because Architecting was the first time Nick Vaughan, who designed set and costumes, was with us from the beginning of the process. He had done the set for Particularly in the Heartland, but he had come to that process at the very end, right before our premiere. With Architecting we were trying to have design conversations along the way so that we could build the show in the set during our 3LD residency. What we found was that it was like Nick had to design a bus driving 90 miles per hour on a very rocky road. And so, while the basic conceit was in place from Three-Legged Dog through to our premiere at the Public, and P.S. 122 about nine months later, nearly all the details and feeling of the space radically altered. We’re still trying to figure out when we can bring design into a process for a production that doesn’t exist yet, and that can suddenly take dramatic 90-degree turns. Nick was a tremendous sport throughout it all, and ultimately I was thrilled with how the space felt and functioned.
MARTIN: You have a track record of investigating America, which has an inspiring and sometimes disappointing history. The idealism of America keeps resurfacing and is certainly part of everyone’s education here, as is the pain of the failure of that ideal. In thinking about the future, what might be ideal subjects for the TEAM?

CHAVKIN: We are beginning a project that is a big, structural project for the company, as opposed to just a single theatre piece. I’m referring to it as “The 50 State Project,” although I’m stealing that from Sufjan Stevens, the composer/musician, and from Howard Dean’s 50 State Strategy. We made a show about Kansas, we made a show about New Orleans, and now we’re building a show that is largely set in Las Vegas, *The Capitalism Project*. We’re thinking that American geography is of tremendous importance to our work. We want to fulfill our mission statement, which is to explore “the emerging American moment.”

MARTIN: It’s as if you’re stating that the company needs to know the American experience from many more vantage points.

CHAVKIN: Exactly, exactly.

MARTIN: You want to locate these different sites of experience to complicate your understanding of America. So you see the company as continuing to take America as its subject?

CHAVKIN: I do.

MARTIN: Eventually you may have to include views of other countries in your vision of America. I taught at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul in the summer of 2008 where several people mentioned that they felt that they should be able to vote in the American elections because whatever happens in America has such an impact on the rest of the world.

The US is still the military superpower and the economic engine of the world, even though China seems to be taking over our economic position. America is a multiple subject that changes its tone, its color, its face, depending upon where one is in the States, and where one is in the world.

CHAVKIN: I think all of us are interested in doing Shakespeare or Chekhov, etc., as well, but I think that kind of work will most likely be work that we do outside the official TEAM umbrella. The company might take Shakespeare as a starting point to look at something, but the American experience is definitely our ongoing subject.

Things look very different depending on where you’re standing in America. So the idea and hope for the coming years is to commit to building parts of our work in different American locations, in addition to developing work in NYC and the United Kingdom, where a lot of our work has previously been built because of support there. I’m actually flying to Las Vegas on Tuesday to meet with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Department of Theatre with the hope of partnering with them, as well as Unite Here—the hotel workers’ union, which is a force in Las Vegas, on this new work.⁴ In thinking about the future years in this 50 State

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⁴ Upon return from Las Vegas, Chavkin wrote in an email addressed to friends and family: “We are happy to be back on the east coast following an extraordinary month for the company in the city of Las Vegas working on *Mission Drift*. This trip was amazing. We spent the majority of the month taking field trips to places like the Culinary Union offices, the Atomic Testing Museum (where we got a backstage tour with the curator and saw a nuke back-pack), to the Springs Preserve (an incredible facility dedicated to sustainable desert living), to a 60-year-old pig farm in north Vegas (shockingly nestled between new housing developments who are now suing the farm’s owner for the stench), to the Neon Boneyard (an extensive collection of old signage). We then would return to the rehearsal room and create material through composition and movement assignments, and writing exercises. At the end of the month we presented two workshop presentations to individuals we met there and received feedback” (2010).
Project, we’re in love with the Rude Mechanicals from Austin and want to go there and build a show with them. This is all long-term, but exciting to consider. We’re not necessarily creating community theatre, or at least not in the pattern of what Cornerstone and Sojourn do so brilliantly. We are hoping to learn from these different communities. If we are there at local bars, at local restaurants and having conversations with people then we will be richer, and more layered. Hopefully we will open a door to collaborations we’ve never even thought of.

References

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