

Five Years and Change with the TEAM

Moving Fast Past the Apocalypse

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apoc-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.

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