

OZ Arts brings 'Steel Hammer' to Nashville

Amy Stumpf, For The Tennessean 12:03 a.m. CST November 15, 2015



(Photo: Stephanie Berger)

Back in January 2014, not long after OZ Arts Nashville first opened its doors, OZ Artistic Director Lauren Snelling had the opportunity to attend the Association of Performing Arts Presenters' annual conference in New York City.

"It's such a wonderful gathering for performing arts professionals, with really interesting panel discussions and artists presenting their work," Snelling says. "Anne Bogart and Julia Wolfe made a presentation about 'Steel Hammer,' which was still in development. And here I am sitting in this room of real artistic heavies, and we haven't even done our first show yet. And I'm thinking: 'I don't know how this is going to work, but we *have* to bring this to Nashville.'"

Fast-forward to November 2015, and Snelling is about to get her wish.

A unique blend of music, poetry and theater, "Steel Hammer" uses the legend of John Henry to explore not only the idea of human versus machine, but the rich tradition of American folklore and roots music. The piece brings together the remarkable gifts of composer Julia Wolfe (winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in music and co-founder of New York's electric chamber ensemble, [Bang on a Can All-Stars](http://bangonacan.org/bang_on_a_can_all_stars)) and Anne Bogart (artistic director of the renowned [SITI Company](http://siti.org/)), which she founded with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992). "Steel Hammer" also includes text commissioned from four renowned poets and playwrights — Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor.

And while the significance of this monumental collaboration cannot be overlooked, it's interesting to note that many elements of the piece were developed independently.

"Julia had already composed this extraordinary oratorio and performed it many times before, so it didn't make sense for the musicians to be there while we figured out how to stage it," Bogart explains. "I knew I wanted to integrate spoken word with the music, so I asked my four favorite African-American playwrights to write a 10-minute version of the John Henry story — their own take on it. Naturally, the four versions were radically different. And as I began to work those into the music, the dramatic elements began to take shape.

"It's been a thrill to watch it come together," she adds. "There are so many facets to it — Julia's music, the brilliance of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the work of these remarkable playwrights and the heart of SITI Company's actors and designers."



OZ Arts Nashville Brings "Steel Hammer" to Nashville. (Photo: Michael Brosilow)

Those designers have fashioned a circular stage, on which the performers incorporate everything from wooden bones to mountain dulcimer, step dancing and their own bodies to convey the story.

“We call it a drum, and the actors are like musicians playing that drum. It’s like a marathon, an endurance event. This is all about the aesthetics of work, so the actors have to work — not *act* at working. The audience has a role to play, too. Theater is gym for the soul, and it should be challenging and enriching. Lauren Snelling gets that, and I’m so proud to be associated with her. We’re excited to bring ‘Steel Hammer’ to OZ.”

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Snelling was on hand for the premiere of "steel Hammer" at Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Humana Festival of New American Plays in 2014, which was presented with recorded music. Now, SITI and the musicians of the Bang on a Can All-Stars are in the midst of touring the full theatrical production, performing at OZ Nov. 20-21.

“To be one of five cities on this tour is just unbelievable,” Snelling says. “And of those five, OZ is the only non-proscenium set-up. The fact that they were willing to accommodate our non-traditional space is such a gift.

“Anne is truly a genius, and really brave in the way she approaches theater-making. She takes the audience on a journey, and makes you feel included and important to the process. To have these incredible artists all come together here in Nashville is just amazing — it still blows my mind that this is really happening.”

If you go

What: OZ Arts Nashville presents “Steel Hammer”

When: 7:30 p.m. Nov. 20-21. (115 minutes, no intermission)

Where: OZ Arts Nashville, 6172 Cockrill Bend Circle

Tickets: \$60

Contact: ozartsnashville.org (<http://ozartsnashville.org/>)

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