

14 THEATRICAL PLOYS THAT

MEET A CADRE OF ARTISTS AND COMPANIES WHO PUT SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND CIVIC CAUSES AT THE FOREFRONT

AMERICAN THEATRE ASKED TWO PERCEPTIVE ARTS REPORTERS—FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR MARK Blankenship and former managing editor Stephanie Coen—to cast a wide net across the U.S. theatre landscape in search of artists, companies and projects that exemplify this issue's Approaches to Theatre Training theme: social action and civic engagement. The resulting roundup of 14 mini-features illuminates a catalog of causes and a myriad of methodologies, tied together by the common thread of idealism and love of craft. These artists and companies utilize performance and performance training in the service of a larger good—and they're by no means the only ones pursuing a change-the-world strategy on America's stages, schools and streets. —*The Editors*

Penumbra's Sarah Bellamy Sets Her Sights on Social Justice

"PENUMBRA THEATRE HAS ALWAYS had a social-justice imperative at its core. But when it was founded in 1976, people couldn't be quite as explicit in dealing with issues like racism as we can be today."

That's the St. Paul, Minn.-based theatre's co-artistic director Sarah Bellamy speaking. A playwright, director and educator, Bellamy knows her theatre's history well: She runs the pioneering African-American company alongside its founder—who is also her father—Lou Bellamy. "The social-justice issue is shifting to the front-and-center of our mission," the younger Bellamy continues, "and we are trying to figure out how we can enact the principles of an activist theatre at all levels of our organization."

One key way Penumbra is reactivating its mission is by rebuilding one of its flagship education programs, the Summer Institute, which is more than two decades old but was relaunched in 2006 under Sarah Bellamy's leadership. Today the institute has an enviable 50 percent retention rate of students (ages 13-19) who remain for all three years of its programming. In the first year, students learn both craft-based theatre skills and about the concept of art for social justice; in the second year, they focus on one particular social-justice issue and write monologues about it; in the third year, in addition to advanced theatre studies, they take on paid internships and create their own original social-change art pieces designed to inspire and facilitate conversations around human-rights issues.

"We recruit students who are really diverse," Bellamy notes. "Students that breathe theatre but never thought about social justice are working alongside kids who are active in debate and student council and community service, but never encountered theatre. What happens is that they start to co-teach each other inside the classroom environment—and they are fearless when they leave. It makes me feel better about the future of the world." —S.C.



ANN MARSDEN
Bellamy

Luis Alfaro

Focuses on Faith, Politics and Identity

THOUGH HE'S TECHNICALLY BASED IN LOS ANGELES, where he teaches at the University of Southern California, playwright Luis Alfaro might just as easily be found at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, where he is in the middle of a three-year appointment as the Andrew W. Mellon playwright in residence; in Chicago, where he's an associate artist at Victory Gardens Theater; or in any one of hundreds of cities in crisis where, over the past 15 years, he has lived, worked, taught and embodied a philosophy that he calls "the Citizen Artist."

"I try not to make a separation between how I live in the world as a citizen and how I live as an artist," Alfaro asserts. "I come with an agenda: I am in the business of making art because I want to change the world."

For Alfaro, this call to action comes from a central tenet: Every community has a story to tell. His job, as he sees it, is to "translate, challenge and interpret what the community needs." In recent years, he's done this, in part, by turning to the classics: His adaptations of *Oedipus* and *Medea*—titled *Oedipus El Rey* and *Mojada*, respectively—brought the epic qualities of Greek tragedy to a Los Angeles barrio and to the quiet life of an undocumented Mexican seamstress in Chicago. (Currently, Alfaro is working on a three-play cycle about faith, politics and identity in California, *This Golden State*, which will premiere as a coproduction between OSF and San Francisco's *Magic Theatre*.)

And sometimes, he makes the work personal, as with *St. Jude*, an autobiographical solo performance that includes Alfaro's rending account of taking care of his dying father. "I realized after the first few performances," he says, "that I needed to take an hour-and-a-half after the show with the audience, hearing their stories, because a whole community was born out of people talking about their own sense of grief and loss." —S.C.



JENNY GRAYHAM
Alfaro

AIM TO CHANGE THE WORLD

BY MARK BLANKENSHIP AND STEPHANIE COEN

SITI's Conservatory

Aspires To Be a "Thought Center"

IN 2013—NEARLY 20 YEARS INTO ITS HISTORY AS "THE MOST PROLIFIC unknown-known company in the country," in the words of founding member and co-artistic director Ellen Lauren—the New York City-based SITI Company launched what Lauren calls "an act of faith in the generation upcoming behind us." After two decades of touring, artistic residencies and creating new work nationally and around the world, SITI has expanded its work to include a biennial, year-round conservatory program that trains 20 international artists in the company's core values.

Part of what makes SITI unique is the equal emphasis its members place on rigor and dedication to a series of very particular vocabularies—the SCOT Company's Suzuki Method and the Viewpoints technique developed by Mary Overlie—and their dedication "to the value of passing along a way of being—model way to be together as human beings," as Lauren puts it. "We decided that we weren't going to try to generate SITI 2.0, but we wanted to pass along the value system that would allow people to make their own companies. It's really about a way to engage with the world in a meaningful, objective way, so there's language to have constructive conversations."

In keeping with the company's founding mission, SITI Company members who are not teaching will often be found alongside their students, taking classes taught by their colleagues. In addition to the Suzuki Method and Viewpoints, SITI's training encompasses a range of other techniques, both traditional and contemporary (including the Alexander Technique, courses in dramaturgy and old-fashioned scene study) and master classes taught by company members and guest artists; the course culminates in a live public performance created by the graduates. As Lauren notes, "We never wanted to make a school—we wanted to make a thought center. The worst thing that can happen with performance art is that it's vacuous." —S.C.



Brent Werzner, Ellen Lauren (foreground), Akiko Aizawa, Katherine Crockett and Makela Spielman in *Trojan Women*.

RICHARD TERMINE



Stella Adler Studio works with inmates at Rikers Island.

TOMMY DEMENOFF

Stella Adler Studio

Reaches Out to the Incarcerated

WITH ITS ROOTS IN THE GROUP THEATRE AND JACOB ADLER'S political activism, the Stella Adler Studio of Acting has been synonymous with social engagement since it was founded in the 1940s. Still, the company's outreach division isn't content to rest on a legacy. That's why, last year, it launched a new project with inmates at Rikers Island, the notorious prison complex in New York City.

"Jails and prisons seem to be places where humanity is under siege," says Tom Oppenheim, the Studio's artistic director. "Particularly in this age of mass incarceration, it seems like the right place to bring the opportunity of theatre to uplift and rehumanize."

Through a series of acting classes and theatre workshops, inmates create and perform original material about any issue they choose. Currently, the program serves both young men in the Rikers Island high school and women from the all-female facility, and Studio reps hope to reach the adult male population soon.

Initial feedback has been undeniably inspiring. Describing a female prisoner at a post-performance Q&A, Oppenheim recalls, "She said, 'I found I was able to communicate in here'—meaning at Rikers—'in ways that I've never been able to out there.' "For me," Oppenheim observes, "that's a reminder that theatre has the capacity to heal, redeem and rehabilitate."

However, this program doesn't only enrich the prisoners. Last December, students in the Studio's joint B.F.A. program with New York University were in the audience for a performance by the female inmates. The event underscored how the very art they were studying could affect someone's life.

That idea is also embedded in the studio's mission, which says, "Growth as an actor and growth as a human being are synonymous." As Oppenheim puts it, "The mission focuses on the power of theatre to activate students as citizens and engaged human beings. It's not their only priority, but it's certainly more important than fame and fortune." —M.B.