

REBECCA BAYLA TAICHMAN POPPING LIKE FIREWORKS

HER AIM IS TO
DETONATE A PLAY,
NOT JUST DIRECT IT
BY SARAH HART

REBECCA

Bayla Taichman sets off ticking bombs in the plays she directs—though the ticking is most often located in her actors' vulnerable bodies.

At each piercing jangle, Polly Noonan's fingers leapt convulsively for the cell phone strapped to her waist in Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., in June.

Tony Shalhoub propelled himself through a manically paced diatribe while his hands methodically slammed back vodka in Theresa Rebeck's *The Scene* at New York's Second Stage this past winter.

And in Rebeck's *Mauritius* at Boston's Huntington Theatre Company last fall, Marin Ireland seemed bent on ripping her shoulders from their sockets as she flailed and stamped atop a sofa in the kind of frustrated rage no words can articulate.

"I want to enter the play and then push it as hard as I can so that its reality is at its most full—most true to bursting," Taichman says. "Does the text have a high fever? Is it slow and distended? How do I detonate that so it becomes its most extreme theatrical self?"

The 37-year-old director has figured out that kind of psycho-



logical and physical detonation in a collection of new works of note over the past several years. She directed and co-created, with writer Elise Thoron, *Green Violin* at Philadelphia's Prince Music Theater in 2003. A stint at Woolly Mammoth as associate artistic director through TCG's New Generations fellowship program hooked Taichman up with Ruhl for *Clean House* in 2005 ("We share a great love of whimsy and bottomless existential curiosity"). She took on Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's phantasmagoric *The Velvet Sky* for Woolly in early 2006.

Then she paired up with Rebeck, beginning with *The Scene* at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Ky., in spring 2006. Rebeck writes, according to Taichman, "hyper-realism," which Taichman thinks makes the two of them a particularly good match. "I pushed that hyper-realism as far as it would go before it would break the back of the play."

Tonally, *The Scene* is tricky. The play is a dark glimpse at the downward spiral of an out-of-work, middle-aged actor adrift in the artificiality of contemporary New York, who leaves his wife for a vacuous blonde he ambivalently despises and desires—and it's as scathingly funny as it is bleak. "It's got a fever," says Taichman, "and it's spiking. I found that if I set up the structure for the piece, it carried the actors. It's like driving a fantastic car: Fuel up the tank with the highest octane gas you can find. Load these amazing actors up with the most dangerous, painful choices, and the play would explode out of them." Taichman won praise for her work at Humana, then directed the play *Off Broadway* with television stars Shalhoub and Patricia Heaton.

Derek McLane designed the set at Second Stage, and he and Taichman noted the importance of the play's framing scenes at a party in one of those

fairy-tale New York apartments: The balcony sparkles bright white; the filth of the city drops away; and the stars are tantalizingly within reach. "It should feel enormous and expansive and shiny—as shiny as New York can get," says Taichman. "That then telescopes down to these tiny human lives that smash up against each other. They're thirsting for that huge, very inhuman, glittery thing. How do you survive in your little, tiny living room?"

Her ability to mine the longing between the vast and the close-up accounts for much of Taichman's skill in creating tautness on the stage. In *Mauritius*, at first look a seedy con story about philately, she locates the struggle as nothing less than the fight to survive—and transcendence comes in the form of a tiny slip of paper. Once a priceless stamp is discovered, Taichman thinks, everything in the play revolves

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around it—to the point that she and Eugene Lee envisioned a set where each playing area emerges, drawer-like, out of the first scene’s dusty, timeworn stamp shop. For Ireland’s character, who says she’s never seen the ocean (much less the island country of Mauritius, where the stamp originated), we can feel this space like a fetter.

Even something as seemingly gentle as Ruhl’s *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* exists within a pressurized atmosphere, in this case almost a vacuum. “Like amber, this play is frozen in a kind of ancient way—and it starts to wriggle free delicately, strangely,” Taichman notes. *Cell Phone* opens with a mousy woman—the kind that barely shows up against the chaotic backdrop of life—answering the phone of the eponymous deceased, then, with a desperate bid for connection, using that lifeline to insert herself into his life that was. There’s a metaphysical vastness here (the play makes a trip to Limbo), pitted against the quotidian bonds that tether us to life, and Taichman sets up each precise movement of her actors with care for its tenuousness. “The play is extremely

whimsical,” she says, “there’s no doubt about it—but it felt like that was in counterpoint to this extreme alienation. That whimsy felt nascent; it was struggling to survive.”

Taichman has taught a class called “Found Texts” at University of Maryland and the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center in which she asks students to develop work from “topics they could talk about all year and never get bored.” It’s clear, as Taichman gears up to describe *Green Violin*, that even having premiered the play in Philadelphia, and taken it for further development in Russia in 2005, it’s not out of her system yet. It’s the story of the Soviet Yiddish Theatre and its relationship with Marc Chagall, and how the company survived from 1920 to 1948 before being wiped out by Stalin. In Philadelphia, Raúl Esparza played Solomon Mikhoels, a forgotten figure in the West, Taichman says, who was probably one of the world’s great actors. “By all accounts, on stage he was like a moving Chagallian painting.”

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Sarah Marshall, left, and Polly Noonan in Sarah Ruhl’s *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company.

STAN BAROUH



J. CARRIER

From left, Franca Barchiesi, Mitchell Hebert and Naomi Jacobson in Ruhl’s *The Clean House* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company.



JOAN MARCUS

Tony Shalhoub and Patricia Heaton in Theresa Rebeck’s *The Scene* at Second Stage.

TAICHMAN

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For the past several years she hasn't been able to pursue this kind of project (she did similar work with *The People vs. The God of Vengeance* in her grad student years at Yale School of Drama) for the very good reason that she's too busy. "I've started to work with playwrights who are just *so good*," she says, with an almost helpless expression. But that bent toward deep inquiry carries into her work on new plays. "You get to have that partner who has so much information in their DNA about what the piece is meant to be. I'm sort of sucking that marrow." (Her father is a scientist, and she's clearly inherited a specific brand of investigative curiosity.) Even the rhythms of how a playwright describes his or her play can be illuminating. "I feel like my job in a way is to immerse myself in what inspired the world of the play—to be a vessel for that."

Her process with both actors and designers is very iterative—she's interested in what can be learned in repetition. "There's an OCD aspect to that kind of refinement, the detail." Taichman suspects that this painstaking method could irritate some of her collaborators. But, she says, "I believe in articulating the frustrations of the process or the frustrations that might come up with each other. Those tensions are part of creating the art." While in D.C. she helmed *The Diary of Anne Frank* at Round House Theatre, in which the cast rehearsed in a room roughly the size of the Secret Annex. "We were literally on top of each other for the whole process," she says. "I was interested in the messiness of the story, and the rehearsal process reflected those discomforts." (Even with those tensions, Taichman maintains that the rehearsal room must stay a safe space for everyone's input.)

Collaboration is key for Taichman, and she's found a long-term artistic partner in sound designer Martin Desjardins, who has worked on nearly all of Taichman's projects since *Iphigenia at Aulis* at Yale Repertory Theatre in 2002 (before that he was her professor at Yale). She immerses herself in the play's world through music, and she's always searching, often with Desjardins, for the song that *becomes* the play in her mind—with *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, for instance, that song was Imogen Heap's "I'm a Lonely Little Petunia (in an Onion Patch)." Taichman also claims to be impatient working without all the elements at hand; if a scene is going to be scored, she needs the music in order to stage it. "Marty really gets that," says Taichman. "It turns him on." ▶



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She's using two sound designers (Daniel Baker and Ryan Rumery; Desjardins is taking a hiatus) for *The Taming of the Shrew*, running through Nov. 18 at Washington, D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre Company. Taichman is looking to Federico Fellini and Baz Luhrmann to create a world that is "contemporary, but with a fantastical edge." Her language speeds up in time with her description: "It's a world that's popping like fireworks. Everything is fast, fast, fast; there's never enough sex, money, distraction. People are greedy in a bloated way." *Shrew* is Taichman's first project in a while without a writer/partner deeply ingrained from inception—a situation she calls both lonely and liberating. The expanse of historic criticism of the play has become a collaborator in its own right, though with all of her research she wants to be careful not to "fix" Shakespeare. "My guiding principle—for new plays too—is not to iron out any of the contradictions or explain away all the ways in which the play is painful and uncomfortable. It feels very true to me that a relationship can contain a kind of extreme violence *and* deep,

profound love."

Taichman seems in awe of playwright David Adjmi, whose *The Evildoers* she will direct at Yale Repertory Theatre Jan. 18–Feb. 9. "David explaining an idea to an actor is like—just extraordinary," she marvels. "His writing is fiercely, fiercely intellectual and unbelievably funny." The play centers around two couples and a search for happiness, but Taichman is characteristically considering its hugeness. "It's about an empire that needs to sink and crack and be destroyed, and then be reborn again. One of the characters is thrashing around in this extremely violent way, trying to crack that veneer, trying to find some way to be authentic in a culture that's lost its authenticity."

She stops midstream to ask, "Have you seen [animator Hayao Miyazaki's] movie *Spirited Away*? There's a character who keeps eating and eating and eating everything. He gets enormous. Finally this very young, innocent girl figures out how to unplug him and lets all the bile out. These plays are sort of like that." 🗨