

New Visions/International Voices

By Lisa K. Ueki

Over the years, the Kennedy Center's New Visions/New Voices (NV/NV) Festival has evolved into a much-anticipated gathering, providing the opportunity for creative teams to workshop a piece with the support of the Kennedy Center and a professional artistic team.

2006 proved a big year. The festival boasted record attendance, with over two hundred participants. All readings were held in the Kennedy Center's new Family Theater, a space dedicated to



(L-R) Tony Mack, Leigh Mangin, Peter Brosius, and Mary Hall Surface. New Visions/New Voices 2006, Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of Kennedy Center staff.

work for young people and families. As a natural evolution of the Kennedy Center's increased focus on international work, this year's festival grew to include international theatre companies and artists, including projects from both Windmill Performing Arts of Adelaide, South Australia and the Unicorn Theatre in London, England.

The recent inclusion of international projects at the festival posed a set of unique challenges and experiences. To illuminate an international perspective on the NV/NV development process, we talked

with Rosalba Clemente (playwright for *Grail*) and Carl Miller and Tony Graham (members of the artistic team developing *Spellsbock*) about their participation in NV/NV this summer.

New to playwrighting, but no stranger to theatre, Rosalba Clemente developed her play *Grail* over an eighteen-month period prior to NV/NV. While on a mid-career fellowship from The South Australian Department of the Arts, and under the mentorship of Windmill Performing Arts, Clemente spent several months researching for *Grail*. For six months, she worked with children from the Torrenville Primary School, focusing on and absorbing their rhythms of speech. Then, after a series of improvisational and experimental workshops with students from Flinders University, feedback sessions with children and parents, and consultations with three astute *Grail* scholars, Clemente's play made its way to the Kennedy Center.

Reflecting on her process, Clemente said, "I wanted to write this play for eight- to eighty-year-olds but [I] wanted to speak to the adults through the children and not the other way round."

National culture aside, Playwright Carl Miller and Director Tony Graham (Unicorn Theatre's literary manager and artistic director)

brought a supreme challenge to the table. Entranced by the theatrical complexity of Maurice Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, Unicorn's artistic team endeavored to create a new musical theatre libretto, specifically directed toward an audience of children, using Ravel's original operatic score. To begin with, it is a challenge to find pianists and singers fluent in musical theatre who could also navigate the demanding score of *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*. Miller described the early development of their piece, *Spellsbock*:

"In some ways there was no play before NV/NV. I'd been listening to the music, reading the score, picking it out painfully on the piano and researching everything from Ravel's experiences of World War One to gay Paris nightspots of the 1920s—it's all in there somewhere! But I'd not written a word until a few weeks before the Kennedy Center's deadline. That's in part because the process of writing this runs completely counter to my normal way of working, which is to become gradually more precise through many, many drafts. Here, where the very first draft had to be sing-able in some form, I was tapping out syllables and stresses in a way I've never done at the early stage of a piece. It's a bit like painting on glass—where you have to do the detail first and then the background."

Once these artists found themselves knee-deep in the New Visions development process, some interesting observations emerged. All three participants noticed how something as subtle as an actor's accent can transform the theatregoing experience—perhaps because our work is so rooted in aesthetics. *Spellsbock's* director, Tony Graham, noted that, "hearing this European opera in American voice(s) offered unexpected dimensions." Similarly, in conversation after her public reading of *Grail*, Clemente admitted that she hadn't been sure how the script would play in an American accent. She questioned whether the words would still transport the audience to the Australian outback, or if we would see the American west instead? Despite her hesitations, Clemente's words seemed to transcend that barrier, and the reading of *Grail* was a first trip to Australia for many audience members.

The time constraints inherent to the NV/NV development process also proved poignant for our international participants in the festival. The development process for musicals and operas at NV/NV



(L-R) *Spellsbock* Director Tony Graham with actor Scott Sedar. New Visions/New Voices 2006, Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of Kennedy Center staff.

entails approximately four hours of rehearsal for five days, while straight plays rehearse for three hours a day—an incredibly intense process by any standard. Notably, NV/NV provides about half the time of the National Playwrights Conference in Australia.

However, Clemente believes that "there is something to be said for this pressure cooker situation." She adds, "I felt strongly that the limited time propelled me to cut to the chase because everyone around me was doing the same. Sometimes I felt a sense of panic because I did not know if I could respond as quickly as I wanted to some of the notes and ideas I was receiving from my team. There was never any pressure to do that from anyone—but I wanted to—and that was the hardest thing—accepting how far you want to go in the time and then how far you can go."

For the Unicorn team working on *Spellsbock*, these time constraints meant picking and choosing their battles. They ultimately elected to focus on developing the vocals and telling the story. Miller says he made it through the week by "staying focused and work[ing] with geniuses. Music

Director George Fulginiti-Shakar squeezed the most effective work out of every minute through a twin-track pursuit of perfectionism and pragmatism. Where we could effectively delve deep or focus precisely we did, and where we needed to move on because the musical demands were beyond the time available, he steered us and our terrific cast with extraordinary musicianship." He further noted, "What we had was the chance to go in depth into one aspect of the production, supported by artists who could not have been better for that process. Had we tried to do more, it would have been frustrating, but the intensity worked well for us."

While participation in NV/NV requires a commitment to produce the work, both *Grail* and *Spellsbock* remain in development. Clemente says of *Grail*, "For now I have dug a deep hole and buried it. There it will bake for the next three months whilst the next lot of huge questions are given space to collect the force of their own true answers." She will continue planning talks with Windmill Creative Producer Cate Fowler and Director Michael Gow, for another workshop, and eventually, a production date.

Miller and his team also plan to address big questions as they move forward with *Spellsbock*. Among other topics, how to integrate musicians with the process and what the visual language of the production will be, remain central questions on his mind. He honestly shares that "this is going to be a hugely demanding project for us. So, yes, there will be plenty more development. But by 2008 I think we should get there. That's the plan, anyway!"

In further reflections on their time at the Kennedy Center, Clemente and Miller agreed that the week was filled with unique experiences. Miller noticed some of the luxuries of working

with a much larger institution [the Kennedy Center], noting that there was less blurring of roles in the artistic process. (In particular, he enjoyed the luxury of having someone else take charge of the musical aspects of their process.) In addition, Clemente commented that the "level of dramaturgical input from the actors was hugely impressive," and that she "was really smitten by how concisely articulate [our American] actors were." Interestingly though, she followed up by saying, "On the other hand, I think we Australians have a much healthier disrespect for authority and a rawness which can yield surprising results creatively."

Clemente also commented on issues of diversity and cultural values. "There was a much greater representation of artists from diverse cultural backgrounds at NV/NV, at all levels including administration. Hooray!" She further noted that "the obvious value placed on youth and family as an important part of the audience, culture, and development of future audiences for theatre is very different in Australia," as the country doesn't yet have an event that focuses specifically on developing new work for youth and families.

However, we can be hopeful about the possibility

(L-R) Michael Kramer, Marcus Kyd, Craig Wallace, Holly Twyford, Elizabeth Webster, and Dawn Ursula in *Grail* by Rosalba Clemente. New Visions/New Voices 2006, Washington, DC. Photo Courtesy of Kennedy Center Staff.





(L-R) Michael Kramer, Marcus Kyd, Craig Wallace and Holly Twyford in *Grail* by Rosalba Clemente. New Visions/New Voices 2006, Washington, DC. Photo Courtesy of Kennedy Center Staff.

spective internationally, New Visions/New Voices is a clear example of the world's best practice, and I'm very pleased to have experienced it with Australia's first (and hopefully not the last) creative team."

Tony Graham supports New Visions/New Voices as: "... a model of its kind in arts development." He adds that, "The international element [of NV/NV] is of its time, as our movement continues to become a global force. We can all learn from each other's adventures, and that is precisely how useful it felt to me. I am proud to have been a participant this year as well as having had this golden opportunity to become more enlightened."

The Kennedy Center team is looking forward to doing it all again—bigger and better—in two years;

so save the date for New Visions/New Voices 2008: April 25–27, 2008.

To keep up to date on Unicorn's intriguing endeavor, you'll have to read the blog: <http://spellshock.blogspot.com/>. To see another example of Unicorn's play development, check out *Journey to the River Sea* (<http://carlmiller.blogspot.com/>). For more information on *Grail* please visit Windmill's website at www.windmill.org.au. ■

Lisa K. Ueki recently completed a fellowship at the Kennedy Center's Institute for Arts Management and is currently manager of corporate sponsorship at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc.

of growing TYA, as Tony Mack, editor of *Lowdown* magazine and vice president of ASSITEJ/USA, has high praise for the NV/NV festival: "From my per-



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