

Hands-on theater: Green Candle takes new approach with "The Napoleon 2012"

by Brent Hallenbeck

One of the actors in "The Napoleon 2012," John Oliver, walked into a rehearsal last week carrying a white bed sheet and talking cryptically about how "the sheet gag is better than the moustache gag."

On his heels, prop maker and painter Mike Smith strolled into the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts carrying an odd little statuette he said was built with a coconut for a head and a cat scratching post for a body, wrapped in rope. Its name?

"Ropespierre," a punny reference to Robespierre, one of the [leaders](#) of the French Revolution.

"Don't pick it up by the head," Smith cautioned

Todd Townsend, one of the production's crew members. "I wouldn't flail the arms too much."

A few feet away, actor Alex Dostie, cast as the Little Dictator himself, was being taken for a ride in a little red wagon. He disembarked, bypassed Smith and Townsend and greeted the newly-arrived figurine instead.

"Ropespierre!" Dostie yelled as if he had known the coconut-topped Frenchman all his life.

Sheet gags, rope-bound revolutionaries and Napoleon in a Radio Flyer give ample visual evidence that "The Napoleon 2012," a satirical play within a play that debuts with two sold-out performances Saturday, is no ordinary production. Behind the scenes, though, the work that marks the 20th anniversary of the Green Candle Theatre Company is even more unconventional.

Aaron Masi conceived "The Napoleon 2012" as a project he calls "hyper-integration," with local theater people taking on duties they don't normally do. A costume designer might be called upon to act, for instance, or an actor could be asked to build sets.

"It's not normal. Normally you become a lighting designer, you become an actor," Masi, whose previous works include the 2008 Green Candle production "The Nose," said in a conversation just before rehearsal last Wednesday night. By asking people to do things outside of their comfort zones, Masi believes actors and crew members will not only learn a new skill, they'll have a better sense of how all elements of a production fit



Alex Dostie, who plays an actor playing Napoleon Bonaparte in the Green Candle Theatre Company's "The Napoleon 2012," rehearses his role. The show features two congruent plots; one is a play about Napoleon Bonaparte, and the other is about the actors' difficulties producing the play. / ELLIOT deBRUYN, for the Free Press

together. An actor learning about props, for example, might have a suggestion for a prop change that could make his or her performance more effective.

“It was such a new idea,” Masi acknowledged. “I didn’t have a plan.”

Because of that, “The Napoleon 2012” isn’t quite the hyper-integrated production Masi envisioned. The open process of creating the production meant February arrived and Masi was still trying to figure out exactly who would be doing what, so he said the company had to dial back on hyper-integration. “That process where everybody was involved continued on,” however, according to Masi.

He found that no one wanted to do the dirty work for a small theater company, namely fundraising. He initially hoped for a \$30,000 budget for “The Napoleon 2012” but dropped that to \$10,000. He also cut the length of the play’s run from 15 weeks to 12 to the final number, six. “It’s twice as long as we’ve ever done a show before” at Green Candle, Masi noted. Masi, who teaches at an alternative [school](#), wants to do theater for a living, and the larger budgets and longer runs are part of that goal.

The sense of togetherness Masi wants to create with his hyper-integration model appears to foster loose, easy-going rehearsals, if last Wednesday’s session is any indication. Dostie, as Napoleon, and Aaron Reil, cast as the Duke of Wellington, re-enacted the pivotal Battle of Waterloo on a floor painted with a colorful map of key locations in Napoleon’s career of conquest. In this case, the battle was fought not with guns but as an exaggerated boxing match, with the occasional play-by-play commentary from the sidelines (“The emperor strikes back!” Oliver yells). The assembled cast and crew laughed throughout and applauded when the two pugilists were done.

Looseness is great for creating a team atmosphere in a production, but hard work will make the play a success. One of the play’s actresses says the idea that everyone contributes to the creation of “The Napoleon 2012” gives each participant that much more ownership.

“Aaron said pretty early on, ‘Don’t wait for permission or edit yourself — create and I will be the editor and filter your ideas,’” said Genevra MacPhail, who portrays Napoleon’s second wife, Marie Louise, and is a co-founder of the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in the Old North End of Burlington. “Having that freedom was great, but a little scary, too. It creates a sense of broader responsibility for the whole project. You can’t say, ‘I’ll step back from this conversation because I’m just an actor.’”

MacPhail helped shape her character as the script was being created. She was interested in the idea Napoleon may not have loved Marie Louise but saw her mainly as a tool to provide him with an heir, while Marie Louise looked at it as simply doing what her duty commanded her to. “That sort of injustice was woven into the script,” according to MacPhail.

“Actors can sit around sometimes saying it should be done this way. This project gives you the opportunity to say, ‘You got something better? Let’s see it,’” MacPhail said. “I certainly hope it makes for a better production. We’re having a great time with it.”

Townsend has done a great deal of acting and set design but hasn't really done lights since [studying](#) theater at St. Lawrence University. He'll be overseeing the lighting for "The Napoleon 2012."

"I like to think of myself as somebody who can do anything, and Aaron encourages that," said Townsend, who has also helped with publicity, printing T-shirts, running the sound, building risers for the theater's chairs and painting the floor map. "Once you commit to an idea like Aaron has, you realize what your skill set looks like."

Townsend said he has always enjoyed the big picture of theater but doesn't want to be a producer and is intimidated by directing. "The best thing I got out of this process is for the first time in years I felt like I got to create the picture, the whole scene," he said. "Creating that world is really what theater is about."

That's just what Masi was hoping for when he came up with the concept for "The Napoleon 2012." He wants crew members to pick up new skills and actors to be involved in writing plays and "having your character say things that are important to you."

"One of the things I said from the get-go," according to Masi, "is, 'This is not my play.'"