

SEVEN DAYS [04.25.12]

State of the Arts

Setting Stage

Is Burlington ready to become a theater town?

BY PAMELA POLSTON

The actors gather in a circle, like a sports team before a game. But rather than the adrenaline-fueled hoots — or prayers — of athletes, what emerges from this huddle is deep breathing, twitching, a shaking of limbs. With eyes closed, the Green Candle Theatre Company loosens up and inwardly slips into the alter egos of the evening, as producer/director/cowriter Aaron Masi leads what can only be called a guided meditation. *Feel the floor beneath you. Let go of your day. Give yourselves permission to play.*

So begins a rehearsal for *The Napoleon*, Green Candle's upcoming show at the **Off Center for the Dramatic Arts** in Burlington. With the spotlights off, the black-box theater is dim and feels almost chapel-like. That doesn't last long. With a final, gentle prod from Masi — *Let's allow our characters to come alive* — the nine actors break apart like determined atoms. The exercise has effected a palpable shift to an alternate universe. Assuming their respective roles, the actors proceed to work through scenes from this zany takeoff on the life of French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

With opening night still weeks away, pretty much every aspect of the play is still being shaped. (Except the tagline: "It's all about the little guy.") There is much experimentation and improvisation. There are flubbed lines and moves; suggestions from Masi, lead writer John Oliver and stage manager Allison Brown. And there is room for silliness: Masi, tall and hirsute, carries around a hand puppet that also has thick black hair and a preposterous mustache. Though it resembles a cross between Stalin and Groucho Marx, the puppet mutters, courtesy of Masi, with a bad French accent.

From this rehearsal, an observer might not gather what an ambitious work *The Napoleon* is — in its originality, in its collaborative genesis and in its planned run of an unprecedented six weeks. Nor is it obvious that something larger is at play, and not just Nappy's egomaniacal empire. In the broader context of Burlington's theatrical community, this work could be seen as one of the forces building toward a tipping point, an evolutionary leap. With apologies to filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, let's call it a theater scene on the edge of a nervous breakthrough.

The players

Burlington actor, director and playwright Seth Jarvis has been involved "in one way or another" with about 30 plays over the last decade, he says — some with established troupes, some with "companies" that



Photo by **Matthew Thorsen**
Cast of *The Napoleon*

lasted for only one show. His most recent work was *Icon*, an intense one-man piece that Jarvis wrote based on the life of movie star Montgomery Clift. His brother, Nathan Jarvis, starred; local theater vet Chris Caswell directed. Its run at the Off Center earned praise from audiences and critics alike.

Since his first show in 2002, Seth Jarvis observes, local theater has grown, well, dramatically. His own role in that development is not insignificant.

“Burlington is a town with a lot of theater, but it is not yet a ‘theater town,’” Jarvis says. “It has the potential to become one.”

Just what is a theater town? “One that supports a lot of endeavors — everything from classics to big musicals to original work,” he suggests.

The endeavors, at least, are already there. Witness the growing number of small theater companies, most of which have organized into nonprofits (a necessary step toward fundraising and applying for grants). The last few years have brought a bumper crop: the Saints & Poets Production Company, which employs puppets along with humans; Small Potatoes Theater Company; the North Hero-based Vermont Shakespeare Company, which is debuting its Bard-in-the-park production in Burlington this summer; Steel Cut Theatre; and the laff-riot crew Potato Sack Pants Theater. Moxie Productions is based in Waterbury, but director Monica Callan is a familiar player in Burlington. And then there is the swelling cast of characters engaged in local standup and improv comedy.

All these new troupes join Green Candle, which is coming up on its 20th year; 11-year-old Spielpalast Cabaret (yes, that scantily clad ensemble has become an institution); 18-year-old Vermont Stage Company; and stalwarts Lyric Theatre and the Saint Michael’s Playhouse. There are individual playwrights, too, such as Jarvis, **James Lantz** (*The Bus*) and **Maura Campbell** (*Flower Duet*, among others), who may work with a company or independently assemble actors and crew to stage their plays. And, though they aren’t local, the Broadway musicals and other touring productions brought in by the Flynn Center and **University of Vermont Lane Series** contribute to the glitzier end of the theatrical spectrum.

Not to be discounted, the University of Vermont and St. Michael’s College both have theater majors and active performing seasons. Champlain College, though it lacks a theater department per se, stages occasional works featuring both students and community actors.

Undeniably, Jarvis says, “There is a lot of activity.”

The stage

Theatergoers who attend VSC’s current production of *As You Like It* will hear Jaques intone the famous line, “All the world’s a stage.” It introduces Shakespeare’s discourse on the “seven ages of man.” But of course the statement isn’t literally true. And, without adequate venues for rehearsal and performance, no town can foment a theater scene. Luckily for Burlington thespians, more spaces are cropping up.

Small companies would be hard-pressed to rent the Flynn MainStage (more than \$3000 per weekend, plus tech and service fees) or even the smaller FlynnSpace (\$425 per day for nonprofits) — home of Vermont Stage. At Burlington City Hall Auditorium, it takes a sure-to-sell-out show such as Spielpalast to cover the expenses (\$20 per hour plus other fees).

That's why the advent of the low-cost (\$150 per day/\$700 per week), 60-seat Off Center was "a huge blessing," says Jarvis, when it opened in June 2010. After downtown club 135 Pearl closed in 2006, "there were a few years when there was no real space to do low-cost work," he notes. Jarvis and Shawn Lipenski produced a stage rendering of *The Breakfast Club* at **Higher Ground** in 2005, but the South Burlington nightclub is built for bands, not thespians.

The four founders of Off Center — actors Paul Schnabel, John Alexander and Genevra MacPhail, and playwright/actor/musician Steve Goldberg — perform there themselves in Goldberg's works and others. For its grand opening, Off Center put together a Switch On Festival featuring 16 groups and individuals who are natural denizens of the venue. For its first anniversary last year, the founders produced what they auspiciously called the First Annual Burlington Fringe Festival. In 18 months, Off Center hosted more than 30 productions.

Also new in the past few years is the **Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center**, which offers a sort-of black-box theater with stadium seating for 135. Its theatrical offerings are still irregular. "Right now we have the [Vermont] Commons School performing *West Side Story*," reports venue director Mariah Riggs, who notes that MSL rents to a lot of school groups as well as business conferences, and is considering copresenting music with the nearby Skinny Pancake restaurant. Since its debut in 2010 with *Rocky Horror (Puppet) Show*, Saints & Poets has used MSL for its twice-yearly productions. Next up, in May, is *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*. (Coproducer Jess Wilson stresses that, though family-friendly, this is *not* the musical version.)

While it is designed to be affordable, at \$300 per show night, MSL is still prohibitively costly for small companies, some of which have sought out alternative venues that have no stages at all. Frances Binder and James Moore of Steel Cut Theatre, for instance, have performed at **Burlington Dances**, in the Chace Mill, and just concluded a run of David Mamet's two-person *Oleanna* at the Flynn Center's Hoehl Studio Lab (\$25 per day for nonprofits). **North End Studio B**, located in the same building as the Off Center and owned by Ben Bergstein and April Werner, has also been used for theatrical productions; their new Studio A is likewise designed for performance, though it's yet to host a production.

With a growing number of both players and places, is Burlington on the cusp of becoming a theater town? "I'd like to think so," says Jarvis. "There are reasons to believe the town can sustain an interest."

So what's missing?

The audience

The recent burgeoning of theater in Burlington may come as a surprise to many locals. If you're one of them, you're part of the problem — and the potential — for the theater community. The work is out there

to be experienced, but, as Jarvis' comment implies, the audience is an equally important part of the equation.

How does a theater company build an audience? Not just bodies in chairs expecting to be entertained, but loyal, informed supporters of live performance?

It goes without saying that sheer quantity is a good thing. "The more [growth] happens, the more the audience grows," suggests Jarvis. "And the more shows you see, the better your appreciation becomes, the more critical your eye."

"It's a combination of theatrical talent and feeling the pulse of the public," suggests John Alexander. "That is, choosing material that will be appealing to a broader part of the populace." It's an interesting comment, given the often-edgy works performed at the Off Center. But whatever you put on, Alexander says, make it as good as possible.

Quality is paramount, agrees VSC's Cristina Alicea, whose current *As You Like It* is an adaptation with seven performers each playing multiple roles. "If you're going to do an adaptation," she says, "you have to do it really, really well." A fairly regular Vermont Stage subscriber base has come to expect — and generally receives — high-quality work from this professional company.

Other actors and directors believe they need to present works that are daring or challenging, or at least new and surprising.

The Napoleon may meet all those criteria — though its ample humor is likely to offset any challenges the play's unconventional structure presents to audiences. Masi says he started working on the play a year ago, after joking around with artist/actor Alex Dostie, who said he had always wanted to play the emperor. "I said I would write him a Napoleon play, but it would have to be a comedy," Masi says. "But early on, we established that it's not really about Napoleon." Indeed, surprises await theatergoers at this one.

Also in the new-and-different category is another original work from Seth Jarvis. This fall, he and Saints & Poets will present his first-ever musical, *The Moreau Horrors*, based on H.G. Wells' 1896 sci-fi novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. "The animal-human hybrid just screamed 'puppets,'" Jarvis quips.

Steel Cut Theatre's motto is "theater that sticks to your ribs" — the implication being that the company gives audiences something to chew on. "We don't like theater when you go and have a fun time and never think about it again," explains Moore. Chimes in Binder, "We like the potential that theater has to frame issues in a new way, and to bring up new questions."

Toward that end, the couple — who moved from Portland, Ore., to Burlington last year to launch their company — invite the public into their process with an online journal, open rehearsals and Q&A sessions at the end of their shows, during which they encourage audience members to discuss the work and its ideas.

Moore recalls a man at one such session who said he had been utterly offended by some of the language in the play and didn't care to see that writer's work again. But, the audience member added, he'd come back to see Steel Cut because he thought they did a good job. Moore says he appreciated that level of intelligent observation; the man could distinguish the players from the play.

Alicea, who arrived in Vermont to take the reins at VSC this past year, has also been using digital media to entice subscribers into the artistic process. In regular e-newsletters, she shares details from rehearsals, hints of things to come and offers extras such as video previews.

Like Moore and Binder, Jena Necrason and John Nagle are a couple who moved to Vermont (from New York) to do theater. Though their Vermont Shakespeare Company offers a very different experience from many small companies — outdoor productions of the Bard — they also foster audience participation. It's "super important," says Necrason, "to invite the audience into the process somehow. That helps them to become critical viewers, to see how a work is created. They become part of the dialogue. Social media is a huge part of it now," Necrason adds, "but it's important to reach out personally as well."

Each of the company's four seasons in Vermont has seen "a big jump in growth," says Nagle. "A lot of it has to do with the fact that we're creating a regular theatrical festival, so to speak." Indeed, his and Necrason's goal is to establish a statewide, multivenue Shakespeare festival." Nagle believes "the more the merrier" is key to building a thriving theater scene in Vermont.

While it may boost morale, a "bring it, do it well and they will come" attitude is not enough to get ticket buyers in the door. Whether business minded or not, creative types will have to suck it up, learn how to create budgets and market the hell out of their productions, suggests Alexander. "If you don't allocate part of your budget to marketing, what's the point?" he says. "No one will come." That poses an advertising "conundrum," as Alexander puts it: "At the Off Center, we barely have enough money to pay the bills, much less buy ads. But you have to."

The business of theater is part of the "infrastructure" that Jarvis says Burlington's scene needs in order to mature. "When people say they 'want to do theater,' they want to perform, direct, maybe design," he points out. "Nobody is saying, 'I want to run the board and fundraise.'" But these are crucial activities that will help small theater companies develop subscriber bases and regular programming that audiences can count on. It's hard, after all, to become a loyal patron when you don't know when, what or where a company's next show will be.

At Green Candle, Masi has another arrow in his promo quiver: bringing theater to people where they are. "We're going to do a rehearsal in my mom's church," he says. "My brother works at Pillsbury Manor. We're actively trying to go beyond the traditional audiences, knowing that [they] might come to see other Green Candle shows."

Another imperative: People who do theater need to *go to theater*, says Off Center's Alexander, who contrasts theater's status quo with the relatively tighter music and visual-art scenes in Burlington. And he

takes a hard line: “It surprises me that local theater people can’t go support each other’s shows,” he says, then adds witheringly, “You can’t carve out *one* night to go?”

Necrason and Nagle are making an effort to do just that — they took in another Shakespeare offering in Burlington this week, VSC’s *As You Like It*. “We’re talking about how to cross-promote in creative ways,” Necrason says. That’s based on a conclusion Nagle drew after he attended the statewide VATTA (Vermont Association of Theatre and Theatre Artists) auditions in March, she says: “He felt there needed to be more cross-promotion across companies.”

For example, Necrason says, “My company promotes what’s happening at Vermont Stage. If you’re all working together for a common goal,” she muses, “I think that’s where a theater community really comes together.”

The encore

Burlington thespians all say making theater is a labor of love; for most, it entails juggling production schedules with day jobs, families and the rest of life. Few are making any money at it. As Jess Wilson of Saints & Poets puts it, “Our goal is to at least break even. If we have a little left over, that’s great; you put it toward the next production.” She reveals that producing 2010’s *Rocky Horror (Puppet) Show* cost upward of \$10,000. And they didn’t even have to pay the puppets.

In other words, theater is a time-consuming financial gamble, not to mention an emotional risk. Sometimes, the audiences aren’t there. Or they don’t “get it.” Yet Aaron Masi still aspires to create a full-time, professional theater organization. Necrason and Nagle want to build a statewide Shakespeare festival. Green Candle actor Tracey Girdich says she’d like “to start creating fringe festivals in Burlington.” Actors are moving to Burlington expressly for theater. Every one of them, from stars to crew and support staff behind the scenes, seems eager to share what Girdich calls the power of performance.

Where does this fierce devotion come from? And why should nonperformers — aka potential audiences — care?

“It’s important to watch people living and breathing in front of you,” insists Vermont Stage’s Alicea. “[Theater is] beyond entertainment. It’s an opportunity to step outside yourself and assess choices you’re making in your own life.”

“As theater artists, we have to fight so hard to get people off their couches and away from their computers,” offers Necrason. “Seeing theater is the ultimate way to interact with other humans. It’s essential.”

This interaction is transformative for theatergoers, too, believes Girdich, who says a college acting class “unlocked my voice and changed my life.” She calls theater “a full-bodied sensory experience because of the nature of the communication and the energy between the audience and actors. When it’s good, it’s incredibly satisfying,” she concludes. “It’s like sex.”

Does Burlington need a better reason to unloose its inner theater town?

Burlington Theater Groups

Champlain Theatre: No theater major or department, but students perform throughout the school year with professionals and community actors. Six productions this past year, directed by Joanne Farrell. Alumni Auditorium, Champlain College. Last show: *Humble Boy*.

Green Candle Theatre Company: Since 1989. A nonprofit dedicated to creation of original theater and sustainability of creative economy. President/cofounder Aaron Masi. Next production: *The Napoleon*, May 5 to June 9 at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in Burlington.

Lyric Theatre Company: Since 1973. The nonprofit is one of the largest amateur companies in the U.S. Executive director Syndi Zook. Produces a fall and spring show each year. Just finished run of *Titanic: The Musical*. Next production: *Rent*, November 8-11 at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Burlington.

Moxie Productions: Since 2001. A nonprofit dedicated to challenging and community-building theater; also presents an annual Vermont Contemporary Playwrights Forum award. Artistic producing director Monica Callan. Next production in Burlington: *The Little Foxes*, October 17 to November 3 at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center. Website under construction; moxie@pshift.com, 244-4168

Saint Michael's College Theatre Department: Presents two big shows per school year, open to the public, and also performs in regional and national festivals. Spring 2012 production was an original work titled *APP-etite*.

Saint Michael's Playhouse: Since 1947. The regional summer theater produces classic and contemporary comedies, musicals and mysteries featuring Equity actors from Broadway and beyond. Producing artistic director Chuck Tobin. Next production: 2012 season starts with *Nunsense*, June 19-30, at the McCarthy Arts Center, St. Michael's College, in Colchester.

Saints & Poets Production Company: Since 2010. Founded by Kevin Christopher and Jess Wilson, a nonprofit theatrical organization whose mission is to promote puppetry arts through a variety of media. Next production: *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*, May 11-20 at Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center in Burlington.

Small Potatoes Theater Company: Since 2011. A nonprofit founded and codirected by Pamela Formica and Emer Pond Feeney "for the purpose of creating unassuming text- and actor-driven theater in Burlington." Most recent production: *Aunt Dan and Lemon*. smallpotatoestheater@gmail.com, 922-4996

Spielpalast Cabaret: Since 2001. Founded by Lois Trombley and Terry McCants, a nonprofit that produces an original cabaret experience with local actors, dancers, musicians and crew. Next production: May 11-26 at Burlington City Hall Auditorium; two "scandalous" shows on May 13 and 19.

Steel Cut Theatre: Since 2011. Founded by Frances Binder and James Moore to create "theater that sticks to your ribs." Just finished a run of *Oleanna*.

UVM Theatre Department: Presents a full schedule of shows during the school year, open to the public. Just finished its Spring Festival of Plays. Next production begins in the fall with *How I Learned to Drive*.

Vermont Shakespeare Company: Since 2008 at Knight Point State Park in the Champlain Islands; 2012 marks debut in Burlington, at Oakledge Park. The nonprofit's mission is to present "wildly innovative professional productions of classical plays" and "connect the beauty of our natural world to the magic of live theater." Founders: Jena Necrason and John Nagle. Next production: *The Tempest*, August 10-12 at Knight Point State Park; August 17-19 at Oakledge Park.

Vermont Stage Company: Since 1995. Nonprofit Equity company producing both classics and newer, original works featuring local and regional actors. Producing artistic director Cristina Alicea. Now presenting *As You Like It* through May 6 at the FlynnSpace.

Very Merry Theatre: Since 2002. A nonprofit traveling children's theater company for ages 6 to 18, focusing on classic drama and literature. Theater camps at the VMT home in the Old North End. Next production: *Mulan, Jr.*, May 10-12, at Edmunds Middle School in Burlington.