

STORIES WORTH TELLING

BY BARBARA MACKAY



PHOTOGRAPH BY HELEN PAFUMI

THE HUB THEATRE COFOUNDERS, FROM LEFT: HELEN PAFUMI, MAGGIE ULMER AND MAREY OAKES

In the spring of 2008, Helen Pafumi and Maggie Ulmer were separately thinking about starting theater companies. “We met on Easter Sunday,” says Helen, “and I asked Maggie what she was doing. As we talked, we quickly found that our goals were very much in line. After many conversations, we decided to pair up with our third cofounder, Marey Oakes.” And so the Reston-based Hub Theatre was born, with Helen as Artistic Director, Maggie as Artistic Director for Development and Outreach and

Marey as Board Treasurer.

“Our mission is to tell great stories in a really beautiful way,” notes Helen. “That mission drives all our decision-making when it comes

to choosing the material. We’re not about finding the biggest names or doing the most provocative things. When considering a script, we ask if it’s a story worth telling, if it’s a story that will connect to our community,

if the characters and the overriding themes are important to us.”

The other consideration, says Maggie, “involves bringing people together. Sharing our stories and the community’s stories goes a long way toward creating cultural identity and community identity.”

Last season, The Hub produced *The Pavilion* at McLean’s 1st Stage, a debut that received positive reviews locally. The current production, which launched the second season, is Italian playwright Dario Fo’s *We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay!* This clever commentary on the rising cost of living revolves around working-class women who rebel against impossibly high prices, taking goods from a store without paying.

The Hub production of Fo’s 1974 play is based on a translation by Ron Jenkins. “He’s contemporized it, giving it a modern twist,” says Helen. “Hillary Clinton is mentioned. But even though the script has been updated, it still has the flavor of the original. The director, Patrick

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November 22 at ArtSpace in Falls Church.
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Torres, has said that it's a story in which time is unimportant. What is important is the fact that these women are people who have been ripped bare, hard-working people who live in a gray, stark world."

Although Fo's play is an established piece, Helen and Maggie are mostly attracted to newer work. Their second production, scheduled for spring of 2010, is *The Boy in the Bathroom*, a 2007 musical that will be directed by Jeremy Skidmore. With book, lyrics and music by Michael Lluberes and additional music by Joe Maloney, it's about a boy who is afflicted with obsessive-compulsive disorder. He never leaves his bathroom, surviving on food his mother slips under the door, until he meets a home nurse who teaches him there is a reason to open that door.

"It's a heartbreaking story," says Helen, "but also very funny. It's about letting go, about that moment when you face how fearful it is to break away from what you've known and move on to something unknown. It's a beautiful story of a mother and son and about young love.

"The one thing both plays have in common is that they speak to our community, to the way groups and individuals deal with hardship. The through line is not a single theme, but different issues that speak to our culture."

Apart from its main stage productions, look for The Hub to be in the forefront of several other area projects. Beginning this fall, it will partner with the Greater Reston Arts Center for a series of staged readings. And on December 5 and 6, Maggie and Helen will launch *Community Voices*, a storytelling workshop at The Sundry in Vienna. "There's an ongoing trend called urban storytelling, which is essentially people constructing narratives from their personal lives," says Maggie. "The art of storytelling, which we provide, helps people contextualize the stories and tell them in a way that is entertaining to the audience."

Next spring, The Hub will expand its family theater offerings to include performance opportunities for children. The team plans to produce Katherine Schultz Miller's *A Thousand Cranes*, about a 12-year-old girl who was stricken with radiation sickness ten years

after her city, Hiroshima, was bombed.

In May 2010, The Hub Theatre will participate in *Minds Wide Open*, a state-wide celebration of women in the arts presented by the Virginia Commission for the Arts. The company will offer staged readings of Allyson Currin's *Benched* and Kristen DeWulf's *Superwoman & Her Daughters* as well as a screening of a new documentary at the Greater Reston Arts Center.

Unlike some community theaters, The Hub does not have an established group of actors. "A core company is still in its infancy and we're very particular about how we're going to put that together," says Helen. "I will say, though, that it won't be a company of performers. The core company will consist of designers, dramaturgs, people on a literary track."

"Production conceivers,' you could call them," adds Maggie. "One of the things Helen and I want to do is to give work to as many actors as possible. Sometimes that's difficult when you have obligations to actors who are company members."

As for the future, Maggie and Helen look forward to choosing plays in their tried-and-true fashion. "It involves lots of coffee and locking ourselves in a room," says Maggie. "It's definitely an intuitive process."

"If a script just grabs me within the first ten pages, it immediately goes into a pile we look at," says Helen. "Three things come into play: 'Is this a story we want to share?' 'Is it important to share?' And 'Is it good?'"

"We've asked ourselves, 'How do you know a play is good?' And the answer simply is: 'Because you do.' It's such a weak answer but it's true. If a play is good, you just know that people will watch it and take away something valuable from seeing it."

We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay! continues through November 22 at ArtSpace in Falls Church. For more information, see www.thehubtheatre.org.



LEFT: ONE SCENE FROM THE HUB'S PRODUCTION OF *THE PAVILION* FEATURES NIKI JACOBSEN AND TIM GETMAN, WHILE ANOTHER SCENE FEATURES JASON LOTT AND TIM GETMAN.