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Theater

Time Out New York / Mar 25, 2009

New York's best

The best New York theater directors

1. [Jay Scheib](#)
 Mixing multimedia with deadpan-cool (and very sexy) actors, Scheib is forging new ways of seeing drama.
2. [Ken Rus Schmoll](#)
 Schmoll takes on more difficult playwrights, teasing out the ambiguity and menace in their words.
3. [Elizabeth LeCompte](#)
 As chief engineer of the Wooster Group's postmodern tech spectacles, she has influenced a generation of experimenters.
4. [Anne Kauffman](#)
 She helmed two of our favorite shows in years: *The Thugs* and *God's Ear*. Sensitive to thorny language, she makes the murky crystal clear.
5. [Joe Mantello](#)
 Sure, he helmed the blockbuster *Wicked*, but the former actor is most at home working on tough drama on an intimate level.
6. [Richard Foreman](#)
 They don't call him the king of the avant-garde for nothing; Foreman is the auteur's auteur: He writes, designs, directs and even operates the sound.
7. [Robert Woodruff](#)
 It's criminal how little he works in the city, but when he does, we're transfixed by the elegant brutality of his cool tableaux.
8. [Stephen Daldry](#)
 Without this bold British director (of stage and screen), *Billy Elliot* wouldn't have been nearly so magical.
9. [Julie Taymor](#)
 We're waiting for a follow-up as impressive as *The Lion King*, but until then, we'll still get weepy over "Circle of Life."
10. [Bartlett Sher](#)
 This guy can do everything: old-fashioned musicals like *South Pacific* and great drama like *Awake and Sing!* He's a treasure.



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JAY SCHEIB

Riding a Different Circuit

The experimental director is making a name for himself outside the traditional resident theatre network



Scheib

BY AARON MACK SCHLOFF

Important things to know about director Jay Scheib: Born: 1969, Shenandoah, Iowa. Occupation: associate professor in music and theatre arts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Number of productions slated for 2008: five, three of them world premieres, taking place in three countries. (“Last season, I had seven premieres in five different countries,” Scheib says evenly. He says everything evenly.) Number of resident theatre gigs this year and every year heretofore: zero.

How can such a director as Scheib—who, not so incidentally, has also written or adapted scripts for about a dozen of his own productions—earn degrees and awards from impeccably conventional bodies (B.A., University of Minnesota; MFA, Columbia University; NEA/TCG Career Development Program grant) and then go on to fashion his career entirely outside of the institutions they were intended to serve—ostensibly the center of the American theatre? The circuit he is now riding—stretching from New York City’s P.S. 122 to Minnesota’s Walker Art Center to theatres and festivals in Hungary, Austria and Germany—suggests that another center exists and that another kind of theatrical life is possible, even if it’s not quite, or not yet, a living.

“One of my goals is to pay my actors as much as they would make temping,” he says. Still, his regular actors, a group of six to eight that one might call the Jay Scheib Players, moan like addicts when they think of working with him again. “Whenever I get a call from Jay, I just stop the presses,” says New York-based performer Eric Dean Scott. He and

the rest of Team Scheib are gambling big as they develop Scheib’s exuberantly physical, heavily technologized but emotionally open style of theatremaking. Audiences and critics may love it or hate it, but they are rarely indifferent. Scheib himself cites Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, William Forsythe, Rem Koolhaas and Anne Bogart among his various inspirations

and mentors—famous names that would mean nothing if Scheib couldn’t refine those influences to give every work (whether it be a song cycle or straight play, with his own text or not, high-tech or low) a genuine sense of excitement and risk.

Let’s look at the projects. In January *This Place Is a Desert* appears at Mark Russell’s Under the Radar Festival at New York City’s Public Theater, the equivalent, for Scheib’s circuit,



April Sweeney and Thomas Keating in Scheib’s *This Place Is a Desert* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

HAYDEN TAYLOR

of the resident theatre's Humana Festival of New American Plays. *Desert* is a smashup of relationships inspired by the works of filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni and Three Mile Island transcripts. Disintegrating couples video and re-video each other with multiple live feeds designed by Scheib's frequent collaborator Leah Gelpe.

In March, his as-yet-untitled Mars project premieres at P.S. 122, combining scientific fact and fiction to imagine genuine space colonization. In July, Scheib's staging of the biographical song cycle by the gypsy cabaret punk band World Inferno Friendship Society, titled *Addicted to Bad Ideas: Peter Lorre's Twentieth Century*, has its European premiere at the Salzburg Sommerszene (it played this past September at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival). This coming September, not far away in Budapest, he will adapt Philip K. Dick's science fiction in a piece called *Time Again and Again*, for Pont Mühely theatre (whose actors also plan to take part in the Mars project, if funding permits). An engagement tentatively scheduled for December will bring him to Minneapolis to direct the premiere of Anthony Gatto's opera



World Inferno Friendship Society in *Addicted to Bad Ideas* at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival.

of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* at the Walker Art Center. Scheib is writing the libretto.

And that's the year. Add to that at least one student production, various readings, teaching. "For the past three years, I've been booked a year and half in advance," he says, again, evenly. "This year it's almost two."

Scheib is tall and lanky, with thick brown curly hair going gray and a square, friendly face with a point of a chin. He moves and speaks casually—at a roundtable discussion, he'd rather sprawl than sit. A former high school track-and-fielder, he can live in his body as well as his mind. (The result, perhaps, of his Midwestern farm-boy



INES ALDA

Malaika Ledig in *Kommander Kobayashi* at Germany's Saarländisches Staatstheater.

upbringing. Actor Aimée Phelan-Deconinck remembers, “In Germany, we were outside a rehearsal space. A shirt was in a tree, very high, and he lassoed it.”

This casualness is also deceptive—or no longer the whole story. The sprawling productions of Heiner Müller and of Scheib’s own works (produced by his own theatres, the Arcade Theatre and the American Theatre Institute) that gave him outlaw cred in Minneapolis in the ’90s have been replaced, 10 years later, by shows that display a more focused mind and structured development.

WHAT REMAINS IS HIS BREADTH OF

taste. “He likes high culture, but he also likes trash,” declares German opera director Berthold Schneider of the Saarländisches Staatstheater in Saarbrücken, who imported Scheib to direct episodes of the space opera *Kommander Kobayashi* after seeing his work in Berlin. “This is rare—there are few people who can contain such various visual and other impressions.” When asked why so many of his adapted works have “after” in the credits—“after Tolstoy,” or Euripides—Scheib speaks of searching for ways to make the works as surprising as they were when they were born. With Tolstoy’s play *The Power of Darkness*, which he developed with his MIT students before directing the show for Pont Mühely, he dropped characters, restored censored scenes and rewrote based on actor improvisations. The play’s rural violence resonated for Scheib. “I grew up in Iowa in the ’80s when every third farmer went bankrupt. Rather than doing the play as a museum piece, I did research to see to what extent it paid homage to its time and engaged social

issues—and then I found a way to reassess them.”

I witnessed a sample of Scheib’s approach last year, when he directed Daniel Veronese’s *Women Dreamt Horses* at the Buenos Aires in Translation festival at P.S. 122. I’d seen Veronese’s own production of his play in Argentina—a semi-realistic dinner party in cramped quarters, brimming with suppressed violence. Under Scheib’s direction, the playing space was vast and the violence was drawn to the surface, enacted with boxing, slap fights, compulsive

vomiting and semi-gymnastic stunts. Was this acting or contact improv? It played like both—and, at the first show, also a bit like porn (when they’re talking, you just want the action). But when I returned for the final show of the run, all was knit together: sensible, Argentine at the source, but American in tone and, most important, continuously

interesting. Scheib had gambled and won.

Scheib is perfectly comfortable being textually faithful to other writers’ new plays, but one thing about *Women* was atypical—its low-tech style. At the finish of *Women*, the gun-toting actor just yelled “Bang.” (By comparison, *This Place Is a Desert* has four screens with live video feed. The role of video mediation in live performance has obsessed Scheib for more than a decade.)

Listening to his players talk about how they developed *Women* reveals a lot about Scheib’s method. First of all, like his teacher Anne Bogart, Scheib treats his actors as collaborators rather than instruments. “He’s interested in people—who you are, what you bring to the process and how you and only you can bring that thing,” says another frequent actor-collaborator April Sweeney. When their extensive table work on *Women* finally ended, Scheib brought the cast to its feet with small exercises and wild-card requests—recipes for moments the actors would go off and create. “We composed a list of things to have,” says Scott, “like 30 seconds of a repetition or one moment of the smallest possible violent event.” One actor knew how to box.

They used it. Dance-trained Phelan-Deconinck can stretch her ankle above her head, casually. So they used that too.

Like the late Polish experimentalist Kantor, Scheib gives titles to different periods of his work. The past seven years, ending with *Desert*, were “The Flight out of Naturalism.” A new era, “Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems,” is being born with the Mars project.

Scheib’s research bent is supported by his current berth at MIT, which, he says, forces him to organize his thinking. “MIT is a research institution.

If my research has to do with the integration of media and live performance, or development of tech for use in live performance, or exploring other theatrical idioms, I have to theorize them and describe them in concrete ways.” He can also use student productions to begin explorations—he had his first crack at the Mars project at MIT in October, for instance. “So long as I can continue to main-



This Place Is a Desert at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art.

HAYDEN TAYLOR

tain a studio environment that I connect to teaching, then I’ll continue to be happy,” he says. “When it becomes routine, it’s time to leave—but as yet it’s never routine.”

The practical challenge for Scheib is turning his theatre life into a living. In the past year, Shoshana Polanco, who produced the Buenos Aires in Translation festival, has joined him as creative producer (a title that

suggests a formal economic relationship that they do not yet have). Her role is flexible, she says, but the management responsibilities are now hers. Financial stability is still a goal. “We fantasize about taking over one of the regional theatres,” she says, even as she admits she has no contact with them.

How long this alternative circuit can sustain them is a hanging question. “I put the work out; I write letters. Most theatres are not interested,” shrugs Scheib. Still, with the Under the Radar showcase, the

array of other projects on tap and Polanco on board—not to mention the continuing loyalty of his players—2008 (or 2009 or 2010, when his schedule opens up) could be the year love meets money. ☑

Playwright and journalist Aaron Mack Schloff writes frequently for this magazine.

March 24-30, 2010

THEATER

TWO MOONS, LOTS A BEER

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI | JAY SCHEIB ADAPTS SAMUEL R. DELANY'S EPIC SCIENCE-FICTION CLASSIC *DHALGREN*



Group sex plus civic catastrophe: *Bellona's* Scheib

In *Bellona*, a city somewhere in the Midwest, a disaster has occurred. The few citizens remaining negotiate an urban space in which scientific rationalism and civilized conduct no longer apply. A red sun haunts the sky by day; two moons hover

in the night. Buildings burn but are not consumed. The geography of streets alters. Time twists. Disorder reigns. And director Jay Scheib has the privilege of translating all this chaos onto the stage. "It's horrifying," he says. "Really hard to do. It's just so huge."

On April 1 at the Kitchen, Scheib will debut *Bellona: Destroyer of Cities*, described as "part dance, part live cinema, part theater, part urban simulation for disappearing cities." He has derived the piece from *Dhalgren*, Samuel R. Delany's sprawling, cyberpunk

meditation on sexuality, race, and catastrophe. While some sci-fi luminaries (Philip K. Dick and Harlan Ellison among them) have termed the 1975 book unreadable, it has sold more than a million copies and attained the status of a genre classic.

After a day of rehearsal at the Performing Garage, Scheib reflects on what drew him to *Dhalgren*. Though its nearly 900 nonlinear pages do not readily suggest theatrical adaptation, he wanted to make a play of the novel even before he'd read half of it. He found himself attracted to the imagery of a damaged city and the troubling timeliness of Delany's concerns. "We're trying to tackle a piece that looks very unapologetically at race and gender in America in the '70s," says Scheib, "but it reads like it was written this morning. We're grappling with that."

Happily, Delany, who attended an early workshop of *Bellona*, approves of Scheib's adaptation. "It's quite wonderful to have your work interpreted by artists of such energy and vision—not to mention such theatrical intelligence," he wrote the *Voice* in an e-mail. Despite this authorial endorsement, Scheib and his cast (most of whom have read *Dhalgren* at least twice) have plenty to wrestle with. They need to animate an abstruse and disjunctive text, which includes several troubling passages that verge on the pornographic. During rehearsal, they had practiced a sequence involving group sex and scandalous language. Shirts were doffed, belts were loosened, a mattress's springs were strained, and Scheib was moved to answer questions such as, "Do I do that before or after I say, 'Smell my dick?'"

Bellona marks Scheib's second attempt to stage sci-fi. It follows *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)* in a venture he's named "Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems." Drawing on his fascination with technology and the resources that an associate professorship in directing at MIT permits him, the project weds theater and science. *Untitled Mars* employed research into aerospace and astronautics; *Bellona* will refer to civil engineering and urban planning. Though he has not yet discovered how to integrate those disciplines into this production, Scheib hopes they will provide insight into how *Bellona* functions. "It has been more or less forgotten and abandoned by the world outside it," he explains, "but nonetheless, it is an ongoing system. No one knows where the food comes from, why there's always beer. It's like a strange social experiment."

The showing at the Kitchen may simply mark the first iteration of this "strange, social experiment." Scheib has fantasies of producing the play in a specific site over the course of several days. "The way to do this project is to actually do it in a neighborhood," he muses. "The audience would have to travel around and live more or less by the rules or lack thereof." His desire to achieve a more naturalistic setting for the piece speaks to the competing impulses that animate his work—science fiction on the one hand, theatrical realities on the other. As to how the two will align in this project, Scheib admits, "I'm very, very scared."

'BELLONA: DESTROYER OF CITIES'
APRIL 1-10, THE KITCHEN, 512 WEST
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JAY SCHEIB in his MIT studio. His multimedia work "BELLONA, DESTROYER OF CITIES," based on the novel "Dhalgren," is part of the Emerging America festival. Photo credit: JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Taking a sci-fi tale to the stage in 'Bellona'

Laura Collins-Hughes

[The Boston Globe](#)

May 13, 2011 ET

BELLONA, DESTROYER OF CITIES At: Institute of Contemporary Art, through May 15. Tickets: \$25, \$22 students. 617-478-3103, www.icaboston.org

CAMBRIDGE — The first time director Jay Scheib read "Dhalgren," Samuel R. Delany's cult-classic science fiction novel, it took him nearly a year. The dense and looping text sprawls to almost 900 pages in the original edition, but length was not the obstacle. The speed bump he kept hitting was something he had thrown in his own path: the decision, made before he had ever finished the book, that he would adapt it into a theater piece.

"This is maybe a terrible admission, but it's sort of how I read a lot of things — because you read it very differently when what you're planning to do is to engage with the material," Scheib, a boyish 41, said on a recent afternoon in his studio at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is an associate professor of theater.

Finally, Scheib skipped to the last chapter — "which kind of blew my mind," he said. It also explained to him much that he hadn't grasped about Delany's 1975 novel, set in a post-cataclysmic urban landscape once inhabited by millions, now peopled by only a few thousand stragglers. Bellona is the name of the American city in "Dhalgren"; it is also the name of the Roman goddess of war.

“Bellona, Destroyer of Cities,” the theater piece Scheib made from the book, opens tonight at the Institute of Contemporary Art, part of the weekend-long Emerging America festival. A highly physical, multimedia production, it embraces the issues of race and sexuality that fuel Delany’s labyrinthine narrative. “It’s rated R,” Scheib said.

“Bellona,” which premiered a year ago at the Kitchen in New York, is the second work in a science fiction trilogy Scheib is developing. He has had the cooperation of Delany, the 69-year-old “Dhalgren” author, throughout the creation of “Bellona.”

“The fundamental dramatic structure of ‘Dhalgren’ is to take ordinary society and then remove a large chunk of it and see what is left,” Delany explained by phone from New York. “Money is one of the things that is removed in ‘Dhalgren,’ and a certain kind of social ability to enforce social laws is also removed. What will happen?”

“The quick assumption many people have is that we’ll, you know, devolve into chaos. Well, I think that takes a little bit of time, and I think people bring their expectations of what life should be like even into a situation like that.”

For Delany, who has already seen “Dhalgren” adapted into an opera, allowing Scheib to make theater from it was partly a matter of aesthetic curiosity. Even so, he wants to make sure that the result is recognizable to him, that it jibes with what his 31-year-old self was trying to communicate in the novel that he spent five years writing.

Scheib is scheduled to take part in a post-show conversation tomorrow night with Delany, whom he called a very tough and very good critic. When the novelist gives him notes after a rehearsal, Scheib said, he puts 75 percent of them directly into the show — and yes, he added, that is a high proportion.

At MIT, where he made “Dhalgren” the subject of a course he taught, Scheib inhabits a studio that was once a squash court. Its high wooden walls are covered with photographs and blueprints from theater and opera productions he has made in this country and in Europe.

Video cameras and monitors are scattered throughout the space, the tools of a director whose work borrows from an array of disciplines and typically combines live action with video. Scheib’s “This Place Is a Desert,” seen at the ICA in 2007, was one such excursion.

“I keep threatening, like, oh, ‘The next couple things that I do will have no media whatsoever: no sound, one light cue.’ ” said Scheib, who last month won a Guggenheim Fellowship that is meant to support the completion of his trilogy.

But listen to him talk about people’s diminishing attention spans — he prefers to think of them as faster attention spans — or about the usefulness of video in the context of black-box theater architecture, and the absence of cameras onstage seems like an empty threat for the moment. “For me, a video frame is essentially just another proscenium,” he said. “It’s a way of getting a hold once again of the visual aspect of performance, in a way which makes use of a vocabulary which culturally we know so well.” Using that technology in “Bellona,” Scheib lends a new, 21st-century form to “Dhalgren,” a work that its author described as “very much a novel of the 1970s.” “As many people have said, there’s nothing that dates faster than science fiction,” Delany said. “And the fact that ‘Dhalgren’ has actually managed to intrigue people for this long I think makes me a very, very lucky writer.” That it has not dated, Scheib said, is because the questions it raises about race and sexuality are still with us. “I think this novel should be no longer politically relevant, but it is,” he said. “It could’ve been written this morning.”

Laura Collins-Hughes can be reached at lcollins-hughes@globe.com.

Theater

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Martian to a different drummer

Multimedia wizard Jay Scheib colonizes the Red Planet for theatrical research.

By Helen Shaw



MISSION CONTROL Scheib probes a strange planet.

Photograph: Naomi White

Deep in the belly of an abandoned vault on Wall Street, a man with a lizard tail talks softly to his foam claws as another stages an aggressive seduction in a boardroom. An almost whisper-soft suggestion—“Could you try that a little more tenderly?”—comes from the lanky director crouching at the lovers’ feet. Even though embraces in Jay Scheib’s shows usually look like wrestling holds, the note persuades actor Caleb Hammond to grip his paramour slightly less viciously—as he half-nelsons her into a revolving chair. The lizard picks up a camera.

Welcome to Mars. Or at least, welcome to a rehearsal of *Untitled Mars: This Title May Change*, a droll, discomfiting trip to the Red Planet as dreamed up by Scheib. An unlikely collision of scientific experiment and Philip K. Dick, the show takes its inspiration from one of the Mars Desert Research Stations, a deadly serious outpost where researchers wear space suits and run around the Utah desert. While the scientists simulate life on Mars, Scheib's company will simulate the scientists—though with a significantly lower budget. Set designer Peter Ksander describes the mash-up of sci-fi and reality as the new alienation effect: "Jay is using Mars in the same way that Brecht used the Thirty Years War." It's not that alien: The 38-year-old director lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and teaches at MIT, where some of his students might actually have a crack at being Mars pioneers.

As with almost all of Scheib's work, the show will be thick with video, much of it shot live in the room. He may not want to become a one-trick pony ("I have an Iphigenia coming up that has no video at all!" he assures us. "Maybe three light cues!"), but Scheib is still known for his multimedia work. Video appears in most of his shows, its function changing to create phantoms (*The Vomit Talk of Ghosts*), a sensation of surveillance (*This Is the End of Sleeping*) or a self-consciously cinematic composition (the Godard-inflected *This Place Is a Desert*). But the director claims there is a constant. "It all stems from trying to work on naturalism," he explains. "I wanted to take up the game that all my incredibly cool teachers—Robert Woodruff and Anne Bogart—had said was dead. It was my rebellion."

The resulting works, exquisitely designed with the lackadaisical rhythms of everyday speech, look totally unlike the rest of the New York avant-garde, though they ring bells with theater buffs in Germany and France. "I am synthesizing techniques that already exist," Scheib readily admits. "It's just that in Europe, the Wooster Group isn't on the fringes—they've been folded into the mainstream."

Not everybody is a fan. Scheib's dedication to observing human behavior forces theatrical time to slow to something like real time, and the pace downshift can leave viewers impatient and disoriented. (Tip: Pretend you're in a gallery watching an installation.) And while theater has been incorporating projection for decades, audiences still rankle at how the video steals focus. Says Scheib: "Desert upset a lot of people. Theater audiences feel bad that they're watching a screen. But for me, video is a delivery system. It's simply a way to bring the performer closer."

Scheib may be the most acclaimed experimental American director whose work you have never seen. The New York premiere of *This Place Is a Desert* during *Under the Radar* in January moved him into the critical spotlight, but this production at P.S. 122 will be his first high-profile run of any length here.

New York economics hobble Scheib's process. His languorous, ensemble-driven works need long rehearsal periods and the kind of technical fine-tuning that can't be done on Off-Off Broadway's panicky schedule. At MIT, he develops work in peace, and then spends roughly four months in Europe making pieces at well-funded spots like the Staatstheater Saarbrücken or Salzburg's Mozarteum. The expense of dealing with Equity and New York real estate drives our most interesting directors into the arms of European state funding.

Another major director who gigs too rarely in New York, Woodruff taught Scheib, but now sees him as a colleague. "It's great that he found a home at MIT," Woodruff says. "He can fly off to Europe, but he still has a place to do his research. If you find another setup like that—please tell me first." The struggle for funding is just another reason to make *Untitled Mars*. "You should go to these space-vision conferences," Scheib says with a chuckle. "That community sounds just like a theater conference—it's always about the lack of funding. It's very rarely about art."

Untitled Mars: This Title May Change is at P.S. 122.

entretien / JAY SCHEIB

UNÉ PARABOLE DE LA VILLE AMÉRICAINE D'AUJOUR-D'HUI

JAY SCHEIB EST AMÉRICAIN. SON SPECTACLE, *BELLONA, EST L'ADAPTATION D'UN ROMAN CULTE DE LA SCIENCE-FICTION OUTRE-ATLANTIQUE, D'HALLGREN DE SAMUEL R. DELANY. UNE PREMIÈRE EN FRANCE QUI S'ANNONCE EXPLOSIVE.*

De quoi parle *Bellona* ?

J. S. : *Bellona* est basé sur un roman culte de science-fiction : *Dhalgren* de Samuel R. Delany. *Bellona* est une ville située quelque part aux États-Unis, qui a été frappée par un désastre. Les habitants fonctionnent en boucle : ils doivent revivre ou réinventer sans cesse les catastrophes qui ont successivement ravagé la ville. Personne ne se souvient vraiment de ce qui s'est passé. Certains disent qu'un noir a violé une jeune fille blanche et blonde et que des justiciers ont entièrement brûlé la ville. D'autres qu'il y a eu un soulèvement suite à l'assassinat d'un activiste noir (une réminiscence de Martin Luther King). Jusqu'à l'arrivée d'une inconnue. Elle ne se souvient pas de son nom mais elle veut devenir écrivain. Et on ne sait pas si le monde et ses expériences façonnent sa poésie ou si c'est en fait sa poésie qui va déterminer le monde.

Qu'est-ce qui a guidé votre choix ?

J. S. : *Dhalgren* est un ovni dans la littérature américaine. C'est un livre qui traverse les genres et qui est d'une grande profondeur poétique et philosophique. C'est un livre sur l'acte d'écrire de la poésie dans une ville qui tente désespérément de disparaître. Dans sa préface, l'écrivain William

Gibson le voit comme une parabole de la ville américaine d'aujourd'hui. Peu de romans réussissent ainsi à sortir les cadavres des placards.

Était-ce difficile de l'adapter pour la scène ?

J. S. : Au début, je voulais faire une adaptation du roman grandeur nature. Je voulais faire un spectacle qui durerait une semaine et transformerait tout l'environnement du théâtre en une nouvelle *Bellona*. Une vraie *Bellona*, avec ses Teddy's bars, ses immeubles en réflexion qui partent en flammes. Le prix d'un ticket aurait inclus une chambre d'hôtel pour la semaine, mais les spectateurs pouvaient aussi choisir de dormir dans les parcs. Les enfants auraient suivi des cours à la maison, sur l'urbanisme, la poésie, l'ingénierie électrique, comme dans le roman. Pour moi, Detroit aurait été le lieu idéal. Mais on a fini par compresser cette vision XL en un spectacle de 90 mn. Et la concentration de toute cette énergie est littéralement explosive.

Quelles difficultés avez-vous rencontrées ?

J. S. : Faire des choix dans un roman de 800 pages qui ne perd jamais en intérêt. Mais aussi sur des questions technologiques : Delany décrit des gars sauvages qui errent dans les rue habillés en hologrammes de couleur pastel. C'est complé-



Samuel R. Delany et Jay Scheib

tement psychédélique ! Je n'ai pas encore trouvé la solution, mais j'y travaille avec deux étudiants du département en ingénierie du MIT.

Vous avez la réputation de faire un théâtre mêlant musique, multimédias et un grand engagement physique...

J. S. : L'année prochaine, je vais faire un ballet à Hong Kong avec un chorégraphe chinois à partir d'un documentaire d'Antonioni sur la Révolution Culturelle. Ça devrait être intéressant. Il n'y a rien que j'aime plus que de croiser les disciplines entre elles, c'est vrai. Et je travaille avec une équipe qui reste souvent la même. C'est très important pour moi d'accumuler les expériences dans notre collaboration. Ces acteurs sont tous incroyablement physiques. Sur scène, pour agir instinctivement, il faut des situations d'urgence. Alors on a fait des improvisations avec une liste de contraintes, qui pour

« C'est un livre sur l'acte d'écrire de la poésie dans une ville qui tente désespérément de disparaître. » Jay Scheib

la plupart venaient du roman : perdre une chaussure, marcher sur un bout de verre, boire un litre d'eau cul sec, s'étreindre à six reprises et changer d'habit à toute vitesse tout en disant son monologue ou son dialogue. Pour moi, toute approche d'une œuvre doit être physique. Peu importe la technologie qu'on a sur scène. Les corps restent les technologies les plus complexes.

On dit de vous que vous avez un parcours atypique dans le théâtre américain. Est-ce vrai ?

J. S. : A l'Université, j'étais un étudiant en colère et un professeur – qui m'a aussi fait découvrir Kantor – m'a fait lire le *Jet de sang* d'Artaud. Il m'a dit : « fais quelque chose là-dessus ». Alors, j'ai monté un spectacle avec des artistes locaux et un groupe punk. Avec ce spectacle, j'ai été invité à un festival international en Hongrie et c'est là qu'a débuté ma carrière. Ça m'a ouvert des portes.

Propos recueillis et traduits par Eric Demey

Bellona, destroyer of cities, d'après Samuel R. Delany, mise en scène de Jay Scheib. Du 17 au 19 mars, à la MAC, Créteil. Dans le cadre d'Exit. Réservations : 01 45 13 19 19.

April 8-14, 2010

Bellona, Destroyer of Cities

★★★★★

The Kitchen (see Off-Off Broadway).
By Samuel Delany. Adapted and
directed by Jay Scheib. With
ensemble cast. 1hr 40mins.
No intermission.

There are several beginnings to Jay Scheib's adaptation of Samuel Delany's 1974 cult-hit *Dhalgren*—appropriately enough, since the novel itself makes a structural fetish of beginnings. Scheib's unnerving *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities* starts with the cast—seen on a giant projection screen—bouncing noisily through an orgy. The room catches fire. Then an astronaut (Tanya Selvaratnam) wanders through the show's blackened brick arcades, stepping lightly in the smoke like she's visiting the moon. We've just met the triple godhead of postapocalyptic Bellona: Debauchery, Destruction and Displacement.

In this American wasteland, deities rule, but rules collapse. Nature, gender and morality all slip their bonds in Delany's transgressive epic, which watches as a cocky, sexually voracious naif (Sarita Choudhury) explores a gutted city, populated by homicidal gangs and violent poets. Luckily, Scheib (who went sci-fi with 2008's *Untitled Mars* as well) has his own immutable laws to ground us: his customarily elegant use of live video,



OFF THE WALL
Hammond, left,
reveals a stash of
pornographic posters.

a grimy aesthetic indebted to Cassavetes, and a sprung-rhythm acting style—embodied by the disquieting Caleb Hammond, the only actor to ever physically frighten me from the stage.

There is one nagging concern: In order to mirror the brutality of Delany's pornographic excess, Scheib unleashes dancers Natalie Thomas and Jon Morris, and here the piece paradoxically loses momentum. Even in the strongest sections, audiences must stay alert, since it requires a conscious effort to adjust to Scheib's anticathartic style. But rest assured, all that labor is a passport to a thoroughly convincing alternate world—one that seems to weirdly overlay our vision even as we stumble outside onto the suddenly unfamiliar concrete of far-west 19th Street.—*Helen Shaw*

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Jay Scheib's Bellona at The Kitchen

Posted on [April 3, 2010](#) by Andy

Jay Scheib's *Bellona, Destroyer of Cities* is a sensory overload of a surreal sci-fi mindfuck, a seriously epic vision of a post-apocalyptic city. It is slippy and unnerving, violently sexual, brash, troubled and troubling.

The show takes place in Bellona, which has been decimated by some disaster that no-one quite remembers, and it is now a shattered landscape of violence and mayhem. Every shifts – sexuality, race, place, politics – and the citizens have to cope with life in a lawless, upended society. The story follows two groups of people, a ragtag ever-changing band of street-type people and a four-person family living in an apartment that serves as a type of bunker against the chaos outside. The main character is Kid or Kidd – a newcomer to Bellona who can't remember her name but, determined to become a great writer, uses the chaos as inspiration for a mysterious book of poems.

In Bellona sex is violence and once-normal interactions are fraught with conflict and aggression. Scheib's staging is intensely physical with the actors throwing each other around and into the set, wreaking destruction on each other and their environs. Conversations are like interrogations and what passes for affection is akin to assault.

Several crucial scenes unfold to a thundering edit of Led Zeppelin's *When The Levee Breaks* – and it captures the mood of threat, violence and majestic destruction perfectly.

The experience of watching the show is as disorienting as life is for the characters – people come and go with little to no introduction, their names change, their identities, sexualities and genders shift. Lines are delivered like threats and accusations. These are not well-adjusted people having emotional crises, these are people who are living with their backs constantly against the wall as the world falls apart around them.

Heightening the sense of disorientation is Scheib's use of video. He is one of the few directors who really seems to know how to blend performative and cinematic vocabularies, using video cameras as tools to direct our attention to moments that might be lost, or to heighten our awareness of multiple realities or just to create a fractured sense of reality.

The show is a rough beast, indeed, and getting caught up in the maelstrom is well worth the trip. It plays at the Kitchen until April 10. It will probably sell out so get your tix ahead of time.

Bellona, Destroyer of Cities features performances by Sarita Choudhury, Caleb Hammond, Mikéah Ernest Jennings, Jon Morris, William Nadylam, Kaneza Schaal, Tanya Selvaratnam, April Sweeney, and Natalie Thomas; Scenic Design by Peter Ksander; Costume Design by Oana Botez-Ban; Sound Design by Catherine McCurry; Lighting Design by Miranda k. Hardy; Video and Photography by Carrie Mae Weems and Jay Scheib; Assistant Director: Laine Rettmer; Tour Producer: ArKtype/Thomas O.

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TOTAL LEGAL SUBSTANCE

Mars Bard

Playwright Jay Scheib is on a mission to bring planet Mars into the limelight, with a new stage show.

“I love science fiction,” says playwright and MIT professor Jay Scheib, 38. “But when it comes to Mars, the actual facts are weirder than anyone could make up.”

Example: A group of rogue scientists are planning to inhabit the planet in the next 10 years, but flying there would most likely be a one-way suicide mission. “The fact that there are people willing to give their lives to get to Mars is shocking,” says Jay, who first heard about the mission through a few of his drama

and math university in Cambridge, Mass. For one thing, he teaches in the music and theater arts program, introducing otherwise stage-shy engineers to the basics of acting. He also doesn’t look like a typical academic. Sitting in the downtown performance space P.S. 122, where *Untitled Mars* debuts on Tuesday, Jay appears more British rocker (à la Jarvis Cocker) than tweedy professor. In his lean pinstripe pants, black blazer and dark wool scarf, he is not at all out of place in the experimental East

P.S. 122.) His usual focus is on opera and Greek drama, but this month he has been devoted to the red planet, rehearsing inside an abandoned Wall Street bank vault (“It’s so weird,” he says. “There are still employee memos on the wall from 2001”) and readying the set at P.S. 122. “We are painting the theater completely white,” he says. “I want it to look like a cross between a space station on Mars and a science lab on Earth.”

The play tells the story of a seven-person team that lands on Mars and must adapt to a new planet—and its bitter-cold, jail-cell conditions—or die. Throughout the play, Jay interrupts the onstage action to interview (via live video feed) real aeronautics students and their mentors at the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah. His questions about their research lends the show the aura of a real-world science documentary.

Trekkies, rejoice: *Untitled Mars* is the first in a trilogy of space-age plays, called *Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems*, that Jay plans to complete over the coming years. After this show closes in New York, however, Jay is off to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to stage a new opera based on the works of Gertrude Stein. Still, the busy professor is happy to have embraced science in his writing: “I work inside the culture of nerd at MIT,” he explains. “I took the time to listen to what my students were talking about, and I was hooked. Now I really want to bring the science into arts and sciences.”

—Rachel Syme

Untitled Mars (This Title May Change) will run Apr. 8–27 at P.S. 122 (150 First Ave., at Ninth St.).



Footage of aeronautics students at the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah is later woven within Jay's play.

students. “I immediately felt inspired to write something.”

Despite the justifiably nerdy subject of the resulting work, *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)*, Jay is as far from a geek as one could imagine—especially for a professor at MIT, the famed science

Village theater.

Jay divides his time between Massachusetts and New York, where he keeps an apartment on the Lower East Side, under the Williamsburg Bridge. (Coincidentally, he met his fiancée, a writer and actress, at a November 2006 show at

"When it comes to Mars, the actual facts are weirder than anyone could make up."

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