

THREE DIRECTORS' VIEWS

DAN BONNELL'S *HEADLESS*

By Tom Provenzano

AS BASEBALL AND APPLE PIE REPRESENTED the happy face of American culture in the first half of the last century, there was also a creepy underbelly that had its most impressive exhibition in the “freak shows” that darkly accompanied carnivals and circuses. Disturbing but captivating human anomalies, now cheerfully labeled “differently abled,” made their ways through the world by showing off what were then known as “deformities.” The psychological fascination with these “freaks” has long been exploited in literature and drama, a tradition continuing in Lea Floden’s play *Headless*, which opens May 19 at the Electric Lodge in Venice.

Originally a screenplay, this story of a rich but eccentric young man who becomes entangled with a carnival’s mysterious “headless woman,” falling headlong into the dark world of the side show, caught the attention of Barry Hunt, artistic director of Portland’s Sowelu Theater Ensemble. Hunt and Floden, who had worked together at New York’s Circle Rep, developed the screenplay for the stage. Dan Bonnell, another alumnus from Circle Rep, was captivated by the stage version created by his former colleagues. He brought it to Los Angeles, where he has successfully staked out territory as co-artistic director (with Laura

Jane Salvato) of the Ensemble Studio Theatre-LA, one of the southland’s leading developers of new dramas.

Bonnell explains, “The storytelling is cryptic and non-linear, almost hallucinatory. There is some narration—an interesting Greek Chorus overtone of voices and images that are like a modern day version of *The Furies*. It’s a very interesting story mode, so the design style needs to be simple and evocative. At the same time it has to have this kind of gritty naturalism but with heightened magic that captures the romance of carnivals where nothing is really what it seems to be. It is very cinematic. It has a dark swarthy edge and at the same time a real true emotional connection.”

Bonnell came to LA from New York to break into television as a director. He had many friends directing top 10 network shows and found

himself shadowing them with the hope of landing his own series. He sighs, “I never got the break. Then after sitting and watching other people work for a year and a half I realized I really didn’t want to do it any more. So I spent a couple years playing in a rock and roll band—a classic LA midlife crisis.”

Finally, his long experience as a director in New York and in regional theatres across the country paid off here. Earlier this year Bonnell directed a production of *Anatol* at the Pacific Resident Theatre, where he was very impressed with that company’s artistic director Marilyn Fox. “She was very helpful, one of those artistic directors whose notes you actually want to take. I am a fairly egoless guy. I believe the best idea in the room wins. If she brings insight to a piece I am not seeing and makes it work I am all the happier. I ultimately get the credit for it!

“I moved out here and had a plan that didn’t quite work out the way I wanted but in all respects I am actually happy. I love directing theatre, love working as artistic director of the Ensemble. I’ve spent my career developing new plays and that’s primarily what we do. Being able to do that and shepherd an organization with a strong history in new play and ensemble type work is close to my heart.”

He was recently added to the faculty of UCLA where he directs MFA projects and teaches advanced acting. “UCLA gives me a little bit of income and I love working with students. I feel the most centered I have been in a long time.”

SCOTT CUMMINS' *BUG*

By Julio Martinez

DIRECTOR SCOTT CUMMINS FEELS FAIRLY SAFE calling Tracy Letts’ Obie Award-winning hit off-Broadway stage play, *Bug*, a comedy. “It is as much a comedy as you can get when the characters’ objectives include a lot of fighting and setting people on fire,” he muses. “There is so much going on in this play but when it all works, it is highly comedic...in a sordid kind of way.”

Letts certainly knows his way around sordid. A resident member of Chicago-based Steppenwolf, Letts made his debut with *Killer Joe*, a searing trailer trash saga which originally premiered at the Next Theatre in Chicago and ran Off-Broadway in 1998.

“I directed the LA premiere of *Killer Joe* for Lost Angels Theatre Company [four 2005 Ovation Awards included Best Direction and Best Production], so I am pretty steeped in Tracy’s mindset,” says Cummins. “There are so many levels of reality at play that have to be realized but his work is so performable.”



GOOGIE FRANKLIN

HEADLESS

Opens May 19;
plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 3 pm; through June 24
Tickets: \$20-\$25
Previews: May 17-18
Electric Lodge
1416 Electric Ave., Venice
213.368.9552 or
www.EnsembleStudioTheatreLA.org
Free on-site parking