

ADVOCATE

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LAUNCH: Q&A with Katherine Owens

by Christina Hughes Babb

What does the artistic director position entail?

My job includes choosing plays and participants. I may choose a director, or I may direct the production myself. I curate, setting the tone of the place and representing the theater, and negotiating when there is friction among different areas of the theater — usually an artistic clash of wills. People usually have good reason when they are upset, and the artistic director has to make decisions. I take on some fund-raising responsibilities, work with playwrights, and read a lot of work.

What makes Undermain special?

One thing is that we have a resident company of artists — have since about year two. The actors and designers [and other members of the troupe] have an artistic home here. With the resident troupe, we have been able to develop original works and work with some remarkable, avant-garde, language-driven writers. The scripts are often rich in language and poetry. [The theater itself] is small and interesting. In New York, they would just call it downtown theater — we call it wabi-sabi, which means the beauty in the imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. The beauty of modesty, in other words. I like that it is in Deep Ellum, and that Deep Ellum is exactly seven minutes from my Lakewood home.

Have many successful productions started at the Undermain?

Over the years, we've had 34 premieres — original shows that may have gone on to other places such as a New York theater, or a published book. And we have [produced the work of] many well-known playwrights — Mac Wellman, Jeffrey M. Jones, Lenora Champagne, for example, and David Rabe wrote the [season opener] “Black Monk” [which the Morning News’ critic called “the most sensitive and assured production in the company’s 25-year history”]. Rabe is a giant of literature, and it is hard to even imagine American theater without him. Possibly because of a good track record, writers trust Undermain with their script ... and are generous with letting us work with it.

Tell us about this month’s production ‘Port Twilight’.

It is a big wild ride. It is a play about the history of science with wild, interweaving plots. It is extremely poetic and beautifully written. The actors are a group of people who understand the language, and the troupe is fully committed to the full realization of the play. There is a strong musical component by my husband, composer Bruce DuBose. Tony Award winner John Arnome, also an East Dallas resident, designed the Twilight set — it’s going to be one of the most extraordinary sets ever — this has, overall, been a year of big productions for us. I don’t know how it happened but it did. We have started taking on much larger material — in the beginning we didn’t know if we’d be able to handle such complicated works.

Have your audiences responded well to the more complex works?

Absolutely. There’s a really important modernist impulse in Dallas — there’s a place for avant guard literature here, and the Dallas audience is very smart.

What else is in store this season?

Look forward to Taylor Mac [February] — he is an astonishing performance artist — and to the final play of the season [April], which will be directed by Stan Wojewodski Jr.

Port Twilight starts November 14. Season tickets available. Find details on page 27 or at undermain.org.