Adaptation

Park Square Theatre is expanding its space and broadening its perspective—will diversity and risk-taking be the theater’s path to failure or success?

by QUINTON SKINNER

THIS YEAR’S AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS CONVENTION in Nashville hosted a buzzy panel with a provocative title: Agree or Disagree: We Should Let Arts Organizations That Don’t Adapt Die. And while the phrasing could have been more elegant, the sentiment was worth considering—does our community have an obligation to prop up theaters, museums, or venues that don’t change with the times and reflect the range of perspectives represented by their audiences?

It can be fun to play the provocateur, and perhaps there’s a degree of self-flattery in asking the question—who gets to define who’s sufficiently “adapted”? But the idea is also an expression of frustration for many theatergoers, who hear talk of broadening the range of styles and voices as common currency but in practice see results that are often mere half-measures.

The prevailing counter response: We could program unexpected plays, and bring in new and diverse artists, but we would risk losing the base that pays for season tickets or attends multiple times a year, alienating its anodyne expectations and conservative tastes. Nonprofit theaters are nearly always at risk of hitting financial icebergs, and a couple of ill-attended seasons can potentially represent a crippling blow.

We could adapt, goes the argument in some circles. But it would kill us.

THIS FALL, ST. PAUL’S PARK SQUARE THEATRE OPENS its second stage, the Andy Boss Thrust (after years of delays amid the economic fallout of the Great Recession)—a 200-seat venue in the basement of its Hamm Building headquarters that will effectively see the theater double its programming overnight. It’s an ambitious undertaking, and one that has been launched with a model of incorporating a range of voices and a spirit of collaboration.

Behind the scenes at many theaters, an unspoken philosophy infuses decisions small and large: If we aren’t expanding, we’re effectively failing. But there are a number of roads to that destination—and simply adding seats doesn’t guarantee that there will be anyone to fill them. Park Square has brought in three local partner companies—American classics specialists Girl Friday Productions, the ensemble-oriented Sandbox Theatre, and the intellectually eclectic Theatre Pro Rata—who will each stage a show apiece over the next three seasons.

The hope is that the companies will grow together rather than treat the relationship as a series of one-off enterprises (a frequent description of guest-company arrange-
ments in recent years in the Guthrie’s Dowling Studio).

“You’re not the flavor of the month; you’re a full partner, and you’re both seeking to learn something,” says Park Square executive director Michael-jon Pease. “The first year will be to figure it all out, and by the third year we’ll go out with a bang—then they’ll go on their way, and we’ll look for new partners.”

“We want to learn from our work together,” adds artistic director Richard Cook. “And with a three-year cycle, if we don’t have a marriage, we don’t have to get a divorce.”

Pro Rata artistic director Carin Bratlie describes the relationship as “symbiotic,” with the hopes of her company’s generally younger audience finding a middle ground with Park Square’s older-skewing crowd. Mutual benefit between theaters and audience is the primary goal. “One of the first things Richard said was that he wants to do no harm,” she adds.

The first season on the Boss Stage will also include guest companies appearing on a one-time basis, and Cook speaks of managing the increase in productions with a mix of anticipation and caution. “None of us have the same jobs we had a few years ago,” he says. “It’s a very risky place, and I’m concerned about not running so hard that we stumble.”

The fruition of the plan to partner with itinerant theater companies builds on the goals of another Park Square initiative. In 2011, Cook launched the “artistic associate” model that brought in four locally based theater artists with backgrounds in writing, acting, producing, teaching, and directing, aiming to broaden the theater’s possibilities of what could take place on its stages.

In addition to being a remarkably accomplished group, the associates represent a mix of gender and ethnicity clearly aimed at promoting diversity—this during a time when two of the Twin Cities’ largest theater institutions came under criticism within quarters of the arts community (the Guthrie after announcing a slate of plays almost devoid of writers or directors who were women or people of color, the Guthrie director Joe Dowling bows out next year after his 20th season and, as the Guthrie’s longest-serving chief by far, will leave a massively ranging and distinctive legacy in the Twin Cities arts world. This fall, the Guthrie welcomes a series of newcomers to the cobalt citadel. Writer/director Mary Zimmerman brings The White Snake, an ancient Chinese tale about a serpent spirit girl and the boy she loves (Cinderella through an Eastern prism); Broadway director Leigh Silverman helms Wendy Wasserstein’s coming-of-age The Heidi Chronicles, and Steppenwolf co-founder Jeff Perry directs A Steady Rain about the lifelong relationship between two policemen amid worldly turmoil. It’s apt—new faces arriving on the cusp of monumental transition. • The White Snake, 9.9–10.19; The Heidi Chronicles, 9.13–10.26; A Steady Rain, 10.14–11.2, guthrietheater.org

2. Colossal Impact: Three years ago, Mixed Blood Theatre artistic director Jack Reuler launched Radical Hospitality, effectively making all seats at his company’s plays free of charge on a first-come, first-served basis. The approach is starting to feel like normal, but don’t be fooled: The coyote trickster is perpetrating perhaps the most radical systemic rethink in the arts in the Twin Cities this decade. Mixed Blood’s fall highlight is Colossal, a football drama telling the story of a star athlete who suffers a spinal-cord injury that destroys his hopes of going pro—as well as altering the course of his love for one of his teammates. The play stars actor Toby Forrest, who is a quadriplegic, and includes four 15-minute quarters and a halftime show. Radical. • Colossal, 10.10–11.9, mixedblood.com

TOP GEMS OF THIS FALL’S PERFORMING ARTS SEASON

1. New Kids in Town: Guthrie director Joe Dowling bows out next year after his 20th season and, as the Guthrie’s longest-serving chief by far, will leave a massively ranging and distinctive legacy in the Twin Cities arts world. This fall, the Guthrie welcomes a series of newcomers to the cobalt citadel. Writer/director Mary Zimmerman brings The White Snake, an ancient Chinese tale about a serpent spirit girl and the boy she loves (Cinderella through an Eastern prism); Broadway director Leigh Silverman helms Wendy Wasserstein’s coming-of-age The Heidi Chronicles, and Steppenwolf co-founder Jeff Perry directs A Steady Rain about the lifelong relationship between two policemen amid worldly turmoil. It’s apt—new faces arriving on the cusp of monumental transition. • The White Snake, 9.9–10.19; The Heidi Chronicles, 9.13–10.26; A Steady Rain, 10.14–11.2, guthrietheater.org

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3. Dizzy Heights: I’m as guilty as most of not including the classical composers in my musical diet on a regular basis—they’re notoriously poor at promoting themselves on YouTube—but whenever I return to Beethoven, it’s to an entire universe of yearning, searching, resignation, hope, and all the outsized dimensions of our species kicking and screaming its way into the machine age and beyond. The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra delivers a ton of Ludwig van through the fall in performances at the Ordway, including the mind-blowing Fifth and Eroica in October and the world-painting Pastoral in November. Any of these, especially played by an outfit such as SPCO, is capable of bringing you to sublime heights (and depths) of feeling—as well as tones and melodies that have tickled our ears in countless other forms throughout our lives. • thespco.org

4. Weird Science: Granted, it might be a line in the sand: those who are excited about descriptive terms such as “digital sound sculptures” and “real-time content feeds” pertaining to live performance, and those who will run without hesitation in the opposite direction. Fair enough, but I’m inordinately excited about Ryoji Ikeda’s superposition at the Walker this fall. It’s a hybrid of digital and real life, with electronic music and video screens added to the mix. The term “superposition” is caged from quantum physics (wait, come back, really!), referring to the spooky reality that subatomic particles exist in all states at once until they are measured, at which time they settle down into occupying one reality. The ground floor of the universe, in other words, is always in a state of flux and limitless possibility—until it’s not. • superposition, 10.24–25, walkerart.org

5. Deep Seeds: Children’s Theatre Company is staging ambitious and adventuresome shows throughout its season—my bet for the fall is Seedfolks, a kaleidoscopic one-woman show featuring the captivating Sonja Parks. It’s recommended for grades 3–8—a breadth of range that suggests the universality of these 11 narratives tied together by a nine-year-old girl, who plants seeds in a vacant lot that blossom into rich neighborhood stories. • Seedfolks, 9.30–11.9, childrenstheatre.org

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Ordway for staging Miss Saigon amid arguments that the play’s contents have become racially offensive in the new century.

Artistic associate Carson Kreitzer, a playwright, remembers looking around the room during the first meeting of the group that included a range of skin tones and backgrounds. “I think we all thought, OK, this is a diversity committee. This is very nice—I’m sure nothing is going to happen, but this is a good gesture,” she says. “Then when Richard put together the next season, he actually used three of our suggestions, projects we were very passionate about. We were all just floored. Richard wasn’t kidding—he really wanted to hear from different quarters.”

Cook doesn’t criticize other local theaters’ choices, and is quick to acknowledge the range of economic considerations and unique histories under which each operates. For Park Square, he sees including more women directors and writers, and more writers and directors of color as essential to the organization’s survival. “I’m interested in the tributaries rather than the mainstream,” Cook adds. “These are the feeders that open my head.”

The plays that have surfaced through the artistic associate process have included the musical Johnny Baseball, which revolves around an interracial romance in 1919 growth in the theater’s audience over the past five years, which suggests that the timing for this new phase is auspicious: The base of attendance and donors is as strong as it’s ever been, which in turn engenders trust based on positive experience and, hopefully, a willingness to come along for the ride on stylistic stretches and unfamiliar works. “Part of their smartness and my assumption for them,” Cook says, “is that they don’t have to love everything equally.”

“We’ve learned that age doesn’t dictate taste,” Pease adds—noting that, like every theater, Park Square would like to lure a younger audience but that demographic doesn’t necessarily hunger for edgier work. A younger person might be drawn to a classic, for instance, that a more seasoned theatergoer might be familiar with from decades in the past.

How this will play out remains to be seen, and Cook cites challenges—days scheduled with multiple performances, when the two stages will have as many as 1,300 seats to fill—that give him pause. Still, if the question is one between adaptation and death, Park Square has landed firmly in the former camp, with a model that may point to one version of the way ahead for regional theaters.

Or else it’s something more humble. “It’s the 21st century,” says Cook. “Let’s just catch up.”

America; the heralded Stick Fly, about the complicated contemporary intersection of class and race; and Or, a bawdy story of sexual license set in Restoration England.

“In the early meetings with the artistic associates, I had them tell me what kind of shows they wanted me to get serious about understanding and considering,” explains Cook. “When they did, I said, Oh my God, you think Park Square could do that? It was so liberating, and it broadened my mind.”

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