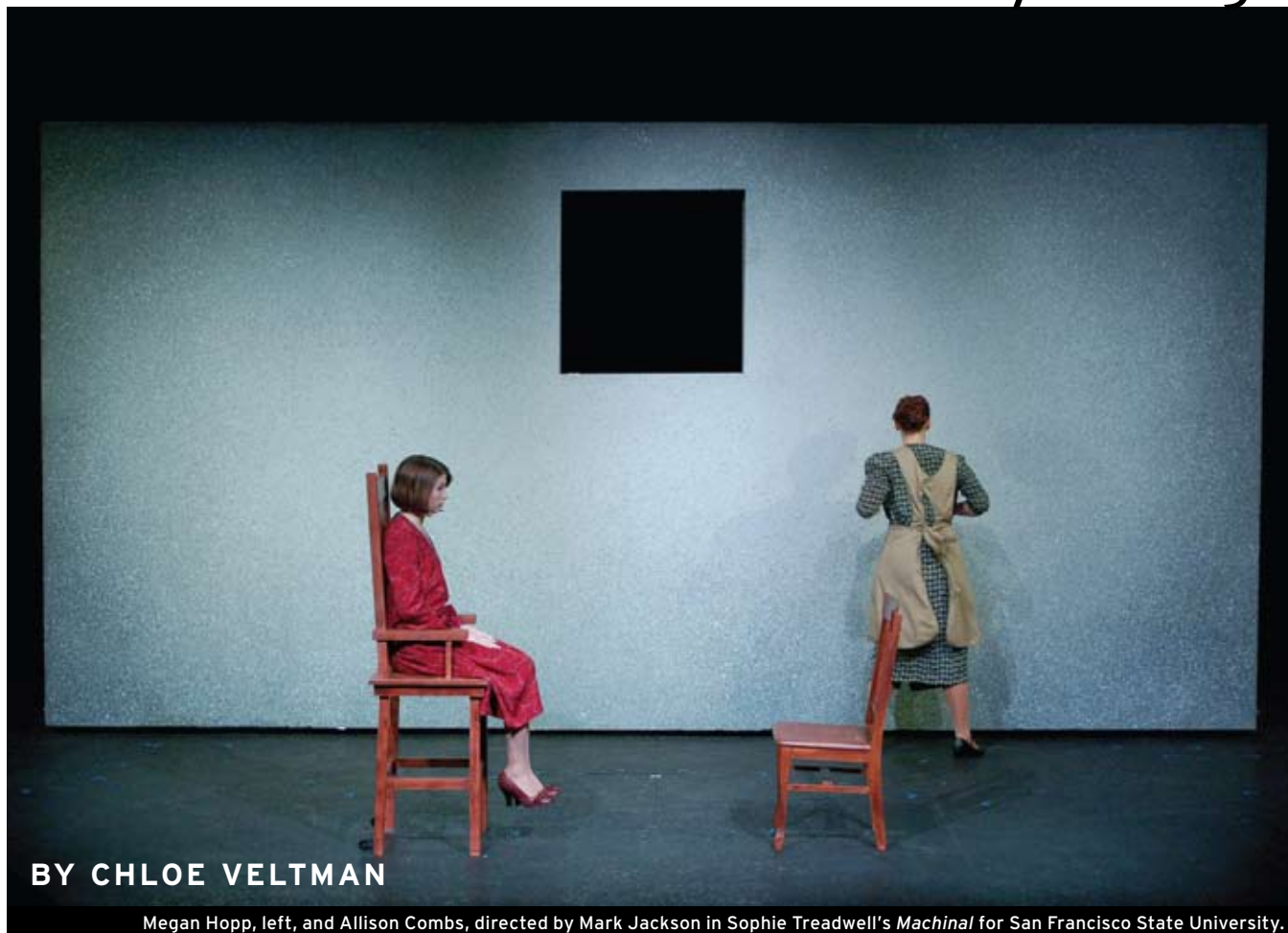


# MARK JACKSON Deutsch by Design



BY CHLOE VELTMAN

Megan Hopp, left, and Allison Combs, directed by Mark Jackson in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* for San Francisco State University.

BENJAMIN PRIVITT

## An affinity for German theatre flavors his genre-bending work in the Bay Area

**WHEN MARK JACKSON SEES A PLAY THAT TO HIS** mind lacks conviction—that lazily or blandly fails to push themes, language and staging concepts to their full potential—he likes to say that the production “is not German enough.”

At one level, the Bay Area–based theatremaker is joking. It’s not as if Jackson believes that the clichés of German experimentalism—nudity! live animals! constant screaming!—are integral to the theatrical experience. But at another level, Jackson is being serious: Seeing the U.S. theatre scene as generally lacking the passion, fearlessness and zealous pursuit of the unexpected evident in its Teutonic counterpart, he often looks to Berlin for inspiration for his own work on stage.

The 37-year-old director, playwright, educator and actor is that rare kind of theatre artist who constantly strives to defy expectations, and in the process inspires adoration from his collaborators even as he drives them beyond their usual limits. “I’m interested in a wide variety of experiences, and I want an audience to feel like they’re seeing something fresh and alive, whether it’s a new play I’ve written or a 400-year-old play by Shakespeare,” declares Jackson, whose careening,

Constructivist approach to Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*, and surprisingly humorous meditation on Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* entitled *Yes, Yes to Moscow*, are among the most memorable theatre productions this reporter has ever witnessed. “So that means I need to examine my choices very carefully,” Jackson continues, “and make certain I’m being honest—actually responsive to the moment—and not just trotting out habits. The Germans do this by course.”

Whether working with Jackson on ensemble-devised projects like *The Lost Plays of Jacques du Bon Temps* or productions of his own genre-bending plays, such as the epic, Japanese-theatre-inspired *The Forest War*, collaborators frequently discover hidden strengths while reaching for Jackson’s sky-high expectations. Actors Kevin Clarke and Beth Wilmurt (Jackson’s longtime girlfriend) are used to bringing his ambitious staging concepts to life. At Jackson’s behest, Clarke has fallen backwards off a seven-foot platform, enacted the slicing open of an expectant mother’s womb with ritualistic precision, and stood on stage for the nearly three hours with his knees bent in a quadriceps-throbbing squat.



RYAN MONTGOMERY

Jackson

“I’ll always say yes to Mark even when I don’t know if I can do something he asks of me,” says Clarke. “He puts it in a way that’s not demanding so you feel you want to try.” (Actually, when Jackson once asked the actor to run up a wall and execute a back-flip, Clarke did say no.)

Known for his strong physical aesthetic, Jackson commonly devotes rehearsal time to movement training in such disciplines as Biomechanics, Viewpoints and Suzuki technique. After working on 2003’s *The Death of Meyerhold* at Berkeley’s Shotgun Players, Wilmurt remembers the arduous process of perfecting a physically intense, two-minute pantomime version of *Hamlet* in her role as the Russian actress Maria Babanova. With its balletic contortions and abrupt mood changes, the scene was hugely challenging to pull off—yet it remains one of the proudest moments of the actress’s career thus far. “Mark’s not afraid to make people feel uncomfortable,” says Wilmurt. “He lets them take it out on him and throw little fits because he knows that they will feel great once they’ve overcome the pain.”

Jackson works his designers with similar rigor. Seeing the people behind a show’s lighting, sets, costumes and sound as core ensemble members, Jackson expects designers to be present at most rehearsals. “Sometimes locking yourself into rehearsals for long chunks of time isn’t always practical as a working designer,” says sound designer Jake Rodriguez, “but being so closely involved in the process produces unmatched results. I develop my cues at the same time as the actors

develop their beats, which feels very organic.”

Jackson approaches every project with passion, dedication and copious amounts of Teutonic punctiliousness. The author of 16 plays and a spate of essays on performance-related subjects, he can spend hours on end standing or prostrate on the couch with his laptop in the small San Francisco apartment he shares with Wilmurt. (He doesn’t much like sitting in chairs.) Jackson is equally focused in the rehearsal room. Working earlier this year at San Francisco’s American Conservatory Theater on an ensemble-devised piece (working title: *The Companion Piece*) inspired by vaudeville double acts, the director jumped straight into refining five minutes of intricate stage business involving a bottle of champagne, an ice-bucket, a vase, flowers, two glasses and a small, square table. It was only day one of rehearsal, but Jackson was intent on perfecting details like where the actors should place their feet while rotating the table 90-degrees clockwise.

Raised in Placerville, Calif., an old mining town some 45 miles east of Sacramento, Jackson started making theatre and films at an early age. When he and his older brother

weren’t co-opting a neighbor’s Holly Hobbie oven to stage dinner-theatre productions in the family garage, the siblings worked on such projects as a 45-minute puppet adaptation of *The Pirates of Penzance* and a *Peter Pan* movie shot with an 8mm camera. Jackson initially thought he would go into film. But his attentions turned towards theatre in high school when he realized that his favorite screen actors had equally illustrious stage careers. “I noticed that all the people I liked in film, such as Meryl Streep and Raul Julia, came from the theatre,” Jackson says. “So I thought I would have more options if I pursued live performance.”

**SINCE COMING TO THIS CONCLUSION,** Jackson’s career has evolved in as focused a fashion as his approach to rehearsals. Following undergraduate theatre studies at San Francisco State University and a six-month stint teaching English and absorbing theatre traditions in Japan, Jackson embarked upon the first of a series of what he terms “Ten-Year Plans.” In 1995, he formed his own company, Art Street Theatre. “Art Street served two purposes,” says Jackson. “It was a place for

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my friends and me to develop artistically and it was a way to create a calling card.” Over the next nine years, Jackson and his cohorts developed a body of physically wild, visually poetic and verbally dexterous work that was—and continues to be—both brainy and visceral.

Even though the company was performing in shoebox-sized fringe venues on shoestring budgets, it didn’t take long for established producers and directors to answer the Art Street call. Melissa Smith, the director of ACT’s MFA program and an early fan, hired Jackson to direct the flagship theatre’s MFA students in well-received productions of Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Michel Marc Bouchard’s *The Orphan Muses*. “Mark’s plays are still the most theatrical pieces I’ve seen in a small space,” says Smith. “They made the room feel large.” Tom Ross, the artistic director of Berkeley’s Aurora Theatre Company, was also impressed with Art Street’s work. Jackson directed *Salome* at Aurora in 2006, and this month (through May 10) he’s staging a production of *Miss Julie* for Ross that aims to emphasize the love story in Strindberg’s play over its better-known gender



JESSICA PALOPOLI

*The Forest War*, directed by Jackson for Shotgun Players.

and class issues. News of Jackson’s reputation similarly reached Shotgun Players’s artistic director Patrick Dooley, who experienced several of the artist’s “really juicy, movement-based pieces” before signing on to produce *The Death of Meyerhold*.

The critical success of this production, the climax of several years of training with leading Russian Biomechanics teacher Gen-nadi Bogdanov, drew Jackson’s inaugural Ten-Year Plan to a euphoric close. The play was picked up by Washington, D.C.’s Studio

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JON FREESE

From top, Beth Wilmurt, Sommer Ulrickson and Tilla Kratochwil in *Yes, Yes to Moscow*, directed by Jackson for Art Street Theatre.

Theatre and won several awards. Jackson planned to focus the next 10 years of his life on developing a freelance career. But in the summer of 2004, following the receipt of a

fellowship from the German government to spend 16 months at Mime Centrum Berlin, a Biomechanics training, research and performance institute, Jackson put immediate resume-building plans on hold and left for Germany with Wilmurt. The expats immersed themselves in the Berlin theatre scene, seeing shows up to five evenings a week. Jackson wrote essays during his stay covering such subjects as the demonstrativeness of German theatregoers (“Booing is quite a rare practice in my country; compare this with Germany, where thus far one out of every dozen productions I have seen has received a boo”) and the German theatre’s unbridled pessimism (“The Schaubühne, like a lot of German theatres, prefers these days to focus on the severity and ugliness of things”).

Since returning to the U.S. in 2005, Jackson has developed an even closer relationship with German theatre. The land of Goethe will make an explicit appearance in Jackson’s upcoming adaptation of *Faust Part 1*, which Shotgun Players will present next month in a production co-directed by Jackson and Clarke, with Jackson himself playing the title character. Jackson’s adaptation of

Goethe’s famous epic aims to toy with audiences’ expectations of tragedy and comedy by mixing together wildly contrasting design and acting styles. Plus, owing to the success of *Yes, Yes to Moscow* in 2007 (which Berlin’s Deutsches Theater commissioned from Jackson and Wilmurt), the couple will return to Germany to develop a new piece at Schauspiel Frankfurt based on the poem “Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen,” by Heinrich Heine.

**JACKSON’S STRONG VISUAL SENSE**

and passion for perfection have opened many doors for the artist since he embarked upon his freelance career—but his strengths as a theatremaker have spawned challenges, too. “He can be quite stubborn,” affectionately avows Shotgun Players’ Dooley, citing a characteristic which may partially explain why SF Playhouse, the company that originally contracted Jackson for *Faust Part 1*, pulled out of the project citing “artistic differences” last year. “Mark suffers a little bit from being a perfectionist,” Wilmurt says. Dooley adds: “Mark doesn’t do realism. He doesn’t do gray. All his staging decisions are sharp and dynamic. The danger with this



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stuff is that you can be accused of ‘all style and no substance.’ When it hits, it really hits. But if the moment hasn’t been thought out right, you get a whole lot of flash and little humanity.”

Tall, thin, pale-skinned and fond of comfortable, ergonomic footwear and blue cloth caps à la Brecht, Jackson wouldn’t look out of place on the staff of the Berliner Ensemble. Yet for all this, Jackson doesn’t carry a hint of the stereotypical auteur-dictator about him. “One of the misconceptions many actors have about Mark is that he comes into the rehearsal room and says things like ‘hold your arm like this and do that,’” says Clarke. “He demands precision—but he’s very open to suggestions.” Yukihiko Goto, head of San Francisco State’s theatre department, admires Jackson’s egolessness. “I have never seen him be condescending to anyone,” Goto says.

Jackson is equally open beyond the rehearsal room. When I met the theatre-maker in person for the first time early in 2007, I had just penned a particularly acerbic review of *American Suicide*, Jackson’s riff on contemporary celebrity culture (loosely




Jackson’s *Meyerhold* at Shotgun Players, with Cassidy Brown and Beth Wilmurt.

adapted from *The Suicide*, a 1920s satire by the Russian dramatist Nikolai Erdman), which I strongly felt lacked Jackson’s usual flair for stage poetry. Following a brazen e-mail exchange, we agreed to hash out our differences over a beer. We never did see eye-to-eye on the play. But it didn’t really matter, because that initial conversation led to something altogether more inspiring: the


founding of a series of Bay Area “theatre salons” that continue to bring people from disparate corners of the local performing-arts landscape together for community-building banter about everything from fringe theatre to audience dynamics. If it weren’t for Jackson’s warmth and willingness to look beyond a bad review, the salons may never have come into being. Neither, for that matter, would our friendship.

With about six more years to go before the end of his current Ten-Year Plan, Jackson has been laying the foundations for his third decade of theatremaking: “I try to give myself a goal knowing that doing specific things will lead to a lot of unknowns,” Jackson says. “But if I end up freelancing for the rest of my life I’ll be happy.”


If Jackson does manage to establish his own arts organization—one that, like his chief source of inspiration, Berlin’s Schaubühne, presents theatre and dance productions on multiple stages alongside rehearsal and workshop spaces and a late-night café—the Bay Area will be all the better for it. Then again, there are limits to how much German-inspired theatre the average San Francisco performing-arts junkie can take. “Mark sends me ridiculous YouTube clips from German theatre productions. Sometimes I get three or four links at a time,” mutual friend and local theatre director John Wilkins recently told me. “This might be the opposite condition of ‘not German enough.’” 

**Chloe Veltman is a San Francisco-based theatre critic and a recipient of an *American Theatre* Bay Area Commissioning Fund grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.**

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