

August 3, 2008
Inside the Director's Studio
www.leighahorton.com/greenroom/

American Sexy, opening today at the U of M Rarig Center Arena, was directed by Brian Balcom and produced by The New Theatre Group. Brian recently took some time to chat with me about the Fringe, directing, The New Theatre Group's process, local playwrights, and his dishwasher:

Two Fringe Fests ago you directed Alan Berks' How to Cheat, last Fringe you directed Steve Moulds' Killer Smile, and this year you've got your paws on Trista Baldwin's American Sexy. Aside from the theme of new works by Minneapolis-based playwrights, the only common denominator in these productions is you... so are YOU The New Theatre Group? If not - who is, exactly?

BB: I am, indeed, The New Theatre Group. I opened a small business checking account before I thought of the name so I was suddenly pressured into making one up, but I think it's pretty appropriate. There is no core artistic 'group', but everything we do is created for and inspired by the particular group of artists working on that show.

How is The New Theatre Group different from the Workhaus Collective?

BB: The main difference between NTG and Workhaus is the process by which the plays are written. Often, playwrights will have a specific actor in mind when developing a character; it can help them to see and hear (in their mind) how things will play out. But rarely will that actor be a part of the actual development process or in the first production. We cast our shows before the playwright begins and the play is then tailored to/inspired by the actors involved. It begins with an early meeting when we talk about the play. The playwright tells us what they want to write about and we talk about it; what it means, how we relate, what about it is important to each of us. We share stories, we argue, we listen, we build. THEN the playwright begins to write.

What draws you to the work of local playwrights?

BB: We're especially lucky that organizations like The Playwrights' Center, The Jerome Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, and others are so committed to new plays and to Minnesota. The Jerome Fellowships bring in 5 outstanding young playwrights each year and many have stayed in Minneapolis. This allows us to build relationships and make plans in a way that would be impossible if we lived across the country.

Do you specifically seek out their work, or do playwrights specifically seek out your direction?

BB: All of the above. Alan and I decided to do How To Cheat together, Steve approached me for Killer Smile, and I hounded Trista for American Sexy. But these are all people I knew personally as well as artistically. Someone recently asked me if we accept submissions. We would never produce a play that already exists, but more than that, creating and developing a play is a very personal and intimate experience and requires a strong relationship between director and playwright. I don't think I could go through this particular process with a playwright I don't know.

You've assistant directed at The Guthrie, and also regularly work with smaller companies - such as Walking Shadow. What do you prefer about the larger setting? What do you prefer about the smaller?

BB: Companies like the Guthrie provide a phenomenal amount of resources to support their productions - and I don't just mean money. It's really incredible to get nearly everything you ask for. Even though I was just an assistant director - and back in 2003 - I felt artistically safe.

When you work for a smaller company, nothing feels safe. A lot of factors contribute to that (edgier plays, rougher talent, less money, etc.), but it adds elements of risk, danger, fear, and excitement. And I love it.

If an audience member were to tell you, "I can't tell what was the actor's choice, and what was the director's direction," how would you respond? Any tips for helping audiences differentiate the two?

BB: Why does it matter? Enjoy the show. (read: it was OUR choice)

What show have you always wanted to direct? Which company would you want to produce it?

BB: I feel like I should have an answer to this, but I don't. I have a short list of playwrights I'd like to work with, but no list of plays. I guess this is what happens when you focus on new works.

Honestly, the play isn't the most important thing to me. What really drives me is the process: working together to create something out of nothing. It's about relationships and problem solving and frustration and sweat and love and hate. But in the end, it's all about hearing the playwright's voice and giving them the opportunity to tell us something and making sure they feel like we've done that as best we can.

What rocks your Fringe? What's the bane of your Fringe?

BB: I love the atmosphere of the whole thing. Fourteen thousand artists and patrons coming together to live and breathe theater is really amazing. The excitement of rushing across town to get to another show, the anticipation of standing in line, hoping to get a ticket to a hot show, hearing strangers talk about theater and share their Fringe experience... It's just great. It feels great to be in it.

I hate hearing people complain about the lottery and its resulting artistic variety.

Anything else, in general, besides show pimpage, you'd like to spill?

BB: I'm concerned about the shrinking number of mid-sized companies. I'm tired of hearing people complain about Joe Dowling and the Guthrie's mainstage product. I'm excited The Cody Rivers Show is in a venue that seats 450. I'm sad that Nathan Keepers is moving to New York. I'm thrilled that my dishwasher works again.

There have been times that American Sexy has made me scared, empowered, embarrassed, nervous, elated, and proud. I'm hopeful that we can share it with you.

FringeFamous Five: Brian Balcom & Trista Baldwin
Posted by fringe famous on August 4th, 2008
Fringefamous.podbean.com

With all the Fringe craziness going on, I was very pleasantly surprised when we were able to catch director Brian Balcom and playwright Trista Baldwin for this week's FringeFamous Five. Brian and Trista collaborated on the current Fringe show American Sexy.

Give us a feel for American Sexy. Word on the street is that it's pretty sexually charged.

BRIAN BALCOM: It is. The show is about how technology and culture are changing the way we value ourselves. Things like MySpace and YouTube are changing the game and it feels like we've got to go further and be more shocking. It's about how common it's become to degrade and exploit ourselves to get the attention we want.

Because of this, it does, at times, have a raw, sexual energy that is sometimes good, sometimes uncomfortable, very real, and also absurd. Our hope is that we've created a memorable, visceral experience — even if you feel disgusted by what you see (and at times, you should).

TRISTA BALDWIN: Yes, and what does it mean to be sexually charged? What's real sexual energy and what is a put on? That's one of the questions I'm asking.

Was the show put together with the Fringe in mind, or was it ready to go before hand?

TB: I had a version of the play in mind before I wrote it specifically at Brian's command. ;-)

BB: I do enjoy commanding playwrights to do things. It helps that I carry a big stick. Really, the playwrights always have an idea or an outline or a feeling. When Alan Berks and I began working on How to Cheat, all he said was "I want to write a play about happiness". And Steve Moulds wanted Killer Smile to be about a surprise birthday party. That's where we began for those shows. Once we got our cast together we started talking, sharing, listening, and building. Only after that did they start writing the script.

Who/What is The New Theatre Group?

BB: The New Theatre Group is just me — there is no core artistic ‘group’. I opened a small business checking account before I thought of the name so I was suddenly pressured into making one up, but I think it’s pretty appropriate. Everything we do is created for the particular group of artists — we cast our shows before the playwright begins and the play is then tailored to/inspired by the actors involved. It creates a unique situation where the actors can really feel like they own the play and their character.

TB: The New Theatre Group goes way beyond Brian, really. It’s a movement.

Have there been any talks of producing American Sexy post-Fringe?

TB: Maybe. Maybe...

BB: I know that Trista’s plan for American Sexy goes beyond the Fringe. I hope she feels that this is a phase of development on its way to becoming a richer, deeper, full-length piece. There’s so much more in it than our 60 minutes allows and we’ve already had to cut it down to its present form. With or without me (or us), I do hope that it goes on.

How did The New Theatre Group and Trista Baldwin connect for this project?

BB: I had been after Trista for a while to do a Fringe show and the schedule never worked out. It was actually luck and good fortune that American Sexy even exists this year — one of her plays got picked up off-Broadway which rearranged her schedule and allowed this to happen. But we had met years ago through mutual friends and that’s the most important ingredient to this particular process. Creating and developing a play is such an intimate process and requires a strong relationship between playwright and director.

TB: I was finally able to succumb to his demands. And I’m glad I did. Even though I’m so Big Time... Seriously, I like writing for specific purposes, and writing/revising in rehearsal. I’m not the kind of playwright that likes to write in my shed and push the script out through a hole in the door. For me, seeing things physically move is great. I’ve gotten a lot of ideas on how to further develop the play in just this last week of rehearsal, and I know more ideas will come as I see it in front of an audience.