

Q&A with Mark Boergers on THE LAST CYCLIST

3/22/2019

[0 Comments](#)



Director Mark Boergers



The Last Cyclist is a truly heroic bit of satire. The story of its creation, destruction and eventual resurrection would make a really good subject for a drama. Written and developed as political satire in the early 1940s in a concentration camp established by the SS during World War II, the play was performed for a single dress rehearsal before being banned by a Council of Jewish Elders who were afraid of SS reprisals over a play that was so blatantly anti-Nazi. Years later in the 1960s, a survivor of the concentration camp who had been a part of that first dress rehearsal reconstructed the satire from memory. Next month, Cardinal Stritch University Theatre opens a production of the play directed by **Mark Boergers**. He took some time out of a doubtlessly busy schedule to answer a few questions about the show.

The Last Cyclist is a triumph of art having survived the Terezin Ghetto in 1944 and eventually reconstituted into its current form. It's been staged a number of times in recent decades. What was the inspiration behind staging it now?

The true inspiration behind the show at Stritch came from Dan Haumschild, Holocaust Education Fellow at Stritch and HERC, who brought the project to us in October of 2017. It was my first time hearing about the production and at first glance I was skeptical because of the multi-layered complexity of the script and the project. However, the more I learned about what this script actually represents and how it relates to the kinds of societal constructs that lead to events like the Holocaust, I became ever more intrigued by the project. Plays that address the Holocaust in general can be seen as cautionary tales, especially when depicting the horrors of the events. This script does achieve some of that depiction, but it goes further to represent a spirit of art and resilience in the inmates of this particular camp. Their voice is unique, absurd and intellectual and portrays a particularly scathing commentary on the political and social climate of the time. One only has to turn on cable news or the nightly talk shows to see how A. our political and social climate is just as tenuous as ever and B. art still has a unique and important role in commenting on it and affecting change. In the most horrible of situations these artists still had the impulse to create, and that has immense resonance to an audience of any time and place. Those kind of archetypal experiences have always been at the cornerstone of my work, so this project is a challenge I was excited to undertake.

Russ Bickerstaff

Archives

[April 2019](#)

[March 2019](#)

[February 2019](#)

[January 2019](#)

[December 2018](#)

[November 2018](#)

[October 2018](#)

[September 2018](#)

[August 2018](#)

[July 2018](#)

[June 2018](#)

[May 2018](#)

[April 2018](#)

[March 2018](#)

[February 2018](#)

[January 2018](#)

[December 2017](#)

[November 2017](#)

[October 2017](#)

[September 2017](#)

[August 2017](#)

Categories

[All](#)

 [RSS Feed](#)

space to bear witness...” The Nancy Kendall Theater is actually a really nice space. How are you using the stage to make it feel like an unpolished rehearsal space?

That might be a little bit of the magic that I don't want to reveal in too much specifics. I will say that it was a big discussion about how to make the Kendall fit with our goals for the show. Particularly the mixture between elements depicting the conditions of the holocaust, but also doing homage to the freedom of creativity and imagination in the minds of the actors that created this script. We wanted to find a way to filter our own creativity and artistic process into the physical space of the show to pay tribute to their own limitless artistic dream world.

***The Last Cyclist* comes from the mid-20th century. However, there are universals in the theme that move well beyond any single era. How specific is the production to any one era? Is there any effort to draw parallels between the script and the modern global political landscape?**

In looking at this script, it became clear that we needed to blur the lines between the historical grounding of the show and the satirical chaos of the play-within-a-play. In very early production meetings, Dan Haumschild spoke to the fact that it is a fruitless pursuit to seek to depict the holocaust with any sort of historical accuracy, but the holocaust is not something that can be suitably explained. In talks with the playwright, I also expressed the desire for a diverse cast in both age and cultural background, which she embraced. This stemmed from the fact that my own personal process starts with how stories apply to all humans at all times and then moves more towards the specific. This philosophy both freed us as a team but also restricted us. We took ideas of what the original cast had available to them (bed sheets, discarded household items, bits of wood, items they took with them from their homes when they got arrested) and then sought to move from there to a more intense and artistically free world of imagination. Because of this, I think we find a way to address the archetypal nature of the story without drawing specific parallels to what is going on today. By grounding the show in the universal experience of artistic impression, it necessarily speaks to the fact that this story has resonance far beyond just that of the holocaust.

It's a rather large ensemble that you're working with and yet...there isn't a single actor in the show who isn't playing more than one character. That sounds like a lot of traffic to juggle as a director. What has it been like working with the cast on the show so far?

It certainly is! I have a large background in Shakespeare so I am used to multiple characters and juggling large ensembles, but this play provides challenges unlike any other. I often find the “play within a play” construct challenging because one wants to pay attention to both the onstage process of humans creating a play and telling the story of artists who are real humans in process- but there is also the actual play and just how committed those “actors playing actors” can be to each of their pursuits. Throw in the fact that this is a very complex, absurd and politically motivated satire and there is a lot for our team to manage. Working with this cast has been glorious. I am so fortunate to have the support of HERC to hire professional actors to work with some of our students, and in creating this ensemble I had the closest eye on who would be able to play together in the room to make sense of the madness. We still have some playing to do, but the environment in the room has been charged with creativity, and the cast has been an organic part of figuring out the motivation and through line of the script. It is in those moments of intense creative collaboration that I feel like we are paying the most specific respect to the original artists who crafted this story under horrific conditions.

The cast mixes established local actors with Cardinal Stritch students. Different productions treat a mixed student/non-student cast for a show in different ways. Some shows place the students along the periphery of an ensemble while others center them right alongside the rest of the cast. How integrated with the rest of the ensemble are they? How collaborative is the process for them?

This is an ensemble show, by nature. We aren't sure how many actors/artists were involved in the original process and if all of them were there from the beginning to the end. It was the process of rehearsal that they were interested in; spending time to create as resistance to the restriction of the camps. Because of this, our process is as collaborative as possible. I don't see a line between the students and the professionals. They all auditioned against others to be placed in this show and I expect the same kind of process from everyone in the room. Of course it is a bit startling to all of a sudden welcome so much new energy into our University rehearsal hall, but from my training and experience it is those "squishy" moments when things feel risky and not-so-safe when the real magic comes out.

There's a stark contrast between surrealist absurdity in the script and the very real politics being explored in the story. Surrealist absurdity always runs the risk of undermining meaningful allegory. How are you handling the balance between surreal absurdity and real world political elements in the production?

That's a great question- and I can only say I hope I am balancing it well! My inclination is to always find the reality in the scene or the interaction no matter how absurd or surreal it may be. There is motivation to any action. I have released the actors from worrying too much about the political implications of the play. We had amazing resources from HERC and other community organizations to have deep research and also interact with a survivor of the holocaust and hear his story. We were able to discuss the political motivations of the playwrights and what may have been going on in the play. But once we got on our feet I wanted to move away from that and delve into the story itself- to the full 360 degree nature of these characters as created and create a physical and emotional vocabulary for the play. It has been a collaborative process and it feels chaotic at times. I hope that means we are on the right track.....

Cardinal Stritch's production of ***The Last Cyclist*** runs **April 5th- 14th** at the **Nancy Kendall Theater** on **6801 N Yates Rd.** For ticket reservations and more, visit [Cardinal Stritch online](#).

Name
.....

[0 Comments](#)

Leave a Reply.

