

THEATER

In production

Myra Donnelly is a one-woman whirlwind in Portland's stage scene

BY PATRICIA L. MACAODHA

The house lights dim. The audience sits in anticipatory silence as actors position themselves in the darkened space. As the lights come up and the first lines are spoken, one woman in the audience leans forward a little.

Myra Donnelly, playwright, producer and partner at Theater! Theatre!, is fully engaged in her role. She has produced and adapted plays for stages in Portland, New York, Los Angeles, Texas and Ireland, where she has twice produced plays for the Dublin Fringe Festival.

For Donnelly, theater is "collaborative art. I'm always looking for people to work with, not for," she says.

She adapted and produced her first play, *Charlotte's Web*, when she was 14 years old, an alternative to attending high school English class. Her parents called her "Sarah Bernhardt."

She began her academic pursuit of a theater arts degree at Rhode Island's Brown University but switched to Sarah Lawrence College in New York to complete her bachelor's. In 1989 she moved to Portland and soon began working for Stark Raving Theatre. She supervised more than 40 productions in her nine years as producing director.

Donnelly describes her approach to theater as "radically romantic" but notes her stint at Stark Raving seldom incorporated her own politics. "I've always had radical politics," she says, "and enjoyed expressing them through theater."

She was appalled by the passage of 1990's Measure 5, which gutted a significant amount of theater funding statewide, and by infamous anti-gay Measures 9 and 13. The 1992 production of *Bent* by Don Horn's triangle productions!, now her partner in Theater! Theatre!, made her want to produce more political drama.

The vibrant theater space on Southeast Belmont came about, in part, because Donnelly wanted to create a "theater mall," with multiple stages and separate rehearsal and meeting spaces all under one roof.

Seeking partners, she approached the city of Portland, the late businessman and developer Bill Naito and other theater companies in the area. Of everyone she approached, "only Don said yes." He wanted a space that would work for triangle.

So Theater! Theatre! was born—home of Stark Raving Theatre, triangle productions!, storefront businesses and nonprofit office space. Donnelly and Horn formed My-Don LLC and worked closely on the project, hiring architect Thia Bankey and contractors Yorke and Curtis. The contractors faced a new challenge, having never before built a theater, let alone two.

The project finished, both theater companies moved in, enjoying the rush of interest accompanying this new creative venue. With a unique venue comes unique problems: Production schedules sometimes had to coincide. Soundproofing, while desirable, is very expensive, and early concurrent play runs experienced moments of unplanned hilarity when screams or shrieks from one production spilled into moments of poignant silence in the other.

In 1999, creative differences led to a parting of the ways between Donnelly and Stark Raving Theatre. "I was suddenly deprived of my work," she says.

Horn was a strong supporter through this period, initially hiring her to assist him with funding development for triangle. Donnelly realized she no longer had to report to an artistic director with whom she had strong differ-



Myra Donnelly, who co-founded Theater! Theatre!, introduces the new, alternative series *Voices in the Wilderness*

ences and that she no longer had "to sublimate her personal projects" but could begin to pursue her individual interests.

Stark Raving moved to the CoHo Theatre building in Northwest Portland, and Donnelly went to Dublin, enrolling in a master's program at Trinity College. Her thesis-in-progress is titled *The Pre-Famine Woman Playwright and the Irish Stage*.

The last few years has been a time of enrichment and growth for Donnelly and has strengthened her resolve to pursue production of works with new artists.

She formed Vanity Productions in 2001 with the goal of producing artist-initiated projects. Her *Death of Cabaret* in Dublin's International Bar during the 2001 Fringe Festival enjoyed a sold-out run. It was "roundly panned by the critics but played to a full audience every night," Donnelly smiles.

Vanity is currently presenting a run of solo performances titled *Voices in the Wilderness* at Theater! Theatre!, including *The View from Here* by Heather Pearl and Michael O'Neill and *Berserker* by Paul Outlaw. Donnelly describes the series—which included earlier productions *J.O.C. (Journey of Clown)* and *Orlando Eats Children with Wine*—as "really idiosyncratic visions." Each play is performed by the writers.

And there's more in the pipeline. Donnelly recognizes the struggle between the need of the artist for expression and the necessity of selling tickets but remains excited about "the willingness of audiences to support new work." She enjoys the freedom to produce what she believes in. The theater, she says, is her primary relationship. □

VANITY PRODUCTIONS presents *The View from Here* 8 p.m. March 28 and 29 at Theater! Theatre!, 3430 S.E. Belmont St. Tickets are \$10 from 503-239-5919.

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