

# IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK

When boundary-busting companies like the Civilians, Pig Iron and Native Voices take their live shows into the hallowed halls of museums, certain rules must be followed

BY DIEP TRAN

The Civilians founder and artistic director Steve Cosson (third from the right) with the cast and creative team of *The End and the Beginning*, the company's upcoming performance at the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. From left: Nina Hellman, Garrett Neergaard, Mia Rovegno, Cosson, Micharne Cloughley and Daniel Jenkins.

KEVIN THOMAS GARCIA





One thing you should never forget is the love that curators themselves have for objects...There's something instinctive about it. And eventually we hope that our visitors will fall in love with these objects, too.

—from the Civilians' *Let Me Ascertain You cabaret at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

## SEE YOURSELF ONSTAGE IS LIKE HAVING AN UNCANNY VALLEY EXPERIENCE.

At least that's how Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Luke Syson feels.

Syson was pleased as punch to be interviewed by the New York City-based documentary theatre troupe the Civilians, which was recently chosen as the first theatre company in residence at the Met. The discomfiture came later. "I didn't know what was going to happen at all!" exclaims the curator, chairman of the Met's department of European sculpture and decorative arts. "I thought they were going to come up with poems or music inspired by some of the things we talked about." Instead, there in the middle of a Civilians performance was an actor impersonating Syson himself. Impeccably.

Obviously Syson had never seen a Civilians piece before. Watching a version of himself in the Civilians' *Let Me Ascertain You* cabaret at the Met's Petrie Court Café last September was a shock, an out-of-body experience. There was his avatar, giving a lecture on a marble statue of a sleeping Adonis by Antonio Corradini. The dialogue was lifted almost verbatim from Syson's conversation with Civilians artistic director Steve Cosson. And, in true Civilians fashion, the performer was British, like Syson, and managed to do a dead-on imitation of the curator's speech patterns.

"All of that made me conscious for a few days afterwards about the ways in which I speak," Syson recalls. "The odddest thing of all, in the end, was that I saw the performed version of me almost like an object in a museum, to be analyzed on that level. Whether that means I was analyzing myself, or analyzing the 'me' reflected and created, I have to say it was weird. I wouldn't want to do it again. I wouldn't want it to do it again *at all*."

That's the kind of thing that happens when you take a sprightly performance troupe like the Civilians and let them run free in an august institution like the Met. You're bound to make some people uncomfortable.

It can be argued that the visual art and performance art are aesthetic opposites, with one medium static and contemplative while the other is kinetic and energetic. But programming the live arts in a house that contains artifacts and visual arts is not a new thing—museums across America frequently provide performance space for theatre companies, musicians or dancers. The most recent wave of museum and theatre collaborations, though, takes the practice far beyond just providing a low-rent venue into the realm of true creative partnerships.

These developments prompted *American Theatre* not only to report on the trend but to lay down some ground rules (we came up with four) for any energetic theatre group who want to invade the relatively staid, more decorous environs of museums.

### RULE #1: Traumatizing the curators is okay.

The Civilians' groundbreaking residency is part of a three-year-old performance series called the Met Museum Presents. "It goes way beyond, 'Oh, we have an Impressionism show, let's program some French music from the late 19th century,'" says Limor Tomer, general manager of concerts and lectures at the Met and supervisor of the presenting initiative. "What we're doing with the Civilians is unprecedented. For the work they're creating, they're taking the source material from the Met collection, so they're collaborating deeply with our curatorial staff. I think that's something fairly unique."

Indeed, theatre artists these days seem interested in far more than the easy scenario of just taking a play and plopping it down in the middle of a gallery. Instead, the works being presented focus on integrating the live with the static, the past history on the walls with the present embodied by the performers.

For the Civilians, who usually focus on contemporary issues, using paintings and relics as source material was a change of pace, and scenery. "I've been to the Met, but not to the depth that we're doing now," says Cosson. "In the scope of our residency, it's an invitation to engage with the history of culture on a global scale." He later adds with a smile, "I could easily imagine spending another 10 years working from the collection at the Met."

Having a theatre company devise work specifically inspired by the art collection was new territory for the museum. This Met Museum Presents season includes the new John Zorn opera *Sacred Visions* and a dance performance (from Gotham Chamber Opera and

Martha Graham Dance Company) set to music inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In addition to *Let Me Ascertain You*, fashioned from curator interviews and other material, the Civilians will also do a one-night-only performance at the 2,030-year-old Temple of Dendur, called *The End and the Beginning* (March 6), a meditation on death that incorporates more verbatim material from the museum's Egyptian art curators.

Then, on May 15–16, both curators and Met visitors will be interviewed as preparation for *The Way They Live*, an exploration of American identity based on the works found in the American Wing of the Met. That show will be in the Met's Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium. The Civilians residency also extends to artist talks and educational programming.

"Once certain museums realize they can host performance art even if they don't have a recital hall in their buildings, this is a good idea that will spread," predicts Cosson. "The trend is moving toward more departments intersecting, more disciplines interconnecting. Having things in the gallery space and having performance work respond to it—I feel that's the direction of the future."

### RULE #2: Don't run.

When devising performances in a museum, it's best to beware of statues. That's what actor Scott Sheppard learned when he (as part of Philadelphia's Pig Iron Theatre Company) was taking part in the development of a show called *99 Breakups* at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts.



Sarah Sanford mimicking Ariadne in *99 Breakups*.

"We had all these scenes we made in a studio, but when you take it to a gallery, it changes so much of what you're doing," the actor points out. "We were trying to improvise a piece in which my girlfriend was chasing me throughout the gallery—to kind of up the ante on the slow energy of a museum. We were zipping around these sculptures, and everyone had to take a very quick and scary breath of fear that we were going to knock them over."

Luckily, no statues were hurt in the making of *99 Breakups* (and the chase scene was later scrapped). The show's original inspiration was a scene witnessed in an airport by Pig Iron cofounder and co-artistic director Quinn Bauriedel—a couple breaking up. He enlisted the company to sketch out their own breakup scenarios, and someone came up with the idea of a breakup happening in a museum. "A museum is a very fancy space—a space where everything is kind of cleansed," suggests Bauriedel. "You look at the wall, and there's somebody being torn apart by a lion. The works on the wall are anything but unemotional and un-evocative, but we're taught to revere them in this way. We thought, what a great space to break some rules!"

In *99 Breakups*, which originally ran as part of the 2014 Philadelphia Fringe Festival, the audience was divided into four groups, each of which was led by docents from room to room where short scenes (or to use an art term, installations) dealing with the subject of failed relationships played out. In one gallery, a bed was placed in front of a painting ("Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos" by neoclassicist John Vanderlyn) of a reclining nude woman watching her lover sail away. "The scene was just lifted up by the painting," remarks Sheppard, who acted on that bed opposite Sarah Sanford.

En route to another scene, audiences might have encountered a woman lying on the floor weeping. The environment became a sort of museum of broken hearts, with the entire theatrical experience mimicking museumgoers' penchant for contemplating artworks for a prolonged period of time.

Unlike a theatre, where performers can come and go when they



Scott Sheppard and Justin Rose in *99 Breakups*.

wish and tech can last all day, Pig Iron had five weeks to rehearse in the museum, and they could only do so after 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays and all day Mondays, when PAFA was closed. (PAFA was a co-producer on the show, receiving 10 percent of the box office.)

"Every day we had to set everything up and strike everything, because it functioned as a museum the next morning at 10 a.m.—that meant we had to have a crew of 10 people," says Bauriedel. "In order to not get overcharged, we had to be out at 11 p.m., so when the show ended at 10:30, we had half an hour to get everything out." In the end, Bauriedel confessed, "I wished we had lots, lots, *lots* more time in there."

It's not just rehearsal time that can be restricted by electing to make a museum your venue—performance time is shortened, too. *99 Breakups* had only 15 performances. The Civilians' productions at the Met are only running for one or two evenings, and the Temple of Dendur show is a single-night event.

For his part, Bauriedel is currently scoping out other similar venues that could host *99 Breakups* (though future versions of the show will require some re-devising to fit the environment). He discovered a possibility in Croatia. What's the space called? "The Museum for Broken Relationships," he says excitedly. Sounds like a match.

### RULE #3: Be careful with the knives.

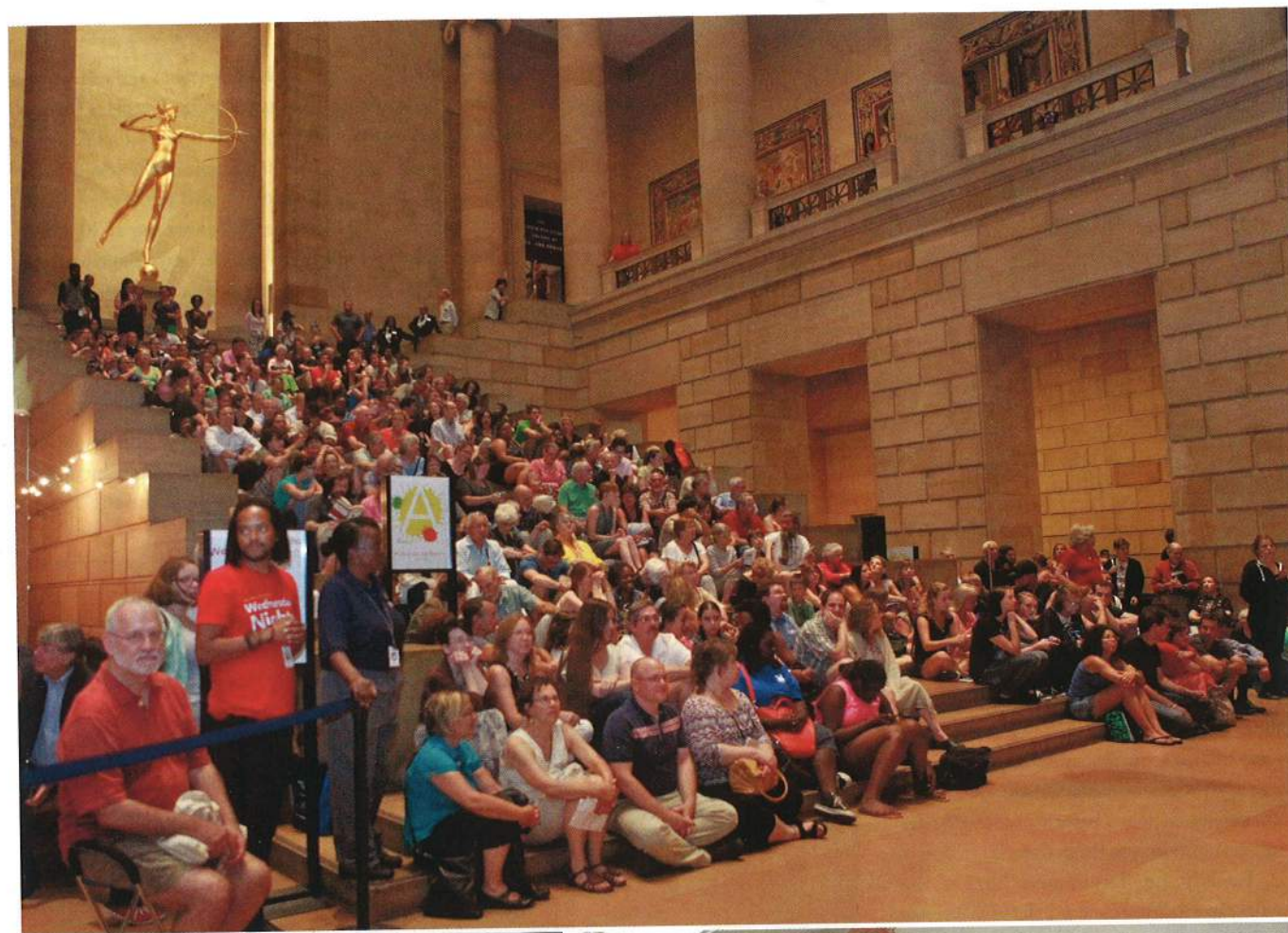
You're walking through a long gallery, filled with 18th- and 19th-century European art. Suddenly you hear shouting, and two actors, playing Hal and Hotspur from Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, launch into a sword fight. Around them a battle ensues, with five other pairs of swords clanging.

Well, at least that was the initial concept.

"The museum wasn't comfortable having any weapons within a certain distance of a piece of artwork," says Griffin Stanton-Ameisen, artistic director of Revolution Shakespeare, an ensemble that recently performed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. "Four days before we opened, I got a phone call from the museum saying, 'I have really bad news—we can't do the fight in the gallery.'"

But if there's one thing theatre artists are adept at, it's coming up with a Plan B on the fly. The battle between Hal and Hotspur ended up being staged in the Great Stair Hall, the venerable museum's main entrance, overseen by a 13-foot gilded copper statue of Diana. But let





Above: The crowd gathers at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for *Five Kings*. Right: Revolution Shakespeare actors lead the crowd through the museum.

it be a lesson: When performing in front of multimillion-dollar paintings, best to not wield anything sharp.

Last summer, in honor of Shakespeare's 450th birthday, the PMA hosted a series of plays by Revolution Shakespeare as part of its Wednesday night in-gallery performance series. The two-year-old Bard troupe staged Orson Welles's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *V: Five Kings*. The performances were staged in installments over four weeks in July, with each episode in a different gallery.

For Claire Oosterhoudt, the coordinator of PMA's Wednesday Night Programs, having theatre artists running around and jumping on furniture was an unsettling new experience. "We were very nervous about it going in—we didn't want anyone falling into a Van Gogh," she allows. "It's surprising—there's a different energy in the gallery as soon as you come across a performance of this caliber. Introducing theatre, with people fighting with swords and yelling, is certainly exciting."

While the *Civilians* and *Pig Iron* were able to devise pieces specifically made to go into a museum, it's unlikely that Welles or Shakespeare intended for their work to be performed in front of multimillion-dollar paintings. Because art conservation rules dictate that there can be no amplification, additional lighting or designed sets, the only way to create a sense of place was via costuming. "In the first episode of *Five Kings*, we were in a room called the Rotunda, which holds a painting by Manet called 'Le Bon Bock'—it's this older fat man with



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a pipe and a beer in his hand. My director, Tom Reing, said, 'That's Falstaff,'" recalls costume designer Becca Austin.

So when the audience was introduced to Falstaff, he was dressed exactly like the man in Manet's painting and holding the same pose. Austin also incorporated the color schemes and time periods of each gallery into her costumes. And actors in *Five Kings* were directed to talk to the paintings on the walls.

Of course, performing in front of a set of famous paintings is its own kind of challenge. "You have these glorious, influential, million-dollar historical paintings, and you're going to ask the audience to turn and pay attention to you? It's an actor's worst nightmare," Sheppard declares.

But when the show comes together, and no one falls into a Van



CHAS SCHWARTZ



Above, from left, DeLanna Studi, LaVonne Rae Andrews and Kalani Queypo in Native Voice's production of *Stand-Off at HWY #37* by Vickie Ramirez. Randy Reinholz (foreground) introducing members of the Native Voices Artists Ensemble.

Gogh, both the performers and the museum benefit. The crowd for *Five Kings* totaled more than 900 (with people lining up an hour and a half ahead of time for admission), making it one of the most successful Wednesday night programs that the museum has ever had. It was a similar case for *Pig Iron* and the *Civilians*, whose museum pieces quickly sold out.

Hosting a theatrical event can be a way for museums to rebrand themselves. "Here was an opportunity for *Pig Iron*'s audience to come to PMA, and that's exactly the demographic they want to know about the museum," says Bauriedel. "When you're an old institution that's seen as a little bit establishment, being part of the Fringe Arts Festival, which is seen as very edgy and very contemporary, brings you into that world."

#### RULE #4: This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

In 1999, the Autry National Center in Los Angeles, dedicated to artifacts and stories of the American West, invited a Native American theatre company to perform in one of its exhibitions. The theatre, Native Voices, never left.

For producing artistic director and cofounder Randy Reinholz, being the resident theatre company for the Autry for the past 16 years has contributed heavily to Native Voices' present-day success. "Twenty years ago, there were two plays by Native Americans for sale in the United States. American Indian theatre had been nomadic and sporadic at best," says Reinholz. But that prognosis has changed. "To date, we've premiered 26 new plays under union contracts, and we've given development opportunity to about 150. That's huge!"

The Autry allocates a portion of its \$16-million budget to Native Voices—this season's apportionment was \$490,000, representing a four-fold increase since Native Voices' first year in residence. In

those early days, Reinholz and his wife (the company's cofounder and producing executive director Jean Bruce Scott) had to make do with very few bells and whistles. The troupe performed out of a lecture hall. "We ran probably 600 feet of electric cable from the downstairs loading dock up to the theatre—we had no stage!" Scott exclaims.

Now, though, Native Voices at the Autry has become a place where Native American actors can get their Equity cards, and where Native American playwrights can see their work developed. This season the theatre created a 40-member resident company of artists.

And while Native Voices has complete autonomy over its programming, sometimes thematic strands overlap between the museum side and the theatre side. This Native Voices season is devoted to

plays about the American Indian boarding-school experience: *Off the Rails*, an adaptation of *Measure for Measure* written by Reinholz and set in a boarding school, plays through March 15. Coincidentally, the Autry recently acquired a series of video interviews of boarding-school survivors. The museum currently houses the second largest collection of Native American artifacts in the world.

For Reinholz, being able to use the Autry as a dramaturgical resource has elevated the plays he's written. "It's like a think tank at your back," he says. "We have 30 to 40 staff members at the museum who are not theatre people, but who are invested in the play-development process. They are interested in the broader issue of bringing Native American stories to the forefront of American history."

For any theatre company looking to spark a partnership with a museum, shared values are important. At the end of the day, museums and theatre are not so different—both are dedicated to the art of storytelling. For Autry executive director Stacy Lieberman, a long-term partnership on par with what her museum has with Native Voices is rare. But she recommends it. "For some smaller museums, having a resident theatre company may be a way to get their institution on the map, in a way that functioning exclusively as a museum may not."

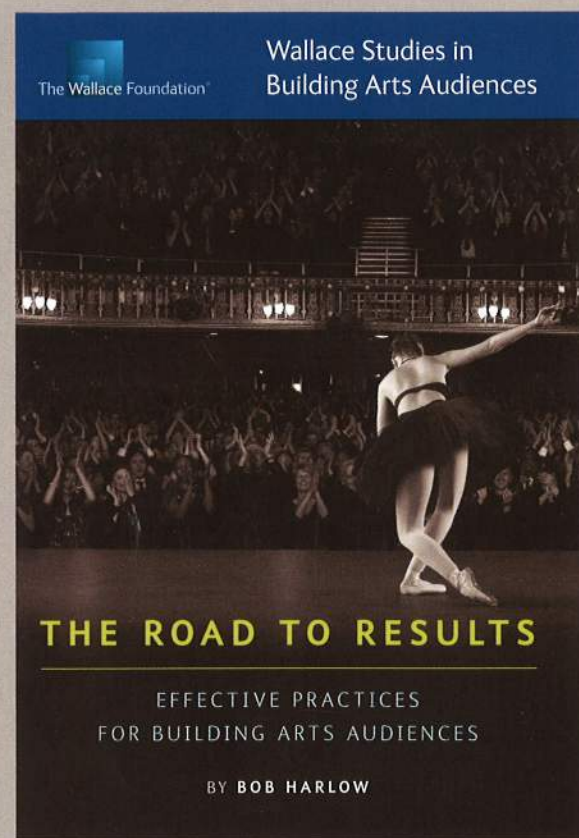
After all, it's all happening under the overarching umbrella of art, and the medium of expression can be seen as merely a technicality. "Don't think of it as performance versus visual art," advises the Met's Tomer. "I just put it in these terms: How do we create extraordinary, meaningful, authentic experiences with art for our audience?"

That's something artists in all disciplines can get behind. **2**



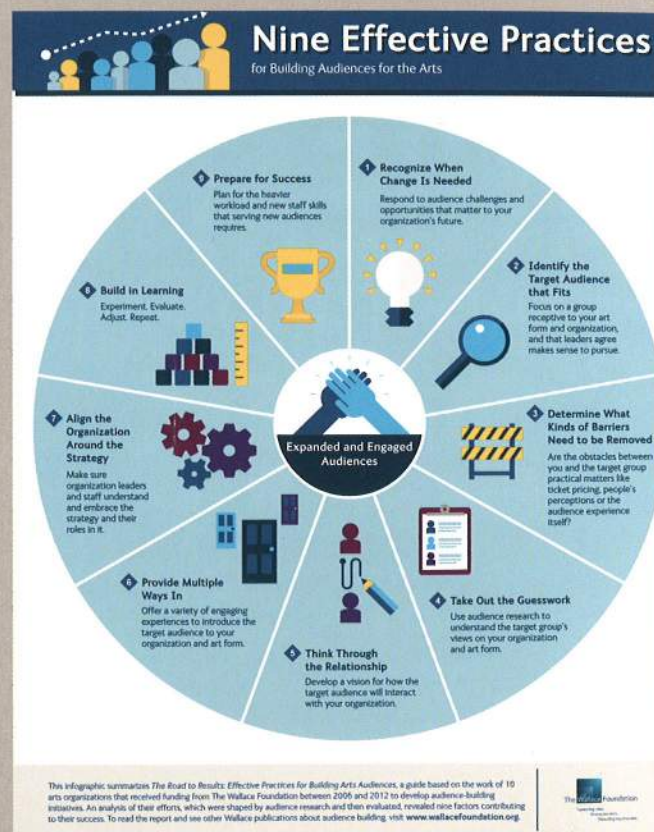
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