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Civilians take unique approach



Auds find Off Broadway company's 'Missing'

by Sam Thielman

NEW YORK -- Steve Cosson likes to be surprised, especially when he's working on a show.

"It's what makes it exciting," says the artistic director of rising Off Broadway theater company the Civilians. "I want to find out what we don't know already, and a great way to do that is to go out into the world and just sit down and listen."

As Cosson describes it, the Civilians' approach to making theater sounds an awful lot like journalism: The entire troupe travels far and wide researching a piece around a given subject, conducting interviews and comparing notes along the way, sometimes for years. It may sound like an arduous process for director Cosson and writer-composer Michael Friedman (Cosson admits that a single show can run "a couple hundred thousand dollars" to research and produce), but it's paid off in spades for the company.

The Civilians have been around since 2001, but it wasn't until last year's "Gone Missing" that the company landed a breakout hit. The trim 80-minute process-driven show was about lost things, from car keys to Atlantis. After being workshopped and vetted everywhere but Atlantis, the show was originally scheduled for a six-week run from mid-June at Off Broadway's Barrow Street Theater. But it opened to such positive word of mouth and enthusiastic reviews that six weeks turned into six months, extending into January.

The company has always depended heavily on grant money to cover travel costs, and since a critical mass of people checked out "Gone Missing," there are now enough grants and donations for the Civilians to stretch a little, including a three-week stint at the Sundance Theater Lab and \$150,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation's prestigious NYC Cultural Innovation Fund.

"They brought together a small panel to choose these," says Cosson, sounding a little thunderstruck. "The other grantees were like, Carnegie Hall, and then us."

Part of the attraction may have been that the Civilians are premiering not one but two shows this season. "This Beautiful City" just bowed at the Humana Festival and is headed to D.C.'s Studio Theater June 11, and "Paris Commune" opens at the Public Theater on April 4. Both shows have been in development for years ("Paris Commune" had its first workshop in 2003), and the coincidence of nearly simultaneous productions has raised the Civilians' profile even further.

Then there is the group's subject matter: Cosson, Friedman and their cast were in Colorado Springs interviewing for "This Beautiful City," which explores evangelical Christianity, just as New Life Church pastor Ted Haggard shocked his congregation by admitting to an affair with a male prostitute. It's hard to imagine a scandal that would allow the group a clearer window into the hidden parts of the community they were investigating -- one of those surprises that so fascinate Cosson.

"When we started our project, Ted Haggard had a lot of stature as an evangelical leader," says Cosson. "The city is about 500,000 people, and it grew a lot over the period of time we spent there. We went in not expecting it to be a story with anything particularly dramatic in it."

"Paris Commune" is a much different story. For one thing, the show takes place in the past, and

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the company had to radically adjust its methodology in order to create it. For another, it's one of the longest-gestating projects in the Civilians' history.

"We'll leave it alone for a year, year-and-a-half, even, and then we'll get funding to do a two-week workshop at the Public," says Cosson. The show takes place in the then-vacant palace in Paris during the Revolution of 1871. It's a difficult piece according to its director ("one of the hardest things you could write a play about"), but it's finally coming to fruition with the help of the Public's LAB series, which is dedicated to giving full (if basic) productions to raw work.

There's still more from these guys: Friedman is writing the music and co-writing lyrics for Playwrights Horizon's "Saved," a high-profile Off Broadway tuner adaptation of the satirical indie film, while on the overflowing back burner there are two more shows, one musical about urban development in Brooklyn and one retelling of the Gilgamesh epic.

At the end of the day, though, the Civilians are less interested in getting into more and bigger theaters and more interested in changing what goes on inside the theaters they're already inhabiting.

"One of the big ideas I had when I started the Civilians was to break out of all the niches we create for theater to live in," Cosson enthuses. "I like the idea that you won't necessarily know what you're going to get."

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