

AMERICAN THEATRE

MARCH 2011 THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

To Wonderland and Back
with STEPHANIE ANSIN
CANVAS THE GLOBE
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Down the Rabbit Hole with Stephanie

Her eye-popping shows captivate
South Florida youngsters—and impress
grown-ups who tag along

BY BILL HIRSCHMAN



Ansin

A mythological firebird flies across the stage on seven-foot wings ablaze with gold and blue feathers. He lands on skeletal branches of a tree bearing succulent fruit as exotic Eastern music swells. From deep inside a warrior's leather breastplate, the creature emits a terrifying roar. The flapping of his wings causes a flying goddess to cling to a branch, stretched out horizontally in mid-air as if riding out a hurricane.

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT IMAGINATION IS an essential ingredient of theatre, but the audience at *Inanna and the Huluppu Tree*, a fantasy adapted from Sumerian folklore, needs no imagination whatsoever to experience the vision described above. It happens before their eyes and ears in an ingeniously conceived, technically sophisticated and lushly appointed production.

For children.

Children initially mesmerized into silence. Children joyfully bellowing back at the monster on stage.

The PlayGround Theatre, nestled in a tree-shaded suburb north of Miami, specializes in dazzling production values and riots of sensory stimuli that eclipse what most people expect from theatre for young audiences.

Over the past six-plus years, PlayGround has delighted more than 120,000 Florida schoolchildren, most seeing shows for free, most seeing live theatre for the first time. Once captivated by swooping firebirds and wind-tossed goddesses, their idling imaginations shift into high gear.

The vibrant images spring from a collective of actors, designers and administrators, including a core dating back to the theatre's founding in 2004.

Behind both the coups de théâtre and a \$2.7-million budget is a slender, soft-spoken 39-year-old named Stephanie Ansin. She is the co-founder, artistic director, playwright, adapter, sparkplug and chief visionary in a company of visionaries who believe that theatre for children requires the same respect for the audience as any other facet of the performing arts.

"This is not a fuzzy animal in a spotlight in front of a flat," Ansin says of PlayGround's ambitious aesthetic. "You would not look at a pediatrician as a 'kiddie doctor.' We are pediatricians of the soul."

Ansin and company create hand-tooled productions noted for sophisticated visuals, original scores, evocative projections, calibrated choreography, elaborate costumes, puppetry, masks, computer animations and a virtuosic ensemble of performers. One show, not even the most complex in PlayGround's repertoire, has 80 sound cues and 150 light cues. (Doubters should check out the company's 30-second promotional video, "The PlayGround Theatre on Plum TV," at www.youtube.com/theplaygroundtheatre.)

PlayGround's personnel, style and texts are decidedly multicultural. *The Red Thread*, now in rehearsal and slated to open in April, is set in China, designed by a native Venezuelan, scored by a composer born in Argentina, and co-written by a Miami Anglo, with part of the set built in Spain. The theatre's source material has ranged from Hans Christian Andersen to Gabriel García Márquez, whose *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* was melded into an adaptation by hometown Pulitzer Prize winner Nilo Cruz.

The mix seems to be an inevitable, organic result of PlayGround's location at the crossroads of the Americas. "Isn't that Miami?" Ansin observes.

PlayGround's shows also have a highly stylized approach that sets them apart from most South Florida theatre, even though local drama evolved long ago past dinner theatre entertainments to LORT

houses favoring world premieres and edgier fare like Neil LaBute and Martin McDonagh. “An arts community grows by virtue of exposure to really great work,” believes Michael Spring, director of Miami-Dade County’s Department of Cultural Affairs, and the team of artists at PlayGround, he adds, has “reset the bar.”

Ansin’s reputation is growing nationally as well. She has been asked to join the board of the professional association Theatre for Young Audiences/USA. “They challenge children’s minds—make them think outside of the box,” board member Daphnie Sicre says of Ansin and company.

Sicre knows firsthand. Several years ago, she brought 100 high-schoolers to see PlayGround’s post-apocalyptic fable *The Beast*: “My students...you could see their eyes pop!”

A large tapestry representing the community in Márquez’s A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings rolls on stage. The collage is a wall of life-sized faces and bodies made of a bodgepodge of fabrics. But suddenly, the audience realizes that some of the faces and feet are moving. Living people are seemingly sewn into the fabric.

ANSIN AND HER FREQUENT COLLABORATOR, DESIGNER

Fernando Calzadilla, are in the closing weeks of a watershed project two years in the making—*The Red Thread*. Drawing upon Chinese folk tales, Ansin helped conceive the story of a widowed weaver who has dedicated three years to creating one magnificent silk tapestry. When his older daughters abscond with his work before it is finished, his youngest daughter sets off across the breadth of the Asian continent to retrieve the masterpiece.

A \$100,000 matching grant from the Knight Foundation will help the images in the creators’ minds take corporeal form. For instance, floor-to-proscenium towers of blond wooden blinds form the legs and backdrop of the set. When the tapestry is recovered in

the play’s finale, the slats will reverse to reveal a stage-wide full-color recreation of the intricate masterwork.

It’s a project full of Ansin’s hallmarks: high-impact visuals, Equity actors rehearsing for seven weeks, eye-catching costumes. “Lighting, choreography, costumes and sets, there is not a weak component,” says cultural affairs director Spring. “For me, that sort of evenness of outstanding quality across all the disciplines in a company this young is phenomenal.”

As important to Ansin as quality is crafting work that will capture the attention of children weaned in a breathless, digital world. PlayGround’s shows feature a steady flow of movement along with ever-shifting colors and shapes—at the rehearsal I watched, large triangular flats reconfigure to represent castle gates, forests or mountains. Equally key is a dense soundscape, ranging from a full original music score to a steady underpinning of hums, clangs and chimes.

The results hypnotize children for 90 uninterrupted minutes. Why? “Because it has to be alive to me first,” Ansin figures. “It is something I have to feel.”

Similar attention is invested in the intellectual content. PlayGround’s pieces share all the usual children’s theatre themes of responsibility and courage. But the team layers levels of meaning and sophistication into the text and production values that can be discerned by different age groups so that entire families are spellbound. *Inanna and the Huluppu Tree*, for example, spoke to maintaining the order of the universe, suggested that someone’s strength may also be his or her weakness, and affirmed that an individual’s success requires community support.

“We take a lot of risks in dealing with taboo subjects like death,” Calzadilla points out. In *Inanna*, Ningizzida, the god of medicine, snakes and trees, tells Gilgamesh that humans are not supposed to possess a root conferring immortality because they “are designed to die.”

Ansin believes that many of the subtle allusions for adults are



Jesús Quintero in *Inanna and the Huluppu Tree*, adapted from Sumerian folklore by Ansin and Fernando Calzadilla for PlayGround in 2009.

PAVEL ANTONOV

picked up by youngsters on some level. In a radically reworked *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the title character's trip down the rabbit hole begins with a projection depicting a tunnel-like tree canopy recognizable to Miamians from the local landscape. Alice is dressed in a familiar Catholic girls' school uniform, and the mock turtle, with its hard shell, is a Miami Dolphins player in a helmet.

"I always want to address everyone's expectations and then turn them on their head," Ansin maintains. She revels in the synergy of collaboration, but observers cite her creative vision and leadership as the linchpins of PlayGround's success. On first encounter she may seem nurturing, passionate and a bit shy, but her champions cite her steely determination, unflinching energy and a perfectionist's attention to detail.

"She can be sometimes like a bat out of hell, and at other times very introspective," ventures family friend Charlie Cinnamon, the dean of Florida arts publicists. "She absolutely wears blinders when it comes to anything that could distract from the show—nothing falls through the cracks."

Actor Jesús Quintero has worked with Ansin since PlayGround's first show. "Stephanie walks through fear to face what she's afraid of. She does not compromise," he says. "She gives everything she has to the company and to the show—and she demands the same from you. That's the only rule."

Her intensity—she will stop rehearsals to polish an actor's hand movement—and her insistence on continued training for her ensemble have unnerved some local artists. One respected actor told her, "Stephanie, people would audition for you, but they don't want to work that hard." But Ansin asks no less of herself, melding her professional life with the demands of being the single mother of a six-year-old daughter.

Ansin was born in Miami to a highly visible family—her father is broadcasting and real estate magnate Edmund Ansin, and her

mother is Toby Lerner Ansin, whose arts activism included founding the Miami City Ballet with Edward Villella. Initially interested in becoming a pianist or dancer, Ansin grew up watching scores of ballets and became particularly intrigued by George Balanchine's work. It ingrained in her the importance of movement, sounds and sights as storytelling devices. From dance she also acquired a choreographer's willingness to create work on the floor—having a detailed plan yet being willing to scrap it for a moment's inspiration.

An unlikely early acting role as Pap in *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at a Massachusetts summer arts camp intensified Ansin's desire to work in live theatre. She earned a 1994 bachelor's degree in theatre arts from Brown University and augmented it with a stint at New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing in Amsterdam. She began collecting a wide range of influences, among them Ariane Mnouchkine, Pina Bausch, Robert Wilson, the masks and puppetry of Bali, and, somewhat later, the work of British director Declan Donnellan and Flemish director Ivo van Hove.

While studying for a master's degree in directing at Columbia University, Ansin balanced the "break the rules" ethos of Anne Bogart and Robert Woodruff with the basics she had learned at the School of Russian Art Theatre workshops in Chicago—"so I felt I had a reason when I broke the rules," she says.

Ansin is fond of reminding people, "I didn't train to be in children's theatre." But the idea for PlayGround did indeed emerge from her training.

In 1998, in a course called Design Your Own Theater Company sponsored by the Manhattan Theatre Club, Ansin's class project was to create (on paper) a full-fledged children's theatre focusing on world theatre and classics. She had no intention of starting such an entity, even though the evaluators urged, "You should do this." Ansin instead resumed her career of directing and assistant-directing Off Broadway with her then husband, the Russian director Oleg Kheifets.

When she became pregnant in 2004, Ansin returned to Miami to be closer to her family. She and Kheifets toyed with turning their New York-based company, Stari Repertory Theatre, into PlayGround. Miami arts activists and community leaders all advised, "This is going to be hard—but we need this," Ansin recalls.

PlayGround began modestly, as a repertory troupe traveling to venues from West Palm Beach to Miami with an adapta-

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Jeff Keogh, left, and Melissa Almaguer in Nilo Cruz's adaptation of *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*, directed by Ansin, 2007.



Noah Levine in Carlo Gozzi's *The Love of Three Oranges*, adapted/staged by Ansin, 2010.

tion of *Pluft, The Little Ghost* by Brazilian author Maria Clara Machado. Kheyfets had mounted the show in Siberia in his youth with a tropical setting for exotic flavor. Ansin and company reset it in a snowy clime for the same reason.

The troupe gradually added new works to its repertoire, remounting them year after year, sometimes reworking them, much like an opera company. But the paradigm proved unrealistic, Ansin says. “We wanted to create a European rep company, do a show, tear it down after two days and put up another. But it never really worked—it was too demanding for the crew. There was no way to get momentum in the marketing. It didn’t click for the actors. There was no continuity.”

Enter the Shores Theater, built in 1946 as a movie venue in the suburb of Miami Shores. The building sported a few Art Deco touches, but no one could conceal that it was a hippodrome with no fly space and a utilitarian ambience that simply didn’t feel like a place where theatrical magic might blossom.

Other theatre companies had failed to make a stand there. The last one, the Shores Performing Arts Theatre, was struggling along in 2005 when it asked Ansin if her peripatetic PlayGround would run a summer camp in the lobby in exchange for rehearsal space. Late that year, the company folded and PlayGround picked up the building’s 78-year, \$280,000 lease.

PlayGround bought lighting equipment from the defunct Indianapolis Ballet Internationale and opened *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* in November ’06.

The following summer, the fire department shut down the building until PlayGround made \$500,000 in improvements. The company rented space from a Miami Beach theatre until April ’08 when the new premises reopened—with a refurbished 330-seat auditorium featuring a 32-foot proscenium arch and a crystalline sound system.

When Alice begins magically to grow larger, the actress playing her leaves a large triangle representing the White Rabbit’s house and stuffs herself into an identical but much

smaller pyramid downstage. As she jostles to get comfortable inside her prison, a perfectly timed film is projected on the huge cyclorama behind her, depicting the actress making the same movements, choreographed to original music.

BY THE TIME THE COMPANY HAD settled into the Shores Theatre, Ansin’s play-making process had been fine-tuned. The process started with an immersion in research and a quest for images. *The Red Thread* began



Marjorie O'Neill-Butler in Ansin's staging of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

two springs ago when Calzadilla was reading Chinese fairy tales aloud to Ansin. Half asleep on a couch, her consciousness snagged on three images: a pink cave, a stone horse turning into a flying horse, and an embroidered tapestry coming to life.

While Ansin walks into the lengthy rehearsal process with a detailed plan—the dramatic arc of the script, the dialogue, the set and costume designs, even elements of the score, sound effects and choreography—she expects to alter it all on the floor. On a new show, blocking is the last piece of the process. “I have the whole show in my head, but I know that is not reality,” she avows. “What I’m seeing on stage before me can inspire me—sometimes it’s the image that informs the structure and the dialog.”

For *The Red Thread*, she and Calzadilla envisioned a heroine journeying the Silk Road, represented by three succeeding bridges traversing the stage. One is a bamboo and wire boardwalk on the stage deck. Another is the kind of creaky rope bridge built by area Boy Scouts. The third is a massive net. In January, Ansin was not certain the bridges would work exactly as she had imagined. “In my head it could be beautiful, but in

reality it involves an actress moving in time to music, the set and six stagehands,” she said.

Rehearsals are painstaking marriages of movement, sound and dramatic intent. Ansin guides her actors through the internal alchemy of their characters, revealing extensive backstories she has invented and creating credible motivations to ground the fantastic tales. “I think my favorite words these days are telling actors to modulate, collect the energy, pull the taffy,” she quips.

Ansin has built a half-hour extra into the Equity contract to ensure the cast will do a pre-show warm-up, with different actors leading the joint exercise.

It’s a meld of thoroughness and imagination that PlayGround carries through its ancillary projects. Like many children’s theatres, PlayGround has a summer camp, after-school programs, study guides, visits to hospital wards and an outreach program that sends actors into classrooms to lead interactive

workshops in how theatre is created. Ansin is especially proud of the Theatre Inclusion Program, which adjusts the work to accommodate disabled children. Some performances add closed-captioning, assisted listening devices, American Sign Language interpreters and narrators piping descriptions into headsets, all at the same time. Children are able to handle the props and costumes prior to the performance.

One performance solely for autistic children and their parents involved subtle changes like turning down the volume and boosting the houselights. It “opened a new world for them,” wrote Kelly Greene, executive director of the Center for Independent Living of South Florida, Inc.

The Inclusion Program’s capper came in May ’10 when Spring’s cultural affairs department partnered with PlayGround for the first “shadow theatre” production of any kind in Florida. At three presentations of *The Love of Three Oranges*, actors proficient in sign language performed choreographed movements on stage behind each of the PlayGround actors performing aloud for the rest of the audience. The bilingual dance saved children from whipsawing between the

stage action and an interpreter off to the side.

All this costs money. Tickets and school bus transportation are free to 83 percent of all patrons, thanks to corporate underwriting, personal donations, government subsidies, foundation grants and program fees. PlayGround's budget ranges between \$1.9 million and \$2.7 million, depending on whether a new show is being mounted. That's the fourth largest projected budget in a region with more than 60 professional theatres. But "the money is on the stage," Ansin pointedly notes. She has a permanent staff of only seven, plus three year-round actors—"and my office is a closet."

Major corporations and regional powerbrokers are represented on PlayGround's 24-member board of directors and 23-member advisory board, but competitive grants are a key facet of the theatre's funding. PlayGround has received money from groups like the Shubert Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. PlayGround sent between six and twelve applications to the Knight Foundation each of the past three years, until finally winning a grant this fall. Ansin does have a leg up in that her parents are influential community figures who also give generously—the family foundation stepped in with a grant when Ansin bought the lease on the theatre.

"I'm very lucky that I'm from here and I have the legacy of my parents. I have a network. I probably couldn't have done this in New York City," Ansin concedes. "But it also closes doors. People say, 'Why contribute? Her dad can do it.'"

So creating a high profile in the community through aggressive marketing becomes a priority. Besides newspaper ads, marketing director Liz Roldan blankets South Florida with e-mail blasts, stories on broadcast outlets, and Tweets and Facebook postings for parents who are increasingly digitally connected. PlayGround's stunning website (www.theplaygroundtheatre.com) features the company's single most effective sales tool: Pavel Antonov's vivid production photos.

But that's today. Ansin and company are already noodling on a project penciled in for 2013, a piece with a working title as amorphous as its current focus: *The Jewish Play*.

"We've done Sumerian; we've done Chinese; why not Jewish?" posits Ansin, a non-observant Jew who has been reconnecting with her religion because of her young daughter.

And she and Calzadilla continue to play "what if?" Wouldn't it be great if the New Victory Theater or the Brooklyn Academy of Music picked up one of their shows lock, stock and flying monster? Or if they staged an opera? Or applied their vision to Shakespeare, Chekhov's *Three Sisters* or even a Tennessee Williams for adults?

More than 300 first-graders are shaking the auditorium with dancing, clapping and deafening cheers during curtain calls of The Love of Three Oranges. As they are shepherded back to their buses, eight-year-olds Jacques Cox, Tom Brown and Darius Conor argue about whether the huge creature with glowing eyes was a dog or a dragon. But one group of kids lags behind, lining the apron of the stage, mesmerized as the crew dutifully clears the stage, snatching up the last crumb of magic.

HOW DOES PLAYGROUND'S STAFF define success? Ansin nods as Calzadilla answers, "When the kids start to come to theatre on their own. We will have created a new audience."

WORD DRUNK, WORLD SAVVY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

this Abul Kasem? A gay disco dancer, someone blurts out. A TV talk-show panel of Euro-American intellectual experts (some with CIA and FBI affiliations) claims he is a terrorist. When a middle-aged Iranian refugee, hiding from Swedish immigration authorities, starts receiving multiple phone calls from one "Abul Kasem," the play's sharp satire shifts into paranoid and ominous gears. In terrorist-fearing societies, Middle Easterners aren't as free to reinvent themselves as effortlessly as Swedes and other Westerners.

Says Loewald, "Jonas has broken new ground in Swedish theatre and literature with both his themes and his beautiful love of language. He has written a play about Arab identity in a non-Arab society. It has all the things I like—it deals with a serious subject in a playful and engaging way."

As excited as she is about the plays she selects, Loewald admits that producing foreign works can be a crapshoot. "Part of what's hard is we don't have stars," she explains. "We're asking audiences to take a chance on unknown writers and actors who are not box-office names and new plays that are untested.

Ansin is optimistic. She cherishes a particular early performance of *The Love of Three Oranges*. As wedding guests danced an infectious tarantella, bushels of plastic orange balls dropped from the proscenium, bouncing all over the stage. Instantly, hordes of children clambered onto the stage to snatch them up.

"Everyone was freaking out," Ansin recalls, reproducing the beatific grin that she wore all that morning. "Someone asked if we should ask them to give back the balls." She chuckles. "Of course not! We just need to buy more. It's a kinder-rave!" ❧

Veteran newspaper journalist Bill Hirschman is a theatre critic and arts writer for South Florida Theater Review, a website designed to make up for the shortfall in local print coverage. He is treasurer of the American Theatre Critics Association's foundation and chairman of the New Plays Committee that chooses the winners of the Steinberg/ATCA and Osborn prizes.

And now we're also saying, 'Here is a play from Sweden. Here is a play from Japan.' Not everybody is going to jump above the fence to see those kinds of work. We try to scrape away all those hindrances and resistances that people have to a work that is foreign or is in translation—of course, without erasing the play itself. In my experience, the obstacles are never about the play itself."

"In terms of box-office," says Lauren Weigel, PlayCo's executive producer, "we have found very little difference between new American works and new foreign works. Every show is unique, appealing to a specific audience, written or performed in a particular style, so they don't compare evenly across the board. Overall, our best-selling shows over the years have been foreign. Gaining attention for our work is largely about word-of-mouth, press attention and community building. Producing a play from another part of the world gives us a hook, actually. We can talk about our writer's country of origin. We can reach out directly to that community of expatriates and others who take a specific interest in that country." ►



WORLD PREMIERE

Directed by Stephanie Ansin

Choreography by Ileigh Reynolds
Original Music & Sound Design by Luciano Stazzone
Set, Costume & Lighting Design by Fernando Calzadilla

THE RED THREAD

By Stephanie Ansin
& Fernando Calzadilla

April 13 – May 27, 2011

Ancient Chinese folktales inspired this mystical adventure. Witness a young woman's heroic efforts to rescue her father's surprisingly miraculous masterpiece.

Recommended for ages 8 and up.



The PlayGround Theatre presents



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