

Cultural Daily

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Devising Wonder City

Eric · Wednesday, February 1st, 2017

Wonder City is the name of the newly “devised” theater piece that has been created by director Ashley Steed and her 7 person ensemble as part of Son of Semele’s Company Creation Festival. It has already run three nights from January 25-27, and it will run two more times on Saturday, February 11 at 8 pm, and on Sunday, February 12 at 5 pm. (<http://www.sonofsemele.org/>)

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Devised theater? What exactly is it?

I should know. I am part of the 7 person ensemble which created *Wonder City* collectively, over a long rehearsal process of several months, starting with no script and just an idea, a concept. Like Simon Rodia said, the Italian immigrant who built the Watts Towers from 1921 – 1954, and who is featured in our show, “I had it in mind to do *something big* and I did it.” Our idea was to create a theater piece out of our own visceral experiences of living in Los Angeles. One day at a time. Of course it didn’t take us 33 years to do it, only 4 months, but one day, one rehearsal at a time, we improvised around themes, ideas, places, and events... fires, floods, earthquakes, foods, dreams, maps, people we knew or who we’d observed, and slowly, oh so slowly, we put together a script... which even now, finally in performance, is still partially improvised, making it hopefully still honest, raw, and still in the act of being discovered.



The Company of “Wonder City”

The process reminds me of my early days as a performing artist, creating original ensemble work, when I was 22 years old on the near north side of Chicago, as a modern dancer with Shirley Mordine’s “Dance Troupe” in residence at Columbia College. On Wells Street in Old Town, right down the street from Second City. I had just started dancing, but there I was, sweating every day in dance classes for the first time in my repressed life, freeing myself, every morning at 10 am. Discovering my own body for the first time, getting out of my head, working with my modern dance colleagues/company members/family/friends... rehearsing every afternoon from 1-4 pm, making evening-length, ensemble dance-theater pieces, right from the fabric of our own lives, decades before there was even a name for “performance art.” There I was, teaching dance-theater classes myself (the little I knew) from 6-8pm, and then falling asleep, totally exhausted, but

completely satisfied... after a full day well spent... physically, psychically, creatively... emotionally.



The old days: MoMing Dancers: Susan Kimmelman, Jim Self, Kasia Mintch, Eric Trules, & Jackie Radis

“Back to your roots,” is what [USC Dramatic Arts](#) Dean David Bridel said to me the other day, part tongue in cheek, about this “Visceral City Project,” and the whole communal-physical movement thing, his words even truer than he could have possibly known. Because now here I was again, almost 70 years young, about to “retire” from USC, crawling around on a black box floor, blowing imaginary dandelions into the air, playing monkeys, frogs, policemen, my own adopted son, and creating a traffic ballet, a cacophony of complaints, a litany of loved foods, and a day of the earthquake, with an odd, but beautiful-looking ensemble, almost all over the age of forty, whose names are Mark Hein, Stacey Jack, Christian Prentice (our token youngster), Melissa Randel, Flor San Roman, and Roger Weiss. And directed by my former USC student, [Ashley Steed](#), devising a new hour-long piece of theater — with original characters, choreographed movement, and an Anne Bogart type of internal physical vocabulary.



Stacey Jack & Christian Prentice

Ashley’s story itself is unique. As a USC student in my solo performance class, maybe a decade ago, she was certainly smart, hard-working, and prolific. She was the director-producer of the annual performance of Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* and organizer for “Take Back the Night” at USC to raise awareness of sexual violence and assault on campus. I told her that she should become a “producuh.” But then off she went to graduate school in London to get her M.A., and when she came back, she was married to an Irishman, had discovered her body, and had learned about devising theater. Back in Los Angeles, she further re-invented herself as an essential part of the LA theater community, its 99 seat theater wars, moderating Facebook’s “[LA Theater Network](#),” and just recently being hired as the new editor-in-chief of [Better Lemons](#) (the also recently re-invented online arts and entertainment resource).



Ashley Steed

In the middle of our rehearsal process, Ashley lost her beloved mother, Diane, who I had the pleasure of meeting at Ashley’s USC graduation. Her mother’s demise was slow, predictable, and painful, yet Ashley was able to survive her loss, or at least to make it slightly more bearable, by pouring herself wholeheartedly into the devising of *Wonder City*. Sometimes she would have to take long distance phone calls in the middle of a rehearsal to arrange for her mom’s funeral or memorial, but she was always the first one at the theater and always the last one to leave. It is also not surprising that one section of the piece is called “Beach as a place to grieve,” a clear example of “making art out of the fabric of one’s life.” Here is the article Ashley wrote herself for [Better Lemons](#) called “[Creativity in the Time of Grief](#).”



The Frog Dream

Devising theater is time consuming, and as we all know, personally, finding time is ...difficult...

especially in the midst of the busy lives that we all live in LA... and elsewhere. It was certainly more time than I had to give. Yet find time... I did.

And so... here I am.... in the devised show... *Wonder City*.... “acting,” performing, being part of an ensemble again... after so many years as a solo performer. It’s challenging... fun... and visceral.... just like the old days. Truly a... “wonder”!



Christian Prentice & Eric Trules seeing the Watts Towers

The show’s stage manager is Christina Bryan. It’s scenic designer is Meg Cunningham, lighting designer, Alexander Freer, and its sound designer, Roger K. Weiss.

Go [HERE](#) for tickets to “Wonder City” on February 11 & 12.

And listen [HERE](#) to Trules’ new PODCAST, “e-travels with e. trules”

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