

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Inside the Block Party, Welcome All & Then Some

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 8th, 2019

There is a temptation to play with the words *BLOCK PARTY* when it comes to the three productions chosen each year by Center Theatre Group (CTG) for its now three-year-old *Block Party* initiative hosted at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. The selected companies get to have a two-week run, all expenses paid, of a production from their own repertoire at the Douglas. Why? What block? Whose play? Whose production? What party?

It's an intriguing proposition and arguably unique at the moment among the nation's regional theatres. Still, questions accumulate. After three years of implementing this project, its artistic results have been decidedly mixed. Why pick this production and not that one? Who decides? What are the rules of the game?



The cast of *Native Son* from Glendale's Antaeus Theatre Company.

Here are some of the known parameters. *Block Party* is an annual CTG competition open to Los Angeles' smaller theatres—LA's own Off-Off-Mainstream, including a majority of those once known as the 99-seat Equity Waiver theatres, although eligibility for the *Block Party* extends to companies operating out of theatres of more or less than 99 seats. The companies are invited to submit their desire to be considered, as well as the production they plan to offer with, presumably, some assurance that they can reassemble the cast and recreate the production responsibly if selected.

This year's menu offered Theatre Of Note's *For the Love Of (or the roller derby play)* written by Gina Femia and directed and choreographed by Rhonda Kohl, The Skylight Theatre production of Jon Brittain's *Rotterdam*, staged by Michael A. Shepperd, and the Antaeus Theatre Company's production of Nambi E. Kelley's adaptation of Richard Wright's iconic novel *Native Son*, directed by Andi Chapman. All three have now closed.

I reviewed *Native Son* when it had its initial run at Glendale's Antaeus Theatre Company and reports indicate that it did well in its run at the Kirk Douglas.



l-r, Ashley Romans & Miranda Wynne in the Skylight Theatre's production of *Rotterdam*.

*Rotterdam* was the most intriguing of the plays, because the dilemma at its core is genuine yet

hardly common, let alone universal. It focuses on a gay woman's deep desire to transition to becoming a man, which she believes is what she was always meant to be. The problem is that she's in a loving partnership with another gay woman, who doesn't quite know what to make of this development.

The ramifications of such a drastic change are unpredictable and carry the risk of destroying a partnership that is solid and that both women hold dear. The Skylight production was brisk, well produced, well performed and directed. It examined the issue with compassion and humor. The fit, when it moved to the Douglas, was not ideal. The space was a little too large for a play that cried out for a level of intimacy to match its intimate subject. Still, its artistic strengths were enough to overcome the drawback.



The cast of Theatre of Note's *For the Love Of (or the roller derby play)*.

The third production was a different creature altogether. It was the all-female Theatre Of Note's *For the Love Of (or the roller derby play)*, an energetic affair that felt like an oddball choice for the *Party*. The roller derby's unique sports environment—largely female and highly competitive, rife with *machismo* and four-letter words—is a hard subject to exploit theatrically. The company did well with the choreography of group movement, but the endemic rah-rah enthusiasm of the sport did not overcome weak performances and the banality of the central love interest and general theme (winning at any cost, no matter how personal), which essentially sidestepped the potential of its unusual premise.

Clearly, it was not satisfying for me. But the bigger question is did that matter in the context of the *Party*, which is designed to offer fringe companies with vigor, passion and ideas (good and bad) the opportunity of a second run in front of different audiences? Disagreement is built into this question. Yet enough other questions lingered about what drove these selections that Culturalweekly (CW) simply decided to ask:

### Who decides what shows will make the final cut?

- More than 50 CTG staff members participate in the *Block Party* evaluation process each cycle.

### What's the criteria?

- *Our criteria include:*

— **The company.** Where it is in its history, is this the right time to highlight this company? Are the leaders on the project committed, organized, and well equipped enough to make this move, and would they work well with our staff (based upon their application materials)?

— **The play** (as written). Is there a reason to bring it to our audiences? Is this a playwright we would like to present and subject matter we think is important to explore?

— **The team.** Are these designers and actors artists we want to get to know better or artists with whom we wish to continue having a relationship?

— **Diversity.** Do play and players represent the diverse landscape of Los Angeles? Diversity can mean — and is not limited to — ethnicity, age, gender, ability, theatrical style, etc.

— **Strength of marketing & press capabilities.** How strong was that theatre's marketing plan? How did the production fare with the press? Was there any traction outside of reviews?

— **Technical compatibility.** Will production elements transfer well to the Kirk Douglas Theatre stage?

— **Overall fit for Block Party.** Given the goals of the program and taking all things into consideration, would this production be a good fit?

### 3. What's in it for the theatres involved, other than the recognition?

- The actors and other creatives are paid. The companies get a small fee and they also have access to all of our departments to consult on management, production, marketing, communications, institutional advancement, etc. We see it as a way for CTG and the *Block Party* companies to get to know one another and learn from one another.

### 4. What's in it for CTG beyond the programming and the good citizen factor?

- *Block Party* was designed to strengthen relationships within our community, create additional avenues for CTG to become familiar with local playwrights, actors, directors and designers, and create conversation and collaboration between CTG staff and staff at companies throughout Los Angeles.

### 5. Who pays and who profits?

- The productions are funded by CTG with the help of some of our supporters. As we list in the releases, *Block Party* receives major support from Aliza Karney Guren and Marc Guren with generous funding also provided by Joni and Miles Benickes. This programming is also made possible in part by a Culver City Performing Arts Grant, with support from Sony Pictures Entertainment. Proceeds from ticket sales go to CTG.

And there you have it. On the whole, these are solid answers aimed in a positive direction for the theatres, but there are nuances that are more difficult to address, because the ground beneath them is constantly shifting. A major factor, and the least avoidable, is the issue of becoming a good fit for the Douglas.



l-r, Ryan Brophy & Ahsley Romans in the Skylight Theatre's production of *Rotterdam*.

Productions are sensitive plants. Transposing a production from one theatre to another invariably leads to unplanned subtle changes. Their values are affected by the change of locale. In the case of a hit, the production could take a negative turn. Or it also could go the other way. When the move is from a small theatre to a larger one, as it almost always is in this case, there is a loss of intimacy, as noted above about *Rotterdam*, a production that must have benefitted from the intimacy of the smaller Skylight Theatre where it originated, but that was strong enough artistically to tolerate the transfer without too much destruction.

Because some of these answers triggered more questions, CW decided to check in with CTG Associate Producer Lindsay Allbaugh for more.

Reaffirming the late French actor Louis Jouvet's conviction that the golden rule of the theatre is

that there is no golden rule, Allbaugh underlined that what her three years with this *Block Party* revealed to her is that the program is a two-way street—porous enough to be tweaked and accepting enough for CTG and the participating theatres to learn from one another. Flexibility is the hallmark of this initiative, with a willingness to deal with whatever imperfections come along if it's in the service of exploring fresh approaches, uncommon subjects, forms and styles. Like the art of making theatre itself, this *Block Party* is designed to be a perpetual work in progress.



Jon Chaffin as Bigger in the Antaeus Theatre Company's production of *Native Son*.

Not every outing will be an artistic success. You or I don't have to like or dislike it, nor will it appeal to everyone in the room, because nothing in the theatre ever does. The *Block Party*'s primary purpose is one of expanding horizons, of discovery as much as of achievement. And this kind of experimentation will and does find its audience. Some people are drawn by the edginess, others by the novelty, some know to stay away and others will vow never to return.

It's a game of chance open to all who are willing to place the bet and buy the ticket. Certainly the members of participating theatres that I spoke with casually appear to welcome the arrangement and it's hard to see why they wouldn't. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain. For the audiences it's a different story. They, as always, will have to decide for themselves.

*Top image: The cast of Theatre of Note's For the Love Of (or the roller derby play).*

*All photos by Craig Schwartz.*

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