



## 10 days of bleeding-edge performance art in Portland

The Time-Based Art Festival, put on by the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, is an avant-garde extravaganza that annually places Oregon on the world stage. Here's how TBA grew in just five years, and who's performing through Sept. 16 – a mix of international and Northwest talent.

**By Stephen Marc Beaudoin**

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**It was in the line** at Whole Foods Market in Portland's Pearl District this time last year that I was introduced to the latest development in Northwest hipster lexicon.

Two twentysomething women were excitedly chatting in line, Odwalla juices in hand. There were murmurs about upcoming performances around town as they pored over a pint-size guidebook, then came an especially delighted squeal over what one girl described as "awesome-looking Asian girls with basketballs in white dresses." A duetted sigh was released. "That's so TBA."

If that colloquialism has little resonance for you, no worries: Over the next 10 days in Portland, you can find out exactly what is so TBA for yourself, as the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA – that's "pie-ka" to the locals) holds its fifth annual Time-Based Art (TBA) Festival. It opened Thursday night, Sept. 6, with a free massed-choir performance of a commissioned work by avant-garde composer Rinde Eckert, in the open-air environs of downtown Portland's Pioneer Courthouse Square. The festival, which features vanguard contemporary performance and visual artists from across the region and across the globe, runs at venues throughout the city through Sept. 16.

As an accelerated birth from animus to animalistic arts fest (the audience has shot from 7,500 in 2003 to 21,000 in four years), the TBA Festival is an astonishing story exemplary of Portland's pioneering spirit, creative grit, and DIY spirit. Emerging as one of the leaders in the field of contemporary arts presenting, it's hard to imagine that just 12 years ago, PICA was barely a pipe dream.

**Artist-curator** Kristy Edmunds is spoken about with the kind of reverence usually reserved for untouchable spiritual visionaries. And in a way, Edmunds was.

It was Edmunds' vision and grit in Portland in the 1990s that helped shape PICA. The organization's first seven years of hop-sotch programming, then year-round, brought world-class artists (Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Donna Uchizono) to Portland whom audiences wouldn't otherwise see or hear, short of a trip to New York.

But without a real home residence - outside of their gorgeous offices and education space in the acclaimed Wieden+Kennedy building in the Pearl - PICA found itself a vagabond in a vagabond's town, skipping from venue to venue with each new installation or performance. A new model was needed.

Taking a cue from multi-week European arts festival models - the Edinburgh Festival, most notably - PICA reinvented itself in 2003 as a predominantly festival-based organization, focusing their energies on producing one slam-bang contemporary arts festival every year and leaving the year-round programming (a few lectures and ancillary events aside) to other organizations in town on the ascendant. like White Bird Dance.

other organizations in terms of the assembly, like *White Bird Dance*.

"The festival was a real strategic move for PICA, to figure out how to be relevant and exciting for audiences without having a home venue," says Lane Czaplinski, artistic director of Seattle's *On The Boards*, a like-minded organization.

Angelle Hebert and Phillip Kraft, co-founders of the Portland performance troupe called *tEEth*, had just moved to Portland when the first TBA Festival was taking off. Now, five years later, their company is premiering a new work ("*Normal and Happy*") during the fest. Even in 2003, they recall being "just blown away" by the quality and range on display at the festival. "Sometimes we feel a little isolated here," Hebert says, "and the festival helps us feel connected to what's going on in the world."

**Soon into TBA's** formative years, PICA made a bold move, restructuring organizational leadership and bringing on its first festival guest artistic director: Mark Russell, longtime leader of New York's influential P.S. 122 and a major player on the contemporary performance scene. This shook things up considerably.

Victoria Frey, whose position at PICA changed from managing director to executive director during that restructure, says "moving to the guest-artistic model was an enormous transition and one that has brought new ideas and expanded our relationships. Mark has been the right leadership at the right time and has challenged and inspired us to think outside ourselves."

*On The Boards'* Czaplinski agrees, pointing again to TBA's unique model and international influences: "The very idea of having a festival and a guest artistic director is not a traditional idea. ... It's more a European model," he says.

Portland's Holcombe Waller, perhaps one of the most singular songwriting performance artists in the region - who makes his TBA mainstage debut this year with "*Into the Dark Unknown: The Hope Chest*" - adds that Russell's presence is one of many factors which have contributed to the TBA Festival's surge in impact and popular appeal. "There are three things that are totally unique to TBA," Waller says, "the first being the completely world-class artistic direction - Mark Russell and Erin Boberg," PICA's performing arts program director, "and historically Kristy Edmunds. The second is that TBA is uniquely artist-centric and artist-supporting to a degree that almost defies expectation. ... The third is that they really engage the community." Pointing to the hundreds of docents, technical/venue assistants, and other helping hands that bring the event to life, Waller says: "The amount of volunteer support and artist/community engagement is unbelievable."

**Although the 2007** PICA festival offers both recognizable names (*Elevator Repair Service*, *Donna Uchizono*) and relative regional unknowns (*Gary Wiseman* or Hebert and Kraft's company, *tEEth*), they are quick to eschew any notions that their flagship festival is either inwardly provincial or overblownly grandiose in scope. The trick, they say, and others agree, is to walk that line and, when possible, offer Northwest artists on the Portland-Seattle axis the opportunity to be seen and heard by an international array of artistic directors, curators, and critics.

As an example, Czaplinski points to up-and-coming Seattle-based choreographer *Zoe Scofield*: "Zoe has come up through our local programs, and she's starting to make an international name of herself," he says, and her TBA debut is part of moving through that artistic pipeline.

"PICA has always had a reputation outside Portland for our national and international field-wide participation and our commissioning and championing of artists," Executive Director Frey says. "We established ourselves as a platform for contemporary work and never saw it as regional, national, or international, but asked ourselves what is most interesting and how do we invest in it."

For regional artists, though, premiering at TBA is an opportunity they treasure. "Just being in the festival opens so many doors," Waller says. "It means a lot to me."

And as PICA reports that more than \$500,000 in cultural tourism dollars were spent during the 2006 festival, with nearly 20 percent of festival attendees coming from outside the Portland metro area, the festival clearly means a lot to the city, as well. (The city invested a \$125,000 grant to the festival each year in 2005 and 2006 - a staggering amount coming from Portland's coffers.)

"Now the festival format brings more critical attention to the *where*," Frey says. "More people are paying attention to Portland as the place where this [work] originates."

As to the future: Can audiences expect PICA's model of festival-based programming to continue? Might there be plans to expand PICA's year-round programs?

"Yes and yes," Frey says.

## Who to watch in 2007

So with more than 100 performances, happenings, installations, and workshops to choose from, where to start? Here are some of the more noteworthy offerings at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA) Time-Based Art (TBA) Festival, which continues through Sept. 16.

- **Nature Theater of Oklahoma**, "No Dice." The obvious myth to debunk is that they're not at all from Oklahoma. Well-pedigreed New York-based theater artists Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper lead a vibrant small ensemble of performers in a self-described "legendary melodramatic spectacle," a four-hour tour de farce show incorporating more than 100 hours of phone conversations by company members. Watch out for pouty-faced Anne Gridley and hunky Zachary Oberzan, both standouts in NTOOK's 2006 breakout TBA show, "Poetics: A Ballet Brut." **Art Institute of Portland, Sept. 11-16. \$20-\$25.**
- **Zoe Scofield and Juniper Shuey**, "The devil you know is better than the devil you don't." A Seattle dancemaker, Scofield's the choreographer to watch at TBA, and her longtime collaborator, video installation artist Juniper Shuey, provides vibrant designs as the perfect complement to Scofield's white-knuckle precise movement. **Portland State University Lincoln Hall, Sept. 14-16. \$15-\$20.**
- **Elevator Repair Service**, "Gatz." ERS has been upending theatrical conventions in New York for nearly two decades, but their monumental project to date has got to be this one. "Gatz" distills Fitzgerald's masterwork, *The Great Gatsby*, to its most bare essential - the text itself - by placing the reading of the entire story (all eight hours of it, with two breaks) within the context of a business office on the brink. We dare you to stay for the whole thing. **Imago Theatre, Sept. 14-16. \$25-\$30.**
- **The Works**. Every night at The Wonder Ballroom in Northeast Portland, TBA revelers liquor up and let it out in one of the most fabulous late-night art parties seen all year in town. Live bands, raunchy performance, and even international arts royalty (artistic directors in town to scope the talent) come together every night for shows that have been known to last well past 2 a.m. Highlights include Portland hip-hop mavens "Lifesavas" (Sept. 7) and the Portland Cello Project (Sept. 11). The Wonder Ballroom, Sept. 7-16. \$8-\$10.

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