

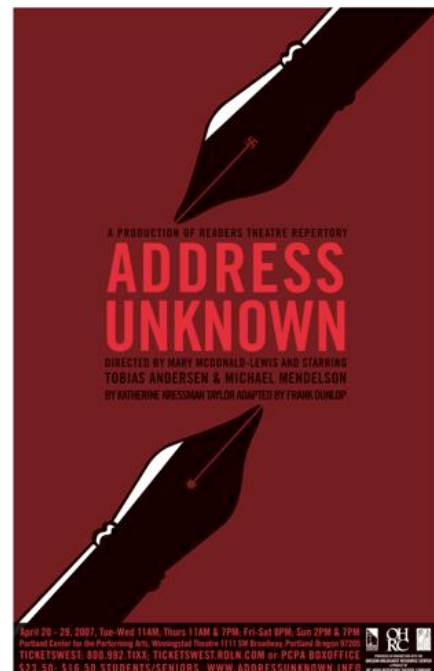
Director *A Tale of Two Plays*

A Doll's House & Address Unknown

Every story we tell as directors is unique. Sure, some things don't change from project to project – when I direct, there's always a lot of laughter on my stage. That, and as actors craft and dream their way toward their characters and their place in the world of the play, plentiful exploration and discovery. There's safety, and there's respect: the artistic process is protected, and working conditions for cast and crew are a top priority. There's order, and best of all, a shared understanding of what the story is about... and an eagerness to tell it well.

But every story has its own voice. Finding it, articulating it, and manifesting it is a joyous task.

Here are two tales I told, and the paths I took to telling them. The process will tell you a little bit about me.



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ACT ONE

I arrive at the first design meeting with mission statement in hand – a kind of topographical map providing clear meaning and purpose. We start our journey here, with design and technical artists adding to it all along the way. Here's a bit from the "topo maps" I provided for these two plays.

A Doll's House

A DOLL'S HOUSE

Love without understanding is perversion.

It is 1955 America, and Nora Helmer has just been threatened with scandal. Her wellbeing, her family's security, her husband's job all hang in the balance if the threat is made real.

"No, it's impossible," she says, in utter disbelief and panic. "I did it out of love." This is Nora's defense and denial of the very thing that will be both her undoing, and her liberation: the act of saving her husband while going outside of the law to manage it. Far worse, Nora goes outside convention, and in doing so, reverses the roles her husband Torvald Helmer is so eager to maintain, and worst of all, exposes the cracks in the façade of their relationship.

Love, Nora is about to discover, is not enough. Not nearly enough. And without self-examination, without true understanding, love is perverted into a kind of intimate hate, and has the power to destroy all in its thrall.

This is the theme of our *A Doll's House*: Love without understanding is perversion.



Amaya Villazan, Garland Lyons

photo: elizabeth eve

Address Unknown

ADDRESS UNKNOWN

A love story.

This is the small and intimate story of Max Eisenstein and Martin Schulse, two dear friends and longtime business partners, and what happens when world events overtake and ultimately overcome their love for each other.

Max and Martin, the Jew and the Nazi. These are two quick and easy labels to attach to them, and both not only just scratch the surface as to who these men are, and are to each other; but also misguide us in our understanding of them altogether.

Max is forward-thinking, interested in the new, the challenging, the avant-garde. Martin cherishes tradition, loves the classics, the comforting, the timeless. Max, a bit finicky, has not found a bride who won't disturb his keen sense of esthetic, or who will not want children (a woman's right, of course, and a dear one, but he is happy to play generous uncle to Martin's boys). Martin has patience with the noise and clutter of a large household, easily exchanging the quiet to have little ones around, and a cheerful wife to care for. Max, though, is in many ways the sentimental one, nicely offset by Martin's pragmatic view of business, and the world at large.

Both men are intellectually rigorous (though Max impetuous compared to Martin's slowly-building thoughts and opinions), harbor large hearts and deep souls. Both are compassionate and loyal. Both are cowards, both heroes. And both are murderers.

Max and Martin, the Jew and the Nazi? Far too simple, and completely untrue.



Michael Mendelson



Tobias Andersen

photos: Andie Petkus

As the curtain rises, this is all Max and Martin know: that they love one another, are an ocean away from each other, and wish to remain close.

But what is brewing on a worldwide scale will soon destroy those wishes, and well beyond.

However, we are not concerned with Hitler's evil plans, his global bloodletting, his unimaginable and massive final solution, and the 11 million dead altogether. Because what we are honored to watch unfold is how these little lives, this quiet, true love, is ruined forever by fascism (and all that means). And the mystery is, within this small story lies much more

powerfully, more poignantly, the larger story. This whisper, *Address Unknown*, speaks to our souls in a way that *Triumph of the Will*, with its metallic scream, can only aspire to.

Max and Martin don't, can't know what lies ahead. They know what they had, as dear friends. What they have.

Everything that happens between them is based on this.

What we are hearing, is love letters.

Address Unknown is a love story.

ACT TWO

Actors and design and technical artists do their best work when it is based on a foundation of knowledge. Dramaturgy is a passion, and I relish providing information that inspires everyone to their imaginative best. Here are excerpts from material my cast and crews worked with for *A Doll's House* and *Address Unknown*.

A Doll's House

Why 1955, for Goodness' Sake?

In my production, *A Doll's House* will be set in 1955 middle-class America. I chose this era to compliment our sleek, aerodynamic Paul Walsh translation of the script, and to contemporize the story, lifting it from a setting that forces the story to be a "women's liberation" tale.

Setting it at a time when women voted and held (ostensibly) many of the same rights men did shifts the focus from simple *power*, to the complicated *power of the self*, in both its *examined* and *unexamined* state.

The 1950s were about secrets, appearances, social climbing, acquisition, and status quo. This, too, serves our story very, very well.



The look and feel of the 1955 play

When it came to habitat and industry, this was a time of strikingly evolved design, with a sleek modern look replacing the darker, heavier aura of the 40s. This design sensibility carried over to art, architecture, fashion, products, and automobiles, to name just a few areas. Simplicity describes it.

There was also a certain hopefulness, and an impulse toward freedom (later fully realized in the 60s), of truly breaking away from the past.

It is important to understand, however, this caution: Torvald Helmer and his wife are not members of the atomic age, nor the "cocktail nation." They are not cool cats. They are not early adaptors of modern design. Their home is not a museum to Saarinen or Eames.

It is likely that they purchased their furniture from Sears and their clothing from JC Penney's, so in retrospect, while it's a kind of neat place, that is completely inadvertent.

As middle-class consumers, the Helmers simply have purchased what is in style in their time.

And that is the truth of our 1955 Torvald and Nora: they are middle-class, mid-twentieth century Americans. They aspire to greater status, but they are truly middle class.

The team also received:

The Era: A Brief History of the Fifties; Costume Design: Costumes & Color Inspirations; Set Design: Home Interior/Exterior Inspirations; Music: Tunes of the Time; and Filmaic Sources for a 1955 *A Doll's House*; and more, all coordinated or written by me.



Garland Lyons, Amaya Villazan

photo: elizabeth eve

Address Unknown

Address Unknown arcs from December 1932 to March 1934. Though many had thought the "war to end all wars" had put to rest forever the human capacity for cruelty and carnage, history now shows us that it had merely gone underground, to simmer until it erupted into mechanized slaughter such that the world had never seen.

Our tale takes place on the threshold of that terrible time, and while we know what lies just beyond, Max and Martin certainly don't. Like all of us, the two men can only *live* in their time -- they cannot live outside it, nor alter the course of their lives by disconnecting from it.

Yes, they can intuit, they can observe, they can anticipate. But it is the *past* that informs our present far more than the future ever can, and Max and Martin's history is one of a boisterous boyhood in Germany; nostalgic and warm memories of their shared schooldays at University or the Art Institute; the grand adventure of leaving Germany for San Francisco in the late

1920s; the heady days of starting their art gallery in San Francisco; their prosperous rise as business owners and successful, well-known men in the social whirl of that time; and then, finally, to the moment we discover them: as men who have been young, grown together, dreamed together, become successful together, and who now must part -- Martin back to Germany, while Max remains in the States.

This is where we find them, as the curtain rises: Max is in his apartment in San Francisco, a light-filled, lovely place in a sleek building, new for the time, with a wonderful view of the city. Martin is found in his cozy den, a ground-floor chamber of his baronial home, a quiet male escape from a lively household of women and children: wife, servants, the boys.

The team also received:

Understanding Fascism; How Fascism Seduced the Liberal German Man; Nazi Germany's Timeline: 1919-1933; A World Timeline: 1932-1934; Jugendstil vs. the Moderne World; and more, all coordinated or written by me.



Michael Mendelson and Tobias Andersen

photo: Andie Petkus

ACT THREE

I want my audience members to have an intimate understanding of the passionate, personal reasons I have for staging the stories I do. Using the director's notes, I strive to tell my truth, and ask that the audience bring their own compass to the tale – and, more importantly, away from it, and out into the world. These are the director's notes found in each play's program.

A DOLL'S HOUSE

Some great stories are like granite: carved by the forces of their time, they stand as permanent reminders of the society from which, or because of which, they were crafted. Other tales are more like water: easily slipping past the stone, they form to their banks, responding to and reflecting the landscape as it shifts from moment to moment. The former whispers to us from history, and there our ancestors' first secrets are scripted in fading, stubborn ink. The latter is shouted from our own town square, the story scrawled on a

mirror's face -- unavoidable, unapologetic, revelatory, and temporal. This is a tale in transition: never done, always new.

A Doll's House is that stream, that story scribbled on the looking glass. When the curtain first rose on the Helmer home in 1879, it was hailed by some as a feminist manifesto. Though Ibsen himself rejected the notion, emphasizing instead its humanism, the play adapted willingly to the impulse of the age, and has done so ever since. Imagine the vision at the heart of the 1886 parlor production that featured Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor as Nora and her common-law husband as Torvald, along with William Morris' daughter May as Kristine, and George Bernard Shaw as Krogstad! Later eras demanded existential interpretations; meditations on class; an examination of opposites and myriad more. But whenever *A Doll's House* was mounted, and whether the play is set in Victorian Norway or in some distant future, it always reveals the present in which it is produced.

As a director, I am interested in what lies beneath: how our self-awareness, or lack of it, informs the way we live. Here we have a group of people -- a husband and wife, friends, an enemy, servants -- all acting on what they believe to be true of themselves and those around them. But so long as each fails to recognize the darker truths that actually motivate them, all are in danger of self-destruction, and the destruction of others. This is a tale easily set in any period, but the 1950s, with its pretty surfaces and ugly undercurrents, seemed an ideal time to let the story tell itself.

Today, with all our advances in psychology and biology, and in our willingness to embrace both science and faith, we have the miraculous chance to respond authentically to each other, and to the world around us. That we haven't is evident; if we do not we risk destruction well beyond our own small lives. Yet... if we *can* learn what I believe is one of the lessons in this era's *A Doll's House*, we might still undo what we have done so far, and co-create a different world indeed.

It is Theatre 101 to assume Nora is the doll in the Helmer household. But given this play's uncanny ability to tell the story of the age in which it is told, I wonder whether we are all dolls in the much larger house of our place and time. Perhaps that is why this story flows so easily from one decade to the next: we are tricked into thinking it is only Nora, and taught that the face in the mirror is our own.



Darius Pierce, Amaya Villazan

photo: elizabeth eve



photo: Andie Petkus

ADDRESS UNKNOWN

Set a story in Europe the waning years of the 1930s and what comes to mind is monstrous grand sweeping brutality; plotted, mechanized and manifested like never before.

But that is not the story. That is never the story. Stories of that time take place not on the vast stage of the Pacific theatre nor across the great galloping miles of the Continent, but between the near-invisible distance of two hearts. This is where we find the myth of the world and our place in it: here lies our mysterious morality and our bewildering cruelty. Here is our ecstasy, and here our keening grief.

Because, who we *are* all comes down to who we are with *one another*... most especially how the powerful are with the powerless.

Max Eisenstein and Martin Schulse are many things. They are German. They are Jew, and gentile. They are successful businessmen, the owners of a San Francisco art gallery. Most of all, they are dear friends, as close as brothers. And yet, as the times overtake them, all they cherish is challenged, and each must decide *who he will be* with the other. And just as history takes its own tragic turn, what happens next changes their lives forever.

The chilling question is, how could this have happened to these men? To Germany, to Austria, to Poland and more? The whispered fear is, if it happened to them, it can happen to us. And not only that we might fall victim to inhumanity... but worse, far worse, that we could just as easily become inhuman ourselves.

And so we tell the little tale of Max and Martin, and as the Greeks did before us and as those who come after us will, we use the story to delve the darkness -- at the least to try to understand it, at the most, to find some small light.

Max and Martin's story, both minute and mythic, asks us to consider who we are today: how are the powerful with the powerless at the dawning of the 21st Century? Let us consider the poor; the "foreign"; minorities of culture, faith, gender, sexuality and race. Let us consider the beasts of farm, forest, waters and laboratory; let us consider the earth, her sky, her sea. From our hearts to the hearts of all of these -- in that infinitesimal distance between ours and theirs -- what is the story we are telling?

What is the story we want to tell?

DENOUMENT

There is *almost* joy enough in just staging the shows I do; but to keep the electricity on and the costumes mended, plays must attract and grow audience. I am honored when people come to shows because they follow my work as director; I am grateful for good reviews and humbled by the letters people send me about the stories we have shared. In closing, here are some responses to these plays. And if you would like to tell a tale together... please, be in touch.



Reviews

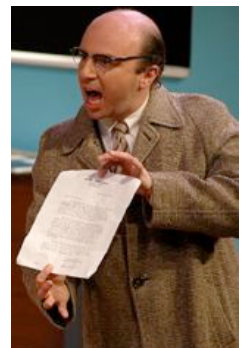
A Doll's House

Director Mary McDonald-Lewis has set Vertigo's production in the US of the 1950s, rather than the Victorian Norway of the original. The '50s aesthetic, coupled with Paul Walsh's engaging translation, results in what is easily the most accessible version of *A Doll's House* that I've seen. Willamette Week

Vertigo's production hits all the right notes from sets to acting: It's a tight show, beautifully timed, with no wasted moments. It shows off Ibsen's brilliance with dialogue and rapid plot development. The opening-night audience members were leaning forward, breathing together at various points, waiting to see what would happen next, even though the play is a familiar one. Oregonian

Fan Mail

We attended last night's performance of *A Doll's House*. I wanted to let you know that I have seen this play done many ways by many companies in many cities (as it is one of my favorite plays) and your rendition is honestly the best that I have seen. Each of the actors was true to the characters they play and played them brilliantly. I have not often experienced Ibsen done with a light hand and a mastery of his characters. I hope that you are all very proud of this work, you should be.



photos: elizabeth eve

Address Unknown

Reviews

...a powerful theater piece. No simple indictment of Nazi cruelty, *Address Unknown* reminds us how vulnerable we all are to circumstances and self-interest. Willamette Week

RTR threads a surprising amount of grace and subtlety into this short play about the Holocaust... With little bombast or grandiosity, *Address Unknown* approaches its difficult subject through the narrow sliver of experience the friendship of two men to convey an important message about individual responsibility and the mechanics of power. Oregonian



Fan Mail

The show was directed beautifully and the actors were outstanding. You did a magnificent job and you should be very proud...

Thanks for a great evening of theatre and thought. It was a pleasure to be there, to be in a room with a theatre piece that awakens one's mind.

It is just such incredibly powerful work. The letters are prophetic and the acting and direction made those characters come fully exposed both on stage in the role and then, really, within each of us.

I just wanted to express my deep thanks for such a wonderful and moving show. I was in tears at the end of the production. Thank you for this vivid journey through the souls of men, for this delicate dance with humanity. You should all be proud. I wanted to send this note of gratitude for one of the best shows I have seen in a long time.



photos: Andie Petkus