

THEATER



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Barbara Damashek directs "Splendour," which echoes the absurdism and existentialism of Beckett and Albee, with her cast at the Aurora Theatre in Berkeley.

Barbara Damashek's latest hatching

By Lily Janiak

When Barbara Damashek describes her process as a theater director, it's clear that she's also a writer, so quickly and prolifically do metaphors come to her.

Directing actors is like playing catcher in a baseball game: "I can give them little signals and tell them, 'pitch this way,' but it's their game." In studying a script before the rest of her team

Splendour: Written by Abi Morgan. Directed by Barbara Damashek. June 23-July 23. \$32-\$65. Aurora Theatre Company, 2081 Addison St., Berkeley. (510) 843-4822. www.auroratheatre.org

does, she is "the person who goes first and makes a path in the forest." On the way, as she mines the text for possibilities long before rehearsals actually start,

"my search as a director is to not leave any stone unturned, if I can help it, to turn over everything. I'm just tilling the ground." As rehearsals start, she guides actors "toward some of the clues that were in the script that they might not have understood or noticed." In creating the world of the play, "I like to go around in a space and plant little treasures that they can find."

That's at least how it

worked when the three-time Tony nominee (for the score, lyrics and direction of "Quilters," in 1985) helmed Aurora Theatre Company's acclaimed production of "American Buffalo" in 2014. Directing is "protean," she says, changing based on the particular needs of a script and its actors.

Directing Abi Morgan's "Splendour," whose Bay Area premiere begins previews June 23,

also at the Aurora, might require all those tools and more of Damashek.

When artistic director Tom Ross first read the 2000 play, he thought it "a puzzle" and decided, "We need to do a reading of this play to understand it." He immediately thought of Damashek, who he says "loves plays that play around with narrative."

Or, as Damashek puts it, "I do tend to be given plays that people don't

understand."

The premise of "Splendour" is simple enough. Four women wait for an unseen dictator to return to a mansion as war rages outside. But if it sounds simple, it's only so in the way that "Waiting for Godot" is about two clowns passing time, or how "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is about a late-night after-party. "Splendour" echoes the absurdism and

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existentialism of Beckett and Albee, but for Damashek a more salient comparison is Caryl Churchill, for the way its story “doesn’t get exposed in chronological order.” (Damashek also will direct Churchill’s “A Number” for the Aurora, in March 2018.)

Growing up in New York, Damashek was “supposed to be a doctor,” she says. But she “ran away with the circus,” — the circus being Yale School of Drama, where she got an MFA in acting. She was a good performer, she says, but perhaps not a great one. “It has something to do with the courage of actors, and emotional accessibility.”

But Damashek also was a musician from an early age, and Yale “found out,” she says, as if it were a dirty secret. Whenever a show required an unusual instrument — the balalaika, the accordion — her peers would foist it upon her. That led to writing scores for shows, which led to teaching at Eugene O’Neill Theater Center and Trinity Rep in New England. When she started directing in conservatories, she says, “I finally understood what all of these other things that I had been doing were about. They all came together — the



David Allen 2014

Paul Vincent O’Connor (left), James Carpenter and Rafael Jordan in the 2014 production of David Mamet’s “American Buffalo,” directed by Barbara Damashek.

music and my understanding of performance as an actress and making space for my conceptual insights, whatever they may be.” She remembers standing up as a director thinking, “Oh, this is what it was supposed to be.”

Evalyn Baron, who was nominated for a Tony for her performance in “Quilters” (and who’s now based in San Francisco after retiring from Broadway), says that Damashek’s skill and magnetism as a director were apparent within moments of their meeting, on a street corner in Manhattan. Damashek had seen Baron in a show and ap-

proached her about performing in “Quilters,” which is about pioneer women crossing the prairie. When Baron demurred, Damashek asked, “Have you got a minute?”

The two found a rehearsal hall, and Damashek played through the score. When Damashek talks about a work, says Baron, “she becomes the pure spirit of the work.” By the time Baron left the room, “I felt in a way that I had already done the show,” so compelling and contagious was Damashek’s energy. After that, “I was a member of the Barbara Damashek traveling show for the rest of my

life.”

Since the 1990s, Damashek has applied that same intellect, passion and rigor to acting classes she’s taught at San Francisco State University. Local actor Juliana Lustenader, who graduated from the university in 2013, recalls that after a five-minute scene in Damashek’s classes, students “would sit there listening to notes for half an hour.”

For many, the ardor is endearing. Local actor, composer and director Casey Robbins, also a 2013 San Francisco State grad, even created a short-lived band in her honor, called the Damasheks (of which

“Splendour” cast member Sam Jackson was also a part). “What’s amazing about her is she is a little scary,” he says. That’s in the way she makes the classroom “a sacred space,” the way “she takes zero bull—,” the way she’s “a mile ahead of everybody else.”

“I hatch plays,” says Damashek, ready with another metaphor. “There’s a pregnancy there.” Eventually though, “you give over the pregnancy, and (the actors) have to take it.”

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