

LEN JENKIN & BRUCE DUBOSE

WABI-SABI AND WINDING ROADS

BY ROBERT L. NEBLETT

THERE'S A WHOLE LOTTA wabi-sabi goin' on under the streets of Dallas, Tex.

Drive a few minutes from the neon and flash of the city's revived downtown Arts District, and you will find the humble digs of North Texas's premier underground (quite literally) theatre company. Nestled in a cement basement beneath a renovated multipurpose warehouse space in the hip and historical Deep Ellum district, Undermain Theatre has created some of the region's most challenging avant-garde and experimental performances for almost 30 years and received a stellar international reputation in the process.

Co-founders Katherine Owens and Bruce DuBose conjure a special kind of alchemy at Undermain, transforming a seemingly impossible performance venue—broad support columns boldly invade the wide, shallow stage area—into worlds both weird and wonderful. Aiding them in this magical metamorphosis are current masters of the theatrical avant-garde (writers such as Mac Wellman, Jeffrey M. Jones, Erik Ehn and Young Jean Lee), mixed in with a healthy dose of nontraditional yet canonical works by Beckett, Strindberg and Pinter.

One of their most constant collaborators of late is playwright Len Jenkin, who asserts, “Undermain is a no-bullshit home rag-and-bone wabi-sabi kind of theatre,” thus revealing an irreverent sense of mutual admiration that exists between him and the artistic leaders of this funky troupe. When asked to describe Jenkin in one word, DuBose and Owens reply without even a pause, “Wabi-sabi.”

And just what is wabi-sabi? It refers to a Japanese aesthetic concept that situates profound beauty within the incomplete, the imperfect, the impermanent—in other words, it purports that the unfinished, the broken and the unspoken have a sublime power to evoke life's continual cycles of change.

Consequently, DuBose is quick to point out his respect for the “unvarnished” quality of Jenkin's writing, for the author's drive to “make it *rougher*...rather than impressing because it's so polished, exposing the imperfections which are beautiful in themselves.” And he would know. Bruce has acted in all but one of Undermain's productions of Jenkin's work and composed dynamic music and soundscapes for all of them.

The duo's professional relationship began when the company produced *Poor Folk's Pleasure* in 1990, but it was not until 2005's performance of *Margo Veil* that a formal active collaboration would be forged, one that soon developed into friendship between the two men. But regardless of how one characterizes their personal connection to each other, it would be disingenu-

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DuBose, left, and Jenkin.

ANDE WHITLAND



From left, Christian Taylor, Ian Sinclair and DuBose in *Jenkin's Port Twilight* at Undermain.

ous to ignore the fact that Jenkin and DuBose are in essence two sides of a tight-knit love triangle that includes Kat Owens as well, a detail that Jenkin clarifies time and again. He attributes the longevity of his close association with the company to “a pattern of increasing trust and increasing sensitivity to each other’s work.”

Yet there is no denying the respect and affection shared by the two men. Jenkin characterizes DuBose’s approach to the craft of acting as full of “dedication, smarts and wonderful flares of imagination,” intimating that DuBose possesses the ability to be “smarter about the text than the author.” DuBose’s admiration for the spiritual elements of Jenkin’s plays leads to a lengthy discussion of how Jenkin is able to explore and expose multiple, often disparate, layers of the human condition and by turning things inside out, thereby revealing the complexity of his characters and their world.

The worlds his characters inhabit are bursting with endless possibilities, a fusion of reality and fantastic dreamscapes that fracture, fold in on themselves, twist and contort. Dallas actor Shannon Kearns-Simmons, a regular face in Undermain’s productions of Jenkin’s work, ruminates: “Len creates these magical-mundane, expansive-disconcerting-beautiful landscapes, where story lines weave in and out in kinesthetic and flexible environments, where one place and time morphs into the next with fluidity and grace.”

Whether he’s creating a *Third Man*-esque treasure hunt for a lost manuscript in *Time in Kafka*, or an end-times extraterrestrial vaudeville in *Port Twilight*, Jenkin peppers the action with what DuBose calls “a humorous sense of foreboding.” This dark whimsy will collide with semi-autobiography in January, when Undermain produces the premiere of *Abraham Zobell’s Home Movie: Final Reel*, the story of a dying man who journeys backward in time to revisit the memories of his past 70 years.

Zobell’s journey through time and memory is a familiar framework for Jenkin’s dramaturgy. Owens even suggests that his oeuvre can be viewed as a series of dramas about literal and metaphorical roads, like funhouse-mirror versions of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby

Road to... films. But Owens takes the comparison one step further, encouraging audiences to see the short, sharp glimpses of action and character one often encounters in Jenkin’s theatre not as caricature or pastiche, but as reminiscent of the momentary glances of houses and lights and people one catches in his or her peripheral vision, flying down the highway—all real, all fully developed, all with their own rich history, only coming into focus in our lives for a split second, but capable of impacting our souls forever.

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It is remarkable how in sync Jenkin and DuBose are with one another, as if they share a form of telepathy. When asked separately to describe the play-still-yet-to-be-written that best depicts their relationship, both men imagine a surprisingly similar scene: a three-ring tent circus “on the eve of the Apocalypse” populated by Beckett-esque clowns, fire-and-brimstone preachers, gypsies and “a drunk on the corner who’s mumbling to himself.” DuBose refers to the playwright as a sort of “Prophet Elijah, always looking for the catastrophe,” but stops himself to chuckle and point out that Jenkin is not a gloomy soul in person. Then he notes that the writer does tend to blend folk images of hope and beauty in the foreground with “a sun exploding on the horizon or raining frogs” just behind.

DuBose sums up the common ground shared by Undermain’s vision and creative process and Jenkin’s discipline and intensity: “There’s a drive to not accept the obvious, but to push beyond it, to see what more can we get from this, what more can we bring to it. Len is always pushing that: How can we open this up? How can we *make* more out of it, get more from it, so it keeps you from complacency?”

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