

Six Degrees of Clubbed Thumb



Get clubby with the artists that make up the New York City-based company

INTERVIEWS BY ELIZA BENT

Clockwise from left, Pam MacKinnon, Rinne Groff, Adam Greenfield, Ann Marie Healy, Heidi Schreck and Andy Bragen.

MACKINNON: SCOTT SUCHMAN; GROFF AND GREENFIELD: HEATHER PHELPS; HEALY: COURTESY OF HEALY; SCHRECK: SHIRA MESSINA; BRAGEN: GREGORY COSTANCO

IF CLUBBED THUMB WERE A PERSON, SHE'D BE that funny someone at a party who seems to know everyone and has a knack for fostering introductions in a seamless, friendly way. More than just a producer of quality theatre, the 13-year-old New York City-based company is a nexus for actors, writers and directors. When the editors of *American Theatre* began to discuss this article we kept coming across names of both emerging and established artists whose paths had crossed with Clubbed Thumb. Fittingly, we started using the shorthand “Six Degrees of Clubbed Thumb,” and many of the artists who share their experiences below point to other artists who have also worked with the Obie Award-winning company.

Clubbed Thumb didn't begin with high hopes of being a connector. In fact, they didn't even start out as a company. “We just put on a play,” co-founder Meg MacCary deadpans. Collaborator and co-artistic director Maria Striar chimes in, “We composed our mission language a few years after we'd gotten going.”

It makes sense that MacCary and Striar began their theatre careers as actors. (Both attended Brown University as undergraduates and then University of California—San Diego, where they got their MFAs.) “We were frustrated with the material we were asked to perform,” MacCary recalls of their student days. Nevertheless, both institutions had strong new-writing programs that simultaneously spurred the duo's interest in producing. “We're theatre people,” MacCary says unapologetically. “We're not just interested in one discipline.” Upon coming to New York in 1995, they set to work.

Just what is the company's work? Like that social butterfly at the party, Clubbed Thumb cultivates a communicative style that is at once au courant, intelligent and humorous. The

group's recently published anthology, called *Funny, Strange, Provocative: Seven Plays from Clubbed Thumb* (with plays by Adam Bock, Sheila Callaghan, Erin Courtney, Lisa D'Amour, Rinne Groff, Ann Marie Healy and Carson Kreitzer), gives a sense of what they are all about. Those three titular words, and related adjectives and ideas, swirl through the six artist statements below. The Clubbed Thumb aesthetic shows a fondness for 90-minute, intermission-less plays that “straddle both conventional expectations of theatrical storytelling and plays that have room for creative collaboration,” Striar says. To that end, MacCary and Striar don't consider plays to be complete things but rather blueprints or equations for potential results. “We are most excited by work that suggests a broad array of outcomes, and where every variable—(actor, design elements, etc.)—can have a profound effect on the resulting production,” Striar says.



Beth Hoyt, Meg MacCary, Hubert Point-Du Jour and Hannah Cabell in *Gentleman Caller* by Healy, directed by Brooke O'Hara.



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Maria Dizzia, Sheri Graubert, Quentin Maré and Cohlle Brocato in Erin Courtney's *Alice the Magnet*, directed by MacKinnon.

MacCary concurs, adding, “We like plays that offer juicy, interesting, complicated roles for everyone.” —*Eliza Bent*

ANDY BRAGEN, playwright:

I have fond memories of Rinne Groff's *Inky* and Sarah Ruh's *Late: A Cowboy Song*, early works for both of these writers, and more recently, I've been wowed by sparkling productions of plays by Jordan Harrison, Sally Oswald and Ann Marie Healy, among others. Clubbed Thumb's sense of adventure and the high quality of its productions set the company apart. It is *the* playwrights' downtown theatre.

For the past year I've been working on my new play *Ranch Home*, (Clubbed Thumb's 2007 Biennial Commission). The story is about landscape and loss, set in and around a decaying swimming pool in the outer suburbs of the Southwest. It's been challenging and has pushed me onto unfamiliar ground. Throughout this process, Clubbed Thumb has been both supportive and respectful. They have worked with me to build a useful development process, rather than imposing a preconceived structure.

Meg and Maria's specific aesthetic has had a huge influence on my writing. I'm excited that thanks to Clubbed Thumb, funny, strange and provocative plays are making their way above 14th Street.

ADAM GREENFIELD, director:

Every time I hear from the Clubbed Thumb gang, whether it's a press announcement or an invitation to work with them, I do a small dance in my ergonomic office chair. I can expect that any news from them will be followed by some delightful experience: an

introduction to a pioneering writer, a fresh take on telling a story or a new approach to working. As evidenced by plays like Sally Oswald's naughty, poignant *Vendetta Chrome* (2008), the upsetting dreamscape of Ann Marie Healy's *Gentleman Caller* (2008) or Jordan Harrison's theatrically cinematic take on art in war with *Amazons and Their Men* (2008), Clubbed Thumb proves that artful,

visionary, intelligent work can be damned entertaining. I'm struck by how reassuring this is in contrast to the often frustrating perception that there's some uncrossable divide between “uptown” and “downtown” art. Having directed workshops of Dan LeFranc's *Night Surf* and Jason Grote's *All You Can Eat*, I've gotten the first-hand Clubbed Thumb experience and have been pushed to expand my definition of how I work in an environment that's unafraid to push me back. Maria, Meg and Diana [Konopka, artistic associate] feature sharp, curious new writing with an attitude of optimism and generosity—it's a combination of values and a way of working as peculiar, obstinate, regal and rare as their medical namesake.

RINNE GROFF, playwright/performer:

I see Meg and Maria in their company. I see their particular brand of humor, engagement with the world and intelligence in the work they choose to produce. It makes sense that their work reflects their personalities and is unique to them. Clubbed Thumb has always had a talent for finding excellent, solid artists and then pursuing an exciting yet no-frills way

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Caitlin Miller and Matthew Cowles in Healy's *Dearest Eugenia Haggis*, directed by Melissa Kievman.



MacCary, Andrew Dolan and Merritt Wever in *What Then* by Groff, directed by Hal Brooks.

of producing their plays. Their vision works beautifully within the means that they have.

Meg and Maria have both played leads in my plays. I can't say enough how they're both really great actresses—aside from the fact that they are adept literary managers, administrators and company runners.

Erin Courtney went to Brown with Meg and Maria. I met Erin through a boyfriend of mine and started seeing their shows. When

I was in grad school at NYU in 1999, I was working on a thesis play called *Inky*. Emma Griffin, who was directing the play, suggested casting Maria, which we did. Clubbed Thumb produced the play the following season, and then co-produced it again a year later—my first professional production in New York.

ANN MARIE HEALY, playwright:
I've worked with Clubbed Thumb for more

than eight years and every production has been a lesson learned, a dozen revelations and—on top of all that—a great time. I can't say it any more simply: Clubbed Thumb has been absolutely fundamental to my growth as a theatre artist in New York.

Too often, new playwrights are left with the proverbial "script in the drawer" because producers won't take a chance, which stunts the growth of playwrights and leaves

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Rebecca Wisocky, left, and Schreck in Harrison's *Amazons and Their Men*, directed by Ken Rus Schmoll.

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them without the vital experience of developing work in front of an audience. Clubbed Thumb understands the difficult task of *reading* contemporary work and they are constantly willing to take on challenging and experimental writing.

In essence, Clubbed Thumb thrives on the challenges of the *impossible play*, the snarled and wonderful writing that comes out kicking and screaming and demanding to be heard. This ethos of risk leads to constant regeneration. The message I always receive from the producing team is: "Take the most exciting, the most revelatory path you can take for your play." This creates a profoundly encouraging culture for collaborative work.

PAM MACKINNON, director:

I met Meg and Maria out at the University of California–San Diego. Two years later Maria and I moved to New York on the same day. When you're new to the city, there's a lot of: *What will we do?* Meg and Maria took it to the next level by not waiting for the proverbial phone call but by producing work themselves. I was hugely influenced by that.

They suss out what the writer needs—whether it's a room with four actors and a director for three days, or a workshop that culminates in something staged—and they figure out a way to provide it. They're tenacious and committed and loyal. A lot of theatres have a group of writers they do readings with and a separate group of writers they do productions with. Not so with Clubbed Thumb.

Meg and Maria's style is hugely influenced by the fact that they are actors. They are drawn to plays in which the writer's voice is in every character—there is no peripheral girlfriend who merely supports the male

protagonist. Meg and Maria came of out really strong acting programs, but they had to scrounge around for compelling material. They made a strong commitment to change the theatrical literature, so that actresses after them don't have to.

HEIDI SCHRECK, actor:

I moved to New York City six years ago and found myself hanging around Clubbed Thumb to do a reading. It was a dream come true—

here was this scrappy company dedicated to nurturing the country's most exciting writers, while also providing an artistic home for remarkable directors, actors and designers.

As a freelance actor, it's a bummer to feel like a temp worker. Clubbed Thumb has created a sense of artistic continuity in my life, as it has for others, including my husband Kip Fagan, who directed Rachel Hoeffel's exquisite *Quail* in 2006. Summerworks, the company's annual festival, is one of those yearly events I look forward to most in the city. Because they are both gifted actors themselves, Meg and Maria have a real knack for finding plays that are formally inventive, weird, funny and wildly theatrical—and yet always grounded in a deeply felt human situation.

Clubbed Thumb has forged some of my most cherished artistic relationships. One of my first acting jobs in the city was in Erin Courtney's *Demon Baby*, directed by Ken Rus Schmoll. Ken and Erin have continued to be two of my favorite collaborators, and I can never be grateful enough to Meg and Maria for introducing me to them. ☒

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