

They're actors. They're living in New York City. They rest their case.

Last fall the *Wall Street Journal* published a story about a surge in opportunities for struggling actors in New York City. Unfortunately, the opportunities were for actors willing to work as bedbug hunters.

It's brutal out there, and it's most brutal in the most expensive city in America. But the Big Apple still beckons, topping other cities in the number of actors who actually work as actors, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Like Hollywood's Boulevard of Broken Dreams, New York City is simmering with hungry overachievers, dreamers, and dilettantes.

And with an apparently inexhaustible supply of imagination, resilience, and chutzpah, BU graduates are defying the odds. In the following pages, *Bostonia* takes a look at three of several alumni-founded theater companies that have made names for themselves in New York City. Committed professionals with passionate artistic, and in some cases social, agendas, they've each carved out separate turf, from the Dominican enclave of Washington Heights to the hip venues of lower Manhattan. Their College of Fine Arts roots keep them entwined. They get to each other's productions and readings and trade wisdom about fundraising, which is as crucial to their survival as it is confounding. They act, they write, they direct, they serve their communities, they work "money jobs," and they apply for awards, romance donors, and jockey for grants.

All of these alumni attest to the fact that their career paths are often frustrating. But they're having the time of their lives. Sustained by paltry earnings, cheered on by their families and former professors, and buoyed by tireless senses of humor, they are grateful to be in the game. Of the uncounted thousands of young people who have longed for a stage, here are three companies that have found one: CollaborationTown, Stage 13, and the People's Theatre Project. A fourth group, Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, can be found at bu.edu/bostonia.

JOINED AT THE HIP: COLLABORATIONTOWN

THEIR FRIENDSHIP

SEALED over four years of a theater education that nurtured ensemble work, Boo Killebrew, Jordan Seavey, and Geoffrey Decas O'Donnell knew by junior year that they wanted to take their act on the road together after they graduated from BU. "We were working together on new plays and really clicking," says Killebrew (CFA'03). With fellow alum T. J. Witham (CFA'01), they cofounded the defiantly democratic CollaborationTown. "We knew starting the company anywhere other than New York would be cheaper, and it was feasible to get space in a million other places," says Killebrew. They moved to New York anyway.

An energetic brunette whose Mississippi upbringing coats her voice with a slight bayou drawl, Killebrew could barely afford her first apartment, an East Village share so minuscule that when the bathtub was covered, it doubled as the kitchen counter. O'Donnell

(CFA'03) and a friend found an affordable, rambling place hugging the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in Greenpoint that became a refuge for BU graduates and their pets. It was full of soot: mushrooms grew on the floor and ceiling. He stayed there seven years. "It was a really, really big apartment," says O'Donnell, who won a FringeNYC playwriting award for CollaborationTown's production of *The Deepest Play Ever*. Forgoing sleep to finance their rent and their art, the three traded off jobs and put in time as waitstaff and dog walkers. These days Killebrew manages the Bubble Lounge in Tribeca. Not only is it the best of her string of "money jobs," but the owners are huge supporters of CollaborationTown, which holds its fundraisers there.

The city's pioneering artists grab rehearsal space when they can, and their definition of that space can be broad and slippery. CTown owes much of its vitality over the past few years to so-called space grants from the

Members of CollaborationTown (from left) Jordan Seavey, T. J. Witham, Boo Killebrew, and Geoffrey Decas O'Donnell.

What They Do for Love





The Stage 13 ensemble (clockwise, from left) Noah Bean, Bjorn Thorstad, Sarah Saltzberg, Ariel Shafir, and Charissa Chamorro are all full-time actors.

Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, a post-9/11 initiative turning tumble-down commercial properties near Ground Zero into temporary rehearsal and studio spaces. “It’s free,” says Seavey (CFA’03), “and you also get a stipend.” Recently the ensemble had a stint at a former basement vault in a moribund bank across from the Stock Exchange. Other BU alumni have joined up with the troupe for a performance or two, but the roster of those involved in three or more productions is impressively long: Sean-Michael Hodge-Bowles (CFA’03), Duke Doyle (CFA’06), Rachel Craw (CFA’02), Max Rosenak (CFA’05), Chinasa Ogbuagu (CFA’03), John Wernke (CFA’01), Dan Stowell (CFA’01), Julia Henderson (CFA’01), Ryan Purcell (CFA’04), Benjamin Posner (CFA’04), Ava Eisenson (CFA’06), Lee Sunday Evans (CFA’06), Noah Starr (CFA’03), Carly Cioffi (CFA’05), and Phillip

Taratula (CFA’04).

Over coffee one June morning in the Deco splendor of Chelsea’s Ace Hotel, Killebrew and her compatriots are particularly upbeat. Killebrew’s *The Play About My Dad* was winding up a run to sold-out audiences as part of an Off-Broadway festival at the 59E59 Theaters. And they had managed to meet the \$8,000 fundraising goal for the production after an online pitch full of humor and endearing desperation.

The funny, touching play within a play overlays the story of a playwright (named Boo Killebrew) and her physician father’s tormented history with the events of Hurricane Katrina in the playwright’s native Gulfport, where her father ended up spending months in a hospital-turned-island as flood waters rose around it, trying to stem the damage to his neighbors’ bodies and hearts.

New York Times reviewer Andy Webster calls the play a “daunting juggling

act,” adding that Killebrew “largely pulls it off.”

“I always wanted to write a play about where I’m from,” says Killebrew, named by parents enamored of *To Kill a Mockingbird* for its character Boo Radley. The audiences that filled the 46-seat theater each night sat spellbound as the play, directed by Lee Sunday Evans, gathered ominous momentum, and they left dabbing their eyes at the cruel ravages of Katrina and the tender, parallel reunions of a flood victim and her son and the playwright and her father.

“People are, like, you’re the play’s mother and Lee’s the midwife,” says Killebrew. “And I said, no—we’re like lesbians and this is our baby.”

With O’Donnell and Seavey nodding their heads beside her, Killebrew declares that in truth her play “is by all of us, and the text is by me,” and, affirmative nods all around, “we have worked our asses off.”



THIS IS MY DAY JOB: STAGE 13

AFTER GRADUATION, STAGE 13 co-artistic director Bjorn Thorstad (CFA’98) went back home to Denver and sold \$50,000 worth of cutlery. This pile of cash helped pave the way for the enduring Manhattan-based ensemble, formed almost six years ago by BU graduates.

The good news about Stage 13 is that all of its members make their living as full-time actors. The bad news is that the actors’ colliding auditions and performance calendars make it almost impossible to schedule Stage 13 events, says cofounder Kelly Hutchinson



(CFA'98), a busy stage actress who appeared in Stage 13's maiden effort, *The Voyage of the Carcass*, alongside Dan Fogler (CFA'98) and Noah Bean (CFA'98), both also cofounders.

"We want to thrive because we've worked together this long, and we love working together," says Hutchinson, sitting in the company's unofficial headquarters, a design loft near Chinatown owned by cofounder and actor Thomas Sullivan and his wife. "It's hard because we work so much, so the time gets longer in between projects. But it's unlike our paying work—we want to do it for the love of the game."

On couches arranged in a nook of the vast loft space, Hutchinson and Thorstad rattle off their adventures and complete each other's sentences. In a career punctuated by Stage 13 productions, Thorstad keeps busy doing voiceovers, improv, and the occasional indie film (*Running Funny*, *When the Flower Blossoms*). A Jersey girl, even though "the term scares" her, Hutchinson helped the group do a workshop production of Jay Reiss' *Meanwhile, on the Other Side of Mount Vesuvius*, a collaboration with Yale Repertory Theatre. The company's quirky production schedule endures: interlocking, overlapping, hilariously

titled (*The Viagra Monologues*) readings, productions, films, and fundraisers asking for people's support.

The Stage 13 group got some early breaks. While Thorstad was touring the country as Shaggy in a road production of *Scooby Doo*, Fogler was helping create *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, which made it to Broadway and won him a Tony Award for his role as William Barfee. Fogler went on to land several film roles (*Balls of Fury*, *Good Luck Chuck*).

Bean starred alongside Glenn Close as doomed surgical intern David Conner in the FX series *Damages* and hopped back and forth from stage

to screen, with one run as randy cowboy Bo in the Huntington Theatre Company's fall 2010 production of *Bus Stop*, and another a movie role as a psychiatrist in the psychological thriller *Stay*, with Ewan McGregor and Naomi Watts. The Stage 13 band of alumni has worked in tandem on such stages as the Peoples Improv Theater and the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre.

Whether it's an intimate staged reading of a new work in the loft or an Off-Broadway role, they say, acting consumes their lives. As Hutchinson puts it, those in the company are committed to pulling "random stuff" out of a "magnificent junk heap" and turning it into something amazing and unexpected.

"We worked hard on the name," says Hutchinson. The number 13 kept surfacing: Sullivan owns the popular Union Square club Bar 13, a patron and the company's prime fundraising venue. There is a 13 in the loft's zip code, and 13 Designs is the name of the design studio the loft houses. And perhaps most significant, the 13th (of August) is the birthday of the company's ghostly muse, Alfred Hitchcock.

The number proved lucky for the company, which is lately throwing itself into the casting and filming of a Fogler film titled *Don Peyote*, which bills itself as a marriage of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gandhi*. Absurdity, social mischief, and pure camp are staples of the company. A summer 2009 run of *EXPOSED! The Curious Case of Shiloh and Zahara*, by Kate Gersten, attracted plenty of attention for its futuristic paparazzi revelations about the private lives of two of the Brangelina brood. As director, Fogler was credited by one critic with creating a Pee-wee's Playhouse feel for the comedy, which nytheatre.com's Matt Roberson called a "good, fun-filled night at the theater."

The group's talent and drive can't be denied, but there's something more—a chemistry that keeps them close and on course, says Hutchinson. "I don't know whether BU created that, or whether we had it coming in," she says. "But we had a remarkable class, and I feel like we grew up together—as artists, and as a family."

AROUND AND ABOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD: PEOPLE'S THEATRE PROJECT

IT'S A BALMY spring night, and the neighborhood fruit and clothing stalls are closing up as Bob Braswell (CFA'04) and his wife, Mino Lora, set up shop in the cavernous lobby of the United Palace Cathedral at 175th and Broadway in Washington Heights. The last of the city's so-called Wonder Theatres built in the '20s, the block-long structure is the former home of the late charismatic preacher Reverend Ike. It's a lot of theater for Braswell and Lora's modest but thriving People's Theatre Project, whose reach extends to the edge of the Bronx and bumps up against the wall of luxury apartments facing the Hudson River.

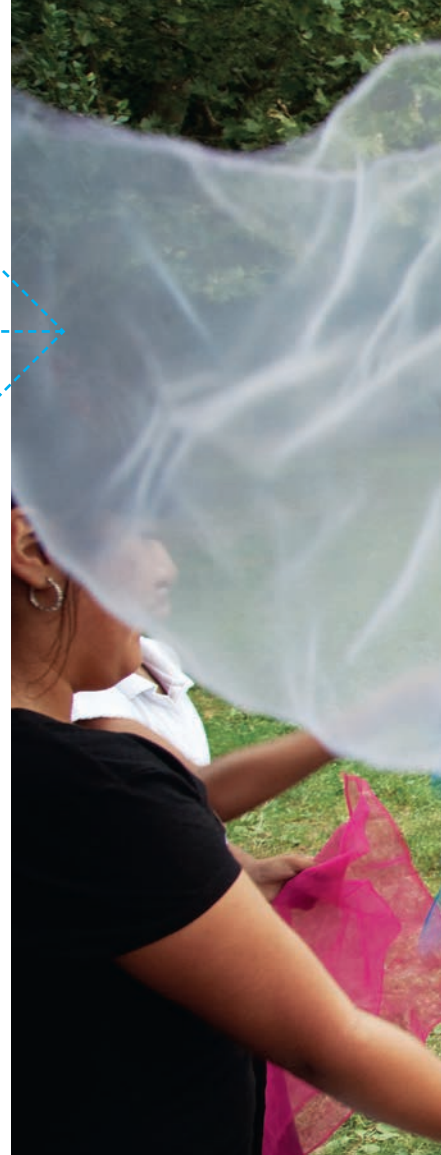
For tonight's show, PTP has paid a pittance to occupy 50 or so seats of the 3,400-seat house for a staged reading of the family drama *Man in Boat*, by emerging Manhattan playwright Kimberly Barranté. The reading is one of a series, the culmination of nearly nine months of weekly workshops with professional playwrights working with actors in spaces secured by the People's Theatre Project. The venues for the annual spring series include the offices of the *Manhattan Times* (for a play about a newspaper), the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center, Coogan's Restaurant (for a play set, of course, in a restaurant), and the Inwood Public Library.

Founded in 2008, the itinerant company leapfrogs from venue to venue for all its productions, often bilingual and largely of and about the realities of life in the neighborhood. Admission is always pay-what-you-can. There is, for example, a Shakespeare program for seniors, and Voices/Voces, a bilingual theater-writing program for local teens that uses Howard Zinn's *A Young People's*

History of the United States and the participants' personal history as inspiration for a theatrical collage of music, words, and movement.

A half hour before the *Man in Boat* reading, things are looking a little too quiet, so Lora sends the company's intern outside with some sidewalk chalk. Soon the pitted concrete along two adjacent blocks is adorned with arrows and the words "Play tonight! Pay what you can." The ploy may have roped in a straggler or two, but things pick up when friends and theater colleagues stream in.

The People's Theatre Project is a shoestring endeavor that lives on donations and a 2010 Union Square Arts Award grant. At first, executive directors Braswell and Lora were told their operation was too small for the \$35,000 grant, but after a visit to the PTP "office"—their apartment—the Union Square





Bob Braswell and his wife, Mino Lora, started the People's Theatre Project, whose venues include parks, offices, and restaurants.

representative was won over, says Braswell, who is managing director. He and artistic director Lora live a few blocks from the United Palace Cathedral.

The pair built the company on a foundation of four basic values: art, peace, dialogue, and community. Braswell, who could easily pass for a teenager, made his Off-Broadway acting debut in Rebecca Gilman's adaptation of Carson McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and toured in a national production of *A Christmas Carol*. He's worked with many companies, including Baltimore Centerstage, the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, the Denver Center Theatre Company, and the Huntington Theatre Company at BU, in *Holiday Memories*. Recently he was cast in the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*.

An actor, director, and teacher, Lora was born and raised in the

Dominican Republic, studied theater at Manhattanville College, and has a graduate degree in peace studies and conflict transformation.

"I joke that I started this company because I'm lazy," says Braswell. A fluent Spanish speaker from southern New Jersey, Braswell fell in love with Washington Heights when he moved there after graduating from BU. These days, he and Lora are fixtures in the neighborhood, where they are periodically intercepted by admirers offering hugs and blessings.

Braswell and Lora established what they call an accessible, affordable "theatrical platform" for Washington Heights/Inwood after a survey they'd distributed revealed that the neighborhood,

which is 78 percent Dominican, lacked both a stage venue and any kind of theater. A loftier goal of the bilingual project is "to transform the cul-

ture of the community from one of disconnection to one of peace, strength, and unity." The company has an education director, a literary manager, and several teaching artists specializing in acting, storytelling, and bringing Shakespeare to public school classrooms and to housing for the elderly.

Although he's committed to his solo acting career, Braswell was groomed for cooperative efforts. Like his friend Boo Killebrew, he credits BU with instilling his respect for, and embrace of, the kind of ensemble work done by PTP.

"Every day," he says, "I think about what I learned from my teachers at BU." ■