

CHLOË BASS, JACKIE SIBBLIES DRURY, SARAH ROSE LEONARD, and ALLISON LYMAN with Frank Hentschker

For many makers and lovers of downtown, experimental performance, The Martin E. Segal Theatre Center's (M.E.S.T.C.) annual PRELUDE Festival is the unofficial kick-off event of the fall season. For three days every October, more than 30 New York artists present, in dizzying succession, short works in progress—be they dance, theater, installation, song cycle, or just a really well constructed burrito. That this should occur at an academic institution in midtown Manhattan may seem incongruous (PRELUDE is held at The Graduate Center, CUNY), but those artists share an equal billing with theory- and poetics-heavy conversation, and projects which inhabit and invert the library and the classroom in ways which academics do well to capture on their home turf.

Founded in 2003 by the singular Frank Hentschker (Executive Director, M.E.S.T.C.), the festival has grown from humble beginnings to capture, in the words of playwright Jeffrey M. Jones, “something fundamental [which has] changed in the practice of experimental theater.” Documenting this change has fallen to a rotating roster of curators, whose combined selections over the past decade shimmer between the quickly dissolving poles of established and emerging: Mac Wellman, Marina Abramovic, and Elevator Repair Service alongside Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, The Bruce High Quality Foundation, and 600 Highwaymen. In practice, PRELUDE resembles not so much the conclusion of an artist's job well done, but three dozen answers to the question of what an artist really is.

Much has changed about the downtown performance community since 2003, and as PRELUDE enters its second decade, festival dramaturgy reflects an interest in agency, presence, and the personal. Delineations between new and less-new, play and play-hybrid, have been replaced by more existential questions which gather around that most mercurial and persistent of artistic needs: care. This year's curators—Chloë Bass (artist), Jackie Sibblies Drury (playwright), Sarah Rose Leonard (director/dramaturg), and Allison Lyman (dramaturg/producer)—sat down with Hentschker to talk shop about the upcoming festival and the ideas guiding its curation.

Frank Hentschker (Rail): As you program PRELUDE2014, what has been materializing? Either as artistic tendencies, or new areas of performance?

Sarah Rose Leonard: I think the simple fact that you [Frank] have chosen curators who also work as artists reflects an interest in how artists care for their work and each other. The four of us are visibly allowed to be artists, curators, and people at the same time. That focus has extended to the artists we've chosen.

Bass: I think there's been more space for questions. In my work as an artist, I make platforms and environments a lot, and I am doing the exact same thing for PRELUDE, but that can look like curation if it's framed that way.

Jackie Sibblies Drury: I feel like our artistic tendencies are new areas of performance. So rather than focusing on aggressively “new” forms, we've all been drawn to personal work.

Leonard: We all seem to be interested in artists who are very much themselves in their work. Very honest and true to their own vision and voice.

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Bass: Maybe some emergent tendencies, too, of what that means as we cross over between making work and the real world, or real life. Both for myself as an artist, and for the artists who I've curated into the festival, who we are in real life actually matters. It's a part of our practice.

Rail: Do these themes harken back to any other time of theater and performance?

Bass: Well, when I think about something like Bauhaus, or Black Mountain College, I think a lot of our shared spirit emerges. We're not really recreating that type of intense collaborative and specified environment, but I'm hoping to allow for engaging some of the conversations that can come out of places like that.

Lyman: I also think that it's a very golden age for performance right now.

Bass: That will not be a popular opinion!

Lyman: [Laughter.] I know! Maybe I mean a golden age in the Grotowski and Germano Celant sense. I'm excited by what happens in a so-called vacuum of funding, of space. The answer is always: so much. I'm not saying it isn't brutally hard; it is. Art might meditate on the void, but it doesn't believe in it.

Bass: There is this prevalent rumor that there's never enough support. Although I also think it's true that not all artists should be supported equally. Another unpopular opinion.

Leonard: I never know when we are in a golden age or a rotten age. There is never enough space or money. Ever. But I certainly think the level of conversation about downtown theater is thriving and mutating and rigorous.

Rail: Interesting because ours is, in many ways, a festival of limitations—time, space, money. We're at an academic institution, our theater isn't even really a theater. I'm always surprised and inspired by how many artists are able to make it work.

Sibblies Drury: Those constraints are always a part of theater. In a way, I think that the limits take away some of the pressure, and allow for that generosity too—you are less afraid of being critiqued, of needing to show that you're worth the investment. All of these things that get in the way of presenting and appreciating work.

Lyman: Generosity from the artists and the audiences. It's all free, it's a bit of a love-in, in a refreshing way.

Sibblies Drury: You can show and see an idea that's not finished and know it is being shown with generosity and that it will be seen with a generosity which is all too rare in downtown theater.

Leonard: Also, I think the fact that it is both for the public and for a small community of downtown theater artists makes it feel very accessible and voyeuristic at the same time.

Bass: I actually don't have the same feeling of access, and maybe that's a good thing because I don't have a really strong idea of what the festival can or can't be. When I first came to PRELUDE as an audience member, I was still very much in the world of downtown theater, so I had an understanding of the festival as kind of the intellectualized space of downtown theater. And I think in some ways that hasn't changed, but also my understanding of the "club" nature of both intellectual space and "downtown theater" has really altered.

Lyman: It seems like your curatorial project is to break that club open a bit, or a lot.

Bass: Yeah, this is kind of my project. The idea of community. What does that really mean? Who is the "we" when "we" say this is for "us," and how do I fit into that? How do "I" make this what it is, in ways I don't even maybe realize?

Rail: And part of community is having a gathering space to keep asking these questions, to see how their answers change over time. It's amazing that the festival has been around long enough now to have impacted several waves of artists within the downtown theater and performance community. Do you have any memorable moments from past festivals?

Sibblies Drury: The first PRELUDE I went to was for a "class trip" in graduate school. I hadn't heard of the festival before then, and I saw a reading of *Neighbors* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. And. I. Lost. It. All. I lost everything. I loved *Lumberob*. I loved Young Jean Lee's *Untitled Feminist Show*. I loved *Ich Kurbisgeist*. Lisa D'Amour and Katie Pearl's Milton piece was so intriguing. So many things. Cesar Alvarez & Sarah Benson's amazing game play with the jumpsuits.

Lyman: *Radiohole*. *NYC Players*. *Big Dance Theater*. Anything Neal Medlyn touches. *Two-Headed Calf*. *Ok-wui Okpokwasili*. [PRELUDE13 Curator] Caleb Hammons put together this incredible panel/performance with playwrights last year that I think about every single day. Too hard, the list is endless. Joyce Cho!

Sibblies Drury: Joyce Cho!

Bass: *Nature Theater of Oklahoma*, always. And some of my favorite moments have been in the conversations. I remember the first PRELUDE I ever came to, not even really knowing what it was, I accidentally walked into a very intense conversation about representation, and it was great to be able to enter the room in a tense, lean-in kind of moment.

Leonard: This is almost impossible for me! I have loved so many Prelude artists. I have to say the first closing night party I produced rocked my world—I met the composer I currently make all my work with, *Lumberob* broke my mind, the dancing felt joyful and furious. I felt very much embraced and challenged by my community in creating that party.

Rail: Okay, so in addition to the 30-some artists presenting their work this year, what's new about the 2014 festival?

Leonard: So much! A performance in a library! Theater in a truck! Workshops! The Resource Room! Actually, maybe you could explain the Resource Room, Chloë, for our viewers out there.

Bass: The Resource Room will be held at the James Gallery and will run simultaneously with programming in the theaters during the festival. I'll be designing activities for the festival attendees that questions their situation as an "I" or as a "we" within the festival. The Resource Room is also a space to host other performers and their work—I'll have artists Aisha Cousins and Nathaniel Sullivan in there, as well as ephemera from the *Truck Project*.

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Bass: This is also why the idea of care is so important to the festival this year. Partially as a form of making choices, but also really as a way to experiment with where our energies come from and how they are shared. It's not as new age as it sounds, it's more like How can we be emotionally sustainable and also do this kind of hard thing?