



theater

# IN ASYLUM

10 years



# Thank you

Thank you to everyone who made this milestone possible.

Thank you to those early and frequent collaborators, to our families and friends, who made these 10 years so sweet: Frankie Alicea, the Appletons, Laura Aristovulos, Jessie Atkinson, Christian Avila, Ariella Axelbank, Andrew Balmer, Jake Beckhard, Sharlene and Joyce and all the Bedards, Randall Benichak, Judy “Cuz” Berger, Melissa Brading, Adrian Bridges, Theresa Burns, Matt Clemons, Jonas Cohen, Kelly Colburn, Mark Costello, Calandra Daby, Dan Daly, Christopher DeSantis, Nadia Diamond, Lawrence Dreyfuss, Karen Lehman Foster, Yonit Friedman, Rick Fudge, Kate Gazzaniga, Amanda Ghosh, Linnea Gregg, Arielle Hader, Ryan Haddad, Kara Hankard, Chris Harcum, Gethsemane Herron-Coward, Elizabeth Hess, Paul Hinkes, Colleen Hughes, Willie Johnson, Meghan Kennedy, Samantha Keogh, Alyssa Kim, Starr Kirkland, Esther Yumi Ko, Jacob Lasser, Marilyn Lawson, Amelia Lembeck, Rebekah Levin, Julia Levine, Diana Levy, Maggie Low, Sofia Lund, Andrea Marks, Hogan McLaughlin, Eric Mercado, Cynthia Meng, the Miliones, Makha Mthembu, Lucy Myrtue, Dylan Neely, Julia Nickerson, Patricia Noonan, Ben Otto, Lizzy and all the Palmers, Russell Peck, Alice Pencavel, Katie Polin, Zac Porter, Greg Redlawsk, Jacob Marx Rice, Mandy Robbins, Jonelle Robinson, Abby Schreer, Ramsey Scott, Manuela Sosa, Hilarie Spangler, Zach Stephens, Dani Stompor, Blake Sugarman, Lucas Tahiruzzaman Syed, Bessie Taliaferro, Valeska von Schirmeister, Dan Stearns, Jen Tash, Marchelle Thurman, Slat's Toole, Alison Walter, Kelly Webb, the Wohlers, Ran Xia, and Sarah Ziegler.

Thank you to the Playwrights Horizons Theater School, to NYU and Columbia, to New York City for bringing us together. Thank you to Erez Ziv and everyone at FRIGID New York (Horse Trade Theater Group) for taking a chance on us and pushing us to become a company. Thank you to Piper Theatre and the Old Stone House, The Episcopal Actors' Guild, the LaGuardia Performing Arts Center, and all the groups who have given us opportunities since. Thank you to Jimmy's No. 43, Bar 82, and above all Dempsey's, our dearly missed watering holes. Thank you to the Gray Mare, Cooper's, and the 12th Street Ale House for taking care of us and hosting our events since! Thank you to the League of Independent Theater, Fractured Atlas, A.R.T./New York, and The Artist Co-op for supporting and advocating for us.

Thank you to everyone who has worked on or attended a Theater in Asylum project. We are so grateful for the love and support and ideas and energy you give. You make this company.

# theater IN ASYLUM 10 years

## Dear friends,

We are thrilled and honored to reach this milestone, and grateful for the conversations, rehearsals, donations, volunteer hours, and heartfelt performances that made it possible.

We founded the company to “provide asylum to characters and subjects in need. With ensemble-driven performance we investigate to inspire curiosity, empathy, and action.” In our first 10 years we’ve offered asylum to artists like Vaslav Nijinsky, Federico García Lorca, and the Brontë sisters, as well as to subjects like revolution and democratic debate. We’ve offered our stage to guest artists at our cabarets, and our love of play-reading to our community in our Cold Reading series. We’ve traveled to Chicago and Prague, and performed at theaters all over New York City.

When we decided to formally organize as a company, we set out to create a space to play, explore, and learn with friends and collaborators who challenge and inspire us. We cannot thank you and this vibrant community enough for all the work and growth you’ve made possible.

10 years after our first piece—*Nijinsky in Asylum*—premiered, we pause to reflect on our past and imagine our future. We hope you enjoy this retrospective and are as eager for what’s next as we are. Onwards!

Peace, power, and love to you,

Paul Bedard, Katie Palmer, Kathryn Appleton, and Hilarie Spangler

# Nijinsky, then *Theater In Asylum*

By Katie Palmer

Paul and I met in 2006, before our freshman year classes even started at NYU. We quickly became close friends and frequent collaborators, but it was the project Paul proposed for senior year that turned us into forever collaborators and catalyzed the formation of our company.

While I was studying abroad in Florence, I got a message from Paul. It felt a bit random, but he was very excited and it couldn't wait. Paul began introducing me to his latest obsession: Vaslav Nijinsky. Nijinsky was a revolutionary choreographer working in Paris with the Ballet Russe in the early 1910s. He set the art world on fire with his revolutionarily primal and proto-modern choreography, and the reaction to his work is encapsulated in the riot that erupted

during the premiere of his biggest work, *The Rite of Spring*. Alongside his trailblazing career, Nijinsky had tumultuous (and public) relationships with impresario Serge Diaghilev and dancer Romola Pulszky. His career was cut short in 1917, however, when he experienced a breakdown and subsequently spent the last 30 years of his life in and out of mental asylums. We were enamored with Nijinsky's story and the diary he wrote while institutionalized. He had a difficult life, often imprisoned in an asylum. We wondered how we might be able to offer him another kind of asylum: safe haven for those with dangerous ideas, misunderstood at the time.

We began crafting a piece to tell that story with five marvelous dancer-actors who said yes to this wild, inventive ride. The piece had no words, and we sought to combine some of Nijinsky's choreography with my



*Nijinsky in Asylum*, 2010. Photo by Stephanie Warren

own. Randall Benichak crafted an original score, combining excerpts of the music Nijinsky danced to (including *The Rite of Spring*, which was Paul's ringtone for years). That first production featured a live chamber orchestra and was a fantasia of repetition, movement, and experimentation. We were breathless by the end of the process—not entirely sure of what we made, but knowing it was something exciting.

Come May 2010, we were freshly minted graduates hungry to get out into the world. We thought, let's put on the show again—there was so much more of the story to tell. The single-act original piece became a three-act, with each act told from a different character's point of view. Randall incorporated even more music from



*Nijinsky in Asylum*, 2010. Photo by Stephanie Warren

## Remembering... that orchestra.

"It is absolutely incredible to think about the body of work that Theater in Asylum has created over the last decade, and I have had the pleasure to be a part of so many of these pieces over the years. With *Nijinsky in Asylum*, Paul, Katie, and I reimagined some of the most famous orchestral works in this incredibly complex narrative.

But it wasn't the performances or the many, many variations that we created on primal rhythms of *The Rite of Spring* that made this work so memorable... It was actually the musical language that Paul and I used to translate the score notations into the cues for the dancers. In the middle of section 2, we had some 'rejection cuddling' as a transition. In the middle of a lighter section, we had some 'zebras running through bubbles.' And in a particularly difficult and complex section of the sacrificial dance, we had a 'Chinese dragon,' Paul and I lovingly referred to because it was so much of a beast to get through.

It was a process that transformed me as a young composer and conductor, coming to understand the sheer amount of work it takes to get a project of this magnitude off the ground."

—**Randall Benichak** (composer, musician, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



*Nijinsky in Asylum*, 2010. Photo by Stephanie Warren

Nijinsky's ballets and conducted an even bigger orchestra. We dreamed bigger and spent the summer manifesting those dreams. The production needed a no-nonsense big dreamer to step in and help manage the whole thing: enter Kathryn Appleton. Paul and Katie courted Kathryn with a pancake breakfast (which we did not make), and she was reckless enough to say yes to this ambition and talented enough to wrangle it. With the three of us shepherding the piece,

we opened *Nijinsky in Asylum* in September 2010 at Steps on Broadway, a prominent dance studio on the Upper West Side.

A few weeks later, after the rush of it all, Paul and I met with a few others at our favorite bar, Dempsey's (RIP), to dream of what could come next. *Nijinsky in Asylum* was such a success, and we loved working together. We were teeming with ideas for shows. "We should do this again," we thought. Everyone nodded in agreement, but questions arose about all that would need to happen for us to do it again. "Well, if we were to do this again, we would need a name." What to call ourselves, the makers of *Nijinsky in Asylum*? The notion of asylum as a kind of safety, a place to put the world on pause in order to explore ideas, captivated us. In a flash I said, "Theater in Asylum." It just... felt... perfect. 10 years later and here we are!



*Nijinsky in Asylum*, 2010. Photo by Stephanie Warren

## Remembering... ballet.

"Paul and Katie, they gave me that impossible moment that people talk about, like maybe I'll be a waitress for someone really famous and they'll be like, 'You're goin' places kid!' So, when I joined the cast of *Nijinsky in Asylum*, I was a very small, supporting role, which I was totally cool with. We had just graduated, I was pumped to do dance-theater. I've always loved dance but I had



*Nijinsky in Asylum*, 2010. Photo by Stephanie Warren

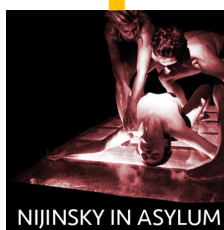
almost no ballet experience. I did some of it when I was a gymnast and my ballet teacher then just... hated my guts. But I was also super interested in how to act without words. And anyway, they bumped me up to the lead of this production, which was the most incredible thing that had happened in...to be honest, probably in my life that far.

And then I got to work with Hogan, who, I mean, I just kept apologizing to him because like, 'You're like... you're a ballerina. You've been doing this for a long time and now you have me! I'm a gymnast, not a lot of ballet experience!' Haha! But, he was great. The whole experience was really great.

It really marked for me the idea of artists taking chances on other artists. That's one of the many things I love about Theater in Asylum."

—**Arielle Hader** (actor, dancer, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)

# Our first 10 years



September 25, 2010  
*Nijinsky in Asylum*  
premieres at  
Steps on Broadway  
studio

theater  
**IN ASYLUM**

November, 2010  
We settle on our  
name, draft a mission  
statement, and really  
organize as a company

# 10 years and counting.

10

Full-length  
Productions

91

Cold  
Readings

17

Cabarets

12

Public  
Readings

16

Theaters  
we've  
performed in

9

Legitimate  
rehearsal  
spaces used

4

After-hours  
workplaces used  
for rehearsal

1

Ball pits  
we've had  
meetings in

\$70,609

Total fundraised  
for our work

216

Company meetings  
+ an unknown amount  
before we started archiving  
everything in 2013

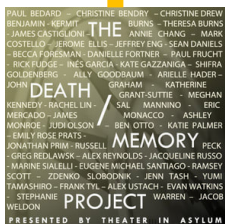
## Remembering... the ballpit.



The cast of *Nijinsky in Asylum*, 2009. Photographer unknown.

"So, where we used to rehearse, back in the very early days. Outside of the rehearsal room there was this giant ball pit. Like McDonald's style, that kids would normally play in. And we would love to just hang out in this ball pit. If you weren't being used in a rehearsal, like for a couple minutes, or if you were on a break, we would all just find ourselves chillin' in this ball pit. And it's so specific to Theater in Asylum that now whenever I do see ball pits out in the world, I instantly think of Theater in Asylum."

--**Theresa Burns** (actor, choreographer, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



April 3, 2011  
Our first cabaret,  
*The Death /  
Memory Project*,  
performs at New  
York Theatre  
Workshop's  
upstairs space



June 5, 2011  
Our first  
"Five in Asylum"  
performs at  
Jimmy's No. 43



August 14, 2011  
*The Others  
Project* performs  
at New York  
Theatre  
Workshop's  
upstairs space

# Friends Everywhere

By Kathryn Appleton

We were young. Hungry. Super ambitious. In need of accomplices.

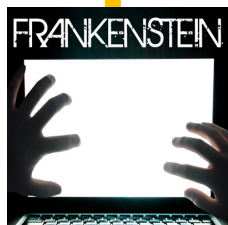
With two full productions under our belt, we were looking for our next endeavor and someone to help us produce. We were extremely fortunate to be awarded a year-long residency at Horse Trade Theater, a small, longstanding East Village theatrical producing company, now known as FRIGID New York. During this residency, we produced three full-length shows in ten months—*Revolution in 1*, *¡Olé!*, and *#Coriolanus*—as well as multiple cabarets and many fundraising events. Looking back now, it's wild that we did it all!

It was at Horse Trade that we got our footing as a company. We learned how to produce multiple events at one time, we grew an audience and a following, we met people who would become some of our closest collaborators, and we became much more embedded in the East Village theater scene. We honed our creative process and laid the groundwork for the future of our company. We became closer (literally and figuratively) as a team, spending each Sunday evening together cramped in a tiny office at Horse Trade.

Horse Trade was the first of many organizations who would help drive our success and continued existence these past 10 years. Since our time at Horse Trade, we've worked with three other New York companies to present our work. In summer 2017, we partnered with Piper Theatre to present our new musical *The Brontës* at the Old Stone House in Brooklyn. Two years later, we worked with the Episcopal Actors' Guild



*Revolution in 1*, 2012. Photo by Stephanie Warren



**November 11, 2011**  
*Frankenstein*  
premieres at the  
Looking Glass Theatre



**April 2, 2012**  
Our second  
"Five in Asylum"  
performs at  
Jimmy's No. 43



**May 18, 2012**  
*The  
Revolutions  
Project*  
performs at  
Bar 82

to present the world premiere production of Alice Pencavel's *Totally Wholesome Foods*. Most recently, we partnered with the LaGuardia Performing Arts Center to present Willie Johnson's *Hephaestus* in the Rough Draft Festival.

Theaters haven't been the only organizations to open doors for us. Our fiscal sponsor, Fractured Atlas, has guided us in seeking grants and donations, while the Alliance of Resident Theaters New York (A.R.T./New York) made multiple grants (space and money) available to us. In fact, we were able to hire our first Community Engagement Manager through the support of the Nancy Quinn Fund, administered by A.R.T./New York.

In May 2017, we were so fortunate to find our home in a newly opened space called The Artist Co-op, putting an end to years of battling for tables (and quiet) in cafes around New York City. The Artist Co-op provided us with a cost-efficient co-working space where we could hold meetings, rehearsals, and... just do the work.

Producing theater takes time, space, money, patience, legal know-how, and... allies. We're so grateful for all of the companies and friends who have allied with us and supported our work along the way. We've missed you, and we can't wait to get back in the theater when it's safe to gather again.

## Remembering... the rat.

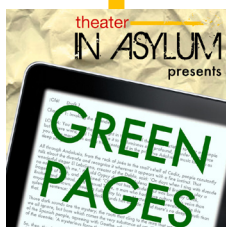


#Coriolanus, 2013. Photo by Bailey Carr

"This business and New York City is crazy, we're always working on a million things, but Theater in Asylum has always been an artistic home that I can come back to. #Coriolanus specifically was an amazing and crazy project that we worked on. Paul had wanted to explore with the project social media and how social media can influence politics, policy, and public perception. Very interestingly enough it was all filtered through Twitter, so everything that all the citizens and people in the government were talking about, they were tweeting at each other, which now feels—Paul was so smart because now that's literally happening.

It was an amazing time, with the fight choreography, with the technology—which was crazy doing it in a tiny little underground space. Sometimes we would lose power, sometimes the projections wouldn't work. One time I was giving a speech, calling the citizens of the city rats and an actual rat ran across the stage and into the audience. But that's just one of so many memories I have with Theater in Asylum. I can't wait to see what happens in the next 10 years!"

—**Russell Peck** (actor and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



**June 12, 2012**  
Our first "Green Pages" series begins presenting new paperless readings



**October 2, 2012**  
*Revolution in 1* premieres at The Red Room



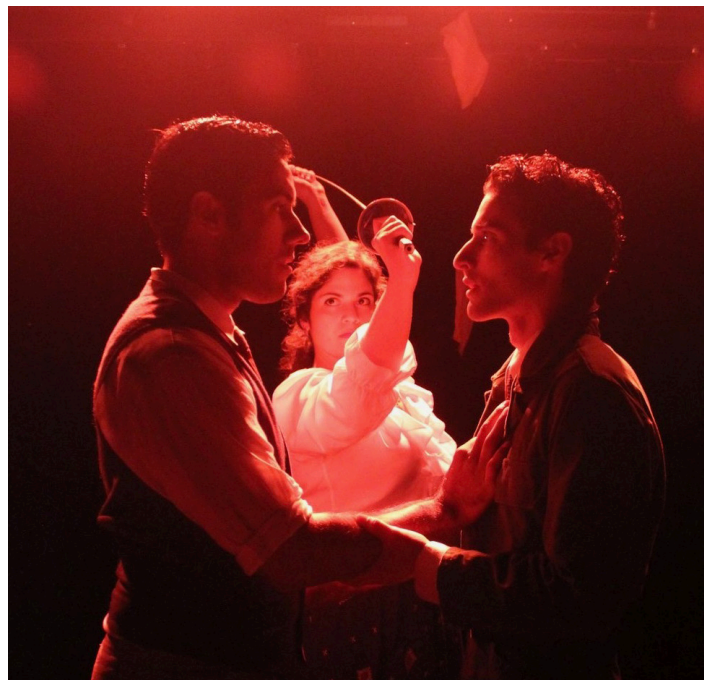
**November 5, 2012**  
*The Battlegrounds Project* performs at Bar 82

# Lorca and Dalí

By Paul Bedard

*¡Olé!* was a labor of love and pain and obsession. It explores the role of the artist, the spirit, shame, responsibility, and, ultimately, death. Personally, the piece is yet one more place for me to ask questions about my art, whether I make it to move forward or to hide; questions about love and sex, whether it's good and worthy of some sort of "pride"; and questions about the places that made me, whether "American" or "New Yorker" really mean anything, and if I have a responsibility to these places. Should we, like poet Federico García Lorca believed, create art to confront our fears, love with proud intensity, and stay true to our homes, life or death? Or should we, as painter Salvador Dalí believed, strive to free ourselves from perceived responsibilities and constraints, create art to assist others doing the same, and seek to lead people towards complete "social emancipation"?

Dalí and Lorca's story has long obsessed and troubled me. In making the show, we sought to chronicle their meeting, their semi-secret affair, and the years-long correspondence they kept, debating art and love and Spain and death. When Francisco



*¡Olé!*, 2013. Photo by Joyce Bedard

Franco rose to power and Spain descended into war, it was clear that socialists and homosexuals like Lorca were not safe in Spain. Dalí, already making a splash in Paris, pleaded with Lorca to flee to Paris—or anywhere—and write in safety. But Lorca stayed.

Lorca spoke and wrote frequently during his life of "el duende," a sort of life-force animated in those who, like the bullfighter or the flamenco dancer, bravely stare down and face what may kill them. After a brief stint in the United States, he returned—

**January 31, 2013**  
*¡Olé!* (its first of many incarnations)  
premieres at Under St. Marks

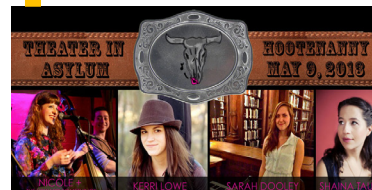


five IN ASYLUM



**April 14, 2013**  
Our third  
"Five in Asylum"  
performs at  
Jimmy's No. 43

**May 9, 2013**  
Our first "Hootenanny"  
performs at Under St. Marks



despite knowing Spain was unsafe for him—to his native Granada, where Franco's forces could easily find him. There's no doubt in my mind that Federico García Lorca knew what he was doing and what would happen. On August 19, 1936, he was assassinated. His body was never found.

Salvador Dalí survived. He moved around, fleeing Europe entirely when war swept the continent soon after Lorca's death. Dalí's career was long and notorious. His melting clocks and iconic moustache can be found on t-shirts and mugs around the world. He did what he had to and survived. He went where he could work, shot commercials for chocolate bars and Alka-Seltzer, denied the more controversial aspects of his life, and leaned into a popular eccentricity. All of this made his career and influence possible.

I wonder all the time, do I owe something to the United States or to New York, even as I rail against their oppressive systems and structures that make art so constrained and a dignified life impossible for so many? What aspects of my life still lie beyond reach because I'm not willing to face what frightens me, what may kill me? What aspects of my love still lie beyond reach for reasons of my own shame? I'm asking these questions all over again as our nation convulses with pain and death, incited by forces old and new. Withstand it? Fight the good fight within it? Or flee? Repress? Survive? Try to go somewhere

else, somewhere with better support for the arts and for people? Make my work in struggle or in peace?

Creating, producing, and touring *¡Olé!* was an incredible experience. It started with a visit Katie and I made to Spain in 2011. After a year of obsessing, researching, and writing, we had the opportunity to produce the piece with the support of a residency in New York before touring it to Hartford,

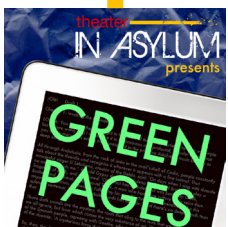
### Remembering...Prague.



The ¡Olé! team in Prague, 2014. Photo by Prague Fringe

"Having worked with Theater in Asylum since 2011, I have countless memories of rewarding collaborations and deep conversations in bars and parks and basement theaters - but if one memory encapsulates Theater in Asylum for me, it would be our tour of *¡Olé!* to Prague. I had been to the city before, but being there with my fellow Theater in Asylum artists was truly special - from exploring the beautiful city, to getting (mildly) electrocuted in the theater, to experiencing the community of other artists and audiences at the Prague Fringe Festival. It was an experience like no other - at times challenging, but full of growth and discovery, and one that I am deeply grateful to have been a part of."

- **Dan Stearns** (lighting designer, tech wizard, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



**June 27, 2013**  
Our second "Green Pages" series begins presenting paperless readings of new plays



**July 5, 2013**  
#Coriolanus premieres at Under St. Marks



**September 5, 2013**  
Our *¡Olé!* Tour begins, opening at the Chicago Fringe Festival and winning the Audience Favorite Award

Chicago, Rochester, and Prague.

We've remounted *¡Olé!* more times than any of our other productions, giving me—and I hope others—the chance to ask all these questions again and again, in different places and at different times. Ten years into Theater in Asylum and seven years since *¡Olé!*'s first staging, I'm as stuck as ever on these questions.

I'll leave you with a final thought from that survivor Dalí: "The personality of Federico García Lorca produced an immense impression on me. The poetic phenomenon presented itself before me suddenly in flesh and bone, confused, blood-red, vicious and sublime, quivering with a thousand fires of

darkness. When I felt the incendiary and communicative fire of the poetry of the great Federico rise in wild, disheveled flames, I tried to beat them down, while already preparing the grill on which, when the day came, when only glowing embers remained of Lorca's initial fire, I would come and fry the mushrooms, the chops and the sardines of my thought..."

### Remembering... anarchy and adventure.

"When I think about Theater in Asylum I think of beautiful chaos and magical anarchy. I think of walking into an audition room on the 3rd floor of some rickety building in the East Village and having no idea that the folks I was about to meet would impact my life so profoundly.

I think of candlelit bacchanalian evenings of art, beauty, music, and conversation. Of wine and revolution. I think of the Burger King crown that Paul made sure I received at some random rest stop between New York and Chicago. I think of navigating a dark, sweaty nightclub in Prague with Sam and Jake and Paul and Sofia—that incredible ensemble that we created in *¡Olé!*, just lost in this world with these incredible artists. I think of love and support and humanity and friendship. I think of power, of boldness, of adventure, of fearlessness. So thank you, Theater in Asylum. I can't wait for the next set of adventures. So here's to ten more years of beautiful chaos and magical anarchy!"

—**Frankie Alicea** (actor and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



*¡Olé!*, 2013. Photo by Joyce Bedard



**September 13, 2013**  
*¡Olé!* opens in  
Hartford, CT  
(Paul's hometown!)



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**September 20, 2013**  
*¡Olé!* opens at the Rochester  
Fringe Festival, winning  
Best Touring Production



**March 16, 2014**  
*The Duende Project*  
performs at  
the Kraine  
Theater

# Theme, Art, Go!



*The Persistence of Annabel Lee*, 2011. Photo by Stephanie Warren

By Katie Palmer

While *Nijinsky in Asylum* was our first show, I have a theory that *The Death/Memory Project*, TIA's first cabaret, is what made us an actual company with staying power.

The prompt was simple: create a piece that responds to the correlation of death and memory. TIA created what might be our favorite piece to date (or at least, we've forgotten so much of it that what is left holds the dearest place in our memory): "The Persistence of Annabel Lee," inspired by the paintings "The Persistence of Time" and "The Disintegration of the Persistence of Time" by Salvador Dalí, and the poem "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allen Poe. It was an abstract movement piece with evocative music, an eerie choreographic style, and

otherworldly costumes by Ramsey Scott.

We reached out with our prompt to every artist we knew—college friends, new friends, musicians—and they all came ready to play with beautiful short pieces. It was, like all things we do, wildly ambitious: 3-plus hours long, 20-some-odd acts, the room packed to the gills. It was an explosion of joy and community unlike anything I had experienced in theater before. I couldn't believe we had brought together all these factions of our lives to make work on a single theme and ponder the art together.

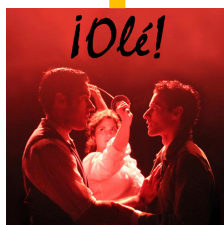
We got such positive feedback, and we were really proud of ourselves. So we thought, we have to keep doing this. We have to keep making spaces for this work and this community.

My other theory is: things have to be really good the first time you try it in order for you to ever try doing it again.

We settled into this format and have produced 17 cabarets in 10 years. They have been a tremendous amount of work: wrangling—and inspiring—upwards of 50 artists for one-night-only events, securing venues, enticing audiences. We've performed in the back rooms of bars, on carpeted floors, and in beautiful theaters. We've had

April 28, 2014

We win our first grant, from the Puffin Foundation



May 27, 2014

Our *¡Olé!* concludes with a run at the Prague International Fringe Festival

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May 8, 2014

Our second "Hootenanny" performs at the Kraine Theater



*The Battlegrounds Project, 2012. Photo by Stephanie Warren*

full houses and audiences of just ten. The themes have ranged from huge spiritual questions to granular political issues.

But the same core has been there every single time: people sharing, learning, and communing through art. The exuberance each cabaret brings is a feeling we will continue to chase time and time again.



*The Countdown Cabaret, 2019. Photo by Theater in Asylum*

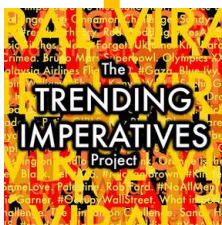
## Remembering... the smorgasbord.



*Healthcare Cabaret, 2019. Photo by Theater in Asylum*

"A Theater in Asylum Cabaret is a night of new work, or newly created work by a bunch of artists who have gathered together around a certain theme. It's a bit of a smorgasbord if you will, of different kinds of disciplines and performance styles and points of view. The Primaries Project was a great night of people coming together and doing different kinds of work around the primaries and the election that was coming up that year. Jabari Brisport did a piece. I did some comedy stuff. It was a really nice, warm, great, smart audience that cared deeply about the work and really got what it was about."

- **Chris Harcum** (actor, writer, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



**November 1, 2014**  
*The Trending Imperatives Project* performs at the Kraine Theater



**January 28, 2015**  
Our very first Cold Reading! We read Annie Baker's *Circle Mirror Transformation*



**December 12, 2015**  
We present the first workshop of what will become *The Debates 2016* at City Center

# Growing the family

By Katie Palmer

By 2015 Paul and I had created five original shows. Being the lead creative forces behind shows was exhausting! But it was also limiting the stories we could tell and how we could tell them. Relatedly, I had always wanted to write a musical. I had performed in them for twenty years and I wanted to add my voice to this canon I loved so much. And I found the most incredible partners to write it with, who I knew were special right away. You know those spark moments when you just know the event or the person is important? Meeting Lucas Tahiruzzaman Syed and then Sarah Ziegler was just like that.

The idea for creating a show around the Brontë sisters was Lucas' idea. At the very end of a 2-hour lunch at AppleJack Diner on Broadway and 55th Street, after Lucas had pitched every idea he'd ever had for a musical, he tossed out "What about Charlotte and Emily Brontë, who wrote *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*?" It was a giant lightbulb moment: here were misunderstood artistic geniuses who railed against their society to prove their worth—the perfect TIA



*The Brontës*, 2017. Photo by Katie Kearns Rakos

subjects.

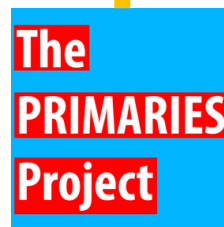
We met with Sarah a few weeks later at a Starbucks in Tribeca, and the rest is history. Well, the rest was actually an incredible amount of research, drafting, workshopping, and dreaming. Lucas composed, Sarah wrote the lyrics, and the three of us collaborated on the book. The process culminated in a glorious three-night run outdoors, behind the Old Stone House in Park Slope, Brooklyn. While there are many things to be proud of from that production, I



**April 4, 2016**  
First full reading  
of *The Brontës*  
presented at the  
Old Stone House



**April 18, 2016**  
*The Debates 2016: Democratic Primary  
Edition* premieres at The Kraine Theatre,  
before touring to Philadelphia and Hartford



**July 7, 2016**  
*The  
Primaries  
Project*  
performs at  
the Kraine  
Theater

think I am most proud of how mesmerizing the experience of the show was: the simple set, evocative costumes, bold lighting, top-notch orchestra, and stunning performances against a backdrop of an 18th century house on a magical New York summer night. It doesn't get any better than that.

At this time, Paul was also expanding his crew of collaborators, finding himself drawn to the political and the zany. After directing a few shows by the incredible playwright Alice Pencavel, the perfect show arose for a Theater in Asylum collaboration: *Totally Wholesome Foods*. The piece, a satire about well-meaning Brooklynites who



*Hephaestus*, 2020. Photo by Ryan Prado

## Remembering... music directing.

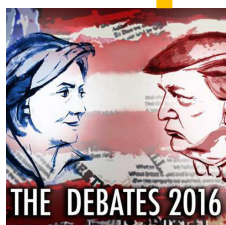


*The Brontës*, 2017. Photographer unknown

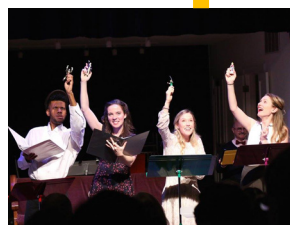
"This was one of my first gigs ever as a professional musical director and it couldn't have been on a better show. I feel like I've never met a more nerdy, amazing trio of composer, lyricist, and director than Lucas, Sarah, and Katie. It was just so fun to hear them talk about the Brontës, and how much they loved researching them, and how close they felt to these characters, and I just loved being a part of the process. I had a great time getting the band together, and rehearsing outdoors, and all the fun things that came with outdoor theater! And it was a beautiful little show that I will always cherish very, very dearly in my heart."  
—**Cynthia Meng** (music director, musician, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)

face a choice between their "woke" values and their livelihoods, won a residency to be produced at the Episcopal Actors' Guild. It was our first out-right comedy and our first production where neither Paul nor I had a writing credit, and the show was utterly, totally awesome.

Earlier this year, we collaborated with another playwright, the amazing Willie Johnson. Anyone who knows Willie can



**November 6, 2016**  
*The Debates 2016: General Election Edition*  
premieres at Under St. Marks



**February 27, 2017**  
Concert version of *The Brontës*  
presented at NY Theatre Barn



**July 9, 2017**  
First full workshop performance of *The Brontës*  
at the Old Stone House

tell you that he brings playfulness, deep rigor, and a political emphasis to his work. He studies the theories behind his work and *Hephaestus* was no exception. Epic in scale, the piece wove multiple Greek myths together, exploring ancient and modern notions of work, beauty, class, and dis/ability. With an incredible team of actors and designers, and the support of the LaGuardia Performing Arts Center, we shared three exciting performances of *Hephaestus* just before New York City shut down in response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

We are so grateful to these collaborating lead artists for entrusting us with their stories and expanding the scope of what a TIA show could be. Thank you for your inspiration, generosity, and passion.

## Remembering... live theater.



*Hephaestus*, 2020. Photo by Ryan Prado

"When we were working on *Hephaestus* it was RIGHT as COVID was starting to shut things down. We were lucky enough to make it through the run—it was literally the last thing I did before I started sheltering in place! I was lucky to be able to go out with a bang playing a complex, endearing, wacky Titan that wore suspenders and some silly socks. And in between that, I ate some damn good homemade hummus. Thank you, TIA. Can't wait to get back into a world where I can give you all high fives instead of elbow bumps."

—**Alyssa Kim** (actor and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



*Totally Wholesome Foods*, 2019. Photo by Ahron R. Foster

**November 6, 2017**

Staged reading of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* presented at The Hive NYC



**June 18, 2018**

First public reading of *Totally Wholesome Foods* presented at Pete's Candy Store



**February 17, 2019**

*Totally Wholesome Foods* premieres at the Episcopal Actors' Guild

# Cold Readings



Cold Reading, 2015. Photo by Theater in Asylum

By Paul Bedard

Early in 2015, while preparing to apply to be a Drama League Directing Fellow, I was devouring scripts and trying to come up with brilliant production ideas to include in my application. Daunted by the amount of reading and the often-dispiriting notion of having brilliant ideas alone, some friends and I began meeting to read and discuss plays together. This was in the basement of the indoor kids playground where I worked at the time, and the casual gathering quickly grew into one of Theater in Asylum's most successful and enduring programs.

Six years and 90 plays later, the Cold Reading series remains one of my favorite things. For those who have never been, we

gather with no preparation to read and then discuss a play. For years, Katie or I facilitated each Cold Reading, but about a year ago we started commissioning guest facilitators, which opened up the curation of plays and has been so wonderful. This year our playwrights Gethsemane Herron-Coward and Willie Johnson, playwright and director Ran Xia, and actors Kara Hankard, Jonas Cohen, and Manuela Sosa all facilitated. Our Community Engagement Manager Hilarie Spangler has also been facilitating. We've assembled quite the team to pick plays and run readings!

Looking back on all the plays we've read, however, some interesting trends emerge. The two eras we've read from the most are the 1990s and the 1930s. After

## CAMPAIGN KICKOFF CABARET



March 10, 2019  
*Campaign Kickoff Cabaret* performs at South Oxford Space



June 6, 2019  
*Countdown Cabaret* performs at the Episcopal Actors' Guild

## HEALTHCARE CABARET



October 20, 2019  
*Healthcare Cabaret* performs at South Oxford Space

the United States, the country whose plays we've read the most is Germany, followed by the UK. Our most repeated playwrights are Bertolt Brecht and Caryl Churchill. The oldest plays we read are by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, who lived from 935-1001. The newest plays we've read are from this year, written in quarantine by dozens of playwrights, commissioned by the Play at Home series.

When New York went into quarantine earlier this year, we shifted our monthly in-person gatherings to weekly online gatherings. Our community grew both in number and geographical reach, with people outside of New York newly able to participate. We now regularly have readers from multiple states, countries, and even continents. The discussions have also grown. While we nearly always discuss questions like, "What stood out?" and "What challenges would arise in producing this today?", the pandemic, the uprising for Black lives, and the upcoming election have brought tremendous urgency to the issues of societal responsibility, equity, representation, power, and protest. These have supercharged our discussions recently and brought necessary lenses to work new and old.

Looking ahead, we'll reach our 100th Cold Reading this December and I couldn't be more proud and grateful. Cold Readings began as a place to share an overwhelming

stack of plays to read for an application (which succeeded, by the way), but has since grown to something so much more valuable. I cherish my Wednesday nights and look forward to the plays, the completely unprepared performances, and the thrilling discussions with friends. Cheers, Dionysus!

### Remembering...our Cold Readings.



Cold Reading, 2020. Photo by Theater in Asylum

"It has been really wonderful to have a consistent Wednesday night, where I get to see consistent faces and feel part of a community. And Paul and Katie have done such a great job at creating a community that is open for both laughter and deep conversations in response to what has been happening over the last couple of months. It's been a lot of things, and it's important that we talk about them. And having a vessel like reading plays, that we have been able to tailor towards the conversations that we want to have has been so important and so wonderful."

—**Hilarie Spangler** (Community Engagement Manager and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)

#### CLIMATE CRISIS CABARET



December 9, 2019  
*Climate Crisis  
Cabaret*  
performs at South  
Oxford Space

#### THE ELECTABILITY CABARET



February 8, 2020  
*The Electability  
Cabaret*  
performs at South  
Oxford Space



March 11, 2020  
*Hephæstus*  
premieres at  
LPAC's Rough  
Draft Festival

# Debates

By Paul Bedard

*The Debates* has been, by far, our biggest project. It's been through many iterations, encompassing dozens of public events, hundreds of people, and nearly a thousand footnotes in the published scripts.

The project began in Ithaca, NY, where I was serving as a Drama League Directing Fellow at the Hangar Theatre. It was Summer 2015: Obama was president, Bernie Sanders was a relative unknown, and our current clown-in-chief was still a harmless sideshow. The 2016 presidential campaign was just beginning in earnest, and I was curious to explore previous presidential debates. With an eager company of young actors, I began digging into excerpts of the infamous 1960 presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. We sought to explore what was specific to the very first televised debate, the debate that literally invented the genre. During this exploration, however, we discovered that the process—analyzing a debate transcript, having different people “try on” the candidates, and experimenting with candidates’ projected images—was more compelling and empowering than the



*The Debates 2016: Primary Edition*, 2016. Photo by Theater in Asylum

show we initially set out to make. By the time my fellowship ended and I returned to New York, the Kennedy/Nixon idea was scrapped and we dove full steam ahead into what became *The Debates 2016*.

Between October 2015 and April 2016, we presented nine Watch Parties and Political Analysis Meetings; expanded our team of actors and researchers; and presented six distinct workshops, clarifying our newfound process along the way. By the time the field of candidates had dwindled to Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, we had a show we were proud of. We presented *The Debates 2016: Democratic Primary Edition* in New York, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania, before each state's primary, and the response was thrilling. NY City Lens wrote, “Not only was *The Debates*... about politics. It was politics.” *The Hartford Courant* wrote, “[*The*



June 21, 2020  
*The Debates 2020*  
premieres  
on Zoom

theater  
IN ASYLUM  
10 years

## Onwards to our next 10 years!

*Debates*] was the way to spend the nervous hours before voting... Forthright, in-your-face, up-to-the-minute...”

That September, we began the process again with the general election. We watched and analyzed the debates, crafted a script and performed at the beloved Under St. Marks theater the night before Hillary Clinton’s assured victory. And... we all know how that election turned out. We learned, however, that our *Debates* work is strongest when it shines a light on challenging questions and complicated candidates. The problem with the 2016 general election was that, for our community, the decision was crystal clear. The notion of stepping into that particular Republican nominee’s shoes and words, with empathy, was just... not possible for us.

We believe there is an audience for a *Debates* show that includes our 45th president, and a company who can make it, but Theater in Asylum is not it. We do our best work when there is a diversity of political opinion in the room and when there’s something to debate. With the general election, we didn’t have those things. The choice was clear for our community, and this led to a production that didn’t expose choices or the debate we assumed was needed.

In the last four years, the country has changed in ways we never thought imaginable. The urgency around the 2020 election couldn’t be higher, and when the Democratic primary debates started in June 2019, it was clear that we needed to mount another *Debates* show. *The Debates 2020* roared with excitement, following over 20 candidates with 12 Watch Parties, 10 Political Analysis Meetings, 5 Cabarets, and a much-needed debate about the candidates

and issues. We had political diversity in the room, with a left contingent split between Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and a moderate contingent that split and shifted throughout the year. When the pandemic struck and the production was cancelled, we were again at a loss. What do we do with this work?

With the country facing both a raging virus and an urgent reckoning with race, we moved online and reframed much of the show. *The Debates 2020* performed on Zoom just before New York’s rescheduled primary on June 21, 2020, and while the race for the Democratic nomination was largely already decided, the piece bloomed

### Remembering... tea-party politics.

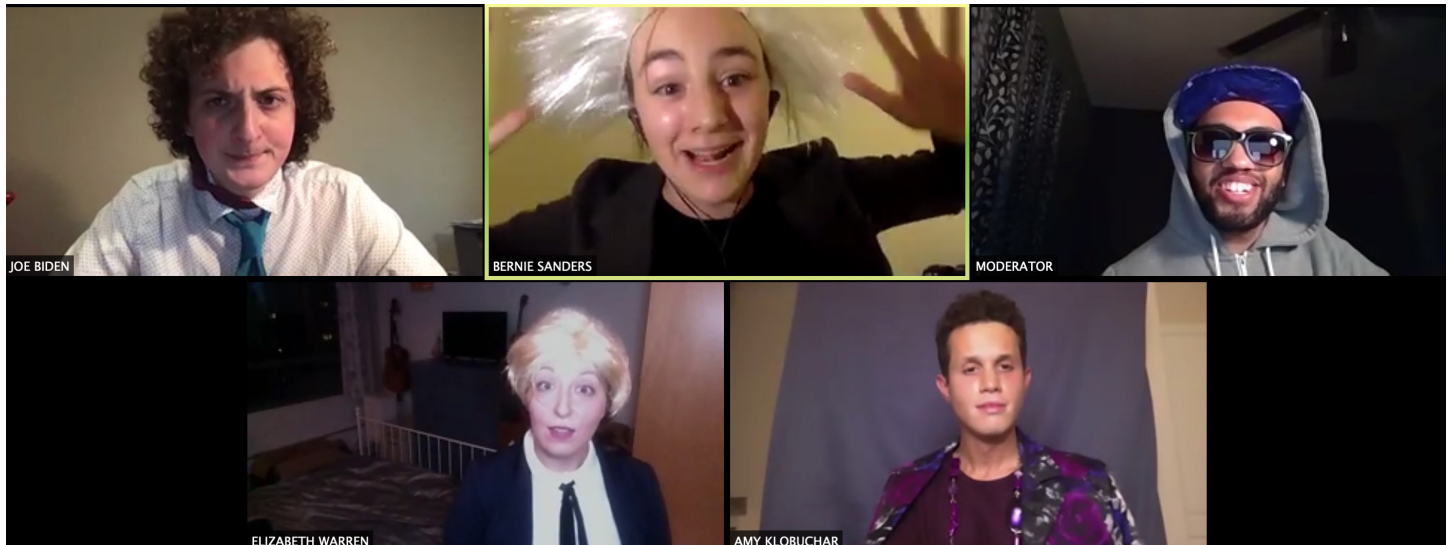


*The Debates 2016: Primary Edition, 2016. Photo by Theater in Asylum*

“This company truly defined my time in New York and beyond. I want to talk about *The Debates 2016*. I have vivid memories of the camaraderie watching the debates, the adrenaline of leading the political analysis meetings, the fun and sometimes the frustration creating the scenes, the late nights of sourcing and footnoting, and the pride and disbelief when every single production was complete. But above all else, I remember how much I learned from all the subjects we covered and all the team members who contributed.

One of my favorite memories is when we created the “Tea Party” scene, with Jessie Atkinson playing Hillary Clinton and myself as Bernie Sanders. We tried constantly to out-posh and out-snark each other. ... It was such a great way to play together, and moments like that are a reminder that joy can be found even through all the turmoil.”

—**Samantha Keogh** (actor, dramaturg, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)



*The Debates 2020, 2020. Photo by Theater in Asylum*

and provoked an incredible conversation about our country that reverberated in our community for weeks. Who were we and who are we, really, as a country? What does it mean to rally behind a candidate — which parts of their and your own identity are you connecting to? And which parts are you disconnecting from?

I am immensely proud of *The Debates* and the team who followed its evolving raison d'être. I'm so grateful to these people for their bravery and curiosity. Our scripts are still online, available to all. I don't know how they'll age and I'll be curious to revisit them in a few months or a few years, after we've hopefully begun healing and growing as a nation. I know that the work we did on the 2016 and 2020 primary contests was relevant and useful to the team and our community. I look forward, with hope, to



*The Debates 2020, 2020. Photo by Theater in Asylum*

future debates and the chance to ask again: who are we, and who do we want to be?

Are you registered to vote?

***Vote.gov***

### Remembering... the campaign.



Theater in Asylum Birthday Party, 2015. Photo by Theater in Asylum

"I have seen literally every Theater in Asylum production except for *Frankenstein*... And I wanted to talk about *The Debates*. I had such a great time going to the watch parties, both rounds, and it's always exciting watching everything unfold. I was actually feeling very disheartened when Biden was selected... But then I watched the production and I was heartened and inspired because you guys highlighted a lot of cultural moments that I had forgotten about, and shifts in the conversation. And also you guys just had a great time, it was clear just watching it. ... I just loved it."

—**Bessie Taliaferro** (writer, TIA Superfan, and dear friend of Theater in Asylum)

# Onward!

Taking the past few months to reflect on all Theater in Asylum accomplished in its first ten years has been dizzying and humbling. We are so grateful for the time, space, and trust we received this decade to make work and share stories with you, our community.

So much has changed since we've started, both in our company and the world. The need for empathy, solidarity, and investigation into history has only grown more urgent.

This year has been the perfect opportunity to reflect on our mission statement and reach for deeper clarity and purpose. To construct our new Mission, Vision, and Values, we are following the process we always use: thinking through

every angle thoroughly, leaning on our community for feedback, engaging in some useful debate, and eventually making a leap of faith. We cannot wait to share a revised mission statement, and with it a renewed purpose.

But first, a toast — to the asylum we've built. A sanctuary for theater and conversation where thinking deeply, rigorously, and empathically is hallowed. A shelter for our characters — many of them victims of oppression in their lives — who come into our space, where their art and stories may shine again.

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for joining us on this ride so far. Without you we wouldn't have gotten here.

Onward!

All our love,

Paul, Katie, Kathryn, and Hilarie



*View video memories and learn more [theaterinasylum.com](http://theaterinasylum.com)*

