



Rob Melrose and Paige Rogers Absurdity Plus

A director/actor team caters to sophisticated tastes at San Francisco's Cutting Ball

BY ROBERT AVILA

SAUL BROMBERGER AND SANDRA HOOVER PHOTOGRAPHY

N TIMES LIKE THESE, PERHAPS IT'S NO SUR-prise that San Francisco's Cutting Ball Theater found its 10th anniversary production, a mounting of Eugene Ionesco's first play, such a runaway hit. In contrast to the grim stretch of sidewalk outside in the Tenderloin (where Cutting Ball is resident at the 66-seat Exit on Taylor, a satellite stage of the Exit theatreplex), *The Bald Soprano* popped out buffed and shiny, a 59-year-old newborn, babbling an arch gibberish that gleefully made mincemeat of meaning. Its vivid two-tone-orange set lent the candied aura of a magazine layout to the home of the play's restively comfortable protagonists, the Smiths (played by Paige Rogers and David Sinaiko). A passerby, straying with boutique bags a few desperate blocks from shimmering Union Square, might have felt equally at home—at least until Ionesco's surreal laughter began its clockwork descent into chaos.

The brisk, tightly “unwound” production came in an equally vivid and fresh-sounding translation from director Rob Melrose, whose actors fluidly rendered the semantic free-for-all of Ionesco's bourgeois breakdown with complimentary physical gestures progressively ajar, akimbo, askew—until all concerned were literally bouncing off the walls. The show broke all attendance records for the company, with the run extending deep into January.

Not bad for Ionesco in the rainy season, never mind the foul economic weather. But then, Cutting Ball's restless founders—the married team of artistic director Melrose and actor and associate artistic director Rogers—have worked hard to cultivate the kind of audience that will eat up the absurd, and come back for more. The company these Minneapolis natives

traveled to San Francisco to found—fresh from prestigious graduate programs on the East Coast—is now synonymous with some of the best small theatre the Bay Area has to offer: intelligent, aesthetically sophisticated, challenging in form and content.

“I think we're building on a nice history,” acknowledges Melrose. An affable and gracious man circa 40, in shaved head and goatee, his unassuming intellect and mild manner offset an otherwise imposing frame. He greets me at Cutting Ball's modest new offices, just down the street from the theatre, but immediately suggests we smuggle to-go coffees into the spacious second-floor lobby of a nearby four-star hotel. “We're really picking up Christina's mantle,” he says, referring to the similarly adventurous programming of Exit Theatre's Christina Augello, who has racked up more than 20 Ionesco productions to her company's credit. Still, when the suggestion that Cutting Ball do more Ionesco came from Paul Walsh (then dramaturg and director of humanities at nearby American Conservatory Theater, where Melrose has served as assistant director to Carey Perloff), Melrose admits he hesitated. “I was a little worried. A lot of people don't like leaving the theatre going, ‘What the fuck was that?’ It does speak to the audience we've developed that *Soprano* is our best-attended show ever.”

Leasing both the Exit on Taylor and nearby office space were moves the company took in 2008 to put the formerly itinerant theatre on a sounder institutional footing. What Melrose and Rogers hadn't anticipated was a major economic recession, which has cut significantly into their usual sources of financial support and generally made the transition shakier



ROB MELROSE

From left, Donell Hill, David Sinaiko, Derek Fischer and Anjali Vashi in Cutting Ball's 2009 *The Bald Soprano*, directed by Rob Melrose.

than hoped. Nevertheless, Melrose has reason to be upbeat as he talks about the company's growth. The current operating budget is about \$300,000, "and we started with \$400," he notes, "so that's pretty good."

That initial budget, while modest, went toward a production every bit as audacious as anything that came afterward. Indeed, Ionesco's absurdist reveries seem like tele-novelas alongside Richard Foreman's *My Head Was a Sledgehammer*, Cutting Ball's 1999 debut. Melrose counts Foreman, the New York-based experimentalist, as a primary influence. "For about 10 years I saw every play he did," he remembers. "I've read all his books. I like the way he thinks about theatre."

As it happens, Cutting Ball's production of *Sledgehammer* ran on an Exit stage too: Like several small innovative companies in the Bay Area—including now-defunct Art Street, Crowded Fire and the bicoastal Banana Bag & Bodice—Cutting Ball launched itself at the San Francisco Fringe Festival, the motley institution founded in 1992 by Exit stalwarts Augello and Richard Livingston. In the years since, Cutting Ball has made its calling card a mix of old-guard avant-garde, "re-visited classics" (including Shakespeare) and new, often form-bending works.

ALMOST INVARIABLY, THE MATERIAL Cutting Ball tackles comes with a strong design component—Melrose thinks very visually. On this score he cites another primary influence: "Robert Woodruff is one of the reasons I wanted to be a director. I saw his production of *The Skin of Our Teeth* [at the Guthrie] when I was 20 years old—it was

just idea on top of idea on top of idea, and the visuals were really exciting." To indulge his penchant for visual design, Melrose has gathered a crack design team around him over the years, including scenic designer Michael Locher, with whom he works unusually closely from the beginning of a production.

It's a formula that has earned Cutting Ball a raft of plaudits. The company's mounting in 2008 of another well-liked Ionesco, *Victims of Duty*, earned a best-production nod from the Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle, and that same year Cutting Ball received the San Francisco Bay Guardian's GOLDIE Award for outstanding work in the performing arts. In between Ionescos, the company scored the Bay Area premiere of Will Eno's *Thom Pain* (based on *nothing*), with the playwright very much involved (Melrose says they're still in contact and discussing the possibility of future collaborations) and audiences again responding well enough to see the run extended.

Other recent critical successes include productions of *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* (Beckett has also been heavy in the mix of late), as well as the premiere of *Bone to Pick*, based on the Ariadne myth, by San Francisco playwright Eugenie Chan. That production—part of an evening of short experimental plays by women playwrights, including Suzan-Lori Parks and Gertrude Stein—was grounded in a memorable solo turn by Rogers, playing a harried, emotionally starved waitress in some



last-chance coffee shop at the edge of a war-ravaged land. (She'll reprise the role in May alongside a newly commissioned companion piece by Chan, titled *Diadem*.)

"We've done well doing plays by Eugenie Chan and Kevin Oakes—things people haven't heard of," affirms Melrose, "along with *No Exit*, *The Maids*—plays that you've read but maybe never got a chance to see."

Melrose is engaged yet serene on the surface, with reserves of energy underneath. He needs them. Not only have he and Rogers shouldered the 24-7 burden of running a serious, small, left-of-center theatre, but Melrose is simultaneously building a rising national career. Locally, he's at work directing a world premiere, Lydia Stryk's *An Accident*, for the Magic Theatre in the spring. He'll also be at Stanford this year, workshopping his version of *Troilus and Cressida*, part of a three-year-old partnership between the university and New York's Public Theater to foster experimental work for the professional stage. When we met in December, he'd recently returned from a related workshop at the Public (where in 2008 he assisted Oskar Eustis on *Hamlet*). True to his approach as a



Rogers in Eugenie Chan's *Bone to Pick*, directed by Melrose for Cutting Ball in 2008.

director, Melrose had lobbied for inclusion of his design team in the process.

Melrose also has an ongoing relationship with the Guthrie Theater in his hometown, Minneapolis, where in 2003 he served as assistant director to Joe Dowling on *Othello*. In appreciation, Dowling gave him his "big

break," putting him at the helm of two well-received second-stage productions, *Pen* and *Happy Days*. In the latter, Melrose got to direct two veteran actors, Sally Wingert and Richard Ooms, whom he'd seen as a 20-year-old in that personally revelatory *Skin of Our Teeth* production by Woodruff.

How does Melrose balance Cutting Ball with his nationally developing career? "It's tricky," he confesses. "It's hard to sustain at the staff level we have. We have a general manager, but I'm really the artistic director and managing director wrapped into one right now." At the same time, he says the outside work has been good for Cutting Ball. "The thing about these other jobs is that the more you're out in the world, getting known and meeting people, the more energy you bring back to your place—and the more people want to work with you, the easier it is to get collaborators, and the more ideas you get."

Both those commodities—collaborations and ideas—were spawned by the couple's recent revelatory and energizing trip to Europe, as they traveled with their two children to Wroclaw, Poland, as part of the U.S. Artists Initiative of the Grotowski Year 2009 (thanks to the prompting of impresario Philip Arnoult and support from his Centre for International Theatre Development). Both Melrose and Rogers emphasized how powerfully the experience had reminded them of their original inspiration behind Cutting Ball—and their encounter with Wroclaw's Teatr ZAR has been especially fruitful, inspiring the development of a new work for the company, spearheaded by Rogers in collaboration with playwright Eugenie Chan. Even as Melrose's national profile rises—and increasingly takes him away from Cutting Ball for parts of the year—Rogers has been moving to the fore as a mainstage director and new-play developer.

WHEN I MEET ROGERS SEPARATELY

at the Cutting Ball offices on a sunny day in December, we follow her husband's tracks and head right out the door again. She's just returned from Los Angeles for a workshop with ZAR, on a U.S. tour at the time (see *American Theatre*, Dec. '09), and I'm helping her trawl Walgreens for nail polish remover. (She'll be going on in *The Bald Soprano* tonight and the shade she has on will need to make way for something a bit bolder.) Time is short, but that never prevents Rogers from stopping to savor a memory or wonder at a fact, as she does on several occasions, describ-

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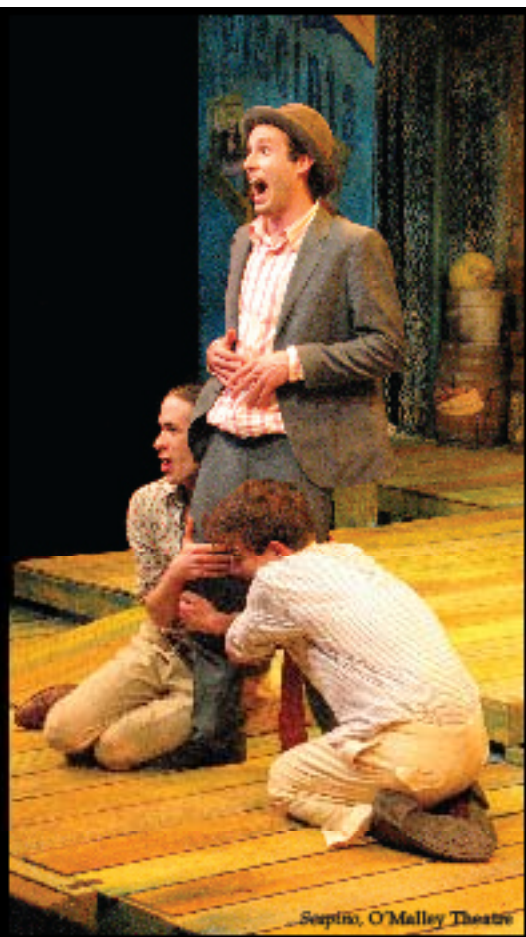
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ing rapturously the small breakthroughs she experienced through the homespun genius of her Polish mentors.

Later, as Rogers applies a thick layer of ruby-red lacquer to her nails in preparation for the night's performance, she explains to me the admirably direct route the couple took to San Francisco in the late 1990s: She and Rob, fresh from graduate work at Trinity Repertory Company and Yale, respectively, drew up a list of American cities most likely to embrace a company wholly committed to the experimental and avant-garde. New York was nixed early because they also planned to start a family; but Providence, where Melrose successfully directed his first play out of Yale (Kevin Oakes's *All Spoken by a Shining Creature*), was a strong contender. Minneapolis, too, from where both hail (a coincidence that brought them together as undergrads at Princeton), might have seemed a logical choice. "We could have had a board, presto, and some support immediately," admits Rogers. But San Francisco ended up at the top of the list, beckoning them across the country with its reputation for charting new theatrical frontiers.

The couple arrived at something of a

low ebb in the Bay Area experimental scene, after the glory days of the 1980s. Long-established practitioners like George Coates and Antenna Theatre were winding down or already gone. Still, activity percolated beneath the surface of the local underground. Rob and Paige—who drew much of their inspiration from the European stages they'd visited in France, Germany and Italy while Melrose was on a 1997 Fox Foundation grant—were in fact joining a new generation of theatre practitioners trying out their own ideas and flexing new muscles.

On stage, Rogers is a vital actor, adept and fearless, emotionally shrewd, with strong comic instincts and serious vocal chops to boot. Her résumé includes work with regional theaters like Oregon Shakespeare Festival, but she has sat on her Equity card for years to develop work with Cutting Ball. In the meantime, she has evolved into a highly attentive director as well—in 2008, at the helm of Maria Irene Fornes's *Mud*, she garnered notable depth, precision and focus from a memorable cast of actors (including Cutting Ball regular Garth Petal) clearly doing some of their best work. "I think I'm more of a

director now than an actor," Rogers declares.

Back in the Cutting Ball offices, she speaks of the new project she and writer Chan are developing. Still hazy in details and without a title, they refer to it simply as "the ZAR project." It will feature music and choreography in equal relation to the text. Another thing Rogers has decided: The music must be integral to her own background and not merely a straightforward borrowing of the traditional Eastern European songs at the center of ZAR's work.

I ask her what it is that ZAR has taught her, and in answer she cites a comment she heard just the day before by Jarosław Fret, the company's director: "He said, 'Breath is life.' To him, music is closest to what good theatre is because it gets immediately to the essence of the human being. It's breath."

And then I leave her to catch her own. ❧

Robert Avila, senior theatre critic for the San Francisco Bay Guardian, is the recipient of an American Theatre magazine Bay Area Commissioning Fund grant, supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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