

# Perform

## ‘Tontlawald’: Cutting Ball Theater’s take on Estonian fairy tale builds on Polish troupe’s innovative method

By Nirmala Nataraj

Cutting Ball Theater is known for its intransigent approach to celebrated works of literature. The company’s new play, “Tontlawald,” similarly takes viewers on a visceral journey through fairy tales and unexpected dramatic maneuvers.

Directed by Associate Artistic Director Paige Rogers and Annie Paladino, with choreography by Laura Arrington and text written by Cutting Ball’s resident playwright Eugenie Chan, “Tontlawald” is an ensemble piece rich with a cappella singing, evocative movement and haunting symbols.

The play was created by the entire directorial team and ensemble, with pieces of the original Estonian fairy tale it was based on woven into the story, moved around, manipulated or discarded. “I didn’t assign any characters to speak specific lines,” Chan says. “I invited the directors and ensemble to find the lines of dialogue that suited their character as they created the piece.”

Rogers says she stumbled upon the story of “Tontlawald” after it was told to her son’s first-grade class. A darkly beautiful tale that relates the experiences of a young girl who is abused by her wicked stepmother, “Tontlawald” is replete with sinister doppelgangers, a creepy haunted forest and the dual themes of violence and transformation.

But the piece was originally conceived when Rogers decided to create a work inspired by the theatre of Poland’s acclaimed



Annie Paladino

**Marilet Martinez (front) is rescued by the people of the Tontlawald — (from left) Madeline H.D. Brown, Rebecca Frank, and Cindy Im — in Cutting Ball Theater’s new play “Tontlawald.”**

company Teatr ZAR. Based on the guidelines of renowned Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski, “Tontlawald” is informed by the Polish company’s emphasis on singing. “It underscores everything happening onstage,” Rogers says, “the immediacy of the breath and the experience of being so close to a group of live performers, singing in beautiful harmonies.”

Because TeatrZAR often performed their songs in ancient and dead languages, Rogers noted, their audiences were able to dissociate the songs’ content from the onstage tableau. As a

result, none of the songs in “Tontlawald” will be sung in English.

Rogers’ work with TeatrZAR also informed the creative process for Cutting Ball’s play. This included a workshop with two of the Polish company’s main dancers, an influential experience that gave her insight into the creation of a rich physical world through movement.

“As far as I’m concerned, my ZAR-inspired directing aesthetic will now be incorporated into every work I create, and this is very artistically satisfying since it came about as a result of initially putting myself in a place

7:30 tonight, 8 p.m. Fri., 2 and 8 p.m. Sat., 5 p.m. Sun. (Check website for full schedule.) \$20-\$50. Through March 11. Exit on Taylor, 277 Taylor St., S.F. [www.cuttingball.com](http://www.cuttingball.com).

that was not so safe or comfortable,” Rogers says.

In addition to the vision provided by Rogers and Paladino, choreographer Arrington has been a vital part of the directorial team.

“I like to think of us as all having an eye towards a common center,” Paladino says. “Each of us understands and connects deeply with this aesthetic nexus, yet we come at it from very different vantage points.”

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### THEATER

**Absolutely San Francisco** A musical comedy about lost love and the San Francisco experience. Ongoing. \$32-\$50. Alcove Theater, 414 Mason St., fifth floor. (415) 992-8168. [www.absolutelysanfrancisco.com](http://www.absolutelysanfrancisco.com). (SF)

**Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland** Based on Lewis Carroll’s classic novel. Fri.–March 4. \$6-\$18. The Firehouse Arts Center, 4444 Railroad Ave., Pleasanton. (925) 931-4848. [www.firehousearts.org](http://www.firehousearts.org). (EB)

**The Auction** Miranda July’s interactive performance piece. 8 p.m. Sat. \$10-\$40. Kanbar Hall, Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, 3200 California St. [www.jccsf.org](http://www.jccsf.org). (SF)

**The Amazing Bubble Man** Breathtaking bubbles and bubbly music, this is a show that will appeal to everyone, no matter what their age. Packed with fun stuff, such as spinning flying-saucer bubbles, square bubbles filled with fog, universe bubbles with orbiting planets and bubble chains that look like centipedes. Through March 18. \$8-\$50. The Marsh, 2120 Allston Way, Berkeley. [www.themarsh.org](http://www.themarsh.org). (EB)

**Arms and the Man** George Bernard Shaw’s tale of romance going awry. Ends Sat. \$38-\$43. Center REPeritory Company, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. (925) 295-1413. [www.centerrep.org](http://www.centerrep.org). (EB)

**Barefoot in the Park** Neil Simon’s ode to young love and commitment directed by Dennis Markham. Through March 4. \$11-\$20. Contra Costa Civic Theatre, 951 Pomona Ave., El Cerrito. (510) 524-9132. [www.ccct.org](http://www.ccct.org). (EB)

**Beach Blanket Babylon** Steve Silver’s fast-paced, topical musical. Ongoing. \$25-\$130. Club Fugazi, 678 Green St. (415) 421-4222. [www.beachblanketbabylon.com](http://www.beachblanketbabylon.com). (SF)

**Becky Shaw** Newlyweds set up two romantically challenged friends, which leads to crisis and comedy. Through March 10. \$40-\$50. SF Playhouse, 533 Sutter St. (415) 677-9596. [www.sfplayhouse.org](http://www.sfplayhouse.org). (SF)

**Becoming Britney** A snarky musical tale based on the misadventures of the pop icon featuring 11 original songs

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