



IMPROBABLE JOY

A CONVERSATION WITH PLAYWRIGHT MADELEINE GEORGE,
DIRECTOR KEN RUS SCHMOLL, AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR JOHN DIAS

Madeleine George and Ken Rus Schmoll are both passionate about new play development—the process by which writers, directors, and actors come together for scene work, script revisions, and readings of works-in-process. And, like *Two River's* Artistic Director **John Dias**, they are even more passionate about new play production. Madeleine is one of the founders of 13P, an Obie Award-winning theater company formed by 13 playwrights who self-produce their own work. Ken is an Obie-winning director who has primarily focused on new plays. But, they have never worked together until John brought them to Red Bank for this production. When they sat down for this interview midway through rehearsals, they began by talking about how they first became aware of each other's work.



Madeleine: Ken directed the first play—and then the third and the fifth—that 13P produced. So I have watched him from the sidelines since 2004. We have tried to work together over the years but it has never worked out with our schedules.

Ken: I first knew of Madeleine by her reputation as a wunderkind through her involvement with the Young Playwrights Festival. [Note: *Madeleine's* play *The Most Massive Woman Wins* premiered as part of the Young Playwrights Festival at The Public Theater in 1994.]

Madeleine: I didn't know that you knew that.

Ken: There are a lot of things you don't know about me. (*Laughter*) No, but seriously, I knew about you from that, and then your play *The Zero Hour* had this lore around town as being an amazing play.

Madeleine: It was one of those plays that went around and around and never got done.

John: Until that production at 13P. Which is a company I love—and I'm not saying this, Madeleine, just because you're one of the founders. It really is a great and bold idea: 13 playwrights coming together as a collective in response to new play development programs that can create what seems to be an endless cycle of development and readings. Producing new plays IS risky. But so is writing them. We must—as audiences and producers—be open to that adventure. In part because really good, productive development of a play happens in production too. I remember thinking from the moment I first read *Seven Homeless Mammoths* that I wanted to be involved in getting it to production. I wanted to help Madeleine develop the play and support her in examining and rewriting it through the reading process, but all toward a goal of producing it on our stage.

Ken: 13P has a wonderful mission statement that is two sentences long: "We don't develop plays. (We do them.)" Play development is not by itself a bad thing—all writers want to develop their plays and spend time working with them outside of a production setting. Its helps you make the transition from what is in your head and on the paper, to the actualities of three dimensions and space.

Madeleine: There is a lot of work you can do on a play with actors sitting at music stands just saying the lines, so that you are basically hearing it as a radio play—I did a lot of work on *Mammoths* in the workshop we did here at Two River last year. But as Ken was saying, there is a whole other dimension that happens on a stage, with people moving around in space, and music and light. Time elapses in a different way.

John: And the way you play with time as a writer is enormously important to this play.

Madeleine: I've been reading a book by Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, which is about Shakespearean comedy. His premise, to summarize it briefly and partially, is that all drama is about movement in time, and the great mythic cycle of literature is the seasons of the year. Tragedy takes its path along the arc from summer to winter, moving from birth to death, and as such it has a feeling of alignment and inevitability. Comedy takes as its path the other half of the year, from winter to summer, moving from death to rebirth. Although that arc is a natural part of our lives, it somehow feels impossible to us because birth does not follow naturally from death—it is our deepest wish, but it does not make rational sense. And that's the reason that comedies turn on ludicrous, improbable, impossible situations, and end with the metamorphosis of something into something else, either literally or metaphorically, and being released into a feeling of joy.

John: Without giving too much away, there is that sense of the ludicrous and improbable release of joy that happens at the end of *Mammoths*. That makes me think of another influence you've spoken of in the past that our audience will likely recognize—American screwball comedy. How did you come to that?

Madeleine: I saw Alan Ayckbourn's *The Normal Conquests* in New York a few years ago, and it was so extraordinary; I thought, this is the highest form of human achievement in art. I decided to investigate how a comedy is made, and I started to think about the comedies that I really love, like *His Girl Friday* and *The Philadelphia Story*, from the 1930s and 40s. There's a book by Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, which looks at this genre of romantic comedy—which we know as screwball comedies—as “comedies of remarriage,” showing the maturation of a marriage into a new form. To bring everything full circle, Cavell's basis for making this analysis was Northrop Frye's book. For example, where Frye shows Shakespearean characters going into the green world or the forest of Arden, in the comedies of remarriage that place is called “Connecticut.” As I was writing *Mammoths*, it was very helpful to use both of those books, because I could use these familiar forms to map out what needed to happen next.

Ken: This play is incredibly well structured and crafted. Although there are some unusual elements, at its core the dramatic storytelling follows traditional rules. It's interesting for me, because I've spent most of my time as a director doing very cryptic, strangely structured plays that don't actually adhere to any familiar form. And Madeleine is also drawing on what we keep talking about in rehearsal as “sitcom time.” I find myself relaxing as we're rehearsing this, because there are rules—like, something is funnier if there's a longer pause here. Or a character will drop some huge important thing that they are doing in order to have a funny bit. When I direct a totally experimental or unconventional play, I feel like my job is to create some sort of frame around it, or shell, to contain it. In this case that frame is there already, which is liberating.

Madeleine: Sometimes in the way you are staging the play I've noticed that an actor is sitting in a place I wouldn't necessarily expect, and I feel that you are doing that intentionally, because it creates a little eruption outside of the frame. And that is so welcome, because the framing is so strict in the play. And it's a huge asset to me that you will not let a moment of gravity escape. You know how to find moments of seriousness and depth. If those are not there, the play would just be farce.

Ken: I guess we're a good match. *(Laughter)*